

**George Bullard: A Ministry Legacy**

*As CMBA celebrates the retirement of CMBA Executive Director George Bullard on June 30, 2022, readers are invited to explore his ministry legacy which spans service in the local church, denominational work at the state and national levels, and involvement in international missions development. George recently shared his reminiscences and lessons learned in the years leading up to his time at CMBA.*

**As you consider the variety of positions you’ve held over the years, could you share a specific memory that speaks to a season of life or place of service when you grew in your personal faith in an unexpected way?**

“I have always said that when I was part of planting a new congregation as a 15-year-old - along with my parents in Philadelphia - was when I experienced significant growth spiritually as I had to understand the basics of the Christian life and the foundation and focus of a congregation. This solidified my call into Christian ministry that had been a general call from the age of 12.

When I served on the Home Mission Board (now NAMB) staff from ages 30 to 34 and was around women and men of great passion for the Good News, I saw how God could open many doors if we served Him in ways that were deeply committed to fulfilling the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. The Home Mission Board days were very exciting times. So many doors opened for ministry in the mega metropolitan areas of our nation that the team I was part of would at times state in an unholy way that we needed to pray for closed door. However, God knew better and the doors kept opening.”

**How about a time when you sensed God positioning you for a specific purpose in that place that you were able to achieve?**

“Because I was the youngest child in my family by ten years, I was always going with my parents to church-related events, and to gatherings about missional engagement. I consider that I had 15 years of ‘church boot camp.’ When we moved to Philadelphia and were directly involved in starting new congregations, I began to get a clear focus on my calling which was reconfirmed at age 17 during my first year in college. That year I was ‘licensed’ by my church of membership – Bux-Mont Baptist Church in Hatboro, PA, which was a suburb of Philadelphia. (This was that first church my family was involved in launching when we moved to Philadelphia.)

Every encounter and place of spiritual calling from that time forward spoke into my specific purpose in ministry. I did not always realize it at the time, but upon reflection later I see how it fit in God’s plan for my life.”

**Can you recall a time in ministry when you discovered something new about yourself that you did not realize before?**

“I am not sure I was necessarily discovering gifts and talents as much as I was having learning experiences which would be essential to my understanding of how to lead ministry strategies in the years to come. I did reflect, speak, and write on many of these experiences, and through doing so was able to figure out strategic patterns essential to an effective and fulfilling Christian ministry to systemically share the Good News.

I suppose the gift and talent most revealed to me and practiced was my understanding of strategy and how to organize to fulfill that strategy. What has been said to me over the years was how much I was organized - which I always said was only when I had the time to organize - and the fact that I could make quick decisions and take decisive actions.

I have always noticed that I could quickly and clearly discern an understanding of the leading of the Holy Spirit and was always ready to move forward while others were still trying to figure out if or what they ought to do. The downside of that was that many around me were not yet ready to move forward. It frustrated them that I was ready to move, and it frustrated me they were not.”

**Has your concept of ministry changed during your lifetime of service and, if so, in what ways?**

“Yes. I grew up in the era of well-organized programming in church and denominational life. My early strategy work was too programmatic. Around 1990 I became convinced our strategies and tactics needed to be much more experiential and relational. This was a creeping feeling I had for a decade, and one that a key mentor in my life – Lyle Schaller, the foremost local church and denominational consultant of the last four decades of the 20th century – tried to help me understand. I finally got it.

Mega churches like Saddleback and Willow Creek began to express this in the late 1970’s when Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, respectively, launched their congregations by leaving behind the program of discipleship and embraced the process of disciplemaking.

Many congregations still want the program of discipleship rather than the process of disciplemaking. Yet, a strong movement of disciplemaking is spreading throughout North American these days. This focus needs to increase. Every Christian has a calling as a disciple, and must be led to look for, understand, and live into their calling.”

**You are a visionary leader. Can you recall a time or place of service when this was easy for you to incorporate in your work?**

“Early in my ministry when I was 30 years old and had just gone to the Home Mission Board to design and lead the next round of missional strategy in metropolitan areas of one million or more (or who would have one million or more by the year 2000), God gave me a vision for how easy it was to do this with collaborative strategic process. All we needed to do was to get the key church, association, state convention, and national leaders related to a given megalopolitan area in a room together, prayerfully dialogue, then make joint commitments to action. The starting point for the dialogue would be the strategy developed by the churches-in-association and shared with the larger group. It worked amazingly well.

In 1992 while at the SC Baptist Convention, Executive Director Carlisle Driggers, myself as missional strategist, and a co-worker named Glenn Akins developed and shared what would become ‘Empowering Kingdom Growth’ for affirmation and ownership with the staff, board, associations, and congregations. The vision statement was *Empowering Churches to Fulfill Their Vision for Kingdom Growth*. Short-term it significantly affected the state convention’s work to where people outside the state declared that this effort had transformed our regional denomination.”

**Has there ever been a time in your ministry when you saw God do a miracle? What was that experience like?**

“As Betty and I approach our 50th wedding anniversary in June, I see God bringing us together at Mars Hill College (now a university) as a true miracle of God. No one could ask for a greater partner in ministry than Betty has been to me. In some ways she laid aside what God could have done through her in Christian ministry to support my ministry.

Of course, in other ways her service as a weekday preschool director in four different churches throughout our marriage, and as a Bible teacher and deacon in our church, has been a wonderful ministry around which she feels called, has great passion, and is an excellent Bible teacher.

I knew who she was from the very beginning of our Freshman year. She did not know who I was until the beginning of our Junior year. After our first date as our Junior year began, we both knew we were dating the person we would marry. We both told one or two other people this at once after our first date. We did not tell one another this until about four months later.

God brought together a preacher’s kid who grew up in Baltimore and Philadelphia with a wonderful woman who grew up in a rural area outside Greenville, SC. We had a common spiritual and cultural experience in Baptist churches that made us Christian ‘soul-mates’ from the very beginning of our relationship. We had common values about life that unified our relationship from the very beginning.

The miracle is that God had prepared us for the ministry we have had together. What a miracle!”

**How have you balanced ministry and family time over the years?**

“Balancing family and ministry was always a challenge – particularly because I traveled so much when our two children were preschoolers while I worked at the Home Mission Board. The key issue of the balance was the need to plan for family time. We visited with family in South Carolina and North Carolina a lot and made that a priority. The Home Mission Board was strong on allowing a certain amount of our travel budget to be used for our family to travel with us.

What I did was to fly out of Atlanta return home as soon as I could. I took more trips rather than longer trips. At the end of my first full year on staff in Atlanta, I was challenged about matching my salary the year before with what I spent on travel. (Of course, it was in the low $20,000s at that time.) They told me I would need to change my travel pattern, take longer trips and stay away over weekends to cut down my expenses.

I asked my boss and the vice president who was meeting with us if they would give me six months to find another place of ministry because, with two preschool children at home, I would not change my travel pattern.

They thought about it for a couple of days, had some conversations I did not know about, and came back to me to say I did not have to change my travel patterns.

I did work hard on decreasing my travel days while still completing my assignment in the mega cities of our nation. When we finally got my travel schedule under control, and Betty and I were comfortable with it, South Carolina came calling to ask me to serve as the state missions director for the state convention. In God’s sense of humor, once we were comfortable it was time to move us to another place.

That was the second time I stood up for my family over my ministry. In 1977-78 I was on a two-year closed-end assignment with the Home Mission Board in the city where I grew up – Baltimore, MD. In the Spring of my second year discussions began about my becoming a national consultant for churches in transition (called revitalization now). I would be the only full-time field person in this area for the whole country. I was only 28 years old.

As we got into negotiations, the idea of how much I would be traveling across the country arose. No percentages were placed on it, but they knew I had some hesitation. When they were ready to offer me the position they said I would be gone from home 60 percent of the time.

Betty was pregnant with our first child at that time. I told the person who would be my boss that prior to having our first child and seeing how that adjustment would go, I could not commit to that. In an especially tense conversation late one afternoon my future boss said either I commit to the travel today or the job offer would be withdrawn. I did not commit. The job offer was withdrawn. I had no job six months from then.

It was a bad evening at home as Betty and I cried and prayed. The next morning when got into the office, I had a telephone call from the director of the Baptist association in Charlotte, NC, wanting to know if I would consider coming there to be the missions person on their staff. One door closed, and at once God opened another door.

We moved from Baltimore to Charlotte a few months later.

Two years later the same person who had withdrawn the earlier offer, came back and asked me to come to Atlanta in a different role. God opened this door again and we moved to Atlanta.”

*In the next interview, George Bullard reflects on his time as CMBA Executive Director for the last five years. He will share CMBA ministry celebrations and challenges, and his hopes for*

*the unleashing of future missional stories of the CMBA Family of Churches.*