

COMMUNITY FAMILIES

What life have you if you have not life together?

There is no life that is not in community.

And no community not lived in praise of God.

(T.S. Eliot Choruses for the Rock, The Wasteland)

What would the poet T.S. Eliot say of today's society? Yet he was right. We are made for community since we are made in the image of God who himself is a community of three.

Where true community exists, God is glorified. But how and where is that true community being lived? For community to be true and lasting there needs to be

- acceptance
- openness
- sharing
- accountability and mutual responsibility
- a common focus
- love.

Sadly much family life fails on the first five of these, and even love is greatly lacking. Members seem to pull in different directions, lack respect for one another, even turn to domestic violence.

Some of the best examples of community are those found in villages or tribes – where there is a common bond and a deep caring of one another. We still see this in some developing countries where people are bonded by local ties. In South Africa people refer to themselves as not living in townships but in township communities. And after all the troubles of apartheid and opposing factions within a township, they are now looking to build community. One of my great joys of being bishop of my area is that there are a number of such township communities. Every time I enter one I feel a sense of community, of extended family and of belonging. In our big cities, to our shame, that sense of community can be lost. So T.S. Eliot wrote:

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour,

Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance...

The joy of an institutional community such as a religious community or the Church, is the common vocation, a mutual sense of God's call that binds hearts as one, for all have given up all to follow Christ.

The failures have often been due to particular hierarchical structures that have robbed members of their mature responsibility in making choices and owning them.

The joy within a religious community and homes such as L'Arche comes with the love shared and the acknowledgement that everyone is equally precious in God's eyes. Individual stories and gifts can be woven together to build community into a seamless robe. 'Can' but all too often don't when we start making comparisons. For the competitive spirit kills community:

compare St Paul's description of the community of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 which recognises every part of the body as a gift for the rest.

Failure in community is all too often due to a lack of openness – a fear of saying what one thinks, of being perfectly open and transparent with one another. When fear stalks the corridors and cloisters; where there is murmuring and grumbling; where people hide behind structures rather than being open and honest; where some resort to subversive tactics, community is in danger.

Yet one of the greatest needs of today is to live out community, to witness to its richness. Our so-called disabled members of society are often outstanding witnesses to real community. They are what they are. They do not dissemble or pretend, they say what they

think, are not impressed by qualifications and high positions. They have an uncanny ability to see through sham. They have their rows but rarely bear grudges. They care for one another, weep when others weep and laugh when others laugh. We would be poorer as a world without their simplicity and love.

The absence of community surrounds us in a daily way – in our neighbourhoods, work places and the anguish of our own souls. We are not always aware of this void but the scarcity of a deep sense of community can wreak havoc below the surface of outwardly busy lives.

Many people find community in their churches, especially the local one and wonderfully, more and more churches have opened their doors to become community centres inviting local people to use the facilities for meeting, sharing a

lunch, taking up a hobby. One would hope that perhaps for most it is worship, especially the Eucharist, that bonds them together, but not all. However, Jesus died for the world, not just the Church, and if Christians can lead the way in building true communities, they will certainly do so to the praise of God.

Perhaps within our Anglican Communion our present difficulties have been exacerbated by our loss of community. If we could regain this sense of community and of belonging to one another, we would surely be able to address the issues that divide us with grace and truth to the glory of God.

COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN

SOS VILLAGES: BOTSWANA

The extended family whereby members, especially children, are cared for and nurtured by elder siblings, aunts or uncles in the absence of biological parents, is a practice which has held pride of place in African culture. Orphans and children out of wedlock have traditionally been absorbed into the family and grown up happily into balanced people.

Changes in community life became evident after rural to urban migration in many countries. The stability of the family was shaken and the advent of "street children" necessitated various forms of intervention. There were also abandoned babies and children living under undesirable conditions with single parents who were unable to cope. As a result, institutions which give care to orphans have sprung up in some centres. The institution that I am familiar with is the SOS Villages of Botswana.

The concept of the Village was to establish a home where children would grow up in as near a normal family situation as possible. Each home had a mother and an assistant mother to look after a maximum of 12 children. The ages of the children were to simulate the age-differences of children in biological families. Siblings from families were kept together. The mothers were to have had children of their own.

Children are accepted on the recommendation of the Social Welfare Department that the biological family is unable to look after them. A process of legal adoption is entered into so that the

children are wards of SOS. However, if and when the adverse family situation is resolved, the biological family can officially claim the children back. Families are free and welcome to visit the children at any time.

The beginning in 1988 saw the admission of about 20 children. Over the years, the numbers have risen. Presently, there are 226 inmates of the Gaborone Village. In 1998, a second SOS village was built in Francistown and it is home to 239 children.

The ages of children admitted range from two weeks to ten years. One child admitted at two weeks of age is now ten years old. Once the age of 14 is reached, the children are transferred to a youth house where they learn to look after themselves and to socialise outside the SOS family. The youth house for girls is attached to the Village and the boys have a youth house in town, financed by the Village and overseen by the Village staff. Once sufficient maturity has been reached, they are encouraged to be

absorbed into the biological family which they have been in touch with all the time.

In its 18 years, the SOS Village Association has seen children qualifying as electricians, policemen, plumbers and craftsmen. Presently, one is studying to become a dentist, while others are engaged in pre-university courses. Two years ago I had the exciting experience of being served in a jewellery shop by a beautiful, pleasant young girl who followed me outside the shop to tell me that she was an SOS child.

The SOS Villages are widely accepted as community homes for orphans. Presently a third home is in the process of construction in a large village in the central part of the country. Funding for the homes comes from Austria (where the concept of SOS Villages originated after the war), Botswana Government and a Danish SOS funding organisation.

SOS VILLAGES: GEORGIA

SOS Children's Villages is an independent, non-governmental social-development organisation which has been working to meet the needs and protect the interests and rights of children for more than 55 years. The Villages have developed an approach based on building a community for children who really have no one. The charity builds a group of between ten and 15 houses as a small community. Up to ten children of mixed ages live in each house cared for by a "mother" who has an "aunt" to work with her and provide extra support. Most children will stay in the village until they are able to live independently.

The Children's Village, Kutaisi, the second biggest city of Georgia, was formally opened in 2002. This is the first institution of its kind in Western Georgia. At present there are 83 children living in 12 Family Houses: 42 girls and 41 boys. 75 of them go to school and eight to the kindergarten. Children are rooted in the families and enjoy a real sense of security and belonging. They live and grow together; siblings are not parted; they get a sustainable family in order to grow up as a healthy individuals. SOS Children's Village Kutaisi makes a big effort on children's education, especially on the language study. Now intensive work is being carried out for the preparation of the further generation of youth who will move to the Youth Facilities in 2007. There they will lead a semi-independent life sharing a flat or living with a care-giver. It is an environment where they can practise self-reliance as the key to a secure future.

SOS Children's Village, Kutaisi is also concerned with families who are socially unprotected; families with big financial difficulties; children who live in poverty and face the danger of getting into orphanages and children's asylums. Kutaisi Village, together with the partner organisation Kutaisi Social Services, is setting up a programme *Prevention of abandonment, strengthening of the families*, to give destitute families foodstuff once in a month and so help these children to maintain their biological families and reduce the risk of abandonment.

STREET CHILDREN PROJECT: UGANDA

Family Empowerment and Preservation Programme in practice

Maama Rapha and her nine children lived in Uganda as homeless refugees from Sudan for many years. We found the family through her three youngest children who were picking wild vegetables on the street. A successful reconciliation exercise led her to release her three youngest and most vulnerable children into our transitional home and her recruitment onto the Family Empowerment and Preservation Programme.

In the programme, Maama Rapha was supported with housing and trained in crafts-making and basic business principles. She is now able to make pillows and confectionery, which she sells to support her family. Through introducing the family to the Gospel and a church in the local community, she has made constructive friends, boosting a sense of belonging and restoring hope into the family.

At the beginning of 2005, we resettled Maama Rapha's children back in their home. We believe that the successful resettlement of Maama Rapha and her family into this new community will serve as a testimony of the transforming power of God.

Dwelling Places, a project which focuses on boys and girls of the street below the age of 14, recognises the importance of raising children within a family setting and doing all it takes to preserve a family unit as long as it is in the best interest of the child.

We must never assume that the best place for the child is away from the parent but rather question how we can help the parents and ensure the child lives with them. However, when parents struggle extraordinarily to fulfil their intended roles, then if we have been called to be God's hand of grace in that situation, we have a responsibility to intervene.

The Family Empowerment and Preservation Programme

Dwelling Places' Family Empowerment and Preservation Programme meets these responsibilities and raises the standard of care for children at risk by working with children and working with families.

The key to working with the children is reconciliation. Children are taken off the street, usually into our transitional rehabilitation home followed by tracing an adult family member. We then follow a reconciliation programme to restore a loving and trusting relationship between the child and the parent or guardian. The programme aims to encourage a genuine sense of belonging and willingness to live together between the two parties, regardless of prevailing conditions at the time.

Work with the family would not be complete without resettlement of the children into the community, which *Dwelling Places* aims to do after two years of rehabilitation.

Source: Extracted from "Restore Magazine, Issue 2: Parenting" with permission. *Restore*, the magazine for the Christian childcare community, is a collaborative initiative of Viva Network, a global movement of Christians working together to bring more children better care. For more information, visit <http://www.viva.org/restore>

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AIDS ORPHANS: BOTSWANA

Most of the children orphaned by AIDS live in developing countries, the vast majority in Sub-Saharan Africa. The orphaned children are the most vulnerable groups in society. Their communities have been weakened by HIV/AIDS, their schools, health systems, care-delivery systems and other social support networks are negatively affected. The people in these communities are struggling with challenges to children's well-being and survival after the death of a parent.

Some national governments have set out clear guidelines for the care and support of orphans in their communities. There is a need to involve all members of the community in addressing the issue of orphans. The community should have a feeling of ownership for sustainability, empowerment and cost effectiveness of the programmes.

Botswana has got more than 51,000 registered orphans, and only about 20% of them are cared for by relatives, while the rest are fed, clothed and educated by the state. The spirit of voluntarism has declined and the challenge becomes how to keep and motivate volunteers. Communities still need to be educated on issues to do with adoption. Many orphans could benefit from the adoption policies if they are adopted in their immediate communities.

Mothers' Union Day Care Centre, Mahalapye

The Centre strives to care for and support the children in Mahalapye and surrounding villages who are orphaned. It seeks to provide both support to caregivers and extended families and to create a caring and supportive environment for orphans and vulnerable children in which they can develop the necessary skills and attitude for a healthy life.

The Centre started in 2000 with 30 children and now there are 131 children registered. These range in age from two and a half to six years old. The children are taught introductory skills in

mathematics, language, writing, games, colouring, interactive play and physical education. Two mini-buses transport children to and from the Day Care Centre and take them to hospital or help with home visits. A Parent Teacher Association provides a forum for caregivers and staff to share ideas and explore new ways for parents and teachers to work together for the well-being of the children

MU Day Care recently completed a new facility which will serve as an after-school centre for primary school orphans and vulnerable children. They will be collected from school, have lunch at the Centre and receive tutorials and home assistance.

In our first three years, 76 students have graduated from MU Day Care Centre and all have successfully gone on to primary education in various Mahalapye schools.

This project is the result of partnership between a wide range of organisations such as the Village Development Committee of Mahalapye, local clinics and hospitals, District AIDS Committees, Botswana Railways, several banks as well as government and international agencies.

Since June 2006, a new programme initiated by an organisation based in the U.S. is running for three years at the Day Care Centre. The orphans and vulnerable children aged seven to 18 years will be collected at the local schools after school. Here at the Centre, they'll have lunch, supervised homework and extra-mural activities like sports, gardening and music. With this new programme we shall be enrolling 150 orphans and vulnerable children from the Primary, Junior and Senior Secondary schools. As the number of children increases so does the number of officers and staff – and the need for more teacher training.

AIDS ORPHANS: CAMBODIA

Many families in Cambodia have been devastated by the effects of HIV. Parents have been rendered too ill or impoverished by medical fees to care for their children and thousands of children have been left orphaned. Two organisations – *Maryknoll* and *Karol and Setha* – are working to address different aspects of this urgent issue.

Cambodia saw a rapid increase in transmission of HIV during the 1990s which now seems to be declining, but among countries in South East Asia it still has the highest reported prevalence, with an estimated 170,000 adults living with the infection.

This would be devastating for any country, but Cambodia's troubled history had already left a legacy of family breakdown and poor health. The Khmer Rouge forcibly separated children from their parents and prevented their access to essential health services.

This era and the conflict that followed left Cambodia particularly vulnerable to the spread of HIV. Communities were divided and livelihoods decimated. A generation of children grew up without positive role models and many professionals went abroad or were killed. Now, domestic violence, rape, prostitution and drug misuse are on the increase and there is a shortage of medical personnel and facilities to diagnose and treat HIV infection.

As well as medical care for people living with HIV, Cambodia needs family-based support for approximately 60,000 orphaned or otherwise affected children; and measures to prevent the spread of HIV that are appropriate to the local context.

Maryknoll, a Catholic mission movement, has been working with adults affected by HIV in Phnom Penh since 1996. Its *Seedling of Hope* programme is based in the Chakangre Krom industrial area, home to some of the poorest communities, and offers practical support, diagnostic services and antiretroviral treatment.

Whenever possible, the programme encourages and supports extended families to care for sick relatives, but for those who are too ill or have been abandoned by their families, it also offers shelter, rent subsidies and a hospice service.

The main concern of people affected by HIV is ensuring their children are cared for. In response to this in 2001, *Seedling of Hope* established the *Little Folks* project, which now cares for 500 children who have lost one or both parents or whose parents are unable to care for them. Children who are themselves infected receive treatment through another project.

The first priority is to keep siblings together by placing them with extended family members or carefully screened foster carers with whom children can develop loving relationships. Carers receive long-term support from Field Workers who visit the families regularly, which also helps to dispel the fear and prejudice surrounding families affected by HIV which is rampant in many communities.

Maryknoll provides a caring, family-like environment to enable children whose life has been turned upside down to resume their education and address emotional issues. A Learning Centre helps the children catch up on missed education and offers therapeutic activities such as dance and art.

When children lose their parents they also lose treasured memories, so the children are helped to put together 'memory books' in which they can express their feelings and record their past to keep it alive.

Some of the older children are also referred to *Karol and Setha*, a project

started by *Maryknoll* but now an independent organisation, which believes in a holistic approach to sexuality and HIV prevention and also aims to help reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy and delinquency.

Karol and Setha works with older children, young people, couples and parents, offering training to develop critical thinking on issues of relationships and sexuality. It helps people to reflect on their rights and responsibilities in sexual partnerships and the effect of adult relationships on children. The project helps to improve understanding within families and equips young people with skills to enjoy positive relationships free from abuse.

As they grow up, the children *Maryknoll* supports are helped to acquire vocational skills to become independent, but they can return for help if they need it, so even those who have lost their immediate family still have a home to go to.



CHILDREN'S HOME/EXTENDED FAMILY – ENGLAND

In 1899, a time when Victoria was still Queen of England, my grandfather Herbert White was moved with compassion by the plight of an eight-year-old orphan girl called Rosie. He arranged for a female Sunday School teacher in his church to care for Rosie in her little flat above the shop where she worked in the East End of London. That single act was the seed that gave birth to the family or community that we now call "Mill Grove". Over the years more children were cared for in larger accommodation with a maximum of 60 at any one time.

Had you visited the place in the 1920s, it would perhaps have reminded you of a boarding school; in the 1950s it would have seemed like a children's home. By the 1970s, there was a growing awareness that it had become quite unlike anything else, and so the name "Mill Grove" was chosen as a way of allowing the community to develop in its own way rather than having pre-determined labels attached to it. Since 1901, Mill Grove has been the home of a biologically related family descended from Herbert White. It is also the home of children and, more recently, families who for whatever reason cannot live in their own homes. It is the fixed point, or hub, of an extended family of those who have lived here, now spread out across the world; and it is a place where neighbours know they can come for support and practical help. There is a pre-school nursery, a toddler group, a school for children with cerebral palsy, and various local groups meeting on the premises.

Mill Grove is an interdenominational Christian charity with a board of trustees, and it has a threefold purpose: to care for children in need; to seek to introduce them by example and word to God's love as revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ; and to rely on God alone to meet all the needs that arise.

How did it come to have its present shape and nature?

Some communities set out to pursue a particular form or way of living; by way of contrast, Mill Grove has evolved as it has responded to the needs of others. It is therefore in some important respects an unintentional extended family or residential community. Part of the work is registered as a "children's home" for practical purposes (it means it is possible to receive children into our care without undue bureaucracy and procedures). But those who come from Africa and Asia see it as a rather typical extended family. Some who have reflected theologically see it as a way of "being church".

Although the dynamics and shape of Mill Grove have arisen in the course of its mission, there has been much careful reflection on how we live together. We have studied, and taken note of much writing about, and practical experience of residential communities. The practical examples include the many varieties of religious orders, L'Arche, S.O.S., Christian communes, and types of foster family. Alternative living requires much careful thought.

It is only if and when a group of people choose to live in a different way that the

relentless and powerful pressures to conform to existing social and cultural norms become fully apparent. In practice Mill Grove is demonstrably both a family and also a residential community that has patterns of life and activity some way beyond that of more ordinary families and households.

So while those who are part of the Mill Grove family enjoy life together without undue need for definitions, others remain puzzled by what it is and how it should be classified.

Since 1899, over 1,200 children have lived at Mill Grove, and probably more than that have been supported through its life and work. All things being equal, it might have grown into a national organisation by now, but it has resisted the usual growth and publicity. Perhaps that it how and why it has become such a radical alternative community where there is life-long commitment to every child in the name of Jesus.



Past Perspective: childhood at Mill Grove in 1940s and 50s.

We had travelled by train from the south of England, accompanied by the Headmistress of the school we had been attending. Now we stood at the door of the large house, with great apprehension. We were three little girls aged eight and seven, my twin and I being the eldest.

Our mother had left us when we were four and five years old and since our

father was fighting overseas, we had been in foster care for three years. However, the last two years with a foster family had been particularly horrific, with beatings and starvation on a daily basis. We had finally been removed by the authorities and were now facing a new and unknown situation.

The door was opened by Mr Herbert White, a gentleman with a kindly face and a twinkle in his eye. Soon we were taken to a large hall and were surrounded by about 60 other children, ranging in age between five and 18 years. It was very overwhelming at first, especially as nobody had explained what was happening to us. We soon learned that we were in a Home for motherless and destitute children.

Being thrust into an environment of community living so suddenly took a lot of adjusting. There were a lot of strict rules about such things as bed time. Everyone had a job to do and it had to be done properly. My first job as an eight-year old was to clean the girls' shoes every night for school the next day – about 30 pairs. All the girls slept in one large dormitory and the boys in another. There was absolutely no privacy at all. We attended the local schools but that could be difficult too because we were teased about being in a Home and not having as nice clothes as the other children.

But there were some good things too.

There was always someone to play with and special times like Christmas were exciting and fun. We learned to share things and to care for the younger children.

I think the most difficult thing was the feeling of rejection by family for most of the children there, despite the fact that we knew that Mr White and the staff truly cared about us.

We lived in Mill Grove for ten years, and although the experience for us was in many ways positive, we found that when the time came for us to go out into the world, we were not really prepared for the "normal" way of life. Since life in a community is by necessity run by strict rules and regulations, learning to make your own decisions was very stressful.

But I would not wish to change the experiences of my life. Community living teaches you to be tolerant of others and makes you understand that there are so many who have at least as difficult a life, if not worse, than your own. And being raised in Mill Grove, I learned that God is above all and can take you through every difficulty if you but trust Him.

COMMUNITIES FOR THE DISABLED – L'ARCHE INTERNATIONAL

It is normal and important for children to leave their families at a particular moment of their life. Usually this happens more or less smoothly and one's favourite dish or the compassionate and open ear of a mother or a father are good reasons to return home from time to time. Otherwise, one enjoys the newly gained freedom until the moment comes to found one's own family.

When people with an intellectual disability experience this need for independence, they and their parents are at the same time forced to acknowledge the difficulties that they might have in getting along with the struggles, both large and small, of autonomous everyday life.

Jean-Pierre, a long-term member of L'Arche now living in the small village of Ambleteuse in the North of France, is well aware of this dilemma: "I don't like carrots and I don't like people going into my bedroom". But whilst acknowledging his need for autonomy, he also expresses the need that there should be others who "are responsible for us, responsible for making sure nothing happens to us, for example if we are knocked over in the road".

Community-building is not always easy and a community-family can only be harmonious if each member is accepted for who he or she is. Community means being carried and yet being free to decide if one wants to let the other in one's bedroom or not. Quoting Jean-Pierre once more, community means that "decisions must be taken with the team: in principle that can mean us, that can mean the assistants who work with us".

L'Arche often sees itself as a big, international family. And indeed, many elements of family life can be found in our communities: personal involvement, a sense of belonging and above all long-term relationships that reassure, that give security and that imply, as Jean-Pierre says, responsibility for one another.

Throughout more than 40 years of

L'Arche's history, L'Arche has experienced that people with an intellectual disability enter into relationships with great spontaneity and directness. They are community-builders. And yet, often they did not choose to come into community. As Jean Vanier, the founder, said as early as 1970 in a talk given to assistants, "One of the biggest difficulties... is the division between the assistants and the assisted. Even though we say that our ideal is to create one community, in a way it is not entirely possible. We can strive for this, but in reality it's not entirely true... There are those who have come to live with us because they voluntarily chose to come and work with us and those who are placed with us..."

When it comes to founding one's own family or choosing one's community, the different realities of assistants and assisted become apparent. A Canadian assistant once said, "L'Arche is my second family, the one I could have built with a husband and some children. L'Arche does not substitute my first family, the one of my parents, bothers and sisters." Jean-Pierre says on this subject: "I don't know about getting married... I don't know if I would be able to take care of a family... I would have like to be married, but there you go... My life didn't work out that way."

Not having had an alternative, whilst others can choose, is an important gap that community members need to bridge if their community is to merit its name. This is not always easy, particularly at the beginning, but when we enter into relationships, when we celebrate, pray and have fun together, when we have

disagreements and then experience forgiveness these simple everyday life moments allow us to let go of the labels “assisted” and “assistants” and just be ourselves.

For community is not a goal in itself, it is a place where one’s favourite dish or the

compassionate ear of a friend allow us to be, to grow, to enjoy life and to become responsible for others – no matter if we have a disability or not.

INTER-GENERATIONAL COMMUNITIES

ENGLAND

I live and work amongst older people in an Anglican charity established in 1674 for the relief of the elderly poor. The site embraces a parish church, a study centre and a church primary school. I have become increasingly concerned about the place of older people both within church and society, believing that we marginalise and disempower them. Our prejudices or fears surrounding old age shape our social, theological and economic responses to those members of our community whom we should learn to celebrate and value.

I was born in a small village in the north east of England where my parents lived opposite my grandmother and great grandmother. As a family, all generations shared in the care and support of children and all our lives were richer because of it. This small community was stable because it was a place where all belonged. It was a place where older people were valued and enabled to participate because they lived and died alongside others. They were given time and respect. At my local church older and younger people worshipped together. I learned the faith at the knees of older women who devoted their time to afternoon Sunday school teaching; who encouraged and embraced young people mindful of their needs. This was, I now see on reflection, an inter-generational community where age was both important and irrelevant! In my middle years I am so grateful for these older people and I still harvest what they shared.

I have come to see the importance of building up a community that gives an intentional value to older people. We should not isolate or segregate them but always seek to find ways of valuing who they are and what they have to offer. This is especially important in our congregations where older people are so often dismissed as yesterday’s people. Older people are powerful evangelists and in many respects they are the churches’ natural spiritual constituency. When we talk of the family, let us

embrace every member regardless of hair colour, physical strength or economic productivity.

Our vision of older people is important. I believe that our faith should enable us not to collude with the attitudes that teach us to abhor ageing and exalt youth over all else. We need a vision of ageing that helps people to grow older with grace. Our tradition affirms the interconnectedness of spirit, mind and body and one of the opportunities that growing older brings is to attend to the living spirit and the essential role the numinous plays in the life of older people.

So we should ask ourselves: what is our theology and vision of ageing? How can older people help us enlarge our spiritual wisdom for living?

Finally one of the things that most distresses me about ageing is the woeful lack of pastoral sensitivity about the ageing process. Can we make

opportunities to learn alongside older people about their hopes and fears, their joys and burdens? As people expect to live longer, do we understand their physical and spiritual challenges? In this respect specialist places like my foundation can work with others in promoting the nature of well-being in old age and encouraging people to work together for the older person. We can also offer community for those who are isolated by family or circumstance.

I hope that when we reflect on the family, older people will always be part of our thinking and practice.

AOTEAROA, NEW ZEALAND

A 'smoke-free' television advertising campaign in New Zealand features prominent Maori Leaders who have given up smoking using the phrase "It's all about *whanau*", which means "it's all about the Extended Family." Maori extended *whanau* may consist of three or four or even five generations living under the same roof. Everyone lives for each other, and everyone puts up with others to some extent. In my home we currently have three generations and I feel doubly blessed to have two of my *mokopuna* (grandsons) with me, even though one of them has gotten into the habit of climbing into our bed at 5 o'clock in the morning. I don't mind really.

To the Maori people, *whakapapa* is the root of any *whanau* or family. *Whakapapa*, loosely translated, refers to the genealogy from which a family springs. Maori *whakapapa* includes a relationship to the heavens and the earth, as well as the birds and the trees, in fact all living creatures. The *whanau* is not a temporary set of relationships as many Western sociologists may propose, but a continuation of what has gone before. The Maori word for grandchild is *mokopuna*. It means 'a blueprint of my grandparents or ancestors'.

The modern world in which we live presents new challenges. There is now far less concern for *whakapapa* and far greater concern for the here and now. In the secular West, spirituality is relegated and often ignored. I am told the World Health Organisation defines personal health as a 'state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing...' devoid of spirituality. This differs from many indigenous models of health. A well known Maori model speaks of four dimensions, roughly translated as: physical (*tinana*); mental (*hinengaro*); family (*whanau*); and spiritual (*wairua*). The two views are worlds apart.

As the world continues to struggle to live together with differing faith and world views, my hope is that the Christian Church will lead the way. After all, scientists are now telling us what the Bible has been saying for a long time. Regardless of our differing faith and world views, our *whakapapa* all have the same genesis. We all descended from the same ancestor.

MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

CZECH/SLOVAKIA/UK

I have just spent a year working in Folkestone UK with migrants from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, most of whom were Roma people. Some were asylum-seekers, others illegal immigrants and others 'economic migrants'. The remit of the Church Mission Society volunteers, working alongside a small charity called Folkestone Migrant Support Group, was to provide support for these families in whatever way that may be needed.

Having lived in the Czech Republic for six years, I was familiar with the 'Roma issue' without actually knowing any Roma people myself. For my husband, the issue went much deeper than for me, having grown up in a Czech town where hostilities between the two communities, Roma and white, are quite open.

When thinking about the theme of community families, I was reminded of Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, in which he suggests three ways of becoming more like the compassionate father.

Firstly, he speaks about grief as a way to compassion. When we first met these families, we felt sadness at the way they

had often been treated in their home countries and in Britain. We saw families of six or more people living in one room, with little hope of getting a permanent job to be able to feed their children. We saw teenage children with nothing to do all day as the local schools would not accept them. These were bright children whose future prospects look very poor, as in their home countries they would often have been automatically put into a 'special school' just for being Roma, and in Britain they had not even been offered a school place. The problems which they faced often seemed insurmountable. We cried for them.

Secondly, he talks about forgiveness from the heart. The Roma people can be quite volatile, and there were times when we had to forgive individuals for hurtful things said to us. Often we were in the middle of family rows, trying to bring some peace to the situation. Often we felt frustrated that fights broke out in the evenings when we were not around to help, or surprised that a family who had sworn they would never speak to each other again were good friends again by the following week. But something which really touched us was the forgiveness they felt towards us, the white majority who had often treated them with contempt. They accepted us into their

homes with real openness and generosity.

Finally, Nouwen speaks about generosity. I sometimes struggled with giving myself totally to these people. I offered my help in one area, and they wanted ten times more than I had wanted to give. They phoned us at night when they were in trouble and I wanted to just switch off and not think about them. I started a choir with the children and I was frustrated that no one came regularly. But how often I would reluctantly pay a visit to someone who I didn't really feel needed it, and be totally ashamed by their generosity to me. People with no jobs and little money insisted that I join them for lunch or wanted to give me a lift home.

The community of Czechoslovaks in Folkestone UK was quite a tight-knit one, often because of family links or just the feeling of closeness created by the common language and situation. I feel privileged to have been a part of it and to have been able to give as well as receive from them. Sometimes the people we serve are closer to spiritual fatherhood than we would expect.

KIBERA SLUM, KENYA

In 2004, Simon Peter Waite and Moses Musumba, without knowing quite what to expect, accepted the challenge put to them to move out of one of Nairobi's more suburban areas and into Kibera, one of the largest slums in Africa. Here is a densely populated community of about 700,000 people living in a place which lacks the most basic facilities of roads, sanitation and electricity and has no permanent structures. This is a city of iron sheet, and mud and stick walls. It is this community that Moses and Simon Peter chose to enter in order to study at the Carlile College Centre for Urban Mission. From this small beginning they have worked with their local Anglican church, helped to plant a new congregation in Kibera and formed the foundations for a small experiment in community-living in the heart of Nairobi's biggest slum.

Today Simon and Moses live with seven other students, inside Kibera, learning what it means to share in the life of this community and to form a small inserted community based at the Centre for Urban Mission. It has not always been an easy experience. At times the very idea of community living has ground to a halt when valued ideals become discarded around a pile of unwashed dishes.

Five of the Centre's nine resident students moved in this September. They

are from different churches in Kenya and Ethiopia. Clearly this is no idyllic community retreat, away from the tensions of urban life. For the Ethiopians, Haile and Markos, the adjustment to this community has perhaps been the most demanding. An Ethiopian in Kibera is not a common sight. Markos thinks back to his first day in Kibera. "All I saw was a very dangerous place to stay, even for one day. Now it is different. Jesus spent time with the poor. He called us to love God and love our neighbour. I now begin to see that happening here and I enjoy being here." As they struggle to communicate with the women at the roadside kiosks in English and fragments of Kiswahili, which causes no shortage of amusement, they also discover a friendliness and welcome they had not expected in a community like Kibera. "This has become like home", says Haile. Sometimes it is our vulnerability in marginal places that becomes the very source of our strength.

All the students agreed that moving into Kibera had been tough and that it is the experience of community life in the Centre which enables them to survive. Together they share five simple rooms and study together in the evenings around hurricane lamps. Daniel is from an African Instituted Church where communal values are celebrated. He notes of life in the Centre, "We work as a community, as brothers." Being community here is essentially practical, cooking together, lending the bus fare to get to college, helping each other in their studies. But this is not community for its own sake but

a community with a purpose. For all its friendliness, Kibera also has the marks of a deeply divided community. To be a people from different communities who seek to live out a united presence in such a context is to be prophetic, incarnating the reality that in Christ the dividing walls of hostility have indeed been broken down. At the heart of this community is worship. On Wednesday evening other activities cease as the students and two staff families living at the Centre come together for prayer and bible study. "What unites us," says Daniel, "is our friendship and common values." On Sunday these students will go in very different directions. One student will be in the city centre at the Anglican Cathedral, with a congregation in the 1000s and TV screens on the pillars, while another, Daniel, will don his traditional hat and head for a small iron sheet hut where the African Holy Zionist Church meets. But in the midst of such diversity there lies the reality that true community finds its expression, not in the reassurance of similarity, nor in the congeniality of our shared surroundings, but in our convergence around the cross of Christ, seeking to live together a life that celebrates His presence in the heart of His world.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE VISITATION OF OUR LADY

The Sisters of the Visitation of Our Lady is a wholly indigenous PNG religious order, based at Hetune, near Popondetta. It was founded in 1964 by two local girls and since their foundation, the Sisters' practical, caring ministry has mainly been with women and families in need in Popondetta Town and the surrounding rural communities.

In most areas of PNG, many women have a tough life and distinctly subordinate status, the consequence of 'bride-price', cultural and customary practices, and male attitudes and behaviour. Some of the concerning consequences of this for women are the high levels of domestic violence, sexual abuse and pack rape and, especially in the Highlands, low levels of literacy and limited schooling. The growing prevalence of 'sex for cash' in a country where many communities have little or no cash economy, and a breakdown of traditional mores and behaviour, is fuelling the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. The current incidence of sexually transmitted infections is already three times the level of any other nation in the Pacific Region.

Life within the Community

The Community numbers 12 members (Sisters, Postulants and Novices). They are situated in an isolated rural setting on land gifted by the local community. It is a mile-long, lonely walk on a track through overgrown plantation and bush from the nearest road. Over the telephone, in the office in England, the Network Co-ordinator talked to one of the sisters about her life in the community. Sister Beverley joined when she was 21 and her interest in a call to the religious life was first aroused by her headmaster when she was at school. Initially she decided to devote the life God had given her to her parents, but when they died she determined to join a religious community and dedicate her life to God there. In the community, the sisters are under the authority of the Mother and household tasks are carefully shared. Prayer and worship are central to their common life. But Sister Beverley's work is also outside in the local community, primarily at The Martyrs' School which numbers about 600. Many of the students coming from the rural areas are poor and, when it is night, come to her for food and water. She also helps to sew clothes for them.

The work is hard but she is happy.

A recent report on the Community of the Visitation ends by thanking God "for the sisters' sweetening influence on Papua New Guinea Church's life" and their valuable ministry to the local community is made clear in a report of Visiting Sisters to the 40th Anniversary celebrations at Hetune:

Many people came to celebrate with the sisters: parishes, village people, ex-sisters and friends of the community. There was a Mass accompanied by a traditional dance group, feasting and the presentation of gifts to the sisters by the many groups present. During the time we were there we experienced the sisters' ministry of hospitality not only to ourselves but also to a mother of four small children who was dying from AIDS. The workers were trying to get her back to her village so that when she died the children would be looked after. There was also a man having marital troubles but his wife had joined him there and they were reconciling. A young girl came from a village as she was having trouble with

her parents. They were also giving refuge to a young man who had recently lost his mother and sister and couldn't cope with his grief in the village. Then there were the students from Martyrs' School who were on holiday but their villages were too far away so they came to the sisters. None of them can afford to pay anything but they do hop in and help. Sister Ann teaches religious education to the students at the St Margaret's School of Nursing and Sister Beverley is Chaplain to the girls at Martyrs' School. The sisters are also planning to give workshops on AIDS Awareness and Family Planning both at their home and in the villages. What I admired most about them is that they always have something to praise and thank God for. We take so much for granted.

Sister Carol, CHN, Community of the Holy Name, Melbourne.

TYMAWR, WALES A CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITY

I began at Tymawr as an Alongsider. The Alongside programme is open to any who want to spend some time with the community, to deepen their own journey of prayer. I was so surprised to find myself in a Convent but couldn't deny that I was experiencing a deep sense of belonging, of having "come home". I was struck by the rooted steadiness of the sisters and their transparency of heart. There was a lack of manipulation and a sense that all were accepted for who they were, rather than what they could give: a very healing experience. The heart of the monastic life is the call to stand before God as one is and to remain there, letting the light of God illuminate and heal; not only for one's own good but on behalf of others in their need. It's not easy to face ourselves as we are, and it's only because God's love invites us to do so that we are able to. As one experiences God's extraordinary welcome and acceptance within, so our own hearts become places of God's compassionate welcome for others.

It has been an ongoing challenge and joy to adjust to being a member of the community rather than simply an individual in the world. There is a sense of belonging, of being part of something

bigger than one's self and of shared responsibility. There is a process of learning to depend on one another and on God, but it takes a long time for the self to yield to being a part of something corporate.

When I arrived I was the youngest by 15 years and most in the community were much older. Although it could be lonely having no one else my age, it did give me the space to find myself at a deeper level. My family thought it was extraordinary that I would want to be with women of my grandparents' age and of such different life experience. The commitment we share, the covenant established between the community members and God, goes much deeper though. It is rooted in Christ and rests on God, not on the affinities between individuals.

Our monastic day is built around the four-fold Office which is said/sung in Chapel and the daily Eucharist at midday. Our guests and visitors are welcome to all the services. The contemplative dimension is as much the underlying approach to the day, as the time spent in prayer. It is above all the desire to keep God at the centre

of everything we do and by this help others to enter into the space created for God in our midst. Keeping periods of relative silence, returning to the Chapel at intervals for services and having times to be alone, all support this focus on God. These elements also hold us through the inevitable ups and downs of community life. Meeting frequently to recite and listen together to God's Word in Chapel places us in the presence of the healing and forgiving love of God and gives a deeper perspective to our preoccupations and tensions.

There is a sense in which one takes a step back from the world by entering a Contemplative Community. This is not in order to separate oneself from others and their concerns, but so as to respond as fully as one is able to God's call to engage through focusing the whole of one's life on God. All life is bound together and is held and embraced by God, who invites us in the ways chosen for each one of us to join in this work of reconciliation in love.

THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY – UGANDA

African culture is renowned for the way it cherishes and celebrates the family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and distant cousins all form part of a vast network of deeply valued family relationships. Family members are bound together by the strongest of bonds, and family loyalty is one of the most fundamental principles of African society. If a person is in trouble, it is to her family that she will always turn for material help, protection and comfort.

Such is the traditional strength of the Ugandan family. But the dizzying changes of modernity and the effects of war, poverty and the AIDS pandemic, are seriously threatening African families. Pressures like these are weakening Ugandan families to the point where many are in danger of disintegration. This current family crisis presents an enormous challenge to the Church in Uganda and all around the world. The Christian church is the family of God. As such, it is uniquely equipped both to support human families, and to provide the loving environment of a family for those whose own human families have been torn apart. The Church is called to be an inclusive family where every person can find a place of acceptance, regardless of ethnicity or social status. It is to be a place of hope and healing where people can belong and can know the unconditional love of God.

Sadly, the very Church which is called to proclaim the hope and equality that are found in Jesus can sometimes be a place of discrimination, where certain members of God's family are favoured and given many opportunities, while others, such as children and the uneducated, are forgotten.

The challenge for the Church, in Uganda and elsewhere, is to recognise and accept its family vocation. Too often the Church is so preoccupied with maintaining its status quo and running services and committees, that it gives little attention to the fundamental question of how to function as the FAMILY of God. Churches need to be places of welcome where people can pour out their troubles and share their burdens, and then also find their own place where they can be fruitful, using their gifts and reaching out to others in their turn. The current changes in family life in Uganda do not just represent a crisis. They also represent an opportunity. They are a chance for the Church to reconsider its role, focus and responsibilities as the family of God, and to become all that it is called to be. Pray that we as God's people will seize this opportunity!

The joy in sponsored families is to see how God changes extreme misery to jubilation. Perusi (left) whose husband left her with ten children, five of her own and five from her co-wife who also died a year later, says, "I have learnt to trust the Lord. He has put a smile on my heart and I now work as church warden, which service I do with all my heart. My children come with me to clean the church every Saturday because we know the one we serve has been faithful." The elder daughter Jennifer who out of desperation dropped out of school and has added two children to the family said "When Dad died everything was bleak, and I decided to be stubborn, but God has been good, and Mum has accepted me as I am".

J. Muhindo

PRAYER

Eternal Lord God,

Enfold us into the mystical and loving community of the Blessed Trinity; Reconcile us within the family of your Church;

Help us within our own family relationships to bring the light and grace of true community;

Strengthen all community families in their mutual acceptance, kindness and well-being;

through Jesus Christ,
your Son our Lord.

Amen

Revd John Bradford

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**THE NEXT FAMILY
NETWORK NEWSLETTER
is to be on the theme of
Slavery: Past and Present.**

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