

Discerning God's Call To Life Together Neighborhood Listening Sessions

Introduction

Cross of Glory has been engaged in a two-year process of reflecting on what it means to share God's gift of life together here in the Brooklyn Center community. The church has been here as long as the city has; when CoG was first organized in 1956, the building was one of the few existing structures in an area that only a handful of years earlier had been mostly vegetable farms and wetlands. The original building was expanded in 1961, and again in 1992, to serve the needs of a growing community, most of whom were second and third generation Scandinavian immigrants. The founders of this church were not wealthy, but they were able to collect enough resources to create a place for people in Brooklyn Center to gather together for preschool, Sunday school, meetings, meals, fellowship, and worship.

Nearly 70 years later, much has changed and much is still the same. Brooklyn Center is home to the same immigrant families that moved here decades ago, and it's home to many new immigrants too. The place of origin is often different, though; neighbors are more likely to be Nigeria than Norway, from Mexico City than Malmö. We think CoG can continue to be a place for people in Brooklyn Center to gather.

This brings us to the Neighborhood Listening Campaign. During the winter and spring and 2023-2024, we hosted monthly listening sessions, inviting neighbors to help imagine what God's call to life together here at 5929 Brooklyn Blvd might look like. We know that Brooklyn Center has much to offer, and we want to think more broadly about how we can contribute to the work that is already underway across our community. More concretely, we want to hear more about our neighbors' hopes and dreams so that we can learn more about what part, if any, Cross of Glory might be able to play in them.

5929 Congregations November 2023

On November 15, a group of 20 people gathered in the Fellowship Hall to share a meal with faith communities who currently share space at 5929. Representatives from both Faith Healing and Messiah's Messengers took part. Leaders from both communities drew on an abundance of experience and wisdom when sharing their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor and the broader Brooklyn Center community: Faith Healing has been in Brooklyn Center--and Cross of Glory--for over twenty years, and while Messiah's Messengers are newer to the 5929 building, their leaders have lived in the community for decades. What follows is a brief overview of some of the things they shared.

Both groups echoed that they were grateful for the welcome they received at Cross of Glory. Messiah's Messengers, in particular, mentioned that they were especially appreciative of Cross of Glory's hospitality (and that has not always been their experience in other churches). Leaders from each community found hospitality to be the rule rather than the exception in the Brooklyns. And our panelists are authorities on such matters; Pastors Esther and Geebae from Faith Healing immigrated to the US from Liberia in the 90s while Pastor Marbue and Deacon

Sandee from Messiah's Messengers came here slightly later. Each recalled the hospitality of neighbors and community members in their first days, weeks, and months in Minnesota.

That said, transitioning from the West coast of Africa to Minnesota was difficult. Not only did they have to cope with the immense loss of leaving friends, family, and homes behind, they also had to learn a new culture, a new cuisine, a new way of making ends meet, and yes, a new climate. In such circumstances, the seemingly small and mundane can be overwhelming: one needs to figure out how to navigate the bus system and manage an online bank account. And, of course, the big things do not simply go away: there are children to raise, bills to pay, and a life to create.

Each panelist has come to love their new community. And they are more excited than ever about what the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor might become. Why? As our panelists noted, the Brooklyns are home to everyone from everywhere trying to build their lives, often because they couldn't stay in the place they grew up. Our panelists, in other words, were thrilled that the Brooklyns are not a place where you have to look or act or speak a certain way to fit in--to be recognized as a member of this community. That's a beautiful thing, Pastor Geebae emphasized, especially in a relatively homogenous place like MN. It's a beautiful thing to see the boundless diversity of God's creation in a relatively small suburb in a relatively small city.

Our panelists are not naive; they also noted the challenges that face the Brooklyns. Pastors Esther and Geebae were most concerned with ensuring that the Brooklyns continue to be a place where people could learn how to live together despite cultural, religious, political, and economic differences. They were alarmed, though, that lots of this learning stopped during the pandemic, and that it hasn't seemed to restart yet. They think there needs to be more meals, more gatherings, more joint programming in the Brooklyns in general but also at 5929 in particular--more opportunities for people to get together to listen and learn from each other. Pastor Esther, in particular, wanted to be sure that the youth are included in such events.

Messiah's Messengers said they're most concerned with ensuring that all who move to or live in the Brooklyns know God--not just through words, but also through deeds. For them, the Brooklyns can be a place where neighbors are loved, even when that love may not be returned. They want to evangelize with acts of kindness and generosity. They dream that the Brooklyns can be a place where God's love is known.

CAPI December 2023

More than 20 people were gathered on a chilly December evening to listen to Monique Hernandez and Amanda Xiong from CAPI share their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor, Brooklyn Center, and the Brooklyns more generally.

Both Monique and Amanda began their reflections by noting that they loved the diversity of the Brooklyns. And, like our brothers and sisters from Faith Healing and Messiah's Messengers who we heard from last month, Monique and Amanda emphasized that this diversity was not only skin-deep. People from all walks and ways of life make this place home--and that makes our community a lively and vibrant place to be. Amanda also shared that she appreciated the patience that members of the community exhibited in the aftermath of Daunte Wright's death in 2021. Not to be confused with complacency, Amanda saw a kind of

quiet resilience and steadfast commitment to make Brooklyn Center a more just place--long after the journalists had left and the news cycle moved onto the next crisis. Put otherwise, the people of the Brooklyns are in it for the long haul. And that is a gift!

Despite the gifts of diversity and resilience, Monique and Amanda also noted that our community is also a place of material scarcity. In particular, both discussed the lack of affordable housing and increased housing insecurity in the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor. There are more unhoused people than ever, it seems. And Amanda was concerned that the proposed Blue Line would only exacerbate the problem. Monique also mentioned concerns about food insecurity. CAPI's food shelf is busier than ever. And this shouldn't be surprising given the high cost of healthy food in the area following the recent closure of Walmart.

Hence CAPI's renewed focus on housing and food. But as Amanda noted, instead of merely meeting needs, CAPI also insists that community members work together to co-create the kind of Brooklyn Boulevard corridor they want. That's why they focus more on empowerment rather than merely service-provision. Whereas the latter might disappear with funding cuts, the former can't be taken away. And for Amanda, story-telling is critical to this co-creation. People in the Brooklyns have such incredible stories, Amanda told us. And when they share them, people listen--and often want to get involved. That's the other part of empowerment: showing up. Being present at the polls or at city council meetings where local leaders make decisions that affect us is important, of course. But as Amanda insisted, so is being present at farmers markets, community celebrations, and even, at times, rallies or protests. Those are the places where stories are shared--and where isolated and frustrated people can become organized and powerful...together.

For both Monique and Amanda, the future of the Brooklyns is bright, especially if/when community members are better organized. They both envision more immigrant businesses, more affordable housing, more support for youth and children in the community, more culturally-specific mental health resources. They also envision a place where neighbors feel safe going for a run or walking their dogs, where kids can play outside without worrying about gun violence. They imagine that the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor, especially the stretch near CAPI and Cross of Glory, might be the place where anyone new to the area--or anyone, more generally--might go to find resources, material and spiritual alike. Or as we might say as people of faith, they hoped this little stretch of Brooklyn Boulevard to be known as a place of abundance. They want it to be known as the place where everyone knows they are welcome--to warm up or cool down, to cook or to eat, to organize or to rest.

Monique and Amanda have both been doing this work for a while. As such, they emphasized that it is hard. It requires the often invisible and thankless work like "doing the dishes," as Monique said, quoting Dorothy Day. Also, they noted that it can be especially hard for folks who are more concerned with doing things on their terms than trying to meet people in the middle or, as Amanda noted, meeting them more than halfway. But they are excited for whatever lies ahead. We are too.

Brooklyn Center Schools January 2024

During our January listening session, about 20 members of Cross of Glory shared a meal (from Falafel King on Brooklyn Blvd--highly recommended) with five guests in various roles in education in the Brooklyn Center community. Yaya Cochran recently founded an organization ([InTENTions](#)) to help youth thrive, especially in after-school hours; Katy Leach and Jill Windsperger are long-time teachers at Brooklyn Center Elementary; Longkee Vang recently worked as Community Schools Site Coordinator at Brooklyn Center Middle and High Schools; and Myko Fuller is currently the Community Schools Site Coordinator at Brooklyn Center elementary schools.

In what is becoming a common refrain, each of our panelists noted that they loved the diversity of our community. And they love the ways that the children in our community embrace that diversity. The elementary school teachers made a point to note that they were continually inspired by the ways that their young students are able to create a culture together across deep difference--and the ways that that student culture spills out into the neighborhood. This skill, they argued, undoubtedly serves them well in an increasingly diverse Twin Cities--both as kids but also as future community leaders. Indeed, it seems to give them an advantage over students in more homogenous districts. Longkee noted that Brooklyn Center--and its schools--reminded him of the best sort of small-town; there was a genuine community full of people, as Yaya put it, were doing work. Myko simply stated that Brooklyn Center is a "jewel." For these five, then, Brooklyn Center is already a model for community building efforts. And its schools, which piloted the Community Schools model almost a decade ago, are a large part of the reason why.

All noted, however, that Brooklyn Center needs even more robust support for its youngest community members--individuals or institutions that offer enriching and affordable ways for kids to learn and grow. While Myko insisted that Brooklyn Center has much to offer, she also noted that she would like to see more spaces for youth to feel welcome (outside of school). Yaya seconded the idea, also noting that a resource hub would be beneficial. In her view, many families are unable to bridge what she calls the communication gap--that they are unable to locate resources somewhat dispersed throughout the community. Katy noted another obstacle: the cost of utilizing resources can be prohibitive for her students' families. More specifically, there simply aren't enough affordable enrichment opportunities for students, especially for young boys. Jill noted that local organizations used to offer one-on-one tutoring with students, but that practice stopped during the pandemic and hasn't yet restarted. Longkee described a need for intergenerational relationships to help students explore career pathways.

They each imagined a Brooklyn Center that did many of the things that Brooklyn Center currently does, only more deeply and widely. Longkee dreamed of the continued growth and expansion of BIPOC and immigrant communities. He hopes that their businesses will be prominent in areas once-dominated by national chains. Jill imagines a Brooklyn Center where elders play a more central role in schools--where the connections made in schools extend far beyond classroom walls and out to community gardens. Myko imagined a Brooklyn Center where folks would sit down and share a meal, especially with those from different backgrounds. Although quite diverse, Brooklyn Center still seems somewhat segregated. The key to addressing that, for Myko, is equipping and empowering current students, many of whom are

already well-versed in breaking bread across difference--to become decision-makers in our community. For Yaya, policies need to match priorities.

Part of the task for the future of Brooklyn Center, for this group at least, is just that: to have the community working together, with all our different gifts and roles, to keep fostering ways for our youngest neighbors to learn and grow--and indeed, to help teach the rest of us.

Brooklyn Boulevard Corridor February 2024

Five guests representing various institutions along the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor joined us for our February listening session. While feasting on Que Viet (another corridor neighbor, it's worth noting!), we heard from a vibrant and diverse group of near neighbors: Professor Odeh Muhawesh is a member at the Imam Husain Islamic Center, an Islamic center up the street from Cross of Glory that houses a free medical clinic in addition to hosting prayers, lectures, and other activities; Lori Petersen is the Executive Director at the Sanctuary, an affordable senior care facility across the street from Imam Husain; Clare Brumback and Keesha Sedgwick represented CEAP, a food assistance site and long-time Cross of Glory partner located off the boulevard just north of 694; and Disciple Jammer Miceli joined us from Task Force Inc., a food shelf and distribution site housed in the building with which we share a parking lot.

The conversation that followed unfolded touched on many of the same themes as past sessions. Clare and Odeh, for instance, noted that they loved the rich diversity of the Brooklyn Boulevard corridor. As Odeh noted, the corridor serves as a primary connector between north Minneapolis and the northern suburbs. As such, one can see, smell, and hear all that the Twin Cities has to offer right outside our doors. And Clare pointed out that the diversity of values were often woven together, too. Indeed, our gathering that night suggested as much.

Alongside diversity, Lori and Disciple Jammer both noted that our location is immensely valuable. Not only does Brooklyn Boulevard connect many communities, it also means that everything is relatively close by--one need not go far to catch a bus, pick up food, visit the bank, or go to one's place of worship. For Lori, that is a tremendous benefit to her senior community, many of whom are unable to travel long distances. Disciple Jammer said the same; Task Force Inc. moved here precisely because of its location.

The panelists also agreed that the corridor's diversity and location offered its share of challenges. Similar to our panelists last month (from Brooklyn Center schools), panelists this month expressed concerns about a lack of safe and affordable spaces for children and young people to gather and grow. Disciple Jammer was particularly concerned about youth who lack mentorship or community support. Odeh emphasized the importance of community gathering places that offer constructive and accessible programming. Lori noted that seniors can feel isolated and unsafe, too. Clare noted that the same is true for a growing number of unhoused people along our corridor. To be sure, many are already attempting to address these issues. But Clare pointed out that such efforts on our corridor are often quite fragmented--that we are not working together as well as we might be. As a result, efforts to build community (for youth and seniors, for housed and unhoused, for long-time residents and newcomers) are often led (and funded) by a single organization. Because these efforts lack a broad-base of support, their reach

and effectiveness is limited. So for Clare, we not only need more sites for children (and youth, elderly, and unhoused people), we also need to be better at building things collectively.

Unsurprisingly, then, the corridor that Clare imagined in the future included exactly that: groups of people doing this world-building work, together. Lori envisioned something similar--she saw the need for "civic catalysts," people committed to our community who take it upon themselves to start something. For Disciple Jammer, the youth should be at the forefront of such efforts. Not only are they the future of our corridor and our broader community, they are also best positioned to leverage the relationships they've developed in our extraordinarily diverse schools. Odeh seemed to capture many of the futures imagined by the other panelists; he talked about the importance of rekindling relationships, especially as we continue to recover from the effects of the pandemic. For him, this includes but certainly is not limited to attempting to improve the relationship between community members and the police. And when we do so, he said, we must celebrate. Put otherwise, Odeh envisions a corridor where community-wide celebrations are a regular occurrence. Keesha concluded our conversation by offering that she imagined our corridor as a place of abundance. Like previous panelists from CAPI and our schools, Keesha envisioned a corridor that was known for its commitment to diversity, equity, and generosity.

As usual, our conversation over Que Viet cannot be summarized in a pithy paragraph. But each of our neighbors on the corridor seemed to emphasize the importance of making and sustaining connections--noting that we cannot, and need not, do everything on our own. It is fitting, then, that Amir, another guest from the Imam Husain Islamic Center who was in attendance, invited everyone to an iftar meal during Ramadan (March 23). Please let Isak know if you're interested in attending.

Brooklyn Center City Staff March 2024

On Wednesday, March 20, we hosted Brooklyn Center city staff as part of our March neighborhood listening session: Armando Oster is the Director of Community Engagement and Raquel Goutierez is the Artist-in-Residence (Cordell Wiseman of Parks and Rec was unable to attend). As usual, it was a lively gathering--it is genuinely fun to listen to people share their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for our community.

Armando grew up in Brooklyn Park and knows the community well. But his favorite thing about the Brooklyns is the spirit of collaboration that permeates the community. People are willing to work together to create common things like community health fairs, grant writing workshops, and Juneteenth celebrations--to name just a few of the gatherings Armando mentioned. Raquel suggests that the same is true at the parks she frequents while engaging in various community art projects. The children she meets there are building a new culture--one that both celebrates difference while creating new, shared things.

For Armando, while there is a willingness to collaborate, there continue to be obstacles to doing so in organized ways. The main obstacle as Armando put it, broadly understood, is that Brooklyn Center lacks a "center." The people of our community need a place where they can gather--a town square of sorts. At the moment, opportunities to collaborate are missed, and efforts to create common things are siloed and/or fragmented. Armando thinks that this is due

in no small part to the fact that there is no central gathering place. Raquel thinks that our parks can serve as those spaces, but some of them are in disrepair--and filled with trash. For Raquel, Brooklyn Center needs more robust support for its public spaces.

Indeed, that's part of what inspires Raquel's imagination: she envisions a clean, green, and art-filled Brooklyn Center. In five years, she thinks Brooklyn Center can be a center of not only art, but art-making. Its public spaces, she thinks, are primed for paint! Armando sees these spaces filled with people at the annual Health Fair, Juneteenth, and still yet-to-be developed community celebrations. More importantly, Armando hopes that these events are all driven and led by the community--not merely something that community members attend. As a possible next step, Armando invited everyone to attend neighborhood meetings that the city is hosting in May. The one nearest Cross of Glory will be at Northport Park (Northport Elementary in the case of inclement weather) on Thursday, May 2 from 6-7:30 pm. During these meetings, members of the surrounding neighborhood will gather to meet neighbors and city staff as well as the mayor and city council members. Additional neighborhood meetings will be taking place in the following weeks. Contact Pastor Ali for more information.