

# Catching the Wave



**Gordon Banks Church Army's rural link officer asks if 'new monasticism' could help rural churches in mission and evangelism and reflects on a recently published book.**

'I think God is up to something' said Graham Cray during his opening remarks at a book launch in London earlier this year for *New Monasticism as a Fresh Expression of Church* (Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy, 2010). So what is it that God appears to be doing with regard to new monasticism?

From the earliest of times Christians have been drawn towards a common life often in a defined community. Acts 2.42 portrays the early Church being birthed into an alternative community, a New Israel where orthopraxis (correct action) was of equal importance as orthodoxy (correct faith). Throughout the ensuing years we find charismatic individuals who speak with a voice of prophecy to the Church, like St Francis for example.

St Francis, St Benedict and many more went on to found what are now known as Established Religious Communities and they are to be found scattered across the world in the most remote places and also in the most deprived areas, amongst the poor and vulnerable. Alongside these Religious Communities there have risen up, often for a given time or purpose, smaller communities, sometimes with a single issue focus.

A current example would be the 24-7 Prayer Boiler Rooms beginning in Reading, spreading across the UK and which now gone global. The single issue here is authentic engagement with God through prayer. ([www.24-7prayer.com/boiler-rooms-and-communities](http://www.24-7prayer.com/boiler-rooms-and-communities), see also *Punk Monk* (2007) by Peter Grieg and Andy Freeman).

Bishop Graham Cray continued in his opening remarks by saying that there was a real need in the Church to weave together a three-fold cord of spirituality, discipleship and mission. Cray stated that if we were to witness the re-evangelizing of our nation then discipleship must be a key element. One of Jesus' objections to the religious of his day, picking up the voices of the prophets, is that the people of God were strong on orthodoxy but weak on orthopraxis.

So, how might this work out in a rural context? In an email conversation with me one of the authors of the book, Ian Mobsby, suggests that 'new monasticism' can sit as easily in a rural context as in an urban or inner city setting.

'A Benefice of differing rural parish churches having a rule of life focusing on orthopraxis (action) celebrating a common order but varying expressions of parish church. City centre churches coming together to have a missional order drawing on a rule of life and spiritual practices as a missional community. Small expressions of the church as new monastic community. The list is endless. For me it is a recovery of the Apostolic which we have forgotten. The 'sentness' of the church when we say we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. It is in this apostolic [imperative] that new monasticism ... contributes to a sense of mission'

There are a number of interesting points Mobsby makes here and the idea of trying to draw together a multi-parish benefice along a path of mutuality and intentional community, seeking a 'rule of life' and perhaps a shared pattern of prayer is very attractive. Sally Gaze in Norfolk has already gone some way

down this path with the Tas Valley Team Ministry ([www.tasvalley.org](http://www.tasvalley.org)). Where a series of cell groups has been developed that form the basis of a flourishing church operating alongside and as part of the parish Team Ministry.

Being an intentional community in a 'small expression' of Church could also add value and bring clarity to mission and purpose. It may be argued that this happens already in many rural places but the thinking behind forming an intentional community is naming the thing. In much the same way as people can live together when cohabiting yet when they get married and name their relationship it takes on a different intention and dynamic.

An agreed Rule of Life is a common feature and many new monastic communities seek to represent these in a culturally relevant way, whilst still picking up echoes of former rules of life from the existing Religious Communities. Words like, accountable, dedication and integrity were common amongst them all new monastic communities.

One issue that has yet to be fully resolved is how tight this rule of life should be. Some 'communities' help individual members to form their own 'rule of life' after something of the core values of that community. *Contemplative Fire* for example follow this model [www.contemplativefire.org](http://www.contemplativefire.org) Then there is the question of whether the community is gathered, dispersed or a mixture of the two. Obviously a rule of life is easier for a gathered community who can be readily called to account to one another in the spirit of loving discipline.

A good number of 'new monastic' communities endeavour to live out in real terms John 1:14 and seek to be an intentional community going and living amongst the least, the last, the lost and searching out the hidden.

In rural areas who are the hidden people and how might we engage with them? Some hidden people might include the unemployed, the person left behind as a spouse travels and works long hours in the city, or travellers.

An intentional community in a rural context would need an expansive approach that sought to embrace the strengths, the joys and the weaknesses of various traditions in the common goal of building God's kingdom. As our society faces great economic stringency, affecting rural areas as much as urban ones, we need to learn quickly about living more simply and find ways of standing up against the powers and principles that say more is better. The Church as a community of faithful people can offer a real alternative.

However this calls for a commitment to the Church as the body of Christ. Diane Kershaw (TOM: The Order Of Mission [www.missionorder.org](http://www.missionorder.org)) speaking of developing relationships says: 'Relationships are growing in depth, breadth and effectiveness as people commit to walking with each other beyond what is convenient into what has become covenant.'

A challenge for the rural Church is to move from merely thinking it is a good functioning community into ensuring this becomes a reality with a common goal and purpose. Creating an intentional missional community and reaffirming the apostolic could provide just such a way forward.

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