

MINDFULNESS IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Illustrations from the Gospels

BY TIM STEAD

ILLUSTRATION BY TERRI SCOTT



The story goes back to the 1970s when Jon Kabat-Zinn, with a PhD in molecular biology, began to develop a meditation-based program to help support people suffering from chronic pain. When he began to realize that the practices might have some significant health benefits, he developed an eight-week program that later became known as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. Mindfulness can be described as being *more fully aware of your own experience in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way*. As he would be the first to admit, mindfulness was not invented by Jon Kabat-Zinn! As a Buddhist friend of mine once said in response to someone's lazy assertion that mindfulness had been invented in America 25 years ago: "Perhaps you should change continents and add on a couple of zeroes!"

Mindfulness can be described as being more fully aware of your own experience in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way.

But many rightly will argue that something very similar to mindfulness has been around in the Christian tradition since the beginning too. We haven't called it mindfulness. We've called it "silent prayer" or "contemplative prayer," "the desert tradition" or "mystical theology," but it has been there from Jesus, through St. Paul, all the way up to the present. Still, Christianity urgently needs to take on board the insights of mindfulness, and there are three things in particular I would like to note here.

First, there is the particularly Western emphasis on the intellectual, with the corresponding caution, if not downright mistrust, of our experience. We are rightly proud of our intellectual tradition in the West, but there has been an equivalent danger of seeing spirituality as something that happens primarily in the head in terms of pure, beautiful and "correct" thoughts about God. Second, the Western tradition has a history of negative attitudes toward the body as well as the material in general. But God made us mind *and* body; furthermore, having made us this way, God declared us "good." Third, we need to consider the consequences of our over-emphasis, in Western teaching, on personal sin and judgment. I fully accept that there are actions I may take that are

harmful both to myself and to others and that these actions often originate in the mind or with body impulses. But many testify nowadays that the way we have spoken about these things and the guilt and shame that has been evoked has not, actually, led to changed lives. In fact, it seems more often that it has led to a very harmful kind of repression.

All these things are forms of the "dualism" that has marked recent centuries of Christian development in the West. Gradually we are coming to see such leanings as an aberration from earlier forms of faith and certainly not helpful for the path toward wholeness. The Gospels, though, seem to me to be full of this more holistic approach to spirituality.

The Parable: "Waking Up"

"When he came to his senses, he said: 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'" (Luke 15:17, NIV).

The parable of the prodigal son is a beautiful story and one that perfectly illustrates the sense of awareness we are trying to explore. Have you ever had the experience of suddenly "coming to" while being fully awake, in the normal sense of the word, all the time? Maybe you were driving along without really thinking. And suddenly you realize where

you are and what you have been thinking about for the past who knows how long. This is what happened to the prodigal. He had made some choices and followed them through on a very long journey until he was miles from home. He would have had to think quite carefully, on one level, about travel, board, and lodgings, choices of various forms of entertainment to spend his money on, and the various business transactions required along the way. So his brain was indeed operating, perhaps very effectively. But in another sense he was sleepwalking, with no real awareness of where he was going or where he would inevitably end up.

In the prodigal's case, it was only when he was reduced to absolute poverty that he "came to his senses." In other words, there came a moment when he "woke up" from his dream and realized where he was and what he was doing. Only then did he recognize the fact that he did have a choice. He could carry on as he was, or he could return to his father and start again.

We are only ever partly awake—partly aware. If we want to know God and God's will for us, we need to wake up to where we are and what we are doing. Sometimes it takes a traumatic event to wake us up. But how much better it would be if we spent time practicing waking up. This is what mindfulness practice does.

The Vignette: "Being" and "Doing"

"There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42).

The visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha is an oft-quoted story, especially by those of us who would advocate the contemplative life over the active life. I remember the time a preacher opened

this passage up to me by saying that there was a bit of Mary and a bit of Martha in all of us. We are not one or the other, but perhaps we ought to understand this as two ways of being in life. I don't think we can assume that Jesus is saying that sitting and listening is better per se than getting the work done. But he may have been suggesting that there are two ways of being in life, and that we need both, but Mary's way is of primary importance. Taking time to sit and become aware of Jesus' words to us must be our starting point. Becoming more fully aware of the big picture must take priority before we rush to do stuff.

The trouble is that for many of us, "doing stuff" is all we know; sitting and listening is a bit of a closed book. Mindfulness, then, helps to develop this kind of awareness.

The Prophet: "Making Way"

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3).

It could be said that John the Baptist is to Jesus as mindfulness is to prayer or the work of God. John came not to save, not to do the work himself, but to help people get ready so that when the moment arrived—when the Savior came—they would be in a place where they were ready to receive what Jesus had to offer.

Mindfulness itself does not fix things but seeks to open up a space where things might (if appropriate) be fixed. In fact, it teaches us more about not fixing things and about learning that it is not our place to try to save ourselves. But it does teach us the skill of opening things up—bringing concerns to the surface—so that, in God's time and in God's way, they might be

Mindfulness does teach us the skill of opening things up so that, in God's time and in God's way, they might be healed or restored.

healed or restored. Jesus talked about how what is hidden will be disclosed and what is secret will be brought to light (Mark 4:22). This is what mindfulness does. Then, when things are disclosed and in the light, there is the chance that God can be more a part of them so that healing or "fixing" may come.

When I started sharing these passages with a group of mainly Christians who had just completed a mindfulness course, a number of other passages with a possible connection with mindfulness began to come to mind.

- *On learning the way of not striving:* "Look at the birds in the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26).
- *On learning to live in the present moment:* "Jesus proclaimed, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near'" (Mark 1:15); "Give us each day our daily bread" (Luke 11:5).
- *On learning to perceive in a different way (not primarily*

intellectual or cognitive): Jesus declares that the purpose of the parables is that "they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand" (Mark 4:12).

- *On receiving physical sight:* the discourse in John's Gospel after Jesus healed the blind man (John 9).
- *On waking up to something that has been under our noses all along:* the disciples who eventually recognized Jesus when he broke the bread at the end of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–31).
- *On the primary dynamic of spirituality of "being" not "doing":* Jesus told us to "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4).

There is a danger, of course, when you have started to think about mindfulness, to read mindfulness into every Scripture text you come across, but there seems to be enough here to give us certain confidence that, far from straying away from Jesus' spirituality, we appear to be straying right into the heart of it.

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BY PHILIP G. MONROE

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Mindfulness has clear positive health benefits by reducing our stress responses to the chaos in our lives. Mindful individuals appear to have greater amounts of patience, are able to avoid impulsive responses to stress, process rather than react to emotions, and have greater capacities to be curious and loving.

It is well-known that small amounts of stress activate the body and larger amounts make us sick. The same biological response system that fights viral intruders activates with high levels of stress. Your body senses an intruder. The macrophages that come in contact with a virus act like little ants sending messages to their buddies to come and defend the colony. Your resulting fever is evidence that the body is working. But to work this hard, other bodily systems get shut down. Your stomach and intestines stop or slow down their contractions, you lose your appetite and sexual drive, you have difficulty thinking clearly. These sick symptoms are more likely the result of your body's defense mode than the virus that has intruded.

The same thing happens with high stress. Your pleasure centers shut down to conserve energy. Such activity decreases clarity of thought and pleasure and thus increases experiences of depression and anxiety. See how a vicious cycle of stress and distress leads to greater symptoms of depression and anxiety?

What is mindfulness? The answer depends on who you ask. Definitions range from Buddhist forms of meditation to being present in the moment, to being aware, to centering prayer, to having a nonjudgmental stance. So for some it is a religious activity. For others, it's a form of consciousness. And for still others it is in relational "attunement," such as a mother's awareness of the meaning of an infant's needs even before the cry or a service dog that picks up subtle clues. The truth is that each one of these

fragments of definitions captures a little bit of what one observes and someone who is able to, in the moment, stand back from the chaos in their life and not react to it. Such people seem to be alert to the moment, are being in the moment rather than reacting and doing something, are more likely to be describing the events, feelings, perceptions, rather than judging them.

Mindfulness in Psychology

Mindfulness research in psychology has exploded because of the propensity for us to be constantly and anxiously judging our worlds. We confirm our own fears about what is right, wrong, good, bad. Mindfulness recognizes that there can be wise thinking about these things, but that much of our lives are reactive and anxiety-based. We benefit from the reminder that acceptance of feelings and experiences helps us to be aware that there is a bigger picture. While some of us, particularly from a Christian worldview, think this acceptance makes us passive or allows us to become unwilling to do something about sinfulness, this is not the point of mindfulness or meditation and would be a misuse of these tools.

What happens in the brain when a person is practicing mindfulness? Thought and feeling patterns result in neural activities in the brain. Repeated neural activity creates stronger connections between neurons (increased synaptic activity and denser connections with neurons in the same neighborhood). Repeated activity leads to greater blood flow and activation in particular regions of the brain. Neuroscientists call this neuroplasticity. Thus, affective and cognitive patterns can change your brain.

Think about this. What patterns of thought do you engage in? Do you have a habit of fantasizing? Mulling over bitter or jealous thoughts? While some of these may come naturally to you, what you do with them may actually change or strengthen neural connections in the brain—for better or for worse. Much of our lives are run on auto-pilot. So frequently we react to life rather than observe it without giving in to impulsive reactions. When we are in that mode, it is easy to fall into rumination, but these are not healthy patterns. Mindfulness reminds us to stay in the present, to be attuned to our surroundings. Notice ruminations, but let them

slide on out of view, and bring yourself back to the present. Use your senses given by God to enjoy the world God made. Smells, sounds, sights, taste and touch all provide means to enjoy the world.

Mindfulness includes the stepping back from shoulds, oughts, and other judgments. One might think that this would be dangerous for Christians. The Bible is among other things, the single guide for Christians to determine how to live for God. So the question is whether Christians should be wary of anything that seems to let go of shoulds and oughts. In my experience as a clinical psychologist, those suffering from anxiety and depression suffer from a disorder of judgments. They are flooded by shoulds and oughts, and their self-talk does not seem to come from the Lord but is already laced with prejudice.

“You *should* have been more vigilant against danger *and* you weren’t. You’re a failure.”

“You *shouldn’t* be rebellious *but* you are always a screw-up.”

“I *shouldn’t* have to suffer this way *and* God must not care for me.”

Notice that most of these forms of judgment seem to be careful consideration of the facts and experience but actually are well-formed opinions that may be based on only a smidgen of the actual events in the person’s present circumstances. Ruminative thinking come in disguise of careful, logical thoughts, but it is well-practiced narratives and conclusion that we repeat regardless of the actual facts of our lives. Mindfulness, then, instead of automatically repeating a script provides the opportunity to discover what is instead just what we assume.

Have you ever engaged in a fantasy conflictual conversation with someone you

are about to meet—or even what you *should* have said after the conversation ended? You play out yourself winning, being mistreated, standing up for what is right, and so on. Notice how such conversations are not useful and only increase your level of stress because your brain responds to the inner drama as if were really happening. We create tension that leads to suffering.

Mindfulness in Christian Counseling

Mindfulness includes practicing being present in one’s surroundings. A Christian psychology of mindfulness might start by identifying the problem of distorted thoughts, perceptions, and judgments and their genesis in the mind and heart. Second, the model of mindfulness might articulate the proper cognitive and attitudinal engagement in an unpredictable and frightening world. In a counseling practice, for instance, the counselor may encourage clients to take in their surroundings. While thoughts may race through the brain, the mindful person may choose not to follow them but instead drink in the creation of beauty around them—things growing, art, or anything that is a delight to the senses. This form of discipline must be practiced in distressed times so that it will be available in a crisis, just like a basketball player practices free throws over and over so as to make the shot when there is only one second left on the clock. Such is the work of taking every thought captive to obey Christ, as the apostle Paul admonishes in 2 Corinthians 10:5, or taking to heart the psalmist’s restful words, “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child

with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me” (Psalm 131:1–2).

One might consider those spiritual disciplines designed to center one’s mind in Christ or to be watchful of thoughts. James Wilhoit of Wheaton College offers helpful thoughts on a prayerful stance of observing the thoughts.¹ The goal is not emptying the mind but maintaining conscious connection with the spirit. Such activity opposes “What if?” or “If only” kinds of hypervigilant thinking—thinking that accompanies depression and anxiety and hinders contentment. Wilhoit describes the concept of watchfulness as an intentional construal of the world from God’s perspective. In my thinking, this form of mindfulness does not grasp after logical constructions but observes the world as God sees it and recognizes the common but distorted scripts used as substitutes.

Anxiety means we’re unable to live in the present. And when we cannot live in the present, we cannot tune into the sacred moment offered to us. Anxiety keeps us at the surface, messing with trivialities with a kind of addictive fervor, disconnected from our soul’s homing instinct. The gift of a moment—this moment—is an awakening to what our hearts most deeply long for. It opens us up to the whisper of the spirit within. God tells us, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10). With a few deep breaths and long pause we can fairly quickly tune back to this eternal truth.

Notes

1. “Centering Prayer,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Books, 2010).

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GETTING STARTED WITH MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness practices bring many benefits but don't have to be overwhelming. Like many habits, the more we practice, the better we get, but we don't have to be experts before we can start. Here are some ideas for getting started with mindfulness in small doses in a variety of ways until you hit your stride.

1. **Mindful Mornings.** Are you aware of how you start the day? Even before you get out of bed, take some deep breaths, use a favorite centering prayer, or pause to be aware of how the various parts of your body feel.
2. **Working Ways.** When you sit in your chair, let yourself feel your body come into contact with the chair, the floor, the desk, or other physical tools of your profession. Draw a breath and let it out slowly before moving on to be physically present to another dimension of your space before being lost in the rush of tasks.
3. **The Best Intentions.** We all have things we have to *do* every day that consume most of our time. It only takes a few seconds to choose something that we want to *be* today—kind, calm, patient. What value is on your heart that you want to embrace in this moment?
4. **Noticing Senses.** Try using a sense you don't usually focus on. Close your eyes and listen. Stop moving and be still. Inhale deeply the fragrances around you. Touch a new texture. In that moment, what is that sense of discovery like?
5. **All the Feels.** We do so much on auto-pilot, from small tasks like brushing our teeth to important tasks like how we fuel our bodies or have conversations. For one minute, turn off auto-pilot. What does it feel like to brush your teeth? To scratch the dog's chin? To inhale clean laundry?
6. **The Real Truth.** When you have a self-deprecating thought, nip the rumination in the bud by speaking truth out loud. Say something positive and admirable about yourself, take a deep breath, and sit with the truth for a moment before moving on.
7. **Flickering Flames.** Light a candle and simply watch it flicker and dance. Let the simple movement of the light calm you. You are not trying to think about anything or accomplish anything but simply notice.
8. **Soothing Showers.** A warm shower already has a calming effect for many people. Use it as an opportunity to intentionally slow down, notice the sensory experience and observe your thoughts without judging them.
9. **Ritual Richness.** Your own mini-ceremony for anything from how you prepare your tea to clearing your desk—and your mind—at the end of the day can create calming space for you to better manage stress in your life.
10. **Cool Spots.** Choose a spot where you can be alone for five minutes—even in the midst of a group of people, such as on a bus or subway ride. Anywhere you can close your eyes, breathe intentionally, and observe your senses will help reduce stress.

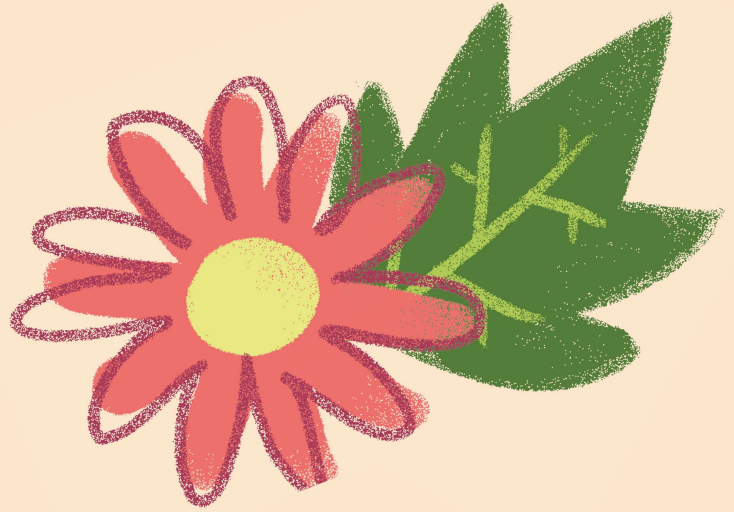
Will It *Really* Make Me Feel Better?

The research
on mindfulness
and medicine

BY JANE SLATERY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TERRI SCOTT





About 20 years ago I hit the wall. A number of health issues grabbed my attention—headaches, generalized joint pain and achiness, weight gain, chronic fatigue, low energy, crying spells, and sleep difficulties. I will never forget one day walking down the hall to greet a patient and she said to me, “Jane, are you okay?” It stopped me in my tracks. I was definitely not okay.

But I had no answers. My doctor could not balance my hormones. My therapist could not settle me down. Exercise, a healthy diet, Sunday church, and meaningful relationships had always helped me manage my stress. But nothing was working. Pray as I might for answers, I was not getting any. I found myself in a place that Franciscan priest and writer Richard Rohr calls “liminality.” It is a place where one is “betwixt and between, having left one stage of life but not yet entered the next” It is typically a realm of discomfort, darkness, and doubt. It is a time of thinking and acting in new ways, a place of new beginnings.

So I began intentionally searching for something genuinely new. The first change started with my prayer life. I began attending Centering Prayer Saturdays at Holy Communion Episcopal Church in Memphis, Tennessee. The next big step was my first week-long meditation retreat. Dan Brown, a meditation

teacher with over 40 years experience, introduced me to a “formal” sitting practice. I’ve learned that even five minutes of conscious breathing can rearrange my attitude, outlook, and behavior. For me, meditation has not only been transformative but life-saving.

What Does the Research Say?

In recent years, studies testifying to the health efficacy of mindfulness and meditation have inundated the public arena. According to Dr. Daniel Goleman and Dr. Richard Davidson in their book *Altered Traits: How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body* (2017), there are over 6,800 scientific articles on the topic of mindfulness and meditation. However, not all studies are created equal! In order to make sense of this large body of research the authors chose to focus on studies that favored the strictest experimental standards. Sixty studies met their criteria, and they found significant conclusions that relate to how we think about mindfulness and medicine.

Concentration. Studies support a marked improvement in the ability to concentrate with the practice of mindfulness. Attention sharpens, and keeping on task despite distractions improves. We also become more aware of when our minds are wandering.

We all know the signs of moving through the day trying to accomplish as much as we can, even if we don’t recognize it takes a toll on our health and well-being. Exploding technology, with apps, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on, is both a blessing and a curse, able to unite us or separate us. The experience of a scattered mind steals our focus. Studies show that heavy multitaskers do more things less well. When we jump from one task to another, the brain pays what Earl Miller, a professor of

In order to make sense of this large body of research the authors chose to focus on studies that favored the strictest experimental standards.

neuroscience at MIT, calls a “switch cost,” the time it takes the mind to return to where it was at the point of distraction. This results in more shallow thinking, rather than the deep concentration that produces answers and insights.

Goleman and Davidson have good news! Even five to ten minutes of daily mindfulness practice will begin to reap the benefits: improved attention, concentration, focus, and awareness. They found that just 10 minutes of mindfulness overcame the damage to concentration from multitasking—at least in the short term. About ten hours of mindfulness over a two-week period strengthened attention and working memory.

Stress and inflammation. Stress is a normal part of life, a condition we encounter on a daily basis: an unexpected meeting at work; preparing for exams; looming deadlines; children fighting; hearing of a loved one’s scary diagnosis. Fortunately our bodies are well equipped to handle and respond to daily stressors. However, long-term stresses take a larger toll on us: caretaking of a chronically ill spouse or child; working three jobs to make ends meet; grandparents raising the grandchildren.

When we have either a real or perceived threat, the body reacts and goes into “fight-

flight-or freeze” mode. Every system in the body responds; for instance, the heart pounds faster so the heart rate goes up, blood pressure rises, the breath quickens, the gastrointestinal system shuts down, and the nervous system signals the adrenal glands to release a flood of hormones. Cortisol is of particular importance in this response. Scientists have known for years that chronic levels of cortisol cause inflammation that can affect the whole body, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, heart attack and strokes, diabetes, cancers, autoimmune disorders, Alzheimer’s, arthritis, and digestive problems.

Once again, there is good news. Studies show that individuals who engage in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for 35 minutes daily for three days decrease levels of molecules responsible for inflammation, and longer practice of mindfulness brings lower levels. In one study, even unemployed job seekers, typically a highly stressed group, showed a reduction in these molecules after a three-day intensive mindfulness training program. In another study, volunteers who had never meditated before practiced mindfulness for 20 minutes a day for a week. When they were shown disturbing images while practicing mindfulness

during a functional MRI scan, their responses were significantly lower than non-meditators.

Chronic illness and pain. Lifting a pencil. Getting out of the car. Opening a window. Vacuuming. Getting out of the tub. Climbing stairs. These are all ordinary things we do every day without thinking about it—at least for most of us. For those suffering with chronic pain, seemingly routine movements prove challenging.

Chronic pain comes in many forms: chronic migraine disease; persistent low back pain from a work-related injury or car wreck; an athletic injury that results in disability; soldiers returning from war zones; cancer and necessary treatment. Regardless of the source of the pain, the chronic nature of it and stressors can change the quality of life in every regard, from financial stress to social isolation and depression.

Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School have led the field with research on mindfulness practices and chronic illness and pain. MBSR is one of the fastest growing kinds of practices offered in hospitals, medical centers, large corporate institutions, and schools, colleges, and universities and is the approach with the strongest empirical evidence of benefits.

What are some of the findings? Studies show a dramatic reduction in the average level of pain during the eight weeks of MBSR as measured by a pain questionnaire; there is an improvement in patients’ ability to engage in normal activities of daily living—driving, cooking, sleeping; negative mood states improve—less anxiety, depression, hostility. Participants report taking less medication, being more active, and feeling better in

general. Most encouraging is the finding that with continued mindfulness practice, the improvements last. However, it is important to note that mindfulness and meditation do not remove the biological cause of pain. Meditation acts on a part of the brain in a way that helps change the perception and experiences of your pain, making quality of life better. Research on MBSR shows that 30 minutes every day can make a significant difference.

Addiction. Science tells us that meditation and mindfulness have a positive affect on all kinds of addictions. An accomplished pioneer in this field, Dr. Judson Brewer, is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist who has found that meditation of any kind or duration has a calming effect on the part of the brain that affects distraction, a wandering mind, self-centeredness, and craving. His 2017 book *The Craving Mind* catalogs this research and explains the link between mindfulness and addictions.

Present to People and the World

Meditation has led me to be more present with my patients, my colleagues, and with those I love. I find myself more present to the cashier in the grocery store, to the mailman I meet at the mailbox, to my participants in my classes, and to God. It has helped me manage my anxiety when I wake up in the morning feeling really anxious and the day has not even started! With 20 minutes of focused breathing, my anxiety greatly diminishes. I can think more clearly, prioritize my day, and make decisions. Day-to-day it improves my concentration and focus to whatever task I am doing.

When I find myself stressed, I find my breath. When old habits and cravings creep in, I meditate and they ease. I have

more patience. Everything for me in nature is brighter, sharper. I am more attuned to the sounds or the quiet, the light and the shadows. The seagulls diving for breakfast. The sand between my toes. Maddie Paddie, my chiu-tzu, digging in the sand for crabs. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says so beautifully, “The little things and little moments, they are not little. They are life.”

About ten hours of
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Jane Slatery is an advanced practice psychiatric-mental health clinical nurse specialist. She incorporates mindfulness practices in her clinical work to help patients suffering with anxiety, depression, trauma, chronic pain, stress, and many other chronic conditions. She also teaches Mindfulness 101, a regular weekly meditation class at Church Health in Memphis, Tennessee.



JUMPSTART MINDFUL WALKING

HOW TO TAKE A MINDFUL DEVOTIONAL WALK

MINDFULNESS MEANS BEING MORE FULLY AWARE OF OUR EXPERIENCES IN THE PRESENT MOMENT.

Often when we walk, whether to get from one place to another or for the purpose of exercise, we separate movement from our thoughts. Our bodies do one thing while our minds race in another direction altogether. When that happens, walking takes us away from the present moment.

Mindful walking is an opportunity to be fully present in what our body is doing. We can be mindful of our breath, of how our bodies feel, of how our bodies respond to the environment, of how our thoughts take form and to bring them back to the bodily experience rather than watching them race off.

We can mindfully choose how to bring our thoughts toward supporting health in body and spirit as we walk with a meditative focus. A brief devotional time before a walk can provide the focus to center our minds as we walk and open up space where God's healing presence may become clear.

USE THESE TIPS FOR MINDFUL DEVOTIONAL WALKING.

Church Health offers three *Walking With* devotionals (see next page), but most devotionals can be easily adapted for mindful walking, so choose one you feel comfortable with.

1
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Begin with a brief devotional time using your chosen devotional or text. As you read the day's reflection, settle on a word or phrase from the Scripture verse or the reflectional passage. Make this your focal point as you walk.

2
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Pray and invite God's presence into your mindful walk, asking God to clear your mind and spirit and open up space for divine communion. You might want to jot down your day's focal point to carry with you as you walk.

3
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While you walk, practice mindfulness. Allow your senses to help you be fully present in the moment and not carried off by the cares of the day. Feel and notice the small experiences around you so that they might be gateways to a larger awareness of God's healing presence.

4
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If you find your mind wandering to your to-do list or your worry list, bring your mind back to the focal point you chose from the daily devotional time. If you wrote it down, this is a good time to look at it again and remember why you chose it.

5
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At the end of your walk, reflect on what you noticed as you walked that calmed you, brought you joy, connected you to God, or provided positive perspective on circumstances that might have been weighing you down. Consider keeping a journal where you write down one sentence each day of your awareness of God from your walk.

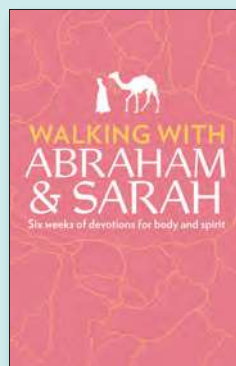
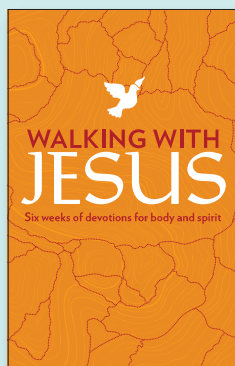
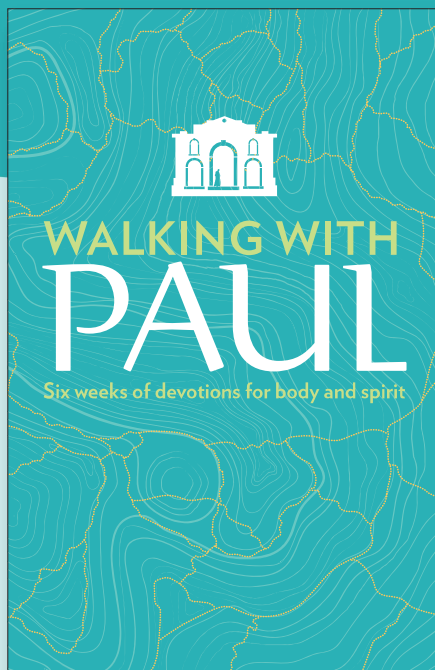
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Give thanks to God for the healing moments of your mindful devotional walk in a brief prayer or song before moving on to the responsibilities that await you.

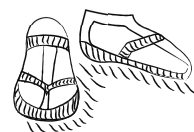
Start your mindful devotional walk with the *Walking With* series

Church Health's *Walking With* devotional books offer tools to invite the movement of God into the movement of your body. Each of these books includes 42 days—six full weeks—of daily devotions designed to help readers make small changes and simple lifestyle improvement to health and faith. Participants add steps, water and vegetables to daily routines. An inspiring devotional dimension supports the connection between health in body and spirit making them an excellent tool for beginning your mindful devotional walk.

At the end of each week, you can transfer your checkmarks and steps from your Daily Health Journal to a summary chart and see how you did for the week.



WALKING WITH PAUL
EXCERPT



Week One in Review

ARE YOU FINDING LESSONS that resonate as you walk with Paul through the early phases of his ministry? An encounter with Jesus changed his belief and led to turning his life in a direction he had not imagined. He learned from others. He joined with others. He listened to the wisdom of others. He put his God-given abilities to use in the service of others. He was not a lone ranger. These are lessons we can all take to heart as we take our next steps along the pathway to an improved level of health in all the dimensions of our daily lives—work, relationships, emotions, faith, medical issues, what we eat and how we move. We don't have to do it alone, and as impossible as change might seem, it is possible. The change might not be change in our outward circumstances. It might be better health in our spirits and in our ability to manage the circumstances of our lives in healthier ways.

Transfer your daily steps in the space below. If you set a goal for all three categories, put checkmarks in the boxes where you reached your goal for each day.

Number of steps	Add 2,000 steps	Add 3 vegetables	Add 3 glasses of water
Day 1 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 2 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 3 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 4 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 5 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 6 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Day 7 _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20 walking with PAUL

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Walking with Paul

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- Two self-assessments
- Tips for adding steps to your day
- Tips for cutting 100 calories
- Activity conversion chart

WALKING WITH PAUL EXCERPT

REFLECTION

We pick up again in the middle of the sermon that Paul was giving in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. After reminding his listeners of the ways God had been active on behalf of God's people through the centuries—the beliefs he robustly shared with the hearers—he now turned to speaking boldly about Jesus. His key message was that the salvation that the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of, which God had promised since the time of Abraham, was fulfilled in Jesus.

"We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us," Paul said.

Paul did not force a message upon his listeners without first preparing them by acknowledging where they were on their own spiritual journeys. The power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, would join them on their journeys. The gospel is God's good news for what God wants for us—what God has wanted for all people from the start.

In lives where bad news can strike at any moment, with the next phone call or the next piece of mail or the next conversation that we have in a typical day, isn't it good news that God's plan has been unwavering? Isn't it good news that God's plan is coming to fulfillment? Isn't it good news that we can participate in God's plan for the world? Take a few minutes to consider how God's good news manifests in your life.

A Message of Good News

ACTS 13:30–33

"And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us."
—Acts 13:32–33

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HEALTH TIP

We all run out of energy—and often reach for the wrong foods or don't even want to think about what we're eating. The right foods fuel our bodies, but did you know that socializing with others also revitalizes your energy? People who are often alone and avoid social interaction also report feeling more tired, stressed out, and overwhelmed. Take time to be with friends this week.

— DAILY HEALTH JOURNAL —

Number of steps _____

☐ Add 2,000 steps

☐ Add 3 servings of vegetables

☐ Add 3 glasses of water

walking with PAUL 21

WALKING WITH PAUL EXCERPT

HEALTH TIP

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Record your steps for each day and check off whether you met the goals of adding 2,000 steps, 3 servings of vegetables, and 3 glasses of water in the Daily Health Journal.



The Way of the Pilgrim

Learning prayer in the mindful life

BY SCOTT MORRIS

When I was a student at Yale Divinity School, professor and author Henri Nouwen was always talking about the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The idea is that you repeat it over and over to clear your mind of other thoughts. On a couple of occasions with Henri leading a group, I tried it, but I wasn’t patient enough. I wanted to connect to God, and everyone said you couldn’t do it without prayer, but I just didn’t see how it worked.

This struggle with prayer had been going on for a long time before—and after—I met Henri Nouwen and first learned the Jesus Prayer in the 1970s.

Over the years, I had tried to pray every way possible. As a kid, I couldn’t see the point of intercessory prayer, where you tell God what you want God to do. If God knows all, surely God is aware of what I want God to do. Why would God need my direction? If someone was sick, surely God was already on the case. If I wanted something to happen, isn’t the point that God knows what is best for me? After I became a preacher, I tried to be good at public prayers on Sunday mornings for other people’s sakes, but I still found it unsatisfying for my sake.



ILLUSTRATION BY
TERRI SCOTT

Was I converting to something other than Christianity? I was not willing to do that.

Sticking with Team Jesus

When I was in college, it was soon after the Beatles had gone to India and met with the Maharishi. I wasn't a Beatles fan, but after that the entire country was ablaze with transcendental meditation, TM. The Hari Krishnas were everywhere in their orange flowing gowns and dancing drums. I wasn't going that far, but as a first-year student at the University of Virginia, I saw signs for a class in transcendental meditation and signed up. I was curious. Of course, I had to pay my money first. There was a lecture on mindfulness, which seemed to me just a way to keep your mind calm. There were pictures of the Maharishi all around the room. I tried to keep an open mind.

It was explained that TM was a way to go deeper into consciousness, and it was important to calm the restlessness of the mind. Thoughts of other things were merely distractions and when they arose, one should just "let them go" and return to the mantra and the meditation process.

That was all well and good, but what was a mantra and when were we going to get down to it? After the second lecture, I was given a time to meet privately and receive my unique mantra and learn how to meditate on my own. On a Thursday night at 8:00, I showed up. A young woman

wearing a sari greeted me with "Namaste." She spoke barely above a whisper. All kinds of incense were being burned. What was I about to do? Was I converting to something other than Christianity? I was not willing to do that. I swallowed hard and tried to look calm.

She called me over to something that looked like a makeshift altar and motioned for me to kneel in front of it. *Uh oh. Jesus, I am still on your team.*

She knelt beside me for what seemed like an eternity. Then she started reciting the sound *om*. She motioned to me and nodded her head. It took a moment, but I caught on. I was to start chanting *om*. So I did. She then got up and took me by the hand and led me to a chair. She told me, "Recite it just in your mind. Let it take you deep into your consciousness. If other thoughts enter just push them aside and return to the mantra." I tried to follow directions.

She left the room. Now what? I tried to do what she had instructed me to do. I sat upright with my feet on the floor and I kept saying *om* over and over in my mind. She told me *om* was unique to me. I'd never heard it before, so I claimed it as mine. She told me never to tell anyone my mantra. For years I never did, until I realized the whole world used it. I sat with my eyes closed and my hands on my lap for 10 minutes. I did feel a sense of calm. Did I drop off to sleep? Perhaps. She came back in and told me I was to meditate twice a day. She again bowed and said, "Namaste." And it was over. I was now practicing TM.

I was embarrassed to tell anyone. I worried people would think the next step was shaving my hair and becoming a Hari Krishna. But I kept at it—at least for a while.

Even though I liked how it calmed my mind, I didn't feel grounded in anything that was about God.

Mindful Openness

When I first tried the Jesus Prayer with Henri Nouwen, it immediately seemed like TM. I just replaced *om* with the short prayer. At the time, I was much more intent on being a theologian than a person known for praying. I didn't realize you really cannot be one without the other.

Years later I was in an unhappy season in my personal life and had to make a difficult decision. I didn't know what to do. For some reason, I picked up a little book—it was only about three inches long—titled *The Way of the Pilgrim*. I'm not sure why I started to read it, except that I felt desperate. It was about a Russian peasant looking to find God. He encountered a priest who taught him the Jesus Prayer, which I'd forgotten about, and told him to use it to pray ceaselessly. He started by praying a few times a day. Then he prayed a few times an hour. Eventually he prayed nonstop, and the prayer became his life. If other thoughts entered his mind, he would let the recitation of the prayer push them aside. By living the prayer, he found what he was looking for. I needed to try something, so I said to myself, "Start praying."

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." And I began saying this prayer as often as I could. At first, I would forget about it for a few hours or a few days. Then I would remember and start again. When I had time, I intentionally thought about how it could let me sit and see how God might connect to me. I would just be open.

It didn't make my stressful circumstances go away, but I do think it helped me weather the storm.

For a while I needed to consciously focus my mind on doing it. If I didn't, I would slip off into whatever else the world was calling me to do. But after about a year, I was able to just keep it there. Ever present. Now I have been praying the Jesus Prayer for years. From time to time I will go for a week or two without the prayer and say to myself, "How did that happen?" and then start back up.

My wife sometimes sees me in what looks like a blank stare and will ask, "What are you thinking about?" I will say, "Nothing" because that is the truth. I am fully occupied in the prayer. It doesn't mean God is speaking to me every time; certainly not. But I do feel calm and believe that if God were trying to say something, I might be in a frame of mind to hear it. It has certainly become the way I best understand what I believe prayer to be—a path to listening to God.

I'm far from the only person who experiences the Jesus Prayer as a way to open myself to God. These days we hear less about the Hari Krishnas and TM, but mindfulness and meditation are widespread and have proven health and spiritual benefits. Many people of faith use mindfulness practices for the same reasons I've used the Jesus Prayer all these years—to let go of everything that clutters our minds and be fully present in *this* moment, to be present in prayer, to experience it more clearly, and perhaps to find God waiting there.

**I do feel calm and believe that if God
were trying to say something, I might be
in a frame of mind to hear it.**

Simple Centering Prayers

What makes listening a holy act is recognizing divine presence at the heart of everything—whether in hearing our inner world more clearly, or in listening openly to another, or in turning our attention directly to the Holy One. Listening to God in the midst of daily challenge and gift is the crux of prayer.

Sometimes we need to stop what we're doing long enough to breathe deeply and center attention at the core of our being. The Holy Spirit resides at the center of who we are—an image of our inmost heart. We know intuitively how to still our busyness and "center down." Paying attention to our breath puts us in touch with what gives life. God is Spirit. The Hebrew word for spirit and breath is the same. God sustains us with holy breath in each moment. We can simply absorb this gift, feeling the presence and energy of divine life in our own breath. The

life force revealed in breath can also bring us a sense of sustaining love. Imagine filling your heart and lungs with God's love! This practice takes very little time, yet can bring deep refreshment, calm, and joy.

Another way to practice "Breath Prayer" is to form a very short prayer phrase in two parts that moves rhythmically with in-breath and out-breath: "Holy Spirit, fill me." "Gracious God, heal my heart." "Lord Jesus, have mercy." "Oh Lord, give me patience." Take a little time to find a phrase that fits your life. Then spend a few minutes breathing this prayer before you rise from bed, breathe it as you shower or gaze out a window, call it to mind in times of stress, offer it up before drifting off to sleep.

Excerpted from *Courage for Caregivers: Sustenance for the Journey in Company with Henri J. M. Nouwen* by Marjorie J. Thompson, published by Church Health and the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, 2017.

Rev. G. Scott Morris, MD, is founder and chief executive officer of Church Health in Memphis, Tennessee. This is the largest faith-based, not-for-profit primary health clinic in the United States, providing health services to over 30,000 patients who are working but uninsured. Dr. Morris is a physician and United Methodist pastor.



Sanctuary, Silence, and Service

A congregation's venture into mindful worship

BY LAUREN HALES | ILLUSTRATION BY TERRI SCOTT

At Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Marshall, Texas, gentle lighting, calming instrumental music, and flickering candles interspersed throughout the sanctuary contribute to the immediate sense of calm and welcome worshippers have come to expect at the Sunday night contemplative service. This congregation of Cumberland Presbyterians are innovating what a Sunday's worship schedule looks like by offering a 5:30 p.m. service steeped in the contemplative Christian tradition. Leading Taizé-based and Celtic-based services on alternate Sundays, they are embracing the ecumenical Christian tradition of mindful contemplation and meditative prayer to worship the Lord.

The inspiration for these contemplative services comes from both the Taizé and Iona monastic communities—sacred spaces that emphasize a Christian contemplative approach to communing with God.

Taizé and Celtic

The Taizé community is a Christian ecumenical monastic community located in Taizé, France, founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schutz (1915–2005), a reformed Protestant. The services at Taizé are known for their focus on silence, meditation, and an opening to God's presence. As the current prior, Brother Alois, explains, "The exchange with God becomes real for us in prayer: by his Holy Spirit, God comes to dwell within us. By his word and by the sacraments, Christ gives himself to us. In return, we can surrender everything to him." The Taizé service focuses on this indwelling of prayer by creating an atmosphere of contemplation through meditative singing, experiencing periods of communal silence, and reflecting on Scripture.

Along the same lines, Cumberland Presbyterian's Celtic contemplative worship service is also modeled after the Iona community in Glasgow, Scotland. The Iona community "is a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship." Founded by George MacLeod in Glasgow and Iona in 1938, the community is an ecumenical Christian community of

people from different traditions drawn together to act, reflect, and pray for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

The Iona worship style, similar to Taizé, focuses on the power of contemplative prayer and music as a catalyst for a deepened experience of connection to God. Iona pulls heavily on the Celtic style of music to enhance worship, influencing religious communities all over the world to use this style of music. Above all, the Iona Community's worship emphasizes the call toward justice, which is present in the liturgy they recite and the prayers they speak.

Contemplative Worship at Cumberland Presbyterian

Just as Taizé and Iona both embrace an ecumenical Christian approach, Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Marshall's contemplative service draws on this blend of worship styles to create an innately Christian spiritual space. As the Reverend Mary Kathryn Kirkpatrick, associate pastor at Cumberland, explains, "There have been some forms of spirituality that have become popular that are not necessarily Christian, so many people seem to think that this is the nature of meditation—that it is not Christian. But it has been around for so long in Christianity; it just isn't practiced as much in the Western world, so it is not understood as an integral Christian practice as well."

This contemplative worship service, which began in 2012, was the brainchild of Pastor Kirkpatrick, the Reverend Richard

Magrill (retired clergy and volunteer) and the music director, Ray Herman. Pastor Kirkpatrick, while attending seminary at Memphis Theological Seminary, visited the evening contemplative service at Church of the Holy Communion (Episcopal). As she explains, “Every time I visited, I thought, we need to do something like this in Marshall if I get called back to ministry there. I had that constantly on my mind throughout the three years that I was in seminary.” When Pastor Kirkpatrick was called back to Marshall, she realized she wasn’t the only person who had been itching to bring a contemplative service to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Richard Magrill had also spent time attending Church of the Holy Communion’s

Though the Celtic and Taizé services differ slightly in their structure, Cumberland has kept the basic flow of their Sunday nights similar, inviting congregants into fellowship with the Lord through mindful worship.

Welcome. With soothing music, silence, and physical closeness, Cumberland is intentional in how they welcome worshippers into their space. By closing off the outer pews in their sanctuary, clergy purposefully invite congregants to sit closer for worship.

Music. While the Taizé services hosts a pianist, bassoonist, and flautist, the Celtic service is accompanied by a pianist and a recorder. The music director chooses the music to reflect both the week’s liturgy and the Taizé or Celtic tradition.

Reading. The Scripture reading sets the tone for the liturgy and reflection.

Reflection. The reflection is mainly given by volunteer lay people. Ranging anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, the reflection adds a sense of community and agency among the attendees by fostering participation.

Silence. After the reflection is a period of intentional silence. Pastor Kirkpatrick explains leaders “started out making our time of silence three minutes, which for some people was still more than they felt comfortable with. As of this last year we have expanded to five minutes, because this time of meditation and contemplation

is so calming for so many people.”

At the Feet of Jesus. This segment is named for Cumberland’s beautiful stained-glass window depiction of Jesus’s outstretched arms. Taking place physically near to the Jesus figure, the candle lighting embraces an ecumenical and mindful Christian effort. Pastor Kirkpatrick points out, “When we first started the candle lighting, an 11-year-old girl saw them lit up at the end of service and exclaimed, ‘Wow! Look at all the prayers!’ and I just thought, *She gets it.*”

Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is said at every service, with variations to explore the richness and versatility of the prayer.

Offertory. Instead of an offering that goes toward Cumberland’s own budget, the contemplative service focuses on the church in service to the community. Every offering is given to the local food pantry, where the church donated over 2,400 pounds of food in 2017.

The inspiration for these contemplative services comes from both the Taizé and Iona monastic communities—sacred spaces that emphasize a Christian contemplative approach to communing with God.

service and was looking to replicate it. With full support from the senior pastor, the Reverend William “Rusty” Rustenhaven, III, the mindful service was born.

These services have been planned, prayed about, and expertly executed for over six years now. Worshippers are immediately aware of the intimacy and spirituality as they enter on Sunday evenings. Soft Celtic instrumental music begins to play 15 minutes before the service starts, the lights are dimmed, and people file in quietly to pray and ease into the mindful nature of the service. The Taizé and Celtic bulletin’s opening paragraph sets the tone for the evening:

“We welcome you to this evening service and hope that you will find strength for your spiritual journey in the week ahead. As this service is contemplative in nature, we ask that you turn off all devices (cell phones, etc.) and that you observe silence upon entering the sanctuary to allow for private prayer.”

Communion. Holy Communion is offered every Sunday night.

Blessing and Closing. As the congregants are blessed and exit the sanctuary, they recess into the narthex where they pass a bowl full of water. Everybody puts their fingers into the water and swirls them around—a symbol designed to be a reminder of the call to service of others.

Why Add a Mindful Service?

Why would a congregation add a contemplative service to its already full Sunday worship schedule? Because, Pastor Kirkpatrick states, “Our members feel a connection with God at the contemplative service that is different from the traditional morning one. Just the fact that the service is different invites a judgment from members. It makes you stop and think about how you worship, it gives you the space for contemplation and a chance to dive in to silence and your own thoughts and prayers. It is so steeped in spirituality that I hope every Sunday it speaks to somebody.” One comment she has heard time and again is that, “The Sunday night service is calming ... to the people who come regularly; it starts their week off on a note of calm and peace.” Even though the style of worship alternates between Taizé and Celtic, the feeling of calm and welcome never varies. In fact, Pastor Kirkpatrick comments, “There are people who probably aren’t even aware that the music changes from week to week but who come just to enjoy the silence and calm.” Adding a worship service that promotes deep inner prayer, connection to God, and service to the community, has been a journey filled with trial, error, and much success.

For congregations who want to start a contemplative worship service, the leadership at Cumberland Presbyterian encourages these steps.

1. Meticulous planning. “We spent a lot of time asking ourselves, how do we want to do this, and what is the reason we want to do this? We wanted to remind people about the importance of service, which is why our offering is dedicated to the local food pantry and it underpins every part of the worship.”

2. Have a champion. For Cumberland Presbyterian, the clergy emphasize just how important it has been for them to have lay people to assist in the planning and execution of the service.

Resources Available to Churches:

- Iona Community’s official website: iona.org.uk
- Taizé Community’s official website: www.taize.fr
- *Songs and Prayers from Taizé* by Jacques Berthier
- Wild Goose Big Book of Liturgies
(from the Iona Community)

3. Be organized about building the service. “Over the years,” Pastor Kirkpatrick explains, “we have compiled a notebook full of our own contemplative liturgy that makes it simple to plan the service in advance. I choose the Scripture reading from the lectionary and then piece together a liturgy from our collection that fits best with the Scripture message. Then the music director chooses music and we are set.”

Adding a worship service that promotes deep inner prayer, connection to God, and service to the community, has been a journey filled with trial, error, and much success.

This contemplative service has become an integral part of the prayer life of Cumberland Presbyterian of Marshall, Texas. Cumberland took the initiative to fill a need they saw in their congregation with stunning results. It is the indwelling of Christ’s presence that calls Cumberland Presbyterian to their ministry of mindfulness.

Lauren Hales is assistant editor of Church Health Reader and faith community outreach coordinator at Church Health in Memphis, Tennessee.

Health Ministry Connections

How to Use This Issue in Your Congregation

Mindfulness, Christian tradition, and health care—three threads intertwine for fuller, balanced lives open to the presence of God in both ordinary moments and larger experiences. In many congregations, this combination may be unfamiliar, and this issue of *Church Health Reader* helps bring the experiences together for improved health.

How can you use this issue in your health ministry?

- Provide copies of a key article to a small group, such as a health ministry team, leadership team, or home Bible study group, and facilitate a conversation about how the article's ideas could help people in your

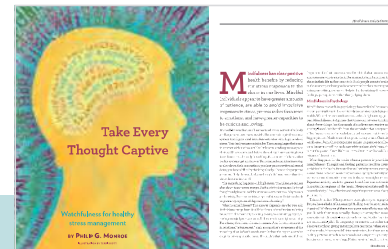
congregation or community move toward better health. (See provided suggestions.)

- Using suggestions in “Sanctuary, Silence, and Service” (page 36), plan a one-time contemplative worship service. Then invite feedback about how the experience helped members of your faith community find inner space to welcome God’s presence.
- Post or distribute copies of “Getting Started with Mindfulness” (page 23) as a way to help people see that simple practices that take only a few minutes and fit into daily routines can bring health benefits to body and spirit.



Mindfulness in the Christian Tradition (page 16)

- The author says that something similar to mindfulness has been around in the Christian tradition since the beginning. Thinking about major parts of the Bible and what you know of church history, how do you see this to be true?
- The article highlights three main examples from the Gospels of “waking up,” becoming more fully aware, and getting ready for the moment when God arrives. How might simple practices of mindfulness help us in these faithful practices?
- Share other examples or stories from the Bible that show mindfulness or meditation bringing healing into our relationship with God and others.



Take Every Thought Captive (page 20)

- A vicious cycle of stress and distress leads to greater symptoms of depression and anxiety. How widely do you see the issue of depression and anxiety in your own circles and experience?
- The author of this article describes the harm of ruminating on negative thoughts that are not founded in fact. How does mindfulness help interrupt the “script” of non-truths with truth?
- In what ways can mindfulness be both a beneficial psychological and spiritual practice?