

go neighboring

by Dorothy Clark, Person County Missions in Roxboro

In March 2016 I was privileged to present a workshop, “Re-Thinking Local Missions,” at CBFNC’s Annual Gathering. I was asked to reflect on that workshop and share thoughts on the topic.

As Christians, we participate in mission work because we are compelled to do so. Throughout the Bible, we are reminded to help the poor, widows, imprisoned, and the hungry. The fact is that any person, civic group, or agency can perform these same tasks, and there are plenty who do an outstanding job. However, I believe that as missionaries, as agents of the church, our engagement with the people we serve should be of a different nature. Jesus’ teaching of the Greatest Commandment was the beginning of my re-thinking local missions:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:37-40 (NRSV).

With that passage in mind, the workshop was built around the following idea: what if, instead of going “to serve the poor,” “to feed the hungry,” or “to help the needy,” we went instead with the idea of helping a *neighbor*. Thinking and speaking of our work in terms of a person’s present state obscures the person and highlights their condition. Further, it maintains a distance, a barrier if you will, between “us” and “them.” It keeps us from seeing “them” as someone just like us. On the other hand, offering assistance to a *neighbor* who is temporarily poor, hungry, or in need, encourages connection with a person and not a label. It also acknowledges that with God’s help, their present condition can change.



Why should we reframe our thought about local mission as *neighboring*, as I’ve taken to calling it? Going back to the verses from Matthew, we are told to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Love comes from getting to know a person, from developing a relationship. Think of the people in your community that you consider neighbors. They might not necessarily be the people next door; they are the ones you talk to, spend time with, the ones you share a laugh with, no matter their physical proximity. I suggest that when we go *neighboring*, we are sharing the love that Jesus talked about. We are also laying a foundation to build our congregations. Consider whose invitation to attend worship services you are more likely to accept, a neighbor’s – someone you know - or a stranger who comes knocking at your door? I work with Person County Missions in Roxboro, an ecumenical group of churches who visit housing communities spreading “Jesus love.” The first time we knock on a person’s door, we do so with a cake in hand.

People are much more inclined to talk when your opening line is “I’ve got a cake for you!” We can then begin the work of creating opportunities to build relationships.

We should not overlook the spiritual growth that comes from reorienting our focus to helping *neighbors* instead of helping the needy. At the August meeting of Durham Congregations in Action, I listened as two insightful teenagers gave a fresh perspective on exactly what I had tried to convey in the workshop. Their report was a reflection about what they learned from participating in the Youth Summer Service Week. Working closely with people who began as strangers, they were able to “get a personal connection.” Prior to spending time with the people they helped, one admitted that she might have been afraid if she just passed by the neighborhood. But working with people and getting to know them, according to the teen, you “get to know why you are doing what you are doing.” I can’t think of a better testament for *neighboring*. When we reframe our thoughts in this manner, we don’t wait to do missions. Instead, we begin to see *neighboring* opportunities all around us!

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