

# CBF and How to Grow a Ministry to Young Adults

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For those of us who make up the first generation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, our connection to the denomi-network is rooted in many things—some painful, some hopeful, but almost always historical.

That is not true for the young adult generation that is now connecting to CBF. Their engagement is based on very different things. Their connections are based on experiences and relationships. They seek out places where they can belong and can use their gifts. Some have found that place in CBF life through connections such as CBFNC college ministry, mission trips, and the CBF summer programs Student.Church and Student.GO. Others have been invited, included, and embraced by local CBFNC congregations.

One young person who has found a home in CBFNC is **Amanda Smith** from Lowgap, NC. When Larry Hovis was invited to **Piney Grove Baptist Church** in Surry County, he returned to speak of a young woman on the pastor search committee who impressed him with her commitment to the mission of the church and to CBFNC. Before he said her name, I said, “You must have met Amanda Smith.” To which he replied, “Yes, how did you know?” “I have known Amanda since she was a freshman at Western Carolina University and I have watched her journey over the past decade,” I said.



What I knew was that her journey had been nurtured and informed by a multitude of people who helped her find her place and her calling as a beloved child of God – and they happened to be people who called themselves Cooperative Baptists.

As a college student, Amanda attended **Cullowhee Baptist Church** on campus. She was surprised to see a woman, **Tonya Vickery**, in the pulpit. Amanda was even more surprised when she realized that along with her husband, **Jeffrey**, she was the co-pastor of the church. Amanda said, “I knew that the Methodist had women preachers, but I did not know that there were any Baptist ones.” Tonya and Jeffrey became, and still are, an important part in her faith story. They helped her unpack some long-held absolutes and to find new ways of contemplating them.

CBFNC’s first constituted Cooperative Student Fellowship was formed at WCU. Cullowhee Baptist’s CBF Resident, **Richard Goddard**, took on the role of campus minister as part of his responsibilities. It was there that Amanda realized that asking questions about her faith was part of growing in her faith. She appreciated being with like-minded students who were discovering the same experience. As they explored doubts and confusion, they were met with patience and acceptance.

Through that group and the church, she was able to do

missions alongside CBF field personnel in various places, both locally and internationally. She discovered the value of having people on the ground who have relationships with communities and know the culture and the people. She went on mission trips to Touching Miami with Love where she met **Angel and Jason Pittman**. She went to a Together for Hope site in Alabama, Sowing Seeds of Hope, and then to Haiti where the field personnel served with a CBF partner that was rebuilding building homes. Those experiences had a profound effect on Amanda’s understanding of meeting people where they are and showing the love of Christ from a position of service and compassion.

As a student, Amanda served as an intern with Student.Church at Cullowhee Baptist Church. Amanda saw the internship as an opportunity to serve Christ as a lay leader who is not going into the ministry profession. Through that summer, she learned of more opportunities to engage with the larger CBF community. As a student and a newly minted high school teacher, she attended General Assemblies in Tampa, Ft. Worth, and Greensboro. At the assemblies, she participated in the college and young adult pre-assembly event, “Sessions.” Here, young adults look at cultural issues through a Christian lens discussing topics like prison reform and race relations.

All of this happened within a five year period. Amanda did not consciously know the impact it was having on her. But when she returned home to teach, she saw herself and her home church differently. She could not simply return to the faith of her youth. For three years she tried, but eventually she began to look for a CBFNC church where she could be with people who allowed her to explore, serve, and grow as the person she believed God created her to be.

Amanda notes, “Our pastor at Piney Grove, **Mark Reece**, reminded the church of the need to support and encourage young adults by asking them to be involved. I would have not considered taking the position as a youth Sunday school teacher without encouragement from Mark and the youth parents. Asking young adults to take part, especially young adults new to a church, is key. Don’t expect them to automatically jump in. It was similar at the campus church. I never would have volunteered to help with the children’s ministry if it hadn’t been for encouragement from the college Sunday School teacher, **Steve Baxley**. The inclusion of young adults is important for the future of the Church. It cannot be overstated.”

Young people beyond our walls are looking for a place to belong. They need people who will encourage without pushing, invite without demanding, respond to questions without giving absolutes, and who will see young adults as beloved children of God - not as numbers or projects. We in CBFNC churches are precisely the people to provide those opportunities. 🌱