

Encouraged by books like *The Irresistible Revolution*, experiences of deep community in college, and the desire to radically follow Jesus, people are forming hundreds of intentional Christian communities across the United States and world. These communities of Christians living in proximity to one another seek to boldly bring the Kingdom of God through such key practices as redistribution, reconciliation, hospitality, simple living, peacemaking, and most importantly love. Unfortunately, I have personally seen community after community emerge with great vision and hope only to drown in the details of day-to-day life together. The purpose of this series of white papers is to help people form and “live into” healthy and vibrant Christian communities by developing a strong foundation and practice of community while avoiding the common pitfalls of community formation and life together.

Charisms, Covenant, and Rhythms (Draft, revised 4-6-2011)

Rather than taking time to live into life together, most starting communities try to live into all their ideals, fully, all at once. Instead of recognizing that freeing ourselves from the addictions of this world takes a lifetime, we attempt to quit cold-turkey and inevitably fail (after all it was the desire for the quick-fix that got us into this mess). Somehow, in our zeal to follow God fully, we get confused and think we’re God and that it’s up to us to save the world or at least that we are to do all we can.

Even Jesus didn’t do all He could, rather he only did that which he saw the Father do (John 5:19). “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:11 NIV)

Gifts + General Callings = Charisms

A charism is an entity’s unique combination of spiritual graces and qualifications. Individuals have charisms. Groups of people have charisms. Communities have charisms. Churches have charisms. Workplaces have charisms. Denominations have charisms.

While, community (and the Gospel) calls us to a life of interdependence with one another and with God, we are each uniquely gifted and called. It is out of this individuation that we discover our deep need for others. Healthy community never promotes sameness, rather we celebrate our distinctive gifts as we learn to submit to the Christ uniquely manifest in one another.

There’s often a tendency to, instead of simply recognizing our charism as important, see our charism as the most important—those with other charisms are inferior or disobedient. This happens in individuals as they attempt to compare themselves to others and to groups—think of how denominations think that their gifts are the most important. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Our unique charism allows us to exhibit the character of God in the peculiar ways we have been given grace to. Together, with our unique charism, we display God more fully than alone. We must recognize, value, and learn from the charisms of others while finding rest in the charism we have been given.

It is essential for people in community to learn to recognize one another’s gifts and weaknesses. Communities must adopt a rhythm of intentionally sharing gifts and weaknesses. When you notice someone’s gifts point them out. When you notice that you are not gifted in an area take note and share the fact with others when appropriate. Out of this knowledge, people can learn to function as one body, in each situation recognizing and giving authority to lead to those with the required gifts of each

moment. Once you know one another fairly well, it is often a great exercise to have a time celebrating the gifts you have been given.

What is your charism? What is the charism of others in your community? How can you better support and encourage others to express their charism? How can you learn from their charism? How can you better express your charism?

Doing it all

Communities, like individuals often seek to express the full spectrum of gifts and call and end up expressing none of them well.

Allow yourself the time to live into community. For your first year, focus on living out one or two discerned practices. Learn to do those well as a community and then, in about a year, add another thing (or don't). It's ok that you're only recycling or you only know a handful of your neighbors. It's ok that your prayer life as a community isn't what you hoped it would be. Learn your gifts and call as a community and be comfortable with living that charism well over time, even when it means doing other things poorly or not at all.

Historical monastic communities usually only have one general call and a handful of common practices.

What is your primary charism as a community? How do you live it out?

Your Community Covenant

What are the things that you are asking everyone to covenant to? Are you committing to a year together? Are you committing to take part fully in weekly meetings? Are you committing to prayer?

While the shared commitments are important, it is also great to allow individuals to make their own specific and personal covenants to the community. What are other things that each individual is covenanting to? Are you covenanting to pray for each individual in the community daily? Are you covenanting to provide greater resources to the community?

Your Covenant should address two key topics: values and rhythms.

Your community values

Historic orders have three core commitments in addition to their charism: poverty, chastity, and obedience.

It's important to state and acknowledge your community values. While these are important to your life together, they may or may not be expressed in your communal rhythm of life. Often, the values of your community will be expressed in a variety of ways individually.

For instance, Franciscans will commit to a shared prayer life and meals, but often their charism, working with the poor, is individuated with each brother leaving for the day to work in different places doing different things.

Your community rhythms/life

These are the values that you live out together on a regular basis. Here are some examples:

Meetings & Communication

As Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove says, "Meetings are the hard work of community." It is key to structure into your community a regular gathering time. Leave only the most important decisions to these meetings and give individuals and small groups the authority to make all other decisions within reasonable parameters. (See the other essay in this series entitled "Decision-making.")

Shared Meals

Something wonderful happens when we eat together. Jesus knew this fact very well. Over and over again in the Gospel accounts we find Jesus sharing meals with people. The Last Supper does not occur as a sip of wine or a small cup of grape juice and a chunk of bread, but rather is found in the context of a celebratory feast. Life in community gives us the opportunity to better live the call of 1 Corinthians 11, experiencing the Eucharist whenever we break bread together. In my communities, we infrequently proclaimed the liturgy of communion as part of our meals, yet we endeavor to make each and every meal together Eucharistic, proclaiming the reality of Christ in our midst.

Prayer

With meetings it is easy to find one's worth in the accomplishment rather than the process. We worship a God of process. Make prayer a core part of your rhythm, not only as you meet, but as you live life together. Seek to make it like meals. You can pray free-form, but often communities find it helpful to use a Prayer Book to guide their prayer together. There are a variety of great prayer books available to you. My favorites are *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro; *Celtic Daily Prayer* by The Northumbria Community; and *Franciscan Morning and Evening Prayer* from the Franciscan Federation.

Sabbath-keeping

A tendency I have seen often in community life is the attempt to be all things to all people, to find value in what we accomplish, rather than peace in the God who deeply knows us and invites us to be His children. Adopting a rhythm of rest in community is essential for sustainability.

Celebration

Will Samson asserts that gathering is not what makes you a community, rather it should be a celebration of the community that has existed in the in-between times... the long conversation with a housemate, the cleaning of the bathroom, the mourning of a neighbor's loss.

In all the work of community, it is easy to forget the importance of celebration. What you are undertaking is not easy. Take time to encourage one another and to point out the work that God is doing in and among you.

Justice

Some communities create a standard rhythm of Justice work. Examples include spending Saturday mornings hanging out with the homeless or offering after-school homework help.

Confession

Community will give you an eye into your own sinfulness like nothing short of marriage. The response God provides us to our sin is confession and repentance to God AND to one another.

We are naturally conflict avoiders, we don't want to acknowledge our sin. A rhythm some communities adopt is a regular one-to-one confession to everyone in the community. In addition to providing a structural framework for people to confess their sins to one another, this rhythm encourages confession in the in-between times.

Common Purse or Gift

Communities often choose to share resources, whether a common purse where everyone places all their income into a pot together or a commitment to give a certain amount or percentage of income to a community fund each month, this practice is helpful for communities to better live out their common life.

Shared Food

This is a relatively easy, but effective rhythm that simply enables a richer life together. When people aren't all grocery shopping separately and trying to manage their own food supplies, it makes it easier to practice hospitality and enable more organic and spontaneous meals together.

It is important that you avoid having too many community rhythms. While it may seem like having more community rhythms makes you more legitimate as a community, this is not true. It is important that people have space to live out their individual charisms and spiritual practices. Too many community rhythms will get in the way of this. Community rhythms should not be looked to as a substitute for personal spiritual practices, but rather a continuation of them.

Inward and Outward Journey

Often communities with a strong outwardly expressed charism (i.e. hospitality, mercy, justice) neglect inwardly expressed rhythms (i.e. prayer, confession, silence). Inward practices are essential to living outward practices with vigor and obedience. This is why the main rhythm and commitment of almost all historical orders is praying the hours. Take care as you begin your community life to take time for inward practices.