

A Call for Krishna: Community Expansion in New Vrindaban

Global Leadership Center

Andrea Dessoffy, Emily Schipper, Caitlin Mitchell, Jacqueline Patton

New Vrindaban is a Hare Krishna (Hindu) community located in northern West Virginia. It was founded in 1968 by disciples of Prabhupada, an Indian monk who is credited with bringing the Hare Krishna movement to the United States and founding the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). New Vrindaban was thus born out of Prabhupada's wish "to erect for the members of ISKCON and for society at large a holy place of transcendental pastimes dedicated to the personality of Krishna." This paper focuses on New Vrindaban's methods of community expansion in the past, present, and future.

New Vrindaban

I. Overview

As with most religions, recruitment is a vital part of ensuring that the Hare Krishna movement grows and is preserved for the future. The New Vrindaban community is unique because it is not only a religion that needs to be preserved but is also a communal way of life that does not function without members.

Through a visit to the New Vrindaban community, we as students of Ohio University's Global Leadership Center (<http://www.ohio.edu/glc>) conducted 10 interviews ranging from a founding member to a member currently considering joining the community. We also researched the New Vrindaban community through books, articles, abstracts and Web sites.

Being evangelical in nature, devotees of this religion feel driven to spread awareness of Krishna Consciousness, particularly through recruiting new members. To understand how New Vrindaban's methods of recruitment have changed through the years, it is important to have a general understanding of New Vrindaban's history and past trends in membership.

II. Historical Background and Membership Overview

The counter culture movement of the 1960s and 70s provided a timely catalyst for the beginning of the Hare Krishna movement. New Vrindaban was founded at the height of this movement, and through the years its purpose and focus have changed. Below is a brief history of New Vrindaban and yearly estimates of New Vrindaban residents (<http://www.hanover.edu/newvrindaban>).

- ∞ **1965:** The movement is brought from India to New York City by Srila Prabhupada, an Indian monk. He then founded ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (<http://www.iskcon.com>).
- ∞ **1966-68:** New Vrindaban begins as an ISKCON project located in northern West Virginia.

- ∞ **1968-71:** New Vrindaban is founded as a rural retreat for the members of ISKCON.
 - **8-10 members**

- ∞ **1972-77:** More land is acquired, and buildings are constructed. New Vrindaban becomes a village. Construction of a home for Prabhupada (The Palace of Gold) is underway.
 - **1972: 40 members**
 - **1976: 80 members**
 - **1977: 100 members**

- ∞ **1979-1983:** Prabhupada's Palace of Gold opens to public (<http://www.palaceofgold.com>). New Vrindaban becomes a tourist attraction and place of pilgrimage for the Hindu community in North America.
 - **1979: 150 members**
 - **1981: 200 members**
 - **1982: 400 members**

- ∞ **1984-5:** Population peaks with over **600 members**

- ∞ **1987:** An FBI raid brings charges against Kirtanananda, New Vrindaban's leader and founder. New Vrindaban is accused of scandal and corruption dealing with several issues including illegal fundraising, child abuse and murder. New Vrindaban and Kirtanananda are excommunicated from ISKCON. Devotees begin to leave.
 - **1988: 400 members**

- ∞ **1988-1993:** A transitional period, New Vrindaban reinvents itself as the City of God. The organization is known as the Interfaith League of Devotees with a dozen satellite centers around the world. It begins to organize interfaith conferences and offers for followers of other religions the opportunity to reside at New Vrindaban. Kirtanananda brings more Western and Christian aspects into worship. Many devotees disagree with these new principles and leave.
 - **1989: 350 members**
 - **1994: 250 members**

- ∞ **1994 - Present:** In an important change, families develop their own sources of income. Devotees either own their own property or rent houses or apartments within the community. Only the devotees who are living in the Temple building itself live communally. In 1997, ISKCON and New Vrindaban formally renew their relationship.
 - **1995: 225 members**
 - **1998: 225 member**

III. Two Distinct Lifestyles

New Vrindaban offers two distinct lifestyles. As a Hare Krishna community, it attracts those who are spiritually interested and devotees of Krishna. However, there are numerous temples in large cities and towns across the United States that are more mainstream and less isolated. What makes New Vrindaban unique?

- ∞ It is an intentional community, which is defined as “a planned residential community with a much higher degree of social interaction than other communities. The members of an intentional community typically hold a common social, political or spiritual vision and share responsibilities and resources” (www.wikipedia.org).
- ∞ Intentional communities also attract those who are interested in a lifestyle that is:
 - rural
 - isolated
 - austere
 - farm-based
 - aspiring to be self-sufficient

IV. Who Recruits

It is necessary to determine the characteristics of a typical recruiter. Generalizing from our interviews and experiences, we have gathered that a typical New Vrindaban recruiter is:

- Male
- Mostly young, without the commitments of families, possibly to identify with a college crowd
- Willing and/or able to travel

V. Foundations of Recruitment

At the beginning of New Vrindaban, recruitment was crucial to the movement’s establishment. Just like any new religion, acquiring passionate disciples for the system of belief is crucial to its survival and success. New Vrindaban employs many recruitment methods and has gained an aggressive reputation.

- ∞ Free food programs
 - Ex. Vegan cooking classes, food distribution at public events
- ∞ Book distribution
 - Ex. *Bhagavad Gita-As It Is*, *Sri-Ishopanishad*
- ∞ Public chanting and music
 - Ex. Mantras, Drumming

VI. The Typical Process

The typical process of transition into the New Vrindaban community starts with free food programs or meeting a devotee who is passing out texts in public. The free food programs, which are still used today, are one of the most successful methods. Hare Krishnas view sharing food not only as an opportunity to promote the vegetarian

lifestyle but also as a way to attract people to the movement. The food distributed is prepared by the devotees and is seen as a way to connect to people and show the sense of community offered at New Vrindaban. Distributing holy texts or flowers is also a primary method of recruitment the Hare Krishnas employ. Less common recruiting activities take place by chanting in public and/or at festivals. Food and text distribution also take place at such venues and are seen as very successful ways to reach a wide audience.

VII. Recruitment in the Present

Present recruitment is a continuation of past methods on a smaller scale and with a more relaxed attitude that allows for a one-on-one recruitment experience. A gradual cultivation of new members is ideal for New Vrindaban in the present. This builds a personal relationship to people before introducing them to New Vrindaban.

The Palace of Gold is and has always been a very effective recruitment tool. The palace brings on average 100,000 visitors a year to New Vrindaban. While visitors take tours of the palace, devotees take the opportunity to invite them to learn more about their faith and community.

VIII. Recruitment for the Future

New Vrindaban is striving for more diversity within the community in regards to the age groups and ethnicities. In the future they would like to see a stronger economic base for the community that could support entire family units and attract younger generations.

IX. Where New Vrindaban Recruits

- ∞ **Universities:** Gaura and Keith are the two main residents of New Vrindaban that orchestrate outreach programs at universities. They provide two types of programs: one for those of non-Indian cultures through which they teach vegan cooking classes and another for Indian students through which they offer Bhagavad Gita classes that are similar to “Bible studies.”
 - At Ohio University in Athens, they teach vegan cooking classes. Gaura and Keith make themselves available for questions and conversations about their philosophy, lifestyle or religion.
 - At West Virginia University in Morgantown they offer their Indian program and teach Bhagavad Gita classes.
 - Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, offers an Indian program and Bhagavad Gita class that Indian students have since taken over. Gaura and Keith go to visit once or twice a month.
- ∞ **Public Schools:** Devotee Sankirantan Dasi is a professional story-teller who shares his stories at public schools in nearby regions. This familiarizes children with the Hare Krishna culture.

- ∞ **Prisons:** Devotee Mukta reaches out to prison inmates by visiting and exchanging letters with them. He also sends inmates Hare Krishna books and literature.
- ∞ **The Rainbow Festival:** The Rainbow Festival is an annual 10-day event that takes place in a different national park each year, and about 6-7,000 people attend. The Hare Krishnas have been attending since its beginning in the 1970s. Devotees set up a kitchen to feed 2-3,000 participants a day as well as hand out books and talk with them.
- ∞ **Hindu Outreach:** Outreach to Indian communities includes putting advertisements into 4-5 Indian newspapers based out of Chicago and New York City, such as *India Abroad*. The ads offer information on New Vrindaban as a place of retreat and/or vacation.

X. Who is Recruited

According to Hare Krishna residents at New Vrindaban, there are four main types of people who find the religion appealing, which is outlined in their holy scripture, the Bhagavad Gita:

“Oh best among the Bharatas (Arjuna), four kinds of pious persons render devotional service unto me – the distressed, the desirer of wealth, the inquisitive, and he who is searching for knowledge of the Absolute.”

- 1) **The curious/inquisitive**
- 2) **The suffering or distressed**
- 3) **Those seeking truth (spirituality)**
- 4) **Those seeking wealth**

Through our research we have observed that others attracted to New Vrindaban include:

- ∞ **Those in transit:** Many college-aged people fall into this category because they are disillusioned with what they want to do with their lives and find reason with the Hare Krishnas.
- ∞ **Those Seeking Community:** When practicing an unorthodox religion, many have found spiritual support from the New Vrindaban community. Others are simply seeking a community which they can be a part of. *“I need a community – a spiritual support system.” (Devotee James)*
- ∞ **Seekers of a Simple life-style** Many devotees expressed their initial attraction to the community because of the simple lifestyle of farming and vegetarian eating habits.
- ∞ **Hindus:** A slowing of membership (and aging community) has lead to increased reliance on the Hindu Community. Through advertisements, outreach to Hindu

communities has become more and more stressed. Because Hindus are already familiar with the religion, they are “just a step away” from New Vrindaban.

XI. New Organization

Kirtanananda’s departure left New Vrindaban with a bad reputation, without a dynamic leader and with a decreased population. This reputation and financial woes kept the residents of New Vrindaban from having aggressive outreach programs as they did in the past. However, now instead of all of the tasks of the community falling onto the president’s shoulders, New Vrindaban has implemented a democratic hierarchy that governs the community. Community Expansion programs now fall into this system.

- ∞ **New Vrindaban Administration Council:** Is lead by the president. It manages the community and supervises the actions of different departments and boards.
- ∞ **New Vrindaban Community Management Board:** Answers to the Administration Council and gives updates on community issues. It is composed of seven members who represent different groups and departments within the community.
- ∞ **Community Development Department:** Is overseen by the New Vrindaban Community Management Board and works to:
 - Foster a community atmosphere at New Vrindaban
 - Tend to needs of individual community members
 - Integrate new members into the New Vrindaban community
- ∞ **Vice President of Community Development:** Organizes and governs the Community Management Board and is responsible for:
 - Leading the Community Development Department
 - Reporting on and advancing the progression of the community
 - Meeting daily with the Temple President to discuss community issues and status.

XII. Vision for the Future

With a new leader and new organization techniques, the residents of New Vrindaban are looking forward to the future.

- ∞ The president expects the population to double in the next 3-5 years as a result of:
 - Devotees from other centers moving there
 - New devotees joining
 - Sale of retirement homes/condos

- ∞ Community members have expressed their hopes for the future of New Vrindaban as well. Some of the most common aspects of those visions are:
 - To take the focus off of cultivating the Hindu Community
 - To add more diversity in membership
 - To break down stereotypes/misconceptions about the Hare Krishnas

Conclusion

Throughout the past thirty years of its existence, New Vrindaban's community expansion techniques have gone through many changes. Previously a main goal, methods of community expansion have now been refined. The aggressive tactics once employed have been abandoned in favor of a more personal approach. This shift in direction has relinquished pressure on recruitment allowing for it to occur on a one on one basis. New leadership within New Vrindaban hopes to attract younger generations by creating a stronger economic base able to support family units. They also hope to broaden diversity and membership. Community members believe that these new methods will strengthen and sustain New Vrindaban.