



Meditation groups: communities of faith

by Paul Harris

It has been said that in each age God raises up prophets and teachers to ensure His work is carried on. John Main is certainly regarded as one of these great spiritual teachers of the 20th century. But he was also in a real sense a prophet. John Main had a deep insight and prophetic vision that his teaching on silence and stillness in prayer would be primarily handed down in small groups. It was his hope that this teaching and practice would be shared in an organic way through support groups of men and women meeting on a weekly basis in homes, churches, schools and work places. He had a profound understanding of the ancient tradition of Christians gathering together to pray.

Laurence Freeman has pointed out: 'John Main saw this modern development of contemplation as originating in the communities of faith and the liturgy at the heart of the early church. These early Christians also gathered in small groups in one another's houses. This coming together in prayer formed the "koinonia", or the social interaction and communion, that was the distinguishing mark and power of the early church. These small groups met to pray and offer support and encouragement to each other in their common faith.'

There is no doubt that the teaching of spirituality is historically rooted in the tradition of the small group. The Israelites were divided up into small tribes and close family units, particularly during their sojourn in the wilderness. Jesus chose a small group of twelve to form the heart of his ministry. Throughout the last 2,000 years small groups of men and women have banded together in the monastic life to live in community and support each other on the spiritual journey. It seems only natural that people who are praying contemplatively in the 21st century should also come together in groups to support each other on their common pilgrimage.

Small Christian Meditation groups have a great advantage in adapting to their environment. They require virtually no resources, other than the time their members devote to the group each week. The small group provides a sense of community for people who feel the loss and breakdown of neighbourhoods and personal family ties.

The need for encouragement, support and sharing are additional reasons for joining a group. We all need the affirmation of others and thus our faith can be strengthened through the bonds of love, caring and fellowship that develop in the small group. Basic spiritual and human values are shared in a group setting and subsequent friendships develop.

This is the foremost reason for getting together once a week. It is as if meditators instinctively realize that this is a journey that is difficult to make alone; it is a journey that is so much easier if we make it with others. It is true that no one else can meditate for us, that we meditate by ourselves each day, but at the same time, we realize that we need the support of others if we are to persevere on this journey.

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