




MIXING IT UP IN DOWNTOWN ATLANTA

BY JOSH MACIVOR-ANDERSEN

Strategic “re-neighboring” creates communities that are diverse, durable, and redemptive



Let's start here, with the ancient, prescient, ever-potent question: Who is my neighbor? But let's not ask it in the larger theological sense, as in “Should we consider that Sudanese child staring into the reporter's camera lens our neighbor?” (The short answer, I believe, is yes.) Instead, let's ask it literally, concretely, as in “Who is the actual person living across the street, the family next door, the individual in the upstairs apartment whose in-the-flesh feet shuffle across the floor at two in the morning?”

If we are one of the millions of North Americans who have been gobbled up by suburban sprawl, it's likely that our physical neighbors live and act a lot like us. It is likely that they drive a similar make and model of car and share similar interests and fears and hopes. Those price brackets on suburban developments, after all—“Single Family Homes at Pheasant Run! \$150-\$350,000”—have a way of sequestering us into socioeconomic enclaves, which, factoring in the zeitgeist of our time, tend to divide us along racial lines as well.

Of course there are lots of exceptions. Gentrification, for example, has a way of mashing up demographics for a while. As wealthier folks rediscover urban neighborhoods, the poor are frequently ejected as property rates increase and Starbucks shops move in. Before long those urban gentrified areas can look just as homogenous as the suburbs.

And there has been much hype surrounding mixed-income neighborhoods, places where socioeconomically diverse neighbors are supposed to network and hang out over barbecues and kids' birthday parties. The federal government, some academics, and a smattering of nonprofits have stated that neighborhoods where key residents act as “role models” or “high investors” in the lives of their poorer neighbors will eventually level out, becoming more stable as rising economic waters elevate everyone's boat.

Unfortunately, many attempts at mixed-income neighborhoods have simply flopped. Experiments all over the country have proven that mere proximity is not enough to dismantle the tensions of race and class and create real neighbors—in some cases that proximity has been like salt in a still-open wound. But not every attempt has failed. I've been sent to Atlanta—this sprawling southern city of professional sports, international flights, and perpetual traffic—to look at FCS Urban Ministries. Since 1976, this multi-faceted community development organization has been experimenting with “gentrification with justice” and strategic “re-neighboring,” concepts that place a theological framework around development in order to foster communities that are real, sustainable, even restorative.

All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly... Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.



South Atlanta residents with a vision: Mary Porter, who has lived here for over five decades, and newcomers Nate and Melissa Ledbetter and family.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

South Atlanta, although its name is geographically correct, does not connote the southern part of Atlanta. Get this right or it's likely that Mary Porter, a lifelong resident of the neighborhood, will quickly correct you. South Atlanta is a neighborhood, she insists, a mile-long stretch of 532 houses, a few giant tow lots, a recycling plant, and lots of boarded-up homes. In fact the rate of foreclosure is accelerating so much in South Atlanta that by the time you read this article, it's likely that one in every three homes will be empty. And with each additional abandoned home, criminal activity increases.

But this is Porter's turf, her territory. Her parents settled in the neighborhood back in the early '50s when her father earned a home through the Negro GI bill. There were important schools in South Atlanta back then, Gammon Theological Seminary and Clark College, schools under the same administrative umbrella as Morehouse and Spellman. The streets were all named after seminary professors and prominent African American leaders, and, according to Porter, the neighborhood enjoyed great economic diversity and everybody knew each other's names.

"We had college professors, doctors, people who were not as fortunate as others," she says. "But they were our neighbors and...if you had a neighbor in need, you would do whatever you could possibly do."

The streets of Porter's South Atlanta are a bit different today, the neighborhood having succumbed to the same social and economic pressures that have derailed communities nationwide. A General Motors plant shut down. The schools moved away. Desegregation (without reconciliation) ironically began to corral people of color into ghettos, sever those communities from economic opportunity, and thus intensify poverty along racial lines. Before long, within a 10-mile radius of South

Atlanta, six public housing projects shared the landscape with a federal prison as sprawling as an airport, and everywhere lay the broken carcass of industry.

No, let's get this right. We journalists like to sweep into these neighborhoods and label them "war zone" or "urban jungle" or "disaster area." To be clear, South Atlanta is as ugly as it is lovely. The two realities intersect on street corners and on porches, entangle a bit, and then shoot off in different directions. You will see used condoms on the street and discarded drug paraphernalia and piles of rotting furniture heaped next to abandoned houses. And then you will pass an old woman on a porch who smiles so widely and says "Howdy" so sweetly that you feel as if God has established his kingdom right there on that crumbling porch.

Regardless, South Atlanta isn't the kind of place where developers are scrambling to build. The few who have come and erected houses, perhaps hoping to be on the front end of a rebirth, have immediately boarded them up, leaving the buildings to weather the seasons and the looters. While gentrification is sweeping over many urban neighborhoods in and around Atlanta, Mary Porter's mile-long enclave is still in an economic tailspin.

NEIGHBOR IS A VERB

And yet there are some new faces in town, some activity, a little energy. There are some foreclosures being bought up, renovated, and sold at affordable rates—that is, at below market value. Some new construction, too, has sprouted on a number of those infamous empty lots where trash piles up and drug deals go down. A six-month-old, brightly colored coffeehouse occupies a busy street corner, and the old movie theater, the one that was closed up only to turn into the local liquor store and a center for drug activity, has some fresh paint and new owners.

People like Nate Ledbetter have moved in. Relocated from up north where he spent his life engaged in an urban context, playing ball, pastoring a church, and reaching out to the poor, Ledbetter felt a spiritual tug toward this tiny stretch of dilapidated Atlanta.

"We fell in love with South Atlanta, with this neighborhood, with the FCS family," he says of his wife and him. "We've been here for a little over a year and absolutely love it."

Ledbetter and I share a couch at that little coffee shop on the busy corner. As he sips at his coffee, his boyish face, blond hair, and street clothes contrast with the maturity of his words—as well as with his title of co-executive director of FCS.

He is also conspicuously white and from a middle-class background. I ask him if he really feels he'll be able to have

something organic here, something authentic with his predominantly black neighbors.

“My heartbeat, my passion is for mutuality, for interdependence,” he says, his smile suggesting that he’s heard this question before. “I believe there is an untapped creativity or imagination for God’s kingdom that exists in a space where people who are unlike each other come together—living together, working together, imagining together.”

And FCS was invited in, he reminds me—FCS goes nowhere uninvited. South Atlanta’s civic league asked FCS to come and restore the old theater. The building had potential. It was once a central gathering place for the community, a point of pride, and the place where arts and culture were celebrated, the beating heart of the neighborhood.

Once invited, the real estate arm of FCS, Charis Community Housing, came in to purchase a certain number of lots at reduced prices in order to create a mixed-income strategy and to channel the energy of the neighborhood toward empowerment. “Rather than ‘putting a new roof on poverty,’” explains Ledbetter, “we are committed to seeing neighbors from various walks of life combine their work and life experiences together. The goal is to reverse the ratio from 80 percent rental to 80 percent homeowner occupied.”

As a result, FCS is partnering with the neighborhood to preserve and honor its culture, history, architecture, and relationships. Rather than allowing gentrification to roll over South Atlanta, they leverage gentrification with justice toward a mixed-income experience, while inviting some market forces to “lift” and empower the neighborhood economically.

“But none of us has anything figured out,” Ledbetter assures me. “We’re discovering God through the relationships we have here, as we learn together.”

Ledbetter and his wife are among a handful of families and singles who have relocated to South Atlanta in an attempt to help reclaim, re-imagine, and rejuvenate the neighborhood. They are not all white, and they are not all young, but they are all social and spiritual entrepreneurs committed to turning the word *neighbor* from a noun into a verb.

“We’re all passionate about doing life with our neighbors as one community,” he says. “It’s not us/them; there’s a strong oneness or ‘we’ to what we’re all pursuing here. It takes a strong intentionality on everyone’s part through a posture of how can we listen to our neighbors and learn from our neighbors.”

And this is where the data from the nationwide mixed-

“What some meant for mortgage fraud, God meant for good,” says Nate Ledbetter of his house (on the left), the first foreclosure rehab completed by Charis Community Housing.

Photo by Christy Norwood

income experiments change. The folks who are moving into South Atlanta and buying homes at market rates are not your average yuppies. They are motivated by things other than returns on their investments and seeing their property values spike. In fact the goal at FCS is to get enough of a foothold in South Atlanta and to have secured enough housing at both below-market and market rates so that when gentrification finally does reach the neighborhood there will be a fabric of real community, and enough residents who own their homes, to ensure that no one will get pushed out. All the boats will someday rise together. (See “To gentrify or not to gentrify” sidebar on page 12.)

NOTHING ELSE MATTERS

Sitting behind Ledbetter, in a group of young people crowded around a small table, is Mike Pearson—long goatee, brightly dressed in baggy and well-worn clothes. Two native Spanish speakers at the table appear to be offering a language lesson.

“Uhhh...” Pearson pauses. “*La ropa?* Clothes?” A less-than-perfect accent. Yes, clothes. Everyone laughs. Another try, “Umm, *los huevos*. Eggs.” Too much *h*. It should be silent, and again the table explodes in laughter.

Pearson is the 20-something co-owner, along with veteran urban minister Leroy Barber, of this little coffee shop on the corner. He’s put everything into it, all his money, time, and energy. His parents are concerned about his future, that his investments might implode, but Pearson’s here with a vision.

“It’s been really exciting because it has created a space where there’s a lot of connecting,” he says of his coffee shop, Community Grounds. “We all want to see a strong, vibrant community that benefits everyone that lives here regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or age.”

Pearson graduated from Mission Year, an urban program that places young people in positions within



neighborhood service organizations for a year. Applicants live in community and share their meals, all the ups and downs. “Love God, love people—nothing else matters” is the theologically charged motto guiding all their efforts.

Pearson did his time with Mission Year in Atlanta, then moved away for a while but was drawn back to this neighborhood. He knows that it takes three to five months just to acclimate to a new place, especially a place as challenging as South Atlanta, so now that he’s a known face on the streets and has relationships, he wants to settle in and make this his home.

“We are trying to lay down long-term roots because this is where we want to be,” he says of himself and his friends. “This is where all of our hearts are at. I feel like this is what God wants me to do, so it’s what I’m doing.”

Simple enough. But is any of this actually working? There are, after all, no guarantees that relocation will create reconciliation, says FCS founder Bob Lupton. Can people like Pearson and Ledbetter really move in and alter the social, spiritual, and economic landscape of South Atlanta for the better?

“It’s in snapshots,” admits Ledbetter, who is anxious to show me around his neighborhood. “It’s literally a crisis. I think in any situation, especially in a place like Georgia, where there’s history of racial tension and inequality, it takes time to build mutual relationships and trust on any level, but it also depends on the priorities and posture that people take.”

But are the folks that have been here for generations receptive? Are they catching the same vision?

“We found a lot of apathy,” says Christy Norwood. She sits on a nearby couch typing on an open laptop. “It’s not because people don’t care, it’s because they haven’t experienced the city reacting to them—meeting their needs, paving the roads, doing code enforcement, 911 responding on time. You kind of give up.”

When she was much younger, Norwood came to Atlanta on a mission trip and met a little girl “whose tears I would never forget,” then off to a Christian college where she studied urban community development, and then into a full-time job with Charis Community Housing and a life rooted in South Atlanta.

To gentrify or not to gentrify? That is the question.

BY CHRISTY NORWOOD

Gentrification—the transformation of blighted urban neighborhoods as the gentry return to the city—is occurring all across the nation. Property values rise. Local municipalities increase urban reinvestment. Deteriorating infrastructures receive a facelift. Drug dealing and prostitution move on to new grounds. The ugly duckling transforms into a beautiful swan.

Yet, when gentrification is left to its own devices, the process often adversely impacts the community’s original residents. Property taxes and rental rates increase. The hard-working residents who dreamed of and fought for a better community are forced out, because they can no longer afford to live in the neighborhood.

Is there hope? Is there room in the city for all people?

We at Charis Community Housing believe in gentrification with justice: the restoration and development of wholesome, mixed-income urban neighborhoods. Rather than isolating the poverty, our aim is to see the poor and the privileged, the working class and the wealthy live side-by-side in mutually beneficial relationships. We believe that healthy, socioeconomically and racially diverse communities serve as expressions of God’s intent for our world.

But gentrification with justice doesn’t just happen. And in order for it to be a long-term venture, an equal number of

affordable, moderate, and market-rate households need to be evenly distributed throughout the community. This requires strategic planning. For Charis, this means we work as a neighborhood-based ministry, focusing our energy on one urban community at a time. Every street, house, and lot is mapped and updated to carefully monitor the gentrification process over time.

Gentrification with justice cannot be done alone. We work alongside Atlanta Habitat for Humanity to secure affordable housing, so that low-income families do not have to use more than 30 percent of their net income on housing. We forge partnerships with local contractors and builders to rehab and construct moderate and market-rate housing. We recruit wealthier families and individuals, whose understanding of community includes the less advantaged and who will use their competencies and connections to ensure that their lower-income neighbors share a stake in their revitalizing neighborhood.

Gentrification with justice is hard work. Some may even say it is an impossible dream, but with God all things are possible.

Christy Norwood studied urban community development at Covenant College and has been working in the community development department of Charis for the last six years.

The community gathered recently in response to a shooting between two households and a stabbing at the high school.

Photo by Christy Norwood

“Sometimes new neighbors coming in and living next door to someone can restore that hope,” she says. “And not coming in with the answers, but coming in to support and bringing in that fresh life, and that fresh hope, can kind of help someone else —breathe new life into them. Sometimes they’ve been doing it all by themselves up to that point.”

THE VIEW

Ledbetter and I take a drive. To our right is a line of five homes boarded up and smeared with graffiti. Almost a third of the 532 houses in the neighborhood will soon be empty. Chronic unemployment rates in South Atlanta explain why, at mid-day, everywhere we look we see men pacing desultorily.

I ask Ledbetter to stop so I can take a picture of an old factory sitting decrepitly behind a chain link fence. These are the kinds of snapshots that tell the story, right?

“So many things go unnoticed when we just zoom past something,” says Ledbetter. “When I take people through our community I want them to understand that there’s both beauty and challenge.”

We see both. We see it at the old theater, the Gateway Center, where FCS first got its foothold in South Atlanta. The building was for many years a blight on the neighborhood but has recently been transformed into a multi-purpose civic center—a space for large events and the offices for Metro Merge, a place where neighborhood organizations can meet and collaborate and imagine together a revitalized South Atlanta.

Fresh graffiti covers the halls, but here it is intentional. Totem, a local artist, was commissioned to paint the walls with something symbolic and inspiring. In the background is the Atlanta cityscape; in the foreground a giant tree, its root flare plunging into the soil, hungry for nutrients and life.

But Ledbetter is most excited to take me to the roof, where, as we step out into the cold January sunshine, a perfect view of the Atlanta skyline presents itself.

“This is a dream,” he explains, sweeping his arm through the air as if he were unveiling a giant Christmas present. “We dream of this whole roof being redone, as another space where people can gather in a really positive way, an urban rooftop garden or a spoken-word gathering place.”

We look out over hazy, bustling Atlanta in the distance.

“To be able to just chill out with the view of our neighborhood and the skyline,” he says wistfully. “And to pray over the city.”

I realize that Ledbetter, here for a little over a year, is as invested and in love with this swath of urban dirt as if he had been rooted here for generations.



KUDZU

Ledbetter’s house is right around the corner. Many things feel as if they’re right around the corner in South Atlanta, except, perhaps, a decent grocery store—you’d have to drive a number of miles to get fresh produce at a reasonable price—but the feeling here is one of overwhelming compactness.

And so a few blocks away from the Gateway Center is Ledbetter’s bright, well-kept house. He and his wife are leasing it from FCS with the intention to buy; in accordance with FCS policy, they’ve kept bars off the windows and doors and kept their fence slats open to promote “transparency.”

“We’re about seeing a neighborhood transformed,” he says. “We don’t want to communicate that crime is here and crime will continue, so we try to do the small things. We want to do things with beauty and in a positive way so we don’t look barricaded.”

Miss Angie, the neighbor from across the street, was certainly happy to see the home so nicely restored. Her street has been one of the rougher ones in South Atlanta. Shortly after Ledbetter moved in, for example, a gunfight took place in the street between their houses. Ledbetter dialed 911, but it took five calls before he was connected to an actual person, who informed Ledbetter that he’d have to wait because there were “other things happening in your neighborhood right now.” Thirty-five minutes later the police showed up, long after the bullets had hit or missed their marks. Miss Angie hopes things are changing.

Things might change more quickly if police actually lived in the neighborhoods they serve. FCS and the civic league encourage this, but it can be a hard sell. Pastors, too, have moved out to the suburbs and typically commute into their churches, along with parishioners, a situation which has recently put community needs at odds with the church.

“I’m a really simple guy,” says Ledbetter. “So when I think about all the crazy complicated issues urban communities are facing, many of those issues are a result of a lack of relationship. I believe that justice is almost always married to relationship, and injustice is almost always divorced from relationship.”

We're all connected, insists Ledbetter, who goes on to describe the white guy in a Mercedes—a stranger to the neighborhood, likely from one of the surrounding suburbs—who was prowling the street corners the other day, looking for \$5 services from one of the many prostituted women in South Atlanta. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

Ledbetter nods “What’s up?” to some of the young guys hanging around a car next door, and we walk off into the neighborhood with his bulldog. He wants to show me a piece of property recently purchased by Charis for development. It is close to six acres of empty land, spreading around the neighborhood like a horseshoe.

“Oftentimes people outside the neighborhood treat our community as a dumping ground, leaving tires and garbage behind for local neighbors to clean up,” he says. “The kudzu has covered it all up, but just underneath are years of garbage.”

Indeed, the land is a sea of kudzu. But a plan is in the works to use the land for FCS’s first green, mixed-income housing development, a project that will utilize solar power and geothermal heating methods, a template for future projects and an initiative that would further transform the neighborhood. Ledbetter stares at the land and points to an oak tree shooting 80 feet up out of trash and kudzu.

“I love that tree,” he says. “It looks so strong.”

I ask him if he ever wishes he could move somewhere without so many issues and needs.

“There’s no way on earth,” he says with a laugh. “I wouldn’t trade our community for anything.”

MS. MARY REMEMBERS

Back at the coffee shop, with South Atlanta scribbled like graffiti across the pages of my notebook, Mary Porter reminds me why she’s so excited to see new faces move in, even if they don’t look exactly like hers.

“We can all learn something from each other,” she says. “We can all teach something to each other. We can always assist each other with something.”

She, too, has started using the word neighbor as a verb.

“To neighbor is to care,” she says, “and to have concern for not only my little patch, but to try and get acquainted with the people who live next door.”

And then she gets very serious, the same way I imagine she would talk to drug dealers, apathetic cops, or dismissive city council members.

“I know how this neighborhood was,” she says. “And I know what it became. And I’m visionary enough to know what it can become again.” ■

Learn more at FCSministries.org.

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A Fate...Transformed

Cars speeding down I-20 to and from work in the city of Atlanta pass under the shadow of Atlanta’s former debtors’ prison. Few know this part of the city’s dark past. Even fewer know of the unmarked graves discovered during the construction of I-20. Built in the late 1800s, the Atlanta stockade housed men, women, and children. A sentence served in the Atlanta stockade became known as “a fate worse than death.” The city closed the stockade in the early 1900s.

Today this symbol of inhumanity has been transformed into a symbol of hope. In the 1980s the city of Atlanta transferred its ownership of the stockade to Charis Community Housing. The building, now known as GlenCastle, serves as a safe, affordable, transitional apartment community. A drug-free environment with supportive chaplaincy services, GlenCastle acts as a stepping stone for 62 families and individuals who are working diligently towards a better life. The place that once stood as a dead end now stands as a gateway to new beginnings.

