

Spirituality and Well-being for Older New Zealanders

The
Bishop's
Action
Foundation



Selwyn Centre for Ageing and Spirituality Conference

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Presented by Simon Cayley, CEO Bishop's Action Foundation

Introductions and Content



- Introductions
 - Simon Cayley, MPhil
 - The Bishop's Action Foundation
 - Penny Eames JP, MA (Applied) & PSE Consultancy
 - Limitations of this presentation
- Presentation Content
 - What did we do?
 - Why did we do it?
 - What did we assume?
 - What did we find out?
 - What do we recommend?

What did we do?



- Developed a hypothesis and constructed a robust and appropriate methodology
- Interviewed 40 older people individually and 10 older people as a focus group
- Held Interviews in Wellington, Taranaki and Waikato
- Used a standard questionnaire to provide consistency, structure and prompts
- Ensured the questionnaire had been piloted prior to being used to ensure validity

Why did we do this?



- We believed everyone has a spiritual dimension to their being and their life
 - *“I had had the blood tests – it was serious and we were waiting for the results and I was driving in my car. As you can imagine I was really worried. Then all of a sudden I was peaceful. It was like a wave. I knew I was going to be all right.” [Abridged]*
- We believed people with well developed spirituality would most likely be more resilient
- We believed spirituality would be expressed in a wide range of ways
 - We wanted to test these beliefs
- We believe discussion of spirituality needs to be more consistent and more open
- We want to influence a strategic approach to spirituality discussions that will enable spirituality to inform policy and service design across New Zealand.

What did we assume?



- We began by developing a working definition of spirituality:
 - It is the core of being. As the body provides an external platform with which a person can function, so spirituality forms an internal platform with which a person can define themselves. Spirituality therefore confirms who a person is. This incorporates facets such as where a person stands, what they believe in, what they will and will not support and also provides strength of character because it promotes self-belief.
 - *“Spirituality – [...it is] about the core of my being. An essential part of being human, ...yes an essential part of being human.”*

What did we assume?



- A spiritual core can bring many benefits to an individual including :
 - Strength of character and resilience
 - A clear sense of 'who I am'
 - Strong self-belief and self-worth- 'who I am is ok'
 - Clear articulation of beliefs and values
 - A clear sense of place (in the world, in community/society and in family)
 - *“Special moment – I remember when I first went to the UK and met the remnants of my family. That had an effect on me. We need to know where we come from. This is important.”*

What did we assume?



- Lack of spirituality within a person could therefore risk that an individual might be:
 - Less likely to respond robustly to life's challenges
 - Potentially unsettled and unsure of where they belong
 - Insecure and questioning of them self and therefore less able to relate to others
 - Likely to try to fill the spiritual vacuum with a substitute which may be dysfunctional such as alcohol, drugs, gangs or other anti-social behaviour.
 - *“Inner strength that comes from my belief system.” (2 interviewees)*

What did we find out?



- Spirituality is a factor that influences the lives of older New Zealanders
- Spirituality is much broader than religion, religion is one, usually structured, expression of spirituality
- Spirituality is expressed in a wide variety of ways including religious ceremony and prayer, trips to the beach, listening to music, climbing mountains
- Spirituality is associated with life experiences (e.g. birth and death) and physical things including environmental themes (beaches, water, mountains) and cultural themes (music, poetry, art)
 - *“I have to go down to the sea at Raglan – I have to see the waves – the bigger and wilder the waves the better – they cleanse my mind and give me peace.”*

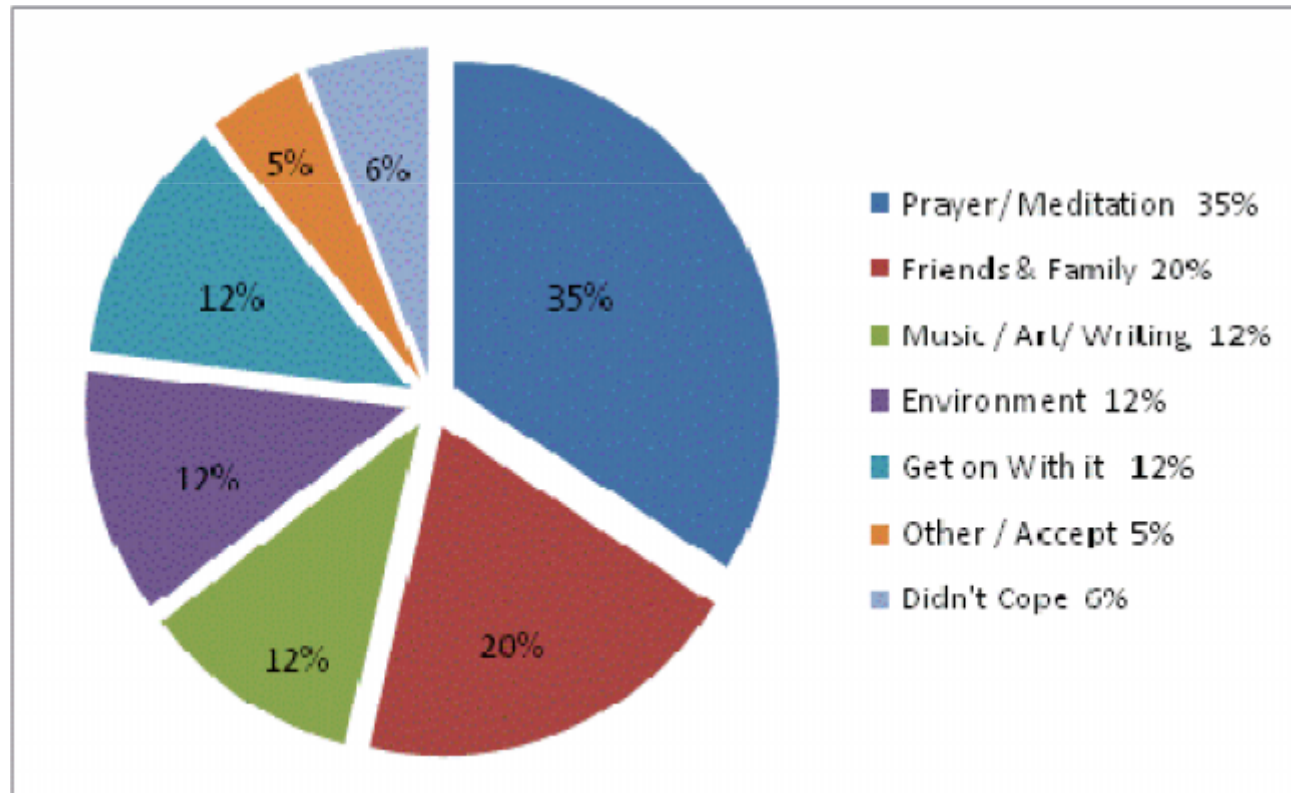
What did we find out?



- It is therefore difficult to define spirituality because it is so complex
- Spirituality is developed through many contributing experiences and events including one's cultural background, one's family values and upbringing, one's peers and one's life experiences
- We therefore agreed that our working definition of spirituality could not be confirmed as comprehensive.
- It may also be counter-productive to focus on trying to define the concept of spirituality, it is perhaps more useful to explore expressions of spirituality and how society can nurture them

How did our interviewees cope in times of crisis?

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What did we find out?



- Society in general could benefit from an open dialogue around spirituality that supports individuals, families and communities to think about how they define and develop their own spirituality
- Community based organisations, local and central government, district health boards and other agencies should engage strategically with how they will respond to spirituality and spiritual needs

What would we recommend?



- Action to develop greater awareness of and engagement with spirituality as an element of life for individuals, families, communities and societies.
- Acknowledgment that spirituality is not limited to religion and should be the subject of meaningful dialogue within and across society in general.
- A strategic focus on spirituality that supports greater understanding of the place of spirituality in peoples' lives, generates more open dialogue about spirituality and informs policy responses to spiritual needs

What would we recommend?



- Further research that builds on this study and explores the issue of spirituality with a wider audience of older people
- Further research that widens the scope of this study to other sectors of society including young people. This would enable interesting comparisons
 - *[Spirituality] "... means a deep awareness of who we are and who I am in relation to the Creator."*
 - *"The spark within us... the spark – you know that spark – that is spirituality"*

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- *“Spirituality is about understanding the universe, about the world we live in and the people we live with.”*