

Intentional Communities: Lifestyles Based on Ideals

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Drawing on information from his visits to hundreds of communities across the continent, Geoph Kozeny gives an overview of the communities movement — not only its current state, but also how it has evolved and its prospects for the future. He points out the common bonds that link communities in spite of their diversity.

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TODAY MANY PEOPLE ARE QUESTIONING our society's values, and asking what gives meaning to life. They bemoan the "loss of community," and are looking for ways to reintroduce community values into their lives.

There are several options now available to the average person that satisfy at least the basic cravings: many folks get involved with various civic or social change groups; others get more deeply involved in the activities of their church; still others create friendships and support networks in their neighborhoods. Those with strong motivation to live their values "full time" often seek to join or create intentional communities.

An "intentional community" is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings. This definition spans a wide variety of groups, including (but not limited to) communes, student cooperatives, land co-ops, cohousing groups, monasteries and ashrams, and farming collectives. Although quite diverse in philosophy and lifestyle, each of these groups places a high priority on fostering a sense of community—a feeling of belonging and mutual support that is increasingly hard to find in mainstream Western society.

Intentional communities are like people—you can categorize them based on certain distinguishing characteristics, but no two are ever identical. Differences among them, whether obvious or subtle, can be attributed to variations in philosophy, in mission or project emphasis, in behavioral norms, or in the personality and style of the leaders (if the group has identified leaders), and the individual members. Each group is somehow unique.

A Time-Honoured Idea

Mainstream media typically promote the popular myth that shared living began with the "hippie crash pads" of the '60s—and died with the arrival of "yuppies" in the late '70s and early '80s.

The truth, however, is quite different. Today there are literally thousands of groups, with hundreds of thousands of members, that live in intentional communities and extended

families based on something other than blood ties. This type of living has been around for thousands of years, not just decades.

It is well documented that early followers of Jesus banded together to live in a “community of goods,” simplifying their lives and sharing all that they owned. That tradition continues to this day, particularly through many inner-city Christian groups that live communally. These groups often pool resources and efforts in their ministry to the homeless, the poor, orphans, single parents, battered women, and otherwise neglected and oppressed minorities.

Yet shared living goes back much farther than that, predating the development of agriculture many thousands of years ago. Early hunter-gatherers banded together in tribes, not just blood-related families, and depended on cooperation for their very survival.

The advent of the isolated nuclear family is, in fact, a fairly recent phenomenon, having evolved primarily with the rise of industrialization, particularly the development of high-speed transportation. As transportation has become cheaper and faster, we’ve also witnessed an increase in transience, and the demise of the traditional neighborhood.

Roots and Realities

Although many contemporary community visions emphasize the creation of neighborhood and/or extended family ties, their philosophic roots are amazingly diverse. The range includes Christians, Quakers, and followers of Eastern religions, to ’60s drop-outs, anarchists, psychologists, artists, back-to-the-land survivalists—and the list goes on.

The scope of their primary values is equally broad, including ecology, equality, appropriate technology, self-sufficiency, right livelihood, humanist psychology, creativity, spirituality, meditation, yoga, and the pursuit of global peace. However, even among groups that base their philosophy on “achieving a holistic view of the world,” it would be quite surprising to discover a community that has achieved “perfection” amidst the fast-paced chaos of modern life. Communities draw their membership from society at large, and those members bring with them generations of social conditioning. The attitudes, behaviors, and institutions prevalent in the broader society—including the very things we seek alternatives to—are a significant part of our upbringing. Merely identifying a problem and expressing a desire to overcome it does not mean that we presently have the perspective or skills needed to transcend it. The problems we see “out there” in the mainstream—greed, dishonesty, excessive ego, lack of self-esteem, factionalism, inadequate resources, poor communication skills, you name it—all manage to find a significant role in alternative cultures as well.

What is encouraging about many intentional communities is their tendency to be open to new ideas, their willingness to be tolerant of other approaches, and their commitment to live in a way that reflects their idealism. Although communities exist that are close-minded and bigoted, they’re the exception, not the rule. More often than not, people who consciously choose to live in an intentional community also have parallel interests in ecology, personal growth, cooperation, and peaceful social transformation—pursuing the

work necessary to change destructive attitudes and behaviors often taken for granted in the prevailing culture.

Some Common Threads

Spirituality or religion, regardless of the specific sect or form, is probably the most common inspiration for launching a new community. Such groups bear a striking resemblance to their centuries-old predecessors—in spite of current developments in technology, education, psychology, and theology. Many of North America’s leading centers for the study of meditation and yoga have been established by intentional communities based on the teachings of spiritual masters from the Far East. (Such centers include Kripalu in Massachusetts, Ananda Village in California, Satchidananda Ashram in Virginia, Ananda Marga in New York, and Maharishi University in Iowa. Each of these intentional communities serves a widely dispersed group of practitioners, including those who live in “sister” communities, and many who live “out there” in the wider society.)

Among secular communities, the inspiration is typically based on bold visions of creating a new social and economic order—establishing replicable models that will lead to the peaceful and ecological salvation of the planet. In some cases, however, secular groups may opt for isolation, seeking to escape the problems of the rest of the world by creating instead a life of self-sufficiency, simplicity, and serenity.

Most members of intentional communities share a deep-felt concern about home, family, and neighborhood. Beyond the obvious purpose of creating an extended-family environment for raising a family, communities create an environment of familiarity and trust sufficiently strong that doors can safely be left unlocked. In today’s world of escalating crime, merely having that kind of security may be reason enough to join.

Dozens of intentional communities, alarmed by rising student/teacher ratios and falling literacy rates in public schools, have opted to establish alternative schools and to form communities as a base of support for that type of education. Intentional communities comprise a sizeable chunk of the membership of the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools, an organization of private schools, families, and individuals who share a commitment to create a new and empowering structure for education. Coalition members publish a quarterly newsletter and organize an annual spring conference for sharing resources and skills for social change.

Other communities, usually smaller, have created rural homesteads where they can pursue homeschooling without fear of legal pressure from local school officials. State laws favorable to schooling at home have been promoted, and in some cases initiated, by members of intentional communities. Many communities that homeschool are active in national associations organized specifically to support parents’ rights, promote topical networking, and to increase the nation’s awareness of homeschooling as a viable educational option.

Another popular issue these days is ecology. Over 90 percent of contemporary communities I've visited, including those located in urban areas, practice recycling and composting. Many serve as model environments or teaching centers for sustainable agriculture and appropriate technology, and feature such concepts as permaculture, organic gardening, grey water systems, solar and wind power, and passive solar home design. Eco-Home, a small shared household in Los Angeles, is an inspiring model of how to live ecologically in an urban environment. "The Farm," a large cooperative community in rural Tennessee, has launched a wide range of environmentally focused projects, including the development of advanced radiation detection equipment; a solar electronics company; a solar car company; the Natural Rights Center (an environmental law project); and a publishing company that specializes in books about environmental issues, vegetarian cooking, natural health care, midwifery, Native Americans, children's stories, and pesticide-free gardening.

In the late 1960s, a wave of new communities influenced by the antiwar movement, the "sexual revolution," rock music, more permissive attitudes about drugs, and the popularization of Eastern religions sprung up to create cooperative lifestyles based on sexual liberation, born-again Christianity, and everything in between. In effect, these often naively idealistic utopian experiments functioned as a pressure cooker for personal and collective growth. Although many of the '60s groups folded during the creative but turbulent decade that followed, hundreds have survived into the '90s and are now thriving—having reevaluated, restructured, and matured over the years.

B.F. Skinner's book, *Walden Two* (a futurist novel based on his theories of behavioral psychology), inspired the creation of at least a dozen communal experiments. Los Horcones, one such community near Sonora, Mexico, is today one of the world's foremost experiments in behaviorist theory.

The Franchise Approach

Some communities hit upon a combination of philosophy and lifestyle that enables them to thrive. Occasionally one will embark on a program of systematic colonization to spread its message and its influence.

During the Reformation, a group of German Anabaptists decided to pool their goods and unite in Christian brotherhood. Jakob Hutter emerged as a primary leader five years later, in 1533. The community prospered, and subsequently formed many new colonies. Today there are nearly 400 colonies of the Hutterian Brethren in Canada and the United States, and a few more in South America and Europe. When a Hutterian community reaches its optimum capacity (100 – 150 members), the group acquires a new piece of land, builds a new set of structures (homes, barns, schools, etc.) acquires more agricultural equipment, and outfits an entire new facility. Then the population divides into two groups—one group staying at the original site, and one moving on to the new one. Neighboring colonies support each other with backup labor and various resources, an approach that yields a very high ratio of success for the new colonies.

Each colony has common work and a common purpose, and most have an economic base of large-scale, machine-powered agriculture within an organizational structure resembling that of a producer cooperative. They have been so successful in their endeavors that in the '80s some of their neighbors on the Canadian plains initiated lawsuits to prevent Hutterites from acquiring more land, claiming that their modernized agricultural base and communal economy amounted to "unfair competition." Because the Hutterites have retained many of their original customs—including dress, family structure, a simple lifestyle, and the German language—many outsiders find the Hutterites to be quite out of place when compared to their contemporary neighbors.

In contrast, members of Emissaries of Divine Light, another spiritually based association, manage to fit right in with the mainstream culture. The Emissaries, founded in the early '30s, have a network of 12 major communities plus a number of urban centers that span the globe. Their overall focus is directed toward achieving a more effective and creative life experience, developing spiritual awareness without rules or a specific belief system. Their lifestyle would be described by many as "upper middle class," and business oriented. Nuclear family units, though not mandated, are the norm. Emissaries pride themselves on being on good terms with their neighbors. One long-standing resident of an Emissary community at the edge of a small Canadian town was elected mayor of the town for 15 consecutive years. The Emissary business staff is well respected—so much so that government tax officials in British Columbia regularly consult Emissary personnel before deciding on strategies for implementing new tax laws and regulations concerning nonprofit corporations.

The connections between and among the various Emissary communities worldwide are maintained in many ways: inspirational talks and special events are always recorded, and transcripts are kept on file at each Emissary center; some events are recorded on video, with copies distributed by mail; on a weekly basis, several centers link up via satellite for instantaneous transmission of related presentations originating from multiple locations. Most active members receive regular Emissary publications, some of which provide a network overview, and others which document the work of special interest subgroups. For example, many of the major Emissary centers have agricultural operations, which grow much of the food consumed by residents and guests. Known as "stewardship farms," these separate operations are managed and staffed by members who regularly share ideas and information about long-term sustainable agriculture. This special interest group publishes a regular newsletter and organizes periodic conferences, planning meetings, and exchange visits.

Network Alliances

The popular myth that the intentional communities movement died in the early '80s has been discouraging to many of the intentional communities that survived and thrived on their own. Many contemporary groups have suffered a lack of contact and support due to

their mistaken impression that they were among the few survivors of a bygone era. Fortunately, there is growing interest shared by a growing number of independent communities who desire contact with like-minded groups, both nearby and around the world. Regional, continental, and even intercontinental networks—alliances for the sharing of ideas, resources, and social interests—are gaining support and visibility, thus enabling groups to learn from each others' failures and long-term successes.

One network of more than 50 Catholic Worker houses publishes a periodic newspaper and organizes occasional gatherings for the sharing of ideas, skills, rituals, friendship, and solidarity. Another values-based network is the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), a North American network created to promote shared living in whatever forms it may take. The Fellowship handles thousands of inquiries yearly from seekers hoping to find a community to join, from communities looking for new members, from academics doing research, and from media people gathering material for stories. A third organization of note is the Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC), established to promote and develop democratically run communities based on equality, income sharing, nonviolence, cooperation, ecology, and sustainability. FEC encourages the identification and elimination of the "isms" (racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc.), and emphasizes the importance of ongoing contact among member groups.

FEC communities tax themselves \$200 per year plus one percent of net revenues, using this fund to finance joint recruitment campaigns, fundraising, and travel to meetings and between communities. They have also created a voluntary joint security fund for protection against the economic strain of large medical bills. This fund has now grown to more than \$100,000 and is used in part as a revolving loan fund that provides low-interest loans to projects and community businesses compatible with FEC values. Member communities also participate in a labor exchange program that allows residents of one community to visit another and receive labor credit at home for work done away. This is especially handy when one community's peak workload occurs during another's off season, and the labor flows back and forth when most appreciated. The exchange of personnel also offers an opportunity to take a mini-vacation, learn a new skill, make new friends, maintain old ones, and share insights about common experiences.

The Federation also aspires to document collectively acquired wisdom, making it available to the public for the cost of copying and postage. They have created a "Systems & Structures Package"—a compilation of written documents on bylaws, membership agreements, property codes, behavior norms, labor and governance systems, visitor policies, and ideas about what to do when you have too many dogs. The point of sharing this information is to help new (and even some not-so-new) communities ease through the struggles of creating appropriate structures, offering models for what to do when good will and best intentions are not enough.

A Contemporary Wave

Historically, participation in shared living communities has come in cycles. One major wave just ahead of the U.S. Civil War included Brook Farm, an educational experiment that attracted the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Other notable waves followed—one at the end of the last century including some still existing “Single Tax Colonies” (based on the economic philosophy of Henry George), one immediately preceding World War I, and another during the Great Depression. The last wave came out of the counter-culture in the '60s, and now a new wave is beginning. This 1994 edition of the Communities Directory documents more than 50 new communities started during the past five years, and that's merely the tip of the iceberg. Also listed are more than 160 that have survived at least a decade, and 80 others that have been in existence for more than two decades.

It is apparent that people—dissatisfied with the gap between their ideals and reality—will keep trying out new approaches until they find lifestyles that solve most of the problems they see in the dominant culture. History suggests that the process is endless. To paraphrase Karl Marx: today's solutions to yesterday's problems introduce new dynamics that become tomorrow's problems. An exciting feature of today's intentional communities movement is that its members are actively seeking to identify problems, working to find solutions, and trying to implement new insights in their daily lives.

Many contemporary groups are exploring ways to achieve a true sense of community while maintaining a balance between privacy and cooperation, a concept quite compatible with values prevalent in mainstream society today. Perhaps by emphasizing common concerns rather than differences in our lifestyle choices, innovations will find their way more quickly across cultural lines.

Although shared living does not appeal to everyone, history confirms again and again that ongoing social experiments inevitably lead to a variety of new social and technical innovations—developments that will eventually find many useful applications in other segments of society. It's hard to predict just when an intentional community will come up with something new that will be assimilated by mainstream culture. However, if social experimenting results in a product, a process, or a philosophy that makes life a little easier or a bit more fulfilling, then we'd be well advised to keep an open mind as we monitor the progress.