

A History of the Association for Promoting Retreats

Abbreviated from J.H. Tyers 'Borrowed Silence; a history of the practice of retreat in the Church of England'.

A group of ladies and clergy to found the Association for Short Retreats in November 1913, an organisation which was four years later renamed 'The Association for Promoting Retreats' (APR). It was brought to birth in the drawing rooms of Bloomsbury with the initial purpose of running retreats for working women from a Friday evening through to a Monday morning.

The Association had been inspired by reading *Retreats for the People*, written by a young Jesuit, Charles Plater, published in 1912. Whilst in training, in 1903, Plater had visited Belgian retreat houses and been enthused by what he saw. The promotion of retreats had become a large part of mission in the Roman Catholic church to attract artisans into the life of parishes and develop an apostolic elite from amongst them:

“a nucleus of Christians tempered to resist the assaults of the foes, impregnated with the apostolic spirit, ready to waive their personal interests, to penetrate the masses, to strengthen the faith that totters, to rally the scattered men of good will” (Plater, 1912, p. 21).

This elite was trained by taking them away for three days of intensive retreat, based on the first week of the Exercises of St. Ignatius. From 1880 onwards, retreat houses for working men had been built in France, and expanded into Belgium, where between 1902 and 1911 nearly 99,000 men attended weekend retreats. (Plater, op.cit. p. 288). These, he claimed, went back to their parishes renewed and enthusiastic, spear-heading a significant rise in the number of men attending Mass. Plater saw this as a way of uniting and transforming society, and even bringing about

an improvement in the material condition of the working classes (Plater, 1908, p. 62).

Members of APR's first committee, which consisted of Anglo-Catholic priests and ladies of leisure, were able to make loans totalling £1,000. They also attracted the patronage of such people as Lord Halifax and Lady Henry Somerset, who offered a gift of hot-water

geysers and the loan of a house keeper. They purchased a suitable house set in over an acre of land in Chiswick which they named St Ursula's, which had 20 bedrooms, a chapel and a dining room (Lampard, 1993, p. 16).

The first retreats arranged at this new venue were held in August 1914 just as war broke out, although a retreat for factory girls was cancelled because the intended retreatants had been thrown out of work by the war, and so could no longer afford to come (Lampard, 1993, p. 17). There was at that time some talk amongst committee members of turning the house into a hospital, but the view prevailed that the war made opportunities for silent reflection even more important than they had been before. The organising committee had a great belief in the innate power of a full retreat, and saw no necessity to make it more accessible by making it less demanding. Indeed, one munitions worker was reported as saying 'Everyone thinks that we want dancing; no-one thinks that we girls have souls' (Lampard, 1993, p. 14).¹

APR was soon to expand its role. Writing to members of the General Committee in April 1916, Mrs Helen Wrightson said that it might be, and in the minds of those who started it was meant to be, a means of 'popularising the idea of retreat, urging people to go on retreat' and be 'a central place of information with regard to retreats.' She also suggested having a travelling secretary and the value of parochial retreats, all ideas which were to be taken up in the 1920's (Thompson, 1983, p. 339; Lampard, 1993, p. 23). Indeed, this was later on to be the main function of APR.

The provision of retreats and retreat houses continued through the first world war. In 1915 a volume entitled *Retreats, their Value, Organisation and Growth*, included articles from authors across the breadth of the church of England, together with Roman Catholic and Methodist contributors. These showed that many men had been converted from sin, come closer to God, had experienced sins forgiven, troubles lightened, grown in charity and in the power to influence others. Other articles demonstrated links between evangelism and retreats, and the need for dedicated retreat houses. The importance of a strong committee was recognised which would keep a register of potential retreatants and personally invite them to come (Robinson, 1915).

¹ APR was not the only body experimenting with retreats for working girls during this period. At the large hospitable All Saints Mission House in Wigan, Sister Sybil of the Wantage sisters ran two non-residential retreats for working women and girls each year, with attendances of about 50 – 70 people. They began with an introductory talk on the Saturday evening, and then the following morning the retreatants came in their Sunday best for Mass, followed by three addresses, much hymn singing and one intercession service at which the girls offered their own requests. There were three substantial meals, the last one being a typical north-country hot pot supper. On the Monday there was a half day retreat for their mothers, beginning in the late morning after they had finished their work, with a more concentrated time-table. There were often 90 present (The Community of St. Mary the Virgin, 1946, p. 87).

The 1916 National Mission of Repentance and Hope had employed retreats to prepare both clergy and people to participate. Reports after the mission encouraged retreats to maintain the spirituality of clergy, and the conversion of the laity (Mission 1918 pp 42,44). Therefore

each diocese should have a Retreat house, which could be used not only by the clergy, but also by the laity, where it might be possible for any men or women who desired to spend a day or more apart (Mission, 1918, p. 20).

After the war, the Revd Mark Carpenter-Garnier, at that time a member of the APR executive, wrote a letter to the press about the part retreat houses could play in the rehabilitation of young men returning from the front. In October 1918 the vice-president of his Association appealed in the Guardian newspaper for funds to establish a retreat house for men. In 1919, the programme of the newly opened house at Pleshey included retreats for those who had been demobbed as well as for the blind (Harvey, 1920). This growth was assisted by a wide-spread interest in mysticism, a desire for quiet after the noise of conflict and, perhaps most important of all, the broad acceptance at long last of the heirs of the Oxford Movement within the established church. Among the retreat houses opened in the 1920s APR's St George's House for men was quickly in financial trouble because it was difficult to encourage men to come into silence. Within a year around 47% of people attending retreats there were women, and by 1926 this had risen to 68%, the ladies being welcomed in order to make the place financially viable (Lampard, 1993, p. 30). Each year APR listed the retreats available, evidencing the growth from 185 retreats in 1920, to 470 in 1934.

As retreat houses were quickly established in many parts of the country over the following years, and in 1924 the Society of Retreat Conductors (SRC) was formed, to train retreat conductors, to organise Ignatian retreats, especially for men, and to administer retreat houses of a high standard. . The Anglo-Catholic congress committee sponsored the work of both APR and SRC. An APR conference in 1929 discussed the possibility of using lay people to conduct retreats but concluded that even though a layman might have the necessary charismatic gifts and theological training, a priest would still be necessary for giving 'authoritative counsel and for administering the sacraments.' The possibility of female leadership was firmly rejected, because they could not have the necessary authority. 'A mother superior might give her nuns spiritual addresses, but could she give a retreat as it is commonly understood?' (Lampard, 1993). So in the Anglican retreat tradition, conductors were always male and in priestly orders, but might be religious or secular, and this continued,

with one notable exception of Evelyn Underhill who conducted retreats, addressed meetings and worked as a spiritual director. For her, the purpose of a retreat was rest and recreation, renewal, rebirth, and the recovery of quality and depth (Armstrong, 1975, p. 266). The all-male conduct of retreats continued right up to 1960. In 1931 APR published a booklet *entitled Retreats for Beginners* specifically to give guidance to parish clergy called upon to lead short weekend introductory retreats (Simpson, 1931).

. In August 1924 the APR received a grant of £500 per annum from the Committee of the London Congress to appoint a general secretary, and Wareham was appointed to the post. In the end he stayed for nine years, spending the time leading retreats, running training courses and generally promoting the cause (*Vision*, 1920-1990, Nov. 1924, p. 2; Jan. 1934, p. 4). He also wrote a number of short books on Christian behaviour, which work continued when he went back into parish life. He was joined from 1928 to 1931 by Gilbert Shaw (1886-1967) who for that time had a remarkable ministry in spiritual direction which continued afterwards and was also experienced in the occult, the psychic and exorcism. His retreat ministry continued, after 1945 being mainly confined to priests and religious and being chaplain to the Servants of the Love of God (Hacking, 1988, pp. 37, 69). They were succeeded in 1935 by Revd Miles Sargent, although this appointment didn't last for long as the London Congress was no longer financially independent and could no longer give a grant towards his stipend (*Vision*, July 1935, p. 4). Sargent, who acted as chaplain at various boys' schools and developed retreats amongst them, continued to be of assistance to APR for many years. By January 1951 he was sub-warden of CSMV, dying in 1958 when chaplain with special responsibility for Clergy Schools of Prayer in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich (Wilson, 2007).

The Second World War nearly caused the death of the retreat movement. By the end of war, APR found that its headquarters had been severely damaged during the blitz, its membership was halved and its resources crippled so that it could no longer employ a full time organizing secretary, and its retreat house of St Ursula had been commandeered for military use (*Vision*, July 1953, p. xiv). Mark Carpenter-Garnier, the president of APR, recalled how houses had closed their doors nationally, with some being requisitioned and some being damaged by enemy action (*Vision*, July 1954, p. xii).

Some ten years after hostilities ceased it was observed that the movement had barely recovered from these devastating actions (*Vision*, July 1954, p. xii; July 1956, p. vi). However, the lists of forthcoming retreats published by APR seem to show that by then the movement was expanding significantly again, as the following table shows.

Type of retreat	1951	1958
Clergy	68	56
Laymen	30	60
Women	140	176
Mixed	79	175
Youth	5	0
Totals	322	467

Source – APR Retreats Lists for 1951 and 1958

Assuming that the number of retreats organised reflects the number of people actually coming, it would seem that at the end of the eight year period, whilst slightly fewer clergy were making a retreat, many more lay people were coming, the most significant increase being in those attending mixed retreats as social mores changed. In 1963, Martin Thornton, who had served for a time on the APR Council, reported that lay people were attending at the rate of 40,000 a year – an increase on the total given in 1925 by Alan Simpson, but still only a small percentage of the lay membership of the church (Thornton, 1963, p. 5).

However, it was not all expansion. Judging by the number of houses which disappeared from APR retreat lists and Church of England Year Books during this period, some 20 houses ceased to function in the 1950's and 60's, many community-owned but also including the Southwark Diocesan House at Carshalton, Farnham Castle, and St Anne's, Cheltenham. These were all pre-war foundations, and probably the buildings needed upgrading (*Vision*, various dates).

Turning to the social mix of retreatants, at the APR Conference in 1947 Fr Andrew Blair of the Community of the Resurrection complained that the chief active supporters of the retreat movement, far from being the hoped-for lower classes, were to be found amongst the main beneficiaries of an unprecedented national wealth, namely the middle classes, who had the leisure and the money for such spiritual luxuries (Carpenter-Garnier, 1948, p. 1). Even more disappointingly, the Revd R. H. Foster said that there was little desire for retreat amongst most church members, and those who did come were in the upper age ranges. He identified three groups which made up a typical congregation; the first was the over 45's who were the backbone of the church and were the most likely retreat goers; the second were the 25-50's who, with their families, jobs and children, were too busy to go on retreat; finally, there were the under 25's whose lives were full of activity, business and bustle, and who refused to consider the idea at all (Carpenter-Garnier, 1948, pp. 7, 8).

Evelyn Underhill had said 'we are beginning to realise that St Ignatius never meant his masterpiece to be turned into a yearly exercise for the devout. It is too powerful, searching, even shattering for that.' The annual withdrawal was an opportunity to 'steep our souls in the

beauty of the mysterious,' to dwell quietly and without self-occupation in the atmosphere of God, and the best way of redressing the balance between the temporal and the eternal sides of our nature (*Vision*, Jan. 1932). So after the war, in 1947, the APR conference, under Bp Carpenter-Garnier, attempted to decide which was the best approach; the Ignatian methods of meditation, of discernment and of self-examination, exploring the fundamental facts of the Christian faith and help the retreatants to rediscover their vocation; or the Benedictine journey in prayer from vocal prayer in the public liturgies to contemplation in the silences. In 1955, APR described itself as consisting of 'members of the Anglican Communion who seek to promote the development of the Spiritual life by means of retreats conducted on definite principles' (*Vision*, Dec. 1955, p. 116)

These principles were developed at a further conference arranged in 1959. Archbishop Michael Ramsey looked upon the retreat as a 'good rest' towards God, letting the desire respond to Him which in time would give way to activities of love, imagination and prayer. The job of the conductor was to give short addresses about the Christian verities in terms of what they meant to him, not driving the point home as in a sermon but gently allowing them to come to rest in the retreatant's imagination and consciousness. (Anstey, 1959, pp. 7-10). Revd. Hugh Maycock, warden of Pusey House, said that retreat was a time for silence and refreshment, not for instruction or exhortation but for making the occasional leap forward. It was a time of recollection when certain truths grabbed hold of us, truths about goodness, beauty, joy, love and innocence, truths about God. It was to be a time when we regained the confidence in the universe of a child and to regain the certainty of our first belief in the truths that moved us (Anstey, 1959, pp. 51-55).

These should be contrasted with statements about retreat which had been made by two leaders of APR. Miles Sargent, a former General Secretary of APR, described the process as follows. A retreat was, he said, an intensely personal thing, although not selfish, with the purpose of consecrating one's personal powers to God. For this to happen there must be firstly a real desire to seek the will of God; then self examination, including an awareness of how one is using ones talents; thirdly an examination of conscience for sin, leading to penitence; next the seeking of the necessary grace to amend ones life, and finally the making of a resolution (*Vision*, Jan. 1953, pp. viii-x).

Reginald Somerset Ward (1881-1962), between 1956 and 1959 produced, with the encouragement of APR, three short books giving material and advice for people to use in private retreats which seem to express the ethos of the Anglican retreat tradition at that time. It is sensible; the retreatant is to have eight hours sleep each night, three meals a day, and two

periods of recreation. It is disciplined, observing absolute silence, and two or three periods of meditation each day depending upon the length of the retreat. It is practical, with the retreatant encouraged to do one act of charity each day, perhaps writing a letter, giving of alms or doing some act of kindness. It is, when possible, rooted in worship, sharing in a daily Eucharist and one other corporate act. It is biblical - his printed 'addresses' are short, clear and simple meditations on key bible stories, and the reading of them was followed by silent prayer and a meditation. The spirit of the retreat is one of a quiet and gentle calm, filled by a balanced but sincere devotion. Here we see a private retreat adopting the form of a preached retreat (Ward, 1956; 1957; 1959).

Parish retreats were still being actively encouraged by APR which published a leaflet about them written by the Revd Charles Smith, at that time APR secretary, which was summarised at the conference for retreat givers held in 1959. He said that the Liturgical movement, so influential in the Church of England at the time, rightly emphasised the corporate nature of the church, but this led to the danger of externalising devotion, and to the lack of deep foundations. As prayer and the spiritual life thrived in silence, if corporate worship was to have depth, individual and group activities must be deeply grounded in the quiet of a parish retreat. They must be a real parish affair, not just arranged for an elite, and so all the parish leaders should be encouraged to come; if they would not come it might be that they were not suitable as leaders. On the other hand, one needed to be selective, because to have the wrong people present could disrupt the event. There needed to be much preparatory work, including teaching people how to meditate and personally asking people to come. A suitable conductor, one with an imaginative presentation and an understanding of ordinary people, must be engaged, and the retreatants were to be encouraged to concentrate upon God, not on ecclesiastical matters. If people could not go away, there was still value in holding the retreat in the parish itself, using the church and the parish hall, although even then the rule of silence must be observed - a return to the nineteenth century parish retreat (Anstey, 1959, pp. 44-49).

Speaking at the same conference, Archbishop Michael Ramsey suggested that the first time a parish went away together might not be for a retreat, but for a time of instruction, devotion, recreation, but also a time of silence as a definite step towards the first retreat. 'The only initiation into silence is silence' (Anstey, 1959, p. 11). The annual or biannual parish retreat did become a feature of the life of a number of parishes, mainly of an Anglo-Catholic flavour, and greatly deepened the devotional life of the congregation and of the individuals.

Writing in 1959, Bishop J. W. C. Wand summed up the development of retreats in the first half of the twentieth century in these words:

The growth of the practice of retreats during the first half of the present century has been most remarkable. A rapid spread at the start, when it was the latest thing, a reaction after the first enthusiasm had ebbed away, firm determination during the special difficulties of the war period, and a steady growth [so that] the movement has become a normal part of the life and practice of the contemporary church (Anstey, 1959, p. 5).

At the beginning of the 1960's, within the Church of England the retreat movement was at a high point. The short-lived growth in church membership during the late 1940's and 1950s had led to a noticeable increase in the number of those making a retreat which probably reached a peak rather belatedly around 1964. It was reported at the APR Annual General Meeting in 1965 that in the previous year some 20,411 retreatants had attended one of the 1,250 retreats which had been announced in *Vision*, in addition to those making private retreats and those attending closed events (*Vision*, Jan. 1966, p. 3). These were cautious figures, as the 40,000 retreatants a year quoted by Martin Thornton shows (Thornton, 1963, p. 5). Some retreat houses, such as the Diocesan House at Pleshey and the Community owned houses at Clewer and Hemingford Grey, were running events almost back to back because so many people wanted to make a retreat.

Despite this success, there were those who were questioning the validity of the formal silent preached retreat based upon gospel meditations. The result was that, whilst for the first 100 years the way in which retreats were offered in the Church of England hardly changed, mirroring what was happening in the Roman Catholic Church, at the end of the next 50 years the practice is so diverse that retreatants are now advised to check carefully on the nature of a particular event before booking to make sure it is what they are looking for (*Retreats*, 2008, p. 6).

Between 1962 and 2008, church membership declined severely, as disenchantment with the Christian faith spread, which reduced the pool of potential retreatments. However it was also a time of spiritual awakening and a concern for spiritual experience, employing new spiritualities which provided an alternative to the thinking centred approach of Western Christianity, uniting body, mind and spirit, embracing our physicality and that of the created order. Other faiths moved into the country, along with Caribbean and African expressions of Christianity. Modern psychology provided insights into how we could cope with the stresses

of modern life, and individuals began to seek counselling and therapy from the imminent God rather than vision and revelation from the Transcendent. On the other hand, there was a growing concern with social issues and community. The decline in church membership and in acceptance of the Christian discourse was accompanied by a search for a meaningful and holistic spirituality beyond the churches. At the same time, a desire for personal wholeness and fulfilment was balanced by a heightened sense of social responsibility and of the corporate nature of faith. Teaching about a transcendent God who was to be contemplated intellectually from afar was giving way to a longing to experience the immanent God at the centre of our being; and the acceptance of an orthodox faith based upon the authority of Bible or of Church was being replaced by a belief discovered and tested by personal experience. All of this led some to see deficiencies in the ways in which retreats were being offered and to suggest changes.

Change was already beginning within the Roman communion itself where bold and well-thought-out developments in the practice of retreats emerged, stimulated and enabled by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican encouraged a fresh look at the Ignatian Exercises, facilitated ecumenical cooperation, and affirmed those who were already learning from the spiritual wisdom of other faiths. These decisions, in tandem with the spiritual explorations being made beyond the churches, would lead to profound changes into the ways in which retreats were offered. New ways of offering retreat, both Ignatian and non Ignatian, greater openness towards other churches and to other faiths, the encouraging of women and laity to lead retreats and the introduction of workshops alongside retreat ministry, all these created new possibilities for those engaged in the retreat movement, both Catholic and Protestant. Penelope Eckersley comments, looking back on her ten-year term as the organising secretary of APR from 1968–1978, ‘the [Roman] church which [had] seemed the least affected by change had led the way in coping with understanding it and learning from it.’ No longer was the preached retreat the only method being employed (Vision, 1979, p. 2).

In 1967, those involved in providing retreats in the Roman Catholic Church of this country, either as owners of retreat houses or as retreat conductors, formed the National Retreat Council (NRC) to coordinate their work. They quickly changed their name to the National Retreat Movement (NRM) and more recently it has been changed again to the Catholic Network for Retreats and Spirituality (CNRS). Almost immediately, contact between the NRC and the APR was established, despite the fact that two bodies differed in

the nature of their membership, APR consisting mainly of secular clergy and an even larger number of laypeople, whilst NRC was almost exclusively religious. It was soon proposed that there be a joint secretariat and a joint committee on youth retreats, both of which suggestions were vetoed by Cardinal Heenan. However, he did allow NRC's participation in the publication of *Vision*, which from 1971 onwards carried the programmes for RC houses alongside their Anglican counterparts. Further, the conference organised by APR in 1969 was made ecumenical, to which both Roman Catholic and Methodists were invited.² Speakers included the Archbishop of Canterbury, and key representatives of the Methodists, the Jesuits, the Benedictines and the Orthodox.

In 1972, at a time when the hope of the visible reunion of the Christian church was still running high, APR changed its constitution to welcome non-Anglicans into membership in the hope that it could become *the* ecumenical retreat organisation. This vision guided its work for the next fifteen years or more, although in practice its membership continued to be mostly Anglican. In 1979 the Methodist Retreat Group (MRG), later known as the Methodist Retreat and Spirituality Network (MR&SN), came into being, largely through the enthusiasm of Mary Holiday, a 'high church' Methodist minister and founder of a small community committed to ecumenism.³ Three years later, MRG were sending two representatives to the *Vision* editorial committee.

A further ecumenical conference was held in 1979. A report of the conference comments on how conservative some Anglicans were compared with their Roman counterparts at that time; Anglican clergy and religious were recognisable by their clerical dress and habits, whereas the Roman priests and religious were in lay clothes. Although Anglican religious provided a wealth of experience of retreats, the balance of knowledge and expertise in conducting them lay with the Roman Catholic contingent, which included a large number of Jesuits. The Archbishop of York, the Evangelical Stuart Blanche, had caused some anger by insisting that Biblical exegesis was the only basis for study, meditation and for retreat addresses, and by his criticism of what he regarded as non-biblical methods, dubious spiritualities and Eastern meditation. Similarly, many were not pleased when Fr Martin Smith SSJE in the final sermon had insisted that silence was of the essence of a retreat, and that the movement was just 'pottering around in an ecclesiastical paddling pool unless it realised that

² Some of the Methodist delegates turned out to be women, which caused consternation as women members of APR also wanted to come along, something which had not been allowed before. In the end, they were permitted to attend, provided that they were actively involved in retreat work. There were of course a number of Catholic sisters present, who had been members of NRC from its beginning.

³ At this point, acronyms begin to multiply like rabbits, and the picture becomes unavoidably complicated.

it was in the business of introducing silence into the world' (*Vision*, 1980, pp. 2, 3). It seemed to some as if the Church of England wanted to turn the clock back.

In 1984, inspired by the Rev. Richard Buck, a joint working party of APR, NRM and NRG recommended the foundation of a National Retreat Centre (NRC), to be a resource centre for retreat houses, conductors and retreatants, to coordinate training and to respond to enquiries from both press and public. They proposed that a full-time director should be appointed, to serve as the administrator for APR, NRM and MRG. The new centre was inaugurated on November 8th 1986, situated in Liddon House, with Gillean Russell as its executive officer. She was typical of many involved in the retreat movement at the time, having been trained both as a psychotherapist and in Ignatian spirituality.

The idea of retreat was being explored in other denominations at this time, and in 1988, members of the newly formed Baptist Union Retreat Group (BURG) and of the United Reformed Church Silence and Retreat Group (URCS&RG) became observer members of the Management committee of the Retreat Centre. However, APR's dream of embracing all those involved in retreat work within its fold was brought to an end when the younger denominational groups felt it best to keep their own individual identities rather than merge with it. Although it was not fully realised at the time, this reflected what was happening in the wider ecumenical field, where the vision of the eventual integration of all the churches had given way to an agreement to remain separate but to work as closely together as possible through Churches Together in Britain, which had replaced the British Council of Churches. The retreat groups did however agree to form yet another body to which they could all belong on equal terms whilst keeping their individual identities, and this was named the National Retreat Association (NRA, now simply The Retreat Association, RA). In this way, an umbrella structure was provided through which Anglicans, Catholics and Free Church groups could cooperate in the promotion of retreats, the sharing of experience and the training of conductors, a provision which probably would not have happened apart from the decisions made at Vatican II.

In 1991, APR handed over its non-Anglican responsibilities to the Retreat Association, namely management of the Centre staff and office, the ownership of *Vision* and the organisation of an annual consultation for those running training schemes for spiritual directors. On the advice of those in the publishing industry, from the 1998 edition the name of *The Vision* was changed to *Retreats* to increase its appeal on bookstalls, and income from sales and advertisements has provided a major part of the income of the Retreat Association. The journal remains as the movement's main shop window.

Judith Lampard, a Methodist, took over from Gillean Russell as Organising Secretary of APR and NRA in 1991, and encouraged the NRA to join the Churches Together in England as a Body in Association, giving the retreat movement a voice on the wider ecumenical stage, especially in the area of spirituality (Clifford, 2007, p. 3).

A further diminution of APR's responsibilities happened in the following year, 1992, when it gave up its role in the pastoral care and training of the wardens of Anglican retreat houses, a task it had undertaken since the 1920's, to yet another new group called the 'Anglican Retreat House and Conference Centre Wardens Association' (Archway). This was brought into being by the wardens themselves, with the active encouragement of the APR Council, because of a growing sense of insecurity. A number of houses had recently closed, and others were facing closure due to increased financial pressures, whilst health and safety legislation had multiplied making demands which wardens felt ill-equipped to meet. They often felt that the church as a whole was not giving them the support which they needed. At first its membership was restricted to Church of England houses so that they could relate to the synodical structures of the church, but it would appear that its membership is now wider, as its web-site describes it as 'An Association of Christian Retreat Houses' (W/Archway 2010). APR continues as a purely Anglican body.

NRA arranged the first of a series of four-yearly conferences at Swanwick in 1992, which contrast with those formerly organised by the APR. Firstly, they were larger, being attended by some 350 or more people. Secondly, those who come were not just retreat conductors, but include retreatants, spiritual directors and directees, retreat house staff and other people who just wanted to find out more. They were in the main over 50 years of age. Thirdly, whereas the addresses at the APR conferences were usually about the art of retreat leadership, this subject was now rarely discussed at the plenary sessions. Rather, the conferences became focused upon the spiritual climate within which retreats were being held, trying to make sense of the present bewildering diversity and the growth of spirituality beyond the churches. Indeed, I felt that a significant number of those attending the 2008 conference were on the fringes of the churches. There was little interest in matters of doctrine or church politics, but rather an honest search for the truth in whatever way it might be revealed.

For some members of the APR Council, this loss of authority was a painful process, being contrary to their earlier vision that the organisation would be open to all within the retreat movement. The association had been thrown back into its original role of promoting

retreats within the Church of England and it took some time to adjust. It still organises an annual meeting which helps its members to keep a sense of identity and continuity. Further, it keeps the importance of retreats before those who are in training for ministry, and reported in 2006 that those responsible for ministerial education in the dioceses of Exeter, St. Albans, Canterbury and Peterborough had asked for help in training retreat conductors and spiritual directors. However, membership of the Association and sales of the *Retreats* magazine are now in decline (RA Newsletter, 2006, p. 2)

The appointment of Paddy Lane as the organising secretary of NRA and of APR in 1994 gave the retreat movement a warm, wise and supportive figure-head, a post from which she retired in 2008. Under her leadership, another important development occurred, reflecting significant changes in the movement. Until 2001, in order to become a member of the Association, one had first to join a denominational group. In that year, at the request of the increasing numbers of retreat houses run by ecumenical teams and of retreatants who did not have a particular denominational allegiance, it was opened to Affiliates, who, whether as individuals or institutions, can join the association directly (*Retreats*, 2002, p. 2).⁴

These new structures, rather baffling to the uninitiated, enabled an easy flow of ideas and experience between those leading retreats, encouraging the development of new ways of offering retreats in all the denominations of this country, including the Roman Catholics.

In the Autumn of 1981, under the auspices of APR, the Cenacle Sister Elisabeth Smyth and the Anglican Christopher Lowe CR initiated a two year training programme. The teaching methods which they used reflected the current holistic understanding that a retreat involved the whole person rather than being mainly cerebral. Art, music, journalling and other ways of reflecting upon one's faith-journey were all part of the training (*Vision*, 1982, p. 4-5). Along with members of other denominations, this course was attended by Anglican clergy, retreat house wardens, religious and laity. It was later extended to three years and continues today under the leadership of Andrew Walker of SRC. Further training courses followed, of varying lengths, and IGRs became a regular part of Anglican retreat house programmes.

Different traditions, contemplative prayer and themed retreats are some of the ways in which the Anglican tradition of retreat has been enriched since 1962. The former Organising

⁴ The *Retreats* magazine has succeeded *Vision* and is published by the Retreat Association from 1991 onwards.

Secretary of APR Sr Joanna Baldwin summed up the changes which took place in Anglican retreats after Vatican II as follows:

Many people continue to value the addresses of a conducted retreat, some [of whom] appreciate the inclusion of specific ways to relax tension and deepen awareness. But increasingly, it is the specialised retreat in which the retreatant is able to make the greatest possible use of the time he or she can give, that is being sought out...music, poetry, yoga, simple exploration of the qualities of silence, or a personally given IGR (Vision, 1985, p. 1).

In both the Roman and Anglican communions there is a close link between the practice of retreat and the ministry of spiritual direction, an association which, in the Church of England, stretches from Pusey himself through Evelyn Underhill to Martin Israel. Paddy Lane said that some people begin looking for a director because of their retreat experience whilst others come to retreat because of the advice of their director (Lane, 2008). Obviously a retreat is an occasion when spiritual direction is available for those who wish to use it and Ignatian retreats are built around it.

In the 1980's, APR took on the role of producing and updating a directory of training courses, of which at the time of writing there are some 30 to 40 in various parts of the country. They also arranged regular consultations for those who were running them, and act as a referral centre for those looking for directors, including Roman Catholics, tasks still being carried out by the RA today. These functions fit in well under the RA umbrella because often retreat conductors spend much of their time directing people.

Since 1991, the number of retreat houses, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, listed in the magazine *Vision* and its successor *Retreats*, has greatly increased. Paddy Lane reports that when she came into post, some 150 houses were listed. Now there are 240 (Lane, 2008). However, during this same period, the number of specified Anglican houses has declined with the closure of some diocesan and community houses. The increase in total provision nationwide has in large measure been due to the establishment of a number of small houses of no specified denominational affiliation.

In part, the reduction in the number of houses reflects the steady but un-quantified decline in those attending retreats since the peak in the middle of the 1960's, but there are other factors at work as well. Over the past twenty years closures have occurred at a rate which appears to have accelerated recently. Often the reason has been combined the financial

burden of the extensive repairs and refurbishment, and of the continuously rising standards demanded by health and safety legislation together with the provision of facilities for the disabled, although this is work which the houses would endorse. So whereas in 1981 some 25 diocesan retreat houses advertised in *Vision*, in 2008 only 17 were listed in *Retreats* (Blewett, General Synod Background Paper, Feb. 2008). Writing of the situation in 2006, Tim Blewett of Launde Abbey accused dioceses of neglecting ‘these great spiritual and mission powerhouses of the Church...over the years’ or even selling them off to help, in the short-term, diocesan budgets (APR Newsletter, 2006, p. 3).

So in the Church of England the way retreats are offered, the people coming, those who lead them and the places in which they are held have all grown in diversity over the last forty years. What is the immediate situation and what does the future hold?

Firstly, the Retreat Association continues to link the various denominational groups, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Free Churches, maintaining the present ecumenical character of the retreat movement while APR is developing the links which it has had over many years with Diocesan Spirituality Officers. However, APR faces falling membership, dwindling financial resources and rising costs – although this has been a familiar story throughout its history. In May 2009, for the first time, the office was moved out of London and they are now based at Amersham, sharing premises with the Quiet Garden Trust. Their new Director is Alison MacTier who has a background in religious publishing. As it approaches its centenary in 2013, the role of APR is as important as ever in the development of the Anglican retreat tradition.

Secondly, the way in which retreats are offered remains diverse, with a continuing emphasis on the holistic approach to spirituality.

Thirdly, the desire of people to come on retreat continues, but numbers decline. Paddy Lane said that the hard core of retreatants, who back in 1994 attended a preached retreat annually, no longer exists; fewer are going on retreat, and in particular on preached retreats. No statistics are kept, but her impression was that whereas in 1994 parish retreats would be bringing 30-40 people at a time, now it is more likely to be just 10-12. Further, people seem to be avoiding commitment; for example, individuals are more likely to book at the last minute, making it very difficult to know whether a particular retreat is going to be viable or not. Again, people are less likely these days to become members of organisations such as APR, and those who do join do so just for a short time, two or three years, whereas in the past a number were members for life. For some, retreats are the way in which they keep in touch with God as they are not being fed by their local church; for others the retreat house is a place

of comfort, as they have been hurt by the church. Others do not go to church at all, but want to keep in touch with spiritual things (Lane, 2008).

Fourthly, people are coming on retreat for a wide variety of reasons. Writing in an ecumenical context in 2002, Margaret Silf reported some of the motives which she had heard from people on retreat. First, there was a striving after 'the other' - something or some one they did not yet know - expressed in a hunger for depth and a desire for authentic meditative prayer and the ability to listen to what was happening in the depths of their hearts. Again, there was a desire for wholeness and inclusiveness, for a spirituality that revered the whole person - body, mind, spirit, senses and imagination - and that included the whole of creation. Next, they were seeing life as an unfolding story, and wanted ways of recognising and sharing their personal story with the help of another person who would listen to, value and authenticate it. After that there was a desire to encounter the radical person of Jesus. She explained, 'a Christ-centred retreat is a prime opportunity for beginning to explore what it might mean at a personal level to be in partnership with this radical peace-maker.' Also there was a desire for community and intimacy. 'For many people, the experience of being listened to with whole-hearted and loving attention can be the first taste of genuine human intimacy, where "heart speaks to heart."' (*Retreats*, 2002, pp. 3, 4).

Fifthly, while the larger houses are becoming more comfortable, more professional in relation to the hospitality trade, and offering more resources. There may well now be a meditation room as well as a chapel, fully equipped conference rooms, art rooms, a labyrinth in the grounds and hospitality trays in the bedrooms, smaller [diocesan] houses seemed to be struggling. Almost all of them needed capital investment to pay for the refurbishment of their buildings and for the creation of new facilities to meet changing market needs. Some were still receiving financial support from the diocese, but others were now expected to operate as stand-alone businesses (*Church Times*, 20/02/09). The future of houses of all kinds, diocesan, community-based and privately owned, remains uncertain and it may be that they have to change their function.

Sixthly, An experienced guide told me recently that he had not been asked to lead a retreat in a retreat house for some years but was busy leading Retreats in Daily Life, the alternative method prescribed by Ignatius himself, where the care of an individual retreatant might last for as long as 18 months. It would therefore seem that retreat houses are important but they are not indispensable. Julia Morant, vice-chair of APR, has commented that although a particular kind of space - sacred space - was essential for a retreat, it does not need to be a

church or a retreat house. It must be a place where there has been Christian prayer, a place with a story, 'a powerful history of connections, people and events...when we visit we draw on that power and add our own prayers to it' (APR Newsletter, 2009, p. 3).

Seventhly and finally, looking to the future, as Paddy Lane points out, there seem to be opportunities which are being offered to the retreat movement to which it should respond. In wider society, the word 'retreat' is becoming familiar and retreats are seen as an opportunity to draw back from the pressures of daily life. For example, hotels offer retreats, using the facilities of their spa, concerned with health, massage, 'pampering' and care. Paddy suggests that Christian houses can build on this, seeing 'retreats as time set aside from daily life, with the whole person being cared for,' and perhaps the upgrading of houses will enable this to happen (Lane, 2008). Some businesses take their management teams on 'retreat' for purposes of team building or to have time to see the big picture and get a sense of direction. There seems to be an interest in spiritual retreats from people beyond the fringe of the churches and already retreat houses find people coming to explore further. The continuing sales of Stafford Whiteaker's inter-faith *The Good Retreat Guide*, written for those who are looking for 'new values, an alternative to materialism or simply some rest and relaxation' and now in its 6th edition, is one indication of this interest (Whiteaker, 2010 subtitled: *Over 500 places to find peace and spiritual renewal in Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, other European Countries, Asia and Africa*). Another is the unexpected interest shown in the BBC 2 series *The Monastery* and its successor *Silence* filmed at Worth Abbey and screened during 2005 and 2010 (Jolly, 2006), which seemed to confirm Rosemary Harthill's view:

Once retreats were perceived as only for priests, nuns, or the determinedly pious. Today a retreat can be a way of dipping a toe into that delicious, but possibly dangerous, A to Z of spirituality - from Abandon to Zen, through ashram, angels, darkness, dance, John Donne, ecstasy and the rest (Harthill, 2001, p. 217).

Paul Heelas, who conducts continuing research on the development of new spiritualities in Kendal and elsewhere, writes that in his estimation 'retreats are an area in which the concerns of the Christian church coincide with those in the newer spiritualities.' After noting, perhaps unfairly, that in what the churches have on offer, anything concerned with 'quality of life issues is noticeable by its absence', he continues:

The only significant exception concerns spiritual retreats, normally held in designated Christian retreat centres...Our enquiries suggest that the market for such retreat activity is growing, with particular demand for retreats that involve one-to-one spiritual direction aimed at personal spiritual growth (Heelas, Woodhead et al., 2005, p. 69).

Over the past 150 years, thousands of Anglicans have found the retreat to be of value in strengthening their spiritual lives and it is still so today. Perhaps in the future we will approach it in more informal ways than we have in the past, but the basic technique of taking time out from our busy Christian lives to consider their direction is as important as ever. The Association for Promoting Retreats, 100 years old this year, has seen many changes as it has assisted the development of the retreat in the Anglican and other churches.

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