



# ProjectCURATE Fosters Relationships Amidst Cultural Explosion

4/23/2015



**Matthew Russell**

With support from the Texas Annual Conference, Houston is serving as a laboratory for ministry innovation and community connections via Project CURATE.

†

Social, ethnic and economic differences can create boundaries between people, but they are invisible to God. “That’s why projectCURATE seeks to uncover ways in which communities leverage networks and creative solutions that might accelerate God’s work of restoration in the city,” says Matthew Russell, Ph.D., executive director of projectCURATE: Center for Urban Reconciliation and Theological Education. Matt Russell is a pastor, activist and professor. Currently, he is on staff at **St. Paul’s UMC**, Houston, working in the area of faith formation and community development, and is an affiliate professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in Practical Theology.

†

Rice University Sociologist, Stephen Klineberg, claims Houston is where America will be by 2040, saying, “How Houston navigates the coming two decades will have enormous implications for Houston and America’s future.” Adds Matt, “Since there is no blueprint at this point, projectCURATE

can be an incubator for creative ministry ideas,” he adds. “Developing kinships between those who are building bridges across cultural divides will increase the capacity for transforming work.”

†

## **Texas Annual Conference is Leading by Example**

ProjectCURATE was imagined in collaboration with the TAC Center for Missional Excellence. “The Texas Annual Conference finds itself in an exciting moment in history as God has literally assembled the nations of the world within our geographic boundaries,” shares Diane McGehee, Center Director. † “Our challenge is

learning to build relationships of dignity and hope with members of communities from cultures and backgrounds very different from our own, but in whose midst God is already at work.† ProjectCURATE is being developed as a pilot that might help us learn to listen deeply to one another's stories and then, out of that deep listening, to create a new story together informed by the story of God for our city and our communities. This is designed to be an organic learning experience where our theology and our practice are informed as we listen to scripture, one another, and our respective communities together and then apply what we learn in life-giving ways in the church and the world."

†

In the Houston context initially, Matt hopes to help create a blueprint for future cities and the modern church by equipping laity and clergy with innovative systems of reconciliation, including a new model of theological education that is accessible by all. "The Conference has been amazing by matching a grant from GCCOR (General Commission on Religion and Race) to make this possible," he shares.

†

### **First Steps and Successes**

One of the first initiatives of projectCURATE has been to create a diverse cohort that "looks like Houston" and begins to explore ways to link resources, ideas, and new ministries across cultural divides. Over 100 applied, and 60 were granted the opportunity to commit to a yearlong experimental ministry experience. "In our monthly gatherings, we have someone with a sixth-grade education sitting next to an engineer, for example, and oil executives in conversation with immigrants. We have



representatives from six diverse communities ranging from Fifth Ward to the prison system," explains Matt. One Saturday each month, the group will participate in conceptual theology discussions and other activities with academic facilitators with expertise in community development. In mid April, the Cohort also took a pilgrimage bus tour of several communities that represented "social and missional entrepreneurs" interacting with thought leaders and local residents helping them curate conversations. "After our tours, we unpacked our thoughts, discussed what stood out, and learned what it feels like to live there," notes Matt.

†

Another success story inspired by projectCURATE relates to a Latino writing program that began with several high school students who were failing. "This pilot program initially spotlighted 10 student poets and helped them produce an anthology, dance troupe and a student-centered performance on May 22," says Matt. "There are now 130 students involved who feel they have value†and are†talented."

†

### **Goals Relate to Seeing the City with New Eyes**

- Develop and leverage relationships that bridge rural and urban dynamics

The Episcopal Diocese may soon partner with Lutheran and Methodist churches in new models of spiritual formation, and two universities have contacted Matt related to their Urban Theology and Christian practices class.

- Develop a CURATE model that is scalable and replicable in other locations—and a CURATE Conference to exchange best practices
- Provide excellent education to the margins, including learning online in a way that avoids language and economic barriers

“Our 5-year goal is to create an online library of animated short films featuring the key messages of the most transformative books,” he explains. As a start, audio will be dubbed in Spanish and English in downloadable MP3 files, with plans to provide insight in Swahili and other dialects.

†

Notes Matt, “Because of Bishop Janice Huie’s expansive vision and permission to imagine ministry in different contexts, projectCURATE is already flourishing.”

He describes the whole experience of developing a robust, deep, creative learning model for ministry as “riding an amazing wave.”

†

#### News

- Conference Classifieds
- Cross Connection
- Prayers and Condolences
- Social Media
- UMC News - National

## The Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church

5215 Main Street  
Houston, TX 77002  
Phone: 713-521-9383  
Toll Free: 877-774-2700