

Staying True, Staying the Course Christian Community in Today's World

by [John Perkins](#)

Distinguished civil rights activist John M. Perkins reflects on his decades-long connection with the Bruderhof. John Perkins grew up on a plantation as a sharecropper in the 1940s, and, with his wife Vera Mae, established a Christian community development ministry in rural Mississippi during the 1960s. Today, the John M. Perkins Foundation runs various youth programs as well as a housing program which provides affordable housing for low-income families.

I have known the [Bruderhof](#) for many years. I have visited the community in New York on several occasions, have been in their other U.S. communities and in the community in England on several more.

What God is doing through their community is becoming a model of what is needed in our day, and especially what's going to be needed to make a real difference in the ghettos of our nation. Today's materialism and individualism is creating a larger and larger underclass that won't be able to function in our society.

So it's going to take communities, people in community, working together to care for the least of these. It is no longer just caring for them socially, but caring for them mentally and spiritually and making certain that their economic life is able to survive, based upon mutual caring. I think that is crucial. I see that what the Bruderhof is doing is New Testament teaching, and it is relevant now to the problems that we are facing in urban communities.

In my Christian life there has been a struggle to be a part of God's people. I joined a group that was called Community of Communities since they tried to make communities around the world. It felt good trying to love God with all your heart and soul and all your strength, that loving God was not just theorizing or wanting spiritual experiences.

I really believe that we ought to *be* the people of God, we ought to be God's people. *Being* is very important. One has to *be* in community. But because community can almost isolate you from reality, how do you reach the world? That has been the struggle for me, wanting God's people to maintain their identity, as a community, and at the same time wanting them to make a creative witness to the world.

We as God's people have got to go beyond individual conversion. American Evangelicals are now over 70 million in number. Yet all the problems of the family get worse: more abortions, more divorce; lottery and gambling are allowed by law in every state. Today's Christianity has become individualistic and proud. We no longer see ourselves as being salt in the world. We do not have

any salt. And so we go on to more conversions, more conversions, more conversions. And we talk a lot about church growth. What difference does it make? What difference does it make in society?

Christianity has become an extension of individualism. We say, “The world is tough and has stepped on me hard, so to help me live my own individualistic life, I need God. I need God to let *me* do what I want to do in life. In fact I’ll even send more money to radio preachers if they will send me something to help me live a better (and better-off) life.” Christianity has become a *me* thing with no application to society, no application to its structure, an extension of selfishness and greed. It’s *my* will and God is there to help *me* carry it out. His will is not really considered.

I believe that people should *be* before they *do*, or they should be *as* they do. And their witness should come out of their *being*. Real evangelism should be an expression of what God is doing in our lives, and we should be giving the reason for the hope that is within us. The highest demand God makes upon our lives is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We have to find a new way to do that.

So we need to re-create community. That is strange within our church today, but it wasn’t strange in earlier days, because in a parish it was assumed that people would worship and work and live as part of a parish. What happened to the parish?

Sadly, all the suffering in our society has become completely isolated from the community, from the kids. It’s not healthy. Life has become so cheap that a fourteen-year-old boy can knock an old lady in the head and grab her purse, and her life is worth nothing, no more than to help him to buy something shiny. So we have to bring suffering back as a virtue in society, to make us grow to be the kind of people who cherish life.

We will never adequately confront suffering until we first restructure the family and then the neighborhood in which we live. Individual conversion might lift some people up once they clean up and get a little ahead and start tithing and doing good, and find a house in another part of town. But we have to rebuild community where we are. We need to bring faith back in our communities. It has to be a faith that *works* itself out in meeting human needs. Faith without works is dead.

We need to learn again—and I think that is something we can learn from the Bruderhof—discipline and the whole idea of the forgiveness of sin, so that God’s power flows back through us. Only as we forgive others can we live anew the freshness each new day. By that I mean forgiving people who are hindering us in relationships that might even call us to run or move, forgiving those people and experiencing the healing, restoring grace of God. Then we will receive from that restoration the joy for living more enthusiastically.

My concern for Christian communities today is that they stay open—that they stay true to who they are but also reach out to a broken world. We must believe that the gospel can burn through racial and cultural barriers to unite people for justice, a justice that has no racial or cultural bias.

I am delighted to be a part of the struggle, and like the Bruderhof trying to bridge the gap: the gospel calls us to be reconciled. God's reconciliation of us to himself has already taken place by his giving his Son on the cross, but he is still waiting for us to be reconciled to each other, across racial, economic, and social barriers. All the more, we must stay the course!