



It's about Grace: Being Neighbor in a Changed Neighborhood

JANE BUCKLEY FARLEE

January 1, 2014, was a very cold day, even by Minneapolis standards. I had heard on the car radio that there had been an explosion on Cedar Avenue. The fire was still burning. I knew I had to go. I knew I had to be there. It's what pastors do. It is what neighbors do.

Walking into the Brian Coyle Community Center in Cedar-Riverside around noon, at first glance it looked like all of the other times I had been there before. But this time was different. This was not a community celebration or a neighborhood meeting; this was because of the devastating horror of an explosion and a fire that was still burning. Several groups were huddled in conversation, mostly in Somali. Firefighters and police officers were resting and warming up. A few elected officials were present, wondering how to lead while knowing nothing more than anyone else. The Red Cross was setting up to help and the Salvation Army was serving all-beef hotdogs. Victims' family members were beginning to arrive. And the news media was scrambling to get a story even though almost nothing was known yet.

Everyone, it seemed, had a job to do or a task to complete, except for me. I

What does it mean to be a Christian neighbor in a context where you have become a minority yourself? Having been located in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis for one hundred and fifty years, Trinity Lutheran is now a part of a community of African immigrants, with whom they are trying to be neighbors.

was there to be a presence, a Christian presence in a predominantly Muslim community at a time of profound grief. But what does that mean when the community is known as “Little Mogadishu,” the largest concentration of Somalis outside of Somalia?

What does it mean to be a Christian presence in a neighborhood where Christians are clearly in the minority, when we're aware that the dominant message in the world these days is that we should be enemies, knowing that the conversation in which we are engaged is a fragile conversation?

So often, as pastors, in difficult situations like this, we can fall back on what is familiar to our people and to us: words of comfort and hope we've said and heard many times; prayers we've prayed time and again; a pastoral role that is somehow understood by everyone in the room. But when the language in the room is Somali, when the women are wearing hijabs and some of the men are wearing thobes, and when the concept of “Christian” is not always a positive one, that which is familiar is not necessarily what is needed.

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I'm not sure, and I have been at this a long time. But I have come to know a few things. Being a Christian presence in Cedar-Riverside means *being* here and often feeling inadequate and not particularly useful, and being ready to feel inadequate and useless for a long time. Being a Christian presence means letting go of any expectations and dreams of solving problems and fixing everything. It means letting the community lead and listening for ways we might, just might, be able to help. It means quietly realizing that being present and listening may be the real help that we can give this community.

But, mostly, it simply means that we are here, for the long haul, with no agenda other than to be here. It means trusting that somehow God is working through all of us in a way that is bigger than anything we will ever be able to comprehend. Accompaniment is the word for it these days.

Trinity Lutheran Congregation was started by Norwegian and Danish immigrants on April 6, 1868, and is the only Christian congregation remaining in the heart of Cedar-Riverside. The neighborhood is home for more than eight thousand people, more than sixty percent of whom are immigrants. The majority of incomers are originally from East African countries, and most are Muslim, which has given the area the nickname of Little Mogadishu. It is the most densely populated area West of the Mississippi, with half of the population under eighteen years

of age. Most of the housing is rental. All of these factors contribute to a high level of poverty. The densely populated neighborhood is also home to four large institutions: University of Minnesota Hospital, Fairview Hospital, Augsburg College, and the West Bank of the University of Minnesota. The boundaries of the neighborhood are more clearly defined than most, with the Mississippi River on one side, and Highways 35W and I-94 merging to create a decisive border on the other. When construction of Highway I-94 began, Trinity's original church stood in its path. Faced with the inevitable bulldozing of the building, the congregation had a decision to make: to stay in the neighborhood in a different building, or to move out of the city. The decision was made to stay, and to continue being a presence in Cedar-Riverside. Our current mission statement, "Nurturing wholeness and holiness in Cedar-Riverside," reflects who Trinity has become and how we have come to see our role. The neighborhood itself became the focus of Trinity's purpose, and as such, it became clear that Trinity could not define or limit the two key words of our mission statement: "wholeness" and "holiness." We were aware that too much definition would get in the way of seeing the gifts and strengths already present in the community. Too much definition would also limit our ability to see the grace all around us and the gifts of our neighbors. We were there to accompany, not to force others to fit in with us.

Accompaniment has become a common term in some circles. It is now a familiar word. There is a risk that comes with familiarity, a risk that the practice of accompaniment has or will become a program or process. But accompaniment, at its heart, requires much more than just doing. Accompaniment of a person or community requires deep listening. Deep listening, at its best, requires letting go. In many ways, the practice of accompaniment is about letting go.

Pastors spend any number of years preparing for doing ministry. We take classes and engage in experiences designed to prepare us for the work ahead. Exegesis. Preaching. Mission. Stewardship. We are taught how to do each of these things, and what the "right" or "best" ways of doing them should be. And yet as we learn the art of accompaniment, we also learn this process of letting go. The neat package of everything that was learned will be unpacked and tossed out, or repackaged in a way that can make it almost unrecognizable.

Accompaniment also means letting go of those things that have become too familiar. It means becoming more aware. Even the words most basic to our theology, words that we have come to love and use with great meaning and comfort, can easily mean nothing or something quite different to those of other faiths and other languages. What do grace and mercy mean when original sin is not a centerpiece of a religion's theology and when a word for "Trinity" does not even exist? It has been made very clear to me that the word "mission" does not have the same positive connotations for others that we automatically give it. "Mission," for some, brings up memories of peoples and cultures destroyed. And yet "mission" is a focus of our work.

More times than I care to count I have worked very hard at understanding an issue, listening and clarifying to a point where I felt like I knew what was happening only to discover later that what I thought I had understood was the exact opposite of the truth. One key word can make all of the difference.

In so many ways those of us who are white Christian leaders have for so long been from the dominant cultural group that it seems natural and right to assume we know and understand the heart or cause of an issue. We blindly and easily assume that we know how to fix it. And then we assume that we have the right to do just that. Letting go is not easy, especially when so much power and control can be lost. Grace can be hard to see at times like that.

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Trinity has been in Cedar-Riverside for almost one hundred and fifty years and is one of the oldest institutions in the neighborhood. We were among the first to call this neighborhood home. In the early years the people of Trinity looked and sounded just like everyone else in the neighborhood. We welcomed wave after wave of immigrants from around the world. We were the majority. We were the hosts.

Today we are clearly in the minority and in many ways we are the guests. We do not look like, sound like, or worship like most of our neighbors. We are Christians and our newer neighbors are mostly Muslim, with some burnt-out hippies from the 1970s sprinkled in. As if the challenges of these differences weren't enough, the current narrative in the news and on the street is that we should hate our neighbors and they should hate us.

The question arises—how do you do ministry when you are host and guest at the same time? How do you be present when outside expectations and unspoken dreams seem to demand different results? It's not just about being here for "the other." It's about being the other. Being guests in our neighborhood, knowing what it is like not to be in the majority, not have the power or control, and not have the answers, gives us a glimpse of what it's like to be the new neighbor. Acknowledging our role as guests makes it impossible to continue seeing the world through the same old lenses we've seen it through for far too long.

Anyone in the neighborhood can tell you that anti-Muslim sentiments and actions are as high now or higher than they were after 9/11. In Cedar-Riverside that can be noticeable, especially after news of violence involving Muslims. After incidents like that, people in Cedar-Riverside are more afraid, and the streets noticeably quieter.

At times like that it seems important to walk the streets of the neighborhood to be a presence, to say hello to people. It's about more than that, of course. It is also to let them know that we, at Trinity, are not afraid of our neighbors. Small solace, perhaps, but according to our neighbor Imam Sharif, it is more appreciated than we can know.

In the past, not wanting to appear too pretentious or to assume I had the right to greet passersby with the traditional, "*assalamu alaikum*," I usually greet people with a hello. On one walk recently I was determined to change that, if the right setting occurred.

As I was walking down Seventh Street two children came running, saying that they were scared, that they had heard a "psst" from someone behind a bush. I had never met these two children before, but offered to walk them home. Their mother, when I saw her, was wearing a hijab and the common long dress. This seemed as fine an opportunity as any, and I greeted her with "*assalamu alaikum*"—"peace be with you." Even in her surprise she returned the greeting with the traditional response, "*Wa-alaikum assalaam*"—"and upon you be peace." As we talked, we discovered that the children's cousins come to Trinity's after-school program, Homework Help, and that the family knew all about us. We learned each other's names, talked some more and I invited them to join their cousins at Homework Help. We parted as new friends. And there were good feelings all around.

The good feelings were not to last. Only a few minutes later as I was coming around the corner, I saw a young white security officer questioning and then frisking three young East African men. This is not an uncommon thing to see. Like the media usually do, I could have easily assumed they were Somali, but it is just as possible that they were of Oromo, Ethiopian Eritrean heritage. Most people don't bother with the difference. The young men were cooperating and after being frisked out in the open, nothing was found to keep them any longer. They were let go. I did not see what had happened that caused the officer to engage them. I also saw nothing to indicate a problem. Sadly, it is reasonable to assume they were "pulled over for walking while black." It happens all the time. And there is nothing the young black men could do about it.

The thing is—I didn't say anything. I didn't challenge the officer, and I didn't say anything to the young men. My excuse to myself was that I hadn't seen what actually happened. Should I have said something? Sadly, for the three young men it was just another day, another common moment in the life of young East African men. Knowing one's neighbor's makes it harder to ignore the injustices in our midst.

What is it to be a neighbor? What does it mean when all of our intentions are right? I have told myself over and over again that I will speak up. What does it mean to be a neighbor when our goals seem like something even the prophets or Jesus would have approved of, and yet when things are not always so clear? When we don't know the language, when our own fears get the best of us?

The questions are real. The letting go of the comfort of "not seeing" is unend-

ing and often painful. Doing accompaniment of any kind, as individuals and as a community of Christians, can mean letting go of, letting die much of what we hold dear, whether theology or longtime habits. When those beliefs and traditions are called into question and no longer apply and need to be let go it can feel like you just might die. The very foundations of who we are and what we believe to be true about God and faith and the way the world works are shaken. The lack of clear answers and clear progress, whatever we think that might mean, will not end.

But that is not what matters.

There are no guarantees. There are complex issues that still arise that we will never really understand. The barriers of skin color, language, faith, and culture are not going to disappear.

It's important to note that Trinity's work in Cedar-Riverside did not begin with the fire.

There is a long history of community-based collaboration in which Trinity has been an active participant. Health initiatives. Safety issues. Vigils at times of tragedy and death. Press conferences when anti-Muslim rhetoric and activity has increased. Celebrations of thanksgiving and neighborhood diversity. Being a consistent presence in the neighborhood had already been instrumental in the relationships and trust that we shared.

After the fire, after sitting in countless neighborhood meetings as the neighborhood was trying to figure out how the community should react to the fire, care for those who lost family members and the injured, and move ahead, things were still very uncertain. Although I was a quiet, listening presence, feeling useless and totally unprepared, Imam Sharif, the imam at the mosque, while leading the meeting asked me, "Sister, do you have any words for us?" I know I said something about standing with the community ready to help. My words were met with applause and a sincere thank-you from those gathered. It was then that I knew it was important that I had been there through it all, even though most of the meeting was not in English.

From there, it didn't take long to figure out how we could help. The Islamic Civic Society of America/Dar Al-Hijrah's building was too damaged by water and smoke to be used. We invited ICSA/Dar Al-Hijrah to use Trinity's lower level. For a year and a half, the space was shared with Augsburg College, until the mosque was repaired. During that time our relationship deepened. We have shared Iftars and celebrations. Bimonthly interfaith conversations with ICSA/Dar Al-Hijrah, Augsburg College, Trinity, and the community continue to take place. Trinity, our three mission partner congregations, and ICSA/Dar Al-Hijrah are cosponsoring a refugee family through Lutheran Social Services, and we are beginning a conversation about working even more deeply in the neighborhood.

There are no guarantees. There are complex issues that still arise that we will

never really understand. The barriers of skin color, language, faith, and culture are not going to disappear. Anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric could easily continue for a long time, and the possibility for misunderstanding and hurtful words and actions between us is always present. But there is no doubt that God's kingdom is becoming more and more real in this corner of the world. Not perhaps as I had imagined it, not because anyone has been converted to Christianity or has ever even heard the phrase "kingdom of God," but in a way that is based on something much bigger than we can dare to imagine. The kingdom of God in this corner of the world has everything to do with God's radical grace, revealing itself in ways we can't even see or define. By grace we have been able together to keep the door open to God's work in our midst.

We have been taught that God's grace is radical, radical beyond anything we can imagine. We have thought about what that means, we have talked about it, and debated what it means. Books have been written about what grace means.

That is all put to the test when accompanying a community while we are being told in so many ways that we should circle the wagons and hunker down. While the news only paints a picture of hate and fear and distrust. That all changes when you come to know, respect, and love people for whom Christianity can be misunderstood at best and hated at worst.

Relationships give new meaning to God's grace. If God's grace is truly radical, then it has to be truly radical. It either has to include those who are "the other," *all* of "the other," or it is meaningless. God has to be bigger than the little boxes we tend to put God in. Or I fear we're all in big trouble. Even with all of the fancy theological words and concepts that get used to explain God and faith, none of us ever really understand God completely or perfectly. If that is what salvation depends on, then I know with certainty that I am in big trouble. Living in a community with neighbors whose understanding of God and faith are very similar and at the same time quite different and who are also doing their best to live faithful lives makes God's grace real.

What Trinity does is not so much about programs, but about being with our neighbors, helping them be the best they can be, embracing our differences and working together in breaking down the walls of faith, language, and culture in order to make our neighborhood a stronger community for all who live, work, study, teach, pray, and play here. It is out of that framework that meaningful programs emerge.

It may be counterintuitive, but the smaller the world becomes and the bigger God becomes, the more appreciative of Christianity I become.

Ultimately, it's about grace. It's about the new life that comes to a corner of the world in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota. And in that life, we see some of the grace that we all are seeking. ⊕

JANE BUCKLEY FARLEE is pastor at Trinity Lutheran Congregation in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota.