

2009-2010 NATIVITY NOTES FROM THE NORTHEND HARTFORD CITY MISSION

WINTER 2009-2010 WINTER 2009-2010 WINTER 2009-2010



You and I do not so much
Resemble bricks, like those
In a house.
But instead we are like pieces
In a puzzle,
Each differing in shape,
In color,
In size,
Each complementing the other,
Each adding value,
And thus completing the picture
According to its original design.
Without each piece,
The puzzle is unfinished.
Without you
I am incomplete.

Hartford City Mission is a bunch of folks who are trying to learn what it means to love Jesus and live like him in the beautiful puzzle of Hartford's northend neighborhood. We do this, in part, through some regular gatherings of smaller communities within the ministry. In the past year, these gatherings have included Noah After School, Hartford YoungLife, Camp Noah, Noah's Art, Women of the Vine, and the Vine Street Blockwatch. Some of these groups get together at our ministry house at the corner of Vine and Edgewood Streets - 'the Vine', which is also where a group of folks connected to HCM are living together in an intentional community setting (*the Community of the Vine*). In these pages, you can see what we've been up to lately, and a few ways we've seen God's presence in our midst. Maybe you'll see opportunities to join in and help us complete the picture.

We can be contacted at the Vine, located at 280 Vine Street, Hartford, CT 06112. HCM's office phone is (860) 246-0132. If you're interested in pitching in with us, our Administrative Director, Scott Willhite, can be reached at (860) 246-6655 or scottw@hartfordcitymission.org. Our mailing address is PO Box 320397, Hartford, CT 06132. HCM is a not-for-profit ministry and relies on the generous donations of our friends to support our work here, for which we are really thankful.

notes and quotes from a week in the northend

Camp Noah

In August teens and adult leaders from the youth group of Valley Community Baptist Church in Avon, CT participated in a week-long urban missions initiative under the direction of HCM staff and summer interns. One of the adult volunteers with the VCBC group compiled the following reflections on the group's time in Hartford.

There were 14 of us and probably 8 of them. During dinner together the mood was odd. On one side of the room were Hartford youth, all African American.

Our suburban youth - almost exclusively white - were on the other side of the room. No one had planned for it to be that way, but it was. We had worked together at Camp Noah all afternoon, uncomfortably trying to figure out what our roles were for this week in the city. Nobody from Hartford or the Farmington Valley was making much effort to get to know anyone from the other group. The young woman in charge was trying to get us to learn each other's names by playing some game where you hit a



"It was an eye-opening experience. Never have I been around children who have had so little and yet are willing to give you such a part of their lives...it's amazing what you can learn from a handful of children."

- High School student, age 17

"Helping at HCM has really opened my eyes to many new things and helped to re-shape my views. One thing it taught me is that the people in Hartford are really kind and loving, and they can be my friends. Without realizing it, I had formed this view that when I helped in Hartford, I thought it was basically charity. I was going in to give these people what they needed, and they were just the receivers of my 'generous serving.' In a way, I had a feeling of superiority. I have come to realize that my mindset was totally wrong. The people in Hartford have also taught me many things. I've realized that they are just like me and that it's ridiculous to think I am superior to them. They are loving, caring, kind, amazing people and my view was completely wrong."

- High School girl, Age 14

person with a newspaper and, at first, it just seemed a little silly and we were all uncomfortable. And then one of the Hartford guys started to scream and laugh and back away whenever anyone came near him with that rolled up newspaper. And we all started laughing together. And relaxing. And getting to know more than just names.

We watched this video about how hard it is to live on very little money in America. These educated, white movie makers decided to live below the poverty line for 30 days. At first they approached it like it was kind of a challenge, but in no time at all they were sad and one was crying because it was frustrating and they couldn't make it work. And they were only doing it for a month. Things changed a lot for our group after that. The way we looked at people in the northend neighborhood was different.

(continued on page 5)

manna, the market, and good news for the poor

kate foran

Community of the Vine

For the past few months the Community of the Vine at HCM's ministry house has hosted a study on the topic of Sabbath Economics, led by volunteers Kate Foran and Steve Borla. The Community of the Vine consists of the residents living at HCM's ministry house, along with both new and old friends.

Around the time I first read bible scholar Ched Myers' book, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, I regularly visited a homeless hospitality house on the street where I lived. I often served breakfast, but more importantly, at the end of the day I often stood in line myself to receive a plate full of dinner, to break bread with the people I served in the morning. One day I saw Duke, one of the regulars, out in the yard stooped under a tree. I was delighted when Duke showed me that the nuts dropping on the ground and under car tires were *pecans*. Most people ignored them or raked them for removal, but the homeless guys, modern culture's hunter-gatherers, gathered the nuts to eat or sell at the farmers' market. Duke broke one open, gave it to me, and continued collecting the nuts in his hands until they were too full. He looked around the bushes, found a stray plastic bag and filled it. Then he handed it to me. It felt like manna from heaven. When I roasted the nuts for Thanksgiving, I thought of the line from the late Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, "There are nothing but gifts on this poor, poor earth."

I think we each have manna stories—experiences of God's abundance, when our needs are met in ways we might not have expected. However, as I learned from Myers' book, the story of manna in the bible is not just a morality tale about trusting God to provide. It also offers a community ethic for economic practice. The instructions are clear—do not gather less than you need; do not gather more. Any manna that is stored up will rot. Of course, the context here is important: the people had just come out of Egypt where they were forced to build storehouses for Pharaoh's surplus. God was inviting them to leave behind the ways of

bondage to empire. (Indeed, I once heard someone remark that if the Torah had a subtitle, it might be *How Not to Be Egyptian!*)

According to Myers, the manna story is only an introduction to a comprehensive biblical approach to the economic life of a community. The themes of what he calls Sabbath economics appear throughout the Scriptures, from the law and prophets to the gospels and writings of the early church. These themes can be summed up in three axioms: the world as created by God is abundant, with enough for everyone—provided human beings limit their appetites; inequality is not caused by natural scarcity or some peoples' superiority, but is the result of human sin; and through the prophets God continually calls for the practice of the redistribution of resources (which is why they proclaim "good news" for the poor.)

Through the prophets God continually calls for the practice of the redistribution of resources.

Essential to this economic practice is the concept of *Sabbath*, which we often limit to mean "church on Sunday." However, its implications are radical: by setting aside one day to rest, we are acknowledging that it is *not* by our own labor that we live, but by God's gift. To mistake our own efforts (or our bank accounts) to be the Source of what sustains us is idolatry! Sabbath was not simply a weekly observance, but a rhythm of economic regulation meant to correct imbalances and injustice. Every seven years (think sabbaticals) both land and workers were to rest. Every seven times seven years (think of Jubilee) people were released from debt and land was redistributed.

These biblical practices offer a direct challenge to a culture dependent on "24-7," on constant growth of markets, a culture which believes that "*God helps those who help themselves.*" (Indeed, "*God helps those who help each other*" might be a better way to put it.)

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Amy (Mentzer) Jarvis is the Director of HCM's Childrens Ministry. Amy was a high school volunteer when HCM's first program, Noah's Sidewalk Sunday School, started in 1998. Amy later served as a summer intern with HCM where she first met her husband, Russell. Amy and Russell now live two doors down from HCM's ministry house.

If someone were to ask me “*What’s your favorite part of directing Noah After School?*” several answers would come to my mind.

I love hearing Ahlajjah’s laugh—she’s only seven but somehow she laughs like an 80 year old woman.

I love giving Papi high fives when he knows the answers to our Bible story questions.

I love watching Kayla’s determination to hold her tongue when boys say unkind words to her.

I love knowing that Trequan will always memorize our weekly Bible verse—he hasn’t missed one yet.

I love listening to JaKyri read through a whole book by himself.

I could list many more special moments with the Noah After School Kids; but I think my favorite part of leading NAS is just that – that I am *with* the Kids.

Two years ago Hartford City Mission merged two one-day-a-week programs (*Noah’s Sidewalk Sunday School* and the former *Noah After School* tutoring) into a single every-weekday initiative run out of the Vine, HCM’s Ministry House. The purpose behind this shift was to focus more on the cultivation of disciples, old and young, urban and suburban, through daily relationships rather than a weekly program focusing on the dissemination of information.

The redesigned Noah After School (NAS) has homework help and reading as well as Bible lessons, crafts, games, and art. The same 15 1st- 5th graders attend each day, most of who live on the same street, down the street, and even next door to the Ministry House. This intentional change allows more time for us to just be present *with* the Kids - to get to know their talents, their reading levels, their favorite colors, and their quirks.

But more time with the NAS Kids is not always easy.

Each child in our program has tested my patience and kindness. Teaching kids to love their enemies while immersed in a violent culture can be downright discouraging. Correcting disrespectful behavior time and again is not my favorite thing. But realizing my own lack of gentleness and unconditional love and my tendency to judge quickly are not my favorite things either! I think that because my relationships with the NAS Kids can be personally challenging they are also rewarding, fun, precious, and what I love most about my job.

Our volunteers, who make all of this possible, have similar experiences. These volunteers come once a week (some more) to be present *with* the Noah After School Kids. They come not just to help with multiplication tables and spelling, but to build relationships. Cheryl Marino, a volunteer from Valley Community Baptist Church, shares about her experience:

“I had no expectations for what I’d get out of it. I just thought it’s a good way to serve. After several weeks of spending time with the Kids I find myself looking forward to seeing them. One Wednesday, leaving a stressful day at the office, I wanted to just go home . . . I ended up at Noah After School and found the stress melted away. The Kids love us for just being there. They give so much.”

Rachel Margolis, a high school volunteer, writes, *“I enjoy working with Papi and Ahlajjah because they are fun to work with. It’s not always easy but they are bright and have tons of energy. I feel like I’ve grown a lot and I love going to NAS because I know all of the Kids who go there and they know me.”*

Julie Ozbun, a former HCM intern who now lives in the Community of the Vine at the Ministry House, shares, *“Volunteering with NAS is hands down the most joyful part of my week. God has shown me about his unconditional love for us and how to love the Kids unconditionally.”*

I can’t agree with Julie’s comment more. Being *with* these Kids makes learning more about God’s love possible. I am thankful that the Noah After School Kids teach me to love and allow me to love them.

notes and quotes from a week *(from page 2)*

And then, after a little less than a week, we left. We went back to our regular lives and our families and our comforts. And we were different.

“The best thing that happened that week is that our wealthy kids began to see the poor as people and not a “people group”. They learned that many underprivileged are not that way by laziness or neglect, but because of a system that makes it hard for them to escape to a different economic situation. Also, they got to see how big a difference they can make just a short distance away from where they live.”

– Church Youth Pastor

(Ed. Note: Four of the high school students who participated in the summer missions experience are now regular volunteers in the Noah After School program.)



Hartford City Mission's Northend in 2010 Summer Internship

is coming in **June** and we're looking for a few college-age and/or post-college men and women who want to learn about life in the inner city, while helping to lead HCM's summer ministry activities.

You'll experience life in community, living in the Vine, HCM's ministry house on Vine Street in Hartford's northend, where you'll learn about urban issues like poverty, racism, and injustice. Our hope is that you would think, live, & love a lot more like Jesus after your summer with us!

This summer we're specifically praying for an individual with gardening or farming experience who might take charge of our community garden at the Vine. We want to make our garden a place where our neighbors can come for food & peace & fun.

More details and our intern application will be announced by Jan 31, 2010 and will be available on our website (www.hartfordcitymission.org)

In the meantime, you can contact Rex (860 805-8660 or rekser@aol.com) if you've got questions.

Second Annual Apple Pie Day by the Numbers:

850 Number of apples we started with

110 Number of pies made by northend kids and adults

34 Volunteers who helped

3 Fingers cut while peeling apples

Lost Track Number of smiles during the day

manna, the market, and good news for the poor *(from page 3)*

As it is written in II Corinthians 8:13 - *“Not that others should be relieved and you afflicted, rather it is a matter of equality. So in this time your surplus should help their lack so that their surplus might help your lack—in order that there may be equality.”*

For ultimately Sabbath economics is not just about meeting material needs, but about right relationship with God and creation and each other - the Kind of mutuality I glimpsed the day Duke showed me how to gather pecans.

From the moment the HCM internship began, I knew the lessons I would learn were going to shape me in very new and raw ways. The first night we gathered together at the Vine, Rex, one of the HCM Board members, said he would be praying that we would suffer during our summer in Hartford. Most who are acquainted with the life of Jesus would understand this statement in some form; but to hear it said that suffering was being prayed *for you* was an interesting twist to my initial thoughts about what I was about to experience!

A goal of mine for the summer was to understand community living more. It isn't an easy task to challenge myself to be more faithful on my own. With the other interns consistently around me and the HCM family always nearby, it was much more feasible. Holding each other accountable to share and discover Christ's Way became a daily reality and I would not have had that supportive discipling without living in the Vine. It made going "home" at summer's end very difficult because I knew participation in these things would be up to me and not a collective effort of the body. Christ's community is crucial; the internship hammered that home for me.

One of the most challenging parts of the internship was learning how to be honest, but not brutal; to "admonish one another in love"; to take constructive criticism and grow from it. A major moment we experienced was in the middle of our summer, on a retreat to New Hampshire. Russell Jarvis, a former HCM intern himself and now a northend resident, facilitated an exercise called Straight Talk in which each team member was to find two positives and two "charges of change" in one another. Once we took time to prayerfully consider these things, we gathered and one at a time took a turn hearing what each other had to share. Finding gentle words is often a difficult task for me and hearing others acknowledge that fault brought sadness, but also helped me want to change! This session was hard, but necessary and I believe it drew our team closer together and helped us to better encourage each other.

I adore Hartford's "porch life". Whether it's yours or your neighbors, it's a way to see each other and just *be*. When the Kids from camp had a rough day with listening, participating or fighting, yet still wanted to come by the house and sit with us, it showed the love of Christ was drawing them in.

There were days that seemed no one either heard a thing we said or wanted a bit of what was offered through Jesus. Then there were days the Kids would have questions about the Bible lesson, or apologize for something without being prodded; give hugs and genuinely enjoy company. This section of a prayer by slain Catholic priest Oscar Romero sums up an important lesson learned this summer:

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,

Knowing that they hold future promise.

*We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there's a sense of liberation
in realizing that.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it's a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace
to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that's the difference
between the master builder and the worker.*

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.



Cara and friends enjoying some front porch time at the Vine.

In a 1959 "This I Believe" essay recently rebroadcast on public radio, the essayist, Robbins Milbank, concluded with this:

"I believe there is nothing passive yielding my will to God's . . . It keeps me very busy . . . using the faith He gave me to pass up self-satisfaction for doing something I want to do anyway."

I noticed something: you may notice something quite wonderful in most everybody you meet, even in those who annoy you or frighten you. But each, in his way, is truth - neither to be rejected nor run from. If you believe 'Thy will be done,' there is less temptation to run away from yourself. You can't escape, anyway."

I believe there is truth in Milbank's words that I have rediscovered during the past few years.

I believe that you find contentment and learn the most about life, about yourself, about Jesus, when your focus is on others and not on yourself, when you open your heart to allow people a place there to stay, whether for a moment or a lifetime.

This is not an easy lesson for me to grasp. Allowing people into my life is something on which I must continually work. I am much more inclined to remain behind the scenes, giving in other ways. But it is an area of my life about which God has been asking me to work in an intentional way. One way in which I have been learning this lesson is as a new volunteer with junior high and high school students in the Hartford Young Life program where the focus is on building relationships.

After the first few weeks attending Young Life, I wondered if I was wrong. Perhaps I could not break through my tendency to drop back behind the scenes. But God is a faithful and persistent teacher. Soon a fellow volunteer needed help driving a group of mostly junior high students from school to the Young Life program. I thought - *I'm good at helping. Perfect.* What happened though was not just driving. Here was a small group of kids in my car and an opportunity to get to know them.



A few Hartford YoungLife students and leaders at a spring retreat in southern Connecticut.

Despite some trepidation, I started feeling a new sense of purpose and ease.

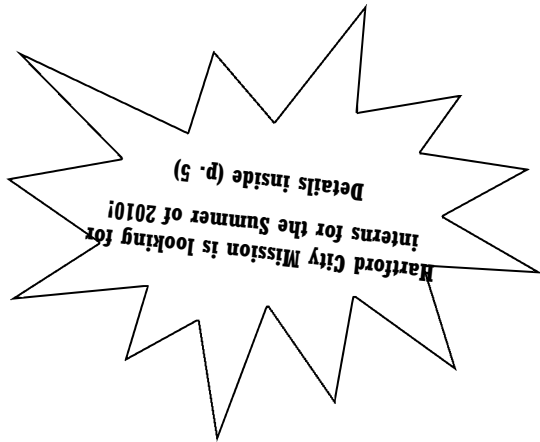
One Friday night our group went to a dinner before Young Life and the other leader suggested we play 'Let's get to know Michele.' The game would be played like this, the other leader explained: "You can ask Michele any three questions. And she has to answer each one."

Three questions quickly turned to twenty, and as these kids asked and as I answered and then turned the questions back on them, I found a strange freedom in sharing, in opening my life to them. In exchange they found a foothold in my heart that has only deepened with time.

I believe that in an age of instant gratification, I must remember that building relationships takes trust, consistency, patience, and time. There will be setbacks, for we all come with our own hesitations. But week after week, I am seeing the *wonderful* in these students, and finding Jesus here in this community of Hartford Young Life. I observe the gifted volunteer leaders teach, listen, pray with students, encourage, and have great fun. God is at work in every moment,

(continued on back page)

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this i believe (from page 7)

I believe these moments spent with the Young Lifers slowly open a space in the hearts of the students as well, where we leaders can move in, love, and continue to share with them the truth and hope found in Jesus Christ. I recognize that God has no need of me here for He is at work, with or without me. However, I am thankful each day for the possibility to learn the lessons found in opening your heart and life to those Jesus loves, thankful for the peace realized in places in which we might believe we would be the most uncomfortable.

I believe that starting a Friday night with the greeting of a running hug from a group of junior high students is all gain. There is no loss here.

I believe that in this small group of students meeting in the northend of Hartford God's will is being done and we will see the truth the prophet Malachi spoke of:

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

THANK YOU

- For volunteering.
- For donating.
- For reading to a child at the Vine.
- For hugs.
- For fixing and painting.
- For throwing a football.
- For holding.
- For planting.
- For singing.
- For praying.
- For harvesting.
- For loving.

The folks at Hartford City Mission thank you for all this, and much more. Your financial contributions allow us to continue.