

Discerning God's Call To Life Together

Site Visits

Introduction

Sharing God's gift of life together calls us to listen to and learn from neighbors around us. To that end, as we've sought to further discern what life together might look like at 5929 Brooklyn Blvd, we organized a series of site visits during the winter and spring of 2023-2024, in which the CoG community visited local faith communities that have creatively reimaged space usage in various ways. The purpose was not to identify and replicate a model for ministry. Rather, we were interested in listening to the stories of how this work came to be, and to witnessing God at work in new ways.

Site Visit

Prince of Peace, Roseville

November 2023

Our site visits began on November 30 with a visit to Prince of Peace Lutheran in Roseville. Three representatives from Prince of Peace shared the story of the "Sacred Settlement," a community of tiny homes near the church's parking lot. It began a couple of years ago when members of the church learned a jarring statistic: nearly 300 children in the city of Roseville had unstable housing. What might the church--which has been in Roseville to serve its neighbors since 1957--do to respond? They formed an affordable housing committee to begin to explore this question.

Not long after this conversation began, the church happened to receive a call from the city asking if Valerie, who was currently living in a converted school bus across town, could park in the church's lot until she figured out an alternative housing arrangement. The church said "yes," and Valerie and the Prince of Peace community began to get to know one another.

But winter was coming, and the bus had no heat. It was not long before the church received another phone call, this time from someone at Settled, a local nonprofit organization that creates communities called "Sacred Settlements" that aims to address long-term homelessness by working with faith communities and their land: would you be open to putting a tiny home on your land where Valerie could live? The tiny home was already built and paid for--it was simply waiting for a person who needed a home, and for an available piece of land. There was a follow-up question, though: would you actually be willing to host *two* tiny homes? Settled pairs people with histories of homelessness with "intentional neighbors," people who opt to change their lifestyle to live alongside them, in an effort to not only provide safe and stable housing for the formerly-homeless but also surround them with a supportive community. After some prayerful conversation and discernment, the church again said "yes."

What has unfolded since these "yes's" is a stable home for Valerie, a new home for the Beary family (a couple, their 11-year old daughter, and their dog) who lives in a second tiny home beside her, and a community of people at Prince of Peace who share life together--and space together--with them.

One of the places where life together happens most often is in the “Common House,” a room located inside the church building that had recently been unused (the church used to host a childcare center, but since it closed during the pandemic, many of its rooms were vacant). Valerie and the Bearys have around-the-clock access to the Common House, in addition to church restrooms that include a shower. The Common House includes couches, a kitchen (that allows for more cooking than the tiny homes themselves), books and musical instruments, a small workspace with a computer, and a large table to share meals. The church has recently begun to host community meals that are open to those who live in Sacred Settlement, members at Prince of People, and any interested neighbors in the wider community—including you!

Rent for the tiny homes is affordable (affordable housing, after all, is what Prince of Peace had set out to address in the first place). Moreover, Valerie has the option of working a handful of hours each month at the church, which includes jobs like opening/closing the building when groups rent space or setting up coffee before worship on Sunday mornings, in exchange for a decreased rental rate. Indeed, Prince of Peace didn’t “solve” the problem of homelessness or unaffordable housing that had sent them down this road to begin with. However, they did for one woman, whose life has since been transformed, and who has in turn transformed the lives of those who live and work and worship around her at Prince of Peace.

When we asked what Prince of Peace imagines might be next for the Sacred Settlement, a variety of ideas came to mind: maybe more tiny homes (in fact, a third is already in the works). Maybe an expanded community garden for residents to grow their own vegetables. Hopefully another shower to add to the one the church has now. But leaders weren’t sure, and said such matters will be shaped in and by relationships, as this whole process has from the beginning. But one thing was certain, according to Pastor Peter Christ: “Our abundant space gives us the opportunity to continue to say ‘yes.’”

To learn more about the Sacred Settlement at Prince of Peace, visit www.settled.org, or read a news update on the church’s website at <https://poproville.org/2023/01/just-the-beginning/>.

Site Visit

Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Minneapolis

December 2023

“Is there anyone who has some good news to share today?” Ms. D asked a room full of eighty or so people who had come to eat lunch at Gethsemane Lutheran Church, located just a couple miles down the road in the Camden neighborhood. The free, daily meals are for anyone—old folks, little kids, people who are members of the church, people who want nothing to do with church, people who have a fridge full of food at home, people who don’t have a home, workers on their lunch break, neighborhood grandmothers who eat and then jump in to help with the dishes.

On December 20, ten of those eighty people were members of Cross of Glory, who were there to break bread and learn about how a neighboring church is sharing their big building, which, like ours, had more space than the congregation itself needed. Maybe some of us from

Cross of Glory were also there because we were hungry too--if not for food, to eat it in community with others.

In addition to the community meals, we learned that the church also hosts a clothing closet and a food shelf. As Pastor Jeff Nehrbass walked us through these spaces, he noted how much abundance there is despite the very real material scarcity that plagues the neighborhood.

Ms. D, back in the fellowship hall, gives people (who are often asked what they need/what's lacking) an invitation to share about this abundance. Everyday before lunch begins, she asks the same question: "Is there anyone who has some good news to share today?"

And everyday, people stand up in this room packed with neighbors and strangers and share some good news. The day we were there, a woman shared that her family back home in Liberia was safe and healthy. Another shared about the struggle of living out of her car, but said she was grateful to connect with someone at the lunch who had some resources for affordable housing. One man got up and simply sang a song about God's enduring presence in his life. And then, one woman stood up and said: "I am so joyful. God woke me up this morning and put breath in my lungs, brought me here to this table and put food on my plate. The world didn't give me this joy and the world sure isn't gonna take it away. I can't contain the joy that I've got," she said, "so I'm gonna share it with you."

These neighbors' words served as a table grace of sorts that day, before we sat down together to share a meal that was hot and delicious (two non-negotiable adjectives when it comes to the food, we were told). But this meal, and the good news that kicked it off, didn't just "happen." Pastor Jeff shared much of the story of how what we witnessed came to be.

Built in 1893, Gethsemane was created to serve the Norwegian immigrant families that were moving into the neighborhood. Like many churches in the area, it experienced steady growth throughout much of the 1900s. But in the past few decades, the number of Norwegian Lutheran families in Camden began to shrink, while the number of African American and Latino families grew. With just a handful of church members left, and only a handful of thousands of dollars coming in each year, Pastor Jeff posed a question to the congregation not long after beginning his call there 15 years ago: "should we start the process of closure, or explore what other possible ways of being church might be possible?" With the sense that God was not done with Gethsemane yet, they pursued the latter.

They knew they needed to get to know their neighbors as they discerned what would be next, so they began knocking on doors. But they were met with suspicion: "what do you want? What are you selling?" As Pastor Jeff said, "that experience required us to confront some uncomfortable truths: we weren't the people to 'bring Jesus to the neighborhood.' Jesus, it turned out, was already alive and at work in it. So instead of asking how to bring neighbors to church, or even how to bring church to them, we began asking a different question: 'what is God already doing in Camden, and how can we join together to take part in it?'"

With a heightened sense of humility, they went back to the drawing board. They decided that rather than doing "outreach," they'd simply host meals, both for those who were members and those neighbors who weren't. Every month, they'd grill hot dogs in the parking lot and invite anyone to attend. It took two years of those gatherings before word among neighbors caught on. Only then were some of their neighbors' core concerns--like housing, employment, and food insecurity--revealed. Of course, Gethsemane couldn't address all of that, but they decided to start with more regular community meals--once a week, all year long. While the

meals ended up being a great way to both to spend the lunch hour and get to know people, it was clear that much more needed to be done to address food insecurity in Camden. So Gethsemane joined together with other neighborhood congregations and institutions to create a 501c3--the Camden Promise--in an effort to build a neighborhood food shelf. The food shelf, which opened in 2020, has its own funding sources, as well as its own (small) staff and (large) volunteer base, which is supported by partnerships with churches across town. In addition to nonperishable items, the food shelf is full of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy, baked goods, and meat, all of which families can come and select themselves--no questions asked.

When we asked Pastor Jeff what might be next for Gethsemane, he mentioned the food shelf's hope to become a resource for other food programs on the north side. He also shared about something that has come to him as an utter surprise (which, he admits, much of what has happened during his time at Gethsemane has): many of the Latino neighbors who have begun attending lunches are now worshipping at Gethsemane on Sunday mornings. However, because most of them do not yet know English, Gethsemane has decided to make their one worship service bilingual. So Pastor Jeff said while he's not sure what's next for Gethsemane and the Camden Promise, he knows that for him personally, it means practicing his Spanish.

Whatever does keep unfolding at the food shelf, the lunches, the clothing closet, and in worship on Sunday mornings, we suspect that there will be more good news shared. More joy proclaimed--a kind of joy, as our one neighbor said, that "the world didn't give, so the world sure isn't gonna take it away."

To attend a lunch, stop by 4656 N Colfax Ave Mon-Sat at 12 pm. To learn more about volunteering at the food shelf, call 612-521-3575. To learn more about the Camden Promise, visit www.thecamdenpromise.org.

Site Visit Salem Lutheran Church, Minneapolis January 2024

Cross of Glory already knew a bit about the work Salem is doing in the Camden neighborhood, as both of our congregations were part of the synod's "Faith & Neighboring Practices" cohort. But on a Tuesday night in late January, we went to see it for ourselves.

Tuesday night is Salem's weekly meal, when 120 hot meals are distributed at the front doors. Salem hasn't always done it this way. Meals originally began as a monthly gathering, but soon became a weekly gathering that nearly filled the basement's fellowship hall. But the pandemic interrupted this rhythm, so Salem needed to adapt. But they've learned from neighbors that distribution at the door is what works best. Because it's not a sit-down dinner, this means, for example, that one neighbor who bikes can bring meals back to her roommates in her group home, or that those at the public housing complex down the block who aren't able to get to the church can enjoy the delivered meals in their comfort of their own home.

We weren't only there to see this operation take place--we were also invited to take part in it. Some of us headed to the kitchen to prep food, others handed out meals at the door. And it wasn't long before we were fed the same hot and delicious meal ourselves.

Sharing food seems to be the center of gravity for what Salem does. In addition to their Sunday morning service and Tuesday evening meal, Salem is also home to two nonprofit organizations. Appetite for Change, which now occupies a large piece of previously-unused outdoor space, grows 10,000 lbs of fresh produce in a deep winter greenhouse to provide year-round fresh produce for their cooking workshops, catering/cafe venues, and the West Broadway Farmers Market. Salem shared that they're exploring more ways to deepen the relationship with Appetite for Change, given food and feeding are so central to what both institutions do. One collaboration is called "Community Cooks," a monthly cooking class that's hosted in Salem's kitchen that gathers neighbors to cook and eat together, while learning about new ingredients, new recipes, and food justice.

The other organization housed onsite is the Camden Collective, which works to empower neighbors to serve neighbors, and does so through hosting youth programming, community events, and a large food share program every Saturday.

We were grateful to hear the story of Salem told by Pastor Eric Hoffer and full-time Meal Coordinator Rachel Carmichael, who shared of both the challenges and joys of sharing space, and of the gift of the relationships that form through the breaking of bread that happens in so many ways.

Learn more about Salem at <https://salemelca.org/>. Learn more about Appetite for Change at <https://appetiteforchangemn.org/>. Learn more about the Camden Collective at www.thecamdencollective.org/.

Site Visit

Calvary Baptist Church, Minneapolis

January 2024

Recently, a chunk of the steeple of Calvary Baptist fell off. The church, which has been on the corner of 26th and Blaisdell since 1879, has renovated just about every other nook and cranny imaginable in its building throughout its 145 year history. Calvary is now in the midst of a capital campaign to ensure that its steeple follows suit, so that the building can continue to serve the Whittier neighborhood of south Minneapolis for the coming (145!?) years.

"Our gift to the community are the resources of this building, which are many," said Pastor Jeff Cowmeadow. "We've renovated so much of it so that it can be used by everyone." Over the years, the building has been home to a thrift store, foot care clinics, after-school programming, meals for unsheltered neighbors, and a farmer's market, to name just a few.

"I believe this to be profoundly true: it's not our building, it's the neighborhood's building," said Pastor Jeff. Out of that belief, Calvary continues to be in relationship with over a dozen "neighbor-tenants" (the term Calvary intentionally uses to cut against the idea that the church is primarily a landlord, and suggest that while a rental contract is involved--which allows the building to continue being shared--the church is called to be in relationship first and foremost as neighbors). Today, the largest neighbor-tenant is Whittier Wildflowers, a preschool that operates on a sliding pay scale depending on families' income. "We knew we wanted a preschool that was accessible and affordable to kids and families in this neighborhood, said Sarah Yamaguchi, member of Calvary and president of the preschool board. She noted that

while the preschool is faith-based, many Muslim and non-religious neighbors send their kids there too. “The church is acting as a gathering place,” she said.

The rent from the preschool allows Calvary in turn to transform other portions of its building into sharable space, including art studios and galleries, offices for mental health counselors, flexible meeting rooms, a theater that hosts everything from jazz concerts to Brazilian flamenco groups, an industrial kitchen used by small business owners and those starting out in their culinary careers, a coffee shop that Calvary’s youth run on Sunday mornings, weddings and graduations, or recently, as we were told at our visit, a 10-year-old’s birthday party (the building is apparently perfect for an epic game of nerf tag).

“There’s a lot going on at the church that most folks don’t know about in terms of who’s using the kitchen, who’s renting the spaces,” said Sarah. But that is precisely the job of Dean Caldwell-Tautges, the church administrator and our site visit host. “If church is just what happens in the sanctuary, then there’s a lot of missed opportunities to be the church in the rest of the building,” Dean said. His full-time job is to come alongside the rest of the Calvary community to build relationships with neighbors, and then invite many of them to find a home at Calvary, whether it be for a dance class, an AA meeting, or a theater troupe.

But Dean was also very matter-of-fact about the challenges entailed with sharing space so robustly. “Not a day goes by without something breaking” he said. The freezer needs replacing, a pipe is leaking, a security system needs upgrading, a furnace needs updating, or yes, a steeple needs bricks and shingles that stay on.

Dean also was honest about how sometimes neighbor-tenant relationships simply don’t work. Part of what it means to share life together, he said, is to work through those situations. He said Calvary sees sharing space as an ongoing experiment of sorts--they learn what works, they learn what doesn’t, and they try to adapt to the ever-changing needs and gifts and dreams of their neighbors.

As the neighborhood continues to change and as Calvary works to keep up with it (or imagine ahead of it?), their calling to serve their neighbors continues to guide them. “We might not know how to do that everyday, but one way is to just keep doing it,” said member Kurdy Darling. “The building is an integral part of how we do that here in Whittier.”

This summary was created both by what we learned during our site visit on Jan 21, as well as what was shared in a video that Dean had shared ahead of our visit. That video can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/wAuGqzag7-M>. To learn more about Calvary, visit www.calvarychurchmpls.org/.

Site Visit

Faith Lilac Way Lutheran Church, Robbinsdale

February 2024

Robbin’s Way, an affordable senior care facility next door to Faith Lilac Way in Robbinsdale, was built through what seemed to be a combination of patience, persistence, good listening, good timing, a lot of meetings, a lot of dead-ends and restarts, and a community of people committed to addressing the need for affordable housing in their community.

On February 15, a group from Cross of Glory got to hear the story of how these things all played a part in the creation of Robbin's Way. The story was told in tandem by Bob Wertz, who was pastor at Faith Lilac Way in the 1990s when this project began (now a member at Cross of Glory), Tim Brausen, a Faith Lilac Way member who helped lead the project, and Pastor Pam Stalheim-Lane, who saw the project through in the years up to its completion in 2009 and continues to serve as Faith Lilac Way's pastor today.

As Bob explained, Robbin's Way began by members of Faith Lilac Way (FLW)--a fellow Wildfire congregation--simply asking "what if?" In the 1990s, the church's parsonage, which had increasingly time-consuming and cost-consuming maintenance issues, was sold to the city with the plan that it would eventually be the site of affordable housing. FLW didn't know what this would look like, or who their neighbors would turn out to be, but they knew that they were part of a tradition with a God who, as Bob said, "pays exquisite attention to the marginalized."

As FLW began to discern next steps, two efforts were already underway. The first was that the city of Robbinsdale had begun an affordable housing initiative, looking for ways to retain its long-term residents when it came time for them to move out of their homes and into care facilities. The second was that a MNDot project was underway to expand Highway 100 and widen 42nd Ave, which created a large plot of land off of that intersection (adjacent to the church and old parsonage), that for a few years sat unused.

The FLW community saw an opening: if they could convince the city to buy the unused land from the now-completed MNDot project, this--in conjunction with the old parsonage land--could be the location for an affordable housing facility to be built.

But this couldn't be done alone. At that time, a few members of FLW were involved with Isaiah, a nonpartisan coalition of faith communities that was already working on affordable housing efforts across the state. Through Isaiah, FLW met neighbors across faith communities and traditions working toward the same goals, and so when it came time for the city to vote on whether to proceed with the project, FLW Lutherans were accompanied by Muslims, Methodists, Catholics, and others across the community who came to show their support.

Once the project passed at the city level, the meetings had only begun. "Being involved with Isaiah, we began to understand the importance of having relationships with people in positions of power," said Tim. He shared that with Isaiah's connections and support, meetings were arranged with senator Steve Kelley to secure the MNDOT land, as well as Norm Coleman, Amy Klobuchar, and Keith Ellison to secure both county and federal funding. Isaiah also helped FLW secure the organization that would build and manage the facility: CommonBond, a nonprofit that builds affordable housing facilities across the state. In 2009, under CommonBonds' leadership, the 36-unit facility was finally built.

Affordable housing was not only a need "out there." It was a concern of members of FLW too. One example was Shirley, a long-time and beloved member of the church who, when she moved out of her home, was initially considering moving across (even out of) the Cities to a care facility she could afford. But instead, she qualified for a unit at Robbin's Way. She lived on the third floor and her view out of her living room window looked out over her church ("isn't that wonderful!?" she'd tell members and neighbors who weren't so sure about their new neighbors. As Pastor Pam noted, "it was hard to disagree with Shirley.")

Most of the residents would not become members of the church. "But that was never the point," Pastor Pam said. Even if residents weren't in the pews of FLW on Sunday mornings,

“life together” could still be shared in all sorts of ways. Over the years, the FLW community has stayed deeply connected to their neighbors at Robbin’s Way, whether it be dropping off a prayer shawl to welcome new residents when they move in, leading monthly bingo, hosting church services in the facility’s community room, or simply shoveling or mowing a path through the yard so that residents can sit in the benches in the church lawn. Pastor Pam also continues to serve on the board of the facility, and has been a consistent neighborly presence, especially important during the pandemic years when the facility struggled to retain managerial staff.

One particularly fun memory was last summer, when FLW hosted its Big Band Bash and invited members of the church and residents of Robbin’s Way to gather together for music, food, and even dancing.

To learn more about Faith Lilac Way, visit www.faithlilacway.org. To learn more about Robbin’s Way, visit <https://robbinsway.commonbond.org/>. To learn more about CommonBond, visit <https://commonbond.org/>.

Calvary Lutheran Church, Minneapolis April 2024

A historic Minneapolis church solved its budget crisis by housing homeless people

New affordable housing at Calvary Lutheran has 88 people on its waitlist, weeks after opening.

By Louis Krauss, Star Tribune, January 29, 2024

Facing a dire situation and on the verge of closure, Calvary Lutheran Church found a way to save its historic building in south Minneapolis: partner with a nonprofit and turn it into 41 apartments for people experiencing homelessness or with extremely low incomes.

The church had more than \$1 million in deferred maintenance costs a few years ago, and it was unclear whether the church would be able to continue at its site. Instead of abandoning the building at 3901 Chicago Av. S., Calvary turned the dilemma into an opportunity to help address the homelessness crisis. Calvary reached out to nonprofit developer Trellis, and in 2021 sold the campus with the agreement that the site be redeveloped to create affordable housing. Sarah Shepherd, the church's council president, said the partnership with Trellis was ideal and that the project aligns with their values of social and racial justice and fostering a good relationship with neighbors

"We desperately needed a solution," Shepherd said at a ribbon-cutting event for the apartments. "We could move, we could merge with another congregation, or we could close. But Calvary was committed to our mission of being in the city for good."

The partnership was also beneficial to the church. Trellis now shares the space with Calvary so it can continue its weekly services. The development improved the aging space with new interiors, lighting, and a much larger food shelf in the basement, which the church operates to offer groceries to residents and community members.

The Belfry Apartments opened in December and are in a redeveloped school building next to the church, in the church basement, and in a new apartment building next door on land which had been a parking lot. The units range from studios to four-bedrooms and are reserved

for people who make 30% or less of the area median income. That ranges from a \$26,100 annual salary cap for a single resident to \$37,260 for a family of four.

Fifteen of the units are reserved for people exiting homelessness or with disabilities. One of the new residents is 51-year-old Talicha Whitmore, who just moved in with her 10-year-old daughter, Brooklyn. Whitmore has spent 21 years as a cafeteria worker for public schools in Bloomington, and previously lived in Bloomington using Section 8 vouchers. But as inflation rose, she had trouble affording her housing and had to move out, realizing her income wasn't keeping up with the higher costs of living.

"My wages weren't going up as fast as everything else in the country," she said. Whitmore and her daughter moved back in with her mother in Minneapolis because she couldn't find a place that would take her housing vouchers.

She got a few extensions on her vouchers, but eventually they expired, she said. After moving in with her mom, she was walking her dog and saw a phone number on the church advertising the new apartments. Twenty days after getting a call back, she had keys to her new apartment, excited that her daughter would get her own bedroom after they shared a room at Whitmore's mother's house. "It's a nice place, and my daughter loves it," Whitmore said.

Calvary joins a growing number of churches using their space to house people as homelessness rates jump to record levels in the country. In 2023, the U.S. saw a 12% increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness, according to a report from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It's also another instance of repurposing churches and other buildings to be used as affordable housing. Hennepin County, for example, purchased five hotel properties with more than \$25 million — mostly paid for by federal pandemic recovery funding — with the intent of turning them into hundreds of affordable single-room units.

While the church's main worship area is still used for services, it's also been augmented to benefit the residents living there. To the left of the altar is a modern kitchen space, and up in the balcony is a display screen that can be pulled out for residents to watch movies.

The idea of affordable housing wasn't immediately popular with everyone at the church; Shepherd noted some were resistant. But when the congregation held a vote on whether to sell the property to Trellis, those who attended voted unanimously for it, Shepherd said.

One of the church members who has supported the project is Anne Boone, 76. She said skyrocketing rent in the area makes it all the more important to build affordable housing there. "You basically priced them out, so to have affordable housing in a decent building, it makes a big difference," she said.

The project cost about \$23.5 million in total. Funding came from the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, the city, Hennepin County and the state. More information is available at belfry.trellismn.org.