

(We weren't able to do a full transcript for this episode, but this summary is fairly comprehensive. )

Malcolm explains that this is not the scheduled podcast on cult dynamics, which has been postponed. He is joined by co-host Peter Land and by Aaron Pott, who lives in an intentional Christian community in Denver. They chat a bit about the snow and cold weather, and about how the retreat center where Peter lives has dealt with COVID.

Aaron describes his experience of community. He has lived at several different intentional communities; he and his wife Julia met at one of them, and once they got married, they looked for a community in which they could raise a family. They eventually found the community they currently live in, Casa Karibu Sze-Ming. (The name means "House of Welcome and Mission" in Spanish, Swahili, and Mandarin Chinese.) They have now lived there for ten years. Six years ago the former owners, who were Maryknoll Missionaries, sold Aaron and Julia the community house. They were able to step into the vision of community life that the former owners had already established.

Malcolm asks about the spirituality that grounds the community's life.

Aaron explains that the ecumenical nature of the community is a key value. Over time, the population of the house has changed; currently, it includes Aaron and Julia and their four children, Sue who is retired, Michael who works at the Spanish Court as an interpreter, another couple, Cole and Chelsea, and a range of more temporary guests and interns.

Aaron and Julia grew up as evangelicals but over time the members of the community have included representatives of many different Christian faith traditions.

Core spiritual values are their vision and mission, which is fairly low commitment but intentional. They are centered around Christ and the Gospel, trying to live into the Kingdom of God, praying that God's kingdom come and trying to discern how they are the answer to those prayers. They have "home liturgies" that help them to grow in community with one another: a potluck meal every other Monday evening, during which they give life updates and share with one another; they pray together using "The Book of Common Prayer for Ordinary Radicals" every Sunday evening;

after prayer they spend half an hour praying for one another. They also share service to their mission of hospitality; they each have individual missions or calling outside the house, but through the house they host interns for “Dry Bones”, an organization that works with street youth, and college service groups working with the poor in Denver. They also provide hospitality to other assorted visitors. During COVID, they hosted a family who needed to escape a bad situation.

Peter describes how he experienced that welcome when he was traveling through Denver as a pilgrim; he felt at home in a Christian environment that didn't pressure but rather welcomed him to join the culture of the place. He asks if Aaron sees welcome as being the key to Christian mission.

Aaron agrees; his personal mission is through welcome; he tries to identify with the humility and welcome of Christ. For instance, in the Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery, Christ makes a “space” in which hearts can be revealed. Aaron talks about how his Evangelical upbringing shaped his worldview, and how he still holds evangelism to be important, but how he has come to recognize the work the Holy Spirit has been doing in people's lives, and that he has been able to realize that he is only entering for a moment into that. It is important to sit and listen to what God is doing in people's lives. It takes the pressure off for him to be able to sit back and listen.

Peter reflects on how being present to people without an agenda, just as Christ did, tends to be a more effective form of evangelical mission. People are attracted to love. We Christians can be too focused on converting people to a particular doctrine or church, but the mission of presence and love is more human, allowing people to grow in the light of community.

Aaron talks about the connection their house community has had over the years with the Catholic Worker house in Denver; their house is different than a Catholic Worker house, but shares some of the outlook and spirit.

Malcolm responds to what Aaron said about being present; he says that it makes him think about Christ as the “Word of God.” Christ didn't just say *words*, he was *the word*. And now, as the mystical body, we are also that “Word of God” by how we live, which can be more effective than what we

say. He asks how often the members of the community get together outside of structured events, and how the house is arranged as far as private and common space.

Aaron explains the house arrangement, which has changed over time. The house is three storied, 132 years old, about a mile and a half from downtown Denver, in a neighborhood of residential homes. Initially, the group took in anyone who needed a place; there would be about 14 people living there, increasing to about 25 when college groups came through; people “sleeping in every large closet.” It was really unsustainable. When Aaron and Julia were expecting their first child, they realized that they needed to set some boundaries to keep their family healthy and safe. So now, their family lives on the third floor, the four other residents live in rooms on the first and second floors, and the basement is set up for hospitality. The residents have to constantly assess their needs as individuals and as a group to see if they can host more guests, or if they need a rest; they sometimes have to make hard decisions as to whether they can take in a person in need. (Similarly, with COVID, they realized that they had to be as safe and cautious as their most vulnerable member requires. So some members ended up being a lot more cautious than they would have otherwise done.)

Peter comments that one of the things he appreciated during his visit to Casa Karibu was just the character of the house itself; the built environment tends to facilitate community. It has a lot of porches which make it easy to interact with neighbors. There are great public spaces, the shared kitchen, dining room, living room, where he was able to interact naturally and informally with the other members, but he also had a private space to retreat back to when he needed it. People ended up eating together even when it wasn't scheduled. The house allowed members to be more private or more social depending on their needs.

Aaron agrees: community members can have as much engagement as suits their temperaments or needs. He also talks about the benefits of being in an urban area and being able to connect with others. Julia helps to run a community garden and the community members attend local churches and participate in other groups, which helps them to meet neighbors and interact with the wider community.

Malcolm says that Aaron has reminded him of the importance of trusting in God and realizing we're not in charge; it can be easy to burn ourselves out if we have an exaggerated idea of our own importance, even if we're trying to work for God. We have to realize that God has everything under control and can bring good even from our mistakes.

Aaron mentions that he really likes some of the "Principles of Community" on the Happy Are You Poor website; they really resonate with his experience. He was listening to the third episode on Gospel poverty and liked how it emphasized that the different aspects of the Faith are not a "check-list" but rather an organic development between God, the community, and oneself. There is a lot to be said for making wise choices in how to serve, and not putting one's ideals above God's actual call and above one's health. He has personal experience of burnout and depression from the bad theology of seeing obligations everywhere, thinking that every need in those around him was his responsibility.

Peter talks about how he admired Aaron's leadership and service to the community, how he was able to be aware of the needs of others and act as a sort of father to the house. Without somebody having the ability to make a final decision, communities can disintegrate into squabbling, but that leader has to be able to really listen to others to provide authentic leadership. How did this balance evolve over time at Casa Karibu? Also, what is it like to raise a family in community? That's a very countercultural thing in today's society where the focus tends to be on the nuclear family.

Aaron discusses his observations of other communities; consensus is very beautiful, but at the same time, communities pursuing pure consensus can get lost in the weeds very quickly. There is a value to having somebody who can say, "Yes, this is what we are going to do." It really helps that some of the other members have lived with them for many years, so that they have a shared vocabulary and can share leadership and initiative, particularly when his family needs his attention. The members are comfortable bringing up problems or issues that need to be resolved. He always wants to be in a place where there is a clear leader, but there is a lot of flexibility and things can be discussed.

As far as living with kids in community, it is big sacrifice, both for the family

and for the other community members. It has helped to reveal his pride; he's had to pull back from his duties in the community, and the other members have had to take over and share the leadership. Sometimes he's surprised that the other members still choose to live with them! They've got four kids under six, and now especially with four other kids in the house and members working from home during COVID, there is a lot of noise and mess and chaos. All the members have had to grow through making accommodation to one another, sharing their frustrations and finding common solutions. Aaron wants to find other families who are living in shared housing to learn from them. It has been hard for him because he can't hide his failings; if he is short with the kids and loses patience, everyone sees it! He doesn't get to wear a good Christian "mask." And that's painful, but also spiritually beneficial. On the other hand, it isn't all gloomy; one of the most beautiful things is that his family and Sue have developed a really tight bond: they are like one another's family. Sue joins them for dinner most evenings, and then helps out by washing dishes while they put the kids to bed. Just in general, families sharing their homes and lives with the elderly who otherwise would be living alone is a great thing, beneficial for both.

Peter is grateful for Aaron's openness about both the highs and lows of community living. And it is great to hear that we can work together to lighten burdens. Having the elderly fully involved in community life is important and wonderful.

Aaron talks about some of the ways that life is made easier by community; they are able to watch one another's children, members shovel the walks, etc. Living with other people who are paying attention and aiding one another is wonderful. Financially, many of the members wouldn't be able to afford to live in Denver without the community; an individual can make minimum wage and still live at Casa Karibu.

Malcolm reflects on not being able to put on a "mask" before others. This may actually be one of the values of Christian community; we have to realize that we are all sinful and weak, and thus we can have mercy and compassion on one another, in imitation of Christ's coming in solidarity with sinners. (At this point Malcolm talks about a sermon he heard on this topic. John was baptizing in the Jordan so that people could acknowledge their

sinfulness before God. Jesus didn't have any sin, but he came to be baptized along with everyone else, and he wasn't carrying a big sign saying "I am not a sinner"!) St. Paul tells us to bear one another's burdens, and that's painful not only for those carrying the burden, but even more, perhaps, for one sharing the burden; it can be hard to burden others. But that is the Christian way, to accept aid.

Aaron agrees. He goes on to explain that married people always need to learn that they can't expect their partners to satisfy all their needs; that isn't how it is supposed to work. This insight easily transfers over to community; a particular community shouldn't be expected to meet all one's needs. One should have realistic expectations. The members of Casa Karibu also participate in local churches, in small groups, and other aspects of the wider community that help to meet needs that the community does not meet. Idealism can be very poisonous for community.

Malcolm brings up Casa Karibu's informal motto: "We're high quality people with low expectations." That could possibly be misunderstood, and is rather humorous, but brings out that important point: too high of expectations, or too unrealistic of expectations, can be toxic to community building. Community tends to attract idealists who have incompatible expectations, and this makes the project fail. Nothing is ever perfect in this life. (For one thing, we all bring our own problems wherever we go.) Something as simple as the ideal of eating all meals together or praying together formally every day can end up being toxic if it doesn't actually meet the community's needs.

Aaron points out that the "High quality people with low expectations" line is tongue in cheek, yet it has served the community well. He's seen many communities fail; one way to help communities to succeed is to see it as operating like a healthy family. The members of Casa Karibu are just *normal* people. They have jobs, families, friends. The community isn't something extraordinary, something *radical*, it is something normal. They are merely attempting to avoid the damaging isolation that is promoted by our culture, trying to support and help one another, and seeing the goodness and beauty that comes from that.

Peter says he appreciates that point: community is not radical. Community

is normal! We need to rediscover that without putting too many expectations or ideals onto people. Including too much structure can be a burden. Christianity is much more about freedom, freedom that is committed to another, that draws on the initiative of love of neighbor and sacrifice, but not from a place of obligation, but from a willing spirit. Close relationships are important for our human good and flourishing, and for coming to know one another. We come to know ourselves much more clearly in the light of the presence of other people around us, and as we see the weakness of others, we become less judgmental. Our surrounding culture is becoming more polarized and judgmental and divided, which may come from the lack of actual contact with the other people who differ with us; we don't see our opponents in their humanity.

Aaron says that even in the best community, individuals have to make a choice to open themselves in love and community to others. He has enjoyed listening to earlier podcasts which talk about fear as a bad motivation for community; every day we need to see if we are acting out of generosity and love. During COVID, the community has acted in a very cautious, careful way, which could be seen as fear, but which they see as charity to the weakest members of community.

Malcolm closes the podcast by reiterating the importance of seeing community as something normal. It is merely a human thing, to live in community, and if we see it as strange or radical, we'll go after it in the wrong way. In fact, this is a wider problem right now; our culture's way of life is so unnatural, so truly strange, that the normal things seem radical. We're living in a strange time in which Christians, who are called to go far beyond the normal, struggle to even reach that level, and we have to be aware of this.