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Abstract

The stated aim of this project was to examine the theoretical grounds and lived practices of the growing number of ecovillages around the world in order to evaluate the ecovillage movement as a prospective model for contemporary ecclesial life-together. The most commonly used definition of an ecovillage is “a human-scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities can be harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development, with multiple centers of initiative, and which can be successfully continued into the indefinite future” (Robert and Diane Gilman).¹ In addition to researching the historical development of the ecovillage movement from the late 1970’s to the present,² identifying key figures³ and pioneer communities,⁴ I spent 20 days at The Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Summertown, TN, where I was enrolled in the ‘Permaculture Fundamentals’ and ‘Ecovillage Design’ courses.⁵

¹ From Diana Leaf Christian’s handout, ‘About Ecovillages’ (Ecovillage Training Center, 7-16-2007).

² In 1979, *Mother Earth News* magazine used the word ‘eco-village’ to describe its ecologically sustainable demonstration site. Also in 1979, in Gorleben, Germany, a community of anti-nuclear activists built a small, sustainable village – what they called an ‘ökodorf’ – adjacent to the nuclear plant they were protesting. In 1990, Hildur and Ross Jackson (Denmark) founded the Gaia Trust, which commissioned Robert and Diane Gilman, publishers of *In Context* magazine (now *Yes* magazine), to prepare a report on the best practices in sustainable communities around the world. That report, *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, was published in 1991. Based on this report, 20 prominent thinkers in the ecological movement met in Denmark in 1991 and determined that examples of ‘sustainable and convivial communities’ were needed to model an alternative global future. In 1994, the Gaia Trust initiated the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) and funded the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee. In 1995, the first global Ecovillage conference was held at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, after which the GEN created three international divisions: GEN-Europe (Europe and Africa, Declan Kennedy); GEN-Oceania (Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Max Lindegger); and Ecovillage Network of the Americas (South, Central, and North America, Albert Bates). In 1996, the GEN was officially recognized at the UN HABITAT Conference in Istanbul, and in 1998, ecovillages were listed among the United Nations’ 100 Best Practices. In 2001, the GEN began to consult the UN. In 2005, the second International Ecovillage Conference was held at Findhorn, at which the Gaia Education program was launched, a four-week ecological sustainability certificate program hosted in ecovillages around the world. *Ecovillage Design* (Global Village Institute, 2007).

³ To name just a few: Albert Bates, Hildur and Ross Jackson, Robert and Diane Gilman, Karl-Henrick Robert, Helen Norberg-Hodge, Dr. Ari Ariyaratne Sarvodaya, Rashmi Mayur, David Blume, David Korten, Vandana Shiva, Max Lindegger, Declan Kennedy.

⁴ Findhorn (Scotland), Crystal Waters (Australia), Torii Superiore (Italy), Lebensgarten (Germany), Ecovillage Sieben Linden (Germany), Huehyuecoyotl (Mexico), OUR Ecovillage (Canada), EcoVillage at Ithaca (New York), Los Angeles Eco-Village (California), Earthaven (North Carolina), Dancing Rabbit (Missouri), Mbaume and Fauome (Senegal), Ecovila (Brazil), Damanhur (Italy).

⁵ An average day consisted of a combination of traditional classroom and hands-on learning from 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. At the end of the course, the participants were required to design an urban ecovillage on 2.5 acres in the Wedgewood-Houston neighborhood in Nashville, TN.

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Although there is no ‘canon’ of officially recognized ecovillage texts and figures, one can point to a number of identifiable influences. These include: *anarchist communism* (i.e. Robert Owen, Peter Kropotkin, Martin Buber), *pacifism* (i.e. Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.), *deep ecology* (i.e. Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, John Seed, Gary Snyder), *organic/ biodynamic agriculture* (i.e. Rudolf Steiner, Sir Albert Howard, J.R. Rodale, John Jeavons, Masanobu Fukuoka), *homesteading/ back-to-the-land movements* (i.e. Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Borsodi, Helen and Scott Nearing), *permaculture* (i.e. Bill Mollison, David Holmgren), *agrarianism* (i.e. Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson), *ecological economics* (i.e. E.F. Schumacher, Herman Daly, Paul Hawken, Bill McKibben), *holistic spiritualities* (i.e. Eastern and Native religions, Eco-Theologies), *climate-change/ peak-oil predictions* (i.e. M.K. Hubbard, Richard Heinberg, Colin Campbell, Al Gore), *new urbanism* (i.e. Christopher Alexander, Jane Jacobs, James Howard Kunstler) and *anti-neoliberalism/ globalization movements* (i.e. Vandana Shiva, Wangari Maathai, Subcomandante Marcos). The resultant vision is marked, on the one hand, by a kind of apocalyptic repudiation of the atomization, aesthetic ugliness, bureaucratic centralization, human and ecological exploitation, and spiritual vacuity characteristic of modern, industrial, free-market societies and, on the other, by a resilient confidence in the possibility of global transformation through a decentralized global network of ecologically-sustainable, village-sized communities guided by the principles of earth care, diversity and interdependence, holism, conservation, non-violence, bioregionalism, beauty, mutuality and cooperation.

The concrete practices which constitute communal life in an ecovillage include *integrated site design planning* (i.e. permaculture, conservation community, new pedestrianism), *natural building techniques* (i.e. strawbale, cobb, adobe, living roofs, wattle and daub, cordwood), *local, organic food production* (i.e. raised beds, polyculture, community gardens, herb and medicinal gardens, forest gardening, seed saving and sharing), *earth restoration* (i.e. reforestation, soil building), *responsible water use* (roof water catchment, groundwater protection, greywater reuse, constructed wetlands), *waste minimization* (i.e. composting, recycling and reuse, voluntary simplicity, shared resources), *motor-vehicle use reduction* (i.e. walking, bicycling, carpooling, public transportation), *renewable energy use* (i.e. solar, wind, hydro, biomass, geothermal), *socially oriented economic interactions* (i.e. local production-consumption, cottage industries, green businesses, CSA’s, income circulation, time shares, bartering, surplus sharing), *non-hierarchical, community-scale governance* (i.e. consensus decision making, transparency, shared leadership, conflict and difference management processes, membership expectations), *whole-person education* (i.e.

non-dualistic, praxis-oriented, system approach, vocationally-grounded), *holistic healing* (i.e. preventative care, natural remedies, yoga and meditation, diet, play and laughter, healing environments), and *cultural celebration* (i.e. creativity and the arts, communal rituals).

Although I began this research project asking how the ecovillage movement might contribute to new understandings and models of ecclesial life-together in our time, I quickly discovered the influence that certain historic Christian communities have had on the developing vision and praxis of ecovillage life-together. In particular, many ecovillage founders draw specific inspiration from certain aspects of such communally oriented ecclesial movements as the monastic communities, Cathars, Diggers, Mennonites, Tolstoy's agrarian communalism, the Amish, and the Bruderhof. Moreover, the consensus decision-making model that most ecovillages utilize is directly derived from the Quakers. That being said, I am confident the ecovillage movement can be a tremendous resource – through a kind of cross-fertilization – to communally and ecologically-minded Christians in the areas of natural building and village design systems, ecological and holistic practices, individual creativity and communal aesthetics, and embrace of the inherent goodness and wisdom of the creation. Especially in light of such contemporary theological turns to embodiment, community, ecology, praxis, and critique of empire, ecovillages provide a tangible reminder to the contemporary church of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's vision of a visible church situated, not on the boundaries of existence, but 'in the center of the village.' My personal hope is for the formation of something like an interconnected network of ecclesial eco-villages, formed in areas of ecological devastation and/or urban impoverishment as spaces of re-generation, holy-holistic-healthy-hallowed living, and practical education in 'the ways that lead to life.' Such "efforts of the spirit, condemned as inopportune and derided as 'utopian,' may well clear the way for the structure of society-to-be" (Buber).⁶

⁶ Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pg. 14.