

Interview with Julius Belser

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

April 18, 1996

Q: Thursday, April 18th, I think, and an interview with Julius Belser of Reba Place. I was wondering if we could start by you telling me some of the history of Reba Place?

A: I could do that. Would it be more efficient to uh, to give you a sort of pamphlet or a book about the history of the place?

Q: That would be wonderful too! Yeah. Maybe you could give me a thumbnail sketch or something?

A: We could spend time doing that. There is a book called Glimpses of Glory, that Dave and Anita Jackson wrote, that does a good job, I think, of telling about the history. And there's also a little pamphlet that uh, is a short form of that. Well, beginning back in '57, '58, some of the students and faculty at Goshen [?] College and Seminary were studying Scripture, and kind of searching out some of the Anabaptist kind of history, and uh, felt drawn to, to just explore living it out more intently, and began economic sharing, all other kinds of sharing as well. Uh, and uh ... so um ... the college and seminary thought it wasn't very realistic, that they needed some more practical experience, they should go out of the church, and just live it out. And so, their exploration of that lead to Evanston, a university community, and South Evanston, a transitional community, racially and culturally diverse. And so they began then over here in Reba Place, that's where the name comes from, the name of the street, to live together. A few singles lived up on the third floor, and two families lived in the first and second floor of the house. From that small beginning, an intentional Christian community developed. And then, some of us ... uh, I was involved at seminary in Chicago during that same time, sent out, when I was finishing seminary I sent out an invitation, to some Christians that I knew, and some Christian groups, including the folks at Goshen, to come and help to colonize an inner city neighborhood. So some of the folks from Reba came down to inner city Chicago, on the west side, on the Maxwell St. area, and joined in colonizing, sharing with people over the back fence and over the supper table, good news. And began living together and sharing together with folks in inner city Chicago and so forth. About eight years then following seminary, some of the folks from Reba, and the Church of Hope, at that point, were kind of sister groups, and uh, ... uh, in 1965 then, Peggy and I and our family moved here to Reba. Some of the others -- the University of Illinois now occupies that neighborhood. The gymnasium is built over the place where we used to live.

Q: And you said that your group was called Church of Hope?

A: Yes.

Q: And what would you say your mission was, or your purpose was?

A: Well, um, to uh, to form ... a Christian ... uh, ... gathering, seed plot of the Kingdom, and to uh, to just uh, to gather a people in response to Jesus, and his Good News. To, as Luke 4 talks about Jesus, said that he came to bring good news to the poor, recovering of sight to the blind, deliverance to captives, and to bring the year of liberation. It's in that kind of, that kind of spirit that we felt called to share Good News with the people who were oppressed and needy.

Q: Did you share all things common?

A: We did. We did. At that point a number of the folks that we were engaged with were on public aid, so we didn't have the resources to take them off of public aid, but we chose to live on the same

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standard of living as they. At that point, in terms of food and clothing and personal incidentals, uh, the people at Reba Place also chose to live simply, and to live on about the same standard of living as public aid allowed.

Q: And how many of you were there at the Church of Hope?

A: Oh, just a small gathering, maybe a dozen or so. Several single-parent families, and another family that was struggling with some alcohol problems.

Q: And did you share one house together?

A: There was a three-flat, but we got uh, as we went along, uh, one of the, one of the local women set up a beauty shop on the first floor. And, um, ... uh, there were others, other apartments scattered around the neighborhood that uh, that folks used. We had a little chapel and a storefront, but uh, we had, we gathered a few times a week for meals and family time. And uh, just sharing.

Q: And were you all working outside jobs in the community, or --?

A: A number of people were. One worked as a printer, and another worked as a school teacher in the local schools. Uh, one was a social worker. Um, I was actually a full-time pastor most of the time, pastor, social worker, whatever. Um, but uh, then there were some volunteer service people from the Church of the Brethren, and elsewhere, that came to help. We had a nursery school.

Q: Were you affiliated with a church, like Church of the Brethren, or Mennonite Church, or something?

A: We were part of the West Side Christian Parish, a United Protestant Christian group. I grew up in the Church of the Brethren, but uh, it was a really, interdenominational parish at that time... . It was actually an outgrowth of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, in New York. It started in 1948, some folks out at Union Seminary, there. An inner city parish in Cleveland, New Haven. Some of the folks came to Chicago, I think, in '52 -- Archie Hardgraves, and Don Benedict.

Q: And then did you hold services on Sunday?

A: Yes. In the chapel. We also cooperated with some of the local, uh, storefront churches and so on, holding Bible schools.

Q: And when what led to the merger with Reba Place?

A: Well, I think they, the concept of the church as community, as a family, uh, uh, ... was something we felt a kinship with, and kind of the concept of "church" uh, ... as, kind of a radical following of Jesus, was something we felt a great kinship with. And uh, the West Side Parish was, uh, very radically involved in the city, and urban life, and urban relevant ministry at that time. We learned a lot from the brothers and sisters in the Parish. Actually the Parish had a group ministry itself, that uh, had common disciplines, a discipline of economic sharing, and um, devotional discipline, a vocational discipline, uh, and a political discipline, involved in politics together. And so, ... um, we were part of the group ministry there, uh, and also then, ... very -- I think basically, the group ministry had a lot of similarity to the, uh, concept of church that we were involved in, except that it was, the um, ... the Anabaptist concept of church is not just the clergy, or the staff under discipline, but the whole body of the church, kind of was to be a

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discipline, a disciplined band. And so uh, ... uh, ... we found, we felt that the uh, ... in pursuing that, and living it out fully, the uh, we were attracted to the, to the Reba vision. Um, ... I ... think we, perhaps some of the other materials you'll see that uh, um, we felt, in coming to Reba, we were also feeling the need to make a new start ourselves, find renewal in our marriage, and in our, ... uh, and searching, really, in the effort to , uh, ... to ... help alcoholics, addicts, and broken families and so on, get it together. Felt very, very powerless often, very helpless, so that part of, in coming to Reba, we felt the ... uh, there was a strong Anabaptist sense of discipleship, but the resources to make those changes, for ... for persons that have suffered a lot of abuse and depression, where often, uh, often lacking. And I think we found also then, in the charismatic movement, as found a little Episcopal church out in Wheaton, and uh, ... they had some healing services, and some praise and worship times that were very vital. And so some of the, some of the resources, the personal and spiritual resources to make the necessary changes, our lives and our life together. So I think we found a good deal of help in the charismatic movement -- freedom, and worship and, uh, ... power to make changes. And so uh, that was very, that was a very important ingredient. We found an Episcopal church down in Houston, Texas, uh, ... that uh, was, was living, that was in the '60's, late '60's probably, uh, the Church of the Redeemer, down in Texas. Gram Pokingham [?], their pastor, came by, uh, and uh, we were impressed with the combination of uh, of ... gathered communal life together, but also very relevant social action, and social ministry. A legal clinic, and uh, and um, some of -- you can see some of the things in the book, a little about some of the impact of that. But, um, it was a hopefulness in making some of the changes and dealing with some of the struggles that people were having.

Q: Did people from this Episcopal church join up with you at Reba Place?

A: They ... they came. And we visited them. They were influential in helping us to get, to come to a fuller sense of the hopefulness of, and the possibility of life together, of uh, personal and social transformation. That is, kind of not simply ... um, personal piety, but also transformation of your political and social order as well.

Q: Were these people living in common in Texas?

A: They had the extended family households. And uh, we've uh, at one point, at Reba, most of us were living in extended families. In the late '60's and early '70's, uh, ... that was a very lively time. It was uh, we sometimes took on more than we were able to manage, uh, but uh, but it was a time of great, great meaning in our life, and growth, and lots of young people came during that time. And uh, sometimes, in our household, we were struggling to find a right name. At one point, they talked about Rocktumbler. Living together in a household, an extended family household, is like being ground against each other, either growing or else!

Q: I like that. When did the Church of Hope combine forces with Reba Place?

A: In '65, '66.

Q: And just so I get the chronology right, when did the Church of Hope start?

A: Back in ... '58, '59.

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Q: Does that have any connection with the Fellowship of Hope? No, okay, that's something else. And so, was Reba Place, during the '60's and '70's, did the people practice economic sharing?

A: Yes.

Q: So there was full income sharing.

A: Yes.

Q: And, about what size a group?

A: Well, uh, ... I don't know. At its height, there was about 155, I think, part of the common treasury. Currently it's about 60 or 65. And the common treasury group, at this point, is like an order within the broader congregation here. So the larger congregation is 265 or something like that.

Q: So there's 65 people in a common treasury?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you part of that?

A: Yes. We have an extended family household here too, there are about a dozen of us.

Q: It's you and your wife and some other people?

A: And some others.

Q: And then the rest of the people involved in the common treasury just live in houses in this area?

A: Yes. There are a couple of households, but uh, most of them live in their own apartments, gather weekly, or however often, depending on the small group.

Q: And then do you get together on a large group on Sundays to worship together?

A: Whole congregation gathers. Four or five hundred.

Q: Do you have a church building?

A: There's a -- over here on Custar and Madison, uh, there's a building that uh, can care for, I don't know, six or seven hundred actually. On Sundays there are between, there are around 400. And there's another gathering down in Rogers Park, another 100 people or so on Sunday mornings. Some of our folks have gone down there, to bend in the city in a little more significant way.

Q: Where is Rogers Park? I don't know Chicago.

A: Just in the north side of Chicago.

Q: And um, again, I know you've told me before about the vision of the Church of Hope, but what would you say the vision is today of what the people who take part in the common treasury are doing?

A: Well, they're doing a lot of different things there. They've been involved over the years in a lot of different kinds of ministry, and starting new ministries of various kinds. And uh, ... connecting with other, uh, groups in other parts of the world as well. There's a community in El Salvador that we're kind

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of sister groups with. There's a community in South Africa that we're in touch with. And we have members in Guatemala, a couple in Guatemala that's working with MCC, a little Methodist congregation down there. So, um, let me get for you a few ... there's a Shalom Mission Communities, will perhaps give you a current ... um, ... [unintelligible] ... here's a current, uh, little statement about the community. This was a very early, uh, little pamphlet that we had. Um, ... uh, let me see. Oh, ... let me just give you a little picture of the larger church at this point. We had a few pamphlets here that, ... just, that are, just produce... this, one, two, three, four, five, six -- yes. Here's a number of the ministries, this one is particularly communal life. Let me get you a copy of the -- ... Treasure in Heaven is a book that Virgil wrote earlier, about money, finances, and possessions. That one, that's not quite -- you're interested much more in history. There are a few other books, there's one about, uh, 911 that the Jacksons wrote about nonviolence and violence in the context of community. What else? Well I don't know, this is probably the one that will help you most in terms of just the history. Uh, ...

Q: Yeah, thank you very much. Um, I guess I'm interested in the type of people that are drawn to Reba Place, that seek out Reba Place. Maybe you can talk some about that -- who comes to you?

A: Well, uh, ... at this point there are two probably central emphases in the church. The one is racial reconciliation, and the other is evangelism. And uh, probably, at this point we're feeling really called to welcome our African-American neighbors, uh, here. Uh, and uh, to ... to face in to the racism that's so ... uh, ensnarls our life and the life around us. And uh, so, we're pretty intentional at this point about, just, ... welcoming and working with, inwardly and outwardly, the racism of our society. We have an African-America pastor, one of the team of elders of our congregation. We have a gospel, and African-American gospel choir, and uh, so that there's a lot of effort that, the joint leadership team is about a third African-American at this point. We haven't, it's especially challenging to move from a heavily White, although in our neighborhood here, some the first African-Americans were members of our church. Um, of our community. We, ... we uh, just really didn't break through as fully as we, I mean, just didn't really take this as seriously as ... as we perhaps needed to, to break down the walls. And uh, so, we're just feeling real strong about that these days. Um, ... now, ... um, ... who else is coming? I don't know, our congregation is quite diverse. Uh, ... in age, and in ... uh, ... I don't know, let me see. I think I have, there was an annual report ... two hundred and eighty seven members at the end of this past year. I ... I'm trying to ponder the fact of who comes. I just know there was a hundred and two visitors, a couple others I believe. But uh, any new people? Uh, ... we generally, here, uh, ... are fairly, a fairly educated bunch. Down in Rogers Park, there's an effort to reach out to an even more diverse -- our neighborhood here is heavily Black and White, and it's uh, ... there are a few Hispanics. Almost equally divided, I don't know, maybe 40% Black and 60% White, something like that. It's close to being even. And we have lived here and haven't been moving. Uh, we, we have about a, the community owns about 130 units of housing here, and half of that is rented out to just the neighbors. Uh, church-related people occupy maybe half of those units. But it also gives us a flexibility to welcome people, refugees and single-parent families, and handicapped people, and all different kinds of -- meet all different kinds of needs, and to rent those properties out at the lower edge of the market. So, uh, we're uh, in the process of starting a co-op for low-income families, home ownership. But that was also part of an effort to clean up a twelve unit building that was infested with drugs and gangs and stuff. So, ...

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Q: I guess I'm curious some about how the community of goods works for the 65 people that are involved in that. Um, do you get, like um, I'm sort of curious about the nuts and bolts -- like do you get a regular allowance? Do you share cars? I just don't know how a community of goods works, really.

A: Yeah, we share -- we have a sign-out sheet at our house that, the members are free to sign out. There are allowance each month, on the 20th of the month, our family gets, I mean I get \$120 dollars that is for our personal, incidental expenses. Uh, that's for clothing, recreation, gifts, and um, ... um, and uh, ... and then our, our rent is cared for, and our um, ... our uh, medical needs are cared for.

Q: And food as well?

A: Food is uh, is uh, ... we get uh, uh, ... \$75 a month is what we, what we use here in our household, plus about \$10 or \$11 household supplies, expenses. I don't know, it's basically, um, you know, things beyond, beyond that -- vacations are a regular part of our arrangement, and special, special needs or special concerns. Discussions, small groups.

Q: And then is there someone who administers all this?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah? A person who's kind of in charge.

A: Yeah. But the basic allowance system is just an effort to, uh, to simplify the distribution according to need. Uh, everybody brings their paychecks, it goes into the treasury. But, uh, the needs are generally determined by the allowance system -- the ages of the children, and so on, and special needs have been discussed. Requests beyond, \$35 or \$40 can be discussed in small group. If it's a major amount, there are stewards that can talk about it.

Q: And is there a retirement system in place? So once a person stops working, they're a part of the community of goods, I assume.

A: Sure.

Q: And is there a pretty broad age range in this core group?

A: Yeah, there is, actually, it's amazing. Uh, ... in -- during, um, ... after the, after the household era, we broadened the communal, the membership of -- it was a communal church up until that point, so everybody, to become a Christian you had to become a part of the common purse community. That was the lifestyle that meant to be Christian here.

Q: Up until when?

A: Up until probably the late '70's, or early '80's, something like that. You can see in the book. At that point, then, a number of people felt that they wanted to manage their own finances, or they wanted -- for a number of reasons we felt it's important to broaden the range of possible options for being Christian. That is, some people, one guy was in jail for 17 years, and he didn't feel ready to become part of a communal group. It was too tight for him. Uh, and some of our teenagers were growing up, and needing to explore some options for their life before they -- they weren't ready to commit long-term in a communal lifestyle. And so, it just seemed clear that there needed to be more options, more ways of

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living out the Christian life than just the intentional community way. And so a number of people stepped back from the communal, or kind of changed -- I shouldn't say "step back," -- but changed their way of administering their finances. And so, um, ... there ... there are now, the communal system is just one of the way of living out the Christian life in this congregation. Um, it's more like an order, I think, within the broader church. Kind of a service order, or mission order or something.

Q: What have your relationships been like with your neighbors in the surrounding community?

A: Very varied. Um, uh, ... we have a, we had a care group last night, that uh, ... that gathers from different congregations, from different -- the Methodist Church, and the Christ Temple Missionary Baptist Church, and Second Baptist Church, where, you have leaders there, along with Reba people, to gather, gathering every two weeks, to pray for our neighbors and to be alert to new people that are moving in, or people that are sick, or people that are having crises, or a fire, or something. But just gathering every two weeks to report on the people who visited and the concerns of the neighborhood. And uh, ... it uh, ... it's quite, it's really challenging, in that, ... um, ... it's a very busy life. Just the small groups and the ministries and all the things that are happening within the church, and the cultural differences between African-Americans and European-Americans are substantial. So that, it takes a lot of intentionality to cultivate relationships, just break through. So we have meetings in the park in the summer, a neighborhood organization, to work on various issues. I ... I -- we have a very open, and I think very respectful relationship to the city. Recently they gave us \$125,000 to purchase this 12 unit building. You know, just to deal with the problems that they didn't, the city doesn't know how to handle. Um, but they did entrust to us, -- and the alderman is very, very open and cooperative and very helpful, in a lot of the ventures. Our day nursery serves the broader area. We have a ministry to the elderly, Senior Connections, that recently won a \$25,000 prize to reaching out to isolated, elderly people. And kind of, it just, regularly, have visitors, that go out. There's about, oh I don't know, about 20 teams, that keep touch at least weekly with the isolated elderly -- it's called Senior Connections. We had an after-school program last year, and we're trying to start it again, but it's been a challenge. We have a ministry to mentally handicapped adults, that uh, ... called, it's much like, -- we have a good deal of contact with the Larsh [?] communities. Are you familiar with John Vanye [?], Henry Nowon [?], and some of those folks?

Q: Yes.

A: We are in process of trying to found a Larsh community in the Chicago area. Some of us are on the board that has made an application to Larsh regional group. And we've raised \$10,000 to get started in, to start a Larsh community here. But, we also have, uh, a little group of, oh a dozen or so mentally handicapped adults, that meet regularly every Friday night, to, just for fellowship and support, but they live in their own homes. It's not a residential program at the present. So I don't know, there are a number of things going in relationship to the broader community. Um, mentally handicapped, mentally retarded people, emergency assistance of various kinds. One of our household members was the director of the shelter for the homeless here in Evanston for 8 years. And it's named after her. Hilda's Place. So, but there are a number of things like that that keep us in touch with the neighborhood. It's not all that it should be.

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Q: So you've never had a problem with neighbors going, "Oh my goodness, there's a commune in our midst!" and being concerned about that?

A: Well, perhaps back in the --I don't know, the fifties or the sixties, there were, people thought it was odd, communist kind of thing.

Q: So some people thought it was odd.

A: Yeah, but actually, the city created a special category in the household era, a special category for extended family households, a type C family, where there could be a father and a mother and some children, and they live together in a common, shared way. The city was very concerned about Northwestern students, and of far-out communes, but they did create a special category for us -- the type C family.

Q: That's wonderful . So that way you don't violate the zoning laws or something.

A: Yeah, no small thing. Took some negotiating, but they did. So our relationship to the city and to the, to our community, has been, generally quite positive, in recent years. And generally, we've been graciously cared for, and I think, have tried to be good neighbors in various ways, keeping our property, and caring for neighbors in various crises.

Q: Yeah. Can you explain how somebody becomes a member of the core group?

A: ... like engagement, or any cultivation of relationship -- we used to call them intentional neighbors. If persons intentionally want to explore, uh, the possibility -- you're talking about communal membership now, I take it? Often, they become members of the church first. And then, and then uh, explore communal -- there's a year of kind of novice, where they perhaps begin to share their finances and so on, without becoming, without simply liquidating all their assets, or so. They just, they begin doing it, and become part of a communal small group. Uh, and uh, ... as they get acquainted with us and we get acquainted with them, it just becomes clearer whether this is right, is good. And uh, often, there are a number of just exploratory steps, just doing it, living it out. For each person there are some unique issues. Unique struggles or so.

Q: Now you have some sort of connection with Plough Creek.

A: They grew out of Reba.

Q: But your community of goods doesn't include them? They're their own organization?

A: Yeah, they're autonomous as a community. Although, uh, we do, Shalom Mission Communities does include them in some of the projects. We're sponsoring a conference in October, I guess it is, that uh, Plough Creek and Reba will join together, relating to other communities. You've been in touch with David Jensen, have you?

Q: No, I don't think so. The name certainly sounds familiar. He rights that column in Communities magazine about religious communities?

A: No. Well, he did, maybe, maybe he wrote one article. Okay. Well, it's a good beginning here. Maybe if you read the, these materials, and if you have further questions give me a call.