

Student House Review Report

Preamble:

The Student House Program is highly valued by students, community and the church. Throughout the past year the need for transparent intentions and framework has become clear to ensure that all parties are operating under the same principles. With a new coordinator and a time of transition for the committee, it seemed good timing for a review, especially as there has never been an intentional review in the formation of the SHP in the late 1990s.

Anika, Ann and Anita met for a month in September/October 2016 and coordinated the gatherings of reflections on the Student House Program (SHP) from past and current students, committee members, Ministers of the Word and Coordinators. The data has been rich and enlightening. It has shown overwhelmingly that importance of the SHP as a life giving and life saving outreach of the Brunswick Uniting Church (BUC).

This review has been important to gain a better understanding of the needs and direction of the SHP and has also provided a space for relevant parties to debrief, reflect and acknowledge the place of the Program in our lives.

Throughout our conversations with people connected with SHP, we found the following themes: reciprocity, relationship between church and SHP Community, dynamics of SHP, faith and spiritual development and personal growth. The following report offers accounts and ideas of how best to nourish and build the SHP in accordance to the mission of BUC while prioritising the experience of being a member or committee member as life-giving.

MAJOR THEMES

In distilling the rich data and stories of the interviews and conversations about experiences of the Student House Community, we broke down the topics into five main themes which are explored below: Reciprocity, Relationship between Church and SHP, Dynamics of the Student House Community, Faith and Spiritual Development and the Role of the Committee. This is followed by a recommendations and further explorations section.

Reciprocity: Obligation vs Grace

“I’m not making it church as much during semester” – Student

“University clashed with Olive Way this year” – Student

“Oh you’re a student house kid, that’s why you are here..... Wasn’t a sense of choice.” – Student

“Not seeing them as a work force...Each person is different and the congregation in general needs to be treated differently...” – Support Worker

“There should be a natural flow between the congregation and the SHP as a community and as individuals” – Committee Member

“[Support Worker] went through a difficult time. There were some comments, which may not have been helpful, directed to her...took her job seriously, professionally and with good humour. She told students when to step up but also experienced ‘interference’ from some church folk checking to see she was ‘doing her job’” – Ex-Committee Member

“I don’t think this is working, for both parties – I’ve heard disappointments voiced regarding the wavering energy of the students to their commitments, and in turn, student’s discontentment with some expectations and roles. I’ve also witnessed how much work it takes to support these young people who need quite trusting and caring relationships as they develop. I’m not sure how to resolve this.” – Ex-Committee Member

The idea of obligations of the students is established through unclear perceptions of how the BUC community place the students within the greater congregation. This is the most unclear and contested issue for the students: feeling like they are welcomed in the congregation without any added preconceptions of how they should present. This was clear through many comments, that voiced that the students truly do want to be involved as much as possible, however are often busy during semester with assignments, university placement and other commitments such as parttime work and family.

It is also difficult to ascertain how much the financial reprieve of reduced rent implies for the greater congregation. There is sometimes an expectation that students will contribute to the community because it is perceived as a form of exchange. This is difficult, as it implies in some ways that the students wouldn't naturally be involved and also places expectations that would not be placed on other congregation members. It is important to note that the Support Worker's role is to ensure that the students are cultivating their own community while feeling able to engage with BUC, and they have to manage this work with the complaints and comments from BUC members who may not be privy to the complexities of student's lives, as seen in quotes above from ex-committee members.

Relationship between church and the SH community (including committee)

"I like how at church people come and talk to you like they already know you." – Student

"Double standard of what we expect of the student house population and what we expect of the rest of the congregation." – Ex-Student

"Not sure [the SHP needs reinventing]... it's the BUC church's relationship to the SH community that needs tweaking" – Ex- Committee Member

"The Student House was set up as an act of giving, no necessary expectations involved" – Ex-Committee Member

"It is a rewarding program to be involved with because of the closeness to people's lives and the intentional engagement with being in community together". – Committee Member

"The student house isn't it's own intentional community, but the intention of the BUC. I'd never thought about it like that before" – Church Council Member

As stated above in the "Reciprocity" section, there seems to be different ideas of what the SHP represents and therefore what the students' expectations are in the church community. We found that, while the students mostly find the church community welcoming, they are also sometimes unsure of

how they are supposed to act. This is both because they are young adults trying to find a foothold in life and also because of the different interpretations of the SHP within the BUC community.

It is important that the church acknowledges that the SHP is not its own “intentional community” but is the result of our intentions in forming a community. Therefore, we need to see the SHP for what it is, 10 young adults who were strangers to one-another, taking a leap of faith to live and journey in faith with other young Christians. This is daunting and not organic nor intentional on the part of the students. The committee, students and congregation feel very blessed to have such a close relationship and bond in this time of growth; however, the ideas of reciprocity above and the realities of the SHP should be clear to the congregation.

Dynamics of the Student House Community:

“Fine, quite busy and so feels like the household probably doesn’t connect enough... The dinners are a nice time to see each other and it might be better just to be social” – Student

“People keeping to themselves a bit more- less interaction amongst houses” – Student

“Respect and sharing responsibilities in the household, being part of a community in the house.” – Student

“Needs to be more communication between students and facilitator.” – Support Worker

Depending on the dynamics and life-styles of the students, the SHP community can sometimes find it hard to catch-up with each other. Through the interviews, we found that inter-house connections have waned since friends between houses have moved out.

The fortnightly dinners are seen as valuable time to catch-up, and just enjoy each other’s company. There was a mixed response as to whether devotional content was appropriate for the dinners, it was noted that this might be influenced by the whim and preference of each support worker. As a result of this mixed response, the review team has offered a new set-up for fortnightly meet-ups moving forward. This would constitute with both more autonomous, casual and student-led meet-ups,

complimented with a more “Table Church” style pot-luck dinner, which includes members of the committee and broader church.

Faith and Spiritual Development

“The Student House is home and has provided a space to explore faith and advocacy” – Student

“Exploring faith can be difficult due to the different beliefs and personalities, diversity of faith important to explore and challenge own beliefs” – Student

“I love having a SH program as this brings in young people from outside our immediate community... This is good for our church and sometimes the students are exposed to another way of viewing their faith.” – Ex-Committee Member

“It strengthened my values as a Christian especially through the student house dinners that were held every two weeks that let everyone share their beliefs. It was also enjoyable to be in the company of likeminded people.” – Ex-Student

“Household worked well, safe space to explore faith..Develop and understand own faith separate to my family’s.” – Ex-Student

Throughout the interview process, we found that independent exploration of faith and Christianity are one of the most important features for the students in the program. Living in a community that is like-minded and open to Christian ideas is unique in inner-city Melbourne and is a true blessing. This also comes with the challenges of respect for differences of faith and life-style which has the potential to result in conflict and/or people feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in the community. It is the responsibility of the student’s, committee and support worker to ensure that any disagreements are handled with respect to all parties and that any discriminatory actions or language is not tolerated. Standards of behaviour should be agreed upon at the retreat and should be brought in throughout the year in the case of a conflict.

Growth in the Student House – Transition of Life into Adulthood

“It felt like a privilege to see them developing and sharing that journey with them.... Still have an ongoing connection with some of them... Gained some lovely young members in the church”. – Ex-Committee Member

“The SHP has been a big part of my adult life. Good community, helped to cope with the city.”
– Student

“A lot more opinions- more independent from parents especially regarding sexuality. Exposure to the city.” – Student

“Dramatic time- moving out, starting uni. Learnt a lot about responsibility to others, the household and community closeness. Learnt from housemates.” – Student

“Brings together different denominations. Lifestyle/ culture is more comfortable than it might be in uni accommodation or other student houses.” – Student

Similarly to faith-development, a major theme distilled from interviews was the importance of a supportive environment to explore early-adulthood while being independent from their families. Many students spoke about the peace of mind they felt being welcomed into a loving home and church community as they adjusted to life in the city and at university. They also noted the ongoing support as they made the initial transition and continued to grow throughout their studies.

Role of the Student House Committee

“Role was in offering a listening ear and friendship to the students...being flexible for when people needed you...Communication was the key”. -- Ex-Committee Member

“It’s important that the expectations and norms for the SHP are clear for things to run smoothly, for the students, committee and coordinator. I’ve found the dynamic with the committee difficult as expectations were not clear at the start of the year” – Support Worker

“Attending fortnightly dinners, sharing interview duties, replying and creating emails and Facebook posts, contributing to report to church council, being available for discussion, support and follow up when particular problems arose.” – Ex-Committee Member

“Linking some students to other church members for particular issues” – Ex-Committee Member

“At one stage a suicide assessment was needed, health advice given and some relationship and communication coaching was needed”. – Ex-Committee Member

“There were times when some mental health issues dominated our concerns and required more individual attention.” – Ex-Committee Member

“Needs a whole community approach” – Ex-Committee Member

It was noted that the role of committee members should be clear and the commitments transparent when approached to join, both in terms of the relationship to the students, and also to the support worker. There is a strong theme of pastoral care to be primarily provided to the students through the fortnightly-dinners and similar meetups, as well as on a needs-basis. Given the potential for volatile mental health amongst young people, flexibility and social intelligence are essential characteristics for student house committee members.

A further issue is the relationship between the committee and support work. As offered in the recommendations, a member of the committee could be the support worker’s go-to to meet up with on a monthly basis and then the rest of the committee would meet every other month. Regular meetings were deemed important in terms of eliminating the pressure on the support worker to call and chair meetings and also to address any additional pastoral needs of students.

Benefits of being on the committee

“I have been inspired by the passion skills and beliefs of these young people”. – Ex-Committee Member

“Watching them develop in their faith, bonding with the community, enjoying the church life evolving into adults pursuing their careers/study” -- Ex- Committee Member

“Watching students come with apprehension, nerves and a little anxiety settling into the city, but over time watching their comfort levels and confidence rise is a lovely thing. -- Ex- Committee Member

“Comfortable at home and in the community, having the Committee and people you know and see at dinners is really good.” – Student

Those who have been involved in the committee throughout the course of the SHP’s history all noted the joys of being involved in the lives of the young adults in a time of transition and growth. In many cases, there were several stories and valuable pieces of feedback that ex-committee members had not necessarily been given the space to air previously. This shows a need for exit-interviews, as well as check-ins, both for the benefit of the community and also in respect of the commitment, insight and validation of the committee members.

Processes of forming and reforming the SHP

“You could always tell if a student was keen if the parents came for the interview and lunch and helped clean up!” – Ex-Committee Member

“Someone once said to me that if we think the person being interviewed is not a good fit for the Program it is better to have an empty room than the wrong person. It is good to consider how much one individual can affect a household/the program.” – Ex-Committee Member

“Parents who had significant expectations wanted to be involved, students must be over 18 – we recognise students as adults” – Ex-Committee Member

“We didn’t get enough info about them... becomes a burden [as some] had particular challenges, had we known, we would’ve been more aware, ensuring support was ready and available.”
– Ex-Committee Member

“It’s not a job interview, we need to know what needs people have, and it’s important to advertise so that there are enough appropriate applicants” – Ex-Committee Member

“Mid-year interviews and exit-interviews are really important for checking-in on the students and what needs are and are not being met in the community” – Support Worker

“We really need a bond-like payment when the students move in, there have been times where they’ve left a mess and it’s bad for the integrity of the community and, really, disrespectful” – Ex-Committee Member

There has been a strong theme throughout the review process (as noted above) that the SHP is an intentional community, not of its own creation, but of the BUC. Through this, there is a need to ensure that the church and committee take seriously the applicants and whether they would suit the current community dynamics and feel at home at BUC. This should be instilled through the interview where the interviewers should focus on understanding where the applicant is at, both in their faith journey and also in their emotional maturity/social development. It’s also really important that the interviewers relate the nature of the SHP and church as well as they can. This is in terms of the expectations of the SHP members, the relationship between SHP and committee and SHP and the church, as well as the general culture of the church. See the Appendix for more details and sample Interview Guide.

Beyond the interview, the retreat was noted as an important and essential time for students and committee to be present and establish the norms and expectations of the community for the following year. This should take place on a weekend in mid-February. Additionally, some attendance at church camp was supported as an opportunity for students to socialise and enjoy the company of the broader BUC in a non-church setting.

NEW IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

The following section of ideas and suggestions is based on a review of data as follows. These ideas are based on assisting with immediate support of the Support Worker, planning of 2017 student intake, recruitment of new committee members and the ongoing embodiment of intentional community in the future.

Ideal Student house:

The Ideal Student House should look like an Intentional Christian community formed by the “intentions” of Brunswick Uniting Church. These “intentions” bring together tertiary students aged 18 to 25 to live together as Christians and participate in the life of BUC. BUC’s intention is to provide God giving grace for young people in a transitional phase of their life.

In this community there is a “natural flow” of reciprocal relationships between students in the community, and beyond to the broader Brunswick Uniting Community. These relationships are dynamic and ever growing. So much expectation on these students at a transitional stage of life, is there a double standard of what we currently expect of student as to other BUC members?

What’s the SHP could look like:

- 10 student house members in two houses.
- Once per month dinner with committee (negotiated time and content depending on the group – hospitality by various families).
- Other BUC events with young person focus – integration with other BUC Young Adults i.e. Pdraig O’ Tuama session this year and proposed link in with Table Church.
- The Support Worker could facilitate connections between students and church families in an effort to enable connections in interests, personality, and faith (ie if you are studying law connecting to a lawyer in the community).
- Meet alternate fortnights independently to build their own community without committee oversight (they need to plan).
- Each house to vote on a Student Representative on a semesterly rotational bases. This Representative feeds back into the committee through attendance of a portion of the meetings and is the first contact for each of the households.
- Bimonthly

- Yearly reflections on fee amounts
- Instigate a Community Commitment deposit at the beginning of the student's period in the community, which will be returned upon vacating as long as the member's room is fully vacated and appropriately cleaned
- Intentional collaborative student reviews at end of first semester and towards the end of the year to allow for planning for the following year.
- Exit interview at end of stay.
- Review of the SHP every 5 years (next review 2021)
- There would be a shared devotional life that arises from the needs and questions of the students – this may involve shared bible study, meditation, prayer and worship, but would be shaped by the students. It may include the Student House Dinners but extend beyond them.

Ideal Student House committee would look like:

- A chairperson who manages the committee (not the Student Support Worker), e.g. agenda items, communications.
- The Support Worker reports back into the committee and are supported by them.
- Committee members have a clear set of expectations of students and themselves (clear understanding of intent and mission of Student House program).
- Members of the Student House Committee are flexible and clearly communicate what they can offer.
- There should always be 2 people plus coordinator at Student House Dinner
- There would be a shared devotional life that arises from the needs and questions of the students – this may involve shared bible study, meditation, prayer and worship, but would be shaped by the students. It may include the Student House Dinners but extend beyond them.
- Meetings take place bi-monthly
- Flexibility at times of need; BUC members that are not part of the Committee can be called upon e.g. Social workers with experience in mental health.
- Student House Committee should know when to refer out, what community services are accessible, and have connections with local services.
- Clear sense of boundaries.
- Be able to relate to young people.
- Understand the principles of community building.

- Roles in interview, retreat, hospitality, integration into BUC are flexible but communicated.
- Exit interviews of all committee members and Support Worker.
- Preferable a member of Student House Committee is also on the Children, Youth, and Young Adults Committee (CYYA) for open communication.
- Student House Committee reports to Church Council via CYYA member on the council.
- Limit on the longevity on committee – yearly reviews plus maximum of 4 years.
- Yearly internal review and reflection of committee and individual student's reflections.

Appendix

Notes: While the applicant is in an interview and therefore wanting to impress and become successful, it's important for the interviewers to make clear that this is a decision that they, the applicant should also be active in making. Being a part of the SHP this is different from a job; it is their home, social and faith community. It is essential that, even if they feel like they need a place and the SHP sounds like a cheap, appropriate solution, the community needs to be a good fit for them, too.

In the interview for vacant positions for semester 1 2017, the support worker has preferred that applicants attend church on a Sunday to gain some insight into BUC's theology and culture. The interview then takes place after the service with the support worker and another member of the SH Committee or the Reverend, followed by the applicant and support worker walking to the Student Houses to have a tour of the accommodation. This walk and tour has been essential in gaining a better understanding of the applicant in a more informal setting. Speaking more casually about their interests and aspirations allows more insight into their personality and suitability for the Student House Community.

Student House Applicant Interview Guide

Applicant Name:

Age:

University:

Where they are from:

- This is not like a job interview, we're just having a chat about what you'd want in a student faith community and congregation, honest answers and not knowing is totally fine.

- Brief description of the student house program

- Expectations:

- that you will be a respectful housemate and an active community member within the student house - consciously aware of the nature of a faith community rather than simply a share house,
- that BUC will be your primary church community, and as such you will be involved in a church committee or program in some capacity
- you attend the student house retreat in early February every year

- attend Church Camp in May,
- as well as fortnightly dinners/meet ups
- You will seek to settle any conflicts within the community with honesty and integrity, accessing the advice and resources of the student house committee whenever you need.
- The Support Worker and SH committee are here for you – use them!!

- Any questions about the program?

- A time you've dealt with conflict in an interpersonal relationship. How did you resolve it?

- What social skills do you value in yourself and in others?

- What does church mean for you?

- Informal chat about the church. Our priorities, demographics, how we're run etc. Have our community tree sheet handy from the front of the directory.

- Queer people in the community, proudly a safe church for LGBT Christians. What are your feelings about that?

- What personal growth would you seek to gain out of being a part of this community?

- And what practical skills would you like to gain/build on?

- Any other questions?