

Misfits in the suburbs

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue



A gathering of the Church of the Misfits, located in suburban Atlanta. Photo courtesy of the Church of the Misfits

When Bec Cranford-Smith graduated from seminary, she figured she would go to Atlanta and start a congregation in the urban center. But Margaret Aymer at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary challenged her: “Why go to the city?” Aymer asked. “There are enough new churches there. Why not plant a church in the suburbs, where you’re from?”

Cranford-Smith didn’t want to go back to Douglasville, Georgia, a suburb 20 miles from Atlanta, where Baptists and Pentecostals populate the religious landscape. She had been hurt by her conservative upbringing and had been asked to leave the Assemblies of God denomination because of her feminism and her inclusive stance toward LGBTQ friends, among other things.

“They were very nice about it. They blessed my ministry,” Cranford-Smith said, but the pain of rejection was still evident in her voice, and she didn’t want to return.

Yet Aymer’s question haunted her. “Jesus had been hijacked,” she thought. “We needed to reclaim Jesus from the nationalistic, homophobic agenda.” With that realization, Cranford-Smith knew she needed to go back to create a space for people to process their own religious rejections and wounds. With her husband, Terry Cranford-Smith, and the Disciples of Christ denomination, she worked on creating Church of the Misfits, which meets not only in her hometown but on her porch.

The church tried meeting in a bar, but it wasn't welcoming for children and those in recovery. The group gathered in a traditional church building, but that setting was difficult for those trying to heal from negative religious experiences. They felt comfortable at Cranford-Smith's ranch-style home.

"Home is a safe place for conversation and laughter. Early Christ followers often gathered in small spaces and in homes," she said. But gathering at her home gets difficult when the group grows to over 50 people.

As might be expected with a church named Church of the Misfits, the community is not of like mind. Its members have begun to reach out to people on the margins of congregational life—people with varying sexual orientations, those differently abled, and independent thinkers who had been thrown out of another congregation.

Though Cranford-Smith was warned that the church shouldn't be a 12-step meeting every week, it does try to be a place where people process their hurts. When I asked how that healing occurred at Church of the Misfits, Cranford-Smith said, "We begin to heal the moment we share our story." The church has two rules: (1) Every voice matters, and (2) Don't be a jerk.

During the sermon, someone preaches for seven to ten minutes, then there are seven to ten minutes of community reflection. People tell stories over the Eucharist and respond through art.

"Art is always a part of the service, because it helps us to share our story," Cranford-Smith said. "We often work on a common thing, like a mobile made out of jewelry and random stuff from junk drawers. Or we work on paintings together."

Attendance at Misfits is sporadic. People often use the gathering as an in-between space, when they are going from one church to the next. "We kind of have a revolving door," Cranford-Smith said.

Cranford-Smith remarked that they didn't want to start a cult of personality, but I wonder if she will be able to help it. She is humble, but she also has a colorful personality that easily connects with people in all walks of life. In her other job, she works as a volunteer coordinator for Gateway Center, one of Atlanta's largest homeless organizations. Her work conveys a compassion that empowers people with dignity.

Cranford-Smith is an artist as much as a minister, and she looks the part, with a wide array of tattoos and hair reflecting every color of the rainbow (at different times). Poetry flows easily from her, until the room fills with rhythm and motion. She belts out songs that people can't help but join in on. And she paints with a folk-art flair, in the spirit of Missionary Mary Proctor.

In all of this, she seems to embody a dilemma of new church work: a church needs charismatic founders to get started, but it also looks to build something that will outlast the initial personality. Is that possible when church and home are tied so closely together? When we look at the house churches in the New Testament, surely the answer is yes.

Cranford-Smith downplays the uniqueness of the community. "We're like one string on a giant quilt. A lot of people are doing similar work. There are coffeehouse churches, art churches, wine churches. They're all expressions of us wanting to become people of God," she said. She also explained that people didn't need to start a new church to do what Misfits is doing. "A lot of churches could be doing this in their own spaces, especially in places where there are not a lot of progressives. I hope more places keep popping up."

I hope so too. May we keep stitching the quilt together, creating spaces of healing.