

The Story of Reba Place Fellowship in Five Chapters: Catalytic Events, Organizational Adjustments, Continuity of Vision

David Janzen

Born in 1957, Reba Place Fellowship has become one of the longest-standing urban Christian intentional communities in the U.S., made up of singles, and married people with families. Its longevity has much to do, I believe, with the flexibility of its leadership structures over the years, even while remaining faithful to its calling to be “a community of love and discipleship, and by nurturing other such communities as God gives us grace.”¹ The old timers among us might say, it’s not exactly the same community, but rather, five different communities they’ve been part of since the beginning. So, I hope to tell those five stories somewhat in outline form for brevity’s sake, while offering a few reflections on catalytic events, organizational adjustments, continuity of the original vision, all bathed in the undeniable grace of God.

1) An Anabaptist Urban Intentional Community: 1957 to 1970.

In 1957 Goshen Seminary asked a renegade professor, John Miller, to take a leave of absence because he was stirring up too much controversy by insisting that Mennonites should return to their communal calling as illustrated in the early chapters of the book of Acts. So, with his family and a few radical disciples, they began such a communal church in a large household at 727 Reba Place in the racially mixed neighborhood of South Evanston. Mennonites were familiar with rural communal groups like the Amish and the Hutterites, but to do something like this in an urban setting (more like the Early Church) was a new thing that drew considerable attention and discussion.

John Miller insisted that the group operate by consensus, but the others acknowledged that he was a father figure who functioned as “the first among equals.” When new people wanted to join the group it became apparent that some kind of catechesis was needed, so John wrote a pamphlet called “The Way of Love,” which has been a core document for the community ever since. It lifted up essential practices of a) living in close proximity, b) sharing goods and basic life decisions, c) making a priority of reconciled relationships according to Matt 18, and d) practicing the non-violent way of love as taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

The community grew as new persons from around the country came to try out and join this new (yet old) way of following Jesus. They bought and fixed up a few more houses in the neighborhood to accommodate growth from the five initial adult members to twenty-five. Yet they remained one circle of consensus decision-making united by an extended family life of many potlucks, workdays, and Sermon-on-the-Mount seminars. Some of the early members, however, felt called to raise their families in a rural setting so they planted a sister community, Plow Creek Fellowship, two hours west of Chicago near Tiskilwa IL. In 1970 John Miller was offered a teaching position at Kitchener-

Waterloo, Ontario, and with community discernment, the Miller family was sent to continue building a similar pattern of communal church where they landed.

2) Charismatic Renewal: The 70's.

John Miller's departure called forth a new generation of three younger leaders, Virgil Vogt, John Lehman, and Julius Belser, who began to function as a team of young "elders." They were soon intrigued by the Holy-Spirit-empowered ministry of Graham Pulkingham at the Church of the Redeemer in Houston. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were active in the Early Church of Acts, so this seemed to be a missing piece for those enamored by the life of the Early Church. Graham Pulkingham's visit to Reba released a "Pentecost" of gifts and exuberant worship that soon was followed by a flood of seekers, many of them drawn to Reba's emerging healing ministry. Within a few years the Fellowship grew from twenty-five to 160 members. To cope with the many needs large ministering households because the norm where a dozen to twenty people lived under one roof for a daily life around a common table with intense spiritual formation, and much pastoral counseling.

During this time, under the advice of Graham Pulkingham, Reba repaired its relationship with the Mennonite church and joined the denomination. In order to nurture other Anabaptist communities also growing up under the Charismatic Renewal, the Shalom Association of Communities was formed. Reba began to buy some larger apartment buildings "on the block" and fix them up, creating in-house employment and an affordable housing business.

It was a season of hot-house life with rapid spiritual growth for many, but it made demands on young leaders that sometimes exceeded their actual levels of maturity. According to the ethos of the Charismatic Renewal, the way to cope with immature members was to exercise strong authority and to teach submission. Toward the end of the 70's a litany of complaints mounted along with some sincere apologies on the part of the leaders, acknowledging an "overdose of authority." This led to a "time-out" from business as usual to make room for a season of review.

3) "The Review" and Development of the Congregational Option: The 80's.

A year of open review sessions resulted in dismantling most of the ministering households and the development of a "congregational option." It turned out that many had joined the communal life, not from a sense of calling, but because it was the only way to belong. An organizational distinction was made between Reba Place Church and Reba Place Fellowship with many opting for the more loosely structured congregational life. The same elders were reaffirmed to serve both the church and fellowship, lending stability in a time of many transitions.

A more decentralized life grouped the Fellowship into two clusters and the congregation into one cluster. In this season of life other ministries emerged. The Overground Railroad gave support to a wide-ranging network of support for Central American refugees, with a South Texas team, host groups, and transportation links

leading to asylum in Canada and, later, the United States. Racial reconciliation became a more deliberate mission of RPF. The congregation continued to grow while the Fellowship shrank from 160 to about 70 members. The Shalom Association of Communities dissolved.

4) Outward Ministries Expand While Core Membership Dwindles Further: The 90's.

During this season of community life the same three elders continue to serve in both Church and Fellowship, but most of the community's attention went to building up the congregation with a variety of new ministries. The Fellowship launched a Ten Thousand Villages store selling third-world craft items that did very well on busy Main Street in Evanston. But as volunteers from other churches became involved, the store's corporation was reorganized to stand on its own feet. Reba Place Development Corporation was organized to take advantage of government funds to buy run-down apartments buildings in our neighborhood and preserve them for long-term affordable housing. A colony of Fellowship folks moved two miles south and launched a new congregation in the Roger's Park neighborhood of Chicago, providing the nucleus of a thriving multi-ethnic congregation with many recent immigrants called "Living Water Community Church."

Meanwhile, the two clusters of Reba Place Fellowship dwindled from 70 to 38 members. New persons were not joining the Fellowship as those who remained, of course, grew older. In this dispirited season of life a visitation led by Richard and Judy Hays prophesied that Reba, like Abraham and Sarah, would become pregnant in its old age.

5) Mission to Youth and a New Leadership Pattern: The 2000's.

With some tears Reba Place Fellowship dissolved the two clusters, each with their own traditions, and returned to one circle of membership. One of the younger members, Greg Clark, was elected to a three-year term as Fellowship leader and was asked to constitute a new leadership team – a pattern that has continued to this day allowing for a variety of leadership gifts to serve, giving strategic attention to empowering women and young people. In fact, many task teams were delegated to provide a variety of needed services so that everyone in the Fellowship is growing in leadership experience. The Fellowship rebuilt connections with a few other communities and the Shalom Mission Communities network emerged.

The first new leadership team developed a brief mission statement which was affirmed by the body and even set to music so everyone can easily remember its focus on discipleship, love, and support for new communities. The Reba "onion" distinguished three membership layers – practicing members, novices, and covenant membership. The community recognized the need to draw together, to meet more often and to rebuild the core life that had been neglected. An intern program begun by a Reba teen and her mentor invited and oriented a new crop of seekers each year, many of whom have stayed around. Greg Clark, philosophy professor at North Park University, began a fall class on "Christian Intentional Community" which brought a large van-load of young

people to our Monday-night potluck, small groups, and seminar. Some of them have become part of our wider spiritual family and have launched community households of their own.

Membership has grown slowly from thirty-eight to forty-eight as younger friends of the Fellowship and practicing members have typically taken a longer time to make commitments of marriage, family, and community. They constitute a wider circle of Fellowship friends who come and go and grow at Millennial pace. Still, the 2000's have constituted a season of growth and vitality in Reba Place Fellowship with both an aging core of veterans and a ring of new growth that promises vitality for years to come.

Continuities:

- The original vision expressed in John Miller's pamphlet, "The Way of Love," has remained a living inspiration. (See below)
- Shared possessions, finances, and common decision-making have offered a radical witness and a unifying force in our life together.
- Periodic visitations have refocused the vision to fit new circumstances in gracious and Spirit-led ways.
- Nurturing other communities, in apostolic visits, writings, and in hospitality to many visitors has been Reba's charism from the beginning. A further development of this mission in the last decade has been the Nurturing Communities Project.
- A mix of common work and outside jobs have sustained the community from the beginning.
- Leadership has modeled reconciliation and humble service.

New Wine and New Wineskins:

Jesus said that new outpourings of the Spirit call for new wineskins, by which, I believe, he meant the structures of community. The structures of community are important, but in a modest and secondary kind of way. They do not produce the wine, they catch and preserve it. Our leadership structures are provisional, always somewhat ad hoc, and not to be idealized. They are not worth fighting or dividing over. They are given to preserve and channel the gifts of the Spirit that must be discerned anew in each season of community life.

¹ Reba Place Fellowship's vision statement approved in 2001: "The calling of Reba Place Fellowship is to extend the mission of Jesus by being a community of love and discipleship, and by nurturing other such communities as God gives us grace."