

New Religious Movements (NRMs) and Alternative Spiritualities (AS)



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Case studies for chaplains

The following scenarios are drawn from actual examples of enquiries which have come into the National Adviser's office. They are offered for discussion and reflection about the identified issues, not arriving at 'right' answers. The scenarios consider the following questions:

Why do people join NRMs?

Look at Case Studies 11, 12, 14

Can NRMs hurt people?

Look at Case Studies 6, 13, 15

Caring for people in NRMs

Look at Case Studies 4, 5, 7

How far can we go?

Look at Case Studies 1, 2, 3, 8, 9.

Scenario 1

At a healing service in your church/chapel you are approached by a young person who is not a member of your regular congregation or community. She offers you a gift of a crystal. She explains the crystal has healing powers and has already healed a number of people she knows. She says that she will give you the crystal and requests that it be put on the altar to increase the efficacy of the service. A number of her friends encourage you to use the crystal. What do you do next?

Issues:

- Compatibility of Christian healing with alternative healing practices
- Belief in and use of healing power of objects
- Engagement with young people from alternative spirituality backgrounds
- Use of Christian space for alternative therapies and practices

Scenario 2

Some of the people you work alongside have got interested in alternative healing therapies and have been taught that Jesus was a master of these actual therapies. They come to you and ask to use healing sessions as part of their Christian outreach to others and to use church/chapel facilities for those sessions. In addition, they would also like to include things like aura reading and angel guidance workshops in church/chapel. What is your response?

Issues:

- Annexing of Jesus by alternative spiritual therapies to give credibility
- Christian understanding of Jesus as healer
- Linkage and progression of alternative spirituality practices and therapies
- Christian understanding of health and healing in general

Scenario 3

Your worship space/premises has had a yoga group using it for some time. After a while a new yoga instructor comes to take the classes and begins to tell the participants about the spiritual theories behind yoga 'purely as background' and to 'deepen the yoga experience as a spiritual discipline'. Some of your community who use the class are disturbed by this and ask you about it. What would be your response?

Issues

- Yoga as exercises or spiritual discipline
- Alternative spirituality within Christian space or hospitality
- Compatibility of Christian faith and yoga practice
- Need to be clear about purpose and practice of groups using Christian space

Scenario 4

A Jehovah's Witness comes to you in confidence because he is worried about his child who may need a blood transfusion. He is extremely concerned that if he does not agree the child will die, but if he does agree, he will be shunned by his community and will lose all his friends. His relatives will no longer talk to him and his child may suffer at school. He wants to keep the faith but he also wants his child to live. What would you say to him?

Issues

- Pastoral care of people from New Religious Movements
- Understanding of NRM beliefs and practices, including negative and hostile behaviours
- Understanding of impact of leaving, or being rejected by, NRM friends and colleagues
- Ways of welcoming leavers and those expelled into the Christian community without blame or hostility

Scenario 5

A woman whose husband whose funeral you recently conducted comes to see you in some distress. She has since been to a spiritualist and has received a number of messages from her husband. Some of the messages have been comforting and helpful; others have been confused and have left her distressed. She wants to know what you think about the messages. What will you tell her?

- **Issues**
- Christian understanding of life after death
- Christian understanding about contacting the dead
- Spiritualists as bereavement counsellors
- Pastoral care of the bereaved

Scenario 6

A 'bible study group' has recently become established in your area. People you know have been going along to it and have told you how warm and friendly the people are. After a while you begin to hear criticism of your chaplaincy and your services and are told the bible study group are the only true Christians and there are problems in your chaplaincy which need to be wiped out. Some other members of your community are worried and upset by how they have been treated. What would you do?

Issues:

- Love-bombing and heavy shepherding of vulnerable individuals, how this differs from Christian understanding of mission, evangelism and conversion
- Separation of people from family and friends, rejection of the world as evil
- How to discern 'Christian' NRMs with hostile intent

Scenario 7

Two members of your community approach you because they have 'lost' their beloved son to an unspecified 'evil cult'. The son no longer behaves as he once did towards them and sees them less and less. They blame this change on a new girlfriend who they say has introduced him to the cult. They fear for his safety and his sanity and say he has been brainwashed and ask you for help. What will you do?

Issues:

- Pastoral care of families who lose family members to NRMs
- How to discern what is the 'real problem'
- Issues arising from conversion to Christian faith from other religions

Scenario 8

A new member of your chaplaincy community confides to you that he is a member of an NRM and would like to see closer ties between his NRM group and the church, especially on issues of common interest which benefit the whole community. He says that there are no issues of compatibility between being both a member of the NRM and being a Christian and would like a platform to share his other beliefs and practices with the Christian community. What would you say?

Issues:

- What are the problems with dual allegiance?
- Conceptual diversity and evangelism
- Compatibility between NRMs and Christian faith.

Scenario 9

A couple come to you for marriage and want an individually tailored ceremony with their own improvised liturgy which makes little reference to Christian faith. They say that if you will not offer them what they want they can get the services of an independent minister who will carry out any form of service they desire and want to know if they can have that in your chapel instead. How will you take this conversation forward?

Issues:

- One Spirit Foundation and similar provision of services, including occasional offices
- DIY services and DIY spirituality
- Marriage Law and marriage preparation over individual choice

Scenario 10

A medium has been holding 'spirit' evenings in the local community centre. They are packed out. Christians from all denominations have been disturbed by the medium's activities and hold a prayer vigil in the car park opposite to show their opposition to the medium, and ask people attending the centre not to park in the church car park. The medium becomes angry and upset, seeing this as interfering with her rights and defaming her practices. Some members of your community denounce her in the local paper. She comes to you as an intermediary asking for help and an apology. What do you say to her?

Issues:

- Rights of Christian action and protest
- Place of prayer and pastoral care
- Action against NRMs and AS and against the work of 'demonic powers'

Scenario 11

You meet a woman in a Mind Body Spirit shop buying materials for a ritual to birth the cosmic child. When asked why she wants to do this, she says it was sympathetic magic for depression and sadness. She has done rituals like this before and she felt better for a while but the sadness returned. On further conversation, it turns out she had had a miscarriage and not been given adequate pastoral care previously by the Church. That had contributed to her search for an alternative spirituality. What do you say to her?

Issues:

- Need for rituals for life events
- Need for self-care if pastoral care fails
- Role of the church in driving people to NRMs

Scenario 12

You meet an older couple in their 50s who have joined a Christian/New Age group and are very excited at the idea of setting up pilgrimages to sacred sites, meeting with New Agers and Pagans and exploring 'fringe' ideas like channelling and soul journeys. When you ask why they were joining this group when they called themselves Christians, they explain that their local church, of which they had been lifelong members, had said their energy and interest was no longer needed as the church wanted to encourage young families. They mention that the group also contains some ministers looking for 'relief' from 'ordinary' church. What do you make of this?

Issues:

- People with energy and commitment feel frustrated
- Desire to do something for God that's different and out of the rut
- Feelings of lack of direction and stagnation; feel left out and cast aside

- Role of the church in driving people to NRMS

Scenario 13

You are asked to be pastorally engaged with two children who went out trick or treating and got involved in a game of Charlie Charlie in which they were encouraged to call up a spirit to answer questions. They have been very badly frightened, can't sleep, have hallucinations, hear voices and cry all the time. Their parents are asking for psychological assessment and counselling and prayer and support from a deliverance ministry team. How do you help them with this?

Issues:

- People encouraged to get involved in the paranormal or spirits.
- Serious problems when people encounter the 'occult' even in fun.
- Need to have proper procedures and guidelines in place for safeguarding people afflicted, including healing and deliverance.

Scenario 14

A group of Christians worshipping with you tell you they engage in Pagan rituals because it allows them to be more creative, to have more sense of the empowerment of women especially, to spend more time on ecological issues and because they find things like cursing rituals give them something the Church doesn't - the ability to be angry. They argue that their Pagan rituals and Christian faith are perfectly compatible – what do you say?

Issues:

- NRMs offer more creativity, more empowerment.
- NRMs allow focus on eg the environment and climate change than the Church.
- The Church expects people to be nice – where do people put their anger?

Scenario 15

A person comes to you who has recently been bereaved and who has been to an alternative practitioner looking for comfort. She received a number of 'messages' but these have left her confused and concerned about whether her husband is in heaven or somehow trapped in the spirit world. Further, people at an alternative spirituality retreat have said she has psychic gifts herself and have suggested she go on some courses to develop them. What do you say to her?

Issues:

- NRMs exploiting people when they are vulnerable
- NRMs drawing people in by making them feel special, set apart or elite.
- Adequacy of funeral conduct, Christian bereavement counselling and pastoral care