

A Report from the Edge House Vision Team, 6/2017

Mark Dawes, Jeff Teeters, Tim Zaring, Nick Hawes, Taylor Grooms, Kirsten Linnabary, Gavin Diehm, Reeve Lambert, Heidi Johns, and Alice Connor

Worship and attendance patterns have been changing for the past few decades. Importantly, attendance and loyalty to mainline denominations have been in ever-steeper decline. These trends have spiked coincident with the “coming of age” of the Millennial generation. Millennials are on a different (perhaps parallel) spiritual path, appearing to walk away from institutional churches, though not necessarily from faith itself. There are some hard realities we Lutherans are facing:

- The ELCA is an aging, shrinking denomination, like the Church in general. Just 8% of our membership is ages 18-29, vs. 29% being 50-64 years old and 27% being 65+.
- Nearly 38% of our 9,000+ congregations worship with 50 people or fewer each Sunday.
- The median age of confirmed members in the ELCA (15 years old and up) is 58. The median age in the US is 39 years old.
- About 100 congregations in the ELCA close annually because they no longer have enough members to remain viable. At this rate, as each generation passes, the ELCA will lose 1/5th of congregations and by the end of the century, we’re about extinct. (With the age curve it could happen faster.)

In the midst of all this, we at GLSC find ourselves on a different path than many of our sister churches. Our congregational numbers are holding steady, so we are not in decline, but neither are we growing. We believe there is reason for concern that “holding steady” is a phase that could precede decline. It would be hard to counter this cultural mega-trend without adapting to a new cultural milieu.

Our tradition blesses us with a richness we treasure. However, reliance on tradition alone can be a curse, leading congregations into the hard realities noted above. GSLC stepped into this problem space and became proprietors of the Edge House ministry from the Southern Ohio Synod during a period when we had the resources to share with a new ministry and the Synod did not. In the past we contributed funds and people-power to other transformative ministries: Habitat for Humanity, Taft Elementary, and First Lutheran Church. We started the Edge House journey because we wondered if joining Millennials on their path could make the faith we share and our future stronger. GSLC committed to ministering to these rising generations through the UC campus and was willing to experiment for our good as well as theirs.

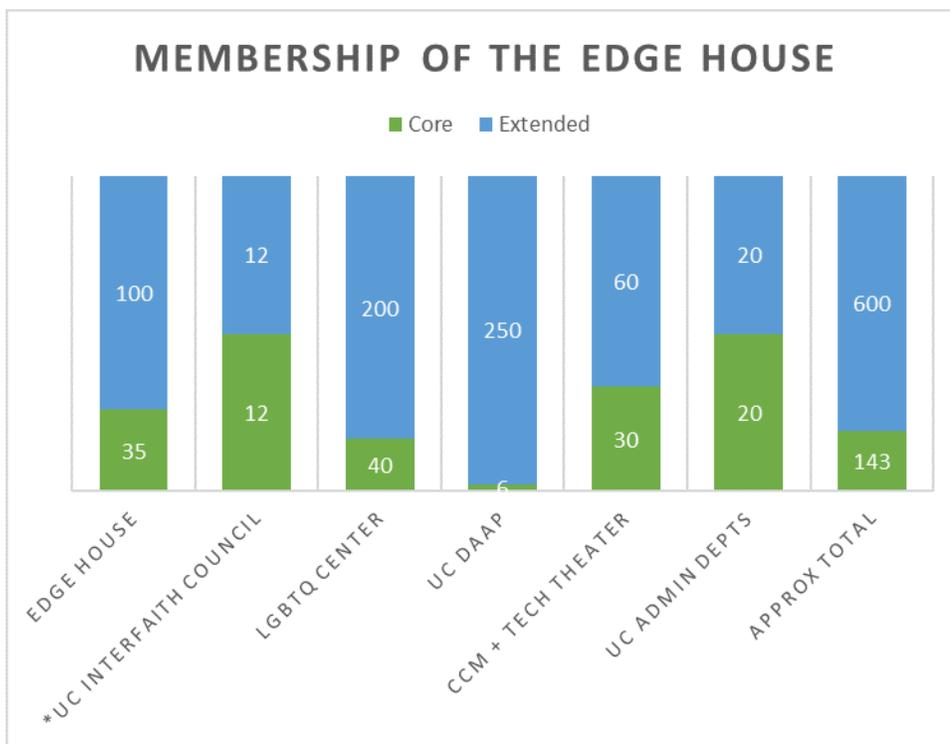
The Vision Team looked back over those eight years and now believes that we are benefitting from our relationship with the Edge House campus ministry and UC’s campus. Reflection on the eight years of our

Edge House ministry is teaching us how we have found Christian communion with the Millennial generation, the most underserved demographic in the ELCA.

We believe our experiment worked and that Pastor Alice has made a breakthrough in ministry design using a “distributed ministry” model. “Distributed ministry” means that the community served is intentionally spread out over many areas or interests. The Edge House is like the Inn in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s a place for reflection and revitalization on the Christian journey. It is a place for healing, a place of storytelling, and a place of transition. The Inn and the Edge House are places simultaneously of non-traditional ministry and of deeply-rooted traditional hospitality. The Edge House is focused on Millennial communities on the UC Campus and shares the faith with seekers from all walks who are invited to come together, bond, and explore their faith journeys in a safe and welcoming spiritual community. They talk, study, and worship with rituals and social activities that are co-designed with Pastor Alice and based on holy practices (some of them quite ancient and deeply meaningful). Simply put, they meet each other “where they are.” It’s relevant and resistant, holy and sticky.

Alice, like her students and like the Good Samaritan, meets folks “on the road.” Her approach takes the church *to* her congregation at their venues and on their schedules rather than expecting the congregation to come to her. For example, there are the ongoing, deep work Alice does with the technical theatre students and staff at CCM, the relationships she has with LGBTQ student groups, plus multiple other entry points to relationship. The use of Christian hospitality at the Edge House building helps the core congregation bond. Her time and the community itself are distributed across campus. It works and its growth has been amazing. Eight years ago Edge House membership was arguably two people; today using a metric that reflects The Edge House’s distribution into campus, the community has a core over 100 and an extended reach in the hundreds.

Because of the nimbleness of our distributed model, we can respond quickly to events on campus. We can also be a place of welcoming and equipping students, sending them out as apostles themselves onto campus and into their own lives. In Jesus’ parable, when the Good Samaritan stepped off the road to help the man who had been beaten, he was doing what his faith and his humanity called him to. He accompanied this man for a time, gave him what he could, made himself vulnerable to offer that help. It was a risk to help this person he knew nothing about, but it was also exciting and transformative for them both. This is what we have done as GSLC, and this is what we do at the Edge House: we take risks to connect with students and we leave our time together transformed by the experience.



- In numbers of people
- Core = regularly attend, we know their names and stories, we seek each other out
- Extended = sometimes attend, we recognize each other, sometimes seek each other out, more casual relationship

Additional detail related to membership:

- During the week, 20-30 young adults gather at the Edge House as a supportive community between Sunday's NOSH and smaller discipleship huddles to talk about life, faith, and Jesus. Friendships are formed and faith grows. Students at The Edge House have a safe place in the midst of a large, messy institution to explore while they transition away from home.
- The total number served is much larger than the core, but no less central to the Edge House mission or its results. This is the nature of a discipleship ministry that goes to its distributed congregational members. Members learn and engage in holy practices such as worship, prayer, meditation, mindfulness, scripture reading, communion, pilgrimages, retreats, self-awareness, and holy conversation. Regular practice of these disciplines equips them for a life of intimacy with God.
- Importantly, this community "reinvents" itself every year as they lose approximately ¼ due to graduation and school co-ops. In spite of this the number of students at The Edge House stays constant or grows and their networks expand even more rapidly and broadly. They are successful

in inviting new people from a transient population to become a part of their community. Students who leave for co-ops and get totally out of rhythm choose to come back to the community. This is an important signal that God's work is being done.

- While few graduates of The Edge House ministry become members of GSLC in the traditional sense, we are confident that we are part of sending faithful young adults out into the world who are well equipped to be community leaders who live faithful lives in their workplaces and families and friendships.

Goals for Council's affirmation

The Edge House is embarking on a mission to:

1 Engage the Council to

- (a) tell the story of the Edge House in the positive, exciting terms we outline here;
- (b) continue to embrace the Edge House's unconventional model which successfully reaches an underrepresented demographic. Explore ways to implement learnings from the Edge House at GSLC. We spoke of this as a "renewal of vows" to each other;
- (c) visit the Edge House in person once a year (whether cooking for or as a guest at NOSH, or any other times).

2 Raise \$20,000 annually outside of GSLC's budget.

- (a) We met this goal in 2016-2017;
- (b) We will make connections internally with campus-engaged GSLC donors and externally with existing and new partners, communities, and individuals;
- (c) We have a "stretch goal" for the end of fiscal year 2022 to raise \$40,000 annually.

3 Challenge GSLC, our Synod, and the ELCA to

- (a) celebrate the victory we've experienced in growing the church and deepening the faith;
- (b) grapple with the future of the church in both innovative and ancient ways.

Respectfully submitted,

Vision Team for the Edge House campus ministry

[Taylor's simple way of describing: Allowed to be there, Be who you are, sent]