



SUCCESS
STORIES

Flexible and Grounded

LuMin Austin transforms its property to endow its mission

Rev. Sarah Jones

If you happen to walk through the University of Texas' Austin campus on a Tuesday evening, you might see a long line of students snaking around the block at 21st Street and San Antonio. They are a multi-cultural and diverse cross-section of UT Austin's community, and they're lining up, no matter the weather, for one of the most popular weekly events: Lutheran Campus Ministry's ("LuMin Austin") Tailgate Tuesdays. Moving to the front of the line you'll find Pastor Brad Fuerst on the grill, flipping sizzling patties with a chef's ease and an emcee's enthusiasm. LuMin Austin's students are walking down the line, taking folks' orders and chatting. Over a hundred students walk away each Tuesday with their bellies full and their spirits high. "It's the best burger on campus," says Pastor Brad proudly. "The students don't just get to eat, they get to eat good."

LuMin Austin provides the Tailgate Tuesday meal as part of their greater feeding ministry for the students, staff, and other residents of the UT Austin campus. Forty-seven percent of the student body is food insecure -- a need that goes largely unaddressed by the University itself. In addition to the Tuesday meals, LuMin provides a food pantry for students, and the food flies off the shelves. The number and diversity of students who benefit from LuMin's feeding



LuMin students and Pastor Brad Fuerst at their grill stations on Tailgate Tuesday. LuMin Austin feeds over 100 UT Austin students and other neighbors every week. Photo credit: LuMin Austin



Pastor Brad Fuerst shows UT Austin pride in front of the LuMin campus ministry space. LuMin Austin has a deep sense of place and call in the West Campus neighborhood. Photo credit: Sarah Jones

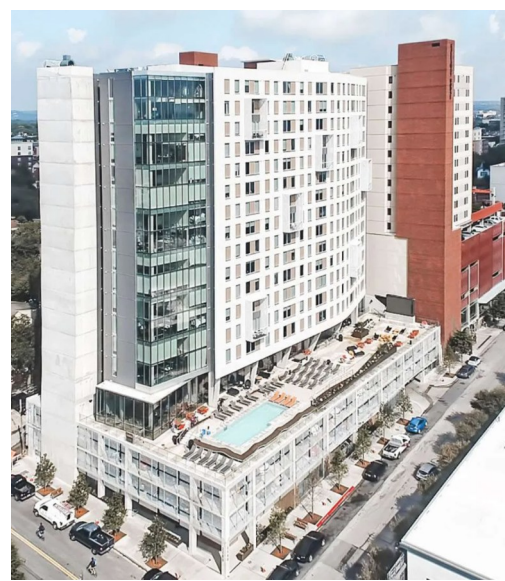
programs is far larger and wider than the students that are a part of the worship and Bible study activities, but the students LuMin serves learn that the campus ministry cares about them – even if they're not Lutheran or Christian. "We get a lot of international students," says Pastor Brad. "That opens up a whole new possibility for ministry – opportunities to offer space and support for the Hindu students, Sikh students, and others that don't have a dedicated campus ministry or advocacy group."

LuMin Austin's impressive outreach and service comes from a deep sense of place in the UT Austin campus and a commitment to the student population. The campus ministry has been located at 21st Street and San Antonio for decades; while at one time that put them on the outskirts of campus, today they are located in and among student housing. "This is a main corridor for students," says Pastor Brad. "We're embedded in their neighborhood...we've never had to advertise Tailgate Tuesdays; students learn about it when they're just walking by." While the feeding ministry has been active for over a decade, the real turning point came during the COVID pandemic. Students were unable or hesitant to come indoors for a meal, so Pastor Brad and the LuMin Austin students began serving outside. Word spread, and soon LuMin Austin saw lines of hungry students down the block. Over the past four years they've experimented with different kinds of food, like tacos, spaghetti, you name it. "We asked the students what they liked, what they wanted more of," says Pastor Brad. "The clear winner was burgers." Pastor Brad is now raising funds to upgrade LuMin's kitchen to be commercially certified and increase its capacity to serve hundreds of burgers a week, for hundreds of students.

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Another key factor in LuMin's success is something they lack - a big old building that demands time and money. LuMin is located in the ground level of a high-rise building that has the capacity to house over 500 students. While LuMin holds the property title, they have ground-leased the land to the Scion Group, a property development and management company. Scion Group pays LuMin \$100,000 a year and manages all property maintenance and upkeep. LuMin is able to use that money to fund its ministries and focus on its outreach and presence to the UT Austin campus community.



In 2012, LuMin Austin traded their Lutheran Center building (left) for a ground-level space in a high-rise student housing building (right). The transformation of their property has allowed LuMin Austin the flexibility and stability to meet student needs. Photo Credits: Jason John Paul Haskins and Ion Austin



LuMin Austin's flexible ground-floor space includes a lounge area, gathering/worship area, and a kitchen. This new space can be configured for large dinners, study groups, a food pantry, and even a Christmas Pageant. Photo Credit: LuMin Austin

The LuMin location, at the ground level of a housing building, is a valuable asset. Close to where the students are, they have a neutral, flexible, and welcoming space. LuMin Austin's space can easily be configured into a worship space, a dining room, a food pantry, a "hang out" location, and much, much more. It's a space built for the students that transforms along with the campus community – serving unimagined needs as they arise.

As is common in ministry, before 2010, the LuMin Austin chapter shared a more traditional church building that they co-managed with the Missouri Synod campus ministry. In 2008, the city of Austin re-zoned much of the West Campus area to allow high-rise developments in an effort to consolidate student housing within the walkable UT campus area. Suddenly, the property LuMin Austin was on became a hot commodity. LuMin Austin had an opportunity to trade in their building for a large source of income that could create and sustain amazing ministry. Rev. Paul Collinson-Streng (then Pastor at LuMin Austin) describes the discernment process as collaborative, faithful, and extensive. "We were considering several options," says Pastor Collinson-Streng. "Do we sell and move to a land-less ministry? Do we develop? Do we hang onto the building?" Ultimately, it was LuMin Austin's sense of place and service that was the deciding factor. "We were one block from campus, and we felt it would be a shame to give that up. If we sold the land, we would no longer have an anchor in the community we're called to serve. So then the discussion became what was the 'highest and best use' of the land for our mission – and housing was the answer."

They convened a Board of local volunteers with experience in real estate, asset-management, and real estate law. Additionally, they involved LuMin Austin students, who had an equal voice in the discernment and development process. Several student-housing developers were explored and they found a partner that fit their vision – a ground lease of the property with the opportunity for LuMin Austin and the Missouri Synod campus ministry to lease back space on the ground floor. The two campus ministries would have full design and management oversight of their space. They moved into their new spaces in 2016 – six years after LuMin Austin began the discernment process.

A decade later, the foresight of Pastor Collinson-Streng and his LuMin Board has paid off in incredible ways. Pastor Brad is thankful for the flexibility and capacity that the deal with the developers has created for the current iteration of LuMin Austin but is also thinking about how to set the campus ministry up for success when they re-negotiate the lease. “There isn’t a lot of affordable housing in this building,” says Pastor Brad. He wants to make sure that the deal increases the number of affordable units for students, even if that means that LuMin will receive less money in the annual ground-lease payment. “This place has to be a manifestation of the Kingdom that Christ describes in Luke. If the space does not reflect that sermon, then it’s just a cash cow for the church and not for the glory of God.”

In the years after his tenure at LuMin Austin, Pastor Collinson-Streng has served congregations in Virginia and Maryland who have also been interested in pursuing development or finding other creative solutions to property challenges. “I would encourage churches to focus on visioning,” says Pastor Collinson-Streng. “Meet regularly, study Scripture, and pay close attention to what’s happening in the community around you so that you can see how you can meet those needs.” And, most importantly, “Be open to where the Spirit leads, and don’t get too attached to one specific outcome.” Being flexible and staying grounded have been the keys to LuMin Austin’s success.



A hospitality station for students with snacks, coffee and announcements about upcoming activities. Through spaces like this, LuMin Austin is ensuring that students are fed—physically, spiritually, and in community together. Photo credit: Sarah Jones

Property Stewardship Lessons

- Development projects take time! Churches need to prepare for years of visioning and pre-development work before they break ground.
- Pay attention to your place in the community – how are you anchored and who can you serve?
- Don’t skip discernment of your values! Having a clear vision will help you seek and find the right solution and partners.

Questions or resource requests? Contact us at CPRH@elca.org.

