

# **Sacred Hospitality**

**Creating a Sacred Space  
for those  
Outside the Church**

**by**

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A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.

## **Introduction**

This is a practical piece of research that I hope will give N.Z. Spiritual Directors the tools and motivation to create 'Sacred Spaces' for those in their communities but outside the church.

I am very interested in journeying with people on their unique, individual, spiritual pathways. I find myself mostly interested in reaching and connecting with those outside church institutions who express an interest in God but are intolerant of institutional forms of religion.

My research included seven people who attend a group I run called Sacred Space.

For 12 - 16 months I've been providing a venue where those outside the church can feel safe encountering God and exploring their spirituality within a Christian setting.

My intention was to discover whether

- a safe enough environment could be created so those who had previously been resistant to religion could begin to be open to encountering God.
- these times could heal old images and hurtful church experiences, and motivate people to pursue their relationship with God.
- people with little experiential awareness of God can shift to a greater experiential awareness of God.

- we could create Sacred Spaces where we can meet with those outside formal religion and be joined together in worshipping and connecting with the same Creator God?
- we could then go on to offer Spiritual Direction to these people who are open to the Spirit but intolerant of religion?

As a spiritual director I would like to provide 'soul hospitality'<sup>1</sup> for those in my community who are interested in God especially those who have rejected the church for various reasons. I would also like to discuss why this might be so important for NZ spiritual directors.

## **What is Sacred Space?**

Sacred Space is an evening of music, reflection, meditation and spiritual discussion.

Two spiritual directors facilitate these evenings once a month.

Those in our community who have expressed an interest in spirituality have been personally invited to attend and continue to receive a monthly email invitation.

In our small, local, historic church we gather on mats and mattresses around a centerpiece with candles being the only source of light. We begin

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<sup>1</sup> Benner, David, *Sacred Companions*, (Inter Varsity Press, Illinois, 2002), pg.47.

the evening with a Centering Prayer<sup>2</sup> which involves encouraging people to relax their bodies, focus on their breathing and then an invitation to use a breath prayer or mantra.

A reflection is read followed by thirty minutes of music with the invitation: to allow the music to take you deeper to the core of your being, to that eternal place where the Divine lives. Great music has been described as 'opening doorways into eternal presence'<sup>3</sup> And Barry and Connolly suggest that when teaching people to contemplate God to use 'any receptive experience that helps a person forget himself and become absorbed in something else eg. music'<sup>4</sup> This music is carefully chosen and is discussed in the Appendix. During this time of music we have a five minute interval of silence for this reason 'by regular practice of silence, God is given an opening and with that opening the image of God in our inmost being begins to assert itself. Since it can never be lost it can always be awakened'.<sup>5</sup>

We conclude this prayer time with a final reading and blessing and the people are then invited to sit around the centerpiece and we enter into a time of discussion about their spiritual lives over home baking and hot drinks. This provides an opportunity for the people to share their own spiritual experiences and to hear ours as Christians. In doing this we agree with Henri Nouwen in 'offering people a venue to explore their own connection point with The Divine rather than offering a dogma and explanation of God'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keating, Thomas, *Manifesting God*,(Lantern Books NY,2005), Pg.131.

<sup>3</sup> O'Donohue, John, *Eternal Echoes*,(HarperCollins,2002), pg 56.

<sup>4</sup> Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, ( San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986)pg 52.

<sup>5</sup> Keating, Thomas, *Manifesting God* (Lantern Books, NY,2005) pg 129

<sup>6</sup> Hawker, Paul, *Secret Affairs of the Soul*,( Northstone publishing, B.C. Canada,2000), pg 151

## Findings from Research

*'Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there'. Rumi <sup>7</sup>*

All responses were from females between 31 - 50 years of age and they have all been regular monthly attendees ranging from 3 - 16 months.

### *What has motivated you to come to Sacred Space?*

Two initially came out of curiosity, two with young children came for peace and quiet and three came to explore their neglected spiritual life.

### *What keeps you coming back?*

All talked about the atmosphere, the beauty, music, cake and the honoring of their spirit and having a time for spiritual exploration. One woman who has begun to follow Buddhist teachings said that this was the highlight of her month.

### *Has Sacred Space affected your life, if so how?*

Only one woman said not yet but she is open to possibilities. The others spoke about how it is teaching them to connect with God and by acknowledging their spirituality they acknowledge depth, become more self aware and have less anxiety in their daily life and are more confident in relationships. One woman said that Sacred Space had possibly triggered her new interest in spirituality and religion.

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<sup>7</sup> Rumi, *Where do we go to find Mystery.*, Christ Community Church, email newsletter, Pg 1.

*Which part of the evening impacts you most?*

Four said the reflections, one said the atmosphere - the candles, church, reflections and music, one said the mix of music and silence and one said the silence.

*Have there been any surprises in these times, please describe?*

Two said that there had not, the other five talked about the impact of the reflections on them, experiences of 'lovely washes of the spirit', feelings of calm, peace and happiness and one was surprised at how warm, full, connected and calm she feels in the times of silence.

*Do you have these experiences in everyday life?*

Five said not often or very rarely and two talked about having these times of peace and connection when in nature.

*Would you say that there have been times when you have sensed a connection with a Being that is beyond you and separate from you?*

One person said no, the other six said yes but two qualified that as a sense of oneness or connectedness with a Being that was not separate from themselves.

*Do you have a name for this Being?*

Only one woman said yes, one was hesitant because there were too many past connections, one suggested life and the one following Buddhist teaching suggested The Almighty.

*Do you follow a particular spiritual pathway?*

Four said no, one said she's started to attend Buddhist teachings and one said more or less Christian.

*Could you tell me about your relationship with your God and how that impacts your life?*

Only two women were able to say they did have a relationship with God which helped them, one described God as the power of nature and the earth, another saw God as a part of herself and what is around her, one said that she keeps coming back to Sacred Space because she's not sure about God and wants to strengthen that relationship, and another recognized that a big part of her life is missing and that her relationship with God is not strong enough.

*Have you ever been involved in Christianity and could you tell me how that has been for you and what caused you to leave?*

Two had been involved in the Catholic church and left because there were too many rules, dogma, guilt, intolerance of others and hypocrisy and because of personal 'sin' thought they had gone past the point of no return with God. The other five had all been involved in Protestant churches and left because of the following reasons: too punitive, guilt inducing, self-esteem shredding, weren't 'cool' when became teenagers, had bad experiences, didn't like the evangelical approach and several said they were too narrow minded.

*Is this experience of Sacred Space different from your previous experience?*

Absolutely yes was the overall response describing the differences as being peaceful, intimate, sacred filling, open-minded and resonating with adult spiritual experiences.

*If you were to plot on an imaginary scale and 1. was no experiential awareness of God and 10 was a greater experiential awareness of God - where would you have placed yourself before your first began attending Sacred Space and where would you plot yourself now?*

Most woman described moving between 2 - 3 spaces up on the scale and one woman who had placed herself at 1 before was now a 3 and she describes herself as now open to the idea.

*Does Sacred Space motivate you to want to explore your spirituality more?*

A resounding 'yes!' and 'absolutely!' from each woman!

*Any other comments you'd like to make?*

Most of the woman expressed their thankfulness and gratitude for what Sacred Space offers. One woman said it had been a return home when she had felt forsaken by her patriarchal, punitive church, several talked about the beautiful venue and atmosphere and how they loved coming to this church building. One expressed her thankfulness for the opportunity to connect with God's presence.

## My Conclusions

From the findings I conclude that those who have been resistant to anything religious can be open to encountering God and begin to have a greater experiential awareness of God in their daily lives.

As spiritual directors we can create a place where those outside the church are motivated to experience a connection with God and begin to heal past church experiences and unhelpful images of God.

I have offered spiritual direction to two of these women, and both have welcomed receiving this monthly and finding it is deepening and strengthening themselves and their relationship with God.

I believe in offering Sacred Space I am helping to encourage these people to journey together with myself within a Christian spiritual pathway, in their own pace, language and experience. Bishop Spong says that 'there is a huge hunger in the church for a journey into the Mystery of God'<sup>8</sup> and I would add that there is a huge hunger outside the church as well.

Our role is simply to create a venue where the Sacred can be encountered and to encourage each individual to journey with God within the uniqueness of their personality and life history. 'The hunger for a deeper life of prayer and for closer union with God, right now, is immense and seems to exist all over the world'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Spong, John, email newsletter, Waterfront Media, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Keating, Thomas, *Manifesting God*, (Lantern Books, NY, 2005), pg 124

My hope is that Sacred Space will become a 'rich faith deepening experience, that I can offer practices in prayer that are so much more than praying to an external controlling God with a shopping list, that I can offer an experience that takes people deeply into their own essence, their relationships with themselves and others and beyond themselves to be immersed in an experience of God beyond the God they formally knew.'<sup>10</sup>

People need and want new wine in new wineskins *'one is emphatically aware that the person we want to meet is not the Jesus of the past, but the present living Lord'*.<sup>11</sup> And this was obvious by people's reasons for leaving their churches of origins and being open to experiencing God at Sacred Space and to continue to attend regularly so that they are forming their own 'church' community.

Alan Jamieson has written two books on his findings of church leavers. In his book 'Five Years On' it was the 'Exiles', those who left the church because they didn't 'fit' with it anymore who mostly remained outside the church because there was no community or place to support them in their time of disillusionment and to help them make the transition to other levels of faith.

Over time these people became more distant from the church and put up a wall to anything religious. I observed that most people in my group were from this category yet they welcomed Sacred Space because it was

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<sup>10</sup> Lawton, Ian, *Where do you go to find Mystery?*, C.C.C. email newsletter pg 1.

<sup>11</sup> Barry, William and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986)pg 56.

perceived as non-religious, non-imposing and yet created a safe space for them to commune with God in their own language.

The discussion times also create a place for exploration and questions and there has been a lot of discussion on how to engage with the Spirit in the present through contemplative prayer or meditation.

Offering these times is so important for NZ spiritual directors, Alan Jamieson says: *'Because NZ is at the forefront of the Western worlds move into an increasingly post-christian, post-modern, post-church culture we find ourselves in a unique position to model new wings for the future'*.<sup>12</sup>

How many people who are outside church today who left as 'Exiles' but because there was no group to meet their needs have now dismissed church altogether? My findings show that these people are wanting and enjoying times of meeting with God in this inclusive, loving God - honoring environment.

Catholic writer Hans Kung suggests that *'personal and mystical encounter with the fruit of God is the only way forward for a dying tradition. God is an immediate experience, discovered through prayer, meditation and sacrament'*.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that God, the Sustainer and Life Giver of the Universe, the All in All, the one who became incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth lives in *all* people.

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<sup>12</sup> Jamieson, Alan; McIntosh, Jenny; Thompson, Adrienne; *Five Years On*, (The Portland Research Trust, Wgtn, 2006) pg.183.

<sup>13</sup> Kung, Hans, *Rediscovering God*, Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*, (HarperCollins, 2003).pg 169

This God is not bound by the rules and doctrine of the church but explodes outside those religious laws to touch and make him/herself known to all.

People's response and interpretation to this communication will be in their language and experience and if that doesn't reflect standard church culture or language it doesn't discount the experience. Even if their religious pathway is outside the prescribed Christian faith and their interpretation is within the religious language of another faith eg. Buddhism, it does not discount the reality of their encounter with The One who is All in All.

*'If nature is in fact graced, everybody, even through sources other than religion can taste the Presence of God'<sup>14</sup>*

Some Christians think that those outside the church are not open to relationship with God and yet the Hardy and Hay research in G.B. in 1985 found that 'there is no reason to suppose that people who are in touch with the experimental dimension of religion will necessarily be church-goers'.<sup>15</sup> This conclusion was substantiated in a poll taken in the USA in 1998.

Paul Hawker reflects in his book *Secret Affairs of the Soul* that *'in history those who showed unorthodox ways of worshipping or seeking communion with God were viewed as heretics eg. Joan of Arc. (And although) we have traveled a long distance from there we are still not actually catering to these peoples spiritual needs'*.<sup>16</sup>

*'From 1976-1996 British churches lost over two million members. 2000 churches closed and weekly attendance dropped to 3-5% of the*

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<sup>14</sup> Keating, Thomas, *Manifesting God* (Lantern Books, NY,2005), pg 124.

<sup>15</sup> Hawker, Paul, *Secret Affairs of the Soul*,(Northstone Publishing, BC Canada,2000).pg 84-85

population.<sup>17</sup> Mostly this was due to dissatisfaction and these people become 'exiles' and as Jamieson has concluded from his research will fall further away from a meaningful faith if their spiritual needs are not catered to.

As spiritual directors we need to create places for these people to commune with The Divine outside of prescribed or religious Christianity. I initially began Sacred Space because I found that as I talked socially with people about their spiritual lives using non-religious language they expressed great openness and a faith in God but not in the images of God that they found in church. They needed, I perceived, a fresh and new experience of God, the old images of The Sacred needed to die but not The Sacred!

David Tacey, an associate professor at La Trobe university, Australia who lectures in spirituality says '*We need an entirely new lexicon and language to deal with the complexity of post-modern experiences of the Sacred*<sup>18</sup>.

His students are quoted as saying:

*'everyday people are staying away from church and going back to God'*

Lenny Bruce<sup>19</sup>

*'God is not dead - people are simply experiencing God in new ways and seeing God differently'*<sup>20</sup>, Beth 19 yrs.

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<sup>16</sup> Hawker, Paul, *Secret Affairs of the Soul*,(Northstone Publishing, BC Canada,2000).pg158.

<sup>17</sup> Hawker, Paul, *Secret Affairs of the Soul*,(Northstone Publishing, BC Canada,2000), pg 163.

<sup>18</sup> Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*,( HarperCollins, 2003).pg 123

<sup>19</sup> Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*,( HarperCollins, 2003).pg 30

<sup>20</sup> Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*,( HarperCollins, 2003).pg 75.

And I believe as spiritual directors we have the opportunity to create spaces where people can once again experience God. *'Once one has had an experience of the sacred, then questions of belief, of subscribing to creeds, doctrines or forms become secondary and not primary.'*<sup>21</sup> Prominent theologian Karen Armstrong says that *'each generation has to create its own imaginative conception of God'*<sup>22</sup>

## Summary

God is so much bigger than church doctrine or belief! This Mystery has no rules about who gets to experience her/him, S/he is all inclusive, all loving, all accepting and longs for communion with all people. S/he communicates through art, nature, music, people, scripture - the essence of the Divine is inherent in all created life, therefore we can communicate with God in all creation and as spiritual directors we have the opportunity to acknowledge this and make a place for those outside our churches to commune with the One in their own language.

*'We must not think to deprive God of His freedom or limit His activity to working only in relationship with religious belief and practices'*<sup>23</sup> The role of Spiritual directors is to help people move closer to God, therefore if we can create a place where this is possible then we can also offer spiritual direction to further encourage their present relationship with The Divine. In spiritual direction we learn about the mystical traditions involving interiority and the exploration of God within. We need to bring these out

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<sup>21</sup> Eleade, Mircea, in Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*, (HarperCollins, 2003), pg 138

<sup>22</sup> Armstrong, Karen, in Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*, (HarperCollins, 2003), pg 162.

<sup>23</sup> Keating, Thomas, *Manifesting God*, (Lantern Books, NY, 2005), pg 124.

from historical obscurity into the light of the present. Today people are seeking a mystical, incarnational and creation centered theology<sup>24</sup>.

In Sacred Space, for most of those attending there are memories and echoes of a religious life which can then serve as a basis for a renewal of faith and spiritual identity - see Jane's response *'It feels like a return home when I felt forsaken by the church'*. But we need a genuine post modern spirituality, new language and new imaging to allow people to make the connection.

My goal in Sacred Space has been to bring those outside the church into experience and relationship with God, I refuse to accept a sacred/secular split but seek to encourage communion with God outside formal church tradition and through the findings of this research I believe I have begun to achieve this. My hope is that spiritual directors of NZ will be motivated to reach those within their communities yet outside church with sacred spaces where people can encounter God.

*T.S. Elliot*

*'We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.'*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*, (HarperCollins, 2003),pg 84.

<sup>25</sup> T.S. Elliot in Tacey, David, *The Spirituality Revolution*, (HarperCollins,2003) pg.111.

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## **Appendix**

### ***Resources for Creating Sacred Space***

#### **Reflections**

The majority of people said it was the reflections that impacted them most during the evening. We have used John O'Donohue's books *Anam Cara* and *Eternal Echoes* as foundations to write reflections. We use Joy Cowley's books of psalms regularly, and material from spiritual directors Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr as well as being inspired to write our own material.

#### **Music**

We have mostly used the *Music of Secret Garden*, as well as Enya, Marie Brennan, The Hillard Ensemble and gentle classical music. We attempt to source music that has a 'musical voice' but is without words.

#### **Practical Matters**

People are invited to bring their own mattresses or yoga mats and blankets for warmth and comfort.

#### **Names for God**

People drop their defenses and become more open when they hear other names for God. Some that we use are :

The Divine,  
The Eternal,  
The Sacred,  
The Mystery,  
The Loving Sustainer of Life.