As I stood outside of Atlanta City Hall singing and praying I knew that I was participating in a different kind of worship. The sermon that evening was not about good feelings, or my personal happiness, but about God’s desire for justice for the poor. Our prayers were not for our petty wants, or profit, but for the legislators inside to create laws that benefited all of the citizens of Atlanta. We heard stories from community members who had lived as homeless people for the past 24 hours. And as we participated in the Eucharist, City Hall employees stopped to watch, knowing that we were different from the usual crowds that gather outside their doors. I was with the Open Door Community as their guest for Holy Week. The Open Door Community is located in Atlanta, GA where it diligently and faithfully works with the homeless community of the city. They seek to live in holy ways by serving together, worshipping together, and advocating for the poor and oppressed in Atlanta and the world. One of the ways that they choose to do this is by celebrating Holy Week on the streets each year, and I was thankful that they let me join them. Each day we continued the regular work of feeding and caring for the homeless of Atlanta while each night we gathered for worship at various locations like Grady Hospital, the City Jail, City Hall and the Capital Building. I ate, prayed with, talked to, and got to know the community members, and I began to understand what it could mean to live in an Intentional Christian Community.

Since the 4th century when “the Desert Fathers and Mothers began the first monastic movement by fleeing the centers of power and creating alternative communities in the desert” (Rutba House ix) Intentional Christian Communities (ICCs) have been vibrant, countercultural, faithful ways of living in the world. Within the 20th and 21st centuries intentional Christian communities have moved away from being monastics in the Catholic faith tradition. They have often become houses or communities within urban areas that include both Catholics and Protestants trying to live out a faith of sustainability, modesty, peace, love and hospitality. I hope to explore the benefits of intentional faith communities as places of honest worship, social conscience, and genuine community.

A Brief History of Monasticism

Many believe that the first Intentional Christian Community that is known is found described in the book of Acts beginning in chapter four. The early church was a community who

Were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common… There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold…. And it was distributed to any as they had need (Acts 4:32–35).

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1 See index for further information.
Throughout history monasteries and convents have been places to live out an alternative, dedicated faith. They were homes and places of worship that drew those people who desired to live out their faith in a radical way, forsaking the things of the world and declaring vows of celibacy, and poverty which were unusual and highly unappealing to the rest of the world. But, of course convents and monasteries are in some ways limited. They are segmented by gender, and often in secluded areas away from society. The nuns and monks who are members of these communities are celibate people who often separate themselves by the clothes they wear, and the ways they interact with society. Nevertheless, these Catholic communities were forerunners in the work of providing sanctuary and hospitality. The purpose of these groups has often been service to people and the world – God’s creation. The Catholic communities remain misunderstood, yet hope giving sanctuaries in the hearts and minds of many people. They are the ideal background from which to start our journey of modern-day Intentional Christian Communities.

There are a variety of traditional Catholic monastic communities such as Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, etc. Each has slight distinctions in their concentration and organization, but overall they seek to serve the same purpose. Monasticism is ultimately about dedicated service to God by living a life separate from that of the secular world. Currently there is a new movement in Intentional Christian Communities called “new monasticism” (Wilson 1) in which predominantly Protestant individuals form communities that are similar to traditional Catholic monasticism. While many of the “new monastic” communities have aspects in common with traditional monastic life there are some great differences. For instance, each monk was required to vow three things to become a member of the order. They are

1. Stability (Stabilitas Loci)
2. Conversion of Life (Conversatio morum suorum)
3. Obedience (Obedientia)

By the first of these the monk commits himself to a particular monastery and undertakes to remain there for ever, with unswerving determination; for the urge to be constantly on the move was considered to be incompatible with the life of the monastic family.

By the second he promises to embrace the monastic way of life, which includes chastity against ‘the lusts of the flesh’, the renunciation of all personal property, and the relinquishment of the right to marry. (Milliken 14).

The first two are not requirements of the “new monastic” communities. While many members of Intentional Christian Communities will decide to live in the same community for their entire lives, it is not necessarily expected of them. In the same way, members of ICCs are not expected to renounce all personal property or their choice to marry. While they do have certain expectations of participating in a common or modified common pool they are not expected to sacrifice everything.

Another way that modern ICCs differ from past monastic communities is the lack of a single leader in the community. The monasteries were run by the abbot who was the sole head of the group. All of the monks were expected to follow the lead of the abbot and obey his commands and requests. According to St. Benedict, the abbot was to
always be respected, “because we believe that he holds the place of Christ” (Benedict 61). He was believed to hold power given to him by God and that he was God’s messenger in the monastery. His authority was unquestionable and his decisions were final. The abbot was chosen by the brothers and was expected to meet a list of requirements in order to hold the position (St. Benedict 62-63). ICCs today have systems of organization set up so that the community is always involved in the decision making and no one person is in charge. Some communities, like the Open Door Community in Atlanta, have a leadership team that keeps the house organized, and makes major decisions. The leadership team consists of the partners in the community – those who typically have dedicated themselves to be permanent residents of the house. At Open Door that group is made up of the founders of the community, ministers who live in the community, former members of the homeless community and everyone in between. These are the people who usually have a vision of the long term for their community and therefore are equipped to make these decisions and keep the programs of the community active.

The Life of the “New Monastics”

In June 2004 the Rutba House 2, an intentional Christian community in Durham, North Carolina, which focuses on community development and whose founders, Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove have worked with Christian peacekeeping teams in Iraq and with racial reconciliation groups, called a conference of ICCs across the United States to come together and write a statement of common commitments among themselves. Until Rutba House took the initiative to call the ICCs together they had no real system of organization outside of their own communities. There was no network of commonality that joined these “new monastics” together. Each community brought their own wisdom and experiences to share with the group. This is the statement they achieved at the end of their conversation, prayer, worship, and exploration:

Moved by God’s Spirit in this time called America to assemble at St. John’s Baptist Church in Durham, NC, we wish to acknowledge a movement of radical rebirth, grounded in God’s love and drawing on the rich tradition of Christian practices that have long formed disciples in the simple Way of Christ. This contemporary school for conversion, which we have called a “new monasticism,” is producing a grassroots ecumenism and a prophetic witness within the North American church which is diverse in form, but characterized by the following marks:

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 novitate.
7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.

2 See index for further information.
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 economics.
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew [chapter] 18.
12. Commitments to a disciplined contemplative life.

May God give us grace by the power of the Holy Spirit to discern rules for living that will help us embody these marks in our local contexts as signs of Christ’s kingdom for the sake of God’s world. (Rutba House xii-xiii).

These commitments are extremely important to the formation of ICCs and therefore must be closely examined in order to understand “new monasticism”. According to Sr. Margaret M. McKenna “Relocation expresses conversion and commitment, the decision to resist imperial pressures and the pleasures and rewards of conformity to the way of all empires: pride, power, and reduction of all values to the ‘bottom line.’” (McKenna 15). But relocation is not enough; it must be done to these specific places. “An abandoned place is one that has no attraction for the ‘world of what’s happening now,’ and therefore is left alone by the political, economic, and social powers that be.” (McKenna 15). These locations embody the desire to be present and active in new ways in the world. They are comfortable with working outside of the system and unafraid to resist conformity.

Unsurprisingly, the modern day ICCs tend to operate in very similar ways to the Acts 4 passage. These communities often have a practice of either a fully or partially shared money system which is a way of showing trust for the others in the community as well as a way of practicing humility and generosity. It gives the impression that if one understands that their needs are secondary to the needs of the whole community, and that nothing on earth is truly theirs, then they put more faith in God and in the community of believers. Thomas Moore explains that “Common ownership fosters an attitude that moves away from passing personal desires, while preserving the deeper, grander wish to live a life in tune with one’s values and philosophy.” (Benedict xviii) In a similar way, Shane Claiborne, a member of the Simple Way community in Pennsylvania, writes about a “theology of enough” which “is anchored in the idea that God did not create too many people or not enough stuff. Poverty was not created by God, but by you and me because we have not learned to love our neighbor as ourselves.” (Claiborne “Mark 2” 31). ICCs seek to destroy the individualism that controls capitalist societies. Some communities, such as Claiborne’s Simple Way community, who seek to establish community development, and encourage alternative ways of living, have a modified common pool in which each member contributes a certain amount or certain percentage of their earnings each month. Other communities like Jesus People, USA (JPUSA), the largest ICC examined in this study with approximately 500 members that live in an

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3 See index for further information.
4 See index for further information.
abandoned high rise hotel in Chicago, IL, have businesses that are run by the community. Most of the community members work in one of those businesses and JPUSA’s common monetary pool comes from the profit of those businesses. And still other communities have a common pool in which each member contributes all that they make to be shared with the rest of the community. Ultimately, community becomes the priority rather than personal wealth and as Claiborne describes his community’s willingness to share with a family in their neighborhood, “We are family with them and money has lost its relevance.” (Claiborne “Mark 2” 36).

Hospitality is intrinsic to the formation of communities such as these. Hospitality is such an undeniable scriptural principle that to ignore it is impossible for Intentional Christian Communities. Throughout the Torah and the rest of the Old Testament God continually demands hospitality for the stranger and the alien. Sodom is burned because of its lack of hospitality and its desire to harm those who are visiting (Genesis 19:1-29). The first monastic communities embraced hospitality as a cornerstone of their obligations and thus became places of sanctuary for those fleeing the harshness of the world. The monastery organizational system even had a position set aside specifically for helping the poor and needy. The “Almoner… was to distribute the monastic alms to the poor, and to help them with ‘their hard life’” (Milliken 77). In the same way, there was another position for showing hospitality. One of the monks would be the “hosteller” who was in charge of welcoming visitors “on the assumption that ‘all guests who come shall be received as though they were Christ; for He Himself said, ‘I was a stranger and ye took Me in’.” (Milliken 78). Nuns were also known for their works of mercy, such as “the education of secular children of gentle folk, but within their means they dispensed ample charity to all distressed people who lived in their neighbourhood.” (Milliken 82).

According to Christine D. Pohl “Local Christian communities shared meals together as part of their regular church practice – an important location for hospitality. These agape meals provided a setting for a communal response to the needs of the poor for food while simultaneously reinforcing a distinct Christian identity.” (Pohl 42). Now many of the new monastic groups show much of their hospitality around the table through the provision of food for the hungry. The Open Door Community offers breakfast or lunch four days a week as a sign of hospitality for the homeless in Atlanta. They continue this ancient practice of the early Church and the original monastics. However, they also expand the hospitality to providing showers, clothing and toiletry items, and more importantly inviting members of the homeless community to join in life with them at the Open Door as residents. Many of the new monastic communities have hospitality practices that they regularly share with the world, whether it’s providing a hot meal, a warm bed, or a simple kind word to someone on the street.

The next mark of new monasticism is “lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.” (Rutba House xii). Those within Intentional Christian Communities understand that as long as societal rifts remain, true community cannot take place. So they fight against racism that still remains in America that threatens to tear their communities apart. They understand that in many ways America is still segregated, specifically in the South, and therefore they must face it head on in order to achieve the “just reconciliation” that they desire. ICCs, specifically those in the South, have a long history of fighting racism. For
instance, Koinonia Farms\(^5\) in Americus, Georgia began in 1942 and from its starting point it railed against a system of racial inequality and injustice. Modern day communities continue in this fight against racism. Now, they fight against societal racism in its new forms, such as the higher numbers of school dropout, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, poverty, and homelessness in the African-American community. And even further, some communities such as Jubilee Partners\(^6\), a small partner community to Koinonia located in Comer, GA fight racism in more concrete ways. Jubilee partners hosts refugees from a variety of countries and they must fight not only racism, but nationalism as well. By welcoming the refugees they help combat societal stigmas by helping the immigrants to obtain proper documentation, jobs, secure places to live, language and computer skills, and societal integration skills. The work they do is vital to ending, even one small step at a time, the racism that occurs throughout America. Truly, ICCs must continue to fight racial issues even in the modern “integrated” society.

Humble submission to Christ’s body, the Church may seem like a strange mark for ICCs to take. Typically they are not involved in actual church bodies, and few are associated with denominations. However, the groups often have a very strong sense of what it means to be part of the Church. Obviously they are extremely committed to the community, and the body of Christ is the eternal community which each person is a member of. Paul wrote about the importance of the body of Christ in Romans 12 and again in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. The community of the Church is vital to the growth of Christians. According to Ivan Kauffman, “Christ has chosen to be present to us in the church, and unless we accept his presence there we will find him nowhere.” (Kauffman 74).

The 6\(^{th}\) mark is intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate. The tradition of the novitiate experience in monastic communities is extremely important to the life of Intentional Christian Communities. There is a need for exploration before one commits to life in an ICC and the traditional novitiate is an effective way to do that. Committing to community life cannot be taken lightly and therefore careful prayer, study, and exploration of the community must be done before one can make such a decision. Many communities have systems of organization set up in order to “classify” those who are in the community in levels of commitment. While this does not denote worth or place in the community it is important in the organization. For instance, the Simple Way describes their commitment levels as the “Onion’. David Janzen describes the layers of the onion which are “Visitors, Guests, Nomads and Novices, and Partners. Visitors come for a brief stay. Guests are invited to stay longer and begin seeking with the community how God might be calling them. Nomads stay for an agreed upon period in order to learn and return to another community. Novices are testing their calling to membership. Partners have made vows to make long-term decisions together and seek God for the community’s ongoing vision.” (Janzen “Mark 6” 87).

While each community has their own system, many of them are organized in similar ways. Each person can choose their level of involvement in the

\(^{5}\) See index for further information.

\(^{6}\) See index for further information.
community. However, when one begins to explore the option of joining the community, they do not face the decision alone. Most communities assign some sort of guide or mentor to those who are considering life in the community. Janzen points out that “spiritual formation will involve extensive conversation – not to persuade or convince them, but to accompany them as the Spirit helps them sort out their authentic experiences of God and the false paths they have taken.” (Janzen “Mark 6” 89). The novitiate is important first because “it seeks to bring a second generation of members into full discipleship and full partnership.” (Janzen “Mark 6” 94) and second because it enriches the life of the community by bringing in new people with unique experiences, outlooks and faith traditions.

Mark seven, nurturing common life among members of intentional community, is one of the most understandable and vital marks. It is seemingly obvious that cultivating community life is important – any time a group of people live together there must be a level of solidarity. However, ICCs require more than the typical communal compromise. These communities are most often lifetime commitments that one makes to the rest of the group and therefore they become family. But this type of family can be quite dysfunctional because of the variety of baggage and past life experiences that each member brings into the community. As David Janzen puts it, “young people in our day are more likely to come from broken families. They often carry wounds from failed relationships that create a longing for community, but also bring significant defenses and healing agendas.” (Janzen “Mark 6” 89). Similarly, many of the communities become places of refuge for those who have suffered from a variety of addictions for quite some time. Those addictions and personal baggage can easily create tension, discord and chaos in a community. Nurturing common life not only involves creating a system of organization that all community members agree upon, but also destroying the sense of individualism that is ingrained in capitalist society. Sherrie Steiner claims that there are five main things that can cause discord within the community and they are “obsession, desire, ecstasy, detachment, and despair.” (Brix and Steiner 103). Each of these is motivated by selfishness and self-interest rather than looking toward the kingdom of God and concern for the community. Steiner claims that “the community became the sign of the coming kingdom to people searching for God – a place that modeled a ‘way of being’ that overcame all divisions, both natural and social, in the transcendent unity celebrated in the Eucharist.” (Brix and Steiner 102). The community is dependent upon its members, and the life of the community is dependent on agreement and communication the community members.

Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children is mark eight. Historically monastic communities have included a vow of celibacy. Traditional Roman Catholic monastic societies have cherished celibacy as being better or more in line with rightly serving God. However, with the introduction of new monasticism which is mostly made up of Protestants, marriage has become an issue that must be taken into consideration. While some community members may feel called to a life of celibacy, many others meet their spouses in the communities, feel called to married life, or enter into communities after already being married and possibly having children. And so the traditional outlook for monasticism must be altered to include the new monastics who seek faithfulness through community life. Jana Bennett points out that the eighth mark is very specific. Singles are called to celibacy as long as they are still not
married. In the same way married people are obviously held strongly accountable to being monogamous in their relationships (Bennett 119 – 120). Both families and singles can be beneficial to community life and should be cherished and welcomed. But they must also be respected and accepted as viable forms of faithful life.

Each community is organized autonomously and therefore differently than other communities. Each group is unique in its living situation, but Intentional Christian Communities intrinsically require mark nine which is geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life. According to Jon Stock, geographical proximity is so important because it enacts that biblical principle of “koinonia.” Stock points out that koinonia, or fellowship, “speaks primarily to ‘mutual participation.’ In Christ, Christians not only belong to one another but actually become mutually identified.” (Stock 127). Later he goes even further to say “that the New Testament expects our koinonia to be quite physical, implying a sharing of time, money, possessions and our very selves” (Stock 128). The type of sharing and the proximity is different for each group. For Jesus People, USA proximity means life in their “Friendly Towers” (Janzen Fire, Salt, and Peace 104) which were two abandoned sky rise buildings in Chicago. At Jubilee Partners in Comer, GA the community is located on a large piece of land owned by the community and proximity simply means living on that land. David Janzen notes that “the partners live – each family in its own home – near the common building with its dining hall and rooms for guests and volunteers.” (Janzen Fire, Salt, and Peace 106). Aside from the partners, the community often hosts refugees from conflict ridden countries such as Vietnam or Bosnia and they have their own section of housing “near the classroom building” in which they are provided “English classes [and] cultural orientation” (Janzen Fire, Salt and Peace 106). Another example is the house at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue in Atlanta. The Open Door community lives together in the same way that Jesus People, USA do but on a smaller scale. Around 15 to 30 people live in the house at any given time, but in the same principle of sharing food, living spaces, and chores. Each community is unique in its approach to proximity.

While the communities are located in very different places – some in busy urban areas and others in small rural towns with a community farm (like Koinonia in Americus, GA) they each understand that they have an obligation to all of God’s creation, including the earth. Mark ten is the care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies. ICCs are concerned with being faithful to the kingdom of God in every way possible. Some of the communities, like Koinonia Farms, are located on large plots of land which they can use to farm and appropriately take care of the earth. The other communities have to take different measures, such as using compost heaps, recycling, and watching their energy consumption. Similarly, many of the communities choose to purchase from as many local vendors as possible. Some communities, such as Jesus People, USA have businesses that they run out of their high rise. In this particular community, they have a design company, publish the popular Cornerstone magazine (several annual music festivals are held under the same name), a printing company, a record label and recording studio, a roofing and supply siding company, and a self storage business. JPUSA has found a way to be extremely self-sufficient as well as providing more cost-conscious services for the people of Chicago. They not only support local business, they are the local business!
The next mark is peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18. Matthew 18 begins with Jesus commanding the followers to “become like children” (Matt. 18:3) then advises to prevent stumbling or causing others to stumble (18:6-9) he goes on to tell the parable of the lost sheep (18:10–14) after that he gives instructions on how to deal with other members of the church sinning against you (18:15-20). He also commands Peter to forgive another member of the church “seventy-seven times” (18:21-22) and finally tells the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35). New Monastic mark 11 has to be based on a passage like this because of its requirement of action. It calls the community to look beyond itself and even more, beyond the national group mentality that is so present in the United States. In his book *The Irresistible Revolution* Shane Claiborne tells several stories about the children that live in the same neighborhood as The Simple Way community. In one of those stories he describes how he “can hear the kids outside finishing a mural on the side of the house that will read ‘My people will beat their weapons into plows and study violence no more’ (from the prophets Micah and Isaiah). The kids are breaking down toy weapons to make a mosaic plow for the mural.” (Claiborne *The Irresistible Revolution* 122). The community is helping these children understand the violence in the world in a new light. Similar to the lesson of forgiveness that Jesus teaches Peter, Claiborne tells another story of one of his “teachers” named Steven.

When he [Steven] was eight, he told me he had been trying to figure out who invented the gun. One day he ran up and said “Hey, hey, I figured it out. I know who invented the gun.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Satan… because Satan wants us to destroy each other, and God wants us to love each other.”

So when I asked him two days after September 11th, when he was ten, what we should do, he thought pensively and said, “Well, those people did something very evil.”

I nodded.

He went on, “But I always say (he was ten years old!), ‘Two wrongs don’t make a right.’ It doesn’t make sense for us to hurt them back. Besides we are all one big family.” (Claiborne *The Irresistible Revolution* 200).

This very conversation shows that the presence of community, specifically ICCs, has the ability to create new realities. Just earlier in the story Claiborne describes that Steven “has grown up in the inner city and has seen some hard things and is well acquainted with violence.” (Claiborne *The Irresistible Revolution* 199). The Simple Way has lived and worked in this community building relationships, teaching and learning from the people in the neighborhood. In a larger way, many ICCs have become involved in protesting the war in Iraq. Members of the Open Door community have organized prayer vigils and protests and they have participated in national rallies. Open Door also participates in the protest against the School of the Americas each year in Columbus, GA, regularly argues against the death penalty, and participates in rallies against Guantanamo Bay which is known for its acts of torture. These communities regularly participate in combating violence because they truly believe in peacemaking.
The final mark is commitment to a disciplined contemplative lifestyle. According to Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove “contemplation is the way Christ has opened for us to receive his mind” (Wilson-Hartgrove 167). Through contemplation it becomes easier to hear and understand the voice of God and to follow the will of God. Contemplation is at the heart of all the previous marks. It drives the acts of worship and social justice that are practiced on a daily basis. Many of the communities do not have televisions, many of the members do not have cell phones, and the internet is not used for frivolous browsing. There is less distraction and more acceptance for quiet, focused reflection within communities. Through contemplation community members strengthen the whole of the community. This practice is the center of community life and it is what keeps the group faithful followers of Christ. Contemplation is the most valuable lesson that Intentional Christian Communities have to teach the world.

The communities define specific goals and practices with the twelve marks. Through these marks they hope for genuine growth and change occur. ICCs have the ability to help individuals develop in new ways. The sociological and spiritual advantages that are available through Intentional Christian Communities are vast and unique. Through ICCs individuals, families, neighborhoods and the world are able to learn and become stronger in a number of ways.

**The Benefits of Living in Community**

There are true sociological benefits to living in communities such as these. For instance, by going against the capitalist system for a more communal way of economy it decreases the amount of competition in a community. With less competition there is less need for conflict and therefore a greater possibility for community members to work together to accomplish goals. According to Gilbert Zicklin’s research “It [intentional communities] makes possible the growth of solidarity and erodes societally established boundaries between people.” (Zicklin 159). In other ways, ICCs can increase the physical, emotional and mental health of individuals. From my personal experience at Open Door those who suffer from a variety of problems such as addiction have a support system in which they can overcome those issues. Many communities, such as Open Door, require that all members who suffer from substance abuse must attend Alcoholic or Narcotics Anonymous meetings on a regular basis. At Jesus People, USA all house members are required to have a partner when leaving the abandoned high rise building where the community resides (Jones 22). This is partially because the neighborhood in which they live is filled with gang violence and gunfire and partly because the area is a place that begs addicts to revisit their vices. By leaving the house in pairs, community members are guaranteed accountability partners before encountering package stores, drug dealers and prostitutes which could lead them spiraling back into addiction. But ICCs long to destroy the holds that traditional society puts on its members – specifically addiction to materialism, selfishness, and substances.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *In the Name of Jesus*, writes about his journey from teaching at Harvard, to becoming a member of a L’Arch community. L’Arch is a group of communities formed by Jean Vanier in order to create community between able bodied, and mentally and physically disable individuals. These individuals live in a house together, work together, help and learn from one another. Nouwen confirms that

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7 See index for further information.
by living in an Intentional Christian Community, his views on life and his need to compete and compare himself to others changed drastically. Nouwen says:

These broken people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. (Nouwen 28).

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arch communities, describes the spiritual value in another way, saying “Community is a wonderful place, it is life-giving; but it is also a place of pain because it is a place of truth and of growth – the revelation of our pride, our fear, and our brokenness.” (Vanier 11). Community reminds people of their need for others. Christopher Leech describes that ICCs provide the immediacy, spontaneity and participation that most encourages the development of confidence and interdependency that characterizes community at its best…. Attitudes to work, marriage, mortgage, child-rearing, transport and all the other multiplicity of daily life manifest themselves in the actions of everyday community life and must be dealt with by the participants. These issues are too immediate, too pressing, to be ignored. The participants are too interdependent, their lives too intertwined to escape from some form of decision making… (Leech 35).

Community also reminds people of their responsibility to others, and requires a lack of selfishness for the members of the community. Community is a difficult place to hide even the smallest of struggles, and therefore community members must face their own shortcomings, as well as those of others on a daily basis and they are not afforded the ignorance that people living outside of ICCs can claim. ICCs are places in which individuals are free to be exactly who they are, to be loved for their uniqueness, and at the same time experience the opportunity to grow and mature.

Wesley, the United Methodist Church, and Intentional Community

These commitments are not only societal, but also spiritual, especially from a United Methodist perspective. The 12 marks are not simply good ideas, but calls from God found in Scripture, tradition, reason and the experiences of the members of Intentional Christian Communities. The involvement in community is spiritually beneficial because it allows brothers and sisters to rely upon each other in a way that is typically not possible outside of community life. Life together requires respect, trust, and dependence. Leech quotes Jurgen Moltmann saying “Hope is lived and it comes alive when we go outside of ourselves an, in joy and pain, take part in the lives of others, it becomes concrete in open community with others.” (Leech 36). The openness and honesty that must be present in community life is God’s intention for the Christian family. Community life allows its members to become the new family that was created in Christ.

Community is an important part of Wesleyan theology. John Wesley was a part of a religious society known as “The Holy Club” (Heitzenrater 41) which “meet regularly to encourage each other in ‘practical holiness’” (Heitzenrater 30). The Holy Club met for faith and academic discussions, they went together to practice the sacraments, and they soon began to practice acts of charity including setting up a weekly schedule to visit the local prison (Heitzenrater 29-30). Later on, Wesley began to organize local societies in
the places he went to preach “in order that they might ‘reprove, instruct, and exhort one another’.” (Heitzenrater 63). Within these societies were smaller groups, called bands, which “were small groups of five to ten persons who voluntarily banded together for intense spiritual nurture and support. Their primary activities were confession and prayer; their goal was spiritual growth.” (Heitzenrater 104). These groups began so that the followers of Christ could gain community that was not currently present in the local Anglican churches of the time. Wesley understood that openness and honesty were vital to spiritual growth and he felt that these societies and bands were the best way to achieve such growth. By meeting together possibly several times a week for prayer and study, these groups built camaraderie and trust which is always vital to community.

At the same time, Wesley’s theology was grounded in seeking “Christian perfection … [which] would not only become the distinctive hallmark of Methodist theology in the eighteenth century, but also act as a compass for his own lifelong spiritual pilgrimage.” (Heitzenrater 48). Christian perfection involved personal and social holiness. ICCs are also focused on Christian perfection. They seek to improve the personal faith life of each member of the community. At the same time, each group has some form of social holiness that they focus on. For instance, Open Door Community works closely with the homeless community in Atlanta as well as fights the death penalty and the war in Iraq. L’Arch community strives to provide safe, adequate, community based housing for mentally handicapped individuals. The Simple Way focuses on a number of social justice forums including economic justice for the poor throughout the world. Social holiness is vital to ICCs because they not only view their living spaces as their community, but ultimately the whole world is the community that they are concerned with. So these groups fight injustice daily, because they know that is the work of Christ that they are called to follow.

While Wesleyan theology is certainly focused on community, the United Methodist Church tends to lack in the type of community development that Intentional Christian Communities offer. The United Methodist Church has a motto of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors”, but it seems that ICCs act out that motto much better than United Methodists do. Granted, the United Methodist Church, specifically certain Annual Conferences, General Boards and Agencies, and institutions make great strides toward enacting Wesley’s theology of community, but the UMC still seems to fall short in many ways. United Methodism offers no long term intentional community for individuals to be part of. By that I mean, UMC’s offer many brief, temporary communities such as small groups for church members to be a part of, but no long term group which they are committed to in the way that Wesley envisioned, and the way that ICCs are set up to operate. It is true that in Wesley’s societies and bands people did not always commit for a lifetime to that specific group, and the same is true for ICCs today. However, each of these types of community was intended for people who can make a lifetime commitment. The United Methodist Church has many short term programs, such as children’s programs, youth groups, college and young adult groups, and later Sunday School classes for various age groups or people of certain interests (which are always subject to change). Intentional Christian Communities grow and change with the members of the community. However, it seems that the United Methodist Church expects its member to grow and change according to the church’s preset programs.
With approximately 8 million members and 40,000 congregations in the United States the United Methodist churches are prevalent. Some UMC’s are in the center of large cities, while others are on practically abandoned roads in very rural areas. And the UMC is actively trying to become more diverse each year. The North Georgia Annual Conference, which is the largest annual conference according to membership, has one of the higher ethnic diversity rates with 11.1 percent of its clergy and 47,113 of its 333,658 laity being African-American (General Council on Finance and Administration “Racial/Ethnic”). However, despite the desire and willingness of the UMC to diversify, they are not willing to take the steps to ensure that diversity in the same way ICCs do.

Though marks 1 and 4 of the 12 Marks of a New Monasticism have already been discussed it is important to remember them when thinking of diversity. The new monastic communities deliberately locate themselves inside areas of abandonment, which traditionally are places filled with poverty and populated by African Americans and other minorities. When ICCs plan on diversifying, they do so with great fervor. Many Intentional Christian Communities consist predominantly of young white people (with a few exceptions such as the Open Door which is evenly varied in age, gender and race). However, because members of ICCs long to be a part of a true reflection of the kingdom of God then they desire diversity and fellowship with all of their siblings in Christ. Therefore, since they seek diversified worship and life, they make it for themselves. It seems that the UMC on the other hand, desires diversity but does not instigate diversity. The United Methodist Church is very skilled at planning programs, but until it actually seek out the diverse areas, the areas populated with African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians it will still lack diversity.

Another chief distinction between Intentional Christian Communities and the United Methodist Church is the participation in social justice activism. ICCs see social justice as central to their participation in the body of Christ and vital to their service to the kingdom of God. Oppositely, the United Methodist Church has a tendency to lack in devotion to social justice. While it is excellent that the UMC and its members give “Over $200 million to disaster relief and $475 million in additional benevolent giving” (General Council on Finance and Administration “This is Our Story”) money and social justice are not equivalent. The small staffs of two United Methodist agencies, the General Board of Church and Society (an official UM agency) and the Methodist Federation for Social Action (an outside organization), advocate readily for the causes of the United Methodist Church, but neither organization is very well known to the members of the UMC. In my own personal experience, I have found that many United Methodists are unaware that the General Board of Church and Society publishes the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church and lobbies for specific legislation in Washington, DC. ICCs, on the other hand, are often known for their social justice work. Case in point, the Open Door Community is a constant presence in advocating for the rights of the poor in Atlanta and the community is easily recognizable as such. The United Methodist Church has a general obligation and devotion to social justice, but it does not reach the members of the churches. Therefore, they fail to truly create change in the world. The UMC could learn from ICCs on what it means to be advocates, and faithful followers of God’s call to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) which is, ironically, the same bold statement that the North Georgia Conference of the UMC has deemed its Annual Conference theme from 2006 to 2008.
The United Methodist Church does have some practices that resemble the faithfulness and service of Intentional Christian Communities. In fact, the UMC actually has a few ICCs within it. For example, the Wesley Foundation (the campus ministry of the UMC) at the University of Virginia has two houses that students can apply to live in and then form a covenant group for the year; they consider themselves to be an ICC (http://www.wesleyuva.org/wfrc/about/). Similarly, the Wesley Foundation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reserves “the second floor at Wesley. It is a covenant community for students who desire to live together in intentional Christian relationship.” (http://www.uncwesley.org/aboutus_house.html). The UMC also has housing and community settings for children and the elderly, but there are few options for true, committed community for young adults, singles, parents, and married couples without children. The UMC seems to be sending an implicit message that adults are not meant to remain in covenant groups. Instead, they should accept their responsibilities and journey through adulthood relatively alone.

The United Methodist Church is a denomination with rich history and theology. As a United Methodist, I fully believe the church has something valuable to say to the world, but I also see that they fail to do so in many ways. The UMC and its members could benefit greatly from the intimacy and support that is found in ICCs. The theology of John Wesley promotes and even commands work with and for the poor, but the UMC fails again to reach their potential. By taking example from ICCs they could truly begin to understand their ability to be a prophetic church that challenges the current government and social systems. The United Methodist Church could benefit from the examples and lessons of Intentional Christian Communities and by combining Wesleyan theology with a church that practices true community as intended by God, they could begin to live as though the “kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2).

Final Reflection on Intentional Christian Community

Intentional Christian Communities offer an alternative to anyone who finds themselves jaded by the traditional American way of life, or the current mainstream American Christian way of life. The individuals who live in ICCs at some point found a disconnect in the scriptural description of faithfulness and the way that many churches teach faithfulness today. Those who seek life in a community have surrendered to the idea that they are unequipped to face life alone and they are in need of others. These communities provide refuge and renewal for those who are tired and wearied by the world around them.

ICCs are built upon worship of God as a powerful, compassionate, merciful, and communal being. The members of ICCs strive to seek God in new and old ways. They long to know all the parts of God and find it impossible in a world of distractions. These community members understand a God who loves the people of the earth and longs to see equality among them all. ICCs manage to bring back to worship something that has been missing for some time now – an understanding of holiness and social justice working hand in hand.

As I went through my week at Open Door I felt awakened. I was surprised by the honesty that was present in all aspects of the community. I learned that in order to live in community, one must be conscious of their strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, one must be prepared to face the things that undoubtedly arise when there is a significant amount of silence. Without the distraction of televisions, cell phones, iPods, and
computers I was faced with the reality of the world and my own spirit. Biblical reflection began to take on a new meaning and conversations began to contain new depth. After only a week I began to feel the transformative power of Intentional Christian Community. Finally I realized what I had been searching for: the reason Intentional Christian Communities are so important is that within the life of “new monasticism” there is grace, wisdom, liberation, truth and immense hope.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Specifics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jubilee Partners</td>
<td>Comer, GA</td>
<td>About 45 members and refugees</td>
<td>A community that deals predominantly with aiding refugees. They not only offer sanctuary for the refugees who visit the community, but also provide them with classes to gain skills in order to be able to secure work and to become more accustomed to life in the United States. The community also works closely with Open Door in prison ministry and fighting the death penalty. They offer their land as a burial site for many of those who are executed at the prison in Jackson, GA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus People, USA</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>500 members</td>
<td>The largest community in the US, JPUSA offers services to the poor in their neighborhoods such as soup kitchens and clothes closets. They also run a number of businesses from their community including t-shirt printing, plumbing, and construction companies. They are the organizers of one of the largest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Members/Residents</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Koinonia Farms</strong></td>
<td>Americus, GA</td>
<td>Very few on site community members.</td>
<td>A well known community started by <em>Cotton Patch Gospels</em> author Clarence Jordan. Koinonia is a farming community that was a strong presence in the civil rights movement. Currently they are still active as a farm and as social justice advocates. Koinonia Farms was also the home of Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat For Humanity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>L’Arch</strong></td>
<td>Worldwide</td>
<td>Over 120 communities worldwide.</td>
<td>A number of communities in which mentally handicapped individuals live in community with able-bodied individuals. The communities provide opportunities for worship, and partnership between community members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open Door Community</strong></td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>20 community members</td>
<td>Open Door actively works to end homelessness and advocate for the rights of homeless people in Atlanta and the US. They offer weekly services to the homeless community of Atlanta. They also regularly participate in action against the death penalty and have a prison ministry in which they befriend prisoners, specifically those on death row. They take monthly trips to Jackson Prison in Milledgeville, GA with the families of those on death row in order to visit the prisoners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Simple Way</strong></td>
<td>Kensington, PA</td>
<td>5 – 10 community members</td>
<td>A small community that focuses on community development and social justice. They work to end economic injustice, violence, homelessness and poverty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


Claiborne, Shane. The Irresistible Revolution: living as an ordinary radical. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006


--- “This is Our Story”. General Council on Finance and Administration. 27 Apr. 2007 <http://gcfa.org/index.html>


