

Living simply can be pretty simple, some say

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Simple living may appear intimidating to people who have only read about it or maybe know someone who practices that spiritual discipline.

Does it mean having to wear hemp clothing to church, digging a well in the backyard or going “off the grid” and living in isolation?

It doesn't mean any of that, according to Christians who live or study the intersection between simplicity and their faith. In fact, they say, living simply is, well, pretty simple.



Joshua and Jessica Hearne “Simple living is no more complicated than a commitment to removing the excess from your life and recognizing how many of your possessions are excess,” said Joshua Hearne, executive director of [Third Chance Ministries](#) and abbot at [Grace and Main Fellowship](#), a Danville, Va.-based organization that adheres to the new monasticism movement.

Simple living can be practiced by anyone, whatever their context, Hearne insisted.

“It can be just paring down your possessions, getting by with a little less, and that often means finding ways to do more with less things,” he said.

Of course for many, including Hearne, the lifestyle can go much further.

The new monasticism movement started in June 2004 with a conference in Durham, N.C., whose participants devised rules for living in intentional communities, *Christianity Today* [reported](#).

‘New monasticism’

They modeled themselves after ancient and more recent church thinkers, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and used the term “new monasticism” from the book [Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World](#) by Jonathan R. Wilson.

Common denominators between the groups that developed include submitting to the larger church, living with the poor, living with or in proximity to other ministry members, shared economy, peacemaking, creation care and reconciliation, Hearne said.



Roland, a member of the Grace and Main community in Danville, Va., cares for a flower bed. (Joshua Hearne Photo) Rutba House in Durham and Grace and Main in Danville are communities typical of the movement.

The movement and its offshoots emphasize a Christian faith marked by adherence to the example of intentional poverty and simplicity displayed by Jesus in the Gospels, Hearne said. He and his wife, Jessica, serve as [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) field personnel.

The lifestyle also is marked by practices of hospitality that include inviting strangers and homeless to live in homes, feeding the poor and communal living.

Among Baptists, the inspiration to live more simply dates back to at least the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council led to more ecumenical dialogue between Catholic leaders and Protestants, said [Loyd Allen](#), professor of church history and spiritual formation at the McAfee School of Theology in Macon, Ga.

Among other developments, the shift brought Catholic monastic and contemplative [Thomas Merton](#) into contact with Southern Seminary professor Glenn Hinson, Allen said. Influenced by Merton's ideas on spiritual formation, Hinson later wrote [*A Serious Call to a Contemplative Lifestyle*](#).

"It is in that conversation that simplicity is defined, is spoken of as a discipline" among Baptists, Allen said. "You start hearing about silence, solitude and simplicity as the three classic characteristics of contemplative life."



A community meal at one of Grace and Main's households. But the movement didn't really take off among some Baptists and other Protestants until the 1980s, he added.

"It was a time of such unbounded enthusiasm for materialism and consumerism, and I think there was a backlash against that by the next generation."

The movement continued, resulting in new monasticism but also in Baptists and other Protestants adapting the principles of the movement to their own lives, said [Molly Marshall](#), president and professor of theology and spiritual formation at Central Baptist Theological Seminary near Kansas City.

"A number of our students have become very committed to simplicity, living with others and offering hospitality to others—including a warm meal and a bed," she said.

"We even have a couple living in a very depressed part of the city. To get into low-cost housing, they had to rid themselves of a third of their possessions."

Intentionally frugal lifestyles

Some faculty members have chosen intentionally frugal lifestyles, many of

them seeking to lower their carbon footprint, Marshall said.

As it did in the 1980s, a materialistic society drives the movement, Marshall said.

“It’s basically driving a stake into the consumerist pattern, which has this seductive notion that if I just own a few more things I will be happy,” she said. “It’s a way of paying attention to what our longings and desires are and how we fill those desires with temporal stuff.”



The movement follows the same rough lines as the rise of contemplative and liturgical worship in Baptist and other traditions, she added.

“There has been a real hunger to learn the traditions of the desert monastics and the medieval spiritual writers, and I think Baptists have awakened to a rich stream of Christian spirituality that we had neglected,” she said.

In Danville, Hearne said he, his wife and others who minister at Grace and Main have found a simple-living attitude toward possessions bleeds over into other areas of life, including worship.

Jesus urged his followers to remember that if the birds and flowers of the field didn’t worry about their material needs, either should they.

They’ve recently undertaken to declutter and remove many of the decorations that adorned an already sparse living room that doubles as worship space in the home. The music is usually sung acapella unless someone brings a guitar or other instrument by during services.

“When you’re living simply, you do develop an inherent distrust of flash. You start realizing when people are manufacturing a feeling.”

The New Testament is replete with examples where Jesus and members of the early church lived lives that were beyond simple, Hearne added. Jesus urged his followers to remember that if the birds and flowers of the field didn’t worry about their material needs, either should they.

Early church practiced simplicity

In Acts 2, the early church practiced simplicity in their common lives and common purse, Hearne said.

The Apostle Paul used a discussion of the Lord’s Supper to caution Christians against great disparity between members of the church.

Implementing even small degrees of simple living can relieve great amounts of stress, because practitioners become less concerned about what they have to lose. The result, Hearne said, is an increased ability to focus on practicing faith as Jesus lived it.

“We sometimes talk about simple living being a treatment for greed and the desire to acquire,” he said. “It’s not just a spiritually uplifting spring cleaning. It’s a spiritual discipline and a way of life.”