TOWARDS A NEW COMMUNAL IDENTITY

By DAVID CLARK

'IFE IS essentially and always communal life. Every living thing is born into community and owes its life to community.'[1] So wrote Robert MacIver some sixty years ago. Following in the footsteps of Ferdinand Toennies, the founding father of the sociology of community, he was here giving expression to a view which has been an ongoing concern throughout the upheavals of the twentieth century. For in no other era has the search for community been so self-conscious and so ardent.

There would seem to be two main reasons for this. First, that all of us 'owe our life to community' because our identity as human beings is intimately bound up with it. If community is weakened or destroyed, then we ourselves disintegrate. But this begs the question as to what this thing we call 'community' is all about.

A long debate has surrounded the concept of 'community'. Some have written it off as an 'aerosol' term which is used to spray on everything to give it, however mediocre or even repulsive, an attractive scent. Others, who have taken the trouble to explore the origins and development of the term, realize that there is far more to it than this. The literature on the sociology of community would seem to indicate that 'community', in the sense that MacIver was using it, has three key components—and it is from these that our sense of identity comes. Firstly, community indicates that human beings must have 'a place to stand'; it is about having sufficient material and physical security to be free from anxiety and to be able to attend to the real business of being human. Secondly, community is about our having 'a part to play'; it means that within whatever human aggregate we live or work we have some role that brings an adequate sense of fulfilment. And thirdly, community indicates that we have a 'world to belong to'; that there are groups within which we know ourselves to be accepted and within which we experience a sense of solidarity. It is these three essential components of community which give us

our identity as individuals and, complementary to that, as groups. For this reason this century has witnessed the search for community.

But so have other centuries. The second reason, therefore, why this search has been particularly compulsive in our time is that the old forms of communal life have undergone traumatic change. Toennies himself sometimes felt that the urbanization of his own rural world of Schleswig-Holstein at the end of the nineteenth century was the beginning of the end of community. But by the time MacIver put pen to paper, sociologists were aware that, whilst old economic and social structures were crumbling, community, as the life-blood of society, was being poured into other organizational forms.

A new era

The name given to this new era is 'modernity'. Peter Berger defines its three main features as technological production, bureaucracy and pluralization.[2] For those reeling from the upheavals of the industrial revolution, it must have seemed impossible that even greater changes were just around the corner. But so it proved. And our century has seen the speed of change not slow down but accelerate.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the search for community became a pressing concern, from individual to nation. For as the old physical landmarks disappeared and the well-tried ways of economic survival were threatened, where was one to stand? As patterns of rural existence and then extended-family life broke down, where could one find a part to play or a world to belong to? As relatively static local forms of society gave way to a mobile cosmopolitan culture, where was the 'glue' to be found that could give social coherence? As past forms of community disappeared so it seemed that personal and corporate identity were also collapsing; a situation which Emile Durkheim spoke of as 'anomie' and which, in many cases was, he believed, a root cause of suicide.

The collapse of old communal structures affected all forms of social life—secular and religious. Modernity was no respecter of persons—no institution could, Canute-like, hope to turn back the tide. Thus, just as secular organizations, from the farmstead to the British Empire, had to search for a new communal identity, so too did religious bodies, from the local Church to the still remaining outposts of Christendom itself.

Some deeply regretted this. They believed that the old world was 'good enough' and that it had offered a rich communal experience which had been of immense benefit—socially and spiritually—to the vast majority of humankind. Others saw that this vantage point was severely limited. They realized that the world of even the nineteenth century had been an incredibly circumscribed one—parochial, paternalistic and obsessively Western in its stance—and grasped that if community were to survive then new allegiances and new identities had to form across old cultural and religious divides. Our existence as human beings could not depend on eternal forms and structures through which community was expressed; it depended on our ability to 'make *and* unmake' the tribes to which we belonged in order that communal life, and our personal and corporate identity, could also be enriched. If we were to survive, 'a place to stand' had to become 'a *more secure* place to stand'; 'a part to play' had to become 'a *fuller* part to play'; and 'a world to belong to' had to become 'a *wider* world to belong to'—and this for all as well as each.

Ferment in the Church

The dilemmas of identity which faced the secular world also faced the Church in the West. Here the challenge of modernity impinged with especial force. A world increasingly dominated by technological achievement meant that the obvious need for a God who sustained and preserved the human race was greatly weakened. A world in which bureaucracy was essential in order to ensure that organizational life was possible meant that the impersonal had to take precedence over the personal—a personal God was either unnecessary or coralled within the private sphere. A world which was becoming increasingly pluralistic, not least in matters of belief and values, opened the door to what Berger calls 'the vertigo of relativity',[3] and old bonds were loosened and old loyalties called into question.

For the Church the undermining of its traditional communal foundations and the threat to its past sense of identity presented an acute crisis. By nature Christendom, whose ethos if not so much its forms still permeated the lives of many Christians, was about stability, order, comprehensiveness and conservation. Their Church was concerned with preservation not change, with programme not process, with continuity not innovation, with maintenance not mission. Yet here ferment was inevitable. For the Church,

to be true to its origins, had somehow to be a model of community not only for the centuries now gone but for the modern age emerging. At the very heart of the gospel was the declaration that community in Christ, *koinonia*, was not only essential for the fulfilment of humankind's destiny, but open to all generations, not least those of the twentieth century. It was an issue which could not be shelved.

The Church's response to this crisis of identity was broadly three-fold. The first was retrenchment. This meant holding on to old forms of communal life in the belief that modernity was a passing fad. But what soon became clear here was an attempt to preserve old boundaries was neither a creative nor even a neutral reponse. For tribes which cease to enlarge their vision and widen their boundaries when required become incestuous. Community itself becomes destructive, the power of good turned in on itself, and thus a great power for evil. It is a situation only too evident in places like Northern Ireland or South Africa.

The second response was reactionary. It took the form of an apparent move into the present, but made safe by reaffirming, often in an idolistic way, the traditions and structures of the past. By nature it was a sectarian response. In our day, this reaction is evident in the emphasis on the self-contained life and, at times, exclusivity of the gathered congregation. It is seen in the intense narcissism of much American religiosity, in many of the so-called 'house churches' in this country and in parts of the charismatic movement. A deeply personalized faith, passionate Christian fellowship and emotively stimulating worship go hand-in-hand with biblical fundamentalism, authoritarian leadership and male domination. Yet neither of these responses to modernity could suffice. For that communal identity which the Church has to regain could not depend on either staying put and letting the world pass by, or on retreat into the religious ghetto. A third way was required.

The search for a new communal identity
The third way I call the beginning of a 'new re-formation'. I do not use this term in an historical but sociological sense. It was, and is, a response to modernity which sought to move with the changes taking place, but to accept or challenge them in the name of Christian *koinonia*. For those Christians involved this meant that they themselves had to discover and experience the latter, and

thereby begin to search out a new identity in the midst of a rapidly changing world.

Where and when this re-formation began is not a simple matter to trace. But, like so many earlier re-formations, it seemed to be the result of an encounter between the vision of the few 'at the top', and a passionate commitment to a new experience of being the Church by many 'at the base'. Thus the impetus for the search for new Christian forms of community came from, amongst other quarters, the leaders of the ecumenical movement, The Second Vatican Council and the liberation theologians 'at the top', and 'at the base' the basic Christian community movement, the re-formed religious orders and congregations 'opting for the poor'.

At this point I must pursue the story with regard to the United Kingdom scene, for it is here that my immediate experience lies. It is the story of the quest for a new communal identity which comes first—for it is only as there is experience on which to reflect that such matters as a new theology and new symbols begin to come to the fore.

My intention here is not to recount in detail the growth of the Christian community movement in this country—I have already written at length about this elsewhere.[4] More recently, Diarmuid O'Murchu has undertaken a survey of this movement, setting it in a global context, and looking at its potential for the future.[5] But I need to point to certain phases and features of the movement if the implications of the quest for a new communal identity are to be understood.

This quest I see as revealing six stages. It began with protest and perplexity. In the United Kingdom this came to a head in the late nineteen-sixties. It had been a decade of cultural upheaval, with undreamt of affluence and opportunity, on the one hand, encountering deep disillusionment with 'the brave new world' of technology, bureaucracy and pluralism, on the other. The mismatch seemed, especially for the young, to be focussed in the denial of civil rights to black people and in the Vietnam war, issues that by no means affected the United States alone.

On the Church scene a similar raising and dashing of hopes took place. The Vatican Council and the Anglican-Methodist unity talks looked set to revolutionize old Church patterns and alliances, and a stress on the centrality of the laity and collaborative ministry looked set to inspire a new shape to Christian ministry. But, by the early nineteen-seventies, these initiatives had either lost their

edge or run themselves into the ground. Those Christians who
had invested commitment, time and energy in these areas of re-
formation were left angry and perplexed. The only option open
was protest—or aligning with retrenchment or retreat.

Many Christians, as those on the secular scene, chose protest.
The forms it took were various, but the dominant one led into the
second stage of the quest for a new identity—withdrawal. This
saw a multitude of Christian groups, many unknown to one
another, stepping outside the mainstream life of the Churches and
addressing themselves to their own calling, as they saw it— 'doing
one's own thing' was the catch-phrase of the time. Thus came
into being groups concerned with new forms of spirituality and
prayer, with the arts, with the environment, with new approaches
to Christian education, with many aspects of welfare, with health
and healing, and with justice and peace. A key theme running
through most of their operations was a life-style which reflected
what they sought to preach through their work. Living together
was an attractive option at this time and community houses
mushroomed, but, even where this did not occur, a shared life-
style often emerged.

The third stage of the search for a new communal identity came
with the gradual realization that withdrawal into the self-centred
groups, however noble the works undertaken, was not enough.
There had to be a linking, and at times a gathering, not only for
mutual affirmation and support, but to identify the whole as well
as the part. The journey needed to be undertaken in the company
of others. Here began a break with the path that many sects have
trodden in the past. For such coming together often meant meeting
and associating with those with a very different Christian pedigree
and undertaking very different ministries. In 1980 the first
Community Congress of Christian Groups in the United Kingdom
took place in Birmingham—though smaller gatherings had
occurred in 1975 and 1977. Over one hundred and fifty groups
were represented—with many religious orders, themselves seeking
a new lease of life, amongst them. This process of gathering has
continued since then, the latest move, of considerable significance,
being the formation in late 1987 of a National Association of
Christian Communities and Networks.

Subsequent stages are still to be worked through, though they
have in part already begun! The fourth stage is what I call
clarifying the message. For the gathering of itself has only been

the beginning of the debate as to what the community movement is about and how the concerns of the parts relate to those of the whole. This is a long arduous stage, with many conflicts, and numerous secondary withdrawals and joinings up again. It is as yet impossible to know whether it will even be satisfactorily resolved. But unless this happens, the identity born of meeting and sharing is unlikely to be powerful enough to cope with the other stages ahead. There are, however, pointers to indicate that the message is becoming clearer. In 1987, the National Centre for Christian Communities and Networks drew together the comments of over fifty new groups into a booklet for the Inter-Church Process entitled *Towards a new vision of Church*.[6] It indicated much diversity of view, but also some striking common themes.

The fifth stage might be called that of re-entry into institutional world—though some argue that it is the creation of quite new forms of institution, secular and sacred, which is at issue. Whatever the case, this stage is not about assimilation into the old, but its transformation and the creation of a new richer communal identity for institutions as well as the community movement itself. This stage has barely begun on the British scene, though such things as the Roman Catholic National Pastoral Congress, the support of the Anglican House of Bishops for the community movement and the opening up of dialogue through the Inter-Church Process are signs of hope.

The last stage, not yet on the horizon, is 'the shape of the Church to come' if and when the message and the new communal forms for which the community movement is seeking enter the life-blood of Christians hitherto relatively unaffected by it. It is about how a movement committed to community as process and mission can change a body whose pattern for centuries has to be to foster community as programme and maintenance.

Identity through process

The community movement in the United Kingdom is, of course, not the only Christian movement seeking a new identity. There are many other tributaries already flowing into the same river— from the black Churches, from local ecumenical initiatives and from work in urban priority areas, to name but a few. But the course it has run, and is running, perhaps shows more clearly than in other cases how a new communal identity can develop in an age of discontinuity. This is brought about not through the

imprinting of past forms, symbols and rituals on passive recipients but through the dynamic process sketched out above.

It is often a very painful process. Protest, perplexity and withdrawal, for example, can lead to a situation, as Tillich once described it, where we are 'without a name, a church, a cult, a theology'.[7] And that is a frightening place to be. Yet it is only as we are seemingly stripped of one identity, as individual or group, that the potential for another can become a reality. On the personal level, this might even be likened to 'the dark night of the soul'; on the more corporate level, to the upheaval and disorientation which some religious congregations have faced in seeking to fulfil the vision of Vatican II in a truly authentic way.

But gathering too can be a challenging part of the process of finding a new identity. For it is, in one sense, easier to travel alone—we do not have to live with the irritating diversity of human beings nor face our own idiosyncracies. I think I would be more convinced that the Church had got her definition of sainthood right if it bestowed this title on fewer people who were rampant individualists, however noble, and on more who knew how to live well with others. The search for communal identity has, for me, therefore, to embrace the grace to be with, as well as stand apart from, one's fellows.

There has also to be the clarifying of the message—not our message but God's. And this means not identity through a 'truth' which we possess and which we alone are called to proclaim (the besetting temptation of all false prophets), but through obedience to revelation, to a gift, to a divine imperative. That this kind of message comes so frequently through the fierce striving together of those who continue to love one another and love God, would seem to demonstrate that our identity is born of mutual struggle, as Jacob learnt, not out of passive acceptance of the status quo.

Nor is the message merely a matter of words, though they have to be used by those of us who are bound by time and space. It is, in a deeper sense, a matter of witnessing to a Covenant between ourselves, as individuals and groups, and God. It is this bond that makes us the people who we are and gives us the name by which we call ourselves.

But there remains a journey to undertake. It is a journey towards 'the Promised Land', towards the kingdom of God, though, in one sense, this is already in our midst. Thus our identity, personal and corporate, is no static designation but an ever-developing

thing. As Charles Wesley once put it, we are being 'changed from
glory into glory'. But this is not 'glory for me'; it is glory for the
whole creation transformed and given a new identity by the saving
grace of God in Christ.

Symbols of a new identity

It is only as the Christian community movement in this country
comes to have its own story to tell that its new identity, and the
symbols which focus this, begin to emerge. Their appearance is
important because symbols make available to all concepts, forms
and signs which give coherence and energy to what would otherwise
be a very disparate aggregate of people.

Because the community movement is very young, these symbols
are still blurred. Thus what I have touched on above, and mention
below, must be taken as a subjective view of what these symbols
are, or will be. But let me point to what I believe are one or two
of these.

Overall, I believe that the story of the Exodus remains as
powerful a biblical symbol as any for many today as they seek a new
communal identity. This is certainly true for the basic Christian
community movement in Latin America; and for the theology of
liberation which has meshed with it. But I believe that in the
United Kingdom too, where our 'captivity' is of a different kind,
the symbol remains a powerful one. For the Exodus describes in a
vivid way the process of protest and perplexity (in Egypt); of
withdrawal (into the wilderness); of re-forming and re-grouping
(with a new tribal life-style); of clarifying the message as word and
relationship (the Covenant); and of seeking for and entering the
Promised Land (the kingdom of God). The story of the Exodus
thus symbolizes today the process of re-gaining our communal
identity as Christian people. It is little wonder that words such as
'journey', 'covenant' and 'kingdom' come to the fore—though
there is here an attempt being made to find terms that point to
the same realities but do not carry some of the undertones which
limit their resonance today (such as the 'maleness' of 'king'-dom
language).

Another symbol which appears to me to be emerging is that
related to the concept of community itself; the Trinity. I have tried
elsewhere to portray the links between this symbol in theological
and sociological writing;[8] God as Creator giving us 'a place to
stand', Christ as liberator giving us 'a part to play' and the Holy

Spirit as Unifier offering us 'a world to belong to'. I have also pointed to the themes of interdependence and wholeness undergirding this symbol. The National Centre's booklet *Towards a new vision of Church* uses the trinitarian model as one into which the contributions of various groups are woven.[9] But, whether such 'commentaries' on the Trinity as a symbol of community are useful or not, the Trinity remains a powerful pointer to the nature of the new communal identity we seek.

Finally, the symbol of the Trinity leads us into the symbols of our particular ministries, many of these subsumed today under the symbol of 'the option for the poor': the physically poor, the socially marginalized and the tribally divided. We find our identity insofar as we seek to undertake our part in the Trinity's work of creation and preservation, of liberation and of reconciliation.

Formation in community

What all this means for formation in community is still an open question, but the telling of the story (so far) of the community movement and the emergence of symbols, however blurred as yet, would seem to indicate something along the following lines:

— That formation is now more about process than programme. We do not know what the 'Promised Land' will look like, but we do know that even in the wilderness where our 'name, church, cult and theology' are obscure, a caring God is there to lead his people in his way.

— That formation is thus a risky business. To cling onto the past or escape into the religious ghetto cannot suffice. We are called to the re-formation of the Church and to a new communal identity.

— That formation is personal *and* corporate—there cannot be one without the other. Any new communal identity is born out of a vigorous exchange between the individual and the collective.

— That the kingdom has to become a more powerful symbol than the Church, though the latter remains its herald, servant and, at times, model. Thus formation must shift from identification with 'given' ecclesiastical or congregational forms and structures—and be open to the sovereignty of a God who relates to the whole of his creation in ways we are still seeking to discover.

— That formation for community needs to immerse itself in a new and deeper inter-disciplinary study of community and of the theology of the Trinity with which it is intimately related.

— That formation for a new communal identity is first about mission; out of which issues of maintenance will emerge in proper perspective.

— That formation is about an apostolate which concerns itself with where community has broken down—so the 'option for the poor', in every sense of that term, becomes the starting point for our ministries in the modern world.

— That formation will only be authentic if it takes place amongst those, themselves often without a 'name, church, cult or theology' who are also seeking to build the kingdom.

— That formation, as a journey towards the greater glory of all creation, never ceases.

NOTES

[1] MacIver, R. M.: *Community* (Macmillan, 1924).

[2] Berger, P. L. et. al.: *The homeless mind* (Pelican Books, 1974), pp 29–77.

[3] Berger, P. L.: *The heretical imperative* (Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1980), p 9.

[4] Clark, D.: *The liberation of the Church* (NACCCAN*, 1984), and Clark, D.: *Yes to life—in search of the Kingdom community* (Collins—Fount Original, 1987).

[5] O'Murchu, Diarmuid: *Sharing the vision—A report on the Christian community movement in the United Kingdom*, (NACCCAN*, 1987).

[6] *Towards a new vision of Church—a report to the Inter-Church Process* (NACCCAN*, 1986).

[7] Tillich, P.: *The courage to be* (Collins—Fontana, 1962), p 182.

[8] Clark, *Yes to life, op. cit.*, pp 29–60.

[9] *Towards a new vision, op. cit.*

(* Publications available from NACCCAN, Westhill College, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LL, U.K.).