

Church should bring about transformation, speakers tell CBF

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By Carrie McGuffin and Aaron Weaver

DALLAS—The church should flex its muscle to bring about transformation, not to sustain power or cling to the past, a Tennessee pastor told the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly in Dallas.

“The western church has been losing muscle every year,” said Wade Bibb, senior pastor of Central Baptist Church of Bearden in Knoxville, Tenn.

“And we’ve been flexing the muscle that we have in the wrong way for the wrong reasons. We’ve been flexing the muscle to sustain power. We’ve been flexing the muscle to hang on to the past. We are flexing the muscle and substituting the mystery for the controllable.”

Bibb cited the New Testament passage in Acts 2: 42-47, in which a sense of awe came over all God’s people, all believers were united and “the Lord added daily to the ones being saved.”

“I’m tired of this passage,” Bibb said. “This is what we’re supposed to be like, and I feel like my whole life—that’s Eden. I’ve been thrown out and I can’t find my way back.”

This vision of Eden, Bibb suggested, may not actually be the goal. The early church could hold it together with this model for only two chapters. Then the church encountered unexpected questions, even internal ones—questions of ethnicity, difference, and the influence of wealth, power

and control. These questions are the ones that continue to plague the church today, he insisted.

“Our church has been learning to flex some of our old muscles in new ways and new muscles in sore ways,” he said.

‘It’s not easy being the church’

This muscle-flexing at Central Baptist Bearden takes the form of ministries such as free trauma counseling for women, haircuts ministry for people experiencing homelessness, a citizenship class on a weekday evening, a day to celebrate and pamper Hispanic women in the community, English-as-a-Second-Language classes with multiple options and providing salary for the teachers at a Baptist School in Haiti that serves 1,000 children each day.

It also includes Central Bearden Ministry Center, which houses Between Jobs, Fish, Love Packages Literature Ministry, KIN—Knoxville International Network, Operation Inasmuch, Samaritan Ministry, Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Project Gabriel.

“No, it’s not easy being the church,” Bibb said. “All of (these ministries)—none of it came from me. All of this came from members who were praying and discerned that they needed to be the answer to their own prayers.”

Central Bearden now is in the process of thinking through broader partnerships.

“Part of our game plan is getting us to learn the importance of participating and working with other churches,” Bibb said. “So, why don’t you join us, let us join you, and let us flex some tired muscles in the right way for the right reasons.”

‘Beloved community’ foundation of Macedonian ministry

CBF field personnel Alicia and Jeff Lee told the general assembly about their ministry in Skopje, Macedonia, where they engage in relational, holistic and healing ministries among refugees, the disabled and other marginalized groups.



Alicia and Jeff Lee speak to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly in Dallas. (CBF Photo)

The Lees described their work with the Food Bank of Macedonia to help confront the challenge of hunger and severe food insecurity with emergency food relief, opening an office and modest warehouse for the food bank. The Lees have helped to distribute almost 10 tons of food with the support from CBF churches.

“One of the defining aspects of the culture and life in Macedonia is how everything centers around relationships,” Alicia Lee said. “Beloved

community is the foundation of ministry in Macedonia. It is only through relationships with incredible people, passionate about helping the people of their community that we have been able to develop a ministry in Macedonia.”

She spoke about their involvement with Poraka, a group home for adults with developmental disabilities.

“Poraka is a place of love and compassion,” she said.

Jeff Lee teaches English and Alicia provides therapeutic activities to residents—ministry made possible because of the support of Cooperative Baptists.

“Your support has made it possible for them to raise chickens and goats; giving them meaningful work to do and provide for their needs,” Alicia Lee told the assembly. “For us, Poraka is a little glimpse of heaven, and it is one of our favorite places to be in Macedonia.”

“Poraka is beloved community, and it is transforming lives,” she said.

The Lees also are working to transform communities in northwest Macedonia through sustainable farming, economic empowerment and cow banking.

“We are deeply grateful to local partners we have in Macedonia,” Jeff said. “They know and we know that the work in Macedonia wouldn’t be possible without you.

“You have allowed beautiful friendship to transform into powerful partnerships. Your support has cultivated beloved community and thanks to you, families now have enough food to eat, isolated and marginalized people now have a home and a community, farmers and farms are flourishing, and the needs of the Global Church in rural Macedonia are

being met. You are transforming Macedonia one relationship at a time."