

# Aiding and Abetting New Life at Koinonia and Jubilee



## Koinonia Farm: April 30 to May 1, 2015

We heard good news at the Koinonia Board Meeting this year about the growing maturity and wisdom of this historic discipleship community, about two-and-a-half completed construction projects, and a marked improvement in the community's finances. However, whether it's good news or bad, folks at Koinonia have long ago discovered how to facilitate board meetings with ample Georgia nuts and chocolate from their products kitchen. This is how Pat, our

secretary, keeps his eyes on the prize while taking notes. Any volunteers for board membership?

The high point of our two days at Koinonia was the annual covenanting-making celebration, renewing commitments for the Stewards (core members), affirming two novices, and blessing the interns staying and also those moving on. Community leader Bren Dubay's ten-year efforts to return a failing non-profit organization back to its communal roots as a witness for reconciliation in the way of Jesus are bearing good fruit. At the heart of this hard-working, guest-welcoming, communal sharing, earth-



loving farm community is a semi-monastic life of prayer that sustains the home folks and the visitors who pass through each year. It seems to me that the best product of Koinonia is the growth in discipleship and maturity of the young people who come through as interns, and often stay on for longer terms of service.

So what's with two-and-a-half construction projects? Last September, a completed kitchen allowed the community to move into its beautiful, spacious, sky-lit dining hall. The new Partnership House (jointly



sponsored by Habitat for Humanity and the Fuller Center, which both had their roots at Koinonia) with sixteen beds, now offers an ideal space for retreat groups -- and for our board meetings. The old guest house built by Clarence Jordan and friends in the early 40's has been remodeled with twenty-two guest beds upstairs (already in use) and a library downstairs still waiting for shelves and a move of all books out of the moldy old bungalow.

The community is ready to re-launch its ministry of hospitality on a larger scale, inviting more guests and service groups to sojourn with them. There they can learn about permaculture farming "hands-on," enter into the story of Koinonia's witness to racial reconciliation in an era of violent persecution, and hear the always-timely call to discipleship with Jesus in community.



*Community leader, Bren Dubay, with her sidekick, Amanda Moore, and ever-loving and helpful husband, Jim Dubay in the background.*

Koinoinia has gained a lot of practical wisdom in the area of finances this past year. Thanks to the recent internship of a young business consultant, Tim Honchel, Koinonia's bookkeeping operations have been restructured to more accurately reflect the shape of their communal life, pecan product sales, and farming operations within the hospitality ministry. Since Tim's accounting overhaul and regular weekly oversight from a distance, the Koinonia Finance Committee has received trustworthy and timely information each month, allowing them to make some significant cost-cutting measures. At the same time, their product sales were up in 2014, resulting in a

modest turn-around from ten years of declining balances. God's providential care arrives in many forms, and all of them are worth celebrating. The wisdom of the cross completes the practical wisdom that comes from good oversight and careful attention to detail.

### **Jubilee Partners: May 1 to 4, 2015**

Since my last visit to Jubilee Partners three years ago, eight novices have become covenant members, bringing the total number in their partnership meetings to twenty-two. Their structures have shifted as well, delegating more work to a Coordinator's Support Team and to the Wellness Committee for pastoral care. This has allowed the whole community to process decisions more expeditiously, but the old-timers are struggling with feelings of loss because

experiences of unity are harder to achieve with more community members. At the same time, more gifts are flowing into a variety of ministries, for which everyone is generally encouraged.



*Jubilee's K-House, a central dining and meeting space for the community.*

In the Sunday afternoon worship service, Naomi's talk with the children explored the mystery of what is real. "How do you know that love is real?" she asked. "You can't see it, can you?" The children responded with their own examples. "Hugs are real." "When Mommy and Daddy let me snuggle after I've had a bad dream--that is real."

For over thirty years, Jubilee Partners has been welcoming refugees with real Christ-like love and orienting them to the language and culture of these United States. After two or three months, the immigrant families move on to Atlanta or other cities

where they tend to cluster with compatriots and extended family. But three years ago God began to do a surprising and wonderful thing. Many Karen and Karenni-speaking refugees who fled repression in Burma, came through Jubilee and found a welcome in the name of Christ. After returning to big city life, many remembered how at home they felt in the woods and the gardens at Jubilee Partners. So they began to resettle in significant numbers into the small town of Comer, GA, just a walk up the road from their Jubilee friends. All national demographics would lead one to expect a local anti-immigrant backlash, but that is exactly what did **not** happen.

This gentle invasion of more than a hundred Karen and Karenni-speaking immigrants (now ten percent of Comer's population and growing) has got everyone talking about what God might be doing here. Sage Woodroof, a former Jubilee volunteer and persistent friend, has begun to organize a response. Sage has begun teaching ESL in the schools and after school. The local churches, both black and white, have welcomed the refugees as good neighbors and fellow Christians. Jubilee Partners has opened a five-acre plot for refugee family gardeners where as many as fifty people with children of all ages, gather on Saturdays to tend their fields and picnic with one another.



*David Janzen with Sage's host mom, Naw Dee Poe, flanked by Jubilee volunteers, Phillip and Jessica.*

Several years ago, Sage joined the family of Bi Kan No (father) and Naw Dee Poe (mother) who helped her learn the language. From that home base Sage has become a translator and cultural bridge for other former Jubilee volunteers who are planning similar moves

into Comer, not to be social workers or missionaries, but to simply join in this exciting thing that God is doing.

In recent weeks Sage has initiated a conversation with the Nurturing Communities Project to brainstorm what kind of supportive community might be possible for former Jubilee volunteers joining in solidarity with this immigrant community. To help us imagine what this might look like, Sage took Phillip, Jessica (Jubilee volunteers) and me to meet with Baw Baw, a mother of six and a spiritual leader in the Karen community in Comer. Later in the evening we shared a Karen supper with Sage's host family.

In both of these settings we were awed by the testimonies of the immigrant families. They are so full of gratitude for what God has done to rescue them from genocidal violence in their homeland, deliver them from refugee camps in Thailand, and bring them to this new land. The men are often exhausted as they work long hours in local chicken processing plants at wages few others will touch. So women end up giving important leadership to the families and the house churches springing up. Exhausted as they are, the men still have a knack for tending large gardens and growing flocks of poultry for their tables. The families put their little money together for new enterprises like a pasture to graze cattle. They inspire their neighbors with good will. Where did this warm tsunami of grace and hope come from? That's what we asked Baw Baw about.



*Bi Kan No gives me a tour of his garden and chicken pens. His greens were in our supper.*



*Baw Baw with five of her six children, plus David Janzen, Sage Woodruff, and Jessica.*

It seems that when a people has suffered greatly holding onto God in trust, they become a fountain of joy for others. As Baw Baw offered in her broken English, "My faith grow so big. See," she gestures with hands spread wide to include her six children, "My family have food every day, everything we need. I just love my God so much, I want to worship all the time," she says smiling through her tears. Who wouldn't want a hundred neighbors like that?

Another development I noticed at Jubilee Partners has been a significant expansion of their Sunday worship and community meal. Even though the Karen

families in Comer are forming their own churches, some of them are also regularly joining the Sunday worshipping community at Jubilee. This service also includes whichever refugees want to join from the Jubilee welcome village, so we were honored that Sunday with a lively Swahili-singing Congolese choir. The Holy Spirit, it seems, is moving faster than anyone can interpret.

As God pours out new wine, conversations ripple everywhere about what kinds of new wine skins can catch this blessing and pass it to others.

While with them, a few of us explored the notion that Jubilee might be an ideal centrally-located site for a Nurturing Communities-type regional camp-meeting in 2016, including folks from a dozen communities within a half-day's drive. Please pray for Jubilee in this surprising season of renewal and discernment.



*The departing Congolese refugees requested an "All-Jubilee" photo that included a few guests as well.*