

On a warm Saturday in February, I stood by the main street of Black Mountain and watched as the motorcade bearing Billy Graham's body passed by. To see a body in a pine box has a way of focusing the mind. It forces one to ask, "Why are we doing what we do?"

For example, why is CBFNC focusing on *Equipping Ministers and Churches*? We are focusing on this so that healthy churches and healthy ministers in healthy partnerships with each other can share the good news that real life comes through following Jesus as Lord. That is our theme today, "Fit Church." Through Jesus there is true health and real life, both on this side of the grave and beyond.

And why are we focusing on *Embracing Our Neighbors through Missions*? Because the world is coming to North Carolina. Because our neighborhoods are changing. Once they looked like Mayberry. Now they look more like the United Nations. Many of our new neighbors are in such transition that their old ways of coping with life are not working anymore. They need a transforming encounter with Jesus, who makes a way beyond all the death-dealing divisions and tribalisms of our world into the life-giving unity of his Spirit.

And why are we focusing on *Engaging Students and Young Adults*? Because passing the faith on to our children and our young adults is a matter of life or death. Because the college campuses that stretch across our state are mission fields ripe for harvest. Those students hate fake, self-serving institutions, but they crave authentic spiritual experience that will make a difference in this world.

And why are we expanding the impact of our Annual Gathering? Because North Carolina needs a gathering like this. Because there is nothing else quite like it. Because when we gather together like this, we go home more alive because we have connected more closely with each other and with the One who is the Vine that gives life to our branches.

As we do this, there are some limitations and some challenges we face.

Funds are limited now. The flush times of the fifties were an unusual fluke in our history. Now we are returning to the more usual story of Christendom, when there have always seemed to be too few loaves and fishes to nourish the Church. At CBFNC, we have faced that reality by making most of our staff positions part-time. This has required significant sacrifices from our staff.

Besides the challenge of limited funds, we also face the challenge of faithfully and effectively channeling those funds. Our Mission Resource Plan has done wonderful things for Baptist ministries statewide and worldwide. Now that the MRP has served us for more than a decade, we are realizing that there are ways to direct those funds that can be more consistent, less confusing, and more responsive.

We face the challenge of honest disagreements about things that matter, such as human sexuality. Again, this is the usual story of the church ever since the Jerusalem Conference that was recorded in the Book of Acts. We have always had to work out how to keep true to what makes us distinct and obedient people of God, yet also how to be responsive to what God's Spirit is doing among us.

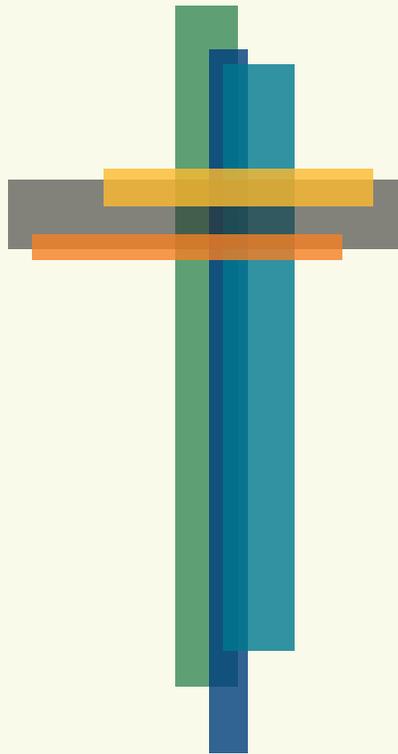
Our younger generations are watching how we do this. They don't expect us to be perfect. But as I've mentioned, one thing they cannot abide is us being fake. They expect us to be authentic and genuine in our discussions and actions. The

Illumination Project has sought to do that, even as Baptists continue to disagree passionately.

And remember,

we also disagree autonomously. While CBF Global has altered its policy and practice, your church is autonomous and free to chart its own course. Likewise, CBFNC is autonomous and has not changed its policies and operations. So let us keep on being the kind of Baptists who can speak truth in love to each other while continuing to cooperate together in every area where integrity and conscience will allow. In essential things, unity. In all things, charity.

Like I said, when you see a body in a pine box passing by, it focuses the mind. Why do we do all this – balancing strong convictions with generous cooperation, figuring out staffing and funding? Why are we so focused on *Equipping Ministers and Churches*, *Embracing our Neighbors through Missions*, *Engaging Students and Young Adults*, and *Expanding our Annual Gatherings*? Because what we're about is a matter of life or death. It's a matter of passing on this life-giving way of Jesus on to the next generation. It's a matter of sharing Christ, in whom there is no East or West, with the nations who are streaming into our neighborhoods. It's a matter of passing the faith on to our children and our children's children. May the Lord grant us strength and courage for the living of these days.



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2018 Annual Gathering Report

by Doug Murray, CBFNC Moderator