



Spirituality Groups

Common Life Communities

by Leslee Alfano

“Intentional” is one way to describe the communities that have formed and are forming as Common Life communities since 2002 through initiatives taken by the United Church’s education centres. These communities represent an intentional action by participants to explore and grow in their faith journey and, through covenant, to practise community with others, based on five practices:

- engagement for justice
- attending to the spirit
- dedication to learning
- commitment to community
- retreat

Groups form covenants with one another in relation to the practices and agree to meet for a two-year time period. They also attend an annual retreat, or possibly two retreats, with other participants in the Common Life communities affiliated with the education centre. Retreat is an important part of the experience and is seen as “pattern breaking,” a space for the Spirit.

Intentionality is also reflected by covenants that individual participants develop with themselves as to how they will connect with the five practices. This can include personal quiet time, whether it is a retreat in silence and prayer for several days, an hour each day, or an hour each week. Mardi Tindal, director of the Five Oaks Education Centre,

describes some examples of the practices for individuals:

- daily prayer
- reading scripture
- receiving and giving support for spiritual growth
- sustained learning
- action for justice
- discernment about the faithful use of resources such as our own bodies, time, and money

The Common Life program is also about creating communities of support and accountability. Although the groups share a common basis for their community, each group shapes its own life in unique ways through ongoing experiences and shared leadership of participants. Members develop a name for their group: Free Spirits, Shekhinah Seekers, Soul Friends, Prairie Spirit, Our Small Group. Gatherings might be structured as day-long meetings or held over a number of weekends; they could take place over coffee or supper or find yet another form. With the five practices to guide the group’s “common life,” a gathering might comprise some or all of the following elements:

- opening meditation
- check-in related to personal lives and to the practice of the disciplines
- discussion about an issue related to one or more of the disciplines
- time for silence
- creative reflection on the issue or plan of action

- evaluation and theological reflection
- closing ritual

The Beginning

In January 2001, two members from each of the then five United Church education and retreat centres (Tatamagouche, Stewart House [no longer one of the centres], Five Oaks, Prairie Christian Training Centre, and Naramata) met for a time of discernment through the formation of their own Common Life community. It was an initiative they developed as they considered and shared a vision to respond to their spiritual yearning and search for deepening faith through a connection to community, commitment, and action.

Three Common Life communities were launched in 2002; by 2003, there were 12 groups with 100 people participating. In that year, one group met at Naramata, two formed in affiliation with Calling Lakes Centre (at that time Prairie Christian Training Centre), three were connected with Tatamagouche Centre, five were linked with Five Oaks Centre, and one was developed through a congregation (First United Church in Ottawa), later becoming affiliated with Stewart House. Connection with

United Church education centres is also intentional. The education centre can offer meeting space, a sense of sacred space, group facilitation, retreat options, resources for social justice, and programs including growth in spiritual practice and leadership development.

Wider Connections

Common Life communities are part of a larger national network. Directors of the United Church education centres meet to evaluate and share insights and to maintain their own Common Life community. A national newsletter edited by Yvonne Stewart shares resources and insights from groups across Canada. As well, inspiration and insight have come through the movement and model represented by the Iona Community in Scotland, which, along with other communities, emphasizes deepening spiritual insight and action through community support. At the heart of each of these is the desire to take part in God's healing action in the world. The idea is not for these groups to build walls around themselves but to become like yeast in a world that needs such actions for peace and healing.



When the Common Life communities began, it was understood that they were not substitutes for participation in church life but supplemental to it. Individuals in these groups might develop their leadership more intentionally, or model faith practices, or initiate social justice actions or learning opportunities in congregations or communities. An important part of the learning journey for Common Life groups has been discovering how to create safe communities with others through a focus on truly listening to others.

Wider Actions

The five disciplines guide Common Life groups and members into a wide variety of learning, action, and concern. Some groups decide to participate together in justice concerns such as the Make Poverty History campaign. Others acknowledge and prayerfully support the involvement of individuals in their commitment to justice and care for others. Stewardship has been a topic of discernment, with the understanding that such stewardship is a “work in progress,” including actions such as financial giving, ethical investing, and body-mind-spirit care. Topics for learning are wide in scope and may come from a variety of sources and resources—new ones as well as those based on the wisdom of the ancients, such as Celtic tradition and labyrinth spirituality.

Deepening Spiritual Life

Since the beginning of the Common Life program in 2002, some Common Life groups have continued, some new ones have begun, and some have ended. The groups tend to be small, with 6 to 10 participants usually. While there has not been a group at Naramata for a while, folks there are looking forward to the possible formation of one beginning this fall with facilitation from Tim Scorer. Another new beginning this fall may grow out of interest expressed by young adults at Five Oaks.


Each group holds a special experience in being a Common Life community, whether or not they renew their covenant time frame. A deepening spiritual life is common in their experience. The program meets a yearning and a challenge for faith that makes a difference in daily life. Sharing the journey with others in supportive, accountable, and “intentional” ways has been meaningful to, and appreciated by, group members.

Worship is integral to gatherings, retreats, and individual reflections. Resources for worship may be shared in the Common Life newsletter. The following prayer was written by Nancy Hardy for the Free Spirits group at Five Oaks. It was offered as part of a ritual of endings and beginnings shared in the national newsletter in September 2006. With Nancy’s permission, the prayer is included here. It is a reflection of the depth of spiritual life in Common Life communities, whether they are ending or beginning.

God of the inward journey,
We give you thanks for the life we have had
together.
For insights shared and horizons widened,
For pain and triumph, tears and laughter,
For loving support in a safe place.
We are grateful.

Spirit of challenge and justice,
We pray for the world around us.
For those who pray for bread and justice,
And those who have lost the energy and heart to
pray.
For those who long for an end to their oppression
And those who work with them to bring hope to
their lives.
Especially today we pray for ...

God of patience and persistence,
Remind us that on our journey, we are not alone.
Help us remember that we follow a risen Christ
who became a servant and calls us to do the same.
Whatever the days ahead may bring,
Grant that we might find joy in your love and
peace. Amen.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming part of a Common Life community, check the website of your nearest United Church education centre. 

Leslee Alfano, *issue editor of Exchange*, is also a part-time ordained minister at St. Paul's United Church, Toronto.

Resources

For resources and information about the Iona Community, see their website at www.iona.org.uk/community/main.htm.

"Eclectic" and "expanding" describe the variety of resources used by Common Life communities in their exploration of and commitment to the five practices. Here is a sample of resources from a much larger list collated from communities at Five Oaks Education Centre:

Dykstra, Craig, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999).

Hurst, Viki, *Personal Pilgrimage at Midlife: One Day Soul Journeys for a Time of Transition* (Kelowna, BC: Northstone Publishing, 2002).

Iona Community, and Kathy Galloway, ed., *The Pattern of Our Days: Worship in the Celtic Tradition from the Iona Community* (Glasgow, UK: Wild Goose Publications, 1999).

Myers, Ched, ed., *Say No to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

O'Murchu, Diarmuid, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004).

Ryan, Thomas P., *Disciplines for Christian Living: Interfaith Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).

Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

Spiritual journey...



Exploring Faith Questions

Journeys of Spirituality and Discovery

978-1-55134-135-4

\$15.95 Book

CH10399

\$19.95 Book and CD

Faithful Moments

Prayers, Graces, and Seasonal Celebrations for Families

978-1-55134-119-4

\$8.95

Spiritual Quest

Stories from Life

978-1-55134-127-9

\$6.95

Visit www.united-church.ca/sales/ucph for excerpts, author biographies, and more.



Call UCRD toll-free at 1-800-288-7365 or locally at 416-253-5456 or contact your local presbytery resource centre.