

Abstract

In recent years, whilst traditional monastic communities in the Church of England have continued to decline, a range of new entities has sprung up, often referred to as New Monasticism or Emerging Religious Orders. This paper sets out the range of such bodies, seeking to characterise them and identify key points of both similarity and difference. New communities are found to be diverse, dispersed, ecumenically open, mixed in sex and marital status, and bound together by a common Rule or Rhythm. Some have a particular call to mission or formation; others seek primarily to deepen the spiritual life of their members. Tensions have emerged around: whether membership enhances or replaces parish life; the balance between the dispersed life, community gatherings and the charism of the order; and the role and status of the founder. In conclusion it is argued that these communities are a genuine, if challenging, development in the history of monasticism.

Introduction

This paper arises from the author's work in recent years as the chairman of the Advisory Council for the Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities in the Church of England and the opportunity thus provided to observe and influence the emergence of new monasticism in its Anglican form. Having set the phenomenon of English monasticism in its historical context, it will describe the common features of Anglican new monastic communities and characterize the main types of community that have emerged in the last decade. That characterization will allow discussion of some of the recurrent themes and issues that have arisen over the same period. Some words about the process of Acknowledgement created by the Church of England to afford formal status to such bodies will pave the way towards a consideration of the extent to which they can legitimately claim to stand within the monastic tradition.

The death, resurrection and decline of monasticism in England

Through the course of the first half of the sixteenth century, monasticism disappeared entirely from the scene of English life. Having broken with Rome over the refusal of the papacy to set aside his first marriage, King Henry VIII discovered in England's monasteries a quick and immediate source of much needed funds for his ambitions. Politically astute, he commissioned reports into the widespread abuses (such as luxurious lifestyles and sexual promiscuity) that affected some monastic houses. These justified him in implementing a programme of closures. Many of the remaining monks and nuns were happy to be given pensions that allowed them to live out their years in comfort and without the constraints of their vows. Lands and properties were sold to Henry's friends and allies. The immediate loss of services such as health care and education that monasteries had provided were slowly replaced by charitable foundations set up by church bodies or wealthy philanthropists. Monasticism vanished from English life for three centuries.

For Henry, and for most of England's subsequent leaders, the problem with Catholicism was less about its beliefs, doctrines and practices than about matters of sovereignty. No foreign prince, or pope, should exercise political power on English soil. Catholics were debarred from holding positions in public life, and their priests executed, for being loyal to a foreign power. The English Reformation, one could argue, had much in common with the present phenomenon of Brexit. Importantly, it left space for more catholic understandings and positions to emerge from time to time within

Anglicanism. The growth and flowering of what came to be known as Anglo-Catholicism in the mid nineteenth century brought this to the centre of the stage. Leaders of the movement explored the range of catholic faith and action, and monasticism was an important part of their exploration.

Many of the emerging communities had their origins in meeting the needs of England's rapidly growing industrial town and cities. Education and health care were major sectors within which religious orders could extend provision in an era before state welfare. Often their origin lay with an individual priest seeking to form a community to enable the needs of the poor to be better met in his parish. The Franciscan family, to which the author belongs, began with a small band of brothers who travelled with and ministered to the many unemployed and itinerant workers who had returned from the First World War with what today would be called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Contemplative orders were always fewer and smaller than the active ones. Monasticism never grew to a large size and many Anglicans might never have come into direct contact with it. Others assumed that the communities they saw were Roman Catholic. Many orders developed oblate or associate fellowships that supported the community through prayer and action.

In the second half of the last century, and on into the present one, Anglican religious orders in England experienced similar decline, for largely the same reasons, as their Catholic counterparts. However, they remained present and active with sufficient numbers and energy to allow them to play a vital role in the development of the new monastic communities and religious orders that began to emerge in Anglican and Protestant Christianity in England around the middle of the first decade of the present millennium.

As recently as 2008, most of the work of the Advisory Council for the Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities was concerned with the problems experienced in traditional communities with ageing and declining numbers. Eight years later, meeting for twice the amount of time it did formerly, most of the effort and energy is spent on helping emerging communities to grow and develop healthily, linking them with individual experienced Religious who can help and guide.

Common features

Ecumenical but with episcopal oversight

Most emerging religious communities do not restrict membership to Anglicans. Some are very clearly ecumenical in all aspects of their life; others may wish to restrict particular positions of responsibility within the order to Anglicans. Membership can be drawn from a wide range of other denominations, including Catholics. Communities that wish to receive formal Acknowledgement from the Church of England are required to have an Anglican bishop as their "Episcopal Visitor". The role of the Visitor models that seen within traditional Anglican communities. Most commonly this will include: to act as a point of advice and support, especially to the leadership; to give final approval to members leaving the community; to be the last court of appeal in matters of dispute within the community; to sponsor or assist with the sponsorship of candidates for ordination to a house of, or service in, the community.

Diversity of churchmanship

When Anglican religious communities were founded in the nineteenth century, they were almost exclusively an expression of the Catholic tradition within the wider church. Some of these

communities moved in their entirety to become Roman Catholic whilst others lost significant numbers of their members to RC orders. This did not however change the catholic allegiances of those who remained, and the surviving orders would hold to the same position today. Some later orders, particularly the Franciscan groups that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century, whilst remaining substantially catholic, drew from a wider churchmanship range, both Anglican and beyond. However, it is with the emergence of the new monastic communities that groups have been formed where the dominant churchmanship is evangelical or charismatic; in some cases (for example TOM, which has several hundred members) being both.

Dispersed but with gatherings

New Anglican religious communities rarely begin with a group of people living together in formal community. Most start and remain predominantly dispersed. In some cases the dispersal will be quite local, especially if the charism of the community is to provide a specific ministry in a particular place. For example a group might provide and populate a place of prayer and quiet in a city centre, exercising a ministry among young people engaged in the night life of the city. Groups with such a ministry will gather quite frequently, others may meet face to face much more rarely. Members are typically expected to commit to the use of particular forms of regular prayer, for example the saying of the community's Daily Office. One recent development (for example the Anglican Cistercians) is that dispersed members gather on-line (such as via Skype) so that they can see and hear each other whilst they participate together in the community daily prayers from their own homes.

Dispersed monastic groups will have some pattern of expecting members to meet together formally for shared worship, to admit new members, to celebrate transitions through the novitiate, to participate in formation into the life and charism of the order, and to discuss the affairs of the community. Where dispersal is over a large area, this will often be through gatherings, perhaps monthly, of small local groups. Large and widely dispersed communities often hold an annual gathering of all members that is associated with the renewal of commitment; the largest bodies may meet all together very rarely. The level of compulsion to attend the various gatherings will vary between the different communities.

For many participants an important attraction of the gatherings is that they provide an opportunity to meet regularly with a group of fellow Christians who share in wanting to take their discipleship beyond the norms of most Anglican or Protestant congregational and parish life. The common bond created by a strong sense of belonging to the order may play an important role in enabling an individual to continue to play an active part in other, less fulfilling church entities. One example might be a member who attends a small and struggling local church that needs his or her active participation but does not offer enough by way of its life and community to support and sustain them. Anglican priests in particular may find that attending community gatherings fills a gap in their spiritual lives, enabling them to carry on in a demanding and less than rewarding ministerial context.

A recent development is that several communities that began without a particular geographical place are moving towards the setting up of some sort of "mother house". This may be a place that acts as home to a small number of the order and also as a focus for gatherings of the dispersed membership. Members of the community may be invited or volunteer to live in the community house for a period of time. It would appear that having specific places that can be hallowed and sanctified as a geographical focus for the life of the community is more important than many may

have initially thought. The creation of such a mother house is not without its own tensions, for example over who may live there and whether it becomes a symbol of a more centralised authority as well as of belonging.

Mixed sex and mixed status

Anglican new monastic communities are open to both men and women. They include both those who are single and married. In most cases there is no requirement that husband and wife must join together as a couple. There is at present ongoing debate about the conflict between making a life commitment both to a marriage partner and to a religious community.

Communities are open both to laity and clergy. Clergy may have particular responsibilities such as chaplaincy to the Order but are otherwise not seen as having a significant difference in status. A small number are seeking to use the longstanding permission given to Anglican religious communities to discern, and present for ordination, members whose priestly ministry will be exercised within the life of the community. It is expected that such candidates submit to the normal processes of discernment of vocation and training required of other ordinands, and most would utilise the diocesan systems in whichever part of the country the candidate is based. Candidates may be ordained by the bishop who is Visitor to the community instead of the local diocesan.

Vows and Promises

Very few new monastic communities have life vows in the way typical of traditional communities. The lifetime vow is seen as being more specifically suited to those who live together permanently in community rather than the dispersed. In particular the majority view within the Anglican tradition is that the taking of life vows is incompatible with making the vows required for marriage. New monastic community members may frame their commitment within a lifetime context, as with Third Order Franciscans, but will commit to the maintenance of the Rule for a named period of time, often a year. This recognises that the changing demands of living in secular society, for example parenthood and career, may require changes in the way in which commitment to and belonging within the community is lived out to an extent not widely experienced in traditional monastic orders.

The nature of the vows taken, and even whether they should be referred to as "vows" rather than "promises" has been a cause of concern for those communities that have close associations to Benedictine traditions. The Order of Anglican Cistercians is a dispersed brotherhood, including married and single members, who pray their Daily Offices together using webcams and meet residentially several times a year in Chapter. Within their tradition the long term and lifelong nature of commitment is given great weight. After considerable negotiation it has been agreed that those who have completed their noviciate and simple vows should make their promises for periods of ten years.

Noviciates

New monastic communities in the Church of England follow a fairly traditional pattern with regard to novices. Those who approach a community with a view to membership will be permitted some initial informal involvement in its life, perhaps with terms such as "enquirer" or "postulant" being used. If both the individual and the novice leader for the community believe it appropriate, a formal noviciate of two or three years will then follow after which, subjected to the agreement of the order

that the novice is suitable, a member will be admitted to profession or full membership and make the appropriate promises for the agreed period of time.

Rules and Rhythms

For a significant number, a principal attraction of new monasticism is the discipline and accountability created by having and keeping a Rule of Life. For a dispersed and mixed community the Rule needs to be quite broadly drawn, a distinction that is often expressed by referring to it as a collection of “Rhythms” rather than rules. These may cover a wide range of themes within Christian discipleship: private devotions such as daily prayers; participation in the Eucharist; attendance at public worship in one’s local church; commitment to attending community gatherings; lifestyle; study; penitence; financial matters; engagement with the community’s charism; retreat and spiritual direction; evangelisation. An individual may then seek to make and record specific commitments under these general headings. There may be a requirement for the individual’s Rule to be approved by officers of the community, in order to see that it reflects the charism and particularities of the order and that it is neither too demanding nor too lax.

Whilst it is clearly not necessary to belong to a new monastic community in order to take up the discipline of a Rule of Life, belonging to an order creates a locus for accountability. This can be both implicit and explicit. Explicit accountability may take the form of all members being required to submit a regular self-appraisal, against the Rule, to another member or officer of the community. Members may also be expected to meet and discuss how they are keeping their Rule with a personal Spiritual Director. Implicit accountability is found in the internalised commitment to keeping the Rule that comes from the member’s knowing that others are seeking to do the same. Community gatherings may reinforce that internal accountability by bringing members face to face with others known to be striving to keep the Rule. Such meetings may also allow members to discuss together aspects of the Rule and how it applies to daily life, resulting in a greater sense of mutual support.

Types of communities

Sufficient communities have emerged in the Church of England in recent years to begin to allow some simple categorisation. Whilst the list below is not exhaustive, it captures many of the main strands.

Communities of prayer

Such communities exist principally to join members together in a common, if dispersed, life of prayer. Members will be expected to commit to a daily routine, using prayer books produced by the order. Several, such as the Community of Aidan and Hilda and the Northumbria Community have grown up with a particular concern to explore the ancient Celtic Christian tradition of the northern parts of the UK. Membership of the community provides a sense of accountability that helps the individual member to maintain the discipline. Occasional gatherings will be focussed around using the liturgical materials of the order.

Rhythm of life communities

As mentioned above, having a Rule or Rhythm of Life is a powerful attractor for some communities, as it brings a sense of accountability and mutual support to the task of living as a Christian in a complex and secular society. A particular model was pioneered by the Community of St Chad, which was set up under the authority of the then Bishop of Lichfield to allow church members in his diocese to commit to a simple Rule expressed under a handful of headings, but with a general orientation towards study of scripture and engagement in mission. Others, such as the Peregrini Community in Manchester are following a similar pattern. The trend is for these most recent Rhythms to become a little less prescriptive and directed than the Lichfield original. They will typically cover some or all of spiritual growth, prayer discipline, service of others, mission, study, involvement in the local church.

Missional communities

Missional communities typically arise from a group of Christians seeking to respond to an issue or mission opportunity in their local town or city. The community is formed when the participants determine that they need a stronger sense of mutual belonging, support and accountability than the missional task alone is capable of providing. Community members will commit time to the task but also commit to times of prayer, retreat, fellowship and worship. The MOOT community, working in central London, has focussed on providing a haven of peace and reflection at the heart of a very frenetic modern city. Such groups may remain local, spread to other locations, or seek to join together with similarly minded communities in other places. Several such are currently exploring a union tentatively entitled the Society of the Holy Trinity.

Conversions of societies

One very specific phenomenon has been the recent decisions by two large and long established Anglican mission societies to convert to religious communities. Both Church Army and Church Mission Society were over a century old, with a wide network of missionaries working in the first case in the UK and in the second case overseas. Both had large groups of prayer supporters and donors in British Anglican churches. In each case considerable consultation was done with the wide membership, and a very high degree of support required. Members made their promises and were admitted to the new community at large gatherings. The reasons for conversion were in both cases to gain a stronger sense of belonging and support in order to work in demanding and sometimes quite isolated situations. For a lone mission worker in a foreign country or deeply deprived city estate the sense of being part of a community might be the difference between ministry being sustainable or not.

The conversion of existing societies to become religious communities raised a specific problem for those society members who were already members of some other Order. Whilst it was felt that multiple memberships should not be encouraged, pastoral considerations have led to an acceptance that a member should not be expected to withdraw from a body to which they already belong simply because it is reforming itself as a community.

Communities of formation

In the Anglican tradition monasticism is seen a lifelong vocation. Leaving the community has often been treated as a grave failing, with the departing brother or sister never spoken of again. The

notion that the religious life might be for a time or season, and its primary function be the formation of a human being for future life, entered the Anglican tradition more recently through contact with the Buddhist and Hindu traditions of the east. The Lee Abbey community owes its origins, in the period immediately after the Second World War, to Anglicans who had spent time in the ashrams of British India. The resident members are predominantly young adults, drawn from across the globe. They spend a year or two away from pursuit of career, in a place where they can deepen their faith and discover what God may be calling them to next. More recently, the Community of St Anselm, based in the grounds of the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, brings together around forty members each year, under the leadership of a Prior appointed by the Archbishop. Such communities combine a robust routine of corporate prayer and personal study with a commitment to practical service of the place in which they are situated. With varying degrees of success, they seek to maintain a sense of belonging among those who have completed their time of residence through a combination of prayer letters, local groups and occasional larger gatherings.

Alongsiders

Anglican Monastic orders have long attracted those who wish to spend an extended period of time living close to them. These join in with the life and charism of the community without formally exploring whether they have a vocation to its membership. The growth of new monastic groups within Anglicanism has coincided with an increase in those who wish to attach themselves to a more traditional community in such a way. A minority of these "alongsiders" will in due course become postulants of the community. Most will return to secular life, enriched by their experience in ways similar to those who have spent time in formational communities. The communities hosting them benefit not only from a potential source of future members but from the fact that most bring youth, energy and a welcome extra pair of hands to the life of the monastery.

The Society of St Francis, in its mother house at Hilfield, has taken a further step in response to the growth of alongsiders by forming them into a community with its own distinctive rules and rhythms. Having such a structure allows the new group to develop a life that whilst consistent with the Franciscan charism of the host community, does not simply seek to replicate it. Whilst some tensions have arisen from having two very different communities located together in this way, so far the exercise has been successful, breathing fresh life into the friary, extending its outreach and providing space for those seeking a fresh direction in their lives.

Recurrent themes and issues

Replacing, alongside or adding to parish life

For traditional religious who live within community, the primary focus for their belonging to the Body of Christ will be through the Order itself. For those that are largely or completely dispersed, the question arises as to whether membership of the community is intended to help the individual be sustained within the normal parish or local church structures, to sit alongside parish life, or to put the community in the place of the local church. Communities rarely explicitly adopt this last model, not least because that would require a sufficiently localised presence to enable members to gather frequently. Some are very clear that their primary role is to equip Christians for mission and ministry in their home churches; others do not appear to address the issue. Church members who are, for whatever reason, unfulfilled, dissatisfied or alienated from their home church, can then increasingly

look to place the community in its stead. They may call for increased length or frequency of gatherings, seek to identify particular pieces of mission that the community can undertake together, and act negatively towards those who do not share their enthusiasms for what they see as strengthening the order. Individuals motivated by a desire to find an alternative to parish structures may, through their very generosity of time and depth of commitment, move into positions of community leadership.

Communities that have come into being in order to address a particular issue, such as homelessness or the vulnerability of young adults frequenting pubs and clubs at night, will have a clear focus for common work. Most members will already be well rooted in their own local church and involved in its life and mission. Such a model may allow the community to maintain a focus whilst not drawing members away from their commitment to their local churches. It is as yet too early to say whether such arrangements are stable.

Rule, gathering and charism

We have seen how communities have a particular purpose or charism, ask members to submit to a personal rule or rhythm, and hold various types of gathering. In any individual community, whatever its main thrust, there may be individuals who are drawn much more strongly to the one than the other. For example the Third Order of the Society of St Francis contains those who are attracted by the life of the saint and wish to associate themselves with it, those who seek to be part of a group of likeminded Christians who share broadly similar values about the environment and go beyond what is possible at parish level, and individuals who wish to hold to a Rule of Life which contains the Franciscan categories. Those in the three categories can come into tensions with each other, most often by failing to realise that they do not all share the same prime motivation. Sitting light to the particular part of the tradition that one person holds most strongly to, can be seen by that person as a lack of commitment to the order in its entirety. Rule motivated members cease to attend meetings, gathering members fail to maintain the Rule, charism members wish the groups could focus on the saint and his teaching rather than waste time discussing the internal functioning of the community.

Role of the founder

One of the most sensitive issues faced by many new communities is their relationship to their founder. Anglican communities are expected to follow the pattern of regular elections to all positions of responsibility within the community, so that the principle of all members having a voice in the affairs of the Order is maintained. Along with this, communities are expected to have procedures to allow the members to remove a leader who has ceased to hold their confidence. Not all communities have a clear individual founder, some have emerged in a more organic and consensual fashion. But for those who do, it is a difficult issue.

During the process of submission of draft constitutions by some early new groups for approval by the Advisory Council it became clear that founders were seeking to write exemptions into the documents in order to protect their own authority and position. Such exemptions might include requiring elections only after the founder has voluntarily stood down and making no provision for the founder to be removed against their will. Whilst it is understandable that a founder will have a strong interest in seeking to prevent the community they have created from losing its way, it is the

Anglican view that it is the community as a whole which is the guardian of its values and ethos, with support as needed from the bishop Visitor.

Acknowledging new monastic communities

Benefits of Recognition and Acknowledgement

A clear distinction is held within the Church of England between communities that are living a traditional form of monasticism, and the newer communities which are the subject of this paper. Communities of the first type are referred to as "Recognised", a status that allows their professed members to vote for a special constituency within the governing body of the Church, the General Synod. Members of such communities who have taken solemn vows can only be released by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who acts under powers ceded to him at the Reformation, having up to that point been held by the Papal Legate.

New Monastic communities, such as of the types mentioned above, may instead of Recognition, apply for Acknowledgement by the Church of England, a process overseen by the Advisory Council for the Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities. Members of such communities have no electoral college and their release from their promises typically rests with the community's internal processes, subject to the agreement of the Visitor. Acknowledgement does however place the community within the Anglican family, afford the possibility of a community led route to ordination, and establish routes for the safeguarding of childbirth and vulnerable adults via the local diocese. This latter issue has become particularly important in the light of disclosures of past abuse in Anglican, Roman Catholic, and other settings.

For some communities Acknowledgement also gives a stronger sense of their being situated within the wider and historic family of monasticism, in that their status is not simply self-declared but awarded by an external body with competence and authority. Such authentication would seem to play a part in encouraging communities to delve into the treasures of the monastic tradition more widely and deeply. This is exemplified by one community, drawn from an evangelical charismatic and mixed Anglican-Baptist background, who felt legitimated in exploring how to adopt aspects of the Rule of St Benedict of which they had previously been unaware into their life.

Who seeks acknowledgement

Communities that have been born and nurtured within the Anglican framework, as well as those Anglican bodies that have chosen to reconstitute themselves as new monastic communities, have a strong and natural impulse to seek some official status within the church, including the accountability and episcopal oversight that can be offered to such. By contrast, some emerging communities, particularly those whose origins lie outside of the Church of England, have neither the desire nor the requirement to seek any formal relationship with the institutional church. However for many, even where they contain members drawn very widely from both traditional denominations and independent churches, a point arises when they desire to take on a formal relationship with the church. For example, the 24/7 Prayer Movement operates across a number of countries and its leaders have mostly come from non-Anglican backgrounds. The movement contains a wide range of predominantly young people who engage in its activities as a way of deepening personal spirituality. As the movement has grown it has developed a core who wish to

make a more formal and lasting commitment to their common life. As part of this they began to make promises and develop a common Rule. Accountability to the Rule and to one another led in turn to a concern about how the community as a whole might be appropriately accountable to the wider church. For communities that are not substantially Roman Catholic the Anglican route is often the only one available.

The process of "acknowledgement"

Acknowledgement is structured as an accompanied journey, in which the community engages with one or two representatives of the Church of England Advisory Council over a period of typically a couple of years. Those accompanying are drawn from both the monastic and episcopal members of the Advisory Council. There will always be at least one monastic, a member of either a traditional or newer, but Acknowledged, Order. They will meet with members of the new community over the period of discernment in order to oversee any required changes and to ensure that it both genuinely understands and desires the formal relationship of Acknowledgement. During this period there will be several reports to the Advisory Council so that members of the whole Council can offer and agree any advice or set requirements. One or two leaders from the community may be invited to attend part of a Council meeting, so that a relationship is established with the whole Council.

There are a number of practical hurdles to be overcome on the route to Acknowledgement. These are set out in the document, "Towards Acknowledgement" which is provided on request to emerging communities. Those accompanying the community have regard to a longer version of the document which underpins the Guidance but is felt to be a little too detailed for circulation to the community itself. The principle questions are as follows:

Does the community have a formal constitution to govern its affairs that is fit for purpose? Some communities emerge with very little formality whilst others arrive having produced complex and constraining legal documents more suited to a large and multinational organisation than to a handful of men and women who have been exploring their way together for a few years.

Does the community have appropriate procedures for testing vocations to its membership and for nurturing novices to profession?

Is the leadership properly and regularly accountable to the membership? How are leaders appointed and removed?

Are the promises made by members suitable? Do they appropriately reflect aspects found in traditional monasticism, even if reinterpreted for their circumstances? Are they neither too basic nor too demanding?

It is relatively uncommon for a community to be refused Acknowledgement. Where this has happened it has normally been because the community has only very tenuous links to the Anglican tradition but stronger ones to other, independent movements. However, in the great majority of cases, the route to Acknowledgement will require some significant changes to either the Rule and Constitution of the community or its practices. Almost always changes required by the Advisory Council have been received gladly, as part of accepting the wider monastic inheritance.

Are these really monasticism?

Oblates or monastics?

For much of the twentieth century, men and women who felt an association with the monastic life but were not called to the celibate life of a gathered community might have explored their calling through membership of an oblate group attached to a traditional order. Many of the features of such groups can be found in the life of the emerging new monastics. This poses the question as to whether these new bodies should be encouraged to explore the oblate status instead. However, there are both practical and ecclesial arguments against such an approach.

Firstly, whilst oblate groups may have some responsibility for the organisation of their life, they remain subject to the authority of the host community. Their primary role is to support that community, be it through prayer or participation in such ministries as the order undertakes. By contrast New Monastic groups, even where they have an association with a traditional order, are fully autonomous bodies, developing their own mission and responsible for their governance.

Secondly, the capacity of many traditional orders, in a period of declining numbers and ageing members, to adequately support a vibrant and growing oblate group, is lacking. Moreover, a very strong association with an older community would create potential problems for the future should the host body reach the point of closure. There have already been some attempts to create New Monastic communities from the oblates attached to traditional communities that have reached the end of their life. These have tended not to be sustainable as there has been no tradition of developing independent, sustainable leadership within the oblate groups. Separated from the guiding hand of the host community they have fallen prey to power bids, ineffective leadership and internal conflict.

The limits of monasticism

If a community can be widely dispersed with only occasional gatherings, contain men and women with different and potentially changing marital status, allow overlap with members of other communities, and recruit members with the explicit intention that they will not make vows for life, then the question has to be asked whether the term monastic has been extended so far as to have lost all real meaning. Certainly, when communities with such features first began to emerge in England, some traditional monastics were decidedly sceptical about their claims.

The very positive and mutually supportive attitudes that define the relationships between traditional and New Monastic communities today would appear to have arisen primarily through a series of formal conferences and informal meetings between the two groups, supported by the careful exploration of the theology underpinning monastic life in general. The ecclesiological distinction drawn between the parish or "modal" form of church and the societal or "sodal" form has been particularly helpful in defining common ground.

New Monastics are now predominantly seen as genuinely seeking to base their life on the monastic way, and as being keen to receive and bring into their lives the wisdom available from those who are traditional monastics. A conference at Whitby in 2015, at the home of the Order of the Holy Paraclete (a long established women's order with a teaching charism) brought together around 120 members of traditional communities, new monastic groups and those thinking of forming new orders. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave generously of his own time to the event. Just as the life

of an individual religious is formed as much by living in the community as by adhering to the Rule, so the rhythm of traditional and new monastics living and praying together over a period of several days may well be of itself formational into a deeper adherence to the religious life. Such a formational process may well not be easily capable of being captured in words, but its effect can be seen in the lives of those involved.

Conclusion

New Monastic communities within the Church of England have been seen to be a diverse collection, however with some strong similarities in both the way they fashion their life and the issues they face. Closer links with traditional communities have helped them to draw more deeply from the wells of religious life whilst remaining true to the challenges of an era very different from that in which previous orders were formed. Identifying these new bodies as forming part of the sodal and monastic form of Christian discipleship has brought benefits to both their self-understanding and the perception of their place within the wider church.