**Community Mediations:**

**The Key to Heaven’s Glorious Embassy**

In October of 2012 several residents of the Stoney Hollow Home Owners Association shared with the Plano City Council a letter they had written. The letter described the Home Owners Associations displeasure with the Heaven’s Glorious Embassy Church, which is located adjacent to the Stoney Hollow Neighborhood Sub-Division. The letter was addressed to Pastor John Omewha, who is the Senior Pastor and spiritual leader of the church. The Home Owners Association described constant late night noise disruptions caused by music coming from the church as late as 2:00am. Officers of the Plano Police Department Problem-Solving Unit utilized the SARA problem-solving model to guide both sides to a resolution of this situation.

* **Scanning**- The problem was created by loud music coming from the church during late evening hours. Officers dealt mostly with the neighborhood residents since they were the complaining party. They also spent time developing a core group of people who were most affected by the noise and allowing them to vent and explain their situation. This problem was prioritized very high for two reasons. First, the obvious First Amendment Issue that may have been created if the church was requested to worship at different hours and the second, which was the racial differences between the church, a predominantly black, African congregation and the neighborhood, which was predominantly white.
* **Analyze**- Officers spent a majority of their time in the analysis stage of the project. There were several efforts in trying to determine why the noise was reaching the neighborhood when it was not audible in the parking lot of the church. Plano Police Department standard protocols for loud music situations were also implemented. It was during the analysis stage of the project that officers learn that the church was trying to reduce the loud noise from their music despite continued complaints from the neighbors. The church tried several methods from moving loud speakers to covering windows, but were unsuccessful in all attempts. It was also revealed during the analysis stage that one of the residences directly behind the church was occupied by an autistic child who was easily awakened and disturbed by the church’s music at night. The consensus of the neighborhood was they had a reasonable right to peace and quiet during nighttime hours.
* **Response** – The ultimate goal was to provide a peaceful environment during nighttime hours for the residents of the Stoney Hollow Neighborhood and support the church’s religious rights to worship at any time. Most of the standard responses were covered in the analysis stage, however the ultimate correct response was facilitating a meeting between the neighborhood representatives and the church representatives. During this meeting, officials from the church and the neighbors were able to reach their own solution to the problem. Officers use their expertise and experience in mediation to assist both sides in reaching that agreement.
* **Assessment**- During the assessment stage officers revisited both sides of the dispute and verified both sides were complying with the agreements they had made during mediation. Officers have monitored the situation closely for the past year and half and calls for service have disappeared and both sides are reporting a higher quality of life as a result of their mutually agreed upon response.

This project is a good example of the Police Department facilitating an open discussion between the two parties of the dispute and guiding them toward a mutually beneficial resolution that improved the quality of life for everyone involved.

**SCANNING**

In the scanning phase of the projects Officers read the original letter and determined this was not the typical neighborhood noise issue. The unique factors of this project were that it was multiple residents upset with a church. Commonly in the bible belt of America, neighborhoods rally around their local churches and organized complaints against a church are extremely rare. It was apparent from the beginning that for a group of neighbors to launch a complaint against a church, there must be some significant issues for both the police and the community.

Upon initial research through the Plano Police Departments Records Management System there did not appear to be many calls for service. In fact there were only three calls on the church for noise. Since the call history did not match complaints received, Officer Ravin decided to meet with some of the key members of the Stoney Hollow HOA for clarification. While speaking with the members who signed the letter, Mrs. Bobbi Sheahan appeared to be the most vocal and also appeared to be the driving force behind the letter and the neighbors’ concerns. Mrs. Sheahan explained that she did indeed have a tangible harm from the music from the church. Mrs. Sheahan further explained she had a twelve year old Autistic child that becomes physically affected by the late night disruptions caused by the music at the church. Mrs. Sheahan and her neighbors explained they felt the late night music devalued their houses, and seriously affected their ability to enjoy life in their home. Other neighbors shared stories of having to leave and rent a hotel room while others slept in other areas of their homes to try and escape the noise coming from the church. All nine of the original letter signers informed Officer Ravin that one family had actually sold their house and moved from the neighborhood citing the loud music from the church as a major contributing factor in their decision to move.

After the initial scan of the situation officers of the problem-solving unit created an entry in the Plano Police Department Problem Oriented Policing (POP) Database. This database is a repository of information that is available to all members of the Police Department. Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn contacted the beat officers that would most likely respond to calls in this area and requested they update the database with any new information obtained on this project.

**ANALYSIS**

As Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn entered the analysis phase of the project, they had to overcome the fact that there was little call activity to justify the severity of the problem that the neighbors were complaining about. It was obvious with the unity and passion that the neighbors shared that there was a problem. Officer Ravin quickly discovered the reason for the lack of complaints was because the offender was a church and people are leery of filing complaints against a church. What made the issue even more problematic was this church was predominately African-Born Americans and the neighbors affected by the noise were entirely Caucasian. All of the neighbors were reluctant to call the police on a church and none of them wanted to be accused of being racist.

Heavens Glorious Embassy Church moved to its current location in Plano in October 2008. The first noise complaint was in May of 2010 and there was not another noise complaint filed with the police department until October 2012. The neighbors sent the letter to the church on May 20, 2012. The neighbors had formed a group of concerned citizens, but as a group they wanted to handle the situation between themselves and the Church primarily to avoid the stigma of filing a complaint on a church and avoiding the race issue at the same time. However, by October of 2012, four months after the neighbors had hand delivered the letter to the church, they felt they had no other recourse but to involve the police. Many of the neighbors had mentioned the noise to city officials in an unofficial capacity, but no formal complaints had been filed. The neighbors had placed calls to the church and expressed their concerns and requests for the music to be turned down at night. After the weekend of October 4th and 5th, the neighbors became so frustrated that they called the City Manager’s Office and requested assistance. The Plano City Manager (Bruce Glasscock) immediately recognized this situation was sensitive and important to the neighbors and the church. Mr. Glasscock is the former Plano Police Chief and an advocate of Problem Oriented Policing. Mr. Glasscock immediately assigned Chief of Police Greg Rushin to have the Problem Oriented Police Officers Ravin and Glenn meet with the neighbors and the church and assist them in resolving this issue.

After meeting with the neighborhood Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn met with Pastor John Omewah of the Heavens Glorious Embassy Church. Pastor Omewah was extremely nice and cooperative with the police. He expressed a desire to work with the community to resolve the situation. He also explained to Officer Ravin that music was very important to his congregation. Pastor Omewah expressed that his congregation has a revival on the first Friday of every month that lasted until 2 AM. He said part of their celebration is loud music including amplified instruments. Pastor Omewah indicated that a compromise must be reached because he did not feel his congregation should be deprived the ability to worship as they have always done. Officer Ravin stated he understood the church’s goal, but explained the City of Plano’s noise ordinance to Pastor Omewah. Pastor Omewah understood the ordinance, but indicated that he felt the music his congregation was playing was reasonable. Pastor Omewah did concede that the late-night hours of his revivals could be aggravating to the neighbors. At the conclusion of the first meeting with Pastor Omewah he advised he would be hiring a sound engineer to investigate how the music was escaping the building and making it to the neighborhood.

For the next two months Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn closely monitored the situation and stayed in touch with the neighborhood residents while physically being at the church on the first Friday of each month until 2 AM to monitor the noise level. Pastor Omewah invited the officers inside to listen to the music and welcome them to monitor the sound levels from his parking lot. The officers utilized decibel readers to determine if the noise level met state requirements for disruptive noise. Officers quickly discovered that while sitting in the parking lot they could not hear the music or pick up the music on the decibel reader however residents from the community were still complaining about music entering their homes. This new discovery also explained why Pastor Omewah did not think his music was too loud. He had employees continuously monitoring around the church to see if the music could be heard and was told that the music was not escaping the church.

Still confused, officers decided to split up one being in the parking lot of the church while another visited the neighborhood to see if the music was audible in their homes. Officer Ravin stayed in the parking lot while Officer Glenn went to the neighborhood and listened from inside several of the residences. Officer Glenn and Officer Ravin were communicating via cell phone when they confirm the phenomenon that Officer Glenn could hear the music inside the houses yet Officer Ravin could not hear the music in the parking lot of the church. Officers switch spots to confirm the phenomenon. Officers conducted some research on the Internet and discovered that sound can indeed skip over areas if projected at the right angle, however they did not have the expertise to fully investigate what a sound engineer would be able to tell them. Pastor Omewah hired a sound engineer that put up some soundproofing along the walls of the worship center however that did not stop the complaints.

Over the next six months Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn attempted to be mediators between the church and the neighbors. However the neighbors felt that the church was not concerned with their issues and Pastor Omewah felt that the neighbors were being too sensitive and using the police to harass him and his congregation. Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn found themselves facing the same dilemma that the neighbors had faced knowing the obvious solution was to start issuing citations to the church for unreasonable noise. Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn both felt it would not be productive for the Police Department, the City of Plano, or the citizens to file criminal charges on a pastor who was exercising his freedom of religion with his congregation.

After the first Friday revival in September 2013 the situation reached a boiling point and several of the neighbors demanded criminal charges be filed against the church. Officers collected written statements and subsequently issued Pastor Omewah a citation for the City of Plano’s noise ordinance. Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn felt defeated by having to issue a criminal citation, however both sides of the dispute were not able to see the situation from the other’s point of view and they were left with only one option.

**RESPONSE**

Everything leading up to the issuance of the citation in October 2013 consisted of Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn going back and forth between the neighbors and Pastor Omewah. The officers decided at this point that a formal mediation was their only chance at successfully reaching a peaceful conclusion to this situation. Officers met with their new problem oriented policing supervisor, Sergeant Wes Gerig. The officers along with Sergeant Gerig arranged a meeting at a community recreation center which was on neutral ground outside the neighborhood or the church property. The officers’ goal of the meeting to provide mediation services and facilitate an environment where both sides of the dispute could work on solving their problems together.

On October 3, 2013, at 11 AM, seven members from the neighborhood and 10 members of the church, including Pastor Omewah, arrived and sat on separate sides of the room. Officer Ravin was the primary facilitator in the mediation. He allowed each side to explain their point of view uninterrupted by the other side. This led to some tense moments and hurt feelings on both sides however Officer Ravin could see that both sides were starting to see things from the other side’s point of view. Officer Ravin then explained to everyone in the room that this situation was not necessarily a police problem. He explained this was a Stony Brook neighborhood Association problem and a Heavens Glorious Embassy Church problem. He explained to them that the only solution to this situation was for them to talk to each other and find a mutually acceptable solution.

After facilitating and mediating the first hour of the meeting Officer Ravin noticed that church officials started directly addressing neighborhood residents and vice a versa. The officers were able to completely step back, not talk, and allow both sides to talk with each other. Once the two sides figured out they could easily communicate with each other respectfully. The neighbors started to fully understand that the church was not intentionally disrupting their livelihood and the church realized the neighbors were legitimately affected by the loud music. With little input from the police, the two sides reach an agreement where they had a representative from each entity that agreed to communicate before and during each revival.

The biggest breakthrough came from one of the outspoken residents who was against the meeting initially, but started listening to the open dialogue between both sides. While his wife had been outspoken the entire time with the police, he had was not willing to participate. He explained that he was an engineer and felt there was a simple solution as to why the church and the officers could not hear the music in the parking lot even though it was traveling into the neighborhood. He pulled up Google images of the church and explained that the ceiling was glass, which acted as a large speaker to the building. He further explained the roof’s angle would allow for the so-called speaker to push the music over the parking lot and into the neighborhood. He asked pastor Omagh if there was any soundproofing or insulation on the roof of the worship center. Pastor Omewah stated there was not and that from the worship center of the roof was simply a glass ceiling. The engineer explained that if they were to put some soundproofing material along the roof like they had on the walls, this would likely fix the problem.

At the conclusion of the meeting Pastor Omewah agreed to have soundproofing material placed in the ceiling of the worship center. The neighbors agreed to call their representative of the church directly if they could hear music at any time and the church agreed to make their representative available to the neighborhood during all revivals and services where music would be played. As a result of their newfound agreement the neighbors who had filed affidavits against the church asked Officer Ravin if they could drop the charges and allow more time to see if this new agreement worked. Officer Ravin was able to recall the citation and informed Pastor Omewah that he did not have to appear in court.

**ASSESSMENT**

Officer Ravin continued to monitor the situation from October 2013 through the present. Officer Ravin has also visited with neighbors and the church to see that the agreement was being honored by both sides. Prior to the installation of the soundproof ceiling, any noise issues were resolved between the representative of the neighborhood and the representative of the church. No calls were made to the police department or City Hall after the mediation process took place. Pastor Omewah did install the soundproofing along the ceiling of his worship center and the neighbors are reporting much improved conditions during the revivals. Mrs. Sheehan has reported that her autistic child is able to sleep at night now and that their quality of life has improved greatly not only by the lack of disruption but also in knowing that they had developed a positive relationship with the staff of the church. Pastor Omewah reports that he too has an improved experience during his services now that he does not have to stress about disrupting his neighbors while being able to provide the type of service that his congregation enjoys.

**SUMMARY**

In summary, we feel this project is a good example of how problem oriented policing does not necessarily require the police to solve the problem for the community. With the current state of affairs in the United States regarding police and community relations, it was important that the police department did not come off “heavy-handed” in this situation. The officers in the situation parted ways with the typical “file charges and let the court prove who’s guilty” mentality by allowing the disputants to resolve the situation themselves. Both Officer Ravin and Officer Glenn are certified mediators in the State of Texas. They have learned that while they may mediate situations like this it is always best to allow the disputants to resolve the situation themselves. The Plano Police Department and its Problem-Solving Unit simply provided an environment where both sides of the dispute were able to gain empathy for the other sides’ point of view. This resulted in a mutually beneficial solution to the problem that should last indefinitely. Calls for service have been reduced to zero and officers no longer need to spend hours each month monitoring the situation. Most importantly, both sides feel that the situation has been resolved and what could have been a media disaster for the City of Plano was quietly resolved without any negative press.



**Agency and Officer Information**

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