



# A gathered stillness: meditation as a fresh expression of church?

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*How might we approach the mission imperative in a Central London church? For the last two years, Hinde Street has offered a midweek meditation group during the Tuesday lunch hour. It is a meeting place for people from a range of local 'communities' which are not merely geographical. This article explores the understanding of mission that underlies the group: not so much the church's mission to the locality, but God's mission both to the church and to contemporary culture. It reflects on the nature of that mission in conversation with works by Walter Brueggemann and Iain McGilchrist.*

ANONYMOUS GROUPS • BRUEGGEMANN • CHURCH • CONTEMPLATION • LEFT BRAIN • MCGILCHRIST • MEDITATION • MISSION • RIGHT BRAIN • SABBATH • SILENCE • WORK

'Be still, and know that I am God!' (Ps 46:10)

It's nearly one o'clock. I hit 'send' on the thirty-seventh email of the morning, and log out of my computer. I grab a candle, matches, clock and book, and set off down the stairs. Halfway down, I realise that I have forgotten the keys to the Quiet Room, so I go back up to my office. The phone is ringing. Sam, our receptionist, tells me that someone has called in on the off chance that I can verify their DBS application now. No, sorry, after meditation. Would they like to come back in an hour? I find the keys, and head back downstairs. I meet Bob, our caretaker, coming up to find me. Would I like to view the CCTV pictures of the guy who sleeps on the church steps being sick all over the entrance to the downstairs rooms? Yes, but not just at the moment – perhaps later this afternoon. As I struggle to unlock the door, turning two handles simultaneously while holding a candle, matches, clock and book, Laura calls down to me. The cereals donated by a local business for our Night Shelter have just been delivered by a courier. They are in her office. Rather more than we expected – 70 boxes of them. The pile is higher than her desk. What would I like her to do with them?

Inside the Quiet Room I set out chairs in a circle. I place the candle exactly in the centre of the table and light it. I adjust the overhead lighting, sit down, put the clock in front of me. I take a deep breath. Tuesday lunchtime. Meditation group. For two years this group has been a regular oasis of quiet, a miniature Sabbath at the heart of my working week. And not just for me. My colleague Sue, Superintendent of the West London Mission, shares in leading this group. A few members of the congregation come regularly. Many of the people who come to our premises to attend an Anonymous Group<sup>1</sup> also drop in to share the space. There are several who live in Marylebone, and others who work in the local area, who spend their lunch hour being quiet with us. This group is important for a range of people. During the first 15 minutes, these people arrive gradually. They take off their coats, put bags under their chairs, finish their takeaway coffees and put the cardboard cups carefully in the bin. No one invades the sacred space of the table and candle with their belongings. Some talk about their week: a difficult decision hanging over them; problems at work; problems finding work; a dispute with a neighbour; too many visitors wanting their time and attention.

Most weeks around a dozen of us gather here. Most weeks there is someone new who has seen the poster on the corner of the street and has come to find out what we do. 'Longing for an hour of peace and quiet?'; it says.

And they are.

Sue and I started the Hinde Street meditation group just over two years ago, in January 2013. The idea for the group came out of two very different trains of thought. The first was an ongoing conversation within the Hinde Street congregation about what it means to be a neighbourhood church in the heart of London's West End. There has been a church on this site for over two hundred years, but the local demographic has changed dramatically over two centuries. Marylebone in the twenty-first century is a wealthy area, characterised by chic shops and expensive flats. Few of our congregation live within walking distance of the church; most commute in from all over Greater London and beyond. Centuries of Methodist tradition give us one way of thinking about mission: as a form of outreach to the local community. But 'Who is my neighbour?' is a complex and nuanced question in this place. There are those who can afford to live in the Georgian terraces of Manchester Square and Harley Street. There are those who work in the shops and offices and international businesses located in this trendy corner of Westminster. There are the hundreds of people who day by day, week by week, come through our doors to attend one of the 69 Anonymous Groups that meet on our premises. Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous: every form of addiction experienced by fragile and needy humanity has a group offering support, encouragement and companionship in the never-ending struggle for a way out of dependency. Most come to their group and go back out into Marylebone High Street without ever realising that there is a church attached to the basement room in which they meet. And then there are the people who sleep rough in our streets. They sleep in shop doorways, tube stations and on our church steps. They have come to London to find a community among the homeless of our capital city. They are our neighbours too.

When I arrived here as a probationer minister in September 2011, I began to think about this question of neighbourhood. It seemed to me that all of these people are our neighbours, but few of them are in the area on a Sunday, when our church doors are open for worship, but the church building is closed to the Anonymous Groups. What might we offer to this disparate community? And when might we offer it?

The second train of thought which inspired the setting up of this group was silence. As a student at Wesley House in Cambridge, I spent a year on attachment with the Jesus Lane Quaker Meeting. Our weekly meeting for worship was an hour of silence. Cambridge Quakers are alarmingly articulate, so this hour was never, in my year of attending, entirely silent. But silence was

the ground out of which came spoken ministry, and the quality of that group silence was extraordinary.

Do you try to set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the divine and to find the inward source of our strength. Seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life.<sup>2</sup>

In September 2012 I attended a course at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham on silent meditation in the tradition of John Main. John Main, who died in 1982, became a Benedictine monk after many years of diplomatic service around the world. In Malaya he was introduced to Eastern meditation, and began to integrate its practice into his daily prayer. As a monk he was advised to give up meditation, but he returned to it through a rediscovery of John Cassian and the Christian monastic desert tradition. Increasingly conscious of the importance of contemplative prayer for modern Christians, he founded a small lay community dedicated to its practice in daily life.

During my days at Woodbrooke, I was introduced to the concept of meditation as one of the 12 steps to recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>3</sup> The eleventh step involves using prayer and meditation to 'improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him'. Here was a link between the given communities of the Hinde Street premises and the Christian contemplative tradition. Sue and I attended a conference exploring research about the use of mindfulness meditation in 12-step programmes, and were encouraged to set up a local meditation group.

Might silent meditation be a place where all these neighbours might meet? Quakers believe that their silence is hospitable. Trying to define what we believe in creedal statements can be divisive. Singing hymns separates those who know the tune from those who do not. Liturgies can alienate those who are not familiar with the pattern. But anyone can be silent. So Sue and I decided to start a weekly meditation group, and to invite our Sunday congregation, those who attend the 12-step groups, those who live and work in the local area, and those who are homeless. These are our neighbours. This is our community.

Over the two years that this group has met, we have found that it is equally attended by members of the first four groups: church attenders, members of the 12-step groups, people who live and work locally. None of those who are homeless have yet come to meditate with us.

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The pattern of our weekly meditation group is this: From 1pm to 1.15pm we gather. If there is someone new – and there often is – we introduce ourselves, and say something about why meditation is important to us. Sue or I explain the pattern of the hour, so newcomers know what will happen. At 1.15pm there is a short reading: something about silence, about letting go, about the importance of making space in busy lives. Sue and I usually bring the readings, but recently members of the group have begun to bring something to share. In order not to alienate those who do not come from a Christian tradition, we do not specifically choose Christian texts for the readings. But nor do we exclude the mention of Jesus, and one way or another, the reading nearly always explicitly brings God into the room. At 1.20pm we begin 25 minutes of silence. We have no particular practice of meditation in our group – some use a mantra, some concentrate on awareness of their breathing, some focus on the candle in the centre of the table, some use images from the reading which help them clear their minds. But we are all silent. There is an occasional cough, a shuffle, a rumbling stomach – there are a dozen bodies in this room after all – but the silence is gracious and hospitable. For the final quarter of an hour, we are invited to share any thoughts or insights which have occurred to us during the time of meditation. Often people share pictures which have come to them, which they don't necessarily understand – nearly always someone else offers an interpretation, a reflection, a comment which resonates with the original vision. Sometimes we simply sit in a companionable silence for the last 15 minutes. At two o'clock we head back out into our lives.

When I was completing the annual Methodist 'Statistics for Mission' in November last year, I decided to enter this weekly meditation group as a 'fresh expression of church'. The structure of the hour does indeed follow the structure of a liturgy: gathering, word, response, sending. This is a congregation with its own sense of community and caring. We remember each other's concerns and problems. We welcome familiar faces, and try to make newcomers feel at home. We get in touch with what we would name 'God' and the anonymous groups would name 'some power greater than ourselves' – something that roots us and grounds us and enables us to be present to ourselves and to others. We go out into the world changed.

Those who come regularly talk about an oasis of peace in busy lives. They talk about how this quiet space re-energises them, and about how they seem to be able to let go of problems which have been weighing them down as they sit in silence. Many of them say that when they can't make it, just knowing that we are sitting quietly at 1pm gives them a sense of tranquillity.

But there is more to it than that.

In the four years that I have been at Hinde Street, I have experienced a church that expresses its faith in two characteristic ways. It is a church that likes doing. And it is a church that likes thinking. There is nothing wrong with doing or thinking, but I suspect that there is a temptation to invest too much of our identity in these things. The meditation group reminds us that there is a shadow side to doing and thinking which needs to be recognised. If we are to be whole people, I believe we need to intentionally explore aspects of faith, and aspects of our humanity, which are predicated on not doing and not thinking.

In what way is Hinde Street a church that privileges 'doing'? Hinde Street is part of the West London Mission, a circuit which includes two Methodist churches and seven social work projects. The West London Mission was founded by the Revd Hugh Price Hughes in 1887 as part of the pioneering Forward Movement. For over a century it has engaged with the needs of people who are marginalised in London – homeless people, people with alcohol dependency, people coming out of prison.<sup>4</sup> Hinde Street church runs a Wednesday Club drop-in for homeless people each week, and is part of the Westminster Winter Night Shelter project for four months each year. Social justice is an important part of our Methodist DNA, and doing things to help people is an integral part of how we express our faith. The risk is that we slip into the trap which Paul recognised, the trap of equating faith with good works.

For Walter Brueggemann, the Exodus story is seminal in forming the identity of the people of Israel. He identifies the culture of 'Egypt' as one of endless doing. There the people are enslaved to the ethos of production. There is no rest in Egypt. No rest for the slaves, or for the supervisors, or even for Pharaoh, who is constantly monitoring production. The Egyptian gods are not gods of rest – it is their insatiable demands that legitimate the entire system. A request for three days' holiday to go and worship the Lord is interpreted as unjustifiable shirking.<sup>5</sup> To be liberated from being slaves in Egypt is to be liberated from being trapped in a culture of work. Brueggemann suggests that what God offers to the people of Israel is a covenant based on relationship, rather than a production schedule based on measurable outcomes. The relationship is with God, and with their neighbour. The fourth commandment – 'Remember the Sabbath' – famously bridges the first three commandments about our relationship with God, and the last six commandments about our relationship with our neighbour. Brueggemann suggests that observing a Sabbath in the rhythm of

our lives interrupts the relentlessness of Egypt's hold on our psyche, and reminds us of a different set of values.

I believe that the meditation group offers a Sabbath moment to those that attend it. But more fundamentally, it witnesses to the congregation of Hinde Street – and to Sue and me – that Sabbath is a divine command. To stop what we are doing, even for one hour a week, is to break the rhythm of doing, both physically and psychologically. To sit in silence and to be present to ourselves, to each other and to God, is a reminder that our identity is located not in what we do but in what we are. We are loved, we are held, and all we need to do to access that love and that holding is to sit still. 'In so doing we stand alongside the creator in whose image we are made.'<sup>6</sup>

Hinde Street is also a church of thinkers.<sup>7</sup> For me this is a positive quality. This is a church that loves thinking things through, that loves discussions, that loves exploring the Bible, politics and social issues. It is not a church that is ever satisfied with 'because the Bible says so' as a solution to a complicated debate. It is a church that loves knowing about everything. And yet I sometimes wonder whether 'knowing about' is a substitute for 'knowing'.

The left and right hemispheres of our brain have very different ways of perceiving the world. Iain McGilchrist, Consultant Psychiatrist, Clinical Director of the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospital, London, and former lecturer in English Literature at Oxford University, writes this:

The left hemisphere is always engaged in a *purpose*: it always has an end in view, and downgrades whatever has no instrumental purpose in sight. The right hemisphere, by contrast, has no designs on anything. It is vigilant for whatever *is*, without preconceptions, without a predefined purpose. The right hemisphere has a relationship of *concern* or care (what Heidegger calls *Sorge*) with whatever happens to be.

The world of the left hemisphere ... yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed, static, isolated, decontextualized, explicit, disembodied, general in nature, but ultimately lifeless. The right hemisphere, by contrast, yields a world of individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known – and to this world it exists in a relationship of care.<sup>8</sup>

McGilchrist argues that we live in a culture where the left brain predominates in an unhealthy way. The Enlightenment project has shaped us and defined us. Modernity has left its mark. And the left brain culture of now is frighteningly similar to the symptoms of schizophrenic illness. Schizophrenia is characterised by an imbalance in favour of the left hemisphere of the brain.

When we cease to act, to be involved, spontaneous and intuitive, and instead become passive, disengaged, self-conscious, and stare in an 'objective' fashion at the world around us, it becomes bizarre, alienating, frightening – and curiously similar to the mental world of the schizophrenic.<sup>9</sup>

We are trapped in a Cartesian dilemma, where only our thought-processes, only our analysis of things, only our schematisation of reality seems real. I think therefore I am.

Ian McGilchrist asks what the world would look like if the left hemisphere of the brain were to become dominant. Much as it does now, is his conclusion. A world where the focus is on technology, rational knowledge, scientific explanations for natural phenomena, being in control. 'Knowledge would seem more *real* than what one might call wisdom, which would seem too nebulous, something never to be grasped.'<sup>10</sup> As a culture, we would find it remarkably difficult to understand non-explicit meaning, and would therefore downgrade non-verbal communication.<sup>11</sup> We might value 25 minutes of silent meditation, but only for utilitarian reasons: because it makes us more effective money brokers, or improves our blood pressure, or lowers our cholesterol.<sup>12</sup>

The Hinde Street meditation group witnesses to a reality that is not dominated by our thinking, analysing, rational selves. It is by emptying the mind of thoughts – good thoughts, bad thoughts, helpful thoughts, any thoughts at all – that we come to our buried treasure, our true selves. Week by week, those at the meditation group talk about how difficult this is to do. 'Distractions' – thinking – fog the mind. Settling into meditation is like letting sediment settle in clear water, it is like allowing people to walk past a café window where you sit enjoying a quiet latte, it is like watching clouds scud past in a clear blue sky. You'll notice that what we find helpful is expressed in images, not in words. Frequently, at the end of the group, as we share our insights, we find that what we are sharing is a picture. A picture that speaks in different ways to each of the people gathered. A picture that engages us with complexity and feeling and context. A picture that lodges in the right brain.



For McGilchrist, the left brain should be in the service of the right brain, not the other way around. Our right brain, the brain that connects us with life, the brain that enables us to see things 'in the round' should use the intelligent, analytical left brain as its servant, its emissary. In our twenty-first-century culture, we have made the left brain our master. Hinde Street, and indeed the institution of the Church in the Western world, has bought into this approach. We have accepted the arrogant left brain's assumption that it knows everything there is to be known. That everything non-rational is therefore valueless.

I believe that the meditation group is indeed a fresh expression of church, a missional activity. But that mission is not just Hinde Street's mission to the local community in which the church sits as a solid, built edifice. It is, at heart, God's mission to the church, to Sue and me, to our own congregation. We need to be still and know that God is God.

And it is therefore God's mission, through Hinde Street, to the broader pathology of Western culture. It restores a bit of balance. It reminds us of the treasures of wisdom to be gained by giving the right brain room to move, to shake its wings, perhaps to fly.

## Notes

1. Hinde Street is well known in London, and indeed throughout the world, as the meeting place for 69 Anonymous Groups. These are groups of people battling with addiction to alcohol, drugs, eating disorders and other problems. The first such group was Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/> (accessed 30 March 2015).
2. 'Advices and queries' 2009, no. 3.
3. See <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA> (accessed 30 March 2015). The original 12 steps were:
  1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
  2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
  3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
  4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
  5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
  6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
  7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
  8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
  10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
  11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
  12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.
4. <http://www.wlm.org.uk/what-we-do> (accessed 27 March 2015).
  5. See Exodus 5, noting the repetition of the words 'work' and 'lazy'.
  6. Brueggemann 2014, p. 33.
  7. <http://www.hindestreet.org.uk/about.html> (accessed 27 March 2015): 'We are an inclusive church, and our theological approach is open and thoughtful. We work out the meaning of our faith using the Bible, the traditions of the church, our experience, and our reason. The Holy Spirit helps us make sense of these things for today. We value questions, and we look beyond easy answers.'
  8. McGilchrist 2009, p. 174.
  9. *ibid*, p. 393.
  10. *ibid*, p. 429.
  11. *ibid*, p. 433.
  12. *ibid*, p. 441.

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