

Christian Meditation for Vulnerable Communities

The editor of this Newsletter is listed among the authors of the following article. This is due to the generosity of the actual writers – my work began only when the real work was already done.

So vainglory is not the reason for its publication here. Instead, it is offered as a testimony to one way of putting the Gospel into action, and a true and living initiative of the spiritual tradition we have all been taught.



It is particularly in harmony with the goals of Meditatio: sharing the fruits of meditation with the wider world – a world that is so often broken, suffering and all too vulnerable.

There are many ministries, many manifestations of the Spirit, and this is but one. Yet I hope it will be one of interest and value to all Christian meditators, whatever the ministry and grace we have personally been given.

Offering Christian meditation in a way that is inclusive of those with addictions and mental illness

Collaboratively written by: Kathy Coyne (Canada), Terry Doyle (UK), Jeff Ewener (Canada), Pat McSherry (Canada), Michele O'Brien (Ireland)

Increasingly, addiction recovery programs and mental health counsellors are encouraging people in recovery to try daily meditation, as a way to maintain balance and calmness under sometimes chaotic conditions. Christian meditation offers a meaningful option for Christians who want to meditate in a way that resonates with their own faith tradition.

However, meditation groups are not always well prepared to “welcome the stranger”, especially someone whose life circumstance may be different from their own. Some of us who run groups for people with mental illness and addictions have come up with a list of tips for other group leaders – to help you make your groups a comfortable place for everyone.

A person who is living a chaotic lifestyle experiences many challenges when getting involved with a mainstream meditation group. Their best option may be a separate group, where discussions can be more focused on the relevance of meditation to recovery, and to the discovery of inner

stability. Once they have begun to show respect for other members (by showing up on time and participating in discussions), an acceptance of the discipline of regular practice, and a willingness and commitment to their own group, they can then be introduced to more mainstream meditation groups. This gradual process makes it a less daunting prospect for the individual, and one that can be experienced as a measure of progress.

However, every group, especially in inner city areas, will sometimes have members who are functionally homeless, living with mental distress, or at various stages of a recovery program. Many group members may, without anyone knowing, be dealing with depression, attention deficit disorder, extreme poverty, or various addictions that are sometimes less visible but equally life-altering. Many may be experiencing isolation and exclusion in different parts of their life. In Christian meditation, we know that we are one, and that everyone is a gift and has a gift. We know also that if anyone feels excluded or cannot offer their gifts, we are incomplete as a community.

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Christian meditation can make a difference. Some ideas to help you support these community members in their participation are:

1. **Be genuinely welcoming.** Vulnerable members of our community often feel invisible. Being authentic and truly present for people, without being intrusive, is a gentle gift we have to share.

2. **Language is important.** People who are homeless, or people with addictions, are first of all people. Encourage group members not to speak about vulnerable people in our community as “those people,” or “the addicts,” or “the prostitutes.” Language like this can make people who may have been homeless at some point, or who are in recovery themselves, feel unsafe. Speak the language of the people in the group, to the degree that it is honest and natural to you.

3. Although anyone who comes to the group will know that it is a Christian meditation group, for many people too much “God” talk can be off-putting. **Our first goal is to help people feel included.** Once that happens, you can gradually introduce a deeper exploration of our spiritual foundation. Sensitivity, careful and engaged listening, and faithful humility may overcome resistance and help you find common ground. It may help to speak personally – from your own experience – about what God means in your own life, what you have been able to overcome or deal with, with the help of God through prayer. But the power of example can exert a gentle pressure that penetrates the thickest resistance, eventually. It will also be translated, over time, into terms the other person needs to hear.

4. The primary focus of a meditation group is the journey and practice of meditation. To support this, **encourage people to leave their “stuff” at the door**, and to sit as silently as possible prior to the start. There are lots of opportunities to offload and problem-solve at other times.

5. **Be open to other ways of being.** People with mental illness or in recovery have a lot of different things going on in their lives. They may arrive late, or fall asleep in meditation a little more frequently than others. Always have a chair for them and welcome them with a smile, even if they are late. Accept that sleeping in a safe place may be the best thing for them that evening – or even every evening.

6. **People with mental illness may like things a certain way**, a certain chair or a personal ritual that they do as they get ready to meditate. Honour this ... there may be much for us to learn in it.

7. **Some people in poverty may ask for money**, and offer a very good reason why you should give it to them. It is a good idea not to, no matter what the reason. You can prepare for this by being aware of the services in the community, by taking the person for a meal, or giving them a ride to where they are going.

8. **People who self-identify as being in recovery may appreciate the link with 12 Step programs.** Ask them – and if so, consider incorporating prayers that are meaningful to them, and invite the person who self-identifies to read from it. You can then also offer Christian meditation as one way for practicing Step 11. Resources to support them using Christian meditation as part of their 11th Step practice are linked-to on the WCCM webpage: <http://www.christianmeditation11step.org/>

9. **Plan carefully how you will facilitate the sharing component.** Make sure everyone knows that sharing is optional. It is also really important that no one give advice or opinion on addictions. In particular, never allow the sessions to degenerate into problem-solving and loud and lively discussions about the merits or failings of particular drugs or support agencies.

10. **People with mental illness may experience significant anxiety.** One way to help reduce that is to limit surprises. Find out what talks people like and which they don't like and keep things consistent. Some people find talks by John Main very soothing, and talks by others more complicated. See what people are most comfortable with, and use those as often as possible.

11. **Engender a sense of welcome and belonging by giving people a voice.** Ask for people's input on logistical arrangements. Invite a person who may experience exclusion to be a prayer reader – but ask ahead of time, so that they can practice or prepare themselves emotionally. Sometimes people are willing to always be a reader, especially if they can read a prayer that they have read many times. Participating in this way fosters confidence and a sense of worth.

12. **Be prepared for comments you don't quite understand.** Encouraging people to say a bit more is good. So is simply affirming the value of their idea, with “that's a good point” or “I hadn't thought of it that way.” But be careful not to allow others to push for explanation, or you may end up with a more complicated discussion than you can handle!

13. **Help people participate in the larger meditation community** – give rides to retreats, arrange for scholarships, and stay with them till they get comfortable with a larger group of people they don't know. Consider introducing quiet days for those who are further down the recovery path, or visits to a local monastery.

14. **Difference often brings out our fears.** Meditation communities are opportunities to “be not afraid” and to share in one other's vulnerability. It is also important to have healthy personal boundaries. Be careful not to create expectations you cannot fulfil. Always be open to the unforeseen. When you are the only ones in the building in the evening, consider having a partner to close up with.

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From the National Coordinator

As meditators, we know about the recovery of the contemplative tradition, but the idea of “updating” may sound alarming. Updating does not refer to a latest and different version. The message doesn’t change. It’s the delivery system that can use tweaking – letting the world know that we’re here, using language and actions that link our contemplative path to our secular world.

A recent WCCM initiative is Meditatio: A way for the community to share and grow. This outreach is about sharing of the fruits of meditation with the wider world. The four-year programme emphasizes three areas: seminars and forums which will generate a DVD and journal; technology which includes a comprehensive website, webcast teaching, YouTube videos and blogs; and a particular effort to create a link between young people and meditation, by building a network of young meditators and creating an international electronic monthly retreat.

The seminars and workshops center on the themes of education, business and finance, mental health, the environment, inter-religious dialogue, and citizenship. You can learn more about these initiatives by visiting the new WCCM website, where videos and teaching materials developed through Meditatio are available.

Each national community will set priorities for the coming year, reflecting the goals of this outreach. Canadian initiatives are meditation with children and revamping our national website. One of the aims for Fr. Laurence’s tour of

¹ *First Sight*, Laurence Freeman, 2011

² *Word into Silence*, John Main

Canada next October is to cast the seeds of our contemplative message as broadly as possible, in the spirit of Meditatio.

As meditators, we encounter paradox, the “both/and” of reality. Through our prayer, in Christ, our actions arise from stillness. We receive by giving. We communicate from a depth of silence. We expand by letting go. “The essence of all poverty consists in the risk of annihilation. This is the leap of Faith from ourselves to the Other. This is the risk involved in all loving.”²

New life in our Community comes from the ground up, not the top down. As a meditator in the Canadian Christian Meditation Community, what Meditatio priority would you set? How could you or your group bring our contemplative message beyond the familiar and safe territory? Spiritual growth happens by moving outside the ego’s comfort zone, repeatedly renewing our leaps of faith from ourselves to the Other.

Support this outreach by sending action ideas to Jeff Ewener, CCMC Newsletter editor, at jeff@jefferyewener.com and we’ll share them in a future edition. This will be a version of community brainstorming. My leap of faith in this matter is in making the request for your input. Take a risk. As a community, let’s share and grow.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

– Colleen Donald
National Coordinator

Canadian Christian Meditation Community National Resource Centre

(5964 ave. Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Suite 208
corner ave. Royal)

P.O. Box 52, Station NDG
Montreal, Quebec H4A 3P4
514-485-7928

christianmeditation@bellnet.ca
www.meditatio.ca

Editorial Team

Phil Barnett, Joseph Clarkson, Colleen Donald, Joy Gordon,
Mark Schofield and Jeff Ewener

Send submissions to newsletter coordinator Jeff Ewener
at newsnotes@bellnet.ca.

échos du silence, a newsletter for French-speaking meditators, is available.
Send inquiries to Fr. Michel Boyer, editor,
2715, chemin de la Côte Ste-Catherine, Montréal H3T 1B6
or email info@meditationchretienne.ca.

Page design: www.khatvanga.com

Vulnerable Communities *continued from C2*

15. **Remember that it's not about high numbers.** Be content to share more with the few committed ones, rather than pandering to the masses who are not ready or really interested. Be very careful about accepting those who are being pressured to attend from the courts or probation, especially if there is more than one. Their motives are clearly mixed. They may hide behind a false front, and spoil things for those who are interiorly motivated to come.

16. **Encourage the few who take to the practice to advocate its merits amongst their peers.** Remind them that they are living proof that meditation works. But

discourage proselytising – this will scare away many potential beneficiaries, and prevent some from ever coming. Remember that God will find a way even where we can't – but we should try to avoid making God's task more difficult, by getting people's backs up and driving them away.

Christian meditation can help all of us to turn our lives around. It provides a steady anchor in an often chaotic lifestyle – even our own. It is also an opportunity to be in solidarity with those among us who are vulnerable, as we are called by Christ to be. As we do so, we enter into our own vulnerability, where Christ is present for each of us.

Calendar of Events

For regular updates go to www.meditatio.ca/News/updates.html

Montreal

18-20 May. Cistercian Monastery at Rougemont, Quebec. Silent retreat for Benedictine Oblates and Meditators, with talks based on the unpublished writings of Fr. John Main. Presented by Polly Schofield. \$150 room with bath, \$110 shared bathroom. For registration call Magda Jass – 514-489-0998 – magda.jass@gmail.com

Toronto

Knox College Monthly Teaching Meetings 2012

- February 23: **Julie Meakin**, "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God: Meditation and the Parables"
- March 29: **Kathleen Russell**, "Being In, but not Of, this World"
- April 26: **Lucinda Sykes, MD**, "Meditation and Psychological Well-Being"

Location: Monthly teaching meetings will be in Room #4, Knox College, 59 St. George Street, University of Toronto (St. George Campus) – 7–9 p.m. Contacts: Maureen Casey Rowed – 416-733-0233 – email myetmoe@hotmail.com or Joy Gordon – 416-485-9718.

24 March: Lenten Retreat, St Basil's Church Parish Hall, 50 St Joseph Street (just south of Bay & Bloor)

10:00–12 Noon "Listening & Healing: Restoring the Balance", a Benedictine Spirituality Gathering, led by Marilyn Metcalfe

1:00–4:30 p.m. "The Psalms as a School of Prayer: A Lenten Guide", with Joseph Clarkson.

All are welcome. Please bring a lunch, if you're planning to stay for both. Suggested donation: morning program \$10, afternoon retreat \$20. Both events \$25.

8-10 June: WCCM-Toronto's 2012 Weekend Retreat

St. John's Convent – 233 Cummer Ave (near Yonge & Finch). "The Journey of the Beloved: Healing Our Identity in God",

led by Michael Hryniuk, theologian, author, inaugural director of the Henri Nouwen Society of Canada and the US and director of Theosis Resources, a consulting practice. Contacts: Noli Mababangloob – 647-286-3041 – nolibee@rogers.com or Claire Andrews – 416-922-7230

Ottawa

23-25 March: "Keeping Faith: Reflections on Christian Meditation and Faithfulness", a silent weekend retreat led by Rev. Glenda Meakin, sponsored by the Ottawa Area Christian Meditation Community. At Maison Notre-Dame-de-la-Providence, 1754 St Joseph Blvd, Orleans, ON. For further information and to register please contact Reta Hamilton 613-838-2401 – meditation.r@gmail.com. Registration deadline: February 29.

Calgary

Workshop: Introduction to Christian Meditation

Part 1: Wednesday, April 18 and

Part 2: Wednesday, April 25, both from 7–9 p.m

Retreat: Christian Meditation Retreat Day

Saturday: March 24, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

Monthly Booster: Meditation "Drop-In" Thursdays 7–8 p.m. on March 1, April 12, May 10 and June 7.

All sessions are offered at the FCJ Christian Life Centre, 219–19th Ave. SW, Calgary, Alberta – 403-228-4215 – fcjcentre@fcsisters.ca – www.fcsisters.ca/fcjcentre

Edmonton

Coming up in 2013! Save the Date!

March 8-10, 2013 – School of Meditation: The Essential Teaching. Cost: \$195 for accommodations, meals and all materials. Location: Star of the North Centre, St Albert. Contacts: Monique Eng: moniqueeng@hotmail.com. Mia Klein-Gebbinck: miklge@telus.net; 780-354-2108

Want to list an event? You will find a user-friendly form to submit additions at www.meditatio.ca/Forms/events.html.

Spreading the Teaching

Ottawa School of Theology and Spirituality completes 10-week course on Christian Meditation

In November, the Ottawa School of Theology and Spirituality completed a series of ten-week courses at All Saints' Westboro Anglican Church, covering such subjects as spirituality, inter-religious dialogue, scripture, peace initiatives, sacred music, Church architecture – and including one called, “Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation”, led by Paul Harris.

About 36 participants attended Paul's evening sessions – a 35-minute talk, followed by a 20-minute period of meditation. Topics covered included an introduction to Christian meditation; the daily practice; the contemplative prayer teaching of the 4th-century desert monks and the 14th-century English spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*; the fruits of meditation; the relationship between prayer and action in our lives; from brokenness to wholeness on the path of Christian meditation; the role of the weekly meditation group; and a full question and answer evening.

The classroom sessions included visual displays on the international aspects of meditation; photographs of groups around the world; hand-outs for the participants; and displays of Paul's book, *Frequently Asked Questions About*

Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation. In the final class, Paul circulated a list of the 42 meditation groups in the Ottawa area, and urged class members to join a group.

The audience gave many signs of their receptiveness to the course. The 20-minute meditation periods were quite silent – an indication that participants (99% newcomers) had adapted quickly to the discipline of the practice. The question and answer sessions drew a large response from the participants indicating a serious interest in the practice and the teaching. Personally, I found the two videos – one by Laurence Freeman on the daily practice of meditation and a DVD from Australia on the role of groups, *Silence in the City* – extremely motivating.

Although I have been studying and practicing Christian meditation for 2 years, I found the historical aspects of contemplative prayer very enlightening. Paul's course has definitely reinforced my commitment to the practice.

– Carolynn Trites

Practicalities of Practice

Q. Why is silence important in our life and in the practice of Christian Meditation?

A. Undoubtedly it has much to do with our contemporary world, our cybernetic age of speed, frenetic activity and excessive noise. Today we are bombarded with over 1,000 TV channels, an inundation of email, and all the raucous outpouring of a digital age.

In this age of decibels, the way of silence and stillness in prayer speaks to us of a deep human need, and of a spiritual path that is rooted in the “inner desert” of the heart, where the Spirit is waiting. Great things seem to happen in silence. In the many times Jesus slipped away from his disciples to pray, I believe he spent the night in silent communication with his Father.

On the first Christmas Eve Jesus came to Mary, and to us, in the silence and stillness of the night. The monastic divine office on Christmas Eve says: “while all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of its course, your almighty word O Lord leapt down from heaven”. Our most famous Christmas carol is called *Silent Night*.

God still comes to us in the silence, says John Main, but he comes to us now in the silence of our daily times of meditation.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) wrote: “Nothing is so like God as silence.” And John of the Cross (1542-1591) echoed this when he said: “Our most important task consists in remaining silent before the great God ... he understands only one language, that of silent love.”

We find a reflection of this in human love. Two people in love often prefer to sit silently side by side; talking would only disturb their loving union. Love unites us with a bond that does not require words. That is what the practice of meditation is all about.

From the book *Frequently Asked Questions About Christian Meditation: The Path of Contemplative Prayer*, by Paul Harris (Novalis Publishers). Paul can be reached at paulturnerharris@aol.com



Fully Alive

YOGA FOR BODY & SPIRIT

The seventh Fully Alive yoga and meditation retreat was held in Kingston on Nov. 11-13, and was attended by meditators from Ottawa, Kingston, Belleville, Toronto and Guelph. This year, Casey Rock was assisted by Lucie Legault and the Rev. Deborah Hart. The sessions addressed Befriending the Body, Awakening the Heart and Honouring the Sacred. In the introductory session on Friday evening, many participants expressed a desire to deepen the habit of meditation.

All sessions promoted a wholistic understanding of our body, mind and spirit, and encouraged positive physical, mental and spiritual practices. For example, we don't practice yoga because we think we "should". We do it because yoga is a way of being friendly towards our body and of promoting health and wellbeing. The Pharisees in the time of Jesus had a long list of behavioural "shoulds" which focused on outer behaviors. Today, we no longer have oppressive Pharisees, but we do have a scientific and consumerist tyranny around the body and health. We are bombarded with information about health, but we do not

have a culture of health. Rev. Hart encouraged us towards a wholistic view of holiness by challenging us to see that we do not practice our faith "from the neck up."

The session on Awakening the Heart stressed that prayer and listening are matters of the heart. Quoting Anthony De Melo, we were reminded that to succeed at prayer we need to live in the present, and that prayer can start in the head but must move to the heart. This involves a deep inner listening, and getting in touch with an inner source of delight and peace. At the heart level, we commune with the divine, align ourselves with the divine, and then we can speak and act upon the truth. When we align with our heart, we can live from the heart, and hold God's people in our hearts.

The pacing of presentations and inclusion of yoga and meditation was relaxing and invigorating at the same time. We were never sitting for too long, and the split of advanced and beginner yoga sessions was very engaging for all participants.

– Joseph Clarkson

Meditators at the 2011 Fully Alive Yoga Retreat: "When we align with our heart, we can live from the heart."



Am I becoming more loving?

School of meditation, Kingston, ON – Nov. 25–27, 2011

We were nine participants, mainly from Ontario, who had already enjoyed a formation in the essential teaching of Christian meditation. Now, under the guidance of team members Marilyn Metcalfe, Phil Barnett and Madelaine Mageau, we meditated, listened to presentations and practiced sharing with others the essential teaching.

For me, freshly returned from mission in Colombia, it was truly a “coming home”. Phil Barnett’s presentation on “The Essential Teaching” was enlightening, heart-warming and engaging. It was truly a confirmation that we are on the right path as meditators.

Our role-playing – explaining the experience of meditation to a friend or to a group – involved us deeper in our own process of growth, as we shared our personal journeys of how we came to Christian meditation.

Madelaine Mageau’s sharing on the Stages on the Journey, was realistic, instructive and encouraging. Meditation brings us to deeper levels of our unconscious, where at times we encounter our dark side – situations or events of our past that we had suppressed or hidden. These are very difficult moments, in which we are invited to die to ourselves, and to rise with Jesus to new life.

Both Madelaine and Phil reminded us that as we repeat our

word faithfully, silently and continuously, we are surrendering to God’s love, at work within us. This requires humility, discipline, concentration and much hope. “The real outcome of meditation”, Phil suggested, “is that it leads us to change and action.” Madelaine challenged us with “the litmus test of meditation: ‘Am I becoming more loving?’”

A quiz on The Tradition sharpened our knowledge and spurred us on to seek further information about points of interest such as John Main, Cassian, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the Jesus Prayer, etc.

Marilyn Metcalfe modeled for us what a group leader is all about. Like the Good Shepherd, she led us gently, surely and peacefully. With her, we learned what leading a group entails: the qualities required, and the resources available for our continued formation as group leaders.

As we gathered to share in prayer, in group work or in relaxation, there was a sense of unity and enthusiasm for Christian meditation as well as an eagerness to share the treasure found. Some of us are already leading a group, others feel called to begin one and the rest of us are listening attentively to the Spirit within. May we respond in trust and faith like the prophet: “Here I am, send me” (Isaiah 6,8).

– Sr. Jeannine Coulombe

PUBLICATIONS

For information on the new titles please see page 12.

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MEDITATION, MYTH AND MYSTERY

- a personal narrative -



When I reflect on my own journey along the path of life and spirit, I see that I have gone from seeking to know and to understand to the place where I am today – falling into mystery. And I have come to believe that our so-called “journey of faith” is really more about getting lost – and finding nothing but “I am”.

The practice of meditation has disassembled all my images of God and the Christian tradition I was raised in. This has brought the uncomfortable realization that, for most of the 30+ years I have practiced Christian meditation, I have been completely wrong-headed about it.

Let me try to explain exactly what I mean by Meditation, Myth and Mystery. By Meditation I mean a practice – one that is intentional in nature and works to quiet the mind, to dispel its voluminous clouds of thought, and bring it to a still clarity of observation and presence.

By Myth I mean the container for the practice. Almost every practice in any tradition has a myth or a story that defines it, describes its purpose and destination point. In religious terms, these include the Christian myth, or the Buddhist myth, and in non-religious terms, things like peace, or self-realization. The Myth is the vehicle for the practitioner, and provides a steady reference point.

The Mystery ... now this is harder to describe. In essence, it is the deepening sense that “I don’t know”, that “I will never know,” and that nevertheless I can live out of this experience – because what is beyond the capacity of the mind to know is not beyond that of the spirit to experience, in energy and light. Mystery is the space without reference point – without guidance, without security, without destination. It is a kind of death for the possessive mind. In

entering the Mystery, one willingly assists the mind to die, to leave one form of sight for another of vision, which is both local and universal.

In the end, what I hope to communicate with these carefully defined words is this: the way is no way. The one who moves is no one, and the end point is nowhere. And yet, with the embracing of all these seeming negatives, one backs into the experience of everything, everywhere.

Now, before you come to the conclusion that I am describing my descent into madness (and you would not be the first!), I want to say that the vector I am on is the opposite of Timothy Leary’s “Drop Out” line of the ’60s. It is, rather, a dropping in to all of life, into all its many contradictions and disappointments, and continuing to like and embrace them.

For me what this means is that I participate in my own tradition, and I am comfortable in others as well – knowing that all our traditions miss the mark somewhat, because they seek to contain and communicate what is impossible to define or to say. Certainly much good comes from this human urge to communicate a story, a truth, an awareness – but in the end, it can only be experienced.

So, after all this time, I realize that the most important part of my journey was to begin, as I did in a small group in Thunder Bay, and to experience my first trip to the Priory in Montreal. To fall apart, as I have done a few times, and to begin again. And then to share with others, in a very ordinary and simple way in my own backyard, what I have learned along the way, and encourage them to find their own path to the experience of “I am”.

- George Zquette

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Canadian Christian Meditation Community
P.O. Box 52, Station NDG
Montreal, Quebec H4A 3P4

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