

ANOTHER CHURCH IN BOSTON IS BORN

Ben Rey, former EGC staff member, is helping to launch a new church

by Grace Lee

All Ben wanted for Christmas was a drum set. The drums were the instrument he chose when it was time for the fourth graders at his school in Illinois to learn a new instrument, and getting his own drums for Christmas was Ben's highest hope. By December, the uncertainty was unbearable. His parents dropped clues about getting drums, but Ben couldn't read them, and he certainly didn't see anything large under the Christmas tree. By Christmas Eve, the tension around whether the drums were coming was so great that he went to his parents' bedroom and cried because he couldn't wait any longer to find out if he was getting a drum set.

On a cold December night in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood of Boston, Ben Rey is telling his story in a cozy living room warmed by candle light and filled with the same kind of anticipation and tension in the air. The adults and children gathered here call themselves the Boston Anglican Mission (BAM), a growing group of 15 to 30 people that Ben leads with Jamaal Crone, a seminary classmate and friend. Since their first meeting in September 2008, the group has met biweekly for contemporary worship, a talk, and dinner together. Anticipation is the theme that ties together Ben's childhood narrative, the anticipation of Christ's coming in Advent, and the group's eagerness to see what they've been looking for in a church come to fruition.

The idea to form BAM started last spring when Ben and Jamaal, students at the Center for Urban Ministerial Education (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's Boston campus), started having conversations about their vision for a particular kind of Anglican church in Boston. Ben, who had moved from Chicago in 2007 and lives in the intentional Christian community house that BAM meets in, and Jamaal, who moved from Arlington, Va. in 2005 and lives in East Boston, learned that they had the same desire for a church in the city that integrated Anglican liturgy and applied values of social justice and multi-ethnicity. Both men were



members of Anglican churches before coming to Boston, and as they pondered what it meant to be a church in the city, what it meant to be Anglican and Christian in Boston, and what their role was in the community, they started to long for a church that they couldn't seem to find.

"Before I started worshipping in an Anglican church, I thought being Anglican just meant being white. What I came to realize was that there's a huge social justice background in the Anglican church that can get lost," Jamaal says. "The rich liturgy and prayers are straight out of the Bible and have stood the test of time, and we wanted to make those our roots, but also see if we can change the face of what it means to be Anglican."

Similarly, Ben was looking for ways to maintain his Anglican identity in an urban context, and felt that others were also looking for the kind of church he and Jamaal had been envisioning. "Through conversations with non-Christians all over the city—in coffeeshops, in the non-profit world—I saw how many people were hungry for church and for liturgy but didn't feel like there was anywhere they could go," Ben says.

In the next months, the two received the approval needed from the Right Reverend Thaddeus Rockwell Barnum, Missionary Bishop of the Anglican Mission in the Americas, to start BAM. More people confirmed what Ben and Jamaal had envisioned, expressing that there was a definite need for a ministry like BAM. "All the

right pieces came together and it was very encouraging," Ben says.

By September, news of BAM had been passed around by word of mouth and through the Internet, and while Ben and Jamaal didn't expect anyone to come to their first meeting on September 7, they were surprised

when 10 people—eight of whom they'd never met before—joined them that evening. Throughout the fall of 2008, God continued to send people, with almost 30 attending BAM's fifth meeting in November. So far, the group mainly consists of people between 20 and 35 years old with higher education degrees and from a church background (most, but not all, with an Anglican background). There are a couple of families with kids less than five years old.

Suzanne Riddle, a 26-year-old who moved to Boston a year ago from Indiana to teach at an urban Christian school, says that finding BAM was a long-time answered prayer for her and her boyfriend, Jonathan. When they first moved to Boston, they attended an Anglican church outside the city that wasn't a good fit for them—just a place they went to for services on Sundays. They prayed about the right church to join, but nothing felt right until they visited BAM. "I felt from the first time that I came that this was it, this was what we've been looking for," Suzanne says. "I like how the liturgical tradition is kept in the service, and how it's very welcoming, not confined, and flows very well."

Although Suzanne and Jonathan regularly attend another church in Boston, Suzanne is eager to grow with the BAM community and see where God is leading the group. "This is where my heart is. I'm anxious for BAM to start meeting every week," she says.

Thinking about next steps—from logistical details to broader questions like

how relocating to larger, possibly less intimate space could impact their desire to be a community that people from a variety of backgrounds can feel they belong—is what guides the group discussion tonight.

“How do we do mission, and how do we do mission and community together?” Ben asks the group as part of his talk. Shannon says that BAM’s welcoming environment and the shared vision of its members were what sold BAM for her, but would a nonbeliever feel the same way? Amy adds on that it’s important not to compromise BAM’s values and vision in the process of figuring out how to reach nonbelievers. Jonathan affirms that the liturgical aspect of the service is something that many of his friends would track with. Jamaal (who coordinates the worship and social justice aspects of BAM) expresses his longing to start finding ways for the group to engage with the community, or what he calls “getting his hands dirty.”

The vast possibilities are exciting and yet sometimes daunting at the same time, Jamaal says. “My biggest joy is from talking with Ben about all the possibilities, but not knowing what we should do next is also a frustration. Ben and I are really depending on the Lord. We set a date and had no idea who would come, and people came. This has also been a source of joy because we felt like our heart was in the right place and that God will continue to bring people and provide space.”

While the specifics of next steps may seem fuzzy by the end of the evening, the common goals and shared vision of the group to reach the city and create an inviting environment for non-believers is distinct and definite. Questions remain, like how to increase racial and socio-economical diversity, how to serve the community (and who exactly their community is, as BAM considers moving to a different neighborhood of Boston), and how to find and fund larger space.

But God has been real, faithful, and present in the whole process. Just as Ben did receive the drum set he wanted on Christmas day after months of great anticipation, the members of the Boston Anglican Mission are happy about what God has done this fall, and they continue to look forward to the gifts God has yet to reveal. “What we’re going to do is yet to be seen, which is what I love,” Jamaal says. “This is something to let God open up for us.”



ABOVE: Jamaal (left) and Abram (right) lead worship.



LEFT: Sarah and Ben go over the liturgy readings for the service.



BOTTOM: Suzanne (right) and a friend she brought enjoy conversation while they wait for the service to begin.

Photos: Grace Lee

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