

(Keep the Date: October 11-14, 2013, the Nurturing Communities Project 4th annual leadership gathering will be hosted by the Platte Clove Bruderhof in the Catskill Mountains of Upstate New York. Registration information is coming your way soon.

A Report on our Nurturing Communities Project Visit to Detroit: March 21-24, 2013

Our Nurturing Communities delegation looked forward to three days of life shared with an inter-racial intentional community engaged in mission to one of Detroit's many depressed neighborhoods. Along the way we had to stop at McDonalds so that Reba Apprentices, Jason and Rachel, could buy green smoothies in honor of St. Patrick. I bought a small ice cream cone in honor of no one except my own. We still got to the Detroit Metro Airport in good time to pick up Philip Bazeley, whose plane brought him from Pittsburgh and from the Spring Valley Bruderhof as part of the Nurturing Communities Project delegation.

As we arrived in Detroit, night had fallen, giving an ominous look to the many vacant lots and houses that loomed dark and empty. Finally, at 812 Blaine Street, we saw a porch light shining and were welcomed. In a neighborhood that looks so abandoned, this one house, where folks were waiting for us with hugs, turned out to be a great relief.

Our conversations with Bev, Matt and Nate (who had set up our itinerary) quickly went deep. We heard the story of this community, which has roots going back about ten years. Actually, Matt and Bev Hale were sweethearts in high school. They went to the University of Ohio in Athens, where they met our friends Philip and Barb Bridgewater, Art (died 2012) and Peggy Gish, and some other folks influential in their lives. Matt is white and Bev is biracial (black & white), of a dark cream hue with dreadlocks that make a statement about her identity. The Hales bought a house before the market collapsed, but can still make payments with the help of two single women living with them and their two children. They have advised their white friends not to colonize and gentrify the neighborhood where they live. Later in the evening their housemates arrived -- ShaCha who is black and Kate who is white.



In the past year the Hales bought a row-house duplex and triplex next door for only \$12,000 plus some back taxes. They've fixed up two of those units for occupancy with three more to go when they can access some funds. In those two units live an

African-American family, Ken, Keke & daughter Kelia and three single fellows -- Nate, Geronimo and "Pops."



Titles to their own house, the row houses and a recently donated minivan are in the Hales' names. Matt asked for conversation about how to share this property so that it could more naturally serve the common good.

Matt and Bev remind me of Koinonia Partners core members who are called "Stewards of the Vision." They also remind me of a favorite parable of Jesus about the mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds that grows into a bush large enough that the birds of the air can land and build their nests in it. "The kingdom of God is

like that," Jesus said. We noted how Bev and Matt, with their long-term commitment to community and engagement with their neighbors are like the mustard seed that grows into a bush with space where others can land and build their nests. We asked if anyone else shares their commitment to be the "bush" rather than the "birds." No one right now, it seems. Nate says it is hard for him to make such a promise when he is single and hopes to get married someday, which may take him away. The other singles in the community would say the same.

Philip spoke about the call of Jesus to seek first the kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount makes clear what it means to seek that kingdom. Community, he said, is a fruit of following that call. His message sounded an invigorating invitation. However, he acknowledged, in a neighborhood of inner-city Detroit like this it might take another form than the Bruderhof rural communal villages.

The folks gathered with the Hales in community, at the corner of Blaine and 3rd Street, have been together from a few months to seven years -- a lot of togetherness already. Another inter-racial family, Billy and Sarah, have recently bought a house on the block and have begun to worship with them. Between the two families there are three-going-on-five children. So far the community has chosen not to take a name -- waiting for more established African-American leadership in the group that can lift up a common vision.

The scheduled events they have in common seem few to me: one supper / worship / planning meeting a month and the women have a sharing/ prayer group each week. They all belong to various area congregations and ordinarily worship there, but during Lent this year they are meeting each Sunday for house church. Still, in practical experience, theirs is a rather "thick" community as they see each other every day, meet in spontaneous parties, outings and other informal events. Each household has its own rhythms.

Some community members are busy with away jobs and others work close to home. Matt and Bev raise their own support through the Navigators, with whom Matt once served as a campus pastor, but now their work is ministering to the local community and its neighborhood. ShaCha is a 30ish African-American woman who served as a social worker in a homeless shelter for about seven years after college and now is finding work as a consultant for groups seeking training in racial reconciliation.

Kate is employed in a local Christian community development organization, where she lines up volunteers to work at area gardens and other tasks. "Pops" is a high school math teacher, Geronimo is a night watchman in a gated community, and Nate is

transitioning to a six-month leave to NW Pennsylvania where he will be an intern this summer at a family organic farm.



production plant that has never been cleaned up. Within the city limits the population is about 85% African-American and in the suburbs it is about the same ratio of whites. It's no wonder that there are tensions and frustrations between Detroit City and its suburbs, which dominate state politics.

Nate also took us to the river-front Renaissance Center and other sky-



Friday evening about thirty folks met in an unfurnished upstairs apartment where five students from Hope College and a faculty supervisor were camped for the week. They came to learn about food justice and community issues in the City.

Nate seized the opportunity by asking them to host a potluck dessert and a meeting of the Detroit Villages -- a monthly gathering of persons participating in or interested in Christian intentional communities.

I got to tell my story of forty years in Christian intentional community and also mentioned the Nurturing Communities Project. Then we had a lively time of questions and answers. There we met three couples (all of them with babies or pregnant) who feel called to plant a community in

Friday morning Nate took us on a Detroit City tour. We saw one blighted neighborhood after another with many vacant lots, burned out or vacant houses with sagging porches and peeling paint. A city of about 2,000,000 has declined to 700,000. There are 20 square miles of vacant lots and as many houses standing empty. The key reason for this decline is all the lost jobs of the fading auto industry. A glaring symbol of this economic crash is the mile-long rusted-out Packard



scrapers where we boarded the elevated People Mover to see downtown from up high -- those parts that Detroit is most proud of. Another source of dubious pride of the city includes two blocks of creative and colorful junk art by the widely renowned artist, Tyree Guyton.



some needy neighborhood of Detroit. Nate and I encouraged them to take plenty of time to clarify their own commitment to each other and to make friends in some neighborhood where God is calling them before they move in.

Saturday there was a larger meeting of friends of the Blaine Street community. Three African-American family men (Daunte, Dwan, and Shannon) are members of a weekly men's prayer group that all the men in the Blaine community attend. It was an honor to hear them speak frankly about their longings for community and about the issues that hold them back. They all want more security for their families than the hard struggles and fighting they knew growing up. Then Dwan spoke about a vision God had given him of twelve



families moving together into one neighborhood where their community with each other could make a positive impact on a part of the city that needed God's love. Having grown up in Detroit, they long to see God's salvation come to its neighborhoods. Bev laid out a challenge to them -- how about this neighborhood?

Sunday morning we joined in for an exuberant hour of house church worship led by Bev and "Pops" in the African-American Pentecostal tradition -- often standing, clapping, with upraised hands, moving in the Spirit. The powerful

refrains continue to sing in me, "I give myself away," and "I have decided to follow Jesus." At that moment I had a vision of all these disciples coming to Jesus from many different starting points, and then forming a united band that travels together on a common kingdom journey. Just then "Pops" switched the pronouns to "We have decided to follow Jesus." In a way that perhaps built on our earlier discussions about commitment, it seemed the Holy Spirit was moving these parts together into a body, a more committed community in mission to the neighborhood.



Following our return home we sent a written report to the community commenting on some of the agenda before them and giving encouragement. We affirmed that their sensitive exploration of a racially reconciled intentional Christian community in close engagement with the people and issues of their neighborhood, is an important contribution to the kingdom of God, an experience from which many others will want to learn.

Since our return home Matt Hale sent this kind endorsement of the Nurturing Community Project's ministry:

Friends,

On behalf of our little community I want to thank you for the Nurturing Communities Project. The visit from David & company was a pleasure: inspiring, challenging, refreshing, and fruitful.

We've been on the wild ride of community for a while now and one thing we've really struggled to find are elders who can give us the kind of guidance that only grows from the rich soil of experience. We have a number of wise people in our lives who help us along in many ways, but none who have spent decades in thick community. So, it is a joy to be connected with this network.

The Nurturing Communities Project is a very worthwhile undertaking and we are thankful recipients of its blessings.

If any of you find yourselves in Detroit, stop by for a visit!

Peace in Him,
Matt & Co.

Rule of Taize

Finally, I want to add the review of a new release you might be interested in.

Paraclete Press has issued a new English translation of Brother Roger Shutz's classic *Rule of Taize*, long known for its spiritual depth and simplicity. The *Rule* points to a life of inner discipline that leads to joy and freedom in the service of Jesus with fellow community members. "This rule contains the minimum necessary for a community to grow up in Christ and devote itself to a common service of God."

Here is another sample of the lucid elegance and joyful passion that suffuses this rule for life together: "Assured of your own salvation by the sole grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, you do not impose discipline on yourself for its own sake. Gaining mastery of yourself has no other aim than to render you more available. No pointless abstaining; keep to what God asks. Bear the burdens of others, accept the minor hurts each day brings, so as to share concretely in the sufferings of Christ: this is our first discipline."

Following the devastation of World War II in Europe, Roger Schutz, with a few brothers, founded the ecumenical community of Taize in Eastern France in 1949. During a long retreat in the winter of 1952-53 he wrote the Rule of Taize to unify the community in its vocation to be a living parable of the way of Jesus. Since the 1960's, the Taize community has become an international "Mecca" for tens of thousands of young people each year. They come from all around the world to join the community of about a hundred monks in their prayers and songs for Christian unity and God's justice

in the world. These pilgrims of peace have taken the Taize songs to every continent where they have by now infiltrated song books of countless denominations.

Brother Roger was murdered in 2005, at the age of 92, by a deranged visitor during a service of worship. Since his death the community has made a few revisions to this Rule, revisions that Brother Roger himself had suggested. This recently-released edition of the Rule of Taize is attractively displayed with French and English text side by side. I commend the *Rule of Taize* to any community working on its own covenant, and as an inspiration in the calling we all share as disciples of Jesus in community.

--David Janzen