

## The Nurturing Communities Project: A Pacific Northwest Tour

**Kingfisher Farm:** As evening sunlight slanted through towering fir trees, Paul and Angela Neufeld led us on a walking tour of Kingfisher Farm, an intentional community on a ten-acre plot in British Columbia, a few miles from the U.S. border. This was our last stop on a ten-day (May 7-16, 2014) twelve-community tour for the Nurturing Communities Project through the Pacific Northwest. We were



never far from salt-water bays, islands of old-growth forests, snow-capped mountains, densely populated cities with high real estate values, and warmly hospitable intentional Christian communities.

At Kingfisher Farm, my travel companion Damon Cole, my cousin Harold Neufeldt (no relation to Paul and Angela), and I wandered with the Neufelds among a collection of barns, sheds, greenhouses, pens for chickens and cows, and a bright red duck mobile. We noticed how busy the farm is these days, sending pickup-loads of potted seedlings from their greenhouses for planting by a small army of volunteers and interns at A Rocha, a Christian environmental center and farming community seven miles away (about whom we will tell more presently.)

Last year Kingfisher Farm completed a large duplex that, along with other housing, allows for six families who co-own this gorgeous property to live together in Christian community. They meet for weekly meals and common business, attend the same local congregation, and four of the



adults are on staff at A Rocha, where Paul is the lead farmer. The eleven community children play together often, and recently, we heard, had their own Kingfisher Kids community meeting. They produced a page-long list of things the community could do for more common life (picnics, field trips, workdays, etc.) Their critique of the adults was that “They always talk about how they are going to play the game, but they never actually play the game.” By “the game” I think they meant, “community.”



**What does it take for intentional communities to last?** As night fell a few Kingfisher adults pulled their chairs into a circle under the stars and, like most of the groups we visited, asked us about community sustainability. They were impressed by Reba Place Fellowship's more-than-fifty-years of history together, not to mention the Benedictines' 1,500 years. "What does it take for intentional communities to last," they asked, "Especially when folks are pulled in different directions by jobs, children, multiple opportunities for ministry and the call to a common life in Christ. How do other communities solve the problems of sustainability when the committed core is often saying goodbye to those who come through as volunteers, interns, transitional members and guests?"



It seemed fitting here as in other communities we visited, to tell Jesus' parable of the mustard seed that is planted (like a community) and grows into a tree with branches in which the birds of the air can build their nests. Branches and birds bless each other in countless ways, but the tree has laid down its life in commitment where its roots go deep in local soil, while the birds -- on the other hand -- tend to come and go. Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like that. The parable helped us name what is going on and to talk about sustainability amidst many transitions.

Also in our conversations with a variety of groups, we noted how the unique gifts of the members in each group, when planted in the context of a given neighborhood, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, will grow into communities that turn out to be quite different from each other, but uniquely adapted their own spiritual and social ecology. Still, in some ways, as all plants are alike, so all Christian communities are alike. We told stories of other communities, including the experiences of Reba and Damon's house church in Chicago, and found that common themes emerged.



We observed how communities that thrive long-term stay focused on Jesus as their source of life; develop a rich common life that blesses children or others marginalized by the wider society; grow nourishing ties to other groups in a wider community of communities; and periodically, they submit to visitations by peers from other communities to refocus their life and mission. They find their calling in serving neighbors with a challenging vision of the kingdom, sustained by lifestyles of simplicity and integrity, in harmony with their local niche in God's good earth. Each community we met had already discovered various ingredients of this common recipe.

In the remainder of this report I want to tell about some of the other communities we visited with a story or a picture. This is much less than the full report I'd hoped for, but, as the Gospel of John recognized, the whole world could not contain the books that might be written about the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

**A Rocha:** Kingfisher farm functions as a private annex to A Rocha (Brooksdale), the busy public Christian environmental center. A Rocha is affiliated with A Rocha International whose main commitments are Christian, Conservation, Community, Cross-Cultural, and Cooperation. The original A Rocha community was founded in Portugal in 1993 and named *Quinta da A Rocha* (Farm on the Rock). By now the A Rocha (pronounced "A Raw-sha") movement has spread to sister communities and earth care centers in twenty countries around the world.



A Rocha's Brooksdale site includes a spacious Tudor-style manor house with other similarly styled out-buildings, a historic barn, along with gardens, pasture land, and a pond next to the lively Little Campbell River. As an environmental center, A Rocha hosts frequent school groups, spiritual retreats, supports scientific research, and restoration of natural habitats. A Community Supported Agriculture farm serves 100 families with weekly food boxes and offers volunteer opportunities for a scores of "wannbe" gardeners

through the growing season.

A Rocha's fields and forest edges are crowded by aggressive industrial and residential developments. There are still a few nature preserves in the Little Campbell River watershed that they are battling to conserve and restore. The story of A Rocha's beginnings in Canada are beautifully told by Leah Kostamo, who with her husband, Marrku, are the community's founders, and also part of the Kingfisher intentional community. (See Leah Kostamo, *Planted: A Story of Creation, Calling and Community*, Cascade Books, 2012.)

One of Rocha's most persistent volunteers is Harold Neufeldt, who also happens to be a relative and a childhood playmate of mine. Harold opened many doors for us on our tour of intentional Christian communities in the Pacific Northwest. So for two days alongside my barefoot cousin with his trademark floppy straw hat, we continued our play by weeded strawberries, talking to the llama, and retelling childhood adventures. I shared what we're learning in the Nurturing Communities Project and heard of his life now as a retired landscape architect volunteering his services and wisdom at several intentional communities in the Vancouver area. It's amazing how after decades of life widely separated from one another, we discover in each other a love for Christian community and for contemplative prayer.





**Tom and Christine Sine**, of Mustard Seed Associates in Seattle, hosted us the first night of our trip. They are highly networked with other communities and eager to share about the recent **Inhabit Conference** of 350 people hosted by the Parish Collective. This is a movement of individuals, congregations and house churches committed to local neighborhoods, rediscovering the wisdom of intentional parish life that involves worshipping, serving and building relationships within walking distance of one another.

**Stefan Schmidt**, gardener and frequent guest of the Sines, told about a movement of households forming by young adults living intentionally together, partly to beat the high rent, but also to support a life of discipleship and service in local churches and non-profit ministries of Seattle. He knew of ten such households within a ten block radius of the one he and four other men share. He expected these households to be transitional as its members get married, but many see these households as the first step in a long-term communal vocation.

**Overlake Christian Church** is a mega-congregation of about 2,000 members, that has within it a movement of middle-aged families and singles who have studied the *Intentional Christian Community Handbook*. Pastor of Community Partnerships at Overlake, Josh McQueen, has shepherded this movement of suburbanites who are exploring household life and more radical availability to the needs of their neighbors. The McQueens and the Butler family have moved together for mutual support and neighborhood focus, as have a couple of other Overlake households. They hosted an evening of conversation with others exploring communal next steps. There we learned that several singles are looking for a house in the Seattle red-light district where they hope to offer friendship to addicts and prostitutes who are burned out on church, but might feel more welcome in a community house.



**Emmaus Community** is in Victoria on Vancouver Island, an exciting three-hour fast-ferry ride from Seattle. Victoria is a genteel city with a strong Asian immigrant impact, and some grand old edifices from, as you would expect, the era of Queen Victoria. An Anglican pastor and his soon-to-be-ordained wife (Rob and Megan Crosby-Shearer), along with their twin four-year-olds, courageously hosted us only a week after moving in to their “community



house.” They closed the deal on 1702 Belmont with help from Margot, an enthusiastic communitarian who is soon moving into the apartment upstairs and already functions as a beloved auntie in the family. This home, they hope, will be the first of a cluster of houses that others from the diverse Emmaus group will purchase or rent in the neighborhood.



The Emmaus Community has come together in the past year for book studies (including the *ICC Handbook*) exploring resources for community living, radical sharing, and neighborhood engagement. This Emmaus community development is strongly supported by Rob and Megan’s priest and bishop, both of whom were in attendance at a meeting of the Emmaus Community with our Nurturing Communities delegation. That evening many of the same people gathered for an Anglican/ Taize liturgy and communion service, inaugurating the house chapel, which also happened to be my bedroom once the guests went home.



**Grandview Calvary Baptist Church** is a modest-sized congregation with a huge impact. It is located in the once-poor Grandview-Woodlands neighborhood which is facing increased gentrification, and is near the poorer Downtown East Side of Vancouver. Vancouver, we often heard, has the distinction of being the second most expensive place to live in the world after Hong Kong. Pastor Tim Dickau and his wife have modeled a form of Christian household living that includes a nuclear family, a few singles, plus persons in need of transitional housing,

who sometimes become long-term members of the family. Damon and I stayed with the extended-family of Tim and Rosemary Klauke, who are deeply involved with the ministries of Grandview where Tim is an administrator.

So Grandview has made a virtue of what otherwise might be an economic necessity. It has actively encouraged and supported a network of discipleship households of hospitality and ministry from a community base. Over the past fifteen years many students from the evangelical Regent College have gravitated toward Grandview, experienced formation in intensive community life and sacrificial service, and then moved back to their home countries to plant



seeds of the same elsewhere around the world. Tim Dickau has written a winsome account of these community developments and discoveries over the twenty years of his pastorate. (See Tim Dickau, *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice, and Confession*, Cascade Books, 2011)

We were greatly assisted in setting up our Vancouver itinerary by Christina Chiu (at my right

hand), who set up several events hosted by Grandview and other communities. Our first evening in Vancouver we met with about thirty Grandview church members and visitors engaged in a variety of community ventures. The evening was only long enough to speak to a few of their many good questions about Christian intentional community living.

In following days we also met with the board of Co-Here, which is planning a twenty-six-unit affordable housing development to be built on the church parking lot next year. There low-income residents will live alongside half-a-dozen “community builders,” who hope to create a supportive community arrangement for folks now living more on the margins in their neighborhood.

Grandview also hosted a gathering of area intentional communities to learn about each other’s missions and challenges, and to explore how this network of communities might be mutually supportive in the Vancouver context. At this gathering we got to meet the following groups:

**Vancouver Catholic Worker** for twenty years has offered hospitality and community to a few otherwise homeless neighbors.

**St. Chiara** is a prophetic resistance community of a few families with many children, modeled in some ways on the pro-life/ anti-war witness of Phil Berrigan and Jonah House in Baltimore.

**614** is the intriguing name of a community movement within the Salvation Army which finds its calling in the words of Isaiah 61: 4. “Ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, and sites long desolate shall be restored, they shall repair the ruined cities and restore what has long laid desolate.” They were represented by one newly-formed community called “The Green House,” who confessed how much they were learning and how little advice they had for others.



Servants occupy two houses that share the same back yard where children and vegetables grow tall and strong.



Christina also arranged for us to visit with a few other communities in the Downtown East Side including:

**Servants of Asia** who have their origins in Manila where communities of volunteers share life and make friends in the poorest of urban slums. The young and lively Servants chapter in Vancouver welcomed us for an evening of pizza and discussion. They hold a variety of jobs in social services, but keep a large margin of time available for their homeless neighbors who are served a family style meal one or more evenings a week. The

**L'Arche Shiloah** (Vancouver Branch located in Burnaby) welcomed Christina, Damon and me to a lunch with core members and a few assistants who explained their households and day programs that teach sign language, crafts, and life skills. We got to taste the special joy the Spirit gives when persons with mental disabilities are encouraged to love and share life with others, including guests like us. L'Arche Vancouver has six households and a lively common center where many day programs and administration services take place.



**The house church at Anita Janzen's place** probably would not call itself either Christian or intentional community. Many share a previously alienating experience of church along with a desire for more community and spiritual nurture. They gather bi-weekly for



personal sharing, hymn singing, and potluck food. They find good news in some of the teachings of Jesus, though they shy away from theological generalizations about him. It is a group affirming of gay and lesbian marriage, supporting Anita, her partner and their children. Anita Janzen spans several divides, coming from a Mennonite background and years with Christian Peacemaker teams, and Registrar at the Vancouver School of Theology. She serves as a convener/ pastor/ mother to this diverse house church

group that wanted to hear from us about the Nurturing Communities Project.

Damon Cole and I return home overwhelmed by the richness of our experience with these community groups and their generous hospitality. We are amazed at all the forms of Christian community life we discover by looking at the grass roots rather than at high-level media gossip. We came home with many treasures to share with our home groups. We hope this report can put you in touch with other sisters and brothers in the same calling who draw strength from the stories we tell about you all in the Nurturing Communities Project network.

Yours in Jesus' service,

David Janzen (with Damon Cole)

P.S. There is a sequel to this Pacific Northwest report in that I will be joining about twenty-five writers, teachers and community practitioners for a three-day consultation on New Monasticism that Grandview Calvary Baptist Church pastor, Tim Dickau, is convening June 10-13 at Rivendell Retreat Center on Bowen Island off the coast of British Columbia. More about that in the next report.