

The 2018 Next Step Breakfast Address: “Who are we? What do we do? Where are we going?”

Offered by Rev. David B. Wolf, Executive Director, SMGW
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Thank you Kojo, welcome everyone! I’m delighted you’re here: Guests, partners, colleagues, donors and friends. I’m especially pleased if you’re here for the first time – to learn what we do and how we do it – because Samaritan Ministry has a heart for learners . . . for those willing to participate in their own life-change . . . for those who lost inside themselves who can’t find a way out . . . for those who don’t have a decent home or a meaningful job . . . for those who, from the story of the Good Samaritan, are stuck in the proverbial ditch of life and just need a hand up. The ditch may be the result of a bad break, a bad choice, a bad public policy, the growing socio-economic segregation of our region – or “all of the above.”

But none of that matters when a “participant” sits down with one of our caseworkers. Then the only questions that matter are these: First, do you want your life to be better and what would that look like? Second, are you ready for change AND will you participate in that change process? Finally: Will you accept the coaching required to set goals and take the necessary “next steps” to meet those goals? If the answer is, “Yes” then we’ll give you all the coaching, all the support, all the follow-up you need for as long as you need it – the hand up – just because you said ‘yes’!

I say “you” and maybe some of you are thinking: “He doesn’t mean me – he means the program participants, who are stuck in a ditch.” But who are WE kidding? (Remember, it’s Lent!) Who among us has not been stuck at one time or another? You see, what our participants receive in the Next Step Program is what we all need from some source. We call it rigorous compassion but it’s really two things: On the one hand, support

and encouragement; On the other hand, challenge and accountability. It's what your spouse or pastor or colleague or boss or best friend says that you would rather not hear . . .

Rigorous compassion is: A gift from someone we trust that empowers us to grow – and Samaritan Ministry offers that gift to folks who have no trustworthy person in their life to offer it – that is, until they come through our doors. And now – with the integration of the STRIVE job readiness training into the Next Step Program – we see many more folks than we saw before – including returning citizens, the homeless and the jobless, and those living with HIV and AIDS.

In a moment you'll hear from Wayne Pointer – a Next Step participant and graduate of the STRIVE job readiness training – whose transformational journey as a young returning citizen reveals how his determination to change, plus our rigorous job coaching, not only gave Wayne a great job, but great hope for a successful and sustainable life.

But there's another ingredient in this recipe for human empowerment. When we invite a participant into the Next Step program, we also invite ourselves. A quote that has been on my office door since our earliest days, reads, "If you have come to help me you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together."

Over 32 years later that wisdom still speaks to who we are and the change-work that we're all about. Samaritan Ministry wasn't founded just to "help people" but to participate in their liberation, with the implied invitation that they will participate in ours. This demands a level of personal compassion, commitment, and vulnerability not found in many places. But Samaritan Ministry is not just any place: We're a pioneer non-profit in a region struggling with an ever-widening gap between

rich and poor, between those of us who do exceedingly well and those of us who are just trying to get a leg up on a steep economic slope.

We rely heavily on volunteers, not because we're frugal, but because we believe in mutual empowerment, in a community partnership where everyone experiences for themselves the change they want to see in the world.

Shortly you'll hear testimony from Susan Weinbeck, a compassionate servant and volunteer who bears witness to the transformational impact of the work on herself, her church – and the wider community we serve together.

So, when we speak of the “community partnership” we speak of how we cultivate change in ourselves and in our communities. The Partnership is really a “community of communities” that includes almost 250 volunteers and over 60 partner churches, schools, and service providers from around the region.

This collaboration gave rise to a new vision that we began implementing just two years ago. So far, the results of our strategic plan include, (1) increased participant accessibility at 6 diverse locations, with another planned for 2018; (2) expanded employment options through the STRIVE job readiness “boot camp,” as well as established relationships with employers that ensure direct placement of almost ALL of our participants within 3 months after completing the course; and, (3) collaborative opportunities with multiple non-profits through our participation in The Workplace DC @ Skyland Workforce Center in DC's Ward 7. In short: Next Step participants have more options than ever before.

This is a lot to tackle but our winning formula is simple: Compassionate coaching + practical tools + access to opportunity = the hand up our

participants need in this over-priced, under-employed environment. While our work is inspiring, I find our formula the most inspiring because it reminds us that our liberation is found in welcoming the stranger who is really our neighbor in life's ditch, a truth embodied in our "community of communities."

So, as you listen to Susan and Wayne, consider what you can offer from your time, talent and treasure. But also consider the possibility that, by your offering, you will grow in ways you never could ask for or imagine – and what greater gift could you receive in the process of offering yours?

Thank you for being the gifts that you are – to each other but especially to our would-be neighbor, stuck in life's ditch – who is you and me.