New Monasticism: The Emergence of Incarnational Communities

Dave Lowitzki
Department of Sociology, California State University, Fullerton

Sharon Kim
Department of Sociology, California State University, Fullerton

ABSTRACT

This paper examines New Monasticism, a burgeoning movement of young evangelicals whose commitment to their Christian faith expresses itself through communal living, social justice, environmentalism, and non-violent activism. Rejecting American individualism and the privatization of Christianity, New Monasticism is marked by a pronounced religious communalism. Abandoning middle class comforts, these young members who view themselves as Christian revolutionaries have settled and formed communities in the most impoverished neighborhoods in this country to be agents of social change.

Introduction

[1] Since the inception of Christianity, there have been groups of believers who have attempted to engage in forms of communal living that they believe is a response to the teachings of Jesus. Different groups from various theological persuasions have come together in efforts to form communities that resemble the early church described in the Bible in Acts 2:44-46:

> All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.

With examples dating back to the seventeenth century, the United States has had a rich history of communal movements such as the early Puritans, the Bruderhof communities, the Catholic Worker movements, and the Jesus People movements of the 1960's.

[2] The current research focuses on New Monasticism, a burgeoning communal movement that is comprised of young, single, middle-class, predominately white evangelicals who have left comfortable suburban lifestyles to live, identify, and advocate on behalf of the poor and oppressed segments of society. The members of these communities view themselves as revolutionaries who reject popular values which they believe are inconsistent with authentic Biblical Christianity. These communities subscribe to what they call the "12 Marks of New Monasticism"[1], which focus on intentional community in and among impoverished areas and the social action/activism that are related to community. New Monastic communities eschew the individualistic nature of society and instead opt to live communally—sometimes in the same house, sometimes on the same block, or sometimes in the same community – but always in some form of intentional community focusing on living near each other and sharing resources.

[3] Not only are these communities unwilling to fall into the trap of American individualism, but they are also unwilling to accept the idea that Christians must have conservative political ideologies. A unique political ideology is prevalent among the members of New Monasticism, one that combines a conservative distrust of big government, passion for social justice, and a commitment to non-violence.

[4] New Monasticism, currently in its beginning stages of development and growth, is attracting new members who desire a radical and alternative option for Christian living. It has caught the attention of many in the evangelical world and has been featured as a cover story in Christianity Today, the leading Evangelical periodical. Due to the unique perspective that these communities embrace regarding faith and community and the intersections between the two, this research provides a fascinating case study in the role that new religious movements play in revitalizing religious institutions and shaping social change.

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[1] See Appendix A for the "12 Marks".

[5] The analysis to be presented in this study is based on data obtained through participant observation, interviews, and reviews of relevant literature. Participant observation occurred at two different communities, one in Philadelphia, PA and one in Camden, NJ. The observation was done over a span of two separate weeks and included staying at the communities and living life with the community members, including, among other things, sharing meals, going grocery shopping, celebrating a birthday, and attending church. A total of ten interviews were conducted with leaders and members of three New Monastic communities. Five of the respondents were male and five were female, which represents the gender breakdown within the communities.

History of the Movement

[6] The New Monastic movement began in the early 2000s as a small number of like-minded communities, individuals, activists, religious leaders, and academics gathered together to share their vision for a new way of living. This diverse group of people gathered together in June, 2004 in Durham, North Carolina at the invitation of the Rutba House, a recently established community. The individuals that assembled were varied. Some were part of communities that had been established for many years as others were part of communities still in their infancy stages, while others were academics writing about religious communities. But all were interested in living a way of life that was in direct contrast to mainstream American society. The purpose of the gathering was not to begin a movement, but instead to come together and discuss characteristics and traits of these diverse communities. The result of that gathering was the establishment of what could be called a community of communities that subscribed to the "12 Marks of New Monasticism." These marks are not rules, but instead are values which they hope to anchor within their newly established communities.

[7] New Monasticism is made up of predominantly white, middle class American Evangelicals. The majority of the individuals within the communities are college graduates in their twenties. The communities subscribe to the Bible as their sacred text, though some would assert that the movement limits itself to the teachings of Jesus while paying less attention to the rest of the Bible. Because there is no official organization, it is difficult to determine exactly how many people are involved with New Monasticism, though there are clearly communities and individuals leading the way. Some of the core communities involved in the movement are the simple way (Philadelphia, PA), Rutba House (Durham, NC), the Camden Community House (Camden, NJ), and the Psalters (nomadic, based in Philadelphia, PA)[2]. While New Monasticism is more than just these four communities, these four set the tone for what the movement looks like through both word and action. Among these communities, two individuals have stepped into the limelight as leaders in the public eye. Shane Claiborne, author of the book *Irresistible Revolution* (2006) has become a sought after speaker throughout the country, while Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, writer of *To Iraq and Beyond* (2005), has been largely responsible for bringing the varying and diverse communities together to establish the framework for New Monasticism.

[2] The Psalters are a nomadic tribe of worshippers, traveling the country performing worship concerts in churches, coffee shops, schools, and even bars. For more information see http://www.psalters.org.

[8] Over the last two years, the New Monastic movement has gained attention from both religious and secular media. Recent cover stories in Christianity Today (Moll 2005) and Christian Century (Byassee 2005) have given New Monasticism direct media attention in the Evangelical world, which in turn has led to media interests as diverse as Time Magazine and the BBC[3]. While the core communities have remained the same, the growth of the movement has been seen in the increasing size in the "community of communities" gatherings and the success of PAPA (People Against Poverty and Apathy) Festival, bringing hundreds of diverse people from around the country to participate in music, teaching, and fellowship for three days in Tennessee.

Forging Community

[9] Robert Bellah (1985), in his book *Habits of the Heart*, asserts that American individualism has grown cancerous. He asserts that Americans are increasingly measuring their marriages, families, careers, and churches by such standards as utility, self-expression, or self-realization. Institutions, such as the church that were intended to mediate private experience have been reduced to private experience. Rejecting American individualism and the privatization of Christianity, members of New Monasticism desire to foster authentic connections and interdependence among its members. Unlike the majority of evangelical churches who cater to the individualistic sensibilities of its parishioners, New Monasticism is marked by a pronounced religious communalism. The emphasis is decidedly on the impact that religious involvement has on the group and the society at large.

[10] As articulated in their 12 Marks of New Monasticism, the members of these communities aim to stand against the pervasive individualistic and atomistic lifestyle of contemporary American society. The following five marks speak explicitly to the value of establishing intentional communities: 1) Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us 2) Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate 3) Nurturing common life among members of intentional community 4) Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life and 5) Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.

[11] One of the foundations of New Monastic communities comes from Jonathan Wilson's (1998) book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*. Wilson was not only the first person to use the phrase "New Monasticism," but he also issued a call for the formation of communities of discipleship. The Simple Way, a New Monastic community in North Philadelphia, addresses this desire for community on their website:

> We are The Simple Way, a community of faith. Each of us is created for community, and in the image of community. And yet everything in the world tries to rob us of this Divine gift. …We believe that humanity is created for community. God is a community, a Trinity, a plurality of oneness. And we are

[3] In recent months, both Time and BBC have contacted New Monastic communities with a desire to write a story on the movement.

> created in that image. Jesus modeled this community with His disciples, as He lived and as He sent them out and taught them to live. We wish to return to the community like that of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. We believe that in this type of community, reconciliation happens. God is establishing a new community, a new Kingdom (www.thesimpleway.org).

While each of the New Monastic communities live out the 12 Marks in different ways, they all place a strong emphasis on intentional community, with members living in close proximity sharing meals, resources, and time with one another. Each community does these things differently. Some have weekly meetings in an effort to address issues and openly communicate. Others have required meals together, sometimes multiple meals a week. Some of the communities all live in one house, while others live in multiple houses that are in close proximity to each other.

[12] The issue of proximity is foundational to these communities. Each community member interviewed placed a strong emphasis on the concept of place. According to one member,

> The intensity, the intimacy of community is heightened, living together in a way that you couldn't have if you weren't living with these people. Seeing these people at all moments of life – in the morning, afternoon, and night-in a crisis, makes things, forces you, pushes you into intimacy.

There was a general perception that while community was possible among groups of people not directly connected by geographic location, it was much more difficult. One person explained it as possible to have community, but it would be much more difficult for it to be authentic: "I think it is a lot cleaner when it is further away, and in a sense less authentic, but you can still share life and be authentic." But by no means were they legalistic about the need for community to be focused around place. And some would say that they are part of authentic communities that involve people globally. With these communities being spread out around the country, it is obviously difficult to have face-to-face time with members of different communities. But through the use of technology, including cell phones, e-mail, websites, and blogs, they are capable to maintain communication and a sense of community with one another.

[13] Other than geographic location, community was defined in different ways. Some people gave very general definitions of community, such as it meaning "more than two people that are committed to looking and speaking into each others lives." Others gave a more specific answer,

> [Community] means people voluntarily living with one another and accepting one another despite themselves. That is essentially what the church is at a bigger level. That involves sharing – emotional sharing and financial sharing. It involves coming together with some kind of common life, whether that is meals or prayer or just daily work. And then also some sort of accountability and some idea of coming together spiritually.

While each person gave a different definition of community, many of them came back to the idea that community was about being real and authentic. For those involved in New Monasticism, community involves sharing not just financial resource, but also sharing with each other emotional and spiritual needs.

[14] Of course, in communal settings, conflict occurs. When one shares living quarters with multiples of people, with different personalities and different ways of living, conflict is inevitable. What came through with each person was that there was a concerted effort to deal with conflict appropriately. One person said that "we are committed to being open and honest, as soon as we realize that something is off, to try and address those things as quickly as possible." Just as importantly, it was clear that the communities embrace diversity of though on many things, ranging from cleanliness standards, to one's view on homosexuality, to one's relationship with the institutional structures. Conflict is the result of big and little things, according to one member, especially living in communal situations,

> I have heard people say that it is all about doing things for the Kingdom of God and doing the dishes, because those are things that make or break community. It is the little things, and you come to find out really quickly what those issues are.

One example of this is how and when to call the police when situations occur in the neighborhood. Some community members want to call the police and build strong relationships with them while others are adamantly opposed to getting the police involved. One community has been able to avoid conflict by having honest dialogue in order to better understand each other. A seemingly minor example of this is when one community had a disagreement on what to do regarding mice. One community member said they could not live in the house if the mice were killed. A different person said that they could not live in the house if they did not kill the mice. The rest of the individuals were somewhere in the middle. While this example appears to be minor, a conflict like this can seriously disrupt an intentional community. The community was able to come together and have an open dialogue on the issue in order to avoid a disturbance to the community. While the two "sides" did not come to an agreement, they did come to an understanding and an ability to embrace the diversity of perspectives.

[15] It is important to understand that living in a communal setting is laden with its own set of internal tensions and difficulties. It magnifies your personal shortcomings. One community member explained,

> Living in community is like putting up a mirror to your face constantly. In living in the kind of community that we have, in close proximity with each other, everything that you do is illuminated or magnified, and you can see it so clearly. And it is really hard to face your shortcomings.

In relation to this, there appears to be some deeper conflict related to the imperfections of the communities. Magnifying shortcomings creates hurt in multiple ways, including sexuality,

> I think one element is private relationship issues – we are all broken people trying to come together and make something good. And broken people hurt each other. … I think sexuality is probably one of the main ones, because it is just so powerful.

While the practice of community can be difficult and messy, it is also important to note that each of these community members is thankful for the community that they are a part of. And while there is risk in being hurt, or being exposed, there was a general feeling of contentment and fulfillment. One member of a New Monastic community said in an

interview that he has been "so blessed to be a part of this, and he has learned so much, and it is so important, on a large scale in his life and it is worth the risk."

[16] The New Monastic communities can be viewed as reactions to the current individualistic consumer-oriented trends in American Evangelicalism. Studies of megachurches, or new paradigm churches, point to the impact that market driven approaches to evangelism have had on the revitalization of religion in the past several decades. Scholars who study new paradigm churches credit the growth of megachurches to the following factors: experiential worship that incorporates transcendent and emotional dimensions, a relaxed contemporary subculture and style, and niche marketing the gospel to cater to the needs and sensibilities of a target audience (Miller 1997). In contrast, the members of New Monasticism strive to practice and present a different face of Christianity, one that rejects religious consumerism and embraces a radical spirituality that promotes positive social change.

[17] Wendell Berry, a professor at the University of Kentucky, a respected environmentalist, and farmer with a long family history in the Kentucky fields has written extensively on the subject of community and place. He also speaks of the need for a connection between not just humans, but humans and the land and all the things that come with that.

> If we speak of a *healthy* community, we cannot be speaking of a community that is merely human. We are talking about a neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it (1993: 14).

He concludes that the economic way of life foisted on the American people by large and invasive government and corporations leads to the disintegration of the land, the people, and in the end the community. His critique of the American "community" extends to the church as he notes the church has usually been at the forefront of this land and community destruction by emphasizing an individual and thus universal idea about humans and human relation to the land. This being true Berry argues that Christian holiness has been perverted,

> The holiness of life is obscured to modern Christians also by the idea that the only holy place is the built church. This idea may be more taken for granted than taught; nevertheless, Christians are encouraged from childhood to think of the church building as "God's house," and most of them could think of their houses or farms of shops or factories as holy places only with great effort and embarrassment. It is understandably difficult for modern Americans to think of their dwellings and workplaces as holy, because most of these are, in fact, places of desecration, deeply involved in the ruin of Creation (1993: 100).

Berry's perspective challenges contemporary Evangelical churches which has largely ignored environmental concerns. It seems quite likely that many of these churches are, in fact, quite wrapped up in the "desecration" Berry speaks of. Berry's definition of a healthy community seems to have deep implications for those Christians seeking "community" in places that he seems to find advancing ideals that are the exact antithesis of community.

[18] Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, takes a closer look at the reciprocal relationship between social capital and civic involvement. He has advocated strongly for the need for increased social capital in American society, particularly for the poor. Putnam refers to social capital as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust worthiness that arise from them (2000: 19). The greater social capital you have, the greater impact one has on their society. He asserts that "civic virtue" is directly connected to relationships:

> The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (2000: 19).

One of the key principles in New Monasticism is intentional and direct community involvement. They aim to build social capital by building relationships with their neighbors which in turn will empower them to exert a transformative impact on their community. But the "reciprocal social relations" go beyond the local community. The communities are "networking" with other communities to ascribe to similar principles and values. These communities together are creating a small but dynamic movement which challenges and transforms the status quo.

[19] According to Putnam, social capital has both a public and private benefit, "some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment" (2000: 20). The communal living of New Monasticism benefits both the members of the group as well as those on the outside of these communities. Putnam also distinguishes between "bonding" and "bridging" forms of social capital. Bonding social capital describes the strength of relationships where people demonstrate care and support for one another. Bridging social capital creates relationships outside one's internal social networks. The bonding forms of social capital are "inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups" (2000: 22). In contrast, the bridging form of social is outward looking and includes people from a wide range of social groups. New Monasticism communities take part in each form. Their inner communities are "bonding" as reflected in their tightly knit and largely homogenous membership. Yet at the same time, these communities are fulfilling the bridging form of social capital by reaching out to a larger and more diverse group of individuals, communities and organizations. First, the communities are intentional about reaching out and connecting with the diverse communities that they live in. This form of bridging social capital creates the connections needed to have the impact that they desire within their neighborhoods and cities. Without the relationships, or "reciprocal relations", it becomes very difficult to have a positive relationship in the community. Because they have intentionally decided to live within impoverished areas, this allows the bridging social capital to form. In defining social capital, Putnam distinguishes between doing things "for" people and doing things "with" people, "social capital refers to networks of social connection – doing *with*. Doing good *for* other people, however laudable, is not part of the *definition* of social capital" (2000: 117). New Monastic communities take seriously the idea that they need to do good with people, not just for people.

[20] New Monastic communities have developed relationships with many outside of their movement, including the Emergent Fellowship, the Ekklesia Project, and the Christian Community Development Association among others. These outside organizations by their association and endorsement have to a large extent legitimized New Monasticism and have created another form of social capital. The relationships that exist on a greater level have allowed New Monasticism to move from a few isolated communities to a small prophetic movement within mainstream Christianity.

Politics and Justice

[21] An essential facet of New Monastic communities is that of "politics." This issue of politics manifests itself in both traditional and non-traditional ways. But it is clear that their politics do not inform their faith, but instead their faith informs their politics. One interviewee stated it succinctly, "I don't think that someone should ever start with the demands of the world, and then fit Christianity into that. It should start with Christianity and then shape their world only according to that." Further, the political nature of Christianity is unambiguous. They are heavily informed by the writings of theologians John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas[4] who believe in the strong political character of Jesus and the cross. One member stated, "Religion and faith, and certainly Christianity, are very political at their core. So you can't really separate the two. … The cross is extremely political, and Jesus' life was extremely political." But often times this political nature of the cross plays out in different ways at the New Monastic communities. Sometimes it takes the form of protest and civil disobedience, other times it takes the form of organic gardening.

[22] The United States has always seen the practice of protest and civil disobedience as part of the very fabric of American democracy, and the members of these communities have taken those practices seriously. Many members of these communities have taken part in numerous political actions, including protests and civil disobediences. These actions have been over many different issues ranging from war, the death penalty, to feeding the poor. One community member explained:

> I don't think any of us are out to just get arrested or do things that are totally out of control, but I think at certain points it seemed absolutely necessary. In each of those instances we have been at the place, either individually or communally, asking, "What else can we do?"

Members are convinced that civil disobedience is a rightful response to unjust actions and laws. One community member described the group's philosophy of civil disobedience, "A lot of it for me has been not a deliberate desire to break the law, but a deliberate desire to uphold the law of God." Adhering to the ethos of civil disobedience, members actively engaged in public protests against U.S. military involvement in Iraq. Several

[4] Yoder wrote The Politics of Jesus (1972), which has become a seminal book in the area of Christian ethics, specifically among Anabaptists and those that subscribe to non-violence as a response to the teachings of Jesus. Hauerwas has a student of Yoder and has become one of most prominent theologians in America, becoming quite influential among those placing the primacy of the Kingdom of God over the Kingdom of the State.

organized demonstrations at the Federal Building in Philadelphia. Others traveled to Iraq to provide food and aid to the Iraqi people. One of the organizers expressed:

> I would like to continue to find creative ways to break laws that are unjust. I think that's the most powerful way to bring about change-such as Gandhi's walking to get salt. I think that the role of civil disobedience needs to find ways to engage proactive solutions that speak against laws that are unjust.

[23] Along the same lines, several people referred to a concept of "personalism" which they defined as a level of investment to a cause that is linked to relationships. Actively, they seek to build relationships with people who are connected to the issue. For example, they may protest death penalty because they have built a relationship with the person being killed or they may participate in action against the war in part because they have relationships with people in Iraq – both Iraqis and U.S. soldiers. They also realize that the goal of their actions is not to be "effective" in the classical sense of the word. The motivation for their actions stem from a desire to be "faithful" to Christian principles and to serve as a prophetic voice in contemporary society.

[24] In the minds of the community members, political activity and activism needs to take place every day. But this does not mean that one is "protesting" every day. In contrast, it means that one needs to be aware that everything that they do is by its very nature political, whether it is the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the things you say, or the vocation that you have. One of the community members who focused on gardening sees her vocation as a gardener to be very political, "I think that being a farmer that saves her own seeds and uses heirloom seeds is one of the most political acts that one can participate in."

[25] Another key aspect that is somewhat unique to the New Monastic communities is their alignment with a form of Christian anarchism.[5] This anarchism does not take the form of chaos, but instead sees the world from a different perspective, where a Christian's allegiance is to the Kingdom of God rather than to the State. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a founding member of the Rutba House in Durham, NC, stated,

> In the midst of a U.S.-led war on Iraq, I'm asking more and more, What *Did* Jesus Do? The closer I look, the more I see that he intentionally resisted the powers of violence by rejecting both the conservative right (Roman prefects and temple authorities) and the radical left (violent messianic revolutionaries). Jesus neither conspired with those who ruled the temple nor did he attempt to take control of the temple. Instead, he redefined the temple, making it clear that the center of economic, political, and religious life for the people of God was the beloved community that we would call his body – the church.

As Wilson-Hartgrove asserts, the New Monastic communities have fully embraced the church as the center of all life – economic, political, and religious. This is directly related to the previous issues of political "action" being part of everyday life. Instead of looking to large social structures and institutions for change, they look to the church and relationships. For the members of these communities, politics plays out in the form of individual daily interactions.

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[5] Much of this thought is informed by the theology and ethics of theologian John Howard Yoder and French philosopher/theologian Jacques Ellul.

[26] This view of allegiance to the church and not the state is exemplified by the refusal to vote, at least in national politics, by many members of the community. This refusal was explained in the context of the recent Presidential election by saying that they "didn't really feel that Bush or Kerry had the ideals of the kingdom of God in mind." Another community member discussed it in the context of power, saying, "That kind of power, from the commander in chief, is not really the way that the kingdom of God is brought about." In turn, they see the kingdom of God playing out in the context of "personalism" and relationships. One person talked about relationships being more important that traditional political action:

> I am progressively losing hope in politics. … I think it is great that people are involved in politics, and Christians of course can be involved in politics. But for me, I am finding that it is important to build relationships with people in my neighborhood-more important than spending time to organize marches and protests.

These relationships take on many different roles in relation to political action and involvement. Sometimes these relationships are simply friendships. But other times these relationships involve talking about issues and educating their neighbors. In low-income neighborhoods that are heavily recruited by the military, one way to practice non-violence is to communicate thoughts through genuine relationships. According to one member,

> I guess that at our core we are kind of conservative when it comes to that- to have the government be smaller and smaller and people taking care of people. Again, we really like "personalism" – do it yourself, get it done-that sort of anarchist view of how to deal with things.

The New Monastic communities see the concept of being politically active as showing that another world, or another way of living, is possible. One member explained, "So I guess that I am always trying to figure out, linguistically you might call it 'protestifying', testifying to another way of life that we think would be more viable." In attempting to "testify" to another way of life, this takes daily effort to constantly interact with the tension between "another way of life" and the world they live in.

[27] Based on the ethical teachings of Jesus, the communities primarily subscribe to an ethic of non-violent peacemaking or pacifism. There is a clear sense that to live a Biblical non-violent life is costly. It cannot just mean that one does not support war. But it also means that one must act to create a non-violent society. One cannot just be against something, but must stand for peaceful reconciliation. They must act as the "peace-makers" that Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount. On community member expressed,

> I am vehemently opposed to Christians participating in the violence of the world… What we need is not just Christians condemning the violence of the world, but promoting ways that don't lead to violence, promoting a culture and societies of people that don't think that violating each other will solve things.

The issue of non-violence is complicated in neighborhoods that have been consumed with violence. One interviewee described how difficult it is to live non-violently while being confronted with violence everyday, "I have never been challenged with that more than by

living in this environment, where I have been challenged to my face physically. And to recognize my not fully integrated belief in non-violence – your first reaction is often violence." Much of the discussion related to non-violence is firmly rooted to the concept of the Kingdom of God being separate from the world.

[28] The two central issues that are at the forefront of New Monastic activism is the fight against poverty and environmental sustainability. All of the New Monastic communities are located in the "abandoned places of the Empire" where economic restructuring and deindustrialization have devastated neighborhoods and left them in states of poverty and decline. One step towards addressing the problem of poverty is to identify with those who are trapped in poverty. That identification takes the form of renouncing middle class comforts to live in low income neighborhoods with the goal of developing a sense of community with the residents. One community member explained why she decided to move into her community,

> I think the best way to respond to poverty is through compassion. And compassion is something that we can draw close to when we experience the small portions of poverty in our lives. I know that I will never be impoverished because of my loving family and all of the resources that I have been born with. But I can draw close to what it feels like to walk down the street and be propositioned like I am a prostitute.

Another part of living with the poor is related to the "personalism" that was discussed earlier. For the members of New Monasticism, the challenge of poverty is not how to end it, but instead how to treat the poor as people, as human beings:

> One element [in dealing with poverty] is to not look at poor people as being any different-not making them out to be saints, not making them out to be demons-but looking at them as people who have a very specific set of issues and exist in a very specific material position. Living in this neighborhood, people are poor – and they are not horrible, and they are not loveable. They are just people.

[29] In addition, they have embraced simplicity as another means to express solidarity with the poor. Yet choosing a life of simplicity is not just one of solidarity with the poor, but it is also done in an effort to live a life that is both economically and environmentally sustainable. This includes everything from eating organic foods to avoiding clothing made in sweatshops. And it is directly tied to living simply. The world, both economically and environmentally, cannot sustain the life of abundance that American society desires.

[30] Often the concept of simplicity and poverty are confused. The New Monastic communities do not take a vow of poverty, but rather a vow of simplicity. One community member understood it as an intersection between the wealthy and the poor:

I think there is a place where the first becoming last and the last becoming first intersect, and some people are actually, they are being freed from wealth, and other people are being freed from poverty. And where we develop this theology of enough and this idea of simplicity rooted in love is not a vow of poverty. The concept of simple living means different things to different people, even within these communities. And there are at times internal tensions revolving around the distinction between living simply and living

"politically." For example, one tension revolved around the consumption of organic food. Some of the members adamantly embrace the importance of organic food and according to one of the members,

> One is my health, because I don't want the pesticides, and the other is that I want to speak out with my dollars, saying that I want to eat organic food, and I feel that the more people do that, the more affordable it will become, and the more stores will carry it.

On the other hand, others members see organic foods as a symbol of class privilege. One of the ways that the communities resolved this conflict between privilege and simplicity was by creating their own gardens where they grow their own organic food. While not all of the communities have access to land that can contain a garden, some are fully embracing the opportunity to plant urban gardens, and they see these gardens as direct political action. The Camden House Community has made their garden a primary focus of their community, and has been able to use the garden to consume local organically grown vegetables. They have also been able to share the garden with the neighborhood, enabling their neighbors to enjoy organic food.

[31] The garden is overseen by a community member who works full-time in the garden, seeing the garden as both her worshipful vocation and as direct political action,

> I would say that my seeking of work as worship through organic gardening is a very political act. Being a farmer that saves her own seeds and uses heirloom seeds is one of the most political acts that we can participate in. Organic farming is political in that it does not convert fossil fuels in to food which is what conventional agriculture is doing.

The community also views gardening as a way of "uncovering life" in impoverished neighborhoods. The garden, in addition to providing food, provides a very important symbolic function for the residents of the neighborhood. The garden functions as a symbol of hope and vitality in neighborhood that has experienced the negative consequence of poverty. One of the members articulated this purpose,

> Important parts of what we do are the gardens and the greenhouse and the bread oven. What we do is to try and uncover the life that is here in Camden, to bring resurrection to the land. So to be able to offer fruits and vegetables and herbs and bread to people in our neighborhood is, I think, the best thing that we can do.

[32] Several of the members of Camden House teach at the Catholic school in the neighborhood, and the garden allows them to share the importance of organic food and give them access to such vegetables. One of the teachers described it like this:

> I teach my kids at school about organic good because I believe that one day that they will have that choice. The first time I brought it up I wondered if I was just being cruel, letting them know about the pesticides that are in their food and they don't have a choice but to eat them? But then I thought, "No," if they really listen to me and learn this they can grow their own food, or they can come down to the garden where we have organic food. That is one of the purposes of the garden – to supply organic good.

As is seen in the primacy of the garden, the ecological consequences of how one consumes is an important factor in how New Monastic community members live. The

decisions related to the environment are also seen in other ways within the communities, such as limiting the consumption of energy or water. The communities are intentional about saving resources and energy by limiting the use of lights, heat, water, and air conditioning. The New Monastic communities are clearly political, yet this political action and involvement is not typical of what many would think of as political. Some of their political action is radical – civil disobedience, protest, or even spending time in Iraq. Yet some of their political action is through living life differently – growing gardens, living simply, or challenging society's definition of "right living."

[33] While the New Monastic communities tend to maintain orthodox views on the core tenets of Christianity, they tend to be less orthodox on issues revolving female leadership, gender, and sexuality. The majority of the community members embrace freedom for women in holding and exercising authority in the church. One of the members expressed the group's position on women in leadership, "We have a very great understanding of women leadership within the church and applaud and celebrate women in leadership in almost all of our communities." There was also a general theme of sadness in relation to how the church has treated women:

> I think that in a lot of ways women have been robbed of an experience of church that is healthy. Part of that is not being able to understand a God that is feminine as well as masculine. And I think that really affects women in deeper ways than we are aware of.

It is clear that these communities view God as both masculine and feminine. And when a church is led solely my males, it is difficult to fully understand God. This is explained by one interviewee, saying, "I think that image of God is directly reflected by the leadership that we see from the pulpit. And it takes a lot of work, even for creative minds, to be able to see and know intimately the full spectrum of the image of God."

[34] Interestingly, the New Monastic communities are linked to both churches and other communities that have very traditional views on women in leadership – both in the church and in the family. The Camden Community House has a close relationship with Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Sacred Heart is very involved in political and social issues and is very active in non-violent resistance including using both protest and civil-disobedience methods. Yet as part of the hierarchal Catholic Church it has a very traditional view on women without any women in leadership. Similarly, the New Monastic communities have a relationship with the Bruderhof communities, which while they share similar philosophies of non-violence and community, the Bruderhof is significantly more traditional on the role of women. Interestingly, while those involved in the New Monastic communities see the value of women in leadership, the official spokespeople of New Monasticism are all males.

[35] The issue of homosexuality is slightly more complicated, as the views on the issue are more diverse among community members. But similar to the views on women, there is an overall sadness related to how the church has treated homosexuals. One interviewee said it succinctly, saying, "I have so much sorrow that is directly related to the churches stance on homosexuality because all of the unnecessary pain and conflict felt in the church that is directly related to the issue of homosexuality." But beyond that, the views

vary. One person stated, "I just haven't been able to reconcile what it means biblically to have homosexuality within the church," while another person stated, "I am affirming and accepting of homosexuality. … I feel pretty strongly that I want to affirm that at this point." Yet even with the diverse perspectives, there was a clear conviction that the communities would be willing to embrace a gay or lesbian individual as a member of their community, as long as they maintained "appropriate" sexual boundaries in their relationships which they define as abstinence outside of marriage.

Conclusion

[36] In contemporary society, American Evangelicalism has been depicted as vociferous players in our society's culture wars, organizing loud, oftentimes angry, protest against issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and obscenity. Scarce attention has been given to small, newly emerging Christian movements that have been flying under the radar of public view and scrutiny. New Monasticism is a movement composed of primarily young, white, college educated evangelicals who aim to communicate their Christian message through authentic relationships that expresses itself in compassion, servanthood, and justice.

[37] In response to what they perceive as the increasing polarization, commercialization and domestication of contemporary Evangelicalism, members of New Monastic communities aim to present an alternative face of Christianity. Renouncing middle class comforts, these young members who view themselves as Christian revolutionaries have settled and formed communities in the most impoverished neighborhoods in this country. They have embraced simple living in order to identify with those who are trapped in the vicious grip of poverty. They aim to create and embody a new culture that resembles the one found in the early church described in the book of Acts. Rather than preach the gospel message through words, New Monasticism strives to preach the gospel message through action. Instead of speaking the message, they desire to become the message. Through their very lives and presence in a particular neighborhood, community members want to incarnate the gospel message. It is clear that while New Monasticism may be small, it is growing into a prophetic movement challenging the priorities and practices of contemporary Evangelicalism.

APPENDIX A

The 12 Marks of New Monasticism (www.newmonasticism.org)

1) Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
2) Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3) Hospitality to the stranger
4) Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
5) Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.
6) Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
7) Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
8) Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
9) Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
10) Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
11) Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
12) Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

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