

The 2017 Next Step Breakfast Address:
“Who are we? What do we do? Where are we going?”
Delivered by the Rev. David B. Wolf, Executive Director
Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington (SMGW)
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Thank you *Petula* and welcome everyone. I’m delighted you’re here: Guests, partners, colleagues, donors and friends. I’m especially pleased if you’re here for the first time – to learn what we do and how we do it – because we Samaritans have a HEART for learners . . . for those willing to *participate* in their own change . . . for those lost inside themselves who can’t find a way out . . . for those who can’t find a home or a job . . . for those who, from the story of the Good Samaritan, are *stuck* in the proverbial *ditch of life* and just need a hand UP. The ditch may be the result of bad breaks, bad choices, bad public policy, the growing socioeconomic divide in our region – or all of the above.

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

So I’m saying “you” and many of *you* are thinking, “He doesn’t mean *me* – I’m not homeless and I’m not stuck in a ditch.” But come on! Who among us hasn’t been stuck? You see, what our participants receive in the Next Step Program is what we *all* need from some source. We call it *rigorous compassion* but it’s really two things: Support and encouragement, on the one hand; and challenge and accountability, on the other. It includes what your spouse or partner or colleague or boss or best friend says that you would rather not hear . . . its truth in love.

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 trusted person in their life to offer it – until they come through our doors. And now – with the addition of the STRIVE job readiness component to our Next Step Program, we see *twice* as many folks as we saw before – including returning citizens, those who are homeless or jobless, and those living with HIV and AIDS.

In a moment you’ll hear testimony for our work from Teresa Batts whose incredible journey reveals how her determination to change, plus our compassionate coaching, produced huge results in a very short time.

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

Over *30 years* later that wisdom still speaks to who we are and the change work we’re all about. Samaritan Ministry wasn’t founded just to “help people” but to participate in their *liberation*, with the implied invitation that they will participate in ours. This demands a level of compassion, commitment, and vulnerability not found in many places. But then Samaritan Ministry is not just any place: We’re a pioneer non-profit in a region struggling with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, between those of us who do really well and those of us who are just trying to get a toe-hold in this world.

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

Shortly you'll hear testimony from Tom Bauder, a stalwart servant-leader and volunteer who bears witness to the transformational impact of the work on himself, his church – and the wider community we serve together.

So when we speak of the "community partnership" we speak of how we cultivate change in ourselves *and* in our communities. The Partnership is really a "community of communities" that includes over 200 program volunteers and over 60 partner churches, schools, and service providers from around the region.

This collaboration gave rise to a new strategic vision that we began to implement a year ago. The results of our strategic plan's first year are impressive: (1) Increased participant accessibility at now 7 diverse locations; (2) expanded employment options through the integration of a rigorous job readiness "boot camp" with a national reputation, namely STRIVE; and, (3) one-to-one relationships with employers allowing us to place participants directly in jobs. In sum *Next Step* participants have more options than ever before!

So what are OUR *next steps* for 2017? First: we want to identify more points-of-entry in geographically diverse areas, like our pilot at Our Savior, Silver Spring that began in late 2015 and now is expanding its hours and services. Second: inspired by the Housing First approach to ending chronic homelessness, we're ramping up to provide *residential* casework for recipients of Permanent Supportive Housing – something Samaritan is perfectly positioned to do given our 30-year history of change-work.

This is a lot but our winning formula remains simple: Rigorous coaching + tools for empowerment + access to opportunity = the hand UP our participants need in this over-priced, under-employed region.

While this vision is inspiring, I think it inspires because it reminds us that *our liberation* is found in welcoming the 'stranger' who is really our neighbor in disguise – a truth embodied in our community partnership.

So as you listen to Tom and Teresa, consider what you can offer from your talent and treasure. But also consider the possibility that, by your offering, you will grow in ways you could *never* ask for, or imagine. And what greater gift could you *receive* in return for offering yours?

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