

A Visit to Three Communities in the Pacific Northwest, March 2016

What a treat, in one day, to exchange drab winter in Illinois for the daffodils, flowering trees, and lush green of the Pacific Northwest! The Church of the Servant King (COSK) in Eugene, Oregon, had invited me (March 10 to 14), to lead a couple of workshops and also to sit in on their conversations about transitions the community was facing.

As was neatly explained to me, COSK has twenty-one adult members -- seven of them are founders originally sent out by the parent community in Gardena, CA, over twenty years ago; seven more of their members joined soon thereafter; and another seven have become members in the last decade. About two years ago the community's leadership team was incapacitated by personal tragedies. This painful time of transition was greatly eased by several visits from Mike Munk and others of the COSK community in Portland, OR, who gave good pastoral care, and who proposed a new three-person leadership team which has been "in the saddle" since.

There is a foundation beneath the COSK Eugene community of relational health and genuine love. They know how to do hospitality well and how to make a common life work between several households within easy walking distance of each other.

One gift the community enjoys is sharing in the work of Wipf & Stock Publishing House nearby as contract negotiators, editors, printers, binders, shippers, and one role as "computer network therapist" I'd not



heard of before. Together they turn out about a hundred new titles every month and supply reprints on about 9,000 titles as orders come in.

Jon Stock, who is a partner in the business, has a related sideline of picking up libraries from the estates of deceased seminary professors and then selling these exotic theological tomes online from a vast

underground labyrinth of book shelves in the basement of Wipf & Stock. By reading the books that pass through their hands, community members are highly educated in matters of theology and Christian community, which they admit, can complicate rather than simplify community discussions..

While life functions according to well-established patterns, the community feels stalled out about longer-term direction, neighborhood connections, and how to harmonize the gifts in the leadership team. Where will new life come from, they ask? The old forms have served them well, but something more compelling for a new generation is needed.

The community invited me to tell the story of Reba Place Fellowship's history of adjustments in leadership structures and vision across its almost 60 years of history. The story falls out into five chapters marked by new opportunities and crises to be solved. Each transition was marked by a season of intense review and conversation to arrive at new wineskins appropriate for the next stage of common life. The focus on being "a community of love and discipleship" persisted through the years because Jesus kept showing up as he promised.



Another workshop focused on the usefulness and limits of practical wisdom and conventional wisdom as we seek live into the wisdom of the cross, opening up a space where the social teachings of Jesus can become normal and visible before a hungry but skeptical world.



In my time with them I especially appreciated the COSK Sabbath tradition that integrates their Sunday meal with worship and the celebration of communion. This involves an intimate sharing of appreciations for one another and for Jesus, whose life laid down in sacrifice makes their life together a joyful possibility. Then after clean-up, they all moved on to another house for the sacrament of ice cream and fellowship that climaxed, this time, in welcoming a new puppy into the community.

In Portland I landed in the good care of Rusty and Mary Lou Bonham at the Spring Water Community in the city's east end. This community of about twenty adults lives in intentional proximity, with couples and singles often housed together.



The community had just concluded a visitation that left behind a five-part list of recommendations they would soon tackle in consensus-building conversations. Toward that end, I led an evening workshop on “The Art of Wisdom-Seeking Conversation.” It begins with a readers’ theater piece that discussed what makes for a good conversation, and in so doing stumbles into some of the ways conversations can go awry and also get back on track. The discussion that followed was animated and ended up with a fine list of guidelines they wanted to abide

by in subsequent wisdom-seeking conversations for the way ahead.

We finished the evening with some preliminary discussion of Spring Water’s desire to become part of an area community of communities whose features might include -- annual camp meetings, leadership consultations, a tradition of community visitations for one another, and a wider circle for similarly-committed single Christians to find partners in this common calling. The usefulness of such community connections was highlighted for us all as Merideth (from Spring Water) and Halden (from Church of the Servant King, Portland) are planning a spring wedding.



Grandview Calvary Baptist Church in Vancouver was my final destination in this three-stop community circuit. The main event was a Saturday morning workshop organized by Joy Banks (Morning Congregation Pastor), to which fifty-five leaders and members of area communities showed up to discuss their wisdom-seeking questions regarding how to sustain a thick community life.

Earlier I had met with a group of networker types from GCBC, A Rocha farm, and Servants of Vancouver; they

were beginning to plan a regional camp meeting of intentional communities from the BC area. A committee of organizers and volunteers has formed, eager to host such a communities gathering in late summer of 2016 or Spring of 2017. They invited my input on how we've organized similar Nurturing Communities Gatherings in previous years. Like the folks in Oregon and BC, it seems that several regional intentional community groupings are seeking a closer association across North America, something the NCP is eager to support.

Over the past twenty years Tim (lead pastor at GCBC) and Mary Dickau (a spiritual director and retreat leader) have modeled a communal way of life that has spilled over into half-a-dozen other households within the church. These households have made a family space for rich and poor, students and professionals, and for others called to a more monastic spirituality and a servant way of life. This is not what you'd expect to grow out of a Baptist congregation, but the Holy Spirit does what the Holy Spirit does. And in the process they've discovered how to make a virtue out of necessity as property values have risen astronomically in Vancouver to some of the highest in the world, forcing families and single people to cluster in tighter bundles to pay the rent. In response, the church has set up a non-profit housing corporation to buy properties to facilitate more affordable housing in their neighborhood.

However, what looks like cold economic necessity, God has turned into a movement of the spirit to transform many lives in these intimate, semi-monastic community houses. Over the years, under the guidance of Tim and Mary Dickau, these households have been the venue for intense spiritual formation of a score of folks in the congregation and an equal number that they have sent out to plant a similar way of life elsewhere across the land.



The people who have invested their hopes and their efforts into this community-building venture now see the value of giving it a clear shape to pass on to another generation in what they call a "Lay Order," with common vows and a shared way of life that they can invite others into for the long haul. For the past year and a half, a "Grandview Lay Order" committee has been at work to pull together the story of God's work among them as a basis for a more explicit covenant of shared vows of discipleship living and mutual support for long-term vocations

of service both at Grandview and in the "Grandview diaspora." It was my joy to sit in on the latest round of conversation in the formation of this emergence of a "new monasticism" very much in touch with the old traditions and yet alert to the new things that the Spirit has been doing among them.

I wish I could hang around for a couple more months to witness ground-breaking at Grandview for a innovative housing development that will turn the church parking lot into a twenty-six-unit apartment building with what Canadians call "social housing" (subsidized affordable units for low income people) and a few supportive "community builders" who are choosing to also make this their home.

In the image of the mustard seed parable, I see at Grandview a people who have become branches in the local "mustard seed tree," to whom the birds of the air have flocked to

build their nests for a season and then take the seed of the mother tree with them to plant elsewhere. As Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like that."