

Founding: Who You're Actually Building With

Surviving Part 8 already covers who to approach first: the same trust-building order as an immediate family network, one ring further out. That’s the right start. This chapter is about what happens once that ring is actually forming into a group that intends to last, not just get through one event together.

What actually predicts whether a group holds together

The common assumption is that a founding group needs to already agree on almost everything, background, values, religion, to have a real shot at lasting. Peer-reviewed survey research on present-day intentional communities doesn’t back that up. Shared ethnicity or religion is not a prerequisite for a successful intentional community. What predicts success far more strongly is something more mundane: whether the group has a real decision-making structure, and whether people actually experience it as fair, not just whether they meant well going in.

That’s a genuinely useful, if unglamorous, thing to know at the founding stage. It means the actual work isn’t finding people who already think alike, it’s building a process the group will trust once real disagreements show up, which they will. Chapter 5 covers that process in depth; this chapter is about the group itself, before governance exists to test.

A real trial period, not a handshake

Every real, long-running intentional community that documents its own practice uses some version of the same idea: nobody becomes a full member on day one. The specifics vary, but the shape doesn’t.

Community	Trial structure	What changes at the end
East Wind Community	A 3-week visitor period	Visitors who fit may become provisional members
The Embassy Network	A full year living in the community	Voting members and the candidate jointly decide whether to continue
Twin Oaks Community	A documented, formal membership agreement	Defines the process and expectations in writing, not by informal understanding

The common thread across all three: provisional members typically have fewer voting rights or community benefits than full members, and the community reserves real judgment for after people have actually lived and worked together, not just talked. A weekend visit or a good conversation is not the same test as a shared workday, a disagreement over resources, or watching how someone handles being told no.

Put the founding agreement in writing before you need it

The Manual's own Security & Shelter chapter guidance on this, "put it in writing before it's needed, not during a crisis," applies to founding a community just as directly as it applies to a neighborhood security pact. A founding agreement worth having in writing covers: how someone actually becomes a member (the trial structure above), what happens if someone wants to leave, how shared property is handled if the group ever dissolves, and who has authority to make which decisions during the founding period itself, before the fuller governance structure in the next chapter exists. None of this needs to be complicated. It needs to exist, and to have been agreed to by everyone before it's tested by a real situation.

Next: Choosing Ground

A founding group's own composition doesn't determine whether the place it's building on actually has a future. See Chapter 3: Choosing (or Reassessing) Ground.

Sources

- Shared ethnicity/religion not a prerequisite for intentional-community success; decision-making structure as the stronger predictor: Sociological Spectrum, "Measuring Success in Intentional Communities"
- Real community membership-process design, trial periods, and provisional membership: Foundation for Intentional Community
- East Wind Community's visitor/provisional-member structure: Wikipedia
- Twin Oaks Community's actual, documented membership agreement: Twin Oaks Community