

2 - Is the Community of the Gospel Right for Me?

Once you've decided that monasticism is right for you, the next important question is "How do I plan to live it?" Since you're in the process of looking at the Community of the Gospel as an option, the question can be further refined (at least for now) as, "Is the Community of the Gospel the place for me to be?" "Will I fit in?"

A little background in monastic organizational structure is important at this point. Essentially, there are three basic structures upon which monastic practices are built: cloistered (all living in one place, such as a monastery), dispersed (all living separately in different places, but connected under some guiding principle), and individual (more commonly known as "solitaries").

Many monastic organizations are combinations of these. For example, some monastic groups have some cloistered monastics, but may also have some members living alone, or in small groups, some distance away. Sometimes even in other countries.

The Episcopal Church recognizes all three of these structures, and defines them to some extent in their Canons (Title III, Canon 14).

First of all, Religious Orders: A Religious Order of this Church is a society of Christians who voluntarily commit themselves for life, or a term of years: to *holding their possessions in common or in trust; to a celibate life in community*; and obedience to their Rule and Constitution. These types of Orders generally live in community, but not necessarily in all cases.

Next we have the Christian Communities. A Christian Community of this Church under this Canon is a society of Christians who voluntarily commit themselves for life, or a term of years, in obedience to their Rule and Constitution. Note that the only major differences is that Christian Communities generally do not hold their possessions in common, nor do they necessarily practice celibacy.

And then we have the Solitaries. These are people wishing to offer vows to a Bishop, and not wishing to be a member of a religious order or Christian community. They basically report to the Bishop on their progress and journey, but have no accountability to any other religious organization.

The Community of the Gospel is a nationally recognized Christian Community within the Episcopal Church. We are a dispersed Community, meaning that all our members live apart in their own homes, sometimes with a life partner, and sometimes alone.

We have sometimes been described as a "network of solitaries." In many ways this is a good description. On the one hand, our members do indeed live like solitaries – they must develop and

sustain their monastic practice without someone standing over them during the day to make sure they arrive to prayer on time, observe rest hours, or perform their work duties properly. Unlike solitaries, however, they have an accountability to the Community to fulfill the vows of their practice, and regularly interact with other members for support in a number of ways:

- email
- phone calls and conference calls
- cards and letters
- local and regional meetings (where available)
- Facebook and Yahoo Groups
- Annual convocations and retreats

Having others of like-mind walk with you on your journey can be a blessing. All members offer the same vows of Daily Prayer, Reflective Study, and Personal Service, but they end up being quite unique in the way they happen with each person. We try to honor the ancient traditions of monasticism while at the same time respect the individual interests, talents, and skills of each person. Each member develops their own Personal Rule of Life that guides them and reflects their practice. But there is also a Community Rule, known as the Customary, that guides the group as a whole.

Every member of the Community is also asked to build a local formation team – people with whom the member can see face-to-face and discuss their spiritual journeys. Members of this local team usually consist of a spiritual director and formation guide from the Community, but can also include counselors, therapists, pastors, physicians, and good friends – people who are adept at helping you find your true self, and follow your own path – not theirs.

So, the Community of the Gospel is somewhere between the cloistered structure and the Solitary. It is certainly not for everyone. It takes discipline and orderliness, and the willingness to honestly interact with other members from a distance. It can be a lonely journey, and one filled with solitude and silence. If your temperament prefers a highly interactive environment, if you're not attracted to a blend of contemplation and action, then this type of Community may not be for you. The Community is not a replacement for professional counseling services, nor is it a social media club.

We believe in the power and wisdom of Christ in guiding our lives. We believe in a loving, compassionate and merciful God, not a vindictive, punishing, or vengeful God. We believe in using other sources of God's loving care that has worked its way into modern psychology as well as other ancient traditions.

It's important to thoroughly explore the Community's website at www.communityofthegospel.org to get a more in-depth understanding of the nature of the Community before making your decision.