Dear LSN Supporters

Scotch Broad to start and the sweetest of peach melbas to finish, with everything from white wine and tortilla chips to Faisi Tomatoes and custard creams in between: the refreshments were as varied as the venues for our recent series of LSN conversations. Our conversation partners couldn’t have been more varied either – all 160 of them – who came to talk, to share questions and suggest answers, or at least approaches, to some of the questions raised.

But from Manchester to London, on to Winchester and finally Dunblane – a confederation of theological colleges, a spirituality centre in the heart of the City, a large city centre church and the home of ecumenism in Scotland – the most pressing questions and concerns were remarkably similar: Is there really a spirituality revolution going on? And if such a revolution is indeed underway, what are the implications for individuals, and for the churches, for those deep inside the institution; those far beyond it; and those somewhere on the edge; for theology and the future of the Christian tradition and vision; for community; for social action and service; for justice and peace; and, last but interestingly high on the list of people’s questions, what will this mean for the children and grandchildren growing up now, tomorrow, with little or no introduction to the Christian story?

While John and I had mapped out a possible route through the terrain, it was marked not in timetables but rather by vague fingerposts and crypts of knotted grass. While the underlying themes were very much the same in each place, different groups shared different experiences, explored different paths, and highlighted different experiences and insights. They were very much ‘live’ events: spontaneous, unscripted, responsive, and as with all live events, it’s difficult to convey what ‘happened’ to those who weren’t there. But John and I have done our best to give a sense of what did happen and I hope you find these reflections helpful.

One thing was very clear: both from the number of people who shared in the conversations and from their reactions at the end of each one of them: the opportunities for such conversations are very, very rare, and yet when the possibility is created for people to share the questions they’re living with – openly, honestly and without fear of judgement, ridicule or falling skies – the effects can be liberating, creative and affirming, sometimes profoundly so.

So I want to thank everyone who made these conversations possible, our hosts (of which more later), everyone who came, John, whose idea the whole project was, and above all Paddy Lane of the Retreat Association, who did the hard work of organising the entire series.

We’ve been asked if we would take the Living the Questions roadshow to other places in the coming months but have decided that the immediate priority to such requests has to be this book. We have been very, not to mention enjoyable, experiment. But it was always conceived as an experiment with a limited lifespan. In looking ahead we will, of course, be considering ways to build on what has happened and living new and different ways to live the questions, for as Thomas Merton once wrote: in the progress towards religious understanding, one does not go from answer to answer, but from question to question.

Get well, Elise.

Whither LSN?

We send thanks to everyone who has taken the time and trouble to contact the office with their thoughts on the future of LSN. We are particularly grateful for your encouragement and affirmation. Although this newsletter won’t be distributed until mid-July, it is being written before the crucial mid-year meeting in Edenbridge at the end of June, as Elise is away for the whole of July. We will of course let supporters know of any decisions regarding the future of LSN as soon as we can.

Living the Questions: thanks! This series of conversations would never have happened without the welcome, support and hard work of our hosts and we want to give our heartfelt thanks to the following people:

David Goodbourn and his colleagues at the Partnership for Theological Education, Luther King House, Manchester
Andrew Wakeham, like Foster Webber and Jennifer Ellis at the London Centre for Spirituality
Juli Wills and Howard Meller at the United Church in Winchester
Allaster and Liz Hulbert and Elizabeth Templeton atScottish Churches House in Dingwall

I’d like to repeat my thanks to Paddy Lane of the Retreat Association, who organised and publicised the whole series, to John Rackley, Minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church in Bath, who asked the ‘Whither LSN’ question that developed into the Questions, and our own Win Kennedy in the LSN office, who fielded calls and enquiries and made sure the bills were paid.

And finally, we want to thank everyone who came and joined the conversations – without you, they wouldn’t have happened!
Living the Questions 1

Eley McNish

I was nervous. ‘Live’ and unscripted is way outside my comfort zone. At 6.15 pm the only movement in the foyer of Luther King House was from one of the four encounters immediately presented me with the questioner who asked: why is it that the most interesting people are leaving the churches? I certainly didn’t avoid the questions when he raised them, but equally certainly I needed to go on thinking through the answers, though I suspect they may not be fully available for several generations come...

Living the Questions 2

John Rakeley

John is Minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church in Bath, a former President of the Baptist Union and former Chair of the Retreat Association

Living the Questions was a triumph of style over content. It was what it started out to be. It was a conversation. Only rarely did our encounter with people deserve detailed discussion and debate. This pleased me.

Conversation is not understood in Christian circles. It is not used often enough.

The urgency of our elders’ meetings, synods, and councils, debates and decision-making can push out the gentler and slower tasks of discernment. Conversation, however, moves at a different pace and can aid the necessarily slower process of perception and consensus. This is what is needed at this time in the life of the Church when panic buttons are being pressed all over the place. Conversation gives priority to listening – it includes both the serious and the recreational and brings down the self-important. It centres the marginal. It has no sense of boundary. It is just what is needed as hands hover over the buttons.

No. I am not one of those who is saying that the Church has been on the point of extinction before and survived, so all we have to do is wait for developments. Eley has convinced me that there is something very significant going on in the spiritual evolution of our Western culture. I expect to see much decline and closing in the latter years of my Christian service as a pastoral minister. Yet I am also seeing seeds of new developments that will feed new enterprises and incursions of the Spirit.

Are they those whom Eley calls the New Believers? Do I know who they are? Will they emerge from the Pentecostal resurgence of the churches in other parts of the world? Possibly. Might they be new expressions of inherited patterns among the traditional spiritualities? I’m not holding my breath. Could they be present in the movement culture of para-Christian groups? Only when they become less selfabsorbed and cope with how to move from first generation to second and third.

So the process has made me think. It was definitely worth all the journeys. It affirmed in me the importance of the local. For that grounds me in the reality of one context and whenever I returned from one of the four encounters immediately presented me with the most important questions: what sort? Only Bath knows my answer. My way is far down the lane and thank you to UHN here are my highlights:

The unnamed North American sociologist who considered one of the tests of the Spirituality Revolution would be how it was explored, conveyed and passed on to the children of those involved.

The minister’s wife who stood up for her husband as she watched his gifts being ignored and shrivelled by his church’s expectation that he manage multiple parishes and of those involved.

The retired minister who was delighted that he now had the opportunity to do what he had been ordained to do and after the cure of souls to people to which he never had thought of himself or full of mystery and�� the latter are not being encouraged by our ‘get your parish in shape’ campaigns.

The questioner who asked: why is it that the most interesting people are leaving the churches?

The image of a person falling out of a broken deck chair and the suggestion that what the churches are doing is trying to fix the deckchair rather than tend the body (of people) who are plucking up the courage to be something different?

The observance that we don’t seem to have said much about God!

Bookshelf:

First, a reminder about the excellent spirituality and theology bookshop recently opened in the heart of the City of London, called Conversations. I could not have been more pleased for the London Centre for Spirituality and was the venue for one of our Living the Questions Conversations. It offers a wide selection of spirituality and theological titles, plus a range of music. With coffee available, the new shop is in the Church of St Edmund the King, Lombard Street (EC3). The shop has places to browse, a calm oasis in the midst of the City, and a good place to make or to have a quiet conversation. A member service is available, with free post & packing within the UK, and searches are undertaken for outprint and American titles (such as the first follower).

Richard Rohr and Friends: Contemplation in Action (Crossroad £9.99)

From Richard Rohr’s Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a series of short reflections on 48 meditations & 8 short essays, published in 2006. This is what Yahweh asks of you: only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God. Contributors include Richard Rohr, Daniel Berrigan, Edwina Gately, Walter Wink and others. Topics range from terrorism and non-violence, restorative justice, personal integration, sustainability, art and meditation (the latter years of my Christian service as a pastoral minister. Yet I am also seeing seeds of new developments that will feed new enterprises and incursions of the Spirit.)

Leigh Eric Schmidt: Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah (Harper SanFrancisco £1.99)

Cornell West of Princeton University writes of Restless Souls: In our perplexing age of religious revival and conservative politics, this brilliant book by one of the most important black American religious figures and movements of American spiritual seeking that combined mystical quests with progressive politics. The book’s powerful genealogy of our spiritual left is a source of hope in our present day crisis.

Roxanne van Aalten: Church Leavers: Faith journeys five years on (SPCK available August £12.99)

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Living the Questions 1
Eley McAinsh

I was nervous. ‘Live’ and unscripted is way outside my comfort zone. At 6.30 pm the only moving thing in the foyer of Luther King House was a large clock, and a setting sun in the ticket hall of Manchester Piccadilly, reposing after a long day in Birmingham with David Goodbourn, formerly of CTBI, now President of the Partnership for Theological Education, was calming, reassuring. They’ll be here. Let’s talk!

And look who they were! About 30 people by the time we started: lay people, clergy, theological educators and retreat directors, with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, opinions, and needs. The room was densely packed. John and I began, as we would go on to do in each conversation, with a setting out of stakes, challenges and questions that brought us to the particular places we now inhabit personally, professionally and theologically, together with an outline of the questions each of us is living with now.

My journey includes a period of deep crisis as a theological student in an evangelical college in the early 80s, 20-something years in religious broadcasting, a brief spell with Oxfam, and four years with the Living Spirituality Network. My attachment to the institutional church and to traditional doctrine and dogma is increasingly tenuous, but my journey of faith and commitment is passionate and, I trust, ever-deepening. So, my questions are: What does it mean to be a Christian in the 21st century? What nourishes, inspires and sustains my spiritual journey today?

John has been in pastoral ministry for 33 years, and the minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church since 1991. Manvers Street is a large city-centre church with a unique ministry, offering an impressive range of community projects and facilities. His concerns are often, of necessity, practical, down-to-earth, everyday, the homeless, the disability community, the abused, the sexually exploited. Such enclaves keeps into making the show on the road. With a declining congregation, where will he find his successors? Yet when I turn to my conversations with John, I note that his journey through the religious and spiritual landscapes beyond the walls of Manvers Street, and wants to know if that something is significant, meaningful and prophetic, or if it’s a chimera, a commercial and media invention, an alluring but merely fashionable will-o’-the-wisp?

Our different journeys, perspectives and questions gave us an outline, a scribbled notepad, for our conversation. We began by talking about the sacred Spirituality Revolution: is it still real, what’s the evidence and what are the implications? These, as I said, ‘live’ and unscripted and so in each place the conversation moved in different directions. Participants were generous and forthcoming in sharing not only their thoughts and opinions, but also their struggles, anxieties and vulnerabilities. It’s impossible to summarise all that was said during conversations but among the key questions, points and issues, the following seemed significant:

- There is a need to be clear precisely who and what we’re talking about whenever we use the words ‘Spirituality’ and ‘Spirituality Revolution’.
- Are the institutional churches simply being left behind by the second challenge: Affirmation and the Spirituality Revolution? Because so many participants clearly appreciated a rare opportunity to air some of these questions and share their insights and experiences, hopes and frustrations. Conversations were sharp and meaningful.
- Our different journeys, perspectives and questions gave us a range of community projects and facilities. His concerns are often, of necessity, practical, down-to-earth, everyday. The homeless, the disability community, the abused, the sexually exploited. Such enclaves keeps into making the show on the road. With a declining congregation, where will he find his successors? Yet when I turn to my conversations with John, I note that his journey through the religious and spiritual landscapes beyond the walls of Manvers Street, and wants to know if that something is significant, meaningful and prophetic, or if it’s a chimera, a commercial and media invention, an alluring but merely fashionable will-o’-the-wisp?

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From Richard Rohr’s Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a series of short reflections on ‘Meditation 6’. It is what Yahweh asks of you; only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God. Rohr invites us to find our way back to the covenantal relationship God intends for us, to forgive our enemies, be in full of certainty or full of mystery and how we can deepen our lives in the moment of our lives. We have formed meaningful new communities of faith outside the traditional churches.

Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater: Male Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Watts (S Andrew Press £5.99). This new book, with a foreword by Rowan Williams, the Archbishops of Canterbury, was exciting great interest and approval at Scottish Churches because for the first time of our Living the Questions Conversations. The publishers say: ‘Roland Watts has inspired and influenced many – from Christian leaders of all denominations to people down on their luck. His name is known only by word of mouth, and few of his teachings have ever been written down. This collection of his words, wise, wistful and deeply loved former parish priest of the famous Roslyn Chapel are available and accessible to all, in his favourite conversational form.

cont...
The Well at Willen, Newport Road, Milton Keynes, MK15 9AA  Tel: 01908 200675  e-mail: spirituality@ctbi.org.uk  www.living-spirituality.org.uk

Events at The Othona Community, Burton Bradstock, Dorset – www.othona-bb.org.uk Contact m1l@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897338
21 July: Jim Catterall ‘one of the most talented writers of Christian prayer today’ asks ‘so radical, prayerful and authentic …’. Jim introduces his newest collection of contemporary poems.
7-14 Aug: Peace and the Human Family, a week of exploration in practical areas such as conflict resolution skills and the ‘greening of your family’ led by the Pauly Schneider family from Minnesota.
22-24 Sept: GLOWing Divinity with Music and Movement, a weekend of prayer, exploration and fun for those broadly defining themselves as lesbian or gay, with Michael Giddings and Gaynor Harper.

**Events at Chrysalis, a residential holistic centre in West Wicklow, one hour from Dublin, founded in 1989 as a place for time out, nurturing and renewal. www.chrysalis.ie Contact peace@chrysalis.ie or 045 404713
16-20 Aug: Seeing your life as a prayer, a chance to immerse yourself in an exploration of a simple, lively, stimulating and sometimes challenging teachings of Fr Anthony de Mello SJ, led by Fr Jim Dolan SJ.
20-25 Aug: Living with Awareness, a five day exploration of meditation as a way of life, with Swami Nityanandanda. And non-residential days at Chrysalis in Dublin:
12 & 13 Aug: Anthony de Mello: A Spirituality for our Time with Fr Jim Dolan

Events at the London Inter Faith Centre. Contact info@interfaithcentre.btopenworld.com or 020 7580 8355
Art and Spirituality Network events in London – Creative Responses to Mystical Texts, a three day event of practical and theoretical exploration of the texts of mystical tradition, led by Derrina O’Mytht, Contact 014134 673 248 or info@artandspirituality.org.uk
Please note, the list of pamphlets enclosed with this edition of Living Spirituality News should have accompanied the Cathedrals for a Changing Church flier sent with the Spring newsletter. We trust it may still be of interest and use.

The Living Spirituality Network

The Living Spirituality Network aims for people who are exploring the meaning of spirituality, both within and beyond the traditional churches. The network provides a supportive with information, encouragement and contacts, as they seek to understand and deepen their spiritual lives.
We work with a wide range of individuals, groups and communities, many of whom find themselves on the edges of mainstream church structures. For further information on the Network, and the groups and communities with which we are in contact, please contact the office for a copy of our leaflet.
Living Spirituality News is issued three times a year. If you know of anyone who would welcome a copy, please contact the Administrator. It is issued free of charge but donations of £10 00 15.00 per pa would help considerably in offsetting our costs and would be gratefully received. Please make cheques payable to: ‘CTBI – Living Spirituality Network’ and send them to the Administrator at the address given. A large type version is available on request.
Contact us at: The Living Spirituality Network, The Well at Willen, Newport Road, Milton Keynes MK15 9AA Telephone: 01908 200675/200672 email: spirituality@ctbi.org.uk

Dear LSN Supporters
Scotch B Celtic to start and the sweetest of peach melbas to finish, with everything from white wine and tontilla chips to Fast Food instant and currant creams in between: the refreshments were as varied as the venues for our recent series of living the Questions conversations. Our conversation partners couldn’t have been more varied either – all 160 of them – who came to talk, to share questions and suggest answers, or at least approaches, to some of the questions raised.
But from Manchester to London, on to Winchester and finally Dunblane – a confraternity of theological colleges, a spirituality centre in the heart of the City, a large central church and the home of ecumenism in Scotland – the most pressing questions and concerns were remarkably consistent: Is there really a spirituality revolution going on? And if such a revolution is indeed underway, what are the implications: for individuals, and for the churches; for those deep inside the institution; those far beyond it; and those somewhere on the edge; for theology and the future of the Christian tradition and vision; for community; for social action and service; for justice and peace, and fast, but interestingly high on the list of people’s questions, what will this mean for the children and grandchildren growing up now tomorrow, with little or no introduction to the Christian story?
While John and I had mapped out a possible route through the terrain, it was marked not in tramlines but rather by vague finger-posts and clumps of knotted grass. While the underlying themes were very much the same in each place, different gatherings offered different emphases, explored different paths, and highlighted different experiences and insights. They were very much ‘live’ events; spontaneous, unscripted, responsive, and as with all ‘live’ events, it’s difficult to convey what ‘happened’ to those who weren’t there. But John and I have done our best to give a sense of what did happen and I hope you find these reflections helpful.

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So I want to thank everyone who made these conversations possible, our hosts (of which more later), everyone who came, John, whose idea the whole project was, and above all Paddy Lane of the Retreat Association, who did the hard work of organising the entire series.

We’ve been asked if we would take the living the Questions ‘roadshow’ to other places in the coming months but have decided that the immediate priority to such requests has to be this first being put to the test, not to mention enjoyable experiment. But it was always conceived as an experiment with a limited lifespan. In looking ahead we will, of course, be considering ways to build on what has happened and living new and different ways to live the questions, for as Thomas Merton once wrote: in the progress towards religious understanding, one does not go from answer to answer, but from question to question.

So well,
Eley

I’d like to repeat my thanks to Paddy Lane of the Retreat Association, who organised and publicised the whole series, to John Rackley, Minister of Manners Street Baptist Church in Bath who asked the ‘What if’ question that developed into the Living the Questions, and our own Win Kennedy in the LSN office, who fielded calls and enquiries and made sure the bills were paid.
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1. Eley McAinsh
2. John Rackley

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Pinboard