

# A CORPORATE EXPERIENCE

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**T**HIS ARTICLE WILL ATTEMPT TO consider forms of retreat in daily life which include both individual guidance and also a more corporate experience, with a view to the building up of Christian community and Christian service as well as fostering individual growth.

Firstly, how did these retreats arise and what do they comprise?

In the course of our work for SPIDIR, an informal and ecumenical network of people interested in spiritual direction, we came to recognize the value of the individually guided retreat (IGR), and also the importance of developing retreats in daily life for those who for various reasons were unable to go away for a residential retreat. At the same time we realized that although Ignatian-based retreats have been of enormous value to many, Ignatian spirituality is not the only spirituality and not necessarily the most appropriate path for everyone.

Further, while readily acknowledging the value of the Open Door retreat, we found it hard to understand in what sense people could be 'in retreat' all through a lengthy sequence of weeks. We had in mind a more concentrated experience, so our first requirement was for a locally based, individually guided retreat concentrated into a limited space of time, open to whatever path of prayer might be most appropriate to each individual.

Some time later, after our pattern of what we came to call 'parish-based retreats' had been successfully established and written up in Gordon's book *Spiritual direction for every Christian*, we enjoyed meeting Dermott Mansfield SJ who had pioneered weeks of guided prayer in Dublin, but here again we realized our aim was different. We wanted to extend the scope of the retreat to make it rather more than a week of guided prayer and not necessarily focusing primarily on the retreatant's time set aside for prayer. We aimed to meet each retreatant wherever they were and to help them to discern something of God in daily life as much as in times of prayer.

Lastly, we were aware from the start that even in the hands of a good director, a retreat can sometimes become a little precious—a bit too much of 'me and God'. We felt that a retreat based on a local Christian

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community could be constructed in such a way as actively to strengthen that sense of community, and in particular help participants to become less tongue-tied about the things of God when talking with fellow-Christians and indeed with others. For some, to speak with a retreat leader about their experience of God, to have that experience of God valued, and to relate God to daily life was the first time they had done anything of this kind. We believed that a retreat could be a good opportunity in which to help retreatants to realize there were others in their congregation with whom they could talk freely and openly about the things of God—a general release and unfreezing.

So in some trepidation, in the summer of 1984 we offered our first parish-based retreat in the parish where at the time we were sharing the ordained ministry. Dorothy had only recently been made deacon and Gordon's previous retreat experience had been of a very different kind, leading retreats for the Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer. We were both, however, already considerably involved in a ministry of ongoing spiritual direction.

It will thus be seen that while Ignatian direction, broadly speaking, seems to take its origin in the Exercises and retreats and *may* spread outwards to ongoing spiritual direction, the SPIDIR approach starts from a concern for ongoing, low-key spiritual direction but sees IGRs as a helpful adjunct or sometimes a way into ongoing direction.

Since on this first experimental occasion there would be only two retreat-givers, just twelve places were offered and twelve places were taken up. Although others have modified our pattern to suit varying local conditions we have found the original vision to be basically sound, except that we now consider five rather than six people for a leader to talk to each day is really quite enough, given all the other component parts of the retreat.

Participants were asked to free some time in their daily round by trying to do only those things which were essential during the Monday—Friday period of the retreat. This exercise alone often makes retreatants aware of how much choice they have over their time and how well or otherwise they exercise that choice.

We normally have a briefing meeting on the preceding Sunday, or at some time in the previous week. This allows not only for the pattern of the week to be made clear, questions answered and retreatants linked up with their own retreat-giver, but the meeting also serves to allay the anxieties of those who are beginning to wish they had never signed up in the first place! (At this stage the leaders may well feel likewise!)

Then in the chosen week everyone gathers each morning for an hour to an hour and a half. Each morning there will be a half hour or so of a

different kind of prayer, so that most participants will learn several new ways of praying. For example, centring down exercises, use of symbols, Bible-based meditations, an introduction to contemplative prayer, music, fantasy, journalling . . .

There is usually though not always a short talk by one of the leaders, but there will always be general discussion on the group prayer session and on the talk if there has been one. Topics for the talks have been, for example:

- a) How do we understand God and relate to God at different times in our life?
  - Infancy and childhood
  - Adolescence
  - Young adulthood
  - The middle years
  - Eventide
- b) God in me
  - God in others
  - God in the environment
  - God in the everyday
  - God as God
- c) The peace of God
  - The wisdom of God
  - The power of God
  - The joy of God
  - The love of God
- d) Images of the Christian (strengths *and* weaknesses of each image can be included) e.g.:
  - Pilgrim
  - Desert-dweller
  - Messenger
  - Soldier
  - Shepherd etc. etc.

Apart from the morning plenary session the only other specific commitment we have requested is a half-hour one-to-one session with one of the leaders each day. Every person is different: some will come with questions of belief or being stuck in prayer, others with questions of relating faith to daily life, others with decisions to make, yet others simply wanting suggestions as to how best to use the retreat. This puts a considerable weight of sensitivity and awareness on the retreat-givers for

there is no set pattern to follow. It is more like ongoing spiritual direction in a compressed space of time. We begin where each individual finds herself or himself and seek ways of helping each one to grow a little in prayer, to discern more of the activity of God in their lives and generally to make the best possible use of the retreat week.

Normally the daily pattern of parish worship, eucharist and office will be there for people to attend or not as seems possible or right for them, and there is often an optional Compline with recorded music and a story at 9 p.m. each evening, celebrated by candlelight, to which partners and friends and anyone else in the parish is welcome so that others in some way share in the retreat. The story will be appropriate to the theme of the retreat for that day and this late night service with a 'bedtime story' has always been much appreciated.

The retreat concludes with a simple eucharist on the Friday evening. Ideally this would be a house eucharist if there is a large enough room available. Indeed, for the smaller retreat the unassuming domesticity of a private house is better for the morning sessions as well, rather than the impersonality of a parish hall. The eucharist is followed by a little party with wine. This provides a general opportunity in which everyone can unwind and raise any points they wish. At the end of the evening, should any of the leaders have come in from outside the parish, the reins can formally be handed back to the parish priest.

The first experiment was successful; very shortly afterwards we followed it with an evening retreat for those at work during the daytime. This works well, though retreatants need to be warned that it will be quite a hard week for them and not like a peaceful residential retreat. For an evening retreat to work well there needs to be strict observance of timing all round and leaders have to be prepared for a very long and busy evening. What happened in those early days was that those who had attended the first daytime retreat were so enthusiastic about it that they conveyed their enthusiasm to partners and friends who were not always available during the day. As well as the evening retreat it was not long before a second daytime retreat was called for. This seems to be a common experience and one inner city group of parishes now builds this kind of a retreat into its programme every six months.

As well as being written up in Gordon's book, articles on these retreats appeared in the SPIDIR newsletter and we moved outwards to helping to set up and participate in retreats for other churches. Today we tend to help, where we can, in the setting up of retreats while not actually participating ourselves, and indeed the pattern is so straightforward that we are glad nowadays to hear of churches simply going ahead and doing it themselves.

The courses in spiritual direction set up by SPIDIR ensure that in the South London area we have a pool of directors on whom to draw to help to staff parish-based retreats. However, often churches discover that they have on their own doorstep or in their own congregation people competent to lead such a retreat. We launched the venture ourselves without experience and it worked; it seems to have worked for others who have set up similar ventures on their own.

And as Dermott Mansfield has discovered in Dublin, unlike residential retreats which (though immensely valuable) tend by the nature of their expense to be somewhat middle-class in orientation, the parish-based retreat is equally effective and appreciated in inner city areas. It is the little things one remembers of the deprivation of the inner city: in one Urban Priority Area parish retreatants were given a single vegetable seed to hold as a part of a prayer exercise. The following day it emerged that quite a lot of those single cauliflower seeds had been lovingly sown in pots. It is all too easy to forget that maintaining links with the natural world is even more important in the inner city than in the greener suburbs.

Numbers can range from a handful upwards depending on the number of leaders and applicants. There would seem to be no limit to the number of people who could participate in the group prayer sessions and addresses, but if it is a large retreat it is wisest for the discussion to divide into groups, each with two leaders together with their own retreatants.

Before proceeding to an assessment of this kind of a locally based retreat it is worth stating that for the past seven years a SPIDIR team has also been conducting five-day *residential* IGRs partly in order to communicate to parochial clergy a form of IGR other than the Ignatian. The pattern of each day on the residential retreat broadly follows that of the parish-based retreat but it has, of course, the advantage of being a fully silent retreat in the traditional manner.

Secondly, for the past five years an ever-growing SPIDIR team has laid on in Southwark (Anglican) Cathedral five Wednesday evenings in Lent for an individually guided 'retreat'. This includes the basic one-to-one, the corporate prayer-time with differing kinds of prayer and time for discussion in groups as well as silence in an otherwise empty cathedral and Compline to end the evening. A simple supper is laid on in the course of the evening in the cathedral refectory.

This has been much appreciated and the 'ripple effect' has led to parishes requesting the use of the cathedral for their own quiet evenings.

So how can we evaluate what perhaps we may have begun, but what, more importantly, others have taken on board for themselves and

sometimes modified to suit local conditions? We are wary of our own subjective evaluation, so we have tried over the years to listen to others.

The fact that again and again parishes have requested second and subsequent retreats would suggest that 'word of mouth' conveys a positive message to partners and friends. The first request for an evening retreat was particularly exciting. We had realized on the first daytime retreat that the Church's theology was good at relating faith to life at home and with the family, but when we came to the evening retreat some participants began to relate the issues at their place of work to their faith for the very first time. If they had come straight back from work to retreat it was hard to run away from the question: 'Where do you think God might have been in all that?' This was unfamiliar ground to some, and these are issues sadly not adequately faced in most parishes other than in a breezy, generalized way from the pulpit which ignores the real agonies and morality of the work place in a grotesquely competitive world. Topics for the brief evening talk therefore need to be angled rather differently, e.g.:

- God and power
- God and weakness
- God and structures
- God and time

Only four talks are feasible on the evening retreat because the eucharist and party happen on the Friday evening as well as the one-to-ones.

In the parish where we began, this evening retreat led to a much wider pattern of monthly meetings, open to all, which we called 'Vicarage Specials', where issues which people encountered in their work were addressed in various ways and related to Christian insights. As time went on, people began to feel freed to offer themselves for ministries inside and beyond the church, appropriate for the people as God had made each one. Other less middle-class parishes have reported back similarly. In other words, people mature significantly in this kind of a retreat.

It is perhaps something to do with beginning to recognize the gifts God has given to each individual, and for them to be gaining confidence to be themselves and to be able to talk honestly and openly. We are convinced that one-to-one sessions *and* group work need to go together. A person gains confidence from talking one-to-one with a retreat leader, but then needs the opportunity to take that outwards, at first in a group of others who have shared the same retreat experience. That is to say

that talking one-to-one makes it easier to talk in the small group, but unless that small group is provided, the further talking and sharing may never happen. The sense of community grows from the experience of sharing.

If we are honest, in ordinary church life, how much *real* sharing of our concerns about belief, prayer and conduct actually take place given the sheer *busyness* of parish life? To set up parish-based retreats which enable groups to share with each other often results in emerging from trivia to a proper concentration on the real task of the church, but in our view this needs the element of *shared* prayer and *shared* discussion if it is to come to life. The real excitement comes when one stands, for example, in the queue at the baker's shop and cannot help overhearing someone talking enthusiastically to a non-church friend about the parish-based retreat and about all that is going on at the church. Non-churchgoers often express real interest when told and there is valuable work to be done on finding a way to extend some kind of a parish-based retreat in a non-threatening way to such people.

From our discussions with the parishes which have set up similar retreats as well as from our own experiences we would want also to underline the importance of the *shared prayer together*. Not all who come into retreat would necessarily join an ongoing prayer group, and in any case most prayer groups lack the variety of kinds of prayer offered in the retreat. It is our experience that many people come to the conclusion that they are 'no good at prayer' because they are unable to relate to most books on prayer and do not find the support and guidance they need to discover the ways of prayer that are right for them. For this reason many people would not think of joining a prayer group, even if one were offered. The variety of prayer experienced in the retreat leads people to begin to realize that prayer is a much wider activity than they had supposed and that prayer encompasses the whole of life. More specifically it leads to a realization that worship together is more than coming along to a set liturgy which the 'professionals' have set up. As confidence grows, lay people can share in liturgical experiment and share not only in the *execution* but also in the *designing* of acts of worship.

We believe that to free lay people to create new forms of worship relevant to their own situation is an urgent and a pressing need—to be free from the paternalism of the clergy. Not everyone is a professional theologian, but everyone has some experience of God and therefore has a theology. We believe that the lay person's experience of God needs to be accepted and valued as a precious gift—a gift to be expressed in appropriate acts of worship.

It does not therefore surprise us that where parish-based retreats happen, lay people begin to be freed to participate in designing prayer sessions. Others will wish to set up experimental Bible-study groups or prayer groups, or for the original retreat group to become an ongoing discussion group. Yet others, having had a good experience of one-to-one work in the retreat, will wish to make a regular commitment to ongoing spiritual direction. Others, again, may be ready for, and can make the space for going on a residential IGR. We had hoped to hold a residential IGR for the parish where all this began, but we were separately called to other ministries elsewhere and were not able to follow this through. Interestingly, however, many who participated in the early retreats in that parish have gone on to exercise their God-given talents and leadership skills much more widely in the diocese.

Both in the one-to-one sessions and in the group discussion there is invariably some sharing of weakness and failure, whether in prayer or work or family life or wherever. This we believe to be important and life-giving. All too often church talk mirrors society and is about success and achievement, as if the Church were only about the resurrection and not about the cross. This is a tendency most noticeable where evangelism is concerned, a strong flavour of triumphalism.

For most of us, although it is important to share the joy and excitement of success and achievement, it is more important that we share our failures, our inadequacies, our weakness, for it is in this kind of sharing that we meet each other in our common humanity. It is in this kind of sharing that listening, caring, concern and helping are born. It is in this kind of sharing that we become community. This increases the 'pool' of understanding and hospitality offered to those outside the church community and decreases the rigidity, the exclusivity that those who strive for a successful image tend to adopt.

Once, then, that weakness is allowed and we acknowledge our own inadequacy and failure to others they are far more likely to come to talk to us, so that the 'ripple effect' begins to spread around the parish. Our retreatants find others coming to talk to them—and not only card-carrying Christians. Who knows where the ripples may reach!

Such a retreat involves considerable commitment from retreatants and leaders alike, but it is confined to a relatively short period of time, and we believe it has proved its worth in the building up of the People of God in a more confident expression of their ministry in prayer, word and deed.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Details of SPIDIR obtainable on sending a large SAE to Paddy Lane, 51 Lime Tree Grove, Shirley, Croydon, Surrey CR0 8AZ.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff, Gordon: *Spiritual direction for every Christian* (London: SPCK, 3rd imp 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Jeff, Gordon: *Am I still a Christian?* (London: SPCK, 1992), p 7.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, Henry (ed): *Approaches to prayer* (London: SPCK, 1991)—another book from the SPIDIR stable!