

We Live in

Community

Eberhard Arnold

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Why
we live in
community

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Life in community is no less than a necessity for us – it is an inescapable “must” that determines every-

thing we do and think. Yet it is not our good intentions or efforts that have been decisive in our choosing this way of life. Rather, we have been overwhelmed by a certainty – a certainty that has its origin and power in the Source of everything that exists. We acknowledge God as this Source.

Why community?

We must live in community because all life created by God exists in a communal order and works toward community.

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God is the source of life. On him and through him our common life is built up and led time and again through cataclysmic struggles to final victory. It is an exceedingly dangerous way, a way of deep suffering. It is a way that leads straight into the struggle for existence and the reality of a life of work, into all the difficulties created by the human character. And yet, just this is our deepest joy: to see clearly the eternal struggle – the indescribable tension between life and death, man's position between heaven and hell – and still to believe in the overwhelming power of life, the power of love to overcome, and the triumph of truth, because we believe in God.

Faith is
our basis

This faith is not a theory for us; neither is it a dogma, a system of ideas, or a fabric of words, nor a cult or an organization. Faith means receiving God himself – it means being overwhelmed by God. Faith is the strength that enables us to go this way. It helps us to find trust again and again when, from a human point of view, the foundations of trust have been destroyed. Faith gives us the vision to perceive what is essential and eternal. It gives us eyes to see what cannot be seen, and hands to grasp what cannot be touched, although it is present always and everywhere.

If we possess faith, we will no longer judge people in the light of social custom or according to their weaknesses, for we will see the lie that stands behind all the masks of our mammonistic, unclean, and murderous human society. Yet we will not be deceived in the other direction either and made to think that the maliciousness and fickleness of the human character (though factual) are its real and ultimate nature. Admittedly, with our present nature, without God, we humans are incapable of community. Temperamental mood-swings, possessive impulses and cravings for physical and emotional satisfaction, powerful currents of ambition and touchiness, the desire for personal influence over others, and human privileges of all kinds – all these place seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way of true community. But with faith we cannot be deluded into thinking that these realities are decisive: in the face of the power of God and his all-conquering love, they are of no significance. God is stronger than these realities. The unifying energy of his Spirit overcomes them all.

Here it becomes abundantly clear that the realization of true community, the actual building up of a communal life, is impossible without faith in a higher Power. In spite of all that goes wrong, people try again and again to put their trust either in human goodness (which really does exist) or in the

force of law. But all their efforts are bound to come to grief when faced with the reality of evil. The only power that can build true community is faith in the ultimate mystery of the Good, faith in God.

We must live in community because only in such a positive venture can it become clear how incapable of life unredeemed man is, and what a life-giving and community-building power God is.

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There are political organizations that stand, as we do, for international peace, the abolition of private property, and full community of goods. Yet we cannot simply side with these organizations and fight their battles in their way. We do feel drawn, with them, to all people who suffer need and distress, to those who lack food and shelter and whose very mental development is stunted through exploitation. With them, we stand side by side with the “have-nots,” with the underprivileged, and with the degraded and oppressed. And yet we avoid the kind of class struggle that employs violent means to avenge lives taken through exploitation. We reject the defensive war of the suppressed just as much as the defensive wars of nations.

We must live in community because we take our stand in the spiritual fight on the side of all those who fight for freedom, unity, peace, and social justice.

Community answers the social-political question

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All revolutions, all communes and idealistic or reform-oriented movements, force us to recognize again and again that one thing alone can quicken our faith in the Good: the

clear example of action born of truth, when both action and word are one in God. We have only one weapon against the depravity that exists today – the weapon of the Spirit, which is constructive work carried out in the fellowship of love. We do not acknowledge sentimental love, love without work. Nor do we acknowledge dedication to practical work if it does not daily give proof of a heart-to-heart relationship between those who work together, a relationship that comes from the Spirit. The love of work, like the work of love, is a matter of the Spirit. The love that comes from the Spirit is work.

When working men and women voluntarily join hands to renounce everything that is self-willed, isolated, or private, their alliances become signposts to the ultimate unity of all people, which is found in God's love and in the power of his coming kingdom. The will that works toward this kingdom of peace for all, like the ungrudging spirit of brotherliness in work, comes from God. Work as spirit and spirit as work – that is the fundamental nature of the future order of peace, which comes to us in Christ. Work alone makes it possible to live in community, for work means joy

Community
is the answer
of faith

in striving for the common good and joy in the presence of those we strive with. Such joy is given to us only as far as we are able to sustain a consecrated relationship to the Eternal, even when performing the most mundane tasks – only as far as we remember that everything that is material and earthly is, at the same time, consecrated to God's future.

We must live in community because God wants us to respond to the unclear longings of our time with a clear answer of faith.

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The spirit-filled life of love that arises from faith has been decisively witnessed to over the centuries, especially by the Jewish prophets and later by the first Christians. We acknowledge Christ, the historical Jesus, and with him his entire message as proclaimed by his apostles and practiced by his followers. Therefore we stand as brothers and sisters with all those who have joined together to live in community through the long course of history. They appeared among the Christians of the first century; in the prophetic movement of the Montanists in the second; in the monasticism of the following centuries; in the revolutionary movement of justice and love led by Arnold of Brescia; in the Waldensian movement; in the itinerant communities of Francis of Assisi; among the Bohemian and Moravian Brethren and the Brothers of the Common Life; among the Beguines and Beghards; in the Anabaptist movements of the sixteenth century; among the early Quakers; among the Labadists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; among the early Moravians, and in many other denominations and movements down to our present day.

Community through the history of the church

We must live in community because we are compelled by the same Spirit that has led to community time and again since the days of biblical prophecy and early Christianity.

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Community in the early church

We acknowledge Jesus and early Christianity. The early Christians dedicated themselves as much to people's outward needs as to their inner ones. Jesus brought life: he healed sick bodies, resurrected the dead, drove out demons from tormented souls, and carried his message of joy to the poorest of the poor.

Jesus' message means the realization of the future invisible kingdom now; it is the promise that ultimately the earth will be won wholly for God.

It is the whole that matters here. Just as the love of God does not acknowledge any boundary or stop at any barrier, Jesus does not stop in the face of property any more than he does in the face of theology, moralism, or the State. Jesus saw into the heart of the rich young man, whom he loved, and said, "One thing you lack: sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come with me!" It was a matter of course for Jesus that his disciples should hold no personal possessions but rather keep a common purse. Only one man was entrusted with the hateful responsibility of managing the disciples' money, and he broke under it – a lesson with no little significance for our mammonistic society today.

Life in
community
means life
in the Spirit

Yet even Christ's betrayal and execution did not mean defeat. The enthusiastic experience of the Spirit with which the Risen One endowed his itinerant disciples gave them the power to carry on their communal life on a larger scale. The first church became a community of several thousand people who, because love was burning in them, had to stay together. In all questions regarding communal life, the forms that emerged were in keeping with an understanding of life as one unified whole.

The first Christians in Jerusalem held everything in common. Whoever owned property felt compelled from within to share it. No one had anything that did not belong to the church. Yet what the church owned was there for all. Its generous love excluded no one, and an open door and an open heart were therefore among its characteristics. At the time of its flowering it found ways to reach all people. And though its members were bound to become the target of hatred and hostility, they still won the love and trust of those around them. It was inevitable that they should, for they were there heart and soul for everyone.

Community today The early Christians lived in the Spirit. The Spirit blows like the wind – it is never rigid like iron or stone. The Spirit is infinitely more sensitive and delicate than the inflexible designs of the intellect or the cold, hard

framework of governmental or societal structures. The Spirit is more sensitive even than all the emotions of the human soul, more sensitive than all the powers of the human heart, on which people so often try – in vain – to build lasting edifices. But just for this reason the Spirit is stronger and more irresistible than all these things, never to be overcome by any power, however terrible; for it is the breadth, depth, and height of being.

In Jesus, who lived a life of love without violence, love without rights, and love without the desire to possess, the Spirit lives on powerfully as the Risen One, as the inner voice and the inner eye that leads to community.

The light of the early church illuminated the path of humankind in only one short flash. Yet its spirit and witness stayed alive even after its members had been scattered and many of them murdered. Again and again through history, similar forms arose as gifts of God, expressions of the same living Spirit. Witnesses were killed, and fathers died, but new children were – and are – born to the Spirit again and again. Communities pass away. But the church that creates them remains.

Efforts to organize community artificially can only result in ugly, lifeless caricatures. Only when we are empty and open to the Living One – to the Spirit – can he bring about the same life among us as he did among the early Christians.

The Spirit is joy in the Living One, joy in God as the only real life; it is joy in all people, because they have life from God. The Spirit drives us to all people and brings us joy in living and working for one another, for it is the spirit of creativity and love.

Community life is possible only in this all-embracing Spirit and in those things it brings with it: a deepened spirituality and the ability to experience life more keenly and intensely. Surrendering to this Spirit is such a powerful experience that we can never feel equal to it. In truth, the Spirit alone is equal to itself. It quickens our energies by firing the inmost core – the soul of the community – to white heat. When this core burns and blazes to the point of sacrifice, it radiates far and wide.

Community life is like martyrdom by fire: it means the daily sacrifice of all our strength and all our rights, all the claims we commonly make on life and assume to be justified. In the symbol of fire the individual logs burn away so that, united, its glowing flames send out warmth and light again and again into the land.

We must live in community because the spirit of joy and love gives us such an urge to reach out to others that we wish to be united with them for all time.

Community as a pattern in nature

The whole of life, with all the various forms it takes in nature, is a parable of the future community of the kingdom. Just as the air surrounds us, or as a blowing wind engulfs us, we need to be immersed in the blowing Spirit, who unites and renews everything. And just as water washes and cleanses us every day, so in the deep symbol of baptism by immersion we witness to our purification from everything that is of death. This “burial” in water, which happens only once, signifies a complete break from the status quo; it is a vow of mortal enmity toward the evil in us and around us. Similarly, the lifting out of the water, which also happens only once, proclaims resurrection in vivid imagery and in unforgettable clarity.

The resurrection we see everywhere in nature is no different: after the dying of autumn and winter comes the blossoming of spring and the fruit-bearing of summer; after seedtime comes harvest. In fact, the whole course of human history, from man’s origins to his final fulfillment, is symbolized by the cycle of nature.

Symbolism can be found in the trivialities of existence, too: when approached with reverence, even daily rites such as mealtimes can become consecrated festivals of community.

The symbolism of community

On a deeper level, we find the expression of community in the symbol of the Lord's Supper: the meal of wine and bread. The Meal of Remembrance not only witnesses to the catastrophe of Christ's death and to his second coming, but to the fact that we receive him in ourselves. It witnesses to his church – his Body – as the ultimate unity of life.

Community as a body The twofold symbol of the body endowed with a soul – of the indwelling of the Spirit in creation – is visible in every human being in a uniquely pointed way. It acquires special meaning in the unity of two people in marriage; for as a bond of faithfulness of one man and one woman, marriage is a picture not only of the unity of the Spirit with humankind, but also of Christ with his church. In marriage, purity – the tempered self-discipline of the sex life – becomes liberating joy in created life.

In the human body, community is maintained only by the constant cycle of dying cells being replaced by new ones. In a similar way, a life of full community can take shape as an organism only where there is heroic sacrifice. Because it is an educational fellowship of mutual help and correction, of shared resources, and of work, a true community is a covenant made in free-willing surrender and sacrifice. As such it fights for the existence of the church.

In the context of church community, justice does not consist in making and satisfying even reasonable demands for personal rights; on the contrary, it consists in giving each member the opportunity to risk everything, to surrender himself completely so that God may become incarnate in him and so that the kingdom may break into his life with power. This cannot take place in the form of hard demands made on others, however, but in joyous self-sacrifice – for God’s Spirit comes to expression as cheerfulness and courage in making sacrifices; as free-willingness; as delight in work, joy in people, and dedication to the whole. Joy and enthusiasm take shape as active love.

We love the body because it is a consecrated dwelling place of the Spirit. We love the soil because God’s Spirit spoke and created the earth, and because he called it out of its uncultivated natural state so that it might be cultivated by the communal work of man. We love physical work – the work of muscle and hand – and we love the craftsman’s art, in which the spirit guides the hand. In the way spirit and hand work through each other we see the mystery of community.

We love the activity of mind and spirit, too: the richness of all the creative arts and the exploration of the intellectual and spiritual interrelationships in history and in humanity’s destiny of peace. Whatever our work, we must recognize and

do the will of God in it. God – the creative Spirit – has formed nature, and he has entrusted the earth to us, his sons and daughters, as an inheritance but also as a task: our garden must become his garden, and our work must further his kingdom.

We must live in community because we are stimulated by the same creative Spirit of unity who calls nature to unity and through whom work and culture shall become community in God.

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No less significant than the symbol of the Body is the symbol of community as the harbinger of God's kingdom – as the news that God will triumph over the earth. When God reigns there will be joy and peace and justice.

In the same way as each individual living body consists of millions of independent cells, humankind will become one organism. This organism already exists today in the invisible church.

When we acknowledge the reality of this invisible church's unity and order, we acknowledge at the same time the freedom of the Spirit within that order. The more clearly a community defines its unique task, the more deeply conscious it must be of belonging to the *una sancta*, the One Church. Because it is part of a larger organism, it needs the give-and-take that comes from serving the whole Body, and it needs to be instructed and guided by the united witness of all those who believe in the church.

Self-determination – and self-surrender The secret of community lies in the freedom of self-determination, in the personal decision of each member to surrender to the whole and, at the same time, to exercise his will for the good.

Community
is a sign
of the coming
kingdom

This freedom, without which communal life cannot exist, is not a matter of power exercised by human self-will, just as little as it is a matter of spinelessness or unrestraint. In a community of deeply moved people who believe in the Spirit, the freedom of the individual lives in the free decision of the united will brought about by the Spirit. Working from within each member as the will for the good, freedom becomes unanimity and concord. The will of a man or woman liberated in this way will be directed toward the kingdom, toward God's unity, and toward the good of the whole human race. As such it becomes life's most vital and intense energy.

Standing as it does in a world of death, an active will must constantly assert itself against the destructive and enslaving powers of lying, impurity, capitalism, and military force. It is engaged in battle everywhere: against the spirit of murder, against all hostility (including the venom of the taunting, quarrelling tongue), against all the wrong and injustice people do to each other. That is, it fights in public as well as in private life against the very nature of hatred and death, and against all that opposes community. The call to freedom is a call to a battle without pause, a war without respite. Those who are called to it must be continually alert. They need not only the greatest willpower they themselves can muster, but also the aid of every other power yielded them

by God, in order to meet the plight of the oppressed, to stand with the poor, and to fight against all evil in themselves and in the world around them.

This fight against evil must be waged more strongly within a community than against the world outside, but it must be waged even more relentlessly within each individual. In community, it is fought by the spirit of the church, which takes its foothold in each individual and fights the old Adam within him from the position of the new. In this way all softness, all flabby indulgence, is overcome by the burning power of love.

We must live in community because the struggle of life against death demands united ranks of souls and bodies that can be mobilized wherever death threatens life.

Community of goods Community of goods presupposes the willingness of each individual member to turn over unconditionally to the common household whatever he acquires in the way of income or property, large or small. Yet even the community does not regard itself as the corporate owner of its inventory and enterprises. Rather, it acts as a trustee of the assets it holds for the common good of all, and for this reason it keeps its door open to all. By the same token it requires for its decision-making undisturbed unanimity in the Spirit.

Loyalty to the end It is clear that the war of liberation for unity and for the fullness of love is being fought on many fronts with many different weapons. So too, the work of community finds expression in many different ways because the Spirit is rich. But there is a certainty of purpose for every stretch of the way we are called to go, and when we possess this certainty we will be given the strength for loyalty and unerring clarity, even in small things, to the very end. Nothing can be entrusted to the person who cannot hold out. Only those who stand firm can bear the standard. There is no great commission without a specific, clearly defined task.

Subordination to the whole Yet it is of decisive importance that any special task lead only to Christ – that it truly serve the whole, the church, the coming kingdom. Whenever people see their task as something special in itself, they will go astray. But when a person serves the whole, even if in his special place and in his own particular way, he can well say, “I belong to God and to life in community,” or to God and to any other calling. Before our human service can become divine service, however, we must recognize how small and limited it is in the face of the whole.

A special calling – living in community, for instance – must never be confused with the church of Christ itself. Life in community means discipline in community, education in

community, and continual training for the discipleship of Christ. Yet the mystery of the church is something different from this – something greater. It is God's life, and coming from him it penetrates community. This penetration of the divine into the human occurs whenever the tension of desperate yearning produces an openness and readiness in which God alone may act and speak. At such moments a community can be commissioned by the invisible church and given certainty for a specific mission: to speak and act – albeit without mistaking itself for the church – in the name of the church.

find out about the history of a life in community
at www.brudermuseum.com

The church we believe in lives in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit we believe in bears the church within itself. This church of the Spirit will give life to the future unity of humankind. It gives life already now to all truly living communities. The foundation and basic element of every community is not merely the combination of its members but simply and solely the unity of the Holy Spirit, for the true church is present there.

An organism becomes a unit through the unity of consciousness brought about by the spirit that animates it. It is the same in a believing community. The future unity of humankind, when God alone will rule, is ensured by the Holy Spirit. For this Spirit is the coming leader and Lord himself. The only thing we can hold on to here and now, the only thing we can already perceive of this great future of love and unity, is the Spirit. Faith in the Spirit is faith in the church and faith in the kingdom.

Community
is a call to
love and
unity

Community means sacrifice

In the life of a community, several decisive questions will need to be confronted again and again: how are we called? to what are we called? will we follow the call? Only a few are called to the special way that is ours. Yet those who are called – a small, battle-trying band, who must sacrifice themselves again and again – will hold firmly for the rest of their lives to the common task shown them by God. They will be ready to sacrifice life itself for the sake of unity.

People tear themselves away from home, parents, and career for the sake of marriage; for the sake of wife and child they risk their lives. In the same way it is necessary to break away and sacrifice everything for the sake of our calling to this way. Our witness to voluntary community of goods and work, to a life of peace and love, will have meaning only when we throw our entire life and livelihood into it.

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It is over five [now seventy-five] years since our tiny fellowship in Berlin decided to venture, in the sense of this confession, to live and work together in community on a basis of trust. With time, a life of total community came into being.

We are small in number, we come from the most diverse backgrounds and walks of life, but we want to place ourselves as one group in the service of all people.

Given our basis of faith, we cannot approach the development of our community from a purely economic point of view. We cannot simply select the most capable people for our various work departments. We aim for efficiency in all areas; but far more important, we seek faith. Each of us – whether committed member, helper, or guest – must be faced again and again with the question whether or not he is growing into the coming community ruled by Christ, no matter what his special service or task.

Our work, then, is a venture dared again and again. Yet we are not the driving force in this – it is we who have been driven and who must be urged on. The danger of exhaustion and uselessness is always present, but it is continually overcome by the faith that underlies mutual help.

Community – an adventure of faith

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