

Diocese of MO

Deaconess Anne House Audit: Abbreviated Report



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Introduction

The Deaconess Anne House was founded in 2012 as a ministry of the Diocese of Missouri and as a branch of the national Episcopal Service Corps program.

The Deaconess Anne House (DAH) is located in the neighborhood of Old North St. Louis, an area in which the Diocese of Missouri (Dio of MO) has long had a presence. This residential ministry sought to house young adults who spent a year living in intentional community, working at partnering social service/nonprofit organizations, rooting all their work in Benedictine spiritual formation, and sharing in a communal rule of life.

In an ongoing effort to ensure the program was meeting the needs and priorities of the Diocese of Missouri, the Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson placed a pause on the program and engaged Vandersall Collective in August of 2022 to perform a review.

In September of 2022, the Rev. Jon Stratton was chosen by Bishop Deon Johnson to lead a taskforce in collaboration with Vandersall Collective's consultants, the Rev. Mieke Vandersall, Erin Weber-Johnson, the Rev. Aaron Michael Rogers and Rae Angelo Tintera. The following were recruited as members of the taskforce:

- Gabriel Oakes
- Jillian Smith
- Carter Whitson

What we did

Our charge was to conduct a financial and programmatic audit of Deaconess Anne House and provide recommendations to move forward.

To do this, we reviewed documentation to understand initial objectives of the program and from there, we reviewed further documentation to see how the program shifted over the years, and conducted interviews and a quantitative survey to understand people's perception of the program throughout its initial life-cycle.

DOCUMENT REVIEW

We received foundational, financial, and strategic planning documents ranging from the inception of the program in 2012 to present. Working with the diocesan staff, we also were provided all diocesan budget information. Well over 300 pages of documentation were provided and at every request we were met with support and a collaborative spirit.

INTERVIEWS

We interviewed those involved with Deaconess Anne House both at its founding and through the years. Interviews were identified by the task force and interviews were arranged by the Rev. Jon Stratton. In total, we interviewed:

1. Jillian Smith, 3rd Executive Director
2. Mike Fowlks, Former member of Advisory Committee
3. Jessica Payne, Old North St. Louis neighbor
4. Travis Hall, Initial envisioning and founding committee member
5. The Rev. Jon Stratton, 1st Executive Director
6. Bren O'Connor, Former Corps Member

What we did

7. LaChrisa Crenshaw, Placement site supervisor
8. Pam Penrose, Former member of Advisory Committee
9. The Rev. Rebecca Ragland, 2nd Executive Director
10. Madison Orozco, Former Corps Member
11. The Rt. Rev. George Smith, Retired Bishop, Diocese of Missouri
12. The Rev. Joseph Chambers, Canon to the Ordinary who oversaw the program
13. Madison Bishop, Former Corps Member
14. Lisa Carpenter, Volunteer and member of Partnering Congregation
15. Erin O'Rourke, Former Corps Member
16. The Rev. Mike Angell, Rector of Partnering Congregation
17. The Rev. Mark Sluss, Deacon for Deaconess Anne House
18. Mtipe Koggani, Former Corps Member
19. Chris Potter, Former Corps Member

Prior to these interviews, we developed a list of qualitative questions. These were created in partnership with the taskforce. These questions are located in the appendices of this report along with comprehensive anonymized responses.

All interviews were conducted in person by Mieke Vandersall or on Zoom by Mieke Vandersall or Erin Weber-Johnson from September 28 through October 6, 2022. Analysis was conducted to identify themes both within each individual question as well as utilizing cross-tabulation to look for primary and secondary themes across all questions.

To conduct interviews and to gain a sense of the flavor of the program and the neighborhood that Deaconess Anne House is rooted in, Mieke Vandersall visited St. Louis. As part of the site visit, she received a very insightful tour conducted by the Rev. Jon Stratton.

What we did

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

To determine the perspective of the program's abilities to meet both its own objectives as well as the priorities of the wider diocese regarding youth and young adult ministry, we developed a quantitative questionnaire which was sent to all diocesan delegates for their participation. To ensure this study met the standard of verifiability, the sample was clearly defined as delegates for the survey was clearly defined, rather than sent out broadly to an unknown number of potential responders through the entire diocesan eblast list. The response rate to the survey was 36%, which meets the threshold of validity in order to identify themes within questions and provide a cross tabulation.

This survey was closed on October 21, 2022. All responses were verified against the list of delegates to ensure there was no duplication of responses and that the audience remained fixed to ensure the integrity of results. A few individuals responded more than once and if the responses were different from survey to survey we chose the most recent survey submitted.

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

Finally, Vandersall Collective staff completed a review of similar programs to the Deaconess Anne House. In our review of other Episcopal Service Corps (ESC) programs and volunteer programs in parallel denominations, we both confirmed themes we found in this audit with other programs as well as clarified diversions from these themes.

In addition Mieke and Erin met with Wendy Karr Johnson, Executive Director of the Episcopal Service Corps, to explore national trends, shifts in cultural identity, and new resources. We also interviewed Emily Brewer of the Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer Corps in New York City in addition to Christina Balderson of Johnson Service Corps of the ESC.

Utilizing the results of the document review, qualitative research, quantitative study, and an external field comparison, we drafted a report and delivered it to the taskforce for their consideration in November of 2022. This was then delivered to Bishop Johnson a week later.

What we found

Both sets of data, in the context of the founding documents and intentions, all point to the fact that the Deaconess Anne House program successfully met its own priorities.

While diocesan priorities were not identified, its priorities and foci were reflected in the programming and former participants reported its fulfillment.

In particular one may refer to the response to the question: “Of the priorities identified in the program’s inception, which do you feel the program successfully met?”*

83% Living in intentional community

61% Working at partnering social service/nonprofit organizations

32% Rooting all their work in Benedictine spiritual formation

61% Communal Rule of life

**Numbers greater than 100% because participants could choose more than 1 option*

What we found

GREATER CONTEXT

The Deaconess Anne House program is vastly different from when it started

At the beginning, the corps members at the House were working directly in the Old North neighborhood. The connection to the neighborhood was stronger at the beginning because the corps members were almost exclusively working and living in the same place. This made it easier to bump into people they knew and become more deeply involved with their neighbors.

Also, there were initially seven corps members in the program, and many congregations came together to make the project happen. Between congregations physically preparing and working on the house, coming for worship and dinner on Monday nights, helping with service projects, providing additional funding for particular projects, and “adopting” corps members, the house was a focal point for diocesan-wide participation.

Over time not only has the number of corps members decreased, but so has the engagement from local congregations. Through our interviews, we did not find the energy that was reportedly electric and palpable at the beginning.

For us it gave my parish an opportunity to do something outside of just our church. To get out of our bubble and do something. It helped get a lot of people involved throughout the diocese. Did that wane over time? A little bit in that the number of corp members went down. When there were more there was more involvement from the wider church.

What we found

We are in a vastly different time in the United States than when this program started

Consider all that has happened in the last nine years.

- The killing of Michael Brown, just miles from Deaconess Anne House
- Considerably greater visibility for trans folks and the life transitions that trans folks experience once they come out
- Multiple tumultuous presidential elections, with a baseline understanding of democracy in question
- A shortage of clergy to serve parishes—it is a clergy market, not a parish market now
- An economy that currently provides greater ease in finding employment, which is very different from when the program began
- COVID-19 and the isolation it required
- A great rethinking of the definition of what, when, where, and how we work and how we serve, the payment that is fair, and the reasons behind work
- The congregations who made it through COVID-19 are unsure of who they are now, and the closing of churches nation-wide is increasing at a faster rate due to COVID-19 than we were in several years ago.

The result of these changes (and we are sure more!), have led to changes in the Deaconess Anne House, and the challenges the ESC program is experiencing around recruitment, placements, and relationships with local parishes.

It is hard for directors to do it. Particularly hard for clergy. There are a lot of opportunities for clergy now. We are in a shortage and this isn't attractive for most clergy.

The thoughts of labor have drastically changed in the last 10 years. And I would fault no one in not wanting to do a volunteer year. That is also analogous to the priesthood.

What we found

You are not alone

In our competitive analysis we spoke with the national director, Wendy Karr Johnson, of the Episcopal Service Corps, as well as a regional ESC director, Christina Balderson, performing a similar audit in North Carolina. Finally, we also connected with the Rev. Emily Brewer, a member of a local planning team for a Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer program (the equivalent in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)). Each individual we talked with said that application and recruitment numbers have significantly decreased from previous years and spoke about how the change in economy was a huge factor. When DAH was founded, service years were “hot.” Now, there is a distinctly different understanding of the value of service in the recent understanding of the “nonprofit industrial complex,” and in this an increasing understanding that a year of service comes with a distinct amount of privilege. Everyone we spoke to is seeing the same trends that DAH is and is trying to figure out what exactly is next.

The Presbyterian program made simple changes in their program by no longer using “simple living” as a concept but instead sustainable living or solidarity living. Their young adults used to be required to raise a significant amount of money to pay into the program, but now that requirement has become a goal of each cohort as whole, or the individual site coordinator. With the decrease in funding for site coordinators and the increase in the requirement for fundraising and recruitment (which is a killer for them as well), many of the problems continue to stand true.

The Episcopal Service Corps, as a national entity, underwent its own audit and determined restructuring around a set of values was needed to meet the changing demands of culture. You will find these core values in the appendix of this report. Additionally, within the audit were articulations of the financial barriers to entry. The Episcopal Service Corps Director noted that her approach was to shift the language of how the program was described. This provides DAH with not only an opportunity to change the language, but to be the first to change both the incentives and structure to meet the needs of young adults.

What we found

Old North is a challenging neighborhood to enter into

Anytime a community or program enters a neighborhood, they enter a pre-existing set of norms, cultures, needs, and strengths. All communities are complicated and have a set of histories that inform what they are at present. In Old North, we repeatedly heard that there are challenges that in particular affect the DAH program and the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri as well. Below is a synopsis:

- **Segregated relationships among community members along lines of race and class.** The result of this reality is that neighborhood members are not all in relationship with each other and different sub-communities within the larger community have different and at times competing needs. This was spoken to in interviews, but can especially be found in the Old North Needs Assessment and Action Plan created in 2021¹. Connected to this is the reality that many people, especially people of color, are unable to receive mortgages to buy homes. We repeatedly heard, and the Action Plan articulated that banks literally do not give mortgages for this area, so anyone moving in would have to use cash straight out to buy, and good rental properties are hard to come by.
- **A history of a colonizing mindset among the Grace and Peace Presbyterian Church that moved in early in the century, many who continue to live in Old North.** “Grace and Peacers,” as they are called, are almost exclusively white and according to the history found on their website: their ministry is “to the city and needy people who live there. This includes a substantial portion of the congregation who moved in the late seventies to another target neighborhood to plant a daughter church— in Murphy Blair north of downtown, now called Old North. But plant members in the early 90s realized their church wasn’t growing. They decided to return [sic] as a group to the mother church while still living as a large community group in Old North, enriching G&P’s outreach to blighted areas of St. Louis. This community continues today.”² DAH is another intentional

¹ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d1d1f5eae1440000149853b/t/602195a6776a382435573060/1612813747559/ONSL+Needs+Assessment_FINAL_21-2-3.pdf. Accessed on October 1, 2022

² <https://graceandpeacefellowship.org/blog/musings-on-the-history-of-grace-and-peace/>. Accessed on October 1, 2022

What we found

community that has moved into this neighborhood but with a very different set of intentions. Intentions are however not known by neighborhood members who only see white folks moving in and who do not stay very long.

- **Fits and starts of community development plans.** This is seen both in the Needs and Action Plan footnoted above and also was spoken to by both the interviewees. This makes it hard for an organization like DAH to plug into existing plans for community progress.

There is some section 8 housing that is hard to connect with. Many people blame the downfall of the area on them. There are also a lot of black homeowners in new homes. Then the Habitat homes are owned by black families in the neighborhood but we don't have relationships with the Habitat owners. And then there are the Grace and Peacers...who brought in a lot of people, many of whom have stayed.

What we found

IMPACT OF DAH

The DAH program has changed the life trajectory of many, many young adults

To a person, each director and corps member expressed a distinct and significant change in their lives due to their time in the program. There is not a doubt in our minds that this program has achieved many of its goals through intentional living, the rule of life, and the nonprofit placements corps members experienced. Not always were the experiences easy, but easy was not the goal.

The DAH program strengthened relationships with the Diocese of Missouri and the church at large

Of course not all corps members have stayed connected to the church, but many have gone on to serve in leadership positions, much due to their experiences as corps members. In addition to the quotes below from the interviews, the quantitative data showed that 59% responded with either a 4 or 5 ranking (from 1 being lowest to 5 being highest) to the question: “how helpful was it in forming young adults for their vocation?”

I saw two patterns. I saw there's a lot going on with the Church beyond individual churches that I wasn't aware of before and I am excited about them. I never would have thought committee work would be exciting, but now I see how I can be a part of it. For another person, they realized that the Diocese of MO was really different and cool and wanted to know more.

I didn't have a relationship prior. I came in from another diocese. I knew I wanted deeper conversation and wanted formation. Through different interactions, it

What we found

broadened my perspective on what it means to be Christian and Episcopalian. Prior to this corps, I had very little contact with the Diocese of Missouri but, through this, I realized how much a diocese does and got to meet lots of people. I would gladly go back.

To my understanding, many alumni are now ordained priests. I being one of them! This number who are now serving as clergy in different diocese has helped the wider Church. It has been useful to the Corp members, helped them discern what they want to do next, and created ministers who are now serving the Church.

The impact that the Deaconess Anne House program has had in Old North is viewed through a mixed lens

The qualitative data poignantly speaks to this. The impact in Old North has been through a charity-based approach, a general presence, and many who weren't sure of the impact. Over time we found that the program was less rooted in the neighborhood as placements became further away geographically, and of course COVID-19 did not help this.

In addition the quantitative survey showed significant levels of "unknown" around the program and its impact in fostering relationships in Old North. From a scale of one to 5, one being lowest and 5 being highest, 25% of respondents responded between 1 and 3 and a whopping 50% did not respond at all to this question, indicating to us that they simply didn't know.

What we found

THE PROGRAM

There was little alignment with priorities of the Diocese of Missouri at its founding because diocesan priorities were not articulated or known

This came out most strongly in the response to the question: “What priorities of the diocese aligned with the program?”

As far as priorities of the Diocese of Missouri, there were none articulated.

There were no diocesan priorities.

While DAH program priorities were articulated, how they aligned to the greater Diocese of Missouri was unclear. As it was also funded by the Thomson fund managed by the bishop, there was not a sense of connection by the whole diocese. This is seen in the response to the question: “How were the program’s finances communicated throughout the Diocese of Missouri?” The answers were: they weren’t, or they were communicated only to leadership. In thinking about what is next for DAH, there is an opportunity now to align with priorities set in the most recent strategic planning process.³

³ https://www.diocesemo.org/uploads/images/strategic-visioning-plan-10252021revised_70.pdf. Accessed on October 6, 2022.

What we found

The Episcopal presence in Old North is historic, and the future is unclear

Episcopalians have been in Old North for many years. Deaconess Anne House was founded to deepen that presence in the spirit of Deaconess Anne who served for many years. Currently the Diocese of Missouri is discerning suggestions for Grace Hill, the rectory, and adjacent properties.⁴ We wonder how Deaconess Anne House intersects with this project, knowing that they are within short walking distance of each other.

The Director position is critical to the success of the program, but not sustainable as it stands

As things stand, the program director position requires a person to have expertise in multiple skill sets, in addition to taking full responsibility for recruitment. Each director we spoke to pointed to the impossibility of the position, (one person said clearly: “this job sucks”), and the primary responsibility placed on them for the success of the program. The challenge for the Director was echoed in the ESC national assessment recently completed. The assessment said this: “Clarity is needed about the type of work a program director actually does. Are they a social worker, pastor, therapist, trainer, developer, fundraiser, organizer, or admin? Is it reasonable to believe they can do all of it?”

Directors we spoke with had particular ideas on how to make a position work:

If sustainability is a big factor, the Director position—there needs to be more than one person working. Or there needs to be an active Deacon with the director. There must be someone else to share the load. Otherwise you will continue to see the turnover.

I would really recommend a different structure for an intentional community. I think

⁴ <https://www.onsl.org/post/give-ideas-for-grace-hill-campus-restoration>. Accessed on October 6, 2022.

What we found

the optimal situation would be to have a Clergy person and Parish adjacent to the community. And a priest and Director working in partnership to support one another. That way the director doesn't feel so isolated.

The turnover of the director is really challenging for corps members. Since directors recruit members, if they go through the recruitment process and then leave before or as the new class begins, corps members are attached to the personality and approach of the director who is then no longer there. The program changes drastically in its focus and flavor from year to year with the director turnover, making the identity of the project in consistent flux.

The program attracts a certain kind of person

A year of service at DAH requires a great deal from its corps members.

- They are to commit to a significant structure focused through Benedictine spirituality, including morning prayer and a commitment to the Rule of Life
- They are asked to make significantly small amounts of money while possibly continuing to accrue interest on their student loans and other debt
- The student loan debt is well documented to be enormous and prohibitive in even the best of circumstances
- They do not know their placement till they arrive, raising anxiety among some.

Given these required commitments, the program mostly attracts people who identify as white and who have financial resources to support them throughout the duration of the year. Former corps members articulated that directors and leaders had acknowledged these limitations and barriers to entry within the program itself.

While it is critical to acknowledge this gap in equity while attempting to recruit people of color and other individuals who exist in or come from historically marginalized communities, structural changes and policy are also necessary if the program seeks to include a diverse set of participants. For instance, many queer and trans folks do not have financial support from their families. Based on the external survey of the other programs, there is no other program providing loan payback or scholarship assistance, outside of Americorps completion grants. This provides DAH with a distinctive opportunity witness to not only acknowledge barriers to entry but shift its own practices.

What we recommend

1. We recommend that the Deaconess Anne House continue its ministry and its connection to the Episcopal Service Corps, but with structural changes addressed below.
2. Communicate the results of this audit broadly, across the Diocese of Missouri and to all former Deaconess Anne House alumnus.
3. Engage in a process to renew and articulate the clarity and purpose for the DAH program. Consider who it is primarily for: the neighborhood, the corps members, the congregations in the diocese? Utilize core values from the Episcopal Service Corps national program.
4. Based on the purpose, create strategies to focus on the specific purpose identified through programming and requirements.
5. Based on the purpose, consideration should be given as to the neighborhood in which this program resides.
6. Consider a multi year option which would allow corps members the opportunity to root further into the community, reduce the stress on the director during the recruitment period, retain talent, provide consistent, longer-term support to non-profits, and provide economic sustainability to the program
7. Be a leader! To address both the barriers to entry of the ESC program which impact both those economically at a disadvantage and/or people of color, consider providing loan repayment assistance to both corps members and ESC directors; consider scholarships for those entering or leaving the program who do not have existing financial resources. The Diocese of Missouri has an opportunity to be a leader in living into its values regarding social and economic justice within the program structure.
8. Create a plan, with professional counsel, to fundraise from individual donors. Other ESC programs utilize a model which allows the program to be self-sustaining—with individual donations up to 80% of the program budget. With a robust individual and congregational donor base, the Thomson fund could be utilized for repayment of loans and building upkeep.
9. Shift the advisory board to a working taskforce. To ensure a diversification of

What we recommend

funding, as recommended above, the advisory committee could take on a more active, fundraising component. This model is used successfully by other programs to ensure both active participation across a diocese and a more sustainable model.

10. Consider an additional program located in rural Missouri. While different in ethos, the two would share core values and collaborate to share administrative resources. In addition to administrative resources, this could perhaps increase their pool for fundraising, and create programs that speak widely to the Diocese of Missouri.
11. Utilize the survey questions and results in planning for youth programming. that show diocesan priorities as articulated in this audit.
12. Hire professional support to guide in the clarification of purpose, process and implementation of restructured program.
13. Constitute a new steering team that includes young adults, stakeholders in the diocese, and those with social capital; these individuals should be able to dream big and implement details to arrive at goals. We do not recommend including previous Deaconess Anne House participants at this current stage.
14. Utilize the following timeline for next steps:

December/January: Create and implement communication strategy throughout the Diocese of Missouri of the results of the audit to various constituencies of the diocese. Finalize contract with Vandersall Collective for next stages and recruitment of taskforce for next stage of work.

February/March: Purpose of program moving forward clarified, as well as how it relates to ESC National core values and the diocesan strategic plan. From this, create a new plan with goals and benchmarks.

April/May: Audience and strategies identified: Utilizing the data from survey questions, align the goals/core values of the program with the needs of the landscape. Create a comprehensive plan for implementing the next phase of life of the Deaconess Anne House.

May: Presentation of plan to the Diocese of Missouri.