Episcopal
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Pandemic brings deeper creativity, meaning to Lent

By Michelle Hiskey
Episcopal News Service

From socially-distanced drive-throughs on Ash Wednesday to Lenten worship bags for online Zoom services, Lent 2021 is testing the creativity of Episcopal congregations.

Parishioners at St. Thomas Church in Mamaroneck N.Y., are using worship and prayer materials picked up before Ash Wednesday. Diocese of New York Bishop Andrew Dietsche requested that churches not impose ashes in any setting.

Congregants were asked to come to the church hall, masked and keeping social distance, to pick up their Lenten bags. All services have been online since March 2020.

Like many Episcopal churches, St. Mark's Church in Upland, Calif., offered an opportunity to receive ashes via drive-through. In previous years, St. Mark's has had the drive-through option, called "ash and dash," for busy people and clergy have administered ashes in the traditional way, using a thumb to apply ashes to the worshiper's forehead in the sign of the cross.

Photo/Liz Beal Kidd

Katherine Marshall hands Lenten surprise bags to a parish family at a drive-by pickup at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Atlanta.

This year, parishioners were given ashes packaged in small bags for self-imposition. "We will not be imposing ashes this year due to health constraints," the church announced on its Facebook page.

Throughout Lent, St. Mark's is also hosting a drive-through Stations of the Cross. Each station is sponsored by a congregation in the area, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, and worshipers are guided by an online phone app. The app tells participants where to go next and provides audio to play once a participant arrives at a station.

Lent 2021 began with changes to the traditional celebrations on Mardi Gras, Feb. 16 this year, the day before Ash Wednesday.

Mardi Gras, French for "Fat Tuesday," is a secularized Christian tradition from medieval times that marks the final day before Lent's 40 days of fasting. Another name for it is Shrove Tuesday; "shrive" means to repent or sacrifice.

Because meat and fatty foods were restricted during Lent, Shrove Tuesday became the last chance to consume them before they spoiled. The English tradition of eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday (using up

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In this time, we stand on the Plain of Waiting

By Richard LeSueur

BENEATH THE towering umber faces of Mount Sinai lies a broad, empty valley called the Plain of Waiting. Bounded by peaks that rise sharply out of the south Sinai, the Plain of Waiting is where tradition says the people of Israel waited and waited in a howling desolation. Dislocated from familiar things, reduced to a marginal existence, they grew more and more anxious. To their leader Moses they repeatedly cried, "Did you bring us out into this wilderness that we might die?"

To be alive in this time of global pandemic is to occupy a "plain of waiting." We wait for a vaccine. We wait for the number of active cases to reduce. We wait for the end of a "second wave." We wait for the easing of restrictions. We wait.

As he left them to climb the mountain, Moses had told them to wait. Weeks had passed. His absence stoked anxiety. They had come so far, leaving everything behind. They knew they would never go back. They had fled, accepting the challenging reaches of wilderness. In trust they had followed their leaders' directions, moving into an unknown and desolate landscape, clinging to the hope of a land promised; a new and safer future.

Last April when the virus claimed precious life after life, and spread quickly across the globe, whole populations fled into isolation and accepted the diminishment of an uncertain and unknown landscape. New leaders emerged in the form of chief medical officers and immunologists to guide this flight into the desert. Their directions, and those of our politicians, were at first clear and resolute. Urban areas around the world willingly accepted the complete shut-down of commerce, schools and social enterprise in a bid to survive this insidious contagion. In this new landscape we have learned much, fashioning new ways of connecting, working and surviving together. We have adapted to a strange and fearsome reality.

Photo/Richard LeSueur

The Sinai wilderness is seen at dusk.

The books of Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Joshua testify that when Israel came up out of the desert at the end of the Exodus, they carried a host of new realities fashioned in the wilderness. The record maintains that the desert gave them the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the service of the Levites, the Sanhedrin (a pattern of religious-political governance), the Torah and the twelve tribes. Biblical scholars caution that some of these developments might have come later after the Exodus or might not have emerged from the desert sojourn so fully formed. However, the principle message was that the wilderness, for all its hardships, wanderings and waiting, became a birthing-room of the divine new. Rather than a stagnant and aimless period in Israel's history it broke open to become a landscape of revelation, discovery, renewal and transformation.

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Due to U.S. Postal Service delays, Episcopal Journal subscribers may receive this issue later than usual. The situation is affecting many publications and the Journal is monitoring the situation. Mail subscriptions include digital subscriptions, available at **www.episcopaljournal.org.**

CONVERSATIONS

WAITING continued from page 1

The Song of Songs (3.6) asks, "Who is she who comes up out of the wilderness?" Is it too soon in our experience to ask, what is the spirituality that is arising out of this time of pandemic? What might we hear from the desert tradition by seeing our situation against this ancient background?

The Plain of Waiting is a harsh landscape of broken rock and sharp grains of granite. There is no sand on which to set your bedroll as you sleep in the open, beneath the stars. The wind blows down the mountain passes and whistles through the camp at night. You shiver even in the summer. High above, against a sparkling galaxy, the dark silhouette of Mount Sinai carves an ominous blackness. One might ask, "Who am I, in this forlorn and empty place, this landscape of Genesis?" The answer comes, "I am nothing more than a grain of sand blowing through this valley of waiting, wrapped in a pervasive silence."

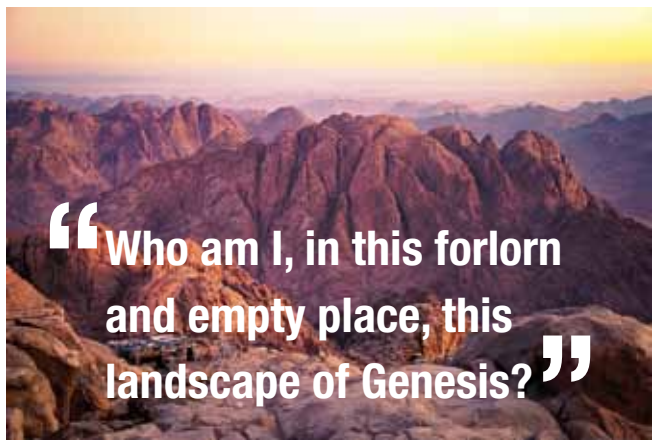
The Hebrew word for the silence of the desert is "damam." The Semitic root for this word is but one letter different from *"dam"* meaning "blood." What we hear in the silence of the desert is the sound of our own blood and thus we are bought nearer to the essence of our being. We hear ourselves. Removed from the bustle and preoccupations of life, the soul is permitted to inhale and turn inwards.

In mid-March the pandemic drove us into our homes, drove us inside. For many this isolation brought a void of distressing loneliness. For some it also introduced an unfamiliar intimacy; parents teaching their children, families doing crafts and puzzles, a surge of outdoor activities, couples rediscovering each other. While these many months have been stressful it also seems true that this interval in the year 2020 has stirred a level of connectedness that perhaps did not previously exist.

One of the ways the Bedouin manage the scale of the wilderness is to periodically stop, settle in the shade of a large rock, light a small fire and sip strong tea. They sit talking, telling stories, connecting. The Psalmist sings, *"O Lord my rock, my fortress in whom I take refuge."* As the pace of life slows, its spaciousness permits new conversations to arise, connections to deepen and the journey of life to be viewed afresh.

As much as this period of the pandemic has slowed our lives and slowed our economy, it has also accelerated realities that, if present before, were not yet fully appreciated and developed. The application of the internet is revealing multiple benefits in new work patterns and on line learning. One can anticipate a reduction in business travel with long-distance conferencing managed remotely. Alternative work-at-home options or employee-work-clusters in suburbs or rural areas are for many introducing a reduction of stress, commuting and transit while reducing green house gasses in urban skies. The captivation with the inner city is already deflating as we see increased interest in rural real estate as urbanites seek healthier lifestyles and a re-balancing of the work-life equation. Many say they can hardly wait for things to return to what they knew; pleasure travel, commerce, etc. However, in the desert one does not go back: the movement is forward. Many things will be different in 2021, 2022 and beyond.

On the Plain of Waiting the people of Israel lost hope. They began to doubt if God was with them or even real. The same can be true of the church. The pandemic has been hard on faith. Dislocation from corporate worship has been a significant loss. For some, the months of absence from our churches have brought a faith that seems thin and empty, at times even meaningless. In the present reality some of us find ourselves with a disturbing question. Is it only because we are not worshipping with others, not sharing Eucharist, not singing our faith, not gathering in fellowship or serving with friends, that faith seems so strangely faint? Or is it possible that this isolation from church is revealing the margins of our spirituality? The solitude of the desert directs us inward.



Two-thirds of the way up the length of the Plain of Waiting is an oasis. It is the only way the people of Israel could have survived there. For the Bedouin an oasis is a gift of God. If a well is dug in the wilderness and water is found, then the Bedouin say that well can be claimed, defended and built upon. But the oasis, as a gift of God, exists for all life. It cannot be claimed. In the desolation of the wilderness the oasis appears as a flash of green seen far in the distance. The tips of tall palm trees signal salvation. The heart leaps. The weary pilgrim arrives under the gentle palms to find living water, welcome, solace from the heat of the day and shade from a blistering sun.

Western Christianity must find this oasis again. For too long we have been building. We have built boundaries with our theologies, boundaries in practices, boundaries in preferences, even in towering walls. We have named those boundaries, relished the aestheticism of our creations, and magnificent they are. But it is also possible that we have become over-identified with such boundaries; reinforcing them, retaining them and relying upon them. Much of what we have come to know and love as worshipping Christians will remain, yet we also know that we ourselves shall have been changed by our desert journey, changed in ways we have yet to discover.

When the wilderness comes in our lives, it is never a destination but a way to pass through by stages; a harsh reality to be survived. It is a way of wandering and waiting, a place of anxiety and longing. And yet, what the Scriptures show is that the desert is the place where God shapes us for the future we are being prepared to enter.

If this is so, we need to embrace this landscape, to find hope in its quiet spaces, to believe that a simple bush can light with the fire of God's presence and call. And when the time comes that we emerge from this pandemic we will feel deeply for those who perished in this desert — physically, financially or psychologically.

On many journeys in the wilderness of the Sinai, I have learnt what I believe to be the four rules of the desert. I also believe them to be true for the church of our time:

Never go alone
Take only what you can carry
Anticipate anxiety
Wait upon the Lord.
And the God of Jesus Christ will surely bless us. ■

The Rev. Richard LeSueur was formerly the director of the Desert Program at St. George's College in Jerusalem and more recently served as its Acting Dean. He has continued a ministry of teaching and pilgrimage in the biblical lands for 25 years. He resides in western Canada. This article was originally published by the Anglican Journal (www.anglicanjournal.com).

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

FOR THE LAST FEW months, Episcopal Journal has carried a message at the bottom of page one, noting that due to post office delays, subscribers may receive their mailed Journal later than usual.

The Postal Service's woes are well known by now — political controversy over the appointment of Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, cancellation of overtime hours, an overwhelming amount of mail and packages due to online ordering during the pandemic

We are in touch with other Episcopal publishers such as Forward Movement and The Living Church who are experiencing similar issues and we are monitoring the situation via our New Jersey-based printer, which manages the Journal's mailing lists.

The Journal is conceived as a handy monthly digest of news, features and opinions of interest to Episcopal readers and those interested in the Episcopal Church. On the editorial side, we strive to be as current as possible, with updates between print editions posted on our Facebook page or website.

Our website currently features an engaging video from board member Jon White about why he subscribes to the Journal — and a reminder that subscriptions include a digital subscription, where the Journal is available as soon as the mail edition is printed. (For this issue, that means February 16.)

Please let us know if you are experiencing significant delays in receiving your print Journal with an email to **editor@episcopaljournal.org.**

This issue includes a feature on the work of one of my favorite Episcopal-connected ministries, the Episcopal Actors' Guild (**www.actorsguild.org**).

This small-but-mighty organization, based at the Church of the Transfiguration in New York, assists performers "of all faiths, and none," to quote their mission statement.

Also known as "the little church around the corner," Transfiguration has been associated with the theater community since the late 19th century and the guild itself is nearly 100 years old.

Theaters have been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020 — an unthinkable disaster for actors and backstage workers.

The Guild has stepped up its grant-making efforts and food distribution, helping performers survive so we can all enjoy their artistry once again. I'm proud to be a life member. ■

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FEATURE

Pandemic has changed, not stopped, rector search and hiring processes

By Mary Frances Schjonberg
Episcopal News Service

The coronavirus pandemic has changed many things about how Episcopal churches operate, including the search and hiring procedures congregations follow when calling a rector.

Dioceses and congregations have approached pandemic-era search processes with creativity, based on changing local conditions and restrictions, the Rev. Meghan F. Froehlich, director of The Episcopal Church's Office for Transition Ministry, told ENS.

"Each situation is an individual situation. … There's not a one-size-fits-all approach during the pandemic," she said. "I have seen God at work in these processes and with our very excellent transition ministers. They have been amazing."

Clergy are deciding whether the Holy Spirit is calling them into atypical discernment processes. If so, they are facing new challenges, such as having more of the search process conducted online and balancing the desire to explore one's sense of call against the risks of travel for a final in-person interview.

The Rev. Michelle Warriner Bolt, canon to the ordinary in the Episcopal Church of East Tennessee, said, "When normal everyday activities feel risky, folks are less likely to take actual risks," like moving one's family during a pandemic. "The increased sense of risk in relocation has changed the marketplace, for sure."

The Rev. Brian Jemmott, canon to the ordinary in the Diocese of New Jersey, added that some possible candidates have not entered search processes because they are reluctant "to leave their congregations right now in the midst of the pandemic if they are the lead person." However, that hesitation on the part of some clergy has not prevented New Jersey congregations from calling priests, he said.

A few dioceses put search and call processes on hold for a time at the beginning of the pandemic. The Diocese of Nebraska, for instance, paused searches in March 2020.

"That was mainly as a way to just acknowledge the demands of the moment," the Rev. Liz Easton, canon to the ordinary, told ENS. The diocese thought that the pressures on parish leadership of trying to answer questions about worship and pastoral care "would impede good discernment," she said. "When we started to settle into these new rhythms, when we learned new strategies for praying and living, we picked most of those searches up where we left off, with an understanding that the process would require more flexibility and creativity than perhaps it ever had before."

Two rectors started their ministries in the diocese just as the pandemic began. After the diocese resumed searches, three other congregations called rectors.

"Our main objective in every single search is for the parish and the clergy to come to know each other really authentically so that we can really discern a match being made by the Holy Spirit," Easton said. She remains concerned about "the development of the spiritual cohesion of search committees who cannot meet in person."

While many transition officers contacted by ENS said that search committees were making the best of digital meeting platforms, they agreed it is not the same. "I personally believe that the Holy Spirit is active and present and perceivable in a different way when we're in the same room together," Easton said.

Photo/St. Paul's Episcopal Church

The parishioners of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Clinton, N.C. post a sign announcing the arrival of the Rev. Eric Grubb and Brandie Grubb.

The Diocese of Northern California took a different approach. The Rev. Andrea McMillin, canon to the ordinary, said it was clear that there were pastoral issues as people realized the pandemic was not going to be a short-term event. They had to learn how to stay safe from the virus, work from home and perhaps help children with online school. Those challenges made it hard to think about the longer-term discernment required in search processes, she said.

So the diocese chose to have, what McMillin called, "an expanded interim time" during which interims or priests-in-charge might stay with their congregations longer than they would during a typical search process, until there is mass vaccination or at least "greater social stability" in common life. The result "is not a stagnant time," she cautioned, but rather a fertile space for interim work and worship and a deepening of mission, outreach and formation.

Four congregations in the Diocese of East Carolina have called rectors during the pandemic. Another three have brought on interims, and other searches are in the works.

"The biggest hardship is not being able to see the candidates in their current parishes because you learn so much about someone in that way," said the Rev. Mollie Roberts, East Carolina's canon for diocesan life and leadership, describing the typical visit by a few search committee members to finalists' congregations. Search committees that are uncomfortable with that lack of knowledge, she added, can pause their process. "Nobody's done that," she added.

The Rev. Eric Grubb, who was called last September to be the rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Clinton, N.C., in the Diocese of East Carolina, said finding a safe way to meet in person was crucial for his discernment process.

He and his wife, Brandie, spent two days at the church after driving three hours from Charlotte, where he was on the staff of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church. He led Evening Prayer in St. Paul's for the committee, and two people gave them a tour of the facility. The interview was conducted indoors with physical distancing. Even so, pandemic restrictions, including on such simple acts as handshaking, made it hard at times, he said.

In the end, he and the search committee "really felt the pull of the Holy Spirit throughout this whole process, even though it has been so strange," Grubb said.

Then there's the process of joining a new community in the midst of a pandemic. "They were very creative in welcoming us here," Grubb said. Congregation members hung a banner in front of the church announcing the arrival of the couple. They also staged a drive-up welcome during which parishioners stopped at the curb outside the church to greet the Grubbs.

The Rev. Chase Danford completed his agreement to become the priest-in-charge of Trinity Church in Asbury Park, N.J. in early March. "It was less than 10 days later that everything started shutting down," he recalled.

Barely a week later, he and his husband, Giuliano Argenziano, became ill with presumed cases of COVID-19.

Danford was scheduled to move from Queens to Asbury Park in May and begin at Trinity on June 1. The start date remained the same, but he spent the first two and a half months either leading worship online or commuting back and forth once limited in-person worship resumed July 12.

Trying to get to know parishioners, he invited them to sign up for "meal meet-ups" on Zoom, joining him for breakfast, lunch, teatime or dinner. It wasn't the same as meeting in person, though. "There's going to need to be a lot of relationship-building happening in the second year of my ministry that normally would have happened the first year," Danford said.

Search processes will continue to change as the course of the pandemic does, especially as more people are vaccinated, East Tennessee's Bolt predicted. For instance, she anticipates "a pretty big wave" when priests who might have put off retirement will decide to take that step.

"We're also going to see folks who had been risk-averse be willing to take more risks," she said. "I think there's going to be room for extra innovation, extra creativity, to continue to pay attention and meet the needs we see right before us." ■

AROUND THE CHURCH

Episcopalians, Moravians celebrate communion, renew commitment to antiracism

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

The Episcopal Church celebrated the 10th anniversary of its full communion agreement with the Northern and Southern provinces of the Moravian Church in America at a virtual ceremony on Feb. 10, featuring remarks from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, House of Deputies President the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings and Moravian leaders, in addition to music and prayers from members of both denominations.

"Our relationship as Moravians and Episcopalians could be looked at as just a nice church thing, but it is more than that," Curry said in his sermon. "It is a sign. It is a witness. It is a yearning for what God yearns, not simply for the church but for the entire human family."

The 10th anniversary celebration, which was streamed on YouTube, showcased the traditions of both denominations and celebrated the churches' common efforts, including joint antiracism work guided by the Sacred Ground curriculum and by Catherine Meeks, executive director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, in the Diocese of Atlanta.

"I have learned so much from our Episcopal siblings about courageous witness in the public square, which has emboldened our witness as Moravians," the Rev. Betsy Miller, president of the Moravian Church Northern Province, told ENS, adding that communion is not a static agreement but a learning process. "Living into full communion is something that is never fully achieved, but remains a journey of discovery, renewal and enrichment," she said.

The celebratory tone was tempered by the pandemic and by humble acknowledgments of racism, including a litany of repentance and renewed mission.

"As we celebrate tonight, we also acknowledge that we are in need of healing, not only from the pandemic, but even more from the racism that has characterized our country and our churches for far too long," said the Rev. Maria Tjeltveit, who represents the Episcopal Church as co-chair of the Moravian-Episcopal Coordinating Committee. "Therefore, our service includes a call to racial reconciliation with repentance and a commissioning, so that in full communion with one another, we can work together to build Christ's kingdom, where all are welcomed and valued."

In her remarks, Jennings said unity and collaboration are even more urgent now than they were 10 years ago, and are necessary if the work of antiracism is to succeed.

Jennings

"In 2011, when the Moravian Church and the Episcopal Church entered into full communion, we celebrated the reconciliation between our denominations. Today, a decade later, God is calling us to heal a different, more difficult division," Jennings said. "As followers of Jesus in historically white denominations, we must redouble our commitment to work toward racial reconciliation by atoning for our participation in systemic racism and advocating for racial justice. We have much to offer one another on this journey to beloved community."

The Moravians are one of seven denominations in full communion with the Episcopal Church, the most recent being the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, which established communion in 2019.

The Episcopal Church defines full communion as an agreement with a church outside the Anglican Communion "in which each recognizes the other as a catholic and apostolic church holding the essentials of the Christian faith. Within this new relation, churches become interdependent while remaining autonomous. … They are together committed to a visible unity in the church's mission to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments."

Tjeltveit

The principles of full communion are expressed in the Moravian motto: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love." Churches in full communion do not need to agree on every doctrinal point, but are understood to have enough in common to worship together, Tjeltveit said.

"When we talk about full communion, we're not talking about a merger," she told ENS. "To be in full communion with people who think differently than we do and operate differently is a really wonderful gift."

In practice, this means that members of both denominations can participate in the same sacraments, and clergy of one denomination can serve a congregation of the other denomination, which has happened in a few parishes so far. One church — St. Mark's in Downey, Calif. — is a combined parish "worshiping in the Episcopal and Moravian traditions."

The Moravians are one of the oldest Protestant denominations, originating in the present-day Czech Republic in the 15th century, pre-dating Lutheranism and Anglicanism. They have historically emphasized living by Jesus' example over doctrine and were heavily persecuted in the 16th century.

They came to America during the colonial period. Today, the Moravian Church in North America counts 140 congregations in the United States and Canada, mostly in the areas around Bethlehem, Pa., and Winston-Salem, N.C. — the headquarters of its Northern and Southern provinces, respectively.

In 1997, General Convention established an official Episcopal-Moravian dialogue with the Northern Province and the Southern Province, which continued into the 2000s. In 2009, General Convention approved "Finding Our Delight in the Lord," a proposal for full communion between the two churches. The Moravian Church approved the proposal in 2010 at its provincial synods, and a celebration of full communion was held in February 2011, attended by leaders from both denominations, including the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Curry's predecessor.

In his sermon, Curry preached on the transformation of suffering into glory in John's Gospel, pointing to it as an example of how Christians can overcome hateful divisions to achieve beloved community. Relationships like the communion between Moravians and Episcopalians, he said, are a sign to the world that unity is possible.

"Our relationship is a sign of that, of who we are and who God meant us to be," he said. "May our relationship be a witness, a witness to the world beyond the chaos to community, beyond the nightmare to the dream of God." ■

New Lent and Easter resources are available

New and updated Lent and Easter resources for congregations, dioceses, and communities of faith are available from the Episcopal Church, including Updated Life Transformed – The Way of Love in Lent curriculum; Sermons That Work for Holy Week and Easter; a new podcast series, Prophetic Voices: Preaching and Teaching Beloved Community.

Life Transformed: The Way of Love in Lent: The journey through Lent into Easter is a journey with Jesus. We are baptized into his life, self-giving, and death, then we rise in hope to life transformed. This Lent, faith communities will be invited to walk with Jesus in his Way of Love and into the experience of transformed life. Access this curriculum here.

Updated and expanded Way of Love resources for Lent and Easter include: an eight-video series, an Adult Forum, a Quiet Day curriculum, a customizable publicity poster, and a daily practice calendar. For the first time, resources are now offered in French as well as English and Spanish. Way of Love resources can be used across all seasons. (Format: Digital download. Videos are in English with English, Spanish and French captions)

Prophetic Voices: Preaching and Teaching Beloved Community: This new podcast series is hosted by the Rev. Isaiah "Shaneequa" Brokenleg, Episcopal Church staff officer for Racial Reconciliation. Across our church and our society, we are having profound dialogues about race, truth, justice, and healing. Join Brokenleg and invited guests for this six-episode series as they share prophetic voices and explore the readings for Ash Wednesday and each day of Holy Week and Easter through the lens of social justice. Learn more about this podcast here. (In English only)

Sermons That Work/Sermones que Iluminan: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter: These sermons are offered for private devotional use or with a small group. Sermons That Work in English include offerings for every day of Holy Week plus Easter; Sermones que Iluminan in Spanish include offerings for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil, and Easter Day. (Format: Digital download. In English and Spanish)

Additional seasonal resources include:

Teaching and Preaching: Churches Revisioning Unity in Christ Through the Holidays: Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), an ecumenical multilateral dialogue among ten Protestant faith communions in the USA including The Episcopal Church, offer new, ecumenical resources for reimagining Lent with a focus on hope and racial reconciliation. These resources include reflections from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, and other leaders of CUIC member churches (In English only).

d365: Daily Devotionals: The Episcopal Church Youth Ministries Office sponsors online daily devotions with their Presbyterian USA and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship partners through d365.org. Beginning on Ash Wednesday and continuing through Lent, Holy Week, and the First Week of Easter, the website's theme shifts to "Journey to the Cross" Artwork to support this theme is also available for download via the share tab on the landing page menu (In English only).

Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM) Lenten Devotion Series: Featuring reflections from a wide range of authors throughout EMM's network of supporters and friends, the devotions are available on the EMM website and by email.

— Episcopal Church Public Affairs Office

AROUND THE CHURCH

Care of Creation Grants now available

The Episcopal Church's Task Force on Creation Care and Environmental Racism is now accepting applications for its 2021 grant cycle. An informational webinar is scheduled for Feb. 18 and will be available afterwards on demand. The application deadline is March 26.

Created by the 2018 General Convention, the Task Force on Creation Care and Environmental Racism is charged with supporting and expanding the Episcopal Church's relationship with God, with each other and with creation. The General Convention allocated funds to this task force to support local and regional ecoministry efforts. This is the second and final granting process for this task force during this triennium.

"Through this grant program, we seek to support long-term ministries which focus on the inequitable and systemic impacts of environmental racism, regional and local ecojustice concerns and the pressing issues arising from the climate emergency," noted the Rev. Stephanie M. Johnson, chair of the Task Force.

Successful applicants will submit projects that respond to these pressing justice matters by engaging in advocacy, civic engagement and developing climate resiliency. It is important that these proposals go beyond secular environmental work to provide resources for faith-based community organizing, theological reflection and response concerning the sin of environmental racism and reconciliation around the concept of environmental reparations. The task force is committed to supporting efforts which are supported and led by youth and young adults, communities of color and indigenous peoples.

Grant awards will range from $15,000 to $40,000 and ten or fewer projects will be funded. Grant proposals must have an impact beyond the applicant's organization/parish and include at least one partner in accomplishing the granted project. Proposed programs or efforts should be those that could serve as models for other communities in different contexts. A proposal must also show significant financial or in-kind support provided by the applying entity, partner organizations, diocese, or another supporter.

The following will not be considered for funding: applications not supported by an Episcopal entity and/or do not actively engage tThe Episcopal Church; capital projects (such as solar panels, updated parish building infrastructure, or materials for church gardens).

The grant application, criteria, and additional information is available on the Episcopal Church website in English and Spanish. The application deadline is March 26 at 5 PM EST.

Please note the following for dioceses of the Episcopal Church: should a diocese fail to pay its assessment in full or to apply for and receive a waiver, the diocese and the applicant shall be ineligible to receive grants or loans from the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society unless approved by Executive Council.

Additional questions can be directed to Phoebe Chatfield, associate for Creation Care and Justice, 347-712-0679.

— Episcopal Church Public Affairs Office

Retreat to focus on inclusiveness

Trinity Church Wall Street, New York, is scheduled to sponsor an online Lenten retreat during the weekend of March 26-28 on its core value of inclusiveness.

Bozzuti-Jones

"Join us for a time of prayer and reflection … Using Scripture and poetry, we will seek to discover how God is calling us to celebrate diversity, to live lives of inclusiveness, and to listen deeply to the voices of wisdom and disruption drawing us into God," Trinity posted in a description of the retreat.

Trinity Retreat Center in West Cornwall, Conn., will host the webinar, to be led by the Rev. Mark Francisco Bozzuti-Jones, the center's director of spiritual formation.

The event is free and registration is not required. The retreat will stream on the Trinity Retreat Center Facebook page.

The retreat will take place over five half-hour sessions throughout the weekend at these times (EST): Friday 8-8:30 pm, Saturday 10-10:30 am, 2-2:30 pm, 8-8:30 pm, Sunday 4-4:30 pm.

— Trinity Wall Street

Leaders sign anti-conversion therapy declaration

By Joelle Kidd
Anglican Journal

An international interfaith commission has called for an end to violence against and criminalization of LGBTQ+ people and a global ban on conversion therapy.

The declaration by the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives, which was launched last December, was signed by about 400 religious leaders from more than 35 countries.

Among the launch signatories of the declaration were Bishop Andrew Dietsche of the Diocese of New York, Bishop Marc Andrus of the Diocese of California and Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.

"Our baptismal covenant calls us to respect the dignity of every human being," Nicholls said.

"That inherent respect means that we must oppose criminalizing people simply for who they are or trying to make them into something else. We are all children of God, created in the image of God, and deserve that respect and dignity," she said.

An introduction to the declaration on the commission's website states, "We recognize that certain religious teachings have, throughout the ages, been misused to cause deep pain and offense to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex." The declaration is meant to "affirm and celebrate the dignity of all, independent of a person's sexuality, gender expression and gender identity."

Among the statements contained in the declaration are: an affirmation "that all human beings of different sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions are a precious part of creation and are part of the natural order"; an acknowledgment that religious teachings have perpetuated violence against LGBTQ+ people; a call for all nations to "put an end to criminalization on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity"; and a call "for all attempts to change, suppress or erase a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression — commonly known as 'conversion therapy' — to end, and for these harmful practices to be banned."

Conversion therapy practices as defined by a 2020 UN Report are interventions "aimed at effecting a change from nonheterosexual to heterosexual and from trans or gender diverse to cisgender." The same report found that conversion therapy is practiced in at least 68 countries, though estimates suggest there are instances of these practices in every country. In Canada, federal legislation to ban conversion therapy was approved in principle in October 2020.

The full declaration and list of signatories is available to view at globalinterfaith.lgbt. ■

NEWS

Church volunteers help elderly parishioners make vaccine appointments

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

With COVID-19 vaccine rollouts varying widely from state to state, some states have been criticized for their confusing and dysfunctional vaccine appointment systems. One of those states is Massachusetts, which — despite being a world-renowned leader in health care and the home of vaccine producer Moderna — has largely delegated the administration of vaccines to a fragmented patchwork of hospitals and private companies.

The problems intensified over the past week as the state began opening up vaccine appointments to residents age 75 and older — a demographic that is less familiar with computers and more likely to encounter difficulty using online appointment systems. They often have to navigate labyrinthine websites, continually refresh pages and upload photos of their insurance cards. Seniors have expressed confusion, frustration and hopelessness.

The Episcopal Parish of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, a suburb of Boston, saw the technical difficulties as an opportunity to help. Volunteers from the parish's COVID Response Team are helping older parishioners navigate the red tape and get signed up for vaccine appointments.

"This is what it's all about," the Rev. Tim Schenck, rector, told ENS. "I always think about Paul's line in Galatians about how we're called to bear one another's burdens, and this seems like an absolutely critical time for us to be bearing one another's burdens, and this is just a very tangible way that we can do that right now."

Over the past year, the parish's COVID Response Team has been meeting a variety of parishioners' needs, from running errands to delivering masks to assisting those who had trouble accessing online worship.

"The COVID Response Team model is taking this organic interest and goodwill in the church and then matching it to the needs," said volunteer Jody Jones Turner. Seventy people signed up to help when it first launched, and they have since recorded about 150 "acts of kindness," she said.

Photo/Jody Jones Turner

St. John the Evangelist parishioner Jody Jones Turner is a member of the church's COVID Response Team.

"I always think about the COVID Response Team as the Match.com of ministry," Schenck said, "really matching parishioners' needs with parishioners' deep desire to help."

The vaccine appointment initiative originated when Schenck got a call from a parishioner "who had just navigated this whole process of vaccine scheduling for her parents and found it to be neither easy nor intuitive," he told ENS.

"And she was like, 'This must be something that other people are having a hard time with, especially [seniors]. … This is such a serpentine process. There's got to be a way that we could help others.'"

"I think it's hard for anybody to do this," Schenck said, "and so you add not being particularly tech savvy on top of that, and it is a little bit of whack-a-mole right trying to get an appointment here and there."

Schenck brought the idea to the COVID Response Team last week, and they got started the same day. "It just seemed like a really good fit," said Turner, who works as the program manager for the transplant unit at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. She brought her knowledge of the health care system and recruited other volunteers to help with this particular project.

"Now we have, like, this little SWAT team organized," Turner told ENS, "and everyone has different levels of information." Turner, for example, knows more about the programs at hospitals in Boston, while another parishioner has familiarized herself with the distribution protocol at CVS pharmacies, and another parishioner with the mass vaccination site at Gillette Stadium.

They posted about the program on Facebook, and within an hour, they had their first request. So far, four people have requested assistance, and three of them have already gotten their first shots. Mostly, the team sets parishioners up with phone-based appointment systems so they don't have to use computers, resulting in "a more pleasant experience," Turner said.

Schenck and Turner say they hope to build a collective knowledge of the distribution system so that they can continue to help as more people become eligible for the vaccine. In the meantime, they hope to inspire other churches to do similar work for their elderly parishioners and neighbors. Both emphasized that the networks and connections formed by the COVID Response Team allowed them to address this need quickly. Once the structure was in place, the volunteers' enthusiasm was channeled into action.

"Setting up the pieces to allow the network to mobilize — that's really powerful," Turner said.

"The intergenerational aspect of this is really beautiful to watch," said Schenck, adding that the effort is an inspiring reminder that laypeople can be called to pastoral care, not just clergy.

"I just love that sense of crowdsourced pastoral care. … The fact that this is grassroots-led is really exciting to me, and that's what a church should be doing. And being." ■

Suburban parish partners with Detroit church to open community resource center

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

Christ Church Cranbrook, an Episcopal parish in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., has partnered with First Baptist Institutional Church in Detroit to open a community resource center that will serve a variety of needs in already-struggling Detroit neighborhoods that have also been hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the two churches said in a press release.

Representatives of the two churches held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new FBIC Resource Center on Jan. 31, though program development and hiring are still in progress.

The center is housed in a renovated space on the First Baptist Institutional Church's campus in northwest Detroit in an area where 31% of residents — and about half of children — live below the federal poverty line.

The center will offer services including a food pantry; workforce training; financial assistance for residents facing eviction or utility shutoffs; and workshops for reading, math and financial literacy, with a particular focus on youth, seniors and veterans. Case managers will also work with clients to connect them with other services they might need.

FBIC has been ministering to Detroiters since 1916, and the congregation has been active in community outreach from its beginning. The church built an extensive campus just south of 8 Mile Road in 1975 to provide for both religious and community needs, and today it offers services such as youth programming and prison reentry. Christ Church Cranbrook, consecrated in 1928, has had a relationship with FBIC for about four years as part of a drive to "build bridges" with churches in Detroit, said the Rev. William Danaher, rector.

Photo/courtesy of Christ Church Cranbrook

The Rev. William Danaher, rector of Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., presents a check to the Rev. Robyn Moore, pastor of First Baptist Institutional Church in Detroit.

First Baptist Institutional Church "has a long history of being one of the leading Black Baptist churches in Detroit. … It's a remarkable church," Danaher told Episcopal News Service.

After the Rev. Robyn Moore became FBIC's pastor in 2018, she and Danaher began imagining further possibilities for outreach and mission work in the neighborhood, Danaher said. The arrival of COVID-19 added urgency to those efforts.

"When the pandemic hit, it was clear that people were coming to the church looking for support in one form or another," Danaher said.

In 2020, Christ Church Cranbrook raised about $241,000 for a COVID-19 relief fund, which was partially matched by the Douglas F. Allison Foundation. Part of that was used as an initial investment for the community center, along with FBIC's own funding, Danaher said. Administering the center will be a joint effort between the two churches, "utilizing congregational talents wherever possible to run workshops and provide a range of services to those most in need."

"My hope is that we'll continue to be able to partner in this project with the foundation that provided us with this initial grant," Danaher told ENS.

Danaher emphasized that the partnership is one of "mutuality and friendship" that breaks through economic and racial barriers.

"We have an understanding that we expect to be transformed by this ministry as well. My goal is to close the distance between the suburbs and the city of Detroit and to build bridges," Danaher said.

"First Baptist Institutional Church is truly an amazing church, and they have as much to offer us as we have to offer them," he added, such as "the opportunity for spiritual friendship and encouragement of yet another Christian community doing kingdom work." ■

NEWS

LENT continued from page 1

rich ingredients such as butter and eggs) has been adopted by many Episcopal churches.

Last year, many Episcopalians in New Orleans and beyond wore carnival masks and partied. This year, across the church, Mardi Gras events were canceled, scaled back or moved online, with many parishes adopting a do-it-yourself approach.

Face masks protected against the spread of COVID-19 and socially distanced celebrations were common. For some revelers, responding to restrictions with creativity added greater determination to planning this year's events.

"Mardi Gras is usually the time right before we get ready for a serious time, but since last year, we've been in a serious time, and people are really suffering leading up to Mardi Gras," said Liz Beal Kidd, director of children, youth and family ministry at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Atlanta.

"This year it's a different message for Mardi Gras: that we aren't giving up all of our traditions even if they have to look different. You can't keep our spirit down," she said.

Photo/Tabi Tobiassen

Revelers at St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Atlanta enjoy the 2020 Shrove Tuesday pancake supper, before COVID-19 restrictions took hold.

St. Luke's usually hires a jazz band, welcomes parishioners in costume, and feeds them from pots of red beans and rice and jambalaya, ending the festivities with a "second line" dance parade to the memorial garden for the traditional benediction. This year, church members picked up a Cajun-inspired meal to eat at home.

Across town, members of St. Anne's Episcopal Church and Day School didn't gather to color their alleluia banner, which is buried on Mardi Gras and unearthed Easter morning. Instead, when they picked up their pancake kits, they left index cards decorated with alleluias. Tabi Tobiassen, St. Anne's director of children's and youth ministry, planned to make a communal banner of the cards and put out a video of it, with a short sermon, that families could watch when they have time.

At Christ Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas, the annual outdoor Mardi Gras Jazz Mass was still scheduled, but the invitation came with a caveat: "Sorry, but this year you'll have to make your own gumbo lunch."

The carnival season was even low-key in New Orleans, where elements of the traditional Mardi Gras parades came to residents instead of vice versa.

Houses were decorated instead of parade floats, and no beads or trinkets were tossed. St. George's and St. Andrew's churches delivered "make your own throw" kits for parishioners to exchange, without physical contact, at a pegboard at St. George's.

To honor the traditional circular king cake and raise money for Camp Able NOLA, a St. Andrew's ministry that serves kids and adults with special needs, youths made glittery door wreaths, each with a tiny plastic baby, representing Jesus, like the ones hidden in the cakes.

"While you can't stop Mardi Gras, churches are not having their typical fundraisers centered around the parades or parade watching parties," Karen Mackey, the Diocese of Louisiana's communications director, said.

Laissez les bon temps rouler … on Zoom

On New York's Upper East Side, the pandemic couldn't shut down the Church of the Holy Trinity Pancake Supper and Talent Show, established over 20 years ago by actor and parishioner Dudley Stone.

This year, parishioners flipped their own pancakes at home during a virtual event. Emcee Erlinda S. Brent, the church's administrator, kicked off the event with her impression of Frances McDormand as God in the TV series "Good Omens." Rector John F. Beddingfield prepared his trademark groan-inducing monologue that includes witticisms like "How do you learn to read the Scriptures? You 'Luke' into them!"

"It's silly and I think we need silly," Brent said. "With so much seriousness and sadness right now, celebrating this tradition is kind of uplifting."

Scaled-back fundraisers

Some major fundraisers are tied to Mardi Gras and its culture. Birmingham's annual Gumbo Gala, the largest Episcopal social event in Alabama, draws up to 3,000 people and has raised as much as $30,000 for Episcopal Place, an independent-living housing complex for seniors and adults with disabilities. The gala, inspired by an influx of Louisianans after Hurricane Katrina, pits parish teams in a one-day gumbo cook-off, as the partiers feast on the gumbos.

The 16th Gumbo Gala will be held April 17 as an outdoor event with a gumbo truck, a band and no cooking teams. "We're continuing to build a brand and plan to be part of the community again in full force in 2022," said Jamie Whitehurst, director of development for Episcopal Place.

In San Francisco, the Diocese of California's Grace Cathedral Carnivale celebration raised a record $600,000 last year for its ministry in early childhood education, arts, music, yoga and senior care programs. In 2020, tickets started at $500.

This year tickets were $25 for virtual

Photo/Taylor Cheek

Left, Episcopal youths in New Orleans make wreaths into noncaloric versions of king cakes for Mardi Gras 2021.

Below, on Mardi Gras 2020, stilt walkers perform at Grace Cathedral's Carnivale in San Francisco. This year's event is virtual.

Carnivale, and guests contributed prayers and intentions that were printed on colorful ribbons and strung along the banisters leading to the cathedral's doors. The tethering of ribbons symbolized the creation of a global community.

Shrove 2020

Mardi Gras 2020 was, at many of these parishes, the last come-one, come-all event before the pandemic. There's wistfulness in looking back.

"We had families who had moved from New Orleans bring a ton of beads and a king cake," said Tobiassen, the children and youth director at St. Anne's in Atlanta.

"We had 60 or 70 people last year, and it's sad to see the photos and realize that I haven't seen many of the people in person since Mardi Gras. It's really sad thinking of where we could have gone with that energy and where we ended up."

For some longtime St. Anne's parishioners, carrying on with COVID-19 restrictions affirms their commitment to long-standing traditions.

"I'm documenting with video and photographs because our children's children are going to ask how we did Mardi Gras in 2021," Kidd said. "We've been going through COVID-19 like it's a long season of Lent — of reflection and

Photo/Melanie Duerkopp

quiet — and it was forced on us. But the pandemic has done what Lent does, which is to create a feeling of gratitude and thanksgiving. We are never, ever, ever going to take for granted anything again." ■

Michelle Hiskey is a freelance writer based in Atlanta. She is a member of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church. Additional material by Episcopal Journal.

FEATURE

How congregations can see their buildings as assets, not albatrosses

By Sally Hicks

Talking about church buildings is fun for the bishop of the Diocese of Indianapolis — not just because she is trained in architecture and historic preservation, but also because it leads to questions like, "What is this congregation for?"

When Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows was growing up in New York, she walked all over the city, reveling in the historic buildings all around her.

She was inspired to study architecture, urban planning and historic preservation as an undergraduate and graduate student. Then, encouraged to discern a call to ministry by leaders at Trinity Church Wall Street where she was an active member, she earned an M.Div. from Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

"I was being called to be a priest who also knew something about preserving all of these old church buildings," said Baskerville-Burrows, who wrote her master's thesis at Cornell University on the role of church buildings in revitalizing downtown communities.

In her current role as diocesan bishop, she continues to combine these areas of expertise.

"Instead of seeing buildings as albatrosses, I have always seen them as opportunities for ministry," she said. "To me, they are part and parcel of the work of being bishop."

Baskerville-Burrows, the first Black woman to be elected diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church, oversees 48 churches in central and southern Indiana. She spoke with Faith & Leadership about the role of religious buildings in ministry, in communities and in the work of racial justice.

Faith & Leadership: How do these interests combine in your work now?

Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows: Bishops have oversight over people and assets that make ministry possible, and buildings are usually the largest asset that congregations hold if they don't have endowment funds.

If a congregation is going to have a place out of which to do ministry and worship, then it's got to have a building that's connected to and appropriate for that purpose. And if a congregation is going to be planted in a community that it has relationships with, then ideally the building is serving a role in the community beyond that of just the congregation.

I am always asking the question, "Who else shares your space? Who else has access? I entered your building, and I didn't know even how to get in. How are you thinking about your signage? How are you thinking about your neighbors who are adjacent to your property?"

Those are all signs and signals about the vitality and possibility for ministry of a congregation, to me.

Buildings come with all kinds of anxiety, because often people don't know what to do about them. I see that part of my role pastorally is to help congregations and their leaders not see them only as sources of anxiety.

F&L: How do you do this?

JBB: I talk about it a lot. We try to create a context where the building is not just a topic for when there's an emergency — the roof fell in or there's a flood or we can't get in our buildings because there's a pandemic.

I meet with all the priests and deacons of the diocese who are active every year. We talk a lot about how if you're going to have a building, it's got to be tied to the mission. And congregations then need to know what their mission is.

This time that we're in a pandemic, we're saying, "Well, what kind of use do you want these buildings to serve, now that you've been out of them for all this time?"

I can set the conversation. It's a lot of fun to be able to do that.

F&L: How can you help folks reframe their thinking about the building, moving it from liability to asset?

JBB: I think part of it is talking about it that way. It's complicated. There's no one easy thing to do.

A lot of the talk in the church is that the building is always a problem — except for our worship space, which we love and we never want to change.

If we think about the building as an asset, which has been a lot of the work of Partners for Sacred Places and a couple of other statewide preservation groups, [we change that conversation].

> "Buildings come with all kinds of anxiety, because often people don't know what to do about them."

They've been saying that buildings are a lot of work and they were built to do things that we no longer do and they were built to hold congregation sizes that we no longer have.

So how do we use them for the ways in which they can be an asset not just to us but to the rest of the community — which is an ethic the church should have all along, right?

To those who are in small congregations struggling with big buildings, I think first of all trying to help them see that yes, it's a burden, but there are also some opportunities, and it may be that that congregation shouldn't be in that building anymore.

As a preservationist and an ordained person, I've never been fundamentalist about it.

I'd say many of our church buildings are not best cared for by our own people. I'd rather see them be put in the hands of somebody else who can take care of it better — a different denomination, a different use — than to see what our

Baskerville-Burrows

churches do by letting them crumble around them because they can't let them go. The demolition by neglect — that's the train wreck.

We're going to go over that cliff very quickly in the next five or six years, with the number of buildings that will not be able to be sustained by the congregations that have title to them.

F&L: Do you think the pandemic will hasten congregations' going over the cliff?

JBB: Absolutely. The pandemic is an amplifier and accelerator, and it's going to amplify and accelerate some of the trends that are troubling. But it can also amplify and accelerate some good things, so let's try to get more in the driver's seat on this.

Not all of the congregations are going to make it through this pandemic in the way that they were before. And that's ultimately a hopeful thing for the church.

Because we're finally asking the questions, "What is this congregation for? What is the building for now that we're not in it?"

Most of our congregations, and I think this is true in other denominations and faith groups as well, to the extent that they've kept their buildings open, it's been primarily for serving the community.

Food pantries have continued to function. Meal programs have been adapted and continue to distribute meals to people who are used to coming to a sit-down for lunch every week. We have a clinic in one of our churches that has continued to function. It's the only place to get free health care in the county.

People have been worshipping online, but the ministry and presence has continued. That's teaching us something, I think.

Clearly, we don't need the buildings to be a church community. We need to be able to gather, but we may not need to do it in the buildings we've historically done that in. And if the buildings are hampering our ability to do the ministry, then we need to ask some hard questions about that and confront the answers.

We have 48 congregations, and so we're small enough that we can check on all of our congregations each month.

We know what's going on, on the ground, because we're checking in on them on a rotating basis. We are trying to have congregation leaders check in on their people between my visitations, the visitation of my canons, just watching carefully what's happening. We meet every other week with the clergy and wardens who are serving churches who don't have settled clergy.

It's not a survey, but we've got good anecdotal data to give us a sense of what's happening.

I'd rather have a small diocese in terms of numbers of congregations that are really clear about who they are, why they exist, what their call to walk with Christ is about and what their building can do to help support that mission than to have 48 churches half of which don't know why they're there and their building is just empty most of the week.

That's not edifying to God. It just isn't. The work of my episcopate is to help shape that conversation.

F&L: What's your vision for your diocese, which has a lot of small-membership congregations?

JBB: That's a really big question.

What I say to people in the diocese is that we have started churches, congregations, and we have closed buildings over the whole of our 180-some-year history. We're going to continue to do that, and we're not going to be afraid of it.

So we can start a congregation like Good Samaritan, which has got some land banked. They're probably going to build a building that has a ministry-center focus with a space for the congregation to worship. It's not going to be a big worship space with a small parish hall.

They're flipping that script, because they're a community that's built upon the notion that they serve.

We have St. John's Speedway, which is worshipping at the golf course clubhouse next to the track at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. They're a pretty healthy congregation of some 30 people that is about as vibrant and active as I would want some of our most long-standing congregations with stone buildings to be.

The mission we have as a diocese is to be beacons of Jesus Christ, to be inviting people to join us in the work of transformation, to stand with the marginalized and vulnerable and be working to transform systems of injustice and to be networking with anybody who will come along with that vision, people of faith or none.

That's the work, and to be raising up leaders, lay and ordained, to do that.

When I get up in the morning, my question is — after thanking God for a new day — how are we doing that?

Because of the legacy of the Lilly family over the years, we have resources to say, "Your roof has caved in? We can give you a revolving loan and help you with that."

[My predecessors and other leaders] set up that fund because they understood the value of having some resources set aside for building emergencies — be-

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FEATURE

How the National Prayer Breakfast became a political event

By Deborah Whitehead

Addressing his first National Prayer Breakfast as president on Feb. 4, Joe Biden spoke of the need to "turn to faith" in a "dark, dark time."

In the wake of the Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol, he called for Americans to "confront and defeat political extremism, white supremacy and domestic terrorism," and argued that religion can help America unite as "one nation in a common purpose: to respect one another, to care for one another, [and] to leave no one behind."

The president's address provided an insight into how Biden plans to navigate the complex relationship between religion and politics in the post-Trump era.

But it also underlines the importance of the traditional presidential address at the National Prayer Breakfast — an annual high-profile gathering of faith leaders and politicians held in Washington D.C. on the first Thursday in February since 1953.

That the annual breakfast draws so much attention marks the fulfillment of a dream by the event's founder, Abraham Vereide, a Norwegian immigrant and minister born in 1886 who credited the idea to an early morning vision brought about by prayer.

As a scholar of U.S. religion and culture, I believe the story of the National Prayer Breakfast provides insight into the complex relationship between religion and politics in the last century.

Photo/Alex Brandon/AP

President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden, center, attend the 2021 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., remotely due to the pandemic.

The start in the 1930s

Vereide came to the U.S. in 1905 and found work as an itinerant Methodist minister. He served as a director of Goodwill Industries in Seattle and spent the first part of his career doing relief work during the Great Depression.

Vereide

But according to Christian author Norman Percy Grubb's biography of Vereide, "Modern Viking," he came to feel it was not the "down and out" but the "up and out" — wealthy and powerful men who were not particularly religious — who really needed his attention.

Vereide wrote that "the manpower of the churches had dwindled badly, and politics seemed under the control of those who were not fit to take leadership." Concerned about the decline of organized religion's political power and the growing role of the organized labor movement, and convinced that both unions and FDR's New Deal were "subversive" and "un-American" influences in business and politics, he turned to prayer.

One night in April 1935, Vereide's prayers yielded what he claimed was a 1:30 a.m. vision and a plan. Later that month he gathered 19 local businessmen for the first Seattle prayer breakfast. The 7:45 a.m. meeting time was chosen so as not to interfere with family and work responsibilities.

In these initial meetings, the group was primarily concerned with how to combat the local workers' movement, which they perceived as dangerous and corrupt, and it was restricted to business executives only.

But in the process, Vereide realized that these breakfast meetings — nondenominational, held in secular offices rather than church buildings, and focused on prayer, Bible study and building relationships — established powerful new networks among the city's business, political, and religious leaders.

Prayer breakfasts became Vereide's method for reaching powerful elites who could help to advance Christian interests in business and politics.

Photo/Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

Attendees sing "Amazing Grace" during the 2019 National Prayer Breakfast.

The prayer breakfast movement quickly spread to other cities, including Washington, D.C., where the first prayer groups were established in the U.S. House and Senate in 1942 and 1943. In 1943 Vereide founded the National Committee for Christian Leadership, changing its name to International Christian Leadership the following year, to provide coordination for the growing movement.

He defined the organization's purpose as "One world in active cooperation in commerce, science, labor and education should be one world in spiritual unity and moral convictions."

Vereide attributed the movement's success to the example of none other than Jesus himself, whose disciples were "men in the fishing business."

"Jesus founded the first breakfast group," he said.

From hesitancy to opportunity

In 1953, the first Presidential Prayer Breakfast, as it was then called, was held in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., with 400 in attendance. President Dwight Eisenhower initially declined an invitation to attend, but relented with the persuasion of evangelist Billy Graham, and delivered an address about the importance of prayer.

Eisenhower remarked that "prayer is just simply a necessity, because by prayer I believe we mean an effort to get in touch with the Infinite."

Since Eisenhower, every sitting U.S. president has attended the breakfast at least once during his term. The presidential address is only part of the breakfast, a multi-day event. While most presidents have used the address to speak about their personal religious beliefs, at the 2020 breakfast, Donald Trump waved "Trump Acquitted" newspaper headlines and used the opportunity to launch an attack on the religious commitments of his political opponents.

Exclusive and elitist?

The breakfast is still sponsored by the same organization Vereide founded, now known as The Family, and two members of Congress and a bipartisan committee serve as its honorary hosts.

After Vereide's death in 1969, evangelist and businessman Doug Coe succeeded him in leadership of the organization. Under Coe, who died in 2017, the prayer breakfast continued to grow in influence — with Coe himself counting high-ranking politicians among his powerful friends.

"The Family," a 2019 Netflix series, explored the influence of the organization on American politics. Journalist Jeff Sharlet, whose 2009 book is the basis of the series, says that "The National Prayer Breakfast is 100% The Family's event, an event that is meant to be this very public display of power."

Attendance at the breakfast is by invitation only, and the event has long faced criticism that it is exclusive and elitist. And secularists balk at the way that the event has become a public religious ritual at the center of U.S. government.

Since the Obama era, many non-Christian and secular groups have called on presidents to boycott the breakfast because of concerns over its connections to anti-LGBTQ and right-wing groups. This year, secular advocacy group Americans United called on Biden to "draw a sharp contrast with his predecessor" by strongly endorsing church-state separation, freedom of religion and religious pluralism.

As the breakfast has expanded to become an interreligious, international event, now including 4,000 attendees from over 140 countries, it has also become a ready opportunity for networking and deal-making.

According to the event registration website, "the purpose of the National Prayer Breakfast is to gather people from all over the world to pray for our leaders and to walk with them on the path that Jesus sets forth for all of us." It also claims not to be "a political gathering." Rather, "many politicians who come are Jesus-centered leaders who talk about how they collaborate and develop friendships across the aisle."

But a 2018 article in the New York Times — published after the indictment of Maria Butina, a Russian agent who attended the National Prayer Breakfast twice in an effort to set up back-channel meetings between Russian and American officials — had a different take, calling the event "an international influence-peddling bazaar, where foreign dignitaries, religious leaders, diplomats and lobbyists jockey for access to the highest reaches of American power."

Biden's address attempted to address those criticisms without breaking tradition and to cast religion as a unifying, rather than divisive, force in U.S. politics. Since Eisenhower, the breakfast has endured as a presidential tradition, he said, but what it celebrates is something fundamentally beyond partisanship, beyond politics, and beyond any one religious tradition: "A nation … always in prayer." ■

Deborah Whitehead is associate professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. This article was originally published at The Conversation (www.theconversation.com).

NEWS

Presiding Bishop joins call for Christians to counter Christian nationalism during webinar

By Egan Millard
Episcopal News Service

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry joined the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for a webinar on Christian nationalism hosted by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, also known as BJC, on Jan. 27. The webinar provided an overview of what Christian nationalism is, how it is showing up in America and how Christians can address it.

The webinar was part of BJC's Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative, which started in 2019 with a statement signed by an ecumenical coalition of faith leaders, including Curry, rejecting Christian nationalism as a "persistent threat to both our religious communities and our democracy."

The topic of Christian nationalism has been widely discussed in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, during which right-wing rioters invoked Christian language and imagery.

The webinar also featured Andrew Whitehead, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, who helped explain Christian nationalism as an ideology that "seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy."

The ideology manifests itself in various forms, such as a drive to privilege Christianity above other faiths, a belief that the U.S. is favored by God over other nations, and the false assertion that the founding fathers created the U.S. to be a Christian nation, Whitehead said. It is also correlated with white supremacy, he added, citing his own research, which indicates that white Americans who espouse Christian nationalist principles are far less likely — in contrast to those who don't espouse them — to believe that African Americans face significant discrimination and police brutality.

"[Christian nationalism] is absolutely a threat to a pluralistic, democratic society, and something that needs to be wrestled with in order to move forward and not repeat the events of Jan. 6," he concluded.

Curry said current iterations of Christian nationalism follow a pattern in which Jesus' most crucial teachings — such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule and the parable of the Good Samaritan — are "moved aside and suppressed for a broad, ambiguous Christ figure who can be adapted to any cultural context." The same pattern was used in Christian justifications of slavery and apartheid, he said.

"When that Jesus Christ is compromised, we're going to find danger," Curry warned.

Curry noted that in the colonial era, the bishop of London told American churches that baptizing African slaves did not grant the slaves the freedom that white people were entitled to.

"That was a moment when white supremacy coalesced with theology and clearly reinterpreted it for political and economic purposes," Curry said. "Christianity was distorted to accommodate to the cultural desires. That's perversion."

That perversion, he said, has infected American Christianity ever since.

"I have always known — I'm 67 years old, been Black all those 67 years — and I have known since childhood that the Klan professed to be Christian," Curry said. "We grew up knowing that, so we knew that there was an unholy conflation of Christianity and white supremacy, and it was often tinged with Americanism."

Curry, Eaton and Whitehead cautioned that Christian nationalism is not the same as civic religion, patriotism or the political work of Christian leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"We are not condemning being patriotic," Eaton said. "That's different. Christian nationalism conflates our allegiance and our understanding — even our relationship — with God with a particular secular state … so you cannot by that definition be a real American unless you're a certain kind of Christian."

Civic religion is different in that it speaks of a "God that demands justice, humility and public service," Whitehead said. "When we talk about civic religion, we're talking about a civic republicanism that emphasizes strong civic virtue. … But Christian nationalism is something different."

Christian nationalism "demands a tribal loyalty," Whitehead said, which includes "violently defending the group and the tribe against outside influences. It's about subduing others. It's about waging wars and, many times, cultural wars. It wants to define the 'us' against a 'them.'"

"The more virulent or dangerous kind [of Christian nationalism says], 'We're number one because we're God's favorites.' And that borders on blasphemy, idolatry," Curry said.

On the other hand, he said, Christian leaders like King have a vital place in American society.

"Dr. King articulated the ideals of an America where there is liberty and justice for all and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the aspirations of the human soul," Curry said. "That's not Christian nationalism, that's a kind of civic religion, if you will, that is legitimate. It lifts people up. It sets people free. And that is consistent with Christianity. The other is not."

Curry's participation in the Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative reflects The Episcopal Church's commitment to "deradicalization," which was expressed at the most recent meeting of the church's Executive Council through a vote "to develop a plan for The Episcopal Church's holistic response to Christian nationalism and violent white supremacy."

"This violent and exclusionary movement is on the rise in the United States, and those of us who believe that God is calling us toward a very different vision, toward the Beloved Community, we have a special responsibility to stand against it," said the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies, in her opening remarks to Executive Council. "If we will not tell the world that it is not Christianity, then who will?"

Curry highlighted that point during the Christian nationalism webinar, calling on Christians to model lives of public faith that embody the compassion, dignity and harmony described by Jesus in the Gospels. ■

BUILDINGS continued from page 8

cause those things happen — so we don't have 48 emergencies all the time with the buildings.

The conversation I have with other bishops is, "How do you put in place some of those mechanisms? How do you change that conversation in the diocese around the buildings?"

When I think about most of my colleagues in the Northeast, [I know that] their problems are outsized compared with ours, because of the size of their buildings, the price of the real estate, the price of living and all of that stuff. I just need to say that upfront.

But I don't think that any of that gets us out of the conversation of "How does our building serve our mission?"

F&L: How is your work with buildings connected to your commitment to racial justice?

JBB: I just think racial justice is the work that has to be done 24 hours a day, all the time, every place. To the extent that buildings can host conversations, I think this is a gift that the church is learning to step into, even now in this pandemic.

The place where social justice and racial justice issues come into play with church buildings is really more about the fact that in the Episcopal Church and lots of mainline churches, we have decided that we don't need churches in poor, Black and brown neighborhoods and we've opened up churches in suburbs. This is the story across Protestantism.

The fact is that particularly in poor, Black and brown communities, a church building plays a lot of roles for that community way beyond what the small congregation that's using it on Sunday [may need].

We now thankfully have this Lilly Thriving in Ministry [grant] that we're starting in partnership with Partners for Sacred Places. We have this grant in partnership with them and with our statewide historic preservation office, Indiana Landmarks, which has a Sacred Places Indiana program.

Collaboratively, we're going to work with those institutions and with the Diocese of Northern Indiana to do this asset mapping. We talk about the assets of our leadership, and now we're saying, "Well, what are the assets that the building has — and every building has them — that provide opportunities for a more effective mission?" ■

This article was originally published at the Faith and Leadership website (www.faithandleadership.com).

FEATURE

Q&A: Washington Bishop Mariann Budde says church should 'lead with Jesus' in its nonpartisan advocacy

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

Many Episcopal bishops, priests and deacons feel called by faith to bear public witness on issues of the day, but few have been as prominent or outspoken in recent years as Diocese of Washington Bishop Mariann Budde. As the top Episcopal leader in the nation's capital, Budde hasn't been shy in calling for federal policies that reflect Jesus' call to care "for the least of these."

Budde, in an interview with Episcopal News Service, said she has tried to "lead with Jesus" rather than let politics guide her ordained ministry, going back to her 18 years as a parish priest in Minneapolis. "If your Jesus always agrees with your politics, you're probably not reading deeply enough into Jesus," she said. At the same time, "I don't think justice and societal issues are optional for clergy. They are embedded in our faith."

Since her consecration as Washington bishop in 2011, she said she has tried to focus on her primary role as chief pastor to the diocese's Episcopalians. When engaging in advocacy, though, church leaders should "take a moral position and not a partisan position, to start somewhere we have authority," Budde said.

Budde and other church leaders also are responding to calls for healing after the recent presidential campaign and its tense aftermath. ENS spoke with Budde on Jan. 13, one week after a deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol by supporters of then-President Donald Trump and a week before the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

The following questions and answers have been condensed and lightly edited for length and clarity.

ENS: The Diocese of Washington is like any other diocese in that it covers a geographic area and encompasses a number of congregations and members, but it also is home to the seat of the U.S. government. Does that shape how you see your role as bishop of the diocese?

BUDDE: The Diocese of Washington goes all the way down to southern Maryland. I wish it had a different name, actually — "The Diocese of Washington and Four Maryland Counties." I mean, there are a lot of people whose profession is government in one form or another, and not just the political, elected side but the civil service side. The temptation is greater to focus on what's happening on the federal side of the government, and that's something that I've tried not to define my episcopate [by]. I'm not a chaplain to the government, I'm the pastor of pastors and a leader of congregations. I tend to pick my issues carefully.

ENS: If you look back at the examples of bishops before you, several of them also spoke out on issues of their time. I'm thinking of Bishop John Walker in the late 1970s and 1980s and Bishop John Chane in the 2000s.

Photo/Mary Frances Schjonberg/ENS

Washington Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, right, recites prayers in March 2013 along with Connecticut Bishop Suffragan James Curry, left, and Connecticut Bishop Ian Douglas in Washington, D.C., in a march against violence.

BUDDE: Bishop Walker is a real model for me, and not simply his moral courage and his social justice leadership, which was iconic, but it was in the context of a very broad ministry. He loved children, he loved parish priests, he loved congregations. He was a man of tremendous grace, so I looked to him quite a bit. I think of him more than anyone, in terms of who has occupied this office.

ENS: It seems like Chane, your most recent predecessor, might have had a different approach?

BUDDE: This is no disrespect to Bishop Chane, because he had a phenomenal ministry, particularly on the world stage and in the Middle East and issues of Middle East peace, tremendous influence and importance. But I dare say that one of the reasons I was elected was I was not John Chane. It was a real pendulum swing for the diocese in the sense that they wanted somebody whose primary commitment was congregational life and vitality, and that the bishop was going to spend the majority of her time working to revitalize congregations. And that was my commitment to them. That's what my passion, my sense of call, was.

ENS: Do you still feel that today?

BUDDE: I do. And I feel that the public witness is only as strong as we are strong. It doesn't really matter how articulate a bishop is if she doesn't have behind her strong, vibrant congregations who are making a difference in their communities and who can mobilize for the benefit of their neighborhoods and towns. And I also think the witness is stronger if there's more than one voice.

ENS: Do you provide any guidance to clergy in the diocese about how to approach political issues and when it is or isn't appropriate to speak out from the pulpit or in public?

BUDDE: In the context of our orientation for clergy new to the diocese and those newly ordained, I discuss the spiritual practice and vocation of preaching and stewardship of the pulpit. In that context, I share my approach and philosophy about speaking into politics and other topics of social concern, but that is only one dimension of preaching that I discuss. Stewardship of the pulpit is essential for good pastoral leadership.

ENS: Is there an expectation for the bishop of Washington to speak out a little bit more? That U.S. politics is part of your mission field?

Budde

BUDDE: Yep, happens all the time. And sometimes I answer to that, and sometimes I take a pass. And I try to do it based on the issues that the constituency I serve has some real expertise or experience with, or issues that are absolutely representative of who they are. Issues of racial justice, for example, are embedded in the life of this diocese, so if I were not committed to that, I'd be the wrong bishop. Immigration reform is an issue that affects not only the moral fabric of our country but the lives of people who are in our congregations.

ENS: Certainly, there is a risk that Episcopal leaders may be seen as being too political. People use the term "political," but what I think they mean is "partisan." A lot of the policy positions that the church has taken seem to be aligned with Democratic positions. I suppose you can't be blamed for which party takes which position, but you must think about that. How do you respond?

BUDDE: I think it's a fair critique, let me just say that. Some leadership of The Episcopal Church, we tend to be more Matthew 25 Christians. We tend to be ones who talk about how we treat our fellow human beings and how we care for the poor and how we clothe the naked — all of those things that Jesus talks about in Matthew 25, as opposed to John 3:16 Christians, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, to the end that all who believe in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Those are the two classic definitions of what it means to follow Jesus. My public stance is more in line with the former because it seems to be the more universally compassionate position that aligns itself with the common good. And I am concerned about a very distorted view of Christianity that has the nation's attention, and I do feel some responsibility to say there's more than one way to live a public life as a Christian. I actually spend a lot of my time studying, reading and learning from Christian evangelicals, because many of them are way better than we are on some of the things that build healthy congregations. And I've learned that there's a very broad swath of people and leadership styles and public leadership perspective within the white evangelical world. It's not some big monolithic bloc. But all Christians must reject what we saw on Jan. 6 [at the U.S. Capitol].

ENS: Do you think that faith can be a healing force in this time of extreme polarization? It could be a dividing force, but what are the ways you think that it can be a healing force?

BUDDE: One of the things about religion is it can be all those things. It can be in service to our highest aspirations and to our most base behaviors. Of course religion can be a healing force. It's the strongest of healing forces. One of my colleagues says, "There ought to be space for grace." Religion, at its best, gives a way to talk about how we fail and how we start again and how we can be drawn back from behaviors that we regret and how we can find a place of healing, sometimes not by dealing with the conflict directly but coming at it indirectly. That's what I see Joe Biden trying to do. I think he's trying to say, "I'm going to do my best to find a way to bring us together according to the things that we really do value as a people." I don't think he's perfect, but I hear him trying to do that and I pray for his success.

ENS: Looking forward, how do you balance the desire to let your faith lead you toward that place of healing and at the same time look back on what has happened and say, "That's not what I think we should be"? Is that in conflict?

BUDDE: It's somewhat in conflict, but I also feel there's a process of reconciliation. You don't just pick yourself up from pummeling someone and then say, "Let's make peace." There are consequences and accountability that do need to take place before we can have kind of a deep reconciliation. And I think that we're learning that with our generational struggle with racial inequity. I feel that in some way we have to allow the people who have been most grievously wounded a chance to heal and to make sure that there's safety and restitution. Healing is a byproduct of work and time. It can't be decreed by a person saying, "It's time for healing." You actually have to work at it. ■

FAITH AND THE ARTS

Episcopal Actors' Guild offers aid to New York performers as pandemic devastates livelihoods

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

The sharp economic downturn in the United States during the coronavirus pandemic has hit the performing arts industry particularly hard. Nationwide, more than half of all actors and dancers and more than a quarter of all musicians were out of work as of fall 2020, according to the National Endowment for the Arts.

In New York, where Broadway theaters have been closed since March and may not reopen for months, some struggling artists have received much needed support from the Episcopal Actors' Guild, a small but dedicated charity that has been serving the performing arts community for nearly a century.

Foster

The organization, based on the second floor of Manhattan's Church of the Transfiguration, is best known for its food pantry and for the annual grants it awards to actors and other performers to help them pay their bills. The pandemic has increased the demand for both services. "We've been doing our part just to get people some financial relief and to get some food on their table," Karen Lehman Foster, the Episcopal Actors' Guild executive director, told Episcopal News Service.

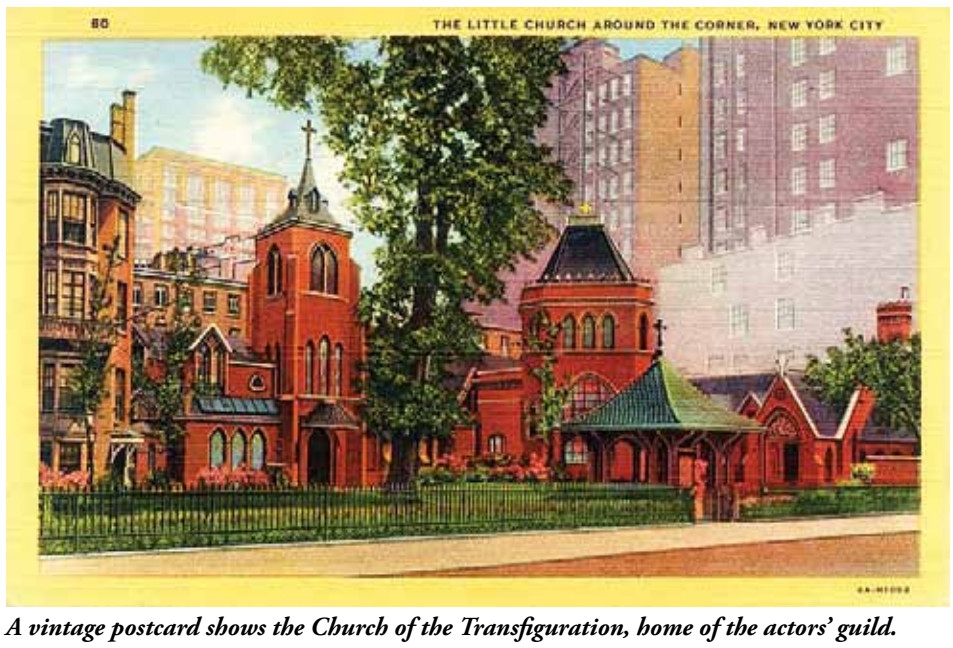
The number of people applying for grants increased fourfold early in the pandemic, she said, and the number receiving food has grown steadily, from about 50 a month before the pandemic to up to 150 a month recently. Much of the organization's food distribution has shifted from in-person grocery pickups to store gift cards and online orders, to minimize the need for personal contact. "Each month, we are spending more in that area because it seems to be the biggest need," Lehman Foster said.

The Episcopal Actors' Guild is an ecumenical ministry open to performing artists of all faiths — or no faith — though it is deeply rooted in the history of Church of the Transfiguration, which is known fondly as the "little church around the corner." The congregation founded the Episcopal Actors' Guild in 1923 and still supports the organization, both by providing office and gathering space for free and by collecting food and monetary donations from parishioners.

"We're part of one another," the Rev. John David van Dooren, Transfiguration's rector, told ENS. "We're grafted together."

Van Dooren noted that there is a plaque on one of the church's pews honoring the Oscar-winning stage and film actor Rex Harrison, who once was a lay reader at the church. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were early leaders of the Episcopal Actors' Guild. The legendary dancer and actor Fred Astaire, who was confirmed at Church of the Transfiguration, regularly donated to the Episcopal Actors' Guild in gratitude for supporting him as a young man, van Dooren said.

The church's stained-glass windows also spotlight the Episcopal congregation's connection to the arts community, with images of saints alternating with panes depicting actors. Today, the church keeps a collection bin in the back of the church for donations to the Episcopal Actors' Guild food pantry. "We assist them whenever we can," van Dooren said.



A vintage postcard shows the Church of the Transfiguration, home of the actors' guild.

The guild offers $750 grants once a year to residents of New York, where the cost of living is among the highest in the country. Recipients are limited to those who have been performing for at least five years and have a compelling need for assistance, such as a sudden job loss. Performers with disabilities and seniors can qualify for $1,000 grants. Those who qualify also can receive groceries from the Episcopal Actors' Guild food pantry every two weeks.

That kind of assistance is much appreciated by actors like Sandro Isaack, who first learned of the guild in 2017, when his career was temporarily sidelined by a surgery that wasn't covered by his insurance.

"The Episcopal Actors' Guild paid for a large part of my surgery," said Isaack, a 47-year-old Brazil native. He told ENS he also received food from the organization's pantry.

Before the pandemic disrupted in-person services, the Episcopal Actors' Guild hosted workshops and offered professional development opportunities to performing artists. After his recovery from surgery, Isaack volunteered to help lead some of those workshops, drawing on his more than 30 years of experience in theater and TV productions.

"One hand reaching out makes you want to reach out your hand to someone in need," Isaack said.

The performing arts industry is cyclical and unpredictable even in normal times, Lehman Foster, the guild's executive director, said. "It's a great industry, but it's not very stable," she said. "Shows open and shows close and TV shoots get canceled, so people are sort of left high and dry, sometimes somewhat unexpectedly."

Photo/Episcopal Actors' Guild via YouTube

Episcopal Actors' Guild volunteers (pre-pandemic) sort food for the Actors' Pantry.

The Guild's lapel buttons and food pantry motto reflects the support the organization gives performers.

The Episcopal Actors' Guild receives most of its financial backing from foundation grants, though it also raises money through benefit events, such as the Christmas show it organized online in December with the House of the Redeemer, another Episcopal-affiliated charity. The event, which included performances by Broadway singers, raised about $2,500, Lehman Foster said.

Lehman Foster is trained as an actor and has a degree in social services. When she began working for the Episcopal Actors' Guild in 2006, it "seemed to be a good mix" of her two professional passions — theater and the nonprofit sector. She was promoted to executive director two years later, and though raised Roman Catholic, she and her family have grown close to the congregation at Transfiguration. She and her husband were married in the church, and they baptized their daughter there.

The Episcopal Actors' Guild doesn't proselytize through its ministry, but performance can be a spiritual practice, Lehman Foster said, even for those who aren't religious. "I think when people perform, that is a divinely inspired thing," she said. "A lot of performers talk about the spirit moving through them."

With the increased demand for the organization's services during the pandemic, Lehman Foster estimated that the guild has served food to more than 600 people in the past year and given out about 300 grants.

"When we think about it, it really is devastating what is happening in the performing arts community," she said, "but we're really glad that we're able to be here to help people." ■

FAITH AND THE ARTS

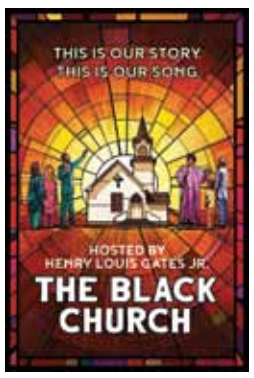
"The Black Church" includes an Episcopal presence

By Episcopal Journal

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is among the faith figures in "The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song," a new four-hour, two-part documentary series by noted historian and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The series premiered Feb. 16 and 17 on PBS stations nationwide and is available via PBS on various streaming services.

Gates traces the 400-year-old story of the Black church in America as the source of "African American survival and grace, organizing and resilience, thriving and testifying, autonomy and freedom, solidarity and speaking truth to power.



"The documentary reveals how Black people have worshipped and, through their spiritual journeys, improvised ways to bring their faith traditions from Africa to the New World, while translating them into a form of Christianity that was not only truly their own, but a redemptive force for a nation whose original sin was found in their ancestors' enslavement across the Middle Passage," according to the PBS description.

Besides Curry, Gates interviews Oprah Winfrey; musician John Legend; actress Jennifer Hudson, civil rights leaders the Rev. Al Sharpton and the Rev. William Barber II and gospel legends Yolanda Adams, Pastor Shirley Caesar and BeBe Winans.

Gates and Curry discuss the powerful influence of music in the Black church and the emotional pull of traditional spirituals.

"When somebody starts singing in a certain way," Curry said, "folk, inside, start reacting and responding. And eventually, there may be shouts and there may be silence, but something is moving inside. And that's where the Black church is found: in those heartbeats."

"And that heartbeat comes from Africa," Gates said.

"Straight from Africa," Curry agreed. "No doubt about it. And it has been integrated with the Christian story and experience."

Gates himself has Episcopal roots, although he is shown in the series attending his childhood church, Waldon United Methodist Church in Piedmont, W.Va. His mother's family was from West Virginia.

Photo/Henry Louis Gates, Jr. via Facebook

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry appears in "The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is our Song," interviewed by Prof. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Gates now is famously the host of "Finding Your Roots," the PBS show that traces the family histories of celebrity guests.

However, his interest was sparked much earlier. In an article for The New Yorker, written in 2008 and titled "Family Matters," Gates wrote about his paternal grandfather, Edward St. Lawrence Gates, known as Pop Gates to his family. He lived in Cumberland, Md.

"Pop Gates was buried at the Rose Hill Cemetery, where our forebears were among the very few Negroes allowed to disturb the eternal sleep of Cumberland's élite white Episcopal citizenry.

"The town's Episcopal churches had been segregated at least since the black St. Philips offered its first Communion, on June 19, 1910. That day, the church's records show, Pop, his mother, Maud, his wife, Gertrude Helen Redman, and about half a dozen other Gateses took the Sacrament, which was offered by the Diocese of Maryland's white bishop."

His documentary on the Black church, said Gates, is "a systematic exploration of the myriad ways in which African Americans have worshipped God in their own images, and continue to do so today, from the plantation and prayer houses, to camp meetings and store-front structures, to mosques and mega-churches.

"This is the story and song our ancestors bequeathed to us, and it comes at a time in our country when the very things they struggled and died for — faith and freedom, justice and equality, democracy and grace — all are on the line. No social institution in the Black community is more central and important than the Black church," he said. ■

Rejoice, revere or condemn — the Easter story by Hollywood

By Linda Brooks

DO YOU LAUGH watching a comedy, cheer a superhero adventure, hide your eyes during a violent horror film? The story structures are similar but each is a variation on familiar old themes.

In Easter-themed films, the storyline is consistent, yet our own personal beliefs affect our perceptions. Our expectations of what should be shown in films about Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are often different from the director's concept.

How do changing social norms affect our viewing? Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection have been interpreted differently on film over the past decades as social norms have changed in American society.

In the post-war conservative era of the 1950s to the early 1960s, "The Robe" (1953) and "Ben-Hur" (1959) were, and still are, considered great epic films. Their stories are not specifically about Jesus' crucifixion, but about the influence Jesus had on the main characters.

Jesus is not so much shown, as felt. The actors portraying him are rarely seen and not credited. The average moviegoer is expected to identify with the main characters. To show a well known actor's face as Jesus could be a distraction. Though they are still staples on television around Easter, they may seem a bit slow (except for the "Ben-Hur" chariot scene) to modern viewers.

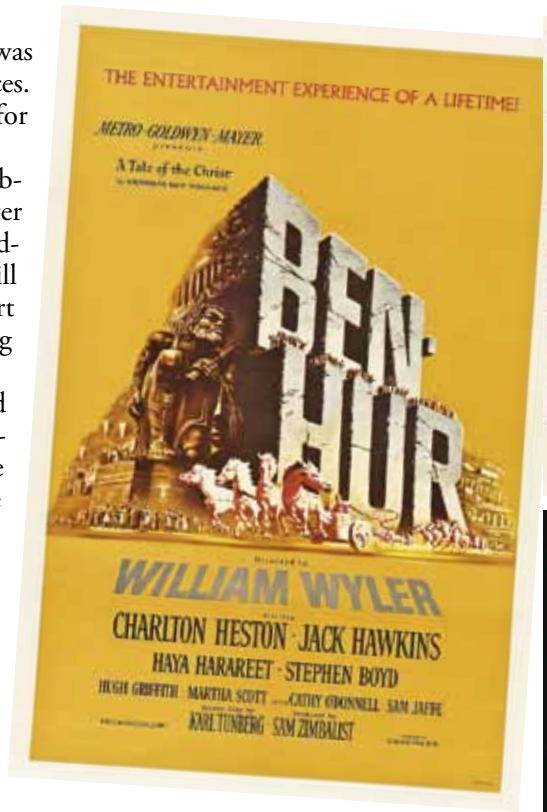
"The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965) was a four-hour star-studded epic told in two parts, the first being Jesus' birth and part two being Jesus' death and resurrection.

Swedish actor Max von Sydow was chosen for the role of Jesus specifically because he was not known to American audiences. Sydow became the "face" of Christ for years.

When released, critics and the public were divided. The subject matter was revered, but the film was considered too long, boring and slow. It still has its admirers today, so perhaps part of the criticism reflected changing tastes in films themselves.

By 1965, America was in a period of upheaval and audiences were interested in stories that reflected those changes, rather than period Bible stories.

To reach the youthful baby-boomer generation in the 1970s, a more modern approach to the Easter story was needed. In 1973, "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell," based on Broadway musicals, presented Christ and his followers as lively counter-culture young people.



"Jesus Christ Superstar" blended modern and biblical costumes and set design. The final crucifixion scene was a montage of ancient paintings. "Godspell" dressed its characters in bright colored costumes filmed against deserted grey New York City streets with Christ crucified against a chain link fence.

The pop culture approach brought the Jesus story to a young audience in much the same way "Hamilton" introduced a new generation to American history.

Pope Paul VI loved "Jesus Christ Superstar" and felt it would reach more people with its modern interpretation. But it was criticized as anti-Semitic and conservative Christians considered it blasphemous by portraying Jesus as a young man with sexual urges for Mary Magdalene.

An older audience comfortable with Christ's depiction in earlier films was not comfortable with this new

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FAITH AND THE ARTS

Idaho church featured in film about reconciliation after school shooting

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Hailey, Idaho, never ceased to be a place of worship, but for one month in 2019, it took on an additional role — indie film set.

The church's role, as the primary set of the new film "Mass," was celebrated by Idaho Episcopalians on Jan. 30 as the movie was streamed online to ticket holders for its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, which is being held virtually this year.

Before the premiere, the Rev. Lea Colvill, who served as the church's priest-in-charge during filming, told ENS she intended to gather with a few others for a private digital screening at the home of a local makeup artist who worked on the film and is a member of the congregation.

"It's a beautiful story about reconciliation, and it's a curious thing that most of the people who were on the cast and crew have a relationship with the Episcopal Church," said Colvill, now rector at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Idaho Falls.

Director Fran Kranz chose to film "Mass" at Emmanuel Episcopal Church after he visited there in the summer of 2019.

Colvill told ENS she was happy to give Kranz a tour of the oldest Episcopal church in the Diocese of Idaho, and during the tour, their conversation turned to the film he was developing, which tells the story of how the parents of a school shooting victim and the parents of the shooter come together to confront the personal impact of the tragedy years later.

Kranz said he thought the church and its parish hall would be a great location for filming, Colvill recalled. "And I said, 'OK, let's make a movie.'"

That fall, the cast and crew took over much of the church for filming, though they paused on Sundays so worship services could continue uninterrupted. Colvill joked that her main responsibility was to make sure a neighbor's dog's barking didn't ruin Kranz's takes — the neighbor agreed to kennel the dog on filming days — but Colvill also provided some input on how the production could depict parish life and church spaces accurately.

Providing space for a movie about reconciliation after tragedy seemed a natural fit for the church, Colvill said. "It's an important conversation," she said. "The job of the church is to help people reconcile with each other and with God."

The importance of those conversations was underscored during the filming by news of a real school shooting in Southern California, which is home to some of the film's crew. In Santa Clarita, a teen shot and killed two classmates and then shot himself.

Kranz chose to avoid depiction of the underlying violence in "Mass," focusing instead on the lives of the survivors and their struggle to heal emotional wounds long after the attack. Much of the movie centers on the extended conversations between the two sets of parents.

Photo/Ryan Jackson-Healy, courtesy of Sundance Institute

Jason Isaacs and Martha Plimpton appear in "Mass" by Fran Kranz, an official selection at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival.

Left, Emmanuel Episcopal Church stands in Hailey, Idaho.

"I always knew I couldn't shoot this movie in L.A. or New York," Kranz told the Idaho Mountain Express in November 2019. "I wanted to achieve a real sense of America, especially in the landscape, even though most of the movie takes place in one room."

In addition to offering the church as the setting for those conversations, some local Episcopalians were invited to appear on screen, mostly notably in a scene featuring a church choir, Colvill said.

Supporting reconciliation efforts "might be some of the most important work I do in my life," Colvill said, and she looks forward to the day, possibly toward the end of 2021, when "Mass" will have its local theater premiere for audiences in Hailey.

Another film with Episcopal connections also premiered at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival: "My Name Is Pauli Murray," a portrait of the first Black woman ordained an Episcopal priest.

The film's description notes that Murray was "a lawyer, Black activist, feminist, poet, and priest [who] questioned systems of oppression and conformity throughout the mid-20th century, with a radical vision consistently ahead of the times. Murray's trailblazing legal foresight influenced landmark civil rights decisions and gender equality legislation that transformed our world."

The film was directed by Betsy West and Julie Cohen, whose previous work includes "RBG," an Oscar-nominated film about the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

"Murray's writings, photographs, and audio recordings, along with newly discovered footage and interviews, interlace to tell the story of a pioneer with a tenacious spirit. West and Cohen balance numerous professional accomplishments with a window into Murray's full and complex private life.

"Murray's personal letters reveal years of grappling with and resisting gender categories, affectionate exchanges with loved ones, and confident and resolute demands for justice," according to the film's description. ■

EASTER FILMS continued from page 13

interpretation. The conflict of what people wanted to see vs what is being shown continued.

Today sex and violence is so commonplace in film that it has crossed a line into the Easter story for the sake of "realism" and with strong backlash.

Martin Scorsese's R-rated film "The Last Temptation of Christ" (1988) offers an alternate reality for Jesus. Tempted by the devil disguised as an innocent young girl, he is offered a peaceful life. Only as an old man does he realize what he must do and returns to the cross to sacrifice himself for the sins of man.

The film spurred protests and boycotts, death threats to Scorsese and an attack on a cinema in Paris that injured 13 people. It is ironic that people would act out with violence the very things they found objectionable in the film. Perhaps the devil's temptation reached deeper into people's perception of what should be interpreted than what Scorsese intended.

Also R-rated, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" (2004) is not for the faint of heart. Violently depicting the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, the film's interpretation is based on Gibson's deep Catholic beliefs. Those holding similar beliefs felt that seeing the violence of Jesus' sacrifice brought them closer to their faith.

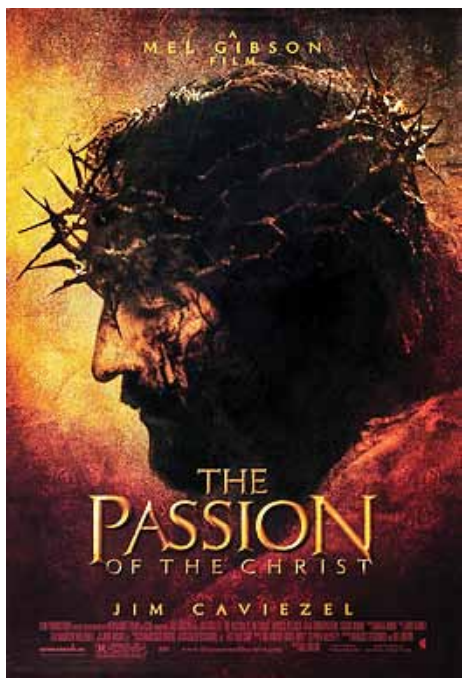
Mainstream Christians had the opposite reaction. Rotten Tomatoes website reviewed it as leaving viewers "emotionally drained rather than spiritually uplifted." Time magazine listed it as one of the most "ridiculously violent" films of all time.

The theme of Christ's crucifixion has been unchanged for centuries — Christ died for our sins so we would have hope for salvation — yet how do we perceive that in our ever-changing world?

What is the visual storytelling arc that goes from witnessing a violent gruesome death to creating a mood of belief and hope in resurrection? The variety of how it is portrayed in film reflects the same variety of our own individual viewpoint of the event so pivotal to our Christian beliefs.

Perhaps we choose to believe that Christ should only be viewed through the prism of light from heaven and not looked at directly. We may turn away in fear — or embrace that light.

Or do we view Christ as being with us, celebrating in song. Do we joyously thank him for his sacrifice, appreciating the beauty of the world he has given us? Do we see him as being human and fearful and tempted by the offer of an easy life rather than sacrifice, as we ourselves could also be tempted? Or do we see the more probable realism of the violence and torture that occurred in ancient times?



How we interpret these films is how we individually interpret the Easter story. We are not just observers of Christ's journey, we are also participants. ■

Linda Brooks is the art director for Episcopal Journal.

NEWS

Washington cathedral, Lucado apologize after controversial preacher's appearance

By David Paulsen
Episcopal News Service

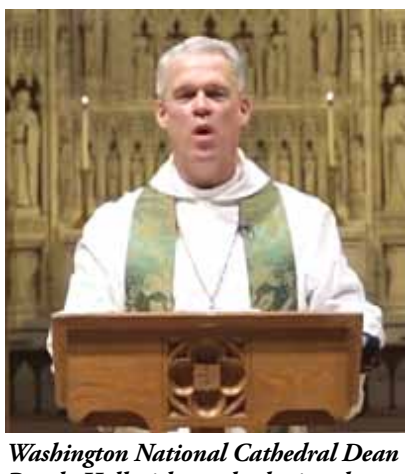
The Rev. Max Lucado has apologized in a letter to Washington National Cathedral after his invitation to preach in a cathedral worship service sparked outrage over his past statements about homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Lucado, a popular evangelical author and pastor, said in the letter dated Feb. 11 that he still believes in "the traditional biblical understanding of marriage" but now regrets the words he used in a 2004 sermon and article.

Critics have condemned his comparison of same-sex marriage to legalized polygamy, bestiality and incest and his suggestion that homosexuality is something that can be changed by pastoral care.

"I now see that, in that sermon, I was disrespectful. I was hurtful. I wounded people in ways that were devastating," Lucado said in his Feb. 11 letter, a copy of which was obtained by ENS. "It grieves me that my words have hurt or been used to hurt the LGBTQ community. I apologize to you and I ask forgiveness of Christ."

Lucado's apology comes a day after National Cathedral Dean Randy Hollerith and Washington Bishop Mariann Budde issued parallel apologies for inviting Lucado to preach by prerecorded video and then failing to heed calls to rescind the invitation after Lucado's 2004 statements were condemned.



Washington National Cathedral Dean Randy Hollerith speaks during the Feb. 7 livestreamed worship service.

Hollerith and Budde also were to hold a listening session on Feb. 21 to receive additional feedback from the LGBTQ community.

Budde and Hollerith both spoke of the pain the decision had caused many members of the LGBTQ community. Budde, in her statement, quoted with permission from a dozen of the people who wrote to her in protest. Hollerith said people had reached out to him as well, and he acknowledged he had erred in not listening to their calls to rescind the invitation to Lucado.

"In my straight privilege I failed to see and fully understand the pain he has caused," Hollerith said. "I failed to appreciate the depth of injury his words have had on many in the LGBTQ community. I failed to see the pain I was continuing. I was wrong and I am sorry."

The outrage continued, despite retired Bishop Gene Robinson's prominent defense of the cathedral. Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church when he was consecrated in 2003 in New Hampshire, agreed to a request by Hollerith to come to the cathedral on Feb. 7 and preside at the online service that featured Lucado.

Now retired and living in Washington, D.C., Robinson told ENS he wanted to show his support for the cathedral as it faced criticism for inviting Lucado.

Robinson addressed the more than 6,000 people viewing the cathedral's livestream. "To those of us who are LGBTQ, while a lot of us are still in pain, while a lot of us have experienced some awful things in our lives — we've won.

"We know how this is going to end. This is going to end with the full inclusion of gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer people, nonbinary people, all kinds of people, in the church and into the society. We work every day to make that true, but we know how it ends," Robinson said.

Like Hollerith, Budde said she should have heeded the appeals of those who were questioning the cathedral's decision to invite Lucado as its latest guest preacher.

"In the days since, I have heard from those who were not only wounded by things Max Lucado has said and taught, but equally wounded by the decision to welcome him into the Cathedral's pulpit," Budde said. "I didn't realize how deep those wounds were and how unsafe the world can feel. I should have known better. More than apology, we seek to make amends."

ENS reached out to Lucado and his church several times late last week and early this week, seeking comment on whether his views on homosexuality have evolved. Church staff members said he was unavailable.

His letter to the cathedral does not specify how much of what he said in 2004 he still believes. "Faithful people may disagree about what the Bible says about homosexuality, but we agree that God's holy Word must never be used as a weapon to wound others," he wrote in his apology letter.

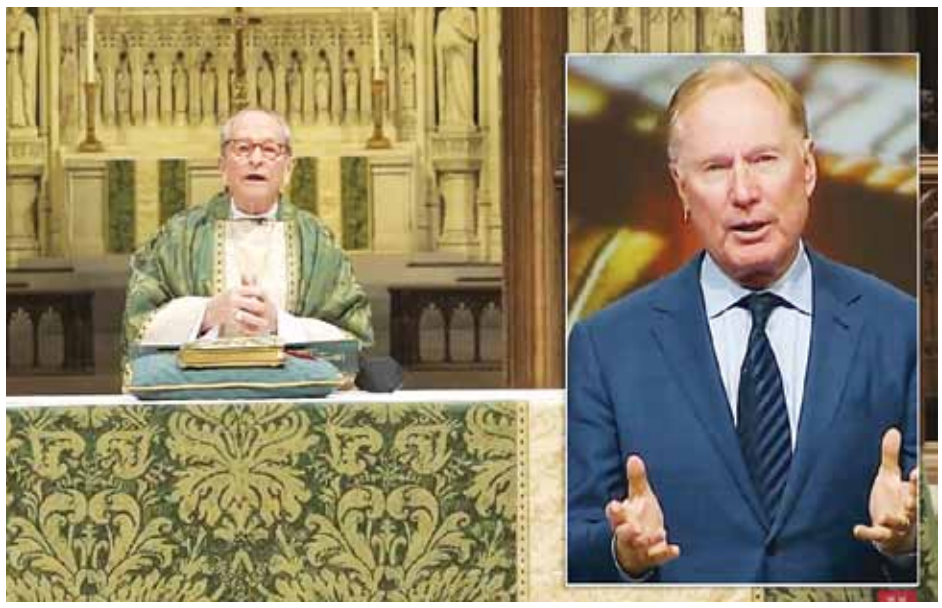
"LGBTQ individuals and LGBTQ families must be respected and treated with love. They are beloved children of God because, they are made in the image and likeness of God," Lucado's letter says. "Over centuries, the church has harmed LGBTQ people and their families, just as the church has harmed people on issues of race, gender, divorce, addiction, and so many other things. We must do better to serve and love one another."

Lucado is a bestselling author of self-help books and the pastor of Oak Hills Church, a megachurch in San Antonio, Texas. His 22-minute sermon for the cathedral's Feb. 7 livestreamed service focused on easing life's anxieties by feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It did not include references to sexuality or same-sex marriage, but critics argued that the cathedral never should have granted him the privilege of preaching, given the harm caused by his past statements on homosexuality and the lack of evidence that he had disavowed them.

"Deep pain was caused to the LGBTQ community by our invitation to Max Lucado to preach at the Cathedral last Sunday," Kevin Eckstrom, the cathedral's chief communications officer, told ENS by email.

"We appreciate him acknowledging the pain his past remarks have caused, and we hope that he will find a way to truly listen to those who have been hurt by his words. For us, here as the Cathedral, we are now in the mode of listening to our community so we can do better going forward." ■



Retired Bishop Gene Robinson presided at Washington National Cathedral's livestreamed worship service. The Rev. Max Lucado, inset, preached in a prerecorded video submitted for the service.

Photos/Washington National Cathedral