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**Unexpected Bodies United in Christ:
A Case Study of Mixed Faith and Race Church Partnerships in Richmond, Virginia**

Sitting side by side near the pulpit of the Love Center of Unity Full Gospel Church International, Bishop Larry Branch and Pastor Lynette Galloway Branch smiled at each other as they shared that they were just one year short of their 50-year wedding anniversary. Behind them, a banner reads “We are a people a part of the body united with the purpose of uniting the body.” Throughout their 49 years of marriage, they had built a successful Christian congregation from the ground up in the Swansboro Community of Richmond, Virginia known as Love Center of Unity (LCU). As evidenced by the prominent banner, standing as a united body in Christ has always been foundational to the mission of the church. The LCU congregation, along with Koinonia Christian Church (Koinonia) and Reveille United Methodist Church (Reveille) established a successful partnership for over ten years, beginning in 2013. Reflecting on lessons learned from the partnership, Bishop Branch shared that “...in the journey you find there’s more to God than what we have...a lot of times churches are about perpetuating an institution.” Bishop Branch then stopped, almost as if he arrived at a discovery and said, “The exciting part is that the more you know about God, you find out there’s more to know.”²

Bishop Branch leads one of the three congregations involved in the Swansboro partnership, with many participants sharing similar thoughts and experiences about how working

¹ Kendall Sargent, VCU History graduate student, selected a 3-credit course internship to document a 10-year history of a three-church partnership by developing a timeline. This article was created based on her gathering, organizing, and analyzing resources from those involved to develop the timeline and to tell the story of the partnership.

² Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Larry and Lynette Branch Transcript, March 3, 2023.

together in joint ministry with people from different backgrounds has helped expand their understanding of the nature of God. Joint ministries require trust, time, buy-in from leadership, a willingness to listen and compromise. Most importantly, however, is a mutual love for God, his children, and his work. This paper will not only document the history of a mixed faith and race tri-church partnership in Richmond, but will also detail takeaways and advice from the frontrunners involved about how to create successful joint-ministries.

Context and Background:

Richmond has long been known for its many beautiful churches. Whether in the downtown area with St. Paul's Episcopal and St. Peter's Catholic church or Jackson Ward's Sixth Mount Zion and Ebenezer Baptist churches, one can hardly walk more than one block in the city without stumbling upon another Christian congregation. Throughout the South, and even many other regions throughout the country, churches tend to fall along racial lines. Historically, even some years prior to emancipation, free and enslaved black Richmonders enjoyed worship as one of the few places that were not under white supervision. Many black parishioners saw themselves in "the Israelites who escaped Egypt" and were inspired to break free from the bonds of slavery as well as the harsh treatment towards emancipated blacks during Reconstruction.³

Even with the inalienable rights promised to African Americans in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, the Jim Crow years in Richmond saw anything but equality. Black churches became not only a place of refuge and worship but also a center of political and cultural activity. For example, Richmond's churches led the charge for voting rights by establishing Union Leagues opposing the violent acts of the Ku Klux Klan. Freedmen knew that without education

³ William Montgomery, "African American Churches in Virginia (1865–1900)" *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities (2020).

and the vote, equality would always be out of reach. One church leader, Reverend John Givens, used his prowess in the religious community to mobilize black voters no matter the cost. In response to white Richmonders threatening and intimidating blacks from voting, Givens wrote to congress “by the help of God” he would “give them a dose of my radical Republican pills and neutralize the corrosive acidity of their negro hate.”⁴ This blending of religion and politics continued on for decades, the prime example being Reverend Dr. Martin Luther who became the figurehead of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. In an NBC “Meet the Press” television segment from 1960, Dr. King coined the well-known trope that “11 o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America.”⁵ Even today, black centers of worship have a unique ability to galvanize congregations on a variety of political issues.

Due to the nature of this paper on interfaith and interracial partnerships in Richmond, it is important to briefly summarize the nature of race relations in the city. Richmond served as the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War and was home to the second largest slave jail and market in the country. During Reconstruction and the decades that followed, many white Richmonders did everything in their power to maintain the racial status quo by intimidating black voters, inciting violence, and even erecting several monuments to former Confederate leaders. As a result of integration and the Civil Rights movement, thousands of whites in the Richmond area fled to the suburbs.⁶

The neighborhoods in Richmond still tend to fall along racial lines today (see Figure 1). Major successes have also taken place in Virginia’s capital city as L. Douglas Wilder became the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *NBC’s Meet the Press*, personal interview (1960).

⁶ "Slave Auction, Richmond, Virginia, 1862", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*.

first black governor in the United States since Reconstruction and the city of Richmond has elected several black mayors. However, both spoken and unspoken racial tensions continue to exist, evidenced by the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. Richmond ultimately removed all Confederate statues from Monument Avenue and is making progress, but racial disparities still pollute the city. This quick sketch of Richmond’s religious and racial history is important context for the uniquely successful partnerships between the three congregations discussed in this case study.

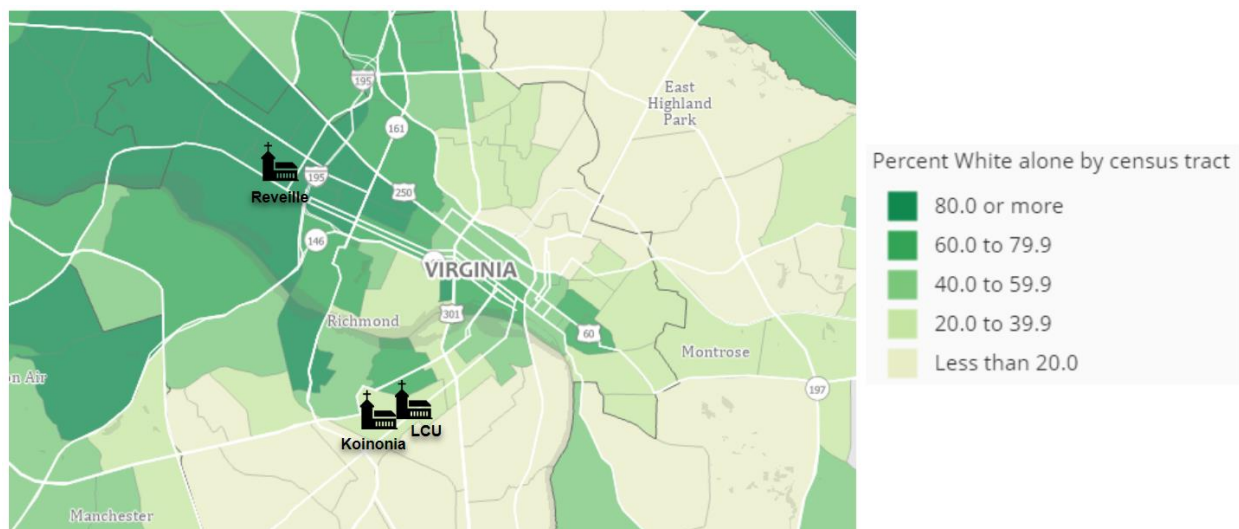


Figure 1

The Partner Churches:

Reville United Methodist Church, the oldest of the three partner churches, was officially formed in the summer of 1951. Its roots, however, trace all the way back to the 1720s when the Kennon family built a plantation on a 50,000 acre grant from the King of England. Still standing today, the estate is the second oldest house in Richmond. The home became a well-known landmark on what is now Cary Street and the name “Reville” was indicated in the 1852 sale of

the property. Nearly 100 years later, Elizabeth Crutchfield left the historic home to be turned into a museum, but was made impossible due to legal stipulations and prepared for a resale.⁷

In 1951, two Richmond Methodist churches, Union Station and Monument, were in the process of merging and seeking a new location for their growing congregation. The blended church purchased the estate and its grounds, nicknamed the “Seven Acres Set-Apart” and



adopted the name of Reville for the newly established congregation. After three years of construction on the church, services were first held on Halloween Day in 1954. The social hall, additional classrooms, the youth center, choir room, and chapel have all been added to meet the needs of

the members. The Reville house serves as an administrative center for the church. Since opening its doors in the early 1950s, Reville has made a name for itself as a leader in mission and ministry in the area. The church is located near the Windsor Farms and Wilton neighborhoods in Richmond’s West End. According to a 2022 census report, these two neighborhoods are the first and second most wealthy in Richmond, based on median household

⁷ “Reville United Methodist Church,” accessed July 2, 2023, <https://revilleumc.org/>.

income.⁸ The members and leaders of Reveille are predominantly white, with a weekly attendance of about 400 parishioners.

In contrast, LCU and Koinonia are both located in the Swansboro neighborhood on the southside of Richmond, across the James River. Swansboro's median household income ranks 90 of 142 of neighborhoods in Richmond proper. LCU and Koinonia



are both predominantly black churches. Koinonia was founded over 40 years ago as an offshoot of a prominent Baptist church. A small group of parishioners were “seeking a deeper level of discipleship” and named their new church Koinonia. In Greek, Koinonia means to “fellowship with God and with each other.” They are a relatively smaller congregation with about 30-40 active members that have been led by Pastor Keith and First Lady Michelle Edmonds for several decades.⁹

LCU was founded by Bishop Larry Branch and his wife Lynette about 30 years ago. Similar to Koinonia and Reveille, LCU was the result of a congregational split. Bishop Branch started the church on the basis of unity and “intentionally about addressing the division that’s in the church,” referencing Christians as a whole. In the early days, the congregation met in a local hotel until they acquired their current church in the Swansboro neighborhood. In the words of

⁸ Ibid; 2020 United States Census, accessed on July 15, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>.

⁹ “Koinonia Christian Church,” accessed on July 15, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Mykoinonia/>.



Bishop Branch, building Love Center of Unity has “been an excellent and exciting journey” that “may transition, but it’s never ending.” The congregation, like Koinonia, is also smaller in comparison to Reveille but has decades-long members that are devoted to the church’s mission of unity.¹⁰

Beginnings and Barriers

In the summer of 2012, Reveille Youth Director Dwayne Stinson had the idea to redirect the annual youth trip to focus efforts locally in Swansboro rather than travel out of the state, as had been tradition for many years. Reveille had a longstanding relationship with Swansboro Elementary school from almost 20 years of volunteering and tutoring. Assistant pastor, Katie Gooch, explored the area by taking the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) bus and walking through several streets in the neighborhood and even attended Swansboro community meetings held at Koinonia to better understand the local needs and how Reveille might get involved. Reveille leadership and parishioners agreed that a local summer youth mission would allow them to not only form meaningful relationships but hopefully continue in partnership long after the week of service finished. In June 2013, work began at the Swansboro Habitat for Humanity home and continued for several months. Swansboro community members from LCU

¹⁰ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Larry and Lynette Branch Transcript, March 3, 2023.

and Koinonia worked and served alongside Reveille youth throughout the week and in the following months to complete the Habitat home for a single mother, Dina Harris, and her four children. Emma Farmer, a member of the Reveille youth mission shared her experience: “Working in our own community meant that we were able to not only make connections with the people we worked with, but keep them as well.”¹¹

A celebration in honor of the Habitat home’s completion took place in November of 2013, but Reveille’s assistant pastor, Katie Gooch wanted to take the connection with the Swansboro community churches one step farther. She and the other leaders at Reveille reached out to Pastor Keith Edmonds and asked how they could continue to help the members at Koinonia. This messaging was not received very well as Pastor Edmonds responded by asking, “What is it about us that you think we need help?” According to Reverend Gooch, this important moment set the tone for the partnership moving forward. The relationship would not consist of Reveille, a large and wealthy predominantly white church, giving to a historically black church in an underserved part of the city. Rather, if a successful partnership were to come to fruition, it would need to be a joint ministry with the common goal of serving together to build the kingdom.

In the spring of 2014, Reveille launched a deep-dive study on poverty by reading *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikker. Taking Pastor Keith Edmonds’ advice, Reveille leaders invited both Koinonia and LCU to study *with* them to better learn how they could help the Swansboro community through joint ministry efforts. Weekly discussion groups were held at Reveille with guest speakers, small group dialogues, and shared meals over the course of a few weeks to generate a vision for the

¹¹ Reveille Communications Staff, “Reveille Window Newsletter,” September, 2015.

partnership around how the churches could come together to alleviate poverty. The small group discussions were organized in a way that had representation from each partner church in raw dialogue with each other. Katie Gooch shared her memory of the book study and the powerful effect it had on the participants: "...the three churches came together and... people just shared their struggles and their hopes and their dreams and their experiences and their stories."¹²

In tandem with the poverty study, Reveille member Kathy Rainey and her son Cole began teaching piano and drum lessons to the youth at Koinonia on Monday nights, evolving into what became known as "Musical Mondays." While students were waiting for lessons, partner church volunteers played games and helped with homework. Volunteers eventually transitioned to work with students weekly in the after-school program at Swansboro Elementary, offering art, crafts, dance, and games. The early days of the partnership were built on a foundation of trust as the partner churches each brought expertise and experience to the table to share. Reflecting on the importance of joint ministry in the partnership, Pastor Doug Forrester shared, "what was beautiful was how over time, starting really from the beginning, watching this relationship morph into a ministry *with*, not a ministry *to* or *for*." Key figures involved in the partnership reiterated several times that the partnership would have failed without a shared mentality of building the kingdom through joint ministry.¹³

Although the unlikely partnership was built upon a solid foundation, all parties acknowledged some cultural and geographic barriers. As mentioned above, Reveille is in the West End neighborhood of Richmond and Koinonia and LCU is on the Southside in Swansboro. The two areas are vastly different, and several key members of the partnership addressed how this held back the partnership at times. Lynette Branch from LCU transparently shared her

¹² Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Katie Gooch Transcript, April 18, 2023.

¹³ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Doug Forrester and Peter Moon Transcript, April 13, 2023.

thoughts: “I think there can be a discomfort if you're not African American in coming to this community, maybe even fear.” She then explained how the majority of partner church activities take place at Reveille, which does have a larger gathering place and some resources that Koinonia and LCU do not. However, stepping outside the comfort zone is one of the best ways to see a new perspective and truly empathize with people who have different lived experiences. Kathy Rainey from Reveille reflected on attending the funeral of Koinonia’s Toni Allen’s mother downtown and being one of the only white people at the service. She realized then that partner church members likely felt the same way when they came to Reveille and how physically stepping into a new space is a “real time of learning.” The partner church events evolved over time with more activities taking place in the Swansboro community.¹⁴

More than just a geographic barrier, many mentioned the racial and cultural barrier that seemed to hold the partnership back. The complex and harrowing history of race relations in the city of Richmond would lead one to believe that a partnership between a large white church in the West End and two small black churches in Swansboro was simply not possible. The three churches also had theological differences with no two under the same denominational umbrella. Charita Branch, Sonya Thomas, and Lynette Branch all mentioned that it was and still is a struggle to get 100% of the congregation excited to dive into the partnership. However, over time participants began to understand that they were more similar than different. Kelley Lane shared a memory from when she was first appointed to Reveille and invited a few of the female leaders from Koinonia and LCU over for dinner. The women ate together and said to each other: “You know, we all want the same thing. We’re all mothers and what we want is for the world to be a

¹⁴ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Larry and Lynette Branch Transcript, March 3, 2023; Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Sheelagh Davis, Kathy Rainey, Mary Ann Ramage Transcript, March 28, 2023.

place where our children can thrive.” Cultural barriers were difficult to overcome, but as the partner churches found common ground, the barrier slowly eroded.¹⁵

Key Moments of the Partnership

The strength and depth of the partnership was a gradual process, but a few key moments served as catalysts to help members bond and appreciate each other as well as the magnitude of what they could accomplish together. One such moment was the creation of the SPIRIT Team joint ministries (Swansboro Partners Inspiring Relationships In Christ Together) in 2014, which consisted of two representatives from each partner church. The SPIRIT Team met monthly to plan joint ministry events and also consider strategic activities to strengthen the partnership. As the joint ministry developed, the SPIRIT Team assembled sub groups to involve more members in 2017: worship, fellowship, study, prayer, and transportation. These sub groups were also made up of members from all three churches, addressing the real needs of the Swansboro Ministry and allowing members to create meaningful connections with each other. For example, the worship team planned joint worship services hosted by each of the partner churches throughout the years, drawing on each congregation’s strengths to add value to the partnership as a whole. Members were exposed to new styles and methods of worship and celebrated their diversity while also acknowledging their shared focus on Christ.¹⁶

George Floyd’s murder in the summer of 2020 served as a wake up call to the nation, but also affected the local Swansboro partnership in a number of ways. By 2020, the partnership had done several studies together on poverty and race that built a foundation of mutual trust, even around more touchy subjects. After the murder of George Floyd, the churches came together to

¹⁵ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Jill Gaynor and Kelley Lane, March 2, 2023.

¹⁶ Jill Gaynor, “Swansboro SPIRIT Team Meeting Notes,” July, 2015 - June, 2023.

mourn and pray for one another. Lynette Branch remembered how the incident “put racism right there so that you could see it, feel it, internalize it.” The transportation ministry team organized a study series in which several leaders in the Richmond political community and law enforcement led small group discussions about how to affect change on a local level in regards to race and policing. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these “Conversations for Change” meetings were held via zoom and allowed for connection during an isolating time for many in the partnership. These frank discussions provided a space for white Richmonders to learn from the unfiltered experiences of their black friends and neighbors. In addition, the tragic event destigmatized talking about race in more direct terms, specifically in regards to the Swansboro partnership.¹⁷



Annual prayer walks, which began in 2019, served as another key moment in the development of the joint ministry. Members from all three congregations gathered at Koinonia in the Swansboro neighborhood to first pray together on behalf of the community and then break up into small groups walking door to door to pray with people in their homes, on the street, and outside of convenience stores. Longtime Koinonia member Lilli Ann Love felt inspired to carry out this idea of a prayer walk and meet people in their own spaces to better understand their

¹⁷ Jill Gaynor, “Swansboro SPIRIT Team Meeting Notes,” July, 2015 - June, 2023.

needs. Jill Gaynor expressed hesitation at the first prayer walk as Methodists are “not really door-to-door kind of people” but being uncomfortable led to beautiful experiences in which all present could “feel the Spirit moving as [the] prayer [was] happening.” Pete Moon joined Reveille as the lead pastor in 2020 and soon after joined a Swansboro prayer walk and admitted that the idea was at first intimidating to him. However, he shared a powerful experience with a man outside a convenience store who asked if the group could pray for him to overcome his drug addiction. Pete Moon commented that joint ministry such as the prayer walks “Get us out of our sort of insular, pretty white bubble to show us that there’s this whole other world that doesn’t think like us, live like us, or look like us.” As with all learning, proximity and stepping out of one’s comfort zones breeds understanding and empathy.¹⁸

Keith and Michelle Edmonds shared how all of the small moments over time were also significant in building trust, open communication, and true partnership among the congregations. For example, simple acts like using each other’s names at worship services and ministry events made all feel welcome and included. Keith Edmonds remembered running into members from LCU and Reveille outside of church events and feeling a sense of community and genuine fellowship with people that he never would have met without the Swansboro partnership. Members developed true friendship and began hosting each other in their homes and choosing to spend time together in a social setting apart from the ministry. All of these small and simple acts contributed to the greater spirit of camaraderie and mutual appreciation felt by many. Ultimately it is the people, not the churches, that create successful partnerships.¹⁹

¹⁸ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Jill Gaynor and Kelley Lane, March 2, 2023; Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Doug Forrester and Pete Moon, April 13, 2023.

¹⁹ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Keith and Michelle Edmonds, April 4, 2023.

Advice for Churches Seeking Partnership through Joint Ministry

During oral history interviews and conversations during gatherings, all the key players in the Swansboro ministry did not hesitate or waver as they deemed the partnership to be a success. When pushed further about what advice they would give to churches seeking a similar partnership, interviewees shared insightful commentary that reflected many lessons learned throughout the 10 years of joint ministry. Koinonia's Michelle Edmonds simply stated that the success of the partnership can be seen by the fact "that it's still happening." As previously mentioned, one might observe the differences between the three churches and assume a partnership not even worth pursuing. However, all involved make a consistent effort to listen, learn, and grow alongside each other. The fruits of the ministry then motivate members to reinvest their efforts in hopes of celebrating more powerful shared ministry. This positive momentum powered many events, studies, and activities throughout the partnership as members came together to learn from each other's strengths while simultaneously bringing their own strengths to bless all those involved.²⁰

A major theme that continued to appear when participants were asked about advice to give to other churches was to first, "be patient." Sonya Thomas advised future partnerships to "not to expect too soon. I mean, it took us 10 years to get here..." Similar to Sonya, Jill Gaynor encouraged churches to reflect on existing relationships and then build from those established connections. She warns that becoming impatient might lead to rash measures such as waking up one day and marching into a black church to say "Hey, I'm a white person and I really wanna

²⁰ Ibid.

change stuff.” Patience and self-reflection about *why* a church is seeking partnership will allow all parties to step back and be more intentional about how to build joint ministry.²¹

Members of the Swansboro ministry also stressed the importance of being intentional and making a plan. For this specific partnership, the intention was clear from the beginning: create a joint ministry among Reveille, Koinonia, and LCU to strengthen the Swansboro neighborhood. As mentioned earlier, Keith Edmonds also emphasized the importance of co-ministry with all three churches helping Swansboro rather than Reveille as the givers and Swansboro as the receivers. Putting these intentions into concrete action plans at times took months, and the full Swansboro SPIRIT Team task force evolved over several years. Plans changed and strategic goals shifted, but leadership continued to make the Swansboro ministry a priority for all three congregations and kept the plans for joint ministry rolling, even in the midst of a global pandemic. In addition, many involved voiced the importance of “buy in” to the plans and goals from senior leadership. When asked about barriers to the partnership’s success, Sonya Thomas shared, “Well, no real barriers because the three pastors...they really connected well. You know, when the head goes forward connecting, well, then everything else kind of follows...”

Congregations tend to follow their leaders in word, action, and deed. The pastors at Reveille, Koinonia, and LCU not only made the church partnership a priority, but they also lived the words they preached about unity and finding common ground. This kind of genuine conviction spreads to the members of the congregations and served as a catalyst for the joint ministry’s intentions and plans for the partnership.²²

²¹ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Jill Gaynor and Kelley Lane, March 2, 2023; Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Charita Branch and Sonya Thomas, April 2, 2023.

²² Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Keith and Michelle Edmonds, April 4, 2023; Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Charita Branch and Sonya Thomas, April 2, 2023.

Another key takeaway from the Swansboro partnership was the ability to listen with more than just ears. In the case of a joint ministry made up of three congregations with starkly different experiences and backgrounds, listening with whole hearts truly brought members closer together. An outsider might look at this partnership and immediately spot several temporal and practical ways to help the members of the congregations as well as the larger Swansboro community. However, Lynette Branch shared how listening with one's heart leads to true understanding of needs: "There are needs in every community. Needs of the soul now. No, I don't expect people who live in Windsor Farms need food." She later went on to say that the most important lessons learned from the partnership is to "make no assumptions." Needs look different in every community, but everyone deserves a listening ear and heart to help meet the needs of the soul. Along the same lines, Toni Allen advised any churches wanting to build a similar partnership to "have an open mind" and Phyllis Bell advised to not waste energy "putting on airs." Listening with authenticity and a genuine heart sets the stage for building raw and meaningful connections.²³

Conclusion

The Swansboro partnership demonstrates not only what is possible when churches choose to come together in joint ministry but also that the experiences benefit all parties. Over the last several decades, many political, religious, and community leaders have expressed frustration and fear about the crumbling, or even collapsing, of societal institutions. The joint ministry created by Koinonia, LCU, and Reville is a testament that transformation does not take place on a global scale. In fact, transformation rarely takes place on the national or even the state level.

²³ Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Larry and Lynette Branch, March 3, 2023; Noah Sarmiento, Oral History Interview with Toni Allen, Phyllis Bell, and Jackie Walker, March 26, 2023.

True ministry and change can be seen within communities, and individuals that live inside those communities. Institutions, whether religious or secular, give human beings a place to belong, a place to call home.

Reconciliation is a big word. Reconciliation requires honesty, openness, and most importantly, it takes time. Members of the three Swansboro partner churches surpassed theological, racial, cultural, and geographical barriers in hopes of creating real and lasting change. At the 10-year anniversary celebration of the Swansboro partnership, Sheelagh Davis shared her personal testimony of the power of joint ministry: “In 10 years time, I will not be standing here, but I hope we will be celebrating our 20th anniversary in reconciliation and enduring hope in a world filled with God’s justice and love.” As stated in Corinthians 12, the Body of Christ can only reach its full potential when all the different parts join together. “But in fact, God has arranged the members of the body, every one of them, according to His design. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”²⁴

²⁴ Sheelagh Davis, “Swansboro Partner Church Joint Worship Personal Testimony,” June 11, 2023.

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