

Guide to Starting a New Christian Community

Introduction:

This guide will place before you a process to help you as you seek to begin a new Christian Community. Founding a new community is not a walk in the park. Founding a new community is better described as the road to Calvary. Founders need to be clear about why there is a need for this new Christian Community in the Church. Being a community is more than dressing up and playing church. The very first thing you need to do is to be clear about what God is calling you to do, and about what your charism will be as a community. A charism is the focus of your community. It is what defines you as a community. So, you need to articulate what the charism of your community will be.

Part of that process is looking at Christian Communities that already exist. Since you have found the website for the National Association of Episcopal Christian Communities (NAECC), you can see that there are links to many different Christian Communities. Visit their sites. Read as much as you can about each one. That process does three things. First, it enables you to read how others express the charism that defines their community. Secondly, it puts before you Rules that other communities follow. And third, it helps you determine if what you feel is already out there. In reading about other communities you may discover that a community exists that already is doing and expresses exactly what you are feeling. In that case God may be calling you to seek membership with that community rather than starting a new community. Believe us when we say that it is far easier to join a community that already exists than to start a new one. So do your homework. You may also want to look at Roman Catholic religious orders for more inspiration.

Communities that belong to NAECC are technically called Christian Communities by the Canons of the Episcopal Church. Religious Orders, on the other hand, are monastic or conventional communities in which their members usually live together and take the vow of celibacy. The Order of the Holy Cross, or the Society of St. Francis of the Americas are examples of traditional religious orders.

Some Communities require celibacy, but for the sake of their apostolate they do not live together "in common." An example of this type of Community is the Oratory of the Good Shepherd. Some Communities focus on a life of prayer and service while living in common, and their Communities are made up of single and married members and their families. The first Anglican religious community at Little Gidding is an example of this type of Community. A contemporary example of this type of Community is the Community of Celebration.

Most of the Communities that belong to NAECC focus on an apostolic ministry in the world, and require neither celibacy or living together "in common." Their sense of Community comes from their dedication to a common purpose, a common rule, a common prayer life, periodic gatherings, frequent communication among their members, and other unifying principles. The Brotherhood of St. Gregory, the Community of the Mother of Jesus, the Companions of St. Luke, and the Third Order of St. Francis are examples of these types of Christian Communities.

As you seek to go through this process, you should be meeting with a spiritual director. That will help you to be sure that you are following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and not the longing of your own ego. Above all else pray and frequently sit in silence with the God who loves you. Having said all this, please know that we are here for you. We will be glad to help you in any way we can, or even to assign you a mentor from a community that belongs to NAECC, to help you through the process.

Once you have done everything in this introduction the following steps can be helpful for you.

Step One - Sharing the Call I Feel:

Part of you will want to stand up in church at announcement time and say "God is calling me to start a new religious order!" Resist that urge. This sharing of the call you feel is a quiet sharing. Meet with your rector to share what you are feeling God is asking of you. Your rector is in a position to both pray for you and offer you feedback. Take advantage of that.

Talk to a few close friends and family members. Be ready for them to not understand what you are seeking to do. Look for spiritual wisdom in their reactions, even if that reaction is, "Are you out of your mind!" Explain what you are seeking to do, and let them question you.

Talking to your rector, family members, friends, and a spiritual director can further help you to express what you are thinking about the community you feel called to begin. At this point, let their questions and wisdom help you to better express what you are feeling. So keep writing and clarifying for yourself and them.

Step Two - Decide on a Rule of Life:

After having a charism that defines who you are as a community, you need a Rule of Life for you and the members of your Community to follow. The traditional rules are, The Rule of St. Benedict; the Rule of St. Augustine; the Rule of St. Basil; and the Rule of St. Francis. Be sure to read each of them. As you do remember that they were written not just to help members on their spiritual journey of living the charism of their community, but they were also written to govern life in the monastery, friary, abbey or convent.

Many of the communities who are part of NAECC have written their own Rules. That is because many of our communities are dispersed orders whose members do not live together. Other

communities have adopted the traditional Rules, or part of those Rules, as their way of life. Again this is a place where you need to really do your homework.

Step Three - Decide on the Vows for the Community:

The Benedictine Vows are: Obedience, Stability of Life, and Conversion of Life. The Franciscan and Dominican Vows are: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience.

If you did your homework and visited the sites of all the communities that belong to NAECC, you would have discovered that there is a lot of variety about how the vows are lived and what vows are taken. So, based on the Rule of Life for your Community, decide on, and define, the vows that the members of your community will profess.

Part of this process is to also decide the stages of formation, and the time to be spent in each. The traditional stages are:

Postulant - A Postulant is a person who has completed the application process, is testing their vocation, and desires to enter the novitiate of the community. The time one is a postulant varies from community to community, with the average time being at least one year.

Novice - A Novice is one who is a student who is learning the ways of the community. Novitiates are normally at least two years, and during this time the novices study the Rule of Life, the Vows, your Constitution and by-laws, and any other documents unique to the community.

Annually Professed - Those who are annually professed profess the vows of the community, and renew that profession each year until they make life profession or final vows. Many communities require that members be in annual vows for three to seven years before seeking to make their life profession or take final vows. Some communities do not require that members take final vows or make a life profession, in which case the members renew their annual vows each year.

Life Professed - Those who have professed final vows or made their life profession, are those who have professed their vows for the rest of their natural life.

However, it should be noted that not all communities follow the traditional stages as we just described them. A number of communities simply have three stages of formation, namely, postulant, novice, and professed. In their stages of formation, at the end of the novitiate the novices solemnly profess the vows of the community.

Step Four - Keep Communicating:

If you have not already done so, go back to your rector and your friends. Share what you have accomplished thus far. Listen to the wisdom in their questions. A good process is to ask your rector to suggest people you can go to in the parish or outside the parish, to also share what you are feeling and what you have accomplished. Not only are you seeking input and practical suggestions, but you are also looking to see if others resonate with the charism and Rule of the Community. If you do not already know the answer to this question, this is a good time to look

for folks who are really interested in what you are doing and who can help you write a constitution and by-laws for your community, and serve as your advisors as you seek to make the community a reality.

Step Five - Write your Constitution and By-laws:

Your constitution and by-laws put in legal language the charism of your community. They help to keep order in the religious community. When you visited the websites of the communities that are part of NAECC you would have seen that some have their constitution and by-laws posted on their website. It is a good idea to read them. Another help is the book that is published by the traditional orders in the Episcopal Church (i.e. those communities that live together.) The book is *CAROA (A Handbook of Guidelines for Anglican Religious Communities in Canada & the United States. Second edition 2009, published by Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas)*. It offers many helpful things to think about as you are putting these documents together, including the canons that govern religious orders and Christian Communities.

Step Six - Obtain the Permission of the Bishop of Your Diocese:

The bottom line is that in the Episcopal Church one cannot form a Christian Community without the permission of the local bishop. In canonical language this is called “establishing a house.” You need to write the Bishop and request the Bishop's permission to establish the new Christian Community in the diocese you live in. In your letter you will want to tell the Bishop about the community, and describe the steps you have taken to put flesh on the call you received from God. Before sending the letter to the Bishop you will want to ask your rector to read it. It is also a good idea to "cc" the letter to your rector. That way the Bishop knows that your rector is aware of what you are seeking to do. In your letter you should also ask if the Bishop would be willing to serve as your Bishop Visitor.

Step Seven - Choose a Bishop Visitor:

Once you have the permission of your Bishop to establish this new Christian Community you will need to elect a Bishop Visitor, unless your local Bishop has agreed to be your Visitor. Your local Bishop may have the names of Bishops you could approach. Or you can contact us and we will suggest some names for you. Then it is simply a matter of contacting your first choice to see if she or he will accept the role of serving as your Bishop Visitor. You will want to decide if a Bishop Visitor to your community will serve for a defined period of time, such as seven years, or for as long as the Bishop Visitor desires to be your Visitor. Once you have a Bishop who has consented to be your Bishop Visitor you can begin to plan the liturgical celebration that will formally bring the community into existence. At that celebration the Bishop Visitor would receive at least you into vows.

Step Eight - Consider Having a Habit:

This is a good time to consider whether or not the members of your community will have a habit. In looking at the websites of the Christian Communities in NAECC you would have seen that some communities wear habits and some do not. Another resource is to go to the website of Glory and Praise Vestments. They make religious habits and have pictures that will help you see what kinds of options you have. Obviously, if your community is going to have a habit, you would want to have it so that you can be clothed in it in the presence of the Bishop Visitor.

Step Nine - Celebrate:

In the presence of the Bishop Visitor have the liturgical celebration that establishes this new Christian Community.

Step Ten - Register with the State and Federal Governments:

Now is the time to obtain your employer identification number from the IRS, and to register with the Secretary of State as a business. According to the requirements of your state, you may also need to register with the Attorney General so that you can do fundraising to help the Community meet the financial obligations that it will have. Then comes the real hard and expensive work of applying to the IRS for the 501 (c) (3) designation that recognizes you as a not for profit charity. And a little reminder, once you have that designation from the IRS you will need to file an annual 990 form by May 15th each year. The IRS has a simple 990 online form that can be filled out and filed in less than five minutes. If you have yet to do so, it is a good idea to start a treasury for your Community.

Step Eleven - Put Together the Formation Program for the Community:

This is where you ask yourself, what will the postulants study? What will the first year novices study? What will the second year novices study? Will there be any additional study for those in annual vows? The formation program for the community helps the new members to grasp the charism and to understand how they can be successful in living as members of the community.

Step Twelve - Attend the Annual NAECC Meetings:

Each year leaders and superiors from many of the Christian Communities come together for five days of retreat and meetings. These gatherings are a gold mine especially for new communities. You get to meet with others who have walked the road you are walking. You get to share your experiences, and ask questions. You get to see that problems your community experiences are

not unique to you. You can see how other groups have handled issues that you face. Just as importantly, you get to be part of the conversation about the place of religious life in the Episcopal Church. The leaders of NAECC are also happy to provide new communities with a mentor to work with them as they go through the process of being a Christian Community "in formation" to being formally recognized by the House of Bishops. Not every Community desires to have the formal recognition of the House of Bishops. To obtain that, a Community must write the House of Bishops Committee on Religious Life. Your Bishop Visitor can provide you with the name and address of the Bishop to whom you would send the letter. In that letter you would need to a) request formal recognition; b) list your members, their affiliation with the Episcopal Church, and their stages of formation in your Community (i.e. postulant, novice, annually professed, or life professed); c) give the name of your Bishop Visitor; and d) include with your letters a copy of the Rule of your Community, and a copy of your Constitution. To be eligible for this recognition your Community must have six full members. That usually means members who have professed life vows or final vows. The current practice of the Bishops Committee on Religious Life is to require that each Community that applies for Canonical Recognition first be given the status of "Provisional Recognition" for a two year period. This allows the members of the House of Bishops Committee on Religious Life to get to know more about the Community that is seeking canonical recognition, and to work with the Community's Bishop Visitor, who is asked to evaluate and recommend canonical recognition for the Community under their care. This period of "Provisional Recognition" is drawn from the common experience in religious life where those who seek to be members of a community are first aspirants or postulants.

Conclusion:

We hope you have found this guide helpful. One can certainly do things in a different order than they are printed here, but these helpful hints have placed before you the kinds of things that are involved in making the foundation of a new Christian Community. God bless you in this undertaking!