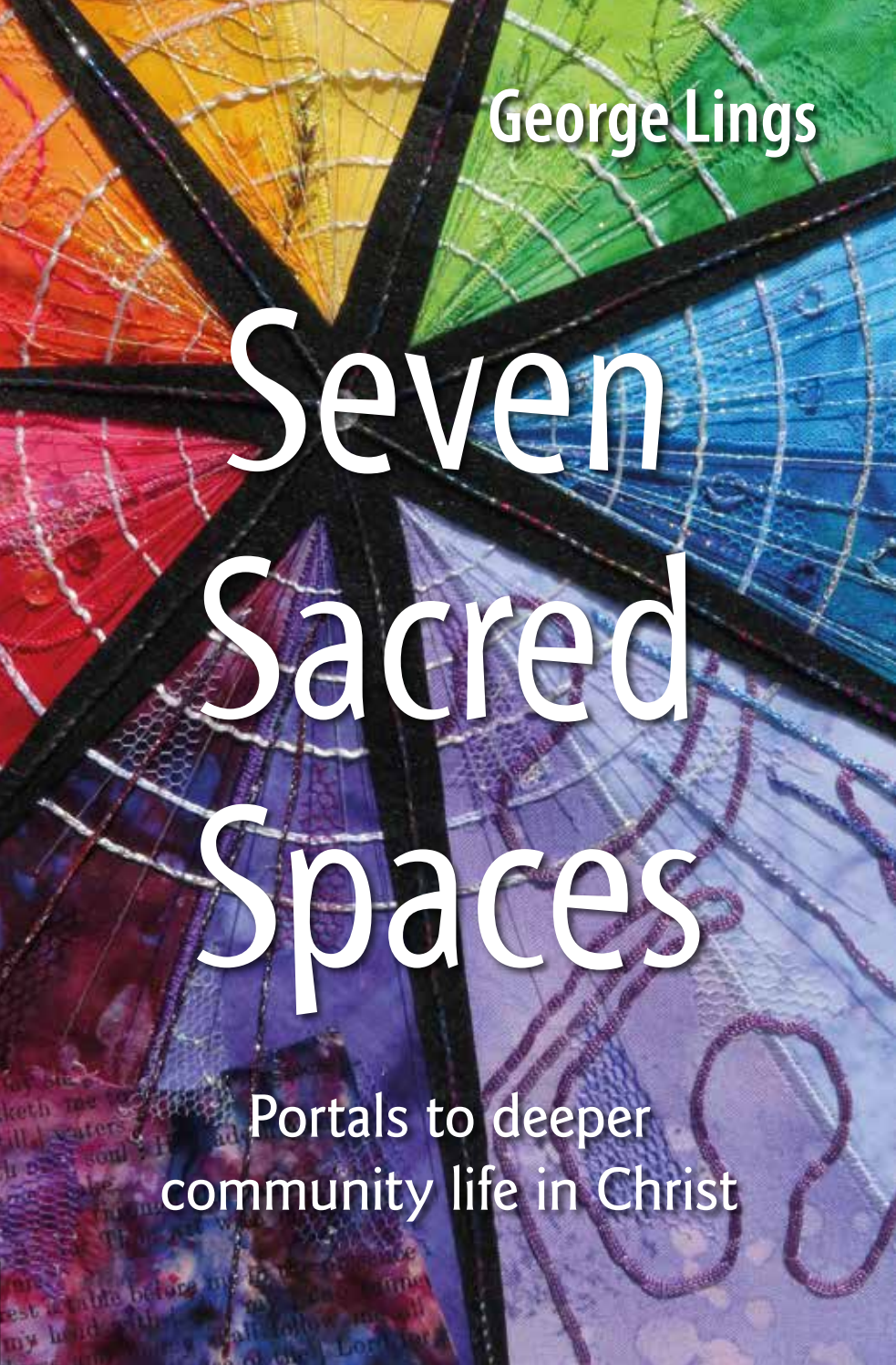
George Lings
Seven Sacred Spaces
Portals to deeper community life in Christ

The Bible Reading Fellowship
15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 934 2
First published 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
All rights reserved

Text © George Lings 2020
This edition © The Bible Reading Fellowship 2020
Cover image © detail of 'Dwelling in the Seven Sacred Spaces' by Karen Herrick, **harlequinarts.co.uk**

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Acknowledgements
Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's Patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers, © 2001 Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgement can be made in the future.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

George Lings

Seven Sacred Spaces

Portals to deeper
community life in Christ

Contents

Acknowledgements

I am writing this as the full seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic has become clear. Like the psalmist, we too now 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death' (Psalm 23:4). Each person's future has become profoundly uncertain. In addition, locked down in our own homes, we all face the sharp question, 'What will this new isolated life be like?'

My wife Helen and I have taken the insights and balance of living out the seven sacred spaces and have found life and order as they have shaped our day. For us it looks like this:

After breakfast we begin separately with private prayer (Cell). Then for me comes a morning of reading and writing (Scriptorium), followed at noon by shared midday prayer (Chapel), then deliberate quiet. 1.00 pm lunch (Refectory) is followed by varied pieces of work (Garden): household chores, personal email, cleaning the car or bike, cooperating with spring in the garden, developing my model railway and staying fit using our static bike. Evening prayer occurs at 5.30 pm (Chapel again) and supper at 7.00 pm. For the prayer times, rather than nag each other we ring a bell. Come the evening, I have no idea which space corresponds to watching TV – I guess it depends on what sort of programme it is. The day closes with Compline (Chapel again). Living 24 hours a day with one's partner leads to frequent, sometimes demanding, meetings with one another (Cloister). Across the day comes decision-making about what to do or not to do (Chapter).

So in these extraordinary times, the ancient patterns and purposes of monastic life, expressed in the seven sacred spaces, have brought to us a welcome shape and renewed purpose to living.

But none of this would have been written without my colleague and friend Sue Hope, who first pointed out these patterns to me in 2009. I thank her and Church Army, who then gave me a sabbatical that year to study this, and who funded the publishing of my findings.

I thought that was the end of the story, but people round the country started to tell me they were using this insight and it was a portal into a richer communal Christian life. Moreover, Helen has lovingly nagged (no, I should write persistently encouraged) me to turn the 2009 booklet into a book to serve a wider readership. Well done, dear, you were right – again.

I also gladly thank Olivia Warburton at BRF, who rescued what looked like a publishing idea that had died. She steered me through the writing process, with warm encouragement and judicious cutting.

Lastly my thanks to many people who gave me their stories which make up one chapter. This demonstrates that this is no mere theory from an ivory tower. It has been road-tested in the past and now in the present. It is indeed a portal and has been found to be life-giving. I trust that when, please God, the Covid-19 crisis is over, the places, patterns and portal I describe will help in the reordering of our lives in what may be a new era.

Foreword

This excellent book reads like a traveller's guide – an invitation and companion to an adventure and a way of life that is both inspiring and practical, written by someone who has journeyed far and wide in his explorations, a pilgrim who lives what he writes about.

George Lings' exploratory inquisitiveness and astute observational eye for detail have contributed to a thorough analysis of the seven sacred spaces. Insightful and informative, this book goes beyond ideas and expressions to reveal the values and principles that provide the foundations to a deep yet accessible resource. Mapping out the spaces, their ethos and the importance of environment, location and shapes, it helps the reader to evaluate and reimagine how faith can be integrated into every area of life, personally and communally.

Drawing from the wider riches of monasticism, and his specific experience within the Northumbria Community, George calls the seven spaces 'portals', through which the reader enters and discovers places and spaces to a way of living that nurtures the believer and that also opens up ways for all who are exploring what it means to live life more fully.

This book invites the reader to an adventure through the portal, to explore and discover. Thankfully it's not a book offering another programme, strategy, thing to achieve or box to tick on a list of must-dos. Neither does it provide easy answers or simple how-tos. Rather it awakens curiosity, triggers creativity and encourages some imaginative thinking. If churches, leaders and those training for ministry could be encouraged to use this book as a template to

reflect on their life and ministry, the seven spaces could significantly contribute to the much-needed reimagining and reformation of what discipleship and church might become in the years ahead. Practical and down-to-earth habits and patterns are shared and illustrated throughout the book, making the disciplines of the seven spaces accessible.

It is a read that can be challenging and, if taken seriously, will impact our lives both personally and in how we relate to others within our family, friendship, church and wider relationship circles. It is quite a subversive book; it provokes and challenges so many of the ways that have been assumed or inherited that, when examined, do little to help the flourishing of life and relationships with God, self or our neighbour. The book's countercultural nonconformity is a breath of fresh air to stale, moribund spaces that have confined and suppressed life and growth.

In drawing on the good, life-giving values and expressions of monasticism, George offers a spirituality that makes sense of life, making the idea of following Christ compelling. This is a great book: an invaluable travelling companion to a way of life.

Roy Searle *is one of the founders of the Northumbria Community and a community elder. A former president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, he is currently one of the denomination's pioneer ambassadors, a free-church tutor at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham, an associate tutor at Spurgeon's College, London, and a member of the Renovaré board.*

✣ 1 ✣

Oh, I see – my own story

I have lived with the approach that I call 'seven sacred spaces' for over a decade. Chapter 2 gives an overview of what I mean by these words and what the seven spaces are, but in coming to write the book I have been fascinated to realise how much of my life has been a preparation for this way of seeing both the church and the Christian life. This chapter tells that story. Readers may well find echoes of their own discoveries and dead ends.

Looking back

Hindsight can be unkind. Looking back, it is quite easy to see what we could have done better. We can wish, on second thoughts, that we hadn't said some unloving words. With the benefit of hindsight, it is puzzling that we did not understand something earlier.

Yet looking back can also be helpful. It can disclose longer patterns and rhythms to our lives that we missed at the time. As soon as we perceive the links, a sense of meaning and purpose grows. More was going on than what seemed at the time to be an unconnected flow of events.

In retrospect, I realise that the seven sacred spaces approach has been creeping up on me for years. It makes sense of a number of chapters in my life which were satisfying and wholesome Christian experiences. It connects to a lifelong aching desire within my spiritual journey, the suspicion that 'there must be more than this'.

For any readers who have given up on church, for those who still attend a congregation but feel they are stuck, for those who sense they trudge a plateau of spiritual mediocrity, that wondering – 'there must be more than this' – will resonate, even if finding any way forward at the moment is elusive.

So how did this richer way of looking at church sneak up on me? 'Church' is a negative word for many people today, for plenty of good reasons. Let me clarify right at the start that when I say 'church', I am not thinking of an institution, a building or an organisation. I think it is most helpful to see church as an interpersonal, Jesus-centred community. If you want to read more about that way of thinking and the difference it makes, you could read chapter 2 of my previous book *Reproducing Churches*.[1] For me, there need be no gap between belonging to Jesus' church and having a shared Christian life worth living. I admit immediately that for many people there is a chasm between these two. My discovery has been to see that the seven sacred spaces approach is one way in which that disturbing gap can close.

Early days at home

I grew up in the London suburb of Barnes, which is like a village. Anyone who watches the annual Oxford and Cambridge boat race will have seen part of it. My brothers and I would watch the early stages on TV, then run down our road and see the crews go by, only to dash back and catch the finish on the telly.

My father, Jim, had been a communist as a student in 1930s Oxford, before fighting in the war and later settling down to become a patent agent. My mum, Hilde, had been a lapsed Catholic German, who came to Britain shortly before the war and settled in Oxford for ten years as an au pair and nanny. They met as friends in that Oxford house. Before going out to fight in India, Jim's CO said to him, 'Lings, get a photo of your wife and children, or your servants won't respect

you.' Being single, this was somewhat tricky. So he set up Hilde and the three children she looked after and had the photo taken. I have it still. Perhaps looking at it for five years grew on him. He returned after the war, popped the question in 1948, and they had children. I am the first of three boys. With two such diverse backgrounds, I jest that it was natural that my parents became Anglicans!

My earliest Christian experiences were of weekly attendance in nearby All Saints' Putney, where my father was the treasurer. The tradition was moderately Anglo-Catholic, with a gospel procession and eucharistic vestments but not incense. We prayed from booklets of the 1928 Communion service, in part sung to the music of John Merbecke (1510–85). In those days, children did not even go up to the rails to be blessed, let alone receive. Yet even then, I sensed, as a non-receiver, that there was a transcendence to be respected and a 'more' to enter into, for which people willingly queued up and from which they seemed to return tranquil and helped.

Another inkling of 'more' is my memory, from when I was 6 or 7, of reading an illustrated children's book with my father, based on the Lord's Prayer. The picture that was set alongside its closing words, 'forever and ever', was of a winding path heading off and upwards into the distance. Somehow this planted the beguiling concept and endless attraction of eternity into my child's mind. Even now, at 70, I can honestly say it is pleasing to be nearer to entering that reality which began to beckon me when I was 7. Looking back, it was my first intimation that significant growing in faith could occur outside the church building and its Sunday service.

A surprise gift

The Anglo-Catholic strand to my understanding was laid down first and has gifts that I retain, but it was rudely interrupted when my father drowned on a family holiday in France when I was 7. He and the patent agent firm he worked for had made wise provision against

unforeseen disaster, and our ongoing life was secure, if somewhat impoverished. His godmother, Sybil, knowing our straitened circumstances, had connections with the Christian Union of the armed services, the Officers Christian Union (OCU). They ran family summer holidays at boarding schools, to which we were invited, and from 1958 to 1970 these were a highlight of my growing years.

The contrasts were considerable and widened my perception of Christianity and shared Christian life. The leaders were laity, not priests. As officers they were natural leaders and easy to look up to, whereas the ordained priests I knew were pleasant but ethereal. For the first time I had peer-group Christian friends, not just acquaintances to whom you might nod across defended pews on a Sunday. We played games and had fun. I suppose it was muscular Christianity, which is sometimes mocked, but I found it invigorating. There were outings to places of interest; we went exploring, not just to church. These lay leaders gave practical teaching about living as a Christian. They spoke in everyday language. It was possible to discuss and ask questions. The 'quiet time' of personal Bible reading and prayer was commended and practised. This was quite a different way to listen to God compared to hearing an epistle and a gospel in a service. For years, one officer thoughtfully sent me Scripture Union Bible reading notes. The lusty singing came from Children's Special Service Mission choruses. This collection, new to me, was a marked contrast to the Anglican hymn book. They embodied devotion, engagement and first-hand experience of God, whereas many Anglican hymns seemed grand but detached, descriptive but distant.

Looking back now, I know it was a broad evangelicalism, though labels were not used. Their language was simply living Christianity. It was my first taste of what a whole-life Christian community might look like. It wasn't just Christianity as public worship. There was passing on knowledge and experience, and there was time for private prayer, eating together, working at tasks, taking action and relaxing.

As I got older, I qualified for OCU's Easter camp for teenagers. It built upon the same values but intensified the issue of discipleship and raised the question of commitment. On 14 April 1965, I was cornered by an older girl who, to borrow the vocabulary of P.G. Wodehouse, had 'stepped high, wide and plentiful'[2] before 'seeing the light'. She rightly accused me of enjoying all the benefits of camp without the surrender of my own life to Christ. If she should chance to read this – thank you, Jeannie; I still have the *Daily Light* book of daily Bible readings you gave me. As a lifelong believer in God, I don't know if it was a conversion, but it certainly was a commitment. It shifted my experience from intellectual to intimate, from knowing about God to knowing him and being known by him, from guilt to forgiveness and from Christian drabness to consummate joy.

There was a downside which I, and others there, experienced. It was as though we went through an annual Mount of Transfiguration followed by the Slough of Despond[3] a few months later. The loss was so real that a group of us even started our own Christmas reunion to put in an oasis in the long march between summer and the following Easter.

Two changes helped reproduce some of these gains. I left my parents' church, because I was the only teenager there, and went to the neighbouring parish, St Margaret Putney, which included a group of school friends. We went to its evening service, followed by its youth group. From there I was invited to a Sunday afternoon Bible class, then called Crusaders, now renamed Urban Saints. Taken together these two factors added back several features: the peer group element, the building of friendships, receiving teaching appropriate to our age and stage, and importantly taking responsibility for giving some of it. There was even a weekend annual Crusader camp to look forward to.

In 1969 the call to ordination mysteriously arrived, and in 1970 I went, as a very youthful and ignorant 21-year-old, to St John's College, which had newly arrived in Nottingham from London, in

buildings not yet quite finished. In that first year, we literally walked on planks across muddy open ground and climbed through a window to get to lectures.

A conscious awakening

The next four years were one of the most consciously constructive periods of my life. My assessment of its genius pays tribute to several aspects. The very talented and diverse staff of St John's College knew the world was changing and did not seek to train us for ordained Anglican ministry as it then was. Rather they trained us to think, going beneath forms to values and principles. They encouraged us to be formed through the experience of community and of mission, not just worship. We also learnt to listen acutely and to discover our true selves.

Those years not only formed my theological instincts, but also led me to be more open to the future, held in conversation with the living Christian tradition. They gave me lifelong friends and a wife, and they planted a desire for a quality of shared and hospitable life that was not only nourishing for the insiders but also attractive and compelling to those looking on from outside. We were a community on an adventure.

Our life together included many elements. Daily morning worship unusually meant meeting in small tutor groups, as well as gathering weekly together in chapel, of which the highlight was the Thursday evening Communion followed by supper. The study element covered expected theological and biblical themes and topics, but in addition we studied philosophy, psychology and education. Our placements could be related to any of these further areas.

The site itself was of diverse spaces. A single-students' block contained 60 individual rooms and a common room for each corridor of twelve people. We experienced being alone and being together.

Across a green courtyard were the married-students' block and the row of staff houses. Along a covered way, shared spaces included a library, a book shop, staff studies and the admin office in one building. The chapel, lecture rooms, refectory, TV room and games room were in another building further along the covered way. I didn't see it at the time, but that palette bearing varied spaces painted a full-colour picture of purposeful communal life. We came out from those years quietly determined to continue those values of diverse communal life ourselves and wondering how these rich gains could be translated to, or awakened in, parish life.

Oxford and Essex

I then took a sideways move after ordination training. My wife Helen and I went to the Oxford Department of Education to study for its certificate. I wanted to study more *how* to communicate, building on *what* I now knew I wanted to communicate. From there I went to a curacy, at St Peter's Harold Wood in Essex. The church was innovative in that its weekly Sunday service was a family service, with both a full illustrated children's talk and an adult sermon. It had an attractional evangelistic life, seeing people come to faith, and a strong sense of family. Curiously, the home Bible groups were deliberately broken up each year, reformed by the ordained staff. Touchy-feely stuff was suspect, and things charismatic were a no-no. Its value of unity trumped any diversity. It was a warm but tight family. It did little towards disclosing seven diverse spaces. After three years it was time to move on.

Seven good years in Reigate

St Mary's Reigate is a large church building and congregation in a Surrey town full of professionals and many London commuters. If labels help, it would be open evangelical and open to the charismatic. But it also had a fiercely defended 1662 Book of Common Prayer

8.00 am Communion service. As a curate once more, I was the youngest member of a talented staff team.

The medieval church was extensively restored in the 19th century. Its space is bicameral (two-roomed) – the nave and the elevated chancel are visually separated by a reputedly medieval wooden screen. In those days the clergy and robed choir peered out through the screen to the populous beyond and below. It was as though the Reformation had never happened. God was still remote, lurking near the sharp end. The space did not model there being one people of God.

The reordering I lived through saw the focal point brought out in front of this screen on a stone apron, the lighting transformed and a simple kitchen and loo facilities installed at the back. We now met and worshipped together in the one nave. It also created a smaller, more intimate worship space in a cleared open chancel with flexible seating. Unworkable complexity had now become diverse flexibility. I learnt that spaces, their location and shapes, all matter.

I was also intrigued by a consistent feature within its 'parish weekends', during which a proportion of the congregation spent the time together at a conference centre. What intrigued me was the quality of the closing service, which combined a touch of transcendence and an aroma of togetherness, never matched on a normal Sunday. Was it because that event was the culmination of having already been together, of having travelled through some corporate spiritual journey, rather than so often on a Sunday trying to start the congregational engine from cold? It raised a beckoning question, rather than giving me an answer.

I was given the youth work, called Spearhead. Knowing my limitations, I recruited a lay couple as fellow youth leaders. Tim and Gay were natural gatherers, carers and evangelists and had a nearby house large enough to accommodate the 50-plus young people who would pile in on a Sunday night. Community flourished in the

right sort of space. It took off. Half a dozen of those teenagers are now ordained leaders serving around the country. Both the church redevelopment and the house-based youth work were powerful lessons of how shared church life and the buildings we use to house it intersect. It is no accident that the word 'house' is both a noun and a verb. The right sort of buildings house better belonging.

We also began to learn that big churches only really work as communities if there are effective small groups. Then people don't just join; they make friends. Groups are also spaces in which good public preaching on a Sunday is complemented by the pursuit of discipleship. They become the primary places of belonging and of spiritual growth. This encouraged us to think of our small groups as like tiny churches, practising group worship, teaching, fellowship, mission and ministry. That vision was clear, but its performance across the groups was mixed. Some groups did go deeper, while others remained in Bible-study-only mode. Perhaps it was related to the age groups involved. My generation onwards value emotional intelligence and the appropriate sharing of personal lives. Acquiring more Bible knowledge or dissecting sermons, but remaining personally distant, holds little attraction for us. It was all an education in diverse spaces.

A good Deal

I then became the vicar of St George's Deal in 1985, where we stayed for twelve years. I still gratefully recall how open to reasoned, consensual change the congregation was.

Spaces and location once more played their part. The rare Queen Anne building, with its three-sided gallery, was a natural amphitheatre and preaching box, just off the high street. It fostered openness, communication, celebration and community. Already a 1970 extension had a kitchen, loos, an office and meeting rooms. It was a multi-spaced complex. It expressed who we were growing

to be. That was taken further by a 1991 reordering, with warmer adjustable lighting, the opening and carpeting of the chancel, removal of the choir pews and controversially installing a hot-fill baptistery[4] beneath the chancel floor. The area was beautified and made yet more flexible. For example, sacred dance could expansively portray our worship, no longer rather cramped by a tight space.

By 1989 we were full on a Sunday morning and plateaued. A remarkable set of events, way beyond my control, brought Alan and Chris Dodds to us, with a view to starting a church plant. They were good friends with a Church Army background. In 1994 a team of over 30 people was sent out to begin another church based on networks of friendships rather than on geographical area and deliberately for those who did not attend church, rather than existing attenders elsewhere. With the ready agreement of the neighbouring parish, it met in their secular Linwood youth centre.

Here once more, spaces and shapes played a crucial role. The room was set out cafe style, way before that was a known type of fresh expression of church. Tables and chairs provided safe places for people to sit. Snacks, crisps and games already on the tables gave normal activities to children and families, rather than children enduring a tense uncertain wait before a service began.

They were serious about hospitality. From the first, this instinct was expressed by serving drinks as people arrived. This is what happens at secular venues or when people come to our homes. Not for nothing was the church plant called The Carpenters Arms – Jesus does pub, you might say. What a contrast to most churches, where a drink is only offered – often not a great one – at the end. Nor were newcomers given books they might not know their way around; here all you needed came up on a screen. Food, fun, friendliness and a focus on God were combined. In the language of the seven sacred spaces, Refectory and Chapel had been combined, though then I didn't know those terms.

What was important was seeing that a brand-new start opened up very different ways of working. By 1999 they regularly saw 90 adults and 40 children. They too then hit a plateau as growing numbers began to limit the intimacy of the cafe atmosphere. Spaces – what they enable and what happens when we try to overfill them – all matter. So a further plant to neighbouring Sandwich began in 1999, and is connected to St George's Deal even today.

The story in the years after both Alan and I left the area is sad. Yet honesty requires a few headlines. Further leadership did not work out as intended. Subsequent lay leaders became overstretched. Tensions with the diocese led to the church eventually going independent. I learnt the hard way that the right use of spaces does make a vital difference, but it is not a magic bullet. Resources for them, and attitudes of those within them, matter more.

I begin to see more clearly

Significant changes can have unlikely beginnings. In 1996 I wasn't looking to move; further developments at St George's were under way. I just happened to see a *Church Times* advert for a leader for the new Church Army research team, investigating evangelism and church planting. I had no intention to apply, yet I was pleased that someone else would fulfil this role and told my wife so. She told me that I should apply, and then she had to scrape me off the kitchen floor. I was appointed in 1997. I began visiting all kinds of adventurous examples of missional church planting that burst the boundaries of conventional thinking. Two years later a friend persuaded me to write up their stories and capture this learning. The result was the 'Encounters on the Edge' quarterly booklet series that ran from 1999 to 2012.[5]

From 1997 to 2012, I and the slowly growing research team occupied a few offices within the then-residential Church Army training college. We needed to carve out our own space, as we were a distinct

team, not an adjunct of the college. We also wanted to make a space that enhanced and expressed our values. We were more than a team; we were a diverse but united community. We turned the largest room into a multi-purpose space. Memorably it housed an L-shaped red sofa, bought initially to the displeasure of our bosses. It became an inviting seat for guests, the cockpit for team discussions, the anvil for decision-making, the crash-out space for the tired. Never in the field of human habitation has so much been owed to one sofa by so many. Spaces and functions need to be in conversation. Researchers are strange: at times they yearn for silent individual space to delve deep, think, ponder and guess; then they want to burst into shared space to test out what they are finding. It is another example of the oscillating dynamic, called alone and together, that all communities need to embrace.

The training college reminded me of the happy years at St John's College, Nottingham, with dedicated different places in which to worship, teach, dig out books, eat, decide, be by oneself and meet others along its corridors. All this began to gain a sharper focus in 2007, when Sue Hope and I worked together within this Sheffield Campus of Church Army. Both of us were committed to the reimagination of church, of which planting fresh expressions is one fruit, and we wanted Church Army to have a significant role to play in that unfolding story. She commented that the complex we occupied contained five classic monastic places: Chapel, Cloister, Garden, Refectory and Scriptorium. We mused together to what degree the architecture, occupancy and management of our building assisted, or at times impeded, the intentions of those spaces. I thank her for crystallising what readers now know has been my very long learning process.

What did others think?

Since 2002 I had been aware of Northumbria Community, and in 2006 I took vows as a companion of that community. To the five

classic monastic places, they taught me to add Cell, a private place for prayer and reading. During 2009 I wanted to research what others thought these six spaces were for, to see if there was any consensus. I led two workshops at that year's Church Army conference, which gave me feedback on what each place was for.

A month later I led a weekend retreat at Northumbria Community's mother house, Nether Springs, and I repeated the exercise. The participants reflected on their own experience and how the mother house exhibited these places. The conversations generated diversity of interpretation, but also a cluster effect, suggesting each place did have a particular role. Both groups insisted that I should add a seventh space: I had not spotted the place of deciding, called 'Chapter'. They were right; I had missed it.

Sabbatical wanderings and wonderings

Church Army kindly granted me a sabbatical in autumn 2009, during which I visited the famous Taizé. I also went to the lesser-known Cîteaux, where Abbot Robert began a reform of Benedictine life in 1098. It became the first Cistercian monastery, sending out Bernard, in 1115, to begin the monastery of Clairvaux.

I also spent several weeks living as a member of two mother-house teams, first with Northumbria Community and then with the Anglican Franciscans at Hilfield in Dorset. Both communities gave me an unvarnished exposure to the daily routines and pressures of their spiritual, human and practical life. During these periods I studied various monastic Rules to test whether these source documents contained historical evidence of the seven spaces. I also watched to see if the sites themselves bore witness to this idea. I found the functions were universal and usually expressed in the architecture.

Making the seven spaces public

From all this I wrote booklet number 43 in the 'Encounters on the Edge' series about the seven sacred spaces. It argued there was a set of classic architectural spaces, with their associated purposes. Working together they offer a fuller and deeper way for communities of Christian disciples to live and be church. That hunch had grown slowly and unevenly. The seeds had been sown through my OCU camp years, nurtured by years in community at St John's College, Nottingham, shaped by the ups and down of parish life, and developed by being within Northumbria Community and twelve years researching with Church Army.

By contrast, in some local congregations I had met thinness of community, threadbare welcome and disconnectedness of worship from life. 'Surely there is something more than this?' had been an enduring lament and a hope. Could it just be that the architectural features found in many monastic complexes, and their associated values, had something to teach the whole church?

A surprising take-up

Booklet 43 went out to our 400-plus subscribers. One of them, Canon Val Hamer, took the idea to Llandaff diocese, organising a diocesan synod day about it. Furthermore, her colleague Richard Lowndes produced a splendid further booklet and DVD which helpfully applied the learning at several levels: personal, congregational and wider community. Like me, they see that this way of thinking carries insights about being human, not just being a church community.

Less surprising has been some take-up within Northumbria Community, as one lens by which people can look at the dynamics of monastic life, even if it is in dispersed mode. Some fresh expressions of church have made it a yardstick by which to evaluate their common life. Other people have made it the template by which they

reorder their buildings. I am grateful that this wide range of stories is now told in chapter 14. They show how the idea has been applied. The sheer breadth of these applications suggests there is a generic truth here. Ubiquity infers veracity.

I have spoken to varied groups about the seven spaces. It seems as though once explained, lights go on. People readily resonate with the discoveries. The idea has travelled well. The original 1,000 booklets have gone, but the demand has not gone away. We produced an updated edition in 2015, making people aware of further resources to fuel their explorations. That too is running out, and it is not well-known enough for people to get hold of. So I am delighted that BRF is willing to turn the idea into a book. Read on and enter the seven sacred spaces.

✣ 2 ✣

Enter the seven sacred spaces

As a child of the 1950s I particularly enjoyed reading Enid Blyton's 'Adventure' series, beginning with *The Island of Adventure*, starring four children and Kiki the parrot. I found them engrossing and amusing, and they remain on a top shelf. I also liked another set of adventures undertaken by some children in a town. They met in Peter and Janet's garden shed, entered only via a strictly controlled password. They reported suspicious local goings-on and plotted responses, fortified by ginger biscuits washed down with lemonade. They were 'The Secret Seven'.

Here come a different seven, which I think have remained too secret for too long. Let the seven sacred spaces enter your thinking. Explore how you, in turn, could enter them and indeed pass through them to what lies beyond. Passwords are not needed.

I wonder why

Let's start with some questions. Why is it that houses that work well for their inhabitants usually seem to have a variety of spaces: dining rooms, gardens, cosy corners, private places, a study and welcoming reception rooms, all linked by corridors? Have you ever felt, as I have, that some smaller houses with only one downstairs lounge-diner sometimes feel claustrophobic and controlling? They don't model relaxed lounging, and the dining area takes up space

only used periodically. This monospace seems to forbid diversity of people and their pursuits. Its uniformity precludes healthy diversity.

Similarly, why does the layout of some church buildings not work well as social space? In theory, they were set up for the worship of God together, but the 'together' part often feels thin. Box pews were an extreme expression of church done in separated compartments. Even with ordinary pews it is known for members of congregations to sit at the antiseptic maximum distance from one another. Some pews are not so much occupied as defended. Filing out at the end, people but nod to one another and may, or may not, shake the minster's hand.

Conversely, what complex factors contribute to the contemporary attraction of cathedrals and reports of growing numbers of visitors? Of course, there is grandeur, architectural magnificence, a sense of history and a sense of the transcendent or numinous. But is it an accident that they also encompass multiple spaces, including chapels, cloisters, chapter house and quiet corners, often set in a surrounding green space, all with various vistas to visit? And these days many have added a cafe? It seems we flourish better as humans when the spaces we occupy express and enable a diversity of functions across the unity of the overall site.

One clue that teases out responses to all those questions comes through noticing the patterns, throughout the centuries, by which parts of the Church of Christ have lived in communities of worship, study and work. These groups have lived with each other for a long time. Long-stay community is always testing: it tests resolve and relationships. Those in them had to make community and their calling work sufficiently well. These monastic communities found over time that their life together needed to be formed by agreed biblically based values, attitudes and practices, brought into a document called the Rule. These factors are truly foundational, but in turn they became linked to, and expressed in, seven distinct spaces.

The spaces, or their function, crop up within the sayings telling of the personal and communal experiences and thinking of the desert fathers and mothers. The existence of many of the spaces occurs in the Rule of Augustine (AD397). The seven can be clearly discerned in the sixth-century Rule of Benedict and those who interpret his work. They are witnessed to in various Rules written between the sixth and eighth centuries for the autonomous Celtic monastic communities. Similarly they are found in the writing and practice of the 13th-century Franciscans and their successors today.

This chapter sets out the essence of what each of the seven is about. Even as this chapter unfolds, you may well find yourself saying, 'I recognise that place; I just didn't know this technical term for it.' By all means begin linking my writing to your own experience of that space and its presence. Sometimes your reaction will be quite the opposite. You may find yourself thinking, 'I wish we had one of those spaces in my church', or you realise it is missing, devalued or distorted in wider society.

I have put the seven in alphabetical order. This is one way of trying to say that they all matter and it doesn't help, at this stage, to try to work out which may be more central or how they interact. I will make those comments about their relative priorities later. The book gives a separate chapter to each one to develop the headlines given here.

Headlines of the seven spaces

Cell is a small, secluded space where a person meets privately with God, and meets their inner self. This is the only totally private place out of the seven; all the others are shared. This feature reminds us that life in Christ is lived both *alone* as well as together. The dynamic of *together* is essential to all the other six spaces.

Chapel is the venue of public, corporate, shaped worship. This kind of worship is measured and structured; it is intentionally like that

and intended to be educative. It is praise and various kinds of prayer. It is prayer with and for others. Chapel operates in rhythms and regularity. These create a familiarity to be passed through, not to get stuck at or bored by. In the period of Christendom, 'church' too often shrunk down to only the Chapel function. I show that this is an error, and I offer a richer understanding.

Chapter is the building where a community makes decisions about its life together. Here leaders and members communicate, discuss, debate and disagree, in order to decide. Historically, each monastic member was accountable to the others in the chapter. It was called a chapter because either verses from scripture or part of the order's rule was read. It reminded the decision-makers that everyone sits under authority. They are to listen to others with due attention. They need to resist temptations to condemn or dismiss others.

Cloister makes connections. Its feature was sheltered walkways and corridors that linked up the other places, so people walked up and down them. They also sat and inhabited them. Monks used this space to change gear, such as the shift from eating to attending worship. Cloister therefore is the place of planned and surprising encounters. You may meet the person you are trying to avoid. But to bump into a beloved friend, whom you have not seen in a while, will be a joy. How we talk with everyone as we negotiate the cloister, whether they are friends or a person we find difficult, is an aspect of community that always matters.

Garden is not about idyllic rest and the beauty of nature; rather, it stands for the place of fruitful work. Originally the garden of the monastery provided food for the table of the community. Its spiritual function also gave a balance to the other two areas of godly work done by monks, namely prayer and study. God has made us in his image, which includes being creative and creatures who work. Without any work, life lacks meaning; conversely doing good work is deeply satisfying. Work guards us against idleness, making it a friend to the soul. But it is not the place of quick results.

Refectory is the eating place. It beats at the heart of community and nourishes it. That is true both literally and socially. Families and communities express their oneness by eating together. This dynamic also works the other way round. Those we regularly eat with, we become one with. Refectory also extends community by providing hospitality. The words eating, meeting and greeting sound alike and are connected. When people eat together, they begin to belong. It is a place of both work and rest.

Scriptorium is another of three classic places of monastic work. Originally it was more about learning to pass on knowledge than simply acquiring it for its own sake. Scribes handwrote the only books that existed. They wrote to enable others to have books to learn from and from which to say their prayers. The kind of learning it fosters matters too. Slow, thoughtful, spiritual learning is about transformation of the heart, not mainly about information for the head. In Christianity, love trumps knowledge, as 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us. This type of learning is all about becoming more like Christ and his virtues.

What this book covers

Some of the chapters that follow open wider issues connected to the seven spaces as a whole, while others delve into detail about each of the seven spaces.

Chapters 3 to 9 go into detail about each of the spaces in turn. I have attempted to distil the comments and wisdom on them, which I have gathered from three sources:

1. within the monastic writers themselves and later commentators
2. current groups exploring the idea of these spaces
3. my own observation of the architecture and dynamics within classic and contemporary monastic communities that I have visited or worked in.

Chapter 10 asks why we should learn from monasticism at all, bearing in mind its danger of elitism and historical corruption and its disappearance in the Protestant Church at the Reformation. This chapter also tracks the rise and character of so-called new monasticism and explores the role of the monastic in relation to society and in the renewing purposes of God.

Chapter 11 shows how the seven spaces can still be found and how they work out in everyday life. Anyone can still find these spaces in older university colleges, cathedrals, conference centres and bigger traditional houses. Some spaces have lost their prominence, as priorities between them have changed, but the overall inheritance remains. I suspect the seven spaces embody functions that turn out to be part of being fully human. Part of their value is that they offer one way to assess what it is to be human and how we are intended to live together. Yet in secular use the balance across them has been changed, as has the way they are understood and applied. This chapter also critiques a dominant view of church life which has overinvested in Chapel.

Chapter 12 picks up the relationship of the seven sacred spaces to the topic of mission. It has to face the concern that the spaces are too inward-looking and that they appear to deal exclusively with relationships within the Christian community. Can and do they travel outwards?

Then chapter 13 investigates what connections there are to discipleship. This is a topic of renewed interest recently. But this occurs at a time in which our understanding of discipleship, in my view, is changing for the better. The seven spaces have a voice to be heard in that conversation.

Chapter 14 is stories. In their own words eight people talk about how the seven spaces approach has affected their lives, homes, groups, churches and even a diocese.

The final chapter tries to be frank about what the seven spaces cannot do and be modest about what they can do. For example, one unhelpful approach is to try to impose them. A variety of different images are explored for how they do work and how we can cooperate with them. I explore them seen as a diet, a language, a lens, a ring road and a portal. All these images offer insights into these possibilities and limitations, mixing realism and hope.

I'll be candid. Thinking in terms of the seven sacred spaces is not a magic formula to solve everything. However, it can act in a diagnostic way to spot the strengths and weaknesses in our private lives, our homes, our churches and our local communities. As we see more clearly by what means communities work well, we have a better chance to live richer lives and to create sustainable, healthy churches. This can occur because we have learnt these lessons from the past, and as we grow into the patterns of shared life which God the Holy Trinity always had for us.

Different sources, contexts, emphases

It would be tedious in each of chapters 3–9 to explain why the evidence from the primary source – the monastic texts – is uneven, so I unpack it here. I have spent days on end trying to read carefully through various Rules and sayings that come from different sources: the Desert Fathers, Augustinian, Benedictine, Celtic and Franciscan. I have also read commentators on these different strands. I am painfully aware that I am no expert in any of them and only sense something of their wisdom and diversity of approach. I am also grateful that I have lived for over 15 years in one Celtic strand of new monasticism, as a companion within Northumbria Community. Whether that creates a bias, others must judge. If this dive into these monastic deeper waters is not for you, turn to the end of this chapter, where you can pray the prayer you will find there.

Treasures from the desert

A key source is John Cassian (AD360–435) from what is modern-day Romania. He initially only visited the desert monasteries, first in Palestine and then in Egypt, but eventually stayed from c. 385–399. Travelling west over the years, in 415 he set up two monasteries in Marseilles. Around 420–425 he wrote up a distillation of desert teaching, codifying their sayings, in two collections called *The Institutes* and *The Conferences of the Fathers*.[1] Both collections major on the eight vices that afflict the soul and their opposite virtues, which bring healing, and on the life of prayer leading to true contemplation. Hence their focus appears to be the inner life, fought out in Cell, which is named in the often-cited saying from Abba Moses: 'Go to your Cell, for your Cell will teach you everything.' Yet their wider sayings clearly address community relations and the need to renounce judging others, either in our thoughts or at meetings that look like Chapter.[2] They also commended consistent commitment to work (Garden) in basket weaving, the demands of hospitality (Refectory) and shared worship (Chapel).

Cassian is a major source for the spiritual dynamics demonstrated in several later strands. Benedict, in his Rule, recommends his work is read to the community (42.3, 73.5).[3] Contemporary Benedictine writers, such as Sister Meg Funk, focus on this path to Christlikeness by contending with the eight vices, which she calls 'afflictions'.[4] Cassian's approach lies behind the approach taken by the various Irish Celtic Rules and also the Celtic penitentials that I comment on later. From him, I take that the mental battle of living a life in Christ, alone and together, is central. The spaces are but the arenas in which that life is played out.

Hints from Augustine

Augustine wrote his Rule in 397 for the lay community gathered around the bishop's house in Hippo, but before he became its bishop. It is thought to be the oldest in the western church. It is

short, with eight chapters and 48 subsections, barely taking up five A4 pages. It begins and ends with motives and attitudes: the start is the gospel call to 'love God and then your neighbour', and the end is an injunction to 'observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity, as lovers of spiritual beauty… living… as men and women living in freedom under grace'. Augustine's focus on love and beauty reflects his experience and conviction that the heart of Christian living is to be captivated by a delight in God. That delight is God's gift by the Holy Spirit: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).[5] And all true love is a delight. I unpack this approach in chapter 3 on Cell.

Minimalist rules emphasise attitudes and deal less with practice or place. This one addresses tensions that could arise in a mixed community made of those from rich backgrounds and poor ones and of both the healthy and the weak, the principle being 'they had all things in common and each was given what he needed' (1.4), even if this meant different treatment being offered and resources shared unequally. The two 'afflictions' most addressed are pride and lust, unsurprisingly for Augustine, with the latter approached, as in the sermon on the mount, as an issue for the eyes and the heart.

The Rule was taken up more widely in the 12th and 13th centuries, not least by a group called the Augustinians, or White Friars, of whom later Luther was one, and by the Dominicans, the Black Friars. Both orders were seeking to engage with and preach to a society becoming increasingly urban and moving away from the rural estates familiar in Benedict's time; it was growing in literacy and with shifts of mercantile wealth and power. Augustine's Rule was more ascetic, and thus countercultural, than the Rule of Benedict.

What does it demonstrate about the spaces? Some are explicit; others are implied. We are told there was an oratory and free time to pray (Chapel; 2.10–11 and 4.24) and that they ate together and listened to readings (Refectory; 2.15). There was work done for the community (Garden; 5.31) and in the reading of books (Scriptorium;

5.38 and 5.39). Uncorrected faults could come to a common meeting (Chapter; 4.27). Clearly they met socially and across differences of station in life, so the dangers of quarrelling, anger and forgiveness are covered (Cloister; 6.41–42). Most functions, except Cell, and appropriate attitudes are there, if not the names. Unlike some other monastic groups, they were neither enclosed nor forbidden to go beyond their buildings (4.20 and 5.36), but they were to go in groups.

The core role of the Rule of Benedict

Attempts to summarise the approach and contribution of the Rule of Benedict feel like trying to catch a waterfall in a teacup. It is far longer than Augustine's, at 73 chapters, with far more detail about monastic community life. Its fame is partly due to the fact that it and its communities are credited with saving Christian Europe in the Dark Ages.[6] Esther De Waal also sees it as striking a balance between Cassian's ascetic desert sources and the more humane communal Rule of St Basil.[7] But the Rule is modest about itself, commending both these loftier sources as 'tools for the cultivation of virtues' (73.6) and describing itself as 'written for beginners' (73.8).

The aim and character of the Rule is spelt out in the Prologue (P). It comes from Benedict as a loving father (P.1), explaining that the Lord is calling the monks to this way of life, striking a balance between the obedience of doing good deeds (P.22) and the fact that 'it is the Lord's power not their own that brings about the good in them' (P.29). The tools for this are the love of Christ and of others (4.21). It is 'to establish a school for the Lord's service' (P.45), in which there is 'nothing harsh, nothing burdensome' (P.46). So Benedict counsels, 'Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation' (P.48). The Rule is full of scriptural quotations. 'It is an immersion in the Gospel life so intense that we never forget for a moment what we are about.'[8]

Benedict is a keen observer of human nature, and the Rule is humane, at points almost humorous. Its people can't match the

worship accomplishments of the Fathers (18.25), the sleepy like to make excuses (22.8), they need a spiritual doctor (27.1) and they may be weak (34:2). Extra work needs extra food (35.12); people get sick (36.1–9) and need different diets (39.1). They can be late – God forbid (11.12) – or miss chapel and go back to bed (43.8). They can be needy (55.21) and find a task impossible (68:1–5). The abbot must be aware of his own frailty (64.13) and amend his own faults (2.40). Therefore 'he should so regulate and arrange all matters that souls may be saved and the brothers go about their activities without justifiable grumbling' (41.5).

There is also respect for context. Benedict makes allowance for flexible practice, even in worship, in the face of the seasons of the year, the age and strength of monks and the effect of weather. The same applies to discipline. The abbot acts with 'discretion, the mother of virtues… that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak have nothing to run from' (64.19). 'Coaxing, reproving and encouraging them as appropriate, he must so accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence' (2.31–32). Even joining the community is a genuinely free choice. In the year of the novitiate, the Rule is read to potential newcomers on three separate occasions. If they choose to submit to it, it is because it was something they were 'free either to reject or to accept' (58.16). Moreover, those brothers who later either choose or are made to leave the monastery may be readmitted up to three times (29.1–3).

Knowing what people are like means that the Rule deals in the practicalities of many things: the rhythms of the day across worship, study and work, down to food, clothing and bedding. It deals with decision-making, discipline, guests and requests to join the community.

In view of all this attention to practical and communal detail, and because the monasteries were built to be self-sufficient (66.6), it is not surprising that nearly all the seven spaces, or what they are for, are named, with several chapters specifically on Chapel and others

on Refectory. Cloister is not named as such, but so much comment is made on the communal life of the monastery that it is impossible to think its function did not exist, and all Benedictine monasteries that I know have actual cloisters. The Rule of Benedict is the major historical source which has undergirded my thinking.

Catching Celtic voices

If working with Benedict is like standing under a waterfall, catching the Celtic contribution is more like trying to herd wild geese, as it is made up of several autonomous sources rather than one dominant rule. All seven places are not named in many of these diverse Celtic Rules. For example, in the six pages of the Rule of Columbanus the only suggestions of the places are the comment at the end of chapter 3, 'Every day we must pray, labour and read,' and the phrases 'each should pray in his cell' and 'the depth of his study' in chapter 7. The Rules are much more interested in combating spiritual vices and cultivating spiritual virtues.[9]

To find liberation from the vices was a process through sin, sorrow, penance and health, for which the Celtic penitentials were penned. These documents take Cassian's view that penance is a form of healing, not of punishment. It assists the growth of the virtue which opposes a vice. The giver of the penance is like a spiritual GP prescribing a course of medicine, but for the medicine to work the sick person must take it. The Penitential of Cummean describes itself as 'the medicine for the salvation of souls'. It has Cassian's eight spiritual illnesses and draws on the medical views of the time: 'The eight principal vices contrary to human salvation shall be healed by the eight remedies that are their contraries' (Cummean 14). From the nature of the penances imposed, we can deduce the functions of many of the seven spaces, but they are not named.

Hard evidence for the seven spaces comes from writers about Celtic monasticism. Uinseann Ó Maidín explains that they followed the pattern of secular habitation. The ring fort was one to three rings of

earth with the living quarters inside. The buildings inside were made from timber or wattle and daub, which were never going to last long. Space between the rings was for animals and vegetable gardens. From him we know of four distinct places:

> The inner enclosure therefore provided the space in which the principal buildings of the monastery were to be found; a church of no great proportions, the cells of the monks, the guest house and the refectory.[10]

Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich wrote about Columbanus (543–615) in *Columbanus in His Own Words* and describes Bangor monastery in Ireland, where Columbanus spent his youth.[11] He concurs with Ó Maidín that as well as a garden area, there were shared wooden cells and communal buildings: the church, refectory and guesthouse. Monks in Bangor learnt Latin and some Greek, read the pagan classical authors and knew the scriptures intimately. Those with the talent spent time copying manuscripts, so Scriptorium is there too. Five spaces can be deduced, plus the guesthouse, which I see as an extension of the hospitality function. Thomas Cahill, an American historian, in his *How the Irish Saved Civilisation*, concurs:

> Irish monks preferred to spend their time in study, prayer, farming – and, of course, copying. So the basic plan of the monastery was quickly executed: a little hut for each monk… a refectory and kitchen; a scriptorium and library; a smithy, a kiln, a mill and a couple of barns; a modest church – and they were in business.[12]

He too witnesses to five out of the seven places, with various workplaces doing duty for garden. Cloister and Chapter are missing as named features, but there were pathways between the other places, so Cloister is not absent.

The Rule of Ailbe is an eight-century text, attributed out of reverence to Ailbe, who died in 534.[13] It is different in that it is in 66 metrical

verses so that it might be more easily remembered. Yet it is very practical – it names Cell, Refectory and Chapel and has much to say on attitudes that apply to all the seven spaces. Across these disparate Celtic documents I have found that the beloved triad, of prayer, labour and study, is echoed in many Rules.[14] These three central roles lead us to Cell and Chapel, to Garden and Scriptorium. We know too that they ate and met and had to handle discipline. All seven are there if we look with care.

The Franciscan adventure

I went for the word 'adventure' in the heading to this section, because encountering Francis is meeting a passion and quest rather than a plan or procedures.[15] The image I have of trying to summarise his connection to the seven spaces is the futility of trying to bottle the wind. His passion was living in response to the visionary call of Jesus and living out the spirit and simple life of Jesus. As such he had no interest in the seven spaces themselves, and the acquisition of property was vigorously resisted.

Nevertheless, a Franciscan Rule emerged, but in stages. The first Rule, now all but lost, was written c. 1209, by which time there were twelve brothers.[16] At that stage there was 'as yet no organization, no cloister, and no Rule beyond the simple words of the Gospel'.[17] It was based around three texts that Francis found, as became his habit, by 'opening the Bible at random, expecting to find God's guidance in the word of scripture'[18] – Matthew 19:21 ('sell your possessions and give to the poor'); Luke 9:3 ('take nothing for the journey'); and Matthew 16:24 ('whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'). It was only informally approved.

The second Rule, which was not approved, hence being called the *Regula non bullata*, was composed in 1219 and is 24 chapters long. It expanded the 1209 version to respond to questions of conduct that had arisen. How should the friars worship if, through absolute poverty, they had no churches to pray in or books to pray from?

Equally, what should they do with the few properties that were given to them? How should they both eat and fast? Should they balance working for a living and asking for alms? How was the preaching that had now been happening for over a decade to be done?[19] How was it to be balanced by contemplation? How should they make decisions in chapter and regulate the groups of Franciscans now starting up in other European countries?

In 1222 Francis drafted the so-called Second Rule with Cardinal Ugolino (later Pope Gregory IX), who acted as cardinal-protector to the young order and persuaded Francis to tone down some parts that would have caused conflict with the wider church. It was discussed by the Society of Saint Francis chapter in June 1223 and confirmed by Pope Honorious III the following November.[20] It is a third of the textual length of the 1219 version and only twelve chapters.

In this shorter, approved 1223 Rule, there is little to nothing about the spaces Franciscans occupied. This is for several reasons. First, 'Francis did not produce a system, but lived a life.' His life was of divine visitations that called him to conversion to Christ and growing into Christlikeness. It was dynamic, not systematic; he was a man of 'spontaneity and uninhibited emotional freedom'.[21] Second, there was the passionate belief in the renunciation of all possessions, including at that stage owning any community property.[22] Latterly it was given to them and not refused. Third, the brothers were intended to live not so much in, as out of, their simple communal life in a friary. Their life pattern enabled by alms was praying, wandering and preaching: 'The Franciscan cloister was the world.'[23] Fourth, the early communities were so small as to merge all these functions. We know of Francis' instructions about this in *Religious Life in Hermitages*: 'Not more than three or at most four friars should go together to a hermitage to lead a religious life there.'[24] Finally, 'Francis had no taste for book learning and was always suspicious about scholarship with the Order.'[25] In addition study would mean cost, time and buildings in which to keep books and the materials to make them.

Francis' attitude is perhaps best summarised in his own words, bearing in mind the corruption and laxity by then within the older orders.

> My brothers, God called me to walk in the way of humility and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want to hear any mention of the rule of St Augustine, of St Bernard or of St Benedict. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me in the world, and God does not want to lead us by any other knowledge than that.[26]

Yet by the end of the 13th century, it is estimated there were 30,000 friars, and a process of standardisation had occurred. Two streams of Franciscan life had emerged, even in the later years of Francis' life, against his vision: the *Spirituals* – or zealous ones – followed his teaching about poverty literally; the *Conventuals* – or relaxed ones – would own communal property. Harsh words, like 'fanatics' and 'compromisers', were bandied about. Schism sadly followed, and they are now separate Roman Catholic families. Yet it is the practices of the latter group that give us access to Franciscan use of the seven spaces.

Today, these founding documents are supplemented by a contemporary document called *The Principles of the First Order*, with the 1223 Rule seen as a founding document but not closely applied. It is found in *The Daily Office SSF*, the Anglican Franciscan version of *Celebrating Common Prayer*,[27] in the form of daily readings across a month, including the characteristic three notes of the order – humility, love and joy. In addition, there is agreement that the Franciscan way is different to other orders, because 'the Franciscan past is very strongly personalised… It consists in the experience of a man and his companions, more than legislative or narrative texts.'[28]

The Principles of the First Order is historically and textually dependent on a prototypical Anglican Indian Rule of 1934[29] and offers connections to the spaces. The communities 'live as a family having

all things in common' and in buildings which are 'the simplest that are consistent with good health and efficient work'.[30] I cite the connections in chapters 3–9. The Anglican SSF mother house, Hilfield Friary in Dorset, which opened in 1921, exhibits all the seven spaces, as does the later northern equivalent at Alnmouth, opened in the 1960s.

Thus the text of the Rule is more about principles than regulations, and Francis the founder is the magnetic force. Hence there are ceaseless biographies about him. Some readers may know the novel *Chasing Francis*, in which a burnt-out American pastor finds renewed and deeper spiritual life by encounter with the Franciscan adventure.[31]

Francis is a timely reminder that more is at stake here than the existence of the seven spaces or even their functions. Still less should we be fussed about being keen to actually build them. That would be to repeat Francis' own error in 1209 to literally 'rebuild my church, which is in ruins'. No, this rebuilding is the rediscovery of life in Christ, met by him, transformed by him. The seven spaces might, at best, be portals to that life; they are not the life itself. Yet they occur with such consistency across the monastic tradition that we are wise to heed them.

Testing the seven sacred spaces idea

I've wanted to be honest and open about whether my first source of information – the monastic texts – does truly support my belief that the seven spaces matter. You will have seen that across these sources they are unevenly referred to, either directly by name or indirectly by mentioning what I have come to think of as their function. In those senses I am satisfied that they are present. Cell, Chapel and Refectory are named most often, perhaps Cloister the least. However, it is also clear that the spiritual and mental roles they play are far more important than the actual place. Moreover, the more mobile the monastic order and its rule, the greater the emphasis on what the

spaces assist, rather than on having buildings to support them. That turns out to be helpful, for few of us will live in actual monasteries, nor have the leisure or resources to build one.

Go through the portal

If the seven sacred spaces can act as a portal, as the subtitle of this book has it, then you might care to pray this prayer (the Anglican collect for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity), which models the need to pass through the external architectural shapes of the spaces to get to what is of greater spiritual value beyond them:

> O God, the protector of all that trust in thee,
> without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
> Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy;
> that, thou being our ruler and guide,
> we may so pass through things temporal,
> that we finally lose not the things eternal:
> Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord.

Enabling all ages to grow in faith

Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

To find out more about our ministries and programmes, visit

brf.org.uk

Too often people's understanding of and engagement with 'church' is reduced to corporate worship, when it is so much more. George Lings identifies seven characteristic elements in Christian communities through the ages, which when held in balance enable a richer expression of discipleship, mission and community.

In the monastic tradition these elements have distinctive locations: **cell** (being alone with God), **chapel** (corporate public worship), **chapter** (making decisions), **cloister** (planned and surprising meetings), **garden** (the place of work), **refectory** (food and hospitality) and **scriptorium** (study and passing on knowledge). Through this lens George Lings explores how these seven elements relate to our individual and communal walk with God, hold good for church and family life, and appear in wider society.

Canon Dr George Lings has been a banker, student, vicar, writer, mentor and researcher. From 1997 to 2017 he led Church Army's Research Unit specialising in fresh expressions of church, gaining a PhD. In 2017 he was awarded the Canterbury Cross for outstanding service to the Church of England. He now serves as a companion of Northumbria Community, vice-president of The Bible Reading Fellowship and consultant to a number of individuals and dioceses.

George Lings is as perceptive and prophetic as ever, as he explores what the ancient idea of the seven sacred spaces means for us today. There is a wealth of practical experience in this book which can bring change and transformation for you and your church. **Revd David Male, director of evangelism and discipleship for the Church of England**

I unreservedly recommend this book that draws on the story and purposes of Christians committed to radical community and Christian discipleship to reimagine church and church buildings for the reality of mission and ministry for today. **Ian Mobsby, assistant dean for fresh expressions in the Diocese of Southwark and guardian of the New Monastic Society of the Holy Trinity**

UK £10.99

ISBN: 9780857469342

Cover image: detail of 'Dwelling in the Seven Sacred Spaces' by Karen Herrick, harlequinarts.co.uk

brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship is a Registered Charity (233280)