Prelude: A Franciscan Pilgrimage

The precise date on which to begin the period of sabbatical study leave that has given me the opportunity to spend these weeks over the summer of 2016 in prayer, study and spiritual refreshment, was determined by the decision of the Ely Chapter of the Society of Catholic Priests to offer its members (along with their spouses or guests) the possibility of a short retreat in the Umbrian hill town of Assisi. As we set out to travel to Italy on the 18th July, I imagined that the week that Judith and I would spend there would simply be a relaxing, enjoyable and instructive way of making the transition from the hectic schedule of parish life to the calmer and more reflective time that I intended to spend reading, thinking and praying about how parish life and the building of Christian community could be rooted in a spirituality of stillness and silence, drawing on the example and resources of both traditional and new monasticism.

But the visit was to have a far more profound and pervasive effect – in fact it influenced and directed my thinking over the entire sabbatical.

That first afternoon, after a very early start and a morning's journey, we were given a gentle afternoon tour of the immediate centre of Assisi and found ourselves in the church of S. Chiara, in front of the 13th century San Damiano Crucifix, the same cross before which the young man, Francis, knelt in prayer and apprehended the voice of Jesus telling him to 'rebuild my church'. From that moment, over the next few days as we visited and revisited the Franciscan sites and shrines – the monastery of S. Damiano itself, the basilica of S. Francesco, the mountain hermitage among them - we were drawn completely into the story of Francis and Clare (about which I discovered I knew very little) and were profoundly moved and affected by that story of total and uncompromising submission to the will of God, in ways that we simply had not expected, and by which we feel that we have both been changed (and are in the process of being changed).

It became apparent very quickly that our 'Franciscan Pilgrimage' would not just function as an enjoyable, relaxing way of beginning a sabbatical, but would inform and guide my reading and thinking throughout the summer.

For some time past, my thinking about prayer and my prayer life itself, have been influenced and guided by writings on Christian meditation (sometimes the word contemplation is used, though this, strictly, is a different, deeper mode of prayer). The principle authors who have guided this thinking are Fr Laurence Freeman (representing a tradition and an organisation – the World Council for Christian Meditation – founded by the late John Main), Fr Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest whose Centre for

Action and Contemplation teaches meditative prayer as the base from which we move out to work and service, and Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary, whose writings on the priority of silence, of itself and as a prerequisite to meditation and contemplation, draw on ancient tradition and modern psychology and focus not only on the relation of the human person to God as individual and in relationship, but also address global ecological issues particularly the relationship of human societies to their environment and the use of the world's resources.

Although their emphases are different, Freeman, Rohr and Ross all focus on prayer that begins with encountering the presence of God at the core of our being in silence. All three explicitly reject the dualism that has characterised Christian thinking, separating God from creation and humanity, and body from soul in the human person. Instead, they draw on the idea of God as a Trinity of persons in relationship – Father, Son and Holy Spirit in an eternal dance of total self-giving love, and that love overflowing into creation[1]. In this model (very briefly and crudely summarised here), God is not monolithic, impassive, infinitely separate and distant, but active, dynamic, overflowing and intimately present at the core of creation and in every creature (Richard Rohr speaks of human beings, along with everything else, *loved* into being by God).

Drawing on Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 ('When you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door and pray to your Father who is there in secret…'), Laurence Freeman in his important book 'Jesus, the teacher within' (SCM, 2010) teaches that the 'room' is the chamber of the heart, that is the deepest level of being, and praying 'in secret', a withdrawal in silence into that chamber where God is to be found at the centre. From Romans 8.26, he draws the image of God the Holy Spirit, constantly at prayer in the heart, 'interceding with sighs too deep for words'. In meditative prayer, we seek to let go of our conscious thought processes – the Orthodox idea of drawing the mind into the heart – and seek to unite our silent prayer with the ongoing prayer of the Spirit. For Freeman the question that Jesus puts to his own disciples in Matthew 16 ('And you, who do you say that I am') is key. In addressing who we sya that Jesus is, we must also question who we really are, both in relation to ourselves and in relation to God revealed in Jesus, and an infinitely fruitful journey of discovery both of God and ourselves ensues.[2]

[1] Ross (in 'Pillars of Flame' SCM, 1988) points out that the concept of God as Trinity is a human construct, and its application needs to be mindful of its metaphorical origins. It is a way in which human beings can apprehend something of God's nature, but should not be assumed to account for the whole (infinitely inaccessible) nature of God.

[2] This question that Jesus puts to us through his disciples, informs Mark Yaconelli's thinking about youth ministry. In a comparative table of priorities, Yaconelli contrasts the anxious, control-seeking that prioritises

Freeman suggests that the obstacle to be overcome in moving to this 'prayer of the heart' is the human ego – not who we really are, but who we think we are and who we would like the world to think we are. This is the core of Richard Rohr's teaching. Rohr expresses this duality in terms of the false self, which we inhabit for most of our lives and the true self, the real person that God created us to be, and in whom God dwells. He too, in a more populist vein, writes of the human ego as the self that we construct: a self that is always vulnerable, always needing to be in control, always anxious, always fragile and brittle, in constant need of defence and repair. In this analysis, the ego is the false self that always tries to hide its failings and believes itself to be separated from a wrathful God who must be appeased. This is the frightened self that struggles to believe that the work of forgiveness has already been done through Jesus and that the gift of grace is already present in every human heart. Rohr characterises the realisation and rejection of the false self as the discovery of the 'immortal diamond', the realisation that the true self is there from eternity, but needs to be revealed to ourselves by stripping away the false self; to be the discovery of the 'pearl of great price' for the acquisition of which, we sell all that we think that we have – our self-important, self-regarding, controlling ego.

Rohr and Freeman write in a readily accessible style. Maggie Ross is more uncompromising, and technical both in theological and psychological thought and language. In her outstanding, but difficult study 'Silence, a user's guide' (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), Ross writes in terms of the self-conscious, self-reflective mind, full of noise and distraction, where our everyday consciousness operates, and the deep mind, where processes out of range of conscious thought happen and again, where the presence of God is constant. Using right and left brain terminology, she argues that it is not possible from an intentional point of view consciously to draw our focus from the self-conscious mind to the deep mind, but that it is possible intentionally to create the conditions under which this transition might involuntarily occur, as a gift of grace, not as a reward for our effort[3]. Ross uses the term liminality to describe the drawing closer to God in silent prayer, to the point where letting go into the love of God becomes a possibility. Ross is uncompromising in her view that humanity needs to recover the balance of mind that allows us to inhabit this liminal space, if we are to re-harmonise our relationships with one another, with planet Earth, the cosmos and with God. Her time spent living with indigenous people in the world's liminal spaces has taught her that this balance is still found in pre-industrial cultures, but that these cultures are in retreat and

answers (here's what we think; here's who God is) with the love centred contemplative approach (What do you think? Or as Jesus said 'Who do you say that I am?'). M Yaconelli, 'Contemplative Youth Ministry'. SPCK, 2006 p.51

[3] 'The predominance of self-forgetfulness in our lives can be hoped for, but it cannot be sought, because if we look at ourselves to see if we are self-forgetful we obviously are not.' (Pillars of Flame, p.160)

increasingly under threat. We live in a world driven by the desire for power and control (including control over our idea of God and our relationship with him) and while this obtains, the possibility of healing recedes. Ross levels similar charges at the Church. She finds intuitive, pre-scientific understanding of the way the mind works in early Christian culture, particularly in the Syriac tradition, especially the writings of Ephrem the Syrian (4thC) and Isaac of Nineveh (7thC): '…this tradition is invaluable to us in the Westas a resource of an ancient Semitic Christianity. It offers a passionate and unified vision of the love of God incarnate in Christ, indwelling the creation through the Spirit, unifying and transfiguring the universe, a vision towards which we in the West have been slowly and painfully struggling…'[4] . The Eastern Orthodox tradition in general, never subject to a Reformation or the influence of the Enlightement, has preserved something of the tradition of mystical theology. As the Western Church developed a rigid hierarchical structure, matched by equally rigidly hierarchical doctrines, this tradition was largely lost, perhaps suppressed, as powerful church structures fixed the gulf between God and humanity, between body and soul, and in their various manifestations, catholic and protestant, assumed control over access to God's grace. Again, crudely summarising a nuanced argument, the Aristotelian dualism implicit in the idea of humankind as inherently Godless and in need of the access to God's grace, which the church reserves the power to grant or withhold, has characterised both catholic and protestant thinking, and bolstered the Church's power base, setting a gulf between the human self and the image of God in which it is created. Ross notes a late flowering of mystical understanding in the author of The Cloud Unknowing and the writings of Mother Julian of Norwich in England in the fourteenth century, before the stream again went underground, to re-emerge in the twentieth with an Eastern-influenced recovery of the practice of silence and meditation.

I have set that background out at length, because I found something of the same sense of harmonisation of human and the divine in the life of St Francis. Whatever one believes actually happened on Mount La Verna in the summer of 1224 when according to his hagiographers, Francis prayed to be so united to Christ that he might share in the suffering of the cross and was granted a vision during which he was so completely identified with the crucified Christ that he received the stigmata, the marks of the passion, on his own body, it is clear that Francis did indeed inhabit his deep mind, his real self, the inner chamber of his heart where the Spirit prays constantly, to a remarkable and inspirational degree. This prelude to my own sabbatical pilgrimage, set me on a course of reading and prayer during the silent retreat that followed the trip to Assisi and for the following weeks, around the lives of Francis and Clare, and a proper introduction

[4] Ross op cit, p.*ix*

to the theology of St Bonaventure, partly refracted through the prism of writings by the modern Franciscan theologian and scientist, Sr Ilia Delio.

A detailed exposition of this investigation is beyond the scope of this report, but aspects of it demand to be shared. I have been particularly struck by three examples (one from each) of writings by these three Franciscan saints.

The first is the prayer of St Francis before the crucifix of S. Damiano, as it is recorded in his writings:

'O most high and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart.

Give me right faith, certain hope, perfect love and deep humility.

O Lord, give me sense and discernment in order to carry our your true and holy will.'[5]

The second is titled Soliloquy, and was written to the 'Poor Clares' by St Bonaventure:

'Christ on the cross bows his head, waiting for you, that he may kiss you,

His arms outstretched that he may embrace you,

His hands are open that he may enrich you,

His body spread out, that he may give himself totally,

His feet are nailed that he may stay there,

His side open for you, that he may let you enter there.'[6]

The third extract is from the third letter written by St Clare to the noblewoman, Agnes of Prague:

'Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the figure of the divine substance! And through contemplation , transform your entire body into the image of the Godhead itself, so that you may feel what friends feel in tasting the hidden sweetness that, from the beginning God has reserved for his lovers…'[7]

[5] Francis of Assisi: Early documents vol.1, p.40
[6] Quoted in Ilia Delio 'Franciscan Prayer' p.91
[7] Clare of Assisi: Early documents p.51

These passages, couched in the highly charged and physical language of love, witness to a mystical engagement with God in Christ that reaches out beyond the self-reflection of purely rational thinking.

Bonaventure's theology is fundamentally Trinitarian. Ilia Delio writes:

'Richard of St Victor and the Pseudo-Dionysius enabled Bonaveture to clarify the meaning of God as ultimate goodness and love…To say that God is goodness is to say that God is self-communicative. To say that God is love is to say that God is personal. The Trinity therefore is both self-communicative goodness and personal love.'[8]

Bonaventure characterises Christ as eternal Word, at the centre of the Trinity sharing in the Father's creativity, and its expression in the Spirit. 'Understanding the relationships of the divine persons, allows one to appreciate the centrality of the Word in Bonaventure's thought…As the Word is the inner self-expression of God, the created order is the external expression of the inner Word'.

Delio writes that the Word expresses all the divine ideas: 'Everything that has existed since the beginning of time, everything that exists, and everything that will exist in the future, is grounded in the one Word of God. Thus the created order is the external expression of the inner Word. All of creation with its manifold variations, expresses the one Word of God.'[9]

Delio writes that Bonaventure's theology is relational, because its foundation, the Trinity, is a community of relationships, and it is out of this community that creation emerges. All of creation is in some way related to the Trinity. This is an important concept to grasp when thinking about how we might mirror that creativity and connection in relationships in evolving new models of Christian community.

'Bonaventure also describes the created world as a book in which its Maker, the Trinity, shines forth and is represented at three levels of expression: a trace (vestige), and image, and a similitude…The trace is the most distant reflection of God and is found in all creatures. That is, every grain if sand, every star, every earthworm, reflect the Trinity as its origin (efficient cause), its reason of existence (formal cause) and the end to which it is destined (final cause). Everything that exists therefore, reflects the power, wisdom and goodness of the Trinity. The image however, is only found in intellectual (human) beings. It reflects the fact that the human person is not only structured according to the image of the Trinity, but as image, the human person is an apt receptacle for the

[8] Ilia Delio 'Simply Bonaventure'. New City Press, 2nd ed. 2013, p.43
[9] Delio op cit p.48

divine…Thus for Bonaventure, creation is a Theophany, an expression of God's glory manifested in the sacred order of creation…The world is created as a means of God's self-revelation so that, like a mirror or footprint, it might lead humans to love and praise the Creator…The book of creation, was intended by God to be the book of divine wisdom made visible to all'.[10]

'When sin rendered the book incomprehensible, Wisdom herself, the Word, became flesh so that the book written within (the divine Word) became written without in the humanity of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, the ground of all reality, the divine Word, appeared at the centre of creation…One who knows Christ therefore, knows the truth.'[11]

Delio continues: 'Francis is one who saw divine beauty in the beautiful things of creation because he saw that beauty first in Christ as he was crucified and glorified upon the cross. Through his relationship with Christ, he identified each and every creature as a brother and sister because he recognised that they had the same primordial source as himself…Through the life of Francis we can appreciate the mystery of Jesus Christ as the mystery of the Word by which we come to know the truth of all reality. Christ belongs to the very structure of reality: as Word, to the reality of God; as incarnate Word, to the reality of the universe created by God. It is Christ who reveals to the world its own meaning.'[12]

It would be impossible to do justice to the beauty and 'complex simplicity' of these ideas without more extensive quotation than space allows. Delio goes on to expound how for Bonaventure, image is intimately related to identity – the truth of who we are or rather, who we are created to be – and this can only be found in God: 'to discover the truth-secret-of one's identity is to discover God because the secret of one's identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God…If one is inspired to seek God more deeply, one is impelled to search within, where God dwells deep within the centre of the soul.' [13]Bonaventure held up the path of meditation and contemplation leading to close union with God, as a model for all Christians, and it seems to me that sense of a journey beginning in stillness and silence needs to be recovered in the church life of today. To me it seems essential, not just for the spiritual wellbeing or salvation of the individual, but for life lived in relationship to the image of God found in others within the Christian

[10] ibid p.61-2
[11] ibid p.62
[12] Ibid p.63
[13] Ibid p.71-2

community, mirroring the life of the Trinity in opening out to embrace those outside into God's unconditional love.

'This is the goal of contemplation for Bonaventure, to participate in the Trinity of love, which is the fountain-fullness of happiness and peace.'[14]

In further studies, particularly in 'The humility of God' (2005) and 'The unbearable wholeness of being: God, evolution and the power of love' (2013), Sr Delio, following Bonaventure, posits a theology of God's presence in creation that expresses God's complete humility. Crudely summarised, Christ, the eternal Word becoming the incarnate Word, is the expressed image of God entering creation, not just or even primarily as a remedy for human sin, but as part of the deep and ongoing plan of creation. 'What if we did not think of the cosmos as a unified whole, but as a still unfinished labour of creation? What if God does not control every event by might and power but allows creation its freedom to play while remaining faithful in love? What if God allows all the time in the world for the mystery of Christ to unfold, the mystery which is not of the past but of the future, that which is coming to be.'[15]

'Perhaps, as Moltmann suggests, the cross exists from all eternity in the heart of God…Jesus the image of the Father, reflects all of the father's love for us, especially in the cross where love is poured out for the healing of the world.' (Ross interprets the 'I AM' of God's self-disclosure to Moses in the burning bush, as the promise 'I WILL BE (FOR YOU)'.)[16]

In The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, Delio places Bonaventure's theology of the Trinity and of creation alongside the thinking of the twentieth century priest and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to suggest that evolution is not just a theory about the way species adapt, develop and survive, but something that is built into the whole structure of creation from its source-event. In this view, the expression of God's image into creation as the Word made flesh, is not just a remedy for human sin (Fr Colin CSWG said to me in conversation about this: 'the incarnation was not God's plan B') but was an integral part of the divine plan from all eternity. This is consistent with the idea of the infinite humility of God (Phillipians 2.5-11) infinitely expressed in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In the crucifixion, therefore, the self-forgetting, self-emptying love of God in humility, is given its ultimate expression (eloquently articulated in the 'Soliloquy' of Bonaventure quoted above). If the image of God in which we are made dwells at the core

[14] Ibid p.140
[15] Ilia Delio 'The Humility of God' (2005) p.78
[16] Ross op cit p.59

of our being, yearning for relationship, then the ultimate expression of that image within, is the crucified man, Jesus Christ.

The implications for a theology of radical inclusiveness seem to me to be clear:

'It is difficult to believe anymore that Christ belongs only to Catholics or that Christ lives only in a golden tabernacle or that Christ has nothing to do with the unbaptised or those who do not know Christ. Moreover it is difficult to believe that Christ has nothing to do with creation and appeared only after fifteen billion years of evolution. What kind of an incarnate God are we talking about anyway? Such beliefs vindicate a very small God, not a God of infinite compassionate love, but a God who counts the cost of things and works on a fixed schedule. Such a God could not be humbly bent low in love for all creation.[17]

And again: 'The life of Francis indicates to us that living in the Christ mystery does not divide but unites. If we truly see and love what we see then the walls that separate – culture from culture, religion from religion, people from people, must crumble…No longer can we speak of 'slave or free, gentile or Jew' (Gal. 3.28). Rather, we must come to see that all are one in Christ Jesus. Christ is the one in the many. The Christian who lives in Christ does not try to make the other into another Christ. Rather, the one who lives in Christ realizes that in the uniqueness of the individual or creature, Christ is that other.' [18]

'…we Christians find it difficult to live in a global age of diversity with an exclusive Christology that was developed in a hierarchically static world of first axial period consciousness…this is the distinct Christian vocation – to discover Christ at the heart of the universe in all peoples, cultures, religions and tribes, to discover the earth as the body of Christ.'[19]

'The Christian today must bear witness to the living Christ – all peoples, all cultures, all religions and the entire earth – through a spirit of selfless, compassionate love…If we reduce Christ merely to a personal Saviour and confine Christ to an institutional church we can be sure that the meaning of Christ will become increasingly irrelevant in a complex world of cultural and religious diversity. Neither Christianity nor salvation itself is a private, individual matter…Living in Christ is to rescue us from the gravity of our individual egos and transform us into relational beings in the image of God'.[20]

[17] Delio: 'The humility of God', p.106
[18] Ibid, p.120
[19] Ibid p.128-30
[20] Ibid from p.132-3

'When we spiritualize Christianity and detach it from the human body of human action, when all we are concerned about is who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', when we raise ourselves up over and against our neighbours or brothers and sisters because of race, colour or religion' [we might also add other labels in current use - sexuality, gender, ideals of what is beautiful or ugly, disability, economic power and so on] 'when we say 'we are saved and you are not', then the body of Christ is reduced to parts, then it becomes fragmented and divided and the whole universe fails to move forward in Christ. Indeed it begins to fall apart at the seams.'[21]

Similarly, Richard Rohr referring to the debates that took place in the thirteenth century at the great universities of Europe between Dominicans and Franciscans, writes: 'Thomas Aquinas and the Dominicans agreed with the mainline position that some kind of debt had to be paid for human salvation. Many scriptures and the Jewish temple metaphors of sacrifice, price, propitiation, debt, and atonement do give this impression. But Franciscan teacher, Blessed John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308), who founded the theological chair at Oxford, said that Jesus wasn't solving any problems by coming to earth and dying. *Jesus wasn't changing God's mind about us; rather, Jesus was changing our minds about God.* That, in a word, was our nonviolent at-one-ment theory. God did not need Jesus to die on the cross to decide to love humanity. God's love was infinite from the first moment of creation; the cross was just Love's dramatic portrayal in space and time. Scotus built his argument on the pre-existent Cosmic Christ described in Colossians and Ephesians. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians1:15) who came forward in a moment of time so we could look upon "the One we had pierced" (John 19:37) and see God's unconditional love for us, in spite of our failings. The image of the cross was to change humanity, not a necessary transaction to change God—as if God needed changing! Scotus concluded that Jesus' death was not a "penal substitution" but a divine epiphany for all to see. Jesus was pure gift, and the idea of gift is much more transformative than any idea of necessity, price, or transaction.'[22]

It seems to me that this thinking, barely touched upon here, has profound implications for forming and transforming Christian community. It has profound implications for a radical inclusivity that welcomes the stranger simply for who they are in Christ, those with all shades and varieties of belief, those with none at all, without fear of difference, without prejudice, and even (perhaps especially) without pre-conceived missional agendas. It has profound implications for the creation of community, firmly rooted in the

[21] Ibid p.165
[22] Richard Rohr, 'Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer'. Paulist Press: 2014, p.70-73

gospel and in participation in the life of the Trinity that nevertheless recognises (or at least admits the possibility of) the presence of Christ, expressed through other spiritual traditions, and in every human person. It is not a disembodied theology, but a call to real participation in the body of Christ, through radical inclusiveness that acknowledges that God acts in ways we do not comprehend and through people whose beliefs we do not share. Clare's urging of Agnes to 'place your mind before the mirror of creation' is an invitation to us to find the image of God in which we are created, reflected back to us from the mirror of the crucified Christ[23], and to join him in humble, self-emptying love and service.

Bonaventure wrote that 'God is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.'[24] The image of a wheel with God at the centre and humanity as the spokes comes to mind. At the circumference, the furthest point from the centre, the spokes are irreconcilably separated, person from person, faith from faith, culture from culture, race from race, able, disabled, gay, straight, male, female and so on. But at the centre, all come together finding unity in God.

'If we accept Clare and Bonaventure's spiritual path then we must admit that it takes a spirit of poverty and humility to penetrate the mystery of the Christian God. Too often, we look for God in all the wrong places. We expect to find a God of power and might but instead we encounter a God of crucified love. To know this God, we must let go of our fears, expectations and speculations of what God is like and freely enter the mystery of the cross. We can enter this mystery by entering into our own hearts, the mystery of our own humanity with its joys and sorrows, gifts and wounds. Here is where God dwells, in the midst of our fragile humanity, the God who bends low to embrace us in love.'[25]

The views set out here, challenge us to revisit elements of traditional catholic and protestant doctrines of the atonement, and the exclusive claims of Christianity and the Church to be the sole repository and arbiter of religious truth. These modern developments in Franciscan thinking will not be acceptable to all. However the extraordinary, unlimited, kenotic love of God revealed in the Word made flesh, seems to me to be consistent with this theology of God's humility, and his invitation to be drawn into that kenotic life of the Trinity. It offers a way forward in an increasingly divided and polarised world.

[23] In 'The Kingdom' by RS Thomas '…mirrors in which the blind look / At themselves and love looks at them / Back…'
[24] 'The Journey of the Soul into God' quoted in Zachary Hayes 'Bonaventure: mystical writings'. Crossroad, 1999 p.106
[25] Delio 'Franciscan Payer'. Franciscan Media, 2004 p.117

My own Franciscan inspired journey continues, and I hope and pray that it will inform and guide our thinking about forming Christian community in a time of uncertainty and change.

Creating Community: Opportunities and Challenges

In an unpublished paper, Canon Chris Neal writes:

'There can be little doubt that the Church in this context, Europe, and the UK, is in serious crisis, both in terms of reaching the contemporary culture and the financial issues which have developed as a result of ageing and falling membership.

Frequently, the response to all this has been shaped by an assumption that the received expressions of Christian Community will be revived and that the Christendom model will again be recognised and re-affirmed. This becomes less and less of a possibility and there needs to be a deeper understanding of the questions being faced, the cultural situation that is being experienced and how to apply afresh the principles of mission which are discovered in the Bible and in particular in the life and ministry of Jesus.' [26]

This formed the background of a conversation that I had with Canon Chris and Kevin Martin, an ordinand from Sarum College who is researching different models of Christian Community in an Anglican context, at CMS Headquarters in Oxford on 12 September, 2016.

In his paper, Chris goes on to identify four key terms that shape the mission landscape that the church needs to cross in order to address the current decline:

Paradigm shift: 'A paradigm is the philosophical and cultural box in which a society understands itself. The paradigm will last as long as the questions asked by that society can be answered within the given framework. As soon as the questions become too big, the current paradigm will collapse and a new one begin to emerge. There have only been 2 such shifts in the past 1000 years, and we are in the second now. The first was from the classical world to the world of enlightenment in the 1400 and 1500s. The second is from that Enlightenment period, based on reason and proposition, to a world which is shaped by relativity, chaos theory and principles of uncertainty.'

Liminality: the transition experienced as we move from one phase of life to another. This transition can often involve uncertainty, nostalgia for old ways, fear of what the future may look like and a desire to cling to the past. Such negative feelings, if not embraced

[26] C Neal 'Connecting the settled and movement expressions of Christian Community: recognising and addressing the key issues' (2014)

and to a certain extent, welcomed as creating the necessary conditions for change, can lead to atrophy and strategies designed to buttress and protect an increasingly unsustainable status quo, and stifle creativity.[27]

Global/Local: 'There is a very real sense in which the world has indeed become a global village. Whilst there are many positives about this situation, there are also huge pressures and challenges which are facing humanity at the present time and in the coming decades… In the past the Church has been content to engage locally and allow the enthusiastic few to be concerned with global mission and involvement. This can no longer be a possibility. The global, lived out locally, will demand the attention of those who want to follow Jesus into his world and live as visual aids of his new way of being and engaging.'

Modal/Sodal: The tension between the more settled (modal) and the movement expression (sodal) of church. The contrast between the settled church in Jerusalem and the missionary journeys of St Paul described in the Acts of the Apostles locates this tension in the very beginnings of the Church. Over the centuries both expressions have had their place in parish and mission work, in settled and mendicant religious orders. The church is beginning to recover its vocation to modality in response to its changing cultural context, and needs to find a way of holding a mixed economy together to encourage and learn from each other.

Chris Neal writes that human beings are created in the image of God and that this image reflects God's creativity. There is a need prayerfully to engage with God's creative impulse. 'In our own missional context, this is showing itself in three ways:

Pioneer ministry, shaped by the promise of God's creativity and a willingness to allow the Spirit to move afresh … connecting with surrounding culture and engaging in such a way that people of all ages [and I would add, of every degree of faith including no faith at all] can discover something of God's love and grace for themselves.'

A new entrepreneurialism. Encouraging, nurturing and resourcing those with appropriate gifts as a resource for mission and outreach. In our conversation, we agreed that these gifts are not always, or indeed often, to be found in ordained ministers, and those in leadership roles in churches must learn to recognise and encourage these gifts in others.

[27] Maggie Ross uses this term in a similar way to describe the internal letting go of the self-conscious mind in silent meditation in her book 'Silence: a user's guide'

The creation of pioneering / entrepreneurial communities. New communities are being formed around the work of pioneer and entrepreneurial ministry (Helene Tame's work in Love's Farm is a case in point). This process depends on the willingness to give space and time to allow new expressions of community to develop and grow, and to recognise that they may look and feel different to received forms of church.

In a second paper, Chris Neal identifies key issues for consideration in the intentional formation of new models of Christian community.[28]

'The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community (even if their intentions are ever so earnest), but the person who loves those around them will create community' (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

'In recent years the word 'Community', as an expression of the life of the Church, appears to have taken centre stage. Whether it is the emerging new monastic communities, the re-imagining of missional communities or simply trying to understand the nature and calling of the Church, the word community is certainly back on the agenda. However, there are some fundamental issues which need addressing if, as Bonhoeffer says, the earnest seeking after community is not to destroy the very thing being sought. The following seem central to this concern: -

1. Community can very quickly become the central focus and the relationships which create that community become secondary.[29]
2. The place of the individual within the life of the community needs to be recognised and understood, so that that individual is released to grow as the person they were created to be.
3. However, the place of the individual within the community needs to be understood, so the whole can grow and flourish and exercise the mission and ministry to which it is called collectively.
4. The word 'Community' can be used very lightly without an understanding of the depth of relationships which need to be developed and then nurtured.'

Chris Neal writes that at the heart of creation is the Community of the Trinity: 'the mind of God being expressed through the power of the Spirit and the Word made flesh and encountered in the person of Jesus.'[30] He elaborates on this idea in his paper 'Echoing the heart of God' which (with permission) is appended to this report. In summary, he

[28] C Neal 'Echoing the heart of God: creating community' (2015)
[29] Conversation with Fr Colin CSWG about his role as secretary to the Advisory Council on the relations between bishops and religious communities, suggests that this bias is often encountered in relation to new communities
[30] C Neal op cit

emphasises that in forming and sustaining new models of Christian community, whether or not they are specifically designated as new monastic communities, building community relationships and spiritual practice through prayerful engagement with the Trinitarian model is vital in connecting what we do with the kenotic outpouring of God's love in creation, and in engaging creatively with God's activity in and for the world. This *inter alia* is entirely consistent with my reading and prayer around the life and influence of St Francis and the way modern Franciscan theology in particular emphasises the importance of spiritual engagement with God as a Trinity of persons-in-love. Chris Neal sets out the defining marks of the contemporary Christian community as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22) in a Trinitarian context. Love, joy and peace flowing from the certainty of the Father's love (cf the prayer of St Francis before the crucifix at S.Damiano); Grace as the gift of God, given through the person of Jesus and experienced in the power of the Spirit leading to servanthood as a natural and joyful response as we grow in relationship with God in Jesus and with one another: 'Servanthood and service become the natural flow of life from a grateful and willing heart'. The fruit of the Spirit lie too at the heart of what Neal calls the 'Inner framework for community', relationships created and sustained in mutual humility, patience, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

No writer on Christian community fails to point out that all of the above requires hard work and sacrifice! The requirement of sacrifice, in particular the letting go of ego-driven personal desires and choices, is perhaps a hard message to hear in a culture obsessed with the centrality of choice. A recently published anthology of writings drawn from a wide variety of authors of the recent or more distant past (among them, Eberhard Arnold, St Benedict, Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, Charles Moore, Anthony de Mello and others), is clear about the hard work and selfless commitment that is required – shared time, space, resources (both material and spiritual) are all important.[31] Charles Moore writes: 'Seeking Christ's kingdom together leads to a revolutionary restructuring of life on all levels. Such a life never comes naturally. It takes work. It means intentionally foregoing the things of this world – its pleasures, pursuits, priorities and patterns and embarking on a journey with others who also want their lives to be shaped by the joy of the gospel. This kind of life is a gift…a gift from above. But to experience that gift, it is worth giving everything we have and are.'[32]

[31] 'Called to Community: the life Jesus wants for his people', ed. Charles E Moore. Plough Publishing, 2016
[32] C E Moore 'It takes work' in 'Called to Community' p.92

Chris Neal concludes his overview by emphasising the importance of commitment – Promise, Vow and Rhythm, and living by an agreed rule of life (which may be simple) within the context of a shared life and vision.

In recent decades, many communities have emerged under the general umbrella headings of 'New Monasticism' and 'Emergent Churches'. Simon Cross locates the origins of this modern movement to the Bruderhof and Iona communities, very different from one another, established in the aftermath of the First World War in Scotland and Germany in the 1920s and 30s (Bruderhof later relocated to southern England).[33] The number and diversity of new communities that currently exist, are detailed in a number of recent books including Cross (op cit), 'The Hospitality of God' by Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham (2011) which compares alternative faith communities and emerging churches in England and the USA, 'New Monasticism as fresh expression of church' edited by Cray, Mobsby and Kennedy (2010) and 'A New Monastic Handbook: from vision to practice' by Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry. Mobsby has been particularly active in the movement through the establishment of the MOOT community in a City of London church, through his publications and conferences, and is currently establishing the nucleus of a new community based in the parish of St Luke, Peckham in south London. In 'New Monasticism as fresh expression of church', Mobsby describes new monastic communities in three ways:

'The first group, inspired by monks and nuns who have established new places for prayer and contemplation, gathering communities of people for worship and loving action in the local community with the de- and never- churched …The second group identify with the friar tradition. They are also committed to seeking the sacred in the ordinary but follow a different model. While the first group tends to gather for worship and action, and then disperse back to their homes away from the meeting place, this second group tends to move into an area either as single households of pioneers or as intentional communities…There is also a third group that combines both the monk and the friar models' (p.13)

These elements are summarised by Ian Adams, and Anglican priest, poet and artist in his book 'Cave, Refectory, Road: monastic rhythms for contemporary living' (2010). The cave represents retreat from the world (drawing particularly on the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings); refectory represents stability, hospitality and presence in the community; road, the religious life lived on the street, in the open, in the market place. Still based on a rhythm of prayer, this is community shaped by encounter and

[33] S Cross 'Totally devoted: the challenge of new monasticism'. Authentic, 2010

engagement with people springing from a sense that God is already at work in the world. Adams writes: 'Each of these paths is proving fruitful to emerging churches. Each has learning to offer fresh expressions, Most groups that draw on the monastic way probably emphasize and use the practices of all three at different times.'

Some of the more well-known expressions of new monasticism currently active in the UK, MOOT, the Northumbria Community (a dispersed community and its offshoot Monos), EarthAbbey, Chemin Neuf, safespace Telford, Contemplative Fire, 24/7 Prayer, mayBe among them are well documented and many have an active presence online. There is also the Community of St Anselm, based at Lambeth Palace which is specifically aimed at young people with a view to giving them a time-limited experience (one academic year) of life in religious community (information at stanselm.org.uk/).

During our conversation at CMS, Chris, Kevin and I agreed that rather than attempt to engage with a range of communities for the limited purposes of this project (Kevin agreed in respect of his own research for a Master's degree), it would be of more value to choose one community and engage with it at greater depth. Fr Colin CSWG, my spiritual director who also kindly agreed to advise me on this project, had already recommended that I should look more closely at the Community of Hopeweavers in Southampton. Hopeweavers has recently become an Acknowledged Anglican Religious Community, but has maintained a very local profile within the dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth without attracting much national attention. This in my view, is to its advantage. It also seems to offer a model of quiet, contemplative spirituality that fits my own brief, elements of which could be adapted within a traditional parish church context. I spent some days with the Community of Hopeweavers in September, and a report on that visit follows.

<u>The Community of Hopeweavers</u>

'God give me the gift of silence; Silence that leads to prayer,
Prayer that leads to love, love that leads to service,
And service that is returned in silent praise.'

St Teresa of Calcutta

Towards the end of his life in a radio interview, Herbert Howells said that the reason he became a composer was because no-one else seemed to be writing the music that he wanted to hear. The Southampton-based Community of Hopeweavers, welcomed as an Acknowledged Anglican Religious Community in November 2015, traces its origins to 2004 when Jacqui Lea, an artist and lay member of the Anglican church with extensive

experience of lay ministry including spiritual direction and a period of time spent as Diocesan Youth Officer for the Diocese of Winchester, was unemployed and wanting to go on a quiet day, was unable to find one locally that she could afford to attend. After time spent in prayer, she discerned a call to organise her own quiet day and offer it to others. From this simple beginning, has grown a ministry of offering a silent contemplative space at her home where people can come to draw closer to God, in a place where no doctrinal or confessional demands are made on them, where no questions are asked and there are no expectations of conversion or to conform in any way, but where hope is weaved that the Holy Spirit too may have a space in which to make disciples, and that those who come may be attentive to the Spirit's gentle moving.

Jacqui writes: 'People often ask me what Hopeweavers is – is it a fresh expression? Are you a new emerging monastic community? Are you pioneer ministers? Or a small missional community or a new church or many other suggestions. People sometimes walk down the drive and ask – what is this place? I guess the answer if I am truthful … is that I don't really know what to call it. When folks ask, I can however, describe a little of what we may see and experience as part of this network.' (Talk given to the Hopeweaver Gathering, February 2012).

This openness, perhaps amounting to a deliberate vagueness, reflects the Community's desire that the work of Hopeweavers should not be pinned down, defined or restricted by ecclesial structures. Its distinctive charism, unchanged in essence from the initial vision discerned in 2007 is (in words drawn from its website):

The Community of Hopeweavers aims to offer sanctuary space and resources for individuals and groups who seek silence and stillness as part of a Christian faith journey:

- to create places away from our everyday lives where we can be refreshed and experience peace and quiet;
- safe places where we can dream dreams and receive from God in stillness and calm;
- somewhere to share silence with others, to learn more about prayer and to make ourselves available to God, to listen;
- encouraging and valuing creativity as a way of responding to God;
- for Christians and people of all faiths or none, of all ages, in small groups, teams, as individuals, in family groups.

Jacqui Lea has more recently summarised the vision as follows:

To seek wisdom and guidance primarily from God's word and presence received in stillness.' This vision which has formed the Community takes 'courage and direction from the words of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, from the Psalms and from the invitation to 'come and see' (John 1:39).'

Creativity is an important part of the Hopeweaver vision, perhaps initially reflecting Jacqui Lea's training and experience as an artist: 'During our time together we seek – usually in silence – to draw closer to God and we offer space and facilities to engage creatively in a number of ways, Most popular are weaving without a loom, collage and journaling, painting and clay work … We believe that we can all be creative. In our experience we have seen how some are called to explore creativity as part of their understanding of a relationship with God.'

It seems appropriate here to outline the history of Hopeweavers from its simple beginnings and the following summary is based on a fuller outline which I am grateful to Jacqui for providing. Prayer, discussion and exploration occupied a period of three years from 2004 to 2007 at the home of Jacqui Lea and her husband Geoff Poulton. The name 'Hopeweavers' and the vision of 'holding space for people to experience God' rooted in John 1:39 was consolidate at this time. In June 2007, the first two Quiet Days were offered in a converted cow shed on the property. Resources supplied by the Retreat Association and the Northumbria Community's Celtic Daily Prayer provided structure and liturgy.
To the astonishment of the organisers, these days attracted a significant number of particpants and requests for further quiet days were received and responded to, and these were also well attended by people from the neighbourhood and from a local church which has supported the work since the beginning. The first meeting of a team drawn from supporters and advisors, lay and ordained, took place in January 2008 and a pattern of three or four meetings a year was established to oversee the fledgling ministry. Quiet days continued to be offered and requests for days from churches, parish groups, clergy chapters and other denominational groups were also responded to. In 2009, a weekly prayer group, Living in Hope, based on the rule of life from the Society of St John the Evangelist met. The numbers coming for spiritual direction, mentoring and prayer increased, and the quiet days started to be oversubscribed, with a waiting list for places. Significantly, it was at this stage that some began to ask if Hopeweavers could be 'their church' (of which more below).

In 2010 conversations began which led to the creation of the Hopeweaver Daily Office, partly prompted by the need for a liturgy with inclusive language. The distinctive characteristics of Hopeweaver worship are simplicity, stillness and silence. Morning, Midday, Evening and Night Prayer each occupy no more than one page of A5, widely spaced. The text is drawn wholly from scripture and each office consists typically of just five or six Bible verses, taken in the main from the Psalter, and separated by periods in which silent prayer is offered for the day or for particular intentions. Bible readings from the Common Worship Lectionary are added at Morning Prayer, and the same readings are used on Fridays when Midday Prayer is replaced by the Eucharist, at which a community member in Anglican priest's orders presides. The sharing of communion is open and inclusive, and avoids making use of creedal language. The selection of texts

used in the Hopeweavers Daily Office was arrived at after a period of prayer, and does not vary. The focus is very much on silence, and listening to God.

In 2010, Jacqui and Geoff attended the 'Changing the Landscape' conference at Lincoln and were inspired and affirmed to hear an address by Archbishop Rowan Williams. In October that year, a pilot Community Day was held in which those who felt themselves increasingly called to live more closely as a community spent a 12 hour day (10am to 10pm) living alongside one another in discussion, prayer and work in kitchen and garden. Monthly Community Days began in 2011, and residential retreats Hilfield Friary (Franciscan) consolidated the move towards community. The first annual Hopeweaver Gathering took place at St Luke's, Hedge End in February 2012. The Community by now was increasingly being asked to provide quiet days and contribute to training days and festivals in other places, and was invited to be involved in the conference 'Treasures Old and New' planned for April 2015, bringing together representatives from both traditional and new monastic communities.

Hopeweavers was by now involved in a wider mission including a day organised by CMS, celebrating small missional communities. In 2013 the vision for 'Hopeweavers@Home' (H@H) – small groups meeting in a variety of homes in different locations – was explored. Originally intended to relieve pressure on quiet day places, H@H has extended and increased the number and diversity of people attending Hopeweaver events. Hopeweavers were invited to lead worship at Greenbelt, attracting 300 people across two sessions and ten small groups led by community members. The range of activities grew through 2014, including work with young people at a secure mental health unit. At this point the call to establish Hopeweavers in a new way was discerned and a small group was tasked with exploring this vision, and in particular with the process of moving 'Toward Acknowledgment' as a new Anglican religious community. During 2015, this process was engaged with, drawing on support and prayer in meetings and reciprocal visits from representatives of CMS and traditional monastic communities. A formal constitution, satisfying the requirements of the acknowledgement process was drawn up, the formal support of the Bishop of Winchester was given and the Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Frost, Suffragan Bishop of Southampton became the community's Episcopal Visitor. Jacqui Lea was elected Guardian of the community, and the Ven Caroline Baston, involved since the early years, was appointed Warden. In November 2015, representatives of Hopeweavers attended the Advisory Council for Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities to be welcomed as an Acknowledged Anglican Religious Community. The Service of Inauguration of the Community of Hopeweavers was held at St Luke's Church, Hedge End on Sunday 6 December, 2015.

This summary is necessarily a condensed version of the history of Hopeweavers' decade long journey from addressing the simple need for quiet day provision into emerging as an acknowledged religious community with a special and distinctive charism and vision – of which more in due course. From my point of view, perceiving the need for a deeply-

rooted contemplative spirituality that is conspicuously lacking, indeed hardly ever sought, in most parish life, the most obvious and vital aspect of the journey to take note of, is that the process of exploration and discernment took place slowly and prayerfully alongside a ministry that grew as it perceived and fulfilled a need for its own special qualities. It is important to acknowledge that Hopeweavers was not intentionally formed as a monastic community – that was a calling that emerged and grew, and was given the time and space necessary to come to the point of realisation that this was what God was calling it to be and that this was where the Holy Spirit was leading. I don't think that this can be over-emphasised. With hindsight, the direction in which the Spirit was moving can clearly be seen, but the consolidation that has occurred at every stage in the journey was necessary in order to allow the community to grow organically. Its evolution has been natural and Spirit-filled, and its establishment and acknowledgment is all the more secure for having played out over a long period of time.

It is vital to have this in mind when considering how Hopeweavers might provide a model for similar work in other contexts. We live in an age, and the Church is not altogether immune from its demands, that looks for instant solutions and declines to take a long view.Taking time and space to discern how such a ministry might look and develop in the local context, and maintaining simplicity and prayerful attention to God's call are ultimately more valuable than being able to take a packaged solution 'pret-a-porter'.

Hopeweavers' constitution lays out its founding purpose:
'The Community of Hopweavers sims to offer sanctuary space and resources for individuals and groups who seek silence and stillness as part of a Christian faith journey.
The vision of Hopeweavers, written in 2007, states: 'to create places away from our everyday lives where we can be refreshed and experience peace and quiet;
Safe places where we can dream dreams and receive from God in stillness and calm;
Somewhere to share silence with others, to learn more about prayer and to make ourselves available to God, to listen;
Encouraging and valuing creativity as a way of responding to God;
For Christians and people of all faiths and none, of all ages, in small groups, teams, as individuals, in family groups.

Community values are: Christian love and acceptance of others, hospitality, simplicity, compassion, listening, sharing, creativity and encouragement.

Hopeweavers charism:
1. Jesus Christ at the centre of the Community;
2. The Community values Christian traditions of prayer, discipline and obedience;
3. We offer hospitality to those who come as guests on Quiet Days, retreats and other events;

4. Some are called to support the ministry through membership of the Community and commit to offer a range of gifts and together seek to offer sanctuary space accessible to all, which aims to weave hope into everyday lives;
6. The Community holds a tradition of 'come and see' (John 1:39). All are welcome regardless of starting point and allegiances. Space is offered for folks to come to experience God themselves in stillness and/or to witness the experience of God within others with whom the space is shared. Many who come may say that they do not have a named faith or an involvement in a church;
7. Some choose to make a commitment to be Members. This dispersed membership is supported by regular local group meetings, led by a Team member.
8. The Community models a way that encourages faith development, missional involvement both locally and nationally, and participation in a church or other worshipping community across a broad range of provision.

Hopeweavers statement of faith:
Made in the image of God, the Community Members are called to follow Jesus and live in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Members of the Community are taught, guided and inspired by the historic creeds and formularies of their own Christian traditions, seeking to be Christ-centred disciples, living in the light of scripture and the wisdom of the wider Christian Church.

Hopeweavers rhythm:
The rhythm of the Community includes:
The modelling of a commitment to a Rule of Life;
The discipline of daily prayer based upon stillness and silence;
Both individually and corporately, the use of the Hopeweavers Daily Office and other appropriate forms of Daily Prayer; and
Involvement in some of the following: Wednesday morning prayer, Community Team meetings, the ongoing programme of Quiet Days, Soul Days, H@H, Refresh, bespoke group days, Members' small neighbourhood groups, Spiritual Direction, Retreats, mentoring and Quiet Days held in other places.

Membership of the Community is possible after the enquirer has spent at least one year's exploration of their vocation with a member of the Team. Alongside the Community Team Member, prospective members draw up a rule of life. Jacqui writes: 'We appreciate the idea described by Margaret Guenther (2006) 'At home in the world – a rule of life for the rest of us', of a rule being like a trellis, to which a good gardener will lightly attach a plant, to provide a structure and guide so each particular plant can flourish as it is called to be. Our Rule of Life encourages the creation and living out of a balanced life of Worship, Work, Study, Relationships and Community, Creativity, Stewardship, and Health, Rest and Renewal. Members, Enquirers, and Friends of the Community of Hopeweavers, seek to support each other – good companions for the road – as we share our different traditions and ministries together.'

At the service of inauguration, the Community was commissioned with 31 members. In addition others who have made a commitment to another tradition, including associate members or oblates of other communities (eg TSSF) may become 'Friends of Hopeweavers'. It is encouraging from the perspective of the wider church that Community members span the generations, include young married couples and are from across the spectrum of denominational and ecclesial traditions. At the time of writing, others are exploring the path towards membership, and the Community is praying for the resources to enable it to engage with a ministry to young families and to children.

In her talk to the Hopeweavers@ Home leaders gathering in July 2016, Jacqui Lea said: 'We hear a call to continue to offer sanctuary in our hurting world and have many visitors who share a little of their own experiences and stories. Many who come are not part of churches or other supportive networks so for a few hours, we are able to draw alongside to offer prayerful support and signposting to others. People of all ages and faith positions are welcomed to our days – recently this has included small babies and older people and those undergoing medical treatment of various types. Our away days for teams support organisations offering this ministry directly – through Christians Against Poverty (CAP) and Beyond the Streets for example. Our Soul Days for Leaders remain popular and have a rich mix of disciples from all traditions taking foundational time out to gaze upon God together. Leaders from churches, faith schools, small missional communities and charities share sanctuary space away from leadership concerns for rest and recollection.'

Hopeweavers recognises that the Community itself relies on prayerful and practical support: 'We work across several diocesan areas and within all church traditions, supported nationally by the Retreat Association, the Advisory Council for relations between Bishops and Religious Communities, Anglican Religious Life and Archway amongst others, alongside religious communities like the Sisters of Bethany, the Community of the Servants of the Will of God (CSWG) and the community based at Hilfield Friary in particular.'

The pattern of the regular Quiet Days is deliberately kept simple. Following drinks, introductions, explanations and housekeeping announcements, all join in Hopeweaver Morning Prayer followed by a brief relaxation exercise as the silence begins. There follows approximately one and a half hours of silence after which a simple Eucharist is shared, including a time for the optional sharing of any feelings or thoughts. Lunch follows, which may be shared communally or in silence as the participant wishes. On Fridays, the day ends here. On Saturdays, the day continues with a brief reflection based on the readings for the day, which includes questions and suggestions for thought and prayer which participants may take into the afternoon's approximately two hours of silence. The day ends with tea and cake, sharing of thoughts or experiences as each participant wishes, and closing prayers.

During the periods of silence, participants are able to make use of a very large range of creative materials, a well stocked library of spiritual and theological books, and Bibles in a range of translations, or to sit or walk inside or in the gardens or nearby woodland. The garden contains striking examples of sculpture using 'found' materials (many by Geoff Poulton) and the 'Holly Chapel', a tiny sacred space demarcated by the branches of a holly tree with Hopeweaver artwork, cross, candles, prayer cards and a space to sit.

The pattern for H@H meetings allows something of this experience to be replicated in members' homes, with a smaller number of people. Depending on the time of day, the appropriate Hopeweaver Office is prayed and the period of silence lasts one to one and a half hours. Creative materials, bibles and other and appropriate books are available and participants are able to move around the rooms or gardens. Numbers attending will depend on the size of the available accommodation, which varies,and are determined by the host. Hosts and leaders should be Community Members and receive training, including the appropriate safeguarding procedures.

It was noted above that some people attending Hopeweavers events have enquired if the Community can be 'their church'. In separate conversations with Jacqui Lea, Geoff Poulton, Caroline Baston and other Community Members, the importance of the fact that the Community of Hopeweavers is not a church was made very clear. Jacqui has identified a clear call in her ministry to serve as a lay person. Although Hopeweavers evolved in an Anglican context and is an acknowledged Anglican community, the fact that it is not a church, or a parish, or a diocesan organisation, gives it the freedom it needs to be flexible, open and welcoming to any, including those who find established forms of church (of whatever denomination) intimidating, unhelpful or inappropriate to their circumstances or stage in their personal journey of faith. Some of those who come are a long way from making any kind of confessional statement, or may only be at the beginning of their exploration of the spiritual dimension of life, or may be at a particular crossroads or crisis in their personal lives. Hopeweavers is explicit and upfront about its commitment to Christian discipleship, and that everything is offered within a Christian framework. But within that simple framework, standing apart from the ecclesial structures of the Church enables the Community to sit lightly to rules, regulations and doctrines and instead to model an attractive mode of Christian prayer, spirituality and living, with its own qualities of gentleness, compassion and love, praying alongside and offering appropriate spiritual help or mentoring as needed.

In conversation with Caroline Baston about the role of the Warden acting both as a buffer zone between the Community and the established church, and as a holder and upholder of the Community's unique charism and vision, we agreed that this 'apartness', together with its as yet relative national obscurity, places Hopeweavers closer to the traditional end of the monastic spectrum than other more widely known new monastic communities, and that this too is a vital part of its DNA. As it adapts and grows into its

new role as an acknowledged community; as for practical reasons, it moves its primary activities away from its original home (which because it has its own special atmosphere, will need careful handling); as it attracts more people exploring membership, and as it resources and trains new leaders, holding fast to that DNA and the core values that have been so important over the whole course of the journey, will be key to its future.

Jacqui writes: 'We are re-discovering how a Monastic Rhythm can lead us into a way of discipleship based on both contemplation and action. Our favourite prayer from Mother Teresa helps us to make the connection from stillness and retreat to times of action and service:

'God give me the gift of silence; Silence that leads to prayer,
Prayer that leads to love, love that leads to service,
And service that is returned in silent praise.'

St Teresa of Calcutta

I am enormously grateful to all at the Community of Hopeweavers for the way in which they wholeheartedly welcomed me over several days in September 2016. In particular my thanks go to Di Osborn and her daughter Jo, whose home is explicitly set up to be available as a community guest house, and who 'welcomed the stranger' with true monastic hospitality and kindness (it was a privilege to be a guinea pig and 'pilot' their first H@H evening); to Jacqui Lea and Geoff Poulton for inviting me to experience Hopeweaver Quiet Days and for giving generously of their time in conversation; to Brenda and Geoff Holden for explaining the concept of H@H (Brenda), and the financial basis of the Community (Geoff); to Caroline Baston for her time in conversation about the need for a ministry of stillness, the evolving role of the Community and how it might serve as a model for building a spiritual base in parish life, and the importance of keeping things simple. I am particularly grateful to Caroline for some simple practical suggestions which are set out below.

<u>Closing reflections and a modest proposal</u>

'In a society that increasingly seeks to fracture our attention, contemplative presence becomes an act of rebellion. *It's a radical in-breaking of the Holy Spirit* every time we seek to be prayerfully present to another human being. However, just as *we must continually return again and again to contemplative prayer* in order to keep our hearts open and attentive to the presence of God, so too must we *intentionally cultivate contemplative presence* with [one another].'[34] (My italics)

[34] Mark Yaconelli 'Contemplative youth ministry: practising the presence of Jesus with young people'. SPCK, 2006, p.88

Mark Yaconelli writes specifically about contemplative prayer in the context of youth ministry. I am convinced that it is vital to the work of being intentionally open to the presence of God at any age, but that it is hardly to be found or practised at all in the context of our parish ministry.

My intention in undertaking this period of study was to consider aspects of new monasticism and in particular to see what these new/old ways of being a Christian community might contribute to my own perceived need for a spirituality of stillness, meditative prayer and contemplation to root and ground prayer and action in mainstream parish life, and contribute to its renewal. Along the way, I have been led to engage with a strand of modern Franciscan thought, which has begun to exercise a profound influence on my own spiritual life, in what promises to be a continuing journey of spiritual refreshment and inspiration.

The published literature (the volume of which increases exponentially if online resources are included) witnesses to a wide variety of models of new Christian community. Whether intentionally 'new monastic' or not, many are characterised by a recovery of ancient traditions, particularly the formation of a rule of life[35], resources held in common, a pattern of shared meals, care for those in need, hospitality towards strangers and welcoming those who are exploring faith, which may or may not present as the Christian faith. In the reading, the conversations, the visits that I have made over the past weeks, I realise that I have barely scratched the surface of a movement that at its best, creatively engages with what many see as the crisis of progressive decline in parish life. It is apparent that the most secure and enduring communities do not necessarily arise out of any pre-formed strategy, but evolve over a period of time in which people have come together prayerfully and inclusively, desiring to love and serve God and one another at a deep level, seeking and receptive to the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit in particular contexts and circumstances. As such, there is no blueprint or pre-packaged model that can simply be 'taken off the shelf' and applied in a different context. Creating the conditions - opportunities through which new expressions of community might evolve in response to people's needs, is always likely to be a more fruitful approach. So, in setting out two modest suggestions for ways in which a parish could engage in more creative and inclusive use of the sacraments, and offer opportunity and space for silence and meditation, I am mindful firstly of Chris Neal's remark in conversation that any new thinking should aim to move from 'programme to people', from 'organisation to

[35] Too late to be included in this survey, my attention has been drawn to Ned Lunn's blog at http://www.nedlunn.com/monasticism/ . Lunn, who is currently involved in the formation of the Society of the Holy Trinity as an expression of new monasticism in parish life, has just completed a three-year cycle of personal daily reflections on the chapters of the Rule of St Benedict.

organic' and from 'grind to gifting', always open to discerning, encouraging and releasing the gifts of all, and secondly, that simplicity should always be the aim.

Eberhard Arnold wrote in 1925, 'Efforts to organize community artificially can only result in ugly, lifeless caricatures. Only when we are empty and open to the Living One – to the Spirit – can he bring about the same life among us as he did among the early Christians. The Spirit is joy in the Living One, joy in God as the only real life; it is joy in all people, because they have life from God. The Spirit drives us to all people and brings us joy in living and working for one another, for it is the spirit of creativity and love.'[36]

I feel convinced that St Francis of Assisi would endorse those thoughts.

There can be little doubt that the linear pattern of believing and belonging that has characterised the organisation of the institutional churches no longer engages contemporary society. 'People brought to church for baptism, raised on weekly worship and Sunday school, approaching Eucharist through appropriate age or Confirmation proceeding on to marriage and the bringing of children to Baptism to begin the cycle again, with a final exit through burial…no longer prevails in Western culture.'[37] Gray-Reeves and Perham survey a changing pattern in emergent churches (which also include models of new monastic community): '[They] understand the linear path of believing, behaving and belonging as a barrier to the faith development of postmodern people and they work around it. They reverse the process, creating a new norm of 'belonging, behaving, believing'. 'Showing up' means that you are 'in' and may fully participate in worship – including Eucharist. Baptism or other rites of admission are not required. Behaving and believing are not necessary for being an accepted part of the church and are understood as a process, a journey that comes along in time through the experience that is inherently offered through full inclusion in the life of the community.'[38] The authors acknowledge, without ruling out the possibility of some sort of flexibility, that completely open policies of Eucharistic inclusion run counter to deeply rooted traditions of 'catholic' church life, and in the case of the Church of England are contrary to the canons. Interestingly, the desire to be more open in admitting people to Eucharistic sharing (or in not excluding them from it) is voiced by representatives from both ends of the Anglican spectrum. Tim Lomax writing from an open evangelical perspective in his book 'Creating missional worship: fusing context and tradition', identifies the missional opportunities in loosening the institutional boundaries around Communion and sparking

[36] Eberhard Arnold 'Why we live in community', 1925 (Quoted in Charles E Moore (ed) 'Called to Community: the life Jesus wants for his people'. Plough, 2016 p.70

[37] Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham 'The hospitality of God: emerging worship for a missional church'. SPCK, 2011 p.70

[38] Ibid p.71

an awareness of God's love through inclusion and encouraging engagement in the journey towards committed faith. Lomax voices the hope that the church will soon explore '…the possibility of expressing Holy Communion as an inclusive meal nurturing faith and not simply as an exclusive meal for those with proven faith.'[39] The view from the catholic end of the spectrum, in conversation at the 'Sanctum' conference at the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield in August, an event organised by Transcendence, a group of clergy in the catholic tradition dedicated to exploring the creative use of the sacraments in fresh expressions, was expressed by a priest who is completely relaxed about administering Holy Communion to any child or adult at his church school who puts their hands out to receive it, observing pithily that as a priest he is '…the conduit, not the guardian, of the sacrament.'

Maggie Ross, as ever, is straightforward and uncompromising: 'We need to recognise once and for all that *the whole creation* is the Body of Christ and that when we talk about the humility of Christ, of Christ's sacrifice 'for all' and our participation in that sacrifice, the whole creation is included in the 'all' and has the choice of finding being in that sacrifice. In spite of the testimony of the author of John's gospel and of Paul and the writers of other letters attributed to him, only today are we beginning to discover this reality in all its grandeur. We cannot help but wonder if some of those first baptisms were eagerly intuitive acknowledgement of the cosmic Christ. But the simplicity of the early days of Christianity was short-lived; too soon the non-baptised were forbidden Communion; technique replaced vision, legalism replaced ardour, the desire for a false reality diluted the scandal of the divine presence in history, in time, in creatureliness and the role of creatureliness in transfiguration. Today we are bogged down by additional centuries of power politics, controversy, theorizing and control.'[40]

One does not have to share all of Ross's preoccupations to share in her passion for the cosmic significance of Eucharistic living, open to all, and to wonder if the time to unfasten the chains of ecclesiastical rules and regulations has arrived. Ross's 'now' was 1988. Engagement with those on the fringes of faith, those who have never been part of a church community or for whatever reason have stopped being part of one, with those who feel unwelcome or unsure, could be significantly enhanced through creative and inclusive use of the sacraments. 'Each bit of the creation is sustained by the life of God, is sacrament, and is engaged with the whole of creation. Each moment of life can be, and, if we are committed to the humility of Christ, *must* be Eucharist. The early Syrian church recognised this fact and allowed all who wished it to receive the Eucharist, whether or

[39] Tim Lomax 'Creating missional worship' Church House Publishing, 2015 p.88-9
[40] Ross, 'Pillars of flame' p.166

not they were baptised. This church recognised that in Eucharist sacred time and linear time coinhere, and the Parousia is now.'[41]

This openness particularly commends itself to being tried in sympathetic environments outside mainstream church buildings, such as may readily be available in a church school, or a new expression of church meeting in a community space on a new housing development. Both of these extended ecclesial environments are possible within the parish of St Mary the Virgin, St Neots.

The quiet spirituality and gradual evolution as an acknowledged expression of new monasticism of the Community of Hopeweavers has already been described in detail. In conversation with the Ven Caroline Baston, warden to the community, we talked of possible practical ways in which that spirituality could be developed in parish life.

As a preliminary: bring together a small number of people (perhaps no more than three of four) who would commit to meet and pray for a renewal of contemplative spirituality, and consider the practicalities of making quiet spaces for God available in the busy activity of parish life. Allow time for this to happen and for a way forward to unfold.

Identify suitable spaces – including outside spaces such as the churchyard as well as the church rooms and church building.

Plan two or three pilot days (or half days), to include a simple opening office of short prayers and readings, light-touch spiritual input, generous allowance of time for silence with optional creative activities that can be done in the silence, closing prayer time with optional sharing of thoughts, artwork etc. A shared meal – a simple lunch of soup and bread or tea and cake at the end of an afternoon for example.

Advertise quiet days widely beyond the boundaries of the church and parish. Initially this would take advantage of existing deanery and ecumenical networks, but might extend for example to community groups, as well as online and through social media networks.

Aim to be as welcoming, inclusive and flexible as possible, and sit light to belief and doctrine – every person's response to the love of God revealed in silence is equally valid. Be prepared to begin slowly with small numbers (Hopeweavers has grown very much by word of mouth).

As silence and stillness can cause deep-rooted feelings and anxieties to surface, offer the option of a private confidential space for brief sharing of any concerns. This should principally be a ministry of sympathetic listening, and not necessarily involve any

[41] Ross, op cit p.166

elements of advice or spiritual direction, but signposting where and from whom that direction may be sought as appropriate.

Ensure that all necessary safeguarding procedures are in place and assess premises for potential risks.

Hopeweavers undertakes bespoke quiet days for church, community and professional groups. This is something that could evolve.

The Hopeweavers@Home model of offering home-based evening or daytime opportunities for silence and stillness in peoples' homes is another possible further development.

Our own existing pattern of annual quiet away-days, with a significant level of spiritual input/teaching from a leader or speaker, perhaps offered more frequently with the possibility of the occasional retreat weekend, would continue to run alongside the pattern outlined above. The Hopeweavers model of silent, sacred space, because it involves a lesser degree of formal input requiring extensive preparation on the part of the retreat conductor, encourages greater frequency and the establishment of a pattern.

It should be emphasised that this proposal to build a pattern of silence and meditative prayer is offered not as an alternative to action, but as the basis from which effective Spirit –led activity can develop. It is my hope that the practice of meditation and contemplative prayer can be encouraged and developed alongside the many other activities that go on in parish life, to ground our life and our mission in recovering the tradition of 'prayer of the heart'.

This time of sabbatical has given me the space to begin to explore different models for deepening the spiritual life of the parish. It is just a beginning, and I hope that alongside others, the journey will continue. It has been a particular joy that the pilgrimage to Assisi with which it began has so powerfully and penetratingly influenced my reading, thinking, praying and speaking. It is simply a rather appropriate coincidence that I write these concluding words as the Church celebrates the Feast day of this remarkable man of God.

Paul Andrews

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The Feast of St Francis of Assisi, 4 October, 2016