

# Session 11: Creating Accountable Communities

## *Knowing Your Faith*

*Jump to: Discussion Questions*

*Knowing Your Place*

*Practices*

*Resources*

**Scripture:** Acts 2, especially verses 1-11 and 41-47

**Related Texts:** Acts 4:32-37, Matthew 25:31-46

**Suggested Ecological Lens Questions:** Try B and E with Acts 2:41-47.

Each autumn, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College hosts a [Sustainability Leadership Semester](#). Undergraduates live and study together at this 1200-acre nature center in Wolf Lake, Ind. In addition to coursework, they prepare their own meals using food from the farm on the property and try out sustainable practices related to food, water, energy and shelter. While students arrive expecting to learn ways they as *individuals* can live more sustainable lives, they leave with the understanding that sustainable living is a *communal endeavor*. This shift in thinking is one that churches need to work at as well.

Churchgoers ought to be old hands at communal endeavors. Christian churches are unique communities bound together in love and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As William Willimon has put it in his commentary on the book of Acts:

The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday, but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, not all of us are as steeped in the reality of the resurrection as we wish. Neither are our one-hour-a-week communities as intimate and vibrant as we might desire.

Many congregations are not supportive places for lifestyle transformation. Questions of consumption simply don't come up in church or are avoided for the sake of unity. I recall meeting a man who was trying to decide if his family needed to buy a van. He found that fellow church members were reluctant to discuss this major purchase with him. They regarded vehicles as a personal matter and were not comfortable giving counsel on a lifestyle issue. Our faith heritage challenges this reticence. Let's consider what our central ritual—sharing communion—might have to say to us about creating accountable communities.

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, *Acts*, in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988) 51.

## Spirited Tables

It seems a tame enough ritual. We recite a few words, say a prayer, take a bite of bread and sip on grape juice in the safe confines of our church sanctuaries. Usually we are with people a lot like us. But if we really understood what we were commemorating when we accept this token meal, our governments would be bugging our worship services. Taking communion is a subversive, Spirit-inspired act of defiance against the dominant world order and its economic structures. It announces that radical sharing across lines of race, class and gender are possible and that when we do that, Jesus Christ is present among us in a powerful way.

Most Christians would trace the origins of our communion ritual to Jesus' request that his followers "do this in remembrance of me" at the last supper.<sup>2</sup> Why was that memory important to early believers? Surely it was reinforced by the early Church's experiences of worship and table fellowship following Pentecost. These too are "communion stories." Given the wind and the flame, it is easy to imagine that Pentecost was an inner mystical experience. It may have been that, but the story also describes Pentecost as an outpouring that enabled radical new ways of sharing resources. Just after Peter's impassioned altar call concludes in Acts 2:41, we hear about sharing, communal meals and redistribution of wealth. On either side of the clause, "bore witness to the resurrection" in 4:33, we find that believers are relinquishing possessions so that no one is in need.<sup>3</sup>

In biblical times, 90% of people lived at a subsistence level. While Acts does mention sales of land, food was the resource people were most likely able to share. Thus, it makes sense that the common life, breaking bread and prayer are all mentioned together in 2:42. The Lord's Supper that the early church observed was a full meal, not a token bite of bread. It was a way of feeding everyone physically as well as spiritually. The early church remembered Jesus by pooling my lentils and your sheep bone; her loaf of bread and his olive oil. According to Acts, this is what happens when the Holy Spirit blows: people who don't speak the same language manage to understand each other, and everyone has enough to eat. This is the vision we commemorate every time we take communion.

We need to reclaim our birthright as people of wind, flame and justice. Can we include birds, insects, trees and land in our tally of who needs food and drink? Below, we'll look at more recent ways people have formed communities in order to honor the needs of all people and the earth. The first two are Christian; the last two speak secular language and offer interesting possibilities for cross-fertilization between churches and their communities.

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<sup>2</sup> What does Jesus intend us to remember when we break bread together? See [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels](#), by Mark Moore. He provides a list of table fellowship incidents in the Gospels and a helpful one-page commentary.

<sup>3</sup> Biblical interpreters have often dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. For an alternate interpretation, see Reta Finger's *Of Widows and Meals*, listed under resources below. According to Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today.

## New Monasticism

New Monasticism is a movement of intentional communities within Protestantism that began in the early 2000s. Like traditional monks and nuns, these laypeople nurture a common life together. They commit to spiritual disciplines, live among the poor, practice hospitality to the stranger, care for the creation around them and share economic resources. In 2004, a number of intentional communities gathered and agreed on the [12 marks of new monasticism](#). This list now defines the movement much as the Rule of St. Benedict does for Benedictine monasteries.

Shane Claiborne of the [Simple Way Community](#) in Philadelphia, Pa., is one spokesperson for new monasticism. [The Jeremiah Community](#) in Toronto is another group. We may not be free to pick up and relocate to one of these inspiring communities, but most of the practices that make them who they are can happen anywhere. A small group within a more traditional congregation might covenant to embrace elements of the 12 marks or the more specific [Rule of Life](#) described on The Jeremiah Community's website. Or a group could write its own rule.

### • The Sevenfold Covenant

Ched Myers of Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, Oak View, CA, developed [this model](#) in the mid-2000s to help people connect their faith with personal and political issues of economic justice. The covenant includes seven areas:

- surplus capital
- debt
- giving
- environment and green living
- consumption
- solidarity
- work and Sabbath

Group participants agree to work on one thing in each of the seven categories in an honest and transparent way. Each household begins wherever it is, without judgment and takes steps that may be small or large. Myers reports that most participants "experienced palpable relief in breaking the social taboos that keep us silent about money, class and lifestyle." They became less anxious about their stuck places and more able to imagine practical alternatives. One tangible outcome from the 45 households that piloted the covenant involved savings. Collectively, they moved 2.75 million dollars into socially responsible investing.<sup>4</sup> Matthew Colwell's *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*, tells stories about people working through the Sevenfold Covenant and provides discussion questions. Again, this model of community could work anywhere, with anyone willing to submit to the process.

## Addiction work and 12-step groups

If you consume a substance or pursue a habit against your self-interest and you can't stop, you are an addict. That is a standard definition from the field of addictions, and it applies to a lot more of us than care to admit it. Most of us think of drugs and alcohol or possibly gambling or pornography when we think of addictions. Nevertheless, our society's use of fossil fuels and its other consumptive habits might fall in that category as well.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Colwell, *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices* (Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009) 13-14.

Do insights from chemical addictions transfer to our compulsion to use more than our fair share of resources? Can we wean ourselves from a high carbon lifestyle through an addictions group in the same way that a compulsive eater might benefit from Overeaters Anonymous? Some people think so. The *Transition Town Manual* mentions addiction, and an emerging field called neuroconservation attempts to apply brain research in areas like addiction to our need to address climate change. For example, the ability to overcome an immediate impulse in exchange for a later, better reward is one feature being studied in relation to both addiction and sustainable lifestyles.<sup>5</sup>

Addicts at the beginning of a [12-step program](#) admit they are powerless over their addictions and throw themselves on the mercy of God or a Higher Power as they understand it. They then move toward recognizing the harm they have caused and making amends. Eventually, they commit to helping others with similar problems. If we applied theological language to the 12-step experience, we might use words like humility, sin, repentance, confession and grace.

A church seeking to address sustainable lifestyle issues could learn a lot from addiction recovery programs and the addicts in their midst. One part of the process that seems particularly compatible with overconsumption of fossil fuels is the “fearless moral inventory” that addicts must face, recognizing the ways their habits have caused harm. Secondly, community life would deepen and take on new meaning if we realized that we are powerless to change without the help of the body of Christ. Recovering addicts know that the community aspect of 12-step programs is essential. For new habits to stick even under stress and temptation, people need to be part of a supportive community that believes change is possible. Without the help of a group to reinforce belief, it is too easy to despair.<sup>6</sup> Recovering addicts sometimes say that their addiction groups are the most intimate and profound experiences of their lives. Such groups could teach us the freedom to face our lifestyle failings and be honest about them. They could also show us the value of genuine community based on mutual support and mutual need.

### **Transition Town Movement**

The [Transition Town Movement](#) is a network of local communities working to:

- build resilience in response to peak oil,
- reduce carbon emissions in response to climate change, and
- strengthen local economies.

The movement began in Ireland in 2005 when a town adopted an energy descent plan. It has since spread to over 1,000 towns in 44 countries. The U.S. has about 150 official sites, with many other locations in various stages of organizing.

Transition town planners assume that life beyond fossil fuels is inevitable and so is climate change. Rather than waiting for the government to act, these communities are organizing for

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Jeffries, [“Carbon Fix,”](#) *Nature Climate Change*, 3, 765 (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2012) 92.

change on their own from the bottom up. They believe that by planning for this future at the local level, we can both weather the coming crises and build a more fulfilling, connected and less harried way of life.

Each transition town is unique to its locale. Our transition movement in Goshen, Indiana, is involved with food issues. For example, it owns a community cider press and sponsored apple gleanings last fall, when many suburbanites with apple trees had bumper crops they couldn't use. It also helps different groups to network together. Transition towns in other communities have developed local currencies or sponsored "re-skilling" workshops for people who no longer know how to cook, build or grow things.

The practical, down-to-earth concerns of the transition town movement can engage a wide variety of people. This movement could provide a much-needed model of community engagement for churches that have stayed focused within their four walls. Alternately, those within churches may have much to offer the transition town movement. Many still *do* know how to cook, build and grow things and can draw on a rich communal heritage that secular people may lack.

*Intimacy* is a thread running between the communal life described in Acts and the contemporary models of community described above. Caring for our congregations, our neighbors and our watersheds may require more intimacy than many of us are used to. A small thing like gleaning apples with strangers is a low cost form of connection that many would welcome. Committing to other practices described above would require more time and intensity. Is this a draw or a sacrifice for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans? Even eating together on a regular basis would cramp many people's busy lifestyles. Perhaps it is as Jesus said: choosing his way requires letting some things go and leaving some people behind. There is a price to pay, but also much to gain.

## Discussion Questions

### Key ideas

1. Is your congregation a supportive place for lifestyle transformation? If so, what makes it that way? If not, how could you work toward simpler and more sustainable lifestyles together?
2. The essay suggests that the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit is a necessary piece of a transformed community life. What helps or hinders your connection with God?
3. The essay also suggests that intimacy with fellow congregants is a necessary piece of a transformed community life. What helps or hinders your intimacy with your congregation?
4. Which of the bold print models of community mentioned in the essay are familiar to you? How could your congregation apply insights from these models?
5. Where is the balance between honoring diversity and challenging each other to consider how much is enough? What are healthy ways to discuss our different approaches to lifestyle issues?

### Supplementary Questions

6. How would you help the man mentioned on page 11-1 discern whether to buy a van if he were in your congregation?
7. How can your congregation practice sharing of goods and services? What do you have to share and how could you share these things?
8. How can your congregation be part of ensuring that people within your map areas have clean water, clean air, healthy food systems and quality shelter? What about future people?
9. What structures can you build into your congregation so that lifestyle issues remain in the foreground? For example:
  - Include a lifestyle challenge in a membership covenant.
  - Plan Christian education classes so that topics such as food, water, energy and various forms of creation care are addressed on a regular basis.
  - Hold a yearly retreat where members work on lifestyle issues.
10. Do you think “addiction” is a helpful way to think about North American consumption of fossil fuels and other goods? In what ways does the definition fit or not fit? In what ways does the 12-step “cure” fit?

## *Knowing Your Place*

### Place Questions

1. What native peoples originally inhabited your region? What waves of immigrants followed and when did they arrive? How did they relate to the land? Are remnants of these groups still present?
2. What natural resources or community resources do members within your congregation share? How can the relationships you already have with each other be an asset in caring for these natural resources?

## *Practices*

### Spiritual Practices

1. **Invite input** from a few members of your congregation on a financial decision you might normally make on your own.
2. **Start a small group** that draws on one of the models of community described in the essay. Or challenge existing small groups within your congregation to wrestle with the issues touched on in sessions 9-12 of this curriculum.
3. **Agape meals:** Sharing food is a sacred act. Find new ways to eat together that include people who usually eat alone or people who have trouble keeping food on the table. Work through the online resource, [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels](#), mentioned in footnote 2. How can an Agape meal help you to remember Jesus and celebrate the Holy Spirit present among you?
4. **“No needy among them”:** Discern non-human need in your community. What about birds that are losing their habitat? Roadsides infested with plastic trash? Polluted water? Pray for the need that God reveals to you, both personally and within your worship services. Seek guidance for action.

### Household Practices

All of these practices refer to your congregational “household.”

1. **Assess Your Church:** Mennonite Creation Care Network offers a [Greener Congregation Score Sheet](#) to help congregations think systematically about their practices. Questions cover a variety of categories, from buildings to worship. Work through one or more



questions on the score sheet. Discussion guides for each category are also available.

2. **Set up a borrowing system** that allows people to indicate what items they are willing to share and under what circumstances. Categories could include tools, housewares, vehicles, labor, skills, childcare, items for worship visuals. You could also draft a covenant that people sign when they borrow something.
3. **Set up systems for recycling** or evaluate the ones you do have. Does everyone know about your paper bins? Is there a need to provide for waste that is difficult or inconvenient to recycle, such as batteries<sup>7</sup> and old electronics. Research how the items are recycled to make sure they are recycled safely. Announce your county's monthly hazardous waste collection, or have one person drive a load to save everyone making a trip.
4. **Glean ideas from others:** Visit MCCN's [stories about churches page](#) for stories about how other congregations are working together to care for creation.

## *Additional Resources*

**Heinrichs, Steve. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together*. Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2013.**

This book relates to the place question about former Native American communities. This challenging collection of essays reveals an emerging dialog between Native voices and settler voices.

**Colwell, Matthew. *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009.**

**Myers, Ched. *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2001.**

These companion books from Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries lay the groundwork for an economics grounded in the Sabbath and the biblical Jubilee. Colwell tells stories about people working through the [Sevenfold Covenant](#) described in this session's essay.

**Finger, Reta Halteman. *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.**

Finger is skeptical of the long tradition that has dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. She examines the sociological background of the time and describes how food and meals functioned in the Ancient Near East. According to

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<sup>7</sup> In most locations, you will need to pay to get rid of alkaline batteries because it is not cost-effective to recycle them for free. [Battery Solutions](#) is one company that does this.



Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today. See pp. 276-286 for a summary of the book.

**Johnstone, Chris. [“Insights from Addictions Recovery Applied to Climate Change.”](#)  
[Climate Code Red](#). N.p., January 29, 2012.**

An addictions specialist makes connections between his work in health care and the dangers of climate change. He describes motivational interviewing. This is a technique where leaders help people hear themselves voicing their own concerns rather than dispensing advice.

**[Mennonite Creation Care Network](#)** (MCCN)

Read stories about congregations caring for creation in various ways. Find a score sheet to help your congregation evaluate creation care steps so far and set a direction for the future.

**Moore, Mark. [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels.](#)**

This online chart catalogs the various forms of table fellowship described in the Gospels and what they might mean. Pastors, you’ve got a sermon series here.

**[New Monasticism](#)**

A web of intentional communities has attracted 20-somethings to follow Jesus by living in community among the poor. [The Jeremiah Community](#) and the rule of life they follow is one example.

**[Transition Town Movement](#)**

Learn about this shift toward local resources and less fossil fuels.

**[The Twelve Steps for Freedom From Addictive Behaviors.](#)**

Review the 12 steps and find many other resources related to addiction at this site.

**Willimon, William. *Acts, in the series, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988.**

A trustworthy and readable commentary on the Acts texts used here.