

## International Updates from the Annual Society Gathering

The following is a slightly edited transcript of a talk given at the Shalem Society Annual Gathering, October 14, 2008—Participants: Carole Crumley, Tilden Edwards, Dwight Fraser and Mimi Saayman

*Carole:* Tilden and I want to share with you some of our experience in taking Shalem to Korea. We just got back about a month ago and were in Korea for about two weeks, and we want to tell you a little bit about how that came to be and about our experience there.

When we began the Clergy Spiritual Life and Leadership: Going Deeper Program, one of the participants in that first class was a Baptist pastor from Seoul. He and his wife came to visit us at Shalem to talk about the program, and as he stood in front of the display of all the Shalem books he said, “Oh, I’ve read that, and I’ve read that and I’ve read that.”

We later learned that he was the pastor of the largest Baptist church in Seoul, with 15,000 members. He was asking in particular if his wife, who was not ordained, could be a member of the Clergy Program class because she carried significant responsibilities in that church. We thought maybe some other programs would be right for her, but in that culture it would not have been acceptable for her to come on her own, so she needed to come with him. Thus the two of them came to the Clergy Program and then went back to their congregation to introduce contemplative practices. As part of the program year, this pastor invited his lay leadership to join him for a contemplative retreat—and 275 of them came. Those were his major leaders. He thought that was the first contemplative retreat that had been offered—certainly for his church but maybe in a Protestant denomination in Korea. So this got my attention.

The next year another participant in the program was Korean, but this person was a Presbyterian who had all of Thomas Merton’s books in his library that he had studied and read, in addition to others. Then the next year a Methodist came, and somewhere in there we were visited by a delegation from the Anglican Church in Korea that was headed by the Anglican Archbishop, Francis Park. He brought his team and Tilden and I met with him. He had just been elected Bishop in Seoul, and one of the things that he wanted to bring to the Anglican Church was contemplative grounding and orientation. He felt the way to begin was with his clergy, so they came—I think they found us on the Internet, I’m not really sure, but they did check us out to make sure that we weren’t too radical or in bad repute with the Episcopal Church.

When he and his delegation came to visit, we went to lunch and talked over what this might look like and what their hopes were, what they were yearning for, how we could support them. I think the Bishop had in mind that it would be really great if one of us could just come and deliver a series of lectures and invite the public. But if they really wanted to further contemplative grounding, we felt it would work best if there were a core of leadership there that we could work with and could test out some ways of offering programs. We just didn’t feel like dropping in, as one colleague used to say—blow in,

blow off and blow out. We didn't feel that was the most effective way to further contemplative grounding, so we suggested that, if it were possible that he send some of his clergy to our Clergy Program and they could bring back information, they could test and see if this would be helpful, and we would be in ongoing conversation.

So he sent three of his top leadership to the Clergy Program. Those three graduated from the program a year ago. When they were at the second residency, they said they would really like us to come to Korea. We didn't see how we could do a full program but suggested that they come to the regional gathering on the West Coast in California since the regional gathering was a design that could maybe be easily transported to Seoul.

Two of those graduates came to the West Coast Regional Gathering, and at one of the meals they said to Tilden, "We're really looking forward to you coming this fall, in September," and I know Tilden's mouth sort of dropped open. We were both startled by the immediacy of this request. But we were able over those five days to have some long conversations with them, and they also had come with a proposal. They had looked through our reading list and they had searched out that 40% of those books had been translated into Korean, and they had a timeline and a budget. We felt they had done so much to further the work that how could we say no? Of course we had a lot of questions and concerns, and our own resistance, but it just seemed like it was meant to be.

We were in Korea at the end of August and the beginning of September, leading what became a hybrid of the Clergy Program and a Regional Gathering—a little bit longer than a regional gathering and a little bit shorter than the Clergy Program, with a variety of things that they will do in between. They did some work before we got there, they'll do some things next year, and we're planning to go back next September.

One of our major concerns was language, so one of the requirements was that we send our talks, have those written down, so that they could be translated. Also, there would be interpreters on site who would be able to interpret what we were saying.

**Tilden:** Carole and I were warming up to a sense of call—the sense that this was really meant to be in spite of our resistance on various grounds. This whole group of 47 mostly pastors, a couple of Protestant religious community people, and one lay person who was one of the translators, were all in small groups four months before we got there. They met every month, and every month they did centering prayer and Taizé chanting. They had all read together (translated into Korean) Jerry May's *The Awakened Heart*.

These were pastors from four denominations—Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist. Except for the Anglican, those are the largest Protestant groups in Korea. Ten of them, who had never been on a retreat before, spent a day in silence with one of our Korean graduates a couple of months before we arrived just to experience what it was like before being with us; they took the time to do that. So that by the time we arrived, just like one of our extension programs except with greater preparation than we ever ask for, they were there and ready to go. A little readier than we were, after 23 hours of travel and three planes and incredible jet lag!

Korean culture is a very energetic and dedicated culture to whatever they are doing, in the church or out of the church. So we hit the ground running with planning meetings with the team there to make sure that every detail, every hour, every need was taken care of. And on Sunday afternoon we arrived at a Catholic retreat center, The Sacred Heart, a women's community that actually has a house in Washington, DC, and a college in this country.

The founder was someone who had some very good experience with a Zen master as well, and this is something that is quite unusual in Korean culture because the churches are quite dis-identified with the religious past of Korea. They have really strongly separated themselves, right to the point that the Baptist pastor said in his first residency that he could not use a gong, it was too Asian and Buddhist, but he could use a tinkley bell which is just as Western and is secular at least. But this group had been using gongs for months and there was no problem. They had a gong just like ours that no one blinked an eye at using.

This Catholic retreat center was our first realization that one of our ascetical practices for the time would be being there, because if you have ever been in New Orleans in the summer, that is also what it is like in Seoul. It was a steam bath, and there was no air conditioning in the meeting rooms, because it made too much noise. And we had a plethora of mosquitoes to help in our purgation during the week. So it was an adventure.

But, they had the most magnificent chapel we have ever been in at a retreat center. Because of the influence of the founding sister, they had something very unusual for Christian churches in Korea: a beautiful open space with a polished wood floor and cushions piled in the corner. A perfect Zendo, except this was a Catholic chapel, with a very simple altar and a perpetual light and some beautiful icons on the wall, and not even the cushions on the floor during the day; you walk into this total glistening space with open light from the windows. The Korean pastors would file in and sit in perfect Zen posture in a way that we could never do. These were Christians who never did this for prayer, but because in Korea you sit on the floor to eat and sleep, you are very used to being on the floor. Still, it was very confusing at times, because I would see people sitting there like a perfect Buddhist Zendo, but these were Christians. There was a beautiful sort of blending of the cultures that no one seemed to have any trouble with. Apparently churches long ago would sit on the floor, back before Korean culture began to take on more Western habits. So that made the whole center very, very special.

One more connection Buddhist/Christian-wise: the early morning times, to which virtually everyone came, where the first half hour was body prayer, the second half hour was prayer led by them, scripture and other ways of entering into the present. For three of those mornings, one of the Korean Anglicans led Korean bowing. Bowing is big in that culture, as in Japan. The focus, though, is on God, as in bowing to God—a perfect Zen or Tibetan bowing practice, standing, going down on your knees, going down on your forehead, standing up again and repeating the whole thing again endlessly. And their only complaint about that was they weren't doing it long enough. This is Korean

culture; you do things to the ultimate extent possible, give yourself totally to it, so the sessions got longer by the day. Let me tell you, three minutes of that kind of bowing is enough for most people in this room, without just giving up. But it was incredible the way that they could give themselves to what was there.

It is a very singing culture and a very singing church, so virtually every session began with someone with a guitar and long Taizé chanting. During the 24 hours of silence, there were optional sessions. One of them was Taizé chanting, which the majority of people came to, and it was just incredible—you would have thought this was a professional choir. They are so used to making singing an unashamed, total givenness to being present to God. In this case, there was a beautiful leader who could sing the descants with Taizé chants and just go on and on. The other special singing time was during contemplative Eucharist. Most of you here have been to contemplative Eucharists at Shalem where we have singing during the classic Sanctus. Except in this case, when they got into it, I thought the windows were going to shatter in sheer ecstasy at the incredible power and resonance and beauty as they just gave themselves in praise in those few moments in time together.

The days were structured by us very similarly to what you all have experienced in Shalem daily schedules. In this case, the rhythm focused particularly on their personal spiritual deepening, because the organizers very much wanted the time not to be dedicated to their roles as spiritual leaders in their congregations. They wanted to begin with the ground where it must begin, with their own personal deepening, just in their raw souls, totally apart from their roles as spiritual leaders. So, there were a tremendous amount of offering of different kinds of experiential ways into the present, questions for them to reflect upon in small groups, and ways to be in solitude and just as much as possible to go deeper.

The participants were incredibly receptive to what we offered. Churches in Korea, except for the Anglican to some extent, are basically very conservative theologically. They had every excuse to be very suspicious of all the new words and so forth that we were using. No one was; they were there for the contemplative deepening, with the sense that this was what was missing in their churches.

They certainly weren't missing prayer. Prayer in Korean churches is just incredibly evolved and deep on the ecstatic and intercessory level, beyond something that we would ever know in this country. There was something that you could label contemplative that they felt was the path to the deepening that they were missing, and they wanted to go as far as they could, because that's what you do in the Korean church. They are just incredibly dedicated to going as deep as you can with whatever resource you are offered—at least increasingly open to other resources. So their receptivity, the kinds of questions they asked, reflected a capacity for readiness for going deeper with God that was just such an amazing blessing to us.

There were all kinds of signs of grace that we don't have time to go into but which were something that we brought back with us, with a sense that whatever we have to offer

them we want to be able to offer. We'll be back, as Carole, said next year. They are continuing their small groups during this year, and there is a sense of the potential seeds that have been laid. It was like being contemplative missionaries, seeing what was evolving personally for them in their own lives, the seeds planted there that will bear fruit in their spiritual leaderships and their congregations where the congregational leader is tremendously respected.

Of all Asian cultures, Confusion roots have remained strong, and there is a respect for older people, respect for highly educated people, and also an expectation that you (as a teacher) will deliver. There is an expectation that you have something to offer and they will sit and be totally present to you and patient, which puts on all the more pressure to have something to offer, because in a way they are depending on you. They trust that there is something that you have to offer. Not that kind of American, egalitarian resistance ("show me you have something to offer"), which in a way takes the load off the leader indirectly, because people are not expecting much anyway, so you don't have to give them much.

There is also a difference in terms of collective, well-ordered activity. We did things together, whether that was to clean up after the meal or whether that was how we go deep down together in our prayer. There is something that really reminded me of both the strength and the weakness of our individualism in this country. It is so much more obvious when you are in a country where there is so much awareness of another, where there is so much movement together. The singing in a way expresses that. It really went into the impromptu party at the end—a party for them is asking each other to sing. Even the Anglican Archbishop, who went through the whole week just as a participant, stood up and sang a song. Carole very cleverly said that it was not in our contract to sing, so we got out of it.

In any case, the seeds were planted at the personal relationship level, at the leadership level, their collective level as their own denominations, and ecumenically because the ecumenical lines are not strong—the denominational lines are very strong. This was a real breakthrough just to come together at this level of depth. Also, on the social concerns level, there is a lot of social activity in the churches as a whole, but I think we made connecting of the contemplative grounding for that social activity in fresh ways that set seeds growing that keep together that presence for God through the activity.

Finally, beyond the interfaith seeds potentially, we wanted to build some trust this year. On the missionary front, which we did not deal with either, there are more missionaries per capital in Korea than in any other country in the world. They are in countries that Westerners are not welcome, and my long-term hope is that there might begin to be some influence and understanding of what mission means, which we have never dealt with here either. What's the implication of contemplative grounding and orientation or the way that you offer the Gospel, you offer God, that you offer presence for others who are just beginning to be open? What does it do to your sense of God, of Christ, of Spirit, all that goes with spiritual practice? What does it mean to be present for God?

So it opened up for us a sense at maybe re-looking for ourselves at dimensions that we had not been looking at, as well as looking at other cultures, as we have in the past, but even more so in the future, including Koreans in this country of which there are many and many Korean churches. Where are the openings? The essence that we could see of contemplative presence was not culture bound, because contemplative awareness potentially belongs to everyone—that old saying that a contemplative isn't a special kind of person, every person is a special kind of contemplative. You can cross cultural lines, personality lines, conservative/liberal theological lines, all kinds of lines. And this to me becomes a meeting ground that has much to offer the world's peace and well-being.

**Carole:** I will just add a couple of anecdotes from the time. We went with a lot of just basic “don't know” mind, beginner's mind. We would ask questions; we had pages of questions that we sent over. For example, we'd say, “tell us about these groups that are meeting before we come.” And they would write back, “The groups are meeting.” And we would ask, “What are the prayer groups doing in their meetings?” And they would write back, “The groups are praying.” So, we had no idea about all of the preparation they were doing and the quality of the preparation and the spiritual heart that was there and present and just waiting to welcome us. I remember Bill came in the day before we were to leave and said, “Are you ready to go?” I said I felt like I had this basket of five loaves and two fishes; we were prepared and had these things, but it seemed really small in relationship to the invitation; we were just trusting that this would be multiplied in some way. I think that's what we experienced so deeply, this multiplication of just the little bit that we brought that was so magnified among this group of pastors.

Tilden said that we were introducing practices, and one night I introduced the practice of praying with icons, which I thought would be different for most of the Protestant clergy, and it was. We were using the image of the Sinai Christ—just that one image, and looking into the eyes of the Christ. And that went okay; it was a bit hard to tell. But the next morning Tilden was leading the practice of radical presence, where he invites participants to pair up and look into each other's eyes. We had debated back and forth—we know in Korean culture one never looks into the eyes of another person—and whether it would even be possible for them to do that practice. “What would be an alternative?” we asked ourselves. Our thought was that we would have them look at the throat of the other person, because the throat is after all a place of great spiritual energy, and the icons reveal that and it is the bridge between the head and the heart.

So it was Tilden's idea that our interpreter would, when we got to that guided meditation time, just lead the meditation. They had it written down, without Tilden's English, nothing to come between. And that is the way that we did it. Afterwards we were going around the circle and asked “What was that like for you?” The first person said, “When I looked into the eyes of my partner, I saw the eyes of the Christ icon looking back at me.” Then the next person said, “When I looked into the eyes of my partner...”

Tilden and I were wondering where this came from. Well, the interpreter was reading the first draft that we had sent over. And then we got to the woman who had actually translated that first draft, and she said, “You know, when I was translating that first draft,

I thought how will I ever be able to do this? I've never looked into the eyes of anyone in all of my life, except very briefly." At that point we just collapsed in laughter, and they wondered what we were laughing about. We said that this we know is the guidance of the Spirit and the surprise of the Spirit just breaking into all of our prayerful thinking and planning, showing up in a way that we didn't expect.

**Dwight:** I'm in a little trouble, because in an effort to keep what I had to say brief, I decided to write it down, except when I got going I had to try hard to find a way to stop. So the story from Jamaica: in response to the opportunity to share, I have been given five words. I'm not sure whether the words reflect more my own story or Jamaica's story, or my experience of Jamaica's story, or my reflection of Jamaica's story, or all of the above! They are just the words that I have been given, and since they are the words I have, I decided to work with them, or let them work on me.

The first word is "struggle." The fact that I had to come this far to find support and nurture for my contemplative heart indicates the struggle that there is to find such support in Jamaica. Looking back now, I realize, it began on my knees as a high school boy, struggling to come to terms with how my developing desires conflicted with my nascent faith. It continued through seminary as I struggled to integrate what I was learning with how I was living, and it continued still in pastorate where I struggled to hold together what I was experiencing of the brokenness of life without and within. I looked in many directions, and I'm thankful that one of them eventually was Shalem. I see that struggle mirrored back to me in the lives and stories of many I encounter in one way or another. Steven Jennings, the current president of my denomination, long before he became president once said, "Struggle is both a sign of life and death. It is death that is happening to us that we struggle against so that we might live." At least I think that there are many who are searching, striving, struggling to live contemplatively.

The second word is "need." I see that there is great need for support for the contemplative way in Jamaica. Maybe if you ask my people they would not list it among their necessities or their priorities. Maybe it is even arrogant for me to suggest that it is, but then again this is the word that I have been given. Listening to the cries of so many; witnessing the search of almost the entire populous for something more, something else; seeing the grasping after substitutes, like North American tele-evangelism, (read tele-drama) or the baser elements of the homegrown dance-hall culture, I am convinced.

The third word is "invitations." A myriad of invitations have come concomitant to and consequent to my adventure with Shalem. I have been invited by people to offer them spiritual direction, I have been invited to give talks on spiritual direction, I have been invited to lead our denomination's first, in living memory, pastors' day of prayer; to serve as spiritual director for our denomination's annual meeting, to write liturgy for our denomination's worship services. I was invited to teach a course in introducing spiritual formation to our denominations ministerial candidates for a year before entering seminary. I also teach introductory courses in the Old and New Testament, which is about reading the bible contemplatively. I was invited to lead the quiet day at our ecumenical seminary. Now I am being invited to write a program for ministerial students

in my denomination in group spiritual formation. You get the picture. One more I have to mention. I have been invited to start holding regular retreats. Where do these many invitations come from if not from need? At the same time, I feel the needs (or are they invitations?)—whatever they are, for one, I do not feel able to manage all of this. It is not so much the volume or the breadth; it is more about the depth. I feel the need for more preparation, if you will; seeing that I am a good Baptist, for more immersion. I should sooner or later do either or both the Spiritual Guidance or the Leading Contemplative Prayer Groups & Retreat Programs. What am I waiting for? It seems that I am stuck between don't wait, and pausing at the threshold.

The other big need or invitation that I have brings me to my fourth word: "community." I have longed and looked for contemplative spiritual community until I've almost retired from looking. Every month, more or less, when I need contemplative spiritual community, I have to put in a call to Maryland, USA. I am, though, paying attention in the hope that it will find me, and I am not un-mindful that it may come into view as I continue to "Windex" my eyes, or be created by my stirring it up. Believe me, I have tried and I am trying. One of the more recent invitations that this need for community has brought to me is the idea and inclination to conduct research into whatever program offering or community there might be on the island that attends to spiritual formation, and whether they do so from a contemplative heart. Who knows, I might find something among the Catholics or Anglicans, or in some unexpected place.

All this brings me to my last word, "doorways." This is a most recent word. There is a doorway in Jamaica for the encouragement of the contemplative. I am having dreams of starting a contemplative retreat center. After almost 12 years in my current pastorate, I am being called to a pastorate where there isn't even any building yet, where it may be possible to construct such a center. Why have I not said "yes" yet? I am apparently stuck, hoping to become unstuck between don't wait and pausing at the threshold. There is a doorway in Jamaica for the entry of the contemplative—even for Shalem, or a Shalem-like campus or outreach. I say to Shalem, if an invitation comes, and maybe this is it, to do something in Jamaica, do not get stuck between don't wait and pausing at the threshold.

There is, finally, even a doorway through Jamaica to the wider Caribbean. One of the invitations that I was given was to go to the multi-island country of St. Vincent and the Grenadines from April to July, and again in August of this year to work in and with a church in which relationships were coming apart at the seams. I got that invitation because of my contemplative orientation, the thought being that the situation needed someone who could lead the church in appropriate practices. I was able to carry out the assignment because of my contemplative orientation. Now I am being promised more invitations to come back to offer more contemplative leadership experience and training. So it may not just be a Jamaica institute of spiritual formation; we might have a Caribbean one. It may indeed be time for the Shalem logo to spread its wing-like appellations, not waiting as it pauses at the threshold, and then not waiting as it flies south.

**Mimi:** I live in a geographically very isolated area in a very conservative rural community (in South Africa). And so my personal story is one where initially when I started this journey, I was very frustrated. The words "struggle" and "need" resonated with me—with the lack of resources, the struggle to get a hold of books, to find people with similar orientation. I am very far from any retreat center, any university library, but over the last 18 months to two years, my journey has taught me the thing that the desert fathers said: go to your soul and your soul will teach you. This has been so important to me. Go to your community and your community will teach you. So just to be there without books but with my relationship with God and living out my contemplative grounding in a conservative community has been very enriching for me.

When Carole asked me last night if I would mind saying something, I thought I am very biased because of where I am geographically, but when I thought about it some more, I think what I can give would still probably be an accurate reflection on where we are in South Africa. I have over the past two years come across many people, individuals or small communities, who have started or are seeking a contemplative way of life. I think for example of a former colleague's father who phoned me and said, "You know, a couple of years ago I picked up a pamphlet on Christian meditation and I was so disgusted with it that I threw it away, but now I really feel God stirring something in me and I want to know more." Or the person who came to the Buddhist retreat center in my town and I just happened to meet him and he said, "Do you know what? Many years ago, Tilden Edwards and Rose Mary Dougherty came to Cape Town, and I went to a workshop there, and it was transformative and it started me on a contemplative path." He described in great depth Tilden's movement session to Kwela (sp?) music from the township and how incredibly powerful that was for him. I've also come across people who are oblates, who are associated with a community in England actually, but keep up the monastic rhythm and lifestyle here in South Africa. I have also just finished reading a book called *Icons as a Means of Grace*, written by a Protestant minister in Cape Town. And it is a beautiful book, and all the reviews that have come from various churches have been that they don't quite understand this but are drawn to it.

So to me the sense in South Africa is that God's spirit is moving in many individual lives, like Tilden has said, across culture and theology, and it seems that those people are starting to bump into each other and are drawing together. There is a center for Christian spirituality, it's the place that invited Shalem in the past, and they are still doing a lot of work but they are based in Cape Town and all the work they are doing is there. For those of us who live far away, it is very hard to make use of their resources, but they are a support. The other big organizational thing is Contemplative Outreach. There are also quite a few groups in South Africa that meet and are quite active in terms of centering prayer, and they do regular retreats. There is a growing community and there certainly is a need, and my biggest sense is just of God's spirit moving and finding some of us who would never have thought that we would have been drawn to silence and stillness and this way of life.

And certainly, we also need Shalem in South Africa. There is no training there. When I went back and wanted to continue my training, I looked at all the universities and

institutes that are there, and there is nothing like this that is being offered. There is no way to continue my training as a leader, and so that is definitely something that is lacking in South Africa. But it is wonderful to know that there is a spiritual home that I have with Shalem, and that has been sustaining me, and so it is a gift to be here again.

*Carole:* I just want to give a shout out to Rose Mary—one of our Korean pastors who came to the Clergy Program was looking at your book on group spiritual direction and said, "Oh, I've read that." I said, "Really?" "Yes," he said, "I was studying at a seminary in India and this was on the library shelf." He said he picked it up, and I think he Xeroxed it (I'm not sure) so that he could take it back to Korea and introduce group spiritual direction to the folks that he works with. This sense of being all over the world in surprising and mysterious ways is fun, I think, and is fun to hear about.