

Religious communities still face challenges — but there are signs of hope and renewal, writes Archbishop Justin Welby in [the Church](#)



ABOUT ten years ago, there were some very bleak reports about the state of religious communities in the Church of England and beyond. The situation, the *Church Times* reported in 2009, was “not one of crisis, but of meltdown.

Among the concerns were declining membership, rising average ages, and struggles with recruitment. Many of those testing vocations were leaving before taking vows, while some vowed members were actually leaving communities.

Meanwhile, the broader phenomenon of “commitment-phobia” in our culture was felt to be deterring many from just about the biggest commitment you can make: staking everything on God and joining a religious community for life.

Unless swift action was taken, some feared that the religious life could vanish from the Church of England for ever.

For a people united by our belief in the resurrection — in a God who raises that which he loves from the dead — there was always another perspective available. And that is especially true in the case of religious communities, whose demise has been predicted before, only for them to be reborn from the ashes, more vibrant and diverse than ever.

That is why, as we take stock at this moment, we can rejoice that God has had very different ideas. To look at the new life breathing into established and new communities across the Church of England is to see the Spirit of God at work in an incredibly exciting way.

WE ARE witnessing a revival of interest in community life in its different forms: celibate and non-celibate, communal and dispersed, traditional and experimental. **Dr Petà Dunstan's account** in this regard is fascinating and hugely inspiring.

Established communities, such as Mucknell Abbey, are welcoming new novices, as they continue to deepen and solidify the foundations of their shared life together. They are a wonderful example of how to hold together the depth of tradition, and how to think creatively and flexibly about the call of religious communities in the 21st century. They have done what the People of God have been called to do throughout history: hold the past with one hand while looking to the future as God leads us into it by the other hand — constantly seeking to be faithful to the past, and prophetic for today.

Another wonderful example is at West Malling, where the Benedictine Sisters have collaborated with others to recreate their space so as to welcome many different people. It is very powerful to see a closed community of women following the Spirit into unexpected places — a move full of hope, inspiration, and trust in God. The Sisters are working with Rochester diocese and St Augustine's College, as well as having the Pilsdon Community on the same site, which is bearing fruit for both the Sisters and the college.

These kinds of partnerships — which we have also seen here at Lambeth Palace between the Chemin Neuf and the Community of St Anselm —

are a particularly innovative way in which communities are embracing change while remaining rooted in their callings.

Meanwhile, new communities, such as the Tree of Life, in Leicester, and the Young Franciscans, based in London, are answering a clear desire among younger people to integrate their faith and spirituality more deeply into their daily working and personal lives.

Each of these communities, established and new, is asking the question: “How do we express who we are as the people of God in this particular place and time?” In each place and context, communities of Christians are discerning their charism — a gift of the Holy Spirit to an individual or group, given to allow them to serve the Kingdom of God and build his Church in a particular way — and prayerfully seeking to live it out.

And a technical point, perhaps, but an important one: many of these communities are seeking recognition by the Advisory Council. This is an expression of their desire to be in this for the long term, and be part of the Anglican family in an accountable manner, learning from and contributing to the life of the whole Church.

IN 2013, I made the renewal of prayer and the religious life across the Church one of my personal priorities. This was never to say that I thought I, personally, was best placed to bring that renewal — it is God’s work, in collaboration with those called to live in community.

But I wanted to make it clear that the religious life matters profoundly to the Church: it has always been the place where renewal begins. It was about ensuring that Lambeth Palace, which has its own rich tradition of housing religious communities, was committed to collaborating with the renewal that God so clearly longs for.

When praying communities are supported and flourishing, their gift to the Church is beyond measure. In them, the broader Church finds inspiration and challenge, and is held in wise and loving prayer.

For the past three years, it has been extraordinarily powerful to listen to testimonies from members of the Community of St Anselm at their end of their year based at Lambeth Palace. I sit there praising God for the way in which he has worked so beautifully in the lives of these young people to invite them into deeper relationship with Christ, and deeper involvement with the world around them.

Our prayer, as we send them back “out into the world”, is always that they will be people whose priorities are God-shaped — people whose lives bring hope and joy to others, and speak of the life-transforming invitation that Jesus offers every person.

WE NEED to take seriously the issue of commitment-phobia in our culture. With endless options and opportunities for pleasure, distraction, and personal advancement, fewer and fewer of us are willing to commit ourselves to something. Coupled with that, we have seen, in the West, more generally a trend towards people being more isolated, and communities more atomised.

Religious community offers an ancient and powerful answer to that.

Last year, the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, announced the social-media company's vision for "building global community" — no mean feat, with two billion users worldwide. Religious communities come at things from the exact opposite direction: small numbers of people living together and learning to accept each other, in real life, without the possibility of "blocking" those whom they do not like, or whose ideas they find challenging. Their impact can be enormous.

That is why this is not, fundamentally, a numbers game. It will always be small, intimate, and, in some sense, fragile. Both new and established communities face plenty of challenges.

New communities are, by nature, a bit untidy, and, from the outside, may resemble a construction site rather than a beautiful piece of architecture. From discerning your primary calling, to stabilising your membership, to working out the cooking rota — everything is a work in progress.

It is easy to say that this is as it should be — that this is what new community looks like. But there is no getting away from the fact that, alongside the joys and encouragements, there are often big frustrations and disappointments. There are experiments that do not work. There are communities, young or old, that will die. But there are new shoots of life for those who look carefully. To quote Zechariah: "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin".

For established communities, having the resources and capacity to nurture new vocations — which are coming in healthy numbers — into long-term commitments remains challenging. And, while some have made strides to harness social media and other ways of communicating with the "outside" world, others are still comparatively hidden from view. How we do we support them in sharing their extraordinary ministries and gifts with the Church and the world?

Another challenge for Religious across the spectrum is how can newer and established communities learn from each other, and — in their very different characters and charisms — flourish together?

THESE challenges are surmountable. The main story here is a renewal that chips away at the pessimism that was around some ten years ago: one that offers signs of hope we can pray with, nurture, and encourage every step of the way.

This is rich soil in which we are planting. It has borne fruit over many centuries. It is always the same impulse, which we have seen since the Desert Fathers and Mothers: to strike out for new territory where we can encounter more of God, know him, and be known by him more fully — and say yes to Christ's invitation at a deeper and more challenging level.

For this reason, we can have every confidence that this an integral and beloved part of God’s vision for the Church. We can draw strength,energy, and courage from that.

God is giving this renewal, and we can rejoice in God’s grace.

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