

Visiting Bonny Downs

‘Stability may be the virtue that 21st-century Christians most ignore—and the virtue we are most called to embrace.’[\[1\]](#)

The notion and discipline of remaining in a place is a centuries old tradition within the Christian faith. It has found numerous expressions from that of monastic injunction, to the compassionate command of church leaders who encouraged believers to remain in towns afflicted by the plague, in order to minister to those who were sick and dying.

The commitment to place is manifestly illustrated in the creation of a parish system in an older period, but even in more recent times, by those who have a gathered church ecclesiology who can usually name and describe “their patch”. As Christianity has come under pressure, especially in areas of urban poverty, that commitment has been tested and stretched. Sometimes the stretching has led to a breaking and a failure to remain.

The phenomenon of ‘redemption and lift’ which leads the children and grandchildren of those converted in working class communities to quickly and naturally become part of the middle classes, is ascribed to the Christian emphasis on hard work, thrift, education, leadership experience and a conviction that the future is full of hope and possibly manifest destiny, has been well observed. In many situations that process has been beneficial to the churches that fostered the process.

But in poorer neighbourhoods, that same phenomenon has resulted in a process of a continual loss of members, as converts, often within a few years of their conversion, see their future and possibly hear the call of God, as taking them away from the church and the community in which they first found faith. This reality is usually very discouraging to local churches as they witness their brightest and best leaving the church for another location, creating instability and pressure for those who remain.

In some nations, this phenomenon is not confined to particular localities within cities and towns, but can impact whole regions. I have spoken to many in the former East Germany who have experienced the frustration of seeing a regular stream of able converts migrating to West Germany, partly as a consequence of the opportunities that have arisen through their very conversion. Creating stable community in those circumstances becomes difficult if not impossible.

To ‘remain’, to be present, to witness, to form an oasis of stability in a world of constantly shifting commitments and relationships, is indeed, as our quote above suggests, a counter cultural and possibly a prophetic action. It attests to the possibility of relationships of fidelity lived in a community and that in turn radiates a continual hope.

A few years ago I sat at table with one of the monks from the Taize community. He described to me how many young people returned to the community year after year and were amazed to find the same members of the community still present. That was particularly true of the presence of

Brother Roger. For most of his ministry he would sit down and talk with many visitors, especially the young. But in his latter years, he could not manage the physical effort of many conversations. He could only walk amongst the visitors and communicate love and welcome with a simple touch – his hand upon head or shoulder. For most that was enough, they did not need his words, they needed to know he was still there, in the same place, rooted and present.

It is unusual in late modern Britain for any family to remain for five generations in a single place, especially when that place is perceived as poor in economic terms. It is even more unusual for families to remain when their Christian faith offers many opportunities to leave and find new avenues for service and the expression of faith. The wider Borough of Newham in which Bonny Downs is located has experienced huge change because of migration. It is arguably one of the most diverse areas in terms of ethnicity in the whole of the United Kingdom. Many white British families have moved out^[2] and for that reason too, the decision to remain, to provide stability and continuity with a remembered past is remarkable.

It is one thing to stay and live in devout isolation amidst change, it is quite another to find creative ways of connecting with a changing community. The story of a church that is growing is a heartening one. The growth of a church in a difficult situation can sometimes produce a siege mentality, one in which enough growth to survive is seen as sufficient. The Bonny Downs story is different. Through the community association and the willingness to worship in the association building, to see that new location as the place of service and witness, this takes courage. Leaving the familiar surroundings of an older church building and indeed making it available to other congregations for worship requires a vision for mission.

But even service to a community can sometimes become simply a device for attracting people, often the needy and dependent, into church. A deeper engagement with a community requires a creative, reciprocal generosity.

While I was visiting Bonny Downs, I heard a story about a fence that was erected around the sports field. The fence was needed to stop balls going into the surrounding gardens and possibly even doing damage to adjacent properties. After the posts had been positioned one resident made a complaint. She invited one of the leaders to come into her living room and witness the impact of the post on the view from her window.

It was a small matter in one way and it would certainly have been possible to ignore the complaint, especially since moving the post would have cost money and for a cash-strapped community associated, would have been something of a frustration. The complainant was not powerful and had little community influence. Nevertheless the post was moved. These ‘small accommodations’ as Lord Glasman expresses it, are vital if we are to create community as compared with offering amenities.

The activity and imagination required to foster creative connections with a community, are enhanced and given authenticity by the willingness to remain. Community requires stable relationships, a consistent commitment and a memory that gives depth to the institutions that buttress such a life.

Writing about the monastic life, Jonathan Wilson-Hargrove notes ‘...part of inhabiting that living tradition of practices is choosing to stay and welcome others who come to learn the craft. In short, there is no stability without a way of life; no rhythm of life together without the commitment to stay.’^[3]

^[1] Lauren Winner in a back cover review of Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010).

^[2] The census for 2001 records 33.8% of the population as white British. By 2011 the figure was 16.7%. This represents the largest fall in white British residents, between these two censuses, in all London Boroughs.

^[3] Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), p.60f.

The image above is the Bonny Downs Community Garden, organised through the [Bonny Downs Community Association](#).