



issue 25

february 2004

Wounded trust

Over recent years I have listened to numerous stories of people who have been hurt, let down, betrayed, and even abused by others who represent the church, the Christian faith and God. I find this intensely sad as I watch the effects of what that does to people. Gone is an openness and trust that may have once been. Gone is their old way of knowing and worshipping God, replaced by a cynicism and suspicion. Gone is a sense of safety in previously good relationships and any *joie de vie* they might have had, in fact gone is everything that is fundamental to living the fullness of life that we are promised from Jesus. And they are propelled into a very painful journey of confusion, anger, guardedness, suspicion, disillusionment and huge loss.

People on this journey have everything that has been core to them and their faith thrown into disarray. And because they have been let down by people who they expected above all not to let them down, people representing the church and God, the intensity of the confusion and let down is only increased. The questions flood in. How could this happen? Relationships can no longer be depended on – who can I trust? Can I even trust myself and my own ability to discern? Where was God when I needed protection and care? God's promises which

previously held hope are now hollow and meaningless. Where is God in this? Can I even trust in God anymore? How did I get to the point of quelling my own internal signals and unease? One person wrote of his experience of betrayal: "...it is hard to explain the grief and the pain." Another wrote: "Time after time I discarded the bible in anger, agony and frustration.... my faith was paralysed."

Yet another: "...I rotate through feelings of anger, embarrassment, disbelief, self-doubt, rage, loss and sadness. I feel I can no longer trust anyone...."

In the story of Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus two friends, described as followers of Jesus are going back to their village after the crucifixion. These two had hopes that this man Jesus was the one who was going to set Israel free. They had heard him speak, seen him interacting with people, probably interacted with him themselves, and knew enough about him to have put their trust in him and call themselves his followers. They had invested their hopes and dreams for the future in this man Jesus who they believed would redeem Israel. And then, in a very short time what was stable and secure in their lives was turned upside down. What they had put their trust in was totally undermined and had fallen apart as far as they could see.

When we lose trust whatever the circumstances, whether a confidence is broken, a promise not kept, expectations are shattered, we are the victims of gross insensitivity, or relational infidelity it is a long journey. And when church and faith issues are involved there is an added depth that hits at the core of our being. The one place thought to be safe where our guards are down and vulnerabilities exposed, has violated our trust. To add insult to injury we often find ourselves alone and sidelined as the power of the system and majority prevail.

Cleopas and his friend are grappling with some of these issues when Jesus draws alongside and begins walking with them, though they don't recognise him. He draws out from them what it is they are talking about and enables them to express their grief and their dashed hopes and disappointment. He challenges their illusions and paints a bigger picture. They are able to rework and reshape who Jesus is and what they are putting their trust in. They could broaden the paradigms of their previous experience and faith is rekindled.

When we are thrust into this journey we often begin a process which may mean the letting go of a lot of often unrealistic and wrongly taught beliefs and expectations and encompassing new paradigms. It may mean going away from triumphalistic and all-powerful images to more vulnerable images of God. There may grow an understanding of God who doesn't take away the pain or give neat answers to life's problems but treats us more like adults and befriends us in the midst of it. Often there are glimpses of God undergirding what is going on in life and a call to a deeper sense of trust.

There may also be a deeper sense of trust in our internal signals and a realisation that God is at work through these. We may rework our perception of safe and unsafe people and places.

Throughout this journey myself I found it important to give myself plenty of space,

care, and gentleness and find companions to travel with – it takes time and it is painful. My companions have been in the form of a spiritual director and others who have travelled or are travelling the same road.

Jenny McIntosh

Annual request: Each year we ask for a \$5 donation to cover the costs of this newsletter. It is that time again now – we would appreciate if you could send that to: Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington.

Thank you to those who have sent donations over the past year. If you have sent a donation within the last few months you don't need to respond again now and if you wish to be removed from the mailing list please email: spiritex@central.org.nz
Thank you.

"What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out, when they look back, to have been a well; and where present experience saw only salt deserts memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water."

C.S. Lewis *The Great Divorce*

Parachute 04

It was my first *Parachute* and I can't say I was really there. I didn't go to any of the concerts and I didn't hear any of the seminars or workshops. What I did do was sit in a stall, chilly one day, hot the others, and very wind and dust blown the whole time.

It was an experiment to take *Spirited Exchanges* to Parachute and it felt a bit odd to be setting up a stall in the Global Missions Tent. Our neighbours were such well established bodies as Interserve, the Church Missionary Society and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship but also included the Christian Heritage Party, Destiny Church (*a new generation of politicians* proclaimed their black shirts), and various other entities and acronyms. Nobody else was about leaving church.

We set up our stall under the title of *A Churchless Faith*. Jenny had commissioned a designer who created a stunning banner. *I want a place where I can be real. Value my questions and doubts. Please respect my journey, don't say I've gone off the rails* These and similar sentences caught the eye of people wandering past. I was fascinated to watch the faces as people read our banner. Some looked baffled, some suspicious, some intrigued, and for some it was like a light coming on. You could see them seizing on these ideas with recognition and relief.

Those facial reactions pretty much represented the verbal reactions of people who stopped to talk. For some the idea of faith outside the church was outside their comprehension. Others could only assume that Spirited Exchanges must have an agenda to lure people back into the institutional church. And if it didn't, it ought to.

Many people were interested and intrigued. They'd never heard of this venture but they all knew of people who had left church for one reason or another. Some of these took our literature which included newsletters and stories written by church leavers.

But there was the fourth group of people, those for whom the bells rang and the lights flashed. These were the ones who were hanging on in church but only just; the ones who had left, but nobody seemed to notice or care; the ones who felt themselves driven out; the ones labelled troublemakers or backsliders. Some of these spent a long time telling us their stories. We heard grief, anger, cynicism, yearning, loneliness, hurt, confidence, courage. Many of these people were stunned to discover that something like Spirited Exchanges exists. Someone is actually attempting to understand and support them.

A couple of themes stand out particularly for me. Every single person I talked to knew someone who had left church, or who was unhappy with church to the point of considering leaving. They might not agree with the approach that Spirited Exchanges takes, but no one could deny the phenomenon of people leaving churches. At the moment it seems the churches most commonly respond in one of two ways. They pretend it's not happening and focus on the 'positive' things that are going on; or they blame the leavers. The feeling grew in me that churches have to find another response. Blaming people or ignoring them doesn't make them more likely to stay in church. On the contrary they are likely to leave with increased bitterness and hurt.

The other theme came into focus through a conversation. One guy who read our handout picked up on the phrase *some need freedom to explore the questions without being given the answers*. He was puzzled. 'Did you say *without* being given the answers?' Yes we did. 'But ... surely you don't mean to imply that there aren't any answers?' Well ... it depends on the questions. It seems that for some people Christian faith is all about neatly packaged answers to pre-selected questions. If that's the case, no wonder people leave churches. Grown up faith needs to do its own exploring.

Adrienne Thompson

BOOK REVIEW

'Doubts and Loves: What is left of Christianity'

By Richard Holloway. Cannongate, Edinburgh, 2002.

"In contrast to the endless resourcefulness and creativity of humanity, religious institutions often give the impression that they have heard the last word on God and know God's settled opinion on everything. But the history of humanity's struggle with God is a history of constant surprise and discovery."

This book describes the religious quest as the "deepest passion of our nature", but views Christianity as an ancient galleon, encrusted with customs and attitudes which make it a poor vehicle of that passion. In the opening chapter the author suggests three possible responses. We can give up on Christianity altogether. We can hold on to an outmoded and irrelevant version. Or we can find a new way of interpreting the Christian tradition which expresses that passion. The rest of the book explores the last option.

Richard Holloway builds from the assertion that "there is no absolute and irrefutable version of the truth". Using the idea of 'paradigms' (provisional systems of thought and practice), he comes to what he describes as a "pragmatic faith". This faith values the useful ideas and principles from the past, but is welcoming of new ideas and

understandings of God which lead to a more loving, humane and life-enhancing faith.

'Doubts and Loves' is a stimulating and thought provoking book which I have read several times. It is an exciting and wide-ranging mix of scientific theory, philosophy, theology, literature, personal experience and recollection. Notwithstanding the richness and depth of content, it is written in an accessible style with realism, humour and compassion.

I particularly liked the idea of "following the way" rather than "believing in" a specific set of beliefs relating to Christianity. It is an encouraging and helpful book for those who want to consider issues of faith in a complex world.

Fiona McDougal

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or on email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz (Note change of email addresses)