



Campus Ministry and Questions About Suicide

Suicide is a prevalent issue for all of us and suicidal desperation touches the

life of nearly every family in some form or another. In our work with UKirk — the office of collegiate ministries for the Presbyterian Church (USA)— we are especially concerned to equip those who carry out their ministries among young adults and college-aged students.

Campus ministers are acutely aware of the particular stresses that can trigger depression, desperation, or suicidal thoughts during a student's college years. Where can they learn how best to minister to students who may be considering suicide? How can they identify signals that someone is experiencing suicidal desperation? How can they minister to those who have lost a loved one to suicide? How does our faith inform a Christian response to these questions? In an effort to respond to questions such as these, UKirk turned to the good people at The Soul Shop Movement.¹

Who is Soul Shop?

Fe Anam Avis (aka Russ Crabtree), is the founder of Soul Shop. The seeds of the Soul Shop project were spurred by the loss of three students to suicide at a time when Fe was serving on the ministry staff of a large suburban church. Each death deepened the pain of the grieving community. The loss sparked Fe's own season of dark desperation and in time, led him to seek training in suicide prevention. He began to create a plan that would train communities how better to minister to those experiencing suicidal desperation. As his plan emerged he began leading workshops to teach the plan to others. In 2015, Fe partnered with the Pittsburgh Pastoral Institute and formally created the ministry now known as Soul Shop. Since then, it has become an independent movement reaching more than 1600 people around the country. Today there are Soul Shop programs designed for congregations, pastors, youth workers, and parents. The Soul

Shop team continues to expand their reach to wider audiences. One area of growth includes the partnership with UKirk ministries and a project to create a workshop designed for campus ministers and campus student leaders.

Soul Shop Meets UKirk

Pictured are participants in the Soul Shop event held July 13-14, 2017, at Davis and Elkins College.

[Front row, left to right] Rich Cardot (Davis and Elkins College), Scott D. Goddard (Vice President for Student Affairs, Davis and Elkins College), Soul Shop facilitator, Michelle Snyder, Ginny Taylor-Troutman (Virginia Tech), Shelly Barrick Parsons (West Virginia University), Rachel Shussett (Pittsburgh Presbytery), Shelly Riemersma (CCO, Pittsburgh), Lacey Wood (Davis and Elkins College).

[Back row, left to right] Lee R. Scott (CCO, Pittsburgh), Tammy Wiens (UKirk Mission Coordinator, Louisville, KY), Jonny Cagwin (CCO, Pittsburgh), Chris Bailey (Marshall University), and Keith Leach (Hampden-Sydney College).



The first phase in the UKirk-Soul Shop partnership was to field test an existing version of the workshop for an audience who has expertise in campus ministry. UKirk sponsored the event, inviting campus pastors

from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia to attend a two-day event (July 13-14, 2017), facilitated by Soul Shop director, Michelle Snyder. Vice President for Student Affairs, Scott D. Goddard, graciously offered space on the Davis and Elkins College campus in Elkins, WV as the event venue.

On the first day of the event Snyder presented Soul Shop just as she would offer the workshop to a group of congregational leaders. A huge aspect of Soul Shop training is simply to get participants comfortable with saying the word “suicide” out loud. And beyond that, getting comfortable asking direct questions about a person’s experience of suicidal desperation so that we are able to have frank discussions about it with those who may be suffering. As the workshop facilitator, Snyder encouraged participants to role play with one another. It’s important to be direct rather than to beat around the bush, and yet there are phrases that communicate clearly without putting someone on the defensive. For example, Snyder offered, instead of saying “do you feel suicidal?” the pastor might preface her question with “you know a lot of people going through what you’re going through start to think about suicide. . . have *you* ever thought about suicide?” The main outcome of a Soul Shop event is to inspire awareness and competence in participants that empowers them to build safe communities. Within a safe community, we rouse those suffering from desperation out of their silence and into honest conversations with someone trustworthy.

UKirk appraisal

After experiencing the full Soul Shop event, our UKirk team stayed on for a second day. Shelly, Chris, Rich, Ginny, Keith, Rachel and Tammy met to evaluate their experience of Soul Shop through the lens of ministry to college students. The consensus of UKirk participants is that the Soul Shop program has a lot to offer the campus community and offers a unique perspective in approaching the topic from a Christian perspective. The UKirk team was able to draw on their personal experiences of ministering to students who face depression, anger, loss, and the whole

gamut of college life, and therefore they were well positioned to offer feedback. After processing the experience on their own, The UKirk team met with Brian Kuhn via video conference. As one of Soul Shop's curriculum writers, it was important for the UKirk team to share their insights with Kuhn and give feedback for a forth-coming "Soul Shop for Campus Leaders."

One of the strengths of Soul Shop the participants identified was its unique approach to issues of suicidal desperation through the scope of faith, using examples from Scripture to normalize and validate the issues, rather than push them aside or allow them to remain hidden as has sometimes been the default mode of the Church. Though the workshop proved itself to be highly valuable, participants did identify some changes that needed to be made to better address the particular needs of a college-based audience. One suggestion was to modernize the presentation style for college culture. The content itself was highly helpful, but there was primary use of still images throughout. Attendees recommended that in lieu of these, the presentation make use of videos and YouTube clips. Additionally, they recommended use of contemporary images and cultural icons that would better connect to a college audience. The most significant recommendation was the need to clarify the audience. There are three levels of leadership that Soul Shop could target for a college context: 1) campus pastors or counseling staff as well as student development/administrative staff, 2) student leaders (e.g. resident hall directors, peer mentors, fraternity/sorority leaders), and 3) the student-body as a whole. The workshop would trickle down the three levels, each one needing a slightly different emphasis because of carrying varying levels of responsibility. Campus ministers and student development personnel would get the most in-depth training, with student leaders getting the second most and the student community getting the third-tier training.

Another suggestion is that Soul Shop training include strategies for building allies. Campus pastors can identify colleagues around the campus community that aren't necessarily coming at student development from a Christian perspective, but would be willing to direct a student to a campus pastor when he or she identifies signs of suicidal desperation. These allies may include administrators in campus housing (resident assistants and resident directors), professionals in the counseling center, professors, coaches, campus security, and anyone who regularly interacts with students. Raising awareness among all campus offices goes along way in helping students to get assistance if experiencing suicidal desperation.

Soul Shop proved to be highly valuable for all participants. The campus pastors left feeling as though they could better handle issues of suicidal desperation and had tools in hand to help others do the same. It is expected that Soul Shop for Campus Leaders will be ready for launch January 1, 2018. If you are interested in bringing Soul Shop to your community, contact UKirk Mission Coordinator, Tammy Wiens at tammy.wiens@pcusa.org or Soul Shop Director, Michelle Snyder, at michelle@soulshopmovement.org

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¹The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours a day. Please call 1-800-273-8255 or visit their website at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org for more information or someone to talk to.]