

## **Cullowhee Baptist joins the Alliance, anticipates much shared ministry**

**by Tonya and Jeffrey Vickery**

When Cullowhee Baptist Church began 2017 as a new partner with the Alliance of Baptists, several members wondered out loud: “Why did it take us so long to join the Alliance?”

Indeed, the various expressions of faith and practice that are Alliance passions – ecumenism, partnership in mission, relentless hospitality and social justice – reflect well the hopes of the congregation here at Cullowhee Baptist, located in Cullowhee, N.C. Simply put, we chose now to become a congregational partner with the Alliance of Baptists because we believe it best represents the welcome and outreach to all people that the gospel of grace commands.

We are nestled in a wide and protective mountain valley and within the boundaries of the Nantahala National Forest. Cullowhee is a Cherokee word that means either “valley of the lilies” or “buzzard’s roost.” Cullowhee Baptist has been on the progressive side of Baptist faith and practice since we began in 1821 as the first church west of the Balsam Mountain range. We welcomed into full membership Christians of all races from our very beginnings.

Likewise, we recognize all modes of Christian baptism as valid, having confidence that how one enters into Christian discipleship is not as important as how one lives out their faith. In 1963 we ordained our first woman deacon, Lucy Crawford. By 2002 our church called us to serve them as co-pastors. The equal call and responsibility of women and men in the congregation is a Christian virtue long valued in practice as well as belief at Cullowhee Baptist.

In our earnest efforts to establish the church as “a place of grace and peace,” we have made it clear that all are welcome in community, all Christians are gifted for leadership, all of creation deserves our care, and the flourishing of all humanity reflects the heart of God as well as the work of ministry and mission.

Being in a rural, mountainous county and across the street from a state university, Cullowhee Baptist is the only Baptist congregation where LGBTQ Christians are both welcomed and affirmed in worship leadership and ministry calling. Our mission outreach is deeply connected in this community while still aware of our place as citizens of the world and a part of the global Church. Our mission work takes us around the corner weekly, and over state lines and national boundaries when and where we can.

This way of being Christian in today’s world is not just our church’s calling. We see it valued in the ministry and mission of the Alliance, which has spent the last three decades

nurturing this openness to all of God's world and all of God's people. In the fall of last year, the church deliberately chose to include the Alliance in our new budgeted giving because of the decisive inclusiveness already reflected in your mission and identity.

It makes us proud to be an Alliance congregational partner and we are excited about developing new avenues of mission work together. Indeed, why did it take so long for us to join with the Alliance? We beg you forgive our delay, and anticipate much shared ministry in the years ahead.

*Tonya and Jeffrey Vickery are co-pastors of Cullowhee Baptist Church, located on the campus of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C.*