



Intentional Community and Spiritual Development

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At first glance the title seems to be the mixture of a past era and the newest fad. It does seem that intentional communities faded when the hippie communes and the new attempts at utopian dreams passed out of sight. Too many of the experiments ended with burnout or the opposite fate of spacing out. But if the communal phenomenon has faded, could there be any more “in” word than spirituality? It invades the new books and the summer seminars and even the nightly news on T.V. William String fellow, writing in *The Politics of Spirituality*, states:

I suspect spirituality is most often uttered as a ministerial deception, albeit often benignly intended. It then is a trick of clergy enabling something to be said when in truth there is nothing to say.¹

I trust that all of us will take more than one glance or a first reaction to our title. The quest for and experience of community has genuine, biblical, healthy aspects. In fact, there is good reason to state the need for experiences of community, especially in our cultural assumption of individualism. It is equally valid to make a case for spirituality being the full expression of the work of God’s Spirit and therefore always having reference to the essence of faithfulness in any age.

For our brief exploration of the connection between intentional community and spiritual development, I shall be using the following definition of terms.

Concerning *intentional community*, I shall be referring to those faith communities where there are at least the following characteristics: (1) the opportunity for direct and reciprocal contact between the individual and the group; (2) a ministry or task outside of itself that goes beyond community nurturing of one another; and (3) some concrete definitions, boundaries, and a covenant.

I cite these characteristics in order to narrow our focus. I don’t believe the small, intentional, covenant community is the only group which can claim the

¹William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 16.

title community. In fact, I believe we all live in authentic communities of family, neighborhood, and institutions. The intent of this essay is to explore one form of religious life. It should be stated also that I am using characteristics of intentional communities in which I have participated. I have been involved in three different communities over a period of more than twenty years. This personal experience in community destroys any possible romantic naivete about community living.

The focus for *spiritual development* is more difficult. The term is very broad. Allow me to quote William String fellow once more:

The topic and vocabulary of spirituality brings a veritable plethora of references, allusions, or connections. Spirituality may indicate stoic attitudes, occult phenomena, the practice of so called mind control, yoga discipline, escapist fantasies, interior journeys, multifarious pietistic exercises, superstitious imaginations, intensive journals, dynamic muscle tension, assorted dietary regimens, meditation, jogging cults, monastic rigors, mortification of the flesh, wilderness sojourns, political resistance, contemplation, nonviolence, silence, the efforts of prayer, obedience, generosity, exhibiting stigmata, entering solitude, or, I suppose, among these and many other things, squatting on top of a pillar.²

Even allowing for the poetic exaggeration in this quotation, it is still clear that spirituality, like community, needs a word of clarification and definition.

One of the primary difficulties with the word spirituality is the divergent, almost opposite, way it is used in our language and therefore in our references to faith issues. The word can refer to that which is non-material and ideal. It therefore refers to those practices and attitudes which help us escape this world, put to death our senses, flee history and politics. The other use of the word is more earthy and social. We can say we had a spirited party. A strong case can be made for this latter description being more biblical, and it results in spirituality referring to the totality of our response to the Spirit, or one's way of living out the faith in the world.

There is need for further clarification if we are going to be faithful to the intent of this essay. Spiritual development has many legitimate aspects. A good theological foundation is essential. Spirituality is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, not a do-it-yourself project. Spiritual development includes our being shaped by the means of grace. Areas of spirituality include prayer, worship, Scripture study, and a host of other aspects of our spiritual formation. Within that vast arena, this article has a very limited focus. What aspects of this development are enabled or enhanced by our participation in an intentional community?

When we limit ourselves to this one question, it is possible to point out some values of living in an intentional community. Parker Palmer writes:

Community is a context for conversion...[It] reminds us that we are called to love, for community is a product of love in action and not of simple self interest. Community can break our egos open to the experience of God who cannot be contained by our conceptions. Community will teach us that our

²Ibid., 19.

grip on truth is fragile and incomplete, that we need many ears to hear the fullness of God's word for our lives. And the disappointments of community life can be transformed by our discovery that the only dependable power for life lies beyond all human structures and relationships.³

In using characteristics and values of the intentional communities in which I have participated, I am using representative characteristics of small, covenant groups which are our focus. The major premise I would propose is that community living provides a safeguard to the tendency toward individualism in one's spiritual development. This safeguard has always been important but it is especially critical in our present cultural situation. *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah and associates has heightened our awareness of the deep cultural assumption of individualism. The study reported in that book indicates that we have almost no alternative to individualism, only varieties of it. We live in a culture which celebrates unfettered individualism.

If our spiritual development involves responding to the issues of our world, we have a strong need to live in community. Parker Palmer states it this way:

How can I participate in a fairer distribution of resources unless I live in a community which makes it possible to consume less? How can I learn accountability unless I live in a community where my acts and their consequences are visible to all? How can I learn to share power unless I live in a community where hierarchy is unnatural? How can I take the risks which right action demands unless I live in a community which gives support? How can I learn the sanctity of each life unless I live in a community where we can be persons, not roles, to one another?⁴

The major contribution of participating in an intentional community is to experience the reality of being part of a "people." There is a difference between being an individual associated with other individuals and being fully part of a community. This is an important experience if our premise is correct that spirituality is not a private, individual matter.

There is no guarantee that a group will not turn in upon itself and be manipulative or elitist. There are, however, some potentially powerful experiences when we discover the full measure of the Spirit's work in our lives through participation in a caring, creative, and candid community.

Within this premise I would like to elaborate on three aspects of living in community which enhance spiritual development.

I. CARING

If I feel people accept me because they really don't know me or because our relationships remain superficial, I will never experience real acceptance. To be affirmed *after* I am known is to experience the grace which makes for genuine spiritual growth. My successes I share with strangers. My failures I save for a few very good friends. My expectations of community include being able to take off the mask and still be accepted. To experience this among a group of people is

³Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1980) 82.

⁴*Ibid.*, 67.

to experience the way God loves and accepts us. Forgiveness and absolution become an integral part of worship and also become an integral part of our common life. As Krister Stendahl wrote,

“We are too weak and scared to bear the weight of our fears all the time. So let’s take turns.”

It is important to expand this caring to those outside the community and to be involved in the issues of justice in the world. This dimension will be assumed if one has an understanding of spirituality rooted in the scriptures and shaped by the person and work of Jesus. Experiencing acceptance in community life is a powerful motivation for responding to our call to discipleship. A caring community both nurtures its members and helps its members move beyond their own needs, thus finding fullness of life.

II. CREATIVITY

The communities of which I have been a part tend to minimize materialism and consumerism. There are many benefits derived from a consumerist lifestyle, but among the negative aspects one stands out. We are not pushed to be as creative as we are able to be.

The creativity developed within a community comes partly from the reality of being a small group without many resources. When the membership is small, each person is more likely to develop some gift which can contribute to the common life and ministry. There is less chance for people simply to be passive members.

When a small community has limited resources, it is not an option to say, “Whom can we pay to do it?” The only options available are, “Whose gift can be used here?” or “Which one of us can learn to do it?” These pressures toward creative responses are sometimes frustrating, but they are also part of the challenge and the joy of struggling together in a common task.

Many of the creative ideas for living more responsibly, for better stewardship of our resources, for more holistic lives, have come from intentional communities that have found new alternatives because of their commitment to simplicity and their rejection of always doing the convenient thing. Whether it is a story-telling evening, impromptu theater, or making music together, some alternative to high cost spectator entertainment helps one feel capable of responding with some creativity. A community which gives some alternative to a culture where the professionals perform and all of us pay to watch has made a contribution toward a deeper appreciation of God’s creativity in making each of us a creative person.

These illustrations of lifestyle alternatives and creative entertainment may seem trivial at first glance. They are, however, the outward expressions of the strong commitment to spiritual development. We have been describing communities where there is an assumption of the Holy Spirit’s work among us. This Spirit is a creative power in our lives and it is manifested in premises such as: each of us has gifts waiting to be evoked by those who love us; there are possibilities of living more in harmony with the creation; and it is possible to find a faith which is good for our health. These realities are consistent with biblical theology and will find expressions in many creative alternatives.

III. CONSENSUS

In each of the communities in which I have participated there has been a very strong commitment to decision making by consensus. I use this one aspect of how a group structures itself for several reasons. First, I use it to point out the importance of making some basic decisions in regard to organization. Structure will be uninspiring to many people, but it is the key to the quality of life in a community. Community is a gift-always! But it is possible to organize in

ways which help make the reception of this gift possible or, on the other hand, to make the gift an impossibility.

The second reason for referring to consensus is that I believe this particular way of making decisions within a group is perhaps the single most important aspect if a community is going to enable spiritual development for its members. In consensus each person's views are honored. Consensus is not endless meeting until there is unanimity. Rather, it is creative listening and sharing until there is solidarity. Each person is valued. Conscience is not outvoted by a majority ballot. Prayer for discernment becomes more important than knowledge of political maneuvers. Spiritual development is enhanced when we connect the way we make decisions with our belief in the Holy Spirit's guidance in our midst and in each life.

These aspects of caring, creativity, and consensus are simply three illustrations of possibilities for a greater sense of experiencing common life. Intentional communities give us the possibility of experiencing ourselves as part of a people—a people affirmed, forgiven, and gifted. In such places we don't lose ourselves in some corporate identity. We find ourselves as unique persons but freed from the individualism so prevalent in our culture.

I don't believe small intentional communities are *the* answer to the world's problems or a replacement for the church. In fact, I believe our primary task is to find community in the neighborhood where we live and in the churches to which we presently belong. But I am appreciative of the option, appealing to some of us, of covenanting together to share a common life. I believe the church is richer if this possibility exists.