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Millennials, Communal Living, and the Fourfold Path

I continue to be impressed by how deeply the 2008 recession has impacted the faith of today's 20-somethings, and I continue to be frustrated by how poorly institutional churches as a whole have responded to this exciting and game-changing generational trend.

While previous generations expected self-sufficiency, there is a strong desire in the millennial generation to live more communally, sustainably, and simply. However, those of us who desire such a communal living situation face a serious challenge.

Americans in general, especially young White Americans, are poorly prepared to share space and resources with graciousness, honor, and love. Whatever our current living situation may be, our way of interacting with others is often better characterized as selfish, emotionally violent, and manipulative. We know that following Christ offers us a better way to live, but we are weak and can't seem to figure it out on our own, no matter how many times we read the Bible. So how does the local church engage with young adults through this current opportunity of community housing? Even more so, how does the church do so faithfully and wisely, in a way that creates disciples and blesses congregational life?

This is where I get to proclaim publicly that I may have one of the most fun and possibly the most relevant "jobs" in the contemporary church! Among

the many hats I wear as Pastoral Assistant at Church of All Nations in Minneapolis, MN, I lead one of our community houses.



Author Dana Caraway

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Our congregation understands that housing is relevant, and our leadership has chosen to invest in this risky and fruitful ministry by having some staff live communally with members seeking housing, discipleship, and community. We've been experimenting with different community living arrangements for 8 years now, and we've learned plenty along the way. Right now, we're dreaming of creating some houses that are more multi-generational.

As we've traveled this journey of living together in community, we have recorded some of our lessons to share with those seeking to enter our community housing – and those who are just curious about how we structure our life together!

The Fourfold Path

1.) Vulnerability: Confessing who we are sets us free.

Living in intentional Christian community reminds us that we are not self-sufficient. When we live together, the things we are ashamed of eventually get exposed. Even our own self-deception is brought to light. As secrecy and deception are the byproducts of trauma, so openness and truth are the fruit of healing. We refuse to be bound by the shame of our past, whatever that may be. Thus, we commit to confessing our true selves to one another and to risking vulnerability. We know that we are free to be vulnerable without fear. [After all, it is for freedom Christ has set us free!](#)

2.) Humanity: Recovering personal dignity in community.

Living in intentional Christian community means that we can recover together the humanity of which our culture has stripped us. In an increasingly alienated and alienating world, we choose to share our grief, joy, and love as a way of recovering our basic dignity as God's children. Just as the individual and lonely existence of Adam gave way to the rich community of the human family, so we also trust that life together will lead to a greater abundance and be more rewarding than the bankrupt promises of an empty 'American Dream.'

3.) Discipleship: Losing our life (*kenosis*) in order to save it.

Living in intentional Christian community means that we give up our sense of autonomy so that we can learn to be disciples. Just as Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and submitting to God even to the point of death, so do we practice emptying ourselves of self-concern, self-protection, and self-promotion. We renounce the worldly life of competition

and recognition. Instead, we commit to a humble, simple lifestyle as co-slaves with Jesus. We agree with St. Benedict that "...a monk is content with the lowest and most menial treatment, and regards himself (*sic*) as a poor and worthless workman (*sic*) in whatever task he (*sic*) is given" (*Rule of St. Benedict*, 36).

Discipleship is about forgetting ourselves on purpose. This makes genuine Christian hospitality possible. And as we give life to others, we find our own.

4.) Authority: We follow Christ as we follow one another.

The intentional Christian communities at Church of All Nations are an expression of the congregation's faith and vocation. Thus, our housing ministry is accountable to our church community through its appointed leaders. We do not interpret the command to "follow Jesus" in "the way" as an abstraction. The disciples followed Jesus by literally walking behind him and learning from his example. They suffered with each other and with those to whom they ministered.

The way of Jesus involves disciples making disciples. Fallible human beings who exhibit particular spiritual maturity are called to guide, encourage, correct, and empower others in the path of discipleship. Jesus does not grant authority to those with academic degrees or impressive titles, but – we believe – to those with mature Christian character. Thus, authority can never be coercive and must always be negotiable by the community. This leads to gratitude for human authority and leadership.

Character of our homes

- Not ruled by fairness, but by mutual forbearance.
- Managed by discerning leaders for the health and well-being of all residents, and not by inflexible rules
- Organized, but not programmatic.
- Clean, but not controlling.
- Flexible, but not chaotic.
- Respectful, but with no entitlement to personal privacy.
- Hospitable, but not at the expense of the sanctuary of the residents.
- Intimate, and still welcoming of others.
- Highly committed, but not anxious.
- Simple, but not ascetic.
- Transparent, and not codependent.
- Playful, but not shallow.
- Generous, and not self-motivated

Discipline

- Exercising the posture of hospitality at all times.
- Flexibility in our personal agendas and prepared to serve others and offer help when it is inconvenient to us.
- Practicing personal and communal cleanliness to honor others.
- Trusting the discernment of the community leader to discern wellbeing of the home and to navigate conflict faithfully

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- Relinquishing a sense of entitlement to privacy and control of space.
- Committing to clear and non-passive aggressive communication with community leader and housemates.
- Participating in daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rhythms.
- Accountability in finances and good stewardship.
- Responsibility for one's psychological wellbeing with community support.
- Guidance and structure offered by the community leader is gentle, forbearing, firm, and accountable to the leadership of the church.

AUTHOR BIO: Dana Caraway graduated from [Princeton Seminary](#) in 2006 and has been certified ready to receive a call by the [Presbytery of Twin Cities Area](#). She studied for a semester in Korea while at [Whitworth College](#) and spent a year in Ghana as a PC(USA) [Young Adult Volunteer](#). She currently serves as Pastoral Assistant to the Senior Pastor at Church of All Nations. Dana is a harpist, loves the outdoors, and enjoys classical music.

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