

Dear Friends,

It's been a "too-long time" since I've sent you a report about the work of the Nurturing Christian Communities Project. In early 2017 I was recovering from knee replacement surgery, and only in March did I begin to play basketball and visit other communities again. (Interesting how those two go together.)

So here are a few stories of what we've been up to and a few reflections on what God has been teaching us along the way.

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But first I want to personally renew an invitation to our **Nurturing Communities Gathering on October 13-16 at the Spring Valley Bruderhof Community**, an hour south of Pittsburgh, PA. In this era of increasingly hostile politics, our theme will be the call of Jesus to radical hospitality, a call that is good news both for our communities and for the world. We make a special invitation to both veterans and new-comers to community, sharing wisdom and energy across the generations, forging connections and new friendships in this lively and ancient movement of God's Spirit. To learn more, and to make your reservation see the attached flyer. Hope to see you and your community mates at our fall reunion.

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**As we get older, I believe we are called to give increasing attention to the pursuit of wisdom, and to seek it in active conversation with a younger generation.** In recent weeks I've been privileged to lead workshops on covenant-making with a couple of fledgling communities, "The Hermitage" near Three-Rivers MI, and the "Lilies and Sparrows" in Harrisonburg VA. These groups have been living community for some time in the context of wider circles of support. Now they are exploring the call to covenant life and discovering their own unique challenges on the way.

### **The Hermitage:**

In late March I was invited to lead a retreat for two couples who are exploring a call to form a residential community at the heart of a thirty-some-year-old retreat ministry called The Hermitage. Situated within the rolling woodlands and prairies of southern Michigan, between the Benedictine community of St. Gregory's Abbey and the interfaith Gilchrist Retreat Center, the Hermitage includes eight retreat cabins, a refurbished old barn for guests and common meals, and a sunlit chapel where staff and guests gather for daily



prayers.



Theologically and historically, the Hermitage represents an integration of Anabaptist discipleship training with a contemplative spirituality. So, predictably, many of its visitors are Catholics and Mennonites from South Bend, Elkhart, and Goshen, Indiana. Over the years I've been blessed to take a few personal and group retreats at the Hermitage, too.

In recent years the Hermitage Board and its lead staff, David and Naomi Wenger, decided that the Hermitage ministry would have more integrity and sustainability if it was anchored by a larger residential

intentional Christian community.

Zac and Kristi Bowman-Cooke came last summer from Jubilee Partners, just in time for the Wengers to take an overdue three-month sabbatical. That was a quick jump into the deep end of the pool. Since then Zac and Kristi have continued at the Hermitage in something like a novice year, working through a set of questions leading to membership. To that end, I was invited to help the two couples to reflect on their covenant-making process.

Following the Biblical pattern of covenant-making, we focused on three movements of the Spirit: 1) The story of God's deliverance, calling into existence a chosen people, 2) a common rule of life, and 3) a liturgy of commitment. (See Exodus 20:1-17 and 24:1-8.)

Our retreat mostly focused on hearing one another's stories, and the history of the retreat center, to discern what God has been doing to call together a new community at the old Hermitage. That exercise showed where the fledgling community was at on the trail map toward commitment.

The Bowman-Cookes are discovering that the ministry of sustaining a center for spiritual retreats has a uniquely monastic and ascetic character. Persons entering this life path must expect to gain much of their support from times of formal prayer and biblical reflection rather than from a gregarious social life within a diverse ethnic community as they had experienced in Jubilee Partners.



Other questions emerged: Can a retreat center offer adequate support for a growing family? How will they sustain connection to their families of origin and to issues of peace and justice in the wider world? The way ahead for these particular people is more complex than just going through pre-ordained novice questions. At the same time it is simple: Will love find a way?



### Lilies and Sparrows:

Here in the Melas-Blanton living room, a big grandfather clock, ticking behind my rocking chair, solemnly chimes 6:00 AM. Outside, in this corner of Harrisonburg VA, the dawn is serenaded by a lyrical robin and occasional whimpers from baby Yani, who is teething a new set of molars. Beside me a candle spreads its warm glow, chasing the shadows into the corners of the room, in this house without electricity, in this community normally without a car. We are in a swath of "liberated urban land" that includes a community center, a fish pond fertilized by chicken-yard run-off that ends up down-stream on the gardens, The sign above the front porch names this house "The Downstream Project," recalling Wendell Berry's ecological revision of the Golden Rule: "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do to you."

Ever since Nicholas and Rachel Sarah met in an ecology club in their senior year at



George Madison University, they have tried to pursue a life-style that would be sustainable for seven billion people on this earth with its limited resources. They continue in this way, now seven years and two children later, not just for the sake of the earth and future generations, but also because they believe this is what the coming kingdom of God will look like.

Soon Nicholas and Rachel Sarah (she goes by two names because there's another Rachel in the community) are up and making breakfast for the others of their group, scrambling a dozen eggs on a wood-burning kitchen stove with fuel easily available in the Appalachian hills around town.

We met all day yesterday in a workshop exploring the covenant-making process that is background to all of scripture, just like at the Hermitage a few weeks earlier.

The "Lilies and Sparrows" told their stories of liberation and commented on the latest draft of their rule of life. They are bracing for the coming year when the Farrells will remain in Harrisonburg while the Melas-Blanton family takes a sabbatical year in France with a community called "The Ark of Lanza Del Vasto." Lanza Del Vasto was a disciple of Gandhi, who launched a community and a movement in France marked by the clear non-violent witness of Jesus along with a beautiful way of living simply on the land sustained by hand-labor as much as possible. In a few years, the "Lilies and Sparrows" hope to give expression to such a life in the countryside somewhere near Harrisonburg.

The Lilies and Sparrows find strong support and encouragement in their local Mennonite congregation prophetically named, "The Early Church," where we met for worship and fellowship on Sunday morning. The congregation is small, about forty adults plus children, most of whom live in the immediate neighborhood. The gathering for worship has a "home-made" rather than professional feel to it. They take a long time for announcements and prayers because so many people are involved in community needs and local justice issues. Several homeless persons and recent immigrants are in attendance. They feel at home because the church meets in a space that, for most of the week, is open to them as a drop-in center. Next door is a tent set up with picnic tables full of potted plants with a donations can if you wish to contribute for what you carry home.

Yesterday, Nicolas spoke of his calling to holiness as one important reason why he feels called to live in covenant community. He longs to become a saint in the most simple way -- words you'd hardly expect to hear from someone so obviously gifted as an intellectual and a community leader. He longs for the structures of accountability and mutual encouragement, the way community folks can speak into his life, and without which he knows he will not make much progress in godly character development. He is seeking a kind of relational wisdom that comes from a community where members listen deeply to each other.

This life together of the Lilies and Sparrows is fragile and yet, so clearly animated by the spirit of Jesus. They are no longer starry-eyed idealists; they have been on this journey a long time now and are building carefully, with a wide network of support, for a kingdom that will last. Thanks be to God for friends like that!



*A family friend chats with Nicolas and Rachel Sarah Melas-Blanton at a neighborhood pupusa party.*



## Plow Creek Fellowship:

**What wisdom can we gain from a declining community about grieving losses, forgiving hurts, remembering God's gifts, and passing on a legacy of sacrificial service?** Over the years, most of my work in the Nurturing Communities Project has been supporting newer communities toward commitment, and helping older groups to refocus their vision. But this year (2017), along with a couple of other Reba leaders

(Sally Youngquist and Allan Howe) I've been called to give support to Plow Creek Fellowship, a daughter community sent out from Reba forty-six years ago, who after two generations of fruitful life, now is "closing shop."

This once flourishing community of up to fifty people has dwindled to a weary dozen who, after the death of three elders last December and January, are concluding that they lack the leadership and the energy to carry on. To lighten their burden they have merged with the nearby worshipping community of Willow Springs Mennonite Church, and have asked Reba to fill some of their leadership gaps in this time of transition.

At a recent community meeting, Plow Creekers experienced a surge of hope by resolving to grieve their losses together, to work at confession and forgiveness for past hurts, and to steward their property into the hands of others who can carry on their legacy of discipleship, service and community. They describe this goal as "finishing well."



On May 13, Plow Creek Fellowship hosted an all-day meeting with seven non-profit organizations who came with proposals about what God might have in mind for the next chapter of kingdom life at Plow Creek. We pondered, "What shall become of this modest farm, houses enough for about 45 people, and a common building, surrounded by 100 acres of woodlands that daily display the beauty of God's good creation? The miracle of unity was given when the Plow Creek members agreed on the idea that the two most promising

proposals might merge their visions for the use of the property.

Menno Haven (a nearby Mennonite Retreat Center) envisions using the Plow Creek housing as overflow for retreat groups. They were invited to collaborate with nearby Willow Springs Mennonite Church, who came with a offer to turn the farm into a field station and training center for sustainable ecologically-sensitive agriculture in a hungry world with limited resources. On May 31, Plow Creek members approved a scenario for merging these two projects beginning January 1, 2018, pending further organizational developments.

Meanwhile, current Plow Creek members are making plans to relocate elsewhere – possibly with family, in other communities, or sticking around in hopes of finding a place in the new operations.



Despite their feelings of grief, Plow Creek members are learning to talk about “success” and “failure” in new ways. Though Plow Creek Fellowship has failed to survive into its forty-seventh years, it did not fail in its mission.

Plow Creek was planted in 1971 by Reba “pioneers” who wanted to raise their families close to God’s good earth, and to offer a place of retreat for city folks who would need it. With much sacrifice and common labor, they built up a rural village and paid off its debts. Plow Creek has been a place of healing for many people who needed a slower pace of life. It offered a splendid setting for bi-annual Shalom Community camp meetings and one memorable 2008 PAPA FEST with a tent city for 700 people. Here interns have learned the hard work of farming, the harder work of reconciliation in community, and the joy of growing life-long friendships along with healthy food upon God’s good earth. They became, as their late leader, Rich Foss loved to say, “A global village practicing the peace of Jesus.” In this they did not fail. By God’s grace the gift that was Plow Creek will continue to bless others as a new generation takes hold with new kingdom visions with the same houses and lands.

Our New Testament has more than a dozen letters by Paul and other apostles giving counsel to church communities that now no longer exist. These ancient communities instruct us because the same Holy Spirit gives guidance and courage in our day whenever we ask. Struggles of faithful living, anywhere and at any time, when faced in love and truth, give life to us all.

At our fall NCP Gathering, I plan to lead a workshop on wisdom to be gained from reflection on Plow Creek’s experience. We’ll look at the following topics and more:

- How to thrive in community where the local economy is depressed?
- Differences of vision -- when should they be treated with forbearance, and when do they call for a parting of ways?
- Learning how to invest in and trust the leadership of a younger generation?
- Accessing the outside help a group might need to be a healing community.

See you in Spring Valley, October 13. dhj

P.S. Andrew Howard, of Genesis Communities, just sent me this photo of their recent weekend Nurturing Communities regional gathering in Minneapolis of fifty persons from ten communities. Enjoy!

