

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 22, 2009 at 9:57am

A place for renegades

by Tom Roberts



Andrea Ferich, an urban farmer who works closely with Sacred Heart Parish in Camden, N.J., carries the first wheat of the harvest to the altar. (Photo courtesy of Susan Cedrone)

22nd in the "In Search of the Emerging Church" Series.

CAMDEN, N.J. -- Chris Haw, in describing his religious upbringing, speaks of himself as "a mutt." He was raised Catholic for a time as a youngster and then went with his family to Willow Creek Community Church, the famous and highly influential nondenominational mega-congregation just outside of Chicago.

While at Eastern University, a school near Philadelphia with Baptist roots, he went with friends to services at Episcopal and Mennonite churches. He also traveled to Belize to take part in a theology and ecology study program and returned intent on refashioning his life and finding work that would "connect faith with creation care."

And then, about six years ago, Fr. Michael Doyle showed up at Eastern University and gave a talk on what was happening in and around his parish, Sacred Heart, located in a corner of South Camden, where one can see all manner of human misery and poverty, and where environmental racism is a reality (*NCR*,

Dec. 11). And it evoked a response from the young seeker.

It sounded to him like a perfectly awful place, and he thought, "I should move there," Haw recalled in a recent phone interview. "It really was the combination of things I wanted to do. I didn't want to keep my life separate from the challenges but to actually move into them."

Andrea Ferich, a young woman from Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, heard the same talk and had a similar reaction. "I was always interested in understanding the church as not just something on Sunday but as a great vehicle for social justice. I came to understand environmental justice as central to the Gospel and concerns for what people are eating, drinking and breathing as an act of loving my neighbor."



Haw and Ferich are good examples of the kind of young people

who are gathering around Sacred Heart and Doyle's idea of what a parish can be. They are people with ambition and grand dreams of the sort that might be akin to the entrepreneurial dreams of others their age, only those who have gathered around Sacred Heart are placing their talents at the service of one of the poorest and most chaotic cities in contemporary America. The community forming is explicit in its debt to the Catholic social justice tradition. Some of its members are deeply engaged in issues of environmental justice and eco-theology. All seem intent on living out their faith in a circumstance where the need for radical transformation is everywhere evident. Some are engaged in the broader ecumenical conversation that has been characterized as the emerging church movement.

"I was interested in living in Camden," said Ferich, "because it really is the dark side of the American dream. I wanted to go and see how I could change the economic system from the bottom up." The 29-year-old from a Mennonite background is taking her stab at "restructuring the economy toward justice" as an urban farmer and as new director of Sacred Heart's Center for Transformation (camdencentertfortransformation.org).

Shortly after Doyle's talk, Haw conferred with three friends about an idea he had written out regarding living in Camden. They gave it approval, so he went to talk to Doyle in the fall of 2003. He told Doyle that he wanted to see "if you guys need help." He recalls Doyle responding, "Sure, we need lots of help." Not long after, Doyle "cut me a key for an abandoned house."

Haw, 28, and his wife, Cassie, a kindergarten teacher at Sacred Heart School and expecting a baby in June, have since moved down the block to another house. The original is now home for new members of the community, which includes a person who serves as a secretary at the school as well as a coach for several of the school's athletic teams and another person who's a full-time mom.

Haw's use of "community" can mean a group of about six people who are deeply committed to exploring what is being called "the new monasticism," and it can also mean the wider circle of friends and acquaintances who have moved into the neighborhood around Sacred Heart, people who have been drawn in by the parish's ministries, including an artist who apparently finds the atmosphere of the parish conducive to his work.

Haw has become a member of Sacred Heart and was confirmed in the church. Ferich remains a Mennonite but says she always feels welcome at the parish. "I feel part of the family," she said. The Web site for the Center for Transformation and her personal blog are rich in sacramental language.

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"We are united at Sacred Heart Church in gathering around God's table every Sunday to celebrate transformation -- of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and of ourselves into the hands and feet of Jesus in this world. We are committed to transformation and Waterfront South is the perfect location," states the center's Web site.

"The most grievous violation of the planet and of the lives of human beings takes place every day in Waterfront South, Camden, N.J. In order to effect transformation of the minds and hearts of people about the environmental devastation being caused by our own economic decisions, people need to witness that crucifixion of the earth and the air, and the people who dwell therein."



In big block letters the site invites all to "be part of the

transformation." The center itself is a transformed building, one of the reclamations of Heart of Camden, an organization founded by the parish to rehab properties to provide affordable housing. The organization built Ferich a greenhouse where she grows an abundance of vegetables and tomatoes, preserving heirloom seeds that Doyle blesses annually. She teaches children from the school how to grow the vegetables and how to cook what they harvest. She's developed a "seed to table" curriculum for Sacred Heart School and for the wider Camden School District.

On her blog (aferich.blogspot.com), Ferich speaks of working out of the Catholic social justice tradition, and her language is laced with the theology of that tradition. She mentions at one point that "we grew rye this past year and milled it into our bread -- our communion is not just with each other but also with the land."

Transubstantiation, she said, "is as much a miracle from bread to body as it is from seed to wheat, so we really have a sanctity of all believers."

She speaks of "Eve's garden," and tells of Eve, "a woman I met who was working as a prostitute. She said she liked to garden. She was a prostitute in a prostituted land." So the garden came to represent, in one sense, "reclaiming the goodness of all people and goodness of all land to the body of Christ."



There's far more to her ministry than words. She organizes and

cajoles to change structures from the bottom up. As director of the new Center for Transformation -- a former convent that was abandoned and is being rehabbed -- she envisions an environmental justice retreat center as well as a food co-op combined with a rain barrel-making business. The center will also reclaim wood from homes and other buildings being torn down in Camden.

She worked a deal with a factory down the street that has to pay \$6 a barrel to have barrels removed. "Now he just throws barrels into my backyard" for transformation into containers that catch rain for watering gardens. In recent weeks, the center received a grant from Conservation Resources, a nonprofit group that funds conservation efforts, to augment the barrel-making venture.

The common strain in all of this work and seeking is the initial welcome by Doyle. Haw, an adjunct professor of religious studies at Cabrini College in Radnor, Pa., said Doyle's hospitality and his "strong and joyful openness to people who are not Catholics" is one of the major marks of the parish and was, for him, a strong draw to the neighborhood.

But that's only part of the attraction. "What draws me is not just his personality, which I like a lot, but the liturgy here. There's something beautiful about the way it happens that makes you want to go there. And it's done in an old building with huge frescoes on the ceiling and it feels as if you're walking into something. ... It's not grasping for the new but appreciates tradition and beauty."

At Willow Creek and other places, he said, he had his fill of "cool and hip. ... I don't need to see smoke machines and blue lighting at church."

Indeed, he and others in communities throughout the region have met to discuss the "new monasticism," a term that is difficult to precisely define but that roughly describes a search occurring in communities, ironically often of Protestant evangelicals, that have formed with a strong focus on social justice and reforming Christian practice. Haw describes the new monasticism as "somewhere between a monastery and a potluck dinner."

His views on the place of the Christian in contemporary culture are spelled out in the book *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals*, written with Shane Claiborne, one of the leading figures investigating the new monasticism as well as a participant in last April's conference on the Emerging Church organized by Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation.

Claiborne, another graduate of Eastern College, is a cofounder of the Simple Way Community of Philadelphia and a much-sought speaker on contemporary Christianity. The movement's sometimes quirky affinity for the countercultural quality of the Catholic monastic tradition might be found in his response to the statement on his blog, "If you could spend a day with a dead person." He answers: "I'd visit the Crystal Cathedral with St. Francis ... and then hitchhike to the beach to turn some somersaults and hear him preach to the seagulls."

As Haw and his friends work through different levels of community, however, the daily concerns are less ethereal than an imagined frolic with St. Francis. He describes those who have moved in around Sacred Heart as "renegades" who "have to have a little bit of grit in your brain to move there." One needs "a certain sense of dark humor, there needs to be something odd about you, something hopeful about you to move into Camden."



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