

Contemplative Fire: Creating a community of Christ at the edge

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The Revd Tessa Holland is an Anglican priest in the diocese of Chichester, a member of the Core Team of Contemplative Fire, a Quiet Gardener and spiritual director. In this article she explores the story, theology and community life of Contemplative Fire.

AS A GARDENER I RESONATE WITH THE IMAGES AND SYMBOLISM OF THE NATURAL WORLD THAT OCCUR IN SCRIPTURE, IN PARTICULAR WITH THE WORDS OF PAUL FROM HIS FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS, 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth' (1 Cor 3.6–7). The genesis of Contemplative Fire is hidden, as a seed is in the earth, in the wisdom of Western and Eastern Christian mystical theology. The fertile ground of the desert tradition, the long lineage of saints and writers on the contemplative path and a cultural context of spiritual interest and hunger, inspired Anglican priest, the Revd Philip Roderick, to initiate a new community. Launched in 2004 as one of the Diocese of Oxford's 'cutting edge ministries', Contemplative Fire seeks to live the way of Jesus, whilst also exploring ways to reframe and re-imagine Christian tradition and practice.

The vision, guided by Jesus' call to 'put out into the deep' (Lk 5.4), was to seed a dispersed network of travelling companions, with an ethos of mutuality, venturesome curiosity about the way of Jesus and openness to the treasures of the contemplatives and mystics. This bold undertaking has established a community that transcends the traditional structures of the Anglican Church, whilst retaining its scriptural and sacramental inheritance. Also, wherever it is present, Contemplative Fire seeks to establish appropriate accountability and blessing, remaining an integral part of the whole Church of Christ.

Contemplative Fire currently has over 80 community members, known as Companions on the Way, and is present in several counties, with its first international region developing in Toronto, Canada. In England and Wales, the Community is registered as a Fresh Expression of Church, with a board of Trustees, Community Leader, Core Team and a group to advise on development.

Contemplatives-in-action

The Community is a rich eclectic mix of people: spiritual seekers, wishing to explore the Christian path; those who come with faith, for whom Contemplative Fire is their faith community; and those who attend a church elsewhere, for whom Contemplative Fire provides inspiration and teaching on contemplative praxis. As a Community, we seek to live the metaphor 'contemplative fire', where the interior journey of silence, stillness and inner spaciousness energises and equips the soul with the fire of the Spirit, imagination and love. To enable this formation, drawing on the ancient Christian practice of a rule of life, every Companion is invited to adopt a simple rhythm of 'travelling light, dwelling deep'. This rhythm has a balance of being, knowing and doing, or prayer, study and action, graphically represented using a Celtic trefoil form.



Within the call to be contemplative-in-action, there is a wide variance in personal practice along the continuum from eremitical to activist. Each Companion is encouraged to step into their own authenticity, adopting a personal practice of being, knowing and doing, preferably with the companionship of a spiritual director. In addition, as a movement which is seeking to 'create a community of Christ at the edge', Contemplative Fire also encourages the initiation of small groups and occasions, facilitated by Companions, to enable mutual learning, fellowship and worship.

Theology in Community

Trinitarian and sacramental: Framed as an integral part of the Community Rhythm of Life is an understanding of God as Trinitarian, each leaf of the trefoil representing an aspect of the Godhead: the Father, Source of life, author of beauty and Creator, the great 'I am'; the Son, God with us, teacher and healer, the *kenosis* (Phil 2.6–7) and servanthood of God (Jn 13.12–15); the Spirit, the Advocate and helper, the wisdom and fire of God (Mt 3.11). The centre of the trefoil incorporates all three elements, representing God as beyond knowing and mystery. The Community is also formed liturgically. Gatherings for creative contemplative communion are planned by Companions using *lectio divina*, a process of reflective reading of Scripture, and there are occasions for shared meals with simple liturgies following the pattern of the Christian year. Easter 2009 saw the baptism of three adults, all from atheist backgrounds, with preparation taking well over a year and their stories becoming woven with the ancient liturgy. Enabling people to be formed in Christ, both pre- and post-baptism, is an ongoing challenge and privilege for the Community.

Language: As a 'community at the edge', we seek to be open to ways of speaking and hearing which honour one another and are inclusive of all people. We are invitational in our discussions, encouraging the use of 'I feel, I think, I wonder ...', honouring wisdom in ourselves and in one another. We explore religious thinkers such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Meister Eckhart and Ken Wilber, Hildegard of Bingen and Teilhard de Chardin, Julian of Norwich and Evelyn Underhill. A series of short accessible guides to the contemplative tradition has also been launched, as an aid to learning and practice. In our learning we hope to be open to being stretched and challenged by both Eastern and Western Christianity with insights from other faith traditions, in an environment of mutuality and trust. Question and unknowing are an integral part of exploration; whilst this can be challenging, many find this a welcome respite from religious certitude and more helpful in the midst of a fast flowing and fluid culture.

Embodied Spirituality: The summary of the law (Mt 22.37–39) is a reminder of how we are to love God with all of ourselves – body, mind and spirit. Jewish mysticism and Celtic Christian spirituality speak of the body as the ‘echo of the soul’¹ and posture, such as prostration, kneeling, the raising of hands in praise, has been an important biblically inspired component in worship for centuries. In an age where spiritual seekers are looking for meaning either in other traditions or new spiritualities, Contemplative Fire is encouraging and recovering a deep engagement with the body as a ‘temple of the holy spirit’ (1 Cor 6.19). Body prayer, where an intentional slow movement or position becomes the prayer, is used alone, in small groups and in worship. Opportunities are created for meditation, the use of the breath and meditative slow walking as prayer practices, which enable connection between the mind and heart, nurturing internal spaciousness and openness to the Spirit’s work of inner transformation.

The Creative Arts: Integral to the contemplative path is an invitation to be open to the ‘fire of the imagination’ – to engage with ways of seeing which take the mind beyond intellect and the discursive into the apophatic dimension of the Christian tradition. Within Contemplative Fire, an ethos of mutuality enables gifts to be released in one another and exploration, experimentation and shared creativity in worship. Over the last couple of years email resources for Advent and Lent have been prepared by Companions using art, sculpture, poetry and photography with Scripture, reflection and writings from the mystics. Drum and chant are often used in worship along with a wide range of musical style, from harp to jazz, from quietly contemplative to upbeat foot-tapping samba! A DVD of Body Prayer and CD’s of contemplative chant and the hang drum are also available as resources.

Creation: Drawing from the wisdom of Celtic Christianity, which describes creation as ‘God’s big book’ and also such thinkers as Teilhard de Chardin and Meister Eckhart, Contemplative Fire seeks to enjoy, bless and listen to the natural world as a place of wisdom and revelation. Both in bodily stillness and in walks of awareness through woodland, field or along the shore, we seek to be open to the still small voice of God and to be deeply and compassionately attuned to the unity of the whole cosmos in Christ.

Missiology: As a Community of travelling companions, Contemplative Fire’s Rhythm of Life invites a courageous engagement with what it might mean to be sent (Jn 20.21). Peter Rollins in his book, *How (not) to speak of God*, asks the question, ‘How many of us have learned too late that our initial idea, that by serving the world we will help bring God to others, has eclipsed the wisdom that in serving the world we find God there.’² As a Community, some of whose members have wounds inflicted by prescriptive and possessive evangelism, we hope to be sensitive to the insights of experience as well as tradition. In doing so, our intention is to know more deeply both God and ourselves. We do not claim a monopoly on truth, but seek to engage with ‘wisdom on the boundaries’ and to be open to meeting Christ as already present in the place where others are. Our tentative and emerging missiology has two thresholds – the threshold of my own heart and life and the threshold of joining another on a journey of companionship, which may involve dialogue about faith, purpose and meaning and which is always compassionate.

We also seek to be metaphorically present in a threshold place, to be open to Jesus’ invitation to ‘Abide in me.’ In that abiding we remain a journeying people, those who seek and recognise that they have not yet arrived. We encourage both questions and affirmations about the nature of God, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and our place in the world. We long to live those questions creatively and

openly. We ask questions about how to be authentically present, open to the unknown other, open to being challenged, open to growth, open to the present moment as a place of Presence and reconciliation. This liminal place is one of connectivity – of being open to what might be, whilst at the same time living from within an awareness of God as the ground of being. Whether in a hostel for the homeless, in the listening to another's story, or in leading a workshop in a spirituality centre, we go, not in order to return, but to be changed and transformed, to be 'in Christ' in that place of encounter.

Seeking God

Above my desk I have a quote attributed to Meister Eckhart, which says, 'Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God who in ways is hidden.' Contemplative Fire carries within its being the riches of the Christian tradition, an inheritance gifted by the whole Church. At the same time, it continues to be at the edge of becoming. Like the ferns in my garden, there has been and still is a gentle unfurling of what might be. We are hidden and visible, contemplative and apostolic, prepared to step out and take risks, yet also prepared to put things down, to rest and to wait on God. Like a flock of starlings we are learning how to be one body, fluid and responsive to the call, as part of the Church, to re-imagine our tradition for today and to be 'contemplative fire'.

NOTES

1. See Philip Newell, *Echo of the Soul: The Sacredness of the Human Body* (London: Canterbury Press, 2000).
2. Peter Rollins, *How (not) to speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006).

www.contemplativefire.org :- for further information and for details of Contemplative Fire events and resources.

www.quietgarden.co.uk :- for further information on the Quiet Garden Movement and contact details for Quiet Gardens in Britain and elsewhere.

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