



Transcript

Means of Grace

Episode 48

Speaker_3: Welcome to Means of Grace, a podcast produced by the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Brian Mateer: Welcome to the means of grace podcast. My name is Brian Mateer, the associate director of Missional Engagement for the Western North Carolina conference. Today I'm joined with by Erin Burleson, and she is the Missional of collective coordinator, and she's going to talk to us today about everything related to the missional collective and how you can learn more and - and perhaps get involved. Welcome, Erin.

Erin Burleson: Thanks. Excited to be here, always excited to connect even if it's virtually and definitely talk about the journey we've been on with missional collective.

Brian Mateer: So Erin, tell us a little bit about what the Missional collective is for those that may have never heard of it.

Erin Burleson: So the Missional collective is group of individuals that are on a journey of being shifted from relief to empowerment models of ministry. And the collective journey is - is during that takes place over the course of a year, a series of retreats to kind of be immersed in good neighboring practices. So its hands on immersive learning experience. The journey part of it is and the collective is - is the individuals who have gone through that journey and want to kind of continue to foster ideas and support one another



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for empowerment work.

Brian Mateer: Right, Thank you. That sounds - sounds exciting and it's something that - that I've been involved in for quite some time as well, from a planning standpoint. It started as kind of a mission engagement project I guess about three years ago. We had an idea of a mission cohort experiential learning. That would go - take a little bit of a deeper dive for those that are passionate about mission in their local churches, maybe mission directors or clergy folks that are looking to move their mission in a different direction of empowerment. So one of the things you mentioned Erin was - was good neighboring. Can you say a little bit about what you mean by that? And perhaps some of the things that in the cohort that focus on that area.

Erin Burleson: Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, I think most of us can get caught up in that language of good neighboring. Obviously, we want to be good neighbors. And so one of the attempts of this journey is to help the participants really practice it, because the best neighbors are the neighbors that actually practice good - good neighboring instead of just reading about it or talking about it or studying it or, you know, going to a conference about it to actually get out neighborhood, meet people you haven't met before, engage with organizations that have existed in the neighborhoods for sometimes decades or beyond, and to really begin to work in a collaborative way. To see what god is doing in the neighborhood and to tap into what he's already doing instead of just constantly, you know, reinventing the wheel.

Feel like, you know, in the most simple sense the best neighbors are neighbors that, you know, share a lawn mower or



chainsaw or, you know, some kind of tool that they need. So ideally, would be the same for churches and organizations to kind of pull together resources and have conversations about what do you have and how can we work together to make things run smoothly around here. And so I think one of the key ways we do that through the journey is by introducing and kind of immersing ourselves in some of the asset based resources that we found to be helpful.

Some of them as simple as, like an - like an interview with the neighbor to kind of assess, like, what skills are in your neighborhood or what interests are in your neighborhood or - or in your church, or even beyond. Sometimes we do that through collecting the stories of the neighborhood from folks that have lived there a long time or folks that are new to the neighborhood kind of getting a good picture of all the different types of neighbors and what their experiences are.

And so we try to provide some tools and some tips and some opportunities to really kind of getting simple -- I'm going to say simple, I don't want to say nitty gritty, but simple but it's the simple things that we often overlook when it comes to building relationships.

Brian Mateer: So Erin, can you tell us our listeners a little bit about what the Missional collective journey is for those that don't know anything about it?

Erin Burleson: Absolutely. The missional collective journey is a yearlong endeavor to help shift the work of the local church from relief to empowerment. Really trying to get out of the box and do that empowerment, focus, work to build up our neighbors. And so it's a series of retreats that the participants attend and then beyond the



retreats, the collective itself is to remain in connection and support to continue to have ongoing support and celebration of the work that each other is doing. And so, through the retreats, there's personal spiritual care, there's connection with other missional leaders.

There's very -- it's a strengthening of your knowledge and skills that you can be effective and not - feel ineffective. I mean, I think feeling like you're being effective is half of what we battle when we try to execute something. It's a ton of resources that you're exposed to, it's planning tools to sort of implement the things that are in your mind to help translate what's happening in your head or in your heart and get it out in a way that you could converse about it with the people that you need to give it some feed or give it some wings or whatever language you want to use to get that thing off the ground, and to really help individuals discern the impact in their community.

The current impact and the potential impact. So those are some of the things that happen or that are sort of the benchmarks that we hope we meet by people participating in the journey. So for individuals that want to participate in the missional collective, it's an application based process. At this point, we've been doing it based on recommendations. But the retreats are held in diverse cities when we're in person and when we're virtual, we try to still pull from components in those cities and make it as immersive as possible in that virtual setting. But, you know, we practiced neighboring.

e try to really practice the art of neighboring with shared meals with interactive discussions with our historical and



theological field trips if you will, with personal spiritually direction and corporate spiritually disciplines. All of those things sort of wrapped up in a bow in our best effort to make that time together as meaningful and helpful for true engagement and empowerment ministry as possible. So that's what you can expect if you participate.

Brian Mateer: And we've wrapped this - this past missional collective journey. I guess in December and we've kind of come up with this new idea of how we can take the next step or help individuals take the next step with their churches or with their ministry. So we've come up with this thing that we're calling the virtual pitch session that you've alluded to earlier and that's to take place here. Well, when you're listening to this, it'll have already taken place. But can you tell us a little bit about the virtual pitch session?

Erin Burleson: Yeah, we had some really good energy as we were closing out the 2020 Missional collective group and people were planning and kind of looking at their lives, their ministry, their work, and starting to refine what was next for them. And so it felt kind of short changed to just be like, you know, good luck and let us know how we can help, which I mean, it was more than that. But, you know, it felt abrupt. And so, by coming into the New Year with the pitch session, it is an opportunity for exclusive to those who have participated in the last two years of the missional collective journeys.

It's an opportunity for us to build those relationships again with one another to continue to support the ideas that are unfolding by giving time and space for participants to pitch



their best ideas. And we're awarding \$1000 which is always fun. \$1000 to put towards whatever those endeavors are. So, as you mentioned it will happen between now and when you all that are listening or actually hearing this. But, we have, I think, seven people presenting and we have a great combination of judges.

So we have denominational leaders, and we have friends that have been on the journey with us, and we have sort of experts in the field judging the presentations, we have dinner provided for everyone and a kit full of goodies, including some swag just to make it fun. So just going to be a fun, lighthearted interactive night for the collective to keep doing what we want to do and support the empowerment efforts, and somebody is going to leave with \$1000. So, you know.

Brian Mateer: \$1000 for their ministry.

Erin Burleson: Right, right. Important distinction. Yeah, I think it's going to be a great annual tradition, to be honest. I mean, we haven't committed to that's what we'll do. But the energy has already been pretty positive as far as thinking about it. And, you know, people that have kind of dropped off their forward momentum are picking it back up a little bit because they have reason to.

Brian Mateer: Yes, the one thing I would mention is, you know, anyone that has been through the missional collective journey can pitch whether it's a, you know, a person that's just wrapped up the journey or someone that have done it in the past and then we're inviting all the participants that have been involved to kind of be the audience and - and we'll also have some say and who gets the - the award of \$1000 grant for their mission. So I'm really excited about, I think



it's going to be a lot of fun, and hopefully it'll be something that will grow in the future.

I wanted to talk a little bit more about the collective and I think one of the things that to me is it has been rewarding and important about this group and as we move into the future and add more folks to the collective is - is kind of the relationships between the members and the participants, but also kind of the collective knowledge that everyone brings to the table. You know, we have people that are in different contexts and churches, but they bring their knowledge, and so this sense of real peer learning community, a peer to peer relationship, and folks can bring problems or ideas that they might be having a particular ministry area or things they might want to see, change or shift or, you know, evolve so that collective group of people speaking into that, I think it's been a really important piece of this effort.

Erin Burleson: Yeah, I think that the way because we have clergy and lay because we have those in traditional church settings and those in other organizations, older and younger. It sort of helps safeguard us from just kind of focusing in one particular direction or learning style or from, you know, becoming experts because we all are at the same starting point. It forces us to be - I guess more hospitable to where everybody's at in their start to the journey and more supportive of helping everybody get to where they personally want to get to in their journey rather than defining that end goal for everybody is the same. And I really - I think that's very valuable about the peer learning.

Erin Mateer: You know, this all started as I said about three years ago, groups on the missioning or members of the mission engagement



team, and members that we - folks that we knew that were connected in mission began to gather first for Duke study leave to kind of hash out some ideas, and then this group, that had been working on it for about a year, maybe a little bit more went through the session. We call it the pre pilot.

And then this past year, we launched the first official pilot. But then COVID hit, so about the time that we were going to launch the first session, we had to regroup. So tell the folks a little bit about that, and in this day and time how we've been able to shift.

Erin Burleson: Yeah, that was definitely like everybody right now. Kind of a curveball and quite a challenge. But I remember, first us kind of thinking, what are we going to do? Or we're going to put this on hold and then recognizing, you know, now more than ever, we need to have these conversations of Missional engagement because people are so disjointed and struggling in so many different ways. So the ability to get into a virtual setting for our retreat series was pretty rewarding.

I think it was definitely challenging, but we were still -- I'm proud of the work and that we were committed to still fostering relationships, and so I don't know if you have something specific you want me to address, but in terms of the structure of it I really enjoyed the opportunity to use multiple formats besides just a zoom meeting platform, you know, to get on more social apps to try to help build the social side of things, to be able to schedule virtual dinner, dinner droppings, we call them so that we could all, you know, still share a meal together and kind of catch up on life again building that relational aspect of the journey.



And the sessions themselves in some ways it was easier to get our guest to participate because they weren't traveling. So they were able for guest gurus to log on and share some of their wisdom with our group. So yeah, I'm proud of that, the way we were able to adapt and still have spiritually disciplines and things like that together. But also, I really liked that by being virtual some of the things - some of the activities we would have done together in one space, whatever city we would have been, we were able to do locally. For instance, one of the sessions we have an assignment of beholding activity.

So the participants are assigned to find a piece of arts or a mural or something in their town or their community if possible, and to spend some time sort of meditating on it. And so, rather than one image where we would all be focused, you know, we had twelve images that we were able to add to our group, and it kind of showed us each other's worlds quite literally like you're part of the world and I think that was fun for participants. And we wouldn't have had that, probably in the same way if we weren't virtual.

Brian Mateer: So Erin, one of the approaches that we've taken is to layer in different types of learning that we feel is important for the participants to engage with and learn. Can you tell us a little bit about those and also some of the guests that we have that will give people a glimpse of what they might expect if they're considering joining the next cohort?

Erin Burleson: Yeah, so I refer to sort of the components of our learning as the components, sort of the guiding force to our practice on so those are experiential learning, intellectual components, contextual and then a personalized piece. I kind of want to start



with personal first. So much of what we have available to us in terms of resources from the church or the conference or whatever is kind of out there in the world is a lot about the program and the process, and sometimes leaves us on her own to do the personal - the internal personal work that needs to be done.

So I think, you know, we've tried to hold a standard of saying that there is - there is internal work that needs to happen in this journey separate from just the intellectual and experiential kind of pieces. And so that happens through our spiritual director that we have contracted with that's available to our participants. And that happens with some of our devotional pieces interspersed with the learning - the direct learning. And then the intellectual component, obviously, is whatever we're engaging to get us really wrapping our mind around some of the hard concepts that we need to wrestle with some of the transformation that needs to happen systematically in our communities or in our policies or those types of things.

And so a lot of the intellectual stuff, I mean, we kind of bookend it with the authors of the Relief to Empowerment Book, which is Lacey and Gaston Warner. It's been a pleasure to have their voices helping, shape this work and shape this journey. And so we enjoy interacting with them along the way. When I think about our experiential pieces of sort of immersing ourselves in the lived realities of others, I think about the justice tour that we do with Greg Geral, who's at QC Family Tree there in Charlotte.

He takes us on a on an interactive tour of sort of the untold stories of the community there in Charlotte, helping us see some of the racial divide intention and the work that needs to be



done when we talk about good neighboring. So that's a little bit unique. It's definitely intellectual because there's a lot of history that's he's sharing with us, but it's even more so experiential because we have to sort of -- we don't have to, but were invited to hear the stories of the people that were living in that community and the history that is there that many people either don't know or aren't looking for.

Let's see, we've been able to interact, of course, with our friends at Heywood Street, we've pulled from a lot of the work and the wisdom of the good neighbor movement. Reverend Brand and Rencher and others involved, several others as well, but it's quite a nice mix of people in different places and different experiences all doing the good neighbor work. Yeah.

Brian Mateer: Yeah, I would say to the, you know, there's the intellectual component. And then it's, you know, propped up with some of the experiential learning at these different sites in it. So it makes it - makes you really evaluate your own context, and we encourage like the neighborhood walk and the justice tour. We encourage the participants to not just learn what happens in Charlotte or what happens in there, you know, somewhere else, but really what's happening in their own neighborhood? What is the history of your of your own place? What is the neighborhood look around your church? And it's not just, you know, it's just not your physical neighbors, it's the who is your neighbor question.

It's where God has called you to in the world, you know, your neighbor is yes, physically right around your church, but, you know, those of us that that might be involved in international



mission. You know, these concepts, this learning, this practical application can be utilized in those areas as well.

Erin Burleson: Yeah, I don't know if it's appropriate to offer a little personal story here, but I think I shared this in a blog, but my experience through the pandemic at the local church level was when we had to do a makeshift service outside was to really be confronted with how different my execution of normal weekly services is in America versus when I was in Mexico on a missions trip.

When I was in Mexico, I was able to let down my guard and adapt to the environment kind of make peace with, like, you know, they didn't do church the way I did church and so we were able to, like, just interact with kids and families and start with the relationship and then build whatever we were going to do off of that first and on a pandemic Sunday and in our outreach center in America, I was like, I don't know, I don't know how to do - I don't know how to do ministry like I was literally, like, stressing out like I didn't know what to do and it was because I think sometimes we lose our way with the relational based approach.

And we think our context is structure, program, order which I'm a huge fan of and it's really people, people, people and more people. Yeah, so if you were to participate in the missional collective journey on any - pretty much any given retreat, they tend to follow a pattern where we try to focus the bulk of the content and the experience in in one main day, but it spills over. So we start one evening and we end by lunch the third day. But the bulk of it's that middle day.

And the most important - no I won't say the most important, but an important part of that is starting with just the



dinner connection, the disconnect from the stress of life, the demands of family, whatever, you know, your job requires to arriving to dinner and friendship and prayer and centering, so that we could be fully present space and open to have a spirit might speak to us through our learning and through our time together. And then on that receiving, sometimes there's also an optional activity.

When we're in person, we've been able to do things like meet and watch a movie together on that first night or meet at the art gallery and kind of reflect on some of the artwork and locally and how it speaks to us, those types of things. Virtually it's pretty much just been a dinner discussion. The main day, we usually do an experiential and intellectual components. So we'll either have somebody present material for us to wrestle with, or we'll do an immersive experience we've done, like the racial wealth gap simulation is something that we like to do.

So in the virtual setting, what we do is, usually meet for a couple hours in the morning. We have a devotional time, a spiritually kind of prompt to center rest for the day that we move into the intellectual or experiential activity. And then we usually break for some self-guided activities. And those are sort of what you were talking about, Brian, trying to give those pieces for you to translate into the local context. Whether it's reading or an assessment of your environment or something like that.

It's just kind of self-led activities that we share. And then we get back together in the afternoon and we kind of unpack how that went for us. And often have an interview piece with somebody who is kind of doing that work whether it's Hayward Street or a Blackburn Community center in Boone or something like that, so. And



the last day we kind of moved, the last morning we kind of ended with again, spiritually disciplines and a time of planning, usually, of what's your next step? How can we support one another? Who do you need to call? Who do you need to meet with? Who do you need to learn from? Something to keep the momentum going, so it's not just what we saw in what we did here, but that it can continue to live and breathe, but we've tried to build in the virtual environment, some breakout rooms for people to connect and continue to have those side conversations.

Usually myself and Brian and sometimes others are available for a drop in, we kind of leave our computers on all day or for a couple extra hours so that we can be available, that kind of thing. So we definitely wanted to serve the participants and not just check our box so we try to build in those times for conversation and unpacking the ideas as they come up in individuals.

Brian Mateer: You know, I think that's one of the things that was a little bit of a concern but also a real surprise in a powerful way is the community that we were able to establish as a group virtually because as you said, we in that first group, we loved having those side conversations and eating dinner together and all of the free time connecting with each other and building those relationships. So we weren't sure how that was going to work in a virtual setting, but boy we had some rich deep conversations and build some really great relationships between the participants in this last session.

Erin Burleson: Yeah, I think. I mean, I think you and I and others who are helping lead are pretty committed to trying to avoid at all costs it just becoming as another zoom meeting. The last thing we need is another zoom meeting. Nobody needs another zoom meeting where



we just recommend a book. That's not going to do the trick at this day and age with all that we're dealing with. So yeah, I think people should have showed up in the space beautifully and really given of themselves.

Brian Mateer: Erin, will you share what the different sessions are called in the journey, the mission of collective journey so that people get a little bit better glimpse of some of the content that will be shared.

Erin Burleson: Sure. The most of the outline of this - the goals and the contents can be can be found, of course, on the conference website, I'm sure we'll be sharing that. But we usually begin our journey with a session called Grounding Ourselves in Monsieur Day. And spend some time with Lacy Warner. She does a great job talking to us about sort of looking for God and being reminded of the importance of his mission in the world more than our mission. So grounding ourselves in Monsieur Day, then we moved to hearing humanity and it's kind of work on identifying and actualizing empowerment.

So we help, you know, sort of look and listen like, Oh, that's what empowerment looks like. Oh, I see how they're doing it, and I see how that's different than the relief work that might be similar. So identifying and actualizing empowerment. The third session has to do with organizing for local mission. Walking your neighborhood way and organizing for local mission, and so we unpack personal values and sort of where we fit in the story, you know, how I walk in my neighborhood, not just how the neighborhood is functioning. Then we move towards bridging divides and we talk a lot about accountability and what it means to, not just know the assets, but of what's happening in your community or the issues in your



community, but to be accountable to really start to make a shift and how that can unfold.

So bridging the divides and then connecting the cultural dots. And that's a session on power, poverty and privilege. So those are the five sessions roughly and they kind of build one on the other. But that's what we cover over the course of the year journey.

Brian Mateer: Erin, do you have a favorite session or favorite moment from one of the sessions that we've had the last couple of years?

Erin Burleson: So I think probably - I think probably the justice tour with Greg Geral is one of my favorite experiences. Every time he takes us on a tour around town whether it's virtually or in person and tell stories of people and experiences that happened in spaces. I'm just kind of humbled, kind of in awe that somebody would take the time and the energy to really actually learn the stories. Not just, you know, they're not just the stories that everybody knows. If you google something about the city, you know, yeah, just the care - let me say the care that's given not just the time, but the care for the people that is embedded in giving that much time to know the stories and then tell the stories again and again. That's powerful to me.

Brian Mateer: So I think for me want to -- probably my favorite session is the bridging divide - bridging the divide session that takes place in Greensboro or at least virtually in Greensboro this past year.

Erin Burleson: Yeah, I - as you're saying that it kind of brings me back to when we were there in person. And I do remember, before we went in the Civil Rights Museum, we had our prayer - had a prayer



time and so we do that practice of prayer, walking past the markers, the historical markers on that street. And I just think it's so important to ask the question of, like, how does what happened then affect, how we pray and live now. I mean, sometimes we can answer the question of how we live now, but not how we pray and vice versa. Sometimes it only affects our prayers about how we live. So yeah, that location and that combination of experiences there is definitely a good one.

Brian Mateer: Erin, can you tell us where this is going? What's next for the missional collective?

Erin Burleson: There's a lot of possibilities on the table for - for where we're heading. And I think for those that are listening, it would be helpful if this kind of get you excited or get you thinking like we'd love to have you joined the conversation even, you know, send an email or send a message and say, Hey, I didn't know you were doing that, how can I get in on this conversation? That would be great. But what we've done through this official pilot year is start to put together more official curriculum so that we have opportunities for this type of work to translate into the local church for folks to do with whoever they want to get on board to do it with.

Basically an eight week session and over the course of the eight weeks to be exposed to many of the same concepts and experiences that are happening if you attend the journey, but in a little bit more concrete way and all those leading up to sort of activity to that whoever is in your church or in your community is going through the curriculum would be able to, kind of, discern where God's at work. You know, look for God in the community and listen for



what's happening amongst neighbors. Figure out where you fit in the story and then work towards making a plan of what's the next step. So again, that's an eight week curriculum that will live and breathe and some type of virtual platform. Our goal - one of our goals is to make it accessible in a lot of different ways.

We know that not everybody can do it. Eight week study or session with everybody. Some people need to hear it pieces at a time, so we're working on packaging the content in as many different ways as we can over time.

Brian Mateer: Erin, how the people listening can get connected to Missional collective?

Erin Burleson: So for anybody out there that is listening, and is feeling like you have a hope or a prayer or a dream or a wish or even a frustration, and you can't figure out where it needs to go or how God might want to shape that into something that he's doing in you and through you. I think the missional collective journey might be a spot to process that, to explore that, to test what's happening inside of you and so, we promised to be conversation partners and give you space to dream and to think and also resources to put some feet to those dreams.

So if you're interested in applying to be a part of the 2021 Missional collective, we are starting just in a couple weeks. And if there's even a spot available, we would welcome your application by Valentine's Day. So Valentine's Day is the cut off for the 2021 journey, and if for some reason there's not space or it's not the right mix, will hold your application and we would invite you to consider, you know, 2022 journey as well. So make application even



if it feels a little rushed, if it's something that you're interested in doing.

Brian Mateer: I would mention that we do have a registration fee for participants of the Missional Collective Journey. But our intention is to return that back to you in the form of a grant after the journey has been completed so that you might utilize the - the registration fee in order to not realize your dream that you might be thinking about are mulling over through the next year. Erin, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast today and talking about the missional collective.

For those that want to learn more or might be interested in and registering for the 2021 cohort or any cohort moving ahead, you can find the information on the conference website and we'll put that direct link in the show notes. You can also contact Erin Burleson at her email or myself, Brian Mateer at my email. Will also put those in the show notes in order that we can continue this conversation. Thanks very much for joining us, Erin.

Erin Burleson: Thank you.

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