

LSN final gathering April 21st 2012

**Reflecting on the Journey:
Contributions from Gwen Cashmore, Paul Renyard,
Ruth Harvey and Murdoch MacKenzie**

Gwen Cashmore (*co-founder/director of the Ecumenical Spirituality Project 1986-1996*)

Today we have come to celebrate and be thankful and I want to pick out 3 moments of the years 1986- 96, the first in Norfolk, then in Farncombe and lastly Milton Keynes - when something began and grew which is one of the strands of LSN.

For everything there is a time: these times need people and places to be incarnated.

From 1986 Joan Puls and I were living in a Norfolk village - Joan lent by her RC Franciscan community and me having left the World Council of Churches after 9 years' work at world church level. We had found that people locally had a hunger to worship and work and witness together - and we wanted to see how this might be nourished.

We had no salaries - did some freelancing and lived very simply.

We visited all over UK, led groups, retreats – finding fellow seekers and places where people WERE being nourished. It was the time when the 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims' process was under way - so our RC/ Anglican team helped.

In 1989 Philip Morgan, a friend and General Secretary of the British Council of Churches (BCC), got in touch with us. A house in Farncombe, with 12 bedrooms, currently home to the Farncombe Community was probably being handed back to the BCC - if it all worked out, would we like to run it for 3 years as a BCC project on Ecumenical Spirituality? We would.

We adopted the phrase 'Clearing the Way' as a kind of shorthand of what we were trying to do - and found a living parable in the rose bed in the garden as we cleared the roots choked with couch grass - fed and watered and watched the resultant new growth and flowering. The roses blossomed with their own unique nature - set free from what was stifling their life.

For the next 5 years we continued the work we had begun, now enhanced by our being able to offer hospitality.

Then came the next moment of change. In 1994 CCBI (as it was now named) had a financial crisis. They needed to sell the house. They thought our work should continue. Elizabeth Templeton, among others, was a strong supporter and fought for us.

We already had some links with Milton Keynes through the opening of the new church Christ the Cornerstone. Now Hugh Cross, Ecumenical Moderator, another friend, had a proposal to explore. The Priory at Willen, run by the Society of the Sacred Mission had spare capacity and might be able to house the project while the ecumenical work in MK would be a natural match with what we were doing. It happened - thanks to much hard work and generosity all round. The library came with us and a wing of the Priory became our new home.

Moment 3 was in 1996. Joan needed to go back to the USA - community and family had given her to UK for 10 years. Now they wanted her back. Gwen, now 65, had ageing parents and was herself at retiring age. We looked for our successors. To our great joy Ruth Harvey was available and interested. We had begun the work. Ruth took it into its next phase.

In those last months we appointed Win Kennedy as administrator, an appointment which has had lasting impact on the project/network, with Win magnificently maintaining the continuity through many changes.

Finally a word from Joan in USA. She couldn't be here today but is thinking of us and wants to express her deep gratitude for all who journeyed with us, for all with whom we broke bread and the Word, for all who shared their stories and dreams and frustrations and efforts with us.

(Any of you here today, who were part of those early years and to whom I have not sent Joan's and my write up of it, *Journeys and Jottings* - do see me and ask for a copy. I have a few with me)

Thank you

Paul Renyard (*chaplain to the Fellowship of Prayer, then LSN*)

Thank you, Judith. I will not be as erudite as Gwen. But I want to take you to Glastonbury, that strange town with perhaps lots of that froth and bubble we have just heard about and some downright silliness as well. Some members of the Fellowship used to meet in groups and some went on an annual Retreat. The Bristol group organised one once a year at Abbey House in Glastonbury. Glastonbury parish church used to organise an ecumenical Communion service each week and if there was a 'suitable' retreat conductor in the House, ask them to take it. So I was privileged to preside on several occasions. It was held in the crypt of the abbey ruins, open to the elements. It was to me a summary of the Christian faith to that point. It was a service, shared by many, stretching back in time. But it also reminded of the great change and violence that could occur, with the abbey in ruins. The townsfolk so hated Abbot Whiting that at the time of the Reformation they stormed the abbey and hung him from the Tor. I don't think Thomas Cromwell had to do much here! But then there was today. A walkway went across the crypt and visitors still went through. I remember looking up once and seeing a whole crowd of very bemused Japanese. But the guides were around and the local congregation afterwards, to answer questions.

So faith moves on and changes constantly but keep threads with the past. Eley spoke of ten years seeming very small when we have heard about 500. But with our modern cosmology, 500 years we know that is nothing. The tide comes in and goes out and is much the same as the tide before or the one after, in these vast terms of the universes. And indeed our short time-scales seem to cross over each other, as Celtic Christianity suddenly became popular again, and the thoughts of Peter Abelard were suddenly helpful again a few decades ago. Nothing is set in stone, and we need together to seek our humanity in our quest for the divine.

I had the task some years ago of moving the Fellowship of Prayer into a new grouping with the Ecumenical Spirituality Project, just as it itself grew out of the Community at Farncombe. These things happen in time and I am sure all will be well with the ideals and ideas of the LSN in the time to come, but in different and as yet unknown ways. I wish us God speed.

Ruth Harvey (*Director of ESP, then LSN, 1996-2001*)

Liberating Relational Spirituality

It's an honour and a privilege to be here with you today, to see so many people, to have so many memories triggered, and to be inspired for the future.

The golden thread that weaves its way through my experience of the LSN is the thread of relational, liberating spirituality: a liberating spirituality which liberates us individually from our limited understanding of the gospel, and which liberates us collectively from the narrow-mindedness of introspective denominationalism into the wide ocean of the oikoumene.

Whether it was in the Church Representatives Meeting, where institution embraced movement, or at the first LSN annual gathering with David Hay speaking on 'the spirituality of people who don't go to church'; whether it was at the Reflection or Management Group meetings where we wrestled with and savoured some of the trickier structural questions, or with the production of the book *Wrestling and Resting*; whether it was round the table at The Well, or sharing Chuck Lathrop's 'Round Table Church' poem at a day workshop on everyday spirituality, or with the network of networks that grew after NACCAN closed – through it all, the gift of the LSN was that conversation about that which moves you at your deepest level, and the insights of each individual were valued.

I would like to share with you two strands of this golden thread of relational, liberating spirituality which for me speak of the gift of the Living Spirituality Network to the ecumenical movement, and to the church at large.

The first strand emerged when I met Gwen and Joan on Iona one Easter in the early 1990s. Their vision of an ecumenical spirituality, shared over a cup of tea in the coffee house, a spirituality released from the shackles of an over-professionalised clericalism, drawing on the gifts particularly of lay people and ordained elders, inspired me, and continues to shape my own deeper engagement with theology and with the church. So thank you Gwen and Joan.

Through this friendship I was invited to help run a weekend for young people at Hanta Yo house in Farncombe. Working with Carmel Heany, the then youth worker for CCBI, we put together a programme called 'A Sense of Belonging', and with around a dozen young people we explored what it meant to 'belong' in faith.

This safe space to share faith and doubts in equal measure, to be listened to and taken seriously as young people, and to be summoned on a faith journey rather than pressed to join a committee, was a freeing, liberating experience in the increasingly introspective and individualistic 1990s.

This was relational, liberating spirituality, and liberating ecumenism at its best.

So thank you, Joan and Gwen.

A second strand to this golden thread of relational ecumenism that thinking of the LSN calls to mind, is the series of conversations that Jayne Scott, of the Community Learning Network in Manchester and I on behalf of the ESP, co-facilitated in the autumn of 1997, looking at Spirituality in the City.

We travelled together to Sheffield, Birmingham, Manchester, Belfast, Glasgow and Dublin, meeting people who worked for church agencies such as Church Action on Poverty, for churches, or who belonged to ecumenical networks on the edge of the church such as the Community for Reconciliation in Bromsgrove, or the Corrymeela Community in Belfast. We explored together what sustained and nurtured us in our journey of faith, but specifically within an urban context.

The travel was both exhilarating and exhausting. The making and forming of new friendships and relationships was equally draining and nourishing.

These gatherings, around shared food, couched in worship and biblical reflection, speak to me of a liberating, a Liberation Spirituality where contextual theology and worship of the people meets the best of Alpha!

What I remember about these conversations is that they were gritty and real. Participants brought symbols of what spirituality meant to them in their context.

We heard about spirituality brought to life at a bus stop, in working with prostitutes, in the murky water of a city canal, in the smoothness of a black pebble, or the prickliness of a flowering cactus, and much more.

I see signs of this relational liberating spirituality alive both in and on the edges of our churches today: in the places where great value is placed on the gift of each God-blessed faith seeker, regardless of their status or church belonging, and where the seam of prayer that connects us is greater than the chasm of structure and doctrine than can sometimes divide.

I see this Hanta Yo, ESP, FPU, LSN thread alive, for example, in the recent signing of a Declaration of Intent in Cumbria where the three church leaders involved openly shared their experience of a trust and a friendship which undergirded their commitment. I see it in an ecumenical project in Scotland called 'Place for Hope' where over 30 of us have been trained as mediators to work in all our churches to overcome conflict, and to deepen our spiritual conversation across divides.

As the LSN comes to a close my hope is that new relationships, new partnership may emerge that will carry, and deepen this vision for a relational, liberating, Liberation Spirituality into the future, for all our sakes.

Murdoch MacKenzie (*chair of ESP, then LSN, 1996-2003*)

In this former Gaelic chapel it seems appropriate to begin in Gaelic. Ciamar a tha sibhin? The last Gaelic-speaking minister here was Alexander Connell and we happen to live in Connel – so there you go! When I joined the Iona Community in 1965 George MacLeod told us never to use the word 'spirituality'. For the incarnational George, spirituality seemed to be somewhat disembodied. He said Jesus Christ came in a body, lived in a body, died in a body and was resurrected in a body. George's version of so-called Celtic spirituality was very much down-to-earth in the back streets of Govan and in that thin place called Iona.

However on my arrival in Milton Keynes, the Ecumenical Spirituality Project, as it was then called, gobbled me up. I already knew about the Dunblane Conference and that Every Bush was Burning and was glad to meet Gwen Cashmore who was still around. But then I discovered that after the death of Reginald Somerset Ward in 1963, Sister Carol Graham, whom I knew in India and whose CSI Sisterhood cross I still wear each day, had helped to inspire the Farncombe Community; and Lesslie Newbigin, my great friend and mentor who ordained me in Madras, as well as others such as Kenneth Slack, Eric Abbott, Marcus Ward and Olive Wyon had signed and sealed the documents which launched the Farncombe Community as an interdenominational Centre of Prayer for Christian Unity and I have a copy of them here.

While I was still in Birmingham, Hugh Cross had encouraged Chris and Dilly Baker to visit me there to explain the vision for The Well at Willen. So these were exciting and heady days. With John Johansen-berg, Martin Reardon, John Reardon, Bernard Longley and others on the Committee we could hardly go wrong and so arrived Ruth Harvey with whose father, John, I had joined the Iona Community all those years previously. The great Tom Fleming came for what was definitely NOT an ordination but merely a WELCOME but nevertheless we all laid our hands on Ruth and with Johnson Jesudoss' Indian meal burning within us we settled down to a memorable performance of 'Every Blessed Thing'. After Ruth's 5 glorious years of conversations across Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England, not to mention *Wrestling and Resting* and the many memorable annual gatherings, funds were running low but somehow with the help of Paul Renyard and David Goodbourn we managed to keep going by ring-fencing the funds of the Fellowship of Prayer for Unity. But with Ruth's departure there was something of a hiatus. Several people were interviewed and then Eley appeared – she wasn't Eley then of course – and we soon discovered that here was someone who knew where the spirit met the bone! Instead of

interviewing her in the normal way, she appeared with technology, CDs and DVDs and sort of 'wowed' us.

Since then she hasn't looked back and by some miracle we are still here in 2012. Eley's radio broadcasts with Mark Tully and her many papers and conferences have continued to inspire me in my retirement as have Win's regular mailings over these many years. Throughout it all, the Well at Willen and SSM with Brother Jonathan and others have more than steadied the boat.

Somehow despite all that the churches have been able to do, or rather not able to do, we have survived. But what will happen now? The answer my friend is blowing in the wind. Those of us here today are testimony to that. Fortunately we are in God's hands and not that of the churches, but they too are in her hands and we are the Church – and let us never forget it! So let's thank God that we are the Church on the margins, which is where we can really listen for what the Spirit is saying, and let us thank Eley and Win and CTBI with the top of our minds and from the bottom of our hearts.

Here is a wee gift for Eley. It is from India where she spent many stimulating visits in a land which is not unknown for its spirituality! George More, who spent over 30 years in an Ashram near Nagpur, once said that when he arrived in India as a missionary he found that God had been there for rather a long time. So Eley, we honour you today in typical Indian fashion with this ponnadai and assure you of our prayers in the days and years to come.

(In India and especially in Tamil Nadu, but also in other places, a 'Ponnadai' is a shawl of honour which is given on all sorts of important occasions, quite often with a garland, to honour and show respect to a visiting guest, a distinguished speaker, or to an employee on their retirement. In a sense Eley is retiring from LSN and so it seemed to be appropriate to honour her in this way.)