

The Cistercian Lay Associates of our Lady of Bethlehem Abbey

Spiritual Journey

The Lay Associate was formed at the instigation of several people closely associated with the Abbey, without any prompting or suggestions either from within the community or from elsewhere. It is in the character of the group that it is a quiet and humble response to the prompting that really matters – that which came from the Holy Spirit. The first meeting took place in May 2000.

We are a group of men and women from a variety of occupations and some retired people who have been inspired by the Community of Bethlehem Abbey as they live their lives according to the Rule of St. Benedict.

From the beginning the group, who mainly live locally, have met regularly at the start of each month, with some members meeting in between the monthly meeting. The tone of the monthly meeting has always been friendly, though formal aspects are respected with minutes being taken. A realisation that some finance was required to fund the group has meant that a treasurer was appointed and a small Credit Union account opened. The nature of the lay group is that of an Association of the Abbey, rather than a more formal designation of lay Cistercians or Oblates.

Once the business of the meeting is concluded, the heart of the gathering is the teaching on spiritual readings chosen by the Abbot. Suggestions for readings are also given by members of the lay group. The meeting is followed by Vespers with the monks, followed in turn by a relaxed cup of tea and toast in the Abbey Guest house. Each year a retreat is organised at the Abbey for the lay group members with an invited retreat giver.

One development in recent years has been a growing group of what we call 'Spiritual Members'. These are individuals from various parts of the world (e.g. Scotland and Japan) who may never attend a meeting, but who receive the minutes of the meeting and copies of the two readings. In this way the group are an engaging combination of local members and a small international fellowship.

Indeed the group is characterised by a quiet and heartfelt loyalty to each other, supportive of each other in sickness or problems. We cannot look to any major crises or extremes of darkness or light, but to a gradual, evolutionary growth in the spirituality of the members. We are grateful for the fellowship with each other, spiritual nourishment and the generosity of the Abbot who gives his time and wisdom to the group. From this we find the resources and grace to face the difficulties of life and to follow God's providence in all things. One member described the group in the following words at our December meeting:

"God forms us slowly and gradually, with a growing closeness to each other, leading us to pray as we can."