

Our Calling and Life in Christian Community  
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February 2018

Note: We wrote this piece at the request of the NCN steering committee as we prepared to transition NCN leadership from David Janzen to Elizabeth Turman-Bryant and us.  
Nancy and Joe

### **The Call to Follow Jesus - 1960's**

In our teenage years we each had a significant experience when we realized Jesus' call would lead us along paths that would bring us into conflict with our Southern Baptist heritage and surroundings.

Joe grew up in a mid-sized, neighborhood Baptist church in a lower-income, working class neighborhood of Waco. At sixteen, when he experienced Jesus seeking him out and asking him to be a disciple, he realized his "yes" meant something qualitatively different than "accepting Jesus as his personal savior." A few months later he heard someone pose the question, "Would Jesus fight in the Vietnam war?" After thinking about that for just a few seconds, Joe, even though he had never heard the word, became a pacifist. Christian discipleship as well as his whole world was transformed.



Nancy also grew up as a Baptist, but in a far different setting. She was born in Costa Rica while her parents were in language school and was raised in Montevideo, Uruguay as a missionary kid. In the late 1960's, as the Uruguayan government was becoming increasingly repressive in its response to the *Tupamaro* urban guerrilla movement, Nancy met a new friend on a bus who told her that she was a communist because she was a Christian. This was a moment of conscientization, and Nancy began to deal with the gospel calling to justice and mercy.

### **Community at Oklahoma Baptist University - 1970-74**

At OBU we joined other students and several faculty members in forming an underground (although quite public), activist group committed to raising consciousness about the Vietnam war, witnessing against racism on the OBU campus and in the Shawnee community, organizing for gender equality on campus, and challenging all to think more deeply about their Christian faith. We carried our precinct for George McGovern in 1972, an experience that primarily succeeded in convincing us that God was not calling us to spend our time thereafter on electoral campaigns. In our junior year, Joe was elected student government president on a platform of "community."

Two hours after graduation we were married, making vows to commit ourselves to God, to the building of Christian community, to our family, and to each other.

### **Ministry in Evanston and Chicago - 1974-1986**

After college we, with a couple of other friends, followed a professor to Northwestern University to work as a team in campus ministry and explore Christian community. Joe went to seminary at Garrett-Evangelical and—being absolutely certain he was not being called to be an ordained Methodist clergy-person—graduated in two years with an MTS. He wrote his thesis

on theological types of Christian communities, looking particularly at how eschatology impacted the missiology of the Bruderhof, Reba Place, Church of the Saviour, and Koinonia.

With discernment from the community he went on to law school at Loyola, again not to pursue a career, but with hopes that the degree and training might prove helpful in ministry. As a side note, he was licensed in Illinois, but has since let that lapse.

Meanwhile, Nancy taught two years as a bilingual teacher in Waukegan public schools and thereafter held a number of part-time jobs. During these years Joe had several part-time and full-time jobs including an associate directorship of a neighborhood mediation center in Uptown.

While at Northwestern we helped found a Christian residential household for undergraduates and served as its house-parents. We also lived for a year in a household related to the campus ministry. In our third and last year in Evanston, we (the campus ministry) started a house church based loosely on the model of Church of the Saviour. This group jelled quickly and thrived for several years.

In 1977 the two of us lifted a call for a mission group to move into a low-income neighborhood in Chicago. After seriously considering the Uptown neighborhood, we decided on the North of Howard area of Rogers Park, a very densely populated, seriously poverty-impacted, two-block by six-block area. The group took on the name of Good News North of Howard.

These are the highlights of our nine years in North of Howard:

- We always had shared living situations while there. For the last seven years we were in a common treasury household with another couple involved in the ministry. At times we had 21 meals together a week. Those years were a wonderful gift. Shared childcare and child-rearing, shared ministry, a common kitchen and living space, conflicts, prayer, reconciliation—these memories still bring us great joy.
- Nancy assisted a neighborhood family in starting a daycare and managed it for a couple of years. She also staffed and organized a summer program for children in the neighborhood.
- We started a bilingual worship service in our apartment that eventually became the Good News Community Church and was affiliated with the United Church of Christ. Nancy then served as the pastor of the Hispanic congregation. The English congregation was composed in fairly equal parts of Anglos, African Americans, and Caribbeans. The Hispanic and English congregations were able to maintain a sense of being one church together.
- We raised funds and bought a storefront that became the center for youth activities, the church, and the soup kitchen that were to follow.
- A six-flat apartment building purchased by the ministry became home for our shared household, a couple of other families, and a Catholic worker house which operated on the first floor and in the basement for five years.
- We started an alternative Christian elementary school, Good News Educational Workshop.
- We were part of an organizing effort in the neighborhood, We Are People Too, to try to prevent the dislocation of the low-income population.
- Two people in our group started Good News Partners which bought the Jonquil Hotel, an SRO. This group ended up acquiring and rehabbing a number of buildings in the neighborhood and initiated several job training and economic development efforts.
- Another housing group grew out of the Good News Church called Peoples Housing. Joe served as the director of this group for our last five years in North of Howard.

### **A Community in Flames, Waco, 1986-1993**

In 1986 we heard God in our prayers telling us to move to Texas. This came as a surprise. We had hoped to grow into old age in North of Howard. After some time of discernment, the calling seemed so strong that in February we decided we would leave on August 1, drive to Texas, and make our home somewhere even if we had no jobs.

That spring God provided connections through Habitat for Humanity, and we ended up moving on August 1 to Waco. This was another great surprise since Joe had thought he would never return to his hometown; we had been hoping for San Antonio or Austin. Joe served as the founding director for Waco Habitat and in 1988 began work for Habitat International as regional director eventually for eight states. He helped form and manage more than 250 local Habitat organizations. Since 2006 Joe has had national responsibilities with Habitat. Nancy would dedicate her time to being a full-time mother for the first few years in Waco. Eventually she would go back to teaching part-time in a public school until she retired a few years ago to take care of our aging parents.

Upon arriving we joined a brand new effort, Reconcilers Fellowship, located in an older, low-income, and racially diverse neighborhood of Waco. After a few months, Joe was asked to serve on the leadership team of this new community.

Reconcilers grew to be about 20 covenanted members, about 50 total including children. The community had a dual calling—to be a Christian community and to be on ministry in the neighborhood and beyond. It turned out to be a grueling, long seven years. At least we were not the Branch Davidians, but we did disintegrate due to internal conflict, spiritual immaturity, and unreconciled relationships (in spite of our name).

There were blessings during those years. In retrospect our failure was good fodder for spiritual growth. We learned that God was sufficient. Another blessing was an alternative, all-volunteer, cooperative neighborhood school, Potters Workshop, that Nancy started in partnership with two sister churches, one African American and the other Hispanic, in the neighborhood. Our daughters benefitted greatly through this experience. And fortunately the conflict among the adults did not spill over in destructive ways to our children. Gabriela and Analí still have some fond memories of Reconcilers.

Also we were blessed in developing a very close relationship with Reba. Virgil Vogt accompanied at times by Hilda Carper, Ann Stewart, and Joan, made a number of trips to Waco to provide some guidance. Their wisdom sustained us and still fuels our spirit.

We lived in two different common treasury households during the Reconcilers year. When Reconcilers fell apart, we were still in one of those households called Hope Community.

### **Hope Community and Hope Fellowship, 1994 to the present**

With the dissolution of Reconcilers, Hope Community was thrust into a time of discernment. What would we do about church? With Virgil and Hilda's counsel we decided to invite neighbors into our home for worship. In Virgil's words, "It is always the way of the Holy Spirit to start new things; justification of its own existence is a task that belongs to an old outfit." Or he said something wise like that.

During this time Hope Community approached Shalom Mission Communities, composed of Reba and Plow Creek at that point, and asked if they would have us. Their acceptance of us was critically important.

The worshipping community came to be known as Hope Fellowship. From the first it claimed a calling to be bilingual, to be based in the neighborhood, to have a strong emphasis on discipleship and shared life, to witness to the non-violent way of Jesus, and to have shared leadership. We approached the Mennonites who were willing to accept us even though we

declined to have any of our leaders credentialed by the denomination due to our commitment to universal ministry.

Hope Fellowship grew. The other family in Hope Community moved away, but John and Ruth Boardman-Alexander, who had just completed three years with MCC in Nicaragua, moved right into their place.

In 2001 we had to pivot. John and Ruth felt a need to have more private space for their young family. After discernment and some financial help from Sojourners they moved two doors down from us. After more discernment, we, Joe and Nancy, with some sense of sadness and grief, decided it was time to give up our pursuit of a structured common treasury as a core part of our effort to build community. In spite of the declared commitments and growth in Hope Fellowship, there was a sense that real community happened in Hope Community. We also recognized that the cultural transition for our Latino brothers and sisters as recent immigrants to move into structured financial sharing was an extraordinary reach.

We, Joe and Nancy, abandoned the effort to develop another common treasury household and instead continued to work on the growth of shared life, generosity, stewardship, discipleship, and ministry in Hope Fellowship. We have, however, for the last 17 years continued to have Hope Fellowship people living with us in our home.

And after more discernment and a visitation by a number of members from the three other SMC communities, it was decided that Hope Fellowship would take Hope Community's place as the affiliated-SMC community.

God has blessed. Hope Fellowship is somewhat difficult to explain. The growth in leadership, in the thick life of community, in wisdom, in discipleship and small groups, and in grace has been a gift that we know we have not earned. We are a mixture of people who happened to live in this neighborhood and others who have come to be part of Hope Fellowship. We have had babies and we have buried people. We have had idealistic people come and some disillusioned people leave. We've always been able to bless people when they left. A number of the members have been part of the fellowship for 10 to 20 years, and some even more. We've experienced growth in numbers and in other seasons we've seen some retraction. We know that God is with us. God continues to generate new projects and groupings within our midst, including a prayer garden, a new support group for recent immigrants, a new Bible study among immigrants, music gatherings for the neighborhood, and a group of three families who have bought several old houses to create opportunities for a variety of people seeking housing in the neighborhood. Through all of this, we've tried to keep a simple focus—we will get up in the morning, good Lord willing, and follow Jesus together.

One other important aspect of Hope Fellowship and our (Joe and Nancy's) experience of community has been our relationship with the Valle Nuevo community of repatriated, *campesinos* in El Salvador. For the last eleven years or more, Nancy along with Dawn Noelle Smith-Beutler of Sojourners has played a primary role in helping to sustain and grow this relationship for SMC. We (Nancy and Joe) are pleased to have just completed a book about this 25-year relationship, *Compañeros, Two Communities in a Transnational Communion* (Wipf & Stock).

### **Our Greatest Blessings**

Looking back at our almost 44 years of our marriage, these are the things for which we are most thankful:

- 1) that we have taken this journey together.
- 2) that we were able personally and directly to care and provide for our parents in their declining years, and that our community supported us during this time.

- 3) that our two daughters each had a desire to go explore other communities (one was at Reba for two years and the other at Jubilee Partners for two years) and then both returned to Waco to be near us and Hope Fellowship. Gabriela and Alfredo live across the street. Analí and Joel live a block away and are part of Hope Fellowship.
- 4) that Hope Fellowship exists in Waco, of all places!
- 5) that we've gone through what seems to be a successful transition in leadership at Hope Fellowship with the two of us stepping off the pastoral team more than a year ago
- 6) that we've had the Latin American connection throughout our lives with the blessing of building the fraternal relationship with Valle Nuevo in El Salvador and the ongoing relationship with many friends in Uruguay.