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Autumn newsletter 2014

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Introduction

In this issue we cover ***LivingConversation*** – a name we are giving to open, mutually respectful, spiritual conversations taking place in a variety of formats. We report on new research into the healing impact of communal Deep Abiding prayer; an exciting new theological partnership that will take forward the work of the LS Equalist Group; a new online resource for the Spiritual Elders project; a visit to the Well at Willen, rediscovering some of the roots of Living Spirituality today; and personal responses to the recent Modern Church conference *A Liberating Spirit?* and to an Abbey of the Arts retreat. We also report on a great article about LS from the *Network* magazine. Several of the articles

are much longer than our newsletter format, and we have given a link to a page on our website, where you can read them.

LivingConversation

Several of our LS steering group members reflect in this article on different forms of open spiritual conversation that have a very sustaining impact in their lives. We are naming these ***LivingConversation*** and suggest that they are an integral part of what ***LivingSpirituality*** sets out to do. I am fortunate to have just attended a Spirited Exchanges meeting at the [Well at Willen](#), and realise that ***LivingConversation*** is another incarnation of the ideas behind a movement that started in New Zealand and was active in the UK, and which now provides solely a website –

www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz – since they felt their work as a transitional bridge within Christianity was complete. Today in the UK many people are still struggling to find places to articulate their authentic experience within churches, or are outside the church and feel isolated.

LivingConversation is one way of responding to those individuals' needs which **LivingSpirituality** could help to promote if there is current need for a hub for this purpose. The article can be found at

www.livingspirit.org.uk/livingconversation

Deep Abiding - Praying, Living and Loving from the Inside Out – new research

Can a heart-focused formal and informal contemplative practice of tuning in and identifying with indwelling life force energy, or spirit as one's deepest, truest self, contribute to both personal and communal healing? That was the central question in a programme designed by doctor-of-ministry candidate, the Rev. Catherine Mary Quehl-Engel (CQE), Episcopalian chaplain at Cornell Liberal Arts College in Iowa. Basing her Interior Prayer of the Heart course on Christian contemplative approaches (particularly St. Teresa of Avila and St. Clare), she also included sources from many spiritual traditions and appealed to a diverse range of participants. In addition, she made use of the research into the importance of heart coherence for reducing stress,

carried out by the Institute of HeartMath - www.heartmath.org. A number of established mind-body-spirit approaches were also included in the course.

The results were most encouraging -

“participants increased compassion for others and self in transformative, healing, life-giving ways. They also cultivated an awareness of our inter-connective oneness in the dynamism shared by indwelling life force-Spirit, others, self, and all creation in a *communio* of love.”

At the present time in the world, with endless news of human conflict and suffering justified in the name of faith, Deep Abiding offers one possible response that may be helpful both for the individuals participating and for the wider community. I shall be contacting Catherine Quehl-Engel to see what guidance is available for leaders considering offering the Deep Abiding course in the UK.

For the full article and for details of how to access the PhD thesis online, click here - www.livingspirit.org.uk/deep-abiding.

New partnership for the LivingSpirituality Equalist Group

Our Equalist Group has been accepted as a partner group of the Institute for Theological Partnerships at the University of Winchester. The Institute was set up in 2009 as the outward theological face of the University. It has as its main aim promotion of theological debate in the wider community - debates around politics, ethics, economics, human

understanding, mind and body and the lived environment.

The Director of the Institute is Professor Lisa Isherwood, a liberation theologian who believes theology to be a communal project fuelled by notions of radical equality and empowered by divine companionship. Her work explores the nature of incarnation within a contemporary context and includes such areas as the body, gender, sexuality and eco-theology. She has written, co-authored or edited 17 books including **An A-Z of Feminist Theology** [Joint editor with Dorothea McEwan, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], **Liberating Christ** [Pilgrim Press 1999] and **Introducing Feminist Christologies** [Continuum, 2001].

More news of this exciting development in our next newsletter. In the meantime our Equalist Group is visiting the Institute's Cosmic Garden in September. In her inspiring inaugural lecture for the Cosmic Garden, Lisa Isherwood set out a broad vision for the project. A short extract is included here:

"I have for some time argued that incarnational theology can never lend itself to certainty, the God who abandoned the heavens in favour of enfleshed existence gave up the assurance of good/correct and perfect outcomes and instead embraced risk as central to the divine unfolding. In grounding theology in incarnation I am declaring for the God who we are told in the Prologue of John's Gospel, pitched his tent amongst us. A tent, not a house, a moveable dwelling, one fit for the walk, one that expands and changes shape with the winds of change,

best understood perhaps as the breath of the Spirit. It was this incarnation who became God in community/God in society/God in creation. This is not a walk in search of perfect origins and the comfort of utopian endings. It is one that moves us out into ever expanding life and so perhaps it is Eve who is our best companion as we walk."

The lecture may be accessed from the University of Winchester website - www.winchester.ac.uk/aboutus/lifelonglearning/Theologicalpartnerships/Pages/Theologicalpartnerships.aspx - or a copy obtained by email from David Carter.

For information about any aspect of the Equalist Group, contact David Carter by emailing drc.book1@gmail.com.

Resources for Elder Spirituality

The Canadian multi-faith website www.spiritualityandpractice.com has developed a range of resources to help people pursue the themes of spiritual eldering. These include books, dvds, spiritual practices and wise elders as well as e-courses developed in partnership with the Conscious Ageing Alliance, which has a number of contributing organisations including the Institute for Noetic Sciences.

Projects of the Conscious Ageing Alliance include:

The Legacy of Wisdom - www.legacyofwisdom.com - is dedicated to creating a vision with practical applications of "wise living and aging." It

was generated through the work of Ram Dass, Rabbi Zalman Schachter, Jay Goldfarb, Tom Valente and Roshi Joan Halifax.

Sage-ing International - www.sage-ing.org

- helps to change our society's current belief system from ageing to sage-ing—that is, from simply becoming old to ageing consciously. “We believe that the wisdom and gifts of conscious elders are urgently needed in today's world, and sage-ing supports the development of such elders.” Sage-ing is both a philosophy and a set of psychological and spiritual practices, originally developed by **Zalman Schachter Shalomi**, that support living with passion and purpose. Rabbi Schachter Shalomi was a founder of the Jewish Renewal movement and an innovator in ecumenical dialogue.

The Elder Spirituality Project of Spirituality and Practice was launched in 2013 with a series of interactive e-courses led by spiritual teachers known for their insights into the spiritual blessings and challenges of later life.

This what Spirituality and Practice say about the benefits of the spiritual practices:

- They activate our service to others through giving, volunteerism, mentoring, and sacred activism.
- They open the doors to better care and attention to our bodies and emotions.

- They help us explore silence and solitude for the enrichment of our inner lives.
- They give us ways to harvest our memories, pursue pleasures, and express our creativity.
- They engage us in lifelong learning and sacred study.
- They give us ways to tell our stories, identify our values, share the fruits of our long lives, and pass on our legacies to others.

www.spiritualityandpractice.com/blogs/maps.php?id=26459

Praise for *LivingSpirituality's* work

We greatly appreciate the coverage given to LS in **Resources**, “a journal for all women interested in spirituality, theology, ministry and liturgy”. This includes mention of “a very attractive website”; our lists of interesting and varied events covering the UK and Eire; and our newsletter “full of interesting material”. They comment with an exclamation mark that we include events for men!

We are always keen to receive your feedback as to whether we are focusing our activities in a way that works for you.

The Well at Willen and the Ecumenical Spirituality Project – the roots of the present

I have recently made a fruitful visit to the excellent community at the Well at Willen, where the Living Spirituality Network (predecessor to **LivingSpirituality**) used to

be based, and which continues its own broadly based programme of workshops and retreats

(www.thewellatwillen.org.uk). For a brief account of the organisations that were part of the history behind Living Spirituality, go to www.livingspirit.org.uk/about-ls/history.

It was particularly illuminating to meet Gwen Cashmore, the co-founder of the predecessor to the Living Spirituality Network – the Ecumenical Spirituality Project (ESP). In the **Jottings and Journeys** report about work across continents, Gwen and co-founder Joan Puls wrote after the ESP concluded its work in 1996, there is much of that original vision that is current and important today, within the context of the bombardment of news from the Middle East, and the role of religions in that.

We quote here resonant sections from **Jottings and Journeys**:

The Church was being called to “a spirituality that is incarnational, life-giving, rooted in Scripture, nourished by prayer, a spirituality that is communitarian and celebrating, expressed in service and witness, trusting and confident (but not naïve), leading to suffering, open to the wider oikoumene (the whole inhabited world), and always joyful and hopeful.”

“We found that we needed to be very human in our approach. We sought a language that was not church jargon, a

context that included literature, poetry, science and politics.” Quoting an unknown source, they continue: “The major task of spirituality today is to humanize the structures and enlarge the common expectations of what it is to be human.”

In their summing up Gwen and Joan say “A world of exchange surrounds us. We are learning from a multiplicity of sources of the interconnectedness of our world, of reality itself.....When there is harmony and a flow of energy and life, life is enhanced, creation thrives, and human beings experience unity and solidarity. The secret of spirituality is the uncovering of this life of exchange, then finding our place, our gift, our role, in the flow of life and making visible the fruits of exchange.”

Scottish lay theologian Elizabeth Templeton asks in conclusion how churches can express the courtesy, the hospitality, the openness of God, and comments that the recognition of multiple modes of creative access to spirituality has been a major source of strength in the Project.

A friend of ESP commented “Our lives have been enriched and challenged by your gift of finding deep meaning in the commonplace things of life.”

A particular pleasure for me was to discover that Gwen and Joan had made a connection with Donald Reeves, then Rector of St James’s Piccadilly (who now provide practical support to

Living Spirituality), in the 1980's. They describe Donald as "a vibrant member of our network" – a link I had known nothing about until my meeting with Gwen.

Gwen and Joan's report concludes with this visionary prayer:

Clear the Way

God of surprises, you call us

From the narrowness of our traditions to new ways of being church

From the captivities of our cultures to creative witness for justice

From the smallness of our horizons to the bigness of your vision.

Clear the way in us, your people,
That we might call others to freedom and renewed faith.

Jesus, wounded healer, you call us

From preoccupation with our own histories and hurts to daily tasks of peacemaking.

From privilege and protocol to partnership and pilgrimage

From isolation and insularity to inclusive community.

Clear the way in us, your people,
That we might call others to wholeness and integrity.

Holy, transforming Spirit, you call us

From fear to faithfulness

From clutter to clarity

From a desire to control to deeper trust

From the refusal to love to a readiness to risk

Clear the way in us, your people,
That we might all know the beauty and power and danger of the gospel.

Impressions of the July 2014 Modern Church Conference on the theme *A Liberating Spirit? Exploring Spirituality for the 21st Century*

by David Carter

What is the best thing about a conference on a theme of real interest to you? Is it the talks and following Q&A's, the liturgies, or the conversations and networking over tea, coffee and meals? All were nourishing and it's difficult to choose one part over the others.

The conference's opening statement included "Many in our world have lost interest in institutions and are weary with dogmatic arguments but are looking for authentic, intelligent and accessible ways of reflecting on the realities and mysteries of life which can actually make a difference to their own lives." It lived up to its promise to "explore some of the contemporary approaches to spirituality through the lens of open minded and well-informed enquiry".

A strong impression given by two of the talks was that spirituality for the 21st Century should have a clear this-worldly ethical dimension. The two talks were

Worldly Spirituality by Rev Dave Bookless, Co-founder and now Director of Theology of *A Rocha*, an international Christian environmental charity, and *Breastfeeding as a metaphor for grace filled service* by Revd Dr Emma Percy, Chaplain and Welfare Dean at Trinity College, Oxford.

Dave spoke of a paradigm shift from an other-worldly spirituality focused on personal salvation and an after-life in heaven to an engaged, concerned, spirituality at the centre of church, society and creation. Dave left us in no doubt about the seriousness of environmental issues, saying that the sober world of geology is now investigating the formalisation of new epoch – the Anthropocene – because of the magnitude of humankind’s impact on the earth.

Emma spoke movingly about embodied spirituality – in our service to others, our being there in our bodies is very often important. Electronic communication has its limitations! Emma gave examples from Christian scripture and tradition of mothering and breastfeeding imagery and surprised many of us by quoting 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 in which St Paul uses nursing imagery of himself. The old misogynist had his cuddly and maternal side!

More details of the conference are available online at www.modernchurch.org.uk/index.php/mc-events/annual-conference.html.

Would I recommend a ‘Modern Church’ conference to LS members? If you are broadly within the liberal Christian tradition and have had some formal theological education, give it a try. There is a different theme each year – 2015’s is ‘Seeking the Sacred: Christianity in dialogue with other religions and the world’.

David Carter is the LS Equalist Group Coordinator.

The Soul’s Journey: A Creative Pilgrimage through Lent - an online retreat with the Abbey of the Arts

by Linda Pearson

The Abbey of the Arts is an online global monastery without walls and seeks to be a place of ‘transformative living through contemplative & expressive arts’ (www.AbbeyoftheArts.com).

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, says

“This is what we need! Christine is offering us a “moving monastery” yet with solid grounding in Scripture, Nature, Art, the Tradition, and the Saints! Abbey of the Arts is spirituality for our time and every time.”

I heard about the Abbey through being a member of *LivingSpirituality* and resonated closely with the ‘Monk in the World’ video presentation on the website to such an extent that I signed the ‘Monk Manifesto’ and receive regular letters via e

mail. I would encourage readers to look at these for yourselves because I don't think they will be what you imagine.

Christine Valters Paintner created the Abbey and was joined recently by John Valters Paintner, her husband. Christine follows the path of a Benedictine as an oblate of the order. The Abbey is gifted in many ways that include opening life's questions in a gentle and creative way that is liberating.

Go to www.livingspirit.org.uk/a-creative-pilgrimage-with-the-abbey-of-the-arts to read Linda's account of the retreat and its impact.

Linda Pearson is Coordinator of the LS Art and Spirituality Special Interest Group, regional contact for the North East, and a Steering Group member.

New Regular Events listing on our website

We have added a regular events listing document on our website rather than putting these at the end of our quarterly listings.

There is also a document for events in September and October that we have heard about since our last events digest.

Both can be found on the Events page - www.livingspirit.org.uk/events.

With good wishes,
Petra Griffiths
LivingSpirituality Coordinator

For details of the LS Steering Group members, go to:
www.livingspirit.org.uk/who-we-are/steering-group.