

Episode 4: The Church at the Hospital

Part One—From Tragedy to Transformation

Megan DeWald: When a natural disaster strikes an area, there's often a lot of attention on that story—the disaster itself and then, the immediate aftermath. But long after the cameras and news crews pack up and leave, that place changes. The land itself often changes, but the disaster also changes the people. And it can change an entire trajectory of a community. Fires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, pandemics. These events don't just happen and then everything miraculously returns back to the way it was before, even though it's probably just human nature to long for that. That's still a narrative floating around these days during the COVID-19 pandemic; that we just can't wait for things to get back to normal. But there's also opportunity presented in the wake of disaster. There's always the opportunity to take advantage of other people's suffering and turn it into some kind of profit; that seems to be human nature, too. But if you've been paying attention during this difficult season, there has also been this counternarrative floating around in different places by different people—a narrative of hope, urging people to consider how we might reimagine our lives, our communities, our systems, and our world—that as we emerge onto the other side of this thing, that we just might take the opportunity to be changed as a society for the better.

Such a change is not without precedent. In August of 1883, a devastating tornado ripped through the town of Rochester, Minnesota in the Southeastern corner of the state. It flattened a third of the town, destroying 135 homes, damaging 200 more, causing 37 deaths and over 200 injuries. To make matters worse, the closest hospital was about 90 miles away in Minneapolis/St. Paul, and so the people of Rochester turned a dance hall into a makeshift emergency room. A local doctor and his two sons started treating patients, and they were joined by the Sisters of St. Francis, a Roman Catholic religious community for women, who tended to the injured. That doctor's name was William Mayo, and he was a member of Calvary Episcopal Church, a red brick building situated in the middle of town; in fact, the first church built in Rochester, in 1862. In the subsequent years following the tornado disaster, the Sisters of St. Francis and the Mayo family joined forces and recruited other doctors to establish a permanent hospital in town, which became St. Mary's Hospital and which eventually evolved into what today is known as the Mayo Clinic—one of the best hospitals in the entire world.

But what about that little Episcopal church? Well, it's still there, and today its red brick building is completely surrounded by the complex campus of the Mayo Clinic. Its members are doctors and nurses and administrators and staff and all manner of folks associated with Mayo, along with other people from different industries in town. But Calvary Episcopal Church also serves a unique population of people who have come from all over the world to receive medical care at the Mayo Clinic or to support their loved ones receiving care for a short or extended period of time. These folks also come in and out of the doors of Calvary searching for another kind of care—care for the anxious spirit, care for the troubled soul, care that brings peace and comfort and perhaps even healing.



Welcome to *Disrupting Ministry*, a podcast from the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. I'm Megan DeWald. In this podcast, we bring you stories of faith communities who are disrupting the status quo in the Church by developing innovative forms of ministry with young people. In this episode, we introduce you to Calvary Episcopal Church in Rochester, Minnesota, and explore how their unique context in a premiere medical destination has informed their dreams of connecting young people to one another and to the church.

Part Two—The Church as Caretaker

Abigail Rusert: I think one of the things that Beth brought to the table at the outset as the application was being filled out is just a connection to the families and a deep resonance also with, um, the sacramental role that the congregation plays in the life of a believer.

Megan: This is the Rev. Abigail Visco Rusert, Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry, in conversation with me about the application we received from Calvary for the Log College Project, which—as faithful listeners of the podcast know by now—is the IYM's grant initiative that has us working with 12 churches from around the country as they design, test, and implement new forms of youth ministry in their contexts. Abigail here was reflecting on the pastoral leadership of the church's Rector and Log College Project Design Fellow—the Rev. Beth Royalty, who in addition to having the best last name, has this rich theological foundation from which she practices ministry.

Abigail: There's this particular holy responsibility and, and I'm glancing at her application, and there's this great line. It says “The majority of our congregation's population is, is over 60, 60 years of age, but we have over 100 youth and children we have promised to support and uphold in their baptismal covenant.” (*Mmm.*) And I think that's really beautiful. So, there's this deep sense of, the church has to do our part. I mean, she even says later in the application, we need to discern how we are going to do this, how we're going to uphold this baptism, baptismal covenant we've made to these families with these young children. So, um, and she names very explicitly—and I, and this has been true of Beth the whole time—that there's just a lot of ownership that she has in her leadership. And that I think she allows the congregation, uh, because of her speaking it out loud, she allows the congregation to own, in a way there's a lot of owning that, ‘Hey, we don't think the way that we're doing this right now is working.’ And I think what she means by that is, ‘working to create disciples of Jesus Christ.’

Megan: In the first episode of this podcast, I spoke about a sort of open secret in the world of youth ministry—that it isn't really “working” anymore, although we're still trying to get a handle on what we mean both by “working” and by “anymore.” There have been numerous studies and reports now about how the most popular model of youth ministry—that is, the “youth group”—hasn't really fostered lifelong faithful Christian discipleship in young people, despite it still being the dominant model that churches have for doing youth ministry. It's so ingrained in the Church's imagination as *the* way to do youth ministry that the terms “youth group” and “youth ministry” are often synonymous in people's minds and vocabulary. So, when a church is aging and doesn't necessarily have a youth *group*, congregants and leaders often lament that the church doesn't have a youth *ministry*. But under Beth's leadership, the application we received from Calvary revealed something very different and deeply compelling.

Abigail: She's really pointing to that theological grounding that, like, we have vowed to care for and walk alongside these young people in their faith journeys, and we're not doing that. So, we need to allow *that* to be our measure of success, that we are being faithful to uphold this vow, um, that we've made in, in, in the presence of God and many witnesses. And, um, yeah, that, that stood out to us because I think one of the other questions that we're asking, I *know* one of the other questions we continue to ask is, ‘yeah, innovation sounds like a great idea. We're, we're on board. We all know that we need it, but there's, um, a rather thin sort of theological grounding for it in this moment.’ I, we, haven't heard a lot of robust

articulation around the *why*, sort of the theological *why*. And I think Beth's application took us really concretely in that direction because she was so bold to say, 'this is a baptismal, faith-formation, disciple-making issue for us, and we're committed to it.'

Megan: There's a profound critique of youth ministry that's being made here, whether a church practices infant baptism and confirmation or an infant dedication and believer's baptism, which I'm not going to spend time debating here. But I do think it's critical for us to pause and ponder the way that church communities do tend to make vows or commitments of some kind to babies and their families. The congregation typically affirms that they will love and nurture this child and accepts collective responsibility to raise them in their faith and in the Church. And then we ooh-and-aah over the cuteness of the kid and enjoy some cake and punch after the service. But how seriously do we take those vows?

In his book *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker*, Dr. Andrew Root discusses theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view of baptism—specifically infant baptism, as practiced in Bonhoeffer's tradition. And he explains how Bonhoeffer argues that, when a child is baptized in the church, that church community has the responsibility to carry that child as a *mother*, to take on the practice of *motherhood* for that child—placing that child at the very center of its life, not outsourcing the child to some peripheral program. (And for the record, yes, this is gendered language here but let's not miss the point; Bonhoeffer isn't saying this responsibility rests solely on women, in the off-chance that's what you're hearing...) Bonhoeffer's real critique here takes seriously the vows that church communities make to these infants and their families, and even extends those vows to their logical and theological conclusion, which, can be summed up with Andy's words—"To baptize the child and then have no sense or concern to carry the child is, in Bonhoeffer's mind, to abandon the child."

This is the critique that Beth raises in her application to the Log College Project. It's not a lament that the church needs more young people to fill its pews so that the church won't die as its older members do. It's not a longing for a *nameless, faceless youth group* just for the sake of having something peripheral to the real church community that will entertain the kids until they're old enough to tithe. It's a theological critique—"We have over 100 youth and children we have promised to support and uphold in their baptismal covenant," the application said. We made those vows, and we must stick to them. We have promised to carry these children as a mother, and we will not abandon them.

Megan: Perhaps if your church is at a hospital, caring for the wellbeing of others is always front of mind. And so, the other element that really drew us to include Calvary in the cohort of 12 churches in the Log College Project was the deep curiosity we had about how such a specific and unique context would influence the church's experience of the innovation process we developed.

Abigail: There's a particular transience connected with Calvary in that it's located right across the street from the Mayo Clinic. People find themselves, sometimes for long periods of time, sometimes really short periods of time, in the Mayo Clinic for many different kinds of reasons, um, all related to the incredible health care that they can receive there. And so, the congregation is situated to serve not only a community, uh, of people, faithful people gathered, um, who are there and going to stay there and be grounded in, in that church throughout the, you know, as long as they live in that area in Rochester, Minnesota, but also folks who are there just for a time. So, dreaming about innovation in a context where you have that kind of transience meets, um, you know, an anchor, a community that's anchored there. And those two things figuring out how to work together seemed like a really compelling, uh, place to do innovation.

I think about the call placed upon a pastor who responds to, uh, an open position and follows God's Holy Spirit to a location like this. You know, what, what, what must it feel like to be Beth Royalty, who is not only pastoring this congregation, but who's congregation, the shape of her congregation, just ebbs and flows with these other people who come in the door. And so, it's, you need to be pretty nimble of a

human being of a, of a pastor, to be able to respond to a singular community made up of two different parts.

Megan: As the Rector of Calvary, Beth is in the senior leadership position, and in addition to shaping the theological imagination of the entire congregation, she's constantly balancing the particular needs of these united but distinctive communities. This is something all pastors really have to learn how to do, but it is rarely as pronounced as it is in this context—caring for people across generations, but also caring for the individuals who are specifically in Rochester for medical care, and caring for the loved ones of those receiving that medical care, and caring for the many carers—the doctors, nurses, surgeons, scientists, and so on. What shape could youth ministry possibly take in such a place?

Abigail: I think it's an interesting comparison to the way that we're doing this innovation work in how we think about young people. We're always positioning young people as the ones who need to be cared for in a way. (*Yeah.*) And so, this work and certainly at Beth's church, written into every, soaked into every other line in her application is this, um, idea that, really, we understand that young people also have the capacity to care for others, you know, and that there's, there's something about youth agency that really rang true for them. I think that they were craving to figure out how to do that better, how to actually give the young people in their congregation more agency to step up as leaders, as disciples, as those whose voices would also inform and form the faith journeys of the adults in the congregation. Caring for the carers is similar to, yeah, the cared *for* caring for others.

Part Three—If at First, You Don't Succeed

Megan: The Rev. Beth Royalty had been serving as the Rector at Calvary Episcopal Church for just over a year when she applied to the Log College Project, having followed a Rector who had had a 30-year tenure at the church. I spoke with Beth, and she explained how, after that first year of her ministry at Calvary, things felt ripe and ready for change.

Beth Royalty: And everybody in the congregation was so excited and ready for new and, and the word innovation just really came to us at the right time... I think it was the word innovation that really captured my attention, because this is an old church that has done things essentially the same way for at least 30 years. And it, we had just, it was so obvious that that wasn't going to work anymore, how we did it, wasn't going to be how we were going to do it. And I've been trying to keep up with all the quick changes and morphs and ebbs and flows of the capital-C Church that we're all dealing with in the past, well, since I've been ordained, really things are just so different.

Megan: Beth was also encountering the very common—but difficult—nostalgia trap from some corners of the congregation.

Beth: You know, when you work with adults in a church who've done middle school or high school volunteering, particularly when you're working with adults and parents who used to do it when their kids are in high school and everything seemingly was perfect back then (*of course it was*), they tend to dwell on that. 'Well, when, when my students were there, when my now 24-year-olds were in high school and how great all that was.' And so that's a part of my frustration as their, as their rector is to move people ba—, you know, let them dwell on that, remember that, be proud of that, tell stories of that, but move them away from this idea that we're going to go back and do it the way they did it, (*right*) 20, you know, 15, 10 years ago.



Megan: When we designed the Log College Project, we had the same hunches that Beth articulated—that the entire landscape of youth ministry had shifted in such a way that required innovation and new models of ministry. As the project developed, we tested those hunches by creating some parameters for our churches to follow. But those parameters were simply ways to test our hypotheses about what kind of new models might work and what kinds of tools might be useful for churches in the innovation process. In a very specific context like Calvary's, we were eager to see how our hypotheses would play out.

Beth: At first it was kind of confusing, I'll be honest. Not everything really worked for us at the beginning; the watching the videos, trying to answer the questions online. That was a real awkward thing for us as a team (*Sure*)...

We had really struggled as a team during those days, um, you know, I know other teams were struggling too, but we were so focused on ourselves that I don't know what it was like for other people, but we, to really kind of be attentive to what we've been asked to do and to hone in on our goals, to present our, you know, our mission, our, our ministry that we wanted to do.

Megan: Beth is right; the other churches were struggling, but the challenges Calvary faced were unique, and it took us a while to start to discern maybe why that was. We noticed that the group of people working on the project—its intergenerational Design Team—was always eager to engage in the process and was very creative and full of good ideas. So, it took the insight of our Lead Researcher, Kelsey Lambright, to help us understand that what might be going on with Calvary had to do with the way it was saturated with an existing culture of innovation and research. Here's Kelsey.

Kelsey Lambright: It's so interesting to know that and, and see how that culture seeps into the work with the Log College Project. For example, in talking with Beth, uh, it's clear that the culture is one of experimentation and tinkering (*huh*), so, so trying things wasn't new to them (*yeah*), but it does seem like it is challenging for them to stick with something, especially if it's not working. And, and so that, that's just fascinating. And Beth connects that to being in this kind of medical culture that they're surrounded by the science and the, the experimentation.

Megan: We're all currently living through a moment of particularly heightened interest in medical research during the COVID-19 pandemic, so the logic of this makes even more sense than it may have otherwise. When conducting medical research, doctors and scientists know that the consequences of some part of the experiment not working could be incredibly harmful to others—even lethal. Hence the very careful and prolonged process of something like developing a vaccine—which involves so many steps and stages and phases. If something goes wrong, the experiment stops and doesn't start again until that problem is resolved. So, at Calvary, surrounded by the Mayo Clinic, if the church tried something that didn't work, they stopped that thing—and then tried something new.

It makes total sense once we understand the context of the church, but it was the only church with which we worked who had this particular challenge. The prevailing challenge with most churches is to get them to try something new at all—or to even have the imagination for what a new form of youth ministry might look like. And then, with all the time and resources that go into trying something new, we often experience a church's resistance to changing or reiterating or pivoting their design. Calvary, however, had no problems trying something new and no shortage of ideas to try, but if something wasn't working—the experiment stopped. Nevertheless, Kelsey saw a common thread weaving among all these experiments.



Kelsey: Youth ministry at Calvary has been an elusive thing. And, and to, to try and try again and reiterate and pivot and invest in something like the Log College Project that shows so much faith, uh, in, in this idea that relationships and faith and young people matter to the congregation. And if that's not God building something in the community, I don't know what is.

Megan: The good news for Calvary is that, if *relationships* are what the community needs, then the method of cultivating those relationships is actually of secondary importance. Cultivating them is the thing that matters. So perhaps Calvary's willingness to experiment with new methods is truly an asset. Through some discernment of the needs in their community, the Design Team decided to focus on cultivating relationships among middle school students, and Beth explained that this is basically where the project landed.

Beth: We call our Log College Project "Connect More," Connect More. That's our name. And our goal is to connect our kids, to take them out of isolation, to connect them, to show them that by, by themselves, they may feel isolated, but together they have power and together they have relationship and how great that is.

Megan: So, what are some of the ways that the young people connected?

Beth: A brainstorm, and we decided to do a movie watching party so that we would, all, all of us would watch the same movie either through Netflix or some other way, and then talk about it. And we did do that. And it turned out to be really fun.

So, we have now since then done one other activity; it was an outdoor activity. Part of our mission at our church is we have a big garden, a big, uh, it's called the Oasis garden. And as part of a, it's like a, another room of the church during the nice months where people come and play, get play ball and read and sleep and hang out with a picnic table and chairs. And, but every time, every, the end of every October, we have to take that garden apart because we do live in Minnesota...

So, Connect More did that cleanup of the garden, and more kids turn out for that than I have seen since last winter, when we started bringing them together. Um, there were a ton of kids and a couple of them brought friends because it was outdoors and they could be safe and they could have fun and see each other.

Megan: Simple ideas, relatively easy to make happen. But the point is, for Calvary, these young people are connecting, even in the midst of a global pandemic, even in a church surrounded by a hospital.

Beth: And to see how many kids and, and their parents, too, turn out on that last weekend of October, that beautiful fall day, to come together, even in the midst of this pandemic to wear their masks, to giggle and play and help each other out, to clean out in this big garden. Um, and to see the smiles; I went, I mean, I just had not seen these kids, and of course they've all grown 'cause that's what kids do. And I haven't seen any of them in person in what felt like forever. So that gave me hope. I think it gave them hope to see each other 'cause they don't all go to the same schools, um, and to see, okay, and for them to remember now they can remember that they did that. And then as we continue working with them, however that manifests, I hope they will remember the power of what they were able to accomplish and coming together to connect, which is exactly what we want them to do.

Part Four—God’s Dream

Megan: Throughout this project, we’ve been conducting research by listening to the stories and perspectives of the people in these churches, hoping that the patterns and themes that emerge might provide insight for other faith leaders who are passionate about youth ministry. Our Lead Researcher, Kelsey Lambright, had the opportunity to travel to Rochester in early 2020 before the pandemic hit, and has followed Calvary’s journey since the beginning of this project.

Kelsey: I have loved getting to know Beth. She is a one-woman wonder. She is, uh, I think out of all of the Design Fellows, one of the most experienced pastors in our group. She has years and years and years of ministry under her belt, and she’s seen congregations through thick and thin; uh, some that she’s left in, in pretty good shape, and some that she’s left with some challenges. And, uh, and I just respect her so much and all that she has done in her career, but also what she is doing at Calvary.

Beth was technically the Design Fellow, but Beth is the rector. She’s the, the person in charge, the head of staff. She has so much on her plate. And, and at times during the processes, she really felt that. And the parents and other adults, uh, they just really pitched in, in different ways to, to carry this project through. And also, they were a lot of fun to hang out with when I was in Rochester.

Megan: Kelsey’s experience with Calvary left her with some lingering questions about our project. In addition to her insight about understanding Calvary’s context of innovation and research, Kelsey also wonders if our hypothesis about the necessity of intergenerational relationships is as urgent across every ministry context.

Kelsey: Coming into this, uh, coming into the Log College Project, we had the idea of, you know, ‘well, we’re not saying what your ministry should be, but we do want it to be intergenerational.’ We’re going to kind of set it up so that it is that, and we found it through the process that that’s not what every church needs. Uh, that some churches really need to focus on the peer relationships, um, of, of young people. And, and for Calvary, this seemed to be the case. Um, there’s still kind of that lingering question of where and how both of those needs are being met, assuming that young people need both peer relationships that are meaningful—and not just meaningful, but also, um, that are kind of spiritual friendships that are, that are with people of their age, who are guiding them toward God—and also intergenerational relationships that are doing something similar. And with this idea of Connect More, they’re focusing on the peer relationships. And so, I think a lingering question is, um, what meaningful ways can these middle schoolers engage in intergenerational relationships? And, um, and maybe including that play that we were talking about. Um, maybe intergenerational relationships that have a sense of holy play and wonder, and somehow also are helping middle schoolers connect with middle schoolers. Is that possible?

Megan: Kelsey’s questions bring us back to the theological realm. How might a youth ministry focused on relationships—be they peer relationships or intergenerational relationships—cultivate an encounter with the presence of God? In his first book, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, Andy Root begins his exploration of Bonhoeffer as a youth worker, which later evolved into the book I mentioned earlier. And he discusses Bonhoeffer’s understanding that the relationships of persons in the church and world are where we encounter Christ. Quoting from the book, “In relationships, God in Christ is concretely present and thus the very core of one’s humanity is transformed. For Bonhoeffer, God’s revelation is ultimately a social reality, a relational encounter.” Andy contrasts this understanding of relational youth ministry with the more prevalent practice of using relationships as means to other ends in youth ministry, where (and I

quote again) “relationships only serve[d] as tools to convince adolescents that they should seek a subjective and individualist faith experience by themselves.”

In our conversation on Beth’s leadership, Abigail reflected on how Beth’s approach to youth ministry is a testament to her own understanding of how relationships are the place where we encounter God in the church and world. Specifically, Beth carries with her that responsibility in her own relationships with all her congregants and with the young people in her care, and we wonder how much of that is the gift of wisdom born of experience.

Abigail: What young people respond to, I think, in seeing an adult, meeting an adult, is they respond to somebody who's just authentically themselves. And I think people who are a little bit older who are in youth ministry have had time to settle into themselves. And so, they don't, or they're not trying, this is in blanket, of course, you know, but certainly with Beth, you know, no one's trying to be anything but who and who they are or where they are in their life. (*Mm-hmm*). And I think that authenticity is something that young people really, really respond well to because they can lean into it. They can trust an adult. Who's not going to try to be someone else in order to impress them or sway them or, or coerce them or urge them um, or anything else that Andy wrote in *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*.

Megan: A question that remains for all of us is how Beth’s leadership and theological commitments—and how all such theologically-grounded youth leaders—will help the congregation remain steadfast in their commitment to relationships as the place to encounter the living Christ. Here’s Kelsey again.

Kelsey : But I do wonder, um, about the, the spiritual formation and these theological practices, both with Connect More, um, but also with their kind of thinking through youth ministry as a whole moving forward. And, uh, it's kind of a, an open question, a live question of, of how to incorporate that, um, in a way that says, this is a *faith* activity, this is something that is, uh, shaping our identity in Christ and as a, as a follower of Christ as a disciple with people alongside us, drawing us closer to God and not, um, yeah, something that we could do at school or something that we could do at some club or something like that. So, so that's, it's a lingering question for me. It's, it's a challenging one. Um, especially because the way that the churches have often done this have been boring and dry and, um, and have turned and have turned young people away, uh, understandably from, from God and from, from drawing closer to God.

Megan: Beth and the team at Calvary remain committed to this vision, walking in the tension of their unique community of permanent and temporary residents, a culture of innovation and experimentation, and a theological imagination that’s being put into practice. And one final word from Beth.

Beth: I can't imagine any better work to do right now, especially with all of the challenges that we all have to show our young people, be they middle-schoolers or older or however old they are, that what they can do with their own power, through the power of the love of God, um, can really, really not—we're not just saying it can make the world a better place—it really will make this world more into God's dream, which I think is the calling of all of us in the Christian faith, is to make this world look like the dream that God had when God made it.

Conclusion



Megan: Next week on *Disrupting Ministry*, I'll introduce you to our friends at Esperanza Viva Iglesia Cristiana in Norwalk, California, and their ministry of empowering and upholding the dignity and self-respect of every person in their immigrant community.

Today's episode was written and recorded by me, Megan DeWald, and then, Nii Addo Abrahams once again blessed us with his audio editing magic and, frankly, boundless patience with me for this one. Thanks, Nii. My thanks also to Maiia Avelino and Christine Toto for their assistance and encouragement. To find out more about the Institute for Youth Ministry, visit our website at iym.ptsem.edu—and from there, click on the words that say Princeton Theological Seminary or visit directly at ptsem.edu. Until next week!