

Beacons of Hope: Communities of Shalom

by John W. Coleman , Jr.

You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. Isaiah 58:12b

In Gallatin, Tennessee, an interracial, ecumenical coalition of seven churches worked alongside local residents, businesses, and institutions over the past four years to rescue and refurbish a city park once overrun with drug dealers. Today, the park is used for recreation programs and a community garden that grows and nurtures relationships as much as it does vegetables, according to the Rev. Cathie Leimenstoll, pastor of Rehoboth United Methodist Church. The Shalom Zone Coalition recently embarked on its most ambitious project yet: raising \$2 million to save an abandoned but once-cherished African American high school facing demolition. The coalition plans to resurrect it as a community education and activity center.



*Children at the Frankford Group Ministry.
Image by:John Coleman
Source: New World Outlook*



*The combined church choirs of the Gallatin,
Tennessee, Shalom Zone Coalition.
Image by:Linda Wesley
Source: New World Outlook*

In Illinois, another new community center may well become the salvation of a depressed section of Decatur, long burdened with poor housing, high crime, and apathy. Since 1994, the United Community of Shalom, a church-based community coalition, has overcome city politics and racial, cultural, and economic differences among its members in its quest to build the much-needed activity center. In June 2001, more than 500 people celebrated the new facility, which offers space for recreation, social services, and neighborhood programs. Most of all, it has inspired renewed pride, cooperation, and hope for the future.

Ten Year Anniversary

Such is the promise and spirit of Communities of Shalom, a 10-year-old United Methodist initiative that has emerged as a movement among congregations and communities throughout the continental United States and in parts of Africa. It all began in 1992 in Los Angeles, California, in the wake of the devastating riots ignited by the acquittal of White policemen in the beating of Black motorist Rodney King. With support authorized by the denomination's General Conference, United Methodist churches and their neighbors responded to the violence by developing intensive and collaborative ministries in designated Shalom Zone areas. They sought to address community concerns, heal conflicts, and remedy the deplorable conditions that had helped fuel the uprisings.

As of June 2002, teams from more than 500 Shalom sites in cities, towns, and rural areas have been trained and commissioned for ministry in 42 annual conferences. A decade after its birth, the initiative is still touching and transforming lives and relationships in many communities that wrestle with poverty, violence, alienation, and despair. Shalom sites engage congregations with their neighbors—often including different faith groups, local residents, businesses, police, community organizations, schools, and other institutions—in joint efforts to transform systems that affect people's lives.

The resulting kaleidoscope of ministries ranges from community gardens, nutrition programs, and health clinics to affordable housing, community centers, entrepreneur programs, computer-literacy classes, and multiracial coalitions that advocate for social justice.

Strengthened multicultural relationships, like those being nurtured in Gallatin and Decatur, are one of the four primary goals that all communities of Shalom are expected to pursue. The others are spiritual growth, economic development, and health and wholeness. Asset-based community development, which focuses on a community's resources rather than solely on its needs, is one of the four guiding principles of Shalom emphasized in training and program development. The others are collaboration to achieve common goals, mission evangelism that emphasizes the spiritual and social needs of people in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and systemic change that addresses the root causes of the problems, which may be racism or economic exploitation.

Empowering Communities

Learning about collaboration and asset-based community development were the main attractions to the Shalom Initiative for church leaders in the Wyoming Conference, comprising parts of Pennsylvania and New York State. In 1999, a five-month-long Shalom training was held in three sites in northeastern Pennsylvania. Today there are 11 Shalom sites in the conference.

One site in Wilkes-Barre opened a children's museum this year at First United Methodist Church. It accompanies the student-run coffee house created in 1999 to offer youth and young adults a safe place for creative entertainment and fellowship. Another site in Binghamton, New York, is working with two area universities and city-planning officials to examine community needs and assets and to plan improvements in local building conditions and public safety.

"We see the Shalom strategy as an exciting way to empower congregations and communities," said conference Shalom coordinator the Rev. J. P. Duncan, who provides training, technical assistance, and networking support to link sites to available resources. "It gave our small-membership churches permission to see themselves as potential catalysts for change through shared responsibility. A small group of church members can put together a Shalom team with participants from the community to identify resources and address problems. They realize, 'We don't have to do it all by ourselves.'"

Participation and leadership for the sites come from the area's diverse faith communities, said Duncan. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Assemblies of God, Muslim, Jewish, and Quaker communities are represented. Such interfaith collaboration may present practical challenges, but it can also yield opportunities and forge a collective vision of Shalom.

As conference Shalom coordinator, Duncan addresses these and other concerns in the training he conducts for leaders of new sites. He also gathers delegates from each site three times a year to build relationships and share information, insights, and possible solutions to one another's problems.

The Rev. Jack Washington, who directs mission outreach for the South Carolina Conference, provides similar support for the 19 Shalom sites in his area. He trains new site teams and monitors the progress of others. He also convenes a steering committee of site leaders to plan and share ideas.

South Carolina was one of the first conferences to undergo Shalom training in 1994, the year after the Los Angeles model was presented at the first Shalom Summit. Site teams benefit from a yearly convocation that brings them together for networking, workshops, site visits, worship, and a banquet to celebrate their varied ministries. More than 200 adults and close to 200 youth attended the February 2002 event.

South Carolina also operates a literacy program in five counties that not only provides tutoring for children and adults but also tries to nurture self-esteem and civic involvement in community concerns. With support from the governor's office, a local college, and a literacy council, the two-year-old program has improved students' grades and reading performance at all levels, according to Washington.

"Shalom has become a major part of our conference's overall mission program" said Washington, "because it offers so many creative opportunities for churches to get involved and make a real difference in the lives of their communities."

Work That Matters

In the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, home of Decatur's United Community of Shalom, one site has built a park and started a summer festival to bring neighbors together, while others sponsor nutrition programs for older adults, food pantries, a parish nurse, and youth activities.

"Shalom does work that matters," said the Rev. Pinckney Love, conference coordinator, "and it affects people's lives deeply." Like others, he sees the Shalom training experience as the key to finding new ways of seeing and doing ministry, especially since it brings together people who may have never before sat down with each other to talk about their community and what it could become.

“We get them to tell their stories and discover how much they have in common. Then the light-bulb goes on,” he said. “As trainers we ask the questions that any community must be able to answer: ‘What are your assets, your spiritual and social needs and strengths?’ We encourage teams to address those questions before deciding what they want to do.”

Conference Support Is Key

Communities of Shalom director Lynda Byrd and a national team of consultants initially train Shalom teams and evaluate Shalom sites. However, some conference coordinators learn to facilitate trainings and other functions themselves through an advanced course titled Equipping Shalom Communities.

“When it comes to keeping Shalom site teams motivated, trained, and connected with the overall initiative, there is no single component more important than strong, committed conference leadership,” said Byrd, who works with the National Shalom Committee to oversee the global program. “When participants at the individual sites recognize that they are part of a greater ministry that is transforming lives in different places, they gain tremendous energy.”

Sally Vonner of the North Texas Conference, one of five 10-10-10 missionaries serving conferences as full-time Shalom coordinators, attended the first Equipping Shalom Communities training in 1999. She has since trained leaders for at least four new sites and new leaders for existing sites.

“It’s a challenging task that requires much preparation and availability to help sites stay on track and stay motivated to meet their goals,” she said. “But far outweighing those challenges is the feeling of triumph when we see Shalom teams become empowered and exhilarated as they complete their training, graduate, and begin to implement their Shalom plans.”

Local sites in North Texas provide summer and after-school activities, family counseling, emergency assistance, senior-citizen programs, and legal aid, counseling, citizenship classes, and other services for recent immigrants, many of whom are undocumented. Vonner’s office also provides several conference-wide programs, including a popular youth entrepreneur training experience in

which teenagers learn to plan and run businesses and explores future career opportunities.

Yet, Shalom faces challenges in North Texas, like other conferences. “With all we’re doing to support our sites and other local ministries, we still have to help others in the conference see what we’re about,” said Vonner. “We also struggle to develop stronger lay and clergy leadership and to build up our financial resources for ministry.”

“It is important that conferences embrace Shalom and that leaders understand the need and the tremendous potential this collaborative model of ministry offers to churches and their communities,” said Byrd, who also is assistant general secretary of the Community Ministries Program Unit of the General Board of Global Ministries.

“With the unbelievable leadership, growth, and creativity that has emerged through this initiative, Shalom sites can become greater resources to each other by networking across the denomination,” she added. “That is where we will shift the focus of this initiative in the future, creating more partnerships to leverage what we have learned and what we each have to offer.”

Shalom partnerships between the Baltimore-Washington and Zimbabwe conferences and between the Texas Conference and the Methodist Church of Ghana will be lifted up at the sixth Shalom Summit in Washington, D.C., December 12-15, 2002. Conference coordinators and their teams from communities across the United States will share information and insights about their ministries—both trials and triumphs—as they celebrate the initiative’s tenth anniversary. The summit will also feature guest speakers, 14 workshops and study tracks, and visits to four of the dozen local Shalom sites in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

“We have discovered that Shalom is the antidote, the spirit-led solution for dysfunctional communities plagued by every disease and disorder that afflicts our society,” said Washington Area Bishop Felton Edwin May, host for the summit and the first chairman of the National Shalom Committee from 1992 to 1996. “My only regret is that while our communities are facing life-or-death circumstances,

the church is treating Shalom like all its other programs rather than giving it the preeminence it deserves.”

Undoubtedly, the effort to raise the stature and support of Communities of Shalom within annual conferences and across the denomination will require broader networking and participation. That, in turn, will require more trained leaders.

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Beacons of Hope

“Communities of Shalom were the church’s response to racism and injustice, to the lack of economic opportunity and hope that exploded in violence 10 years ago. Today many of these communities are beacons of hope. They have demonstrated that by utilizing the assets of the community, collaborating with institutions and other partners, and strategically planning to bring about systemic change, communities can be transformed by the power of Christ through the church.”

Bishop Max Whitfield, National Shalom Committee Chairman and Episcopal Leader of the Northwest Texas-New Mexico Area

Goals of a Community of Shalom

Spiritual Growth: To renew the Spirit of God among church and community members and help them become more faithful witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Economic Development: To generate hope, stability, and economic growth in communities through the creation of homes, businesses, skills, and employment among residents.

Strengthened Multicultural Relationships: To stimulate and strengthen relationships that cross barriers of race, culture, religion, and economic class, and to help participants understand and resolve the discord and disadvantages that often result from those barriers.

Healing and Wholeness: To improve the health and welfare of communities, while helping churches and residents to overcome the physical, emotional, spiritual, and social damage caused by poverty, illness, and despair.

Principles of a Community of Shalom

Mission Evangelism: To live out, through word and deed, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in love, forgiveness, mercy, and deliverance and thereby to reach persons where they are, uplift them, and welcome them into a new life of faith and righteousness.

Asset-Based Community Development: To identify, develop, and capitalize on local talents, skills, relationships, and material assets as primary resources for generating economic growth and confidence among residents.

Collaboration: To engage diverse residents, organizations, institutions, businesses, and congregations in working together painstakingly to pursue a common Shalom vision of bringing healing, wholeness, unity, and development to their community.

Systemic Change: To substantially improve people's lives and relationships by addressing the causes, and not merely the consequences of poverty, injustice, despair, and conflict. Those causes are often represented in the flawed systems

and institutions that control or mediate access to basic needs and resources, and they must be challenged and reconciled through advocacy and community empowerment.