

The background of the cover is a painting of a dense, colorful town. The houses are packed closely together, with various rooflines and colors including browns, yellows, oranges, and blues. The style is somewhat abstract and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a warm, golden light filtering through the buildings. The overall impression is one of a vibrant, lived-in community.

Why We Live in Community

Eberhard Arnold
with two interpretive talks by
Thomas Merton

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Foreword by Basil Pennington



P L O U G H P U B L I S H I N G H O U S E

Published by Plough Publishing House

Walden, New York

Robertsbridge, England

Elsmore, Australia

www.plough.com

Material by Eberhard Arnold and Basil Pennington

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“Building Community on God’s Love” and “Community, Politics, and Contemplation” are reprinted from Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*. Copyright 1989 by The Thomas Merton Legacy Trust. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. World Rights.

Why We Live in Community is a translation of “Warum wir in Gemeinschaft leben,” an essay published in Eberhard Arnold’s journal *Die Wegwarte* 1:10/11 (October/November 1925) and again in 111:8/9 (May/June 1927), in Sannerz, Germany.

PRINT ISBN: 978-0-87486-068-9

PDF ISBN: 978-0-87486-567-7

EPUB ISBN: 978-0-87486-568-4

MOBI ISBN: 978-0-87486-569-1

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We do not want you to copy or imitate us. We want to be like a ship that has crossed the ocean, leaving a wake of foam, which soon fades away. We want you to follow the Spirit, which we have sought to follow, but which must be sought anew in every generation.

*First generation Quakers
at Balby, York, late 17th century*

Foreword

There is something stark about Eberhard Arnold's statement on community. It is chiseled clearly in the solid granite of faith. It does not spare us any of the anguish of a world so horribly failing in community—even communities of faith. Our open wounds confront us. Arnold stands unambiguously in the church's option for the poor, the option of our divine Founder. For him, community is our way of saying an existential "yes" to God and his creation, to our own nature and predestination, a predestination, though, that will only come about—by God's own design—if we work for it and work together.

In a world where the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is growing ever wider we need to again be forcefully and persistently confronted with the ideals of the early Christian community. It is certainly a scandal when a person who professes to be a disciple of Jesus goes off to his bed well fed, and with food in his larder, while a fellow human hungers within his reach. It is certainly a scandal when a person professes to be a disciple of Jesus and uses his God-given talents only to augment his own

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wealth – while fathers cry out for an opportunity to earn a living for their children. Perhaps the ecclesial communities would more effectively enlighten such benighted consciences if they reformed and renewed the powerful sacramentality which Arnold reminds us of.

It may be difficult for today's Christians to hear Arnold's constant reminder that the fullness of life, which is found only in community, comes at the cost of complete self-sacrifice. Yet that is the Paschal mystery of life through death. And it is a sacrifice shot through with joy. Arnold brings out the real paradox that is so essential for the vibrant community, but so difficult to attain: the requirement that each member lives out a personal decision to surrender to the whole and yet exercises his or her will for the good. The secret behind this is, of course, the Holy Spirit, a secret a faithless world cannot know – hence the many strivings for community that end in shambles, with deeply wounded people feeling totally betrayed. A community animated with the Spirit centers on Christ by necessity; it knows the struggle for liberation in Christ, and so it lives in the hope of the resurrection. It is a community of universal love, a leaven in the human family. The Spirit enters into a community when, through its members' common yearning, the community opens itself and makes itself ready to be Spirit-driven.

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Arnold speaks out of the spirit of the Reformation when he issues a call to “those who are called,” and his call echoes the call of Augustine, Benedict, Bernard, Francis, Ignatius, and Don Bosco. Anyone knowing how the life of the church has been continually enriched by these charismatic leaders and the communities which they founded (and which they continue to inspire across the centuries) cannot but feel some regret that their legacy has not been cherished more. Christian communities living in this time of vital renewal will draw rich inspiration from Arnold’s penetrating analysis of what community animated by the Spirit really calls us to.

It is precisely this that Thomas Merton was trying to help the Sisters at Precious Blood Monastery in Alaska – and all of us who read his words – to do. As genial a person as Merton was – and he was certainly a very down-to-earth monk – he was also a genius. With penetrating lucidity, he captures and sets forth the essence of Arnold’s thought. Merton summons us with Arnold, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King to the higher plan of the Spirit, to the realm of love – not to an ideal, but to the real, practical love these men lived and died for.

Merton’s thought in his two published talks on Arnold is wide-ranging. Placing Arnold in historical context with incisive clarity, he then proceeds to make extensive verbatim use of the latter’s masterly essay. He does

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not hesitate to make criticisms in the few cases where he feels Arnold has overstated his case, but he immediately goes on to qualify them by showing us the validity of Arnold's underlying insight and his ultimate conclusion. Like Arnold, Merton is totally Christocentric, and we can only admire his comprehensive grasp of Pauline Christology and the ease with which he weaves it into his exposition. He proclaims in very straight-forward language the fact that community is love's victory over death, lived – by ordinary people – in union with Christ, by the grace of his victory.

Both Merton and Arnold emphasize that ordinary people can live the victory of community, though not by their own doing; it is possible only through God's working in and among them. We need to see this very clearly. If we do not, we cannot face the evil in us that militates against community. We let it discourage us, and we give up in our attempt to live communally, or we repress it and relate in a superficial and untruthful way that never realizes true community. It is poor, weak, stupid sinners that Christ finds his joy and glory in bringing to loving oneness through the activity of his Spirit. As Merton says, "The ultimate thing is that we build community not on our love but on God's love." In the midst of conflict, our question should not be "Who

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is right?” but “Do we believe?” “Faith is first, and the only one who is right is God.”

I am sure Arnold would only feel joy that the leading Catholic writer of this century was so completely in harmony with him in his thinking, a harmony that spilled over into life as Merton lived the age-old traditional monastic life that for celibates incorporates all the values and ideals that Arnold held so precious and essential to true Christian community. How well Merton resonated to Arnold’s hymn of labor and the simple life – this monk who belonged to an order that defined itself as characterized by the spirit of simplicity.

When we see spiritual giants like Thomas Merton and Eberhard Arnold reach across what in times past seemed to be an unbridgeable gap, we are not only inspired; we see how and why we have come as far as we have today, and we may take courage to dream dreams we dared not dream before. Because prophetic figures throughout the ages have dared to proclaim, “I have a dream,” we, too, have a dream – a dream that is being realized. We have a long way yet to go, but it is solid food for the journey like this bread Arnold first served in the wilderness that gives us the strength to press on toward the mark: the full realization of human solidarity in Christ Jesus. For we are compelled by Jesus’ own Spirit,

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who breathes deeply and gives utterance through the impelling words of men who were not afraid to lay themselves totally open to that uncontrollable Spirit.

Basil Pennington

Why We Live in Community

Eberhard Arnold

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

In 1920, Eberhard, his wife Emmy, and their five children moved from Berlin to Sannerz, a village in central Germany, where they founded a small community of families and singles on the basis of early church practices as described in the New Testament. He wrote this essay five years later.

Why community?

Life in community is no less than a necessity for us – it is an inescapable “must” that determines everything we do and think. Yet it is not our good intentions or efforts that have been decisive in our choosing this way of life. Rather, we have been overwhelmed by a certainty – a certainty that has its origin and power in the Source of everything that exists. We acknowledge God as this Source.

We must live in community because all life created by God exists in a communal order and works toward community.

Faith is our basis

God is the source of life. In him and through him our common life is built up and led time and again through cataclysmic struggles to final victory. It is an exceedingly dangerous way, a way of deep suffering. It is a way that leads straight into the struggle for existence and the reality of a life of work, into all the difficulties created by the human character. And yet, just this is our deepest joy: to see clearly the eternal struggle – the indescribable tension between life and death, man’s position between heaven and hell – and still to believe in the overwhelming power of life, the power of love to overcome, and the triumph of truth, because we believe in God.

This faith is not a theory for us; neither is it a dogma, a system of ideas, or a fabric of words, nor a cult or an organization. Faith means receiving God himself – it means being overwhelmed by God. Faith is the strength that enables us to go this way. It helps us to find trust again and again when, from a human point of view, the foundations of trust have been destroyed. Faith gives us the vision to perceive what is essential and eternal.

Faith is our basis

It gives us eyes to see what cannot be seen, and hands to grasp what cannot be touched, although it is present always and everywhere.

If we possess faith, we will no longer judge people in the light of social custom or according to their weaknesses, for we will see the lie that stands behind all the masks of our mammonistic, unclean, and murderous human society. Yet we will not be deceived in the other direction either and made to think that the maliciousness and fickleness of the human character (though factual) are its real and ultimate nature. Admittedly, with our present nature, without God, we humans are incapable of community. Temperamental mood-swings, possessive impulses and cravings for physical and emotional satisfaction, powerful currents of ambition and touchiness, the desire for personal influence over others, and human privileges of all kinds – all these place seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way of true community. But with faith we cannot be deluded into thinking that these realities are decisive: in the face of the power of God and his all-conquering love, they are of no significance. God is stronger than these realities. The unifying energy of his Spirit overcomes them all.

Here it becomes abundantly clear that the realization of true community, the actual building up of a

