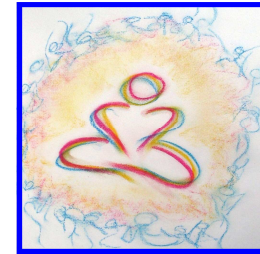




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*The Heart of Change -
the Inner Journey*

*A discussion booklet for
Christians and Churches
who are serious about God's call to
transformation*

Adelene Mills

Feel free to contact Adelene.
Your feedback on this "Heart of Change"
material would be warmly welcomed.

Rev. Adelene Mills: "Spring Valley Retreat"
50 Patons Rd., Penguin, Tasmania 7316
ph. 03 6437 5368
email: millsmenagerie@skymesh.com.au

*The illustration in the box on the front cover was drawn
by Adelene's daughter, (Dr.) Ani Wierenga, in an
early morning "quiet time".
Thank you, Ani, for being such an inspiration.*

Cover illustration: "Calling",
crayon drawing by Ani Wierenga © 2008

Origin and Purpose

The material in this booklet, “The Heart of Change”, on which the study questions are based, was written for the Tasmanian Presbytery of the Uniting Church in Australia in April 2008, as a response to the request of the chairman of Presbytery, Dr. Andrew Glenn, for material for a theology of change for the Tasmanian churches. This “inner journey” material describes the personal journey and conclusions which underpin my previously published “Changing Churches” stories (Tasmanian Presbytery 2008).

When asked to write about ‘the inner journey’, I was faced with a dilemma. The inner journey is a very personal thing. Many people have shared stories of their inner journey with me, but they are not mine to share. But without stories, this material could be very theoretical and un-grounded or disembodied. So, necessarily, some of this material is about my own story. My own journey into new life and new understanding with my God.

The aim of using this material for small group discussions is that the people who participate might also, through honest personal sharing of stories and questioning, and a deepening capacity to listen to and trust each other, grow in their understanding of their faith, seeing more clearly its life-changing potential, and through this process, grow in their relationship with God. Without the ongoing personal transformation of individuals, the church cannot truly be the body of Christ in the world. It is not what we know, but who we are, and how we use what we know, that will change the world. And that can never be static. Hence the journey image.

Traditional Bible studies often seem to approach the Christian faith primarily at a head level, and provide knowledge, rather than encouragement to enter into a dynamic, life-changing heart-to-heart relationship with God. Through engaging with these sometimes very personal reflections on the inner life, I hope people will take this opportunity to explore more deeply their own relationship with God, and the influence that relationship has and can have on their lives and the lives of those around them.

Changing the church begins in the heart of each one of us.

For group leaders

You can use these pages to write your own notes.

This group material should be discussed in **small** groups, so that every individual's voice can be heard. There are understandings in the material which could be controversial. Give copies of the booklet to all your group members at least a week before the first discussion session. If you have a large group (more than 12) divide the group into smaller groups or pairs for the more personal questions.

Be sensitive to those who are quieter in your group. It is very important that each group member's opinion is respected, even if not agreed with. It is also very important that the leader understands the difference here. Some people believe that their opinion is the only possible one and tend to dominate the group. Group leaders need to be able to say— "James, thank you for your opinion. I'd like now to hear how other people respond to the question...or "Thank you, James. I'm wondering what the rest of you think about what James has said - Do you agree with James or do you see things differently?." Sometimes group leaders need to give active permission for people to disagree, or the group will be intimidated by those who think they know, and honest and open discussion will be inhibited. This kind of domination by well-educated and confident individuals can be deadly for small groups.

Group leaders themselves need to be aware of their own tendencies to give their answers or talk too much, rather than encouraging the questions of group members and allowing them to grapple with new truth that may be important for their spiritual growth. The aim is 100% participation, not getting to one right answer.

May God guide you and give you bucketsful of love and sensitivity as you encourage the individuals in your group(s) to explore and share their inner journey. And may you be moved and awed by the sharing, and by the beauty of the inner "landscapes" you discover on the way. May you too grow in wisdom and love.

God was with you. Use colours creatively. Do your own thing!

OR Write a poem or story / prose instead..

OR Use your creative imagination in any other way to reflect some of what you have learned in this course of studies.

5. Group members share with the whole group as much as they feel able of what they have drawn or/and written.

6. Pray for each other and thank God for each other in whatever way suits your group best. In pairs can work well.

To Finish

Use the act of worship / communion you planned last week.

You may need to finalise your arrangements first, including group members in readings etc. Make this a real celebration of what you have learned and shared together.

Finally

It is my prayer that, through these studies and your small group faith-sharing experiences and open-hearted living of your questions into their answers, you will continue to grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ...and be filled with the very nature of God (Ephesians 4) whose transforming love embraces all peoples and all of creation.

May we all re-discover the fire of love (see Teilhard de Chardin quote p.12) in our relationship with our Creator, and learn to pass it on. Heaven knows, our world needs transformed (and transforming) people!

Adelene Mills
February 2009

For group participants

A different way of studying a text:

You are invited to mark the text with the following symbols as you read it:

___ (underline) words you think are important

✓ words you agree with

😊 words you feel strongly positive about

X words you disagree with

😞 words you feel strongly negative about

? words that confuse or puzzle you

♥ words that warm your heart

Feel free to use one or more symbols at a time or add your own symbols to the list above.

The Heart of Change – the Inner Journey

Introduction

A story is told of a group of tribal people in Saskatchewan who heard for the first time of the love of God for them. After the missionary had spoken (in their own language), an old chief stood up and said: “When you spoke of the Great Spirit just now, did I hear you say “our Father”? Yes, said Egerton. “That is very new to me” said the chief. “We never thought of the Great Spirit as Father. We heard him in the thunder, we saw him in the lightning, the tempest and the blizzard, and we were afraid. So when you tell us the Great Spirit is our Father, that is very beautiful to us.”

The old man paused, and then he went on as a glimpse of glory suddenly shone on him – “Missionary, did you say that the Great Spirit is your Father?” “Yes” was the reply. “And” the chief continued “did you say that he is the Indians’ Father?” “I did” said Egerton. “Then”, said the old chief like a man on whom a dawn of joy has burst – “then you and I are brothers.”

God’s love, by its very nature, cannot be kept to ourselves. Through our own experience of God’s love for us, we are led deeper into a universal love, which confronts us with our smallness of heart, our limited vision and understanding, and takes away our fear, and, at the same time, offers us a forgiveness which transforms our past experiences into wisdom and compassion, and offers them back to us as stepping stones for the continuing journey. This is the inner journey of change – of transformation, of re-birth, of resurrection. This is where the joy is found.

One of the biggest challenges that the Uniting Church faces today is that, in an attempt to re-dress the balance between heart and head in religious experience, we have swung to a more intellectual understanding of our relationship to God, and tried to do it all in our heads. In so doing, we have often de-valued, even lost, an essential dimension of our faith experience. The number of people who are now, in Australia and on a world- wide scale, embracing a more emotionally charged conversion-oriented faith experience, together with the number of people who are leaving the more traditional churches, indicates that there are many who

Allow silence after the reading for people to think about it.

Listen to or sing: “Will you come and follow me” (Iona Community) or TIS 685 “Lord, I come to you”.

Close with a prayer

For next week Remind people to read and mark **section 6 (pages 19-20)** with symbols (page 3) for next week. As this will be the final week, talk about the possibility of having a meal together before or after your session. How would you like to finish these studies? Would you like to have communion together? Plan together your final act of worship for the last session.

Session 4

The leader will need to bring pencils, crayons, textas, large sheets of light card, paper etc. for question 4. Be as creative as possible.

First: Warming-up exercise: around the group in turn each person shares briefly about “something scary that happened to me”.

Then: Section 6: “Being in the world—sharing the journey” (pages 19 and 20) is read aloud. Symbols are added or checked, and time is allowed to read it again in silence.

Questions:

1. Symbols (from page 3) and the reasons for using them are shared.
2. If there is now no fear of eternal hell-fire and we are not sharing our faith because we are afraid the other person will go to hell, why is faith-sharing still important? What is it that God wants us to communicate to the world, and how?
3. Can you think of circumstances in which talking about your faith with someone who is not a Christian might be appropriate? Have you had this experience before? Would you do it differently next time? Do you like the term “companions on the way”?
4. (**Allow about half an hour for this activity**) Creatively write or illustrate some of your life’s journey. One suggestion is to draw a time-line of your life with its ups and downs. Include significant events and people. Mark the times when you knew

Session 3

First: Warming-up exercise: around the group in turn each person answers briefly the question “What is your earliest memory”

Then: Group leader (or good reader) reads **Section 4: “Connecting God’s story with our story”** (pages 15--16). Group members follow in their books and add symbols if not already done. Then give time to look through it again in silence.

Questions:

1. Leader goes through each paragraph, asking which symbols people have used where, and encouraging members to say why they used that particular symbol.

2. What difference does it make to our understanding of Scripture if we see within it a “process of getting there”, which is three steps forward and two steps back? (see quote from Richard Rohr, page 15). Are there particular Scripture passages you have struggled with that might make more sense if they were seen as “two steps backward texts”, rather than as God’s truth for us now?

3. How do you feel about asking the question “Where is God’s truth for me in this?” of your own story (things that happen in your life) and of Biblical stories? How do you feel about the statement “Our story too is part of God’s story, as God’s story becomes a part of ours”?

Read aloud section 5: “Growing together in a community of faith” (pages 16-19), allowing time for people to read it again and check the symbols they have used.

4. Share group members responses through the symbols they have written in the text.

5. What does this mean - “Have we mistaken the pointers to the moon for the moon itself?” How would you answer this question? Are we allowing God’s truth and love to change our inner being (risky!!), or do we prefer to stay as we are?

6. Do you agree with Rhor’s statement “we need transformed people today, not just people with answers”? How might we encourage this process to happen in our church?

To finish: Read **John 3:1-10**

do not find the spiritual food they need in a more rational and / or traditional approach.

On the other hand, a legalistic, individualistic and “once only” understanding of the conversion experience is still deeply entrenched in our rituals and practices, and often keeps people’s faith awareness at a “Sunday School” level of development. The underlying commitment to church and Jesus Christ of many of our members is still based on fear. If we have not moved from that base, and our underlying motivation for being a Christian is our need for an insurance policy that will ensure our eternal destiny, then we have been short-changed in our understanding of what a life with Christ is meant to be. A church made up of individuals, whose faith is fear-based, will have little to offer those outside the church today, who, on the whole, respond very poorly to this kind of emotional pressure or ‘shouldism”.

The fear of God, and eternal damnation, that used to be a motivation for people to come to church, is generally no longer taken seriously by people outside the church. However, there is quite a body of evidence that indicates that people are recognising that they do have spiritual needs. (ref. “The Spirituality Revolution” by Australian sociologist, David Tacey; Harper Collins 2003) Some young people in a recent study on young people’s spirituality, undertaken by the Youth Research Centre of the University of Melbourne, have said that they have given the church a miss because what the church offered them was answers, when what they were looking for was company for the journey.

With our growing materialism and technological advancement has come a breakdown in community and family life. This gap in many people’s lives means that they respond to communities that offer the unconditional love they are seeking. Often they have not found this kind of unconditional love in the church.

In the church’s practices and language, we cater for those who are “in” and know the language already, but not for those who are seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, and know that something is missing. We have become a holy club of people who know the language and teachings of our tradition, and come to the well

regularly to draw water, but have missed out on having a growing personal relationship with the one who offers us “living water” (John 4:1-15).

If we do not have abundant evidence of this ‘living water’ in our individual lives and in our church communities, we cannot, therefore, offer it to others who come and are thirsty for something more.

How do we, then, re-gain this sense of connectedness with the God who made us, and offers us “living water”, this ‘something more’ for which we, as individuals and as part of a broader human race, have an in-built longing? How do we go about filling the “God-shaped hole” inside each one of us, which longs for a perfect love, beyond the partial and often fractured love that we can offer each other? How do we, as church, become a community that embodies a spirituality that is open and inclusive, and affirms, and lives out of, God’s love for all people and all of creation, a spirituality that also caters for the needs of each whole person, including head and heart? How may we, together, better understand this inner spiritual journey to which we are all called as individuals, and which is an essential part of our humanity?

1. Changing our image of God

In our contemporary world, the stark contradictions of our human propensities seem to be revealing themselves. At the same time as we are, personally and through government and legal systems, increasingly opting out of responsibilities for our own actions and our neighbour’s welfare, there is a gradual dawning of understanding of the devastating and far-reaching effects of our materialistic, individualistic, competitive, consumer- oriented, greedy and wasteful ways of life on the planet on which we live, and on the people who do not live with the privilege that many of us in the western world take for granted.

It may be that we are discovering that the hell we thought was prepared for us by a disciplinarian God is a hell of our own making. It is a consequence of our ignorance of, and blindness to, the integrated way in which God’s creation works and the laws of love that govern it, and our unwillingness to see beyond an

2. How is the church at risk of limiting God and excluding people through its language and religious practices?

3. How would you define prayer? Does James Conlan’s definition of prayer (page 10) make sense to you?

4. **(This question would best be done in pairs)** What spiritual lessons have you learned from your life’s journey so far, and how did you learn them? Where has God been evident in your life? (Allow at least 10 minutes per person—20 mins in all. More if needed—this sharing is very important to spiritual growth. Leader should check how pairs are going, and judge time needed accordingly.

Read aloud section 3: “Learning to Love” (pages 12-14) as you have done section 2, allowing time for people to read it again and check the symbols they have used.

5. Share group members responses through the symbols they have written in the text.

6. Using the text for some ideas (pages 13,14,) brainstorm how your church might encourage the development of deeper and more loving relationships with -

- a) God?
- b) with self ?
- c) With family members?
- d) with other church-goers?
- e) with non-church folk?
- f) with the local community?
- g) with the wider world, immigrants and refugees?
- h) with the environment?

To finish: Read **1 Corinthians 13** (whole chapter) and **14:1**.

Allow silence after the reading for people to think about it.

Listen to or sing: a gentle song about love and relationship eg “Take, O take me as I am” (Iona Community). or “Come as you are” (TIS 693).

Close with a prayer: eg “Prayer of St. Francis”

Remind people to read and mark **sections 4 and 5** with symbols (page 3) for next week.

4. Have you ever thought of your past experiences (good and bad) as “stepping stones for the continuing journey”? Does it make sense to see our life with God as a journey? (Think of some Biblical journeys.)

5. The fear of hell-fire and damnation used to drive many people to their knees, and is still the motivator for some people to be Christian. Where might this leave people? If someone asked you “What’s the point of being a Christian if there is no eternal punishment for not believing?”, what would you say?

6. Why might we need to change our image / understanding of God? What difference could it make (eg. to evangelism)?

To finish: Read **John 4: 5-15**.

Discuss briefly: What is this “living water” of which Jesus speaks?

Listen to: gentle music with sounds of flowing water eg Trisha Watts’: “Deep Waters”.

Close with a prayer that through these group sessions, each person may grow in their relationship with God and tap into this never-ending stream of “living water”.

Remind people to read and mark **sections 2 and 3** with symbols (page 3) for next week.

Session 2

First: Warming-up exercise: around the group in turn each person answers briefly the question “What is your most favourite place in the world?” (answers can be as diverse as “my bed” or “Mt. Everest”.)

Then: Group leader (or good reader) reads **Section 2: “Connecting with an ever present God”** (pages 8-12). Group members follow in their books and add symbols if not already done. Then give time to look through it again in silence.

Questions:

1. Leader goes through each page (8-12) asking which symbols people have used where, and encouraging members to say why they used that particular symbol. They may wish to share some of their own story at this point, which is to be encouraged.

individualistic and self-centred understanding of our lives. Perhaps, like a good parent, our God tells us and shows us how to live with each other in ways which will work for the best for each of us, for the other, and for the future of the whole of creation. When we deliberately or unthinkingly ignore these built in laws, we can expect to suffer the consequences.

Might it then also not be inevitable that the dualistic understanding of God as an unforgiving disciplinarian parent, who required a human / divine sacrifice to save those who believe in him from the fires of an everlasting hell, needs to be re-evaluated? “The cross is not the price Jesus had to pay to talk God into loving us. It is simply where love will lead us.” (Richard Rohr: “Everything Belongs”: Crossroads Publishing: 2003)

Dennis Linn et al in their delightfully written and accessible book “Good Goats: healing our image of God” (Paulist Press: 1994) say that “In every aspect of our lives, we become like the God we adore...if my God can send God’s enemies to a hell inferno, then I can send a hell inferno on my enemies... We find that a key to personal and social healing is healing our image of God.” Eminent Catholic theologian, Richard Rohr, says of this book: “I wonder if we can move forward in this time of changing images without the healing transformations this book offers us. I don’t think we will move very far or very deep unless we recover the wondrous image of the invisible God that Jesus first offered us.”

This is the book that, when I referred to it in my preaching, and lent it to members of one of my congregations, provoked such anger in a small group of fundamentalist Christians that they threatened to burn it! Why is it that those who claim they are closest to God’s truth get so angry at the thought that God’s love and grace might include more people than they ever imagined?

Perhaps one of the keys to becoming a purposefully forward-moving, dynamic church lies in this profound awakening to the unconditional love of a God who loves us so much that he gives himself in Jesus to show us the way to a deep and meaningful and worthwhile existence – abundant life for all people and all of creation. Surely this, together with the promise that ultimately all will be well, is the good news we need to share, and others need to hear.

2. Connecting with a bigger, ever present God

When I was a child, I believed that the only way to be a Christian was to go to church on Sundays, and to read the Bible with a reading guide and pray for about half an hour each day. As a young student living away from home at a girls' hostel in Hobart, I used to get up at about 5:30 am when everyone else was still asleep, find a bush in the garden to hide behind, so nobody could see and ridicule me, and read my Bible and Scripture Union notes and pray.

Although I remember that this daily reminder of a God who was there for me was very important in my life at the time, and was probably the preparation I needed for what was to follow, the moment I remember as an epiphany was when I climbed up and sat on the hen-house roof at the Huonville Congregational Manse (where we lived at the time), and suddenly I knew that life would not always be as grey as it felt just then. The greyness in my heart, and in the sympathetic sky that enveloped me, did not mean that the sun was not there, that dancing in the sunlight was not possible for me. No words - but a deep consciousness that the light was there behind the clouds, and would break through. A promise - hope for the future - when life seemed very bleak. This promise has sustained me in dark times since then, and has become my lived experience.

Much later, standing by the kitchen sink at our Taroona home, with 2 young children at my feet, I was to experience something indefinable that would change my life. Suddenly, in a moment of timelessness, I became aware that I was accepted by Something - Someone - much greater than my self. The light turned on. From that moment, I lost the crippling shyness that had darkened my youthful years. Something deep in my soul had shifted. I was accepted, and started to learn to accept myself. (Paul Tillich's sermon, "You are accepted", comes closest to putting into words what happened for me on that day.)

I tell of these transformational moments because they were not times when I sat with my Bible and my Scripture Union notes, or in the community of the church on Sunday morning. God broke

Questions for group discussion

NB Don't feel that you have to finish the questions for each session. The questions are to encourage your discussion and sharing, not an end in themselves. If the sharing is such that you only do one or two of the questions in a session, and you have grown in your relationship with each other and with God, know that you have been truly blessed.

Before you begin each session make sure everyone is comfortable and all group members can see each other. A table or cloth, with some relevant symbols on, could provide a visual focus in the centre of the circle. Group members may be encouraged to bring an object symbol for the next session.

Session 1

First: Warming up exercise: Make sure all your group members know each other. Even if they do, you could begin with each person in turn saying something about themselves that they don't think the rest of the group knows—eg "I'd really love to have a ride on an elephant before I die". Or "my favourite food is black pudding". Or "my son and daughter-in-law started an orphanage in Africa last year". Make it brief—only a few sentences. The leader should begin, and set the tone.

Then: Group leader reads the **Introduction** (pages 4-6). If people haven't already used the symbols on page 3, suggest they write them in as you read it. Then **briefly share** some of these group member responses **before reading section 1. "Changing our image of God"** (pages 6-7), and then answering the questions below.

Questions:

1. When, where and how were you first introduced to God?
2. As with the Saskatchewan people, has fear of God been a part of your faith experience? Psalm 111:10 tells us that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." What does this mean to you? What does the word "beginning" imply?
3. Do you see your faith as a set of beliefs (head) which guide your life, or an inner transforming relationship with God (heart) or both? Where would you put yourself on the line between these 2 poles? (Put a mark across the line in your own book.)

Head _____ Heart

on which there is much for us still to learn. We share knowing that we are brothers and sisters in God, and it is in God's love that we are learning to trust.

On the road

I strongly encourage any who are seeking to deepen their own spiritual life and / or the spiritual life of their church to read one or two of Richard Rohr's books:

a) "Everything Belongs: the Gift of Contemplative Prayer"
Revised and updated edition; Crossroad Publishing 2003 :
ISBN 0-8245-1995-7

Inspirational and a spiritual classic, now revised with a group study guide, easy to read and accessible, suitable for individual reflection and group discussion.

b) "Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality"
St. Anthony Messenger Press 2008: ISBN 978-0-86716-659-0

A more solid book, but equally engaging. Essential reading for ministers and others who are looking for a different and transformational approach to Biblical stories and themes.

"In this exploration of central themes of Scripture, Richard Rohr transforms the written word, discovering in these ancient texts a new and vital meaning, relevant and essential for modern Christians. He uncovers what the Bible says about morality, power, wisdom and the generosity of God in a manner that demands a life-changing response from believers."

(Walter Brueggemann)

*This paper was written by Adelene Mills in April 2008
as part of a Presbytery initiative towards change in the church..*

through to me outside my religious boundaries and tradition.

In my tradition, we were led to be suspicious of any spiritual manifestations that were not prescribed. Leaving our minds open was an invitation for undefined evil things to get in. Doubting and questioning was frowned upon. Exploring different ways of experiencing the Divine was courting eternal damnation. Not doing the acceptable Christian religious things was invoking eternal damnation. Much of our Christian belief and witness was based on fear, not love. This fear pervaded the Manse environment in which I grew up. Prohibitions, inhibitions and unrelenting control were ever present, and were, unknowingly, confused with God and goodness.

My inner journey has been one of learning to let go into Love, of discovering the Divine love energy which is the creative force behind all things and is the image of God in God's creation and in all people, not just those who profess to be Christian. I have learned that, in Jesus, God came to "save" the whole world, not just the chosen few – to show us the way to live a life that works, not only for us as individuals, but for us as part of the world- wide, global community that we are called / commanded to love. Jesus told and showed us that the way to become his followers was through an inner transformation, This is not so much a "religious" experience as a re-orientation of the heart and mind; not a 'once only", but means being born again (ref. John 3) and again....and again....into the Love which seeks to permeate our whole being. This is freedom: it is the new life in Christ for which our spirits yearn. It is about letting go of fear (and therefore control) and learning to trust.

I believe that the only way for our churches to be transformed, re-formed into the body of Christ, which is our calling, is for individuals, who together are the church, to experience this re-orientation, this ongoing transformation, and re-birth of the Christ in us. The inner journey is a life-long journey of transformation, of allowing God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ into the very core of our being and into every aspect of our lives, private and public. In this life, we never 'arrive'. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: "Now we see through a glass dimly, but then face to face.." We are always "people of God on the way to the promised end" (Uniting Church Basis of Union).

We need to know that God is not defined or confined by our church or religious practices. Yes, they can give us a safe framework and a supportive community in which to express, explore and grow in our relationship with an awesome Creator God who is way beyond human understanding, but we cannot own God. The limitations we put on God and God's activity in the world, and in individual lives, do an injustice not only to God, but also to many individuals whose experience does not fit our confines, is not expressed in our rituals, and cannot find its home in the Christian church and its culture.

James Conlan, in his "Ponderings from the Precipice – soulwork for a new millenium", defines prayer as: "conscious presence – about paying attention to the divine, who is already here." He says "prayer is less about words than about listening and responding. Prayer is about opening to the epiphany moments that come to us, that speak to us in every aspect of our lives and through all creation. Prayer is about engaging with God, who is living, affective, transforming - who is mystery. Prayer provides the energy we need to live our lives with depth, dedication, identity and purpose. In prayer we involve ourselves in all that is. Prayer calls us to acknowledge our membership in the community of creation. It invites us to live reflectively with Earth. It is more about being than doing, more about presence than petition. Prayer is living our humanity with depth, spontaneity and compassion. Prayer is awakening to who we are; it is our story lived out each day."

Similarly, Richard Rohr in his spiritual classic, "Everything Belongs: the gift of contemplative prayer", sees God as ever-present for all people. "You cannot not live in the presence of God.....You cannot earn this God. You cannot prove yourself worthy of this God. Feeling God's presence is simply a matter of awareness. Of enjoying the now. Deepening one's presence. There are moments when it happens. Then life makes sense....The contemplative secret is to learn to live in the now."

Through learning from our Catholic brothers and sisters, and the saints who have given communication with God a priority in their

is an essential part of enabling spiritual growth in our churches. NCLS surveys have indicated strongly that small groups are very often a feature of churches that are spiritually alive. In order for these groups to enable spiritual growth it is essential that group leaders are growing spiritually themselves, have had some relevant training, and are not primarily focussed on imparting information. There needs to be a greater emphasis on building trusting, caring relationships, sharing the journey, and connecting our own stories with God's story.

6. Being in the world – sharing the journey

Evangelism and mission take on a new meaning when we are growing spiritually, growing in self-awareness, and learning to love (see section 3), and when we realise that God's love for the other person is already so much greater than ours (section 1), so we don't have to worry about their eternal destiny. If we believe they are as safe with God as we are, then our motivation for sharing our faith changes. Our motivation then comes from love not fear. It is gentle and appropriate and respects and accepts the other person and their life's journey. It does not make false assumptions or superficial judgements. We share the love that we already know because we can't help it. It is part of our nature and our growing – of our being. When it is appropriate, we share our stories, our questions, our doubts, our struggle with life issues, our common humanity as well as our joys and discoveries, gifts and talents.

We learn to share the spiritual journey as companions on the way, and we learn from each other. We share, knowing it is our need as much as it might be the need of the other person. We share knowing that they too have the image of God within them, whether they go to church and profess Christian beliefs or not. Our sharing begins and proceeds and ends with attentive respectful listening, which is the purest expression of the love we are seeking to communicate. We share knowing that our **being** often communicates more effectively than our spoken words or our **doing**, and that we too are on a journey

heart). As E.F. Schumacher points out, spiritual maturity is characterised by a trustful dance between outer authority and inner authority, between the head and the heart.

It is my strong belief that we urgently need to find this middle way, which engages both the head and the heart. In my experience of the Uniting Church, we have often tried to hold together these opposites, with varying degrees of success, rather than seeking the middle ground, where scholarship is valued and personal experience of our living God is encouraged and enabled. As Rohr puts it: "Information is not necessarily transformation...we need transformed people today, not just people with answers."

As in Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, it is important for us to recognise that the seeds of this new movement of the Spirit are already there in our churches, some already growing. In the Uniting Church, there is the beginnings of a growing awareness of the value of contemplation, meditation and group and individual retreats, of spiritual companions / guides / directors, of new and creative ways of doing worship with silences for individual reflection (eg "Lacuna"), of prayer walking with a labyrinth. The Uniting Church's Centre for Theology and Ministry (CTM) in Melbourne has recently appointed its first spiritual formation advisor to the staff. In Adelaide, Stillpoint Spirituality Centre, also a Uniting Church initiative, offers retreats and training in spiritual direction and retreat leadership. But, at present, there is still little understanding, and some reluctance, to discover what this renewed interest in spirituality might mean in a Uniting Church context.

Small groups have, since Jesus' small group of 12, been seen among Christians as places for sharing the spiritual journey. They have most often been in the form of a Bible study, and have often been used as a tool for acquiring education and information (head stuff), rather than a safe place to share the joys and perils of the journey (heart-stuff), although, at times, both have been successfully combined. Reviving small groups

lives, we, in the Protestant churches, are beginning to realise the value of the silence of meditation and contemplation and retreats and labyrinths, and of trained spiritual guides with whom we can share the journey. We are learning how to create safe holy spaces where people can explore their relationship with God in new and creative ways which build an ongoing sense of God-consciousness in our ordinary everyday lives, and facilitate the process of inner transformation. Creating spaces in our busy lives for God-consciousness and personal reflection is an invitation to our ever-present God to do God's work in us. It requires a growing trust in a God who understands us and loves us more than our hearts can know, and seeks to re-make us and mould us, gradually removing the barriers to love in us, so that others too can experience more and more of God's love and peace through us.

As I have sought to understand spiritual journeying, I have become aware of those in the church who see such activities as unnecessary and unhealthy introspection. Alongside this awareness comes the knowledge that many health care professionals are now seeing the value of meditation practices for preventative health and in the healing process itself. It maybe that God is, once again, teaching us from outside the community of faith that God is at work in God's world in ways that we in the institutional faith community have been unable to recognise.

In our complex and reactionary culture, the converse is also true - that our 'dark nights of the soul' or times of deep distress tend to be pathologised in an attempt at a quick fix, when there are fears within us that we need to come to terms with, and losses we need to grieve, and guilts and regrets that need to be brought out into the healing light of day and seen for what they are. These dark times can be the stuff of transformation, if we have the courage and patience and perseverance to face them and walk through them, seeking deeper understanding and knowing that God is with us on the journey.

As it is with individuals, so it is with the church. Our dark times can lead to new understanding, new faith, hope and love if we do not give in to fear. In following Christ, we need to let go and 'die' and

be born / resurrected again...and again ...and again. Following Christ's way of love is never easy, but we live with the knowledge that "love is eternal", and must be our highest goal (1 Corinthians 13 and 14), and it is love alone that can transform the darkness in us and in our world.

3. Learning to love

"The day will come, after harnessing space,
the wind,
the tides,
and gravitation,
we will harness for God the energies of love,
and on that day,
for the second time in the history of the world
we shall have discovered fire."

(Teilhard de Chardin)

We all know we need it, and we assume we know what it is, and have it. 'Love' is a word that has multiple meanings and uses in our secular world, many of them unhelpful in understanding the love which is the energy and the life force of creation, and was there for us even before we were born (Psalm 139).

If the whole of the deeper meaning of the "law and the prophets" is summed up in Jesus' command to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10), then we who are followers of Jesus need to be much more intentional in thinking about this word 'love'.

If love is our 'core business', then the church should be a place where people come to learn to love. Learning to love involves self-awareness, as well as an ability to empathise with others. We need courses in self-understanding, listening and empathy skills, preparing for marriage, parent-effectiveness training, conflict resolution, understanding grief and depression, supporting people with particular types of disabilities and needs etc.etc. In other words a central role of a church that believes it is called to love is to teach about life-giving, life-enhancing relationships. This

need to speak out against injustice, to be aware of the abuse and misuse of power in governing structures, and the insidious effects of economic rationalism and seeing money and profit as the bottom-line for decision-making etc. etc., but have we noticed that these evils are evident in the church too? There are many people who no longer belong to churches because we do not embody the values we teach, and maybe there are almost as many people who walk as closely (and maybe even more closely) to the way of Jesus outside the church as there are people who are in it.

Have we mistaken the pointers to the moon for the moon itself? Have our religious structures and writings become as God to us, instead of being pointers to a growing, deepening relationship with the God who is so much bigger than any of these. Is the way we are attending church and reading and studying the Bible bringing about the inner transformation which Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 and 6), and his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3)? Is God's truth and love changing our inner being – our feeling and our thinking — and springing up from within us as living water (John 4), refreshing the thirsty world around it?

Maybe, in a world where spirituality (not necessarily Christian) is becoming fashionable as people discover the gaping hole in their lives, which cannot be filled by the materialism of our age, God is teaching us in the church, again and in new ways, how to be receptacles of God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who brings light to the world, and fills the aching void.

The danger that we constantly walk into in Christian churches as we seek new light and understanding is that of either reverting to a more fundamentalist approach, expecting particular prescribed religious experiences of Jesus' followers, and ignoring scholarship and context in relation to scriptural truth (all heart and little head), or to a more liberal historical critical interpretation, which substitutes talking about God for first-hand spiritual experience, and regards itself as enlightened (all head and little

call.” (“Everything Belongs”, p.45) The story makes sense at this deeper, spiritual level. As ‘information’, some of these stories do not work, but if they are seen as ‘transformation’ stories, our souls say “Yes!” as a chord of truth is struck deep within us; the story articulates something of our own story, and we are enabled to move on, knowing that we are not alone. In this story, and Rohr’s spiritual interpretation of it, I see some truth for us – the Uniting Church - at this present time.

When we see the rich stories of Scripture as a part of spiritual journeys which ebb and flow, as does our own, then we can identify with the characters and their responses, we can put ourselves in the story, and discover where we are, and where we are going. We need to learn to read Scripture with spiritual eyes and a heart which is being transformed by God’s truth, which is hidden in the stories and in our own story. Just as we need to learn to ask of our own story – “Where is God’s truth (as revealed to us in Jesus, who is for us the fullest expression of this truth) for me in this?” so we also need to develop the courage and receptivity, insight and spiritual awareness to ask this of Biblical stories. Our story too is part of God’s story, as God’s story becomes a part of ours.

5. Growing together in a community of faith

Out of this evolving understanding of a Creator God, who is love, and whose story involves, and seeks to engage, all of humanity and all of creation, emerges a new language in our hymns and liturgies, new ways of preaching and teaching Biblical truths, and, ultimately and most-significantly, new ways of relating to God, to ourselves, to each other and to the world in which we live.

Often, in our thinking as church, there seems to be an artificial distinction between what we do and say among ourselves as a faith community, and what is said and done by us outside the four walls of the church. Maybe we need to see ourselves as ‘walking with’ rather than ‘over against’ the world, of ‘getting with’ the Jesus who is already out there doing God’s work in the world. Yes, we

learning to love also needs to embrace our relationships with people from other cultures than our own, and the environment in which we live.

What I am saying is that to assume that just being told we should love our God, ourselves and other people, in order for this to happen, is not enough. In not providing for a deeper and broader understanding of what this ‘love’ means in our living and in our relationships, the church has left people to rely on their own conditioned and limited and unexamined resources. None of us has experienced perfect love in our upbringing. Like us, our parents were fallible human beings. Some of us have experienced the other end of the spectrum and have been abused emotionally, physically, sexually, psychologically and / or spiritually, and recent research tells us that incidents of such abuse are not decreasing in number. Unhealthy dynamics in relationships are often passed on from one generation to another unless there is an opportunity for a new awareness to break through.

Telling people they need to love each other means little when what is seen as love might actually be a destructive dependency, or control of one person over another. What we mean by love, what God means by love, needs to be a topic that is examined and re-examined in the light of contemporary research and understandings, life experiences and spiritual insights, as well as in the light of the wisdom that has been accumulated over many hundreds of years of people seeking to follow Jesus faithfully.

Because all genuine love is of God, and is nurtured and sustained through our relationship with a God whose love is its origin and source, our relationship with God provides the primary motivation and sustaining purpose for our loving. Jesus’ assumption was that if we truly loved God then we would truly love the people God loves, and that, for God and for us, includes all of humanity.

Within the church, we need to work on developing deeper and more meaningful relationships – with God, with ourselves, with each other, with our local communities and neighbours, and with the wider world and environment in which we live. This sounds like an enormous task, but all the above flows naturally out of a love

that is born of God – God-given, God-inspired and God-nourished, the ground of our being and the creative energy by which “we live and move and have our being”.

If we in the church today truly and sincerely seek to be followers of Jesus Christ, much more of our attention needs to go into understanding our universal calling to love, and the many challenging dimensions of that call for our everyday lives, our relationships within our churches, and our relationship to the world in which we have been placed. We have focussed on the ‘doing’ of love. Maybe now is the time to focus on the inner ‘being’ of love, in order that our ‘doing’ may be more effective and more life-giving. If God loves the world so much, and people are built with a God-shaped hole deep inside and a deep need for love, then why is it so difficult to bring these two givens together?

If we are called to be channels of this universal love into the world that God loves so much, then we need to find ways to unblock the pipeline in ourselves and in our churches, so that love can flow freely through us like a healing stream into the world. Letting go of those things that block the channels of God’s love through us into the world is a significant part of our necessary inner journey of change. In order to unblock this healing flow we need to free ourselves, individually and collectively, from those things in us that inhibit love. This inner journey of self-awareness takes courage and commitment, honesty and humility.

As mentioned earlier, our image of God needs to change in order for our relationship with God, and with the world God loves, to change. In our efforts to define and relate to the indefinable, we in the church have unthinkingly diminished the word “God” to mean a Being to whom many people in our own culture, as well as other cultures, cannot relate. We have tried to contain the mystery that is God within our buildings, rituals and structures, religious books, images and language in such a way that we have lost the child-like sense of awe and wonder towards a Creator God who is far bigger than all of these. It is as though, instead of being ‘pointers to the moon’, they have become for us the ‘moon’ itself.

4. Connecting God’s story with our story – Scripture as spirituality

Meister Eckhart, 1200 years after the birth of Christ, said in Cologne Cathedral: “What difference does it make if the Christ child was born 1200 years ago if I do not give birth to the Son of God in my life?” Information does not necessarily bring about transformation, so why do we need this information if it makes no difference to our lives, if it does not change us?

In Richard Rohr’s latest book, “Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality” (St. Anthony Messenger Press:2008), he says: “[Many people ask] ‘What’s all of this monotonous history and out-of-date science got to do with anything that matters?’ That’s why an awful lot of people give up on the Bible....But the genius of the Biblical revelation is that it doesn’t just give us the conclusions; it gives us (1) the process of getting there, and (2) the inner and outer authority to trust that process.....Life itself- and Scripture too- is always three steps forward and two steps backward. It gets the point and then loses it or doubts it. In that, the Biblical text mirrors our own human consciousness and journey. Our job is to see where the three steps forward texts are heading (invariably towards mercy, forgiveness, inclusion, non-violence and trust), which gives us the ability to clearly recognise and understand the two steps backward texts (which are usually about vengeance, divine pettiness, law over grace, form over substance and technique over relationship.) This is what you cannot discern if you have no inner experience of how God works in your own life! You will just substitute the text for the real inner spirit. Or as Paul courageously says: “The written letters alone will bring death, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6)”

One of the passages of Scripture that I have struggled with is the story of Jonah and the whale. Jesus speaks too of the “sign of Jonah” (Luke 11: 29) Richard Rohr opened my eyes to the deeper meaning of this story, which then connected with my story: “We must go inside the belly of the whale for a while. Then, and only then, will we be spit upon a new shore and understand our