

Presbyterians Today

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Turning church upside down

Intentional communities pioneer new forms of faithful living



How one congregation made its sermon go viral | Theresa Cho: "Wreck this church"

Common values, uncommon rewards



Intentional communities find innovative ways to nurture spiritual growth.

BY MARK RAY



Becca Calendo and Amelia Lorenz, housemates at Chicago's Hesed 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 says.

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 says. "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."

Calendo isn't alone in this desire for a supportive community that goes beyond Sunday-morning worship and Wednesday-evening Bible study. A growing number of Christians are joining intentional communities as an opportunity to live out their faith daily and in fellowship with other Christians.

At their core, intentional communities are groups of people living together on the basis of common values. Tim Miller, author of *The Encyclopedic Guide to American Intentional Communities*, says they have four defining characteristics: a common purpose, shared housing, economic sharing, and "critical mass," which is often defined as at least five people. They include everything from ecovillages and full-blown communes to student co-ops and cohousing enclaves in which people own their own homes but share land and amenities in common. And their numbers are growing.

At last count, 2,433 communities had registered with the Fellowship for Intentional Community, a national nonprofit. Laird Schaub, the

Fellowship's executive secretary, says there's been a small boom since 2005 and estimates that at least 100,000 people in the United States live in an intentional community. And these aren't just young adults. More and more people over the age of 50 are getting involved, Schaub says. They are seeking ways to live intentionally into new life stages as they change careers, retire, or see their children become adults.

Whether it's the "new normal" of debt and unemployment, the transition back into US culture after serving a year abroad as a volunteer, or a firsthand encounter with the evidence of a dying planet, it's that experience of radical change that brings many people to intentional communities—a place where they can together confront their changing worlds and witness to alternatives. And a number of Presbyterians have caught the bug.

Hesed: sharing joys, concerns, and life

Hesed Community Cooperative—the name means "loving-kindness" in Hebrew—is a housing co-op started by a group of friends who attended McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago together. According to cofounder Matt Lang, pastor of Burbank Manor Presbyterian Church in a southwestern Chicago suburb, 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 says.

After five years of on-again, off-again conversation and a year of intense planning, Hesed 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



Members of Hesed Community Cooperative in Chicago, several of them graduates of McCormick Theological Seminary, share a meal.

part of our life together. We're all changing, and it's helpful to have people at nightly dinners to talk stuff out," Lang says. "You share your joys, and they multiply. 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 PC(USA)'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



AYAVA House residents install a garden behind their house on the campus of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

discernment and theological reflection so they can make sense of their experience and identify God's call on their lives.

"They're at such a crucial stage of becoming," says 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, with cooking duties rotating, 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 says. "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 says. "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."

From campus to camp: Wooster and grACE

Although many college students become alienated from the church, students at the College of Wooster in Ohio can find spiritual nurture through shared living and community involvement. For four decades,

the college has invited small groups of students to live in program houses where they connect with local community agencies and one another.

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, says living together is important.

"Instead of sitting down and reflecting [once a month], it's kind of a constant form of reflection," she says. "It's a more holistic lifestyle instead of just compartmentalizing that part of your life."

A holistic approach also is the cornerstone of grACE House at Crestfield Camp and Conference Center, part of Pittsburgh Presbytery. (The name stands for growing relationships, advancing communities through empowerment.) The program allows young adults to live and work at the camp and

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Although the term *intentional community* might seem like a 21st-century catchphrase, the concept is nothing new, according to Tim Miller, a professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas and a leading scholar of intentional communities. His *Encyclopedic Guide to American Intentional Communities* catalogs more than 3,000 intentional communities throughout American history.

In his research, Miller has tracked a decline in totally communal, religious-based communities—such as 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 says. "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 in ecovillages, which are in effect living laboratories for sustainable practices. "In the last 20 years—less than that, maybe—those have basically gone from nothing to hundreds today," Miller says.

Unlike the separatist communes of the past, ecovillages want to share what they're learning. According to the Miller, their philosophy is: "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."



Students living in the College of Wooster's Poverty Outreach House serve a meal for anyone in need during the Fall Feast.

conference center, 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 who were from inner-city neighborhoods and who had few resources.

Pres House: creating community on campus

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, shared interest in a particular topic is the basis for an intentional community. 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 yearlong microcommunities of four to eight students who focus on a particular topic. This past academic year, two microcommunities explored world religions.

“The students participating in those communities are from a wide variety of faith backgrounds; we have some Jewish students, some agnostic students, some Christians,” says Ginger Morgan, director of residential community for Pres House

Apartments. “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



At Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, an intentional community called the Nest houses 17–21 students who live, worship, study, and do service together.

apartments, and the apartment serves 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 year, such as sponsoring a speaker. Residents are also expected to participate in other building-wide activities.

Topics aren’t limited to religion. 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 that everyone who chooses to live in community is in recovery—from isolation, consumerism, or some other social ill. “It’s a good way to live. It’s not easy, but it’s good,” says Matt Lang of Hesed Community Cooperative. “We’re all braver, smarter, stronger people for living like this.”

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LEARN MORE

If you’d like to explore how to create an intentional community or hospitality house through your congregation, go to pcusa.org/yav (look for resources in the left-hand navigation bar).

- » AYAVA House: austinseminary.edu (look for it under the header “Admissions”)
- » Fellowship for Intentional Community: ic.org
- » grACE House: crestfield.net/grace-house
- » Hesed Community Cooperative: hesedcommunity.com
- » Poverty Outreach House: wooster.edu (search for Wooster Volunteer Network)
- » Pres House: preshouse.org