

The Call to a Christian Community Lifestyle

A MULTIPLY
'Let's talk' Booklet
for those wanting
to experience
living Christianity

The Call to a
Christian
Community
Lifestyle

by Trevor Saxby



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By Trevor Saxby
a Senior Leader of the Jesus Fellowship
and the New Creation Christian Community

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for those wanting to experience living Christianity



And all who believed were together
and had all things in common;
and they sold their possessions and goods
and distributed them to all,
as any had need.
(Acts 2:44, 45)

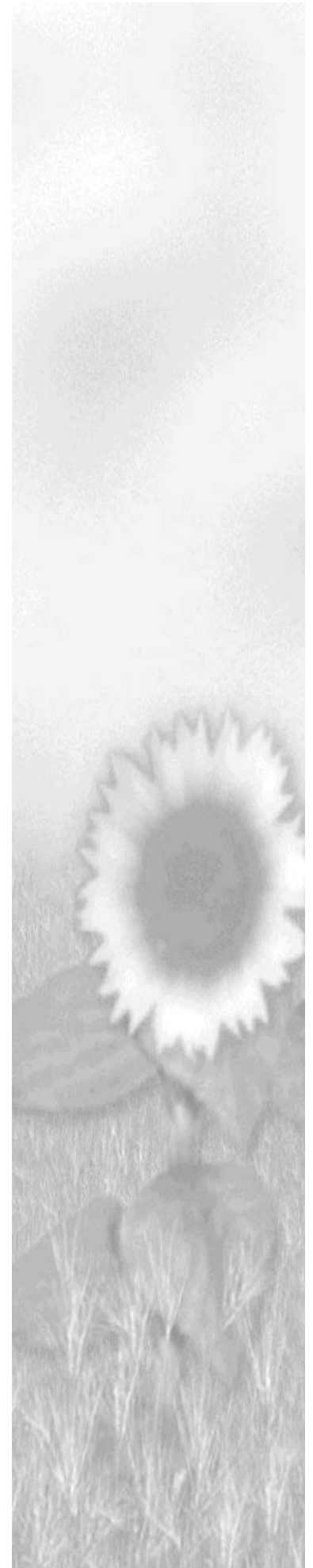
Now the company of those who believed
were of one heart and soul,
and no one said that any of the things
which he possessed was his own,
but they had everything in common.
(Acts 4:32)

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Introduction

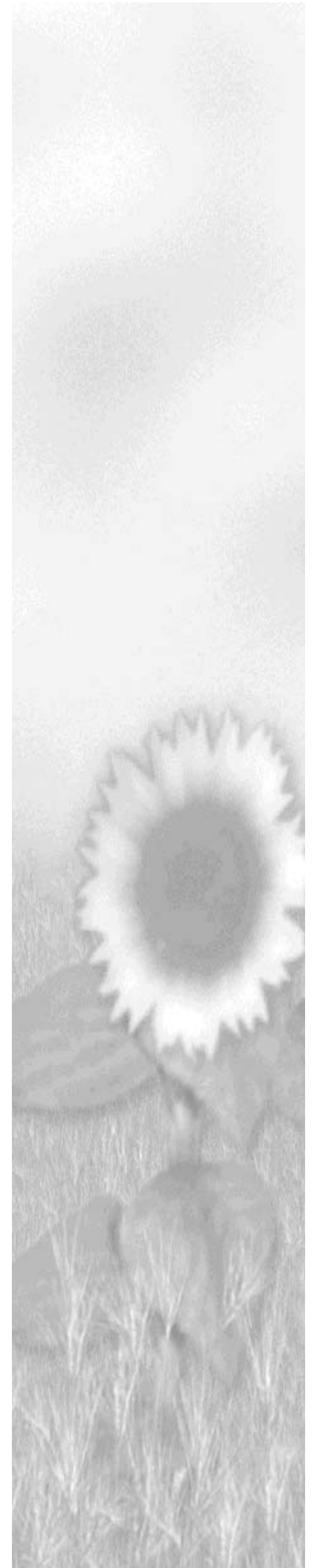
Christian Community is back on the agenda!

THIS BOOKLET was first published on 24 January 1998 for a Conference on 'The Christian Community Lifestyle in Today's Culture', held in Northampton, UK. The conference gave an opportunity to fellowship with other Christians keen to look at lifestyle implications for today.

Those first believers after Pentecost devoted themselves to four things: *teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers* (Acts 2:42). Following this model, there were elements of all four in the conference programme, as well as ample opportunity to *eat together with glad and humble hearts* (v. 46)!

Christian community is certainly back on the agenda. It was a theme at a recent Greenbelt festival. Some of the books that stimulated community discussion in the seventies are now being revised and reissued (e.g. Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*). A keynote speaker at the Wembley Praise Day in November 1997 said that the missing element in the Church's witness to society today was **community**.

So let's see ourselves as part of a prophetic movement in our land today, and may we all learn more deeply what it means to truly 'love one another earnestly from the heart' (1 Peter 1:22).



New Creation Christian Community



THE NEW CREATION Christian Community represents roughly a third of the membership of the Jesus Fellowship Church. It's made up of people who have felt God call them to live shared lives, as in the book of Acts. There are marrieds, children, committed celibates, and singles, living in properties ranging from ordinary three-bedroom houses right up to a former hotel with room for sixty people.

The Community has grown and developed from quite humble origins. The Baptist chapel at Bugbrooke, Northamptonshire, came alive in the charismatic renewal of the early 1970s. From day one, God planted in people's hearts a deep love for one another. We wanted to be together seven days a week! So even on evenings where there wasn't much on, folk would gather in someone's home and spend literally hours sharing their hearts and praising God.

We were quite a mixture, too! Village chapel-goers, Pentecostals, converted drug addicts from Northampton, intellectual seekers from Oxford, and hippies from almost anywhere, found that Jesus broke down dividing walls. As we gave ourselves to this, a love was born, and the foundations of a whole new society were laid. There was a two-way influence: the 'straights' parented the 'freaks' into a more ordered lifestyle, and the hippies (who

The Baptist chapel in Bugbrooke, Northamptonshire, where the story begins



'Here was a new culture, a 'city on a hill', where brotherhood and equality reigned'

were used to communes) convicted the middle-class by their emphasis on simple living and care for one another.

Around 1973, some families took in a single or two and started living in 'extended families'. Someone had the idea of buying food in bulk at the cash and carry, then sharing it around the church, as a way of living more simply and leaving more money for God's work. There was a notice board in chapel where people could pin notes: 'Sheila needs a sofa', 'Fred has time to mow lawns on Fridays', 'Barry has a carpet to give away'. We were starting to *share what we had* (Heb. 13:16).

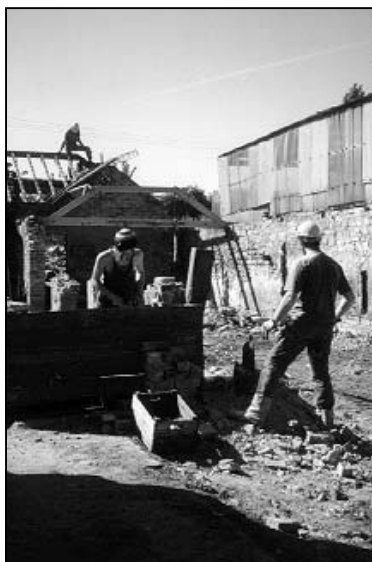
Suddenly Acts 2 and 4 came alive! The first Christians had shared *everything in common*. The love of Jesus had abolished the social injustice of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Here was a new culture, a 'city on a hill', a 'Zion of God', where brotherhood and equality reigned. We were already half way there, so shared community living was the logical next step. So, as God provided the funds, we bought one or two larger properties, and folk sold up their own homes and moved in.

Houses and businesses

That was 1974, since when we have grown to the point where there are around 80 community houses, large and small, spread over much of the UK. The road hasn't been easy, but it has certainly been blessed by God. We've had to learn many things. How to live at close quarters with all kinds of people, even those you don't like! How to respond when trials come and love burns low, and how to overcome with faith and devotion. How to arrive at a right 'mix' of people. How to manage finances and ensure everything is done fairly. Above all, how to 'take up our cross daily', lay down all that shouts 'Me!', and embrace the 'Us' of brotherhood in Jesus.

(Below, right) New Creation Hall in Bugbrooke, our first large house.

(Below, left) It needed a lot of work!





In the early days, as we laboured to restore old properties, we realised that working together was a good thing! So the vision was born for several businesses, owned by the church and staffed from the Community, which could provide a service to the neighbourhood *and* bring in an income for the Lord's work. After all, Paul made tents to finance his ministry. So we founded a building supplies firm, a farm, a health-foods wholesalers, and a painting/decorating/plumbing service, all of which are still trading, with over 200 of our own people employed there.

We soon realised that if we were to continue in existence long-term, we would have to organise ourselves in a way that was recognisable to outside agencies like the taxman! God raised up among us people with the gift of 'helps and administrations' (1 Cor. 12:28) to guide us through to the structure that we still have today. Jesus Fellowship Community Trust owns the community properties, furniture, equipment and vehicles as well as the House of Goodness Group of businesses. Day-to-day running costs are met from Common Purses at each house. There are separate funds for charitable church activities.



(Above) Christian community ... it takes all sorts, from brick-layers to doctors!

(Below) The Food Distribution Centre, our central buying department.

The staff of one of the Community's businesses. Almost all live in the New Creation Christian Community.



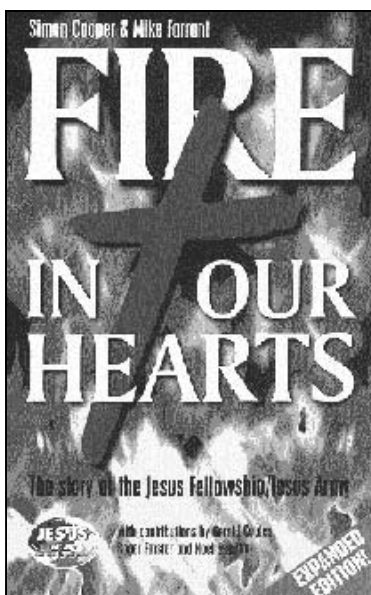
Servant-heartedness

Most of the members of the Community live together in large houses, pooling their goods, income, resources and abilities in God's service. Others live in their own place but are still part of the common purse of the large house to which they belong. The New Creation Christian Community is only one part of the Jesus Fellowship Church as a whole. Many Church members who are not part of the Community also take steps to live more shared and accountable lives, often including the area of their finances. Some try to buy or rent houses in the same street as other families, so they can operate a 'neighbourhood community' model, with a fair degree of sharing.

The Community members aim to serve the ever-growing and diversifying membership of the Fellowship as a whole. They seek not to be superior or elitist, but rather to add their love, commitment and servant-heartedness to the whole church. They can be counted on to 'be there' when needed. Church members also bring life to the Community by keeping its horizons broad and its members rooted in the real world!

Community doesn't exist for itself. Having premises with space available, and a community team that has learned to love one another, warts and all, means that we can invite people to come and stay a while with us. Our street outreach to the disadvantaged can be backed up by the offer of a time of restoration and growth in a family atmosphere. Christians searching for a New Testament way of living, and for relationships that go deep, can also come and stay in our houses for some 'hands on' experience of *faith that works through love* (Gal. 5:6).

Find out more by reading the full story of the Jesus Fellowship (see page 19)



Pentecost and Christian Communities



WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT descended in power on the first believers, He automatically led them into sharing. After all, Jesus had shared a common purse with His disciples, with Judas looking after the 'money box' (John 13:29). Now, following Pentecost, the 'love of God shed abroad in their hearts' (Rom. 5:5) meant that nobody wanted to stay rich while their brother or sister was poor. No committees, no experiments, just a practical expression of simplicity, justice and love.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). They were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-35).

Early Communities

After Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, godliness was eroded, and many spiritual souls turned to Christian community as a prophetic demonstration of how things ought to be.

Early leaders like Augustine, Basil, Jerome and John Chrysostom took in others to live as extended families. The 'Desert Fathers' of the 4th century set up communities in desert areas, some of which numbered thousands. Some of their writings, e.g. by St. Antony, have survived. Out of these grew the monasteries and convents, which were to be the torchbearers of Christian community for centuries (but which often needed revitalising!).

By the 6th century there were many believers living in monasteries and convents, and certain leaders drew up Rules

**'Nobody in the
Early Church
wanted to stay rich
while his brother
was poor'**

to govern their organisation. Benedict of Nursia wrote one (c.525) which is still in use today.

The Celtic churches of Britain, which God used to re-evangelise Western Europe from around the 450s onwards, were strongly community based. They embraced poverty, purity and brotherly love, together with a reverence for God's creation. They called their monasteries *muinntir*, meaning 'people', where each member was cared for by an *anamchara*, or 'soul friend'.

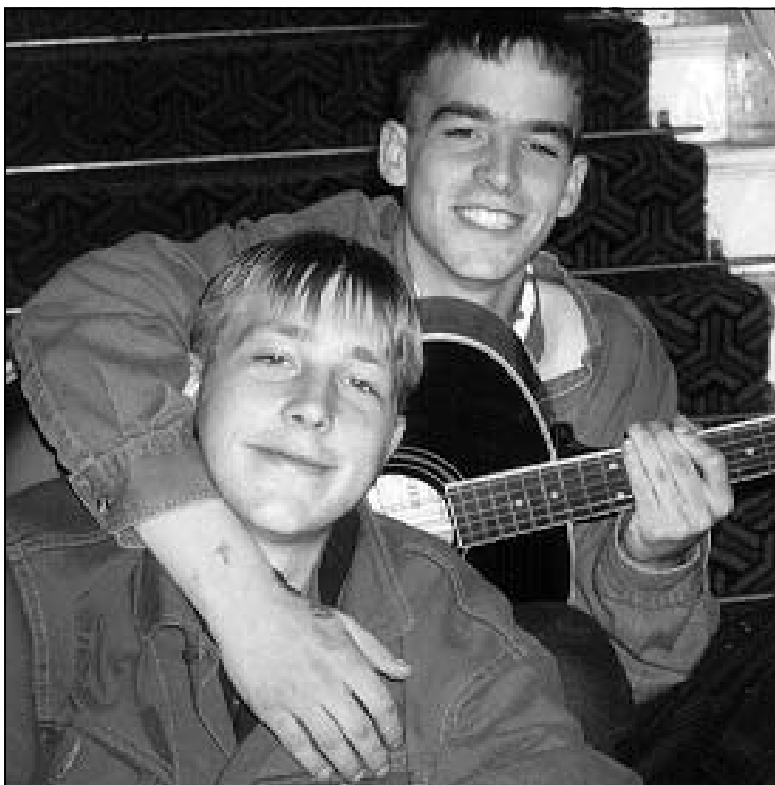
From the 13th to the 18th century

From about the 1200s, groups other than monasteries began living in Christian community. The Beguines of Belgium and the Waldensians of Switzerland were well known in their day for their sharing, their righteousness and their care for the poor. Yet they were persecuted and did not last.

The Brethren of a Common Life (late 14th century) in Holland actually produced one of the classic Christian books, Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. In Eastern Europe the United Brethren (15th century) had hundreds sharing all things in common.

The Reformation of the 16th century saw the final fragmentation of Roman Catholic control of the churches. Many believers followed the first Protestant champions, Luther and Calvin, into new denominations, but there were others who

Christian community ... means
real friendships



wanted a full-scale return to New Testament living – including Christian community.

The Swiss Brethren (from the Alps), the Mennonites (in Holland) and the Hutterites (in Eastern Europe) all founded churches based on equality and justice.

The Hutterites especially had large and carefully organised communities, ran their own schools, and provided a medical service for the local area. Their craftsmen were so gifted that their trade at times rivalled Venice! Yet they were severely persecuted, and thousands died for their faith. Nevertheless God preserved a remnant, and



the Hutterian Brethren (as they are now known) still exist today.

In the 17th century a huge experiment was tried in South America by some Jesuit missionaries. Faced with the horrors of genocide being practised by Spanish colonists, these missionaries gathered the Indians into communal settlements run on New Testament lines. Property was shared, the poor and widowed cared for, and craft goods were sold to provide income. At its height, this 'Holy Experiment' involved a staggering 140,000 people.

The 18th century saw the rise of the Moravian (or Herrnhuter) communities. They began in the 1720s when Count Zinzendorf opened his estates to persecuted believers, who founded a Christian community. They were fervent evangelists and great planners, so the movement spread widely, with similar communal settlements founded from Scandinavia down to South Africa. One of their missionaries was used by God to convert John Wesley.

The past two centuries

The 19th century saw a great upsurge of community activity, both Christian and secular. The main focus was the United States of America, where vast tracts of land were available. Christian communities such as Bethel, Zoar, and the Amana Society, flourished. Another, the Harmony Society, became one of *the* places to visit in America, its spirituality admired and its structures copied by economists and social reformers.

Coming to the 20th century we find a whole range of Christian community models (including traditional Roman Catholic and Anglican communities) in all continents. Communist China saw the Jesus Family. Germany spawned the Bruderhof, which still exists in England and the USA. The years since World War 2 have been fertile ground for expressions of love and sharing, with young people looking for solid moral ground and for relationships that carry weight. America has produced the Community of Celebration, Reba Place, JPUSA (Jesus People USA) and a host of other smaller communities. Britain too, and many other nations, have seen groups too numerous to list, often quite small but still very committed, rise up to the challenge of laying down their life for their brothers and sisters in a prophetic life of sharing, justice, simplicity and heart relationships, all through Jesus Christ.

'Young people are looking for solid moral ground and relationships that carry weight'

Christian community ... you can relax and enjoy!



Some relevant quotations



MOST CHRISTIANS live in the world and go to the church. God intends us to live in the church and go to the world. We are a counterculture. Our values are not the values of the culture around us. We do not embrace independence, but mutual submission and interdependence. We do not embrace materialism, but Jesus Christ as owner and master over all we have. We do not embrace privacy, but shared life, family, community.
Clay Ford, 1977

HOW MUCH more honourable it is to serve many than to live in wealth. How much more useful to have friends as our adornment than lifeless decorations!

Clement of Alexandria, 2nd century

DO NOT NEGLECT to do good and to share what you have. *Hebrews 13:16*

WHOEVER SPEAKS OF Christ and of love, and yet refuses to hand his property over to the community, for the sake of Christ and the poor, proves by his actions that he loves the things of the world more than Christ.

Andreas Ehrenpreis, an Anabaptist, 1650

JESUS OFFERS Himself and gathers a voluntary community wherever people hear His call, forming a new family of sharing with people of any and every previous condition. This is what heaven will be like – and the kingdom of heaven is at hand. *David Janzen, 1996*

WHOEVER LIVES by love, possesses Thy goods in common for the good of his neighbour, and not for himself. O Lord, since all the good that men have comes from Thee, how dare any give Thee of the worst and keep the best for himself!?

Anon., 14th century

COMMUNITY IS the best place to get rid of wilfulness, bad habits, and vices generally, for we are subject to the constant scrutiny and reproof of others, which, rightly taken, will go far toward preparing us for the great Community above.

An elder of the Zoar community, 1830s

I WANT TO impress upon you that truly blessed poverty of spirit is to be found more in humility of heart than in merely going without everyday possessions, and consists more in the renunciation of pride than in mere contempt for property.

Guerric, a 12th century monk

COMMUNITY LIFE means sacrificing daily all our strength and all our rights, all the demands commonly made on life and assumed to be justified. When people voluntarily make a joint commitment to renounce everything that is self-willed, isolated or private, their bondings become signposts to the ultimate unity of all mankind. *We have* to live in community, because God wants us in faith to give a clear answer to the unclear longings of people today. *Eberhard Arnold, 1927*

WE MUST engage in a rigorous practice of truth. The day the radical falters is the day the Christian radical must demonstrate his staying power. If reformation does not come, then the Christian community must assert its regained integrity in being a loyal remnant. Such people can be a spearhead in a new reformation.

Os Guinness, 1975

COMMUNITY MEANS nothing other than to have all things in common out of love for our neighbour. Each lays down what he has, and all share with one another, both in joy and suffering. "Mine" and "yours" have been the cause of all wars and still are today. Both are related to greed. Love does not seek its own ends, so it obviously seeks community. *A Hutterian Anabaptist, c. 1590*

POSSESSIONS ARE highly dangerous. They lead to a multitude of sins, including idolatry. Western Christians today desperately need to turn away from their covetous society's grasping materialism.

Ron Sider, 1976

Until Jesus comes in Majesty!



IN OUR DAY Satan may create counterfeit communities in the form of authoritarian cults. Our response must be to allow the Holy Spirit to do as He did in the first Church – to bring the wisdom, life and love by which we will become genuine *Christian* communities.

Such groups will become what Jesus called little ‘cities set on a hill, that cannot be hidden’, which bring ‘light to the world’ (Matt.5:14) and provide an impetus for evangelising the people and planting churches in the nation.

The 21st century will see a big increase in Christian communities (with varying models) in the United Kingdom. They will become popular among the younger generation, an attractive and magnetic expression of an alternative style of society. Many people, of all ages and backgrounds, are searching for the very mix of spirituality and family that community offers.

The birth of more Christian communities could be one of the indications that we are reaching ‘the end times’. We are not meant to know the day of Christ’s coming in majesty (Acts 1:7), but we are to live as those whose ‘lamps are burning’ (Luke 12:36) and whose talents are all used in the King’s service as we await His return.

Maranatha! Come,
Lord Jesus!

Many of this bunch grew up in
Christian community



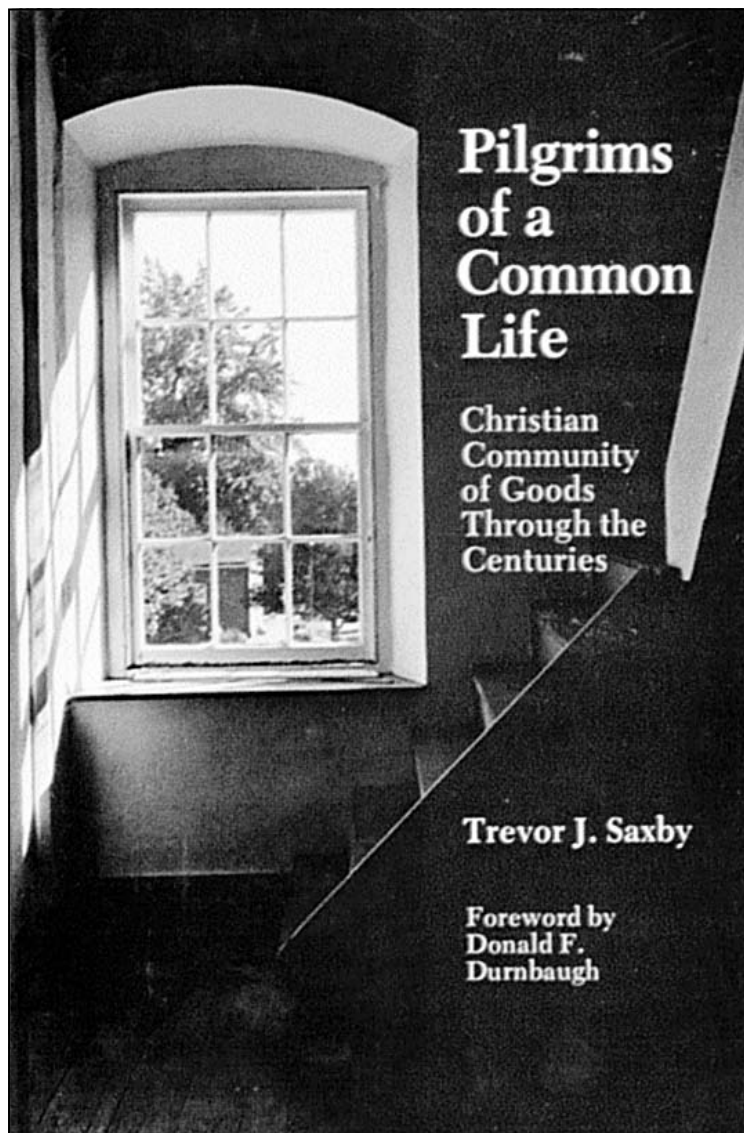
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Reader in Sociology,
University of Oxford*

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Suggested further reading

Appendix

Eberhard Arnold, *Why we Live in Community*, Plough, 1976

Simon Cooper and Mike Farrant, *Fire in our Hearts; the Story of the Jesus Fellowship*, revised edition, Multiply, 1997 (available from Jesus Fellowship)

Andreas Ehrenpreis, *Brotherly Community, the Highest Command of Love* (a Hutterite text of 1650), Plough, 1978

Arthur Gish, *Living in Christian Community*, Albatross, 1979

David Janzen, *Fire, Salt and Peace*, Shalom Mission, 1996

M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, Arrow, 1987

Trevor Saxby, *Pilgrims of a Common Life*, Herald, 1987 (available from Jesus Fellowship)

Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, revised edn., Darton Longman Todd, 1989

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