

**GUIDELINES FOR THE RECOGNITION AND  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES  
AND SINGLE CONSECRATED PERSONS**

Adopted at a meeting of ACARLA in February 2018

Note: It is an objective of ACLARLA to advise Bishops in their oversight of religious communities and individual religious by providing them with the procedures for the accrediting and recognition of new expressions of religious life. These Guidelines are to be used by ACARLA in advising Bishops at the time when a community comes into being or a person enters into some other form of religious life.

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## 1 Religious or monastic communities

At all times in the life of the Church people have felt called to participate in various forms of Christian life in which they have lived in community and/or 'under vows'. It has been suggested that there are three elements which mark this form of Christian living:<sup>1</sup>

- a deep level of commitment to the way of life
- a commitment to the group relationally
- a mission or fresh expression focus.

There are in the Anglican Church in Australia a number of religious or monastic communities which take a traditional form drawn from the long history of monasticism in the Christian Church. However, the Holy Spirit never ceases to call into existence new forms of the religious life responding to the needs of the times.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there will be Christians who feel called by God to live together in new ways of life in the Church, exercising new forms of ministry or expressing new visions of commitment.<sup>3</sup>

In certain circumstances such a community can be regarded as a 'religious community'<sup>4</sup> within the life of the Church and, accordingly, as a matter of good order and good faith, it is appropriate that it should seek recognition or acknowledgement by the Church.

A religious community can be either gathered or dispersed. A gathered community is generally localised around one or more houses and its members, or at least most of them, live together. A dispersed community is one where the members share the common rule and vows but live individually.

## 2 Types of religious communities

### 2.1 Traditional religious communities

A traditional religious community is one in which its members:

- make vows or promises either of stability, conversion of life and obedience (in the Benedictine tradition), or poverty, chastity and obedience (the evangelical counsels); and
- share a common life and live together, although not necessarily in the one place; and

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1 Based on Ralph Winter, *The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission*, Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies, Pasadena, California; as discussed in *Acknowledged Religious Communities*, The Advisory Council on the Relations of Bishops and Religious Communities, November 2012,

2 The term 'missional community' might also be used.

3 The last two sentences of this paragraph are taken from the Constitution for ACARLA, adopted in 2000 and subsequently amended.

4 As the term is defined in these Guidelines.

- have a rule or constitution which provides for the ordering of the community.<sup>5</sup>

Members of a traditional religious community may be of the same gender, or both women and men.

## **2.2 Acknowledged religious communities**

An acknowledged religious community is normally a community, dispersed or living together, largely composed of lay people who make vows, but not to the traditional understanding of poverty, obedience and chastity with the expectation of celibacy.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between Traditional and Acknowledged communities is necessary in order to honour the single or unmarried state and the sharing of a common life, that historically have always been characteristic features of the religious life.

## **3 Criteria for recognition of a traditional religious community**

These criteria are essentially focussed on identifying the stability and sustainability of the community.

### **3.1 Rule or constitution**

The community has a rule of life or a constitution to which its members commit.<sup>7</sup> The rule or constitution may deal with a range of spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, work, rest, evangelism/mission, learning, shared worship, tithing, living justly and commitment to living either in a dispersed or communal way.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.2 Common life**

The community's members live a common life, and have individually committed to that common life. The common life includes regular prayer, usually including the regular saying of the Daily Office.

The community has documented what the elements of that common life are, usually in its rule or constitution.

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<sup>5</sup> This definition of description is drawn from *Towards Acknowledgement: guidelines, expectations and advice for a community seeking acknowledgment as a religious community in the Church of England*, p 1.

<sup>6</sup> This definition or description is drawn from *Acknowledged Religious Communities*, The Advisory Council on the Relations of Bishops and Religious Communities, November 2012, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> This might also be called a rhythm of life – see *Acknowledged Religious Communities*, p 9.

<sup>8</sup> This list is drawn from *Acknowledged Religious Communities*, p 9.

### **3.3 Vows**

The members of the community take common vows or promises, usually either in the Benedictine tradition or in the form of the evangelical counsels.

The community has documented what vows its members take, what they will be, if applicable, at various stages of membership of the community, and how long they shall be. There is a procedure for suspension and/or dispensation of vows.

### **3.4 Governance of the community**

The community has a system of governance and decision-making. The rule or constitution of the community sets out expectations for good discipline within the community.

### **3.5 Number of members**

The community has at least three members of which at least two are full members, who have been full members for at least three years. This number may include those who are novices, but not postulants or aspirants, nor oblates or other such associated people. In some circumstances, a community with two members will be recognised or acknowledged.

### **3.6 Where not all members of the community are Anglican**

Whilst a community may have members who are not members of the Anglican Church, in those circumstances at least some members of the community are Anglicans and criteria 3.8 and 3.9 are complied with.

### **3.7 Period of time in existence**

The community has been in existence, including in its formation stage, for at least three to five years.

### **3.8 Hermits**

A hermit is a person who is a member of a religious community. The process for a person within a community who is becoming a hermit is essentially an internal matter for the community. Accordingly, these Guidelines do not make any provisions in regard to the recognition of a hermit.

### **3.9 Leadership**

The Constitution states what the leadership of the community is, how the Leader is elected and by whom, the length of term of the leadership, the number of terms allowed, and the scope of the role of the Leader.

### **3.10 Accountability: Visitor**

The community acknowledges that it is part of the Church and that, whilst its life and ethos may be counter-cultural in some respects, it regards its

place as being within the Church and holds orthodox Christian belief as expressed in Anglicanism.

Accordingly, the community has a visitor who is a person holding office in the Anglican Church of Australia, usually a bishop, but is not a member of the community.<sup>9</sup> A community which includes members from outside the Anglican Church may have more than one visitor, but at least one visitor must be an Anglican.

### **3.11 Accountability: relationship with the local Bishop**

If the community is a gathered community, with some or all of its members living together, it has the approval and recognition of the Bishop within which its diocese its community house or houses are to be found.

### **3.12 Property**

The community's property, real and personal, is held in common and the community has a written statement, either within its rule or constitution or elsewhere, as to how its common property is to be held, managed and dispersed. There is also a provision for disposition of the property should the community be wound up or closed which is in accordance with local laws for the disposal of property owned by charitable bodies upon their winding up or closure.

### **3.13 Winding up or closure**

The community has in place processes, recorded in its Constitution or governing documents, to deal with all of the matters that would arise if the community were to be wound up or closed.

## **4 Criteria for acknowledgement of an acknowledged religious community**

Acknowledgement of a religious community occurs when the community takes a form other than that of a traditional religious community.

It is recognised that acknowledged religious communities are often in a formative stage or are young or may in some way be experimental. Therefore, the indicia of the criteria set out below may not be in a final form and may reflect the evolving development of the community.

Despite this, emerging communities are encouraged to develop a link with a traditional community for advice and support.

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<sup>9</sup> The visitor may be called the protector or some other such title. The role of a visitor of a religious community is to be the guardian of the rule or constitution of the community, and to serve as an arbiter in matters which the community or its members cannot resolve through its normal processes. [This statement is drawn from *Relationship with Religious Communities & Groups in Canada*, House of Bishops Standing Committee on the Religious Life, June 2015.]

An acknowledged religious community will be acknowledged if:<sup>10</sup>

**4.1 Vocation**

The community is able to express what its particular vocation is in the service of the gospel; that is, how it considers God has called it into being and what gifts it has been given for its charism.

**4.2 Rule**

The community has a rule of life that seeks to express its particular aspirations and practices.

**4.3 Vows or promises**

The members of the community have taken short-term vows or promises but not life vows or promises.

**4.4 The Church**

The community is able to express its involvement in, and commitment to, the life of the Church. For a dispersed community this will depend on the particular ministry of each member. For a community living a common life in a particular place, it will usually be expressed in the life of the local church and of the diocese.

**4.5 Formation**

The community continues to seek ways for its charism to be formed in the life of its members.

**4.6 Period of time in existence**

The community should have been in formative existence for three to five years. Stability is tested by time and continuity of membership during that time.

**4.7 Number of members**

The community has at least three members of which at least two have been members for at least three years. This number may include those who are novices, but not postulants or aspirants, nor oblates or other such associated people. In some circumstances, a community with two members will be recognised or acknowledged.

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<sup>10</sup> These criteria are based on *Towards Acknowledgement: guidelines, expectations and advice for a community seeking acknowledgment as a religious community in the Church of England*, The Advisory Council on the Relations of Bishops and Religious Communities, pp 3 – 4.

#### **4.8 Leadership**

The community has guidelines about its expectations of leadership, how a leader or leaders are chosen, elected or replaced, and the length of time of periods of office. There are clearly expressed accountability structures, where appropriate.

#### **4.9 Governance**

The community has good structures and processes for governing the life of the community, including so that the views of each member can be clearly heard. It should be working towards a document that sets out its governance structures and processes, if it does not already have one.

#### **4.10 Finance**

There are structures and processes for careful dealing with finances, including the keeping of records of donations or contributions and expenses.

#### **4.11 Accountability**

The community is developing a working relationship with a bishop, who may act as visitor. The community seeks to have a good relationship with its diocesan Bishop.

#### **4.12 Winding up or closure**

The community has in place processes, recorded in writing, to deal with all of the matters that would arise if the community were to be wound up or closed.

### **5 Emerging religious communities not yet acknowledged**

ACARLA will keep a register of unacknowledged religious communities, which have either not met the criteria for acknowledgement or have not sought acknowledgement. In either case, the community may have sought contact with a religious community or the Church generally for assistance with mentoring or other advice.

A representative of an unacknowledged religious community may, in some circumstances, be invited to attend an ACARLA meeting as an observer.

### **6 The process whereby a religious community can be recognised or acknowledged**

A community which is not yet ready to seek recognition or acknowledgement may nevertheless contact ACARLA at any stage in order to seek support, encouragement and advice.



A community should not normally seek recognition or acknowledgement until it has lived its common life for at least two years.

A community seeking recognition or acknowledgement should follow the following process:

- 6.1 The leadership or leadership team, preferably in conjunction with the community's visitor, should indicate to ACARLA its desire to be recognised or acknowledged, and an informal meeting should be held with the Chair of ACARLA and others nominated by him/her.
- 6.2 The community should present to ACARLA a document setting out how it considers it meets the criteria for recognition or acknowledgement, supported by relevant documentation, eg. the rule or constitution.
- 6.3 ACARLA considers the documentation, and may meet with the leader or leadership team of the community, and may consult others, such as the diocesan Bishop or priests with knowledge of the community.
- 6.4 ACARLA meets to consider the application for recognition and acknowledgement and either votes to approve the application or defers (for one or more specified periods) or rejects it. If ACARLA votes to defer or reject, the community has the right to seek a further meeting with ACARLA.
- 6.5 If ACARLA votes to recognise or acknowledge the community its name shall be placed on the list of such communities kept by ACARLA, the community shall become, if it wishes, a member of ACARLA, and its leader or other representative shall be able to attend all ACARLA meetings.
- 6.6 Upon completion of this process ACARLA will advise the House of Bishops, and the diocesan Bishop in which the community is carrying out its life, of its decision in regard to the recognition or acknowledgement of the religious community.
- 6.7 If ACARLA votes to reject the application, it shall include the community on its list of Unacknowledged Religious Communities.

## **7 Other forms of religious life for individuals**

### **7.1 Single consecrated persons or solitaries**

- 7.1.1 A single consecrated person or a solitary is a person who considers her or himself to be called by God to dedicate themselves by vow or promise and live a consecrated life without living in a community with a specific leader and rule. This autonomous vowed life is an authentic Christian vocation.
- 7.1.2 In regard to the vow/s or promise/s, consideration should be given as to whether it is more appropriate for the person to make a single

vow or promise, normally celibacy, perhaps in the form of vowing to live simply in the unmarried state in the world for the sake of the gospel. This vow would be rather than vows relating to poverty, celibacy and obedience or stability, which may be difficult or inappropriate to fulfil in a situation where the person is self-supporting and not living under obedience in a community. However, vows or promises may be taken where obedience or stability is grounded in a bishop.

7.1.3 The process for a person to seek to be recognised as a single consecrated person or a solitary is as follows:

- 1 After encouragement by a wise counsellor, the person should be sponsored either by their parish priest or another appropriate spiritual guide.
- 2 The sponsor shall, when they judge the time is right, present the candidate to the diocesan Bishop or other bishop appointed by him/her.
- 3 The bishop may make arrangements for the candidate to receive ongoing guidance and advice.
- 4 If the bishop is satisfied the candidate manifests signs of a valid vocation, the bishop then receives the candidate's vow/s or promise/s. The bishop should decide whether it is more appropriate for the vow/s or promise/s to be received privately or publicly in the presence of the local congregation.
- 5 At this stage, the candidate should make a temporary commitment for a specified period, which commitment may be renewed until such time as the bishop considers that life profession is appropriate.

7.1.4 Any bishop who receives the vow/s or promise/s of a single consecrated person or solitary shall record with ACARLA:<sup>11</sup>

- the name of the person
- the date of the service at which vow/s or promise/s were taken
- the nature and content of the vow/s or promise/s made
- whether the vow/s or promise/s were temporary or permanent; and
- any other pastoral considerations as shall be deemed necessary.

and the Secretary of ACARLA shall advise the House of Bishops accordingly.

7.1.5 The person taking the vow/s or promise/s is accountable to the bishop who received the vow/s or promise/s, and shall report to that bishop at least annually.

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<sup>11</sup> This section is based on *Relationship with Religious Communities & Groups in Canada*, House of Bishops Standing Committee on the Religious Life, June 2015.

- 7.1.6 The person is best advised not to adopt any kind of quasi-religious habit or dress, although a badge or medal may be appropriate. It is not normal for the person to take a new name in making the vow/s or promise/s.
- 7.1.7 In receiving the vow/s or promise/s the bishop should make clear to the person that neither the diocese nor the bishop is responsible for providing work, accommodation or a stipend.
- 7.1.8 The bishop accepts pastoral and spiritual responsibility for the person but may delegate these to the parish priest or some other suitable person.
- 7.1.9 If for good reason the person moves to another diocese, the bishop should commend the person to the Bishop under whose jurisdiction the person now lives. Equally, if the Bishop retires or leaves the diocese, the person should be commended to the Bishop's successor.

## **7.2 Hermits**

A hermit is a person who is a member of a religious community. The process for a person within a community who is becoming a hermit is essentially an internal matter for the community. Accordingly, these Guidelines do not make any provisions in regard to the recognition of a hermit.