ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

THE ST. ANN COMMUNITY IN COLLEGE HEIGHTS:

A THEOLOGY OF PUBLIC LIFE

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**The St. Ann Community in College Heights: A Theology of Public Life**

In systematizing a theology of public life for the St. Ann Community, a new monastic community of which I am a member, four foundational concepts emerge as guiding our community’s engagements with one another and the broader world: the image of God, trinitarian unity in diversity, immanence, and being good news.[[1]](#footnote-1) I will begin by providing a necessary background sketch of the two groups involved in this highly contextualized theology of public life: the St. Ann Community and the people of the College Heights neighborhood of Abilene, Texas.[[2]](#footnote-2) Then, after briefly articulating my community’s understanding of virtue, I will proceed to examine the four guiding principles of the SAC, their foundations, and their implications for our engagement in the world, focusing on our involvement in the College Heights neighborhood, the specific public context in which we find ourselves embedded as participants in and ministers of the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The St. Ann Community

The St. Ann Community(SAC) is currently made up of ten Christians who are committed to living together in intentional community while also working for development within the College Heights neighborhood and its surroundings. Most of the SAC has been walking through life together since our initial formation as a group in February 2010, and since the summer of 2011, we have been primarily established within CH, where we are beginning to cultivate the relationships with neighbors that are fundamental to the hopes and commitments we have for our interactions in that context.

The dream that God has given us as a community is one with many facets, though those fall generally under a three-fold framework: community, neighborhood, and city.[[3]](#footnote-3) For the SAC itself, it is a dream of holy and purposeful covenant living that challenges us to grow into deeper relationship with God and one another. For the CHN, it is a dream of community development, not just in economic resources, but also in the residents’ interpersonal bonds and quality of life.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the larger city of Abilene, it is a dream of participating in and furthering a network of connections among the city’s officials, organizations, and concerned citizens, all for the sake of the well-being of the city and its inhabitants. In all of these areas, we hope to see reconciliation of relationships and the restoration of people and things to their intended beauty and function.[[5]](#footnote-5)

College Heights

The College Heights neighborhood is in many respects a typical Abilene neighborhood. It consists largely of single-family homes, most of them occupied by renters, along with a few apartments, a handful of churches, and one swath of commercial space. Stretching from Ambler to North 8th and from Treadaway to Grape, the area boasts of a diverse collection of people, including residents from nearly every social, racial, ethnic, age, educational, and economic category visible in Abilene.[[6]](#footnote-6)

College Heights is in many ways, however, what the new monastic movement would call an “abandoned place of empire,” a place that has been generally forgotten or neglected by the larger structures and institutions which formed and still surround it.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the words of Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, it is a place “that has no attraction for the world of ‘what’s happening now,’ and therefore is left alone by the political, economic, and social powers that be.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This neighborhood is one of the more economically and socially disadvantaged ones of Abilene; although the city’s major hospital is technically included within its borders and the city’s civic center and downtown district lie just at its southernmost boundary, those institutions truly belong to a world that is quite different from that of most of the residents of CH. College Heights is a neighborhood that the general population of Abilene may perhaps travel *through*, but rarely *to*, for it is a place that in most people’s perception holds nothing of worth and even plenty to fear. And it is in part that very *mis*perception that has drawn the SAC to live in its midst.

**On Virtue**

The SAC takes an essentially virtue-based approach to ethics, in which we endeavor to become virtuous people by paying attention to the living God’s self-revelation and by practicing the imitation of God as part of the community of faith. We cultivate ever-growing relationships with God, who is both our spiritual lifeline and our paragon, and we adapt our attitudes and our actions to reflect an ever-expanding understanding of who God has revealed Godself to be, most fully (though far from exclusively) in Christ. In addition to drawing us further into God’s presence, these two main pursuits—relationship and imitation—are for the purpose of individual and communal character formation, which in turn results in the building up of the church and the betterment of the world. In other words, our investments are for the transformation of all people, all relationships, and all of creation further into the image of God. For us, this is what it means to be participants in and ministers of the coming kingdom of God.

**Theological Foundations**

The four normative ideas guiding the SAC’s engagement in the CHN—the image of God, trinitarian unity in diversity, immanence, and being good news—are derived from our community’s desire to understand and imitate our self-revealing God. Though the four concepts overlap and cannot always be clearly delineated, when examined in depth, each yields rich insight into the character of God. Therefore, given our desire as a community of God-followers to model ourselves after the God who fully embodies the best of these principles, they also offer great potential for practical application in our growth as people of virtue and our engagement in the world around us. These guiding principles truly do frame the story of our involvement in the CHN,[[9]](#footnote-9) and it is to them that we now turn.

The Image of God

The SAC is deeply persuaded that the image of God is readily observable throughout creation. We are convinced that the creation reflects its creator, and therefore aspects of the character of the God whom we love and serve are found everywhere we look around us, expressed in a myriad of extraordinary ways, most magnificently in us as human beings.[[10]](#footnote-10) Every human was created in the image of God and bears that image in a unique way—this is the positive anthropology that undergirds our interactions with the CHN (as well as our other relationships). Examined closely, this understanding of humans as made in the image of God consists of three basic components: createdness, locatedness, and goodness.

*Createdness*

As created beings, humans are finite creatures. Though we do have something good to reflect about the God who made us, we are inherently limited beings who are dependent upon a loving God for our survival and flourishing. We are not all-powerful, all-knowing, or self-reliant, for if those traits belong to anyone, they belong to God alone. We human beings are made in the *image* of God, but we are not ourselves *God(s)*. A theologically sound Christian anthropology will not only perceive but will also *embrace* that created nature, acknowledging the goodness of God to design us as beautiful but vulnerable, limited beings.

It is this very vulnerability that allows for and requires us to enter into relationships—with God, with other humans, with nature—that reflect the image of God as expressed in the communion of the Trinity. As the issue of trinitarian communion will be discussed shortly, suffice it to say for now that our willingness to recognize and, again, to embrace our createdness is essential for God-honoring human relationships, like those we hope to see between the SAC and the CHN. In order for the relationships that we as a community build with the people of the neighborhood to be healthy and godly, they must be based upon our humble realization that we are all finite created beings, heavily reliant upon the goodness of God to sustain us.

*Locatedness*

A further aspect of our createdness that deserves particular attention is our locatedness. We humans—again, in the *image* of God rather than existing *as* God—are not omnipotent or omniscient. Neither are we omnipresent. Each one of us is placed in a particular time, place, and sociocultural context, and it is from those locations that we engage the world. Our locatedness, much of it unchosen, is in large part determinative of our beliefs, our opportunities, the ways we approach the world, and the trajectories of our lives.[[11]](#footnote-11) And though some situations of locatedness are admittedly less coveted than others, our locatedness in itself is not something to be lamented over. Rather, it is to be understood, celebrated, and used to glorify God.

This requires first simply acknowledging that each human being does exist within an unavoidable web of associations, both voluntary and involuntary,[[12]](#footnote-12) a kaleidoscope of relationships, commitments, and beliefs that are particular to him or her. When we recognize this fact, we free ourselves up to allow for and even to appreciate diversity. For if God is the creator whose image is reflected throughout the creation, and if God has chosen to place people within certain contexts, then it follows that there must be something in those people and those contexts that reflects the image of God.

Locatedness, then, and diversity of locatedness, are a gift rather than a curse. Our contextualized nature, in addition to being altogether inevitable, is a helpful heuristic tool for discovering more about who we are and how we reflect the image of God. And as we explore in treasure-hunt fashion how God’s character is echoed in our voluntary and involuntary associations, we can also discern how to better imitate that character through how we respond to, modify, and create those associations.

*Goodness*

As finite as we humans may be in our createdness and locatedness, being made in the image of God also entails a marvelous goodness. We truly are magnificent creatures, designed to reflect the splendor of our maker by bearing the divine image. There is fallenness and brokenness in our world, to be sure, and we humans are not exempt from that on the basis of our status as particularly blessed image-bearers. However, even the corruption of a depraved world cannot erase the indelible mark that God has placed on us. We are good—even *very good*, according to the Genesis narrative—simply because we carry the image of a good God, reflecting in our very existence the character and essence of that God.

And though there are commonalities in how we echo God’s goodness (for we are all human, after all, and we are all reflecting the same God), the variety of ways in which the image of God is expressed in humanity is utterly astonishing. No two people reflect the image of God in exactly the same way. Both our createdness by an endlessly imaginative God and our specific locatedness in voluntary and involuntary associations lend us distinctiveness and leave us inimitable. Each person’s goodness, then, is instantiated only once, and each person’s goodness reveals God’s goodness in a way the world needs to see.

Trinitarian Unity in Diversity

As beautiful as it is to see the character of God reflected in the multitude of individuals created in God’s image, the multifaceted nature of God is only visible (though still then imperfectly so) when those representations are brought together, unified in their diversity, to create a fuller portrait of God. The SAC’s endeavor to nurture unity in diversity, then, is an extension of our witness concerning the image of God among people. This commitment to unity in diversity entails three beliefs: that the trinitarian God is indeed diverse and yet one, that the communion of God demonstrated within the Trinity is to be imitated, and that such imitation is in fact a plausible and positive pursuit.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The God after whom we are modeled is a communal God, made up of three persons eternally abiding in one another in perichoretic union. Our God is three *in* one, not merely three ones. And it is in this communal image that we are made. The mutual, intimate, and self-giving intermingling of the persons of the Trinity is the archetype for who we humans are meant to be. Imitation of God’s communion is not only possible, then, but should be presumed. In the words of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

And if the Trinity is a teaching about us as relational people, then genuine and deep respect for the image of God—both in God and in ourselves—will entail us growing in relationship, just as God does. We will seek out relationships not only with God but also with other people, who point us back to God and help us as a community to reflect God’s image more fully. In the SAC, then, when our belief that people individually and communally reflect the image of God is combined with our desire to imitate a trinitarian God of perichoretic unity in diversity, we are doubly obliged—though enthusiastically so!—to promote unity among people who reflect the image of God in different ways.Attaining this unity is far from simple, but we maintain that any approach to relationships that allows for sectarianism and the promotion of discord and division within the kingdom is inherently flawed because it does not recognize that communion in the midst of diversity is an essential part of being made in God’s likeness.

Achieving unity in diversity first requires an appreciation for the ways in which people do display the image of God differently because of their unique locatedness and goodness. Cultivating this esteem for the divers expressions of God’s character found within humanity is a daunting enterprise, partly achieved through the development of a sound theological anthropology, with a particular focus on our creation in the image of God. But the task is also helped along by and is only fulfilled by the transference of this theoretical understanding to the experiences of everyday life. Our commitment to unity is not fully real or fully realized until it is lived.

Actualizing this desire for unity in diversity, then, also involves forming a positive vision for how the many partial revelations of God’s character found in diverse people can be integrated so as to better approximate a view of the fullness of God’s character, much like a puzzle is fitted together from its sundry pieces.[[15]](#footnote-15) Such an endeavor requires being able to see with spiritual eyes and listen with spiritual ears, wide open to the revelations that God may bring about a particular “piece” of the “puzzle.” It also calls for creative and dedicated engagement in relationships for the purpose of reconciling people, who though similar are yet quite distinct and often, in our world of brokenness, even estranged.

Particularly because relationships are so difficult in a world of hurt and of finitude, relational practices of humility and hospitality (behaviors exemplified even by the members of the Trinity) are especially important. Humility, the arrangement of all beings in right relationship towards one another,[[16]](#footnote-16) challenges us to honor others as much as or more than we honor ourselves, advocating their good and their growth. In practical terms, it promotes interdependence in relationships and entails not assuming we have all the solutions to the questions and problems of life. Similarly, hospitality involves welcoming others into our lives as though God is present through them. We freely and eagerly make room for those who are different from us, both as an exhibition of God’s love and grace and because we desire to understand, honor, and learn from the image of God we know to be displayed by them.

Practices of humility and hospitality open us up to be able to form flourishing relationships that are appreciative of the image of God as it is diversely shown by a vast array of human beings.[[17]](#footnote-17) By embedding ourselves in such healthy relationships, we orient ourselves toward the kingdom of God, a kingdom that reconciles all people, bringing former strangers—or even enemies—together in communion not only with God but also with one another. As this communion is more closely approximated by the unification of diverse people, we more clearly reflect the image of a diverse and yet unified God and are better able to participate in and be ministers of the kingdom of that God.

Immanence

Though God has made Godself present to the world through these numerous partial revelations of the image of God in human beings and the rest of creation, this is neither the only nor even the most prominent manner in which God has chosen to come near to the world. For God is not just present by proxy. No, personal divine immanence permeates the biblical narrative: from the presence of God in Eden, to God’s guidance of the people of Israel, from the coming of God in the flesh as Jesus the Christ, to the Spirit’s descending upon this God-man and subsequent working among the church and, finally, to the foretold gathering of all beings into the presence of God at the end of time. God is continuously present throughout the created realm, and the SAC readily acknowledges that presence and desires to imitate God’s willingness to be deeply invested in the life of the world.

The incarnation of God in the form of Jesus is the primary historical paradigm of God’s immanence that the SAC seeks to model itself after. In the words of Eugene Peterson, in Jesus “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”[[18]](#footnote-18) It is this self-divesting presence among creation that we as a community desire to imitate, so we also make an earnest attempt to take on the “flesh” of people who are in many ways unlike us, even moving, quite literally, “into the neighborhood” of CH in order to engage in God’s work there.

But God’s involvement in the world is not merely in the historical sense. God is certainly not dead, and neither did the Spirit abandon us and leave behind a presence only in the words of Scripture. No, God is alive and well, working in and among the beings of the created world, particularly through the Spirit’s presence in the lives of humans. So while the incarnation of God in Christ is truly a significant and helpful example to model ourselves after, the SAC also readily observes God’s current presence and work within the world. And given our deeply embedded desire to imitate God’s character and actions, we not only *perceive* God’s continued immanence in the world, we also eagerly seek to *join* God there, investing ourselves in the ceaseless work we discern God is already doing in places just like the CHN.

Being Good News

Our desire to join in God’s work is expressed most fully through our longing to be good news to the world, testifying about the power and love of God to people who badly need to hear and understand that message. Life as people of good news has as its center a mission: the reconciliation of relationships and the restoration of the entirety of creation to its intended beauty and function, so that it better reflects the image of God it already possesses. This is, in short, the growth of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is primarily about God breaking into the life of creation and bringing *shalom* to the world. The peace, wholeness, health, and harmony that characterize *shalom*, the transformation of individuals and communities that happens as a result of the kingdom, and the communion that is brought about between us and creation, one another, and ultimately God—this is the mission of God in which the SAC participates.

This undertaking to be good news follows readily from and is in reality the culmination of the theological commitments outlined throughout this paper. All humans were created in the image of God and designed to live in diverse communion with the rest of creation, a communion that expands as God’s presence within creation is increasingly acknowledged and sought out. Therefore we in the SAC seek to be among those who eagerly welcome the further integration of God into our own lives and who witness boldly about the power and potential of that relationship to everyone who will listen. That is to say, we want to live as good news.

As we see it, testifying to the good news is primarily about a state of *being* rather than a practice of *doing.* And being good news in the world means living a life so intimately connected to God that we and the world around us are transformed because of it. Thus *being* good news (as opposed to merely speaking of good news) requires a healthy relationship with God as a foundation before any kind of ministry or outreach can develop. And this is no arbitrary rule. Rather, it is an unavoidable imperative, for having that intimate relationship with God is not just a precursor to being good news, it is constitutiveof and tantamount to being good news.

Our pursuit of being good news in the CHN, then, does not fit the prevailing mold of modern era “evangelism.” Our preoccupation is not with preaching, teaching, intellectually focused arguments, or emotionally driven conversion experiences, all for the purpose of a narrowly defined “salvation,” as has been the case in evangelism for so long. Nor do we cherish measurability, manipulability, or formulaic strategies in the ways that the modern era has. No, in our attempt to be good news, we focus instead on the formation of rightly oriented relationships—with God, with self, with other people, and with creation—that reflect and honor God and are an indication that the kingdom of God is at hand.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This relationship-orientation toward the good news and our emphasis on being rather than merely doing surely do not preclude us from participating in customary practices of worship or evangelism. It is certainly *not* the case that relationship and such practices are antithetical to each other; healthy relationships will even lead into certain practices. However, it is relationship—the fundamental prerequisite for communion!—that deserves priority of place. Tools like preaching and teaching have an appropriate role in the kingdom and will be utilized when fitting, but it is the character and relationships that are cultivated through these kinds of practices that are the aim, not the practices themselves. Therefore, in the transition out of modern era evangelism, these kinds of practices lose some priority as emphasis is shifted toward the formation of relationships and as the practices become subservient to that cause.

Based upon our understanding of evangelism as whole-self participation in and heralding of the kingdom of God, a natural consequence of being permeated ourselves by the good news of God, the SAC seeks to practice the sentiment expressed in the phrase often attributed to our brother St. Francis: “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” In our relationships with the CHN, it is our entire lives that are the testimony, not just our words. And each one of us is good news to the world in a unique way, for we all reflect different aspects of the character of God. Therefore, as we discover the image of God that is expressed through our own specific locatedness and goodness, we are able to impact the world in particularly powerful ways specifically because of those unique compositions.

In the SAC, God has brought together a number of people who reflect the image of God through commitments to justice and sustainability. These are, of course, not the only ways in which we in the SAC reflect God, nor do we believe that they are superior to the ways in which other individuals and communities reflect the image of God. They are, however, particularly prominent ways in which we corporately display God’s likeness, as the locatedness and goodness of the individuals of the SAC combine to create a kind of community synergy. These commitments, then, are two of the most prominent ways in which we seek to be good news to the world, most immediately to the people of the CHN. Our passions for justice and sustainability flow from our desire to see rightly oriented relationships among God, self, other humans, and creation.

*Justice*

Our pursuit of justice, based on our commitment to imitate a God of justice and our hope for healthy relationships among human beings, translates into a desire to see the unseen and to help the voiceless find their voice. This is one very basic, but extremely important, way to be good news. In addition to our eagerness to be present in a place where we knew God was already at work, our longing to see the typically unseen good in people and places and to minister to people who are often ignored or discounted was in large part what first led us to the CHN. Misperceptions about neighborhoods like CH usually result in those neighborhoods being feared, forgotten, neglected, or abandoned except by the vulnerable few who reside in them. It was the very existence of those misperceptions, though, that heightened the need for justice and reconciliation and therefore made CH the perfect place for us as a community to live out the good news.

So as we attempt to be witnesses to and participants in the kingdom as it is lived out among the people of the CHN, we strive for justice for the oppressed and afflicted of CH. Particularly relevant concerns for the people located in our neighborhood include racial and economic justice, equal opportunities for education, neighborhood safety, and fair access to city resources. As we walk through life with the people of CH, being good news means paying close attention to these concerns, while also along the way enlisting our neighbors to seek justice for those who are more oppressed and afflicted than they.

*Sustainability*

The SAC’s vision for being good news in relationship with the CHN also contains within it three aspects of sustainability: personal, relational, and environmental. *Personal* sustainability involves constructing a lifestyle in which one’s relationships with God and self are healthily aligned so as to yield greater communion and ever-increasing *shalom*. As indicated previously, having a rightly oriented relationship with God, which in turn leads to a rightly oriented relationship with self, is foundational for being good news in any other way. Personal sustainability, then, means developing a substantial relationship with God, a meaningful purpose, positive self-value and self-expression, and a healthily balanced life, all of which can be perpetuated over time.

The goal of *relational* sustainability is the creation of healthy interpersonal bonds that are viable for the long term, not just for the immediate future. Relational sustainability, therefore, requires stability, investment, commitment, and the formation of a web of interconnecting relationships that nurture not just individuals but entire communities. For the people of the CHN to grow in individual and corporate well-being over the long term, then, relational sustainability—what some might call rootedness[[20]](#footnote-20)—must be cultivated vigorously.

But being good news is not just about bringing people into communion with God and with one another, as we hope to do through our pursuit of justice and of personal and relational sustainability with the people of CH. Witnessing to the kingdom also means seeking greater communion between humanity and the rest of the created world. This is where our community’s passion for *environmental* sustainability comes in most keenly.

Because we believe that God created the entirety of the universe, not just humans, in a way that reflects God’s image, and because we believe that image should be honored wherever it is found, we in the SAC are dedicated to working toward greater environmental sustainability. We hope to be good news within CH at least in part by adopting and pointing to a way of life that respects the goodness of creation and seeks healthier, mutually beneficial relationships between humanity and creation. For this reason, the SAC’s relationship with the people of the CHN will entail attention to down to earth (pun intended!) matters like sustainable gardening, recycling, reduction of energy use, ethical treatment of animals, and the like. We firmly believe that the good news of God’s kingdom will affect every aspect of our lives, every relationship of which we are a part, so if the good news is to be truly good, it must be good for the entirety of creation, not just for ourselves.

**In Action**

It remains now to be seen how the commitmentsof the SAC toward engagement in public life, largely theoretical in nature up to this point, translate to everyday interactions with the specific public in which we find ourselves, the people of CH. What does it mean in our context to look for the image of God, to believe in unity in diversity, to seek to unearth and imitate God’s immanence in the world, and to live as people of good news? The following pages will discuss some of the implications of the theological commitments that undergird and inform the SAC’s presence in CH; it will be a beginning attempt to incarnate our theology.

Putting flesh on our theological commitments first means that the SAC must explore the ways in which the people of CH—and here I include us in the SAC—reflect the image of God. As a community, we devote our time, energy, and talents to the formation and strengthening of relationships, uncovering the createdness, locatedness, and goodness that are present in ourselves and our neighbors and paying close attention to how we all—individually and corporately—echo the character of God. We recognize our finite nature, divesting ourselves of the need to accomplish everything perfectly or all at once (or ever, for that matter). And we pay particular attention to the contextually located nature of our interactions, humbly but unabashedly acknowledging the goodness of our community’s own locatedness and Christian commitments, while also seeking to understand and honor the locatedness and goodness of our neighbors.

We engage the relationships we form in CH from a fundamental stance of respect for the image of God, all the while cultivating ever-increasing attitudes and practices of reverence for that image. This sometimes proves difficult, as when we interact with neighbors who are very different from us, neighbors in whom it may be initially hard for us to clearly see the image of God. But an attitude of humility and practices like expert attention paying (sometimes using the sociological tool of ethnography), deep listening, and accepting and extending hospitality open the way for more intimate relationships and are therefore crucial to our already-achieved and hoped-for future successes at unearthing and appreciating the image of God in the people of CH.

The SAC’s dedication to asset-based community development (ABCD) is an especially significant methodological commitment that flows out of our respect for the image of God in humanity. ABCD is just what it sounds: the advancement of groups of people (typically neighborhoods) through attention to the resources that they bring to the table. This methodology assumes that all people have assets and asks them to use those assets for the betterment of their lives and communities. Therefore ABCD—embraced by groups as theologically founded as the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA)—cultivates dignity and giftedness, emphasizing the potential for good in every person.[[21]](#footnote-21)As this philosophy so strongly reflects the SAC’s desire to discover and honor the image of God in the people of the CHN, it serves as a primary guiding principle for our relationships and goals in that context. The SAC, then, while affirming our own community’s giftedness and goodness, looks also to our asset-laden neighbors in CH to co-inspire, co-initiate, and co-create development in our shared neighborhood.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As we discover the image of God in the individual people of the neighborhood, bringing everyone’s God-given assets to bear on the concerns of the CHN, the SAC also seeks to bring people together in greater communion with one another. We work to break down the barriers (of wealth, of culture, of prejudice, etc.) that are so often and so easily erected between highly diverse people, urging our neighbors to see the good in others and to invest in relationships that will be for the benefit of themselves and the neighborhood. The SAC has often spoken of a beautiful and nearly biblical vision for this ideal unified diversity: people of different social classes, ethnicities, ages, and life situations all gathered around a table, feasting together as part of a loving, dedicated communion of restored individuals.

The restoration of people so that they are able to participate in this vision—truly a vision of the coming kingdom of God—is possible only as the good news of God’s presence and power among us all is shared and believed. So in our words but even more extensively in our lives, the SAC testifies to and participates in that good news.

To do so, we first turn our attention to how God is already at work in the CHN, looking for God’s immanent presence and activity. Through practices of personal and communal discernment and prayer, we perceive what God is up to and determine how best to join in that work. Among other things, we have seen God drawing certain people into relationships, urging them to stand firm for justice and righteousness, using them to display certain attributes of God’s own character, and prodding them to live in more sustainable ways. And we encourage them in these pursuits, also taking part as appropriate in their particular ways of expressing God’s image and being good news by lending them our own physical, relational, and intellectual presence and resources.

In turn, we also witness to God’s presence and power by living—in our own ways of reflecting the image of God—as good news, offering our neighbors the opportunity to join us as we do so. We demonstrate to them our eagerness for healthy, balanced, and sane lives, lives increasingly characterized by *shalom*. We commit to being fully invested in the CHN as long as possible, until God leads us elsewhere, with no end date in mind. We ask them to participate with us in our commitments and passions, such as those to justice and sustainability. We show them our own longing and struggle to attain unity in the midst of diversity. We indicate our desire to develop flourishing relationships with them, with the created world, and with God, encouraging them to join us in those pursuits. In short, we invite them to live into God’s kingdom vision at our side.

—Your paper lays out its theological foundations for SAC, and in this regard your paper is very instructive. Some of your key points need greater clarification and devlopment (e.g., the relevant virtues that form and sustain the community—I presume that justice may be one virtue; the extent to which your four theological foundations norm the community’s self-understanding and engagment with the relevant community. Nevertheless, this is a good start.

Grade: 89

Grade for the course: A-

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1. Though I speak often throughout this paper of how “we” as a community view and do many things, it must be said that my analyses are just that: mine. I do hope in the very near future to submit the impressions and convictions presented in this paper to communal discernment and insight, but at this point the perspective offered here, though that of a well-informed insider, is an inherently limited formulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These two groups will often henceforth be abbreviated as SAC and CH or CHN. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I will here briefly describe the SAC’s hopes for these three publics, but the remainder of this paper will focus on our interactions within the public of the neighborhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some aspects of community development will be briefly touched on later in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Many aspects of this dream fall in line with the commitments of the new monastic movement. For further explanations of those commitments, see The Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Though the statistics are woefully out of date (from 2000), see the city of Abilene’s website for more information on the larger North College area of which CH is a part: City of Abilene Office of Neighborhood Services, “North College Area,” City of Abilene, TX, http://www.abilenetx.com/ons/doc/map/NorthCollege.pdf (accessed November 11, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A brief word on the perceived anti-institutionalism of new monasticism might be apropos here. While it is true that some new monastic communities harbor only negative feelings toward what they might term “empire,” the larger structures of the world that they believe do only harm, not all communities take such extreme views. The SAC recognizes and laments the potential of institutions to harm people and the planet, but we also recognize that God can be and is present through the workings of such structures. Therefore, we generally participate in these structures, all the while seeking their purification and redemption so that their intended good purposes can be fulfilled.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The same could be said for how they tell of the community’s genesis and its subsequent internal interactions. Sadly, due to time constraints, page limitations, and a need for focus, those narratives must be left aside for now. However, for those who are interested, Joshua Kirby does an especially marvelous retelling of our community’s story, and as opportunities arise, I (and other community members) hope to compile written, photographic, audio, and video records of and reflections about our community’s history. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Individuals, groups of people, and the non-human creation all clearly mirror God’s image. The present section will focus on the image of God as reflected in individual human beings; discussions of that image as found in groups and in creation will be subsumed, respectively, under the sections below on trinitarian unity in diversity and being good news. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ruby Payne’s work on the hidden rules of class provides a helpful illustration here, one that is particularly applicable to the interactions of the SAC with the CHN. See, for example, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on these voluntary and involuntary associations, see Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Demonstrating the veracity of the first of these beliefs—the existence of a trinitarian God—is obviously far beyond the scope of this paper. It will therefore be assumed rather than explicated. The second belief—that God is to be imitated—has already been established as normative for the SAC. It is the third belief, then—that imitating God in this manner is both possible and salubrious—that is the main focus of this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Just as is the case with a puzzle, the corporate image of God that emerges in the unification of diverse individual pieces is still merely an image, not God. Beautiful and evocative as it may be, it is simply a representation, a limited interpretation of the real thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I recognize that this understanding of humility differs greatly from common definitions. Humility, however, is not mere self-abasement, and I believe that this definition’s strength lies in grasping the positive state of affairs that is the result of all beings—created and uncreated—modestly acknowledging their proper place in relationship to one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Again, though that is not my focus here, this idea and these practices of humility and hospitality could easily be transferred to our relationship with the non-human creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John 1:14 in Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I recognize that my summary of modern evangelistic tactics may seem too simplistic or even unfair; it is, however, just a brief observation that has been more substantially corroborated by the work of others. For further insight into the shift that has been occurring in the field of evangelism recently, see William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) and Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010), uses the language of stability and rootedness in his examination of the transient nature of American culture and the Christian faith within that culture. His ideas—for example, his declaration that “practicing stability has meant unlearning the habits of a culture that tells us the answer to our problems is always somewhere else,” (40)—connect deeply with the commitments of both the new monastic movement and asset-based community development (a methodology that will be discussed shortly). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For further information on ABCD, see John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993). The CCDA’s website (http://ccda.org/) is also a helpful resource. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. One future component of ABCD within CH may be the restoration and subsequent community use of the abandoned St. Ann hospital building, from which the SAC originally derived its name. Any developments here, however, will proceed only with the participation and/or blessing of the neighborhood’s residents. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)