

fishing rods and winter coats

by Larry Hovis,
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Like many North Carolinians of my generation, one of my favorite television series of all time is *The Andy Griffith Show*. During one particularly memorable episode (out of many memorable episodes), Opie was about eight years old. He was doing chores and odd jobs, trying to save enough money to buy a new fishing rod. Andy was proud of the way his son was working hard and learning how to manage and save his money.

While this was going on, Opie met a girl at school and they became good friends. Opie told his father he needed a little more money, and asked if he would give it to him. Fishing season was about to begin and Andy assumed it was for the new rod. He told Opie that since he had worked so hard, he would help him with the remainder of the money. When the first day of fishing season arrived, Opie got out his old rod. Andy asked him where the new rod was. Opie said that he didn't use the money to buy a fishing rod, but to give his girlfriend a present instead. Andy became incensed. He scolded Opie for wasting his hard-earned money on a trifling present for some girl. He refused to let him go fishing and made him stay at home to think about what he'd done.

That night, Andy talked to Opie about what had transpired earlier. Opie said that he didn't mean to defy his father or waste his money. He said he was just trying to do what was right. Andy still didn't understand. With tears in his eyes, Opie explained that his girlfriend came from a poor family. She had very little clothing. Her coat was tattered and torn and failed to keep her warm on cold days. Opie had used his fishing rod money to buy her a winter coat.

How did Opie learn to be so generous? Who taught him the way of generosity? Even though Andy looked clueless in this episode, the larger Andy Griffith story reveals Opie's father to be the primary molder and shaper of his character. If Opie was generous, then Andy and the Mayberry community surely showed him the way.

Although not explicitly stated in the show, I believe the ultimate teacher of generosity is the one Jesus refers to as "Our father who art in heaven..." God is the original Generous One. Though we often refer to God's characteristics or attributes with concepts like omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, transcendence, immanence, and holiness, I believe generosity should be high on the list.

God's generosity began with creation, continued with the formation of a special people called Israel, culminated with the gift of the Son, led to the birth of the Church, and was carried out by the gift of the Spirit. To summarize the generosity of God, "God so loved the world he gave..." (John 3:16).

If generosity is a central characteristic of God, then surely God's people are called to follow God's example. Ephesians makes this extremely clear: "Be imitators of God" (5:1). As God is generous, so are God's people called to be generous.

This year, CBFNC is emphasizing the theme, "FitChurch: Nurturing Healthy Congregations." We believe healthy churches are generous churches. They are generous toward God, toward one another, and toward their communities and world.

This issue of *The Gathering* explores generous churches from several angles. The partner church list is a way of celebrating churches whose generosity extends to CBFNC and, ultimately, to God's mission in North Carolina and beyond. Without the generosity of partner churches, CBFNC would not exist.

In addition, Ruben Swint shares practices by which churches can grow generosity. James Smith explains how we can be generous after our walk on earth is concluded. Jim Hylton describes ways churches can cultivate financial generosity beyond the offering plate. Several articles illustrate how partner churches express and cultivate generosity in a variety of ways, including but not limited to financial generosity.

Generosity is a hallmark of God, God's Son, and God's people. Generosity is expressed in a variety of ways. Generosity is a lifestyle. It all comes down to the question, "Are we about buying fishing rods for ourselves or giving winter coats to others?"