

“Kingdom Community, Neighborhood Presence, Unity in Diversity” Washington, D.C. Report: March, 2015

A familiar anxious feeling grows in me as I arrive at nightfall in Washington, D.C., a darkening city with a million doors where I'd be a stranger, and only one where I'll be welcomed. I'm riding on a subway train past platforms too dimly lit for me to read the station names. A voice announces the next stop over a loudspeaker system so full of static it's like a foreign language. My map, I realize, is of no use when I don't know where I am. So I ask a fellow traveler, how many stops till the Deanwood station? "It's the next one," she replies. I get off, walk down the steps and feel a rush of joy at seeing Brian Gorman, waiting for me.



Jesus sent his disciples out two-by-two, telling them to find a house of peace and to stay there. I happened to be traveling one-by-one, but God graciously provided a house of peace. Soon I am at Brian's kitchen table partaking with him from a huge pot of fresh minestrone soup, and catching up on our lives since last we met.

After supper Brian invited me to join him at a musical evening hosted by a household of four women associated, as is Brian, with Peace Fellowship Church. I was quickly immersed into the culture and crowd of 30-40 hip Christian social-justice activists, interns and grad students from the D.C./ Baltimore area. It's a transient crowd of shifting roommates and exciting next things. The average person arriving in D.C., I was told, is gone in two years. Those who plan to stay longer often come together in more intentional households with an informal covenant that they can explain even if it's not been written down.



Joy Ike is a favorite musician and song-writer for this crowd, who soon assembled to hear her stuff. Joy is at home on the keyboard; she pours herself out in a lush earthy voice; invites us to participate with ugh-ugh rhythms, claps, and snaps; and draws us along with her contagious love for Jesus and his radical Gospel. Joy's story came out in bits of monologues between songs -- the daughter of Nigerian immigrant parents who sacrificed so she could become

a doctor, lawyer, engineer or a preacher -- not an itinerant artist/ evangelist who barely makes a living.

I was at least thirty years older than anyone else in the room, but felt no barrier as folks were eager to tell their stories once they heard I was a friend of Brian and of community. However, after a long day's travel, I bailed out at the intermission and went to bed.

Brian Gorman caught the community bug when he was an intern at Rutba House right after college. I first met him at a Nurturing Communities Project Gathering five years ago. At that time Brian was living with some recently-homeless folk in a rehab house in Washington, D.C., and helped convene regular gatherings of the D.C. area Community of Communities. We've kept in touch by e-mail, at NCP Gatherings, and last fall at the CCDA Conference in Raleigh NC. Brian's household with Rob and Matt had a space for me because Matt was away on a retreat.

This year Brian arranged for me to lead a Saturday workshop for his congregation, Peace Fellowship Church, which has attracted a racially, educationally and economically diverse body of believers -- some of them living intentionally in households near the church and others scattered across the D.C. area. From the beginning fifteen years ago, the church articulated the call to be a community presence in the predominantly African-American neighborhood of Deanwood in the more-isolated section of the City east of the Anacostia River. We titled the workshop "Kingdom Community, Neighborhood Presence, Unity in Diversity."

Eighteen people showed up -- a diverse mix of folks God has drawn together. We worked hard with Jesus' parable of The Mustard Seed, which I characterized as "an artful quick-sketch road map to the kingdom of God." However, in retelling my experience of feeling lost on the subway, I observed that unless we find that little arrow on the map that says "You are here," we can't discern our next steps. So we lined up our bodies in various configurations down the central aisle of the meeting house according to our . . . proximity to the meeting house, years of education, years of participation in the church, and more. We discussed our self-perceptions of privilege and disadvantage in the society around us and wondered what it would take to become a living witness of the reconciliation we have in Christ.



Brian Gorman across the street from the Peace Fellowship Church Meeting House (a once-upon-a-time funeral home)



We observed, with help from the mustard seed parable, how the tree is not imposed; rather it grows organically, becomes indigenous, and adjusts to the local conditions and needs of the neighborhood. We noted that that unless there are some branches committed and rooted in one place for life, there will be no space for the birds to land, nest, find healing and, perhaps, one day become branches themselves.

For their vision to become reality at least a core of people at Peace Fellowship Church would need to acknowledge God's call to become this mustard seed tree in their neighborhood rather than just a collection of birds waiting

to see what the others will do. The unity they seek will call for an intensive season of dialogue on a list of issues we named. I commended the experience of honest weekly conversations as practiced by the Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis where, for the past fifteen years, the Holy Spirit has led them to unity and a wide range of fruitful neighborhood initiatives. This story is well-told by Chris Smith's pamphlet *The Virtue of Dialogue*. Brian is on a steering committee that is planning further workshops and congregational conversations toward this end.

For the past two years Brian has studied to complete a Masters Degree in music education. During that time has not had the freedom to convene the D.C. Community of Communities gatherings -- and no one else has picked up the slack either. On Friday, however, just before he picked me up from the Metro station, Brian had taken and passed his MA oral examination hopes to graduate in the spring. He makes his living giving piano lessons and



volunteers in an arts enrichment program for musicians from poorer families.

Saturday evening Brian was busy splitting wood and nursing a fire in his back yard anticipating the arrival of persons from a few community households whom he'd invited. We gathered with our minestrone soup around the fire to catch up with each other and meet the visiting "community guru" from Evanston, Illinois. In a city known for transiency, I was delighted to learn that many young people in the D.C. area are finding a transforming life together in intentional households of singles based on a

radical discipleship theology and a commitment to hospitality. These households usually have a few core people and considerable turn-over as well. That makes for lots of birds and not many branches in these Christian community households. The branches, we observed, need support.

One person in the circle asked, "How do we move from households of single people to more stability as intergenerational communities with families and children? What wisdom do you have for us about next steps?" I encouraged them to visit communities that have been around for a few decades, to engage in deeper conversations about their immediate challenges, and to keep meeting as communities of communities to encourage each other. When I asked if they wanted to get the Nurturing Community Project monthly reports about community visits and news from the community network, everyone signed up.



Brian Gorman reminded everyone that there is a cluster of elders to coach them at the Church of the Savior begun by Gordon Cosby in the 1950's. From Cosby's ministry has grown a

low-key network of mature small congregations with a focus on the inward spiritual life, community, and many outward creative sacrificially-supported ministry initiatives.

Since returning home from D.C., I have felt the inadequacy of our answers that evening as I've continued to ponder how hard it is for anyone, especially young adults in our society, to make commitments, to lay down our lives for sisters and brothers in daily service and for the sake of the kingdom. In my mind echoes a short line from Pastor James Ellis III in his Sunday morning sermon at Peace Fellowship Church, "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life." Sounds like bad news until you remember whose company we get to keep in dying to self and rising to new life with Him.