

Joshua Shepherd

Community member at a Christian Intentional Community in Kansas City, KS

Interview by Chhaya Kolavalli at Quay Coffee, Kansas City, MO

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Transcribed by Chhaya Kolavalli

Note: Interview questions are written in bold, respondent's answers are in regular font.

Abstract: In this interview, Joshua Shepherd discusses the organization of his intentional community in Kansas City, Kansas. He covers the ideology of intentional community, the purpose of living intentionally, and his ideas of social justice. Notably, he talks about the imperative of racial reconciliation within New Monasticism.

Alright, to start with can you give me some background information? Name, age, date of birth, place of birth?

My name is Joshua Shepherd. I'm 29, I was born on [REDACTED] in Jacksonville, Florida, and I grew up in the Deep South. We moved away, across Georgia, when I was about six months old. So I grew up in the church, and that's kind of a background to my story—the church I grew up in was kind of a fundamentalist background. So I actually left the church for several years, from age 18 to 23, based on—I didn't really identify with the expression. I felt like there was a gap between what I read about Jesus and the way that it was lived out.

So you were raised in a religious family?

Yup, Southern Baptist.

So you said moved away from faith until you were 23—what brought you back?

I had this actually strange experience that seemed like a call. I wasn't expecting it, and I felt like there was a call to discipleship, a call to actually follow Jesus in a new way. And at that time it didn't make sense to me, and only looking back do I see how it was kind of—maybe an invitation to see the experiences that I had had in the church weren't necessarily the true expression of who Jesus is. At the time—that was seven years ago—I couldn't have expressed it that way, in fact I was kind of scared. I thought, well I don't really wanna be a Christian because...in the South, at least, my understanding of Christians was that they were bad for people. So, they were actually—it was actually an environment that didn't seem like it could actually be saving or positive or good for anyone. So it's been a process of gradually being invited to go through some reading and checking and seeing how this life is really lived out and how I might be able to do it differently, or, like I actually found out later, in a way that that is actually the old way. Just the original way. I really just

had a weird set of circumstances where I felt an internal sense of call, and I kind of just chased that for a while.

What denomination do you identify with today? How would you define yourself?

Really, nondenominational. I've spent some time in a Methodist Church. We have supporters from a local Southern Baptist Church that really doesn't actually publicly identify as Southern Baptist. So it's Protestant. But my wife grew up Catholic. I think Brian McLaren wrote a book called "Why I'm a Protestant Catholic...Such and Such.." (laughs) So I think that there are—we actually intentionally draw from all different kinds of backgrounds, denominationally, because we find there is some aspect of the truth that can be seen from each perspective. So I read widely. We have Mennonite friends who are a part of the Mennonite Brethren, and they give me their Anabaptist readings...I don't identify with any denomination, but I also don't have a problem with the idea of you having a certain affinity that you think in this way, or you worship in this way, it just isn't for me.

So when did you first hear about Christian intentional living, or first start thinking about it?

Actually, so I read Shane Claiborne—"Irresistible Revolution"—and that was about 2007, when I had maybe a come-back-to-Jesus experience, and I met some Christians who were like "Hey, read this," and I think that was in late 2008. I read it, and the stories that he was telling, um, were resonating with us. Actually, the way that he talked about it—it was just story telling—it was only later on that I read the 12 Marks of NewMonastic Community, and began to read books about people who were talking about how to live this out. I had to kind of dig into what they even meant by New Monastic, as I kept reading I was like "Oh, this makes a lot of sense that you would live in a certain way that looks like Jesus, but you would do it as a community and you would do it publicly." You wouldn't cloister and separate yourself from the whole world, you would actually do it close to your neighbors.

Through reading and listening to people like Shane and Johnathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and some of those other writers who were sharing their stories and kind of looking at some of the—through an organization I work with called Forge, there's an intentional community in Lexington, and we would hear their stories—Jeff and Sherrie Maddock. And I would just think about what it would be like for us to do that in a kind of neighborhood where we felt like our gifts were available to being given, and we thought we would be of help to the people around us. So...

I'm actually not religious at all, but I read "Irresistible Revolution" and it even resonated with me.

Well it's a way of life, and it's a way of life that communicates—no, I'm sorry to interrupt, you read it and?—

No, no, no! It's fine. I just think it's interesting that he's such a mobilizing writer for both people of faith and people without it.

And that's one of the things I think about Jesus today, if you spend time with the kind of people...the Christians I grew up with didn't wanna spend time with people who weren't religious. Jesus actually liked people who weren't religious, he was always fighting with the religious people and they hate him because he's spending time with people who aren't religious. To me, Shane kind of lives that out and is pushing us all to understand that we haven't lived our faith yet. We haven't even done it ecologically in the way that we talk about the environment—what we've done historically—all of those things, I'm glad that he's speaking publicly in a way that people can understand. Even if you're not Christian, I think we should be owning the story of how much we've screwed up, and actually try to live differently.

So he's been a big—a lot of people read him, and especially if you're an idealist like me, you dive in and there's this process of understanding that he's 20 years into living this and he's really radical. Where we're at now is trying to learn how to live it out in ways that are healthy, that aren't just full of idealism. Because when you actually get into the community, you got real people around you and you have to love them—you live in intention, and you gotta deal with conflict. That's where I am now, is going from a place of hearing his idealistic ideas and then actually learning to live our own story and not just think about it in our heads, but actually live it out every day.

So have you lived in intentional community?

Yeah, so we started a little over a year and a half ago. My wife moved into the house where we live—it's down in Kansas City, Kansas—we moved in there two and a half years ago, and the first year we kind of got to know the neighborhood and got set up. Right now we have three permanent members. Currently during the summer we have 20 interns that are an international group, so our house is like five thousand square feet, specifically purchased and remodeled for that purpose. So during the summer we end up with like 20—it's basically just an internship, to come and get a taste. They work with Urban Farming Guys, so right now they're with them doing introductory work with them. Then they'll come and do organic neighboring—just being available to our neighbors. Because we don't believe—we're not coming in as an organization. I don't believe we have answers, and we're not saving them.

So one of the things that we want to do is get to know the neighborhood. We're trying to invite them into—probably if you've spent much time with Christians you'll know that when we go on mission trips sometimes we do more damage than good, and we think we're gonna fix everything. But we're actually trying to slow them down and get to know the neighborhood. Also, because they're international and multicultural, by the virtue of living together they have some really new experiences that push them. So for right now, for 11 more days, we're doing that. Then for nine

months we live with—some people from that internship go on to stay with us for a nine-month commitment with no strings attached, just committed to another nine-month learning process about what we do. Mentoring and coaching along the way, and then out of that some people—we now have three people—some people will stay permanently. Which I think is where the real important work can be done. There's a quote I saw from John Perkins or Shane Claiborne, like it'll take you 12 years to see actual change. So we want to commit to stability long-term in the neighborhood.

Can you tell me a bit about how you picked that neighborhood to build your house in?

Yeah, so my wife is a Spanish interpreter, and I learned Spanish after I met her. We were going to Guatemala together on trips, and I couldn't, actually, when we first met, I couldn't communicate, so I was like "I have to learn Spanish." So then I did, and it became our thing together where we felt kind of alive, in a different way, around Hispanic people. We enjoyed the culture—I mean, you can't say you enjoyed a whole culture, but we liked it, we felt good. It was something about—we had an affinity, and we felt like...so our church is now, we go to a Hispanic Spanish speaking church, and so that...we were living in the suburbs, and we knew we wanted to move to an urban area where it was probably a little poorer economically and people were struggling. The kind of neighborhood people say they don't wanna move to, that kind of thing. We also wanted it to be largely Hispanic. We weren't even actually thinking about KCK, but some mentors of mine brought up the idea of moving here. Because actually—we formed a nonprofit, and the person who'd come in before us and set up all this stuff, he had to move because of some family circumstances, he'd set up the house and renovated the house, and kind of came up with the vision of the internship aspect.

So there was a house in a neighborhood that fit, really—we were thinking kind of in terms of demographics where we would feel most alive and happy and be able to be good neighbors. So that was the main thing and then this specific opportunity came up like a week later.

After you picked this neighborhood, was it just you and your wife who founded the community first?

Yeah, in terms of actually living there, yes. But we have a board of directors like a 501c3 nonprofit set up, where we have specifically—there's a group from Church of the Resurrection, which is a large Methodist church in Kansas City that helped pay for the house. The house is actually owned by a nonprofit. So a lot of people actually—and I mentioned the guy, Sam, who actually rented it...the house had raccoons living in it like five years ago, so he did like 90,000 worth of renovation work. So it's actually been a process, but in terms of moving in there, my wife and I were there by ourselves for a year but there are a lot of people involved. Like I said, we have a training organization called Forge—which is a training curriculum. It

helps us think about a lot of things that Christians need to think about, like colonialism and—see, we use the term missionary formation. But when we use it internally we know that that's pretty scary for a lot of people. Because what that usually entails is a colonial kind of coming in and thinking you have the answers. So we use that because what we mean is like, when you move to a place, love your neighbors. But when we say that, it means proselytize and come in and act like your culture is the best. So Forge helps us give a curriculum to change the paradigm of a lot of young Christians, to help kind of challenge some of those notions about what it means to live out your faith publicly—to share it, but not to be bad news, not to do some of the damage that other people have done. There's a lot of people involved. And we have a foundation that pays for the internship—pays to them to be interns, also.

I ask that, because I've talked to maybe 15 people so far, and intentional community ranges from two couples being like "Oh yeah, we sat down and wrote on a post-it that our mission statement was reconciliation and blah, blah, blah," to this, where you have like a curriculum. What is Forge, again?

So Forge is a training organization founded by an Australian guy named Alan Hirsh. Actually, before I ever met him and got to know him, I was reading his books and they were really helping me understand a lot about, really some of the—one of the themes is some of the messed up stuff that happens when Christians think they need to be at the center of power. We sort of eradicated the separation of church and state—we're talking about Christendom. The whole model of Christendom, and how we live in a place where we're increasingly marginalized, and that's where we belong (laughs). On the margins. That's the whole intentional community thing, is live on the margins with people who are marginalized culturally, and then just love them. And then, like, that's it! (laughs). That's the whole thing. That's just an example of the kind of things those guys are writing, and they formed a training organization to help people go through a process.

A lot of people, they're grappling with these things. It's hard to change your paradigm. If you think that being a Christian is about saying a prayer and going to heaven, and then somebody else is saying "Well, there might be more to it if you actually read our story." Then they're like, I don't know how to process that. So Forge is trying to help Christians who are open to the concept of challenging some of their core paradigms. Specifically in our house, we do that not only during the eight-week process, but also during the nine months. We do a lot of readings together, then we push them outside of their comfort zones in terms of living with availability to their neighbors who might look different, language barriers, stuff like that. So, yeah, that's—it's just a training organization but in a really kind of grassroots way. There's no paid leadership. They're the ones who come up with the curriculum. We have an organization called [unintelligible], which is the one they pay for the interns to set the foundation to do so in sort of memory of their son Willy, who passed away when he was 19—he did a lot of this stuff—so to honor him, his family set up this

foundation—“What Would Willy Want?” So we have five cities where we’re doing this internship right now. That’s one of the other organizations involved.

You guys have a far reach.

When you think about [unintelligible] it’s a Methodist organization, so students from one particular school...and then Forge kind of gets some national recognition. So I think between those, people tend to go to the website—young people..you talked about the Shane Claiborne thing...young people are increasingly thinking like this. Like they wanna radically live it out. It’s actually like—the internship is in high demand. My heart is actually in the more long-term intentional community thing, but I know we can do both. The history of monastic community would have the novitiate, right? So I think it’s a little bit like that—come and taste, and we’re not gonna pressure you to stay, because you may not be right for a long-term commitment. But come and see what we do, and we’ll learn from you, and if you’re fit, you can learn longer. That’s where it’s at right now.

Do you keep in touch with many of the interns, do you know if they go on to be a part of intentional community?

We’re in our second year—we are. Dawn and Wooly, who began the internship program in Alabama, he could tell you stories—he tells me stories all the time of people who come back, and people he has to challenge and almost kick out of the program. He talks about a lot of—not only do they end up, let me see how to phrase it...because we’re not actually trying to push them into a Christian ministry, we’re just trying to teach them how to live out...because we believe there is no sacred and secular divide. All the world is sacred. Any vocation or gift that you express for the good of the world is good. Go into business, but go into business this way—that’s what we mean by missionary formation. I haven’t had a chance to see more than just the two-year process, but I know that—yeah, we stay connected, my wife especially who is better at that, we keep talking to them. Some of them are from around here, some of them go back home and they do similar things back there.

So, in terms of the community that you’re a part of, how has the neighborhood reception been to your house?

It’s been 100% positive, what we do though is a little bit different I think from—we haven’t advertised our presence there. There’s a book called “Abundant Community,” which I feel like motivates what we do. It talks about finding a way to facilitate the gift giving for all your neighbors. It talks about understanding that one of the problems with what happens in neighborhoods that are economically impoverished, is that you tend to have—if you have an organization people like me come in and we get to give our gifts, and I get to feel like wow I have something to do and I’m really important here. It exacerbates my own issues and ego. And also it exacerbates the condition of them just being recipients. So what we’ve done is felt the impulse to be quiet, we ask, for example, what would Chhaya do if she just

walked into a regular neighborhood? You wouldn't walk in and talk about all the work you're going to do. We wanted to get to know our neighbors over time.

So it's hard for me to answer the question, because it sounds like partly it's an organization question, right? 'Cus if you moved in and we started some kind of soup kitchen or developmental program to help people with skills, then we would wanna tell people we're here. But what we've done is we actually kind of quietly just get to know each neighbor around us, meaning in a natural way, because that's what we think is actually our call, is to know and to love our neighbors. So, over two years now we're getting a great response. I want that to sound like—maybe if you moved into a neighborhood and your neighbors actually liked you (laughs). So they'll come to us and be like “We watch the way that your young people talk to each other and talk to other people in the neighborhood,”—one of our neighbors specifically is marrying a guy and he has two children, and she's like “I want them to hang out with you guys.” Because the young people who come in there are respectful and kind and they're patient and nice. Those are the things that are important to me, that we don't come in and—that we also live there as a positive benefit to our neighbors, to the specific people around us. And so that's—we're actually starting to hear some really good stuff—it could go the other way, and a lot of times it does. A lot of times Christians come in and make a lot of promises and then leave. And actually ours is—I think it's good so far.

A couple questions about what you think about intentional living. I know it's only been two years, but how do you think faith is lived differently when it's lived intentionally, in community? Has it changed the way you feel your connection to your faith?

Yeah, it has a chance to go from something that is purely in your head, purely that you read about or think about, to being something that you daily demonstrate. That you'll be daily challenged. If we say that one of our core beliefs is that we should forgive people constantly, that's one thing if you're just living around one person that you've kind of just gotten used to, like in a marriage (laughs). But it's a whole nother thing when you come downstairs and someone's socks are there for like the fiftieth time, and you're like...these kind of things happen constantly, that you begin to actually chafe and rub against each other, and there's a lot of opportunity if you actually live it out, and you have to actually go to a person if you have a problem. Before you even do your worship thing, actually go and talk to them, actually go and fix that if they have something against you. And those challenge us, like it's easy to live if you don't have to worry about living close to people, like we did in the suburbs. You're in isolation and it's a lot easier to love people you only see for an hour a week. The actual—and even in the first year you see this departure from “Here was something I said I believed in, now here's the chance for me to see if there's a better way of life.” For me, it goes from being ideal and abstract to actually being concrete.

There are times when I've fallen way short and feel like a jerk. And we find that actually seems pretty common. Other people in the house feel like a jerk, and we talk and find that out, and you actually end up accepting each other. When you realize "Yeah, I am a jerk sometimes, but you actually don't need me to be perfect" there's a breakthrough. After a year with the last group, we started trying to stop judging ourselves and each other, and to actually kind of break through and actually like each other. So that's, yeah...

On the topic of conflict. I've talked to some groups who are very particular about choosing who they live with, making sure they're all along the same lines of faith. But other groups have been like "The more variation the better, we live with Buddhists, agnostics, whatever." Where does your community fall?

So in terms of like homogeneity—one of the languages we use—those of us who actually join the community and say that we're long term are committed to living the life of Jesus, actually living the life and practices of Jesus. Anybody can come and be a part of what we do. They can belong. Anybody. What that means is that there's no margins or boundaries or fences. What that means is there is a core group of us who said—if you said to me, I want to commit to doing this diet, or this thing, I'd say as your friend I should probably help you live that out. So those of us who commit to actually living it out, there's a high bar. We challenge each other—you said you wanted to live this out, and it's actually hard, so we're gonna help each other do it. But if you—specifically, since you told me you're not religious, or my friend Ben, who I'm going to meet with today—come! Come stay and come live. I'm not going to challenge you on what you're doing. Whether you're Buddhist, agnostic, whatever, you can come live with us. And if anyone was giving you crap I'd be personally offended, if anyone was like trying to challenge you on what you believe—because we don't think it works that way.

So it's both—you actually do have a group that is committed to a certain set of practices, that we think call us to do certain things. We handle conflict this way, we treat people this way. But if you don't tell me that that's what you want to do, then I'm not going to expect that of you, and I'm also not going to tell you that you can't live with us, you can't hang out with us. It's both. Within that center set, we also long for multiculturalism, we long for diversity, and we long for discomfort. In the beginning at least, we think that—there's not much benefit from—we don't go looking for people who look like the exact same manifestation as us. We want a diversity of experiences, of background, because that's a reflection of the story we actually say we believe—this kingdom of people that actually don't look alike, and don't have to think alike, but actually love each other regardless of differences. Does that answer your question?

Yeah, that's a great answer! I want to turn away a little bit from that, and ask a couple questions about social justice—some communities say what you're saying, that being a part of community and making relationships, that is a

form of social justice. But I know that the Urban Farming Guys have a whole elaborate thing—people garden, we're going to help people be sustainable on their own, and that's how we're gonna improve this neighborhood. Does your community have any social justice plans, or if not, why is that not a part of your program?

One of the reasons our interns are currently working with Urban Farming Guys is that they're maybe 10 or 15 years down the road from where we want to be. We don't want to just copy them, because I don't know that I could do what Jason does—someone called him the Bob Villa of urban farming. I admire what they're doing, and maybe when we have more than three people committing—it'll always have that neighboring ethos. For me, our specific call is to live in flesh, in the neighborhood, and be a neighbor. And beyond that, if your neighbor has immigration issues, you're not going to ignore them. You're not only—you know, Shane Claiborne talks about not only giving a fish, but teaching a man to fish—you're also going to begin questioning who owns the pond.

So that—one of the things specifically I'm involved in right now is immigration reform, comprehensive immigration reform. So going with other fellow Christians to the Whitehouse, talking to our senators, as Kansans, saying "Hey, you know, you think all Christians are Republicans and hate immigrants but that's not true." So that's a part of specifically what we do right now, living what we do. Now I know Urban Farming Guys—it ends up being this local thing. If your neighbors are Hispanic, and all these people around you are struggling with immigration stuff, then that's how it happens for me. It's like a local thing. You're like a good Samaritan. Once you realize what's happening with this person, you have to follow up. So that's immigration. Nutrition, for all of us, is going to be a big thing. I'm really weak in understanding that right now—we live in a food desert, we have no fresh produce in a grocery store within three miles. We're just not there in terms of solving that as sort of a local community of us. We do have partnerships with—we have an urban gardens input—the biggest thing is learning to use my voice as a citizen and as a Christian. In Kansas they think Christians are against immigrants, I think, our politicians do. So to keep calling and keep saying this is not true, I'm a voter, I live in your state, and I'm asking you to reconsider your perspective on immigration reform—our immigrant neighbors are good news for us. The other issue is continuing to help refugees. Right now we have three guys who are with us—in my opinion they're in a better position than our neighbors who need documentation, but they still need help with English. So ESL is another big issue. Since my wife and I are both bilingual—we're not great ESL teachers yet, but we wanna continue to get better. To maybe fill in some of the gaps. There's a lot of great ESL programs, but we can fill in gaps because we have a great relationship. So our neighbor Luis, maybe isn't going to a class because he works all the time, but he hangs out with us a lot so we've tried to learn how to pattern English for him over time. Is that an answer to your question?

Yeah! You guys are like Christian anthropologists.

We're trying! The problem is that—sometimes Christians don't pay attention to stuff like this, right?

So I guess what I'm hearing from you—when you're living around people who you wouldn't normally encounter in the suburbs, their problems become your problems, and that opens you up—

It would happen in the suburbs too if you were actually paying attention. Which we do sometimes, I'm not against the suburbs. Some people—Christians are not living in the suburbs and caring for their neighbors. My mother-in-law is always providing meals for her neighbors when they're sick and stuff like that, just because it's a good neighborly thing to do. I think that's natural, I think if you hear this person is going through this thing, then you wanna do something about it. Then if you hear that almost all of them are, with immigration specifically, then yeah, it becomes your problem. Hopefully that's true and not just something you say. That's the hard thing over time to keep letting it affect you.

So, looking at the 12 Marks of New Monasticism, one of them was intentional racial reconciliation. And in asking that question—I know it's an awkward question to ask—a lot of people say “pointing out race only exacerbates the problem.” What is your stance on that problem?

I point it out. I point out the history of racial tension. I point out my own actual biases that have been expressed and try to apologize and practice reconciliation about them, but I also point out the obvious and implicit forms of racism I'm not going to be aware of—so, right now, in the house right now living with us are four or five African American students, three actual African students—so there's already, they're telling me, I didn't even know about this tension. A Nepali, we don't have any Hispanic people, and then we have some white people like me who—we don't have much experience multiracially. So what we do is we actually talk about it in the house. Specifically it's kind of like that—we have a set of teachings that we're supposed to be living by that actually say those divisions don't exist for us, in a way that it's already true. We believe Christ did that, that it's broken down. It's called the ministry reconciliation, and we're supposed to be actually living into that. And right now in the house we have clicks. We were sitting in a circle and I was actually watching this, and it was white, white white white, Nepali, Nepali. Like, we still do that. So if ignore it—it talking about it exacerbates the issue—I think ignoring it is actually what allows us to...it's a comfort issue. I think that's an aspect of racial reconciliation we need to point out, it's that you're going to have to be uncomfortable. You're gonna have to ask him his story even though he's struggling with English right now.

Within our group we push people pretty hard, because we think that that's a way of, a path of healing in life. Not because we're trying to come down on people. Outside, we try to challenge people on some of their preconceived notions. If they're white,

and they come from the suburbs, there's some fear where there shouldn't be fear. "Nothing has happened to you, calm down. He looked at you, nothing happened." One of the things we do during the internship is specifically challenge that. We also invite leadership—black leadership, Hispanic leadership, and not only mentor people that—for example, the president of the school board is a friend of mine, Dr. Evelyn Hill. So when she calls me about a problem that an African American girl is having, she thinks she might be able to help her better than I can, and I think she's probably right. We try not only to show—there's a multiracial face of the leadership, the people that are supporting us as well. We're trying to pattern—this is how we work together. And then actually talking about it. Actually interfacing together with Dr. King's writings is a big deal. Actually interfacing with people who can talk about black and white relations. Because right now in KCK that to me is the one that feels the most tense. Hispanic and white is like okay, we kind of—we're not completely crossing boundaries where sometimes you can tell...there's a lot more room for misunderstanding between white people and black people. I think we should acknowledge it. And that means I should acknowledge some of the things that I do, some of my own kind of things that cause this to be prolonged and exacerbated. That's not something I feel like we're experts in. It's a gut instinct. When I read Dr. King, I feel like he's actually addressing it, and he makes distinctions between his sick white brothers and the other white people. And I want to make that same distinction, because racism is a sickness. And we're gonna have to talk about it, and if it's in the church it needs to be crushed and it needs to be figured out. And if you're with us, then we're gonna talk about it.

Well I personally agree with you and I understand—I'm a TA for cultural anthropology, and it was awkward to discuss race with African American students when I'm coming from a privileged position myself.

Yeah, it does feel awkward. I think we can at least offer that. If you come from a privileged background, then at least allowing yourself to go through the awkwardness is...we can at least offer that (laughs). That's the one time I feel most awkward as a leader, and that's okay. If you come from a privileged background, then at least allowing yourself to go through the awkwardness is the offering you can make. And my experience has been that some people are willing to take me aside and teach me, but if they're younger or older they'll actually share with me their experiences. So far it's actually been really good to actually talk about it instead of pretend it's a non-issue.

Onto a different topic, you've sort of touched on this but I'm going to harp on it again. Is evangelizing or proselytization a part of your program at all?

We don't even—so proselytization for me is a stupid word, you can throw it out. Evangelism is not even a really great word, even though I know a lot of Christians would disagree with me. It's not even in the bible. Our commission is to make disciples. And it sounds like—most Christians I know quickly convert. A disciple is an apprentice, someone who is learning. The word means student but a student in a

Hebrew way is not just in an academic setting. It means all of life, but you're learning all these new concepts—think about it, the whole apprentice system in other countries or in England. You live with the person you're learning from, and it's long-term life teaching. That's what we mean by discipleship. Evangelism, while I like the root, which is we have the good news—supposedly “our story is good news”—I know you know what I'm talking about, because often it's like “You're going to hell.” That's not good news. So probably that's what you mean by evangelism and proselytization—[interruption]—so yeah, so we actually say we don't—we do talk about the gospel, we believe the gospel is this whole life message about a way of life that we believe extends. Living this way is abundant life. When we praise about Kingdom Come, most Christians think that means you're going to heaven. Actually, we want the life that is available in heaven to come down, to let it infiltrate all areas of life. Like the Urban Farming Guys, when they build a garden—that's the manifestation of the Kingdom, that's good. And it's good for the neighbors. And so making disciples of that means that someone comes to me and tells me they wanna learn that. If they tell me, if we both agree, then we'll do that. We'll actually begin to study that, and I'll share what I have, which isn't all of it.

I was just talking about this with my friend Adam—like if someone says I'm struggling with my marriage right now, let's ask him about it, let's bring him in. It's not like I have it all together. But we do believe in discipleship, that's our thing, that's our mission. It probably sounds scary from the outside, it sounds like it quickly gets turned into proselytization or evangelism. I don't do either. We think that there is a good story, and that when it's lived out it looks good. That's the only way you could learn what you're doing, is to be with people who are teaching you anthropology. We don't go to strangers and knock on their door and tell them “We have a great story for you.” They probably actually have heard this story in some way, and have their own reasons—whether they've accepted it or reject it. They've probably often heard this story, it may have sounded good but then they didn't see anybody living it out, and they saw Christians actually being the opposite of the story. For all of those reasons, I don't use either of those terms. And if I use even gospel or discipleship, I'm trying to use it in a way to make people understand. But it certainly is not done in a way that is uninvited. And if it's discipleship, it has to happen—like I would not be here trying to disciple you. I'm talking about my friend who wants to—we're together five nights a week talking, like how do you guys do hospitality? Like that's discipleship. We wanna share that way of life, and I think that there's corollaries in Buddhism, there's corollaries in—you want to learn about Buddhism, someone is going to teach you the tenants of that faith and how you actually live that out. That's what we mean.

I didn't think you were trying to convert people, I bring it up because I wanted to hear you talk about it.

I will tell you that most Christians use the word evangelism, and they think that when we say—we say what I said about Jesus, that he said go make disciples—they think he meant go do that 20-minute talk. What I think is misunderstood is that

message. If you look at the way he did discipleship, when people left him, he let them go. He actually turned to people who were with him and said “Do you want to go too?” He’s actually open to the fact that some people aren’t gonna want to do this. And so yeah, that bugs me. I probably should’ve started with this story—when I grew up in the church this was an expression I grew up with, that you go and knock on people’s doors and you don’t actually like them or love them or get to know them, you just have to get this 20 minute speech in, or five minutes. So we don’t do that (laughs).

Yeah, psychologically it doesn’t make a lot of sense.

It makes zero sense. And theologically it’s not actually our story. It’s a Greek kind-of gnostic gospel, that you’re supposed to say this prayer, and nothing else, the rest of your life, Chhaya, will matter, and then you’ll go to this place in the sky that doesn’t even sound that cool. It isn’t even our story. It isn’t even anywhere in scripture. That’s the weird thing. From an outsider it sounds crazy, from an insider it sounds crazy, but it’s this paradigm thing that’s co-opted our imagination, but really the story is the opposite. Sorry about that! (laughs).

Another set of questions I have is about simple life and sustainability. That seems to be such a big part of this 21st century wave of Christian intentional community. And you said you guys have a garden?

Well there is a community garden that was put in by—Kansas City Community Gardens—so we helped put it in, but it’s not our garden, no.

Well do you try to practice sustainability or simple living?

Define for me simple living, first.

Um, well that’s a spectrum—I know some people who recycle waste-water, and maybe grow their own herbs. Or they’re very conscious of like where they buy their clothes, or the ethical parts of consumption.

We actually had a speaker come in yesterday, and he wrote a book—he’s ahead of us in this whole area and he’s right. He wrote a book called “Free” which is really about how you use your time and money. So all the ideals I’m sharing with you, one of the things that can happen is I screw up and not know how to use my time and money and none of this happens. So, within that he had us do this questionnaire, and one of them was about ecological ways and sustainable ways of living. And he wanted us to give feedback, and that was by far my worst area. So if you’re asking about our community, that’s a blind spot for us currently. The truth is, he’s right. Everything he was talking about—that I have to be more cognizant of where I shop, I have to be more aware of where my clothes are coming from, be more aware of gosh, the whole—they’re using solar panels to power their whole...all that stuff, sometimes you come across the truth and you’re like I need to live that out, but I don’t know

what to do next. And that's where we're at—I don't currently know how to do some of the things—yes I know how to make better choices, better individual choices about where I make purchases—but the bigger picture of leading our community in better ways of living and recycling waste water or solar panels, those haven't happened yet. I think we have the capacity to make it happen, because the leadership at Urban Farming Guys'—my answer is they're right, the people who are doing what you describe as simple living. If our story is about God creating everything and we're not taking care of it, then that's stupid. That's just stupid. That doesn't make any sense. If we believe that all of creation is good, then we have to care for it. That's a weakness and a blind spot, and where our community probably has the most growing room—because I have the most growing room, and I often lead us. So the answer is yeah, it's great, we need to get better. And we need to learn from people at Urban Farming Guys and other communities—Cherith Brook—actually, those two, for me, encompass...Cherith Brook is doing this simple living in a way that you can actually tell their money is a vote. And Urban Farming Guys is doing sustainability in a way that you can tell they are actually promoting ecological, local practices that are good for people. So we are trying to learn from what they are doing but we have a long ways to go. It's actually not how I grew up, in the South, believe it or not. But it's right, and it's good, and it's true.

So if you can't speak from personal experience—I know Shane Claiborne advocates this kind of stuff—why do you think so many Christian intentional community leaders are interested in living this way?

Because they're almost always idealists, meaning they look for what's true and right and good, and they believe this is how our story calls us to live, and they figure out how to do it. And they also realize—part of the thing about intentional community is seeing the gap between the church as it's lived out in our society and what actually, the lifestyle Jesus actually lived and we find in our story—it's seeing that gap and actually trying to live it. So one of the biggest gaps—the biggest gap is ecological sustainability, creation-care if you want to call it that—a move away from consumerism, and trying to create our identity through what we purchase. So they—we implicitly and intuitively know that it's right and we try to live it out. I think that's the whole point of intentional community, is that you can't find a way to do this in most expressions of the church. Because they're not talking about that. Like if you go to a random church right now, they're talking about their Sunday service. So they end up forming these communities as a response to that. My probably first instinct was to form a community in response to this justice stuff, to the fact that the church by and large doesn't seem to be responding to the poor, or injustices like immigration. And my blind spot is this other area where we need to be responding to. And I think that's why they're doing it—we don't form intentional community just 'cus we want to live in community, I think actually that's hard. We do it because we actually want to fill this gap that we feel isn't being lived out rightly by Christians by and large.

Anything else?

Nah.