In 2018, the Diocese of Southwest Florida began planting traditional churches again in earnest.

Southwest Florida has had precious few church plants in recent decades, with the Great Recession putting building aspirations of almost every parish in the diocese on hold. Bishop Dabney Smith, who arrived to Southwest Florida in 2007, began reviving the discussion about new church plants in his 2013 convention address. In it, he outlined his wish to launch five new worship communities in the upcoming years. A few years on, and that aspiration has become a reality with the launch of the Wesley Chapel Episcopal Church, led by the Rev. Adrienne Hymes.
“I am constantly pleased at the forethought of the leadership of this diocese in making sure that our budgetary recommendations are in place to help both congregations revitalize and new churches start,” said Smith. “Both happen on purpose.”

Although budgeting has been critical to fund new starts and revitalization, Smith is keenly aware that growing new congregations has to come from a much deeper place. “If one looks at the developed church in the 1950s and in the 1880s and 1890s, you will see that the first resource required was not financial, but the hearts of the people to have a church where they worship,” said Smith.

A New National Effort

In 2015, the Episcopal Church General Convention decided to make a major investment in church plants. At the convention, the budget was amended to support $5.6 million in funding for a national network of plants. Speaking in support of that effort was Georgia General Convention deputy, the Rev. Canon Frank Logue, who is now assisting the diocese as a church planting coach.

At that time, the Episcopal Church’s church-planting skills had grown a little rusty. In the past, the efforts had been largely formulaic: identify a growing area, announce a church was opening to the community in that area, hire a priest, and it was off to the races.

“We could just have a growing neighborhood, and start a new church,” said Logue. But the model stopped working in recent decades as communities settled and needs adjusted, and as a result, most dioceses also stopped planting new churches.

“It used to be something we opposed,” said Logue. Of course, it was not intentional. The problem? Dioceses were looking at new plants from a scarcity perspective: there are only so many Episcopalians in the world, and you need to just sort them out among current congregations, said Logue. In many dioceses - Southwest Florida being a happy exception - councils and standing committees represent older churches, many of them struggling themselves: the idea of “let’s go start a brand new one” falls flat. Why should old churches divert their resources to new ones when the old ones were failing?

Logue, who attended Virginia Theological Seminary, participated in two launches for churches in the Diocese of Virginia in the late 1990s, including one in Alexandria. At that time, dioceses in Texas and Virginia were the ones that were recapturing the skills and expertise of how to launch churches, and he learned from their experience.

In 2004, Logue launched King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia, a parish in a fast-growing area just above the Florida border. Today, King of Peace is thriving: Logue has moved on and now supports the Diocese of Georgia as Canon to the Ordinary. The undertaking also has helped neighboring churches. In his own experience in Kingsland, Logue
saw a neighboring church housed in a very small building and ended up reinvesting in it. King of Peace, with a church largely under age 40, was a “fairly lively” service for some Episcopalians who came to visit, with children and youth. He would, in turn, direct them to the neighboring churches, where there would be things like E/M programs. In fact, the church plant can aid the older church. “Church plants serve as research and development about how to connect with our neighbors,” said Logue.

Logue looks to the business world for direction, where retailers are continually reinventing their store footprints, following demographics and housing starts, and using reproducible models. Stores are renovated regularly, and new locations appear constantly. “Publix has no problem saying ‘we need to be there,’” said Logue.

Dioceses don’t always have the strategic models or resources to know how to formulate a strategy, often resulting in missed opportunities around the U.S. “How could the Diocese of Nevada respond to the rapid growth of Las Vegas?” asked Logue. “We missed an opportunity there. Do we want to miss the same thing as Wesley Chapel?”

Today, however, Logue believes many in the Episcopal Church see the opportunity.

“Our skill sets were developed in the 1950s and 1960s,” said Logue. Because many of the skills of church starts were no longer in the Episcopal Church, they had to “intentionally learn from the other parts of Christ.” That knowledge was in the evangelical church. At meetings and conferences, Logue and others began talking to other people like himself from denominations and the liturgical church, who were also interested in new church starts.

Today, there are a number of people who work on church replanting and growth at the denominational level as part of the Church Planting Advisory Group. The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers, Canon to the Presiding Bishop for evangelism, reconciliation, and creation care, leads the overall effort, with the Rev. Thomas Brackett as manager of church planting as part of a staff of three in the Church Planting and Mission Development Department. Coaches around the U.S., like Logue, assist at a diocesan level, providing access to essential resources which help potential plants assess, train and collect information so they don’t have to start from scratch.

And there are bright spots on the radar now; models to observe and study, including Holy Nativity in Scottsdale, and St. Andrew’s in McKinney, Texas. Some have to be innovative, like the revamp of Grace Church in Yukon, Okla., a place where the neighborhood has so vastly changed that the whole church had to reinvent itself.

The diocese is part of this effort, and subsequently received a $100,000
grant from the Episcopal Church’s Executive Council for a church plant, which was led by Adrienne. At the time, Bishop Smith hoped that using the building in a refreshed way would “gain knowledge and skills that are beneficial and portable to other regions of the diocese.” Indeed Bishop Smith believes revitalization is the task of every parishioner across the diocese. “As you are reading this, I hope that your heart is inspired to challenge your church to revitalize and look around your community, and if you see places we need to try to plant, start the conversation, say your prayers, and talk to your priest.”

He also believes that church planting is called for in the New Testament. “The gathering of the resources of leadership, the property, heart and finances, and the desire to not quit revitalizing or plant, which St. Paul talks about in 1st Corinthians, is what we see being enacted today.”

Crossing the Border

Before the church plant, the Diocese of Southwest Florida had identified two areas in the northern part of Southwest Florida as potential candidates for new churches: the Fishhawk area of eastern Hillsborough County, neighbor to St. John the Divine, Valrico and Holy Innocents, and Wesley Chapel in Pasco County, a location where churches like St. Elizabeth’s, St. Martin and St. Stephens were a considerable distance away. As they looked at both areas, Wesley Chapel seemed like the best option: statistics indicated the population was growing quickly, and people were more accessible than in the Fishhawk community, a planned development which was gated and insular. “The bishop and everyone on the church planting team were comfortable with where we thought the best planting would take place,” said Hymes.

Just before the creation of the Diocese of Southwest Florida, the original Diocese of South Florida had an astounding 30 new church starts in various stages of development. At the height planting in the 1960s, the Episcopal Church was opening a new church every six weeks, many of them in temporary storefronts, leased funeral homes and Holiday Inn banquet rooms. The Wesley Chapel Episcopal Church started Sunday services the First Sunday not be large; it’s the commitment that matters. “The numbers are not what will inspire us right now,” said Hymes. “I am looking at how the community responds to each other. How they are caring for each other. If they’re calling each other when sick, or picking up each other for church. People investing in their own vestments. I look at people who come by themselves, and show up with their family.”

An important part of Hymes’ effort is making the worship dignified, even within the confines of a former suburban office park setting. The Episcopal flag is there, and the Diocesan Altar Guild has provided candles and chalice and paten. Vestments have been provided from Tampa Deanery parishes through Hymes’ concurrent work at the St. Anselm USF Chapel Center. The altar was donated by All Saints, Tarpon Springs.

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Luckily, the startup church has been blessed with people who are
steeped in the Episcopal identity. "Obviously, we don’t exist just for Episcopalians, but it was a surprise to know how many Episcopalians are sitting in Wesley Chapel, waiting for their own church to be built in their neighborhood," said Hymes. "I had prepared to welcome unchurched, de-churched folks and regular people.”

Pasco County is not what everyone expects. While it is considered the country and appears rural, it is rapidly expanding and growing. Professionals line the buildings and roads; restaurants stay open later. There are also new kinds of potential members, including Anglicans from the islands, who see worship as more traditional.

"Wesley Chapel mirrors what people used to think the typical Episcopalian was. Educated. Upwardly mobile. Professional. A mix of ages. Active retirees, and young families.”

As Canon Logue looked at the plant and at Hymes, he assessed her specific skill set as well as her motivation, and encouraged her to use her natural talents in the church. He noticed a white board at USF, and noted that teaching would be an important part of the ministry. To that end, a Wednesday Evening prayer and Bible study, often with Anglican favorite works like C.S. Lewis, have been key to building the group.

“I didn’t feel like I had permission to set the DNA for the congregation. I initially bought into this idea that a church plant/startup/congregation might be relegated to bare feet and campfire music; I wouldn’t attend a church like that. Frank noticed my concern and gifted me with the message of quote, ‘Adrienne, remember that as the DNA is set for the congregation, it needs to be the church that you yourself would want to attend’.”

Adrienne, he believes, is the right one for the task. "She’s just wired the right way to organically network and connect with people.”

Hymes’ work as chaplain at University of South Florida has given her a window into the next generation of churchgoers. “What I have found with USF, and a younger population of unchurched and de-churched individuals, as well as Wesley Chapel’s Episcopalians, is that you can never go wrong with tradition and being true to our Episcopal identity.”

Hymes believes that the church uniquely exists to be counter-cultural, and not look like the YMCA down the street or a Saturday night concert. “We offer a sacred experience that cannot be engaged in just anywhere, which necessarily calls people into the four walls of the church building,” said Hymes. “Church liturgy has its place where it does the powerful work of transformation in the gathered community. Mission work outside of the church depends upon the rootedness of the congregation in their spiritual journey.”

Hymes’ family church in Norfolk, Grace Episcopal, was led by...
the Rev. Joseph Green, a leader in the African-American community. “It was a predominantly black congregation, which is generally very high church. Fr. Joseph Green was my example for the dignity exuded by the priest. I am very cognizant of how I present myself in interacting with congregants.”

Going by the book helps too. “All our new churches will bear the mark of being Episcopal churches by being Book of Common Prayer churches,” said Logue. Even The Abbey in Birmingham, Alabama - a modern church in style and formality - follows the Book of Common Prayer, which by design and theology can be used by the laity.

“The rhythm of our liturgies has always influenced how I am approaching this church plant. The gift that we have is the structure of our liturgies which helps to bring everything back to center,” said Hymes. “I don’t have to make up anything new. It’s there already. Use it.”

“People want something deeper and they especially want something that is rooted in tradition that won’t pass away.”

The Future

With the approval of Diocesan Council and the bishop, the church plant has found a new permanent rental space for church, one that allows fellowship time and where no one has to pack up after the service has concluded. The first Sunday will be on July 7, 2019, at 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. John Reese at St. Andrew’s in Tampa has acted as a mentor to Hymes during the church plant. She attended the church while she was a deacon, and was ordained at the church in May of 2018, where she still preaches occasionally.

Reese says they have worked together on very “down-to-earth” matters, including discussions on the pacing of services and other details of worship including Christmas and Easter. Planting can be a group effort: St. Andrew’s choir has assisted with worship, and their website was put together by Vic Omila, a St. Andrew’s choir member who helped put together the St. Andrew’s website, and used the template to bring Wesley Chapel’s web presence.

As part of the work, they have also discussed what the church should look like as it is going forward and what is needed for the service. In Wesley Chapel, they have not had a praise band; rather, the music has been from keyboard and the worship style more formal. Reese says that in many ways that makes sense for reasons: many in the culture do not have much experience with church at all, and do not know much about it. The liturgy helps visitors learn the basics of the faith and exposes them to a wide variety of readings through the lectionary.

“I am excited that there is a future for that,” said Reese, who is encouraged that they are not looking for a “reproduction of what looks like a secular music performance,” which work in some church settings. “We need to be who we are, and do what we do well,” said Reese.