

Bible camp in the street: Ministry on a troubled corner

by [Kate Foster Connors](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue



COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY: The Harlem Avenue Bible Camp in Baltimore's Mosher neighborhood brings together diverse groups of people. Photo courtesy of [the Center](#)

Five miles west and a little to the north of the tourist hub of Baltimore is a neighborhood called Mosher, which many refer to as "the other Baltimore." Mosher is known as a rough area. More than half the children in the neighborhood live below the poverty line. It has an unemployment rate of 24 percent, with 90 percent of children in neighborhood schools receiving free and reduced lunch, and only 35 percent of eighth graders passing the state math exams in 2013. In many of the houses, three or four generations live under one roof. Other houses are vacant and boarded up.

Two years ago a local leader named Richard Parker asked Hunting Ridge Presbyterian Church to consider providing a peaceful presence in Mosher. Parker had seen the spike in Baltimore violence and organized an antiviolence rally. Although the church is located only a mile west of Mosher, none of the members of Hunting Ridge live in the neighborhood. Members had been eager, however, to find a way to be engaged in the community.

Pastor Deborah McEachran and others from the church gathered every Friday at a street corner known for drug dealing and gang-related crime. The group stood on the corner for a few hours to reclaim it as a peaceful space.

At first no one knew what to do during those hours. But then members of the group began talking with neighborhood residents, and got to know the business owners. Someone brought chess and checkers, and soon neighbors were sitting down and playing games. When the weather turned cold, business owners ran power cords out to the sidewalk so the church group could provide hot coffee. And when the weather grew warmer, Hunting Ridge members put flower planters on the corners. A youth member of a nearby church painted a mural of children on the side of one of the businesses.

Soon Hunting Ridge's members met Leslie Howard, president of the neighborhood association; Willie Ray, who runs the antiviolence ministry Save Another Youth; and Arthenia LeFlore. LeFlore, known as a "block mother" in the neighborhood, runs One Heart One Way Ministry, providing clothing and food for neighborhood residents. When I visited, she was filling bags of food for a single father with two children, one of whom has a severe disability.

As the Hunting Ridge group prepared to take a break from its corner ministry during the coldest winter months, some of them began talking with LeFlore about expanding their ministry. Was there a way for more members from their church to become involved in the neighborhood? These conversations led to the first Harlem Avenue Bible Camp.

Hunting Ridge Presbyterian and Arthenia LeFlore asked for help from the Rehoboth Church of God in Christ Jesus Apostolic, which provided volunteers, and from the Center (where I work), a mission partnership of the Presbytery of Baltimore that connects church groups from around the country with opportunities to serve in Baltimore. Soon ten youth and adult leaders from White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, had signed on to serve as counselors during the camp.

With so many people involved, the planning process for the camp was a challenge. Racial tensions, ever present in Baltimore, provided a constant backdrop during the planning process. When some residents met Hunting Ridge's white pastor, some assumed that the church was all-white, and expressed concerns about a "white suburban church" coming to "do good" in a black neighborhood. In reality, Hunting Ridge is a multicultural congregation, with members who have come from Myanmar, Colombia, South Korea, Ghana, and Haiti.

The Center was concerned about how an all-white youth group from North Carolina (from a church called White Memorial!) would relate to people in an all-black neighborhood. The church decided to require that youth participating in the Bible camp have previous mission trip experience. The director of high school ministry planned a series of programs so that Bible school volunteers could learn about white privilege.

When the week of Bible camp arrived, Mosher residents came out every evening to sit on their stoops and watch. "Harlem Avenue has never had anything like this before," many of them said. The camp obtained permission from the city to block off the street, and it set up in the middle of the street, using pop-up tents provided by the city. There was dinner each night, with children and volunteers eating together, singing hymns, and listening to Bible stories. A curriculum from Heifer International provided daily scripture lessons and themes, and volunteers led crafts projects and recreation activities. In the middle of the week there was a field trip to a farm.

One morning's devotion was based on Moses and the burning bush. "Look and listen for what God is already doing in Baltimore," leaders told the campers. "You might not see a burning bush, but God is alive and already at work here—your job is to pay attention and let us know what you notice."

What participants noticed was that African-American children were at work and play with immigrant children from Myanmar (Falaam Baptist Church of Baltimore), African-American volunteers from Harlem Avenue, Jamaican immigrant volunteers from the Rehoboth Church, and white volunteers from White Memorial Church. A praise dancer, an African storyteller, and African drummers led programs. Mothers of the children from Myanmar dressed in traditional Burmese clothes and performed Burmese dances. Baltimore police officers assigned to patrol during the camp joined the festivities, playing Duck, Duck, Goose with the children and helping with crafts. Soon the partner churches were dreaming about how to increase their collaborative efforts.

For this fall, the coalition of churches and neighborhood leaders has planned an outing for the children of Harlem Avenue to the Negro Baseball League Museum in Owings Mills, Maryland, a "trunk or treat" Halloween event, and a parents' night out at Hunting Ridge. And of course everyone is already talking about next summer's Bible camp.