

On a regular basis I am asked, "How did Collaboration Project get started?" and the answer to that question is one of my favorite stories to tell. Here is that story; my hope that it is a witness to the Spirit at work. How Collaboration Project started is entwined with my personal story and that of countless others who have longed for greater unity and community transformation in and through the local church in Dane County.

In the late '90s, I was an undergrad at UW-Madison involved with the youth ministry at Blackhawk Church. As I got more involved, I had the opportunity to join the youth ministry staff as an intern. I said yes for the holy reason of having the opportunity to get paid a little for the work I was already doing with students and I really enjoyed the ministry. This was the start of 14 years as Blackhawk's Middle School Pastor. It was one of the programs we launched during those years of working with middle school students that laid the foundation for Collaboration Project.

In the early 2000s, our ministry was asking the question, "how might we take the best of short-term missions(which were all the rage) and apply it to our local context?" The goal was to make it easier for all to access and set up the possibility of ongoing relationships (social media didn't exist yet in the same way it does today). Out of these conversations came a week-long, summer service-based youth camp called Madison Missions. After an inauspicious first couple of years, Madison Missions grew into a foundational part of the ministry. Key to making this six-day experience work was local non-profits willing to let 12-14-year-old students come into their organization to "help." This gave me and others on our team a chance to get to know dozens of non-profits every summer. We stood with students pulling weeds at local pantry gardens, folded donated clothing at various donation centers, played bingo at retirement homes, handed out lunches to the unhoused in our urban center, and much more.

Thanks to Madison Missions, I began to see a different side of our city that far too many residents had long known well. Madison is often on the top 10 lists of best places to live but tragically is not the case for many communities of color. Increasingly I wanted to find a way to work within a local church where my job was helping the entire congregation seek the flourishing of all people in our city as an expression of God's infinite love and experiencing the goodness of the gospel.

That very opportunity became available and I joined the staff as the Pastor of Community Development at a large church on the east side of Madison. My job was to help move congregants into relational service with the most vulnerable in our community and with our National/Global partners. During my first year, I began brainstorming with my co-worker Karrah and a small group of volunteers about how we

might offer our volunteers a space to learn about Biblical justice and dream together about what it might look like lived out in our community. Out of those conversations came the Kingdom Justice Summit, a one-day conference focused on Biblical justice and local application.

The initial response to the Kingdom Justice Summit prompted our team to consider other ways we could bring the Church together to love our city. It also started us down the road of wondering where we might find common ground within the diverse body of Dane County churches for the common good.

At the same time, I was encouraged by the stories of other collaborative church movements for the good of the city happening around the country. Knowing my interest in these city movements, a generous individual offered to send me and two others to a City Gospel Movement gathering in D.C. This was an invite-only event and now I just chuckle at our audacity for inviting ourselves. The room was filled with people from all over the world and I think the smallest city represented was 1.5 million and then there was our group from Madison with a population of around 270,000.

During breaks, meals and late nights while in D.C., Collaboration Project started to come together. The three of us, Karrah, Aisha and me, began to dream about what it would look like for the Church of Dane County to come together for the good of our community and the glory of God. What would it look like for all people to flourish? What story might churches tell if we were united for the good of our city?

Then in March 2019, I found out that my job had been eliminated at the church. This news was totally unexpected and the process was hard and messy. One of many graces from this time is that the experience helped me be more empathetic and for that I am grateful.

As our family considered what was next, we prayed, confided with close friends and family, and sensed that working to fully launch Collaboration Project was the right thing to do. In fact, I don't know quite how to put it into words but I have never felt a clearer sense that this was the right thing to do even if it wasn't the thing that made the most logical sense.

And so in May 2019, another small team came together to flush out the mission, vision, ministry plan, and programming that has led to what is now Collaboration Project. We exist to foster collaboration between Dane County churches for the good of the community. Our dream is that one day the Church will be unified in transformational love

to the glory of God and flourishing of all people. As I look back it is clear that the Spirit of God was at work and that truth makes it exciting to dream about what the future holds.

I am deeply grateful to the many people who have poured their passion and talents into serving others. Thank you, John, for that first internship. Thank you to Amanda, Julie, Linda, Kristen, Katie and Brianna for shaping Madison Missions. Thanks to Karrah, Paul, Aisha and Mary for making the Kingdom Justice Summit happen and for the hours of paperwork, applications and late night conversations and thank you Scott for the trip to D.C. that created space to dream. #soallmayflourish