

Law School Christian Fellowship – Spring Break in Sandtown

On a Sunday morning, we arrived in Sandtown, a seemingly hopeless, poverty-stricken neighborhood in west Baltimore. The 72 blocks that comprise the neighborhood were once a thriving center of African-American culture, music, businesses, faith and prosperity – cultivating leaders such as former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and jazz legend Cab Calloway. Today Sandtown is one of the most financially destitute communities in the nation, with nearly 40 percent of its children living below the poverty line. Neighborhood residents are plagued by drugs, crime, gang violence, homelessness, chronic unemployment and illiteracy. Housing in Sandtown consists mainly of army barracks-style projects and turn-of-the-century brick row houses, the majority of which are abandoned, boarded-up and decaying. Throughout the week, however, each encounter with community members chipped away at our unfounded assumptions about the promise and resources of neighborhoods like Sandtown.

As soon as we passed through the doors of the New Song Community Church, we were struck by the extraordinarily hopeful, loving atmosphere. A group of smiling children flocked around us, squabbling over who would be in charge of handing visitors service bulletins. Their faces radiated with pride and optimism as they told us about their excellent school and church. New Song is a truly diverse, manifestly loving congregation. Pastor Thurman Williams' sermon that Sunday infused every open heart with hope. Worship at New Song is a uniquely delightful experience—R&B-inspired praise music fills the sanctuary and flows exhilaratingly through the congregation. This celebration of the Lord's Supper was followed by a brunch of fellowship and soul food.

After the service, two of our hosts from the Episcopal Cathedral of the Incarnation, Don and Sarah Stevens-Rayburn, came over to introduce themselves. They led us outside and pointed to a gutted brownstone catty corner from the Church – “That's our house: 1418 Presstman Street,” Don informed us. It had no roof or back walls. What remained of the original structure was crumbling from almost 100 years of neglect. The house was the 13th Habitat house in Sandtown that the Cathedral sponsored with funds and volunteers. Don, a white-whiskered astrophysicist in his mid-sixties who rehabs houses in Sandtown “for fun,” had written the blueprints and would serve as our construction foreman for the week.

That evening, a few miles east near Johns Hopkins University, we attended an evening service at the Cathedral, joined again by Don and Sarah and conducted by another of our hosts, retired Reverend Ben Smith. It was an intimate, peaceful service with meditation substituted for the sermon—an ideal conclusion to our stirring, thought-provoking first day. We ate dinner with parishners at the Cathedral, retired to our hosts' homes and met again that evening to marvel over

and give prayers of thanks for the enormous generosity the Cathedral community had extended to us – providing beds, breakfasts, dinners, access to a chapel for morning prayer, free use of a van, and abundant kindness and patience. Reverend Jan Hamill, Don and Sarah, Ben, Ken and Doris McElroy, and Adele Wakefield, viewed their hospitality as an extension of their faith, serving their brothers and sisters in Sandtown.

Each morning, we bundled up and joined Don and other Habitat volunteers for construction in Sandtown. We loaded and unloaded trucks, mixed mortar and reinforced masonry, built walls, installed joists and a floor, built and installed chain fencing around backyards, and cleaned out an unfinished basement.

During lunches and dinners, we met individually with Elder Clyde Harris, Patty Prasada-Rao, Susan and Allan Tibbels, Antoine Bennett and Pastor Williams to discuss the challenges facing the Sandtown community. These leaders of the New Song team were frank and levelheaded about the daunting nature of their mission; yet their resilient hope was always apparent.

We also saw how people's individual, and often very different, life histories empower them to collectively gesture towards the message of peace that the men and women of Sandtown seek to embody. For example, Antoine explained how Eden Jobs, New Song's employment center, seeks not only to assist community members in finding a legal, stable source of livelihood, but also to encourage renewed faith and self-confidence. He told stories of men and women who had reclaimed their homes, their families, and their hope through the sometimes straightforward, but many other times complicated, road to economic security. Perhaps most inspiring was Antoine's strong sense of vision for his ministry, which was derived not simply from the rewarding nature of his good work—His skill and courage in working with the community came from his own broken past when he was devastated by the despondency of the prison system. Once out of prison, however, New Song's jobs program delivered Antoine from his despair and, in his heart, transformed Sandtown into a community of hope. Thus, his experience moved him to do his part to advance New Song's vision of shalom.

Throughout our trip, we observed the daily life of Sandtown around us—children walking to school in New Song uniforms; vacant lots full of garbage; police sirens; the conspicuous absence of grocery stores, banks, retail stores, or restaurants; murals depicting struggle and triumph or warning criminals that “there are children watching”; the overwhelming need in those 72 blocks in spite of its 52 churches; the tangible pain, fear, resentment and hopelessness starkly contrasted with the vibrant colors of finished Habitat homes. One day soon, a family will move in to 1418 Presstman Street and will know that it was built by God's love and

the “sweat equity” of neighbors and friends. And from now on, each member of our group will carry the hope of Sandtown in our hearts. Our group sought to help this community that the world discarded, and instead we were renewed by the Spirit that present in those 72 city blocks. We lovingly thank the people of Sandtown, New Song and the Cathedral who gave us this miraculous gift.