



Common Values, Uncommon Rewards

Intentional Communities Find Innovative Ways to Nurture Spiritual Growth.

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Becca Calendo and Amelia Lorenz, housemates at Chicago’s Hased Community Cooperative, love molasses cookies. So last Christmas, they used one of the group’s three kitchens to whip up several batches of their favorite recipes. Then, they enlisted the rest of the community for a blind taste test. “It was very spontaneous—something we thought of that evening over dinner,” Calendo said.

But it was more than that; it was an example of what living in an intentional community can be like. “That speaks to the kind of abundance that’s possible in community,” she said. “Certain people have a little bit of energy for something, and then we get to invite other people into it, and it becomes a shared, awesome, fun thing that wouldn’t ordinarily happen on a Wednesday night.”

So what is an intentional community? According to the Fellowship for Intentional Community, it’s a group of people living together on the basis of explicit common values—a broad category that includes everything from eco-villages and full-blown communes to student co-ops and cohousing enclaves (developments where people own their own homes but share some land and amenities in common).

Hased: Sharing Joys, Concerns, and Life

Hased Community Cooperative—the name means “loving-kindness” in Hebrew—is a housing coop started by a group of friends who attended McCormick Theological Seminary together. According to cofounder Matt Lang, who serves as pastor of Burbank Manor Presbyterian Church, the friends simply wanted to extend the sense

of community they'd enjoyed in student housing. "It was really nothing more high-minded than that," he said.

After five years of on-again, off-again conversation and a year of intense planning, Hased opened its doors in September 2008. Today, nine adults, four children, and assorted pets share a brownstone and carriage house in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood. Residents (who are now split between owners and renters) share bathrooms, kitchens, and living rooms and participate in weekly check-in and business meetings, semiannual retreats, and regular chores and cleanup days. Perhaps most importantly, they eat dinner together each evening.

"Sharing meals together every night has been a pretty essential part of our life together. We're all changing, and it's helpful to have people at nightly dinners to talk stuff out," Lang said. "You share your joys, and they multiple. You share your concerns, and they're diluted."

AYAVA: Discernment, Reflection, and Service

Shared meals are also important at AYAVA House, an intentional community on the campus of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas. Started three years ago, AYAVA House provides housing to young adults who come to Austin for programs like the PCUSA's Young Adult Volunteer Program or AmeriCorps' City Year. (AYAVA stands for Austin Young Adult Volunteers/AmeriCorps.) The goal is to offer residents tools of discernment and theological reflection so they can make sense of their experience and God's call on their lives.

"They're at such a crucial stage of becoming," said program coordinator Martha Lynn Coon. "I feel one of the ways that you can learn the most about yourself is through relational engagement."

AYAVA House residents share dinner on Sunday evenings (rotating cooking duties) and gather again on Wednesdays for book discussions, reflection exercises, and other activities. Coon also schedules regular check-ins with individual participants.

Sarah Wildt, who's now a student at Austin Seminary, lived at AYAVA House last year and found the experience to be powerful. "The majority of us were from Christian backgrounds, but there was one nonbeliever who was with us," she said. "That was a really great way to broaden our perspective on calling and discernment."

Coon believes AYAVA House can also broaden young adults' perspectives on the church. "I see so many young adults who are disaffected with church," she said. "I think that's often because it's been harder for the church to find ways to engage them personally and intimately as they stop going to youth group and go to college."

Pres House: Creating Community on Campus

College, of course, is where many young adults check out of church for the first time—and perhaps forever. Pres House gives students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison reasons to check in instead. Located in the heart of campus, Pres House is a campus ministry, a student church, and an apartment building, all rolled into one.

It also houses a number of year-long microcommunities of four to eight students who focus on a particular topic. This past academic year, two microcommunities explored world religions, according to Ginger Morgan, director of residential community for Pres House Apartments. “The students participating in those communities are from a wide variety of faith backgrounds; we have some Jewish students, some agnostic students, some Christians,” she said. “They are having conversations together both about their own faith and about the way that religion and faith get expressed around the world.”

Students propose a topic for a microcommunity and receive rent credit and program funds. Core members typically live together in one of Pres House’s four-bedroom apartments, which doubles as the group’s main gathering space. To keep microcommunities from becoming too insular, Pres House requires them to do something for the broader building during the course of the year, such as sponsoring a speaker. Residents are also expected to participate in other building-wide activities.

Topics aren’t limited to faith. Pres House’s first microcommunity focused on food production and nutrition, and Morgan is now planning a microcommunity for students in recovery from substance abuse.

Of course, some might say everyone who chooses to live in community is in recovery—from isolation, individualism, consumerism, or some other social ill. People wouldn’t choose the lifestyle otherwise.

“It’s a good way to live. It’s not easy, but it’s good,” said Matt Lang of Hesed Community Cooperative. “We’re all braver, smarter, stronger people for living like this.”

Defining Community (sidebar)

Dr. Tim Miller is a leading scholar of intentional communities. A professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, he is the author of *The Encyclopedic Guide to American Intentional Communities*, which catalogs more than three thousand intentional communities throughout American history.

Miller said four characteristics define intentional communities:

- *Purpose.* The community must have a common purpose, whether that’s religion, simple living, environmental stewardship, or political philosophy. “It’s not just friends hanging out,” he said.
- *Shared housing.* “There are different ways to do residential, but there has to be a geographical center to it,” he said. Some intentional communities live in a single building, some live in adjacent homes, and some have sprawling compounds.
- *Economics.* “There has to be some economic sharing; something has to be done in common,” he said. That could mean holding everything in common, as in a commune, or owning some land together but maintaining private bank accounts.

- *Critical mass.* “There’s a great debate about how many people you have to have before it’s real,” he said. “The definition of size that’s most commonly used in communal living studies is a minimum of five people.” (And those five can’t all be related by blood or marriage; otherwise, you have a family or clan.)

In his research, Miller has tracked a decline in totally communal, religious-based communities—think of the Shakers—and a rise in cohousing, where simple living is the driving force. “Communal living inherently is pretty economical, just because you don’t need to duplicate all kinds of property and facilities,” he said. “If you’ve got 50 people living together, you don’t need 50 cars. You could probably get by with 10 or 12.”

Another growth area he identified is eco-villages, which are in effect living laboratories for sustainable living practices. “In the last 20 years, less than that maybe, those have basically gone from nothing to hundreds today,” Miller said.

Unlike the separatist communes of the past, eco-villages want to share what they’re learning. Their philosophy, according to Miller: “There is a better way out there, and we’re going to demonstrate it. Once other people see what we’re doing, that’s going to be great for the world.”

From Campus to Camp: More Examples (sidebar)

For four decades, the College of Wooster in Ohio has invited small groups of students to live in program houses where they connect with local community agencies and with each other. One such house, the Poverty Outreach House, connects students with a local feeding ministry two hours a week. Celeste Tannenbaum, a 2013 graduate who now works with the program through Wooster’s Office of Interfaith Campus Ministries, said living together is important. “Instead of having once a month that you sit down and reflect, it’s kind of a constant form of reflection,” she said. “It’s a more holistic lifestyle instead of just compartmentalizing that part of your life.”

Much newer is grACE House at Crestfield Camp and Conference Center, part of the Pittsburgh Presbytery. (The name stands for growing relationships, Advancing Communities Empowerment.) This program allows young adults to live and work at camp, spend 10 hours a week with a local nonprofit, and participate in guided reflection and discernment. The program grew out of a perceived need to serve former campers from the inner-city who have few resources. “We cannot become some focused internally that we don’t reach out to those that need the love of Christ and can be offered things that they wouldn’t have access to otherwise,” said Betty Angelini, Crestfield’s executive director.