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nurturing communities

Nurturing Communities Network is an informal and growing network of Christ-centered intentional communities that works to *support* and *inspire* one another to live more faithfully and bear witness more fully to God's realm here on earth.



Our Visit to the Bonhoeffer House in Dallas

Dear Friends,

Last fall we decided to focus on organizing several Nurturing Communities Network (NCN) regional gatherings in 2019 rather than scheduling a national event again this year.

Our first meeting of the year was held in Dallas on Groundhog Day. Even though Saturdays are for sleeping in, grocery shopping, or gardening, 25 of us from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and west and central Texas got up early and drove to the Metroplex for the full-day meeting. The attendees agreed we would love to repeat it, not so we could—in Groundhog Day tradition—get the day perfect, but because the gathering itself was just about perfect. All of us were filled with joy and left encouraged.

Community members came from Eden in Abilene, Hope Fellowship (east of Eden) in Waco, Coleman Creek in Little Rock, and the Missional Wisdom Foundation (our hosts) in Dallas. Interestingly, almost half of our group could be called seekers, individuals who are in the early stages of planting a new community in several different places, and seven students from Oklahoma Christian University where Alden Bass is now teaching.

The old veterans were heartened and even surprised to see that the Holy Spirit is moving in places such as Cisco, Tulia, and Baird, all small towns in Texas, so out-of-the-way that many would not consider them as a venue for Christian community.

The newcomers to the movement, were reassured, “No, we’re not crazy.” It’s not crazy to believe that Jesus calls us to a life of service, sharing, and sacrifice lived daily with fellow disciples. It’s not crazy to seek an alternative lifestyle based in households or neighborhoods of sisters and brothers, to love our enemies, to place our trust in God in very real and practical ways rather than in money or violence.

Our day at the “The Mix,” a Missional Wisdom facility, included worship, conversations, a couple of World Cafe discussion topics, and prayer for new communities, old communities, communities not yet formed, and each other. After lunch we dropped in on the Bonhoeffer House, one of several new monastic households that the Missional Wisdom Foundation has planted around Dallas. A couple of the Oklahoma students commented that this visit

around bands. A couple of the Oklahoma students commented that the visit helped them picture themselves living in a communal household. “I didn’t realize that we as young people could really do this!” one said.

SMC in San Francisco...



Heather Clark, a Reba-ite, joins the Women of Resistance in SF

Travel comes easy for advantaged, financially-capable citizens of a large geographic country like the United States. We can get up on a Saturday and easily drive 100 or even 200 miles for a meeting and still sleep in our own bed that evening. We can fly across the country for a weekend meeting and be back on the job or at work on other things by Monday afternoon. Highways are fast, gas is inexpensive, flights are available, and there are no borders, no impossible or even restrictive visa requirements, and no unscalable walls.

As followers of Jesus, however, we have to consider matters of justice, privilege, fairness, stewardship of time and finances, and environmental impact in discerning the merit of any trip.

Nancy and I had to weigh some of these issues for another meeting of communities in January. The annual coordinators meeting for Shalom Mission Communities (SMC) was being held in San Francisco two weeks prior to the

Communities (SMC) was being held in San Francisco two weeks prior to the NCN gathering.

SMC is an almost 30 year-old association of Christian communities that currently includes Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco, Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston and Chicago, Hope Fellowship in Waco, and our sister community of *campesinos* in El Salvador, Valle Nuevo. In January, two or three representatives from each of the U.S. communities get together to share news, pray for each other, work on calendar for larger reunions and the annual delegation to Valle Nuevo, and deal with annual budget items and other planning matters. This year our meeting also included two members from Jubilee Partners in Comer, Georgia, which has asked to join SMC.

It was a given that Nancy should go since she serves throughout the year as the primary communication link with Valle Nuevo. Ruth, one of the pastors of Hope Fellowship was also going, so whether I should go as a third traveler from Waco was questionable, or better put, discernment-worthy. It would also make three consecutive weekends that I would be out of town for community-related meetings. There were, however, some other matters adding weight on the other arm of the scales.

With a nudging from the Spirit, I went. I'm convinced there is no human calculation on these matters that can determine the right answer. Since forever Christians and other people of faith have made a priority of fraternal-sororal (brotherly-sisterly in case you are wondering) visits, traveling great distances for fellowship, encouragement, and associational purposes.

In San Francisco we heard about the challenges, transitions, and joys of Jubilee Partners. We prayed with Reba Place about an internal difficulty in their fellowship. We were blessed by the thoughtful hospitality of Sojourners. Hope Fellowship testified to God's faithfulness through a number of illnesses and emergencies in this last year. Nancy gave us an update on happenings in Valle Nuevo.

Sojourners' regular Sunday evening service included David Janzen's telling of a story from his new book about the seven saints who migrated almost three generations ago from the Westside Parish in Chicago to Reba. In one session Tim Otto invited us to envision Jesus-inspired forms of social-spiritual-political resistance. In another Dawn Noelle Beutler gave us a preview of this year's

delegation to El Salvador.

Through all of these things and more, Nancy and I were reminded how the brothers and sisters of SMC have been instrumental in unfolding our understanding of the gospel and foundational in the development of Hope Fellowship's identity.

Springwater in Portland

The third of my three weekends in a row was a four-day trip to the Springwater community in Portland. This was to have been a visitation, a periodic check-up visit by a handful of members of other communities. Nancy had also been invited to participate, but since it was sandwiched in between the San Francisco trip and Dallas NCN meeting, she had to decline. It turned out that scheduling also was problematic for other invited visitants, so the main event was canceled. I went ahead since I had a non-refundable flight.

Springwater, now a decade old, is a community of about 35 people located in the Lents neighborhood of Portland. They have an order of life that includes Bible studies, Tilling groups (Truth in Love small groups), regular worship and study, several retreats a year, shared child-care, some co-housing arrangements, mutual financial aid, creative neighborhood engagement and service, and care for each other. Springwater is also the home community of Elizabeth Turman-Bryant, one of the members of our Nurturing Communities Network leadership team.

I met one morning with their leadership group about a variety of topics including transitions within their own team, community stability, plans of one of their families to plant another community in the Portland area, and the need for healing in the aftermath of a recent divorce. In addition to meals, hikes, and individual conversations, I was also able to participate in their Sunday evening worship including "early church," an intergenerational time with the children in smaller groups for a light meal before the big worship that is more adult-oriented.

Before leaving town I also met with Cory, the leader of a young community in another part of Portland. This group in its third year has already planted its second community cluster, about five blocks from the first.

And in the airport on my way home I had a phone conversation with Tim, a founder and leader of The Refuge, a community in Oklahoma City. Their vision has some similarities to Cory's Portland group. With some success they have been calling those who are alienated or otherwise not attracted to more standard-type churches to a community of love and mutuality in Jesus Christ. The Refuge has planted three communities and is considering more.

It so happened that Tim was heading to Portland a few days later. He gladly took Cory's contact information so that the two of them could meet and compare notes. I felt I had succeeded in a small way with my networking job.

Numberless are the voices that urge us to guard and protect ourselves from a hostile world, that promise us happiness if we acquire more possessions, that lead us to despair or grimness when we try to respond with faith.

We need encouragement to live open-handedly in love. We need models of stewardship so we will know how to live generously. We need reminders to turn to the One who leads us to wholeness and inspiration so that we may be courageous. This is why we gather.

Peace and grace,

Joe Gatlin

on behalf of the NCN leadership team

(Joe and Nancy Gatlin, Elizabeth Turman-Bryant)



Groundhog Day in north Texas

**Spread the Word about
Upcoming Regional Gatherings:**

Northwest Gathering: March 23rd in Tacoma, WA

Southeast Gathering: Still in process, TBA

Please email nurturingcommunitiesnetwork@gmail.com for more info.

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