

Small Talk

STRENGTHENING SMALL CONGREGATIONS

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A Church For Others: The Welcome Table Missional Community

by the Rev. Ron Robinson

Note: Three years ago Small Talk published a three-part essay called “The Inside Out Upside Down Small Large Church World” about our small emerging church (at the time known as The Living Room) that had recently transformed into a missional community. We had just moved into a larger space and gave it over completely to the public and its needs, here in our low income, low life expectancy “abandoned place of the Empire” (Turley, OK). We did it so more diverse groups of people could make connections and renew community, and where we, acting as guests in our own space, met in small-group worship to renew our spirits for our focus on serving others. Since that time three years ago, much has happened.

When we made the first big move in 2007, we had no grand plan. We just wanted to better serve the people and area around us. And to do that we knew we needed to be and do things differently to connect with the new and different culture in which we lived. So, from faith, we took a leap. We moved away from a small rented space we could barely afford, where we were promoting ourselves as a church and hoping to attract people to “come to us,” and where we primarily existed for worship and education and, on the side, organized service projects outside the building (in other words, when we were still doing church as it had been done since the 1950s and probably since the 1500s and the dawn of the modern era in church history). We moved into a much bigger rented space just a block away that we could not afford, but where we could begin creating church as “go to them,” as incarnational not attractional or extractational, as more organic than organizational. And all those things and partnerships began to happen that I wrote about in the three-part *Small Talk* essay.

But many grand things have emerged with us and through us as we committed to go smaller, as we sought to do small acts of justice with great love. Many of those things were later chronicled in a cover story in the spring 2011 issue of the *UU World* magazine. We had quickly outgrown our rented space; we began to have more ministries than “members” (though we still don’t “do” membership, board, budget, bylaws, or 501(c)3 organization as “church,” and the church as worshipping, missional community is organic, we have created a separate nonprofit community organization that carries on some of the things needed by a more formal group). The *UU World* article mentioned our impending move into an abandoned church building four times the size we were in (even in our then larger rented space); and it mentioned our purchase of a city block of abandoned homes where we are turning it into a community garden park and fruit tree orchard. And it mentioned that we do all this and still worship each week here and there with about seven to 10 people.

That is all true; but here as 2012 emerges, is even more of what life looks like, and where our dreams are leading us to.

The community park continues to grow food for our multiethnic mix of neighbors and for our food pantry, and gives us a place to hold taste and teach times, here where there is a healthy-food desert, where there are no sidewalks but people walk and push grocery carts more than a mile to get to a store that rarely carries good produce or healthy items; they walk past where our park is located, overlooking downtown Tulsa six miles away, where it is becoming part of a food justice center. The park is emerging, the orchard is doing well, we are putting in more beds and clearing space for more community events in what has become an outdoor “third place” center. We call our community foundation A Third Place because it reflects the global movement to reclaim such spaces in our lives where people who are different from one another can find common ground.

The Community Center In A Previously Abandoned Building. We continue to have our community center, renamed The Welcome Table Community

Center with a library, food pantry, TV, computer center, clothing room, meeting space. It hosts community art projects, community holiday parties, festivals, health events, movie nights on contemporary issues, recovery groups, and a neighborhood watch and safety group. There is a veterans room underway, and plans for a community kitchen, healthy food store, classrooms, gardens at the center, and an outdoor visiting space. Moving into this space has been a win-win for us and the community. We are able to put our money into our own equity and our own community instead of it going to a landlord who lives outside the area, and, because it was an old, abandoned, foreclosed property, we were able to get it inexpensively. Our mortgage is half what our rent used to be, though of course with insurance now and other costs we are still taking a leap of faith and have moved into a building we cannot afford, yet again, but finding ways for the community to help us afford it and renew it as a leading community resource.

Working to reclaim and renew community landscapes was one of our first endeavors, and besides the work done reclaiming abandoned neglected blight spaces where our park is, and where our center is, we continue to reclaim abandoned intersections and roadsides for wildflowers, turn blight into beauty, and help businesses beautify throughout the service area. We did extensive native plant landscaping of Cherokee School and still maintain it for the community even though the school system this year closed it, and we even decorated it with holiday lights just as it had been when school was in session. Our own center was lighted for the holidays and was the only public or commercial building to have holiday lights in our area for miles on a busy street. No one else bothered, but it was our way of saying thanks to the community and our way of bringing a bit of joy and light.

For educational justice, we partner to support the area public high and junior high through creating and supporting a new foundation for the school to help it raise outside funds, and we support its school programs; we also partner with the remaining elementary school in our area supporting its teachers and students with monthly lunches, and they have returned the fa-

vor by carrying on a food drive for us that resulted in 15 boxes of food for our pantry, a pantry that many of those families also use. And we continue to take the lead in working on the future of the recently closed Cherokee School where we had been active; we have held public workshops and are hoping to help others with grants to repurpose the school so it can continue to be used and of use for the community. We have no private schools in our area, but we hope to use our community center and its computer lab to help our area students who are homeschooled or in whatever place they go to school.

For health care justice and community leadership development in our area, we partner with the University of Oklahoma's Graduate School of Social Work, OU Design Studio, and OU Community Health Departments to conduct community programs, research, and service learning in support of the community and the community foundation projects, helping educate not only graduate students, but through our Community Academy blending graduate students and community residents, we help increase the leadership skills of the residents. We used to host the site of an OU Health Clinic, but the university ended up closing all their clinics here in our area of the highest need and lowest life expectancy, due to cutbacks from its funders and its focus on a specialty clinic near our area where we also are active as community partners. But, after the clinic closed in our space, we have been a lead partner with OU researchers in a proposed revolutionary health care paradigm shift to neighborhood-based community health workers, people who live right here in our area, mentoring others in their neighborhoods who have been too frequently relying on emergency room care as primary care. Also, the OU Design Studio is working with us on plans to repurpose the recently closed Cherokee School which had been a key asset in the community and one of our partners. For three years we have run the daily free lunch summer program for children and youth at Cherokee School, conducting it throughout the full summer and not just when school staff might have been available, as at other area sites. We also held a weekly nutrition class with an instructor from OSU and hope to renew it in our new space.

Turley Deep Planning has also become a part of our work as community leaders here in our area (we are located as an unincorporated urban area). We lead the Turley Area Planning Group clearinghouse organized to address needs for disaster response that began after wildfires this past summer very near to us burned down and damaged several homes. We also are working on possible incorporation of the community, bringing back a post office which was closed this past year despite our leading efforts to keep it open, supporting the local Industrial Green Park, the schools needs, and beginning a small area plan and other projects that will promote the area and nurture existing businesses and residents and economic development.

Our other current partners include our food justice presence and pantry with the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, and the kitchen-gardenpark and school gardens with the work of the Indian Health Care Resource Center's Food Security Council and its projects and proposals. Partnering also with the North Tulsa Farmers Market. Partnering with other northside community organizations and neighborhood associations to help their efforts at improving quality of life, especially so far taking a lead role in the Turley Community Association and the O'Brien Park Advisory Board, working on gardens, on cleanup efforts, and supporting other projects such as our Abandoned Properties Project OU Social Work also helped us on, where we identified priority places for removal of abandoned structures — this past year we have seen 21 structures removed in our area.

We also conduct monthly community festivals and parties for all the holidays where we both feed hundreds of people, and provide free entertainment and community here in our area where there are few to no other places available.

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Finally, in this coming year, while maintaining our work on the projects mentioned already, we seem to be moving toward offering more spiritual-oriented programs and services as well. We are worshipping as a small group twice a week now, with weekly vespers

in the evening, and we are talking about ways to offer more opportunities for daily worship, prayer, meditation, and spiritual counseling and classes as part of the options we offer people.

We have gone from our start in 2003 as an emergent-oriented, new church start in a fast growing suburb of people with means, to, in late 2004, moving to this area of poverty, to, in 2007, moving from attractional to missional model of church, and now, in 2012, in our own new spaces we seem to be taking more and more steps of developing into a progressive urban missional new monastic community, one where a small group of people live nearby, eat together at least three times a week, and worship and serve their neighbors. As part of this we will even be looking, in the coming year, at ways of reorganizing our originating church group and opening it up as a “trans-local” church with members supporting us from many different places,

and looking at how we in turn through digital ways or frequent intensive retreats here can support them.

To keep up with us, follow me on Facebook at facebook.com/revronrobinson, or at the websites progressivechurchplanting.blogspot.com, missionalprogressives.blogspot.com, and turleyok.blogspot.com. And come see us and serve with us.

For more information about *Small Talk* and how to strengthen small congregations of all kinds, contact Jane Dwinell at jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com, or visit her website at spiritoflifepublishing.com.

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