

Column: Meet for Coffee, Change the World

By Ed Hortsmann, Sentinel Columnist

It all started with an invitation to have coffee. Not long after I began my work as senior pastor of Round Hill Community Church, I received an invitation to attend a breakfast meeting at Inspirica, a Stamford-based agency dedicated to breaking the cycle of homelessness in lower Fairfield County. I attended the coffee morning because I was beginning my ministry in a new town, thought I might meet new colleagues, and hoped to gather better information about an organization that my congregation had supported with grants over the years. Those low and relatively safe expectations were shattered the moment that the small gathering was introduced to Jason Shaplen, Inspirica's visionary CEO.

As I listened to the stories he told about the families who come to Inspirica in search of the basic necessities of life, and learned more about the results-driven programs that the organization makes available to those individuals, I felt like I was glimpsing an outpost of the kingdom of God. When Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about the dream of creating a beloved community on earth, he was talking about places like Inspirica.

Two actions resulted from the coffee morning at Inspirica. First, a group from Round Hill Community Church chose to put their faith into action by volunteering on Tuesday afternoons from 4 to 6 p.m. at Inspirica's Youth Center. These volunteers provide homework assistance, recreational activities, and a welcoming environment for the roughly twenty children who attend the center on a daily basis. This new initiative complements the congregation's commitment for over 20 years to prepare and serve meals for those who seek refuge in the shelters at the Woodland Place Inspirica campus. These shelters include a women's shelter, a shelter for men with long-term disabilities and transitional housing for people with AIDS.

The second action was a decision by the church Outreach Committee to award a transformative impact grant of \$105,000 to provide the seed money towards the creation of an Early Childhood and Parenting Program at Inspirica. This innovative program addresses the needs of children born into homeless families. Addressing the needs of these children is the most effective way to break the cycle of homelessness and this is especially true for children 0-age 5. Inspirica's Early Childhood and Parenting Program has two goals: to ensure that the youngest, most vulnerable children receive the foundational skills they need to develop in line with their peers who are not homeless, and to ensure that the parents learn essential parenting skills.

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Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, once said that “prayer is an uprising against the disorder of the world.” We believe that the Early Childhood and Education Center at Inspirica will be an uprising against the disorder experienced by the homeless individuals in our family and state who struggle bravely to find and create a place called home.

My work at Inspirica is slowly shaping my faith. There are many reasons why people become homeless and all share the challenge of making abundance out of very meager resources. I have been brought into direct contact with people who are extraordinarily resilient, and for all the sadness that must attend the lives of many who find their way to Inspirica, I have found there an unquenchable sense of determination. The Youth Center has been for me a place where I have found acceptance by children who viewed me initially as a stranger, and yet who are brave enough to let me help them with their math homework. Those friendships have filled me with hope at a time when hope seems at risk across the globe.

The greatest ongoing need for the Early Childhood and Parenting Program is volunteers. The center is open four days a week and volunteers are needed from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. to work directly with infants and toddlers. Just imagine how much goodness might unfold by sharing with those who seek them the basic skills of parenting, cooking, and sharing stories about how to craft a life worth living. By making time to mentor a child, support a parent, and share a meal with a family in need of permanent housing, it is possible to change the world for the better, and forever.

In the past two years I have learned many valuable life lessons from the brave women, men and children of Fairfield County who are in search of a place called home. And wherever those relationships may lead, I am deeply grateful for the offer of a simple cup of coffee made them possible in the first place.

If you would like to be part of our work to change the world for the better, I can be reached at: Round Hill Community Church, 395 Round Hill Road Greenwich 06831
egh@roundhillcommunitychurch.org, 203-869-1091.

The Rev. Dr. Ed Horstmann is senior pastor of Round Hill Community Church in Greenwich.

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