

the test of our faith

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

What would you say most distinguishes us as Baptists? Believers' baptism by immersion? Freedom of the local church? Advocating for religious liberty?

All of these concepts and more are vital to our particular Baptist identity. I would add to that list an emphasis on missions. Growing up in my Baptist church, I don't remember a lot of talk about baptism (we certainly practiced believers' baptism, but didn't talk about it much), local church autonomy or religious liberty. But we talked about missions all the time. At Christmas and Easter when we collected missions offerings. In RAs and other Christian education programs. At summer youth camp. In Baptist Student Union. Missions was a strong emphasis in my formation as a Baptist Christian.

And while the missions we learned about certainly included sharing the Good News of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, it was delivered (by missionaries and our own efforts) primarily through acts of mercy and compassion to vulnerable and marginalized people: children, elderly, hungry, poor, and sick.

This focus, of course, is thoroughly biblical. The following verses are but a few samples of the hundreds of Scriptures that point us in the direction of serving the weakest and most needy among us:

- "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome... who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)
- "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free...? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)
- "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." (James 1:27)

In my travels to partner churches I see many examples of congregations engaged in hands-on missions ministries with

the vulnerable and marginalized: food pantries, clothes closets, wheel chair ramp building, benevolence ministries, constructing affordable housing, visiting the sick and elderly (including but not limited to church members), and much more. But congregations are limited in the amount of direct ministry they can provide to these populations.

Therefore, we join together as a fellowship to support efforts to serve God's mission to the poor and marginalized. Here are a few examples:

- Marc and Kim Wyatt in our own state, plus CBF field personnel around the world, welcome refugees and asylum seekers to the communities in which they live, sharing the love of God in word and deed.
- 764 CBF endorsed chaplains and pastoral counselors (159 in NC) serve in hospitals, correctional facilities, all branches of the military, public safety circumstances (police, fire, and EMTs), business and industry settings, VA facilities, continuing care communities, and other settings.
- Fellowship Southwest, CBF's newest regional organization, has organized prayer vigils and other expressions of welcome for families and children affected by the immigration crisis on the US-Mexico border.
- Anna and LaCount Anderson minister to needy persons in eastern NC as Cecelia Beck ministers to needy persons in western NC.

Mahatma Gandhi was not a Christian but many Christians saw in his life a faithful example of following the way of Jesus. Gandhi said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." Perhaps we could modify that statement to say the true measure of any church is how it treats the most vulnerable.

I think Jesus would approve. After all, in describing the final judgment, he said, "Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Serving the vulnerable and marginalized. Perhaps we should add that to our list of characteristics that distinguish us as Baptist Christians.

Oberammergau 2020

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Since 1634, to commemorate their escape from the bubonic plague, residents of the small village of Oberammergau, Germany, have performed a Passion Play commemorating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus every ten years. The play will be performed again in 2020.

Larry and Kim Hovis will be hosting a trip to Europe, May 18-27, 2020, with the Oberammergau Passion Play as the centerpiece. Additional stops will include Budapest, Vienna, Salzburg, and Prague.

If you are interested in traveling with CBFNC friends on this wonderful adventure, contact Larry Hovis (lhovis@cbfnc.org) for more information.

