

Communities of Shalom: Realizing the Vision

by Lynda Byrd

Ten years ago, General Conference delegates united in response to the social, economic, and spiritual devastation of riots in Los Angeles. The response was Communities of Shalom, “churches and communities working together to renew and rebuild community life.”

Today, more than 500 Shalom communities are making a difference in rural, urban, domestic, and global settings. First-time homeowners have received needed training in the dynamics of credit and public housing. Because of the training, poor living arrangements have greatly improved for families and singles in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Charleston, South Carolina; Camden, New Jersey; Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina; Memphis, Tennessee; Little Rock, Arkansas; Bamberg, South Carolina; small- and mid-sized towns and cities across the North Texas Annual Conference; and multiple settings across the United States.

While access to health care continues to plague political pundits, Shalom communities have created safety nets to provide assistance to the poor and indigent. These include immunizations for children and basic medical examinations for youth and adults with no previous health-care



La Sander Saunders from the Deaf Community of Shalom, Baltimore-Washington Conference, addresses a group at Shalom Summit V.

Image by: John Coleman

Source: New World Outlook



Shalom logo.

Image by: New World Outlook

provisions. The aged and the “almost ill” are receiving levels of health care that had previously been inaccessible. Neighborhood clinics served by volunteer physicians, nurses, and dentists are welcomed additions, providing treatment, medication, and the chance to hold jobs previously denied because of untreated health conditions.

Collaboration, one of the Shalom principles, has been the catalyst for people to gather across socioeconomic and racial divides to address common issues. Communities of Shalom have become the places where reconciliation begins in communities long divided by unchallenged differences that are more myth than fact. Efforts toward conflict resolution have proved effective. Well-structured training programs help clergy and laypeople guide people out of prejudice, miscommunication, and spiritual anemia.

A Worldwide Shalom

Shalom experiences continue to reach across congregations, communities, and even continents. They are reflected through the compelling need to share resources and realize in remarkable ways the benefits of asset-based community development. Five annual conferences combined their resources to assist in the purchase of a mobile medical unit as an extension service to the Watreso Shalom Clinic in Obuasi, Ghana. Five people representing these annual conferences traveled to Ghana to put the mobile medical unit into service.

More than 400,000 residents living in villages and hamlets in the undeveloped areas around Obuasi now have access to basic medical care. The Watreso Clinic (established as a Shalom site after training in 1999) provides health care to children, women, and families who are able to walk or find limited means of transportation to reach the remote clinic. Still, thousands could not travel the distance. True to the culture of collaboration, Shalom communities in the United States made their resources available. Following the lead of the Texas Conference and its gift of \$8000 toward the mobile medical unit, Northern Illinois, Illinois Great Rivers, and the Baltimore-Washington annual conferences made contributions that realized the global partnership.

This sharing of gifts demonstrates the scope of possibilities when Shalom sites embrace the role of “repairers of the breach.” Partnerships are enriched by valuing every contribution because no one is without a gift to share.

Demonstrated Positive Outcomes

In 2001 alone, 74 Shalom Sites interviewed (of 123 Active Sites identified) affected more than 65,000 lives. In 2002, more than 700 leaders served on local Shalom Teams. Across the country, 840 secular organizations and 570 religious congregations partner or collaborate with Shalom Sites. Generating human, physical, and financial assets, Shalom is active primarily in low-income communities, in areas with both very low and very high population densities.

As a churchwide initiative, Shalom is:

- Seized by people who are motivated by strong spiritual callings as a way to intentionally manifest their faith;
- Creating opportunities and relationships through which people at all levels of connection with local sites further their personal faith journeys;
- Initiating and/or strengthening partnerships among congregations and community organizations;
- Generating program ministries that build local assets as they improve economic development and health conditions within local communities; and
- Creating opportunities and relationships that result in improve racial/ethnic understandings.

Communities of Shalom

Shalom calls people, churches, and local organizations together to determine and create their own vision of the future. Shalom Sites minister to urgent needs, while taking steps to initiate systemic change in the environments that limit wholeness and growth, by pursuing four central goals: Spiritual Growth, Economic Development, Strengthened Multicultural Relationships, and Healing and Wholeness.

The originators of the Shalom Initiative were keenly aware that its approach to

community ministry must generate widespread, multidimensional impacts. The initiative paid careful attention to four principles: Mission Evangelism, Asset-Based Community Development, Collaboration, and Systemic Change.

Communities of Shalom (COS) training

This five-session module takes place over six months and equips people to implement the Shalom Initiative in their local geographic areas. Clergy, laity, community leaders, and community residents learn specific skills in planning and leadership. They also gain knowledge about identifying, developing, and utilizing local assets and creating effective partnerships.

A second important training component, called Equipping Shalom Communities (ESC), was developed in 1998 for Conference Shalom Coordinators. The training teaches coordinators how to facilitate initial consultations with potential sites and conduct the COS training.

Sites that complete COS training are eligible to receive seed-money grants of \$2000 from the Shalom office. Approved sites also can receive second-tier funding up to \$10,000. Both grants are intended to support sites' requests for resource from other sources. In order to receive grants, sites must submit proposals that address the benchmarks set forth by the Shalom office in the COS training.

In addition to training and funding, the Shalom office and most annual conferences provide sites with newsletters, site visits, networks that deliver information about opportunities, and affirmation and encouragement.

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