

## ITEST Member Spotlight

### Lauren Lester

I've always loved science and math; as a child, the only trophies I ever earned were from math competitions, not sports. I've also always loved my Catholic faith - the sounds of hymns, the scent of incense, the peacefulness of a prayerful church. I never questioned that these two things might be considered at odds by some. Only as a young adult did that start to become apparent.

I began work on a physics degree in 2002 at the University of Missouri, planning to finish bachelor's degrees in physics and math then move on to graduate school to study astrophysics. During my time there, our physics department outreach days made me quickly learn that I loved to teach students how the world worked. So instead of astrophysics, I finished those physics and math degrees and then completed graduate work in physics, earning a master's degree at the University of Missouri - St. Louis alongside a teaching certificate to foray into the world of secondary education.

It wasn't really until I first became a high school teacher at an urban all-girls Catholic school in St. Louis that I started getting challenged by questions the students had about the relationship between science and their Catholic faith (or sometimes their abandonment of the faith). I had never given much thought to how to address these questions because I never had struggled with them myself. In 2014, I received a flyer for a conference for high school science and theology teachers hosted by ITEST and featuring Fr. Robert Spitzer as the presenter. This was my first introduction to the faith-science conversation, and it was eye opening. Suddenly I had real answers to the questions my students often asked. Not long after this conference, I joined the ITEST board of directors to provide high-school-teacher perspective to ITEST's various activities.

In my 12 years of teaching since then, I have used a variety of resources from Fr. Spitzer's Magis Center to more formally incorporate topics of faith into the physics, physical science, and astronomy classes I have taught. But even informally, I frequently find myself describing some awe-inspiring chemical or physical phenomenon necessary for life to have developed on Earth and following it up with a "It's almost like someone important wanted us to exist!" This is usually met with eye rolls or weak laughs from the teenagers in front of me who have heard that for the tenth time, but yet I trust that I'm always planting seeds that the Holy Spirit will nurture. I like to think I'm giving my students the ability to be confident in the future when their faith is challenged by a materialist argument, or at the very least confident that the answer exists even if they need to look it up.

While at the same all-girls school in 2014, I found myself leading an initiative there to create a FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) team. This is the highest and most intense level of high school robotics competition in which, in just several weeks, students create a complex 100-pound robot almost from scratch: machining raw metal, designing gear and motor systems, and coding programming to create a robot capable of playing that year's game against dozens of other schools at regional competition sites, all while also running business and outreach tasks that simulate all aspects of real-world engineering processes. We founded the first all-girls FRC team in the state of Missouri and the St. Louis metro area, aptly named "SistamatiK," a nod to the pride the team had in its girls-in-STEM status.

During my time as the coach of this robotics team, and through my ITEST connections, I was introduced to Dr. James Bornholdt, a then-in-formation deacon of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. Dr. Bornholdt was an engineer by trade and a professor of engineering and invention. He used our robotics team students to pilot a ministry idea for young people that he called “Theology of Inventiveness,” a program that encourages students to explore their passions to invent solutions to real-world problems. This invention process is situated in conversations around the human ability to invent and the ways in which it reflects the creative nature of God; it is part of our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God. I have carried many of these ideas with me as I moved through my teaching career and still incorporate them into a high school introduction to engineering class that I teach.

After another degree, this time in Catholic School Leadership, and a brief foray into high school administration, I have settled back into teaching at a different Catholic high school in the southern end of the St. Louis metro area where I continue to incorporate, both formally and informally, the complementarity of faith and science. I continue on the ITEST board, most recently working to grow our social media presence in order to bring the faith-science conversation to more people. My own five children, who currently range in age from six to sixteen, now ask their own questions about faith and science. As any parent can attest, you always worry if you are doing enough to share your faith with your kids, but thanks to the many years I’ve now spent learning about the faith and science conversation, first spurred by my affiliation with ITEST, this is one part of my faith life that I know exactly how to share with them.