

# Celebration LINK

May 2008

## Ageing gracefully

It was an interesting exercise to try to analyse my feelings on settling down to write this article. For some reason I felt distinctly uninspired, although for me the written word usually flows fairly easily. One factor, I knew, was a surfeit of reading the religious press. The endless narrative of religious politics becomes insufferably tedious after a while, a story of bigotry, power games, judgement passing, headline grabbing initiatives, opinions and sour grapes.

Definitely not something to warm the heart and inspire the soul. Turning thoughts to the great themes of the day, I almost had the same response. Back in our early community days, we were all into banning the bomb and ending apartheid. Not so long ago it was about dropping the debt for poorer countries. Today it is all about global warming and the duty to reduce carbon footprints.

Vital as these causes are, often serving as a rallying point for Christians of all types, there is something about them that feels a bit like a bandwagon. If they ceased to exist we'd have to invent one. It's as if they have a purpose wider than the specifics of the issue in question. They help to tell us what it means to be a Christian, in a world where there is no agreement on what that involves, where the church is often irrelevant to most people's needs and where Christians look little different from anyone else, by and large.

But maybe what I was feeling was just the weariness of age. At the heart of

Christianity – and of the spiritual impulse to embrace community – are the transformation of lives and commitment of one's life to God. Both of these take place more easily in the idealism and energy of youth than in the tiredness and worldly wise maturity of later years – which is why it is important to establish faith and spiritual formation as early as possible. But that raises a question about age. Is age, in the Christian world as much as in the secular, more or less synonymous with out-of-date-ness and irrelevance?

When I gave up my original career job to work full time in community, I knew I was burning my boats. The idea that I could go back into it ten years later, if the need arose, was absurd: by that time even those who had remained in that employment were potential candidates for redundancy. The prevailing sentiment in many areas of employment was that you were over the hill at 45. Younger workers were cheaper and more likely to have fresh ideas. If anything, that tendency seems to have accelerated over the years.

In life generally there is an obsessive aversion to ageing. Botox and tummy tucks, gyms and slimming diets, health clubs and the need to keep up with fashion, whether in dress or gadgetry, are all indicators of the desperate desire to stay young. Maybe health is part of it, but even in that there is a large element of trying to stave off the inevitable for as long as possible, to remain physically strong and mentally alert like the young person we once were.

Most of the discussion about an ageing population has to do with the looming problems of care. But there is also a curious phenomenon when everyone is trying to stay young: it almost feels as if there are too many of us. In the Christian world, the young have their own causes and agendas; the older generation, who spent their youthful energy banning the bomb or in some other cause, still want to be seen as relevant even if they no longer have the same creative drive and the causes for which they gave their lives are long gone.

Age is the enemy, agelessness the holy grail that guarantees our value in a world in which even the scrap heap has become an inconvenient problem. What is lost in all this is the beauty and wisdom of age, the fruit of all that life has taught us and which (in a forgotten era now, it seems) we were supposed to pass on to those who came after us.

The irony is that the world does not need old-young people; it has enough young people as it is. What it needs is the wisdom of age. But when it no longer values insight and memory, the essential uselessness of the over 60s causes older people to react in various ways. Some start dying in little ways. They no longer get out and about or maintain social networks. They can't be bothered with the challenges of the day. Others have an opposite reaction, like the baby boomers who seem to be creating almost a parallel society of their own, spending their savings in enjoying

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Above: the group that met at Minster Abbey. Back row: Dave Porter, Ray Humby, Robert King, Howard Page-Clark, Phil Bradshaw  
Front row: Jane Porter, Val Humby, Margaret Bradshaw, Jodi Page-Clark, Sue King, Jeanne Hinton

## On retreat with old friends

Recently we spent a weekend away with a group of old community friends at Minster Abbey in Kent. The purpose was simply to be together, to share where we were in our life's journey and to seek to hear the Lord for the future.

For some it had been many years since there had been an opportunity to gather in this way, listening to one another as we used to do in times past. We began by sharing in turn how we came to be where we are today. Later, we tried to identify some of the features that had meant so much to us in community life.

Primarily it was an experience of family, of being known, heard and accepted for who we were. We talked about a number of principles central to the life, e.g. it is more important to be loving than to be right.

We were also able to talk honestly about the pain involved in some of our past experiences. Acknowledging it is also part of re-owning the past, which makes it possible to move on together.

A scripture that was shared was 'how I have longed to share this meal with you.' This gathering was all about a meeting of hearts. It was not about setting up some new organisation.



Above: the chapel at Minster Abbey. Below left: Phil, Dave, Howard

We were very fortunate with the weather, which was sunny and warm for the most part. The Abbey, whose foundation goes back to the 7th century and which still exhibits the ruins of a Norman tower, has beautiful grounds that make for a very peaceful environment. In the evening we attended Compline with the sisters.

We had no set agenda, so there was plenty of time to relax and catch up with each other - sometimes learning things we didn't know before! Phil and Dave were surprised to discover they had a great deal in common in their early history, both knowing people and places in childhood who had been important and formative in their lives.



## Leading an Alpha weekend

In November Phil & Margaret went to The Hague to lead an Alpha Course weekend on the Holy Spirit. They were there at the invitation of Roland and Thea Price, old friends of the Community from Cholsey days, though for many years now they have been based in The Hague.

Studying the course material meant re-connecting with the roots of our community experience, which of course came out of a vibrant movement of the Holy Spirit in the 60s and 70s. It made for an interesting and powerful experience for us as leaders - whatever it may have meant for those on the receiving end!

On the Sunday morning Phil preached at the English church in The Hague, a lively church with several services to accommodate the large congregation. As it was Remembrance Sunday, he preached on 'he is not the God of the dead, but of the living.' In other words, the message was about living the resurrection life of Jesus today.

Margaret & Phil greatly enjoyed the trip and renewing their friendships.



Above: Roland & Thea Price with Margaret & Phil Bradshaw at the English church in The Hague. Below: Val & Ken Ramsay at Ken's 90th birthday celebration.

## 90th birthday celebration

Ken Ramsay celebrated his 90th birthday in April. Among many guests from Lee Abbey and Gosport days were Phil & Margaret Bradshaw, Sue & Robert King and Janet Barker from Ken's community connection. Phil gave tribute to Ken's life in the Community.



Above: Dave and Margaret led the worship

We were conscious that many others from our past would have loved to be with us for such an occasion. For now, though, we are planning to meet again in the autumn, when Bill Farra and May McKeown will be with us for their annual visit. Whatever 'the way forward' means will hopefully become clearer then.

Finally, we all gave a special thank you to Sue, who had organised the weekend - by no means an easy task, juggling with venues and diaries.



Above: Jane, Sue and Jeanne share a laugh

Luckily the sisters were able to produce an electric keyboard, so we soon got into the swim of worshipping again with Dave and Margaret leading. It made an impression on at least some of the other guests - one said she thought it was the radio!

In addition to sharing and worship, we also had the obligatory celebration with a bit of wine flowing (it was nice not to have to think about driving). Fun and laughter have always been an essential ingredient of our community life.



themselves rather than leaving assets to their children or thinking about what sort of legacy they are leaving behind.

There is little room for reflection when all that matters is the present moment. Again, the irony is that the fear of age causes many people to become old – because they can only measure themselves against the capabilities of the young. They fail to see that life is a process, and older years are a different kind of life, a life that is theirs for the making. It is not the age of pioneering or frenetic activity, but it is the right time for contemplation and reflective wisdom.

This is the time when we think about what our lives have been about and what we have become over the years. I recall that at Post Green there was a bench inscribed with a famous quote from T.S. Eliot: 'The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' It is a time for sifting and understanding what has been really important. 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?' wrote Eliot in *The Rock*. 'Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' This is the stage in life where we look at all we have received and decide what we really believe.

But why should that be of interest to anyone else but us? The function of the older stage of life is to distil what has been good in the past and make it available as a resource to the present. It will not look the same today. Just as the Olympic ideals are interpreted in a modern way yet owe their existence to the founders of the movement and those who kept those ideals alive over the years, so in spiritual terms we hand on a vision of what the life of Christ will have to be about if it is not to be buried by the priorities and ideologies of the present day.

Age, then, is a sign, not of irrelevance, but that we hold in trust the things that are really important in spiritual life when all the hype and activity of today

cease to command the attention that they currently do – provided, that is, that we ourselves keep true to those values and are always seeking to expand their treasury of wisdom. The causes for which we originally gave our lives are then but the first fruits of the gift that we ultimately leave to the church and to the world.

This is not an easy lesson to learn. In community life it is easier to dwell on past glories than to distil the wisdom of all that God taught us as a gift for those still in the thick of battle. In recent times we have been seeking to do this, interacting with those on the margins of the church or in other community traditions, looking at what we have in common and discovering how the same lessons are being learned as others too reflect on what has been important in their lives and ministries.

In many ways our parish involvement over the last few years has been an extended time of such reflection. Continuing the chemistry metaphor, it is as though parish life has been a necessary medium through which to distil the experience of community, which by itself is just raw material, undigested in many respects and not contextualised in the ordinary life of the church.

Just recently, as the article inside this issue describes, we have gathered with others from our community past to do some of this process of reflection together. This is not about dwelling on the past; the purpose is not reunion, pleasant though such events may be. It is about trying to put into words what it was that touched us so profoundly, and seeking to be faithful to what God did among us in the circumstances of today, as in varying degrees we begin to enter an older stage in life.

Many of those who supported us 25 or 30 years ago have continued with us over the years. Some are old now and some have died. The Community itself is no longer the big, vibrant body that it was, with a worldwide ministry; today

it is small and lives a more measured existence. Yet in spiritual terms where it is today is like T.S. Eliot's place from which we started. It is the place where we discern what has been really important, what has been at the bottom of all that journeying, upheaval and sometimes frenetic eagerness to follow the Spirit.

Hopefully those who travelled with us will also catch something of this. In one sense we are still travelling together; in a good way, we trust that our spirits are still young. But this is also a time for understanding what it has all been about. The gift of age is also something that we trust Celebration still has to offer.

**Phil Bradshaw**

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### News of the book

Phil is now hoping that his book will be published in 2009. It is entitled 'Following the Spirit: the story of the Community of Celebration.'

The first part is a factual description of the stages of development that the Community went through in order to become the religious order that it is today. Then there is a discussion of various topics, giving the characteristic 'community' perspective. Finally, there is an attempt to convey the sense of theological journey, undertaken especially by those who came out of a charismatic-evangelical background.

Betty Pulkingham has written a foreword, and (at the request of the publisher) Phil has written an introduction describing his own spiritual journey up to the time he joined the Community.

Christian publishing is a very difficult business these days, and the onus is mainly on the author to sell a book. With that in mind, we hope that as many Link readers as possible will buy it and recommend it. We aim to keep everyone in touch with progress.