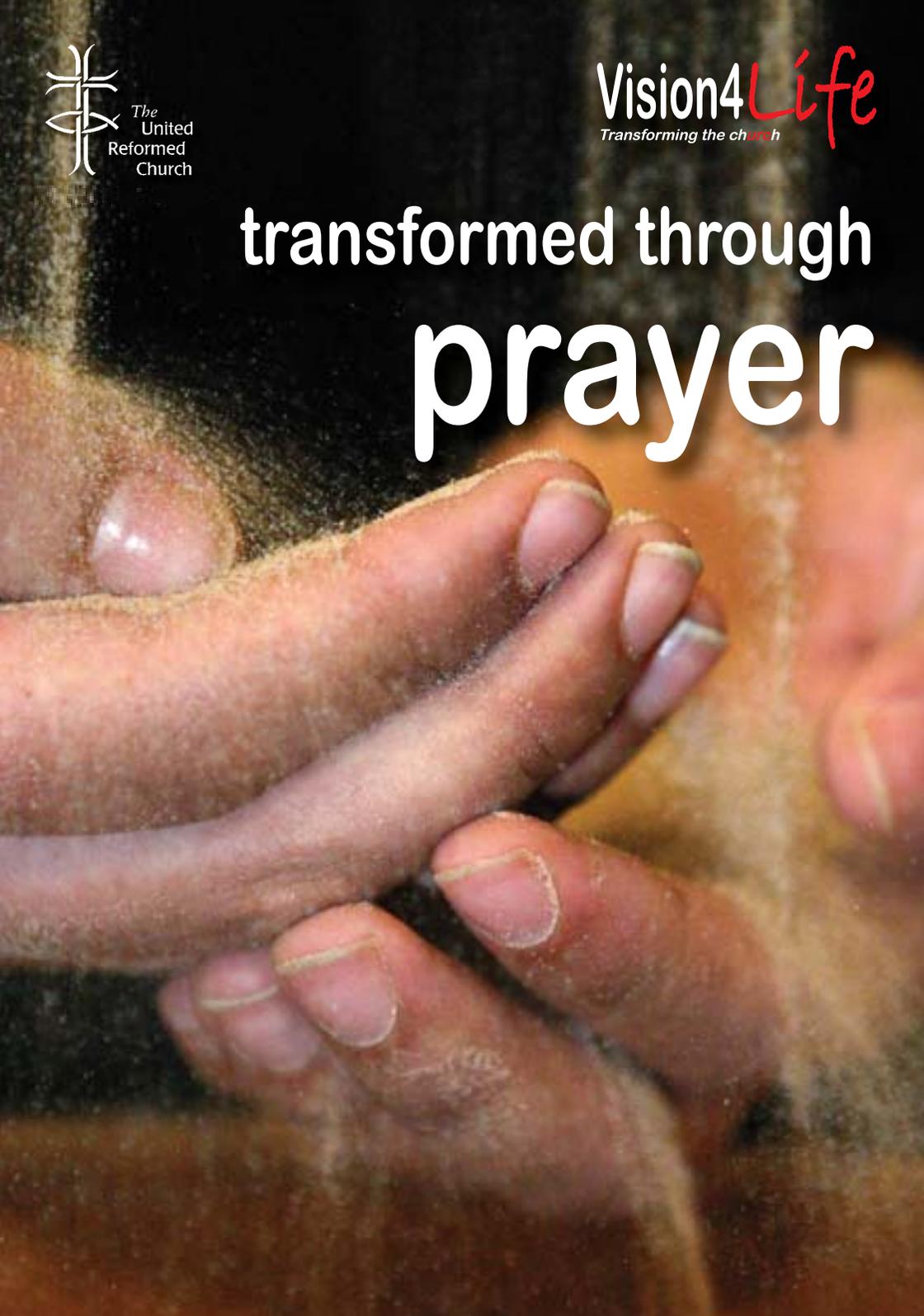




Vision4Life  
Transforming the church

# transformed through prayer





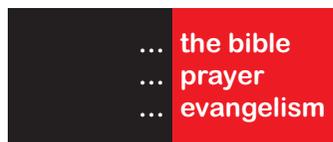
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## conversations about



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## Introduction

### The vision

This is the second of four conversations which congregations across the United Reformed Church are having during 2008. *Vision4Life* follows on from *Catch the Vision* and was introduced in 2007 at General Assembly. It grew from conversations between people from across the denomination, who got inspired by exploring the Bible and prayer, and sharing their faith stories.

Churches planning local initiatives such as Hope '08 are encouraged to try including elements of *Vision4Life* within these events, and not to see it as being in competition with them.

What follows is not material for a prayer meeting but an invitation to talk about how prayer works for us in church and in daily living. How well does prayer, as we currently understand it, help to sustain our lives? The four sections – Remember, Reflect, Respond and Refresh – are followed by stories under the heading of 'Life'.

This material is for use by whoever leads the session – probably ministers or Elders. If leadership can be shared by several people then so much the better. Group members will each need a photocopy of the worksheets at the back of the booklet.

Please visit the website [www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk) for other *Vision4Life* materials including worship.

## How to use the material

The most important role for leaders is to give everyone the best chance to talk openly and honestly about their story and experience. Set ground rules at the start – about listening to each other, respecting each other's views, encouraging everyone to speak and not letting anyone dominate.

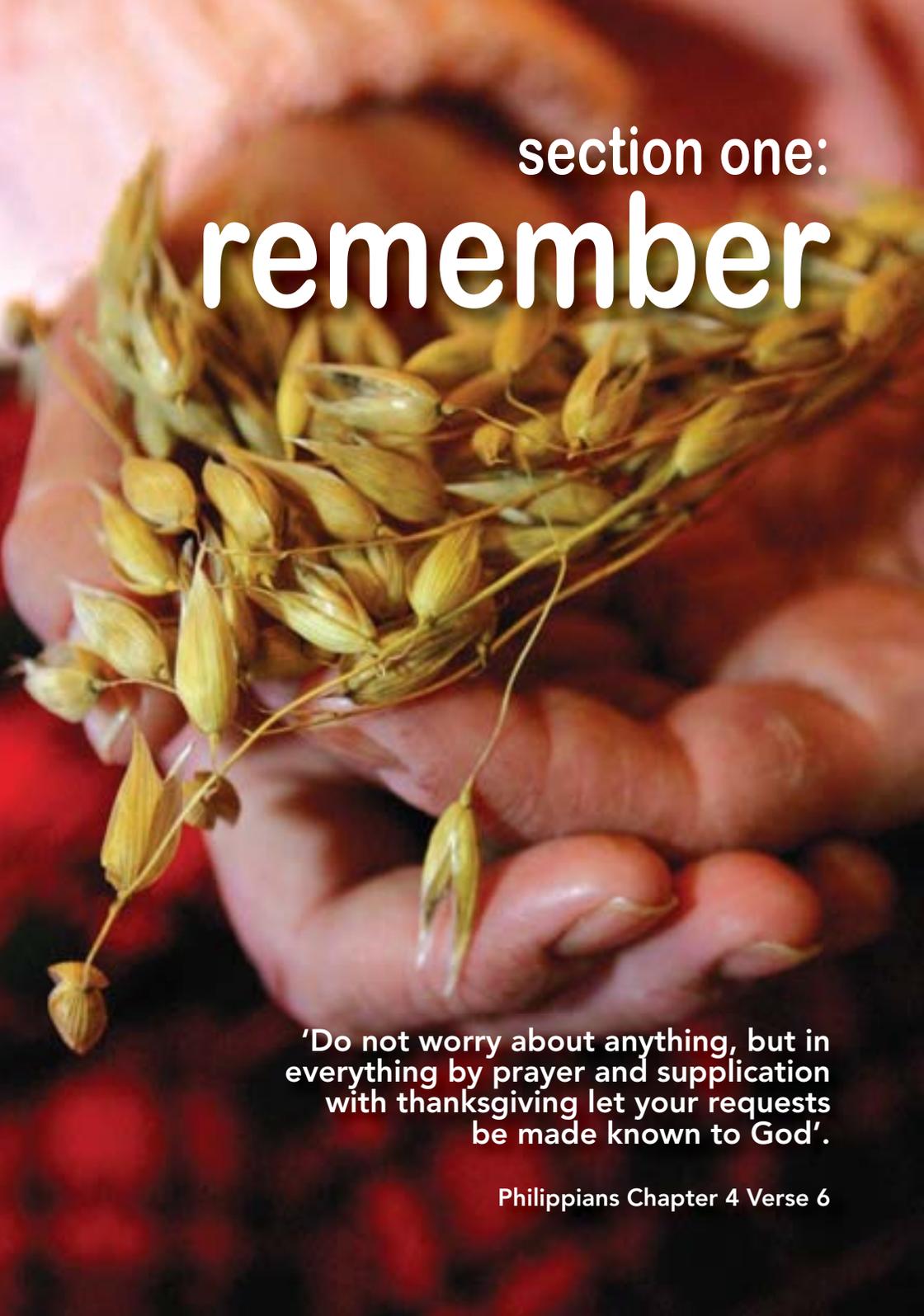
For the opening 'Remember' section of this material there is a worksheet (pp 22-23) to photocopy and give out to everyone taking part. There are suggested timings for each section, eg: 5, 10 if you are using the material in one 90 minute session, which may begin and end with worship.

Here are some suggestions for using the material. Please choose any which suit your setting and feel free to adapt or add to them:

- Conversations woven into Sunday services
- Specially-arranged discussion groups at church or in people's homes (or a mixture)
- Pairs of Elders organising home discussion groups for those on their lists
- A church day conference for all four conversations, or two half day sessions
- People offering to host one or more discussions with a meal in their home
- Weaving these conversations into existing groups and events
- Conversational events with shared food at your church
- Parallel events for different parts of the church family such as young people
- Find ways to include the housebound and those with mobility difficulties.



Notes to assist you  
are in the margins



section one:  
**remember**

**'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God'.**

**Philippians Chapter 4 Verse 6**

## How prayer works 5

Give out the worksheets and then ask everyone to answer the first question by completing the phrase 'in my experience, prayer is...'

## Prayer is... 10

Now, take a little longer for the whole group to assemble a collection of words and phrases that describe prayer. Include any ideas offered, not just what people have written on their worksheet. Use whatever recording method you wish, whether a flipchart or electronic means.

As the ideas are assembled, invite the group to see whether they think every aspect of prayer is adequately covered, or whether there's more that should be added.

## Unpacking our prayer 10

Now ask the group to form twos or threes, if they can do this without great upheaval. Explain that we would like each person to talk in their group about three things:

- to remember a time when praying seemed helpful or natural
- to remember a time when they found praying hard
- what they think and feel about the prayer in their church and how this relates to praying on their own.

**This section has three purposes – to get people talking, to remember experiences of prayer and to collect their ideas. Encouraging people to talk openly, honestly and freely about their faith, including what prayer means to them, is at the very heart of the whole process. Watch out for anyone who looks uncomfortable with this.**



The 'Prayer is...' exercise, and the 'Sharing about prayer' exercise overleaf, need two facilitators – one to write up and the other to interact with those giving feedback and the whole group.



**Remember, this exercise is a key part of helping people to share their faith experience, especially about prayer, in a relaxed and understanding atmosphere. The aim is to share and record what people have said, not to correct or judge their comments. It's about giving them an affirming welcome and checking you understand what they mean, as you list their contributions.**

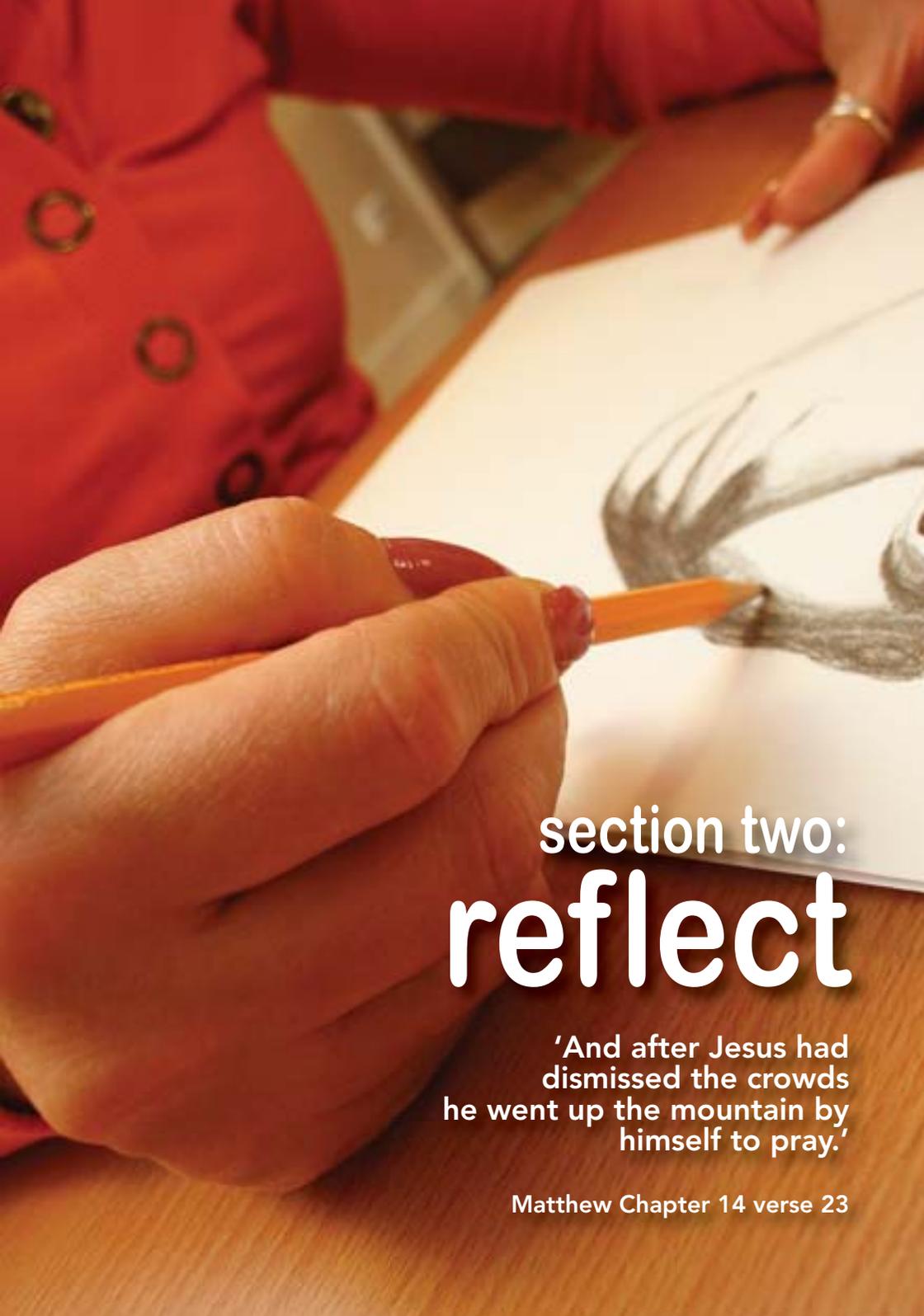
If there's time, each group should also give everyone a chance to say whether, how and why their understanding of prayer may have changed over the years.

Remind the groups that the questions are all on their worksheets.

Allow a little more time for this exercise but not so much that it feels daunting. Be willing to extend the time if people seem to be talking well and make sure that everyone has had a chance to share their own story before the group comes back together.

### **Sharing about prayer 5**

Now gather the whole group together again and ask people to share a flavour of the things they said in their twos and threes. Try to build up a shared picture of when prayer feels natural and when it feels hard and how church prayer relates to personal prayer.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a pencil, drawing a sketch of a face on a white sheet of paper. The hand is in the foreground, and the pencil is positioned to draw a line on the sketch. The background is slightly blurred, showing a wooden table and a person wearing a red jacket with circular patterns. The text 'section two: reflect' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

## section two: reflect

'And after Jesus had  
dismissed the crowds  
he went up the mountain by  
himself to pray.'

Matthew Chapter 14 verse 23

**This section is to get people reflecting on different types of prayer. As before, the answers are important, but so is the process. How well are people responding and sharing? Is the process relaxed and encouraging?**

### **Psalms as prayers 10**

Now ask the group to form smaller groups, which should have no less than three and no more than a dozen people in them.

Try to make sure that there is at least one group working on each psalm. They can choose one psalm from this list to reflect on:

- Psalm 13
- Psalm 32
- Psalm 137

Offer all the groups these two questions to answer about their psalm:

- reading your psalm as a prayer, what can we learn about the person praying?
- reading your psalm as a prayer, what can we learn about praying?

The three psalms were chosen to show:

- **Psalm 13** – the fear that God is not listening to the one who prays
- **Psalm 32** – how prayer addresses our sense of failure (the religious word is 'sin')
- **Psalm 137** – that prayer is probably the best place to admit to and deal with anger.

**OR as an alternative**, use the following exercise:

## A poem on prayer 10

As an alternative to the previous exercise with three psalms, here is the text of a poem called 'Prayer' by the English poet and country parson, George Herbert (1593-1633). It is a collection of words and phrases describing prayer, neatly fitted into the shape of a sonnet.

Share this text with the group and work through it as quickly or slowly as time and the group's inclinations allow.

Without allowing anyone to dominate, find out if and how the poem speaks to people's own understanding of prayer. Does any of it relate to their own experience or expectations?

All three psalms and Herbert's poem offer us very human people engaged in prayer, not plaster saints.

*Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angels' age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth;  
Engine against th'Almighty, sinner's tower,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six days world – transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;  
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,  
The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's  
blood,  
The land of spices; something understood.*

plummet – a plumb line for taking depth soundings  
engine – a siege-engine for laying siege to a castle



Remember, the process is important, not just the answers you get. How well are people responding and sharing? Is the atmosphere relaxed and encouraging?

### **What we've learned about prayer 5**

Offer a brief period for groups to report back and explain what they learned about the author of their psalm or poem and about prayer itself. Listen carefully and encourage people to honour the unique insights each group will bring.

### **Praying together and alone 5**

Working as a whole group, try to answer the following questions together. Record the answers given and discuss them with the group to see if people agree.

- List the ways prayer is woven into the life of our church
- List all the ways of praying alone that people find helpful
- Does the prayer we share in our church help the prayer life of individuals as well as it could?



section three:  
**respond**

'Then when you call  
upon me and come pray  
to me, I will hear you.'

Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 12



This is going to be the crunch question to allow the whole process to proceed in any church



This is actually quite an important question. The process needs to encourage as many people as possible in each fellowship to engage more deeply with prayer – not just the 'faithful few'.

### **Making prayer work for us 5**

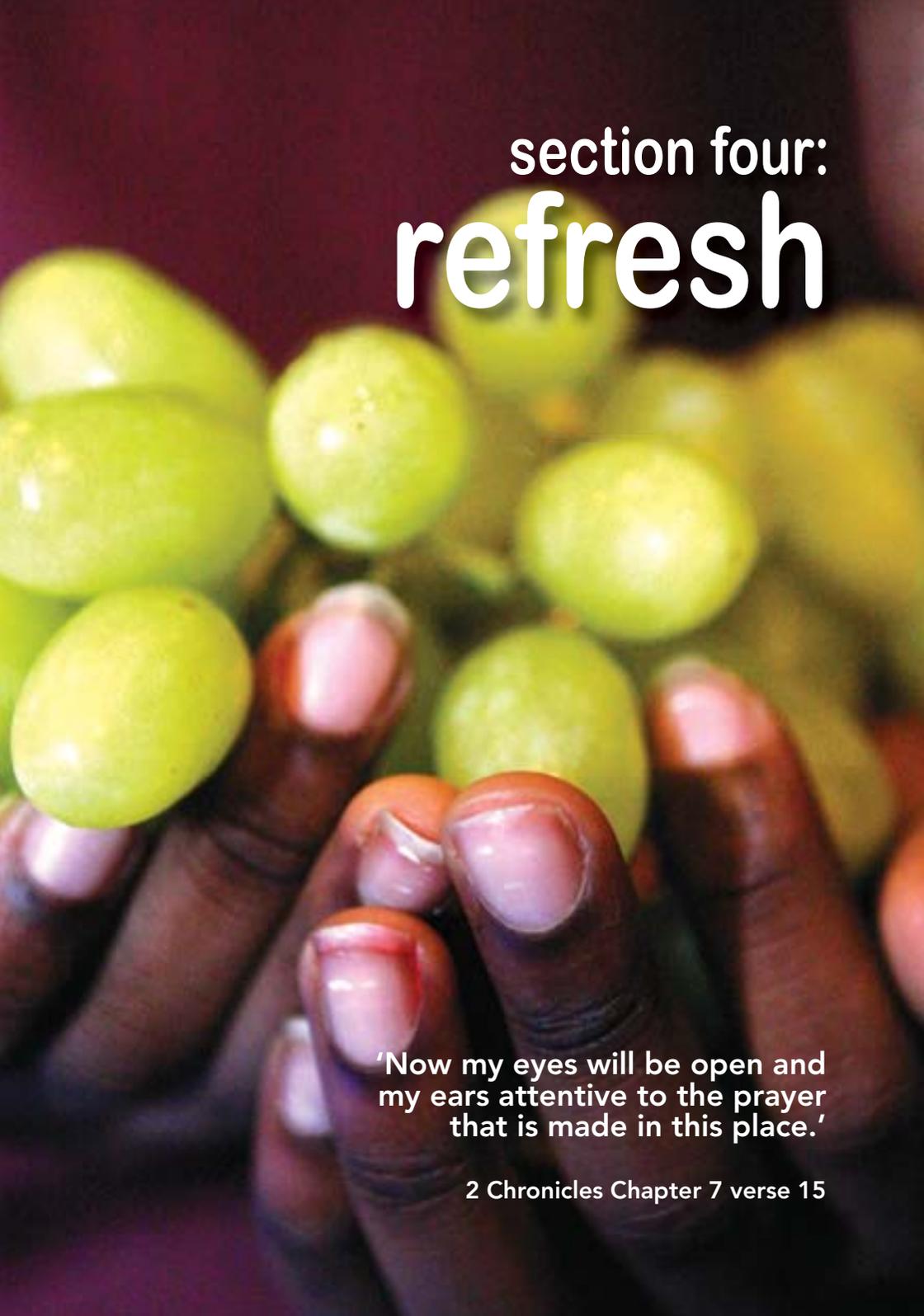
Here is a chance to respond to what has been said so far, in the light of what the group has shared.

- Does the way they understand prayer relate to their daily lives and experiences?
- Is prayer effective as a ministry to a hurting world?
- Do they think their church needs to refresh and change the way people engage with the prayer? If so, how does it do this?

### **How typical of our congregation are we? 5**

Ask the group to consider what they have shared about experiences of prayer, and how it works for them now, in the light of those members of the congregation who are not present.

Would others in the local church share some of their views or not?



section four:  
**refresh**

'Now my eyes will be open and  
my ears attentive to the prayer  
that is made in this place.'

2 Chronicles Chapter 7 verse 15

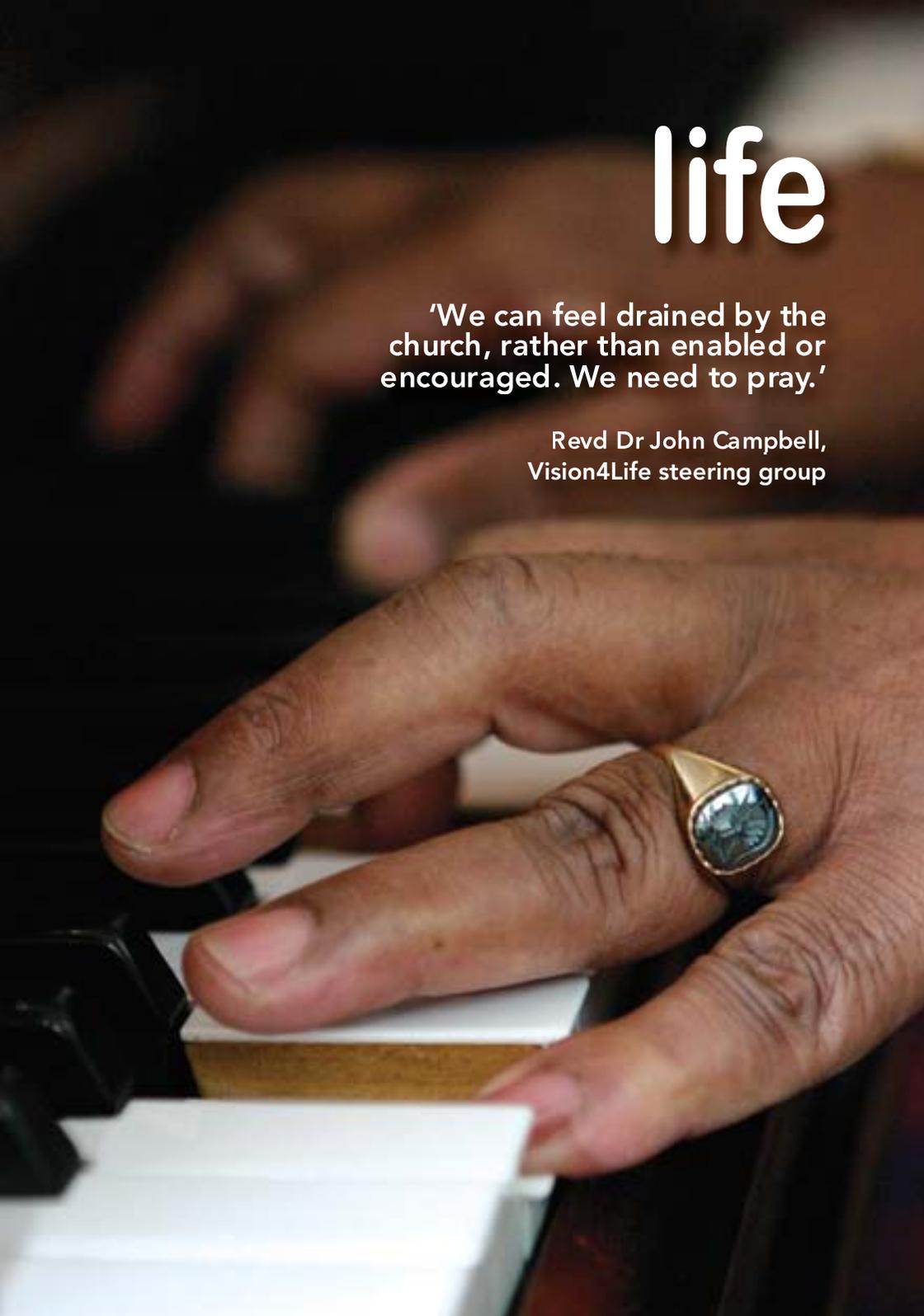
**This is a chance for the group to stop, draw breath, and consider how their conversation so far could relate to what their church does now and might do in the future.**

**Any ideas as to how we do this? 5**

Ask if the group want their church to sign up for *Vision4Life*, which includes the Prayer year starting in Advent 2009. The website [www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk) will have a menu of practical suggestions and materials before this starts. This will not be all that's needed for every church but it should allow local groups to come up with their own programme, suited to the needs around them.

Meanwhile, if people wonder how they might start refreshing their engagement with prayer now, here are some suggestions. Maybe they do some of these already:

- Could the church invite people to come early to Sunday worship for prayer – silent or spoken – before others arrive?
- Might people use the Prayer Handbook for prayer before Church Meeting, the women's fellowship, or the Elders?
- Can you display a prayer notice board, with adhesive notes and pens to write prayer requests on them, in a well-used public area of the church so regular worshippers and visitors can make prayer requests?
- Could you ask those people who use your building during the week if they would like prayer for their work or anyone they know?



# life

'We can feel drained by the church, rather than enabled or encouraged. We need to pray.'

Revd Dr John Campbell,  
Vision4Life steering group

**This section can be shared as a trigger for further thought. It gives a brief overview of prayer in all its variety and richness. It may help encourage people to try some new ways of praying, or take heart to return to some familiar ones they've tried in the past. Try to encourage people to experiment and to keep exploring even if it's not always easy to find what works for them.**

### **Prayer is for everyone 5**

Prayer is the way Christians talk to, and listen to God. When we pray, we bring before God the concerns that matter to us – people, places and situations we know personally, as well as people we've never met, countries we've never been to and global issues.

There are plenty of ways to pray, and we all benefit from time and space to discover what works for us. Prayer in church on a Sunday morning is not the same as prayer in a small group, or our personal prayers at times of joy or sorrow.

Sometimes, in the general busyness of church life, prayer gets pushed down our list of priorities rather than being built into everything we do. Then we lose out on our greatest potential source of support, energy, guidance and challenge. We need as many ways as possible to pray, to be still in the presence of God, if we are to have a real vision for life in the future. As in human relationships, prayer doesn't depend on us finding the right words. The Holy Spirit helps us and even sighs can be enough.

Some churches have weekly prayer groups to pray for those in the fellowship or beyond. They may pray for anything from a mission partner to a concern such as climate change or world poverty. Individuals may ask for prayer support during difficult times. Churches may pray for their sister churches and use a prayer cycle. The possibilities are endless. Perhaps the only thing that's unhelpful is to do none of these things

### **Four stories of people praying 10**

At this point you might offer one or more of these four stories of people praying. You can decide which to share with your group or you may think of others which suit you better.

### Prayer for healing

Someone came for prayer with laying on of hands during a Holy Communion service, seeking prayer for her dying father. She didn't ask that he would live – she knew his death was coming – but for him to lose his fear of dying and for his reconciliation with her two brothers who hadn't been on speaking terms with him for years. Within the week her father had died, at peace, with his family present and without any fear. Both his sons had been at the bedside, with other family members, as he died. The woman spoke later of the way God had answered her prayer in every respect. Her father and her brothers had settled their differences and the manner of his death had left a very strong impression on the medical staff at the hospital. Only a few people in church knew about this. It was a powerful reminder that Communion allows people to let go and surrender to God so healing can happen.

*'God answered in every respect'*

### Prayer with chocolate sprinkles

Prayer in a café may sound rather strange, but this is what four churches in one suburb have been exploring with monthly café style services. It's in a local café out of hours, with food and drinks, and different activities set up on tables. Prayer is linked with things to do – people have written *haiku* prayers on the theme of water, planted bulbs with their prayers for creativity, and given thanks for the joys of summer on the rays of a huge sun. For those who want some stillness there is a space with words and images related to a theme. At first, most of those who came were from the four churches. Now it has begun to reach those on the margins of, or disillusioned with, the conventional church. It is a chance to pray with the imagination and the senses, blurring the boundaries of sacred and secular. God is experienced in the shared food, friendship, and reflective exploration of prayer.

*'Reaching those on the margins'*

\* haiku: short poems with 17 syllables

*'Praying for people  
makes faith relevant'*

### **Something you'd like us to pray for?**

One church has been praying effectively for the community around it for a number of years now. Each week, from Easter to Harvest time, pairs of people walk the streets, stopping sometimes to pray, and visit homes in the local area one street at a time. Early in the week a card is delivered to let people know that they will be calling. Then the visitors ask if there are any prayer requests to bring to church on the following Sunday. They usually get a very positive response and the prayers are part of the Sunday intercessions. No further contact is made apart from a Christmas card but the results have been very encouraging. The church is now known as a prayerful group of people who care for the community. As a result, local residents often drop prayer requests through the letterbox or call in on a Sunday to ask for prayer. Not only are the congregation's prayers now community-based but a number of people have come to faith this way. It seems as though praying for the community has helped people to become aware that faith can be living and relevant – they want to know more.

### **Hanging on in there with prayer**

A committed church member, who has a demanding job working with small children, regularly asks her church for prayer from their weekly group and on Sunday mornings. Sometimes she asks for herself and sometimes for those she works with. She quite often finds one colleague, who happens to be her boss, very difficult. She considers this person handles situations badly, fails to consult senior staff before making major decisions, and causes a lot of unnecessary pain to staff members who feel undervalued and overlooked. At times she feels like looking for another job. At other times she says her prayers seem to be answered – her boss asks her for advice and treats her as someone with skills and experience, so the atmosphere in work improves for a bit. She never knows from one day to the next how things are going to be. Despite everything, she keeps praying and asking for prayer about her work. The situation isn't resolved – it's still messy and difficult despite the occasional signs of hope – but somehow prayer keeps her hanging on in there in a way nothing else could.

*'We need your prayers  
in work'*

# worksheet

transformed through prayer

**HOW PRAYER WORKS**

In this box, please put a word or phrase that completes the phrase: **In my experience, prayer is...**



### **UNPACKING OUR PRAYER**

In your small group, take turns to talk of three things

- to remember a time when praying seemed helpful or natural
- to remember a time when you found praying hard
- what you think and feel about the prayer that happens in your church and how this relates to praying on your own

If there's time, each group should also give everyone a chance to say whether, how and why their understanding of prayer may have changed over the years.

### **PSALMS AS PRAYERS**

- reading your psalm as a prayer, what can we learn about the person praying?
- reading your psalm as a prayer, what can we learn about praying?

**Hearing back from you...**

We hope that our ideas have helped you to have a useful discussion and that your church is considering engaging with the next three years of *Vision4Life*.

A lot of *Vision4Life* materials, including downloadable versions of the words and images in this booklet, will be on the website [www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk) as well as worship ideas. Please use the website if you can and let us know if having printed materials as well is really important to you.

Comments, stories and suggestions on our website:

**[www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk)**

or send an email to:

**[admin@vision4life.org.uk](mailto:admin@vision4life.org.uk)**

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Many thanks from the *Vision4Life* steering group

