



One Ministry Plan Paused as Another Grows at FBC Winnsboro

First Baptist Winnsboro Pastor Craig Bailey says COVID was the “worst possible thing to hit us while trying to make strides in racial reconciliation” through relationships the church has been actively building with other churches and individuals across the community. The shared worship services and an annual partnership to host dinner for local high school football teams with African American sister churches have been put on hold for a year now, but God continues to work in new ways through the church and its people. In fact, the virus has opened the door for First Baptist to begin hosting a new ministry that is reaching teenagers desperate for activities offered in a safe environment.

“COVID has really hindered our ability to get together [with African American brothers and sisters] and make things happen. Our quarterly services with St. Mark Baptist Church and opportunities to share speaking engagements with other local churches like Zion Pilgrim have stopped. I am so looking forward to being able to once again be back together, we are feeling the pain from it,” Bailey says.

In the Fall of 2017, First Baptist linked arms with local churches to arrange a community worship service at Fairfield Central High School to address racial reconciliation. Building on that momentum, Bailey says a community Easter sunrise service held on First Baptist’s front lawn has included local African American leadership and other opportunities would come up for the churches to share speakers. And then the virus came.

“As we consider how much longer we will be prevented from gathering, we will need to look at new ways to connect virtually,” says Bailey, who sees weekday morning devotionals he records and shares through YouTube as one creative way to stay in touch with all types of ministry partners near and far.

During the pandemic, women of First Baptist and St. Mark Baptist have tried to stay in touch through a Saturday morning phone conference call hosted by St. Mark. First Baptist members were invited to participate and lead a devotional one Saturday. While First Baptist’s Women’s Ministry Director Diana Osterly has started something similar at the church, Bailey acknowledges “it’s not the same as face-to-face or sharing a meal together, but right now it’s all we’ve got.”

Clarence Gilbert is a deacon at St. Mark Baptist and serves as a member of the Fairfield County council, and says he also misses the interaction with friends from First Baptist. He explains that his church has been active through virtual worship in order to be careful about the health of many of its members and has not regathered for in-person worship yet. He looks forward to the end of the pandemic making way for community churches to get right back to building relationships.

“First Baptist is a great group of people, and we love working with them. It really was a lot of fun to look forward to getting together every quarter to break bread together and meet back with our friends. I believe in churches being together and would like to get more churches involved in what we’re doing with First Baptist,” Gilbert says.

While COVID has frustrated some ministry plans – like improving race relations among churches – Bailey is excited about a new one that is meeting the needs of teenagers at a local STEM school for underserved and multiethnic middle and high school students in addition to many from other schools in the area. Every Wednesday after school, First Baptist volunteers pick up the STEM students on the church bus, sometimes making two round trips to carry everyone, then open the gym for physically distanced activities and fun.

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Students must wear masks but can choose to play basketball, hang out in the student ministry's game room or do their homework for a few hours while at the church. Volunteers supervise the students and then feed them a meal. Afterward a praise band from Columbia International University leads in a time of worship and a devotional is shared. According to Bailey, the program is "one of the few relational things that we can actually do right now. These students need an outlet, the more they are locked down the more frustrated they get. They've had the rug pulled out from under them in all of this and we are giving them an outlet."

Wes and Louise Welch are members at First Baptist and connected with the STEM school through coaching and teaching opportunities. They say the church has been open to STEM students and their families in a variety of ways in recent years, including inviting the school's cross country team to use First Baptist's trails for practices, which has positioned it to be a welcoming place in the community. They are seeing God work through the afterschool ministry in unique ways.

"The STEM school is a Title One school. There is a 75 percent poverty rate and many students come from tough homes. It turns out that COVID was a blessing in disguise, as parents have welcomed activities for their kids in a spacious gym and the upstairs recreation room and said 'yes' right away," Wes says.

Louise agrees and shares about the growth seen in one student attending the program. "This young man always tries to do the right thing and will intervene to deescalate situations between other students. He is a quiet boy, but you can see the wheels turning. He is starting to ask questions about the Bible and about morals and values. He sees there is a difference in the way Christians live, and that your circumstances or school environment become a whole different world through God's eyes. It has been fun to watch him grow," she says.

Since the beginning of the academic year, 12 students have given their life to Christ through the afterschool program. Wes shares about a conversation with one teenager whose brother had been removed from the home. She had not seen him in a year and told Wes she prayed silently one Wednesday night to see her brother again. That same night her mother shared the news that her brother was coming back home. He has since attended the afterschool programming with her.

"COVID has left these kids needing something. They are living in a new world that is scary, and they are unsure of the unknowns. This program is giving them a chance to be safe, secure and comfortable while still being a teenager. What better role could we have than to mentor these kids to become better adults? COVID is a horrible thing, but God is bringing something good out of it," Louise says.

First Baptist is planning some fun surprises for the students in the coming weeks – including an excursion to a movie theater, which will be a first for some of the teenagers. Bailey hopes to expand the afterschool ministry in the future by partnering across racial lines with other local churches to reach deeper into the community. "We love and appreciate these kids and families. And if we want to truly minister in the community of Winnsboro, we realize we must continue to minister across racial lines," Bailey says.