

GROWING TOGETHER

Fostering spiritual growth for all God's children

AIMS

- To consider the nature of spirituality
- To examine some models of spiritual growth and faith development
- To explore the possibility of multi-generational programmes for spiritual growth and faith development.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

There is widespread interest in our so-called 'secular' society about 'spirituality' and it is an interest that is particularly evident amongst the young. But what *is* spirituality? How does your perception of spirituality relate to the list of statements below? Do you want to add anything? Do you think that these statements reflect what secular society means by 'spirituality'? Do you think that a member of that society would want to add anything?

Spirituality is ...

- An awareness of ultimate questions:
Why? Who am I? Why am I here? What is this all about?
- An awareness of one's inner life.
- A capacity to experience the extremes of human emotions:
What causes me delight or despair? Who / what is important to me?
- An ability to use one's senses fully in attending to the world.
- An ability to be fully present.
- An attitude to the world which is enquiring and curious:
How does this happen?
- A capacity for being in relationships:
Who are you? How do I relate to you?
- An awareness of order and pattern in the created world:
How should I live in the world? How should I use its resources?
Should this be allowed to happen?
- A capacity for awe and wonder:
Wow!
- A sense of transcendence, of otherness, of there being more to life than meets the eye:
Is there anyone there? What is he / she / it like?
- A sense of mystery at the heart of life.
- An imaginative approach to life:
What might this be like? Could things be different?
Does it have to be like this?

(List compiled from various sources by Alison Harris: *Barnabas/brf.*)

Can you recall any strong experiences that you would call 'spiritual'? When in your life did the experiences happen? Can you think of examples from a range of periods in your life – childhood, youth, early adulthood, middle age, old age (depending on how far you have progressed on the journey!) ?

HOW DOES SPIRITUALITY RELATE TO FAITH?

Alison Harris's list could be equally applicable to people of any faith or of none. Do you think that's right? Is there a distinction between spirituality and faith? Many people in our 'secular' society would probably say so – many, of all ages, would probably say that they are comfortable with seeing themselves as 'spiritual' people, but would not want to see themselves as people of a faith. Is that the case in your experience of talking to people? Why do you think that might be?

Prince Charles famously said some years ago that he would like to be styled 'Defender of Faith' rather than 'Defender of *The* Faith.' Do you think there is a valid distinction to be made between 'having faith' and 'having *a* faith'? Do you think people outside the faith communities are more comfortable with the thought of 'having faith' rather than 'having *a* faith'? If so, why do you think that might be?

Do your reflections on the above questions have any implications for us as evangelists – bearers of the Good News? Should there be any implications?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH – GROWING IN FAITH

Two possible misconceptions can result from a comparison of spirituality and faith. One is that because spirituality seems free of form and structure, it is simply a 'given' and not something that can be developed – all you need to do is 'let it be'. The second is that because faith can seem more allied to a world of forms and structures, the best way to develop faith is to impart information. The following three models show that we can do more with our spiritual lives than 'let them be' and that there is more to faith development than passing on information.

MODEL I: 'RELATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS' – David Hay

David Hay approaches spirituality from a biological perspective (following zoologist Alistair Hardy) and sees it as 'hard-wired' into us as human beings – part of what we are born with, and part of what we need for survival as a species. The context of his key book *The Spirit of the Child* was the growing debate in the late 1990s about the place of a spiritual dimension in formal education – a debate precipitated in part by public concern about social coherence and an intuition that spirituality had an important part to play in holding us together as a society.

The Spirit of the Child is the result of extensive research into what spirituality might be, based on the spiritual talk of children. As a result of the research, Hay came to explore spirituality in terms of what he called 'relational consciousness'. He claims that 'awareness of an holistic relationship with the rest of reality is central to the nature of spirituality' (p142) In other words our spirituality amounts to an awareness that we are part of a greater whole – in vital relationship not only with all our fellow human beings, but also with all our fellow creatures including St Francis's 'brother Sun', 'sister water' and 'sister mother Earth' and, of course, with the creator of all – the 'interfusing presence' (p149) who is the basis for all the relationships.

As he was writing in an educational context, Hay went on to explore ways in which spirituality – seen as relational consciousness – might be nurtured. He acknowledged at the outset that 'strictly speaking (spirituality) cannot be taught, since relational consciousness is a biological in-built constituent of what it is to be human. What the teacher *can* do is to help children to become "aware of their awareness" and to reflect on this experience in the light of the language and culture within which it emerges' (p155). He felt that this kind of nurture had never been more important than in the present since, if spirituality is understood as relational consciousness, the individualistic emphasis of contemporary society is actually undermining spirituality, rather than simply 'letting it be'.

He noted that when schools considered the curriculum for 'Spiritual and Moral Education' they tended to concentrate on the moral aspect, because it lent itself to imparting information – eg moral codes. However, simply telling children what is considered to be 'right conduct' clearly doesn't ensure that they will act accordingly. For Hay, it is much more important to develop the relational consciousness which *produces* the moral codes in the first place – in other words 'spiritual education' is the bedrock of 'moral education'. Hay proposed a four-point plan to nurture the spiritual life of children.

1. Help children to keep an open mind

Hay suggests that children need to relate to themselves – to know and value themselves. He claims that those who seek to nurture children need to value them and their insights, not crush them into conformity and close their minds. He gives the example of using a Russian doll with children as a way of exploring the complexity and richness of who they are and *how* they are in different contexts and with different people.

2. Explore ways of seeing

Relational consciousness reaches out to the viewpoint of 'the other' rather than asserting the 'rightness' of our own approach. The example of perspective drawings, which can be seen in several different ways (eg the cube which could be a view from below or above) and other ambiguous figures were used to help children appreciate that there are different ways of looking at things.

3. Encourage personal awareness

To illustrate this, Hay cites an exercise developed by Dr Patrick Pietroni in which people are asked to eat a piece of fruit as if they had never done so before, noting every tiny aspect of the experience. The aim is to encourage immediacy of experience and a deeper awareness both of themselves and themselves in relation to the world around them.

4. Personal awareness of the social and political dimensions of spirituality

Hay states that 'spirituality by definition is always concerned with self-transcendence. It requires us to go beyond egocentricity to take account of our relatedness to other people, the environment and, for religious believers, God' (p172). This entails promoting a sense of relatedness to the world and its systems, and Hay illustrates this by suggesting an exploration of what goes into the production of the apple on our plate – all the people, activities and systems involved.

- What do you think of Hay's view of spirituality as relational consciousness?
- What do you think to his four-point plan?
- Hay says he is concerned to 'convey a mood, a perspective' (p162). What are the implications of this mood and perspective for our work?
- Are any of the four points only applicable to children?

MODEL 2: THE SEED BED AND THE FRAME – Kathryn Copsey

David Hay says, 'although I maintain that religious belief is a characteristic outcome of relational consciousness, I am concerned with nurturing a human predisposition rather than with any specific religious (or secular) system of belief' (p162). Kathryn Copsey's book *From the Ground Up* comes from her experience as project leader of CURBS (Children in Urban Situations), which is concerned with Christian nurture. Her 'seed and frame' image provides a link between what David Hay has to say, and the question of specific Christian faith development.

Like Hay, Copsey sees spirituality as a 'given' of life. It is not something that we have to 'give' to our children – God has already given it by making them in his image. She writes, 'You may have heard speakers challenging you to "bring God to these children". We seem to have failed to recognize that God is already there and active. We need to open our eyes and see where he is at work' (p24). For Copsey, the imperative is not only to foster the natural development spirituality, but also to repair damage which has been done to it.

Copsey defines spirituality, specifically in relation to children, as 'an innate sensitivity to matters beyond and yet within everyday life' (p26) and sees the qualities of children's spirituality as **openness** – to the world, to feelings, to people; **immediacy** – in the 'here and now', in spontaneity, in simplicity; and **freedom of spirit** – in creativity, in integration (of their inner and outer worlds), in love. She recognises that children's spirituality, along with that of all humanity is 'marred' by original sin, but it can also be 'tarnished' by surrounding influences and 'scratched' by deliberate or inadvertent messages (pp65-66). Our job is to be on the side of repairing rather than increasing the damage.

Quoting Hay, Copsey holds that spirituality is not the property of any religion. She has likened it (*Fanning the Flame* conference: Manchester, 2002) to seeds growing in a seed bed – they sprout and grow, then spread across the bed without taking any particular shape or form. The different faith traditions provide different frameworks, and depending upon which framework has been placed over an individual's spiritual seed bed, their spirituality will grow into the shape of that faith. Copsey's concern is that if we pay more attention (or indeed *only* pay attention) to constructing the frame and not to the health of the spiritual seed bed, then the shoots may never sprout, or if they do may wither before they make contact with the framework: a damaged spirituality and a lifeless faith will be the result.

In building or repairing the spiritual life of children Copsey says we need 'cement', which she sees as: starting in the child's world; earning the right to be heard; being alongside (not ahead of) the child; knowing that we are building foundations not the whole building; working holistically with other aspects of the child's world (pp123-128). Bricks are also needed. Copsey identifies Jesus as the foundation stone. The first level of bricks are the children's workers – the kind of people they are and the

relationships they foster are key. Other important building materials are: an openness to seeing things from fresh perspectives; engagement with the child's world; an awareness of our own cultural biases; an appreciation that the children may not share our familiarity with scripture; and an acknowledgement that providing experiences and fostering awareness are more important than giving information (pp 128-138).

- Copley reminds us that 'Jesus encourages us to become like children' (p 27). Are the qualities of children's spirituality she identifies needed by your adult congregation?
- How can these qualities be nurtured, with any age group?
- Is it possible for an adult Christian to have a well formed framework of faith, but little growing on it? How would you know?

MODEL 3: RINGS OF THE TREE – John Westerhoff

John Westerhoff's model is one of faith development. He identifies four 'styles of faith' ('experienced', 'affiliative', 'searching', 'owned or mature') and likens them to growth rings of a tree. He points out that a tree with one ring on it is no less a complete tree than one with many – the latter is simply an expanded version of the former. Westerhoff uses this analogy to maintain that no style of faith is inherently 'better' or 'greater' than another.

Westerhoff claims that development through all the styles is not automatic – for instance many adults will still have 'affiliative' as their predominant style. Neither will there necessarily be a linear progression since people may well move back and forth through the styles depending on their life's experiences. However, Westerhoff does hold that 'owned' faith cannot be experienced without a period of 'searching': he sees the transition from 'searching' to 'owned' as the point of 'conversion'.

Experienced faith

At this stage, theological words and doctrines are unimportant. Experiences of trust, love and acceptance provide opportunities for faith to form. Patterns, routines and ways of being are established at this stage. The important thing is not what you tell the person but their experience of you being a Christian.

Affiliative faith

Stories, experiences of awe and mystery, feelings and religious experiences combine to give a sense of belonging. Members of the faith community are observed and copied. What they say is important. Creative activities and sharing help to deepen faith. There is a strong need to belong, to participate and to identify with the community of faith.

Searching faith

This is a time of questioning, doubting, experimenting with other ideas and finding alternative suggestions and explanations. Elements of doubt and critical judgement are essential to the development of a personal faith which replaces expressions of faith borrowed from other people.

Owned faith or Mature faith

This is a combination of the affiliative and searching styles of faith. People now want to put their faith into personal and social action, to stand up for what they believe. They are secure enough to be open to other points of view. Owned faith is enriched and developed by the challenge of different perspectives on the truth. People now find new meaning in and through story, symbol and ritual.

(Synopses from: *Kaleidoscope*, National Christian Education Council, Section I, Unit C (1998).)

- Can you identify times in your life when your faith has been expressed in some of Westerhoff's four styles.
- What are the implications of saying that no style is 'better' than another?
- How can children be given opportunities to move from one style to another? How can adults be give similar opportunities?

ALL TOGETHER NOW

We have seen that questions of spiritual growth and faith development are equally applicable to young and old. We should therefore have programmes to foster this growth and development for all ages. The question is, *could all ages use the same programme?*

The United Reformed Church, *Charter for Children in the Church* says the following:

‘As a church community we must learn to do only those things in separate age groups which we cannot in all conscience do together.’

WHY SHOULD WE DO IT?

Why should we *want* it to be the same programme? Why are the URC so insistent about trying to find ways of doing things together?

Jesus famously said, ‘Let the little children come to me’ (eg Mt 19:13). But his insistence that children had an equal right to be amongst those around him went further than being a charitable gesture of inclusion: he told his disciples, ‘Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 18:3). In other words, the Christian community has something vital to learn from children – rather than being the least in the pecking order, it turns out that they are in the vanguard on the way to the kingdom of heaven. It is surely significant that Jesus is ‘indignant’ (a uniquely strong term for his feelings) when the disciples try to keep the children away (Mk 10:13-14). To exclude children is clearly a very serious matter indeed: it robs the community of its pattern for discipleship.

In our current context, if we do not have children present with us we cannot see the pattern they are intended to give us. For the children to be truly present, not ‘present but absent’ by being in a separate building, room or group, the children must be in the very midst of the community, where Jesus placed them. They must also be able to take a meaningful part in the broadest range of community activities, including exploration of the faith, in the full company of the community.

Philip Mounstephen and Kelly Martin in their booklet *Body Beautiful? Recapturing a Vision for All-age Church* remind us that our three-in-one understanding of God makes community a divine attribute. They point out the importance both Old and New Testaments give to creating a community; and they cite the story of Hannah and Samuel (1 Sam chs 1 to 3) as an example of the way God calls both young and old to his service. One of the closing images of Revelation (22:3), they point out, is of God’s servants in community at worship in the holy city; and they begin their book by warning that the all-age worship we seek to promote on earth is unlikely to flourish without an all-age culture in a church to underpin it. St Paul spoke of ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Cor ch 12) and Mounstephen and Martin highlight the diversity Paul explores as the hallmark of this ‘body’. They conclude that if we can be a true all-age community – valuing our differences rather than allowing them to divide us – then we will provide a powerful witness to the kingdom in our fragmented age.

HOW WOULD WE DO IT?

You don't have to spend long in a truly engaged exchange with a group of children to realise that there are not many of the 'big issues' of existence that are not meaningful to them and on which they cannot express themselves. They may not bring the experience of an adult to bear on the topic, but they often bring vivid insights of their own. The key to a successful exchange between a broad range of ages is not so much the topic as the way of exploring it. The traditional format of a talk followed by a discussion is unlikely to engage many children and young people. However, if an approach can be found which is active, participatory, multi-sensory, experiential or creative, and if a response is invited that is open, reflective and allows for a variety of levels to be valued, then children will readily engage. It must be said that many adults will also find that they are much more deeply engaged than in more standard discussion sessions.

'Children learn in Sunday School: adults learn in church,' has been the standard model of parish education. If all-ages are to learn and grow together, then we must find a context in which they can be together and engaged in a common pursuit. Amongst suggestions in chapter 3 of *Signposts: Practical Ideas for All-age Learning* (edited by Peter Privett) are the following:

Workshops

Members of the congregation or community with special skills could enable an all-age group to explore a theme through a variety of crafts and activities.

Tasks

Mixed-age groups could produce a collage, a drama, a song, or a banner expressing their feelings about a theme. (The focussed approach of a task could be mixed with the freedom of selection from workshops, and in either case some of the material produced could later be used in the worship of the church).

Shared Experience

All ages could share a visit, a game, or other stimulating experience and then share their feelings about the experience in a creative way.

Residential

The planning of Parish Weekends will often entail putting a lot of time and effort into planning separate programmes for the adults and the children, and the mustering of large teams to lead both programmes. Why not halve the preparations and reduce the leaders required by planning one programme that is accessible for all ages?

Retreat or Quiet Day

There is a widespread misconception that children don't like quietness or reflective times and are only interested in noise and being 'hyper'. Children are just the same as adults – some only like noise, some only like quiet, but most value a healthy mixture of the two in their lives. Are there ways of enabling younger members to share in the more reflective times of church life?

House Group

When a house group or study group programme is organised exclusively for adults, young families have to organise child care in order to attend. Solve the problem by making the group multi-generational. Adults sometimes find it hard to talk to their children about matters of faith in the home setting – a group designed to allow adults and children to interact round a theme of faith may open up new dimensions in a family's life.

The Sermon/ Ministry of the Word

This traditional adult learning time can become all-age if a more active and participatory approach is taken to presenting readings and responding to them in reflection and prayer. A 'liquid' approach could be adopted in which a number of stations and activities are provided during this part of the service. If the whole of the service can be made all-age, then two recurrent problems – how to find children's leaders and how to enable children's leaders to worship – can be solved at a stroke: the children remain in church for the whole of every service – learning, worshipping, and being with the rest of their community.

WHAT ELSE?

In what other contexts can the adult members of a congregation learn with and from the young members? When planning the kind of events hinted at above, is there a way that the children can have an input? Are there more innovative ways of running planning meetings than the ones we are used to?

And when the activity is over, is feed-back only sought from half the church – the adult church? Are there creative ways of gathering feedback that will enable all ages to participate? *Signposts* chapter 8 has some suggestions to start the ball rolling: questionnaires; a graffiti board; a selection of expressive faces that participants can chose to reflect their feelings; using 'thumbs up/down' signals to respond as a group to questions about an activity; standing on carpet squares numbered 1-10 to 'score' an activity.

HELPFUL READING

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