

from missional to incarnational

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

In 2004, the term “missional” was new to most of us in the CBF community. CBF Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal had published a book entitled, *It's Time: An Urgent Call to Christian Mission*, in which he sought to clarify what it means to be a missional church. CBFNC leaders adopted a strategic plan centered on this concept. For the next ten years, in a variety of ways, we tried to encourage Christians and churches to shift their focus from only attracting people (“Come unto me...”) to also sending people (“Go ye therefore...”).

During that period we saw an explosion of churches expanding their missions programs. Not only did they send youth and adults on mission trips to faraway places, many congregations also developed service projects in their communities – particularly with the poor, the vulnerable, and the underserved.

In the summer of 2015, Wake Forest Divinity School student and CBFNC intern Seth Hix conducted a research project. Seth conducted phone interviews with ninety-one church leaders from across North Carolina. The largest number of those interviewed was laity. The remaining interviewees were evenly divided between senior/solo pastors and staff ministers. Questions centered on four broad topics: congregational identity and values; church strengths; church challenges; and relationship to CBFNC/CBF Global.

Overall, missions was judged to be the greatest strength of this group of churches. Interviewees described a variety of ways their churches were involved in missions, especially in their communities. As Seth joked, “If anyone in any part of North Carolina needs a wheelchair ramp built, I can hook you up with a Baptist church to do it!” From Seth’s conversations with our partner churches, it appeared that the missional message had been internalized and realized in very tangible ways.

There was only one problem. The church leaders told Seth that they hadn’t gone far enough. They had embraced the idea of missions, especially local missions. They had embraced mission projects. But they hadn’t always embraced the people who were the recipients of these ministries. They had often failed to establish relationships. They were sometimes guilty of “parachute missions,” dropping into a community or a situation of need, providing a quick fix, then going back home without getting to know the people with whom they ministered.

What they needed, they told Seth, was to go deeper. They needed not only to engage their neighbors, they needed to embrace their neighbors. They needed to move from an incomplete understanding of missional (increased mission activities) to being incarnational. They needed to learn that faith is best shared, not at a distance, but face-to-face and hand-in-hand. This faith is shared over the long haul, not just short-term.

CBFNC has just completed another strategic planning process.

You’ll be hearing more about it in the coming months. One of our new initiatives is “Embrace Neighbors.” It’s more than just a fancy way to say “missions and evangelism,” though it definitely involves missions and evangelism. We believe the time has come not only to minister *to* our neighbors but to minister *with* our neighbors. The time has come to stop holding them at arm’s length, and to start wrapping our arms around them with the love of Jesus.

We know many Christians and churches in our Fellowship are already embracing their neighbors. We want to tell their stories and encourage others to discern whom God is calling them to embrace. Who are your neighbors and how can you embrace them?

- Perhaps your neighbors are refugees from around the world who have come to your community fleeing violence, persecution, or simply seeking a better way of life for their families.
- Perhaps your neighbors are the people who live in the houses surrounding your church property (even though you may live miles away).
- Perhaps your neighbors are your literal neighbors – those who live on your block.
- Perhaps your neighbors are your co-workers.
- Perhaps your neighbors are the children and families in your neighborhood school.
- Perhaps your neighbors are people of a different race with whom you’ve been acquainted, but never really taken the time to get to know.
- Perhaps your neighbors are people of a different faith, who may be the object of prejudice and ridicule.

Wanda Kidd recently moved to the town of Mars Hill. Wanda and her husband, Dan, purchased a house near Mars Hill Baptist Church, where they moved their membership.

Wanda’s life has been devoted to relational ministry with young adults, especially on college campuses. One of Wanda’s first priorities was to invite a group of young adults to her home on a Sunday evening for a meal. Some have a strong church connection, others none at all. The goal is to meet monthly and provide a safe place for spiritual conversations to which they can invite their friends, some of whom may be too intimidated to attend a church service.

Though Wanda doesn’t know where this effort may lead, she is clear on one thing: Christ has called her to embrace young adults, not only through her official CBFNC responsibilities but also the young adult neighbors in her community, as she goes about her daily life.

Mission and Ministry Offering Envelopes Offering envelopes are inserted in this edition of *The Gathering* to receive CBFNC’s annual *Mission and Ministry Offering*. Please give generously. Additional envelopes may be ordered by calling (888) 822-1944.