

The Crossing: Worship, Community, and Action in Emergent Episcopal Ministry

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I think a lot of young adults have really negative...views of churches but this is a really welcoming, safe space and it's kind of fun and it engages you on multiple levels – there's music, there's art, there's incense, there's the Word. And a really strong, beautiful community of people who care for you and it's small enough where you can get to know all these people. And they welcome people no matter where they are on their journey.

Lana, Age 24, Crossing Member¹

The Crossing is an emergent church in downtown Boston, associated with St. Paul's Cathedral, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. As Lana expresses, it offers a blend of traditional worship, progressive social views, and a flexible, ground-up approach. It is a small community yet it has also grown significantly over the past few years to 45 weekly worshippers, more than double the attendance two years ago. All of the leadership and most attendees are young adults; more than 85% are in their twenties and early thirties. It is, as Lana further describes, a “young adult community” rather than a community that attracts some young adults. While this demographic structure poses certain challenges, it also provides an exciting model for other churches to draw on and adapt.

Radical Welcome: The History and Mission of the Crossing

The Crossing began in 2005 when the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts hired Stephanie Spellers, an ordained Episcopal priest in her early thirties, to build on the Dean of the Cathedral Jep Strait's New Wine, a previous young adult ministry

¹ With the exception of Rev. Spellers, Rev. Strait, and Isaac Everett, all names are pseudonyms.

that had not attracted significant numbers. The Diocese's interest in young adult ministry corresponded with Spellens's own plans; a few years earlier she had had a vision in a New York gay bar that led her to feel called to create a radically welcoming ministry focused on celebrating God. "Rev. Steph" began by gathering together a handful of young adults for a process of discernment. For more than half a year they met in a pub and discussed what path their Christian community might take. Today, Jep Strait admits that he was confused about the delay; in retrospect, he believes that this incubation period was key to the Crossing's eventual success. Each person in the group was wholly committed and personally invested by the time it launched. This early strategy also clearly situated the Crossing as a community endeavor, rather than one centered on Rev. Steph as the priest paid by the Diocese.

During this process of discernment, the group entertained a number of ideas: a dance ministry, meeting at a bar, a potluck church, or a more traditional Eucharistic service. They opted for the last and, in April 2006, began to hold worship on Thursdays in the Cathedral. Although the first services drew about 25 people, the actual membership numbered below ten. Six months later, they had grown to 15-20 people who worshipped weekly and joined each other in an ad hoc way for social and social justice events. In spring 2007, the Crossing launched a monthly bible-reading group (at a pub in Harvard Square) and its first small group, a monthly faith-sharing circle held at a member's apartment. In autumn 2010, 40-50 worshippers came weekly and a much larger number of people (likely at least 80) were involved in some aspect of Crossing ministry. One reason for this growth has been the simultaneous development of the Episcopal Diocese's Micah Intern Project (started in 2000 and expanded in 2008) and Relational Evangelist project (started in 2008). These programs host 25 young adults in ministry projects each year, many of whom become involved with and attend the Crossing.

From the beginning, the Crossing's mission has been to offer "radical welcome" for anyone, whether churched, de-churched, or never churched. This focus is most evident in the fact that the church contains a nearly even mix of

straight and queer/transgendered people. Half of its 13-member leadership team is queer and/or transgendered. This theology of radical welcome is paired with a focus on Christian justice in the world. By the spring of 2010, it was clear, however, that this commitment was too demanding of some people's time and energy. Members were taking on multiple roles, often devoting 25 or more hours per week to church activities, particularly related to justice. When a number of longstanding members suffered burnout and left, Rev. Steph invited a key group of 13 for a visioning retreat. The result is the current structure, in which church life is divided into three "circles:" Worship, Community, and Justice/Action. A paid staff and an unpaid member guide each one. This structure is meant to ensure that no one is highly involved in more than one aspect of ministry, thus limiting the activities that any one person is expected to take on. At the same time, the Crossing decided to focus their social justice efforts in two key local arenas that overlap: trans/queer rights and homelessness.

Who Goes to the Crossing and How They Get There

The Crossing mainly draws young adults ages 21-33, most of whom were raised in Christian homes, primarily Episcopalian, evangelical or Catholic. Today, members generally identify simply as Christian, although cradle Episcopalians continue to identify with the denomination. The Crossing has an even mix of genders and sexual orientations. Most worshippers are white, although there is racial diversity, including Rev. Steph, who is African American. There are about three to four committed older adult members and, currently, no young families at the Crossing. The young adults who call the church home hail from across the country: Texas, California, the Midwest, Florida, and Boston. Most are in the city for three to five years while they are in school, mainly in seminaries and theology programs. This makes for a very cerebral and intentional type of Christian practice because, as one member put it, they "are here for a limited amount of time and...feeling experimental in their worship." Andy, a 26-year-old member, grew up in a conservative church in Florida. He recounts his first impressions of the Crossing:

I walked in and I realized that the service had been designed and put together with great intention by theologians, by critical thinkers. That's really how I felt. And I felt that because of that I could be there and not have to bring everything down, deconstruct everything. I could sort of trust people there, you know? The way I couldn't trust people in other [churches] maybe, where I felt like people were engaging less critically and weren't asking the questions I felt were important.

Young adults often say that they are drawn to the people at the Crossing because they are clearly engaged in thoughtful questioning, particularly addressing Christians' commitment to the world. Andy, like many Crossing members raised in conservative churches, feels that this aspect was lacking (or absent) in his childhood church.

Andy is also typical of Crossing members in that he first heard about the church through word-of-mouth from classmates. At the Crossing's inception in 2006, Rev. Steph posted on the blog, "A WORD ON GETTING OUT THE WORD: while we'll have lots of publicity rolling out over the coming weeks...we all know that's not the chief way that people will learn about the crossing. it's relationships! So...i hope you'll be inspired to connect with friends and anybody else you know who might be yearning for god and community and a common practice..." Today, Crossing members continue to tell their friends and classmates about the church and often carry business cards to give away. They are careful only to do so, however, to people who they think are already yearning for church, as Rev. Steph indicated above. Cards are handed out at events, like Boston's Gay Pride Parade, and in the first months, church members also left flyers at spots with young adult appeal: yoga studios, gyms, thrift stores, coffeehouses, bookstores, co-op groceries and university campuses. There is also a sign in front of the downtown Cathedral while the Crossing meets on Thursdays, which sometimes draws in passers-by.

Leadership Structure and Getting Involved

Rev. Steph is paid by the Diocese only to serve as a part-time priest at the Crossing. This was by design in order to ensure that no single (ordained) person would become too central and that the church would retain a flexible, lay-led approach. At the same time, the young adult members, who are in school and have multiple other commitments, found it burdensome to take on too much of the administrative and organizational work. In order to strike a balance, in September 2010 the Crossing hired its second professional staff person, Isaac Everett, who is now the part-time Worship Minister. The only full-time paid position is a rotating 12-month internship for a recent college graduate in the Micah Intern Project.

At the Crossing, as one member put it, “church is the people.” This makes for a very fluid process of involvement and leadership. People at the Crossing are extremely welcoming. During worship, greeters stand at the door and hand out name tags. New attendees are welcomed in each service and invited to sign up for “coffee on the Crossing,” a chance to meet a current member at a local café one-on-one and ask questions about the community. New members’ breakfasts are also held monthly. Generally, after a new attendee comes for a couple of months, Rev. Steph (or sometimes another member) asks him or her to take on some aspect of leadership. Most often this is related to the worship service but it can extend to participation in a committee or a particular event or project. Members see this system as reflecting their bottom-up approach to church—anyone can become involved in leadership quickly. Personal interaction is also key; although the Crossing has a website, weekly emails, a facebook page and a blog, most organizing happens face-to-face.

Although I have referred to “members” of the Crossing above, it is important to note here that there is no official membership or process for becoming a member. Although a Rule of Life is posted online, attendees are not asked to formally commit to it, and there is little pressure to associate regularly or contribute specific amounts of money or time. This flexible approach is part of the Crossing’s theology of radical welcome and also reflects the demographic to

which they appeal: young adults who are urban, in transition, and (often) students. The Crossing also tries to keep the bar for membership low so that those who have had negative experiences with church in the past—homeless people and transgendered people, in particular—will feel welcome at worship, once or regularly, without feeling pressured by a formal commitment.

Worship: Tradition and Creativity

Worship is central at the Crossing. Services run for 75 minutes and are held on Thursday evenings so that people can come directly from school or work. People gather on the stage at the front of the Cathedral, where they sit in a circle on chairs and cushions. Lights are dimmed and lamps set up. The altar is decorated with candles, lavish cloth, flowers, statues and icons. Incense burns. Technology is rarely used and members say that the traditional atmosphere makes worship a more reverent time, clearly separate from everyday life.

Crossing services are best described as a blend of the traditional and the post-modern experimental. However, as the Crossing makes clear on its website, it is “way more than...a worship laboratory.” To offer a sense of consistency, the church devised a liturgical structure that it has kept nearly the same since its inception. It is a Jesus-focused community and weekly worship includes the Eucharist and a New Testament reading from the Revised Common Lectionary, chanted by the Music Director. There is always a Gospel passage (the minimum requirement in the Episcopal Church for the celebration of Eucharist) and this is sometimes supplemented by readings from Psalms or other poetry, as chosen by the Worship Team.

As one Crossing member in her early twenties puts it, “Being young doesn’t make that central theology less important and it doesn’t water it down. It just demands a different context.” The new context at the Crossing, which young adult members find particularly appealing, is the opportunity for people to respond, react and do their own thing. The service begins with group chanting, followed by a spiritual practice and a five-minute sermon, each given by different lay members. There is time to respond aloud to the sermon and to offer personal

reflections and prayers during the “Prayers of the People.” The middle portion of the service, called Open Space, is fifteen minutes during which worshippers choose their own practice from options designed by the Worship Team and that week’s spiritual practice leader (e.g. drawing, dance, meditation, discussing the sermon). 26-year-old Jeremy, one of the longest-standing members of the Crossing, believes this has particular appeal for young adults:

I think a lot of people of our generation, if they’re interested in Church at all, are looking for more open spaces or free spaces in church where there is movement or opportunity for people to access a relationship with themselves, with each other, and with God in a range of expressions – and understanding that we all do that differently. So I think that’s a huge gift the Crossing [offers] and if we lost Open Space we would lose a lot of the integrity of what makes the Crossing, the Crossing.

Music has been key to the Crossing’s practice and theology from the beginning. The website describes it as a chance to “...step into the groove – the rhythm that thumps on the street and in your heart and moves you into the dance God started at the beginning of time” and Crossing members sometimes say, “We worship together, we groove together.” Theologically, “the groove” links worship to the street—the community outside—and is about feeling joyous, heartfelt love for God. The music itself is generally a mix of R&B, soul, and gospel, often taking pop songs, slowing them down and adding bass. One of the few paid positions is a music minister, and his or her band plays throughout, including the distribution of the Eucharist, which occupies the last part of the service. As the band plays, people stand in a circle and pass the bread and wine to each other, singing and clapping while everyone partakes.

Community and Social Justice

Community is central to the Crossing, as is evident during worship. Rev. Steph often begins by asking everyone to look at each other around the circle and think about Jesus’ presence in every person there. The act of passing the Eucharist from person to person also creates community, and many members cite this as a

particularly stirring aspect of worship. Services are always followed by a community formation activity: a potluck, a theology discussion, a trip to a local bar for Episco-disco or an “Education for Action” discussion. On a wider level, Crossing members feel connected to other progressive emergent churches in the United States.² When people leave the Crossing, Rev. Steph often refers them to other churches, and members sometimes attend emergent church conferences.

Crossing members are encouraged to direct their energy outwards into the world. “[The] real church,” says the Crossing website, “prepares us to take our part in the world-changing, peace-making, justice-seeking, all-embracing mission of God.” This commitment to others is tied to Jesus’ ministry and the idea that all people are connected through Christ. In its first three years, the Crossing was involved in a wide variety of justice issues, from Fair Trade to supporting developing world nongovernmental organizations. In spring 2010, the Crossing made a decision to focus on two particular issues closer to home: BGLTI (bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgendered, and intersex) rights and homelessness. The former has been a particular focus since the church’s inception and the latter is a natural issue for the Crossing because Ecclesia Ministry for the homeless also operates out of St Paul’s Cathedral. Furthermore, Crossing members point out that these issues overlap because 40% of homeless youth in the United States are BGLTI.

Currently, the Crossing organizes social justice activities throughout the year (e.g. 9/11 Day of Service or Trans Awareness Week in November). It also supports the Hope in Action campaign as one of eight Boston churches that will pledge 1% of each member’s time or money to a non-profit partner organization.

Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities

There are a few challenges associated with a young adult church like the Crossing. The main one is how to create a stable, accountable community in the midst of a transient stage of life. The Crossing’s membership largely turns over every school

² Progressive emergent churches connected loosely to the Crossing include Transmission (NY), Thads (CA) and Jacob’s Well (MO). For more see www.thecrossingboston.org/emergent.html

year and the church goes on hiatus during the summer—leaving people who are still in town without a home church until September. The Crossing is still a very young church and its members acknowledge these difficulties and are working to address them. A fundamental way that the Crossing maintains stability is by keeping worship grounded in traditions like the Eucharist and by following the same structure every week. In fact, a positive aspect of this turnover is that there is a constant rotation of voices heard during worship and ideas in the church leadership. The Crossing does not get stuck in old routines and remains flexible and accountable to its members. The fluid structure of leadership and membership allows young adults to attend without feeling burdened by major commitments.

The Crossing benefits greatly from its affiliation with the Episcopal Diocese, which foots most of the Crossing's \$100,000 annual costs from its endowment. A benefit of this shoestring budget is that there is no full-time minister or priest. As a result, lay people are quickly pulled into active leadership positions. Indeed, the Crossing manages to operate all of its many programs on very little money in large part because many young adults (particularly those without children) are willing to devote significant time to creating community and participating in social and social justice activities. Volunteers account for almost all of the leadership, tech support, set-up and clean-up. As the Crossing learned in spring 2010, it is nonetheless necessary to create a structure to minimize burn-out, particularly amongst young adult members who are enthusiastic and not yet practiced in the art of saying "no." Perhaps the main benefit of association with the Episcopal Diocese is that the Crossing becomes the home church for many of the 25 young adult interns who come each year. Partnering with such organizations—the intern program, but also other churches and local non-profits—has been a key way in which the Crossing has increased its membership and roster of activities.

Worship at the Crossing is one of the main draws for young adults. It provides a meditative space apart from the everyday. It is a chance to be surrounded by peers in a warm, welcoming environment. BGLTI young people,

many of whom were raised in churches, are particularly appreciative of this opportunity. The Crossing's worship and theology focus on relating personally to Jesus. His love is seen as forgiving and all-encompassing, a way to unite all people together in him. It is a call to prayer, to intentional thoughts and actions. This focus on Jesus is also a way to connect all Crossing members at the most fundamental level, whether they were raised in mainline, Catholic or evangelical churches.

Young adults at the Crossing are asking how church can look more like what they see around them. How can it be diverse, creative, and responsive to community needs? They wrestle with how to formulate a Christian response to injustice and offer a radically welcoming worship that still draws on tradition. They might not have all the answers but, Crossing members point out, at least they are asking the questions. And this, they say, makes all the difference.