

Finding God in Unexpected Places

Byron Nelson, 2019-20 NBA XPLOR Resident in Dallas, TX

On Sunday morning September 22 as my body began to wake up I was overcome with insurmountable dread. This was my first Sunday playing piano for my host church. Although this was not my first-time playing piano for church, I was still anxious. Since I began playing at age eleven, I have played for plenty of church services. I've played for Baptist services, Methodist, Episcopalian, and plenty of Disciples of Christ services. However, all of those services were old news compared to what I was facing this Sunday. This Sunday I was playing for Warren Avenue Christian Church.

Warren Avenue's worship service is unlike any service I've ever participated in. While the Episcopalians stick to the service outlined in *The Book of Common Prayer*, at Warren Avenue, the Spirit is the worship leader. Sometimes we sing, sometimes we clap, sometimes the lyrics are changed to fit the sermon, but it's all *good*. My greatest source of dread was that Warren Avenue's gifted musicians have no need for sheet music. Their talented pianist and choir can just make music happen and whatever comes out is always incredible. Fortunately, the music director selected hymns that were all in the hymnal for this week, knowing about my inability to deviate from the notes on the page.

As I left our house to go to church, I noticed that I had a flat tire. This only added to my dread about the day. I easily changed my tire in the 90-degree morning heat and slowly drove the two miles to Warren Avenue. I arrived late for Sunday School, but I had plenty of time to calm my nerves before the service began. Worship that morning wasn't flawless, but the people had nothing but encouragement and love for me—what a relief! After worship, we had a light luncheon, and one of the congregants approached me, kindly handed me \$30 to get my tire fixed, and connected me with a tire

shop that was nearby. When I got home later that afternoon and breathed a sigh of relief, I realized that not only did I survive this dreaded day, but it was actually one of my best days so far.

In the same way, I had reservations about coming to Dallas. I was worried about going from my small community of 12,000 to the fourth largest metroplex in the United States, boasting 7 million residents. I had reservations about working 11 miles away from our house, knowing that my drive would cause me anxiety. I was nervous to go to work, assuming that my education didn't adequately prepare me for this experience. I was even more unsure about being the only white person in a congregation comprised entirely of people of color. I wondered if Dallas would treat me like a shoe that doesn't fit, and eventually put me back on the shelf of shoes that belong to no one. For most of September, my primary question was, "Do I belong here?"

However, as I sit to reflect on this first month of XPLOR, I can see clearly that the Spirit of God is pushing me into those spaces where I think I don't or can't belong, places where I am learning to encounter that which is Holy—in faces of people who look nothing like me, in music that will never be "written down," in confusing intersections of city streets, or in the middle lane of a six-lane highway during rush hour. That's where I've been finding God. In people who see that I'm driving on my spare tire and shove \$30 into my hand so it can be fixed. In people who just know that I need a hug even though our relationship is still new. That's where God is. My anxieties about what will happen in Dallas are fading because I've seen the hands of God in the people around me, simply living lives of love and service. As we are just over 10 percent done with our time of XPLOR, I have so much hope and excitement for what the rest of my time here holds, knowing that I will be transformed by these people, and these places, and this music.



NBA XPLOR is a 10-month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a “heart for care” as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. **Learn more and apply at nbacares.org/xplor.**