

Crazy. And Christ-like?

Rachel Twigg Boyce

House Blend Ministries was first formed when a group of people within the Mennonite Brethren Church in Manitoba felt a growing sense that God was calling our denomination to engage the city of Winnipeg in new ways. This group began meeting biweekly to pray and dream. Eventually the group felt that rather than starting a new church or a new ministry, we should begin by forming a team of people who are passionate about the issues connected to inner-city neighbourhoods. Then we would allow ministry and mission to flow from the group that God had shaped and the

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particular individuals God was calling. It was at this time that I was hired on a part-time basis to help us move from dream to reality.

Interested people were invited to come together weekly to study *Sub-merge: Living Deep in a Shallow World: Service, Justice and Contemplation among the World's Poor*, by John B. Hayes.¹ This gathering eventually became a weekly potluck where we could get to know each other, learn more about the residents of Winnipeg's West End, pray, dream, and discern God's direction.

In the fall of 2009, at the end of a potluck one of our members said, "You know, I sometimes let homeless people sleep on my couch." No one knew how to respond to that comment. She was a single woman who lived alone. Surely inviting homeless people to sleep on her couch was crazy. And Christ-like? And crazy. And Christ-like? Our gathering ended awkwardly that night.

A few days later I had the opportunity to meet with author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. He did not know what had happened to me that week, but he told me this story: "I know a single

woman who lives alone who encountered a homeless man and felt that she should invite him to stay on her couch. This seemed both dangerous and exactly what Jesus would do, and in that moment

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she asked herself two questions: “Why have I arranged my life in ways that make it so difficult to do good, and how can I rearrange my life in ways that would make it easier to do good?”²

That conversation and those questions created a light-bulb moment for me, and they changed the shape of our growing community’s conversations. It is both crazy and Christ-like to invite a homeless person to sleep on your couch, but it would be easier (and significantly less crazy) if you didn’t live

alone. It would be even easier if these sorts of invitations were being made in the context of a supportive community of people who live within walking distance of each other.

Exploring ways of making it easier to do good

Over the next few months we continued to explore ways of making it easier to do good. We discerned that a key element we needed was a community home in the neighbourhood where some of our members would live and where some bedrooms would be reserved for guests in need of a place to stay. Other members of our community would live in the surrounding area as an additional layer of support.

We were excited about this opportunity, but I also thought of it as an impossible dream. Where would the money and other resources come from to purchase and maintain such a home?

There is a longer and amazing story behind what happened next, but a few months after discerning that we needed to purchase a home, we had one, and after a few more months of renovations, three members of our community moved into their new home. Since then we have continued to renovate this home, and now we are looking forward to having eight bedrooms available for community members and guests.

We are still a very young community, and we are being formed largely by a combination of faith in Jesus Christ and trial and

error. We are excited about what God is up to in our community and our neighbourhood, and we are looking forward to what will happen next. We are inspired by Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you [have] become so dear to us."

Although we are being formed as an intentional community, we are also individuals, and while we share some distinctive practices and inspirations, I have also been formed by my own experiences and unique personality, and the following thoughts are largely my own.

My decision to participate in the formation of this Christian intentional community stems from my sense that this is the way Christ is calling me to live; it is intricately tied to my faith and my desire to live into the Great Commission. I think there is no better way to disciple others and to be disciplined than in the context of a community that I can commit to being a part of for the rest of my life.

I am also inspired to live in community through my understanding of scripture and the example of those who have lived in

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community throughout history including monastics, Catholic Workers, and Anabaptists. In addition, I am inspired by my own experiences working for Mennonite Central Committee, by my friends in a local Benedictine monastery, and by the growing network of likeminded individuals I have had the privilege to meet in the past few years.

Several years ago I had the good fortune to spend some time with Reba Place Fellowship in the Chicago area, and it was there that many of the pieces of my dream for House Blend fell into place. It is exciting to see so many people, from a broad range of experi-

ences and denominations, who are embracing this way of life. I see it as truly reflective of the image of the church as a body: the various parts may look different from each other, but when they work together it is a beautiful thing.

Sustaining practices

A variety of practices have given me life throughout this journey. Several of these, such as the practice of Sabbath-keeping, retreat, and regular visits to a spiritual director, have found their way into our community's Rule of Life. Gardening together and simply finding time to laugh and have fun with friends, both within our community and outside it, have been vital to ensuring that I can sustain this delightful but difficult way of life. Our weekly potluck

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and prayer evening is also a highlight of the week, giving me a chance to touch base with others in the community and to meet people who are interested in learning more about our way of life.

Once a week we gather at our community house for “potluck and prayer.” This is open to anyone who wants to attend, so it usually includes a mix of committed House Blenders, neighbours, and newcomers. For most of the year we begin with a potluck meal (during the summer we simplify our format) at which

we celebrate every item that is shared—from a bag of chips to Martha Stewart's latest masterpiece—as a gift for the community. After dinner a bell is rung to encourage people to finish their stories, clear their dishes, and retire to the parlour for prayer.

In theory, when we gather for prayer we are sitting in a circle, but in practice we are sometimes as many as twenty-five people crammed into a room that would comfortably seat ten—so function tends to trump form. After a brief explanation of what is about to happen (for the sake of newcomers), we go around the “circle,” and each person shares her name and one high and one low from their week. “Pass” is also a perfectly acceptable way to participate. Following the sharing, we take a moment of silence to hold each other's stories and settle into a time of prayer. We follow a consistent liturgical format that includes times of singing, scripture reading, and prayers of the people. The prayer ends with a group blessing, a round of Happy Birthday (when appropriate), and then it's time for coffee, cake, and more conversation.

Our weekly gathering is not the only time we use the practice of highs and lows. We also use it during our weekly house meet-

ing, at special gatherings, and in informal conversation. Anyone who has been around House Blend for even a short period of time will be familiar with this practice, even if he doesn't know about

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its more traditional origin: highs and lows is really a basic version of the awareness examen. I regularly practice the more formal version of this prayer, and appreciate both its simple wisdom and its grounding in Christian tradition and theology. I also love that with minimal instruction anyone, from the theologically trained to the first-timer, can participate in this prayer. Everyone can identify the places in their week that were highs and lows, and everyone has the opportunity both to share and to be listened to. This simple practice has had a deep subversive power: our

community continues to include those who tend to be ignored and who find it a rare gift to be able to speak about their highs and lows with people who are actively listening to them.

My participation in the House Blend community has stretched and shaped me into the person I am today, and I am looking forward to the ways it will continue to challenge me to grow into the person God wants me to be. I have experienced many highs and lows in my time with this community, but I can't think of a place I'd rather be than Winnipeg's West End, or a group of people I would rather choose to journey with than my House Blend community. It is, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, a delight to live in this way.

Notes

¹ Springvale, VIC: Go Alliance, 2002.

² I didn't realize this at the time, but I have since learned that these are the two questions that inspired Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day to begin the Catholic Worker Movement.

About the author

Rachel Twigg Boyce is a spiritual director and the pastor of House Blend Ministries, Winnipeg, Manitoba (houseblendministries.com). When she is not working, she can often be found drinking coffee, walking her dog, or doing both at the same time.