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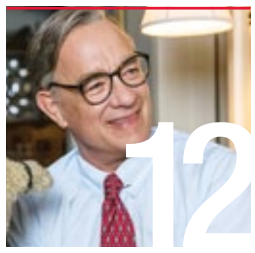

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BEHOLD!

Photo/via Wikimedia Commons

Young mother, holy babe

Caravaggio's "Adoration of the Shepherds" (1609), broke with typical Renaissance depictions of the Nativity. There are no angels, no beams of heavenly light. "This painting exemplifies a faith that God became man as one of the poor … mother and child exemplify humility as they lie on the earth," wrote art critic Tom McCarthy in the Portsmouth Point blog.

Iconic Boston church reckons with its links to slavery

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

Boston's Old North Church is a living witness to one of the most significant chapters in American history. Immortalized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride," the white spire rising above the North End's narrow streets is where two lanterns were hung to signal the approach of British troops at the start of the Revolutionary War.

But while Old North has been known as a symbol of the American fight for liberty and justice, its story is also intertwined with the saga of slavery.

In October, the leadership of the 296-year-old church — which is Boston's oldest standing church, the city's most-visited historical site and an active Episcopal congregation — held a panel discussion on Old North's links to slavery. New research had revealed that some of its most prominent early members were slave traders and they had donated large sums of money to pay for the construction of the original steeple in 1740.

One name in particular — Newark Jackson — is still familiar to the Old North community. In an adjacent building, the historic site runs a re-creation of an 18th-century chocolate shop named for Jackson, who owned and operated a chocolate shop elsewhere in the North End in the 1740s. Since 2013, Captain Jackson's Historic Chocolate Shop has offered visitors the chance to watch the process of Colonial-era chocolate making and taste (and buy) the results. In the church, there was also a memorial sign in the private pew Jackson occupied when he attended services.

Photo/Egan Millard/Episcopal News Service

Old North Church, built in 1723, is the site of the lantern signal — "one if by land, two if by sea" — that set Paul Revere off on his famous ride.

When Old North started the chocolate shop, Jackson's name was "picked

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Atlanta center to launch project named for Barbara Harris

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

The Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in Atlanta is expanding its scope in the name of one of the church's most heralded bishops. The center is an initiative of the Diocese of Atlanta that has served the past two years as an educational center supporting the Episcopal Church's racial reconciliation work.

On Nov. 16, the center launched the Bishop Barbara C. Harris Justice Project to strengthen the church's efforts to address environmental injustice, health inequities, mass incarceration, the death penalty, inhumane immigration policies and other social justice issues.

Harris became the first female bishop in the Anglian Communion when she was consecrated as bishop suffragan of the Diocese of Massachusetts in 1989. Now retired at age 89, she continues to be an inspiration to Episcopalians and an example of faithful commitment to justice work, making her a natural choice for this honor, Atlanta Bishop Robert Wright said.

Retired Bishop Suffragan Barbara Harris of the Diocese of Massachusetts.

Harris is able to "thread the needle" of being both kind and candid, Wright told Episcopal News Service, exemplifying "how to talk in terms of inequity and to talk in terms of justice and where we've missed building relationships of Christian affection." She has spoken forcefully on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation while remaining personable and affable, Wright said, "and you just don't see that every day."

Harris is scheduled to join the ceremonies next week in Atlanta, which will include a forum discussion, a commemorative dinner and a worship service, with Wright preaching, at St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

The day was a celebration of Harris' life and the starting point for the new justice project named for her.

"She totally embodies what this work is about, in her own journey and the way she has been living her life in the world as an advocate for justice and her courageousness and

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CONVERSATIONS

Learning resistance and courage from Ida B. Wells

By Catherine Meeks
Religion News Service

My earliest act of resistance came when I was a teenager, when I was taken to the local doctor. He had a waiting room for black patients in a dimly lit hallway that was separate from the well-lit, comfortable room where his white customers waited. I would refuse to sit in the space assigned to us. There was something in my soul that made me choose standing to sitting. It was a quiet protest, but I knew what I was doing.

I may have been inspired by my mother and several other teachers in her small school in Wheatley, Ark., who were fired after the school was integrated because the white people preferred white teachers. My mother and that courageous group of middle-aged African American colleagues, having finally found their voices, sued the district. To their surprise, they won the lawsuit.

Long before either my mother's or my resistance, there was Ida B. Wells, the anti-lynching activist and fearless investigative journalist who is the subject of my latest book, written with Nibs Stroupe. In 1883, when Wells was still a public school teacher herself, she was thrown out of a Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad ladies car because she was not white, though she had the proper ticket for that car. She had the courage to sue the railroad. She won the lawsuit initially but lost on appeal.

The greatest gift that studying Wells has brought to my life is freedom from fear. The plague of the 21st century is fear. Of course, there are many of us who live each day as best we can as resisters to it, but the fear hill is steep, and many are slipping down it instead of scaling it.

From 2016 to 2018, I led "Calling Their Names: Remembering Georgia's Lynched," an initiative of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. We placed markers and created spaces for remembering the victims of lynchings in the state, while exploring the intersections of slavery, lynching, the prison industrial complex, the death penalty and 21st-century police extrajudicial killings — modern-day lynchings.

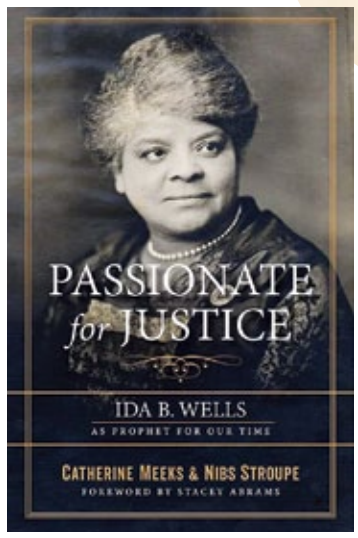
The initiative helps to address the issue of the moral injury that lynching brought to the nation and knocks at a door to healing that will not be opened until deep and true healing work is embraced.

Though our work was not nearly as dangerous as Wells', we owe her a debt. She was a pioneer in several arenas, but her work against lynching angered the white population the most because she refused to allow the white narrative, which blamed lynching on the behavior of black people, especially the men, to stand as the truth.

She laid the responsibility of the indefensible act of lynching at the feet of the white perpetrators where it belonged. She observed that "in fact, for all kinds of offenses and, for no offenses — from murders to misdemeanors, men and women are put to death without judge or jury; so that, although the political excuse was no longer necessary, the wholesale murder of human beings went on just the same."

The kind of courage that Wells exhibited at age 16, when she took charge of caring for her siblings after her parents died, or when she fought the Chesapeake Railroad or when she returned to the South to engage in her liberation work even though she knew that there were white folks who would have killed her if given the chance is the kind of courage that must engage the powers, principalities and spiritual wickedness that the Holy Scripture speaks about in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood," Paul wrote, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."



Image/courtesy Church Publishing Inc.

I have pondered this passage for many years, and it is clearer than ever to me how those powers are manifesting themselves in the current moment. They are supporting our collective fear and distracting too many of us from doing the work of racial healing and liberation.

Careful reading of Wells helps to deconstruct the current fear-based systems that serve the powers, principalities and spiritual wickedness in high places that stand in the path that leads to Beloved Community. She helps us to know that they cannot have the last word unless we allow them to do so. She encourages us to heed the call and to search for the inner voice that keeps telling us that nothing but true liberation is good enough for God's children.

Wells imagined that the world could be better than it was and believed that she had a right to live in that world. I believe that the world can be better than it is and that it was never God's intention for us to make the world that we have.

Thus, the call from God is and always will be to create a world where all of God's children, which includes every soul on the planet, can be who they were sent to the earth to become, without being held hostage by enslaving and dehumanizing supremacists' notions that imprison the body and the soul of far too many.


Photo/Mary Garrity/Creative Commons
Ida B. Wells, circa 1893.

The struggle against the darkness created by white supremacy and its child, white privilege, is one to be engaged by whites and blacks, as well as all other people of color.

The journey is long, and we are far from home now, but there is a light shining at the end of the tunnel. We can catch a glimpse of that light every time we choose to embrace courage rather than fear. This realization has been one of the best sources of hope and empowerment for me. It helps me to live in a brave space where the truth can be told. It helps me to tell the truth freely, and I am encouraged every day by my dear sister, Ida B. Wells. ■

Catherine Meeks is the director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in the Diocese of Atlanta [see related story, page 1]. This article is adapted from "Passionate for Justice: Ida B. Wells as Prophet for Our Time," co-written with Nibs Stroupe, published by Church Publishing Inc.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

LAST APRIL, WE featured a Rembrandt portrait of "The Risen Christ" for the Easter issue that emphasized the subject's humanity and inner soul.

Similarly, the Christmas image we have chosen, "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Caravaggio, is almost unbearable in its realism. The viewer almost has to work to find joy in this depiction of the Nativity.

The scene is no idealized stable; it's the real thing. You can almost feel the rough wood, breathe the dust from the scattered straw, hear the animals shifting their warm, fragrant bodies.

The exhausted mother leans against the manger and the three shepherds gaze on the baby. They're barefoot, working men, a point the painter emphasizes by the light falling on the muscled arms and chest of the middle shepherd.

That's Caravaggio for you. His paintings are full of emotion, violence, blood — the very core of humanity. There's no gold here, no haloes — but there is intense feeling.

He painted this scene for the Capuchin friars in Messina, Italy, Franciscans who believe that Christ was born for the poor. In the painting's lower left, Joseph's carpentry tools and a white cloth lie with the only food the stable-dwellers have — a loaf of bread.

Art critic Tom McCarthy, posting in the Portsmouth Point blog, quotes a Capuchin preacher imagining Christ saying, "for see in how great a need of human help I was born, with no shelter, no bed, no fire and no nurse to aid my mother."

Christianity's narrative constantly challenges human nature. We like triumph and glory; the idea of our God-figure as helpless at birth, and at death, invites us on a lifelong quest to look more deeply into the mystery of God-made-man. Have a blessed Advent and Christmas. ■

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NEWS

UTO grants helped the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church survive, rebuild

By Lynette Wilson
Episcopal News Service

At one point in the mid-19th century, almost all the residents of Villaescusa, a tiny village in the north of Spain near Santander, were Episcopalians.

It started with one villager who traveled 200 miles to the town of Fuentesaúco, where he bought a Bible, carried it home and began reading it. Then he brought the Bible to his Roman Catholic priest."The priest said, 'This is a Protestant Bible; you cannot have this,'" said Bishop Carlos López Lozano of the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, during a visit with 12 U.S. Episcopalians to Holy Spirit Church in Villaescusa.

The man, Melquíades Andrés, didn't know anything about being a Protestant; he just wanted to read the Bible. But the priest said, "'Give me this Bible. I'll put it in the fire.'" The man did not surrender the Bible and, instead, traveled 222 miles to Salamanca, where he attended his first Episcopal service at the Church of the Redeemer. "He went, he liked the service and then he saw the school," López explained.

In October, 31 Episcopalians traveled to Spain for a 10-day pilgrimage organized by the United Thank Offering (UTO) in coordination with the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Indiana. The pilgrimage began with Mass at the Anglican Cathedral of the Redeemer in Madrid. The following day, the pilgrims boarded a bus and drove to the 11th-century walled city of Avila.

In Avila, the group went in two different directions. A dozen people traveled by small bus to Salamanca, where they visited the first of three UTO grant sites; the larger group departed for Sarria, where the next day they began the 62-mile walk along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The two groups would later converge in Arzúa for a pilgrims' Mass the night before the walking pilgrims completed the journey's final 12 miles and the groups reunited in Santiago de Compostela.

The "grant-site pilgrims" made stops in Salamanca, where they visited the Atilano Coco Center, an international student center named for an Episcopal priest and a professor at the University of Salamanca who was assassinated by the Franco regime in December 1936. From there, they visited the rectory that serves as Holy Spirit Church in Villaescusa, and later, they stopped by St. Eulalia, a storefront church serving low-income Spaniards and immigrants in a public housing development on the outskirts of Oviedo.

The grant-site pilgrims, who heard the history of the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, were surprised to learn of the critical impact UTO grants have had on churches and ministries across Spain.

"I knew that we had this long relationship with the Spanish church, but I didn't realize how [the church was] nearly exterminated and how deliberate that extermination had been," said Sherri Dietrich, UTO board president, who attends St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Newcastle, Me.

Photos/Lynette Wilson/Episcopal News Service

The United Thank Offering pilgrims pose outside Holy Spirit Episcopal Church in Villaescusa, Spain.

Each day of the pilgrimage, the UTO visitors would stop and reflect and read one verse of Psalm 103:1-5. Leo Dugger reads the verse.

The Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2018. In the years following the Spanish Civil War when the country was under the dictatorial rule of Francisco Franco, the government confiscated the church's property, with the exception of the cathedral in Madrid, forcing the church underground.

"Twenty-six buildings and 14 schools were taken by Franco," said López, who led the pilgrims' tour. "The church was almost entirely destroyed. People met in a private home with a Bible and the Book of Common Prayer."

In 1936, when Holy Spirit Church in Villaescusa was forced out of its building, the congregation moved down the hill to the rectory, where they worshiped until 2008, when the roof collapsed and they moved to the city hall. A $20,000 UTO grant allowed the small congregation to fix the rectory's roof.

"Seeing where our money went to repair a roof with a congregation that had only 15 people — they would have never been able to do that; they would have had to close again," said Dee Dugger, a UTO coordinator for the Diocese of Florida and also her parish, Holy Trinity in Gainesville.

In the 1950s, the U.S.-based Episcopal Church became aware of the Spanish church's challenges, among them having no bishop. So in 1956, two American bishops — Minnesota Bishop Stephen Keeler and Northern Indiana Bishop Reginald Mallett — along with a bishop from the Church of Ireland, which had oversight of the Spanish Episcopal Church at the time, entered the country and in secret consecrated Bishop Santos M. Molina in his home in Sevilla.

Mallett and his wife had vacationed in Spain previously and returned under the pretense of tourism, said Northern Indiana Bishop Douglas Sparks, who walked the Camino with the UTO pilgrims.

"The Episcopal Church in Northern Indiana, our diocese, they're grateful for the risks that Bishop Mallett took and the other bishops to come and to make it possible for the church to be sustained in the midst of some pretty challenging and life-threatening experiences," Sparks said.

Then, UTO took notice. "From 1956 until now, UTO has helped us to survive," said López. To date, the Spanish church's properties have not been returned, nor has it received compensation, though it formally requested the latter a decade ago.

After Franco's death in 1975, the church began to rebuild with the continued support of UTO and others. Today, it operates 55 parishes in all major cities and towns in Spain with bi-vocational clergy. Last year, to help celebrate its anniversary, the Spanish church invited the Rev. Heather Melton, UTO's staff officer, to speak during its kickoff event, and it was from there that she imagined the pilgrimage.

"During that trip, I heard countless stories of how congregations or ministries would not have existed were it not for the funding provided through UTO grants," Melton told Episcopal News Service.

When Melquíades Andrés saw the school at the Church of the Redeemer in Salamanca, he set out to establish an Episcopal church and a school in Villaescusa, where only the children of wealthy families who could hire tutors received an education. From that one church, another five were established in the region.

"Four hundred people, almost all the villagers, became Episcopalians," said López.

Today, Villaescusa has only 150 to 200 year-round inhabitants, and the 15 to 20 Episcopalians who attend Holy Spirit Church continue to worship in the former rectory, while up the street at 41 Calle Derecha, a Swiss company owns the actual church building, whose front gate stays locked. Still, it's an active congregation engaged in the community.

"You cannot imagine how important it is to us to have you here and to thank you," said López, as the pilgrims toured Holy Spirit.

Thank offerings collected during a calendar year are granted the following year. UTO has set aside $60,000 in matching funds for the 2020 grant cycle to help to establish an Anglican Pilgrim Centre in Santiago de Compostela. To date, $23,594 has been raised.

The Anglican Pilgrim Centre would follow those in Jerusalem and Rome, the two other cities most often visited by Christian pilgrims. Like Israel and Italy, Spain has a rich religious history, from the time the Apostle St. James brought Christianity to the Iberian Peninsula just after Jesus' death to its history as part of the Roman Empire to the Muslim conquest that began in 711 and continued until 1492. Then in 1880, the Reformed Episcopal Church of Spain was established by former Roman Catholic priests who began to question the pope's infallibility and dogma in what was truly a Spanish-led — not an Anglican-led — movement.

Still, the Roman Catholic Church, which aligned itself with the Franco regime, continues to be the state-sanctioned church, receiving $900 million from the Spanish government yearly, and its history is told throughout the country in its many Gothic and Romanesque cathedrals, as the grant site pilgrims would discover. Yet, it was the Episcopal churches and ministries that most impressed the group and brought tears to their eyes.

"It's just very touching, spiritual and sacred. … It's holy work, and it feels like holy ground," said Dugger. "You know, the cathedrals that we've been in have been awesome, but these little, tiny, simple churches are more magnificent than the biggest cathedral with all the silver and gold."

The United Thank Offering was founded in 1890 to support innovative mission and ministry in the Episcopal Church and to promote thankfulness and mission throughout the Episcopal and Anglican churches worldwide. To date, UTO has collected and granted $138.6 million in thank offerings through 5,257 grants. ■

AROUND THE CHURCH

Episcopal Church 'still in' despite U.S. withdrawal from Paris climate pact

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

The Trump administration announced on Nov. 4 that it would withdraw the United States from the global climate pact known as the "Paris agreement" within a year, but Episcopal leaders said that won't affect the church commitment to the accord's goal of stopping or slowing climate change.

"The Episcopal Church considers climate action part of fulfilling a sacred trust from God," Diocese of California Bishop Marc Andrus said in a statement reacting to the withdrawal plan, which he called "an irresponsible move that particularly threatens some of the world's most vulnerable populations."

Andrus, who has led Episcopal delegations in recent years to annual climate summits hosted by the United Nations, warned that delays in addressing climate change could produce catastrophic scenarios in both the short and long term. The hardest-hit communities "will continue to suffer the tragic effects of wildfires, sea level rise, heat waves, and other climate-related disasters," he wrote.

An Episcopal delegation was in Paris in December 2015 to make a spiritual case for climate action during the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP. At that conference, member countries, including the United States, reached a landmark agreement to set voluntary goals aimed at keeping global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius, which scientists think would be necessary to prevent a spiraling catastrophe of melting glaciers, rising sea

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Photo/David Paulsen/ENS

Members of the House of Bishops pose for a photo on Sept. 20, the final day of their fall meeting in Minneapolis, behind a banner supporting creation care.

Call for papers: Theology of Gratitude

The United Thank Offering (UTO) and Bexley Seabury Seminary has invited scholars in philosophy, religion, theology, and other relevant disciplines to offer papers on the Theology of Gratitude.

This call for papers comes in recognition that gratitude has become a phenomenon in popular culture and is written about in books ranging from self-help to the Harvard Business Review. Scholarly engagement has developed primarily in the psychological community, which has demonstrated the correlation between gratitude and improvement in personal health and the development of strong, healthy relationships. There is far less scholarship arising within the theological community.

Submissions will be reviewed by a panel of thought leaders in the Episcopal Church. Authors of select papers will be invited to present their submissions as part of a Convocation and Scholars Conference in Chicago, April 23–24, 2020. Convocation speaker Diana Butler Bass will respond to the papers at the end of the conference. Presenters' papers will be published in the fall 2021 issue of the Anglican Theological Review (ATR). Housing will be provided; presenters will be responsible for transportation to and from Chicago.

- Papers due: January 15, 2020
- Paper selections announced: February 28, 2020
- Convocation & Scholars Conference: April 23-24, 2020
- Polished papers due: October 30, 2020
- Final papers due: April 2021
- Papers published in November 2021 ATR Fall 2021 Issue

For more information, visit: **https://unitedthankoffering.com/conference/**

Central New York priest under investigation for alleged financial misconduct

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

An upstate New York priest accused of financial misconduct is now being investigated by law enforcement, according to the Diocese of Central New York, which announced on Oct. 31 that it had turned over the results of its own investigation to police.

The Rev. Joell Szachara had been serving as the rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in New Hartford, but resigned at the direction of Bishop DeDe Duncan-Probe, the diocese said in late September. At that time, Duncan-Probe placed Szachara on administrative leave, restricting her from engaging in ministry, while a forensic audit was conducted on the finances of St. Stephen's.

Szachara

With the audit complete, the diocese — which did not specify the type of financial wrongdoing — referred the case to law enforcement as it continues its own investigation through the Title IV disciplinary process, Duncan-Probe wrote in an Oct. 31 letter to the clergy and wardens of her diocese.

"In this diocese, we have a shared commitment to transparency and accountability, acting in ways that honor the sacred trust of being a community of faith," Duncan-Probe wrote. "While there may be times when that trust is betrayed, together we will do the hard work of holding one another accountable, repenting, and seeking forgiveness, praying to 'live lives worthy of our calling.'"

Szachara, who served St. Stephen's for over a decade, has held several prominent positions in her diocese and the Episcopal Church. She was a deputy at three General Conventions and served on various General Convention committees, in addition to the board of the Diocese of Central New York and several diocesan committees. ■

TRANSITIONS

Diocese of Lexington elects Van Koevering

Provisional Bishop Mark Van Koevering was elected diocesan bishop of the Diocese of Lexington (Ky.) at a special convention held at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Winchester, Ky. on Nov. 1.

Van Koevering has been serving as the provisional bishop since being appointed by the diocesan convention in February 2018. As such, he continues as the ecclesiastical authority of the diocese, but now also is bishop diocesan-elect.

Scarfe

Pending receipt of the necessary consents, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has set aside March 21, 2020, for Van Koevering's investiture, to take place at Christ Church Cathedral, Lexington.

Van Koevering

A Michigan native, Van Koevering studied agronomy, genetics and plant breeding at Michigan State University. He worked with the Peace Corps in Thailand and taught in China. He promoted peace and reconciliation in Mozambique, working with the Mennonite Central Committee.

He was ordained deacon and priest in the Anglican Church in Wales. He was elected bishop of the Diocese of Niassa in northern Mozambique in 2003 and served until 2015.

Late in 2015, he was called as the assistant bishop of the Diocese of West Virginia. He is married to the Rev. Helen Van Koevering and they have three grown children.

— Diocese of Lexington

Bishop of Iowa to retire

Bishop Alan Scarfe of the Diocese of Iowa announced at the diocesan convention in late October his intention to retire in September 2021 and called for the election of his successor in the spring of 2021.

In a letter to the diocese, Scarfe said, "Your gracious, patient and generous spirit has made me your bishop, always humbled and proud to be 'the bishop of Iowa' and never merely 'from Iowa.' To stand before General Convention in 2018 and describe your revivals was one of the greatest honors of my life. God only knows the sparks we have set alight through that witness. I am sure that some are saying, 'Well, if Iowa can do it, so can we.'"

Scarfe was elected ninth bishop of the Diocese of Iowa in November 2002. The diocese had sought a "shared ministry" bishop, and Scarfe's ministry in the diocese has included a focus on being "in mission with Christ, through each and all."

He has been active in social justice issues through his involvement with Bishops United Against Gun Violence, support for the LGBTQ+ community and encouragement of the Becoming Beloved Community initiative development. Scarfe has been an advocate for youth and young adult ministry and the development of new worshipping communities. In the last several years, he has gathered the diocese in over 40 revivals across the state and encouraged and supported congregations through Growing Iowa Leaders and Engaging All Disciples.

— Diocese of Iowa

AROUND THE CHURCH

Bishop joins Wisconsin rally for gun safety bills

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

Milwaukee Bishop Steven Miller was among a group of Wisconsin gun safety advocates who spoke Nov. 7 at the state Capitol in Madison in favor of pending legislation — two bills that state Republican leaders ignored before closing the day's brief legislative sessions without debate.

Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, had called the special legislative session for the Senate and Assembly, both controlled by Republicans, to consider measures that would implement universal background checks for gun purchases and a "red flag" system allowing judges to approve the temporary seizure of guns from individuals suspected of posing threats to the public.

Miller, a founding convener of Bishops United Against Gun Violence, spoke before the legislative session at a news conference organized by a coalition of groups, including the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Mothers Against Gun Violence, March for Our Lives and Forward Latino.

"We are here, as Episcopalians, because we believe in the dignity of every human being. And the dignity of every human being includes keeping people safe," Miller said, describing Evers' legislation as "common sense" measures that have Wisconsin citizens' widespread support.

Photo/WisconsinEye via video

Milwaukee Bishop Steven Miller speaks at a rally at Wisconsin's Capitol in Madison in favor of two gun safety bills.

He and other advocates of the bills point to the results of an August poll by the Marquette University Law School that found 80 percent of voters in the state support background checks for private gun purchases and gun show sales, and 81 percent back red flag laws.

"This government must take a vote. We deserve to know where our legislators stand on this issue since 80 percent of us support it," Miller said. He spoke for about two minutes at the beginning of the 25-minute news conference, which was streamed online by WisconsinEye.

Republican leaders were required by law to convene a session on the legislation based on Evers' request, but they were not required to act on it. Instead, the Assembly and the Senate each met Nov. 7 for less than a minute before adjourning.

"There's just not any momentum in the caucus to take up either one of the bills that the governor has offered," Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald told reporters, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The Episcopal Church has for decades advocated stricter regulations on gun ownership and improved gun safety. General Convention's most recent actions, in 2018, included a call for greater study of gun violence as a public health crisis. Another resolution paved the way for the church to buy stocks in gun manufacturers to implement new shareholder advocacy strategies.

Bishops United, a network of about 80 Episcopal bishops, also has pressed for federal legislation. Some of the bishops traveled to Washington, D.C., in February to meet with lawmakers on the issue. While they were on Capitol Hill, the Democrat-led House passed a background check bill that has since languished in the Republican-controlled Senate.

Miller did not participate in those lawmaker visits earlier this year, but he has been active in Bishops United since the network was created in the wake of the December 2012 massacre of 26 children and educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Two other deadly shootings had occurred months earlier in suburban Milwaukee, at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek and at the Azana Salon & Spa in Brookfield.

In a radio interview Nov. 7 before the news conference, Miller cited the salon shooting in October 2012 as a grim example of the need for a more comprehensive background check law. In that attack, the shooter killed his wife, two of her coworkers and himself with a gun he had purchased in an online sale after being turned away by a gun store.

Miller also highlighted the rising problem of suicide by firearm, especially in rural Wisconsin. The proposed legislation, he said, promises to help alleviate that strain of gun violence, which claims hundreds of lives in the state each year.

"This is an opportunity to care for one another, I think, in a significant way," Miller told the Between the Lines show. "We know that these laws will save lives, and I don't know why an elected representative would not want to save the lives of his or her citizens." ■

CLIMATE continued from page 4

levels and related weather extremes.

The COP23 summit in 2017 was intended to build on the Paris agreement, but the agreement's effectiveness was thrown into doubt when President Donald Trump said he would withdraw from the accord rather than hold the United States to its pledge to dramatically reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

The Episcopal Church responded by joining the We Are Still In movement, a coalition of faith partners, governments, nongovernmental organizations and companies committed to continuing to work toward the Paris agreement's goals.

Environmental justice is one of the church's three main priorities, along with racial reconciliation and evangelism. Over the years, General Convention has passed numerous resolutions on the issue, whether supporting federal climate action or pledging to mitigate the church's own impact on the environment.

In 2018, General Convention approved a resolution titled "Episcopalians Participating in Paris Climate Agreement" that called on Episcopalians and congregations to set examples "in the spirit of the Paris Climate Accord, by making intentional decisions about living lightly and gently on God's good earth."

Some of those individual decisions were collected by the Episcopal Church last spring through the church's Creation Care Pledge, which coincided with Easter and Earth Day 2019. More than 1,000 people pledged to take steps to improve the environment and reduce their contributions to climate change.

Andrus' diocese also has taken the lead in developing the online Carbon Tracker for Episcopalians to record and visualize the impact of their efforts. The diocese has nearly completed development of the tracker, and more than 800 households have participated so far in the test phase.

"For us, climate action means commitment to personal and local community transformation, advocacy for the best climate and environmental policies, and standing with those who are already experiencing the deep pain of climate-related displacement and loss," Andrus said.

In 2016, the Episcopal Church was granted U.N. observer status, which allows members of the delegation to brief U.N. representatives on the church's General Convention climate resolutions and to attend meetings in the "official zone." Most recently, Andrus led a delegation representing Presiding Bishop Michael Curry to the COP24 summit in December 2018 in Katowice, Poland.

The United Nations' COP25 summit had been scheduled for Dec. 2-13 in Santiago, Chile, but the country was forced to withdraw as host because of civil unrest tied to Chilean student protests over rail fares. Instead, the summit will be held in Madrid. ■

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her trailblazing spirit," said Catherine Meeks, executive director of the center, which is located across the street from Morehouse College, a historically black men's college.

Meeks analogizes the Harris Justice Project as the center "spreading its wings." So far, the center has assembled online resources, organized events, developed curricula, and led classes and a pilgrimage intended to help Episcopalians and Episcopal clergy members reckon with their own racial biases and need for healing, in the context of the Episcopal Church's Becoming Beloved Community framework. Meeks sees the next step as connecting that spiritual journey to the outside world.

Much of the center's ongoing racial healing work will build on the example of an inaugural pilgrimage that brought 20 Episcopal priests and deacons to Atlanta in May. The participants were selected from all 20 dioceses in the church's Province IV, which encompasses all or part of nine states in the Southeast. Future pilgrimages will draw from a broader pool of participants, and the center hopes clergy members will return to their dioceses and parishes and mobilize Episcopalians to start their own journeys toward racial healing.

They also will be encouraged to consider how their faith calls them to work for justice on a range of social issues, Meeks said, because she thinks "racism is at the core of all those issues."

Starting with a focus on the environment, the Harris Justice Project is developing a course curriculum that will debut in the new year. The curriculum will highlight ways that environmental risks tend to disproportionally affect minority communities and people of color, especially in less-affluent neighborhoods, Meeks said.

The Episcopal Church has endorsed such work through its General Convention, which in 2015 passed a resolution opposing environmental racism, "expressed in such ways as the locating of extraction, production, and disposal industries where they disproportionately harm neighborhoods inhabited by people of color and low income communities." That resolution echoed a similar measure passed in 2000 that raised concerns about "the practice of locating polluting industries disproportionately near neighborhoods inhabited by people of color or the poor."

Photo/Matthew Cavanaugh/Diocese of Massachusetts

Retired Bishop Suffragan Barbara Harris leads the Diocese of Massachusetts in singing hymns during its 2014 electing convention.

Racist roots of unjust environmental policies stem from "the ways in which we've constructed this country on ideas of supremacy, on ideas of some people are better than others," Meeks said.

She also knows that the people who come to the center's classes bring a wide range of attitudes about race and society. Sometimes, it's important for diverse groups first to unite around the basic Christian principle that "everybody on the planet is an equal person," Meeks said. "That's a starting place." ■

Diocese of New York establishes reparations fund, adopts anti-slavery resolutions from 1860

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

At its annual convention on Nov. 8 and 9, the Diocese of New York established a task force to examine how it can make meaningful reparations for its participation in the slave trade and committed $1.1 million from its endowment to fund the efforts the task force recommends.

It also passed four resolutions condemning slavery, which had first been introduced by John Clarkson Jay — grandson of founding father John Jay, governor of New York and first chief justice of the Supreme Court — in 1860. At the time, the resolutions were met with fierce opposition from the clergy and laity, many of whom were still profiting from the slave trade, and they had been tabled indefinitely until now, according to the diocese.

Photo/Diocese of New York

Wayne Kempton, archivist and historiographer for the Diocese of New York, displays the journal of the 1860 diocesan convention.

New York Bishop Andrew M.L. Dietsche has made racial reconciliation a priority in his diocese, which designated 2017-18 a Year of Lamentations, 2018-19 a Year of Repentance/Apology and 2019-20 a Year of Reparation.

"The legacy, the shadow, of white supremacy which flows from our slave past and continues to poison the common life of the American people … continues to impose extraordinary burdens, costs, hardships and degradation upon people of African descent in our country," Dietsche said in his address to the convention. "The Diocese of New York played a significant, and genuinely evil, part in American slavery, so we must make, where we can, repair."

Dietsche noted in his address that in the 18th century, a high proportion of New Yorkers were slave owners, and according to diocesan records, some churches owned slaves as parish servants or "property assets."

"We have a great deal to answer for," Dietsche said. "We are complicit."

At the 1860 convention, Jay, an ardent abolitionist, introduced four resolutions urging the leadership and laity of the diocese to publicly renounce and oppose slavery and slave trading. Importing slaves had been illegal in the United States since 1808, and the last remaining slaves in New York were freed in 1827. However, the Port of New York was still considered "the largest slave market in the world" as late as 1859, being the home port for ships that sailed across the Atlantic to abduct Africans and generate profits for New York merchants.

Jay wanted his diocese to take a firm stand against the human trafficking that continued "in violation of the statutes of the Republics, of the teachings of the Church, of the rights of man, and the laws of God."

The reaction?

"Enough people rose and left the floor of the convention to deny the action even the possibility of a quorum," Dietsche said.

Diane Pollard of the diocesan Reparations Committee said it was decided to bring back the resolutions at this convention in part because "it is so painful" to have them still sitting on the table, an unfinished chapter of an ugly history.

"It is painful to people who have family that were slaves," Pollard said in a video produced by the diocese about the resolutions.

Dietsche referred to the passing of the resolutions as "the fruit of the Year of Apology" but noted that "there is a third and final chapter to this movement, which begins now with this convention, and that is the Year of Reparation."

In his address, Dietsche called for a previously unannounced resolution "to set aside $1.1 million from the diocesan endowment for the purpose of reparations for slavery."

Citing Virginia Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary as examples — VTS pledged 1.1 percent of its endowment and Princeton 2.25 percent — Dietsche considered 2.5 percent of the diocesan endowment an appropriate amount, which came to $1.1 million.

"Much smaller, and the resources for significant reparation would be insufficient; much larger, and it might not be something we could do," Dietsche said. "When I ask that we remove this much money from our modest endowment, I know that this is not a small thing. However, I am sure that any honest process of reparation must require sacrifice and a commitment, not only from our surplus but from our seed corn."

The resolution included the creation of a task force that will determine how best to structure the reparations effort and make recommendations at the next diocesan convention. Dietsche emphasized that the effort is about more than simply spending money, but he brought up several specific possibilities.

"This money could produce five $10,000 college or seminary scholarships every year in perpetuity," Dietsche said. "This money could establish and fund an education and advocacy library and resource center in this diocese dedicated to racial justice and reconciliation. This money could support a first-step program in this diocese to invite, nurture and prepare black young people, and men and women, to explore the possibility of ordained ministry. $1.1 million isn't so much money, but it's not nothing either, and I look forward with anticipation to the creative possibilities that might come from this initiative." ■

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somewhat out of a hat," without knowing much about him other than his ownership of an Old North pew and a chocolate shop, said the Rev. Stephen Ayres, the vicar at Old North and executive director of the Old North Foundation.

"'Jackson' just sounded good, so we picked that without knowing a lot about him," Ayres told Episcopal News Service.

The deeper research started after Ayres happened upon a book called "Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston" by Jared Ross Hardesty, which mentions Newark Jackson — not as a chocolatier but as a slave owner. Old North asked Hardesty to do additional research, and the results were informative but upsetting.

"Jared eventually found the ship manifests, and that's when he called me and said, 'I've got bad news for you,'" Ayres said.

The news was that Jackson and several other Old North members were participants in a slave-smuggling ring. Defying British law, they transported slaves from Barbados to Suriname, outside the British Empire. In 1744, Jackson and fellow Old North parishioner George Ledain were killed in a mutiny shortly after leaving Suriname, according to Hardesty's research. On the ship, Dutch authorities found 15 slaves who had not been sold:

Photos/Egan Millard/Episcopal News Service

Far left, at Captain Jackson's Historic Chocolate Shop next to Old North Church in Boston, visitors can watch chocolate-making demonstrations and experience what Colonial-era chocolate tasted like. Left, the Rev. Stephen Ayres, vicar of Boston's Old North Church, stands next to Newark Jackson's old pew.

Photo/Egan Millard/Episcopal News Service

Old North Church is Boston's oldest standing church, and it still houses an active Episcopal congregation.

2 adults and 13 children. Jackson himself owned three slaves at the time of his death, according to Hardesty.

Hardesty's research had "given us some work to do to figure out how to go from where we are to where we should be," Ayres said.

The first step was to present the findings to the community at that panel discussion in October, which included Hardesty, another historian, a lawyer and the Rt. Rev. Gayle Harris, bishop suffragan of the Diocese of Massachusetts. The commemorative sign in Jackson's pew has been removed and may be replaced with a new one. Further changes are in the works, Ayres said.

"We have a board meeting next week and on their agenda is to talk about debranding the [chocolate] shop, which would be to stop calling it 'Captain Jackson's.' We still want to do the chocolate program, but we don't want to be honoring somebody who by our standards is not honorable," Ayres told ENS.

The discoveries about Jackson and the other parishioners could be just the tip of the iceberg. Even in a region not typically associated with slavery (Massachusetts abolished it in 1783), almost 10 percent of Boston's population in the 1740s was enslaved.

"There was probably enslaved labor working on the construction of church; we haven't really done the deep dive into our archives to see if we can find any information about that, but that's for future research. We know the first two rectors of the church were slave owners," Ayres said.

Slaves and free black citizens attended Old North, and there are multiple records of a particular free black family, Ayres said. But all people of color had to sit up in the mezzanine, which was the least comfortable part of the church — cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

"Because of the nature of slavery, black people did not have much of an opportunity to get together and socialize. So this was a real source of community to them. I also think about how they're sitting up there looking down on all their owners," Ayres said. ■

ADVENT RESOURCES

Digital Advent materials available

Dec. 1 is the first Sunday of Advent, the Christian season of spiritual preparation before celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Episcopal Journal *presents some resources suitable for the season.*

By Cara Modisett
Episcopal Cafe

New and updated Advent resources for congregations, dioceses, and communities of faith are now available from the Episcopal Church at **www.episcopalchurch.org**. Digital Christmas Eve services are also being offered.

Digital Invitation Kit for Advent
(available in English, Spanish, & French)

Continuing the invitation to connect Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's "Way of Love, Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life" more deeply to the seasons of the year, the church has developed additional free and downloadable resources for congregations, dioceses, and communities of faith. An Advent Digital Invitation Kit is available now to help congregations invite people to enter into this season of preparation.

***Created by Susan Elliott with drawings and text by Jay Sidebotham, this 2019 calendar poster suggests ways to mark the days through the Advent season. The calendar offers ideas for prayer, helping others, and being thoughtful about the true meaning of Christmas. It is available at* www.forwardmovement.org.**

The theme of the kit is inspired by Mark 1:3 and Isaiah 40:3 "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" and includes a customizable poster, postcard, and flyer; a social media-ready graphic; and a Facebook cover image.

The Way of Love (**www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love)** is a journey that begins by saying "yes" to God's call to birth new life into our lives and the world.

Journeying the Way of Love Advent curriculum and Advent calendar
(available in English & Spanish; calendar available in French also)

A four-week Advent curriculum and Advent calendar pegged to readings and themes from the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke that incorporates Way of Love practices and the Nativity/infancy narrative of Jesus to enable participants to grow spiritually during this season of preparation.

#AdventWord (available in English, Spanish & Haitian Creole)

This popular Advent practice returns in 2019. Sign up to receive a daily word, visual and short written meditation. Each day during Advent, meditations will be available in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole, with ASL videos. This global effort asks participants to post a reflection of where they find the #AdventWord as part of their spiritual journey. Find #AdventWord at **www.adventword.org**.

Sermons for Advent and Christmas

Advent can be an important time to slow down and anticipate the joy of Christmas. This is a compilation of Advent and Christmas sermons from some of the best preachers in the Episcopal Church. Whether you use this book for private devotionals and inspiration, small group study, or reading from the pulpit, we pray that you will find this holy season brightened by the Everlasting Light himself.

Find sermons at **www.episcopalchurch.org/advent-and-christmas-resources**.

Bulletin inserts
(available in English & Spanish)

Bulletin inserts for each Sunday in Advent are designed to complement the revised Advent calendar and Journeying the Way of Love Advent curriculum. Available in full page, one-sided and half page, double-sided formats.

Advent reflections

Episcopal Migration Ministries will offer weekly advent reflections on the EMM blog **www.episcopalmigrationministries.org/blog/** and on the Hometown podcast. Hometown episodes can be found on SoundCloud, Stitcher, Google Play and iTunes.

Christmas Eve programs

The Episcopal Church is offering digital Christmas Eve services on December 24, making Christmas Eve worship accessible to those not attending a service or program at a local church. More information on the digital Christmas Eve programs will be available at **www.episcopalchurch.org**. ■

Cara Modisett lives in Roanoke, Va., where she serves as music director at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church and staff collaborative pianist at Radford University. This article was published on the Episcopal Café website, ***www.episcopalcafe.com.***

Five ways to 'prepare ye'

By Linda Buskirk

Already stores urge us to "prepare for the holidays" — as if the whole season depends on us choosing a new color scheme for our Christmas decorations. Right now.

Episcopal sensibilities resist this, of course. We are too busy getting back into the swing of Sunday School, reviving outreach ministries, and conducting annual giving campaigns. Before we know it, the last pot will be scrubbed after the annual community Thanksgiving meal. Dry your hands, sit down, take a breath. Welcome Advent.

Here are five ways to get ready to experience a meaningful Advent.

1) Be intentional about Advent. Give Advent a fighting chance to be part of the mix of your life in December with intentionality. Author Cynthia Bourgeault in "The Wisdom Jesus," advises that an approach to centering prayer can be applied to Advent, with the urging that it is "important to be as clear as you can be" about how willing you are to give yourself to a practice:

"To the extent that your intention is clear and strong, your practice will be also. If your intention gets muddled and consumed, so will your practice. You are simply asked to attend, to give yourself completely into that deeper, mysterious presence," she writes.

2) Prepare ye. There are wonderful resources for personal, group, congregational and children's observances of a meaningful Advent. Episcopal Church Publishing, Inc. offers a variety of daily meditation and reflection books for adults, children and families at **www.churchpublishing.org**. Forward Movement publishes a variety of pamphlets helpful for engaging groups of adults or children in preparing for the coming of Christ at **www.forwardmovement.org**. Now is a great time to peruse the offerings and order publications so ye are prepared to jump in on the first Sunday of Advent, Dec. 1.

3) Make a place. We all know where our Christmas tree stands. Where is your spot for contemplating Jesus' birth? In the delightful children's booklet "Love Life, Live Advent," found at Church Publishing, authors Paula Gooder and Peter Babington advise families to "make a place in your home where you will think about Advent. Make it special by putting your Advent calendar, candle, crib-set or wreath there."

4) Invite. The wealth of our liturgical year holds value for all seekers of God's light. Even if your Advent reflections are done solo, you can share your experience with others, just as you might tell them about a good book you are reading. When party guests arrive, mention the beauty that the Advent wreath is adding to the season. The light you are finding will shine brighter when shared with others.

5) Expect. Jesus promises that when we seek God, we will find God. Hold your Advent journey lightly in your hand, joyously experiencing where it may lead. Advent anticipates more than a celebration of what we know already happened 2,000+ years ago. Expect transformation and your own rebirth in the manger of your heart. ■

Linda Buskirk is a capital campaign and strategic planning consultant for the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF). This article was originally posted on ECF's "Vital Practices for Leading Congregations" website, ***www.ecfvp.org***.

NEWS

Welby and Pope Francis plan united visit to South Sudan

Anglican Communion News Service

The first joint pastoral visit by a pope and an Archbishop of Canterbury could take place in South Sudan early next year, the Vatican and Lambeth Palace announced on Nov. 14. The news came after a private audience between Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby at the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta guest house.

"During the friendly talks we focused on the condition of Christians in the world and on some situations of international crisis, with particular reference to the painful reality facing South Sudan," the Vatican Press Office said in a bulletin.

"At the end of the meeting the Holy Father and the Archbishop of Canterbury agreed that, if the political situation in the country should allow the establishment of a transitional government of national unity in the next 100 days, at the expiry of the agreement signed in recent days in Entebbe, in Uganda, they intend to visit South Sudan together."

Confirming the announcement, Welby said in a Facebook post: "We discussed our shared passion for peace in South Sudan and agreed that if the political situation permits the creation of a transitional government of national unity, it is our intention to visit together.

"Our commitment to the teaching of Jesus means we long to see a lasting solution to the conflict in South Sudan. We renew our call for spiritual and political leaders there to strive for peace."

Responding to the announcement, the Anglican Primate of South Sudan, Archbishop Justin Badi Arama, told ACNS that "the Episcopal Church of South Sudan appreciates the continued interest in, and commitment to prayer for, South Sudan and her people from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. Justin Welby, and Pope Francis. We welcome their intention for a joint visit and join them in praying for lasting peace in South Sudan, and the formation of the new transitional government of national unity, which will enable this to happen."

A joint pastoral visit by a Pope and an Archbishop of Canterbury would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. But it is not the first time that Welby and Pope Francis have taken unprecedented joint action, particularly on peace in South Sudan. Earlier this month, at the invitation and with the participation of Pope Francis, Welby led a spiritual retreat at the Vatican for South Sudan's opposing political leaders.

Photo/ACNS

Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby embrace ahead of a private audience at the Vatican on Nov. 13.

The Churches of South Sudan have been united in acting as a catalyst for the ongoing peace process, working to end five years of civil war. Peace talks led by Arama helped to renew the peace process which had stalled despite the efforts of IGAD, a regional inter-governmental body, which had been working to bring the warring parties together.

The audience was primarily held so that Welby could introduce his new Personal Representative to the Holy See and Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, Archbishop Ian Ernest, to Pope Francis. ■

NEWS

Confederate symbols workshop re-examines the past

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

When the Rev. Hannah Hooker traveled in early November to the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., she brought along her thoughts of a specific stained-glass window back home in Little Rock, Ark., where she serves as associate rector of Christ Episcopal Church. The window depicts Bishop Leonidas Polk preaching at the church's dedication in 1839.

It's not a conspicuous window — located to one side of the nave, overlooking a breezeway where little light reaches its panes. Only after a longtime parishioner pointed it out did Hooker examine it closely and consider what Polk's legacy means for her congregation at a time when The Episcopal Church has called on its dioceses and congregations to research and tell the full stories of their historic complicity with slavery, segregation and other systems of racial oppression.

Polk, as missionary bishop to the Southwest and later bishop of Louisiana, was a key figure in the founding of Sewanee in the 1860s, but he died before the opening of the Tennessee seminary, killed in battle during the Civil War while serving as a general for the Confederacy. Today, he has become a problematic figure in the churchwide reexamination of Confederate symbols and memorials in worship spaces.

"I sort of am of the opinion that all churches, whether they have Confederate symbols or history, have the opportunity to investigate their own history and sort of own whatever grossness is in their past," Hooker told Episcopal News Service by phone this week after returning from a three-day Sewanee workshop on those topics.

Hooker and 10 other priests attended the university's inaugural Confederate Symbols and Episcopal Churches Workshop Nov. 5-7. Each priest came from a Southern parish with historical connections to the Confederacy. Some of the priests lead worship services in churches where Confederate symbols are present. Their congregations generally have not yet engaged in full-throated discussions of those symbols' meanings.

At Calvary Episcopal Church in Fletcher, N.C., Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee are two of the Southern historical figures remembered in stone monuments, more than a dozen in all, arranged in a roadside display outside the church. The rector, the Rev. J. Clarkson, attended the Sewanee workshop on Confederate symbols and described the monuments at his church as "a little bit unusual."

"Figuring out what the church might want to do with them at this point is … a more complicated discussion," Clarkson said in an interview with ENS.

The Rev. Rusty McCown brought to the workshop a different example from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Franklin, Tenn., where he is rector. In the parish hall of the 200-year-old church hangs a portrait honoring a prominent early parishioner, but a darker part of the man's past is hardly acknowledged — that he was a major slaveholder.

"I'm kind of a belief we shouldn't have any portraits at all," McCown said, though no changes have been discussed yet at his church. He attended the Sewanee workshop looking for guidance in how to approach such conversations in a congregation where some parishioners may be resistant to change.

He said he came away from the experience better equipped to lead the planning of his congregation's upcoming 200th anniversary commemorations, knowing that it is important for a church to "own the history and remember that history, but at the same time, how do we go forward with this?"

The Sewanee workshop was a pilot program developed by two seminary graduates, the Rev. Hannah Pommersheim and the Rev. Kellan Day, through the university's six-year Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation. The research project, named for late history professor Bryan Roberson, aims to tell the fuller story of the university's founding and first 100 years within social and economic systems built upon racial injustice.

This initial workshop received a $5,000 grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund and was only open to Episcopal clergy who are dealing with Confederate symbols at their churches. The workshop's three parts examined the theological underpinnings of Confederate symbols in worship spaces, provided context for understanding art and symbols and steered participants toward best practices for local action.

Pommersheim and Day, working with Sewanee history professor Woody Register, will review feedback from participants and consider future options, such as offering the in-person workshop for a broader pool of ordained and lay Episcopalians or hosting it online. Another option would be to develop a curriculum that dioceses and congregations can follow on their own.

"These conversations, we want them to be happening in more churches. We want folks to have tools to have these conversations," Pommersheim told ENS.

The 11 priests who participated in last week's workshop weren't expected to return to their congregations and immediately start removing objects connected to the Confederacy, Pommersheim said, though congregations might decide to take such steps after changing and deepening how they engage with their history. "Something actually changing was the goal."

The Sewanee seminary was among the Episcopal institutions that reassessed their own Confederate symbols in the wake of a deadly August 2017 standoff in Charlottesville, Va., between white supremacist groups and counterprotesters, who converged in the city amid a legal dispute over its Confederate statutes.

Photo/Sewanee

Participants in the workshop on Confederate symbols visit All Saints' Chapel at Sewanee: The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn.

In September 2017, Sewanee relocated a monument honoring Edmund Kirby-Smith, a 19th-century professor who previously served as a Confederate general, though even before Charlottesville, the debate over Confederate symbols had divided the campus community. Some of the contention centered around how best to represent Polk's role in the founding of the university without glorifying his Confederate service.

Another focal point for debate has been All Saints' Chapel. Confederate battle flags were removed from the chapel years ago, but just last year, remaining references to the Confederacy in the chapel's stained-glass windows generated renewed scrutiny. The university responded in October 2018 by removing a pane from the window that had featured the seal of the Confederacy.

Participants in last week's workshop on Confederate symbols visited All Saints' Chapel, turning it into a classroom for lessons on the meaning of art and the assessment of art theologically. Sewanee art professor Shelley MacLaren led one of those discussions. Another session, on best practices for congregations, was led by the Rev. Molly Bosscher, who spent four years as associate rector at Richmond, Va.'s St. Paul's Episcopal Church, once known as the Cathedral of the Confederacy.

The Rev. Jamie Osborne led a session on the theological underpinnings of Confederate symbols in churches. Such symbols are given added spiritual importance when placed in a church, elevating them to "a higher level, a God level" alongside the baptismal font and altar.

Osborne brought to the workshop his own experience in Montgomery, Ala., where he serves as associate rector at St. John's Episcopal Church. The St. John's vestry decided in February to remove a plaque and pew that had been known as the "Jefferson Davis pew" because church leaders determined its connection to the Confederate president was tenuous at best and its 1925 dedication had been steeped in racism.

"The removal of the plaque and the pew is good for the long-term future of the church," Osborne told ENS. "But there's also the deeper conversation of 'How was it that pew and plaque got there?'"

Those conversations are happening at Episcopal congregations in all regions of the United States, not just the South. Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, removed its own plaque honoring Polk in 2018. More recently, in Boston, the historic Old North Church held a forum in October to discuss its historic links to slavery, acknowledging that slave traders were among the prominent early members who helped pay for the 1740 steeple. [See related story, page 1.]

Reexamining centuries-old history goes beyond what certain Episcopal congregations might do about the Confederate symbols on church grounds. It's about racial reconciliation, said the Rev. John Jenkins, associate rector at St. Paul's Church in Augusta, Ga.

"If you have an older church, your church is a Confederate symbol. It's a symbol of the whole economic system," Jenkins told ENS after participating in the Sewanee workshop.

Polk's funeral was held at St. Paul's

Photo/Sarah Hartwig/Christ Church Cathedral

This plaque honoring Leonidas Polk, an Episcopal bishop and Confederate general, was displayed in Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, until its removal in 2018.

in 1864, and the "fighting bishop" once was entombed on the grounds, Jenkins said. A monument honoring Polk takes up space in the sanctuary, as does a flag display that includes a Confederate banner that was known as the Bonnie Blue.

Jenkins participated this year in the Justice Pilgrimage organized by the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in the Diocese of Atlanta [see related story, page 1], and he hopes to mine that experience and the recent Sewanee workshop to help his congregation decide on next steps.

"We need to take responsibility for learning our history and confronting it truthfully," he said. ■

FEATURE

Arizona churches honor 'people of the land,' add Indigenous Peoples Day to diocese's calendar

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

Photo/David Schacher via Diocese of Arizona

Native American church leaders offer a traditional blessing during the consecration of Arizona Bishop Jennifer Reddall.

The Diocese of Arizona is stepping up its efforts to give recognition to the "People of the Land," including by creating an Indigenous Peoples of Arizona Day, which churches in the diocese can celebrate in future years on the second Monday of October — the Columbus Day federal holiday.

The diocese's 59th convention was held on the weekend after the most recent Columbus Day. An Indigenous Peoples Day was one of two resolutions approved to encourage greater acknowledgement of the 22 federally recognized Native American tribes in the state. The other resolution offered congregations specific language that can be incorporated into their services.

Across the diocese, "we don't have a church that isn't directly on or very close to traditional native land," the Rev. Debbie Royals told Episcopal News Service in an interview. "We are pretty much guests on that land."

Royals, the diocese's canon for Native American ministry, is a member of the Pascua Yaqui, whose tribal land is in the Tucson area. She helped draft and submit the two resolutions that were approved Oct. 19, expanding on a commitment the diocese made in 2016 to acknowledge the "traditional custodians" of church land.

Royals' voice wavered as she grew emotional describing the joy she felt when her diocese wholeheartedly backed both resolutions, signifying what she saw as "a big step" toward increasing the visibility of Native American members and their culture in the church.

"I sat with such a feeling of, for the first time in my life … that I'd been seen, that I was no longer in the shadows," she said.

The resolution adopting Indigenous Peoples of Arizona Day doesn't mention Columbus Day specifically, though the date is the same. It will be set aside as "a day of prayer and reflection to understand our shared history and continue along a path or reconciliation."

Congregations wishing to offer worship services on Indigenous Peoples of Arizona Day are invited to use the resolution's suggested collect and propers — Isaiah 40:25-31, Psalm 19, Philippians 4:4-9 and John 1:1-18 — which also are the collect and propers used by the Anglican Church of Canada for its Indigenous Peoples Day, celebrated on June 21.

"We wanted to have this as a resource for the diocese," said the Rev. Ben Garren, the Episcopal chaplain at the University of Arizona in Tucson who drafted the resolution with Royals. Both serve on the diocese's Council for Native American Ministries.

The resolution invokes the words of the 26th Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who during her 2006-2015 tenure urged the church to take up the work of healing and reconciliation after generations of injustice and oppression toward Native communities.

The Diocese of Arizona, by inviting congregations to commemorate indigenous history and correct the historical narrative, is fulfilling "the work that General Convention already called us to do along these lines," Garren said, and he would welcome efforts to organize similar commemorations in other dioceses or churchwide. "It is readily transferable to any other diocese."

Royals on Oct. 30 discussed the two resolutions with the Episcopal Church's Indigenous Ministries Advisory Council. The Rev. Brad Hauff, the church's missioner for indigenous ministries, told ENS by email that he found the Diocese of Arizona's example encouraging.

"We as a church need to do all we can to promote awareness of indigenous people, our presence, our painful history and our hopes for a renewed and empowered future," said Hauff, who is Lakota. "There are still many people, within the church and the general population of our country, who do not know us other than through the distorted lenses of the Columbus myth and Manifest Destiny, and this needs to change."

In fact, an increasing number of states, cities and churches in the United States are choosing to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day, often in place of Columbus Day as part of a growing re-examination of the legacy of Christopher Columbus' journeys to North America.

The Italian explorer, hired by the king and queen of Spain in the late 15th century, often receives credit for "discovering" America in 1492, even though he never set foot on mainland North America, and the continent already was home to millions of people whose ancestral history dates back around 15,000 years. Historians also note Columbus' record of brutal mistreatment and enslavement of many of the land's indigenous inhabitants.

"Columbus was a hired gun. The Spanish crown needed someone to advance its interests. Like a gun, Columbus, as a representative of power, quickly became an agent of violence," the Ojibwe author David Treuer writes in "The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee," a history of Native America published earlier this year.

The Episcopal Church's General Convention at least since the 1970s has expressed support for Native American land claims and human rights, and a resolution in 2009 explicitly repudiated the Colonial-era Doctrine of Discovery, which purported to give Christian explorers the right to claim lands they "discovered" and convert the people they encountered.

Another resolution, from 1997, called on the church to "take such steps as necessary to fully recognize and welcome Native Peoples into congregational life."

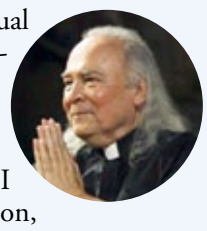
That was the spirit of the other resolution approved at the Diocese of Arizona's recent convention. It encourages congregations to fulfill a 2016 diocesan measure that urged them to routinely acknowledge their communities' indigenous people, such as at annual meetings, on websites, in worship bulletins and during worship services.

The new resolution offers language that can be incorporated into the opening of meetings. It also offers suggested insertions for the Prayers of the People written in the styles of Forms I through VI. "Help us to honor the knowledge of our indigenous neighbors, to listen through them to your call to renew the life of the earth and to live together as your people," reads one of the prayers, for Form IV. ■

Native American Heritage Month Episcopalian Profiles

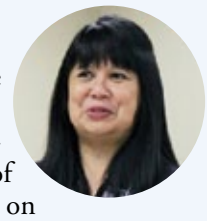
In 1990, President George H. W. Bush declared November as National American Indian Heritage Month, thereafter commonly referred to as Native American Heritage Month. The month aims to provide a platform for native people to share their culture, traditions, music, crafts, dance, and ways and concepts of life. Episcopalian Sandra T. Montes is posting profiles of native Episcopalians on her Facebook page throughout November.

Bishop Steven Charleston



My role in spiritual life is to pray for others. I also write books to help people in their own spiritual search. To help me do that I practice deep meditation, participate in traditional ceremonies and learn from the medicine people. Chahta sia: I am a Choctaw. I am proud of my resiliency and creativity of my people. I try to honor the wisdom within all indigenous cultures. I hope women and men from all walks of life discover a spiritual resource in our Native American story for their own lives. Sv hochifo aivlhpesa yat ish ikhana kiyo, my traditional name is personal but it speaks to the healing of all people.

Elsie Dennis



My role is to be guided by and live out The Baptismal Covenant as follower of Christ. I have served on vestry, been a chalice bearer, lay reader, taught Sunday School, been active in Episcopal Church Women. In my diocese I have worked as interim communications coordinator and [on various committees such as Multicultural Ministries and First Nations Committee]. My tribal affiliation is Seewepeme and Cherokee. Our diocese has been supportive to incorporating Native spirituality and practices into events. My mother taught me that everything has feelings and to be sensitive and respectful to all. I appreciate being connected to the land and people.

The Rev. Isaiah Brokenleg

I am a vicar at Trinity Episcopal Church, Watertown, S.D. I also serve on the Task Force for Communion Across Difference. My tribal affiliation is Rosebud Sioux Tribe (Sicangu Lakota). I love that we sing in Lakota from our Dakota Hymnals and that we gather annually at Niobrara Convocation. I greatly appreciate the unique cultural perspective indigenous people bring to the table. The idea that we are all related (Mitakuye Oyasin) and that we are all called to be good relatives to one another. I appreciate that traditionally as a winkté (Lakota two-spirit) we have always held a sacred social/spiritual role in society. Too often, our non-native LGBT siblings have experienced shame for who they are. However, in our Lakota history our two-spiritedness was viewed as a sacred thing. It allowed us to walk between the worlds of the masculine and feminine, the natural and supernatural. ■

FAITH AND THE ARTS

Joanne Rogers: On her husband Fred Rogers' commitment to prayer, church, children

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

At "91 and a half," Joanne Rogers remains a devoted advocate for the legacy of her late husband, the iconic star of the long-running children's show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Fred Rogers' widow shared churchgoing traditions and a love for music with her husband, whose story is depicted in the new movie, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood."

The film, released Nov. 22, stars Tom Hanks and depicts the friendship that developed between Fred Rogers and Tom Junod, a journalist who profiled the TV luminary in Esquire magazine.

Joanne Rogers continues to attend Pittsburgh's Sixth Avenue Presbyterian Church, the congregation where she worshipped with her husband, who was ordained by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1963 and died in 2003. The former longtime professional pianist recalls that beyond making TV his mission, her husband — who majored in music before attending seminary — was "a very fine pianist" who shared his talent with her at home.

"I had a lot of two-piano literature, and so, when Fred and I would have a chance, we'd sit down and sometimes I'd make him play the other part," she said, "so that I could practice a little, and he would do that. Had a good time at two pianos."

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You have said that your husband used to say the space between the television and the person watching it was "holy ground." Did you see his show as a form of ministry?

Absolutely. That's a yes. It was what he was ordained to do. That was the command from the ordination, to be ordained as an evangelist and continue his work in television and the media with families and children.

Photo/Lacey Terrell

Maryann Plunkett, left, plays Joanne Rogers, right, on the set of TriStar Pictures' "A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood."

Photo/Lacey Terrell

Photo/John Beale

Left, Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers in TriStar Pictures' "A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood." Right, Fred Rogers with Daniel Tiger from his show "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

But he never mentioned his faith explicitly, that I'm aware of, on the show. If so, why not?

He wanted to be inclusive, and there are many, many people you would exclude if you start mentioning one God, one faith. That was the reason for it. I think that he acted his faith, always, as much as he possibly could. He worked very hard at doing that. He worked very hard at being the person that he was, and he could act his values and his faith.

In the movie, Maryann Plunkett, the actress depicting you, said, "We don't call him 'Mr. Rogers' at home" and Tom Hanks, playing your husband, mentioned that at least one of his sons was reluctant to tell his friends who his father was. Was it hard for you sometimes to be the other parent of the children of Fred Rogers?

I was used to it. (laughs) I got a lot of practice doing that and I hope I was understanding of it, probably never as understanding as I might have been. But the fact was that my oldest son went to college and never said what Rogers he was until his dad came to visit him. But he just is a type who doesn't like to bring attention to himself that much. He likes to have his privacy, yet he's still very outgoing.

The movie depicts Fred Rogers reading Scripture and praying for people by name. Did these practices develop because of his church experience or in some other way?

I don't know how they developed. I suspect because he was a churchgoer from early childhood, I think. His parents were, and they all went to church, and he was very much a Presbyterian growing up.

But the praying for people by name and reading Scripture were things he did?

He did that every morning. He was a person who really liked schedules. He liked to know what he was going to be doing, and he wrote a song for the program called "I Like to Be Told." And he really liked that. So first thing in the morning — and that means maybe about 5:15 or so — he prayed in his room. And he had a legal pad with all the names on it that he wanted to remember.

Can you talk a little bit more about his church experience? Did he go to service regularly and if so, where?

He went to church regularly, and it changed around somewhat. He would go, maybe if a friend was gonna be at a church. He didn't have to go to the same church, but he did go most regularly to the Sixth Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh.

Your character in the movie notes that Mr. Rogers is not a living saint, and he's not a perfect person. Is that what you would actually say about him? How would you describe him?

I would describe him as a loving, hard-working person.

He talked about how people deal with death and that's something that can be uncomfortable. But he talked about if it's human, it should be mentionable. If it's mentionable it should be manageable. Could you speak to whether the way he approached death may be something that is helpful to you even to this day?

I think you can admire the way somebody handles something, and Fred did a wonderful job of handling death as part of life.

What do you think of Tom Hanks playing your husband?

First, what I think of Tom Hanks doing the part: superb. I think someone said Tom Hanks just disappears into the person he's trying to present. And I think that he's amazing. I say, thank you God, they got him.

The movie depicts your husband as someone who asked for prayer for himself. Did he ask you to pray for him?

It's more complex than that. He would ask people who were very disabled, challenged. He would ask those people to pray for him. And, Tom Junod, who was the real journalist in the story, asked him: "Oh, are you doing that just because you want to make them feel good?" And he said, "Oh, oh, not at all. Not at all. I just feel that people who have gone through as much as they have are very close to God." ■

FAITH AND THE ARTS

With interfaith exhibit, Boston's Abrahamic faith groups revisit their shared roots

By Aysha Khan
Religion News Service

Just over a year ago, the day after the deadly mass shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue, more than a thousand locals gathered together on the Boston Common to mourn and pray.

As the Rev. Amy McCreath, dean of the historic St. Paul Cathedral that overlooks America's oldest park, watched people of various faiths unite once again to mourn another national tragedy, she was hit with an emotional realization.

"I looked out over the crowds of people, and it was so clear that all of them really want a peaceful future," she remembered. "We want to work together against violence, but we don't even know each other. Unfortunately, the odds are good that something like that will happen again, and we need to be prepared to support one another and defend one another."

That's part of the reason the Episcopal cathedral agreed to host a new interfaith art exhibit that explores the faith and life of Abraham, the shared spiritual forefather of the world's three largest monotheistic religions — and launched an accompanying interfaith book study to spotlight Abraham's wives, Sarah and Hagar.

The two-year touring exhibition "Abraham: Out of One, Many," is curated by the Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler of Caravan, an international art non-profit affiliated with the Episcopal Church. After premiering in Rome in May, the show began a 20-month U.S. tour at Nebraska's Tri-Faith Initiative this fall.

Late last month, St. Paul received the 15 paintings, which are arranged in sets of three to illustrate Abraham's journey through the eyes of Middle Eastern artists from Muslim, Christian and Jewish backgrounds. The art will be displayed there through Dec. 6.

"Abraham is a complicated figure, and his legacy in human history is very complex. It's not all flowers and roses," McCreath told RNS. "Many people who come to the exhibit are familiar with the basic stories from Scripture, and each piece of art invites them to think more deeply about each story, interrogate it, see more in it."

Local Iraqi Muslim surrealist Sinan Hussein, California-based Chaldean abstract exhibitionist Qais al Sindy and Jewish Jerusalem-based painter Shai Azoulay each offer their own depictions of five themes within Abraham's spiritual journey: "Living as a Pilgrim," "Welcoming the Stranger," "Sacrificial Love," "The Compassionate" and "A Friend of God."

The exhibition is a response to the new wave of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate, as well as the "general climate of growing prejudice and stereotyping" and "tribalism," that have enveloped the country, Caravan president and exhibition curator Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler said.

Photo/Aysha Khan/RNS

Image/courtesy of the artist

Visitors from Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Little Rock, Ark, view art in the "Abraham: Out of One, Many" exhibition at St. Paul Cathedral in Boston.

Left, "Welcoming the Stranger," 2019, oil and collage on canvas, by Qais Al Sindy.

"In these three faith traditions, whose followers are referred to as 'children of Abraham,' Abraham is seen as a model of hospitality — of welcoming the 'stranger' and embracing the 'other,'" Chandler, who was recently appointed rector of The Anglican Centre in Qatar, said. "The exhibition attempts to artistically answer the question, 'What can Abraham teach us today about freeing our world from sectarian strife?'"

In Al Sindy's interpretation of "Welcoming the Stranger," the artist reimagines the iconic image of three men visiting Abraham — sometimes interpreted as the three parts of the Christian Trinity — as representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths. Hussein depicts Abraham's son Ishmael as the stranger, noting that Ishmael is often sidelined as a character outside of Islam's telling of the story, while Azoulay's painting shows the continuous nature of Abraham's welcome of the three strangers in the desert.

"This cathedral was really founded with a vision of being a place where people of all faiths could come together and deepen their appreciation for one another," McCreath said.

Indeed, for the past two decades hundreds of local Muslims have been holding their weekly Jummah prayers there. The church's tagline, "A House of Prayer for All People," pulled from Isaiah 56:7, is embossed over the foot baths installed to make performing ablutions easier.

Church leaders partnered with a handful of local Jewish and Muslim congregations — including Central Reform Temple, Emmanuel Church and the Dar

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Museum of the Bible displays medieval Hebrew Pentateuch

By Yonat Shimron
Religion News Service

A rare medieval Pentateuch manuscript that had been in private collections for years is on display at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C

The volume, which dates to around the year 1000, was acquired two years ago by the Green Collection, headed by billionaire Steve Green of the Hobby Lobby arts and crafts chain.

The Pentateuch, consisting of the five biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, forms the first part of the 24-volume Hebrew Bible. It was written by scholars of the Masoretic tradition who codified the Hebrew Bible and added diacritical marks above and below the Hebrew letters to enable correct pronunciation.

Before the appearance of books, Jews read the Pentateuch from the Torah, a scroll made of parchment or animal skins. Torah scrolls are still read in synagogues, but because they do not contain vowels, readers sometimes consult Pentateuch collections such as the one on display at the Museum of the Bible for the authoritative pronunciation.

There are several other extant volumes of the Pentateuch from the 11th century or earlier in Russia and Israel, said Herschel A. Hepler, associate curator at the museum. The Museum of the Bible named this one the Washington Pentateuch.

The 15-by-24-inch volume, bound in leather with metal bosses, contains two sections. The main section (nearly 500 pages) was written around the year 1000. Another section (20 pages) was written in 1141 by Joseph ben Jacob in Alexandria, Egypt. This section originally belonged to a different manuscript. Centuries later, it was added to the original manuscript.

According to the museum, the book made its way to a Karaite Jewish community in the Crimean city of Yevpatoriya. That community gave it as a gift to the archbishop of Kherson (Ukraine) in 1835. Later, it was owned by the Moscow Theological Academy before several Israeli collectors bought it.

The Green Collection acquired it from Israeli financier David Sofer, who lives in London and collects ancient manuscripts. Sofer was recently in the news because he and his partners bought prime Jerusalem land from the Greek Orthodox Church. They had initially intended to build luxury apartments on the site believed by Christians to be the original Hill of Evil Counsel, where, according to the New Testament, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas and his advisers decided to betray Jesus to the Romans. Last year, those plans were withdrawn.

Photos/Alejandro Matos/Museum of the Bible

This Pentateuch was written around the year 1000 and will be displayed at the Museum of the Bible.

The exhibit at the museum is titled "A Fence Around the Torah." ■

NEWS

Chicago churches join growing movement of congregations paying off medical debt

By Emily McFarlan Miller
Religion News Service

This Thanksgiving, 5,888 families in Illinois' Cook County will receive a card with the names of several congregations belonging to different Protestant Christian denominations throughout the city of Chicago and these words:

"Have a wonderful Thanksgiving. We want you to know that all your debts have been forgiven."

The churches don't mean that merely theologically.

Together, they paid off $5.3 million in medical debt for "the poorest of the poor" — many in the city's South Side neighborhoods, according to the Rev. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of the historic Trinity United Church of Christ. Trinity UCC, a congregation of 8,500 founded in 1961 in Washington Heights, is the first black church in the UCC and counts former President Barack Obama among its past members.

"We believe this is a moment of Jubilee for our community — a moment of Jubilee for our nation, where we reset the moral compass of our nation and for some of our churches that have lost their way in reference to the waves and the undertow of our current political situation in this nation," Moss said at a celebration announcing the churches' donation Sunday, Oct. 20, at Trinity UCC.

The pastor said the idea came several months ago from a conversation he had with the Rev. Traci Blackmon of the UCC. The two were discussing how they could engage their communities and "plotting some holy mischief" when the conversation turned to an article in the New York Times about a nonprofit called RIP Medical Debt.

"I thought, 'What an incredible program! Instead of allowing debt collectors to purchase the debt, why not have communities of faith purchase that debt and forgive that debt?" Moss said.

For every dollar Chicago churches donated, RIP Medical Debt was able to purchase and abolish about $142 worth of debt, according to Blackmon, the UCC's associate general minister of justice and local church ministries. The average amount of debt they "forgave" was $970, she said, which cost the churches just $7, allowing their donations of $38,000 to cancel the more than $5 million of debt.

"I'm glad that we could do it, but there's absolutely no reason why people should be held hostage so that other people can be enriched on their backs," Blackmon said.

The Chicago churches join a growing trend of congregations paying off medical debt for the people in their communities and beyond.

At least 18 other churches have done the same from the start of 2018 to the end of May 2019, forgiving $34.4 million in debt through RIP Medical Debt.

Emmanuel Memorial Episcopal Church in downstate Champaign, Ill., paid off $4 million in debt for southern and central Illinois residents with the $15,000 surplus it had raised for building repairs and upgrades to mark the church's centennial earlier this year.

Pathway Church, a nondenominational church with several locations in and around Wichita, Kan., spent the $22,000 it had budgeted this spring for Easter to instead pay off $2.2 million in debt.

Photo/RNS/Emily McFarlan Miller

The Rev. Otis Moss III, center, joins other leaders of Chicago churches and the United Church of Christ to announce they have purchased and paid off $5.3 million in medical debt for Illinoisans — mostly on Chicago's South Side — through a nonprofit called RIP Medical Debt at a buyout celebration Sunday, Oct. 20, 2019, at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Other churches — including congregations in Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri and Texas — have taken up special collections for RIP Medical Debt.

Even comedian John Oliver paid off nearly $15 million in medical debt through the nonprofit in an episode of his HBO show "Last Week Tonight" (though not on behalf of the satiric televangelism ministry he also started for another episode of the show, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption).

Joe Antos, a health care policy scholar for the conservative American Enterprise Institute, raised red flags for congregations wanting to pay off medical debt for their members earlier this year in an article in Christianity Today.

They are "well-meaning," but, Antos told Religion News Service, "Generally churches do not have expertise in health financing."

RIP Medical Debt co-founders Craig Antico and Jerry Ashton do. Both had worked in debt collections for years until realizing who was impacted and how "destructive" it was for them, Antico said.

"It became abundantly clear: Why don't we do what we did with our business life and just do it for good?" Antico said.

RIP Medical Debt, which was founded in 2014, purchases "portfolios" of medical debt from health care providers and from the secondary debt market at an average $1 for $100 of medical debt, according to its website.

Those providers sell the debt at pennies on the dollar to try to recoup some of the cost of those unpaid bills. Usually, those who buy that debt then continue to bill people for it.

RIP Medical Debt instead abolishes the debt, with no tax consequences or strings attached for the recipients, according to its site.

The New York-based nonprofit brought in just $3,000 in its first year, according to Antico.

But donations exploded after RIP Medical Debt appeared on "Last Week Tonight," he said. It quickly raised $250,000, and donations have continued to grow since then.

Antico said he expects the nonprofit to raise $10 million this year and cross $1 billion total forgiven in a matter of weeks — the goal it set when it started, he said.

Churches have played a huge role in that growth, according to the co-founder. RIP Medical Debt worked with more than 70 faith-based groups this year alone, according to the Chicago Tribune.

"It's nonpartisan or non-political, and Republicans, Democrats, progressives can all agree on this," Antico said.

"And churches — they all agree that their mission is to help their people get through hard times and be resilient and let people start over again and know that they're supported. I think that's the key here: They care so much about people and their community and that's why it's resonating."

The Chicago churches hope their efforts will inspire other churches to do the same in their communities.

"This is not one time. We want to see movement of debt relief," said Moss of Trinity UCC. "Instead of people preying on individuals, we want to see people relieved of that debt so they can go about their business and realize the dreams that God has placed in their heart."

The Rev. Matt Fitzgerald, senior pastor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, said his church was "proud" and "delighted" to join other churches in the city for this purpose.

St. Paul's was founded by German immigrants and held German-language services until 2002, Fitzgerald noted. Its congregation remains largely white.

"In this particular historic moment, when it seems like white Protestants are doing everything they can to drive our country right off the edge, but also to ratchet up evil and injustice, it feels very good and it is very good to stand and say, 'No, there's a better way to be the church,'" he said.

Members of New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church in the West Garfield Park neighborhood also "leaped at the opportunity to be part of this movement," according to its pastor, the Rev. Marshall Hatch.

After pointing out the gap in life expectancy between residents of his neighborhood and the city's affluent Loop, Hatch said, "Our funds were collected from people who needed help themselves, but who saw this as an opportunity to help somebody else."

"We believe medical doctors and medical staff can open opportunities for healing, but only God does the healing, and nobody should go into debt for the healing God does," added Hatch, who also co-chairs the board of the Leaders Network on the West Side of Chicago.

UCC churches across the country will make medical debt relief the focus of their Giving Tuesday campaigns on Dec. 3, Blackmon announced.

"This is not the end. This is the beginning. We are using this as a sacred launching pad in the United Church of Christ," she said.

The churches also hope it will turn a spotlight on healthcare as a justice issue for Christians voting in the 2020 presidential election, Blackmon said.

"We stand here not just as gifters, but as agitators. 2020 is an election year, and we are going to demand that health care costs be brought under control in this country," she said.

Earlier in the celebration, the Voices of Trinity choir had sung, "Let's do the work / Let's live out the purpose of the church."

This is what the church does, Blackmon said as the celebration came to a close.

"The letter says, 'Happy Thanksgiving. Your debt is forgiven,'" she said.

"It also says something else. … The letter lists the churches, and it says, 'You may never enter the doors of any of our churches, but we love you because we are the church, and, more importantly, you are beloved by God, and because of that love, your debt is forgiven.'" ■

NEWS

‘Yes in God’s Backyard’ to use church land for affordable housing

By Alejandra Molina
Religion News Service

Image/courtesy of Resources for Community Development

An artistic rendering of the future St. Paul’s Commons in Northern California. St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Walnut Creek would like to open its affordable housing complex in December or January. It’s called St. Paul’s Commons, and it will be a mixed-use development with community spaces operated by St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. It will include 45 affordable apartments.

Faith congregations across California are responding to the state’s housing crisis by sharing their parking lots with people living in their cars, providing mobile showers for the homeless and joining their neighbors in calling for rent control in their communities.

But another form of housing advocacy has been taking place among spaces of faith.

A number of churches are exploring ways to build affordable housing on their own land. It’s what pastors and other leaders are referring to as YIGBY, or “Yes in God’s Backyard.”

The acronym is a play off of the term NIMBY — short for “Not in My Backyard” — a term often used to describe community pushback against affordable housing or other similar projects.

“Jesus very clearly tells us to keep our eyes open to those who are in need,” said Clairemont Lutheran Church pastor Jonathan Doolittle.

California is home to the 10 least-affordable major markets in the nation and is near the top in cost-burdened households — second among homeowners and fourth among renters, according to a January 2019 report from the Public Policy Institute of California. The median home price in California is $549,000. The median rent price is $2,800.

About four years ago, Clairemont Lutheran Church members in San Diego decided they needed to do something about the housing crisis affecting their community.

The church was part of an interfaith shelter network in which congregations open their spaces for a certain length of time to house families in crisis. During this time, churches host families for two weeks while they get back on their feet.

The families rotate to other churches in the network, but once that cycle runs out, they may have nowhere else to seek shelter, Doolittle said.

As the church made plans to redevelop its fellowship hall, Doolittle said they sought to include affordable housing as part of that project. The church proposed building a number of affordable apartments on part of their current parking lot.

Church leaders thought the affordable housing component could also speed up the approval process for the project. Instead, they encountered more roadblocks including parking restrictions and costly environmental impact reports.

In San Diego, city code makes it a requirement for churches to have a certain number of parking spaces based on the number of people who can fit in the sanctuary.

The renovation of the church’s fellowship hall is underway, but the housing element is on hold for now.

However, that could soon change.

On Nov. 6, a subcommittee of the San Diego City Council voted in favor on an item that would make it easier for faith communities to get approval to build housing on their parking lots. Under this plan, excess parking spaces could be used as a location for housing. The City Council will consider the item at a future meeting.

Clairemont Lutheran Church plans to jumpstart its housing efforts next year, hoping to put between 16 and 21 apartments on its parking lot.

To housing advocate Tom Theisen, the city’s move is a step in the right direction.

Theisen — a retired attorney and former chair of the Regional Task Force on the Homeless — is part of the San Diego YIGBY working group that helps activate under-utilized faith community properties suitable for residential units.

He says the YIGBY group shows how an abundance of church land across the county can help address the region’s housing shortage. Theisen said that in the past, individual churches were going to the government proposing small projects of 15 to 20 units.

“It’s hard to create any change when you’re talking about individual small projects,” Theisen said.

Theisen said the YIGBY group emerged when San Diego County tax collector Dan McAllister identified about 1,100 faith community properties on more than 2,000 acres of land. Theisen said a substantial portion of that land is available for housing.

“If we look at this from the perspective of, ‘how do we help the churches help the needy in their community and look at it county wide,’ we’re talking hundreds of potential housing units, possibly thousands,” Theisen said.

Theisen estimates construction costs could be “primarily if not exclusively” paid through income coming in from the housing.

“The idea is to start building housing and start putting people in houses,” Theisen said.

In Northern California, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Walnut Creek would like to open its affordable housing complex in December or January.

It’s called St. Paul’s Commons and will be a mixed-use development with community spaces operated by St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. It’s also where the nonprofit Trinity Center will have a physical space to serve people who are homeless.

The project will include 45 affordable apartments. The church leased its land to Berkeley-based developer Resources for Community Development, which used a property management company to perform background checks, call references and conduct interviews for apartment applications.

The development is taking over a single-family home where Trinity Center provided services to the homeless. The Rev. Krista Fregoso said they were already assisting people who were homeless and later thought, “What if we became a part of the solution, too?”

To Fregoso, “This is just one part of how we live out our faith. We hope to be a model for other faith communities who might see their property in a different way.” ■

NEWS

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Al-Islam Jummah gathering — both to present the artwork and to develop a series of accompanying events to deepen the impact of Caravan's exhibition.

On Nov. 23, the cathedral was to host a concert by local choir et al. incorporating music from the three faith traditions. And every Sunday until Dec. 8, members of the public are invited to join St. Paul leaders in an interfaith dialogue on the 2006 book "Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives."

When book study organizer Jane Redmont, co-chair of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts' Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations, raised her hand during early exhibit planning meetings to bring up representation of Sarah and Hagar, members were immediately supportive.

"We wanted to bring in the stories and the realities of the women and children in the Abraham story, because they're an integral part of it," Redmont said. "This is not an either-or situation. It's a both-and."

The book, edited by feminist biblical scholars Phyllis Trible and Letty Russell, includes essays by three women scholars from each faith tradition. With each reading group session, a local woman scholar or faith leader of that tradition leads a facilitated discussion on a chapter of the book and what the figures of Sarah and Hagar mean for different communities.

"Abraham is not a lone figure," Redmont said. "He certainly must have felt alone when he left his home and followed a divine call that nobody else was hearing, but he did that with his family and his servants and his animals."

When that family expanded with his wife Sarah gifting her slave, Hagar, to Abraham in the hopes that Hagar would bear children, the situation became complex, Redmont said. Various traditions detail serious conflicts between Abraham and Sarah as well as between Sarah and Hagar.

'People who want to just keep the focus on Abraham might say, 'Oh, you're complicating the story, but, well, the story is complicated," she said. "Some of the relationships are conflictual, some of them are loving, some of them are both. And that's how we exist as human beings, within a web of complicated family relationships. They're a healing balm for our troubles and they're a source of our troubles."

Photo/Aysha Khan/RNS

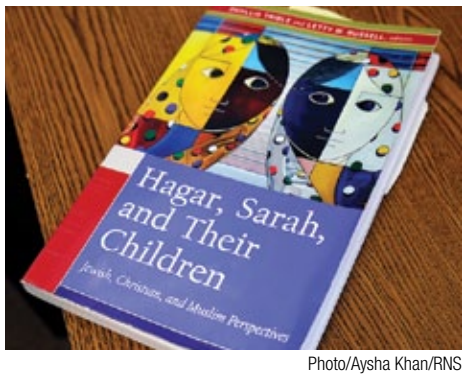
Foot baths for Muslim Jummah prayers at St. Paul Cathedral in Boston.

The reading group is also a chance for locals to enhance their religious literacy, including re-examining elements of their own faith tradition, Redmont said.

"You're going to learn about Hagar's importance in the Muslim hajj," she said. "You're going to learn about Hagar's laughter. You're going to learn that Christianity throughout history appropriated Hagar and Sarah in negative ways sometimes, and in ways that were also anti-Jewish, using Hagar as the symbol of the old Jewish law and Sarah as a symbol of the new Christian faith."

The figure of Hagar, especially, has undergone a "sort of rediscovery," as Redmont put it, among scholars and faith leaders over the past few decades. That trend is evident in Nyasha Junior's new book "Reimagining Hagar," Mohja Kahf's 2016 anthology "Hagar Poems" and a recent push among Muslim women scholars for imams to deliver Eid al-Adha sermons focused on Hagar's sacrifices and strength, among other initiatives.

Redmont said many people are particularly unaware of Hagar's prominence in Islam. For Muslims, Hagar is believed to be the mother of all Arab people and the matriarch from whom the Prophet Muhammad eventually descends. She figures prominently in hajj rituals, with many elements of the pilgrimage coming from stories of her efforts to survive in the wilderness outside Mecca with Ishmael. Many Muslims also believe she and Ishmael are buried at the Kaaba, which Abraham is believed to have built.



Photo/Aysha Khan/RNS

An interfaith book about Abraham's wives, Sarah and Hagar.

Both Sarah and Hagar, along with their children Isaac and Ishmael, are often taken as symbols of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Redmont also noted, because they are seen as the ancestors of Jewish and Muslim people, respectively.

That modern context makes a "very live backdrop" for the exhibit and for the reading group, she said.

"We're not going to solve these problems with an exhibit or a book group, and nobody's under any illusion that we are," she added. "But we have to start somewhere. And what art can do is it can open people's hearts and put them in a contemplative space." ■