

New Habits for a New Era - Exploring New Monasticism
Notes from Conference 3rd May 2008
United Reform Church, Warwick Row, Coventry.

Jointly organised & presented by [Anabaptist Network](#) and [Northumbria Community](#)

"The church in Britain (and much of western culture) is in exile, according to many commentators, aliens in a strange new world. What spiritual resources, patterns of community and ways of living do we need to sustain faith, inspire discipleship and energise mission?"

We hear many stories of 'emerging churches' and 'fresh expressions of church', but Christians in many places are also rediscovering older forms of spirituality and discipleship. Some are drawing on the monastic traditions to find resources for a post-Christendom culture. 'New monasticism' is the term many are using to describe these attempts to re-work old rhythms, rules of life and liturgical resources in a new era. Is this a hopeful sign? Or is this 'monastic-lite', a fad that is unlikely to last? What does 'new monasticism' mean and what does it offer the church?"

Sarah Pillar from NC opened the conference and introduced the speakers, who each gave a brief overview. This was followed by worship in the Northumbria Community tradition, the Morning Office from 'Celtic Daily Prayer' was sung.

Plenary Session - Peter Askew of NC - New Monasticism

New Monasticism -Is it a movement? Lots of communities all over northern hemisphere – all different. Kaufman ([NewSaintBenedict.pdf](#)) wrote that what is happening is similar to the Benedictine movement of the first millennium.

Several of these communities met together in the US in 2004 to debate the issue and came up with '12 Marks of New Monasticism' which described such groups. Not all of them have all the Marks, but together these form the basis for recognising New Monastic communities.

The 12 Marks are as follows: (see [newmonasticism.org](#))

- 1) [Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.](#) (Described as Inner Cities, places the State has over-looked)
- 2) [Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.](#) (Some have a 'common purse' or version of it).
- 3) [Hospitality to the stranger](#)
- 4) [Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.](#)
- 5) [Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.](#)
- 6) [Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.](#)

- 7) Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
- 8) Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
- 9) Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
- 10) Care for the plot of God's earth given to us, along with support of our local economies. (Like going organic, growing-your-own and buying locally produced food and goods)
- 11) Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
- 12) Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

Some communities are very small, only 2-3 people, exploring how to live. There was an explosion of interest in NM in 2005 following a front page article in the magazine [Christianity Today](#). Some were looking for a longer term way of life, or to start their own communities.

A Church of England report, [Mission Shaped Church](#) also mentioned New Monasticism as a fresh expression of church, or rather, a traditional form of church inspiring new interest.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter to his brother during WWII, wrote:

'The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this'

This current 'wave' goes back to the '30s and '40s, and then Taize was begun after the war and grew in the '50s, followed by more movements in the '60s and '70s. Pope John Paul II also encouraged lay communities.

Exile – the period has been characterised by the marginalisation of the church. Seeking after God turns exile into pilgrimage.

Pete finished the session asking – 'Does NM help us to be better followers of Jesus?' Most new communities promote seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus. For example, [The Simple Way](#), lead by Shane Claiborne, has a mission statement: **"To Love God. To Love people. To Follow Jesus."**

There followed a Q&A and discussion session. There was a question about the north-south divide, what is happening in the southern hemisphere, in relation to NM? Pete said NM is a response to what is happening in our northern culture and had no knowledge of community activity in the south.

There was a question on individual spirituality vs. mission. NM is about both – mission comes out of community. Community comes first; can it happen the other way round? In the US there is radical activism in many communities, different to here, where they are more contemplative.

There was another question about commitment in NM. Pete acknowledged that it can sometimes be a problem. There are different levels of commitment in the Northumbria

Community; Companions, friends, Community Groups, plus many people who simply join them through the saying of the Offices in 'Celtic Daily Prayer'.

Someone asked about the first 'mark' of NM, the reference to empire – did this include the Church, in that the Church is often linked to 'state'? (I did not record the answer given to this, but think it was largely affirmative, and recognised that in many ways the Church is less present in those places). Pete made reference to Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, a Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest regarded as the founder of [Liberation Theology](#). He describes Christian poverty as an act of loving solidarity with the poor as well as a protest against poverty. I also made a note about the [Eden Project](#) in Manchester, but not sure what the context was, probably it was to do with their being a community working in an urban setting in the UK.

They followed a choice of two sessions – Anabaptism – Re-monking the church after Christendom, with Stuart Murray Williams, or The Northumbria Community – Re-habiting the church in exile, with Roy Searle.

I went to the Roy Searle session

Reference was made again to the Bonhoeffer quote as above, and to Bob Dylan's – 'The times they are a-changing...' The context - Exile

Cultural and Ecclesiastical Exile

- Inter-testamental – between old and new, are we living in such a time – nothing there?
- 'How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? The church is in decline – many people leaving – in exile.
- Defining Reality – what is real
- Christ or Canute – do we work harder and just hope things get better? It's not enough – why are we in exile – has God done it to make the church change, repent, think differently?
- Power and Control – need new models of leadership
- Renounce, restore, renew, re-imagine. The poor are largely ignored by today's culture; what can we learn from them, from poverty? What can we do? The people of Israel went into exile to renew their image of God. God does this to us sometimes. In Exile we discover how we have become squeezed.
- How then shall we live? In exile we have the opportunity to find new ways of being human in the world. Finding a new way to be. Writers such as [Ivan Illich](#) and more lately, Scott [Bessenecker](#) (author of *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*), say we need to find and live (and tell, Roy added) an alternative story, to change society.

Characteristics of a re-habited Church

- Seeking God – as if returning from a far country – prophetic voice and influence shaping and informing established and emerging Church; the far off country is a land of busy-ness, we are too busy.
- Relationship – valued over reputation
- Community

- Contemplation and action
- Discipleship – spiritual formation and transformation, not information – a heart change; a holy, worldly people
- Rule or Values, not Visions and mission statements - Values must underpin community – not just people getting together to do something, rather people sharing a set of values – the rule – which shapes who we are and what we do.
- Rhythm of life (prayer, work, study etc)
- [Kairos](#) not chronos time – special, in between time, different to the world’s time – we need time to both recognise and be in the presence of God, and for people.
- Wisdom not knowledge – knowledge is easy to come by – we need wisdom; to be self aware, how to live. Solitude and hospitality are hand-in-hand – you can only live in community when you can face yourself, in your cell.
- Creative and Adventurous
- Creating space – as oppose to programmes
- Experimental and Imaginative – exploring
- Taking Risks – Brendan the Navigator, monks setting off in their coracles not knowing where they were heading
- Missional - as oppose to Pastoral. NM is quite harsh – seek God for yourself – get on with it – not a fellowship model but communal.
- Marginal – not mainstream
- Connected but not controlling – kaleidoscopic, lots going on – observing, not analysing
- Power of Love, not Love of Power
- Authenticity, integrity and transparency, as oppose to relevance – See Order of the Holy Paraclete ohpwhitby.org or Urban Space in Wakefield urbanspace.org.uk
- Emmaus vs. Damascus – getting alongside, being companionable
- Spiritual – we live in a spiritual age, lots of people looking for spiritual answers, often the church is the last place they look. (When 'The Monastery' was on TV, there were 40 thousand hits on the website for Worth Abbey – it struck a chord).
- Hospitality – an attitude of heart, people see through superficial giving
- Generosity
- Subversive and Radical – rebel against things in church and culture which are alien to the gospel.

Q&A session: Should we be critiquing NM? Yes, need to examine it; we can't *be* Celtic saints, but can learn from them – (See [Thomas Merton](#)).

Values – there may be hidden values under those that are agreed upon – yes, but have to submit to the rule.

In NM, to what extent are leadership roles expressed i.e. Priesthood and Prophets?

There is a need to lay down control and power. Look at the Celtic saints – had women in leadership. It's about finding the right seat, not power and authority.

Community or Church - how do they relate? Can have a foot in both camps, NM is not a new church or denomination.

Old monasticism was scary – how do we avoid NM becoming a watered down version of the old? It's good to be provoked – we need to check what we are doing, can't be done in isolation, we need accountability.

After lunch there was a choice of several Workshops

I did 'Home-made Habits?' which I thought was going to give me lots of practical advice for developing a rhythm of life at home, but was instead somewhat more personal to the workshop leaders, [Karen Stallard](#) and Sally Nash - just as stimulating and interesting – simple and honest)

They talked about vocation, and recommended a book, '[Sleeping](#) with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life' as well worth reading. They urged us to find our **core calling**, and work that out, where ever God puts us. They asked: What gives you life? Contemplate those things which cause you to be fruitful. Find new ways to sustain yourselves, new habits – Where do you find God?

They asked: How do we live incarnationally (as Jesus)? Do we have to be resilient? Was Jesus? We need to engage with people, but also have times alone, where we re-charge our batteries, chillin' out – emotional and mind space. Be honest about what you need, be real. We need sacred space, whatever, wherever it is, urban or rural, man-made or natural, TV soaps or forests, video games or country walks.

They also talked about [Values](#):

Values are the beginning – they are what inspire us: for example being driven by the desire to support people to increase control over their own lives.

Values are the means – they determine what we do and how we do it: for example planning and delivering work using approaches that encourage initiative and self-help.

Values are the end – they are what we are trying to achieve: for example bringing about a society where everyone can play their part. ([Community Links](#))

After tea there was 'Conversation with Practitioners' a kind of panel Q&A session with Ian Adams from [mayBe](#), a community in Oxford, Brother Samuel, of the [Order of Anglican Franciscans](#), Trevor Saxby of the [Jesus Army](#), author of several books on community, and Pete Askew of Northumbria Community. The guys were asked questions and each in turn gave their answers, so it was interesting to see the different approaches and similarities. Brother Samuel talked about providing friendship on the road, and living with the environment and people of different faiths. He wanted to both encourage and learn from NM, and thought it was important for both the Church and traditional Monasticism.

There was a time of reflection and further discussion of the Twelve Marks of NM lead by Stuart Murray Williams of Anabaptist Network, and Roy Searle. People had added questions and comments to a large sheet of paper, and Roy and Stuart attempted to answer some of them, provoking some interesting discussion.

Lament for racial divisions – we need new worship songs – Spring Harvest's theme one year, was Sing the Lord's Song! It was too upbeat, whereas the cry of the captives in Psalm 137 was from the depths of the heart. It was remarked that after 9/11 lots of people left church because there had been no mention of the atrocities – there were no suitable songs and no appropriate words, so many church leaders just ignored it.

Peacemaking – urban action, countryside is not necessary, need to be where the poor and needy are. Retreats largely middle class, richer folks, whereas the Celtic saints were on the margins, and so should we be. St. Francis - 'Preach the Gospel at all times – use words if necessary'.

Hospitality – the common table, all sitting down to eat together, a sign of the Kingdom. Shared meals are really important.

We ended with some worship in the Anabaptist tradition, singing a song in the round, which was really cool.

For other experiences of the conference see the following blogs/sites [simoncross](#)
[inthebellyofthebigfish](#) [urbanexpression.org.uk](#)