‘Intentional community’ is a reasonably modern term, but refers to a very old way of living communally and includes what are known as communes, ecovillages, cohousing communities and a wide range of religious, social and political ‘utopias’. The term intentional community was coined in North Carolina, USA during the late 1940s by Griscom Morgan and other members of Community Service to refer to people coming together “by intent”. A Trove search shows its first use in an Australian newspaper in the Canberra Times (14 August 1976:10).

The phrase emphasises members’ intention to create a better, perhaps ideal society, with more sharing and equity, and a healthier lifestyle. Such people regard both society and culture as being malleable, or perfectible, and visualise better ways of living – then consciously try to bring these into reality (Metcalf & Christian, 2003).

Of course no-one achieves utopia and no sensible person would expect to, but evidence is that people following an intentional community path improve their well-being and standard of living, however measured, while reducing their environmental impact.

While the specific ‘intentions’ of people forming such communities differ, most include simpler living, increased self-sufficiency in terms of energy, housing, health and food, having a reduced ecological footprint, greater equity and self-actualisation, and a richer social and cultural milieu through being part of a supportive pseudo-family of like-minded people (Metcalf, 1995 & 2004).

Victoria, like the rest of Australia, has a long and rich, albeit little-known, history of intentional communities, and many thrive today, with many others being planned and the occasional new one opening.

A Brief History of Victorian Intentional Communities

While there were several attempts to create intentional communities in the first half of 19th century Australia, Victoria’s first was Herrnhut, established in Geelong in 1852 and moving to Penshurst the following year. The founder was Johann Friedrich Krumnow, from the eastern part of Germany, who led a group of about 60 ex-Lutherans to create an intentional community, sharing all income and resources, growing most of their own food, and living as brothers and sisters following God’s divine will – as channelled by Krumnow, of course. They built beautiful blue-stone communal eating, praying and living quarters, worked together and prospered, producing wool and wheat for export, and dairy products which they sold to miners on the gold fields (Metcalf & Huf, 2002).

In the mid 1870s they were joined by ex-members of Hill Plain, another Christian commune from near Tungamah, which was the first to be formed and led by a woman, Maria Heller. Heller, based on what she ‘knew’ to be divine revelation, believed that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of the new Messiah and thereby establish a new era. Under divine guidance, Heller led her followers from Eastern Europe to Tungamah where God had promised to provide them with cleared farmland and ready-built houses.

Instead, her members starved in makeshift tents while she failed to become pregnant in spite of taking several ‘consorts’. Victorian police tried to commit her to an insane asylum before Johann Krumnow intervened and, in March 1876, led Heller and her followers on a 500km wagon trip to Herrnhut where, indeed, the Hill Plain communards found cleared and productive farmland and communal houses awaiting them, just as God had promised. One could argue that Heller was Australia’s first cult-leader and Hill Plain our first cult (Metcalf & Huf, 2002:56-76).

The Hill Plain communards did not fit in with the more staid and practical Herrnhut members and most, including Heller, left within a few years. They did not re-form as an intentional community, but Heller continued to channel God’s word, and prophesise the end of the world, until she died, childless, in 1906.

After Johann Krumnow died in 1880, Herrnhut’s leadership was assumed by 27-year-old Louisa Elmore who had grown up there. Due to accumulated debts, an ageing and dwindling membership, and changing economic and farming conditions, Herrnhut closed and was sold in 1889, although some members lived on the site until 1925 (Metcalf & Huf, 2002:77-139). Today, stone ruins, including those of their small church, remain in a sheep paddock, and have recently been the subject of archaeological research by Geoffrey Hewitt of La Trobe University.
As the back cover of the book Herrnhut: Australia's First Utopian Community declares: “The communards sought a better world, free from corruption and state oppression… This remarkable group established a safe haven for Aborigines, a refuge for homeless people, and arguably Australia's first women's shelter—while efficiently managing a large farm and supporting, on average, about fifty people”.

As Herrnhut was closing in the 1880s, several other Victorian intentional communities were forming, including Co-operative Home, Australia's first urban intentional community, at Melbourne's Albert Park, in 1888, and Community Home, near Drouin, in 1889. While Community Home, formed by George Brown with 30 members, supported itself through dairying and raising small crops, Co-operative Home, formed by David Andrade and John Andrews with six members, ran a bookshop, newspaper and Australia's first vegetarian restaurant. In spite of having strong Socialist, egalitarian philosophies neither lasted more than a few years (Featherstone, 2006; Metcalf, 2012:150-1).

In 1892, Horace Tucker and Charles Strong, both Melbourne-based evangelical ministers and Christian Socialists, started a large-scale experiment in intentional communities in Victoria. They formed nine groups usually known as Croydon, Horsham # 2, Jeetho, Jindivick, Kilfeera, Moora Moora, Red Hill, Wonwondah and Wombete, with a total of over 1000 members. These members, almost all lacking rural skills, tried to support themselves through farming, timber-getting and doing government-supported infrastructure work such as road-building and draining the Kilfeera Swamp. They had their own schools, bakers, shoemakers, etc, pooled all income and resources, and tried to live good lives. In spite of acquiring reasonable land and with Tucker and Strong providing leadership and external funding, all groups collapsed within a few years because members were neither prepared for rural work nor for communal living (Adams, 1971:77-106).

Also during the 1890s in Victoria, several small intentional communities, such as Hirsch Single Tax Community (Wedderburn) and Struan Robertson Co-operative Village (Blackwood North) formed, following obscure political and communal principles, but none lasted long. Others, such as Rechabite Co-operative Agricultural Colony, were mooted but never got off the ground.

Leongatha Labour Colony (Leongatha), established in 1893 by Pastor Herman Herlitz who had been previously connected to Herrnhut, grew to have a membership of about 200, mainly men. It slowly dwindled but did not close until 1919. It was, and is, often seen more as a place for training unemployed urban men with rural skills than as a communal group in its own right, although communal living was always central to its operation. It was, and remains, a controversial, government-supported venture – either a utopian communal intentional community, or an 'anti-utopia', a dystopian semi-prison, an abuse of socialism (Kennedy, 1968; Murphy, 1983).

The Victorian Government, in 1893, enacted legislation to facilitate what they called Village Settlements. These were only marginally communal and it is questionable if one should consider them to be intentional communities or just another attempt to settle unemployed urban people on the land. Nevertheless, over that decade about 7500 settlers joined 89 Village Settlements. Some were large, such as Tonimbuk (Bunyip) with 12,500 hectares, and Fumina (Neerim) with 10,100 hectares, while others were small such as Coongulmerang and Sarsfield, both near Bairnsdale and with only 13.5 hectares. Some had large populations such as Bullarto (Lysonsville) with 552 and Echuca North (Echuca) with 322 people, while others had small populations such as Greensborough (Hurstbridge) with eight and Beethang (Wodonga) with seven residents. Some, such as Woosang (Charlton) and Murray (Koondrook) quickly collapsed while others, such as Dimboola and Warburton, prospered and became the foundation of contemporary rural communities. But idealistic and radically communal they were not (Adams, 1971:107-318).

In 1900, Dr Arthur Dalzell, following the teachings of an obscure Christian visionary, Benjamin Wills Newton, formed Holy City, an intentional community on 46 hectares of farm-land on the eastern edge of Kyneton. The 34 members lived communally in four houses and met to pray, eat and socialise in Ernstowe, their sixteen-room mansion. They were pacifists and pseudo-anarchists who believed that they were on the spiritual path to a New Jerusalem as they awaited the second coming of Christ. They finally did move to Jerusalem in 1911, but many died in Palestine of malaria and typhoid fever (Featherstone, 2008).

Also during the early 20th century in Victoria, Bickleigh Vale (Mooroolbark), Guild Hall (Melbourne) and Warrandyte (Warrandyte) intentional communities were formed, but all ended less dramatically than had Holy City.

During the 1930s, Mallacoota Community Farm (Mallacoota), Heide (Bulleen), Montsalvat (Eltham) and Tucker Settlement (Carrum Downs) formed. Heide and Montsalvat were based on artistic excellence and hedonistic indulgence while the other two were based more on Christian Socialism. While Mallacoota Community Farm soon collapsed, Heide continues as a museum, Montsalvat as an artists' retreat, and Tucker Settlement as a retirement village (Webb, 1972; Roland, 1984; Bennett, 1995; Harding, 2012).

In the 1940s and 50s, various intentional communities formed in Victoria including Goodwill Service Fellowship (Fitzroy, 1940), Whitland (Mansfield, 1941), Maryknoll (North Tynong, 1949) and St Benedicts (Gladysdale, 1972),

In the 1970s and 80s, Victoria’s intentional community movement really took off with dozens of small groups forming, including urban groups such as *Moorabbee* (Kooyong), *Carlton Resistance Collective* (Carlton) and *House of Gentle Bunyip* (Clifton Hill), and rural groups such as *Hesed* (Glen Lyon), *Moora Moora* (Healesville), *Commonground* (Seymour), *Mt Murrindal Co-operative* (Buchan) and *Ruach* (Heidelberg). These all prospered for some time, with *Moora Moora*, *Commonground*, and *Ruach* being bigger and better than ever today. They had different founding philosophies but all had a concern for the land and for creating sustainable community in which people could thrive with equity (Cock, 1979; Metcalf, 1995:14-40, 140-69).

Since then, Victoria has seen the development of urban intentional communities such as *Murundaka* and *Urban Coup* (Melbourne), both cohousing groups, and small rural groups such as *Alchera* (Longwood East), *Peace Farm* (Yarra Junction) and *Entropia* (Moe), with most following the ecovillage model.

Cohousing groups usually have a shared kitchen, dining and lounge areas and spare bedrooms, with each living unit having private sleeping and living space. These are popular with professionals who want to live in intentional community without leaving the city. Ecovillages tend to be in rural areas and with most living units being more-or-less self-contained, while members share land, equipment and facilities such as gardens, roads, power distribution and perhaps transport. Both cohousing and ecovillage models have a strong emphasis on equality, personal growth, sustainability and environmental responsibility (Metcalf & Christian, 2003; Meltzer, 2005:114-62).

**Summary of History**

Although this account shows that many of these groups were short-lived, *Herrnhut* lasted 37 years and, in 2014, Victoria has intentional communities such as *Moora Moora* (with about 65 residents) and *Commonground* (with about 15 residents) that are about 40 years old. Various scholars, including me, have debunked the myth that all intentional communities are short-lived, pointing out that, like small businesses, while many collapse within a few years, others endure and prosper. Membership duration in intentional communities, far from being transient, is longer-lasting than that for school-teachers but a bit shorter than that for academics and public servants (e.g. Zablocki, 1980:146-62).

While *Moora Moora* and *Commonground* are rural, the emphasis today within this movement is on urban and suburban intentional communities, often following the cohousing model developed in Scandinavia in the 1970s, and refined in Holland, Canada and USA through the 1990s (Meltzer, 2005:1-17).

What all of these intentional communities have in common is their members’ desire to create a sustainable, human-centred and human-scale community in which to live a full, creative life: where children can grow in a safe, rich milieu; where adults can thrive; and where the elderly and infirm will be cared for. All intentional communities have fallen short of their ideals, but they have generally come closer, and achieved more, than have those Victorians living without such ideals.

**Ecological Footprint**

While most of the more recent intentional communities have an aim of reducing their ‘*ecological footprint*’, it is important to ask if there is evidence to indicate that they achieve this.

First, while *ecological footprint* is a very useful *heuristic* concept, it is far from straightforward when applied to real people living complex lives in the real world. What should be included in the calculations? While consumption of fossil fuels, electricity, white goods, etc. are obvious, what about child-bearing and rearing?
Arguably, the biggest ecological impact one can make is to have children – yet none of the studies take this into account. Just because it is hard to calculate is hardly an excuse for not trying (Best et al. 2008; Wiedmann and Barrett, 2010; Metcalf, 2014).

It is easy to measure consumption of electricity and gas, but what about the embedded energy in so-called energy-saving solar panels or hybrid electric cars? And should we compare an intentional community member’s ecological footprint with his/hers before joining, or against what demographically similar non-members consume today – and how would one do that anyhow? Measuring ecological footprint is far from “an exact science”, with most data being based on what can be easily measured rather than on what has the greatest long-term impact (Tinsley and George, 2006:33).

Nevertheless, several studies of the ecological footprint of intentional community members, conducted over the past forty years, are worth examining. American researchers found the energy consumption of urban intentional community members to be less than half that of their neighbours, and pointed out that instead of being materially worse off, they were better off, having access to more goods and services, at lower cost, through sharing. When joining an intentional community, consumption dropped by more than half while they maintained access to modern consumer appliances but used them far more efficiently (Tinsley & George, 2006; Metcalf, 2014).

Graham Meltzer (2005:99-106), an Australian researcher, found that in Cascade, an intentional community in Hobart, residents consumed less than half the electricity of their neighbours, floor space was about half that of neighbours and sharing appliances and equipment dramatically reduced cost of living and consumption while maintaining, or even expanding, access to modern conveniences. Meltzer found this pattern to hold, more-or-less, for such urban intentional communities around the globe.

As far as is known, there has been no good published research, yet, into the ecological footprint of rural intentional communities in Australia, although a PhD student in Sydney is working on this (Daly, 2014). Nevertheless, the international data is extensive and consistent, and there is no reason to think those research results would not roughly apply in rural Victoria.

Danish researchers found, in 2003, that rural intentional community members used between 2/3 and 3/4 the energy of fellow Danes but had only half their CO2 emissions (Samuelsson, 2003). German research in 2004 showed that intentional community members used considerably less energy and resources and emitted only a quarter of the CO2 compared to neighbours (Simon, 2004). Likewise, British research in 2006 found that intentional community members consumed about 1/4 of the national energy per person. When combined with a number of other measures, they concluded that intentional community members’ ecological footprint was under half that found across UK – and again this was without decreasing their quality of life (Tinsley & George, 2006).

These and various other studies suggest that intentional community members, on average, probably have about half the ecological footprint of other Victorians. Their cost of living is lower, their social networks are wider and deeper, loneliness, suicide and domestic violence, while not unknown, are relatively rare, and members, overall, seem to be happier than will be found in the general community (Metcalf, 1995, 2004 & 2014).

**Summary**

Evidence demonstrates that we humans have a long tradition of living in some form of intentional community, with the first reported example being Homakocion, established in Italy in about 525 BCE. Since then, we have probably never been without examples. I have argued elsewhere that “perhaps Homo sapiens (wise people) should be called Homo communitas (community people), since community of one sort or another is something into which we are born, in which we live, and where we shall all die and be long remembered – or soon forgotten” (Meltzer, 2004:5). And intentional community is about living community life to the fullest.

But, if intentional communities are such a great idea, why do not more people live in them? Many local governments are suspicious of intentional community developments and many individuals seem to fear them as being some sort of ‘cult’ or ‘hippie commune’. Unfortunately, Victoria is probably Australia’s most reticent state when it comes to local and state government support for intentional community developments. In Queensland, there are several large-scale projects such asCurrumbin Ecowillage and Crystal Waters, each with several hundred residents and each receiving local government co-operation. In NSW, Narara Ecowillage, a multi-million dollar project, is being built on land acquired from the State Government, with local government co-operation. In Tasmania, Tasman Ecowillage is being developed with local government encouragement. Intentional community developments are an efficient way to create community and strong communities help overcome a myriad of social problems (Metcalf, 1993, 1995, 2011 & 2013).

Victorian intentional communities such as Moora Moora, Commonground and Murundaka have open days to try and dispel some of the myths around such groups. Urban and regional planners, and even local councillors, show evidence of slowly becoming aware of what intentional communities have to offer. Melbourne’s annual Sustainable Living Festival, in Federation Square, also helps debunk some of the misapprehensions and ignorance about intentional communities.
communities as a real option for life in the 21st century.

But this is not to suggest that everyone could or should live in an intentional community. Many people are unable to cope with the intensity of such a complex social and cultural life. Others cannot contemplate sharing property and everyday life. Some seem afraid that their individuality and unique personality might be compromised within a communal environment. Evidence from many studies, however, shows that many people thrive within these rich social and cultural realms, prosper through sharing, and feel their individualism is supported through intentional community life (Cock, 1979; Munro-Clark, 1986; Metcalf, 1993, 1995, 2011 & 2013; Meltzer, 2005; Miller, 2013; Litfin, 2014).

One serious problem is that few of us are socialised into this way of communal living. When raised within a nuclear family that generally becomes how one assumes one ought to live. To live any way, with anyone, requires a degree of commitment and many people fear the commitment to a group way of life. Experienced members of intentional community recognise how important it is to carefully select new members who are open to new experiences, socialise them into this new way of life and develop what is known as 'we-consciousness' and help each other develop a deep and passionate commitment to the group and this lifestyle. Like success in any other social endeavour, this is not always easy, but perseverance pays off.

Several overseas intentional communities such as ZEGG in Germany, Findhorn Foundation in UK, and Twin Oaks, The Farm and Earthaven in USA all offer excellent live-in educational programs on intentional community living.

There are occasional efforts in Victoria to help train people into living in intentional community. As part of the Sustainable Living Festival, workshops demonstrate what to expect if joining an intentional community and how to be socialised into revelling in, rather than being tarnished by, the experience. Ecovillage Design courses are occasionally offered in Victoria and these look at the social and cultural aspects of this way of life. Commonground community, near Seymour, and Moora Moora, near Healesville, occasionally offer workshops which explore socialisation into intentional community. But while these projects help people fit into intentional community, most people prefer to just jump in and see how it goes.

Conclusion

While certainly not without problems, intentional communities, both rural and urban, are generally an effective way for many Victorians to reduce their ecological footprint and likelihood of personal problems such as loneliness, while living a more satisfying lifestyle on a lower income in the 21st century. Intentional communities can be a win-win option for the individual, society and the environment.

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