

Church with a clean slate

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue



(From left) Jason Chesnut, Jenn DiFrancesco, and Sara Shisler Goff of the Slate Project in Baltimore call themselves co-conspirators rather than co-pastors. Photo courtesy of the Slate Project

"What happens if we just cleaned the slate?" Sara Shisler Goff asked, describing the origins and mission of the [Slate Project](#). "What if we had a blank slate for being and doing church?"

"We know slate is formed, pressed, and made over time. We're not trying to ignore that," Jenn DiFrancesco said, referring to the richness of church theology, history, and tradition.

Goff picked up the thread: "We just need to identify what should be cleaned off. We just need to name it. Every day, every minute, we can clean off the slate."

My head moved back and forth as Goff and DiFrancesco finished one another's sentences and expanded on each other's thoughts. The energy between the pastors glowed like a filament between two contact wires in a lightbulb.

This seems to be the magic of the Slate Project, a new church in Baltimore. The community is a joint project of the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Episcopal Church donates space and the Lutherans have given three years of funding. Three people make up the staff: Goff, an Episcopal priest; DiFrancesco, a Presbyterian pastor; and Jason Chesnut, a Lutheran minister.

Chesnut works full-time at the Slate Project. Goff and DiFrancesco serve part-time while also ministering at other churches. Though their schedules are constructed differently, they are copastors with no hierarchy. “No one has an overwhelming ego,” DiFrancesco explained. “We’ve learned to promote ourselves, while being supportive of one another.”

The ministers were not close friends before they started working on the project, although Goff and DiFrancesco had done some vacation Bible school programs together. They didn’t have much in common except a love of church and a frustration with the institution. They decided that it would be more fun if they worked on something together.

They began to pray and read scriptures together. Then they hosted an open mic night, inviting people to share their stories through poetry, art, music, and song. They invited artists to work with them for a season, teaching the community things like canning, needlepoint, and quilting. They tried things and sometimes failed, learning to constantly shift and make things fresh.

The Slate Project community gathers online and face to face. Each week, the community has a theme that follows the church calendar. On Saturdays, Chesnut produces a #SlateSpeak video and posts it on the group’s YouTube channel. On Mondays, he posts a blog entry, and the community gathers at the Cathedral of the Incarnation for #BreakingBread (a play on the Breaking Bad television show). On Wednesdays, people meet in a café for a Bible study called the Word@Night.

Besides following this schedule, the pastors try to react to events. “Responding in the moment and living life is liberating,” Goff said. “We always ask what ‘mission’ or ‘service’ means in *this* community.” When Baltimore became a focus for protests of police brutality, and a CVS pharmacy in the neighborhood was burned, the Slate Project held a peace and prayer walk.

As I listened to these pastors speak about thinking up themes and hashtags, I realized that they didn’t show the same sort of weariness that church planters often display a couple of years into trying to start a community from scratch. They had a sense of collegiality and friendship that made the work seem a joy rather than drudgery.

Their interaction reminded me of how lonely starting a new church can be. One person rarely has all the skills that a church needs.

Furthermore, denominational bodies often find that if they put a lot of investment into one pastor and the pastor burns out with the stress of the work, then the fledgling community often dissolves along with the pastoral relationship. But with the right team of pastors, there is less stress, and if one person leaves, the community can keep going.

Goff and DiFrancesco worry about how to support three pastors in the future, but they note that a lot of churches have a secretary, a janitor, and a pastor. Without a building and with skills in technology, they do not need support staff in the same way that an established church might.

“Cocreating is a lot of fun,” DiFrancesco said. “It’s like we created a conversation between the three of us, and then we just invited other people into the conversation.”