For the spiritual thirst of our times…

How can we be leaven in our communities, asks **Alan Heeks**

A community resilience group in Nottingham *Photo credit: Georgina Wilson*

One of my favourite spiritual teachers is Thomas Berry, an American priest. Although he died in 2009, Berry had a very clear view of the climate crisis ahead, yet he wrote, *"The basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the earth."* He offers a blessed challenge to our concerns!

Perhaps, like me, your faith that all is for the best and that divine Providence is awake at the wheel may feel really tested in these times. If so, Berry's book *The Dream of the Earth* could help you. One hopeful way to view the current situation is that only a crisis of this severity will awaken people to the spiritual thirst that could recover their connection with the divine.

I believe there are plenty of signs of a widespread spiritual thirst in our society, but it's not apparent, because few people would use this language, and the mainstream media is hardly looking for it. Some of the wisest observers on the climate crisis, such as Rupert Read, Joanna Macy and Jem Bendell have described it as fundamentally a *spiritual* crisis, calling us to question the meaning and purpose of life.

Spirituality as leaven for communities?

I've been exploring how community and spirituality connect for many years, learning from places like Hilfield Friary, the Northumbria Community, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, and Findhorn Foundation. These are what I'd call "peak" spiritual centres, which offer powerful teachings, but in a form that mainstream society would struggle to relate to.

So there seems to be a pressing need to offer spiritual nourishment in forms that more people can engage with. Language is a key factor: even words like spiritual can be a deterrent. We live in a society which is relentlessly materialist, preoccupied with what's measurable: so how can we offer an accessible experience of divine grace and the joy of feeling faith?

Could we reinvent the monastery?

Role models for what we need aren't obvious, but I'd like to describe some of the spiritual communities which have inspired me. Walking the Camino San Benedetto in Italy for two weeks, I learnt what a crucial role monasteries played in the chaos of medieval Italy; amid times of civil strife, sickness and uncertainty, the monasteries were places of support, trust, stability. They would mediate in disputes, provide food and health care, and just as importantly, nourished the soul.

A Ricostruttori monastery in Italy *Photo credit: I ricostruttori nella preghiera*

Another role model, also from Italy, is a modern reinvention of the monastery as a welcoming spiritual community with a

A ricostruttori meditation room *Photo credit: I ricostruttori nella preghiera*

Christian core and an interfaith flavour. The Ricostruttori di Pace (Reconstructors of Peace) were founded in 1978 by a Jesuit priest, Father Cappelletto, who wanted to offer a spiritual path for young people, very different from mainstream Catholicism. I have visited one of their monasteries several times, and find it very inspiring. The Ricostruttori take on derelict rural buildings with land, restore them beautifully, grow much of their food, and practise crafts like stained glass and fine woodwork.

My impression is that they are living as Jesus lived: in poverty, simplicity, and close to the land. The vision I'd love to explore with fellow Green Christian members is for a catalytic centre that draws on some of the best of the monastic tradition, but like the *Ricostruttori* is much more accessible, adaptable, and attuned to the needs of our time.

It's pretty clear that we all face rising turbulence in the years ahead, from climate change and the many other crises of our times. It's also pretty certain that government policies can't fully meet these pressures, and nor can individual households. I believe that local communities are the best focus in raising resilience to face the climate crisis, and the best kind of capacity to strengthen is social infrastructure. By this I mean the connections between individuals and groups within a community, and the skills to handle stress and conflict. The specific emergencies ahead of us are unclear, but social infrastructure will help with all of them.

Even if Green Christian members and others could engage only a small minority of their local community, it could significantly add to the community's resilience, bringing benefits to the whole locality, particularly in the event of a major challenge. Adam Greenfield's book, *Lifehouse*, which describes how superhuman qualities of inspiration and selflessness emerge in disaster situations, illustrates this well.

Exploring Faith and Soul Resilience

Recently, I've been exploring with networks and individuals what language, and what processes, could provide the spiritual leaven for communities. Our hope is to inspire and train individuals who could then catalyse a neighbourhood. They would be the transformers who draw on divine presence, but turn it into accessible language: for example, inviting their community to name and strengthen shared values such as mutual care, respect, inclusiveness, and to explore what their collective vision and purpose could be.

This process of exploration and experimentation is likely to continue for many months, and one aim of this article is to invite Green Christian members to share relevant experience and to join our journey if they'd like to. We are calling the project the Soul Resilience Network. The first events we're offering are online groups, with a different guest presenter each month, and topics including: Faith, Meaning, Prayer, Emptiness, and Ecospirituality. We want to signpost a wide range of networks and resources which could help people, including those from specific faith traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism and Sufism, as well as integrative approaches like spiritual ecology.

SOUL RESILIENCE NETWORK
Spiritual purpose to grow through crisis times

The hope is that people will join the group each month, and that this will evolve into an online community with its own life, with opportunities for in-person residential events later in 2025.

The spiritual teacher, Neil Douglas-Klotz in *Revelations of the Aramaic Jesus*, urges us to see creation not as a one-off event way back in time, but as a continual process of divine unfolding[1], in which "our job description as humans is to figure out the creative part we're asked to play". If you are interested in exploring whether this project might be for you, you can see more at soulresilience.net or contact me at alanheeks@gmail.com. I will also be taking part in a Green Christian workshop discussing ways of being communities of support and encouragement in early summer this year. ■

Alan Heeks is a writer, group facilitator and project pioneer, who set up the Hazel Hill Wood retreat centre. He is deeply involved in climate crisis responses, including ways that Christian teachings can have wider application.

1 see *Revelations of the Aramaic Jesus*, Neil Douglas-Klotz (Hampton Roads, 2022)