

Faith Connection Story – Outreach at St. Paul's, Dallastown

After last Christmas I read a book that I picked up at Hearts & Minds Books in Dallastown, *The New Parish* by Dwight Friesen, Paul Sparks, and Tim Soerens. The day after I finished the book I had two cancelled appointments, and seeing the afternoon to myself and my family already out for the day, and prepared for the next Sunday, I decided to do a little exercise: some old-school brainstorming with ideas I had gleaned from the book.

I timed myself for a couple of hours, turned off the phone, and got out the fountain pen and just started writing about ideas. Lots of “what if we did” kind of questions. Then I made a list of things we were already doing at St. Paul's and how I might make them better in the next year. When I couldn't think anymore I went back to the ideas and started writing details. Who is the audience? How would this connect with the neighborhood?

Describing some of these programs requires some circular thinking about our particular congregation and our particular circumstances. We are ONA, we are theologically progressive, we have become very active with substantive interfaith work with Muslims, we have been in national and international news for being the tolerant and diversity-promoting congregation in the area.

Our Children's VBS program had grown slowly over the past couple years, and in the past year I had enough volunteers to really run the program, but the neighborhood kids weren't really connecting. We just couldn't get the parents interested or the kids to walk in the door. We decided we were on a road too busy to really have kids meandering around outside as part of a VBS program with stations, so taking it outside wouldn't be practical without even more volunteers for a two-hour program in the summer.

So what if we created a children's program that invited folks in to teach what we have become known for, what our mission is in this community?

As a result the Children's VBS morphed into a new program TGIF@StPaul'sDallastown. TGIF would happen each Friday in the summer at 10:30 AM, with a story time for kids, a healthy snack, and a yoga class. Better yet, we would invite different community leaders for different faiths, backgrounds, professions, etc., to be “guest readers.” Hearts & Minds books selected readings if the readers did not have a book planned—the themes would be tolerance, diversity, accepting differences, being healthy, and children's books with a local connection. That is, what I hope the community knows or does know about St. Paul's in Dallastown.

I invited different guest readers, and to my surprise, all said yes! I had volunteers to do the program using SignUpGenius—the first time we had used it. One of my invitations was to the PA Governor's office; and Frances Wolf, First Lady of PA, was our guest reader for our last session.

I had hoped for more kids but one has to accept the limitations, it's in the morning on a weekday, it's summer, etc., but all of our volunteers thought it was worthwhile and we met some new kids in the community.

Our hand-off program is our Sunday Messy Church worship service with a blessing of the backpacks, which will be followed by a puppet workshop and puppet show.

The second program is a reformation of our Adult VBS program, which had been rather small, but it we had great discussions—last year we used the UCC's curriculum on gun violence.

Taking a cue from Tripp Fuller's Homebrewed Christianity podcast, I announced that we would have Adult VBBS—Adult Vacation Beer and Bible School! We used Rob Bell's new book, *How to Read the Bible*, which we arranged to get from Hearts & Minds books, not as the discussion for the week but as a guide. In other words, you didn't have to read the book, but we'll do some stuff from the book. We had 2-3 different craft beers every night, paid child care, and 20-25 adults every night. What was interesting is that we had *different* people every night, with about 35 total participants.

Most of the participants were newer members of the church, some community folks, and a few older folks, age ranges from 20s to 70s—with most in the 20s, 30s, and early 40s.

The program was an introduction to the Bible from a progressive perspective, discussed biblical genres, some language, the ideas of canonicacy, inerrancy, apocalypticism, eschatology, mythology, and feminist and queer perspectives on the Bible. Discussions were great. We had some social time, and financially the program broke even without working too hard.

We're planning on doing more once a month, but perhaps as an emergent worship service.

Also over the summer we had an active presence at the York Equality Feast and National Night Out. At the latter we are the only church in our town who participate, we can have a free table if we aren't selling something there and we're contributing to different community safety issues. Typically we have a game, and if kids stop at every table they get a prize from the fire department. This year our game was teaching children how to care for their pets in the summer; past years have included bike safety, hydration, etc. We gave out 200 flyers for church programs and ran out, which was far more families than we had in previous years at this event.

