

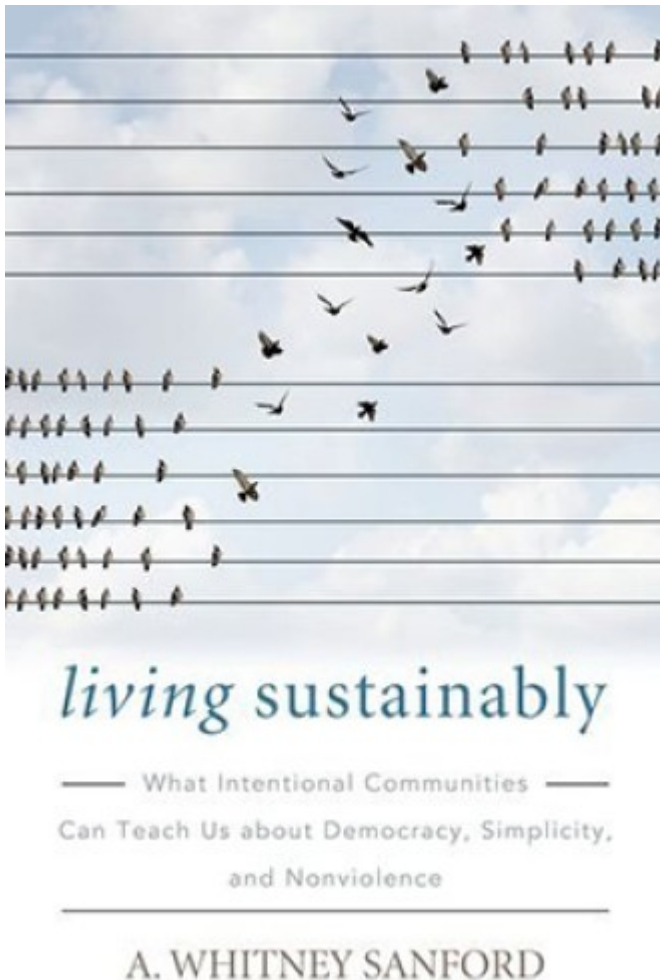
The burdens and blessings of intentional community

What happens when a group of radical idealists tries to live together?

Sunday's Coming Premium

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In Review



Living Sustainably

What Intentional Communities Can Teach Us about Democracy, Simplicity, and Nonviolence

By A. Whitney Sanford

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For nearly a decade, my family lived in a Mennonite intentional community on a 180-acre farm in the Midwest. We worked together with the members of our community, lived as close neighbors, shared meals twice a week, and worshiped together. Since we've moved away, I've missed the noises of the farm: pigs squealing, our children playing with neighbors in the shared backyard, and the determined whisper of a hoe hitting the soil. But most of all, I've missed the neighbors and friends who taught me about radically following Jesus. It was a transformative way of life that pushed us to rethink our consumption of the world's goods and helped us to learn to love others better.

A. Whitney Sanford's book came to my doorstep just as my husband and I were struggling over how to hold on to the values we'd learned in community. The book, which chronicles the 15 intentional communities Sanford visited over a four-year period, offers some suggestions—if not answers—about what many of us can learn from those who live in intentional communities.

Depending on how broadly *intentional community* is defined, there are hundreds (if not thousands) of them in the United States and across the world. Sanford defines the term as “residential communities with a shared vision, . . . shared purpose, some kind of common living space, some shared resources, and critical mass.”

To narrow the field for her study, Sanford evaluated communities through the lenses outlined in the book's subtitle: democracy, simplicity, and nonviolence. She sought out places that share values like consensus decision making, a striving toward simple and sustainable living, eating together, and practicing peace in everyday life. Sanford privileged communities that seek to live holistically in nonviolent ways, whether through food practices, clothing choices, or approaches to conflict resolution. These criteria brought Sanford to many different kinds of groups: from Catholic Worker houses based on the movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the early 20th century to eco-villages, communes, and co-op housing developments.

Sanford's descriptions of her short time in each community remind me of my own idealistic notions of life in community in our early years. From the beginning, my family noticed some of the challenges that Sanford periodically points out—the “emotional burden” of repeatedly hashing out ideas, rules, and policies through consensus decision making; the difficulty of nurturing a vision across multiple generations of community life; and the “significant time cost” of trying to do everything sustainably. It's possible to overlook these difficulties in the effort to strive for a noble, beautiful, and worthwhile way of life.

The things that community members idealize are often the most difficult parts of life together, and community life can get very hard. A resident of the Los Angeles Eco-Village explains that in the earlier years of consensus decision making in that community, residents spent “seven or eight years of hell” because those who were untrained in that model were “controlling the community” by blocking decisions they didn't like. After training became a requirement, the resident notes, things got better. But this story demonstrates how less-mature participants can exhaust a community of radical idealists who are already striving to find compromise.

One of the perennial problems of many intentional communities is something Sanford also observes: the lack of diversity in education, ethnicity, and economic position. The fact that some people can choose to live in these kinds of communities is often a sign of privilege—it's a choice made overwhelmingly by those who are educated and white.

But Sanford's observations also describe some of the things my husband and I most valued in community life: the maturity that comes from approaching conflict in intentional and nonviolent ways, the satisfaction of hard physical labor, the joy of growing your own food, and the unique gifts these groups can offer to those on the margins. Because of their communal nature, many intentional communities are able to offer opportunities and care to those who would otherwise be isolated or homeless. The people who run Catholic Worker communities, Sanford shows, give up many comforts in order to live among and provide aid to those in great need. My own intentional community cared for many of its aging members—in their own homes—for decades without asking for anything in return.

Sanford concludes that among the most important things we can learn from intentional communities are ways to deal with conflict through “nonviolent communication.” The practices of conflict resolution that Sanford observed across

communities had a profound influence on her.

By the end of the book, I sensed in Sanford an ambivalence—and perhaps even a frustration—similar to my own after leaving intentional community. The most life-changing part of community for me was the call to love and show hospitality to my neighbors in radical ways. But living radically takes a lot of imagination, determination, and time. And it's hard to do alone, apart from others who share a commitment to living by sustainable and nonviolent values.

How can those who live outside of intentional community embrace and enact the radical form of life that is modeled within such communities? Sanford doesn't answer this question directly. If sustainability and nonviolence are our guiding principles (and for Sanford, this certainly seems to be the assumption), living radically outside of intentional community depends upon our own strength and determination to carry it out. But if our guiding principle is the gospel of Jesus, then we have the church as our community and the Spirit of God as our aid.