

WellSpring and Australian Spirituality in 2011

WellSpring seeks to 'provide space, support and learning within a Christian context for those who wish to deepen their awareness of the presence of God in all of life and to follow the implications of this in everyday life in ways that are just, compassionate, healing and reconciling.'¹ The extent to which these goals are achievable can be explored by examining some recently published critical reflections and sociological surveys that have looked at the way in which both religious and secular Australians actually recognise their own needs in the areas of religion and spirituality.² A common factor emerging from these research findings is that the only real constant is change. Furthermore, these changes are influencing politics, business, sporting clubs and the environment as well as impacting on religion.

In spite of an increase in affluence, and apparent accessibility to a wide range of education, health care and recreational resources widespread community well-being is not universally present. Social research shows that 'close to one-fifth of young people and older people say that they are hurting deep inside and that they are not satisfied with their lives.'³ While human spirituality is consistently recognised as a positive human aspiration, the institutional church, as a primary source of spiritual resources, is becoming less and less valued.⁴ How might WellSpring respond to these identifiable needs? In order to respond to these questions let us look at some of the relevant recent social, religious and educational research available.

Critical Social Factors

The Rise in Individualism

The First Australians, like the indigenous peoples of many lands, are essentially communalists. They have a connectedness to the land and to each other as an inextricable part of their spiritual being. Over the last two centuries, as we Europeans have colonised their land, there have been continuing shifts in the social expressions of both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The earliest convict society experienced forced communalism controlled by a socially communal military, while a rugged individualism developed amongst the free settlers many of whom led lives of total isolation. The prime concern of these people groups was survival in their new and challenging environments. Over time a strong Euro-centric culture predominated and the new immigrant populations moved into urban and suburban settings. It was sports clubs, local pubs, schools and, up until the last fifty years, churches that provided their social hubs. They were places of human contact where trading networks were established, partnerships formed and where people's stories were shared and ritualised in a new way.

Today, apart from football Grand Finals, Anzac Day and Carols by Candlelight there are few collective stories that are celebrated widely on a regular basis. Rather, many stories are being shared in a multitude of different spaces, including cyberspaces, and at times of personal convenience. The contemporary individualist speaks about their spirituality in terms of 'personal decision', 'private faith' and 'many sources,' whereas the collectivists once spoke about 'the faith community', 'societal transformation' and a 'prophetic stance.' In response to their recognised need for personal fulfillment, allegiances by contemporary Australians to sporting clubs or churches are more likely to swing towards the 'winners' or leave the group completely, rather than staying unswervingly loyal to their teams of origin if they appear to be 'losers'. As David Tacey noted a decade ago:

¹ The WellSpring mission statement accepted in mid-2010.

² David Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*. Pymble NSW: HarperCollins, 2000; Peter Kaldor, Philip Hughes, Alan Black, *Spirit Matters. How making sense of life affects your wellbeing*. Preston VIC: Mosaic Press, 2010; Philip Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality. A review of Christian ministry in the Australian context*. Preston, VIC: Mosaic Press, 2010, based on the World Values Survey (2005). These recent studies have drawn upon the significant quantitative data derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) last census figures, the more recent data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) and the published studies of the Christian Research Association (CRA). In addition, a number of other smaller qualitative studies emerging from a range of Australian tertiary institutions have contributed also to the wealth of accessible analytical material.

³ Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*. 5, 23.

⁴ P. C. Hill and K. I. Pargament, 'Advances in the conceptualisation and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health,' *American Psychologist* 58, 1 (2003) 64-74. Consciousness of spirituality as a community concept has been developing increasingly, leaving behind an entirely Christian understanding to one which embraces 'any aspect of humanities' connection to something other than itself

Many try to fill this emptiness with compulsive economic consumption, absorption in the mass media, faddism, cults, ideologies, substance abuse and various other kinds of escapism. Our symptomatic behavior gives us no sense of enduring meaning and the inner emptiness always returns. The so-called 'identity crisis' of white Australians is itself a spiritual crisis; it is a sense of disconnection from ourselves, from the land, from history and from the world.⁵

The growth of global consciousness

We live at a time of unprecedented global awareness. Millions of people travel around the world every day, some voluntarily and others involuntarily. We can receive instant news reports in any language we want from almost anywhere via television, YouTube,⁶ radio, email, SMS and twitters. Our boundaries are no longer limited by lack of technology, but the deluge of information we do receive can be overwhelming, depressing and even deceiving.

We are becoming a 'network society' that lives in a 'global village' with an emerging single 'global economy'.⁷

Spirituality, understood as a human sense of the transcendent encountered in culture, habits, practices and thought forms . . . has become a commodity on the global market, with a range of often eclectic religious 'fixes' available to the spiritual searcher in the global village. A wonderful range of options is offered, in a variety of media, from Zen meditation classes to Wiccan solstice rituals for the 'solitary witch'.⁸

It is an environment of instant results that may conflict with the concept of spiritual and personal formation which is a lifelong learning process.⁹ But at the same time there are opportunities to develop appropriate pathways within this globally networked community. As Alex Tang, a Christian minister in Singapore, notes:

The Internet has made it possible to reach even the remotest part of any country as long as there is Internet access. It has also allowed even the remotest part of the world with Internet access to be readily accessible. A Christian website may be accessed by anyone, even those in areas not accessible to missionaries. Social networking allows people to connect over long distances which otherwise will not know of one other's existence. Streaming videos and MP3 allow download of materials anywhere in the world. The global culture has a made inroads into many other cultures. It is a two-way street.¹⁰

Religion & Spirituality

The *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (2007) revealed that only 10% of those surveyed found their values reflected by religious institutions. The prime values identified were 'a peaceful world, honesty, true friendship, equality and social justice.'¹¹ Note that all of these values are named in the WellSpring Mission Statement! The 2007 survey identified a significant community concern for environmental issues along with scepticism about the values of religions and political parties. The 'fair go' principle was seen as a prime value and a strong identifying factor for most Australians, but not all religious organisations were noted for their apparent commitment to giving all people a 'fair go.' In fact, there can be a great discrepancy between the values held by uncritical churchgoers and questioning truth seekers who might even have the same religious

⁵ Tacey, *ReEnchantment*, 128.

⁶ For example see Michael Laitman *The Spiritual Root of Globalisation* www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZK-2yJ6nkM accessed 17 June 2011.

⁷ Anthony Egan, 'Spirituality, globalisation and resistance. Notes from South Africa,' *The Way* 46, 4 (2007) 85-86. [85-98]. See also Bryan S. Turner, 'Reshaping the Sociology of religion: Globalisation, spirituality and the end of the social,' *The Sociological Review* 57, 1 (2009) 186-200.

⁸ Egan, 'Spirituality, globalisation and resistance,' 87-88, citing Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London: Routledge, 2005; and Pedro Casaldaliga and Jose-Maria Vigil *Liberating Spirituality: A Spirituality of Liberation*. Quezon City MX: Claretian Publications, 1996.

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006, 53; 'whereby the innermost being of the individual (the heart, will or spirit) takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.'

¹⁰ Alex Tang in 'The influence of globalisation on the Christian spiritual formation in churches in Malaysia and Singapore,' < http://www.kairos2.com/SF_influence_of_globalisation > accessed 17 June 2011.

¹¹ Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, ' 26.

identity. The latter are more likely to have a larger environmentally influenced world-view, while the former may be more focussed on the eternal privileges of church membership and its European Judeo-Christian cultural preferences.¹²

Clearly, the traditional local church that has provided a significant place where human 'believing, belonging and behaving' is centred and nurtured, is no longer as influential as it was once.¹³ In fact, Tom Frame, in a recent study on 'Unbelief in Australia,' argues that 'spirituality must not be confused with religion,' going on to assert that:

In my observation, spirituality in the Western world exists as a generalised protest against formalised religion and as a specific reaction to monotheism . . . spirituality has become an independent form of power that seeks to deprive the churches of their monopoly on the sacred. It is most likely to flourish where formalised religious affiliation is weakest and when religious institutions are unable to control and contain individualised and popular expressions of spirituality.¹⁴

Over the past 40 years there has been a decline in people's traditional beliefs in God from 87% to 48%, so that currently 'between 50 and 60 percent of Australians take a predominantly secular approach to life.'¹⁵ 'The outflow to having no religion is huge and demonstrates a significant cultural shift.' As a result, spirituality is clearly not the provenance of religion alone. At the same time it has been noted by researchers that 'the reflectively Christian group outnumbers the uncritically Christian group by a factor of three to one' suggesting that 'we may be emerging from an era when beliefs and affiliations were handed on from one generation to the next, and moving more and more into an era where how you make sense of life is a matter of personal choice.'¹⁶ In contrast to Frame, David Pohlman, a Queensland school chaplain, when addressing the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia in 2008 noted that,

'while Australians are rejecting the dogmatic, the religious and the institutional, they are not really rejecting the spiritual. They are welcoming, I think, of authentic Christianity. The Christianity that rolls its sleeves up – the one that welcomes – the one that cares deeply and shares divine resources profoundly – the one that is prepared to hear their story – and companions them on their journey.'¹⁷

In continuity with Pohlman's observation, a Christian Research Association report notes that most of the 43% of Australians who claim to be nonreligious are actively engaged in activities that include searching for a transcendent element. To meet their needs they draw upon many resources including 'spending time with family and friends, in music and homemaking, in nature, travelling and dining out.'¹⁸ Furthermore, for many people there is a greater recognised 'spiritual capital' derived from their workplaces than with any particular local church. For example, a significant number of employers in large business institutions engage outsiders, some of whom are Christian ministers, to introduce the Enneagram program to their employees as they recognise its capacity to enhance relationships within the workplace. As most Australians are open to 'personal growth,' this program is warmly received and produces positive outcomes as it embraces people of any culture, race, gender or age.

While locally-based religious communities might still have a role in providing a 'spiritual home' for a minority of Australians, it is thought that innovative ecumenical and inter-faith networks are more likely to provide for a healthy functional future. However, some of these inter-faith

¹² See Sophie Sunderland, 'Post-secular nation; or how "Australian spirituality" privileges a secular, white, Judaeo-Christian culture,' *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 2, 1 (2007). <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC> accessed 10 June 2011.

¹³ Tom Frame, *Losing my religion. Unbelief in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009, 12. Frame attributes the source of this idea to Robin Gill *The Social Context of Theology*. Oxford UK: Mowbray, 1975.

¹⁴ Frame, *Losing my religion*, 25.

¹⁵ Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, ' 6-7, 42. 'only 28% of Australians 'took a predominantly religious approach to life.'

¹⁶ Kaldor, Hughes, Black, *Spirit Matters*, 14-15.

¹⁷ David Pohlman, www.ccaa.net.au/aust/documents/Journal-SpiritualLayoftheLand.pdf accessed 30 May 2011

¹⁸ Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, ' 6-7.

initiatives, and even intra-faith inclusivist groups risk being labelled 'heretical' by their traditional religious parents. It should be noted, also, that while 'conversion'¹⁹ is still a missional aim for many traditional religious groups, more Australian Christians have been converted to other religions than have people from other religions been converted to Christianity.²⁰

Spirituality and Education

In spite of recent concerns, there is little doubt that educational institutions are places where spiritual learning can be nurtured. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory²¹ has been influential in curriculum development widening the scope of learning pathways and allowing meaningful reflection that nurtures healthy human development even if 'spiritual intelligence'²² is yet to be recognised formally as one of the intelligences essential for holistic development.

'The school curriculum is a highly contested area of education and has always been. Everybody has an opinion on what should be taught and how much of it should be covered. The opinion varies according to conceptions of the purpose of schooling. To put it simplistically, there are two broad camps. The first camp prioritises post-school employability and national competitiveness in a global economy. It is concerned with both fundamental and high-order skills in areas such as reading, writing, problem-solving and the use of technology. These primarily involve English, mathematics and science. The second camp favours a holistic, liberal and formative approach to education. It gives weight to subjects that develop a sense of identity, community and citizenship such as visual arts, drama, music, religious education and history.'²³

Christian Religious Education tends to be an optional adjunct to the wider learning objectives in both public and private schools. But while CRE might find a greater place in the formal learning programs of church schools it is probably best demonstrated informally in many Australian public schools through the life-style examples provided by teachers and chaplains. The spiritual formation of these teachers and chaplains is crucial in helping to form the moral and ethical frameworks of generations who are often completely unaware of the way in which the Judeo-Christian narrative has impacted the social, legal and political decision making that has crafted our democratic society. Without their input many are unable to recognise the way in which our values have become so secularised that the narratives used to sell commercial products have usurped the moral and ethical narratives of the Christian Gospels. As one commentator notes:

[T]he majority of important television commercials take the form of religious parables organised around a coherent theology. Like all religious parables, these commercials put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of Heaven. This will be obvious to those who have taken to heart the Parable of the Person with Rotten Breath, the Parable of the Stupid Investor, the Parable of the lost Traveller's Cheques, the Parable of the Man Who Runs Through Airports, or most of the hundreds of others that are part of our youth's religious education.²⁴

Healthy integrated learning is a life-long process and goes well beyond the primary, secondary and even tertiary learning systems.²⁵ It is learning that is personal and social, relational and accessible, rather than impersonal, competitive and selective. No one has fully comprehended all there is to know and the danger continues to exist whereby 'we make finite things . . . into God by making them the limit of our lives.' In containing the boundaries and requiring faith

¹⁹ Noting that the primary understanding of conversion often is to persuade 'others' to become 'like us.'

²⁰ Hughes, ' *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, ' 47.

²¹ Howard Gardner *Multiple Intelligences*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

²² See Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *SQ Spiritual Intelligence. The ultimate intelligence*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2000.

²³ Fatima Meashim, 'Education in a post-WikiLeaks world,' www.eurekastreet.com.au/ accessed 15 December, 2010.

²⁴ Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 34, cited by

²⁵ See Robert A. Harris, *The Integration of Faith and Learning. A worldview approach*. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2004.

expressed in formulas we run the risk of making a 'god' in our own image and restrict the possibility that the presence of the Creator God can be recognised in unexpected places.²⁶

Conclusion

The challenge is before us now. The future church, whether the unbounded, osmotic 'Diocese of God' or any particular denominational structure within that diocese, is dependent upon on this generation taking risks, embracing innovative methods of communication and critiquing the old ways of being that may no longer be relevant and able to offer hope. Philip Hughes suggests that churches need to employ a 'consumerist approach' by offering 'a range of ways in which people may nurture the spirit, such as counselling centres, living and learning centres, in offering music groups, task groups and educational activities.' WellSpring, with its capacity to open new ways of guiding the spiritual yearnings of today's society, is a place that can offer specialised skills accessible both inside and outside of denominational structures. It is well equipped to offer pathways for appropriate spiritual formation and transformation encouraging every pilgrim to discover their own spiritual energy as well as equipping them to facilitate the process for others. There is no fixed formula, but a flexible program of possibility.

We have a rich inheritance of faith that is grounded in traditions that nourish and give birth to God centred, relevant new ways of being spiritually aware. It is an inheritance of reconciling love, of global grace, of creation's mutuality and interdependence and it is immeasurably rich. If we take it seriously, spirituality as an integral part of human experience and education can be fanned into a flame that joins with others in setting alight a healthy reinvigoration of the whole of God's world. The possibility is enough to excite us to begin the task again, in even the smallest way, and to renew and enliven the WellSpring flow and fire!

Merrill Kitchen, June 2011

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*. vol 1. Welwyn UK: James Nisbet, 1951, 235.