

Creative Collaboratives between Churches

by Rodney Franklin

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The season of Lent offers Christians a time of reflection through prayer, reading scripture, and remembering the temptations of Christ by Satan while he was in the wilderness, and the season brings up hope. This 40-day period can easily be observed by one church, but what are the possibilities and opportunities for deeper learning when it is observed by six congregations of different denominations?

Our creative collaboration between five churches began in the first part of 2005 in Birmingham, Alabama. We are known as the Smithfield/College Hills Ecumenical Group. We joined together each week during Lent beginning with a joint Ash Wednesday worship service. We came to know more about each other through our sharing and exchanging of programs and worship services. What we learned when we gathered was we can do more together than separately, ecumenism can be seen with new eyes, young people from our congregations can join other young Christians in their faith journey, and we can contribute financially to nonprofits that make a difference in the lives of people who deal with challenges from homelessness, hunger, and domestic violence to HIV/AIDS issues and a lack of education.

The churches that gathered are Our Lady Queen of the Universe Roman Catholic Church, Tabernacle Baptist Church, Thurgood Memorial CME Church, Greater Temple Baptist Church, and First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ. A couple of years later, St. Paul AME Church joined the group.

As a way of focusing on a topic during Lent, we would gather over breakfast and talk about scriptures and possible themes to consider, and then we would select dates for our time together. One of the dates selected would always be for the youth of our churches so they could also participate in their own way in presenting the theme for Lent. Once the theme was selected, we would share it with our congregations so they in turn could get ready in preparation to host the weekly Lenten gathering.

We began with a joint Ash Wednesday service at the Catholic church, and the service included the imposition of ashes. Each gathering would begin with a simple shared meal so we could collectively be reminded of this season of sacrifice. The next week on each Wednesday evening, the host church prepared the meal and in a manner of their choosing, presented a program on a shared topic for our time together. We have had panel discussions, guest speakers, and dramatic presentations. There would be devotion and a time for an offering during the program. The hosting church for the evening would designate the offering to be gifted to a local nonprofit. Some of the organizations that have benefited from the offerings have been the University of Alabama at Birmingham's 1917 Clinic (local support for HIV/AIDS patients), Greater Birmingham Ministries, the American Red Cross, United Way of Alabama, AIDS Alabama, and the Lovelady Center (supports women and children in transition), just to name a few.

To further learn about our congregations and their history, we spent several weeks in the fall of the year with presentations about the history of the congregations and how they came to exist in the communities where they are located. Time was taken for questions and answers as information was presented. Many members of the congregations would exclaim that they had

passed by the different churches and had been there for programs and worship, but found the time in these informational sessions to be educational.

One of the things we have learned as a group of churches is that together we can further help those who deal with the issue of hunger, which is a critical need in our community. One of the pastors was asked by a research team from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's School of Public Health, which was investigating the need for daily nutrition to be distributed to seniors, if our churches could participate with the Jefferson County Meals on Wheels program. The decision was made to secure volunteers to assist Meals on Wheels in feeding those within our zip code. We jointly decided to participate, and each day during the week a church is responsible for delivering the Meals on Wheels meals to deserving families.

The volunteers from the churches have been great ambassadors in delivering meals to residents. The issue of hunger is a growing need in our community and city as people deal with the devastation of the economy and loss of jobs. We also see the problem of food deserts where fresh fruits and vegetables are not readily available in the community. Meals on Wheels is a tremendous help to people who may not have access to fresh food, who have limited incomes, or who have medical conditions that prevent them from preparing meals. There have been some challenges with volunteers changing and some only serving for short periods of time, but the effort continues and is making a difference in meeting the needs of residents who participate in the Meals on Wheels program.

Our coming together has also given us a voice to speak to zoning issues in our community. One issue that we gave voice to had to do with the building of a business that was next to one of our churches. If built, the business would create traffic problems. Discussions were held to determine if it was the most-appropriate or most-needed business for that particular

location. Members of our churches wrote letters to our city council representatives and the zoning committee, attended zoning meetings and city council meetings, and made phone calls in opposition to this building project. Unfortunately, we were not successful in our opposition to this business, but it helped us know the importance of speaking truth to power, and it made the community and city more aware of our collective presence. We also learned what we will need to do differently in the future to successfully oppose and support projects.

If churches of various denominations seek to model our collaboration, the first step would be for them to simply come together in Christian unity. Then, find what unites you and meet needs in the community in which you are located. Also, see who you can partner with and further the ministries of the churches involved. Then, the churches can collaborate with organizations in areas where the church does not have expertise. This involvement becomes a win-win for the churches and the organizations with which the churches partner. Additionally, be sure to create an evaluation tool to make your collaboration better over time.

Finally, the sky is the limit when churches come together and do joint ministry. When the body of Christ further explores not only what it can do individually but collectively, the work of God is expanded. We also further affirm our humanity when we work together as churches. I believe that Bishop Tutu, talking about Ubuntu, was right in saying that we represent the essence of God when we recognize the humanity that resides in our brothers and sisters. Furthermore, we further lift the essence of the goodness of God when we come together. When creative collaborations between churches are made, opportunities to do different types of ministries are unlimited.