

The Promise of a New Place

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Tulsa's Table

NBA Incubate Initiative Affiliate Ministry

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With this writing, I am on the heels of a move just made to a new location for *Tulsa's Table* and in the middle of a personal move to a new home. Anyone who's made a move of any size knows how much effort it requires to get from one place to the next. Heavy boxes, moving vans,

backaches and long days remind us that moving is hard work. Yet, in the midst of it all resides a beckoning promise that the new place offers. Promises of new beginnings, new adventures and new relationships travel with us, whether across town or across the country.

As we settle in, *Tulsa's Table* is excited about the promise that our new location holds. Unpacking every box is a reminder of the gifts located in sharing food and how that practice is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, as well as other religions. The promise of this new place for us is an opportunity to set a table for extended hospitality where everyone is welcome, and justice and equity can also be fostered.

Our new neighborhood may or may not reflect your own. Here, in the 74107 Zip code, more than 5,000 individuals are determined to be at or below the poverty line. Four out of ten children under the age of 18 in this area experience poverty, but for people of color, these numbers go even higher. In the last 12 months, only 41% of persons over the age of 16 worked full-time and year-round, 22% worked only part-time, and 37% weren't employed at all. Teens in this area attend a high school where the dropout rate is close to 40%. And disconnected teens that are neither in school or employed, number 27,000 across the city.

In Tulsa county 24% of children, 17% of adults and 32% of the elderly live in food insecure households. This neighborhood reflects the same dynamic and is identified as a food desert. Grocery stores for those living in close proximity to *Tulsa's Table* are a 30-minute bus-ride one way. Convenience stores, fast food chains, and a few small restaurants are the only nearby options for groceries or meals and none of them present fresh healthy options that increase nutrition and vitality for the residents.

Teens living in these circumstances are at high risk of not being able to maximize their potential because of barriers to success, like the ones just listed. Yet, it's been proven that the combination of a stable family or community system, full-time employment, and at least a high school diploma significantly increase a person's success. It is this network of support that is the focus of our work at *Tulsa's Table*.

Our mission is to increase economic and social mobility for youth by fostering their capacity to achieve self-sufficiency. We provide a model that creates synergy between building youth assets through the Search Institute 40 Developmental Assets approach, offering living wage employment opportunities and supporting continued connections with educational avenues. Teens gain job and life skills through culinary and gardening experiences and address the food insecurity of their community by operating a pay-what-you-can community café, where nutritious meals are served to the public.

At the core of what we do is a 3-day-a-week program: Day 1 focuses on culinary and life skill training, developmental asset building, menu planning and local food/grocery sourcing. Day 2 focuses on working with chef educators to prepare meals for service at the community café or for "grab and go" sales. Day 3 allows the youth to serve the public through the operation of the community café. Youth will also have opportunities to meet with mentors at the end of each day in personal one-on-one meetings where they can explore continued education avenues, professional interests or find support through case management services.

Tulsa's Table is a model of community work that is dedicated to revealing the best of what the youth and their neighborhood already have and to build upon it as they desire. We know that all people yearn to live free of oppression and to realize success in life, however they see that to be. We are not bringing the answers, only a promise to listen and learn as we walk alongside the youth in this new place. Presenting opportunities through the gifts of earth, food and table is our promise. Showing up to stand in solidarity with our new neighbors as they strive for equity and justice is our

call. You too are invited to join us in this good work and we welcome your gifts of support through engagement, prayer or financial contributions. Thank you for the many ways this is already happening.

*The NBA incubates new ministries, supporting social entrepreneurs of faith who are serving their communities in a variety of innovative ways and empowering these Disciples-led health and social service projects to focus on growth, impact, and sustainability. Learn more at **nbacares.org/incubate** or by contacting Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, Director of the NBA Incubate Initiative, at **awatkins@nbacares.org**.*