

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

Dinner Church Experience, *cont'd.*

organically-formed community aims to expand God's Kingdom in local communities beyond the reach of established local congregations. The objective is to extend a welcome to people who would not normally attend a Sunday morning worship service. There is no sophisticated programming or intricate strategy for Christian formation beyond the of sharing of a meal, hearing the gospel, forming community around a table, and an openness to sharing life with others.

Jesus regularly ate with his beloved disciples as well as with people from all segments of society. As Baptists, we value fellowship around the table. And as Cooperative Baptists, we remain open to new means of conveying God's love to folks in our community. Perhaps God is calling you, or your church, to consider the impact that a simple meal can have on God's Kingdom.

As I chatted with the half-dozen people gathered around my table, it became apparent that this was more than a benevolent meal offered to those in need. The two ladies who shared their personal stories with me expressed a genuine care for the people in the room, most of whom self-identified as regulars. In fact, many of the folks in this low-key dinner experience were there because they considered this a sacred time. The food filled their stomachs, but the friendship lifted their spirits and the gospel nourished their souls. The woman who sat across from me accurately captured the essence of the evening's experience as she affectionately claimed, *"This is my church!"*

Find out more about this innovative movement at: freshexpressionsus.org.

Holy Friendships by Marc Wyatt, CBF Field Personnel, Raleigh



I first met my Afghan friend when he came to be a guest of Welcome House Raleigh. After flying for many hours he was in a whole new world and jetlagged. Through squinting, sleepy eyes he tried his best to absorb all that was happening as he listened to the guest orientation we provide all new refugee and immigrant arrivals. It was clear, though; what Mujib most needed was sleep.

Welcome House is a temporary home for up to 10 guests awaiting long-term housing. While with us, guests live in community together with our house hosts, Joy and Shaun Price. It doesn't take long for folks to get it. They share almost everything together. From yummy exotic recipes to full-on belly laughs and stories about things and people that matter most back home, holy friendship is shared.

Our community includes folks from just about anywhere. We have hosted new friends from small villages in Congo and Angola, families of 10 from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, grandmothers, grandfathers, stateless Rohingya men from Myanmar, single moms with small toddlers wrapped tightly around their backs from Eritrea, and even newlyweds from Djibouti. Our family shares one thing in common—a hope to find home again. Mujib quickly joined right in.

One day, I told him I'd be sharing a bit about Welcome House with a church. Churches help provide this house, I explained.

"Ever been to church?" I asked.

"I knew some of the US Army guys were Christians. But I've never been to an American Church. Can I go with you?" he asked.

I told him "Yes. You can come with me but you are going to hear some things said and see some things done you've never seen before. I won't be able to explain stuff or debate ideas with you while I'm at the church. But afterward, on the way home, I'll be happy to talk about anything and everything. Ok?"

"Deal," he said.

While sharing with the church, I asked them how many veterans were in the room. Many hands went up. I said, "My friend, Mujib, served alongside the US military as an advisor and

translator. He and his family risked their lives on the front lines with our guys because they want a better life for their country." The whole place lit up in standing applause. That experience really spoke to Mujib's heart.

After the joint Sunday School gathering, we sat together in worship. It was a regular Sunday morning service. But for Mujib, it was the first time he stood with Christians while we sang. It was the first time he heard our prayers. And, it was the first time he heard the Scriptures read and proclaimed.

After the benediction, while waiting to shake Pastor Hadley's hand, a lady walked up to us, hugged Mujib, and handed him a torn off corner of her bulletin with her phone number on it.

She said, "You call me and I'll bring you to church next Sunday, you hear?"

Mujib is from the Middle East. Women don't act that forward there. I assured him she wasn't coming on to him. I explained, "She'll send her husband to pick you up at Welcome House if you want to go to church next Sunday. They want to be friends with you." He exhaled with a relieved smile.

On the drive back to Welcome House, Mujib peppered me with questions. Those questions continued all that week and have to this day.

The next Sunday, sure enough, the lady's husband picked up Mujib and took him to church. He's been going to Tabernacle Baptist Church in Raleigh ever since.

There have been questions, meals, stories, and belly laughs with his new friends since that day.

On Sunday, November 18th, Mujib followed the Lord in Christian Baptism. He professed Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He desired to become a member of the church that honored his service and included him into the family. Thanks be to God for friendship that is holy and welcoming to foreigners.

If you would like to encourage our new brother in the faith please send your card to Mujib c/o Marc Wyatt, 4503 All Points View Way, Raleigh, NC 27614.