

# What is the Communes Network?

**T**oday, in the 1990s, Communes Network (CN) produces a roughly quarterly newsletter, and organises occasional readers' gatherings. It is open to intentional communities and interested individuals - anyone who pays a subscription. The aim of the newsletter is to keep people in touch with each other, exchange news, opinions, information, and our experiences of communal living; and also to connect up people seeking a community to join with one that is looking for new members. The prevailing ethic is that CN is a group of like-minded people keeping in contact with each other, rather than a commercial venture. For this reason and as the budget is quite small, due to the relatively small number of subscribers and the bargain price of the newsletter, the 'staff posts' are filled in a voluntary capacity, which is polite for unpaid.

The communities who make up the core of *Communes Network* are mostly of a particular type of communal group, which were started in the early 1970s. Some longer-established communities do contribute, and there are also several newer groups, and those in the process of formation. Face-to-face contact between the members of these core-group communities, exchange visits and personal friendships are what the Network is more usually valued for, rather than the sense of a political movement. Some communities are not looking for contact with others, and therefore do not join *Communes Network*, and yet are still part of the wider intentional communities movement which Diggers and Dreamers hopes to encompass. There is no uniformly accepted definition of intentional community, as we tend to let communities define themselves. A group of three or more adults choosing to live together and call itself a community is accepted as such. (See 'What is Communal Living?' in Andy Wood's article 'History and Overview of Communalism' in

Once upon a time there was a *Communes Movement* ... **Pam Dawling** explains what happened to it and how its current descendent evolved

The work of editing and producing the newsletter is done at one or other of the communities involved, usually by a small group within the community, for a period of a year or so, after which it passes to another group. Answering the enquiries, maintaining the subscription list, dealing with sales of publications, and any other administrative work is usually done by one or more people at another community. The organising and hosting of gatherings is left to any community expressing interest. This minimal level of bureaucracy was deliberately chosen to leave many possibilities open and make change easy.

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**Visitors will rival only our community literature and music, films and slide shows as a medium for spreading the word and inspiring others to break new ground.**

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*Lindsay Rawlings,  
Genesis Proposal 1975*

Contributions for the newsletter take several forms: there are usually several letters from people seeking communities, sometimes news items from a

range of communities (although this usually depends on the editing group finding the energy to phone round and extract the news), usually some kind of community profile article, (often overseas), adverts for events or publications which may be of particular interest, and a varied range of articles and letters from readers.

## **Life before Communes Network - the Communes Movement**

The *Communes Movement* was started in 1968 by Selene Community in Wales. One of its main activities was the production of a beautiful bi-monthly magazine, the *Communes Journal*, which sold quite widely in shops. The *Communes Movement* was intended to 'create a federal society of communities', not merely to be a loose-knit association. A Federation Fund was started to collect money which would be used to buy property for groups to build pilot communes. Newsletters were distributed almost every month to the membership of around 200, and there were also occasional Bulletins, as well as the bi-monthly *Journal* and 'Commune Services' - skills lists of members willing to volunteer their help - and working weekends at various communes. In the spirit of the movement and of the times, the administration was 'vested in the entire membership'. This meant decisions were made by postal ballots, which became a very unwieldy structure, and finally contributed to the end of *CM*.

The highly successful Journal was being printed bi-monthly with a staggering 3000 print run, 600 of which went to subscribers. The Directory sold 1000 in nine months. During 1973 Journal problems came to a head. The magazine was really too expensive to produce and was seen as too infrequent to be useful to people seeking a community to join. There were financial problems in 1974, and the secretary was not replying to letters. Added to these problems there was low enthusiasm among communes to host a Journal production weekend. 1975 opened with discussion in newsletter 104, about the future of *CM*. A meeting to resolve the situation was held in Aston, Birmingham at the home of The Gorilla Family on February 15th and 16th. This meeting was the birth of *Communes Network*.

### **Early Days of *Communes Network***

The Aston meeting was attended by 20 to 30 people and it was recognised that *CM* had had beautiful ideas, but was too ambitious, and not relevant to most of the members. It was agreed to emphasis co-operation among communities and other alternative organisations, rather than adhering to the narrower idea of a Federation of Communes. Answering enquiries and running a newsletter were the most important tasks. So the Journal and Bulletin were abandoned, and communes no longer had a 'public face'.

The 'new' organisation, *Communes Network*, was to have minimal bureaucracy, with decisions made by consensus at meetings, with individuals having the right of appeal in the newsletter. It was recognised that communalism is much more than the core group of *Communes Network*, but that a self-help organisation could best offer mutual support, rather than be always reaching out attempting to build a movement. Production of the newsletter, originally monthly, had by 1987, become quarterly.

### **Fairground**

The £600 in the *Communes Movement* Federation Fund was passed over to *Fairground*, with the last £30 of *CM*'s current account, in around 1982. *Fairground*, a descendent of the idea of a federation of communes, was formed primarily to be an alternative financial institution supporting communities. *Fairground* was a secondary housing co-op, that is, a housing co-op whose members are other housing co-ops, rather than individual people. *Fairground* was established with the aims as stated in the 1981 Prospectus, of providing advice and support for member co-ops, representing

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the interests of communes in the wider world, and offering people a place to invest ethically in order to lend capital to newly forming communities to buy property. The hope was that on the combined capital value of all their properties, the communities would be able to borrow more capital and thus buy more land for co-operative ownership. Members from 15 or so communes met quarterly for over three years to bring *Fairground* into existence.

At the time, this was pioneering work - the struggle to get the *Fairground* rules accepted by the Registrar of Friendly Societies took considerable brainpower and perseverance, and there were further negotiations with the Inland Revenue about exemption from Capital Gains Tax when properties were transferred from the individual co-ops to *Fairground*. The work put into *Fairground* has given no direct benefit to the groups involved, however. By the time *Fairground* was legally established, all but two of the communities involved had no desire to join, or were unable to do so for legal reasons and so the Grand Plan was shelved.

One reason was probably that in working so hard to get the scheme accepted by the public bodies, too little attention was paid to its acceptability to the members of the communities involved. Meetings tended to be dominated by the same few men with sufficient legal and financial understanding. Many community members were unwilling to risk the autonomy of their commune in the hands of an increasingly small number of individuals, however benign the intentions of those people were. Since those early days, however, secondary housing co-ops and ethical investment funds have become quite common, and there is even the *Ecology Building Society*, so it can be seen that the ideas have lived on.

## **The Alternative Communities Movement**

*Communes Network* has never been a campaigning organisation, but more of a network to provide a means of communication between groups and for recruiting new members. But parallel to the *Communes Network*, a commune called *The Teachers* started the *Alternative Communities Movement* 'to spread knowledge of communal living, to help people to get together to build communities, and to teach the technology of co-operation and how to live together and deal with the problems caused by alienation, inadequate education and the pressures to conform socially to the stultifying nuclear family.' They produced a fairly frequent Journal, a mail order service for 100 relevant books, directories of

communities in the British Isles and Worldwide, and held Camping and Courses weekends at their Bangor smallholding. They also helped establish local groups. Their heyday was the early eighties, and by 1990, although still a commune themselves- they had retired from publicity and stopped answering enquiries about communities. Their valuable contribution of four or five editions of the directory and much national advertising drew many enquiries. Unfortunately their certainty of the superiority of their own model of communal living was off-putting to many people with ideas of their own. Although from time to time efforts were made by individuals within both *Communes Network* and *The Teachers* for more co-operation, the main theme was of mutual distaste.

## Philosophy, Politics, Ideals and Practice

*Communes Network* has always had several delicate balances to maintain. The underlying issue is a dilemma of purpose: whether to concentrate on being a membership organisation, an informal communication channel, or whether to be a public shopfront and reach out to more people. If the first view prevails, the priorities for *CN* are to spread news and views, and to facilitate communities supporting each other, eg by work exchanges, or by organising gatherings. The individual members of *CN* only become important as potential commune members. Newsletters which are cheaply produced, full of in-jokes and personal anecdotes are quite appropriate. If the second view prevails, any published material must be attractive, widely available and easy to understand for the first time reader.

With *Communes Network*, the first view has always had a large majority over the second, and there has been very little information available that is useful or attractive to the general public; a consequence of that is that *CN* circulates round a very small sub-section of the population. To provide something more suitable for the public takes a lot more effort, and may initially at least, not seem to provide much in return for the communities or individuals doing the work. Talking to journalists, thesis writers and television producers does not usually bring any immediate rewards - even, sometimes, a kick in the teeth from some newspaper reporters. Frequently we have been misunderstood, and dismissed with clichés from the 1970s. Students and media people are usually not about to join a commune themselves, and help us with the harvest, the washing up, the nappies, the weeding. (Although I do remember a well-known *Guardian* journalist roped into the an-

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# Group Cycles

**A** healthy group is never stable. It is always changing, growing, re-forming. There are many theories about the stages of group formation, but in my experience with groups several stages are generally occurring at once. Nevertheless, a broad movement can usually be discerned, and knowing something of its pattern can, at least, reassure us that we are not the only group who ever went through these particular conflicts and survived. I prefer to conceive of the cycle as following the magic circle of the four elements.

## Air

The group begins with a common vision and common perceptions. Often, members are excited when they meet others who think as they do, who share common goals. This is usually a honeymoon period, during which members feel close to each other and admire each other - because they don't really know each other. Energy is generated.

## Fire

The group struggles to discover how to use its energy. In hierarchical groups, members struggle for power-over. In non-hierarchical groups, members struggle more subtly, or struggle to define structures and processes that will empower individuals

and allow them to share power equally. The group begins to discover its will, and deep feelings are generated.

## Water

The group struggles with the feelings members have for each other. Now that members know each other, they love each other and rage at each other. People in the group both want and resist more intimacy. They fight about closeness or distance. Someone's feelings are being continually hurt. Sometimes group members become lovers - or worse, fall in love with each other's lovers. This stage once drove me to formulate Starhawk's Three Laws of Small Groups:

- 1 In any small group in which people are involved sexually, sooner or later there will be grave conflicts.
- 2 In any small group in which people are involved, sooner or later they will be involved sexually, even if only in fantasy.
- 3 Small groups tend to break up.

## Earth

If the group survives its emotional conflicts, it tends to crystallize, defining itself and its boundaries more clearly. As its purpose and character emerge, the group can begin to undertake serious work. During this phase some members usually leave the

nual stock-take at Crabapple once). The gains to be had from being more public are longer term and more diffuse - a wider interest in, and understanding of, communal living, leading to more people (from many cultures and walks of life) living a wide range of collective and co-operative lifestyles.

group (if they haven't left before). New members join. The group functions in the wider world. Its success, failures, and continued growth lead eventually to a new vision - and the cycle begins again. In each stage, conflicts arise about the very areas which are potential sources of new growth. Conflict can be creative if we look upon it as telling us what tasks we need to accomplish. Some guidelines for each of the stages follow:

### **Air**

Conflicts arise about goals, perceptions and differences. Visions and goals need to be expressed. Accept that people will have differing perceptions. Discuss people's differences in background, including class, race, culture, education, and conditioning to sex roles. Also discuss differences in people's present situation, including their special needs, the resources of time and money available to each, and their personal goals. Differing levels of experience should also be acknowledged. Create a bonding ritual.

### **Fire**

Conflicts arise about power. Use all the processes described above that encourage the sharing of power. Exchange roles, train replacements, encourage silent people to speak up and talkative people to occasionally shut up. Practise consensus. Competition is always present in groups.

Acknowledge it; it can be used creatively. Create situations, such as rituals, in which people can show off and be admired. Work directly with group energy through breathing, chanting, dancing and grounding.

### **Water**

What are people feeling? Express the negatives. Speak the unspeakable. Name the group's unspoken rules. Be aware of how much time, energy and attention each member asks for and receives. Give the group, and individuals, praise and appreciation as well as criticism - and encourage members to accept praise. Share food. Have fun. When couples or coalitions develop, take care that those involved also strengthen ties with other group members - perhaps by working together on projects.

### **Earth**

Clarify the group's organizational structure and its boundaries: who is in and who is out. Wish those who leave well, but don't try to keep them if they want to go. Take on new people. Get the work done..

### **Air**

Reflect on the experiences that grow from the work. Arrive at new visions, perceptions, goals, differences. Start a new cycle.

From *Dreaming the Dark* by STARHAWK. © Miriam Simos 1982. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press.

within CN lies another dilemma - which kind of structure should be used for decision-making? For some people it is vitally important that every member of CN has an equal say in decisions. The experience of *Communes Movement* showed that postal ballots were too cumbersome. So CN aimed to make decisions at meetings which were open to all members. In practice it was found that these readers' meetings were not very well

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attended, particularly by commune members. Often quite a lot of new subscribers would come along hoping it would be an opportunity to ask questions of commune members and perhaps find a community to join. And so decisions were sometimes made (mostly by individuals not living in communities) which did not take into account the people (living in communes) who would be required to carry them out. Decisions made about the frequency of publication of the newsletter, for instance, might be based on how often people wanted to read a copy, rather than on either the quantity of material submitted or the energy for doing the editing and paste-up.

Dissatisfaction with readers' meetings had a fruitful outcome however: from time to time a community would decide to host a Communes Gathering restricted to people actually living communally, or a Women-in-Communities or Men-in-Communities weekend. The aim of these weekends has been to give community members a chance to share with others living broadly similar lives, without the necessity of being available to answer lots of questions from people who have not yet lived communally.

Those who were interested in producing some kind of publication other than the newsletter were as likely to do so outside the democratic decision-making structure as within it. Although the early directories were produced by *CN*, with the work being done by the editing group of the time, later ones were compiled by individuals in the *Info-pack* group, who needed an up-to-date directory to include in the pack (a collection of specially written leaflets intended for those new to ideas of communal living). Both *Collective Experience* (a compilation of the best of 10 years worth of *CN*), and the *Info-pack* were produced and published independently by small closed groups of *CN* members and not organised by either the *CN* admin team or the editing group. The *Info-pack* group later became the *Diggers and Dreamers* group (with some changes), and a sub-section of this group produced the 1990/91 International Supplement. (The original *Info-pack* group, incidentally, was set up to produce a video, but this has still not materialised). The *Directory of Intentional Communities* from the USA was specially imported by the current *CN* admin worker without consultation of the membership. Once again, an idealistic and open decision-making structure has been found to be fairly unworkable by the people doing the jobs.