



From South Carolina to New York City
George Russ and Kevin Cabe
The Columbia Metro Connection Podcast 048
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Chris Reynolds: Welcome to the One Priority Podcast, where our goal is starting and strengthening congregations to serve as vital and vibrant missional communities. The One Priority Podcast is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and the almost 100 family churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. This week we had the opportunity to talk with George Russ and Kevin Cabe from the Metropolitan New York Baptist Association. We were able to hear how God is using a \$30,000 gift from the family of churches located in and around the Columbia Metro, here in South Carolina to transform lives for his glory to the ministry of brothers and sisters in Christ living in New York City.

George Bullard: We're really glad to have with us today George Russ, who's the Executive Director of the Metropolitan New York Baptist Association and Kevin Cabe who works in missions partnerships with him but has the intelligence to live in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, which I think is a really great thing. So George and Kevin, we welcome you here.

George Russ: It's a pleasure to be with you, George.

Kevin Cabe: Thank you for having us.

George Bullard: Yeah. Well, George Russ, first question I'd like to pose to you, I'm not so sure that people really understand how Southern Baptist work got started in the Metropolitan New York area and how long it's been going on and so, give us a little bit of a foundation of how did things start there and when did they start?

George Russ: Well, Southern Baptist have been in New York and New York States since the 1950s. A lot of the presence of Southern Baptist came with job transfers of people moving north to follow employment, to places like Buffalo and Syracuse and New York City. So, that's how Southern Baptist arrived in New York and very soon after that began organizing congregations. From the very, very start, it has always been a multinational presence here. From the earliest stages, we had Spanish and Haitian and other kinds of churches here in the convention. We grew pretty rapidly through the '80s actually and peaked a little bit in the late '80s and have been holding our own, I would say, since then. There's been some spurts of growth through the years but a lot of diversification too with church starting amongst different types of people groups that are now here in our area.

George Bullard: Yeah. Well, George, I remember when I first started traveling to New York with the old Home Mission Board, so 1981 when things were really booming there and I remember experiencing much of that boom during the 1980s, but during this pandemic time how are the pastors and families of churches association doing in the midst of all that's going on right now?

George Russ: Well, I'd say it's a hard one to pin down, George because the impact of the pandemic and everything else has been different from neighborhood to neighborhood. That's one of the things about New York that I think people need to remember. The city is a bunch of neighborhoods. It's not a monolithic culture, so some areas were very, very hard hit and others just very lightly. So we had one church that had 30 funerals in one month and we had another church that had no one affected. So, the response of the pastors has been along those lines, trying to deal with the reality in their neighborhood. Frankly, some are depressed. I talked to one pastor this week that my voice was the only voice he had heard other than his wife's in a couple of days.

George Bullard: Wow.

George Russ: And other pastors are really upbeat because they've... Or for example, one of them has given away 1 million pounds of food in his neighborhood. And when they finally reopen, he doesn't know how many people are going to show up because of the impact they've had, so it goes back and forth between those two.

Chris: Now George Russ, when the CMBA's Visionary Leadership Community determined to give a missional tithes to the association there in New York following the sale of one of our properties.

George Russ: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chris: None of us knew what kind of impact the pandemic was going to have on New York. However, as is always the case God is providing for our needs even before we realize that we have a need. So, what are some of the ways in which those funds have been used to help strengthen those churches in your area?

George Russ: Well, I'm going to pass this off to Kevin because it really was Kevin's idea. But the initial request included some help for pastors to come together for brotherhood and fellowship, perhaps and overnight retreats. We had sensed well before the pandemic that this was a need, this was a growing need, isolation and feeling alone. So we prayed through that and it was Kevin's idea to put together a series of what we call micro meetings. We just concluded them about a week and a half ago. So Kevin, why don't you tell Chris and George about how that came about?

Kevin Cabe: Yeah, absolutely. When the pandemic started, the first things that we started doing initially was weekly prayer calls. And so, I think that started the process of getting pastors on the call and also lay leaders were also joining the call just for encouragement. I think most people wanted to hear what God was doing. They wanted to hear a steady voice, a steady presence and George was able to offer that, our staff was able to provide some of that. But I think as months passed and we realized that an annual meeting, a typical annual meeting wasn't going to happen.

George Russ: Yeah.

Kevin Cabe: And so, as we began to process, "Hey, what can we do?" We know that the month of October is pastor appreciation, these guys haven't been with their churches and so why don't we create a series of micro meetings for the sole purpose, no training because they've had plenty of training, "seven steps to thrive in a pandemic," they're tired of that, right?

Chris: Oh, yeah.

Kevin Cabe: And so, we said, "Hey, let's just get a group of men together across our territory." For what we're calling micro meetings, it was really just fellowship in nature. Like, "Let's come together, let's sit down – socially distanced – enjoy a meal and just hear, let's talk to one another and hear how we're doing." And so those micro meetings, I think we had 10 or 11 of them just across the city, across the boroughs, we were in Long Island, we were in New Jersey, we were in Connecticut. I think that's the other thing about our association is that we cover a 75-mile radius from Times Square.

Chris: Wow.

Kevin Cabe: So that's a very large territory. So we're in the epitome of urban and then we're in often the rural sections as well. And so again, just out of those micro meetings, we heard the need for brotherhood, fellowship, communication, "Let's talk best practices. Let's get together and talk about how this week was terrible. You know? My wife doesn't need to hear that again but we can sit in a group like this and really have those conversations." And I think it was very eye-opening for us to be able to hear them say that. And I think our association, we've never really acted as a pastor to pastors. We're so diverse, obviously we want to do that. We want to provide those opportunities, but I think we found the pandemic for George and I as, you know what? We have to pivot what we're doing as an association to be able to really encourage during the season, so I thought they were very successful.

Chris: Good.

Kevin Cabe: Yeah.

George Bullard: Do you know exactly how many congregations that you think aren't going to make it out the other end of the pandemic that they actually are going to end up closing?

George Russ: I would say we do, but right now, we're not really sure how many. One of the things that has happened in the pandemic, George is that there's been a tremendous economic disruption in the city. I sent some pictures over to our staff the other day I was at Jamaica train station. If you remember Jamaica, it's a transportation hub for buses, trains, connections to flights and airports, Long Island railroad. All of those come together in Jamaica. I was there at rush hour, supposedly on a Thursday afternoon at five o'clock and there was probably 40 people in the whole station. It was empty. It was completely like a ghost town.

George Russ: So, there have been churches that had people move away. Some obviously lost members due to the virus, people working at home now. So I don't think we know yet how much disruption that's going to cause in the churches but we have had several congregations just really... They've pivoted kind of downward into micro church type gatherings because they can't get together in some of their places. So they're not really sure yet how they're going to survive.

George Bullard: Sure. Well, I understand, yeah. Similar situation in our association also, we've had churches that have struggled before the pandemic who had really struggled during the pandemic and are now open to choices and avenues of next step ministries that they weren't open to before. And so in a certain sense, it's been an open door of opportunity.

George Russ: Right. Right.

Chris: Yeah. Now, one of the things that you'd mentioned concerning the micro meetings was that this is kind of brought a cohesiveness for the pastoral element that these pastors even from diverse backgrounds with diverse congregations are starting to come together. Is this kind of what led your association to start offering, I think what you guys are calling, synergy calls? What's going on with that? What's taking place through that particular opportunity that you guys offering?

George Russ: Yeah. Well, "synergy" is the name we give to our training opportunities that we provide at our building. And we were planning to diversify that to other regions before the pandemic.

Chris: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

George Russ: Synergy is we put it together but we usually have local people who come and share what they're doing in training disciples, praying, preaching in an urban context, social ministry, rest and relaxation, mental health of pastors, a variety of subjects that I think really appealed to pretty much everybody. So when the pandemic came, we pivoted that to be completely online and we changed some of our subjects to be more appropriate for the pandemic. So, that's what synergy has been. It's going to continue to be online for the rest of this year. We were toying with the idea of opening it up again but with some spikes in some neighborhoods, we said, "This is probably just the best thing is to keep it online for the rest of the year." And we're looking in the future to do like, what are some core competencies that everybody needs to have to minister effectively in a place like Metro New York.

Chris: Right.

George Russ: And we're talking about those kinds of subjects for the near future. Kevin, you're on all of those. What would you add about synergy?

Kevin Cabe: Yeah, I think synergy, at least for the last few months... Those are fellowship in nature too, but the training component has been really good especially during the pandemic because a lot of our churches were not online. They had zero online presence, no website, no Facebook. And so through those trainings were able to help pivot and get them online so they can continue to communicate with their congregations. So.

George Russ: And we would typically have, George probably 35, we've had as high as 50, which during the week on a Tuesday to come to Manhattan for a meeting like that, I think it's pretty significant. Online, we haven't had quite that number but we have had a very diverse audience join us. So, we're really pleased about that.

George Bullard: Yeah. Well, I think obviously one of the things that we're interested in trying to engender interest in our own association is that there might be congregations and individuals that would want to be of more significant support and more personalized support to New York

as and when and where and how appropriate. And so Kevin, I'd be interested in hearing you talk about some of the partnership opportunities that are available in the New York area. And also the issue of... Since you're in Myrtle Beach, the possibility of your coming over and meeting with some of our churches about that issue.

Kevin Cabe: Yeah, absolutely. One of the places I like to start with churches is to ask the question, "Hey, what is God doing in your church now? And specifically in the area of missions, how are you engaging your community? Are you engaging the international scene? Are there any other countries that you're involved in?" And really just kind of asking those questions to get a base level of what they're thinking. In New York, you can come to New York City and have an international experience. You can come to New York and you can be involved in church planting. You can be involved in college ministry. There's over a million college students that are in New York City. Our established churches need assistance. They need help with Vacation Bible Schools, marriage conferences, retreats, and things like that. So there's plenty of opportunities and so I like to start with those questions first week and then move to a vision trip.

Kevin Cabe: There's nothing like walking the streets of New York and seeing the faces, seeing the people and letting God really grip your heart. As George said, New York is made up of communities. There's over 400 communities in New York City. And of course we don't have time to go over all of them, but there's so many different pockets. We lead a tour that we call, See The World On The Seven Train. And that's a tour that starts at our building, we go to Times Square and then we're going to take the Seven Train out to Flushing but along the way, we pass one of three Chinatowns and Flushing. We touch Jackson Heights, which is a hub for Southeast Asians. We're going to see Corona Queens, which is a hotspot for Latin America, people from those countries. And so, again, that's just one train run.

Kevin Cabe: We have 900 miles of train tracks, there in New York city. But again, it's just starting a dialogue of what God is doing there and how that can translate into New York City. So I would be a starting point for that. You can contact me, you can visit our website – mnyba.org and get some information there about partnerships as well. So I think it's exploring, letting God really direct where we're going and then looking at opportunities of how their church can come alongside of the local church to support and prop them up through prayer, through giving, through sending people, through sending interns. Maybe there's a 18 to 25-year old that's sitting in their church saying, "What am I doing with my life?" We'll send them to New York or maybe there's someone who's getting their education, wrapping up college. They want to be a teacher. Well, go spend two years in New York City and be a teacher and serve alongside of a local church, so.

George Bullard: Kevin, one of the things about that and that is one of the things that we're just now posting about and are going to be using with some of our congregations here in the association, but we also want to emphasize the fact that this is "glocal" in terms of what's going on – local and global – is that we're starting an emphasis called Missional MOBS. Now this goes back to the old flash mobs understanding, where you'd have this performance art and people would gather in that kind of thing. But I don't know how many people know that the Roman Catholic Church actually developed a missional strategy around that. And they called it Mass Mobs, thinking about the mass service where people would go when there was a missional opportunity in another parish and take a group and either it was a one-time event or it was an ongoing six months to year-long kind of process.

George: And so, I don't know where that's going to head, but we could hope that maybe the concept of Missional MOBS in terms of being missional, in terms of a breakthrough service that might happen in that sort of the MOBS, in terms of what was happening there. But hey Chris, another thing, you've expressed a real interest in knowing more about internationals in a place like New York as compared to a place like Columbia and what approaches are that kind of thing?

Chris: Right. And the reason why George and I talked about that is, I know that New York is a major hub for international ministry as you guys have said and I also through my own research. But what's interesting to me is that Columbia has become a hub for international ministry. Talking to Robbie McAllister, one of our ministry mobilizers here at the CMBA, he's done a lot of work with international ministry. And I think we have 17 different nationalities that are organized into possible congregations, as well as anywhere from about 75 different nationalities that exist in the Columbia Metro area. And so from that, what's some things that you guys have learned that maybe we can also learn and implement in our context as we seek to do international ministry.

George Russ: Well, that's a really great question, Chris. The truth about New York is [inaudible 00:18:30] it's almost at an all-time high, the number of foreign born in the five boroughs, it's approaching 40%.

Chris: Wow.

George Russ: So, if you add to that, their children are 1.5 generation or 2.0, whatever nomenclature that you may use, well over 50% of New Yorkers do not speak English around the dinner table.

Chris: Wow.

George Russ: So, that's a pretty amazing reality.

Chris: Yeah.

George Russ: Yeah. So we've done a few things that I think are really helpful. One, Kevin has been a part of and I've been a part of what we call Coats for the City. It's been a December event every year where we started in Queens with one location, 800 coats in a South-Asian context, we learned real quickly that newly arrived people from other warmer climates are usually ill prepared to meet the winter climate here.

Chris: Yeah.

George Russ: So, we set up a coat giveaway with prayer stations and [inaudible 00:19:32]. And in some cases even concerts or outdoor singing and that's grown from one location to, I think it was... How many Kevin? 17, 18?

Kevin Cabe: 18.

George Russ: ... a year ago. We're not having it this year, where we had 8,000 jackets distributed in 18 locations in established churches and church plants, and Volunteers came for

that one day, we worshiped the day before, we gave out the coats and witnessed the next day. And then we went to church the following day with the church that we helped. So we host events like that, that help people kind of put their toes in the water when it comes to international ministry. And, that's been a real positive thing for us. And then in Christmas we have something called International Christmas. Kevin, you organize that. So maybe you can go over what that does for us.

Kevin Cabe: Yeah. International Christmas in New York, it's really designed to serve our international churches. And so we we've recruited churches and BCMs across the country to come and to participate... First of all, it's Christmas in New York but essentially they're working alongside of Chinese churches. I know in one instance for the Chinese church, they helped do a backpack drive and fill supplies and would distribute those, so they're serving along the Chinese churches in Chinatown and in Brooklyn. They're serving among the South Asians in Jackson Heights, more outreach events there as well. But I think, George, to go back to the Coats for the City for a second, I think what was pretty important in our context was, we took a pastor there and really just walk the streets of his neighborhood and said, "Where are your people? Where do they live? What do they need? How can we help? How can we serve and how can we come along?" And so what started as just a small idea, morphed into a city-wide event for us.

Kevin Cabe: And the second thing I would say is, again, because New York is so diverse, we really support those groups, they've kind of naturally formed their own groups. And so we will speak into those groups, resource those groups as well. And I think that's been really important at identifying, supporting, and resourcing. So.

George Bullard: Good. Good. Well, guys this has been great. I would ask for sort of a recap, if you were to mention either George or Kevin, either one, one, two, or three really high-priority things that you wish that congregations maybe from the Columbia Metropolitan Baptist Association might be a part of with New York in the near future. What's coming at you right now, as this pandemic, hopefully wanes over the next several months, but we'll see?

George Russ: Kevin, I'll let you do that first.

Kevin Cabe: Yeah. As much as I would love to say [inaudible 00:22:49] teams, and I think that's going to come. I think... Please pray, I don't want to underscore the importance of prayer right now. The stress, the depression, the weight and the burden that your brothers and sisters up north are carrying right now is really heavy. So I would advocate set aside a Sunday morning, set aside a Wednesday night, just set aside some time to pray. And George, and I'll take this time to throw this in, you referenced that I live in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, I would love to come and speak to churches in your association and just to share, but prayer would be the first thing that I would recommend, George.

George Russ: Yeah. Well, I certainly would say that as well. I do think that there is going to be some collection of congregations coming together to... I don't know if they're to form a legal entity or not, but they're definitely want to augment what they've been doing in ESL, immigration, food distribution, medical care, things like that. And we have churches that have different skills in those areas or experiences in those areas. And we're trying to network them. We don't really quite know how to do that. So, pray for us for sure, but if you have any kind of experience in forming non-profits to address issues like that, that would be something we could use some expertise on.

George Russ: George, we are looking at our building as well. We have a beautiful building on 72nd Street. It is extremely expensive to run. We own it, but it's still expensive to run, but we are praying through how do we maximize that building for missions? And we don't know what the answer to that question is right now. We have a team looking into everything, but man, if you had any counsel for us, that would be real plus for us as well.

Chris: Good, good. Well, great. Well, George and Kevin, thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to spend some time talking to us about the ministry taking place over there.

George Russ: Thank you so much for having us.

Kevin Cabe: Thank you for having us.

George Bullard: Thank you for being here.

Chris: And to all of our listeners, thank you for joining with us and 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 it with others so we can get the word out about what God is doing. Until next time from all of us, 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.