

Nurturing Communities Project

Visit to North Carolina and Virginia: 9-19 to 9-27-15

9-18 to 9-21-15 at Blackburn House in Todd, NC. My arrival at Blackburn House community was a comedy of navigational errors and of small town welcome. According to Google Map, I should have made it from Evanston, Illinois, to Blackburn House in Todd, North Carolina, in thirteen hours. But on the "blue roads" of the Appalachian Mountains after dark when my phone was out of range, I found mistakes happened, but so does grace. A couple of



car mechanics, working by flashlight on a stalled pickup, directed me to turn around and go to the other end of Three Top Road, where I'd find the town of Todd and my hosts. Once in Todd I found no street numbers posted, so I asked for help at a little all-purpose craft and snack store next to a very active dance hall. When I named my hosts, Rev. Brandon and Erica Wrencher, the store lady exclaimed to my relief, "Oh, I know them. You sit right here. I'll call and they'll come and get you." Sure enough, in a few minutes Brandon met me, unlocked the Blackburn House and showed me where a bed was waiting.

Brandon and his wife Erica first met me a few years ago at an Ekkleisa Project Workshop at DePaul University in Chicago. Again we met at the CCDA conference in Raleigh, NC, last October when they were excited to talk with the author of a book their community was currently reading. They invited me to visit them whenever I could come to North Carolina, which put them at the top of my list for this September trip. Networking works.

There is a three-year old community that began with four interns living for free in the parsonage of Blackburn's Chapel in exchange for staffing this United Methodist Church made up of mostly elderly folks. At the same time, this dwindling but still vital congregation also won a grant from the Duke Foundation to support these interns for



ent work in the area.

w scattered houses, small shops and a dance hall

hanging onto the hillsides along the cascading New River. These Appalachian mountain valleys are inhabited by some old-time farm families, a few second-homers who live most of the year in the nearby university town of Boone, a few mobile home residents, and an improbable intentional Christian community led by the only African-American couple in the area. The meager economy of beautiful Todd is supplemented by summer streams of back-packers and rafters who pass down the middle of Todd on river-propelled adventures.



The Blackburn House community included me in a morning of gardening, composting, potato digging and food sharing - their way of making new friends in the area. I learned about their ambitious year-long project to conduct a hundred or more interviews to discern assets and needs in the wider community. At the heart of this community organizing effort is an intentional community made up of former Blackburn House interns who have planted themselves

in the Todd neighborhood along with recent interns living communally in the parsonage under the spiritual guidance of Rev. Brandon Wrencher. This intentional community is attracting a few older neighbors who want to get in on the spiritual vitality and vision for neighborhood renewal they see emerging.

Presently, the community is in an intensive (and hopefully brief) phase of writing mission statements and clarifying institutional connections for the long haul. I got the picture of three intersecting circles □ the intentional Christian community, the Blackburn's Chapel congregation, and a community development organization that includes some of the above persons, but also a few neighborhood volunteers attracted by the prospect of common work for the common good.

9-21 to 9-23-15 at the Bruderhof House, Chapel Hill, NC. For two nights I stayed at the Bruderhof house where present occupants are Aaron and Atalie Paul plus Else and Sergei Mercoucheff.





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designer of Bruderhof web sites. These two couples are in various communities and non-profit service organizations in the area. As others reported to me, this makes them terrific networkers in the intentional Christian community scene.

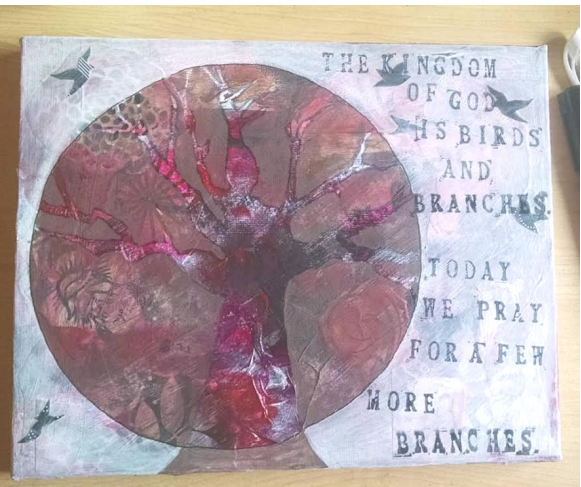


9-22-15 at The Family Tree in Charlotte

NC. Greg and Helms Jerrell (two kids in grade school) are the anchor family for The Family Tree community. Their house is shaded by an immense 150-year-old Post Oak tree; where up to fifty homeless friends, African-American neighbors, and other volunteers gather here on Friday evenings for outdoor fellowship meals -- moving indoors for bad weather. The Jerrells, with help from area churches

and other friends, host a variety of children's and youth fellowship groups, art workshops, week-long learning trips, and Bible studies that make their home something of a neighborhood center. A few other houses and apartments (some in need of major repair) are providing low-income housing under their care.

Until a few months ago, Greg and Helms were on staff at a church across town, but two months ago they took the step of faith to be full-time available in their neighborhood. At present they are waiting for the next crop of interns to join them in their calling to community, neighborhood presence and ministry. We discussed Jesus' parable of the Mustard Seed, which grows until birds come and nest in its branches. This inspired Helms to create a textile version of the same, which you get to see here fresh out of the workshop.



Grace and Main in Danville, VA. Grace and Main is not a street
it meets Main Street in intentional Christian community by

that name. G & M grew out of a Bible study about six years ago where a few seminarians and their friends asked what would happen if we put into practice this stuff that we are reading about in the Gospels and the first chapters of Acts. Josh Hearne, one of the original members, took me on a tour of six community houses that typically have an anchor couple and some long and short-term community mates off the streets who seek a life of discipleship together. We also visited a fascinating terraced permaculture garden and retreat space that is emerging, with much labor, from a densely wooded ravine that runs through the city.

Danville is a depressed city struggling in the economic shadow of a huge abandoned textile mill that once employed thousands. The closed mill leaves behind high un-employment and a considerable homeless population. After the tour I followed Josh to Averette College, where he taught an Introduction to the New Testament class --, this session on the Gospel of Mark. Like other spiritual descendants of that transformative Bible study, he is finding a part-time professional niche that allows him to put most of his energy and love into community-building according to the mission of Grace and Main.

For dinner Charlie Strauss took me out to a fine Italian restaurant where he proceeded to tell about his career as a lawyer and then two decades as a judge. Now in his retirement he has been avidly reading Dorothy Day, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, more obscure writers like David Janzen. He is also been making friends with the folks at Grace



and Main. God has been turning his life upside-down in a fresh Gospel kind of way. He meets people in the G&M evening prayer times whom he had sentenced to prison years ago! "What are you doing here?" they ask each other. The answer usually has something to do with Jesus.

A Grace and Main scene of

Following our evening liturgy of Bible reading, songs, and a prayer of part-time professionals, survivors (by God's grace) of all kinds of foolishness and systemic oppression, were hanging around, sipping coffee, basking in each other's company, and answering questions from this impertinent visitor about what they had in common. Through stories and tears they told how God is bringing them together, helping them find useful work whether paying or volunteer, building them up into a family of love and mutual service where long-dormant gifts are put to use in the kingdom of God that is so real among them.

9-24 to 9-27-15 at Rutba House, Durham NC. Brian Gorman joined me from Washington DC at Rutba House, from where we visited several other communities in the area. For Brian this was a bit of a home-coming since he was an intern at Rutba right after college, and there he heard a call to pursue life with others in missional community.

Rutba is two anchor families with several short and long-term house mates, mostly from the neighborhood. Both families are in the stage of life where children's birthdays, school projects, and toddler needs often take center stage. For guests that means someone is always available to play ball, assemble puzzles, or come with a story book to read. We observed how extra informal baby sitters are a blessing in the houses. Here we see a scene from the Rutba House front porch where the "elders of Berkley Street" hang out to offer wisdom for whoever walks by, even guests.



Jonathan W-H took Brian and me along to a meeting at Duke Divinity School, where he chaired a panel discussion for seminarians on the messy necessity of engaging slowly and deeply with folks deemed poor and marginal by the dominant society, learning from their leaders rather than bringing our solutions from a place of privilege and power. The rest of our days with Rutba House and other communities we visited in Durham, showed us from the inside just how slow, messy and intimate this work is, a work in which Jesus keeps showing up.



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9-25-15 at the Community of the Franciscan Way, Durham NC. Brian and I participated in a small candle-lit prayer service at St. Joseph Episcopal Church in Durham, where we and members of the Franciscan Way intentional community were the only participants. From there we adjourned to the Peter Maurin House five blocks away where. They promised we'd recognize it by the Episcopalian flag. There we shared in the community meal, extended conversation, and Compline in their household chapel.

This "Catholic Worker" community includes three families who identify with the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Episcopalian Church. Colin, the Priest at St. Joseph with his family, are members of the community, only they live a mile away from the main Peter Maurin household. All together there are three families and about six single men, some who come from homeless backgrounds, sharing a life of mutual service and often intense conversation.



Fr. Colin was reticent to call their operation an intentional Christian community. Rather, they are intentional about faithfully worshipping together every morning and evening which is facilitated by a shared life. The three families all appear to be in the same life stage with babies riding daddy's chests. The mothers and fathers are a highly-educated bunch who all admit to having studied under Stanley Hauerwas at nearby Duke Divinity School. Regarding community polity, Fr. Colin acknowledged that they were organized according to an ancient hierarchical Catholic tradition where the community discusses issues, and then the priest, backed by the bishop, decides. That way, as Fr. Colin explained, "The community members can be angry at me rather than at each other."



9-26-15 at Braggtown Community in Durham, NC. We met with Reynolds and Kaitlyn Chapman who, about eight months ago, moved to the Braggtown neighborhood of northwest Durham, which is about 90% African-American with a few Hispanics, Asians, and Whites. The Chapmans live with a long-time friend,

ing friends and seeing where God leads them into service
ating with people in recovery from addictions or coping
with other disabilities. Reynolds is a pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church for whom he is
officially a church planter, but with the understanding that they might join forces with a local
congregation if the fit is right. Emma has some years of farming experience in community in
New Zealand with an itch to garden as much as
she can, which is reflected in her T-shirt that
says, "Get to know your Farmacist."

After a morning of conversation Brian
and I followed Reynolds, Kaitlyn, and Emma to
an area park where others from the
neighborhood met for a monthly prayer vigil at
the site where a teenager had been shot. This
is a group that is praying faithfully for the



renewal of their neighborhood and building strategic friendships with local leaders, some of
whom are talking "community" with them, although the shape of that life together is still to be
discerned.

Finally, I want to identify a few unifying themes from this trip.

Front yard tomatoes: I saw a lot of front yard (and back-yard) gardens. Most of these
communities are avid food growers, some experts and others just learning. Growing your own
food and sharing it with neighbors is a way of life that humanizes the city; it puts folks who did
not start out as farmers in touch with God's creation in spiritual, physical and relational practices
that promise to heal the earth and souls in common work and worship.

The Three R's and submission to the leadership of the poor. Most of these
communities participate in the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) that
gives expression to the witness of John Perkins summarized in "Relocation, Redistribution, and
Reconciliation." Often this has taken the form of a few white families opening their homes to
formerly homeless folks who become long-term community mates that seeks a journey of
conversion anticipating the peace and justice of God's kingdom.

Regional connections and gatherings: In visiting these communities I've tried to
encourage gatherings on a regional level. The newer and more isolated communities would
welcome such an emerging network for wisdom and guidance toward mature incarnations of the

groups who have been established longer seem to have management and resource-sharing to meet their needs, so regional gatherings are not as urgent for them.

My own apostolic role seems warmly welcomed, leading to immediate and deep conversations about current community discoveries and needs. Each group is on a developmental journey with much to learn from other groups in the same stages of life. Just as scripture interprets scripture, so one community's experiences reveals what is going on in the life of another because the same Holy Spirit is at work. Most of the Spirit's work is done in obscurity □ carried on for the love of Jesus and our neighbors □ a work that is quickly distorted when the motive is publicity and media-based fund raising. The hype of New Monasticism a decade ago has died down and those seeking maturity in the wisdom of Jesus are sticking with it. That is exciting in its own quiet way. Thanks for coming along.

I close with the prayer on Helms Jerrell's collage: □The kingdom of God is birds and branches: Today we pray for more branches.□

--David Janzen with Brian Gorman