

**Transforming Culture By Strengthening Community**

**Kelly Strum, Speaker**

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Chris Reinolds: Welcome to the Columbia Metro Connection, a podcast where you can go to get valuable, relevant, and quality resources for you and your congregation. I'm Chris Reinolds, certified church consultant, lead pastor at Kilian Baptist church, and your host for this week's episode. The Columbia Metro connection is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and the almost 100 family churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. Joining me this week is Kelly Strum, founder of Koinonia, a year round, Christ-centered, nonprofit ministry partnering with Eau Claire Baptist Church. This summer Kelly and her team are making a difference in the lives of 50 kids in their community by caring for physical and spiritual needs in real and tangible ways. Through this ministry, Kelly wants every child to learn that they have worth and that God cares for them. Kelly, thank you so much for being with us on the podcast. We're thrilled with the ministry that you guys are doing in the Eau Claire community here in Columbia.

Kelly Strum: Thank you so much, Chris. I really appreciate George's invitation and Columbia Metro just partnering with us through this. Koinonia is an asset-based community development nonprofit, often referred to as ABCD. This is a sociological model that is out of originally Northwestern University that has been moved to DePaul university, but as I shared with Julia as we were discussing Koinonia prior to her writing the article, though it's the sociological model, to me it is a deeply theological mindset.

 When I read the scriptures, all, old and new, I see in that that God is a creator of all things good and that our human eyes often, in our own fallenness, neglect to see the goodness of God in everything and in everyone. We divide ourselves and we have hierarchies and things that just intensify the sin nature, but when we ask for eyes to see and hearts to discern and scales to be removed from our eyes that so easily can be placed there, we can see the goodness of God in all people. I love to tell the children one of my main, actually the main goal, every summer…this is our third summer working with children in the Eau Claire community. I want them to know, when I ask them, "Who are you?" not to just tell me their name, but to say, "I'm a child of God." I want them to know that I see God smiling through their smiles and shining through their eyes and that they are created in the image of God. If we're all created in the image of God, then that means there is God's goodness in all of us.

Chris Reinolds: Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, while some people see low economic growth, neglected communities, and declining neighborhoods, you see something more in those areas. You see a God-created people with gifts and talents and abilities. Can you share a little bit about how your perspective has changed while other people have this other perspective and what formed and shaped you to think differently in this way?

Kelly Strum: Yes, absolutely. First of all, I think two of the biggest things that shaped me in this way ... First of all, growing up, and I really didn't become aware of this until I was about middle teenage years, I knew that my parents were very different, very unusual Christ followers, not always fitting the cultural sort of Christ ...

Chris Reinolds: The mold.

Kelly Strum: Mold.

Chris Reinolds: Right.

Kelly Strum: Right. My mother was a teacher of special education students for 30 years, and my father was a probation officer at the juvenile level and then at the federal adult level. So my whole life I watched my parents work in situations where many might would see them as saviors, but they never saw it that way. They were in deep relationship, my mom with the parents of the children that she worked with and teachers who she was trying to mainstream her children with. My father was taking Christmas gifts and in relationship with families he worked with on probation and parole and I never heard them speak in a way that was “us and them.” It was more of a, “we're all in this together,” and we, for whatever reason, are blessed to be a blessing so that they in turn can be a blessing as well. So there was ... we were just taught, not in word, but just in formation, to see goodness in all people.

 Then my father, himself, later in life began to really struggle with some ... He's no longer with us. He passed away in 2009, and this formation has occurred even more since his passing, but he struggled with some depression issues that stemmed from childhood. I just watched him struggle to sometimes fit that, like you say, that cultural church mode, but yet was the most devoted follower of Christ in his praying, in his walk, just in who he was. So whereas some might see, "Oh, what's wrong here? This depression, this ..." and I saw it as a man following after God's own heart as David did.

 And then one last thing, our children are adopted and just walking in an open adoption with their birth mom, I often wonder, and people will say things that have good intention, but yet if you really think about some of the things that are said, like, "Oh, but for the grace of God, that would be me." And I said, "Well, God's grace covers her too." And just to see that in her suffering humanity and struggle that would put her in a place where she needs an adoption process. Yet our lives were blessed through that, and just grappling with those kinds of issues and seeing the goodness in her, in all people.

Chris Reinolds: Yeah. Helping to see the messiness in other people's lives is God still using that messiness in their life to mold and shape them and you actually have an opportunity to be a blessing in their life at times.

Kelly Strum: Absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: Sort of one of those ... essentially it's been nurtured into you, from what you're saying.

Kelly Strum: It has, and reading scriptures like Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats and having a place to put that parable through all of this to say, okay, so it makes sense that Jesus shows up to us in the one needing food, the one needing shelter, the one needing a visit, the one needing community. We aren't just Jesus to them, but Jesus shows up to us through them. Has been powerful for me to that exchange.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. I can see how it sort of affects y'alls sort of the different focus or the different characteristic that makes Koinonia so unique, at least from my viewpoint. It seems that you guys don't start off with the goal of trying to, in quotation marks, "Save people," but you're not pushing for them to pray a prayer and sign a card and give them a pat on the back. I think that that's what I'm seeing. Tell us a little bit about why that is that you don't take that approach to this ministry and why you believe that the approach in which you're going at is actually probably a more biblical model of what it looks like.

Kelly Strum: Thank you. Yes. Back to that parable that Jesus shares with us that's just so profound, where it's clear that Jesus wants us to know that we all in community need each other. There's a piece of God in each of us. The more that we, as Jesus prayed before he left in the book of John, that we would remain one. The more that we seek to be one and not divided into us and them, saved and unsaved, the more that we seek to say, "Okay, I'm going to find God in you," something about that process helps that person to find God in themselves, I think. There's a redeeming quality in just knowing that someone sees my worth and value and the worth and value in my community that is often discarded or just labeled or seen as needing to be fixed. Whereas if we really listen and watch with, like you say, those eyes that we've been given in prayer, we can really see each other.

Chris Reinolds: I think a point for clarification, I think that same word sort of further discipleship development of Christ in us, we can begin to see that in other people as well.

Kelly Strum: Yes.

Chris Reinolds: Because we're all made in the image of God, therefore there are characteristics that exist in all of us that are characteristics that are given to us by God.

Kelly Strum: Absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: Sometimes people just don't even realize that those characteristics that are existing inside them are ones that God placed there. For some, they may see those characteristics as a means of being weak, but He's actually put them there as a means of strengthening them in some way or somebody else in some way.

Kelly Strum: To lean on Him, yes.

Chris Reinolds: So I think that that's positive. Now is this model of ministry, is it something that's unique to you guys or is it a compilation of things that you guys have picked up along the way? How did y'all come up with this idea as far as Koinonia goes?

Kelly Strum: Sure. Sure. Well, we are mimicking a model that is in North Charleston that has been around about 17 years now, I believe, named Metanoia. Their urban missionaries are Bill Stanfield and his wife, Evelyn. They have really, in the state of South Carolina at least, pioneered this work of asset-based community development where the dignity of each person is recognized and there is this idea of walking alongside, seeing everyone as citizens of the neighborhood, of the community. So watching that happen, I was in seminary here in town at the Lutheran Seminary in the Baptist Studies Program and watching this ministry develop in North Charleston and just saying, "Wow, this is really ... I don't know. I mean, I'm a very evangelical-hearted person..."

Chris Reinolds: Right.

Kelly Strum: But also seeing some models of evangelism becoming, I don't know if I would say just out of date or just not as relevant or as-

Chris Reinolds: Effective.

Kelly Strum: Effective is a good word... Yeah, and just saying, "But something here is really working." So I followed it really closely. The demographics of North Charleston are similar to those of North Columbia. I remember just saying, to colleagues and friends, "Wow, this could happen in North Columbia. I wonder why someone hasn't done this in North Columbia." Just really saying that and saying and thinking that and praying through that and so that's where we are today, trying to do what we've seen happening, true community transformation. Stuff like crime rates reducing, true community development. Martin Luther King coined the term "Beloved community." That's what I think the heart of evangelism is, is when we together can create God's dream of beloved community. So that would be our biggest mentor is Metanoia of North Charleston.

Chris Reinolds: That's good stuff. Now, would you say, as you focus in on the individual, yes, but also in the community at large, would you say that a lack of positive perspective for individuals about their own self-worth or their lack of genuine community even within the context of their own community is something that compounds the problems that we're seeing in our culture today, that is existing in our world to where they don't feel like they have that worth and they don't feel worthy of whatever? And then the lack of feeling like they can be real with another human being. Do you feel like that's contributing to what we're seeing in our culture?

Kelly Strum: I absolutely do. At the heart of Koinonia, and something we don't often have a chance to flesh out in conversation enough with community partners, but you'll see on our website and in our mission and vision statements and the inspiration of scripture behind what and who we are, is a real rally towards social justice. If you look at a lot of distressed inner-city communities, if you look at the history of a lot of these communities, it's steeped in a lot of racism and prejudice and exploitation and gentrification issues that marginalize a people and marginalize communities and create divisions of us and them. A lot of times I appreciate the openness to be able to talk about that because I think that going back to some of those ways in which we have created some of these divides and some of this lack of self-worth, if we can do that and confess those things, I think that helps bring us together and provide some really powerful healing that can happen, not just like you say on the community level, but within the individual, to know their worth in God.

Chris Reinolds: Right, and that is something that is difficult to change. It can be very, very ... It's not a short term process either.

Kelly Strum: No, no, no, no.

Chris Reinolds: But one of the ways in which you guys are seeking to change that is with this next generation as you work with children and families in the community. This summer y'all are putting on a day camp. What all is taking place there? I think you'll have 50 kids over a six week time period and it's from like nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock. Is it Monday through Friday?

Kelly Strum: It sure is, yeah.

Chris Reinolds: What in the world do y'all do with 50 kids from-

Kelly Strum: Beyond get exhausted?

Chris Reinolds: Exactly. What all is involved in that?

Kelly Strum: Okay, thank you. I love talking about this program. It's the heart of Koinonia is our summer enrichment program. This is the third summer we've offered it. We have about a third to a half of the 50 children have been with us now into this third year, which is, again, the heart of something that we are is to build relationship. So when we can continue to see the same families year after year, that makes us happy.

Chris Reinolds: It strengthens that relationship with you and the parents.

Kelly Strum: Absolutely. Yeah. So, we ... the program itself is ... we often refer to it in shorthand as summer camp, but technically it's a summer enrichment program. The morning hours are structured around academic and biblical education. We have the 50 students split into four groups according to age. This year we had a staff member recommend, "Why don't we call it the different names of God?" So we have Rapha, Raah, Shalom.

Chris Reinolds: Oh, that's cool.

Kelly Strum: And the other one's going to escape me, but another name of God. We teach the children what those names of God mean. They're grouped accordingly that way, and they have a group leader that takes them to reading, writing, math and Bible. Then we have a recess and lunch rotation between 12:30 and 1:30, and then in the afternoon it's still a structured four-class approach, but it's more of your arts and crafts, music, character education and computer games.

 So the kids are on the move all day, every 40 minutes they change, which is good. Their group leader takes them to these different sessions. In the morning there's a reading, writing, math, Bible teacher ready to present a lesson. Then in the afternoon it's the same with, you know, they're learning a couple of songs that we're going to present to their families and folks in the community at a celebration service at the end of the year. So they're excited about learning the music, presenting their crafts and things they've done, a little bit like some churches do with Bible school except it's all day, all summer. Research has shown that children in lower income neighborhoods very typically lose one third of their academic progress from the prior school year during the summer, but if some type of enrichment is offered, that gap is lessened. It's called the summer slide. So our hope is that what we offer is helping to reduce that summer slide we have. It also just creates a place for the kids to be during the summer that's safe, that's fun, and that builds community and teaches them they're a child of God. So all of those things.

Chris Reinolds: A point of clarification, when children in those lower economic communities, where mom and dad are both having to work and they spend most of their days working, if not one, but multiple jobs or even some circumstances, mom is the only one that's in the home having to work multiple jobs, education can sometimes take a back seat, therefore continuing to increase that downward economic spiral because you have that summer slide that takes place if there's not someone that's in place to help encourage continued learning. So you guys are really, you're providing a necessary service. In order, as you mentioned, you know that asset based community work to help strengthen the community in those ways to where the kids go into the next year of school and they don't feel like they're completely behind, therefore, there's less of a chance that they're just going to throw up their hands and give up.

Kelly Strum: Absolutely. One of the things that we really have embraced here in these last couple of years is a true welcoming posture towards parents. We want parents who often feel distanced from the education process or intimidated by it, especially if their child is struggling in school. We want them to feel that safe space, that emotional safety of joining the process and knowing we're in this all together, helping to identify their child's strengths, building on those, identify their own strengths and building on those, so that when they return to the school year, maybe they can go, as you say, strengthened a little more, knowing there are partners alongside them. Not all of these children go into an afterschool program with us, just because we can't. The summer is quite an expensive process. I didn't mention that it's tuition free. We work hard to make sure the children have to be in 29203 and we're still trying to kind of define our footprint in the area because 29203 is large, but we try to focus around the church, Hyatt Park Elementary, Arden Elementary, the magnet school in the area, Logan Elementary, as well. We try to be very intentional about who is in the program because donors give to this. They support this $35,000 summer program. The parents have just a simple registration fee, but they're children who otherwise wouldn't be able to do something like this, have the opportunity afforded them, so.

Chris Reinolds: Now, is Koinonia open to partnering with other faith-based groups, civic groups, local entities, and the surrounding community? How does that work out as far as others partnering with y'all or helping out or participating in or how do those things work together?

Kelly Strum: Yes, yes. That's our dream. That's actually in our vision statement. It's a longer vision statement, but I just ... I'll share with you what we teach the kids, which is "Anchored deep like a tree at a river side, flying in formation together so that all may know community." That's the piece you're referring to, "Flying in formation together." We seek partnerships with whoever is concerned about the welfare of the children here. I think we all are aware that all across the world there are needs, children and families, and so many needs. A lot of times we can overlook what's right-

Chris Reinolds: In our own backyard.

Kelly Strum: In our own backyard and especially churches. This model can be duplicated in any church, any neighborhood that says, "Okay, we're going to focus on the asset of the neighborhood children and families around us." So we have some volunteers that are interested in learning more about the model, possibly taking it back to their churches. We love to be in conversation like that. We have some folks who say, "I just want to join you in this." In our logo is a V formation of geese and we talk about we can fly so much further when we're in that V formation, less energy, all working together. So we have a really good staff, but every extra adult volunteer makes it so much more like we're gliding, lowers that ratio of teacher adult to students.

 So volunteers can come in and read with children. They can support a group leader. They can help in the craft room, have lunch with kids, play basketball at recess with kids. Developing relationship is the core of what most people who come and volunteer say, "I want to help. I want to get to know some of these kids and come back and check on this child and this child." That is just the best way to turn things around for a child. For them to know that, okay, there's somebody really checking on my family.

Chris Reinolds: They actually care.

Kelly Strum: Yeah, absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. That's positive. Now, what else is Koinonia doing? What are your all's plans for the future of this ministry? What are you doing throughout the course of the year?

Kelly Strum: Okay. Okay. We have, and I should mention also, I didn't mention in the last question about civic partners as well as church partners, not just individual volunteers. You can go to our website to see plenty of opportunities to help us financially, not just with sponsoring a child during the summer, but we have an afterschool program that begins that we're not able to offer to all 50 children because it's completely volunteer run. Our summer camp director is a volunteer, a retired principal in Richland One, Dr. Richard Moore. He is also our afterschool program director, so it's a smaller group that we intend to keep it small, actually, to work on those relationships and follow them through as they continue their schooling.

 We also have a mother support group. In fact, the mother support group began before Koinonia became a 501C3. It was a just a vision of joining together as moms. Though we may be different background experiences, all kinds of different churches, different neighborhoods we live in, all kinds of different demographics, the thing we have in common is the love of our kids and the hopes and dreams and fears of the things our kids face. So the support group this October will be our third year of meeting together as moms on Wednesday nights. During that time, the children have the opportunity to participate in Eau Claire Baptist churches, RAs and GAs and Acteens while the moms gather together for a support group. We also are partnering ... We do work with Eau Claire community council, also, with a nonprofit in the area called Serve and Connect that is seeking to improve relationship between law enforcement and distressed communities or just communities in general.

Chris Reinolds: Right.

Kelly Strum: That there's less of a fear of law enforcement and more of a bond and a, police officers are here to help us. So we have a pretty strong developing partnership with Serve and Connect and other groups that we would love to continue to build that would strengthen us.

Our thing that will wrap up the year in December, it's the first time we've done this, is on December the seventh. Our Koinonia kids are hosting what we're calling Bethlehem Market. It's right there in the beginning of the season of Advent. Bethlehem Market is an asset based craft market and talent exhibition, where the children this summer are learning to identify who they are as a created being of God, what has God put in me to build up my neighborhood. Is it, I'm an artist, I'm a poet, I'm a singer, a dancer, a builder? We have lots of little ones that love the Lego's.

Chris Reinolds: Yeah, definitely.

Kelly Strum: Am I an athlete? Who am I and how can that bless my neighborhood and, really, create an economic mindset in the kids for them to see, "Okay, we made these Christmas ornaments and we put together this book of poetry and we're preparing this song and this dance and we're inviting our parents and our neighbors and the community and community leaders to come and participate in the market, pay for these items." Then the children this summer, we haven't decided yet, we're in a consensus process right now trying to decide, what are they going to ... when they raise the money, what are they going to use the money to do for their neighbors, their neighborhood?

Chris Reinolds: That's pretty neat. That's really good.

Kelly Strum: They're tossing around some ideas like a park bench or a bench at a bus station right beside our church that people stand. Maybe it'd be nice if they could sit. Something that the Koinonia kids, through their talents gave their community. So we're real excited about that, but it's the first time we've tried it so. Hope it's going to go well.

Chris Reinolds: Well, that's exciting though. That's good. Well, if there's somebody listening to the podcast that is interested in getting involved or supporting Koinonia, how might they be able to get in touch with you?

Kelly Strum: Sure. You can go to our website to learn more, which is koinonia, and I'm going to spell that. It's a Greek word that means community, communion with God, with neighbor. It is [Koinoniaofcolumbia.org](https://www.koinoniaofcolumbia.org/) and my email address is Kelly@KoinoniaofColumbia.org. So I'd love to hear from anyone by email. There's also on the website a place where you can submit forms, questions, different things you'll see to get in touch with us, that we can reach back out. We also have a Facebook account where we're posting all about our summer program, all kinds of stuff that you can find, so.

Chris Reinolds: Well, that's great. Well, Kelly, thank you so much for what you're doing and also thank you for joining with us today.

Kelly Strum: Well, thank you Chris. Thanks for this opportunity.

Chris Reinolds: To all of our listeners, thank you for joining with us. Please be sure to check out the show notes for more detailed information about today's show. Also, if you found this podcast helpful for you and your ministry, share with others so we can get the word out about what God is doing. Until next time from all of us in the Columbia Metro Connection, we thank you for listening and urge you to share this podcast with everyone you know. It's the good news about the Good News in the Columbia Metro Baptist Association.