

The Open Table, Or... A Piece of Chocolate Cake

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UrbanMission Community Partners

NBA Incubate Initiative Affiliate Ministry

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The NBA Incubate Initiative strives to encourage and support the development of new and innovative health and social service ministries and organizations by Disciples. These ministries, in turn, inform and inspire fellow Disciples throughout our communities and across the life of the church. Together, we expand the church's understanding of and capacity for health and social service ministry as part of Christ's work in the

world. Rev. Stephen Patten, the author of this blog post, is the Community Wellness Director and Minister of UrbanMission Community Partners, one of our Incubate Partners. It seeks community wholeness, resilience, and sustainability in the Pomona area of Los Angeles County, California, by working with families and individuals at risk from poverty, hunger, homelessness, incarceration, and/or inadequate education and healthcare.

Although UrbanMission Community Partners (UMCP) is a nonprofit organization, our core values resonate with what others might identify as spiritual. My personal faith journey and theological formation inform the way I approach my dual role serving as UrbanMission's Community Wellness Minister *and* as UMCP's Community Wellness Director.

Several weeks ago, one of the long-time attendees at UrbanMission's Open Table community dinners showed up in an unusually disturbed state. We have witnessed her gradual deterioration over the past few years. Her struggle with substance abuse has driven her to the depths of grave mental instability. But, from time to time she shows up, always asking for chocolate cake. This particular evening Lucy was in a violent mood, flailing her arms, shouting, and cursing at people. Our leadership team, concerned, was on the verge of asking her to leave. Our desire to be a truly open table

to everyone was truly put to the test. We conferred and decided to hold off for a moment and see if the situation would defuse itself.

We see UrbanMission's Open Table as more than "just" a community dinner, it is a holy communion of those seeking wholeness in one way or another. When our communities dine



together, we choose to remain in solidarity with one another, acknowledging our shared brokenness, and longing for wholeness. This is one of the reasons why many of UMCP's partnerships are solidified during the church's Open Table dinners. To be able to sit across the table and see *the person* instead of their "problem" or need is essential to our work promoting wholeness and sustainability in our community.

When our aim is to promote wholeness instead of to solve problems, we remain accountable to our community. One of the ways we do this is by recognizing and honoring the complexity of the challenges we are facing together, such as inadequate access to healthcare, which, for many like Lucy, most definitely includes mental healthcare.

Reducing the entirety of a person down to a particular "problem" robs them of their humanity. There are many reasons we do this: in the case of those dealing with mental illness, they may stir unease within us and our own mental fragility. When this happens, we may be tempted to shy away from, or ostracize, persons with mental illness. This space we conveniently place between *us and them* is often filled with some underlying fear.

The same can be said of those houseless neighbors who occupy side streets, back alleys, and shelters. These folks too possess a brokenness that often puts the wider community off, creating a space between where offensive judgement grows. Their otherness is magnified by the physical and emotional distance that many create for a variety of reasons.

UMCP shares UrbanMission's openness to vulnerability in order to faithfully seek wholeness and step into these spaces of separation. We do this in many contexts:



- In our partnership with UrbanMission and the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, in the use of the property through our South Pomona Community Garden and our new Community Wellness Center.
- Through the restorative justice work done inside nearby California state prisons and with other organizations.
- Through our InsideOut Art shows, and the many organizations and churches called to support the restorative and transforming power of art.
- Through our coaching and consulting with organizations and churches willing to bridge the spaces within their own communities.

Being intentionally vulnerable in order to bridge the many spaces of separation created by this world is challenging; we must step lightly and hold many things in tension. But by doing so, we can tear down walls, cross boundaries, and bridge spaces of separation to become agents of wholeness and healing in a fractured and hurting world.

Lucy stayed that evening. As dinner was served, her behavior began to change. Her spirit settled. She ate, and then got up to leave. As she made her way to the door she approached me, gave me a hug, and asked for a piece of chocolate cake.

The NBA incubates new ministries, supporting social entrepreneurs of faith who are serving their communities in a variety of innovative ways and empowering these Disciples-led health and social service projects to focus on growth, impact, and sustainability. Learn more at nbacares.org/incubate or by contacting Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, Director of the NBA Incubate Initiative, at awatkins@nbacares.org.