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Encounters on the Edge



no. 29:
**Northumbria
Community:
Matching Monastery
and Mission**

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Northumbria Community: Matching Monastery and Mission

Writing this issue has been difficult. More than ever, I am conscious that I have been trying to bottle the sea. I can capture water but not the wave, the tide, the power nor the beauty. The words compared to the reality seem so inadequate and second-hand. Putting the inspiration into a booklet cannot convey the life which is probably only caught first-hand.



Lindisfarne flowers

Laying out a map

For me, the monastic has seldom been far away. My great-uncle Maurice became a Franciscan lay brother after his wife died. I visited him and stayed at his friary. Our youth group in London went with the curate to *Taizé* in the late 1960s bringing back their simple yet enduring musical prayer. In writing *Mission-shaped Church* in 2002, we noted one of the emerging strands was a fresh expression of the monastic spirit. We guessed it was connected to the rise of interest in spirituality, the increase of people going on retreat and the demand for spiritual direction. The BBC2 series *The Monastery* in May 2005 made a wide impact. Both Worth Abbey and the Benedictine website have had many more visitors since. Something is going on.

A number of groups that could be called “new monastic” have grown up in the British Isles in the last 30 years. There are two larger groupings which are related to Anglicanism. The older is the **Community of Aidan and Hilda**, begun in 1994 by Ray Simpson and Michael Mitton. Its purpose is “*cradling a spirituality inspired by the Celtic saints.*”¹ The second is **The Order of**

¹ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* D.L.T. 2000 p.49
www.aidan.org.uk

Mission or TOM. It was officially launched in 2003 when the first novices took vows. The purpose is founding missional communities particularly to work with young adults and pioneer fresh expressions of church. The founder is Mike Breen, then Rector of St Thomas Crookes Sheffield, but TOM is now found in over a dozen countries, with which that church has links.

There have been other smaller attempts to draw on the inspiration of an order. Two began around 2000: Living Proof to serve young people and *Jacobs Well* for the ministry of healing². More recently Revd Tom Gillum founded the *Community of St Jude* in south west London. Its inspiration (though not authorisation) comes from the Sant'Egidio communities of Rome, offering friendship with the poor, not charity to them³. The missionary society CMS are still in active discussion about reforming as a mission order and sending out missional communities. Sensibilities with their protestant donor base may lead them to call it a mission movement.

Some listed as founders would renounce that honour and perhaps think of themselves more as midwives or catalysts; others would not be so bashful. All these groups have a dispersed life, though some have more frequent gathering patterns than others. These groupings have different levels of recognition from the wider church. Other groups are exploring having a rule without claiming to be an order; *Moot*, an “alternative worship” community meeting in Westminster is a good example.⁴ Other individual churches are following a call to be more like retreat centres, upheld by an enhanced sense of forging community and sometimes finding that their buildings are on old monastic sites.⁵

Within such a diverse set of groups, I have chosen to focus specifically on Northumbria Community. They are a dispersed community with up to 3000 people connected worldwide, drawing inspiration from the saints of the north-east. I know this strand of “new monasticism” through extended

² The Bishop of Monmouth, Rt Revd Rowan Williams commissioned about 30 members of Living Proof in 2000. Since then, the charity has run into difficulties and the work, described in *Encounters on the Edge* No.1, has ceased.

³ www.stjudeschurch.com See also chapter 8 of *Setting the Church of England Free* Mark Mills-Powell (Ed.) John Hunt Publishing Ltd. 2003

⁴ www.moot.uk.net

⁵ An example is given by Hugh Ellis, vicar of Bradfield in chapter 10 of *Setting the Church of England Free* Mark Mills-Powell (Ed.) John Hunt Publishing Ltd. 2003

experience in relationship and prayer that I can't bring to any of the others. Since 2002, at their request, I have been their “accompanier” within the Building Bridges of Hope (BBH) process.⁶ **Like many who meet them there has been a sense of a wanderer coming home.** What was unknown, felt curiously familiar. I hope I have been a useful critical friend, but I know I have also been a grateful receiver.



Hetton Hall - entrance

Differences between ‘old monastic’ and ‘new monastic’?

The “new monastic” communities differ from historic monasticism in that **they are essentially dispersed groups. Furthermore, they have dispensed with the previously invariable forms of the vows of celibacy and poverty.** I here note the view of Christopher Donaldson writing an affectionate life of Martin of Tours, that the root of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience was something Martin took from the life of the roman soldier, of which he had been a notable example.⁷ As such, are these vows an inculturated expression of following in Christ's army, but not necessarily the only way full time service must be expressed? It raises questions of whether being single and without personal possessions is exclusively inherent to being ‘monastic’.⁸

⁶ BBH is an ecumenical venture which, for some years, has been seeking to identify common factors that assist Christian groups to become renewed in spirituality and mission. One parameter is willingness to have an outsider, different in some way to them, walk alongside, observe and comment.

⁷ *Martin of Tours: The Shaping of Celtic Spirituality* Christopher Donaldson Canterbury Press 1997 p.30

⁸ The Order of Mission (TOM) have offered one workable contemporary translation of the essence of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience by using the language of simplicity, purity and accountability. Like the 3rd Order SFF (Society of St Francis) movement it gives place to married people and recognises that authority and economic patterns have changed. By contrast the Rule of Benedict and pattern of Francis are particularly firm in renouncing possessions.

Why has the “new monastic” arisen?

1) Communities of resistance

The first fruits of what I recognize as this trend to “new monastic” emerges in several founders and births, which broadly share a context: Finklewalde and Bonhoeffer in the 1930s, George MacLeod and *Iona community* in 1938⁹, and Brother Roger and *Taizé* from August 1940. They have in common a background of war. I wonder whether they are all, in some sense, communities of resistance – counter cultural signs of alternative ways of living. It is plausible to think the particular charisma¹⁰ of *Taizé* is reconciliation, which in time of conflict is highly apt.

Resistance is an early Christian note. Archbishop Rowan in Chapter 2 of *Why Study the Past*, points out that the early Christians were odd. They thought they were a new version of the human race, with exclusive claims to the loyalty of their members. This stood against the sacred reality of empire and the unifying venerating of the emperor, a system claiming to be ultimate, holy and legitimate power. By contrast, the Christians called themselves holy, or saints. They met in *ecclesias* so they claimed a citizenship of something and, as *paroikoi* (immigrant workers), their loyalties were somewhere else. So martyrdom narratives become their characteristic form of writing and mutual recognition between churches. This act affirmed that the empire could not have the last word, for another king was acknowledged, especially in death, as an act of resistance. He also comments “**it is still true that the church will at times find its unity when it finds what it has to resist.**”¹¹ I would add that there is a danger of focusing too much on resistance and only finding



⁹ For a summary of *Iona's* story, ethos, scope and rule see *Colonies of Heaven* Ian Bradley DLT 2000 pp. 45-48

¹⁰ The term “charism” we understand to mean that special combination of calling and character which makes them one of God’s gifts to the church.

¹¹ Rowan Williams *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* DLT 2005 p.55

a unity in what is opposed. Such negativity is not the same as the early church dynamic of belonging to an alternative kingdom and its sovereign. Then the stance taken springs from divinely bestowed internal identity not just secular external threat.

Is it possible that more robust forms of today’s monasticism are also **resistance to today’s dominant powers**? Venerated and supposedly unifying idols today might be economics, consumerism, individualism, entertainment, nationhood or sport. Arguably consumerism could be a leading candidate. It combines materialism, hedonism and individualism. It has its own enormous evangelism budget called advertising. Its message is encoded in the language of rights, including that of choice. Its vocabulary and plausibility are already powerful. Knock down arguments against its rivals cite phrases like “*but the bottom line is*” and most people already speak of “*buying into ideas*”. In the face of this, **vows like poverty and values like self-denial are so crazy as to attract attention for their sheer difference**. Out of the fat into the friar, you might say. Another strand of resistance could be seen in Jean Vanier and the *L’Arche* communities beginning in 1964, in which the so-called handicapped and equally so-called normal live in community, thus refusing to find value only in the, so-called, beautiful and intelligent. In later life, Henri Nouwen joined them and is eloquent about the brokenness of us all.¹² I now think the **personal discovery of a blessed frailty is one enduring strand of the monastic** from the desert fathers onwards. Francis in particular lived humility as the joy of dependence and surprised acceptance, redeeming humility from the self-destruction of exaggerated self-denial.

It is a protest against the addictive perils of possessions by embracing poverty.

2) In the face of excess

It is widely said that the generation growing up after the second war has been the most affluent in history. Consumerism could only flourish in a sufficiently widely wealthy economy. I wonder if the rise of “new monasticism” is part of a counter-cultural protest. I want to qualify the word “protest” because it sounds too much like standing on the sidelines and hurling abuse. **I mean rather the protest of passive disobedience to norms around us and**

¹² Henri Nouwen *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* Hodder and Stoughton London 2002 p.69

It is a fasting from the assault of information by daring to enter silence.

choosing a lifestyle that raises its own questions of the culture.¹³ As such, it is protest against excess, by choosing to live the value of simplicity, a protest against the addictive perils of possessions by embracing poverty, a fasting from the assault of information by daring to enter silence, a renunciation of obsession with sex in the welcoming of chastity, a rebuttal of isolating individualism through embracing the demands of intentional community and a blessed relief from the curse of being driven, through finding a sense of balance.

"Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"*¹⁴

Some earlier monastic foundations like the Franciscans and the attempted reform of Benedictine practice by those who became the Cistercians occurred in periods where the rich and poor were sharply contrasted. So the first Rule of Francis (1209) is around three New Testament texts that emphasise the self-denial that leads to life, through selling possessions and giving to the poor. Yet this factor alone cannot be the most significant in that I would then expect an even more vigorous monasticism in the USA.¹⁵ Perhaps it has to be linked to some higher level of dissatisfaction with the spiritual life in the existing church. The USA is unusual in still having much higher levels of church attendance.¹⁶ However, that does not mean that the level of spirituality is necessarily higher. Indeed some would say the consumer virus is virulently present in the marketing prevalence within the US church.

3) A call within an indistinct church

At the close of a story about his parish discovering a monastic calling, Hugh Ellis remarks, *"Throughout history whenever the Church has become slack*

¹³ Rule of Benedict Liturgical Press, U.S. 1981 chapter 4.20 *"Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else."*

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot *The Rock* pt.1 lines 14-17

¹⁵ I warmly commend a book from the US drawing threads together of the new monasticism they have uncovered. *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* Rutba House (Ed.) Cascade Books 2005

¹⁶ As instanced by Grace Davie *Europe: the Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* D.L.T. 2002

*in its distinctiveness, monastic communities have arisen."*¹⁷ Rowan Williams unpacking the beginnings of the desert fathers sees it more as the search for clarity:

*"The early monks and nuns moved off into communities of the desert because they weren't convinced that the church in its 'ordinary' manifestations showed with any clarity what the church was supposed to be about ... what humanity really was when it was in touch with God through Jesus Christ."*¹⁸

Antonio Romano, strongly influenced by the post-Vatican 2 emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit on founders of religious movements, puts it still more generously, with Pachomius (293-345) and Benedict (480-543) in mind.

*"The founder has the great merit of being the one to have approached the shortcomings of the time in which they lived with ingenuity and to have tried to make up for them by personal example."*¹⁹

The attitude among founders is significant. **Romano sees a significant difference in humility between those who act as rebels rather than innovators:** *"The second works within the system, while the first leaves banging the door."*²⁰ In today's culture, not noted for its patience or humility in the face of the past and critical in its views of the elderly, contemporary founders might ponder.

Yet Romano does not imply that founders are acquiescent in the face of a church that is dull or stubborn. **Because the root of their creativity is a gift of the Spirit, they may be 'unexpected and daring'.**²¹ As vanguards of the Spirit their charism keeps *"them moving ahead of the church. They are placed like a sign of contradiction for all those not living their Christian lives urgently."*²² Their genuine originality can be disturbing and cause difficulties

¹⁷ Hugh Ellis *Setting the Church of England Free* Mark Mills-Powell (Ed.) chapter 10 John Hunt Publishing Ltd. 2003 p. 128

¹⁸ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion Oxford 2003 p. 23

¹⁹ See Antonio Romano's inspiring book *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.35

²⁰ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.53

²¹ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.60

²² Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.61

It is a renunciation of obsessions with sex in the welcoming of chastity.

The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this.

to the church. Yet they are to be seen as prophetic not heretic. **They question some aspect of the church, but do not call into question the church itself.** As such, they resist the temptation to become gnostic, in the sense that those on the inside of a movement can see themselves as recipients of a privileged esoteric wisdom and those outside are dismissed as benighted. *“The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this.”*²³

These interactions point up sharply long-standing questions of the overlapping relationship of a religious order and the church, to which I will return. At this stage, I note that the Catholics have more experience of this disturbance as a positive influence, perhaps because they have lived longer

with its complexity, have a higher view of the church that reaches more easily beyond immediate conflicts and have a stronger view of the one church to which non-heretical variants belong by definition.

In considering the role of the special to the whole, or the radical to the inherited, I have found myself thinking that the Cell Church Movement (CCM) has certain factors in common with the “new monastic”. They both have a concern for discipleship that goes further than church attendance, a passion to ask what would Jesus do, the existence of focused relationally-based groups, a yearning for deeper spiritual life in which the individual takes responsibility and yet is mutually accountable to others. Both use the language of cell, although “new monastic” means being solitary with God and CCM means a

group system. Moreover, both can lose their charism and become barren organisations, acting out the shapes but losing touch with the values. **I now wonder if monasticism is the deeper pattern of the renewal of spiritual life and cell is more like one manifestation of it.** Monastery is of course the older tradition and any view of the Spirit in the church will note that. Monastery offers more varied rhythms and has a history of spiritual direction that brings wisdom in dealing with people seeking God. Monastery

It is a rebuttal of isolating individualism through embracing the demands of intentional community.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter to his brother - quoted on www.northumbriacommunity.org

also offers a wider set of callings, across the contemplative, charitable work, social justice, teaching, evangelism and even the ecological.

4) Hope shining in a new dark age

It has been a surprise to me to find the breadth of sources that chime in with this view. The saving influence of Benedict is explicitly in mind in the words of a moral philosopher.²⁴

*“What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us... this time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers. They have already been among us quite some time and it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot but for another doubtless very different St Benedict.”*²⁵

I doubt whether mere civility, intellectual and moral life will be enough, but if they bubble over from an inner life in God which transforms us to love and respect each other, I see their value.

A historian writing about what we can learn from the Celtic church, beyond unfounded romanticism about it, makes a similar claim about the context we face. *“It is most definitely a vision we need to recapture if Christianity is to shine again in our own perhaps even darker age.”*²⁶

A friar expresses not just this link but encapsulates the positive values that will be vital.

“Monastic life may seem utterly out of tune with the spirit of our times, yet if we are entering another dark age, it may be to the wisdom of such a way the Church

I sense that both the renewal of both the church and society will come through the re-emerging of forms of Christian community that are homes of generous hospitality, places of challenging reconciliation and centres of attentiveness to the living God.

²⁴ The Rule and its monasteries are credited with preserving western culture.

²⁵ Alastair MacIntyre *After Virtue A Study in Moral Theology* 1984 p.263

²⁶ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven* D.L.T. 2000 p.xi

of today needs to turn. I sense that the renewal of both the Church and Society will come through the re-emerging of forms of Christian community that are homes of generous hospitality, places of challenging reconciliation and centres of attentiveness to the living God.”²⁷

I often return to this last quotation. In one sentence it instinctively holds together a dynamic balance of mission exercised through hospitality, quality community fashioned through recognising true reconciliation, infused by a spirituality centred in attentiveness to God.

Dark age language with its sense of alienation, of living in a more hostile environment, of existence after the ending of a period of power, influence and self-determination is also picked up by two out of the three questions which Northumbria Community have identified as core to their quest.

“Who is it that you seek?”

“How then shall we live?”

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

(Ps 137: 4)



“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

The second is in the monastic spirit of all who seek to live out the Gospel of Jesus, but also contains the suggestion that this task is more difficult than it used to be. The third question is taken from an exilic source. People in exile and those living in another dark age will have instantly animated conversation. However, it must not descend into mutual pity or despair. Rather the centre is to be found in the God of hope, to who even the darkness is as light (Ps 139: 11-12). He is the God of resurrection, who raised Jesus from death and who has considerable experience in raising up founders for communities of godly resistance, good hope and communal life graced by knowledge of forgiveness.²⁸

²⁷ Brother Samuel SSF Mission and Community *Transmission* British and Foreign Bible Society 1998

²⁸ Other sources could have been added like Bishop Michael Turnbull 1400 Year Celebration of Rochester Diocese 2004 p.82

The history and development of Northumbria Community

They never intended to become a community

I have noticed that a hidden gestation is common to a few founders. Francis did not intend to found a religious order nor establish a community but to live life in accordance with the Gospel. Brother Roger of *Taizé* went from Switzerland to Burgundy by himself in 1940. The first other monks only joined him at Easter 1949. Reading Luke’s Gospel in Advent and Christmas last year, I noticed that after the annunciation, Mary went off to the hill country and this most famous gestation was thus also hidden. **I long for today’s initiatives to dare to take time to let what is conceived within them grow slowly in secret.** I see this pattern in this story and believe it is one of the gifts they offer to us. I would be sad if this booklet created precisely the opposite effect. Becoming popular quickly creates enormous problems, as St Francis too discovered and agonised whether the very charism stood in danger of being lost.

What emerged took time to grow.

The gestation began through relationships formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, initially with Anglicans John and Linda Skinner and Roman Catholic Andy Raine in north Northumberland. In keeping with this analogy, God planted the seeds of vision and vocation in them that were born as ideas, images, metaphors and concepts. These became foundational to the ethos and spirituality of what later became Northumbria Community.

Often the material saw the light of day in the annual Easter workshop where relationships and teaching were explored, culminating in worship and witness on Holy Island on Easter Sunday. This pattern has become an annual high point, underlined by the renewal of community vows on the Island.



Looking out to Lindisfame

In the mid-1980s, the Nether Springs Trust was formed. It enabled John Skinner to exercise a ministry of spiritual direction within a contemplative calling. A few years later, a group led by Roy Searle, called Northumbria Ministries committed to mission in the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, met the Nether Springs group and they explored coming together. From June 1991, they started out on a joint journey.

Generation one: the founders

Northumbria Community is unusual in that there are at least three founders, not one person. **Moreover, it is more centred in values than personalities.** This is in contrast to Francis and Ignatius Loyola in whom the person and the charism are very closely intertwined. Romano in *Charism of the Founders* is very readable in exploring how this charism is recognised and transmitted. “*The Spirit demands fidelity and creativity from us. Merely copying the founder is doomed to failure.*”²⁹ Only such dynamic fidelity bears good fruit and “*the inheritance is passed down...incarnated in those who live again the experiences of their founder.*”³⁰ “*For any community the only hermeneutic and spiritual key to a true understanding of their founder is to love them.*”³¹ With St Francis, this loving is clearly what happens. I listened to conversation between a Benedictine and a Franciscan and both agreed that, with the former, the rule is more important than the founder. Indeed, Benedict is almost only known through his rule. The reverse is true with Francis; his light and life are the magnet, or the fire, under the Spirit.

As such, Northumbria Community are not quite like either. They are more like the Augustinians who formed much later but chose to honour the much earlier great man. In the case of Northumbria Community, the inheritance and the loving is in the fidelity of renewal, and creativity of reinterpretation, of the Celtic Northumbrian tradition with its heroes and heroines such as Aidan, Cuthbert and Hild. At their mother house, Celtic saints drift down the corridors and appear visibly on the doors of each bedroom, for each is named after a Celtic Saint. “*You are sleeping in Brendan*” they might say. Initially, it strikes you as odd and then curiosity takes over to find out more about the person you are spending the night with!

²⁹ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.16

³⁰ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.13

³¹ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 p.11 reiterated in the closing sentence of the book p.186

Romano also helps because **he distinguishes between the simpler charism of founding and the rarer charism of the founder.** Northumbria Community founders are probably just starters, but they themselves, like John the Baptist, are content to point away from themselves to longer lived charisms in the Celtic monastic tradition.

Generation two: the few

As the founders explored, an **unplanned, spontaneous community emerged** around them, called “the few”. Out of normal daily living, shared relationships and common values, a way to live became centred in the necessity of seeking God through what became called the values of *availability* and *vulnerability*. Several elements formed a chain linking them to a slice of the past: the influence of the Apostle John³², the tradition of the desert fathers, the values linking Martin of Tours, Patrick and the saints and scholars of Ireland, the heritage focusing on Aidan, Cuthbert and Hild, and the life in the world of the Franciscans. Most elements of this are reflected in the Finan cycle November daily readings within their office book *Celtic Daily Prayer* (or CDP as they themselves call it). Northumbria Community refer to this as “*Building the new on foundations of old*”.

Sometimes “the few” are overshadowed by the stature of the founders or the sheer numbers of the many who follow later. However, Romano pays attention to them, likening them to the first disciples around the Lord. They are the privileged witnesses of the original story, who have lived in intimate relationship with the founder(s). Historically, the biographies of Martin of Tours and Francis of Assisi came from such groups. **The few make the first discernment of the perennial task of transmitting the charism.** One danger is that they may be too legalistic in the name of fidelity, which actually betrays the founder's spirit. Yet how the charism works out in their lives becomes part of the transmission and the tradition.³³ Thus in generation two, the particular “both/and” features of the community crystallised out as values like alone and together, monastery and mission. The core values became part of the rule and the interpretive framework to hand on the tradition.

³² Roy Searle has written a thesis at Master's level on the Johannine Tradition *Rediscovering the Johannine Tradition For a Contemporary Age* 2002

³³ Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul's Press Slough 1994 pp.63-64

A mother house

In 1992, some families moved to what is now the Mother House at Hetton Hall. In Northumbria Community parlance, it is known as the “Nether Springs”. Lindisfarne or Holy Island retains its spiritual and historical primacy by being known



Hetton Hall

as the “Upper Springs”. This motif of two springs in the desert (from Judges 1:14-15) is recalled in *Celtic Daily Prayer* monthly readings days 13 and 14. It reminds the community that its very life, and any refreshment it brings, is itself a God-given gift to any who are in a spiritual desert. The community’s birth was also a response to the yearnings now focused in their characteristic three questions. **Hetton Hall is in practice the heart, home and hospitality of a monastic centre.**

The name Northumbria Community was officially adopted in 1994. Considerable numerical growth of people wanting connection to the community resulted in a process starting in 1995, which sought to move roles and responsibility from the original founders to a wider group. This has gone through various evolutions including a community council. It coincided with the growth by which Trevor Miller succeeded John Skinner and became partner to Roy Searle in overall leadership. In January 1998, the Skinners relinquished the responsibility they shared for the Community in order to concentrate on pioneering their European vision of the Celtic arc, a spiritual connection and progression from Turkey to Ireland. As such, the Community is notable because it has survived what is still felt by some as a painful split among founders over divergence of vision and inability to come to common discernment about it. **Recovery from adversity and failure may be more diagnostic of the quality of community than apparent absence of such tension.**³⁴

³⁴ Read Scott Peck *A Different Drum* Arrow 2005 for the fatal affect of pseudo-community

Generation three: the many

They arose through people making new kinds of connections with Northumbria Community. The creation and sale of the publication of *Celtic Daily Prayer* and CDs of their music is one reason. Another is that Northumbria Community have been invited to present at Christian festivals like *Spring Harvest* and *Greenbelt*; many have met them this way. This has led to a change of process from the past, whereby information about Northumbria Community is accessed before relationship with Northumbria Community people. This has led to the need to review how people may truly join, not just consume Northumbria Community products. **The monastic tradition, at least as far back as Benedict,³⁵ does not encourage easy joining.**

Community weekends and *Living What We Teach* induction are seen as crucial in transmitting the values. The view held by Northumbria Community is that you only “get” Northumbria Community by being there. The experience and ethos of the mother house and who is in community are crucial. Entry to deeper levels of belonging to Northumbria Community has been dependent upon relational links thus far (though some say earlier in the life of community, this reality was even less structured). Within living memory, there is a shift from a loose attitude of “you’re in because we know you” to a formalized teaching “you must come on a *Living What We Teach*”. Issues making the latter difficult to achieve consistently include lack of liberty from work to attend, travel to the north-east of England and that it is always midweek.

A further question is whether the people who attach in some way, through the recent website, will become the 4th generation. It is arguable that web-based knowledge acquisition is creating a new way of connecting and is linked to the rise of the gift economy (where everything is traded free, like share ware). In a product/consumer worldview even more loose bonds of belonging or commitment are becoming seen as normal. This will need not just careful handling, but active resistance, for the dilution of the charism of any monastic group is a dangerous way forward. Monastic benefits cannot be casually acquired.

³⁵ The Rule of Benedict chapter 58 urges that a person wanting to join, knock on the door for at least four to five days to show patience before they may be admitted as a guest, not even novice.



Companions gathering locally at Evesham

Levels of commitment

The least committed are those who are only users of Northumbria Community materials. As such, they may not belong at all. Much more linked are the c.600 *Friends* who have relationship with Northumbria Community people. They receive (and many contribute to) the prayer letter and the internal news called CAIM. They pay, in effect, a subscription. Some may be trying

out vocation; for others it is the level they wish to stay at. Either is accepted. There isn't a formal novice category. About 200 *Companions* are the most committed and coherent group, who will have been through a teaching and relational induction process (including interview) which is bound to centre in their calling and the rule. This level is intended to be for life and serves as one distinguishing mark from being *Friends*. As far as I know there is not a formal first taking of vows, but *Companions* will be expected to renew their vows each Easter at Holy Island.

At all levels, Northumbria Community is either trans- or post-denominational. From the outset the founders were a mix of Anglican, Baptist and Catholic. Increasingly, there are those of no denomination at all. Perhaps today it feels most like being with Baptists who have discovered liturgy and monastery, rather than Anglicans who have discovered community.

Monks or friars?

At a number of points so far I have made connections to the Franciscan tradition. I do this not to question Northumbria Community's Celtic preference but for other reasons. **The first is that as a Franciscan put it to me, monks live in the monastery; friars live out of a friary.** Northumbria Community, like most of the so-called new monastic groups, are much more "new friars". Few are solitaries like Brother Ramon or enclosed contemplatives like the Clare of old.

The second reason is that, in inner spirit, Northumbria Community seem to me more like "new franciscan" than "new monastic". Not only are they out in the world, but they are often laughing; their enjoyment of life is conspicuous. At the same time, there is something in the common life they share which is humble, playful, carefree, and even crazy. The latter is a term used with approval in explanatory Franciscan literature. Day 29 of the monthly readings celebrates the Lady Poverty. The Nether Springs site also has a wonderful simplicity, almost poverty, about it. The accommodation is perfectly adequate yet feels like a time warp from a previous era. Meal times model the same qualities of simplicity and generosity that love to give away even what there is.



What gifts do Northumbria Community offer us?

I have chosen the word “gifts”, being both wider and less technical than charisma, to emphasise that these things are received, rather than dreamt up. Their insights, and even life together, are not possessions as such and Northumbria Community in my experience are very good at practicing one of their values which they call “not holding onto what is not ours to keep”. Meeting generosity and people holding things loosely and lightly is one of the pleasures of journeying with them.

All the gifts I have noted naturally are set within the framework of the rule. The rule itself is not like that of Benedict, which is both the inspiration to a calling and a manual of community practice including disciplinary procedures. It is more like something out of the literature of the desert fathers in that it more resembles a collection of sayings. Biblical texts jostle with wise words old and new. Northumbria Community themselves sometimes call the rule a scaffolding, by which community build a life with God. **Or they liken it to having spectacles.** The point is to look through them, not at them. Both pictures are modest about the rule; it is a means to a greater end. Yet they also grant it is more than that. It offers stability to the community. It is a yardstick to measure progress, or a metronome to pace the rhythm of its life. **It focuses the calling and charisma.** I suppose it also acts as a good fitness program, stretching but not overtaxing the follower, not simply saying “do ten press ups” but offering a framework to build healthy habits and lives³⁶.

As I have listened and lived with them, certain couplets have gained prominence. Pairs of things held in tension are perhaps characteristic of Northumbria Community. It is then no accident that the most condensed rule is two operative words: availability and vulnerability. In turn, they cash out as being available to God and to others. That in turn is related to monastery and mission. It may be that **availability is about direction and vulnerability is about style in that direction.** I notice the same with the Franciscan rule. There are three ways of service (or direction) which give

³⁶ To explore the Rule further, see Trevor Miller *A Way of Living: Introducing the Rule of the Northumbria Community* Northumbria Community Trust 2004

expression to the vows: a balance across study, prayer and work. But there are also three notes (or style): humility, love and joy. These are essential to characterise the lives of those living the directions.³⁷ How we are counts so much more than simply what we do.

Availability is:

- firstly to God in the cell of our hearts, to seek his face
- to others through hospitality - in so doing we welcome the Christ too
- to others by care, concern and intercession
- by participation in mission, responding to initiative of the Spirit

Vulnerability is intentional by:

- being teachable - through choice, prayer, exposure to Scripture and being accountable to others in order to effect change
- taking the “heretical imperative” - constructive criticism asking awkward questions that often upsets the status quo
- making our priority relationships not reputation
- living “church without walls” such that the life of God in us can be seen, challenged and questioned, as we build friendships outside the Christian ghetto³⁸

Within those few words, there are a number of spiritual dynamics. I think some of them are typical of most monasticism and others spring more from the Celtic background. My instinct is to begin with what Northumbria Community call *alone* and *together*.

1) Alone and Together

Alone

The order of words is important. There is something fundamental about being alone. **Being alone is often confused with words like loneliness and being an individual.** The two are perhaps connected. Loneliness might

³⁷ See Principles of 3rd Order SSF Day 21. “When these characteristics are evident throughout the Order, its work will be fruitful. Without them all that it attempts will be in vain.”

³⁸ This is my own shortened summary. For the fuller version with commentary on its spirit and purpose and a collection of key texts that underlie it, see Trevor Miller *A Way of Living: Introducing the Rule of the Northumbria Community* Northumbria Community Trust 2004



be called the unwelcome absence of others, whereas being alone can be the pleasure and adventure of solitude. Being an individual is a way of being a particular example, often a differentiated example of humankind. By contrast, being a person is “*the unique intersection of the relationships in which it is involved.*”³⁹ **We can only be persons because of others.** I note that we never speak of the three

individuals of the Trinity and have been rightly schooled to call them persons. Their life holds being *alone* and *together*. They are persons in community, though their being “three in one” goes beyond even our stretched minds.

I think it is a counter-cultural value to stress the necessity of being alone, in a noisy, urbanised culture blindly scampering from fear of loneliness. In Northumbria Community there is conscious dependence on the Desert tradition and a well-used phrase is “*your cell will teach you everything*”. Each monk in the desert would have had their own small place in which significant time was spent. **It was thought that it was not so much what you would do in your cell, as what it would do to you.** Silence, solitude and the desert are interweaved themes that are common currency in monasticism. The Rule of Benedict urges it.⁴⁰ Henri Nouwen remarks, “*Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life*”.⁴¹ Romano, speaking of how the charism is reborn in the life of a follower, baldly says “*no one else can do it for them*”.⁴² Here is the insistence that each person needs to take responsibility for their own spiritual life. **Neither the rule, nor the community, nor its corporate worship can deliver what the cell will expose.**

This is of cardinal importance if today’s Christians are to recover from the viruses of consumerism and dependency that are rife in church life and have

³⁹ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion 2003 p.53

⁴⁰ Rule of Benedict chapter 6

⁴¹ Henri Nouwen *Making All Things New* quoted in Richard Foster *Devotional Classics* HarperSanFrancisco 2000 p.136

⁴² Antonio Romano *The Charism of the Founders* St Paul’s Press Slough 1994 p.178

crossed almost unnoticed from the deeply addictive western culture in which we live. We are conditioned to more not less, to provision on the shelf not surprising finds in strange places, and to opening a package not creating it ourselves. The cell may be what we most flee from, for it will strip us of pretence, our glib second-hand opinions, our preference for other experts to top up our spiritual bank balance and **most dreadfully it will show us ourselves.** But this is the doorway to truer liberation in Christ. As such, the desert is no place of escapism but rather of stark reality. The cell is the address for finding our own vulnerability and being vulnerable to God.⁴³

The cell, because it is bare but for a Bible, is a place for listening. It reminds me of a remark by a therapist on a slimming program on TV for grossly overweight people. “*You must learn to take food to nurture your body not blank out your mind*”. **Listening to God in the solitude is far from the inflated diet of information fed to us by the secular and Christian world.** Another connection comes from the line of the good servant whose attitude is “to hear is to obey”. I was fascinated to discover the view of Nouwen that the linguistic root of the prime monastic word obedience is the Latin *audire*, to listen.⁴⁴ **Obedience, availability and alone are connected.** We cannot be available if we will not listen. We cannot listen if we will not be attentive. We cannot attend unless we enter silence.

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Together

Sitting in your garden shed by yourself accompanied by a candle, might be a twee expression of being alone but it would hardly be “new monasticism”. **Because our deepest identity is being persons, alone is balanced by being together.**⁴⁵ As such, our view of humanity is derived from Trinity. It is part of being in God’s image. Rowan Williams notes that our society is at the same time deeply individualistic and yet also conformist shown,

⁴³ CDP provides one longer intense exposure to the value of alone through its Finan December readings, exploring “poustinia”. This is the normal Russian word for desert, but has come to mean the place where the hermit went. It is not necessarily a secluded spot, but essentially a state of mind and heart. The emphasis on alone is underlined in the diagnostic set of 31 readings in CDP for each month. The first two are about silence and the contemplative.

⁴⁴ Henri Nouwen *Making All Things New* quoted in Richard Foster *Devotional Classics* HarperSanFrancisco 2000 p.136

⁴⁵ In the understanding of the Rule of Benedict, monks called to be solitaries are those who have already mastered the demands of being in monasteries.

for example, in peer group fashion.⁴⁶ Both forces are equally destructive of true community because neither is founded on an understanding of persons. Individuality will degenerate inexorably into competition, perhaps held back artificially by rules. Capitalism is one example. Conformity uses the rule to produce uniformity and communism has shown us the ugly face of such societies.⁴⁷ Only community based in persons will liberate distinctive vocations held in mutual respect. Persons know the primacy of love, for it is loving relationship which comes from the other that has made me what I uniquely am. It is no surprise that marriage is described by some as the smallest example of true community, both for the centrality of love and the presence of deep difference, in this case, brought by gender. **Love in community will always have to work with the genuine difficulty of difference, out of the knowledge of our own frailty.**

Bonhoeffer argued that **it was essential that members become disillusioned with idealism about community**⁴⁸. For ideals would set up their law and turn to accusation. As a Lutheran working instinctively from Justification, he expected there would be clear fallenness in the community, for its existence was only brought into being because it had in common the forgiving love of Christ. Francis rejoiced in his own failure, weakness and worthlessness as the essential prompt to humility, which was the only antidote to pride and which unchecked leads to judgmental attitudes in the community.⁴⁹ The stories of desert fathers frequently illustrate this desire to **“renounce the power of judgement over someone else”**.⁵⁰ The briefest is as follows, “A brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest. Abba Bessarion got up and followed him; he said, ‘I too am a sinner’.”⁵¹ Throughout the value of *together*, vulnerability is writ large.

This self-knowledge leading to refusal to judge and interfere in the lives of others comes out in the common life at Hetton Hall. The community there seems to me quite deliberately understated and not intense. Visitors are not buttonholed about their spiritual identity or health. The conversations among team are always rich in jokes and leg pulling. **There is so much**

⁴⁶ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion 2003 p.51

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion 2003 p.58

⁴⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* SCM 1965 pp.15-18

⁴⁹ John Michael Talbot *The Lessons of St Francis* Plume 1998 ch. 5 p.75f

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion 2003 p.24

⁵¹ Rowan Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* Lion 2003 p.29

laughter that you suspect something serious is happening. Persons are understood and valued, held within the stability of the pattern of offices, quiet hour before lunch and shared meals. These create a firm structure, but that at the same time leaves a style that feels loose and permission-giving. This feel is not explicitly stated but simply lived.

Another aspect is that the more I have got to know the dispersed community of Northumbria Community members, I have noticed the higher than average proportion of people who are either on a subsequent marriage or single but divorced. In saying this, I think no less of any of them; I am pointing up the existence of a transforming community of acceptance in the face of pain and failure. Sadly, by contrast, it is an area of life where church is often more experienced as being censorious. The end of a marriage often leads to people leaving churches.⁵²

A pleasing subtle statement of this pair of key values *alone* and *together* is built into the architecture of the mother house site. The house and chapel speak of the value *together*, while the grounds and the *Poustinias* (buildings to house one hermit) testify to the necessity of *alone*. This reality may be worth pointing out to visitors, so that they can more consciously use the space to live the values. So *alone* and *together* steers the course between the rock of individualism on which the ship of community would crash and it steers against the whirlpool of unhealthy dependence on community into which it could be sucked.



Poustinia

⁵² Philip Richter and Leslie J. Francis *Gone But Not Forgotten* D.L.T. 1998 p.70



2) Monastery and mission

Northumbria Community have noted the ebb and flow of the tides around Lindisfarne. When the tide is in, contact with the world beyond is cut off and monastery beckons. When the tide is out, then a way over to others in mission is open. The tidal analogy strongly reinforces that both forces need each other

and that there is natural flow from one to the other. **So this fresh expression of church is unusual and noteworthy in that both factors are deep in its DNA, and profoundly well-balanced.** Many older forms of monasticism were enclosed and thus less missional. They attracted but did not venture out. The Celtic, Franciscans or Jesuits would be closer to what Northumbria Community live out. The danger for many fresh expressions is the reverse. Their temptations are to activism and to seek results in order to justify their existence before the watching church. Such anxiety is contrary to the spirit of quietly confident monasticism.



There is a further interweaving of the two strands in that the focus for monastery is Nether Springs/Hetton Hall, but it clearly has its own mission as a retreat centre. Those who inhabit (and to some extent create) “thin places” (where the boundary of heaven and earth grows thin) know these have a missional effect. Guests include those open to discover faith, but the majority who come are the faithful and increasingly over the years those falling out of church. To the latter, there is a remedial hospitality that is a kind of mission. Those who together exhibit the communal spiritual life lived well will offer a counter to the sometimes deadening effect of congregational life. **Monastery naturally includes mission.**

It is equally held that all those **engaged in mission need to operate out of the monastery of the heart.** Unless the life is being lived, the witness will be flawed and hollow. Traditional expressions of mission, centred on proclamation through evangelistic campaigns or cold calling, are foreign to the Northumbria Community ethos for several reasons. Mission in the Celtic tradition is oblique. Kate Tristram, Deputy Warden on Lindisfarne, expressed it in a lecture that “*mission is a by-product of being on pilgrimage.*” Yet this oblique way works, because those seeking God are naturally attractive to others. Those who together exhibit the life lived with and for God, will have evangelistic effect by the quality of their spiritual communal presence. Mission is seen as expression of pilgrimage as “wandering for the love of God”, preferably done communally, and with a preference for going to the poor. Maybe both the missional and monastic practices lead Northumbria Community to other pairs of values, like loose at the edges and committed at the core. The hospitality of monastery and the connections in mission will meet untidy situations that tight boundaries don’t suit.

Because part of the mission is the life of the community, it is no accident that where there is focused mission beyond the monastery, it is done in teams and Northumbria Community people in the area are encouraged to “*go and gather*”. That not only increases the variety of gifts offered in mission to story telling, dance, song, drama, etc. It also once more models the life lived which is the attractive value.

3) Abbot and bishop

Those who take the Encounters series may have spotted that, from time to time, I make a plea for fresh expressions of church to learn from the variety in Celtic monastic patterns of ministry.⁵³ One of these is held to be the existence of abbots like Hild who was responsible for the monastery and the wandering bishop like Aidan who engaged more in mission.⁵⁴ I stumbled upon this first in the embryonic thinking of the leaders of *Living Proof* (Encounters on the Edge No. 1) but since 2002 have seen it lived out in Northumbria Community and even the labels are used, but with inverted commas as people in Northumbria Community don’t take themselves too seriously.

⁵³ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today’s Church* D.L.T. 2000 p.6

⁵⁴ Encounters on the Edge No.26 *A Rocha Christians, Conservations and the Community Church Army* 2005 p.14 Encounters on the Edge No.25, *A Short Intermission How Can Church Be Expressed Within The Arts Church Army* 2005 p.25

I don't know whether the setting out of these roles came from reading Celtic church material, was adopted to provide a bastion to living out the equal importance of monastery and mission, or whether it safeguarded the tradition of bringing together those two strands that made Northumbria Community in the early 1990s. However, it is clear that having Trevor Miller as "abbot" and Roy Searle as "bishop" does set in place the focusing on, and inherent guarding of, the balance of monastery and mission. **Thus energy for mission and stability in monastery are both nurtured.** I confess a preference for dispersed patterns of church authority, for it encourages partnership rather than individual power. It models diversity not uniformity. It exemplifies that in community there must be working at difference. The two are not unlike traditional mother and father roles - the homemaker and forager. The roles are so different that it is easy to see the value of both and the need to discover them for themselves. It is another example of the disastrous choice of the one person leader model from the medieval period. **I regret that with fresh expressions of church, both history and economics perpetuate deployment patterns that just have a single pioneer leader.** Almost invariably, it is a bishop figure and the danger is that these fresh expressions of church can become exhausted by their own activism, unsustainable for the lack of a stable centre, and malnourished for lack of strength or depth of spirituality to sustain the mission.



Roy Searle and Trevor Miller

Here it is abundantly clear that Trevor and Roy enjoy their relationship. They respect one another's wisdom and different callings; alone, one might go out and innovate and the other remain put and cautiously guard against captivity by the new. But together, they are united through the rule and its values. They have covenanted to express availability by spending time together weekly at

least by phone or email and monthly by taking a whole day. The commitment includes living the vulnerability of being mutually accountable. As Northumbria Community has grown, so both have chosen to share their specific callings with teams, one for monastery and one for mission.

Ian Bradley comments "*the pattern of life in Celtic monasteries was characterised by a sense of balance and rhythm, between solitude and community, activity and contemplation, worship and pastoral care.*"⁵⁵ I have taken three interweaving examples of balance in the life of Northumbria Community and highlighted them, rather than describe many of their activities, because it is these instincts which may be the best gifts they offer to the church, rather than specific patterns of community or mission which others might try to copy, but which would not spring from the charism.

4) Worship and the charism of Northumbria Community

The strength of *Celtic Daily Prayer* is its simplicity, accessibility, freshness, realism, and, what I would call, its "aspirational" texts. There is a welcome absence of narrative prayer describing how excellent God is (which he presumably already knew) and more that puts into words our desire to seek him. The admitted weakness is the uneven nature of its often very short lectionary readings and the meditations for the day, only most of which bear biannual repetition. There are some in Northumbria Community who admit that some passages and thoughts which were significant and poignant in its founding and shaping years, no longer resonate and require significant explanation for the 3rd and 4th generation reader. It would not be difficult to do this for the prominent 31 readings for the month and might assist the new friend (or even companion) to stay in touch with the founding stories⁵⁶. It is almost as though Northumbria Community has, by publication of CDP, created its own *Book of Common Prayer* and is now faced with the struggle to find how it creates what Anglicans call *Common Worship* including its CD version. The Northumbria Community website and use of pdf files are beginning to facilitate home production of sources that rightly continue to evolve. The most recent update has tried to iron out the lamented misprints in the daily lectionary readings.

Bradley thinks the genius of earlier Celtic worship was its ability to **value both formal monastic liturgy and nurture popular devotion in the home.** He advocates a twin-track approach, not trying to fuse the two, as one is counter-cultural and the other culturally friendly.⁵⁷ CDP has elements of both

⁵⁵ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* D.L.T. 2000 p.18

⁵⁶ This is noted as important by Romano *Charism of the Founders* St Paul's 1994 p.110

⁵⁷ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* D.L.T. 2000 pp.150-154

within one cover. Perhaps the offices lean more to the well-rounded formal, with clear allusions to biblical passages and well-loved prayers, while the prayers for set days or functions are more immediate, earthy and salty.



The worship in the chapel at Hetton Hall makes a deep impression. **There is a sense of rapid and natural descent into depth and stillness.** The slow pace both of spoken and sung liturgy carries conviction. Though the music is drawn from the genre of folk singing and is accessible and rustic, it has somehow the simplicity and almost the gravitas of plainsong. It carries you. More than that, even for a

person freshly exposed to it, incomers would detect that it is sung and said from the heart and the memory. This contrasts favourably to the offering of ethereal technical excellence brought by a non-believing classically trained choir, whether playing on Classic FM or live in some English Cathedrals. Northumbria Community people when they sing pray twice.

I notice with gratitude that both the rule and prayer book have a strong emphasis on the centrality of Christ as befitting a Celtic root and engaging with a contemporary multi-faith mission context. Balancing this focus on Christ is the emphasis in spirituality on seeking God and becoming more what he calls us to be. This characteristic seeking is not one of a desperate person lost without bearings in a religious fog. Rather it is the sense of longing for connection and deeper discovery; it is expression of intention to live life with, in and for God. Such language of journey makes wide use of Celtic sources and models humility, discovery and passion. All of these fit well for today's mission. It is also significant that the liturgies were evolved over time by the community. So they express and sustain its particular *charism*.

Most Anglican liturgies arise from a Christendom pastoral context and do little to nurture the calling and *charism* of pioneers and evangelists.

No wonder there is some drive for more creative acts of worship amongst the fresh expressions. They are rightly looking for what will feed their calling and identity.

The monastic and church

Classic monastic communities have long been seen as specialist groups within, but not complete examples of, the church. If the church is a circus, they might be the clowns (Francis?) or the lion tamers (Jesuits?). History helped them evolve that way, as protest against some weakness in the church. Another difference is that they are more difficult to join than church, and involve discernment of some further and deeper calling. **Their specific charism also points up the existence of a particular vocation that may not be shared by all Christians.** The vows of renunciation of all property and marriage also set them apart, in that this is not required of all Christians.

At the same time, they have never been totally separate from the church. Various sources from Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* to the passionate vows of canonical obedience made by founders like Francis and Ignatius Loyola all agree. At the same time there has been some desire not to be totally controlled by the institutional aspects of the church, which they have in common with groups like the protestant missionary societies and Church Army.

If the gap between monastic and church is too great then the danger is it is seen only as the call to the few; it buttresses an unhelpful unattainable view of sainthood and fosters a lay/clerical divide. The early creation of the 3rd order within the Franciscan story and the case of Benedictine Oblates show at least the desire for the charism to cascade wider for those whose calling is to stay in the world and not become enclosed, or who want to take the spirit of monastic vows. However, distance between monastery and church enables it better to offer prophetic witness to church and world, to hold up a higher path that others could climb. Their untidiness as standing outside episcopal territorial jurisdiction and yet belonging bears witness to the way the Spirit blows where he wills. They illustrate how following the gospel of Jesus is likely to lead to a search for new wineskins. **It is thus essential that they are allowed to disturb us.**

Fresh expressions of church have prompted looser ecclesial definitions

Our evolving ecclesiological understanding suggests we should think of only “expressions of church” and no one example is a full expression. All expressions are partial and in need of the others. More specifically, the centrality and sufficiency of congregationalism is being challenged by both smaller unit church like cell or household church but also by the need for church to relate more loosely through networks and even the internet. Church is becoming seen as a multi-level reality, not just a congregation-sized organisation.

From the missiological perspective, the need to inculturate both gospel and church further undergirds the legitimacy of creating particular examples, shaped by mission, that will inevitably be specific and partial. This looser, overlapping ecclesial world would more easily have space to accommodate the new monastic as another expression of church. **All these factors blur the earlier more firmly drawn lines between church and monastic.**

Is Northumbria Community church?

Northumbria Community are clear they are not a church in the sense of being a denomination or a set of congregations. In the past, they have been very careful not to give offence at this point. Now two things are changing.

The first is that as the language changes and definitions loosen, some parts of the Christian landscape are becoming called church, though not a church. Further examples include groups previously called parachurch such as mission societies and youth ventures. Reflecting theologically on all this, some pictures of the church, such as light or a city on a hill, emphasise the church as gathered, strongly visible and working attractively. While **other images of church, like salt and yeast work by being dispersed, virtually invisible and subversive.** This variety of images and their dynamics suggest more space for seeing dispersed monastic communities like Northumbria Community as being church without claiming to be “a church”. If we are minimalist about essential ecclesial qualities, this group is centred in Christ and following him. They have a common life. They live out something of the journeys of the classic four marks⁵⁸. In terms of constitutive marks, word and sacrament both are present and practiced. There have been baptisms and eucharist is part of the rhythm at Nether Springs.

⁵⁸ For an explanation of the classic four marks, see *Mission-shaped Church* GS 1523 Church House Publishing 2004 pp.96-99

The second factor is that Northumbria Community is working at a time when the language of post-church Christians has arisen. While this term does not stand up to theological inspection as being technically possible, it is around and acts as shorthand for people about whom most of the following are true; they still have Trinitarian faith, practice private spirituality, may well go to a small group, but have given up on attendance at congregational forms of public worship. The more reflective may be asking “what is church?” and think they haven’t left the real thing at all, only a pale shadow of it. Connection to a loose-edged group like Northumbria Community that talks of “church without walls” could be very natural. **It is one part of the body of Christ some ecclesial exiles still think they can belong to.** Others are further out and these journeys are documented in *A Churchless Faith and Journeying In Faith* by Alan Jamieson. As a bishop wrote, “*The issue that churches must face up to...is not so much that people do not believe in God but they do not find the church is credible*”.⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, an increasing percentage (now one third of those attached to Northumbria Community) see it as their church. A further third see Northumbria Community as part of being church for them, while they continue happily in local congregations where they live. In addition, some in Northumbria Community come from a non-churched background and Northumbria Community is the only church they have ever known. It is how some have found faith. From there, standard congregational life with its weaker sense of community, narrower attitude of enquiry, more anaemic worship style and disconnection from issues of life, would not be seen as a step forward. I regret the lack of spirituality in the churches that creates the exodus, but **I do not regret the existence of groups like Northumbria Community that can reawaken faith and hope, and on the way, disturb past boundaries of what is church.**

⁵⁹ Nigel McCullough *A Gospel to Proclaim* 1992 D.L.T. p.84

Northumbria Community and the future

When a fresh expression has survived its early years, further issues arise. Northumbria Community is an illustration of this and most of the following factors will apply, though they have a specific shape in this context.

Welcoming the exile question

The questions “*Who do you seek?*” and “*How then shall we live?*” beat strongly in the public life of the community. They are obviously reflected in the content of the office liturgies, the monthly readings and in the name of some booklets. They undergird the rich tones of spirituality and the grace-led demands of ethical discipleship in Northumbria Community. However the third question “*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” seems to me to exist in the shadow of the other two. It is neither talked about so much as the other two, nor do the liturgies much reinforce its importance. It is covered less in the commentary on the rule and yet I guess this third question is becoming more and more significant in our time. The exile question cannot be answered through what some in Northumbria Community feel and have expressed to me, which is they are exiled from the church and more at home in the world. Our identity as belonging to Christ (that other King) means we are subjects of a different kingdom however much we like its non-members and we are fellow citizens with those other tiresome Christians.

It is this third question from the period of Exile which connects today’s church with its own profound self-questionings: how God is to be understood, how our exile from the centre of society is to be reacted to, and how Christians are to be his people as a curious and even despised minority in a post-Christendom world.⁶⁰ **It is the perfect question for the mission and monastery of today.** It opens the way for lament as well as praise. It engages with suffering and incomprehension. It models vulnerability and is a royal route to the strength that only comes in weakness. I have suggested to the leadership of Northumbria Community that they take its own chosen third question, connect it back up with the exilic context of the westernised Church and use it far more widely and deeply. This would help its members

⁶⁰ Encounters on the Edge No.13 *Exploring Exile* was my first exploration of the topic.

explore their identity in relation to a foreign, powerful and often dismissive surrounding culture. This point has been keenly heard, generously welcomed and is beginning to surface in their prayer letters and comments to others inquiring about Northumbria Community.

How do they multiply?

The process of multiplying their life in other countries and other houses is beginning naturally but uncertainly and the period of my accompanying the community may have helped to apply the lessons learnt from the creation of fresh expressions. Northumbria Community, because of its inner paired balances, is both gifted and unusual in its acceptance of thinking about diversity which will help it on this journey. It is not, by choice, a controlling body.

Their increasing popularity with some 3000 linked to them has created a problem. Though they welcome the contact, their commitment to “*being relational rather than functional, to being descriptive rather than prescriptive, is extremely important to us and we are very concerned that the Community does not become institutionalised, uniform or overly organised.*”⁶¹

Previous monastic orders grew by replication not contextual reproduction. For example, the Benedictines spread in the time of Christendom when copying exactly was a cultural value. In the 8th century this was used to reform the life of both secular and religious clergy. “*In his desire to encourage and standardise education in this realm Charlemagne made the Rule of St Benedict the de facto rule for the monasteries of his empire.*”⁶²

Today we cannot think like that and Northumbria Community are facing the inculturation questions that face all church planters when the church reproduces. **What is essential to being Northumbria Community and what is contextual?** Is there a difference between Northumbria and being *Northumbrian*? Can you be Northumbria Community in France or USA? When other expressions of Northumbria Community arise then come the relational questions, historically seen as working out the mark of catholicity. These are not the same as enforcing uniformity, but involve finding ways to express unity in diversity. It is a new journey for a group that has grown up in one place

⁶¹ www.northumbriacommunity.org

⁶² *Dictionary of Historical Theology* Trevor A Hart (ed.) PaterNoster Grand Rapids 2000 p.64

that has had a founding feel. Maybe the uncertain mission path from the 1st century church in Jerusalem is the earliest example of these kind of tensions.

Keeping its character

As it grows larger in one geographical area and as it multiplies in others, there is an inherent tension between remaining the questing, loose, dispersed, relational community with which it began and becoming an organized coherent and cohesive body. Little will be gained by resolving to opt for one of those two forces. As a group which admires being “purposefully lost”, it should be wary of being “found” too readily. There is a cultural tendency, through the processes of inspection, appraisal and litigation, to “improve” what we have which almost invariably leads to more control and systems.

By these means a charism can become encrusted with an organisation that is foreign to its wild spirit.

Some similar particular temptations occurred early for the Franciscans as within 75 years the movement reached 200,000 members. Today that would be called revival. I shall watch to see how Northumbria Community respond as they flourish. Will they move to owning property, which is a move away from simplicity? At present they do not own Hetton Hall and overall are glad of the spiritual challenge this vulnerability brings. Faced with popularity and greatly increased size, some say the Franciscans became hierarchical, the later versions of the rule become less radical in conformity to previous monastic patterns, and tighter obedience was brought in to episcopal control.⁶³

I am indebted for the identification of two other interior dangers to Jonathan R. Wilson reflecting on the experience of American new monasticism:

“Perhaps the greatest temptation faced by the new monasticism is simply the perpetuation of its own life... the other great temptation in the life of the new monastic is to swing from the danger of perpetuating its own life to the equally mistaken conviction that the new monastic exists for the sake of the world for this is only its penultimate goal.”⁶⁴

⁶³ The three rules of the order and the testament of St Francis can be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franciscan>

⁶⁴ *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* Rutba House (Ed.) Cascade Books 2005 p.6

These seem to me to be wise words for any new monastic group to ponder. I would hope that the values in the rule of Northumbria Community mean it is well equipped to resist these dangers but I am aware that the charism does not transfer automatically down the generations or across the multiplying process.

What more does the new monastic in general say to the church?

People want a spirituality that makes sense of life and has vigorous yet possible demands. Perhaps another way to put this is to speak of the attraction of the craziness of following Jesus seriously, or living the gospel.

“When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission he told them to be poor and to take nothing with them. And he told them to do things that were impossible to do all by themselves. So it is for all missions. Communities and members are called to be poor and to do impossible things such as to build community and to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and wholeness to people.”⁶⁵

There is a chronic need to recover rhythms beyond those imposed by demands of work and lures of leisure. The hardest rhythms to find seem to be those that will enable us to enter the domain of *alone*, to seek God with attentiveness and accept the vulnerability of that encounter. The old “quiet time” offered rhythms of exposure to scripture, but easily slid off into being educational about scripture, not entry into the experience beyond the text.



The Chapel at Hetton Hall

⁶⁵ Jean Vanier *Community and Growth* DLT 1979 p.87

It was also far weaker in exploring depth in prayer and did not touch the commonality of shared usage in prayer. **Longer rhythms will include times of self-denial of which coming out of work and family in order to take a retreat may be more significant than the temporary loss of chocolate.**

Bradley asks, “*Could it be ... people are actually craving commitment, discipline and obedience?*”⁶⁶ This cannot be found only alone and so links to the desire for accountable community. **Together is one of the gifts that may help us dare to be alone.** Somewhere I read, “*He who cannot be alone cannot be together and he who cannot be together, will not be able to be alone.*”

It may be all as simple as the old message of monasticism. The life of the church is simply not spiritual enough; it does not either ask or offer enough. John Drane’s latest book came too late for me to do more than glance at it. Its title links in here: *Do Christians Know How To Be Spiritual?*⁶⁷

My own journey of the last few years makes me think that the new monasticism is more significant than many kinds of fresh expressions which commendably focus on connecting with those outside the church, but may still pander to

society’s values. **If the need today is for deep people then here is the portal to inner attentiveness in following Jesus and the painful but liberating process of being transformed by him.** No other fresh expression can afford to ignore this strand and will be well advised to spend significant time pursuing this depth of spirituality. Only when the mission meets the monastery will there be balanced sustainability.



George Lings
March 2006

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

⁶⁶ Ian Bradley *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today’s Church* D.L.T. 2000 p.55

⁶⁷ John Drane *Do Christians Know How To Be Spiritual?* D.L.T. 2005

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