

INTRODUCTION

THE TREND TO COMMUNITY LIVING

Over the last fifty and more years there has been an increasing movement throughout the world towards living in community, a conscious awareness of the values of what some call ‘this more humane way of living.’¹ This is to be seen in the large number of ‘intentional’ communities which are based on religious, ecological, and educational ideologies and concerned with projects to meet particular needs. Many communities are small, fairly informal, and not widely known, but for those who live near them they are oases of peace and good sense in the turmoil of life. Their variety is enormous: ashrams in the centre of big cities; rural sustainable communities; religious men and women living on council estates; communities for those with special mental health or physical needs; families living separately but organised communally and sharing facilities; and retreat, training and conference centres run by people for whom community is a core value; and many others.²

This book has grown primarily out of working with many different kinds of religious communities. I also draw on my experience of the Grail Community³ of which I am a long-standing member. For several years I was closely connected with the Lindore Road Community in south London.⁴ I currently belong to the Global Eco-Village Network⁵ and the National Association of Christian Communities and Networks,⁶ both of which are in touch with large numbers of communities in this country and overseas. All this convinces me that much that I have learnt and which I want to share through this book is applicable to all who live in community.

Wherever human beings strive to form community, the experience will inevitably include challenge and struggle. Commitment to community living with its close involvement with other people is not an easy option. Being an Anglican or Roman Catholic religious and endeavouring to live the evangelical gospel counsels does not automatically rid people of the less desirable human features. Indeed religious who live in small communities often describe themselves as a microcosm of humanity with all its hopes and fears, gifts and foibles, strengths and weaknesses. It is, in part, struggling with those that makes community living immensely enriching.

SMALL COMMUNITIES OF RELIGIOUS

Small communities of religious living alongside and easily accessible to ordinary people are now a recognised and established feature of parish landscapes. They emerge from a revolution in religious life going back to Vatican Two and spurred on by the reduction in vocations. In both Catholic and Anglican traditions small communities are increasing, large ones decreasing. This transition, unimaginable at one time, has

far-reaching consequences for religious, for the church, and for local neighbourhoods. Understandably the shrinkage or demise of large convents and their traditional apostolic work is painful and confusing to those who have devoted a major part of their life's energy and effort to them. For some time there was a propensity to equate smallness with failure. This is changing with the advent of small communities and religious life is once more exciting and galvanising. Religious are seeing the Spirit stirring new 'fire in these ashes' as new opportunities for ministry open up and religious collaborate with non-religious to their mutual enrichment, live closer to those who are poor and marginalised, and engage with people who have urgent human and spiritual needs. Notwithstanding and not surprisingly, this process has its difficulties. There is no well-trodden path to follow and an underlying and constant problem is that, while Vatican Two pointed to visionary and fundamental changes in religious life, inadequate attention was given to the ways and means of making them. Recently, I heard a cry from the heart, "Why is the setting up and living in small communities so much more difficult than we had imagined?"

For thirty years I have been privileged to work with religious as they faced these challenges and the problems encountered. This book has grown directly from that experience. I have been closely involved with all concerned, from those in positions of overall responsibility, to those at the grass roots; with single communities, and with congregational gatherings: both informal assemblies and with decision-making chapters; and I have worked with individuals on consultations and training courses. It was exciting to engage with them as they started radically re-thinking their situation as never before, and they are continuing to do so.

Small communities have mushroomed and become established. Much has been achieved and gained from these years of experience. I am convinced that now is an opportune moment to gather together the many valuable lessons which have been learnt from deeply satisfying and apostolically fruitful ministries, struggles against unexpected and sometimes overwhelming odds, and from the malpractice resulting from oscillating between new and outmoded habits of thinking and working. As I engaged with people on this material, I identified the basic issues and questions involved in forming, developing, living in, re-forming, healing, and repairing small communities, and in closing them when their life cycle is spent. The process is endless because communities are living, ever-changing organisms. Having provided various kinds of help through innumerable workshops and courses, I wanted to make continuing help more readily available, especially for those who do not always have people able to help them think things through, nor immediate access to a consultant or facilitator. That is how the idea for this book was born. *Gradually I became convinced that a handbook of this kind, giving ready access to key processes, could be of use. It is therefore a self-help manual to be used in working at tasks, rather than a book to be read or a blue print for action. My intention is to enable members of communities to be their own facilitators and become more reflective practitioners in relation to difficulties they face and the changes they seek to make in their everyday life and ministry in what is an on-going period of transition.*

UNDERLYING THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

This book is about becoming, being and living in small communities, particularly as vowed religious. The approaches and processes are firmly grounded in the evolving theological and spiritual insights of Vatican Two. This entails taking seriously such dynamic concepts as co-responsibility, subsidiarity and *koinonia* as they apply to living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. It also involves determining the interactive processes necessary if religious are both to serve and learn from their contemporary ecumenical, spiritual, and secular context. It is therefore a book of the practice theory necessary to enable people to help their own and other communities to work out the practical and theological implications of Vatican Two in the hurly-burly of life.

Experience has proven that the practice theory embodied in this book is effective with people of widely differing spiritualities and with a variety of charisms. It is acceptable and beneficial to them and promotes human development and spiritual growth.

The book is about what is involved in making a small community an effective instrument of mission. Mission is the *raison d'être* of apostolic religious community and needs to be in the forefront of the thinking, prayer and reflection of community members. The quality of a community's life together affects the quality of the mission and ministry of its members. Ministry and community overlap, interweave and are complexly inter-related. Both need to be kept in mind even when the immediate focus is on one or other.

This is a practical workbook. It takes spiritual aspirations seriously by paying careful attention to the mundane and seemingly trivial matters which go into creating, maintaining and developing community. Communities thrive through attention to such things and often fail through neglect of them, rather than through a lack of vision.

I try to avoid the use of religious terminology because I find that ordinary language often helps people to see old truths in a fresh light: it is so easy to become immune to religious jargon.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is for all who deal directly or indirectly with small communities, although my primary reference is to apostolic religious. It is for those with overall responsibility for forming and supporting them; potential and existing members of small communities; those living alone; those who remain in large communities; and both new and experienced members of a congregation. The approach advocated throughout this book is about maximising the creative participation of everyone involved and implicated in making and maintaining small communities. Clearly, some sections are more applicable to some people, occasions, and phases of community life than others. Where appropriate, I indicate to whom a section is likely to be primarily relevant.

I write out of extensive experience with, and research into, women's congregations, but I have done enough work with male religious and non-religious to feel confident that the basic principles and approaches are relevant and applicable to communities of men, and to all kinds of religious and secular communities of both women and men.

My work with communities has taken place in the United Kingdom and Ireland, but these have included members from various parts of the English-speaking world. I know, from this experience, that the approaches and processes embodied in this book can be of use wherever people are living in or working with small intentional communities.

Whilst this book is not written primarily for external facilitators and consultants, they may find it useful. Furthermore, the way in which it is structured makes it a form of distance learning for those who wish to acquire consultancy or facilitation skills to help those in small communities.

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

The shape of the book is designed to make its use as easy as possible for people who are involved in or with small communities. It consists of the following parts:

Part One: Small communities in religious life. This part is an introduction to the internal and external context of the movement from large to small communities. It identifies the nature of the changes being experienced, why they are occurring, and how they can best be facilitated. It describes characteristics and models of local religious community, and its context in the congregation and in society.

Part Two: Opening and closing small communities. Part Two presents a sequence for thinking constructively about the factors that need to be taken into account at the starting up of a community and in closing a house:

- exploring the initial idea; deciding its membership, location and timing; informing the congregation and others outside; preparing to move in; and its early days;
- closing a house so that withdrawal is experienced as life-giving and leading to development rather than a negative event; decision making; informing others; and preparing to depart.

Part Three: Religious life in small communities. Part Three presents those things that make up the life of a small community:

- living as a community: its purpose; how members organise themselves; the tackling of inevitable difficulties; community meetings; and leadership;
- determining mission and ministry; exploring the needs of an area; starting new work; designing work programmes; working collaboratively; and mutual support;
- reviewing and evaluating community life and ministry; and reporting or sharing what they have learnt with the leadership and congregation;

- exercising co-responsibility between communities and the congregation.

This however, makes the life cycle and decisions associated with each phase look more neat and tidy than it can ever be in reality. Life is messy. Progress is often made through cyclical rather than linear processes. A systematic presentation of these phases helps one to work more constructively: it is not to suggest that things can be worked through rigidly in a given order or in isolation from the rest. In real life there will be repetition and overlap, periods when the way seems clear and ideas tumble over themselves, and times of stagnation, deep uncertainty, and struggle. Working out these things is a matter of the heart and the head; the order, rate, and depth varies with different people.

Part Four: Transition between communities. This part considers the move of individuals from one community to another. Such a transition starts when they begin to consider the possibility of moving from where they are and ends after they have been in the new situation a year or more. It considers this critical path and offers suggestions to help people reflect on and learn from the past; to withdraw from a ministry; and to settle into a new situation. It also deals with changes in the membership of a community, and relationships with members who are living elsewhere for a period. A new member, or a member moving out or dying, changes the shape and dynamics of a community. Taking cognisance of this can be important.

Part Five: Towards equipping small communities. This part is about those things which all communities have to do in order to become increasingly effective in mission and ministry and be the sort of community which is life-enhancing to live in: tackling problems, making decisions, evaluating their life and work, and having community meetings. It also includes exercises and discussion outlines on a variety of topics such as community life, charisma, faith sharing, poverty, and mission, and some longer-term exercises.

USING THIS BOOK

As this book is meant to stimulate thought, promote creative ideas, and be used for reference, there is an extended list of contents, many cross references, and a full index. My hope is that it will spark off other questions of particular relevance to those who use it. Ventures often stumble and fail, not because people are incapable of achieving success, but because they do not ask, and then work through, the essential questions. However, even asking the essential questions does not automatically or always guarantee success; working things out carefully and systematically will not necessarily ensure the smooth running of any human venture. But it invariably helps. My intention is to help those concerned with small communities to do some things more effectively, to prevent some excursions down cul-de-sacs, to reduce some of the pain experienced because things do not turn out as expected, and to see ways of working through the consequences of unexpected difficulties or mistakes. The book will be of greatest help to those who enter into a dialogue with it, questioning it from their own experience, as well as allowing it to question and challenge them and their ways of doing things.

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

Definitions of some of the terms used throughout this book are as follows:

Congregation: I use the word congregation synonymously with religious order: Groups variously use one description or the other. Some congregations are divided into provinces and regions, others are not. For the sake of simplicity I usually use the word 'province' to refer to the national or regional grouping of religious, and 'congregation' to refer to the international grouping.

Community: refers to a local community of religious or lay people rather than to the congregation or national grouping as a whole.

Leadership team: refers to those who have been elected or appointed to positions of authority at national, provincial, or international level. I often use the word 'team' rather than council, because this is a more accurate description of the common and preferred way of exercising these functions.

Priesthood: I refer to those ordained as priests. They may be parochial or non-parochial. Also, following common usage, when I talk about lay people I refer to those who are secular, rather than religious.

Personal pronouns: As the English language does not have unisex pronouns I have alternated the use of 'he' and 'she' as appropriate.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Metcalfe, Bill: 'The Wisdom of the Elders: Communal Conflict and Conflict Resolution' in *Creating Harmony: Conflict resolution* edited by Hildur Jackson (Gaia Trust, Denmark, in association with Permanent Publications, UK 1999).
- 2 *ibid.* That most world religions include a community dimension, and most communities a spiritual one occurred to me forcibly after reading this book which has contributions from some twenty-seven people closely associated with or living in eco-villages or sustainable communities, the vast majority of which have no religious affiliation.
- 3 The Grail, a Roman Catholic foundation although it welcomes people of all faiths community, has been in the U.K. since 1933. It has a core residential membership of women who have made a long-term commitment to a simple life-style, to helping individuals to grow, and to caring for the earth on a small scale. Men and women who share this ethos and the work that flows from it, become part of this community for longer or shorter periods of time. There is also a large non-residential network of members throughout the British Isles. The community is based at Waxwell Farm House, 125 Waxwell lane, Pinner, Middlesex HA5 3ER.
- 4 The Lindore Road community existed for several years in Clapham in the 1970s to 1980s. It had a small residential group and a larger number of associates who met weekly for a eucharistic or liturgical celebration and discussion. It attracted many who called themselves 'fringe Christians'.
- 5 The Global Eco-Village Network (GEN) consists of communities and settlements that focus on ecological issues and sustainable living. GEN was inaugurated in Istanbul in 1996 and is now on the Internet (<http://www.gaia.org>). It has national groupings in many countries.
- 6 NACCAN is a network of Christians interested in or living in a wide variety of communities throughout the United Kingdom. It has a quarterly mailing and an annual assembly. Its headquarters is NACCAN Community House, Eton Road, Newport, NP19 0BL.