

New Monasticism:
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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.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When talking about religion, and specifically Christianity, many immediately think about Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and the Religious Right¹. The Religious Right movement has dominated much of the discussion regarding religious involvement, especially in terms of political action. The Religious Right has appeared to gain even greater influence in very recent years, especially in regard to the influence that many religious leaders have on the current Presidential administration. When looking at the Religious Right, it is important to distinguish between Evangelicals and the Religious Right. These two groups are not synonymous, yet the terms are often used interchangeably. Chip Berlet discusses this distinction as such:

Most Christian evangelicals, however, are not part of the Christian Right. I know from talking with evangelicals and fundamentalists across the country that they are offended by the rhetoric from some liberal and Democratic Party leaders who do not seem to be able to talk about religion without chewing on their foot. (Berlet, 2005)

¹ The term Religious Right is a somewhat vague term that is typically used to characterize those that combine conservative political values with conservative theological values. This term is often linked with “Evangelicalism”, which takes much more of a religious tone than a political tone. It is important to note that the two terms are not synonymous. One can be Evangelical without being a part of the Religious Right, while at the same time one can be a part of the Religious Right without being Evangelical.

According to CNN.com, a 2004 Election Day exit poll found that 22% of voters regarded moral values as the most important issue, with 80% of this group choosing to vote for George W. Bush (CNN.com, 2004). This concept of moral values has led many to see the American Church and the Right-wing of American politics as being synonymous. Yet this view of American Christianity is far from complete.

While the Religious Right has received a disproportionate amount of attention, the concept of individualism has continued to remain the center of American democracy. This concept of individualism has been a core concept of democratic and capitalist principles, as is discussed in Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1996) and Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). Bellah asserts that the pervasive individual nature among Americans has led to the breakdown of American communities and human interactions. This individualist nature has led to a lack of any sense of true community in American society. Putnam's classic study found an increasing disconnect that people have among each other. There is little connection and little sense of belonging. He found what he defined as a decline of social capital, causing social structures and communities to continually lose importance in society. Both Putnam and Bellah rely on Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2002), where Tocqueville shows the need for social capital in order for American democracy to work in an effective and efficient manner. But it is clear that the prevailing individualism in America is leading to a decline in social capital, and therefore a decline in community. Yet while individualism in America has become prevalent and

social capital has declined, there are communities that are rejecting this mindset and seeking an alternative paradigm.

Since the early days of the Christian church, there has always been a small faction of Christians who have attempted to engage in a form of communal living that they believe is a response to the teaching of Jesus that are found in the Bible. These communities have taken many different forms, many of which have been modeled on the early church that is mentioned in the Book of Acts (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.

This concept has played out in different ways over the last 2,000 years. Different groups from various theological persuasions have come together in efforts to form communities that resemble the early church that the Bible speaks of.

It appears that the American church is beginning to see, in George Barna's words, "revolutionaries" that are attempting to redefine church.² Barna (2005) explains it like this: "These are people who are less interested in attending church than in being the church." While Barna's research focuses on those that are leaving the local church, the same concept can be applied to New Monasticism. The members of these communities are in the same way interested in "being the church". Instead of leaving the local church, as Barna discusses, they are instead engaging with the local church to establish true and authentic community. Barna discusses the idea of "being Revolutionary":

² Both Donald Miller (1997) and Christian Smith (1998, 2002) go in to detail in the redefining of church in America.

In America today, the easiest thing to get away with is going with the flow. ... To the Revolutionary there is no such as “going along to get along”. You either stand for Jesus or you stand for all that He died to repudiate. To the Revolutionary, yes indeed, life truly is that simply, it is that black-and-white, whether university scholars and the media ridicule that point of view or not (2005 p. 74).

This is what New Monasticism is doing. The members of this movement refuse to just go “along to get along”. Instead the radical way that their faith is being played out is exactly what they are called to do in standing for Jesus.

In America we have seen several different attempts at religious communities, from the early Puritans³ and the Bruderhof communities that began in 1920, to the Catholic Worker movements that began in the 1930’s, the Jesus People movements of the 1960’s, to the communities that exist today. New Monastic communities are one of these types of communities. New Monasticism is a small, growing movement of communities attempting to “discern the Holy Spirit's movement in the abandoned places of the Empire called America” (www.newmonasticism.org).⁴ These communities subscribe to what they call the “12 Marks of New Monasticism”⁵, which focus on intentional community in and among impoverished areas and the social action/activism that relates to community. New Monastic communities eschew the individualist nature of society and instead intentionally live together – sometimes in the same house, sometimes on the same block,

³ Bellah argues that “The Puritan settlements in the seventeenth century can be seen as the first of many efforts to create utopian communities in America” (1996, p. 29).

⁴ By abandoned places of empire they are referring to those areas that have been abandoned for various reasons, places like Camden, NJ and Durham, NC. These are places that are wrought with poverty, inequality, race issues, and abandonment.

⁵ See Appendix A for the “12 Marks”.

or sometimes in the same community – but always in some form of intentional community focusing on living near each other and sharing resources.

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 and a passion for the poor and non-violence, and they are actively involved in opposing the “empire which is called America” (www.newmonasticism.org).

This movement is not just a small isolated movement. People are taking a notice⁶, and more and more people are looking for an alternative in terms of religious involvement and community. Yet these radical and progressive Christian communities have received little attention by sociologists. Due to the unique perspective that these communities have regarding both faith and community, it appears that they are seeking something different than the greater society. A closer examination of these communities can allow us to learn about how this small movement is impacting religious, community, and political perspectives.

This research will take a qualitative look at three different communities that subscribe to a New Monastic philosophy. Both participant observation and in-depth interviews will be included, along with an extensive look at related literature. The research will focus on

⁶ For example, Christianity Today, a major Evangelical magazine, has a cover story on this small and growing movement (www.christianitytoday.com).

the communities' rejection of the individualistic mindset in American society and their focus on authentic Christian community.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

Community

One key issue in looking at religious groups is related to the research on isolation and how it relates to church/religious community. In modern America, society has become much more mobile and in turn much more isolated (Wuthnow, 1994b; Frazee, 2001). This concept of isolation has had a great effect on true community, isolating individuals from their neighbors, and lacking a common place with other people (Frazee, 2001).

Donald Miller (1997) has done an in-depth study on the modern evangelical movements – Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, and Hope Chapel. Miller examines all three of these movements, where the congregations are often considered “large” (over 1,000) and looks closely at why American Protestantism has taken a direction towards large, conservative churches. These churches all began around the “Jesus Movement”, attempting to create a new church experience for those that were tired of “traditional” church. Miller (1997) discusses the idea that these movements cater to the consumer mentality of Americans, where church attendees look to find the best “experience.”

In the 60’s the churches studied were counter-cultural in almost every way. One of the ways that they responded was creating an “experience” that was different than the “boring” services that the churches of the day offered. They did not offer a theological

difference as much as an “experiential” difference. Instead they offered surface changes – changes of how church was experienced, what music was played, what you could wear to church, etc. Efforts were made to make church comfortable, which would eventually lead to the church growth model that is seen in many churches today. This church growth model focuses on creating a church experience instead of just a church service. In turn, this “experience” has led to a form of church consumerism. This consumerism is focused on the individual’s needs. Individuals often are looking for specific aspects of a church, and if they do not find what they are looking for they will move on the next place of worship. What this does is create a lack of connection to one’s religious community, and in turn leads to a more isolated group of people. Because church attendees are willing to leave a church in order to find something that better fits their individual needs, they no longer have the larger community’s needs in mind.

The New Monasticism communities are somewhat similar to the original churches that Miller studied in that they are a reaction to the current trends in American Evangelicalism. But what they are reacting to, and what their reaction is, is significantly different. With New Monasticism, they are instead offering a theological difference along with an experiential difference. They are pursuing a new form of radical discipleship that rejects the consumer mentality that the “new” churches of the 60’s created. They are embracing a radical theological perspective that takes the teachings of Jesus literally while offering a place that rejects the consumerism and individualism of American society and American Christianity.

Wuthnow sees a similar pattern as Miller (1994) observed, discussing the concepts of selective adaptation and isomorphism. Wuthnow asserted that both are evident in the mega church movement whereby the church takes on many of the consumer based and individual driven ideas in an effort to be relevant. However, in the process these churches end up resembling a shopping mall full of options more than a church full of people.

The research surrounding churches and the communities they are a part of seems to suggest that there is a large disconnect between the perception of community and what is truly occurring. This is only more pronounced if community is defined not only as a connection between humans, but as a connection between humans, businesses, schools, and the land that all of these people share. The old idea of a local church has given way to regional churches that draw large amounts of homogenous and market accessible people to their doors (Pritchard, 1994). This kind of community certainly needs to be further explored and scrutinized to see exactly what kind of effect it is having on the religious environment of American Evangelicalism and the people who make up this social group.

Wendell Berry (1993), 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:

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.

He concludes that the economic way of life foisted on the American people by the 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 or 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, p. 74).

Of course, Berry’s line of thinking has implications for the American church that, though may include many positive aspects, is certainly not a political force in the remaking of the earth. 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.

Individualism and Social Capital

Of course, much of this research comes back to Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1996).

Bellah focuses on the concept of individualism that is prevalent in American society and that the New Monasticism communities explicitly reject:

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. ... There is a Biblical individualism and a civic individualism as well as a utilitarian and an expressive individualism. ... We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious (1996, p. 146).

This individualism creates a society of autonomous individuals that leads to a society that no longer sees as a necessity the need to engage with one another, and in turn no longer has a sense of community. While a critique of Bellah may assess critically the utopian ideal that the books seems to propose, it does offer a realistic look at how American society has become one of individualism that lacks involvement and social capital.

This connects directly into what the New Monasticism communities are attempting to do in terms of community. These communities desire to fight against the prevalent mindset of society in order to create and encourage authentic interaction with one another, and in reality a healthy dependence on the fellow members of their communities.

Bellah refers back to Tocqueville, who is credited for first using the term “individualism”, saying it:

is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look out after itself. (1996, p. 38).

Bellah follows up on this concept and how it has played out in contemporary American society. *Habits* looks at a variety of ways that this individualism plays out both in private and public life. Most importantly for this discussion, one must look at Bellah's discussion of how individualistic lifestyles impact public life, including overall involvement, religious involvement, and civic or political involvement. In looking at individual lives in different public settings, it becomes clear that aspects of the modern American society have led to less relational involvement with one another.

This concept of isolation and withdrawing from society is prevalent in society, and is precisely what the communities of New Monasticism are fighting against. Those involved in New Monasticism have taken a look at how the current culture has led to individualism, and in turn have consciously decided to seek something different – an alternative to the quest for isolation. They have intentionally sought after relational community in a manner that has rejected individualism.

Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone* (2000), takes a greater look at social capital and involvement. Putnam refers to social capital as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust worthiness that arise from them” (2000, p. 19). The greater social capital one has, the greater impact one has on his/her 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 p. 19).

One of the key principles in New Monasticism communities is their involvement with their community. This is a form of social capital, where they are building relationships with their neighbors in order to have a great impact on those that live around them. 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, and in turn are increasing the reciprocal relations between communities which are creating an increase in the social capital available in the individual communities.

One aspect of social capital is that it has both a public and private good, which can be seen clearly in the individuals of New Monasticism. Putnam asserts that “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, p. 20). This is seen within the New Monasticism communities – individuals benefit from their communal living and interaction with each other, along with several of the other “marks”, yet in turn these marks are benefiting those on the outside of these communities.

Putnam also distinguishes between “bonding” and “bridging” forms of social capital, where the bonding form is exclusive and the bridging form of is inclusive. The bonding forms of social capital are “inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups” (Putnam, 2000, p. 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

significantly “bonding”, with their communities being relatively exclusive (in terms of “membership”) and fairly homogeneous. The majority (though definitely not all) of those in these communities are white protestants, often coming out of a middle class background. In their larger meetings⁷ they gather together among likeminded individuals and communities to discuss further directions of the communities together. These gatherings fulfill the bonding form of social capital.

Yet at the same time, these communities are fulfilling the binding form of social capital by reaching out to a larger (and more diverse) group of individuals, communities and organizations. To start with, the communities are very intentional about reaching out and connecting with the diverse communities in which they live. 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. Putnam talks about how social capital is not about doing things for people, but doing 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, p. 22). New Monasticism communities take seriously the idea that they need to do good with people, not just for people.

⁷ Several communities that ascribe to the New Monasticism ideologies have gathered together more than once to come to a communal understanding of the shape that New Monasticism will take (Rutba House, 2005). The “12 Marks” (see appendix A) came out of the first of these larger meetings.

The bridging capital expands outside of just the communities. The greater New Monasticism community has developed relationships with many outside of the community, including many in the Emergent Village, the Ekklesia Project, and the Christian Community Development Association⁸ among others. Some of the members of these other groups have become part of the New Monasticism movement, while others have played a supportive role. These outside organizations have in a way legitimized the movement by adding credibility – both intellectual and social – 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 dynamic movement within the American Christian church.

The majorities of those in the New Monasticism communities have come from Evangelical churches, yet have rejected the traditional emphasis on the individual aspects of Evangelicalism. Robert Wuthnow, writing about the differences between mainline denominations and evangelical churches, points out the difference: “whereas the mainline churches participate in progressive social betterment programs during the first half of the twentieth century, evangelical churches focused more on individual piety” (1999, p. 34). This historical trend continued through the second half of the century, and

⁸ For more information on these organizations, see their relevant websites: Emergent Fellowship: <http://www.emergentvillage.com/>, Ekklesia Project: <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/>, Christian Community Development Association: <http://ccda.org/>

it would appear that those involved in the New Monasticism communities are rejecting the individual piety of the evangelical church and yearning for more social involvement.⁹

⁹ It is important to note that it appears that this trend is beginning to change. This can be seen in things like Rick Warren's P.E.A.C.E plan that is focusing on alleviating poverty in Africa. Ted Haggard's National Association of Evangelicals has also taken a greater interest in social involvement and social betterment in recent years. But this new trend has only been seen over approximately the last five years.

Gaps in the Research

While there has been extensive research on religious communities, most has focused on mainstream churches and organizations. A great amount of the research has concentrated on current popular trends within the American Christian church – the Jesus Movement of the 60’s, the church-growth movement and megachurches, small groups, and now the growing “emergent” church. Yet there has been little attention to the small alternative methods of living out community within the church. In the same way, there has been extensive research on individualism and the decline of social capital, yet the literature is limited when looking at communities that are rejecting the prevailing norms of society. New Monasticism fits both of these both categories where literature is limited, and further research on these communities will give insight into what it looks like to reject the populate norms and trends of American society – both in the church and the greater social order.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to provide a greater understanding of the New Monastic movement. In order to obtain data, both participant observation and in-depth interviews were used at two different communities that subscribe to the New Monastic philosophy. Interviews were done with ten members of New Monastic communities, with five males and five females. The gender breakdown in the sample is fairly similar to the gender breakdown in the population of the New Monastic communities.

Participant observation took place over the span of two different weeks, with the researcher staying with the community and attempting to participate in the daily life and practice of their intentional living, including, among other things, sharing meals, going grocery shopping, celebrating a birthday, and attending church. Participant observation occurred at two different communities, one in Philadelphia, PA and one in Camden, NJ.

Data was also gathered through materials that have been created by members of New Monastic communities, including websites¹⁰ of the individual communities and books that have been written.

¹⁰ See Appendix B for website information.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

History and Demographics

The New Monastic movement began in recent years 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 in the diverse university town (Rutba House, 2005). 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” (see Appendix A and Rutba House, 2005b). These marks are not rules, but instead are characteristics that the communities are striving for.

New Monasticism is made up of predominantly white, middle class American Evangelicals. The majority of the individuals within the communities are also 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)¹¹. While New Monasticism is more than just these four communities, these four setting 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 (2006), write of the book *Irresistible Revolution* has become a sought after speaker throughout the country, while Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (2005), writer of *To Iraq and Beyond*, has been largely responsible for bringing the varying and diverse communities together to establish the framework for what New Monasticism looks like.

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

¹¹ 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>.

the Evangelical world, which in turn has led to media interests as diverse as Time Magazine and the BBC¹². 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.

¹² In recent months, both Time and BBC have contacted New Monastic communities with a desire to write a story on the movement.

Community

In looking at New Monastic communities, it is essential to examine what it looks like to live out the communal aspects of intentional communities. In looking at the 12 Marks of New Monasticism (see Appendix A), several of the marks relate to the concept of intentional community, including the following:

- Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
- Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
- Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
- Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
- Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.

But even more than the 12 Marks, the concept of intentional community is the very foundation of what these groups are attempting to create. One of the foundations of New Monastic communities comes from Jonathan Wilson's (1998) book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*. Wilson was not the first person to use the phrase "New Monasticism," but he also issued a call for communities of discipleship that people took seriously. The New Monasticism website describes it like this:

[Wilson] concludes his book by calling for disciplined communities of discipleship in which the whole people of God can rediscover the practices that make for faithful Christian living. What is more, he calls for communities in which those practices would make sense (www.newmonasticism.org).

The Simple Way, a New Monastic community in North Philadelphia, talks about 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. ...

"Life in community is no less than a necessity for us, an inescapable 'must' ... all life created by God exists in communal order and works toward community." -- Eberhard Arnold¹³ (www.thesimpleway.org)

They continue on their “Commitments” page to further define their commitment to community:

We believe that humanity is created for community. God is a community, a Trinity, a plurality of oneness. And we are 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 (money, vehicles, abilities, etc.), and intentional time together. 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.

The issue of close proximity is an important issue that is foundational to the communities. Each community member interviewed placed a strong emphasis on the concept of place. One person explained this emphasis with this:

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

¹³ Eberhard Arnold was the founder of Bruderhof, an organization of intentional Christian communities with close parallels (and relationships) with New Monasticism.

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. They are able to build authentic and real relationships through the use of technology. On top of that, it was clear that there was a sense of community among the “community of communities.” 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 of communicating at a deep and authentic level.

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, saying that 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 resources, but also sharing with each other emotional and spiritual needs.

Of course, in communal settings, conflict occurs. When one shares living quarters with multiple people, with different personalities and different ways of living, conflict is inevitable. What each person noted 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 thought 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, 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 dialog 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 dialog 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.

It is important to understand that living in such a communal setting can be ugly and difficult. It magnifies ones’ shortcomings. One community member explained it like this:

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.

Yet this difficulty is rarely seen. The recent media attention on New Monasticism has created an image of perfection, of people happily living together in community among the poor. And some of this is the result of the way that people within the communities speak about it. As these groups are getting more and more attention, they are receiving

more and more opportunities to speak to people and share their experiences. And while there is some debate on whether or not this is a good thing, there are also some thoughts about what needs to be said. One community member stated the following:

We don't need to tell each others garbage or our own garbage all the time. But sometimes you need to give a little taste of it. ... Sometimes I think we leave out all the bad stuff, and there has tons of bad stuff. ... The other thing, if you are going to start talking about it, then you are responsible to change it. And to be honest, most of us don't want to. We have our little things and we want to keep them hidden.

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 belong to. And while there is risk in being hurt, or being exposed, there was a general feeling of it being worthwhile. One member of a New Monastic community said in an interview that she has been “so blessed to be a part of this, and we have learned so much, and it is so important, on a large scale in our lives, and it is worth the risk.”

Politics and Justice

An essential piece of the New Monastic communities is that of “politics.” This concept 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, asserting, “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. Those ascribing to the New Monastic philosophy are heavily informed by the writings of theologians like John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas¹⁴, and they all believe in the strong political character of Jesus and the cross. One person stated the following, saying, “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. Sometimes it takes the form of protest and civil disobedience, sometimes it takes the form of gardening in the ghetto, and sometimes it specifically takes the form of not voting.

The United States has always seen the practice of protest and civil disobedience as part of the very fabric of an American democracy, and the members of these communities have taken those practices seriously. Many members of these communities have taken

¹⁴ Yoder (1972) wrote The Politics of Jesus, 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.

part in numerous political actions, including protests and civil disobediences. These actions have been over many different issues – war, the death penalty, feeding the poor, etc. Each of the interviewees were clear that they were not out to protest for protest sake.

One community member said it like this:

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?"

One pattern that observes in relation to civil disobedience was that members of the communities believed that unjust laws must be broken. They are not out to break laws for the sake of breaking laws, but instead they desire to not allow society to continue with laws that they see as unjust. One community member described his philosophy of civil disobedience saying, "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. As Daniel Berrigan has said, 'the real problem is civil obedience.'"

In these discussions it was also clear that there was a need for direct action. Several members of one of the communities participated in an action at the beginning of the war in Iraq, blocking the doors of the Federal Building on Philadelphia. At the same time, members of two of the other communities were in Iraq bringing food and medicine to the Iraqi people. There was a clear disillusionment with the former, and a desire to be a part of creative actions like the latter. It was described like this:

If it is illegal to feed folks in downtown Philadelphia, we are going to go feed folks. If our neighbors are going to be arrested for lying down, we are going to lie down

with them.¹⁵ So that is different, you are kind of being faithful to Christ in the midst of that and going to jail for that.

Another interviewee talked about the need for creativity:

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.

Along the same lines, several people talked about a concept of "personalism." This is related to the idea of being creatively direct, but it is more focused on relationships.

Some may protest a death penalty because they have built a relationship with the person being killed. Others participate in action against the war in part because they have relationships with people in Iraq – both Iraqis and U.S. soldier. The protestors also realize that the goal is not to be "effective." They realize that participating in an action is not going to stop the war, feed all of the poor, or end the death penalty. But it is clear to them that they need to be faithful. One person said, "Usually it is not a matter of being effective but one of being faithful. So I am going to continue doing what I need to do to love our neighbor." The action and civil disobediences are directly related to the community members' faith and how they view the teachings of Jesus.

Along with the idea of civil disobedience, it was clear that those involved in New Monastic communities believe that there needs to be more in the area of political involvement. 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

¹⁵ This is referring to the homeless in the city, when an ordinance was passed making it illegal to lie down in certain places.

aware that everything that he/she does is by its very nature political, whether it is the food one eats, the clothes one wears, the things one says, or the vocation that one has. 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.” Another person said that he was more interested in relationships than with the world: “I am not concerned with this world as much as I am concerned with living a faithful life and trying to use my passions and talents to touch the people who in my life.”

Another key aspect that is somewhat unique to the New Monastic communities is their alignment with a form of Christian anarchism.¹⁶ 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, wrote this in an essay on how Christians should respond:

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 (Hartgrove, 2005).

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

¹⁶ Much of this thought is informed by the theology and ethics of theologian John Howard Yoder and French philosopher/theologian Jacques Ellul.

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.

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, the community members see the kingdom of God playing out in the context of “personalism” and relationships. One person talked about relationships being more important than 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 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.

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 person summarized his political involvement like this: “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.

There are two major themes related to this alternative paradigm. The first theme is related to how one deals with and approaches poverty, and the second theme is related to economic and environmental sustainability. The New Monastic communities have chosen to live specifically in the “abandoned places of the Empire.” These abandoned places are neighborhoods like Waterfront South in Camden, NJ; North Philadelphia in Philadelphia, PA, and Durham, NC. Each of these places is dictated by the consequences by poverty. Walking through Waterfront South, you see abandoned house after abandoned house along side dozens of abandoned factories. Two significant sources of income in the neighborhood are prostitution and drugs.

One key aspect of how these communities have decided to respond to poverty is to live among it. One community member talked about how while living with the poor was not necessarily going to change anything, it was still what was needed:

No doubt I was born in the privilege part of it, and I think that part of me, me living simply or living closer to poverty does not really change a lot. But for me to come closer and to interact with it and then to share it with people is why we need to be here.

A different community member described the rationale for living among the poor like this:

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.

Another key aspect to the New Monastic response to poverty is the desire to live simply. They have embraced simplicity as one way to attempt to show solidarity with the poor. This comes from the classic quote stating, “There is enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.” 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. So in turn the members of the New Monasticism communities attempt to live in a way that is sustainable throughout the world.

Often the concept of simplicity and poverty are confused. The New Monasticism communities do not take a vow of poverty, but instead see it as a vow of simplicity (though there is no official “vow”). One community member talked about 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 living simply means different things to different people, even within these communities. And there is at times a disconnect between living simply and living responsibly and “politically.”

This disconnect is highlighted in the desire to eat organic food. It is important to recognize that not all of the community members, or even communities, make it a priority to consume organic food. One community member stressed the importance of eating organic for two reasons:

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.

Yet those that do recognize the value of eating organic also see the divide it creates in the context of living simply. One interviewee said this in the context of buying organic food:

It is important to have discipline in what we consume into our bodies and to maintain a level of sanctity and making as much as we can from raw materials. But we can't get our consumption fix over buying organic. We can't feel better about ourselves because of buying something. There has to be points in time where you need to acknowledge that you don't have to eat avocados.

Another community member sees the consumption of organic food as a privilege, but one that is done for their neighbors that do not have the same opportunities:

It is recognizing that we do have privilege, but how are we going to use it? It is that balance – we reject the opportunity to live in a “comfortable” suburban, quiet neighborhood – a neighborhood that is very removed from dealing with poverty and drug addiction. ... We probably make more than more people – our neighbors cannot afford to do this, therefore we want to do this for them.

One of the ways that the communities attempt to get around this conflict between privilege and simplicity is doing their own gardening. 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.

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.

She later talked about how growing one's own food enables someone to have discipline in what the body consumes, saying, "It is important to have discipline in what we consume into our bodies and to maintain a level of sanctity and making as much as we can from raw materials. Even if means growing our won food or baking our own bread."

The community also sees the gardening as a way of "uncovering life" in such an impoverished neighborhood. One community member talked about how the garden works to help the community:

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.

Some of the members of the community teach at the Catholic school in the neighborhood, and the garden allows them to share the importance of organic food and gives 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 the New Monasticism communities 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 energy by limiting the use of lights, heat, and air conditioning (i.e. there is

none, which was very clear during the very hot and very humid August week that the researcher spent in Camden) and saving water by limiting toilet flushes (for example, there was a sign above one toilet saying, “If it is yellow, let it mellow; If it is brown, let it drown.”) and even talk of possibly using a compost toilet (essentially a bucket that is disposed of as part of a compost pile).

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 simply living life differently – growing gardens, living simply, or challenging the status quo of how society says that one must live.

God, Theology, and Religion

It is impossible to fully examine New Monastic communities without discussing their concept of God, theology, and religion. It is clear that everything that these communities do is a response to how they view the Bible. It is important to note that these communities are not monolithic in their theology. While individuals in the communities tend to agree on general concepts and ideologies, they also differ in their specific views. It is also clear that the issues discussed earlier are a part of their theology. Their views on community and politics are directly tied to the way that they view the Bible.

The New Monasticism communities are unapologetically Christian. But this means something different than what it means to most people, or at least is lived out in different ways. One member described what it means to be a Christian like this:

We are Christ like, and so we are trying to live that same incarnation of the things that God is. So we do the things that Christ did, we hang out with the people that Christ hung out with. We magnetize the people that Christ magnetized, we frustrate the people that Christ frustrated, we get to have the imagination of Christ, we try to set our minds on the things that Christ did, we try to deal with conflict like Christ did.

While this is not something that most Christians would disagree with, it is how it is actually lived out where things begin to differ. Instead of rules and dogma, it is about love, grace, and action. One member discussed his understanding of the gospel, saying, “And I am slowly discovering what the gospel is-ultimately it is grace, it is self sacrificing love in which Jesus died and goes through violence all for something that he does not deserve in the name of love and redemption of others.” The discussion moves towards issues of power, explained by one person as following a Jesus who subverts

power: “The Jesus that I am seeing today is a very creative lover of people who rides on a donkey on Palm Sunday and subverts power through choosing to partner himself with the scum of the earth.” Nowhere did it say in interviews that being a Christian was saying a prayer and accepting Jesus into your heart. And nowhere did an interviewee talk about rules that one needed to follow. What was said was that being a Christian was about action and imitation. It was about “being willing to share your life and be open and have others share their lives with you.” It was about “a connection to the poor.” It was about “a connection to the earth and a willingness to take care of it.” One person discussed what was to be imitated, saying, “The only imitation that Paul mentions is that you carry your cross or that you are crucified with Christ. ... I think someone who carried their cross is someone who cuts across the grain of society and gets killed for it.”

One conversation with a community member ended up discussing some of the criticism that the New Monasticism communities have received. One of the criticisms was that they were “Christocentric,” meaning that they place too much emphasis on the teachings of Christ in scripture. This criticism implies that the movement ignores other parts of the Bible, including the Old Testament and the epistles. While the criticism of ignoring certain parts of scripture may not be valid, it does seem to be true that the place on emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, and even more specifically the ethical teachings of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This was even highlighted by one person in discussing the core of the New Monasticism communities, saying, “There is a central point we are all

aiming towards-a new life in the church through the Sermon on the Mount and all of the basic teachings that we understand as orthodox Christianity.”

Primarily based on the ethical teachings of Jesus, the communities primarily subscribe to an ethic of non-violence peacemaking or pacifism, though there is hesitation on use of the term pacifism. One interviewee described the hesitation:

It tends to be a word that is identified with what it is against and it doesn't have a constructive, non-violence, risky, costly living. One person, at the New Monasticism gathering, said “I think the mark of peacemaking in our communities should be moving beyond the language of pacifist to ‘crucifist’, that we actually believe in the cross, and that is really, really costly.”

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. This is where the previous political actions came into play. One cannot just be against something, but must stand for peaceful reconciliation. One must act as the “peace-makers” that Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount. In New Monasticism's *Schools for Conversion* (2005), Fred Bahnson discusses what it means to live non-violently:

To follow Jesus' nonviolent way in a world wracked by violence and strife is to choose a costly path. Because of sin we all have violence deep within us. ... We need no longer ask if it's permissible for Christians to kill, because the searing light of the gospel has shown us a difference way to treat our enemies. (p. 124).

Another community member talked about Christians and violence:

I am vehemently opposed to Christians participating in the violence of the world. And I do think that it is pretty utopian to assume that the world would be okay if there was no policing. I understand that is utopian. But I think the church operates in utopia sometimes. The best way to promote the new eon, the new kingdom of god is to live in it. ... 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 talked about how it is difficult to live non-violently while being confronted with violence, saying, "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 also related to the concept of the Kingdom of God being separate from the world. The discussion of the Kingdom of God was prevalent in many of the discussions. The church's allegiance is not to the world, but to the Kingdom of God:

[It is] believing that the church is god's instrument in transforming the world, or mid-wifing the kingdom of god. Primarily our call is to become this type of people that God wants us to be and the nations will begin to conform to that as well. So when the prophets say the people will beat their swords into plowshares and nations will not rise up against nations, it begins with people who humanize and personalize that, and they begin be acting out that prophesy and it works its way into the nations.

Another community member talked about the power of Christians truly rallying around the Kingdom of God, saying, "Imagine Christians saying that we belong to another Kingdom; we belong to a savior who just gave himself up to the powers and allowed himself to be killed. There is potentially a lot of power in that." While many Christians view the Kingdom of God as something that will come in the future, the New

Monasticism communities see the Kingdom of God as being in the present, and that they must do what they can to further the Kingdom.

While the New Monasticism communities tend to maintain orthodox views on the core issues of Christianity, they also tend to be less orthodox in relation to issues like women and homosexuality. Overall there was a general sense that females should have opportunities to be in the same leadership positions as males. It was summarized by one member as applauding and celebrating the role of women, with one person saying, “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 by 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.”

Interestingly, the New Monasticism 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 Monasticism communities have a relationship with the Bruderhof communities (though there is no official relationship), which while they share similar philosophies of non-violence and community, the Bruderhof is significantly more traditional on issues like the role of women.

Interestingly, while those involved in the New Monastic communities see the value of women in leadership, the spokespeople of New Monasticism are all males. Part of this is caused by what society likes to focus on, as has been shown by the recent media attention that has focused on the males in the community. It is also related to the traits that society, especially American Christianity, sees as those of a leader. There are a handful of males within New Monasticism that have the ability to communicate very well to large groups, and in turn they receive the attention and praise from the outside.

The issue of homosexuality is slightly more complicated, as the views on the issue are more diverse. But similarly 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 church’s 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 said, “I just haven’t been able to reconcile what it means Biblically to have homosexuality within the

church,” while another person said the opposite, “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 sense that the communities would be willing to have a gay or lesbian member of their community, as long as they maintained appropriate sexual boundaries in his/her relationships. This relates directly to one of the 12 Marks (see Appendix A) that calls for the celibacy of singles.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Recently American Christianity has been characterized by rules, patriotism, conservatism, tradition, and individualism. Any attention given to religion in recent years has focused on fundamentalism – both Islamic and Christian. Yet among this culture of fundamentalism a different group of people have grown into a small movement. The New Monastic communities have taken a similar path as the fundamentalist groups – one of serious devotion to their faith. Yet it has come to look like something very different than what the current fundamentalist strains of Christianity look like. New Monasticism has come about in a response to the literal teachings of Jesus, taking Biblical ideas of matters like community, justice, and non-violence seriously. And this has become a stark contrast to the way religion has been viewed in recent years.

Similar to Donald Miller's research finding a consumerist church, Stanley Hauerwas makes a related observation:

The church exists in a buyer's or consumer's market, so any suggestion that in order to be a member of a church you must be transformed by opening your life to certain kinds of discipline is almost impossible to maintain. (1999, p. 24)

Churches have become like a mall. You can pick and choose what you would like, but there is not real community and no real action. Miller and Hauerwas, while coming from

different perspectives, both see a pattern that has evolved over recent years in the American church. This “buyer’s market” has created a church culture of a buffet, where you can individually pick and choose what you want with your Christianity without little thought to a commitment to a greater common good of the church community.

Robert Wuthnow (1994a), in Sharing the Journey, discusses how small support groups have in recent years been a replacement for what has been traditionally seen as community. Wuthnow asserts that these small groups, while offering a certain kind of support for the members, are failing in their effort to create authentic community. These small groups have become the core of many churches in America, leading to an environment of limited support and little community within America’s churches. In turn, some are becoming frustrated with this lack of true and authentic community. Added to the consumerist church and its inability to provide authentic community is the greater society’s inability to do the same. The individualism and decrease in social capital that Bellah and Putnam discuss have created a society of individuals who see little need (or at least make little effort) to establish authentic and real relationships.

New Monasticism has risen out of this context – a context of churches and religious groups that are not providing authentic community and a society that has embraced individualism. In response they have intentionally gathered together in communal settings in an effort to live together. Yet they are not stopping at just living together. They are seeking to live out a life of discipleship and full devotion to their faith. This discipleship and devotion is shown through action and living a life of intentionality.

Most importantly this research shows that these New Monastic communities are offering a distinct alternative to what mainstream Christianity has been offering. This alternative is not just different, but instead it is a radical contrast to what is known as the church in America. But this alternative is not like the alternative that was offered by the “Jesus movement” churches of the 60’s. This alternative is one that offers both a theological and experiential difference. In taking the teachings of the New Testament seriously, those involved in the New Monastic communities are seeking to live out a passionate, non-violent life in community with others while seeking to follow Jesus in the best way that they know how.

While this research has shown the distinct alternative that New Monasticism offers, it does not show a complete picture. Instead the research calls for more. More research is needed looking at more communities and a greater number of individuals. But even more so, research needs to be continue to look at how the movement progresses. Because the movement is so young and fresh, it is difficult to get a comprehensive picture of where this movement is heading. The youthfulness and newness of the movement leads to in incomplete picture. Will this movement progress and grow? And will this movement have a true impact on the American church? Or will this movement reach a standstill and have little impact outside of its current sphere of influence?

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.

APPENDIX B

New Monasticism Community Websites:

Camden House: <http://www.camdenhouse.org>

the simple way: <http://www.thesimplyway.org>

Rutba House/New Monasticism: <http://www.newmonasticism.org>

The Psalters: <http://www.psaltern.com>

New Jerusalem: <http://www.newjerusalemnow.org/>

Reba Place Fellowship: <http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org>

There are numerous other communities and organizations that have similar ideologies and like-minded philosophies. The above list is a general sampling of some of the leading voices in the movement.

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