

windows

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Life in the City: An Exercise in Faith and Flexibility

By Valerie Sansing



Photograph by Andrew Sterling

Launching a new congregation is always an exercise in faith and flexibility, but when Life in the City began in Austin as a mission project of The United Methodist Church in July 2014, we had no idea just how adaptable we would need to be. Thankfully, God has gone before us every step, preparing the way.

Initially we understood the call to be to plant a new church at the Long Center for the Performing Arts to reach those in urban south Austin who were disillusioned by institutional church. Demographics revealed a mission field ripe with those who understand themselves to be spiritual but not religious.

At first we reached new people by walking neighborhoods, offering yoga and fitness on the Long Center lawn, and being a presence at special events in the community. Fifteen of our launch team members were band members who started a Sunday night worship service at First UMC Austin several years ago, so we capitalized on the gift, graces, and commitment of those instrumentalists, vocalists, and multi-media team members. We held events at restaurants and bars that would host us, forged relationships with two area elementary schools, and showed up with musicians and hospitality wherever we thought we might be able to meet new people.

Serving the community through creative arts—Given the pitfalls of existing decision-making processes based on “majority rules,” democratic models of secular government, compounded with the biblical and doctrinal

Valerie Sansing (MDiv'00) was senior pastor of Covenant United Methodist Church in north Austin before launching Life in the City. She serves on the Austin Seminary Association Board. Learn more at: lifeinthecityaustin.org

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basis for a spirit-led process, one of the key visions for the new church was to use corporate spiritual discernment for all major decisions. Since the early days of my ministry, I have taught and used the practice described by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen in their book *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. When the call to lead Life in the City came, I was clear that this new congregation was to operate differently, letting the Holy Spirit guide not just the pastor but also the congregation on big decisions.

Life in the City used this process well when the opportunity came to move our home to the campus of Grace UMC, a once-vibrant community now beginning discussions about closing. However, we were unable to reach such corporate clarity related to our core mission. Then we held the first of our Creative Arts Camp Saturdays at Meadowbrook Apartments, a 160-unit low-income housing community in urban south Austin, and just like that, it became clear to all involved that THIS is to be our signature service. The congregation is serving out of our strong gifts and graces for the creative arts, giving the children an opportunity to express themselves and connect to God through dance, song, and fine arts. The children and their families are thrilled with the work we are doing, not only asking for our continued presence, but requesting more information about the church and developing support groups for mothers. God continues to go before us, preparing the way, surprising us with new twists on how we are being blessed to be a blessing.

Outreach through musicals—It began as an inspiration to do a mash-up of two beloved musicals: “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “Godspell.” It has turned into an ongoing ministry for enabling the congregation to use our creative gifts and graces to reach the urban south

Austin community with the good news of God's gracious love revealed in Christ. Since our first production of SuperSpell at the Long Center during Holy Week 2015, Life in the City has presented two more original musicals: "A Downton Christmas" and "Game of Thorns." As I write this article, we are making preparation to present our most complex and challenging musical yet: "Highlights from Hamilton." The process of preparation is a powerful experience, binding the congregation while giving us a wonderful venue for reaching out to those who might not ordinarily come through the doors of a church.

Radically inclusive to all God's creatures—Urban Austinites love their pets. Life in the City has tapped into that passion. Not only have we held Blessing of the Animals events at Food Truck Tuesdays, we initiated our own pet-inclusivity in worship with a Blessing of the Animals worship in the sanctuary last spring. Pets continue to attend worship each week. Flexibility and kindness are vital values as we worship with the occasional barkers, but it's worth it. Everyone, especially guests from the neighborhood, attests to loving the presence of pets in worship.

God has provided so much so quickly. We are excited about the future that lies ahead for Life in the City. ❖

Context

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family in Philadelphia in the early 2000s, she married a US citizen and had two children here. Although her only crime was crossing the border illegally, she faced deportation. As Christians, and especially Presbyterians who have a history of providing sanctuary, WKM had to live out its faith, and we did. Angela's deportation order was removed and she is on a path to citizenship.

Our hot July day ended as it began, shackled together hand in hand. This time however, we held hands as we prayed. We thanked God that no one was hurt and that law enforcement treated us with dignity and protected our First Amendment rights to speak freely, to peaceably assemble, and to petition our government. Hand in hand we prayed for the many who cross deserts to come here in search of opportunity and for the families of those who have lost loved ones on their journey north. We prayed and thanked God for a tradition that welcomes the stranger and charges us to do so. We prayed for courage, strength, and guidance as we keep following the Galilean, who as a child had to flee to Egypt to stay alive. As we prayed, hand in hand, we offered our act of civil disobedience to God as an act of faith ... all in all, it was a good day. ❖

Nones and Dones

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about our experiences and deepest hopes. We bring a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences to our conversations, and our lives are changing as we are welcomed around shared tables. I feel wiser because I know these new friends. Some of them have shared they feel more spiritually alive because they have a new context where they are comfortable to belong.

I hope to share what I am learning, and, in the next few years, I want to help others create similar types of communities across the country. Seminaries can be particularly helpful in this process, as they are positioned to teach emerging leaders how to convene holy conversations.

As conveners, we invite people toward one another. It's that simple. But it's also that profound because God shows up among us. The Great Convener transforms our lives. Are we ready to meet the neighbors who exist beyond our church walls? Are we ready for them to change our trajectory of leadership? Gathered together, perhaps we will experience transformation—and even a reformation—of our religious communities themselves. ❖

The Church Lab

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I believe this is absolutely necessary for the church right now: risk as a core practice, embracing failure as a contributor to progress. As such, in this laboratory we get to learn how God is making all things new in our context of 2016—with millennials, burn-outs, the non-religious, and seekers who will not darken the door of an institution but will show up to be with friends in a living room, willing to ask the vulnerable questions they have about faith. It is a place where pedagogical evolutions and experimental worship ideas must be attempted. It is a place where Christians are challenged in unfamiliar ways to act as stewards of the Holy Spirit's agenda.

Getting to know neighbors this way does not keep the world as simple as when keeping a distance. However, it is difficult to turn back once there is a glimpse of how the Holy Spirit enters a room where all are different and all are listening with open hearts. Here is a safe haven from defensive postures, a place to cut through the noise of daily like-minded messages. TCL recognizes this is where God does the humbling, transformative work. Here we find an open door to learning to love the Lord our God with all our mind, our heart, our soul, and our strength (Luke 10:27). All four are needed when TCL is in session. ❖