



Introducing The Nicholas Center

By Rebecca Wilson

It took more than 40 years, but the crew at the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago has finally cleaned out the attic.

They needed the space. Last April, Ab and Nancy Nicholas of Milwaukee made a \$10 million gift—the largest in the diocese’s 187-year history—to create the Nicholas Center at St. James Commons. The Center, to be developed and operated in partnership with the Living Compass Faith and Wellness Ministry, which shared in the gift, will offer programs to strengthen clergy and lay leaders for service in the church and the world.

When the gift was announced, Bishop Jeffrey Lee said, “What we focus on grows. We need to focus on the health and wellness of our church leaders and the vitality of our congregations so we can do God’s work of feeding the hungry, advocating for the oppressed, and testifying to the power of the risen Christ in our lives and our world.”

Since last spring, the attic—also known as the fifth floor of St. James Commons—has become a construction zone. Scheduled to open in the spring of 2014, the space will include meeting areas and 14 rooms with private baths. “The Nicholas Center is being built with the efficiency of a ship’s cabin to carry people safely into transformational change,” said Lee. “This is a place you’re going to want to come and experience.”

The plans for renovation, budgeted at \$2.5 million, have been developed in concert with the Rev. Scott Stoner, Living Compass’s founder and president, who will direct the Nicholas Center. Stoner is an Episcopal priest and therapist who founded Living Compass to help people understand the connection between the truths of their faith and their physical and emotional wellness.

The Nicholas Center will serve as Living Compass’s

headquarters and main training facility, but will also offer other leadership programs. “Living Compass will be just one of the prayer books in the Nicholas Center’s pew,” said Stoner. “We want to be a place full of programs about leading well.”

Thrive, the Diocese of Chicago’s congregational vitality program, will use the Nicholas Center as its research and development center. “Thrive brings together clergy and lay leaders who want to strengthen the health and vitality of their congregations,” said the Rev. Jim Steen, the diocese’s director of ministry and the leader of the Thrive initiative, which is now entering its second year. “One Saturday each month out in the diocese, Thrive participants reflect and worship together. In between meetings, they learn by trying new ideas and approaches to ministry. The Nicholas Center will help us explore, test and integrate new resources and ideas into the program.”

For two years, the diocese has been relying on the strategies of Fierce, Inc. to reshape its culture. Fierce training, which is part of the Thrive program and will be available at the Nicholas Center, teaches people to have difficult conversations in respectful ways. Stoner and Steen will both be certified by Fierce, Inc. to provide the training, as will the Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, the diocese’s director of networking, and Courtney Reid, the director of operations. “Whatever you do each day, Fierce can help you do it better,” said Steen. “At work, at church, or at home, every conversation you have can make a difference.”

Living Compass, Thrive and Fierce will be the Nicholas Center’s core programs, but there’s more to come. “There’s still a lot in the creative stock pot,” said Lee. “We are dreaming about this being a place of transformation for the diocese and the wider Episcopal Church. Who knows what might yet be here?” †

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