



Sanctifying time on a College Campus – “Ash Wednesday is in the middle of sorority rush”



by Amy McCreath

Behold, I bring tidings of good news: we are in a period of lively liturgical innovation and renewal in Episcopal and Anglican campus ministries.

Spurred on by a new generation of chaplains who grew up using the "new" prayer book; by the freedom with which our emerging church friends dig through the liturgical treasures of the Church to serve a postmodern world; and by a determination to help the iPod-bound learn how to be physically and emotionally present to one another, campus ministries are doing noteworthy work in connecting liturgy and mission.

The goal of this new column in OPEN is to help the church take note of it. Each new column will tell the story of a campus-based worship experiment, process or innovation.

We will be hearing from practitioners in college chaplaincy work from a wide diversity of American and Canadian settings. My guess is that some of it will delight you and some of it will worry you; campus ministry has a grand tradition of doing both to the Church. But since we serve the rising generation – the folks who will soon decide whether to join *your* congregation or study at *your* seminary

– these are trends worth attending to and truths worth hearing. My hope is that some of the stories also will raise questions or possibilities for parish-based liturgical practice. I would love to hear whether and how that happens. So be in touch.

For our inaugural column, I am going to begin by sharing some of the work, and the questions behind the work, from my own stomping ground, the [Lutheran Episcopal Ministry](#) (LEM) at MIT. Coming to campus work from parish ministry six years ago, it took me a while to really see and feel that the rhythm of life, the cycles of energy, and the seasons of possibility and risk are very different here. The academic calendar, the traditions of the particular college, the sports' seasons, and the upheavals and battles a particular student group or administration are weathering in a particular year are foreground. Liturgical seasons (and certainly stewardship season) are background.

Problem-sets are due on Good Friday. Ash Wednesday is in the middle of sorority rush. Sorting through these events and cycles with an eye to sanctifying time as I was trained in seminary is no mean feat. It is not that students don't celebrate Christmas; but our students don't celebrate Christmas together. It is not that the students' parents back home are not aware of

exam week; but when we come together at LEM to pray during exams, we hold one another's hopes in a very immediate, particular way. In light of this, what do we gain and what do we lose if we simply march through the feasts and fasts of the Church year, insisting that *this* is God's time?

Our campus, like most, acknowledges the holiness of certain academic moments – convocation, graduation, the institution of a new president – by inviting a chaplain to offer an invocation. This is usually a bland serving of thankfulness to our creator for our gifts and our opportunities. I've offered such a prayer, but even while uttering it, I was thinking "Surely, there is more at stake, more to name, more to reveal here."

Several years ago, my Lutheran colleague and I starting wondering with our student leaders about how LEM could better mark and pray through the significant moments and seasons of campus life. We thought together about when students were most likely to be "poor in spirit," when much seemed at risk, when critical decisions about vocation and identity were up for grabs. From there, we began consciously trying to create liturgies and shape liturgical elements and prayer practices that honor the particular lives of the students at this particular school.

We started at the beginning, with the first day of the fall term. We kick off the year with a "blessing of the backpacks," an idea we did not invent, but which we adapted for our community. Students heap their backpacks, iBooks, test tubes, and other symbols of lab equipment on the altar steps. We gather around it, each offer our "one great hope" for the year ahead, all raise a hand in blessing, and pray together that these tools may help us do work that is part of the work of God, work of peacemaking, reconciliation, and justice-sowing.

We developed a tradition of praying for freshmen as they prepared for their first-ever round of college exams in December. We gather together to make soup while every freshman at MIT is slaving over their first, and most notoriously difficult, exam: the Freshman Physics exam. As they exit the exam room, we invite them next door for a free soup lunch, and about two hundred and fifty of them come.

We developed a prayer journal to give out to students, which has suggested prayers listed for each week. We incorporated prayers for the faculty, for the facilities crew, and for the campus police. We note the feast days of patron saints of engineering, science, medicine, and architecture, the vocations towards which most MIT students are moving. The photos in the journal are of normal, "secular" places at MIT, suggesting that they are in a house of prayer wherever they are on campus, even if they never set foot in our beautiful Chapel.

As Erik Erikson noted, the central struggles of young adulthood are with questions of intimacy and isolation. Much of the suffering of the college years is a sense of being alone and at risk – academically, socially, spiritually, and physically. Our culture, replete with technology proffering unlimited connectivity, but leaving students unequipped for meaning-making and interpersonal thriving, does little to support students through this suffering.

The sacramental tradition holds that God works in us and through us in real time and in real people. It would seem a particular calling of our campus ministries to help students marry *chronos* and *kairos*.

A few years ago, Bonnie Perry spoke at our diocesan convention about her parish's practice of honoring "secular holy days." At All Saints', Ravenswood in Chicago, they strive to honor the real lives of the actual baptized there in the neighborhood where the church is located. She gave an example of a memorial service they held for a type of tree that had characterized the neighborhood for generations, all of which were being cut down because they had an incurable disease. I think that what we are trying to do at LEM is along these lines: listen carefully to one another, look intently at our surroundings through God's eyes, and create outward and visible signs of what God is doing in our midst.

I have nothing against rogation days. I love to beat the bounds. Bringing alive the holy times our ancestors in the faith honored in ways that speak to the 21st century is a great project and a blessing that expands our spiritual sensibilities. But my experience on campus has been that there are other rhythms and moments of sacramental truth to set alongside these. I wonder what the "secular holy days" of your congregation are?

Amy McCreath is in her seventh year as Episcopal Campus Minister and Coordinator of the Technology and Culture Forum at MIT.

She is also Coordinator of Ministries in Higher Education for Province I of ECUSA. A graduate of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL, she serves as Vice-President of APLM.

A Response to the first "Liturgy & Mission on Campus" Column

by Donald Schell



I am excited at the start of this new column. I write as founding rector, with Rick Fabian, of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, San Francisco. Our liturgy and vision of community were born in college work at the Episcopal Church at Yale. From 1971-1977, at daily sung Eucharist Monday through Friday and Sunday evenings, a shape for a gathering, specific practices, new music, and our distinctive understanding of the work underway in Trial Use preparatory to the 1979 BCP got shaped. Bright, committed students with the knowledge they were doing something counter-cultural, traditional and innovative took ideas we had formed in seminary and turned them into something much, much more powerful – it was an expression of congregation-tested practice and experience.

I was heartbroken in the 1980s and 1990s to see our graying church in various dioceses and on campuses turn its back on university-based congregations, typically with the insistence that the students should go to whatever regular parish was nearest the campus; it was a generational power move that helped ensure our congregations' median ages would keep rising until we had lost a whole generation of young lay and clergy leaders. If APLM helps our Church hear what is possible in university settings, highlights good work, and raises the profile of what Amy and other leaders are helping students make and do, we will be doing something of value to the whole church and every congregation in it.

Donald Schell is consultant and creative director of All Saints Company, continuing work he began at St. Gregory of Nyssa, San Francisco as a founding rector. Donald also served the Episcopal Church at Yale as a college chaplain. He is on the Council of APLM and author of various books, chapters and publications on singing and other kinds of community-making, sacred space, pilgrimage, theology in ordinary human experience, and discernment.