Mission accomplished: The vision of seekers church

by Paul Wilkes in the April 11, 2001 issue

The accidental tourist traveling through the Adams-Morgan district in Washington enters a fascinating, complex neighborhood. There is a smorgasbord of ethnic restaurants and sidewalk vendors, a mix of expensive housing and slum dwellings, for this is a “transitional” neighborhood, where the homeless share the narrow, busting sidewalks with Gen Xers hurrying to Capitol Hill jobs.

The soul of Adams-Morgan is not so apparent, but those who know the neighborhood might say that its spirtual center can be found behind a nondescript collection of storefronts and buildings. There is no grand structure, no huge sign, very little to proclaim that over 50 years ago three laypeople with no institutional affiliation, backing or support set about to transform Adams-Morgan. They cast their lot among society’s castaways, aiming to make these mean streets into a New Jerusalem, a city on a hill.

Today these buildings and storefronts are part of a church fired with a vision at once ancient and revolutionary: the Church of the Saviour. It has no church structure, but concentrates instead on deep, covenanted commitment. It thrives on smallness. In fact, in 1976, when the church reached some 140 members—a modest-sized congregation—it was disbanded. Members were urged to form new communities that would allow them to better address the pressing needs around them.

Seekers, one of the resulting nine “churches,” chose child advocacy as its mission focus. Some of its members are lawyers who work in child advocacy for HUD or the Defense Department. Others work for grass-roots development in South America. Still others operate A Hope and a Home, a 17-unit building that houses poor families and helps them to become self-sufficient. Some Seekers create innovative liturgies that will involve children in their Sunday service.

Marjory Bankson, one of 24 members, teaches in the Christian Leadership school, where people can take courses ranging from Christian ethics to liturgical clowning.

“We try to keep our groups—we call them mission groups, and they can comprise from three to as many as ten or 12 people—focused on gifts and calls: a person’s abilities and the actual need that has presented itself,” she says. “We pray a lot and discuss a lot over this, but it is pretty simple, actually. We need to help mothers and kids to thrive; we need to change public policy; we need to educate our own children about what it means to live out the gospel mandate.”

“We always look to the ‘edges,’” says Sonya Dyer, co-founder of Seekers. “What can we do that nobody else is doing and that is screaming out to happen?” Bankson adds, “And we want what we do to change us. What we do needs to be like sandpaper on our souls.”

Bankson and Dyer represent a second generation of leadership that has taken on the vision of founder Gordon Cosby. The inner-city work of this community is by no means random—members are not recruited to work in a soup kitchen once a month or collect canned food for the homeless. The process is much more deliberate. It begins with the notion of God bringing a problem to the attention of one of the community’s members. The person then prays and mulls over the idea within his or her small church group, and eventually leads or takes part in a mission to address the problem. The Church of the Saviour was built upon this idea of “call,” as members over the years responded to ideas they believe the Holy Spirit implanted within them.

Adams-Morgan is a testament to those who have answered God’s call to work there. The Potter’s House, for example, anchors a string of ministries. It was created as a coffeehouse where members of the Church of the Saviour could go to “listen to” the neighborhood. When they learned that affordable housing was virtually nonexistent, they purchased and rehabilitated a drug-infested building. Today it is a safe haven for poor families and individuals.

When a doctor found a homeless man frozen in a phone booth, she was outraged, then resolute. An infirmary was needed. The fact that she had no money to buy or renovate a building for such a project didn’t phase her or other members. About that time, a wealthy woman decided to tithe her money to the church. While she totaled her assets, the doctor had architects draw up plans for a 30-bed infirmary. The amount estimated to build the infirmary came to more than $2 million—the same amount as the wealthy woman’s tithe.

Often, ministries started by one person draw others. Sally Holmes moved to Washington from Texas in order to be part of this church. She met her husband Paul at Seekers, and found a family within the close-knit community. She also found her “dream job” working with a A Hope and a Home.

I walked the streets of Adams-Morgan with Ray McGovern, who works with the Servant Leadership school. It was as if we were visiting stations of the cross—places of human suffering that had been transformed through this church’s work. Columbia Road Health Services is a clinic for the district’s most vulnerable residents; Christ House, a 34-bed medical recovery facility for the homeless; Kairos House, home to 37 chronically ill indigents; Good Shepherd Ministries, a beehive of education and recreation programs for children. Samaritan Inn provides crucial transitional living to help the homeless rebuild their lives and is staffed by yearlong volunteer “inkeepers.” Jubilee Housing provides 284 apartments. Jubilee Jobs seeks employment for the poor. The 34 apartments of Sarah’s Circle are for elderly people with limited means. McGovern says he found deep commitment and support. “You start to volunteer in these places and it just sweeps you away. You don’t want to do anything else.”

When asked about the absence of formally sanctioned clergy, Seekers usually shrug. “There are many ways to live out one’s faith,” says Dyer. “This is ours. What we have found is that, given the opportunity, you can evoke lay leadership that can articulate a modern-day theology that is both engaged in the world and committed to the gospel.” Each of the small churches actually ordains certain members who have completed whatever training that church requires. Some go on to be licensed so they can perform weddings and funerals. But in a sense ordination is peripheral. It is the commitment to the work of the church that brings and keeps people there. The ordained have no greater place or privilege.

The radical difference between this and conventional churches is something Cosby calls “integrity of membership.” When a person chooses membership, he or she commits to divide energy between the “inward” and “outward” journeys. This results in a balance between the time one spends cultivating one’s own relationship with God (the inward journey) and doing God’s work in the world (the outward journey). While visitors are always welcome to attend liturgical services and to volunteer, there is no room for half-heartedness if one chooses membership.

“Membership is not for everyone,” says Bankson. “This will always be a small movement. This kind of commitment will transform your life—but you have to be willing to have that life transformed.”

In an era where popular culture celebrates individualism, materialism and personal achievement, Seekers seems to be moving in the opposite direction. While the members have not sold all their worldly possessions and do not share all things in common, they do tithe. Some 50 percent of the $190,000 annual budget goes to outside child advocacy groups and agencies, and a Seekers member is involved in each group.

At Seekers, there are often four times as many people in worship services and mission groups as there are members. If people attend regularly but do not choose to commit, they are encouraged to find a church that better fits their needs. If they stay, they must join a mission group, where they may be asked to submit weekly written reports of what’s going on in their lives to a spiritual companion, or “faithful friend.” Bankson has been giving two single-paged sheets to the same man in her group for 12 years. “He told me he’s never been more intimate with anybody he hasn’t slept with.

“People find support for an alternative lifestyle to what our culture dishes out,” she adds. They talk about the church as their “life,” their “spiritual home” and their “family.”

On a summer Sunday at Seekers, there are 24 committed members, their children and about 75 visitors. Someone announces a group outing at 1 p.m. to see a *Star Wars* movie. An elderly woman tells everyone that she will be gone the next weekend to attend a relative’s wedding. Visitors are welcomed and asked to tell something about themselves. When announcements are finished, the day’s liturgist strikes a handheld bell, and the group files into the parlor in silence to begin worship.

The theme for the liturgy is “incendiary grace,” and it’s dramatized by the hole burned through the cover of each bulletin. The altar’s only permanent adornment is a flat wooden cross decorated with a cloth woven from bright red, yellow and orange strips left from last year’s Pentecost banners. A brass pot suspended from the ceiling contains a small fire. Seekers doesn’t have a single preacher. All members have the authority to compose and deliver sermons. “As long as you can see over the lectern,

you can preach," says Peter Bankson, Marjory's husband.

After a powerful call to worship ("We come together, walking barefoot toward flame"), periods of silence, a litany, and hymns and reading from the traditional lectionary, there is a children's play. In "The Time Portal," several children play travelers going back in time to meet first-century Christians. Amazingly, the tenets of Christians they meet are what is needed in the 21st century: no more people enslaved, women treated equally, care for widows and orphans—exactly what Seekers hopes to do in Washington. The result is a series of powerful lessons preached not *to* children, but *by* children to the rest of the congregation.

This infectious spirit has brought people to these tiny churches for five decades. Ken Burton used to drive 150 miles round-trip from Philadelphia until he gave up and moved to Washington. Another married couple, both physicians from Atlanta, moved here to be a part of the ministries.

Seekers continues its commitment to smallness. Members serve as the governing body of the church, taking on the jobs performed elsewhere by deacons, elders and pastors. As prospective members, they are required to take four in-depth classes on Christian belief and doctrine, and to take on administrative and sacramental duties in the church.

The heart of their commitment is the mission group. Here members band together toward common service and goals, and form deep friendships, pray for each other and help each other through crises. Each weekly meeting is mandatory except under exceptional circumstances, and involves worship, silence, sharing, prayer and work on the group's mission. And when that mission is completed, the group will disband and take on another mission.

Seekers Church embraces change. Members believe that God can issue more than one call to an individual or a congregation in a lifetime. Thus, they are ready to move on if something isn't working or has run its course.

On a wall in the room where Seekers members meet is a map of Washington with pushpins marking the locations of several buildings the church wants to buy. One is a two-story printing house on Pennsylvania Avenue. It has bay windows that would provide light for studio art space. Another would serve as a coffeehouse/bookstore, attracting Capitol Hill workers who might participate in lunchtime policy discussions. Even as one ministry dies, a dozen new ones are taking shape.

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