



issue 43

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a forum for people grappling with faith and church issues

values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God

Power and Control

How do we define spiritual abuse? When is authority and power misused? Andrew Dunn in the summer 2002 issue of the *Spiritual Growth Ministries* journal which had spiritual abuse as its theme says: "It's wherever church rules and authority push people around, draft and regiment them and set restrictive boundaries regarding ministry, worship, service, approach to the Lord's table, or people's spiritual growth." Ken Blue in his book *'Healing Spiritual Abuse'* writes that it is when a leader with spiritual authority uses

that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.



ABIGAIL FIRMLY BELIEVED THAT A THRIVING CHURCH COMMUNITY NEEDED EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION.

William's story in this issue is the kind of situation that seems to happen quite frequently in churches. I am coming increasingly to see that these kinds of incidents, while they should definitely not be happening, are also very complex. There are layers upon layers with numerous dynamics, historical and sociological factors that come into play, not to mention a particular church culture and expected mores.

Churches are systems, made up of interrelationships all with their own idiosyncrasies being played out. Power and control can only be power and control if others collude with that and let that happen. So what is it in us and in the system that causes us to let that occur? This is a huge topic with many different slants. We would like to engender some responses for publication from you. If you would like to write in with your story or ideas on any of the above please email jenny@central.org.nz

Healthy Disobedience.

"They have a right to make that call. If they are wrong, they will have to answer to God, but you need to accept their right to make that call, and you need to obey" said Simon.

Simon was the regional coordinator of our church denomination, and was expressing concern about a rapidly developing rift between myself, my wife Debbie, and our church leaders. I won't tell Debbie's story here. My own difficulties with our church leaders began when I tried to help a friend, Jim.

More than a year before my meeting with Simon, Jim discovered that his wife was having an affair with one of the church elders, Andy. Our Pastor had stepped in to manage the situation and he decided that the church members should be told nothing of what had happened. Thus, Andy's resignation from the eldership was announced and members were told there were health-related reasons; his contribution had been much valued, and he received a lot of sympathy. All of this was salt in Jim's wounds. When Jim questioned the Pastor's handling of the situation, the Pastor became antagonistic. Among other things, the Pastor decided that Jim should withdraw from his role with the church Sunday School and to this end he wrote a resignation notice on Jim's behalf and inserted it in the church newsletter without telling him. Outrageous as it was this was hardly the major issue; Jim was going through probably the greatest emotional turmoil of his life, and those of us who should have been supporting him as his brothers and sisters in Christ were not even allowed to know of the situation.

Jim wrote a letter to the church elders, complaining about the way the Pastor had isolated him from support, and protected Andy from the consequences of his actions. I was one of those elders, and I also told my wife Debbie about the letter and its content

even though I suspected the Pastor would have disapproved of this. However, I figured I needed Debbie's support and wisdom to react in the best way.

A meeting was held to discuss the situation and how it had been handled to date. Beforehand I sought advice from a retired minister I knew who had had to deal with a case of marital infidelity. Based on his advice I thought the church members should be told, with care, something of what had really happened. I believed that truth, though difficult, would result in a deeper healing than the charade we were now playing.

At the meeting it became apparent that it was considered the job of the elders to support and obey the Pastor. Some of the things the Pastor said at the meeting did not match Jim's version of events and I challenged the Pastor as to whether he was telling the truth. The senior elder, Todd, was scandalised by my stance and reiterated that it was my duty as an elder to support the Pastor - I received a dressing down the like of which I don't think I have ever received before or since. I saw a clear choice, I could walk away from this meeting with the approval of my fellow elders by saying nothing more about this and adopting the party line, or, I could hold out for Jim not to be made a pawn in order to protect the image of a perfect church. I didn't feel antagonistic towards my fellow elders, in fact, I was physically shaking from the humiliation of Todd's rebuke. When I asked if we could research the facts the Pastor had presented (about which I had my doubts as Jim had given a different version of events) the chairman said he would not allow it and I found myself telling the meeting I had no choice but to resign as an elder, as a matter of personal principle.

So returning to the opening sentence, what Simon was asking was for me to bury my differences with the leadership team and work now to their instructions. Simon went on to tell

me of Todd's complaints about my attitude. When Todd had phoned me and asked that I meet with the elders and receive a letter from them I had insisted on being allowed to see the letter before the meeting, so as to have time to consider my response (particularly as I believed it would be a letter of rebuke). Todd felt that for a church member to attempt to impose conditions on a request from an elder was unacceptable. It was clear Simon was siding with Todd and in response to Simon I told him I would need to think.

In the end, I wrote to some senior church members asking them to help me resolve these issues. The leaders announced to members in a Sunday service soon afterwards, that Debbie and I had accused them of dishonesty. This misled members because my letter had not directly mentioned dishonesty, only that I had had a problem resolving differing versions of events. The National President of our denomination became involved and appointed a committee to review the situation. The committee came up with an unexpected proposal - all those involved should sign a contract never to talk about these matters again; we were given a week to decide.

As Debbie and I talked through the issues in the week that followed, alternating between thoughts of compliance and of maintaining our stand, we came to the conclusion that to yield would actually be *unhealthy* obedience, and not in keeping with the essence of true Christianity. For me, the 'priesthood of all believers' means that we are empowered in Christ to make decisions for ourselves. Yes, we do need to respect our Pastors and leaders and support them, but it seems to me

there is also a line where unthinking obedience becomes unhealthy. Johnson and van Vonderen describe this very well in their book 'The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse'. We decided not to sign the contract; not out of belligerence, but because we couldn't convince ourselves it was a good solution. As a result, Debbie and I were subjected to a disciplinary meeting of church members attended by The National President. Though he never at any stage talked with me, he told members he had personally investigated the matters I had raised, and that the leadership had no case to answer. No details were ever supplied to members. The president asked members' permission to handle matters on their behalf and no one objected. He closed the meeting, and in a private meeting that followed, he made it clear to Debbie and me that the best thing for the church would be for the two of us to resign our membership, though he would like this to be our own decision. We did resign and members were notified the next Sunday. We have never been back to our former church, which we had attended for over 20 years.

Much soul searching has followed. Immediately after these events, my self esteem was very low indeed and it took a couple of years to regain it. I don't attend church regularly right now, but I talk conversationally to Jesus many times each day - He is as close as He ever was. I hope there will be a church somewhere in my future. Meanwhile the experience has made my life richer, with more colour than before. As I reflect on my decision to resign as elder that night, I believe I would do the same again. I regret the conflict that followed, but I have an inner peace that I did what I did for good reasons. For me it was therefore the right decision - could we say healthy disobedience?

William Morgan

Open dialogue – a space for reader response

this is an opportunity for open conversation from readers about previous articles. You may offer your own story; a broadening or different view of the subject; or point to other resources. We ask you to respect the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited Exchanges groups:

- We're not trying to produce one answer. There is freedom for differing views and opinions.
- Anyone is free to share his/her own view even if it's different or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
- We ask for respect for each person's opinions
- We let God defend God

SPIRITEX

I am writing in reference to an item in 'Open Dialogue' Issue 42 May 2006, A Hindu Prayer. In your platform for freedom and exchange do you want to offer the leavings of other religions? Are you casting your net outside of Christianity? In Christian belief prayer is like a corridor through Christ, leading to or reaching the Father. Other religions do not direct prayer through Jesus Christ and do not reach the Father.

What do they reach? Something else, or worse - nothing. I think that by adopting prayers and wisdom words from other religions we are suggesting that the Christian faith has lost its potency for us and we are shopping elsewhere. I think this prayer might sound acceptable to a Christian because the wording is similar to some of the great hymns of praise to be found in the Bible and even Christian liturgies, but let's make no mistake, a Hindu prayer is a Hindu prayer.

I really appreciate the items 'Twelve Symptoms of a Counterfeit Church' and 'Some Threads of Celtic Christianity', in the issue thank you.

Glenys Brookbanks

Spirited Exchanges UK Alan Jamieson

Recently Sandra and I spent time with some of the people establishing SE/UK. I found it a huge privilege and very encouraging. It is quite unnerving to be in London at the Church Missionary Society Head office talking to potential funders, church leaders and interested people about something that began back here in NZ. I talked about the original research on church leavers and updated this with the findings from the research on church leavers five years on. About 50 people attended the open lunch time meeting. My sense would be that SE/UK will continue to develop a network of groups operating within the UK and could, if they are able to attract some financial support, develop further to encourage groups around the country. From the questions and interest it seems the time is ripe for a network like this and Jenny's visit last year has been an impetus to the development of an SE network in the UK.

If you'd like to hear the talk and see the UK site go to <http://www.spiritedexchanges.co.uk/>
The talk is in MP3 format.

The Spiral Staircase

by Karen Armstrong
Harper Perennial 2005

If you're interested in stories about church leavers, this one is more dramatic than most. In 1962, at the age of 17, Karen Armstrong became a Roman Catholic nun. Seven years later she left the convent and re-entered a world that had changed dramatically. In this book she tells the story of that re-entry. (The account of her time as a nun is given in an earlier book *Through the Narrow Gate*, published by Harper Collins.) It's beautifully written, moving, entertaining, and ultimately hopeful.

In her seven years in the convent Karen had done her uttermost to 'die to self' - to become the perfect nun. She left because for all her longing and trying she simply could not conform to that ideal. She had entered because she longed to find God. She left because in the end, God simply did not turn up. She saw herself as the failure, rather than God or the monastic ideal.

Karen describes a culture shock beyond most people's experience. Far from plunging happily into the new life of freedom as people expected, she was disoriented, confused, and homesick even for the routines and the beauty of some aspects of convent life. To make things even more difficult for her she suffered panic attacks and seizures. Her doctor and psychologist insisted on treating these as mental problems. Not for some years was the real cause traced: she has epilepsy.

Adolescence and the early 20s are the years in which most of us begin to discover who we are - what we like and dislike, our talents and weaknesses. But these were the very years in which Karen Armstrong was doing her best to cooperate with a system designed to eliminate all individuality and enforce perfect conformity. Thus the book tells of her struggles and experiments to find out who she was and what she might do with her life. A gifted scholar, she recovered the ability to think critically, but failed to become an academic because her doctoral thesis was not accepted. Instead she became a teacher, and later made television documentaries for the BBC. She is now a best selling author writing about aspects of faith and history.

For me the most absorbing aspect of the book is Karen's reflections about faith and belief - the inner journey. She continued to practice as a Catholic for a time after she left the convent but eventually admitted with relief that it had no meaning for her. She describes how it had been:

"I had wanted to be filled with God, transformed by a holiness that would bring me a fuller and more satisfying existence. But instead I had starved my mind and my heart, and that hunger had atrophied, died, and been replaced by a malaise with all things religious. And yet ... I felt nostalgia for what I had once been."

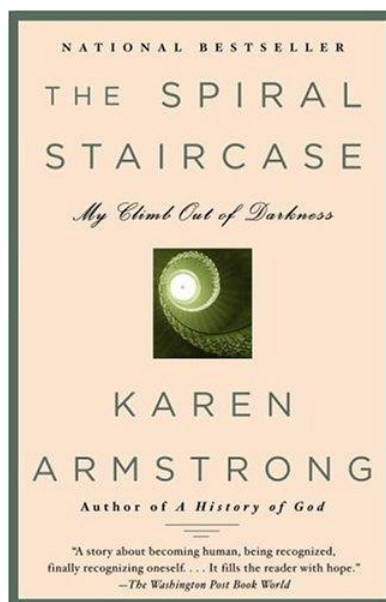
That 'and yet' continues to be expressed in Karen's life. She is often asked whether she 'believes in God'. That, she says, is not a proper question, not an answerable question. In her study of the three Abrahamic faiths she came to realise that theology is not a science but an art, a species of poetry, not about assent to propositions, but about being receptive to elusive truth. In study she found 'mini-seconds of transcendence, awe and wonderthe ecstasy that I had hoped to find in hours of prayer.'

The proper question for Karen is not the explicit content of what we may believe about 'God' or 'the sacred' but the effect that faith has in our lives. Does it lead to practical compassion? Compassion - feeling with - is the pivotal, essential virtue. She ends the book with her sense of having come full circle.

"I tried to break away from the convent but I still live alone, spend my days in silence and am almost wholly occupied in writing, thinking and speaking about God and spirituality."

This is a book to own and re-read.

Adrienne Thompson



Spirited Exchanges Facilitator Training Weekend June 23 - 25

Are you looking to start a Spirited Exchanges group in your area or want to know more about what these groups provide? The Facilitator Training weekend will help you understand the ethos and develop the skills required to run such a group. The course and materials will be free of charge and some accommodation is available. You will be expected to get yourselves to Wellington and to pay for some meals.

By the end of this weekend we hope you will understand:

- what the ethos and aims of Spirited Exchanges are
- more about faith development and journey - yours and others
- why people leave churches and the resultant issues
- the skills needed to facilitate a group
- your own readiness to lead such a group

If you would like further information or to register for this weekend please email:
jenny@central.org.nz

spirited exchanges groups for 2006

Wellington:

- Student spirited exchanges group meets fortnightly on Thursday evening (during term time) around a meal beginning at 630pm at 10 Glasgow St, Kelburn.
For further details please contact Peter McKenzie-Bridle peter@spiritedexchanges.org.nz.
- Young adult (roughly early 20s through mid-thirties) meets fortnightly on Monday evenings at 730pm at 183 Brooklyn Rd, Brooklyn. For further details please contact Donia Macartney donia@central.org.nz
- Spirited exchanges (all ages) meets fortnightly on Monday evenings at Wellington Central Baptist Church at 630pm. For further details please contact Craig Braun cjbraun@extra.co.nz or Sarah Hill sarah_hill007@hotmail.com

Auckland:

- Meets on the first Friday of each month at 14 Erson Ave (Disability Resource Centre rooms) at 730pm.
For further details please contact Jocelyn Grantham JG@dilworth.school.nz

Christchurch:

- A new group began in Christchurch on Friday April 28th.
For further details please contact Elizabeth Taylor candet@paradise.net.nz

Palmerston North:

- A new group is beginning to form.
If you would like to receive information please email Jenny McIntosh jenny@central.org.nz

If you would like to contribute an article, suggest a topic for discussion, comment about the newsletter or come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz or Donia Macartney donia@central.org.nz. For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz
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