Is it I, Lord?
Students Discern Vocations at Texas Youth Academy

There are as many reasons why high school students are drawn to the Texas Youth Academy (TYA) as there are students. For Sarah Roberts, it is a search for direction in her faith. “I came to see where I am in my faith life and where I might go.”

Since 2009 the Texas Youth Academy has been encouraging and enabling young people throughout the state to discern vocational calls. A ministry of the Texas Annual Conference and a foundational element of the Emerging Leaders Initiative, TYA is modeled on the acclaimed Duke Youth Academy as a tool for discerning vocations. TYA, however, is distinguished by the length of the program: for two intensive weeks, students attend classes in theology and the arts on a college campus affiliated with the United Methodist Church (this year’s TYA was honored to be hosted by Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University). Their days are punctuated by worship and local service projects. Over their course of study, students freely share ideas, question notable professors, and experience being the hands and feet of Christ in action. For many it is an awakening realization that there are other young people who share their calling.

A rising high school senior, Laney Betke is discerning her call to ministry and hopes one day to attend seminary. “This is a really great opportunity to experience study, fellowship, and awesome professors! I expect to feel the Holy Spirit, hearing other people talk about their faith journeys, knowing that I am not alone on this walk,” Betke says.

Inspired by her youth director, Valerie Stout came to the Texas Youth Academy questioning whether to go into ministry. TYA was instrumental in her youth director’s call to ministry, and she hopes for similar discernment process. Many of the students were influenced by their pastors’ recommendations and the strong spiritual guidance they had offered throughout the years. “The main reason I came to TYA is that I really like learning theology, and there are not enough opportunities at my church,” explains Thomas Strutton.

Danny McCowan, a participant from the North Texas Conference, learned of TYA from cousins who were members of previous classes. Sponsored by his pastor, Danny is a leader in the youth group at his church and hopes to hone his leadership skills.

Other students also have active youth leadership roles in the UMC: both Kass Johnson and Kate Mosel serve on the Conference Committee on Youth Ministry. Like Danny, Kate learned of TYA from a relative who attended, in this case her sister. “I really wanted to come because of my older sister who was in the seventh TYA. Her class is still connected—they continue to grow in fellowship with one another, and fulfill their leadership within the church. You can see the fruit of what they have produced from what they have learned.”

Kass voiced the attraction many young people have to TYA: “I am very passionate about church—I breathe church—and I want to connect with people who are as passionate as I am. I want to learn why we do the things we do.”

Learning “why we do the things we do” is foundational to TYA. Following morning prayer each day, students attend plenary sessions led by notable UM professors and clergy in which they learn the fundamentals of Christian theology—baptism,
evangelism, the Incarnation, Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, as well as the basics of Wesleyan theology and social justice principles. For many students this is an epiphany.

Rachel Risko is also on a journey of discovery. A Make-a-Wish child, Rachel is an active volunteer for the organization: she sees non-profit work as ministry. “Service as ministry is one of the things you can do,” she explains. Alternate afternoons at TYA are spent on service projects. While most students have some volunteer experience, this exposure to social justice in an urban setting can be an awakening.

The 2019 TYA class is comprised of nine students hailing from eight different congregations in the Texas Annual Conference and one from the North Texas Conference: Laney Betke, Katy St. Peter’s UMC West Campus; Sam Brace, Houston St. Johns UMC; Kass Johnson, Rose Hill UMC; Danny McCowan, Dallas St. Paul’s UMC; Kate Mosel, Kingwood Strawbridge UMC; Rachel Risko, Athens FUMC; Sarah Roberts, Pearland FUMC; Valerie Stout, League City FUMC; and Thomas Strutton, Red Lick FUMC. The students in this year’s class mirror their predecessors, somewhat anxiously forming a community from strangers; sharing a passion for Scripture, learning, and serving; and quietly discerning God’s unique call for them.

This is the first of a three-part series on the 2019 Texas Youth Academy. The students’ reflections on their two-week experience will be explored in the next issue of Cultivating the Call.

Advancing Pastoral Leadership

What is the impact of an APL pastor?

Advancing Pastoral Leadership (APL) is a program design to expand and accelerate the leadership capacity of young pastors. We sampled 10 congregations throughout the TAC being led by APL pastors and compared benchmarks for the year APL began (2009), the year the first class of APL pastors had completed APL training (2014), with our most recent records (2018).

KEY MEASURES OF SUCCESS:

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Increase in Professions of Faith</th>
<th>Increase in Church Membership</th>
<th>Increase in Average Dollars Spent on Ministry and Operations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>121%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>$5,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
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ADOPT AN “APL”

ADOPT AN APL

$3,500 provide one year of training in the Advancing Pastoral Leadership program

$17,500 provide a pastor with training in the Advancing Pastoral Leadership program for the length of the study (5 years)

PLANT A TREE

$50,000 sponsor an APL cohort (15 APL participants) for one year

HARVEST AN ORCHARD

$250,000 sponsor the Advancing Pastoral Leadership program for one year; or, sponsor a cohort for their entire APL program (5 years)
Andrew Dorsett’s faith journey mirrors the goals of the Emerging Leaders Endowment: discerning a call to ministry at the Texas Youth Academy in 2015, then serving as a College Pastoral Intern this summer and aspiring to attend seminary upon graduation next year.

Living abroad as a child, Dorsett did not attend church until seventh grade. “That was a transformational year. I had felt like an outsider, and then I discovered Sugar Land FUMC and a church home. People there wanted to invest in my life.” This realization led him to invite others to experience the same acceptance. As Dorsett matured in his faith, he wrestled between calls to lay and ordained ministry. The Rev. Ben Lohmer, then associate pastor at Sugar Land FUMC, encouraged him to attend TYA.

Dorsett was among 27 young people hoping to experience vocational guidance at the Texas Youth Academy in the summer of 2015. “This was the year to discern a call,” Dorsett remembers. “TYA helped me figure out the difference between lay ministry and ordained ministry. Thanks to TYA, I figured out my faith story.”

Dorsett’s faith journey has led him to Cornerstone UMC in Cypress, where he is on staff as a pastoral intern, and this summer to Bellville UMC, as a College Pastoral Intern. His responsibilities at Bellville included facilitating worship, preaching, pastoral care, leading Sunday school, and attending administrative meetings. “My work at Belleville is similar to Cornerstone but more intense.”

“The culture of a small rural church is different from that of a large urban church—it is more laid back but the connections are more meaningful.”

A senior at Houston Baptist University majoring in business, Dorsett sees the next step in his journey as admission to seminary, discerning among Asbury, Perkins, and United Theological in Dayton, OH.

Andrew Thompson’s faith journey offers an opportunity for vocational discernment to young people between the ages of 19-24. Over the course of 10 weeks, participants experience pastoral ministry in a directed program that spans the life of a church.
Saying Goodbye to Rev. Gail Ford Smith
A Passionate Voice for Young Leaders Retires

An important chapter in the development of the Emerging Leaders Endowment closed in June 2019 with the retirement of the Rev. Gail Ford Smith from the Texas Annual Conference and the ELE Board. Gail served on the Board since 2016 and, as the Director of the Center for Clergy Excellence, was instrumental in shaping the identity of the initiative.

Clergy Excellence Associate Director and ELE Board member Rev. Elizabeth Duffin notes, “Gail was an early champion of young clergy and the need for the Texas Annual Conference to recruit gifted, young, diverse clergy. She saw the work of the Emerging Leaders’ Endowment to be critical to this mission and not only was a personal supporter of the endowment but was consistently raising awareness of the initiatives it funds among clergy and laity alike.” Bishop Scott Jones echoes her thoughts: “Gail has consistently been passionate about ensuring all voices were represented and considered and worked tirelessly to encourage and include young leaders wherever possible. She frequently expressed the importance of ELE initiatives and routinely shared stories of their impact on the lives and ministries of those involved.”

Gifts in honor of Gail Ford Smith's service to the Texas Annual Conference and the Emerging Leaders Initiative may be made to the Emerging Leaders Endowment at www.txcumc.org/ELE or by mail to the Texas Annual Conference, 5215 Main Street, Houston, TX 77002.

For more information about the Emerging Leaders Endowment or ways in which to support it, please contact Mary Linda Portner, Director of Development, at mlportner@txcumc.org or 713.533.3712.