

**Focusing on the Deep and Trusting Jesus with the Wide**

**Bill Crews, Speaker**

**The Columbia Metro Connection Podcast 035**

**March 2020**

**Columbia Metro Baptist Association at** **CMBA@ColumbiaMetro.org**

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Chris Reinolds:

Welcome to the Columbia Metro Connection, a podcast where you can go to get valuable, relevant, and quality resources for you and your congregation. The Columbia Metro Connection is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and the almost 100 family churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. Hosts for this week's episode are George Bullard, Strategic Leadership Coach and Executive Director with the Columbia Metro Baptist Association, and I'm Chris Reinolds, Certified Church Consultant and Lead Pastor at Killian Baptist Church. Joining us this week is Bill Crews, Pastor at GraceChurch in Columbia, South Carolina. GraceChurch is a gospel-centric church with a passion for discipleship. Their goal is to build relationships with people from Oliver Gospel Mission to the University of South Carolina to introduce people to Jesus Christ.

George Bullard:

Bill Crews, it's so great to have you with us today to talk to us about GraceChurch of Columbia.

Bill Crews:

Yes, I'm glad to be here. This is my first official podcast. So here we go, right?

George Bullard:

Who knows how famous you'll become as a result of this podcast?

Bill Crews:

Who knows how famous I'll become, right?

Chris Reinolds:

Right, exactly. Exactly. All right. Tell us a little bit about where you come from, how you came to Columbia. I know a little bit of a tidbit. You were about 15-20 minutes away from my hometown for a little while when you were serving in Fernandina Beach.

Bill Crews:

Yeah, we're a long way from Northeast Florida, aren't we?

Chris Reinolds:

Indeed we are.

Bill Crews:

We are a long way from Northeast Florida, but I am from South Carolina. I knew I always wanted to come back to Columbia, or South Carolina. Columbia was not even on the top 10 list of where I wanted to go.

Chris Reinolds:

Right. I understand.

Bill Crews:

God had other plans, and so here we are.

Chris Reinolds:

Oh goodness. So what brought you to GraceChurch?

Bill Crews:

Well, I... Well, God did. Short answer was because I served on staff for 10 years at First Baptist in Fernandina, and really wasn't looking to leave. I was more so just waiting on God. Now, I didn't think it was going to take 10 years.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

I guess I thought it would take two, and then two turned into four and six and eight. And it was just a random thing such as things of God are random, but I actually saw a video on their website of GraceChurch and I was like, "Wow, you know, that's... I could do that."

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

And I think they tell me I was number 187 out of 200 and some possible. How's that for not very good eyes? So that's how I wound up here.

Chris Reinolds:

Okay. Okay.

Bill Crews:

But it was all God, because as we all say, I'm nowhere near qualified for what they needed or where they were going, but God had other ideas.

George Bullard:

Well, tell us a little bit about the background or the heritage of GraceChurch and how it came into existence.

Bill Crews:

Well, we just celebrated 15 years, actually. November was our 15th year celebration, and they actually started in the basement of Kilbourne Park Baptist Church.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

But interesting thing is, it wasn't just... When you think about, "Oh, they started in the basement. Well, it was just people that wanted a contemporary service after contemporary music."

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

But I always knew that that wasn't it, and it really became real to me at our 15 year celebration. I had one of the founding members share with our church kind of as a history, and she would have been in her mid 40s when all this took place. But it was very raw, what she talked about, and ultimately it was a restlessness. And so I really got a vivid picture of it was just restless that God had more planned and so just a group of people came out of that church. Also I learned, they had no idea what God was calling them to. I think they thought they would end up being like a suburban church, starting somewhere, and he put them in the middle of almost inner city Columbia.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah. Yeah.

Bill Crews:

And the neat thing about it too, as I think about it, it's the timing, but also the process so mirrored my own call to ministry. Really almost parallel timings of when first God started calling me into ministry. It was about the time that he started calling this group of people out of where they were.

Chris Reinolds:

That's pretty cool.

Bill Crews:

And so it's kind of a neat parallel path.

Chris Reinolds:

It's kind of like God's got this master plan that we can't see.

George Bullard:

That's right.

Bill Crews:

Yeah.

Chris Reinolds:

Now one of the emphasis that y'all's church has been involved in is heavy, heavy on evangelism and sharing the gospel and engaging people with the gospel. And y'all joined up recently with a pilot program that's just recently launched here in the Columbia Metro area called Saturate. What does that look like? How was that playing out at y'all's church? How are y'all utilizing those resources and that pilot program?

Bill Crews:

The neat thing about it is it's not really an evangelism strategy.

Chris Reinolds:

Yes.

Bill Crews:

I think, George, you were the one who asked, "Hey, would y'all be interested? Who would be interested in more evangelism training?" I don't think anybody raised their hands.

George Bullard:

Sure.

Bill Crews:

But would we be interested in something else? And so that kind of caught our eye. And ultimately it was, I think we spent a day and a half at the convention office. The neat thing about is, it's tailored for us and where we were, and really what they did was, it wasn't a strategy they brought us, but they gave us resources, people, and ultimately what they did was ask the right questions because me especially, I love to think out loud and so if you asked me a question and get me talking, I'll come to the answer. And so it was they let us, and I guess ultimately we did come into it with some preconceived ideas, but they led us to where God was leading us. And you know, three churches did it together in the room at the same time as we worked through this, and we kind of came to three different ideas on what that strategy would look like.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

And for us, and maybe it's just because this is where my heart is, but it was heavy in disciple-making, which ultimately the first step of disciple-making is evangelism.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

And then the neat thing about it as we're going through it and as we've come up with some goals and we're working through it, they, and this is Lee Clamp's team, and they were all fantastic. But as going forward, Stephen Splawn has become kind of our contact person, and it's neat for me because Stephen, like me, was called out of the workplace into ministry and so we really hit it off. He's been fantastic in helping us through it. It's kind of a, they didn't come to us with a strategy, they just came with us for resources to help us get where we were going.

Chris Reinolds:

That's good.

George Bullard:

Well you know, to put this Saturate evangelism pilot in context, Bill, would you share just a little bit about the characteristics of GraceChurch and the community where you serve so that our listeners would understand how you're doing this pilot in that context?

Bill Crews:

I remember driving into Columbia the day we moved here and in the U-haul truck, and I looked over the city. You know when you make that turn from 26 out onto 77 and you can see the city there?

George Bullard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chris Reinolds:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bill Crews:

And then I was thinking, God, this is exactly what I always prayed for, which was just a corner.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

I never really wanted to be in an urban downtown setting, didn't want to really be rural setting in Northeast Florida. But we've been to that part, but it was the corner of a city. And ultimately that's what we are is where we are, we're in the... I think we advertise ourselves as Forest Acres because it kind of sounds sexy. That's the nice part of Columbia. But we're kind of uniquely situated between old Forest Acres and the Pinehurst community, for example. We minister in Bradley Elementary, which is, I guess they're a Title I school, and so within a half mile radius of our church is generational poverty and old Columbia money, all within a half mile radius.

Bill Crews:

And so when we ran our numbers for our demographics, I really couldn't go more than a half a mile because anything beyond that was just too big and too diverse. And so all of that diversity within a half a mile radius.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

But even in that, because of the way we started as a church, we have people that live all over Columbia. We have folks in Irmo and outside of the 77 beltline, and that part makes it a little difficult, and there are some of us who live right there in the community. It took us nine months to buy a house because we wanted to live there in the community and I like to walk home for lunch, so that's kind of great.

Chris Reinolds:

It's good.

Bill Crews:

But that's the context where we are, and it's just an amazing diverse setting of opportunity.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

If that's the way you say it.

George Bullard:

Tell me about the demographics within the congregation. Who currently is GraceChurch?

Bill Crews:

Well, now I just got convicted by something Dante Lewis said of, "Are we really seeking diversity, or are we just seeking assimilation?" So oh, that hurt a little bit. We're pretty diverse in our attendance. Probably 30-40% African American. One of our partnerships as a church is with Oliver Gospel Mission. So we will have anywhere from 10 to 15 guys from the Mission will come in on a Sunday. It's part of their part in the recovery program part of Oliver Gospel Mission. They're able to come in for our worship service. A lot of the guys plug into our church and do things. They'll come help us when we do community events.

Bill Crews:

We also have a partnership with the team leader at Cru at USC. She's a member of our church, and so a neat part about, I think where George's question was going, she brought in a good many freshman girls was her Bible study, and she'll walk with the same age group through college. So we had three or four of those girls came in, so we had predominantly white freshman girls from USC. We had predominantly African American men from the Oliver Gospel Mission recovery program. And that was the bulk of our church softball team.

George Bullard:

How about that?

Bill Crews:

Now if that's not a picture of who we want to be as a church, I can't think of a better one.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

George Bullard:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

I use that example all the time of, "Okay, this is who Grace is." Because you won't find a more diverse team in the softball league.

Chris Reinolds:

Right. Well with the resources that Saturate has provided you guys, as y'all say, helped clarify your evangelism call and your discipleship call as a church body, what are some flesh and blood stories of how you've seen these things at work in y'all's context?

Bill Crews:

Okay. Can I give you the non-spiritual answer first?

Chris Reinolds:

Sure.

Bill Crews:

Okay. Because the non-spiritual answer is...part of what we did with that program was we came up with three goals that were measurable and achievable and that we could put meat around. They helped us develop the skeleton to it. So on the one hand, it helps me show our church, "Okay, we've got some goals," and so, "Oh, this guy knows what he's doing. We've got goals. That's good, right?" But, I also am somewhat using it as leverage, if you will, because we've started the year going through a series just called Rhythms. You know, the way of Jesus and spiritual disciplines. I'm sure I didn't say it. Most of what I say I heard from somebody else, but I couldn't get away from this phrase that, "Unless we are pursuing God in our private lives, we will never make disciples." And so I used that. I said, "Church, if we're not pursuing God in our private lives, we will never make disciples and we'll never meet these goals."

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

George Bullard:

Right. That's great.

Bill Crews:

And so we're using that as we go through the aspect of spiritual disciplines, and ultimately that comes back to you’ve got to trust God. You’ve got to focus on the deep and trust God with the wide.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

George Bullard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bill Crews:

And so that's where we're trying to start now. Of course the dynamic is well, if you read the goals, they're really disciple-making heavy. But again, you can't disciple someone unless you're evangelistic, and so one of them is focusing on getting people in disciple-making groups. Well, that's where you hold each other accountable to share your faith.

George Bullard:

Right, exactly.

Bill Crews:

Who are you praying for? Who, specifically are you praying for? One of them is on neighboring and being neighbors in our community. And so that, in and of itself is evangelistic. Sustainable relationships. So that's kind of the gist of where we're going with it.

Chris Reinolds:

That's good.

George Bullard:

Well I know this pilot has really just officially kicked off in January, and here we are talking together the 20th of February, and so it's just beginning to happen,

Bill Crews:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

George Bullard:

In terms of the kinds of things... How do you feel like your congregation, your lay leaders, are accepting this challenge to be more intentional about our prime directive of helping people come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and savior and to be baptized?

Bill Crews:

Well, one of the things they're doing as part of it, not just with our goals that we have and helping us stay on track to implement them, but they're also, we got this big thing on the wall in my office where we're tracking gospel conversations.

George Bullard:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Chris Reinolds:

Ah.

Bill Crews:

How many people are you praying for specifically and how many gospel conversations have you had. So they're helping us keep it in front of us, if you will. But then the other thing we will do, like I had a meeting just last week with two of our teams, one is our care team that kind of cares for the congregation itself and then we have our missions and outreach team, and met with them together, and I was like, what are we doing to help our people develop sustainable relationships with people? Because we can have events and we've had some great events and they provide great fellowship for the church and they provide great outreach and really service for the community and outside, but we need to just see those as what they are for the way we do them. So unless we're going to change the way we do them and add to it, they're just serving and letting the community know we love them. What can we do to help our people develop sustainable relationships with people such that they can share the gospel?

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

Everybody's afraid of acquaintance sharing of the gospel, I think, but the more we have a sustainable relationship, earn the right if you will, not that we need the right, but I think that goes a long way. To share the gospel, it takes a sustainable relationships.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

So that's... And I heard somebody else say, again, "It's time to stop encouraging our people and start equipping them."

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

And so one of the big things we're going to do that we're scheduling, and that's the other part of this pilot project is, you get some resources you may not normally get, is on how to be a neighbor. How do we be good neighbors and what are things we can do in our neighborhoods? And oddly enough, my wife and I did it where we live. There were some folks from another church actually live on both ends of our street and we kind of live in the middle. We did a thing over Christmas where we just kind of set up outside in all three houses and encouraged our neighborhood to just walk the street and get to know each other.

George Bullard:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

And I think we met 30-something people on our street that we did not know, that we had not met before.

Chris Reinolds:

That's incredible.

Bill Crews:

And of course I kicked myself because that's exactly what we're talking about. Now, the goal is then to do that with follow up, with specific names so we can pray specifically for specific people. And so we'll do better next time. I didn't let them in on it, but I'm going to, because we're actually having dinner with one of the couples in another week or so to kind of plan the next event.

Chris Reinolds:

Okay, that's good.

Bill Crews:

And at that point, I'm going to say, so you don't mind if I co-op this for my church, right? Because this is specifically what we're trying to get our church to do.

George Bullard:

Right.

Chris Reinolds:

That's good.

George Bullard:

Sure, sure.

Bill Crews:

And so I'm going to use it as a pilot, if you will, for our church in what we want them to do in their neighborhoods.

George Bullard:

That's good. So there are pastors out there that are struggling with the same thing that you guys have struggled with and are walking through. If you could give any encouragement to those pastors or to those churches, what would you say to them? How would you encourage them?

Bill Crews:

I guess I would go back to the focus on the deep and trust Jesus with the wide.

George Bullard:

Okay.

Bill Crews:

Because again, if people, because I think people are starving for more of God.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

And if they aren't pursuing God in their private lives, they're never going to share their faith.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

Because ultimately now, because some people may hear that and, "Oh, that sounds awful internally focused." Well, you know it is. It is internally focused, but you can't focus, you can't go deep with God and not go. You trust him and one of the things that I like to tell our folks is, "We don't want a church where we just attend and serve. We want a church where we abide and go."

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

George Bullard:

I like that.

Bill Crews:

And so if you trust Jesus with the deep, he'll take care of you. If you go deep with him, he'll take care of the wide.

Chris Reinolds:

That's good. That's good.

Bill Crews:

Abide and go. That's what you got to do.

Chris Reinolds:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

George Bullard:

Well, you know, we must admit, even in our religious culture, we sometimes are success oriented, but I guess it's okay to ask success questions for measuring because it's more than even being faithful. Yes, we ought to be faithful to the gospel, but we also ought to have strategies that are effective and that innovatively help us connect with people in a sustainable way like you're talking about. So I'm wondering, how are you, as pastor of GraceChurch, how is GraceChurch going to define success in terms of this Saturate Evangelism pilot?

Bill Crews:

Well, when they approached us, because you have to talk in terms of something, and so we talked in terms of baptisms. Then the more we talked to Lee and his team, we really kind of, you can be more specific though, of gospel conversations, and so we track both. Not just baptisms, but... The other thing too they taught us to look at to know how effective you're being is what led to the baptism? Was it just a pastor sharing with somebody? Was it VBS? Is it a family generated? We just baptized two twin girls. Well, they came up in a family that loves Jesus, and so that was part of the thing I keep challenging our people with, "Okay, what are we doing to create opportunities?"

George Bullard:

Sure.

Bill Crews:

That some of our baptisms are relationship, the result of relationships and not just people that... Because we also baptized two ladies because their kids came to VBS. But we want to start to see baptisms that come from relationships and people having gospel conversations. We want to spend more time tracking gospel conversations and not just baptisms. Baptisms are easy to track, but gospel conversations cause you to do a little more work and be a little more intentional.

George Bullard:

Right.

Bill Crews:

And start by praying.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

George Bullard:

Well, part of what I hear you saying is, you're hoping for a cultural change within your church to where it's more of a natural thing to focus on gospel conversations that come out of sustainable relationships that you're creating, and to pray specifically by names for people.

Bill Crews:

Yes, right. And I mean that's an initiative within the whole Southern Baptist Convention is “Who's my one,” right?

George Bullard:

Right.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

Bill Crews:

But for whatever, it sounds simple and it sounds kind of like, well duh, but how many of us really do that? Pray specifically for people by name.

Chris Reinolds:

Yeah.

George Bullard:

Well you know it's interesting, the church that I happen to be a member of is also one of the three churches in the pilot, and one of the things that we're working on in our church is to get our Sunday school classes, which we now call life groups, to reorganize their weekly prayer list and have at the top of their prayer lists a category for people who are far from God because most all of the prayer list of the life groups are about people who are sick or mourning or going through some kind of life transition. And what greater life transition is there than being far from God and becoming close to God?

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

George Bullard:

And it's a new... It's a calf looking at a new gate, if I could use that cultural expression. And so it's not like it's just revolutionarily happening overnight, but we're trying. What are some of the faint signals from the edge that you're beginning to feel in Grace that the people are responding to what the initiative is trying to do?

Bill Crews:

Well, and on your point, kind of the way we learned it from Lee's team was, they even helped us be a little more specific with it. It's pray for three, care for two. Look for opportunities to impact two people. And then share hope with one.

George Bullard:

Right.

Bill Crews:

So that's the mindset we're starting to do, and it's really... I'm starting to get people to understand who their neighbor is, because one of the things is, we talked about one of the goals was being a neighbor to pray for three, share for two, share hope with one. Who is my neighbor? That's the question that goes with that goal because your neighbor may not be the one, and I've had people come to me and say, "Well, I don't necessarily live in a place where..." I had one lady, a single lady living by herself.

Chris Reinolds:

Right.

Bill Crews:

And so I'm not necessarily going to open my home to my neighborhood, but I work in an office where I've got three or four ladies that we periodically do lunch together or do whatever together, and we're starting to do these things together. So in a lot of ways, it's the light bulb was starting to go off that we're starting to ask, "Well, who really is my neighbor?" Because that’s where the opportunities are.

George Bullard:

Right.

Bill Crews:

It's who's in your circles, and how many circles do we have? How many opportunities do we have of who is my neighbor? Seemed like somebody said that one time.

George Bullard:

It does seem like that.

Chris Reinolds:

Well that's good. That's good. Well Bill, I can't tell you how much we are grateful that you have joined us today, and we really appreciate what you guys are doing there at GraceChurch.

Bill Crews:

All right, thank you.

Chris Reinolds:

And we're excited about the future.

Bill Crews:

Thank you for what you're doing. This is great.

George Bullard:

All right, blessings to you.

Chris Reinolds:

That was good. Good.

Bill Crews:

All right, thank you.

George Bullard:

Appreciate it, brother.

Chris Reinolds:

And to all of our listeners, thank you for joining with us, and please be sure to check out the show notes for more detailed information about today's show. Also, if you found this podcast helpful for you and your ministry, share it with others so we can get the word out about what God is doing. Until next time, from all of us at the Columbia Metro Connection, we thank you for listening and urge you to share this podcast with everyone you know. It's the good news about the Good News in the Columbia Metro Baptist association.