

St. Peter's Catholic Student Center

Ashley Palmer

Baylor University

Introduction

It would be impossible to attend a mass or any other event at St. Peter's Catholic Student Center without being overwhelmed by the demographics of the congregation. Unlike the average Catholic parish, St. Peter's is predominantly composed of young adults. Located in Waco, TX, adjacent to the campus of Baylor University, the largest Baptist university in the world, this small church is a thriving center for young Catholics. Attracting its membership from the local Catholic population and the neighboring university, its membership is ethnically diverse—white, Latino, and Asian—and educated, most coming from a middle to upper-middle class background. Though this group has existed locally in various formulations since the 1950s, only in the past ten years has it transformed into a named community with the building of the center. Still in its infancy, the church has made vast strides in establishing itself as a home for young Catholics at Baylor and, increasingly, the broader Catholic community.

The Story of St. Peter's

The story of St. Peter's began more than fifty years ago when the Austin Diocese purchased a small house near the campus of Baylor University to be used as a meeting area for the local Catholic student population. For years, the house operated more as a Catholic social center than a church: its staffing was intermittent and unfocused and students had to go elsewhere for mass. Three decades later, the diocese made the group a mission of a local Catholic church, which it remained until becoming a named community in 2004. Having outgrown the house it occupied, the Catholic student group began sharing space at the Methodist student center in 1992. It remained headquartered there until

the completion of the current facility, which it has called home for roughly a decade.

Having established a permanent residence, St. Peter's had a greater source of continuity and stability. In the years since the group was first formed in the 1950s, it had been served by roughly a dozen different priests. And despite having formerly occupied a house of its own, the Catholic group had never had its own location to celebrate mass. An article in the campus newspaper written during the planning and building of the center conveyed the anticipation for such a place. There, the former director noted that having the center would give the Catholic students a greater sense of belonging. Although leadership transitions have challenged the church's base at times, St. Peter's has nevertheless seen its community grow and thrive. The first priest assigned to the center established an effective model for the engagement of the young adult community that the current priest has adopted and continues to refine. The defining features of this model can help to advise other congregations seeking to engage young adults in their own faith communities.

A Church to Call Home

More than any other terms used to describe the community, St. Peter's members consistently talk about the church as a "family" and a "home." A student-made video featured on the church's website captures this sentiment perfectly, with young members describing the love and unconditional support that they've felt through their participation in the community. One young adult is explicit about this: "St. Peter's has been so much more than just a church. It's been a family to me." Another echoes this sentiment, "These people here have become not my second family but a part of my family." As the video concludes, the word "Home" is displayed across the screen with two voices saying, "St. Peter's is my home."

That St. Peter's is a home and a family was also apparent in my conversations with members and my participation in church events. One young man explained that the church is more of a home to him than the place he currently lives: "Whenever I pull into town, I don't even go home first; I go to St.

Peter's." Having this kind of connection to the church is an important source of continuity and stability for young adults because this period of life is characterized by instability and transience. Though apartments and roommates may change annually for young adults, the church and the support of its community remain. Not only do young adults at the church conceive of it as their family and home, but this idea is also reinforced by their interactions with the Chaplain and director of the center, Fr. Anthony. In celebrating the Baccalaureate mass last spring, his warm, fatherly demeanor toward the young adults and their reciprocal care and respect for him were evident both in his delivery of the homily and the heartfelt good-byes exchanged. As in a family whose child is leaving home for the first time, he conveyed a feeling of loving support and hopefulness, but sadness at the loss of the person's presence. Older adults in the community are also often understood as occupying parental roles.

As a family and a home, St. Peter's is an important of support and unity to the members. Those I spoke with found comfort in knowing that they could locate support in the church in times of crises and pointed to occasions in which other members had helped them through personal struggles. In addition, the family analogy helps members to find a common bond that unites different social groups within the church. Although members acknowledged the existence of different cliques or social circles within the community, these are not ultimately divisive boundaries. As one member explained, "It fills a void that maybe you've had all your life for a community, for just a family...even if you disagree sometimes...you grow." In other words, members understand that, like a family whose members do not always get along, they are nevertheless united in a single support system that is stronger than its disagreements.

Merging the Social and the Spiritual

Understanding St. Peter's as a home for its young members is facilitated by the fact that the church is also a student center. This dual function is conducive to the overlap of spiritual and social life. Students are constantly at the center because it is a place *for them* and their constant presence leads to the blending of the

religious and social. Young members sometimes talked about the interweaving of spiritual and social life as a holistic experience of faith. Not only do they worship, plan, and execute spiritual activities there, they also use the space to study, watch movies together, make communal meals in the kitchen, and socialize in the narthex. It is common for conversations to evolve from the mundane to the deeply theological. And the context encourages them to explore theological discussions further. Religious debates are solved by fetching the Catechism from an adjoining room or explored by inviting the chaplain or other adult member into the discussion.

The center is always abuzz with activity, leading to a ready supply of participants for ministries and events. On the evening that I attended the church's praise and worship ministry, The Rock, almost all of the participants were young adults who had already been hanging out or socializing in the narthex. Rather than arriving at the church specifically for the event, members who had been there for other purposes fluidly transitioned from doing one thing at the church to engaging in a worship activity there.

The spiritual and social overlap of the St. Peter's community also helps engage young adults because it creates friendship ties which are rooted in their shared faith and connection to the church. Many young adults I spoke with told me that they had formed their closest friendships as a result of participating in activities at the church. One young adult within the church's chapter of the Knights of Columbus indicated that his participation in this group and the church community were mutually reinforcing. Through the Knights, he formed deep friendships with other church members. Participating in the organization and the life of the church provided a medium for the growth of these friendships which simultaneously fostered his spiritual development.

Grassroots Young Adult Leadership

A third defining feature of the St. Peter's community that contributes to the successful engagement of young adults is the church's approach to leadership. St. Peter's administration is small, consisting only of four members: the chaplain, an

administrator, and two deacons who volunteer their services. By all accounts, these positions are insufficient to meet the leadership needs of the community. However, aside from these official positions and a handful of advisory roles occupied by other adults, St. Peter's is run completely by the young adult members of the church.

When he was assigned to St. Peter's a few years ago, Fr. Anthony inherited a leadership model put in place by the previous chaplain: give the young adults in the community as much leadership as possible in order to (1) develop them as leaders so that (2) the church's ministries and activities reflect the interests and initiatives of the community. Rather than employing a top-down approach to leadership that would dictate the activity of the community, Fr. Anthony promotes grassroots leadership from the young adults at the church. Although he might plant the seed for activities or ministries to particular young members, he encourages them to develop the initiative, charging them with the idea that it is their church.

Fr. Anthony continues to refine this leadership model by adding more checks and balances in the decision-making process. For example, the church now has a Pastoral Council composed of young adult members, in which he also encourages permanent community members (older adults) to participate. He also encourages greater attention to budgeting for activities. In general, however, the barriers to involvement for leadership are low, requiring little to no training, and opportunities are accessible for those initiative. As a former council member told me, "you just jump in."

Having young adults in leadership roles is important for several reasons. Seeing one's peers in leadership lowers the perceived barriers to entering leadership positions. Leadership also gives young adults ownership of the church and its activities, and makes them further invested in all aspects of church life. Furthermore, young adult leadership roles in the church are important because they help young adults develop experience that can be used in the next phase of their parish involvement.

Supportive Adult Community

The nature of the relationship between the young adult and adult communities within the church is key to its success. As a Catholic student center, St. Peter's occupies a unique position as a worship community. In recent years, a ruling by the US Bishops erected obstacles to student center becoming parishes. In the words of an adult that I spoke with from the community, "They basically made this ruling...that student centers need to be student-centered." On one hand, this limits the involvement of adults and families from the permanent (non-student) community. On the other hand, it means that those who are part of the community see their involvement as conducive to or supportive of this mission.

In fact, young and older adults alike that I spoke with at the church tended to understand older adult involvement in the church in a supportive capacity. Consistent with the language of family that church members employ, one young adult noted that adults at the church seem to occupy parental roles, with younger members treating them as older family members deserving respect. When asked about her role in the church, an adult member explained, "I don't know how I fit in yet. I like it. I love it. And I'm there if they need me. Sometimes the girls will come talk to me and sometimes they don't. But I just, I guess I'm just play a supportive role. I'm there if somebody wants to talk. If not, then that's ok, too."

When asked whether the adult community of the church functions in a supportive capacity for the younger members, another adult endorsed this relationship:

I would say that's what it needs to be because in any parish you need to support the...young people who are in the process of developing those boundaries. And so to have strong mentor-like people in that community...you need to have those people present and helping those younger people any way they can whether it be delivering burritos or donuts or making chocolate chip cookies—it don't matter, if the conversation can happen when you deliver those cookies. And so I think that the support that people feel is very important and for those kids to

feel that there is a group out there that really looks after them and when they get into a pinch, that if they need someone, perhaps they can go to the donut delivery man or to the cookie delivery woman, whoever it be.

His comment points to both the supportive aspect of the adult-young adult relationship in the church, but also the importance of adults as mentors. Younger members, too, expressed a need for mentorship and guidance. A lay leader from the young adult community explained the importance of having a set of adults that younger members can turn to as mentors, especially for those who have been in leadership positions and are at risk of burnout.

Although adults conceived of themselves as supporting actors in the church, those that chose to remain members at St. Peter's still felt spiritually fed. When asked specifically about being an adult in a predominantly young adult church, many said that they appreciated the vibrancy and energy of the youthful community. As one adult lay leader described her initial experience, "I was just totally floored [by the active participation of the young adult community] and I figured there had to be something really important going on here." In addition, the adults in the church consistently pointed to the chaplain as a compelling homilist and spiritually grounded individual whose preaching "challenges you as a human" regardless of whether you are a young adult.

Attentiveness to Context

The final characteristic of St. Peter's that facilitates the active engagement of the young adult community is the church's attentiveness to its context. The vast majority of the young adults that the church serves are affiliated with the local university, which is an officially Baptist institution. Because of this, young Catholics often find themselves defending or explaining their faith to evangelistically-oriented Protestants. Many young members reported that Protestants do not typically understand the Catholic faith, particularly with respect to doctrine regarding Mary, the saints, and transubstantiation. In one sense, then, St. Peter's has become a safe haven for Catholic students who may feel misunderstood by their non-Catholic peers. One member explained the

church as a safe haven for her, a respite where she can be in a community that understands the traditions of her faith.

Additionally, St. Peter's encourages young adults to better understand their Catholic faith and to do so in a way that allows them to dialogue with non-Catholics. A former RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) director specifically developed a scripturally based form of religious education for St. Peter's members in response to the Protestant context. This provided the Catholic young adults with a form of Christian apologetics that would make sense to non-Catholics who might question or challenge their beliefs and traditions.

Indeed, the context of the university fosters an obligation to be emotionally attached to a faith. As one lay leader noted, Catholic students have picked up some sense of the Protestant emphasis of the role of emotionality in faith. Some members pointed to the use of acoustic guitar in worship as evidence of the Protestant influence. Working with the desire for this kind of faith experience, St. Peter's offers The Rock, a praise and worship ministry which incorporates speakers, fellowship, and praise music. One member explained that having a Wednesday night ministry like this is something of a Catholic take on a Protestant tradition.

Nevertheless, the need for an intellectual experience of faith and the paramount importance of tradition for young Catholics predominates at St. Peter's. Young members consistently cited tradition as the thing they most liked about their Catholic faith and many young members could not help but intellectualize when discussing their theological views and those of the church. One member described her awe at being part of a tradition that connects churches, parishes, and people across the world. St. Peter's, thus, also attracts the young adult community by emphasizing the distinctions of its tradition.

Conclusion

St. Peter's is successful at attracting young adults in part because it occupies a particular niche in the local setting. Its proximity to a Baptist university means that it is an easily accessible option for Catholic students. But its success as a

church that caters to young adults is more than a matter of convenience. The defining features of the St. Peter's community effectively engage this community, and these are features that can be adopted by churches looking to reach the young adult community. First, young adults benefit from having a space that is their own. Although not every church can be student- or young adult-centered, providing a space within the church that they can inhabit and personalize gives young adults a sense of connection to the church. This connection is also achieved by combining the social and spiritual. St. Peter's young adults felt that the friendships created in the church and the ability to engage there socially provided a more holistic experience of faith.

St. Peter's also effectively engages its young adult members by providing them with leadership opportunities, which they both initiate and run. Providing young adults with leadership roles further invests them in the life of the church and means that they know the audience their efforts are intended to engage. Having a supportive adult community to which young members can turn for advice in their endeavors as well as for mentoring and spiritual guidance makes this possible. The young adult and adult members function in complementary fashion because they share a unity of purpose in the activities and ethos of the church.

Finally, St. Peter's successfully engages young adults because it is attentive and responsive to its context. As a Catholic student center serving the young Catholics on a Baptist campus, the needs of the St. Peter's community are unique. However, the lesson that can be generalized to other congregations is that church offerings tailored to the unique circumstances of a given community can be used to meet the needs of the young adults there.