LOCAL FRIENDS
Helping ordinary people care for one another
Spirituality and Society

Contents

Introduction

The aim of *Local Friends* is to love and serve people where they are, with no conditions or strings attached and no hidden agenda. Helping people spiritually is just one strand of what we offer, alongside the other ways we offer to help people.

Christians understand the nature and process of salvation in many different ways, and use a wide variety of language to talk about such things. We are not seeking to achieve full agreement on these matters, but we do need some guidelines concerning how we work together; and ideally we want some idea of what we can agree about.

Within the context of *Local Friends*, we want to talk about the Christian good news when it is appropriate. The question of when it is appropriate is addressed in the *Faith and Spirituality* document. When it is appropriate to talk, and someone asks us how you become a Christian, we respond by telling them the 'good news', one presentation of which is provided in the *Good News* document; how we go about this is described in the *Telling the Good News* document.

This document provides some of the background for the other documents, describing how the approach we have adopted fits into the culture and addresses some of the issues of the wider society.

It has been written for anyone who is interested in our work from a spiritual perspective so that they can understand our approach to spiritual matters and thus (we hope) be comfortable with our work. We hope that it goes some way towards explaining why we have chosen the approach we describe.

Links to these documents can be found on the temporary *Local Friends* web site:

- http://localfriends.pbworks.com/

Detail

An acceptable approach

Taken together, our documents[1] describe what is intended to be an acceptable approach to spiritual matters, so that other groups (both faith-based and secular) can understand where we are coming from; and so that we can work together in a constructive and creative way, both with people who identify with the Christian faith and also with those who do not.

Every human culture embodies some form of spirituality – because treating a person as a human being whose life and feelings matter is a step of faith, even if there no other reason. Every person lives out some form of spirituality through their morality, values and purpose (even if these things are unrecognised by the individual concerned); even a person without any recognisable morality (and such people are vanishingly rare) will live with some kind of purpose, and with values which shape and prioritise their choices.

Spirituality is expressed in terms of morality, values and purpose. We view these things as normal parts of everyday life. Spirituality is therefore important, but needs to be considered alongside all the other important aspects of life, such as: body, mind, economics, work, entertainment, play, friends, family, culture and society.

Like all the important aspects of life, spirituality affects all the other aspects. But, unlike all the other important aspects, public bodies and services do not (at present) engage directly with issues of spirituality.

We live in a culture which recognises it is important to help people maintain a healthy body and manage their finances well – we talk about these things and seek to provide helpful information about them, even though the experts disagree about some of the advice.

However, for some reason, advice and help with spiritual matters cannot be offered explicitly, but must be dressed up in some other guise to make it acceptable.[2] This can create a dangerous environment in which unhealthy forms of spirituality are able to flourish unrecognised.

As *Local Friends*, we seek to operate within a framework which says that every activity involving people is undertaken with (at the very least) an implicit spirituality, and every organisation which undertakes such activity operates with an implicit corporate spirituality, expressed in their culture – in the policies, procedures and accepted working practices.

We aim to be explicit about our spirituality and how it is expressed for a number of reasons.

- We believe this is the most honest approach.
- We also believe this is the most effective approach.
- It enables any problems or issues in this area to be recognised, addressed and resolved.

Spirituality in a social context

The aim of *Local Friends* is to provide pastoral care to people in our community: we seek to do something worthwhile, and to do it is a good way. Our values are important, and they are worked out on the basis of our understanding of people and the society in which we live.

Our words and actions can be seen as an expression of our understanding and beliefs. This section attempts to express some of the key points in our understanding of spirituality, as it relates to the work of *Local Friends*.

- Questions of morality, value and purpose are spiritual in nature and cannot be resolved by reference to objective facts or testable hypotheses. The factual, "What are the likely consequences of doing this?" can, in general, be investigated; the moral "Should I do this?" cannot be addressed in the same objective way, even when you are confident you know the likely consequences.

- All the big issues, challenges and difficulties of life have a spiritual aspect – and some of the biggest are largely spiritual in nature. Abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty are clearly moral issues, but so too are the treatments we offer to addicts (and the conditions we attach to them) and way multinational corporations are taxed.

- Every approach to helping people with the big issues they face will embody some form of spirituality – there will be some essential beliefs and assumptions, either implied or explicit. You cannot effectively seek to help people unless you believe that they matter; you will not seek to change things unless you believe that some circumstances are better than others.

- There are different forms of spirituality, and the differences between them are both genuine and significant, just as scientists have a number of competing theories to explain the 'missing matter' in the universe.[3]

- Different forms of spirituality have different consequences in the real world: Western individualism produces a different kind of society and a different set of ethics from Eastern collectivism; a society where people seek to avoid guilt will create fundamentally different systems, structures and ethics from those in a society where people seek to avoid shame. This is not to argue that one approach is right and another wrong, only that they are genuinely different.

- It is ineffective and counter-productive to address spiritual issues while denying that this is what you are doing and pretending to do something different. If we want to really help people the best way we can, one essential starting point is that we have to be honest and explicit about the spiritual assumptions we are making.[4]

- The easiest way to run a society is as a single, unified culture with a common set of beliefs and values; but the only way to achieve such a state is either to exclude everyone who does not conform, or force the deviants to conform. Such cultures are both stagnant (change is not allowed) and fragile (any widespread deviance from the accepted norm can destroy the belief that the official story is the only possibility) which is neither desireable to most

people, nor consistent with God's Kingdom as described in the New Testament.

- A multi-cultural society in which every culture (and every set of beliefs and values) is given equal weight is no society at all, but only a collection of individuals who cannot agree with each other about anything which matters.
- A healthily functioning multi-cultural society will establish some essential beliefs and values while permitting individual choice in other areas. Authentic Christian faith and practice creates a multi-cultural society in which multiple forms of spirituality not only exist but also are permitted to be expressed.[5] We are not arguing that only authentic Christian faith and practice can create such a society, but it is interesting to examine the historic record on this subject.

Notes

1 There are presently five documents: *Faith and Spirituality, The Good News, Telling the Good News, The Less Good News* and *Spirituality and Society*. They can all be found on the *Documents* page of the temporary web site: http://localfriends.pbworks.com/.

2 The most obvious way we see this is through counselling and psychotherapy: 'psuche' is the Greek word for 'soul'. Every discipline which seeks to engage with people as people (as, for example, teaching and addiction services do) must operate on the basis of an assumed spirituality if the spiritual basis has not been recognised, identified and acknowledged.

3 Some apparent spiritual disagreements can be resolved by concluding that, when understood properly, they are both true (as illustrated by the famous parable of the blind men and the elephant), just as some scientific conflicts have been resolved in the same way (it turns out that light is both a wave and a particle, but not at the same time); but it is not the case that all spiritual disagreements can be resolved in this way – just as it is not the case that all scientific disagreements can be.

4 By way of analogy, industry needs to be honest and explicit about the environmental costs of its activities; to ignore them or pretend they are unimportant generally leads in the long run to disastrous consequences.

5 This is not the case for all spiritual traditions: many adopt a totalitarian approach which permits no space for any competing form of spirituality, regarding any alternative as a falsehood which must be eliminated. Of course, the same can be be said about the spirituality of some Christian groups, but this is not the position of Jesus and the early Christians.