

Swansboro Church Partnership Interview

Interviewer and Video Editor: Noah Sarmiento

Interviewees: Minister Sonya Thomas and Charita Branch

Transcript Editor: Linda Gill

Noah: Hello, my name's Noah Sarmiento. I'm a junior at VCU and I'm a major in cinema and history and it's very nice to meet both of you today. Would you like to introduce yourselves?

Yes sir. Thank you. My name is Sonya Thomas. I am currently an assistant minister at Love Center of Unity Full Gospel Church and have been with that church for 34 years.

Nice to meet you.

Charita: Hello, Noah. My name is Charita Branch and I'm a member of Love Center of Unity for over 30 years.

Noah: Wow! Nice to meet you both today. Thank you. So the first question's going to be how are you currently personally involved in the partnership between Koinonia, LCU, and Reveille?

Sonya: Well, I served on the Spirit team. I actually took Charita's post on that team. Yes. I currently serve on the Spirit team with others to provide actions...you know, for us to go forward and have fellowship throughout the year.

Charita: And what I am doing currently is I am involved with the after school program at Swansboro Elementary School. Reveille is there on Mondays, and so I serve on Mondays working with the kids..

Noah: That's awesome. So when and why did you first get involved with this partnership and for how long have you been?

Sonya: I would say from the onset, as far as how long.... When the individuals from Reveille made connection with our pastor and we started with the meeting and greeting and they started fellowshiping with us at our church, we were all present, you know, to kind of get to know them and make friends,

So what's the B part? How long are you currently... why did you get involved? When and where? Yeah, so it started right at our church and it just was a natural progression of things. You know, I think our church has always been what's called inclusive interdenominational versus denominational. So all denominations were welcomed. So when Reveille came, it just was a natural thing for us to include them.

Charita: I would say around the same time as Minister Thomas in that, you know, it was a church effort that we did, and there were some of us as members of the church who were more inclined to get into the partnership and work with Reveille and Koinonia on

the different projects and events that we had. So that's how I became involved with it, through the ministry.

Noah: And what were some key moments in the development of this partnership and when did these take place?

Sonya: Oh my, so many over the years. I think on the onset, they wanted to assist us with helping with our youth wing and that was a major undertaking because there we were in an older building that had a lot of structural damage. So they started in trying to support us and of course programming came out of that. We started with a group study ...it seems like shortly after that. And that group study was phenomenal. It was awesome. *When Helping Hurts* was the title of the book and we got together, I don't know, at least four to six weeks during that time...doing that study. And it was really good. So that was kind of like the onset for us. For me.

Charita: And around 2015 is when I became a part of the Spirit Task Team that met at Sheelagh Davis's house and there were two members from each church, Koinonia, Reveille and LCU, and I would represent LCU, myself and another person, Sister Taylor.

We would go to the meetings. We met once a month. We planned different activities. For the three churches to get together and do and everything. So that, that's how I really became involved at that time. And like the events where we would have on Wednesdays, like Black History Month, I was really impressed with that. When we would have a speaker to come in, we'd have dinner and then we'd have a speaker. Like the Sheriff from Richmond, she came in and spoke. And not too long ago, we had the author of the *Yellow Wife* a book that she wrote. And it was just very enlightening to be exposed to those different types of things that maybe I wouldn't have been otherwise.

Noah: That's awesome. And what barriers were there or maybe continue to exist with this partnership, if any?

Sonya: Well, no real barriers because the three pastors, Pastor Keith, Pastor Doug and Pastor Peter Moon. Once he (Peter Moon) came on board and Bishop Branch, they really connected well. You know, when the head goes forward connecting, well, then everything else kind of follows and we kind of started off like on a loving note. So it was like, I know somebody referenced, we started off as friends. We did all start off as friends, but it was a lot of love and respect for each other. So it was, for me, I didn't see or feel if there were barriers. I didn't notice them.

I think the biggest thing is probably trying to get more people, more people involved in what we were doing, That wasn't a barrier, but trying to get more people involved with what we were doing. And we would do events to make sure that happened. So, yeah. But no real true barriers to getting a partnership going. Do you agree?

Charita: I agree there. I can't see where we saw any barriers. Those who were involved were plugged in. Right? Yeah. They were definitely plugged in and wanted to be a part of and wanted to see us excel and grow and be successful and it panned out.

Noah: And that kind of leads into the next question. What successes were there and/or continue to exist with the partnership?

Sonya: So many. So I would say one of the successes that I really loved was the women we got together because....it's hard to articulate how things get started, but sometimes it's just the spirit kind of gives you some kind of notion to do this. So we got a notion to have prayer partners because how can you get closer to somebody than to pray? So we had a lady's tea, we had a formal tea, and we designed it and everybody came and it was really fun and we hooked up.

And the thing was to not have a partner with somebody who's already in a church with you, but have a partner with somebody who's not. Right. So we tried to pair ladies from LCU with ladies from Koinonia, and ladies from Koinonia with ladies from Reveille. We were all paired together. Reveille is the larger of the three congregations, so of course they usually have more participation, but everybody had a partner and it worked out well.

You know, some of the stuff fell by the wayside as far as connecting and everything, but the goal was to get closer. You know, it's like if I know what you're praying for, if I know what your concerns are, if I know what your family's going through, that's not a superficial conversation. Now we're really getting into the nitty gritty. Right. And it worked for me. It worked. It worked for a lot of us. And we, we had some off the rail, but it was good.

Charita: And I would say that with the Spirit Task Team that I've worked with there became a friendship amongst us so that as we met at Sheelagh's once a month and during the pandemic we met via Zoom, there was such a good relationship that developed amongst the ladies. Prior to our meetings even started, it gave us an opportunity to share life's experiences, which in many cases is different based on your background. And so that helped to solidify the relationship that we had to grow. And at Christmas time, we would go to a nice restaurant. We would do Secret Santa and exchange gifts. So all of that helped to really build the relationship that still goes on now.

Noah: So I guess overall, would you view this partnership as a success?

Sonya: A huge success, tremendous success. This has been... it's been really good. It's been really good. I can't give it enough good adjectives...phenomenal. It's been a blessing. It's been a blessing for us as a congregation, and I think it's a blessing for the whole city of Richmond at large.

You know what we've done. I look forward to spreading it.

Charita: I see it as a personal blessing. As well as that I got the opportunity to meet people that I ordinarily would not have met who have even been involved with me outside of Reveille, you know, the umbrella of Reveille in some of the personal organizations I belong to.

I've had a couple of them, Jill and Mel, who've been judges at some oratorical competitions that my organization hosts and they love it. And it has been such a blessing to have them a part, you know, of that competition. So, you know, personally, it really has been a blessing.

Noah: That's awesome. So what did you like best about the partnership, the friendships, the relationships you made, or is there anything else?

Sonya: I think just kind of peeling back the covers. You know, a lot of the stuff that we've talked about over the years has shed a lot of light on some things that a lot of people don't like to look at, don't like to talk about.

So I think just exposing some of the truths. You know, it is what it is... our America experience is different from each race, each culture, each ethnic group as well as each economic group. So everybody's experiences are different. So to be able to come together and say, okay, this is my experience versus your experience and really look at them as a whole and kind of intertwine our lives. And just, like I said, just see you know, why do you think that way? How do you think that way? You know, it's been a blessing that has been truly... It's fed me a lot. I get excited when we have events to the point where I try to tell people, come on, y'all need to go. This is going to be good. You just need to be there. You know, that's, that's my take on it. It fuels my intellect, it fuels my spirit. It just fuels me so.

Charita: And I think that being able to be in mixed company and share different ideas and thoughts, and you are not judged by your thoughts. You are sharing your experience with me so that I can try to understand and I share mine with you so that together we can see we have more in common than we don't.

Yes. So the conversations that we've had when we've had our get-togethers at the church, at Reveille, you know what we've had, especially during the Black History time and people get to express themselves and no one's judging because you do not feel the way I feel and vice versa. I'm learning from you and you are learning from me.

So I've really enjoyed seeing how others worship because we don't all worship the same. They say that Sundays are the most segregated times that we have because everybody's in their own box, but this brings us together. So it's been really nice to see things in worship. I love the bell ringers. This is not something you would normally see in our churches. The bell ringers at a program, you know, and I was very impressed with that.

Sonya: The lighting of the candles. There's a lot of liturgical things that they do that we don't do. So that's traditional.

Charita: That's been great.

Noah: And if other churches came to you and wanted to replicate the partnership you guys had, what advice would you give?

Sonya: First to start to make a plan... to be intentional on purpose, not to expect too much too soon. I mean it took us 10 years to get here, but we were always in a good place. You know, over those 10 years it was always a good smooth sailing. But ask and pray a lot. Ask the Holy Spirit to God. You know, we've done a lot of great things in the community. Every person who brought those things to the forefront, I believe the spirit was working through them to have those events take place.

Charita: Keep an open mind, don't be judgmental and to listen to other points of view. You know, yours isn't the only one and it isn't always the right one. So, you know, listen to other points of view.

Noah: Moving on. I guess this is more specifically for you, Charita. About the Swansboro Elementary School. When did you first get involved specifically with the elementary school?

Charita: When I retired in January of 2017, one of my goals was to work in an inner city school - to give back to the community because I grew up in inner city schools.

And when we partnered with Reveille, and Reveille was asking for persons who were interested in becoming a mentor at Swansboro. I jumped on it because this was fulfilling one of my prophecies for myself. I'm going to work in an inner city school, so for...I went there to Swansboro. I went, well, first of all, we had our Community in Schools meeting and had to do the background check and what have you.

And from there I went to the school. I, there actually were grades and I wanted a fifth grader at that time, so I got a fifth grader and I started going on Tuesdays. I think it was to meet with her at lunchtime, and we would play games together. We would eat lunch together. We didn't eat in the cafeteria because there's so much going on that one-on-one time wasn't good.

So we would like go out into the little garden that they have, you know, during good weather and sit out there and eat. And I might stop at McDonald's and get her some McDonald's and bring it in to her. And before school ended, she moved, so I lost her. So, because it was near the end of school, I didn't get another student, but I went back the next year and I got another student and started working with her.

And then she left and I'm like, Hmm, is it me? Is this why these kids keep leaving? But they said that the transition at Swansboro with the students moving to other areas, you know, this happens frequently. So it's not true, Charita. So the third year I got the student and then the pandemic came, and she has since graduated.

So when we could go back into schools, I don't know where she is now. Right. But what I do, I no longer go to mentor, but I do work with the kids in the Marvelous Monday after school program. When they asked for volunteers for that, and I told Sheelagh, I said they have a craft group and they have a game group, you know, Connect Four, putting together puzzles, Uno, all of that.

And they switched the kids up after 30 minutes. So I told her I can't draw a straight line with a ruler, so I can't do a craft, but I can play games. So that's what I do now. I go on Mondays and play games with the students and it's a lot of fun. They have their own rules for games. I've never, you know, no, that's not how you do it.

No, but this is how we do it. So they have, every student has their own way of playing games and they like to cheat. Kids like to cheat when they're playing. So, so we playing a game and, and you know, they're saying "you can't do that." And they say, "Yes I can. Yes I can. You can't do that." But, you know, it's fun playing with them.

And as I played with them, I was telling my husband when we had gone away a couple of weeks ago and we were playing Connect Four and I said, "I am beating them in Connect Four." And my daughter said, "Mom, you can't do that. You have to let the kids win." So I said, okay, and they'll go, "Mrs. Branch, can I win the next game?" So, I'm enjoying Marvelous Mondays at the school and we'll continue to do so. And through that,

with my organization that I'm in, we have also hosted a family for Christmas, a single parent with two sons, and LCU provided them with food for the week.

During Thanksgiving. And then for Christmas, we provided them clothing. So I'm enjoying it.

Noah: That's awesome. And about the Spirit Team... what went into the planning or how did you come up with ideas like the prayer walk and stuff like that?

Sonya: Well, I think each individual who has had a part in the partnership kind of had like free course to bring ideas. And that prayer walk was the baby of evangelist, I want to say, yes, she's the evangelist minister from Koinonia. Come on, Sonya. Lord Jesus. Lilli Ann Love. It just was something in her spirit. And what we would do once we came up with something, an idea, we would get a committee.

So the committee came together - somebody from each church. So LilliAnn, Deacon Bell and her husband, Jill from Reveille, myself, and I'm sure there were some others, but those were like the remaining, you know. We would just come together and like work for months to decide what we're going to do, how we're going to do it, how we're going to plan it out.

And it evolved. We knew we wanted to evangelize in the area. And we just came up with how we would make that work. So I think that was pre-Covid. The first one was pre-Covid and again, we wanted all the three churches to be involved. And then Covid came, and then we wanted it not to stop because it was so good.

Then we had one during Covid, and then we had one post Covid. So, but yeah, I would just say everything was spirit led. Everything was spirit led, you know, it's just like you get an inkling. You say, okay, let's see how this would work. And we'd come together and make it work.

Noah: Well, were there any last words that you guys wanted to say?

Charita: I would say that any other churches that are interested in this type of program with other churches, it is well worth the time spent. The camaraderie, the friendships and relationships that you get from them is well worth any effort that goes into it. It, and it's not so much...it doesn't become an effort after you continue to do because you look forward to those times together. And I know I do.

Sonya: I want to say, thank you. And whoever came up with this idea to document what has taken place because it is different. It's odd, and it's life changing. My goal every time we get together is to kind of unearth what Richmond has been in the past.

You know, a lot of people live here, but they really don't know the history of what we...who we are, what we are, what we've done to each other here in this area. And I feel as if because we're kind of like the...I don't want to say the catalyst or the beginning point...it's like if we can unearth it and tear this down here, then we can have a ripple effect across the nation. So that's always been my focus and my goal when I work with this group. So I'm looking forward to that happening in the near future.

Noah: Come back for the 20 year anniversary or something.

Sonya: That'll be nice.

Noah: All right, well thank you so much for your time.

Sonya and Charita: Thank you.

Noah: Thank you so much and I hope you have a great Sunday.

Sonya: You, too. Bless you, sir.