

# **God Is In The Neighbourhood**

Equipping community to become ‘aware of their  
awarenesses’. Spiritual direction, a practice  
uniquely equipped to infuse community  
development.

**by**

**BRUCE MADEN**

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Spiritual  
Directors’ Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries

Jesus had a long story telling afternoon (Mt 13.34 – Petersen E. 1997<sup>1</sup>). Can you just imagine it? Threads of reality being woven in intricate fashion. His voice modulating to give added emphasis, surprising twists and punches to the solar plexus in the tail. Wow!! So in the tradition of the great story teller who appeared to spend a lot of time in the neighbourhood, let's begin with a tale. I'm sure a research paper can be dressed up to capture your attention!

*A diverse group of men and women, young and old, Maori, Pacific Island and Pakeha, perhaps of different faiths, for at least one woman wears a headscarf, sit around a room. Through the windows and across the road the very utilitarian, insipid coloured two storey housing units, so indicative of New Zealand State Housing, create the backdrop. Some children play in the park – they almost certainly are of school age. Perhaps their teachers are quietly breathing sighs of relief that they haven't appeared this morning. An elderly Maori gentleman walks slowly past – his walking stick rather incongruously has a child's sandshoe stuck on the end. So much for setting – have I stirred your imaginations enough? Annie Dillard<sup>2</sup> you immersed yourself in Tinkering Creeks but I am left with much more prosaic environments.*

*A woman, within the group, begins to share her story – a slice of reality. She speaks of a long dreamt of holiday to the United States of America, with her husband and son and of an unexpected gift that made it possible. But no travelogue is this. She paints a verbal picture of her husband feeling unwell in the final week of their holiday. She speaks of their attempts to get medical assistance at the Emergency Department of a Hospital near Los Angeles and after waiting all night for unforthcoming attention from medical staff, of their decision to board their pre-arranged return flight to New Zealand.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Petersen E. (1997) Leap over the Wall – Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians, Harper, San Francisco.

<sup>2</sup> Dillard A. (1974) Pilgrim at Tinkers Creek, Harper Perennial N.Y., U.S.A.

*A story unfolds of her husband increasingly becoming unwell and delirious on the flight and of his collapse at Auckland Airport. She speaks of him sinking into a life threatening coma and of a diagnosis of Legionnaires disease. All in the room have become still, immersing themselves into the reality created in their imaginations. She speaks of a work colleague, hearing of this crisis, phoning to ask whether she would like her to arrange for a prayer team to come and pray for her husband at his bedside and of her rejection of that offer as something she couldn't with integrity accept because of her rejection of the idea of a personal God. The opposing tensions are outlined, for all those present in the hui (meeting), as she speaks of extended family fearfully hoping her husband wouldn't die and of her own feelings of pain at watching her husband so desperately cling faintly to life. She speaks of finding herself, somehow prompted from within, without conscious decision, conversing with God. She further speaks of attending to herself with surprise at finding how this transition from a universal belief in some spiritual component to life to crying out to a personal God has occurred. Prompted as if from within, she relays how she finds herself saying 'Thy will be done' and speaking words of release to her husband – 'if it's too difficult to live please let go of life – go with my blessing'. Pin drop silence has pervaded the hui – a greater awareness of reality is infusing itself through the room. Our story teller communicates to us of how at this point she felt a tremendous sense of inner peace – of being held within a vast loving and safe container and of how over the next few hours and days her husband began to return to consciousness. She speaks of the ongoing questions and medical tests that were conducted to try and reveal whether there had been lasting consequences to the ravages of the disease. She concludes by speaking without naming them of 'hints of blessings' throughout the unfolding ordeal.*

*In the ensuing silence amongst all those present in the hui, people can be observed brushing away their tears of emotion. Gradually dialogue begins to evolve. Those present share as to how this story has deeply*

*touched them. One young mother speaks of being challenged by this story. She speaks of being separated at an early age from her parents and raised in Christian institutions – of believing in God and of stopping believing in God after she had cried out to God to save her new born baby only to see her baby die. She speaks of her anger and the refusal to believe in God over the many intervening years. However she tearfully shares how this story has again challenged the barricades so carefully erected in her heart and mind. Others begin to ask questions of the storyteller about could she elaborate what were the ‘hints of blessings’ and another asks her to speak further about her spiritual quest and the milestones on it. To the former, the storyteller speaks of how fortunate they were that they didn’t receive the medical attention they were waiting for in the States as this allowed them to board the flight which would probably otherwise have been prevented. She also speaks of how a close friend of their family had flown back to Auckland, from overseas, only a short time after the arrival of their own flight and how he was able to provide friendship and support in this time of crisis when they were not in their home city. The second question evokes a deeply reflective response as she seeks her own answers. She begins to speak of how she was always aware of God as a young child, of how she loved being encouraged to attend Sunday School at the local Catholic Church and of how she shut the door on God after she prayed that her father, whom she loved, would return home after her parents separated when she was six years of age. She speaks, with a voice breaking with emotion, of being abandoned by an earthly father and of this colouring her view that God must have inspired this dreadful act. And of how only when she is in great danger of being ‘abandoned’ by another important man in her life is she brought back to re-question the framework of meaning she had arrived at as a young child.*

*Over the ensuing morning others in the group deeply respond. One stirred by all this God talk forcefully responds that this God stuff is a figment of fertile imaginations and a crutch for people in desperate*

*situations. Rather colourfully she states she doesn't believe in all this 'spiritual crap'. A retired Pastor speaks of being deeply moved by the robust and honest conversations occurring in the room. He shares how he finds it so refreshing to see that an ethos has been created that gives permission for people to share contrary views and beliefs about spiritual life, especially so when they probably know he is a retired Pastor. Another person from a strong evangelical tradition is more circumspect. His comments reflect both intrigue and puzzlement. He takes a position as 'defender of the faith'. A rather awkward silence follows before a visiting researcher comments that 'the conversations are so real and authentic'. Spirituality is grounded in everyday life. People are encouraged to wrestle, journey, to share discoveries and to rub shoulders in honest dialogue. She concludes by saying 'that if this is church, or a community of faith, she would want to belong'.*

This community dialogue emerged out of a 'God Spotting' hui. It forms a part of a qualitative research project that was informed by Action Research (Slater G. and Burgess K.)<sup>3</sup>, Grounded Theory (Glaser B.G.)<sup>4</sup> and Decentred Research Practice (Tootell A. 2004)<sup>5</sup> methodologies. In keeping with Glaser's grounded theory methodology this research project did not have a specific research question but was rather based on 'wonderment' of what is going on in relation to spiritual experience and spiritual formation in a community development setting and to explore whether there are ways to encourage 'awarenesses of awareness' in such a setting. Through a series of recorded conversations from gatherings or hui, with community participants, focus group reflections by staff within a community development organisation and one to one conversations it was hoped that key elements that might encourage spiritual attending, journeying and growth within a community based setting could be identified. Rather than follow a prescribed questionnaire reflective conversations were stimulated and 'awarenesses' of participants recorded.

---

<sup>3</sup> Slater G and Burgess K. (pending) Helping Students Develop Learning Skills through Action Research Processes, N.Z.

<sup>4</sup> Glaser B.G. (1992) Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis, - Emergence vs Forcing, Mill Valley C.A. Sociology Press.

This paper is an attempt to support the earlier work of Simon Brown (2003)<sup>6</sup> with whom I share the hope that Christian faith infused spiritual direction and the Contemplative tradition have an essential place in the neighbourhood beyond the institutional church, in assisting ‘neighbours’ to notice, attend to and dialogue with the emerging Ultimate Other or God that is infused in both their ordinary lived experiences and in rather more inexplicable specific spiritual experiences they encounter.

This paper therefore begins from the premise that the practice of Spiritual Direction can be infused into the relational world of ‘neighbours in the neighbourhood’. It builds on the understandings of spiritual direction offered by Tilden Edwards (1980 p.8)<sup>7</sup>, who writes,

*“Spiritual guidance in the Christian tradition is an offering, a bridge, a ‘way in’ to the Ground of all human life – a ‘way in’ to our shared holy Ground available for all people yearning to touch that Ground more firmly”.*

It is my argument in this paper that such spiritual guidance must increasingly be available for all who quest (even if they do not know they are questing or for what or whom they quest) in the neighbourhood. This paper therefore is an attempt by a student in the art of spiritual direction to construct some of the elements of practice that are important in assisting the ‘neighbourhood’ ‘to touch that holy Ground more firmly’. It is my premise, that in a world that is increasingly beyond the institutional Christian Church there is a need to grow the presence of the ‘anam cara’<sup>8</sup> – the celtic word for soul friends. This paper therefore hopes to encourage all those who seek to be ‘anam cara’ in the ‘neighbourhood’-all those who seek to create a milieu, an interpersonal climate in which ‘neighbours’ (directees) ‘become progressively free of fear, spiritually perceptive, generous, able to assume responsibility and to take initiative in the spiritual

---

<sup>5</sup> Tootell A. (2004) Decentred Research Practice, International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work No. 3, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Brown S. (2003) Mission and the Art of Spiritual Direction, Refresh – A Journal of Contemplative Spirituality, Spiritual Growth Ministries, Vol3, No. 2. 2003 N.Z.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards T (1980) Spiritual Friend, Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction, Paulist Press, New Jersey, U.S.A.

<sup>8</sup> O’Donohue J. Anam Cara, Bantam Press, U.K.

life.’ (Schneiders S. 1976)<sup>9</sup>. As Paul Hawker (2002)<sup>10</sup> says we desperately need trustworthy Christian spiritual guides in our culture (neighbourhood).

### **The Context**

Te Aroha Noa Community Services operates in a community that has a high proportion of Maori and Pacific Islands families. The locality is often described as an area of high social and economic deprivation (Munford and Sanders 2001)<sup>11</sup>

Te Aroha Noa has been present in this community for eighteen years. It originated out of the Central Baptist Church and currently operates on a semi-autonomous basis. The organisation operates in a secular environment, using Christian values to inform its mahi or work.

Te Aroha Noa has grown to provide an extensive range of services to holistically respond to the needs of young families/whanau. These include a Family/Whanau Development Programme (HIPPY), An Early Childhood Centre, Social Work and Counselling Services, First Steps Adult Education, Aerobics, Community Development and a Clothing Shop and Craft Group. While a few services are provided solely by professionally trained staff the majority involve the community in the co-provision of services. This has resulted in Te Aroha Noa having a strong degree of community ownership. The organisation uses strengths principles (McCashen W. 2005)<sup>12</sup> and the works of Freire (1972; 1985)<sup>13 14</sup> form an important part of its engagement with families. Freire argued that education was an act of freedom and that educators must believe that people are capable of creating their own freedom (1972, p 147). Similarly Amartya Sen (Reeler D, 2005)<sup>15</sup> concurs when he states ‘that development is indeed a

---

<sup>9</sup> Schneiders S. (1976) *The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction*, Chicago Studies, Spring, U.S.A.

<sup>10</sup> Hawker P. (2002) *Spiritual Experience in the General Population*, paper presented in Wellington N.Z., July 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Munford R., Sanders J., with Andrews A., Butler P., Kaipuke R. and Rewhiu L., 2001 *Aotearoa/New Zealand – Working Differently with Communities and Families*. In C. Warren-Adamson (Ed), *Family Centres and their International Role in Social Action*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>12</sup> McCashen W. 2005 *The Strengths Approach – a strengths based resource for sharing power and creating change*, St Lukes Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria, Australia

<sup>13</sup> Freire P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, U.K. Penguin Books

<sup>14</sup> Freire P. (1985) *The Politics of Education, Culture, Power and Liberation*, Basingstroke, U.K., McMillan.

<sup>15</sup> Reeler D. (2005) *Horizontal Learning – Engaging Freedom’s Possibilities*, Annual Report, Community Development Resource Association 2004/5 Report, [www.cdra.org.za](http://www.cdra.org.za)

momentous engagement with freedom's possibilities'. Reeler further argues that due to the effects of colonising domination, people's belief in the value of their own and their neighbours experiences, knowledges and ideas become increasingly diminished.

These theoretical perspectives have ensured that Te Aroha Noa actively encourages all participants to acknowledge their capacities, experiences and resourcefulness and to see themselves as an active partner in the creation of change in both their individual, family/whanau and community change processes. These concepts form part of what Lightburn and Warren – Adamson (2005)<sup>16</sup> call the 'culture of care'. They use this term to refer to the dynamic, creative, flexible and responsive mix of concrete activities and programmes and more intangible values, principles and orientations that combine together to characterise what it is like to be part of an integrated community centre.

This 'culture of care' or 'heart' of Te Aroha Noa is primarily conveyed through the 'telling of stories'. Stories of growth and development are encouraged to be shared within the community centre and beyond. These 'stories of change' often emerge slowly and are the result of an uncovering process in a safe environment where dominant stories that might be negative and diminishing of the potential of a person are deconstructed and alternative stories of capacity, resourcefulness and resilience are reconstructed (White and Epston 1990)<sup>17</sup>, (Mark, Winslade, Crocket and Epston 1997)<sup>18</sup>. Woven within this 'culture of care' is a responsiveness to the spiritual. Te Aroha Noa has a vision statement that encapsulates this by simply stating that it desires 'To be a God Inspired Community Unleashing the Potential of all People(s)'. Its website<sup>19</sup> says that not only does it want to assist its surrounding community but that increasingly it is challenged to become community – To Turangawaewae (A Place to Belong). A place of nurture and safety, a sanctuary, for those who may have few other people to support them to become who they truly want to be. It quotes Eugene Petersen<sup>20</sup> speaking of how the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky challenged him:

---

<sup>16</sup> Lightburn A. and Warren – Adamson C (2005) Developing a Community-Based Model for Integrated Family Centre Practice published in the Handbook of Community Based Clinical Practice ed. Lightburn, A., Sessions P. Oxford University Press U.K. 2006.

<sup>17</sup> White M. and Epston D. (1990) Narrative means to Therapeutic Ends, New York, Norton.

<sup>18</sup> Mark G., Winslade J., Crocket K., Epston D. 1997) Narrative Therapy in Practice – The Archaeology of Hope, Jossey – Bass, San Francisco, U.S.A.

<sup>19</sup> Maden B (2005) Te Aroha Noa community Services Trust, 2004-5 Annual Report.

[www.tearohanoa.org.nz](http://www.tearohanoa.org.nz)

<sup>20</sup> Petersen E. (1992) Under the Unpredictable Plant – An Exploration in Vocational Holiness, Eerdmans

*'He (Dostoevsky) refused to take the evidence that the people presented of themselves as truth; he dove beneath the surface of their lives and discovered in the depths, fire and passion and God. He trained my antennae to pick up the suppressed signals of spirituality, discovering tragic plots and comic episodes, works in progress all around me. I was living in a world redolent (fragrant) with spirituality. There were no ordinary people!!'*

The website goes on to say: 'Throughout every aspect of Te Aroha Noa we too are training our antennae to discover beneath the surface of all those we encounter the suppressed signals of spirituality in the depths, the fire, the passion and God. We have decided to stand against accepting people's version of themselves as the true version. We meet only extra-ordinary people!! We look beneath the surface and discover the deeper longings, the unexpressed dreams, the God saturated moments and the hunger for life other than it is.'

Within this perspective the use of the term 'spiritual' or the 'wairua' is not seen as describing something separate from or a component of but as infused into all that is – comprehensive and integrative. The Spirit of Christ is seen as already in the neighbourhood, as already at the heart of all that is and wanting to be noticed, embraced and called forth. It is a perspective that challenges all to become and connect with what they already know and to enter into the reality that is already God in and around them (Petersen p. 189)<sup>21</sup>

This then is the setting within which this wondering about the possibilities of infusing spiritual direction within community development processes occurred. Arising from the recorded stories and observations I have attempted to elucidate potentially critical elements of practice and to weave into these supporting theoretical perspectives.

### **Critical elements of practice**

#### **Attending to the suppressed signals of spirituality**

This research recorded many stories within both individual and group settings that support the premise that spiritual or religious experience is widely encountered by many

---

<sup>21</sup> Petersen E (1992) Op cit. p.189

with little or no religious involvement. As is illustrated in the opening ‘story’ of this paper and in the many stories recorded in the course of this research there is a very significant awareness of the spiritual dimension in people dwelling in the neighbourhood beyond institutional church. When a permission giving environment is created and constraints to expression removed, people share experiences of prayer being answered, the strange falling into place of events, the sacred in nature, an awareness of the presence of God and in one story a sense of the presence of evil.

These recorded ‘stories’ are supported by the research of David Hay and Kate Hunt (2000)<sup>22</sup> who in a Soul of Britain study in 2000 found that in a randomly selected study of the general population 76% of those sampled admitted to having a spiritual or religious experience – an increase of 28% on average over a similar study completed in the U.K. in 1987. Yet only 6-8% of the survey population were regular church attenders. These results came from asking respondents the following question:

*“Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power (whether you call it God or not) which is different from your everyday self?”*

Similarly Paul Hawker<sup>23</sup> in an Australasian setting has recorded the ‘stories’ of many peoples encounters with spiritual or religious experience and again the great majority have tenuous or no links to the institutional Church.

It is the premise of this paper that God is indeed in the neighbourhood and that spiritual direction is uniquely equipped with a tradition and practice that can assist people to embrace the quest to encounter, ultimate reality. For as Carolyn Gratton (Pg 2)<sup>24</sup> says:

*“An appreciation of human freedom and of its built in directedness towards the divine presence underlying all events is the basis of the Church’s traditional understanding of spiritual direction.*

*We need to be reminded often of the hidden intentionality of these longing hearts. When they lose their way, for the moment, they need*

---

<sup>22</sup> Hay D., Hunt K. (2000) Understanding the Spirituality of People who don’t go to Church, Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham U.K.

<sup>23</sup> Hawker P. (2000) Secret Affairs of the Soul, Northstone Publishing, Canada.

<sup>24</sup> Gratton C. (1993) The Art of Spiritual Guidance – A Contemporary Approach to Growing in the Spirit (Crossroads N.Y., U.S.A.

*guidance. The spiritual guide is there to help seekers freely awaken to or remember the path along which God is leading their hearts.”*

She also remarks that we are all in constant dialogue with reality and so this research suggests that there is a need for spiritual guides (directors) in the neighbourhood to assist people to become more conscious of their innermost questions – to assist them to make the pre-focal or unconscious conscious so that they can more intentionally give shape and form to their lives. And that guides are needed to connect the detached happenings of peoples lives with that person’s deeper longing for the divine (which they may not know they have). So within Te Aroha Noa questions such as the following are immersed into conversations to assist people to attend more consciously and dialogue more deeply with the reality they are experiencing:

What do you think is really going on here?

What does this event mean for you?

In the midst of this mess what do you think is the best direction to take?

If you were open to a divine Presence existing what do you think that Presence would be saying to you now?

From these experiences what understandings are you developing about God or the Divine Presence?

It was noted in the research that the ‘quest’ is often strongest when life events and life transitions overflow the previous frame of mind that was able to contain them. These disturbing events, as in the story told at the beginning of this paper, seem to invite us or force us to go deeper and to ask what this new event or loss means for me in view of the larger purpose of my life. Dilemmas seem to push people towards the ultimate questions of life.

*This was illustrated in the story of a mother who shared that at the birth of her baby she was told by medical staff her baby was unlikely to live. In the midst of feeling deeply troubled she felt an unseen hand touch her arm and a clear voice say ‘Don’t worry it will be alright’. She said that from that moment her fear diminished and that she felt her baby’s life was in the hands of Atua (God). When her baby*

*suddenly died some months later she was comforted by remembering this poignant experience.*

**The findings of this research support the premise that God is in the neighbourhood. That in every conversation there can be suppressed signals of spirituality which often need the assistance of spiritual friends to be fully attended to.**

The need to develop a shared understanding that supports God being in the neighbourhood

For this attending to develop and have more than momentary significance I would further suggest **that a shared framework of understanding must gradually be developed that supports this practice of spiritual direction in the neighbourhood.**

It must become supported by and rooted in theoretical understandings and rich traditions of faith so that the new seedling can grow to become a strong tree. As Matthew Fox (1993, p 22)<sup>25</sup> says ‘All Theology ought to be endeavouring to articulate the will of the Spirit in peoples experiences and ought to resist using a tired ideology as a procrustean bed to tell people what they ought to experience.’ David Hay (2002)<sup>26</sup> supports this idea of the need for spiritual guides in the neighbourhood as his research has continued to develop the hypothesis of Alister Hardy (1966)<sup>27</sup> a zoologist, who suggested that religious awareness is a biological phenomenon in the human species – basically we are hard wired for religious or spiritual experience.

Therefore Hay (2002)<sup>28</sup> says ‘that from my Christian point of view another way of saying this is to say that God the Holy Spirit communicates with all of Creation’. From this perspective one might see the mission of the Church as to be alert to – and to be in tune with – the ways in which God is already in touch with everybody, inside or outside the Church.

---

<sup>25</sup> Fox M. (1983) Original Blessing, Bear and Co, Inc, Sante Fe, N.M.

<sup>26</sup> Hay D. (2002) The Spirituality of the Unchurched, a paper delivered to the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies Conference, [www.martynmission.ac.uk](http://www.martynmission.ac.uk)

<sup>27</sup> Hardy A. (1966) The Divine Flame. An essay towards a Natural History of Religion. Collins, London, U.K.

<sup>28</sup> Hay D. (2002) Op.cit.

Within the context of Te Aroha Noa these perspectives have been integrated into a holistic approach of attempting to increase what Hay., Nye R. and Hunt K. (1998) <sup>29</sup> term ‘relational consciousness’. This phrase describes assisting people to deepen and become more conscious of their relationship with self, others, their world and God – to become ‘aware of their awareness’. Within this framework there is an important role for the spiritual director to assist the community participants (directees) to reflect on these experiences in the light of the language and culture within which they emerge (Hay D, Nye R, Hunt K. 1998)<sup>30</sup>. As one new Maori staff member said in response to being asked to reflect on her experiences:

*‘I notice I korero (talk) with Atua (God) more. I’ve been more aware of a sense of Atua going before me and bringing events about. I’ve become more aware of ringaringa aroha o Atua – the loving hands of God, personally guiding my life. I also find myself sometimes being prompted to offer karakia (prayer) – like the other day I had to go and visit a whanau (family) and I felt an inner voice telling me to offer a karakia. I wouldn’t normally do that. So before I got out of the car I said a karakia and as I approached the front door of the home I could hear a furious verbal argument occurring inside. Normally I would have felt afraid in these circumstances but this time I felt safe and protected and so I just knocked on the door and I think I helped restore harmony in the home. I’m now thinking about how Atua is in my life on a daily basis. I don’t know how this has all happened. Somehow the wairua (spirituality) of this place is deeply affecting me’.*

This concept of holistically increasing ‘relational consciousness’ is also supported by Thomas Keating <sup>31</sup> who writes that, ‘when you truly love yourself, you become aware that your true self is Christ expressing himself in you and the further awareness that everyone else has this potential too. Augustine had a beautiful phrase for this, ‘One Christ loving himself’. Then everything begins to reflect not only its own beauty but the beauty of its Source. One becomes united to everything else in which God dwells. You see what is deepest – one’s union or potential union with Christ. The transcendent

---

<sup>29</sup> Hay D, Nye R, Hunt K. (1998) Understanding the Spiritual Life of Children, University of Nottingham, U.K.

<sup>30</sup> Hay D, Nye R, Hunt K. (1998) Op cit.

<sup>31</sup> Keating T (1992) Open Mind, Open Heart, Continuum, New York, U.S.A.

potential of most people is still waiting to be realized and this awakens great compassion’.

Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Canterbury also supports this perspective when he writes in a book linking the traditions of the Desert Fathers to our contemporary world (Williams R. 2005)<sup>32</sup>.

‘If we get to the true depth of the heart, what we find there is the echo of God’s creative word. Each one of us is a unique kind of echo of God. It is that we are naturally attuned to the reality of God. Our task in growing up in the life of the Spirit is to recover this attunement. Deep down we are attuned to God, but we have jarred the harmonies in various ways. We are out of tune and the trouble is what we often listen to is the out of tuneness, the habits of self protection and self regard.’

These perspectives, arising out of the contemplative tradition have contributed, in the Centre researched, to struggles and tension in the development of a shared understanding. The frameworks of understanding that have underpinned the involvement of some in the setting studied and indeed the frameworks from the originating church have been drawn from the evangelical tradition. As Alan Jamieson (p. 123, 2004)<sup>33</sup> writes, an underlying theme of this framework is what he terms ‘lifeboat theology’ - an analogy he acknowledges contains an important truth but which in his view increasingly is too restrictive. In this analogy people are viewed as floating aimlessly in the ocean. The church is seen as the lifeboat that comes to rescue these sometimes floating or drowning people from the water. The premise is that you need to be in the lifeboat to be saved. Furthermore there is a clear division between those in the lifeboat (saved) and those in the water (lost). God is at work only in the boat and there are clear processes involved in getting in to the boat – a conscious and decisive act of belief and trust in Jesus as the Son of God.

While wanting to acknowledge the great contribution of the evangelical tradition, both universally and in the writer’s own spiritual journeying, I would want to comment that I believe it is restrictive and constraining, at least in the forms often practiced, of the necessary inclusive and respectful practice required in community development settings.

---

<sup>32</sup> Williams R. (2005) *Where God Happens*, New Seeds, Boston, U.S.A.

In fact I would go as far as saying it is, in my opinion, seriously problematic in these settings if it isn't integrated with some of the understandings drawn from the other great theological traditions such as the Contemplative, Social Justice, Holiness, Charismatic and Incarnational streams (Foster R.J.)<sup>33</sup>.

In contrast, or perhaps alternatively, Sheila Pritchard's (1996)<sup>35</sup> contribution of the wells and fences metaphor and the work of Dave Andrews (1999)<sup>36</sup> offer important contributions to the development of a shared framework that supports the practice of spiritual direction within community development settings. As Pritchard says using a mathematical Centred sets analogy, 'It is much more realistic and helpful to think of Christianity as a centred set; a set defined by movement towards the centre, the person of Jesus Christ. Conversion is the point at which a person turns towards the centre, and begins the journey. This is a much more dynamic view of following Christ in which Christ-likeness is emphasized and boundary crossing de-emphasized'. Pritchard explains this metaphorically using an example drawn from Australian cattle ranching where in some areas large sections of land go for miles without any sign of fences. A local farmer, when asked by a visitor who was intrigued how farming was possible without fences, explained 'Oh that's not a problem. Out here we dig wells instead of building fences.' The implication Pritchard says is obvious. "There is no need to fence cattle in when they are highly motivated to stay within range of their source of life".

Supported by these theoretical and theological perspectives spiritual direction is able to be infused into this community development setting in such a way that inclusively invites and welcomes all who want to partner or journey with the kaupapa of the organisation to share in the creation of To Turangawaewae (A Place to Belong) – alternative community.

#### The creation of a milieu that supports spiritual direction in the neighbourhood

While in the setting studied there were many one to one interactions, perhaps in the disguise of the counselor and the client, the supervisor and their supervisee, the educator and their students, that mirror the one to one traditional model of spiritual direction, there was also evidence here of the creation of a milieu that supported spiritual

---

<sup>33</sup>Jamieson A. (2004) Called Again – in and beyond the deserts of faith, Garside Publishing, N.Z.

<sup>34</sup>Foster R.J. (1998) Streams of Living Water Harper;San Francisco;USA.

<sup>35</sup>Pritchard S. (1996) Wells or Fences, Journal of Spiritual Growth Ministries, June 1996, N.Z.

exploration. Much of the ‘directing’ often happened in group contexts and subsequently ‘directing’ conversations were seen to be emerging in the whole relational milieu. Community members would be heard sharing ‘I think I had one of these “God Moments” we were talking about’ and their friend or colleague would be heard asking them questions that further engaged the person in deeper spiritual exploration. As can be seen from this paper, this sense of a shared kete – a shared basket of knowledge where the concept of reciprocal relationships sharing their emerging expertise is very compatible with the models that have informed our community development, counselling and social work practice. It appears as if a context has been created where all are on a spiritual journey and all are responsible for encouraging and guiding their fellow travelers.

The results of this research project suggest that it is possible to create a ‘sacred space, a holy place, in the neighbourhood’ where a community of people grow in paying attention to the ‘Word’ in another. Influenced by Spiritual Direction and the Contemplative tradition people can be guided to become increasingly ‘aware of their awarenesses’. A milieu can be created that gives freedom to speak out about encounters with the Mysterious Other, God or simply the ‘Weird’. Where stories can be shared and people learn to ask questions of each other to ‘thicken’ the emerging understandings. Where questing is honoured and where people learn to respond to the deepest reality, the Christ, in each other. Through simple conversations people, individually and in groups can be guided to both express their spiritual experiences and to inductively co-formulate their understandings from these experiences in their own language which may be significantly different from traditional Christian language.

**To hear these stories, these engagements with the ‘Mysterious Other’, I would further suggest, requires attention to the creation of a safe environment where freedom of expression is encouraged.**

As the woman who was the key contributor of the story at the beginning of this paper responded when asked to reflect on what had assisted her spiritual journey said:

---

<sup>36</sup> Andrews D. (1999) *Christi – Anarchy*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, England

*“It was the permissive freedom that you (the Director) gave that encouraged me to spiritually journey. Even when you might have been deeply concerned where I was heading you encouraged me in my quest for finding my own spiritual meaning. In fact, the single act which spoke most to me was your staunch advocacy of my quest when people in leadership authority questioned you about the suitability of my appointment and the unorthodoxy of my spiritual perspective. At considerable risk to yourself, you defended my right to quest spiritually and you somehow trusted that God was involved in this quest”.*

On personal reflection, Spiritual Directions encouragement of my own deepening encounter with the Loving Presence has assisted in the creation of an inclusive space that trust’s God to know the unique ways to encounter all who are in the neighbourhood.

Again I would also re-emphasize that **a willingness to be creative with language is important for creating an inclusive milieu that encourages personal encounters with God.** To assist in the illustration of this I have narratively constructed this paper using multiple descriptions of God. During the course of this research participants would approach me and share ‘I think I have just had one of those God Moments and go on to share in their own language and within the context of their own cultural experience their encounters with ‘Ultimate Reality’. As Brown S. (2003) <sup>37</sup> says, ‘direction in this context must constantly be involved in a process of deconstructing religious language and reconstructing it in mutually accessible language.

#### Letting God be God – the importance of the directors spiritual formation

Reflecting on this study has identified that an important element in infusing spiritual direction practice into community development settings is **the inner commitment in the director to allowing God to be God.** Increasingly I acknowledge, as I review this unfolding research project, that my own spiritual formation is an essential element. My own deepening encounter with the Mystical has developed my own trust in the ‘bigness’ of God and increasingly allowed me to let God be God increasingly freed from cultural and religious institutional constraints. If the Spirit blows wherever it wants then the

---

<sup>37</sup> Brown S. (2003) Op cit p.50

prophetic imagination (Bruggeman W. 1978)<sup>38</sup> can be unleashed to attend to and cooperate with what unfolds outside of institutional Church and the voices of the ‘royal consciousness’ that are so prevalent in both Church and social settings. If one is to direct people to discover God’s movement in the ‘beyond’ then it appears vital that the director is increasingly at home in the ‘beyond’ themselves.

**As an example of giving space for God to be God it has been intriguing to note, without conscious influencing, the increasing growth of moral decisions amongst community participants in the setting studied.** Women have shared about how they have decided to stand against the prevalent culture of alcohol being needed at all events by holding a ‘Mothers day’ party where there was no alcohol, and of standing against family violence by calling the police whenever violence occurs in their street and by declaring to Work and Income changes in domestic status which affect benefit entitlement. Prompted ‘as if from within’ these stands against the prevalent culture have entered the shared narratives of the Te Aroha Noa Community. It appears that when a milieu is created of ‘educating the spirit’ through conveying the ‘peaceful worthwhileness’ of each person through aroha and practical care then God will move, God will create, God will change. As Williams says ‘conveying this sense of peaceful worthwhileness is much more fundamental to religious formation than just communicating religious information’ (Williams R.)<sup>39</sup>.

#### The ‘call’ to be involved in community

Lastly one of the important outcomes mentioned by many of the participants in this study was of their sense of involvement in making Te Aroha Noa happen. Community members shared how this was more than having a job or being a volunteer – **it was somehow about being involved in something bigger than themselves. It was about being caught up in a vision about life changing possibilities and about creating alternative forms of community.**

Human beings want to make a contribution to the world around them We want our lives freely to fulfil a unique intrinsic purpose; we have ‘vocational hunger’ (Gratton C.

---

<sup>38</sup> Bruggeman W. (1978) The Prophetic Imagination, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, U.S.A.

<sup>39</sup> Williams R. (2005) Op cit.p.54

1993)<sup>40</sup>. Within a community development setting it seems apparent that it is important to not only assist people to attend to inner spiritual life development but to also assist them to discover what they are called to do and how they most deeply want to use their time and energy. It seems an important element of working in the neighbourhood that there is an integrated attentiveness to developing the deepest interior capacity of the soul and to the call of a spirit-inspired life of social commitment. Indeed it could be said that a community development setting is uniquely designed to assist these integrated movements to occur.

In conclusion I would affirm God is indeed in the neighbourhood – moving beyond the frameworks of institutional religion. I would further suggest God has always been in the neighbourhood but at this moment in what is termed post modernist history, where increasingly large numbers of the New Zealand population have little or no knowledge of the Christian tradition, there is an exponentially growing need for anam cara (soul friends) or spiritual guides, who are able to assist people to discover truth organically. From this study I have suggested some of the critical elements in infusing spiritual direction practice into community development settings. These include attuning our ears to the suppressed signals of spirituality, practices that assist ‘neighbours’ to become ‘aware of their awarenesses’, the development of a shared theoretical and theological understanding that supports spiritual direction in this context, the creation of a milieu that inductively supports spiritual journeying, the creative use of language, the importance of the director attending to their own spiritual formation and the emphasis on a vocational call to a spirit inspired life of social commitment.

God is indeed in the neighbourhood and we desperately need trustworthy Christian spiritual guides to be present at the interface of this encounter.

---

<sup>40</sup> Gratton C. Op cit. p.5

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, D. (1999) *Christi-Anarchy*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, U.K.
- Brown, S. (2003) *Mission and the Art of Spiritual Direction*, Refresh, Journal of Contemplative Spirituality, Vol. 3, No 2, Spiritual Growth Ministries Trust, N.Z.
- Bruggeman, W. (1978) *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, U.S.A.
- Dillard, A. (1974) *Pilgrim at Tinkers Creek*, Harper Perennial, New York, U.S.A.
- Edwards, T. (1980) *Spiritual Friend, Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, U.S.A.
- Fox, M. (1993) *Original Blessing*, Bear and Co, Sante Fe, N.M. , U.S.A.
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, U.K. Penguin Books
- Freire,P. (1985) *The Politics of education, culture, power and liberation*, Basingstoke, McMillan.
- Glaser, B.G. (1978) *Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*, Mill Valley, California, Sociology Press
- Glaser, B.G. (1992) *Basics of grounded theory analysis – Emergence vs forcing*, Mill Valley, C.A. Sociology Press.
- Gratton, C. (1993) *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, Crossroads Publishing, N.Y. U.S.A.
- Hardy, A. (1996) *The Divine Flame: An essay towards a Natural History of Religion*, Collins, London
- Hawker, P. (2002) *Spiritual Experience in the General Population Paper* presented in Wellington N.Z. July 2002.
- Hawker, P. (2000) *Secret Affairs of the Soul*, Northstone Publishing, Canada.
- Hay, D. (2002) *The Spirituality of the Unchurched*, a paper delivered to the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies Conference, [www.martynmission.ac.uk](http://www.martynmission.ac.uk)
- Hay, D., Hunt, K. (2000) *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church*, Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham, U.K.

- Hay, D., Nye, R., Hunt, K., (1998) *Understanding the Spiritual Life of Children*, University of Nottingham, U.K.
- Keating, T. (1992) *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Continuum, New York, U.S.A.
- Jamieson, A. (2004) *Called Again – In and beyond the deserts of faith*, Garside Publishing, N.Z.
- Lightburn A., Sessions P.(ed.) (2006) *Handbook of Community-Based Clinical Practice*, Oxford University Press, U.K.
- Maden, B. (2005) *Te Aroha Noa Community Services Trust 2004-5 Annual Report*, [www.tearohanoa.org.nz](http://www.tearohanoa.org.nz)
- Monk, H. (2004) *Relationships: The HEART OF TEACHING?*, Master of Education (Adult Education Thesis), Massey University, Wellington.
- McCashen, W. (2005) *The Strengths Approach – a strengths based resource for sharing power and creating change*, St Lukes Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria, Australia.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crockett, K., Epston, D., (1997) *Narrative Therapy in Practice – The Archaeology of Hope*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Munford, R., Sanders, J. with Andrew, A., Butler, P., Kaipuke, R., and Rewhiu, L. (2001) *Aotearoa/New Zealand – Working Differently with Communities and Families*. In C. Warren-Adamson (Ed) *Family Centres and their International Role in Social Action*, Aldershop: Ashgate.
- Munford, R., Sanders, J. *Te Aroha Noa – An Integrated Community Centre Approach to Learning, Growth and Change*-an as yet unpublished draft manuscript.
- Nouwen, H. (1976) *Reaching Out*, Collins, Great Britain.
- O’Donohue, J. *Anam Cara*, Bantam Press, U.K.
- Petersen, E. (1992) *Under the Unpredictable Plant – An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A.
- Petersen, E. (1997) *Leap Over a Wall – Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, Harper, San Francisco, U.S.A.
- Pritchard, S. (1996) *Wells and Fences*, Journal Spiritual Growth Ministries, June 1996, N.Z.

- Reeler, D. (2005) *Horizontal Learning – Engaging Freedom’s Possibilities*  
Annual Report, Community Development Resource  
Association 2004-5 Report, www.cdra.org.za
- Riddell, M., (1998) *Threshold of the Future – Reforming Church in the Post-  
Christian West*, SPCK, Great Britain.
- Schneiders, S. (1976) *The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction*, Chicago  
Studies, Spring, U.S.A.
- Slater, G. and Burgess, K. (pending) *Helping Students Develop Learning Skills Through  
Action Research Processes*.
- Stringfellow, W. (1973) *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*.  
Wipf and Stock, Oregon, U.S.A.
- Tootell, A. (2004) *Decentred Research Practice*, International Journal of  
Narrative Therapy and Community Work, No 3, 2004.
- White, M. and Epston, D. (1990) *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*, New York,  
Norton.
- Williams, R. (2005) *Where God Happens*, New Seeds, Boston, U.S.A.
- Winslade, B. (2005) *State of the Union Address to Baptist Assembly 2005*, N.Z.

Bruce Maden  
6 Marama Crescent  
PALMERSTON NORTH  
06-3569359, 027-3290963  
bruce.maden@infoegen.net.nz