

Retreating from the 'Garden of Eden' ...



Eden Hall Garden

Eden Hall

... to an Urban



Oasis



St. Paul's Cathedral
99 Belmont Hill- Lewisham

Canary Warf

Front of House Garden

Front of House

Labyrinth Back Garden

‘There is a season for everything... a time for planting, a time for uprooting’ ... This extract from Ecclesiastes 3:2 expresses well the transitional stages of our community of the Sisters of St. Andrew from Edenbridge in Kent from 2001 onwards until January 2014 when we arrived in our new home in Lewisham. More recently called the ‘Urban Oasis’ – it is a place of hospitality and a small spirituality centre, situated between Blackheath and Lewisham, with the Greenwich meridian line, running right through our Oast house Chapel!

This move was the final step of several years of discernment dating back before 2001 when we decided that financially we could no longer run our Preparatory School and residential Home for 44 elderly people. It is never easy to close what is both good and loved yet a ‘season and time of change’ was inevitable. Within a space of 3 months by July 2001 there was just the community and a few volunteers living on site compared to our usual daily intake of over 200! This was a real shock to the senses to find ourselves surrounded by empty rooms and buildings still full of furniture but uninhabited – already the feeling of ‘uprooting’ had begun.

Not knowing what lie ahead, between 2001 and 2013 with little financial resources – but a lot of inner energy and creativity we took up the challenge - to transform the buildings into a Spiritual Centre for Silent Retreats, welcoming groups and individuals. For a period of 12 years we were able to offer our guests the space, the calm, the garden and grounds of ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’. Some of the sisters working with a small team were at the heart of what was to become ‘The Centre’, providing spiritual accompaniment, formation, and retreats in the Ignatian tradition. The ‘welcome’ that began on a small scale gradually increased until by 2013 there were over 3,000 guests each year. It worked, and indeed it was ‘very good’ but we always knew that we were on the move.

Perhaps what we learnt from this experience was that when financial resources are diminished it is possible to use one’s creative gifts in a completely new way. ‘Not having’ obliged us to think creatively in a much wider sense and working with a volunteer team made dreams come true and ‘The Centre’ was slowly born and produced fruit a hundredfold during the space of over 10 years.

As the Eden Hall Estate had so much to offer for the community as well as responding to the needs of people wanting to come away ‘to a quiet place and rest awhile’ during this first period of discernment the decision was made ‘to stay on site’. A part of the complex was chosen for a new build for the Community including a part for Welcome and Retreats. Architects plans were drawn up and the community was to be at the centre of what looked like ‘a miniature village’.

But as the ‘wind blows where it wills and we don’t know from where it comes or where it goes’ ... the more we thought about things and looked at the project from a feasibility point of view, both financially and in terms of ‘people’ including the ageing profile of our community - it soon became very clear that we would be unable to sustain such a project. So the architect’s plans never left the paper!

Consequently we began to think wider still and the Spirit opened our hearts and minds to stepping out of the familiar place into the unknown and we found ourselves

like Ignatius waiting to be led by the Spirit and ready to following whilst remaining wisely ignorant having decided to leave Eden Hall after 70 years.

Having decided we needed to 'downsize' we drew up a 'spec' of our needs and started 'large house' hunting around the surrounding area of Eden Hall..... But Communities are a rather unique species both in who they are and the way they live and it became quickly evident that although there were many 'large' houses in the area none of these luxury 8 bedded mansions suited our simple way of life and our community needs.

London 'calls again' - the move from the rural to the urban

As the Spirit speaks in unusual ways it seemed that London was again 'calling us', having lived in the past in a variety of places, and in more recent years in Vauxhall and Tooting. Part of the ongoing history of our Congregation has been that although we have each time searched and explored, and spend much time and energy in trying to find a place as 'if nothing depended on God but everything depended on us' having exhausted all our human means, the next step was to 'let go' as if everything depended upon God and nothing upon us.' Suddenly out of the blue – the house in Lewisham – 99 Belmont Hill appeared on the horizon – as a variety of people knowing us well had heard about the property and brought it to our notice saying that 'the house would just suit your community.!'

The said house however - 99 Belmont Hill did not exactly correspond to our 'spec'. It was much bigger than we anticipated, certainly no longer in a rural area but situated right in the middle of Lewisham and Blackheath! But as visited the house then entered the 'Oasis Chapel' and sang It was wonderful! The more we visited it the more we loved it. The house although on a much smaller scale corresponded to what we had been able to offer at Edenbridge - welcome, retreats, accompaniment, groups, etc. With its surrounding garden, proximity to shops and local parks including Greenwich, accessibility by public transport, it had so much to offer, After much reflection and negotiation in the Autumn of 2013 the house previously belonging to another community became ours! And in January 2104 we moved in!

So what are the challenges of 'retreating' to the 'Urban'?

Compared to our life at Edenbridge where we found ourselves in a setting of particular natural outstanding beauty, a place of silence and tranquillity, the move has opened us up to exploring 'What kind of retreat is right for today in the contemporary world in which we live? It is a new season and a time of change. How are we going to help those who seek the space and quiet but do not have the opportunity, time and means to retreat far away? The challenge is to seek and find God in the reality of now in our everyday lives even where we live? The first reaction for some has been 'What! a retreat house in Lewisham'? Who on earth would want to move to Lewisham, from Kent of all places when most people are trying to get out of the stresses of London!'

The challenge is in recognising that God lives, moves and breathes in all that is around us. Part of our ministry is helping our guests to discover God 'in the ordinary

of now' amidst the rush, the crowds, and the noise, helping them to seek silence and space without necessarily withdrawing from it, not pushing out the exterior noises or avoiding them, but to own them welcoming 'life as it is' and integrate 'what is' - 'the now' into the silence. Slowly in a very different way by creating a 'retreat within in the silence of the heart – a soul space' it is possible with practice to discover that this is also an area of outstanding natural beauty as we contemplate God's people and life around us. 'Bidden or not, God is present.'

The retreat is in fact something much more than the exterior environment, something much deeper, it is literally 'going into the secret room' that Jesus mentions when teaching us to prayer. This secret room where God dwells and knows us can be found with practice in all places at all times.

It was only after nearly a year of taking time 'to arrive' in this 'unknown area' that we began to think about some sort of yearly programme alongside our ministry of hospitality. When we arrived we just had no idea who would be our clientele and what shape this ministry would take. We needed time to explore the house and decide how we would use the rooms, where the community was to live as well as taking time to discover the location in which we were living. Regaining our energies and living this 'fallow time' just letting things emerge and happen enabled us to discover this new world at our door step. Much of our thinking was determined by our lifestyle at Edenbridge and 'what seemed to work' – there the world came to us, but at 99 Belmont Hill the world is at our doorstep, and certainly accessibility is a major element in being able to provide a spiritual resource for many on a shoe-string budget.

- God's life in Lewisham/Blackheath is very different from being in Kent in the rural Edenbridge which was surrounded by trees and the beauty of the countryside. Contemplation has taken on a new meaning having exchanged the rural countryside and outstanding beauty of God's creation to that of the market place, mingling with a people of a multitude of races and languages, a place full of colour, vitality, its markets, noise of ambulances and planes.

- The house itself is set back from a main road yet is very silent (double glazing) and is surrounded by a lovely garden, both cultivated and wild , a vegetable garden a labyrinth and a variety of seating areas.

- The area provides a lot in the way of walks and parks, much greenery including Greenwich the heath, wide open spaces, and other smaller parks –there are always seats to pause and contemplate, the beauty of God's creation, the view of the Thames and the city of London.

The paradox of the rural and the urban what do they have in common:

What has not changed, what we can identify as non-negotiable whether it be retreating to the country or city is the hunger for God, to find one's true self and 'come away'. First and foremost God is already at the heart of the seeker who wishes to reflect on their life in God.

The urban retreat offers new possibilities, and there are some essential 'ingredients' in retreating both to the rural and the urban that are expressed in new ways.

- It has become evident that many people are just seeking a space, solitude and nothing else – less input, and simply time to ‘rest and be’
- The importance of the welcome and presence of the community in being made to feel ‘at home’ and the space to ‘be oneself’ and take time to resource and deepen the relationship with God during the experience of silence. Knowing that the ‘community’ provides that discreet presence and that the sisters are available to ‘listen’ when requested.
- The importance of personal space – to be able to withdraw to a room and close the door.
- The chapel - for personal prayer and reflection and for those who wish to join with the community in prayer. Other quiet spaces as well creativity and offering nourishing reading are all part of the ‘guest’s package’.
- The prepared meal has given way to Self- catering which is more affordable and gives the guests a greater freedom to rest, organise and plan their day according to the movement of the spirit.

The challenge is in helping others to recognise that God already lives, moves and breathes in all that is around us. Part of our ministry is helping the retreatant to discover God in the now within the rushed pace of life whilst remaining ‘inwardly in retreat’, not to run from but to engage with the surroundings in a completely different way.

After nearly 3 years the challenge is forever present as we are constantly being ‘surprised’ by the gifts this ‘Urban Oasis’ offers and challenges as we learn new ways of accompaniment using the Ignatian tools – finding new ways of helping people to pray and contemplate, explore and be challenged themselves.

Yes! Something very good can come out of Lewisham.

December 2016 Diane Reynolds