

Phyllis Bell, Jackie Walker, and Tony Allen

Interview Transcript

Running time: 16:25 minutes

Noah: So I'd like to keep it really casual. It's just we're gonna have a nice discussion. So I'm just going to introduce myself really quick. Hello, my name's Noah Sarmiento. I'm a VCU student and I'm majoring in history and cinema, and it's very nice to meet you all today

Nice to meet you, Noah.

Noah: And can each of you introduce yourselves please?

Phyllis: I'll start since I'm the oldest. My name is Phyllis Bell and I am a deacon here at Koinonia and a founding member and I've been here for, since, seems like forever

Toni: And my name is Toni Allen. I'm one of the ministers here at Koinonia. And happy to say that I've been with the Joint Partnership from the beginning as well.

Jackie: My name is Jacqueline Walker. I am also a founding member here and I am chairperson of the Hospitality Ministry.

Noah: It's so nice to meet you all today. So the first question's going to be how are you currently personally involved in the partnership between Koinonia, LCU and Reveille?

Phyllis: Well, I'll go first. So currently I'm serving on the Spirit Team, which started out being two members from each church, and our job is to come together, usually monthly. And we discuss the activities and events going on in each church to keep each other abreast and then to gather collectively to plan things, activities like a joint picnic or different services to keep us in fellowship together. And I also am a part of the study group, a Joint study group, and we have through the years chosen books to study or a particular topic all aimed at helping us to get to know each other better and working on reconciliation between the races and just being about God's business.

Jackie: I am also in the Spirit Team. And we have had our meetings and it gives us an opportunity to get to know each other better on a personal level, you know, as well as a spiritual level.

Toni: Currently I'm not as active as I was from the beginning, but I try to support, you know, the joint ventures that we have and try to make sure that I'm there whenever there is a joint venture happening.

Noah: Thank you. When and why did you first get involved with this partnership and for how long have you been involved? I guess we kind of went over that in the beginning.

Phyllis: Well, I mean, I can answer it because it doesn't seem like it's been that long, 10 years. So I was present at the very first meeting that members from Reveille came over to our church to meet our pastor and a select group of people. And they were interested in finding out how they could help us at our church and be a part of the work that we do. That was 10 years ago. Pastor Keith was our pastor then, and I think it was Katie Gooch, who was then one of the pastors at Reveille. And so, you know, we worked together to figure out how we could become a team.

Toni: And my reasons for getting involved from the beginning had a lot to do with the fact that I was the youth person at the church. I was the chairperson of the youth ministry. And one of the first activities was Music Mondays that was created to bring area youth from the community or anyone in to have piano lessons, guitar lessons, violin lessons. So that drew my attention immediately. I had a daughter who was interested in playing piano. So it kind of was, you know, personal. But it also included the children in the community as well. So that's why I first got involved

Jackie: And then I got involved also because of the food pantry ministry. I am not the chairperson, but I am in that ministry and Reveille has been very instrumental, you know, in the building of that ministry as far as being able to help us so that we can better serve the community

Noah: So what were some key moments in the development of this partnership and when did they take place? While this partnership developed, what were some key moments that stood out to you.

Phyllis: Well, I think at the very beginning we all came together over at Reveille and we developed different teams that all the members could sign up to be a part of. I signed up for joint study. I remember Jackie, you signed up for the food, the entertainment. Entertainment, yes. Picnics, hospitality, social things like that. And I think a lot of those different committees have sort of fizzled out over the years. The joint study remained. The picnic one (remained) up until Covid.

Jackie: I think that that (COVID) changed that a lot.

Noah: We can go on to the next one if you guys would like. So what barriers were there or continued to exist with the partnership when you first started partnering with Reveille?

Toni: I think with what we were doing, the only barrier was that it was new and we didn't really know what to expect or how to kind of proceed, but God just kind of orchestrated it all along the way and everything just worked out so beautifully. And it's still, even though some of the initial programs aren't happening, but there's still so much more and so much more to come.

Noah: So I guess it kind of leads into the next one. What successes were there with this partnership or maybe continue to happen with this partnership?

Jackie: Well I can truly say that we have gained a lot of knowledge about how things work from both ends. They have been very, very helpful as far as our food pantry ministry. The Bible says you give sparingly, you know, you receive sparingly, and they have truly been good. And you know, helping us to be able to serve the community with no barriers.

Toni: One of the partnerships that I was thinking about, we were able to go on mission trips together. So the youth were able to attend mission trips. We went together and we served together. And there was a point where Revelle's youth came and they did a choir concert here, and then our youth went over to Reveille and did a liturgical dance. So we were all into each other's worlds, if you will. And it became one beautiful worship service each time.

Phyllis: I've especially enjoyed the joint prayer projects that we've had through the years. We actually did a Zoom prayer day that was interesting and we've had drive through prayer during the Covid time. And I also have enjoyed the book studies that we have done. We did "When Helping Hurts." That was one study we did on poverty. And then the reconciliation we've done. We've read so many books over the years that have been springboards for conversation about race and reconciliation. And we get to know each other on a different level, but know that we are all God's children, all God's people, and we have more in common than we have differences.

Noah: So I think a common theme throughout all of these interviews I've done so far is the Covid. Do you think that strengthened you guys' relationship with the other churches? Because I've heard people say that through Zoom it kind of helped, although physically you guys were isolated from each other. You guys were able to come together as a community through Zoom. Do you think Covid helped strengthen the relationship with all the churches before compared to how it was before?

Toni: I wouldn't necessarily say strengthen, however, I will say it's because of Zoom and other creative avenues we were able to maintain and kinda reflect on how important we were to each other when we were unable to see each other or worship together or, you know, do activities together.. Just realizing how important we were to each other that we may not have really thought of before or kind of taken for granted.

Phyllis: Yeah, I kind of agree with you, Tony .It may not have strengthened, but it helped us to see just how strong our relationship was because Covid could have been a barrier. I know that a lot of things that had been developed but because of Covid and not being able to come

together, they kind of fizzled out or stopped or didn't ever pick up again. But we continued with our relationship and I just really, really, thank God for that.

Noah: So would you view this partnership as a whole, as a success?

All - P, J, T: Yes. Yes. Yes..

Noah: Why would you say that? If you could summarize it, I guess, about the success of this partnership?

Toni: I just see all the different ways that the partnership has grown and how the real relationships were formed. It was more than superficial. You come to my church and I come to your church, but there were real relationships formed and still exist because of the partnership and being able to do ministry together. Even, you know, being exposed to something that you may not have been exposed to before, but embracing it.

Jackie & Phyllis: I agree. I agree.

Phyllis: And some of the members of Reveille have really become friends.

All - P, J, T: Yes. Yes

Noah: And like I saw earlier with Mr. Downs, who's saying hi to everybody. Yes. So what, what did you like best about this partnership?

Toni: One thing that I like best is that it reached everyone. Like I said, I was very involved with the youth aspect of it. And you know, not only did it do a lot for the youth, but it also reached some of our older members. So there's something for everybody. So that's the part that, you know, I find just really fascinating. It's something for everybody. Nobody's left.

Noah: So what has been most beneficial for you personally? The congregations and the community as a whole? I guess so like for the community, what has benefited the community, yourself?

Toni: I think the presence of Reveille, just being in the community. I know every summer when they have, when Reveille has kids camp. They come over and for a few years, they've done flower pots where they've planted the flowers and gone in the neighborhood delivering flowers to the neighbors. So being visible, being seen. Habitat for Humanities. Helping build homes for those, and they extend that to the Swansboro community. We did a program at the school, at Swansboro school, the after school program where we called it Marvelous Mondays, where we did crafts and activities. And that program just picked back up after Covid. We stopped before Covid, but it just picked back up. That's good to hear.

Phyllis: And then, the Boy Scouts from one of the members. The troop of young men came over and they actually built those mini libraries outside and we stock with books and Reveille also provides books. So members in the community can walk by and choose a book to read. Either bring it back or keep it, and we keep it stocked. That's cool. So that's the benefit to the community.

Noah: So if other churches came to you and asked and wanted to replicate this sort of partnership, what advice would you give them?

Toni: Have an open mind.

Phyllis: I'd be authentic. Yes.

All: P, J, T: Yes.

Phyllis: That's the benefit to the community.

Toni: A lot of times we put on, put on airs. I want to call it put on airs trying to be, instead of just being, being yourself.

Jackie: Yeah.

Toni: And know that we are all God's children.

Noah: So really quick, if you can basically explain what is the story of your church and where they came from?

Phyllis: My church. Well, our church, right. our church started over 40 years ago. We came out of a prominent Baptist church. Here in Richmond, a small group of us left along with a pastor and we were seeking a deeper level of discipleship. And so we started Koinonia which means fellowship with God and with each other. We started out very small and as a matter of fact, we are still very small. But I think we have a deep connection with Jesus and we are growing every day to be more like him. And that was the reason why we started the church from the beginning. My mother was not the first pastor, but she was the third pastor. And she was the pastor for over 30 years here before she retired. And so we continue to be that kind of church centered in Christ in the center of the community. loving with the love of Christ.

Noah: So were any of you involved with the Micah project. Does that ring any bells with the Micah project with the Swansboro Elementary School?

All – P, J, T: I wasn't, no. Okay.

Noah: Oh, that's it. That was really quick. I want to thank you guys for coming out. Thank you so much for your time. I hope you guys have a blessed Sunday. Thank you so much.

All: P,J,T: Thank you. Thank you.

Tonia: Thank you so much, Noah, for what you're doing to kind of memorialize all of this. To see a young person, you know, so dedicated. Yes. And dedicated. Yes. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much and keep up the good work.

Noah: Yes, thank you. It's very fun, too.

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