

Preamble.

no - Pancom - people.  
Q of MO people.  
media article & interviews.

This Document (Pancom 238) assembled by Peter Hamilton for Pan Community Council, contains the following two Documents:-

Pancom Document 237.

- "Definitions of Terms" and "Common Misconceptions about Intentional Communities" being extracts from "Shared Visions, Shared Lives: Communal Living around the Globe" by Bill Metcalf, Findhorn Press, 1966

Pancom Document 236.

- "What's True About Intentional Communities: Dispelling the Myths" compiled by the Fellowship for Intentional Communities, 1996. (web site.)

+ Pilot check list prepared by Pancom participants of above of the relevant

Pancom 180 (2pp) 1996  
" 188 (3pp) 2001  
" 214 (1pp) (2001)

Sadts

- Graham/Pancom/Fiona etc
- Senior/Di Pancom
- Lisa - Key MO folk
- ANICA
- Bill Metcalf Robina (see Creative Commons)
- P. Lock

art of above

email copy available in request to peter@ncc.com.au.

Consider draft topics areas of questions for individual members of a MO.

*[Signature]*

# **“Definition of Terms” and “Common Misconceptions about Intentional Communities”**

Extracts from  
**“Shared Visions, Shared Lives: Communal Living around the Globe”**

by Dr. Bill Metcalf, Findhorn Press, 1996

Edited by Peter Hamilton

## **Clarification of Several Key Terms<sup>(1)</sup>**

**Utopian** refers to the intention to achieve an ideal society, not the outcome. While utopian is a perfectly legitimate analytical term, it is often misunderstood as 'naively idealistic'.

**Communal living** refers to a way of living everyday life where more rather than: less is shared. What is shared usually includes ownership of resources, eating together, child rearing, social life, living space, ideology and world view, as well as interactions with the social and biophysical environment. In most cases, this sharing is freely chosen and seen by the participants to have some worthwhile purpose beyond mere practicalities and convenience. Social life in hospitals, prisons and military barracks is certainly communal, but as this option is not freely chosen it is of no interest to this book. For similar reasons this book does not address communal living in tribal or kin-based societies, not because these forms are not interesting but because they are beyond the scope of the present work. This book is about communal living which exists as a practical alternative for the reader -- and obviously that followed in tribal and kin-based groups is not generally available.

**Communal living** takes place in either a **commune** or an **intentional community**, the distinction depending on the degree of intimate sharing.

**Commune** members place the group ahead of the nuclear family unit, generally maintain a 'common-purse' and collective household, and make intimate as well as general decisions as a group. By sharing everyday social life and facilities, a commune emulates idealised family life, being another form of 'primary' group. A commune is comprised of individuals whose emotional bonds are to the communal group, rather than to any subset within that group such as a lover or nuclear family unit. Within a commune, the group is experienced with emotions beyond that of a mere social collectivity.

In contrast, members of **intentional communities**, although seeing themselves as an identifiable group, live in individual households, and the decisions that affect household functioning are private. Intentional community is not a form of family but will normally include nuclear and/or communal families. Given their less intimate interactions, intentional communities are 'secondary' rather than 'primary' groups, thus involving less affective commitment and fewer emotional ties. The group nevertheless serves to mediate between the individual and the outside world.

Intentional communities, being secondary groups, can be very large, with hundreds or occasionally thousands of members.<sup>(2)</sup> Communes, being primary groups, are much smaller, with generally less than 20 people. Occasionally, much larger groups are able to operate as communes, but only via

strong charismatic leadership, and a belief system which values group above individual, and actively rewards communality. The logistical complexities of relating intimately with a large number of people preclude large-scale communes, except in unique circumstances.

### **Common Misconceptions about Communal Living**

Communal living is often thought of as a rare form of social life. While accurate data is hard to find, some figures might help. In USA, Oved <sup>(3)</sup> was able to study 277 communes which existed prior to 1930 <sup>(4)</sup>, while the 1995 *Communities Directory* <sup>(5)</sup> lists over 500 American groups, but that is probably only a fraction of those currently in existence <sup>(6)</sup>. *Diggers and Dreamers* <sup>(7)</sup> gives detailed information on 69 U.K. communal groups. One of the editors states <sup>(8)</sup>, "I think that we have most of the greenish groups listed. But there are many more spiritual groups ... If you drew the line at groups with more than ten adults involved in a substantial amount of sharing my guess would be that there are between 150 and 200 in the UK." In Israel, there are 282 communal Kibbutzim, the oldest starting in 1909. About 2.5% of Israelis live communally, by far the largest proportion anywhere. In Holland 8500 communes have been located, meaning that almost 1% of households are communal <sup>(9)</sup>. My own Australian research discovered that 50 communal groups existed between 1853 and 1970, while I estimate that about 150-200 groups currently exist. So while communal living has always been a minority phenomenon, it is not as rare as is often imagined.

People engaged in utopian communal living are frequently presented by the media as being part of some sort of youth movement, pictured as being full of enthusiasm and naive idealism. Considerable research <sup>(10)</sup>, however, indicates that the average age of participants is now in the mid to late 40s, with as many participants over 50 as under 30 years old. Urban communards are, on average, younger than their rural counterparts. The communal movement around the world is very much a movement of and for middle-aged people. Nevertheless, the contemporary movement is frequently dismissed by its critics as a youth movement.

Many scholars and communards are fascinated with utopian history, particularly with the lessons to be gleaned from the dramatic communal experiments of nineteenth century America, Europe and Australia. However, while nineteenth century communes are certainly interesting, they existed in a radically different cultural and political milieu, so comparisons may be difficult, and their historical lessons may not automatically apply today. These misconceptions are particularly dangerous and misleading when addressing thorny issues such as communal longevity.

There are a host of popular misconceptions around patterns of sexual conduct within communal groups. All sorts of orgiastic stereotypes are routinely trotted out by the popular media. In reality, communal groups do indeed demonstrate a wide range of sexual behaviour and familial forms ranging from 'corporate' or group marriage and 'polyfidelity' to complete abstinence and avoidance. Most commonly found in communal groups, however, are heterosexual, monogamous relationships -- no doubt a great disappointment to those readers with voyeuristic intent! We can learn a great deal about differing sexual behaviours, gender roles and diverse family forms through studying communal living, but we must look past naive stereotypes.

Many commentators have argued -- based on an alarming lack of evidence -- that only communal groups with clear religious principles are able to endure. It is further assumed that such groups, particularly when 'blessed' with charismatic leadership, tend to become 'cults'. There is no historical or contemporary evidence to support this doomsday notion. Within this book I present stories from both religious/spiritual and secular communal groups, some with charismatic leaders and others without. Communal living is far too complex to analyse through such naive, stereotypical assumptions.

Another misconception is that communal groups are always short-lived and transitory, with a high turnover of members. American data, being roughly consistent with that from other countries <sup>(11)</sup>, points out that "Commune membership turnover is high but not extraordinarily high compared with that of other organizations... Hospital nurses and factory workers both turnover a bit faster than commune members. University professors, civil servants, and prison wardens... a bit more slowly." While it is true that about half of all communal groups collapse within the first two years, and that about half the remainder follow within the next two years -- the same applies to small businesses! So while one must acknowledge that communal ventures are often unstable and short-lived, they are no more so than are most other, comparable social forms. The Hutterites have been living communally for four centuries, and the Israeli kibbutzim go back almost a century. The oldest communal group still in existence is Bon Homme, a Hutterite commune founded in USA in 1874-5, but as it was almost abandoned for several years at the end of the First World War, perhaps the mantle for oldest commune should go to Degania, a kibbutz founded in 1909 in what is now Israel. The communal groups in this book average well over 30 years longevity, with the oldest starting in 1934. Communal groups can and do endure.

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Communal living is often thought of as a rare form of social life. While accurate data is hard to find, some figures might help. In USA, Oved <sup>(3)</sup> was able to study 277 communes which existed prior to 1930 <sup>(4)</sup>, while the 1995 *Communities Directory* <sup>(5)</sup> lists over 500 American groups, but that is probably only a fraction of those currently in existence <sup>(6)</sup>. *Diggers and Dreamers* <sup>(7)</sup> gives detailed information on 69 U.K. communal groups. One of the editors states <sup>(8)</sup>, "I think that we have most of the greenish groups listed. But there are many more spiritual groups ... If you drew the line at groups with more than ten adults involved in a substantial amount of sharing my guess would be that there are between 150 and 200 in the UK." In Israel, there are 282 communal Kibbutzim, the oldest starting in 1909. About 2.5% of Israelis live communally, by far the largest proportion anywhere. In Holland 8500 communes have been located, meaning that almost 1% of households are communal <sup>(9)</sup>. My own Australian research discovered that 50 communal groups existed between 1853 and 1970, while I estimate that about 150-200 groups currently exist. So while communal living has always been a minority phenomenon, it is not as rare as is often imagined.

People engaged in utopian communal living are frequently presented by the media as being part of some sort of youth movement, pictured as being full of enthusiasm and naive idealism. Considerable research <sup>(10)</sup>, however, indicates that the average age of participants is now in the mid to late 40s, with as many participants over 50 as under 30 years old. Urban communards are, on average, younger than their rural counterparts. The communal movement around the world is very much a movement of and for middle-aged people. Nevertheless, the contemporary movement is frequently dismissed by its critics as a youth movement.

Many scholars and communards are fascinated with utopian history, particularly with the lessons to be gleaned from the dramatic communal experiments of nineteenth century America, Europe and Australia. However, while nineteenth century communes are certainly interesting, they existed in a radically different cultural and political milieu, so comparisons may be difficult, and their historical lessons may not automatically apply today. These misconceptions are particularly dangerous and misleading when addressing thorny issues such as communal longevity.

There are a host of popular misconceptions around patterns of sexual conduct within communal groups. All sorts of orgiastic stereotypes are routinely trotted out by the popular media. In reality, communal groups do indeed demonstrate a wide range of sexual behaviour and familial forms ranging from 'corporate' or group marriage and 'polyfidelity' to complete abstinence and avoidance. Most commonly found in communal groups, however, are heterosexual, monogamous relationships -- no doubt a great disappointment to those readers with voyeuristic intent! We can learn a great deal about differing sexual behaviours, gender roles and diverse family forms through studying communal living, but we must look past naive stereotypes.

Many commentators have argued -- based on an alarming lack of evidence -- that only communal groups with clear religious principles are able to endure. It is further assumed that such groups, particularly when 'blessed' with charismatic leadership, tend to become 'cults'. There is no historical or contemporary evidence to support this doomsday notion. Within this book I present stories from both religious/spiritual and secular communal groups, some with charismatic leaders and others without. Communal living is far too complex to analyse through such naive, stereotypical assumptions.

Another misconception is that communal groups are always short-lived and transitory, with a high turnover of members. American data, being roughly consistent with that from other countries <sup>(11)</sup>, points out that "Commune membership turnover is high but not extraordinarily high compared with that of other organizations... Hospital nurses and factory workers both turnover a bit faster than commune members. University professors, civil servants, and prison wardens... a bit more slowly." While it is true that about half of all communal groups collapse within the first two years, and that about half the remainder follow within the next two years -- the same applies to small businesses! So while one must acknowledge that communal ventures are often unstable and short-lived, they are no more so than are most other, comparable social forms. The Hutterites have been living communally for four centuries, and the Israeli kibbutzim go back almost a century. The oldest communal group still in existence is Bon Homme, a Hutterite commune founded in USA in 1874-5, but as it was almost abandoned for several years at the end of the First World War, perhaps the mantle for oldest commune should go to Degania, a kibbutz founded in 1909 in what is now Israel. The communal groups in this book average well over 30 years longevity, with the oldest starting in 1934. Communal groups can and do endure.

Groff Kozeny, a well known American communitarian and communal scholar captured the utopian intent of contemporary communal groups by observing <sup>(11)</sup> that "in visiting hundreds of intentional communities, I've discovered that they all share one thing in common: each is based on a vision of living a better life ... Each group defines for itself just what that means, and no two visions are identical."

## **References**

- (1) See A. Butcher, *Classifications of Communalism*, self-published, 1991. See also "The Bulletin of the International Communal Studies Association, No.14, 1993, pp.2-5; and No.15, 1994, pp. 6-10.
- (2) The largest such group known to Metcalf is Kibbutz Givat Brenner in Israel, with about 2000 residents.
- (3) Y. Oved, *Two Hundred Years of American Communes*, New Brunswick; Transactions, 1988, p.viii.
- (4) The first American commune was established in 1663 by Dutch Mennonites.
- (5) Anon. *Communities Directory: A Guide to Cooperative Living*; Fellowship for International Communities, 1995.
- (6) This number only includes the minority of communal groups which are willing to be published.
- (7) C. Coates et.al. *Diggers and Dreamers 96/97*, Winslow: D&D Publishers, 1995.
- (8) J. How, Personal Communication with Metcalf, 30 Jan. 1996.
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- (10) For example, T. Weggemans, op cit.; W. Metcalf & F. Vanclay, 1987, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, Brisbane; IAER, Griffith University; D. Questenberry & M. Morgan, 1991, *A Demographic Analysis of 186 North American Intentional Communities*, presented at the International Communal Studies Association Conference, Elizabethtown, U.S.A.; and M.Cummings & H. Bishop, 1994, "Stereotypes Challenged", in *Communities: Journal of Cooperative Living*, No. 84, pp.10-2.
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Fellowship for Intentional Communities

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However, their purposes vary widely. For example, communities have been formed to share resources, to create great family neighborhoods, to live ecologically sustainable lifestyles, or to live with others who hold similar values. Some communities are wholly secular; others are committed to a common spiritual practice; many are spiritually eclectic. Some are focused on egalitarian values and voluntary simplicity, or mutual interpersonal growth work, or rural homesteading and self-reliance. Some communities provide services, for example helping war refugees, the urban homeless, or developmentally disabled children or adults. Some communities operate rural conference and retreat centers, health and healing centers, or sustainable-living education centers.

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Fact: Many people use these terms interchangeably, however, it is probably more useful to use the term "commune" to describe a particular kind of intentional community whose members live "communally" in an economic sense--operating with a common treasury and sharing ownership of their property. Most intentional communities are not communes, though some of the communities most active in the communities movement are.

### **4. Myth: Most community members are young--in their twenties.**

Fact: Most communities are multi-generational. In the hundreds of North American communities we know about, most members range in age from 30 to 60, with some in their 20s, some 60 and older, and many children.

### **5. Myth: Most communarians are hippies.**

Fact: While some of today's communities can trace their roots back to the counterculture of the '60s and '70s, few today identify with the hippie stereotype. (Moreover, many of the characteristics that identified "hippies" 25 years ago--long hair, bright clothes, ecological awareness--have become integrated into mainstream lifestyles.)

On the political spectrum, communitarians tend to be left of center. In terms of lifestyle choices, they tend to be hard working, peace loving, health conscious, environmentally concerned, and family oriented. Philosophically they tend toward a way of life which increases the options for their own members without limiting the choices of others.

**6. *Myth: All intentional communities are out in the boondocks.***

Fact: While 54% of the communities listed in the 1995 Communities Directory are rural, 28% are urban, 10% have both rural and urban sites, and 8% don't specify.

**7. *Myth: Most intentional communities are organized around a particular religion or common spiritual practice.***

Fact: While it's true that many groups have a spiritual focus--and most of the better-known historical communities did, such as Amana and Oneida--of the 540 North American communities listed in the Communities Directory, 65% are secular or don't specify, while only 35% are explicitly spiritual or religious.

**8. *Myth: Most intentional communities have an authoritarian form of governance; they follow a charismatic leader.***

Fact: The reverse is true; the most common form of governance is democratic, with decisions made by some form of consensus or voting. Of the hundreds of communities we have information about, 64% are democratic, 9% have a hierarchical or authoritarian structure, 11% are a combination of democratic and hierarchical, and 16% don't specify. Many communities which formerly followed one leader or a small group of leaders have changed in recent years to a more democratic form of governance.

**9. *Myth: Community members all think alike.***

Fact: Because communities are by definition organized around a common vision or purpose, their members tend to hold a lot of values and beliefs in common--many more than shared among a typical group of neighbors. Still, disagreements are a common occurrence in most communities, just as in the wider society. The object of community is not so much to eliminate conflict as to learn to work with it constructively.

**10. *Myth: Most communities are "cults."***

Fact: Many sociologists and psychologists know that the popular image of "cults" and "mind control" is distorted. Both the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion have done research that refutes the idea that religious or other groups are systematically brainwashing their members or interfering with their ability to think critically.

Although the term "cult" is usually intended to identify a group in which abuse occurs, its use frequently says more about the observer than the observed. It would generally be more accurate if the observer said "a group with values and customs different from mine; a group that makes me feel uncomfortable or afraid."

Most communities are not abusive toward members. The ones which are, especially those prone to violence, can attract media attention which falsely implies that intentional communities are abusive in general. It's our experience that the overwhelming majority of communities go quietly about their business, and are considered good places to live by their members--and good neighbors by people who live around them.



**11. *Myth: Community members have little privacy or autonomy.***

Fact: The degree of privacy and autonomy in communities varies as widely as the kinds of communities themselves. In some communities individual households own their own land and house, and have their own independent economy (perhaps with shared facilities, as in many land co-ops); their degree of privacy and autonomy is nearly identical to that of mainstream society. However, in communities with specific religious or spiritual lifestyles (such as monasteries or some meditation retreats), privacy and autonomy are typically more limited, as part of the purpose for which the community was organized. Most communities fall between these two points on the privacy/held-in-common spectrum.

The trend among intentional communities forming now is toward more individual control than was common among those which formed in the '60s and '70s. For example, one of the fastest growing segments of the communities movement today is cohousing, where residents enjoy autonomy similar to that of any planned housing development. Finding a healthy balance between individual needs and those of the community is a key issue for the '90s--in both intentional communities and the larger society in general.

**12. *Myth: Most members of intentional communities live impoverished lifestyles with limited resources.***

Fact: Communities make a wide variety of choices regarding standard of living--some embrace voluntary simplicity, while others emphasize full access to the products and services of today's society. Communities tend to make careful choices about the accumulation and use of resources, deciding what best fits with their core values. Regardless of the choices made, nearly all communities take advantage of sharing and the opportunities of common ownership to allow individuals access to facilities and equipment they don't need to own privately (for example power tools, washing machines, pickup trucks, and in some cases, even swimming pools).

In terms of material wealth, communities evolve like families: starting off with limited resources, new communities tend to live simply. As they mature, they tend to create a stable economic base and enjoy a more comfortable life--according to their own standards. Many established communities (20 years and older) have built impressive facilities, some of which are quite innovative in design and materials. The dollars to finance these improvements have come from successful community businesses, ranging from light manufacturing to food products, from computer services to conference centers.

**13. *Myth: Most people who live in communities are running away from responsibilities.***

Fact: Many people choose to live in community because it offers a way of life which is different, in various ways, from that of the wider society. Since living in community does not eliminate everyday responsibilities, most community members raise families, maintain and repair their land and buildings, work for a living, pay taxes, etc.

At the same time, communitarians usually perceive their lifestyle as more caring and satisfying than that of mainstream culture, and because of this--and the increased free time which results from pooling resources and specialized skills--many community members feel they can engage more effectively with the wider society. In fact, many communitarians are deeply involved in their wider community of neighbors, and often provide staffing or even leadership for various local civic and social change organizations.

For more information, please contact the *Fellowship for Intentional Community*: 660-883-5545, RR 1, Box 156, Rutledge, MO 63563, Email: [fic@ic.org](mailto:fic@ic.org) <http://www.ic.org/pnp/myths.html>

## **What's True About Intentional Communities: Dispelling the Myths**

Compiled by the Fellowship for Intentional Communities, October 1996

### **1. Myth: *There are no intentional communities anymore; they died out in the '60s & '70s.***

Fact: Not so. Many of those communities survived and thrived, and many new ones have formed since then. A significant new wave of interest in intentional communities has grown over the last several years.

We listed 540 intentional communities in North America in the 1995 edition of our Communities Directory--up from 300 in our 1990/91 edition. Several hundred more communities (who declined to be listed) are in our database. We estimate there are several thousand altogether.

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However, their purposes vary widely. For example, communities have been formed to share resources, to create great family neighborhoods, to live ecologically sustainable lifestyles, or to live with others who hold similar values. Some communities are wholly secular; others are committed to a common spiritual practice; many are spiritually eclectic. Some are focused on egalitarian values and voluntary simplicity, or mutual interpersonal growth work, or rural homesteading and self-reliance. Some communities provide services, for example helping war refugees, the urban homeless, or developmentally disabled children or adults. Some communities operate rural conference and retreat centers, health and healing centers, or sustainable-living education centers.

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