



Dear LSN Supporters

Scotch Broth to start and the sweetest of peach melbas to finish, with everything from white wine and tortilla chips to Fair Trade instant and custard 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 listen, 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 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 last, but interestingly high on the list of people's questions, what will this mean for the children and grandchildren growing up today, and 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 groups had 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.

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* 'road-show' to other places in the coming months but have decided that the immediate answer to such requests has to be 'no': this has been a very fruitful, not to mention enjoyable, experiment. But it was always conceived as an experiment with a limited life-span. In looking ahead we will, of course, be considering ways to build on what has happened and finding 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.*

Go well,
Eley

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 two-day meeting in Edenbridge at the end of June, as Eley 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 Walker, Julie Foster, Robert Webb and Jennifer Ellis at the London Centre for Spirituality

Juli Wills and Howard Mellor at the United Church in Winchester

Alastair and Liz Hulbert and Elizabeth Templeton at Scottish Churches House in Dunblane

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 'What if ...' question that developed into *Living 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!

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Living the Questions 1

Eley McAinsh

I was nervous. 'Live' and unscripted is way outside my comfort zone. At 6.15pm the only movement in the foyer of Luther King House was outwards, to the car park. John was still drinking cappuccino in the ticket hall of Manchester Piccadilly, re-focusing after a long day in Birmingham. David Goodbourn, formerly of CTBI, now President of the Partnership for Theological Education, was calm, reassuring: *They'll be here. Let's eat!*

And indeed they were there, 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 reflections, and a wide range of questions. John and I began, as we would go on to do in each conversation, with a setting out of stalls: brief summaries of the journeys that have 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 me) to be a Christian in the 21st century?* and *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, day-to-day: the homeless, the depressed and the abused of Bath. Much energy goes into *keeping the show on the road*. With a declining congregation, *where will he find his next Treasurer?* Yet he recognises that something is shifting in the religious and spiritual landscape beyond the walls of Manvers Street, and wants to know if that something is *significant, meaningful and even 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 route-map, for our conversation ... we began by talking about the so-called Spirituality Revolution: is it for real, what's the evidence, and what are the implications? It was, 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 in six hours of conversation but among the key questions, points and issues, the following seemed significant:

- There is a real 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 an inexorable movement of the Spirit beyond their walls, and beyond their interest and understanding?
- Why do so many committed, faithful people find the churches meaningless and irrelevant to their spiritual growth and development?
- What is the relationship between the Spirituality movement and traditional Christian theology and doctrine; why is there so little theological *trickle-down* from pulpits and theological colleges; why do so many ministers, pastors and priests have one set of beliefs for themselves and another for their congregations?
- What has Spirituality to do with justice and peace; is the Spirituality Revolution in any way *good news for the poor, or for the planet?*

- Why it's misguided and mistaken for the churches to seek to use Spirituality as a cloak for evangelism

Now the conversations are over, I'm left with two thoughts: the first, *affirmation* and the second *challenge*. Affirmation because so many participants clearly appreciated a rare opportunity to air some of these questions and share their insights and experiences, hopes and frustrations. Chords were struck, connections made and experiences validated.

My sense of challenge comes, interestingly, from two of the participants John also draws attention to: the Scottish theologian who both *loves and hates the church*, and our mysterious American sociologist en route to Heathrow. A third participant, a theological educator in Manchester, added to the challenge when, slightly irritated by my 'caricature' of the state of training for ministry, he said *Just because the church gets up my nose, I don't feel inclined to turn my back on that immense inheritance of understanding of God giving Godself to the world.*

I spend a lot of time explaining and defending Spirituality. Such explanation and defence involves separating out, from an undifferentiated blob labelled 'Spirituality', the different elements, their composition and meaning. I have a very high view of certain of those elements, and not such a low view as many people have of the rest of them.

But I, and anyone who speaks up for Spirituality, must also be prepared to confront the critical questions, questions summarised by the sociologist from the US:

- How does something as 'deeply narcissistic' and 'therapeutically-oriented' as Spirituality draw people out of themselves and challenge them to be something different?
- How does a 'spiritual seeker' know when they've hit something true – got 'a true answer'? Can subjective experience be self-authenticating or is there something outside my experience which tells me 'yes' and 'no'?
- After centuries of what we've learned through the religious institutions, shouldn't we be more appreciative of, even submitted to, the authority of those traditions?

I certainly didn't avoid the questions when he raised them, but equally certainly I need to go on thinking through the answers, though I suspect they may not be fully available for several generations to come.

Living the Questions 2

John Rackley

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 descend into discussion and debate. This pleased me.

Conversation is not understood in Christian circles. It is not used often enough. In the urgency of our elders' meetings, synods, and councils, debate 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 growth to perception and consensus. This is what is needed at this time in the life of the Church where panic buttons are being pressed all over the place. Conversation gives priority to listening. It includes the seeming inconsequential 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 incarnations of the Spirit.

Are they those whom Eley calls the New Believers? I do not know. 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 self-absorbed 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 of questions: so what? Only Bath knows my answer. But by way of farewell and thank-you to LSN 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 onto the children of those involved.
- The minister's wife who stood up for her husband as he watched his gifts being ignored and shrivelled by his church's expectation that he manage multiple parishes and organise people into the Kingdom.
- The same person who characterised churches as either wishing to be full of certainty or full of mystery and how the latter are not being encouraged by our 'get your parish quota up'.
- The retired member of the clergy who was delighted that he now had the opportunity to do what he had been ordained to do and offer the cure of souls to people which he never had opportunity to do before as a parish priest.
- The theologian who declared she both hated and loved the Church.
- 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 left sprawling on the deck!
- The observation 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 The Centre Bookshop, it's part of 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 theology titles, plus a range of music. With coffee available, the new shop is in the Church of St Edmund the King, Lombard Street, London EC3V 9EA (020 7626 5031). It's a great place to browse, a calm oasis in the midst of the City, and a good place to meet for a quiet conversation. A mail order service is available, with free post & packing within the UK, and searches are undertaken for out-of-print and American titles (such as the first three items below).

Eric Elnes: *The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity* (Jossey-Bass £8.99) An exploration of 12 principles known as the Phoenix Affirmations, originally penned by a group of clergy and laypeople from Phoenix, Arizona, in an attempt to articulate clearly the broad strokes of the emerging progressive Christian faith. It's a book which *offers disillusioned and spiritually homeless Christians and others a sense of hope and a tolerant, joyful and compassionate message.*

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 Micah 6:8: *This is what Yahweh asks of you; only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.* Contributors include Rohr himself, Daniel Berrigan, Edwina Gately, Walter Wink and others. Topics range from terrorism and non-stop war, non-violence, restorative justice, to personal integration, sustainability, art and meditation and simplicity.

Leigh Eric Schmidt: *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah* (Harper SanFrancisco £16.99)

Cornel West of Princeton University writes of ***Restless Souls***: *In our perplexing age of religious revivals and conservative politics, this brilliant book lays bare the deep Emersonian roots of quintessential figures and movements of American spiritual seeking that combined mystical quests with progressive politics. Schmidt's profound genealogy of our spiritual Left is a source of hope in our present day crisis.*

Alan Jamieson: *Church Leavers: Faith journeys five years on* (SPCK available August £12.99)

In this follow-up to his bestselling *A Churchless Faith* Alan Jamieson finds out what happened to the group of 108 church leavers he first interviewed five years ago. He explores their current beliefs and practices and discovers the extent to which they have formed meaningful new communities of faith outside the traditional churches.

Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater: *Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls* (St Andrew Press £8.99)

This new book, with a fulsome foreword by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was exciting great interest and approval at Scottish Churches House in Dunblane when we were there for the third of our *Living the Questions Conversations*. The publishers say: *Roland Walls 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 appeared in print – until now. For the first time, the views of this prophetic, wise, mischievous and deeply loved former parish priest-in-charge of the famed Rosslyn Chapel are available and accessible to all, in his favourite conversational form.*

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We're happy to recommend the book, despite the fact that in Fr Walls' view *spirituality is a hideous word which should be expunged from the Christian language!*

Jill Fuller: Time: God's gift in a busy world (SPCK £7.99)

A book to help readers, both individuals and groups, overcome the sense of anxiety and rush so often associated with Time. As Jill writes in her Introduction: *While efficiency and industry are both valuable and can enhance our achievements, there is a tendency that, in an overactive environment, time can be seen as an enemy and our lives become an anxious race against the clock, straining to beat its demands and fearful lest we 'lose' time and fall behind the targets and goals set us. This book invites us to examine the ways we experience time and to reassess it as a gift from God, a space within which we can discover our path of discipleship and live out God's purposes for us.*

Pinboard:

Events at The Othona Community, Burton Bradstock, Dorset. www.othona-bb.org.uk Contact mail@othona-bb.org.uk or 01308 897338

21 July: Jim Cotter, 'one of the most talented writers of Christian prayers today ... so radical, prayerful and authentic ...'. Jim introduces his newest collection of contemporary psalms.

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 Divinely with Music and Movement, a weekend of joy, exploration and fun for those broadly defining themselves as lesbian or gay, with Michael Giddings and Gaynor Harper.

9-12 Oct: Thomas Merton: Dancing on the Rim of Chaos, led by Richard Evans and Hebe Welbourn. An opportunity to learn and experience something of Merton's inspiring vision of the contemplative life and encounter with other faiths.

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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 the 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 Nityamuktananda.

And non-residential days at Chrysalis in Dublin:

12 & 13 Aug: Anthony de Mello: a Spirituality for our Time with Fr Jim Dolan

26 & 27 Aug: Mind, Mood & Happiness: the Art of Mindfulness, Meditation and Self Healing, with Ron Alexander.

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Events at the London Inter Faith Centre. Contact info@londoninterfaith.org.uk or 020 7604 3053

Art and Spirituality Network events in London - Creative Responses to Mystical Traditions. Booking essential via artandspirituality@gmail.com or 020 8946 8365:

9 Sept: The Still Point of the Turning World

5 Oct: Anatman: the concept of the non-self in Buddhism

8 Oct: The Changing Face of Religion in Contemporary Britain

with Alan le Grys

21 Oct: Dreams as Wellsprings of the Soul

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And elsewhere:

18 Sept: Sarum College, Salisbury, **The Lotus and the Cross: a conversation between Tibetan Buddhist and Christian Benedictine Monks.** www.sarum.ac.uk Contact hospitality@sarum.ac.uk or 01722 424800

23 Sept: Edenbridge, Kent, **A Feast of Colour: quiet day for Harvest**, led by the Rev Sue Henderson and Sr Christine Head. Contact team@standrews2.freemove.co.uk or 01342 850388

30 Sept: Glasgow Ignatian Centre: **Bio Spiritual Focussing:** an introduction to this body-centred way of spiritual exploration. www.iscentre.btinternet.co.uk Contact iscentre@btopenworld.com or 0141 354 0077

16-20 Oct: The Ammerdown Centre, Radstock nr Bath, **Let's Play God! Dare we? Should we?** An opportunity to rethink our relationship to God, to each other, and to our Planet Earth, led by Fr Adrian Smith. www.ammerdown.org Contact centre@ammerdown.org or 01761 433709

28 Oct: Winchester, Hants, **womenwordspirit Annual Gather** with Verena Wright. What does womenwordspirit mean for us in our everyday experience? Contact Gillian Limb, glimb@freenet.co.uk or 01962 867374

28 Oct: Turvey Abbey, Beds, annual **Christian East West Day: The Church Devolving or Evolving.** Contact Sr Esther, Turvey Abbey, Turvey, Beds, MK43 8DE

27-29 October 2006: Minsteracres, Consett, Durham, **The Divine Awakens in Creation's Story:** workshop offering fresh perspectives on spirituality from modern science and cosmology, led by Diarmuid O Murchu. Contact 01434 673 248 or info@minsteracres.co.uk.

Please note, the list of pamphlets enclosed with this edition of Living Spirituality News should have accompanied the Catholics for a Changing Church flyer sent with the Spring newsletter. We trust it may still be of interest and use.

The Living Spirituality Network

The Living Spirituality Network exists for people who are exploring the meaning of spirituality, both within and beyond the traditional churches. The Network provides supporters 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 pa would help considerably in off-setting 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.

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