Communal Pathways to Sustainable Living:
International Communal Studies Association Conference, Findhorn Foundation

I have just been at Findhorn Foundation, that well-known, 50-year-old intentional community in Scotland, for ICSA2013 (June 26-28). The community hosted 250 delegates (including 120 presenters) from over 40 countries. Academics, graduate students (including two of mine), and intentional community members socialised, debated, and shared information and inspiration.

After ICSA Chairperson Jan Bang (from Norway) and conference organiser Dr. Graham Meltzer (from Findhorn) opened the conference, Dr. Robert Gillman (from the US) spoke about “the Dynamic Planetary Context for Intentional Communities.” Giving an up-beat assessment—“I have never been more encouraged about the future than I am today”—Robert argued that “there are no environmental problems—only environmental symptoms of human problems,” and promoted the role of intentional communities as demonstrators and exemplars of change.

Over the next three days, we heard topics as diverse as David Leach’s (Canada) “Kibbutzing the Burbs: Can sustainable community be scaled-up for suburbia?”, Nicholas Anastasopoulos’s (Greece) “The Crisis and Emergence of Communal Experiments in Greece”, and Ruth Kark’s (Israel) “Christian Communes in Israel.” Other speakers came from Australia, Austria, Brazil, Congo, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the US.

My personal highpoints included Stephen Lloyd-Moffett’s (US) explanation of “ivra” forms of communal monasticism, Ina Meyer-Stoll’s and Achim Ecker’s (Germany) update on the iconic ZEGG community, and Iris Kunze’s (Germany) insights into “Why is Community so Popular in Individualistic Society?” My presentation, “Single-Sex, Secular Intentional Communities in Australia,” was well received.

We also had 22 workshops on offer with titles including:
“Light Your Fire: How to create enthusiasm, focus and passion in the individual and in an intentional community”; “Story Telling in Community”; “Moving to Connect: Sacred and popular dance to build intentional community”; “Creating a Conscious Culture for Community Sustainability”; and “Punch Drunk Love: The spirituality of wine in community.”

At our second plenary session, we heard detailed accounts of how the Findhorn Foundation thrives, with over £1.8 million (US$2.7 million) annual income, mainly from education and guest programs, allowing the community to engage with a wide range of NGOs as well as the United Nations. The Findhorn Foundation supports over 100 “co-workers” while another 600 community members support the Foundation in a host of ways. Recent research confirmed their extraordinarily small ecological footprint. Our electricity was generated by their four wind turbines, most of our food was grown in their gardens, and our wastes were treated by their “living machine.” The Findhorn Ecovillage is one of several iconic leaders of the global intentional communities movement.

At the third plenary session, six senior scholars (including me) and community members looked at the future of the global intentional community movement. Most, including me, were positive, albeit with reservations. Intentional communities are no longer a wealthy, western phenomenon (niche or otherwise), not limited to middle-class “drop-outs,” but have enormous implications around the globe—particularly within the guise of ecovillages and cohousing.

When not speaking, listening, discussing, and learning, we enjoyed Findhorn’s Taizé Choir, ate superb vegetarian meals, slept comfortably within ecological housing, and danced, sang, meditated, discussed, and shared life with each other and with Findhorn Foundation community members. Each evening, we enjoyed a range of entertainment, wrapping-up this ICSA conference with a traditional Scottish Céilidh where professors, students, intentional community members, and other guests danced such classics as
“strip-the-willow” into the night.

The International Communal Studies Association (www.ic.org/icsa) was founded in 1985 by Professor Yaacov Oved of Israel and Professor Donald Pitzer of the US. The ICSA meets every three years somewhere in the world, usually in an intentional community or an historical communal site. Recent conferences have been held at Damanhur (Italy), ZEGG (Germany), Amana (US), and Kibbutz Mizra & Emek Yehez Reel College (Israel). Membership is open to anyone interested in learning about intentional communities around the globe.

Professor Yaacov Oved, being unable to attend, sent farewell wishes via DVD. He reminded us how ICSA came into being, and of the important role it continues to play in bringing together scholars and communards from around the globe.

This ICSA conference, my 10th, was a wonderful opportunity to appreciate the exciting and dynamic nature of the global intentional communities movement, to meet and learn from people from different continents, to appreciate how to create positive futures for members and for the world—and to have fun.

Our next ICSA conference, under the new chairmanship of Chris Coates (Editor of Diggers and Dreamers, and founder of Lancaster Cohousing, UK) will likely be held at Tamera community (Portugal) in 2016, so I hope COMMUNITIES readers will start planning to attend and enjoy a unique, intentional-community experience.

Note: Conference proceedings and video-recordings of the plenary sessions and paper presentations are available as free downloads from the conference website: www.findhorn.org/icsa.

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