

**An Article From 1999 Winter issue  
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"Celtic Christianity"**

**CHRISTIAN CELTIC COMMUNITIES TODAY by Ray Simpson**

Interest in Celtic spirituality is sweeping the English speaking world. Beyond the glut of Celtic books, artefacts, and internet rings is this spirituality actually being lived out in communities? Not a lot, but embryonic attempts to do this are increasing.

These communities and networks may be put into three categories: New Age, Nationalist, and Christian. Neo pagan, New Age, or Creation (rather than God) -centred groups essentially seek to embrace the energies of Mother Earth, to attune to them, to celebrate or even to become them. The Findhorn Community in Scotland is prominent among New Age Communities. The revival of ancient druid practices in places such as Glastonbury and Stone Henge catch the headlines, but this historical revival is present also in urban centres. Ultimately, in my view, these groups breed some form of nature worship, although Christians can learn from their criticism of the hierarchical church and its worship.

Romantic, historical or nationalistic groups echo the short-lived Celtic revival of the 19th century known as the Celtic twilight. In some of the lands known as the "six Celtic countries" (Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, Isle of Man, Scotland, Wales) Celtic history is kept alive in organisations such as the Cornish Gorsedd or Welsh eisteddfods. The concept of an independent Scotland, Wales etc. within the European Union appeals to many people, and the tide of nationalism is running strongly. There is a Pan Celtic New Dawn Movement. Peter Beresford Ellis in *The Celtic Dawn* (Constable 1993) traces the origin of Pan Celtism, of the Celtic League founded in 1961, and outlines its philosophy and future development. Some small Christian groups in the six "Celtic countries" come in to this cluster: they find their identity by harking back, or by being anti other groups. There is now even a Muslim Celtic Alliance, which spans Celtic people in Spain and Turkey, and which has a community in Scotland.

The Iona Community was the first of the 20th century Christian Celtic communities. St. Columba, the founder of the first great mission community on the Scottish island of Iona in the sixth century, prophesied that the island would revert to empty fields, but that before the world ended it would be restored. In 1936 the island was given to the church and Church of Scotland minister George MacLeod linked his concern to find work for the unemployed with the chance to rebuild the Iona abbey and found a network of Christians who shared his concerns. The members of the Iona Community do not live permanently on Iona, they are more likely to work in the most needy areas such as the slums of Glasgow, throughout Britain and around the world. Their five-fold Rule includes prayer and Bible-reading, accountability for time, money and relationships, and action for justice and peace. Its Wild Goose Worship Group and Worship Resources are used widely beyond Scotland.

Although members of the Community come from a spectrum, it is thought that Christians who are not pacifist, or who emulate the signs and wonders ministry of Columba would not be at home in the present community. In his old age George MacLeod himself was sad that the Community had divorced the social from the evangelistic concerns which he had held together. On Iona today Catholic, Episcopal and other groups have retreat houses, as well as the Abbey and Youth Centre run by the Iona Community in the season. On Mull the Iona Community run their youth adventure camp at Camas.

The Northumbria Community had its origins in the 1970's but was formalised in its present shape in 1991. It is a network of Christians who seek to see the kingdom of God extended in Northumbria and beyond. It has not sought to be labelled Celtic, but it has found that the Celtic saints' experience of God has made sense of their own journey. They believe they share the following emphases with the Celtic saints: "that our first calling is to seek God for himself, that people matter more than things, that relationships matter more than reputation, that who we are matters more than what we do, that a monk is defined not by his task but by what he is called to be, a man of God, that prayer and action, contemplation and mission belong together, that this is God's world with no sacred/secular divide and He is interested in the ordinary everyday happenings of life."

Members of the Community adopt a Rule of Life whose twin peaks are vulnerability and availability. Members are scattered and meet in groups in various areas. Their focal house is Acton Home Farm near Felton, in Northumberland, England.

Smaller communities pop up all over the place, such as that founded by Sister Agnes in the remote Shetlands Isle of Fetlar. She tells her story in *The Song of the Lark* (SPCK. Triangle 1992). Now Sister Helen CSMV is founding a Celtic Christian Community on the far northern coast of the Isle of Skye which she describes as an idyllic spot on good days! David and Pam Pott head up the small Fountain Gate Community at Brockley, South East London. They share their large house with others, and with two other nearby households they seek to live a rhythm of inflow and outflow. This combines times of stillness, meditation and study with times of hospitality, teaching, and facilitating creative gifts. David is logging his experiences on long pilgrim prayer walks, and has set up an agency to develop these for groups.

(The Fountain Gate Community, 58 Geoffrey Road, Brockley, London SE4 1Nt Tel: 0181 692 8271.)

A radical community in Catholic Ireland is Aisling Aran, a loose network of people with a vision for a new church and a new society based on community. On Inis Mor, Aran Islands, and elsewhere, various households give expression to this vision whose key features are: Celtic spiritual and cultural roots; right relationship within the cosmos; gender balance; a just world; wholeness; hospitality; self-reliance and simplicity. However their priest has declared that he no longer recognises the jurisdiction of the Pope.

Celtic Christianity is now impacting the USA. Tom Sine, the church leadership guru for God-centred management of the future, tells me he is setting up a Celtic style ranch to help trainee church leaders experience community and a rhythm of work and prayer. Randy George, President of Gaelforce in Al Fresno, California, and his team have a vision of Anamcara places in cities throughout the world. These will be small, warm, candle lit places of prayer open day and night where people are available to give friendship (Anamcara is Irish for friend of the soul).

Then there are churches which seek to be communities which draws inspiration from the Celtic saints. The Celtic Orthodox Church has a monastery at Saint Dolay, Brittany, France where six monks live a truly authentic life. For twenty years they have eaten only what has been given to them. Their leader, Bishop Mael, is Metropolitan of this church which has small houses (congregations) in Britain, France, and even in Australia. They regard themselves as fully Orthodox in faith and in apostolic succession, but, wishing to have an ethos which is indigenous to the Celtic lands, they do not place themselves under the jurisdiction of an Eastern patriarch.

In Sussex, England, New Churches have spawned Celtic-inspired communities under the umbrella of the Revelation Church network.. Two of their pastors tell their story in *New Celts: Following Jesus into Millennium 3* (Roger Ellis and Chris Seaton Kingsway 1998). The Internet advertises a maze of new churches, mostly in the USA, who take to themselves the Celtic label, and there are a few in Britain, such as The Charismatic Apostolic Fellowship of St Luke & St Columba. Its pastor, Rev. Alan Munday invites people who seek to remodel existing churches or start new ones on what he calls Neo-Celtic lines to network by sending a blank email to <[celtchrist-subscribe@onelist.com](mailto:celtchrist-subscribe@onelist.com)> or by logging in and subscribing on the website at [www.onelist.com](http://www.onelist.com).

I myself was one of seven founders of the Community of Aidan and Hilda in 1994. It is a network of Christians who aim to cradle a Christian spirituality for today which draws inspiration from the Celtic saints, and which weaves together the evangelical, catholic and charismatic strands in the church. Any one may become an Explorer of its Way of Life, which combines a biblical cutting edge with contemplative simplicity, love of creation and the use of spiritual gifts, seeking to apply this to their personal circumstances with the help of a soul friend. Those who make commitments become full members by taking what we call The First Voyage of the Coracle. We are bound together by the Common Way of Life, the community gatherings and magazine, and by our two small houses in the English Midlands and at Lindisfarne, where I have a small retreat cottage. We are currently seeking to purchase a larger property here to be used as a Community House which will offer training and hospitality as did St. Aidan's first seventh century monastic community here. There is a Chapter in the USA and we have our first few members in New Zealand.

Rev. Ray Simpson was founder of the Christian Church in Bowthorpe, Norwich, to which six streams, both Catholic and Protestant, are covenanted, and of Bowthorpe Community Trust. In 1994 he was appointed Honorary Guardian of the new Community of Aidan and Hilda, and in 1996 he moved to Lindisfarne, where he nurtures the Lindisfarne Mustard Seed Project from his cottage, Lindisfarne Retreat. This seeks a new cradling of Celtic spirituality through retreats, soul friendship, church audits and provision of resources for schools and churches. He is author of Give Yourself a Retreat and of other popular books published by Hodder and Stoughton which include:

Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for our Future.

Celtic Worship Through the Year.

Celtic Daily Light.

Celtic Blessings for Everyday.

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