

Longing for belonging

A new worshiping community is providing skateboarders and isolated youth a place to call home. For the church, it's an opportunity for fresh perspectives.

BY HEATH K. RADA

Bang! A loud sound hit us as we opened the door to the warehouse in downtown Kalispell, Montana. It didn't sound like church, and certainly didn't sound like a place where we were invited to have a Communion service. But it was.

This skateboarding new worshiping community, part of the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative, is alive, well, and loud. Skateboarders showed off their stunts and opened us in worship. Among the gathered were remarkable youth (and some pretty remarkable adults too). The community is an outgrowth of First Presbyterian Church of Kalispell, where a few adults saw a need and decided to act.

After watching the skateboarders take to the air, doing backsides and nosegrinds, we were treated to a delicious dinner of hot chili. On a cold Montana night it hit the spot. The youth spread themselves out among the gathered adults (the gathering was part of the Glacier Presbytery meeting) and began a dialogue.

Of particular interest to me was the commitment of the adults to this ministry. Not only were the two pastors of the church involved, but numerous other volunteers were also present. A lawyer and his wife, both of whom had a wonderful bond with the youth, played a lead role. And sitting at the table with my small group were a physician and a college professor, who helped provide musical leadership to the worshiping community. These youth come as many as three nights a week,



Heath Rada, moderator of the 221st General Assembly (2014), with some of the youth involved in the new worshiping community that has grown out of First Presbyterian Church of Kalispell, Montana

and every time adults are there to support them.

But the real attraction was the youth. Tattooed, pierced, and with hair colors that represented every hue in the rainbow, the adolescents were excited to see and welcome us. Over supper they recounted stories about their personal lives—many of which were sad stories of dysfunctional homes or school situations where they did not feel included. But when they spoke of this new worshiping community, their eyes lit up, and they showed a spirit that made most of us envious.

For the worship service three of the approximately 130 youth who

are part of this ministry shared their personal testimonials with us, particularly focusing on why this church mattered to them. They talked about belonging, of having a place to come when life was not treating them well, of having food when they might not have any at home. They talked about how they invite their classmates to come, and how at first they are labeled as crazy, or weird, because they go to church. But their friends come, and they too find a new identity, a place to be themselves.

After each testimony, each youth shared their favorite Bible verse. One of my favorites was shared by

the young man who was new to the church. He was not familiar with the Bible and had been asked to read the Gospel of John as an introduction. He told us that he had discovered a favorite passage and was excited to share it with us: John 3:16. This young man shared the passage with us in a way that we had never heard it before. It was new. It was fresh. It was exciting. And he wanted us to know that God loved us so much he gave his only son to die for us so we could go to heaven. There were few dry eyes in the room when he finished.

I admit it. I fell in love with these young people. Their fresh perspective on faith and their enthusiasm about how their lives had changed because of this church were glorious.

And this is but one of the success stories we have to tell from across the church.

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There is Centro Familia Cristiano in the Atlanta area, where most of the participants are recent immigrants from South America. There is The Bridge Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, a community that has just added a second worship service and is still outgrowing its space. Community 3 for 1 in Pittsburgh is a joint ministry we are sharing with the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of America. Two struggling congregations decided, rather than to close their doors, to find a new identity in a vulnerable community, and as a result, have found new life. And in east Tennessee, GeekWorks brings together and binds in worship self-identified gamers, computer nerds, and comic book collectors.

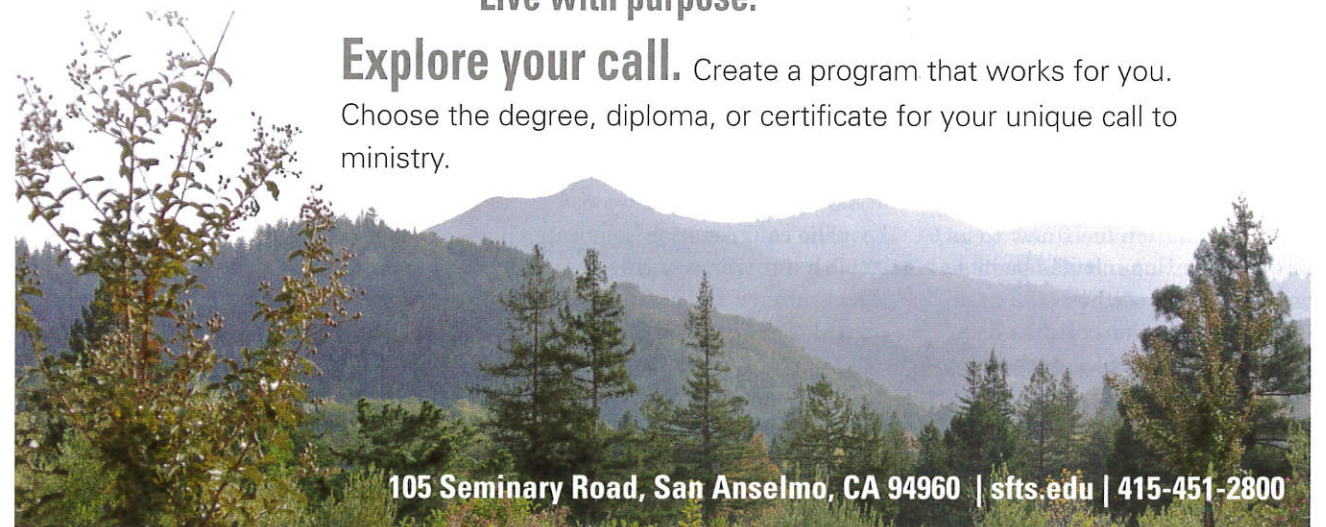
Sound gimmicky? It may be. But if you could have heard those three young people give their testimonies, you would have wanted to buy into the gimmick too. Thanks be to God for helping us to know about the faith in whatever place or space we may find ourselves. And thanks to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for supporting the development of these exciting and important worshiping communities.

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