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fellowship!

magazine

WINTER 2024-2025

Called in Context

Telika McCoy
says “Yes” to
Mount Peace
Baptist



Who and what are we seeking?



PAUL BAXLEY is
Executive Coordinator
of the Cooperative
Baptist Fellowship.

As Christians move from Christmas to Epiphany and beyond, the texts of scripture call on us to ask an essential question: “Who and what are we seeking?”

The Magi came from the East to Jerusalem because they were seeking the one born King of the Jews. Their arrival in Jerusalem and the question they asked challenged religious and political leaders alike. And by their willingness to travel across the world in an act of holy seeking, they made clear that from the earliest moments of the Christian faith, the way of Jesus has been global. When they entered the presence of the young child Jesus, they offered the earliest glimpse of the worldwide community that Jesus was born to establish. The seeking of the Magi formed the Church and participated in changing the course of history.

As I remember the story of the visit of the Magi, I find myself asking really basic questions. What are we seeking in this season of our life and faith? How are we seeking to be the presence of Christ? How are we pursuing the mission of Jesus even at personal sacrifice? What gifts are we bringing to Jesus and his work in the world? And, like Jesus’ mother and others, are we willing to receive the gifts and presence of new friends and even holy strangers on our way to deeper faithfulness?

There are some things I know. For example, I know that God has gathered our Cooperative Baptist Fellowship community of congregations and individuals so that we can seek the thriving of congregations and the flourishing of their leaders. Congregations are uniquely positioned to participate in Jesus’ mission in their communities, contribute to Jesus’ mission around the world, and be a demonstration of the values of the reign of Christ in the midst of a world that is badly divided while people are suffering tremendously.

I know our Fellowship is called to do all we can to encourage congregations and join with them to notice and nurture new generations of women and men whom God is calling to ministry and mission.

I know God is using our Fellowship to pursue deeper faithfulness to Jesus’ mission around the world in really beautiful and unusual ways. So many of CBF’s field personnel have served for more than a decade, some even more than two. Over those years, they have built deep relationships with Christians and churches all around the world and are now better positioned than ever to draw our congregations into a transforming participation in Christ’s work globally. In my travels I have seen the beauty of the faith and commitment of our field personnel, the quality of their ministries, and I have seen our congregations changed by deeper engagement in global mission.

As I shared at General Assembly last summer, our Fellowship is also becoming more racially, ethnically, generationally and geographically diverse at a very moment when our world is becoming more polarized. That is true in our congregations, and it is true across our Fellowship. This means our life together gives us more and more opportunity to encounter new friends and receive the gifts of holy strangers, just like we first see in the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus and his family.

We have the opportunity to seek a holy openness to difference, to recognize that God often meets us not only in our holiest most established friendships, but also in the gifts brought by those we first receive as strangers. We are being called to seek openness, to practice hospitality, to be a community of remarkable belonging and in so doing offer a demonstration of the power of Christ.

Who and what are you seeking in your life? In the life of your congregation? In deeper participation in our Fellowship? Are we willing to seek not only through our prayers and our presence but also through bringing our gifts and offering ourselves in tangible ways? God is at work in our world and in our Fellowship. Let’s be overcome by the same Spirit that summoned the Magi so that in our seeking, our lives, our congregations, our communities and our world might be changed.



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fellowship! magazine

FROM THE EDITOR

We are excited to share with you the Winter 2024 issue of *fellowship!* magazine. In these pages, you will learn about CBF's *Called in Context* initiative and read the story of Telika McCoy, who was called into ministry from her own congregation—she just couldn't say "no" (pp. 16-19).



Baptist journalist Marv Knox writes about the *McCall Exploratory Process*, a racial repair pilot launched by CBF in 2023 (pp. 10-13). Contributing writer Jennifer Colosimo shares the inspiring story of First Baptist Church, Morrow, Ga., a small but mighty congregation whose food pantry is making a difference in its community (pp. 22-23).

Chris Hughes tells the story of Kenny Phillips, the longtime disaster response director for CBF Florida, working in a small, forgotten town in Florida after Hurricanes Helene and Milton (pp. 4-5). You will also find stories of our churches and partners helping communities recover in the aftermath of these devastating hurricanes (pp. 6-7).

Read about CBF's *Thriving Congregations Initiative* (TCI) flourishing in Tampa, Fla. (pp. 25-26), and hear TCI director Chris Aho's invitation to engage in faithful experimentation and innovation (p. 24). Finally, longtime CBF contributing writer Grayson Hester shares the compelling story of asylum-seeker Yosenderi and her journey from Venezuela to Texas across the Darién Gap—available in both English and Spanish (pp. 27-31).

We hope you find this issue both informative and inspirational as we move from the season of Christmas into Epiphany, celebrating the light of Christ that guides us into new beginnings and shared ministry in the year ahead.



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Disaster response veteran Kenny Phillips forges new partnerships amid hurricane recovery

By Chris Hughes

When the state of Florida got hit by back-to-back hurricanes within two weeks, Kenny Phillips was ready to respond, loading up his truck with as many supplies as he could fit in his vehicle and heading south to see where he could help.

“I called my buddies up, and I grabbed a handful of them, we started loading up every tarp we could get, every container that we could get gas in, as much ice as we could bring and about 10 ginormous coolers, muck-out buckets and just started heading south,” he explained.

By buddies, Phillips means the group he worked closely with in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, an unprecedented Category 5 hurricane that made landfall and battered Florida’s panhandle in 2018. It’s relationships like these that Phillips has cultivated over his eight years as disaster response coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida and the

Caribbean Islands that are key to his work.

According to the National Weather Service, Hurricane Helene made landfall as a Category 4 storm on September 26, 2024, in the Big Bend area of the Florida Gulf Coast. Its impacts were felt from the Gulf Coast to southern Appalachia, especially in places like western North Carolina where widespread and devastating flooding left thousands stranded without power, killing hundreds and causing billions in property damage.

Thirteen days later, Hurricane Milton swept west to east over Florida, making its way from the Gulf Coast out into the Atlantic Ocean. It did not make landfall as a Category 5 hurricane as was expected, but was diminished to a Category 3 by increasing wind shear. Still, it hit the Sunshine State with torrential rainfall of 15 inches or more in some areas and unleashed at least 19 confirmed tornadoes.

Phillips planned to follow the crook of Florida’s panhandle from his base in Fort

Walton Beach to find where he was needed most. His trek took him first to a town called Panacea, but he found the damage there wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be. That’s where a chaplain with the sheriff’s office told Phillips about a tiny fishing village further south down the coastline called Steinhatchee, where his help was desperately needed.

When he arrived at Steinhatchee, the devastation was overwhelming. “There was just not a lot left standing. There’s one grocery store in town; it was totally demolished. There are only two gas stations; those gas stations are gone. A handful of restaurants are all gone,” he said.

“This whole community is pretty much gone,” Phillips concluded.

The village has a population of 1,049 people, according to 2020 U.S. census data. The median income is \$28,750, with only about 40 percent of the village employed. It’s a transient town, Phillips explains, with a good chunk of people who come to hunt and fish, but don’t permanently live there. “It’s kind of a little forgotten place, and I’m really glad that the Lord brought us there.”

The Lord led Phillips further in Steinhatchee when he and his first responders were helping to clear a path to a woman’s trailer. “She kept saying, ‘You need to talk to my pastor,’ and I said, ‘Give me your pastor’s name, I want to talk to him.’”

That’s how Phillips got connected with Pastor Davy Cannon and his church, the Friendship Chapel Church of God, a

Zulma Zabala-Rivera, CBF Global Missions Executive Assistant, played a key role in several CBF Disaster Response projects after the hurricanes. In Steinhatchee, she helped organize the hundreds of donations of critical items.





Kenny Phillips worked with CBF's Zulma Zabala-Rivera, CBF Florida and Caribbean Island coordinator Tammy Synder and new partner Davy Cannon, pastor of the Friendship Chapel Church of God in Steinhatchee in the aftermath of the hurricane.

listen to the community, because they know their community better than I'll ever know," he shared. "We have to find churches, no matter who they are, to work within these communities because they have the heartbeat of the community."

On the ground, both Phillips and Cannon believe the recovery process will take months, if not years, especially due to how widespread the damage is. "There's a hundred communities just like the ones we're working in and I just don't know who's helping in those other areas," Phillips shared.

"I guarantee you at least a year from now, people are still going to be cleaning up from the storm," Cannon said. That's why he urges people to remember his community, even after the news coverage passes. "Don't forget about them. It's easy to get forgotten. And when you suffer a tragedy like this and the resources are needed, you know, but if people forget, then we're stuck here with no help."

Still, recovery work is Gospel work as Phillips sees it. It has the power to remind people of God's mission in the world. "It tends to bring a lot of people together for a common cause and my hope in all this is we can always stay on common ground. We're God's people and God gave us an opportunity; He wants us to love our neighbor and treat our neighbors like we want to be treated," Phillips concluded.

Your gifts to CBF Disaster Response help change lives and make stories of hope like this possible. Please give generously at www.cbf.net/hurricane-relief.

Pentecostal church on Highway 51, right by the Steinhatchee River. The church was founded in 1984 and has about 50 worshippers.

From wind damage to flooding and more, Cannon says every one of his church members was impacted by the duo of hurricanes. "We're actually at brother Bob Nelson's house right now," he cites as one example. "He was heavily affected—about eight inches of water in his house and his house is two-and-a-half feet off the ground. So there was a little over three feet of water roughly, right here in his front yard. He's just one of many.

"But not one in my church came in going, 'Hallelujah, nothing happened,'" he added.

Cannon says the landlines and internet are down, and lack of clean water and working sewers is a problem. Homes have suffered heavy water and wind damage. While many of the roadways have been cleared of debris, the pastor says people's homes remain in bad shape. "The moment you step off into a person's yard, you recognize just how much work still has to be done throughout the county," he said.

Through Friendship Chapel Church of God, Phillips has set up a base of operations in partnership with CBF Disaster Response. He quickly received hundreds of donations

of critical items, from "muck-out buckets" carrying cleaning supplies to paper towels and toilet paper to non-perishable food. The items are distributed just as soon as they arrive.

Every usable space is being utilized for recovery as well. Since the storms, church members have been living in the fellowship hall. "We're down to just one family, but now we still have them living in the churchyard because I allow them to park their emergency campers at the churchyard. They don't have anywhere to park them," Cannon explained.

Phillips has secured a shower trailer so that CBF Disaster Response and CBF Florida can begin hosting mission teams to aid in the recovery work. He says the fellowship hall can be partitioned to make a room for men and another for women, and there are working bathrooms. Phillips says the focus for the first mission teams will be cleanup and debris removal, and later teams will work on minor repairs.

For those wanting to help at a distance, monetary donations can be made to CBF Disaster Response.

Forging partnerships with local churches is critical for Phillips, who has been doing disaster recovery around the world for 23 years. "It's very important that we listen to people, and listen to the church, and

CBF RESPONDS TO DEADLY HURRICANES



Georgia church partners with Angel Flight to deliver supplies

Angel Flight is a nonprofit of volunteer pilots who help get around transportation barriers in times of emergency and need. They partnered with First Baptist Church Columbus to send supplies to Augusta, Ga., after Hurricane Helene. In just 72 hours, they delivered between 1,700 to 2,500 pounds of supplies directly to Daniel Field Airport in Augusta. The supplies included non-perishable food, medicine, band aids, blankets and diapers.

Volunteer pilot Len Strozier has been flying with Angel Flights since 2003. “The most rewarding part is helping desperate people with aviation. We can fly over the damage with emergency supplies.” Strozier is a member at FBC Columbus. As the hurricane shifted just 150 miles to the east of Columbus, they felt called to help those less fortunate. FBC Columbus Missions Minister Howie Hooper said, “It’s an outpouring of love to our neighbors who have lost much. It’s the least we can do.”

“Seeing how the Columbus community, not just First Baptist, has stepped up and have donated thousands of pounds of supplies shows that true compassion is evident in Columbus. It is the very least we can do.”



Hurricane Oscar assistance in Cuba

CBF Disaster Response contributed \$20,000 to provide emergency assistance to aid those suffering in Cuba in the aftermath of Hurricane Oscar in partnership with CBF of Florida and the Caribbean Islands and leadership of the Baptist Churches of Eastern Cuba.

The financial support funded three community kitchens based at local churches in the most affected areas, providing a daily meal to a total of 1,000 people for 20 days with priority to feeding families with children, pregnant women and senior adults.

“As we continue to support the recovery efforts in the United States after Hurricanes Helene and Milton, in collaboration with CBF Florida and the Caribbean Islands, your donations have made it possible to provide one hot meal a day to children and vulnerable adults at three communities devastated by Hurricane Oscar in Cuba,” said CBF Global Missions Coordinator Laura Ayala.



South Carolina church provides space and hope

FBC Greenwood, S.C., is building beloved community and providing space for respite after Hurricane Helene. Greenwood felt the overwhelming effects of Hurricane Helene. Desperate for gasoline, food and power, Greenwood neighborhoods quickly came together to clear roads of downed trees and distribute food. FBC Greenwood faced two large, downed trees and some groundwater seepage on its property. After recovering power, FBC Greenwood opened its fellowship hall as a charging station and A/C hangout spot, offering ice to the surrounding neighborhood.

FBC Greenwood also encouraged its congregation to donate to relief efforts in the community with many still without power, stable



Cooperative Baptists offer relief and care for neighbors after devastating storms

food items, hygiene items, water, laundry and cleaning supplies, flashlights and batteries and baby care items. Pastor John Uldrick offered a devotional thought on Greenwood's social media channels to encourage the Greenwood community to come together. "In these moments of trial, God reminds us of the power of unity," Uldrick said.

On October 6, FBC Greenwood welcomed a sister congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, whose facility was still without power. Celebrating World Communion Sunday, the two congregations created loving and supportive community during this difficult time.

Mars Hill church aids neighbors with food, shelter and cleanup kits

Mars Hill Baptist Church has a designated fund to help those impacted by flooding and natural disasters. In years past, the church sent this money out of state. Now, for the first time, they distributed the fund locally. Located in western North Carolina directly north of Asheville, Mars Hill was hit with flooding, fallen trees and power outages as a result of Hurricane Helene.

As soon as the rain stopped, members of Mars Hill Baptist started doing what they could to meet the needs of their community, beginning with an impromptu potluck on the church lawn. Members emptied their freezers and volunteers grilled enough meat to feed 300 people.

Pastor Tommy Justus said he got a glimpse of something holy. "Nobody worried about who was in that line, about waiting. Everybody was patient and helping each other out. There were people of all colors and backgrounds who spoke with all kinds of accents, and people were eating together. The Kingdom of God will be something like that. There was something that was powerful."

The church offered ice and water to the community as well as housing to four people



who had nowhere else to go. It also expanded its ministry to the nearby town of Marshall, N.C., which was especially hard hit by Helene, receiving five months' worth of rain in three days. Flooding destroyed the town hall and left homes and buildings deluged with mud.

Mars Hill Baptist has helped the town of 1,000 residents begin the cleanup process. Volunteers from the church donned muck boots and grabbed shovels to remove mud from downtown Marshall. They also delivered CBF Disaster Response cleanup buckets, containing useful supplies such as cleaning products, gloves, masks and trash bags.

Dalton and Augusta churches distribute essential supplies

On October 8, First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga., delivered 12 emergency supply buckets, 30 cases of water, 40 packages of diapers, 30 cans of formula, 100 hygiene kits and 600 pounds of nonperishable food and pet food to First Baptist Church Augusta. "We had to rent a 16-foot Penske truck because all the donations wouldn't fit in the church van," said Suzanne Hooie, FBC Dalton missions minister. "The congregation really showed up."



"When FBC Augusta senior pastor Will Dyer shared a tangible way to help the Augusta community in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, we felt called to respond," said Jonathan Barlow, FBC Dalton senior pastor. "The members of FBCD gave over and beyond, and when we arrived to Augusta I was stunned to find so many volunteers passing out essentials to those who lost everything. It was a blessing to witness a sister church shining God's light and goodness."

MISSION BITES

PEACE CAMP FOR REFUGEE YOUTH

By Shelah Acker

Each year we try to hold a camp for the youth and young adults from the Center of Hope in Kampala. This camp has traditionally been called the Peace Camp. It is a time when the refugee youth, most of whom have never left the urban and crowded environment of Kampala, can go to a peaceful place and have fun, as well as



learn about the Bible and the hope found in Jesus. It is a highlight of the year and many youth describe it as the best few days of their life. This year the camp began on September 18 and there were 35 participants. The event was deeply impactful and we are so thankful for the way God moved in the lives of the youth.

Shelah and her husband, Jade, are CBF field personnel in Kampala, Uganda, where they work closely with nonprofit Refuge and Hope, helping thousands of refugees.



The Foushees serve alongside Kanazawa Baptist Church to meet the physical and spiritual needs of internationals in their city.

I'LL REMEMBER THIS DAY

By Laura Foushee

After our English service ended, I started chatting with a new visitor. She lives in another city but came to Kanazawa to meet friends visiting Japan, and they all came to the service together. A full-time language student since January, she and I talked about learning Japanese and about life in our respective cities.

As the conversation wrapped up, I offered to stay in touch. She responded, "Oh, I'm not a Christian. You don't have to stay in touch with me." I was a bit surprised by her response. Then she continued, "But I really did enjoy your service today. I learned a lot and it was rather academic, which is probably why I found it interesting. And I really enjoyed the conversation in my small group. I'll remember this day."

I was touched by her impressions of the service. As many pastors can attest, as a worship service concludes, you wonder what was heard or received by the worshippers; and on many Sundays you don't receive feedback. On that Sunday, though, I was grateful to hear from someone who was welcomed, engaged and touched by the worship of a faith not her own.

Laura and her husband, Carson, serve as field personnel in Kanazawa, Japan. They have been partners with the Japan Baptist Convention since 2013.



The Center of Hope is a program where ESL, computer, Bible and general knowledge are taught to refugees from the ages of 15 to 60 years old. They serve more than 600 students a day.

BLESSINGS IN TRANSITION

By Greg Smith

After over 20 years of direct ministry with and among the Latino and immigrant community in Fredericksburg, Va., Sue and I are transitioning to our home state of Arkansas to live into our final years of field personnel service before retirement. Apart from the packing and planning and even more packing and planning that any transition from one location to another requires, the hardest part of any move is saying goodbye to those we have come to know, serve and love.

Those who started out as “clients” often quickly became good friends. Children we first held in our arms became high school and college graduates. Men who came to earn money to send home adjusted to life in the U.S. to become trusted and beloved members of our community. Women who felt they had little to contribute learned to develop and utilize their God-given gifts to make important differences for themselves and their families. Young people we mentored and led on retreats and conferences today serve as congregational leaders. Colleagues who blessed us much more than we blessed them inspired us to do more than we ever thought possible.

We’ve seen God work in the lives of many over more than two decades. It has affirmed that authentic ministry requires long-term presence in a community. No doubt the memories and friendships made will continue to bless us as we find new ways of service in our new home.

Greg and his wife, Sue, are CBF field personnel in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where they started LUCHA ministries to serve the Latino immigrant community.



In 2008, Greg took a 14-member Latino youth missions teams to the Baptist World Alliance Youth Conference in Leipzig, Germany, where they met a Roma choir from Pecs, Hungary.



Brooke and Mike hosted four students through CBF’s StudentServe, including two volunteers from July 1-15, one volunteer from July 1-28 and the final volunteer from July 12–September 30.

SERVICE EXTENSION

By Mike

At the beginning of summer, we hosted 34 students and faculty from Baylor University’s Church Music program. They came, they sang, they learned and they left. Well, most left.

For the 10 years we’ve been serving in Indonesia, we have regularly hosted college students for summer learning and serving opportunities. This summer was no different. But, with 30 Baylor students committing to two weeks in Southeast Asia, we figured why shouldn’t a few of them stay for the whole summer. Full schedules and other commitments meant that most could not extend, but two did and two have said they’d be back to serve at other times. We picked up one more student from Puerto Rico and yet another Baylor student later in the summer.

The four students were able to experience more than just the parachuting in experience of a short-term trip. They got to experience what it means to live in a different context for an extended period of time, enough to deal with sickness, both homesickness and physical sickness. They also got to engage in conversations and reflection about what life and ministry could look like in a context drastically different from their own, challenging, yet beautiful. This pondering helped students further discern where and how God was calling them to serve, one nearer to home, one to continue to seminary, the others’ calling refined and a clearer connection to global service.

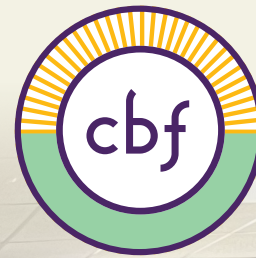
Mike and his wife, Brooke, are CBF field personnel in Indonesia. They serve as ministers and educators supporting local churches and schools in the area.

McCall racial repair project helps churches thrive by ‘doing one thing very well’

An innovative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship racial repair endeavor has taught Black congregations the truth of “less is more” and demonstrated how they can strengthen their ministries by cutting back.

That’s what happened for Palmetto Missionary Baptist Church in Conway, S.C., Pastor Cheryl Moore Adamson reported.

By Marv Knox



Dr. Emmanuel McCall

Racial Justice and Leadership Initiative

CBF’s Emmanuel McCall Racial Justice and Leadership Initiative launched the McCall Exploratory Process, a racial repair pilot project, in 2023.

From left to right, Rev. Cheryl Moore Adamson, executive director; Dr. Tiffany Hollis, volunteer; and Rev. Dr. Katrina Reaves, project director.



Palmetto participated in the McCall Exploratory Process, a racial repair pilot project launched by CBF's Emmanuel McCall Racial Justice and Leadership Initiative. Rev. Kasey Jones, CBF's coordinator of outreach and growth, and Dr. Pamela Jolly, a former banker who consults with communities of color to understand how faith and finance impact each other, co-directed the process.

Palmetto jettisoned two of three signature ministries and modified the third. "Amazingly, by narrowing our focus, we learned we could better appropriate our resources to ensure we're doing one thing very well," Adamson said.

Congregations that participated in the McCall Exploratory Process demonstrated courage and vision, Jones said, adding that racial repair is vital for Black congregations "because we need to set up systems that are sustainable and replicable."

That involves empowering Black churches not merely to survive, but to thrive by building on current resources to be stronger in the future

For too long, Black churches have reflected Martin Luther King Jr.'s assessment of the Civil Rights Movement, she explained, citing a statement from Dr. King quoted by Jolly: "Although our actions were bold and crowned with success, they were substantially improvised and spontaneous. The goals we set carried the blemishes of our inexperience."

That "inexperience" perpetuated Black churches' cycles of faithful and laborious ministry that fail to produce gain, Jones said, observing, "We work hard to be rewarded with more work."

To begin rectifying that malady, the McCall Initiative engaged six Black congregations in the racial repair pilot project. In addition to Palmetto Missionary Baptist Church, participants were Central Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mo.; First Baptist Church of East Point, Ga.; Mount Vernon Missionary Baptist Church in Nichols, S.C.; New Morning Light Baptist Church in Conley, Ga.; and Remnant Fellowship in Morrow, Ga.

The project explored "how internal Black church asset mapping and external community asset mapping can be used to construct and design racial repair strategies

and culturally relevant programming," Jones said.

Asset mapping is a process of discovering the resources, strengths and tools available to an organization. In the pilot project, churches evaluated five types of "capital"—human, social, intellectual, cultural and spiritual—available to them, both within the congregations and in their communities.

They implemented a program called The NarrowRoad, developed by Jolly. The NarrowRoad is "a faith-based, culturally relevant approach to wealth-building in the Black community," she noted.

At a retreat, Jolly taught teams from the churches to view themselves from not only a biblical/spiritual perspective but also through the lenses of business, finance and strategy.

Teams applied what they learned to writing proposals for grants of up to \$10,000 from CBF's McCall Racial Equity Fund. The

grants are intended to support ministries that can transform both their congregations and communities while focusing on each church's "most productive body of work," Jones said.

Later, McCall Initiative leaders conducted site visits with the churches. "We listened to them and helped them fine-tune their understanding of their assets with the goal of writing stronger grant proposals," she said.

"We framed the proposal process differently than most grants, which start with assessment of needs," she explained. "I don't like this (needs-based) approach, because whoever tells the worst story gets the biggest bucks. That becomes the narrative of that community, because it's how the money shows up. But it also defines the community by its weakness and needs, not by its strengths and assets."



Tiffany Hollis, an associate professor at Coastal Carolina University who received her Ph. D. in curriculum and instruction (urban education concentration), volunteered with the McCall Exploratory Process retreat in Conway, S.C.



Pastor Adamson speaks at the MBC Freedom School to their fifth through 12th-grade scholars at the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom school, a six-week summer camp for 30 students.

Palmetto is working with a city program to provide social skills workshops for their scholars and exposure to activities at Coastal Carolina University.



upon the identity of church leaders and volunteers. How could the small church sustain such time-intensive ministries when the people who founded and nurtured them retired?

"We had been salivating over the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom School," Adamson acknowledged. "It's a canned program that does not rely on our personalities and goodwill. We knew we could hand it off to others coming behind us."

The grant enabled the church to train new staff and host its first six-week summer Freedom School for 30 students—"we call them 'scholars,' age five through 12th grade," Adamson said—this year.

"So, now we are in the process of mentoring the next generation of leaders—a young couple, both professors at Coastal Carolina University, who have two sons in our program."

The leadership handoff is progressive, she added: "We're working to prepare our new leaders. They're observing me. Next year, we will work together. The following year, I will watch them fly."

Another assurance of how the ministry

will soar surfaced when a local benefactor pledged a quarter of a million dollars to fund the Freedom School for five years. Narrowing and focusing "has made us and what we're doing so attractive that other people want to be part of us," Adamson exulted.

With the donor's support, Palmetto is collaborating with a city program to provide social skills workshops and giving its young scholars exposure to and aspiration for activities on the Coastal Carolina University campus.

So, the church is reveling in the boost it received from letting go of CHOPS and the after-school program and focusing on the Freedom School, Adamson reported.

"The whole concept of going from 'broad is the way to narrow is the way' in what we supported gave us permission to make this change," she said. "Now, we not only have survived, but thrived. This has put us on sure footing that we will have a legacy—not only in the community, but in God's kingdom."

That outcome echoes the reason Palmetto, which "goes way, way back with CBF," participated in the McCall Exploratory Process in the first place, Adamson noted.

"Racial repair ensures African-American congregations are on sure footing about what they are capable of. It gives us an assurance of our value and of what we bring to the table. It provides a strong foundation for interacting with others."

Participation in the McCall racial repair project provided the church with at least three solid takeaways, Adamson observed.

First, it deeply engaged the small church's leadership in shared values, with one in five members participating in the process.

Second, the community asset map helped them identify additional resources—such as churches, government entities and local professionals—that could share in their ministry. "We learned we could be more creative in how we approach them for supporting our work," she said.

And third, "this process brought us joy," she stressed. "Of course, we could feel a sense of accomplishment. But we also could experience the joy of letting go and gaining perspective. We learned we had everything to gain and nothing to lose by engaging in this process."

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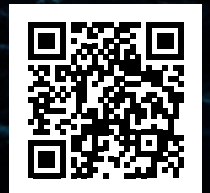
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Ephesians 2:19-22 MSG



Called in Context

When Telika McCoy's church called, she just couldn't say "no"

By Marv Knox



"Youth work is just who I am," Telika McCoy said. "There's not been a church where I've been a member that I did not work with youth. Plus, I had worked with kids in the school system. It's like I was born to it."

McCoy has published three books. Here she signs copies of "That Day: Enjoy the One You Have," a book emphasizing that days don't have to be "bad" and can be different from "good days."



Across the span of her life, Telika McCoy has followed the path she believed God laid out for her. So, when her church suggested that path included joining its ministry staff, she “just couldn’t say no.”

Ten years ago, McCoy transitioned from lay member to multi-vocational youth pastor at Mount Peace Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C. She also teaches practical ministry and directs a Lilly Endowment-funded initiative at Shaw University Divinity School. And she heads a global ministry of encouragement to fellow Christians.

McCoy’s move to local-church ministry is the kind of transition Cooperative Baptist Fellowship leaders are asking more congregations and their members to consider through a church-staffing initiative, Called in Context. The idea is for congregations to consider looking internally—at gifted, committed members—when filling ministry positions.

McCoy followed a long path that eventually guided her to become youth pastor at her home church.

After she earned an undergraduate degree from Shaw University in Raleigh, she landed a job in banking.

“I applied for that job because a lot of older people told me it was good to go to school, get a good job and stay in that job,” McCoy explained. “For a young woman, that was exciting. I could work there 30 years, have a good career and retire.”

Besides, although she loved the Lord and her church, “I didn’t know there were so many ministry options,” other than serving local congregations. And she did not expect to serve on a local-church staff. “I thought my pastoral job would be chaplain,” she explained.

To prepare for chaplaincy, McCoy enrolled in Shaw’s divinity school, where she earned a Master of Divinity degree. She also earned a Ph.D. degree from Capella University.

Along the way, she worked as an exceptional child specialist in the Winston-Salem/Forsythe County School System and eventually returned to banking.

McCoy juggled school, work and volunteering in her church as she pursued



(Right) McCoy was invited to be a guest with Nia Imani Franklin, Miss America 2019, at the Miss North Carolina 2019 Competition. (Left) McCoy shares a moment with civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump.

her long-term goal. Then she took a turn. “Although I was headed toward becoming a military chaplain, I ended up being invited to be the youth pastor at our church,” she shared. “And I just couldn’t say no.”

“Youth work is just who I am,” she said. “There’s not been a church where I’ve been a member that I did not work with youth. Plus, I had worked with kids in the school system. It’s like I was born to it.”

And even though she had not considered local-church ministry, she easily imagined herself on the Mount Peace staff.

“I had volunteered in church since I was a little girl,” she recalled. “I was the first to arrive and the last to leave. It didn’t take a lot of discernment. I love the church and was already helping with the youth. So, it was natural.”

McCoy also credits Black church culture with helping her accept her church’s call.

“You’ve heard the African proverb: ‘It takes a village to raise a child,’” she said. “That type of wisdom is imbedded in the Black church. It’s all our responsibility—a collective responsibility, a collective call—to help raise up our youth.”

Looking back, McCoy realizes her corporate career taught her a vital lesson for church ministry.

“In banking, I talked to people around the globe. I learned about them and about their cultures,” she said. “That taught me to have

patience for all types of personalities. In our church community, our people have different personalities. So, the skills of personality management and self-control I learned in banking apply well in the church.”

Perhaps counter-intuitively, McCoy said, her experience in the secular world reinforced the importance of embodying what the Apostle Paul called the “fruit of the Spirit”—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And those qualities serve her well as a minister.

As she has served youth and their families, another key skill she developed earlier—the “ability to be transparent without doing harm”—has grown in importance, she noted.

“In the past 10 years, we have worked to cultivate a culture of trust, because young people nowadays hardly know whom to trust,” she said. “Sometimes, young people need to be listened to and heard. The response is love, demonstrated by open arms and a closed mouth.”

As she transitioned from being a lay member of her church to one of two ministers on staff, McCoy took care to “respect the office of pastor,” she said.

“There’s a professionalism that needs to be attached to your [pastoral] office,” she added. “Other people get to choose how to respond, but the question is: ‘How do you

carry yourself? I had to be sure to do this, because this is important work, and I don't take it for granted. You are the person God has entrusted to this role. How do you move through this great call with respect and honor?"

Calling a staff member from within the church is "a blessing to both the congregation and the individual," Mount Peace Baptist Church's pastor, Vincent Terry, said, noting the church had done so prior to calling McCoy.

"Before she joined our staff, we were able to see her faithfulness in the areas of ministry," he said.

The church received even more than it anticipated, Terry added. "We have gotten the best of more than one world. Because of her faithfulness, she has not only benefited us in the youth ministry—which is her assignment—but in other areas of the church. Whatever we needed, we could find in her.

"She has a great heart for ministry and for people. She has proven to be the best choice we could have made."

McCoy knows she occupies a unique position, which inevitably makes her a role model.

"I am okay with being a female minister. I am a female," she said. "A little girl may look at me and say, 'Oh, Dr. McCoy is a pastor, a preacher.' I want young girls to have a respectful example of what a woman minister is like."

Similarly, McCoy and Mount Peace Baptist Church are role models for other congregations and other potential staff members, noted Brian Foreman, CBF's coordinator of congregational ministries, and Colin Kroll, its young adults ministry manager.

They have developed Called in Context as part of a larger endeavor to strengthen churches in the area of Christian education, particularly focused on ministries with youth

and children. Called in Context is designed to help churches identify ministry resources within their membership and to help laity see their opportunities for ministry.

Churches need Called in Context for a couple of reasons, Foreman said.

First, CBF churches have been doubling down on a traditional "model for ministerial calling"—when a vacancy occurs, hire a trained staff member already serving another church—that no longer works, he explained. And second, the traditional model doesn't work because "the pipeline of students going to divinity school is shrinking, and many who do enroll are not interested in congregational ministry."

While no "magic solution" is available, Foreman conceded, CBF is coming alongside divinity schools that are experimenting with new models for theological education. For its part, CBF is helping churches look inward to solve staffing challenges.



Telika's original long-term goal was to become a chaplain. But her plan took a turn when she was invited to be the youth pastor at Mount Peace Baptist Church. After volunteering in church since childhood, helping with students was natural.

"You've heard the African proverb: 'It takes a village to raise a child,'" McCoy said. "That type of wisdom is imbedded in the Black Church. It's all our responsibility to help raise up our youth."



“We are proposing a commitment to nurturing calling from within your congregation,” he added. “We want to facilitate a culture of calling, beginning with folks who are already in your congregation.”

“Telika is a prime example of what Called in Context is all about,” Kroll stressed. “Her gifts and her love for the people in Mount Peace Baptist Church and the larger community already had been recognized. It was only natural for her to be invited into leadership in a new way.”

“This represents an example of moving away from the old model that focused on recruiting staff from outside the congregation,” he noted. “It affirms people who already are there, who are loving and leading and doing well.”

McCoy and Mount Peace also illustrate another aspect of recruitment that Called in Context is emphasizing, Kroll said.

“By calling multi-vocational ministers, churches can fill positions they might not be able to afford if they only considered full-time staff,” he explained. “Telika’s other endeavors teaching at Shaw and her ministry of encouragement—make her more available for Mount Peace.”

To help congregations implement Called in Context’s ideas, CBF is developing resources necessary for equipping lay members to serve effectively as church staff.

For her part, McCoy said the Called in Context model that worked at her church can apply to other congregations, and she offered advice for pastors and ministry candidates alike.

“To pastors, I say, ‘Pay attention to your people’s skills, and don’t discount them,’” she said. “Remember how Jesus did it when he called his disciples. James and John were already fishing, so they had skills to be

‘fishers of men.’ And when Jesus chose the Zealot, some would have said, ‘Oh, no,’ but Jesus saw a place for that type of person. He saw a place for all of them in that great work.”

And she counseled members who might consider joining their churches’ staffs not to be daunted by the challenge. “To the one who accepts the role, I say, ‘Do what you can, and don’t worry about the rest.’”

For questions about vocational calling or how CBF can assist with your ministerial staff search, contact CBF Director of Ministerial Transitions Jay Kieve at jkieve@cbf.net



CBF’s Called in Context initiative was developed to help congregations imagine new opportunities for calling those gifted people who are already present into ministry. “Telika is a prime example of what Called in Context is all about,” young adults leader Colin Kroll said. “It represents an example of moving away from the old model that focused on recruiting staff from outside the congregation.”



ADVOCACY

FAITHFUL PUBLIC WITNESS

CBF Advocacy seeks to help congregations, pastors and lay members enhance their missions and ministries through advocacy. As Christians dedicated to serving our communities, we strive to exercise responsible Christian citizenship by modeling an inclusive public witness for the Church that amplifies the voices of marginalized, neglected and forgotten communities.

CBF planted roots in Washington, D.C., in 2024 when they opened their advocacy office with the help of Jennifer Hawks, CBF Director of Advocacy, and Sharon Felton, Congregational Advocacy Manager. The office space is in collaboration with Bread for the World, a CBF partner and Christian advocacy organization that strives to end hunger in the U.S. and globally.



Explore CBF's 2024 Impact Report at
www.cbf.net/impact-report

Photo: Brooke Blake

CONGREGATIONAL ADVOCACY



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AND

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IN CONGREGATIONS
AND COMMUNITIES

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CONSULTING WITH
PASTORS AND LAY
LEADERS



ADVOCACY AND ENCOURAGER CHURCHES

**COLLABORATING
FOR IMPACT**

Advocacy partners with CBF's Encourager Church initiative to host a breakfast at General Assembly. This year, 2023 National Teacher of the Year, Rebecka Peterson (pictured at left), spoke on the importance of churches supporting public schools, educators and students. Advocacy through partnerships with local schools, caring for teachers and families as well as legislative advocacy is critical.

220+
ATTENDEES



LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

CBF'S NEW D.C. OFFICE
EXPANDS ADVOCACY
WORK

5 MEMBERSHIPS
IN FAITH-BASED
ADVOCACY COALITIONS



**BUILDING
COALITIONS**

18 LETTERS
ADDRESSING

- 5** PUBLIC EDUCATION
- 4** HUNGER
- 3** POVERTY
- 2** VOTING
- 2** JUSTICE REFORM
- 1** INDIGENOUS RIGHTS
- 1** ENVIRONMENT



13 VISITS
BY
12 PEOPLE



The Little Church That Could *By Jennifer Colosimo*

How big faith in a small fellowship can do great things.



The congregation at First Baptist Church in Morrow, Ga., has about 70 members who faithfully serve 100 people each month with their flourishing food pantry.

A team of volunteers collect, organize and pack the specific foods that families need.

Would you discount a small group with dreams to make a big impact? How could just a few people make a difference to an entire community? With a singular focus and a willingness to spread out the service, one small church just south of Atlanta proves that no matter how big or small a congregation might be, anything is possible.

Among several community-driven missions, First Baptist Church, Morrow, Ga., started their food pantry many years ago. It is a straightforward operation, inviting community members to pick up a food order once a month, by appointment. It's run by a team of volunteers who every week work to collect food donations, organize the intake and pack up the donations based on what each individual or family needs.

"What's been unique about the way we do our food pantry is that having people make appointments to come regularly has allowed for deep relationships between those serving and those being served," said Devita Parnell, pastor at FBC Morrow.

They've established partnerships to stock the pantry with Midwest Food Bank, and while that makes up for a large portion of the food they're able to use in the pantry, it's not enough. "We have to supplement it with collection," Parnell said. "We have an ongoing collection site at the church and people bring items every week. Others give money to be used to purchase groceries and some serve as our shoppers."

To make that enough, with a congregation of about 70 in regular attendance, Parnell decided to make churchwide collection a focal point in worship, as well. During the month

of October, she preached a sermon series called "Hungry." That included a deep dive into various types of hunger, such as a hunger for companionship or community, courage or commitment. One Sunday, Parnell invited a guest speaker to talk about literal hunger and what it looks like right there in the church's backyard.

Hunger remains a pressing issue in Clayton County, where 11.9 percent of residents—more than 35,000 people—experience food insecurity. Annually, it would take over \$25 million to bridge the gap for those in need. Statewide, the numbers are equally staggering, with 13.1 percent of Georgians, or more than 1.4 million residents, facing food insecurity.

"Since October is traditionally focused on world hunger needs, we decided we could tie in giving toward our food pantry with this theme of hunger that we were focusing on in worship," Parnell said. "Between our missions committee chair and the food pantry director, we set a goal that would stretch us a little bit. Our plan was to have people bring their items and put them right on the altar table as a part of our worship. Sure, there were people who questioned it; but I felt like as much as our financial gifts are a sacrifice and a part of worship, these gifts were also."

Parnell believes that giving offering in this manner introduces the idea of community and establishes the church's mission in worship. It helps people think more deeply about it. It's more than a handful of canned goods, this is a true gift for someone who needs it, a way to share God's love with the neighborhood. Parnell and her staff also posted stats about hunger in Clayton County in their bulletin as well as printing prayer requests for specific people in need.

"It was important for us to see that, especially being a smaller congregation," Parnell shared. "We need that assurance to see the impact of what we can accomplish. And seeing the altar was both motivating and inspiring. We could see that, yes, we can do this."

While the food pantry at FBC Morrow has always been a ministry of the entire congregation, only about a dozen people are engaged in the hands-on aspect of it on a weekly or monthly basis. Parnell wanted to make sure that the mission of the pantry

didn't get "siloe" into being the focus of only that handful of people. She wanted the entire congregation to be made aware of (and get involved in) all the quiet and faithful ways to minister to the community throughout the week. By bringing this ministry front and central into worship, it gave everyone a way to participate and further its impact.

It worked. FBC Morrow continues to make a huge impact on its community through the food pantry, serving approximately 100 people monthly.

"I think anytime you have a singular focus or goal you are working toward, it allows energy and excitement to build and to bring everyone on board," said Parnell, nodding to the success they've had. "Our congregation is very compassionate and generous, and they want to serve others. I also think that this was particularly successful because food is something everyone can gather around and something that everyone needs. Everyone, no matter what age or ability, goes to the grocery store and can pick up an extra item or two."

Her encouragement to other small churches wanting to do big things is to just start!

"It is easy to look at bigger churches with more people and more resources and compare; but it's okay to have your own big dreams about doing something new that will have a huge impact on your community," she said. "In fact, that was the story of our church 25 years ago, when it helped launch a free medical clinic in our community to meet a critical need. We are much smaller now and can be easily discouraged. But God still has a purpose for us. Our food pantry is a faithful ministry of our church and makes a huge difference in the lives of people in our community. So, it is my hope that in starting with what we do have, God will show us how to expand or go deeper in that ministry and will multiply our efforts far beyond what we could ask or imagine."

It's already clear that FBC Morrow is a church that is loving, welcoming and caring. In moving forward, Parnell will ask her members how that can make the pantry about more than just giving out food.

"How will we implement a church banquet for those who come to our pantry so that we're serving them by sitting at the table



(Below) Youth from nearby Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Tucker, Ga., gathered at FBC Morrow for a day of service and fellowship during the DNOW (Disciple Now) weekend in November.

with them, getting to know them?" Parnell asked. "Coming from a perspective of empowerment, bringing dignity to people, making deeper connections and not being transactional, let's go deeper. How do we go beyond the emergency needs that food pantries usually meet?"

FBC Morrow has already begun opening up space at their "table," recently inviting the youth from Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Tucker, Ga., to get hands-on, helping their small church with various things. They helped prune the prayer garden, clean out storage, shred old papers and sort clothes for an upcoming foster family event.

"I really like the idea of a church-to-church partnership, and hope that this is the beginning of more opportunities for service and exchange," she said. "It illustrates what can happen when partnerships develop."

Hint: It's big things.





Turn experimentation into innovation

By Chris Aho

It was a Thursday afternoon and as I rustled through the kitchen, I couldn't find what I needed. It was a "taco soup in the crockpot" day, but the chicken was nowhere to be found. Without the protein, our makeshift taco soup was not going to fly.

Digging deeper, I found some beef leftover from our family's nostalgic Old El Paso hard-shelled Taco Tuesday. I decided that tonight's crockpot six-can chicken soup would become a five-can, plus beef, taco soup. And if it didn't work, I could always send my 16-year-old out for something else.

Around 2 p.m., I dumped the cans and beef into the crockpot, turned the dial to high and "let 'er rip." As the afternoon wore on, the pot did its thing. About 30 minutes before dinner, I sampled my experiment to see if I needed to send out an APB or if we'd be stuck with PB&J. Surprisingly, the experiment worked—we had a tasty beef taco soup! Was it high-end? No. But it was easy, comforting, filling, provided leftovers and has since become one of our favorite ways to make the most of a Taco Tuesday.

I share this story because it illustrates two key principles we all need to remember. The first is "necessity is the mother of invention," and the second is "every tradition was once an experiment."

"Necessity is the mother of invention" is a traditional proverb reminding us that invention often comes from need—not just from want, desire or curiosity. In my case, I needed protein for the soup, so I experimented with beef instead of chicken. Was it a high-stakes experiment? No. But not every experiment or innovation needs to come with high stakes. In fact, keeping stakes low is often the wisest approach.

"Every tradition was once an experiment or innovation" is a phrase I often share with leadership teams in Thriving Congregations Learning Communities. As we move from assessing our capacities in the Thriving Traits toward working on and with Faithful Experiments, it's important to remember that the traditions, habits and meaningful

practices in our lives all started somewhere. Everything starts with an idea—some stick, some don't. But the ideas and experiments that do become traditions are simply the innovative attempts that "stick."

With this in mind, CBF is working to help congregations cultivate vitality in today's chaotic world, often using the phrase "Thriving Congregations experiment." This statement is underpinned by the Thriving Traits of Holy Tenacity and Faithful Agility. It emphasizes that exploration happens through trying, not just thinking. The VUCA (volatile, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous) world we live in requires that we design solutions to problems previous generations couldn't have anticipated. To create these solutions, we can't expect to design perfectly the first time, every time. So, if we're going to meet the needs around us, we must be willing to experiment. And experimenting is a skill we can learn. Are you interested?

As part of our Thriving Congregations Learning Communities, we teach leadership teams how to imagine and scope Faithful Experiments. But we realize that not every church can commit to a full, year-long Learning Community—that's an unrealistic expectation.

Instead, we want to invite you into the practice of Faithful Experiments. Over the coming year, there will be several opportunities to engage, with the first one taking place in Waco, Texas, in cooperation with the CBF Texas Gathering, from March 21–23, 2025. We're inviting 20 people to join us in Waco to learn about Faithful Experiments so that you can put these practices in place at home in ways that are authentic, innovative and tailored to meet the unique needs of each congregation and community.

These days, on Old El Paso Taco Tuesday, I make a couple of extra servings of beef because on Thursday or Friday, we make soup. And it all started because necessity was the mother of invention. So each time I load up the crockpot, I'm grateful for how innovation can lead to new traditions. When you're ready, come experiment with us to help lay the groundwork for your next favorite tradition.

Chris Aho directs CBF's Thriving Congregations Initiative, which exists to equip congregational leaders with tools and strategies necessary to move towards transformation and thriving in their unique congregational context. Learn more at www.cbf.net/thriving-congregations.



Tampa church explores ‘dynamic collaboration’ through CBF’s Thriving Congregations Initiative

By Kristen Thomason



In Tampa, Fla., Waters Avenue Church is trying to make a difference, but doing ministry in a time of cultural change isn’t easy.

“There’s simply no denying that churches struggle with how to move forward in the world as our culture transitions to a place where certain ecclesial structures make less sense than they once did,” said Chris Kravitz, pastor of Waters Avenue. Even though the church was not formally aligned with CBF, Kravitz turned to CBF’s Thriving Congregations program to learn how Waters Avenue might better serve its community.

With a \$1 million grant from the Lilly Foundation, CBF launched the Thriving Congregations Initiative in 2022. Working together in learning communities, participants meet throughout the year, both in person and online to encourage one another, conduct hands-on “holy experiments,” and engage the five traits of thriving congregations: Compelling Clarity, Faithful Agility, Holy Tenacity, Rooted Relationships and Dynamic Collaboration.

“Having clarity on the five traits had a huge impact on the team, and thinking through them congregationally definitely renewed our focus and gave us a way to assess ‘thriving,’” said Kravitz. The leadership team from Waters Avenue chose to focus on Dynamic Collaboration during their time of study with Thriving Congregations.

Chris Aho, CBF’s director of Thriving Congregations, explained that Dynamic Collaboration involves “carrying out work and ministry in ways that bring forth the life-giving koinonia (fellowship) the Apostle Paul mentions in the book of Philippians.”

Such collaboration can be within the congregation or may include partnerships with fellow churches and other ministry organizations. Collaboration becomes the catalyst that allows a congregation to thrive by multiplying the impact of its assets.

“Thinking from an asset-based approach gives a renewed sense of freedom and possibility that we must embrace if we want to see our churches make a positive influence in our communities,” said Kravitz.

For its Dynamic Collaboration, the congregation at Waters Avenue decided to officially partner with CBF by becoming a CBF-affiliated church. Using what they’d learned from the Thriving Congregations program, Waters Avenue approached the collaboration as a “holy

Chris Kravitz (top left), senior pastor of Waters Avenue Baptist Church in Tampa, Fla., celebrates a new chapter with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, becoming a CBF partner church after a transformative experience with the Thriving Congregations Initiative.

experiment” in which a church learns through doing. “Some in our congregation expressed hesitancy as most had scars from their IFB or SBC pasts,” said Kravitz. “So, approaching it from the posture of experiment and using the tools we gained in the cohort was essential.”

Those at Waters Avenue who worried CBF would be overly focused on religiosity rather than social justice, soon found they had nothing to fear.

“Through our time with Thriving Congregations, we saw others who affirmed an open and embracing posture towards all people and who worked for justice and equity in their local contexts,” said Kravitz.

The ministry partnership with Waters Avenue is also a boon for CBF. “Chris and his friends have created a little community of faith that has some hope and energy in it,” Aho said. “They are creative about how they are using their space and have a vibe that is all their own.”

Thanks to connections made in the Florida learning community, Waters Avenue is also collaborating in another holy experiment with neighboring Bayshore Baptist Church. When a minister at Bayshore left to join the staff of Passport Camps, the church asked Kravitz to take on the job of ministering to their youth and young adults in addition to pastoring at Waters Avenue. “This arrangement has thus far been very fruitful, and I can say with certainty that it would not have happened without CBF’s Thriving Congregations initiative,” noted Kravitz.

For other churches looking to impact the world around them for Christ, Kravitz said that CBF’s Thriving Congregations initiative will not only give them the tools they need, but will provide a supportive community as well. “I now have friendships with people to whom I can look for guidance, as well as access to resources I would have never had otherwise. I really could go on and on. I’m a big believer in Thriving Congregations!”

Learn more about CBF’s Thriving Congregations Initiative at www.cbf.net/thriving-congregations.



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Isaiah 43:19





From the Darién Gap to the local church

Yosenderi trusts God and serves others amid asylum journey

By Grayson Hester

For many Americans, “Venezuela” has become a symbol for their anxieties about government overreach and the policies they deem as radical. It is often used as shorthand for unchecked government control, corruption and societal collapse.

For millions of immigrants in the United States, however, Venezuela represents something deeply personal. It is their homeland—a place they were forced to leave, yet still hold close in their hearts. It is the country where they were born and to which they hope to one day return. It is a once-thriving nation brought to heel by greedy politicians and opportunistic oligarchs. It is not the Venezuelan people’s fault that the country to which they swore allegiance did not reciprocate the loyalty.

Neither is it an easy decision to flee. But millions—including Yosenderi in 2023—have done just that. “My sister-in-law, my husband, daughter and two other families came with us,” she said. “It was not easy.”

Yosenderi and her family came to the United States for the same reasons scores of other refugees do: They wanted what any person, any family, wants—opportunity, freedom, health, happiness. If they could have found those things in Venezuela, they would not have left. It is not a decision casually made or a journey easily completed. In fact, it is often—too often—lethal.

While the seven-country-long trek is never particularly safe, its danger reaches a fever pitch along the infamous Darién Gap.

It’s a stretch of jungle between Panama and Colombia that claims lives and reverses fortunes with casual indifference. It’s relentlessly trying. It’s also unavoidable.

“You have to sleep in camps where snakes were coming out, people screaming,” Yosenderi said. “And the more we walked, the more we found dead people everywhere.”

People are kidnapped. They perish from hunger or exhaustion or hopelessness or some combination of the three. They are murdered. The jungle takes them. They become separated, sometimes irretrievably. Some make it. Many don’t.

“What we want is a better life for my daughter, for my family,” Yosenderi said. “My hope for the future is to be able to stay here, that this country will give me the opportunity to stay here and win my political asylum claim. To rebuild my life here.”

The unfeeling violence of the wilderness slithers along the floor of human malevolence at every stage of the passage. And while its iterations may seem novel, its existence is nothing new. For one group of people, it’s Pharaoh and the desert; for another, it’s a president and the jungle.

Whether cruelty manifests itself as a snake bite or a noxious policy, in the Hebrew Scriptures or on the nightly news, its effect is the same—a violation of the image of God.

Fortunately, then as now, malignancy is not the full story. Death does not have the last word.



Yosenderi's family and throngs of other families found help from strangers—20 pesos here, a car ride there. Due in no small part to this assistance, they made it to the U.S.-Mexico border at Brownsville, Texas. While their troubles did not magically cease upon the crossing—they had to sleep in various shelters for months, subsisting off crumbs of grace and food—their prospects brightened all the same.

And along the way of seeking a better life, Yosenderi unexpectedly found something else, too: a passion.

"She has become the leader and organizer of the volunteers in the respite center of Golan House of Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville with Pastor Carlos Navarro," said CBF field personnel Elket Rodríguez, who also serves as Global Migration Advocate for CBF Global Missions.

Rodríguez, whether in the heat of America's border or the bluster of America's capital, dedicates his life to helping migrant families like Yosenderi. He uses his legal expertise to plead their case in the halls of power and he uses his organizational leadership skills to connect immigrants with reliable information, resources and

community in the streets of cities like Brownsville. His is a comprehensive advocacy, both systemic and interpersonal, and it embodies CBF's commitment to integral mission. And the fruits of this work truly speak for themselves.

"Yosenderi is finding that in service, she can express herself and show her love to other migrants and other asylum seekers," he said.

By connecting Yosenderi to a leadership opportunity, Rodríguez helped clear the way for her to thrive. "Elket has helped me a lot," she said. "I volunteer here in the church; I arrange the clothes. I help to distribute the food that is given to the immigrants, and it feels very nice to do what they did for me."

The help she and her family received upon entering the country is now the help she extends to others who are walking a similar path. It provides her with purpose, and it provides other asylum-seekers with the things they need, both material and spiritual.

This isn't simply paying it forward; it's building the Kingdom of Heaven, one meal and one stitch and one conversation at a time.

"Yosenderi is an asylum-seeker who actually is helping other asylum-seekers in their journeys.

And she's passionate about what she does," Rodríguez said. "Yosenderi has put her trust, not just in God, but in the people that God has put on her path."

She trusted God all the way back in Venezuela when she and her family began to walk the same path Jesus and Joseph and Mary did thousands of years ago—the path of an asylum-seeker. She trusted God at every step of the perilous journey through Central America, following in the footsteps of formerly enslaved Jewish people, wandering similarly treacherous terrain, centuries ago. She trusted God when she and her family reached the border of an unfamiliar country, knocking on a nation's doors with the same trembling hand as Naomi and Ruth and Orpah in times long past. And she now trusts God to continue making a way for her and her loved ones—wherever that may take her.

"My hope for the future is to be able to stay here, that this country will give me the opportunity to stay here and win my political asylum claim—to rebuild my life here," she said. "What we want is a better life for my daughter, for my family."



Yosenderi is the leader and organizer of the volunteers of Golan House at Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville, Texas, where she arranges free clothes and distributes food to asylum seekers. "It feels very nice to do what they did with me."

BEHOLD...A NEW THING

Isaiah 43:19

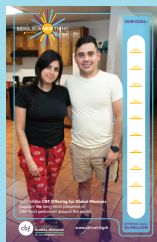


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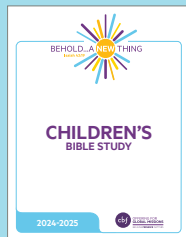
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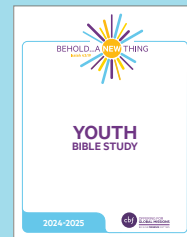
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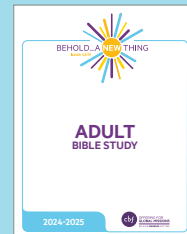
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De la brecha de Darién a la iglesia local

Yosenderi confía en Dios y sirve a los demás en medio de un viaje de asilo

Por Grayson Hester

Para muchos estadounidenses, “Venezuela” se ha convertido en un símbolo de su preocupación por las extralimitaciones del gobierno y las políticas que consideran radicales. A menudo se utiliza como sinónimo de control gubernamental descontrolado, corrupción y colapso social.

Sin embargo, para millones de inmigrantes en Estados Unidos, Venezuela representa algo profundamente personal. Es su patria, un lugar que se vieron obligados a abandonar pero que aún llevan en el corazón. Es el país donde nacieron y al que esperan regresar algún día. Es una nación antaño próspera, hundida por políticos codiciosos y oligarcas oportunistas. Los venezolanos no tienen la culpa de que el país al que juraron lealtad no les corresponda.

Huir tampoco es una decisión fácil. Pero millones -incluida Yosenderi en 2023- lo han hecho. “Mi cuñada, mi marido, mi hija y otras dos familias vinieron con nosotros”, dijo. “No fue fácil”.

Yosenderi y su familia vinieron a Estados Unidos por las mismas razones que decenas de otros refugiados: querían lo que cualquier persona, cualquier familia, quiere: oportunidad, libertad, salud, felicidad. Si hubieran podido encontrar esas cosas en Venezuela, no se habrían marchado. No se trata de una decisión tomada a la ligera ni de un viaje fácil. De hecho, a menudo—demasiado a menudo—es mortal.

Aunque esta travesía de siete países nunca es especialmente segura, el peligro alcanza su punto álgido a lo largo de la tristemente célebre Brecha de Darién. Es un tramo de selva entre Panamá y Colombia que se cobra

vidas y cambia la suerte con indiferencia. Es una prueba implacable. También es inevitable.

“Hay que dormir en campamentos donde salían serpientes, la gente gritaba”, dijo Yosenderi. “Y cuanto más caminábamos, más encontrábamos muertos por todas partes”.

La gente es secuestrada. Mueren de hambre, de agotamiento, de desesperación o de una combinación de las tres cosas. Son asesinados. La jungla se los lleva. Se separan, a veces irremediablemente. Algunos sobreviven. Muchos no.

La violencia insensible de lo salvaje se desliza por el suelo de la malevolencia humana en cada etapa del pasaje. Y aunque

sus iteraciones puedan parecer novedosas, su existencia no lo es en absoluto. Para un grupo de personas, es el Faraón y el desierto; para otro, es un presidente y la jungla.

Tanto si la crueldad se manifiesta como una mordedura de serpiente o una política nociva, en las Escrituras hebreas o en las noticias de la noche, su efecto es el mismo: una violación de la imagen de Dios.

Afortunadamente, entonces como ahora, la malignidad no es la historia completa. La muerte no tiene la última palabra.

La familia de Yosenderi y muchas otras familias recibieron ayuda de extraños: 20 pesos por aquí, un viaje en coche por

“Lo que queremos es una vida mejor para mi hija, para mi familia”, dijo Yosenderi. “Mi esperanza para el futuro es poder establecerme aquí, que este país me dé la oportunidad de quedarnos y ganar la solicitud de asilo político. Reconstruir mi vida aquí”.



allá. Gracias en gran medida a esta ayuda, consiguieron llegar a la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México en Brownsville (Texas). Aunque sus problemas no cesaron mágicamente al cruzar -tuvieron que dormir en varios refugios durante meses, subsistiendo con migajas de gracia y comida-, sus perspectivas mejoraron igualmente.

Y en el camino de la búsqueda de una vida mejor, Yosenderi encontró inesperadamente algo más: una pasión.

“Se ha convertido en la líder y organizadora de los voluntarios en el centro de respiro de Golan House de la Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville con el pastor Carlos Navarro”, dijo el personal de campo de CBF Elket Rodríguez, quien también sirve como Defensor de Migración Global para CBF Global Missions.

Rodríguez dedica su vida a ayudar a familias de inmigrantes como Yosenderi, ya sea en el calor de la frontera o en las bravatas de la capital estadounidense. Utiliza su experiencia jurídica para defender su caso en los pasillos del poder y su capacidad de liderazgo organizativo para poner en contacto a los inmigrantes con información fiable, recursos y comunidad en las calles

de ciudades como Brownsville. La suya es una defensa integral, tanto sistémica como interpersonal, y encarna el compromiso de la CBF con la misión integral. Y los frutos de este trabajo hablan por sí solos.

“Yosenderi está descubriendo que en el servicio puede expresarse y mostrar su amor a otros migrantes y otros solicitantes de asilo”, afirmó.

Al poner a Yosenderi en contacto con una oportunidad de liderazgo, Rodríguez le allanó el camino para prosperar. “Elket me ha ayudado mucho”, dice. “Soy voluntaria aquí en la iglesia; arreglo la ropa. Ayudo a distribuir la comida que se da a los inmigrantes, y me siento muy bien haciendo lo que ellos hicieron por mí.”

La ayuda que ella y su familia recibieron al entrar en el país es ahora la que extiende a otros que recorren un camino similar. A ella le proporciona un propósito, y a otros solicitantes de asilo les proporciona las cosas que necesitan, tanto materiales como espirituales.

No se trata simplemente de dar algo a cambio, sino de construir el Reino de los Cielos, comida a comida, puntada a puntada, conversación a conversación.

“Yosenderi es un solicitante de asilo que en realidad está ayudando a otros solicitantes de asilo en sus viajes.

Y le apasiona lo que hace”, dijo Rodríguez. “Yosenderi ha puesto su confianza, no sólo en Dios, sino en las personas que Dios ha puesto en su camino”.

Confió en Dios desde Venezuela, cuando ella y su familia empezaron a recorrer el mismo camino que Jesús, José y María recorrieron hace miles de años: el camino de un solicitante de asilo. Confió en Dios a cada paso del peligroso viaje a través de Centroamérica, siguiendo los pasos de los judíos que fueron esclavizados y que recorrieron terrenos igualmente traicioneros hace siglos. Confió en Dios cuando ella y su familia llegaron a la frontera de un país desconocido, llamando a las puertas de una nación con la misma mano temblorosa que Noemí, Rut y Orfa en tiempos pasados. Y ahora confía en que Dios seguirá abriendo camino para ella y sus seres queridos, dondequiera que la lleve.

“Mi esperanza para el futuro es poder quedarme aquí, que este país me dé la oportunidad de quedarme aquí y ganar mi solicitud de asilo político, para reconstruir mi vida aquí”, dijo. “Lo que queremos es una vida mejor para mi hija, para mi familia”.

Yosenderi es líder y organizadora de los voluntarios de Golan House en la Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville, Texas, donde se ocupa de conseguir ropa gratis y distribuir comida a los solicitantes de asilo. “Me siento muy bien haciendo lo mismo que hicieron conmigo”.





CBF equips church leaders with tools and strategies to move toward transformation and thriving through five key traits: Compelling Clarity, Faithful Agility, Holy Tenacity, Dynamic Collaboration and Rooted Relationships.

Rooted Relationships require us to show acts of care to one another, to our neighbors, and to ourselves. One act of care that CBF is highlighting in 2025 is creating your will. Creating your will creates rooted relationships with:

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- **Your family:** Designate guardians for children and provide for your loved ones
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A simple act of care to create rooted relationships

A thriving congregation includes rooted relationships built on acts of care. Prayerfully consider completing your will as an act of care.

To get started, CBF offers an online will-writing tool so you can complete this act of care for free. Scan the QR code or visit FreeWill.com/CBF

