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Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown

by ARBUTUS SIDER

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WHAT IS Jubilee Fellowship? Most simply, we are a church in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. We have roughly twenty members, plus about fifteen children.

In backgrounds we are an ecumenical group: Brethren in Christ, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Reformed Quaker, United Church of Christ.

A little over three years ago some of us began meeting regularly as a Christian fellowship and support group. At that time we all attended separate churches in the city. A year and a half ago we started meeting in one another's homes for Sunday worship. Over the past two years, one by one, our families have moved into a multiracial area of Germantown. Within a few months, God willing, all but three of us will be living within a six block area.

We have been variously called a church community, a house church, and a fellowship. Recently we adopted the name Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown. We chose the name *Jubilee* as an ideal we would all like to strive after. To us it suggests, on the one hand, joy, jubilation, and praise. On the other hand, it points to a willingness to share with each other and with the poor beyond our fellowship—in the spirit of the Year of Jubilee. This is the spirit that Jesus seems to have referred to in his first sermon, announcing that he had been chosen to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” ([Luke 4:14–18](#)).

This is an ironically appropriate name for a Christian fellowship in Philadelphia, since our city’s Liberty Bell refers to that same Year of Jubilee. Inscribed on the bell are the words, “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all the inhabitants thereof” ([Lev. 25:10](#)). [p. 179](#)

So much for our name. What about our style of life?

We do not live communally, nor do we have a common purse. But we live in the same neighborhood so we can share what we have—and what we are—with each other as any has need. And we do share economically in certain group projects.

We meet regularly on Sunday mornings—three Sundays a month—for teaching and worship, followed by a simple meal. Then we spend as much of the day together as our schedules permit: playing football, hiking, or the like

On Thursday evenings we meet together without our children for worship, sharing, and discipling of each other. These are the times when we share most deeply our cares, frustrations, weaknesses, and spiritual struggles—as well as our hopes and dreams and joys. We give each other both support and counsel.

Some of us also meet four days a week for prayer and singing and reading of the Scriptures before our work day begins.

Those are our regular gatherings. As needs arise, we also schedule work days—perhaps to help a new family move, or to help people (either within or outside our community) scrape walls or put on a new coat of paint.

We do not have pastors or elders, as some other house churches do. We are not closed to the possibility that the Lord may one day lead us in that direction, but we cherish a nonelitist, nonsexist form of community, based on consensus decision-making. We believe the Lord has a lot to show us about how such a model can bring wholeness.

We do have specific tasks to perform, and therefore teams of three or more attend to counseling, teaching, the nurture of our children, the leadership of worship, and deaconing. (All of us share at some time in child care, meal preparation, teaching the children, and planning worship.)

Why have we committed ourselves to this life together?

At one level the answer is very simple: we believe God has called us together to be his people in this part of Philadelphia.

For seven years Ron and I went to the same church in Philadelphia almost every week. It had a marvelous pastor and fine people, but I can remember being in a home of one of the other members only twice. We met together Sundays for worship and on weekdays for choir practice and maybe bowling, but we certainly [p. 180](#) did not function together as brothers and sisters who loved each other as we loved ourselves.

To achieve this closer fellowship, we adopted a life very different from that of the normal parish church. Actually it is a very old form, found in the New Testament itself: the house church.

We do not mean, however, to shut ourselves off from other Christians. In fact, our decision to meet together only three Sundays a month was prompted, in part, by a desire to leave one Sunday open for members to attend other churches.

While we are together, however, we work hard at developing our gifts. Such gifts often lie dormant in a traditional congregation, where the pastor is wrongly conceived as one who either possesses all the gifts or as one who is paid to exercise them for all the others.

The greatest gift of all, of course, the one that hangs like a cloak over all the rest—without which the others are useless—is love. On our inward journey we seek to grow in love for one another. We are still babes in Christ when it comes to caring for each other. But we are learning, we are growing, and we find that, even when our love fails, God's does not.

In Jubilee Fellowship, we are committed to communicating the whole biblical message. And that includes more than many of us previously associated with preaching the gospel.

We see the gospel as the good news of forgiveness and our reconciliation with God—brought to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the good news that all who accept him as Savior and Lord become new creatures and enter the new kingdom, the church.

Evangelism is therefore a crucial part of our outward journey, an essential type of communication.

But in our evangelical heritage, evangelism in this sense has been the only thing we have worried about. Proclaim the message and welcome the believer, we thought. And then our job would be done. But that is about as realistic as the ending of a Grace Livingstone Hill novel, for her novels always end when the storm is just beginning: with the wedding!

The clear teaching of both Old and New Testaments is that God is a God of justice. He is a God who sides with the poor and oppressed, and he calls his people to do the same. [p. 181](#)

The gospel of the New Testament is for the poor. It was not only by the preaching of the gospel that the coming of the King and the kingdom was identified, but by the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead, the freeing of prisoners, and the liberation of the oppressed.

I wonder if one reason we hear this so infrequently is that so few of us are poor. So few of us have been in prison. So few of us have experienced oppression. Though we live in a world where there is a bigger and bigger gap between the rich and the poor, we Western Christians have not shared Jesus' special concern for the wretched of the earth.

At Jubilee Fellowship, we believe we must communicate the whole biblical message, the vast scope of God's relationship to his people, the truth he revealed through Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, and most especially, through Jesus.

One way we do that is through our involvement in the community. We have helped a number of people buy and renovate abandoned, government-owned buildings. Our whole fellowship has gotten involved. In addition, one of us belongs to the neighborhood housing corporation that tries to provide more such homes to low income people.

Some of us are also involved in block organizations, in running a local food coop, in working for improvements in the public schools, and in seeking opportunities for the retarded. One of our group serves as a counselor to nursing mothers. Another has been the administrator of a community service center.

Though we do not have any person who seems to have a special gift for evangelism we do try to have an evangelistic outreach. At the moment, for example, Ron meets regularly for Bible study with a young man who, through a series of discussions, has grown from a very skeptical view of the gospel to a real hunger for the Word. It is beautiful to see. Others are involved in similar situations, and one person is even working as a consultant to the evangelism working group of the National Council of Churches, helping interested churches rediscover biblical evangelism.

We have hardly turned Germantown upside down, and it is highly unlikely that we ever shall! But where God's Spirit is present and at work, there is always that explosive potential.

Turning to another area, several of us are involved—some as [p. 182](#) staff and others as associates—with *The Other Side*. We feel this is a good example of witnessing not just in Jerusalem but in Judea and Samaria as well. *The Other Side* speaks to many of the themes we think are important.

Then, through our ties with Evangelicals for Social Action, many of us are involved with a new venture called "discipleship workshops". Through workshops in churches and on college campuses, we seek to spread our vision of the biblical message of social justice.

We also have several members involved in Liberty to the Captives, a nonviolent action group that uses many means to raise public consciousness about the many thousands of "prisoners of conscience". Liberty to the Captives works to get laws passed (and adhered to) that will stop our government from supporting repressive regimes. We think it is an important ministry.

Finally, there is Jubilee Crafts, which is officially a ministry of *The Other Side*, but which has sprung very much out of the life of our community. All of us are involved in this effort in some way. By helping to market crafts produced by Christian Cooperatives abroad, we provide an income for the poor and encourage their gifts. We also give ourselves an opportunity to communicate some of the injustices of the world economic system.

Jubilee Fellowship is not a large group. We come from many different backgrounds. But we are united by a love that we want to share with others.
