



City of God

Kathy McAdams (facing page) leads a service for the homeless on Boston Common. To her right, chaplain Tina Rathbone (STH'09) prepares to give a blessing.

Today's urban ministers have to be social workers, lawyers, fundraisers, and activists. The School of Theology is looking at how the best city pastors juggle it all, hoping to train its students to do the same.
By Bari Walsh

THE PASTOR TELLS the people gathered around her to hold hands, so they do, standing in a loose circle, waiting for the song to begin. Some of them seem dazed and look disheveled. Some stare at their feet, shy in front of the tourists strolling through the park. The man with the banjo takes charge, confidently strumming the opening chords of the old spiritual. A woman in strange garb, with vinyl superhero gloves, a short dress, and extremely high heels, shakes a tambourine. "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day," they sing, his voice gruff and folksy, hers high, soft, choir-worthy.

Halfway through the song, the man tells the congregants to raise their arms, and they do. They sing louder, arms to the sky, hands still clasped.

The circle tightens, and pigeons rise up from a nearby lawn, hovering overhead in a sudden flush of grandeur and inspiration. If you believed in God, you believed He was here at that moment. If you didn't, you had to wonder.

This is church on the Boston Common, with the homeless, the addicted, the mentally ill. And it's one of twelve new Boston University theological teaching sites, congregations BU will connect with as the School of Theology grapples with all that urban churches are today.



The University is reconfiguring its theological education, consciously embracing connections with city congregations and nurturing its own pastors-in-training to meet the enormous challenges of contemporary urban ministry.

“Urban ministers tend to a range of social needs that boggles the mind,” says Bryan Stone, the School of Theology’s E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism and codirector of the Center for Practical Theology (CPT). “It’s so much more than pastoral care, counseling, and preaching on Sundays. It’s job finding, housing issues, immigration issues, substance abuse, mental illness, violence. They have to be an expert on all these things, or at least be a referral. Urban pastors work longer hours than their rural counterparts, and they put in more administrative work hours. They’re around people all day long, but they’re some of the loneliest people on the planet.”

Stone and Associate Professor Claire Wolfteich, his codirector at the CPT, are engaged in a long-term study of what makes outstanding urban ministers and what keeps them that way. With a \$2 million grant from the

Lilly Endowment, they ran a five-year project called Sustaining Urban Pastoral Excellence (SUPE), working with ninety-six Christian pastors in cities across the country to strengthen practices of partnership and friendship, Sabbath, study and reflection, and spiritual renewal. With ever-growing demands on emotional, financial, and organizational resources, the best ministers, Stone and Wolfteich found, were those who could not only preach and counsel well, but could build a community of their peers, consciously take time away from their ministries, and engage in regular courses of study and spiritual renewal.

The SUPE project had pastors form four-member partnerships, groups that met biweekly to discuss a specific issue of uniting importance. The project also funded sabbaticals, which it framed in terms of Sabbath-keeping. “It’s the ability to rest, even when your work is vital and life-giving to you and others, and even life-and-death in some contexts,” Wolfteich says. “There was a real angst some pastors expressed about what it would mean for them to be away.” After, most recognized that their sense of being essential to their congregation’s functioning was misplaced; some even called it idolatrous.

Listening to the pastors, Wolfteich says, it became apparent that there was a “dissonance between what they were saying was life-giving and the rhythms and patterns of our own students.” Pastors were validating the need for peace, faith reflection, and community; students were running to classes, internships, and other jobs.

Now, with a new Lilly grant of nearly \$1 million, Stone and Wolfteich will spend the next five years integrating the lessons they learned into the fabric of STH’s ministry education. Most of the thirty to forty ministers that STH turns out every year will wind up in urban congregations, but little is done to prepare students to balance the challenges they’ll face.

As SUPE enters its next phase, that dissonance between training and practice will be a focal point. “There is a whole range of things we want people to learn in seminary,” Stone says: “counseling, preaching, leading worship, being a theologian, understanding the serious ethical issues that face us at this time. But if you can do all that and yet burn out completely within four years, what good does it do?”

OPENING DOORS HER DENOMINATION WOULD SHUT

THE REV. TIFFANY STEINWERT (STH’01) has done something unusual in these days of mainline denominational struggle: she has started a new Methodist church in the city. And she’s done something near-unthinkable in the United Methodist tradition: she has made that church specifically welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

For Tiffany Steinwert (STH’01), the pastor’s role is to bear witness to transformative moments in people’s lives.



Cambridge Welcoming Ministries is one of the new partner congregations that Stone and Wolfeich will connect with in the next phase of the SUPE project. These congregations will be contributors to a new kind of theological training; the pastors selected for the project, like Steinwert, will be role models who live their work and faith in sustaining ways, amid the pressure, noise, and friction of urban life and urban church work.

Cambridge Welcoming is housed in a majestic old Methodist church in Somerville, Massachusetts, that's home also to a traditional congregation. Steinwert says the thirty people who gather with her on Sundays tend to be young, theologically and socially progressive, religiously diverse, and passionate. Some come for a while and return to a nongay church, having gotten what they need; others stay, committed to the church's activism for equality within the denomination. "They are people seeking reconciliation and transformation," says Steinwert, an articulate, put-together woman whose polished exterior nearly masks the radical's soul within. They want to "reconnect with God, the church, or themselves," and as a community, they are "committed to living out the vision of God's peace and justice in the world."

Steinwert says that's in line with the teachings of John Wesley, the denomination's founder, and with the mission of the Methodist Church. And yet in April, as she and nine members of her ministry looked on, the 2008 General Conference of the United Methodist Church reiterated its stance that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Steinwert's group wept as the decision was issued.

"It's always difficult for me to ask people to join, when I know I'm asking them to join a church that says, 'We do not want you,'" says Steinwert, who has a Master of Divinity from BU and is finishing her doctoral dissertation. "It takes a person who can live in that tension, for whom future hope outweighs present pain. It takes a person whose faith is deepened through struggle."

Pastoring, she says, is about bearing witness to moments of transformation, big and small. She's sat at deathbeds and watched family members forgive and reconcile after years of dysfunction. She's walked with people through the early phases of coming out to their families and living as a gay person. Again and again, she says, she's been moved by intimate glimpses of grace and renewal. "And the special thing about the pastor's role is that I don't do anything," she says. "It's the Holy Spirit who is ministering to these people. I just facilitate and witness it."

One such transformative moment has stayed in her mind. On a quiet Sunday when only a handful of people had turned out for services, a man walked in about ten minutes after worship had begun. The congregation was seated in a small circle, and Steinwert was asking people what had brought them there that day.



Karen Fritz juggles resources and needs, but her ministry comes down to the basics: community and love.

"We got to him, and the man begins to weep, and he can't talk," she says. "After about five minutes, he said, 'I came here because yesterday I lost my marriage and my church. After twenty-five years of marriage I came out as being gay. My wife kicked me out, and my pastor told me I was going to hell. I had no other place to turn, but I saw your sign and thought I might be welcome.'"

"I don't know the man's name, and I don't know what happened to him. He never came back. But it was a holy, sacred time, being present for his grief."

A VITAL COMMUNITY HUB, DESPITE IT ALL

THE REV. KAREN FRITZ is pastor of the Brighton Allston Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, a 181-year-old congregation with 2008 problems all over the place. Take your pick: there's keeping your doors open to the community groups who want to use your building while trying to pay the heating bills with only sixty low-to-middle income members. There's keeping your weekly community supper going, feeding the poor and elderly in your neighborhood, when the city tells you that you're violating restaurant codes and



Urban ministries are community builders, providing an antidote to the anonymity of the city.

need to renovate your kitchen. And there's ministering to a multiethnic, transient congregation and to the needy and neglected who use your food pantry. And that's while trying to keep something going for yourself, like a family life or a faith life.

But Fritz, a down-to-earth, nurturing, and slightly frazzled woman, sparkles when she talks about it. She's a problem-solver and a dot-connector, and her congregation, limited in resources, mirrors those traits. "Folks in Brighton and Allston are just real folks, working-class folks doing their best to get by," Fritz says. "And then there's this whole mix of folks passing through, grad students, professors, medical students. It can be difficult, because people join, they're great leaders, and then they're gone. It's constant turnover."

If her positive energy fades for a moment, her resiliency soon kicks it back into gear. "But that adds vitality to the mix. Because so many people are here for a short time, we're home for everybody. We are whoever we are in that moment."

Back in 2005, Fritz was one of the ninety-six pastors from around the country invited to take part in STH's SUPE project. It came along at the right time. She'd been in a rough patch, and the weight of expectations was wearing her down. For six months, she met once a week with three other women pastors from Boston, and "a lot of it was just, 'Oh my God, you won't believe what I have to deal with this week.'" But the group talked seriously, too, focusing on the issue of trauma. "We talked about how to be midwives of Sabbath, or peace, in a world where there's so much coming at us. And how to be a calming presence and sit beside someone who has experienced trauma and help them move forward."

What has lasted from her experience is a greater

sense of balance. "Before, I took everyone's pain to heart," she says. "Now I breathe more. I still really expect that when someone comes to the church, the church will address their needs. But addressing the need is different than meeting it. Because we can't, with the incredible needs; I'd never sleep at night. I've gotten more peace around that."

Mostly, the congregation manages to find its own fragile balance between need and resource. The church runs a twice-weekly thrift shop whose small proceeds, Fritz says, help pay the bills. And a new concert series, she hopes, will fund the kitchen renovations she needs to keep the community supper up to code.

The supper feeds about sixty people a week, and it's a vital thread in the neighborhood fabric. It attracts the homeless, the undocumented, poor families with lots of children to feed, the mentally ill, and "people in their eighties and nineties who live alone, who just need someone to sit down to dinner with," Fritz says.

In casual conversations during dinner, she steers people to lawyers or housing advocates, tells them what their rights as tenants are, and connects them to social services and to neighbors who've faced the same problem. It's a ritual that brings things down to a basic level: providing, nourishing, giving thanks. "When we sit down to dinner, for me that's the kingdom of God right there," Fritz says. "Even though we'll walk out that door and face some hard stuff, in that moment, it's right the way it's supposed to be."

A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE FOR THE OVERLOOKED

"I THINK THIS is the ministry Jesus would do if he was walking the Earth today," says the Rev. Kathy McAdams, the pastor who leads the ecumenical mass on the Boston Common. A straightforward, rugged-looking woman who exudes a California calm, McAdams is executive director of Ecclesia Ministries, another of STH's new partner congregations. The mass, called *common cathedral*, is the centerpiece of a range of spiritual and communal activities for the homeless that McAdams oversees during the week, including art classes, a Friday movie and discussion, AA meetings, prayer and reflection, and lots of street outreach. And there are community outings, too, to places like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and Georges Island in Boston Harbor.

Mostly, McAdams spends her days listening. She connects people to substance abuse services, mental and physical health services, shelters, and housing resources, but she also offers something less tangible, and rarer: friendship.

"Most of the people who come to me aren't asking for anything," McAdams says. "They just want someone to really hear who they are and what they're going through. They're looking for somebody who will hold

trust with them, hold hope with them. They just want to connect.”

Congregants at the Sunday mass range in color and age, and they cover a spectrum from overtly disturbed to affable and articulate. (Not all are homeless; Ecclesia teams with wealthier, “housed” congregations, whose members bring sandwiches and snacks for an after-mass meal and for McAdams to hand out on the streets.) Just like at any mass, there are the regulars, who position themselves near the large, handcrafted wooden cross that marks *common cathedral*’s altar, and there are the tentative outliers, who linger just beyond the circle, on the grass or along the edge of a nearby fountain.

“I want to remind you that we’re all invited to share in this service, no matter how unworthy we may feel,” McAdams says as she offers a communion of bread and grape juice.

When familiar faces are missing from the circle, other members offer prayers for their safety and return. They pray, and often weep, for the jailed brother, the uncle who’s struggling with cancer, the friends who’ve finally found a room and are trying to stay sober, the mother who’s sick, the children who are somewhere else. Birthdays are celebrated, not just with prayers but with cake.

After the mass, everyone lines up for sandwiches. They converge on McAdams, who later says they mostly talk about day-to-day struggles. “I was asking

those three guys how it’s going — they all recently became housed,” she says. “One of them was saying the best part was not having to wait for the public restrooms to open every morning.”

The needs of the community are enormous, and keeping those needs from overwhelming her is a daily struggle, McAdams admits. “I can’t fill all those needs, and I don’t feel like that’s what I’m called to do. I feel like our ministry is about walking with people on their journey and being with them in their need. It’s me saying, ‘Wow, that sucks that your stuff got stolen.’ It doesn’t mean I’m going to go buy you new stuff. But I’m going to sit with you and feel that.”

Rob Nofsinger (STH’09), who will spend this year doing fieldwork with Ecclesia for his Master of Divinity, says it takes a radical selflessness to do the work McAdams and her team do. “It’s loving without needing a return,” he says, “which is exactly the opposite of what the world says. The world says, ‘Love because you’re going to get something out of it.’ There’s no fanfare. It’s just you out here demonstrating your faith on a daily basis.”

But McAdams finds rewards every day. Her own faith is deepened, she says, “when I can be with someone who is carrying everything they own in this bag, and they can give thanks to God for taking care of them. It continually reminds me that we need so little. We need God and we need each other. Everything else can kind of fall into place.” ■

WATCH A slide show of one urban minister explaining her congregation’s vital role in the Allston-Brighton community.

Kathy McAdams says her ministry is about walking with people on their journeys, sharing their hope and pain.

