

## **Intentional Christian Community**

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“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:44-47

### **Definitions**

This description of the early Christian church provides the foundation from which many intentional Christian communities stem. This picture of community, peace, and love is appealing and idyllic and it is evident why intentional Christian communities begin with this as their model and goal. However, while this verse is in some ways very concrete, within the practical implications, there is much room for interpretation—hence, there is much variation in the communities which have formed and continue to form today.

The definition of intentional Christian community (ICC) is very diverse and can mean something as simple as a group of people who get together for a Bible study or can be as involved as a group of people living in the same house, sharing all their money, and eating daily meals together. For the purposes of this paper, I will narrow this definition to only include groups of people who are tied to one another by place in some way with common goals and vision. However, this definition is also too broad as it includes a huge number of groups including whole religious groups, such as the Amish.

So, added to the basic definition of place and common goals, I will be focusing “intentional Christian community” with four additional criteria. I will be examining communities which are in an urban setting, are economically co-dependent to a degree,

have a focus on issues of social justice and will focus on Protestant groups<sup>1</sup> which are not by definition intentional Christian communities (as with the Amish).

## **History**

In the past five years, there has been a noticeable growth in intentional Christian communities being formed. However, it is important to realize that this movement is not entirely new. There have been intentional Christian communities throughout most of history, especially when using the term more broadly and considering different religious groups such as the Franciscans and early Celtic orders.

However, during the 1960’s and 70’s there was a significant movement towards communal living both in the Christian and secular world. This could be seen in the forming of the many communities as well as the literature produced. One example can be seen through the inception of a magazine entitled, *Communities*, which was formed in December, 1972. The editors described the magazine in the first issues calling it, “a unique magazine—describing and discussing communes, co-ops, and collectives...to build a better world, a peaceful one in which all people will be able to live happy, productive lives without exploiting others” (p. 1, *Communities*). And many of the communities, listed in that first issue, which were primarily secular, seemed to adhere to this basic goal.

In the Christian movement this happened primarily with the enmeshment of hippie culture and a kind of spiritual awakening among many youth (Eskridge, 1998).

Through this “Jesus Movement” (Eskridge, p. 84), many ICC’s were formed. Historian

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<sup>1</sup> While it was important to limit research to Protestant groups in order to provide an in depth analysis of a more limited topic, it must be noted that many groups and specifically the Catholic Worker Houses have been profoundly influential in this movement and much can be learned from them (for more information see <http://www.catholicworker.org/>).

Thomas Miller who has studied 1960’s communes estimated several thousand Christian communities in the 1960’s and 70’s were formed, some lasting a few weeks and some still running today (Moll, 2005). This movement was largely based on the theme of setting oneself apart as a way to grow spiritually alongside other Christians, many with a secondary focus on evangelizing.

The largest of these Jesus People movements was the Shiloh Youth Revival Centers. Shiloh was begun by John Higgins, with a mission to reach college-aged students and bring them the gospel. Higgins, and therefore Shiloh, was premillennialist and as a way to prepare for the rapture, Higgins saw his calling as converting as many people as possible and gathering them together to “live collectively and faithfully” (Goldman, 343) until that time. From 1968-1979, there were nearly 10,000 youth who were members of one of the 75 Shiloh Centers across the US (Goldman, 1995). Shiloh communities were very strict on most issues, coming down very traditional and conservative on most issues including the place of women, music, biblical interpretation, and interaction between men and women (Murphy, 30). All members were admitted on the basis of making a commitment to Jesus and were given all accommodations—food, housing, and clothes and required in turn to give all assets to the community. Some held jobs outside of the movement and some worked on the premises doing things like tree planting (Goldman, 1995). The movement came to an abrupt halt in 1979 after Higgins was asked by the board to step down. This caused the communities to disperse as they no longer had their leader.

While there were problems similar to the ones experienced by the Shiloh community at different communities, causing some to disperse, there was also much

personal growth in many of the members of the various communities and a few of the communities formed in the 1960s and 70s are still around today.

## **New Monasticism**

Like the Shiloh Community, many Christian communities of the time held a separatist attitude, as a way to grow in faith and live counter-culturally. This is starkly different from the major movement of ICCs today which is based heavily on justice and being part of a larger community or neighborhood. This new movement has been termed “New Monasticism” by some because of the similarity it bears to the beginnings of early Celtic and Franciscan orders (Moll, 2005). The term, taken from Jonathan R. Wilson’s book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, was officially instated at a conference in June of 2004.

At this conference a diverse group of more than 60 people met; people from various Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, and people from different communities with different visions and foci. The group met and formed a document of the following 12 statements which they saw as the major guideposts for the New Monasticism movement (taken from [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org)).

1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire,
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us,
3. Hospitality to the stranger
4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation
5. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church
6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate

7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community
8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children
9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life
10. Care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18
12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life

The conference also resulted in various goals and tasks in order to spread and continue the vision. Some of these included writing a book, attending an annual “reunion,” beginning an on-line conversation for ICC’s as a way to extend the conversation, and requesting a grant (a full list can be found in the report of the event at [http://www.newmonasticism.org/nm\\_docs/ Report%20on% 20New%20Monasticism% 20Gathering.pdf](http://www.newmonasticism.org/nm_docs/Report%20on%20New%20Monasticism%20Gathering.pdf)).

Shane Claiborne, founder of a community called “the simple way” in Philadelphia, spoke about the importance of the conference and document saying, “the marks show the common threads that connect Christian communities that might otherwise be seen as scattered anomalies, rather than vibrant cells of a body” (p. 2, Moll). There are many of these “cells” which were represented at the conference, some of which have since been connected to the movement, and there are likely many which are not connected to this movement but are still functioning in ways similar to those labeled *New Monasticism* communities.

## **Community Survey**

In order to better understand this movement<sup>2</sup>, it is important to examine specific intentional Christian communities. I will briefly describe four ICC’s with slightly different foci, set-ups, and goals. This overview is in no way comprehensive, but is meant to provide a better understanding of several individual communities<sup>3</sup>.

Reba Place Fellowship began during the first wave of ICC’s, and continues to thrive today. Reba Place, located in Evanston and Rogers Park, Illinois is a community which began in 1957 with a group of three people sharing a house together on the north side of Chicago. Like many of the communities formed during this time, there was little focus on issues of race or class, but instead the vision of these early members was “to live out a life of radical Christian discipleship as they observed it in the Gospels and the book of Acts” ([http://www.Rebaplacefellowship.org/Who\\_We\\_Are/A\\_Short\\_History\\_Of\\_Reba](http://www.Rebaplacefellowship.org/Who_We_Are/A_Short_History_Of_Reba)). The community grew and changed in both the focus and the set-up.

Today, there are nearly three dozen people involved in Reba Place Fellowship from various religious backgrounds, with different jobs, of varying ages, and all of whom share a common purse and have common meals and meetings together. In this community, there has also been an increasing focus on urban mission with three specific foci including common work in the community and our area, scattered work for employers around the metropolitan area, and volunteer work for service organizations they have developed ([http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Urban\\_Mission](http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Urban_Mission)). They describe themselves as “followers of Jesus, freely sharing life and resources in order to demonstrate God’s peace and justice in the city. Seeking to live out the teachings of

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix A for a further listing of ICC’s and their websites.

<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that the information about the different communities is primarily drawn from the websites of the individual communities and therefore self-reported information.

Jesus Christ with each other, living our whole lives for God, practically, economically, socially, spiritually” ([www.rebaplacefellowship.org](http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org)).

Also within the first wave of ICC formation, Plow Creek Mennonite Church began in 1971 when a few members from Reba Place left to begin a rural community, also in Illinois. It is currently made up of a group of forty-five people who “participate in life together” ([www.plowcreek.org](http://www.plowcreek.org)) living and working on a 190 acre farm. They have a focus on the environment and sustainable agriculture. They practice sustainable farming and are members of the Mennonite Church USA. The community members, made up of people of all ages, share two common meals a week, worship together on Sundays, and while all do some work on the farm when necessary, many also work in the larger community. This community also has a strong focus on peacemaking, supporting the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams, and have a mission statement which reads, “A global village practicing the peace of Jesus”.

One of the first in the new movement, the Simple Way was being formed nearly ten years ago when students from Eastern University were compelled to go and live among the poor following the gospel message of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (Moll, 2). Two years later, in 1998, the Simple Way began in Kensington, Pennsylvania with seven students, moving into a house in Pennsylvania’s poorest neighborhood (Moll, 3). The community, currently with six members, also houses people from the neighborhood for different lengths of time. Community members work part-time jobs and dedicate other time to spending time in the community, in Bible study, ministry, or playing with kids from the neighborhood (Moll, 3). The community has developed a set of core commitments which include a commitment to scripture, to the

Church, the Trinity, Humanity, Evangelism, Justice, Need, Community, and Love. They have weekly meetings, bi-weekly dinners, and a set-aside Sabbath day ([www.thesimpleway.com](http://www.thesimpleway.com)). Shane Claiborne, recent author of the book *The Irresistible Revolution* (Zondervan, 2006) and one of the founders of the community, has been hosting “family reunions” at the Simple Way for the past five years in order to bring together various ICC’s for support, idea sharing, and growth (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2004). The Simple Way has provided much inspiration and guidance for many of the ICC’s which have formed since then.

A community that has formed a strong relationship with Claiborne and the Simple Way is the Camden House located in Camden, New Jersey. The Camden House was formed in 2003 and is a community of eight people with a uniquely environmental focus. Like the simple way, the house is located in a very impoverished neighborhood and unlike in Kensington, the town is weighted down by pollution, causing people to abandon the area. The members of the community have “chosen to re-neighbor in an ecological disaster and do urban community gardening and brown-field to green-field projects” (Wilson-Hartgrove, 14). They therefore try to fight this injustice in practical ways such as planting gardens and starting a greenhouse as well as through calling on the factories and businesses of the area to be more environmentally conscious and change policies and practices (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2005). They are committed to simple living as a way to stay focused on seeking God’s kingdom and not buying into a consumerist culture. The house members have community meals, prayer and scripture meditation and study the condition of their neighborhood, the city, and the world in order to be knowledgeable and believe that “action should be a prayerful response to learning” ([www.camdenhouse.org](http://www.camdenhouse.org)).

They also believe in the importance of hospitality and encourage seekers of God to see a different way of living and be challenged and encouraged in their faith.

### **Conclusion**

Though all these ICC are encouraging to see on their own, it is more encouraging to find the unity being developed between many of the communities mainly due to the New Monasticism movement stemming from the conference. However, while this movement is gaining momentum, there is still very little literature about these different communities, especially done by social scientists. There is much room for questions about the effects of these communities on the neighborhoods they inhabit, the effects of community on the community members, the ways to make these communities function well, and what causes problems for an ICC. There is much being done in ICC currently in terms of growth and development of these communities, and hopefully this growth and development will encourage more research.

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## Appendix A

Agape Corner: [www.agapecorner.org](http://www.agapecorner.org)

Bartimaeus Cohousing Community: [www.bartcommunity.org](http://www.bartcommunity.org)

Bruderhof Communities: <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/Bruderh.html>

Catholic Worker Houses: <http://www.catholicworker.org/communities/commlistall.cfm>

Common Ground Community: [www.lvoe.org](http://www.lvoe.org)

Community House: [www.vineyardcentral.com](http://www.vineyardcentral.com)

The Company of Jesus: [www.companyofjesus.net](http://www.companyofjesus.net)

Chase House: through [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org)

East Central Ministries: [www.eastcentralministries.com](http://www.eastcentralministries.com)

Greehaus Community: [www.greenhauscommunity.org](http://www.greenhauscommunity.org)

Missio Dei: [www.missio-dei.com](http://www.missio-dei.com)

Rutba House Community: [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org)

Shalom Mission Communities: <http://www.shalomconnections.org/>

\*\*For more, go to <http://www.newmonasticism.org/forum.html> and look through descriptions of many different communities