

From Targets to Friends

by Larry Hovis
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The 2009 movie, *The Soloist*, is based on the true story of Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez who is having trouble coming up with story ideas. Then he meets Nathaniel Ayers, a mentally ill, homeless street musician with prodigious talent. He produces amazing music in spite of his sub-standard instruments and personal challenges. Steve develops a relationship with Nathaniel and writes a series of articles in which he draws attention to the plight of the underclass in Los Angeles. As he strives to transform the lives of Nathaniel and his fellow street-dwellers, he finds that his friendship with Nathaniel ends up transforming himself.

I don't know what motivated Lopez, but most Christians are motivated by faith. They desire to minister to those around them and to transform their lives for the better. Most churches sponsor mission programs and local ministries targeting needy groups with a variety of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Churches seek to involve their members in ministries to "the least of these" – defined in various ways.

In 2015, while serving as a divinity student intern for CBFNC, Seth Hix conducted a research project in which he called almost one hundred church leaders (lay and clergy) to interview them on the state of their churches and their partnership with CBFNC. He learned that most of the churches in the sample are involved in robust missions ministries, locally and globally. As Seth quipped, "If you want a wheelchair ramp built anywhere in North Carolina, I can hook you up with a church that can build it!"

A recurring theme Seth heard in these interviews was that even though these church leaders were pleased with their efforts, they felt that something was missing. They were doing many good things "to" and "for" their neighbors, but they weren't taking the next step of sharing life "with" their neighbors. Many of these church leaders said they needed to learn how to establish relationships with those to whom they ministered in ways that would welcome them into their churches and their lives.

In short, they desired to establish holy friendships.

CBFNC Church and Clergy Coach, Eddie Hammett, describes this shift as "from missional to incarnational." In the early 2000s, our fellowship discovered the concept of "missional church." That is, rather than simply trying to attract people to

church buildings and programs, we sought to deploy church members to minister in their communities and the world. Rather than seeing the church as the center of God's mission, we began to see the church as a vehicle for engaging in God's mission. That was an important discovery.

Hammett says that now a new shift is needed. Rather than "parachuting" into a community to do good deeds, we must "pitch our tents" in the community and live out our message and ministry in relationship with others.

I heard of two examples, at the individual and congregational level, of folks in our fellowship who have sought to make this shift.

First, Daniel Vestal, former Executive Coordinator of CBF Global, struck up a friendship with a homeless person in Atlanta, where he lives. This was not a transactional relationship in which Daniel did things for the homeless person on a one-shot basis. This was a true friendship in which they visited as often as Daniel's busy schedule allowed, sharing conversation, getting to know one another, and supporting one another. Daniel said it was as enriching to him (perhaps more so) than to his friend.

Second, Ellen Price, former minister of hospitality at Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, led that church to engage in efforts to reach their neighbors – the neighbors who lived near members. She encouraged church members to invite neighbors to a meal in their homes on a particular night, not for any purpose other than to offer hospitality and get to know them better. When some church members objected to that approach, countering that they could invite people to their homes anytime, she replied, "You could, but you won't. If we all do this together, on the same night, we are more likely to actually take the time to get to know our neighbors."

John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." I like the way Eugene Peterson renders this sentence in *The Message*: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood..."

If that was God's approach, how can we do any less? And if we do so, like Steve Lopez, we might find that the life that gets transformed is our own.

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