

Intercultural Ministries

National Ministries stands ever committed to sharing the transformative power of God's love with people of different racial, ethnic, economic and faith backgrounds as well as political persuasions. To minister beyond the church walls means reaching out to touch anyone, and everyone. To that end, National Ministries strives to support and empower the local church to bring healing to its neighborhoods that brings, in turn, transformation. That happened for a church in Vermont, and the community will never be the same.

First Baptist Church of Bennington, Vt., surveyed its declining membership in 2005 and recognized a need for renewal. When the congregation began a "season of transnational ministry," led by intentional interim minister the Rev. Jerrod H. Huguenot, the church discovered it had "lost touch with its town's needs and challenges." Guidance from Dr. Ronald Carlson, National Ministries' missional church strategist, says Huguenot, helped the church commit to "working on creative ways to reconnect with its missional context: Bennington itself!"

Carlson visited the church twice, giving the church a "springboard for much good to take place," says Huguenot, and continuing to share with and encourage First Baptist members to live out the Gospel through a viable community presence.

A two-day training conference about community conflict transformation, hosted by First Baptist in February 2008, turned out to be an important catalyst for renewing community relationships. Fifty-seven participants, most from social service, health care and court-

related agencies, attended the conference led by National Ministries staff members the Rev. Dwight Lundgren and the Rev. Aundrea Alexander, Esq. who led conferees in understanding the root causes of conflict and building greater trust and commitment for sustainable change.

With its ministry focused on the community as well as the congregation, First Baptist became a unifying source of hope—and an example of commitment, Huguenot notes.

"Why did this workshop attract so many persons from differing, yet primarily secular contexts? The answer lies in the transformational ministry underway at First Baptist."

For First Baptist Church of Bennington, questions of identity and mission in challenging times are being answered in significant ways through its expanding community relationships. At the core of its vision today is an understanding that God calls for a simultaneous transformation of its own mission and that of its neighborhood.

"The Bennington Free Clinic is illustrative of First Baptist's growing understanding that our congregation has a missional calling," says Huguenot. Located at the church, the clinic will operate initially one night a week. More than two dozen doctors have agreed to begin the certification process to offer medical care to those in need.

The dream of local retired physician Dr. Richard Dundas—who sought to provide health care for Bennington area residents with little or no health insurance—this clinic is becoming an important community resource, thanks to the partnership of First Baptist, Bennington's Interfaith Council, Dr. Dundas and community supporters.

Another new community connection is Family Time, an organization related to the Project Against Violent Encounters that provides supervised visitation to families as well as educational programming and skill training. It is renting three rooms in the church to conduct its work within the community.

Such vital transformational outreach would not have happened five years ago in Bennington. The church, indeed, is experiencing the opportunities and challenges its openness to transformation affords. But a surer sense of identity and mission guides its work and informs its vision now. "Churches reclaim their role within their community," Huguenot says, "when they can be responsive to the missional needs around them."

—Rich Schramm



Additional Intercultural initiatives:

- Burmese refugee resettlement
- Gender & cultural conferences for church leaders
- "Many Voices, One People, One Mission" seminars, workshop & Web-based resources
- Asian Ministries conference
- ABC Hampton Ministers Conference reception
- Kaleidoscope Institute training