

Presbyterian-run Catholic Worker house does things backward -- like Jesus

Bill Tammeus | Feb. 20, 2013 A small catholic

Among the homeless on the sometimes-surly streets of northeast Kansas City, Mo., hardly anyone knows the place as the [Cherith Brook Catholic Worker house](#) [1]. Rather, they call it the Shower House because four mornings a week, 20 or more people come to feel clean again.

For the Rev. Eric Garbison, the Presbyterian pastor who helped to found Cherith Brook in 2007, there's something sacramental about the showers as well as the five meals a week served there to up to 50 people.

"What I've learned from Dorothy Day (a founder of the [Catholic Worker movement](#) [2]) is that the world is a sacrament. ... Part of volunteering here is taking turns eating with everybody, sitting down. That for us is Eucharistic," he said. "And sometimes we talk about the showers being a baptismal experience because every morning, somebody says, 'I feel like a whole new person. I feel like a human being again.' Well, isn't that what baptism's all about?"

A Presbyterian minister helping to create and manage a Catholic Worker community?

"Well, yes," says Garbison, a graduate of Duke Divinity School. "We're jokingly known as the Protestant Catholic Workers of the Midwest."

After being ordained, Garbison spent four years as an associate pastor of a traditional Presbyterian church in suburban Kansas City, but he knew that eventually he wanted to try to live out the communal values inherent in the Catholic Worker movement because of his experience of being connected for two years to the [Open Door Community](#) [3] in Atlanta.

So in 2006, Garbison, his wife, Jodi, and their two young children moved to this northeast neighborhood several miles due east of downtown. Within a year or so, they acquired the two buildings now known as Cherith Brook. The name comes from [1 Kings 17](#) [4] in which God foretells a drought and directs Elijah to go to Cherith Brook to survive.

As is often the case when people feel called to ministries of hospitality and comfort, it wasn't clear to Garbison at first what that would look like.

But when the handful of Cherith Brook residents began to wander their community introducing themselves, one homeless person after another asked whether it might be possible to take a shower at the facility and maybe do some laundry. That became the ministry's core.

It's not a systemic answer to homelessness, not a model for how to cure the economic dislocations that cause people to have no place to sleep. And it's not a full-service shelter where those without beds can spend the night.

Rather, it's a center of welcome, of respite, of respect.

Yes, those who come may attend prayer gatherings, may join in periodic roundtable discussions about such issues as racism and nuclear disarmament, may help serve.

But mostly Cherith Brook, where currently no Catholics live, is deeply within the Catholic Worker tradition of hospitality and community. And increasingly, it's a model for how to live simply, with all shower water collected from precipitation and none from the city's water system; with eggs provided by the several dozen chickens housed in open coops between the two buildings; with 60 percent of electricity provided by solar panels; with a substantial portion of the food served grown in the backyard.

Nick Pickrell, a Cherith community member, describes how one night he and others were on the street experiencing what it's like to be homeless. They stopped near a rescue mission and asked someone if dinner was being served. That person said a worship service before the meal was under way, "and they shackle you to the (worship) service to get the services. You know what? Jesus had it all backward. He just gave you what you need and you could then stick around if you wanted to."

So these Protestants at a Catholic Worker house are, like Jesus, doing it all backward. And every day, homeless folks feel like new people. Imagine that.

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Links:

[1] <http://cherithbrookcw.blogspot.com/>

[2] <http://www.catholicworker.org/>

[3] <http://www.catholicworker.org/communities/Commdetail.cfm?Community=30>

[4] <http://www.usccb.org/bible/1kings/17/>

[5] <http://billtammeus.typepad.com/>

[6] http://www.amazon.com/They-Were-Just-People-Holocaust/dp/0826218601/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1299296756&sr=1-1

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