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A Third Place Foundation

Loving, Serving, Growing

Case Study: A Third Place

A Third Place Foundation is a faith based community and secular nonprofit organization in Turley, Oklahoma, a low-income area of Tulsa. They are involved in food justice through their food pantry and their “Garden/Orchard Park” where they grow food for the community. They also provide a clothing closet, a community art space, free water and internet and support community connection through regular festivals and gatherings. They strive to be responsive to the needs of the immediate community they serve and also gather regularly in worship with a variety of faith communities to renew their souls for this justice and service work.

Overview

This project started as a UU church plant named Epiphany Church in a suburb of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2002. Rev. Ron Robinson, a Unitarian Universalist minister, began the church and still leads the nonprofit today. They had a small group of pledging members but were too small to affiliate with the Unitarian Universalist Association. After a few years the community moved into a lower income neighborhood because they could not afford their rent. This move caused a change of direction for the community, which began to focus on the needs of their neighbors in their new community.

By January 2007 they opened up a community center in a small commercial strip and began partnering with Oklahoma University. They initially had a health clinic in their center, which no longer functions. In 2009 they formed a secular nonprofit, the Third Place Community Foundation, in order to apply for grants that were not available as a church organization nonprofit. With that shift, the church moved into being an organic, missional community called The Welcome Table Church. In 2011 they moved from their initial community center site to a formerly abandoned church building where they set up their current community center.

Third Place follows an “action-reflection-action” praxis model. They take actions toward meeting the needs of the community, they listen intentionally to community members and reflect, then they take more informed actions. Their spiritual message best aligns with Christian Universalism, and they stay connected to the larger Unitarian Universalist community through Ron’s participation in ministers’ gatherings and by participating in cluster and regional events. They also worship with other Christian groups in their area, such as a local Methodist congregation that is located near their “Garden/Orchard Park.”

This community also welcomes those who are interested in service learning and have a partnership with Oklahoma University's School of Social Work. Though their financial situation is always tenuous and they have no paid staff, they strive not only to provide services to their community and education to visitors, but also hope to work on larger systemic justice issues as part of their commitment to their community's well-being.

Early Planning and Discernment

When Ron came in to start this church plant in 2002, he brought experience from the UU Congregation of Tahlequah, which he had started in 1991 in Cherokee County, Oklahoma. When he first arrived in Owasso, Oklahoma, a suburb of Tulsa, he imagined that his new church plant would go similarly. They began meeting in homes, then started renting meeting spaces for Sunday only, then renting a spot in a strip mall. At first they had enough people coming and contributing monthly pledges to afford what they needed: advertising in the community, copies of materials, and rent. There were four couples and a few single people: a core group of about ten folks who were involved. But by 2004 the leadership came to realize that the magic trinity of culture, leadership and resources wasn't there and they weren't able to afford their space. So they decided to move into Turley, OK, an area with lower rent, and continue with their church plant more affordably.

In Turley, they began renting a larger and less expensive space and also began receiving rental income from the UU Christian Fellowship, which moved their offices to their site in Oklahoma. Initially many of their original pledgers continued with financial support and some of the suburban members continued attending, but the nature of the community began to shift based on their new location. Turley has a very high poverty rate as well as high rates of hunger and poor health. Though their community had intended to preach a life-giving Universalist message each Sunday, the immediate needs of their neighbors became more pressing than creating a new denominational church. In fact, they had never been large enough to affiliate with the UUA as a congregation and their strongest affiliation was with the Christian churches within the UUA. So they shifted to a missional focus and began to strategize about a community center. With this shift they lost most of the support from their suburban pledgers, though a few remained connected.

By January 2007 they were able to start renting a 4,000 square foot space and opened up their community center that April. The center had very few streams of income: about five couples were contributing funds. Despite uncertainty about making their rent, they moved forward with a variety of programs. They offered a community library and computer lab, meeting space for twelve-step programs, an animal shelter, a free music coffeehouse, graffiti removal, and more. They also began partnering with the University of Oklahoma who brought a health clinic to the space and deemed it a service-learning site for their social work students. In 2009 Oklahoma University's School of Social Work supported Third Place in becoming a secular nonprofit. While they still had a worshipping community and all of the board members for A Third Place were also involved in the church, this shift made them eligible for more grants and financial assistance than they had been as a religious nonprofit. Since 2009 they have been functioning, always in flux with a variety of projects, as A Third Place Community Foundation. A Third Place Community Foundation owns the Welcome Table Center and the Welcome Table GardenPark; the worshipping community now meets there as a guest.

Fundraising and Financial Sustainability

Because they began as a church plant, the initial funding model for A Third Place was pledging from families and individuals who were involved in the congregation and worship services. Support from members continued to be a primary source of income as the church evolved from a more traditional church plant to a missional community to a secular nonprofit. Today, regular pledges still make up about a third of their total income. Some of them are part of their worshipping community, but many are not; their current supporters are folks who believe in the mission of A Third Place, regardless of their own involvement.

With the shift to secular nonprofit, grants became a more important part of their fundraising strategy. However, Ron notes that the grant income depends largely on whether or not the volunteers who run A Third Place have time to write grant proposals. They have no paid staff to take care of this task. Still, grants make up another third of their current budget. The last third of their income comes from one-time donations to their organization. Even the low-income folks they serve try to donate when they can; while they cannot contribute a large amount financially, it is a testament to the program that people want to contribute what they can.

With such limited income and no paid staff to work on fundraising, A Third Place does sometimes live “cutoff notice to cut-off notice” as Ron put it. Like so many of the area’s residents they are treading water, adjusting their programming as needed when funding gets low. For example, a community Halloween party might be eliminated from their schedule because of lack of funds. But Ron also noted that every time it looks like the center will have to close, something unexpected happens and they end up with enough money to pay the rent, keep the water on, and keep going. The organization would love to move into a more sustainable financial situation, ideally by obtaining enough capital to hire someone to work for them on grants and other fundraising, thus allowing them to scale up their organization.

Successes

When asked about their biggest success, Ron said it is the fact that they are still there as a group in the community, as a visible consistent presence. In an area where so much comes and quickly goes - businesses, restaurants, the high school principals, -it is important that A Third Place is committed to staying present to the needs of the community as consistently as possible. Their overlapping communities are also a part of their success. Their worshipping community meets each week: twice a month with other faith communities and twice a month on their own in spaces such as their garden park or their community center. They have from five to ten regular worship attendees. Sometimes they combine their worship with other initiatives such as a meal and food giveaway; those events tend to draw a larger attendance of up to thirty people.

In terms of specific programming, food justice has been their strong suit over the last six years. It started out as a small closet food pantry and grew as people began informally collecting food to keep it stocked. Up at the “Garden/Orchard Park” they now grow food for people and families in the neighborhood; it is free for the taking. Whatever is left gets harvested for the food pantry. They impact about one thousand people each month with their food distribution. This project is incredibly important because, as Ron points out, when people are hungry it is difficult for them to take responsible action toward dealing with other areas of their life that need attention, such as mental health issues or seeking employment. They also teach classes on cooking with an emphasis on balanced nutrition, when they have folks who are interested in teaching and learning on that topic.

Other important services include providing water and internet access. Once A Third Place realized there was a need for water in the community, they set up an outside hydrant that could be used even when the center was closed. However, after folks began using it at night and using it for bathing, they started an appointment system, which keeps the neighbors happy and encourages relationship building. They also have a hydrant at their garden park. In terms of electronic support they have bolstered wifi that can be accessed outside the center, as well as outdoor outlets so people can charge and use electronic devices when the center is closed.

Challenges and Setbacks

The biggest challenge to A Third Place is probably self-evident: a lack of funding. Serving low-income folks means that the community that is most invested in their work cannot provide any significant financial support to run their center. Therefore they must rely on donations from those who are not as directly served by their ministry. However, with no paid staff, they cannot spend as much time as they need to cultivating donors or applying for grants. It is a vicious cycle: they need staff to raise money and they need money to hire staff. It is difficult to imagine breaking out of this cycle without a significant infusion of capital.

A related and significant challenge is to cultivate and transfer leadership. Ron has been the primary leader of A Third Place since it began and he hopes that younger folks will be interested in picking up the leadership of this initiative. However, without the ability to pay for staff, leadership depends on who is able to volunteer. Ron imagines that the community is ripe for younger folks who are interested in justice oriented, intentional, missional living where a little bit goes a long way due to very low cost of living. They hosted a young UU seminarian, Jerrod Oltmann, for over a week recently and his stay helped them imagine how they might become a more steady service-learning site.

Another minor setback was a fire on their property, which destroyed an abandoned parsonage and the holiday decorations they had stored there. However, after this property loss they are planning to build outdoor decks and gardens on their property to encourage a “community feel” to the outdoor space.

Future Directions

One future direction that A Third Place hopes to pursue is to work on turning abandoned buildings into affordable housing. There are 34 houses in their immediate community owned by one housing agency with an office in Omaha, Nebraska. Only 14 of these houses are currently being rented, and the agency has actually approached A Third Place about the possibility of selling the houses to the community center. This would allow A Third Place to expand from food justice to housing justice and to get to know community members more intimately. It could also bring an income stream to help with sustainability. In the meantime, A Third Place continues to work on keeping the area clean through volunteer work and building up community support and resources to reduce crime. Getting into the housing market was never one of the original goals of A Third Place, but this endeavor would fit their model of reacting to the needs and opportunities in the community they serve.

A Third Place also hopes to host more service learning trips and residential students, as mentioned above. They currently host a variety of church groups and organizations for anywhere from a couple of hours to a whole week, but Ron hopes that they can increase this trend by getting the word out about their site, and also by becoming a regular site for seminarians who are interested in missional communities. No matter what the future holds, however, it is clear that A Third Place will continue to listen to their neighbors and will continue to act, reflect and respond to the felt needs of their community.