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Introduction:

Karen is a textile artist who explores faith through creativity and stitch, facilitating others to draw closer to God through creativity. Through her art, she creates faith inspired narratives using layered textiles and mixed media and commissioned contemporary appliquéd stoles. See her work here: www.harlequinarts.co.uk

She is also a freelance creative facilitator working across the East Midlands in the areas of arts and wellbeing, primary education, adult & family learning. Karen is an experienced teacher and has worked as a children's & community worker in the Church of England, involved in Fresh Expressions of Church.

She is a spiritual director and lay chaplain with a passion for creativity, colour & contemplative prayer and enjoys facilitating others to draw closer to God. Karen has worked with the New Wine Arts Team, Spring Harvest, WORTH charity and across the country providing creative quiet days and retreats. She writes a blog, "Sanctuary in Stitch", journaling her spiritual journey in stitch. www.harlequinarts.co.uk/blog/sanctuary-in-stitch

Evidence Supporting the Benefits of Creative Arts & our Wellbeing:

I have been involved in facilitating wellbeing through the arts, providing bespoke participatory creative sessions for over twelve years, in a plethora of places ranging from parks to primary schools, tepees to tents, church halls to care homes, hospitals to holiday centres.

It is through enabling and inspiring others to be creative, working with a variety of people whose positive mental health is a challenge; facilitating connections through creativity- that informs my understanding of the benefits of how participating in creativity can enhance wellbeing.

There is an increasing amount of scientific and quantitative data to support this, too.

It has been found that participation in creative activities can provide a wide range of benefits, including:

- the promotion of well-being
- a better quality of life and health
- increased levels of empowerment
- positive impacts on mental health and social inclusion
- raised self-esteem
- provides a sense of purpose
- helped people engage in social relationships
- enhanced social skills and community integration.
- becoming absorbed in a creative process provides a positive distraction from pain, life issues and illness.
- engaging in a creative thinking process transfers to problem solving in general life and inspires life changes

Why Creative Arts Improve Wellbeing:

Participation in art has an impact on brain wave patterns, our emotions, and the nervous system, and can raise our serotonin levels. Art can change a person's outlook and the way they experience the world.

It has been found that participation in the arts impacts everything from overall academic achievement to social and emotional development. Research has proved that the arts develop neural systems producing a broad spectrum of benefits ranging from fine motor skills to creativity and improved emotional balance. Quite simply, the arts, in their broadest form, are invaluable to our proper functioning individually and as a society.

Combining creativity, faith, and prayer to support our own wellbeing

So...how can we combine creativity, faith, and prayer to support our own wellbeing, alongside those we encounter in ministry?

Below you will find a few ideas to try, both for your own wellbeing, and ideas to perhaps provide for your congregation, church groups or community (current social distancing and guidelines being followed, of course!)

Tips:

- We are all different, so some things may appeal to one person, but not another.
- My advice would be to just have a go, even if it feels unfamiliar....Almost every wellbeing session that I facilitate, I hear phrases on the following lines “Well I never thought I was any good at art, but I’ve really enjoyed this...and surprised myself at what I’ve created!”
- Try not to allow any negative associations in your head from the past, where you may have been told that you are no good at art. We are each made in the image of a creative God, and as such, are each made to be uniquely creative in some way or another. Try it, and see, trusting the process, rather than being too anxious about the end product. I would love to hear how you get on...

A Creative Medley of Ideas

The following ideas are in no particular order, just a hotchpotch of creative ideas to hopefully inspire you...

For Individuals:

- ***Plant bulbs/ seeds / herbs/ grow something***
Everyone can nurture a seed to growth, even if it is on a windowsill at home. Seeds have so much to teach us, and there are many spiritual truths shared in Scripture through analogies with seeds. As you sow the seed, nurture, and nourish it through the seasons, consider your own spiritual growth and perhaps journal or share with God how each stage of growth makes you feel.
- ***Share favourite music/ poetry/ book- whys***
In a group (use technology to meet up if unable to physically meet), share a favourite book or poem or piece of music (3 sessions there!) with each other. Consider why you like it. What life lessons does it contain that have helped you? What feelings does it evoke? What spiritual lessons are contained within, even if it is not an overtly spiritual book.
- ***Share stories of favourite tools***
We often own a tool that belonged to someone else. Share what it means to you, whether you still use it, what it has helped to create. Give thanks for the original owners. Consider how you each might pass on skills/ tools to others. Look at the stories of skilled craftspeople in Scripture... Dorcas the seamstress, Paul the tentmaker, Bezalel and Oholiab, artists, silversmiths and stonemasons, Joseph the carpenter. What characteristics does any Christian need for their job? *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.... You are serving the Lord Christ.”* (Col. 3:23-24)
- ***Create simple origami (e.g. fish/ heart/ box)***
There are lots of instructions online for these. You could use a piece of newspaper or magazine if you don’t have any fancy paper. Pray as you fold the design. For example, if folding an origami fish: “Thank you, Lord for your provision for me, providing all I need to eat. May I trust your provision. You are a God of miracles, who fed thousands from five loaves and two fish. Teach me to offer whatever small things I have into your hands, for you to use. Help me to be a fisher of men, looking to you for guidance wherever I go, being prepared like your fishermen- followers, to leave whatever is asked of me to follow you.” Once completed, place your origami creation somewhere prominent to contemplate further on what you have made.
- ***Phone photography praise***
Use your phone to intentionally capture images of our wonderful creation. Even if you cannot get out and about, a regular photo of the ever changing sky can often be enough to lift our spirits, and the photos are a legacy to look back on when we are feeling down, enabling us to marvel at the power of our Creator God.

You could share your photos with friends, to lift their spirits, too.

- ***Creative prayer with everyday familiar things***

Use any familiar thing, whether it be a household item such as a shoe, spoon, armchair, window or something you can see outside - a tree, street lamp, grass, bird to inspire you to prayer.

Consider ONE item for a few minutes. Think of its function, its colour, how it feels, who uses it, who made it, where and how it was made....Now let these thoughts lead you to prayer, allowing God to take your thoughts wherever He leads. For instance: A Shoe: "Thank you, Lord for the craftspeople who made my shoes, so that I can walk comfortably and safely wherever I choose. I pray for those who made this shoe, who perhaps were not paid a fair wage, nor afforded the protection in the workplace that we might expect in this country. Help me to walk in the ways of righteousness, following the way that you lead me, Lord. May my steps be trusting in the way that you lead me..."

- ***Recipe sharing/ Recipe for Life***

Share a favourite recipe. Tell others it's story. Where is it from? What memories does it hold for you?

Perhaps make it for someone else to enjoy. Write out your own "Recipe for Life" What advice would it contain? How does your recipe for life compare with the "recipe" Jesus gave us in the form of the greatest commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

- ***Share a simple homemade meal with someone***

Community is enhanced by eating together. We use the creativity of preparing & cooking food, alongside the gift of hospitality to create community. This isn't easy in the current climate, so use the advantage of good weather days to eat outside with a friend... simple shared soup and bread or tea and cake is a wonderful way to create wellbeing with and for others, or meet virtually via Zoom to share a meal with another household.

- ***Zentangle mandalas or postcards***

Using a black pen and white paper, zentangle patterns are a great way to pray. If you are unsure what zentangle is, look up "zentangle patterns" online for some examples. Basically, it is doodling- using different line and shapes to create complex patterns. Try drawing a simple cross. Split it into different sections using straight, wavy, curved, zig zag lines and then fill each section in with a different pattern. As you draw, think on all that Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross and being raised to life. Alternatively, create the word "JOY" or "FAITH" in bubble writing and use zentangle to fill the letters as you pray.

- ***Colouring***

Many find simple colouring a great way to unwind and pray. All you need is a pattern or picture that appeals and some colouring pencils.

- ***Collage***

I use collage quite a lot, often utilising torn coloured magazine pages for the colours, and newspaper or magazine letters for writing to build a collage of how I feel, or to think through a Bible passage or Scripture. A glue stick, scissors and a background piece of card is all you need for this idea.

- ***Gratefulness Diary/ Jar***

No matter what difficulties we are going through, there are always things to be grateful for. In this country we have so much to be thankful for. As we learn to be appreciative of all that we have, we dwell on the positive rather than feed any negativity and acknowledge the generosity of God.

- ***Post-It praise***

A slightly different take on the gratefulness diary....Take a pile of post-its and use one each day to write one

thing you are grateful for. Collect them together in a jar, to prayerfully consider your blessings.

- ***Colour Diary squares***

Divide a page up into 30 small sections (around 2cm x 2cm). Each day, in one square use either patterns or colour to express how you are feeling. There's no right or wrong for this, but it may help you to acknowledge how you are feeling, think about what has caused that, and be more aware of how to change that, if the feelings are negative. We can bring those feelings to God, too, asking for his help. Over 30 days, you may find patterns in your feelings when you look back...or you may not!

- ***Creative Bible journaling***

Many people like to journal in their Bible, either writing, doodling, drawing, painting, or collaging in the margins, to help them focus more on God's Word. If you are the sort of person who doodles when they are on the phone or at a meeting, to help you concentrate, then you are likely to enjoy this! If you Google "Creative Bible Journaling" you will find lots of pages that give you an idea of the sorts of things that are possible. You can even get Bibles with wider margins, slightly thicker pages, and blank pages to do this now! In Derbyshire there is a group that meet to explore this way of meeting with God, called "The Doodling Shack". They have a Facebook page under "N. Wingfield bible art Journaling"

- ***7/ 30/100 Day Creative Challenge***

For a bigger creative challenge, you could commit to doing something creative, every day for a week, a month or 100 days. Whatever you choose, make it small and achievable. One photo a day, one two-line poem, one doodle, one line of stitching, listen to a different piece of music every day...its up to you! Its amazing how tiny steps can, over time, lead us onto greater things.

For Churches & Communities:

- ***Creativity Audit***

Find out your congregations' creative talents- engage everyone to share something with others Have a creative audit. You may be surprised what hidden creativity lurks inside each person. People are often reticent at sharing a talent, when they feel they may not be particularly good. It is often through sharing our talents that we both enable others and grow in skill ourselves.

- ***Adapt any of the suggestions above for groups, congregations, or communities***

- ***Board Games Café***

Once able to, amidst the current circumstances, create a weekly or monthly board games café. It could be on a small scale, in someone's garden, home or larger scale, at church or in a community centre. Most people like to play games and there is such a variety out there to suit everyone. In the meantime, even retro games using paper and pencils such as battleships or a beetle drive (online or otherwise) provides creative connections, fun and laughter and needs extraordinarily little equipment.

- ***Themed event***

Whilst this may not be possible with the current COVID- 19 restrictions in place, perhaps use this time to creatively dream and plan. This could be for a small-scale event at home or a larger event for the community. Be creative! Create a themed event for a specific time of year such as harvest, sharing skills with others such as soup making, bread making, flower arranging, creating a harvest wreath... This could be for all ages, not just children. You could hold a tea dance, a pirate party or a comedy night dependant on your interests & skills. In the current climate, you could still do this, but connect with each other via Zoom, utilising different people's skills to provide the entertainment!