Koinonia’s search for community: Can its vision be restored?

by Cary McMullen in the March 1, 2000 issue

Under a quartz-blue sky last October, a procession made its way from Habitat for Humanity’s international headquarters in Americus, Georgia, to a modern gray one-story building a few blocks away. A sign identified the place as Habitat’s Clarence Jordan Center, used for training and programs. The occasion was the 30th anniversary of Jordan’s death, and with typical flamboyance, Habitat leader Millard Fuller chose the occasion to dedicate the center to his memory.

Jordan was Fuller’s mentor, and the driving force behind Koinonia, the Christian community established in the red-clay land of rural Georgia as a witness to peace and racial brotherhood in a land where both were as rare as snowflakes. It was at Koinonia that Fuller and his wife, Linda, learned from Jordan the ethics of Jesus and renounced the millions they had earned; there that Jordan translated most of the New Testament into the “Cotton Patch version”; there that thousands of people have stayed over the years for a few days or decades, to live simply and strive for Christian community; and there that the Habitat movement was born, as well as another community, Jubilee.

Several hundred people crowded into the auditorium, including Jordan’s children and grandchildren and other relatives. There were songs and a video about Jordan, and then Fuller made an emotional speech. He recalled Jordan’s sharp wit, his unconventional way of reading the Bible and applying it to the world, and how the two of them would milk cows together, talking of Jesus. A plaque was unveiled, and other activities followed during the weekend, including tours of Koinonia.

Visitors to the “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God,” as Jordan liked to call Koinonia, saw a neat, though aging, compound, surrounded by pecan groves and cotton fields and flanked by two small, unincorporated villages inhabited almost entirely by blacks, some of whom have lived there since the early days of Koinonia.

The placid appearance belies the turmoil that has ruled the community for more than seven years, although there is hope in some quarters that Koinonia may be returning to a measure of stability and to its former role as a symbol of prophetic

Christianity.

Last May Koinonia's board of directors accepted the resignation of Debra Lilly as executive director. She had been at that post, including interim duties, about 18 months and was the third director in five years. Both her predecessors were dismissed by the board.

Farmland has been sold off to retire almost $1 million in debt. Koinonia's celebrated communalism has been abandoned for the past several years, though there is talk of reviving it. Its witness for racial harmony has waned, since few white people live or work there. Most former residents agree that it had lost its theological and conceptual force.

I first visited Koinonia in 1983 as the new son-in-law of two of its longtime resident partners, George and Louise ("Coffee") Worth. After retiring as Presbyterian missionaries in 1977 they were drawn to Koinonia, inspired by the community's original vision of working for racial harmony.

With my wife, Evelyn, and our children, I spent much time at Koinonia over the next 15 years. Between 1995 and 1997, we rented a house on Koinonia property. We watched as our friends who lived there departed one by one, and we witnessed the downward spiral that led Koinonia to the brink of dissolution and receivership.

I was sympathetic to the hopes and aims of young white families like ours. I still have sympathies for those hopes, but there are those who have other, very different hopes and aims for Koinonia, and in what follows I have tried to present those as well.

The board's new chairman, David Good, is hopeful about Koinonia's future. The board has a plan to turn it into a center for discipleship training and mission partnership. Good speaks of Koinonia as a global ministry. It sounds right, but is it recapturing Jordan's vision or abandoning it?

To be sure, Koinonia always struggled with what its ministry and vision should be, and more than once in the community's 57-year history it has been on the verge of collapse. In its early years it nearly came apart over internal squabbling; in the 1950s it was almost forced out of existence by violence and a boycott; in the 1960s weariness took its toll. In each crisis, somehow Koinonia was rejuvenated.

But in all that time there has been a persistent tug-of-war inside the community that has defied resolution. A recent book, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*: *The Story of Koinonia Farm*, by Tracy Elaine K'Meyer (University of Virginia Press, 1997), provides a fair analysis of the forces within and outside the community and is a good companion to Dallas Lee's fine narrative history, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*.

A serious flaw of K'Meyer's book is that it stops where Lee did, with the death of Jordan in 1969. But she clearly shows something that has been apparent to everyone who has spent any time there: that there were always two Koinonias, one black and one white. Despite the best intentions and sincere efforts of black and white people who lived and worked there, it was never possible to bring together both of the cherished aims of its founders —communal living in a racially integrated community.

According to K'Meyer, there was tension between these two aims from the first. Koinonia was always a refuge for white liberals. Clarence and Florence Jordan were themselves in many ways prototypical white southern liberals, part of a coterie of men and women who were determined in the years after World War II to bring the South into the 20th century. In later decades, dozens of young whites came to Koinonia from all parts of the country, drawn by its reputation for embodying Christian community.

Of course, the Jordans were motivated by Christian charity and a sense of mission rather than notions of progressivism, but in the end they and those who followed them suffered from liberalism's curse—they were resented by those they were trying to help.

As K'Meyer notes, "Koinonians failed to bring whites and blacks together as equals because they did not take into consideration differences in values and goals. They established a community guided by their own values and expected African-Americans to join it in order to bring about reconciliation."

At Koinonia, seeds of resentment were planted alongside those of brotherhood, and the two grew together.

The current troubles began about ten years ago. Florence Jordan died in 1987, the last surviving member of the original community. Volunteers still streamed to Koinonia. There were daily good-natured volleyball games on the main compound.

Contributions from a 20,000-name mailing list continued to be received. The farming operation and a mail-order business brought income which was used to subsidize a child-care center, Koinonia's communal lifestyle and a few other efforts that leaned heavily to peace and justice issues—demonstrations against trains carrying nuclear weapons and against the death penalty, ministries to improve prison conditions. Like the Jordans and the other founders of Koinonia, the partners involved in these efforts were motivated by faith, but they were also clearly tilted to a white liberal agenda.

Racial equality, of course, was still of concern to Koinonians, and they supported secular civil rights efforts. And they assumed that their very existence, working and living alongside black people, was a witness to a region and a nation where racism lingered. But about the time of the community's 50th anniversary in 1992, that witness was challenged.

At that time, Koinonia consisted of about 15 to 20 "partners," full-time residents who lived in community from a common purse and made all decisions about the community's operation. All were white and virtually all came from elsewhere—from other parts of the South, the Midwest, even overseas. This was historically the case. Local blacks, who were living in involuntary poverty, were decidedly uninterested in the kind of voluntary simplicity that so appealed to privileged white liberals.

Koinonia employed about 30 people—almost all of them black—as workers on the farm's 1,500 acres, in its kitchen and in its mail-order business. On weekdays, employees, partners and guests all shared the noon meal together. Partners lived in the villages, side by side with employees and their families.

Relations between whites and blacks ranged from amicable to edgy—sometimes due to personalities, as in any organization. Here and there, genuine friendships developed. But roles were clearly defined, and the partners were in charge. Often young, inexperienced partners would supervise long-term employees. The result was a kind of cultural distance that wasn't bridged by physical proximity.

Don Moseley, a partner in the 1970s who later helped found the Jubilee community in north Georgia, recalls that the black employees considered the dining hall "white turf." Even spiritual community was a struggle to achieve. Sunday afternoon worship services, usually held in a shorts-and-T-shirt, sit-in-a-circle style, didn't attract black worshipers. (Once, when this was being lamented by some of the younger partners, longtime partner Ruth Field bluntly said, "Well, are you willing to start dressing up?"

The answer was no.)

Since the partners ran the business, Koinonia had the appearance of just another organization in which blacks worked for whites. There were criticisms from visitors and finally a letter of complaint from the employees that said, in part, “We are here to stay, unlike partners who come and make major decisions that change and uproot our lives and then move on.”

The partners, of course, were aware of the problem and sympathetic. With the board of directors, they arranged a series of workshops and held formal and informal conversations about some solutions. In the end, the board made a fundamental change in the organization that some blacks and many whites felt was rash. Essentially, Koinonia was turned from a community to a nonprofit organization. The common purse was abandoned. Everyone was put on salary, and white partners, with a few exceptions for the elderly, had to pay rent. Instead of decision by consensus, a management structure was established with a director. Everyone earning a salary was then considered a partner, and blacks assumed key management roles.

The change was made in March 1993, and there were problems almost from the start. Management positions were filled before they were defined. A local black Baptist pastor, Fer-Rell Malone, was tapped to become “operations manager,” with white partner Gail Steiner as a sort of codirector. The differences in black and white operating styles were immediately apparent. The rough-hewn look of the buildings was due to the white philosophy of keeping things simple. Malone ordered that the office and dining hall get indoor-outdoor carpet, reasoning that Koinonia needed new funds and that appearances were therefore important.

In the dining hall, three pictures appeared on the wall: Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X. One can only imagine what Jordan would have thought of honoring non-Christians or people who accepted violence as an instrument of social change.

By October, Steiner was writing to the board that “fear and mistrust are common feelings.” The following year she resigned and she and her family moved away. Many other disillusioned white partner/employees followed suit over the next few years.

John and Bonny Stitt were friends of ours who left. Bonny told me recently, “It lost all its specialness. I realized it had become just a job. I didn’t come there for just a job; I came there for community.”

The newsletter to Koinonia supporters lapsed, contributions lagged, debt mounted. In October 1994, the board fired Malone. Later, he would tell the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that the board lacked faith: “They were not ready to follow African-American leadership.”

Moseley sees it differently: “He hoped by spending a lot of money, something big would happen. He’d rent expensive vehicles and let them sit for a week.”

Moseley said he and the board conducted a nationwide search for an experienced black administrator, but couldn’t find anyone interested in the job. Finally, Betty Jean Jones, a black Koinonia employee for more than 15 years and interim director after Malone left, got the post.

Koinonia continued to struggle. Jones had some ideas but few resources. There was internal bickering on the staff. By 1998 all the white partners from five years earlier were gone, including my mother-in-law. George had died in 1996 and Coffee, heartsick over the dissension and loss of friends and community, moved to the Jubilee community.

In late 1997 the board summarily dismissed Jones and replaced her with Debra Lilly, a former assistant director. Within months, the board was down to two members. Lilly terms it “a vanity board,” and says they sent her a letter giving her a free hand to run Koinonia. In her version of events, she inherited a desperate situation. The mail-order season was past, there would be no income from crops for months, and bills were six months in arrears. Although she claims to have reduced Koinonia’s debt by several hundred thousand dollars in five months, she admits that even she did not know how deeply in debt Koinonia was.

For more than a year, Lilly was virtually unsupervised. She eventually assumed the jobs of bookkeeper and farm manager in addition to being director. “It was a game of survival. No one knows how hard it was but me,” she said.

Lilly reached out to Habitat for advice and financial help and recruited some new board members. In January 1999, David Good, pastor of First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, Connecticut, joined the board of directors. Good said he was appalled

by what he found: no budget or financial reports and no questions by the board.

Good and Millard Fuller raised $120,000 in pledges, but Good insisted that the books be examined and sent a volunteer from his church to take a look. After a few months, the volunteer reported that Koinonia was $750,000 in debt and had outstanding bills of $100,000.

Good said that he was prepared at the May 1999 board meeting to recommend that Lilly be fired. She resigned before the board acted, citing an atmosphere of blame and attempts to control the staff. Former board chairman Jim Tyree gives Lilly credit for starting to turn Koinonia around, but said she was unwilling to share authority with the board and that her resignation was “for the best.” Of Lilly’s tenure, Good said, “There was misappropriation of funds and mismanagement.” Lilly’s reply: “I feel like I’m taking the blame for something that was already there, and that’s an injustice.”

The board decided not to seek a replacement for the director. A management “team” is in place, and all checks must be signed by a board member.

Now the question is whether there is work for Koinonia to do. Good said the board has made two major decisions about Koinonia’s future. First, about half the farmland has been sold and the farming operation downsized. This has reduced Koinonia’s debt from about $850,000 to $120,000. Farming will remain a part of Koinonia’s volunteer program, but it will no longer be the primary source of income.

The second decision, pending final approval, is to create the Clarence Jordan Center for the Advancement of Christian Discipleship. The board has plans to apply for a grant from the Lilly Foundation to get the center started.

Good said he envisions the discipleship center as a place where there would be seminars on Jordan’s theology; discussions about “a new, nonpaternalistic paradigm of missions”; conferences at which black and white churches could be brought together to forge partnerships; and “experiential education” for volunteers as Koinonia has traditionally practiced it, learning by serving with manual labor.

According to Tyree, the center would return Koinonia to one of the concerns Jordan had just before he died, that of spiritual development. “What has been missing is a spiritual vitality. We want to go back to basics,” he said. Fuller, who has stayed “at arm’s length” from Koinonia for years, said he is hopeful about its future.

So it appears that, thanks in large measure to Good and his congregation, Koinonia will once more become a place where ministry in the white liberal style will be carried on, and the pendulum will swing back toward community. Perhaps that is fitting, in a way. In doing so, it may be returning to the vision of Koinonia's founders and may once more draw white support, but it is unclear whether the black people who work at Koinonia and live nearby will embrace that vision.

Mildred Burton, a longtime Koinonia employee who recently resigned, told me there is concern that blacks will be blamed for the difficulties of the past few years. And in words echoing those of the employees' letter several years ago, she says of the decision to sell the farmland, "Locally, nobody was asked. We have complete strangers coming in making decisions."

I asked Tyree about the danger of once more alienating the black employees and those in the villages. He said in effect that Koinonia is no longer simply a local ministry but part of a legacy that has a wider scope. "The fact that there were no black partners was not the real issue. The people who do come—we'll make sure they're thoroughly grounded in the ideas of Koinonia, of reconciliation and empowerment. Whether they're all white, we'll leave that to the Lord."

Good spoke of the "globalization of Koinonia," and said that except for Koinonia's day-care center, the villages had "very little connection" with it anymore. "This ghettoization has to change. Koinonia needs to be integrated with the rural community, with America and the wider world," he said. In its new manifestation, Koinonia could become more successful and renowned than it ever has been, in the fashion of Habitat for Humanity. But Koinonia's struggles signal the profound difficulties of bridging racial, cultural and regional differences. If Koinonia once more becomes a white retreat center—a global one this time—the irony will come full circle.

Betty Jean Jones told me, "Koinonia has always focused on the needs in Sumter County. It would be self-defeating if things in their own neighborhood aren't right."

Fuller's interpretation of Clarence Jordan's vision is that differences are bridged simply by working side by side in the name of Christ on the worthy goal of alleviating inadequate housing. It's impossible to question the success of Jordan's legacy at Habitat. But Koinonia has always aspired to the goal of a deeper brotherhood, a closer communion between black and white. Though failing to achieve it, Koinonia has provided inspiration and hope to thousands in the attempt. If the new Koinonia

can manage even that much, then perhaps Jordan’s legacy will reach yet another generation.