Together on the ark: The witness of intentional community

by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in the August 11, 2009 issue

I once heard a preacher say that it might have been crowded and a little smelly inside Noah's ark, but the folks inside knew it was better to be on board than not.

The same thing goes for living together in the church. Traveling together isn't always easy, but the ark saves us from drowning. And it does more than that—it gives us a space where we can learn to live together.

The new monastic community my family is part of has provided a space for Christians of different traditions to learn to live together. Our group of Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Episcopalians and Catholics has found a way to live together as a community of Christians who want to care for one another and for our neighbors around us (we've done this while remaining members of our denominational churches).

In the 20th century most ecumenical efforts were directed at getting leaders and teachers of the church to sit down and agree to statements about doctrine. These efforts made some headway, but the reconciliation at the top of church structures was slow to trickle down to the pews. What we've found in intentional community is that a life together focused on the practices of Christian faith can unite us day to day in ways that transcend doctrinal differences.

This doesn't mean that doctrine doesn't matter. All those issues that our ancestors killed and died for are important, even if a little distance can help us see their significance in a different light. And even when we come to terms on those issues, we still have other disagreements of our own. We don't all agree on how to read the Bible, the relationship between church and state, sexual ethics or eschatology. We argue about these things, and we don't anticipate any easy resolutions.

We will, in the meantime, keep washing one another's dishes. Our little community is unified around a commitment to practices like welcoming the stranger, seeking peace, sharing economic resources and forgiving one another. We have developed what I like to call a doctrine of adoption. Whatever else salvation history may mean for the church and for the world, we're convinced that Jesus died and rose again so

that we could be adopted into God's family and have time to live together, even when we disagree. While the rest of the world is rushing to prove their enemies wrong, Jesus has given us the gift of time to wait together, bearing with one another in the practice of a life together. Even when the people God has welcomed get on our nerves, we're convinced that membership in this family is a gift.

We call our community Rutba House after a little village in the western desert of Iraq. During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, my wife, Leah, and I traveled with Chris tian Peacemaker Teams to Bagh dad, believing that the way of Jesus called us to interrupt the unjust war our country was initiating. Three days after U.S. planes bombed the children's hospital in Rutba, a car in our CPT convoy hit a piece of shrapnel on the highway outside of town and landed in a side ditch. Iraqis stopped by the roadside, took our bleeding friends into their car and drove them to a doctor in Rutba. "Three days ago your country bombed our hospital," the doctor said, "but we will take care of you." He sewed up their heads and saved their lives.

For our community, that experience has become a modern-day Good Samaritan story. A good Iraqi—and a good Muslim—not only saved our friend's lives; he also showed us what God's love looks like. So in addition to our focus on practice and our doctrine of adoption, we always remember that our relationship with God depends on outsiders. We can't be saved apart from the stranger, even the stranger who seems to be our enemy. As grateful as we are for this little ark that keeps us afloat in the storms that rage about us, we can't forget that the God who invited us in has left the door open. The stranger who comes along isn't just a charity case who deserves our sympathy. She is a fellow traveler. Who knows, she may be the only one who can show us how to navigate the waters ahead.

I'll be the first to admit that the witness of new monastic communities is both imperfect and small. Ten or 20 people opting for life together in an intentional community is hardly a model for congregational life. But if I have learned anything from my Benedictine friends, it is that the monastic life, however small and seemingly insignificant, is a life lived for the church and the world.

I have a friend who almost gave up not only on Christianity but on his own life because of the dead end he reached in the conventional streams of fragmented modern Christianity. Raised by conservative missionaries in Africa, my friend knew something was wrong when he felt himself attracted to other boys. As an undergraduate at an evangelical school, he went through programs and asked for

prayer to be delivered from his homosexuality. But nothing worked. He was gay, and he knew that meant he was not welcome in the church that raised him.

Like many others in this situation, he left the church behind and set out to make a life for himself in the gay community. This was comforting for a while. He met gay Christians who were members of affirming churches. But my friend says he couldn't find anyone who was able to explain to him why his life still felt meaningless.

Almost by accident, he stumbled into a Christian community where he met people whose faith seemed different. They were trying to live their whole lives by the Sermon on the Mount. They served alongside the poor and tried to love one another. They worshiped God with enthusiasm, but their worship wasn't just a service on Sunday morning. It was their whole life together.

Maybe this was the answer, my friend thought to himself. Maybe this kind of life together, living the way Jesus taught, was what he was made for. The community's life was compelling, but he was cautious: what would they think about his homosexuality? Asking for a private meeting, he put the question to a leader in the community. The leader's response: "I don't know what all that will mean for our journey together. But I will say this: you are a gift, and we want to welcome you as one."

Twenty years later, my friend is a leader in that same little community. He says God and the people there have saved his life. Of course, his is only one life in the context of one small community. His story does not present an answer to the homosexuality debate that threatens to further divide a fragmented church. But his life and the community that surrounds it are, I think, a sign of hope, pointing us toward a new kind of Christianity for our time. While so many of us were trying to figure out the right position on an ethical issue, a community of imperfect people had the grace to welcome another imperfect brother as a gift. In doing so, they not only saved his life; they saved their own, becoming a people that shines with the life that is really life.

Monasticism has always helped the church remember its true identity in times of rapid social change. In the fourth and fifth centuries, desert mothers and fathers sought a way to live faithfully in the newly "Christian" Roman Empire. Almost every significant social crisis since then has given rise to monastic movements in Christianity. If there's a word that a new monasticism has to offer the church in our time, I believe it's the good news that Christianity as a way of life promises new

possibilities in the tired debates between left and right. Indeed, it changes the question.

For my friend, the real question was not whether homosexuality as a lifestyle is to be condemned or embraced. That way of phrasing the question focused everything on my friend's identity as a homosexual. No matter how much conservatives talked about "hating the sin but loving the sinner," he couldn't but feel their condemnation of his lifestyle as a condemnation of *him*. On the other hand, no matter how much an affirming congregation was willing to embrace my friend as a homosexual, he still felt stuck with an identity that wasn't satisfying. Wasn't he made for something more than identity politics?

At the center of his being, my friend wanted to know who he was and what he was made for. He was saved by a little community that offered him a new identity: he is a gift from God whose whole purpose in life is to serve God with thanksgiving in the messy relationships of common life. I pray for a church that can help all of us know what it means to receive our lives as a gift and be transformed by the refining fire of others whom we love as if they were God's gifts, too. I'm grateful for little communities that carve out space to experiment with what that can look like in our time.