**Whatever Happened to "New Monasticism"?**
Evan B. Howard

Meeting Shane Claiborne face-to-face in 2008 was one of the most significant moments of my life. You see, in 1992 while I was in California attending a charismatic congregation, I had a stimulating conversation with a friend of mine about planting churches. That night I had a dream in which I saw a "bishop," dressed in all the bishop's finery, laying hands on people who one-by-one knelt in front of him. They walked up, received the bishop's hand of blessing, and departed to one side. I somehow knew they were joining religious orders. And then I saw this hippie come up. This bishop refused to lay hands on him or bless him. I was appalled. I remember my response as if it were yesterday. I walked up to the hippie, put my arm around him and said, "Don't worry, I'll help you." And then I woke up. That next morning I went to my friend and told him directly: "Rob," I said, "I'm not going to be planting churches. I am called to plant monasteries." At that time in a charismatic environment, we had no idea what this meant. Needless to say, I was deeply touched when thirteen years later I saw Shane's dreadlocked face on the cover of the September 2005 *Christianity Today* magazine along with the title "The New Monasticism." And it was incredibly powerful in 2008 when I visited The Simple Way, spoke at one of their Schools for Conversion, and was able to meet Shane at his home and tell him my story. I have been poking around at monastery planting ever since.

But whatever happened to "new monasticism" since then? I have a friend who hangs out in Christian community circles who declared that "new monasticism is dead." Another colleague expressed the sentiment that "new monasticism is old news." I pondered those statements. New monasticism is dead, is it? Old news? Needless to say, this question had some relevance for my own sense of calling. And then I had an idea. Why not find out what has happened? Why not contact those who were featured in that first article in 2005? Why not look a little wider and a little later? Just where has "new monasticism" traveled in the past twenty years? In this essay I share my discoveries. As you

will see, my conviction is that when we trace the journey of new monasticism(s), we find that the path is more interesting than we might have thought.

**New Monasticism moved on and never changed**

I was able to interview nearly every person mentioned in the original article. It felt like I was hosting a family-reunion one-by one. One thing I learned in the interview process was that new monasticism has both moved on and never really changed.

Take Shane Claiborne and the Simple Way. Shane (now married with a child), and a few other "relocaters," still live in the same place with a number of "remainers." The Simple Way community ultimately developed from an intentional community house into a little village on the North side of Philadelphia with about a dozen properties on the same block. As Shane told me, "over the years, we evolved from a community *in* the neighborhood to a community *of* the neighborhood." The Simple Way recently celebrated 25 years of community building, and has helped launch multiple nonprofits focused on affordable housing, gun violence, immigration, and youth mentoring. Much of Shane's work these days is devoted to the ministry of Red Letter Christians, a media and movement-building organization dedicated to inspiring Christians to emulate Jesus' love, mercy, and countercultural way of life.

Chris Haw—who as a college senior wrote what he calls the "manifesto" which served as the foundation of the Camden House community is now a professor of "peace studies" at Scranton University and director of a prison education program. Timothy and Cheryl Heatwole-Shenk joined the Camden House community shortly after it began and are still there as leading members of this active community seventeen years later. Due to the growth of families (all of which can no longer fit in any one of their small row homes) and the challenges of the pandemic, some of the common meals, prayers and other formal community practices have become less common, but the living relationships are still alive and well. Tatiana Heflin, who visited the Camden House community and later was an intern at

Reba Place Fellowship (mentioned in the 2005 article) ultimately—along with her husband Chico Fajardo—moved to Ford Heights, IL and have remained there in solidarity with their low-income neighbors for fifteen years.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. and his wife Leah still live in the Walltown neighborhood of Durham, NC with the Rutba House community twenty years after its foundation. The community has never had never more than about twelve members at a time, but over the years they have welcomed over one hundred people within their homes. Jonathan's teaching and writing work since 2015 have increasingly emphasized socio-political engagement, and he is currently employed (working remotely) at Yale University's Center for Public Theology and Public Policy.

Finally, there are those that Scott Bessenecker identified in the 2005 article as "new friars": youth "taking up residence in slum communities in the same spirit that I find in the start of the Franciscans and the early Celtic orders . . ." The five groups of international mission teams Scott introduces in his book *The New Friars* all exist today. Some have more members now than they did twenty years ago, though some have less. Nevertheless, as Scott insisted in my interview, "they have an impact out of all proportion to their size." Scott also informed me how the character of their mission has itself shifted over two decades: "from predominantly Western Christians going to non-Western places, to a position of "from all nations to all nations": poor in one location relocating to another poor location in order to encounter Christ there."

Yes, a number of the communities founded in the wake of the "fad" of new monasticism have closed their doors. Yet nearly all of the key founders are still in the same place, doing nearly the same thing they did twenty years ago. Perhaps many of those original founders view themselves now more as communities *of* the neighborhoods and less as communities in the neighborhood. Yet – It is only natural after twenty years to find yourself more embedded in the neighborhood and for leadership to arise from within. It is only natural that some folks might be qualified and called to wider and more public ministry while others desire to hunker down and just love neighbors. It is only natural that youthful

idealism (or perhaps what a 2016 *Christianity Today* article on new monasticism named "legalism") softens into a less formal structure of community life. Perhaps in one very important sense, new monasticism never really "died" or left. It did just did what we all do, it grew in continuity with what was already emerging. And yet . . .

**New Monasticism Was Always Bigger Than New Monasticism**

This is one of the inadvertent mistakes of the 2005 article. It mentioned only a few examples, and consequently the phrase "new monasticism" became associated with a small segment of a much larger phenomena. In his 2008 *New Monasticism: What it Has to Say to Today's Church*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove mentioned a few kindred spirits like the Bruderhof, Jubilee Partners, and Jesus People USA, introducing a group of communities that ultimately became the Nurturing Communities Network, a collection of over 60 communities that recently held its largest gathering ever. Frankly, none of us had a clue just how widespread things really were. I can offer only a few examples here in addition to those Jonathan mentioned. The Alleluia community (Augusta, Georgia; founded 1973; currently around 700 members), is one expression of an entire network of charismatic covenant communities. The Northumbria community (founded in the late 70s and 80s), well-known by the publication of their devotional guide *Celtic Daily Prayer*, has grown over the decades into a globally dispersed network of followers. The "boiler rooms," begun in England and celebrated in the book *Punk Monk* (2007), are also now scattered throughout the world. New Monasticism was never a single stream that fizzled out down the hill. There have always been multiple rivulets flowing. Some dried up, others grew into streams. Many are interconnecting now more than ever.

But what must be noticed, if we are to ask the question, "Whatever happened to new monasticism?" is that this loose, wide, collection of networks (including Simple Way and friends) changed the face of "Protestant" Christianity. Jared Boyd, founder of the Order of the Common Life (2012) spoke to me of this era with the analogy of a well-known Olympian I had followed when I was

young. In the 1968 Olympics, Dick Fosbury and his “Fosbury flop” revolutionized the high jump. In spite of criticism, Fosbury pioneered a new and effective way of accomplishing what so many longed to do: jump higher than anyone else.

Similarly, this ad hoc collection of Christian experiments functioned as a “Fosbury flop” for the development of new forms of Christian life. These were all Protestants who held to some list of “12 marks” (or six “commitments” or five “values”) bearing some kinship to traditional monastic Rules of Life. Jonathan Wilson’s introduction to *Schools for Conversion* speaks of their longing for a new St. Benedict. Don Swenson, in his account of the Alleluia community, states that their membership covenant is similar “to vows that monks, friars, and sisters make to a religious order.” The Northumbria community is explicit in their aim to recover the heritage of Celtic monastic spirituality. Furthermore, social values were often mentioned in the lists: justice, racial reconciliation, care for the environment, peacemaking. This mix of elements—Protestants, forming experimental communities, valuing not merely personal but social ethics, and explicitly borrowing from monasticism—was unique. Consequently, they served as models for what would come after. As Jared says, “I might not do things now exactly as they did then, but we could not do what we are doing now without what they did.” Sure, folks still do it the old way, but for many, things will never be the same.

**Introducing *New* New Monasticism**

So, whatever happened to new monasticism? It just kept doing what it valued and growing in the process. It was really part of a much bigger movement, and that movement altered, in some measure, the shape of Protestant Christianity. Yet, as we all know, things have changed since 2005. Many of the “blighted urban sections,” the “slum communities” mentioned in the 2005 article have become the gentrified (and expensive) neighborhoods of 2025. What we called “incarnational ministry” in 2005 smells a bit patronizing today. People foster intimate community and mobilize action virtually as often as through face-to-face gatherings these days. The fear of missing out—or more currently, the

fear of engaging—makes commitment daunting to say the least. Yet the longing for more, for some kind of whole-hearted, lifestyle-embodied, distinct-from-the-world-yet-loving-the-world Christian faith (monasticism?) is as pervasive and as strong as ever. Shane Claiborne called it in my interview "running after Jesus like a most precious pearl." Scott Bessenecker spoke of people today who are "uncomfortable with their comfort." David Janzen, Reba Place Fellowship member and elder statesman of new monasticism described "a God-hunger addressed by this movement." These kind of statements touch monasticism at its heart: beyond the forms to the substance. Which then, leads us to the question, how can we do "new monasticism" today?

We can ask again – whatever happened to new monasticism? It has given birth to a whole new generation of experiments. *New* new monasticism.

Again, I can only offer a few examples of what I am observing these days. One form people are experimenting with is campus residential life. Students at Whitworth University's Emmaus Scholars Program live in intentional Christian community in the Emmaus Houses near the campus in Spokane, Washington. They share a weekly routine of communal prayer and communal meals. They engage in acts of service, receive one-on-one mentorship from a professor, and reflect theologically on what it means to be a follower of Jesus in today's world. Students in the Candler Formation Communities at Emory University live in distinct houses, each house writing and practicing its own Rule of Life coordinated by a student rector and a faculty chaplain. The Eden Fellows at Abilene Christian University engage in community living, course work, and participation in a regenerative culture conference. Some student groups have followed the lead of Francis and Edith Schaeffer's L'Abri Fellowship International (which currently oversees seven residential locations worldwide). The Residential Scholars Program affiliated with the Center for Christian Study located at the University of Virginia includes consistent mentoring relationships and opportunities for serious theological reflection. These programs are reviving the late medieval understanding of small "colleges" of Christian students attending larger universities: empowering—in the context of a community with common commitments,

rhythms, and practices—the training of Christians who are prepared to make a difference in the church and in the world.

Something is also happening in Europe. In 2023 I visited the New Monastic Roundtable (NMRT) in Switzerland. The NMRT (started in 2018) is more of an event than an organization, but the folks who put on the event—and those who attend—are growing into a friendly network of intentional Christian communities. There were about 20 different communities represented at the 2023 gathering. The NMRT resources a group of predominantly residential communities. Sandra Hofer, whom I interviewed, stated explicitly that the intimacy of residential life was critical for the kind of Christian fellowship these folks desired. One community provides a place of prayer in the midst of urban Zurich. Another welcomes neighbors to experience Christian communal living, something many secular Europeans find astonishing. Another community is exploring creative uses of a convent that they share with a dwindling group of Roman Catholic sisters. And still another has bought a farm and is exploring the blending of contemplative space, agriculture and ministry to troubled youth. Lakshmi Piette's podcast *Dwelling Place* introduces us to a number of interesting expressions, with particular attention to the UK.

And then there are the dispersed expressions. Jared Boyd, founder of the Order of the Common Life (OCL), established the Order as an experiment within the Vineyard movement. Now people are joining not only from the Vineyard but also from Todd Hunter's Anglican diocese, the Church for the Sake of Others, and more. Like other expressions, OCL affirms a Rule of Life, summarized in four rhythms and 12 commitments. Yet, most of their life is lived within a wide network of online gatherings. Though they do not currently have a residential expression, they are seriously exploring what a 21st century urban monastery might look like. Likewise, the Order of the Mustard Seed (OMS – named after the religious community founded by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in 1716, with fresh seeds planted in 1999 and fuller development after 2007) calls itself an international, dispersed, lay-led order. They are officially recognized by the Church of England as a lay ecumenical religious

order. OMS has members in over forty countries and expects that by 2025 they may have up to 1000 members. I could tell you more of the Northumbria community, the Iona community and more, but you get the idea. Dispersed formation expressions are a "thing" now.

What I see, when I visit and talk with representatives of *new* new monasticism, is a continuity with, and yet development from earlier expressions of new monasticism. True, some communities are currently located in "blighted urban settings," but they might also be found on university campuses or dispersed in global virtual communities. Whereas the 2005 article highlighted communities emerging in the United States, I sense a stronger international character to the newer expressions. I remember attending one virtual new monastic training session where people from eight countries were represented. Both "new" and "*new* new" monasticism(s) value formation. Yet the more recent experiments are making formation a priority. And yet—and perhaps because of this sense of the need for every person formation—I find the newer expressions giving attention to offering steps or "doorways" that are readily accessible. We have seen *Celtic Daily Prayer* and *Common Prayer.* Now we see "Lectio 365," *Practicing the Way,* introductory virtual classes on contemplative prayer, university dinner discussions, and open prayer spaces in alleyways and financial districts. Finally, I see the newer expressions more explicitly drawing from Christian monastic history. Campus houses are writing Rules of Life, Prospective members of the Order of Common Life proceed through postulancy and novitiate stages, as some European expressions are re-purposing convents.

**Whatever Happened is Still Happening**

We have discovered that new monasticism—even the new monasticism described in the 2005 article—is indeed not dead. It lives on in blighted urban settings and in the hearts of those who still seek to become "ordinary radicals" (to use Shane's phrase) in contemporary society. Furthermore, new monasticism has always been a much wider collection of experiments and associations. Charismatic covenant communities, ecumenical "Catholic Worker" houses, Anabaptist intentional communities,

dispersed support groups and more: there have always been multiple rivulets flowing. Yes, some have dried up, but others grew into streams, and many are interconnecting now more than ever, perhaps forming a powerful river. Furthermore, *new* new monasticism(s) are, I think, *new* news, as I have communicated above as well as in a recent *Christianity Today* article on "Living Like a Monk in the Age of Fast Living."

The fact is, my dream-career of planting monasteries is probably just beginning. What happened to new monasticism is that through those early experiments a few "pioneer" seeds were planted. These seeds quietly grew along side many other similar seeds and now a lush and diverse garden is beginning to grow. A little ecosystem of new monastic expressions is coming to life. I look forward to helping water a few flowers and planting a few seeds of my own.