Vision of Wholeness
Rev. Nora Jacob and Rev. Al Lopez
UrbanMission, Pomona, CA
2015 Hope Partnership Leadership Academy Participants,
NBA Incubate Social Entrepreneur Cohort

Early in 2013, Al Lopez, a Disciples seminary student, was called by the Southern California-Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ to plant a new UCC/DOC church. He envisioned an unusual way of doing church planting. Al’s premise was that those who did social justice work together would eventually attract and grow a worshiping congregation. Its individual ministries would be self-contained but interdependent, funded primarily through social entrepreneurship rather than traditional means.

UrbanMission was planted in a Conference-owned empty church building in South Pomona, California. A few neighbors, who turned into the first partners (aka “members”), walked in and offered to help restore and transform the building.

Meanwhile, at the Disciples Seminary Foundation, Al connected with two other Claremont School of Theology students with whom the UrbanMission ministries collective would begin. Stephen Patten, a longtime educator, was passionate about food justice, community wellness, and sustainability. Nora Jacob, a mid-life career changer, was ready to begin ministries of restorative justice and reentry services (particularly housing) for those coming out of jail or prison.

Today, UrbanMission offers a gathering each Sunday morning with an average attendance of 20; an Open Table meal each Sunday evening for 50-75 community members; a food pantry and clothing/shoe locker; and a monthly reentry resource fair for people returning home from prison/jail. We’ve baptized 20 new and returning followers of Jesus Christ...begun a community garden...and established a new nonprofit, Pomona Valley Reentry Coalition. We are involved in partnerships with more than two dozen nonprofit and faith-based organizations.

We look forward to cementing a new affiliation with the NBA Incubate Initiative, with an aim to incorporate UrbanMission Community Partners as a nonprofit organization committed to carrying out our vision of wholeness in our part of a fragmented world.

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Beyond Sunday Morning: From Project to Ministry
Dr. Betty M. Green, Hiram, OH
2015 Hope Partnership Leadership Academy Participant,
NBA Incubate Social Entrepreneur Cohort

Beyond Sunday Morning Ministry seeks to educate and sensitize faith communities to the needs of women who have suffered abuse. The ministry reaches out to women who have been victims, by supporting them in dealing with this tragedy in their lives.

Pastoral care is the main component of the Beyond Sunday Morning Ministry. Clergy and other church leaders are considered first responders when church members experience tragedies in their lives. Learning to practice good pastoral care skills, such as providing calming, nonjudgmental presence and support, are essential; it impacts a person’s ability to move from victim to survivor. This also means having resources in place for safety and appropriate referral for counseling and health concerns, when needed.

Domestic violence (also known as intimate partner violence) is one type of abuse that women must contend with. The consequences of domestic violence is manifest in the lives of victims in multiple ways. Consequences can be experienced physically and emotionally. Victims of abuse face life-changing issues and circumstances. Other consequences may include financial problems and homelessness. In order to survive, a woman must learn to come to terms with her abuse, as it will always be a part of who she is. This is a social justice issue, which keeps women on the margins of society.

The seeds for this ministry were planted as I began doing research for my doctoral studies project. The statistical data collected informed me that this was a concern of overwhelming proportion. My passion for this ministry grew as I realized how profoundly abuse impacts the lives of women. It is a common thread in the lives of many women. The NBA Incubate Initiative gave me the opportunity to attend the Hope Partnership Leadership Academy, which provided me with the resources to turn a project into a ministry.

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Looking back at 2015, it has been a whirlwind. It’s been a year of starts, endings, new beginnings, and an abiding presence of hope and partnership.

This past February, our new church start was just gearing up for a weekly launch when we were kicked out of our denomination over our commitment to full inclusion of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. This was a heartbreaking experience, to be sure, but it opened up a whole new possibility for partnership and new life.

As we continued to lean into our calling to be an inclusive church, we were humbled at the invitation of Portland’s historic First Christian Church to nest in their wonderful, hospitable facilities. For me, matters of inclusion aren’t just a matter of so-perceived “hot button” issues – inclusion is always about people: who’s in, who’s out, and who are we missing? Because inclusion is always also about gathering Christ-centered community for social change and the common good.

Affiliating with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been one of those inclusion moments for us. To think that in our time of heartbreak and need, another community would come alongside us to offer their support and encouragement. For me, the Disciples’ commitment to welcoming everyone to the Table of God in our week-in-and-week-out communion practice has undergirded my hopes and prayers for inclusion.

Attending Leadership Academy and participating in the social entrepreneurship track this past autumn in Indianapolis was one of the highlights of the past year. Brainstorming and wrestling with colleagues across the country, imagining anew churches for the common good, went a long way in helping me discern how we might maximize our potential in Portland for the same.

Portland has recently declared a homelessness emergency. These past months we’ve become engaged in what will be a multi-year effort to address this crisis and turn it into an opportunity for housing solutions and our neighbor’s flourishing. To that end, we’ve partnered with First Christian Church and First Congregational UCC of Portland in an effort with the Do Good Multnomah overnight shelter for veterans. The mayor of Portland has encouraged each of us to do even more, and we’re in discernment about opening another similar space for more in need.

But ultimately, what I’d like to see happen is creating a “third space” called “Table.” This would be a place where people could get a great cup of coffee and come in from the rain. This would be a place where college students could come in to study for their finals and hear some great tunes on vinyl. This would be a place where business associates could duck in to finalize their plans over a chai tea latte. This would be a place where our once-homeless friends would be able to get the job training and experience they need to not only get back on their feet, but also help us get back on the right page for community.
My friend Steve Chalke, in his work with Oasis in the UK, always says, “God never stops counting us in.” So, how do we create Christ-centered community beyond the traditional Sunday service? How might we church beyond Sundays? For me, our work at Table will be one small part of achieving that call.

We’re just getting started, and I can’t wait to see what 2016 has in store—for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.

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Nearly 100 years old, Glen Oak Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is in the midst of missional transformation. Historically an outreach-centered congregation, Glen Oak currently operates several community-focused ministries. To build on the concept of community need for fellowship, food, and a future, key church leaders and I are exploring, through a 2016 sabbatical grant, an opportunity to develop a cottage industry on Peoria’s East Bluff—a small pottery business that could help provide jobs and life-skills training for community residents.

Our plan includes me learning pottery as part of my sabbatical. My Lilly Grant will purchase a kiln, slab roller, wheel and 800 pounds of clay to get us started. We are still raising operating funds to cover incidentals like retrofitting a space at the church for a ceramic studio.

Rev. Greg Turk’s work at All Peoples Community Center in Los Angeles, CA, will be a dynamic model for us. His being so instrumental in the NBA’s Social Entrepreneur Cohort at Hope Partnership’s Leadership Academy was more than fortuitous. He is sharing his 16-week training course with us. Where his team made and sold soap, we expect to use pottery. It will be our prototype, from which we hope to develop other businesses. Geetha Sant, also a Leadership Academy instructor, relieved a lot of our anxiety about how to organize this ministry without jeopardizing the church’s nonprofit status.

There are various things we are still exploring, and the congregation will need more opportunity to own this ministry. While I am gone, they will be reading Joshua. It is a book my pottery teacher insisted I read. In it, the hero teaches two boys upholstery, from which they build a business that changes their economic and spiritual futures and those of their neighborhood.

Pottery also seems a natural way to link economics and spirituality—for when the clay is marred, it can be reformed and remade.

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Moving the Welcome Mat Outside
Teresa McNearney, Disciples in the Wilderness, Conroe, TX
2015 Hope Partnership Leadership Academy Participant,
NBA Incubate Social Entrepreneur Cohort

Picture it: Conroe, Texas, 2014. A tiny, strong-willed, liberal, female minister steps into an ultra-conservative, Caucasian, male-dominated religious community. Change was inevitable, and change we did. We were exposed to a new way of “doing” church and loved it. She inspired us to actually put our beliefs into actions.

A small group began to study, and we learned not all of our loving congregation were willing to, let’s say, move the welcome mat outside. This very small group began to feel as though the welcome mat was cemented on the wrong side of the door, and that if we wanted to make a difference, we would have to step out into the Wilderness. None of us actually believed we were headed to a new church plant, but God seemed to have other plans for us.

Our first gathering brought about 40 people sharing dinner at the Golden Corral and discussing what the Wilderness had to offer. By the end of the meal, we knew it was filled with a bunch of questions, a little bit of fear, and a lot of uncertainties. The next few gatherings were at a member’s home, where the goal was to maintain fellowship and continue the studies we started. We encouraged each other while we continued to search for new church homes, but soon realized that where two or more are gathered, we were becoming a church without a preacher. We continued as Disciples in the Wilderness and were meeting at the local community center until scheduling conflicts caused us to search for a new venue.

In March 2015, God placed us in a 96-year-old house on a street with three other ministries and blessed us with all we needed before we knew we needed it. We have renovated the home and taken it back to its original beauty, with the full support of the owner and unbelievable support from strangers and our local Home Depot.

The blessings from God continued when two of us, for the first time, attended the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Columbus, OH. An angel named Shernell Edney wrapped her wings of comfort and guidance around two lost sheep. She listened to our struggles from inside the Wilderness and went out of her way to make us believe in ourselves and God’s plan for us. She introduced us to another blessing in the form of Ayanna Johnson Watkins with the NBA. These two beautiful women combined their resources and provided two scholarships to attend the Hope Partnership Leadership Academy; one went through New Church, and the other participated in the NBA Social Entrepreneur Cohort. The tools and insights we took from this opportunity have improved our focus and provided much needed information on how to accomplish our goals.

I am very proud to say that we are moving forward and are ready to grow our church by being the hands and feet of God outside of our beautiful building. We’ve been feeding the hungry in a park in Conroe, and providing safe space and volunteer opportunities for our LGBTQ neighbors. Now, if we could just get some musicians or singers! We are a group of friends on a spiritual journey, and what a ride it has been. “Take a walk on the wild side—caution, that first step is a doozy!”
This Is Church
Rev. Steve DeFields-Gambrel, First Christian Church of Vincennes and Washington Christian Center, Vincennes, IN
2015 Hope Partnership Leadership Academy Participant,
NBA Incubate Social Entrepreneur Cohort

Last night I went to church, but not in a church. In an old elementary school converted into Washington Christian Center, 90 teens were in the gym, 20 kids danced upstairs, while a group ranging from 60 to 10 years of age played board games in the basement. Earlier preschool kids filled the halls with giggles. Sunday we danced to rockabilly and gospel music; Friday the Humane Society presented a musical. I used to think church meant doing religious stuff, but as I listened to the bustle of activity from every direction I realized, “This is church.”

At Hope Partnership’s Leadership Academy, I spent a week with people who are caring for the homeless; providing safety, homes, and jobs for immigrants and refugees; feeding the hungry; caring for the sick; healing victims of domestic violence; and helping prisoners re-enter society. That’s the church. Together, we were given new to grow all of our ministries to the next level. As Rev. Greg Turk said, “Let’s do something great, and make it easy!”

Almost four years ago, First Christian Church of Vincennes purchased the old Washington Elementary School and renamed it the Washington Christian Center. It was intended to be a busy community center, providing education and recreation and other wholesome activities for the city of Vincennes, especially for children. We provide a variety of programming and resources, including a preschool, summer day camp, a drop-in center, youth group activities, community event space, computer lab, toy and school supply drives, and more.

I am more convinced than ever that in the 21st Century, the church will either be spending most of her time healing the sick, caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, providing haven for homeless and refugee and prisoner, fulfilling the commands of Matthew 25—or we will not be at all. There is no longer room in our society for a religion that is merely theoretical.

For all that we do, our building still sits empty far too often. Leadership Academy has convinced me that we fail most often because our dreams are too small for God. I am convinced that we can find the funding, the partners, and the tools to be the church all day, every day, in dozens of ways we would never have thought possible.

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Jumping with God
Rev. Jonathan Hall, First Christian Church, Ventura, CA
2015 Hope Partnership Leadership Academy Participant,
NBA Incubate Social Entrepreneur Cohort

Our story is one of experimenting, discerning, and jumping.

Over the last two years, First Christian Church, Ventura, California, has been experimenting with various ways to engage with our community. Ventura is located close to the beautiful wine tasting area that surrounds Paso Robles. In Ventura, there is a budding wine industry. We wondered what it would look like if God was inviting us to jump into deeper relationship with our community.

In November 2013, we launched our first Aerator gathering in a wine tasting room. An aerator is used to push fresh air into wine to bring out the best flavors! Aerator, the community, is an emergent-style gathering where we share cheese, wine, coffee, everyday music, and conversation. It is communal in its sermon style and experiential in its ethos. We gather to feel God’s breath (in Hebrew, ruach) in hopes of bringing out the best flavors in ourselves and our community.

We have discerned God’s calling for our congregation to sell our property to better engage with our community where many people do not feel safe in a sanctuary, which, ironically, means a safe place. We are preparing to jump into a community place where people can gather around locally made products, community events, organic fair-trade teas and coffees, and wine. We are preparing to partner with a family-owned, award-winning winery on the central coast to make wines. We chose this winery since they focus on making blends because we believe that we are made to work with one another.

Our mission is to bring out the best flavors possible in our community through the sale of products, by connecting people to causes in our community, and forming a faith community where all feel safe—even the “nones” and “dones.” Our experiment has been generative. Our discernment has been a faith-filled journey. Thanks to the NBA, we are ready to jump with God!

Please like us on Facebook at “Aerator.” You can follow us on Twitter and Instagram at #aerator805 and #spiritualityfortherestofus!

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Before I attended the Leadership Academy, I did not really know what to expect. Though I am a newly commissioned pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I have had plenty of experience with church conferences and trainings. Still, I really didn’t know what all was in store for me as I boarded the plane bound for Indianapolis. However, I did know this: I needed help.

For the past few years of my ministry life, my wife, my team, and my colleagues have heard me talk about my desire for further development as a leader. After planting a new church and helping see it through the roller-coaster ride that is new church ministry, I had been longing for some helpful ideas, fresh insight, and practical leadership guidance. This desire for development continued to intensify as God began to expand our church’s vision for Christ-centered community development here in North Portland, Oregon.

The working name for our project is The Foundry Project, a combined effort of St. Johns Community Church and University Park United Methodist Church to transform our existing church property into a vibrant, multi-faceted, ministry hub. This project includes the building of 24 affordable housing units on the church property—an urgent need in Portland right now—and the renovation of our current church building into a multi-purpose “third space” community site. The vision for this project comes from our commitment as churches to the call of Micah 6:8 to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Thank God for Leadership Academy—particularly the faith-based social entrepreneur track!

In addition to discovering that I wasn’t the only one there who needed help (imagine that), I also quickly realized that this event was actually going to live up to its billing as a place to be encouraged, inspired, and equipped to do the work that God has called us all to do. The time we spent in our cohort groups was especially valuable, as I found myself taking copious amounts of notes and asking all sorts of questions about fundraising, legal issues, leadership strategies, and the overall vision for our project.

I came home from Leadership Academy with a renewed sense of energy and anticipation about all God is going to do in the work that is ahead of us, and with some helpful perspective and practices when it comes to being a leader and developing other leaders around me.

In short: I got a lot of help. And what’s more, I look forward to even more help to come as I continue the relationships that have been forged and fostered by my time at the Leadership Academy.

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