

Metanoia's work: Grassroots change in North Charleston

by [Ira Brent Driggers](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue



Children and a counselor in Metanoia's youth leadership programs, who are not named for privacy reasons, are reunited after a vacation. Photo courtesy of Metanoia.

In 2002 Bill Stanfield and his wife Evelyn Oliveira moved to Chicora-Cherokee, a distressed neighborhood in North Charleston, South Carolina. The couple had been commissioned by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina and assigned to Chicora-Cherokee as part of an antipoverty effort. Having been trained in asset-based community development, they were determined to avoid imposing any solutions from the outside.

“The worst case scenario,” Stanfield says, “is to have nonresidents come in from the outside and attempt to fix problems that they don’t actually live with. Outside agencies get larger, while the problems remain or even grow. . . . Truly sustainable change,” he says, “needs to start not with the community’s problems, but rather with its assets. It’s the difference between charity and investment.”

Stanfield and Oliveira soon met Tony Joyner, a resident of Chicora-Cherokee, and invited him to join a community advisory council. Joyner had been running an after-school computer lab for youth at a local community center. When he and another volunteer took new jobs, the program was forced to shut down. “About 70 kids came through [the computer lab] every day,” Joyner explains, “and now they were doing nothing.”

In spending their initial year listening to the neighborhood, Stanfield and Oliveira learned that education was a key to community change. Along with Joyner, they launched the Young Leaders Program, a leadership-based after-school program for elementary school students.

This was the first initiative of Metanoia, which became a nonprofit organization in 2003. Joyner was elected chairman of the Metanoia board, and Stanfield became CEO. The biblical term *metanoia* means “transformation with understanding,” said Stanfield. “We liked the way it linked change and awareness.”

Twelve years later, the program has evolved into a yearlong Youth Leadership Academy that teaches academic subjects, public leadership, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy to students of all grade levels. The programs are housed in St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, the predominantly African-American church where Stanfield serves as an associate minister. In 2015, the academy’s high school students won a statewide stock market challenge, competing with 521 other teams, many from more economically privileged schools. In the spring, the academy will graduate its third class of seniors. Many of them have attended Metanoia since elementary school, and many will go on to college or to good jobs in manufacturing.

Responding to the well-documented “learning slip” that disproportionately plagues low-income students during the summer months, Metanoia partnered with the Children’s Defense Fund to offer a free six-week Freedom School for grades K-12. This program focuses on student strengths and imagination to foster a love for reading and a commitment to making a constructive impact on society (while also providing working parents with safe and enriching child care). Each week the roughly 100 students take home a new, age-appropriate book that reflects their heritage and culture. Neighborhood resident and current Metanoia board chair Lisa McLean is proud of the way the Freedom School integrates youth of all ages, giving them active roles in their own learning. “The young kids, the middle schoolers, the high schoolers—they all have a part in leadership. Everybody’s involved.”

Youth programming at Metanoia is not just about youth education; it’s related to the task of community development. “Our youth are key stakeholders in the community’s revitalization,” says Stanfield. “Many of them are talented, motivated, and tired of seeing their friends tempted to make an easy buck selling drugs.” To cultivate this potential, Metanoia began offering entrepreneurial training to its older youth.

Two local youth businesses have emerged from this training. Hodari Brothers Screen Printing was created with a grant from the state's Department of Commerce. The company prints shirts and mugs for local businesses, churches, and civic groups. Isoke Sisters Jewelry began under the leadership of Oliveira as a way for young women to express their creativity and earn extra income. It then became a business selling necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. A third business will be a neighborhood café that employs youth and adults.

To help sustain these successes, Metanoia recently transformed a 5,000-square-foot abandoned building into a Youth Entrepreneurship and Volunteer Center; it provides space for Metanoia's youth businesses as well as dormitory-style housing for volunteers and interns.

While youth education and leadership remains the foundation of Metanoia's mission, it has also launched initiatives in housing. This effort started when the parents of two promising students had to move out of the neighborhood because their substandard housing was forcing them to spend too much of their paycheck on utilities. Metanoia decided, as Joyner says, "to up our game and move into housing development." Stanfield did some research and discovered that the rental rate in the neighborhood was 82 percent. A viable community generally has a 60 percent home ownership rate.

Thanks to government grants and to Joyner's leadership as housing director, Metanoia has built or renovated 27 housing units for ownership or rental. It also repairs homes for those on a fixed income (over 60 homeowners have received vital repairs), and provides free financial literacy classes and a down payment assistance program.

It was because of these opportunities that a single mother of four named McLean moved to the neighborhood. She found affordable houses in Chicora-Cherokee while doing online research and contacted the organization. "It was my first time buying a home, but they [Metanoia] took me by the hand, almost like divine intervention, and led me along the way."

The Metanoia strategy is to develop the community by giving residents a larger stake in its well-being. On Ubank Street, where Metanoia developed three homes for new homeowners (McLean is one of them), there was a 64 percent drop in violent crime from the previous year, as well as substantial financial investment in the local

economy by new Metanoia homeowners. “Homeowners spend their resources in the community and their home equity builds local wealth that can create opportunities for other neighborhood residents,” said Joyner. That’s why the goal of 60 percent home ownership is so important. “We want the dollars staying in the community.”

The connection between money and power was driven home in a negative way recently, when residents of Chicora-Cherokee found out that a major railway yard was being planned for a 26-acre lot adjacent to the neighborhood. It would bring with it noise, vibration, and poor air quality. The original plan was to build a port facility on nearby Daniel Island (ten miles east of North Charleston) and then add the railway yard to the port. But wealthy neighborhoods had formed on Daniel Island, and the residents protested the plan.

Community buildings will be torn down to make way for the railway yard, including an auditorium for the arts and an indoor gymnasium. “Those buildings will need to be replaced somewhere,” says Metanoia board member and city councilman Michael Brown. Neighborhood residents are concerned that the loss of these facilities used by their youth will result in more crime and other negative dynamics within the neighborhood.

Another source of concern is the North Charleston Police Department. From its early days Metanoia has worked to foster healthy relationships between the NCPD and the residents of Chicora-Cherokee. In partnership with the NCPD, Metanoia earned a 2009 National Community Revitalization Award for the reduction in violent crime rates in Chicora-Cherokee.

But the relationship with the police department remains strained, especially since the shooting of Michael Scott by an officer earlier this year.

One encouraging sign is a “positive ticketing” campaign launched by the NCPD, with prompting and support from Metanoia. Officers ticket youth who are “caught” doing things that positively impact the community (picking up litter, volunteering at community events, wearing bicycle helmets, etc.). Youth can exchange the tickets for vouchers at partnering businesses, including water parks and restaurants.

Despite the challenges it faces, “a whole lot that Metanoia is doing is working,” said McLean, who now serves as chairwoman of Metanoia’s board. “We see the positive things they’re doing with our youth in home renovation and home ownership, and in the financial literacy classes.”

For Joyner, Metanoia's youth programming is fundamental. "A lot of the kids live with people who are doing bad stuff. Their brothers and their uncles are selling the drugs. But the kids are telling them, please don't mess with Metanoia because that's where I go." In some cases that reputation has even helped to minimize the vandalism of Metanoia's home-building sites. "The neighbors will keep watch for us," Joyner explains.

When asked about the key to Metanoia's success, Stanfield points to the emphasis on investment in community assets. It matters who owns the capital. "In healthy communities the citizens own most of the capital and direct it toward assets. But in most distressed communities, the citizens own precious little, and too often they can only enter the stream of capital by demonstrating deficiencies. The capital comes from outside, and it's directed toward problems. No one is there to invest in you on your good days."

The strategy goes back to Metanoia's earliest stage and is reflected in the substantial neighborhood representation on its board. In addition, Stanfield, Joyner, and other staff attend neighborhood council meetings and partner with the council to host annual town hall meetings. The community feedback led Metanoia to organize residents to petition for the construction of a new elementary school, for reduced speed limits, and for changing neighborhood zoning to benefit tax-paying homeowners. Metanoia has also helped youth organize against gun violence.

One lingering issue is the need for a local grocery store. Chicora-Cherokee is officially an "urban food desert," meaning that residents have to travel more than a mile to the nearest supermarket. "It's become a major concern for our neighbors," said Stanfield, "so we're educating ourselves as part of our strategy for attracting a store." Metanoia is working with the city of North Charleston to make that happen.

Another success has been the creation of a community garden in 2011. With the city's permission, Metanoia staked claim to a half-acre lot in an abandoned trailer park. A community resident who is a certified master gardener developed the plot, and neighborhood volunteers maintain it. Corporate partnerships helped the organization secure gardening equipment, an underground irrigation system, and a children's playground adjacent to the garden. Having started with 45 plant varieties, the garden now includes several hundred and has supplied well over 2,000 pounds of fresh produce for residents.

The community garden exemplifies what Stanfield calls the “iron rule” of community development: never do for people what they can do for themselves. This philosophy is not a socially conservative or a libertarian commentary on government services, but rather a commitment to partnership and empowerment. As councilman Brown puts it, “Our community has some growth to do, and we’ve got to take an active part in that growth.” That’s why none of the programs provided by Metanoia are completely free: even the free youth programs require parents to contribute in the form of volunteer service. In an average year, Metanoia parents contribute over 1,500 hours of community participation. “It creates a sense of pride and ownership,” says Stanfield. “The highest compliment our parents can pay us is when they refer to Metanoia as us rather than them.”

These days Stanfield spends much of his time raising money. To ensure real success, he explains, he must present the community in the most empowering manner possible. “If we present our neighborhood as desperate and needy, we might get a little support, but in the process we reinforce stereotypes, and people end up receiving assistance at the cost of their dignity. For Metanoia to really work, we need everyone to be willing to give something and receive something. That is true of our lowest-income resident and our wealthiest donor.”

In other words, metanoia for everyone.