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The Nurturing Communities Project: Fostering Persistence and Emergence in Intentional Christian Communities

By Margie DeWeese-Boyd

The concept, praxis, and experience of “community” in America have arguably been stretched thin so as to no longer signify anything substantial. Many, in fact, decry the demise of community even as “buy local” campaigns and the locavore food movement try to reclaim some of its lost ground. Bill McKibben, for instance, bemoans the growing dispersion and disconnection that characterizes a good deal of American life today: “We change religions, spouses, towns, professions with ease ... [w]e are not just individualists; we are hyper-individualists.”¹ Ours is a culture that readily severs ties, even as it suffers the ramifications of those various dislocations.

This American life is a life dispersed: we work ten miles away with people who live twenty miles beyond that, buy food grown a thousand miles away from grocery clerks who live in a different subdivision, date people from the other side of town, and worship with people who live an hour’s drive from one another... We serve soup to the poor folks on the other side of the tracks, but we don’t know the person on the other side of our fence. There is little of consonance, commitment, spontaneity, or stability in this new paved world.²

Our mobility, hyper-individualism, fixation on economic growth and the consumption practices it is predicated on, have, in many ways, signaled the death knell of community in America. With the loss of the kinds of deep-seated relationships that only community can cultivate, we are less happy,³ less engaged in civic and political life,⁴ and less connected to one another, in myriad ways.

This disconnectedness is especially apparent in the culture of “emerging” adults—those eighteen to twenty-three years old. In his recent

book, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*,⁵ sociologist Christian Smith describes these “adulthoods” as disengaged and “morally adrift.” This rootlessness is mirrored in religious disaffection and disconnection, indicated by studies suggesting American youths are abandoning institutionalized religion in large numbers.⁶ So profound is the trend that some have deemed Christianity itself in “crisis,”⁷ and the blogosphere is already humming with talk of a post-Christian era.

While social critics lament a culture bent on mobility, consumption, and hyper-individualism, there persist countercultural currents intent on commitment to geographic place, material simplicity, and authentic community. These subsectors of American life have repeatedly offered a countervailing response to the dominant, corporate- and consumption-oriented culture. This communitarian impulse is both persistent and emergent among American evangelical Christians: from the centuries-old Hutterite, Amish, and Mennonite communities; to the nearly centenarian Bruderhof communities and mid-twentieth century Anabaptist and Civil Rights-oriented communities; to the mere decade-old communities of the New Monasticism. No single endeavor captures this persistence and emergence as aptly as the Nurturing Communities Project, shepherded by David Janzen of Reba Place Fellowship, a Mennonite community in Evanston, Illinois. Arising from a huddled conversation between two friends, the Nurturing Communities Project has developed into an annual gathering of members from intentional communities across the country, and produced its own instructional manual, *Intentional Christian Community Handbook: For Idealists, Hypocrites and Wannabe Disciples of Jesus* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2013). In many ways, The Nurturing Communities Project exemplifies how some intentional Christian communities are attempting to push back against the disintegrating forces McKibben and others see. This paper explores the background, perspective and purposes of the Nurturing Communities Project with a view toward better understanding a sampling of these countervailing currents in American life.

Background and Perspective

The Nurturing Communities Project grew out of the experience of older communitarians, the fervor of younger ones, and the collaboration between

the two. The friendship between long-time communitarian David Janzen and the New Monasticism's Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove speaks to the intergenerational energy and perspective of the Nurturing Communities Project. In the summer of 2009, Janzen and Wilson-Hartgrove struck up a conversation while both were attending a conference at DePaul University in Chicago. Each had been separately witnessing the appearance, and sometimes dissolution, of newly forming Christian communities. Many of these newer communities aligned themselves with the principles of the New Monasticism. A young and growing movement begun in 2004, the New Monasticism claims well over one hundred intentional Christian communities that are in keeping with its spirit and intentions (<http://www.communityofcommunities.info>). A pioneer in that movement, Wilson-Hartgrove and his wife, Leah, had started the New Monastic community, Rutba House, in Durham, North Carolina, in 2003. After the publication of the movement's manifesto, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*,⁸ Wilson-Hartgrove had begun meeting with members and leaders of many New Monastic communities via weekend workshops. These "School for Conversion" workshops gave participants a taste of life in intentional community and introduced them to the principles of the New Monasticism. From interactions at these weekend workshops and elsewhere, the notion that fledgling communities might learn from those that are more established—and that both might benefit from the connection—became readily apparent to Wilson-Hartgrove. Moreover, it was an idea that he and David Janzen shared.

That initial conversation between the two men propelled Janzen into a years-long mission of visiting, listening to, and conversing with various intentional Christian communities throughout the United States. In tandem with his involvement with leaders and communities of the New Monasticism, for Janzen, the Nurturing Communities Project also grew out of over forty years of personal experience living in intentional community. He had seen, from the inside, what the struggle to make such communities thrive looks like. One early and profoundly formative experience came when Janzen and several others started an intentional community in Newton, Kansas in the early 1970s. What had begun with a tremendous amount of zeal, vision, and energy, ended just eighteen months later when many of the members had chosen to move on. Janzen describes the process of decline:

From the outside, for a while, it looked like we had it together. But we would come home from antiwar rallies and fight about the right way to clean, or not clean, the kitchen. Peace for the world, but not for each other. We offered hospitality to a few troubled souls and were quickly overwhelmed. Mental breakdowns and marriage crises caused us to urgently look for help from therapists and wiser mentors in other communities. The traumas of our lives were catching up with us, and we realized we needed to get wise about resources for personal healing if we wanted to continue living together and not devour one another.⁹

The crisis prompted the group to ask for outside help from an established community, Reba Place Fellowship. Through the assistance of Reba Place and others, the remaining members were able to find healing, renewal, and a way forward. As Janzen recalls, “Our neediness tempered our grandiosity and helped us to grow in many ways.”¹⁰ New Creation Fellowship, a Mennonite congregation, was formed from the remnants of that original venture. In 1984, Janzen, his wife, Joanne, and their two children left New Creation to take a year-long sabbatical at Reba Place, thereafter deciding to stay and pursue membership in that community. A key lesson Janzen took away from the experience in Kansas was the need for mentors and more experienced communarians to speak to the process of beginning such a risky—and countercultural—venture. For himself, he had found such mentors at Reba Place.

Having been established in 1957, Reba was replete with experienced communarians when the Janzens arrived. By the late 1990s, however, this seasoned, self-reflective—and now aging—group was confronted with the fact that they had few younger members, and consequently, limited future prospects. Nevertheless, the community hoped to eschew the typical end-of-lifecycle of intentional communities. Janzen describes how communities

begin with charisma, high energy, inclusion of new people, creative institutional forms, and a vivid sense of purpose worthy of personal sacrifice in time and possessions. And they end in low energy, with the same old people doing the same old tasks for the sake of institutional self-preservation.¹¹

In order to avoid atrophy and begin building the future community, Reba began exploring ways to invest its time and energy accordingly. Prompted by a conversation during a lengthy bus ride between David Janzen and a teenager who had grown up at Reba, the community began an internship program to offer the opportunity for young people to live and study “community, discipleship, and service” for a year.¹² The internship program has had far-reaching effects, and many community-wide changes have sprung out of it, including a storefront bicycle repair and resale shop named the Recyclery. As a result of the involvement of the younger generation of interns, membership rules, meeting structures, and other aspects of community have been reconsidered, and subsequently reorganized. As this experience of crisis and renewal made vivid to Janzen and the members of Reba Place, intentional communities need to draw upon the practical knowledge and experience of a wider range of interlocutors if they hope to both survive and flourish.

Accordingly, in 2010, Reba Place allowed Janzen time off from his work overseeing an affordable housing program to visit thirty intentional communities across the United States, with a view toward listening, learning, and providing support. This marked the beginning of the Nurturing Communities Project, and reflects its ongoing purpose:

There is a new generation of Christian intentional communities springing into life in our day. The Nurturing Communities Project is a response to this work of the Holy Spirit, bringing together more experienced and newer communities for learning and inspiration.¹³

Financial support for Janzen’s travels was itself the product of networking and community building, with funds provided not only by Reba Place and the Shalom Mission Communities, but also by Shane Claiborne and the Simple Way community in Philadelphia, Wilson-Hartgrove’s School for Conversion, and eventually, the Louisville Foundation.

Some of the communities Janzen visited expressed a need for specific guidance and support as members worked through particular challenges, considered a new direction for the community, or had other particular issues that needed addressing. For these communities, more involved “visitations” were conducted. This provided an opportunity for Janzen, and other seasoned communiterians, to review the spiritual architecture

and practices of the requesting community. An online “How to” was developed,¹⁴ providing an outline of the community visitation process. The process begins with the initiation of a request and a subsequent phone interview. Following from that conversation, a team is convened to undertake the visit, while the community prepares on its own to receive them. At the conclusion of the process, a written report with suggestions is presented to community members.

The Intentional Christian Community Handbook aims to articulate in practical terms the insights Janzen gleaned from his experiences working with these communities. At base, it is an instructional manual for would-be communitarians organized around the themes that emerged throughout Janzen’s travels. The need for such a manual, Janzen indicates, stems from the fact that many of the skills required for living communally have been lost amidst our cultural “automobility”—an issue raised in his initial conversation with Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove. In the tradition of David and Neta Jackson’s 1974 classic, *Living Together in a World Falling Apart*,¹⁵ Janzen’s previous book, *Fire, Salt, and Peace: Intentional Christian Communities Alive in North America*,¹⁶ focused on intentional Christian communities, providing detailed descriptions of some twenty-nine of them along with a directory listing one-hundred and fifty others. While in some ways a sequel, *Handbook* focuses more explicitly on community praxis: the “how to” of living together. Interwoven with anecdotes—contemporary and Biblical—that provide a narrative backdrop, the book combines the voices, experiences and stories of fifty individuals, making it an expression and exercise of communitarianism itself.

Drawing on lessons learned not only from enduring intentional communities, but also from those that form only to “fizzle” and fade away, Janzen’s *Handbook* sets out to address in a systematic way the challenges and opportunities facing new communities. The book is divided into sections according to specific stages in the development of intentional Christian community observed by Janzen and those he interviewed or visited with. It opens with “The yearning for community in context,” then moves to, “Is intentional community your calling?” Parts three through five address the particulars of collective life: “Before you move in together,” “The first year of community,” and, “Growing tasks for a young community.” Throughout this sequential ordering Janzen weaves together the stories of numerous community members, told in first person, with commentary and practical suggestions about the pursuit of community life, such as questions

a novitiate might explore in order to determine if her own perspective about community life resonates with that of the community in which she has chosen novice membership. These concrete, personal narratives lend the book authenticity, as well as deftly communicating Janzen's pastoral approach.

Handbook also grapples with a range of practical issues, such as community-based decision-making, leadership and achieving unity, as well as with the more profound challenges that seem to plague Christian intentional communities, e.g., achieving gender parity and diversity. "The Christian intentional community movement," Janzen notes, "is largely a white phenomenon."¹⁷ In a chapter devoted to racial reconciliation, Janzen asks leaders of mixed-race communities in Georgia how Christian communities can best pursue racial diversity. If diversity is the end goal, these leaders responded, it must pervade the process at every juncture. John Perkins of the Christian Community Development Association chides those pursuing racial diversity to "relocate, reconcile, and redistribute."¹⁸ A testimony to his provocative appeal, many of the communities involved in the Nurturing Communities Project have been shaped by Perkins' work and inspired by these "three R's."

Another persistent challenge for intentional communities of all sorts is how to build internal, *bonding* social capital, while also reaching out and building *bridging* social capital. Janzen describes a conversation with members of the Greenhouse Community in Minneapolis regarding the need to balance the inward goal of creating a community built from strong internal relationships—i.e., "thick" community—with the outward goal of social engagement.¹⁹ Assessing several communities according to these two, sometimes competing, goals, Janzen depicts Bruderhof communities as having "thick" community and lower levels of social engagement; whereas the Simple Way community experiences "thinner" community due to the instability in its membership, yet has higher levels of social engagement in the city of Philadelphia. In intentional Christian communities, Janzen argues, the pursuit of bonding social capital and bridging social capital is best thought of as synergistic. The ultimate goal of service and ministry in Christian communities is to allow the world an opportunity to "witness the attractive power of love and unity working in community."²⁰

Janzen's *Handbook* calls for renewal in the lives of both individuals and communities. This revitalization must be founded on recognition of the need to balance tradition and new ideas, and to welcome newcomers

while continuing to support long-time members. As the book testifies, this is an imperfect process in any community and requires humility, authentic dialogue, and possibly midcourse corrections. *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* seeks to provide guidance through this process, but Janzen insists it should not be thought of as a blueprint. Nurturing these nascent communities is more like “tending a garden” than constructing a building.²¹

Gathering and Nurturing Community

Life in intentional community is “too hard to do alone”; what is called for is “mutually life-giving relationships *between* intentional Christian communities.”²² Recognizing that a manual alone is insufficient to realistically foster community and build bridging social capital, a second outgrowth of Janzen’s travels and interactions with both inchoate and seasoned communities is the Nurturing Communities Project (NCP) gathering. The NCP gathering is focused on building relationships, networking, and offering mutual support between distinct communities. These annual gatherings bring together members of intentional Christian communities from across the country that differ in a variety of ways. Some are urban, others are rural; some are affiliated with particular theological traditions, others are theologically unaffiliated; some are large, others are small; some hold a common purse, others do not; etc. Having first gathered at Reba Place in 2010, the group has subsequently convened at Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, and then at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota.

The most recent NCP meeting at Platte Clove Community provides a window into what this “movement”—the term is used here cautiously—looks like on the ground. The hosting community, Platte Clove, is a Bruderhof community in the Catskill mountains of New York. The Bruderhof, a network of a few dozen communities worldwide with approximately 2,600 members, has a longer history than the other communities represented at the 2013 gathering. Originating in 1920s Germany, the Bruderhof established themselves in the United States in 1954 with the founding of Woodcrest community in New York. Like many of the NCP communities, the Bruderhof maintain a common purse, as well as common work and shared dwelling space. At Platte Clove community, some 200 members live

and work, either in the factory, Rifton Equipment (which makes specialized products for people with disabilities), or in various jobs to maintain the community's collective life—e.g., cooking, cleaning, physical plant and grounds maintenance, etc.

Sixty-five individuals, sixteen of whom were children, attended the NCP gathering at Platte Clove Community. These participants represented sixteen different intentional communities from across the country, including Nehemiah House (Springfield, Massachusetts), Lotus House (St. Louis, Missouri), Koinonia Farm (Americus, Georgia), Simple Way (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), and Church of the Sojourner (San Francisco, California). The sending communities differed in structure and common life in a variety of ways. Some (e.g., Nehemiah House) are comprised of several houses in a specific neighborhood, or even on a given street (e.g., Green House, Boston, Massachusetts); others involved members' sharing one large dwelling (e.g., Lotus House). Members of both urban (e.g., Radical Living, Brooklyn, New York) and rural (e.g., the Mount Community) communities attended. Participating communities also differed in the age range of members. Given its lengthier history, Reba Place has several members that have lived there for forty years or more and is beginning to devote more time and resources to health care and caring for the aging, even employing one of its members to oversee health-care provision full time in the community. Other communities, such as the Simple Way and Casa Justice and Mercy (Boston, Massachusetts) are populated primarily by members in their twenties and thirties. While the sharing of material resources in some fashion is common among participating communities, the extent of financial sharing differs, from a common purse with no individual member incomes, to sharing household items and living space primarily, and finances only indirectly.

The theme of the 2013 NCP gathering was “becoming a mustard seed people,” drawn from Jesus' parable of the same name. The announcement for the gathering explains:

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed which grows into a shrub large enough to welcome the birds of the air and offer them a home. We all have been birds who, in the miracle of a living parable, are planted by God into communities of love and mission.²³

Following from this overarching theme, the opening session provided time for participants to share, in smaller groups, their stories of choosing to live in community. For some in the novitiate process, these were stories still unfolding; for others, these stories were woven through decades of faith, struggle, and commitment.

Much like Handbook, the NCP gathering was organized to address issues and complexities common to collective life. Sessions, covering a variety of topics, included:

- Embracing diversity and the need for a shared vision
- Forming relationships for long-term life together
- Strategies for neighborhood engagement
- Life together—life apart: bridging church, ministry, work and community
- Active listening: conflict and resolution
- Shared finances in community

While the sessions, held in Platte Clove's K-8 school, were widely attended by participants, the gathering was as much about the informal conversations and implicit networking as the structured discussions. Accordingly, the schedule allowed ample time for these sorts of connections—in between sessions, by the campfire, on pony-cart rides, etc. Meals, prepared by Platte Clove members, were communal and were often accompanied by singing, dancing, and games. On Saturday afternoon, participants engaged in a common work project with Platte Clove Community members in the large vegetable garden onsite. That evening, there was a bonfire with s'mores, handmade paper lanterns, and more singing.

For the time being, the NCP appears to have gained the momentum needed to continue its stated purpose of fostering community. Plans for the coming year's event—hosted by Jesus People USA, an intentional community of roughly 500 members in Chicago—include exploring avenues for even greater communication and connection between communities, as well as discussing the possibility of adding more frequent, regional gatherings. While associations of communities exist in a variety of forms—e.g., monastic orders, L'Arche communities, Hutterite colonies, etc.—the NCP network is unique, particularly in the loose affiliation of the communities involved. Within the Nurturing Communities Project there exists no formal organization and very little overhead. Participation in the annual gathering entails minimal expense, thereby increasing the

range of individuals able to attend. In spite of the missing organizational structure, the connections between participants appear to be both robust and enduring—evidenced by the year-to-year consistency in attendance. A letter and summary report to participants hints at both the fervor David Janzen brings to the project and the depth of relationships formed through the NCP:

My biggest joy is to meet younger communities and their leaders, to help them understand the importance of their life and work together... New communities always have problems, but these problems usually are like the problems other communities have struggled with, so if I can introduce them to each other the conversation usually goes on great without me. I confess that I still don't know where this movement of newer communities is heading, but I do know that when we come together the Holy Spirit has already prepared us for a rich encounter with Jesus in one another. So I found myself at times, sitting back at the Platte Clove Gathering, watching folks from different communities offering workshops, leading worship, and sprawling out into many little circles eagerly talking about their stuff. I felt like a grandpa watching the cousins play and realized that some of them are bonding for life and will keep seeking each other out for years to come because of the gifts they have shared.²⁴

These words capture the ethos of both the yearly gathering and the burgeoning NCP network.

Conclusion

According to Martin Buber, the realm of the “between”—that meeting of I and thou; that sharing of common reality—is the core of human meaning and existence. As human beings, we are wired to seek existential and spiritual meaning through mutual interdependence and authentic connection with others; human life is founded on relationships. The architecture for that essential connectedness, many find, is all too uncommon in the wider American culture, which is arguably driven more by consumption than communitarianism, more by individualism than

collectivism. Yet the yen for greater human connectedness and sharing is readily evident in communitarian impulses in the United States. The appearance and reception of David Janzen's book, along with the visits, consultations, and gatherings of the larger Nurturing Communities Project signify a new and enduring phenomenon among evangelicals in the United States: a communitarian impulse that is both avowedly Christian and uniquely American.

Notes

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4. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
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9. Janzen, *Handbook*, 7.
10. David Janzen, personal email communication with the author (January 27, 2014).
11. Janzen, *Handbook*, 317.

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17. Janzen, *Handbook*, 135.
18. Ibid., 144.
19. Ibid., 263.
20. Ibid., 271.
21. David Janzen, interview with Deborah Arca. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/takeandread/2012/11/a-how-to-for-intentional-christian-community/>. Accessed January 3, 2014.
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