

Reba Place Fellowship: Portrait of a New Monastic Community

BY CELINA VARELA

Members of the oldest urban Christian community in America frame their daily lives around honest and loving relationships, the full sharing of resources, active witness to God's justice and peace, practical service to those around them, and a visible common life.

In the summer of 2007, over five hundred former and current members of Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) gathered to celebrate God's faithfulness over the community's fifty years of existence. Memories unfolded through stories organized by decade, songs written by members of the community, and liturgical dances, new and old.

Among those celebrating were many young people. Our participation in the community spanned only one to three years, yet we were invited to welcome these old stories as part of our own stories. As we heard the history of the oldest urban Christian community in America, we marveled at the longevity and determination of those among us whose commitment contributed to five decades of community.

RPF's history reveals a community that has experienced periods of trouble and instability mixed with stretches of excitement, peace, and sustained ministry. In 1957, when the community began, the desire to take seriously the words of Jesus and the practices of the early church formed the early members' driving vision to live out a life of radical Christian discipleship. That desire remains unchanged, bringing unifying focus to a community whose changing makeup demands continual adjustments to the rhythms of their common life together.

The members of RPF are not so unique in their Christian confession. That is, we believe essentially what all Christians believe.¹ What can be surprising to people is the framing of our daily lives. We believe that radical discipleship includes honest and loving relationships, the full sharing of resources, active witness to God's justice and peace, practical service to those around us, and a visible common life.

For Jesus, the disciples, and the early church, the fruits of radical discipleship grew from their daily life together. The common practices we develop come from our efforts to seek God's guidance and the power of God's spirit in forming a Christian community.

OUR COMMON LIFE

The mission of RPF is "to extend the mission of Jesus by being a community of love, and discipleship, and by nurturing other such communities as God gives us grace."² Therefore, we welcome all people to share life with us. The invitation can be overwhelming since increasing interest in the life of RPF brings people with different desires and needs.

Some people come with a desire to be observers and learners in the community. Others come to discern vocation, a relationship, or a calling within the context of community. Many come seeking emotional healing from past wounds. Different needs arise in the varying stages of life that are represented in the community: young adults recently out of college or pursuing post-college degrees, single adults, married adults, young families, full- and part-time workers, retired adults with lots of energy to work, and elderly adults needing to slow down.

We discover that these differences are significant when we attempt to form a daily life together. The community's needs challenge our leaders to consider our diversity and develop healthy, inclusive rhythms. In response to the variety of needs, members created categories to clarify levels of commitment. Currently, sixty-seven members are formally participating in the life of the community. That number includes thirty-eight covenant members, eight novice members, eighteen practicing members, and three apprentices.

Covenant members are those who commit to stay in the community until it is discerned that God is calling them elsewhere. They are committed to participate in all community processes and activities, regular prayer and devotions, shared decision making, accountability, and the common treasury. Novice members are those who are testing and discerning a call to covenant membership. The practicing member category is for people who want to learn from the community and discern their future in the context of community for a term of nine to twelve months. Lastly, the apprentice category involves people accepted into a nine-month program to grow in Christian discipleship, community, and service. Novices, practicing members, and apprentices commit to the same practices as covenant members, but do not participate in the common treasury.

Certainly, our life together is not limited to those who fit neatly into these categories. Outside of the sixty-seven regular participants there are many neighbors, relatives, church members, housemates, and past members with whom we have close, ongoing relationships. These friends support us in many ways and occasionally attend our social and worship events even if they do not take on a categorical label.

Four charisms, or guiding gifts of the Holy Spirit, form the spiritual heritage of RPF: worship, accountability or mutual correction, spiritual direction, and ministry and witness. As members and friends receive these gifts, and live together through them, they become part of this distinctive urban Christian community.

THE CHARISM OF WORSHIP

In his book, *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier speaks about how “the littleness and ordinariness of our lives” can become an act of worship.³ When we desire to do the simplest task in love, he says, our mundane actions become ways to commune with one another and with God. The language is inspiring and many newcomers arrive with the beauty of this sentiment in mind. The challenge, however, is to conform our thoughts and actions to this ideal.

Sometimes the people with whom we work are as lacking in splendor as the ordinary tasks we share with them, and our desire for something spectacular is disappointed. The attempt to discover God’s communion with us in daily tasks must include an equal persistence to work through disappointment. By committing to stay together through the joyful, mundane, and painful realities of loving one another, our acts of worship can go beyond Sunday morning meetings. We worship together as we share meals, celebrate significant life events, and take breaks from our regular routines. Still, it is important to establish intentional time and space for hearing God together.

RPF members reside in the wider communities of Evanston and the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. Our meeting spaces for worship include Reba Place Church in Evanston and Living Water Community Church in Rogers Park. While both congregations belong to the Mennonite denomination and draw strength from the Anabaptist tradition, RPF members come from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Many of us worship together regularly on Sunday mornings, and some members participate in other congregations as well.

In addition to Sunday mornings, members from Rogers Park and Evanston meet on the second Tuesday of every month, alternating locations. We gather to sing, pray, hear updates, and discuss business matters. Shorter versions of these meetings happen weekly in small groups.

We often have Saturday work mornings, celebrating life together by helping with “Reba-moves.” As much as we speak about commitment and stability, we are not without transitions: young people switching households and apartments, newcomers moving in, friends moving away. In fact we do

it so regularly, we sometimes joke that we could start a new moving business. We have the process down to an art, forming lines from one spot to another so that you only need to hand the box, chair, or lamp to the next person in line. On good days we even break into song, reminding ourselves that our common work is a way we respond in gratitude to the gifts of God.

Other forms of common work serve to financially support members of the Fellowship. These businesses include an Amish furniture store, a property management service, and a business office offering bookkeeping and payroll administration.

THE CHARISM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

When I help lead tours for groups of visitors, typical questions are: “Are you allowed to smoke or drink?”; “How does it work to have single men and women in one house—do you separate floors by gender?”; “Are you allowed to go out whenever you want?” When we mention words like accountability and mutual correction to outsiders, many assume that we mean strict rules and guidelines. While there may be times when we depend too much on rules, what we hope to create is a space where people are known and cared for, so that accountability stems from a loving relationship. I remember my friend and fellow community member Greg Clark’s half-joking response to the question about drinking and smoking: “We don’t really have the money to sustain our vices.”

RPF members desire to lead lives of simplicity. The call to simplicity may look different from one member to the next, but all RPF members live well. They are not lacking in any need. Still, with a personal allowance of sixty-one dollars each month, it is difficult to support an expensive recreational habit. Entertainment often takes the form of our households hosting movie nights, craft nights, meals together, or game nights. Interactions of this nature facilitate relationships. Greg’s amusing response invited the visitors to ponder a more significant detail: there are ways in which the established practices of the community facilitate accountability in themselves.

Living arrangements differ among community members. Some of us live in households sharing common space, chores, meals, and belongings. Other buildings are divided into flats so that families share a house, but have their own space. Many people live in apartment units, with some families intentionally choosing the same building to help one another through the challenges of raising children. Both in Evanston and in Rogers Park, we live in close proximity to one another. In our little villages, we can walk to one another’s houses, to the meetinghouse, and to other meeting spaces. In this way, we are easily available to one another and can share resources when needed.

Likewise, fellowship with one another happens through small groups made up of six to twelve people. While some of the people in each small group may live together, not everyone is a member of the household. Small groups provide a much-needed way for friendships to develop across gen-

erational and gender lines. As varied as they may be, each group desires to meet weekly in order to hear about current struggles or victories and pray for one another.

In our efforts to know each other and to be known, we open ourselves to a life of honesty and mutual correction. Certainly, someone can still hide sin and unbecoming behavior, but this requires dishonesty and probable absenteeism from communal events. It would ultimately become too difficult to sustain a lie. Likewise, such behavior is hopefully noticed and questioned by other community members. It is important for us to approach someone with noticeably disturbing behavior in a way resembling Christ's love. We must not give in to the temptation to avoid someone and allow judgmental thoughts to reside with us. The early members of RPF recognized the importance of resisting this temptation.

John Miller, a founding member, said that the only solution was to follow the instructions of Jesus found in Matthew: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (18:15). It is only in beginning with genuine openness and moving toward confession and forgiveness that we can overcome our sin and deception.⁴ We seek to cultivate relationships that embody God's peace by confronting and correcting one another in love.

THE CHARISM OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Forming a daily community of love also challenges the way we make decisions. We reject the idea of individual freedom that requires a person to work through a decision alone. Such thinking promotes the belief that the individual knows best what she needs. The decision, then, is made based on what makes her happy, even at the expense of others' needs. Within our community, we desire to make decisions together as we listen to and discern God's will. The decision-making process happens in many ways.

For example, major decisions that affect our life together – the selecting of community leaders, receiving others into membership, purchasing land or buildings – require a consensus from members. The process can be slow, particularly when there is disagreement and the decision must be voted on at several different meetings. If consensus cannot be reached by the third meeting, there is a way for a decision to pass with no more than fifteen percent of opposition. However,

Forming a daily community of love challenges us in the way we make decisions. We reject the idea of individual freedom that requires a person to work through a decision alone.

members of RPF have never needed to use the allotment. We trust that it is God's spirit among us that brings us to a place of agreement and unity.

Other decisions do not require consensus of the entire group, but are decided by a trusted leadership team. The team meets regularly to pray about the needs of our community and how best to respond. Decisions are then made with the community's input. We are grateful for those who put in the energy to be a part of this team, taking on the great responsibility of intensely seeking God's will for our life together.

We also recognize decisions that cannot be made by members of the Fellowship alone. Sometimes it helps to have the perspective of an outsider who understands our commitment and calling. For this reason, visitations are regularly scheduled. Members from other communities form a visitation team and meet with RPF to discuss important aspects of our life together. Our friends outside the community can encourage us by expressing where they see the Spirit moving and working. They can challenge us by speaking honestly about areas needing more attention. With their help, we acknowledge the community's current stage of life and discern the direction to which God is calling us.

Beyond decisions concerning the whole community, there are personal decisions that one encounters in community. Vocational changes, unusual family needs, mission opportunities, and category changes in the Fellowship all involve significant resources from the community, but do not necessarily need to be decided on by all members. These decisions are often considered in our small group time together, where members prayerfully listen through the decision-making process. At times, it may be necessary to form special discernment groups. With this practice, we remember that we are not meant to hear God's voice in isolation, but in a common search, supporting one another.

Many people completing a novitiate period, a term as a practicing member, or the apprentice program, need support as they discern their next steps. The question they face is not whether all our theories about community are alike, but whether God is calling them to share life with us.⁵ It is important, then, that community members support them without pressure to join the group. A strong commitment to finding God's will allows all involved to bless departures and new members.

When newcomers are seriously considering a commitment to community life, their excitement can remind others why they made the decision long ago. Vanier calls this trait "the gift of wonderment," a gift that can renew and restore a sense of wonder in the community.⁶ As we affirm one another's gifts throughout the discernment process, we discover a mutual encouragement to both the seeker and the long-term community member.

THE CHARISM OF MINISTRY AND WITNESS

In the Gospel of John, Jesus commands his disciples, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). The gift of love that he extended to his followers provided an example of how to love one another.

Our communal life is a practical way to respond to Jesus' call. It is only by God's grace that our efforts become ways of blessing one another and those whom we encounter, allowing us to see that our life together can indeed be a witness to the world.

Visitors to RPF are interested in hearing more about our daily practices. When we explain the normal activities of RPF members — turning in paychecks to the common treasury, living on a prescribed budget so that everyone has equal care, sharing cars and tools, living with other people to help care for one another, practicing active pacifism — their response is often encouraging. When their visit causes them to hear the words of Jesus with fresh ears, we trust that God's spirit is moving them to a new way of living. Many people leave wanting to be in more honest, loving relationships with those around them. We know that it is not by our own acts that they leave with some conviction.

For years, RPF has hosted a potluck meal followed by a seminar on Monday nights. Students from North Park University who are enrolled in a course on intentional Christian community join us. By the spring of 2007, numbers were high enough to demand that meals be separated into five different Reba households before regrouping for the seminar. During discussion time, students often hear stories from RPF members on topics like food practices, kingdom economics, and spiritual practices.

The ways we show love to people around us stem from relationships formed by individual members as they see needs in surrounding neighborhoods. For example, many community members participate in a bimonthly meal with the Sonshine group, which began meeting about twenty years ago when members felt called to reach out to a nearby residence for people with mental disabilities and illnesses.

We share food through the "House of Manna," a garage where community members receive and distribute food donated by bakeries and grocery stores. A few years ago community members organized Community Supported Agriculture shares with our sister community Plow Creek Farm and Fellowship in rural Tiskilwa, Illinois.⁷ Now, during the summer, the same garage distributes fruits and vegetables. Across the alley you can walk down some steps to "The Pick," a store full of free, donated clothing and household items.

The list of RPF-related ministries ranges from an affordable housing ministry in Evanston to international outreach in places like Santa Marta, El Salvador. In between, there are ministries that tell the story of people committed to serve their neighbors.

Our attempt to love one another as we follow the teachings of Jesus is not easy, and we often fail. Our failure may cause us to wonder if we are effective witnesses to God's kingdom and action in our world. During those times, we must say honestly, as Wendell Berry does, that we may never be able to know the results of our "local affection" in ways that would satisfy the realms of academia or business. "The ways of love tend to be secretive,"

he writes, “and, even to the lovers themselves, somewhat inscrutable.”⁸ Many times, living faithfully and joyfully in Christian community necessitates standing in the mystery of inscrutable love.

NOTES

1 Heather Munn, “What Do We Believe?” *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, 2003). “We believe all the basics of what Christians believe; the Apostles’ Creed pretty much sums it up,” Munn begins. Available online at www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Resources/Belief%20Statements/Munn%20%20What%20We%20Believe (accessed May 19, 2010).

2 David Janzen and Allan Howe, “RPF Mission Statement,” *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, February 2, 2005). Available online at www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Who_We_Are/Mission_Statement (accessed May 19, 2010).

3 Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, second revised edition (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 298.

4 John Miller, *The Way of Love*, revised edition (1960; reprinted in *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook*, [Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, 2000]).

5 *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 87.

6 Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 255.

7 For more information on Plow Creek Farm and Fellowship, see www.plowcreek.org.

8 Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 24.



CELINA VARELA

is Director of the Intern Program at Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois.