

Looking for a City with Foundations: Intentional Urban Communities as a Christian Response to Justice and Power

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For he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10).

In 1943, during the darkest days of World War Two, Northwestern University – located in the Chicago suburb of Evanston – published an obscure Hutterite document laying out the ground rules for life in a Christian intentional community (Schiemer 1943). Originally written in 1527, this ‘Discipline of the Believers: How a Christian is to Live’ (Schiemer) was one of the impulses leading to the founding of a small communal fellowship 490 years later in a conflict ridden, inner city neighborhood on Reba Place in Evanston, Illinois. The pioneer families, who set up this early Mennonite experiment in urban communal solidarity, raised their children, redistributed their incomes, advocated for humane housing conditions, and opposed US military

involvement in East Asia in a collective manner. Children growing up during the founding years of Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) enjoyed only limited personal privacy and even less in the way of family property. They did experience at a young age what it means to help refurbish dilapidated slum dwellings, live in close quarters with dozens of ‘brothers and sisters’, and demonstrate against the war in Vietnam, racial segregation, and property speculation. RPF’s founders were reform-minded graduates of Mennonite colleges in Virginia and Indiana. Instead of putting their dreams of a Christian community into practice in a rural setting, as had their forefathers for half a millennium, they opted to raise their families in an urban environment in an attempt to make the ‘Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision’ (Hershberger 1957) relevant to modern day society.

This author is one of those Reba Place children who grew up in the Fellowship during the 1950s and 1960s, experiencing a combination of communal living, social activism, and an egalitarian approach to collective governance based on the teachings of the historical Jesus and the life of the original Christian church. The following pages are as much the result of a thorough literature review on the topic as they are a personal rediscovery of the path taken by RPF during the last 60 years. One of my strongest memories of communal life as a child in Evanston was sharing a renovated Victorian mansion on Reba Place with several other Fellowship families; waking up for breakfast in a combination kitchen-living room, which served simultaneously as a children’s bedroom for four. Research for this chapter helped flesh out another childhood recollection, namely that extreme poverty not only has sights and sounds but also a uniquely unpleasant smell. Members of the Fellowship took their children along to RPF’s sister “Church of Hope” in the Peoria Street slums on Chicago’s South Side to help rebuild impoverished homes and empower the local minority community there. In the following, the reader will be introduced to the historical roots of RPF, the impact it had on its surrounding community, and the impressive successes and unique failures it faced in putting its faith-based approach to internal governance into practice. Since its founding in 1957, RPF largely succeeded in this dual approach to external servanthood and radical internal governance. The reasons it failed to live up to its own high standards during the second decade of its existence will be one of the main foci of this study. According to Harris (1973), the Reba Place model of “The Way of Love” (Miller 1960; Miller 2013) has survived and prospered where others have failed because of its emphasis on the sanctity of the individual within the collective as an expression of God’s will.

This author's personal experience growing up in Reba Place, along with extended email correspondence with past and present members of the Fellowship, have provided insights into the role that spiritual guidance and "a radical commitment to God's will" (Harris 1973: 178-180) can play in both encouraging and undermining individual freedom within the collective whole.

According to Jackson, a key component of the Reba Place approach to changing "the world by being an alternative community in which the kingdom of God is being manifested" (Miller 2013: 57) was the assumption that by continuously calling on "the Holy Spirit's help the congregation can deduce from the New Testament a set of instructions, commands, and prohibitions" (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 51), as a foundation for its social justice agenda. According to Harris (1973) and Miller (2013), it was the Holy Spirit which enabled RPF's egalitarian experiment in communal self-administration to succeed during the formative phase, starting with a student group led by the then theology professor John Miller¹ at Goshen College Indiana in 1956, and lasting until he was called as a professor and left Evanston for Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario in 1969. Inversely, Jackson and Jackson maintain that it was this very same radical dedication to the Holy Spirit which led to a stark undermining of personal freedom in the Fellowship during the 1970s. As described in "The Spirit, the Power, and the Excess (1972-1978)" (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 161-250), the Fellowship took a hard authoritarian turn after Miller's departure, only to recover and regroup in the 1980s. The Fellowship has largely been able to return to its original approach to internal governance, while expanding on its mission of radical servanthood during the last 40 years of its existence.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL ROOTS

Many strands of the communitarian tradition served the founding families at RPF as sources of inspiration. Along with various biblical references to living in community (e.g. Act 2:42-47) and collective governance and power sharing (e.g. Matthew 18), the historical German ('Taufgesinnte') and Dutch ('Doopsgezinde') Taufer movement

1 This author had the honor to discuss an earlier version of this article with John Miller before his death in late 2017.

of the 16th century Radical Reformation played an important role in guiding the young Mennonite students and scholars who initially founded the Fellowship (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 27-36). Please note here that this author prefers the historically precise term 'Taufers' (Kauffman 2009, 175), as opposed to the more commonplace descriptive 'Anabaptist', because the former more appropriately signifies the nature of the Radical Reformation, which dates its inception back to the reintroduction of adult baptism (or Taufe) in the Switzerland of 1525².

The actual founding of RPF can be followed back to the "Concern Movement", which was the direct result of reflections of a group of young Mennonite intellectuals meeting in April 1952 in Amsterdam (Toews 1990) in order to process their disappointment with their own historical peace church tradition. In the Netherlands during World War II, Mennonites and Quakers participated in the overall church resistance movement against Nazi occupation. Their contribution, however, did not go significantly beyond that of the Dutch Reform and Catholic churches³. The situation in Germany and Eastern Europe was much more troubling. At best, the Mennonites put up little resistance to the gradual introduction of totalitarianism throughout the 1930s. By the late 1940s it had become increasingly evident that in the eastern part of Germany and in the regions occupied by the Nazis as of 1939 many Mennonites had openly sympathized with the German authorities (Regier 2004, Schroeder 2003). The Concern Movement saw this pervasive inability or unwillingness to resist fascism as indicative of the larger crisis within the church in general, and the Taufers tradition in particular. According to Paul Toews' definitive study, 'The Concern Movement: Its Origins and Early History' (1990) and Hershberger's analysis of the impact of 'Concern' on the Mennonite church today (2013), RPF should be understood as the tangible realization of the hopes

2 According to adherents of the Radical Reformation, pedobaptism, or the baptism of infants as practiced by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Magisterial Protestant denominations, was not in conformity with the traditions of the original, first century Church. By practicing 'believers baptism', thus allowing any devout Christian to baptize new adult members into the faith, the Taufers movement also undermined the authority of the priest as dominant leader of the congregation (Bender, Friedmann and Klaassen 1990).

3 The anti-fascist resistance of the overall Church in the Netherlands was as much national as it was based in the Christian faith. Despite their longstanding tradition of radical pacifism, the historical peace churches did not develop a unique form of opposition to the Nazis along the lines of the anti-war position taken by the Taufers during the Ottoman occupation of Central Europe in the 16th century (Zijpp and Brüsewitz 2011; Sensenig 2016).

and dreams of those young critics of the Taufer tradition who had been forced to consider a radical transformation of their approach to community and service to society. One of the up-and-coming Mennonite intellectuals of his day, the young Paul Peachey, “wrote his colleagues that ‘from all appearances Amsterdam succeeded in jolting us out of some of our complacency’ (Toews 1990: 12).” Upon returning to the United States, the Concern group would discover that – at least initially – few within the leadership of the Mennonite church shared their exuberance for a radical renewal of the faith.

Several members of the Amsterdam group played a direct role in applying their newly won convictions to both their scholarly work and practical life experience. With the support of his fellow theologian, John Howard Yoder, RPF founder John Miller attempted to implement the thinking of Concern in both instruction and communal living at Goshen College Biblical Seminary in Indiana. Returning from Europe in 1954, Miller brought the enthusiasm to change “the world-wide church” to the satiated Mennonite church of the post-war era in America (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 16). His message was not well received by those in power. This ultimately led to Miller being pressured by his employers, in early 1957, to take an extended leave of absence in order to reconsider his radical intentions. Rather than discouraging the adherents of Concern (i.e. Miller, Peachey, and Yoder) in their attempt to revolutionize the church, this disciplinary measure was actually the spark leading to the founding of the first urban community within the, until then primarily agrarian, Taufer tradition. Taking a group of young scholars and students with him, Miller and his wife Louise moved to Evanston in the summer of 1957, setting up a Mennonite commune in a three story Victorian mansion in a short, one-way street named Reba Place. They were followed shortly thereafter by a small group of recent graduates of Eastern Mennonite College (EMC) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, including this author’s parents. As a member of the Concern team, the eminent Mennonite sociologist, Paul Peachey, played an important role in promoting the Reba Place experiment at EMC, today’s EMU. John Howard Yoder, known internationally as author of the definitive pacifist study on church-state relations, “The Politics of Jesus” (1994), remained at Goshen College, supporting RPF from within the largely ambivalent to hostile Mennonite ‘academic establishment’ (Jackson and Jackson 1987).

According to Timothy Miller’s exhaustive survey of intentional communities in North America during this period, the decision to set up a Christian intentional community (CIC) in a major city

was a break with Taufer tradition. The founders of RPF took the “unprecedented and radical step of planting a Christian community not in a rural area, as the Hutterites and Bruderhof had done before them, but in metropolitan Chicago – a place where they could use the traditional Anabaptist vision of righteousness to confront endemic social evil” (1998:182). Many rural role models existed at this time, which the founders of RPF could have emulated, including the Amish, Old Order Mennonite, and Hutterite communities of their own Taufer tradition, the afore mentioned Society of Brothers (Bruderhof) with its German-Christian Socialist roots, and most importantly, the interracial Koinonia Farm, founded in 1942 at the height of the segregationist period, in Americus Georgia⁴. As shall be illustrated below, the choice of an urban context proved to be beneficial on all fronts. It not only provided a solid financial foundation and readily available housing and infrastructure for the Fellowship, but also promoted the peace, freedom, and social justice agendas of this community by placing them in the center of various escalating conflicts during the coming decades, including the wars in South East Asia and Central America, the struggle for civil rights, and battle for affordable and dignified housing in America’s big cities (Harris 1973).

A wealth of literature now exists on the history of Reba Place and the role of the Taufer tradition in its development. As described by Toews (1990) and Hershberger (2013), the founders of Concern Movement and RPF looked back into their shared history to anchor themselves in the experience of 1st and 16th century Christian communities in the Middle East and Central Europe respectively. According to a reference in Janzen’s overview of CIC in North America, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has also played a role, if only indirectly, in the trajectory of RPF (1996: 133). Often cited as a major influence on 20th and 21st century New Monasticism, Bonhoeffer’s principled 1938 anti-fascist volume ‘Gemeinsames Leben’ (Life Together) stands in stark contrast to the capitulation of German Mennonites when faced with the terror of the Nazi regime (1954:21).

During its formative years, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, RPF had close ties to numerous CICs throughout North America.

⁴ Based on the ancient term for deep fellowship, Koinonia Farm directly challenged the racist practices in the ‘Jim Crow’ south of the 1940s and 1950s. Not unlike Reba Place Fellowship which was founded 15 years later, this inter-racial agriculture community practiced shared property and simple living, radical pacifism, and an ecological approach to land use (Lee 2011).

Koinonia Farm, the Bruderhof, and the Hutterites were the most significant and these ties are well documented in the Jackson and Jackson study (1987). Like the Amish and Mennonites, the Hutterites were part of the Taufer historical peace church tradition, dating back to the early 16th century. The Bruderhof, rooted as it was in the Protestant branch of German Christian-Socialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was outlawed after the Nazis came to power in Germany. Its North American branch, the Society of Brothers, was created through a merger with the Hutterites in 1930 and absorbed much of the potential of the movement during and immediately after the war (Pfeiffer, 1992). The founders of RPF were attracted to both traditions, but ultimately shied away from a merger with either, encouraging those members who were interested in pursuing life in these agrarian communities to join them individually (Jackson and Jackson 1987:85). Ties with Koinonia Farm were much closer. Although this agrarian project was rooted in the historic traditions of earlier centuries, it shared the peace, freedom, and social justice commitments of the RPF founders. Both communities were openly interracial and anti-racist at a time when – even in 1950s Chicago – this was by no means the norm. In times of need, Koinonia and RPF supported each other financially, sending staff and even entire families to each other's communities, and participated in joint anti-war and economic development projects. Both communities were based on what Markofski terms 'holistic communitarianism', a tradition in which Christian evangelism, spirituality, and social justice activism go hand-in-hand (Markofski 2015: 21-22).

A final strand in the development of urban Christian communitarianism, which most likely did have an albeit limited influence on RPF, can be located within the Catholic and secular labor organizations and civil rights movements in the Chicago area. Evidence of this is purely anecdotal, though the literature on new monasticism does emphasize the importance of – for example – the Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933 (Huysen 2008: 414) and the impact of interaction between Martin Luther King Jr and RPF (Berger 2007, Shenk 2011, Miller Shearer 2015) on the latter's development. Historically, Mennonites shared and supported many of the social justice goals of the labor movement in the United States, although they were skeptical of labor unions in particular because of their perceived militancy (Thiessen 2009, Thiessen 2016). This author was unable to find any direct ties between the Catholic Worker Movement and RPF during the formative years. However, many links can be found today (Kauffman 2009).

Two issues were at the center of the thinking which ultimately led to the establishment of the RPF as a living community bent on witnessing to their Christian faith in an urban, rather than the more traditional rural environment. The first was the perceived need to counter the assimilation of the Taufer movement into its militarist, materialist, and individualist environment – or as the founders of RPF termed it “Mars (war), Mammon (materialism), and Me (individualism) (Schreiner Youngquist and Varela 2011: 46)” – in North America and Western Europe. The second was the desire to reintroduce the concept of the 1st and 16th century believers’ church – in which everyone in the group should be equally responsible for leading the community (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 113)

Over the 60 years of its existence, RPF has successfully resisted the pull of mainstream American society. Along the lines of Markofski’s concept of ‘holistic communitarianism,’ it has placed itself in opposition to American militarism at home and abroad, to corporate and individual greed, and to the prevalent culture of selfishness now common in many parts of the world. RPF has developed a variety of social enterprises and community services, ranging from education and care giving, to real estate and retail merchandising. These are described in great detail on its website (<http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/>). According to its current leadership, RPF continues to experiment with its dual approach to an alternative economy, which both serves the community and develops its inner sense of Christian worship. “Our experiments to date have included property management, book-keeping services, a nursery school, a home repair business, an artists’ cooperative, and an Amish furniture store” (Schreiner Youngquist 2012: 37).

This alternative economic model is seen as a form of Christian witnessing and as a tangible way of loving one’s neighbor. Individually and collectively, members of RPF have actively opposed the US wars and intervention in Korea, Vietnam, Latin America, Southern Africa, and the Middle East. Two specific examples – one related to countering government refugee policy and the other to undermining speculative housing practices – will be presented here in order to illustrate the hands-on approach taken by RPF.

The ‘Overground Railroad’ helps Central American refugees circumvent US immigration authorities and make their way safely to Canada (Epstein 1986). It was set up in the 1980s by Koinonia and RPF. According to Betzelberger: “Because Reba Place Fellowship and Koinonia shared an emphasis on social justice, pacifism, and close-knit

common-purse communities, they formed a close bond” (2011: 24). Together they created a network of faith-based organizations throughout the US and Canada. The Fellowship also actively supported refugees from Cambodia during this period and ultimately many began attending the Reba Place worship services and some were baptized into the Christian faith.

Of equal significance on the local and personal level was the work for renters’ and home owners’ rights. RPF was set up intentionally in 1957 in a racially mixed area of southern Evanston, in order to promote racial and social reconciliation and to fight housing speculation head on. In this manner, members of the Fellowship were able to actually live their faith and love their neighbors, figuratively and practically. According to Harris’ 1973 study, RPF not only served the lower income African-American residents in the community. They also launched a concerted campaign, including door-to-door canvassing, in order to convince their white neighbors to remain in their working class community. The comparatively large real estate holdings of the Fellowship played an important part in countering property speculation in this part of Evanston (106-107). Rooted in the ‘Overground Railroad’ refugee resettlement ministry, the Reba Place Development Corporation continues to play a key role in creating affordable, below market housing units for low income renters and first buyers in Evanston.

The trajectory of the social justice servanthood agenda of RPF has been continuous from 1957 until today. This was not the case for its second core agenda, the attempt to recreate the egalitarian self-governance model of the early first century Church and the Radical Reformation. According to Harris’ 1973 study, the initial success of the Fellowship model of egalitarian self-rule was based on two factors, the first being the fact that formal and informal leadership positions had no impact on the living standards and external manifestations of prestige of those members entrusted with them. Because of the collective decision-making processes and the fact that all members agreed to live on a subsistence income – equal to the welfare recipients with whom they shared their neighborhood – leadership was considered a responsibility, but not a form of power or recognition. Secondly, the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding decision-making and influencing conflict situations was taken seriously. As mentioned at the outset of this study, the members of RPF saw disagreements and dissent as manifestations of divine Grace at work within the Fellowship of believers. This equilibrium would collapse after the departure of John Miller in mid-1969. According to Jackson and Jackson, the introduction of the Charismatic Renewal Movement to RPF in the early 1970s led to a concentration of power in the hands of

the middle and top level leadership. One decade later, after a severe crisis of confidence, this process was reversed. In the words of Albert Steiner, one of the original ‘rebels’ who accompanied Miller from Goshen to Evanston, the Fellowship abandoned its democratic principles during the Charismatic experiment between 1972 and 1979.

“Before his departure,” recalls Albert, “there was a certain, almost pride in our not having leaders—a pride led by John Miller, himself. This attitude was built on the theory that everyone in the group should be equally responsible, and it came from a strong reaction to some historical abuses by clergy.” (Jackson and Jackson 1987:113-114).

After Miller’s departure, power gradually became concentrated in the hands of the leadership ‘Coordinating Committee’, later called elders. The Fellowship began an extended, painful, but ultimately successful process of “Repentance, Regrouping, and Renewal” as of 1978 (Jackson and Jackson 1987:244-251). By 1980 the process of concentration of power in the hands of a few had been largely reversed. “The Review, a seven-month in-depth look at what had gone wrong and what needed to change” determined that the abuse of power by the elders, household leaders, and those enjoying informal power had “betrayed not only the trust of the community but also their responsibility to the Lord” (Jackson and Jackson 1987: 194, 197). According to Schreiner Youngquist and Varela (2011) this abuse of power had a particularly detrimental effect on two groups, namely women and minorities, primarily African-Americans and Latinos. Today RPF has taken great strides to rectify these problems, integrating women and minorities into its leadership and diversifying its membership structures to integrate those choosing not to live in communal households (Schreiner Youngquist 2012).

Reba Place Fellowship offers 21st century social activists and faith-based seekers alike an interesting example of applied Christian communitarianism over an extended period of time. Its modest achievements in speaking truth to power go hand-in-hand with its admittedly mixed successes in living a truly egalitarian lifestyle based on the role model of early Christianity. As a direct result of this experiment, this author traces many of his progressive instincts back to his experience of growing up in an intentional Christian community. With the 2025 quinqucentennial of the Radical Reformation rapidly approaching, revisiting the 60 year history of RPF provides insights into the promises and challenges of relying on the Holy Spirit to ‘counter Mars, mammon, and me’ within a shared communal space in a globalized urban society.

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