

EARLY DAYS OF CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Ecumenical roots

In September 1969, an American Catholic couple, Bob and Laurin Balkam, who had been baptised in the Spirit in 1968, came to England with their six children (they had two more later). After their arrival, Balkam contacted Michael Harper as the Fountain Trust was the only “Pentecostal source” that he had known before his departure. Michael Harper invited him to a Fountain Trust meeting at a Baptist Church in Elephant and Castle, London in December.

In 1970, Balkam was invited to participate in the committee of the Guildford 1971 Fountain Trust Conference and he was the only Roman Catholic among the five members. [The purpose of the conference was to draw together Christians from every church tradition from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal, and from many countries of the world, to learn more about the power of the Holy Spirit and the way in which our churches can regain it in its fullness.]

Harper continued to invite the Balkams to “share as fully in Fountain Trust activities” as they liked and to become part of the Trust with other Roman Catholics. But Balkam had already envisaged developing a charismatic organisation with “visible” and “distinctly Roman Catholic expression” of the renewal so that the renewal could gain the acknowledgement of the Roman Catholic officials.

Balkam and other Roman Catholic charismatics organised activities mainly for Roman Catholics such as the first “Day of Renewal” at Heythrop College on 19 September 1971 and Bishop Victor Guazzelli was invited to come. Bob Balkam organised the second “Day of Renewal” in December of the same year; Harper was invited to speak and this enabled the Trust to be more involved in the Roman Catholic Renewal which was progressing at that time.

The Catholic National Service Committee

The International Ecumenical Charismatic Conference in 1972, and another conference at the University of Surrey in 1973, both had Roman Catholic and Episcopalian speakers from the US. In November 1973, Balkam proposed to some Roman Catholics that they should have a Catholic charismatic organisation, and in the same month, the National Service Committee in England and Wales was founded and chaired by Fr. Mike Targett.

This created better connections between prayer groups and local bishops, and arranged charismatic conferences and teaching. It organised its own renewal activities but also maintained a cooperative relationship with the Fountain Trust. The National Service Committee was born in November 1973, after the Guildford 1971 conference. Balkam attributed this development to Guildford 1971, saying, “The family tree of Catholic charismatic renewal in England and Wales certainly has roots in the Surrey hills”.

The extracts above are from “Grassroots unity and the Fountain Trust international conferences: a study of ecumenism in the charismatic renewal” by Ho Yan Au (2008).

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Bronwen Astor

The following facts are taken and adapted from "Bronwen Astor – her life and times" by Peter Stanford (2001)

On 18th August 1970 the Community of Christ the King was formally created. The leadership team was Bob and Laurin Balkam, Mary Tanner and Lady Bronwen Astor. It was based at The Quarry, a house purchased by Bronwen Astor next to her own house Tuesley Manor near Godalming. (In a 2010 interview on Conscious TV, Bronwen said she had "thrown a medal of Our Lady over the fence into the garden of the Quarry, with the result that the owner reduced the property's sale price and offered it to Bronwen.) The community had originally planned to live at Effingham Park near Horsham but a series of problems led them to sell that property and focus on Godalming.

The Community was inaugurated on 31 January 1971 by local church dignitaries including Bishop Michael Bowen of Arundel and Brighton, who welcomed the pioneering initiative to establish a new style of lay community. It was committed to Charismatic Renewal, but also to better inter-church understanding by living and praying together. The founders had their roots in the IEF the International Ecumenical Fellowship, and many of the people who attended meetings or stayed in the Community house were from that background.

The centerpiece of the Community was the Friday evening charismatic prayer meeting, which included recorded talks by Cardinal Seunens, hymns, Scripture, praying in tongues, deep silence, and prayers for healing and anointing in the Holy Spirit.

The Community came to an end in 1974 – there had been very little regulation and control over its activities, and pastoral irregularities, dubious spiritual practices and misconduct had begun to infiltrate. The Balkams left at that time, however the weekly charismatic prayer meetings continued at The Quarry with Bronwen Astor and Mary Tanner until 1983, when they were absorbed into Godalming Parish.

Alton Day of Renewal

The following is an article "History of the Alton day of renewal" written by Sister Paddy

In the 1970's the Catholic Charismatic Renewal spread from America to England. Prayer groups were beginning to spring up and followed seminars in the Holy Spirit. The aim was to convert our lives and heart, renew our spiritual life and follow Christ in the power of the Spirit of God dwelling in us from our Baptism and to fan into a flame the gifts given to us at Confirmation for the building of the Church and the spreading of the Gospel.

In November 1974 a Mill Hill Father, Fr Coogan in Basingstoke, started a prayer group in the home of Ron and Margaret Nicholls every Thursday evening. Our whole community of Sisters in Basingstoke consisting of 5 Sisters joined this prayer group from the beginning, as well as Deacon Pat and Brenda Taylor. Soon other members of the laity came along and we followed the book of Seminars of the Holy Spirit. There were only two other groups to help us understand what was happening. One was the monthly day of renewal in Battersea, which soon moved to Westminster Cathedral Hall. They prayed we would be able to have another day of renewal in the South. The other group we went to

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was the ecumenical community in Warminster, near Reading. From that community we were blessed with their Fisher Folk musicians and learnt all their songs, so anointed. We visited them a number of times while following our seminar in Basingstoke. They came to pray with us when we prayed for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

After the Baptism in the Holy Spirit new things began to happen quite rapidly. Father Coogan, Ron and Margaret, Sr. Alice and myself went to the 2nd Charismatic Conference in Hopwood Hall called "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God". It was a Healing Conference to help pray for healing. During that Conference we experienced the Gospel of Jesus ministering to the crowds, healing bodies, minds, emotions, inner healings, and deliverance from evil or sinfulness. We experienced the power of the Word, of the Sacrament of forgiveness, of the sacrifice of the Mass. People's lives were being transformed as the Holy Spirit was pouring down on the people at that Conference to fulfil various callings to build up the Church.

Mary Tanner who was there said to me over breakfast: "If you never go to another Charismatic Conference in your life, you have experienced this week the work of God and outpouring of the Holy Spirit of love enough for a lifetime". I agreed, but she and Ron and Margaret were to organize another Conference in Roehampton a few years later for Religious Sisters of the South. It was again very powerful.

It was after the Hopwood Hall Conference that a day of renewal was held in Basingstoke in St Joseph's Parish, which was at that time a hall used also as Mass centre on Sundays. It was the first Day of Renewal structured around talks, workshops, with of course prayer and praise. After a talk about Charismatic Renewal, a movement of the Holy Spirit, workshops were set up to give practical experiences and answer many questions people needed to clarify. The following two months the Day was held in two different parishes in Southampton. Fr Leo Target had a flourishing prayer group there and they offered the venue twice. At the second of these, Mary Tanner and Bob Balkam, who had returned from the States, were the main speakers. Mary spoke of her childhood, how she was told by Jesus about a movement of the Spirit that would spread throughout the world. Jesus called her to help Him and gave her many details she did not understand at the time.

Bob Balkam then said:

- 1) You need a Core Group to organise the Day chosen from the existing prayer groups that have sprung up. They were brought to the front and all prayed for them and over them for this service.
- 2) You cannot have a roving Day of Renewal. We must pray for a place to hold it. Those gifted with tongues sang and then Bob said "You can stop now, the Lord has chosen the place".

He then closed the prayer time and left! Where was the place? No one knew...During the prayer in tongues I heard the Spirit say "I have a job for you to do". I thought it referred to the Core group still in the front and continued to pray for them. At the end I turned to a lady sitting next to me and said that the Alton Convent had the facilities required for the Day of Renewal. She replied that it would have to be central for access. Once home in Basingstoke I looked at the map and it was right at the centre of the Prayer groups that existed at the time. I rang Father Coogan and Ron and told them that the job the Lord had given me to do was to reveal the place he had chosen for the day of

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Renewal. Father Coogan and Ron asked the Superior of Alton Convent to allow us to hold the Day of renewal there. It was granted and continued there from January 1975 till it moved to Medstead Convent of St Lucy Filipino in 2002.

The early people who contributed and served the Day of Renewal in the beginning were the following: Father Coogan, Fr Leo Target, Deacon Pat Taylor, Ron and Margaret Nicholls, Sr. Madeleine OLP, Mary Tanner, Esmond, Joy, Rev Gumble, the vicar of Blackburn village, Richard Avery, Madeleine Fowler, Chas (who helped so much with the crèche) Pat Stamp (who gave us an outreach to Albania) Sr. Monica, Sr. Elisabeth of Farnborough Hill, all the members of Basingstoke community and 2 members from Alton Community. Richard Hobbs and his gift of prophecy, Elise Hobbs, and John Edwards.

Some of the speakers we had at the beginning were: Father Ian Petit, Michael Harper, The Hallel Liturgical Dancers, Fr Nicholas Broadbridge, Margaret Pizza, Fr John Hewitt, Michael Le Morvan....

The numbers coming to the day of renewal increased to 300 to 400 people sometimes. The Chapel in Alton Convent was getting too small. The large group that came up from Southampton and Portsmouth set up their own day in Southampton. Conferences, held every summer in the Southampton College of Higher Education, ran for 9 years .

Deacon Pat Taylor set up a healing Day of renewal every month at Christ the King in Brighton Hill in Basingstoke as the Lord gave him a ministry of healing.

Before Ron died he asked the two Johns to take over the leadership of the Day of renewal: John Edwards and John Foley who both are now Deacons.

Ron Nicholls

(By Sister Paddy)

Ron was a great friend. He was a man of many talents and many gifts who gave himself wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ His Lord and who was prepared to proclaim Him "from the roof tops" if necessary. Through his love and commitment to Christ he helped innumerable people to come into closer relationship with Jesus.

He was a great encourager and no situation was a lost situation because Jesus is the Saviour and answers to everything and the Lord responded to Ron's expectations. He was constantly amazed and delighted whenever he saw or heard of what Jesus was doing in the power of His Spirit for anyone. He was steeped in the Word of God and wore several Bibles. He lived by the Word of God and taught it to all who would listen.

All the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to Him in Baptism and Confirmation and strengthened in Eucharist were operative in his life as husband, father, grand-father. For many years Ron and Margaret opened their home every week for a prayer and growth which bore abundant fruit in spreading Charismatic Renewal here in the South of England not least this Day of Renewal.

Ron was enthusiastic, a fully alive person, joy and life generated around him. He touched and provided for young and old. He would wear himself out to give the children a "Rise and Shine" and "If I were a butterfly" session. He was interested in everyone. Margaret fortunately was a steady

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hand to harness this enthusiastic tireless Ron when needed. He always appreciated her wise and good counsel for himself and others. Together they were a good team. I was privileged to know them and be part of their prayer group for as long as their health and strength allowed it. The close community bond created there has always remained strong even though the Lord led us along new paths spreading outwards in all directions.

Ron and Margaret continued to pray for our community and be interested in our missions especially the link with India. It was interesting that some of the members of our community who were in India and who had been part of his prayer group were all in England at the time of his death and therefore able to be at his funeral to remember, celebrate and thank him for what he had done for us.

A good tree bears good fruit. He had the gift of spiritual discernment and was never happy if he saw the love between brothers and sisters in the Lord being tempered with by squabbles over position or ideologies and would remind us that Christ came to serve, and we should love one another, cooperate together giving God the glory and obeying Him together. He would be looking to hear where the Spirit was moving and he would say if that person was the one being called for this or that job, talk or activity.

He had the qualities of leadership because he listened to the Spirit, and respected the gift of each person and set out to enable them to use them. He heard the Word of God and was guided by it. He listened and discerned prophecy. He was a good organizer and administrator so although freedom was given to the Spirit enough structure was there to ensure the smooth running of things,

Ron had a multitude of interests as shown by his library and the art around his home including the artistic talents of some of his children.

The Father's love for the Prodigal son always touched him. He had a great and tender love for the Father. Being a father and grand-father he understood the unconditional love of the Father and the great compassion of the heart of Christ for all mankind's wayward sons and daughters.

An Ecumenical Dimension at Alton

This article is extracted from a booklet "Blackmoor Renewed" written in 1996 by The Reverend Richard Inkpen A.K.C. former Vicar of St Matthew, Blackmoor. The booklet is copyright, but these extracts are reproduced by kind permission of Rev. Richard's widow Priscilla.

When I came to the Parish of St Matthew, Blackmoor in 1970 I considered "What did the Church have to offer?" A number of us were very concerned; the Church seemed dead. We tried all sorts of ideas to get people alert to the tasks ahead.....

In 1978 my wife Priscilla and a friend had been on a retreat together and came home excited – something was stirring! That Lent a small group started to meet in church on Thursday evenings... none of us was used to extemporary prayer, but they decided I should try. As we prayed we asked God to do something to arouse us. We had read some wonderful accounts about how dead parishes had come alive in remarkable ways. We were sure God's church in Blackmoor and Whitehill could be vibrant with His presence – somehow, please God!

That Lent many of us in the Parish prayed the following prayer daily: "Heavenly Father, pour down your Spirit upon your Church. Grant us a new vision of your glory, a new experience of your power, a

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new consecration to your service, that through our renewed witness your Holy Name may be glorified, and your Kingdom advanced, through Jesus Christ Our Lord.”

After Easter, I attended a big Conference in Loughborough – not the most exciting I had attended, but when I came home things began to happen! Two of us were searching in the Church Times that weekend for someone who could help us find “Renewal” for Blackmoor Church. Separately we both spotted “ALTON DAYS OF RENEWAL”. In no time we were in touch with the organiser Ron Nicholls of Basingstoke, a committed Roman Catholic. The Renewal meetings were held monthly in Alton Convent of Our Lady of Providence. He told us these days had never been advertised in the Church Times before! (Some would call this a coincidence – others a God-incidence.)

Three of us went to the next meeting there and came home very excited. We contacted Ron again and Priscilla and I went with one other to see him and his wife Margaret. We knew things were stirring, we wanted to know what it was all about and what we should be doing – how best we could co-operate with God in what He wanted to do. I found myself explaining what had happened a few days earlier at a mid-morning Eucharist. From the very first word I spoke I found I was shaking uncontrollably. Every word I read seemed to be of tremendous importance. I was overawed by words I had used time and again.

Ron explained how the Holy Spirit had already started to touch the three of us. We went with them that evening to a house where two of the Catholic sisters lived. There, in their tiny chapel, we found ourselves quietly praising God with them in simple songs of faith and love. Nothing would have dragged me away that night. I was in God’s presence with His people – and I knew it.

The three of us were invited to join a Prayer Group which met in Ron’s home weekly, and were able to continue weekly for six months. The second time two of us began to praise God in a new language (we call it “tongues”) quite without warning that it was happening. Priscilla had to wait a year before she received this gift, but when it came it was accompanied by the ability to help others receive it. Ron made it very clear to all of us as he led the worship that all this enthusiasm, spiritual gifts, awareness of God and so on, was NOT to make us feel good or holy, but for the building up of God’s Kingdom.

We started our own weekly meeting of prayer and praise that summer, and for some years it continued to bring together between ten and twenty of our congregation. We also ran a series of seminars to help people who wanted to deepen their faith and enter into a new relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Until his retirement in 1993, Rev Richard and his congregation continued to experience many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit including healings of body, mind and spirit which cannot be included here. But he concludes his booklet as follows.

“That prayer we prayed in Lent 1978 is a summary of all we experienced at Blackmoor; all we asked for in that prayer was granted, in ways we could not possibly have anticipated. God’s imagination is, of course, limitless. He will have a way for you to experience all these things – He loves you and wants you to know life in all its fullness”

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In 1995 Rev Richard wrote the following to Ron and Margaret Nicholls.

You made us very welcome both at the Alton Days of Renewal and also at the weekly prayer and praise meetings at your home. That summer we began to see the wonderful things God can do when we open ourselves up to Him.

One aspect of Renewal of which I am especially aware is that of being much closer to those of other churches without at any stage wondering if I was in the right place as a priest in the Church of England. I felt very honoured when asked to talk about Parish Renewal at the (Catholic) Southampton Conference a few years later. I saw more clearly that the divisions of the Church of Christ were, and still are, man-made!

God can unite us again, as we know is His will. I have always taught that, as we come closer to God in Jesus, so we will come closer to our brothers and sisters in other denominations. I am now more sure that this is true. Although there is still much that keeps us apart from each other, as we draw closer to the Lord in love and obedience so we will find that He show us how to break through these walls of division. As for how and when – I have no idea! But it is His divine will, His plan, as Isaiah and St Paul remind us. It is our task ever to seek His will and way in our lives; he will bring us ever closer together until we are truly One in Him! Alleluia!

To be continued..... hopefully. If you have any memories of the early days of charismatic renewal please contact Alastair Emblem email: alastairembem@yahoo.co.uk