

A New Look at the Vital Role of the Christian Meditation Group

by [Paul Harris](#)



For more than 30 years, Christian meditation groups worldwide have demonstrated that they are the primary means of sharing the teaching. Perhaps it is time now to re-evaluate, re-emphasize, and reinterpret their role. The personal observations and suggestions that follow on the current status and future of the Christian meditation group have come from my 20 years of experience in starting and leading meditation groups and from discussions with leaders in the community about ways to assist the weekly meditation groups.

John Main had a deep insight and prophetic vision that his teaching on silence and stillness in prayer would be primarily handed down in small groups. It was his hope that this teaching and practice would be shared in an organic way through support groups of men and women meeting on a weekly basis in homes, churches, schools and work places. He had a profound understanding of the ancient tradition of Christians gathering together to enter into the experience of prayer.

How many times in his talks does he indicate that it is not sufficient to listen to talks or read books on the teaching, but rather that one must enter into the experience of this way of prayer. As we so often repeat, "Christian meditation is caught, not taught". The Christian meditation group has in fact become the primary spiritual focus where-by newcomers can not only hear the teaching on a weekly basis but more importantly enter into the discipline and the experience of the practice. The group is where the teaching is "caught".

Here is a summing up of what we have learned from the lived experience of groups meeting over the past 20 years.

Meditation Groups: Communities of Faith

As Laurence Freeman has pointed out, "John Main saw this modern development of contemplation as originating in the communities of faith and the liturgy at the heart of the early church. These early Christians also gathered in small groups in one another's houses. This coming together in prayer formed the 'koinonia', or the social interaction and communion, that was the distinguishing mark and power of the early church". These small groups met to pray and offer support and encouragement to each other in their common faith.

The Historical Roots of Small Groups

There is no doubt that the teaching of spirituality is historically rooted in the tradition of the small group. The Israelites were divided up into small tribes and close family units, particularly during their sojourn in the wilderness. Jesus chose a small group of twelve to form the heart of his ministry. Throughout the last 2,000 years small groups of men and women have banded together in the monastic life to live in community and support each other on the spiritual journey. It seems only natural that people who are praying contemplatively in the 21st century should also come together in groups to support each other on their common pilgrimage. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the most successful "small group" organization in the world, has demonstrated that all that is needed is to have a teaching and small weekly group meetings to effect change and transform lives.

Small Groups are To-day Redefining Spirituality

A recent book *Sharing The Journey* by Robert Wuthnow documents the growing popularity and influence of small groups in creating community and teaching spirituality. Wuthnow maintains that small groups are redefining spirituality and that religion is once again becoming alive in the humble homes of those on the spiritual path. The author also confirms through research that small groups have emerged in response to the impersonalization of society and the weakening of family and community ties.

What has experience taught us over the years since John Main started the first Christian meditation group at Ealing Abbey in London in 1975? Here is what we have learned about the role and influence of the weekly meditation group.

Why Meditators Meet in Groups

* The heart of the meditation group is the sharing of silence together. This is the primary reason why, spontaneously, people around the world are starting small groups to meditate weekly together. The power and strength of meditation together comes from the words of Jesus, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:2).

This is the foremost reason for getting together once a week. It is as if meditators instinctively realize that this is a journey that is difficult to make alone; it is a journey that is so much easier if we make it with others. It is true that no one else can meditate for us, that we meditate by ourselves each day, but at the same time, we realize that we need the support of others if we are to persevere on this journey.

The Development of a Spiritual Bond among Members of the Group

* Meeting in a group promotes a spiritual bond amongst the members and a mutual concern between those who have set out on a common pilgrimage. The meditation group is really a community of faith, much as the early Christians experienced community in St. Paul's time.

The group setting enables beginners to learn how to meditate. Newcomers can be integrated into a group at any point in time. Experience has shown that when a group starts in a new geographic area, people who have never meditated before will join the group. New groups introduce new meditators to the teaching.

Small Groups Give Support and Encouragement on the Spiritual Path

* The weekly group meeting provides support and encouragement to those who might be discouraged or experiencing difficulties "on the path". All of us need, from time to time, the encouragement of seeing others who are faithful and committed to the discipline.

* We also need to absorb the teaching more deeply and we do so at the weekly meeting with the playing of a taped talk by John Main on some aspect of Christian meditation. There are now over 200 talks by Father John and additional talks by Laurence Freeman available [from www.MewdioMedia.org] on various aspects of meditation. These talks provide instruction, deepen our motivation, and help us to persevere on the path. They give us a spiritual boost each week: part of the food we need for the journey.

* The question / answer period at the end of the meeting often helps immeasurably in clarifying situations, not only for the questioner who is often a newcomer but also for other

members of the group. Discussion allows members to express their doubts, fears and misunderstandings of the teaching.

What Are the Other Additional Advantages of Small Groups?

* Small Christian meditation groups have a great advantage in adapting to their environment. They require virtually no resources, other than the time their members devote to the group each week.

* The small group provides a sense of community for people who feel the loss and breakdown of neighbourhoods and personal family ties. The need for encouragement, support and sharing are additional reasons for joining a group.

* We all need the affirmation of others and thus our faith can be strengthened through the bonds of love, caring and fellowship that develop in the small group. Basic spiritual and human values are shared in a group setting and subsequent friendships develop.

We are not, contrary to public perception, a society of rugged individualists, who wish to go it entirely alone, but rather we are a communal people, capable of banding together in bonds of mutual support. "Meditation creates community," as John Main so aptly put it.

The prayer that leads from the head to the heart, from fragmentation to unity, from isolation to caring, grows in the fertile ground of the weekly meditation group meeting. This is the spiritual revolution taking place all around the world today. It was John Main's great vision that the teaching would grow and expand and be shared in weekly groups. Let us, each in our own way, get on with the challenge John Main has left us!

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