

The new monastics: Alternative Christian communities

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

At a time when the church had grown too cozy with the ruling authorities, when faith had become a means to power and influence, some Christians who sought to live out an authentically biblical faith headed for desolate places. They pooled their resources and dedicated themselves to a life of asceticism and prayer. Most outsiders thought they were crazy. They saw themselves as being on the narrow and difficult path of salvation, with a call to prick the conscience of the wider church about its compromises with the “world.”

I’m describing not fourth-century monks, but present-day communities of Christians who think the church in the United States has too easily accommodated itself to the consumerist and imperialist values of the culture. Living in the corners of the American empire, they hope to be a harbinger of a new and radically different form of Christian practice.

These “new monastics” pursue the ancient triumvirate of poverty, chastity and obedience, but with a twist. Their communities include married people whose pledge to chastity is understood as a commitment to marital fidelity. Poverty means eschewing typical middle-class economic climbing but not total indigence—some economic resources are necessary for building this desert kingdom. Obedience means accountability not to an abbot but to Jesus and to the community.

The description *new monasticism* comes from the theologian Jonathan Wilson. In *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s ‘After Virtue’* (1998), Wilson responds to moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who concludes his celebrated 1991 critique of modernity by calling for “the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. . . . We are waiting for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.” Wilson agrees, and as an Anabaptist theologian he recognizes the resources in his church to create precisely the sort of new monasticism for which MacIntyre calls.

Be careful what you write. Wilson's daughter is now a founding member of one such new community, the Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. Rutba got its start and its name from the experience of a Christian Peacemaker Team that was in Iraq at the start of the war. Leah Wilson-Hartgrove and her husband, Jonathan, were trained in CPT's tactics of nonviolent conflict resolution and of "getting in the way" of those who would do violence. Their group had a car accident in which a member was seriously hurt. They took him to Rutba, the nearest town with a hospital. The Iraqi doctor treated the injured American for no fee, but asked the group to promise to tell others what had happened to them in Rutba—that while their country was dropping bombs on his, he offered healing and peace. (Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove tells this story in *To Baghdad and Beyond: How I Got Born Again in Babylon* [Cascade].)

The Wilson-Hartgroves returned to the United States and started the Christian community in Durham, where Jonathan began study at Duke Divinity School. It's based in a sprawling old house with creaky hardwood floors in a largely black section of the city called Walltown; drug problems and civic neglect give the neighborhood a reputation as a dangerous place. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove describes Rutba's mission there as one of "hospitality, peace-making and discipleship." He contrasts the community's vision with that of the rural Southern Baptists among whom he grew up: "Jesus doesn't just forgive my sins, he gives a whole new way of life—the best way to live."

The community shares meals and daily prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. Its members do not have a common treasury in the strict sense. They tend their own finances, but they do keep a common purse that members are encouraged to give to or take from as they have ability or need.

Their theological commitments are visible in the pictures on the living room walls: one is of Martin Luther King Jr., the other of Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement. Rutba's members are committed to being in Walltown. When other Duke students travel home for holidays, Rutba *is* their home. A bit worried that the Rutba members may be perceived as white do-gooders who intend to "save" the housing projects, Jonathan can only counter that they are committed to being a presence in Walltown—"unless the area gentrifies completely."

Wilson-Hartgrove heard a call to this sort of life while at Eastern College outside Philadelphia, where he studied with Tony Campolo. "A lot of Tony's students took his

ideas more seriously than even he was ready for," he said. A number of Christian communities that include Campolo's students have cropped up in blighted neighborhoods in and around Philadelphia.

The Rutba community has only five members. In addition to the Wilson-Hartgroves, it includes another divinity school student, a 40-year-old man and a high school student whom the community has taken in as a foster child. When I asked whether the neighbors think Rutba is weird, Jonathan said, "You should hear [the high school student] tell his friends where he lives. 'Well, I live in this house, they're Christians, white and black, who aren't really kin to me, but as Christians sort of are . . .'"

Despite its small size, Rutba House has a prominent place in the network of intentional Christian communities. In 2004 Rutba hosted a conference that led to the publication of a book, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Wipf and Stock), which includes essays on such topics as "Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire," "Sharing Economic Resources" and "Peacemaking in the Midst of Violence and Conflict Resolution." Jonathan also tends a Web site that seeks to connect and support like-minded communities across the country (newmonasticism.org).

He is wary of having such a leading role in the young movement. "The Internet is the 'yeast' of the Pharisees about which Jesus warned," he jokes. Indeed, the Wilson-Hartgroves and Rutba could be accused of a sort of naive idealism, both in Iraq and Walltown, as they try to change a violent and racist world as 20-somethings. They are aware of that charge, and reply that their steadfastness over time will refute it. (The rate of failure for these sorts of communities is quite high.) These communities' eager use of the Internet reveals some of what is new in the new monasticism. They do not reject technology as such. They embrace the Internet, as it serves their purposes of linking similar Christian communities to one another and sharing resources.

Newness is also evident in their embrace of Catholic and Orthodox sources of inspiration, which other Anabaptist or Amish communities who live in similar ways once eschewed. Wilson-Hartgrove often uses a Dostoevsky quote that Dorothy Day employed in her ministry: "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

In contrast to Rutba, Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois, is a long-established intentional community. It was founded in the 1950s by a Mennonite professor from Goshen College who wanted a church more strictly modeled on the New Testament. Reba's membership peaked in the 1970s at about 150. Now it has 33 adult members, 16 children and teens, five "interns" who are considering membership, and a half-dozen or so people who simply "knocked on the door" to express interest, according to Reba leader Allan Howe. Some seminary students in the area have been steered to Reba by their professors. Those who want to know where they can find the way of life described in the New Testament actually lived out are directed to Reba Place Fellowship.

Reba members pool their money, and the community draws from the common treasury to cover members' housing, transportation and health care. Over the years Reba has acquired considerable resources, including dozens of houses and apartment buildings in racially diverse south Evanston. The fellowship rents many of these apartments at below-market rates as a service to the community. In contrast to Rutba's young idealism, in 50-plus years Reba's membership has grayed considerably. The community's decision to foreswear health insurance, trusting Providence for expensive medical care, may eventually tax even its deep pockets and those of its generous givers.

Reba is hesitant to refer to itself by using the ancient Christian terminology of monasticism. Mennonites have always rejected what they see as a two-tier church in which monks and priests are regarded as especially holy. Reba's David Janzen says the community has no interest in MacIntyre's ultimate purpose of "saving Western civilization." Rather, its members hope to show the world what following Jesus' way of justice and peace might look like.

A Chicago television station recently profiled Reba Place Fellowship by focusing on the Selph family. Doug Selph is a computer programmer who puts his \$100,000 salary into Reba's common pot. Doug and his wife, Lisa, and her two children receive \$762 a month from the community to cover the family's expenses. The WTTW program focused on one event that revealed how the community works. Lisa Selph's daughter Hannah was being encouraged by her violin teacher to buy a professional-quality instrument at a price of \$10,000. The Selphs took the proposal to their "house group," with whom they pray regularly. The next step would have been to take the proposal to the entire fellowship.

Reba's leaders said they would be inclined to regard such a purchase as good for the whole community—like paying for a college education. But the question never got that far. The Selphs' house group suggested that Hannah earn the money to help pay for a new instrument and in the meantime continue to rent an instrument and develop her musical gifts. For the Selphs, Reba's practice of communal discernment kept the family from making an idol out of their child's talents.

Janzen, who contributed an essay to the *New Monasticism* volume, says that how the community's life works is not as important or interesting as why it works. "We keep returning to Jesus' teaching, [his] commands to love one another, to see to one another's welfare. There is a Spirit that grows up among us in doing that that is heaven on earth."

Even a casual visitor to the fellowship gets a sense of what he means. Their prayers crackle with evangelical piety and concern for peace, both global and local. The presence of a visitor from Christian Peacemaker Teams talking about her work in war-torn Colombia shows this is not merely private piety. The members of the fellowship want to make an impact, however small, on the world.

Something of a different animal from Reba is the Church of the Servant King in Eugene, Oregon. Many of its members are evangelicals who originally joined a parent congregation of the same name in 1978 in Gardena, California. The Eugene congregation was planted in 1987. Most of its key leaders have been living together in intentional community since the '78 founding.

Servant King started as an evangelical effort to live out scripture's vision of the church. A commitment to nonviolence evolved slowly, partly as members read the works of Stanley Hauerwas, partly as they decided who would clean the bathrooms. Peace is not merely about a position on the war in Iraq; it is about how one relates to one's neighbor, one's spouse and one's adversary in the community. Community leader Jon Stock points out that most intentional Christian communities that are not committed to nonviolence don't survive, because when arguments erupt, someone has to win—and the community loses. The Gardena congregation that planted Servant King has had such a rupture and is now on strained terms with its ecclesial offspring in Eugene.

Servant King's members say that a key to its survival is its "overcoming of pietism." They are not rigid about drinking, smoking or cursing; the atmosphere there can

seem a bit like the early hours of a fraternity party. This is intentional. Members have worked hard to avoid any sense of competition over righteousness, both as individuals and in comparing Servant King to the wider church. Such pride can splinter a community, as in the Gardena congregation's case.

When I asked Stock whether he considers his community a model for the rest of the church, he almost visibly shuddered: "I'm much more comfortable talking about the mistakes we've made." Though smoking and drinking are permitted, the group is traditional in other moral matters. "We're quite conservative in what we do with our genitals. You have to get money, sex and power straight or they'll ruin you."

Pietism can create artificial boundaries between a community and the wider church. Communities like these are born precisely out of impatience with the mainstream church, which they regard as compromised by or indistinguishable from the world. Servant King has, with some difficulty, reembraced the wider church. It follows the lectionary in its preaching and celebrates the Lord's Supper weekly. It invites prominent theologians to visit and teach in its midst.

On the Sunday I visited, the community added a new member to the group, which Stock says is made up of 23 adults, eight teenagers and "I can't remember how many" children. The group gathers in the largest living room of its several houses in Eugene to sing "Down to the River to Pray" and to accompany the new member to her baptism—in a large tub in the backyard. She makes a public confession of sin, saying she has "idolized relationships above all." Stock almost whispers, "The Lord forgives." His fellow pastor, Brian Logan, shouts St. Paul's words as he dips her under the water: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation!"

In a liberal university town on the west coast, Servant King seems strange not because it's a commune of sorts, but because it's Christian. The community works to be known as such among its neighbors. It runs Windows bookshop, a used bookstore with mostly theology texts on its rough-hewn shelves. Ten years ago the bookstore birthed Wipf and Stock Publishers, which employs many of Servant King's members. The community also runs a coffee shop. All these activities take place in a city block-sized building that includes a pizza parlor and a stage for performances, which draw others in. Eugene's small number of Christians (it has the fewest churches for a city its size in America) know the church, as do the colorful assortment of folks who stop by for pizza, coffee, books or conversation.

By comparison with Servant King's members, Reba's Mennonites seem a bit more pious and plain. Reba's participation in a network of similar Anabaptist fellowships in the Shalom Mission Communities also stands in contrast to Servant King's independent status. But the two groups have some things in common. The life of the mind is important to both (one makes its living by selling books; the other has bookshelves filled to overflowing). Both communities are also quite wealthy. Reba's real estate is worth a fortune in the overheated Chicagoland housing market, and Servant King's property has tripled in value during the recent housing boom.

Yet these communities are not investors. Their property is important to them only as a way of allowing members to live near one another and share life together, as Stock writes in the *New Monasticism* book, or of enabling them to offer low-cost housing to their neighbors. When I asked Stock and Logan what they plan to do when their members retire, they looked befuddled. Christians don't retire, in their view. "Florida is not on the Christian map," Stock says. They plan to work until they cannot, at which point they will trust others to take care of them.

If their care for one another now is any indication, others will be there for caregiving. Stock and Logan kiss each other on the cheek when they part for a journey of a few days, suggesting that three decades in intentional community has led to a deep friendship. "What we're after is a place that tastes and smells like the kingdom of God," Stock says. One gets a sense of such a place at the party after the baptism. The new member has requested a traditional backyard barbecue, but I'm told she could have chosen any food she liked. Really? Even lobster? Sushi? Caviar? "Sure, she's a new member of Jesus' body—when else do you celebrate?" Servant King is not opposed to extravagance as such, but wants to see it in the service of building the kingdom of God rather than in private consumption.

Another branch on the new monastic family tree is the Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco. Eighteen years ago some evangelicals who wished to wed a personal gospel with the social gospel helped begin a church and intentional community in the city's Mission District.

Tim Otto, part of a leadership team for Sojourners, speaks of rethinking vocation along Christian lines. The new monastic communities swim against the pull of the American dream—to be financially secure, to move across the country for a better job, to plan for retirement. Sojourners encourages members to resist the allure of relocating or borrowing for career opportunities, but to be eager to move or take out

a loan for the sake of the church. When asked what he does for a living, Otto says, "I'm trying to become a saint." Only subsequently does he reveal that he is a part-time nurse. The flexibility of part-time work is important to him, as he devotes the rest of his time to the church.

Sojourners traces its founding to its members' realization that they were better at being Americans than at being Christians. Disparagement of America is not controversial in San Francisco, but the claim to be Christian is. The contrast is evident in Sojourners' concocted "Celebration of Yahweh's Kingship," held annually on the Fourth of July. Its goal is to "colonize" the holiday for Christianity the same way Hallmark and Madison Avenue have colonized Easter and Christmas for their purposes. Member Debbie Gish says the Sojourners' barbecue and fireworks are part of a "declaration of allegiance" not to the United States but to "Christ the King," by citizens "of a monarchy, not a democracy." That won't play in either red state or blue state America.

Another church that bears a family resemblance to the new monastic communities, though with some key differences, is Grace Fellowship Community Church. The largely Asian congregation, part of a small denomination, the Cumberland Presbyterians, began as an offspring of a 100-year-old congregation in San Francisco's Mission District.

Grace looks like a "normal church," according to pastor Bob Appleby. Its members do not all live together as in the self-described intentional communities. But to join, one must submit to an intensive, nine-month catechetical program. The church takes Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon's *Resident Aliens* as a sort of manifesto. Catechumens are asked, among other things, to take the church's trash out and make the coffee. Such tasks are seen as a sort of truth in advertising—the church is about service, not about having one's "felt needs" met.

Grace Fellowship's primary relationship to the new monastic communities is its effort to give the church prominence in its theology, rather than the state. Pastor Sharon Huey talks of Grace's catechumenate as preparation for taking something like a "vow of insignificance." Putting off prestige is hard, especially for "overeducated" and upwardly mobile Californians, and even more so for Asians, she says. But it is scriptural.

Huey and Grace Fellowship share with other evangelicals a love of scripture. But they have put it to use in reading Hosea as carefully as the rest of the Bible. The prophet taught Huey that the common reduction of Christianity to psychological help for the privileged is a sort of “whoredom.” Reading the prophets is training in how “not to be nice,” the amiable Asian woman says, for her community is “better at harmony than truth.” In a time of empire when the church should tell a “more persuasive story” than one of exultation of the nation, Bible study is radical stuff. Community members say they were “ready” on 9/11, for the prophets had taught them to mistrust claims that saving power comes from anything other than God.

The communities I visited have important differences in organization, style, finances and even theology. Some *are* churches, like Church of the Servant King and Church of the Sojourners. Some are *related* to churches. Reba sponsors two ecclesial gatherings nearby, so that one can worship with a Reba congregation without participating in Reba’s common-purse arrangement. Rutba looks for support and wisdom from nearby St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church, but members do not have to attend. Grace Fellowship is simply a mainline church committed to more radical living. Reba folks have a common treasury and give a stipend to members; Sojourners members maintain an agreed-upon standard of living and give the rest of their income to the church. Servant King members tithe 15 percent and open their books to one another to account for the rest. Servant King’s rough speech and petty vices would make some people at Reba uneasy.

These communities can seem a bit inbred. Jonathan Wilson, coiner of the phrase *new monasticism*, is father and father-in-law of the key members of Rutba, which hosted the conference, edited the book and sponsors the Web site by the same name. The woman I saw baptized at Servant King is Jon Stock’s niece. Stock runs Wipf and Stock Publishers, which prints Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s work. Members of Sojourners and Grace Fellowship spoke at a conference organized by the Chicago-area seminary professors who send students to Reba.

Another problem the communities face is the challenge of transcending divisions along the lines of race and class. While those who do join are drawn to the scriptural norm of communities that transcend racial and financial barriers, they tend to be white, college-educated folks, despite great effort to reach out. For example, one of the Sojourners’ original goals was to serve some of the tens of thousands of refugees displaced to San Francisco as a result of civil war in El Salvador. Three Salvadoran families joined the church and benefited from its legal clinic and job

preparation aid. As soon as they acquired the resources, the families promptly bought minivans, left the church and moved to the suburbs. Perhaps those who have had less of a chance at pursuing the American dream are not yet ready to be disenchanted with it.

Even with these difficulties, the new monastic communities say they are adding new members, and various new communities are sprouting up around the country. Camden House in New Jersey has planted a garden in an area of postindustrial blight, where homeless people can get fresh vegetables. The Open Door in Atlanta is billed as a sort of “Protestant Catholic Worker” house, where members staff a soup kitchen for the homeless and agitate for justice in the city. Others communities have arisen in such unlikely places as Shreveport, Louisiana; Omaha, Nebraska; Waco, Texas; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Lexington, Kentucky, now linked as part of the informal new monasticism network. Each has its own gifts, idealism, quirkiness and commitment to local community. And each claims to be an alternative to the now-regnant empire and a foretaste of a coming kingdom.

Each of the communities I visited seeks also to serve the wider church—and even to convert it. Monastic communities have always had greater influence than their numbers. For one thing, they enable preachers and other Christians to point and say, “See, someone does try to live out the costly demands of Jesus with regard to possessions, family, nonviolence and love.” Their presence also encourages more traditional churches to alter their life in small but significant ways.

Even if the effort doesn’t have that effect, its adherents view it as worthwhile. As Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove says, “Whether these communities proliferate or not, this life is good enough in itself.”