

## *Connecting the Mind, Heart and Hands through Intentional Community at Calvin College*

By

Jeff Bouman ([jbouman@calvin.edu](mailto:jbouman@calvin.edu))

Don DeGraaf ([ddegraaf@calvin.edu](mailto:ddegraaf@calvin.edu))

Mark Mulder ([mmulder@calvin.edu](mailto:mmulder@calvin.edu))

Joy Van Marion ([jv5@calvin.edu](mailto:jv5@calvin.edu))

Calvin College

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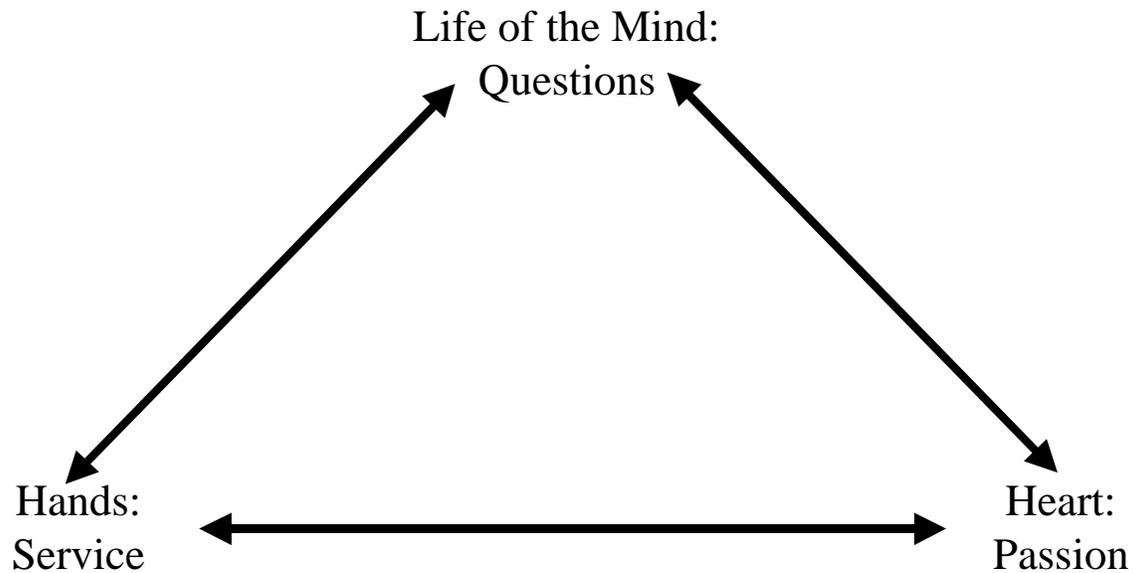
Throughout the last 10 years much has been written about the loss of community and the lessening of civic engagement being felt throughout America and the world (Putnam, 2002, McKnight, 1995). McKnight (1995) postulates that our loss of community can be attributed in part to the professionalization and institutionalization of our capacity to care and help one another. This manifests itself in the creation of a service economy, which encourages professionals to look for problems to solve rather than allowing individuals and communities to co-create their preferred future. Colleges and Universities do not avoid McKnight's critique, as he writes "consider modern universities as institutions serving students. We might ask whether they have become commercial gatekeepers whose grades select the elites who will control the future. Are professors people who convince eighteen year olds, and the rest of society, that young people are incompetent beings in need of technical infusion that will enable their deficient selves to be effective agents in serving systems? Are professors servants who depend on deficiency and control rather than competence and community" (p. 177-178)?

The challenge for colleges and universities in this critique is twofold. First how do institutions of higher learning avoid the specialization that is evident in all aspect of our society and avoid using knowledge and information as a commodity rather than an opportunity for community. Second, how do institutions of higher learning connect the mind, heart and hands in a meaningful way for both students and society. Henri Nouwen highlights this challenge in discussing how our questioning and pursuit for new knowledge must connect with how we live our lives. "Questions have to be lived rather than developed intellectually. In other words, we need to cease taking our world for granted and begin taking our questions into the arena of life by living them out practically. True questioning can only lead to a new doing. Searching can only lead to shattering some of our securities. And risk taking, when born of a desire to live more truly and authentically, can only lead to a new life" (Ringma, 2000, p. 46).

In addition to the challenges raised by McKnight, higher education must also face the fragmentation and loss of community within its own institutions, making education for citizenship at least counter-intuitive for students. This is at least in part because higher education in America has separated knowledge, skills and virtue by buying into a rampant societal individualism. Thus the question for college and universities is how can we reconnect the mind, heart and hands of students. One means by which secular colleges and universities have tried to address both these challenges is through inter-disciplinary approaches to service learning, combining vigorous liberal arts education and promotion of lives of services. Christian colleges can take this endeavor one step further combining service, learning, and faith for a fully integrated Christian life (Heffner & Beversluis, 2002).

One means by which Calvin College has attempted to connect these three components can be seen in the efforts of Calvin faculty and students to create an intentional Christian community through three Christian, intentional communities.. This project will seek to identify the long-term impacts of these experiences on those who lived within each of these communities. In addition, this study will examine if and how service, learning and faith intersect and enrich each other through each of these communities. Preliminary Results of this study indicate that offering students opportunities for intentional living does help in making connections between what they feel, what

they learn and how they serve. In addition, all respondents reported that they recognized the positive impact these intentional communities had on their lives although these impacts differed from one community to another.



### The Study

Fifteen participants from each of the three communities were identified and asked to complete a telephone interview, exploring their perspectives and experience in intentional Christian community. Of the forty five people identified to complete the interview, all agreed. The following questions guided the survey instrument: What were your most memorable experiences while living in the house? How do you think the community impacted the neighborhood where it was located? How do you think the house community impacted the Calvin community? In fleshing out this last question, additional questions were used, such as: How has your experience within this community shaped your career choices, your engagement in community today, and your faith?

### The results

An initial analysis of the three intentional communities in question yielded varied results. Important to note is the fact the three communities have both geographic and time discrepancies – (See table 1 for community descriptions). The interviews of residents demonstrated that these disparities created different issues and challenges. However, there did emerge within the analysis a number of themes that seemed to transcend both time and place. The data revealed that the experience of living in these three particular intentional communities did have certain impacts that were similar. These impacts included:

- The importance of children as an entry point into each community.
- Respondents reported feeling that each of the communities created a ministry of presence in their neighborhoods although overall impact on the neighborhoods varied.
- Intentional community is difficult to sustain over time where students and sometimes mentors are transient.
- All respondents reported that the experience was highly impactful although the impact was different in each of the communities.

Specific finding within each community include:

- Residents from the Pamoja house seemed to demonstrate the most concern about social justice issues
- Moving the Pamoja house three times really hurt the impact of the community on the neighborhoods in which they lived.

- Within the Pamoja house there did seem to be a difference between early and later house residents, with early members of the house being more dedicated to the ideals of living in intentional community.
- Within Project Neighborhood there were varied perspectives based on three distinct houses. Despite this variability it was evident that there was some professional impact with former students talking about how the experience shaped their career choice.
- Project Neighborhood seemed to be the most intentional of the three communities especially in relationship to reaching out to the surrounding neighborhood and as a result Project Neighborhood was seen as having the greatest impact on the neighborhood in which they were located.
- Respondents from the Worden Street community indicated the strong impact of the experience on their faith. Devotions were identified often as being very important to residents. There seemed to be less of an impact of the community on the neighborhood.

Possible insights of this study for college and university administrators include:

- Goals. Results of this study indicate that communities that had the most formal goals were the most successful in reaching these goals as it allowed them to be the most intentional in striving for their goals. At the same time it should be noted that the intentionality of Project Neighborhood and the role of mentors in facilitating this intentionality created some tension between students and mentors; yet this intentionality also resulted in the finding that the Project Neighborhood houses had the greatest impact on their neighborhoods.
- Housing Options. It is important to offer students options for their housing, included in these options should be opportunities to live more intentionally and as this study indicates additional options such as amount of supervision given by mentors could be one way to differentiate options within Christian, intentional communities.
- Co-creation. Remembering the importance of including students in the planning and implementation of housing options. As indicated by this study the issue of co-creation is very important for students living in intentional communities.
- Resources. Creating resources for students to be intentional in their living arrangement throughout college regardless of the type of house in which they choose to live. This could include helping students in finding ways to live out their values in large or small ways both within their houses and towards their communities. For example, as reported in this study, many resources have been developed for students living in one of the intentional communities, these resources could be developed for other students living in a variety of other settings to be intentional in different areas of their college living experience.

## References

- Heffner, G. & Beversluis, C. (2002). *Commitment and Connection: Service learning and Christian higher education*. New York: University Press of America..
- McKnight, J. (1995). *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits*. New York: Basic Books.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ringma, C. (2000). *Dare to Journey with Henri Nouwen*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinion Books.

## **Table One Community Descriptions**

### **Worden Street Community**

This community was most active during the 1970s and was started when four faculty/staff families from Calvin joined together to live in community as Christians responding to their understanding of a Biblical calling. In 1971, these families moved to Worden Street, in Grand Rapids, a lower income neighborhood, which was struggling with white-flight. After buying homes near one another, they collectively purchased a communal home on the same street, which they decided to open to Calvin College students who desired to be part of the community. The first two floors were divided into men's and women's floors and the third story was occupied by a young married couple. For ten years these faculty families and the student house engaged in intentional Christian community. Communal meals were shared by everyone twice a week and a time was reserved for devotions in the evening. The families and students got to know one another and established a presence in the neighborhood. The community started to dissolve in the early 1980s when the student house was sold and the remaining faculty slowly moved out with the last family moving out of the area in 1986 when the Worden Street Community came to an end.

### **Project Neighborhood**

Project Neighborhood was founded in 1997 with the purchase of one house. The vision of this new community was to provide a place for students to live off campus together, committed to growing their faith, building relationships with each other and reaching out to the community around the house. This initial house was named *Koinonia*, meaning "fellowship" in the fall of 1998. Since this time, Project Neighborhood has expanded to include two more houses located in different Grand Rapids Neighborhoods. These last two houses were created in partnerships with local churches, the second named *Harambee*, for "pull together" and the third *Peniel*, meaning "face of God". Each of the Project Neighborhood houses has a mentor identified by the college to live with the students and help facilitate the overall experience of what it means to live out their Christian faith in the community.

### **Pamoja House**

Pamoja House began in the late 90s with a few students desiring a stronger sense of community and involvement in the neighborhood in which they live. The Pamoja house has no live in mentor, rather they have chosen to ask a Calvin faculty couple to mentor them by meeting with the house on a regular basis, holding meetings to share support and encouragement. Since it originated, the Pamoja house has moved three different times, struggling with poor landlords and zoning laws requiring that no more than four unrelated people live in a house together. Currently the Pamoja house has two residences a small house and an apartment next door. This housing arrangement complies with zoning regulations and as a result may become a more permanent residence for Pamoja. The Pamoja House is not directly tied to Calvin College and student residents are even more independent in the decision making process. The internal and external community of the Pamoja House is entirely student initiated. They challenge one another as they strive to realize their vision for community.