

Re-Imagining the Church

**An exploration into the way
new shapes of faith communities
are emerging around the world
at the end of the 20th century**

Study Leave Report November 1996

Rosemary Neave

**Co-ordinator Women's Resource Centre 1987-2001
Futurechurch networker 2001 -**

**rosemary@futurechurch.org.nz
Massey Rd RD 2 Waipu 0254 New Zealand
09 432 1234**

Contents

2	Introduction
2	Some Historical Context
3	Snapshots of Communities around the World
5	Different threads of emerging communities
5	Some Things to Notice
6	Post Modernism - the many or the one?
7	Movement Building - the role of networks
8	Snapshots of some networks around the world
8	Movement Building- Solidarity and White Privilege
9	Maintaining Connections with a Tradition
10	Margin or Threshold?
11	Ways Ahead
12	Appendix

Introduction

The Women's Resource Centre has for some time been aware of a growing number of groups around New Zealand which are described variously as - new faith communities, alternative faith communities, women-church, reshaped church ... We felt that we were beginning to see more than just isolated groups, but perhaps the beginnings of a movement. Most of the groups seem to have in common that they are building on their christian origins and searching for alternatives to patriarchal christianity, while having a commitment to affirming women and women's spirituality, making faith relevant and connected to our experience, and to working for justice and care of the earth.

This study leave gave me an opportunity for some time out to read and reflect more widely on this movement, and to travel and see it in some international and historical context. I honour the Women's Resource Centre, both for it being an exciting place to work and for the opportunity to undertake this study leave. I am also grateful for the financial support from the Auckland Anglican Diocese and the St John's College Trust Board Scholarships Committee.

Some Historical Context

"The dynamic of the small community of committed christians as an expression of church renewal is as old as christianity itself. It has continuously been an element in the dialectic of the church's historical existence. Sometimes such groups have flowed into the renewal of the parent institution. Sometimes they have split from it to found another church. Sometimes they have been institutionalised as structures within the parent structures, as in religious orders... The continued vitality of the church depends on a creative interchange between the converted community and historical institution which both recognise the specific role of the other, in which the committed community does not become strangled by trying to replace the historical institution, and the historical institution does not rebuff the self-actualisation of community"

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Christianity and Crisis

Working for the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) has put me in touch with small groups of women and women and men working mostly from a specifically feminist perspective. In 1993 I attended the Women-Church Conference in Albuquerque along with 3,000 others, and I saw some of the shape of this movement in the USA. As exciting as this was, it was not until I read about the development of 'basic christian communities' (BCCs), that I began to make connections with an even wider context and movement. Of course I had heard a little about the basic christian communities that had developed in South America, but I started to discover a larger story.

In the post-war period, there were attempts to put the world back together - the United Nations was set up, there was rapidly increasing affluence and with the communication explosion, this set the scene for the social and political upheavals of the 60's. This upheaval was reflected in the Church in events such as the Vatican II council, the moves towards Church Union, widespread liturgical reform, increasing lay participation, contemporary music, charismatic renewal and small group movements. It was out of this ferment in the Churches that the movement that I shall call BCCs developed. In South America people like Franciscan Leonardo Boff, in *EcclesioGenesis*, and Alvaro Barreiro, in *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, tell the story of the development of BCCs in South America.

The story that is less often told is that at much the same time, similar groups emerged around the world. Ian Fraser and Jeanne Hinton document some of the history these movements in their books: *Living a Countersign: From Iona to Basic Christian Communities* and *Walking in the Same Direction - A New Way of Being Church*. I was glad to be able to access research libraries in Dunblane and Selly Oak which contained much of their source material, as well as to meet both these people.

Rosemary Radford Ruether defines a BCC as "a small, committed Christian community that seeks to unite theological and biblical reflection with social analysis leading to action for justice". Jeanne Hinton describes some of the common characteristics they have around the world as - a commitment to the marginalised, strong lay involvement and liturgical creativity. She also notes that one of the differences between them is whether they are seen as a basic cell of the Church, or as on the fringe or outside the Churches, a theme I will return to later.

More detail about BCCs is contained both in my notes and in the books I refer to, and I believe that there is much to be learned from them. However my reason for mentioning them here is both to recognise them as one of the current responses to re-imagining 'church', and to say that I believe they can be described as a first wave in the current process of reconstructing and re-imagining christian spirituality and faith community.

Some people talk of the **first wave** of feminism being the work of the suffragists at the turn of the century who laid a foundation for the revolution that happened later. In much the same way the growth of BCCs along with the changes in the Churches in the sixties and early seventies, seemed to lay the ground work for what was to follow later. They placed on the Church's agenda issues of justice and a commitment to work against oppression, along with the claim that the work of doing theology, liturgy and ministry belonged to all God's people.

Most BCC's sought to maintain their relationship and links to the institutional Church (a subject I shall return to in section seven). However as early as the end of the sixties, certainly by the seventies, a conservative reaction had already begun to set in, both in the Churches and in society, and as this increased many of the radical groups moved or were pushed to the margins, or they were domesticated.

In the 1970's a **second wave** began to gather momentum, a wave that was to build on the work of the sixties but which brought a much sharper analysis and critique of the Church as a patriarchal institution, and of the role of mainstream Christian theology in perpetuating racism, sexism, colonisation and exploitation of the earth. Along with this critique came the process of reconstruction as new theologies were born which called us beyond patriarchy to a new world - Feminist Liberation Theology, Eco-theology, Womanist Theology, Indigenous Peoples' Theology, Lesbian and Gay Theology...

And in this process of reconstruction, other new communities have been born - not often through planned programmes, but more as local responses to a felt need to re-vision spiritual communities that could empower people to live their lives and to work for justice. Many people in these groups continue to be involved in the traditional expression of Church, but these emerging groups are often the place where they increasingly feel 'at home' and empowered.

Snapshots of Communities around the World

These are small snapshots of some of the communities I had the opportunity to meet in hear about. While each of them is seeking to be an empowering christian spiritual community, each is remarkably different in how they are doing this. *Note: New Zealand examples are not included here.*

Christian Feminist Worshipping Community (San Francisco) This is co-ordinated by a former United Methodist minister, Sandi Gess, who puts a lot of energy into helping it to happen. They meet fortnightly for worship in a supportive United Methodist Church, and in between weeks some gather to plan the next service. They have links to the Centre for Women and Religion at Berkeley and often have students attending from seminaries in the area.

Small Faith Communities (San Francisco) 10 groups of 8-10 each, they are part of a local Catholic parish in a predominantly gay area called the Castro. In the 70s many gay people started moving into the area and the priest began to

introduce ideas from liberation theology. Although some people left the parish at that stage, it has grown in its commitment to the neighbourhood and is welcoming of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The small group of older women I met with felt that what is happening now is too strong to go under, even if the bishop and priest were supportive.

PostGreen (Dorset) This residential community was part of the Fisherfolk communities which emerged out of the charismatic movement in the 70s. It has undergone a lot of changes, and is engaged in several projects, from the base of its ongoing intentional community. One of these projects is called Holten Lee. In a beautiful site overlooking the Poole harbour, they have built The Barn with the needs of people with disabilities in mind. It offers respite care, relaxation, retreats especially for people with disabilities and their carers.

Seekers Church: An intentional community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour (Washington) They have a high level of commitment to be a member having 22 full members and about 70 others. The Church of the Saviour was begun in 1947, and this group began in 1976, assuming independent status in 1994. Their name was inspired by some writing of Robert Greenleaf "...It is Seekers then who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service." Three people are paid to work part-time and it is part of their commitment to shared leadership to not have anyone paid full time. One of the three is an original seeker who helps to keep the vision alive as well as being the connecting person from the past to the present.

Wimbledon Experimental Liturgy Group (London) They meet monthly on Friday nights at 8pm in a church close to a Tube station. Usually 12-18 women and men gather and they take turns organising the simple liturgy. They have been going about 10 years.

Spirit of the Lakes (Minneapolis) was set up as a gay positive Church, and were keen to affiliate to a denomination while maintaining their unique perspective. After looking at various options, they chose to affiliate with the United Churches of Christ.

Womenspace (London) this is a women's spirituality programme organised by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild. It is not a group, so much as a space, diverse and open. It is called Womenspace because the felt need was for 'space' not 'women-church' because the latter sounded too organised. Hannah and Jennifer's experience indicates that women in the wilderness of transition from patriarchal religion are sometimes quite ambivalent about community "both wanting a sense of belonging and others to share liturgy with, but also being wary (on a practical if not theoretical level) of ongoing commitment".

Holy Joes (London) meets in a South London pub on Tuesday nights and has been brought together by Dave Tomlinson, author of "The Post-Evangelical". He sees key issues for those emerging out of the evangelical tradition as: encouraging the right to doubt, to question and explore and separating the heart of the gospel from cultural trappings. The format at Holy Joes is simple and the atmosphere relaxed, people do what they normally do in a pub - drink, or smoke, participate as much or as little as they wish. They have worship evenings "Quite contemplative, with plenty of candles, symbols and ambient music", and they have bible study evenings.

Church with No Walls (Philadelphia) This group, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary, was set up with background threads of social and church activism, basic christian community ideas and inspiration from the Church of the Saviour in Washington. It moves around, meeting in people's homes with membership changing over time. They sought a relationship with the Episcopal Church, and were set up as a Mission which gave them the most flexibility, but probably also brought with it the danger of becoming institutionalised.

St Hilda Community (London) This group rose to some prominence in the years before Anglican women were ordained as priests in England. Although a small group, they have become a symbol for many others, in some ways out of proportion to what the actual group is and does. After the ordination of Anglican women in England, some people went back to the Anglican Church. Others stayed on because for them it was not a substitute but the real thing. The small group of women and men continue to meet regularly in people's homes and they are planning to publish a second book of inclusive liturgies.

The Community of St Martin (Minneapolis) This is an ecumenical worshipping christian community committed to non-violence which has been meeting since 1984. They have roots in the Lutheran tradition and people and some of them have been involved in groups like Sojourners and Church of the Saviour. They have 80-90 members, with about half of them also attending other Churches. They have a process of a year's programme to become a member, and each year have a commitment service for everyone during which each person makes their offer of what they can contribute during the year

to come. They run a bookstore/restaurant called St Martin's Table and the Heartland Institute which aims to integrate personal spiritual journeys and commitment to peace-making, non-violence, living with sufficiency and justice. Some of the group live near to each other and share in a closer way, and they have a commitment to living simply and confronting the culture of materialism. They meet in the basement of a Mennonite Church, having outgrown their restaurant space.

Women's Liturgy Group (New York): they split into two groups, to maintain a size in each of about twelve. They are an ecumenical group, meeting once a month in people's homes. The presence of some Catholic sisters has brought to the group a sensitivity to ritual and symbol. There is a strong commitment to be there on time to begin the liturgy which moves through a process of setting of sacred space, exploring the theme or content, personal sharing, some symbolic action, and then a closing ritual. Afterwards they always ask "Did this liturgy work for you".

Aisling Arann (Aran Islands): a loose network of people with a longing for a new church and new society based on community. Central features are celtic spiritual and cultural roots, right relationship with the Cosmos, gender balance, just work, wholeness, hospitality, self-reliance and simplicity.

From my experience within New Zealand and overseas, I have begun to form a list of different kinds of groupings that I would see as being a part of this justice seeking, re-imagining church. The list is not exhaustive, and I suspect there are overlaps and that some groups might find it hard to see where they 'fit' in. However in naming the differing categories, I think it helps us to look around and notice some of the groups that might exist around us. I think there are more than most of us realise, although not all would see themselves as 'church'. A few of them are an integral part of mainstream Churches, recognised and honoured, while some have very little contact with the mainstream. Others sit in between these two, maintaining their autonomy while also keeping links in some way to the mainstream.

Different threads of emerging communities

- i) **'basic christian communities'** - a focus on the bible as the starting point for action and reflection, and have a strong commitment to working for justice through solidarity with the poor
- ii) **Christian action groups** - a primary focus on work for justice, different to i) because there is less emphasis on the bible as the primary starting point for reflection.
- iii) **'women-church'** - working specifically from a feminist liberation perspective with women's experience and spirituality as a starting point. Some include men and children.
- iv) **contemplative worship groups** - many groups are forming which draw on the traditions of the Taize community in France, offering a quiet reflective ritual as a point for gathering.
- v) **celtic worship** - groups of people gathering around the reclaiming of celtic traditions and theology
- vi) **Creation spirituality** - groups gathering around the ideas of people like Matthew Fox and friends, nurturing a spirituality that is creation centred and reclaims our connectedness with the earth.
- vii) **'Religious' communities** - intentional communities based on a total shared life of some kind. This could include both traditional religious communities who offer a way of being connected to a worship tradition that is not parish based. It also includes newer intentional communities who share their life and worship together in some way. Often these groups become a focus, not only for the committed members, but also for companions, associates and friends who gather around them.
- viii) **Youth networks** - many young people see their primary connection to the Church as being through their youth networks with their occasional or even annual gatherings.
- ix) **Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender affirming groups** - in the context of a mainstream tradition that is at best cautious about their full involvement, groups are beginning to form that are intentionally welcoming of all.
- x) **Workplace groupings** - groups who gather in workplaces to reflect and pray together.
- xi) **Groups of friends and fellow travellers** - often people who have left unsatisfactory churches continue their spiritual journey through gathering with friends in an intentional way to reflect and pray and continue their journeys
- xii) **Post-evangelicals** - groups of people who have come out of an evangelical tradition, who seek to keep the best of that tradition while wanting to explore in a more open ended and reflective way that is often allowed within that tradition.
- xiii) **Sea of Faith Network** - groups, especially in England and New Zealand, who gather around the ideas of postmodern scholars such as Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering.
- xiv) **Reading and Reflection groups or classes that go on and on** - some groups have gathered to read and reflect intentionally in some area of theology/ethics etc and have decided to keep on meeting and form a more ongoing community.
- xv) **others.....**

Some Things to Notice

Ecumenical Commitment: While the life of some groups has sprung from a particular denomination, all of these groups welcome all who wish to come, and most are intentionally ecumenical in their commitment. The sense that the church exists not for itself, but for the whole inhabited earth - the oikoumene, seems very much at the heart of the vision of these groups.

“The world has changed and the old ways aren’t working anymore” : I explore this further in the section on post-modernism, but a strong thread amongst these groups is that what used to make sense, doesn’t any more. And while some Churches are calling for a return to old certainties, others are taking steps into the wilderness of uncertainty and change. Some people who have come out of the mainstream Church are maintaining a connection there as well as in new communities, but the life and empowerment is often seen as coming from the new.

Community or Sect? Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities said that people sometimes called L’Arche a sect, but he believed that a community become a sect when openness was diverted into “total closedness, with an all-powerful guru who tolerated no other authority.” In *Communities*, a US journal of co-operative living, Julia Duin writes about Authority and Submission in Christian community. Reflecting on the demise of some of the larger charismatic communities formed in the seventies, she says that at the heart of their structure were “inadequate and unbalanced concepts of authority and submission”. They were overseen by a group of mostly male leaders, with a lack of outside accountability, and almost total control over peoples lives. Over time this had disastrous results in many cases, with charges of sexual misconduct, lack of accountability and entrenched sexism.

Leadership: in contrast to the style of leadership mentioned above, the groups I looked at had a commitment to shared leadership. Even those larger groups that employ people, like Seekers, or the community of St Martin, have a commitment to shared leadership that often means that no one person is employed full time. Where ordained people are involved they are often not the prime focus of leadership. Even in Catholic BCCs who celebrate a fairly conventional Eucharist, if they do not have a priest to celebrate, they often do it anyway. The community is seen as the celebrant, and ordination is not something that is seen as important for the functioning of these groups.

One comment I would make is that, although there is a commitment to shared leadership, there is often a small handful, even just one or two people, who give extra of their time and energy to make sure things happen in these groups. In contexts where people are living increasingly busy lives, most seem relieved when there are a couple of people who offer and are able to take the load of organising. The emerging culture of mutuality in these groups seems to mitigate against this being institutionalised into a formal and exclusive leadership position.

Ordination: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza reflects that in the post- constantinian Church one was born into the Church, and therefore “When baptism becomes a mere co-incidence to citizenship, ordination or religious vows become necessary for those determined to follow Christ radically and to dedicate themselves completely to the mission of the Church”. As we are no longer born into the Church in the same way, wxe emphasis is on the call of all the baptised to live the gospel, and ordination seems to make no sense in this emerging culture. Once groups separate themselves from the mainstream expression of Church, ordination seems to fade as an issue.

Liturgy and Ritual: As Jeanne Hinton remarked, one of the common features of these emerging communities is liturgical creativity. Liturgy becomes an expression of making connections between life and faith, unfettered by traditional expectations of what ‘should’ be present. Mostly liturgies are simple, reflective, participatory and rich in symbol. They are not always narrowly eucharistic - but often include food of some kind. They can mark the seasons, rites of passage or have a political focus... They use biblical and non-biblical readings, prayers and reflections, music and movement...

Political Action: While most of these groups have a commitment to work for justice, it seems that only occasionally do groups act together on these issues, apart from some groups who have a primary focus to act together politically. It seems more common for them to think through issues together, and join with other people of goodwill in their workplaces, action groups, neighbourhoods to form actions. The groups are more likely to be a place to focus issues and motivate and empower people to act. There are particular issues around the role of white middle class women and men working for change which I address in section six.

Longevity: While some of the larger groupings have been around for 20 plus years, many of these groups are small gatherings that have no intention of becoming institutionalised, or continuing forever. Jeanne Hinton comments that many of these communities have ceased to exist within ten years, it is rather the networks which have grown and proliferated, an issue I explore further in the section on Movement Building. That these groups might fold up within a few years is not seen as a failure, but another part of their story

Post Modernism - the many or the one?

I think it is important to reflect on the surrounding culture out of which these movements are emerging, because this helps reveal whether these movements are responsive or reactionary, whether they have the seeds of hope for the emerging

future, or whether they are calling us back to a world that is fast fading.

I am using Dave Tomlinson's book *The Post-Evangelical* as a starting point, not because it is the only book on the subject, but because I feel it comes from an unexpected part of the Church. Tomlinson posits that evangelicalism and liberalism were both forged out of the world of modernity, and that "post- evangelicals tend to be people who identify culturally more with postmodernity, than with modernity... and that this has a significant bearing on the way that they approach and understand the christian faith."

Very briefly, modernity as a way of looking at the world emerged in the 18th Century. Also known as the Enlightenment, it was a reaction to feudalism, the idea that God was the Big Boss in the sky, that all authority derived from there and to dissent was to be a heretic. Modernity looked at the world objectively and critically - out of this was born objectivism and modern scientific thought. Religion too was affected by this, as religious liberalism sought to synthesise this new critical way of thinking with the 'essence' of christianity. This led to a reaction from some to this 'liberal sell out to modernism', and Tomlinson claims the modern evangelical movement was born out of this reaction.

Modernity as a way of understanding the world is no longer making sense to many people. The old certainties and hope that scientific advances would usher in a brave new world has faded in the post World War II world of Nuclear Weapons, Holocaust, global warming, Rwanda, AIDS, growing disparity between rich and poor...

Out of this disenchantment a new world is emerging that Tomlinson describes as "a world that understands itself through biological rather than mechanistic models; a world where people see themselves as belonging to an environment, rather than over it or apart from it; a world distrustful of institutions, hierarchies, centralised bureaucracies, and male dominated organisations." He goes on to describe it as a world of networks and grass roots activities, the book age giving way to the screen age, and a world which is hungry for spirituality, but dismissive of systematised religion.

~One of the themes I have been reflecting on during my study leave has been the theme of 'the many or the one', which was raised at the Dublin conference on Feminist Theology. In the post-modern world 'the many' is celebrated - there is not one way, one grand narrative, rather there is diversity, plurality, solutions emerging from local contexts. In the context of the uncertainty that this view of the world generates, there is often pressure to return to 'the one' and to limit creativity and questioning. These emerging communities and networks largely reflect the post modern reality - they are 'the many', each has arisen from its own context, and has its own character. One of the challenges from the Dublin conference was for people to stay with the uncertainty and questioning of 'the many', and to resist the pressure to return to the false security of 'the one'.

I think this has implications for the way that the mainstream church responds to these emerging groups, as there is a tendency to want to domesticate them, to create guidelines and frameworks for measuring them and to find a basis for including or excluding them. This does not mean that there should not be critique of these groups, but rather that one of the base lines of that critique should be a celebration of difference rather than pressure to conform.

Australian Terry Veling comments that in this transitory time there is a great "homelessness and lostness", a sense of being exile, and that this is the major reason for the existence of BCCs on the margin who are "not only critiquing the institutional church, but the whole social-symbolic order of modern western Christianity." He goes on to say that they have a prophetic role "in the bringing in to existence not only a different and authentic church for our times, but a new society, world order, in fact, bringing in the new creation". (See also later section on Margin or Threshold)

This is the world that we find ourselves presently in, and while there are some who are wanting to call us back to past certainties and hopes, this is the world in which radical new paradigms are called for and are emerging. They are emerging from the grass roots, as people endeavour to make sense of this new world in which they find themselves.

Movement Building - the role of networks

If someone dreams alone, then it remains only a dream. If many dream together, then this is the beginning, the beginning of a new reality. Dream our dream."

a story from the German women's movement quoted by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza.

It seems clear that in the emerging post-modern world, the new paradigms will be built from the grass roots up, rather than through some overall plan of action conceived at the top. I see signs of hope in the new shapes of spiritual community that are emerging, but I am left with the question of how we assist the process, how we empower this grass roots process.

Last year there was news of a new island being formed in the Tongan group, as an active volcano emerged above the surface of the water. That image has come back to me as I have thought about these emerging groups and the role of

networking. My feeling is that most of these groups are self-sustaining and self-motivating, few employ people, fewer own buildings, and their infrastructure is small and light. They are not asking for much (if anything) * - sometimes a place to meet in, access to ideas and resources, a sense of being connected to a larger picture. They are like that island, they have emerged from the sea, and have their own life, and may even disappear into the sea again. So the question for me is not so much how we support the 'emerging islands', but how can we maintain the life of the sea out of which they come, and to which they will return. For me the network is the sea, the linking element, the place in which new islands may emerge as people and energy gather together. The sea is also what continues and sustains life when a group decides its life cycle is over.

**(I would make a proviso here that in poorer, less resourced parts of our community, some extra financial/resource commitment is often needed to support communities in their work of organising and empowering their members)*

Ian and Margaret Fraser after years of meeting with and reflecting on the development of BCCs around the world, talk of the need for 'light institutionalising'. They recognise that while there is a fear of the institutionalising process and the possible build up of power that may be involved, there is also a need to co-ordinate and share the visions.

This is where networks as a structure come into their own, they reflect a commitment to connect rather than control, to share information rather than ration it, to disperse power rather than gather it into the centre. As such, network as a structure is consistent with post-modern realities and hopes.

Networks tend to function in three main ways:

- 1/ sharing information in a newsletter/journal/internet/publications
- 2/ being a resource bank
- 3/ organising occasional gatherings or other ways of connecting groups together

I believe that networking is the heart of movement building in this post-modern world. In making links, networks help us to move us beyond isolated spurts of creativity and life to see patterns emerging, and perhaps inspiring others to make links and get involved. Many of the groups that we are talking about are small and fragile, sometimes isolated. Networking helps them to see themselves as part of a larger picture. Sometimes there are individuals who are not connected to a group at present, but want to remain connected to this developing story, and belonging to a network enables them to do this. It is the networks which are often the public face of this movement rather than the smaller groups and it is often through networks that people hear about ways that they can connect.

Snapshots of some networks around the world

Like the emerging spiritual communities, networks themselves are diverse and tend to be responding to grass roots developments, rather than organised and controlled by larger institutions.

Women in Theology (UK): networking 300 women and groups around the United Kingdom.

NACCAN (UK): National Association of Christian Communities and Networks with over 500 names on their mailing list, many of these representing some quite large groups". They have an annual assembly and regional gatherings.

Women's Resource Centre (New Zealand): sends newsletters to over 800 and shares information about groups and networks around New Zealand and internationally, and also offers a library of resources to draw on.

Sojourners (Washington): they are a well known intentional community, who also have a role as a networking organisation through their magazine. In 1993 they began their own programme to help build a faith based network through putting people in touch with each other and assisting in the formation of new small faith communities.

Hildegard Network (international): an example of a more focused network, in this case of those interested in gathering around the ideas and example of Hildegard. Presently it has 250 members worldwide.

Women-Church Convergence (USA): a network of networks - a "coalition of autonomous Catholic-rooted organisations/groups raising a feminist voice and committed to an Ekklesia of women which is participative, egalitarian and self-governing."

Call to Action: a national Catholic movement working for renewal in the Catholic Church. They have a large national gathering, regional networks gaining strength and a programme of supporting the development of small faith communities, especially, but not only in parishes. They produce a directory of small groups.

Re-Imagining Community: "A global, ecumenical community of acceptance where exploration, discussion, study, and practice of the Christian faith are carried out freely and responsibly to seek justice, honour creation and all the church into solidarity with all people of God". This network was born in 1993 and formed in the process of conservative reaction to the initial conference. With a mailing list of 1,000, this community has an annual conference and is also encouraging local groups to form their own 'Re-Imagining' Groups.

Movement Building- Solidarity and White Privilege

How do we preserve difference, while building connection? How do we build alliances amongst the diverse groups working for change, when there are disparities of power and resources. In particular what is the role of those who carry what Peggy McIntosh describes as 'The invisible knapsack of white privilege' ('96 Re-Imagining Conference)

One of the boundaries I worked within on this project, was looking at groups that had a commitment to justice and to moving beyond patriarchy as part of their ethos. BCCs that were formed in South America and other places by largely oppressed groups working for change had a clear political focus. This focus is sometimes less clear as largely white middle class groupings began to form in the West - where was their place to stand in working for justice. This question was raised at the '96 Re-Imagining Conference, as it is in most feminist conferences. What is the role of white middle class women working for change. One African American woman responded, 'it is not about having more of us here, it is about you white women speaking out about racism out there.'

Francois Houtart (Vienna) warned, "... some groups which call themselves grass roots communities are simply middle-class groupings which form a social function integrating the middle classes into a society in which there is so much mobility that they have difficulty finding their place. In these there is nothing so very radical, no fresh style of life and commitment. So one must watch the descriptions which groups give themselves."

It is very easy for those of us middle class folks, to slip into expecting a group to be a personal support group - helping me get by another day. While this is often important, it is also important to maintain the edge that asks 'where can I/we make a difference and bring about justice' and 'what am I doing about the knapsack of white privilege I am carrying'. I think this is an issue that all groups of 'privileged' people committed to justice need to keep asking, and it is one that is at the heart of the christian gospel.

Another focus in addressing issues of justice can be resource sharing. When people leave the mainstream church, sometimes it is all too easy to absorb into personal expenditure, money that was previously given to maintain the Church. I believe we need to continue to look at 'stewardship' of our resources as individuals, families and groups. Members of Seekers in Washington commit themselves to tithing, and only half the money they tithe is used for the maintenance of their own community, the rest is given away. How we can use the resources we have to empower those with less access and power? We can do this by forming alliances with groups in poorer areas, giving to justice focused overseas development programmes like Christian World Service, supporting movements for change and empowerment within New Zealand.

It is important that we move beyond the paralysis of guilt and sometimes getting it wrong, and work from the basis of knowing deep in our being that none of us are free until all are free. It is only then that we will be able to be helpful and reliable allies with other groups in working for justice.

Maintaining Connections with a Tradition

The Judeo-Christian tradition has maintained a thread of continuity in history with its stories of peoples engaged on a journey to find and know God. Being a part of that historical thread of connection remains important to many people, although I would notice it seems more important to those who have been a part of mainstream denominations than for those who have come to christianity via one of these new emerging communities. One of the things I decided to take note of as I travelled, was the variety of ways groups were (or were not) maintaining connections to this historical tradition.

Who is leaving who? Aruna Gnanadason of the World Council of Churches Women's Programme reflected that there were small groups emerging all over the world - they were no longer banging their heads against the brick wall of an unchanging church, but getting on with what can be done. She went on to wonder "Who is leaving who?" Mostly it is not the women, the gay and lesbian people and those working for justice who are leaving the church, but the church which is failing to include them, or making it difficult for them to find their place.

Many groups talk of a desire to remain connected:" People who were on the move in the institutional church were extruded by the bishop. If the bishops had been more open and less fearful, the whole movement could have had a different character" Livorno

"We acknowledge them (members of the hierarchy) to be the church, but insist that we are also church" Basque

"We made several attempt to liaise with the bishop and the official structures. We will go on trying. But we get cold-shouldered". Oporto

"What they want is not recognition from the institution, what they are struggling for is a change in the institution so that it makes room to allow for their experience to have its impact." Italy

“Critical solidarity is the term used in Europe for these relationships and partnerships between BCCs and the institutional Church... It is really the position that asks for mutual respect, the possibility of sharing experiences and insights, and also recognising the validity of comparing our present church situation with the very different early church/biblical experience.” Diarmuid O’Murchu

I have not read about or come across any groups like the ones we are describing, who have any desire to form another church or denomination. Most have a strong desire to remain connected in some way, but also maintain their prophetic edge. Most are committed to the inclusion of all people, including women and people of all sexual orientations, they are ecumenical, they are deconstructing and reconstructing theology, they are committed to justice and siding with the poor, and they are not interested in asking permission to do things or in supporting hierarchies. These issues, and others often put them off side with the mainstream Church.

There have been some deliberate moves to domesticate some of these emerging groups and incorporate them into the Church but others have found a place to be connected through a friendly person or place in the institution, which does not limit their autonomy. Richard Holloway, the Anglican Archbishop of Scotland, once belonged to a small radical community called the Gorbals group in Glasgow. They were middle class people practising downward mobility, sharing their money in community in a poor area. Ian Fraser wrote of the group “The traditional church never knew what to do with them, they were only an experiment”.

I asked him, now that he is Archbishop, would he know what do with such a group? He reflected that as a member of an episcopal church at that time, he was able to maintain a relationship with the bishop, even though the latter often disagreed with what they were doing. He wondered if the members of the Church of Scotland found it harder, as their connection had to be with a part of the bureaucracy rather than with an individual. He felt that it is a bishop’s role to be the point of connection for all those in the Church, the fact that parishes actually claim a lot of that time is a result of history and economics. He felt that it was important for a bishop to remain connected to groups on the margins.

Ways that emerging groups are retaining a connection to the mainstream Church or tradition:

- through a friendly person or part of the Church - eg bishop, archdeacon, structure...
- through some people in the group maintaining a connection eg some people who work in other parts of the Church, some people continuing to go to regular congregations, some ordained people maintaining their links.
- through linking with a network that maintains a connection
- through a relationship with a supportive parish/congregation
- through becoming formally a part of a denomination
- through continuing to knock on the door and refusing to be pushed out
- through story telling and claiming a link to the liberative thread of christianity

These connections can be made through the group taking an initiative to remain connected in some way or through a denomination or ecumenical structure taking some initiative to create a safe space for them to connect. Sometimes the link is there because groups have developed out of a structure that has enabled them to remain connected.

Margin or Threshold?

(Several publications I looked at explored the idea of margin and threshold in relation to these emerging groups. I felt there were some important issues that were worth drawing out a little more in this report.)

Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, writing in 1909 about Rites of Passage, uses the word liminal, from the Latin limen meaning threshold, to describe the periodic separation of a person from their family during rites of passage. He sees liminal people as being both powerful and dangerous, for a time standing outside the traditional structures of the society, drawing attention to its features.

Diarmuid O’Murchu draws on this work, and referring to groups like shamans, gurus, religious orders, claims that every society consciously or unconsciously creates its own liminal groups, projecting onto them “its deepest hopes, dreams and aspirations, and in a sense requests the liminal person or group to embody and articulate for society at large, the deepest values that society holds dear and sacred.” They act as a kind of positive scapegoat - putting all the positive values and hopes on to the liminal person, but generally still needing to drive them out of the camp, or otherwise marginalise them.

O’Murchu posits that liminality is essentially sacred and spiritual, because it is fundamentally about meaning. It is an ambiguous state, it is both negative in the sense of it being outside, alienated, cut off from the mainstream, but it is also positive, “a counter culture movement on the frontier, opening up new horizons, dreaming new possibilities.”

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild in their excellent book “Guard the Chaos”, use this idea of liminal space to describe what many Christians call the ‘wilderness experience’ - an in-between time, a time of travelling, of having left but not arrived, a space where God has room to move. Ward and Wild prefer the idea of liminal rather than marginal, particularly in describing groups on the edge of the mainstream Church. Liminality describes a threshold rather than a margin - it is a space of potential, the opening up of new horizons and possibilities.

While some have been reclaiming the margins as a prophetic place, especially in terms of standing with oppressed groups, Ward and Wild feel that “To define oneself as marginal is to define oneself in relation to someone else’s centre: it is to accept another’s definition of how things are. In that sense, it can be quite disempowering and in itself alienating.” They feel that the idea of threshold and liminality offers perhaps a more creative language and image, one that looks forward to new possibilities rather than backwards to points of exclusion. And it offers the potential of change and movement - today’s threshold may become tomorrow’s centre, as cultural shifts take place.

In a 1996 Report to the Methodist Futures Task Group in New Zealand, Alan Jamieson draws on the work of Danny Miller in his book “The Icarus Paradox: How exceptional companies bring about their own downfall, and Loren Mead of the Alban Institute in Washington, to talk about the need for experimental units within businesses and churches. He reflects that while these experimental units pave the way for the future, it is important to note that the environment that will foster their development is very different from the environment that drives either core business or Church activity.

Danny Miller describes this as learning and innovating at the boundaries and Jamieson writes that there are three factors which are important in such groups, and none of them come easily in the Church environment:

- a) Development units need flexibility and freedom to move and experiment, and time to really find and test their wings. “The new will not emerge while it is overshadowed and constrained by the status quo”.
- b) Workers in development units need to be recognised - businesses are better at recognising innovators than Churches are. Innovators in the Church environment are more likely to be branded heretics.
- c) Development units need to be allowed to fail. Jamieson writes “A theology of failure needs to be developed and embraced for a climate of innovation and change to be promoted”.

While I believe that there are some important ideas here, I would add two provisos. One is the question of who defines what is success and failure? For example when a small group meeting for five years, with a focus on spirituality, empowerment and social change decides to wind up, this is only a failure if success is defined in terms of longevity. Secondly this framework assumes that a structure, a business or a Church can institutionalise these ideas for innovation. This raises questions about the role of grass roots movements for change and their relationship, if any to this process. I can imagine a process developing whereby grass roots initiatives might be either further marginalised by this process, or co-opted and domesticated through it.

Ways Ahead

Finally I would like to suggest some future directions in welcoming and developing these emerging groups.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING: The challenges for emerging groups

Consciousness raising groups were a key part of building the second wave of the feminist movement. Through gathering together, telling stories, sharing information, we started to connect our personal stories to a wider story. I think we need to engage in a similar process of consciousness raising as emerging groups, to **help us to see** the patterns that are developing and to help us to see ourselves and our groups in a wider context.

i) Alternative? Will we continue to think of ourselves as ‘alternative’, or ‘experimental’? While this is helpful in recognising that we are in process, and not institutionalised, I think it is important for us to begin to be more intentional in claiming that ‘we are church’ and that the work that these groups are engaged in is part of ‘the real thing’. Some groups are being empowered by the process of naming themselves - finding a name that is uniquely theirs, so that they can say ‘I belong to’ rather than ‘there’s a monthly group I go to.....’.

ii) Naming the movement: What language can we develop that both allows for the provisionality and flexibility of these groups, and yet claims a central place for them in the movements for change in church and society. I wonder if ‘Re-Imagining’ is worth considering as a descriptive word. It has a story/herstory because of the 1993 international conference, it is ecumenical, it includes women and men, it assumes we are building on something (our Christian origins), while also assuming a different shaped future, and gives us some identity as part of a global movement.

iii) Seeing the bigger picture: I think it is important to make links between groups and to see that although these groups may be small, localised and fragile, there is a sense in which they are part of a bigger picture - there are others walking similar paths.

iv) Networking: I think it is important to recognise the role of networking groups in providing the linking between groups, in giving visibility and acting as advocates for the movement. Let's help establish and support networking groups, especially financially.

v) Doing justice: If we are a white middle class group, let's keep asking what is our role in bringing about the reign of God and ushering in the new creation. Alongside building community in our groups, how can we shift resources and work for justice,

vi) Story telling: Let us find ways of telling and recording the stories of some of these groups, through newsletters, oral histories, research.... Let us draw together the threads and see the patterns that are emerging, let's celebrate them.

vii) Resource Sharing: Let us find ways to share liturgies, music, resources

viii) What about some gatherings - nationally, regionally to do some of these tasks?

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES - The role of the mainstream Church

i) Naming and removing the Barriers: are there points at which these emerging groups are being marginalised and disempowered? What action can we take to stop this?

ii) Putting in place structures of connection: how can we create safe places for groups who wish to, to continue to maintain a connection to the tradition of which they and we are a part?

iii) Resourcing: how can we support these groups (where necessary) and help resource networking groups which they have identified as being helpful to them.

iv) Mutual Learning: how can we learn from these groups without disempowering them? How can structures change to be more flexible, mutual and life affirming.

v) Our post-modern World: in what ways are we/should we be changing in response to the changing culture and world view emerging at the end of the 20th Century?

vi) Celebration: in what ways are these groups expressing the gospel, how can we celebrate and support this?

Appendix

The WRC has on file, a copy of my notes taken in reading, research libraries, visits etc. These contain the references for quotes used in this report. Here is a summary of that material

Books for this study leave:

Alvaro Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, the Evangelization of the Poor

Leonardo Boff, Ecclesiology Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, A Critical Ekklesia-ology of Liberation

Ian Fraser, Living a Countersign, From Iona to Basic Christian Communities

Jeanne Hinton, Walking in the Same Direction, A New Way of Being Church

Letty Russell, The Church in the Round, A Feminist Re- Interpretation of the Church

Dave Tomlinson, The Post-Evangelical

Sharon Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, A Feminist Theology of Liberation

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, Guarding the Chaos - Finding Meaning in Change

Journal: Communities - Journal of Co-operative Living Fall 1996 Christian Communities Then and Now

Methodist Research Project Research Project by Alan Jamieson

Research Libraries:

College of the Ascension in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England. This College contains much of the source material used by Jeanne Hinton both in her book and in her work promoting the development of 'New Ways of Being Church'. Documents looked at included: 1993 Canadian Dissertation; 'Different Terminology for BCCs' by Joseph Healey; Basic Christian Communities and the Churches: the tension Movement/Institution an article by Ian and Margaret Fraser; Communities - an Australian Journal; Sharing the Vision by Diarmuid O'Murchu MSC, a report on the christian community movement in the UK; The BCC Movement and its Significance for the Churches in the United Kingdom, an article by Rev Peter Price;

Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, Scotland. The library at this ecumenical centre holds the source material gathered by Ian and Margaret Fraser's work on BCCs around the world. Documents looked at included: Wind and Fire - the Spirit Reshapes the Church in Basic Christian Communities by Margaret and Ian Fraser; Pointers from BCCs; In Search of New Wine Skins - an exploration of models of Christian Community by Mary Britt OP; Christianity and Crisis - US Journal, focus on BCCs;

CWIRES Archive, Manchester University This christian feminist group collected information and resources from a wide range of groups within UK and overseas. It is a mine of information about what was happening in the UK in the early 70s and 80s.

WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) Library, Washington: Notes taken from a thesis Re-Worlding toward Solidarity: Healing and Empowerment in Feminist Spiritual Community by Brigit McCallum for Harvard Divinity School

As well as the above, I have a record of key conversations and meeting that I held in my travels.

All this material is on file at the Women's Resource Centre Library.