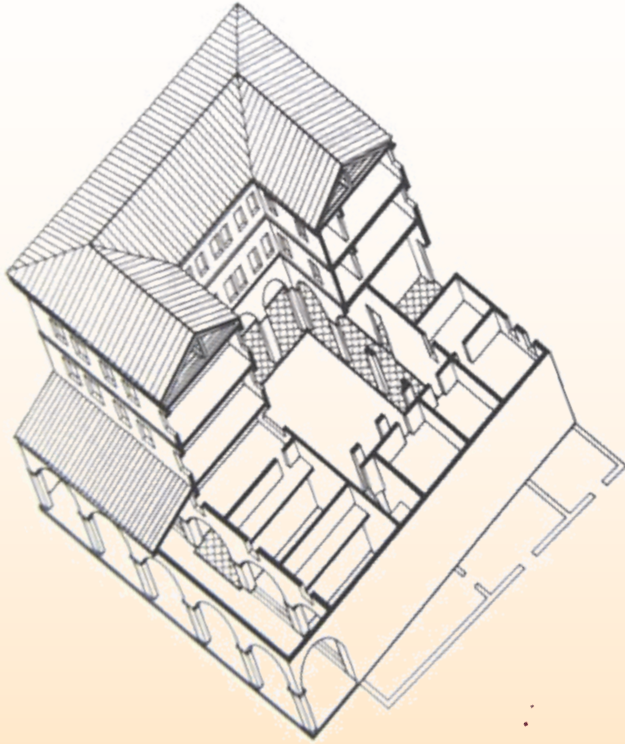


Intentional Community: Moving from Monologue To Dialogue



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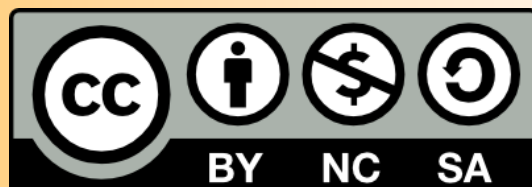


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From Monologue to Dialogue ...

I am not sure if you have interior dialogues that meander throughout your days sometimes scattered and, at other times, with the kernel of a narrative? Perhaps they are not necessarily words, but – nonetheless – offer direction, challenge or nudge you with a voice other than your own? Perhaps they are not always affirming or hopeful leading you beyond where you might feel comfortable; and, in other instances, filled with both potential and dread co-existing in the weave of your interior self?

The following sharing, for me, is such a tapestry that has long been stitched, avoided, returned to and worried upon; it now feels too big to contain. I do not necessarily know whether anything will come of this sharing with the Universe. Regardless, I have arrived at a place where speaking aloud, through the written word, and engaging in a dialogue feels important. What I share is not mine; I do not have a sense of ownership, though I admit I do have an implicit sense of direction, of trajectory, of possibility. I also do not know if this assuredness will include me or whether or not there is enough convergence for the monologue to move to dialogue and then a tangible lived expression. Regardless, I take this leap into the

¹ <http://www.united-church.ca>

unknown outside of the echoing walls of my own self. What may come is what will come. What you will hear is what you will hear and, in the end, perhaps that is enough ...

So how much do I share? What part of my context would be helpful for this to seem like it was offered with some intention, passion and hope? More importantly, where is the line between engagement and simply a lot of words that drown out the threads of a narrative that have been my own for some time? I have no doubt that I could not only ask more questions, but also that I could quickly lose the potential for this hoped for conversation ...

Let me briefly offer, therefore, the following: I have been a seeker who has travelled through many of the faith options that are apparent in the pluralism of our current Western Civilisation. In that journeying there have been many voices that have allowed me to distinguish between TRUTH (that which requires systematic defense and rhetoric) and truth (that which frees one to be a presence of compassion in the world). I do not care what any one person believes other than whether you reply in the affirmative to this question: Does whatever you believe lead you to acts of compassion that are grounded in humility?

I have chosen, after much discerning, to return to the Christian



Sharing Assumptions

There are two assumptions that are key to this discussion: 1) The Early Christian Church beckons us back to the truths it had discerned prior to becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313. C.E.²; and, 2) Since we are currently living within the wealthiest context of the human condition, we—in particular within the West—have an opportunity to leverage that wealth in a way that is consistent with the challenges that Jesus shared with the Rich Man:



The Rich Young Man³

Matthew 19:16-22 (MSG)

16Another day, a man stopped Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

17Jesus said, "Why do you question me about what's good? God is the One who is good. If you want to enter the life of God, just do what he tells you."

18-19The man asked, "What in particular?"

Jesus said, "Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you do yourself."

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_the_Great_and_Christianity

³ Acts 2:43-47 Offers an image of the Early church and the radical sharing that occurred within the community. 0.21 110629

Sharing Assumptions

20The young man said, "I've done all that. What's left?"

21"If you want to give it all you've got," Jesus replied, "go sell your possessions; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then come follow me."

22That was the last thing the young man expected to hear. And so, crest-fallen, he walked away. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn't bear to let go.

Those who felt called to Jesus' teachings during and within the first few generations following his execution took seriously the idea of sharing. This idea has been much maligned within our consumer-capitalist society that values the individual as the driving force behind an economic system that values the individual only so long as he or she participates in an economic system that is destroying the resources of the Earth

. In such an economy, the idea of being able to continually purchase, at the expense of others and the environment, becomes hidden by the illusion of unlimited progress and is quickly digested and fabricates the myth that if you earn enough, acquire enough, just work hard enough the fruits of the world shall be attained. The reality, however, is that the earth cannot maintain this artificially

Sharing Assumptions

insatiable paradigm, nor can the majority of the human species—who are required to provide the labour for the minority who live within this illusion.

The men and women who lived into the idea of Early Christian community shared, in order to ensure that the egalitarian potential that was modelled during Jesus' ministry was achieved. As the letters from Paul illustrate, however, this was not easy, in part, owing to both internal and external tensions. Nonetheless, being the Body drove these communities to ensure that the least were cared for by the sharing of their corporate abundance.

We are the inheritors of this Christian tradition and we must acknowledge that we are not the least for whom Jesus clearly indicated a preference throughout his ministry. I do not mean to imply that we do not suffer, do not have ills or brokenness. The reality, however, is that if you are reading these words, likely printed from a computer or on a screen, you are—as am I—the rich person in this story that appears in all of the Synoptic Gospels.⁴ By extension, the challenge before us is whether or not we are able to embrace the question in the 21st Century, in a way that best utilises that wealth, in order to offer healing to all Creation?

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_rich_young_man

Community: Insula-style ...

Context

The Roman Insula—Latin for island—was a tenement structure.⁵ It was the apartment complex of its day and often housed those who were poor to the middle class. Though these are artificial terms—*poor* and *middle class* for the Roman context—they are helpful to understand the central intent of the insula as a *home*.

As with any large structure, the build quality reflected the degree of privilege of those whom it housed: the wealthier the people, the better the construction. For the urban Roman context, the tenements were both a boon as they allowed many people to maximise valuable space required in a city and also a threat, because the poorer constructed models could become flash-points for the ever-present threat of fire.

It is likely that it is in such apartments that some members of the Early Church called home. It is in these places where Paul's letter were received, in which there was a corporate sharing of abundance. These communities were likely made up of various strata of Roman Society that ranged from those who had to those who did not. Paul's letters often offer guidance about how to live in these communities

⁵ <http://library.thinkquest.org/26602/romanhouses.htm>
[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Insula_\(building\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Insula_(building))

⁶ Ephesians 2:19-20.
Romans 8:1-17.

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and offered challenges when there was a tendency to slide back into the hierarchical model of Roman culture.⁶

It is not only this model of living that lies at the core of this monologue, but it is also the physical structure itself that I think resonates for our urbanised Western context. A city is a gift because it involves a multitude finding ways to co-exist and it is a challenge because it can reflect the horrors of the injustices that are required for those who have to enjoy comfort. For the Early Church, it was within these tensions that they made their home and, I would offer, where we too might be led.

Structure

The Roman Insula was inward looking. Apartments would be housed several stories high with an open courtyard in the center. The courtyard acted as a light-well and would often have a green space that could be utilised for small scale gardening. Depending on the wealth of the occupants, water features, shared worship space and larger gardens might also be included. Often the insula housed multiple generations of the same family and, in some instances and dependent upon status and wealth, could be occupied by one larger extended family.

Community: Insula-style ...

Often the apartments overlooked the courtyard with a balcony like façade and the exterior windows were smaller and were designed to allow light and quick access for the disposal of waste and refuse. In general, these windows were utilitarian in nature, as the units focused internally to the shared courtyard

Though the apartments were more internally focused, the first floor of the exterior of the insula housed artisans and craft shops. Local providers of goods and services—for both the internal and surrounding community—could be purchased and often ensured that income remained within the neighbourhood. As the apartments often housed families and extended networks, these same people often also operated the businesses as well. The insula was both home—in that it was private in nature—and it was connected with the larger community—in that its members operated businesses and offered skills back to the neighbourhood. It is also worth noting that the private and public spheres also set the standards of gender roles and expectation: women belonged in the private and men occupied both. Part of the Early Church's core challenges to secular context of the Roman Empire was its attempt to live into the egalitarian model that Jesus modelled during his minority.

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Modern Context

Though it is fair to say that the insula, both as a model of living and as an actual physical structure, would translate well into either an urban or rural context, it is my belief that it is better suited for a densely populated area. The community would be grounded in two assumptions: Christ-centred (*Modern Context*) and green-motivated (*Modern Structure*).

Initially, owing to my own context, there might be a stronger denominational presence of the United Church of Canada (UCC). It must be acknowledged, however, that we occupy a time of an evolving post-modern, non-denominational context. Post-Christendom is beginning to reject dogmatic or denominational niceties: rather there is a developing theology of radical inclusivity. To be explicit, regardless of theological differences, **ALL** are welcome within this insula who are willing to live into the egalitarian model that Jesus offered and which translates, within our current Christian experience, as a community that welcomes all—regardless of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, culture, class or any human construct that is intended to keep people apart or oppressed—who desire to live in right relationship.

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The community would live into being a place that cared for its members throughout the life-cycle. Though secular care is afforded to those who are ill, aging or dying, too often people die alone and without the dignity that a Beloved of God is warranted. As such, such a collection of men and women would endeavour to educate and care for one another to ensure that the presence of the Holy would be experienced with the warmth of a known human touch throughout the cycle of life.

This would be a worshipping Christian community that would be comfortable to model faith not only within the confines of the courtyard, but out in the streets of the neighbourhood in which the insula was planted.

Furthermore, this Christ-centred community would take very seriously the neighbourhood into which it was planted. In particular, the inner city context of many urban environs mirror the horrors that have been perpetuated upon the least. Jesus' ministry went to the people who lived on the margins and offered them a model, an example, of a different way: a way that allowed them to challenge the narrative that this life was simply that of misery and toil. The insula-community would do the same., while also accepting that the

⁷ This number range, 100-230 with the ideal being 150, is understood as the Dunbar's Number: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number

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following question must be in front of those who have the privilege to engage in this conversation that possesses the temptation and potential to simply end up echoing previous aspects of Christendom: How do you be authentic in community, realizing all the privilege that I/we/you carry?

Establishing such a community is not missional-work, rather it is a declaration of solidarity. By harnessing the abundance currently enjoyed by many within middle-class Mainstream Christianity at the beginning of the 21st Century, the men and women who live into this opportunity would respond to the challenge that the Rich Man faced. Unlike the parable, however, this is one manner in which to live into the challenge posed to those who enjoy privilege owing to the happenchance of birth.

Though certainly not final, for the sake of this short exploration, the insula-community would be intentional about integrating into the community. This intentionality would only be bound by context and imagination. Some examples might be advocacy for affordable living, beautification of inner cities and industrial parks, resistance to gentrification, advocacy for those with the least, feeding those who are unable to care for themselves, capacity building for individuals

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and the neighbourhood that would lead to dignity, and support the greening of the urban landscape. Regardless of the work, it would be key to take direction from those with whom the community walked and with whom trust had been gained. The days of colonialism are not gone and such an opportunity would need to resist its current resurgence.

Modern Structure

In general, the structure of the Roman Insula would be similar in its contemporary expression. There would be approximately 50 units. 40 units (80%) would be dedicated to permanent members, another 5 (10%) for those in transition and 5 (10%) to accommodate those in the local community for whom there is discernible mutuality. The general size of the community would be range from 100-230, but the ideal would be 150.⁷ Furthermore (See: *The Body*), once this threshold had been met, the community would intentionally begin to plant another community in another locale.

Though it is outside of the scope of this introductory exploration, the intention is that this community would be as green as is possible with current technology. Some of the possibilities to consider, though not limited to, are: recycled building material, alternative and carbon-

⁸This example illustrates the hope that this initial insula-community will be able to provide funding/support for future plants that will be less onerous than the initial community.

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neutral insulation methods, geo-thermal heating/cooling, energy production that would allow independence from the grid (i.e. geo-thermal, solar, wind); the roof would utilise green-roof technology geared toward gardening; and, energy-efficient windows & doors.

All decisions would be grounded in an intentionally and communally agreed to environmental evaluative process. (See: *Decision Making*).

By extension, the community would be committed to urban gardening. Both the courtyard and roof would be dedicated to this end and could include the use of an apiary to insure pollination of annual produce.

The Body

The Pauline idea of the Body, as an image for the Christian community, continues to be one that speaks to people on many levels. It is, ultimately, an effective way to illustrate both the potential and challenges that confront those who respond to a Call to Discipleship.

For the insula-community, this image is key to both its feasibility and longevity. If the community is to move into a dialogue, which ultimately translates into action and actuality, it is important to understand what and how this body might function and operate as

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an entity that is composed of individuals.

As mentioned previously, the structure would contain—approximately— 50 units. These units would house approximately 150 people. 10% of these units would be dedicated to ensuring right relationship with those within the planted community. What that means is that those 5 units would be set aside as a way to intentionally honour the intent of living in solidarity with those within the neighbourhood. This opportunity for mutual discernment will likely not be easy, but it presents an opportunity to begin to challenge the various cultural norms and stereotypes that are reinforced when we do not choose to live with intention.

10% of the units would be held for people in transition. This might include, but would not be limited to, people seeking the Creator and simply needing space to be, people who might be in a place where the safety of a secure community might allow them to discern what next, people who might be moving from one insula-community to another,⁸ and those who are trying to figure out whether or not commitment to community-living is a fit.

Finally, 80% of the units will permanently house those committed to the local expression of this particular insula-community. Each unit will

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be modular in design, meaning that other than the fixed facilities found in each unit—kitchenette and bathroom—the space can be modified to reflect the needs of those who occupy each space. It is, at this point, imagined that each unit will be approximately 700' in size.

As mentioned previously, central to the community's physical expression is the courtyard.—a green space that would serve as a living reminder of the corporate connexion to Creation. Furthermore, the centrality of the courtyard would also serve as a reminder of the green roof technology that will offer further opportunities for sustainability through urban gardening .

Other key areas to the gathering community would be both the worship space, which would also serve as a general gathering space, and the fellowship area, which is intended for regular meals that would be shared in community on a regular basis. Though it must be acknowledged that differing commitments outside of the insula-community will mean that not everyone can gather for fellowship and worship consistently, there is—nonetheless—an explicit expectation that the community will gather for these two events as regularly as individual commitments can accommodate. Though it

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may seem redundant to reinforce this expectation, the worshipping experience will serve as both an individual opportunity to centre and connect with Holy through community, but also serve to collectively embolden the people for the work that is possible through their commitment to this course of Discipleship.

As with many items in this preliminary discussion, much will remain unspoken. That is the nature, I would offer, of building trust and sharing a vision that moves from the self and beyond. Being open to how this will change is part of the challenge that I must recognise as I choose to share this long standing monologue. Much that remains unspoken, I believe, are the items, the details, the substantive issues that the community must address collectively. With that acknowledgement, there are two matters, I feel, that I must share prior to completing this section: Decision Making Processes & Governance Model.

What is key, I would suggest, after reading Paul's letters to the Early Church is the requirement for any community to have, in some way, an intentional vocabulary that helps with healthy and respectful communication, even in times when there is conflict and disagreement. As such, I am suggesting two tools that have helped

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me personally and vocationally: the Enneagram and—complementarily—Archetype exploration. Ultimately, communication, when effective, is grounded in an individual having a high degree of self-knowing and, in respect to mutuality, the trust of a community grounded in the same vocabulary.

It may not seem, immediately, that a shared vocabulary is a prerequisite to Decision Making Processes and Governance Models, but it has been my experience is that it is in the tasks and workings of any community where derailment can occur. If this experiential reality is shared, then I would further suggest that such intentional tools become a central and ongoing educational opportunity that should occur on a regular basis.

The core model of decision making I believe must be a Consensus Model. Though this process often takes more time, it is a way to ensure both long-term engagement and the health of the community. Everyone who will comprise this community will have different theologies, politics, perspectives of right and wrong. Grounding those differences as the gift of diversity, as opposed to a detriment, I believe begins in embracing a Decision Making Process that is geared towards harnessing the gift of plurality. Before moving

Leveraging Abundance

I have already mentioned the reality of the abundance that is enjoyed by middle-class Mainstream Protestants within Western Culture. I recently learned that, as of 2008, The United Church of Canada had an estimated 3.3 Billion dollars tied up in property! We may be experiencing many reasons to lament as we journey into the 21st Century, but to claim poverty feels dishonest, at the very least!

By extension, many of us enjoy such abundance. That gift of wealth, as my experience anecdotally indicates, is often felt more as a weight by people who long to engage in their faith in an intentional and authentic manner. The insula-community I believe is just one way to respond to that longing.

As with much of this monologue-dialogue, there are many items that cannot be addressed until action begins. I offer the following, therefore, as a working and flexible framework:

- The insula-community cannot proceed until there are 15 families/individuals willing to commit to this venture of faith;
- Commitment will require an agreed upon formula of sharing that will ensure there is both enough possible equity contributed and people committed in order to then approach possible NGO/faith-based contributors;

Leveraging Abundance

- The formula I am suggesting is 100% of all equity/income;
- It must be acknowledged that such a formula cannot be fully realised until the community itself is built and established;
- The interim will see the initial 15 negotiating what equity can be liquidated, in order to begin to pool a sufficient amount of capital to seek supplemental funders and financing;
- Once such negotiating has occurred, living accommodation will be further discerned for those who have released the capital tied up in property with those who have not yet done so;
- At this stage, the 15 will discern the 6 Elders/Eldest;
- From this point, supplemental financing will be actively pursued, as well as discerning the additional 25 families/individuals, but no less than 15 to ensure that 60% of the apartments are accounted for prior to breaking ground;
- During this time, the original 15, elected Elders/Eldest and the up to 25 later committed Disciples will begin to deal with the many substantive issues, which are not limited to: financial framework (that will address many items, some of

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which are: a formula based on national mean disposable income that will be returned to members of the community; reserve fund; tithing to local community; fund for further education and supplemental health care options; and, fund designated to seed future plant); specific architectural designs; establishment of insula-community as a cooperative/registered charity; community norms; and, curriculum of study focused around the use of the Enneagram/Archetype tools to normalise Consensus Making Model and to ensure there is an established vocabulary of self-knowing for use throughout the Governance Model; and,

- Once no less than 30 families/individuals are committed (while noting that as new Disciples are identified the same approach to liquidating property will be utilised as with the initial 15) building/construction will begin.

This section's sole purpose is to offer a way to transition from dialogue to action. I realise it does not offer particulars, but I do feel it is a useful framework that can serve to encourage any conversation that continues toward actuality.

A Time to Listen ...

My initial response to the silent and persistent whisper to share this monologue was anxiety. I was concerned that sharing it would seem naïve, foolhardy and perhaps even idealistic. I now realise that a) that is in fact the case, and b) that's just fine! This shift has occurred owing to the reality that as I have shared this monologue, even only in passing and, when the gift of time was afforded, through conversation the possibility seems to resonate with many people. I do not know whether this will translate into action, for me personally—though I certainly long for it. Regardless, I take deep satisfaction for choosing to share this with the Universe in the hope that it serves as motivation for others to dream and imagine radical ways to live into the model of church that beckons us from the experience of our Early Church Brothers & Sisters!

In Christ,

RMT

PS Please do let me know if you have challenges, affirmation or responses in your own context that are influenced by this

