

# the heartbeat of God

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

Due to the timing of the Annual Gathering, CBFNC's fiscal and organizational year runs April 1 - March 31. The first major event of the year is our annual All Councils Retreat, an overnight experience in late April or early May for the Coordinating Council, Ministry Councils, staff, and sometimes other invited CBFNC leadership groups. It's a time for team building, organizing for the new year, developing a shared focus, and spiritual formation.

We met this year on May 3-4 at Caraway Conference Center. The first day featured presentations by two guest leaders. Dave Odom, of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, spoke on the topic, *The Pivot: Necessary for Today's Leadership*. Utilizing the basketball image of the pivot, in this age of challenge and fast-paced change, he encouraged us to keep one foot planted in tradition while we experiment with new approaches.

The second presentation, *Mercy and Justice: The Heartbeat of God*, featured Barry Jones, professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Campbell University Divinity School. He reminded us that a normal heartbeat has two phases, systole and diastole. During the first phase, diastole, blood from the atria (upper chambers) fill the ventricles (lower chambers). During the second phase, systole, blood from the ventricles is pumped to the body or lungs.

In a similar way, Barry noted, mercy and justice are two phases of God's "heartbeat." Beginning with Exodus and working his way through other biblical texts, he showed how mercy and justice aren't extras or add-ons to biblical faith, but sit at the core of God's character, and should be central for God's people. The overarching direction of biblical faith, beginning with Israel and moving to the Church, reveals a God who is greatly concerned with extending mercy and justice, and forming a people who maintain that focus as well.

A healthy faith will show mercy *and* seek justice. One without the other is like a heart out of rhythm. Justice without mercy produces self-righteousness, Barry noted. Mercy without justice is arbitrary and short-sighted.

I struggle more with justice than with mercy and I think that's true of most folks in our Fellowship. We tend to lean more to the mercy side of the equation than to justice. Perhaps that's because we think of justice primarily as punishment for wrongdoing. We hear about injustice in the criminal justice system. We have an image of God that is focused primarily

on love, grace, and forgiveness and we gravitate toward biblical texts that support that inclination.

We have a too small and distorted view of justice. Too often, we only think of justice in terms of a corrupt system that unfairly punishes those who have the least access to power. True justice is about making things right. It's about restoring order to chaos. It's about treating everyone with dignity and fairness, regardless of external differences. The scales of true justice are blind.

Justice involves police, courts of law, and prisons, to be sure. They serve an essential function in society. Biblical justice is about restoring a fallen creation to its proper state. It's about reconciliation. It's about loving God and neighbor as ourselves

... that is, not only having nice feelings for our neighbor but actually desiring and working for the same good for our neighbor that we desire and work for ourselves. It's about "making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

In some ways, mercy is individual and justice is structural. That is, we extend mercy by forgiving our neighbor who has wronged us and addressing the immediate concerns of our neighbor in need. We do justice by addressing the systems that keep our neighbor in need or encourage our neighbor to behave destructively.

The struggle to understand mercy and justice reminds me of a story I heard about a group of friends who were having a picnic, lounging at a bend in a river near rapids. Someone noticed a swimmer in the water flailing his arms and shouting, "Help! Help!" The friends mobilized and managed to save the drowning person. Afterward, as they rested, they noticed someone else struggling against the current. They saved that one, too. Then more people appeared in the rough water and they mobilized a rescue effort,

eventually saving dozens of people from drowning.

Finally, one of the picnickers left the rescue operation and started walking upstream. A companion shouted out, "Why are you leaving us? There are so many more to save. We need you!"

She replied, "I'm going upstream to figure out why all these people keep falling in the river. Someone needs to address the source of this problem."

Mercy and justice are complex concepts, but they are central to God's character and to the work of God's people. Either without the other is incomplete. Christians and churches who strive to be heart-healthy will focus on both.

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