

THE MONASTIC APPEAL FOR POST MODERN PEOPLE

Lecture at CA&H Summer School by Ray Simpson
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Ivan Illich, the philosopher made famous by his book *De-schooling Society*, observed that 'neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change society – rather you must tell a new and powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story – one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and present into a coherent whole, and shines light into the future so we can take one step forward.' Can the New Monasticism become this preferred story?

FOUR SIGNS

Jesus urged people to read the signs of the times. He wanted his friends to relate their work to what is emerging, not to what has had its day (Luke 12:54, 55).

Four key signs of our times are:

- 1) Global overheating
- 2) Western 'affluenza'
- 3) Eastern strike-back by terror.
- 4) A vacuum being filled by non-Christian religions.

1. In regard to global overheating it is now too late to save large numbers of species and vast tracts of land. James Lovelock – famous for his Gaia theory of earth as a self-sustaining organism – predicts that starvation will cut the earth's population from six billion to less than one billion. Large parts of America, Australia, and Asia will become deserts. Europeans will flee north from their southern deserts. Britain will escape because the Gulf Stream, which currently keeps it warm, will be diverted by the melting ice caps. He predicts that Britain will become a Life-boat for Europe, and most of its inhabitants will live in sky-scrapers. Jesus says 'Blest are the meek: they shall inherit the earth.' An expression of Christianity that cherishes and is cherished by the earth, which treats it as a vineyard to be lovingly tended in love of its Creator, and of church communities that live simply and are self sustaining, is needed as never before.

2. In regard to 'affluenza' – this is the term coined by the child psychologist Oliver James to describe what he calls a virus spreading around the world's richest countries causing depression, anxiety, addiction and ennui. This is caused, he suggests, by advanced selfish capitalism which makes money from our dissatisfaction, which deludes itself that consumption and market forces can meet human needs of almost every kind. Advertising stokes false needs. Although we have everything we need, we work longer to acquire bigger houses and flashier goods, but the more we get, the worse we feel. Oliver James, who authored *Britain on the Couch*, and *Affluenza* (Vermilion 2007) asked during last year's England world cup performances 'Is the hysteria surrounding these symptomatic of a nation in crisis?' The hysteria, he suggests, reflects feelings of low status, insignificance, powerlessness and helplessness... While part of us longs to be the best. Jesus says 'Blest are the poor, the Kingdom of God is theirs'. An expression of Christianity that is rooted in the values of the Beatitudes as the way to lasting fulfilment is needed as never before.

3. Globalism stirs up fears, disorder and ethnic rivalry. The debate about a clash of civilisations between the capitalist Christian West and the largely poor, oppressed and Muslim lands, who perceive Christianity to be an anti Muslim crusade fuelled by power and greed, bodes ill for the future of the world. If however, a third way is offered, a movement within Christianity which renounces greed and power, there is hope. Monasticism offers a

pattern that engenders hospitality towards all, and trust. Jesus says 'Blest are those who build peace and hunger for justice'. An expression of Christianity that reaches out to those whom others reject as the axis of evil may be our only chance.

4. Mosques are well attended in Britain and are open seven days a week as centres of community and prayer. Sikh Gurdwaras likewise are multi functional centres which feed large numbers of people free of charge. Young people throng Buddhist monasteries for a week, a year or for life. In these communities religion is not fragmented and relegated to a mere individual possession. Jesus said 'Blest are those who are single in heart' – that is, unfragmented. I wonder if the great vacuum waiting to be filled is that of a holistic expression of Christ-centred community?

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre likens contemporary culture to the period when the Roman Empire began to disintegrate from the third Christian century onwards. He characterises contemporary society as 'a collection of strangers.' He, like many before him, believes that it was small monastic communities of virtue which maintained civilised life and saved the western world from barbarism. He suggests that it is small Christian communities who will have the most powerful effect on our present society.

CHURCHES ARE NOT HEEDING THESE SIGNS

Too many church people have so far failed to heed these signs of the times. In the second millennium, church people in the West became disconnected from the earth, from the poor, from peace-making and from holistic community. Some churches became addicted to success. Bigger, more, means better. Some have become addicted to a triumphalism that ignores injustice and they become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The church has also become disconnected from religion that is the journey into humanness. The eminent Roman Catholic psychiatrist Dr Jack Dominian writes: 'It is no secret that in the western Church there is haemorrhage of Mass attenders. The Magisterium knows this and has had, for the last twenty years, one answer, namely evangelisation through return to liturgy, sacraments and prayers. It is not working because for the last two thousand years the human side of the Incarnation has been largely neglected.'

The second millennium church was based on order, and feared letting its members 'go with the flow'. The emerging church seeks flexible frameworks which enable all people to move and grow and flow with God's Spirit within the natural patterns around them.

Now there is a groundswell of Christians who put their energies into groups or networks rather than into congregations. While church attendance declines, Christian initiatives increase. The phrase *Liquid Church* has been used to describe this, as in Pete Ward's book of this title (Paternoster Press 2002). But how can these avoid being unreal, non-holistic, and like the over individualistic people in Moses' day, when everyone 'did what was right in their own eyes'? Christians who follow an individual path which keeps them on the move, uninvolved in the day-to-day life of a faith community, are like scattered fragments of metal - they need a magnet that can make them part of a pattern. They are like spokes not yet placed in a wheel - they need a hub to which they can relate. So also do many small churches. They don't respond to being slotted in to some bureaucratic arrangement; they need an organic relationship with a spiritual home.

So large numbers of Christian groups, networks, small churches, as well as mobile Christians outside them, cannot flourish unless there are also centres of stability, prayer, resource and hospitality to which they may relate.

For these and other reasons an increasing number of Christians are turning to 'the new monasticism'.

NEW MONASTICISM DOES HEED THESE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The coin of the post modern world is authenticity. Post modern people mistrust claims by institutions that do not model what they talk about. They will not dedicate the whole of their lives to ideologies or movements that are not open to scrutiny. They might grab a package from a church, but they won't stay with it.

Post modern people want to tap into something bigger than themselves, but not if it is pre-programmed. The refusal to be programmed is reflected in the current glut of reality TV shows. Reality TV is about not being pre-programmed. The people in some of them may be selfish, stupid and dysfunctional, but at least the viewer can eavesdrop on life which is not pre-programmed. Shows like *The Castaways*, *Monastery*, and *The Convent* have attracted millions with a glimpse of an alternative, authentic type of community. Churches that 'put on', as it were, Sunday services, but provide no unprogrammed experience of community, lose the plot.

WHAT IS THE NEW MONASTICISM?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a prophetic letter to his brother Karl in January 1935:

The restoration of the Church must surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have only one thing in common with the old, a life lived without compromise according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Jesus. Sadly, the German Church did not take hold of what he had conceived. In Scotland, however, George McLeod had been developing the Iona Community during those same war years. Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* became standard reading there.

A generation after Bonhoeffer the evangelical leader John Stott called for 'the re-monking' of the church. In this decade Eugene Petersen has called on Protestant church leaders to be radical and to make a calculated plan to replace their 'ego lust to be god' with a corporate pattern that makes space for God. He writes:

Historically the most conspicuous corporate construction that does this is the monastery... The genius of the monastery is its comprehensiveness; all the hours of the day are defined by prayer; all the activity of the monks is understood as prayer...

I think this is in *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* Eugene H. Peterson

Post modern Christians who seek a new monasticism are wary of structures that are imposed from the centre. They do not want to be trapped in a new legalism; they don't want to be shut off from ordinary people. They see themselves as on a journey, and can't pre-judge what they will be doing at a later stage of the journey. They want to be free to follow each prompting of the Spirit, to be single or to marry. Nevertheless, those who embrace new monasticism seek to be connected to God in the centre as well as in the streets, in the other parts of the Body of Christ as well as in their own hearts.

Basil of Caesarea, an early founder of monasticism, believed that monasticism is the living out of what every Christian is called in principle, to live.

Raimundo Panikar in his book *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype*, views the monk as an element that is in every person. He defines the monk as a person who so desires to reach the ultimate that he renounces all that distracts from this. For Panikar the fundamental monastic principle is Blessed Simplicity. The monk is the one who learns to say 'no' to all that fragments or creates barriers. But the modern monk does not say 'no' to anything that is real; he achieves simplicity through integration, not denial.

Five marks of 'the Inner Monk' are:

1. To live for God alone.

2. To be who you are

Flannery O'Connor, in his *The Habit of Being* describes this:

Just being who you are, not justifying or apologising. It sounds so easy, it's a life work not to get caught in producing, performing, proving, keeping accounts of indebtedness, waiting for gratitude, reward, ambition, manipulation, staggering self-pity, but cultivating the habit of being.

The Habit of Being- Letters of Flannery O'Connor ed (ii) (Farrat Straus Giroux 1979)

A true monk never takes a holiday from being a monk, that would indicate (s)he is fragmented.

3. To ripen patiently

Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet*, describes it thus:

To let each impression and each germ of a feeling come to completion wholly in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own intelligence, and await with deep humility and patience the birth-hour of a new clarity... not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer. It does come. But it comes only to the patient, who are there as though eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly still and wide.

Rainer Maria Rilke (iii) in *Letters to a Young Poet* trans M.D. Herter B. Norton (W. W. Norton 1954)

4. To establish spaces for solitude

C. G. Jung concluded that noise drowns the instinctive warnings of global catastrophe. It gives a false sense of security, it crowds out painful reflections. The real fear is what might come up from the depths if there was silence - all those things previously held at bay by noise.

5. To foster a heart of mercy towards all creation

The Desert Father Isaac described a merciful heart as a 'heart burning for the whole of creation, for people, birds, animals, demons and for every creature. Eyes running with tears at seeing and recalling all these.'

Much work and thought is happening around new monasticism in the USA. Some of this comes from years of solid foundations from Dorothy Day and others like her. A book edited by the Rutba House called *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Cascade Books)ⁱ includes these marks:

Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire; Sharing Resources; Hospitality to the Stranger; Pursuit of Justice and Reconciliation; Humble Submission to Christ's Body, The Church; Intentional Formation and a Community Rule; Care for the Plot of God's Earth Given to Us; Commitment to a Disciplined Contemplative Life.

Rutba House *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Cascade Books, Eugene, 2005)

In the New Monasticism the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are seen as one particular expression of three universal principles. It recognises that the principles are more primary than any particular ways in which they have been applied. The Three Life-giving Principles which apply to every part of life and from which all else flows: Simplicity, Purity and Respect. These principles relate to the three primal drives of money, sex and power. These drives can become idols that destroy us, or gifts that transform us. Simplicity is the essence of Life, and reflects the beauty of the Creator. Purity is the harnessing of Life, and reflects the wholeness of the Spirit. Respect is the relationships of Life, and reflects the servant heart of the Son.

Obedience is the joyful abandonment of ourselves to God and attentive listening to those who have oversight roles within the Body of Christ. Like the Trinity, each of the three gives to and receives from the other. The Three are One and the One is Three.

Some may understand the new monasticism as the latest of the periodic waves of renewal within traditional monasteries. But monasticism always had to take shape in the context of its time, and our time is different to any that has gone before. Post modern people have instant access to information, can choose a series of careers or lifestyles within one life time, have scientific knowledge of sexual and personal development, and so on. In the light of this I suggest these four new features of monasticism:

1. Monastic frameworks are more flexible

Routine is expendable if it inhibits God-given (in contrast to selfish) impulses to adventure. The core community does not have to turn up for everything. It can be good for the ego of a monk to have to fit into a framework that is not to his or her liking: the new monasticism is about mutual discerning of God's calling of each monk, AND of how the framework can best enable these to be used for God's glory and the up-building of others. This challenge for the new monastic framework is how can it avoid being a plaything of colliding egos? Part of the answer is to have agreed periods of listening and mutual accountability.

2. Leaders are mutually accountable

In the first two millennia obedience to the Abba is a fundamental requirement. This is healthy inasmuch as it spurs the monk to abandon self will. However, if the abba is blind or wilful or manipulative, this violates the monks as well as God. The abba himself needs to check out with someone. We suggest that the fully mature monks elect a group of wise, mature members who listen to God for the Abba and his decisions. Thus what we might call a presbyteral element is introduced into the monastery. In fact Benedictines make big decisions like a closure of a school collectively. In some new communities leaders are elected for a specified period.

3. Vows are multi track.

People are welcome to make vows of different kinds and different duration without it being assumed that some are 'better' than others. Within a monastery some may be celibate, and others married. Some may make trial vows; others make full vows for a specified period, others for life. Families may live near a monastery and have a close relationship with it.

4. Married people can be part of it.

Generally, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches assert that the monk is alone - and therefore cannot be united to a spouse: to call married people monks is an abuse of language. The monk is the one who, when two duties conflict, chooses the monastery. To allow married people to be monks is a cause of stumbling to those making the sacrifice of celibacy, and impairs full communion with monastic (celibate) communities. Some new monastics argue that although the celibate's primary availability is to the monastic community, while the spouse's primary availability is to the spouse, there can be two 'orders' within the one community. There are, in fact, examples in the first seven centuries of married people being part of monasteries.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF MONASTICISM

1. Dispersed monks and hermits

Bishop Kallistos Ware, Greek Orthodox bishop in Britain, is an idiorrhythmic monk of Mount Athos. He receives a small allowance, returns once a year for a retreat and gives account to his abbot, but earns his own keep and is responsible for his own work and dwelling. He maintains celibacy, loose obedience, but not poverty. Nearly half the Mount Athos monasteries are idiorrhythmic. In Orthodoxy one can only become such

a monk through the Bishop, and one must be in obedience to the spiritual father or mother of a particular monastery. This began in the fourteenth century and I suspect is increasing in our time.

2. Households

Monasticism began in households, for the women in particular. Households are a foundational building block of Judaism. Now that the extended and even the nuclear family are no longer pervasive, people seek fellowship in 'families' of like minded people. Though cells, in which people share intimacy and commitment, flourish in many churches, the practice of excluding e.g. children, and of hiving off half the cell when it reaches a maximum number reflects the priority of mission over community in the cell movement. A household, in contrast, can provide the ingredients of a cell with the added dimension of a long term, organic relationship and tested calling. Common pitfalls encountered by intentional households include the tendency to become inward looking, stifled by dominant persons, stressed by unexpected demands of members or their friends, resentful because hidden assumptions have not been examined. In order to avoid such pitfalls a household requires a Pattern or Rule to which each member subscribes.

3. Sketes

A Skete is neither a wholly solitary hermit life, nor a fully organised monastery under one roof. It appeals to post modern people who wish to combine their own stewardship of their work and household with a framework and ethos shared with others who live nearby.

4. Residential communities

Holy Transfiguration Monastery is a centre of renewal in Breakwater, Geelong, **Australia**. As the community grew, members developed a Resolve, the practices by which they live, which include: Love God, neighbour, all creation; judge no one, not even yourself; love beauty; maintain inner silence; show hospitality, err only on the side of generosity; speak truth to power, especially power without love; let your only experience of evil be in suffering, not its creation. The community has over thirty members who live in the Cloister or nearby. Families live in houses, while the celibate' Members support themselves through ordinary work.

5. Dispersed Communities

The Aidan and Hilda, Iona and Northumbria communities are but three examples of growing networks of people who live by a Common Rule or Way of Life.

CAN EXISTING CHURCHES BECOME NEW MONASTIC COMMUNITIES?

A few groups that began as a monastery have grown to be churches. A modern example of a monastery that is also a church is The Community of Jesus, Orleans. This began in 1958 with two women offering a ministry of teaching, prayer and charismatic renewal. This attracted a small group of people to move to these grounds on the shores of Cape Cod Bay. They covenanted to live together in mutual service and honesty. Several families soon followed, to share in the common life of prayer and work. In 1970, the Community of Jesus was formally constituted. For more than thirty years, the Community's pattern of life has evolved in the Benedictine spirit and is summarised in its own Rule of Life. Today there are approximately 165 professed members, and 50 children and young people who live in privately owned homes that surround the church and guest house. The celibate Brothers and Sisters live in their respective houses— the Friary and the Convent. Each of the Community households consists of more than one family, often with several generations represented, who share together in the daily tasks of home-life. Household families and individuals are financially responsible for themselves, while also committed to care for one another's needs.

Monasteries can be churches, but at first sight it seems unlikely that churches can become monasteries. The Breakwater Community started as a church, but I know of no other. One reason why this is difficult is that

leaders of churches are appointed by bishops or boards with a non-monastic agenda. In religious communities, in contrast, the spiritual leader evolves from within in an organic relationship of unconditional commitment. A second reason is that in monasteries the core members commit to be available for certain duties and to live by values for which they are held accountable. Church members are not required to make such commitments. A third reason is that churches employ staff with pay differentials; in monasteries everyone is equal.

Although it seems unlikely that churches can become monasteries, changes in society require churches to adapt in ways that have more in common with Celtic monastic churches than with Sunday only congregations. For example:

- * A twenty four hour society calls for seven day a week churches.
- * A cafe society calls for churches that are eating places.
- * A travelling society calls for churches that provided accommodation.
- * A stressed society calls for churches that provide spaces for silence and retreat.
- * A multi-choice society calls for churches that have a choice of styles and facilities.
- * A digital society calls for churches that are not bound by parochial parameters.

So it may be worth while looking at trends and possibilities in the emerging church which recover something of a monastic spirit or framework.

A Vineyard Vision

Vineyard pastor Peter Fitch thinks the Canadian Cambridge Vineyard's new home, a Slovakian Jesuit monastery, fits well with the cry for an 'ancient-future' church that Robert Webber, Thomas Oden, and others have been raising in their books and articles. He writes that while meditating 'I was seeing a form of spiritual monastery rising up in cities and towns all over our land. It was connected to the passion and faithfulness that led ancient Christians to make so many sacrifices, but it was also full of serious engagement with the world as it now is.... Every living church got to play its part... Their prayers, at times ordered and at times spontaneous, were like the Benedictine hours of the Divine Office. Their songs, whether gentle or wild, whether acoustic, electric, or digital, echoed the meaning of Gregorian chants. Their healing compassion for the broken ones around them was like the Franciscan care of lepers. Their devotion to the Word or to the teaching ministry of the Church was reminiscent of the Dominicans or the Jesuits as they travelled to spread the Gospel far and wide. And their growing intimacy with God was a picture of the Cistercians, particularly of Bernard of Clairvaux who preached 86 rapturous sermons on the Song of Songs. The Cambridge Vineyard... became for me a prophetic picture of God's longing for a new monasticism in the 21st century. Not all of our churches will acquire monasteries or traditional church buildings. However, all can become strong and beautiful communities of faith and action that rise up and fill the land with the best intentions of the past and their appropriate fulfilments in the present and the future. (ii) That, however, remains but a vision.

Churches as Multi-Resource Centres

Some churches have turned their buildings into multi resource centres. In the USA two million people belong to mega churches. These contain certain elements of the Celtic monastic city. The mega church has food halls, sporting leagues, day care and learning groups as well as a variety of worship patterns. 'I am not the pastor of a church, I am the mayor of a city' observed the leader of one mega church (*BBC TV Newsnight January 2 2003*). Ann Morisy has some excellent insights into multi-resource churches this in her book called *Journeying Out: A new Approach to Christian Mission* (Continuum: 2004). Warehouse churches typically provide a variety of resources in a warehouse or complex of ordinary buildings in the middle of a residential or shopping area. One such church provides a charity shop, hairdressing salon, art gallery, cyber cafe, skateboarding , crèche and worship areas, and a hermit's caravan.

However, the multi-resource and mega churches often lack the spirituality of the monastic tradition, they do not pray daily in the rhythms of creation, or adopt common spiritual disciplines Morisy warns that we need to balance the places we make public with the place for the sacred.

Existing churches that are restoring certain monastic features

A growing number of churches provide daily public prayer, cafes, conference facilities or work projects. Such churches are listed on the Community of Aidan and Hilda web site www.aidanandhilda.org The Church of the Saviour, Washington, has some ten congregations each with a distinct project in different locations such as cafe, drugs rehab centre, old people's circle, study centre. Membership entails a year's discipleship course, the writing of a personal spiritual profile, and a covenant. A small group maintain daily prayer in a central location.

Covenanting congregations

If a church is to be a monastery a core group with a values covenant or rule of life who are also the decision makers needs to be its foundation. A Baptist minister thinks that a gathered congregation like his own is well placed to become a community whose members make a covenant which could embrace the seven days a week praying, eating and resourcing community. Catholic parish sees itself as a community covenanted to hospitality, spirituality and stewardship in Owings, Maryland, USA. They are now considering making commitments to a daily common discipline that includes liturgy of the hours, training in spirituality, provision of soul friends, retreats, and places for solitude within the grounds.. (iii)

Network churches

The inherited church is beginning to sponsor network churches, some of which rekindle the monastic spirit. Five churches in Nottingham sponsor the Malt Cross Project which focuses around a cafe bar where a core community of eight Christians sustain a daily rhythm of prayer. A youth worker is paid for by the Church Army. They aim to have a series of spaces: Safe Space (the cafe bar); Sacred Space; Thinking Space and Relationship Space. I spent a day with staff exploring how they might develop a common Rule of Life by which they would live.

VILLAGES OF GOD

Many seekers after authentic spirituality avoid 'one-size fits all' Sunday-only churches. In a multi-choice society they need the freedom to choose from a range of good things that meet the need of people of different temperaments, cultures and ages. I use the term 'village of God' to describe a spectrum of emerging churches that provide for such needs.

Although village isn't common coinage for everyone, shopping centres, airports, and tourist centres now have 'villages'. New urban housing developments are designated as villages to distinguish them from mere housing estates which lack the components required for good community life. And just when the collapse of farming, the power of the supermarket and rises in traffic and urban house-building threaten the demise of the traditional country village, all over Britain rural communities are coming together to resurrect themselves as community-minded green villages.

Emerging villages of God start where people are. Some grow piecemeal. Others grow as a result of congregations and networks planning how to creatively link together. Some which seem disparate to the eye, show up as something like a village on a web site provided by the churches and projects of an area. Certain 'villages' will be in one geographical area, others will be more dispersed but their various parts are linked by pilgrim trails and web sites. Some are virtual, and some are potential expressions of church. In China, so many churches have grown in one town that it is now known as China's Jerusalem; this can, when it is not blacked out, be explored on the web site <http://www.worthynews.com/news-features-2/china-visit-jerusalem.html>

CHART

For some people these villages of God resonate with the folk memory of early Irish monastic churches that were twenty-four seven hubs of the population, serviced by married and single, learned and manual workers.

I use this also as a concept that can be expressed in diagram form and be a source of meditation. I have had excited emails from church leaders in rural, as well as urban areas, who have realized how apparently isolated, marginalized Christian presences can become parts that connect to one another and make up a powerful whole. I use it to describe a virtual reality of praying, educational, activity, pilgrim, work, art and sacred spaces, run by different congregations and networks, that a web site can invite surfers into even though they are not geographically on one site. An example of this is the www.networkleeds.com web site.

'In my Father's house are many rooms' (John 14): In a new monastic village, which is meant to be a colony of heaven, there are provisions that suit many different types of people. Whilst the integrity of the faith, values and worship of the Christian community must be guarded, there is no reason why, if there is a mosque, synagogue or temple in the areas of the village, there could not be common eating and meeting places. In fact, this is not entirely new. Places such as St Catherine's monastery, Mount Sinai, have included a mosque since the first millennium.

This is not a return of the Christendom model. These villages of God serve; they do not oust the institutions that exist in the area. These villages of God are resonant of the early Celtic monastery model of church. The following diagram illustrates the concept.

I justify the Village of God concept biblically in several ways. Firstly, it is rooted in the Trinity – a community of distinct, creative, loving selves who are nevertheless in their essence One. The Old Testament 'church' was likened to a city, e.g. Jerusalem, in which every part fitted into the whole harmoniously (Psalm 122). This demonstrates unity in diversity, magnetises people to it, and is a light to the surrounding areas. The New Testament Church is likened to a human Body with Christ as the Head of the Body, but the body has many parts (Romans 12)

Where are models of these villages of God today?

This question is often asked. I know of no village which has all the features included in the Village of God Diagram, but welcome information about any that are moving in that direction. I am aware, however, of places which have pointers, and places which are signs. Some of these are pilgrim centres.

It would be foolish to claim that the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, where I live, is all that it is meant to be. Historically, after the Vikings left it desolate in 793, and again after the pale restoration of a priory by Benedictines, which put comfort before the needs of the villagers and whose stones were ransacked by the islanders at the Reformation to build their own homes, the people became hostile to the church, hardened and ingrown. Some earned their living by smuggling. The parish church restored daily prayer last century, and pilgrimage revived. Although it is indeed a 'thin place' where many visitors find God, this does not immediately undo the failure of preceding centuries. Nevertheless, certain things are currently evolving which are pointers, however frail, of God's kingdom.

Daily worship patterns * Visitors healing services* Accommodation * Inter-action between church and local providers * Sacred space * Eating places * Retreats * Work * Weaving together the separated strands of Christianity * Fair trade produce.

Villages of God grow naturally, like a mustard seed, and take a different form in each place. One may be sponsored by a single church which develops seven day a week facilities and links up with other networks. In some areas, the local church leaders forge a deep and prayerful relationship with others which transforms localities, as did relationships described in the video *Transformations*. (v) A village of God could consist, for example, of a Salvation Army Soup Kitchen, a Roman Catholic Oratory, an Anglican daily worship centre, and a new church youth venture.

Seven day-a-week emerging villages of God typically include a number of these features:

* Daily corporate prayer * Eating places - e.g. cafes * Accommodation units - e.g. hostel, B&B, on site units for members * Learning courses - resource centre * Work and creative arts projects * Sacred space * Mentors and counsellors * Social entertainment * Allotments, gardens or another earth-friendly link * Facilities for all or most ages. The village of God is like a wheel with spokes that reach into the hub places of society. The spoke takes the form of being a supportive presence WITHIN the cultural pattern of the hub. The hubs may include: School * Health Centre * Supermarket * Pub * Sports teams * Fitness Centre * Community centre * Bingo club * Uniformed organisations * Police * Social services * Local media * Centres of other religions * Places where disaffected groups hang out * Night clubs * The homeless.

THE VALUES OF VILLAGES OF GOD

Such villages of God presuppose certain common values without which they would fall apart. These values are likely to include: Respect for life * Seeing Christ in the face of the other * Unity in diversity * Trust
Churches in villages of God acknowledge that the part is not the whole. The villages enable churches to be true to themselves, to share their wounds, use all five senses in worship, and be more sustaining of their society. In villages of God the prayer oratory of one tradition or the soup kitchen of another can be true to its root - but each can flower because it is in an environment that does not attack it. Villages of God become prejudice-free, hate-free, fear-free, earth-friendly fair trade zones. These villages of God offer the soil of reflection and the wisdom of the forgiving heart to which politicians and public may repair. They foster that love which inspires inner transformation, stable relationships, and motivation to live healthy, law abiding, earth-cherishing lives.

FINALLY, SOME PROPOSALS

1. Establish a major ecumenical new monastic community in the heart of London. An ideal development would be for Brompton Oratory and Holy Trinity Brompton (dare we one day also include the nearby Russian Orthodox Cathedral?) to combine their spaces so that twenty people who follow their common Rule of Life may live there, and service six day a week peoples spiritual home that includes market stalls, counselling, life-skills and meditation classes as well as trice daily prayer. Export this to the great cities of the world.
2. Turn cathedral closes into new monastic centres.
To books on the future of cathedrals in recent years have been a disappointment to me. Let each cathedral draw up its own Way of Life. Let each property that becomes vacant in a cathedral close be offered to someone who lives the Way of Life. Turn tourists into pilgrims by sustaining inter-active prayer stations that attract people of all races and temperaments. Open up the cathedrals, not just to tourists but to the people around. Let those who cannot afford a wedding have their picnic wedding receptions free in the cloisters. But let the people come into a seven day a week community above all.
3. Harness new monastic churches to shopping centres. The manager of the new city centre shopping complex in Cork invited the local Catholic and Protestant ministers to run a daily prayer room in it. They have agreed to run this Monday to Saturday. Supermarkets which have a good link with local

churches can have a prayer request board. These are taken to the daily prayer at the church. Visual trails from the shop to the church can be provided.

4. Turn village churches into the hubs of eco villages. As the greening of Britain hastens, and people use their cars less often and walk to their local church, this will become more realistic. Take the little Cornish village of Blisland. In 1999 the last shop and village post office closed. Residents gathered to discuss what they could do to stop their village dying. From their determination came something remarkable. Today, Blisland has a new village centre that contains a shop, post office, café, internet hub, small business units, and a doctor's surgery. Built by local architects this green showcase uses geothermal heating, photovoltaics, rainwater recycling, 'wind catcher' air conditioning and other cutting edge green technologies. The village web site <http://www.blisland.com/default2.html> gives details of the school, church, inn and local organizations.
5. Go to work with an egg timer. Holy Island's Vicar Brother Damian is at Worth Abbey this Sunday, the monastery which featured on the TV 'Monastery' series. He has taken an egg timer to illustrate how busy urban Christians can create spaces while they remain in life's fast lane. Meditate for the duration of the egg timer in the loo or the lunch-break, in the gym or the traffic jam, in a queue or in a crisis.

By all means, let the new story be told, and let the new monasticism advance.

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