



The Kendal Project
Patterns of the sacred in contemporary society

www.kendalproject.org.uk

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Welcome to the second Kendal Project newsletter. In the last newsletter we reported the findings of our survey of church attendance in Kendal where we counted the numbers of people attending each of Kendal's churches on one Sunday last November. In this newsletter we'd like to report some of the findings of our survey of alternative spiritual groups and practitioners.

In Kendal, or within 5 miles of Kendal, there are some 62 groups who consider their activities to have a spiritual dimension. These include 23 yoga groups; 7 Tai Chi groups; 7 dancing, singing, drumming or arts and crafts groups; 5 healing groups; 4 groups with an earth based spirituality; 4 syncretic or interfaith groups; 4 therapy or self-discovery groups; 4 women's groups; 3 Buddhist groups; and several other specialised groups such as Bahai and Sai Baba groups. Spiritual teachings and practices are the main purpose of some of these groups. In others the spirituality is enmeshed within health, fitness or artistic activities. But in all the groups listed here, a language of spiritual growth was explicitly used within the group itself, or the leaders or facilitators of the group said they considered spirituality to be an important aspect of their group's purpose.

We discovered and interviewed approaching 90 practitioners of

complementary therapies who actually practice in or within 5 miles of Kendal. Of these, 63 considered their practice to have a spiritual dimension. We have yet to questionnaire their clients, but it seems that some explicitly see such therapies as related to their spiritual growth, while others go more for relaxation, stress or pain relief. Several practitioners said that although they saw their practice as having a spiritual dimension, they would never push this upon a client. They would only mention, say, that they thought there might be a spiritual dimension to a physical ailment, if they felt that the particular client was open to that.

Overall we have calculated that, on an average week between October 2000 and June 2001, about 450 individuals attended groups with an alternative spiritual dimension, and about 280 saw spiritual practitioners. The extent to which this 280 see those visits as spiritual is yet to be determined. But with that proviso, we can say at this stage that in any one week some 730 individuals are involved in non-Christian activities with a spiritual dimension. That compares to an overall church attendance of 2175. And while we restricted the church attendance count to Kendal itself, the survey of alternatives included an area within 5 miles of Kendal. This is because 2 of the major centres serving Kendal with alternative spirituality - Rainbow Cottage and Loop

Cottage - are outside Kendal itself. With the difference in population taken into consideration, a weekly 7.9% of the population attending church can be compared with a weekly 2% attending alternative spiritual groups or practitioners. However, it is worth noting here that unlike church attendance, attending alternative spiritual groups and seeing complementary therapists do not necessarily work on a weekly cycle. In order to get this weekly figure for alternative spiritualities we had to factor down the overall numbers involved. With this in mind, we clearly cannot say that 4 times as many people are practicing Christianity as are practicing some kind of alternative spirituality.

We have space here to pull out 2 other themes that have emerged from looking at the overall picture of alternative spiritual groups and practitioners. One is the preponderance of what we might call 'bodywork'. Many groups and therapists use work on the body as a way into spirituality. 'Chi' or 'energy', which is thought to run around channels in the body, is seen as something that somehow links mind, spirit and the body. Massage, pressure point techniques, exercises and movements are seen as a way of stimulating the flow of this energy around the body, and this in turn is seen as enhancing spiritual wellbeing. This is part of a 'holistic' paradigm where mind, body and spirit are seen as fundamentally one. Of course, many of you are already completely au fait with this!

The second observation concerns the gender and age profiles of those involved in these alternative spiritualities. Over 80% of those

attending alternative spiritual groups and over 85% of spiritual complementary practitioners are women. And the majority of participants are aged between 40 and 65, suggesting that it is those who entered adulthood in the 1960s and 70s that are active in alternative spirituality.

Over the past few months we have also begun our work with case studies, which we hope will give us a more in-depth understanding of the field. Karin has been working with Parr Street Evangelical Church, New Life Community Church, Holy Trinity Parish Church, and the Unitarian Chapel, while Ben has been focusing upon 2 Yoga groups, an Infinite Tai Chi group, and practitioners and clients working from the alternative health centre, Rainbow Cottage in Endmoor.

Another of the tasks that Ben is presently undertaking is to hear people's stories about the development of alternative spirituality in Kendal. If you can remember groups, therapies or events from the 1980s or before, or if you have an idea of what developed when in Kendal, then he'd love to hear from you!

Many thanks to all of you for your continuing support in helping us carry out this research.

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