

March 20, 2013

Dear Nurturing Community Project Friends,

The snow is melting, dripping from the roofs, running into puddles, running into streams and then into the lake where the ice is turning to slush. Red-wing Blackbirds call from all directions with their characteristic “Skreeeee,” and the note of an early-arriving Cardinal is pinging like a little hammer on an anvil. Joanne and I are enjoying a couple of days here in Southern Wisconsin next to Camp Lake where Reba has a retreat house. I feel the nearness of spring and of you all whose names are before me on an e-mail list that I am updating with new communitarians I have met in travels over this past month. I’d like to share a few stories from those conversations.

A new understanding of the mustard seed:

While visiting Hope Fellowship in Waco TX to assist in their community review, I fell into a delightful breakfast conversation with my hosts, Michelle and Matt Porter. They have recently



adopted two chocolate-hued infants, a boy and girl, who reminded me of our son James, of similar background, who came to us by adoption at that same age. Michelle teaches Spanish at the local community college and Matt is an instructor in religion classes at Baylor University, where he is finishing a dissertation on Anabaptist theology post-John

Howard Yoder. Despite some debts they are rich in promise.

That’s interesting enough, but what got my attention was that Matt and Michelle have decided their careers will take second place to their participation in Hope Fellowship where they feel called by God to “lay down their lives.” That idea began as a small nudge of the Spirit no

larger than a mustard seed, probably planted by the example of Joe and Nancy Gatlin who have led Hope Fellowship for twenty-years now. Around a core of such committed members, a sturdy and growing discipleship community (with only volunteer staff) has flourished so that now they have the problem of maintaining unity while dividing the community into three clusters that can worship in Spanish and English, in living-room sized spaces.

Jesus told the story of the tiniest seed growing into a mustard plant large enough that the birds of the air can build their nests in it. Every community will have “birds” who stay for a season and then fly on. But that is only possible because of the shrub whose roots go deep into the life of Jesus, and whose stem and branches are those community members who have taken a vow (whether implicit or explicit) of stability. These are the core members who are looking at no career options that might take them away from their local calling. Koinonia Partners calls these members “Stewards of the Vision.” Though few communities have an official membership category for this inner core of folks who are life-time committed, they are essential to any community that will endure. Gerhard Lohfink, who wrote *Does God Need the Church?*, says “unless some members give their whole life to it, community is impossible.” These folks are the inner layer of the community “onion.” As Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a little mustard seed...” (Matt. 13:31)

Meeting a few birds and mustard seeds in Austin, Texas:

Wherever I go now, I’m looking to see where these mustard seeds have sprouted. After we (Sally Youngquist from Reba Fellowship, Rusty Bonham from Springwater, and I) concluded our visitation report at Hope Fellowship, Greyhound Bus lines took me on to Austin, Texas, for a couple of days. That’s where new-found friend Josh Gahr met me with an itinerary of meetings lined up with leaders of various intentional Christian communities and seekers of the same. Josh is something of a networker, tying together the intentional community movement of Austin. He had ordered ten copies of the *Intentional Christian Community Handbook* and was giving

them out with recommendations at each stop around the city.

Our first pause was at the home of Rigel Thurston, a gentle giant of a man who whipped up a lunch of three-bean salad and chips for Josh and me to eat with our fingers while he told about his calling as a realtor to find affordable homes for his Christian friends



to colonize a poorer part of town, Georgian Acres. By now five families have moved within walking distance of each other, but they are wondering what steps to take toward a more gathered life in mission to their neighborhood.

In another meeting convened by Amy Stabeno I learned about fifty persons from the Austin Stone Community Church who have intentionally moved into a needy neighborhood for similar reasons. At a busy pub where we had to shout to be heard, they asked, “Now that we have moved into proximity, how do we find a thicker community life that will sustain us in mission to our neighborhood?”

There is a familiar pattern I see emerging in new and wannabe communitarians. They have become strategic neighbors but wonder, what next? They have read *The Irresistible Revolution* and want to do something more, but they don't know how to make it happen. The churches they attend already are impressed by the radical thing they've done. But the fragmenting forces of our “me-first society” are still strong to keep them apart. Front-yard gardens, un-ending home renovation projects, new babies, back-yard chicken coops, broken and hurting families all around, shots in the night and prowling police cars -- all call for a dedication and maturity in these challenges of multiple priorities. How do they seek first the kingdom of God?

In talking with Amy and her friends we came up with a possible next step -- inviting all

the “on purpose neighbors who mean to stay around for more than five years,” to begin meeting regularly to work on a covenant for a common life of discipleship and neighborhood mission, and see who sticks with it. With the parable of Jesus newly contextualized, I encouraged them to consider the mustard seed.

Josh and I met with Jack Bardon, Admissions Director of the Austin Presbyterian Seminary, who has arranged for an intentional community of Americorps and Presbyterian service volunteers to occupy some vacant apartment units in seminary housing. He observed that young adults with previous community and service experiences are their best seminarians.

Next Josh drove me to Hampton House, a large Christian housing collective of about thirty students. Steven Styptak, who will graduate this spring, is something of a visionary and pastor in the house. Last summer, with a few friends, he drew up a covenant that is both poetic and prophetic.



This year Hampton House seems to be a highly transformative environment for the young people in it.



At Hampton House an artist named Audrey talked with us on the first (women’s) floor where we admired her artwork of tree foliage covering a large wall. For the past five years she was part of a Christian artists community named Fireseed and was the author of an attractive book of reflections and

instructions titled, *Fireseed Family Recipes: A Field Guide for Missional Community*.

Elizabeth Huss, a widow, was my gracious host. She is something like an intentional

neighbor of Connexion House, an intentional community a couple of blocks away where she participates in prayers and fellowship. Connexion House is where Josh Gahr works. Its mission is to give a discipleship and service orientation to a new group of young people each year. Geno Hildebrandt, a veteran pastor and participant in a series of intentional communities over the years, seems to be Connexion House's spiritual leader.

I ran around with Steven Hebbard for a morning. He is an energetic and creative community organizer who, in recent years has hired homeless folks to plant gardens on vacant lots and back yards, and now has helped to develop a model village for homeless folks along



with paid jobs in gardening and other skills. Their motto for alleviating homelessness is "community first." We saw the scrub-land just outside Austin where they are planning a major new development for 200 formerly homeless folks and volunteers who are slated to live in a garden and park-like setting in refurbished RVs and campers affordable to

people on disability support. This village is the project of a long-standing non-profit organization, "Mobile Loaves and Fishes," whose 6,000 volunteers and supporters have befriended the Austin homeless population for fourteen years. Steven has been part of several intentional community ventures that have come and gone during this time.



Many of the folks I talked with in Austin have already been through a series of intentional community experiences. They feel the call to a frugal, communal and missional way of life. But

the missions keep evolving as do the cast of characters -- provisional arrangements that seem to serve for one stage of life. They are like birds looking for a mustard plant to build a nest. The news of groups like Reba, Koinonia, or the Bruderhof, who have sustained a life in mission for a few generations, suggests further visits in both directions. They were excited to hear of a Nurturing Communities Gathering this fall but dismayed by the distance to upstate New York.

More about the Nurturing Communities Gathering October 11-14:

Our NCP Gathering Planning Committee includes Charles and Leslie Moore (The Mount Bruderhof/ upstate NY), Jason and Vonetta Storbakken (Radical Living/ Brooklyn NY), Alden Bass (Lotus House/ St. Louis MO), Karen Sloan (An Ordered Life/ Pittsburg PA) and myself (David Janzen/ Reba Place Fellowship/ Evanston IL). We are working on a schedule and invitations to the Nurturing Communities 2013 Gathering that will be hosted by Platte Clove (Bruderhof) Community in the heart of the Catskill Mountains. If you have any suggestions for workshop topics or other things you'd like to see at this gathering, let us know.

