

# The LabOratory Church provides a safe space for health, healing, and hope in Indianapolis

*by New Church Ministry, Pentecost 2020*

Rev. Amie Vanderford has experienced trauma.

She knows what it's like to distrust others; how damaging isolation can be to recovery. That's why she and her husband, Thaddeus Shelton, launched [The LabOratory Church](#). This new church offers safe space for those with mental illness to worship, cultivate strong connections, and seek healing.



[New Church Ministry](#) spoke with Pastor Amie about The LabOratory Church, one of the 1,034 congregations (and counting!) that have formed or become affiliated with the Disciples since the [2020 Vision](#) was adopted in 2001.

## What's your church focused on?

We want to reach people who have experienced trauma. According to psychologist Judith Herman, there are three stages of healing. The first is about naming the trauma. You work through it in the second stage, like in the therapist's office. The third stage is relational healing, being in relationship with each other. That was the stage where I had stalled. I felt like if I was fully myself, people would reject me. We want to be the place where people find healing in relationship.

## Does mental illness affect your neighborhood? Or are you addressing the local context of a wider problem?

You start with yourself and then the people around you. We name individualism as the problem. The sins that break our relationships are based out of our culture saying that individualism and competition is the only way to survive. Our cultural norms say: "You can't trust anyone, they're gonna' steal your stuff." It's a scarcity mentality. We're trying to do an abundance mentality. We're teaching people to ask themselves, "Are our decisions supporting everyone? Or are they self-serving?"

## Is your team-leadership style a response to individualism?

Absolutely. Because we're in the early stages, we are keeping the leadership between Thaddeus and I. In our statement of values, we're clear about including people across economic statuses, races, genders, sexualities. We're focusing on training people to internalize these values before we give them more power over decision making. Because Thaddeus is a therapist, he's in charge of the mental health aspects. I'm in charge of pastoral care and worship. But we talk everything through. When I figure out what scripture to preach on, we'll ask ourselves, "What is going on in the world right now?"

What sort of mental health challenge fits what people are dealing with? And how does that tie to our mission?"

**Who are The LabOratory Church's members, or are you not at that point?**

We have a solid group of people, but we haven't called them members yet. We're still figuring out what that looks like. A number of them are members at another church, but they're still instrumental in our programming. And it's a mix of people too – younger, older, middle aged, single families, gay, straight, Black, white.

**Eight months ago, you planned to lease a storefront by January, meet on Saturday nights, and have a New Church Ministry [coach](#). Have you met those goals?**

The storefront required way too much work. So, we planted inside another church that hosts five congregations, which we loved. But it also meant we could only use certain time slots. We have worship once a month online now. But we're thinking about increasing that to twice a month, and then once we can get back to meeting in person, we'll alternate between once a month online and once a month face-to-face. I've also been meeting with a coach who's addressed our bylaw and constitution questions. We're slowly working toward our goals.

**You attended last year's Leadership Academy. Did the event help your ministry? If so, how?**

The packet on demographics that we received confirmed that we had picked the right neighborhood. One of the best things was the relationships we made with fellow church planters. Being a church planter can be lonely. Bouncing ideas off of others going through the same thing was awesome.

**What's in The LabOratory Church's future?**

I personally have connections with people all over the world, because I was a traveling photographer before I started doing this. I like the idea of us being a dual type of church, where we serve our local neighborhood while focusing on our online ministry to reach people who don't want to attend (traditional) church and still have questions. We could go global, because we're trying to do life in a new way. It's not just about church, it's about how can we live together better as humans.

*Each year, half of what you give to the [Pentecost Offering](#) stays in your Region to support and sustain new churches near you. The second half helps train, equip, assist, and nurture leaders across the United States and Canada through New Church Ministry programs. Disciples can make contributions through their congregations or by using the DMF [website](#). Most churches will celebrate the Offering on May 31 and June 7.*