

## **SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE**

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*As the theological colleges go, so go the churches. If the theological colleges veer to the left with many doubts about the authority of Scripture, the churches in time will be so affected. If the theological colleges major on academic preparation and fail to train the students in godliness, the churches in time will be so affected.*

*Hence the spiritual formation of students in our theological and pastoral training institutions has generated much concern in recent years. What can we do? What should we do? How can we do it? In the last issue of AJET we published a substantive article on a survey of literature on the subject. In this issue we publish a paper originally presented at a plenary session of an ACTEA regional consultation for theological educators held in Jos, Nigeria. Alan Chilver has served for more than thirty-five years in theological education in Nigeria, including various posts at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), and is well qualified to reflect on this issue.*

Many of us involved in theological education are rightly concerned that the spiritual growth of our students should match their academic development while under the formative influence of our institution. But how can a theological college assist in the spiritual formation of its students?

The ICETE Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education urges:

Our programmes of theological education must combine spiritual and practical with academic objectives in one holistic integrated educational approach . . . . We so often . . . hope for student growth . . . but leave it largely to chance. . . . Our educational programmes must deliberately foster the spiritual formation of the student (Article 7).

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And the ACTEA Standards for post secondary theological education in Africa state:

The institution's programme should evidence a holistic approach combining both curricular and extracurricular activities in an educational plan which embraces objectives concerned for spiritual and vocational as well as academic development. Thus worship, community life, work, sports, social activities, practical Christian service, and so forth should be intentionally and manifestly shaped to participate in the educational objectives of the institution (Standards, 4a).

Faced with such expectations, many of us are tempted to switch off. We either say to ourselves that this is not really possible in our situation; or else we say that indeed this is what we would like but that we will simply have to leave it to others. Or perhaps, more subtly, we are tempted to excuse ourselves from such effort by attributing this aspect of training to the work of the Holy Spirit!

Is it possible to achieve these standards? Paul saw it as his task "to present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). Is it practicable to attempt to present every student mature in Christ through the training received in our theological colleges?

The subject of spiritual formation inevitably brings us deeply into differences. There may well be differences as to what we mean by 'spirituality'. Certainly there are differences in our understanding of the way spiritual formation actually takes place. And these differences can frequently have denominational or national or ethnic roots. For example Lutheran piety is different from Baptist piety, Brethren piety is different from Reformed piety, and these are different again from Pentecostal piety or Catholic piety. Or we may speak of national differences: German piety is different from Italian piety, as Nigerian piety is different from Danish piety, which is different again from Dutch piety, American piety or even British piety. And ethnically, of course, Western piety is different from African piety. It is very important to notice this fact of variety, to recognise it, and to take full account of it.

In our experience at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), we have been very exposed to such differences, for all of the denominations mentioned above are represented except the Catholic; and we have had all of these and more nationalities present on the staff at one time or another, except the Italian.

For example, there is one group at the college who feels that communion is incomplete without foot-washing. I wonder how many of us have

experienced foot-washing, a very moving service, and something I had never experienced before coming to Nigeria. Or again, personally, I well remember how I was put on the spot when I went to lunch at the home of a fellow missionary who came from a different tradition. In the middle of the day, while sitting at the table, they had a family reading before the meal, and then I was asked to pray. I assumed I was being asked to say grace, so I said grace. And the youngest of the children piped up, "My, that was short!"

I wonder whether one of the reasons we are having such a struggle at TCNN in addressing the challenge of spiritual formation is because, by virtue of the nature of our situation, we cannot channel our efforts into only one particular approach. And does this perhaps also lie behind some of the struggle we face in all our colleges, the fact that by its very nature spirituality is personal, individual, and gloriously varied, and cannot be forced into any one form or pattern?

## SPIRITUALITY

What is spirituality? What is the purpose of spiritual formation? What are we aiming at? What is the end result that we are seeking? And what, in fact, is the purpose of all our theological training?

In response to these questions, Colossians 1:28 is particularly relevant: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ". In Colossians 1:22 Paul has already spelled this out in a little more detail. He says: "God has reconciled you . . . to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable before Him". And in Colossians 2:10 Paul speaks of the Colossian Christians as coming to "fullness of life" in Christ. Again in Galatians 4:19 Paul speaks of a similar objective for his work in these terms: "My little children with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." In Ephesians 3:17 he expresses the prayer "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." And in Ephesians 4:13 Paul speaks of the reason the gifts of the Spirit have been given: "until we all obtain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature adulthood," which he then explains as being "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". Or again in Philippians 1:10\_11 Paul prays that the Philippians "may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ."

What does all this mean in terms of spiritual formation? What is spirituality? What is this maturity of which Paul speaks? I have found much

stimulating reflection on these and related questions in a collection of essays edited by Jill Robson and David Lonsdale and titled: *Can Spirituality be Taught?* Let me quote selectively from the opening essay in this collection.

"What is taught as spirituality . . . will of course deal with prayer and meditation. But how and why it deals with them is important . . . .

The function of a re-discovered spiritual theology will be to understand, interpret, guide, and facilitate the experience Christians have of God . . . .

It focuses upon the communion we have with God in Christ and the ways in which that communion is initiated, maintained, and improved. It has to do with what used to be called "interior life", but . . . as Jesus was truly incarnate, both divine and human, so also Christian spirituality must have an incarnational flavour, with moral, social, corporate, and private elements . . . .

The word spirituality is used to indicate the recognition that the way we are with ourselves, and the way we are with other people, depends upon the way we are with God" (pp.3-6). "The heart of Christian spirituality is to do with a living, growing relationship between ourselves and God" (p.108).

### **CAN SPIRITUALITY BE TAUGHT?**

Now if all this is true, then it raises the question whether 'spirituality' can be taught. Is it not too inward, too private, too individual a matter to be taught? This is so crucial an issue that in fact it is the title of the collection of essays just mentioned. Each essay approaches that question from a different perspective. I want now to rephrase the question slightly, "Is spirituality taught or is it caught?" How is it acquired? How is it gained? Certainly many of us in theological education act as though we feel it is caught. If only 'spirituality', a changed character, would simply brush off on our students! But will it? Certainly our experience at our theological college demonstrates quite clearly that it does not inevitably happen, and that only very rarely does it just simply happen.

So can it be taught? Well certainly Paul thought it could. From the passages just quoted from Colossians (1:28, 29; 2:1) he certainly assumes that yes, it can be taught. Paul's stated objective is to present each person mature in Christ. He does this by proclaiming Christ, and by warning and teaching everyone. And he says this is hard work: "I toil, struggling . . . . I want you to know how greatly I strive for you."

In Paul's ministry it seems that the proclaiming of the Gospel is explained and developed by warning and teaching. We should note exactly the

same phrase, translated slightly differently, in Colossians 3:16, where Paul speaks of the community as "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom". It is not just to be a one-man show; it is to be a community effort directed towards Paul's great objective to present everyone mature in Christ, to bring into God's presence each individual as a mature Christian incorporated fully in Christ, and to display that person as clearly mature. The goal then is to present to the 'audience', in this case *mirabile dictu*, to God, every person as mature in Christ.

A look at the context, Colossians 1:21-22, shows that Paul is saying that the intention of God's work of reconciliation is to present Paul's readers holy, blameless, irreproachable before Him. That is the ultimate objective of God's work of reconciliation. But now in Colossians 1:28, it is further explained that God gets this intention of His brought about by Paul as His agent. The divine and the human are intended to work together. So spiritual formation is not something to be just left to God, for Him to get on with, to present every person mature in Christ. We as theological educators do have a responsibility in spiritual formation, just as Paul did.

### 'MATURITY'

And what does 'mature' mean? (i) First, it means 'perfect', 'complete'. It is used as a parallel word to mean 'filled', 'fulfilled', 'filled full'. In Colossians, Paul is very careful to make it clear that his idea of 'perfect' has nothing to do with the Gnostic ideas of being perfect, of being filled with a special supernatural wisdom or a particular divine power or ability. 'Mature' means full-grown, a man not a boy, fully educated rather than a learner, someone now equipped and trained to do the job. It means someone who in the 'completeness' of himself is not an unworthy offering to bring to God.

And yet we must notice that Paul does talk of this perfection in terms of being 'filled'. In Colossians 4:12 he says that Epaphras is someone who "is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." When Paul talks about being filled, it is not being filled with some strange esoteric supernatural wisdom; rather it is being filled with everything that is God's will. This is very close to the moral and ethical tone of the Old Testament phrase, "walking perfectly in the ways of God". Paul's understanding of perfection is wholly directed towards obedient fulfilment of God's will. That is what it means to be mature. 'Perfection' is directly related to the will of God, not to some special wisdom or to some special power. So in Paul's thinking the act of presenting people as 'mature' is not just something for the *eschaton*, something at the end. It is something that happens in daily life.

(ii) Secondly, if we go back to Colossians 1:22, we find some of the parts which make up this maturity: 'holy', 'blameless', and 'irreproachable'. What does 'holy' mean? Basically it means different, separate, set apart. The temple was 'holy' or different, not because it was not made out of bricks and mortar like all other houses, but because it was set apart, it was for a different use. The Sabbath was 'holy', not because it did not have 24 hours in it; it was different because it was set aside for a different purpose. And God Himself is called 'holy' because He is totally other, so different. A mature Christian is first and foremost someone who is different; not different by withdrawal from the world, but different by and in his involvement in the world. The New Testament does not know of saints 'in the desert'; it does not have saints in the monastery; but it knows of saints in Colossae, saints in Rome, saints in Philippi. Are our students trained for this?

And 'blameless'. A mature Christian is to be without blemish, which means a life of radiant purity, loveliness, such that it can, like the Old Testament unblemished sacrifices, be taken as an appropriate offering to God. It is something good enough for God. That is what the mature Christian is, a blameless Christian; his or her life is offered to God as a sacrifice, offered to God as a gift, and it is acceptable. The truly mature Christian's life can be taken and offered to God; the whole life, not just the Sunday parts of it. Can this be said to be true of our students?

Then 'irreproachable'. Christian maturity also involves unimpeachable innocence. The mature Christian life is so good and so pure that no one can level any charge against it. He or she is an unimpeachable advertisement for the Christian faith. Do our students measure up to this?

This then is the goal toward which we are aiming in spiritual formation, as we seek to present every student mature in Christ.

And even more troublesome, even more demanding, even more challenging, is that our task is to train our students so that they themselves in turn will be able to present every man and woman in their congregation mature in Christ in this way. The tragedy all too often is that those in training to minister to others legitimately complain that they themselves have not received a prudent and loving quality of pastoral care while in training.

## **MEANS TOWARDS SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Paul speaks in Colossians 1:28 in both negative and positive terms. First, he speaks of 'warning', setting right, correcting, admonishing the believers. Paul did not shrink, as I find myself often wanting to, from the very uncongenial

work of rebuking. Do we rebuke where it is necessary, or do we shy away from it? Or do we, God forbid, sometimes even enjoy it, waiting until there is a clear error, a clear wrong, and then enjoy being right, and our student being wrong? It is so much easier when the issue is clear cut! Or are we prepared to discuss and talk over, to counsel with our students, being open and being vulnerable, and learning together? In fact, a true warning is always positive in intention, and if it is effective it is certainly positive in result.

And then secondly, Paul speaks of 'teaching' every man, positively. Now we are on home territory! That is what theological education is all about; that is what we are all involved in!. But again we have to ask ourselves whether our lecturing, our classroom teaching, first and foremost leads our students to maturity, to spiritual maturity? Is that both our objective, and what we achieve? Or are our energies largely aimed at putting facts into the minds of our students? Can spirituality be taught? Yes! That's what theology is all about.

As we see and recognise the goal and begin to touch on the means, it becomes clear that in Paul's thinking and in practice this spiritual formation must be a life-long process, the process of sanctification. Now of course we have students within the orbit of our influence for only two, three, perhaps four or at the most five years. So there is a sense that in no way can we present them fully mature in that limited time. And so let us realise that the full burden is not entirely on us.

So can spirituality be taught by us in a theological college? Well, we do have them for those two, three, four or even five years. And so, surely, we can make a start. Surely we must take them forward from where they are, rather than allow them to stagnate and to decline. I suggest we can teach spirituality, and that we must. I suggest that it is at the peril of our own Christian integrity, and of our own Christian responsibility as theological educators, as well as to the detriment of Christ's church, if we fail to do all that we can in guiding and facilitating our students in their spiritual formation, helping them, enabling them, and providing them with the relevant tools.

## **FACTORS IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

But the big question surely is how to do it? That is the toughest question. If there is a grain of truth in the quip "education is what you remember after you've forgotten all you were ever taught", then in our context of theological education may not spiritual formation similarly be thought of as that which our students do with their privacy, once we and our demands as teachers on their time and attention have receded from the foreground? What do they do with their spare time, in college, out of college?

How can we set about dealing with their growth in grace? Our concern is growth in faith, growth in love, growth in character and life, growth in prayer, growth in worship, in spiritual as opposed to merely cerebral understanding. If we recognise that the quality of the service a person gives to Christ, is determined by the nature of the life he lives, if we remember that what is central in the kingdom of God is not what a person does but what he is, then I suggest we need to give more attention to this aspect of our training, but at the same time to get firmly fixed in our minds that teaching about spirituality alone is not guaranteed to produce it. It is going to take more than teaching about spirituality.

And it is right here that we need to be especially on our guard against the dangers of manipulation. We are there to train, to teach, to guide, to facilitate spiritual formation, to facilitate spiritual growth and development. But ultimately that will mean to facilitate our students to be themselves, to be their sanctified selves before God, not (thank God) to be copies of us. And this means of course that there will be variation, there will be no stereotypes, there will not even be a hard and fast official line in many areas of spiritual growth within the college. So when we are talking about how to do it, we need to bear in mind that there are different types of spirituality and that there will be variety. Such variety must both be allowed, and I would even dare to say encouraged. Encourage your students to express their spirituality in the way that best suits them.

### **ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Let us summarise what we have seen regarding the "how to" of spiritual formation. There are at least three different dimensions. (i) First there is teaching, whether explicitly on prayer and personal commitment, or on ethics and counselling, or implicitly during study whether of the Bible or doctrine or any of the formal subjects within the curriculum. Our teaching in class needs to be made relevant, and needs to be shown that it is relevant, to issues of personal and community spirituality. What do students learn spiritually from what we teach? And from how we teach?

(ii) Secondly, there is the less formal, but equally formative impact that is implied in the training situation we provide, through the actual practice of prayer in our college, through the practice of worship, whether in community or in groups, through the example and role modelling of both staff and other students, and through the structures of our whole college life. How do we administer discipline, for example? What do students learn from the way our institution is? What do they learn from the underlying assumptions that are made, from the



customs that the institution has in practice, from the whole prevailing ethos during the period of their training?

Both of these aspects of spiritual formation depend heavily on the commitment of the staff and of the governing bodies, the administration and the organisation of our various institutions. Spiritual formation depends far more on these intangible factors than we are usually prepared to recognise, and often also depends more on these factors than on that which is studied, stated, and overtly communicated.

(iii) And the third aspect of spiritual formation is that fundamental outlook, that attitude of commitment, that 'way of being' which trainees have while they are at college and which they take away with them; that quality of faith and prayer, of commitment, of receptivity, and the capacity to develop relationships. And much of this does in fact depend on what they "catch" from us, their trainers.

### **MODELS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

As we continue to look at the "how to", we need to remember that there are going to be different models, different patterns, different ways of thinking about spiritual formation, even within the members of our staff and our governing body.

Spiritual formation can be regarded simply as a specialist branch of theology, one more subject in the theological curriculum. Of course it is very important to scrutinise and to analyse the theological assumptions that underlie various schools of spirituality. So, an objective academic study of spirituality is important. But of course we also have to remember that being an informed expert does not imply that the expert is a practitioner of that expertise.

Spiritual formation can also be seen as introducing students to a set of principles. But that rather implies that what spirituality is is already known, what holiness is, what righteousness is. Or at least it assumes that they can be defined. This approach also assumes that there is a definite set of rules, a set of principles that apply, and that certain things ought to be done and ought not to be done in a certain way. That can be a very limiting approach.

At the other end of the scale, spiritual formation can be looked upon as giving people a chance to fall in love. This way of looking at it is very unstructured, much less organised and patterned, more individualistic maybe. The strength of such a model is that it is very heart-warming; it allows room for a full-hearted development and an enthusiastic life. The weakness is that it may

ignore the discipline needed for the hard realities of a continuing relationship which is growing into maturity with Christ. Surely most of us are aware of the problems that have come into western society with its concern for romantic love and cosy marriage, without giving any help for the everyday realities of living together. So we have to be careful there as well.

Spiritual formation in the theological college can also be seen as offering role models, exhibiting a different lifestyle, the lifestyle of the holy person, setting up such a life before students as a good example. A weakness of this approach is that attention may centre on the externals of the person that is being copied, the peculiarities of his dress or his habits may become thought of as the essence of spirituality. The strength of this approach is that it demonstrates that there are different ways of being holy. Spirituality is not sticking to one particular practice. And this approach makes it possible for individuals to embody their own spirituality, to work it out in their own way.

Or again, spiritual formation has also been seen in terms of passing on various skills in order to fulfil a specific function, i.e. a part of the training to become ordained. Passing on such skills can be a very useful part of training a person in spirituality, but it depends on how it is done. The weakness is that the emphasis can be on the outward activity, the outward singing of the liturgy, the outward ability to lead in prayer or worship; on the assumption of a certain technique rather than the inner attitude which should naturally issue in appropriate ways of doing things. We all know of the 'perfect' or 'special' voice that is produced when someone is leading in prayer. The strength of teaching specific skills is that, as human beings, we often really only learn the inner meaning of an activity by learning how to do it. Few people would really learn to enjoy tennis by sitting in an armchair. And I suggest few people will really enter into praying, or preaching, without practising it. So there is room for passing on these skills.

Perhaps one of the most important patterns for training in spiritual formation is that of engaging in action-reflection in this field. As students are stimulated to reflect theologically on what they are doing, opportunity is given to adjust praxis in the light of that reflection. In experience, the weakness of this is that it is often thin in the area of genuine systematic analysis of the issues. Its strength is that it can help to affirm all of life as 'spiritual', not just special parts or times; and thus the whole of life can be seen as a vehicle for God's action.

So there are many different ways of regarding the task of spiritual formation, and hence there are many different ways of doing it, as well as different tools for accomplishing it.

## TOOLS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

I have already indicated some of the tools we may use in seeking to ensure that the spiritual development of students in theological college is commensurate with their academic growth. Let me now draw attention to other possible helps from various sources, including especially the experience of some of the contributors to the volume of essays already recommended.

(i) The ACTEA Standards for post-secondary level accreditation state: "The institution must have an organised arrangement whereby all students are regularly in contact with designated staff for personal counselling and encouragement" (5b). That seems to me to be an absolute minimum.

(ii) One of the persons contributing to the essays in *Can Spirituality Be Taught?* tells of a rather shattering experience shortly after joining the staff at a theological college.

Two years after I joined the staff of the theological college, an ordinand dropped one of those chance remarks that effectively hit home like a sledge hammer. He said, "You [meaning the tutors] presuppose that we pray, but you never teach us how."

The writer goes on to say:

I shared this with my colleagues, who responded by asking me to experiment with a teaching syllabus in Christian spirituality . . . . The first thing I asked for (and it took some time to get) was that once a week we should have a college rule of quiet between 8:30am and 11:00am. One hour was for a lecture, the other hour was for use in whatever ways students found conducive to quiet, reading and prayer. Over the next few years we gradually constructed a spirituality syllabus in which a number of tutors took part. Each term, over two years, a different unit of ten lectures was offered, and these included:

Year 1 - Foundations of Christian spirituality (looking at the different parts of prayer). Individual and corporate aspects of prayer (including liturgy and also including aspects such as the family and prayer). Finding and using a rule of life.

Year 2 - Biblical patterns of spirituality (based on Biblical characters). Spirituality in the history and traditions of the Christian church. Spirituality and ministry.

Generally, student feedback was very encouraging, as was attendance. We seemed to be scratching where they itched. When asked in their first term, it came to light that only a handful had ever been on the receiving end of any consistent teaching on prayer in their churches, most using models or patterns which they had picked up in a rather random variety of ways. They were often left feeling inexperienced, lacking in guidance, support and direction. They also lacked confidence as to how they might teach other people to pray" (pp. 108-109).

In retrospect the writer felt the need to ask whether the approach to the teaching of prayer and spirituality had been too cerebral, and whether it had adequately allowed for difference in personality types. She then goes on to suggest various less 'obvious', less usual approaches to teaching prayer and spirituality:

(iii) Listening to God in and through our life experience--as a group recollecting and sharing what God has done in and for the members; privately recalling first in general, and then in particular, and deliberately re-living and enjoying a specific occasion which the member is prepared to share; trying to describe it, or draw it, or find a verse or write a song to put with it, and looking at what has happened since. In so doing we are in prayer to God, and our spiritual perceptions are heightened. A further stage is actually to share it with another, and to learn from that other's comments.

(iv) A Prayer Walk - deliberately slowing down the pace of life, going for a walk and asking God to speak to us about specific questions and concerns; and, maintaining an awareness of the outside world, asking whether God is saying something through it.

(v) Praying the Scriptures -

(a) Imagining oneself into the biblical situation meditatively for 10 to 15 minutes; then sharing what members want to in groups of 3 for several minutes.

(b) Introducing visual objects to focus attention on, or related to the passage, and so encourage imaginative meditation; then again sharing in small groups.

(c) Alone, or in groups, listening to the radio or in front of the TV, praying silently for national or international affairs with a particular verse, like John 3:16 in mind.

(vi) Enacted Experiences such as Foot-washing, or participating in a dramatisation of the Way of the Cross, or a Passover Meal.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It will have become apparent that, by virtue of the very nature of the topic, I have felt reluctant to spell out much detail on the actual "how to". My concern has been to raise questions, to stimulate thought and concern for discussion--and hopefully also for action; to give pointers rather than to attempt to give solutions

I have wanted to suggest that we need to reflect more deeply on the purpose of our theological colleges, and therefore to work out in practical ways how to meet the needs for spiritual formation in each of our own situations. "Christian spirituality, spiritual formation as a subject for study within Christian training institutions ought to have the aim of assisting people in spiritual guidance by assisting them to understand ... the unity, variety, and possibilities of the Christian tradition of spirituality" (p.8).

My own experience on a number of Visitation Teams for ACTEA accreditation shows that spiritual formation is an all too frequently neglected area. This is an aspect of training which is equally demanding of attention in theological extension programmes, since in them there are certain in-built, additional difficulties in the pastoral care and spiritual formation of students, primarily engendered by sheer distance. However, the fact that students studying through distance-learning are usually integrated into their own Christian community provides a golden opportunity for closer observation and training in spiritual formation, if such opportunities are grasped.

A great deal more thinking by our college staffs, and by our college governing bodies too, needs to be done in this area. In this aspect of training, supremely so, theory and practice must be held in careful balance. In Africa this is essentially an 'African' task, for African spirituality must develop its own forms in its own way. And the "pursuit of excellence", so prominently written into the ICETE Manifesto, must be allowed to reach into this area too. Our prayer is that God will direct and guide us in our theological colleges to lead our students into a spiritual formation that will be to the glory of His Name.

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<sup>1</sup> Robson, Jill, and David Lonsdale, *Can Spirituality Be Taught?* London: Association of Centres of Adult Theological Education, and the British Council of Churches, [1987]. This publication provides especially valuable reflection on some of the issues concerned with how one goes about the task of spiritual formation. It is available either from: Way Publications, 114 Mount Street, London W1Y 6AN, UK; or from: British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London SW1 9BL, UK. The cost of original publication was £3.25, plus postage and handling.