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## The Neighborhood

I will admit that I was slightly terrified by my choice to work in one of the most unsafe neighborhoods in North Minneapolis. The more articles I read about the high level of violence within the neighborhood certainly did not help; neither did my parents, advisors, and even the staff at Redeemer who warned me about the dangers of the neighborhood. Violence, drug abuse, and poverty are high. The City of Minneapolis Census Bureau states that the percentage of families living in poverty in the Harrison neighborhood is above state averages and has increased as much as 43 percent from 1979-1999 ([http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/neighborhoods/harrison\\_profile\\_home.asp](http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/neighborhoods/harrison_profile_home.asp)). I also quickly came to realize that my presence in the neighborhood was unusual. I was an obvious minority, white and seemingly wealthy I am sure. However, I was surprised by how quickly I stopped noticing my differences compared to those around me.

Working in an urban church setting, especially in a community like the Harrison neighborhood, taught me a great deal about church mission. I often compare my home congregation in Chandler, Arizona and St. Olaf to Redeemer and almost always find myself very critical of the religious communities in which I have previously been involved. I believe that Redeemer excels in furthering the Christian message based on hope, trust, and building community. Compared to most Lutheran congregations that define themselves by numbers and memberships, Redeemer chooses to define itself by the neighborhood that surrounds them. In other words, Redeemer strives to be a church community based geographically rather than congregationally. Moreover, the staff at Redeemer do not just preach this message; they live it by choosing to reside within the neighborhood itself.

## The Mission

Redeemer defines its mission as, “a beacon of hope” to the Harrison neighborhood through providing a “dynamic, impactful ministry through the development of authentic, transformational relationships” grounded in Christ’s love (<http://www.redeermpls.org/>). I was drawn to Redeemer largely because of this commitment as well as the work of Redeemer’s non-profit branch the Redeemer Center for Life. Redeemer also boasts in its diversity. It has become a church body that truly does reach out to an array of people ranging from upper middle class St. Olaf, Wartburg, and Concordia alumni to struggling neighborhood families who are all in search of being part of a powerful community.

Redeemer is by no means a perfect church community. Daily it deals with and accepts the challenges of working within an impoverished urban neighborhood. Congregational numbers are not high, due in a large part to the transient nature of many families living in North Minneapolis. Funding is mediocre and mainly comes through outside sources and the Redeemer Center for Life. Robert Wuthnow reiterates these challenges of the urban church in his book *Saving America: Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society*. He believes that religion is not only “fundamentally social” but also contextual in that “its implications are always conditioned by the contexts in which it occurs” (17). Wuthnow defends faith based service organizations as influential, positive, and lasting organizations for social change. Again, Wuthnow emphasizes Redeemer’s beliefs that “faith is principally about community, a community of belonging and identity that involves deep friendships and caring and that puts religious teaching into practice” (175). While Wuthnow critiques most faith based service organizations as failing to provide this type of community, he acknowledges that a few do. I believe that he would view Redeemer as one of these few.

## Worship

My worship experiences at Redeemer were always exciting and uplifting. I had never experienced a Lutheran worship service quite like those at Redeemer, nor knew they even existed. I was always struck by the amount of diversity at any given Redeemer Sunday worship and how well this dynamic worked for the church community and its mission. We sang from the LBW, but only to add in drums, tambourines, and whatever other instruments to create some extra rhythm and life. Pastor Kelly's sermons were always straight forward and simple. He always spoke about the importance of direct and immediate social change. I always appreciated these sermons. Redeemer is wholeheartedly determined to make a difference in its neighborhood and within the larger community. Worship was a time to gather and empower members to do so.

Members not only feel empowered to make a change within the community, but within their personal lives as well. Redeemer allows time at the end of every service for announcements and introductions. At this time Pastor Kelly passes the microphone around to new faces and to members who seek to share thanks, prayer concerns, or any news about their lives. Many members at Redeemer are extremely open, honest, and trusting. One woman would share her thanks every Sunday for the support and positive impact Redeemer has had with her struggle against cocaine addiction.

In fact, there are not many things "Lutheran" about Redeemer worship services. For example, time is never an issue. The prayers of the people can take as long as 20 minutes. Perhaps most striking is how Redeemer conducts the sharing of the peace. Although daunting at first, the sharing of the peace at Redeemer shows the commitment to meaningful relationship and community building. Pastor Kelly often warns newcomers, "When we share the peace at

Redeemer, we really share the peace.” Before you know it, the entire congregation is out of the pews, moving around, giving hugs, and catching up. Only when the pianist starts playing a dance like tune does everyone return back to their seats and worship continues.

Sunday worships at Redeemer are intimate, meaningful, and empowering. In this Lutheran congregation any and every member is given a voice, a meaningful time to build relationships and community, an unhurried time to worship and give thanks, and much more. I believe that many congregations have a lot to learn from Redeemer about what it really means to provide and serve. There is no pomp or showiness. People come as they are and they are welcomed wholeheartedly regardless of skin color, social standing, or sexual orientation. Redeemer is a Lutheran congregation that remains humble yet empowered and confident to make direct and positive social change.

### The Church Community

The importance of community to the mission of Redeemer Lutheran Church and its congregation is profound. Moreover, Redeemer celebrates in its diversity while openly and honestly accepting the challenges that such diversity may bring. Pastor Kelly believes that the diversity at Redeemer is what makes the many relationships and the well-being of the broader community so special. In other words, each individual person whether black or white, rich or poor, highly educated or not, brings something of their culture, gifts, and experiences to the Redeemer community. Effectively, these relationships serve to build a community that promotes understanding, racial equality, and an effortless drive for social change.

Once one has spent time at Redeemer, it becomes very apparent that the foundation of these relationships is largely build on trust. For a little less than a century, Redeemer has established a

high level of respect among its members and community, allowing for equally high levels of trust to take place. Wuthnow believes that trust within faith based service organizations has the power to “make a broader impact on the well-being of communities” as well as “restore people’s faith in their fellow human beings and in themselves” (217). Moreover, Wuthnow’s studies suggest that trust is more difficult to build in low income areas, due in part to the dangers and difficulties of everyday life. My experience with the community at Redeemer revealed to me not only the importance of trust, but the struggles of gaining such trust as well. For example, it was not until a few weeks before I left did I feel as though the kids had truly come to trust me as both an authority figure and friend. While I have experienced high levels of friendship and trust throughout my life and in various communities, the church community at Redeemer seems to profess a different level of trust that moves beyond racial and social boundaries, promoting a limitless mission of Christ’s love to all people.

### The Children

Building meaningful relationships was one of my main objectives for the summer. In many ways, I feel as though I accomplished this goal. This endeavor was made much easier largely because of my work with the church youth. The children at Redeemer and in the Harrison Neighborhood were very unlike any other youth I had ever worked with. For example, I experienced first hand what it is like to be completely disrespected and slightly intimidated by a 7 year old kid. I came to learn that most of these children are largely growing up on their own, and quickly. It did not take me long to come to the realization that these kids had served me more than I had ever hoped to serve them.

Towards the end of my summer I had a difficult time dealing with the guilt that I felt for building relationships with these children only to leave after a few months. However, I felt more at ease when Pastor Kelly reminded me that my presence this summer was just a small part of the larger institution the church is seeking to build for these children. The church has truly become a safe haven for the neighborhood children. Every day kids would walk into the church simply seeking a place to hang out and something productive to do. By providing this service to the children, Redeemer is successfully instilling in these children a sense of community grounded in trust, love, compassion, and understanding. Working alongside the staff at Redeemer, I also came to realize that what we were instilling in these children was not only a trusting and positive social network but ideals of personal responsibility and structure. For example, we stayed strict about what time the children had to arrive in order to be driven to the morning program. We gave the older youth responsibility, partial employment, and encouragement to start programs under our support. Moreover, through the children's involvement, Redeemer is able to connect with parents and families, continuously building community and respect within the Harrison neighborhood.

#### Pastor Kelly

It takes an incredible gift of leadership to successfully guide a church community like Redeemer. I believe that Pastor Kelly Chatman is an extremely gifted and well suited individual for this demanding job. My first impression of Pastor Kelly, or PK as some like to call him, put my initial nervousness at ease. He is a type of person that you immediately respect and trust. Pastor Kelly's humility, calm nature, optimism, and self-assurance blend to form a leader who prioritizes his time and work untraditionally yet meaningfully. For example, Pastor Kelly's

office is always open. Children will come in at random times of the day, sometimes just to sit there while PK tried to get his work done. Pastor Kelly unceasingly stresses the importance Redeemer has in providing a safe haven for these children. He surely upholds these ideals, sacrificing hours of office time for the kids.

Pastor Kelly once told me that community shapes leadership. PK's presence is a vital and integral part of the community. Gary Gunderson in his book *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith* describes leadership as the ability to “know who you are, where you are, what you are to do there” (8). A true leader focuses on “what matters: relationships and the values and commitments that shape and sustain relationships” (13). This excerpt mirrors the mission of Redeemer and Pastor Kelly's role and leadership within the church and community. Moreover, Pastor Kelly realistically and methodologically deals with the issues of race that often arise within an urban church and a Lutheran one at that. I once asked Pastor Kelly if he felt his influence and success at Redeemer had something to do with race, he did not hesitate to say absolutely yes.

## Race

Throughout my internship at Redeemer, I felt quite an array of emotions ranging from fear, hope, frustration, excitement, joy, sadness, and so on. As the summer progressed, I especially found myself feeling frustrated and even disadvantaged by my white, educated, upper middle class privileged life. I struggled and continue to struggle with the racial disparities that I experienced this summer. A journal entry from my first day read, “How do I even begin to relate to how these kids have grown up and what they and their families have to deal with day to day?” Such questioning seems typical of many people like myself seeking a career in the social field.

In reality, I believe I put more emphasis on my racial and socio-economic differences than anyone else. The kids seemed unconcerned by my presence. While there were times when racial differences were apparent, such as the girls asking about my hair and how I get it so straight and soft, I truly never experienced a negative racial encounter. I spoke with the staff about these frustrations and difficulties. No one at Redeemer denies the importance of race in American culture, neither do they dwell or stress themselves over the issue. Race is simply a part of the everyday life of most people living and working in a city like Minneapolis. However, I could not help but feel bothered by the uniqueness of Redeemer as a black majority Lutheran church.

### Service

This summer I learned valuable lessons about what it means to serve. Feeling frustrated and limited by my perceived limitations, I eventually came to realize that my presence, regardless of what it may have looked like to outsiders, was one of the largest ways I was serving the staff, congregation, and children at Redeemer. As I built relationships with the kids, it became apparent that I had become a positive presence in their lives. Most importantly, I gave them my time, my ears, and I gave them my respect.

I came into this internship hoping to serve, but in the end I realized that the reverse had taken place. Pastor Kelly, the staff at Redeemer, and especially the children had served me in abundant and unexpected ways. Pastor Kelly and the staff provided me with a supportive and caring network. They provided me with numerous insights into the everyday struggles and joys of running a church and serving a community. The children allowed me to become part of their lives and to learn about the struggles they face growing up in the neighborhood. I will always

feel an incredible amount of gratitude to Redeemer and the Lilly Grant program for allowing me this short but impactful internship experience.

### The Future

I do not profess to be an expert of the Lutheran faith or institution. However, having grown up Lutheran, being active in my home congregation, spending 3 years at a very Lutheran school, and now experiencing an internship at an urban Lutheran church, I feel a connection and commitment for the establishment that has been a large part of my life. Yet still, I find myself very critical of the Lutheran church today. In fact, I was surprised to realize that my fellow interns and I had much more to critique about the Lutheran church throughout our internship experiences. One overarching issue we all agreed on is questioning the well being and future of the Lutheran church if it continues to remain so homogeneous? Does the Lutheran church need to let go of some of its strict heritage and tradition in order to draw in people of different backgrounds and make them feel comfortable? Will we ever be able to make majority decisions on issues or will the ELCA eventually become divided? Robert Benne acknowledges some of these concerns in his book *The Paradoxical Vision* saying that although the ELCA is “heavily acculturated to other segments of American culture” including issues of feminism and multiculturalism, their efforts for change are greatly weakened by the serious disagreements often present (228-229).

In many ways, I believe the Lutheran church should seek real change in order to secure a positive future. This summer definitely confirmed my desire to be part of a church community like Redeemer: diverse, empathetic, unsheltered, and driven to do real social work within its own community. Redeemer emphasizes and lives out the Christian message that I pray all Lutheran

congregations follow, to simply love your neighbor and do good work in God's name. I feel blessed to have experienced and worked alongside a devoted staff and community who are making real, positive changes in the lives of its members and those in the larger community.

### Speaking of the Future

What would a Lilly Grant Sponsored Internship be without speaking of vocation and living a life of worth and service? While I have yet to provide a precise answer as to what I will be doing for the rest of my life (a major feat, I believe, for a religion major who does not want to become a Pastor). This summer did provide me with an important glimpse into the daily routines of a church body and a struggling one at that. This summer reconfirmed my interests in a career in social work through a church or religious organization. I believe in the message of the church, the foundations on which it was founded, and the irreplaceable levels of trust, love, and hope found within a church community.

This summer also opened my eyes to the importance of partnerships in the church. The non-profit branch of Redeemer, the Redeemer Center for Life, is an incredible partner organization that has the vital role of receiving government funds for various activities and projects that the church itself otherwise receive. Another partnership I learned about this summer are those between small urban churches and large wealthy suburban congregations. Redeemer's partnership with Westwood Lutheran in St. Louis Park, for example, functions as an important relationship. This affiliation helps provide not only economic support, but various opportunities for members and especially youth to meet, crossing boundaries and forming meaningful relationships. I see these partnerships as a real hope for both small urban and large suburban churches to make real positive change for one another, their communities, and society. I would certainly love to be part of this constructive, practical, and encouraging change.

Resources

Gary Gunderson, *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America: Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).