



What Intentional Christian Communities Can Teach the Church

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Perhaps nothing calls to mind more stereotypes than mention of intentional religious communities. Many in mainline denominations picture some sort of free-love utopian communes filled with flower children from the sixties. Others imagine charismatic but manipulative leaders brainwashing a cult of disciples. The stereotypes typically say more about those of us who hold them, or at least about how we think of ourselves, namely, more responsible and realistic than idealist communes and more discerning and independent than obedient cults.

In this essay, we consider the challenges and opportunities that the recent flourishing of intentional Christian communities, many under the name “New Monasticism,” offer the wider church. Unlike several “insider perspective” books¹ and more journalistic accounts,² we seek to use our position as sympathetic outsiders to examine theologically some of the more striking and enviable characteristics of these communities. In the summer of 2013, the authors conducted open-ended,

¹The Rutba House, ed. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005); Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); David Janzen, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook: For Idealists, Hypocrites and Wannabe Disciples of Jesus* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2013).

²See, for example, Rob Moll, “The New Monasticism: A Fresh Crop of Christian Communities Is Blossoming in Blighted Urban Settings all over America,” *Christianity Today* 49/9 (2005) 38–46; and Jason Byassee, “The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities,” *Christian Century* 122/21 (October 18, 2005) 38–47.

Experiences with five intentional Christian communities reinforce five lessons that apply not only to these communities themselves but to other expressions of the body of Christ, including the more traditional ones that most of us belong to.

qualitative, semi-structured interviews with long- and short-term members who were interested in sharing their experiences in community with us. The participants belong to five Midwestern intentional Christian communities: two Catholic Worker farms in Iowa (New Hope Farms in Lamotte and Mustard Seed Community in Ames); two urban (neo-)Mennonite communities (Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois, and the Mennonite Worker of Minneapolis); and one house church network and community church that sprang from nondenominational roots but now considers itself “high church Mennonite” (Christ Community Church in Des Moines, Iowa).

As these short descriptions suggest, *de facto* ties to Catholicism (especially to its tradition of works of mercy and contemplative practice) and to left-wing Reformation churches (especially in their commitments to peacemaking and their critiques of cultural-political accommodation) remain pronounced. Still, each community has distinctive relations with and attitudes about wider church bodies, which we will explore at the close of this essay. Throughout, we share our firsthand accounts as interviewers and participant-observers about how the realities of life in community both defy common assumptions and serve church bodies as they come to terms with their own ecclesial shape. Here, then, are five “lessons learned” over and against assumptions that too easily compartmentalize, dismiss, or romanticize such “radical Christians.”

LESSON 1: “BALANCING” FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY

The fact that typical stereotypes of intentional communities tend toward *either* the free-love commune *or* the manipulative cult suggests that we view such marginal groups as extreme *either* in their individual liberties *or* in their structure and authority. That is, we assume that we in the center have the proper “balance” of individual rights and social commitments. In reality, many of the communities we studied tend toward *both* egalitarianism *and* communitarianism, valuing diverging and dissenting opinions while still emphasizing the call to bend toward the good of the whole.

Reba Place Fellowship moved to Evanston in 1957 after being founded a few years earlier by members of the Mennonite seminary and college in Goshen, Indiana. It now comprises a relatively loose-knit community insofar as its core members (currently about 50–60) live in various places in the northern Chicago neighborhood, including Fellowship households, apartments surrounded by non-members, and individual households. Given its large membership, its clearly defined layers of commitment,³ and the extensiveness of its civic and financial engagement (owning property, running food co-op and bike shop businesses,

³Reba Place Community, like many intentional Christian communities, finds it helpful and also necessary to distinguish levels of commitment to the community. Reba’s layers of membership include apprentice (somewhat like an internship), practicing member (an initial time of discernment), novice member (a time to live on the fellowship’s budget but keep one’s money while discerning full membership), and covenant member (the innermost layer in which one is a part of the common purse). For various distinctions within communities, see David Janzen, “Mark 6:

etc.), the fact that members note their reliance on clearly demarcated roles and leadership is not surprising. What is more surprising is that even in a large community with formalized structure and paid employees, participants distinguish it from other organizations and institutional churches.

For example, Becky, a Reba Fellowship novice, speaks of having “hopped around” among congregations where church was “individualized” and “limited to Sundays.” She finds Reba Place Fellowship to be much more communal, illustrated by the fact that buying a car, for example, becomes a decision handled through open-ended discernment and prayer within the small groups. Members thus use language of *bending* and even *submitting* to the wisdom of others, but note that these others are not primarily community leaders or an anonymous whole, but any and every community member whose sense of responsibility and ownership increases with every concern introduced by another. Individual responsibility and deference to the community rise in tandem, even though negotiating the two is not always simple.

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Both Catholic Worker farms we visited tend toward even more radical notions of individual freedom *and* yielding to the community. Each farm tries to embody the anarchism propounded by the Catholic Worker’s original founders, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, by advocating nonhierarchical relationships and critique of state coercion. At New Hope, while we helped one couple in the fields, others did a variety of tasks including preparing lunch in the outdoor kitchen, tending to the “three sisters” garden (a Native American planting practice), and working on the newest housing structure from wood salvaged from an old barn. “Anarchism” here certainly cannot suggest that each member goes her or his own way, but only that they strive for relationships with one another, guests, and the soil itself that are nonhierarchical and nondominating. At the same time, there are centers of power that the community acknowledges; for example, one of the four couples, Mary and Rick, started the community, own the land, and often provide the public face of the farm to neighboring towns. Still, Brenna notes that they strive to be a grassroots *organism* rather than a top-down *organization*, refraining from paid roles or titles and making all shared decisions by consensus.

Of the five communities, the Mennonite Worker of Minneapolis looks on the surface to tilt most strongly in the nonauthoritarian direction. Located in a section of Minneapolis known for its vegan fare and anarcho-punk scene, the community’s two houses of hospitality give shelter to so many short- and long-term guests

Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate” in *School(s) for Conversion*, 80–96.

(many otherwise homeless) that it can feel like a revolving door. A number of members consider themselves Christian anarchists, although Don (recently made a “resident,” similar to a novice) is quick to explain that this “only” means that they strive for nondomination in discourse and practice, exhibited primarily by consensual decision making. Pushed as to whether such freedom *from* the authority of another doesn’t fit too squarely with individualism and cultural liberalism that Mennonite Workers otherwise resist, Jared (one of seven full members) explicitly questioned why we must think of true authority and individual freedoms as a zero-sum game. He insists that “leveling out the playing field [in decision making] *necessitates* community—it doesn’t do away with it—because all of a sudden there is no one person making the decisions [and so] everyone has to make decisions.” Individual freedom and commitment to the community here seem one and the same.

LESSON 2: EFFECTIVE HOLINESS

A second stereotype about intentional Christian communities—this one propagated by many in traditional churches—involves the idea that they essentially *withdraw* from the messy realities of civic duties and political necessities (and institutional churches) in the effort to build idealist, righteous subgroups. Indeed, many of the members we interviewed were more concerned with staying faithful to their collective calling than with focusing on results, especially when bringing them about would compromise their sense of fidelity. In the words of Jim, from Christ Community Church, “I’m not here to succeed, or even to stay alive, but to bear faithful witness.” Nonetheless, the image of the impractical, unengaged purist seems wholly false. Alternative practices and witness become more effective means of transforming the world, as Chad from Christ Community Church brought up when he explained the decline in membership since the church’s beginnings. In his words, “If you’re really succeeding, it doesn’t necessarily mean the Lord’s on your side. And if you’re really failing—or apparently failing—that doesn’t necessarily mean that the Lord’s against you.”

Alice, the founder of Mustard Seed Catholic Worker farm, notes that what might not look like much—in her community’s case, about ten committed individuals running an eight-acre farm, on which a host of other folks work three hours per week in exchange for a box of vegetables—still has the capacity to change the world. “Fundamentally, we are trying to turn the whole structure of the world upside down,” she insists. That seems less overblown when one concedes her next point—that much of the world currently runs by rules that are not only immoral but also *not working*; politics and economics as usual create poverty and other domination systems in which so many of us are caught. Perhaps aware of the charge of isolationism, she turns the table again. Compared to cooperatives, unions, farmers’ markets, or Mustard Seed itself, the nuclear family looks quite isolationist, unable by its very composition to “cre-

ate the kingdom of God.”⁴ Nicholas, an early member of Mustard Seed, agrees that, whereas the long-term goal is to change the world, the short-term task is to witness to a different way of life. The trick is to not hide from those who might take notice, while also avoiding becoming “overly ostentatious” or “judgmental.”

Such members thus think of themselves as participating in *counter* or *alternative* economics, culture, and politics rather than (only) unplugging from predominant ones. This is especially true of their economic practices.⁵ On the one hand, all their practices resist the encroachment of “the Market” into other areas of life. Mennonite Workers offer personal, home-based hospitality in a culture that either outsources or institutionalizes what was a central practice of the church.⁶ On the other hand, the community members participate in a much *wider* “economy” (from the Greek *oikonomia*, “household management”) than what typically passes by that name. Mustard Seed member Rachel, for example, speaks of the power of knowing where her community’s food comes from and where their waste goes (to the same place, if done right). In fact, over and against common impressions of voluntary poverty as somehow depreciating the materiality of the world, members of each community speak of the transformative practice of eating and drinking together on a daily basis, a practice that cannot be entirely separated from the sacrament of communion.

Among the five communities we visited, Christ Community Church seems on the surface to be the least different from both mainstream culture and mainline churches. Members enter into one another’s homes for “house church,” consisting of morning prayer and fellowship, before driving to a church owned by another denomination for their communal worship. Jim, a long-term member, admits that the house church model (a “smaller version of Ephesians 5”) resembles the small-group ministry groups popular among mega-churches. “But that model is therapeutic,” Jim contends, whereas Christ Community Church creates bonds that resist the fragmentation and individualization of the wider culture. Even their liturgy inscribes such resistance to cultural accommodation. It includes a confession of sin where members typically confess their bondage to the myth of redemptive violence and to other allegiances (the nation-state, economic security) over the Lordship of Christ, as well as a final blessing declaring freedom “from the present evil age.”

⁴For another allegedly “sectarian” view that turns those charges back on Constantinian churches, see John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 136–138.

⁵All share resources to different extents, ranging from Reba’s common purse to participation in Community Supported Agriculture, and other practices. Members of every community are employed in traditional jobs on top of community work, although they also limit their work hours in order to spend time with one another and (at least in the case of New Hope Farm) to earn less than the lowest taxable income to avoid financing the United States military.

⁶See “The Christ Rooms Project,” *The Mennonite Worker of Minneapolis* 1/2 (October 1, 2013) 1, at <http://www.mennoniteworker.com/newspaper/> (accessed January 27, 2014).

LESSON 3: PEACEABLE PEOPLE

Perhaps the easiest way to romanticize and so dismiss intentional Christian communities, especially those considered pacifist, is to take them as comprised of naturally peace-loving, harmonious individuals whose dispositions are enviable but not permitting of emulation by more conflicted types. Actually, the communities showcase tremendous realism about hostility, conflict, and “nonviolence” by actively practicing peacemaking regularly. Such practices thereby form more peaceable dispositions, rather than the other way around.

In fact, the only distinctly religious practice that every community we studied shared was some version of interpersonal confession/sharing of grievances and a ritual of reconciliation. New Hope Catholic Worker Farm appears the most practiced and deliberate about peacemaking. Mary and Rick acknowledge the difficulties of living in community. According to Rick, “it’s the hardest experiment I’ve ever been engaged in.” Much for him hinges on whether they can work through inevitable conflict: “If we [the eight adult members] can’t succeed, and we’re all white, middle class, similarly educated, [of the] same faith, then how are the Palestinians and Israelites or the Sunnis or any other group going to be able to do it? If we can’t model a way of working through conflict, [the worldwide situation] becomes dismal.”

In small and larger ways, the community understands itself to be “finding connection through violence” and even “living into conflict.” The peace thereby forged is quite different than a natural absence of conflict.

Mary adds that active peacemaking always risks exacerbating latent conflict. Wanting to treat discord more intentionally than most who avoid conflict, New Hope turned to their shared faith background’s sacrament of reconciliation, the practices of a nearby monastic community, and the work of Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, and others, in order to formalize a weekly ritual of reconciliation.⁷ Beginning with silent prayer, New Hope’s Friday service continues with admission of faults and shortcomings along with asking for forgiveness. It continues by naming any grievance that hasn’t yet been acknowledged, while the one committing the offense “listens with an open heart and without defensiveness.” The community then shares affirmations followed by the final step, a sharing of the peace. When persons occasionally raise large conflicts that cannot be “contained” in the ritual, they find even more deliberate strategies for working through them, drawing on nonviolent reconciliation training. In small and larger ways, the community understands itself to be “finding connection *through* violence” and even “living

⁷Mustard Seed’s most consistent practice, the “sharing of consolations and desolations,” is patterned on an old tradition as well, the Ignatian Daily Examen.

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LESSON 4: *STABILITAS*

Some sidestep the challenge of community by relegating it to a passing phase—*historically* to the latest “church renewal” movement, and *developmentally* to that which young people do before they get married and find real jobs. In short, many assume that Christian communities come and go at a rapid rate, while individuals join and vacate them even more quickly. Next to them, institutional churches appear tried and true.

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This assumption too has truth to it; for every person we interviewed, we heard of many more who discerned that it wasn’t for them, who started a different community, who had changing needs, and so on. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that members *do* speak of them, remembering the marks (and sometimes the wounds) that they leave behind. One would guess, too, that the frequency of departures would be equal or higher at any typical mainline congregation, especially when one includes those who leave for reasons completely “understandable”—getting a new job and moving away. However, being formed within intentional community makes such mobility less reasonable. In fact, the commitments that members make to particular people inhabiting particular places, along with the daily practices that further root them there, work to resist the rampant deracination of our upwardly mobile culture.

We noted above that Christ Community Church outwardly resembles mainline congregations insofar as the majority of members live in private homes within nuclear families. Given this reality, Pastor Kent considers corporate prayer on a weekly basis within four or five of these homes to be the only—and a vital—resistance to the entropy otherwise so prevalent in the suburban context. They have even been able to resist giving up members to better jobs in different cities, which Chad describes as “something of a miracle.” Fellow parishioner Jim accuses the typical American church of preaching a “disembodied gospel” from rather placeless places. Instead he feels called “to be married to a local body.” Marriage means one flesh, and Jim thinks we ought to consider the body of Christ in equally corporeal terms.

Practiced fidelity to place as well as to people also slows the multiplication of “options” that the affluent otherwise pursue. Before beginning Mustard Seed, Alice

shadowed many Catholic Worker communities, including New Hope, but she “knew the soil” in her part of Iowa and “had a connection with *this* land.” Not surprisingly, the Benedictine vow of stability for her connects with ecological sustainability; covenantal vows would seem naive at best if to a community that does not conserve the land on which it resides.

The ability to be formed to resist the proliferation of possibilities out of affection for *these* people and *this* place also depends on what Wendell Berry calls the propriety of scale.⁸ In short, we can only properly know what we can properly care for and properly care for just so much. The Catholic Worker farms employ this principle deliberately: New Hope has eight adults on the farm because that is what the land can sustain; Mustard Seed recently purchased ten acres because that is what it can care for. Attention to scale characterizes the urban communities as well. Sarah Lynn, a five-year member of the Mennonite Worker, tells of studying international human rights in college while intending to work for the United Nations or another global organization before recognizing that the simplest way to do no harm is to work for change on a smaller scale. That is also how one develops deep affections, has one’s desires “schooled” to love what one should, and so stays in a place with those whom one loves.

Finally, while such stability is initially established through the vows members make upon joining (in Reba Place’s case, commitments to “stay unless God calls you elsewhere”), it would seem that the ties that truly bind form through the intentional work and prayer that happens *after* the initiation; members do not simply perpetually *stick to* their vows but become *engrafted* into a body that they eventually can’t do without. Jared and Don from the Mennonite Workers suggest that while members once *chose* to practice *voluntary* poverty, now their poverty is fairly *involuntary*—not in the sense that they wish it were different but that they find themselves wholly depending on the community and accepting such need as who they are. In all the communities, mutual dependence holds the body together.

LESSON 5: FOR AND AGAINST (AND BESIDE) THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

In his insider perspective on new monastic communities, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove suggests that they should be considered “prochurch” and not simply “parachurch.” Parachurch groups, filled with special-interest individuals who are good at getting things done (responding to disasters, ministering to prisoners, etc.), have the particular liability of leaving less for the church itself to do. Plus, it is the church catholic, not fringe movements, that makes visible the wisdom of God to the powers of this world (see Eph 3:10).⁹ Each of the five communities we visited and different members therein should be considered prochurch in this sense; still,

⁸See, for example, Berry’s 2012 National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecture, “It All Turns on Affection,” at <http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture> (accessed January 27, 2014).

⁹Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 145–147; compare Ivan Kauffman, “Mark 5: Humble Submission to Christ’s Body, the Church” in *School(s) for Conversion*, 68–79.

their different attitudes and commitments to the wider church remind us that the body of believers has many different parts, each offering unique gifts.

Reba Place Church, which is wider than the Fellowship, was founded precisely because Fellowship members needed a way to include those who could not or would not join the intentional community. Julius, a leader of Reba, tells the story of a man who came to know the Fellowship after spending seventeen years in prison. The option of living “intense life together” was “too much for him”; Reba Church, by contrast, could provide a place of connection. A similar wisdom may have led to the stalling of efforts by Christ Community Church to found a “school of charity” where seminarians and others would live and study together within the life of the church. Pastor Kent does not fully understand why those initiatives did not pan out, but he notes disagreement over whether the initiative should have become the congregation’s only or primary work. In a suburban context, how do you experiment with more radical initiatives “without [making] church one size fits all”? Kent says he does not have the answers, but he trusts that Christ Community Church is moving faithfully toward greater mutual dependence while being careful to leave as few behind as possible.

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The Mennonite Worker started ten years ago (then called Missio Dei) as a Baptist church plant and was quickly becoming a growing hip urban church. According to Sarah Lynn, the founding couple quickly decided they didn’t want to start another church in the city that drew worshipers from the suburbs. The congregation soon disbanded, became a house church, and then gradually (and somewhat accidentally) transitioned to a residential community. In the last several years, however, they sought to connect with the broader Mennonite tradition. “It was awkward at first,” say Jared and Don, referring to what can look like their desire to appropriate a deep tradition. But the Mennonite Worker is now considered a vital congregation within the Mennonite General Conference, although one that publically identifies with congregations “at variance” with church teaching on homosexuality, as well as one whose members and long-term guests include Eastern Orthodox, charismatics, Pentecostals, Baptists, and even “nonbelievers” beside their one ethnic Mennonite.

The two Catholic Worker farms stem from the Catholic tradition and social teaching, but their positions as to how deep that connection goes differ. Mustard Seed’s relationship with the church is strong for Alice, their founder, but weaker for many, including Nicholas, who has been instrumental to the life of the farm but remains ambivalent at best about Catholic creeds and church hierarchy. Like Men-

nonite Workers, core members are more united by practice than confession, in Mustard Seed's case, through their desire to treat the land and each other with respect and care. For members of New Hope, by contrast, being Catholic is integral to their identity. Eric and Brenna even expressed disappointment with other Catholic Workers when, at a recent national gathering, most chose to worship within the assembly rather than at the local parish. According to Eric and Brenna, to say that works of mercy alone provide the ties that bind Catholic Workers together fails to appreciate the movement's longtime commitment to Catholicism. Brenna claims that it is that commitment—and God's grace—that keeps the movement thriving. Perhaps, too, the only commonality among these five unique and shifting relationships with the broader church is the commitment to be intentional with many different Christians, as well as thoughtful about their place within the church as a whole.

We close by noting how the five lessons learned might relate to and redefine central characteristics, if not theological marks, of many Christian communities. First, they offer a new perspective on *the priesthood of all believers*—one that goes beyond critiquing church hierarchy in their efforts to become discerning mediators (priests) in one another's lives. Second, as these communities reenvision what "effective holiness" entails, their lives witness to *church as ek-klesia*, as called out from "the world," including their idea of what it means to be effective. Third, the communities' reconciling practices critique placing individual rights and non-interference before the challenge of working through conflict in order to become *the body of Christ* in more than name. Fourth, the communities' desire for stability rediscovers the importance of *formation over time*, especially against easy Protestant caricatures of works righteousness and monastic withdrawal. Finally, because of their complex relationships to the wider church, these communities show that *prophet and priest* go hand in hand—that one cannot be faithful to a tradition without loving it enough to call it into question. ⊕

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