

**Summary Report from Summer 2007**

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**Serving with Our Community Place & The Early Church**

**North Harrisonburg, Virginia**

I have spent three months in eclectic learning with a small community organization, *Our Community Place* and a Mennonite church plant laughingly called the “Early Church”. The site was a scant one-acre lot, mostly consisting of dry lawn, in an industrial down-town neighborhood of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Satellite work hubs were three ordinary homes of community members, replete with kids’ toys, chaos, construction and good homemade soup.

Looking toward the coming academic semester, I want to acknowledge how this summer experience has changed certain perspectives relating to my field of study: social work. Currently I feel dissonance between my major’s emphasis on humanitarian work and a liberal social agenda compared to the social transformation empowered through the reality of Jesus Christ. In previous theological study, I learned about the political nature of the Gospel. By logical deduction I assumed that Christian ethics are by nature political as well. Because I saw little correlation between the conservative agenda and biblical teachings on non-violence, care for creation and those who are marginalized, I aligned myself with liberal thinking. I would define this as focused on the rights of minority populations, motivation to affect macro-level social change, and interest in conforming our nation state’s policies to a greater degree of justice.

Under the mentoring of my leader, Ron, I was exposed to a radically different opinion on liberal values and political action in general. Speaking from his counter-culture, “revolutionary” identity, Ron, along with many Anabaptists, believes that the church is to be totally separate from the state. His singular hope for redemption lies in the way the church can embody Christ’s justice, love and mercy—giving little or no attention to altering national policy. While he would advocate for the marginalized on a personal or local level, Ron sees systematic change as seduced by the desire for worldly efficiency and results. Ultimate value is given to earthy,

personal sacrifice in solidarity with the poor. The language of rights of the marginalized is replaced with the concept of duty to the enthroned Christ and servanthood to all.

Coming from a very liberal educational perspective, the thought of dismissing systems-level change and healthy accountability with governing authorities was jarring for me. I have studied government programs and understand how large their affect on the poor is. More personally, I have participated in marches and political advocacy. Simultaneously, I am consistently disappointed by the shallowness of social work practice in truly engaging with those in need. As a Mennonite, I agree that the Reign of God is completely other to this world, which is quickly passing away. Confusion ensues!

I struggle to avoid a zero-sum mentality in which I value one perspective and devalue the other. Is it possible that God inspires and calls individuals and communities differently—some to direct political action and others to complete dedication to social change through the church? More importantly, can I sense how God is calling me in community context as we strive to live our lives in solidarity with those who are oppressed? Hopefully I can be aware of my smallness and dependence on God's grace in this discernment process. I am also interested in reading a well-recommended book on these issues, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* by Stanley Hauerwas.

Other themes that emerged from my interactions within the immediate church community, neighbors and people on the street included the topics of social status, security and wealth. Because I was interacting with people from multiple class and income levels, from homeless men to generous donors, I was keenly aware of the differences and similarities we held among us. I felt my privilege harshly when I admitted that I had a home, a car, a family intact

and the opportunity of a college education. I struggled to not feel superior to those traditionally on the bottom, and to treat them with respect and affection as I would any other person.

Interestingly, I found that prejudice based on social status is not limited to an upper versus lower class tension. There is a pecking order among the lower class as well. I remember a homeless man, Sam, telling me forcefully how intelligent he was, while speaking down to all the “drunks”. He wanted an elevated status among all those on the street.

I am not dismissing the unfair privilege of the upper class, saying that building hierarchy is normal, but would like to highlight the complex nature of class relations. Academic generalizations focused on the “rich” and “poor” as homogenous groups no longer fit. In addition, this example shows that mainstream societal beliefs about socio-economic status as bearing on the value of a person are highly internalized by lower class people. Although they are victims of stratification, they actively create it as well. Strict categories of the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” are also muddled. Indeed, both the rich and poor are human after all, in need of God’s transforming grace.

Another theme consistently discussed this summer was that of earthly security and wealth. The Early Church community is dedicated, in their words, to “learn to share their possessions and serve the very poor”. I was very much challenged by how they lived this out in daily life—Ron sharing his beat-up pick-up with the whole neighborhood, Brian and Jason sharing their living space with men in need of crisis housing, and each family living a relatively simple lifestyle. Their lives are intertwined with those in severe need, specifically with men who struggle with chronic addiction, physical disability, spiritual bondage, and homelessness. I was able to enter into some of these relationships as well, which was a humbling, difficult, fun and now almost natural experience.

Theologically, the group is intent on being servants and taking the “low road”. I watched Ron’ family give up a normal income and rely on donations in order for him to take up full-time pastoral and community work. That takes courage! Even so, the community is not trapped in quantifying a level of simplicity they must attain. Rather, there is a freedom to follow one’s conscious, celebrate God’s goodness, and receive from each other and the larger community. Such an ethic is not birthed without struggle, however. Those with spouse and children grapple with what it means to take Jesus’ teaching about forsaking all, even family, for discipleship seriously. In a larger viewpoint we questioned what giving up earthly security means for residents in wealthy America, compared to the two-thirds world. Even if we opted out of normal economic society, we all knew there would be plenty of food in a land of plenty.

I hope that I have provided a glimpse of the questioning, spiritual formation, and relationships I have been given the opportunity to experience this summer. I leave this service internship with a deepened desire to live in authentic Christian community and be fruitfully engaging with people who are poor and marginalized. My eyes have been widened to diverse philosophies that under gird community development. I have a realistic understanding of the joys and shortcomings of grassroots neighborhood work, at least in one context. At the core, I am sharpened to completely sell out (economic reference intended!) for the Reign of God’s full coming and to critically analyze all that is not Jesus-centered.