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Main content

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Interest and membership in traditional religious organizations has declined steadily since the mid-twentieth century in North America. In hopes of stemming this tide, many Protestant churches have lowered their standards for belief and practice. But this move increased the impression that they had little to offer anyway, while groups stressing high commitment have tended to attract greater attention and rapid growth. These groups include intentional communities, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, the high point of countercultural experiments.

As society grew more conservative from the late 1970s through the late 1990s, many of these communities receded from public view, focused on internal issues, or even disbanded. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, as interest in traditional denominations continued to decline, alternative forms of Christianity have resurfaced. Though some are called "new," they bear many resemblances to movements of the 1960s and 1970s and have their roots in preceding centuries.

One such intentional community, which was quite visible in the 1970s but less so through the late 1990s, is the Bruderhof (also known in English as the Society of Brothers). In 2012, a renewed Bruderhof unanimously adopted a comprehensive outline of its convictions in a document called Foundations of Our Faith and Calling. This statement is intended not only for Bruderhof members, but also for the wider public, including other religious bodies, with whom the Bruderhof welcomes dialogue.

In this review essay, I will seek to identify some issues that Foundations might raise for people who find value in traditional, even if declining, denominations, but who are also moved by the radical communal vision. Since these folks can be found in a wide range of bodies, from the very liberal to the very conservative, I will call them simply "denominational Christians." I will raise some questions that such people might ask in response to Foundations. If it seems that Foundations might not resolve some issues sufficiently for them, I do not mean to imply that it is inadequate for its intended purpose. Foundations may say everything that the Bruderhof needs to say to itself, even if it does not address everything that others would like it to say.

Foundations is written in clear, nontechnical language, with wide margins that cite relevant Scriptures. Its 82 pages are helpfully organized into seven sections, which contain 108 articles. However, the distribution of these articles is far from uniform. Section 1, "The Basis of Our Faith," contains only four articles, and Section 7, the "Conclusion," has none. Section 2, "Our Calling," which outlines their worldwide vision, includes eighteen articles. Section 3, "Heritage," an overview of historical influences, has nine. The remaining seventy-seven articles form Sections 4-6 ("Church Order," "Church Actions," and "Life in Community"), which describe communal practices and structures. While the overall balance may not indicate the relative importance of each section for the Bruderhof, it does give some indication of the attention that so radical and admirable a communal effort must devote to internal matters.

Section 1 briefly lists...

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