

On Holy Ground in Austin, Texas: February 17-20, 2015

“The Solution to Homelessness is Family”

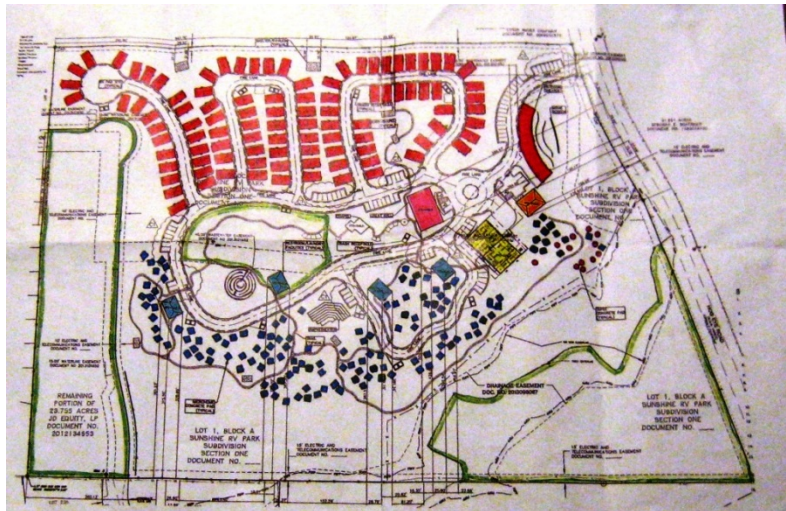
Steven Hebbard took me along to a meeting of an unusual intentional group in formation called The Mission Community. Six families and four singles are planning to converge this spring in what they are calling “an RV Park on steroids.” It’s part of an audacious experimental village currently under construction on the outskirts of Austin TX. This site is designed for 300 formerly homeless people to live alongside

short-term volunteers and long-term friends in mini-homes or refurbished recreational vehicles on a 27-acre development. The Community First Village (see plan above) will also include gardens, goat pens, workshops of various kinds, a greenhouse, recreational areas, indoor and outdoor meeting spaces, and countless creative ways to be productive -- matching up folks with skills and those eager to learn them.

Steven has been working for years with a large non-profit called Mobile Loaves and Fishes, involving many of Austin’s churches and other civic groups in feeding and befriending folks who are chronically homeless. They are convinced “The solution to homelessness is family.” The Community First Village is an outgrowth of this decades-long innovative ministry with the homeless.

A year ago God told Steven that he should not just coordinate volunteers and other projects for the Village, but he should live there himself. Others have stepped forward with the same sense of call to what seems a miracle of God. Now twenty-one persons, including Steven’s fiancé, are meeting every other week toward that end.

Steven arranged for me to meet with the Mission Community to



The Community First Village plan: Red rectangles represent RV pads and green squares are mini-homes for 300 people.



The general contractor and Steven Hebbard confer about the construction time-line.

talk about next steps in forming an intentional community. I don't remember much of what I said, but I do remember what one woman in the group had to say about her motivation for this mission -- to which everyone else seemed to give assent.

"I've been serving homeless folks a few hours a month, but it's not enough. We've had too many Bible study classes of privileged people, where everyone already knows the right answers. It's like we are at a Thanksgiving feast every meal, and we're growing fat rather than growing in our faith. God doesn't want a little bit of me, God wants all of me. I don't want to do a little good and go back home. God is calling us to be neighbors of the poor and the oppressed, and with their help I hope to be converted to become more like Jesus."

Wow," I thought. "We are on holy ground."



The next morning Steven took me along to the Community First site where huge backhoes were digging twenty-foot-deep sewer trenches, workers with hard hats were swarmed all over the place forming up driveway edges and setting re-bar for a concrete pour to begin the next morning. I recalled two years ago: when Steven brought me to this same place I could only see one bulldozer parked in a wilderness of mesquite, prickly pear and gnarly oak. But my friend could already see a village. Now I was

beginning to see it too, a \$12,000,000 vision coming to life where unlikely partners are gathering in an economy of grace, a Kingdom of God experiment before the eyes of a watching world.

Connexion Houses:

Over the past two years, since Josh Gahr took his job as director of Connexion House, many things have gone well. Josh's work is to find housing for groups of

single people that want to live in Christian intentional community. These young adults are university-aged or just starting out in their chosen line of work. Josh is giving some pastoral oversight and property-management services for three community houses -- two for guys and one for women. Josh trains and orients community groups for life under an initial Connexion House Covenant with some minimal expectations. But once the cohort is gathered, they set out to write their own covenant that will express their shared commitments and rhythms of life.

A lot of Josh's efforts have gone into the practicalities of finding housing that would work for these groups, leasing the property in the name of Connexion House, and then setting up the rental payments that the residents could afford. Austin is a very expensive place to live, so none



of the houses are able to fully pay their way, which means the Connexion House Board has had to subsidize each house to keep them affordable. The houses have been an important way to sustain commitments to care for one another in a life together as disciples of Jesus. Josh has had to get involved a little to help them over some disagreements, but mostly the houses have



been thriving well and he feels a lot of satisfaction in his work. However, the financial drain has not been offset by donations as the Connexion House Board had hoped, so they are facing some tough decisions in the coming months. Perhaps a different financial model is needed.

On the home front, Josh is most grateful for his family and for two neighbor families who share a common courtyard and an informal life in Christ. Josh's wife, Johanna caught a vision of Christian service and community life growing up in Mexico. She was trained in accounting, but, she jokes, "Accounting did not make me rich or happy,

so it was not hard to give it up and do what I love, which is now teaching immigrant parents how to better care for their families." Johanna and Josh are raising two beautiful daughters, Piia (3 ½) and Mila (1) who know how to welcome guests with bright eyes and lots of hugs, just like their parents.

In their immediate neighborhood there are several other Christian families clustered within walking distance who share occasional meals and friendship support. Shane Blackshear is one of these neighbors who

happens to host an intriguing podcast called "Seminary Dropout." Josh took over the interview and asked questions about the *The Christian Intentional Community Handbook* and the Nurturing Communities Project. If you want to hear what we discussed, check it out on

<http://www.shaneblackshear.com/category/podcast/>.



Josh Gahr. with microphone. prepares to interview David Janzen.

Hampton House Two Years Later:

Josh and I were invited to a taco dinner by Alex Gordon and a couple of his friends who wanted to talk about their community. Twenty-seven young adults, mostly U. of Texas students, live in intentional Christian community at Hampton House. Women occupy the first floor, men on the second and third stories. The average stay of residents is two or three years, although Ben,

sitting at our table, claimed the record at eight years. The house is governed by two Representatives from each floor. Alex, who is about thirty years old, holds a unique position in the house as the landlord's representative, the property manager who collects rents and makes repairs as needed. We asked if he or others experienced his role in the house as a conflict of interest. Our table companions affirmed that Alex is a rare guy who wins everyone's trust by his eager service and his enthusiasm for every kind of common event. An example close at hand was his offer to host a taco dinner for all of us. Alex's job is made easier because the landlord, a

missionary in South Africa, lived in the house a decade ago and stays closely in touch. He has heart for Christian community living and knows the students' need for frugal lodging.

Two years ago when Josh and I visited Hampton House and the report on life together was not so rosy. We met with Steve who showed us a Hampton House Covenant draft on which the Floor Representatives were working. I was impressed by its gracious and clear language, and especially the guidelines for resolving conflict according to Matthew 18. House rules included no sex, no illegal activity, no underage drinking, no drunkenness, faithfully doing



chores according to common agreements. It instructed that offenders should be lovingly confronted in private. If that did not bring peace, then the Floor Reps. were included. Then if a floor meeting could not resolve it, the person agreed to leave peaceably.

At the beginning of each semester, the whole House meets and goes over the agreements together so that new members are oriented and old members stay focused. The result has been a spirit of peace and joy in mutual care that has made a big difference in the past two years.

I was surprised by the high degree of participation and satisfaction people in the house expressed with their community life despite the fact that they have few actual meeting times in their schedule. It turns out that the house, being old and somewhat crowded, forces people on each floor to deal with one another on a daily basis. A lot of friendships grow, resulting in informal times of eating together sharing mutual support. The relationships are "thick" and mutually encouraging. Members in the house tend to be highly involved in their local congregations and volunteer a lot of hours in ministry through a variety of channels. So the purpose of the house is not to organize a lot of ministry or social events, but to support each other in those commitments elsewhere. It is common to get e-mails announcing a need for five



Alex Gordon hosts our taco feast at Hampton House.

volunteers at an event someone in the house is planning elsewhere, and people respond through their network of friendships.

In our conversation I mentioned how community visitations work as spiritual/ relational/ leadership health check-ups. Ben and Alex got excited about organizing such a review for Hampton House. We discussed friends of the House they might want to include on such a team. At the end of the evening Josh Gahr handed out copies of *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* and pointed to the chapter on “Visitations” for their consideration.

From Austin I traveled on to Waco, Abilene, and Dallas discovering and visiting with new intentional Christian communities on the way. I hope to send another report soon on those stops. At each place I’ve been urging communitarians to imagine a Gathering of intentional community groups sometime in 2016 where they can make new friends, share counsel on common concerns, and see who their allies in this kingdom adventure might be. It seems like the time is ripe because everywhere folks expressed a strong interest in making it happen. I can see it now:



**Welcome to the Nurturing Communities Project Gathering
Somewhere in Texas: Sometime in 2016**