

## A Calling to the City: *Second Wind's Urban Ministry in San Francisco* | BY GREG NELSON



*Our monthly Friday evening Bread & Jam (eating and singing)*

*What keeps us going are the stories of personal journeys and the testimonies of life transformation.*

### OUR CELEBRATION

Each November, Second Wind celebrates its birthday (this year was our fifth) with a big party during our Saturday service. The energy in our upper room above the auto repair shop is electric and joyful. Our gratitude for such fellowship is palpable.

The heart of the service is an activity we have enjoyed as an annual tradition. Each person selects a random postcard on their table to share with the whole group about how the picture or saying on the card describes their spiritual journey with Second Wind in the past year. The testimonies are often raw, honest, and incredibly inspiring and moving. We laugh, we cry, we clap, we shout encouragement and affir-

mation. It is pretty amazing.

What keeps us going are the stories of personal journeys and the testimonies of life transformation we hear from our community. One young female student who came to Second Wind because her boyfriend (a regular attendee) invited her said, "I've never really believed in God. But hearing all of you pray really inspired me. And so I decided to try it, wondering if I would feel anything or if anyone would respond. I now pray regularly." And she says she loves being a part of the Second Wind journey.

A former Adventist pastor who lost his job when he came out as gay and is now on our leadership team reveals, "Second Wind has given me back a spiritual home—a safe and energizing place where I can grow and minister and serve others in the ways that express who I am and who I am still growing to be." And then, with a serious look in his eyes, he says, "Thank you for being a welcoming congregation that gives LGBTQ seekers a place to experience belonging and spiritual growth."

A young female physician, whose Hindu family is from India, started coming to Second Wind by invitation from a regular attendee's cousin. Both were in medical residency at UCSF Medical Center. The cousin ultimately moved to another part of the country, but this physician continued to worship with us. She said recently, "I credit Second Wind with providing the most formational influence on my spirituality I've ever had. My life has been forever changed for the good."

I sit there listening, my heart filled with awe

as I hear each story—people who live in the midst of a big busy city, choosing to carve out sacred space and show up authentically and transparently in community to experience a divine encounter. I remember thinking that of all the kinds of ministry I've done through the last 31 years, this is where it has all led, and I am struck with the grace of it all.

## OUR CALLING

I remember vividly that Sabbath sermon in the College View Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, over a decade ago when I stood in front of my congregation and announced that I had felt the Spirit moving me from “inside the stadium, with all its lights and crowds of fans and enthusiasts” to the obscurity of a start-up ministry in the middle of Seattle. Seattle is one of the most unchurched cities in America.

I remember while in that new ministry experiencing my most painful personal and professional failure and wondering if I would ever recover and re-emerge with any light to shine on any place in the world again? Was



*Sorting pasta at the San Francisco Food Bank*

God still there and still moving on my spirit and soul? I remember realizing that my passion for urban ministry had not only not abated, it had strengthened.

When it became apparent that denominational sponsorship might not be forthcoming,

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*A typical lunch outing in the Mission District after a Second Wind service*



*Second Wind's fifth birthday party gang*

began to realize that I didn't have all the answers. We are not lone possessors of "the truth." Every person has pieces of truth. We must show up as receivers of those pieces even more than as givers. We must learn to learn from others. And we must learn not only to be

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I decided to place myself in an even more challenging urban environment: San Francisco. I did it not as any kind of spiritual, religious hero, but this time as a broken, humbled "clay pot" (2 Cor. 4:7). My motivating promise from St. Paul's pen was that the light of God's grace needs cracks in order to shine through the walls of the clay container. And I had plenty of cracks.

**OUR TRUTH**

**T**he good thing about all of those painful cracks was that I had to be real. Authenticity was the upside to having a spectacular public failure yet still feeling called to ministry. I no longer could hide anything, and the inner image consultant that I had carefully cultivated over decades of Adventist ministry was out of a job.

I discovered what happens when we show up with an honest, transparent witness through our failures and weak spots. I've learned that this is precisely what effective urban ministry demands—authenticity and a willingness to be vulnerable, to come "as we are," to both give and receive from others. I

givers of grace, but to receive grace from others, all others, even the most unlikely others. And sometimes, it's the receiving that can be the hardest.



*Second Wind's Mission District location above the auto repair shop—with a cathedral ceiling no less!*

## OUR CITY

**W**e live in San Francisco! According to many church people, San Francisco is more Sodom and Gomorrah than Sodom and Gomorrah. There is no way this urban metropolis could remotely facilitate spirituality. With its reputation, it defines everything that is evil about cities. In spite of the fact that San Francisco is among the top five most visited cities in the world, many of these visitors are happy and excited to observe and taste for a safe, brief period of time. But they would never settle down here—that would be pushing their spiritual luck!

With the idea of “urban spirituality” as a stretch, spirituality in San Francisco just doesn’t seem possible to many. We city-dwellers and many church people are used to seeing pictures of our skyline superimposed with images of doom, destruction and end-time scenarios. The view is that urban spirituality can only exist as a phoenix rising from the city’s ashes of judgment.

Yet I learned something significant about this important city when I moved here. Its namesake is St. Francis, the twelfth-century spiritual leader who had a reputation based on two personal choices: he renounced his wealth in order to identify with and serve the poor, and he was called “the clown of God” because he chose to act and behave in unusual ways to get people to see God differently. He forsook wealth and image to serve others effectively.

St. Francis’ choices represent the DNA of San Francisco, its foundational core values, and the city has certainly lived them out in extravagant ways. This financial center of wealth has a higher per capita rate of philanthropy than anywhere else in the country. Even in the deepest period of the current recession, San Franciscans volunteering time and money for charitable causes keeps their city at the top of the list in the U.S. San Francisco and the Bay Area have more nonprofits dedicated to serving the world than anywhere else in our country.



*Sharing our stories during Second Wind's 5th birthday party*

Many know how this city deals with the image issue: “be who you are” is the mantra here. Don’t worry about what everyone else says. Just be the best you you can be. That attitude plays out in everything from fashion to architecture to food to music to gay rights. The history of this city is an ongoing story of failure and fruitfulness, tragedy as well as triumph, in how it has lived out these values. It has been admired and ridiculed, loved and hated by the world. Its “take it or leave it” attitude has made enemies and loyal friends alike.

It became clear to me that if ministry was to be effective here, we had to pay close attention to these core values. I had to come to grips with them in my own life—I had to be willing to serve unabashedly and express myself beyond the cautionary voice of my inner image consultant.

## OUR COMMUNITY

**M**y wife Shasta and I started Second Wind five and a half years ago in San Francisco because we had a hunger to create a spiritual community where people gathered to share their stories and experience a sense of belonging and passion for a deeper,

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*Lunch time after Second Wind service*

*Second Wind's vision centers on providing both a spiritual community and a resource center for personal and relational growth for San Francisco neighborhoods and beyond.*

more intentional life. And since Christianity and fundamentalist religion have such tarnished reputations in San Francisco (deservedly so in many ways), we wanted to develop a positive and progressive voice for God here.

Every community has a culture or personality that is shaped by the values and beliefs of the collective. Second Wind was formed out of a true sense of acceptance and honor for people wherever they are on their personal faith journey. Our name Second Wind continues to shape our experience and passion to be a safe place for people, where people are graced with second chances and new beginnings, where people who have given up on God or themselves or their dreams or the church can find a second Wind/Breath/Spirit of love, acceptance, transformation, and hope. We see a God that is big enough for all of us. And we see a God who is bigger than any one of us, who is expressed more fully by all of us in unique and diverse ways.

Second Wind's vision centers on providing both a spiritual community and a resource center for personal and relational growth for San Francisco neighborhoods and beyond. As a spiritual community, we engage in weekly Saturday morning services where we have con-

versations around topics that impact our discovery of identity and how to live in alignment with that truth. We challenge ourselves with what it means to make a positive difference in the world. We explore questions about God and how the faith journey impacts life. We provide service opportunities in collaboration with other non-profits in the city.

As a resource center, we offer workshops, classes, seminars, and events that center around topics of personal, relational, and family health. We even periodically host a toddler dance party for parents and their kids to enjoy lively singing and playing. Definitely high energy! Our vision is to continue expanding our reach to more and more people who share a deep curiosity about life and a hunger for transformation.

Second Wind's concept of community is centered on a significant paradigm summarized well by a Christian psychiatrist who said, "There are two things in life you cannot do alone: be married, and be spiritual." We believe we grow best in the context of supportive, nurturing relationships with others. Community is a high value for us.

The power of belonging to a spiritual community is that people find themselves getting



*Two of Second Wind's leadership team, Tom Baxter and Marcos Apolonio*

to know people they would most likely not choose to be best friends with or hang out with on a regular basis. This kind of diversity stretches us and teaches us the art of learning how to love people who are different from us. Over the years a very eclectic gathering of people has formed, comprised of young and old, couples, singles, and families, students and profes-



sionals, gays, straights, and transgenders, and a rich mix of ethnicities. Some of us have had positive religious experiences, but we craved something more. Others have had no intentional spiritual education but are curious. Still others have seen the worst of their religious upbringings but are hopeful and courageous enough to believe that not everything God-related is abusive.

## OUR CHALLENGE

Jesus used the metaphor of light to describe the mission of his followers. What is significant about light is that there is a wide spectrum of colors that makes up light. In order for a community to follow Jesus' call to be light in the world, it must embrace more than one kind or style of light. Are we willing to allow for radical diversity in our witness and influence? Can we allow spiritual journeys to look different from what we have experienced? Can even our conceptions of God be different and still experience effective community? Can we let God choose how God wants to use our individual cracks to shine light through, rather than imposing our own views?

I've seen how messy ministry often is in this environment. Building relationships with urban-dwellers requires a broad-mindedness

and non-judgmental attitude. It calls us to live with and among and on the side of people instead of conducting missions from the safety of the suburbs. We are compelled to rub shoulders with our neighbors and friends as fellow travelers rather than as their teachers and saviors. It has involved changing my personal paradigm from "I'm here to save you" to "I'm here to learn from you." In that same vein, I've been confronted with the necessity of changing my standard of success: "How can I serve you?" instead of "Here's what you can do for me: join my church!"

And yet, Shasta and I periodically wonder whether we're making a meaningful difference. The high mobility rate in cities creates challenges to growing stable and sustainable community. Sometimes we feel disconnected from our own past and lost in the middle of this concrete urban jungle. We get weary of having to constantly raise money to achieve sustainability for both Second Wind and ourselves. Being self-supporting in this environment is a huge challenge, which continually stretches our faith. Regardless, Second Wind somehow continues to expand its ministry in a city labeled as one of the most expensive places to live in the U.S. God

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*Giving the Blessing is a call to ...live out the goodness of God in authentic, courageous, persistent ways.*

continues to bless through the faithful and generous gifts of individuals who share a belief in the significance of a nontraditional, deeply spiritual, urban safe place for people of all stripes and sizes “to experience belonging, excite dreams, extend compassion, and explore God” (from the Second Wind mission statement).

### OUR BLESSING

**S**tories keep us going. They remind us of the importance of urban ministry. At a time when churches tend to invest less attention on cities than elsewhere, and when the only contact churches tend to have with cities is sending out thousands of brochures depicting God’s fiery judgment on them, we are reminded how important it is to live here and build trusting

relationships with people who long for something more in their lives.

Our ministry team is persuaded to keep practicing a fundamental truth about the human family in the midst of the rich diversity in this city. It is called “Giving the Blessing.” It’s based upon the ancient Jewish theology of blessing. Giving the Blessing is not conferring something on another person that they didn’t have before. Giving the Blessing is simply acknowledging her/his fundamental identity of goodness that is already in each person. It’s calling out that Divine goodness to be recognized and embraced by that person. It’s saying, “I honor you and the Good God who lives and loves in you.”

This spiritual practice is transforming our sense of Presence in this city by empowering us to be genuine Light-bearers, showing up with love, compassion, and hope. Giving the Blessing is a call to all of us to live out the goodness of God in authentic, courageous, persistent ways, whether it’s in the middle of the urban jungle or the pasturelands of rural regions, whether it’s through our successes or our failures, whether it’s in the stadiums with bright lights or the back alleys in the shadows. It’s a call to let the Light shine through the cracks so God’s goodness can be seen and felt in transforming ways. ■



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