

that church

by Marc Wyatt, CBF Advocate for Internationals

You may recall that our friend, Jay (featured in CBF Global's Offering for Global Missions video, www.vimeo.com/222863247), is a Special Immigrant Visa arrival in North Carolina. For their service to the U.S. government in Iraq and Afghanistan, certain Iraqis and Afghans are granted Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status overseas by the U.S. Department of State and are admitted to the U.S. by the Department of Homeland Security. The Department of State, in conjunction with the Voluntary agencies and Office for Refugee Resettlement (ORR), assist with the resettlement and integration of SIVs into the U.S. An SIV is eligible for the same ORR benefits and services for the same time period as a refugee, from the first day the SIV arrives in the U.S.

While storm clouds swirled outside, 19 friends assembled from Snyder Memorial, Fayetteville; First, Fayetteville; Mount Pisgah, Fayetteville; First, Red Springs; and Godwin Heights, Lumberton. We met around the table to talk about folks like Jay who were now our neighbors. We hoped to encourage each other in our ministries of welcome and hospitality, learn from one another, and seek ways to collaborate when and where it was possible.

Our conversation started with an excerpt from *Embracing Our Neighbor*, a 30-day prayer guide produced by my colleagues on the Internationals North America Team. Dr. Greg Smith states,

As CBF Global Missions field personnel serving in cities and towns across our great country, we have heard and responded to the call to welcome with open arms the immigrants, refugees, international students and others whom God brings to our shores. Ours is not the job of timidly peeking through the blinds at new faces moving into our neighborhoods, but of joyously flinging open the front door and shouting "Welcome, friend, we're glad you're here!"

Yet Christ's call to "welcome the stranger" (Matthew 25:35) leads us as his followers to embrace and receive the stranger as a true neighbor, even as a fellow traveler (Luke 10:25-37) who, like we ourselves, is in need of acceptance, friendship, healing, and opportunity.

Embracing our neighbors takes on different forms and meanings. It means taking the initiative to reach out to our immigrant friends, even when we face rejection or misunderstanding. It means loving our new friends enough to share our lives with them and receive their lives in return. It means listening to their stories, without prejudice and without judgment, walking alongside them when the road is smooth, and, especially, when it is rough and the destination is unsure.

Ultimately, though, embracing our immigrant neighbors and friends means receiving and caring for each of them as God in Christ receives and cares for us (John 13:34-35).

CBF's Global Missions Distinctives provide guidance as we model what it means to embrace our neighbors in Jesus' name. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and through ministries of incarnational presence, we gladly embrace our international neighbors:



■ *By bearing witness to Jesus Christ as we invite these friends to trust their lives to him. The greatest gift we share with refugees, immigrants, international students, and others is our faith in Jesus to recreate, renew, and transform all of life. Our witness through the actions we embody as well as the words we speak gives validity to the ministry we share with our international neighbors.*

■ *By cultivating beloved community in a way that seeks genuine relationships with all internationals with whom we come into contact. We cherish the bonds of love and trust forged between our international friends and ourselves. We believe each person, no matter who they are or how they arrived in our communities, is made in God's image, full of worth and demanding our respect.*

■ *By seeking transformational development in all aspects of life. Daily God is working to renew not only personal and community life but also the social and cultural structures which govern and control life. Our calling is to "co-labor" or collaborate with God (1 Corinthians 3:9) to transform the many systems that impact the lives of our neighbors, in full anticipation of God's kingdom coming "on earth as it is in heaven."*

We led the group in a brainstorming session and read Leviticus 19:33-34 and Deuteronomy 10:18-19. We stated, "Let's imagine a church that hears God's words and says, 'We want to be **that church!**' When **that church** embraces its international neighbors, what does it look like?" Our friends responded with these words: No Fear. Open. Hospitality. Diversity. Empathy. God not Government. Giving. Warm. Friendly. Incarnation. Investing in cultures. Community. Listens. Out in the community. The community is in the church. Learns. Partners with others. Outward-focused. Relational. Fun. Good food. Shared ministry (all kinds). Diversity in worship. Availability. Trusts. Willing to change. Willing to down-size. Willing to share with others. Intentional. Cares about others more than selves. Art reflects people in church. Multilingual. Multicultural. Flags of countries. Interpreters. All have access to resources. Staff reflects diversity in congregation. Allows children to be around foreigners. Hospitable toward other faiths.

Then we asked, "What does **that church** have to do **differently** to become a church that embraces its international neighbors?" They responded: Something must die. Willing to be rejected by others. Change long-range plan. Education. Discover Biblical hospitality. Embrace differences.

Friends, let's be **that church** that believes what the Bible says, asks good hard questions of itself, makes changes, and embraces with open arms their international neighbors. **That church** is doing just that over in Cumberland and Robeson Counties. What about in your neck of the woods? Want to be **that church** too?