

1-15-14

Dear Friends in the Nurturing Communities Project,

New Year's greetings and God's blessings on all your ventures in discipleship community. I've just returned from Toronto where Brian Walsh with his co-workers in Urban Remixed, and Jason McKinney from Jeremiah Community, lined up a rich four days of community visits. They also prepared a half-day conference that brought together practitioners and seekers of community in the wider Toronto area. I was joined by Peter and Clara Maas from the Platte Clove Bruderhof in this effort of the Nurturing Communities Project. Here are a few glimpses of the Holy Spirit's work in those fascinating days.



“Our community was not a failure:” Brian Walsh and his daughter took me along to the Toronto Pearson Airport to pick up Peter and Clara Maas from the Platte Clove Bruderhof. But as the Maas's plane was delayed, Brian told the story of their rural community which came to an end after eight years when a core family left the Walsh farm and retreat center last May.

“In other words,” Brian concluded his story, “our community failed.”

His eighteen-year-old daughter Madeline, however, objected. “No, Dad, our community was not a failure. I've lived half my life in community, and it was good. That's why I'm now part of the L'Arche Toronto community as an assistant. I love it.”

“Well,” her startled father replied, “I guess I stand corrected. It wasn't a failure. It's just come to an end, at least for now.”

Madeline has become an apostle of Christian community, and her comment raises an un-conventional but intriguing way of assessing the impact of a community that has disbanded. Did it cause its members to hunger for and to pursue a more intensely-shared life of discipleship? Our community at Reba has a lot of members who were part of formative community experiences elsewhere that came to an end, but that left them with a life-time calling. Joanne and I would include ourselves in that number.



Posted on the door of the Urban-Remixed office/ meeting room are an invitation to Tuesday morning communion and a Saturday community workshop led by the NCP.

Maybe we're not dying: Another conversation on another night led to a similar conclusion. Peter, Clara and I were guests at Junia House, home of Ben and Angela ElzingerCheng, their three children, and housemate,

Stephen. A few others in the neighborhood also claim Junia house as their extended family. We were talking about the departure of Jodi and Doug Johnson-Hatlam and their three children last summer so that Jodi could accept a theology teaching opportunity at North Park Seminary in Chicago.

Angela and Jodi had been close friends since college days when they and a group of female classmates began to dream about Christian community. The other women and their husbands are, it turns out, similarly engaged in community/mission ventures. The ElzingaChengs and the Johnson-Hatlam families had anchored Junia House in Toronto for almost a decade. (Their community name, Junia, came from a female apostle that St. Paul commends in Romans 16:7.) But now the

ElzingaChengs were feeling the sadness of a diminished common life. Stephen, who came to their

community nine years ago, after a job loss and two years of homelessness, said “We’ve got to do something to add more people, or we’re going to die.”

Angela countered him by saying, “No, I don’t believe we are dying. We’re just going through a time of grief because our friends left and because we are now one household instead of two. But God wants us to carry on loving our neighbors well and to trust that the Spirit will inspire others to join what we have here. We don’t have to be more than we are in order to do God’s will. What we have is already good.”

“Oh,” said Stephen, “I’m glad to hear that. If you say so, maybe we’re not dying.”

You mean those Christians? I have first-hand evidence that they are loving their neighbors well. My second night in Toronto, I spent with the Graduate Student Fellowship hosted by Urban-Remixed, talking with about thirty young adults about their calling to community even in a season of transiency. We discussed the parable of the mustard seed, the committed branches, and the birds who make their nests in the tree. Many of them had read the *Intentional Christian Community Handbook* and were looking beyond the “bird” stage of life to where they might soon be planted to help grow community. Most of them hung around for a couple of hours after our formal discussion ended.

The convener of the Fellowship, Sarah DeMoor, then dropped me off at Junia House for the night. As I left the car, I was momentarily puzzled in the dark about which building to enter. A man exited nearby with a dog and walked past me toward another house. I asked him timidly, “Sir, I’m looking for the home of Ben and Angela. Do you know where they live?”

“You mean those Christians?”

“Yeah,” I responded hopefully.



Peter Maas from Platte Clove Bruderhof, Daniel ElzingaCheng and son Isaiah at home in Junia House.

“Oh, they live in that house over there,” he said pointing with his hand, and added, “Go right on in, the door is never locked.”

“Wow,” I thought, “just like Jesus said, ‘A city on a hill cannot be hid.’”

A Second Generation of the New Monastic Vision: In recent years I have met dozens of other families and small life-sharing groups like the ElzinagaChengs and their “Christian” friends who are remnants of what once began as young idealists pioneering a missionary intentional community life in the roughest urban settings. Now, years later, they are no longer doing the cool thing of choosing “downward mobility” and moving to “abandoned places of empire.” They no longer think of themselves as missionaries. They are at home, they are now indigenous, neighbors who identify with neighbors and their issues. They have scruffy homes and gardens that will never make a magazine cover. But they are rich in friends whose lives are often falling apart, but who together make a home where others can rest and serve. They hesitate to call themselves “intentional communities” because they don’t want to stand out as white do-gooder institutions. And yet, they draw much support and encouragement from the Christian community movement. When we look with Kingdom eyes, they are a little “city on the hill,” “a light that cannot be hid.” And they are, by God’s grace and with a little help from their friends, proving that this life is sustainable.

A merry chaos: We visited a couple of other “cities on a hill” in Toronto whose community life is centered on “core members” with mental and physical disabilities. At L’Arche Toronto (where Madeline Walsh is a live-in assistant), I had an informative conversation with Joe Eagan, a council member of L’Arche International. Joe talked about the upcoming celebration of L’Arche’s 50th anniversary in communities around the world.



At the same time, the organization is facing profound changes now that their charismatic founder, Jean Vanier, along with the first cohort of leaders are turning over the reins to a new generation. We explored how communities can encourage renewal in the formation of new members. Joe was eager to learn how Reba Place Fellowship made covenant with the different layers of community that have been drawn into fellowship and service. So I could share with him a few pages from our manual, and also look at some of their resources.

Later our NCP team, along with Brian and Madeline Walsh, joined the L’Arche Daybreak for their weekly community-wide celebration. We were reminded in a variety of ways that this was the community where Henri Nouwen found a spiritual home for the last decade of his life. We were moved by the beauty of their meeting house which Nouwen helped designed before his death. It’s shape reflects Noah’s ark from which the L’Arche movement took its name. In L’Arche’s logo, the ark becomes a small boat with three persons: a core member, an assistant, and the Holy Spirit.

Their celebration of the mass involved core members at every stage. For those of us used to seeing communion done in good order, this celebration teetered on the edge of merry



chaos. But the high point for me came after the mass when a much-loved volunteer asked for prayer in celebration of her 65th birthday. At this request, all the core members mobbed Mary (I think that was her name), placed hands on her from every direction and prayed simultaneous blessings with exuberant voices, shrieks, and tears that showed us all how much joy worship can raise up when the weakest are given a space to serve with love and freedom. Wow! Words fail here! I hope a picture can help. Brian

Walsh summed it up for us by saying, "If everything else flops this weekend, we've already gotten every blessing and can go home in peace."



Jason McKinney, a leader in the Jeremiah Community, served as host for the "Community: Wounded and Blessed" conference.

A wealth of friends: Saturday morning we were pleasantly surprised by a different kind of mob when eighty-four persons showed up from the Toronto area. They represented a rich diversity of communities and community seekers. They came to hear us Nurturing Community Project folk speak a couple of times and to engage in a variety of workshops on community themes. It was a multi-layered occasion where traditional monastics, Bruderhof members, new monastics, and wannabe disciples of Jesus "of all stripes," shared and learned in intense fellowship. I was encouraged by seeing persons coming to

community from many different directions -- Anabaptist, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, and non-denominational fellowships.

Jill, a new-found friend, identified herself as a member of a group in Hamilton who began a decade ago as the Greater Ontario House of Prayer (GOHOP). Their zeal to raise up prayer 24/7 led them to practical engagement in the issues of social justice and peace that matter to their neighbors. And now, more recently, they've



felt called to sustain that ministry with intentional Christian community living. Like others gathered for the day, they are pursuing the poverty of Jesus and discovering a wealth of friends with practical wisdom for the journey.



Our last hours in Toronto were spent worshipping and visiting with the Jeremiah Community, co-sponsors of our visit. The sign at the Epiphany and St. Mark sanctuary tells something about their calling to share life with their socially marginal neighbors who feel more welcome at the church back door. The community has taken the prophet Jeremiah's advice to the people in exile, to "strive for the peace of the city." They "seek to receive and inhabit the space of reconciliation that God has opened in Jesus." This vision statement guides

fourteen covenanted community members with shared disciplines of worship, prayer, service, study, work and celebration. Though the community is dispersed in living arrangements, they are focused in ministry to the Parkdale neighborhood that surrounds their host congregation. We also learned that the Anglican denomination is investing serious resources in support of other new intentional communities in their communion, hoping to revitalize local congregations and neighborhood ministries of presence. We felt this affirmation in the participation of the area bishop in their Sunday afternoon Eucharistic celebration.

Looking ahead, what's next for the NCP?

--Next month you can look for a report on a trip to the Shalom Mission Communities leaders meeting in San Francisco and a visit of friends from Areumdaun Maeul, a twenty-year-old rural-urban community in South Korea.

--A first conference call/ meeting of an emerging NCP steering committee to plan our annual gathering for October 10-13 at Jesus People USA in Chicago. Mark the date.

--Regular calls each week with younger community leaders for mutual support, learning and encouragement.

Your servant and brother in the family of Jesus,

David Janzen