Episcopal Parish Network
Where the Church Gathers

Summary and Transcript
Wellbeing as a Bridge for the Loneliness Gap
Originally presented June 16, 2025

Summary

This workshop featured the Reverend John Burris and the Reverend Mary B Sullivan discussing the Threshold Center at Saint Stephen's in Birmingham. The session covered the Center's origins, mission, programming, community partnerships, and practical considerations for creating third spaces that address loneliness and foster well-being outside traditional church settings.

Key takeaways:

- **Origins and Motivation of the Threshold Center**: The Threshold Center was established in a repurposed building formerly used by a church for the deaf, with a vision to create a neutral, welcoming space for the broader community, especially those who may not feel comfortable in traditional church settings. The project was partly a response to a tragic event in 2022, which highlighted the need to address isolation and loneliness in the community.
- **Mission and Vision**: The Center's mission is to nurture well-being through practices that engage the heart, body, and imagination, intentionally creating a space for diverse perspectives and a sense of the sacred. The Center is designed as a "third space"—distinct from both home and church—where people can find community and support regardless of their religious background.
- **Programming and Community Engagement**: Programs include spiritual practices for resilience, women's circles, arts and creativity workshops, labyrinth walks, forest bathing, and partnerships with organizations like Braver Angels and the

Collegeville Institute. The Center has successfully attracted a diverse group of facilitators and participants, with some programs drawing 40+ attendees and others focusing on smaller, more intimate groups.

- **Intentional Language and Accessibility**: The leadership is mindful of using inclusive, everyday language (e.g., "well-being," "connection," "mindful living") to make programs accessible to the unchurched and those unfamiliar with spiritual vocabulary. There is an ongoing effort to refine messaging and lower barriers to participation, including offering drop-in, donation-based events and scholarships.
- **Organizational Structure and Funding**: The Threshold Center operates as a ministry of Saint Stephen's, not as a separate 501(c)(3), which simplifies administration and accounting. The Center is staffed by a three-quarter-time priest (Mary B) and a part-time communications/marketing coordinator. Program fees are charged for some events, but scholarships are available, and donor support helps cover facilitator costs.
- **Challenges, Surprises, and Lessons Learned**: Key challenges include honing the Center's mission and language, reaching younger and more diverse demographics, managing increased demand and volunteer engagement, and balancing the Center's advisory circle with parish governance. The leadership emphasized the importance of humility, adaptability, and creating clear community guidelines, as well as the need to be less clergy-centric and empower lay leadership.

Transcript

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

Well, we got a healthy number in the room thus far and so pleased that you're joining us on this summer Wednesday.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

My name is Joe Swimmer.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

I'm the Executive Director of Episcopal Parish Network.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

And really thrilled to be joined today to talk about the Threshold Center at Saint Stephen's in Birmingham by the Reverend John Burris and the Reverend Mary B Sullivan.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

This is a project that has been a couple of years in the making and one that John was telling me about, you know, just months ago and and how exciting it is and what they're doing the the idea of the threshold being a a liminal.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

A liminal space that that gets you to the next point, a new opening, a new opportunity.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

And we hope that this will seed some ideas for you, for your parish, for your community, things that you may want to think about.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

We would ask you if you could to please put your name and where you're dialing in from into the chat, just so John and Mary B can see that.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

Also, please, throughout this session, use the chat for your questions or your comments.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

And as I turn it over to John and to Mary B, I would just like to remind you that Episcopal Parish Network is the place the church gathers and we are excited to bring you content like this.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

We have several more webinars coming up in July and in August.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

If your parish is not a member, please do reach out to us and note that we will be gathering again for our annual conference March 3rd through 6th this year, this coming year in Charlotte.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

And we would love to welcome you.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

There'll be more information about that in the next month or so.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

But without anything else for me, I'm going to hand it off to Mary B and John.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

And again, grateful to you all.

John Burruss

And the people of Saint Stephen's for all that you're doing and for saying yes to being with us today.

John Burruss

Thank you, Joe.

John Burruss

Thank you.

John Burruss

Well, welcome everybody.

John Burruss

And then thanks for saying hello.

John Burruss

In the chat, I'll begin just to introduce myself.

John Burruss

I'm John Burruss.

John Burruss

I am the Rector of Saint Stephen's.

John Burruss

A church that I'll I'll tell you a little bit more in in a minute.

John Burruss

And I've been here for about 8 years, but before I was at Saint Stephen's, I worked in the Diocese of West Tennessee doing congregational development.

John Burruss

I was not responding to the loneliest epidemic.

John Burruss

I was more my work was helping churches reimagine space.

John Burruss

One of our big projects was working with the School of Architecture at the University of Memphis to reimagine how we use church space and so.

John Burruss

I think that's part of the story that's led us here, but I'll let Mary B kind of share a little bit about her background and then we'll move into our presentation today.

John Burruss

So welcome.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thanks, John, and I echo that gratitude for all of you who are here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Get this live and those who will be looking in later.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you so much.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm also excited at some point to connect maybe with some of you who have some similar programs and learnings that you'd like to share offline for sure.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm Mary B Sullivan.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm a priest in the Diocese of Alabama.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I came to the priesthood later in life and had a circuitous.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Root.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I grew up Catholic.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I left the Catholic Church and then was really delving deeply in a lot of different kinds of spirituality, living in Tokyo and California.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so things like yoga and meditation and a Buddhist community informed me greatly.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then through a gift of centering prayer, found my way back to Christ, to to the Episcopal Church and have been grateful for the welcome and really excited.

Mary Bea Sullivan

About the work we're doing here, I feel like it melds some of what I was doing earlier as a spiritual director and an author, and also leading retreats with being a parish priest.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But I thought, at least for myself, what would be helpful would be to take a breath together.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so I'm going to invite us to start with a spiritual practice.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You decide if you want your eyes open, if you want your eyes closed.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm going to encourage you to not do what a lot of us do, myself included, and look at five other things while we're on the zoom and just be here for a minute.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And and it's often starts right there with our breath, right?

Mary Bea Sullivan

So my guess is if you're like me, you've had a really busy day, so just take like two or three good.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Deep breaths, just just a sense of reconnecting, allowing our souls to catch up with us.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And perhaps in this moment there's something particularly heavy that is weighing in your heart or on your mind, and I would encourage you to lift that up to the Holy One.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And trust that it is held at least for the next 45 minutes or an hour, and perhaps to silently name that and ask for a moment of relief from that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Just breathe in that, breathe into that space and perhaps there's something.

Mary Bea Sullivan

That you're particularly grateful for today.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Something really wonderful you saw or someone said or you read or you felt in your heart and just holding that deeply and and lifting that up and gratitude in this moment as well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And finally, if if you have some intention for this time, something you're hoping to learn or to experience or to feel.

Mary Bea Sullivan

To set that intention now, and I will share my intention with you, and that is that this be a sacred space where we feel the spirit's presence and we share.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Unfortunately, we're not going to hear all your stories, but we share our story in a way that plants seeds that come to fruition in ways we will never know.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And that we will be clear and generous.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Maybe one last breath and we'll all come back together and just welcome back.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Come on back.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I feel better.

Mary Bea Sullivan

John, do you want to?

John Burruss

Start us off?

John Burruss

Yes.

John Burruss

So I'll just give you a little before we jump into the threshold center it it looks like from.

John Burruss

The comments in many of y'all are connected to parishes and some some diocese across our country.

John Burruss

St.

John Burruss

Stephen's was started in 1973 in the suburbs of Birmingham and a place that at the time was called Slab Town.

John Burruss

So it really kind of a diverse neighborhood.

John Burruss

A lot of the people that worked in the coal mines and one of the interesting kind of models of St.

John Burruss

Stephen's was known for starting things and.

John Burruss

In 1987 hired A clergy person, the Reverend Bill Greeley, who was an associate rector that really only served on Sundays and maybe did a few things in the parish.

John Burruss

But then he he his work was starting Holy Innocence Ministry, which was working with orphans, young men that had lost their parents to create a create a group home that that later became what's King's Ranch in in in Birmingham.

John Burruss

But it kind of spurred this idea that that there's a way of of the church using its resources to start.

John Burruss

Starts new initiatives.

John Burruss

And so part of that I think is the model for Mary B, who serves here on Sundays in a Sacramento role and pastoral care.

John Burruss

But her body of her work is outside of our physical building in the Threshold Center.

John Burruss

And so it's a model that's been a part of Saint Stephen's.

John Burruss

It's happened a couple of times in the life of here.

John Burruss

St.

John Burruss

Stephen's in the the mid 90s helped raise money and one of our church members who was an architect and another that was a builder raised money to build a church for the deaf.

John Burruss

There was a need of that and and we gave property that's across the street to build St.

John Burruss

John's Church for the Deaf.

John Burruss

That community dissolved in the mid around 2015 sixteen.

John Burruss

That community dissolved and the diocese returned to us that building and said we're tired of keeping this resource and and and putting money into it.

John Burruss

It's yours.

John Burruss

Do as do as you wish for ministry.

John Burruss

So.

John Burruss

So we ended up with with a what was a church for the deaf and a parish hall and some bathrooms and a.

John Burruss

In a meeting room and over the last decade have been wrestling with with how to use that for the good of the greater community.

John Burruss

So we ended up with an extra space that and I think this is significant for most of the community in Cahaba Heights.

John Burruss

They do not see that as part of Saint Stephen's.

John Burruss

It's a neutral, it's a neutral space.

John Burruss

And so my role as as a rector of a parish is how do we?

John Burruss

You know, how do we use what we have to benefit the the greater community?

John Burruss

And and we all know that as much as we'd like every single person in the neighborhood to come into our pews on Sunday morning, that is not going to happen.

John Burruss

But we can be a part of people's lives.

John Burruss

In 2022, our community went through a person that had been worshipping here and and kind of become a part of the congregation, shot and killed three members of our parish at a potluck dinner.

John Burruss

And so one of the ways that we have been looking at that is to how do we really take seriously the isolation that people feel in this world.

John Burruss

The the person was isolated and lonely and and I think this is a faithful response of of reconciliation for us to to take seriously the loneliness epidemic, not saying that's going to solve.

John Burruss

Problems and so on.

John Burruss

But it seems a faithful response to what we can offer in this community.

John Burruss

And so that's part of the motivation for for us, for for for our community to be intentional about how we respond.

John Burruss

So I'm going to Mary B move to your slide presentation and we'll jump with the PowerPoint and you are.

Mary Bea Sullivan

OK, so a couple of years ago.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So I want to just say that the Threshold Center in some ways has been being dreamed for a long time ago.

Mary Bea Sullivan

The current Bishop of the Central Gulf Coast, Russell Kendrick, when he was the rector at one time, was looking at ways we use this space as well and had some conversations about using it as a place to nurture spirituality.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then it just kept growing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And two years ago, my husband Malcolm and I began.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Worshipping.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I had left full-time parish ministry and John and I had we've gone to seminary together and we had this shared vision like we could do something really beautiful here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And So what we decided to do and I'm grateful for that support just as people are thinking about what can I do where I am.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Support is so important.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's you just we just can't do it alone, can we?

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so I'm grateful for his support and the support of the parish.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So the first thing that we did is.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We started having listening sessions within the congregation to hear what people wanted and learning that there was this desire to give back to the community that had supported St.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Stephen so well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And as John already mentioned, address the loneliness epidemic.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We are housed on beautiful grounds, so there's like a memorial labyrinth that was built.

Mary Bea Sullivan

There's also beautiful woods, and so it lends itself for outdoor spiritual programs as well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Like forest bathing and labyrinth walks.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so, so we began to gather with a big group and then from that big group created a smaller group which we're now calling the Advisory Council.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we've wrestled with, you know, what's our vision, what's, you know, how do we hound this in?

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's a it's a big desire.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so where we are in this moment and I really invite you to go to the website and see some of the past programs and things that we've done, but.

Mary Bea Sullivan

This is really a place of welcome and and and our heart is in nurturing well-being through practices that engage the heart, the body and the and the imagination and and we desire to create space where diverse perspectives can be heard and there's a sense of the sacred in this as well and.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I believe one of the reasons why people have gotten excited about what we're doing is there's a real yearning for these third space kinds of things, which we'll talk about more in a little bit and also.

Mary Bea Sullivan

To our, we are very fortunate.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We have incredible facilitators available in the community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so the quality of the programming I think has helped and some of our facilitators have brought in folks from the community that we maybe would not have touched in other ways.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we're growing in this way.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We still have a long way to go, but this is, this is the heart of who we aspire to be.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're not perfect at it all the time.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But this is our heart to be this for people.

Mary Bea Sullivan

If we could go to the next slide, John, you know, we really feel that we want to look and know, yes, there's scriptural grounding in what we do and and just a reminder that holiness.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Wholeness is a is a path to holiness.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And you know, and that we do this in community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Like if we look in Mark and Mark, the second chapter of Mark, and I think it's the 5th chapter of Luke, when the community is lowering that man down into the on the mat and to be at the feet of Jesus, it's like we come at this together and we know wholeness is so important.

Mary Bea Sullivan

In relation to our relationship to God, to ourselves and to one another.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I I remember when I was first ordained a younger priest.

Mary Bea Sullivan

They're all younger than me, but a younger priest just said to me, you know, we're in our offices too much.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We need to get out.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I still feel that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I feel that today.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I think there's truth in it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And just remembering that, you know, Jesus was, of course, I mean, most of you are clergy, you know, or are serving in a parish.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So I'm not telling you anything we don't already know.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But, you know, just to remember this idea about Jesus going right into Samaria and sitting at the well with the woman doing things.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Other people are like, what are you doing?

Mary Bea Sullivan

You're not supposed to do that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But he knew that was the core of the healing for her, the continuation of the mission and.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And frankly, here at the Threshold Center, most of our programs so far, so when I say this, no, we started a soft opening last year, our buildings undergoing renovation and the real opening is happening in a couple of months, but we offered enough programs to have learned a lot.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So most of them have been housed here at the Threshold Center, but we did offer one program, an artist way program online and reached people around the country with that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So that was a little bit more of the reaching out.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then tomorrow night I've been invited to be a part of a storytelling.

Mary Bea Sullivan

In the city where communities around Birmingham, AL are all going to be offering stories about their communities.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we know we need to do more of that and have desires and ways to do that through targeted labyrinth walks and other things.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But just to realize our mission is to go beyond the walls of not only our parish but also the threshold center and and again leaving our comfort zones that Jesus sent his followers out.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then the the next slide and then we're pretty much done with the slides till the end.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But I, you know, probably many of you love Parker Palmer.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I love Parker Palmer and he speaks to community in such an important way.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And he says if we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace that challenge alone.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support.

Mary Bea Sullivan

If we are to sustain the journey of an undivided life, that kind of community, one that knows how to welcome the soul and help us hear its voice, I call a circle of trust.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So this is coming from a Quaker, Parker Palmer, and we can say that about our congregations.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So what's different?

Mary Bea Sullivan

What's different about creating a circle of trust?

Mary Bea Sullivan

At Saint Stephen's and creating a circle of trust over here at the Threshold Center.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I think John and I in a conversation try to be as intentional as we can about remembering worship happens like I'm moving like I'm across the going across the street where John is.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Sitting.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But worship happens at Saint Stephen's.

Mary Bea Sullivan

That is the gathered Christian worshipping community that does the outreach, that does the Christian overt Christian teachings, all of those things.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And yet there's so many people, as we all know, who are yearning for community beyond that, who maybe have been hurt by the church for a million different reasons.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so this is a space for them to come and to create community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A lot of people who are coming are actually a part of faith communities.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A lot of them are from Saint Stephen's, but they're getting something different here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And our hope is to continue to grow with programming that invites people from different perspectives to come who are yearning for this kind of community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And Maria, I just want.

John Burruss

To say too that one of the things that I've realized over the last year is.

John Burruss

And I think this is significant.

John Burruss

So when I was engaged in congregational development work, I did that for for almost three years working with congregations and and most of the projects we came up where the outreach, outreach focused.

John Burruss

But there was this feeling that all of them were an attempt ultimately to drive people back to the church community.

John Burruss

And and I think by having a third space that is offering something to the community, this is this.

John Burruss

I know that there may be some people disagree with this, but I've never taken any of the the mailing list for the threshold center and use that to invite people to to Easter Sunday or Christmas.

John Burruss

Like there is a separation that gives a sense of freedom that we can totally focus on the well-being of the community.

John Burruss

Now I hope that people that are hungry for a Christian community and are looking for that may end up coming across the street 100%, but that is not the reason.

John Burruss

And and and and and there is no value lost if people are just made well across the street.

John Burruss

I just need, I need to claim that and that has been an intentional strategy that I think is different than the main approach I would have taken 10 years ago.

John Burruss

I'm not concerned.

John Burruss

Well, think you get the idea.

John Burruss

Do you want me to share you'd ask, do you want me to share the?

Mary Bea Sullivan

Website for Threshold Center?

Mary Bea Sullivan

We could do that now.

John Burruss

Sure.

John Burruss

So I think I I was going to ask you to tell me about some of the programs that you've offered or plan to offer and I thought it might be easier to.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You go to the top at the programs page, you can just right there then I'm sure and if you Scroll down a little.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we're right now we're showing our past programs because we're taking a hiatus this summer, but you get an idea of what some of it is.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we're moving toward a rhythm where Monday nights we're offering series called Spiritual Practices for Resilience and we started that in the fall of 2024 and.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Brought in eight different facilitators.

Mary Bea Sullivan

One was a rabbi, one was a Zen meditation teacher, a couple of priests and lay folks, and all a yoga teacher highlighted different things that lead to resilience within a variety of kinds of spiritual practices.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we were hoping maybe 10 or 15 people would show up and we had 40 plus sign up for that eight week Monday night series and that was a really wonderful surprise.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Not everybody came every week.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Some of it dropped off over the eight weeks and we learned some things that people were like a four week series is more digestible.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'd like to have more of one teacher instead of a smorgasbord kind of thing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we adjusted and then what you see here with the.

Mary Bea Sullivan

The spring schedule we offered three three-week series, or maybe it was 4 three-week series on Monday night and then I do a women's circle on Tuesday morning, usually a book group.

Mary Bea Sullivan

This year I'm doing something different.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Then we did this one thing we called Third Thursday.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're moving it to try it Tuesday, but where it's just like a one-off fun thing that people can just drop in and have fun with.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And the one that was we did Tai Chi, we did sound bathing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

People all loved it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I mean, you know, we had a small group, maybe 15 or 20 people come for sound bathing, but everybody who came really loved it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A lot of them didn't know what we were doing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so I think like as time goes on, there will be.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Some more energy around that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then we also hosted what's called Braver Angels, which is a maybe you know about this group that addresses issues around political polarization.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And one of our parishioners at Saint Stephen's is a skilled facilitator around that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we had people from different parts of the political divide come and learn about de-escalation.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we didn't have some big political talk.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We were learning about how.

Mary Bea Sullivan

To deescalate and we hosted, we hosted some retreats.

Mary Bea Sullivan

The Collegeville Institute was really neat.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I can say more about that in a little bit, but those that's just a little smattering of some labyrinth walks, forest bathing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And and just to say this, John, before we move to the next question as we look at the fall programming.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're going to continue the Monday night spiritual practices.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm going to continue my Tuesday morning wisdom circle with women.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then Tuesday evening we were this.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I love Molly.

Mary Bea Sullivan

She does such a beautiful job with ours.

Mary Bea Sullivan

On Tuesday evenings, we were a beloved St.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Stephen's parishioner came last winter to ask me about what the Threshold Center was about, and she's a phenomenally creative woman.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And she also is part of this Commission on Spirituality and she just got so excited about what we were going to do.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And she had hearing loss.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So she was so excited about what we were doing with the building.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And sadly, her health declined rapidly soon after that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And when she died, she asked for donations to be made in honor of the her to the threshold center.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And one of her beloved friends gave a significant donation that now we have a Billy James Fund for the Arts.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we're really able to look at the intersection of the arts and spirituality.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we've got some great facilitators who are going to do some work around poetry, storytelling, writing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're hoping to have an artist in residence starting in 2026.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But those, I mean you may, you all may have some questions about programs, so feel free or anything to put some questions in the chat there.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But I want to say one more thing about an upcoming program.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we have found that we're still trying to tap that demographic about younger people.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And people not as connected and how do we find them and how do we make it accessible for them and so like.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I said we just got started, but we're going to start a Thursday night mindful living series and it's going to be a rotating list of facilitators.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's going to be 6:30 to 7:30 at night on Thursdays.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's a drop-in.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's donation.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It, you know, it's drop-in.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's donation.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's, I hope will be something where we'll talk about mindful eating, meditation, walking, stress.

Mary Bea Sullivan

All of those things.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So I see there's did you see that question?

John Burruss

And so actually, and in some ways Noah's question was similar to to the next question I had that you have.

John Burruss

And I think I'm gonna try to blend those two.

John Burruss

But I, you know, I'm wondering if we take seriously that unchurched, that if the Kingdom of God is all people here on earth that we're to minister to, and that includes the unchurched, how do we seriously, you know, take seriously Wellness?

John Burruss

But then Noah's asking here too, how do we articulate that in everyday language?

John Burruss

When people may not have a vocabulary for spirituality.

John Burruss

And one of the things I'm noticing is we're talking a lot about spiritual practices and so on.

John Burruss

So I think it's, you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Know, worthy of consideration.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you for the reminder.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You know, I have a set point.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I find myself falling back on and I think we have to be really, really intentional about our language.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I think language around things like Wellness, well-being.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Connection, community, those seem to translate well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And the word mindful actually translates well and has all this neuroscience behind it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we're still like, Noah, I'm telling you, we're still working on it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Like, thank you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's a fabulous question.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I will have to say John knows this cause I'm wrestling with it all the time and with the advisory circle, how do we articulate this and we keep honing and honing but there's more work to do.

John Burruss

I mean I I would say and I would say that the the clear divide that there's no worship taking place at a center.

John Burruss

So one of the one of the things that is.

John Burruss

Intentional about a third space that has another name and a kind of outside group that both cause the Advisory Council has a handful of people from Saint Stephen's, but then it intentionally has people that are not a part of this faith community.

John Burruss

That what that allows is at least in the South you feel a lot of pride in your community and so it's I I feel like it's hard sometimes to be going into another church and not feel a little guilty.

John Burruss

And so we've created a place.

John Burruss

Where you can be a member of another faith community or you can not have a faith community and you can go and participate.

John Burruss

And so even if if someone who is not Christian doesn't have an understanding or or not Buddhist or not Jewish or or grounded in spiritual practices, I think even like a class on spiritual practices, we've I I think this is an entry point where someone can say, hey, I'm interested in learning, there's no commitment and I'm not being forced to join a group.

John Burruss

And so you've created you, you've lowered the threshold for you've created a playground for the faith or or or larger, but larger than just the Christian faith and giving people a chance to experiment with something without in in a less threatening environment, if that makes sense.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And and also John, to piggyback on that, Noah, if you look at what John has up on the screen, Molly, who is a yoga teacher, a breath work teacher, has a nutrition passion as well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

If you look at her language, it's well-being through movement, she's using words like.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You know, comfort and support.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Anyway, there there are ways reducing burnout.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And as you say this, you've helped me cause I think I might change the name for the Monday night series just to practices for resilience and get rid of the spiritual practices possibly.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's always a moving target.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We'll see.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then there's a question from Jennifer.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I may be asking too soon in your presentation, but do you have suggestions?

Mary Bea Sullivan

For an urban, clearly Christian space without a large outside property, I have some thoughts you probably do to to John.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I think it's a great question.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Everybody, we all have to work in our context, right?

Mary Bea Sullivan

So some of our contexts are great gifts and some of our contexts are great limitations and we all have them in my personal.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thought on this would be you just lean into who you are and where you are and make it your own.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So there might be things that we would do at Saint Stephen's because we have this extra space, but there might be ways that your internal spaces could be made to feel a little more neutral.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You know, we all this space where I am, Al-anon meets here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A Baptist black congregation meets on Sunday, a memory care respite program.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And it all did that even when it was a church.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So there's ways we can possibly make our spaces more hospitable.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I don't know if you have something other than that, John.

John Burruss

Well, I mean, I would, I would think, you know, it's interesting when I think back to my previous work, like one of the most vibrant congregations before it built a church was a church that met in a paint store on Sundays.

John Burruss

So what are the what are you know are the are there prisoners or people that have space that's not used on a certain day that could be neutral ground to test out without with with a low barrier.

John Burruss

So you're not investing a lot of resources.

John Burruss

That's what I would look for in an urban context cause it's hard to maintain property 24/7 and so it's nicer when someone else does that just led us to some of our partnerships for for example with the Klatt Jewish Family Services.

John Burruss

Maybe I'm curious if if.

John Burruss

You know, we're talking about belonging.

John Burruss

We haven't really responded to loneliness.

John Burruss

We've kind of cleared the air a little bit for what it means to create space that may be more accessible for for people.

John Burruss

What's a moment where you felt like someone had a breakthrough?

John Burruss

Are there any stories that you're willing to share from the programming when someone has found belonging or or felt seen in ways that?

Mary Bea Sullivan

May be more meaningful to the community that was gathered?

Mary Bea Sullivan

Great question.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A couple things come to mind.

Mary Bea Sullivan

One is in that first eight-week series, one of our one of our facilitators is a woman named Elizabeth Vanderkamp, and she actually does a program on listening as an act of love.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And it is really powerful the way we learn to listen devoutly to one another.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so in that experience there was a man who would, I think he's probably in his late 40s or early 50s, a very successful person in his career, was very vulnerable with this group of 30 some people about having an aha moment about how he was interacting.

Mary Bea Sullivan

In the world, in certain spaces, and it brought visible emotion to others who were in the room, and perhaps particularly the men who were gathered.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And that was like a a powerful surprise, another one.

Mary Bea Sullivan

That comes to mind has to do with a young woman who had been feeling estranged from her faith community, working too hard at work and being very clear that this moment on Monday night was the highlight of her week, being able to share stories with other people even though she was.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Probably one of the youngest people in the room.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It was really important to her.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Those are just two that's in mind.

Mary Bea Sullivan

There are a lot, but those two.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Thank you.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Anna's asked a question that we we did.

John Burruss

Not do a formal needs assessment or any asset-based community development.

John Burruss

I mean there was there.

John Burruss

There's a lot of kind of looking at what programs are being offered in the community and and seeing if there's any overlap.

John Burruss

We had explored for a while.

John Burruss

There was a yoga studio down the street that was that that ended up going out of business and during the pandemic.

John Burruss

And so that really hasn't shaped our vision at all.

John Burruss

But there are there's a few exercise classes or yoga or class for for cancer survivors.

John Burruss

There's a chair yoga, although I think that's moved over here to the side of campus.

John Burruss

One of the things that's interesting to me is to see the different community partners and and maybe I wondered if if you can share a little bit of of how you've built connection and trust with different community organizations.

John Burruss

You you've mentioned you mentioned Collegeville Institute and the CARES program and and and some recovery labyrinth walks and some.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Would you share a little more?

Mary Bea Sullivan

So these these collaboration partners are building cause we've only been able to be a partner with anyone for a short time and a lot of them have come based on relationships.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Those of us in this leadership group already have or logical people to reach out to.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But there we we have partnered with the recovery community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Last year and they're asking for more ways to partner with us this year.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And last year in September, we did a recovery labyrinth walk and I created a liturgy for recovery.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And one of the leaders of one of the recovery groups actually was the leader, not me.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then we had a a labyrinth facilitator come in and do that walk.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And it was so cool because we had all these people walking the labyrinth who we don't normally see at Saint Stephen's and it was.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Moving.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then they shared their experience of it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

My hope is, is we continue to partner with them.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Some of them might say, hey, I'm interested in that mindful living program or I'm interested in that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But that's one Collegeville Institute you all may know about out of Minnesota.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're very fortunate.

Mary Bea Sullivan

One of somebody who's in relationship with us has a good relationship with Collegeville.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Lauren Winter, who many of you may know, got excited about offering a program here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And what happened was like a local coffee.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Shop said we'll bring the coffee and snacks and they let people know about it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And because of Collegeville's reputation and reach, we had folks from Tennessee and Mississippi along with all parts of Alabama.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And it was also the most racially diverse thing we've done because they brought in racially diverse leaders.

Mary Bea Sullivan

In the plenary, speaker was an incredible African-American poet named Ashley Jones.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And and so that was actually one of the moments I thought was most profound because I saw people who I know would not have normally been sharing their writing, like older guys and younger women of color.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Really listening and supporting each other and laughing and hugging.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I mean, I don't know, it's just not all about the emotion, but the connection was very real and the writing was powerful.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So that's one.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then we've been reaching out to the al.com and other communities within here.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Scott Stoner on a national level through Living Compass has been a huge mentor and partner helping us with some of these things.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we're.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And and we want to reach out actually to neighborhood partners like first.

John Burruss

Responders and some others and start working with them as well.

John Burruss

Laurie's asked for a separate 501C3 we're not and and actually there is some of my background has been in nonprofit work and there's always this idea like.

John Burruss

Let's create a 501C3, which means you have to file legal paperwork, you have to maintain a board, you have to file a 990.

John Burruss

It does sometimes open you up to grants that wouldn't fund typical religious work, and that's often the driver.

John Burruss

But there's a great deal of freedom not doing that when you're starting something new.

John Burruss

We just have restricted accounts on our in our church accounting, so the funds are not commingled.

John Burruss

You know, all the accounting is separate.

John Burruss

And yet it doesn't require additional staff.

John Burruss

It does our our Director of Finance, her role has grown over the last couple of years through the care, you know it works and and so that's you know a consideration.

John Burruss

But but I I personally have found a lot of freedom in not trying to go down that road at this point.

John Burruss

People think that's often necessary at the beginning and.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I've not found that to be true and I don't.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Know if this is helpful for you all to know.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I am three quarter time and my salary is paid for by the church.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And as John said, I also have clergy responsibilities, sacramental responsibilities and we have hired somebody who works 20 hours a week who's good at the communication and the marketing.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And as you could imagine with how many programs we're doing, we are interacting with a lot of people for.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Information about their programs, promoting their programs, registrations, and she handles a good bit of that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But it doesn't always have to be that complicated.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You know, it could start very small and meaningful for sure.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we do charge fees, but everything is open to scholarship with no questions asked.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So we play with and some things are free, you know, it's about us all.

John Burruss

Now, but I would say like it's interesting because that's something we have parsed out like when Saint Stephen's offers events.

John Burruss

I mean, I don't, I don't think we've ever charged for anything unless it's like a big workshop and lunch.

John Burruss

You pay for lunch or something like that.

John Burruss

You know, church events have always seemed like that's the offering and that's what ties and and gifts go to.

John Burruss

And there's been no barrier.

John Burruss

If you're going to go to an outside program by paying a little bit, it's it's almost like a digging piece, like I want to be here.

John Burruss

I'm committing to this.

John Burruss

You're more likely to go if you've registered.

John Burruss

Those costs have largely been able to to to cover the cost of facilitators and a little bit of the part-time person who's working to manage that.

John Burruss

And so then Mary B's role has.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Been that the outreach of the church.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we try to be generous to the facilitators and yet it's not that expensive.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we actually had a donor who came forward and said if it takes some pressure off in the fall, I'll pay some of the facilitation fees so that you can have that for the pot.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But.

John Burruss

It it's an interesting model if you think of of for those in church leadership if you to hire a staff person versus what it's looked like to coordinate.

John Burruss

You know, 20 different speakers every year and to give a a generous stipend that is respects the work that they've done.

John Burruss

There's different ways of reaching and kind of and honoring the work that's.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Out in the community.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You don't always need another staff person.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I have a dream that will take these programs that are happening here, but they're going to happen with partners.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Like in the inner city and other places.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I really believe some of those relationships through some of our facilitators and others are starting to happen and that would be really lovely like almost like a threshold center outreach program in a way.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I as I look at the.

John Burruss

Questions we prepared, I'm not sure how helpful they are as the way the conversation is going, I mean I think.

John Burruss

You know, maybe just to kind of deviate from our script.

John Burruss

Tell me you've you've had this idea that this movement of responding to Wellness can be less clergy-centric and would love for you to speak, speak to that.

John Burruss

There's always in in a church that's the name of our denomination is wrapped up in clericalism, right Episcopal.

John Burruss

And so curious your thoughts on on what it means to be less clergy-centric.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's a tricky thing because I am a priest.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I'm glad I'm a priest, and right now I am the leader of the movement and the co-visionary with others, you included.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so I'm not ashamed of being a priest, but I also think this is a model that really lends itself to it not having to be a clergy person.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So you see, like I'm not wearing my collar today.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I find myself, when I'm leading at the Threshold Center, wearing my collar less often.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Just because of all the things we've already talked about, about making it accessible for other people.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But I have found, and we have beautiful clergy like the rabbi and you know, the Reverend Doctor Jose Fernandez and others who have done incredible work.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I wouldn't want to discount the work of the clergy, but I believe that some of our strongest leaders have also been like you saw Molly, I mentioned Elizabeth.

Mary Bea Sullivan

The guy who does the mindfulness, whose name is gone from my head right now, but that that people seem to be just as connected with them because it's about the heart

connection as they are with anybody who's creating some sense of a hierarchical model.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're even looking at this in our leadership.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You know, clearly I'm the director and it falls on me and in conversation with John and the vestry that we make sound decisions as best we can for the for the mission.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But we've changed the name to Advisory Circle to make it less hierarchical so more people can have their voices in how the mission moves forward.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I'm grateful that we're grounded in Christian theology.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And it gives us that passion and mission and yet we can hold it lightly and and allow for the space for others.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I don't really like the word empower because that assumes you're but like just to step back a little and allow more space.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And one of the ways we do that, we hey you guys, I hope you'll sign up for our e-mail newsletter.

Mary Bea Sullivan

You can do that on the website.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And we send a reflection out most Thursdays.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We took a break for a month.

Mary Bea Sullivan

We're starting again next week.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But I'm not the only one who writes reflections, even though maybe I'm a writer.

Mary Bea Sullivan

But but we have other folks from the community who write reflections as well.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And most of them are lay people.

John Burruss

And a lot of them are are facilitators.

John Burruss

So we try to lift up these other voices.

John Burruss

Well, I.

John Burruss

Maybe want to leave a little bit of time.

John Burruss

I know people have kind of commit 50 minutes to an hour for for these webinars.

John Burruss

If there's questions out there, maybe if you're thinking of any big challenges, surprises that that have come to mind or anything that you think that that our our community gathered here today needs to know.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I think I've named one of them, which is language, mission, honing it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Still kind of working on that, reaching some of the folks we're getting there.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's going to take time for anything we do.

Mary Bea Sullivan

It's going to take some time.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I think I have been surprised at the amount of time that it like that is being requested.

Mary Bea Sullivan

I kind of thought this will be this little fun and it is still fun, but there's a lot of enthusiasm, which is great.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then people want to be a part of it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So how to respond to that in timely ways and all of that and and and being the polity like how does a subset of an already existing organization in our situation, a good-sized parish that has a vestry, you know, we have you, I have a role and.

Mary Bea Sullivan

How do we develop that polity in a way that the people who are engaged on the advisory circle feel like they have a meaningful, something meaningful to offer, but that we're clear the real polity lands at the parish, at least how we are right now.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I think we're getting there and we're getting great volunteers.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So just organization.

John Burruss

I would, I would share that what what my observation is people are very, very hungry for intentional finding, finding belonging in community.

John Burruss

They're hungry for it.

John Burruss

They're lonely and it's a it's a response.

John Burruss

And the church is not what it was 70 years ago.

John Burruss

And and yet like I am wearing my collar like there's nothing more life-giving than the body of Christ to me personally.

John Burruss

It's it's where I find my home and my place.

John Burruss

And yet I know that I can't just assume somebody's going to see that significance.

John Burruss

And So what does it mean to care for people?

John Burruss

And and so it is the challenge of the church to reimagine how we are engaged in the community and and how we use space.

John Burruss

And the Episcopal Church, one of the benefits most probably from just the fact that we've been around longer than a lot of people is we have space and and so anyway that we can kind of change the barriers for that space, especially when there's streets that divide it.

John Burruss

I mean that's probably 1 benefit.

John Burruss

So while while the threshold center is on the corner, if you were to look at a map of Saint Stephen's and I I wish I had thought about this.

John Burruss

The campus is connected, but there is a road that divides that divides St.

John Burruss

the Threshold Center, which used to be St.

John Burruss

John's from Saint Stephen's.

John Burruss

And that road actually creates an opportunity.

John Burruss

It creates a sense of safety for those that are yet that that don't find the hope in walking across the street.

John Burruss

And that's OK.

John Burruss

I'm not here to to to to judge and take that.

John Burruss

So I I think there's a there's a sense in our kind of.

John Burruss

The way that we think about our properties, they can give us hope.

John Burruss

And so my hope is Jana wrote in the comments to share Sylvestre.

John Burruss

I think that's I love that.

John Burruss

I hope it's.

John Burruss

I hope it's helpful.

Mary Bea Sullivan

Hey, I'm grateful.

Mary Bea Sullivan

There's one last thing I want to say we took a long time to create.

Mary Bea Sullivan

What we call like the being in community guidelines and you'll see them if you've ever done some Parker Palmer work and some listening circles or wisdom circles.

Mary Bea Sullivan

A lot of it is born from those experiences and we try to start every program with that, reminding each other about that being so important.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And I also want to say that we have not always lived into that.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And when we haven't, we've kind of had to come back and say, I'm sorry, like none of us are perfect at it.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And so to be gentle with ourselves and give ourselves some grace and have entrepreneurial hearts, but be mindful that we have people's hearts in our care, just like we do at church, but also to to be willing to risk, but to hold each other listening devoutly with respect.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And then also to be willing to say, wow, that was a mistake, I'm really sorry.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And to deepen in our connection with one another with that humility.

Mary Bea Sullivan

So anything else anybody has wonderings?

Mary Bea Sullivan

I can't see my there it is.

Mary Bea Sullivan

OK, I was trying.

John Burruss

To get to the chat to see if there was, but.

John Burruss

We're grateful for everyone staying on for for for nearly an hour and and listening to the story and I hope it sparks conversation within your own communities.

John Burruss

And if you're doing something that you think is is related that would be helpful for us to know, please, please, please.

John Burruss

Reach out.

John Burruss

We'd love to connect.

John Burruss

We are learning every single day and we do not have everything figured out.

John Burruss

But we're excited about the journey and the path that we're on.

John Burruss

Thank you all very much.

Mary Bea Sullivan

And thank you, John and Joe and EPN and everybody.

John Burruss

Thanks a bunch.

John Burruss

Thank you, Laura.

John Burruss

Thank you.