

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”
Part Thirty-seven
December 13, 2020 • Sunday Evening

In this Q&A Alton Hardy will be filling in for Bruce Stallings who is a part of our pastoral staff at Briarwood and continuing his recovery from COVID-19. Alton Hardy is the pastor of the Urban Hope Church in Fairfield, Alabama. I want to give a little background on him and then we'll be joined by two of his leadership team.

In place of the devotional I would like to quote Mark from the Bible where “Jesus went immediately to the next town” or “Jesus went immediately to the village.” In other words, when Jesus is fishing for men, the Gospel net goes to the fishing pools. The fishing pools are places where populations gather. The cities origin was out of rebellion to God and that can be checked out in the city of Babel. That's fine if that is what it originated to do but that means it then becomes an objective of Gospel ministries because that's where people gather and if they're in rebellion against God then then need to hear the Gospel. And we need to go to them with the truth of the Gospel.

One will see in the Acts that Paul went to 28 identifiable cities and some cities were where he planted a church from which churches were planted. Jesus says in evangelism that we are to go into the highways and byways to compel people to come into the Kingdom so we can see the strategies of the Apostles. Then we need to plant in the seats of the Kingdom to equip people to go into the highways and byways. How do you get to the county seats? You go to the larger city to reach the county seat, then to the villages, the towns and out to the rural areas. That is what is happening as the Gospel turns sinners right side up and that means it turns the world upside down in the book of Acts.

This is what we try to do with the church planting ministry at Briarwood. When we go to our own Jerusalem which is Birmingham then we want to be thoughtful and strategic. Due to God's kind providence Briarwood has been a part of a number of wonderful ministries and almost all of them are in the Fairfield area. There is Restoration Academy, Grace Home and various other initiatives. It's almost like we have all the spokes of the wheel but we don't have the hub. Briarwood is too far away from the hub but we could be a part of the hub being placed there, which is a local church and that's where God brought into our hearts the opportunity to meet Alton Hardy from Grand Rapids who loves the Lord so he could pursue the finishing up of theological education. Then through our presbytery and other churches as well we have been able to see what the Lord has done through his ministry there.

So I want to introduce Alton Hardy who is the pastor and church planter of this mission endeavor Urban Hope in Fairfield and then his compatriots. Noah Despinasse, not only works with Alton but he is also on staff with Briarwood as our Urban Missions Director. He helps get people connected and keeps us as a church building relationships with each other. They need financial resources, intercessory prayer but we also need relationships. Dion Watts is the director of outreach at Urban Hope.

There is a video that captures the wonderfully informed challenges of the heart of the Urban Hope missionary endeavor and church plant under the leadership of Alton and his team. If you'd like to see this video visit briarwood.org/urban.

Now we get to talk to the man himself, Alton Hardy, for you are the man that God has called to lead this endeavor. Some of our members are involved with Urban Hope in various ways and some have even moved to Fairfield to help you in various ways. I would like for you

to share with us why God brought you from Grand Rapids, what has He called you to do there in Fairfield and why.

Alton: We believe that when God called us into the Kingdom that He has an intentionality with that – purpose driven in a sense that we were born to complete a work. In my life in general, being born in service, with all the things the Lord has had for me to experience and come into my life, God just burdened my heart to come into ministry. When I first came into Reformed thinking it was different but for me it was meat on the bones. The biggest thing I love to talk about is the sovereignty of God. It has been a lifeline for me to help me understand my life, not from my perspective but from God's perspective. So I would say I was born for urban ministry. My life has been a part of that – experiencing poverty, fatherless, homelessness, you name it I experienced it. I have met God personally and met God in my circumstances and He has helped me make sense of it.

When I came to Birmingham God set me up. I was first introduced to Birmingham through Briarwood Presbyterian Church. Here I am eight years later and to think about what God has done! I think our inner cities need a robust Gospel, something that's not fluid that comes and goes with the times. There are all kinds of world views that are encroaching upon the church and what I love about the theology the Lord has brought me into is not always being shaped by the culture. It's been shaped by our Triune God. With that said we need churches like that who go into these hardened urban communities preaching a robust Gospel and I think for such a time as this God has brought Urban Hope Community Church. We don't try to take shortcuts. We have been very strategic by saying the family is foremost and the battleground where theology, the world views and God's blueprint for the family comes head to head. That has been my biggest desire and God has been doing that.

Harry: I know you tackle the work of the Gospel. Number one you get a right relationship with Christ, then you begin to disciple, next you highlight the need for a Godly marriage and Godly family. When I was growing up all of the horrors of the Jim Crow laws were despicable. I'm so grateful that they are being and have been dismantled and the further remanence of it but in the midst of that the one thing that was noteworthy is conversational. The African American family was rock solid in the 1950s. They weren't touchy feely dads because they didn't have time for that but it was more like – I'm going to love you, I'm going to put food on the table and I'm going to see to it that you're going to the best school I can get you into. Then came this destruction and I think there were a lot of well-motivated policies that were a part of that but now you're at the other end of it where there are some who don't even know about what the concept of a marriage is.

Alton: I would say that you have just hit it on the head. Our inner cities, especially the poor, marriage and the blue print of marriage from God's vantage point has totally been removed from our culture and our way of understanding. I would make the argument that some of the policies that came from the government whether it was intentionally or unintentionally, they still got what they intended and it came against what God has said to build family with, so it just disintegrated the family.

We just watched a video showing on Amazon Prime titled 'What killed Michael Brown' that deals with what goes on in the African American family. It will make you cry. It is a

documentary done by Shelby Steele. All the social pathologies we see in the urban industry are not just African American people but all of that comes directly from that family structure.

Harry: I want to come back to that but I thank the Lord He is already blessing your ministry and one of the blessings is pulling together a leadership team. Dion Watts is now a part of it and speaking of family, Dion, I hear you just got engaged to Alton's sister. Dion I would like for you to share a little bit of your background, what you do with Urban Hope and where you came from.

Dion: I am a native of Fairfield for I was born and raised there. I come from a single parent home. I didn't have the dynamic of a family structure. My family was not intact in the way we have been talking God made the family to be. So I am very aware of the issues just from my own personal experience and where I grew up.

I am at Urban Hope because I am the director of outreach now. That was a long journey for that is just a new position that I have been placed in. I had served in the position of controller where I handled all the accounting as well and that was due to some of my background but because of the way that I grew up, as the Lord saved me and brought me out of that, He really put on my heart a burden for young men who came from similar situations I came from. That is where the Lord has really put a desire and foundation in me to serve in that context.

When Pastor Alton came along and shared his vision I connected with him immediately because I knew that God was calling me to be a part of a greater work that was going on in the city of Fairfield so that's why I'm here.

Harry: That's great! Dion, are you taking any theological classes right now?

Dion: Yes, I am a student here at Birmingham Theological Seminary (BTS). I'm getting trained up and I'll leave my favorite teacher unnamed (smile).

Harry: Many know Noah and his wife and I will let him share in just a moment. Noah is also working on his theological degree. Noah is the director of urban ministries here at Briarwood Presbyterian Church and works very closely with multiple ministries that Briarwood is engaged in, in the Birmingham area and beyond, but he spends a lot of time interfacing with Alton Hardy's leadership team and Urban Hope Community Church. So Noah I'd like for you to tell people a little bit about yourself and what you are doing.

Noah: I have the responsibility of championing urban ministry here at Briarwood, helping galvanized individuals who are interested or have a heart for church planting and other ministries here in Birmingham or Fairfield that we're a part of, which is restoring the community, helping people who come from broken families, challenged situations and who are considered to be the marginalized in our community. There is a lot of this going on here in Birmingham so Briarwood has a commitment to seeing Birmingham be restored in a Gospel way through a Biblical perspective.

In my role as director I am connecting people here with people in Fairfield for Godly relationships, ministry opportunities and I have been in this position coming on three years now. I try to communicate to others that I don't want it to be a one size fits all approach ministry. Engaging with Briarwood members I love to learn about who they are and what they are gifted in. God has created us all and He has given us different things that interest us and that we're

gifted in so some of that plays itself out in our careers or in other things. When you are talking about ministry in a community that you may not be familiar with, particularly in Fairfield there are a lot of different ways you can help out. There are avenues there for ministry opportunities through Restoration Academy, Grace House, the Aspire Movement, Hope Health Center and Foundations. We thank God for all those ministries.

I've also seen God use people in their individual careers or their gifts and skill sets to be able to connect resources. For instance, if you're a business owner then you can partner with Alton or Dion to help a man get a job. Or if you are a lawyer and you are able to advocate for someone who has some legal issues, that's another way to connect and help out. Whatever God has gifted you with I want others to know that because your particular gifts can be a resource and be helpful in the work that is happening in our communities. I love the pleasure and the honor that I get to help in this way through this position.

I'm also big on equipping our members here at Briarwood as well. I think there are a lot of people who have good intentions when it comes to wanting to be in ministry but may not know all the facts and details so I really love recommending certain books and sitting down with people to help them process what's happening in our community and the best way to go about resolving some of that.

Harry: One of the things that has blessed us is that Noah has built relationships throughout our church and one of the reasons he was able to do that is that he is a product of the Briarwood Fellows Ministry. So while he was a part of that ministry he was able to build relationships and then know a lot of people who have been involved. Miss Lois who started Grace Home ministry has gone home to be with the Lord but now there are so many others involved in that ministry that keeps it going. There are multiple ways people can get involved as Noah pointed out some of those ministries but I really want you to hear this manner of the Urban Hope Church because that's the hub. It's wonderful to have the spokes but when those ministries are doing what they are doing there needs to be pastoral resources in a Godly church in the community that is solid theologically and philosophically in ministry. Secondly, those places are the ministries where those people reach to be brought to the church so they can be disciplined, shepherded and developed. Para church ministries are wonderful but they are just that 'para church' and the church is what God's intention is for Jesus loved the church and bought it with His blood, fills the church with His Spirit and gives us our mission to go and make disciples which now brings me back to Alton.

Alton, I know we as pastors are visionaries and causes our elders heartburn, but it's like the old good to great, the hedgehog principle – to be effective you have to know what that one thing is that you stay focused on and becomes a fixed point. If there was one thing you know to do or be committed to, but I know it's not the only thing you will do in ministry, with the anticipation of what? That is what I'd like for you to answer. When you get up every morning what makes the alarm clock turn into an opportunity clock for you to get done as a church pastor of Urban Hope Community Church? Then as you do that what is the anticipation of things that you want to come from that?

Alton: That's a great question. I am daily moved and burdened by the reality of first of all we're celebrating Advent and that story of Advent is not a fantasy. That is a real story which changes and transforms lives. The heart of God coming into the world as a human, therefore in the community where I live where people have bought into a lie that they somehow can't achieve or

be what God has called them to be and we say they are taking home the beliefs of the Egyptians. Our mission and vision of Urban Hope is coming out of Egypt into the Promised Land. I am moved and motivated by the fact God is real and therefore He still has a long time to break the victim mentality out of my mind. So I wake up every day in Fairfield telling young followers no matter who they are that this Jesus who was born of a virgin is the real deal. Come to Him. Run to Him. It doesn't matter what anyone else says and stop believing you can't be something of what God has called you to do. All over these urban communities people have bought into a lie so I'm moved by getting young men from all over this area where you see fatherless communities and all where it's been happening for so long they wonder if God can even do anything and yes He can but it comes back to the reality of do I believe that He can and that is what I'm moved by. I'm trying to inspire others through the Gospel and this is why it is important for the church.

I came from a para church where I get it and understand it but what makes a church important is that we preach God's Word because there is power from God that comes through the preaching and teaching of God's Word. I Corinthians 1:20-21 says *[20] Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? [21] For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.* Sinners are made alive by the working of the Holy Spirit and I think in many ways what we have done to the inner cities, is that we have tried to cherry our way for them to be transformed. There is nothing wrong with that but if we don't have preaching that proceeds the cherry, we will have what we have been getting for the last 40 to 50 years where we're not getting the transformation so this is why it's important for church planters to understand this. This is what Briarwood stands firm on when it comes to church planting.

People tend to ask me 'why are you getting all these young men married?' That's a messy message.

Harry: Where they are is countercultural. It's Biblical culture when you're starting to live out the Great Commission to break free from that.

Alton: What I have learned and understand is that there are all kinds of gospels in Fairfield as Paul says in Galatians – there are many different gospels (Galatians 1). I'm not talking about that gospel, but the Gospel that takes dead men and makes them alive that transforms them and makes them overcomers.

Harry: I'm ready to 'Amen!' I love the verse Acts 17:6 which says *[6] And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."* I like to make the point here that they didn't go out to turn the world upside down. They went to turn sinners right side up and that's what turns the world upside down because everything starts changing.

So Dion in your area of ministry what right now do you see as your biggest challenge which becomes your biggest opportunity as a Christian?

Dion: It's just pursuing young men.

Harry: Do you have some small groups that you are working with?

Dion: Yes, we work up at Fairfield High School, Miles College and some the other school systems or even some young men in the community that we know that live in Fairfield. I have some classmates I had in Fairfield that I reconnect with so I'm pursuing in ministry young men and trying to help them come to the realization that they need God and created by Him. I try to help them to see they need Him in order to understand why they are here, their purpose in life and as I pursue young men I want to be consistent in it because part of outreach is not just a onetime thing. It's a constant thing, following up over and over again, pursuing relationships like Jesus does with us. We constantly run from Him and He constantly comes after us. The pursuit and the consistency is probably the most difficult thing because you have to realize it has to be done over and over and over again. You have to preach the Gospel over and over and over again and hopefully eventually God's elect will hear it, come to that realization and be made alive. The pursuit is probably the most difficult part because it requires you to come outside of your comfort zone and be sacrificially living for others. Sometimes you have good weeks and sometimes you have bad weeks – good days and bad days – and realizing regardless of that God is with you in every pursuit of the lost.

Harry: Here is a young man who is in a church responding to the leadership of the church planter that was there and he was just sharing his ministry. One it is a Biblical ministry. Two it's Biblical priorities and three good theology was through everything he just said. He talked about how regeneration precedes faith and repentance. He talked about how faith and repentance reveals God's sovereign grace and all of those are built into everything he just shared. That good theology doesn't just happen. That comes because he is doing his job and what he is doing is going to show up in other young men's lives and that's how this gets done. It's called making disciples. You see the fruit of it like he shared.

So Noah what would you say as Urban director to our people that in addition to praying for this ministry, how they can get involved?

Noah: One is to make an effort to really understand what is happening in Urban Hope Community Church in the city of Fairfield. I like to recommend members at Briarwood to go visit services at Urban Hope, not to take away from Briarwood but they appreciate visitors so they can see some of the things going on there. They get to see a church plant operating in that community, hear the preaching being done and see God bringing people from the community into the church. That's a wonderful thing to be able to witness. Also I would encourage them to find ways to build authentic relationships that can lead to deep long lasting ministry. I do think people get excited about these projects and one day events that happen and those things are needed but if we're going to see long lasting transformation that goes beyond us and our lifetime we have to be committed to the lost. So finding ways to come alongside the leaders who are already there, not coming in with an agenda but wanting to learn from how things are working there. Ask the leadership there what is happening in their community, then share your heart and what you're gifted with and ask how you can serve them in what the Lord is already doing.

We are about the church so we want to help the church, stabilize the church and we know there are different ways we can do that especially in this season of Christmas we know the church needs help financially so that's another avenue where people can help and learn more about. This would be my message for now to our people as we continue to move forward and build relationships with Urban Hope Community Church.

Harry: I want to end with you Alton with a question you may not really want to answer due to the controversy but I do a radio program called Today in Perspective and one of the things I've had to deal with is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the Antifa movement. I would say absolutely that black lives matter, just like in Germany it would be okay for me to say Jewish lives matter for there is a time you can be very focused but the framework is that every life matters because we're made in the image of God. With that said BLM pushes back on that and then I say 'the Gospel is the answer' and then BLM says that 'Christianity is one of the problems and the church is not the answer and it rejects the notion that life is intrinsically valuable because God has so declared it by declaring us with dignity made in the image of God' so all that Christian world and life view is pushed out by BLM. But yet we see all of this unrest and everything. That's one of the reasons I'm glad guys like you Alton are there because your voice is a lot more persuasive than mine for multiple reasons so how do you take this on as an African American? Because if you don't salute to that you're going to get challenged and you know that so what do you say in response to it?

Alton: First of all, I stay Biblical. That is part of it and I have been pushed on that. I have lost a few people along the way on social media and probably will continue to lose people. This is why this is important for Urban Hope Community Church for such a time as this. In this message we have been preaching Ephesians 3:10 which says *[10] so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* The people of God need to join together – black and white – through the Gospel of grace through Jesus that has been given to us before time began but God is making it known now that we're joined together through the commonality of the Gospel. These world views that will continue to come for I don't think we've seen the last of it and I've seen BLM and that whole movement pretty much in any sense paralyze a lot of pastors. People are afraid. They don't know what to say, especially as it relates to race.

So I want to say what God has said. He has made all the humans. He also said we are all sinful and that's right out of the book of Romans. It doesn't matter what color your skin is. So let's start there. We all need a Savior. People, of course don't like that I start here and they know it's a movement that is not coming with a Biblical world and life view. So all my pastor friends are asking what to do – should I wear this t-shirt. I say we should wear a t-shirt that prints Genesis 1:26 which says *[26] Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."* Why can't we all get here? That is what I have stayed with. I've put it on my Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. I've been consistent to say what God has said about how we all got here – He made us in His image and likeness and we understand the fall of man.

Now, when you hang out at Urban Hope Community Church we have what we call Wake Up on Wednesday nights with all black men from every city. When we go around the room here is what you will hear and say, and if BLM people are in the room they probably wouldn't like it very much. One guy actually put it on Facebook and he spoke up for me and kind of said what we actually see. The issues that are facing black young men in these inner cities this is what the number one thing they'd say with tears coming down their face; I would be a better person if I had a dad. We want to make it more like that. We have the real screen shot from the website of what this guy put on the internet but they tried to take it down. Is that what we want in our communities? The young men we're meeting with don't have a dad.

I tell other pastors who want to know what to say to come interview these young men. We had some young men in our prayer revival in Fairfield share their stories. They basically said 'we need our dads' and that goes back to the church. When Jesus called us to go into these communities to preach the Gospel and help people repent of their sins, we didn't turn away from families who try to build families on their own blueprint, we come back to the blueprint of God and that's a part of their repentance. That is what a church needs to carry first in these communities and preach that in that engaged city and all over America. Therefore people get the opportunity to return back to the order of God as it relates to the family. So I say stay Biblical and just know you're not going to get any fanfare and that this too shall pass.

Harry: We have arrived at the end of our Q & A time so I want to finish up this way. I want to get back to Alton for one thing. In a sense those who are members are already involved since Urban Hope is a key element in our National Ministries conference and we're grateful for the eight years of partnership we have been able to do with them. We are grateful for those who have become a part of Urban Hope to assist in their ministry and the families from Briarwood who are connecting and supporting Urban Hope in various ways. If you are more interested in helping in this ministry Noah our Urban director at Briarwood is the man to call on this. He can help you explore where your gifts and passions could best help them for he loves to help you get equipped in this. Also probably the best way to get to Dion is through Noah and he can help to give ideas of what might be with discipleship and fellowship. If young men need dads then some of you could be spiritual dads in people's lives and be available. They need coaching and mentoring from those with a Christian world and life view.

Then I would say to please pray for this work. What you have just read was not only Biblical but courageous from Alton. We have no idea what he goes through. We think we have a hard time articulating that in this world but if you were in his shoes saying what he just said you would really feel the tallest nail getting hit on the head first on the plank. We need to pray for Urban Hope Community Church. It is different. There is no prosperity gospel there, or a therapy gospel or a social gospel there but there is a Gospel there that have Gospel words that lead to Gospel deeds through discipleship. We need to pray for insight, wisdom and courage for Alton and his leadership team at Urban Hope.

Alton is about to tell you an important way for you to get involved right now. A church is not a building but in a place like Fairfield to have an anchor, stability is key. They are trying to stabilize lives in the Gospel to have a stabilized presence. The Lord has opened up the door.

Alton: About two years ago we were able to get a building that was right across the street from Fairfield City Hall. It's called the old bargain town and we're right downtown in Fairfield. We're right across the street from Restoration Academy. God opened the door for us to get that building for \$27,000.

Harry: I have been in that building and \$27,000 is a great buy for that building in that location. There is definitely some work to be done on that building.

Alton: It ended up being a million and six to redo this building and that is with a very well-known construction company who is being very gracious with what they are doing to the building. We signed the contract with them today and we need about another million dollars over the next six months. We are starting next week on the renovations and we don't want to

start and stop but we want to keep going so that in about a month you will be able to see the entrance to Urban Hope. This will help us in our discipleship training and be able to do more of what God already has us doing. God has brought us to this place and this is the time, the moment that just feels right. So we are open to any way Briarwood members can help. You can contact us through our website at <https://urbanhopecc.com/>. This is going to be a collaborative work for there are a lot people working on this project. We are an urban ministry so we value to work with the urban poor. We are not going to leave the urban poor. That is where my heart is at and so we need resources to be able to get this building and therefore not be burden by it so we want to pay it off and have it done. This is so we can continue the work of discipling young men who are fatherless so we can get them married. Can Jesus Christ break the cycles? I believe He can.

Harry: If all else fails where it seems you can't get connected then call me and I'll get you connected. I love these guys and it's a great privilege to be in ministry with them. It's a great privilege to have them with me for you. I want to remind you of the five services we have at Briarwood Presbyterian Church on Christmas Eve – Candlelight Services at 3pm, 5pm, 7pm and Communion Services at 9pm and 11pm. Thanks for joining us and may the Lord bless you this Lord's Day. Stay safe but stay focused on Jesus. Isn't it wonderful to not only do a church on mission, on message and in ministry but to be engaged the extension of it with church planting and church revitalization in general and the urban community in particular and Urban Hope specifically?

Please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and Lord willing we'll answer them in upcoming Q&A times. It's been great to be with you. Praise the Lord.