

ON GROUPS BY PAUL HARRIS

John Main's Deep insight about small groups

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.

Meditation groups: communities of faith

As 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.

The historical roots of small groups

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 groups are to-day redefining spirituality

A recent book *Sharing the Journey* by Robert Wuthnow documents the growing popularity and influence of small groups in creating community and teaching spirituality. Wuthnow maintains small groups "may be redefining spirituality" and that the church is once again becoming alive in the humble homes of those on the spiritual path. The author also confirms through research that small groups have emerged in response to the impersonalization of society and the weakening of family and community ties.

What has experience taught us over the years since John Main started the first Christian Meditation group at Ealing Abbey in London in 1975? Here is what we have learned about the role of the weekly meditation group.

Why meditators meet in groups

* The heart of the meditation group is the sharing of silence together. This is the primary reason why, spontaneously, people around the world are starting small groups to meditate weekly together. The power and strength of meditation together comes from the words of Jesus, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:2).

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.

The development of a spiritual bond among members of the group

* Meeting in a group promotes a spiritual bond amongst the members and a mutual concern between those who have set out on a common pilgrimage. The meditation group is really a community of faith, much as the early Christians experienced community in St. Paul's time.

The group setting enables beginners to learn how to meditate. Newcomers can be integrated into a group at any point in time. Experience has shown that when a group starts in a new geographic area, people who have never meditated before will join the group. *New* groups introduce *new* meditators to the teaching.

Small groups give support and encouragement on the spiritual path

* The weekly group meeting provides support and encouragement to those who might be discouraged or experiencing difficulties "on the path". All of us need, from time to time, the encouragement of seeing others faithful and committed to the discipline.

* We also need to absorb the teaching more deeply and we do so at the weekly meeting with the playing of a taped talk by John Main on some aspect of Christian Meditation. There are now 250 talks by Father John and additional talks by Laurence Freeman available on various aspects of meditation. These talks give instruction, deepen our motivation, and help us to persevere on the path. They give us a spiritual boost each week: part of the food we need for the journey.

* The question answer period at the end of the meeting often help immeasurably in clarifying situations, not only for the questioner who is often a newcomer but also for other members of the group. Discussion allows members to express their doubts, fears and misunderstandings of the teaching.

Where do groups meet?

Groups meet in diverse locations and at various hours through-out the day and evening. There are now over 1,200 groups worldwide meeting in 60

countries of the world in homes, apartments, schools, churches, rectories, religious communities, Christian Meditation centres, chapels, universities, prisons, government office buildings, a department store, senior citizens' homes and factories.

Lists of groups and times of meetings are available from Christian Meditation group leaders in various countries. An inter-national list of groups is available from The International Centre, The World Community for Christian Meditation, St. Mark's Church, Myddelton Square, London ECR1XX, England.

What happens at the weekly meeting?

The typical weekly group meeting lasts about one hour and includes an opening welcome to the members by the group leader. Most groups light a candle symbolic of the presence of Christ. This is followed by the playing of a 15 minute cassette tape by John Main or Laurence Freeman on some aspect of the practice and teaching of meditation, followed by the *heart* of the meeting, 25 minutes of silent meditation. At the conclusion of meditation any announcements can be made and newcomers given a chance to ask any questions pertaining to the teaching. In more and more groups the meditation group leader is giving a short five minute talk relating to John Main's talk that evening. The group leader then asks for dialogue from the participants on the points he/she has made.

On starting a group

How do groups start? The most important ingredient in starting a new group is the commitment of a leader to the time and effort required to set up and guide a group. A decision must be made about the time and evening of the meeting and a location must be found (a quiet location if possible). A number of things can be done to attract newcomers to the group. A letter can be sent to all churches in the area asking for pulpit and bulletin announcements about the establishment of the group. Posters can also be produced for church bulletin boards. Notices can be sent to religious/daily/weekly or community newspapers. An announcement can be sent to local cablevision TV stations and radio stations. Notices can be pinned on shopping plaza bulletin boards.

The role of the group leader

The leader must work in setting up the group as if humanely speaking everything depended on himself/herself., while at the same time realizing that in the dimension of faith the growth and success of the group will depend on God. *Numbers* are unimportant in a group. Our Lord said "where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them". Where *two* meditators are gathered there *is* a meditation group. Once a group starts, others will join in time.

A leader will require a tape recorder, some of John Main's/ Laurence Freeman's cassette tapes on meditation, and a timer. Where electricity or a tape recorder is not available selections can be read from books by John Main

or Laurence Freeman. Many group leaders utilize a pre-programmed cassette timing tape with a few moments of music, 25 minutes of silence and music that signals the end of the meditation period. But more than these material items the meditation leader will require faith and commitment. Faith to "wait on the Lord" not only in meditation but also for the increase in new members. But God works through the instrumentality of human beings. If the leader has worked to communicate information about the new group, God will bring the increase....and a new meditation group will be born and will flourish.

What are the other advantages of small groups?

* 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.

* We are not, contrary to public perception, a society of rugged individualists, who wish to go it entirely alone, but rather we are a communal people, capable of banding together in bands of mutual support.

The spiritual revolution taking place to-day within small groups

While these findings will be of interest to anyone participating in Christian Meditation groups, either as members or leaders, it should be pointed out that the period of meditation itself will provide a strong bond of unity within the group. Because it is the prayer of Jesus Himself, it necessarily follows that a spirit of love and friendship should develop within the group.

As Laurence Freeman has written: "The early Christians experienced this inner reality of prayer and knew the strong bond of unity it gave. But as the church grew older, its emphasis fell more and more upon formal prayer and external observance. Its interiority weakened, and wherever it weakened, the church's influence diminished and her spiritual life grew more sterile".

To-day in the small group setting we are recapturing a prayer that leads us from the head to the heart, from fragmentation to unity, from isolation to caring. This *is* the spiritual revolution taking place around the world to-day.

