



Home / Offices / Communications / News

## Art as Ministry: St. Paul's Houston

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St. Benedict



St. George



St. Barbara



St. Cosmas and St. Damian

*Photos courtesy Kelsey Johnson, Executive Director of Communications, St. Paul's UMC Houston. Art by Ibraim Nascimento Santos.*

**By: Sherri Gragg**

It began as so many beautiful ministries do, with a friendship.

The Rev. Nataly Negrete, Associate Pastor St. Paul's Houston, met Helen Spaw one afternoon during an after-school program for St. Paul's United Methodist children. Negrete was working in the program. Spaw, an art therapist, was teaching art. Connections were made. Friendship blossomed. And then, in that fertile ground, God planted the seeds of St. Paul's art ministry.

Today, art is everywhere at St. Paul's Houston. It dances in ballet slippers in the Fine Arts Program for preschoolers. It lifts its brushes in worship as local artist Ibraim Nascimento Santos creates art to the liturgical rhythms of worship, praise, the reading of the Word, and prayer.



Art restores broken lives through Project Curate and Iconoclast. It whispers ancient truth through a Lenten devotional illustrated by congregants of all ages.

Art opens hearts to healing through St. Paul's Healing Art Circles and whispers, "No matter what. God sees you. We love you. You are never alone."



**Here are eight ways art is ministry at St. Paul's Houston:**

**1. At St. Paul's Houston, art provides common ground.**

"We are a very diverse church," said Negrete. "We discovered that art is one of the ways we can connect with this diversity. We can affirm our individual talents through art, heal through art, grow spiritually together through art."

**2. Art provides St. Paul's a connection to its community.**

"We are neighbors of the Museum of Fine Arts here in Houston," said Kelsey Johnson, Executive Director of Communications. "I think our location helped formed our connection to the arts. We also have several artists in our congregation. We have this beautiful campus of St. Paul's which is, in and of itself, a work of art."

**3. Music is everywhere.**

Psalm 33 joyfully challenges us to make music to the Lord in any way we can. St. Paul's takes the command seriously. From children's choirs, to bell ringing, to adult choirs, St. Paul's music program is vibrant and creative.

**4. St. Paul's ministers to children through their Fine Arts Program**

Ballet classes. Piano. Paints, brushes, and pallets. St. Paul's Houston is rarely quiet as they welcome pre-school children and special needs children and adults.



**5. Through art, St. Paul's Houston invites the congregation to actively participate in worship.**

"For a number of years, we have included art submissions from children, youth, and adults in our Lenten devotional. It is so beautiful to give a text of scripture to a child, or adult, for reflection and see the different perspectives in how they visualize their faith," said Johnson.

**6. St. Paul's Healing Art Circles, co-facilitated by Negrete and Spaw, provide the space for God to heal deep emotional wounds.**

"Art helps us to speak with our hands the things our voices cannot express," said Negrete. "We come to the Healing Art Circle to speak with intention and listen with *attention*."

**7. Art reaches out to Houston youth through Iconoclast.**

Iconoclast seeks to support and encourage underserved students by empowering them to express themselves, and strengthen writing skills, by offering instruction and platforms through which students can share their work.



**8. Art testifies to the greatness of God's redeeming love.**

"During Lent, we will have art both inside and outside of the church. Inside, we will have the Stations of the Cross. Outside, on the corner we will have art installations that speak to Jesus's passion," said Negrete.

**9. Art invites us to slow down...and worship.**

"There is no other way to do art other than one step at a time," said Negrete. We have to slow down. Participate. It is sacred time. In slowing down, we can understand better what God is trying say to us. We rush every day in our lives. Art invites us to listen to ourselves and to God. Once we do that we begin to walk, then we find the manger and we offer our gifts to Jesus.



**10. During Special worship services at St. Paul's, art provides another way for the congregation to approach God.**

“Local artist Ibrahim Nascimento Santos creates beautiful works of art as he listens to the service. As we combine all of these elements of worship, we can better appreciate the gifts we have been given. This, in turn, gives us the courage to give love, bring hope, fight for justice, and share compassion with others.”

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