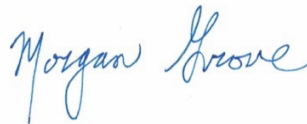


Cultural Services of Church Land Stewardship: **The Stillmeadow Method**

Gabe LePage
Hixon Center for Urban Ecology
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Faculty Advisor: Morgan Grove



Abstract:

In October 2020, a small church in southwest Baltimore announced its forested property as the Stillmeadow PeacePark. Stillmeadow Community Fellowship has partnered with city and environmental agencies to steward their 9.5-acres of forested property for the common good in a way that works to build trust between community members and government and non-profit institutions and across social divisions. This paper reflects on the quality of relationships and social process of the church to build culture in a way that promotes ecosystem services, especially the cultural serves of sense of place and belonging. The paper traces some of the theoretical background at work in the church and lays out 9 building blocks for others to replicate their approach. Other organizations and communities can mimic Stillmeadow's approach to landscape stewardship and to social relationships to build trust across divisions of race, class, and religion, to increase local senses of place and belonging and increase disaster resilience.

Introduction:

A City is like a body. When one part of the body does not feel connected with another, serious problems occur. This has been well documented in terms of natural disaster. Klineberg studied how the breakdown of the social fabric led to high death rates, especially among the elderly, during the 1995 heat wave of Chicago (Klineberg 1999). The disaster response to Katrina in New Orleans suffered from seeing the victims of the storm as a potential threat (Adams et al. 2009). Government responders broke up families in relocation efforts and patrolled the streets with mercenary groups, when lower income people and people of color needed help. Outside of natural disasters, racial and social divisions have led to redlining and racial and economic segregation, creating long term inequalities in access to city services, environmental goods, and wealth (Rothstein 2017). Environmentally hazardous land uses are concentrated in lower income and minority communities, poisoning an environment ultimately shared by the entire city body (Taylor 2014). When one part is hurting, the whole is wounded. When the decision-making apparatus cannot feel the pain of part of the body, a disease exists - a leprosy. To heal the city, an interconnectedness must be restored in a shared sense of place and belonging to one another and to that place. This paper explores a case study of a church, Stillmeadow Community Fellowship (Fig. 1), that has effectively partnered with government agencies, environmental organizations, and its neighborhood in Southwest Baltimore to build connection, a shared sense of place, and belonging. While its story is unique, the church leadership believes that its approach to local social and environmental problems suggest common building blocks that other faith communities and social service and environmental organizations can use to rebuild a shared senses of place and belonging for the health of cities.

Goals and Methods:

At a basic level, cities rely on landscapes and ecosystems for all the services listed below (Fig 2). While many of the services operate without human interaction, all human life is dependent on them. Human culture can facilitate the creation of the services below, and can threaten them to the detriment of human and biological life both within and outside of cities. The question is what cultural forms both protect provisioning, regulating, and supporting services for cities and perpetuate the cultural services that make this possible? What cultural forms can provide these services equitably? While many certainly exist in the world, attending to cultural forms already present in the landscape of American cities provides possibilities of cultivating communities that can reproduce culture to reproduce the ecosystem services that we all depend on and address severe inequities of a divided city body.



Figure 1. Stillmeadow Community Fellowship from the forest.

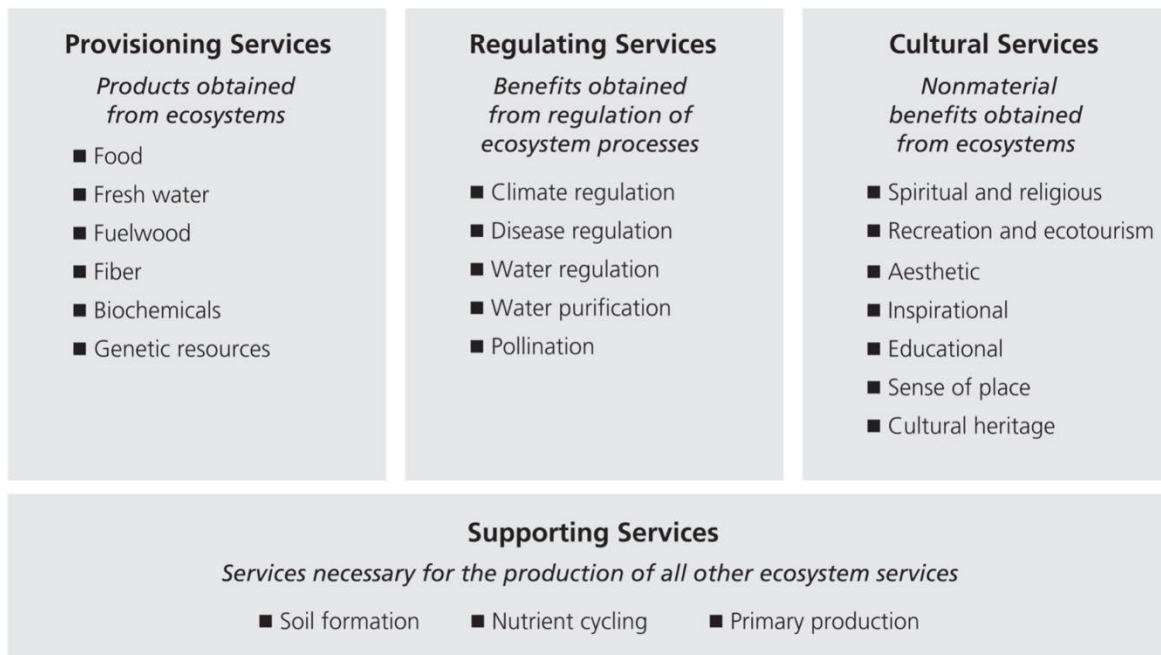


Figure 2: Ecosystem Services ([Millennium Assessment 2005](#)) are a United Nations framework to understand human relationship with the environment. They provide ways to quantify how different ecosystems serve human communities.

Stillmeadow Community PeacePark & Forest consists of 10 acres of forested land and a stream that is located on the grounds of a church called Stillmeadow Community Fellowship. The church and its forest are situated in the heart of the Beechfield and Irvington neighborhoods in southwest Baltimore City, Maryland. The Beechfield and Irvington neighborhoods are made up of predominantly Black households, have been historically underserved, and are vulnerable to flooding and heatwaves due to climate change. Recently, the community has experienced significant losses in tree cover due to emerald ash borer, extreme flooding, and an economic downturn that has created economic, housing, and food insecurity. Stillmeadow Community Fellowship is a small Evangelical Free Church. While part of a predominantly white Christian denomination, the church has been a mixed-race congregation since it moved to its current location in a predominantly African American neighborhood over 30 years ago.

The Stillmeadow Community PeacePark supports a multigenerational community and attracts a cadre of volunteers and partners that are highly involved with park activities and development opportunities. The Park includes: 1) a 9.5-acre forest; 2) an organic apiary, community gardens, and orchard to produce honey, vegetables, and fruits; 3) trails and meditation areas to address the recreational, mental, and physical health of the community; and 4) community-based research and citizen science activities with children, youth, and adults from the community and Stillmeadow Church programs to improve forest and watershed health by investigating park biota (e.g. flora, fauna, fungi, etc.) and hydrology in urban settings.

To study how the church managed their land to promote a sense of place and belonging, I followed Terry C Daniel's schema for studying the spiritual significance of sacred forests (2012, Fig 3). I wanted to know how the church is building cultural forms, and what quality of relationships they applied to do so. Many ecosystem services and even many cultural services are quantifiable and can be explored through quantitative research. Cultural services that deal with

questions of identity and cultural heritage, religious questions of spirituality, and aesthetic inspiration are not immediately quantifiable and are better explored through qualitative approaches of document analysis, observation, interviews, and participation (Daniels 2012). The question of a sense of place and belonging, a question at the heart of the ecological viability of cities, is best answered through dialogue. The production of cultural services, though listed as separate topics, occur together within an active community and the provision of other ecosystem services.

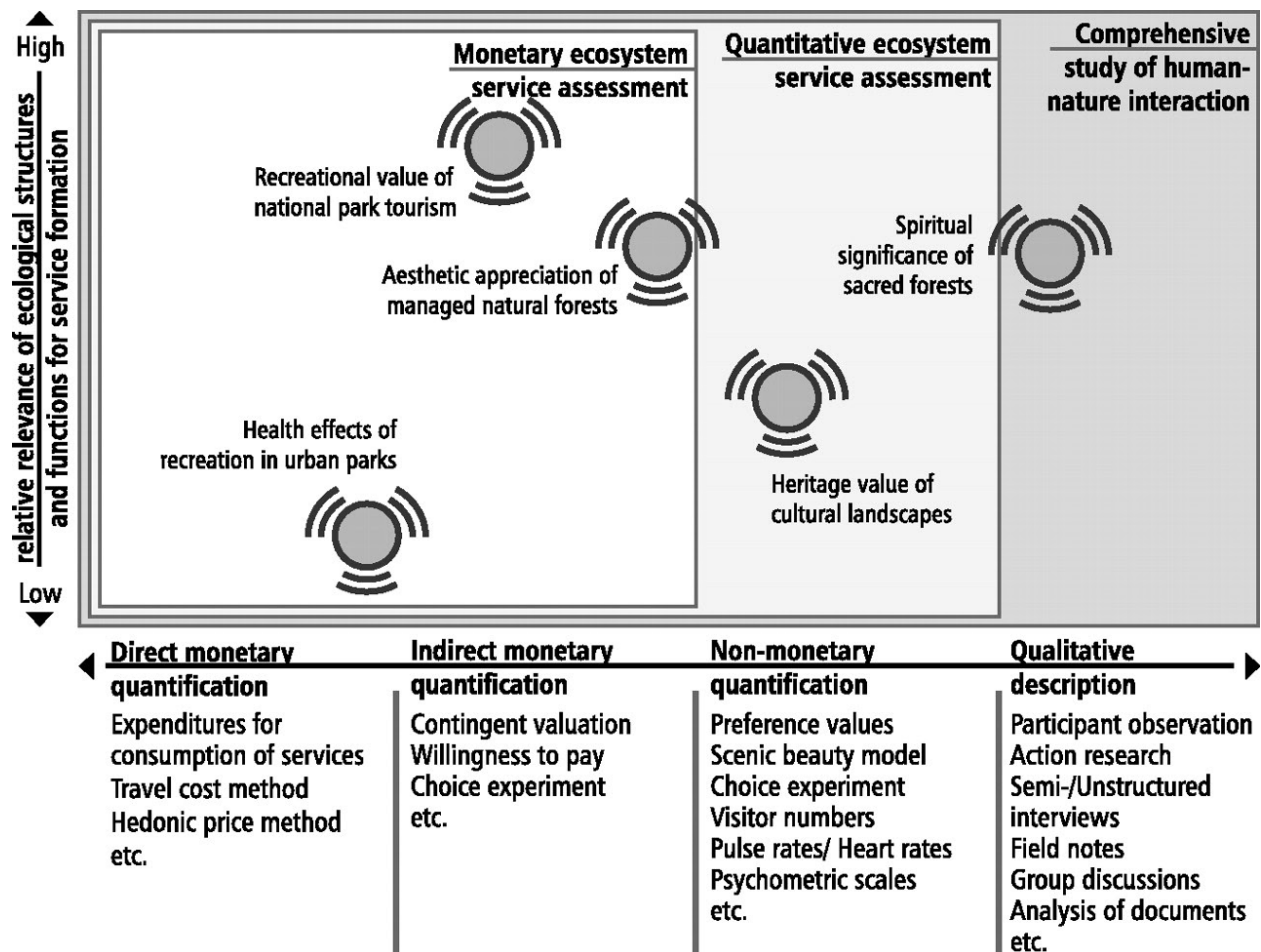


Fig 3: Daniel, Terry C. et al. 2012. (<https://www.pnas.org/content/109/23/8812>.) This chart frames why I chose a more qualitative approach to explore the sense of place and belonging cultivated at Stillmeadow Community Fellowship. Rather than try to understand the monetary value associated with the PeacePark, I sought to understand how the church's relationship with the land creates cultural services such as sense of place and spiritual, religious, and cultural heritage tied to belonging.

To understand how Stillmeadow Community Fellowship and PeacePark produce culture through environmental stewardship, I engaged in participant observation and conducted interviews. I lived in an office in the back section of the church for 2 months from June 2021 through first week of August 2021, allowing me to participate fully in life of the church. While conducting this research for the Hixon Center for Urban Ecology, I also completed my supervised ministry requirement for my Masters of Divinity degree. These joint commitments

involved me in the theological and faith commitments of the church while attending especially to the environmental and social interactions. I attended worship services on Sunday mornings when we did not need to water newly planted trees in the forest. I worked closely with the US Forest Service and volunteers as we planted 1600 willow and poplar saplings in a [reforestation experiment](#). At the same time, the church ran a food pantry and held regular Covid-19 testing and vaccine drives. Between activities, I conducted interviews with church members and church partners on perceptions and history of the park, the church, and how key relationships formed.

My participation increased significantly in the second month as Pastor Michael Martin hired 20 youth through a city-wide youth employment program, Youth Works, as well as four young people who had previously volunteered regularly in the park to help manage the work. I ended up working closely with the four youth, who we dubbed the Canopy Crew, to manage the Youth Workers for the last month, facilitating trainings, responsibilities, and work schedules. While this was an unexpected component of the summer, it provided a close look at how the work in the park could build and affect culture, sense of place, and senses of agency and belonging.

Pulling together the interviews and participant observation, several building blocks emerged that other groups can use to manage land for the provision of cultural services, whether those groups are non-profits, faith communities, or government organizations. Stillmeadow Community Fellowship is a fast growing, experimental, and adaptive project that contains many particular building blocks that others can replicate. Their approach to relationships, to land stewardship, and to leadership development are within reach of institutions and grass roots groups alike, and holds potential for building communities with cultures that care for local landscapes in ways that in turn care for people.

Literature Review:

Many streams of thought pour into the Stillmeadow Community Fellowship story, and I will only highlight a few here. The Christian Church has historically sought the common good of the city, and churches continue to take action towards social welfare and social justice around the world. Church efforts overlap naturally with other approaches at seeking the common good found in practices of Community Based Forestry and disaster response. The convergence of these ideas provides a mental framework for why Stillmeadow has thus far been so successful in securing funding, responding to neighborhood needs, and bridging social divisions through their landscape stewardship.

From its early days, Christianity spread primarily in cities, and they won favor within the Roman Empire partially by caring for the sick and the poor, sharing food, and remaining present in times of plague. When Emperor Julian tried to revert the Roman Empire to Greco-Roman Religion, he attempted to institute some Christian and Jewish practices in Greek temples to care for the poor. In a letter to a Greek High Priest of Galatia in 362 AD, he writes,

For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us ("To Arsacius, High-Priest of Galatia").

"The impious Galilaeans" refers to Christians, suggesting the social work of early Christian communities, along with early Jewish communities, encouraged the Roman Emperor Julian to

create a social safety net for the poor in his attempt to reinstitute Roman religious practices. Today, Christian churches and Jewish synagogues remain active in seeking the social good and filling the gaps in the social safety net through food pantries and care for the homeless. Faith communities can play a positive ethical role in society.

Transformational Development:

Transformational Development is a prominent theory of change at work amongst Christian faith communities interested in community development through non-profits and non-governmental organizations. Bryant Myers' book, *Walking with the Poor* and Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett's *When Helping Hurts* articulate this approach. Of a group of 85 Christian development organizations in the ACCORD network in 2017, 68% claimed these two books as shaping their vision and approach (Offut and Reynolds 2019, 5). The approach is based in more conventional international development theory, but it couches the theory within an evangelical faith perspective.

In summary, transformational development explains poverty as a rupture in relationships between an individual with themselves, God, one another, and the world. Community development is the healing of those relationships. The approach is a response to what some see as an over emphasis on charity work: giving material and money in ways that are paternalistic and cause dependency. Such giving can maintain the social ruptures in the city's body that lead to injustice rather than restore the network of relationships that lead to health. Instead, the authors lay out a framework of Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development, as three types of response to poverty appropriate to different times (Myers 1999; Corbett and Fikkert 2009). Relief is short term in response to a personal crisis or communal disaster. Rehabilitation is medium term and involves capacity building. Development is long term and focuses on capacity building towards the restoration of the four relationships. Some have instead proposed a framework of Relief, Development, and Advocacy to include consideration of systems change and addressing structures of power (Ver Beek and Wolterstorff 2019, 7). The goal is a restoration of the four relationships toward a healed society and environment.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD):

Practically, Transformational Development relies on many secular and participatory development theories developed around the world by people of various faith on non-faith backgrounds. Asset Based Community Development is a secular theory gaining popularity in churches engaged in community development, prevalent among churches near Stillmeadow and cited in both Myers as well as Fikkert and Corbett's books. John Kretzmann and John McKnight formed this theory in Chicago as they engaged in low-income neighborhoods and observed that every neighborhood has assets or gifts that can be utilized to improve the local quality of life (1993). "[They] define assets as gifts, skills, and capacities of individuals, associations, and institutions within a community" (Green and Goetting 2010, 4). Another way to consider assets, relevant to Stillmeadow, is "financial, social, physical, environmental, human, political, and cultural capital" (Green and Goetting 2010, 6). By focusing on assets rather than on the needs or problems of a community, the ABCD approach hopes to sustain longer term engagement from residents towards a preferred future.

Community Forestry:

While ABCD can tend to de-emphasize the role of professionals in community well-being and Transformational Development emphasizes participatory development, Community Based Forestry attempts to bridge the importance of technical expertise and local participation and leadership. Dr. William Burch, former professor at the Yale School of the Environment, was training students for community forestry in Southeast Asia when a member of the Baltimore Parks Department challenged him to apply the concepts in urban contexts in the United States. At this invitation, Dr. Burch founded the Urban Resources Institute (URI) that seeks to provide technical support to community groups in managing local forests (Burch and Grove 1992, 20-21). The Urban Resources Initiative has applied a human ecosystem and watershed approach to Baltimore, based on community forestry practices in Asia (Burch 1997, 264). They seek to work with existing social groups, such as kinship groups, existing ecological groups, religious organizations, neighborhood associations, or schools, to equip them in community-based forestry according to their own goals (Burch, Grove, and Vachta 1992, 28). In this way, the gifts of ecological professionals are put to the service of the gifts of community groups.

One of the benefits of Community Forestry is an emphasis on the relationship between humans and the environment. This relationship is perhaps the least emphasized in the Transformational Development discourse but is central to Community Forestry. In describing human ecological systems, William Burch emphasizes culture as the way that *homo sapiens* interact as a species with environmental conditions, both being shaped by them and shaping them (Burch 1997, 262). In this sense, Community Forestry is seeking to build a culture where people are both caring for the land and local ecology and being sustained by it. The Urban Ecosystem Framework behind Community Forestry efforts actually seeks to map these relationships (Fig. 4). It is helpful to consider specifically how the urban body fits together.

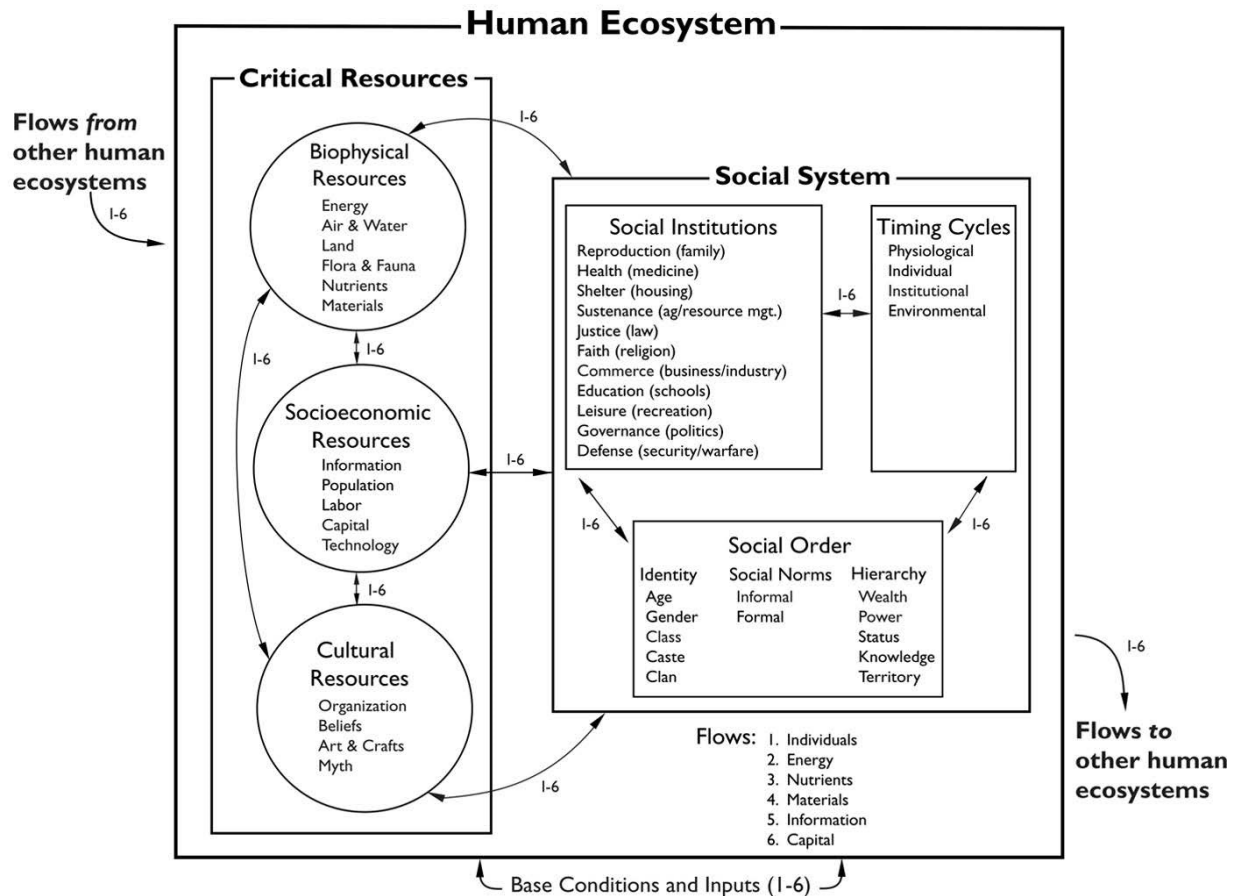
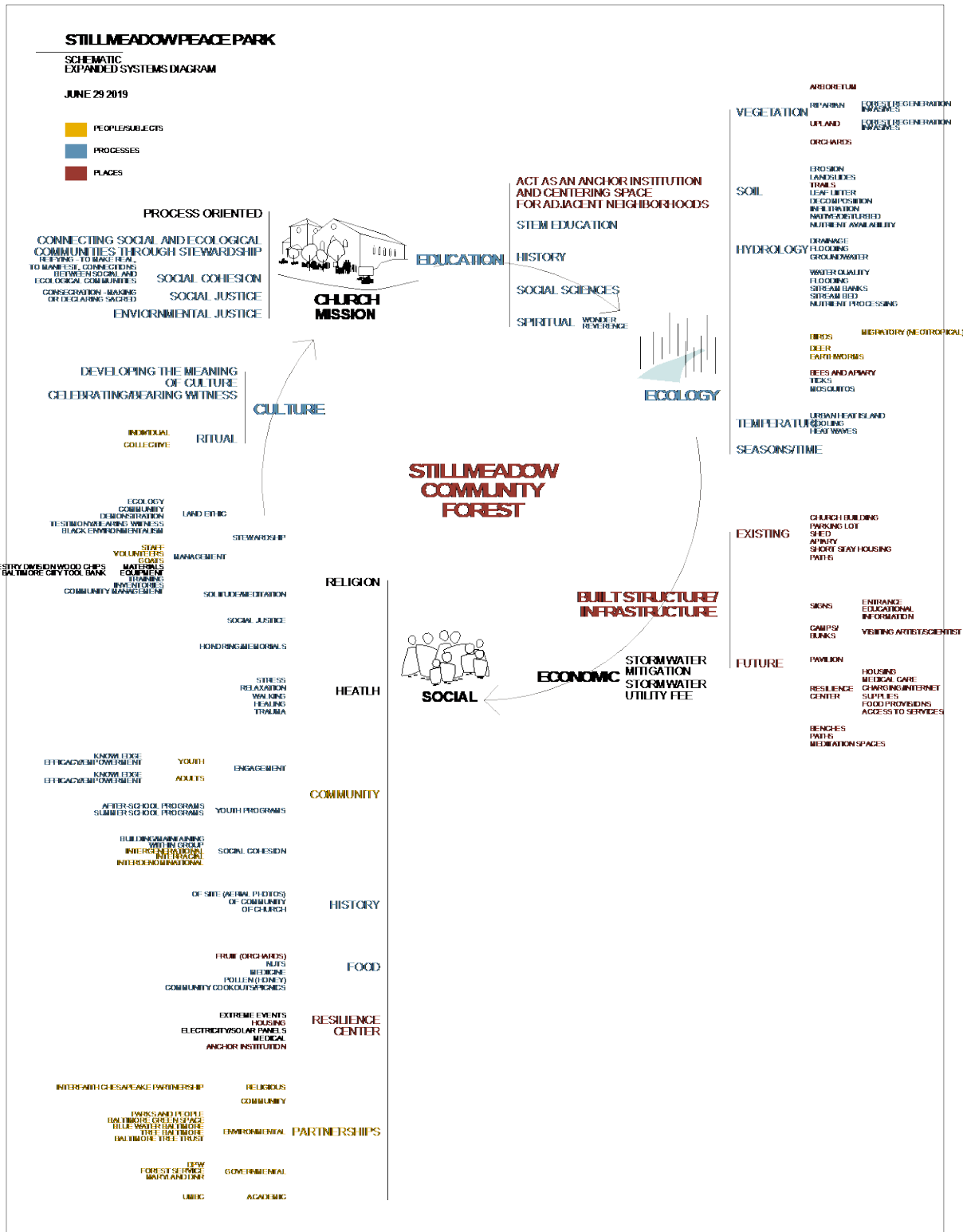


Fig 4. While the Transformational Development framework outlines relationships in general, the Human Ecosystem framework attempts to think through the relationships more specifically in ways that can be explained, traced, and measured (Grove et al. 2015).

Dr. Morgan Grove, a part-time professor at Yale School of the Environment, who also works with the USDA Forest Service in Baltimore, connected me to the Stillmeadow PeacePark. Dr. Grove works closely with Stillmeadow Community Fellowship in the stewardship of their PeacePark and has connected the park with several Hixon Fellows. Under the Community Forestry framework, a previous Hixon Fellow named Jen Shin presented a systems design map of how the management of the PeacePark achieves some of the goals of the church (Fig. 5). Informed by the Human Ecosystem Framework, she mapped how the cultural form of the church achieves many of the ecosystem services. What follows is a qualitative review of how the church perceived the needs and gifts of its neighborhood and went about building this model in a way others can replicate.



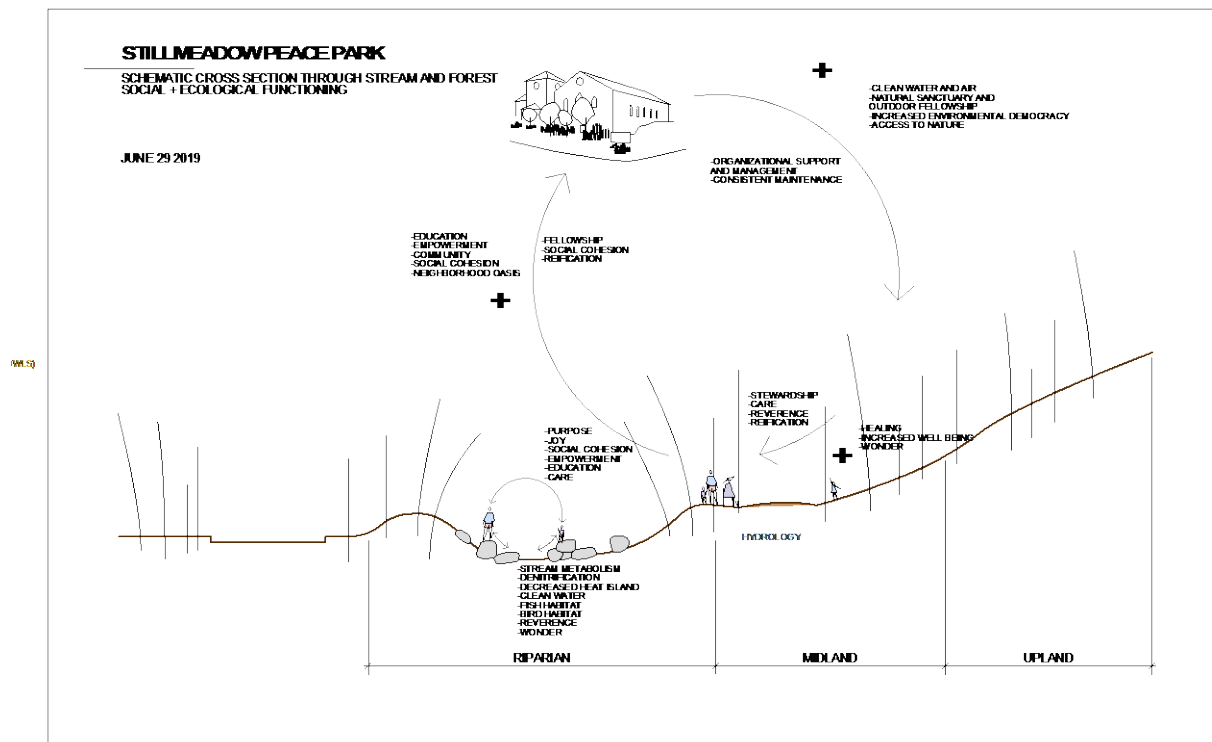


Figure 5. Using the Human Ecosystem Framework, Jen Shin mapped how the church and PeacePark function to produce ecosystem services, including cultural services. The previous page presents a comprehensive map, while the image above focuses on a cross-section of the park (Shin 2019).

The Problem:

Drawing from the literature review above, a key problem in urban Baltimore is the breakdown in critical social and ecological relationships, and a failure to understand these relationships specifically and one's place within them. One term to describe this breakdown in relationship among people is "Social Distance," which I define as understanding others, such as the poor, people of color, or white people, as fundamentally separate from one's own well-being. This social distance can be seen in both the social history of Baltimore surrounding racial exclusion and white flight and ethnographically in my time in Baltimore. The same sense of mental distance also exists between people and the natural environment, as urban settings make it easy for humans to imagine our well-being separate from our ecology. A healing of both social distance and ecological estrangement is the goal of the Stillmeadow Method.

Both forms of estrangement have negative impacts. When describing Southwest Baltimore, Pastor Martin explained that he spent his first few years at Stillmeadow Community Fellowship telling people that "Southwest Baltimore don't get no love." He explained, "I had lived here for 9 years and never came here. When people interact with Black people, they go to East Baltimore or near John Hopkins University" (8 June 2021). Residents experienced the lack of love in perceiving less response by city services and utilities. During the summer I was there, phone lines hung down onto the sidewalk beside the church property, and members of the church spent weeks calling various utility companies to act with little response. This lack of love--social

distance--has dire economic and ecologic effects when it is compounded in decisions about housing, siting of industry, hiring, insurance, loan access, park creation, and maintenance.

The cumulative effect is a neighborhood-wide feeling of exclusion. When I asked Pastor Martin and Yorell Tuck, the Director of Operations at Stillmeadow Community Projects Inc, about how they have engaged the neighborhood in their work, Yorell had this to say, "Pastor Michael is not all about the survey and asking what everyone thinks because it is easy to lose direction. Everyone has a different opinion. But I think [Pastor Martin] did go on a listening campaign to hear themes and a common thread: Living in this area, they felt forgotten" (8 June 2021). In 2018 on Memorial Day weekend, a flash flood ran down the street from the church, flooding basement apartments and displacing residents. Maiden's Choice Run, a stream that runs through Stillmeadow's property, "rose over 11 ft in 30 minutes, with over 4 inches of rain in less than 3 hours" (Weather.gov). Pastor Martin went out to talk to neighbors, and one elderly woman told him, "Reverend, ain't nobody coming back." Pastor Martin told me about how he felt, "I was stupefied. I came back and cried. The people had no expectation they would be helped." Pastor Martin said that "they weren't mad or angry, they were resigned" (8 June 2021). While residents of Frederick Avenue by the church suffered from a flood, Ellicott City, a nearby historic town and shopping district in Baltimore County, also flooded and received significantly more media attention. In the middle of disaster, the social distance threatened the well-being of residents. The heart of the church's work is hearing the emotional pain of the neighborhood and responding as members of a community whose well-being is connected.

When there is a lack of relationships with or knowledge about a community, institutions rely on sets of practices drawn from the social sciences to relate to communities they do not know. Pastor Martin explains that "The challenge is treating urban areas as a laboratory" (9 June 2021). As in Tuck's earlier comment about avoiding the survey for decision making, Pastor Martin sees the patterns of surveys, formalized community engagement, and door knocking often used in urban communities as an inhuman sort of relationship. For example, in response to a request from a partner organization to get community input on the design process of the park, he emphasized the importance of what he calls "adult" relationship, saying,

Do not ask questions you are not willing to get an answer to. We know what we want to do. We have option A, B, or C. It needs a framework. It feels like abdicating leadership. Do you ask a kid what they want in cheese cake? [They'll say] chocolate. No, you make the cheesecake and they'll love it. If this is something we have studied and thought about, why are we asking people who have not studied or thought about it. (9 June 2021).

He did not want to burden members of the neighborhood with the responsibility of decision making on details of church property, and feels that asking without being able to deliver is more infantilizing. At the same time, he is very willing to engage neighbors and partners about design ideas as much as they are keen to get involved. He is critical of the paternalistic attitude hiding within the impulse to collect input without human level engagement, explaining that, "It's not all racial. It's the scientific mindset that wants to study everything: Over-exercising the scientific muscle. It is safer to study than to relate. I'm a woke patient, available to interact but you are treating me as comatose" (8 June 2021). Community surveys, when given by untrusted institutions or actors can feel uncomfortable to community members who wonder what the questions will be used for or if they will be used at all. As he put it, "You are asking me these

goofy questions that you feel good about but I suspect" (8 June 2021). A different set of practices or culture of engagement within mainstream institutions is necessary to bridge the social distance and transform a sense of estrangement and forgottenness to a sense of belonging.

At the same time, the church realized that a blocked culvert on their property caused the stream to overflow into the street and contributed significantly to the flooding. The land management on their property, including their large parking lot and the city's neglect of the culvert, had contributed to the suffering of their immediate neighbors. This was a visceral demonstration of how the stewardship of the land was directly tied to the welfare of the community.

The Stillmeadow Method: 9 Building Blocks (Fig 6)

9 Building Blocks:

1. Quality of Relationships
2. Vision and Naming
3. One Anothers
4. Leadership
5. Potluck Approach
6. Partnership and Race
7. Multitasking
8. Cultural Information Sharing
9. Celebration

Figure 6. The Building Blocks from the Stillmeadow Method are outlined below.

Quality of Relationships

The quality of relationship within the church as a family and outside the church in partnership and service lays an important foundation for its work. Family, partnership, and service represent three distinct and helpful relationships, though they overlap. Church communities operate as a type of "sphere of intimacy" through which knowledge of a geographic place is created and held. Places are named and known through social structures and human relationships. The church family has a certain quality of relationships and knowledge of the local area, with some members as residents of the area and some coming from outside the area to worship. Members of the church family who engage in partnership and in service with those outside the church family in turn create new "spheres of intimacy" and bring new knowledge into the church family. In turn, they can bring new knowledge into the neighborhood through friend or kinship networks, neighborhood associations, and other neighborly relationships. Knowing how these pathways of knowledge and partnership operate is essential to understanding the provision of cultural services in an urban setting, for anyone considering stewarding land for increased a sense of place and belonging.

Vision and Naming

In terms of relationship with the land and physical structures, how one names the places, by whom and for whom, becomes the foundation of creating a sense of belonging and place.

Names and senses of place are always contested, but those who control them shape the direction of culture. Names both honor what is and act upon a space to transform it; they are in fact methods of creation. Paulo Freire argues in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that to be human is to name the world, and that to name the world is both to accurately reflect the world and to act upon it to transform it (1970, 87-88). Freire defines oppression as taking away another's ability to speak their own word, and proposes true dialogue as the solution (1970, 88). Names are known within "spheres of intimacy" or realms of common culture, and when a name is recognized as authentic to a cultural community or is spoken in a way that does not negate another, individuals experience both a sense of knowing a place and a sense of belonging in it. If the name is imposed or seems external to the "sphere of intimacy" by negating it, it may elicit a sense of strangeness and displacement. Names born out of dialogue reflect reality, act to change it, and increase senses of belonging.

To create the PeacePark (Fig. 7), the church leadership had to have their minds changed of how they conceived of their own land, and convince the various publics, such as the church community, neighbors, and environmental partners. When Pastor Martin arrived to the congregation, parts of the forest were almost mythical. One adult member told him, "They say there is a pond out there." The pond was only a rumor. Congregants and neighbors referred to the land as "the woods." Yorell Tuck grew up playing in woods after church as a kid. Neighbors used it as a cut through. Pastor Martin who had the leadership position to enact change was the first to have his mind changed. A church member, Patrick Healy, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt and carrying a machete, took Pastor Michael on a tour of the 'woods.' There were already trails from water, deer, and people. Afterwards, Pastor Martin could not stop talking about all he saw. He preached about it the next Sunday, expanding the idea of stewardship. He saw that people and creatures were already using the park, and that it was an immense resource of 10 acres. Pastor Martin had been preaching about stewarding the church building, but he had a theological realization that the church also needed to steward the land. A church member, Troy Burke, brought up the idea of the PeacePark, and Pastor Martin quickly adopted that as the plan going forward. He said in an interview, "We did not vote as a church to make a PeacePark. The Elders did not agree or disagree. The Trustees did not agree or disagree. We did not go through a committee" (8 June 2021). He simply began acting as if it was a PeacePark. The property transitioned in the mind of the congregation from "Woods," to "Forest," to "PeacePark" within a year.

Stillmeadow Community Park



Figure 7. The map by Stedman Jenkins (2020), a Stillmeadow volunteer, shows the initial trail system made by Patrick Healy and the layout of the church property, including the stream that overflowed onto Frederick Avenue.

Pastor Martin felt justified to act without any governing board's consent for several reasons. The congregation had tried to sell the land previously. They had tried to give it to the city and been declined. Pastor Michael, with the thought, "It did not mean anything to you," decided to make use of the land following the church vision statement. Yorell Tuck merely thought, "Oh, that's interesting. I had never thought about that" (8 June 2021). To her, the PeacePark was merely a new idea. Not everyone agreed. Pastor Martin described himself as "being bossy in certain areas while some were deciding if I would stay" (8 June 2021). However, while church members, except for the few who lived in the area or had grown up playing in it, had mixed feelings about the land, the environmental community in Baltimore was thrilled. Pastor Martin said, "People were losing their minds" (8 June 2021). When he told environmental professionals about the PeacePark vision, they responded, according to his recounting, "The most we have ever dealt with is 10 acres" (8 June 2021). To respect the church community however, Pastor Martin chose not to use the church's money on the park as they were not initially interested. Several years later, the church is on board while they still have other partners and sources of funding to manage the park.

Re-naming the land "PeacePark" through dialogue with Patrick Healy and Troy Burke and a few others created a new direction for the church. Pastor Martin was careful to frame the new direction within the church's own vision while not threatening neighbors or the church's current use of the land. Even as the PeacePark was named, the physical and social transformations of relating to the land as a welcoming park versus a fearsome wood was still occurring. Neighbors and church members still referred to it as the woods and experienced it in the same ways. The creation of the PeacePark is in a sense a creation of a new community that experiences the land in a new way, creating a new sense of place even as the place is re-created. This act of creation does not negate other's experience or use of the land, but adds a new layer. Managing land for the creation of culture and a new future requires respecting the culture and names that came before, and rooting the new names within an accepted "sphere of intimacy." Re-naming is essentially political, but it can be a politics of love.

One Anothers

For the church, the quality of relationships they aspire to live out is the biblical idea of the "one anothers." The term "one another's" refers to a list of statements in the New Testament where Jesus or early Christian leaders encourage the community to treat one another in patterns of mutual regard and love. The Stillmeadow church website lists "Practicing One-anotherness" as the 5th Church Life Value. It lists, "One Another... love, be devoted to, build up, accept, admonish, care for, be likeminded toward, be patient with, comfort, teach, bear with, encourage, stir up, pray for, confess faults to, show hospitality to, speak in music to, look to the interests of... ONE ANOTHER" (<https://stillmeadow.community>). Another example from the book of Romans is to "honor one another above yourselves." Though never practiced perfectly, church community seeks to live out these patterns of relationship. Pastor Martin talks and preaches about these values as a helpful model regardless of belief (13 June 2021). Communities benefit from a positive culture where members seek each other's well-being. Both the seeking others well-being and the receiving of others' care increases a sense of belonging.

To demonstrate this quality of relationship, it is also helpful to point out that not all members of the church are involved in the work of the church in relation to the neighborhood or in the PeacePark. Pastor Martin is involved in the vision process, and Yorell Tuck coordinates the moving parts and operations. Vanessa Kirkland has been essential for business administration. Jackie Griswold has been key to gardening and leading environmental stewardship efforts around the campus. Kim Cruise works with her kids to run the food pantry. Other members serve as elders, volunteers for church cookouts, custodians, sound technicians, or simply as congregants. Without listing everyone, each person has a role and a part. Though not everyone is active in the PeacePark, each member brings a different gift to the church. The apostle Paul wrote that the church is a body with many parts, and Stillmeadow lives this out in a local form. Each part brings a different gift of service to the community. All organizations and communities express this dynamic to some extent, but recognizing diverse roles as an asset that builds up and supports one another takes some intentionality, informed by a culture of "one another-ness."

These relationships and how they are joined together present another way to consider Asset Based Community Development. ABCD focuses on discovering the gifts of institutions, associations, and individuals. Every community has a treasure trove of these gifts. Pastor Martin offered a helpful critique of this approach, saying it is important to "know how to put the joints

together" within the context of a local vision (8 June 2021). Within the context of the church metaphor, how does one put the pieces together as a body that support one another? This is an important question for other non-profits, neighborhood associations, or city agencies seeking to build up the life of a neighborhood. Discovering the institutions, associations, and individuals at work in a neighborhood is the first step, but an effective community process to improve quality of life requires the pieces to be put together.

Leadership

Strategically putting together compatible gifts and resources to achieve neighborhood goals or respond to crises is the gift of leadership. Leadership charts a path, though others need to walk it as well. Pastor Martin emphasized that all the resources that the church has used to do the work in the PeacePark, the food pantry, the covid testing, the vaccine clinics, the disaster preparedness, and so on were available before he showed up. He said, "It all has to do with leadership. All the resources existed before 2017" (8 June 2021). He managed to both recognize the gifts and leadership within the church family and in church partners to respond in service to crises and opportunities in the community. He has named the path in conversation and others have walked with him.

Leadership is a hard building block to replicate. One of the challenges to the replicability of something like Stillmeadow is that the people with the right gifts or resources have seemed to pop up just when they have been needed, but part of this is an institutional ecology ready to receive these gifts. It is impossible to replicate a Pastor Martin or Yorell Tuck. On the other hand, any community can intentionally build a sense of local needs and resources and build a vision for the future that prepares the group to receive or partner with the needed resources and gifts. The gifts of community members and potential partners can then be joined together to respond to needs and to work towards the shared vision. By having such a vision, Pastor Martin has created an institutional ecology that can catch talent and draw in gifts for the service of the neighborhood that would otherwise be either uncultivated or would pass the neighborhood by.

In 2019 Pastor Martin attended a Baltimore environmental conference, where he demonstrated this quality of leadership and preparedness to receive gifts. He and other members of the church already established the idea of a PeacePark, and the church had already become active in responding to community needs during the flood in 2018 and with their food pantry. Two young white kids with environmental justice on their minds came down in the spring of 2019 to be involved in that vision, and they invited Pastor Michael to a local environmental conference. The conference was about Urban Neighborhoods, but the only people of color were some Puerto Ricans who were visiting and someone from a tree organization in Baltimore. Pastor Martin wanted to network around environmental issues in Baltimore but found only technicians speaking in jargon. Pastor Martin explained, "They say it here on purpose," as he raised his hand above his head before lowering it, "when they could say it here" (8 June 2021). He was gesturing at the incomprehensibility of technical language to outsiders, and part of his leadership was seeing the need for environmental information about urban neighborhoods to be accessible to members of urban neighborhoods. Someone asked him to speak. He talked for 10 minutes about the PeacePark and how the conference was not communicating to people who needed to hear this information. Participants loved it. As Yorell Tuck described it, "White progressives love to be told off. It helps them be more woke." Pastor Martin recalled, "4-5 people cornered me afterward and I have good relationships with 3 of them" (8 June 2021).

Through a mixture of challenge and sharing a vision, partnerships developed with key environmental groups who could help move the PeacePark project and the mission of the church forward.

Potluck Approach

Stillmeadow has managed as a congregation to mobilize a small church to respond to large social problems. As problems emerged, whether deep problems like social distance or situational problems like the flood or emerald ash borer, they offered what they have towards the common vision in collaboration with partners. Nothing was done alone. They responded to continuing dialogue with neighbors and partners to transform limited situations using the resources accessible through the network of relationships. The dialogue includes the input of experts, using the community forestry model, to reflect on ecological and economic concerns.

While the magnitude of a crisis is often too large for one person or one congregation, Stillmeadow practices offering up what they have in a "potluck approach." Depending on their background, people referred to this as the "Loaves and Fishes Approach" or the "Stone Soup Model." For example, a member of the church, Kim Cruise has worked with the food pantry for 17 years. She emphasized a "Loaves and Fishes" approach (4 June 2021). The pantry fed around 30 families every 2 weeks before the pandemic, but the number rose to over 300 families during the pandemic (Fig. 8). Cruise did not think at first that such an expansion was possible. There was not room in the current pantry and not enough money in the church budget. In looking at the magnitude of the problem and responding to it, Pastor Martin challenged her to expand the pantry into the church fellowship hall, unused during the lockdown. Aubrey Germ, the Climate and Resilience Planner from the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, had gotten to know the church in response to the 2018 flood, and she helped connect the church to deliveries of fresh produce and a grant for 3,000\$ that could cover several years of the food pantry budget (2 August 2021). Though the challenge seemed daunting, Pastor Martin practiced what he calls "Seeing around the bend," to envision what is possible and equip leaders to meet a need. The church offered what it had, and it was multiplied through the church partnerships.

Food Pantry Participants per ZipCode for Stillmeadow Food Pantry-Source

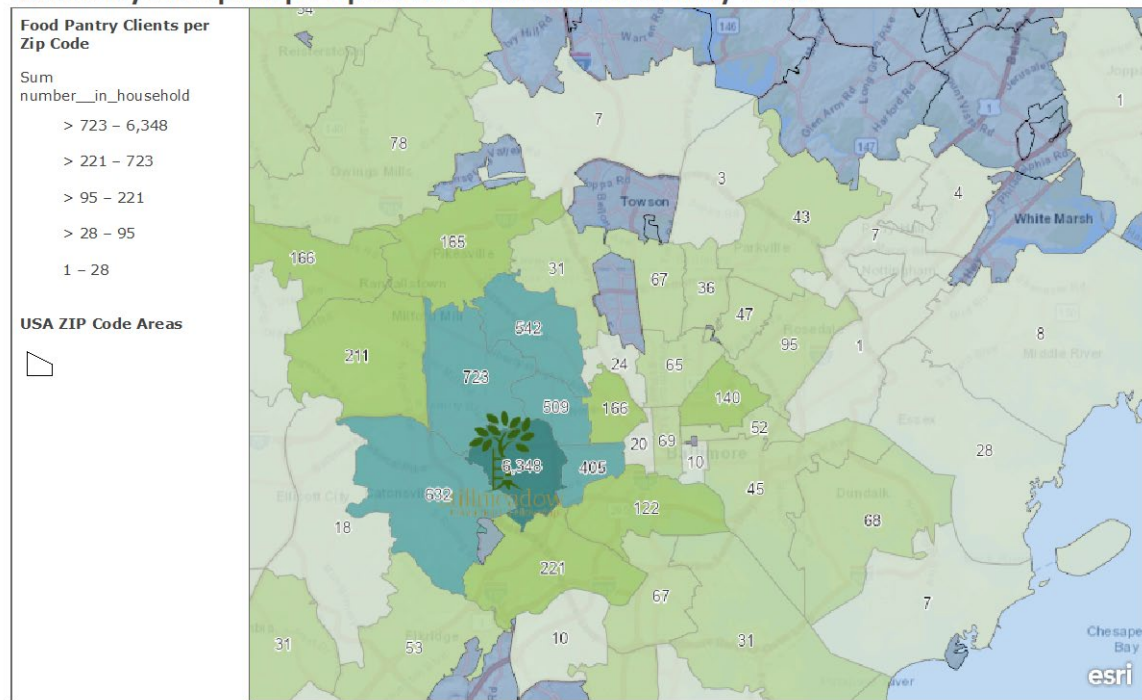


Figure 8. This map, made by church volunteer Frank Davies and myself, shows the number of individual participants by zipcode who visited Stillmeadow's food pantry from 2020 through 2021. A small church is able to have an outsize influence by offering what they have.

Morgan Grove from the US Forest Service emphasizes this model of involving many actors. Rather than the biblical theme of the "Loaves and Fishes," he describes Stillmeadow's work as a "Stone Soup Model." In the first, what is offered is multiplied, while in the second, a little bit offered is an excuse for much more to be given. Grove has partnered with Pastor Martin to help manage the forest, and with his colleague Nancy Sonti, establish a long-term reforestation experiment to create a healthy, diverse canopy after the loss of many ash trees to the emerald ash borer. Speaking about the research experiment at the beginning of June, he said, "It's been a lot of work. It's been every Saturday since last September" (4 June 2021). It's not that he or other members of the church or volunteers have not each contributed a significant amount, but that together, the work becomes something more. As he put it, "An individual can make a difference. A group can make a miracle. It's the stone soup model. We never know who would show up each week. It's been faith" (4 June 2021). One sense of his use of the term 'faith' is very practical. They do not know what the wider community might offer but find, as in the story of Stone Soup, that much is given.

The social interaction of working together on a greenspace with this "potluck approach" creates deeper social cohesion. Grove described the work in terms of the church's role as a resilience hub where the environmental work outdoors helps with "building social cohesion and team work to prepare for a pulse event" (4 June 2021). The social cohesion becomes key to better disaster response. In this sense, the church's multi-tasking work around Covid testing and vaccines, food pantry, forestry, and gardening are all a part of disaster preparedness and

community development. As Grove said in our interview, "One thing can be many things at the same time" (4 June 2021).

Partnership and Race

Pastor Michael's approaches partnership with a specific approach to interracial engagement that addresses race as a major barrier to and major source of belonging in the American context. Understanding racial dynamics in a neighborhood is key to a sense of place and overcoming barriers to a quality life. For example, Pastor Martin explained, "Others [black ministers and community leaders] have told me, 'Don't let the white people come in and take over'" (8 June 2021). By carefully managing the vision and the partnerships, Pastor Martin and Stillmeadow Community Fellowship have created a space where relationships with white service groups and primarily white organizations can put their gifts to the service of the neighborhood under African American leadership. A space like this is necessary to overcome the social distance described above. Referencing his relationship with Morgan Grove, Pastor Martin said, "Morgan and the others will tell you, the white people have been nice but have had no place to be nice" (8 June 2021). Again, Pastor Martin has intentionally created an institutional ecology that allows white people to share their gifts within an urban community, under African American leadership. This is another example of leadership charting a path through the pain of American racial history and oppression to create just relationships for the common good today.

Pastor Martin repeatedly emphasized the trust and intimacy in relationships with key partners, especially across divisions of race. The personalities of the people involved and Pastor Martin's intentional approach to interracial relationships both served to build trust. For example, when I asked Bonnie Sorak, a white Jewish woman who works for Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake and is one of the key partners for the church, how her relationship with Pastor Martin began and why the partnership has worked so well, she said, "Simpatico. You know, I'm a doer. He doesn't suffer fools. We've built an honest and trusting relationship over time. We don't agree on everything, but we know we can count on each other" (29 June 2021). She was emphasizing a similar spirit that was willing to work through differences and willing to take action. The description of every trusting relationship involved examples of disagreement and working through it. The relationships were marked by a willingness to try, to make mistakes, and to move forward.

Pastor Martin's intentional approach addressed deep seated patterns of black anger and white guilt. He suggested this framework as a way to bridge the racial divide (Fig 9). As he emphasized, "intimate deep partnerships" with dozens of NPOs, NGOs, and City Departments, he also said, "We know what to do with them. We're not mad at them. We're not trying to hit them up for money. We know how to manage them" (2 August, 2021). For white actors, he suggested a parallel three approaches of not being intimidated, not being a one-timer, and not leading with money. These attitudes for black and white actors are practical disciplines for overcoming deep, legitimate emotional barriers to effective partnership and citizenship. These are the psychological barriers related to white flight, unfair siting of hazardous waste sites, and failure of city services to serve communities of color.

Black	White
Not afraid	Not intimidated
Not mad	Not a one-timer
Not seeking to get something	Not leading with money

Figure 9. Pastor Martin summarized his approach to interracial relationships with 3 attitudes helpful to overcome barriers to relationship for black and white people respectively around anger and guilt.

By practicing these disciplines, the possibility for partnership grew out of trust building, conflicts, and conversations within overlapping goals. In working together, misunderstandings around issues of race are bound to come up and need to be navigated. During one meeting to plan for a forest meditation event that would be led by a primarily white environmental organization, the partners acknowledged to Pastor Martin and Yorell Tuck that the event would be on Juneteenth and suggested they should do something to intentionally acknowledge it during the event. Pastor Martin said directly and graciously that they should not try to do it. It was too late notice and could not be done well. It was enough to do a forest bathing event. In my understanding of this interchange, the white professionals wanted to be sensitive and acknowledge a primarily African American holiday, and felt compelled to do so out of a desire to not be racist. The compulsion, however, is sometimes driven by the sense of white guilt rather than a free expression of solidarity they were already achieving in partnership with the church. Rather than let them struggle to earn their place in the community by acknowledging Juneteenth in a setting and way that may or may not resonate with African American community members, Pastor Martin let them out of a cage of racial guilt to offer the gifts they were good at giving. Interchanges like this maintained rather than fractured relationships as both parties offered what they have to give.

While Pastor Michael's vision and leadership have been key, the model he is promoting only works with mutuality. Aubrey Germ, the Climate and Resilience Planner for the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, provides that mutuality on the city department level. She works with the [Baltimore City Community Resiliency Hub Program](#) that emphasizes partnership to support organizations to build capacity, respond to crises at different time scales and scopes, and connect organizations to city agencies so they know who to call. She is able to be a person within the city system who can make that system work for people. She said in our interview, "Someone is there. Someone is listening. I won't say, 'Hey, I will refer you to DOT.' I will call them. The goal is not to put additional pressure on these organizations but to support them" (2 August 2021). She has helped Stillmeadow get their salt boxes installed and refilled by the Department of Transportation and have access to sandbags for neighbors concerned about flooding. At the time we talked, Germ's department worked with 12 active resiliency hubs around Baltimore, including Stillmeadow, and with 18 groups involved in some capacity. She is actively stitching together an effective social network around city agencies to connect the goals of city departments with the goals and needs of neighborhood organizations. In return, Stillmeadow is always pitching new ideas and making the program their own. The partnership has led to grants for energy efficiency and installation of solar power and a battery backup system in the church and to Pastor Martin

expanding the idea of a resiliency hub to include digital access. Mutuality serves the local institution and the city-wide program.

Multitasking

Rather than maintain social barriers, Stillmeadow frequently worked to build bridges between groups, and they designed this into their community development work. Stillmeadow uses a practice of multitasking to bridge relational barriers and cultivate shifts in a sense of place by connecting different demographics to one another. They would schedule multiple events and groups at the same time with the hope they would see each other's work and interact. For example, in one Saturday morning, volunteers in the PeacePark planted 820 trees to establish the reforestation experiment, other volunteers ran the food pantry, and the health department ran a vaccine drive. Different groups came to the church with different agendas, but by overlapping, had a chance to see one another and develop relationships with people that transform relationships with the land.

Multitasking allows for the possibility of relationships forming that undermine negative cultural stereotypes. Stillmeadow volunteer Frank Davies emphasized how personal relationships with individuals can transform perceptions, for better or for worse, of an entire social group. As he put it, "The narrative is strong, but the truth is stronger" (20 July 2021). Multitasking projects like Stillmeadow create spaces where individuals from different backgrounds choose to remain engaged in a common project because of shared interests or what Morgan Grove called "adjacent interests." The relationships are not necessarily deeply intimate, but they can still have a positive effect. As Davies put it, "It does not have to be familial. We could just share an interest in growing carrots. The proverbial work relationship is just fine" (20 July 2021). Frank explained that quality work can create respect even at a distance. Multitasking creates spaces where quality work across lines of difference can be made visible.

Cultural Information Sharing

The relationships with the land are transformed both by what Frank Davies calls "Cultural Information Sharing" and by experiences that deconstruct stereotypes. For example, many volunteers from Baltimore County or from various colleges were predominantly white. They typically held a stereotypical view of Southwest Baltimore as dangerous and crime ridden. By coming to volunteer at Stillmeadow, they had a positive experience and worked under African American leadership. The church assigned neighborhood youth to lead college students in door knocking about church events or to lead a church youth group in invasive plant removal in the PeacePark. Davies described this as developing our own relationships to replace harmful cultural narratives. "We have our own link, I don't need someone else's link," he said (20 July 2021). Transforming narratives around race that people have about Baltimore transforms relationships with place that could have powerful economic impacts. As much as property values are tied to narratives around safety and race, experiences like this transform the internal mental landscapes that cause segregation and disinvestment in the city.

"Cultural Information Sharing," on the other hand, refers to the creation of habits and practices that lead to effective landscape care. In effect, this concept is Davies' narration of the Community Forestry model and its ability to instill ecological practices in a community. He used Morgan Grove as an example of a professional with ecological knowledge. While some

professionals do work in a community without explaining it and others share information about a problem, "Cultural Information Sharing" is the professional working with the community as an equal to both do the work and share knowledge about how the work is done. The process of working together in community creates the culture that can effectively steward land and builds relationships and teamwork that can effectively respond to future problems. As Davies said, "If superman came, knocked every tree down and planted super trees, and we had the perfect place, it would be a net loss" (4 August 2021). The process of working together to share the cultural practices of landscape care weaves ecological knowledge into the sphere of intimacy associated with stewarding the PeacePark, a social sphere that overlaps with those of the church and the neighborhood.



Figure 10. Eric Fishell from Baltimore Greenspace leads a training on bird ringing with the Youthworks and Canopy Crew students.

Developing a culture that continues to respond to social and environmental crises involves continued education, employment opportunities, and access to career pathways. One way the church did this and plans to do it in the future was receiving a group of 20 Baltimore youth from a city program called Youthworks. It was my job to work with the Canopy Crew and the team of 20 youth to manage the reforestation experiment plots and trails for the summer. Environmental partners came every week to do trainings on subjects like watersheds, environmental justice, tree ID, and bird watching (Fig. 10). I led trainings on trail maintenance and compost. In interviews at the end of the 6 weeks, youth spoke about having

favorite birds and taking on gardening and landscaping projects at home. Youth knew how to build deer exclusion fences using bamboo, metal stakes, plastic mesh, and zip-ties. They could begin to identify and remove invasive species as well as protect natives. The cultural practices necessary to care for the land took root in the youth through our work together, largely through their connection with environmental partners willing to share knowledge and work alongside us.

Celebration

Regular rhythms of celebration are essential to formation of identity and community, and sustaining a culture of environmental and social care. The church did this intentionally toward the end of the summer by having weekly community cookouts, including movie nights and a West African dance demonstration (Fig. 11). In October 2021, they threw a party to celebrate the 1-yr anniversary of the park. The celebrations continue to foster the relational overlap that the multi-tasking achieved. People, who might not otherwise see each other, interact and become aware of the work at the church and in the park.

Awareness of the work of the church instilled a deeper sense of belonging and counteracted the sense of forgottenness caused by social distance. A Morgan State University public health professor, Dr Lenwood Hayman did a training with the youth workers and described our work in the park in terms of love for the forest, the church, and the neighborhood (21 July 2021). As he walked out of the forest when he came to speak to the youth, an older woman told him, "Thank you for your work." He replied that he had not done anything, but explained to us that her thank you is a reverberation of that love expressed through work though she does not know what we have been doing. Neighbors regularly expressed appreciation for the church's work in the park and through its various ministries, especially the food pantry. The work became an expression of the "one anothers" in the broader community. It also increased neighborhood pride in their place.



Figure 11. Church neighbors enjoy a West African drumming demonstration at a weekly community cookout.

Conclusion:

Using these building blocks, the church became and is becoming a key node for reconnecting parts of the city that had been divided. By living out their theological commitments to reconcile relationships between people with each other and the land, they are spilling the ideals of the "one anothers" beyond the church into the neighborhood and the city to overcome the patterns of social distance that led to the neighborhood feeling forgotten. They are building cultural forms that engage in landscape stewardship for the benefit of communities, and increase a local sense of place and belonging. While their story has just begun, they have embarked on a social process to re-member parts of the civic body to make it more resilient should further climatic disasters strike. They have created cultural forms to steward their land for the provision of ecosystem services across social boundaries. In a world with increasingly irregular weather due to climate change, the building blocks of the Stillmeadow Method could serve to construct more social connectivity and responsiveness to make sure communities that are forgotten by decision makers are remembered. They can also serve to root people more deeply in their places and local stories in ways that increase belonging.

Government agencies, environmental and social service non-profits, and faith communities can all use these building blocks to listen and to attend to the needs of those around them and to partner with others to respond to the crises of the day. By honestly naming in dialogue the social distance that exists around race and from the land, and naming opportunities to heal and to build one another up, all can partake in building up the civic body and increasing local senses of place and belonging.

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