

Mission & Community

by Brother Samuel SSF

The Revd Brother Samuel SSF is a member of the Society of St Francis, an Anglican Franciscan order of men and women living in community. He is the Guardian of Hilfield Friary in Dorset, which welcomes people for shelter, friendship, prayer and rehabilitation.

The brothers there invite young people to live alongside them in order to learn some of the skills and disciplines of Christian community.



Many commentators have pointed to the disintegration of community as one of the chief causes of social breakdown. The traditional mechanisms which enable people to belong, to participate and contribute to community life are being eclipsed by the need for personal self-improvement or the relative exclusivism of the nuclear family. Here, Brother Samuel explores how the local church can develop a depth of community life which is rooted in the nature of God, and offers a radical pattern of hospitality and reconciliation as a basis for the Church's mission.

The social worker on the telephone sounded weary. Could we possibly take her client coming out of prison next month? He had lost contact with his family, and needed to make a

fresh start in life. Without some kind of structure and support he would be very likely to revert to his previous pattern of offending. "Care in the Community is a brilliant idea" she said, "but there's no community for the likes of my client".

I might have replied that this was true not only for her client, but increasingly for the general population. As patterns of relationship in our society are steadily dissolved by market forces, which promote individual freedom of choice as the ultimate goal of human existence, more and more people are experiencing, and suffering from, the loss of any real sense of community. The sense of belonging, of being bound together with others in a common purpose and hope has disappeared. Loneliness is a growing problem for many.

This loss of community has a profound effect upon our understanding of, and relationship with, an essentially social God. God calls into being a people, not isolated individuals. God, who is Trinity, invites us all to share in the fullness of community. How can our fragmented, individualistic society possibly grasp, or even glimpse this reality? No wonder that we find living and sharing the Gospel difficult: our whole mind-set and way of life is inimical to a sense of this God. If this is so, then the task of building and nurturing genuine community is an integral part of any form of evangelism; in fact it may be the only form of evangelism left open to us.

Communities of Welcome

The Church is called to be the sign of God's community, to proclaim, to welcome people to, and to celebrate that "being in relationship" which is God's purpose for the world. The trouble is that in most situations, the fellowship of Christians is just too fleeting, too thin, to give people a taste of what it is all about. Every congregation I know claims to be "very friendly", but the fact is that outsiders often find it hard, if not impossible, to join – particularly if they are single, or gay, or just out of prison. They don't feel welcome. And if

they do manage to break through the cultural barrier, then the cup of tea after the Sunday service, or the *Alpha* meal is probably not going to be enough to sustain them in the Christian life, let alone help them grow. There is an urgent need for Christian communities which can be places of radical welcome, and which can provide the trusting and close relationships which will point people to the Kingdom, and lead people to God.

Peacemaking Communities

Part of our contemporary difficulty is that we tend to expect communities to be associations of people like us, with similar views and insights. In fact, community lived at any depth is rather different. In my experience of living in a religious community, I find that there are tensions of personality, background, expectation and theology. I sometimes feel that life in community would be fine if it wasn't for the other brothers and sisters! The life of a wider church can be much the same; it has been said that there is enough conflict created by an average church bazaar to fuel an international crisis. The temptations for communities in the face of difficulties are either to develop a shallow culture of "niceness" or to retreat into ghettos of uniformity, and, through both, to avoid the challenge of reconciliation. As Christian communities of any kind, we are called to explore and share the mystery of forgiveness won for us through Christ, and to live and proclaim that forgiveness in the world. Such reconciling communities become themselves significant instruments of Christ's work in a broken and divided world, making peace not only with those around us, but with all of God's animate and inanimate creation.

Worshipping Communities

A small group of our Franciscan brothers, living for a time on a housing estate in the North East, opened up their living room each evening to local people to share

in a form of Night Prayer late each evening. What started as a very small group grew over the few months into a regular daily congregation. Sometimes, there wasn't much room! Despite the empty pews of many churches, I believe (and there is much evidence emerging to support the view) that there is a deep desire in people to worship and to pray, to praise and to stand still in awe and wonder. Worship is an activity which makes us truly human, and which both focuses and forms the life of a community. There is, therefore, a huge need for Christian communities to be places where worship and prayer are offered, not just on Sundays and on occasional days of the week, but on a regular daily pattern. Such regular liturgy, whether it is traditional, informal, or charismatic, is the essential warp and weft of any community life, and a witness to the Community to which we believe we are called.

Missionary Communities

It is said that, in the Dark Ages of Western Europe, the monasteries were sanctuaries of Christian civilisation, which both preserved the life and culture of the Gospel in those parts which had been overrun by the pagans, and which were also instruments for taking the Gospel beyond the boundaries of the old Roman Empire. Monastic life may seem utterly out of tune with the spirit of our times, yet if we are entering another Dark Age, it may be to the wisdom of such a way that the Church of today needs to turn. Of course, not all aspects of traditional "Religious life" are going to be appropriate, but as our vision of community fragments at the end of this second millennium, I sense that renewal of both church and society will come through the re-emerging forms of Christian community that are homes of generous hospitality, places of challenging reconciliation, and centres of attentiveness to the living God.