CULTIVATING DESIRE IN MISSISSIPPI

Northside Baptist Church of Clinton, Mississippi is a predominantly white church in an increasingly diverse neighborhood. The members of Northside have articulated a desire for the presence of their diverse neighbors, attempted numerous outreach projects in their community, and have a history of advocating for racial equality, but genuine neighborly integration in its membership remains an elusive prospect. I have been the pastor of Northside for thirteen years. I was attracted to Northside because of its unique location in a changing neighborhood. I believed (and still believe) that Northside has an extraordinary opportunity to participate in a new way of being church in the Old South. This story is a reflection on Northside's place in its neighborhood and upon a recent project to cultivate desire within the membership for the presence of its neighbors.

This story focuses on the development of one particular experiment aimed at learning a new way of relating to a small group of high school football players—as neighbors to be enjoyed in their own

presence. The story is remarkable in that the experiment yielded almost no ground, and no perceptible change in language or practice occurred, despite significant work in a progressive and open congregation with an identifiable desire to change. The story is hopeful because it reveals the presence of desire, however inchoate, for the presence of neighbors, but also because it invites us beyond our paternalistic improvement projects to realize our neighbors, and God with them, as ends to be enjoyed for their own sake.

Northside in the Midst of Great Migrations

Clinton, Mississippi is a small suburban town immediately west of the capital city of Jackson. Northside was founded there in 1969 as new developments were being built to accommodate projected growth in the 1970s. Indeed, a wave of population growth began in Clinton in the 1970s, with the population doubling from 7289 to 14,660.[1]

Northside was founded in a period of widespread racial unrest, and placed in the midst of all the swirling desires, fears, attractions, and revulsions of a great migration. The standard explanation for Clinton's growth is "white flight" from the nearby city of Jackson. The Civil Rights Acts passed in 1968 provided for equal housing opportunities regardless of race, and as black people moved into Jackson neighborhoods, white people, many of them Christian, moved out. Martin Luther King's assassination in nearby Memphis, Tennessee in 1968 led to widespread rioting in cities across the nation, and stirred up fear in the hearts of many white people. Also in the late 1960s many recognized that a 1954 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, outlawing racial segregation in public schools, would soon be implemented, and many whites moved to school systems that were considered safer for their children.

There is no indication that the early church planters of Northside questioned the rationale for growth in their new neighborhood, but the new church did make one crucial decision: they decided to be open to all regardless of race. It is not now unusual in the American South for a church to be open to people of all races, but it was considered bold and progressive in 1969, and the decision no doubt influenced the early leadership of the church. The church called as its first pastor, James Porch, who had completed a dissertation on Mississippi Baptist attitudes toward race. Another early leader, Richard Brogan, was the staff leader of the small Mississippi Baptist office charged with race relations. Together they were working on advancing the cause of interracial cooperation. In the early 1970s Northside baptized a black student at nearby Mississippi (Baptist) College, and it was considered the first baptism of an African-American in a Mississippi Baptist church since the American Civil War.[2]

The baptism of a black student was a decisive public event that led many members to leave the church. Their departure left Northside a smaller church, but one that was decidedly more progressive. In the decades that followed Northside voted to ordain women as deacons and ministers, began to follow the Christian seasons, and gradually eschewed traditional evangelical practices to concentrate on poverty and hunger relief.

Racial equality remained an interest of Northside, and for a time they invited a black church to share

their facilities, but at the same time as it was becoming more clearly identified for progressive theology and liturgical worship, it was becoming a drive-in church. It began its life embedded in a neighborhood, but it gradually became a drive-in church for people of many neighborhoods who shared progressive opinions and appreciated Northside's "high church" style of worship. In addition, this shift from neighborhood church to drive-in church occurred just as Clinton itself was beginning to change racially. A wave of African-Americans moved into Clinton after 1990, and Clinton became a very different place than it was in the 1970s. Clinton was 82 percent white and 16.8 percent black in 1990, 74.4 percent white and 22.5 percent black in 2000, and 60 percent white and 34 percent black in 2010.[3] At the same time as this significant black population began to move into Clinton, many Northside members were moving out of the neighborhood to larger houses on bigger lots in new developments. Northside's church facility now sits in the midst of an increasingly diverse neighborhood, while Northside's membership is scattered around the city of Clinton.

Northside in the New Neighborhood

Northside is currently composed of approximately three hundred active and prospective members. Only four members are African American; the rest of the membership is white. In vivid contrast to the homogeneity of Northside, the surrounding neighborhoods, community schools, and the city at large are racially diverse. Northside sits on a plot of land between three neighborhood developments comprised of single-family homes and adjacent to one small apartment complex. Clinton Park was the original neighborhood of many founding members. It was once entirely white, but in the past two decades many black families have moved into the neighborhood. The Briars was developed after the founding of Northside, and it has become a racially and economically mixed neighborhood, with a combination of modest single-family homes and inexpensive rental properties. A third neighborhood, The Cascades, is noticeably less diverse. It is a quiet neighborhood with lots maintained by an association, and it includes a private neighborhood swimming pool and tennis club. Immediately west of the church is an apartment complex with approximately forty units. The residents are racially mixed.

The Clinton school system is also one of the most racially integrated systems in Mississippi, and its racial diversity makes it a striking exception to typical patterns across Mississippi. Just over 50 percent of the students in Clinton public schools are black, 44 percent are white, while almost 4 percent are Asian and a little over 1 percent are Hispanic.[4] It is rare for a public school system in Mississippi to be so balanced racially. Indeed, even though it is now over sixty years since the Brown decision, almost no gain has been made in reversing school segregation across the U.S. since 1967, and the schools of the South are recognized as the most racially segregated in the nation.[5] Of course, even though Clinton is an exception to the pattern of segregation, there is widespread recognition across the community that as the balance shifts another white exodus could begin.

Signs of Awareness of Estrangement from Neighbors

In the midst of Clinton's striking diversity and complex racial balance, the racial homogeneity of Northside is ironic and puzzling. It is ironic because it was a brave and faithful decision to be racially

open that most defined Northside from its beginning. The homogeneity is puzzling because it endures and remains even after several years of outreach and development specifically begun in an effort to enhance visibility and relationship within the neighborhood.

Northside first began to recognize its homogeneity as a challenge and to speak of a desire to be neighborly integrated in a deacons' retreat in 2008. As the church prepared to celebrate its fortieth anniversary, the retreat aimed at envisioning the next chapter of their story. The leader invited participants to imagine Clinton and Northside in twenty years and then to share what they had imagined. Every participant imagined Clinton as an increasingly diverse community, and everyone imagined Northside as a church that was at least becoming more diverse. The conversations among these leaders indicated at least an inchoate desire to become a church more integrated with its community.

Following the retreat, deacons met to consider how to begin to fulfill their goals of increased diversity. After much discussion they landed upon the idea of diffusing a single question throughout the congregation: "What is one small gospel ministry of healing and wholeness that Northside can offer our neighborhood?" After many months the Missions Committee finally stepped forward to announce four answers to the question. First, there was an emerging after-school program. Second, there was a new partnership with the Opportunity Center in Jackson, a ministry to the homeless in the city of Jackson, led by a Northside member. Third, there was a project to make an existing garden on church property into a site of outreach and sharing with neighbors. Fourth, there was a new mission imagined by a much revered but recently deceased member, who wanted Northside to serve as a site of the recovery of neighborly relations.[6] This last mission resulted in the repair of a house in the midst of a historically black neighborhood.

The results of the first three answers to the "one gospel ministry question" were impressive. Northside now has a six-person After-School Committee, supervising a year-round program of after-school and summertime care for twenty-five children. The program and the staff are racially mixed, and a number of Northside members and others in the community now offer their time weekly to tutor, make snacks, and "hang out" with a diverse group of children.[7] In addition the congregation has increased its awareness of its relationship to the city of Jackson through increasing involvement with the Opportunity Center, and they have built relationships with each other and with neighbors through the garden project.

In spite of these multiple efforts to expand Northside's missional presence in its neighborhood and city, the church remained stubbornly homogenous, and members also began to show fatigue and frustration. A close examination of the fourth answer to the "one gospel ministry question" reveals some of the fatigue, and it also highlights the dangers of working for others without closely examining paternalistic patterns of engagement. This brief excursus on a frustrated missional effort shows why it was necessary to do something to learn a new way of engaging, and even enjoying, neighbors

Excursus on a Frustrated Missional Outreach

Richard Brogan was the revered leader who had originally led Northside to explore interracial cooperation. He was one of the reasons I originally felt led thirteen years ago to come to Northside as its pastor. I wanted to learn alongside him, and as Northside was asking the "one gospel ministry" question, he began to challenge the church to develop a ministry of friendship in the community. We called him "Brogan," and he had a gift for enjoying the presence of neighbors. In fact, he was known for not working, but "visiting," during mission projects.[8] Brogan envisioned Northside becoming a church that fostered neighborly relations in Clinton, and to prod the church into action he invited members to know one particular family he had discovered in need of emergency work on their home. His neighborly project became the fourth answer to the question of how to engage the church's neighbors in gospel ministry.

Brogan visited in the home of the family in crisis and began to know them and appreciate their struggles. Emphasizing our getting to know this family as neighbors, he envisioned Northside first coming alongside him in friendship and eventually pitching in to help the family, but he died of a massive heart attack before any work could begin. Wanting to do something for this family in memory of their friend, the members of the church got busy and used their best talents coming up with a plan to overhaul the house—only they neglected the work of building friendship that Brogan had begun. They raised money, recruited volunteers, worked for months, and then they began to grow weary.

Some members began to complain that the family being helped was not participating in the work. Volunteers began to drift away as the work stretched into the hot summer. To make matters even worse, near the end of the project I discovered the recipient was already a member of a local black church. When I called the church to solicit help in the project, I realized we had acted hastily without proper local knowledge of our neighbor's history. The leaders of the black church recounted their own history of working for this family in crisis, and were understandably reluctant to enter into another church's charity work in "their" neighborhood. Seeing its neighbor as a project for improvement left Northside exhausted, frustrated, and at odds with other churches in the neighborhood. The work resulted in increased distrust and division across racial boundaries, and it deepened the divide between churches in the community. The failure of this well-intended, hard-fought project highlighted the urgency of learning a new way of engaging its neighbors- one more in line with the original neighborly vision of Richard Brogan.

The Scope of a New Project

After one puzzling missional failure and years of work that yielded no real neighborly integration, I created a project to help a small group experiment with new ways of neighborly engagement. The project was embedded into the liturgical life of the church, from Advent 2013 to Pentecost 2014. It introduced several bodily practices in order to help team members step out of long habits of primarily internal and cognitive reflection. All through the project team members were led to explore and examine their own habits of paternalism, avoidance, desire, or fear in relation to neighbors.

The project unfolded as follows: Advent was for preparation and recruitment. In Epiphany the team

concentrated on becoming aware of Northside's missional challenges. Team members recalled the years of hard work and outreach, and they were led to reflect on their habits of engagement with neighbors. In Lent the team was to begin articulating those habits of engagement that led to alienation and estrangement from neighbors, and they were to craft small, simple experiments. The experiments were specifically designed to put team members into new relationship with those who were typically seen as the recipients of Northside's ministry. Ideally team members would find a way to be the recipient of a neighbor's hospitality or generosity, but they were encouraged at least to engage their neighbors as neighbors, and not as charity cases. In Easter the team would execute the experiments, and at Pentecost they would gather to report, celebrate, and articulate new commitments and transformed desires.

The four new bodily practices introduced at the beginning of the project were weekly Eucharist, daily prayer, *Lectio Divina* reading of scripture, and inhabiting a "third place." Each of these practices offered the team members an opportunity to step out of internal and cognitive habits of reflection and into bodily engagement. *Lectio Divina* reading would be the central time for reflection, but *Lectio Divina* is more than a private, cognitive reading of scripture. It engages the whole person, and leads to tentative, responsive actions in the time between readings. The concept of inhabiting a third place was entirely new to the team members, but it was aimed at getting participants into their neighborhoods as recipients or observers of neighborly life.

As the project unfolded one particular group of participants focused their reflections on a new ministry they had recently begun in the church's relatively new youth building. Two Northside members with a desire that the new building be used as a blessing to their community invited members of the Clinton High School football team to come to the youth building after practice each Tuesday during the season, for snacks and fellowship. Their invitation was met with immediate and enthusiastic response. Thirty football players soon began spending their Tuesday nights at Northside, and most of them were black. They enjoyed simple snacks, table tennis, and foosball, but most of all they enjoyed being among people who wanted to be with them.

In many ways the football ministry was a promising example of engaging neighbors as ends to be enjoyed for their own sakes, but the leaders needed help framing the ministry as something other than a charitable gift. The beauty of the ministry was that a space and time was provided for friendship to develop. No devotions or services were offered; instead, the players were simply given a place to hang out, and the leaders enjoyed being with them. In fact, recently one of the leaders observed to me that because of this ministry he was learning to see young black men in a new way. Still there were some conflicting signals: The ministry was entirely on Northside's turf; it was led and funded entirely by white benefactors, and the ministry leaders had begun to offer scholarships to players.

In order to help these ministry leaders recognize and cultivate the kernel of desire for the simple presence of neighbors that lay at the heart of their ministry, I encouraged these participants to develop an experiment aimed at getting out of Northside and into neutral territory. The proposed experiment was called "On Their Turf." In order to discern the activities of the Spirit in the lives and neighborhoods

of one Northside mission "recipient," football ministry team members would invite members of the football team to meet at a local drive-in restaurant for a thirty-to sixty-minute conversation, once per week, for six weeks. By meeting at a popular local youth "hangout," the football ministry members would step out of the role of host and into the role of guest. They would enjoy a cold drink and ask appreciative questions about life in Clinton from the perspective of the football players.

The hope of a bodily experiment is that by acting in new ways, the participants might also begin to think in new ways. It was hoped that through a simple experimental action these participants might be able to recognize their own desires for the presence of these beloved neighbors. Further, it was hoped they might become aware of the ways that paternalistic engagement could thwart their intentions.

The "On Their Turf" action team consisted of the two members from the football ministry and one other member from the larger project group, but the action team was reluctant to follow the plan I suggested, and they ultimately reverted to a more familiar type of engagement. After several weeks of discussion and hesitation, they decided to revise the plan. Rather than meeting in small groups for conversation around a table sharing in a cold soft drink, they chose to host a "Senior Night" at a local restaurant. They did not see any benefit in meeting with small groups of players, and they also seemed to lack the time for several meetings, so they decided to invite twenty seniors to a meal at a local restaurant. The leaders paid for a very nice meal, and they even ate at separate tables from the players. At the end of the meal, the leaders stood up to offer summary marks.

After intensive work during Epiphany to come to awareness of the dangers of paternalism, and after several weeks of further exploration and planning in Lent, the decision of the football team ministry leaders was puzzling. Rather than getting "on their turf," the leaders invited the players to a restaurant of their own choosing. Rather than sitting at the table and listening, they sat at different tables, and then limited the conversation to a large group time at the end. Rather than receptively engaging they chose to pay for the meal, once again taking a position as a benevolent provider. Even though these leaders have developed a beautiful ministry that hints of a deep down desire for the simple presence of their neighbors, they had a hard time breaking their habits of engagement..

Subtle Internal Resistance to Bodily Engagement

One important episode during the project displayed how hard it is to break out of habits of working for others. Throughout the project the group was led through *Lectio Divina* readings, and for several weeks the group engaged Luke 10:1-10. The passage offers an opportunity to imagine receptive missional presence, but the participants seemed slow to enter into the reading. They had difficulty entering into a genuine, personal engagement with the text; instead, they consistently tended to try and determine the "meaning" of the text. The team was consistently instructed to pay attention to words or phrases calling for their attention so that they could have a conversation about how the Spirit was at work among them and in their neighborhoods. Still, there was a stubborn tendency to retreat to more objective, academic readings of the text, and conversations and imaginations were stifled by this habit of reading.

By the last meeting in Lent there was pressure and tension because the group had struggled to plan their experiments, and they were weary of the *Lectio Divina* conversations. They had exhausted their search for meaning in that singular text, and after the initial reading and silence one member jumped to speak. His voice rose, and he said, "I've about dissected this passage as much as I care to, and I'm getting kind of sick of it." He seemed angry and almost ready to walk out of the project. It was an important moment full of pertinent conflict and language that needed further exploration, but just as the group was about to address the conflict, another member distracted them with a story. The story was unrelated, and appeared to be a device aimed at relieving tension and keeping everyone calm.[9]

The group listened politely to the seemingly unrelated story, and then another member brought up another important question. She expressed exasperation that had seemed to be growing in her, and she finally blurted out, "I cannot figure out what these people are supposed to do!" She seemed agitated and bothered that Jesus would send workers into the field without a project, without some job to accomplish. She had made an essential and important observation, but her observation raised tension in the group, and once again someone rushed to resolve the tension by telling yet another story. Finally, we were unable, ever really, to explore our deep-seated habits of working for our neighbors, rather than simply enjoying their presence.

Conclusion

The habits of paternalistic engagement with neighbors are hard to break. Like all habits they become deeply engrained in our bodies, shaping the way we imagine our relationship to our neighbors. Northside is a good church with an impressive history of work in its community. It has shown signs of genuine desire to enjoy the presence of its neighbors, and deep conviction in the dignity of its neighbors, but it remains in habits of working *for* its neighbors, and it has found it difficult even to imagine ways of enjoying their presence.[10]

[1] Joseph Lusteck and Associates, *Clinton Municipal Annexation Study* (Clinton City Hall: Clinton, MS, September 1982), 35.

[2] This is the undocumented claim of Dr. James Porch, and it may be true; but true or false it remains a part of Northside's ongoing identity.

[3] Maybelle G. Cagle, "City Growth Less Than Predicted," *The Clinton News*, April 5, 2001.

[4] "Clinton Public School District," Public School Review, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.publicschoolreview.com/agency_schools/leaid/2801090. The demographics for white and African-American students in Clinton almost exactly mirror the demographics for public school students in the state of Mississippi as a whole.

[5] "Brown at 60: Great Progress, a Long Retreat, and an Uncertain Future," The Civil Rights Project at the University of California Los Angeles, May 15, 2014, accessed, April 14, 2015,

http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/brown-at-60-great-progress-a-long-retreat-and-an-uncertain-future."

[6] Richard Brogan was the pioneer in race relations and co-author of *Not Our Kind of People*. He died in April of 2011 shortly after taking the initial steps to build a relationship with a family in a historically black neighborhood in Clinton.

[7] The program is intentionally racially open, and the leaders of the program openly acknowledge the importance of the program being racially integrated, but race remains a difficult subject for conversation at Northside, and the committee has not deliberately framed the project around racial reconciliation, nor has it worked on intercultural understanding at the staff or committee level.

[8] Visiting is a historic, but dying, Southern tradition of hospitality. Cita Cook writes, "The primary purposes of any visit have usually been to have fun and escape daily worries, to help solve problems, and/or to establish and reinforce personal ties." Cita Cook, "Visiting," in *Myths, Manners, and Memory,* vol. 4, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 188.

[9] Charles Reagan Wilson writes, "Manners [in the South] have been seen as one aspect of upper-class ideology and power. The southern elite used manners to soften tendencies toward social class conflict. Manners were an aspect of a paternalistic style." Charles Reagan Wilson, "Manners," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 4: Myths, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 100.

[10] For a discussion of the implications of engaging our community by "working for" rather than "being with" those in need see Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 20-47.

Stan Wilson

Stan Wilson has been pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi since 2002. He is married to Jennifer, an accomplished secondary math teacher, and they are the parents of Jane (13) and Kate (10). The Wilsons enjoy living on a small plot of Mississippi land where they grow vegetables, raise chickens, and depend on kind church members and neighbors to help them learn practically everything. Stan will become coordinator of the Ekklesia Project in July of 2015, an ecumenical gathering of friends, new and old, devoted to resisting the world's violence through ordinary life within God's Church.