

By Summerlee Walter

‘WHAT A RARE THING’

How the New Hope Collaborative is deepening relationships in southeast Raleigh

During a recent afternoon at the New Hope Collaborative, a developing ministry of the Diocese of North Carolina situated on the property of the former St. Mark’s in southeast Raleigh, board members from a potential new partner organization were touring the campus with Joy Shillingsburg, diocesan mission strategy coordinator and one of the people who helped shape the ministry. As the tour was winding down, the director of the afterschool tutoring program housed in the former Sunday school building called everyone over to point out the remains of a hawk’s meal in the middle of the lawn her students would be crossing in a few minutes. It needed to go, fast. One of the potential partners immediately stepped forward, asked for a plastic bag and scooped up the mess without missing a beat. The remains disappeared into the dumpster, and the kids’ route was clear.

That is how things go at the New Hope Collaborative: Problems arise, and members of the community solve them. The ministry functions on the principles of asset-based community development, or ABCD, which focuses on what a community has instead of what it lacks. After the congregation of St. Mark’s held its closing service on April 24, 2022, the diocese hired a consultant to lead the discernment process around the future of the three-building campus. He met with community leaders of mostly minority-led nonprofit organizations that are committed to addressing poverty, drug use, community safety, food insecurity, immigration and education for people in the neighborhood.

“There’s a lot of grief and misunderstanding about how this space closed, and one of the alumni [of St. Mark’s] said so wisely in the discernment process that the reason this church closed was because they failed to connect with the resources of the community,” Shillingsburg explained, “and that was so instructive on how we develop the mission and vision of the ministry.”

She and the Rev. Canon Franklin Morales, diocesan canon missionary for Latino/Hispanic ministries, became involved toward the end of the discernment process, when they joined the diocesan staff in summer 2023. They soon concluded that, in order to leverage the campus’s assets, they needed to be “boots on the ground,” continuing the consultant’s work by deepening the diocese’s relationships within the community.

“The first thing that we did, honestly, was meet with the stakeholders, listen to them, their needs, their grief,

and their visions, expectations and dreams for this facility,” Morales explained.

The community leaders the consultant initially identified invited other leaders they knew to join the conversation, and the project gained momentum. What became clear during the discernment process is that the small, extremely local nonprofits in the New Hope Collaborative neighborhood were having a large impact with small budgets, but they were priced out of the Raleigh real estate market. They needed space to continue their work and grow their impact. They needed a place to serve their clients and a permanent address to apply for grants. They also needed a space to connect with each other and build community.

The former St. Mark’s campus had space to offer, but it also had lots of deferred maintenance needs. While Shillingsburg continued to focus on building relationships, Morales took charge of the buildings and grounds. It was a hands-on process. The week before school started in 2024 and immediately after the Loaves and Fishes afterschool program signed a lease with the New Hope Collaborative, the HVAC system in the former Sunday school building flooded, water overflowing the pan and dripping down into the light fixtures. So Morales found a ladder and a bucket and got to work. Walls were painted, faucets switched out and light fixtures replaced. The Wi-Fi got an upgrade. Slowly, the buildings became more usable and inviting.

The burgeoning partnerships required a leap of faith for both the diocese and the community partners. Following the community’s lead meant the diocese wasn’t dictating the future of the campus. Signing leases with the New Hope Collaborative meant the nonprofit partners were paying for space they might not be able to occupy immediately in buildings that were sometimes falling apart, literally. All of this required trust, on both sides.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

For Ash Wednesday 2024, Morales and Shillingsburg decided to hold a community Ashes to Go at the bus stop. They recruited local clergy to help and bought Chick-fil-A breakfast sandwiches to share. They offered food and prayers to community members both at the bus stop and inside the buses. It was a spirit-filled introduction to the wider community, but according to Shillingsburg, what happened a few weeks later on Maundy Thursday defined what the community partnerships look like today.



The New Hope Collaborative on the site of the former St. Mark's, Raleigh, is a community resource and gathering space. In the past 12 months, the ministry or its partners have hosted a Black History Month play in the sanctuary; "Be You," an intergenerational event celebrating Latino identity; and a sound bath for community nonprofit leaders, among other events. *Photos by Joy Shillingsburg*

MEET LESLEY PEACE

After a thorough search, Lesley Peace started as the founding director of the New Hope Collaborative on February 10.

"I am eager to contribute my experience in community organizing, educational program development and advocacy to ensure this initiative becomes a model for collaborative impact within the diocese and beyond," Peace said.

Read more about her on page 8.

She cold-emailed all of the local nonprofit leaders she knew—and others she found through Google—with an invitation to an evening of caring for the caregivers. It was a play on the traditional Maundy Thursday foot washing ritual. The Rev. Canon Lindsey Ardrey, canon missionary for diocesan restitution and reparations ministry, led a beautiful, creative liturgy. Shillingsburg invited one of her connections to lead a sound bath. Both bishops and some local clergy attended, and the diocese introduced itself to its neighbors.

"We introduced it as this is how we intend to proceed," Shillingsburg explained. "We are not landlords. We are not



just leasing a space. We're an Episcopal presence that has something very unique to offer this community in a totally different way than just being a church. We are going to care for the caregivers. We're going to use our assets here in this neighborhood to be supportive because you are the hands and feet here. And it has set the tone on how we behave together in this ecosystem."

FINDING PARTNERS

While the New Hope Collaborative welcomes the broader community, a key part of inviting community partners to lease space on the campus has been discerning if and how they align with the diocesan mission strategy goals (Racial Reckoning, Justice and Healing; Congregational Vitality; Formation; Collaboration and New Communities; and Creation Care). Worship has returned to the former church building on Sunday mornings in the form of Ekklesia, a non-denominational church grounded in community outreach, racial justice and community collaboration. The church has been collaborating with another community partner, Loaves and Fishes, a long-running, high-quality community afterschool program serving more than 40 Black and Latino children in kindergarten through 12th grade. Justice Served NC, led by violence prevention specialist Diana Powell, helps those impacted by the criminal justice system reintegrate into



their communities. The Bridge International supports survivors of human trafficking through outreach, direct services and community awareness. Evolve Mentoring envisions an equitable world in which Black and brown youth thrive and are equipped to be the leaders of tomorrow. In addition to these five partners, the New Hope Collaborative team is in conversation with several other nonprofits. Perhaps most importantly, the partners are in conversation with each other.

“What’s different about this place is the commitment every organization has to one another of being a community together,” Shillingsburg said.

As the community partnerships have evolved and grown, so has the need for diocesan presence on the campus. Shillingsburg and Morales both have responsibilities beyond their roles with the New Hope Collaborative. Lesley Peace came onboard as the founding director on February 10, just a few days before this article went to print. The Rev. Liam Barr, a curate through the diocese’s Reimagining Curacies program, also works at the ministry three days per week. While he eventually hopes to start a bilingual Episcopal worshipping community in the church building, at the time of this writing, he functioned as the diocese’s main representative on the campus.

As the person at the ministry most days, Barr has navigated several of the challenges that have arisen as

the New Hope Collaborative discerns its new way of being in the neighborhood. Ekklesia’s trailer was stolen from the parking lot. A stray bullet hit the mailbox. Barr spoke with the police about some violence happening in the neighborhood around the property. And then he, Shillingsburg and Morales invited their nonprofit partners to a meeting to discuss what had been happening.

“I think nine times out of 10 in any project that looks like this, the conversation would have been fueled by anxiety and fear,” Barr reflected. “How do I put up more walls? How do I push people away? How do we make sure we’re safe? And we don’t actually want to reckon with the dignity of people in the neighborhood.

“This conversation was entirely about the problems in the neighborhood and how the answer to problems is relationship. How do we become more engaged with our neighbors? What organizations in the area can we connect with? How do we draw more people in to show them that we are—all of us—unified by our missions of loving people? How do we make that real for people in the neighborhood? And what an incredible unifying thing that is, like it’s so close to what it means to be followers of Jesus. And what a rare thing to find in this world.”

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