

COMMUNAL PERSPECTIVES ON FORMATION

By ATHOL GILL

ALONGSIDE the new monastic communities of Europe and the 'base ecclesial communities' of the Third World, intentional christian communities have mushroomed in the western world since the second world war. They are part of the 'growing interest in community' which Henri Nouwen has recently described as one of the 'very hopeful' signs in the contemporary Church.

Some have written in romantic, and almost messianic, language of the new movement as the hope of the Church and the world. In his latest bestseller, *The clowns of God*, australian novelist Morris West, for example, attributes apocalyptic significance to the role of communities in the nuclear age. He tells the exciting story of the imaginary Pope Gregory XVII who is forced to abdicate because of his claim to have received a private revelation of the end of the world. After a period in exile the former pope seeks to make known to the world the message of his revelation in the hope that it might avert the imminent disaster of nuclear holocaust. His journey ends at a small community established in the Austrian Alps by his close friend Carl Mendelius, one of the few who share his vision. In the closing pages of the book Jesus explains to the community the mystery they share:

First, you should know that you are not here by your own design. You were led here, step by step, on different roads, through many apparent accidents, but always it was the finger of God that beckoned you.

You are not the only community thus brought together. There are many others, all over the world, in the forests of Russia, in the jungles of Brazil, in places you would never dream. They are all different because men's needs and habits are different. Yet they are all the same, because they have followed the same beckoning finger, and bonded themselves by the same love. They did not do this of themselves. They could not, just as you could not, without a special prompting of grace.

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You were prompted for a reason. Even as I speak, the adversary begins to stalk the earth, roaring destruction! So, in the evil times which are now upon us, you are chosen to keep the small flame of love alight, to nurture the seeds of goodness in this small place, until the day when the Spirit sends you out to light other candles in a dark land and plant new seeds in a blackened earth.

While most of the new communities would not entirely identify with the intensely apocalyptic vision of Morris West and very few would claim a private revelation such as that attributed to the imaginary Pope Gregory XVII, many would nonetheless want to affirm that it was 'the finger of God who beckoned' them and that through 'a special prompting of grace' they have been encouraged to keep alive 'the small flame of love' so that God might, in his mercy and grace, 'plant new seeds in a blackened earth' of western materialism.

The new christian communities come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, all the way from a single household with three or four young people to dozens of families in the one neighbourhood, covenanting together to develop a common life. Some of them are non-denominational, some are ecumenical, others belong within local churches of mainstream denominations. Some are new and may not last very long, others have already been in existence for many years and their members have made long-term commitments to one another. Some are seeking to escape the pressures of life, others are determined to live out their lives in the midst of the world, bearing the bitterness and pain of modern existence. Some despair of the world, others are working for the renewal and restructuring of society and Church. Some are longingly looking back to the past, others are seeking to grasp the future with eager expectation affirming the present as a gift from God.

At the beginning many of the new communities paid little attention to the question of christian formation, believing it was sufficient for a person to have experienced the call of God and to be committed to follow Jesus Christ in his messianic mission in the world. The pressures of a lifestyle diametrically opposed to many of the unspoken principles on which contemporary society has been fashioned, especially of a lifestyle lived on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, have taken their toll in many of the communities and they are being forced, sometimes against their will, to learn some hard lessons from the traditional Churches. But if the new communities have benefited from the experiences of the traditional Churches, it is also true that those involved in the structures of the traditional Churches, especially those in

theological education and christian formation, could well gain some fresh insights from the experiences of the new communities.

Sadly, though, the traditional Church is a notoriously slow learner. Theological colleges and seminaries have frequently been prepared to continue persevering with ways of formation which have so often been tried and found inadequate rather than take minimal risks and learn from the experience of some of the newer groups. I make these observations after twenty-six years of seminary life (ten years as a student and sixteen as a lecturer), with the last fourteen also involved in the life of two ecumenical inner-city mission communities. It is not a case of one being right and the other wrong, or of one group having all the insights and the other none. It is simply a shame that we are not able to learn more from each other's experiences.

Seven years ago the house of the Gentle Bunyip Christian Community, where we now live, sought to reflect theologically on their pilgrimage and they expressed their understanding of community in terms of the following five basic principles:

The centre of our common life is Jesus Christ. We have come together not simply as a matter of convenience, nor because we share the same interests or accept a common ideology. Our coming together is the result of the activity of Jesus in our lives.

Our common life is made possible by the grace of God, it is held together by his grace, and it exists to extend his grace to the world. We are here not because we are better than anybody else, because we know more than anybody else, we are here simply because we know that God loves us and that he has called us to live together as his children.

Our community does not exist for us or for itself, it exists for the sake of the world. We therefore seek to be open to those who need us, particularly the poor and the oppressed, the little people of the world.

In the ordering of our lives together and in our mission we will seek to give concrete expression to the fact that it is a community of grace and love. The community is to be a place where we will acknowledge our gratitude to God in worship and humble service. It is a place where people will be encouraged to discover their God-given gifts, to develop them, and use them within the context of the community's developing mission in the world.

In our life together we will seek to be open to the God who leads into the future and so we will not take on a structure, or even a confession of faith, which will bind us to the present and will ultimately bury us in the past.

For many readers of *The Way*, particularly those involved in religious orders, there is nothing particularly new here and you may well be wondering why it takes some Protestants so long to catch up. (Be patient with us!) With respect to ministerial formation, however, there are a number of interesting consequences.

The first and most obvious consequence is that the call of Jesus Christ (the gospel and our response in repentance and faith) is central to ministerial formation, even as it is central to all other aspects of the Church's life. This being the case it would seem that, from reflection on our communal experience in the light of the gospel, the ecumenical dimension ought to play an important role in ministerial formation. In an ecumenical setting where denominational differences are respected but not determinative and where the distinctive insights of each tradition are shared, christian formation will more adequately reflect the fact that it is Jesus Christ who is the centre of all that we do.

The second, and perhaps no less obvious, consequence is that the christian community is the appropriate context for ministerial formation. By christian community we mean the whole christian community, not simply the community of theological students or seminarians. Christianity is essentially a communal religion and individualistic and competitive theological education is clearly an inadequate mode of christian formation. At a time in the history of the Church when priests, pastors and lay people are struggling with urgent issues of ministry and mission in a world of intense pressure, ministerial formation needs to be related to the faith journey, the struggles and victories, of the community of the people of God. All members of the christian community, clergy and lay alike, lose out when a gap is allowed to develop between the 'academic' theology of ministerial formation and the pastoral life of the christian community.

The third, and perhaps most important, consequence for ministerial formation is that in the western world where academia has played such an important role, it is the christian community engaged in mission in the world which gives the appropriate meaning and direction for ministerial formation. The messianic ministry of Jesus Christ continues through the community of his people which is the goal of all of the activities of the Church, including, and perhaps especially, its formation for ministry. Colleges (or whatever form of institution is used in ministerial formation) exist to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ within the context of the christian community as it responds to Christ's call to mission in the world. The final horizon of the community's ministry is not the community itself, but the world which God loves and reconciles

in Jesus Christ. The ministry of the christian community, and hence the intention of ministerial formation, is not merely to understand the world in the light of the gospel, but to change the world by the power of the gospel. This being the case, it seems singularly inappropriate that such a large proportion of western ministerial formation should take place either within the context of elitist tertiary institutions committed to the maintenance of the inequalities of contemporary society or in seminaries and monasteries located in idyllic surroundings separated from the world of injustice and evil. Ministerial formation must be incarnate in mission for any theology worthy of the name is theology of obedience, theology of mission, theology of discipleship in the world.

The fourth, and in some denominations most controversial, consequence is that ministerial formation of clergy and religious is to be seen as part of the entire process of development and training through which all Christians prepare for their messianic vocation. Specialist ministries require specialist training, but this is also not to be restricted to the clergy. Ministerial formation is an open process involving married and single (celibate through vows or life situation) female and male, old and young, academic and unschooled, as members of the christian community. Christian ministerial formation is truncated and incomplete when separated from the development of the gifts and talents of the entire christian community and when reserved primarily for those who will perform certain leadership (priestly and pastoral) roles within the community.

The final consequence of these community principles is that christian ministerial formation must be open and oriented towards the future rather than closed and determined wholly from the perspective of the past. The kingdom which the gospel proclaims began to break into human history in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This kingdom, anticipated in the life of Israel, continues to break in to human history in the liberation of the oppressed, the release of the captives and the bringing of humanity to wholeness through the good news of Jesus. Ministerial formation carries within itself the kingdom tension between the already and the not yet of the kingdom of God. It is thus always formation for liberation, not oppression.

We have been speaking here of the consequences for ministerial formation of the principles which have developed through reflection on our corporate experience of the grace of God in our midst. That is one way of viewing the process, but of course it must always be borne in mind that we have, in fact, worked from the

action to the reflection in order to express the principles which are at the basis of our common life. Part of the action on which the reflection is based has been the experience of the community in ministerial formation. Reflection—action—reflection have always been an essential part of the communal process.

It is interesting to read in the newspapers recently that there has been a tremendous increase in the numbers of people entering seminaries from the base communities and other groups in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America. This accords with our own experience. From the two small mission communities of which we have been a part over the past fourteen years, eight people have entered the ordained ministry of four denominations, seven others have completed their degrees in theology and are involved in other christian ministries, eight have almost finished their studies, while another twenty or thirty have undertaken some formal theological study. This same trend is beginning to appear in many of our other mission-oriented churches as well. Exciting things can happen when christian formation finds its rightful place as an integral part of the ministry of the entire community engaged in the messianic mission of Jesus Christ.