

How Do We Stir Curiosity?

In the previous articles, we highlighted the need for a new starting point for gospel interactions that takes into account the relevancy barrier. We also emphasised that any new starting point must answer the questions people today are asking and embrace the reality that people decide what is true by experience rather than engaging with logical proofs. We then presented the idea that the key to unlocking curiosity is by stirring up spiritual longings that are hidden within each human.

“Faith doesn’t feature in most young people’s lives. But a working theory for us is that it’s not dead, it’s just buried...under a really thick layer of cultural dust.”

-Chris Curtis, CEO, Youthscape

I once had an amazing professor who often referred to the maxim, ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.’ ‘That *is* true, she would say, but... you *can* feed him salt!’ You can probably gather she was not trying to help cowboys solve horse rehydration issues. Rather, she was instructing her future Bible teachers that we must give a class a *reason* to listen instead of expecting students to show up in a room eager to learn. I’ve often thought about this same principle

when it comes to sharing the gospel message. It seems most people today are not interested in talking about God or about faith. Is it possible to help people *gain* interest?

How can we stimulate a spiritual thirst?

Dig for the Soul

Over the past twenty years of working with youth in a post-Christian context, we have found that one of the most effective starting points to overcome this ‘relevancy barrier’ to the gospel and arouse spiritual curiosity is by helping people to discover – through experience – they have a soul. Rather than attempting to use logic to convince individuals there is a God who is ‘out there’, we can rely on what God has already placed ‘in there’ to stimulate -curiosity and then to point to longings that cannot be satisfied by the limits of self or the confines of this present life.

Use This New Soul Awareness to Build Momentum

As people see their spiritual nature is real - if a person’s experience is *true* in the 21st century definition of the word we might say - they find new motivation to explore faith and pursue God, instead of responding with the usual passivity and apathy.

Call Attention to The Soul's Longing for God

Once a soul is stirred, stagnation can turn into spiritual inertia. We can encourage these individuals to consider where their spiritual longings may originate. We can ask why it seems so many of our longings cannot be satisfied by the limits of self or the confines of this present life. Next, we can introduce them to God – the ‘Someone greater’ their soul longs for – help them to encounter Jesus, invite them to make faith commitments and expect that, whilst the spiritual soil may still prove to be infertile for many, some will respond and ultimately decide to follow.

We have started to call this approach, simply, ‘stirring souls’.

Learn to Stir Souls

Learning to stir souls sits firmly within the ‘cultivating’ and ‘planting’ stages of a spiritual harvest. So be aware, stirring takes time, stirring is hard work and stirring takes large doses of faith. Saying that, we firmly believe that if all Christians were to take up the task of stirring, the spiritual climate would once again be more conducive for an ongoing, fruitful harvest and God could be famous once again in our current culture.

We are not the only ones – nor the first ones – to start here. Many other theologians, missionaries, authors and practitioners have also struggled to get over the hurdle of indifference that pervades much of Western society. And many of their voices have helped us to uncover fresh starting points.

Several years ago, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch began to encourage Christians to learn to ‘Whisper to Souls’. Similarly, Rick Richardson used the term ‘Soul Awakening’ to describe a method of helping people to get in touch with their spiritual needs and longings and advised Christians to ‘begin with the fact that every human being has a spirit or a soul and go from there.’*

Whilst some work has been done to translate these helpful analogies from theory into concrete and practical approaches and resources, when we look at our current approaches to evangelism, it seems much more work could be done.

* Frost, Michael and Hirsch, Alan, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003

* Richardson, Rick, *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News*, Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000

But is ‘Spirituality’ a Good Thing?

Before moving forward, we should acknowledge that some Christians will rightly question an approach that so heavily emphasises the ‘spiritual’. What does this mean? And isn’t there a renewed interest in ‘spirituality’ that has nothing to do with the God of the Bible or Jesus and doesn’t in any way lead people to Him?

Taking the time to discuss and understand these insightful questions further is necessary and beneficial. For the moment, we acknowledge our current approach takes a very practical view. When we describe people as ‘spiritual’, we simply mean that every

human has a spirit or soul (or, perhaps more accurately, we as humans *are* souls!).

**How does this ‘stirring souls’ work?
How can we help people discover they are spiritual beings?**

From the outset, soul stirrers must recognise that most people today decide what is true through experience versus having information presented to them. Therefore, our main role – at least in the early stages – is about guiding people to discover this reality for themselves rather than trying to explain it to them or use logical persuasion.

If that sounds a bit confusing or ‘airy fairy’, stay with us while we attempt to make this practical.

Skills of the Soul Stirrer:

- **Observe:** Look out for the everyday emotions, questions and longings that reveal people’s true spiritual nature.
- **Identify:** Find common ground by acknowledging we possess the same longings and questions
- **Interpret:** Call Attention to these longings and define them as spiritual
- **Invite:** Ask people if they desire to explore a connection with God

OBSERVE

The first way to ‘stir’ is to simply be aware; to come alongside people, have our antennae up and look out for the everyday emotions, questions and

longings that reveal people’s true spiritual nature.

We have learned to be especially attentive to the following ‘stirring points’ as they often seem to bubble spiritual realities up to the surface:

Origins

We often hear people sharing thoughts about how we as humans ‘got here’ on the Earth. There are many theories – and many of them do not involve God or a god in any way. The aim at this point is not to prove whose theory is correct, but rather to observe that we wonder about such things.

Connection

Despite the fact most people think – at least on a surface level – we are here by sheer luck, most of us cannot bear to accept a reality where the events of our lives are guided by random chance. People often express a desire for someone (like a god) or something (like a force) to connect everything together. We also desire a reality where we experience deep connections with other humans, sometimes other creatures, and even the earth itself. Is this longing for connection necessary for existence or a hint of something more?

Superstition

Also resisting the notion that our lives are left to random chance, others perform, or avoid performing, certain behaviours in an effort to influence the forces of cause and effect and

achieve positive outcomes for their day, for their health or for their sports team. Why are we discontent with randomness in our lives if we exist in a supposedly random universe?

Prayer

Most people at some point in their lives have attempted to pray, usually when they - or someone they love - needed help. They may not know who or what they were praying to and the results may not have been what they expected or what they wanted. But they have prayed. What were they looking for?

Suffering & Injustice

This stirring point is potentially the most significant in our experience. When bad things happen, whether that occurs in an individual person's life or in the wider world, people have an immediate emotional reaction. There is a sense that things should not be this way. And despite the underlying belief that our species originated first as a result of random chance and then the 'survival of the fittest', for some reason people still expect the world to be 'good'. And nearly every person holds to the seemingly innate ethic that people should not be able to hurt other people without consequence. Why?

Worship

Our current culture teaches us to 'love ourselves'. The message we receive is that each of us is special and unique and our

highest purpose is to pursue whatever it is that will make us happy. 'You do you'. So why do so many of us give our attention – and our value – to celebrities, athletes and other famous individuals whom we don't even know but seem bigger, more powerful and more important than us? What about us as humans causes us to cast our affection on someone who is greater than ourselves?

Emptiness

Why does it seem so difficult for many of us to find happiness? There has never been a society in human history with so much freedom, finances and free time. But the latest purchase or the latest holiday never seems to satisfy. Do humans have needs beyond the physical and the emotional that cannot be so easily filled?

Sense of Awe & Wonder

Most of us have experienced being moved by something beyond the here and now, something emanating from deep inside us. Perhaps it occurred while staring at a single flower blossom in our garden or when gazing up at the starry sky. Maybe it was prompted by a strangely familiar aroma that sparked a latent memory and left us with a curious longing. What was this feeling? It doesn't seem necessary for survival. Could we name it? Could it be spiritual?

Each of these seemingly normal, everyday experiences can serve as potential 'stirring points'.

"Through the grace of God, the creation points to its Creator. Through the generosity of God, we have been left with a latent memory of him, capable of stirring us toward a fuller recollection of him."

-Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God*, p.16

Several authors and practitioners reference similar topics and also suggest a number of other themes to look out for. Alister McGrath refers to these as 'points of contact' or 'God-given footholds for divine self-revelation'. N.T. Wright, speaks of 'echoes of a voice' as he encourages people to listen out for four basic human experiences that can serve as signposts for contemporary spiritual journeys. Daniel Strange maps out five fundamental 'magnetic points' all humans are searching for.*

The approach to stirring souls is not about finding *one* topic that will magically convince a person. It is about learning to be aware of the spirit (and the Spirit!) at work and expecting several different thoughts and emotions to simmer to the surface over time.

- McGrath, Alister, *'Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths'*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1993
- Wright, Tom, *'Simply Christian'*, London, SPCK, 2006. Signposts include: a quest for spirituality, a longing for justice, a hunger for relationships and a delight in beauty.
- Strange, Daniel, *'Making Faith Magnetic'*, The Good Book Company, 2021

IDENTIFY

When these emotions, reactions or longings bubble up to the surface, (or we learn to help them bubble up) what happens next?

It is important to remember our main aim at this early stage. This is not a one-time truth encounter. Our goal is not to win arguments or to prove that we are right. We want to stimulate spiritual curiosity. We desire to keep the conversation and the relationship going. We know that if we can help individuals discover their spirituality for themselves, we will not have to do the convincing and we can anticipate an openness to explore further.

One of the best ways to create safe and trusting 'stirring' environments is to simply identify with these emotions when they appear. Like Paul in Athens (Acts 17) we can find common ground. We are fellow humans, with similar questions, doubts, fears and longings. So we can affirm and respond in one of the following ways, 'I desire the same thing, I want the world to be good and for people to not get away with hurting each other.' Or, 'I have wondered that myself, how did we get here when there was nothing?' And, 'I feel the same way. I hope my life means something and will make a difference after I leave this earth.'

INTERPRET

A further important action we can take when hints of buried spirituality bubble to the surface is to raise it to the level of 'conscious articulation'*. We can ask whether these questions and emotions can be explained by the body or brain alone or if something more is at work.

We can point out that it seems several of these longings cannot be satisfied by self, or by physical means or by the limits of this present life.

In other words, we can call attention to these 'stirrings' and start to define them as spiritual. This helps people to grow more aware of the soul. Spiritual sinews are finally moving and making their presence known, perhaps a bit like when we start a new exercise routine and exclaim the next morning, 'I never even knew I had muscles there!'

So, in the moment, when stirring takes place, we might say something like:

'You know, I think that shows you are spiritual or that you have a soul!'

'You don't accept that things happen by random chance and you wonder if there is someone or something connecting it all together.'

'I can see that you want the world to be good and right and that we should protect the most vulnerable. Where do you think that desire comes from? I think it's spiritual.'

'You mentioned that you tried praying, and even though you didn't get the answer you wanted, did you feel any emotions when you were trying to communicate to whoever is 'out there'? I think your praying is spiritual. It shows a desire to connect with someone or something bigger than yourself. You just haven't figured out who that is. What do you think?'

'You really wonder whether the circumstances of your life – the family you were born into, the place you were born and the gifts you were born with –

all happened by random chance or if there is some purpose for it all. I think that's a question worth exploring. And I think wondering about it in the first place shows something spiritual is happening.'

This kind of interpretation – calling attention to something and giving it a language - is such a crucial element of not only understanding our present realities, but also giving us the necessary tools to experience new realities.

"Noticing and 'naming the ache' as Mark Scandrette described it, means identifying both the universal and the specific needs young people have, and then inviting them to experience first-hand how the kingdom of God engages that ache."

-We Do God: The Role of Practice in Missional Youth Ministry,' The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2020, p.67

INVITE

How does stirring lead to the gospel? How do we go beyond mere 'spirituality' and get people into the Bible and down to the business of Jesus? We are glad you are wondering! Stirring is only the start. If people are to have any hope of experiencing full life in the Kingdom of God, stirring *must* lead to opportunities to present the painful truth about our current standing with Him and the good news of God's rescue plan. But at this early stage – when individuals have little desire *for* God – a gospel presentation tends to feel much more like information than *salvation*.

So stay with us.

We have only taken the first few 'awakening' steps, aimed at overcoming the relevancy barrier. Next we can introduce them to the One we know their soul is stirring for. We can demonstrate how joining Him, and His plan, brings full life. We can ask if they desire to know God in this way and, if they do, we know there is someone else they need to meet as well...someone who can *really* make the soul come to life!

INTENTIONAL STIRRING

Stirring does not have to be merely *re-active*, waiting patiently for spiritual rumblings to surface so that we can call attention to them. It can also be *pro-active*.

We are innovating several methods that *intentionally* help people exercise their atrophied spiritual muscles by sparking soul-centered emotions, questions and longings. These are experiences where we can invite people to explore and then guide them through reflection and interpretation, spaces where the spiritual can surface and we can point to it and say, 'That, right there. We believe that is your spirit at work. You are spiritual!'

"So we are faced with the challenge of providing young people with practical in-roads to explore and experiment with faith. I wonder if the place to start is by connecting with their own deepest longings and needs."

-No Questions Asked: The Findings From a Qualitative Study of 16-19 Year-Olds in Luton, The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2016, p.30

The Stir Course

One of these innovations is 'The Stir Course'. We describe it as a 'pre-evangelism' resource. It is a series of sessions you or your church can use to invite your friends, neighbours, co-workers or classmates – all those who seem indifferent – to engage with faith. It can be used with individuals in a coffee shop, with groups of people in schools, as part of a home group or in youth centres and churches. You may find the Stir Course helpful if:

- You are working with people who do not think they are interested in faith
- You are working with individuals who are not yet asking questions about God or Christianity
- You are working with people who wonder how God or faith can make their lives better
- You are running a drop-in, café, summer festival, community group or compassion ministry and struggle to transition from social relationships to spiritual conversations

In this article, we have learned some of the basics about stimulating curiosity by stirring souls, but we still have much to learn. How can we leverage people's spiritual awareness into opportunities to introduce God and present the gospel? If you are interested in finding out more, continue with us and read the next article as we present the overall Stir process and unpack these important questions.