

## Why Are You Limping? How a Simple Tool Can Help a Community Find Out

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by Ellen Hanusa Wonderlin

Some of the African American faith leaders who gather this night at the Neighborhood Health Initiative (NHI) at 16<sup>th</sup> & Jefferson describe themselves as part of Des Moines' senior crowd. They look back through time and see the vast changes that have taken place in their old stomping grounds. Streets that once carried on to the next block now abruptly end with concrete barriers.

Houses and school yards have emptied, been boarded up and ripped into. Even popular nighttime haunts where music and laughter intertwined and burned hot have come and gone. But what stood then and remain now are the houses of worship. They tick them off – Corinthian on 9<sup>th</sup>, Bethel AME, Maple Street Baptist that even the new freeway didn't take.

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*"A lot of people have needs. They don't know where to go and what to do. They limp in and limp out, but they never get asked, 'Why are you limping?' We need to ask the question."*

*– Pastor Ben Bell*

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The ministers recognize that for many living on the edge, the neighborhood churches – established parishes and newer ministries in former store fronts alike – give them an anchor. They know these places provide a dependable and consistent presence. But they want to do more, feel called to do more, have ventured here for more.

It's the one thing they've always been after – something more than a band-aid to get their people out from under and to a healthier place.

Pastor Ben Bell leads Living Truth Church, worshipping out of the former Logan Boys & Girls Club building on Des Moines' near east side. He and parishioner John Swift, a retired government employee, came because they're concerned about the community and what happens here.

"A lot of people have needs," Pastor Bell says. "They don't know where to go and what to do. They limp in and limp out, but they never get asked, 'Why are you limping?'"

"We need to ask the question."

Mike Richardson is an assistant minister at All Things Common Apostolic Ministry of Des Moines, and together with his wife, Deanna, heads Battle Cry Ministries. He echoes Pastor's Bells comments and adds, "Our faith teaches us to embrace each person and offer unconditional love and to help.

"But it takes time. It takes a long time."

Tonight, they and the others want to learn more about the Family Measurement – a holistic approach used by NHI outreach workers to help people start on the path out of poverty. They want to see for themselves how it works and to discern whether it can help their congregants unravel and address those things that keep them from getting to where they want to go in life.

So Tony Wilson, director of the Neighborhood Health Initiative, issues a few instructions. He gives each person a pencil and a copy of the Family Measurement tool, an unassuming single sheet of paper with copy on both sides.

He says, in advance, the results may come as a surprise.

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The Family Measurement is a simple concept really. It's divided into 10 categories representing the basic components families need to be strong and healthy, things like shelter, nutrition, health care, and employment. Each category contains three or four questions that when compared and contrasted can identify an individual or family's strengths and weaknesses in terms of "at risk", "safe" or "thriving." Often the

process points a way forward because the term “at risk” clearly names the areas most needing attention.

At NHI, outreach workers guide individuals through the assessment process. It is one of the first things that happens when people stop by NHI for help. Once complete, team members connect them to pathways – a prescribed series of steps – and a plethora of community resources that can lead them to “safe” and “thriving” in health, employment, finances, education and more.

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The actions taken, the pace set, and the focus for growth – all are chosen by the person seeking help. NHI outreach workers simply act as a sounding board and a source of affirmation, encouragement, and next steps. It’s the individual who decides what to change, does the work, and assumes control.

The Family Measurement derives its strength from a fundamental belief that people generally have the capacity to solve their own problems – and in fact, know how to solve them. Too often, however, they get tangled in a complexity of systems, emotions and sheer despair so even one step forward seems out of reach. This process helps peel away these things.

“We have to address the sense of hopelessness first, even before working on other issues,” Tony says. The tool provides a way to “look at the stuff in the background” that may stand in the way of a person getting and keeping a job, for instance. Things like lack of transportation or reliable child care or waning confidence. It creates space for people to be open about changing their lives and to rediscover hope.

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The faith leaders take their pencils and their Family Measurement sheets and begin.

I, too, take my pencil and answer the questions about my own family. I wonder. What will I find? And then what?

As Tony predicted, I am surprised. Surprised at how quickly the tool paints an accurate picture when one is honest. A mental checklist would have produced a similar sketch. I have, for example, thought of job security and my family's emotional health before. Just not in these terms or in totality. I am comforted by the things my husband and I have done to keep our family strong and am reminded to remain on watch for those things that could cause us to limp.

The Family Measurement has cut to the chase.

I am under no illusions that solving any newly-named problems will come easily for folks. However, it amazes me how easily the tool breaks problems into manageable bits, lifts up and affirms things that are going right, and gives safe space to consider – perhaps for the first time in a long time – that steps actually exist to move from “at risk” to “safe” to “thriving.” For someone facing daunting odds, I see how articulation through use of the Family Measurement process produces clarity and reassurance, and clarity and reassurance give way to hope.

The Family Measurement just might be that “more” the pastors need and want to help them ask, “Why are you limping?”

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For Tony Wilson, this is a moment of truth. Never before has he attempted to exponentially reach more people with this idea and help them get to “thriving” by partnering with other groups where trusting relationships already exist. What will the faith leaders assembled think? Will the surprise results he predicted lead them to embrace the concept for use with their parishioners?

NHI's Family Measurement tool and other supporting processes have, after all, been used in the community for less than a year. In many ways, it is a theory playing out among the city's hardest-to-reach people. Although the early returns show promise, he cannot categorically prove in enough hard numbers and statistics just yet its capacity to leave people "better off."

But he has a hunch and is following it. He took his team through the process. Like those NHI serves, many of them had been "on the edge." He has witnessed huge change within them and marvels as they now grade their own progress in terms of "at risk," "safe" and "thriving." Many pursued and obtained their GEDs. One set her sights on saving 10% of her income and devised a plan to do that. Another put in place the pieces needed to earn her nursing degree. And just days ago, yet another purchased her first home. Stories like these ripple out from the hundreds of citizens served so far by NHI.

So Tony postulates. If other community groups, like the local African-American congregations represented here tonight, would employ the Family Measurement process, just imagine the number of people who might hear someone ask the question for the first time, "Why are you limping?" He hopes the faith leaders here are game to give it a try.

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Tony queries the room and finds they have indeed been surprised. Unexpected issues of health, education, and medical debt rise to the top. They quickly see places in their overall family health that could be strengthened. They had not considered them before in quite this way.

Discovery of personal need leads to discussion of outlets for solutions, of partnering with NHI, and of connecting more effectively to one another and that treasure-trove of resources already available in the larger community.

On this evening, the faith leaders see potential, a way forward. They like the concept and want to try it with their members because they know that for some people, the neighborhood church is their only dependable refuge. And most of the time, offering a band-aid is not nearly enough.



*The Neighborhood Health Initiative is a service of Iowa Health-Des Moines. Making Connections is an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Visit us at: [www.makingconnectionsdm.org](http://www.makingconnectionsdm.org) or [www.AECF.org](http://www.AECF.org).*