

New Koinonia

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Background

New Koinonia is a new concept for Intentional Communities. It incorporates many of the traditional qualities and characteristics, but also adds some features that may not be found in most. The inspiration for this project, and its name, derives from the Koinonia Foundation in Stevenson, MD, which was founded in the 1950s as a training environment for missionaries and volunteers who were involved with Frank Laubach's Literacy Project in disadvantaged and war-torn third world nations. It was organized as an Intentional Community where people shared responsibilities and lived in a simple cooperative manner. Eventually this work was taken over by the Peace Corps, and the mission changed to address the problem of disillusionment of students in college during the tumultuous times of the late 60s and early 70s. Thus a concept known as the "Alternative Semester" was instituted, offering an opportunity to investigate other fields of study as well as learning techniques such as meditation and yoga and spiritual growth. It was during this time, in the early 70s, that I joined the community both as a student and staff member.

More details of my two-year residency and continued involvement with Koinonia are provided elsewhere, but it was an incredibly exciting and life-changing experience for me. I enjoyed working in the organic gardens, helping with maintenance projects, and learning guitar, pottery, silkscreening, photography, meditation, modern dance, philosophy, and other pursuits of knowledge and skills. It was also an excellent opportunity for social interaction among people of all ages and professional status. Unfortunately there were unresolvable conflicts among members of the community and the director in charge, and the focus shifted toward the "new age" concepts that were in vogue in the late 70s. Eventually lack of money and proper building maintenance and other problems combined in 1985 to force the Koinonia Foundation into bankruptcy and sale of the 55 acre prime property and buildings at auction, and it was turned into the present-day "Gramercy Mansion" Bed and Breakfast, while the Foundation continued for a while as a philanthropic entity awarding modest grants for worthwhile projects.

Meanwhile, I pursued my own career in Electronics Engineering, but I also held a strong commitment to environmental responsibility, recycling, energy efficiency, appreciation for nature, and healthy social interaction. I became an active member of the Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy, and Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, and I enjoyed playing volleyball, hiking, tennis, and other healthy activities. I satisfied my need for social interaction by becoming involved with several singles clubs starting around 1981, and in 1991 I took over a local club which became the Baltimore Singles Network, and it flourished for more than 10 years but eventually dissolved due to waning interest and the effects of the internet and on-line dating and social media.

Around 2004 I rekindled my involvement with the Sierra Club and I proposed a concept called "Cooperative Conservation" which was published as an article in the local Sierra Club Newsletter. This identified some of the problems affecting people, the economy, and the environment, and offered suggestions for improving peoples' lives while at the same time adhering to sound ecological principles and responsible use of dwindling resources.

Also around this time I explored the engineering details for electric and hybrid vehicles and transportation systems, as well as efficient LED lighting and various renewable or alternate energy sources. I also became involved in cohousing at Liberty Village, which is an

intentional community in Frederick County, but their vision differed substantially from mine as it involved relatively large suburban houses and minimal sharing of resources, or efforts to promote outside community involvement and internal educational opportunities. Also, I visited the intentional community about 30 miles north of Baltimore, called "Heathcote", and it more closely matched my vision of a rural environment with modest individual homes and emphasis on sustainability through shared resources and permaculture, but I did not feel the right "vibe", so I did not pursue that option.

The New Koinonia Concept

The concept I propose is modeled somewhat on a campground, and in fact, part of the community's business could be a public campground. The idea is to obtain a parcel of land, which may already have some improvements on it that would facilitate such an operation. Zoning for a community with a large number of homes in a relatively small area can be tricky, but a campground does not have such restrictions. Campgrounds such as the KOA have sites for travel trailers and RVs, as well as small simple cabins and larger housekeeping units with kitchen and bath facilities. There are also centrally located buildings for a commercial kitchen, office, store, and recreational use, and also one or more homes for the owners and their families. The following are various facets of what I consider necessary or beneficial for an intentional community based on sustainability and sound environmental practices:

Water

The most critical need for human beings and other animals is water. We usually take it for granted that we can turn on the tap and have a nearly unlimited supply of clean, safe, potable water for drinking, cooking, washing, irrigation, and other purposes. In a city or most suburban environments, water is provided by municipal utilities, and is processed by filtering and made safe by the addition of Chlorine and other chemicals. But in rural areas suitable for a campground, water must be obtained from private systems, usually wells, but sometimes springs, or taken from streams or lakes. These require testing, processing, storage, and maintenance.

Water for irrigation and similar purposes can be obtained from graywater, rainwater, or direct from lakes and streams. Water for drinking and cooking needs to be tested for purity and safety, and often must be processed by softeners and filters. The choice of a site for a community will require the assurance of a reliable supply of water and the means for making sure it is safe for all intended purposes

Sanitation

As an adjunct to water supply, waste disposal is also critical. In urban and most suburban settings, public sewage is available, and you don't have to think much about flushing the toilet or using a garbage disposal in the sink. But a rural community needs a private system to deal with safe and convenient disposal or processing and reuse of waste that is normally just expelled into the sanitary sewer where it eventually goes to a municipal processing plant. The traditional means for this is a septic tank or cesspool, which uses bacteria to break down much of the solid waste, and allows relatively clear water to be dispersed into the ground in a drainfield. But care must be taken to assure sufficient percolation through the soil and natural filtration so that it is safe to be returned into the water table which may be the source of water.

Other means of waste disposal are available, and may be preferable for a sustainable

community. Composting toilets, like the venerable Clevis Multrum, can process human and animal waste along with biodegradable materials using the composting process, and will produce nutrient-rich soil and natural fertilizer. But the process requires considerable work and care so that the composting reaches proper temperatures to kill harmful bacteria and a safe product, especially if used on plants which will be consumed as food, and particularly if they will be eaten raw.

Food

Another necessity of life is food. People can survive for several weeks without food, and such fasting is often beneficial. But generally, we must eat at least once or twice a day, and for energy we need about 1500-2500 calories a day. But we also need minimum quantities of many nutrients, such as protein, vitamins, and minerals, and these need to be reasonably well balanced, of good quality, and in forms that the body can readily digest and utilize.

Some communities intend to be 100% self-sufficient, and propose to grow, process, and store everything they need. This is a noble goal, but it requires an extraordinary amount of work and expertise to assure bountiful crops and then be able to process and store these in sufficient quantity to feed all the people and animals that will be living in the community.

Some people also insist on everything being organically grown, and some want to observe a vegetarian or vegan diet. I realize that it takes an enormous amount of land and crops to raise animals for food, but I don't think the community should restrict the consumption of meat. However, I think we should try to consume mostly vegetables, and eat meat sparingly, perhaps two or three times a week. This should be a personal choice, but everyone should have an appreciation of the downsides of a largely carnivorous diet, and maybe people should live by the motto that if you would not kill it, then don't eat it.

There are great advantages for a community when it comes to food procurement and processing. With enough people, foodstuffs can be purchased in bulk, and everyone can take turns helping with preparation, cooking, and cleanup. And sharing meals as a community is a powerful bonding and socialization experience.

Demographics

My own experience in the community of the original Koinonia was greatly enriched by the diversity of ages of the members and visitors. I think young people and little children benefit from the influence of many different people, and I believe in the concept that "it takes a village". Experienced senior citizens have a lot to offer, and a community is an excellent place for social interaction and learning. Middle aged people with growing families may find a community to help with the exigencies of parenthood, and sharing of both responsibilities and pleasures makes life easier and less stressful.

Students

My concept is to have the community located near enough to colleges and universities so that students can be provided with an inexpensive and safe form of off-campus housing. Ideally they will also be studying, or at least have an interest in, environmental studies, permaculture, alternative or renewable energy, efficiency, reduction of pollution, and sustainability. A community such as I envision would have many opportunities for projects that target these concepts, and there is also the possibility (and hope) that some students

may enjoy living in an intentional community with these values, and would want to stay for a longer period of time, or indefinitely.

Some of the properties I looked at are fairly close to Shepherd University, just across the Potomac River in West Virginia, and they have a good environmental studies department. I have been in contact with some people in their administration, and will be pursuing further discussion and perhaps a mutually beneficial relationship.

Transportation

For quite a long time I have been interested in efficient means of transportation, from bicycles to electric or hybrid cars, trains, trucks, tractors, and other vehicles. It should be a high priority project for the community to acquire or build an electric or other efficient vehicle to be used for commuting to and from school, jobs, and nearby sources of supply or entertainment. Such vehicles could be shared by the community, or built by individuals for their own present and future use outside the community.

Within the community I would like to explore the possibility of a small-scale railway large enough to carry people, materials, and crops. Not only would this be very efficient, but it would be an attraction for people outside the community who may use it for entertainment as well as a way to operate engines and rail cars of their own design.

Energy

Everything requires energy to move and do work. We have crested the "peak oil" point and we need to look toward other sources of energy than fossil fuels, due to their carbon footprint, pollution, and environmental damage, as well the need to use these resources (particularly oil) for the manufacture of plastics, pharmaceuticals, and other things that are needed for our present technology. We should not just burn this valuable resource to support unnecessary transportation in hugely inefficient heat engines in vehicles.

New Koinonia would place a high priority on the installation of solar, wind, and geothermal energy extraction devices, and their design, construction, and maintenance would be excellent projects for students and members of the community. There should be regular evaluations of present and developing technology to determine the best course of action to reduce dependence on the grid and purchased fuels.

For heating, a rural community may be able to utilize wood harvested from its own land, or from nearby properties where dead or fallen trees are not wanted. There are some pollution concerns with the burning of wood, and these should be investigated and mitigated.

Wood can also be used to produce wood gas, which is a process that is about 80-90% efficient, and can be used in simply modified internal combustion engines, with less harmful emissions than gasoline. This is another project that could be attempted, and there are many successful examples of this available.

Biofuels are often considered ineffective and wasteful, but there are ways to use some plants, such as sunflowers, where the seeds can be compressed to make vegetable oil, which can power diesel engines. This seems to have more promise than the usual Ethanol distilled from plants with high sugar content.

Woodworking

One of the goals of a sustainable community is to have the capability to make things like furniture, and erect homes and other buildings, using as much as possible the resources on the property. Thus, a sawmill may be built to convert logs into lumber, and that may be used for building or for smaller woodworking projects. A fully equipped woodworking shop would be a high priority as a means of creating items that are needed, or for crafts that could be sold, and to provide an opportunity for skill building and experience that could be valuable for those who want to find employment outside the community.

Metalworking

With a good range of tools and machines, almost any common item can be built or repaired. Basic items would be milling machines, lathes, grinders, shapers, presses, saws, and welders. CNC machines could also be acquired for repetitive jobs. The ability to operate such machines is valuable to the community, and also provides training for jobs on the outside. Such equipment can also be used for hobbies, and for pieces needed for renewable energy and efficient vehicle projects.

Electronics

New Koinonia does not intend to be a "back-to-the-land" experiment or a group of Luddites that shun modern technology. There are many valuable uses for electronic devices such as vehicle controllers and battery chargers and solar/wind projects. It is also a valuable skill for those seeking outside jobs.

Arts and Music

Creative expression and development of talents and interest in the fine arts is an important part of the human experience. Creating works of art and playing musical instruments, or just enjoying them by listening and singing, is very satisfying, relaxing, and inspirational. Participation in such activities is greatly encouraged, and can be a means toward healthy socialization and enjoyment of life. I would expect to have many campfire sing-alongs and open mike musical presentations, and group viewing of movies and other entertainment. This is supposed to be *fun!*

Animals

I believe that animals can and should play a large part in everyone's life. We can learn from their closeness to nature and simple needs and unconditional love. There are many animals who are suffering from abuse and neglect, and they need to be rescued, rehabilitated, and offered a comfortable life in a loving environment. I would like to operate an animal rescue and sanctuary, where dogs and cats and other pets may be able to have more freedom and a healthier place to live than the cages of the Animal Control facility.

A major factor in the care of animals is training, and one of the outreach programs I would like to see at New Koinonia is the opportunity to learn how animals think and what influences their behavior, and how we can learn to read their intentions and feelings by listening to and seeing their often subtle means of communication. There are many methods employed for training, and I think we should look at all of them and choose what works best for individual animals in particular situations. It is also important for people,

especially children, to know how to approach and interact with an animal safely and respectfully. It may be a valuable opportunity to provide hands-on training for people on how to work with animals.

We usually think of working and playing with the usual pets, such as dogs, cats, and birds. But we will be enriched by also experiencing other common domestic animals often found on farms, such as chickens, pigs, cows, goats, sheep, and horses. I think it would be good to have some of these animals in the community to give people a wider experience.

Concept of Minimal Work and Maximum Enjoyment

At the dawn of the industrial age and with advancing technology, some people envisioned a day when machines would do all our work for us, and we would be able to sit back and relax and enjoy life. We were also "promised" flying cars, and it looks like that's not going to happen, but what about this idyllic existence and the "easy life"? Why does it seem that most of us have to work harder, longer hours, and spend increasingly more time commuting to and from work?

Well, the basic foundation of capitalism is consumerism, and most business and economic models rely on continued and increasing consumption. This worked for a while, as there was room for expansion and more people, and our US economy, at least, was able to thrive with cheap fossil fuel energy and abundance of other resources, and little competition from the global market. There were ups and downs and robber barons and powerful labor unions and the Great depression, and then WW2 which galvanized the US into action which boosted our manufacturing industry and led to the relatively prosperous and happy days of the late 40s through the early 60s. Life was good, everyone could find work, gas was cheap, and people were able to move to the suburbs and buy a house and car and have a career at a good company until they retired with a gold watch and a nice pension.

But the 60s brought unrest due to the cold war and fears of evil Communism and the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam war. There was great social unrest with the riots and war protests and the "Summer of Love" at Woodstock followed by the Kent State tragedies, and things started breaking down. Some of the hippies "saw the light" and "turned on, tuned in, and dropped out" with Timothy Leary, and some formed communes to escape the rat-race and military-industrial complex. But businesses were greedy and sought to profit from muscle cars and suburban sprawl, and families became increasingly fractured and divorce and single parent families became common.

With women entering the workforce on career tracks, twice as many jobs were needed, and there just weren't enough consumers to continue the business model. With the advent of the oil embargo and skyrocketing energy costs, the long commutes and suburban sprawl sharply increased spending on energy, and people continued to want more things, so some people even took second jobs and went deeply in debt. Meanwhile, the emergence of the growing economies and competition from Japan, India, and China caused businesses to downsize, and jobs became scarce and pay for many was insufficient to feed their desires, so we have the situation we are in today.

But there was, and is, a simple solution to this problem, although most people have been conditioned to reject it, and even conflate the concept with the "evil Communism" that was drummed into almost everyone, at least among the "boomers", by the McCarthy era. The concept is the intentional community. I think it is possible to reduce individual consumption

and need for sole possession of many expensive material goods, by reaffirming the concept of sharing and minimizing the per capita use of resources. We are increasingly becoming isolated in our cars, houses, rooms, offices, cubicles, and cell phone "bubbles", and we crave ever more material possessions for entertainment and relief from boredom or stress. By combining our assets and cherishing our relationships with other people, we can create a close approximation of the "utopia" that was promised with the age of machines and technology. And we do not need to shun this technology and revert to a primitive existence, but instead use it wisely to achieve our goals. Many of us have become slaves to our machines, like cell phones and fast cars and TV and video games and social media, but we need to break those chains and learn how to exist happily with each other and nature.

Outreach and Expansion

Initially, New Koinonia would likely be a single entity, with a few people living full time or part time on a piece of land with perhaps a few small buildings, or even without any permanent improvements. I would hope that it would attract new people and grow and develop over a period of a couple of years, to become a comfortable and invigorating place for people to live, interact, share, and enjoy life in harmony with nature and each other.

But beyond that, I would hope that this experiment would inspire others to start their own communities wherever they wish, across the country and even across the globe. Ideally, at some point, there may be enough such communities that people could feel free to travel within a day's drive to other communities where they will be welcomed and find a place to stay and enjoy communal meals, or simply relax in solitude with nature without being pressured to join in activities.