

The Experience of a Group for Sharing Spiritual Journeys

by **Petra Griffiths**

The *LivingSpirituality* Journeying Together Group (JTG) emerged out of an initiative in 2014 designed to “explore the spirituality and theology of giving equal weight to female and male language for the divine”. After a few meetings we broadened our scope to reflect the original members’ interests.

Aims

Our aims now are to:

- share our spiritual journeys;
- use inclusive language and imagery exploring the feminine and masculine nature of the divine, particularly focusing on bringing forth the suppressed feminine strand within the Judeo-Christian tradition;
- acknowledge our connection with the web of life;
- make deeper connections to God, as we listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit in our time;
- be open to insights from the contemplative tradition and from other faiths;
- respect diversity.

Membership

The Journeying Together Group has been meeting in London for nearly two years. The group has ten members, and is full at present. The Group also has a planning group of five members, though one is away for a year, so we are currently four.

Monthly meetings

We decided to divide our evenings into two parts – a talk and/or a discussion, and a liturgy.

An hour is devoted to a talk on an agreed topic by a group member or a visitor, followed by a discussion. Alternatively, we have a discussion about a theme which we have asked everyone to think about ahead of time. Members share their insights and experiences, and sometimes bring images or objects that symbolise an important aspect for them. There is a half hour refreshment break, and a further hour for a lay-led creative liturgy, with as much participation as possible from the group members. Some people prefer having the liturgy first and others prefer it after the discussion session, so we change the order of the evening each time.

Themes

Examples of **the themes** we have covered are:

- The Holy Spirit
- The Deeper Centre
- Christa (based on research one of us is conducting)
- Insightful Ageing
- Margaret Silf's Landmarks approach
- The Paschal Mystery (Thomas Keating's approach)
- Pilgrimage.

Examples of **themes we have all contributed to** are:

- Circles of Belonging
- Our spiritual journey
- Who have our spiritual teachers been?

The Insightful Ageing evening also gave us an opportunity in our liturgy to explore similarities in the sayings of the Buddha and of Jesus, based on Marcus Borg's book (*Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*). This was connected with inviting a Buddhist, who runs an Insightful Ageing Group, to talk on the topic. This was an opportunity to put into practice our aim to be open to insights from other faiths.

Group agreements

We made the following **group agreements** in April 2015:

- Not to pressure anyone into sharing any personal information that they don't want to share, but allowing those who want to share personal things to do so.
- To keep the information shared in the group sessions confidential.
- To respect people's different needs and perspectives. To go with the majority view if there is a choice between different themes.
- To maintain a balance between heart and head. When looking at theological topics, aiming for them to have relevance to people's lives, and to be presented in an open-ended way.
- To distinguish between sessions that involve the discussion of ideas, and those where personal sharing is invited. When there is personal sharing, people need to listen and leave a space without responding unless the person requests responses.

- Where possible to let people talk at the length they wish to but to make use of agreed timings if there is a danger of some people not having a chance to speak.

These agreements have greatly facilitated the process of running the sessions and dealing with any difficulties arising during discussions. As in any group, we have people with different perspectives and priorities, and arriving at where we are now has had its ups and downs. Some members want to focus more on heart-related topics, and others are keen to retain the aspect of examining new ideas.

This has come into balance through making sure that ideas that are presented relate to people's lived experience, and through ensuring that enough space is given for people to give their personal response to any themes presented, rather than just listening to someone talking. Over time, roles within the group have become very clear in terms of getting all the practical arrangements for the sessions and refreshments sorted out, so we don't have muddles over who is bringing what.

The sessions enable a number of the group members to exercise skills they have in a meaningful way, such as one member who provides opening music each time, and accompanies the inclusive language hymns we use. Another who is an actor does the most complicated readings. Another ensures that we are respectful of the space, and put everything back in place before we leave. Another suggests and organises group outings. Personally I enjoy the opportunity to bring together many of our monthly creative liturgies, and to enable wide participation in the way we conduct these.

Creative liturgies

The group liturgies contain three standard aspects:

- A prayer for the wellbeing of all and of the whole creation;
- Silent meditation, followed by the opportunity to light candles for people or situations we are concerned about;
- To close, making a connection by holding hands round the circle and blowing out the candles together.

We have some excellent source books for our liturgies. For the hymns:

June Boyce-Tillman's ***A Rainbow to Heaven***

Common Ground - A song book for all the churches

Bring Many Names by Brian Wren

For the readings:

Praying with the Women Mystics by Mary T Malone, which gives modern renderings of the mystics' sayings.

Naming God by Jan Berry, which has prayers and poems for many life events

Books by Jim Cotter, including **Prayer at Day's Dawning**

1000 World Prayers edited by Marcus Braybooke

Outside visits

In addition to our monthly meetings, we also make visits to talks and cultural events, and have had several good visits to places of spiritual interest such as Canterbury, Winchester and the National Gallery. We have a group member who is good at arranging visits and plans carefully ahead of time what the options are on the day and how we will get from place to place.

These extra events add to the richness of the group experience.

The benefits of the Journeying Together experience

A year after we made the group agreements we asked people to write down why the group is important to them, and what its benefits are. Here are some of the responses:

"An oasis in the week. A space to become more grounded again. The warmth of other people."

"I really appreciate our regular meetings where we share our reflections and our journeys through life with depth, honesty and with a lived sense of the spirit of God, or Christ, accompanying us. I love the shared liturgy, drawing on a range of wisdom writers, poets and teachers. The holistic inclusion of environmental awareness, the sacredness of nature is rich and nourishing, moving into new modern areas of our life experience and of other people around us, especially the vulnerable and suffering. Yet there's always a balance, with light as well as darkness."

“The opportunity to explore in liturgy, discussion and sharing themes rarely or never raised or aired in church. Fellowship: a growing sense of closeness to other members of the group. Occasional extras, like day pilgrimages, add something to the monthly meetings.”

“..... a re-assuring structure of returning again to be one in a circle.”

“I feel a spirit that is moving and growing within the group. We respect one another’s search, even when we are not in the same spiritual space. We learn from one another and are open to new expressions of the Divine. Thank you for the life-affirming spirit of the sessions. It’s been a real joy to share the beauty and reverence of the sacred spirit of life and light.”

“It’s good to draw on mystical texts with a contemporary context. Good also to have the opportunity to contribute in a smallish group as one, rather than constantly splitting into smaller groups.”

“I find this group very stimulating, because most of my spiritual life is conducted on my own through walking, reading and contemplating. It is reassuring to listen and sense other people’s needs, hopes, longings, disappointments or concerns. I look forward to the monthly meetings.”

“The group provides a safe place to explore my own spiritual concerns and to hear those of the other members of the group. It also provides me with a creative outlet in relation to music, which is important aspect from my own point of view, as well as hopefully, providing a service to other members.

It is good to do something for a community, however small, as an antidote to living a fairly isolated life for most of the time.”

“The gender balance is equal, and women’s strength and creativity is celebrated.”

“I like the regular rhythm of monthly meetings which all have the same structure, yet each session is new and different. I really valued the support from group members after having surgery.”

"I wanted to tell you how precious to me the check in is in this group. Situated in love and so transparent."

Guidelines for setting up a new local group

We do hope that others seeking the benefits of group membership may consider setting something up locally. Of course, each group will have a different focus, and not everyone will want to incorporate creative liturgies, which are an important aspect for us.

Jenny Sandler kindly drafted guidelines for *LivingSpirituality*, drawing on her many years' experience of running groups. They will help you to think through what you are looking for from a group, which in turn will help with recruiting appropriate members. The guidelines are available at:

www.livingspirit.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/group_guidelines.pdf.

Resources for creative liturgy

For anyone wanting to start offering creative liturgies, Jan Berry's new booklet *Re-thinking Worship? Together in Hope - Resources for Christian Faith Today* discusses ways in which modern believers can offer worship with integrity. It lists many useful sources for liturgy. Each chapter asks valuable questions for people to consider. The booklet can be ordered via the Modern Church website: www.modernchurch.org.uk/index.php/together-in-hope. The Together in Hope series is produced by Modern Church, PCN Britain, Free to Believe, and St Marks Centre for Radical Christianity.

If you want to discuss your plans to set up a spiritual sharing group, please email Petra at petragriffiths@livingspirit.org.uk.

Petra Griffiths is Coordinator of the Journeying Together Group and of *LivingSpirituality*. She has a wide range of experience of running groups and courses.

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