

LIFE TOGETHER ▶

“I think students are just really hungry for authentic spirituality.... The students that I come across are just really hungry for more meaning and depth in their life.”

—The Rev. Ruth Dantzer



◀ On Tuesdays, about 150 University of Victoria students gather for the Pet Café and Laughter Meditation, hosted at the university’s interfaith chapel. Once a year, though, when Anglican chaplain Ruth Dantzer brings baby goats to campus, almost 1,000 students show up. “It’s like this huge campus event.... It’s getting quite a reputation through the city, actually.”

PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED

Chaplaincy innovations bring students together

Joelle Kidd
STAFF WRITER

The University of Victoria’s interfaith chapel has been called the “happiest place on campus,” Anglican chaplain Ruth Dantzer says.

That’s because every Tuesday, close to 150 students gather to snack on treats, pet cuddly animals and laugh together during the weekly Pet Café and Laughter Meditation.

“It’s been the most popular program, attracting more students than any other program in the history of the interfaith

chapel,” says Dantzer. Once a year, in the spring, when Dantzer brings baby goats to campus, almost 1,000 students show up. “It’s like this huge campus event.... It’s getting quite a reputation through the city, actually.”

The idea grew out of a desire to create a program that would attract a large number of students to the chapel, which is slightly outside the “main hub” of buildings on the campus. “From what I saw, programs weren’t actually that well attended, so I was just trying to think up something that would bring people to the interfaith chapel that maybe normally wouldn’t come. I

wanted everyone on campus to know the resources that are available.”

Dantzer contacted two organizations in Victoria that provide certified therapy animals—Pacific Animal Therapy Society (PATS) and St. John’s Ambulance Therapy Dog Program—who were excited to bring in therapy dogs. Then she asked local parishes to provide cookies, coffee and tea to create a café-like atmosphere. Since animals are not allowed inside the chapel sanctuary, Dantzer had the idea of using the space for drop-in laughter meditation.

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University calls for creative chaplaincy: Dantzer



▲ Since starting the pet café, all the chapel's programs have seen growth in attendance from students, Dantzer says.

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She reached out to the local laughter yoga community and found instructor Gene Furbee, who now leads the weekly drop-in class.

Since starting the pet café, Dantzer says all the chapel's programs have seen growth in attendance.

University chaplaincy is often about thinking creatively, Dantzer says. "I feel like you have to be creative and really think outside the box these days to bring people in, especially young people, into a religious-based environment."

For Dantzer, the chaplaincy at University of Victoria has been her "passion and love."

After getting her MDiv, Dantzer first worked as a chaplain in a trauma hospital in the United States and then at an addiction treatment centre on Vancouver Island.

"You know, chaplaincy in those kinds of environments is very beautiful but very intense. As a mom with two young kids I was looking for something... more life-giving. When this position became available it really felt like my dream job in many ways."

Dantzer was hired in January 2017, after the diocese decided to make the chaplaincy a diocesan program rather than a responsibility of the rector of St. George the Martyr, Cadboro Bay, which is near the University campus.

"When I was nominated to the position...I became a member of diocesan staff," says Dantzer. "I think it's better having that separation... [With] how parishes are, there's always so much to do." This way, Dantzer says she is able to focus wholly on the chaplaincy.

Dantzer operates out of the multi-faith chapel on campus, home base for around 15 chaplains coming from different Christian denominations and religious traditions.

"It's a really amazing model," says Dantzer. The chapel is shared between all these religious traditions, and the space is relatively neutral. "You can't pinpoint any one tradition... Hundreds of Muslims come in to pray on Friday afternoon, and before that there's a Catholic mass and Buddhist meditation. So it's really this fluid and accommodating space."

Weekly, Dantzer helps run Wine Before Supper, an ecumenical communion service she hosts with Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Church of Canada chaplains in the interfaith chapel.

There is also a program called Sundays@5 that takes place at St. George's. "They offer a...no-strings-attached, free meal every Sunday that's home cooked by parishioners," says Dantzer. "A really beautiful place for community building and free food."

This year, Dantzer launched a new program which culminated in taking a group of students to walk part of the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Eight students, Dantzer and the University's United Church chaplain went on the trip. "We met all year, actually... It was a formation group, really—telling our stories, looking at different things that we've struggled with in religion and spirituality, setting intentions for the pilgrimage itself. We formed a really beautiful community before we even went on the Camino, and then we walked the Camino together."

All told, the group spent two weeks in Spain, staying at a monastery and walking the pilgrimage path. "It was a really powerful and beautiful experience," says



PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Dantzer.

Dantzer was able to offer the program thanks to a grant from the diocese of BC's Vision Fund, which covered much of the students' trip expenses.

"I think lifelong friendships were made," she adds. The group of students came from a variety of Christian backgrounds, including Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Church. "A lot had lost touch with their Christian roots, actually, and were exploring more the Eastern traditions, and through this pilgrimage their Christian faith really became kind of renewed." The value of the group was creating a safe space to ask questions, Dantzer says, some "that may have caused them to leave the church in the first place."

While many Anglican students seek out Dantzer as a chaplain, she says she also sees students and staff from a variety of backgrounds who are "exploring and seeking."

Dantzer offers spiritual direction as a free service for any student of the university. "It's a beautiful way for me to meet regularly with people and walk with them on their journey...with their relationship with God, or...their spiritual path."

Dantzer also oversees programs like "meditate with the mystics"—a contemplative centring prayer time based on the writings of Christian mystics that she co-runs with the United Church chaplain—choral evensong, and promoting the John Albert Hall lecture series.

"On any given term I'm probably juggling, I want to say, between seven to nine programs and events and workshops and things like that," she says.

More traditionally Anglican and religious programs attract lower numbers than more generally spiritual events like yoga, meditation or the pet café. "Say, choral evensong or Catholic mass, it's more in the 30-person range, 30 to 40, rather than the hundreds that the other ones see. So we've definitely noticed that trend," says Dantzer.

Dantzer says she loves working in

a multi-faith environment. "It's such a privilege to...work alongside these different chaplains who are coming...from very different perspectives and worldviews. I love that engagement and the dialogue that happens in a multi-faith team, and how we can support each other."

As Anglican chaplain, Dantzer says it's not her job to "make Anglicans."

"I'm a representative of the Anglican church, and I speak from that background, but I really just welcome and embrace anyone who is looking for more meaning and answers to the tricky questions... I also really feel that my job is never to provide answers for them, but it's just to walk alongside them as they struggle with the questions that they have and [try] to make meaning. And then I can give them different tools that have helped me in my life and spiritual path."

The University of Victoria "has such a strong inclusion policy, so I really make sure that people from all backgrounds and orientations, that everyone feels welcome to all the programs that I offer... [I] just really want people to know that there's a place for them on campus."

University is a profound time of formation and transformation, says Dantzer, a time when young people are seeking spiritual meaning. "I think students are just really hungry for authentic spirituality... The students that I come across are just really hungry for more meaning and depth in their life." ■

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