

## **LaVerne and Al Stokes on Sandtown Habitat for Humanity**

Theology and Community Building Workgroup Meeting  
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Mark Gornik: I have the incredible privilege of introducing LaVerne, as well as Al Stokes this morning. I have worked with LaVerne – or she has put up with me, to be quite honest – for over ten years and I really don't have the words for how much I care for her and respect her work.

Today in Sandtown - a neighborhood in west Baltimore, a neighborhood of great joy and possibility but also it has a lot of struggles that LaVerne will talk about - today in that neighborhood they are dedicating a house. It is 160<sup>th</sup> house that's dedicated for home ownership in about a 12 square block area. This house actually means more than most to us because it is going to be owned by a gentleman named Isaac. Isaac helped found the church, New Song Community Church in Sandtown, which LaVerne is going to be talking about. New Song founded a housing program called Sandtown Habitat for Humanity and one of the main people who helped found that church was a ten-year-old kid named Isaac Newman. Isaac and his family are going to be moving into that house by Christmastime. Isaac has lived in incredibly substandard housing; housing that if I took you in it – unless you have been in such substandard housing in America - you wouldn't believe it existed. He has lived there his entire life. He has gone from being a founder of this work – there was no housing ministry, no church buildings, nothing but a little house church – to now being a worker at Sandtown Habitat, to now his family owning a house at his age: without rent, without fear of lead poisoning, without fear of being evicted. All these things and he will now have ownership of the home. And in great measure that would not have been possible without LaVerne and her work.

LaVerne is the executive director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. Sandtown Habitat is probably the premier urban Habitat affiliate in the country and we are the largest builder of Habitat homes in the United States. It is building at a clip of about 40-50 homes per year right now. LaVerne is the coexecutive director – she has done that for many years, about 9 - and is also a homeowner in that program. LaVerne serves on a number of boards for the New Song Habitat work. She is key in that area: she brings incredible commitment, she brings management skills - which I believe are second to none - and her Christian faith is extraordinary (it far

surpasses mine in her depth of commitment to the Lord). She is well recognized in the city as well as the community, and nationally as a leader in faith-based community development. Along with her husband Al, they are leaders in the church and they are co-chairs of another great project – that is there is a community center that is in the process of being built and that will be dedicated sometime this spring.

I really can't say enough about LaVerne and how honored we are to have Al and LaVerne take this time to come and be with us during the holidays. I think we'll be very impressed with the interaction between faith and community development.

LaVerne Stokes: Thank you. I just want to thank Charles for his prayer and I hope you don't mind that I need to pray. So before we begin I want to pray.

*Lord, thank you for life itself and thank you for this very moment. Father, my prayer is that you would anoint me to speak and say what you would have me say, Lord. But most of all we thank you for this time and we just praise you Lord. We give you all the glory and the praise, in Jesus name, amen.*

Mark, that was quite an introduction. I just want to give you some background information about who I am and about living in Sandtown. First of all I need to tell you that Sandtown is a community in West Baltimore within the inner city and I have had the privilege of growing up there. I have been in Sandtown the entire 48 years of my life. I often share with people that it is home. Sandtown is a community that consists of 72 square blocks, and I happen to be privileged to grow up in the central part of Sandtown. Growing up in Sandtown...it's a predominately black community and growing up there it was a community that had everything right at its fingertips. As I look back as a child, we never left our community to go shopping; well today that story is very different. Even though at one point we had supermarkets within Sandtown, right now there are no supermarkets within Sandtown. It's right on the boundaries about five minutes away, but we don't have that privilege anymore. Growing up there we had about 8 or 9 movie theaters, today there is none. There was a lot of factory work in Sandtown, we had a lot of dairies and bakeries, just a variety of businesses there. After the 60's a lot of businesses left

the inner city and never rebuilt. And so basically all of our shopping was done outside of the community so that there were no dollars actually turning around again.

Also, after housing legislation was passed and people were able to move wherever they wanted to, what happened is a lot of folks opted to leave. What I often share with folks is that they left because the quality of houses sank. What I find is that even folks that we had grown up with who had left the inner city - left Sandtown - its kind of funny because I see those folks almost every day right down in the neighborhood that they grew up in, with the exception that they don't live in the neighborhood anymore. So my thought has always been, if there was a good stock of quality houses people would really stay. And if there were businesses and things of that nature then the community of people would certainly stay.

Because I truly believe that Sandtown has a sense of community where so many other places have lost that sense. We still have extended families; you have generations after generations still there in Sandtown. I think one of the strengths of Sandtown – and I need to share with you that it is one of the poorest communities within the city of Baltimore – but one of the strengths of Sandtown is that the one thing you will never see in Sandtown is anybody who is homeless. You will never see anyone sleeping on the street. You can go through the city of Baltimore in any other community and see that, but in Sandtown we believe in taking one another in. Now what you will see is overcrowding: you may see a two-story, two-bedroom house with 20 people in it and that is not an exaggeration. That's families taking in families or just friends. I mean you have extended networks there. So my community has really been devastated: vacant buildings, people leaving the city, a lot of crime and a lot of drugs.

And so back in 1986 what happened was that Mark Gornik, former pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore (founding pastor and former now) Mark and Allan Tibbels (co-executive director for Sandtown Habitat and also helped to found New Song Community Church) moved back into our community. I remember actually saying and wondering, “Why are these white people here?” You know you have to wonder when you look at folks moving into your community, where you have over 1,000 vacant houses – at that time anyway. We were very curious as to why Allan and Mark would be moving in.

Needless to say, we found out through our children. There are so many organizations out there that mean well coming into the community of need, however they tend to get screwed up and do it really backwards. What Mark and Allan did was they came in and the first thing

they did was become neighbors with people. They did not bring their own agenda. It has always been a very big insult to me when people have come into the community with their own agenda. We know what our needs are, no matter how people may look at us as being poor. And the other thing I often share with people is, you know what, I never knew I was poor until somebody told me. Personally I don't like the term poor. Maybe we're a community that did not have a lot, but we were certainly rich in spirit and that's much more than what a lot of people have. I try to share that with people. People will say, "How do you all have so much faith?" What I share with people is, you know, we have so much pain and struggle there we have to depend on Jesus, we don't have anybody else to depend on but him. So along with having a lot of pain and struggle, we also reap the benefits of a lot of joy and a lot of love.

But anyway, I need to get back to sharing with you what Mark and Allan did was actually get to know the neighbors for about two years. They came to the Sandtown Association - there was an association already set up of people attempting to resolve a lot of issues within the community - and shared their thoughts and asked if they could move in. They didn't say they were moving in, they came in and asked if they could move in. And so the association said sure, you know, I don't think they thought they would actually do it, but they said sure. So that really was the beginning of a long-term friendship and relationship with the neighbors. After that it was just a handful of folks working with New Song Community church, there wasn't even a church established at that point. But as Mark indicated, Ike - whose house is being dedicated today - was one of the first people, and he was a child at that time (he was about ten years old). Allan and Mark befriended a lot of kids in the neighborhood and I guess that was a vehicle to working through the children. We always heard raves about Pastor Mark and Mister Allan from all the kids. They took the kids on field trips, you name it they did it. I don't know how good Mark is at basketball, but he actually played on the court with the children. Parents listen to their children. And so we found out who they were, got to know them and it just became a real good key relationship.

Of course Mark and Allan and the rest of the folks in the early stages formed New Song Community Church. People would fellowship in Mark's house which he had bought in the 1300 block on North Mount Street. The church actually started off right in Mark's living room! As I look back now, we actually had drawings - there were a lot of children in the church - and at one point the kids drew what they thought their neighborhood should look like. And I tell you we

still have those hand drawings today, and after ten years their drawings are actually becoming a reality. I mean the things that they drew are becoming a reality. From the church, and with a lot of people being involved, one of the clear needs within our community was certainly the need to have quality housing. You can imagine in the inner city when you have a lot of vacancies it draws a lot of rats, a lot of drugs, a lot of crime. And so it was clear that what Sandtown needed was some quality housing stock. So rather than reinventing the wheel...Habitat was well known from an international standpoint. A lot of folks often think that former president Carter founded Habitat, and I'd like to share with you that Millard Fuller actually founded Habitat back in 1976. As I recall, Mark and Allan both were downtown - and of course the story has always been, and still is, we never had any money - so Allan and Mark actually placed a phone call to Habitat back in 1989. Fortunately, Millard Fuller answered the phone and they explained to him that we would like to start a Habitat. And I don't know how many of you know Millard Fuller, but he is an excellent speaker; he is just so encouraging. He actually said to Allan and Mark, "Do you have a dollar?" And they said, "That is all we barely have." And he said to them, "Run, go get started!" That's how Sandtown Habitat was actually started. We named it after the community itself.

Back in 1989 we actually started Sandtown Habitat and in 1991 (or close to 1992) we had completed just 5 homes. In 1992 we had the privilege of having President Carter come to Baltimore. At that time we kicked off a hundred-house project, committing that we would complete 100 houses within a five-year span for home ownership. As Mark indicated, as of today we have completed 160 and that is going really really well. We basically gut and rebuild, but we were blessed to get a piece of land where some old houses sat that were in no condition to be rehabbed. We did 27 brand new units for the very first time. But we basically do rehabs.

We've also had the privilege of seeing thousands of volunteers: we see anywhere from 8 to 10,000 volunteers a year, and I'm always baffled as to why people continue to come back. And they do come back and they network and bring additional people, which is always amazing to me. But there is no doubt in my mind that God's hand is in that pot of people coming to Sandtown. I also want to share with you that Professor Fowl has done numerous volunteer hours at Sandtown Habitat along with his family and friends. I tell you it is so very very diverse and it works. Everybody is coming together for one common goal to establish home ownership and I really think when people see tangible results they become more involved. But it is more than

just doing houses and I think that's the key. What happens is that people are improving the quality of one's life. And when they can see that, people really become more involved than what you would ever imagine. And so I am excited.

That is the ministry I am solely responsible for. Nothing tops the joy of actually seeing people's lives being changed through so many people and of getting to know the families. I often share with people that relationships are the key to anything you are doing. So no matter how corny it might sound, people might say, "LaVerne, how do you get people to come again? How do you bring them all out?" I say to them, "You simply love them, just a genuine love." One thing I share with people is that when I work with people I am very clear in my communications. If you know me, you know what to expect. I don't dance around any issues, and I think in the long run what happens is people love you and respect you for that. I find a lot of times that just day-to-day we all as people have a hard time with telling the truth: what is right, wrong or indifferent. And I think you earn a lot of respect from being honest with people, letting them know exactly what your expectations are and simply loving them. And what I mean by loving them is being there for your neighbor; not just talking about it, but doing it.

I find that a lot of times I have a very very hard time with churches that sit in the midst of the Sandtown community - and its about 50 churches that sit within the 72 square block. A lot of those churches are store front, but we have one very large church right in the midst of where our church is. It's Sharon Baptist Church; a traditional black church with a lot of folks who actually commute into the inner city. My biggest problem with that is how do you bring people on board or how do churches say, "I love Jesus" and yet not do anything when they see their brothers struggling. Or not even see. I mean what is wrong with speaking to people? That's something that has always been weighing on my heart. But my faith has allowed me to just carry everything to God in prayer and I know that in God's timing he will help the churches recognize that people in the inner city are people too. I think a lot of times what happens is that people get labeled and that's what I find out when volunteers come in to work with us. For some people it is their very first time in the inner city. I think they come in with one notion that everybody has a bad rap and when they get there they find out that we are individual people, our wants are the same as anybody else: we want good education for our kids, we want to live in a safe environment, we want good jobs, we want the whole nine yards. So I think it changes everything once people get here and actually meet real people and relationships do develop.

I just want to touch base on the rest of the ministries that are here. That's the New Song Community Learning Center – which is certainly one of my favorite ministries. For the first time in a lot of the families their children will be given the opportunity to go to college. And I think the biggest thing about that is that they will be coming back in a leadership position taking over my job and a lot of other jobs that are there. The learning center was started by Allan's wife Susan in 1991 by the request of parents with just a handful of kids - running an after 3 program. What happened was when the children were reaching middle school, they actually came to Susan saying why can't you teach us, we hate the schools that we are in. Needless to say, the City of Baltimore has certainly struggled with the public school system in the inner city. Our children were in middle school and actually really complained about the schools. Susan is an excellent listener, but she had a lot of people pushing her. Not only were the kids complaining about the school, but the parents within the community. And so actually New Song was able to start - it was like a charter school, almost - and we kind of did things backwards. We always laugh about that. We started the school with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, keeping in mind that we only had an after 3 program for all other ages. Today we are a full school from kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Baltimore had what they called new schools initiative, so what they actually did was put out a proposal for non-profits or communities to take over the schools. It was about 70 applicants who were a part and about 9 actually made it. But we thank God that New Song was one of the 9 schools that actually made it. The other public schools and the school board have a real hard time with the new school initiative. I think they feel threatened. They do because you have teachers who actually care, you have students who show an increase in their performance already, so it is a threat to the other schools. It shouldn't be, I mean we all want the best for our kids and we strongly believe that our children can learn. Last year our first graders were among the highest scorers in the city of Baltimore. And we know that if you have people who really care and are willing to give their all, the children have no problem with learning.

We are very very excited that we will be able to build the New Song Center. Now it will be a community center but in the daytime hours - because we are cramped for space, we are growing - in the daytime it will act as a school. I am really happy about the Center because for the first time in Sandtown we will have someplace to meet as Habitat, someplace to perform. The Center will be able to seat 350 people. It will have a half-court basketball court and we will

be able to do nutritional classes, aerobics; you name it we'll be doing it. The key factor is that it enables the kids to come off the street in the evening. So we are very very excited about that as Mark indicated. My husband Al, and I both were co-chairs for the capital campaign and from a neighborhood standpoint, I need to tell you that since the inception of New Song and all the ministries here we have never once asked the neighborhood to contribute anything financially. I suggested that now was the time. When you are doing development work or any type of work, the timing has to be right. I often share with people that you don't want to run by your neighborhoods, you want to work hand in hand. Throughout all the ministries we provided housing, we provided education, and the next step I want to talk about is our health services.

Baltimore is one of the leading cities in having lead problems in the houses. It is a very serious problem. So with the people in our community not having a lot of funding or not having jobs, they are certainly not being able to afford health care. Also a lot of people suffer from high blood pressure and diabetes and just very large amount of sickness. And I often thought the key to that was a lot of people don't do preventative care because they simply don't have money. They have no other choice but to wait until you get a toothache that is killing you and then you run to the dentist or you run to an emergency room. And so back in 1991 these programs took birth at New Song Community Church in a basement (it wasn't as large as this room) and so you can just imagine - we started the health center in 1991 in the basement of the church with just one exam room. We were open every Wednesday 6-8 and we had volunteer doctors come in and really help people who otherwise would have no way of going to the doctor. And we saw all uninsured patients, so the visits were free of charge. So certainly we had a lot of community people then coming in. We knew that we had to do something because it was an overwhelming amount of people trying to get service.

Al Stokes: I think this story is really about how one person with some connections and with compassion can make a difference. I think the key thing to what Mark did in Sandtown – Mark and Allan – was they came in and partnered with people. They began to show people that they had worth. And from that group almost every ministry we have has someone that's a partner, that's a co, from the community. And they show folks how they can use connections, how they can make the government work for them, how they can meet other people – folks like yourselves



– who can begin to believe in what’s going on. And that’s the greatest thing – personal compassion.

I think LaVerne spoke about Sharon Baptist, this huge traditional African-American church in the community. Sandtown – the old Sandtown we grew up in – was a progressive community where parents wanted more of their children much like you do. All of us were high school and college graduates, our families had done extremely well: all college graduates and all started in Sandtown. But after the riots, after this integration occurred, one of things that Sandtown was robbed of was its wealth: its wealth of people, its power of people. We did have some that couldn’t go anywhere.

This Sharon Baptist church that LaVerne spoke about, these are people who left Sandtown years ago, and they still come back to Sharon Baptist but they have gotten this uppity attitude. Look at them, they are not doing anything and there is no intent among them to help. Sandtown is a community like any inner city community that struggles with drugs. My wife, she flips because, rather than call the police, I’ll go out and address the drug dealer direct: “I can’t believe you guys.” We sing in church, “God has not given us a spirit of fear” but we hide in houses and peep out of windows. I really believe God hasn’t given us a spirit of fear. I honestly know and believe in predestination; if it is meant for me, my life could end by the hand of the drug dealer, so it will be. It was written in the beginning, that’s how it is going to end. But I have got to protect my family. More importantly we have got to show people how to stand up for themselves.

I think Mark, Allan and LaVerne have been leaders in the community in teaching people how to fight. If you came to Sandtown right now in the midst of this great renaissance you’d see in some areas beautiful homes with people with newer cars who have greater desire for the children. And that is a product of teaching them how to fight. You speak of New Song Learning Center, what LaVerne didn’t mention was that right next door to New Song Learning Center there’s a Baltimore City public school. This public school is going to be taken over by the state - nobody attends there. New Song Learning Center has a waiting list of 300 people. We have strong attendance there. The quality of education you get is much like the education I got when I was in Catholic school. The beautiful thing about New Song Center, it reminds me of when we were kids. The principal lives in the community; she knows the children, she knows their pain,

she knows their story, she knows why they are not learning. I mean, it is just a great great story the New Song Center. So we are absolutely proud of the accomplishments.

We do stand as the chair people of the building committee. I think we have to raise about \$5.5 million we have raised about 4.3 to this day. We have gone down to the state of Maryland, we have gone to the community, we have gone to everyone we know. And you don't be careful; we will be coming to you asking your help for something! I think the whole story is of a person with compassion. And if any of you know Mark personally, you know that if Mark is going to do something, 540 million elephants couldn't hold him back. When he is ready to do it he is going to do it. It's his compassion; it's his love. He's your friend; he's with you. And if he is not your friend, he is with you. And I love that about Mark: his compassion, how he has touched so many of you to make you believe in the same thing. Mark understands the hurt, he understands that there are tremendous problems, he understands there is a tremendous need for racial reconciliation. We are very happy with what we've accomplished there, and we just want you to know that one person who believes in Christ can make a difference.

LS: Thank you. I am just going to touch base on the health center and let you know that we now have a full-scale center with about six exam rooms. We see anywhere from 5,000 to 6,000 patients a year and we are in partnership with a major hospital in Baltimore called Mercy, and that is working extremely well. Actually, it is next door to Habitat. I can't remember, Mark, when you purchased the building we are actually at. Was that '94? You always need somebody who has vision. We all bring different gifts to the table. But I think Mark could always see...he was always so much further ahead than what we could see. I can remember when he purchased this large run down vacant building. I just think back saying, "What are we going to do with this big old thing?" Thank God that he did make that investment because it turned out to be one of the best investments. There are not a lot of large buildings in the Sandtown area. We have just outgrown everything. We're always cramped for space.

So we thank God for giving Mark a vision in buying that old rundown warehouse that we had no clue what we were going to do with. But actually it houses the Habitat offices and we have warehouse space so we are able to store everything in that building. And then right beside it is the New Song Family Health Center. And so again we are able to see about 5,000 to 6,000 patients a year. We have doctors on staff and we also have volunteer doctors come through.

One of our elders in the church, Dave Thomas, is a doctor at Johns Hopkins and he has had a lot of people from there come through.

Within our community, the medium income level is about anywhere \$10-11,000, so people don't make a lot of money. Of course they're no businesses there, so the jobs are out on the outskirts or in the county. But one of the biggest problems is transportation for people. Baltimore is certainly not a New York where you can get around. In Baltimore you have certain bus lines, but you may not have a bus line that runs you to Hunt Valley where you get a job or where they have businesses out there. Back in 1994 we had our pastors go out to the community and they actually asked people, "What could the church do for you?" 99% of the people said, "Can you help us find a job?" Because people want to work. And what I find is that when you have taken work away from people, you have taken away their self-esteem, you have taken away everything. So out of that, the jobs program was birthed. And we have a young lady who actually grew up in Sandtown, Nina Anderson, who is one of the directors of the program. She actually runs the program and she does an excellent job. Basically what Nina does is job counseling one on one. We found that there are a lot of job programs out there that offer training. Well people go through 6 weeks of training and at the end there is no job. When people walk into our door, they are looking for immediate help: they need to put food on the table now. So we have to find out how we can get past that. So what we actually do is we network with a number of employers and we take that person right where they are, with what skills they have, sharing with them that the majority of jobs are entry level according to their skills. But we are able to place people to work. Nina has placed 500 people to date to work.

Now I need to remind you that we concentrate on a 12-block focus area. Because the one thing we want to be able to do is make a very strong impact: with home ownership, increasing better housing, educating the kids and especially people getting jobs. The one story I love to share with people, is that when we were in the very early stages of forming the learning center we could actually call a parent meeting in the daytime at 10:00 and get a lot of parents there. That's because a lot of people weren't working. Now there is no way we could have that meeting – thank you, Lord – everything has to take place in the evenings because everybody is working now. What EDEN jobs also does is if people are ready to move on or once they have established themselves, they can connect you to where the training programs are so that you can get better careers and move on. But we have found in our community that people want to know:

How do I feed my kids right now? How do I pay my light bill right now? So Nina has done an excellent job just placing people, but not only that, what happens is you build relationship. So not only do they come to her with job concerns, but with any concerns. And the same is true for every other person in the other ministries. Some people in the community may just have a Habitat house. Some people in the community may have a Habitat house, their kids go to the Learning Center, they got a job, or some people may just use the health services. So we touch a lot of lives outside of that 12-block focus area. If live within the 72 square blocks, you are welcome to participate in any of our ministries.

The last ministry I want to touch base on is Voices of Hope. This particular ministry was actually birthed in the New Song Learning Center. Susan had gotten the kids together and had started a little mini choir, and I'll be the first to share with anyone that they could not sing a lick. They just couldn't, ya know. Eventually the children were doing just so well, ye know, man they became very very well known. They actually sing praises to the Lord. It's a gospel choir. They had the privilege of making two CDs. They have sung up and down the east coast. They opened for the governor of the state of Maryland. They've sung for both mayors.

Question: Did they just play for the Baltimore Symphony?

LS: Yes they did.

AS: Just a couple of days ago they were on national TV. They sung two years in a row with the Baltimore symphony. It's just a phenomenal group of children. We have discovered the talent of the children in the community who would otherwise be doing other things. And you can't stay in this choir if your grades are bad, you can't stay in this choir if you have a discipline problem. What the board has done, we have put down some strict paradigms and it's amazing that they would much prefer to sing and to dance and praise the Lord than be out on the street. They have been invited to sing at Disney World, King's Dominion and the Baltimore Arts Scape. They've gone to Johns Hopkins - one of the best-known hospitals in the world - and they have sung for children struggling with cancer. And the children were so touched by them that they have asked them to come back every year. They have just done a magnificent job. We are very very pleased with this.

LS: That's basically the overall ministry. We are separately incorporated but we work hand in hand. We could not do it if we didn't have the job piece, the health piece; all the pieces there play a very important role. We do have another addition, which is called Martha's Place. One of the elders – Elder Harris - who grew up in this community and who worked throughout all the different ministries, now directs what we call Martha's Place which is transitional housing for women, and that just opened up a couple of months ago. And so he is able to help at least anywhere from 8 or 10 women that they house at a time. Through the EDEN jobs program they come through, get a job – that's the goal, get a job - get established, perhaps get a Habitat house too. Just a new way of living for all of them.

I need to share with you that what I have found from a personal basis is that community development work is extremely hard and very challenging. You must be committed and dedicated. The biggest thing is that you have to be persistent in what you do and know that you pray about everything. The other thing I have found is it is the most rewarding work that I have ever done in my entire life. I come from the corporate world - been out there for 22 years – and the corporate world has nothing on community development. Being able to know that you are making a difference in somebody's life. What I love sharing with people is that I receive much more than what I could ever give to anybody. It's a good feeling. But I often say to people that you do have to be committed, you have to know that there are going to be struggles on every end. And in Sandtown there is a lot of pain and there's a lot of struggle. Sometimes before you get to work you find out someone has been killed, shot you know people. But there's a lot of things there to celebrate. I think the best thing I like is that we celebrate together and we struggle together. It's not like you are alone.

Thursday night –we gave a Christmas party for the Habitat Homeowners Association. And needless to say we also invited the other ministries from across the board to come in because they play an important role. All of the leaders here and all of the people involved play a very important role in everybody's life in the community. Across the board it's about 80 of us - 65 are right from the community. And so I am a big believer that, no matter what community you work in, you must involve the folks who belong to the community. They have to have an important role; they have a key role to play because they know what the needs are. We might

have started off with just a handful of people, but the party was actually packed – there were over 200 people there. We bring them all together. We just had a phenomenal time.

I often share with people that you are not going to win everybody. Some are going to fall by the wayside. But my thing is we need to make certain that there's an opportunity there for people to take control. And what I find is that if you provide an opportunity for people, if it's just and if it's fair, people are going to take that opportunity and run with it. You have ten people and two don't want it. All right, that's fine, but the other eight are going to go for it. The key thing is just loving people and building relationships. That is basically it.

AS: Today there are 80 employees and 7 different ministries. People's lives have been changed. That is the power you have - that is the power we all have. If you believe in something, you know that people will help you - folks will come and take advantage of the opportunities you give them. It's not easy work but I think LaVerne said it best that its so much more rewarding than you could ever think or imagine. It's almost like getting parents who go out to Toys-R-Us and stand in this long line to buy this play station for your child. You think what am I doing. But Christmas day, to see how happy that child is, you know it was worth the wait. And that's how this is. This is not an easy road. These 10 years have been tough years. But when you stop and look...we've built 100 and some houses. Our church has grown from maybe 25 people to now you can't get in on Sunday. Our church has outgrown its present sanctuary I think it has a capacity of about 90-100 people. Every Sunday the men give their seats because it's filling up. You are at the stage where you are saying, "How will this work?" It works by faith.

Heather Warren: I have a question. How much hopelessness did you find when you first got involved? Was there a hopelessness on the part of the people in Sandtown or was it one of the things that was going for you?

LS: I think there had been hopelessness. I think we as a community had thought, "We have been placed in a forgotten community." However, what I often share with people is that we always knew for some reason that God has never forgotten us. As I said, it has been very very painful to go through that, but now to see the hope that has risen. People are very very encouraged. People have become empowered - just the little things mean so very much. For

example, the 1500<sup>th</sup> block of North Stricker Street which had the two story houses that we rehabbed on the newsletter. I actually grew up in one of those houses. And I share with you that when everybody moved in a lot of people didn't have cars, now everybody owns a car. So we had parking issues.

The homeowners contacted the city to get angled parking and they did it themselves. What we try to do is support and nurture the homeowners association, but we can't do it all. So the leaders have to come out of anything that you do. But you already have people there. There are leaders, you might just need to tell them, "You take this road instead of that road." What I often share with them is that we all have to learn it sometime in our lives because we never knew it all, we still don't know it all! We know what we do to make this work. I personally think it is working because of what community folks say.

Before I became a part of the staff, before I was involved with the church, I was simply a community resident, so I can give a personal testimony that it does work, it has changed people's lives. What I often share with people is that, what New Song means to me it the true gospel of Jesus Christ. It's flushing out the true gospel. What should churches be doing? What would Jesus do? We love everybody. We don't say that you have to belong to New Song Community Church, we don't say that you have to be saved. But what I find is that just loving people that draws them into Christ. And I can remember when I wasn't always saved. I often share with Allan and Mark, I would say to my sister, "Here she comes again with this Jesus thing, I did not want to hear it." This makes it so much easier just to love people instead of, "Let me tell you about the Lord." In a little while they will draw me into God, they will realize. Let us show you about the Lord, let us show you what Jesus would do.

AS: LaVerne told you about the angled parking, but she didn't tell you why they got the angled parking. It's because this Sharon Baptist Church would block all of the community residents in. They'd pull up and double park right there and leave their car there for three hours. They would just block them in. So the community got tired, and one of the things that this whole New Song experience has been about is teaching folks how to do for themselves, that the system does work and can work for you. So many African Americans have not thought the system could work for them. And it hadn't, quite frankly, it hadn't worked for them. But I think Mark and Allan came in and said, "Say to me what you just said to him. Now do for him what you would do for me."

And they get it - and that's what this was all about. I think Mark is capable of answering your question about hopelessness also. He was the founding pastor – he still is the founding pastor – of New Song. So Mark could you address that?

MG: Let me just address this. Al overstates some things in the sense of what I did. It really is a community-based group and that's one reason that it happens. For example, in Latin America a lot of the reason people think that there was a movement of hope in the base communities and so on. We did a contrast comparison between Central America and Sandtown. There was a big difference. There wasn't that sense of hope in America's cities; it just does not and did not exist in the same way it has in other contexts. That's been a big part of it.

HW: Why? What's been the difference?

MG: I think LaVerne gave the answer in the sense of this historic disempowerment. I mean in the 1960's I really think with King's death that signaled in many ways the end of the road. Because at the same time as his death, deindustrialization was really at full force. You had a combination of factors, which just said it's not going to really change. And in fact things have gotten worse, not better. And in different ways they are worse now today than they were 10 years ago – in different ways. So I think even though there's more jobs and so on, it's still worse. I wasn't there in the 60's, but it seems looking back it's just an overwhelming combination of forces. And there was not going to be change and things were not going to be different and they were going to get worse. For the record, Baltimore is still losing a 1,000 people a month. And you can look at cities like Philly and so on – it's not New York's story – but other cities are still losing population and there is not a sense of cities have importance and communities have importance.

There is a general mistrust of the government and the police. I think we talked about this drug dealer story; they'll deal drugs right in front of your house and if you don't go out and address them, they'll keep dealing. You call the police and the police will drive right by you. So you have got to take matters into your own hands – not with a gun – but by being a man. Wives are fearful for their husbands but you fear the Lord and that's why you're part of the church.



Because the fear of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. I have a Father that will deal with them on judgment day.

I heard someone tell a story about a child and how the greatest thing this child knows is that the most powerful person is their father. And they have this great belief that their father can do everything. They'll stand at the top of the steps and they'll say, "Dad, I'm gonna jump," because they know that their father will grab them. And their father won't let them fall. That's the way we are told to think about God. If somebody bothers you, tell your Father. The Bible says that God delights in the impossible. We call him to task, and you know what? He delivers. Laverne didn't tell you that at the beginning of almost every week she wonders how she is going to make payroll. God delivers. Every time she is ready to dedicate a house she wonders where she is going to get a refrigerator and stove from. God delivers. These drug dealers were on a corner in front of the church. We prayed. They have not been back there since. And I was gonna go out and talk to them, but they have not been back there since.

We get a chance to see God, to see some of the lives that have been changed. We have one of the young men in my men's Bible study who a reformed drug dealer, and to see him on fire for Christ... When he came out of jail he went over to his buddies and his buddies told him something and he was convicted. He had been studying the Bible while he was in jail and when he came out he was still on fire for him. We can tell you over and over stories of lives that have been changed.

LS: I think a lot of the young guys are beginning to see that there is a different way or a way out. But again, when you're young and a teenager you don't want to deal with this Jesus thing. But I think they know that it is genuine loving, so it is drawing people in slowly but surely. Even the younger group are beginning to get drawn in.

HW: One of the things I would see connected closely with hope and keeping hope alive is trust. And is that where the love comes in? You would think some of them would have to be persistent too.

LS: Trust has to be there. That is a very important and key factor. People have to be able to trust you and so, what I share with people is, “Let your word be your bond; don’t commit what you can’t deliver.”

AS: That’s where the partnering comes in. Mark and Allan knew LaVerne and several other folks in the community very well. Now the community would trust LaVerne but it had to learn to trust Mark and Allan. So they’re partnering with someone in the community. The community person knows the needs of the folks in the community; that’s why partnering is so very important. And that’s where you are going to get your trust. I mean, just to walk in and say, “I’ve arrived.” Well who’s that? But when Laverne said, “Mark’s arrived and he’s a decent person.” They will trust someone they’ve known for 20 years.

Omar McRoberts: You described this traditional Black Baptist church in the area but you also mentioned that there are a lot of free community churches, and I was curious about what their presence was like.

LS: A lot of them are small storefront churches, which don’t have a lot to offer. But everybody has something to offer, so we try to reach everybody in the community. I am a firm believer that it takes everybody working together. If I come in this section, somebody might go over to this section. Let’s work with this as a whole. There are so many people in need – just the daily basics, the things we take for granted. Some people may not have any food on the table. So I just think it takes all of us working together.

Sharon Baptist Church really gets under my skin, and I have to constantly pray about that because it’s a commuter church. You just come and take up parking spaces and you don’t do anything else! Another big church here is Saint Peter Catholic Church. Because we don’t have space for a hall, when have our homeowners Christmas party, we rent from St. Peter’s. Each time we have paid a fee, and I understand that it doesn’t run on water, but this time the deacon wanted us to pay \$675. And when we went over there in the early part of December...I’m going to show you how God works...I had already cut the check for \$400 because that is all we were going to give them.

And that's why I say I'm always clear people, I am not going to dance around the issues. I am a child of the King, I am working for the Lord. So you can step on me if you want to, but don't mess with God's people. I can tell you that! So we went there and I told the deacon, "Now wait a minute. Something is not registering. Aren't we sisters and brothers in Christ? I mean we are neighbors! I understand that it doesn't run on water, but what I am saying to you is that I don't have a lot of money to give you. I am trying to provide a nice time for community folks to come together and celebrate." And needless to say, he didn't like that conversation but he did say, "You know what? My heart and mind just changed." I said, "It's the Spirit of God." We paid the \$400, but I shared with him, "If you ever need a spot for a meeting just give me a yell, when we have completed our center and it will be free of charge because Christ has paid for everything."

So we need to stop being so tight. And what I share with people is, "You know, you came here with nothing and you are going to leave with nothing." I'm not saying don't bother with things in life; that's not what I am saying. But what I am saying is stop being selfish and just thinking of self all the time. The Bible says that he who wants to be great needs to humble himself. So it's a way to distribute the goods to see that everybody has. The United States is one of the richest countries in the world. Isn't it sad that people are still struggling for food and shelter. You know everybody deserve a decent place to lay their head. I am not asking for much, just a small portion to improve the quality of life of other people. What we do is very small, but, I tell you, the rewards are just so high when you see how happy people are. And so I've learned to put life in perspective. I don't take anything for granted and you should be thankful no matter what comes your way. And I'm just thankful for New Song, and most of all I am thankful for a community like Sandtown. I think it teaches you to know that God is real. He is there – no matter what your pain or struggles are – he is there. So I often share with people again, "We have no other choice but to call on Jesus."

AS: That's the good part: that's all you have, all you have is Jesus. That's where you hang your hat. I'm sure you wonder, "How does this community with no money and how does this organization with no money...Where do you get your money? And how do you start this thing?" I think Mark and Allan had the best way of doing it: they went to the churches. They went to the churches that had money – the Presbyterian churches had money and they wanted to hang their

hat on something, they wanted to do something - and they all helped. One church builds a house, and another church finds out about it and then they send volunteers and build a house, and then another church. And then the people from those churches come down and they fall in love with the person that they built the home for. And next thing you know...I believe LaVerne told this story about a couple from Virginia - if I'm not mistaken - who came to the Learning Center and saw the children, and saw the great progress that was occurring there, and they felt so touched that they went and sold their Mercedes and donated the money to the Learning Center. That's a story of someone that just fell in love.

Wallace Best: I wanted to pick up on Omar's question about the churches. I am so inspired by what I am hearing. Does it, at some point, evidence a failure on the part of those two churches? What about inner city tradition? Was there a mission like this or does it demonstrate a lack of leadership on the part of the churches that existed there? And secondly, what is their response now? Have they taken to ministry or have they joined with you and shared your vision now? What is your relationship with those churches now?

LS: Just let me share with you that the 50 churches are within the 72 square blocks and just keep in mind that we focus on a 12 block area. Some the 50 churches, sure, have joined on board. Elder Harris has his own church, it's called New Born Holiness Church, and he's been with us onboard since the inception, he's been right in there with us. In fact, we all worship together so the worship is very different...it is Presbyterian-Holiness.

The other churches have joined on. But what I am speaking of is I can't understand how the largest churches sit right there in the midst of everything we're doing - we're talking millions of dollars - and they sit in the midst of everything we're doing. They also have about two vacant buildings that are just sitting there. I have graciously visited them and I have said, "You know, we're buying them if it's about money. We need them. They can't remain an eyesore right in the center of where people live." I think sometime we as people forget and are only concerned about where we live. Well everybody's concerned about where they live. Would you want that in your particular neighborhood?

I think I'm on that church because it's such a large church, it is a commuter church, it's people who have left Sandtown but yet still go to that church. You didn't make it on your own

back; you made it on my father's back and somebody else's back. Don't forget that. And I am not saying it is not OK to have the finer things in life, if you want. What I am saying is there is a lack of respect for inner city folks and it shouldn't be.

AS: It hurts more being an African-American and seeing it coming from an African-American church. Certainly we wouldn't tolerate that from any other church. Some of the African-American churches in the community have certainly tried to come along and help. The smaller churches are the ones that have just been sort of fixed for funds themselves. But this one particular church is right in the middle of the focus area. Well they are a bunch of stiff-necked people who refuse to budge an inch. See the difference in what we do at New Song is that you don't have to attend our church to receive anything that we have to offer. You just have to be in need. The traditional churches are sort of like, "If you attend our church you are going to be the first to get this." But we are not like that, you just have to be in need and then you will receive.

Christine Pohl: I have a couple of questions actually. One is how important do you think it was that Sandtown had an identity already and you could come in – you know you picked a very small portion of the community to work with in building (which I think is wonderfully wise) - but you also get a sense of place and identity familial connection. How important was that in having this work blossom?

LS: I think it was very important because if you scatter yourself too far you are not going to make a strong impact. We want to stay on the path and not lose focus. We will eventually expand, but we must complete all the vacant houses in our focus area first. We want to have at least a 300 home homeownership area there, with the school right there and the clinic right there. There will be a strong impact and strong people. Everybody is working for the same common goal, because we can't do it all.

Again, the 1500 block of North Stricker Street was so drug infested. Folks would come in and say, "LaVerne, what is the ministry doing to address the drugs and crime?" We can't take on everything, but it is happening once the homeowners tell the dealers, "You are not going to do this here." That has since moved on. But I think it is critical not to bite off more than you can chew and to be able to really make an impact in the area.

AS: Also, the name Sandtown had almost virtually disappeared. No one was using the name Sandtown anymore but Mark and Allan sort of brought that name back. Outside of the 12-block focus area there are 9 developers developing. They come in and say, “Sandtown! That is a hot piece of property.” So you’ve got 9 developers now developing for profit. So the whole city of Baltimore has now focused its attention on Sandtown.

Steve Fowl: Could I just add something to what Laverne said? I think that with the exception of Leslie Street, which really needed to be completely raised, there is a great emphasis on keeping the buildings intact because so many people in the neighborhood have associations with that particular house. It’s not always easy to do, but there’s a great emphasis on keeping the façade. Even though you are rehabbing a building from beginning to end, keeping the facade is really important. So Leslie Street was really transformed, but with the rest of the houses there is a lot of continuity that has been maintained for the people who have lived there all of their lives.

Amy Laura Hall: Many of us are involved in University teaching, and I guess my first question would be, can I come bring some people from Duke to look at what you are doing and listen? Because one of the things we did at Duke - which I think we just did all wrong – was the university wanted to kind of gentrify this one little area that’s right in between the school and Balltown. It’s called Trinity Heights – it’s this one little block of these big fancy houses. And then the Divinity School (where I teach) started this Balltown Ministries, which they partnered with the commuter Baptist church that’s right there in the neighborhood that really no longer has any ties. There is already a huge amount of resentment among the residents against both the church (the one that the Divinity School was partnering with) and Duke, because it is the employer and pays its employees dirt. They are not unionized yet but we hope for that. I think they went about things in all the wrong way so that people in the community really resent even the good stuff that is happening.

LS: And that will happen. How would you like it if I came into your community and didn’t even get you involved?

AS: Or people outside of the community that look like you start telling you what to do. That's not right.

ALH: For any of us who have been in universities we are going to have to do things in very different ways than we are used to doing them. We are professors, we profess, we go in and speak, we don't listen...And this whole thing of going into the community and actually living? We don't do that. We drive in and profess and then leave. And I think that it is going to require a real overhaul, if we are going to take this back. It is going to require a whole different way of thinking about how theology engages.

AS: I think what Mark and Allan did with the "us and them" syndrome was they became one of us. And now they say, "We're in the same boat together." It is we. And now we can talk because you hear the same sirens I hear, you hear the same gunshots I hear, you feel the same pain I feel, and you see the lack of response that I get for the tax dollar that I am spending. Once you become one of us then you can understand what is going on.

LS: So I say to people who relocate, "Don't come if you are not ready." And we are not saying to everybody that you have to relocate. If you are going to work from the outside looking in, then please, for God's sake, listen to what people are saying. We need your resources but we know what to do, we're not stupid, we know what we need. But listen to what people are saying and work with them, let it be a partnership and share the power.

AS: It has got to be sharing power and information. You'll be sharing some of your power with them and they will be sharing their power with you. You will be imparting information to them and they too will be imparting information to you. That's how you achieve success.

HW: I can speak out of the UVa situation. I think some of it is that we have the expertise and that is how we justify our own existence. We are experts and experts tell people. So we are an institution that doesn't want to listen and there is a long history of that too. I don't think this university – and I don't know how Duke sees itself - really sees itself as a service institution. That is, that its real principal place of work is beyond it's walls. It's what happens after the

people leave here, that's where the service goes on. UVa always talks about being responsible to the citizens of the state, but to be honest with you, I don't see a whole lot of response. And we don't reward people who do that kind of thing. We don't have the President stand up and say, "This is the kind of people we want. This is the way we want to model education." We don't get that. And I think that's an institutional problem.

LS: I want to share with you that we in the community don't have all the answers because we need technical support; we have got to have technical support. Education is a major factor. We don't know it all! So it takes everybody sitting at the table. But what I am saying to people is don't downplay community people because you feel they are not educated, OK? I would like to share with all of you that I have a degree in Jesus Christ so I can do all things. You've got the JD, I have the JC, so it does not stop me. When we started in this business I knew nothing about housing not one single thing about housing. We knew nothing about all these things that have been formed here, but we were persistent in getting better things to improve the quality of life. It's a learning stage. I learn something new every day. And I tell you, I learn really from the people.

Just to show you what I mean by being a good listener: when we were getting ready to do the Leslie Street project, we designed Leslie Street the way we thought it would be. But see we don't do anything without the community signing on. So when we brought the people in who were actually going to live in the houses and when we brought the adjoining block in whose houses would be close, man, did we have to go back to that drawing board and change things! Because they said, "LaVerne, who's going to maintain all that greenery space? We don't need that. A lot of us are single mom's, we are not going to be out there cutting grass." And suddenly folks on Leslie Street said to us things that we had never thought of. So we had to get all those things taken care of. I have lived there all my life, but when the folks who were going to live in the house came in and started asking questions, they were thinking far beyond what we had thought. So it's very important to bring people in. But again we need all the technical support we can get, because we don't have all the resources and we don't have all the knowledge.

AS: But the same guys who didn't know how to do electrical work and didn't know how to make a hammer reach a nail are experts at electrical work now - they are experts! That's why



the first year or so they could build 3 houses in a year. Now they can build 30-40 houses in a year because they have obtained this expertise.

LS: So it has been a slow process but it has been very rewarding when you know that somebody came in not knowing a thing, and now they have their Masters in electricity. It is a commitment to empowering people. But it really does take everybody from the universities to the factory workers. We're so thankful that we have a lot of suburban churches who have come onboard. In fact, professor Fowl's church – Cathedral of the Incarnation – is working on their 10<sup>th</sup> house. They came back year after year. In fact the 1500 block of North Stricker Street is called the Episcopal Row now because of their work. And that was nothing from our ministry, but that was the folks in Sandtwon saying, "We are going to rename our street because we appreciate what folks have done."

I guess I can relate better if universities don't understand, I can relate better if corporations don't understand. I can't relate when it's God's house proclaiming that they love the Lord and they can't love my neighbor. And so that's very very hard for me to comprehend. But again I say that things work in God's time for a reason and my belief is that he will bring Sharon Baptist to its knees. Those folks need their minds changed and their hearts changed. And I guess I'm not afraid to say – being African-American – that, "It hurts. How dare you forget where you came from? The struggles, the history, my brother. You can move on, but don't ever forget to pull somebody else up along the way. There is nothing wrong with that."

And I just don't fault them, I fault society. It's been an unjust system. You know it and I know it. It didn't take us overnight to get to this situation. And yet we are all in trouble now because of it. So the key thing is how do we get out of it now? It takes all of us working together. We've got to know that it's going to be a long term investment, it's got to be sharing resources, it's got to be educating everybody's child – everybody's child has the right to be educated. You're going to have to examine your hearts and be truthful. And my hope is that churches will step to the forefront, because I strongly believe that if churches take the lead other people will follow. Especially in the African-American community, we have always relied on our churches; that's the base of everything.