

New Zealand's 'new'

“We do not lay up treasures on earth. If we have any money left in our account at the end of the year, we give it away.”

—Neville Cooper

“We work with our hands,” says Neville Cooper, “preach the gospel, submit to leaders and each other, and look for the return of Christ.”

What would a Christian community look like if believers today would live out the simple teachings of Jesus? The Springbank community, located 25 miles from Christchurch and seven miles from the small town of Rangiora, may be one example, for in many areas of living its members are committed to keeping the teachings of Jesus.

They share their material goods and labor, create jobs where there are none, practice Christian discipline among themselves, love enemy as well as neighbor, maintain order, aspire to be poor in spirit, humble rather than proud, seek to be reconciled to their brothers and sisters, observe foot washing, and practice modesty in

dress and grooming. They will not swear oaths, take human life or go to war, become members of trade unions, sanction divorce, or remarry divorced persons.

Although virtually unknown outside of New Zealand, the group has existed for about 15 years. They have chosen no official name, preferring only to be called “Christian,” or simply “The Christian Church at Springbank.”

The leader of the community, “Nev” Cooper, was an evangelist in Australia for 20 years. After locating in New Zealand, he felt that traveling evangelism was “not the way.” He began to teach the necessity of practicing the “commandments of Jesus,” of loving one another, becoming reconciled, and sharing life and material goods.

Families began to meet together in homes for fellowship and worship, and they used their vacation time to live together communally several weeks each year. Eventually the group bought a farm, started a school, and began living “like a New Testament church.”

“We felt that people were getting too far away from the teachings of Jesus,” said Nev. “We are a family people. We believe the state of the family is appalling. We want Christian homes. We want to rear children, for we love them. We are against abortion and birth control.”

Most travelers would recognize the community as a farm where fresh produce and bread are

sold. Central in the compound is a large two-story building. The dining room and kitchen are located on the first floor and the assembly room is on the second floor.

Other buildings are two large dormitories and a large farmhouse used for family living quarters. There are spacious buildings for lower and upper school children. Other buildings include workshops, a flour mill, and a bio-gas digester that produces enough fuel from chicken manure to operate the group’s eleven vehicles.

The well kept buildings and the neatly trimmed lawns render a pleasing view. Springbank maintains a bird sanctuary and a small zoo, with appropriate landscaping and plants. There are deer, rabbits, parrots, special species of birds, and swans.

Near this natural habitat is a swimming pool, built last year with the savings of the young people, and a guesthouse with a dining room, a small kitchen, and a whirlpool spa. This house is a place where newlyweds may “get away” for a time, where once a month each married couple may invite out another married couple for dinner and an evening’s fellowship, and where a family may have a few days of relaxation together.

If going into debt, using credit cards, overdrafts, and mortgages are wrong, how does Springbank develop capital for expansion? The answer is simple. Creating jobs where there are none. Men are trained for specific trades: plumbing, chemistry, building, airplane



Christian community

BY JOHN A. HOSTETLER

maintenance, electrical work, carpet laying, cabinetmaking, horticulture, the construction of bio-gas plants, and other occupations which do not compete with the local trades. Labor-intensive occupations are preferred.

Most of the income-producing occupations are performed in the community. But if work has to be done in nearby towns, two persons generally work together. Produced in the community are garden products and herbs, melons, walnuts, children's toys, health bread, flour, willow baskets, and large quantities of processed willow cane. Large amounts of garlic are prepared and packaged for export.

"Manure is a God-send, worth its weight in gold..." That, according to Nev, is the experience of the Springbank community where chicken, pig, and cow manure is being successfully converted to methane gas to fuel cars, trucks, and tractors. The gas is produced by the action of bacteria manure. What began as a high school project has developed into a plant for the production of adequate and cheap fuel.

When the community was first established they were paying \$20,000 a year for petrol and diesel. Persons who were mechanics, engineers, builders, and plumbers combined their faith and labor and, with the help of the Agricultural Research Center and the technical expertise of others, built a bio-gas digester.

In 1980, the first vehicle in New Zealand was run on bio-gas. At two-thirds capacity, the plant pro-

duced enough fuel to run 11 vans and several tractors. Within a year, the plant was putting out more than \$21,000 worth of transport fuel as well as \$2,500 worth of pig feed, and \$2,100 worth of fertilizer per year. The fuel cost was equivalent to between 40 and 50 cents a gallon of petrol. A bio-gas plant can be built commercially for between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

The members of the community believe there is potential for many such plants. The Springbank community has just completed the construction of a plant in Auckland. Silage can be used instead of manure, but members of the community are reluctant to use the products of valuable farmland when waste material is available. The plant's operation requires the services of one person for about two hours per day.

Although most of the Springbank community members are of Australian and New Zealand background, other nations are represented, too. The first adherents were attracted by Nev's evangelistic work. But there are persons from Switzerland, Germany, England, Greece, Canada, and the U.S. A Maori young man is married to one of the Cooper daughters. During the early formation of the community the group conducted evangelistic efforts. Members of the group contacted footloose young people in Christchurch. They sang and gave their personal testimony

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Entrance to the Springbank community. The sign tells passersby what products the community has for sale.

The (Springbank) community has had its share of ridicule It has been labeled heretical, cultic, separatist

in the city square. A few of these world-traveling young people were converted to Christ and have never returned to their native land.

After conversion many have changed their names. In fact, most have adopted names which derive from the Bible or from Christian attributes. Fervent Stedfest, headmaster of the school, changed both his first and last names when he became a Christian. His wife's name is Peace. Their children are Valiant, John, Maranatha, Grace, Prudent, Rapture, and David. Other names in the community are Noah Hopeful, David Courage, Faithful Pilgrim, Enoch Upright, and Charity Overcomer. Renaming is optional.

Members point out that the early Christians who came out of heathendom chose new names for themselves. Jesus gave new names to some of his disciples. New names help the individual to sever connections with the old life. One person commented, "It forces my parents to accept me as I really am."

The community has had its share of ridicule and persecution. It has been labeled heretical, cultic, separatist, and exclusive. Wealthy and highly educated parents who have lost sons or daughters to the Springbank community have felt that the group is fanatic. To experience the rejection of their own values by their own children and to see them adopt a new name was reason enough in their minds for alarm.

The school, ranging from kindergarten through high school (Forms 3-5), is an integral part of the community. Presently there are 34 children in primary grades, and 12 in secondary school. All teachers meet certification standards. The school is inspected regularly and is



"Miracle" with a pet. Names may have biblical origins.

registered. There are courses in foods and nutrition, science, geography, chemistry, horticulture, engineering, woodwork, typing, accounting, math, history, English, and music. And the practical benefits of these subjects are realized in the community. A few years ago the school's home economics class won the New Zealand Country Women's Institute Prize.

The presence of the bio-gas plant in Springbank has attracted many national and international visitors. The "health bread" and fresh farm produce have become widely known and well received. The group's reputation as a hardworking, dedicated, self-sufficient community has won the admiration of many. Their skills as mechanics, plumbers, and builders are widely sought.

Visitors are given a tour, by appointment, of the living quarters, flour mill, gardens, shops, and schools. Following this, they are served a three course meal, and for many years each was given half a loaf of health bread. After the meal, the wedding ceremony is explained and shown on a video tape. Some visitors are brought to tears by the beauty and simplicity of the ceremonies.

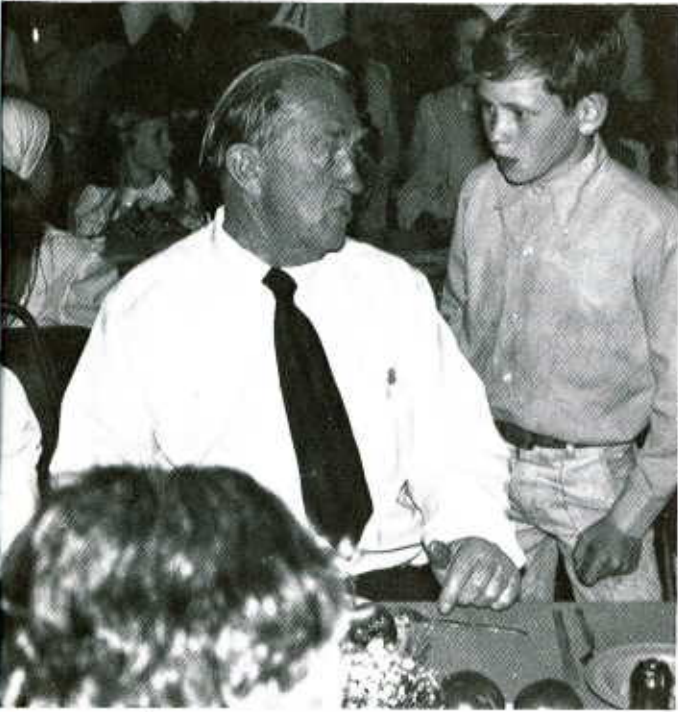


Gloria Cooper, Nev's wife, listens to a friend.

The tour leader introduces various persons in the community. For example, "Here is Victory. She is a mother, and here is her daughter Charity. Her husband left her, and every member of her family is divorced; her father, mother, and all her brothers and sisters. Her father never cared for her. . . . Now God is her Father, and she has found a new family here."

Young people are permitted to marry when they are physically and spiritually mature. The law in New Zealand allows marriage at the age of 16. Many in Springbank marry at an earlier age. Birth control by any means is forbidden. Marriage is for life and must never be broken by divorce. Marriage among non-Christians is considered binding, and becoming Christian does not dissolve a previous marriage.

"We educate our young people about marriage and sexual relationships," says Nev. "If God makes people physically mature and capable of reproducing at an early age, why should we suppress it? Let them marry. The world out there lets its young people fornicate until they are 29 or 30 years old. We say no to all fornication. That's



Nev Cooper, communal leader, is often sought out for counsel.



Peter Courage (r.) with his wife and son. Families sit together at mealtime.

not what God wants.”

The age profile of the community reflects early marriages and large families. Of the 162 persons in the community, 49 are five years old or under. There are 34 children in primary school and 12 in high school (Forms 3-5, ending at 15 years). There are five teenagers out of high school: two boys and three girls. There are nine married couples in their 20s, eight married couples in their 30s, four married couples in their 40s, and two couples in their 50s. Only seven persons are aged 50 or over. Thus, like the Hutterites, the population has a high percentage of children.

“In the household, we follow God’s order,” said Nev. “The man is the head of the home and we keep it that way. Our outlook is simple. We look after our children when they are young. When we are old they will look after us.”

In marriage arrangements, the couple will make their own vows. God joins them together with a bond that only death can break. The young people in the community observe the marriage in their way. They may sing in groups, put on a play, or skit, set the Scriptures to music and dance. People from every age-group contribute to

make it a day of joy and blessing.

The leaders take general oversight and lay hands on the couple, praying that God will bless them, but every person is free to preach and exhort from the Word of God. “We want something real from the people’s own hearts, and not set ceremonies and rituals,” said Fervent.

Women in the Springbank community do important work. They bear and rear children in a godly way. The work of women is dignified and highly regarded by all in the community. They prepare nu-

tritious meals, serving them with the help of men and children in an orderly, pleasing, and artistic way. Women are honored by being seated first at the table while all the men stand until the songs and prayers of thanksgiving are offered.

There are six women who do all the laundry together each morning. Their turn comes once each week. Both men and women work in the kitchen. At the end of the year, all women are relieved from the work schedule for two weeks. During this time, all community work is done by the men.



Jacob Kleinsasser (l.) of Manitoba and Fervent Stedfast, headmaster.

The dialogue between the Springbank community . . . and the Hutterites . . . was engaging and constructive.

My visit to the Springbank Christian community came about through invitation. Two years ago, Fervent Stedfast, headmaster of the school, ordered some books from Herald Press. He inserted a note asking if there were any Bible-believing Christian people who lived in community and who had encountered school problems with the government. The letter was sent from one place to another and reached my desk after six months. We exchanged letters and the Springbank community showed a keen interest in the Hutterite Brethren. They then read my book *Hutterite Society* in their assembly over many months, and also translations of Hutterite writings printed by the Hutterite Plough Press. I accepted an invitation for a two-week visit. Accompanying me, on request from the Springbank community, were three Hutterite couples, including two elders.

The dialogue between the Springbank community, "a first-generation community" and the

Hutterites, a "four-century old community" was engaging and instructive. Agreements and differences were openly shared. The Springbank community had dismissed their school during our two-week visit so that the teachers and pupils would have time to visit with us freely. The two weeks were enjoyed as vacation. In respect to the nurture and schooling of children there was mutual sharing, with each eagerly learning from the other. There were differences in experience, beliefs, and practices. Some exchanges were pointed.

Although the Springbank spokesman felt that no Christian should go to war or join in any capacity the army, navy, air force, police, or any other military organization, they insisted that God was not a pacifist. "He is not opposed to war, not even to nuclear war, if it fulfills his purposes. Did he not destroy the whole human race except for eight souls in the days of Noah? Has he not helped Israel possess the gates of her enemies as

much today as he did in Old Testament times?" The Hutterites objected. To define God, and to declare what he would or would not do, is to render God something less than God. "If we can define who God is, then he is no longer God," they said.

The Hutterians talked of their long history of ups and downs, their persecutions and survival. The Springbank group took exception. "Only the scripture is our foundation, not the experience of someone else." They asked, "Did not the Pharisees inform Jesus that Abraham was their father? But, said Jesus, although they were children, their real father was someone else."

In starting their community life, the Springbank group said, "We investigated every tradition that was handed down to us. We had agreed that the baptism of babies and christening of children was wrong, so we threw that out. Then we investigated Christmas, and because it came from the Roman Catholic mass we threw it out."

In conclusion, I offer some day-to-day observations of life in the community.

The food is nutritious and is served with dignity. Flour is made from whole grain raised in the community, on soils that have been tested and properly fertilized. The cooked cereal is the most delicious I've ever tasted, perhaps because it was ground fresh every morning. Fruits and vegetables are abundant. Families sit together at the tables, usually tables which accommodate two couples and their children. Plates are served at the table by small children who carry one plate at a time. In other ways children are included rather than excluded from important and essential work in the community. Delicious ice cream

JOY IS LIKE THE RHINE . . .

with castles, vineyards and music, or like the Rio Grande, essence of Jamaica, curvaceous and gentle for rafting, or refreshing like the Murray of Australia after a dry time in the outback, or like the Thames, unruffled, flowing sedately down to London. Every TM tour has its river.



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Phil Marnell, a certified airplane mechanic, and his wife use their skills for the good of the community.

was served each evening, made with an ice cream machine operated by the community kitchen. Plates are not scraped at the table but removed and washed in the commercial dishwasher.

Virtually all business, information, news, and prayer requests were dealt with after every meal. There are no committees, or study groups sitting and deliberating and reporting to other committees as in a bureaucratic system.

Children and babies sit through all those after-dinner discussions, frequently for two hours. There are no children crying, resisting, or struggling, and although parents take care of their needs, there is no strapping and commotion from out back.

There is little shopping and running to town. The community has agreed on the kind of soap it will buy and the kind of shoes it will wear. The needs of families are fully supplied in the community so that there is no need to go to town.

Recreation and good fun are evident on every hand. Group singing and plays are important to the group. They enact *Pilgrims Progress* and show a video of it.

While we were there they enacted *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I never realized how truly "Anabaptist" its message was.

Cleanliness and orderliness are

also in evidence in the living patterns. Notable are the men who wear neckties, even in manual work situations; and in those occupations where ties could be dangerous, shirts are buttoned up to the top. I wonder about this. But I am informed that the neckties are kept as a standard of neat and orderly presentation befitting Christians, and that because the ladies dresses allow no neckline, the men are responding in kind with their collar closed at the top. "Since the women are to wear full-length modest clothing, how can we as men do any less?" Both men and women's clothing is made from yard goods by the women in a spacious sewing room.

No tea or coffee is served because of the caffeine content. Since this is especially bad for the children, the adults have rejected it on the basis of being a good example, "If it's wrong for the children then it's wrong for us," they reason. Soya "coffee" (ground roasted soybeans) is served for breakfast, and sometimes milo, but decaffeinated coffee is served for visitors if they ask for coffee.

There is much singing, spontaneous singing, before and after meals. They sing songs from memory and some set to biblical passages. There are virtually no choruses or light ditties from the mainline Christian or the charismatic pool. Worship is conducted on Sunday mornings from about 9:30 for two hours. All sit in a large circle. Since the group threw out the "churchy" Protestant model, the worship consists of sharing—a song, testimony, admonition, a Scripture passage, and the service never lacks or lingers. The bread and grape juice are passed around on an ordinary plate, each partaking as it is passed; those children who had been baptized as repented

Virtually all business, information, news, and prayer requests are dealt with after every meal.

believers were not excluded. The service ended by singing and dancing in a circle for those who could or wished and finally ended with hugs from each to all.

To my astonishment the school was teaching Anabaptist history. One of the sources was the *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, 5th ed.), and the school has issued an abridged edition of 60 pages. The martyrs' accounts were arranged into ten periods of persecution according to emperor and dates. An appropriate introduction was written by Fervent Stedfast. *The Pilgrim Church* is another text used in the school.

In respect to economic policy, the community stresses the teaching of John Wesley in his sermon "The Use of Money" (1746), based on the teachings of Jesus in Matthew: (1) Gain all you can, by diligence, without hurting either yourself or your neighbor. (2) Save all you can by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire of the eye or flesh, and waste nothing. (3) Give all you can to the poor; give not a tenth, but all that is God's.

The community is vigorous. Pervasively taught and practiced are the qualities of thorough conversion, faith in the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the emphasis on keeping the commandments of Jesus. Strong leadership is evident, but there is equally strong affirmation from the 15 or more couples and unmarried young men who freely speak up at mealtime and in the assembly.

What lies ahead?

According to their spokesman: "We are not seeking or looking for new, fancy revelations, but getting into basic Bible truths and understanding them and applying them. We would like the next generation to do the same." ■