

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL
FOR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

TOWARDS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Guidelines, expectations and advice
for a community seeking Acknowledgement
as a religious community in the
Church of England

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help those groups or communities who are seeking Acknowledgment as a Religious Community.

The Council is able to register two types of religious communities. The **Recognised** communities are those in which the members make vows or promises either of stability, conversion of life and obedience (in the Benedictine tradition) or poverty, chastity and obedience (the evangelical counsels). The members share in a common life and live together, though not necessarily all in one place and have a Rule and Constitutions which provide for the ordering of the life of the community.

The **Acknowledged** communities vary in their practice and lifestyle. In most cases the members are dispersed, with opportunities provided for meeting together. In some communities, all the members are single, with a vow of celibacy, whilst in others members may be single or married. Some members of what is otherwise a dispersed community may have a shared life in one place. A community initially established to minister in a particular place, might consist of married members and their families, as well as single members, with all living together in one house, or in several properties near to one another. There are many possibilities and the Council accepts this fluidity and variety and seeks to encourage this growth in community life in the Church.

The distinction between the Recognised and Acknowledged communities is necessary in order to honour the single or unmarried state and the sharing of a common life, which have always been characteristic features of the religious life and also because the professed members of the Recognised communities elect representatives to the General Synod.

The Handbook of the Religious Life, published by Canterbury Press for the Council (available from Church House Bookshop) contains much useful information and guidance. Those communities looking at the possibility of Acknowledgement should consult it, bearing in mind that some of the detailed provision is provided mainly for the Recognised communities.

Both Recognised and Acknowledged communities can be ecumenical in their membership. In the case of an Acknowledged community this would need to be reflected in its governance documents and in those chosen as episcopal (or equivalent) sponsors. When appointing a Visitor, the community would probably need to have two or three people to exercise this ministry jointly. The Council would expect one of them to be an Anglican bishop.

Process for Acknowledgement

Communities that seek Acknowledgement vary considerably in size, gifts and focus of ministry. It is not possible to establish a detailed procedure that fits all of them. The intention of the Council in providing a process is to enable a community which is considering Acknowledgement to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in its life. This process is not intended to be a series of hoops to jump through, hurdles to be jumped, boxes to be ticked or any other appropriate metaphor. The Council seeks to provide support and encouragement. The process that is outlined and the guidelines that are provided are intended to help a community give attention to key aspects of its life.

It is not necessary for a community which is considering Acknowledgement to wait until it feels it might be ready for

Acknowledgement before making contact with the Council. The Council encourages communities to contact the Council in the early stages of the community's life. The best way to do this is for the leader or a person appointed by the community to contact the Chairman of the Council. Once the information that the Council needs has been gathered, the Council will appoint one or two members to liaise with the community, to provide advice and support and to ensure that the contact between the community and the Council is maintained.

During this time the Council will expect the community to look at the following areas of its life. Some of these things the community may well have already worked on, others will need clarification and others will be new. All of them will need to have reached a satisfactory stage for the community to be considered for Acknowledgement.

Guidelines and expectations

- 1 The community needs to be able to say what its particular vocation is in the service of the gospel. It should be able to express how it feels God has called it into being and what gifts he is giving for its life and ministry.
- 2 There needs to be a Rhythm or Rule of Life which seeks to express the particular aspirations and practices of the community. This does not need to be a very detailed document and needs to be flexible to leave room for development.
- 3 It is important that the community seeks ways for its particular calling to be formed in the life of its members.
- 4 The community must draw up guidelines about its expectations of leadership, how the leader is chosen, elected or replaced and the length of time of periods of office. It must do similar things for any leadership group that might be formed and ensure that there are clear accountability structures, where appropriate.
- 5 The community must ensure it has good structures for governing the life of the community so that the views of each member can be clearly heard. Eventually the community will

need to draw up a constitution or governance document. Chapter 7 of the *Handbook* provides a useful structure for this and the areas that might need to be covered but initially a community seeking Acknowledgement should keep its governance documents simple.

- 6 Financial matters must be dealt with carefully and records kept of donations made and expenses paid. How this is done will depend on the size of the community but whatever the method, great care is needed as this is an area in which difficulties and misunderstandings can arise.
- 7 The community needs to be able to express its involvement and commitment to the life of the Church. This will vary according to the particular vocation of the community. In the case of a dispersed community, for example, this will depend on the particular ministry of each of the members. For a community living a common life in a particular place, it will most likely be expressed in the life of the local church and in the life of the diocese. It is important that a community doesn't see itself as, or develop into, an alternative church.
- 8 The community needs to develop a working relationship with a bishop, who will act as an episcopal advisor and sponsor. When the members of a community are in several dioceses, the community must find a bishop who is willing to take on this responsibility. When a community is located in one diocese, the initial contact and support should come from the diocesan bishop. In either case, the agreement of the diocesan bishop must be sought for any necessary liturgical authorisation.
- 9 The members of the community must not make vows or promises without the agreement of the Council. It is not necessary for a community to be Acknowledged before agreement for vows to be taken will be given but the Council will not agree that life vows or promises can be made until the community is Acknowledged.
- 10 There will need to be at least six members of the community before Acknowledgement will be given.

Acknowledgement

When the community decides that it wishes to seek for Acknowledgement by the Council and the member or members of the Council who are advising the community support this, then the procedure could be as follows.

- 1 The leader or leadership team of the Community should ask the diocesan or sponsoring bishop to write to the Chairman of the Council, formally requesting Acknowledgement.
- 2 The community should be able to present to the Council a Rule or Rhythm of Life and governance documents or constitutions in accordance with the guidance given.
- 3 If not already done, an Episcopal Visitor will need to be appointed.
- 4 It is envisaged that the community and the member or members of the Council acting as advisors will have worked together to ensure that everything has been done to comply with the guidelines for Acknowledgement laid down by the Council. The Council may ask for further clarification of certain matters if it sees fit.
- 5 If the Council agrees with the request for Acknowledgement, the secretary of the Council writes to the diocesan or sponsoring bishop, the leader of the community and the Visitor to inform them.
- 6 The secretary of the Council enters the community in the register of Acknowledged Communities.
- 7 The secretary of the Council writes to the editor of *Anglican Religious Life* to ask for the community to be included in the next edition.
- 8 It is hoped that the process would conclude with an appropriate commissioning service.

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