

We Have What We Need: The Simplicity and Beauty of Cultivating Christian Community at the Margins of Campus

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“Dear Pastor Kate,” she wrote in an email, “How does one get involved in your church? I’m not exceedingly religious, but I am quite lonely.” This was 2017, long before the pandemic and even before Cigna’s 2018 research¹ revealed that for the first time in history young adults reported higher levels of loneliness than any other generation.² Emily³ was simply saying the quiet part out loud.

Campus ministries, and campuses in general, are often the canaries in the coal mine for a culture. When we pay close attention, and listen with compassion and generosity, there is so much to be learned about both the present and the future. As we pay attention now, it is clear we are in crisis as a culture.

The National Institutes of Health reports that within the last year and among all age cohorts, young adults reported the highest level (33.7%) of “any mental illness,” the highest level (11.4%) of “serious mental illness” and that 56.7% of seventeen to eighteen year olds reported that they had experienced mental illness during their lifetime.⁴ That is more than half of eighteen year olds that have reported a mental illness, in a culture where accessing health care for mental illness still carries stigma in some families and communities.

Additionally, in May of 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a *Surgeon General’s Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*.⁵ Cigna’s recent report on loneliness indicates that 58% of adults are considered lonely. The press release that accompanies the report notes that loneliness and mental health go hand in hand and that adults with mental illness are more than twice as likely to experience loneliness as those with strong mental health.⁶

Many fingers point in many directions as the root of our crisis, including social media and smartphones,⁷ the pandemic, overabundance,⁸ a toxic political climate, the decline of trust in institutions, and even late-stage capitalism.⁹ As a small Christian community nestled into a very large, secular institution, Lutheran Campus Ministry-Twin Cities (LCM) is not going to solve these problems for the larger culture. But, as we build culture in our context, as we build a community of unconditional belonging, we are planting seeds that will bear fruit for a very long time.

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“Dear Pastor Kate . . . I’m not exceedingly religious, but I am quite lonely,” the student wrote. What a gift and challenge to be the church at this particular time and in this particular place.

I serve a mid-sized Evangelical Lutheran Church in America campus ministry at a very large, public, secular university, the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, where 55,000 undergraduates and graduate students live, learn, and grow. Public discourse on religion is marked by black-and-white thinking and surprisingly severe judgment from people on both sides of the argument. We are a queer-affirming ministry, politically mixed, and theologically inclusive.

Our students are a mix of denominations and no denomination, and so curiosity must be a hallmark of our community. No set of knowledge, rituals, or beliefs can be taken for granted. We are a transitional lot, which allows us to tack in new directions quickly, unencumbered by institutional memory or nostalgia. We are also comprised of eighteen to twenty-four year olds who are wide open to learning and mentorship as long as there is mutual trust and respect.

At LCM, we have long been a ministry by students and for students. Servant leadership work with students is at the core of who we are and what we do. The work that we do with our leaders is the work of discipleship. It is formational at the core, and it changes their lives and the lives of people around them.

As we strive each year to create a community of belonging rooted in the unconditional love of God, we must consider the culture and context that the students are coming from. We are formed and reformed each year by the work of the Holy Spirit, the discernment work of our student leaders, and the careful attention and support of the staff at our organization. When I began this work in 2010, social media and smartphones were not ubiquitous in the way they are now. We hadn’t yet reached the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. Barack Obama was still in his first year as president, and the vitriol that we now associate with politics was only beginning. In short, the culture was very different. And our work with students was very different.

During the last several years, even preceding the pandemic, we realized that our student leaders were not coming with a uniform set of social skills, as many had in the past. Some of them were very capable, and others, for a variety of reasons, were arriving hungry to learn and to simply gain skills that they didn’t have space to practice in other arenas of their lives. We have had to adapt and adjust our formational work with our leaders, our board, and the broader community to reflect this hunger.

Over time, I have come to understand that religious leaders often assume that their people come with a cadre of knowledge and skills that is no longer intuitive or given. Whether it’s having a first conversation with someone, practicing the art of discernment, sharing one’s faith, or even simply praying, somehow, we’ve forgotten how to do the things that give texture and girth to community and allow communities

to thrive and grow and care for one another. Leaders get frustrated because their people don't do what they're supposed to, but I sometimes wonder if our people are actually equipped to do the work that we're all called to do.

The young adults I meet are generally not equipped. And, I've discovered that when we equip them with the skills they need, assure them that it's a grace-filled environment, and empower them to be a part of building a community of belonging, all in the name of Christ, the impact can be tremendous.

As I was meeting with one of our leaders this past year, I asked him why he chose LCM as a place where he wanted to contribute, especially given the many options he had about how to spend his time. He said to me,

There are so many amazing things about going to a large school—countless activities to get involved in, numerous resources, and the seemingly unlimited people to meet. But there is also an overwhelming feeling that you are just a drop in the bucket, that your presence on campus doesn't really matter. I certainly felt this. But at LCM, I didn't just feel welcome, which was nice. I found a community where I was accepted and wanted just as I am, which was great. But at LCM, I feel like I am actually needed—like I am an integral part of the community and that things wouldn't be the same without me. And that matters to me so much.

The question at the core of Lars's statement speaks to the ennui that so many young people experience, perhaps that so many people experience—the question of whether they actually matter, to their friends and family, to their communities, and to their God. God creates us and calls us good, gifting each of us with unique identities, gifts, and quirks. Of course, we matter. And still there are so many people who feel as if they do not matter. This might present as a mental health crisis, or an epidemic of loneliness, or many of the other cultural maladies that are pervasive.

The Springtide Research Institute is a growing organization focused on the intersection of Gen Z, spirituality, and mental health. Their mission is to understand and communicate data so that institutions can be proactive in preventing crisis, not simply responding. Their most recent study, "The State of Religion and Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know,"¹⁰ named the top qualities of mental health-friendly spaces. These qualities are highlighted on their website and are listed below:

Connection is about creating spaces of belonging;

Expectations is about making sure standards for success are matched by the tools to meet those standards; and

Purpose is about helping young people connect with something bigger than themselves.¹¹

As the church, we have a theology, ancient practices, and preexisting infrastructure that, with some intention, can be helpful as we seek to address the crises that are ahead for us as a culture.

First and foremost, our theology of God's unconditional love and belonging changes the way that we do ministry and how we do community. With grace as our grounding, we are set free to talk about the gifts that people are given, identities waiting to be explored, and the brokenness that is longing for healing. We connect young adults with a sense of purpose and meaning that transcends their profession of choice, assuring them that their 'being' matters just as much to God as their 'doing.' Secondly, our ministry is deeply shaped by our theology of the body of Christ, where Christian community is the hands and feet and beating heart of Christ in this world. In the body of Christ, we recognize that we do not all have the same gifts but that everyone has something to share. We also talk openly and often about the reality that in Christ we share in one another's suffering and joy and the implications that has for our world. And finally, and certainly connected to the two previous points, our ministry is shaped by the baptismal rhythms of death and new life. With each new group of students, we receive a different set of gifts and a different articulation of our call to love our neighbor. We hold our programs lightly so that our students might experience the life-giving rhythm of death and new life and through that learn to trust that in each death there is new life.

As a campus ministry, we are a bit of an outlier in the ways that we center worship, our weekly Word and Sacrament gathering. We trust that through this practice of regular prayer, song, sacramental offering, and reflection on Scripture, we are shaped and formed by the Spirit in ways we might not have anticipated. Worship becomes one of the places where we teach faithful engagement with Scripture and different ways to pray and where students share the ways that God shows up in their lives. The sacraments are offered as a visible sign of God's invisible grace. In a world and on a campus where despair and doubt are companions on the journey, the embodied, earthy, tangible nature of the sacraments is one of our most significant gifts.¹²

Additionally, we weave the practice of the Examen into most parts of our ministry.¹³ I use it in individual reflections with students, and we encourage students to form small groups of support and discernment when one or more is facing a large decision. We also use the practice of the Examen to engage in discernment as a leadership team, and through that it becomes woven into the fabric of our life together.

Christian community, in its great diversity, is often well suited for offering connection and purpose, two of the three foundations that Springtide Research Institute identified as contributing to cultures of mental well-being. I wonder if, as we transition into post-Christendom culture, we might be relying too much on our faith, our

practices, and our community life in general being “caught” instead of taught. I have become increasingly convinced that to really be together as Christian community, we have to start formally training people in building connections with one another and giving them tools to both name and live into their many vocations. We must do explicit, constructive theology that equips people with words to describe the God they believe in. Without these tools and a shared set of language around our “why,” it is hard to move together in a meaningful direction.

And so, we train the leaders in our community. We equip them with the capacity to ask good questions and actively listen. They practice inviting a friend or a stranger into the community where they have found meaning and purpose. We teach asset mapping and how to explore their spiritual gifts. We teach the leaders how to have deeper conversations, and we give them mental health first aid training. We model prayer and share leadership of prayers in our meetings and our worship. We give them words for their faith. We encourage coffee dates between people who don’t know one another so the sinew of this body remains strong and so one charismatic force doesn’t tank the whole thing. We train them in cleaning the kitchen and then hand over the keys so they can serve their fellow students at least one lunch and one dinner a week. By practicing the Examen individually and as a community, slowly over time our leaders become practiced at the art of discernment, able to articulate possibilities of what God might be calling our community into next.

Some of these things are quite simple. Others will take a lifetime to master. All of them are intentional and assume that we are all beginners. We formalize teaching these things in ‘trainings’ so that we can all learn and practice together and so no one assumes that anyone has these skills baked into their DNA. No action is too small, and everyone is given a job.

It is easy to roll one’s eyes and say, “Kids these days,” or “People these days,” but much like teaching my seven-year-old child to scramble eggs, unless we teach her where to crack the egg and how to turn on the oven safely, she will have to figure it out on her own. That will be a slower process, messier, potentially dangerous, and definitely less fun.

Throughout my fourteen years in campus ministry, I have been routinely surprised at the ways just a small bit of attention, equipping, and support can give birth to a vibrant, creative, and healing community. I don’t think it’s that people don’t want to co-create Christian community but rather they don’t know how. And, more than anything, I remain in this call because I get to witness, on a very regular basis, the transformative power of the gospel as it is enfleshed in Christian community. I have been astounded at the simplicity of it all.

Recall Emily, the student who emailed me telling me that she was exceedingly lonely. After a first conversation, I was able to introduce her to one of our leaders who

was gentle and very socially skilled. That leader was able to accompany Emily in worship in a way that was compassionate and then connect her with others. Emily was brave enough to say yes to a student invitation to join our spring break trip, and she quickly became a beloved and favored member of our community. Her dad had written to me in the middle of the night, telling me, among other things, that he just wished Emily's peers could see what an amazing person she was, so funny and so kind. As a gaggle of students rolled into church after the spring break trip, they were laughing and remembering their trip fondly. One of them said to me, "Pastor Kate, do you know this new kid Emily? She's so nice. And hilarious!" This community of students, alongside the work of the Spirit, with some attention and support of a staff mentor, created the conditions where Emily could shine as the person God made her to be, where she could be known for all of who she was and bring her gifts to bear on our community. This didn't just change Emily's life, it changed the community, and through all of us it will change the world. Thanks be to God for that.

¹ Cigna, 2018 *Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index*, https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/loneliness-survey-2018-full-report.pdf?_gl=1*1bax5wz*_gcl_au*MTY2MDM3MTkxMi4xNjg5Nzc5NTgz.

² The UCLA Loneliness Scale debuted in 1978 and has been widely used to measure loneliness, primarily because of the ways that it impacts our physical health.

³ All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the identity of the people whose stories are told throughout this article. Permission has also been granted by the students to use their stories.

⁴ National Institute of Mental Health, "Mental Illness," NIH, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>.

⁵ Vivek Murthy, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

⁶ The Cigna Group, "The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults," 2023, <https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look>.

⁷ Sociologist Jean Twenge and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argue in books, articles, and podcasts that smartphones are to blame for many of the issues adolescents and young adults are facing. Jonathan Haidt's Substack newsletter, *After Babel*, contains the most thorough collection of articles, blogs, and resources. In September 2017, Twenge summarized her recent book's research in *The Atlantic* in an article titled "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"

⁸ See Anna Lembke's *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (New York: Dutton, 2021).

⁹ Anna Zeira, “Mental Health Challenges Related to Neo-Liberal Capitalism in the United States,” *Community Mental Health Journal* 58, no. 2 (2022): 205–12, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8145185/>.

¹⁰ Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion & Young People 2022: Mental Health—What Faith Leaders Need to Know,” https://www.springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/thestate2022-methodology_v1.pdf.

¹¹ Springtide Research Institute, home page, <https://www.springtideresearch.org/>.

¹² A senior student shared the following story about wrestling with God: “When I let go of the need to meet every question with a rigorous and doctrinally sound answer, I found that the sacraments were forms that carried me through my faith journey. That on the days when my cynicism gets the best of me, the days in which I quarrel with Scripture, the days in which belief is hard to come by, I can always return to the grace found in the baptismal font and practice of sharing a meal in community. I haven’t the faintest idea how, but in these practices God keeps showing up not as an answer, but as a reminder that the questions are enough.”

¹³ The Examen is a reflective practice originally created by Ignatius of Loyola for the purpose of aiding discernment and moral self-examination. It is a hallmark practice of the Jesuit community. Jesuit Institute, “The Examen,” <https://jesuitinstitute.org/Pages/Examen.htm> accessed 8/3/2023.