

World Council of Churches Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace

Reflection

Transformative Spirituality: a spirituality of encounter

by Kristine Greenaway

I discovered the term «spiritual transformation» in the new mission statement of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. «Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes» is a statement calling churches to a new understanding of our role in God's mission in the 21st century. It says that God's mission for the church today is not to focus on individual salvation but rather to transform the world so that all peoples might live in just and peaceful relationship.

Unlike more traditional approaches to spirituality that are developed and nourished in solitude during intentional spiritual retreats or by communing with nature, transformational spirituality is born through contact between strangers, in encounters with people who are profoundly different from us. During these encounters, which can be disconcerting, disorienting and destabilizing, we are broken open and experience transformation, a transformation of our long-held beliefs, a transformation that shakes the foundation of our being and of our beliefs.

This transformative spirituality born from encounters is spirituality for today in the globalizing world where each day we meet people who are different from us. It is spirituality for modern pilgrims, for an era where everything is being questioned and where we are all on a journey towards the unknown. We are seeking renewal in a new place.

Many in the churches of the global north today are only too aware of the need to follow Jesus' advice and fish on the other side of the boat. Visions of our church's future fill us with fear and pessimism. We see ourselves surrounded by a desert of dry bones (Ezekiel 37: 1-14). We sense we must seek new paths or risk becoming a heap of dry bones ourselves. We hear Jesus' call to go to unfamiliar places and to meet with strangers. We know what it feels like to leave familiar places and take a path toward a future that is hazy and uncertain.

We have to leave this desolate landscape and seek new life and new resources. Yet we fear the unknown. We are afraid that in these encounters with strangers we will lose our uniqueness. And yet God tells us the opposite is true (Ezekiel 37: 14).

The theme of pilgrimage and encounters is central to the biblical narrative. God has often called God's people to leave for the unknown. The faithful leave their neighbours and loved ones and go out to meet strangers and encounter new cultures. Along the way, these encounters transform their faith and they become agents of transformation themselves. But how can we believe in this transformative, life-giving potential of encounter with the stranger? Is Ezekiel talking to us? Where can we find hope that what he says is true for us?

It is perhaps in a Genesis text where we can find this hope. Through the story of Abram and Sarah, who are called to leave their home and seek new neighbours in new places, we are told that it is in the moment that we obey God's call to leave the familiar that we find new life. It is as pilgrims that we go out to find the future, and it is in new places that we find new life and growth. (Genesis 12:4).

In our times, as in the times of Abram and Sarah, agents of transformation come to find us from the four directions of the earth. And so we can be engaged in transformative encounters without having to board a plane or lace on our shoes and walk the route to San-Juan-de-Compostela. In many of our parishes, if we simply open the doors to those on our doorsteps, we meet people who are not « like us ». And what might that mean?

Here is the key. In order to engage in transformative spirituality, we have to dare to open up, to take risks, to listen to people we don't want to hear. It's anything but easy. God calls us to make a choice: meet others and take the risk of having our spiritual beliefs broken open and transformed; or keep our balance and preserve our traditions by protecting ourselves from what disturbs and destabilizes us. The first way can lead to renewal, the second can leave alone and parched in a desert.

The mission statement of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches is asking me to believe that God is calling me to develop a practice of spiritual transformation in my own life and parish in order to transform the world. I hear the wisdom. I'm not sure I'm ready for the call. Are you? May God grant us wisdom and courage to be open to the life transforming experiences God puts before us.

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