

The Theological, Historical and Practical Vision of Church on the Street

(In 1999 *Church on the Street* was officially founded under the leadership of Kurt Salierno. After enjoying years of fruitful ministry *Church on the Street* underwent significant transitions. In 2008 Andy Odle took over the leadership of *Church on the Street* and began to steer the ministry in a new direction. With a singular focus on reconciliation they began to ask new sets of questions that shape the path they now travel.)

What if what Jesus says is true? What if in Christ we really are all one? What if Jesus really tore down the dividing walls that separate people? What if the most despised, outcast and least in the world really are the most honored in the church? What if all of life – companionship, family, work, government – is precipitated by God’s living command to love Him and our neighbor? In other words, what if we risked believing in reconciliation? Jesus seems to suggest that life’s encounters would look something more akin to friendship, where disparate lives are joined and transformed in surprising ways.

Church on the Street is an attempt to allow the truth of reconciliation to guide our life together. Our desire is to be *an intentional and diverse Christian community where everyone is welcome, belongs and discovers their gifts of service, especially the most vulnerable*. (By “diverse” we specifically mean in regards to race, gender and socio-economics in such a way that we find a common life through joining together.) So we experiment with different forms of life together that press us to respond concretely to actual neighbors through both giving and receiving. This compels us to come close and enter into each other’s stories, to know one another and resist judgments made from afar about strangers we only think we know. Being together this way challenges our preconceived ideas, cultural prejudices and ideologies that lead us to live separate lives in a divided world and begins to free us to form new ways of thinking and living together. Living into reconciliation frees us to focus on those practices that make for peace. In doing so we are freed to be friends, but more than that, we are freed to be family.

Centering In

I am often asked by guests and during my travels about what we do. Do we focus on evangelism, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or any other such ministry? My response is always the same: we are focused on learning to be neighbors and friends. But here’s the catch and the danger of such a venture: what wouldn’t you do for a friend? Ministry has its built in limits, judgments and boundaries – we already know who needs something, what they need, why they need it, who’s going to give it to them and how they’re going to accomplish the task well before we ever know or are known by others. In this way, ministry has a tendency to buttress difference and division. Friendship knows no such bounds. Friendship is learning to know one another, learning to speak truthfully to one another, learning to suffer with one another, and learning to celebrate with one another. To be sure, if my friend is hungry I do what I can for her. If my friend doesn’t know Jesus I introduce them. If my friend is judgmental or self-righteous I speak truthfully to him. If I have wronged my friend I repent and ask forgiveness. Friendship teaches me how to love my neighbor, while also revealing my own needs and

vulnerabilities. This is why living into reconciliation begins with the “will to embrace,” not the will to help or judge.

As we began to develop relationships in the midst of a large homeless population in the middle of downtown Atlanta, we quickly learned that we could not be a traditional homeless ministry. Homeless ministry in our neighborhood more than not plays out through an individualistic, divisive and emergency based approach by people who come from someplace other than our neighborhood that we have come to refer to as “drive-by” ministry. Broadly speaking, it is based on the dual assumptions that homeless people are hungry and need to hear the gospel, and that once these problems are addressed they will be integrated into mainstream society. These assumptions, upon close inspection, turn out to be untrue. Most of our homeless neighbors already know the gospel better than those preaching it and are nowhere near hungry. We also found that it is especially difficult for “drive-by” ministries to ever move beyond the assumed immediate need. Although under certain emergency conditions this approach may be helpful, we realized that this would not facilitate what we were hoping to achieve.

To be sure, there are other more meaningful ministries and social services in our neighborhood. These are certainly important and we partner with those that are making a difference, such as Housing First programs, but we are called to something more fundamental and beyond the logic of economic efficiency. There are also a few churches in our neighborhood that have homeless ministries. These ministries tend to be segregated from the congregation in the name of not making the homeless feel uncomfortable around those that are well dressed. We believe that is another way to reinforce division.

We decided to concentrate our efforts on building community through the logic of the Gospel that transcends boundaries and fosters reconciliation. Put simply, we want to live out the teachings of the church in the world. The way we like to put it is that we are learning to *live for and with our most vulnerable neighbors*.

The Community

Our experiment with community started modestly by moving into a neighborhood with a large homeless population, walking out the door, and meeting the neighbors (This is now called a *Parish Walk*). The exercise did not include bringing hand-outs to those in need, but rather to simply offer friendship. Over time relationships began to be forged and lives, on both sides of the divide, were being transformed. The stories of these lives, exchanges and friendships began to be told and others took an interest in seeing what this was all about. The problem was that these relationships were mostly one-on-one, so bringing others into the mix created barriers to getting to know one another with any level of intimacy.

So it became necessary to begin what is now called *Saturday on the Street*. *Saturday* is intentionally designed to bring groups of both strangers and friends together to simply be together in the hopes of forming or deepening friendships. The idea is simple: invite or welcome diverse groups of folks to the park for fun and conversation. We intentionally do not serve meals in the park (although this practice is ubiquitous in our neighborhood) because there is no need for food on our streets and, in this context, it

takes away from the culture of reconciliation we are trying to develop. So you could say that our first commitment is to relationships, but our first practice is play.

As bonds were formed and friendships began to grow it became evident that we needed space where community could flourish through more regular and organized gatherings. Enter *Retreat from the Street*. *Retreat* came to life through a partnership with a local church that donates the space needed to develop such a community. Through some experimentation and research we settled on four practices we felt both expressed and fostered community that would give shape to our day: praying together, eating together, serving together (chores) and celebrating together. In addition, we provide space in the day for what we refer to as “Enrichment.” Enrichment is any activity that may be helpful to members of our community such as computer use for job searches, resume writing and checking email, healthcare workshops, educational seminars, Bible studies, peer advising, small groups and clothing sharing. (In community volunteers come from inside not outside the community. Thus, we take responsibility to do the work of the community ourselves rather than relying on outside volunteers. So, for instance, the first time you eat lunch with us you are our guest. You are not allowed to serve, only to be served. We believe that part of reconciliation for those of us who come from privileged backgrounds in this context is to learn to be served by those society teaches us to think we are better than.)

The homeless population in our neighborhood is dominated by single males. This results in life on the street for women to be especially difficult. Although we were making connections with the women that we encountered, we realized that it was impossible to provide the kind of welcome and respite for women in our context that is needed to support one another. Out of this need our women’s ministry was birthed. Although most of our day is spent together, this intentional sub-group allows periodic time and space for the women of our community to come together for study, sharing, support and fun.

As the community has grown and stabilized we began to realize a need for what we call “back end ministries.” Whereas the “front end” is the welcoming and establishing of community, the “back end” is where the privileges of community are received. For instance, even though we are not a homeless community, many members of our community are homeless. So some needs began to consistently present themselves such as a need for clean clothing, assistance with rehabilitation, help finding transitional housing, and aid in reconnecting with estranged family. Once you are a part of the community then the community will try to help you meet some of these basic needs. But more than that, once you are a part of the community then you are also tasked to help distribute these benefits. To be a part of our community one needs only to participate in the life of the community, take on responsibility for the work of the community, and serve as a part of the team that meets to discuss the various happenings in and around the community.

The Center for Practical Theology

Running in tandem with the community is our *Center for Practical Theology*. This is the banner under which we organize our educational programs aimed at the church at large. It is our opportunity to invite the church to be our guests or to visit churches and universities to share about the work we do and why

we do it. All of our programs are born out of our living and understanding of reconciliation. Two of these programs, internships and mission teams, are occasions to be immersed into the life of our community while being exposed to and reflecting on the theological and communal commitments that undergird our life together. In addition to these opportunities we speak at events, host seminars and lead training related to community and serving the most vulnerable. We also advise and consult with churches, organizations, and universities.

Church on the Street is simply an experiment in believing that the church is intended to be for and with their most vulnerable neighbors. In this experiment of radical love we have committed ourselves to certain practices that make for peace: praying, eating, serving, celebrating, learning and playing together. We hope that in our living we are one example of what life might look like because the gospel is true.