

JOINING HANDS: A "Talking Paper" (Thanksgiving 2004)

An interesting problem is how two important community institutions -- Asbury Methodist Church and the Cherrywood Neighborhood Association -- might act in concert for mutual benefit.

Asbury (< http://www.gbgm-umc.org/asburyumc_austin/ >) began as a neighborhood congregation. Members who lived nearby founded it in 1948, and raised the graceful stone building at Cherrywood & 38½ Street. It continues to be one of our cultural and activity centers. Our children enjoy its Open Day Preschool < <http://www.opendoorpreschool.org/> >. We meet there. We vote there. Anytime we ask a favor of the Church, the answer unwaveringly is yes.

And yet, demographic changes have stretched the original tie. The founders have aged and moved away, though some still come to attend worship. Community churches in general have lost ground to mega-churches and TV ministries, which seem to offer a quicker if shallower religious experience. Young families seem find joining a small, intimate congregation less appealing than seeking rapture alone or in a crowd. But that's another story. The upshot is that the Asbury congregation physically has drifted away from the Cherrywood community.

This is a loss. There is even talk of the Church closing, and the property put up for sale. Imagine "Asbury Business Park" with a Physicians Weight Loss Center franchise instead of a sanctuary. Could happen! It would be as bad as AISD closing Maplewood Elementary. Our whole sense of neighborhood and community would suffer a crippling wound.

Can we prevent such a future? Maybe, if we shake hands:

1. Asbury and CNA discuss it together
2. We allow time for trial and error
3. We combine small initiatives into a whole

Asbury, for its part, must entertain hosting initiatives designed to appeal to Cherrywood residents, who for the most part are a generation younger than the Asbury members. These initiatives may include or evolve a spiritual component, but not necessarily. They must begin at the beginning -- addressing existing community interests that might be largely social.

CNA, for its part, must join Asbury members to generate ideas. What might 78722 residents find interesting and valuable that involves the Church? First discussions should be totally uncritical "ideaphoria" in the nature of a "focus group." We should write down every idea that occurs, no matter how silly it might sound.

Noontime concerts? Dance lessons for shy teens? Friday night child care? Showcase for local artists? Pot luck suppers? Fora to thrash out neighborhood social or ethical issues, such what we should do about the homeless among us? Gripe sessions? Introduction to contemporary Christian Mystics? Part-time job fairs? Remodel the building? Recruit new tenants? Who knows? Nothing should be out of bounds. THEN (and only then), after our imaginations are exhausted, we should start eliminating less promising suggestions. The list that survives should be our menu of choices to consider, refine, and try.