Advancing the Gospel Together: Reflections on Missional Orders and Other Religious Associations, Old and New

by Evan B. Howard, October 23, 2012

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10:5-15)

With these words, Jesus founded the first Christian missionary Order. There have been others like it ever since. But just what *is* an "Order"? What is a *missionary* Order? What makes an Order different from a monastery or a voluntary association of Christians who have common interests? More importantly what are some ways that committed Christians can "order" themselves appropriately today, appropriating the wisdom of the past in ways that support the mission of God on earth here and now? These are the questions I will address in this essay. The outline for this essay was originally developed as a seminar for the 2008 gathering of InnerCHANGE, a Christian Order Among the Poor. That gathering explored what it might mean for a group of Christians to call themselves a missionary *Order* today. I was invited to facilitate a couple of conversations addressing the historical perspective, and prepared an outline to that end. However, I never presented what was on the outlines. Both sessions turned out to be open "Question and Answer" sessions and my outline was laid aside.

More recently I have been approached with similar questions about the nature and structure of Orders, only now with the added need to distinguish Orders from other religious societies and voluntary associations. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to revise the outline developed for the earlier conversations into an essay, and to add to this essay a treatment of some of the different kinds of groups through which Christians structure themselves to serve Christ. After clarifying a few definitions, I will give a brief history of Orders and missionary Orders in the Christian tradition. Then I will briefly introduce a few other organizational forms through which people have advanced the Gospel of Christ together. Finally, I will offer some reflections on the place and possibilities of intentionally developing and overseeing missional groups today.

Definitions: What is an "Order"?

Often, when you open a dictionary of the Catholic Church and look up "orders," you will find information about "holy orders" or "ordination." You will learn the regulations governing the life of priests and deacons and other members of the hierarchy of the Church. In order to learn about an "Order" in the sense described above, you must look under "religious orders." Believe me, its complicated. The fact is, there are all kinds of distinct groups of Catholics who want to seek God together with the official approval of the Church. Monasteries, religious societies, oblates, Orders and other groups are all identified as "institutes" of the Church. Religious institutes are identified as a subcategory of broader forms of association. Thus, on the one hand, the term "order" only refers to a small collection of groups with a particular kind of designation, structure and canonical approval. To find out more, keep reading. But on the other hand, the term has morphed over time and now is used more generally to refer to lots of different groups.[1] While my historical summary covers the origins and development of formal missionary Orders, ultimately it is this broader understanding of Orders and other types of association I will be exploring here in the present essay.

A Brief History of "Missionary Orders"

For the sake of making sense out of the complex history of religious communities and missions I will simplify the material: summarizing select institutions within the Western Church up to the sixteenth century, treating only two Roman Catholic expressions in the modern period, and offering a few reflections on Protestant organizations. My hope is that after a select survey of the history and forms of mission/devotion-focused institutions, we may be able to more intelligently reflect on the development and oversight of similar forms of association today.

1. Earliest Christian Forms

We read above the Rule of life which Jesus provided his followers as they set out on their first mission in Matthew 10:5-15. We can identify, in this passage, their:

- Mission (target audience – lost sheep; message – kingdom; tasks – preach, heal . . .),
- Distinct *charism* (itinerant and charismatic generosity aimed at those who listen)
- Rule of life (no payment, simple possessions, housing, clothing and so on)

Simon Tugwell, in his introduction to the spirituality of the early Dominicans, writes, "Our Lord himself was a wandering teacher, in the best (or worst, as some thought) tradition of Galilee, and he sent his disciples out to be itinerant preachers. In the early centuries of Christian history we find evidence of this tradition continuing, and even hardening into a *rule* of itinerancy, *obliging* some people never to settle down anywhere. It is probable that this is the true beginning of Christian monasticism, long before the more settled monasticism of Egypt."[2] In the second-century *Didache*, we find reference to wandering prophets. The descriptions of how to treat these itinerants gives the impression that they adhered to a common standard of simplicity and contribution to the host household. While some see in this merely an approval of Christian virtue, I see hints of a common framework of religious life. If we take the references to the community of widows in 1 Timothy 5 as an early form of "monastic" or more cloistered religious life, a form which continued to develop in the early centuries of the Church. Thus both "missionary" and "monastic" Orders have roots in the earliest centuries of Christian history.

2. Patrick and the Celts: A Monastic Missionary Movement

Whereas the Pachomian sodalities were communities of "withdrawal," the renewal which began with fifth century St. Patrick of Ireland was a movement of "advance." Patrick, a nominal British Christian, came into the vibrancy of faith while a captured slave of the Irish. After an escape and some years in England and Gaul, Patrick again left for Ireland as a monk and bishop to be a fisher of men and ambassador among the Irish. The achievements of this mission? Patrick himself mentions that he baptized "all those thousands," that he "ordained clergy everywhere," and that the people of Ireland have become "a prepared people of the Lord." Indeed, "An ancient document called the *Annals of the Four Masters* reports that Patrick's mission planted about 700 churches, and that Patrick ordained perhaps 1000 priests. Within his lifetime, 30 to 40 (or more) of Ireland's 150 tribes became substantially Christian."

Following Patrick's lead, people like Columba (also known as Colum Cille 521-597) , Columbanus (d. 615), and Aidan (d. 651) evangelized the Picts (Scotland), Anglo Saxons, and Europe itself, "saving civilization," as author Thomas Cahill claims, and creating a society ordered around monastic life. Their style of missionary practice and evangelism has become a model for many today.[3]

The Bangor monastery during the time of well-known leader Columbanus, for example, is described by Tomás O Fiaich as a collection of round wooden huts within an enclosure, with only a few communal buildings: the church, the refectory, scriptorium and library. The daily fare was bread, vegetables and water. The dress was a long white tunic with a coarse hooded outer garment and sandals. The monks assembled frequently in the church by day and night for the canonical hours. They engaged in all the necessary agricultural labours from the sowing to the harvest. Their learning was centered on the Sacred Scripture, but Bangor was one of the Irish abbeys where a high standard of Latin learning was attained and perhaps a smattering of Greek as well."[4] (107)

These Celtic Christians were not only "monastic," they were also missionary. Celtic monasticism was a powerful missionary monastic movement But were they a missionary *Order?* NO. The formal notion of an Order does not appear in Western Christian history until the eleventh century.

3. Cluny and the origins of the formal "Order"

During the reigns of Pepin the Short (751-768) and Charlemagne (768-814), the Church permeated the Roman Empire. There were monasteries everywhere, becoming important cultural centers in Europe. But each monastery was founded and governed by their own abbot in their own way. Some of them adopted Benedict's Rule of life, while others adopted a form of the Rule of Columban and still others drew elements from any number of Rules. The Carolingian rulers sought greater uniformity, as did some of the abbots themselves. Ultimately Charlemagne requested the abbot of Montecassino for a normative copy of the Rule of Benedict. He then sent this Rule to all the abbots of his empire and demanded that they adhere to this Rule of life. Thus the Benedictine Rule was imposed upon all the monasteries in the Roman Empire. Constitutions clarifying the legal details of their lives were developed in this period as well.

As these monasteries prospered materially, they often degenerated spiritually. Local feudal lords gained control of monastic properties and positions, and the spiritual health of many communities floundered. Reform came from the monasteries themselves. Historian Juan Maria Laboa writes:

In 910 William of Aquitaine decided to build an abbey at Cluny "for the salvation of his soul," and he linked it to the "patrimony of St. Peter," that is, the papacy. The popes granted Cluny a spiritual exemption. . . In virtue of belonging to St. Peter, Cluny remained safe from the interference of bishops and feudal lords, and this autonomy, which broke the chains of the previous feudal system, was the basis of its greatness.[5]

William chose, for the abbot of Cluny, a learned man named Berno. To foster the pursuit of God, abbot Berno instituted a very austere form on Benedictine life. Furthermore, the constitutions of Cluny required that all sister monasteries to be subject to the authority of Cluny. This created a family of monastic houses all related to each other. Thus, "the true religious order here emerges in the now accepted sense: a congregation of aggregate houses, centrally governed, with its own "mode" or interpretation of the rule set forth in its own constitutions, or bylaws. Thus Cluny can be called the first modern order."[6] The medieval monastic "Order" involved three principle elements: (a) freedom from local ecclesiastical and secular interference, (b) a single rule to govern a network of houses, and (c) a single abbot having ultimate authority over all the related houses. Cluny was the birth of modern Orders, but was Cluny a *missionary* Order? NO. The foundation of the first true missionary order(s) was not to take place for nearly three hundred years.

4. Francis and Dominic

By the end of the twelfth century the monastic culture of Europe was once again suffering from corruption. Peasants experienced hardships due to poor management of lands, economics, churches and ideas: from the landed aristocracy, from the rising merchant class, and from the abbots and bishops who were too often enmeshed in their affairs. Ecclesiastical elites were ridiculed and various sects emerged (like the Waldensians, Cathars, Albigensians and the Humiliati) preaching a gospel of personal salvation and resistance to Church authority. Many representatives of these sects lived simply, denouncing the pomp of the ecclesiastical culture. Into this climate were born Francis of Assisi (1181/2 – 1226) and Dominic de Guzman (c. 1171-1221). Francis was the son of a cloth merchant. He enjoyed the party life with his friends and then set out to gain recognition as a knight. God had other plans, however, and through a chain of events Francis found himself abandoning all his connections with with family and wealth, choosing to imitate Christ's life of complete dependency and itinerant ministry.

Soon others followed him and after a meeting with the Pope in 1209, the Franciscans received provisional approval as an Order. Dominic de Guzman had religious training in Spain and served as an assistant to a bishop Diego during a mission to the Albigensians. There Dominic witnessed first hand both the dangers of their heresy and their penitential lifestyle. By 1207 Dominic had decided to devote himself to a life of preaching, traveling from place to place in voluntary simplicity proclaiming the gospel of the Catholic faith.

Francis and Dominic pioneered forms of "mobile monasticism," taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, keeping the divine hours of prayer insofar as was possible,–and linked with the Catholic Church in orthodoxy, recognized clerical status, and religious observance–and yet were fully identified with the populous through their voluntary poverty and open ministry conducted not in the church or monastic cloister, but wherever they went. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran council, in an effort to curb the proliferation of religious sects, ruled that no more Orders were to be formed and that only the Rules of Benedict, Augustine, and Basil would be accepted. They made an exception, however, in the case of Francis, due to his conversation with the Pope in 1209. The Dominicans adopted the Rule of Augustine and modified the constitutions of the Premonstratian Canons to suit their purposes. These two Orders changed the shape of consecrated life (more properly termed "religious" life) forever.

Both the Dominicans and the Franciscans were true "missionary Orders." First, they were formal religious communities: taking vows, in formal relationship with the Church, committed to living a lifestyle distinct from ordinary secular existence, incorporating a rhythm of prayer, and so on. They were also Orders in the technical sense. They were networks of separate houses or communities which were governed by a single Rule and ultimately by a single leader. They were not subject to the whims of local bishops or secular authorities. Finally, they were also *missionary* Orders, explicitly committed to spreading the Gospel beyond the walls of their cloister and their homeland. The mission impulse was present in the very beginnings of both Orders, as the earliest members separated from each other to embark on missionary journeys. Both were committed to living the apostolic life, though in different expressions. Dominican Simon Tugwell writes:

Both respond to the same notion of *vita aapostolica*, based on the same New Testament texts, but for Francis the emphasis is on *vita* (this is the term he uses for his Rule), and apostolate is invisaged at first only as a potential part of the whole way of life, on a par with any other occupation, and later, after the victory of the clerics, it is envisaged as growing out of and being validated by the whole way of life, whereas for Dominic the emphasis is rather on *apostolica*, and his followers are fired more by the ideal of the apostolic job, defining the apostolic life more in pragmatic terms, justifying the way of life by reference to the apostolate rather than the other way about; literal adherance to the details of the text hardly comes into their view at all.[7]

The Dominicans were named the Order of Preachers. Along with the Franciscans, these two "mendicant" communities formed the first official missionary Orders in the Christian Church. Doley Moss summarizes their influence: "The mendicants were the first great battalion of the Church Militant: born that the contemplative life might be reborn and bred to combat hate with love and ignorance with knowledge. Through the friars, every quarter of the world would be flooded with new spiritual energy. Because of them, compassion began to temper the harsh extremes of the time and an unprecedented awareness of religion quickened the spiritual life of the people."[8]

5. The Society of Jesus – the Jesuits

We now move from the foundation of the first missionary orders to a couple of modern expressions. The Jesuits, like the Franciscans, were adopted by the Church as an Order in spite of the regulations banning new Orders. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that "the Society [of Jesus] ranks among religious institutes as a mendicant order of clerks regular, that is, a body of priests organized for apostolic work, following a religious rule, and relying on alms for their support [see the Bulls of Pius V, "Dum indefessae", 7 July, 1571; Gregory XIII, "Ascendente Domino", 25 May, 1585]."[9] Needless to say, this kind of approval involved some wise maneuvering by Ignatius of Loyola, their founder. Doley Moss writes,

When the "Company" decided to become a religious order the plan at first met with some opposition from its own members–as it was contended that they would have to adopt an ancient rule and put aside many of their revolutionary methods–but it was at last approved. Constitutions which would safeguard the principle of their being "all things to all men" as "auxiliaries" of the Holy Father, in a fourth vow of "Special Obedience," were carefully composed by Ignatius. He assumed command of the Society of Jesus, Order of Clerks Regular, from his headquarters in Rome in 1540, from whence his soldiers spread, literally, over the earth.[10]

Thus, like the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the Jesuits were founded as a missionary Order: tied to the papacy and consequently free from local influence, regulated by a single Rule (their Constitutions and Norms), and governed ultimately by a single leader (called a General).

The Jesuits took further steps from identification with their monastic predecessors. They eliminated the "chapter" meetings within which a great deal of monastic decision-making had been conducted. Positions were appointed and the Order was structured hierarchically so as to facilitate mobilization for mission. They also eliminated the obligation for communal recitation of the divine office. Frequent return to the common house for prayers distracted from ministry. "We are not monks! Nadal [one of the early Jesuit leaders] proclaimed continually. If flight from the dangers of the world was the reason so many joined the Society, he needed to disabuse them of the mistaken notions about the character of the Society that this motivation seemed to imply. He needed to instill in them a new way of thinking about life in a religous order. For Nadal, in fact, the essence of the monk was 'to flee the company of other human beings.' But the essence of the Jesuit was to *seek* their company 'in order to help them.'"[11]

The Jesuits saw their mission in four major categories: (1) the ministry of the Word in preaching and other forms, (2) the administration of sacraments, (3) works of mercy, and (4) the formation and administration of schools. They were active in recruitment, aggressive in deployment, intentional about formation, and committed for life. Consequently, the Jesuits exercised an extraordinary degree of influence in the modern Catholic missions. To this day they are well-known for their contributions to spiritual formation, to education, and to the mission of the Church worldwide.

6. Daughters of Charity (also known as the Confraternity or Sisters of Charity)

In August of 1617 Vincent de Paul was preparing for Sunday mass when a parishioner brought him news of the illness and destitution of a family in the parish. He mentioned their need during his sermon and that very afternoon people responded to the need with surprising generosity. Vincent de Paul, sensing their desire to care, mobilized them into a voluntary society who then regularly offered assistance to the sick or indigent of their neighborhood. They called themselves the Confraternity of Charity. During this time Vincent developed a relationship with Louise de Marillac. She had grown up in a religious house, was refused entrance to the Capuchins, married and gave birth to a son. Her husband grew sick and died in 1625. Vincent became her spiritual director, especially through correspondence. Indeed, we possess seventy-five letters written from Vincent to Louise between 1626 and 1633. By 1629 the spirit of the Confraternities was flagging. They needed support and encouragement. Vincent sent Louise to visit and give support. Later Mademoiselle le Gras collected a few of these women into her house and formed an informal community. At this same time Vincent had the confraternity organized into a formal society. Thus, "In 1633, together with St. Louise de Marillac, he founded the Sisters of Charity, the first congregation of women who were not enclosed, and who took no final vows; they were entirely devoted to the care of the sick and poor in a way that was impossible for the Ladies of the Confraternity of Charity."[12] They were missionaries, servants of the poor and sick. They were not, however, a formal Order, because they were not formally "religious." They only took simple (renewable) vows and were not as strict about other things. But the approach of Vincent and Louise to consecrated life ended up being the right thing at the right time. Women were eager to leave the cloister and enter the streets of missions. The Daughters of Charity opened the way. As Louise Sullivan put it in her portrait of Louise de Marillac, “The form of consecrated life begun by Vincent and Louise with the Daughters of Charity has become the norm for most religious congregations.”[13]

Other Forms of Missionary Association

The Daughters of Charity opened the doorway for the development of a wide range of forms of mutual association for Christian mission and devotion. Third Orders, Oblates, and other types of organizations have existed for many centuries, but in the past few centuries, the primary growth in Catholic missionary activity has been through either the Jesuits or through less strict forms of association. Indeed the Jesuits themselves (and other Orders such as the Theatines, Ursalines, and the Oratorians) began as religious societies and received formal approval as an Order later. Sorting out the precise distinctions between confraternities, associations, societies and so on is unimaginably complicated; it is really the task of a canon lawyer. consequently my aim here is only to sketch out a brief portrait of the various kinds of associations through which devotion and mission are collectively pursued in the Roman Catholic community today, and in the process to provide a sense of what kinds of factors distinguish one from another.

1. Pious Unions, Societies and Associations

Perhaps the terms used to define the broadest range of collective organization for the purpose of Christian mission or spirituality are “pious union” “pious society” or pious association. In the Code of Canon Law, associations of the faithful were called *piae uniones* (plural of *pia unio*, in English, “pious union”): “Associations of the faithful which are established for carrying out some pious or charitable work are called “pious unions”; if they constituted as an organic body, they are referred to as “sodalities.””[14] Pious unions are distinguished from other Catholic associations by having an explicitly religious purpose (usually advancing piety and charity). They also must be formally approved to be recognized by the Church. Some well-known pious associations are: Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the League of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

2. Confraternities

A brother/sister hood is an association with a slightly higher level of association and mutual commitment. Originally they were corporate groups that organized the devotional and charitable life of lay believers around the model of ritual kinship. In the medieval period the administration of confraternities followed the pattern of the local guilds, and most guarded their autonomy from the clergy. In larger cities, confraternities organized members according to devotional preference, trade, nationality, neighborhood, or charitable activity, and took on extensive social responsibilities as a result. Some developed into networks of confraternities, through which a number of local expressions were organized. They were the lay face of the church, and most of what passed for social welfare was organized and run by confraternities. Common meetings, common service and devotional activities, and common values characterize the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of the Church. Each Confraternity organization has a set of rules or by-laws to follow which every member promises to live by. Even though the Catholic Church works in harmony with the confraternity, these rules are not religious vows, instead merely rules set up to govern the confraternal organization. The Confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine are a couple of examples.[15]

3. Religious Institutes

The phrase “religious institute” is used to identity the strictest layer of collective organization within the Catholic community. Technically a religious institute is “a society in which members, according to proper law, pronounce public vows, either perpetual or temporary which are to be renewed, however, when the period of time has elapsed, and lead a life of brothers or sisters in common.”[16] It is a society of men or women approved by ecclesiastical superiors (bishops or the Holy See) whose members are under vows, either temporary (to be renewed) or perpetual. An institute must have its own constitutions to determine the mode of government, rights, and duties of each. Religious institutes can be further divided into two groups: (1) “Religious Orders” – institutes which take solemn vows, which vows may be taken only by orders directly approved by the Holy See, and (2) “Religious

Congregations" – religious institutes in which members take only simple vows, either temporary or perpetual, publically professed (received by the superior in the name of the Church) and to be renewed (if temporary) except for unforseen obstacles. Those under diocesan approval, not papal, come under this category.

4. Churches

Needless to say, all of these forms of collective relationship for the purposes of advancing the kingdom of God differ from that of a local church, congregation, or parish. In a church not only are there no vows professed by the members or formal rules to be followed (outside of the Gospel itself into which we grow as we are able), but the membership itself is intentionally composed of people of all age groups, and all levels of maturity and and all degrees of commitment. Whereas Orders and Congregations often limit their membership by sex, churches do not. A local congregation does not focus its mission around a limited focus (as, for example, with associations that are organized for the promotion of charity to orphans). A local congregation has the entirety of the gospel as its call. Associations, Confraternities, and Orders are specialists. Churches are generalists. These are the basic distinctions used by missiologist Ralph Winter to differentiate what he labeled "modalities" and "sodalities."[17]

A Note on Protestant forms of "Missionary Order"

Protestants did not follow Roman Catholic practice in developing religious institutes of service to Christ characterized by intentional communities, vows, and formal Rules. And yet at times different groups would appear that bore significant similarity to the religious institutes of the Catholic tradition. Consider, for example, historian Kenneth Scott Latourette's description of the Methodist circuit riders of the American frontier:

Methodist growth was predominantly in the rural sections and on the frontier, both North and South. This was in part because of the Methodist organization. The circuit plan which Wesley had devised for England proved singularly adapted to the rural and frontier areas of the United States. Under Asbury and the bishops who were later given him as colleagues were district superintendents. Under the district superintendents were circuit riders. As the name indicates, the latter were assigned areas to cover. Over some of these the route might be as much as five hundred miles. It had to be traversed by whatever conveyance was possible–on horseback, by canoe, or, where these failed, on foot. The circuit riders spoke wherever they could gain a hearing–in log cabins, court houses, school houses, taverns, or in the open air. Asbury wished them, like himself, to remain celibate, and while they took no vows, and some married, for the most part in effect theirs were the three obligations of the Roman Catholic monastic orders, poverty, chastity, and obedience. There was that about them which strongly resembled the Franciscans in the initial days of that movement. Like the latter they preached and sang the love of God in Christ.[18]

Ralph Winter speaks similarly of Protestant missionary William Carey's "Serampore Brotherhood" active in India in the early nineteenth century. He speaks of a tight-knight group of missionaries making their decisions in a somewhat consensus-based format, a group that was locally organized rather than controlled by a home-based mission society. But more than that, the Brotherhood was about lifestyle, rekindling the values of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Winter then reflects on the implications of orderish structures for the work of missions today:

Thus it is probably a truism that any new movement which "gathers" (e.g. *selects*) highly committed followers during its founding period will in its first generation reflect a higher level of commitment and motivation than it can maintain later on if its membership is gradually replaced by its own non-selected children growing into membership. The result will be a nearly inevitable "reversion" to a nominal community calling itself Christian, but reflecting a social tradition rather than a "believers church." The Roman orders, in so far as they did not build on biologically perpetuating families, were at least potentially able to continue to be selective not only in the period of their origin but in successive generations." He proclaims regarding the Catholic missions that "the orders were the steel rails which carried the Christian tradition through much of the latter part of the first millennium."[19]

While Protestantism avoided the development of formal religious institutes, only approximating them in select instances, they made heavy use of voluntary associations and societies. Sunday school societies, Bible societies, mission associations, societies for charity to the poor, the Young Men's Christian Association, and on and on: the voluntary association was a chief means of missionary energies particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We call many of these organizations "para-church" organizations today. Some of them require greater levels of maturity or commitment than others. Some of them have been segregated by sex. While many of these societies and association would resemble Catholic associations and a few of them might resemble confraternal networks, few of them expect the level of mutual co-existence, the duration of commitment, and the rigor of lifestyle demanded of many religious Orders.

5. Summary and Evaluation

God's people accomplish God's mission with a variety of forms of mutual support and organization. In addition to the basic framework of the local church, Christians have found reason to collect themselves into voluntary associations, brother/sisterhoods, and religious institutions. Each type of organization offers distinct benefits to its members. Each type of organization also limits the possibilities of mission and community in distinct ways. There are a number of factors that have influenced the designation, development and oversight of these different groups:

- **Numbers** – Is this a small association of around twenty people who can informally manage their life and mission together or is this a large organization, requiring greater specificity of organization and oversight?
- **Geographical spread** – Is this a local confraternity or association, developed to meet the needs of a particular population or district, or is it a network of intentional communities spread throughout the globe?
- **Approval and authority** – Does the reasonable sphere of influence exercised by a group demand approval and oversight by second- or third-tier authorities or does the expected range of influence demand approval and ultimate oversight by the highest levels of authority. Does the representation of one group by another require certain approval and oversight requirements?
- **Specificity of task** – Is the group committed to a task that is best seen as intimately connected with the work of a local congregation or the service of the diocese or larger Church? Or perhaps is the work of the group intentionally specifically identified in a way that sets it apart from the general work of a local congregation or larger Church, demanding particular training, commitments, membership requirements and the like?
- **Membership and commitment level** – Who is allowed to join? Men and women? Old and young? People of certain training and background? What maturity level is expected of members? Are husbands and wives expected to make identical commitments, or can people join the association much as individuals would volunteer with any charitable society? How long a commitment is expected, encouraged, or permitted?
- **Shared life** – What do the members share together? Is is simply a matter of regular email encouragement between members and a few common disciplines? Are there common meetings? How often and for what purpose? What kinds of shared values are expected? Where is there freedom to differ? Why? Is there a common Rule of Life with expectations regarding possessions, use of time, relationships and such? Are members expected or encouraged to live together in intentional community?
- **Regulations** – What are the expectations regarding lifestyle? Which most para-church organizations are organized around the apostolic task, few are ordered around an apostolic lifestyle. To what kind of Rule of life does the group adhere? What kinds of exceptions to these Rules are there and why?

These questions are not comprehensive but merely serve to give a heuristic sense of the kinds of factors involved in structuring networks of various religious groups. The point is to see that there are–and perhaps always will be–different ways of structuring our life to promote the life of Christ around us. The breadth of involvement possible in a simple charitable or evangelistic association itself limits the possibilities of an organization that expects targeted relocation into distant pockets of poverty. Membership in the Jesuits requires a tremendous level of training and formation. Involvement in the YMCA requires very little.

Now, having reviewed the history of religious orders and scanned the spectrum of missionary association, we are now prepared to consider the development and oversight of such organizations today.

Advancing the Gospel Together: Reflections on the Development and Oversight of Missionary Associations Today

The question before us is this: how best to develop and maintain various associations for the purpose of advancing the Gospel of Christ. This question, of course, begs the question of just what *is* the Gospel, but space prevents my treatment of that question. Suffice it to say that I consider the Christian Gospel to include a transformation of all that we are as individuals and corporate entities.[20] Consequently "mission" or "advancing" the Gospel is not only a matter of outreach (though it includes this), but also involves who we are and how we live. Advancing the Gospel together is a matter of both proclamation and demonstration by means of life, word, character, power, and more. It is the deliverance from inner wounds and it is deliverance from injustice. As God sends the Son to restore wholeness to the world, so we–as also "sent"–set ourselves to be instruments of a similar wholeness of life.

Consequently, my first point is that we need all kinds of social groupings to promote the advancement of the Gospel. The Gospel is too big to be served merely by the planting of new churches, or by the addition of a few networks of new friars or new monastics. True, we need more churches, more monasteries and more friaries. But we also need volunteers offering spare time from a regular nine-to-five job to tutor disadvantaged children at the local Boys and Girls club. We need partners and practitioners for the Christian Community Development Association who will offer time, talent, or treasure–or who will take the further step of relocating into an under-resourced neighborhood. We need those who will volunteer with Young Life, offering their homes as places of meeting for Club meetings, Bible Studies and other events. We need more Daughters of the King, an Anglican/Episcopal sisterhood whose members which devote themselves to prayer, service and evangelism. The kinds of advancement-of-the-Gospel-together (is *Zusammenevangeliumweiterentwicklung* a word?) we can — and even *should* — offer is limited only by the boundaries of our own creativity.

That being said, it seems that there is a distinct movement, particularly among some Protestants, toward a recovery of something resembling "religious" or "Ordered" life. Ralph Winter wrote in his article on William Carey's Major Novelty:

I believe that Protestants have underestimated the Roman orders, and that after two centuries of extensive Protestant mission experience, it is high time to recognize these unusually committed fellowships or "orders" for what they are, namely a marvelous invention allowing old and pluralistic church traditions to express their internally varied vitalities in non-conflicting patterns. Perhaps even more important, however, the order type of structure, with internal control, allows consecrated teams of apostles/missionaries in decidedly different field situations to make decisions on the field with the advice of, but not the control of, an external board of directors.[21]

Similarly Viv Grigg, missionary pioneer and director of the Urban Leadership Foundation, writes: This failure in the great Western mission thrust is, at its roots, ultimately not strategic but spiritual. A church trapped by cultural perspectives on affluence rather than adopting the biblical stance of opposition to the "god of mammon" has exported this into missions. We must return to the pattern of Jesus, who chose non-destitute poverty as a way of life, took the time to learn language and culture, and refused to be a welfare agency king. We must return to the way of the apostles and of the wandering friars who have been the key to the conversion of the world in generations before us. Non-destitute poverty and simplicity must again become focal in mission strategy… we must thrust out groups similar to the devotional communities of 12th century preaching friars, or the wandering Irish monks that converted Northern Europe between the fifth and ninth centuries, before the Catholic hierarchy gained control there. In our case we must send communities of men and women, married couples and singles, with commitments to live as the poor among the poor in order to preach the kingdom and establish the church in these great slum areas… it would be wise for mission directors to create new orders of men and women called to the poor.[22]

Finally, John Hayes, founder of *InnerCHANGE: A Christian Order Among the Poor* , writes, "I believe that "order," as a word, idea and structure, is an example of a helpful tradition that needs to be reimagined to see Kingdom mission advance sustainably among the poor. "Order" is a powerful word that connotes mission, mystery, discipline, distinctive values and longevity. Negatively, "Order" conjures images of unsmiling severity, authoritarianism, celibacy and elitism. Partly because of this mixed review and partly because orders tend to be overwhelmingly identified with the Catholic Church, Protestants, for the most part, have not formally explored orders as a vehicle for mission. In today's world, however, I believe that the word "order" should be interpreted *structurally* rather than ideologically. In this generation, we hold the opportunity to recapture "order" in its internal dynamics of support, not in its caricatured dynamics of restraint. In this way, a new generation of evangelical Protestants and Catholics alike can embrace a valuable tradition and reappraise and redefine it selectively for their contexts. The dictionary defines the kind of order I am discussing here as "a religious community living by mutual consent according to the principles of a common rule of life." This definition affords contemporary missionary leaders much latitude in forging fresh expressions of the word "order."[23]

These quotes are only samples of a growing sentiment. There is an increasing hunger for order(s).

The point of our exploration here, however, is not to document this call to order(s) but to consider how we might wisely facilitate the development and oversight of new orders and other similar associations.[24] The development and oversight of new "orderish" expressions is encouraged even in the practice of these new expressions. For example, Ivan Kauffman's discussion of the fifth "Mark" of the twelve Marks of new monasticism, "Humble Submission to Christ's Body, the Church," encourages alternatives for meaningful connections between local communities and the larger Body of Christ [25] Groups like InnerCHANGE are embraced within a larger mission agency such as Church Resource Ministries. Groups like Urban Neighbors of Hope have connections with a particular denomination such as the Australian Churches of Christ. The Nurturing Communities Project and Shalom Missions Communities are active in fostering healthy intentional communities. New expressions of association, community, and mission are sprouting up everywhere and many are looking for support. Again, the question is how we might best foster this support. In this last section of my essay, I will offer a few reflections based on my experience with new expressions of together-advancement and my reading of the history of Christian spirituality.

1. Bless What Emerges from the Grass Roots

Quite often some of God's greatest movements arise not from the planning table of the leadership, but from a crazy idea of some "nobody": Saint Patrick, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, William Carey, Phoebe Palmer, Toyohiko Kagawa. Each of these people fostered new groupings of people to advance the Gospel in their own context and each experienced their own tensions from ecclesiastical authorities in doing so. My encouragement is that we give as wide a permission and encouragement as reasonable to grass roots pioneers of new ideas. True, there will be some wild stuff popping up; even some weeds.

But better to wait to sort that out until later when things are more mature and we can see more clearly what is a weed and what is a wonderful new kind of fruit. Governing bodies can empower young expressions of the Gospel to become what they could not be without the help of the governing body. They can also quench the life from a movement, smothering the fire with expectations and regulations. I believe that the institutionalization of monasticism in the fifth and sixth centuries brought order to a wide range of diverse expressions. I also believe that one consequence of this institutionalization was the loss of a certain "wildness" characteristic of the desert traditions (some of which were not in the desert at all). I grieve that loss. Similarly the papal authorities granted Francis and his disciples permission and enabled them to multiply and preach throughout the world. I also believe that they effectively quenched a radical edge characteristic of Francis and some of his earliest followers. The work of a governing or overseeing body is a contemplative work: over-seeing, just watching to see what the Spirit of God is doing.

We must allow new expressions to emerge in their own time. I would recommend that new expressions wait to seek formal oversight until they reach a certain level of growth: numerically, organizationally, and spiritually. Governing bodies can offer consultation and wisdom, but need not demand formal connection until the time is ripe. Particularly with “orderish” expressions which may involve common living, long term commitments, and Rules of life, I think it is valuable to let a group grow from association to confraternity to Order in a natural process. Yet there will always be those who wish to start right out with radical commitments to simplicity and the like. Some groups just hang out together for years and then slowly develop a Rule of life. Other groups start with a Rule and learn to settle into it (and to revise it). I suspect that for the most part–those who make the greatest commitments are in need of the greatest level of oversight. Possessions, housing, basic relationships and more are at risk. Nevertheless, on the whole I encourage giving grass roots expressions as much freedom as possible.

2. Permit Variety, Promote Purity

My second point is that our aim, in development and oversight, is the advancement of the Gospel. And since this Gospel is both broad yet bounded (doctrinally, ethically, spiritually and so on), my encouragement is that we concern ourselves to permit variety and promote purity. Most of the “permit variety” part of this has been covered above and so I need not repeat this here, other than to say that part of the richness of the church is the blessing of various different forms of association and ordered living. The diversity of charisms expressed seem to reflect together the beauty of the richness of the Godhead.

But there is purity to be maintained. Often young groups fall apart with a failure of purity. Relationships are fractured by the impurity of petty strife and factions as expectations come into conflict. Authentic connection with the Christian Gospel is abandoned due to members distancing themselves from the faith. Personal habits or behaviors may threaten the health of the community as a whole. Or the group may have a desire to model themselves as a “monastery” or an “order,” and yet their practice falls much short of their language. We must permit variety, but we must also promote purity. One of the purposes of a governing body is to nourish a group into the health of the Gospel, so that it may be advanced through them. This will require both a heart toward the group and an eye to the Gospel.

3. Care

Ultimately what we are looking for as we develop and oversee churches, associations, Orders and the like, are relationships of care. I take the word care very seriously and do not have the space to outline my notion of care in detail.[26] I see care as an intentional, loving, self-giving for the enrichment of another. In care we offer what another does not have (and we do) in order to change something about that other. When we offer what we have to others without love, we simply rule them. When our offer is itself governed by love it becomes an expression of care.

What does a governing body have that emerging communities, churches, Orders and such do not have? A number of things. Whereas a small missional community may have all kinds of exciting vision, they may not possess sufficient equity to procure property to facilitate the vision. Similarly network with people who could be valuable for the group’s vision, administrative staff and resources, and communication framework might be available through a larger organization that might be unavailable in a small association. Another resource that governing bodies often have to offer is wisdom. Frequently mission agencies or denominations have member care staff who specialize in the care of people who give themselves to missions. They often have a broader perspective than individual teams or even particular Orders, since they are one step removed from the details of the local context. In some cases, the governing body also carries a certain level of authority: power to permit, to regulate, or to prohibit either aspects of a ministry or the ministry as a whole.

A good governing body should, like a good abbot, offer what they have in a spirit of care. Care is offered as the fruit of habitual prayer, attentive listening, sincere interest, and a desire to serve. It is one thing for a governing body to give lip service to these virtues and practices. It is another to live them out.

4. Develop Appropriate Structures

A care-full governing body, then, will be attentive to provide those structures that best facilitate the advancement of the Gospel both in general and for the particular missional association. It is ever so easy to address problems of relationship with policies and structures. This must be avoided. Governing bodies must learn how to be active peacemakers, modeling and training groups how to manage their own complex relationships and not trying to “solve things” the easy way through issuing directives. Appropriate structures are ones that are suited to the actual relationships of the people involved.

Some organizations are only in need of oversight and encouragement from a local church. Their scope of ministry is best served from within this context and formal connection to a large overseeing body may burden both the local ministry and the overseeing body. Other associations may be small but widely dispersed. Again, we must ask what is the most appropriate means of providing care for this kind of group. Still others may be larger, more complex, and spread throughout the globe. Appropriate care will require particular attention.

Some groups are associations, gathering periodically to perform a particular mission task or to nourish relationships. Some groups are more like confraternities, sisterhoods and brotherhoods of people who encourage mutual formation and mission within a certain range of common values and practices. Other groups are more like formal Orders or monasteries, living together in geographic proximity, having frequent common meetings for a variety of purposes, making common decisions, undertaking some form of common commitments or a Rule of life. And some are churches, opening their doors to all comers at all ages at all times. For some groups the mission is most important. For others the lifestyle is most important. For still others, the community is most important. Governing bodies will need to be sensitive how to support and network these different kinds of expressions. Some groups will need relationship with other groups of their kind. At the same time, however, it is important not to give some particular label undue respect such that groups think they need to become “that” in order to be accepted, approved, or affirmed. It is easy for one group to think that they have to look like “that” group in order to really be “new monastic,” or an “Order.” Wise oversight will allow different groups to become what they become for the sake of Christ, facilitating the responsibilities and relationships that best promote the advancement of the Gospel both in the small and in the large perspective. Wise oversight will give voice to the groups overseen in the process of making decisions. The honest hearing-through of visions and concerns by all parties involved in a given matter, the open discerning ear to the guidance of God, and the public demonstration or the fruit of the Spirit and the characteristics of love will go far to promote the Gospel within appropriate structures of oversight.

Finally, appropriate structures of development and oversight will offer what they have when and where it is needed. It is true that a given denomination, mission agency or other body may be able to offer financial resources, administrative framework, consulting staff, networking connections, and formal accountability. But the fact that these resources are available does not mean that they must be employed in every case. One group may flourish best if only periodic consulting is offered. Perhaps later on other resources may be needed. Perhaps a governing body could think in terms of layers of association with the governing body, wherein a greater commitment *to* the body would permit a greater flow of resources *from* the body. Lots of alternatives are possible here. The point is to identify the appropriate structure for each case. It takes a little care-full review, but I think at this point in the history of the development of new expressions of community and mission the results are best when each case is considered individually rather than in terms of a “policy.”

Conclusion

I am excited to the the emergence of new expressions of Christian life, community and mission. I have longed for this development for some time. I am particularly excited about the development of new expression of new “religious life”: intentional communities, boiler rooms, friars, hermitages and the like. Consequently, I am eager to see that these new expressions not collapse due to lack of care nor are smothered due to inappropriate care. It is time to take steps of nurturing groups into maturity, be they associations, confraternities, churches, or Orders. May God grant us the love, the care, and the wisdom to take these steps.
