

# Just Friends

by Greg Jarrell



To work in God's mission in the world is to dance with partners called Justice and Friendship. In my years as a neighbor in one of Charlotte's toughest neighborhoods, I have come to see that both of those partners are needed in building the realm of God in the world. Having robust friendships will not guarantee justice. Without friendships, justice will be impossible. The small move of learning to know a neighbor as a friend, to see them as something besides an Other whose body is to be controlled and ghettoized and warehoused in undesirable places is an important start. But that small move is hardly a robust conception of justice. Justice is necessarily social—there is no other kind. It must extend beyond private relationships. More than friendship is needed, but friendship will push people to work together for justice.

Among the things friends do when they gather in groups of two or three or more is to sing. Joining voices in song is a physical means of joining bodies together to work in harmony and solidarity with one another. A song in duet, or trio, or in a chorus, is a rehearsal of a social order built on solidarity and belonging. Everyone gets a part. Every part matters. Singing together prefigures the coming world, the world of equity and rightness, of creative dissonances and moments of resolution. This is why worship services often end with song before the congregation goes out to serve the world or why protest movements include singing and chanting in the streets.

Children learn to sing by matching their voices with their parents. Jesus learned to sing from Mary and Joseph, probably many kinds of songs. Silly ones. Lullabies. Songs for learning letters and numbers. One of those songs is still around. Mary started singing it from the first moments when she learned that the justice of God was living in her womb. The vibrations of her song were already working through him then. She must have kept singing that song to him as she told him the story of their people, and how their people's God

has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
In remembrance of his mercy,  
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
To Abraham and to his descendants forever.[1]

This is the justice that friends will work together for, and pray together for, and stand together for. It brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly, creating from a song the kinds of spaces where all of God's children can thrive.

[1] Luke 1:51b-53

*Greg is Co-founder and Director of QC Family Tree, Charlotte, NC. This article is adapted from his new book, A Riff of Love: Notes on Community and Belonging, published by Cascade Books.*

# Dinner Church Experience

by Seth Hix, Church Engagement Coordinator



*A church fellowship hall filled with round tables.  
A cooler of lemonade and a few pitchers of water.  
A plate of spaghetti, salad, fruit, and a cookie.  
A brief proclamation of the gospel through word and song.  
A time of fellowship.*

All of the elements listed above are familiar to most CBFNC congregations. In fact, my best guess is that most people reading this article have personally experienced all of them many times in their own church family. So, what could make these elements seem extraordinary? The simple answer: Dinner Church.

I attended a Dinner Church on an ordinary September Tuesday night in a small North Carolina town. A modest sign sat outside the church's back door pointing people inside for a free meal. The people who wandered inside were not members of this congregation. Some of the people were in search of a fresh meal. Some were seeking fellowship and companionship. Some were attracted to the message of the gospel.



Surprisingly, the people preparing and serving the meal were not members of the host congregation. They came from several local congregations and a religious non-profit group seeking to meet the needs of the community.

Dinner Church is experienced in a variety of ways across the country. It is an initiative of a broader missional movement known as Fresh Expressions, "an international movement cultivating new kinds of church alongside existing congregations to more effectively engage our post-Christian society." Fresh Expressions originated as an initiative of the Church of England to birth new communities of faith to co-exist alongside established congregations. Our Baptist friends at the Baptist General Association of Virginia were instrumental in bringing Fresh Expressions to the United States in 2010. The Fresh Expressions movement reaches far beyond Dinner Church. It intends to "connect with those uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the inherited church."

The North Carolina leadership of Fresh Expressions has set a goal to establish at least one Dinner Church in each county across the state. This cross-denominational endeavor is supported by church leaders in a variety of Christian traditions. The expansion of the Dinner Church movement is not about boosting numbers in existing churches. Each