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Emily Scott tells of the first months of founding St. Lydia's, her new effort at liturgical evangelism and community building with young adults in New York City. The congregation that she began and that's now taking steps to shape its own life is still, as she says, 'hot off the press,' and she tells the beginning of a story that invites us to ask for more. Here as St. Lydia's is just begun and while the thinking and experience are in formative stages she writes about what prompted this beginning, how she made initial choices, what church and organizational thinking she drew on to shape a new start-up. With the unguarded voice of those moments of beginnings, she's asking what the work of starting something really is. That question of how to begin something new can speak to any church leader and any congregation. It's always going to be specific and local, anyone risking the spiritual and practical work of first steps will welcome hear not just of the progress St. Lydia's has made, but how that progress was made, and what they learned along the way.

Starting from Scratch: What Church Planting Looked like for St. Lydia's

by Emily M. D. Scott



St. Lydia's is a brand new thing, hot off the press. We're barely a church yet, but I have a feeling that we're doing something right. With God's grace and plenty of forgiveness for one another, we'll be stronger and bolder with each passing year. In this piece, I'd like to offer some early, personal reflections on where we are and how we got there, in the hopes that they might be of help to a reader who would like to make something from scratch, be it a new church, a piece of art, a sermon or a business.

The idea for St. Lydia's was born from a culturally-based experience. In the summer of 2007, I moved to New York City to take a job at the Riverside Church. Moving back to New York meant an opportunity to reconnect with many of my old friends from college, now living and working as artists in the city. Working to establish a friends group, I began to notice something about the culture in which I was participating. First, my peers found it weird that I worked at a church. Second, it seemed to be hard for people to make friends, especially outside of their immediate networks (such as their jobs). Third, people in New York never hosted one another in their homes. I noticed that when I had people over for dinner in my tiny studio apartment, rather than seeming cramped for space, they were awestruck by the concept of homemade food. I started talking with folks about religion and about God, and began to realize that there were plenty of younger people out there who were looking for a church – they just hadn't found one that worked for them.

I started to think about what a church for the city might look like, and I began talking to people about such a church. I had a lot of conversations, with all sorts of people. I talked to Donald Schell and Rick Fabian, who founded St. Gregory's, and Daniel Simons, the Executive Director of All Saints Company. I talked to Siobhan Garrigan, who remade the chapel program at Yale Divinity School. I talked to every priest and minister I

knew, to friends and people I met in bars and at parties. I talked to Rachel Pollak, a friend, artist, and now collaborator, who will move to New York this summer, in part to contribute to this project. I asked everyone for advice, and as vision started to take shape, I talked to them about it again. The vision was this: a church based around the table, where New Yorkers could come to share a home-cooked meal. We would gather Tuesday evening (this later shifted to Sunday evening) because Sunday morning is when New Yorkers go out for brunch. We would sing mostly "paperless" music, taught phrase by phrase by a music leader, because of its simple beauty, theological strength, and ability to draw communities together through the act of learning together. Everyone would be engaged in the work of making church – asked to set the table or stir the soup as soon as they walked in the door, just as you would be when arriving at a good friend's house for dinner. We would not be a ready-made church, but a home-made church, where everyone was engaged in the act of building.

Then, I read. I read a thin book called *10 Mistakes New Church Starts Make*, which reminded me not to get so excited about this church that I forget about God, and warned me that churches can grow much faster than they can develop strong leadership and funding. I read everything Malcolm Gladwell has written, especially *The Tipping Point*, which talks about how ideas take off and turn into epidemics. Perhaps most importantly, I read *Art of the Start*, written by Guy Kawasaki who remade Apple in the 1980's. It's a sharply written guide about how to start *anything*, and it

gave me the tools I needed to bring my ideas into focus and begin. I learned that good ideas will survive mistakes, and if St. Lydia's is a good idea, it will roll downhill faster than we can chase it. I learned that good ideas are by nature evangelistic – that if St. Lydia's is working right, the folks who come will tell others about it with no prompting, just as loyal customers do for companies such as Apple. Finally, I learned that the best thing I could do was just to start and see what happened, so I dove in and began.

The first gathering of St. Lydia's took place in a colleague's living room on the first

Tuesday of Advent. There were twelve folks at that first gathering, all people who I had talked to about this vision of St. Lydia's, and drawn into the act of imagining what it

might be. We ranged in age from early twenties to mid-sixties, and were remarkably balanced in terms of gender and sexual orientation. We cooked dinner together, sang and lit the candles at the table, and blessed the bread and our meal. Seated around the table, we read and interpreted scripture, and then blessed the cup. We cleaned up together and passed the Peace. When our four gatherings had concluded, I realized that strangers were becoming friends.

Six months later, St. Lydia's has grown into a congregation with an average attendance of 15 people. At the start of the New Year, we began a relationship with a Lutheran church called Trinity Lower East Side. Their Pastor, Phil Tryznka, is an encouraging and creative partner in this work, and the congregation



has warmly welcomed us into their space as well as their lives. Trinity serves a daily hot meal to over 250 homeless individuals in the East Village, and this common theology and practice of feeding people ties us together. We met at Trinity for eight consecutive Sundays from Lent into Easter, and found that each week we grew together in love. As needs arose, offerings were brought, from salt and pepper shakers to empty yogurt containers to take home leftovers. Our cleanup time after worship slowly evolved into a dance party, and a congregant made a mixed CD filled with Prince and Madonna. On Easter we decorated our tables with a congregant's colorful pashmina scarves and sprinkled cut daffodils at the place settings. Congregants call me each week to see what we need that evening, and they arrive with their arms full of gifts: flowers or wine or juice or dessert. Each week is a feast of abundance and generosity.

Through the summer, we'll be meeting the first Sunday of the month, and in the Fall we'll launch as a full-time congregation that meets every Sunday night. We'll have a budget, a part time coordinator, and will, with God's grace, blossom into a thriving ministry. I can see God's plans for St. Lydia's like a gradually evolving architectural sketch. The drawings morph slowly from iteration to iteration, gaining clarity with the passing of time and experimentation. After a few years of meeting on Sunday nights, we'll discover that we're feeling a little too big for our space and the intimate nature of our worship. We'll start another gathering on Tuesday nights, and then another one on Thursdays. In time, I imagine that we'll have our own space in the city, complete with a backyard where we grow tomatoes for our salads and compost our scraps. I hope St. Lydia's will become a place that is tied to the life of the community. We'll hold free movie nights and open up our space for dance rehearsals and community classes. Our collaborator and resident artist, Rachel Pollak, will lead us into a relationship with the visual arts that conceives of art as growing out of and emerging from community. The possibilities seem wide open and immensely exciting. They'll change and shift as we grow, originating from and reverberating through the congregation, becoming more and more vital.

Here are the most important things that I've learned. Whatever you're starting, I hope these four points can offer insight and encouragement.

1. Pray

If you don't know what to do, just pray. God will answer.

2. Don't push

You are not in charge of what you are building: God is in charge. God will tell you when you are ready to take the next step. Don't try to launch an ad campaign, build a building, or open a Community Arts Center until God tells you it's time. Your congregation will tell you, too.

3. Do not fear

The thing you are building will unfold one step at a time. Take each challenge as it comes and know that God will not give you more than you can handle. The first eight weeks at Trinity Lower East Side were a crash course in everything I had ever feared, and everything I needed to work on. Conflict. Awkward social situations. Learning not to take care of people. Talking about money. The lessons came one at a time, and I learned from each. All I have to do now is keep learning.

4. Follow the Spirit

Like a parent teaching you to swim, God is moving backwards, encouraging you to move out into deep water. There's nothing more terrifying, and nothing more grace-filled. Starting something from scratch means trusting, trusting, trusting in the One who made you. Follow the Spirit. God is calling.

Photographs from www.stlydias.org.

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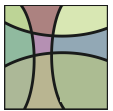
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