

# Blind spots clouding our vision?

## HOW OUR EYES WERE OPENED

by Julia Wheeler

**A**re you aware of your blind spots? Of course not! Most of the time you don't even know you have a blind spot, thus the term. I have discovered that not only can a person have blind spots, but churches can too. This is the story of how my church and I were given the gift of seeing, the veil pulled back.

Although it is only four miles from my previous home in La Verne, Calif., the city of Pomona seems a world away. La Verne is quiet, upper- to middle-class, predominantly white, and home to the Brethren-founded University of La Verne. It contrasts sharply with the sprawling, urban Pomona with diverse neighborhoods, where many eke out a living just to make ends meet.

When I first moved there, I looked at Pomona through my blind spot. Seeing the homeless sully the neighborhood park, I just wanted them gone. I gave no Christian thought to their plight or circumstance.

The Church of the Brethren congregation in another area of the city also did not have a clear vision of its hometown. Established in 1907, the congregation has stood for more than 100 years in the city as Pomona Fellowship Church of the Brethren.

The church struggled for many years with a declining, aging congregation and a large, empty building needing more care than the congregation has energy for. The majority of church members have lived outside city limits. A unanimous decision was made to sell the building and maybe relocate to a more manageable space.

The church at one point in its history had held much sway in Pomona, and still had visions of that reputation in its corporate memory. However, when their new, young, and energetic pastor, Lauren Seganos Cohen, went to city meetings and said she was from Pomona Fellowship Church of the Brethren, most people had not heard of the church.

Church members began raising searching questions about

what their congregation had become, and how they might relate to and serve the community as it is now.

In the meantime, I too began to get involved with the people and activities of city life in Pomona. Surprisingly, it is one of a handful of cities nationwide that has declared itself a City of Compassion, addressing the holistic wellness of its community, especially as it relates to those most at risk. Compassionate Pomona is an inclusive community group that attracts participants from nonprofit leaders to city officials, artists to school superintendents, pastors to police officers, and everyone in between. I began to see the vast interwoven network of care and community love.

My experience with the city exposed my own blind spot. I had fears, and doubts, and uncomfortable moments that made it difficult for me to see the "something new" God seems to be creating. I felt my own call from God, not to something cushy but to disturbingly uncomfortable spaces.

More and more, I find myself drawn to Pomona as a place

Stephen Yorba



*A bountiful harvest of cabbage at the community garden run by Community Partners 4 Innovation.*



*Pomona Fellowship Church of the Brethren.*

where the Kingdom of God is becoming manifest. I became involved in a Restorative Practices Collaborative, having attended a four-day training with the city manager, mental health professionals, and the police chief and his deputy. The city government wants to create pathways to encourage the community to prevent, address, and rectify the struggles of those disconnected and disenfranchised, in a holistic and restorative way. Isn't this what Jesus came for?

In a sense, a new me is being born in the city of Pomona. Now, when it rains, I say a prayer for my unhoused friends. I shop in the dilapidated downtown and make a priority of patronizing the local eateries. My Bethany Seminary education has offered some courses that have helped me evaluate my charitable intentions and focus my public theology. I have come to see that proximity to community needs calls me to action and shapes and guides my actions. I remind myself that Jesus walked among people such as these. He ate with them, he ministered to them, he came for them. It's not merely what Jesus came for, but what the church itself is for in the world.

Strangely, I often find myself on the outside of the needs of my city, looking in with wonder. I am the learner here, finding a vision beyond my blind spot. I am one being given new sight, and being blessed.

Pastor Lauren, in order to help her congregation get to know their city and think outside the box, held a series of "Know Our Neighbors" meetings, with speakers who gave presentations about their good works. The congregation began to see the great need and enormous possibilities in the city. They began to envision ways to serve the city and bring new energy and vitality to the community—and to themselves. One might say the congregation began to see itself differently, bringing into focus the vision of Jesus for his church in its real-life setting.

Pomona Fellowship Church, with its new insight, had to decide what was important in its ministry, beyond meeting for worship. How would the congregation define its mission?

The congregation had to confront powerful internal conflict, including:

**Fear.** Not only was the congregation contemplating doing a new thing, but it was going to engage more deeply with the city. Weren't there gangs down there?

**Self-doubt.** Church members questioned themselves. "We haven't done anything like this. Are you sure we'll be able?"



*Volunteers sort produce at the community garden.*

**Comfort.** The term "restorative justice" implied conflict, something that this fellowship and its denominational roots have sought to avoid. The whole idea seemed unsettling.

But they were informed and inspired by the needs of the city, and they saw good people already at work. Collaboration seemed to be an answer to their prayers.


Two of the nonprofit organizations that gave presentations to the church became a focus of attention. One, Inland Valley Hope Partners, provides food, shelter, and supportive services to thousands of people in the valley. A second, Community Partners 4 Innovation, works actively with the community through gang intervention, prison re-entry, an abundant community garden, and community wellness promotion.

The ministries of these two nonprofit groups opened unfamiliar and uncomfortable new territory for the church members. The prophetic words of Isaiah, "I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?" (43:19, NLT), gave them the courage they needed. A collaboration with these agencies was approved by the congregation.

Inland Valley Hope Partners hopes to collaborate with Pomona Fellowship to use some of the church space to see clients and have a food pantry.

Urban Mission is seeking a place where its urban garden can thrive and have neighborhood influence and impact. They collaborate with a medical college and would like to open a wellness center in the neighborhood. Urban Mission also is known for Sunday community dinners, where executive director Nora Jacob says, "We are all invited to be co-creators in bringing God's world."

Pomona Fellowship Church has responded to the call of God into discomfort. The church has made a choice to "live, really live" (Luke 16: 9, The Message).

The new vision of the church is still coming into focus, as is my own. Thus far, the Spirit has seemed to lead us into new moments of being "smart for what is right," and not just getting by "on good behavior" (Luke 16:8, The Message). We believe we are being given a clearer vision, beyond our blind spots, to be the church where we are—with bravery, creativity, purpose, and self-sacrifice. 

Julia Wheeler is associate director of development and director of church relations at the University of La Verne in La Verne, Calif.