

**THE ADVISORY COUNCIL  
ON THE  
RELATIONS OF BISHOPS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

**ACKNOWLEDGED  
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

**A briefing paper for the Council**

## **PART A – INTRODUCTION**

In recent years re-imagined forms of the Religious life and New Monastic Communities have been emerging within the UK, and it appears that this process is now increasing both in scope and number. Such Communities, with their inherent missional orientation, were recognised in the Mission Shaped Church Report (2004) as an authentic fresh expression of Church which needed to be encouraged and nurtured. Such expressions are now apparent in all the major denominations, as well as emerging ecumenically and independently, and are also a global phenomenon – with communities in Germany, The Netherlands, Canada, USA, New Zealand, Australia South America and the Philippines. This ‘emergence’ appears to be a work of God’s Holy Spirit, and there is the need to understand this movement, but also to create appropriate frameworks which allow the Communities to be recognised, encouraged and mentored.

It should also be noted that this movement is not only from amongst ‘fresh expressions’ of Church, as it is also found within established expressions of the Monastic and from different traditions within the Church. An understanding of the ‘mixed economy’ of Church life as expressed through the parochial system now also seems to be emerging within the Religious Life.

Within the Church of England there has been a growing appreciation of the need to recognise and support the differing expressions of the religious life including small missional communities drawing on a model of the religious life. A key development of the Advisory Council has been the creation of a category called ‘Acknowledged Religious Communities’ which are largely lay communities who make vows, but not to the traditional understanding of ‘poverty, obedience and chastity’ with the expectation of celibacy.

Over the past few years a number of Bishops within the Church of England have encouraged the development of these ‘re-imagined forms of the Religious Life’ and ‘New Monastic Communities’ but until now there has been little contact with the Advisory Council

and few have asked for Acknowledgement. However, with the growing number of such Communities, and with a widening understanding of the possibility of Acknowledgement it seems important that the Advisory Council has a clear discernment process in place which will both support Diocesan Bishops, but also enable to Communities themselves to understand more fully their calling to be an authentic expression of Christian Community within a 'religious life' framework and understanding.

The Advisory Council is seeking to support and recognise these New Monastic Communities and reimagined expressions of the Religious Life, and importantly seek greater relationship and communication between traditional and new monastic communities in partnership for the Gospel.

## **PART B – SETTING THE SCENE**

Before looking at the frameworks which may be required, it will be helpful to reflect on the history of the Church and recognise that such movements have often been part of its renewal and led to a rediscovery of its calling within the mission purposes of God – a calling that needs to be encouraged, nurtured and resourced. It will also be helpful to determine some of the strands which seem to be appearing in this present moment.

### **i) A Brief Review of History - Sodality and Modality**

A brief review of Church history will show that there have always been two streams of the Church – Diocese/Parish and communities of the religious life. It is often the movements on the edge of Church that have enabled the wider Church to re-discover its calling to true mission. This was true of the challenge of the Desert Fathers in the 3rd century, the ministry of St Benedict and St Francis in the 5th and 12th centuries, the Jesuits in the 16th century, the Wesleyan movement in the 18th century and on into the 19th with the creation of many of the Mission agencies and charities which are still with us. In his work at the end of the 20th century, the American Missiologist Ralph Winter explored different expressions of Church and suggested that, from the NT period itself, Christian

Community has always been lived out in at least two ways – the more settled which eventually became the parish or local congregation, and the movement, such as the missionary band of St Paul, which was eventually expressed in and through the various Monastic Orders and movements. Winter called the first expression ‘modal’ and the second ‘sodal’.

**The Modality** is a more structured and diverse expression of Christian Community, which, in some senses makes little demands on members. The default is to be inward looking and focused on maintenance, and this introspection can command criticism. However, modal expressions of Church can be inclusive and safe and provide a place where people can explore and embrace the Christian faith. In many ways it is the modal form of ecclesial community which shapes most people’s understanding of Church.

**The Sodality** can either be expressed alongside the modal form of Church, or can sometimes be discovered within it. The default is to look for a deeper level of commitment, both a commitment to the group relationally, but also to the mission focus to which the group is called. Sodal expressions of the ecclesial community can be criticised for being exclusive and even superior, but they can help and encourage the wider Church re-discover and re-express its true missional nature, calling and ministry. It may well be that within the re-discovery of these ways of expressing Christian Community, and finding a unity in Christ, (despite diversity of outworking), the true mixed economy of the local church will be found.

All expressions of the religious life operate a **voluntary ecclesial order** in that people enter into them out of choice, and this choice is not about church canon law or canonical obedience. In the Church of England, the *Handbook of the Religious Life* sets forward good practice for the advice of all religious communities in communion with the Church of England.

## **ii) Navigating the Present**

As well as reflecting on past history, it is vital to try and discern some of the strands and themes which are emerging in this present movement of God’s Spirit. The following seem to be key: -

1. Whilst all Christian Community should be shaped and informed by mission it is clear that this can be expressed in many different ways. Some of the emerging Communities are expressing their life pastorally and working primarily with those who are already Christian.
2. Some forms of the emerging new monasticism are focussed on a missional purpose, often expressing themselves as a Small Missional Community which is seeking to bring something of Kingdom possibilities to individuals, Communities and Society at large. (It should be noted that not all Small Missional Communities would express themselves within the New Monasticism.).

**With the above in mind it appears that the following expressions of Religious Life can be identified: -**

1) Forms of Established First Order New Expressions –

- An example of this would be the Lay Non First Order living alongside the established Communities e.g. Hilfield Friary

2) Forms of the Re-imagined Religious Life. These would include: -

- Ministry Communities – these are communities which discern that they have a particular calling to exercise a ministry within the wider Church, and so enable that wider Church in its own understanding of and engagement in ministry and mission.
- Pastoral Communities – these are closely linked with Ministry Communities, but members feel called to a ministry of prayer and pastoral care within their local churches and communities.
- Religious Societies – these are church related societies where participants have made vows or aspirations to a rhythm of life, and meet regularly as a society. Good examples of this are the Oratory of the Good Shepherd and the Company of Mission Priests.

3) Forms of New Monasticism

Reflecting on the New Monastic Communities the following can be discerned:

- A concern to nurture small local communities arising out of mission or a fresh expression initiative.
- A desire to establish themselves as sustainable communities and declared themselves to be New Monastic.

- The more ‘Monk-like’ Communities which tend to be localised and intentional communities with a mother house where mission then is to spiritual seekers and Christians going on pilgrimage to these places (e.g. Northumbria Community, and aspects of the Community of John and Mary/Monos)
- The Friar/Mendicant Communities which focus on mission to a particular place as a small missional community with a rhythm of life to sustain them, (e.g. those with a clear missional order such as CMS and the Order of Mission).
- The middle way – Communities with a mixed vocation – aspects of both ‘monk’ and ‘friar’ (e.g. Moot and 24/7 Prayer Communities).

This continuum can be expressed visually as: -



From these differing vocations and purposes, there appear to be three distinct forms of New Monasticism.

- **Localised intentional community or a particular small local expression.** These are communities where there are currently only one localised community that have a shared rhythm of life. Many have or plan to have an intentional community as part of their vocation as some form of motherhouse. Participants of this community tend to travel to it. The vocation of these groups tends to be more ‘monk’ focused. Good examples of this are part of the Northumbria Community, the Community of Mary and John and the MayBe Community Oxford.
- **Networked New Monastic Communities** – These are intentional missional networks of at least two localised communities with a shared rhythm of life. These tend to have a mixed vocation of ‘Friar’ and ‘Monk’ – of apostolic mission as well as place for prayer and mission through hospitality. Good examples of this are 24/7 Community. The

Moot Community aspires to grow in this way although it only has one localised community at the moment.

- **Mission Order Communities.** These communities tend to be far more mendicant/friar like with core purposes around mission. These missional new monastic communities are centred on mission and evangelism in places where the wider Churches presence is weak. Here the communities and rhythms of life are primarily to serve the apostolic mission endeavour. Good examples of this are the Church Mission Society. The Order of Mission and The Earlsfield Friary is a network of households in Earlsfield, South London as well as smaller initiatives such as the All Hallows Community in Bow.

4) All the above can also be expressed as: -

- **Dispersed or Network Community** – these are communities that do not live together but, having made vows or a similar form of commitment, are living a common rule or rhythm of life. Some have a particular call to celibacy.
- **Ecumenical Community** – these are communities drawn from many Christian traditions and backgrounds. They can be dispersed or gathered, living to a rule or rhythm of life and committed to shared values and vision. The ecumenical dimension may bring a particular challenge if there is a request to be acknowledged within one Christian tradition.

## **PART C – THE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT**

Having set something of the context in which we are now working it is possible to begin to explore the process of discernment which will be required.

### **i) Some Important Foundations**

1. With the emergence of a new monasticism, and a desire to re-connect with some of the historical roots it is important that there is a framework of understanding. Such a framework needs to be 'non prescriptive' allowing room for

the Spirit of God to move and so take all of us to a new understanding of what is happening.

2. Within this frame-work there needs to be lines of accountability. However, these lines of accountability must be developed in the context of mutuality and a deep and wide radius of trust which allows all parties to go to the new space which the Spirit is creating.
3. In all this there is to be an understanding of the need for collaboration between the new expressions and traditional forms of the religious life, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, a growing sense of learning from each other, and journeying together.

All of the above are to allow an on-going conversation so that together we might understand more fully what the Spirit of God is doing, and within that unity discern his purposes.

## **ii) Authentic Marks of Christian Community**

For a Community to be Acknowledged the following marks of authenticity will need to be in place:

- Clear calling to the purpose of serving God.
- Commitment to a voluntary ecclesial order.
- Commitment to prayer and practice.
- Commitment to a shared life in community.
- Commitments to a Rule or Rhythm of Life.
- Commitment to reflective practice, (the process of how the community reflects on its life in the local context).
- Commitment to mission, serving those on the edge or the outside of the community.
- Commitment to counter cultural life in Christ.

## **iii) Features of New Monastic Communities in the UK**

For a Community to be Acknowledged some of the features below will need to be in place and lived out by the Community. This list is

not intended to be either exhaustive or prescriptive, but to express some of the features which will need to be apparent and demonstrable.

**a) Seasonal Aspirations, Rhythms of life, Spiritual Practices and Postures**

Most New Monastic Communities put a focus on a holistic understanding of formation and Christian discipleship beginning with Orthopraxis (right living) with Orthodoxy (right thinking and belief) but often and very importantly with Orthopathy (right feeling, wellbeing). This holistic approach to Christian identity within New Monasticism is shared with more established religious and monastic communities of the church and begins with Jesus' Great Commandment to love God, love yourself and love others.

Many communities formally meet before a Bishop or other perceived authority figure within the Church to commit to a Rhythm of Life or Rule of Life. For some, this rhythm of life begins with aspirations which seek to answer the questions 'How should we live in but not of the world?' and 'What does it mean to be a mission-centred disciple in the contemporary world?' Aspirations are an entry point for spiritual seekers who need to be able to belong before they are able to explore belief. This is a deliberate missional strategy using what S B Bevans called the 'transcendent model of contextual theology'. Most New Monastic Communities are radically contextual. Much of these aspirations are about living counter-culturally to our overly-consumptive, individualistic and materialistic society.

Spiritual Practices are also committed to. These vary but tend to include prayer, meditation, work, rest, evangelism/mission, learning, participation in shared worship, tithing, living justly and commitments to being a dispersed network or intentionally living community.

Attitudes, or what some New Monastic Communities call 'Postures', seem to be expressions of the religious life and connect with the

virtues such as sufficiency, generosity, gentleness, humility and wonderment.

### **b) Commitment to being Missional and Contextual**

As with other Fresh Expressions of Church, the vision starts with birthing new monastic ecclesial communities out of contextual mission. Many are very committed to be present in the places members of the community live. Some have deliberately moved to places abandoned by the Church or wider society such as inner city Estates which are tough to live in, with a vision of serving God and bringing God's love to places where there is great social deprivation, poverty and community breakdown. Some focus on establishing forms of mission and evangelism in areas where the church is weak. Some communities focus more on those who are unwell, addicted or face spiritual impoverishment, who desperately seeks meaning, belonging and healing. In all there is the vision of the now but not fully yet Kingdom of God, where mission is about catching up with what God is doing. Mission and evangelism then is about transformation and growing – human becoming – in a culture that is losing a sense of what it means to be human let alone what it is to be Christian.

As with other Anglican expressions of Church, new monastics are committed to the following marks of mission:-

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom,
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers,
- To respond to human need by loving service,
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society,
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

### **(c) Dispersed Network and distributed household networks**

Many New Monastic Communities are dispersed networks of people in a particular City or place or places. Some such as the Earlsfield Friary are a network of intentional households and some such as the All Hallows Community in Bow are an intentional community after taking over a large clergy house. Some maintain a

deep daily intentionality through liturgies and prayers that are shared through out the day through emails, text messages, podcasts and other information technology. For all New Monastic Communities, a depth of community is vital not only to sustain the ministry, but to be the locus for mission and evangelism.

#### **(d) Participative Governance**

Many New Monastic Communities have a shared Governance System inspired by the Benedictine and Franciscan traditions. Here there is a commitment to listening and contributing to decision-making. People do have differing vocations, but these are ones of function not of privilege. New Monastics have differing vocations, where people are given room to exercise these ministries in the context of being one community.

#### **(e) Prayerful and Sacramental**

Many New Monastic Communities are liturgical, and are extremely creative in writing original and experimental liturgies. They draw heavily on ancient spiritual practices such as Lectio Divina, the Examen, Ignatian meditation, Centering Prayer and many other disciplines that require you to reach beyond the egoic self. Most practise table fellowship, and have a high view of the Agape meal, Eucharist or Holy Communion. There is a wide breadth of prayer tradition represented in New Monastic communities from the contemplative to the liturgical right through to the charismatic.

#### **(f) Commitment to non-dualism and non-tribalism**

Many New Monastic Communities are influenced by contemporary missiology, postmodern theology, practical theology and the writings associated with small missional communities, the mystics, friars, monastics and the missionaries. The Church has struggled throughout its history with the damaging effects of power, schism and dualism in politics and belief. It can be argued that Monasticism began as a reaction to this at the time of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. In continuity with this tradition, New Monastics seek to be humble, non-dualistic and post-tribal. As with many participants of

the religious life, New Monastics have a high view of Christ's New Commandment for love and unity (in diversity and not conformity) in the Church. New Monastics seek to find peace and wellbeing for the whole of Christ's community in the context of a complex and uncertain world.

### **(g) Commitment to Post-Christendom and Servant Discipleship**

Avery Dulles defined 'Christendom' as one of the first models of Church arising out of the Roman Empire as 'Church as political society'. Whilst the model had the advantage of consolidating orthodoxy (the formulation of doctrine and agreement about the central tenets of the faith) this model also introduced a number of weaknesses and problems. New Monastics, again following the tradition of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, are rediscovering the politics of powerlessness and giving power away. As Shane Claiborne said "Many beautiful Christians working for social change in a range of movements believe we can bring about fundamental change by using power benevolently rather than reworking the power equation. We see ourselves as the good guys who will use our influence for justice — and perhaps, in these terms, we succeed in getting our candidate on the ballot or elected. But the Christ we follow has a different, harder path -- one of downward mobility, of struggling to become the least, of joining those at the bottom." Inspired by the Franciscans, New Monastics seek to follow the example set by Jesus in the Beatitudes as a particular missional imperative. Now that the Church is increasingly losing power, this focus on servant discipleship is a deliberate approach inspired by Christ the Servant and loving teacher. So we follow Jesus Christ as our example, Saviour and Lord (Philippians 3:10).

### **(h) Deeply Trinitarian in belief and practice**

Without exception, New Monastic Communities are deeply Trinitarian. Inspired by the Great Monastics, Mendicants, Mystics and Missionaries, The Holy Trinity is seen as an expression of perichoretic community. As God is one yet three expressing

perfect love, justice and inclusion, so we the Church are beckoned so to do. So worship and prayer are about joining in with God, and mission is about catching up with what God is already doing as God seeks to restore all things into right relationship with God. This approach is very open to the Holy Spirit leading the Church into new opportunities and new challenges.

### **(i) Experimental and Creative in spirit and practice**

New Monastic communities on the whole have been birthed from a spirit of creativity, a need to find a way of community, living and worship which is flexible and contextual and a desire to exercise creative and artistic gifts. These communities have become crucibles for new liturgical forms and patterns as well as revisiting those from current and ancient traditions. Liturgy and rhythm have grown from the real and raw experience of community members and the culture in which they dwell. As such they have a real grounding in the now, a healthy provisionality and yet maintain a sense of the continuum of Christian heritage and worship. This creativity involves the exploration of a form of hospitality described by Bishop Michael Perham as real and radical, an openness and welcome to others beyond the community and the tradition. mixed economy of the local church will be found.

All expressions of the religious life operate a **voluntary ecclesial order** in that people enter into them out of choice, and this choice is not about church canon law or canonical obedience. In the Church of England, the handbook to the Religious Life sets forward good practice for the advice of all religious communities in communion with the Church of England.

### **iv) New Monastic Community as Bishop's Mission Order and potentially Acknowledged Religious Community.**

With the implementation of the agenda proposed in the Mission Shaped Church Report and 'A Measure for Measures' Report, the Church of England has begun to implement the now legally accepted 'Bishop's Mission Orders'. This Church of England Legislation

recognises a particular church community to address a particular missional function in a particular place or network. These are seen to be outside but in parallel to parish churches and come under the authority of a particular Diocesan Bishop. As most New Monastic Community's are missional, it may be a possibility that particular communities seek to become Bishop's Mission Orders as well as Acknowledged Religious Communities.

There is a particular discernment track for BMOs to be considered, which requires formal governance and accountability structures to be clear and visible. A key role with BMOs is the Mission Accompanier which in many ways is similar to a Visitor to a Religious Community. So it may be possible that the requirements of a BMO would also resonate with some of the requirements of the Advisory Council Visitation responsibility. This needs further thought and reflection. It is right though for Diocesan Bishops to consider and recognise this dual identity and vocation – both fresh expression and new monastic.

#### **v) Issues requiring further work to be discussed by Advisory Council**

1. For localised New Monastic Communities operating within the parish or Diocese system – there is an issue to be considered regarding the named Visitor. It is important to separate out line management/accountability from the Community Visitor or there may be a conflict of interest. This needs further clarification.
2. For Ecumenical Communities – clarification of what minimum standards need to be in place for this to be recognised by the Church of England.
3. It is unclear how this proposed process of discernment will work for requests for Acknowledged Religious Community status from community's that are not Anglican but who are part of Churches that the Church of England is in communion with such as Scandinavian Lutheran Churches,

Old Catholics and plans for the covenant with the UK Methodist Church.

**vi) Compilation into the *Handbook of the Religious Life***

It is proposed that the content of this proposal be implemented, and then once tried and tested, fully compiled into the ongoing annual revision of the *Handbook of the Religious Life*.

**PART D – GUIDANCE**

1. If the particular New Monastic Community is an Ecumenical partnership, then there needs to be clear lines of accountability and expectations concerning participation in the various Church traditions. For the Community to be a Church of England Acknowledged Religious Community, some lines of accountability to the Church of England need to be established.
2. New Monastic Communities need a permissive framework which encourages the freedom to innovate and experiment to be able to respond to the local context reflecting missional and pastoral needs. This necessitates a healthy discussion about how this is going to work between the particular New Monastic Community and those appointed with Diocesan oversight.
3. For many new monastic communities, reflective practice includes the consideration of exploring theology in the local context, or what is called Contextual Theology. For some New Monastic Communities the work of S B Bevans (and other writers concerned with mission and contextual theology) is an important tool as the task of orthopraxis holding in tension the Holy Scriptures, the ongoing traditions of the Church, the context and culture that one is theologising in, and the complexity of cultural change.
4. Some New Monastic Communities in the UK and abroad have used the title Abbot or Abbess for those involved in

leadership roles. This report affirms that the title Abbot or Abbess present particularly within the Benedictine first order tradition needs to be respected and should not be used lightly and without due reflection and consultation with the wider church. Whilst New Monastic Communities need to discern, encourage and name the development of vocations and their voluntary internal order, the titles used for these vocations need to be consistent with the definitions, expectations and practices of these roles within the Church of England and beyond.

5. Regarding liturgical accountability to an appointed Visitor and/or Bishop. This assumes a healthy tension between the responsibility for innovating liturgy out of contextual mission and pastoral needs, but at the same time, taking seriously the resources and commitments created by the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England.

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