

A Labor of Love and Faith
Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins
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“I refuse to believe...” They struck me as odd words to be hearing at a ministry conference, particularly a ministry leadership conference. But as pastor and retired social worker Milele Hobbs went on talking, what I heard was actually profoundly faithful. “I refuse to believe in the recovery-relapse cycle,” she declared, “that continued relapse is a thing to be accepted.” Trained in social work myself, I had also been taught this “truth” of my discipline.

Rev. Hobbs, however, had chosen to supplant this conventional wisdom with faith in boundless divine possibilities. It led her to start Gomer’s House, a residential addiction recovery program and ministry nonprofit targeting those who had repeatedly failed in other treatment programs.

Rev. Hobbs was one of 12 ministry leaders Rebecca Hale and I were blessed to gather this past month as a cohort of “social entrepreneurs of faith,” Disciples clergy and laypersons who have started or are considering starting ministry nonprofits with a focus on serving their wider communities. The cohort was one of five that made up the *Leadership Academy*, a leadership event of HOPE Partnership, a general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) committed to empowering and equipping congregations and Disciples leaders to do God’s mission how and where they are called to serve. This September session of *Leadership Academy* was the first to include a social entrepreneurship cohort, made possible by a collaboration between Hope and the NBA. The NBA not only facilitated the new cohort, but also brought in speaker-mentors: Rev. Shaunie Hoskins, Rev. April Lewton, and Rev. Dr. Irie Session, as well as coach and pastor, Rev. Greg Turk, who would each help to equip the larger group as well.

Other participants in the cohort included: Rev. Susan Barton exploring dementia care; Rev. Sharon Cosby with the Oklahoma Family Empowerment Center; Rev. James Hobbs and Sheenkai Kilpatrick, also with Gomer’s House; Helms Jarrell and Tiffany Rendelman with The Family Tree; Rev. Dr. Rosalyn Nichols with A More Excellent Way; Rev. Denise Prose with the Chalice Grief Care Center; Rev. Ruben Rodriguez exploring improving life chances for residents of Lakewood, Colorado; and Rev. Kimberly Zarley and Adrienne Windley with the Courageous Dance. There is a labor of love and faith, another manifestation in this fragmented world of a movement for wholeness!

Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, MSW, served as the NBA Mission Specialist for this collaborative partnership between the NBA and HOPE for the fall 2014 Leadership Academy. Learn more about NBA’s Incubate Initiatives at www.nbacares.org/incubate or contact Rev. Rebecca Hale, NBA Vice President of Mission and Ministry at rhale@nbacares.org.