

Many churches aspire to be open to all. Unfortunately, when it comes to the nitty-gritty practicalities, the road to decline is paved with good intentions. When intentions turn into intentionality, however, something like Grace Crossing, Charlotte, happens. “Our church is brave enough to remake itself when it needs to. We began as Allen Street Baptist Church, moved and became Shamrock Drive Baptist Church, moved to a local high school, and now have a new building and minister to a developing community in Charlotte. We are an agile church. I say that Grace Crossing is a 100-year-old church plant,” says Jason Blanton, pastor since 2010.

The church had to make some difficult decisions before making this move. Financially, things were very tight. Demographically, the church was made up of about sixty older white people. The church was moving into a community that was very diverse ethnically, economically, and in almost every other way. The church made the decision to focus on ministering to all persons in their new community. Since the 2013 move, the church has doubled in size, with almost all of the growth coming from the local community.

The church’s website states, *Grace Crossing is a place that embraces differences - in politics, theology, and culture. What that means is that you will worship alongside people who are liberal, conservative, or somewhere in between. It means you can bring any and all of your questions, and never feel ashamed. It also means your questions are just as likely to be met with more questions than easy answers. If there is a national debate around an issue, you can be sure it is being debated in our church, and we believe that our differences make us stronger, not weaker. We are people on a journey of faith - together.*

Nathaniel Perez was born and raised for much of his life in the Dominican Republic. He and his family attended when the church met at the high school but then the church went through “a nasty divorce” with a pastor. That was disillusioning to the Perez family, so they dropped out of church for about three years. When Grace Crossing finished building in his neighborhood, they began visiting again. “We have a patient God. I tried to ignore God for a while, but for the sake of my children God called us back to this church.”

Doretha Allen visited the church alone two years ago and was overwhelmed by the welcome she received. “I wouldn’t bring my grandkids anywhere they are not wanted. But when we come here, I get so many hugs! It really goes to your heart.” Now, when Doretha attends, there are 13 others who join her! “My grandchildren love their church, their Sunday School teachers, and their pastor. They pray for our pastor by name. Jason is concerned for all of us and he really listens to your questions or concerns before giving an answer.”

When Bob Huck moved to Charlotte, he visited a larger church but it felt impersonal to him. Bob looked up Grace Crossing on the internet and

listened to some of Jason’s sermons. “He preaches from the Bible!” Bob says. He visited the church. “The thing that first impressed me was that everyone made eye-contact. That’s very important to me.” Bob sees his diversity not in his ethnicity but in his history. He is a recovering alcoholic, sober for 40 years now, and eager to

help others on their recovery road. “Not a lot of churches will let an old drunk be a deacon,” he says.

Jason notes, “We are struggling in a society that forces us to choose camps. It is a war of division and nonsense. The church is the only solution

to our nation’s divide. I believe that God has never looked on a face that he has not loved. If you can get people to start there, lots of your problems go easier.”

Grace Crossing has spent years undergoing this transformation. “It has been hard for all of us. We are a weird Petri dish trying to make it work. We’ve gone through a lot of grief, pain, distrust, and financial crisis. Anything that could go bad, did. But we got back to our roots as a church that cooperates with others and actively reaches out into the community.”

Can Grace Crossing be replicated? Jason says, “Churches are like fingerprints. They can’t be replicated but you can see patterns. We cannot be franchised. A church needs to discern who it is, be unapologetic about that, and do what it does well. Most importantly, you must mean it when you say, ‘All are welcome.’”

all are welcome

by Rick Jordan, CBFNC Church Resources Coordinator



Left to right: Nathaniel Perez, Doretha Allen, and Bob Huck.