Special Issue

CALLED TO BUILD, SENT TO GATHER

Exploring Our Mission in Branches and New Starts

Our missionaries in Indianapolis

A tent-raising competition during a South Bend branch picnic

Our work in Allendale

Lord’s Day in Oahu
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is a special issue of Vine & Branches. In it, I hope to give you a picture of where we are as a community, where we’re headed and how we are organized to get there.

God has richly blessed us over 35 years. That goes without saying. He’s formed us into a people where his glory shines, where we glimpse what it will be like when Christ really is all in all. Take a look at our life for a moment: the Lord is in everything we’re doing. He’s in our hearts and our minds, of course, and also in our relationships of brotherhood and sisterhood. He’s in our homes, businesses and branch centers, in our unity, our Lord’s Days and our growth efforts, in everything you’ll find pictured in this issue of Vine & Branches. Every day we’re blessed to live inside the “mystery of his will” spelled out so succinctly in Ephesians 1:9-10: “to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Today God is calling us to new and greater things. He wants us not only to keep up every aspect of our Spirit-filled life but also to grow in our branches and to establish new branches, too. He’s called us to choose to be a community of 200 branches and 200,000 people by 2045. We are called to build and we are sent to gather. We face mighty challenges.

That’s why I feel so blessed to have two of the community’s founding leaders, Kevin Ranaghan and Paul DeCelles, working directly for me. These faithful brothers continue to shoulder serious responsibilities for our life and our work.

Kevin is the chair of the branch relations council, a group of five coordinators whose job it is to relate to and communicate with our 21 branches. When you think of the rich life we have in our branches, of our efforts to grow and become more citylike in branches, think of Kevin and his team. They’re responsible for working with branch coordinators and branch leaders to ensure that the life we have is always worth growing.

Paul is the chair of the program coordinators’ council, presently a group of three program coordinators. When you think of Allendale and Dinkytown, of the Action and Mission divisions, and of our efforts to grow inside the Mississippi River Valley (see page 11) think of Paul and his team. Their job is to help move us from 21 branches to 200 and to increase our numbers in all these new locales.

In this special issue, I’ve asked both Kevin and Paul to talk at some length about their work and to answer questions about their jobs. You’ll find Kevin’s section beginning on page 3 and Paul’s on page 11.

As we move forward in answering God’s call, the traditional boundaries and distinctions between our life and our work, between branches and program offices, and the connections between the abundant life we’ve always known and our new growth and city-building efforts may all start to seem somewhat blurry. At the end of this issue, I’ll respond to questions on these topics and talk about how everything we’re doing today fits together.

I hope you enjoy these pages.

In Christ,
Craig Lent
Revealing the Roots of Branch Life

By Kevin Ranaghan

Originally I was planning to outline a vision for branch life in this article. However, I thought and prayed about it, and I concluded that there wasn’t much new to say on that front. Craig has already given us our vision, in his talks from the 2005 Leaders’ Conference for Men, available online in the Center for Christian Studies File Library. We have a clearly articulated long-term goal, to grow into a community with 200 branches in the next 40 years. We also have an urgent immediate objective—each men’s group is tasked with adding one new person to the community per year. Craig has asked women’s groups to consider how they might help our growth effort. He’s also asked all of us to pray and talk about how we can become more visible to others, more like a city. This may be a long process, but it is already happening through the decisions we take today. I urge all of us to talk together about moving closer to one another, about ways to put our meals, our money and our stuff more in common, about integrating our businesses and working life with the rest of what we do in the community. But that’s all I’m going to say about growth and city-building for now.

Instead, I want to address something more radical, that is, more at the root of things. Why is it that our branches are worth expanding? Why are we supposed to be coming up with ways to intensify our already busy lives? Why is God calling us to do any of this? Jesus sometimes responded to tough questions by telling stories, and I’m going to do something similar here. The story that follows is true, it’s loaded with meaning, and it answers many questions.

Bob, Patty and the South Bend Branch

By V&B Staff Writers

When her clock radio clicked, even before it buzzed or played music, she was up and about and full of energy for the day, while I lay wondering where I was!” That’s how Pat Rath remembers her former roommate, crackerjack nurse and quintessential morning person, Patty Chukinas, who died of multiple sclerosis on February 3.

Patty came into the community as Patty Kaley in the early 1970s . . . all the way in. She left her apartment in Michigan (she had been commuting for an hour just to get to prayer meetings in South Bend), moved into a household and made the covenant. Linda DeCelles credits her with popularizing a question in the DeCelles household (where Patty lived in 1974), “Where’s your spirit of adventure?”
“We all held as our ideal living out the covenant to the fullest,” Linda’s husband Dan recalls. That meant putting your paycheck in the same bank account as everyone else’s. Patty made more from nursing than the college students made studying, lots more. But Dan says that she didn’t dither about putting her money in common. It was the same way with her car.

She was adventurous, gung-ho and sold on community.

Over on Oahu, Bob Chukinas, man of the arts, was busy soaking up the cultural scene. He performed in operas with the Honolulu Symphony, took classes at the Honolulu Academy of the Arts, and pretty much from the moment he began attending them, he sang and played guitar at the charismatic prayer meetings held at Chaminade College. His voice was a lot like his faith . . . deep. It was strong and spunky and soulful, good enough to bring a crowd of 8,000 people to their feet (as later charismatic conferences would definitively prove!).

When folks from the prayer meeting started talking about moving to South Bend, Geoff Kelleher remembers that Bob was pretty much of a mind to go from the beginning. He was adventurous, gung-ho and sold on community.

He landed in the Midwest in 1978 and began dating Patty in 1979. “I was impressed by her love of life, her kindness, her great smile, her love for the nursing work she was doing,” he says.

But Patty was sick. She had these symptoms, numbness in her legs and arms, dizzy spells and occasional falls. By 1980 they added up to an official diagnosis, two letters: MS. Bob and Patty were in a serious dating relationship by then, but not engaged. “We sat down at a restaurant,” Bob remembers, and Patty said ‘We don’t have to go through with this.’ She gave me the option.”

Bob never thought twice: “I married her because I loved her,” he says. “I didn’t look at it like the knight who takes this on as a challenge.”

It was a challenge. The symptom-free part of their marriage lasted six months. By their first anniversary, a slow but steady decline had begun. Patty adored nursing work and kept at it through the 1980s, until she couldn’t stand up any more, until memory-loss meant she had to quit. “She had an indomitable spirit,” Bob says.

In 1992 Patty suffered a major seizure. Her legs weakened and she needed a wheelchair. Bob drove her everywhere, lifting Patty and her chair in and out of the car four times a day or more. As his back grew arthritic, he put on a brace and

From left: Michelle Walker, Wanda Gouge and Mary Bilby (Muncie).

From left: Steve Becker, Pete Wolney, Bill Wacker and Mark Lambrecht play cards at the Servant Branch men’s retreat.
kept going. At home, he cut Patty’s food for her, changed her clothes and bathed her.

As Bob and Patty suffered and struggled, the South Bend branch rallied. They cooked four meals a week for Bob and Patty and kept it going for a few years. Then two families, the Days and Thomases, started having Bob and Patty over for dinner two evenings every week. Patty’s women’s group met at the Thomases’ house after dinner on Tuesdays so that Patty could participate and Bob wouldn’t have to move her as much.

The disease wracked Patty’s body and weathered her spirit. She grew angry with God, mad that she couldn’t be a nurse anymore or have children of her own. Her women’s group listened to her, consoled her and prayed with her. “The anger and anguish she experienced were sometimes overwhelming,” Kathy Thomas says.

Then, in the late 1990s, a miracle occurred, when the community was experiencing the new outpouring of the Holy Spirit we called “More of the Lord.” Somehow, Patty just lost her anger at the Lord. Her whole personality changed. Tormented no longer, she became sunny and sweet and ever so grateful to Jesus. “Jesus loves us so much,” she said. “He loves us so much that he died for us. He loves us so much that he freed us from our sins. He loves us so much that he...” On and on she’d go in that vein, finishing the refrain with whatever blessing came to mind.

After her second major seizure in 1999, Bob made the tough decision to move her permanently to Holy Cross Care Center in South Bend. Still, he visited her continually, usually twice a day, first on his lunch break and again in the evenings. For the next eight years, he never left town for more than a few days at a time.

Patty’s women’s group (Valerie Day, Irene Mead, Ruth Sanford, Mandie Sternitzke, Kathy Thomas, Cathy Van den Driessche) visited, too. On Monday nights, the whole group arrived, holding their meetings in Patty’s room, in the chapel, the conference room or out in the hallway, wherever they could find space. Women’s group members stopped by privately, creating a ripple effect that brought many in the South Bend branch to Holy Cross.

“She was hardly ever without company,” recalls Pat Rowan, a chaplain at Holy Cross from 1999 to 2005. “My goodness. You’d walk into her room and there would be all kinds of pictures that kids had sent, or flowers, or photos of her with other people.”

Make no mistake about it. The story of Patty’s eight years at Holy Cross was not some tragedy of unrequited love, of blessings poured out thanklessly on someone who couldn’t return them. Patty may have had MS, but she was no pushover. She loved back.

She loved Irene, a fellow Holy Cross resident...
She was hardly ever without company. You’d walk into her room and there would be all kinds of pictures that kids had sent, or flowers, or photos of her with other people.

Patty loved nursing. Even in her latter years she would look enviously at the nurses caring for her and ask when she could have a job. She always thought she could do it, that her return to work was just around the corner.

“If she was active with a good body, she would have wanted to be...”
branches

a nurse in Allendale,” Bob says. Patty couldn’t take care of Bob, couldn’t love him with deeds the way she wanted to, so her brothers and sisters had to do it for her. For more than a decade, Bob kept going over for dinner to the Days’ and Thomases’ and later, at the Kellehers’, too. He often brought a CD or an interesting movie, or delivered an impromptu book review over dinner. Bob Thomas, his head, encouraged Bob in his hobbies. Bob fished, joined a church choir and took lessons in jazz guitar, the violin and Tai Chi.

He spent his days at the LaSalle Company surrounded by friends who prayed for Patty daily and offered Bob jokes, hugs and more prayer. On his lunch breaks, Bob drove 15 minutes to Holy Cross, had a good visit with Patty and then came back.

Bob was always very involved in Patty’s medical care, advocating for her good treatment with the staff at Holy Cross and with the hospitals she had to visit. He even joined the advisory board at Holy Cross, helping to plan an outdoor fountain surrounded by trees and a garden, where he and Patty often enjoyed sitting.

“He draws his strength from his prayer life,” says Bob Thomas. “He is very faithful to that every day. The Lord blesses him and keeps him going.”

Bob and his brothers and sisters kept going, accompanying Patty until February 3, when she died, aged 60 and well into her 26th year of marriage. Immediately after she died, Bob reported, the rose-colored rash that had marred Patty’s cheeks for years disappeared. She was resplendent.

“Over the past eight years, she became one of my very best friends. I often experienced God’s glory and God’s love through her.”

Three weeks after her death, Bob looked weathered but cheerful. He smiled broadly and had a twinkle in his eye. “The Lord wants to use me now,” he said. “He’s freed me so that I can continue to serve him in some great capacity while I’m here on this earth. I came to South Bend because I wanted more than the laid-back kind of life I had in Hawaii, more than just satisfying myself. I came here with that intention and met a great lady here and had 25 years with her.”

Catherine Ficker (foreground) and Donna Bowar prepare treats for a wedding anniversary party in Servant Branch.
We ourselves didn’t deserve community life. . . .
How can we fail to offer it to those around us, people no different from us before we met the People of Praise?

Bob and Patty’s story obviously says a lot about service, about sickness, about brotherhood and sisterhood, everyday branch matters. But how is it connected to growth?

It gets to the heart of why we want to grow.

Suppose that you walked into a nursing home and offered the first MS patient you met the chance to have a community life just like Patty had. Think of everything that offer would involve: hundreds of everyday experiences of brotherhood and sisterhood, freedom from anger, closeness to God, countless acts of service, a men’s or women’s group that showed up once a week just to sing and tell funny stories. What a profound offer!

In our growth efforts, we’re taking everything we’ve got, this entire way of life in Christ, and offering it to strangers and acquaintances alike. Some may be sick, some may be lonely, some may be angry—and in our branches we have the power to redeem all these extremely difficult situations. How can we fail to offer that power to those around us?

That reminds me of another thing I like about the story. Through the covenant, those of us who are fit, strong and free enough to work on growth are intimately connected to people like Patty who aren’t. Patty, I think, would have jumped at the chance to go to Allendale. She was so active in her day. And when she was sick, she had brothers and sisters working to expand the community on her behalf.

Let’s switch gears and move on to some questions about your work.

What are you responsible for?

I work on Craig’s behalf to help lead, unite and care for the branches of the community. I am responsible for relating to 19 of our 21 branches, every branch except for South Bend and Servant Branch, which relate directly to Craig. Putting things more formally, I chair the branch relations council, a group of five coordinators charged with communicating with branches on Craig’s behalf. This council works with a larger group of brothers and sisters. Together we’re what I like to call the branch relations team.

What pastoral concerns do you have in caring for branches?

Unity is at the top of my priority list. Unity of mind and heart. Unity in our

A volleyball game in the Oahu branch.
Unity is at the top of my priority list. Unity of mind and heart. Unity in our way of life. Unity in our understanding of our Father’s call on our lives.

Way of life. Unity in our understanding of our Father’s call on our lives.

That means communication is a big part of my job. I help branches stay on the same page with the board of governors and help the board understand what life is like in branches. When the board agrees on a new teaching, program or course of action, I work with branch coordinators and branch leaders to help turn it into an everyday reality. Lately, that’s meant working on practical ways to help branches grow and become more visible. In the past I’ve worked with public meetings, with our teachings on Christ in you, freedom and prophecy and many other developments.

Incidentally, whenever we do something new in the community, there is always a healthy conversation, with information and ideas flowing in every direction. Our job isn’t to do a top-down, rigorous implementation like you might find in the government or business worlds. We’re always working together.

My team also deals with the problems that inevitably arise in the course of our life. We offer advice on some of the toughest situations branches can run into: money and marriage difficulties, serious illnesses, disagreements among brothers and sisters, natural disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Ivan and so on. Obviously we can’t tell stories about some of these situations, but I have seen the Holy Spirit work some real turnarounds over the years. I bank on the Lord and I really believe in our basic community teachings: right speech and forgiveness and reconciliation. Put to use, they really work!

Who’s on your team?

David and Sharon Sklorenko are my delegates in relating to the Appleton, Grenada, Jamaica and Rockford branches. They never tire of traveling to visit the Yakima branch. Dorothy and I hustle around trying to keep pace with Buffalo, Corvallis, Muncie, New Orleans, northern Virginia and Oahu, as well as with Colorado Springs, Indianapolis, Saskatoon, Tampa and Vancouver/Portland.

About a year and a half ago we decided that it would be good if some of the other members of the board of governors began visiting branches in my place from time to time. Craig wanted me in the office more and he wanted to give other board members firsthand experience of some of our branches. For example, in 2006 Rich and Beth Preuss visited New Orleans on my behalf. Dorothy and I visited there in 2007.

by car, plane or even boat! Tom and Diane Evans cover the Gulf Coast region of Biloxi and Mobile as well as Shreveport, and have been at it for nearly two decades. Fred and Jeanne Dang regularly drive down the Columbia River Gorge from Vancouver to visit the Yakima branch. Dorothy and I hustle around trying to keep pace with Buffalo, Corvallis, Muncie, New Orleans, northern Virginia and Oahu, as well as with Colorado Springs, Indianapolis, Saskatoon, Tampa and Vancouver/Portland.

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What does your day look like?

I guess that depends on where I am! Dorothy and I are on the road approximately one week each month. When we visit a branch, we have a lot of meetings. I meet with the branch coordinators or the branch leaders. Dorothy meets with the handmaids or the women leaders. (Sometimes I will meet with the women’s leaders, too.) Often I will share at an all-men’s meeting and Dorothy will share at a meeting of branch women. We are always available to talk with branch members who have something on their minds. Toward the end of the visit, I will usually address the branch meeting. That’s an opportunity to bring greetings from Craig, to update the branch on what is going on throughout the community and to comment on what we’ve learned during the visit. These visits are intense, but they are also filled with very warm hospitality, wonderful meals and great times of fellowship. It’s always hard for me to say goodbye!

When I’m back at Greenlawn, I’m on the phone and constantly checking my e-mail. I report to Craig and talk with the other members of my team. I actually do as much work from the office as during the visits. I have monthly or more frequent phone calls with each of the branches I am relating to directly, but I never really know when an urgent call is going to come in (or where it will be coming from). One time my phone rang while I was browsing for books in Barnes & Noble. Dominic Jeremiah was calling from Grenada about a medical emergency and coming through clear as a bell.

Our team strives to be accessible and available. I just have to remember to leave my cell phone on!

I also have some other responsibilities as a member of the board of governors, as a member of the board of trustees of Trinity Schools, and as a representative on some ecumenical charismatic committees. These all can take chunks of my office time.

What would you say to someone who is already very busy caring for brothers and sisters and finds it hard to work on growth?

There are lots of things that make growth hard. We don’t all have the chance to interact with strangers on a daily basis. We aren’t all young and full of vim and vigor. We don’t all have large gaps in our schedules. But all of us participate in making God present in the world, and his presence has the power to save and redeem. To someone who is busy with many things yet still responsible for caring for others, I say: Do that well, be a good head, lead your women’s group well, feed and love your sick brother and let the light of your love shine out. Let your caring be visible. We want to grow and we will grow. We’ll find the way to do the job, together. And while we’re struggling to figure it all out, let’s never forget what the Lord has already done for us and is doing in us every day.
od our Father is sending us into the world as Christ in order to change the world (2 Cor. 5:18). To accomplish this goal we need to grow. As a community we are therefore committed to growth. Much of this growth will come through new starts, places where life, work and worship can be united. We hope our new starts will eventually become People of Praise branches.

It is our lived experience that the Holy Spirit creates an ever new and more intense desire for shared life. This has certainly been our experience in the past. We began to go to prayer meetings because once-a-week church services didn’t suffice. We became the People of Praise because once-a-week prayer meetings didn’t suffice. We wanted to share more life with one another. We established men’s groups, women’s groups, households and pastoral care in order to be present to one another more and to “serve one another and the community as a whole in all needs: spiritual, material, financial” (Spirit and Purpose, 3). Today, at this moment in our history, we are once again experiencing a desire for more shared life, more daily contact with one another. Starting more People of Praise businesses and building more People of Praise neighborhoods will help fulfill this desire.

Our goal is to be a community of 200 branches by the year 2045. We expect our growth to be exponential, which means that the next 10 years would not see the explosive growth that would happen between 2035 and 2045. Nevertheless, at the present moment our growth must proceed a little faster than linearly in order to achieve our goal.

Overall Strategy

In order to grow, we have a two-pronged strategy, and both prongs of this strategy require finding land where we can build our life literally from the ground up. The first prong of our strategy is to become more visible, more citylike. We want to become less like an organization. People who belong to an organization are scattered throughout society, usually indistinguishable from other people. We, on the other hand, want to become more like a Chinatown: think “neighborhood,” think “visible and distinctive.” In other words, we envision our future branches to be places with discernible if not definite boundaries. The second prong of our strategy involves starting businesses. Not only do we want to live in close proximity to one another, but we also want to

Criteria for New Starts

New Directions for the Mission Program Office

by Paul DeCelles

Much of our growth will come through new starts, places where life, work and worship can be united.
work together in businesses which we own and operate. We want our businesses to be geographically close to our houses so we can see one another during the work week. Having houses and businesses close together makes us more visible, more like a Chinatown, more like a city.

So our two-pronged strategy for growth involves building businesses and becoming more citylike. These are very practical goals, but they emerge out of the lofty vision of Revelation 21-22. The city of God, the new Jerusalem, is a place where all things are one in Christ. Heaven and earth are united in Christ. The city has walls, but the walls have many gates. In other words, the city has permeable boundaries. There is money and commerce in the New Jerusalem. The nations bring their wealth into the city (see Isaiah 60:5). It’s also a place of healing for the nations, a source of life for those who come into contact with it. It is above all else a place, a place where love for God and love for one another can become visible for all to see, a place where we can be present to one another and where God is present to us and we to him. It is a new creation. In Christ, we are a new way to live in every way.

Location

Where do we want to build these new starts of the People of Praise? To begin with, we are targeting the Mississippi River Valley, a region we’re defining loosely as the wide swath of land 300 miles to the east and to the west of the Mississippi River. Although we certainly want to support and encourage our branches on the coasts and in other countries (see the section on branches in this issue), we want to capitalize on the less expensive land in the Mississippi River Valley and its lower cost of living. Currently, we see opportunities for affordable growth in this area. This is a window of opportunity that may close. Some experts predict that the United States population will grow by 70 million people in the next 10 years. Eventually, people will realize how much land is available in our target area and how much money could be made simply by selling a high-priced home on the coast and purchasing a home in the Mississippi River Valley. Of course, we are not ruling out the possibility of new starts outside the Mississippi River Valley if the circumstances are right.

For the time being, we want to build our new starts within existing metropolitan areas. We want to make use of existing city infrastructures (roads, water, sewer, electricity, etc.), rather than building, for example, in a cornfield outside the city limits or in a totally undeveloped rural area. Existing cities are also attractive because we want to be close to major highways and good airports. We want travel among our new starts (and among branches and new starts) to be as easy as possible. There’s already a lot of travel among branches and new starts, for example, between South Bend, Dinkytown, Indianapolis and Allendale, and we envision more of that. Ideally, we would like a network of branches and new starts connected by interstate highways. For example, an ideal new start would be somewhere on a route between Minneapolis/St. Paul and Allendale or between South Bend and Allendale.
New Starts

What makes a city attractive to us? We want to build in cities with affordable universities. This will allow our students to graduate from college with minimal debt, so that they can freely go anywhere and do anything that will build the kingdom of God in the People of Praise. At present, some People of Praise college graduates want to work with us and for us, but are unable to do so prudently because of their large educational debts. As college costs rise, it will become increasingly important for our members to educate themselves at a reasonable price.

Public universities are attractive to us because of their affordability, but not all public universities are equally suited to our purposes. Some public universities are located in places (small towns, rural areas, etc.) that students move away from after graduation. We want to build near universities that are located in places college graduates move to. In other words, we want to build in cities that are attractive to college graduates. We expect people to join us and we think we will be most successful among 18-to-30-year-olds, because they are free, unattached, unsettled, looking to make new friends and searching for new, creative ways to live. This age group is our target demographic for new starts.

Where in a given city would we like to purchase land? We want to live in close proximity to a university. We want a place for our students to live and we want to live in a place that will be visible to potential members. We also want to live close to downtowns and other urban centers. Although we hope to employ our members in our own businesses, thus fulfilling their desires not only to meet and fellowship together but also to work together, we recognize that this will not be possible right away. Since many of our members could find jobs in a downtown area, we want to build nearby so that life and work are more united. In sum, inside a city, our ideal location would be within two miles of a public university and within two miles of downtown (measuring from the nearest edge). A shorthand way of saying this is that we want students and employees alike to be able to come home for lunch.

Key Features

What kind of place do we want to build? We envision places where the buildings and open spaces are arranged in a way that builds our common life and makes our presence to one another possible in a variety of new ways. Contiguous land and shared spaces are key to our vision. We want homes and businesses (preferably community-owned) to be close to one another. We want shared spaces, both indoor and outdoor. Examples of the shared spaces we have in mind are: two or three houses sharing a yard, two houses sharing parking or a patio, small clusters sharing a technology center (computers, big-screen television, etc.) or an exercise room or a garage workshop, and even businesses and neighbors sharing some spaces. In short, we want to create places for the way we want to live as the People of Praise.

As we move forward in our plans we expect to work closely with architects to help us design spaces that will meet our criteria. In the future, we expect to have a People of Praise architecture in our new...
New Starts

starts. We know from our past experiences that families need their own spaces and boundaries, but we expect to find new ways for families to share life. Using architectural planning, we want to develop many new ways to be present with and to one another, ways that differ from the malls, workplaces, schools and other large institutions that are typical gathering places. One litmus test for our plans would be: Is this space good for mothers with small children? Will it end their isolation from one another and from their husbands during the workday? We hope that no one will be farther than a half mile from anybody else.

To begin with, we want sites large enough to support 100 adults and 100 children. Our shorthand way of saying this is: enough dirt for 200. One hundred adults is the maximum size of an area in the People of Praise. A group this size is large enough to have a variety of talents and experience to draw upon but small enough for everyone to know everyone else fairly well. Of course, the possibility of expansion beyond 200 would be a plus.

We are looking for sites that will appreciate in value. We want people who buy homes and start businesses in our neighborhoods to be making a good investment. We also want these neighborhoods to be something all community members could invest in, no matter where they live. When we think of being financially in common, we often think of sharing paychecks, but there are other ways we can pool our money. Many community members have assets that could be invested in a People of Praise investment fund, managed by professionals and guided by a board of People of Praise members. Such an investment fund would allow people to invest in our common work and would provide a reasonable rate of return.

Building new People of Praise starts is not a pie-in-the-sky project. It is very doable. It’s a venture greater than we ever thought we’d be involved with, but we have the assets to launch it, and it will pay for itself as it progresses. We’ve already experienced growth among our target group (18-to-30-year-olds) because of our city-building work. We do, however, need managers, architects, engineers, real-estate experts, investment professionals and many more skilled workers to accomplish our plans.

We want to create places that are appealing to the eye, built with high-quality materials but not luxurious. They should be attractive to 18-to-30-year-olds, but also to those over 30. We’ve discovered that our life appeals to younger people in part because it offers chances to interact with people of many ages and occupations: children, businesspeople, retirees, etc. We envision a multigenerational environment in our new starts. We don’t want to build a retirement village, but it would be a plus if we built a place that retirees liked. We intend to build some of our new starts in places with a mild climate for those who need it.
New Starts

We want to develop sites that will be affordable for all People of Praise members—students, one-income families, retirees, etc.—so that people of different income levels can live next door to one another.

 Structural connection
  New starts will begin as projects of the Mission program office and will involve members of the Missionary Company (see the interview with Paul on page 16) and, where appropriate, campus division members. They may also involve other branch members under the direction of various program offices. New starts will eventually become (a) new branches, (b) divisions of branches or (c) areas of branches, depending on particular circumstances.

 Summary of criteria
  If we could capture our intentions in two words, those two words would be “increased presence.” To this end, we’ve developed a list of criteria for our new starts. We designed these criteria to help us in our ongoing reconnaissance of the Mississippi River Valley, but they are not hard and fast rules. Of course, plans always change when you put them into operation and we know that it is “God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). We may end up choosing a site that does not satisfy all these criteria. Also, this list is not exhaustive.

  We are looking for places (in no particular order):
  • that are in the Mississippi River Valley, up to 300 miles to the east or west of the Mississippi River
  • that are in cities, making use of existing city infrastructure
  • that are near major highways and connected by major highways
  • that have good airports
  • that are within two miles of an affordable university so that our students can graduate with as little debt as possible
  • that are attractive to college students and recent college graduates
  • that are near downtowns, within two miles of the nearest edge
  • that can be homes for People of Praise businesses
  • that have possibilities for People of Praise architecture: shared spaces and mixed use (residential and business)
  • that are big enough for at least 200 people (100 adults, 100 children), and room to expand would be a plus
  • that are attractive to investors
  • that are multigenerational, that aren’t solely a young person’s place
  • where people might want to retire
  • some of which have mild climates
  • that are affordable for everyone.

  This enterprise differs notably from our work in Allendale. In Allendale we want to continue to include our neighbors in our city-building plans. Though we want to do more projects like Allendale, these new starts are a different sort of venture. In these new starts, we’re building for ourselves. We’re creating places that will serve and deepen our common life in ways we believe will make us more visible, more recognizable and more attractive to others, more like a Chinatown and more like a city. We expect that many people will want to join Christ in our new starts. In this way, we hope to answer God’s call to change the world and become a new way to live in every way. ■
Sent To Gather

An Interview with Paul DeCelles

What comes next, after the community has applied the criteria you listed and successfully identified a new start?

Craig recently established a new group in the People of Praise called the “Missionary Company.” Their job is to move to new starts and to begin meeting strangers and drawing them into our life. Missionary Company members are real missionaries, devoting all their energy and most of their waking hours to making our new starts work. Their pattern of life is still evolving. Out in the field, they probably won’t have normal full-time jobs or steady paychecks. To get by, they’ll pool the money they have and work odd jobs as needed. Missionary Company members will be financially in common when they’re deployed.

Craig has already appointed 19 people to the Missionary Company: Nathan Barrett, Liz Brewer, Hannah Brummer, Laura Brummer, Josh Caniff, Naomi Caniff, Brian Couch, Thomas Duddy, Jon Gapp, Cathy Grill, Nick Holovaty, Rus Lyons, Joan Pingel, Ellen Putzier, Gretchen Rolland, Mary Seale, Mary Timler, David Zimmel and Jeanette Zimmel. They are not all deployed yet.

Although all the current members are relatively young, youth isn’t a membership requirement.

Missionary Company members are real missionaries, devoting all their energy and most of their waking hours to making our new starts work.

How does the Missionary Company fit in with existing community structures?

Missionary Company members operate under the auspices of the Mission program office. Nick Holovaty is the program coordinator for Mission and the leader of the Missionary Company. He reports to me in my capacity as chair of the program coordinator’s council.

It’s worth noting that all this represents a new direction for the Mission program office. The Mission program office used to be concerned with helping existing groups—typically charismatic prayer groups—become People of Praise branches. (Aside: many of our 21 branches became part of the People of Praise through this former work of the Mission program office.) The present focus of the office is different—building our life and adding to our numbers in places where we aren’t in contact with any groups, or perhaps anyone at all.

What’s our next new start?

It’s in Indianapolis, but in a different part of the city from the area where most branch members live. This February, Jon Gapp, Rus Lyons and Nick Holovaty moved into a rental house near the joint campus of Indiana University and Purdue University. There’s a lot we like about Indianapolis. The IUPUI campus is very close to downtown and many college students stay in the city after graduation. It fits well with our criteria for new starts. (See page 15).

Since their arrival, Jon, Rus and Nick have been evangelizing on campus and door to door, praying with people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and inviting them to join us. They’ve even preached during lunch hours at a very busy food court, drawing applause and some boos. (For samples, check out their web site, www.jesusatiupui.com). You could say they’re proclaiming the kingdom of God at IUPUI.

In August, more members of the Missionary Company will move to Indianapolis and then Nick will take a few members and move on to Memphis, Tennessee.

Memphis?

Yes! We continue to reconnoiter the Mississippi River Valley, scouting its length and breadth. Of all the cities and towns we’ve visited, Memphis fits the best with our criteria for new starts. It seems right to the Lord and to us to go there. Memphis has a great university (the University of Memphis) where we have every reason to believe we can attract students to the community. There is also a very affordable neighborhood next to the university that we’re targeting. It’s home to students, families and the elderly alike, a good place for the People of Praise.
Memphis is also well situated geographically. It’s a convenient stopping place if you’re traveling to Allendale from South Bend, Servant Branch and several other branches. Please pray for our work there. It’s our first attempt at a new start in a city where we don’t have a branch already established.

Switching gears for a moment, what are your responsibilities as head of the program coordinators’ council? I’m responsible for identifying and developing our new starts. I also oversee the work of the program offices: Action, Mission and Publications, not to mention the Center for Christian Studies and our campus divisions (which are part of program offices). I have other responsibilities too, by the way, with the LaSalle Company, Trinity Schools and the community’s finances.

Who do you work with? On new starts, I work most closely with Nick Holovaty, Mary Frances Sparrow, Sean Connolly, Chris Vieck, Bud Rose and Mike Zusi, but many other people participate in the planning meetings and discussions, as needed. I also work with a variety of folks who work at least part-time in Raclin Hall: Trish Brewer, Elizabeth Grams, Jennifer Kenning, Chris Meehan, Jeremy Osterhouse, David Salmon, Carrie Urbanski and Justin Walters.

What does your typical day look like? It’s easier to talk about a typical week. Every week I have a schedule of meetings. I work very closely with Craig and meet with him somewhere between two and four hours a week. I also have frequent Vine & Branches editorial board meetings and weekly headship meetings. Every day I get at least one phone call from Nick. We are always working together. I also spend a lot of time with Mary Frances doing Center for Christian Studies work. For example, we assist Craig in preparing materials for community-wide conferences, and we recently revised most of our community teachings (which the board of governors has approved). We also spend a lot of time preparing retreats. Frequently, I am overseeing someone who is directing the Spiritual Exercises. I spend a lot of time answering questions, either in person or by e-mail. We have a lot of irons in the fire.

That’s why it’s very good that everyone in Raclin Hall stops at 10:15 each morning to pray: for our new starts, for the needs of those who are ill in the community, for the success of the LaSalle Company and any other special needs.

How can folks who aren’t in the Missionary Company help with new starts? Missionary Company members face major obstacles. They are talking to a lot of strangers. At times they experience rejection or fear. They don’t have a typical home environment with stability. They do a lot of wearisome traveling. They are working every day, all the time, at building the new start and they do a lot of praying and fasting. We can’t afford to pay them much or even anything at all, so they are noticeably poor. They cannot do this work on their own. They need the support of the entire community, especially the encouragement of their brothers and sisters in all the branches, and recognition that they are doing a good job. They also need material support such as appliances and furniture, financial support for food and rent and everyone’s prayer support. We all know how powerful that is. Every day, picture them in your mind and pray for them for more of the Lord. They deserve a lot of honor and respect for what they are doing. We can also encourage other members of the community, including our children, to be open to joining the Missionary Company.

P.S. They like cookies and care packages, but the trouble is that their addresses are always changing! You can always e-mail Nick at ngholovaty@peopleofpraise.org.
Conclusion

“Eye has not seen . . .”

An Interview with Craig Lent

Building 200 cities and growing in all our branches is a very ambitious set of goals for a community of only 3,000 people.

Yes! Most new things God does are very small at the start. God is doing big things but he is willing to start small. Remember Abraham, one man who becomes a mighty nation because he believes what God says to him. There’s the tiny mustard seed Jesus speaks of, which grows to become the largest of all the garden plants. Then there’s Jesus himself, the savior of the world, born into poverty and raised in a backwater town. As the prophet Zechariah writes, the Lord doesn’t despise “the day of small things” (Zech. 4:10).

We shouldn’t be ashamed of our size or fear the great challenges which lie ahead. Just as Abraham had to decide to move from his home country and go to the land God had prepared for him, we have to decide to turn our feet and start walking on the path toward growth. We have a choice. We can fret about the future or think about what we can do this week to help the community grow. The success of our growth efforts may hinge on hundreds of single conversations that we’re perfectly capable of having in the months ahead.

Right now we have a lot to figure out. We’re in the very early stages of learning how to build a branch in a totally new place, Memphis. We’re at the beginning of learning how to grow in our branches: how to meet people, how to talk effectively about the People of Praise, and how best to invite people into our life. In a few years, we’re going to have the welcome benefit of experience in all these areas. Beginnings are hard, but they never have to be repeated.

Who is responsible for city-building in branches?

Responsibility for leading branch city-building efforts lies with the branch coordinators in larger branches and the branch leaders in smaller ones.

But I also want to emphasize that all of us—and especially those of us who are covenanted—are co-owners of this work. Kevin Ranaghan is fond of pointing out that the Greek word for “community,” koinonia, literally means “having a work together, forming a partnership.” I think this is particularly the case when we’re trying to do something as ambitious as city-building. Our branch coordinators and branch leaders are responsible for leading, but we all have to participate if we’re going to make progress.

I know this question was about city-building but, since we’re on the subject of responsibility, I wanted to take a moment to recall the consultation about growth we did a few years back. The responses to that consultation came back overwhelmingly positive. We all have seen the importance of growing and now we’re in the challenging and sometimes daunting position of having to follow up on what so many of us said we wanted to do. The fact that so many of us said “yes” to growth should give us a real impetus to get out there and meet people.

What should city-building look like in branches? Is it different from city-building in new starts?

Branch city-building is different because we already have so many resources in place in our branches. In a new start, we’re building everything from scratch. We don’t know anyone, we don’t own any property and right now our presence in those locations looks exclusively like unmarried missionaries living simply. There are no families yet, for example.

Branch city-building involves changing the way we’re living in branches now, morphing our life so that our branches look more like cities. This process begins with a hard look at the resources we have already: our houses, our money, our businesses, our branch centers, our schools, skills, personal contacts, etc. We have to take stock of the opportunities in our metro areas, too. Are there neighborhoods we could move into? Are there opportunities and incentives for businesses to expand or move? When we drive around the city, where does the Lord seem to be calling us?

After the leaders’ conference for men in 2005, Charlie Fraga convened a small group of Vancouver/Portland branch members and began a conversation of this type. The group talked for six months or so, and eventually realized that there were many
opportunities for them to live and work together in an area called North Portland. They scouted the commercial and residential real-estate market for a while, prayed and talked about it more, and eventually bought some houses there. Now there are 12 People of Praise households and one business in North Portland.

It takes a lot of time and effort to make progress with city-building, and yet they have made surprising progress in just two years.

I expect that branch city-building will look different in each branch. There isn’t a uniform starting point for our discussions. In some branches we live close together already. The place to start may be with more meals or with morning prayer together. In other places, many branch members are business owners, making it more natural to talk about working together or moving our places of business closer together. At this point, the most important thing is that we start having conversations about city-building.

Also, as branches make progress with city-building, it’s going to become very important to share our best ideas. I expect Vine & Branches and the community’s web site will serve us well in these regards.

Who is responsible for growth in branches?

Again, responsibility for leading growth efforts lies with branch coordinators and branch leaders. But here men’s groups also have a particular charge. As you know, we’ve given our men’s groups the new charge of adding one person to the community annually.

There are many ways we can grow. We shouldn’t be relying on any single strategy or making growth the exclusive domain of men’s groups. The article on outreach to women in the January, 2007, issue of Vine & Branches points at a number of creative strategies, from flower arranging parties to prayer meetings for women. In South Bend, for example, the branch coordinators have been talking about using their monthly men’s prayer meeting as a vehicle for growth. In northern Virginia they’ve been using the Pentecost Seminar in creative and successful ways.

Also, we shouldn’t underestimate the value of sharing our testimonies and stories about the People of Praise. Many people trace their involvement with the community back to a single conversation.

How are we going to pay for new starts?

It’s worth pointing out that we’re already paying for new starts, though not with much money. We’re paying for them in the person of our missionaries who have sacrificed jobs and career prospects in order to help get new starts off the ground. Also, a number of people have made generous contributions to the Community Growth Fund allowing us to purchase property in Allendale and Indianapolis, for example.

In spite of that, we don’t yet have all the capital we need to build homes, start businesses and do everything else we need to do in Allendale, Indianapolis and Memphis, not to mention in future new start locales.

Most people don’t realize that when they give 5% of their gross income to the community, only a tenth of that total (or 0.5% of their gross income) goes to support headquarters and its operations. (It’s worth noting that many people contribute more than 5% of their gross income to the community.)

Headquarters receives a total of approximately $220,000 from community-support gifts annually. We use this money (and income generated by the LaSalle Company) to publish Vine & Branches, put on leadership conferences, purchase property and pay for accounting services, secretarial assistance, general administration as well as all our new growth and city-building efforts.

As a community, we need to invest more in building the kingdom of God. On behalf of the board of governors, I’m asking every community member to prayerfully consider donating regularly to the Community Growth Fund, in addition to their usual support to their branch.

We’re very grateful to those who are already doing this. Several individuals have also responded to requests to support specific needs, and their generosity has made some big steps forward possible.

Do you have any closing thoughts?

We’re moving forward into new things in the Lord, and we’re moving forward together. It’s very exciting. Five, 10 or even 15 years ago, how many of us could have dreamt that we would be in the situation we’re in today, building cities and growing our community in places new and old? How could we have imagined all the chances we have to serve our Lord, or the amazing and rich life that we’re carrying with us into the future?

Scripture says, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard nor has it dawned on the mind what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). From time to time, as we live and work together, we do catch glimpses of the things the Lord has in store for us. I hope the pictures and articles in this issue of Vine & Branches will help all of us see more clearly what God has prepared for his People of Praise.

People of Praise Vine & Branches is published monthly by the People of Praise community for its members. Reprint permission must be obtained before use. Please contact Sean Connolly, 107 S. Greenlawn, South Bend, IN 46617; e-mail thevine@peopleofpraise.org or phone 574-234-5088 or fax 574-236-6633.

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Front cover photos: Clockwise, from upper left: Michelle Herli, Mike Stapp, Tom Bowar, Jenny Sergio
Back cover photo: Susan Weilbacher
“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. . . . And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Ac 2:46-7).