

Entry points: Church as a hosting community

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

If it is a little difficult to find your way into Holy Nativity Episcopal Church in the Westchester neighborhood of Los Angeles, it isn't because there are too few doors, but because there are so many.

Enter one way and you walk through a charter school for troubled students, enter through another and you are in a designated "quiet garden"; a third leads you into the World Community for Christian Meditation Center, and somewhere in your wandering you'll find the sanctuary, the church office, a commercial-quality kitchen and lots of meeting space. The multitude of windows and doors is part southern California architecture, but it is also emblematic of rector Peter Rood's philosophy of church: "As many entry points as there are ideas and questions."

Rood came to Holy Nativity soon after September 11, 2001. Other priests in the Los Angeles Episcopal diocese say that the church he encountered was suffering from long neglect. They describe an office piled with unfiled papers, low attendance at worship and little participation of members. Rood says that he remembers coming to Holy Nativity with a passion for interfaith work after the terrorist attacks, but he didn't know how this passion would translate into his work at the church.

At the same time, he was struggling with prayer. "My prayer was very prayer book-centered," he says. Then, at a clergy retreat, he was introduced to the idea of a Christ-centered mantra. "A mantra is a way to control the monkey mind, and I have chronic monkeys." The center of church life has become silence. Silence is incorporated into meditation, held twice a day for a half hour for whomever comes. It is the heart of Rood's own spiritual practice.

Rood believes that the days of "expecting people to come to the church building between 8 and 11 on Sundays as a sign of faithfulness are gone." Instead the church is a place where people should be able to pursue religious paths that have meaning for them personally. Doctrinal agreement is not an issue, and Rood says that he

does not worry who will stay, for how long or for what. Membership he regards as largely an outdated concept.

Among its activities, Holy Nativity is working on “environmental repentance,” and the church draws people of diverse spiritual commitments to an Environmental Change Makers group. Jazz vesper services reflect a commitment to young musicians and new music; the church’s advertising emphasizes that both people of faith and people of no faith are welcome. Cooking classes feature guest chefs. Last summer volunteers from the church and neighborhood planted a garden that produced 600 pounds of food for the local food bank. The tiny plot—fewer than 1,400 square feet—produces startling quantities of tomatoes, chard, basil, eggplant and fava beans. Workshops and retreats teach people about meditation and its Christian roots. This year’s Lenten theme was “Mystics and Heretics.”

What holds these disparate activities together? What is a church if not a group of people doctrinally bound together? In Rood’s mind, the central meaning of a church is hospitality. “Just because people are not going to show up on Sunday morning doesn’t mean we can’t be vital and alive. The main purpose of the church, like the main purpose of the monastery once upon a time, is hospitality, however it can be offered.” Everyone who enters the church, Rood reasons, brings a gift. Everyone, he hopes, also receives a gift. The goal is to provide a place of hospitality and prayerful discernment where people can connect with a personal passion and then deepen and grow.

Hospitality means hosts, and the church’s leaders are trying to learn how to turn the use of the church space over to others. “Initially, when the leadership team decided that we would provide more soft entry points into this community, we were the primary hosts.” But eventually the church learned to share the role. “We have this piece of God’s green acre at 83rd and Dunbarton,” Rood says, “and as we determine how it should be used, we allow others to host us as well as us being hosted. It’s a very dynamic process that was initiated by our commitment to be a hosting community.”

With all of this activity happening on the grounds of the church, Rood struggles, like many pastors, with time. “I can’t say I’m very disciplined in how I manage my time,” Rood admits. “This year I am working on *kenosis*, learning what I can give away. I can’t say to others, ‘You must take care of yourself,’ if I am not taking care of myself. I am trying to place myself in situations where I feel uncomfortable, and my

area of disequilibrium is giving away ministries to others. I have to find ways to be involved without being attached. My goal would be for there not to be a reason for me to be here.”

Looking ahead, Rood is most interested in providing opportunities for people to experience silence together. Will that mean introducing meditation in parochial schools? Instituting a time for silent gardening? Offering silent Saturday walks through the neighborhood? In light of the current crisis in Gaza, Rood would like to bring people of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths together to pray in silence. The bridge between the disparate worldviews, commitments and desires of the people who enter Holy Nativity, Rood says, may be silence.

Holy Nativity might serve as a model for revitalization of the church. It is rooted in prayer and starts with the question, “Of what use to this neighborhood, this community and these people can we be?” Rood knows that God’s presence in the work is both transcendent and immanent. “Some days, I don’t know where we are going with this,” he says. “But we have seen that God comes in both sitting and striving.”