

## **Report on Pomona Hope August 1, 2005 – November 1, 2006**

Pomona Hope is a concerted effort of residents, churches and relational institutions to bring spiritual, social, economic and political hope to the people of the city of Pomona, CA. According to the US Census Bureau, Pomona is the poorest small city in the United States. Pomona Hope came into existence in 2003 through concerned members of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, and is still housed at that institution. Its mission is to “bring hope, peace and well-being to the city through engaging in community organizing, serving the people by providing educational opportunities and working for neighborhood transformation.” It seeks to accomplish this through a combination of community organizing, community education, community economic development, community spirituality and community incarnation. This is a report of the efforts to accomplish this task from August 1, 2005 through November 1, 2006.

### **Community Organizing:**

“Never do for others what they can do for themselves.” The “Iron Rule” of community organizing captures the essence of this discipline, which is to equip the people of a community (and especially the poor) to build leadership and to organize the power they have in each other to identify and address their most substantive needs. This is done through a process of action and reflection that begins with individual meetings between people, then house meetings, and finally into action bodies that both research issues the people have identified and mobilize the people to address those issues.

In 2005-2006, 75 people did individual meetings with others and have held more than 400 such meetings with people in the community. They have gathered these people into neighborhood house meetings to discuss the issues about which they have been concerned. Issues that have most emerged have been the absence of streetlights in poor Pomona communities, crime and safety and immigration issues. Organized actions taken by the people have included meetings with the Pomona City Council (including more than 500 people attending one such meeting) that resulted in an agreement to install 5,000 streetlights in Pomona’s poor neighborhoods, with the chief of police in Pomona that corrected harassment of Hispanic drivers, and with the superintendent of the Pomona Unified School District on parent access to teachers. Involvement of Pomona Hope in organizing is done primarily by volunteers, headed by John and Lynette Whitney and Derek and Lisa Engdahl, along with part-time community liaison Meg Connors (see “Community Education” below). The organizing that Pomona Hope did in its neighborhoods was done in conjunction with ONE LA, a broad-based organization of voluntary institutions (churches, schools, unions, community groups) across Los Angeles County that work together to improve the quality of life for families, congregations and communities in southern California.

### **Community Education**

Pomona Hope’s primary vehicle for community education is the Pomona Hope Community Center (PHCC). The mission of the PHCC is to be a safe and accessible place for neighbors to acquire skills that will enable them to be competitive in the American economic climate, for

children to receive love, acceptance and the strengthening of their skills, and for teens to build positive and transforming lifestyles and skills. The PHCC's full-time director is Robert Linthicum Jr., Meg Connors works as part-time community liaison and Ryan Dick and Chad McRae work as part-time interns provided by Pomona College and the Claremont Graduate University respectively.

The PHCC opened as a program of Pomona Hope on September 26, 2005. Previous to that time, several months had been spent in start-up, building the financial base under the center, recruiting sponsoring churches, colleges and community groups, securing the services of volunteers, and establishing its operational infrastructure. During its first year of operation (9/26/05 – 9/24/06), it concentrated upon the operation of its After-School Program. That program included organized gymnasium sports, recreation (ping-pong, foosball), a healthy daily snack, arts and crafts, help with homework, a Friday afternoon story-time of Bible, moral and ethical stories and computer activities. 60 elementary-school children participated in the program, with an average daily attendance of 26. 40 volunteers<sup>1</sup> worked with the children the first year, coming from four churches and four colleges. During the 2005-2006 season, the community liaison visited all the families of all participating students, as well as many other families in the neighborhood surrounding the Pomona Hope facility..

For the 2006-2007 season, the PHCC program continues with its After-School program supported by a comparable attendance of children and volunteers as last year's. But this year, programming has expanded beyond After-School to include one-on-one tutoring for children, the development of a computer learning center and computer lab, a family literacy program, and specialized youth activities. The one-on-one tutoring program is now in operation two nights a week; in this program, a tutor works with an assigned child or youth for the entire year, building a relationship with that child and with their family as well as providing academic support to them. The Family Literacy Program has begun, and uses an informal monthly gathering as a way of promoting parents and children reading together and building English-speaking skills at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. The computer lab is now opened; 21 computers are being used in the After-School program and the tutoring program. Later in this season, the lab will be able to be used by children, youth and adults for strengthening computer skills, building English language facilitation, teaching and honing typing skills and for Internet use and training.

## **Community Economics**

Perhaps the most decisive factor in making Pomona one of the poorest cities in the United States has been the collapse of its economic infrastructure. Most of the industry that once formed its backbone has departed. To walk through its downtown is to walk past empty stores. 52% of Pomona's households live at or below the national poverty level (\$18,100), while an additional 19% of households make less than \$30,000 a year. It is obvious that there will be no future for Pomona unless its economy is decisively turned around.

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<sup>1</sup> Volunteers are asked to work at the center once a week; a few choose to volunteer two or more times a week. Students, on the other hand, attend, every day. Thus 40 volunteers for 45 students actually means an average of 8 volunteers present on any given day, for anywhere between 20 and 45 children – about a 3-1 to 6-1 ratio.

Pomona Hope has been invited to make application to the Department of Health and Human Services of the U.S. government for a major grant to create and implement a community economic development program in Pomona. The proposal would be designed both to create ongoing moderate-pay jobs for poor residents of Pomona and to stimulate local business. A member of the Pomona Hope board and a former executive of Earthlink, Tom Hsieh, has been provided with a year-long sabbatical that has freed him to head this effort to bring major federal dollars into Pomona to stimulate business. Pomona Hope has contracted with a national development agency to assist us in this exploration, and Tom is currently organizing a team of community residents, business people and Pomona Hope representatives to create a proposal and business plan for HHS. The proposal is to be submitted by April of 2007, with funding to begin in October. This funding will enable Pomona Hope to move into economic development and jobs creation in Pomona in a major way.

### **Community Incarnation**

An urban community cannot be reborn simply by outside groups and people providing organizing skill, volunteer work, or the building of economic or political capacity in that community. It will eventually occur only if middle-class people are willing to move into the poorest areas of that city, build relationships of trust among their new neighbors, enter fully into that city's public life as residents and citizens, and work together for that city's transformation. That is what Pomona Hope does.

Beginning in 1993, middle-class college graduates who had previously worked with Pomona's poor began to move into the city. Today, there are fifteen couples and singles who have bought homes or rented apartments there, joined churches and other community institutions, become engaged in Pomona's public life, and are working "from the inside" for the transformation of Pomona. In 2005, Emily Peine and Johnny and Karen Hwang moved into Pomona. And in 2006, three more singles intentionally moved into Pomona as part of the Pomona Hope mission: Bob Linthicum Jr, Bryant Taylor, and Elizabeth Ng.

### **Community Spirituality**

"Man does not live by bread alone". Nor can community transformation occur solely by economic, political and social betterment. There must be an effort to transform the "spirit" of a community from one of oppression, exploitation and marginalization to one of justice, equity and embrace. And this is accomplished by spiritual renewal happening in many different ways.

During the 2005-2007 years, the Pomona Hope community has gathered together weekly for worship at First Presbyterian Church, Pomona. Further, a larger community gathers weekly for Bible study in homes around the city. At haphazard times during the year, celebration has occurred, whether it is rejoicing in a major agreement with the "principalities and powers" of the city, "Friday Night at the Movies" when the neighborhood gathers to see an old feature film from the "Golden Age of Hollywood", or a backyard barbeque. These are Pomona Hope's efforts to work for the transforming of the spiritual atmosphere of Pomona into a city of faith, hope and love!