

News and Notes

By Walter Brumm

Twice I visited Chicago and its environs in 2007, both in connection with my communal interests; this after a hiatus of thirty years, omitting airline transfers to western destinations. As I recall, my last visit was to see the King Tut Exhibit in 1977. Although it was the Communal Societies Association Board Meeting that prompted my return to the windy city, it was my renewed acquaintance with Reba Place Fellowship that turned one visit into two.

In April, the CSA board met in a conference room at Jesus People USA (hereafter JPUSA), in the Uptown area of Chicago. As it turned out, the former hotel and now residence and nerve center for the JPUSA organization is only some six miles from Reba Place in south Evanston. That made it possible for me to both attend the meeting and reconnect with Reba Place Fellowship, which I initially visited in 1971. When I

expressed that interest, Ruth Lambach, friend and fellow CSA board member suggested that I call Peggy Belser, the Fellowship's long-serving and gracious guestmaster. I called, and within a day or two I not only had a place to stay in Chicago, but had appointments arranged with current leaders of the Fellowship—Julius Belser, Virgil Vogt and Allan Howe, who is currently serving as coordinator. Over a five day period, I had a great time, met interesting people and gained insights into urban communal life.

Interacting with both groups heightened my sensitivity to the similarities and differences



Julius and Peggy Belser
(Photo by Walter Brumm)



Reba Place Fellowship homes
722 and 726 Monroe Street, Evanston, Illinois
(Photo by Walter Brumm)

between Reba and the JPUSA. Part of the ritual of getting acquainted was my hosts' orientation to their facilities, which took the form of a tour of their work and residential areas. JPUSA occupies a former hotel in a commercial area; Reba Place Fellowship inhabits a residential suburban area of apartment buildings interspersed with single homes with small yards. Both groups have

extended their operations beyond their immediate neighborhoods. JPUSA has purchased additional properties to develop their business interests, while Reba has started a mission church, the Living Water Community Church, in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, and has acquired additional properties not contiguous to the Reba neighborhood.

My experiences and visual impressions of Reba Fellowship and JPUSA soon found themselves organized around some basic sociological concepts: organizational structure, social adaptation, belief and practice. Visitors are never simply passive participants in a new setting. Their interpretations of what they encounter reflect their ways of thinking and perceiving.

Since the comparisons and contrasts between the two communities are what fascinated me at the time and remained with me long afterwards, several are included here for your consideration. The first concerns the origins of the two groups. JPUSA did not have its roots in academic or professional settings. In the booklet "Meet Our Family," they describe their beginnings this way: "Jesus People USA (JPUSA) never started out to be a Christian community; our roots were in the early Jesus movement of the late sixties and early seventies. When Jesus called, many of us were social rejects in search of something worth living for." (p. [1])

Contrast this to the Reba Place Fellowship, which began with a group of seminarians troubled by how the Church was responding to war and racial strife. Nonetheless, both groups arrived at the need to live simply and communally, and to work for social and economic justice in poor urban areas.

The way the groups saw themselves and interacted with their neighborhoods evolved over the years. As dynamic entities they adapted their organizational structures and processes for realizing their ideals to their changing situations. In an urban environment, involving so many factors outside communal control, this kind of change tends to occur more quickly than in isolated rural communes. In an urban commune there is far less isolation and far greater population diversity. Remaining economically viable in an urban area can be more challenging than in an agricultural one. When a community depends less upon the land to supply economic support, the unique skills of the membership take on greater significance. How does the community market skills for its economic survival? How does it maintain stability when investing in business ventures that can either flourish or vanish with a change in the market or with how it is viewed by outsiders?

The membership characteristics of each group, i.e. age, sex, race, ethnicity, can either advance or limit opportunities for economic



“The House” at 920 W. Wilson Ave.

Home of Jesus People USA in Chicago, Illinois

(Photo by Ted Jindrich. Used with permission of JPUSA Archives)

development. JPUSA, with a membership of 420, many of whom are between twenty and fifty years old, could and did undertake the operation of ten businesses, “four of which provide the lion’s share of the funds needed to support the JPUSA community.” (Tim Bock, *Unless the Lord Builds the House*, 2nd ed., 2006, p. 5) These are Lakefront Roofing and Siding Supply (with six locations), Friendly Towers (low income housing), Belly Acres (a t-shirt printing business), and Riverside Self Storage. All of these require young, physically able workers. Of course, each of these enterprises has clerical and managerial components as well, and age is less a factor in these areas than in those involving manual labor.

The earnings of these businesses go into JPUSA’s common purse and are used to support communal needs as well as the social outreach programs they operate, which are described as follows:

We run five shelter programs in three buildings about four blocks away from our house. Every night we house over 350 people, including homeless families, women with children and single women. We serve dinner to over 200 homeless people twice a week and give out food bags once a week. (Bock, 6)

Historically, members of Reba Fellowship have worked more often in educational and social service settings. As their numbers have declined and as the average age of their member has risen, however, they have become more bound to commercial endeavors such as Reba Apartments, Reunion Property Management, Plain and Simple (a store selling Amish furniture), The Recyclery (recycling bicycles), and a silkscreen business. (Note how this resembles the economic transition in the Harmony Society). Reba’s numbers have fallen from a high of 165 to thirty-five full members currently, although there is a cadre of twenty-five young people exploring membership. An intriguing question is how the origin and theological orientation of the group influence recruitment of new members. What types of people are attracted to what types of organization—or the image of an organization?

Another question which inevitably arises is how to create a community in an urban setting when white communalists undertake a mission of social justice for a predominantly black urban population. Although Reba Fellowship did have several black members, it was viewed with suspicion in the neighborhoods where it operated. Addressing this relationship, Dave and Neta Jackson in their book *Glimpses Of Glory* note Julius Belser’s evaluation of his mission work on Peoria Street:

Our presence there on Peoria Street, before urban renewal leveled the area to make room for the University of Illinois Circle Campus, had a stabilizing effect and was a sign of hope in the neighborhood. ... The relationship between Reba Place and Church of Hope [Peoria Street] grew until they became sister congregations. When Church of Hope dissolved in 1966, those of us on the staff moved to Reba and became members here. All the members of Hope were invited to come, but I guess it's not surprising that the black members chose to move to other black areas of the city where they would be close to relatives or friends. They felt that we were going back to our people, and that they should stay among their people. (p. 74-75)

An attempt to bridge this gap can be seen in the creation of the Reba Place Development Corporation. Housing is a critical issue for the poor. As the area around Reba Place became more desirable and less affordable, the poor were forced to leave. The Fellowship intervened by purchasing more area apartment buildings and keeping the rents low enough so that the poor residents could remain in their homes. To accomplish this they sought to ally themselves with black churches. To remain true to its mission and to quell the suspicion about its motives, including the appearance of white supremacy, the membership of Reba Fellowship created an organization which included the Fellowship and seven black churches, called the Evanston Community Development Association. This organization was totally under black control with



Charlotte Oda, member and secretary at
Reba Place Fellowship
(Photo by Walter Brumm)



David Janzen, member of Reba Place Fellowship, author of *Fire, Salt, and Peace: Intentional Christian Communities Alive in North America*, and editor of *Shalom Connections*

(Photo by Walter Brumm)

white churches as support partners. Collaborating and sharing of power were not only pragmatic but also created trust and a common purpose.

Reba Place now is a multifaceted organization. There is Reba Place Fellowship, which is comprised of those who live a common life with common ownership of property. There is also Reba Place Church, an integrated evangelical church. Non-communitarians can be members of the church but are not part of the Fellowship. Members of the Fellowship hold church membership in Reba Place Church, like an order within the larger Church.

The ability to re-vision the structure of a communal society, i.e., to subordinate the communal organization to the original mission, is nothing less than genius. Whether Reba Place Fellowship will survive its shrinking membership is not known; however, their purpose for being has at least for the foreseeable future been secured. This accomplishment stands in contrast to the Shakers. I recall many years ago having a conversation with Eldress Gertrude Soule. At that time a number of professional people had shown interest in joining the Shakers, but they could not or chose not to sacrifice their careers to move to Sabbathday Lake's Shaker Village, whose setting and economy were agricultural. I asked why clusters of interested people could not be allowed to live outside the Village. Eldress Soule, however, could not imagine a non-agrarian, non-localized Shakerism, in spite of the fact that there were a number of early nineteenth century "out-families," i.e. persons living

the Shaker life outside of one of the established villages. Although there seems to have been more flexibility and adaptability in the earlier years of Shakerism, one cannot overlook the fact that “out-families” were more an anomaly than a secondary community structure. The Shakers could not envision themselves differently, although the inspiration for a communal structure appears to have been more about how to protect new converts from disapproving families and local citizens. In short, it was an adaptive strategy in one context and a non-adaptive strategy in another.

Whereas many rural communities sought to protect their members against the corrupting influences of the world beyond, JPUSA and Reba Place Fellowship chose their locations in order to engage with the world, indeed to witness to it and modify what they perceived as corrupt in human relationships. They have elected not to be models for community, but to be communities of service whose purpose is to change their immediate environment as a response to or as a testimony of their faith in Jesus as the hope for social justice. Unlike many communes of the mid- to late twentieth century which rejected or subordinated religious concerns in order to focus on social justice and alternative social relationships, JPUSA and Reba Fellowship wanted to reclaim what the Christian Church lost when it accommodated to secular culture.

Engaging persons marginalized by society, whether by race or poverty, JPUSA and Reba Fellowship, although theologically quite different, have developed lifestyles based on the model of primitive Christianity, especially on communal economics as a way of demonstrating God’s love and justice. At the same time the demographics of the two groups have significantly influenced the manner in which that model is realized.

By now you may have forgotten that I visited Reba Fellowship twice in 2007. The second visit is testimony to Reba Fellowship’s faith and survival strategies. In early August 2007, Reba celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and I was able to join in that celebration. (See *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 2007, sec. 2, p. 19.) Fifty years of memories and memorabilia were shared as well as services of praise and thanksgiving. Following the anniversary events, the Shalom Mission Communities Gathering met August 5-7 at Reba Place. SMC, by way of introduction, “is an association of four Anabaptist-inspired intentional communities with shared convictions and practices”: Plow Creek Fellowship, Hope Fellowship, Church of the Sojourners, and Reba Place Fellowship. Long-term friendships between communal societies

beyond this intimate circle are the basis of Shalom Connections, a network of communities sharing common beliefs and goals. This interactive network includes Jubilee Partners, Koinonia Partners, Grain of Wheat, Church of the Servant King, and The Open Door Community.

At this year's annual Gathering, the keynote speaker was Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. He, along with Shane Claiborne, is credited with starting the "New Monastic Movement," although the formal birth of the movement is attributed to a meeting of like-minded individuals who gathered in 2004 at Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. Out of that meeting came a book entitled *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New*



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove addressing the Shalom Mission
Communities 2007 Gathering at Reba Church
(Photo by Walter Brumm)

Monasticism.

An article in *Christianity Today* about this new monasticism was subtitled “A fresh crop of Christian communities is blossoming in blighted urban settings all over America.” The movement promotes a disciplined spiritual life, but not necessarily a celibate life. Furthermore, the small communities become a part of the poor urban centers that they seek to serve. They respond to the needs and concerns of marginalized members of society as opportunity and means permit, and this work is as much a discipline as it is an attack on social fragmentation and materialism — twin roots of anomie as discussed by sociologist Emile Durkheim.

In light of my interest in religious trends, communes, and process and structures involved in social movements, how did I overlook these emerging communes? How did I miss a social movement? How many are like me? My surprise is threefold. Clearly, however, there is a small but growing movement. Persons gathering in small groups to promote a common interest are emerging across the urban landscape of the U.S.A. Although characterized by spontaneity and uniqueness, they have coalesced into a self-consciousness network. One factor in this unity within diversity is that many of them have ties to other established groups like Reba Place, which can function as clearinghouses, putting new and emerging groups in contact with one another. The very nature of these groups, however, suggests that they will not gain mass appeal. Instead, the new monastic movement might function as the leaven in a loaf of bread, the loaf being the institutional Christian church. Their significance therefore may not be in their numbers but in what their existence and practice offer dissatisfied mainstream churchgoers. In recent years such grassroots movements have cropped up in the political arena and altered the political landscape, or at least the fortunes of some political leaders and causes, examples being the network of politically active student groups in the 1960s or current political blogs. We might ask whether we are entering a new era of a populism, religious as well as political. And, while there are political overtones in the new monasticism, all seem focused on a spiritual awakening in which the emphasis is on actively entering into a spiritual life rather than reflecting on or bemoaning an ineffective or lifeless spirituality. To gain some sense of the scope and significance of this movement, do a Google search on new monasticism and discover the wealth of attention and comment.