

The 2019 Next Step Breakfast Address
“Who are we? What do we do? Where are we going?”
Offered by Rev. David B. Wolf, Executive Director, SMGW
14 March 2019

Thank you, *Lisa* – welcome everyone! I’m delighted you’re here. I’m especially pleased if you’re here for the first time – to *learn* what we do and how we do it – because Samaritan Ministry *loves* learners . . . people willing to *participate* in their own life-change . . . people lost inside themselves who can’t find a way out . . . people without a meaningful job or an affordable home . . . people who, from the Good Samaritan story, are *stuck* in the ditch of life and just need a *hand up*. The ditch may be the result of a bad break, a bad choice, bad public policy, the socio-economic segregation of Greater Washington – or all the above.

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

I say “you” and some of *you* are thinking: “He doesn’t mean *me*; he means the *participants*, “the clients”, stuck in the ditch.” But who are WE kidding? Who among us has not been stuck at one time or another? You see, what our participants receive in the *Next Step* Program is what we *all* need. We call it *rigorous compassion* but it’s really two things: On the one hand, support and encouragement; On the other, challenge and accountability. It’s what your spouse or your coach or your colleague or your best friend says that you would rather not hear . . .

Rigorous compassion is: A gift from someone we trust that empowers us to grow – and Samaritan Ministry offers that gift to folks who have *no trustworthy person* in their life to offer it – that is, until they come through our doors. And now – with the addition of the *STRIVE job readiness training* AND new locations – we see more folks than ever – especially returning citizens, the under-employed and un-employed, as well as those living with HIV and AIDS.

In a moment you’ll hear Michael Hood-Bey, a *Next Step* participant from our Anacostia office. Michael’s determination that his life would be different after completing a 41-year sentence of incarceration – combined with rigorous coaching from caseworker Naima Harrison – empowered Michael not only to take his life back, but to create the *NEW* life that he is living already!

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

Over 33 years later that wisdom still speaks to who we are and the change-work we’re all about, as we practice partnership on all levels. Samaritan Ministry wasn’t founded to “help people” with a handout but to participate in their liberation, with the implied invitation that they will participate in ours. This demands a level of personal investment, passion, and vulnerability not found in many places. But Samaritan Ministry isn’t just any place: We’re a pioneer non-profit in a metropolitan area struggling with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, between those of us who do very well and those of us who are just trying to get a toe hold on a steep economic slope.

We rely heavily on volunteers because we believe in *mutual empowerment*, in a community partnership where *everyone* experiences for themselves the change they want to see in the world.

After Michael speaks, you'll hear from Michele Lewis-Muzzatti, a passionate volunteer caseworker who will share the life-changing impact of the work on herself – how it's shaped her own sense of ministry – and how she sees it impacting our wider community.

So: When we speak of the “community partnership” we are speaking of how we cultivate change in ourselves *and* in our community at large. Our Partnership is a “community of communities” that includes over 250 volunteers and over 75 partner churches, schools, and service providers throughout Greater Washington. This is a *collaborative* network, fully empowered to make a difference in the lives of our neighbors who just need a hand UP!

Three years ago, this collaboration gave rise to a new VISION that is now poised to move our mission of empowerment to the next level – a level where a participant can connect with Samaritan virtually anywhere in the region – a level where our rigorous workforce readiness training results not just in job acquisition but *job retention* – with employers like *Thompson Hospitality*, the largest minority-owned hospitality company in the country – a level where we connect chronically homeless adults with affordable, permanent housing – a level where partners are engaged not just in offering their time, talent and treasure to support individual change-work but are also *collectively* invested in a mission of *community* change-work, one that includes changing the systems and structures that allow poverty to prosper.

Where are we? We're not even half way, but the best is yet to come – and the results are adding up: (1) Increased participant accessibility at *5 diverse locations*, with 3 more in the works; (2) expanded employment options through the *STRIVE training*, including placement of virtually ALL graduates within 3 months of course completion; and, (3) On-the-ground collaboration with other non-profits @ Skyland Workforce Center in DC's Ward 7. While there is more to come, *Next Step* participants already have more options than ever before.

This is a challenge, but we know we have a *winning formula*: Rigorously compassionate coaching + essential tools + access to opportunity = the hand up our participants need in this competitive, over-priced, under-paid environment. While our work inspires, I find our *recipe most inspiring* because it reminds me that *my liberation* is found in welcoming the stranger who is really *our neighbor* in disguise, temporarily stuck in life's ditch.

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

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