

Putting away the silver

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue



A meal at Chattanooga's Southside Abbey. Photo by Ed Barels, courtesy of [Southside Abbey](#)

In her essay “An Expedition to the Pole,” Annie Dillard writes about explorers who didn’t make it. When their skeletons were exhumed, researchers learned a lot about their last days. For instance, many of them tucked settings of silver into their coats. When those adventurers braved the frigid brutalities of the Antarctic, they could not imagine leaving behind those elegant and weighty trappings of luxury. They clutched their family crest etched into the polished metal even when they didn’t have the sustenance to survive. This image reminded Dillard of the church.

It’s a metaphor that Robert Leopold also uses as he describes his adventure starting Southside Abbey, a church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. “We can get so worried about the silver,” Leopold said as we met over lunch. The Eucharist is central to Leopold’s ministry, but “in our churches, we’ve stylized the meal so much that we can’t even recognize it any longer,” Leopold said. “What is that wafer and tiny cup? How is that a meal?”

If I’m portraying Leopold as a cynic, he’s not. He loves traditional worship, pipe organs, and silver settings. He radiates with passion for the history of the Episcopal Church he serves. Yet two years ago he realized that he wasn’t called to be the pastor of an established church any longer. He was ready to put the silver in the closet in order to reach out to the “un-churched, anti-churched, and over-churched.” Leopold asked his bishop if he could start a new congregation, and Southside Abbey began with a grant from the diocese.

I visited the congregation, which met in the Hart Gallery, a nonprofit organization that provides support to artists who are experiencing homelessness, low income, crisis, or mental or physical challenges. A bright garden mural extends along the side of the building, contributing to the hipster vibe of this Chattanooga neighborhood. A curbside book nook stands in front of the gallery, allowing children to borrow colorful volumes and return them to the window-sized box.

I had to dodge a fierce rain in order to enter the art gallery by 6:11 on a Friday night. As my clothes began to dry, I noticed the warm walls vibrating with artists' color, and the air breathed with creativity. The energy echoed through the space, dispelling any gloom that the rain brought outside. Most people were sitting at a long table in the center of the gallery, like a giant family at Thanksgiving dinner.

A woman stretched out her hand with a warm welcome, asking my name and how I had heard about the church. She became my guide on our expedition, filling me in on the details and letting me know what to expect. She told me that the service took place at 6:11 because of the words in Matthew 6:11, "Give us this day our daily bread." As she pointed out the art, the place filled up with the young and old, homeless and well-heeled, a diversity of ethnicities, and people with varying intellectual abilities.

Someone hastily passed out sheets of worn green card stock printed with an Episcopal service liturgy. Southside Abbey intentionally uses prayers and songs that are in the public domain. When Leopold arrived, he picked up a stole and placed it over his T-shirt and cargo shorts, and then explained the service.

"This is how it works," he said, pointing to the sheet of paper. "Different individuals are going to speak in the places where it says 'One.' Everyone says the parts marked 'All.' After we receive the bread, we're gonna go to the kitchen." He looked toward the back of the gallery, allowing his chin to point the way. "We have cheese pizza tonight." And with that, we began with the familiar words of a collect.

The evening had the feel of a dinner with friends. The intimate space and group of people made me imagine what that first (and last) supper must have been like.

Over pizza, Sarah Weedon, a student from Sewanee School of Theology, read the scripture and invited us to break up into small groups to reflect on the passage. After eating the pizza we passed the cup, singing a simple melody as we did.

Since the overhead has been kept low, the Abbey is able to put more resources into mission. When the community found out that a church in the city was raising \$700,000 to erect enormous aluminum crosses on the side of the highway, it decided to try to raise a comparable amount of money for outreach in the community. It began a Jubilee Fund that has gone to support a tutoring program, provide computers for a local elementary, and start a language school.

The ministry and mission of Southside Abbey is not meant to be a secret. The Abbey is committed to making the community replicable, even as they know every context will give birth to a unique expression. To that end, they made their founding documents, bylaws, and budget available on their website.

As I thought about the other expedition that this community is on, I thought of the skeletons of those polar adventurers. But Leopold quickly brought me back to the truth of our faith. "I want people to know that they can do this too. They can do that dream," he said. "I mean, if we're resurrection people, what are we afraid of?"