

Two Community-Nurturing Apostles and their Networks in Abilene and Dallas, Texas: February 20-26, 2015

I finally got to meet two apostles of intentional Christian community on their home turf. Kent Smith is a professor in the School of Theology at Abilene Christian University and Elaine Heath is similarly situated in the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Both are convinced that the institutional systems of the church that we inherited are dying, even as ancient/new expressions of church are being born. Most congregations are top-heavy with bureaucracy, thin on community, doing a poor job of making disciples of Jesus, and the younger generation is largely giving up on them. Kent and Elaine are exploring with their own lives and with a growing network of friendships, how to intensively form followers of Jesus in small missional communities. These communities are taking seriously the inner life, thick community relationships, and engagement with the neighborhoods where God is planting them.

For the past decade, Kent Smith has trained cohorts of house-church planters in a missional way of life. His “offspring” now are spread out in urban scenes around the U.S., with a few overseas. Six years ago Kent first visited Reba Place Fellowship on his way to reconnect with a house-church-planting couple that we had also befriended. Kent has flattered Reba by saying things like, “There are many diagnosticians of what is wrong with the church in America, but very few of them are actually doing something with their own lives that points a hopeful way forward. That is why I keep visiting Reba. I want to learn from folks who have been doing this faithfully for decades.” When Kent heard that I was coming to visit Abilene, he lined up a full series of meetings with his friends in the University and in the local house church network. He even connected me with an intentional community of four guys who regularly play basketball with their friends, fellows willing to include me on the gym floor for an exciting hour of “hoops.”



Kent and his wife Karen are involved with two younger families, the Callarmans and the Kaczmeracks, in forming an intentional community that plans to buy 80 acres of scrub and pasture land fifteen miles outside Abilene. We hiked over the hills where they can already imagine five households and a training / retreat center for cohorts of community planters and interns. Where I saw only grazing cattle and juniper bushes, their vision is alive with permaculture water-courses, gardens, animals, and families living close to God’s good earth.

We shared a day-long retreat of worship, common meals, and conversation about how their community covenant connects with the liberating and people-forming work that God has already done in bringing them together. We also explored the role of friendships in community, business plans for common work, and a land-use covenant that might bind together neighbors a common

care for the land. They have read Jesus' story of the man who found a treasure in a field, buried it, and sold everything he had to buy that plot. This is their story, their parable, their joy.



Kent and Karen took me along to a meeting of the area House Church Network. I was asked to tell my story of community and to talk about other communities I've visited in Texas. We then moved into a generous time of song that caused the house to reverberate like a small medieval cathedral. Acapella singing is a strong tradition among the Churches of

Christ, and, I'm convinced, we heard their best. Most stunning was their favorite anthem, "The Greatest Commandment," which unfolds like a round in shimmering harmonies that inspire love of God, neighbor and self. That one is a "keeper," which I vowed to take back home to Reba. We concluded with communion and tearful words of thanksgiving by Kent Smith as he looked around the room full of friends and former students who are living out thick community in their various house churches around the area.

The Missional Wisdom Foundation:

For some years people have been telling me, "You've got to meet Elaine Heath. She is doing among mainline denominations what you have been doing in the New Monasticism movement, and much more." She returned my e-mail with a wide-open invitation to talk and meet with her friends. However our arrival was postponed by a half-inch snow storm with a little ice that shut down Abilene, Dallas-Fort Worth and the rest of north Texas because there are no salt trucks, snow plows, snow shovels or windshield scrapers in sight. Coming from Chicago, I couldn't believe how easily tough Texans are intimidated by a little winter.

Eventually Kent Smith drove with me to Dallas where Elaine Heath and her co-workers



in the Missional Wisdom Foundation (MWF) welcomed us and routed us to an evening with five young people living in the Romero House, an intentional community attached in various manners of service to a local United Methodist Hispanic congregation. We heard about other communities (called Epworth Houses) of young people like them anchored to local Methodist churches in the Dallas area called. We also learned about a few housechurches with families (called New Day Communities). These groups share common

covenants, daily rhythms of prayer, and a formation in essential discipleship practices. At Romero House we met Cecilliah Igweta, who is the newly-appointed Abbot of the Epworth and New Day communities. We also met Wendy Miller, who is training them in monastic traditions of spiritual formation and contemplative prayer.

The Missional Wisdom Foundation (see missionalwisdom.com) lists fifteen persons on its staff -- most of them part-time or volunteer. It was born from a conversation between Elaine Heath and Larry Duggins who met each other in the airport on a pilgrimage to Iona about five years ago. Larry was a successful entrepreneur and businessman who left all that behind in mid-life to go to seminary. He reminds me of Barnabas in Acts 4:37 who cashed in his land and joined the apostles in this missionary movement we call The Early Church. Larry and Elaine have headed up the Missional Wisdom Foundation which, in the last five years, has done a good job of accessing Methodist sponsors and other support for the work of inspiring, resourcing, and guiding a movement of missional communities on the edge of the fading mainline denominational structures.

With Larry Duggins giving administrative and fund-raising support, Elaine Heath is free to teach her classes in the Perkins School of Theology at SMU and also speak at conferences and workshops around the country. There she gets to tell about the good news of communities for people of all ages who are daring to live out the Gospels in ways that ask for your whole life - not just a few hours a week. Elaine is in love with the Celtic way of community and mission that kept alive the best elements of the church in the Dark Ages, and spread the life of the Gospels into pagan Europe with missionary bands, planting lay and monastic communities wherever they went.

Elaine's household practices what she preaches from the lecturn. Her home base is in a small intentional community of four people and three dogs. It includes her husband, Randy Bell, a retired "roads and bridges" engineer, and an elderly Mennonite couple Ed and Wendy Miller. Ed is a retired pastor offering spiritual companionships to a few young folks while Wendy, though retired from teaching at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, is still active as a trainer and teacher of Spiritual Direction and Formation. Apparently the men keep house, feed the dogs, keep up the evening prayers, and support the local Epworth Houses. Meanwhile their wives are often flying around the country, resourcing a wide-spread movement of the Holy Spirit that keeps them way younger than their years.



Elaine and I had an animated last hour together on the train to the DFW airport as she was traveling on to Alaska and I was returning home. We shared our life stories and plotted how we could be helpful to each other in this wider nurturing communities project.

Elaine is a wise theologian mining the resources of the deeper traditions of the church for the newest generation of Christian community pioneers. Elaine highly recommends *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* in her own handbook for the communities she tends in the Methodist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches. Co-authored with Larry Duggins, this book is titled *Missional, Monastic, Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions*. I'd encourage you to check it out and learn from Elaine, who exuberantly serves as both theologian and "mother" to the Christian intentional community movement.