



# THE BEACON HILL TIMES

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## *Young men and women find spiritual communities on the Hill*

by Jacqueline G. Harris

IF YOU ARE IN YOUR 20S OR 30s, into skiing and want to meet skiers, you join a ski club. But what should you do if you are into God?

Two local organizations, Havurah on the Hill and Theology on Tap, offer twenty- and thirty-somethings without children a place to meet others who are looking for some sort of spirituality, but want it geared towards a younger crowd. "I don't consider myself highly religious," said Dave Gerzof, founder of Havurah on the Hill. "It is just really nice to be able to be with all of these other people in this atmosphere."

Gerzof, along with three friends, Aaron Mandell, Marc Rubinfeld and Andrew Perlman, decided to form Havurah on the Hill because they were looking for a sense of community that they couldn't find at some synagogues. "In the Jewish community, you go to temple with your parents, at college there is Hillel, but once you graduate, there is nothing



*Father Gray and others enjoy one of the guest speakers at "Theology on Tap."*

there for you," said Gerzof.

Gerzof found himself not going to services because they were geared more towards older people and married couples with children. "For that reason, a lot of young Jews may not be going to services," he said.

So Havurah on the Hill was born. The group searched for a place to meet that had more spirituality than "someone's liv-

ing room," and in doing so created a symbiotic relationship with the Vilna Shul on Phillips Street and the Boston Center for Jewish Heritage, which owns the building.

The four approached the BCJH about starting a young leadership division and now sit on the board of the group. In exchange for the use of the shul

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Havurah on the Hill meets at the Vilna Shul at 18 Phillips Street one Friday a month.

one Friday night a month, the group donates monies raised from the services to the BCJH for the restoration of the shul, which was built in 1918 and is the oldest remaining synagogue in Boston.

What gears Havurah on the Hill's services towards a younger crowd? For one thing, they meet just one Friday a month. "You want to hold on to your traditions, but you don't want it to

dominate your life," said Gerzof. And, instead of starting at sundown, which during some winter months is while people are still at work, the start-time is at 7:30 p.m. across the board. Finally, the service is not given by a rabbi.

Gerzof, 29, calls the meetings "learning services." They begin with a service, and then have a guest speaker, followed by a kosher dinner and socializing. "You tend to want to be with

people with similar interests that are the same age," said Gerzof.

Gerzof said about 100 people typically attend.

Another group, "Theology on Tap," uses the casual, comfortable atmosphere of local pubs and bars as the venue for discussions where God is the topic.

The series was started a couple of years ago by Father Patrick Gray of the Church of the Advent, and is an offspring of a similar program out of Chicago. "I remembered an article in the *Globe* about a priest hanging out in a bar and I thought, that's pretty cool. God and beer," said Gray.

While Theology on Tap is not meant to replace a weekly service, it offers people a place outside of a church to talk about theology and a group of people with whom to talk.

Gray describes his job in two words — God and people. "I like to drink and hang out in pubs and talk about God," joked Gray.

While a benefit to the venue is the fun atmosphere, Gray holds the sessions in local bars because he is striving to provide a comfortable, familiar place for young adults to explore what role faith

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and God will play in their lives. "It is a chance to meet someplace other than Sunday mornings and provide a safe spot for people who might not be ready to attend a church," said Gray.

Theology on Tap runs a couple of series a year, and each series is four weeks in a row. Each week there is a topic, a guest speaker and a short question and answer session. The sessions usually draw about 60 attendees.

"I think it is a unique blend of talking about theological issues in a casual, friendly environment that is somewhat ecumenical," said Shelley Steen, Myrtle Street, who has participated in Theology on Tap since its inception.

Steen thinks addressing the twenty- to thirty-something age group is important, and when church services focus on families and children over and over again, young singles feel left out. "You can't apply that to your own life, which is frustrating," she said.

While the series is open to everyone, about half of the participants are members of the Church of the Advent, according to Gray. It's the people and the topics discussed that keep parishioner Nathaniel Stinnett, Brookline, coming back. "It's a more accessible way to do something that involves religion," said Stinnett. And the discussions are fun, with pop culture topics such as "the gospel according to the

Simpsons." "It is more like a casual academic discussion about how people's faiths interact with pop culture," said Stinnett. "It appeals to people of a younger generation who might not be willing to take the time to go to church every Sunday."

What was Stinnett's favorite topic? "The Gospel according to U2," he said. "It rocked."

The next Theology on Tap series will begin in May. In February, Fat A (Friends at the Advent) will host a film series entitled "Faith, Film and Forgiveness." It is free and open to the public. Call 617-523-2377 for more information.

The next Havurah on the Hill is scheduled for Friday, January 21, at 7:30 p.m. The suggested donation is \$18 and the guest speaker is Jim Gordon, president of Cape Wind Associates. You can r.s.v.p. for the service at [www.vilnashul.com](http://www.vilnashul.com). ▀