

Reba Place Fellowship: Communal Response to a Six-apartment Fire.



Most of my Nurturing Community Project reports begin on the other end of a trip with a community of folks I'm just getting to know. This story, however, interrupted life right on our home turf.

On Monday,

December 12, I was in a meeting, discussing housing issues, when my colleague, Adrian, looked outside and said with alarm, "I see smoke in the air." We rushed across the alley and saw flames shooting out of a second floor apartment, quickly leaping up the back stairs of the six-apartment block. Fire trucks from Evanston, Skokie and Wilmette with their crews were

deploying hoses in front of the building out of view of the actual fire. It took an agonizingly long while for a tanker truck to come down the alley and begin dousing the flames at the rear and on the roof of the building. Meanwhile, the Reba Property maintenance team alerted everyone in



the twenty-five unit building to evacuate as quickly as possible. Soon the firemen got organized and spread out into every affected apartment and onto the roof -- tearing open walls and attics, and dousing hidden flames until the fire was extinguished half an hour later, saving the other nineteen units in the building. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and even the pets were rescued.

A city inspection decreed that all six apartments at 635 Sherman were unfit for occupancy because of fire, smoke and water damage. We estimated that demolition, mold remediation, and reconstruction would require six months before the residents could hope to



move back in. The property management crew and other volunteers labored in bitter cold to close up holes in the roof, broken windows, and burned out partitions to seal the building against further weather damage. An emergency response team was formed of Fellowship members, homeless residents, and concerned neighbors.

Meanwhile, an angry scene broke out next to the building -- one mother, who had worked a night shift, was awakened to find her apartment engulfed in smoke, and had no time to salvage belongings before the firemen charged through to fight the blaze. In the alley she angrily confronted the person in whose apartment the fire began, and screamed her accusations for everyone within shouting distance to hear. Neighbors tried to comfort and to mediate the confrontation, but the raw wounds could not be so quickly healed. Offers of temporary lodging and other forms of aid soon arrived from neighbors and Fellowship friends. Building residents began the disheartening task of carrying out burned and damaged items to the trash.



The news of the fire spread quickly. We were surprised by the wide-ranging response of sympathy -- offers of lodging, furniture and cash that poured in for the six families, (eighteen persons) suddenly rendered homeless. The emergency response team began looking for

longer-term housing options. Reba Properties quickly reimbursed the tenants' December rent and security deposits so they could look for lodging with cash in hand.

On Friday evening, Reba Fellowship had a well-attended potluck where the news of the fire was replayed in sufficient detail to answer everyone's questions. We also made plans for a Saturday communal workday to help our homeless neighbors salvage their belongings and to temporarily store them in a quickly assembled cluster of storage pods in Reba Park.



At times like this spiritual battle lines come into focus, highlighting powers at work to destroy relationships, and also forces of compassion that rally resources and brings people



together. The spiritual highpoint of our meeting came when the Fellowship member in whose apartment the fire began, described how, on Monday morning, she had left behind a wax-melting incense pot near a wreath while she took her boys to school. And then on her return, she was dismayed to discover that her own negligence had started a fire now out of control. She confessed waves of regret and guilt over the losses she had caused to other residents and to Reba Place Fellowship, owner of the

building, On behalf of the community, leader Sally Youngquist expressed our full and heart-felt forgiveness. We prayed for reconciliation among the persons who had been burned out of their homes and safety for the demolition workers. We told stories of similar accidents that had been forgiven in Reba's history. And we gave thanks that this happened to be one of a few Fellowship buildings with fire insurance – a condition required by our mortgage holders.

So this is the how community is supposed to work, we realized -- heart and soul united, giving the “Accuser” no openings to tear us down or pull us apart. Of course there are lessons to be learned and further precautions we may want to take, but we will deal with those in time.

Organizing workdays for community moves is something Reba Fellowship has been doing for decades, only this time we would be adding lots of neighbors and friends of the displaced families into the moving line. The next morning, as volunteers arrived, we huddled in a warm garage for instructions and to sign waivers.



Then we spread out into the six apartments to help former residents box up their salvaged belongings. Soon lines formed to pass boxes and furniture down the stairs, hand-to-hand, into the waiting truck.



On this bitterly cold morning, we kept retreating to a heated three-car garage ready as a snack spot and warming center. Then we went back to work, moving each box and furniture item again from the truck to a cluster of storage pods in Reba Park, to keep family’s belongings safe until they found provisional

lodging. Amazingly, by noon all six units had been cleared out and the providentially assembled crew could celebrate with the displaced residents, a job well done.

But the biggest celebration was not in securing possessions, it was in witnessing an amazing reconciliation. Just as the angry confrontation on Monday had been painful and public, so on Saturday we saw the same people exchange hugs and words of condolence. They

shared gratitude for each other's safety and the joy of goodwill restored. What can you say when prayers are answered like this except, "Halleluia!"

We believe that "All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purposes." (Rom. 8:28) But this belief is not a magic mantra that automatically fixes calamities. It is an affirmation of what we have found true of our experience in past disasters, which allows us to hang in there with hope and faith in today's crises. Crises like this remind us why we pray, hope, and work for the kind of community where all burdens are shared and no one remains alone in her need. In community, this is our everyday reality, but on special days like last Saturday, we get to share this joy with our neighbors in a day of common work freely given for the common good. Faith keeps us alert to see and to give thanks every time good triumphs over the evil in the circumstances around us.

In closing, I want to note the exemplary cooperation of the City of Evanston Fire Department and the Police, the Red Cross, the local park district. Likewise, we were impressed



by the many gifted volunteers who organized to meet immediate material needs alongside the pastoral souls who listened to grief on the spot and offered prayers for healing to begin. We pray that one day, half a year from now, six families may gather and give thanks for newly refurbished apartments, where they can be neighbors once again.

One final memory hovers over the workday for me -- tables full of donated snacks, hot drinks and cider, surrounded by bright eyes that kept meeting in the warming center on a cold, cold day of common work. And presiding over this snack-fest was our hostess extraordinaire, Nieta Jones. encouraging our efforts on to the finish line. Her warm, radiant, caffeine-enhanced

smile reminds us that “Neither life nor death, . . . nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39)

Filling in the map in Illinois and Wisconsin: A Nurturing Communities Project local group formed a couple of weeks ago, bringing together a few elders and young folks from Reba and from Jesus People USA, to reach out to intentional Christian Communities (including student groups) in Illinois and Wisconsin in the year 2017. We look with look for a variety of patterns to emerge to share gifts and encouragement as we get to know each other in the months ahead. (See attached an essay outlining some of our strategies and hopes.)

On a personal note: It’s now four weeks since a competent surgeon gave me a new right knee. I am learning how increased mobility and healing comes at the cost of considerable pain as physical therapists and exercise routines encourage me to push past my physical limits to regain flexibility and strength. Today I could walk down stairs, left-right-left, without pain. I’ve left crutches behind, and the possibility of a three-point jump shot beckons me. God is good, and so is that host of folks who have been praying, including you my dear friends.

--David Janzen: December 2016.