



Together For His Kingdom

“But when they believed Philip, as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12 HCSB).

Engaging, Cultivating, and Investing *Reaching the Unchurched in North America*

By Carrie Brown McWhorter

The word *cooperation* suggests an attitude of unity, a sense of harmony and teamwork. “Together for His Kingdom,” this year’s theme for the Week of Prayer for North American Missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, emphasizes the cooperative mission of Southern Baptists to pray for missionaries, give to support their work, and go to further the gospel.

The North American Mission Board (NAMB) estimates 259 million people in the United States and

Canada do not have a personal relationship with Jesus. Researchers are finding a growing spiritual apathy among the unchurched. A June 2016 study by LifeWay Research found that few think about what happens after they die and only a third of respondents said they would go to a worship service, even if invited by a friend.

If the unchurched are willing to visit a service, there might not be a church trying to reach them. According to NAMB, only one Southern

Baptist congregation exists for every 6,828 people in North America.

Believers in the early church worked cooperatively to build the kingdom of God, and Acts 8:12 confirms the results of their efforts: “When they believed Philip, as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (HCSB).

Just like the early church, Southern Baptists are preaching the gospel and baptizing new believers. New churches

Week of Prayer for North American Missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering®

MARCH 5–12, 2017

are seeing tremendous kingdom growth. According to namb.net, established Southern Baptist churches baptized three people per 100 resident members. New churches baptize four times that many.

Church plants also reach the increasingly diverse populations found in North American cities. Census data shows that more than 80 percent of the population now lives in metropolitan areas. Young professionals and Baby Boomers are leading the trend. Send Cities also have high foreign-born populations, and more internationals are coming every year.

Regardless of where they come from, these urban transplants share common goals—better jobs, safer communities, and long-term prosperity. As a result, NAMB has prioritized 32 Send Cities as vital missions fields for kingdom growth and influence. These cities, spread throughout Canada and the United States, are the unreached Samarias of North America. In addition to supporting church planters and missionaries, NAMB supports a wide array of initiatives and church-based ministries aimed at fostering community partnerships to increase global impact. Chaplains, pastors, students, and volunteers all play a role in pushing back lostness in North America.

Prayer and financial support through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering are critical for the work of the church planters, evangelism catalysts, and missionaries who daily carry the gospel forward in Send Cities and throughout North America. Every dollar of the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering goes to missionaries and their work throughout North America, allowing them to preach, baptize, and make disciples “together for His kingdom.”

**ANNIE
ARMSTRONG**
EASTER OFFERING®
anniearmstrong.com

National Goal: \$70,000,000



A Plentiful Harvest

In Acts 8, we find Philip proclaiming Christ to the lost people of Samaria—a place full of evil. The crowds listened to Philip’s words “with one accord,” and the Holy Spirit broke through the darkness. People were delivered from unclean spirits. They were healed from illness. Even Simon the magician turned to Jesus and was baptized, though there are questions about his sincerity. The Spirit of God swept through Samaria, and Scripture says there was “great joy in that city.” It was a victory for Christ and His kingdom.

The vast missions field of North America is just as dark as long-ago Samaria. Terrible violence and sexual perversion are regular topics on the news. Broken relationships and poverty fragment families. Long the voice of hope in our communities, churches are losing their influence. Approximately 75 percent of Southern Baptist churches in America are plateaued or declining. Many are closing. On average, 17 Southern Baptist churches shut their doors for good every Sunday, leaving underserved and unreached neighborhoods in cities across North America.

How can we respond? Prayer should be at the top of our list.

North America has experienced bleak spiritual periods before. In those times, God’s people have turned to Him in prayer, and great revivals have occurred. We often think, *All I can do is pray*. But prayer should be our first defense. Ephesians 6:18 urges us to pray constantly for the Lord’s people, interceding persistently on their behalf.

In prayer, we ask God to take control. We turn our concerns and anxieties over to the One Who can turn darkness into light.

On this first day of the Week of Prayer for North American Missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, pray our missionaries across North America stay Christ-centered and Spirit-led in their efforts (Rom. 15:18–19). Pray God sends an abundance of laborers to reach millions of North Americans living in darkness (Luke 10:2). Pray you and your church will be on mission for Christ in your neighborhood (2 Cor. 5:14–15).



James and Natarsha Roberson

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

The Bridge Church in Brooklyn, New York, has incredible diversity and creative talent, which means every day brings new challenges for NAMB church planters James and Natarsha Roberson.

“In this city, people have all types of belief and all types of lifestyles,” said James, pastor of The Bridge Church. “The goal can’t be to just gather a bunch of people who are going to come on Sunday and be in the building. We had to embrace that some will take 7–10 years to come to faith.”

The city presents an interesting ministry environment, and The Bridge Church reflects that. About 75 percent of the church’s 125 or so attendees are single adults in their mid-20s, a comfortable demographic for James, whose background includes many years in college ministry. Most are natives of Brooklyn but grandchildren of immigrants, so ethnically they identify closely with Caribbean, Latino, and Anglo communities that came to America with a strong faith foundation. The problem is that many of their grandparents’ churches worship in their native language rather than English.

“These kids grow up in America and are not able to experience the same faith of their parents,” James said. “A lot will say, ‘My mom or dad

is Christian, but I wasn’t involved in the church because I didn’t understand the language.’ ”

The nature of doing life in New York City brings together people from all nations and languages, all socioeconomic groups, and all religions.

“I am around different types of people. . . . I’m forced to shop, ride, and do laundry with them,” James said. “Even a trip to the park is like a visit to the United Nations.”

“The investment into their heart most likely means my heart will be broken, but I look at the cross and see a Savior Who gave everything for us.”

As a result, the Robersons and their ministry team have grown more compassionate for those in their neighborhoods who don’t know Jesus. They also have gotten creative with programs to attract seekers. Their first small group Bible study began out of friendships formed at a baby shower in the summer of 2013. As that group began to grow, they explored what topics or programs might get unchurched friends to give church a try.

Out of that brainstorming session came a one-night event called

“Everything You Want to Know about Love, Sex, and Dating.” Group members made flyers and invited people to come, and 125 people attended the program. That night showed the Robersons it was possible to get “raw off the street” Brooklynites into a gathering. However, winning them to Christ and discipling them takes an incredible amount of time and investment, James said. It also takes incredible faith.

“It is often painful,” James said. “You can pour your time and energy and love into someone’s life and then see [him] walk away. That’s hard.”

When that happens, only one source of strength remains.

“The investment into their heart most likely means my heart will be broken, but I look at the cross and see a Savior Who gave everything for us. For some, I won’t plant, I won’t water, I won’t see the fruit. But prayerfully, God will give the increase.”

Pray for James as he also serves as campus pastor to the 10,000 students of Long Island University Brooklyn. Pray also for Richard and Emmy Bowman, early members of The Bridge Church who will now lead a second campus of The Bridge in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Pray God will raise up leaders with vision for both campuses.



Garth and Patty Leno

WINDSOR, ONTARIO

We Love Windsor is an annual three-day event in Windsor, Ontario. Last year, members of The Gathering stood near the warehouse where the church meets and distributed water and soft drinks at one of the busiest intersections in the city. The simple act of kindness is just one of the ways Garth and Patty Leno, church planters with the North American Mission Board, and their church, The Gathering Windsor, seek to engage the largely unchurched population of Ontario's 10th largest city.

"We try to take advantage of existing opportunities and create some of our own," said Garth Leno, pastor of The Gathering Windsor. "Every chance we get, we throw a party."

The Gathering's first birthday barbecue in May 2015 was an especially popular event, drawing a packed house of 350 people. The celebration included testimonies, baptisms, and afterward, carnival games and food. The first birthday party was so successful, the church did it again in 2016 and attracted an even larger crowd.

The Gathering Windsor also has incorporated backyard Bible clubs and three weeks of sports and arts

campus to gain traction in the community. Though the events are fun, the goal is to create an atmosphere of invitation in a community that, like the rest of Canada, is extremely underchurched, Leno said. In the city of Windsor with a population of 230,000, only one Canadian Baptist church exists, one reason The Gathering plans to plant two new churches in the region.

"There is a real hunger and a deep need for good Bible teaching in our city. In the early days that was the big draw—open Scripture and let God speak through His Word,"

"We keep looking for ways we can penetrate the communities in which we live, invite people to engage, and to say The Gathering is a really good alternative to what you've known as church in the past," Leno said.

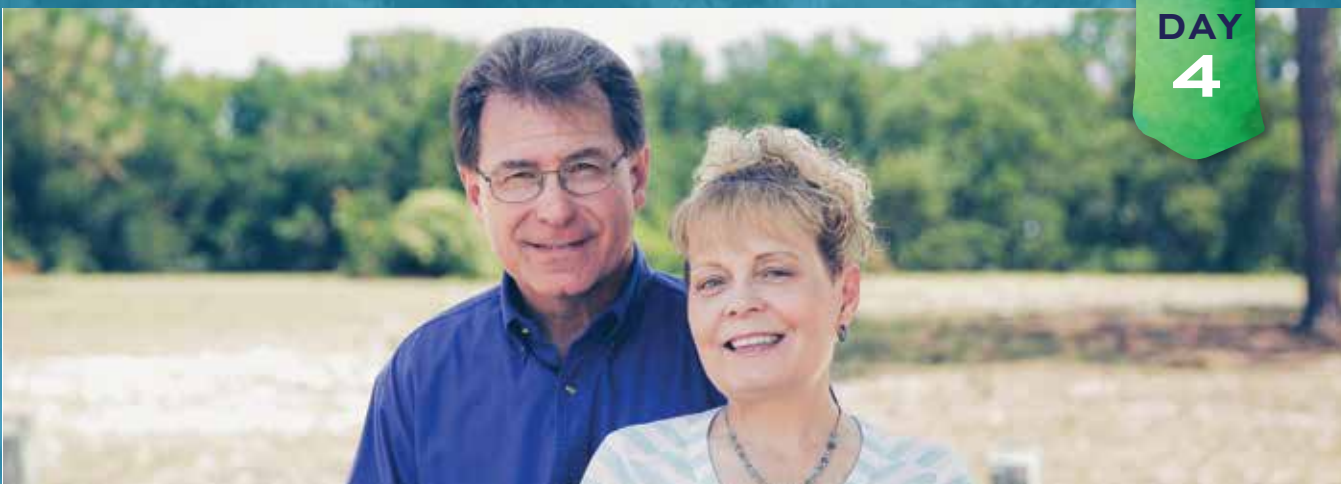
The city's strong automotive and manufacturing industries and proximity to Detroit, Michigan, have brought families from around the globe to the region, many of

whom come from Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, or Hindu backgrounds. As people find their way to The Gathering, they are exposed, some for the first time, to simple worship, passionate prayer, and strong Bible teaching—a commitment that is paramount to the mission of The Gathering.

"There is a real hunger and a deep need for good Bible teaching in our city. In the early days that was the big draw—open Scripture and let God speak through His Word," Leno said.

After first outgrowing the Lenos' home and then rented spaces, The Gathering is now looking for a permanent location. They ask for prayer in discerning where God wants the church to be located in the long-term and the financial costs associated with a permanent location.

Most of all, Garth and Patty seek prayer for the members of The Gathering to truly learn how to live life on mission. "Pray our people will become everyday missionaries. Some have lost the urgency with which we started the church, so pray that the Lord increases our sense of urgency in reaching lost people with the gospel."



Kim and Ron Carr

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

The large refugee population of Jacksonville, Florida, creates a high demand for English as a second language (ESL) programs. The International Learning Center (ILC) led by NAMB Send Relief–ILC national director Kim Carr meets that need daily by investing in the lives of those displaced from their home countries by poverty, war, and persecution.

Carr and her husband, Ron, founded the ministry in 2000, and they officially opened the ILC in 2003. Since then, they have enrolled over 5000 ESL learners representing 108 countries. Often, ILC students have worked as professionals in their home countries yet find few job opportunities in the United States. To help this situation, ILC programs focus on English language acquisition, reading, workplace skills, citizenship classes, and youth tutoring. The ILC's focus on family is important.

“Children are everything to these refugees. The next generation is the reason most of them have come to the United States. So when they get here and suddenly their children are struggling in school, mom and dad are desperate for help,” Carr said.

One family of refugees, Coptic Christians from Syria, has become especially important to Carr and her family. Though the family members

knew about Jesus, they had no sense of what a relationship with Him could be. Within a few weeks at the ILC, the adult family members all accepted Christ. Soon, their children did as well. When one member of the family returned home, Carr and others at the ILC made sure she had resources to help her grow in her faith, reach lost family members and friends, and disciple others. “Our families are woven together. This is one of those families that have become friends for life,” Carr said.

Carr and her staff of volunteers teach ESL classes for both men and women using a workplace curriculum and a reading program that uses the Bible as its text. As ILC students improve their reading, they are exposed to the Word and are welcome to ask questions.

“We become friends, which leads to sharing the gospel, and the next thing you know, we’re planting churches among these people,” Carr said. “We marry church planting with compassion ministry.”

One key difference between the ILC and other ESL programs is the gender segregation of the classes. “Having separate classes for men and women gains us all kind of favor in the international community,” Carr said. “Women love not having men

in the school, and the males in their lives like that their female family member is not in class with other men.” Separate classes also means the women are more open to conversation because no men are present.

Since the beginning, Carr has worked 60–110 hours each week teaching, tutoring, and meeting one-on-one with students. The ultimate goal is to plant churches among the unreached people groups represented in those who come to the ILC. So far, more than 80 church plants have come out of the ILC, and the program is being replicated in other cities with large refugee populations.

Carr desires prayer for wisdom and discernment in the daily ministry of the ILC and for the growth of the program. She also urges prayer for favor in the international community so students will continue to enroll and for access to elementary schools across North America.

“We’re starting to plant our program in other cities, and elementary schools are important,” Carr said. “We don’t work in churches because the people we reach will not go to a church. By planting new programs in elementary schools, we can tutor the children while teaching ESL to the parents. We can minister to the whole family.”



Jacob and Jessica Dahl

ELLENSBURG, WASHINGTON

When they encounter college students who are cynical about church, North American Mission Board church planters Jacob and Jessica Dahl are not surprised. In fact, they see themselves in those students.

Jessica spent her first two years of college at Washington State University (WSU) believing a career in journalism was her future. An engineering major, Jacob was just as determined to pursue financial and career success. Both surrendered to the Lord during their college years and found authentic Christian community at Resonate Church, a gathering that launched in 2007 with the goal of reaching college students for Christ.

The Dahls met in 2009, graduated soon after, and joined Resonate Church as interns. Both had the idea that God could have a year or two of their lives before they entered the professional world.

“Neither of us saw this as long term,” Jessica said. “We were still telling God, ‘You can have some of our lives, but not all of it.’”

The Dahls married in 2011 and took jobs at WSU. During their ministry sabbatical, they prayed for God’s direction. The

central question was how much God wanted to use them. His answer was “profound and pivotal.”

God began to show the Dahls the missions field of college students. Soon Resonate determined the location of its first church plant—Central Washington University (CWU) in Ellensburg—and called Jacob as pastor.

The student population at CWU is not unlike other small state universities. Ninety-two percent of the college’s 11,000 students primarily come from four nearby counties.

“CWU is not the first choice of a lot of our students, but with that comes a drive to be part of something bigger,” Jessica said. “Many are still trying to find their identity, and they are open to ways they can get involved.”

Most of the students are “nones” with little religious background. The Dahls don’t see the students’ lack of knowledge as a hindrance. Instead, it frees leaders to teach the Bible from a “blank slate” rather than having to “deconstruct a falsely built Christian worldview,” Jessica explained.

The heartbeat of Resonate Church is small groups known as “villages.” At CWU, villages meet in homes and

on campus, providing an easy entry point for Resonate Church members to bring their friends. At any given village, there might be an atheist or a Buddhist discussing the Bible and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The relational element means new people are regularly joining villages, which leads them naturally into church.

Resonate holds church services on Sunday nights in the CWU student union building. Being in the hub of student life allows Resonate members to connect with campus life in a personal way. Another student life connection was made early on when Resonate shared its giant blow-up movie screen for a freshman orientation event. More than 800 students showed up to the event and heard about Resonate during their first days on campus.

“It was huge favor that we got to have with the university and with incoming freshmen,” Jessica said.

The Resonate mission and the Dahls’ prayer is for college students to become disciples who make disciples.

“Since day one we believed the Great Commission is for all of us,” Jessica said. “Our prayer is that God will continue to move people to go.”



Kelly and Brandi Parrish

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

The beauty of the Rocky Mountains inspires awe and reverence, but few in northern Colorado know the Creator responsible for the majesty. Church planters Kelly and Brandi Parrish hope to introduce them.

“People in Colorado are highly connected to nature, but they don’t know Jesus,” said Kelly, who pastors Living Rock Church in Fort Collins, located about an hour north of Denver. Home to Colorado State University, Fort Collins is the fourth fastest-growing community in Colorado. The tech industry draws workers from all over the United States and Asia. The people are highly educated, well off financially, and very independent.

“Tolerance is big,” said Kelly. “The mind-set is ‘You believe what you want to believe; I’ll believe what I want to believe.’ Rarely will people bring up God.”

Earning the opportunity to start that conversation takes months, sometimes years, and the Parrishes have to start with the basics. Many of those who visit Living Rock Church have never owned a Bible, much less read God’s Word, which is why every Sunday morning, the

Parrishes put out Bibles for children, students, and adults. Kelly tells everyone to take one home as the church’s gift to them.

“Most of the people we are living life with right now, we gave them their first copy of the Word of God,” Brandi said. “They have no comprehension of it.”

“Church planting is the hardest thing we’ve ever done,” Brandi said. “But keeping our eyes on what God is doing is so important. Knowing and believing God has called us is critical.”

Liz* is one of those people. As neighbors, Brandi and Liz often talked about the weather and their children, but everything changed when Brandi invited Liz to a women’s Bible study. After attending Bible study, Liz was full of questions and conviction. She also wanted to know more about the Bible, a book she had never encountered.

Receiving her own Bible led to Liz’s salvation, then her husband’s.

The couple recently bought a new home in the neighborhood, and they had only one requirement—that the house have room to accommodate the Bible study that has outgrown every other home that has hosted it.

Though it has been fun to be part of stories like Liz’s, the work in Fort Collins is not easy.

“Church planting is the hardest thing we’ve ever done,” Brandi said. “But keeping our eyes on what God is doing is so important. Knowing and believing God has called us is critical.”

“It’s what we are called to do: love people, invest in them, plant the gospel, and hope that grows into life,” Kelly said.

Pray for Kelly and Brandi and their children, Zachary, Noah, Joshua, and AnnaFaith. Pray for their marriage and that God will give them quality family time together. Pray also for God’s protection over their children’s hearts.

Pray God will send more missionaries to northern Colorado. Leaders with vision for all areas of ministry are needed, Kelly said, as are mature believers who can disciple new believers.

**Name changed.*



Dan and Amanda Coleman

AUGUSTA, MAINE

At community events in Augusta, Maine, the green shirts of Kennebec Community Church draw attention, exactly the reaction Dan and Amanda Coleman want.

“When someone sees the green shirt, they know it is us,” said Amanda. “They see us out there loving on people and taking our mission seriously.”

In their role as North American Mission Board church-planting catalysts, the Colemans have helped their congregation grow from 70 members to more than 900 by establishing a presence in the community and consistently showing up to meet needs. People sometimes refer to Kennebec as “the church who is always doing free stuff for kids,” but the result of that outreach is a thriving ministry to families with children and teens.

Reaching the lost in Maine is not an easy task. In national surveys, Maine consistently ranks as one of the least religious states in the United States. Few people in the state grew up attending church and most have no knowledge of the gospel or Jesus, Amanda said. In Augusta, that sad statistic is changing one family at a time.

“We reach out to a broad spectrum of people, and our congregation includes homeless people as well as

doctors and lawyers,” Amanda said. “But we do focus on young families in our outreach because we are a young family.”

One of the particular challenges in Maine is skepticism. People don’t believe you care about them until they see you in action, Amanda said. That’s why the church shows up for big events like the annual Fourth of July parade but teaches an emphasis on developing personal relationships that demonstrate the love of Christ.

Kyle* and Jamie* experienced that love, and it changed their lives. When the couple’s business was going under, Kyle grew very depressed and was hospitalized. At that low point, Jamie shared their struggles with a friend who attended Kennebec and heard words of hope and spiritual encouragement. When Kyle got out of the hospital, Jamie told him they were going to church. Both became believers and were baptized.

“Through our community loving on this couple and explaining their need for Christ, they both totally understood,” Amanda said. “He went from giving up his life for the world to losing his life and gaining eternity.”

Because so many come to Kennebec Community Church with no knowledge of the Bible, small groups known as “community

groups” are a key part of the church’s discipleship efforts. Within these small groups, believers and seekers alike spend time praying, reading Scripture, and asking questions.

“Community groups are where we really get people connected,” Amanda said. “If they have a need, a joy, or a celebration, community group is there for them.”

Last year, Paul* and Vanessa* began attending the Coleman’s community group at the invitation of a friend. Both got saved, but Paul resisted baptism. After an in-depth discussion with Dan, Paul ultimately chose to be baptized, as did his wife and his two oldest children.

“This was a family struggling in their marriage, struggling with their kids, and now Christ is definitely the center of their relationship. You can see the change,” Amanda said.

Pray God will raise up more leaders at Kennebec Community Church to fill staffing needs so the church can continue to reach families in the Augusta area. Pray also for discernment in using a gift of land the church received in 2016. Finally, pray the Colemans and their three children will be refreshed and reminded of the eternal significance of their ministry at Kennebec Community Church.

**Names changed.*

Together For His Kingdom

When Philip preached in Samaria, crowds of people saw God's power and believed in Jesus. Lives were changed because Philip was obedient. Later in Acts 8, Philip had a divine encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch and another life was changed because of Philip's obedience to God's call to go.

Like millions of people across North America, the eunuch had knowledge of the Scripture but no understanding. When Philip explained the good news of Jesus, the eunuch believed and was baptized. He returned to his homeland full of joy, the bearer of a life-changing message.

Imagine what will happen when Southern Baptists across North America—everyday people like you and me—obey the call to pray, give, and go. When we work together and embrace the missionary call to bear that same life-changing message of the gospel to communities and cities across North America, lives are changed and joy results.

As we conclude this Week of Prayer for North American Missions, pray fervently for our North American missionaries and churches to work together for God's kingdom (Rom. 15:5–6). Challenge yourself, your family, and your church to give generously to support our missionaries in North America through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering (2 Cor. 9:6–7). Finally, put feet to your prayers, and go intentionally as a missionary to the community where God has planted you (Matt. 28:19).

Amazing things will happen when we work “together for His kingdom.”

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 HCSB).

CARRIE BROWN MCWHORTER covers missions and ministry for several publications. Read more at CarrieBrownMcwhorter.com.