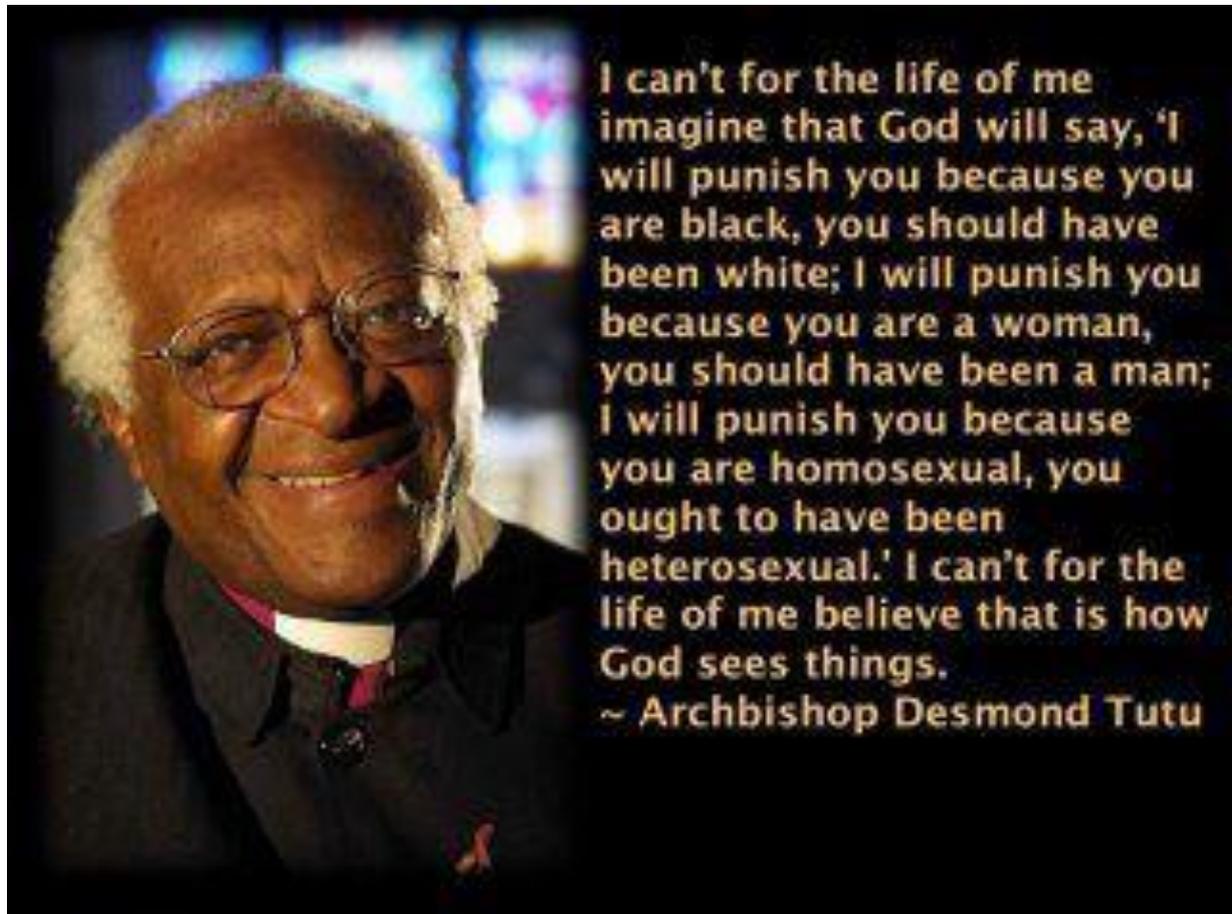


Thoughts

"...all can be enriched with contemplation and with the obscure sense of the presence of God."

Thomas Merton



Books

Ben Okri a time for new dreams' - a book of short essays and poems

Resources

www.baptist.org.uk/crossingplaces/evangelism/resources.html

Blogs

<http://bridgesandtangents.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/religious-vocations-for-women-on-the-rise-in-the-uk/>

UNTIL recently, nuns in Britain had fallen out of the habit. In parts of the country, years went by without any women seeking to get themselves to a nunnery. Then, suddenly, convents have reported a spike in interest.

It is not huge in numbers; but in significance it is of a new order. In the past three years the number of women entering the religious life has nearly tripled from six to 17 and there are also many more who have entered convents but have not yet taken their initial vows. This influx is thought to be a result of the Pope's visit to Britain last year. Such has been the sudden surge in inquiries that religious orders have had to ask bishops how to cope, so unused to receiving new vocations have they become, and so accepting of the received wisdom that, with many convents closing and being sold off, their way of life was likely to be coming to an end.

Now, if these inquiries result in more women taking their vows and becoming novices, numbers could edge back up to where they were in the early 1980s, when more than a hundred women a year took vows as sisters in enclosed and other religious orders.

This week, the media have reported that even a former girlfriend of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, has become a nun called Sister John Mary. "I thought of marriage ... then God called," Laura Adshead, 44, told a television documentary about the Benedictine order she joined, the Abbey of Regina Laudis in the Connecticut hills in the US.

Father Christopher Jamison, director of the National Office for Vocation, adds some comments:

Many people today, especially the young, find it difficult to listen to their deepest spiritual desires, so the Church needs to offer a structured approach to vocation if the call of Christ is to be heard by more people.

It's against a background that's surprisingly upbeat given the general perception of the state of the clergy and religious life in this country. In the last few years, the number of people applying to seminaries has been gradually increasing and, in more recent years, just in the last couple of years, ever since the Papal visit, the number of women approaching women's congregations has also been increasing.

[It was not fully reflected yet in the figures because it takes time from an initial approach to become a novice, said Father Jamison]. But it is certainly more than anecdotal. There are congregations of women who have been contacting us to say, 'Could you help us because it's been a while since we've had this sort of response', and so we are now happily supporting them in dealing with an increase.

Judith Eydmann, development co-ordinator of the National Office for Vocation, gives some interpretation:

"For young women it is not just the life that is attractive. They feel that it is what Christ has called them to, the total dedication of their lives to the service of God. We have moved away from a model of recruitment to one of discernment and that gives people a safe environment in which they can make safe choices."

She says new Catholic movements such as Youth 2000 have been key to the increase. Among the general Catholic population of more than five million across the UK, about 10 per cent have had contact with new movements but among those entering monasteries, convents and seminaries, the proportion is 50 per cent. In a further new development, one in five of the new vocations are

converts to Catholicism, compared with the 1970s when nearly all those seeking to become priests, monks or nuns were cradle Catholics.

And here is Ruth Gledhill's uncynical and unironic signing off:

Whether these newly formed nuns are finding God, or God is finding them, the religious life is coming back into fashion as one that offers not so much riches, but a way of life exemplified by courage, wisdom and serenity – not bad for women who might be tempted to think they haven't a prayer

Newspaper articles

Tracy McVeigh

The Observer, Sun 6 May 2012 00.04 BST

Free food, caring and sharing: new spirit of community in Yorkshire

Hebden Bridge and Todmorden are leading a grassroots movement which people say is delivering quality of life

Hebden Bridge will host July's Ambitious Communities conference to spread the message.

Photograph: Alamy

There is an extraordinary sign on the outside of a well-tended West Yorkshire vegetable garden: "Help yourself."

In the same town this summer, people will be helping themselves to sweetcorn growing around the police station. Compost and watering cans seized in drug farm raids find use in the local gardens. And come the autumn a trip to see a local doctor will be a pick-your-own free-for-all as the health centre's grounds have been turned into orchards.

Grieving families who want a rose bush at the graveyard are encouraged to think productive – in one case leading to a remembrance garden of broccoli.

Meanwhile, commuters can snip fresh herbs from the beds and pots outside the railway station. It's all kept weeded by an army of local people who give up an hour or so on the occasional Sunday.

With 40 volunteer beekeepers just trained up, there will soon be honey for all. Anyone inspired to start their own vegetable patch can borrow a community tool library at the community-run allotments.

In the next village, things have been taken even further. The local community are attempting to take over a pub and have already taken over the cinema, the theatre and even the town hall.

In a fold of the wet hills of Yorkshire, the communities of Hebden Bridge and Todmorden are at the vanguard of a movement that is picking up momentum across a UK disillusioned with corporate business, government and cuts. It is neither hippy nor New Age, but is made up of ordinary people, old and young, from both affluent homes and social housing.

Call it a sharing revolution. "Community empowerment, social enterprise, co-operative, it has various titles, but it's quietly getting huge," said Mike Perry of the Plunkett Foundation, a thriving national organisation supporting such enterprises nationwide. "I don't think it's about the recession as such in financial terms; it's more that it's made people think about what's important to them.

"It starts with food, then it's taking over a shop that's closing. Then it's getting fired up about broadband and renewable energy, taking over infrastructure of their community. We're at the start of what could be a significant movement."

There are nine community-run pubs and 300 such shops in the UK, but those numbers look set to grow dramatically, not least because they show staggering resilience in tough times, but also as people power reacts against closures that fundamentally affect their lives. It may not create many jobs, but it does glue communities together and keeps money circulating locally.

And it's not just in the countryside; there are many web schemes across the UK where people can arrange to swap or give away items to others in their area. Tool libraries and bike sharing are growing. In London, Streetbank.com has begun organising people to share everything from a lawnmower to a DVD with others within a mile's radius. Some 3,000 people have signed up in its first few months. DIY retailer B&Q has a pilot scheme in Reading on tool sharing, to ease the environmental damage caused by millions of people buying power tools they may use only once or twice.

Mary Clear, owner of the "help yourself" sign in Todmorden, is overwhelmed with the success of the innovations she has pioneered in her Incredible Edible project, which she set up with her friend, Pam Warhurst, after the banking crisis. Thirty other towns have followed suit.

"It was a reaction to the lack of leadership nationally and locally," she said. "We wanted to make our own behavioural shift, to bring people together. Everyone eats, yet food is such a marker of social injustice, so we started guerrilla gardening."

The energetic grandmother of 10 lives a frugal life after being made redundant in the public service cuts. "We've no offices, no staff, no money. I'm not against supermarkets or bankers; it's about kindness and social justice. We want to reach the people who can't afford a great big glossy coffee-table book called Thrifty Foraging or some such.

"Me and Pam are women of a certain age, we've not got balaclavas, it's just about not being afraid to step forward in your community and do it."

In July, Hebden Bridge will host the Ambitious Communities conference, which will proclaim just that message. Attendees on a budget will have the option of experiencing Britain's very latest community initiative – camping in the back garden of Richard Holborow. He and his wife have signed their Hebden Bridge home up to campinmygarden.com, a website that matches its swiftly growing membership with community-minded people who are happy to have strangers pitch up in their gardens, whether they are avoiding the London Olympics hotel room price hikes or just want to get away on a budget.

Hebden Bridge Community Association, which has more than 500 members out of a population of 5,000, admits that Hebden Bridge is not Everytown UK, and not everything happening here could immediately be replicated.

It has a rich history of involvement with the co-operative movement and the 19th-century Chartists. When the mills closed, it saw an influx of writers and artists, and from the 1970s onwards it was colonised by a succession of tribes, from bohemians to hippies and eco-warriors. It drew in a lesbian community that, by percentage of population, is the largest in Britain. The town's streets are full of independent shops and free of bland chain stores.

However, an influx of affluent outsiders fleeing the rat race has caused house prices to rise and some people feel that a cut-price supermarket chain would meet their needs more than an organic delicatessen, so extra efforts are made to pull people into community projects from all social backgrounds, said Andrew Bibby of the community association, which is due to open its revamped, people-owned town hall in seven weeks as a civic hub with space for small business units and facilities for groups and clubs.

"The local authority was struggling to find resources, and the onus fell to the community. We're lucky in having a huge skills set to draw on and lots of community projects to link into," he said.

He admits that Hebden Bridge, which has problems with youth unemployment and drugs, is no Utopia. "There is also the challenge of accountability, something you don't get when things are run inside the structures of a democratically elected council. That's something we're having to start thinking about. You don't want the tyranny of everything run by the same self-appointed people."

However, the movement has brought in real jobs. Amy Leader, 35, who returned to her home town three years ago after years working in London, is one of three new employees of the Hebden Bridge Community Association. She is also president of the Women's Institute branch she established after meeting "all these great women who didn't know each other".

"I decided to come back, and with that came the decision to get involved with my community. Once I'd made it, the rest was easy and amazing. The energy that comes from a room in a project like this, whether it's a boring business meeting or an ideas meeting, the energy is great. There's a deep down feeling of real satisfaction, the quality of community life is what gives you the best quality of life."