

DIFFERENT WAYS

Basic Christian Communities

By DAVID CLARK

THE CHURCH is a conservative institution. This is natural enough, since the Church is the guardian of her own historical tradition: the story of so many of her faithful men and women, and how they have struggled to give meaning to and find purpose in their existence. It is inevitable then, that the Church has to face the problem of what has been termed 'cultural lag'; that is, of so living in the past that her efforts to conserve all that is valuable in this experience tends to constrain the work of the Spirit. Consider, for example, how Europe from the twelfth to the fourteenth century was structurally dominated by the Church. 'Christendom', that institution to end all institutions, overshadowed every kind of society: one might say that it underpinned them all during that period when the Church was at the zenith of its political power. Even at the parochial level, it was the Church, in reflecting a land-based feudalism, which shaped local customs and social intercourse. Further, there was little 'space between' the local and the central; only a small élite was sufficiently mobile or intellectually dominant to create an 'in-between'.

Today, Christendom has been a thing of the past for nearly six centuries. Yet the concept of the Church as a world-embracing institution is still very much alive in sentiment if not in actuality, and especially among Roman Catholics. Similarly, the parish as a unit of social significance has been on the decline for nearly four centuries. Yet belief in its fundamental importance, especially amongst Protestants, still remains almost unchallenged. Such nostalgia has its place; but it is equally a symptom of 'cultural lag' — a luxury which the Church can no longer afford. The situation at present is not that institutions are irrelevant (although a monolithic Christendom is obviously so); the fact is that we need much more effective and dynamic institutions. Nor is it that the parish, or at least the local church, has lost all its value. The problem is that whilst

Christians see the institutional Church and locally the parish as the only possible expressions of christian community and concern, this is at the neglect of an increasingly important aspect of the current social scene: what I have called above 'the space between'. It is an area which has steadily increased over the past few centuries; one which currently contains a vast variety of groups of all shapes and sizes, often loosely organized, whose members are free to move around, not only spatially, but intellectually, and often socially.

The emergence of such energetic mobile groups on the human scene is a phenomenon which historically has always signalled the acceleration of social change. This is particularly true of our own time; which makes it imperative for a lateral shift in the Church's understanding of community: one which will enable it to jettison its preoccupation with the structures of the past.

The tribe

The Old Testament is all about a small and nomadic group of people, bound by deep common interests as well as by ties of flesh and blood. Members of this group grew in their knowledge of God as they wandered and wondered. They became a people in their escape from a nation institutionalizing itself in mighty pyramids of sand and stone. Through this small, fragile tribe, faithful despite its many mistakes and deviations, God began to work his miracle of redemption. Such has been the pattern ever since. As tribes have settled and become locked into localities and institutions, there has come the necessity of breaking out into a new land and new relationships, lest the spirit of man become imprisoned and die. It is a rhythm of settling and wandering which seems to be part and parcel of the purposes of God.

Christ himself entered a nation that had become relatively stable: settled families with great institutions. He challenged both permanence and institution. His small band of twelve became the forerunners of momentous change. The personal cost was, of course, immense: the price that must always be paid for the break-through into a new understanding of what God's gift of being human is all about. So it was that the early Church was epitomized for a while by the concept of the small group, linked by preachers and pastors sufficiently mobile to keep its various groupings alive and dynamic.

There is no need to give a detailed narrative of how the pendulum continued to swing between the immobile and the mobile, the 'local'

and the 'cosmopolitan':¹ how doors were opened to new visions and to new realities concerning the divine purposes, as the Desert Fathers, and the subsequent monastic 'tribes' which gathered round them, took their journey into the wilderness; or the early friars, mendicants who travelled about in order to teach the Church the deeper meaning of material possessions and man's responsibility for sharing them; or the explosion of a pluralistic Protestantism at the Reformation which, as always with a people on the move, revealed new insights into both the glory and degradation of man; or the methodist revival of the eighteenth century which, reflecting the early Church, took the small group or class-meeting as the foundation-stone of its work, and drew on the fruits of mobility through the inspiration of its itinerant preachers; or finally, the massive missionary movements of many christian traditions which dominated the nineteenth century.

All these and similar ventures in faith would seem to demonstrate that the wandering tribe and the itinerant worker are so fundamental a part of God's scheme of things that their contribution to the life and witness of both Church and society is neglected at great cost. Yet such movements have often been neglected, discounted and indeed savagely attacked; for they bring man back to the frightening realization that he has no abiding city here on earth. They challenge power, possessions and passivity in the name of a Christ who had no power yet greater authority, nowhere to lay his head but was immensely rich, was busy from morning till night yet had all the time in the world.

The tribe today

There is no doubt that the 'cultural lag' is one reason why the significance of the tribe is not fully appreciated today: the three centuries during which Christendom dominated the Western World, and of the longer period of time during which the parish system dominated the local scene, has still not been fully recognized; so that, despite the emergence of the most mobile generation man has ever known, the Church remains virtually unaware of its need for new forms of christian community. We have still to learn that history is the story of God revealing himself to his people through the informal as well as the formal, through the small primary group as well as great institutions, through the fragile and the poor as much as the secure and the powerful, through mobility as much as stability.

¹ Merton, R. K.: *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, 1957), pp 387-420.

The Church has become tied to the idea of movement and change as being essentially 'a temporary state',² and that the norm is a settled, defined order of at least ecclesiastical affairs and procedures. In fact, both upheaval and stability are equally 'temporary states'.

There is no question that the Church makes a contribution to society by affirming the value of stable institutions, international and local. But when not only tribes but whole peoples are on the move, then a Church that would live and learn must also be on the move. It would seem that the emergence on a world-wide scale of what are coming to be known as 'basic christian communities', is witness to the acceptance of this truth.

The emergence of such communities is particularly noticeable in those regions where a truly human existence is most difficult to establish. It is not surprising that they mushroomed in Latin America from the early 'fifties. Now, however, evidence of their existence and growth is plentiful from Mexico to Mozambique, from Italy to India and from Brazil to Britain.³ Basic christian communities form a kind of continuous line across the space between the parish and the well-established institutions. Some are less mobile from the spatial point of view and closely associated with neighbourhood life; whilst others are on the move (such as the Pilgrims of St Francis, an ecumenical group which fosters fellowship by means of regular pilgrimages) and discovering what community is about, literally *en route*.

The nature of basic christian communities

The significance of these communities is not simply geographical or numerical. It lies much more in their search for a new understanding and quality of community in Christ, and in the way their sociological shape has assisted their quest, individually and collectively, to discover the meaning of God's gift of being human. Basic christian communities are about a total quality of life; otherwise, they are at best irrelevant, and at worst sectarian and divisive. Theologically speaking, the members of such basic communities are seeking personally, within tribes and between tribes, to discover for our age what salvation is all about: personal and corporate wholeness in Christ. Such mobile and intimate small groups seem to release for this purpose a hitherto unrealized vitality and energy.

² Mehl, R.: *The Sociology of Protestantism* (London, 1970), p 5.

³ See the *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin*, 62 (September 1976), 'Basic Communities in the Church'.

The various ways in which basic christian communities can create a richer corporate life and deeper sense of community, have been discussed fully elsewhere.⁴ Here I wish to examine the potential of such communities by means of the insights into the group-process as first devised by Wilfred Bion.⁵ It must again be emphasized, however, that this potential can be realized only if the situation is sufficiently conducive to change. This is why I have emphasized the crucial importance of mobility, of giving people 'space' in which to grow. Bion maintains that all groups operate at two 'energy levels': 'the work level', directed to attaining the agreed task for which the group meets, and 'the basic level', which supplies members with the sense of personal significance and of solidarity with others necessary for growth. All groups have the potential of combining the energy released by undertaking the agreed task, and that which is acquired when the members of the group experience a strong sense of significance and solidarity.

Many christian movements have in the past achieved this very powerful combination of meeting both their work requirements and their personal needs; and many basic christian communities are experiencing the same today. When the deep needs of people in a mobile society are neither ignored nor suppressed by institutional or traditional parochial sanctions, considerable potential appears. The key to the vitality of these christian communities would seem to lie in their ability to generate and to channel energy creatively, above all at the basic level. (It is interesting that the word 'basic' is quite separately applied both to the communities of which I speak and to the group dynamics process of which Wilfred Bion writes.) What then are the sources of this basic energy?

1. *Dependency.* For Bion, the first source of basic energy is that associated with people's need for security. All human beings to a greater or lesser extent are dependent creatures. An immense energy is both expended on and results from the search for security. The argument is that basic christian communities have emerged in recent years because, in an insecure age, they have been able to provide, far better than institutional Church or parish, the right kind of nurturing. An example of this is the Compassionate Friends,

⁴ Clark, D.: *Basic Communities* (London, 1977), and *Basic Christian Communities* (Liverpool Institute of Socio-Religious Studies, 1978).

⁵ Bion, W. R.: *Experiences in Groups* (London, 1961). An attempt to apply Bion's ideas to groups commonly found in the parish situation has been attempted by McCauley, G.: *The God of the Group* (Illinois, 1975).

a network of caring groups, founded in 1969, to offer support to bereaved parents by bereaved parents. The Compassionate Friends is only one example of many communities which fit into the category of mutual aid or peer support groups. Another example of a nurturing network is the federation of *l'Arche* households, founded by Jean Vanier in France in 1964, to create a home-life and work situation for mentally handicapped adults living alongside normal (or as Vanier expresses it, less handicapped) people.

The need for security is, of course, a two-edged weapon. It may be used naïvely or desperately to enforce the belief that this person or that group is omnipotent or infallible. The contribution of the basic christian community here is to affirm its ultimate dependence on a God and Father whose love is invincible; and at the same time to maintain a mature dependency, which still requires the members to work out their own salvation as responsible human beings.

2. *Pairing*. Bion's second source of energy at the basic level is called the phenomenon of 'pairing'. This occurs between people who are caught up by some force which is experienced as integral to but also greater than themselves. It is an experience of 'immortality' and of a hope which transcends and transforms the immediate self: one which, according to Bion, is necessary for human survival. Basic christian communities have certainly tapped this spring of energy: perhaps most notably in recent years in the many small groups associated with the charismatic movement. We might cite the Community of Celebration, which grew out of the Church of the Redeemer in Houston, Texas, moved to Coventry in 1972, and has now diversified further. The main community currently occupies the Cathedral of the Isles, on the Isle of Cumbrae, Scotland. A similar dynamic has inspired the Centre for Christian Renewal at Rostrevor in County Down, Northern Ireland, where, in 1974, Cecil Kerr was instrumental in establishing a community whose aim was to be a focus for prayer, renewal and reconciliation between people of many different christian traditions.

But the energy originating from a hope-possessed people is not confined to those closely associated with the charismatic movement. It exists in nearly all those basic christian communities which occupy what I have called 'the space between'. By definition this is a place for those with vision and imagination. Such would be Lothlorien, the community which over the past four years has been painstakingly built up, near Dumfries, by Rosemary and Algy Haughton and their family and friends, concerned to work for wholeness of persons and

the conservation of a healthy and beautiful physical environment; or St Christopher's Hospice in Sydenham, London, where Cecily Saunders and colleagues are bringing hope and happiness into the lives of the terminally ill. As with dependency, so with pairing, there are problems as well as promise. By its nature, the basic energy produced by pairing has a strong sexual dimension which can bring great joy when it is channelled creatively towards the accepted task. But the wild stallions of the human emotions take some holding, and the chariot can easily go off course. There is, too, the hazard of hope that becomes utopian, and the visions which become fantasy. There is the further danger of idolizing the leaders, of projecting on to them the messianic dreams of the group. This is a particular difficulty for those belonging to any form of charismatic movement.

The contribution of christian communities here is to witness to the power of those pairing situations dependent upon a Lord who always refused to receive sentimental adulation, and trod the hard road of suffering rather than the easy road of popularity: a Lord whose messianic hope and understanding was grounded not only on the expectation of total human fulfilment, but also on the acceptance of all the trials and tribulations endemic to mortality. For basic christian communities, the vitality of pairing is none other than the optimism of grace, whose every expression reflects a real world, where men need to be redeemed from evil and suffering.

3. *Flight and fight.* Bion's third source of basic energy is the desire for identity and for the preservation of the group as a unique and valuable entity in itself. It is the human determination to maintain not only life but the distinctness of personality. Bion saw this process of preservation being sustained by what he termed 'flight' and/or 'fight'. Basic christian communities have often been accused of self-seeking 'flight'; they are regarded as escapist and even élitist. This is indeed one of the false trails along which the group can dissipate the energy it generates. But flight need not be escapist if the world from which one retreats for a time is overwhelmingly destructive and deadening. Nearly all the tribal movements of christian history have needed their period of wandering in the wilderness, away from the bondage of Egypt or the flesh-pots of modern civilization. The communities have taken to flight not only to ensure the survival necessary for growth to maturity, but in order to discover together the purposes of God for them. They have withdrawn from the empty routine of the ceremonial attached to much present day worship, in order to find fresh means of grace.

They have felt the need to escape the dehumanization of society in order to find themselves as persons. This is not escapism, but a search for a new spirituality, a revitalized humanity. In this context a number of religious orders are playing an increasingly important part by supporting and sustaining members of younger, lay groups who need periods of retreat and renewal.⁶

For other christian communities, perhaps a more emphatic source of energy under this heading is the 'fight' aspect of the flight: the fight-response to life. These are the groups of protest, pressure or persuasion, which affirm the identity and solidarity discovered in the wilderness, in the midst of the action. The latin american scene has been one breeding ground for such groups; but they also exist in other regions, including Britain. Within this category we might mention the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, striving to facilitate reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic; and Amnesty International, in which many Christians play a prominent part, working for the rights of prisoners of conscience throughout the world. But virtually all basic christian communities are in lesser or greater degree communities of protest; for they fight against all that impersonalizes, dehumanizes and destroys the image of God in man within our modern society. At the same time, just as flight can turn into sheer escapism, so fight can turn to foolhardiness and arrogance. Basic communities are by no means immune from these dangers. But where such christian groups are true to their vocation, fight is always undergirded by the command to love one's enemies, and to forgive others as one would wish to be forgiven. Often they fail to live up to their Lord's words; but they have those words before them as the criterion of their search for freedom and justice.

4. *Leadership and authority.* Bion's analysis of the small group and its sources of energy has offered a valuable framework for observing what is happening in groups; but the question of leadership — of how such groups can best be led towards their goals, receives very limited attention. In the wider literature on group dynamics, the general view on leadership is that different styles are required for different tasks and situations. There is no 'right method'. The leader, if there is one so recognized, is conceived rather as the conductor of an orchestra. Different players with their differing instruments, skills and contributions will be required during the performance.

⁶ For example, the Anglican contemplative Sisters of the Love of God, whose Motherhouse is at Fairacres, Oxford; and the Ampleforth Benedictines' retreat centre at Barnhouse, near Liverpool, which seeks to provide support for those working in the city.

Most basic communities would accept these views, though they would wish to place the emphasis on two components of leadership. Wherever possible, they would opt for leadership to be corporate, in the sense that authority and responsibility are shared, and decision-making involves all concerned. Secondly, they would stress that leadership should be a positive and creative attribute, in that it seeks to release the various abilities and expertise of every member of the group, as the occasion requires. Though many communities still reflect what Rudge terms the 'traditional' or 'classical' structures of the institutional Church,⁷ they are increasingly moving in their understanding of leadership towards the corporate/enabling functions. This is occurring not only amongst the more informally organized lay groups, but also within religious orders, particularly in the years following Vatican II.⁸ There are many issues yet to be resolved, and fears and prejudices to be overcome; but certainly leadership and authority will be a critical problem in the years ahead.

Tribalism and universality

The mobile tribe has throughout history been the vehicle of some of God's deepest revelations to man. But it constantly faces the threat of 'tribalism': of so protecting and treasuring its own identity and insights that it denies the very revelation it has received. In its protest against nation or institution, the tribe can set up its own idols. In claiming authenticity for its own life-style, it can deny the authenticity of being human in other ways. David Jenkins examined this tension at some depth in his 1974 Edward Cadbury Lectures; whilst Paul Tillich has underlined this dilemma as one requiring both 'the courage to be as oneself' and 'the courage to be as a part'.⁹ Thus it appears that one of the most critical tests facing man is how from the culture of the tribe a society and a world can emerge, which enables individuals to remain unique persons, yet increasingly to accept and empathize with one another, as George Simpson stated it several decades ago.¹⁰ One essential difference between basic communities of our day and those of the past is the pace of change: rapidity of modern communications is forcing a hasty search for religious and/or political frames of reference which can hold the untidy bundle of diverse units together in a

⁷ Rudge, P. F.: *Ministry and Management* (London, 1968).

⁸ Duckworth, Ruth: 'Communities in Upheaval', in *Community*, 20 (Spring 1978), pp 1-2.

⁹ Jenkins, David E.: *The Contradiction of Christianity* (London, 1974); Tillich, P.: *The Courage to Be* (London, 1962), pp 114-51, 89-113.

¹⁰ Cf Simpson, G. L.: *Conflict and Community* (New York, 1937), p 39.

creative manner. The precise modern issue is how to establish a sense of being one in Christ without destroying that diversity which is integral to their very existence.

Basic christian communities are aware that the word 'christian' is in this context far more than an optional extra: 'Only God as the centre is sufficient for the infinite possibilities of being human'.¹¹ To overcome tribalism or, as Jenkins describes it, 'the pathology of our identities', we require 'the resources of the love of God as they are displayed in the pattern of the incarnation, dying and rising of Jesus. That is to say, we need the resources of an identifying, absorbing and overcoming love'.¹² These communities place their hope, not in man revolving round his own visions and efforts, but in a very different source of revelation and power.

The role of institution and parish

As the fusion of basic christian communities into wider associations and networks occurs, as part of the rhythm of history, the role of the institutional Church and of the parish takes on a new significance. Though it has been argued that these two aspects of christian community can no longer be all things to all men and women, they retain their importance as the link with history and locality, time and place. To use a metaphor from the game of billiards, they are the cushions between which the communities we have been describing continually bounce; but they keep them on the table! The eventual contribution of these communities of our age to Church and society will depend not only on their own quality of life and on their own courage to be identifiable yet open; but perhaps even more, on the way in which their growth and creative association is helped or hindered by the institutional Church and the parish. These latter must face the increasingly urgent problem of taking seriously and helping to foster the growth of movements which may eventually bring very profound changes to the shape of the Church as we know it; or of hindering such growth, in the name of their own brand of tribalism, by opposition or by sheer passivity. However, one thing is sure. If God is really at the centre and is acknowledged so to be by institution, by parish and by basic community alike, and the distinctive but equally important contribution of each to the whole mutually accepted as authentic, then there could occur such a renewal of Church and world as has yet barely been glimpsed.

¹¹ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p 106.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 108.