Broken glass, “tagged” fences, crumbling walls and streets filled with potholes are stark reminders of urban blight. They almost always accompany internal moral decay and external “white flight” from our inner cities to the suburbs. So it was with the neighborhoods near the intersection of N. 15th and Colcord Ave.

There was a time in the decades of the early 20th Century when this area thrived. Beautiful, large homes lined the streets. There were businesses like the Texas Theatre, Witt’s Cafeteria, North Waco Tropical Fish, Moran’s Restaurant, West Junior High and Safeway Grocery. Back then, there were few vacant lots, and children played outside with few worries of harm. Yet times changed and the turbulent 60’s brought a cultural upheaval nationally and locally. Martin Luther King, Jr. was marching for Civil Rights and African Americans now began to populate white neighborhoods. But like most people of color, their economic security was fragile and good paying jobs were hard to find. As the business community abandoned the area, poverty encroached.

In the history of God’s people, Israel had also experienced loss of their city. Jerusalem was defeated and the Jews were exiled because of their sins of hypocrisy and double-mindedness, which included God’s punishment for their empty religious talk and acts and attitudes toward the poor. The exiled Jews in Babylon lost hope that they would ever see their city again, especially not rebuilt as in days of glory. But the prophets of the 8th Century encouraged them, reminded them it was God who brings “shalom” to the city, so that “all might prosper.” Led by the prophet Nehemiah and his contemporaries, the walls were rebuilt and life was eventually restored for God’s people. Isaiah proclaimed, “You will be called the Repairer of Broken Walls; the Repairer of Streets with Dwellings.”

The message is clearer when we understand that God’s kingdom is both now and yet to come. Christians often “spiritualize” heaven as the only viable escape from lives of toil and suffering. We forget the Lord’s prayer that reminds us, it’s “on earth as it is in heaven.” Followers of God are not to abandon the city, but become the healers, the repairers, and the restorers, now in the midst of the problems.

For us at Mission Waco, the restoration of the old grocery store is not just a bunch of “do-gooder” Christians trying to make a formerly decaying neighborhood nicer. It is addressing our sense of “call” to bring healing and justice among the poor and disenfranchised. It is confronting a food desert, promoting health, adding a few jobs, and reminding all of us that God is “reconciling” his people of different skin colors, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds into a community and neighborhoods where love predominates and children can play together. Rebuilding, restoring and reconciling are visible works of our God, which we are privileged to participate in and then celebrate newness for all. Most of you have joined and supported this faith journey of holistic renewal. Just as the workers in Nehemiah’s celebrated their rebuilding effort, so we hope you, too, will come celebrate “jubilee” with us and thank God.