

A.E. Pierre-Louis
MFA-Interdisciplinary Art
Goddard College
Plainfield, VT 05667
alexis.pierrelouis@goddard.edu
May 2007

Introduction

Intentional Community (IC) is a way of sharing housing and resources with people who share similar values. The IC model presents a significant opportunity to reduce living costs and pollution intake and output. For these two reasons alone, IC should be one of the most attractive living models for communities of color, which generally experience poverty and environmental injustice in greater numbers than European-Americans (Heiman, 1996) .

But because of some of the preconceived ideas about IC, and because of the traditional values held by many people of color, many intentional communities have a difficult time attracting and retaining people of color.

This Ain't Your Momma's Hippie Commune

One of the commonly held preconceived notions about IC in traditional communities of color is that intentional community is just a dressed-up, 21st century concept for old-style, 1960s-era hippie communes where white folks with long-hair do recreational drugs and refuse to bathe. Because of the global distribution of intentional communities, there are a wide range of communities reflecting a variety of living styles including IC communities with all the amenities of urban living such as high-speed internet, e-mail, public transportation, and cable television.

Identifying Exclusion Barriers

With its national reputation for environmentalism, its picturesque countryside, and progressive politics, Washington state is a magnet for people seeking alternative lifestyles. As a result, Washington state has seventy-six intentional communities ranking it third in the nation. California ranks first with 174 intentional communities and New York ranks second with 79 intentional communities (IC Data, 2007). Although many IC communities in Washington state are largely comprised of people of European descent, many IC organizers and members sincerely want to attract a more diverse membership especially in terms of race and ethnicity.

With 77 percent of the Washington state population self-identifying as white/non-Hispanic (Census, 2005), a lack of exposure to the experiences, values, and lifestyle ethics of people of color can often lead to unintentional exclusion. Many people of color are often striving for the American Dream and this value is often in sharp contrast to the "less is more" values in many intentional communities. Additionally, many of the lifestyle ethics in terms of diet (vegetarian/vegan), transportation (car-free, biodiesel, or electric), religion/spirituality and parenting (attachment/conscious) are widely different in majority-white intentional communities than in communities of color (Paiss, 1994).

Walking The Walk and Bridging The Gap

If perceived and actual differences in lifestyle ethics and in opportunities to meet and socialize with people of color are the major barriers to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in intentional communities, then what are some of the solutions? The most obvious solution is to increase outreach to communities of color. Intentional communities are often created with a small core group of friends. People often form social networks with others who have shared values and experiences.

By intentionally seeking to broaden one's social network, a person becomes exposed to and connected with a more racially and ethnically diverse base of friends. When a diverse core of friends organize an emerging intentional community, that community is more likely to reflect a wide range of values and experiences that will appeal to a more racially and ethnically diverse membership base. A few of the ways that majority-white intentional communities can increase social networking opportunities within communities of color are

- Locally, become familiar with and involved in neighborhoods, schools, and communities centers that have large populations of people of color
- Be aware of the diversity of values and experiences within communities of color (for example, don't assume that all Hispanics share the same values, experiences, history or culture)
- Become familiar with the history, culture, and arts (historic and contemporary) of communities of color
- Market to the choir but don't forget the rabblerothers: seek out racially/ethnically diverse members who both share your IC's values and also members who challenge it
- Make it an ongoing effort: bridging the racial/ethnic gap in intentional communities is a huge undertaking that will take concentrated, continuous effort over time. Make a commitment to ongoing outreach in communities of color
- Say it loud: in your marketing materials (blog, website, etc.) and in your networking sessions tell everyone you meet about your commitment to increasing diversity. Listen for feedback and follow appropriate leads

References

Census 2005, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53000.html>

Heiman, M.K. (1996), <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/rwc.html>

IC Data Collective, <http://directory.ic.org/iclist/geo.php>

Paiss, Z. (1994), <http://www.ic.org/pnp/cdir/2000/32diversity.php>