

Chapter IV: A New Song in Sandtown

“For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”
-Hebrews 3:4

“The kids drew what they thought their neighborhood should look like. And I tell you we still have those hand drawings today, and after ten years their drawings are actually becoming a reality. I mean the things that they drew are becoming a reality.”

-LaVerne Stokes, Co-Executive Director of Sandtown Habitat

In this chapter, I seek to relate the theological themes discussed in the preceding pages to the uniqueness and particularity of the west Baltimore community of Sandtown. Here proclamation and performance of the Word coalesce in a way that is undeniably authentic, prophetically bearing witness to the alternative reality of Christ in a landscape plagued too long by urban decay and violence.

The Sandtown that Once Was

Sandtown used to be a thriving community, bustling with shops, markets, bakeries, and movie theaters. It was home to the esteemed Douglass High School (where Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall attended) and the famous Royal Theater, which attracted such jazz greats as Fats Waller, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. Singers Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday were regulars at the Royal and Pearl Bailey got her start there as a chorus girl. With other venues such as the Strand Ballroom and the Albert Hall, Sandtown was a flourishing and vibrant mecca of culture and community.

So long as the good times lasted in West Baltimore, city leaders could conveniently brush aside and excuse entrenched patterns of segregation and disenfranchisement. With the surfacing of deep racial hostilities in the tumultuous 1960s, this illusion of stability was shattered. To a crowd in nearby Cambridge, MD, Black Panther leader H. Rap Brown shouted, “It’s time for Cambridge to explode baby. Black folks built America, and if America don’t come around,

we're going to burn America down.”¹ The riots incited in Cambridge resulted in the mass exodus of nervous whites to the outskirts of the city and the surrounding suburban neighborhoods. In the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, the Gay Street and North Avenue riots left six people dead, some 5,000 arrested, massive property damage, and streets patrolled by the military.² White flight continued, as businesses and consumers looked elsewhere for more stable social and economic conditions.

Things only worsened from 1973-1975 when a recession brought a massive wave of plant closures and deindustrialization to the Baltimore region. Manufacturers relocated to the cheaper labor pools of Third World countries, drowning the local economy and drastically raising the unemployment rate. As President Nixon declared the end of the urban crisis, Baltimore's problems were just beginning. In an attempt to remedy the economic crisis, mayor William Donald Schaefer concentrated the city's attention on transforming the Inner Harbor into a commercial and tourist center, approving the construction of the National Aquarium, the Convention Center, and several new hotels. Despite the concentrated success of the project, the rest of Baltimore suffered, especially Sandtown. Its population decreased from fifty to eleven thousand, becoming one of Baltimore's poorest and most neglected neighborhoods. Unemployment reached fifty percent, infant mortality grew to a level that exceeded that of many of the poorest countries in the world, and hundreds of houses were abandoned and boarded up. The median income fell to a mere \$8,500 a household, well below the poverty threshold, and violence, drugs, sickness, teenage pregnancy, and illiteracy came to dominate the community.³

¹ Karen Free, "Sandtown: A Community in Transformation," *Habitat World*, June/July 2000

² Elizabeth Fee, ed. *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 234.

³ Mark Gornik, "Between Resurrection and Reconciliation: The Story of New Song Community Church," *Urban Mission*, December 1994, 54.

Left out of the city's redesign plans, the people of Sandtown were left alone to deal with their growing social and economic problems.

Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution

With an appreciation for what Sandtown once was and a deep admiration for the strong sense of community that, despite all its hardships, still thrived there, Maryland natives Mark Gornik and Allan Tibbels (with his wife and their two daughters) moved to Sandtown in 1986. Gornik, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of America, had visited liberation theologian Guillermo Cook in Costa Rica and spent a year with the Voice of Calvary ministry in Jackson, Mississippi, where he was mentored by the civil rights activist John Perkins.⁴ Through these experiences, Gornik learned that at the heart of the gospel is God's desire for reconciliation among His people, and it was a desire for racial healing that motivated the Tibbels and him to relocate. Gornik explains, "Our call was rooted in knowing how much God loved Sandtown, a desire to follow Christ in a spirit of servanthood, a deep concern for the poor, and a commitment to repentance."⁵ Repentance, Gornik clarifies,

is not feeling guilty or sorry. Rather, repentance involves 'owning' our sin, whether rooted in commission or omission. Concretely, repentance means turning away from one way of life to an alternative reality. Repentance in the Bible touches every area of life. It is at once spiritual, social, and economic (Isa 1: 16-17; Lk 19:1-10). As white Christians, we believed that it was vital that we turn from our complicity in a culture that is anti-back, anti-poor, and anti-urban and turn to the biblical obligations of justice and reconciliation.⁶

⁴ Perkins speaks of community building in terms of *relocation* (living and serving among the poor), *reconciliation* (blacks and white bearing the "burdens created by each other's pasts"—whites' guilt, blacks' bitterness, and often deep-seated notions of superiority and inferiority), and *redistribution* (of skills, education, and resources so as to empower the community of need). These three aspects are essential to the work being done in Sandtown.

⁵ Gornik, 55.

⁶ Ibid

Repentance and reconciliation could not be carried out from a position of privileged detachment from the struggles of Sandtown. It required a commitment to join the community members where they lived, to be with them, to support them, and most importantly, *to listen* to them.

Gornik and Tibbels came to Sandtown without a specific agenda, something the community members greatly appreciated. LaVerne Stokes, a lifelong resident, remembers that Gornik and Tibbels did not come in and announce they were moving in, but *asked* if they could move in. “The first thing Mark and Allan did,” Stokes reflects, “was become neighbors with people. They did not [bring] their own agenda. It has always been a very big insult to me when people have come into the community with their own agenda. We know what our needs are, no matter how people may look at us as being poor.”⁷ For the first two years, Gornik and Tibbels focused entirely on building relationships with their new neighbors. They volunteered at the local recreation center, played pick-up basketball games, attended community meetings and visited people in their homes. Their posture was one of genuine openness, grounded in the sincere desire to learn what the needs of their neighbors were. “We sought to listen to our neighbors,” Gornik explains, “understanding the community’s felt needs from the inside out.”⁸ Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, who has seen his fare share of community developers, comments,

It was an investment not only of money but of individual energy... I mean the fact that people were going to live there and stay there, and invest their time and effort was a major sign of hope and uplift for the people in Sandtown. And then as they saw that this was going to be a partnership, that this wasn’t going to be people coming in and telling them what to do, but they were going to be real partners in there... my goodness, the interaction with the community was so positive.”⁹

After this initial two-year period, the need for a church that could organize the community’s assets became clear. The people of Sandtown, resilient, gifted, and bound together

⁷ Project for Lived Theology Workgroup Meeting, December 16, 2000.

⁸ Gornik, 55.

⁹ Sandtown Habitat for Humanity Orientation Video

by a strong sense of community, did not lack a base of assets; what they lacked were the physical and economic resources that would allow them to capitalize on these assets. A church founded by and for the community could provide these resources. Gornik and Tibbels purchased a long vacant building in 1988, remodeled it, and opened the doors of New Song Community Church in 1990, committed to being a Christian community development model of the church. “With the church as the foundation and energizing center,” Gornik writes in *Urban Mission*, “we initiated a wholistic approach to community development focused on approximately ten blocks in the north-central section of Sandtown.”¹⁰ “As a congregation,” he continues, “we wanted to address life needs and concerns of our community. How could we proclaim the good news to an entire neighborhood? We would have to demonstrate God’s love, power, and compassion, not just talk about it.”¹¹

Through New Song, an inter-racial partnership was established that allowed members of the community themselves to guide the course of Sandtown’s revitalization. The church’s voice and its priorities were directly shaped by the community’s needs, the most urgent of which was quality and affordable housing. A local branch of Habitat for Humanity was started through the church in 1990, and since then, nearly 200 homes have been gutted and rebuilt throughout the focus area. Once-dilapidated street facades now radiate the bright blue, red, and green hues of hope and resurrection. Whole streets have been rebuilt, with empowered Sandtown residents now enjoying the status of being proud Habitat homeowners. Sandtown Habitat today attracts 10,000 volunteers a year from all sectors of society, from corporations to local congregations, youth groups, suburbanites, and even Jimmy Carter in 1992.

¹⁰ Gornik, 55.

¹¹ Ibid

“Fleshing out the Gospel”

Co-directing Sandtown Habitat with Allan Tibbels is LaVerne Stokes (quoted above), a lifelong Sandtown resident and Habitat homeowner. As she and I walked the streets viewing the newly built homes, neighbors frequently called from their windows with warm ‘hellos’ and ‘good afternoons,’ pleasant greetings that were always returned by LaVerne’s beaming smile and inquisitive responses, “How is your brother doing?” or “How is the job going?” Neighborliness, Stokes says, is what makes Sandtown so distinctive. “One thing you will never see in Sandtown,” she shares, “is anybody who is homeless. You will never see anyone sleeping on the street. You can go through the city of Baltimore in any other community and see that, but in Sandtown we believe in taking one another in. Now what you will see is overcrowding: you may see a two-story, two-bedroom house with 20 people in it and that is not an exaggeration. That’s families taking in families and friends.”¹²

For Stokes, the gospel is a message of hope and transformation that must be embodied, or as she puts it so well, “fleshed out.” “You should share your brother’s burdens,” she says. “They should get to the core of you. You should be able to feel their brokenness and respond.”¹³ Fleshing out the gospel means “getting your hands dirty with people in need,”¹⁴ being with others through their daily pains, heart-aches, and joys. “What would Jesus do?” she asks. “Would he let his brother live in poor conditions? Would he let his brother suffer from high blood pressure if he knew that we could do a clinic and actually help? Or would he not be there at a time of death to help a family grieve. Jesus wept for Lazarus even though he knew he was going to raise him up; he was still there to weep with the rest of them.”¹⁵ Christians are called to

¹² Workgroup Meeting, December 16, 2000.

¹³ Interview with the writer, March 23, 2001.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

be with neighbors in their hour of grieving, just as they are called to be with them in their hour of rejoicing. Indeed, no amount of hardship, no bodily suffering, Stokes says, can quell the instinctive desire among Sandtown residents to rejoice. “It’s a wealth of joy in Sandtown and that’s something the world could never take away from any of us... God has never forgotten us.”¹⁶

After Habitat was firmly established, New Song sought to address other pressing community needs. Neighbors expressed the desire for improved education for their children, and so the New Song Learning Center was established. Initially, it was just an after-3 program, but the children involved took such a liking to the director, Susan Tibbels, they begged her to become their junior high teacher. After the adult community affirmed the children’s idea, Tibbels agreed and extended the program’s offerings. The once humble tutoring program is now a K-8 academy that is about to move into a \$4.3 million facility that will not only house the school, but provide recreational space for the entire Sandtown community. On the success of the academy, Stokes comments, “Probably for the first time in their lives some of the kids of the families now have an opportunity to go to college. And I think the biggest thing about that is that they will be coming back in a leadership position taking over my job and a lot of other jobs that are here.”¹⁷ An entire generation is rising up with the skills and cultural capital that will allow them not only to continue the renewal work already started, but bring to bear refreshing new ways of imagining Sandtown’s collective identity. Their ideas will enrich and expand the scope of Sandtown’s ongoing revitalization, opening new doors of possibility and inaugurating a new reign of Christ’s peace and justice.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Workgroup Meeting, December 16, 2000.

In response to the overwhelming need for quality health care among community members who could not afford insurance coverage, New Song also established a health clinic. Without health coverage, cases of high blood pressure, diabetes, and infant mortality rose at an alarming rate against which no significant challenge could be posed. New Song Family Health Center was started to combat and reverse this trend and help restore God's *shalom*—the presence of peace and wholeness—to the people of Sandtown. Originally started in the basement of New Song church as a free clinic on Wednesdays from 6-8, the project has graduated to a full-scale center with six examining rooms that sees 5,000 to 6,000 patients a year. Much of the health center's success has come through a strong partnership with Mercy Hospital, which has provided volunteer doctors and nurses. This partnership is one of many that have nourished the small seeds planted by New Song, now sprouting and flourishing into the abundance and fullness of life.

To address the community's fourth major need, unemployment, New Song established EDEN jobs (Economic Development Employment Network) in 1994. The program networks with area employers and acts as an advocate on behalf of community members seeking work. EDEN jobs boasts an impressive record of over 500 job placements that have given Sandtown families the stability and security they have needed to get back on their feet, put food on the table, and adequately handle a mortgage. This rise in employment, Stokes notes, has created a new 'problem' for Sandtown: "The one story I love to share with people is that during the early stages of New Song—especially with the school—we could actually call a parent meeting in the daytime at 10:00 and get a lot of parents there. That's because a lot of people weren't working.

Now there is no way we could have that meeting—thank you, Lord—everything has to take place in the evenings because everybody is working now!”¹⁸

In addition to its many ministries, New Song contents itself in the call just to be there for others: praying with a grieving family, running errands for the mother who is at home with her two-year old suffering from leukemia, vicariously representing community members in front of city institutions, teaching people how to make the system work for themselves, and speaking life into the dark corners of the community the rest of Baltimore has given up on. In all of this, New Song is more than merely the sum of its actions. It is modeling for the city *an alternative vision of reality*. Gornik writes, “To many observers, our cities are in danger of sliding down the Bosnian road. Where will the world look for examples of inter-racial relationships? We believe that a significant part of the church’s public ministry must be to model healthy cross-cultural relationships like the Kingdom and less like our hypersegregated culture (2 Cor. 5:17).”¹⁹ Reconciliation has come to Sandtown through the mediating power of Jesus Christ, through his redemptive work in human beings, transforming hearts and minds from the bondage of self-centeredness to an overabundance that flows outward towards others. Christ is reconciling blacks and whites, males and females, into a loving community of peace and goodness. “Behold,” we read in Psalms, “how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133). Living out this ‘good’ and ‘pleasant’ model of unity, New Song serves as “God’s counter-sign amidst relational and structural brokenness,”²⁰ providing hope for a city desperately in need of racial and spiritual reconciliation.

As New Song continues to grow, struggle, and share in the joys of life in Sandtown, it is continually encouraged by new stories of resurrection and transformation. Torey Reynolds, 35-

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Gornik, 55

year-old mother of four, used to be a crack addict and welfare recipient. She remembers waking up in the morning not knowing how she would possibly make it through the day. “I didn’t know what I was going to do from day to day,” she reflects. Through the loving embrace of New Song, her life was transformed. “Now they can come use me as a role model. I’ve become a homeowner, a Christian person and employed.”²¹ Antoine Bennett, who was imprisoned at the age of eighteen, is now a Habitat homeowner and a financial counselor at the health center. Bennett remembers getting out of prison and not recognizing his radically transformed community: “The day I got out of jail there was a snowstorm; between the snow and the changes, I couldn’t recognize my own neighborhood. I had to go to a phone booth and call for help.”²² Three years later, he qualified for a Habitat home and began the required 430 hours of ‘sweet equity’ on his house. “I used to say to myself, ‘Is it really worth it? I can rent a house that’s just as good.’ But owning this house has managed to bring my family together. The cookouts, the parties, the Sunday dinners—they’re in Sandtown now. I love it when I hear someone say ‘I’m going to Antoine’s house.’”²³

New Song, Gornik is careful to stress, still has a long way to go. It has its struggles just like any church. Through it all, it continues to press on in the love and reconciling way of Christ. “We are in the process of becoming reconciled, of growing into our identity as one people. There is much work ahead of us, labor filled with great joy but also pain. Added to this, each one of us brings our own brokenness and need for Christ-centered wholeness.”²⁴ In the same spirit of humility and repentance with which it was founded, the New Song community diligently continues to envision ways in which the *shalom* of Christ can be extended over Sandtown.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ *Baltimore Sun*, November 17, 1994.

²² Free, 2.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Gornik, 58.