

Creating Community

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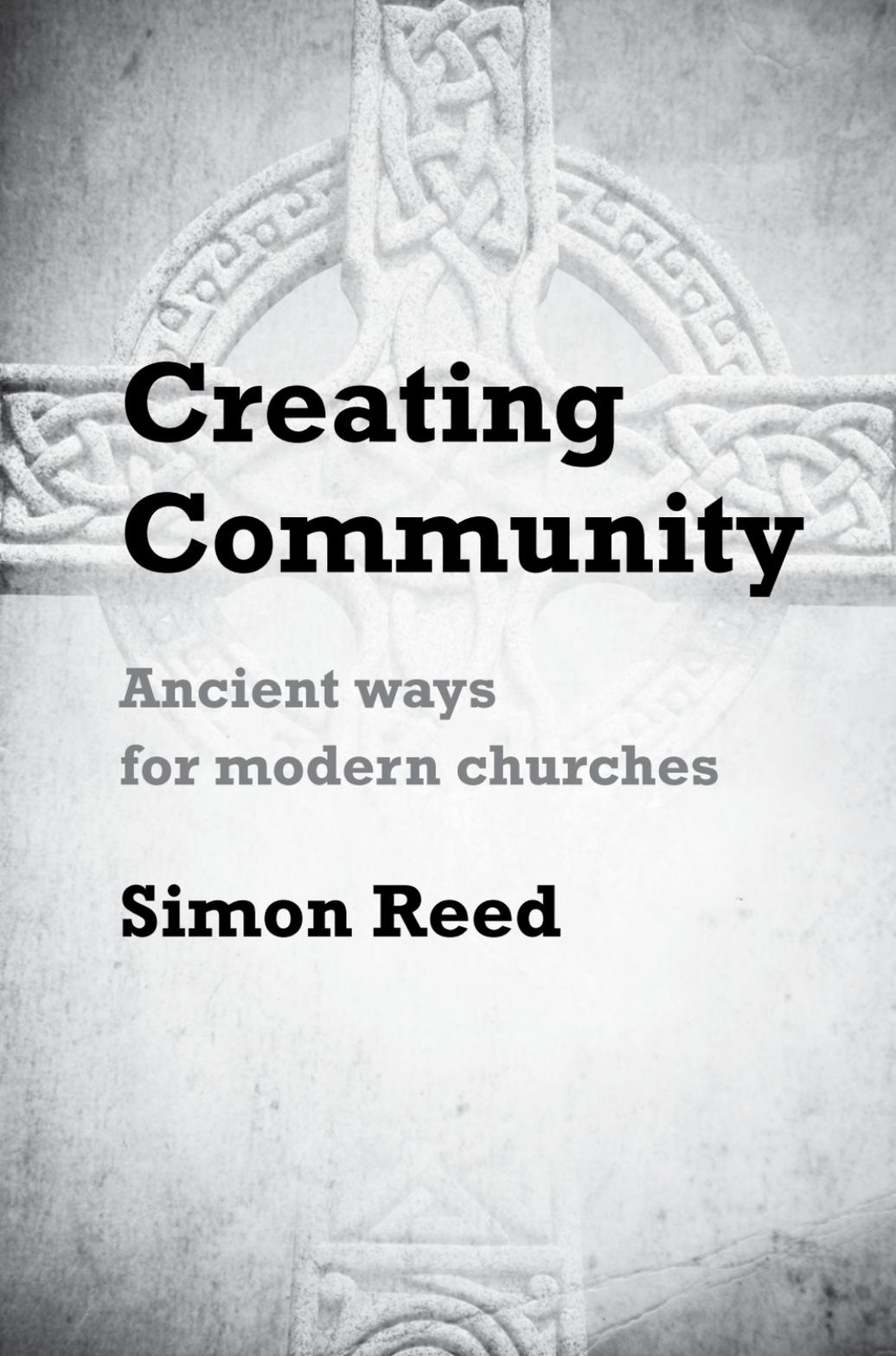
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Creating Community

**Ancient ways
for modern churches**

Simon Reed

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Foreword

This book could be entitled *From the Ordinary Church: a Way of Life*. Its author shares the vision that the local church is the hope of the world and that each church can find its distinctive vocation. He observes that whereas many contemporary churches try to attract a crowd and then turn it into a community, the early churches in Celtic lands started as small communities and then gathered wider numbers.

But can our long-established small churches become living communities? From his own experience, Simon argues that they can if they adopt three practices—a Way of Life, a network of Soul Friends and a rhythm of prayer. He establishes that a Way of Life coheres with New Testament practice and explores how to develop it.

I know Simon as a friend and colleague in The Community of Aidan and Hilda, which has Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical members. He tells his personal story from within his own tradition. Always (and this is so refreshing) he is more concerned with the product than with the label.

The book is timely, for, as the author points out, the moral disintegration that underlies the unravelling of community and society could herald a new dark age. Winston Churchill, when his country had its back to the wall during World War II, famously said ‘Give us the tools and we will finish the job.’ Simon gives us some tools. Let us, the readers, help to finish the job.

Ray Simpson, Holy Island of Lindisfarne
www.raysimpson.org

Introduction

At 11.30am on 29 May 1953 Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay stood on the summit of Mount Everest, 8848 metres above sea level, the first men to reach the roof of the world. Their names are well known all over the globe but their achievement would have been impossible without another man whose name is known only to other mountaineers. His name was Eric Shipton and without him Everest would not have been climbed for many more years.

Since the 1920s, expeditions had tried to climb the world's highest mountain from the north, approaching from Tibet and trying to ascend its difficult north-east ridge. In 1951, when access through the kingdom of Nepal was finally permitted, Eric Shipton led an expedition to try to find a way up the mountain from the south. With great determination they explored the vast glacial valley known as the Western Cwm and bravely picked their way through the forbidding ice towers and crevasses of the massive glacier known as the Khumbu Icefall. Having got to the end, they didn't go on to climb Everest, but for the first time they saw a route to the summit which looked as if it would work.

Writing this book feels like reporting on that Reconnaissance Expedition. I want to tell you about something I've seen but haven't yet reached. It's the story of a journey in progress whose outcome will not be clear for some years yet, but I hope that it will inspire you to set off in search of a place I think is worth reaching.

I climb mountains for fun—smaller ones than Everest, I must admit—but my day job is rather harder. I'm a church leader and my goal is to help people deepen their connection with God and each other, and connect God with the whole of life. I've tried lots of different ways of doing it but I'm always on the lookout for better tools to use in making disciples and creating community. For

more than ten years I've drawn inspiration from Celtic spirituality through my membership of the international Community of Aidan and Hilda and it's from this contemporary expression of Britain's spiritual roots that I've gained the insights I want to share in this book.

There's much talk today of 'new ways of being church'. As I've explored the Celtic roots of the Christian faith in the British Isles in community with others who are inspired by our spiritual ancestors, I've realised that the third-millennium church has much in common with the first-millennium church, and, more importantly, much to learn from it. I want to introduce you to a new but very old way of being church which is based upon a Way of Life, a network of Soul Friends, and a rhythm of prayer. These are the building blocks of what many are now calling a 'new monastic' spirituality. I believe that their rediscovery offers a vital key which opens up an ancient way for modern churches, one which makes grown-up Christians and creates genuine and lasting community.



Making disciples and building communities

Martin came to an Alpha Course, drawn, I imagine, by its invitation to explore the meaning of life. He was absolutely convinced that he had no need to become a Christian, but after the course he decided he wanted to stay in touch. We would meet for lunch from time to time and Martin would talk about his own journey to find meaning and purpose in life. One of his favourite approaches was to turn the conversation round and ask me for my answers to the probing questions he was asking himself. As a result I found myself one day putting down a steak sandwich to consider what I thought the purpose and focus of my life was. ‘What are you here to do?’ asked Martin with his usual quizzical smile.

Studying theology does give you a head start in situations like this. The classic statement from the 17th-century Westminster Catechism flickered through my mind: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.’ That answer was not going to satisfy Martin. I’d need to explain what it meant and he was already sceptical of anything he felt was simply dogma. Only something personal would do. I did a quick rewind, reviewing my life as a Christian, and was faintly surprised by how quickly and how clearly the answer came: ‘Helping people connect with God.’

I have never needed convincing about the importance of evangelism because I would not be a Christian without it. I don’t mean big tub-thumping rallies full of emotional hype and psychological manipulation—the negative and largely inaccurate image that many people have of evangelism, both in the church and outside. What I mean is the simple process of ordinary Christians

sharing their faith, as opportunities arise, with those who don't yet believe, in obedience to Jesus' command to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19). That's how I discovered Christian faith as a teenager and so my understanding from the very start has been that if you get connected with God, you want other people to make the same connection and you do whatever you can to help them.

In the years that have followed it's been my privilege to see God at work in a variety of settings, from the hot-house environment of university life to the grim urban depression of 1980s Merseyside and then through the early days of introducing the Alpha course in a Buckinghamshire market town. My relationship with the church has been a surprising journey. Occasional childhood experiences of a village church whose worship was as fossilised as its building was ancient left me with the impression that going to church was as spiritually beneficial as watching paint dry. Thankfully some better experiences elsewhere brought me to a different opinion but it was still something of a jolt when, after two very exciting years as a full-time church and youth worker, God made it unmistakably clear that the next step was to train as an Anglican minister.

Since then, my convictions about the church have come a long way. Bill Hybels, founding pastor of the innovative and influential Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, has famously written that 'the local church is the hope of the world', and I would wholeheartedly subscribe to that view. Christianity is irreducibly something we do together. Our faith in Christ must be personal or it is nothing, but it is lived out and matured in relationship with other people. The word 'you' in the New Testament is nearly always plural, and, whatever some scholars argue, the overwhelming conclusion is that the ministry of Jesus was about calling people *together* to express the life of the coming kingdom of God. So whether it's good, bad or indifferent, we end up with the church, which means not a building—useful as they are—but the *ekklesia* (from which we get our word 'ecclesiastical'),

the congregation or gathering together of God's people. God's church is at the heart of God's plan for God's creation, so for me it's a no-brainer that we need to find ways to enable it to reach its full God-intended potential.

For that reason, although my first taste of church leadership was in a relatively large church which was regarded as 'successful' and saw itself as a local flagship of the 1990s renewal movement, I was not looking for more of the same when I moved on. There were still many churches struggling to catch up with a fast-changing world and, if renewal meant anything, it had to mean something in these settings. That was how, in 1996, I ended up with a new job in Ealing, West London, with not one but two churches to look after.

The Church of the Ascension, Hanger Hill, close to West London's most famous Gyrotory system, and St Mary's, West Twyford, were both churches whose first instinct was to describe themselves as 'traditional'. St Mary's needed to be. Its structurally flawed building had been closed on safety grounds the previous year and the elderly remnant of the congregation were meeting in a back room of the run-down church hall. The past was all they had to hang on to, but they were very determined not to give up. The Ascension was in better shape but the congregation were aware that they had seen better days. What marked out both of these otherwise unremarkable churches was that they did not want things to stay as they were. Neither had a clear sense of what change would mean, but both understood that it was necessary if they were to reach out to their neighbourhoods and draw new people into the Christian family. What a journey we've been on since! The greatest compliment I can pay to this diverse and endlessly interesting and engaging bunch of people is that they have allowed their churches bit by bit to change, almost beyond recognition from what they were, as together we have gone in search of God's best for us and for the people who don't yet know him.

There's more than one way to grow

When you're a small church it's very easy to feel patronised and demoralised by bigger churches who are able to do all kinds of things that you can't, simply because they have more people and more resources. In recent years various people have written in praise of the small church and told us it's OK to be small. 'A tangerine shouldn't feel bad that it's not an orange.' It's not my place to judge (no, really!), but I did think it was slightly ironic that just after the publication of one such book and the accompanying speaking tour, the author went off to become the minister of a very large church somewhere else! The reality is, however, that if small churches don't add new members to replace those who will inevitably move on, they will decline and die. More than that, according to Jesus we're in the disciple-making business, and it seems obvious to me that if we don't add some new disciples to the process from one year to the next, it's hard to see how we're doing our job.

This was brought into sharp focus at the beginning of the millennium when, in the year 2000, I visited Lindisfarne, England's historic Holy Island, to attend an intriguing conference called 'Celtic Models for Emerging Churches' led by Ray Simpson of the Community of Aidan and Hilda. It was a week full of insight and inspiration but what got my attention in the first session was the conclusion from the most recent national church survey that, in the next few decades, some 20,000 small to medium-sized churches were likely to close. Their only hope was to change. You won't be surprised to know that my priority during some personal free time was to start praying with a fair degree of intensity that we'd be one of those that made it through.

I learned a lot that week about what the first-millennium British church has got to offer the third-millennium British church. The starting point for me was that these early Celtic Christian communities in Ireland, Wales and Scotland were all different, and each

had its own sense of calling. We were given the challenge to go back and discern God's distinctive calling for us. Find that and, whatever it was, we'd know we had a future of some sort.

Vision has become a rather jaded term, perhaps because of the way it has found its way into modern management-speak. 'Our vision is to deliver the perfect pork pie' may be a valid commercial goal but it's hardly inspirational. I'm happy to go on using the word but perhaps it's more helpful, and certainly more biblical, to think in terms of *vocation*: what is it that God is calling us to be and to do? If we ask that question of a church, there will always be a great deal of similarity and overlap because there are certain things which all churches are called to do—worship, pray, teach, care for one another, and so on. Yet there will always be the personal nuance, the distinctive call from God. The important thing is to identify and express it in a way which speaks to us.

Vision is rarely received instantly. There are times when God speaks with amazing clarity, but even then you need to spend time thinking through what he has said. As I tried to discern God's vision for our church, I wanted to be sure that every word I wrote truly reflected as far as humanly possible God's distinctive call to us, and that it was genuinely owned by the members of the church. In 2002 'A Vision for the Ascension' was presented to a core group of the congregation, who received it with great positivity. Our headline statement, which was then unpacked in greater detail, was an aspiration to be 'a Christian community committed to praying, welcoming, and growing'. I had no idea at the time just how much meaning was packed into those nine words.

Since then, that core vision has given birth to three successive 'Mission Action Plans' designed to help us progressively to realise more fully each of the three elements of the vision. During that time there have been encouraging signs of God at work. We've seen a greater confidence in prayer and a greater creativity in worship. There has been a slow growth in confidence in inviting others to events like the Alpha course. The age range of the congregation has

widened, involving a greater number of children and teenagers but without losing our older members. Most exciting of all has been a project to reorder the church building to create a 'welcome area' at the back with a kitchen and lounge space. I'm excited by this because building projects often start from the minister and have to drag the congregation with them. This project was birthed by members of the church who were thinking through what it meant to be welcoming and decided that the building would have to change. I didn't remotely disagree with them about that, but the important thing was that the idea came from them and was carried through by them, and the motive was to make the church more accessible to those who didn't normally use it.

One of the most important insights I gained through the whole process was that there is a close relationship between growing spiritually and growing in numbers. This might seem an obvious point, but in practice it is often hard to pin down solid evidence of the link. The first two years after we began to implement our vision brought much positive activity and energy but no growth in numbers. At the time, we had a trainee minister on placement with us and she spoke warmly about all she experienced here but expressed her amazement that there weren't more people. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. Shortly afterwards I came across a church survey tool developed in Germany called Natural Church Development.¹ This approach argues, on the basis of extensive international research, that growth in numbers is linked to the quality characteristics of churches, and it offers statistically validated tools for measuring them. The eight significant areas are identified as empowering leadership, gift-orientated ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-orientated evangelism, and loving relationships. Grow the quality, Christian Schwarz argues, and the numbers will follow.

The results of the survey told us that we were encouragingly strong in a number of areas but that our biggest perceived weakness

was in the category of ‘passionate spirituality’, and this was holding us back. We had many discussions about what precisely the term means—and it has nothing to do with how loud you can shout or how high you can raise your arms (not that there’s anything wrong with either!). The bottom line was that many of our people, even those who had been Christians and members of the church for a long time, did not feel a closeness or confidence in their relationship with God. They didn’t feel they had a good connection. The extraordinary and wonderful thing was that as soon as we began to address this issue, we began, very modestly, to grow in numbers, and this growth continued for several years. It’s been memorably said that ‘to reach for God is to reach God’.² It seemed that God was honouring our desire to connect more deeply with him in order to connect more effectively with others, even before we had managed to translate it into definite action.

That discovery led me into a fresh understanding of vision generally and of our vision. I realised that vision isn’t just about identifying a target and charting a course towards it, but also about seeing what lies beyond it. If our life with God is a journey, then it’s helpful not only to find ways of checking our progress but also to think about where we’re trying to go. Out of my struggles to participate in the mission of God in our small church, I began to identify common challenges and fresh ideas which resonated with other people as well. As I explored them in conversation with other church leaders, and then at seminars and conferences, I saw these ideas strike a chord.

The two big questions

The first big question which seems to be exercising everyone’s mind, both in the church and in wider society, is how we create, maintain and deepen a genuine and lasting community. This seems to be the holy grail for which everyone is searching.

We live in an increasingly individualistic and fragmented culture but there is still a longing for community, even if we're not sure what it is. It's easy to criticise social networking through the internet, but we must not overlook the underlying desire and need to connect with one another, which is as strong as ever. A little while ago I registered some new software and received an email saying 'Welcome to the *Serif* community'. A community made up of people who don't know each other but all use the same publishing software isn't much of a community, but the use of the word tells us that they think people will respond to it in a positive way. When David Cameron became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on 11 May 2010, he declared, 'I want us to build a society with stronger families and stronger communities' and described 'rebuilding community' as one of his core values. During the election campaign, Gordon Brown, the previous Prime Minister, argued that his party would protect the 'universal services which gives us something beyond price—a sense of community'. The 2011 riots in many British cities threw these issues into an even sharper and more urgent focus. There may be conflicting visions of what exactly community is in the social sense, and even less consensus on how it is to be achieved, but there is agreement that people feel deeply that it is important. At bottom we all have a need to belong and, however privatised our lives become, that need does not go away.

Community is also the holy grail of the church. I once worked with a vicar who said that he used to think of local church ministry as being like having a group of people sitting on a giant mushroom while he rushed around the bottom to stop them sliding off. They needed something to stick them together—and that something is community. It's also a particular challenge for an eclectic church like ours, where an increasing number of the congregation (currently about one-third) live outside the geographical area of our parish, in a part of London where a two-mile journey can take an hour unless you're happy to walk. Getting people together in one

place more than once a week is often surprisingly difficult.

The second big question is how we create mature adult disciples of Jesus Christ—people who are deeply connected with God and find ways to connect every area of their lives to God. In Colossians 1:28, Paul writes that ‘it is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ’. This is the core pastoral task in Christian ministry and in our present climate we often struggle to do it successfully. We have excellent tools to help people find Christian faith. Alpha, Emmaus and other similar processes have touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The problem is what to do next. We can run a follow-up course but, despite the spread of Alpha, there is no universal agreement on what to use. We can try various kinds of home group structures, but many churches find them hard to sustain over time and, at every stage, people drop out of the process. Research indicates that even in churches with a very strong home group structure, only half the members at best join a group. The cell church idea has tried basing everything around small groups but, unless a church is starting from scratch, it seems to take a huge amount of restructuring to adopt this model.

Looking back, it’s frightening to see how many of my friends who were fired-up Christians at the age of 21 had wandered away from Christ by the time they were 30. Add to that the number of older Christians who have been church members for decades and yet have only the vaguest understanding of their faith and how to live it out. Add to that the number of Christians who can quote chunks of the Bible but never get beyond one-line answers to the complex issues we all face in life, and we’ve got a big problem. In a recent conversation with a senior leader in my own part of the church, she expressed the view that discipleship is the biggest issue in Christian ministry today.

Finding out how to create community and make mature disciples is therefore absolutely essential to the well-being of our churches and to our own well-being as individual followers of Christ.

The one key insight

It's easy to criticise the church growth movement for being obsessed with numbers and techniques, but, as I pointed out previously, if we're not seeing more people becoming followers of Christ, then we're not carrying out the task he gave us to do. Serious study of the factors that influence church growth originated in the United States, and in the 1980s and 1990s a lot of ideas and influences about church growth and wider renewal came from the other side of the Atlantic. There were many useful insights and I would be the first to acknowledge a great debt of gratitude in particular to John Wimber and the Vineyard movement for all that they gave the British church. Particularly associated with the healing ministry and an emphasis on 'signs and wonders', John Wimber's deepest passion was to see people become Christians and devote every part of their life to God in practical action. From his teaching, also, I first learned the principle that the growth of the body of Christ is inseparably linked to the health of the body of Christ.

Nevertheless, as time went on I found myself growing more and more aware that help from across the Atlantic was limited in its effectiveness. In the first place there are immense cultural differences between the USA and the United Kingdom. Some 40 per cent of Americans have some kind of church involvement compared to between five and 15 per cent of people in the UK, depending on which statistics you use. Knowledge of the Bible is also proportionately greater and Christianity is more highly valued in public life. Tony Blair, according to his spokesman Alistair Campbell, famously 'didn't do God' in his public life, whereas an American President gains support if he attends a prayer breakfast and affirms his personal faith. When Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church*,³ a book which thousands of church leaders have read, started Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, he researched the local community and sent a mailshot to 15,000 people offering them a church for people who

wanted a new style of church. Two hundred people turned up to the first service! There is a lot of useful insight and wisdom in Rick Warren's book, but there is no way that such an approach would get the same results here. Our culture of churchgoing has eroded far more than theirs. People need much more to get them even interested.

Secondly, a great deal of material from America originates in large churches, and what works in a large church often does not work in a small one. I nearly laughed out loud at one church leadership conference where we were offered a seminar to help us overcome the pitfalls of recruiting Christian 'superstars' on to our church leadership teams. At that time I was the team and our income wasn't even enough to cover the cost of employing me, let alone recruiting anyone else. I felt like I was visiting a very alien planet.

Thirdly, a great many American churches are entirely independent, a product of the entrepreneurial and pioneering spirit which is so much a part of their culture. Many British churches are part of long-established denominations with particular structures and practices, and individual congregations may well have existed for over a hundred years with all of their accumulated history and tradition. Quite simply we often do not have the freedom to start from scratch in the way that many American churches and movements have been able to do.

This is not meant as an attack on American Christianity, which has many real strengths and can still offer us fresh perspectives. It is merely an observation that there are serious limitations on the help it can give to those outside its national borders. I have a further frustration with the church growth movement in general, despite all the good it has done in offering insights and calling us back to our core task. It is simply that all too often the message coming from 'successful' churches, wherever they are in the world, is 'Become like us and you will definitely grow too.' I heard the pastor of a church numbering many thousands, from a city in the American Midwest, tell a British audience that if he were to take

over the leadership of any of our churches for one year, it would be absolutely certain to increase in numbers. Perhaps the politest thing I can say about that is that I'd love to see him try, and I doubt if he ever has done or genuinely intends to do so. Churches, like individual Christians, are amazingly diverse, and one size can never fit all. So how on earth do we realise the potential of all, and how do we join these multi-faceted bricks into a stable building?

As I reflected on this question, it dawned on me that the answer lay not across the seas but across the centuries. I realised that I already knew something growing in our own soil which was creating real community and nurturing genuine and incredibly diverse spiritual growth.

For the past ten years I have been a member of the international Community of Aidan and Hilda, a dispersed and cross-denominational network of Christians who draw inspiration from the Celtic expression of Christianity which flourished in the British Isles in the first millennium. CA&H isn't a church but, as I thought about it, I realised that what I had learned and experienced as a member of this community seemed to hold the key to unlocking answers to our two big questions—creating genuine and lasting community, and making mature disciples of Jesus. Drawing on the ancient wisdom of the Celtic Christians and recasting it for the 21st century, I began to see practical ways of achieving these two vital goals.

An ancient and new way of being church

The Community of Aidan and Hilda emerged in the early 1990s, as a network of people already involved in various creative ways in the renewal of the church found fresh inspiration in the early church of the British Isles. Celtic Christianity has become very well known in the years since then and much has been written about it, some of it quite naive and romantic, and some of it a highly critical reaction to

that naivety. Two well-written and accessible introductions are *The Celtic Way* by respected church historian Ian Bradley and *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* by Ray Simpson, the founding Guardian of the Community of Aidan and Hilda.⁴ Both attempt to be accurate about what these inspiring early Christians were really like, but also to apply what they can teach us to today.

Many things drew me to this community. One feature of the church in Britain in the fourth to eighth centuries was that it held together many of the strands of Christianity which today have become separated. The ‘Celtic church’⁵ had an Evangelical emphasis upon the scriptures and upon mission, a Catholic sense of the importance of incarnation and sacrament, a Pentecostal-charismatic experience of the work of the Holy Spirit, and an Orthodox vision of God as Trinity. My own journey of faith showed me that there was far more to God, his people and his mission on earth than the particular Christian stream labelled ‘renewal’ seemed able to express, and I was drawn to a community which seemed to be able to hold it all together.

Another important attraction was the idea of sharing our Christian journey with others in a relationship of encouragement and accountability. As I’ve described elsewhere,⁶ I was in my 30s at the time, but I’d been in Christian leadership long enough to see people becoming driven or disillusioned, bullying or burned out. I remember commenting to a colleague that the model of ministry we operated seemed to depend on people being self-motivated self-starters. I could tick both boxes but I could also see how unhealthy that was.

A further draw was the realisation of remarkable similarities between the first millennium and the third. Anglo-Saxon men fought hard, then drank hard. Many of our town centres today are full of people doing exactly the same two things—but in reverse order! Yet into this violent and dangerous society came a vibrant expression of Christianity which transformed lives and permeated the entire culture. There had to be something to learn from that.

I picked up a copy of Ray Simpson's *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* during a holiday in Scotland. Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. On every page I turned, I learned something new, but no sooner had I taken it in than I felt as if I'd always known it. Suddenly the pieces of so many things I'd been thinking about were joining together. When I read at the end of the book that there was a community trying to live this spirituality out, I knew at once that I had to join them.

Unlike some of the experiments in Christian community in the 1970s, the Community of Aidan and Hilda is a *dispersed* community. This means that most of the members generally don't live very near each other, so they don't share everything in common under one roof, as did older monastic orders or some of the previous experiments in community. Other modern communities, such as the Iona Community, the Northumbria Community and the Franciscan Third Order, work in the same way. I discovered that in spite of this, and in spite of the fact that CA&H members sometimes only see each other once a year, if that, they have an extraordinarily strong sense of real community—a deeply held commitment to God and to one another expressed with a genuine personal warmth. Their common desire to grow in connection with God, and to connect God with the whole of life, results in a powerful connection with each other. Despite coming from different countries, cultures and settings, and from some pretty diverse church backgrounds, it is possible to see people only rarely and yet to enjoy a depth of relationship in Christ which many churches struggle to touch upon. What makes this possible?

Many present-day churches, whatever their denomination or structure, try to gather together a congregation and then, afterwards, to address the challenge of turning it into a community. Those operating on the parish system that grew up in the Middle Ages try to serve a geographical territory which often bears no relation to living patterns of local people. The two churches of my Anglican parish are divided by a six-lane road! Many of the Free

Churches are defined by a particular theological standpoint—for example, adult baptism—and their members will travel significant distances to find a church which fits their beliefs. More recently founded churches or ‘fresh expressions’ of church are often defined by their style of worship, again tending to attract people who are willing and able to travel to find something which relates to them. What they all have in common is that they start by pulling a crowd (or trying to!) and then have to face the challenge of turning it into a community.

Celtic churches worked the other way round. They started as communities and then gathered wider congregations, which attached themselves to the communities and took on their values and practices. All of these churches were basically monasteries but, to understand them and unlock their potential for today, we need to abandon most of our preconceived ideas of what a monastery is like.

Let’s look at one of the most famous Celtic monasteries, the seventh-century mixed community of men and women who were presided over by a remarkable woman called Hilda of Whitby. If you go to present-day Whitby, you’ll find a town more interested in Dracula than Christianity, thanks to Bram Stoker’s novel in which the world’s most famous vampire lands in England at this north-eastern fishing town. High on the cliff-top above the town stand the iconic remains of the medieval monastery, a massive stone structure which speaks of power and awe, erected to pray for the soul of the Anglo-Norman nobleman who had it built. Whatever Hilda’s monastery was like, and there are almost no remains, it was nothing at all like this.

Here’s what it almost certainly was like. Imagine yourself crossing the wild and exposed North Yorkshire Moors, probably on a bracingly windy day, and, with a certain feeling of relief, coming in sight of the sea and your destination. What you see is neither a pillared cloister nor a tall stone spire but something that looks for all the world like a large village or a small town—and that is

exactly what it is, a village of God. There are houses and animal sheds, workplaces and shops, and somewhere in the middle stands a wooden building which doesn't look much different from any of the others but is, in fact, the church. As you approach, you see not a high stone wall but a simple dry ditch encircling the village. This ditch serves a practical purpose in that it stops the animals from wandering away, but it has a symbolic purpose too. It reminds everyone that once they are inside the circle, the rules of the kingdom of heaven apply and everyone must seek to live by them. Within the village is a bewildering array of people. There are monks and nuns living under the disciplined and compassionate rule of life set up by Hilda. There are lay members of the community—men, women and children, single people and families—who follow the community rule less strictly. There are other Christians who live and work there, and probably also pagan visitors enjoying the hospitality of the community or seeking Hilda's practical wisdom while seeing what living Christianity looks like.

Three core elements bind this community powerfully together. First, there is the *Way of Life*, which in those days would have been called a Rule—a set of practices which everyone would have followed according to their particular level of commitment, designed to help them to follow the path of Christ and take on his character in day-to-day living. Second, there is the *rhythm of prayer*, the simple patterns of worship, intercession and Bible reading which punctuate the day and enable everyone consciously to connect with God and remember that every hour belongs to him. Third, there is the practice of *Soul Friendship*. Every member of the community has a Christian brother or sister whose task is to accompany them on their spiritual journey, listening to them and offering encouraging prayer and compassionate counsel. This care extends to ordinary Christians who simply live in this village of God, and it is also available to anyone, believer or pagan, who wants to draw near to the living God.

These are the three essential practices which are followed in a

modern form by the Community of Aidan and Hilda and which enable this dispersed, international and interdenominational community to enjoy such a deep mutual commitment. Similar practices are followed by other dispersed Christian communities such as the Franciscan Third Order, mentioned earlier. The result is people who are growing Christians, deepening their connection with God and one another, and connecting God with the whole of life in a multitude of creative ways which advance the kingdom of God on earth.

Jeremiah 6:16 says this: 'Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.' For many years I have been a contributor to a popular series of daily Bible reading notes. I was invited to a meeting to explore a new range of publications which we might be able to get sold on the high street, aimed at the many people seeking practical spiritual guidance in their day-to-day lives. Most of the other people there were from new and emerging Christian communities, closely in touch with popular culture and discovering innovative ways to communicate and express their faith. I felt awkwardly out of touch. But as we talked, it became clear that I had been invited because of my links to Celtic spirituality and, as I explained about the core values and practices of the Community of Aidan and Hilda, people were attentive and interested. Many of these new communities have realised the need to find ways of helping their busy and active members to connect more deeply with God and each other. They are also sensing that there are first-millennium answers to their third-millennium questions.

The 24–7 Prayer movement began with a group of young people seeking God and finding far more than they imagined. Prayer led to mission, which led to a building and a group of people and the realisation that what they needed to sustain it was community. In their groundbreaking book *Punk Monk*, Andy Freeman and Pete Greig write that 'the reason for community is to help us follow

Christ, to help others to live Christ-like lives'. They quote Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, who said that 'the difference between community and a group of friends is that in a community we verbalise our mutual belonging and bonding'.⁷ It is no surprise to find the 24-7 Boiler Room communities drawing heavily on Celtic models and inspirations for their way of life and rhythm of prayer.

It's not just radical new communities who are looking to our ancient roots for inspiration. On several occasions the Community of Aidan and Hilda has been involved in leading the reflective worship slot at the annual Spring Harvest event in Minehead, Somerset, attended by thousands of Christians from all over Britain. In 2009 we were invited to present a seminar entitled 'Developing your rule of life'. I arrived at Minehead to meet up with fellow Community members Penny Warren and David Cole, wondering what we had let ourselves in for. With some of the best-known Christian conference speakers in the country on hand, why would anyone want to come and listen to people they'd never heard of talking about a subject they probably knew nothing about? On top of that, we discovered we had been allocated a venue right on the fringe of the site which was not at all easy to find. Buoyed up by the thought that we would give our best shot to whoever turned up, however few, we busied ourselves working with the technical team to ensure that microphones and laptops were working properly and trying to grab a few minutes to pray.

With ten minutes to go, people started to come in. We smiled and tried to pretend we were perfectly relaxed. With five minutes to go, we noticed that the stewards were becoming a little agitated. Extra stacks of chairs were appearing and being hurriedly set out in rows as more and more people were arriving to sit on them. As start time arrived, nearly 200 people were packed into the venue, and for the next few days we could not move around the site without being asked further questions about what we'd shared in that one-hour seminar. People are clearly looking for ways to connect more

deeply with God and to connect God with the whole of life, and the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors is speaking ever more clearly to them today.

In the following chapters we are therefore going to explore each of these three essential practices—a way of life, a network of soul friends, and a rhythm of prayer—to see how they can be adopted today in the lives of ordinary Christians and ordinary churches. After all, if following them has such a powerful and life-changing impact on individuals who belong to a dispersed community spread across the world, what might begin to happen if they were to be widely adopted by the members of local churches?