

New Generations:

An Update on Campus and Young Adult Ministries

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

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The Relational Evangelism Pilot Project is an eleven month internship of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Eight young adult women and men work part-time for a church or chaplaincy in a new role called Relational Evangelist. The Relational Evangelist is trained as a community organizer to engage more young adults (18-35 year olds) in God's mission, community, deepening spiritual life, and making a difference in their broader communities through their site.



Young adults gather at worship at St. Stephen's in the South End of Boston.

St. Stephen's Young Adults Show Leadership, Diversity

When most people think about young adults living in Boston, they think about the thousands of college students swarming the city's streets. But the young adults at St. Stephen's Church in the South End show how diverse this population really is, and it is Sonya Peters' task to bring this group together in community.

Sonya is a 23-year-old Brockton native who grew up attending Church of the Holy Spirit (Episcopal) in Mattapan. Holy Spirit is one of multiple sites for the B-SAFE program based at St. Stephen's in the South End, and Sonya spent the summer of 2008 working as the Teen Staff Director for the program.

"It was an intense six weeks!" says Sonya, but the experience led her to discover an opportunity to continue working with St. Stephen's through the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project. "At first, I wasn't sure it was the right fit for me, since most of my experience had been working with teens," says Sonya. "But as I went through the interview process, it sounded like a good opportunity to work with great people. I was willing to take this chance and see where God would lead me."

Sonya began working as St. Stephen's Relational Evangelist in September 2008. Immediately, she noticed the different young adult populations

flowing in and out of parish programs. Because of the after-school program, Sonya saw a lot of young parents using St. Stephen's services during the week. In addition, she noticed many volunteers from Boston College and Northeastern University working during the week and a separate contingent of young adults in the pews every Sunday during services. "I soon realized that the activities going on Monday through Friday were not connected to services on Sunday", says Sonya. Now, Sonya was responsible for helping young adults make the connection from weekly programs to Sunday services, all while making sure she reached out to all of the different segments of St. Stephen's young adult population.

One way that Sonya brought together young adults from St. Stephen's was through events. Most recently, a group of about 25 young adults went to Boston Bowl. "It was fun, social, and a chance for everyone to spend time with people they wouldn't normally spend time with," says Sonya. She also hosted a school choice seminar for young parents and a financial literacy seminar in March. The events have been very well attended, and some, like the financial literacy seminar, have presented opportunities to spend time with individuals after the event to talk more about their specific needs.

Another way Sonya organized the young adults in the parish was through the building of a leadership team. The leadership team is an important component of the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project. Its purpose is to continue the mission of young adult ministry even after she completes her term as a Relational Evangelist. Sonya put together a diverse group of young adults that will carry on her work once she leaves her position, as she will be moving out of the Boston area at the end of May. "It is such a great group of people with a variety of life experiences," says Sonya. "One person on the team is a college student, another is a woman who is married with a child, a third just moved to Boston recently, and another is a young single parent. They're from all walks of life working together on the same goal: to build a young adult community at St. Stephen's."

Sonya says there have been many successes as well as challenges since she started her role as a Relational Evangelist. "Like any new program, it has been a

challenging yet rewarding experience. Sometimes, people share deeply personal information with you. You quickly learn that sometimes the best thing you can do is just sit and listen to their stories." She hopes that once she leaves St. Stephen's, the leadership team she helped build will feel empowered to bring new ideas and energy to young adult ministry. "If everyone divides up the work," says Sonya, "the program can continue to grow. I hope that 10 years from now, the young adult ministry at St. Stephen's can be as big or even bigger than the current after-school and teen programs." ■

Peter Murdoch: Project's Newest Relational Evangelist

Like many people approached to be a part of an experimental program, Peter Murdoch was initially unsure about becoming involved in the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project. But according to Peter, "once I figured out what this project was all about, I saw an opportunity to be a part of a larger conversation about community. I was really amazed that the church was doing this."

Before becoming the project's newest Relational Evangelist, Peter's spiritual formation began after moving from Western Massachusetts to the Boston area where he attended a Catholic high school. During high school, he says that he took a religion class and felt that "for the first time I was invited into a space that was safe enough for me to experience God in a deeply personal and intimate way." After high school, Peter attended Gordon College, a Christian liberal arts school in Wenham, MA. "It was my first experience living in a community outside of my family," says Peter. "I met a lot of amazing people at Gordon, and while many of my peers had stopped going to church, they were often ready to engage in conversations that looked and sounded like spiritual direction. People were always willing to talk about the things that were most important to them."

Peter returned to the Boston area and started attending Church of the Advent at the suggestion of a friend during the summer of 2008. "Church of

the Advent helped me remember the goodness of church,” says Peter. “I encountered it during the feasts, listening to the music, and celebrating the Rite I mass.” Eventually, Peter met with the Rev. Patrick Gray to talk further about his involvement in the parish, which is where he learned about the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project. Being a part of this new project presented a unique opportunity for Peter to combine his passion for the church with his passion for building community.

Peter is very excited about working with Advent’s young adult population, which is mostly comprised of graduate students and young professionals. “My goal during my time here is to create a place where our young adults can gather and talk about what matters to them, I think they really want that connection with one another.” To facilitate this, Peter is hosting dinners in his home with young adults from the Advent. He is also trying to generate interest around hosting financial literacy and homebuyer workshops. “So far, both of these ideas have gotten a positive response,” says Peter. “We really want to help young adults learn how to financially exist in Boston.”

Peter says he enjoys listening to the young adults’ stories and hearing about how much they have in common, such as a desire to have a rotating potluck and

engage in small group sessions. While he is enthusiastic about his role as Relational Evangelist, he is also looking forward to letting the other young adults in the parish take the reins as he works to foster young adult ministry leadership within the parish. Peter hopes that by the end of his term as a Relational Evangelist, the young adults at Advent will come together to create their own “vibrant community life” based on the young adults’ personal and spiritual needs. ■

Relational Evangelist Helps Parish Grow Through the Arts

“Our parish was a bit of a wild card – with no young adult community to start with, our task was to build one from scratch!”

Thankfully for Kristy Harding, the Relational Evangelist at St. Luke’s and St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church in Allston, she came to the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project ready for a challenge. A native of Connecticut, Kristy was introduced to the Episcopal Church through her husband, who was attending Church of the Advent in Boston when they first met. When the two married and moved to Brighton, they began attending St. Luke’s and St. Margaret’s in Allston, a parish affectionately known as SLAM.

According to Kristy, SLAM is a small parish where “everyone knows and cares about each other. It is a tight-knit community that is very proud of its identity, especially in regards to its affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.” However, besides Kristy and her husband, the youngest member of the parish was the Rev. Cameron Partridge, who is in his 30s. Despite a lack of peers, Kristy and her husband found a home at SLAM. Because of her deep interest in becoming more involved in the church, Rev. Partridge suggested Kristy look into the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project. Kristy took this unique opportunity as a chance to further explore her call in the life of the Episcopal Church.

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Peter Murdoch is serving as a Relational Evangelist at Church of the Advent, Boston.



Musicians participate in a concert at SLAM.

While SLAM had no young adult community of which to speak, the Allston-Brighton area is teeming with young adults, many of whom are students at Boston University, Boston College, and Harvard. Kristy's first event that reached out to the young adults in her neighborhood started with National Novel Writing Month. The idea behind National Novel Writing Month is that groups of writers spend one month writing a novel together. Kristy organized a group of writers in November 2008 to participate in this project. However, once the project was over, the group moved from their coffee shop meeting spot to Kristy's apartment and opened the weekly meeting to all artists to work on their craft. "Many of our discussions revolve around religion because all of the artists there know what I do," says Kristy. "It's become a front door event to services at SLAM."

Another way that Kristy reached out to her local young adult community was through the social networking website, Facebook. Facebook allows its users to stay in touch with current friends and reconnect with old friends online. "I searched through my list of friends on Facebook, and I ended up meeting up with someone who I hadn't seen since we were 14!" Upon reuniting, Kristy found out that her long-lost friend was a very

talented folk singer. "We came up with this idea of hosting concerts at SLAM, and over 30 people came to the first one", she says. The parish has hosted three more concerts since then. "The concerts and open-mic sessions have been a great opportunity to talk with the young adults who attend about their faith experiences," says Kristy. These conversations prompted SLAM to change their service time from the morning to 5:00PM. "So many people were saying that they would like to come to church, but the services were too early in the morning," says Kristy. "Now that we've changed the time, more young adults are joining us for worship."

While Kristy's events have been successful, there have been some challenges along the way. "I find that many people have little or no familiarity with the Episcopal Church or with SLAM," she says. In addition, SLAM is a financially struggling parish, which may have been a deterrent for some young adults. "You shouldn't have to come to a parish and immediately start worrying about money," she says. However, despite the challenges, Kristy's work has helped the parish grow tremendously. Young adult attendance has increased in the parish, and Kristy's work has increased awareness of SLAM in the Allston-Brighton community. After her term as Relational Evangelist ends in May, Kristy plans to stay at the parish to help with healing ministry, especially for young adults who have been hurt by other faith groups in the past. "Healing is such an important aspect of the Gospel," she says, and she hopes that her new ministry will help those young adults in need of further spiritual guidance. ■



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