

# Not dead — just new and different

Religious orders in the C of E are alive and flourishing in new ways, says *David Walker*

THE ARTICLES about the present state and future fears for Anglican religious communities (Comment, 27 February) have provoked a spate of responses (Letters, 6 and 13 March) and much correspondence to me as the chairman of the Church of England's Advisory Committee for the Relationships between Bishops and Religious Communities.

The writers are not complacent: they acknowledge the decline in numbers among professed members of traditional English orders, but are adamant that this is only one part of the story, and not the determining factor for the future of religious communities in the Church.

As Nicholas Buxton wrote, lifetime commitment is hard. A society that has abandoned lifelong careers, relationships, and communities is ill placed to foster lifelong monastic vocations. At least as important a factor, briefly alluded to by Barry Orford, is the question of the founding charism of any order. Victorian teaching and nursing orders were — far from an escape into solitude — one of the few ways in which women could lead an active life with the real exercise of leadership.

Orders for women and men underpinned Christian outreach to both newly accessible parts of the globe and the deepest English urban slums — places where family life and commitments were barely compatible with the demands of the mission field. Times have changed. With them, the religious life is also changing, and doing so in exciting ways.

THE personal-spirituality boom, within and beyond the Churches, is spilling over into a new desire for expressions of corporate spiritual discipline that sustain the individual and provide space, silence, and stability in a hectic society. Groups such as the Third Order of the Society of St Francis have expanded significantly in recent years.

The Advisory Committee is also working with a number of emerging communities who are exploring the treasures of Celtic spirituality. These



Green shoots? Sr Mary Cuthbert from the Community of the Holy Cross

bodies take the traditional monastic vows and interpret them, as St Francis did, for those engaged in careers and family life, of whom only a small minority will live in community. Some have a direct connection to a "traditional" religious order; many do not.

Just as exciting, the renewed zeal for mission in the Church of England is bringing to birth its own fresh expressions of religious life. The Church Mission Society is the first of several established missionary bodies to become an Acknowledged Community; other well-known names are not far behind. Along with them, newly founded bodies, such as the Order for Mission, are exploring the same path.

These communities, coming from across the spectrum of church traditions, are discovering the religious life to be a missionary imperative. Older communities and the

Advisory Council are working closely with them.

IN MY travels around the Anglican Communion, I have seen religious houses bursting with young novices, for whom, even if their orders are now independent, their mother communities in Britain still play a much revered part. Meanwhile, the order for which I am Visitor has begun a joint initiative with its daughter community, bringing English and overseas sisters together to work with the expatriate Korean-speaking population in Surrey.

The Advisory Council is working with the Ministry Division and the UK Borders Agency to ensure that changes to immigration rules do not stifle this and similar initiatives. Religious communities are among the most internationally minded bodies of the Church, and to portray Anglican religious life from a purely

British perspective is to do even the UK orders a disservice.

THIS is the wider context within which some older Anglican orders are planning for closure. Their ability to recognise when this needs to happen is no less than we should expect from those whose weekly rhythm of prayer immerses them in the great narrative of birth, mission, death, and resurrection, which, in Christ, underpins all Christian faith. Members of the Advisory Council work with them.

Even here, though, the uniformly glum picture that Dr Orford portrays is not one that either my mailbox or my own experience recognise. Some report an increase in both enquiries and novices in the most recent years.

Many are rising to ever greater expectations that they will nourish the spiritual life of men and women who are beyond the reach of other expressions, fresh or inherited, of church. Outreach into cyberspace is provided both by communities' own websites and through the gateway provided on the Advisory Council's initiative at [www.thekingdomisyours.org.uk](http://www.thekingdomisyours.org.uk).

The orders I have spoken to uniformly resist Dr Orford's calls for a revised Advisory Council with more clout. Formal accountability is best rendered, as it always has been, through each order's episcopal Visitor. The independence of communities from any centralising power protects their particular charisms, and gives them the flexibility to respond to a rapidly changing environment. The Council advises them.

The journey ahead for our communities is no less bumpy, and the picture of where we might be in 20 years is no clearer, than religious, who are committed to travelling light, expect. But those tempted to write the obituary of the Anglican religious life we can only direct to the famous riposte of Mark Twain.

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**'Renewed zeal for mission is bringing fresh expressions of religious life'**