



**[ This month we have a guest post from Jon Berestecky about his family's experience visiting BCC for a weekend and making the decision to move to Chattanooga to become urban missionaries. Thanks Jon! ]**

If you Google Racial Reconciliation Chattanooga the first site listed belongs to Bridge City Community Church. *But who would do that?*

Better question: why would anyone all the way in Fort Worth, Texas punch that line into the search bar? There is a long version and an even longer version to

this story. Perhaps I'll land somewhere in between. Let me start by introducing myself and my family. We are the Beresteckys. I'm Jonathan, my wise and beautiful wife is Sarah, and our three kids are Sophia (6), Elijah (5) and Willow (3). Sarah and I met while working for the Boys and Girls club in Arlington, TX shooting pool and playing basketball with kids living in a small income-based apartment complex. A lot of those kids had recently moved into that neighborhood, displaced from their hometowns by hurricane Katrina. Some of the kids were refugees, still with thick accents. We were in college, and in love, and just starting to dream about a future together.

We sensed that God was calling us to participate in what He was doing in neighborhoods just like the one where we had been working. That was 10 years ago. I wish I can say that in the years which immediately followed we found ourselves caught up in the sweep of God's glorious call on our lives. Yea- not so much. Instead we found ourselves caught up in the sweep of our abundant dysfunction. Let me throw at you some headlines from those foundational years... **JONATHAN HAS THE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE OF A TREE STUMP. SARAH IS DEPRESSED AND DOESNT KNOW WHY. SARAH THROWS SHOES AT JONATHAN - HE DESERVES IT. CALLED TO MINISTRY BUT FLUNKS THE ONE SEMINARY COURSE HE ATTEMPTS.** I hope all that encourages some newlyweds out there! Still we sensed this nudging of God, a longing to see holistic transformation come to communities like the one where Sarah and I met: neighborhoods with underperforming schools, low property values and high unemployment rates. Neighborhoods frequented by social workers and probation officers. We struggled more and more as God was making clear his intentions for our lives while we were working to build relationships with folks from neighborhoods like the ones described and reading books about issues affecting these communities.

At the time, I was working as a probation officer. We attended a mostly white,

middle class, evangelical church but found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the two worlds. A hard question began to bang away in our hearts: why in the world are we venturing to bring the Gospel across oceans to peoples living in different countries, while making so little effort to traverse the economic and racial divides that have existed our cities and nation for so many years? We heard often of the call to care for the orphan and the widow, but we knew God was looking just as intently on the stressed out single mother smoking weed to cope... on that grand mama raising up a second round of youngsters... on lost boys and girls who had no memory of a father's love. I know we meant well, but it seemed like the only time our church got involved with folks like these was when we were handing out gifts to them at Christmas time. Where was the Beloved Community? How had the churches in America become so fragmented, so segregated by race and class. Had the radical Gospel story really taken so little ground in our hearts?

We have friends moving to Chattanooga this summer. A few months ago, while my wife and I were discussing what God might have next for us, we started talking about those friends, and we asked the question, "I wonder what God's up to in Chattanooga?" Naturally, we took to Google (*um, I mean, we prayed... yea*). To her credit, my wife is the one who first discovered Bridge City Community. I sent an email to the pastor, Josh Woodrow, and about a month later we were making the 15 hour trip from Fort Worth with a 6 and 4 year old in tow. After a few days we left Chattanooga to head back to Fort Worth on Martin Luther King day - a fitting capstone to the trip. Josh asked me to write a post about our experience for his blog; my first thought was, "**Lord, don't let this sound like a Yelp review of the church.**" So let me share a couple of our thoughts about Bridge City Community.

1. Pastor Josh and his wife Jenny have a pretty amazing ability to make folks feel welcome - at home... like family even.

2. The Sunday service is not the focal point of the ministry. I'm not knocking the preaching (*Josh can bring it*).

What I'm saying is that, from what I've seen, local churches in America have fallen way out of balance, dumping way too much time, energy and money into creating an *excellent* Sunday morning experience. Maybe church leaders are only responding to their constituent church members worn out from their week's pursuit of the American dream and cater to their need of filling and feeding. Spiritual consumers. Certainly leaders feel the crunch to keep the church doors open and the staff paid, so they are compelled to create a quality product that can hold its own in the spiritual marketplace. Bridge City seems to take another approach - it's had to.

Driven by a commitment - a call - to a specific people in a specific place (Alton Park), the focus has been on learning the rhythms of life of the community so that the Gospel can be presented with relevance (throughout the week, not just on Sundays). These may just sound like missional buzzwords, but the truth is that Pastor Josh is a middle class white guy from California with a waxed mustache and a master's degree aiming to plant a church in a predominantly African American neighborhood known for gang activity and high poverty rates. Bottom line is that he, his family, and the launch team really all have had to LEARN the rhythms of life in Alton Park and gain credibility with its residents. This has meant everything from volunteering at the local elementary to befriending gang members. BCC is laboring not to create a vibrant church in the way many of us have come to think of it, but to create a vibrant family where folks learn to love and serve one another and to care deeply for their home in Alton Park.

As this happens I think the Sunday worship service starts to feel less like sitting at a restaurant, where emphasis is placed on presentation and experience ("Excellence"), and more like a family meal. People head into a restaurant

essentially disconnected from one another with the expectation that they will be served and catered to. Much of the time, all they have in common is that they have all chosen, for whatever reason, to sit and in eat in the same place. Rather, the family meal is the culmination of community life. Folks who have worked and learned and laughed together throughout the week come together to fill their bellies. Everyone chips in. Gifts are discovered. We get to figure out who makes the best spaghetti! (*or the worst spaghetti for that matter*). People have told us that we are "bridge people," that God has given us some knack for bringing together folks who live in different worlds. Jenny and Josh, and the entire Bridge City team have this quality. They embody the Gospel of reconciliation, and we are excited to get the chance to join with them and to be a part of what God is doing in Chattanooga.

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Follow the Berestecky's journey to Chattanooga and all other regular stories from the urban mission of BCC at [bridgecitycommunity.com/blog](http://bridgecitycommunity.com/blog)

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Subscribing to receive our monthly updates is the best way stay informed with what we are up to on the southside. Each month we will share stories about how God is reconciling lives in Chattanooga and how communities are being transformed.



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Our monthly newsletter is a great way to stay up to date with the efforts of Bridge City Community to act justly, love mercy, & walk humbly.

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