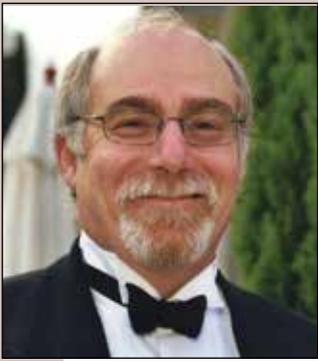


Coming home to Christ

It is easy to dismiss alternative spirituality but **Hugh Ellis** has been struck by the way that some people outside the Church can come to know Christ. It is clear, he says, that this is the work of the Holy Spirit



I am struck by the fact that Abraham knew God and walked by faith despite his being nurtured in a pagan culture. Clearly this was a key factor in St Paul's thinking when he referred to Abraham's 'seed' as those who walk by faith. Similarly, that 'great cloud of witnesses' referred to in Hebrews 11 comprise those who knew God in some way and, consequently, walked by faith; yet all of them preceded Christ and, therefore, had no clear set of Christian doctrines or creeds to which they gave assent, as we might. Surely, such faith is the result of work by God's Holy Spirit.

Over years of engaging with those of other faiths and alternative spiritualities, I have met people who seem both to know God and, through that relationship, to have learned such things as we might find in Paul's letters or in the Gospels, despite their never having read them. It appears that the Holy Spirit is at work in countless peoples' lives whatever their faith background or culture.

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A few years ago, Jed and Lily (not their real names) came to me enquiring if I would marry them at a particular church in a farmer's field. Part of the hippy culture of the 1970s, they had been living in community for a number of years and were clearly spiritual people with high ideals. Key local figures in the networks associated with the multi-faceted spirituality groups found in nearby Glastonbury, I would have called them New-Agers, although they wouldn't use that term of themselves.

The Spirit was clearly at work as we met together for marriage preparation. I think it was whilst describing Christian love in terms of the story of the prodigal son that I sensed their desire to respond in some way. I asked whether they minded if I said a confessional prayer for myself, asking to be filled afresh with the Spirit of God, and invited them to make any aspect of the prayer their own, should they wish, by joining me in the 'Amen' at the end. There was a hearty 'Amen' from both of them; Lily was tearful and Jed quietly said 'I feel like I've come home.'

During the evening of their wedding, Jed took me quietly aside into a circular thatched hut in his garden. Inside were symbols of almost every religion and spirituality one could think of. Yet in the centre of a makeshift altar at the heart of this building there stood a cross, images of Jesus and various other Christian symbols.

Again I offered to pray for them. On this special day, Jed was hungry for prayer and blessing, so I prayed that the Holy Spirit would fill them both and that they would be channels of God's love and grace. He said that the prayer had moved him and that it felt different from others he had heard before. He went on to say that if I were to hold a monthly service in that church, he and his friends would fill it!

Together we explored what such a service would look like. Jed suggested that the service should contain the teachings of Jesus, and not so much talk about God, but opportunities to encounter God. He asked, also, for permission to have readings from non-Biblical but nevertheless spiritual books, and that the congregation have the opportunity to pray their own prayers aloud. Participation was to be an essential element, and love the ethos.

Jed requested that the service not be rushed and include opportunities to ask questions or to comment on what had been said from the Gospel readings and the teachings of Jesus. Thus a regular act of Celtic style worship came into being.

Over the same period, some of those from this network of spirituality-seekers had, what I can only describe as, mystical experiences. One had a dream of a 'Being of Light' appearing in the gardens of Glastonbury Abbey. As she approached the being, it turned out to be Jesus. Another's attention had been drawn to the fact that Celtic Crosses had appeared as crop images that August. Yet another had been inspired, before the wedding, to buy a crucifix and have it especially blessed at the Chalice Well in Glastonbury with a view to giving to someone. She gave it to me after the wedding, believing the link was significant. A Druid priestess had an experience of the unconditional love of God revealed in Jesus whilst participating in an 'Upper Room Blue Bowl ritual', a silent act done in the Upper Room of the Chalice Well retreat house, Glastonbury, commemorating the foot-washing by Jesus at the Last Supper.

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As a consequence of these experiences, members of this network have had their attention drawn towards Jesus and have grown in what they would term 'Christ Consciousness'. Some of them would now call themselves 'intuitive Christians'. Some pray out loud and movingly in the Church and the Celtic service has become more of a spiritual event than a church service.

In stories such as this, it is clear the Holy Spirit has, and continues to make God known to people from countless cultures and religions, becoming their companion as the gift of faith is bestowed on those who are seeking. As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the called children of God (*Romans 8:14*). 

about the writer

The Revd Hugh Ellis is Team Rector of the High Wycombe Team Ministry which comprises six parishes and seven churches of varied traditions. His role involves much civic and community engagement including chairing a Jewish, Christian, Muslim group and being Vice Chair of the Council of Christian-Muslim Relations. Hugh was in the RAF on Nimrod Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft and then training officer cadets at Cranwell. Six years ago he regained his Private Pilots Licence. He is married to Jenny, who is also ordained, and they have two children.