

Spirituality in Australia – Reflections on Merrill Kitchen’s Paper Susan Campbell, WellSpring 2011

Firstly, ‘spirituality is a recognised and valued human reality while church, as primary source of spiritual resources is becoming less valued.’ I doubt this is news to any of us. We know the stats. But, what does it actually mean for us? What does it feel like and how does that impact our faith and our lives?

For me it means that I’m the only Christian in my mother’s group, and I’m often confronted by the strongly negative views my friends have about Christianity and the church. It means that in my husband’s classroom where he teaches there are no Christian students, and only one parent sends their child to Scripture/RE. It means of the large group of friends from church that I grew up with, only a few have continued their involvement.

It means that many Christians feel isolated and very different from those around them. Thus, the pull to spend time being *busy* in our churches and maintaining social relationships primarily with Christians, is very strong. We know from sociology and anthropology that minority groups stick together, and church-goers, now a minority of Australians, seem to stick together very well: Children attend Christian schools and Christian sporting competitions; we listen to Christian radio; visit the Christian mechanic or dentist; read Christian books and comment on Christian blogs. While it may provide comfort for many, it only exacerbates the problem, as the proximity spaces for non-Christians to interact meaningfully with church people is ever more diminished. The snowball continues to grow. Negativity towards Christians is fuelled by ignorance, as less and less Australians have contact or meaningful relationships with Christians.

Yet, people are still searching. The research shows that ‘active engagement in activities that search for meaning and connection with the transcendent’ is as real today as it ever was. Where are they looking? The research indicated ‘spending time with family and friends, in music and homemaking, in nature, travelling and dining out.’ How do you respond to that? I’m cheering! People are realising that ‘spiritual capital’ is not restricted to the church. We are re-awakened to revelation of God in the everyday stuff of life. ...In food and poetry and art and nature and conversation and media. Spiritual experiences are not confined to the pews, but are on the pavements and in the pubs. This is good news!

However, as people engage in the search of what we would recognise as the Spirit of God in everyday life, I wonder what framework they use to make sense of their experiences? What hooks to hang things on? What structure and language and tools do they have to deepen their experience and develop their awareness and understanding? The majority are not looking for a framework in the church, so where else, who else, how else are they being supported?

Perhaps we can draw on my knowledge of what Global Interaction missionaries, or ‘cross-cultural workers’ endeavour to do overseas. The teams are not building church structures, preaching on street corners, holding rallies or other strategies employed in the past. They are, instead, moving into neighbourhoods, working, taking their kids to school, building relationships and simply doing life. With a clear theology that there are no Godforsaken places on earth; that God is at work among creation; that God is revealing himself in a myriad of ways, drawing people to himself - the team are there to, when invited, journey with people and help provide some framework for their spiritual experiences.

For example, one of the most common ways God communicates with people in Asia is through dreams – a very normal, accepted way of connecting with the transcendent in the culture. As the dreamers share with their Australian friends and neighbours, they are listened to, and gently encouraged to explore meanings and feelings and over time recognise the Spirit of God being revealed to them. Many have come to faith in Jesus. It's about being there, being open to be used by God and having the skills of discernment, self-awareness, deep listening, and contextually appropriate ways of sharing the message of Jesus with others.

Is it any different here, in Australia? We know people are searching. We know many are hurting. We know people are experiencing God, whether they recognise him or not. So, our response, just like our brothers and sisters overseas, is to be open to what he is doing. To be there. To have genuine relationships with people. To journey with them. To help people make sense of their experiences.

Here's the crunch: In order to be effective in this, Christians need encouragement from other pilgrims and we need skills. We need formation. We need self-awareness, discernment, prayer, cultural sensitivity, sound theology, accountability and practice! We need ministries and places like WellSpring to provide some aspects of this in order to sustain, nurture and equip us.

My experience over the last 12 months as a new mother as someone entering a new phase of life in becoming a mother - in antenatal classes, in pregnancy books and websites, in Christian bookstores, in mother and child magazines, in mothers' group classes, in all the information overload, there is nothing...nothing...about the spirituality of this overwhelmingly spiritual experience. The closest I found was a book in Koorong titled 'Dear God, I feel like a whale' that didn't actually address spirituality at all. That book ended up in the bin!

Where is the framework, the hooks, the tools to help people engage with God and make sense of their experience in order to connect more deeply with their Creator, Sustainer, Mother, Nurturer God? I shared with a friend my maybe-one day-if-I-have-time idea of researching and facilitating a workshop for pregnant women and new mums around spirituality of childbirth and motherhood. My non-Christian, church-hating, God-denying friend *loved* the idea and said she'd be the first to sign-up!

New ways of helping people engage with God are needed for this generation. Merrill concluded that 'the future church is dependent on us taking risks, embracing innovative ways of communicating and critiquing the old ways of being that may no longer be relevant.' My sense is that we are now getting very good at the latter, critiquing, but not so good at the former, embracing innovation and taking risks. We can critique til the cows come home but unless we get busy creating new opportunities, there'll be nothing left to critique!

We must give people space and time and resources and encouragement, knowing that the initiative may fail. 9 out of 10 ideas may not come to fruition, but, we'll learn a lot along the way, and there may be 1 idea that takes off. It's worth it for that one isn't it? It's worth making a few people shift in their uncomfortable pews and ruffle their feathers a little. Because if we don't we miss out on the opportunity God has given us to direct people to him!

Merrill commented that 'some risks are being labelled heretical by traditional religious entities.' Really? Still? Perhaps this is the case in some places, in some denominations, and possibly more accurately some people who have loud voices. But I think many people know that the church is becoming pushed to the margins of society, people are feeling like the minority that we are, people are concerned about the future of the church. They see the moving vans outside church buildings, sold off and developed into apartments. They are asking questions of how to

revitalise, re-form, re-shape and survive. I am hopeful that people are open to those who will 'have a crack' and give something a go.

Merrill's observation that Australians are sceptical about religion and politics stirred me to consider the state of play of these two heavyweight institutions.

You may know about GetUp!, a movement that aims to build a progressive Australia and bring participation back into our democracy. It's a not-for-profit grassroots advocacy movement that has social justice, cultural diversity, economic fairness and environmental sustainability at its core. And for many Australians, particularly young people, this is the most accessible way they can engage with politics. Nearly 600,000 Australians have joined the movement - signing petitions, attending events, talking to their politicians and learning about current issues through e-newsletters. Its impact on Australian politics is going viral – quickly, creatively and effectively.

The GetUp website states: "Political parties and institutional politics have too often failed to inspire people or offer meaningful opportunities for participation, yet many Australians remain deeply concerned about the political direction of our country."

So, I wonder, who and where is the GetUp equivalent for religion? If some words from GetUp's website are substituted, could it be true: "Churches and religious institutions have too often failed to inspire people to offer meaningful opportunities for participation, yet many Australians remain deeply concerned about the spiritual health and direction of our country."

Who is 'pushing back' to our churches, asking questions, challenging, advocating and keeping us on our toes, to provide a relevant and authentic expression of faith? Who is being creative and innovative in helping people depth their experience of God and nurture their spirituality? Who is providing the tools, resources and inspiration to help us engage with God, each other and our world?

Perhaps WellSpring may hold part of the answer.