groundwork II
DIGGING DEEP FOR CHANGE & GROWTH
Guide for Lenten Study and Action
YEAR B
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A Lenten Guide for Study and Action *YEAR B*

by Jim Lemler and Charles Fulton

Introduction

*Groundwork* is a resource for individuals, congregations and their leaders to assist them in engaging Holy Scripture and the mission of God’s Church. These activities till the ground of prayer, learning, reflection and conversation so that people can learn together. *Groundwork*’s goal is to encourage personal and congregational transformation. It asks congregational members and leaders to dig deeply into the soil of their mission so that they may do serious and joyful learning about the Gospel and their community of faith.

The Lent 2006 edition of *Groundwork* uses the lectionary for the Sundays in Lent from *The Book of Common Prayer* but it may be used at any time for congregational learning and planning (including use with the Revised Common Lectionary.)

The 2006 edition of *Groundwork* focuses on personal growth and congregational mission. *Groundwork* hopes to encourage the vitality and growth of individuals as well as the mission focus of congregations. God has blessed us with gifts for growth and mission. We need to embrace them and allow ourselves to be embraced by them.

*The Book of Common Prayer* tells us (p. 855) that the church’s mission is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ,” and one of its prayers for the mission of the church (p. 816) asks God to inspire our witness to Jesus “that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection.” How we as Christians and members of Episcopal congregations live out the church’s mission depends on where we find ourselves. We may respond by working with organizations that serve the community around us — or we may see an unmet need and develop a ministry of service. We may find ourselves inviting a neighbor to come to Eucharist with us. We may be called to teach the Good News of the Gospel, or to simply share our faith journey with someone who wonders why we belong to the church. We may be called to prayer. Often, the question of how to live out the mission of the church has more than one answer.

This is an urgent and hopeful moment for the Episcopal Church as embodied by its congregations and members. The urgency stems from the Gospel’s timeless call to transformation, discipleship, vitality and mission.

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The Rev. Dr. James B. Lemler is Director of Mission for the Episcopal Church.
The Rev. Charles N. Fulton, III, is Director of Congregational Development.
It also stems from the present moment in our context and culture when people and congregations face new challenges and opportunities. How do we respond in a time when churches that are part of the “mainline” expression of Christian faith experience a decline in membership and attendance? How do we become more grounded in our personal call as believers and more focused on our call to mission as communities of faith?

It is also a hopeful moment for the Episcopal Church, its congregations and its members. The Spirit of God is guiding and inspiring this church and its people. God blesses us with riches of spiritual tradition and experience. New forms of mission and ministry are forming congregations and individual Christian people. People are learning to tell their stories of faith to each other and are creating new ways to invite and welcome those who come to us seeking Jesus.

*Groundwork* provides a connection between the Lenten scripture readings assigned for 2006 and resources for congregational and personal transformation. It utilizes the images and stories of God’s love and purposes which are to be found within those parts of Scripture. Like *Groundwork 2005*, this year’s materials provide links to various mission and congregational development resources that are available from the Episcopal Church Center. *Groundwork 2006* provides materials for education and spiritual reflection. Scriptural themes are identified for each Sunday in Lent and they are connected to three tracks of educational work and mission planning:

- **Track 1 — Welcome and Incorporation** — offering processes for engaging the mission of evangelism. This is primarily material from *Groundwork I (2005)* slightly re-cast so it may be used by congregations that were not able to use last year’s resources.

- **Track 2 — Congregational Advertising** — providing materials for the design and implementation of an advertising strategy for the congregation.

- **Track 3 — Covenants and Commitments** — taking a new approach to congregational mission and vitality focusing on the covenants and commitments that people of faith fulfill for effectiveness and faithfulness.

*Groundwork* is made to be flexible so that it may be used for Sunday or mid-week study, for congregational or leadership retreats, for committees and parish working groups, for preachers and in other ways that may come to mind. Here are some ways that *Groundwork* may be used:

- While the material is framed around the Lenten Lectionary, it may be used at some other point in the year. The congregational and personal transformation resources are pertinent to the ongoing life of the congregation.
This resource may be utilized on Sunday mornings (a 30-minute format) or for mid-week study (a 90-minute format). It is also possible to make use of both Sundays and mid-week times sequentially for this learning.

You may want to make use all five themes or take one theme and develop it in depth for five weeks.

You may also use any of the three tracks and cross the tracks from week to week as an individual Sunday’s activities meets your congregation’s needs.

These materials may be used in a retreat setting (for individuals, congregations, vestries, committees, or working groups.)

All materials have been designed as starting points for you. Please use them and develop your own structures for their use. They are theological and they are practical in their nature. Use what is most valuable to you and your own congregation.

Groundwork contains a number of resources. Additional materials appear on-line at www.episcopalchurch.org/groundwork.

God has given gifts of life and hope to people of faith as individuals and as congregations. These gifts are evident in the journeys of believers and of local communities of faith. They sustain and support growth, service, worship and invitation and are at the foundation of mission.

Groundwork recognizes the mission purpose and action of God. It is a resource for personal and congregational vitality. May God bless you and your congregation during this holy season of Lent and throughout the year.
**Theme:** We are joined to God by God's invitation and through God’s love. God promises us life, compassion and hope. We make promises too. We promise to love, to follow, to trust, to live a life congruent with the Gospel. The promises of our Baptismal Covenant are clear and to the point: pray, resist evil, return to God's love, proclaim the Gospel, serve, strive for justice and peace and respect human dignity. These are promises of mission. They are full of possibility, and they invite our active response. Complacency will not suffice. Commitment is required. We are invited to reflect on the meaning of the covenant of our Baptism, a covenant made with God and we are invited to consider the ways in which we live out that covenant.

**Scripture**

- Genesis 9:8-17
- Psalm 25
- I Peter 3:18-22
- Mark 1:9-13

**Introduction**

“We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you let the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.”

“We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism...”


The First Sunday in Lent offers Scripture that overflows with the stories of water, covenant and life. The Old Testament reading is the culmination of the Genesis story of Noah and the ark. God makes promises to Noah, his family, and the creation itself establishing a covenant of love and new beginning. The rainbow will be a sign of this promise. The covenant itself is a pattern of the loving promise that God makes to human beings to enfold them in mercy, compassion and grace.

The First Letter of Peter provides an interpretation of the story of Noah. The writer perceives the waters of the flood as “prefiguring” the waters of Holy Baptism. Just as the writers of the Old Testament believed that the waters of the Genesis flood washed the world clean of sin and separation, so the writer sees the waters of Holy Baptism washing away all the barriers between humans and God.
Mark, the Gospel writer, tells how the mission of Jesus of Nazareth begins in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, and his identity is proclaimed in that experience: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism propels him into the wilderness where he will be challenged and tempted by the devil, only to emerge manifesting his identity even more fully in his mission of teaching, healing, preaching and announcing the loving reign and rule of God.

The waters of Holy Baptism overflow with promise, hope and life. God promises to be our God, to love us, to forgive us, to guide us, to stand fast with us, to make us a new creation. When we say our thanksgiving over the water each time we baptize someone, we give thanks for God’s grace and favor towards us. We thank God for the water in which we are buried with Christ in his death and by which we share in Christ resurrection and so are reborn.

The baptismal waters give definition to our identity as people of faith. We make promises too, promises that reflect who we are and what we believe. At the core is the promise to trust God. Prayer, service, compassion, justice, peacemaking, proclamation and respect emerge from that trust. The promises of the Baptismal Covenant define us and our mission, call and purpose. The mission itself is enacted through the commitments we make with God, with other people, with the stranger and with our community.

Individuals keep the promises of the Baptismal Covenant in the journey of Christian believing and living. These promises apply to all of life. They are part of the daily walk of life itself. How do I communicate my story of faith to others? How do I practice prayer and remember God’s presence? How do I engage in actions of service, reconciliation, justice and respect in my living day by day? These are the personal questions of our Covenant.

The Covenant also belongs to the whole Christian community. We pursue these promises and actions together. They give shape and purpose to congregational life. Particularly they remind us that we are a church called by God to a mission of reconciliation. Our very purpose and call are reflected in these promises. There’s nothing complacent or humdrum about them. They envision a church that is alive and flowing with evangelism, worship and service.

Today every congregation is called to a stance of mission. This stance requires a clear understanding of the unique call, identity and context of the local congregation. It also necessitates vision, strategy and a plan for the future.
MORE VOICES

Remember not the sins of my youth . . .

I bet we all remember sins of our youth. Sins of ignorance and of excess. Sins against God, ourselves and others. *Forgive my sin, for it is great.* They say hindsight is 20/20, yet there is often a fine line of *luck* between experiences that become “life lessons” and those that become regrets. In good fortune or bad, we are lucky if we *know* how much God loves us. *Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.*

We may go out for adventure, but we come home for love. One’s youth is a time for exploration and mind-expanding encounters; even though sometimes, we end up *alone and in misery,* like the prodigal son. Many young people leave the Church, never to return. Others never knew a church home to begin with. The Gospel calls us to embrace those who have *strayed,* encourage those who *stayed,* and extend hospitality to the *stranger.* It is in offering a hearty “Welcome Home!” that our churches are transformed.

. . . Remember me according to your love.

— A. Bowie Snodgrass

*Episcopal Church Office of Communication web content editor*

A man once went to visit Mahatma Gandhi seeking his advice on a troubling issue. The great man listened attentively and then offered his opinion. Some days later, the man by chance was once again in Gandhi’s company and raised the same issue that he had previously discussed with him. Gandhi spoke again. The man listened and with dismay said, “But when we first discussed this, you told me something completely different. How could you have changed your mind?” Gandhi replied, “Since I last saw you, I have learned something new.” This story illustrates how all of us come to see things differently and come to understandings differently because we have learned something new.

In the story of Noah’s Ark, we see God, the great Yahweh, the God of our forebears Abraham and Sarah as a vengeful God, a God of great judgment. In this story, because the Creator is displeased with those who inhabit his creation, God sets forth to destroy and to begin again. It is without a doubt, one of the most tragic stories in biblical literature. To imagine that every person except one man and one woman and a male and female of every species of lesser life is destroyed is far more tragic than the recent disasters that have swept across the face of the earth, for we live to see these tragedies on television and read about them in our newspapers. For Noah and his wife and the creatures who joined them, there was no documentation but only the devastation they believed was wrought by a vengeful God.
In the story of the baptism of Jesus, we see this same God in a different way. By his own revelation, he has given us his beloved Son and the sins of the world are washed away, not in devastating floodwaters but in waters of baptism and redemption. We have come to see something new and understand God in a new way. Hence, this revelation is the New Testament and what we perceived as God’s bitterness and wrath we now see as the kindness and love of the redemption of God’s creation. If all are born in Christ, then in the redemption of Jesus’ baptism all are cleansed and made a new creation.

We have come to see and understand something new because we have learned something new.

— Thomas K. Chu

Program Director and Staff Officer for Episcopal Church Ministries with Young People Resources

O God of gentle strength, your love embraces me.
With sureness of your care my heart rests willingly.

Your waters of rebirth have claimed us as your own.
As members of one body, we shall never be alone.

And when life’s challenges eclipse our minds with doubt,
Let holy wisdom spark a flame to drive the darkness out.

Where will the journey lead? The path may be obscure.
But promised hope of things unseen will keep our footing sure.

— Patricia B. Clark (1995)

Suggested activities

Track One — Welcome and Incorporation

Telling Our Stories

The Baptismal Covenant (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 304-305) is at the heart and center of Christian faith and life. It describes the covenant which God makes with us and the promises that we make to God. One of the promises focuses on our welcome and incorporation of people into the community of faith: “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” Proclamation, invitation and welcome are parts of the covenant which forms our human response to God’s initiative.

God takes the initiative in our lives and calls us to God’s own love. God is our companion, guide and friend as we proceed on our journey of living and believing. It is important for us to reflect on this journey. Therefore, we need to tell our faith stories to each other and to those whom we welcome into the community of faith. For this first Sunday of Lent, use the faith-story activity as a way to engage stories of faith in your congregation.
**Instructions**

Introduce this Sunday’s theme, Faith Story.

Using the guide “Preparing To Tell Your Faith Story” (following), have two people prepared to tell their faith stories to the group.

Debrief the experience of telling and hearing faith stories.

If time permits, allow participants to begin working on their stories. Schedule another time to re-gather to hear the stories.

**Preparing to Tell Your Faith Story**

by Charles Fulton and Susy Miller

Draw a time line from left to right on a sheet of paper, the left being your birth, the right being the present.

Time line:

Birth __________________________________________________ Present

- On the time line, mark and identify (by year) significant events that were turning points in your life.

- Above the line, describe the context within which the event occurred. What else was going on in your life at that time?

- Below the line describe your awareness of God at that point. Was God present or absent?

- What was God doing with you in that event — comforting, challenging, provoking, teaching, giving, providing, loving, affirming, etc.?

- Look at the whole time line. Are there patterns in the turning point events of your life? What initiates turning points, what is required of you, how were you different after these events?

- What are the patterns in your experience of God and your relationship with God? Is there a consistency in God’s actions and responses in your turning points?

- Imagine telling someone about your insights into God’s presence and working in your life. Tell your story of how God has come into your life and what has been the result when you have recognized God’s presence. Tell the story to yourself, then tell your story to a friend and listen for the story your story will trigger in your friend.

- Tell your story to someone outside a faith community.

- Commit to inviting God into your life as your life line lengthens into your future, regularly engaging the Gospel with others.
Track Two — Congregational Advertising

Just Add Water

This week’s lectionary readings emphasize themes of baptism and rising tides. Indeed, the fresh experiences and media images of recent hurricanes and the 2004 tsunami make Noah’s flood that much easier to envision.

We also live daily with another kind of torrent: the unrelenting barrage of advertising and other media messages. We know the annoyances of seemingly endless streams of television commercials, some 30-second spots priced at $500,000 and up during primetime. Circulars spill out of newspapers. One page of advertising in the Sunday New York Times, for example, begins at about $154,000. E-mail brings unwanted spam, and pop-ups keep popping up online. Voicemail brings other recorded ads.

Advertising is obviously big business. In the United States, at least $245 billion is spent on advertising annually, according to the Newspaper Association of America. It is part of a consumer culture given to excess and in continual need of moral scrutiny and evaluation.

In this sophisticated media mix, how does the local Episcopal Church get the attention of its neighbors in such ways that the good news of its ministries can be widened?

These challenges are actually not that difficult to overcome. The work begins with authenticity and building connections, with planning and follow-through, and — most importantly — with personal, one-to-one interaction. There is no substitute for a personal invitation.

Any congregation wishing to expand its evangelism using advertising and other communication strategies can begin with these practical first steps:

1. An integrated approach is best. Develop for your congregation a comprehensive communication plan that encompasses not only advertising but also publications, web site, signage, media relations, crisis planning, photography and digital recording, among other components. (See sample plan online at www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/GW_CommunicationAdvertising.pdf)

2. Build the plan as a group, perhaps as a task force of the vestry or bishop’s committee. Share ideas and responsibilities.

3. Launch a web site and update it daily. The congregation interested in evangelism and growth will recognize that a web site is as integral to parish life as having a telephone in the parish office. Numerous congregations increasingly report that newcomers visit because they have identified the local church online.
4. These steps assume that weekly parish ministries are strong and inviting, and that the congregation is truly hospitable and prepared to welcome visitors (see related Groundwork resources online). If work is needed here, widen the welcome before advertising.

5. Now consider the following questions about advertising, branding, marketing and other strategies identified in this guide:

**Should a congregation advertise?** The answer is yes. Ideally, budget funding should be applied to cover listings in phone directories and yellow pages, and a weekly local newspaper ad of service times, parish address, phone number and web site. Those are the basics. Other print and digital advertising can follow.

**What’s the best form of advertising?** You are. There is no substitute for a personal invitation into the life of a local congregation. Practice and see what happens.

6. Make a realistic assessment of your congregation, its strengths and weaknesses, and its neighborhood.

**Action item:** Form a Communication Task Force for your congregation, and move ahead in consultation with the clergy and lay staff or volunteers, and with the vestry or bishop’s committee.

**Track Three — Covenants and Commitments**

**God’s Promises and Our Promises: Experiencing the Baptismal Covenant**

God has made promises to us, and we make promises to God. The Baptismal Covenant is an expression and symbol of these promises and our relationship with God. This week’s Covenant and Commitments track focuses on the waters, relationship, and promises of Holy Baptism. In this first week of Lent, we examine the Baptismal Covenant and consider what we best fulfill and what we most neglect in the Baptismal Covenant.

This week’s prayer and learning might include a reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant.

1. Begin by sharing experiences of Holy Baptism (your own or someone else’s).

   - What are the images of water and stories of Scripture depicted here?
   - What are the gifts mentioned that God gives through these waters of grace?
What are the promises of God’s love to us?


Read aloud the first three questions of trust… “Do you believe in God the Father… in Jesus Christ, the Son of God… in God the Holy Spirit…?” Emphasize that these promises are about relationship and trust more than about doctrine and intellectual assent.

Focus on these questions:

- How have you experienced God as Father/Creator; Son/Redeemer; Spirit/Sustainer in your life and/or in the life of the Church?
- In your own faith journey, when has trust been accessible, and when has it been challenging?
- How is trust enhanced and/or challenged in your own local congregation and community of faith?

Focus on the five promises in the Baptismal Covenant in the following way.

- Read them aloud in sequence.
- Discuss the question “What words or phrases have particular impact for you in your own journey in faith?”

Take each of the five promises and examine them in these two ways:

- How do we keep this promise in our personal lives as believers and disciples?
- How do we keep this promise in our community of faith?

4. Conclude the conversation with the following slightly edited prayer from the service of Holy Baptism (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 308):

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.
Theme: What love God gives us! It is real love, substantial love, sacrificial love. God gives God's own son, God's own self. The Good News of the Gospel is that this love freely given, that it is strong and everlasting. Paul sums up the Good News this way in today’s reading from his letter to the Romans: “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God...” (Romans 8:38-39). This love is the foundation of our life as believers. It is also the heart of the life of a congregation. Everything a congregation is and does ought to reflect that loving and giving. How then do we love? How then do we give? How do we live out the Good News that this love is for everyone, everywhere? God’s promise of reconciling love cannot be broken, and it includes every human being. No one is excluded.

Scripture

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 16
Romans 8:31-39
Mark 8:31-38

Introduction

A terrible story confronts us on the Second Sunday of Lent. How can we understand it? But there it is: the Genesis story of father Abraham taking his long-awaited, much-loved son Isaac to be sacrificed. It witnesses to Abraham's intense faith and trust in God. Even though this narrative challenges our modern sensibilities, there stands Abraham, willing to offer and sacrifice his own son. God recognizes this and does not require that sacrifice. No, God provides a ram.

The story of sacrificial loving and giving can be off-putting if not downright offensive. Jesus’ disciple Peter wants to hear nothing of it. In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells his followers about his own loving and giving. It will involve suffering, sacrifice, rejection and death. Peter rejects this, but in the strongest language possible, Jesus tells him and his disciples that this is the necessary way of love and servanthood. He goes even further, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me....” Gospel loving and giving are to be forms of life for Jesus’ followers too.

Such loving and giving are powerful. Paul describes its dynamic character and effect as he writes his Letter to the Romans. “Nothing in all creation... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This loving and giving are so strong that no other power can overcome it.
We are grounded in it, and it will surround us in our living, our dying, and the life yet to come. It is so strong that it embraces all people.

The scripture for Lent II boldly proclaims Gospel loving and giving. It tells the story of the sacrifice of God's own Son and self meant to reconcile us with God. The story is the basis of Paul’s belief and hope that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Paul, who once persecuted the followers of Christ, experienced the forgiveness the story incarnates. The story calls us to love and give as well. The pattern of the cross is the pattern of our loving and giving.

Important questions are raised for us as individuals and congregations on this Second Sunday in Lent. How do we love? How do we give? How do we embrace? How do we include? We are called to live cross-formed lives as believers. Part of our transformation involves sacrifice, giving, and servanthood. We have been shown compassion, and we are called to open ourselves to that compassion. We are called to live in and live out that compassion.

Congregations are called to the same compassion, sacrifice and servanthood. We are representatives of God’s love in the world. A powerful sign of our compassion and service is the quality of our relationships within the congregation itself. The more intentional we are about our behaviors and our commitments with each other as members of the congregation, the stronger our witness to God’s love will be. Every congregation, large or small, urban, suburban, or rural — every congregation — is called to compassionate service. It takes many forms and has diverse manifestations, but the cross is always there. This compassion embraces all people as did Jesus when he “stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace . . . ” (The Book of Common Prayer, Collect for Mission, p. 101).

MORE VOICES

Nothing can keep us from the love of God. This is a foundational statement of Christianity, yet one that we have a difficult time embodying. There are so many things that we allow to get in our way of hearing and knowing this truth in the very core of our being.

We often allow ourselves to measure our worthiness to be loved based on our jobs, incomes, clothes, and the size of our houses. Our worth is caught up in the cars we drive, the workload we carry, the children we raise, and how we decorate our houses. At the end of the day, all of these measures of self-worth leave us feeling “less than” or feeling as though we haven’t done enough.

I find that when I am at my busiest and most stressed, I have difficulty slowing down enough to connect with God’s love. This love grounds me in the knowledge that who I am and what I do is enough for the King of
all Kings. I need time, quiet and space to breathe in and listen to God’s whispered words of kindness and deep love for me and my family.

When I truly know and believe that I am important to God and that God is deeply embedded in my soul then I am not afraid of failing or of not being of enough. I am not afraid of being who God has created me to be: wholly lovable and loved.

The church can often mirror society’s dissatisfaction for people. We are always asking for more volunteers, more Sunday school teachers, acolytes, altar guild members and youth advisors. It is not that these ministries are not important and fulfilling. However, for people arriving at church on Sunday, seeking a place that is quiet enough and gives space to touch the holy, thoughts of inadequacy can spring from being in church. Sunday mornings can feel like one more time of not measuring up.

During Lent, we often give something up or take on something. Perhaps Lent should be six weeks of pausing to quiet oneself to the breath of God that calls us as beloved children. What would we change about our lives, about what we wish to accomplish, if we find ourselves looking at our business through the eyes of God? Perhaps we would truly behave as if we believed that we are more than adequate and most deeply loved.

— Betsy Boyd

Episcopal Church Staff Officer for Youth Ministries

Nothing on this earth or in the cosmos or in the secret and dark places of our hearts can separate us from the love of God.

We hear this Sunday how Paul explains this good news to the Romans: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There is deep forgiveness and hope in Paul’s words. Paul knows in his bones and in his soul what it means to be forgiven. Paul knows what that transforming experience is like.

The man once called Saul used to persecute Christians for a living. His lineage as a Jew, his membership of the tribe of Benjamin, and his duty as a good Roman citizen told him that the way to deal with these upstart Christ followers was to imprison them and kill them. He believed that he was being a faithful Jew who had discerned God’s will and was doing it.

And then one day, the living gospel struck him blind on the road to Damascus and transformed him. No longer was he conformed to the world. So, he knows whereof he speaks when he urges his Roman brothers and sisters to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, and when he tells them to be transformed (Romans 12:1-8).
He knows that the gospel doesn’t just change the way we think. It doesn’t give us a new intellectual framework. It changes the way we perceive the world. It gives us a new filter, a new lens.

And then the gospel’s power continually polishes that lens and re-focuses it, and we see the world and the communities we live in differently now through this gospel lens. We begin to see that if we allow the gospel to transform us, we can never be conformed to the world, we cannot be answerable to the world’s demands, the world’s rules and the world’s expectations and assumptions.

Listening to the Gospel transforms us into a community of believers that stands between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world. It is a community that must be ruthlessly honest about discerning not whether God is on its side but whether it is on God’s side.

That day on the road to Damascus, Paul heard a voice call him by name, a voice he recognized as Jesus’. He was struck blind by the prospect of being loved so deeply despite all the things that he had done to those who were following Jesus.

— (The Rev.) Mary Frances Schjonberg
National Correspondent, Episcopal News Service

We go to God when we are sore bestead,
Pray to God for succour, for God’s peace, for bread
For mercy for them sick, sinning or dead.
All we do so, Christian and unbelieving.

We go to God, when God is sore bestead.
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;
Christian stand by God in his hour grieving.

God goes to everyone when sore bestead,
Feeds body and spirit with God’s bread.
For Christians, pagans alike God hangs dead,
And both alike forgiving.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Suggested activities

Track One — Welcome and Incorporation

God’s love is real and powerful. It is so strong that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” This love is manifest in the self-giving, sacrificial love of the cross. Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross to welcome, to embrace, to hold humanity in God’s love. Jesus also calls his followers to take up our cross and follow him.
The Welcome and Incorporate activity for this Lenten Sunday helps us to reflect on just how we open our arms in the love shown through the cross. How do we welcome and include? How do we distance and exclude? The Inclusion/Exclusion activity helps make the cross the center of our congregational life and evangelism.

**Instructions**
Set up and play the simulation game, “Inclusion/Exclusion Experience.” Reflect on and debrief the experience.

**Inclusion/Exclusion Experience**
A congregation knows who it wants and who it doesn’t want in its membership. A congregation has at its disposal subtle screening behaviors, so subtle that the average congregation is unaware of its behaviors. In order to welcome visitors, we must become aware of those behaviors and learn how to intervene when screening behaviors are being used. The following is a blatant screening device, a very brief (one minute) simulation game:

- Use a flip chart for directions.
- Form groups of six and number the members of each group 1-6.
- Numbers 1-2-3 begin a lively conversation about anything they choose.
- Number 4 tries to break into the conversation anyway he/she can, using all his/her skills of entry.
- Numbers 1-2-3 do everything, short of physical violence, to keep Number 4 out.
- Number 5-6 observe without becoming involved, watching for behaviors and body language.
- One minute *only*.
- Group reflection on the experience
- How many 4’s got in?
- Note that screening behaviors are well developed, that no one asked for training.
- Screening behaviors are far better developed than entrance behaviors.
- Our culture teaches us how to screen, not how to get in.
- Ask the 4’s what it was like to be kept out of a group. What if it had gone on for five minutes?
- Ask 1-2-3 what it was like to deliberately keep someone out, and be good at it.
Ask 5-6 to identify behaviors and body language that they observed and what they experienced watching it.

**Track Two — Congregational Advertising**

**Sacrifice and Servanthood**

This module, featuring samples of effective advertising designs and best practices, is posted online at www.episcopalchurch.org/adcollaborative.

A PowerPoint presentation can be downloaded for viewing.

**Track Three — Covenants and Contracts**

**Our Commitment to Each Other**

It is our own experience of loving nurture within the congregation that leads us to reach out in love to others. The quality of our congregational life increases greatly when we make explicit those implicit intentions we have to help others find their places in our congregation.

**Establish Behavioral Guidelines**

- In small groups have people identify their pet peeves about meetings and how people in the congregation interact with one another. Record responses on newsprint.

- Come together with the whole group to receive the reports from the small groups. Weigh or value the list to identify the top 10. Put the top 10 in positive language. For example: From “People are always late to vestry meetings” to “Vestry meetings will begin on time”

- Remember, the behavior you have the most control over is your own. You cannot force guidelines on others; you can invite people into them. The best way to get a buy-in is to have groups use this process themselves.

Even after you have commitment to guidelines, they must be honored and enforced by the group. Violations of the guidelines must be called and conforming behavior invited (gently at first).

**Create a Membership Contract for Your Congregation**

- In small groups identify and record best experiences of being loved by your congregation, these experiences may be real, imagined or hoped for.

- Listen to the small group reports together and record them on newsprint.
• Brainstorm to fill out the list with occasions for congregational response to members (births, deaths, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, graduations, illnesses, hospitalizations loss of employment, divorces, relocations and transfers, retirements, etc.).

• In small groups, distill the list to those actions and responses you wish to and can consistently provide to members.

• Again, come back together to hear the reports and build consensus.

• Remember, you cannot expect to receive what you yourself are not willing to offer others in your congregation.
Lent III — Getting It Wrong . . . Getting It Right . . .

Theme: What are we called to be? How are we called to live?
These are questions for each of us and for our faith communities.
We struggle to believe and to live a life that reflects our beliefs.
Sometimes we succeed; sometimes we fall short. Sometimes we get it wrong; sometimes we get it right. There are things in our own lives that hold us back. There are also things in congregational life that keep us from clarity and effectiveness in mission. Sometimes we put incidentals at the top of our church list. Idols are formed even in the community of faith. The central message of the Gospel and the primary purposes of the Church can become obscured in church life. We can get it terribly wrong. Our temples need to be cleansed.

Scripture

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:7-14
Romans 7:13-25
John 2:13 — 22

Introduction

Lent III’s Scripture is poignant and powerful. The reading from the Book of Exodus lays out for us the heart of the covenant of God with God’s people. Here are 10 Commandments, 10 ways of life given so that human beings might be joined to God. They form a fabric of life that is focused on God. They show what is central and what is to be avoided. They are the “Law,” the foundation of relationship with God and each other and the pattern for faithful living. These commands flow from the love and redemption which God has for God’s people. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and now God invites them to walk in that redemption by honoring God first and foremost, and by living lives based on faith, respect, and honesty. The law is a gift.

However, there is a problem. People get it wrong. Human beings fall short. We do have other gods, other things that hold high and even ultimate value for us. We avoid the refreshment and restoration of Sabbath time. We give ourselves to the accumulation of things and are not honest with ourselves. We become angry. We fall short. Paul the Apostle was painfully aware of this. The portion of his Letter to the Romans which we read on this Third Sunday in Lent offers his reflection on this reality. Lord knows, he has tried. He has tried to live the law and the commandments, but he has not achieved all that he would hope he might achieve. Too often he has missed the point and gotten it terribly wrong. Too often he has placed secondary things in front of first things. He poses a heartfelt question: “Who will rescue me from this...?” His recognition follows: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” It is God’s love.
The Gospel reading for this Lenten Sunday tells a challenging story. A zealous, angry Jesus enters the temple of Jerusalem, God’s own house, and throws around the furniture, and casts people out. It is a picture of Jesus so wholly different from the compassionate and gentle one that we usually see. However, he behaves like this for a very important reason. He is “zealous” for God’s house. He loves the worship and purposes of God as reflected in this most holy and sacred place, and he sees that the worship and these purposes are being terribly obscured. Secondary matters have replaced primary purposes. The primary purpose of the Temple is worship of and relationship with God and God’s love. That has been obscured, and other things offered in its place. Jesus wants to cleanse the temple so that the primary purpose and mission can be restored, so that people can get it right.

We have gotten it wrong. We have fallen short of the love and grace of God. We run at such a fast pace and become consumed by so many things. We look for God, and we want to be joined to God. Somehow, though, we turn away. Paul’s lament is our lament. “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Jesus offers us the cleansing grace of God’s love and presence, offering our souls new beginnings and new life.

Congregations also get it wrong. Congregations fall short. We do miss the point. Our primary work, our mission is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 855). This can become obscured, and church life can be filled with so many other things. One of the most important issues for congregations today is how we focus on that which is essential to our mission. This requires a careful consideration of the heart and purpose of a congregation and its ministry. It means that we have to take a long, hard look at our congregational life. Some things need to be cleansed. Some things need to be reinforced. Some things need to be begun.

When we as a congregation welcome new people into our community in a way that feels genuine to them we show that we understand how important relationships are to our mission. Clear and consistent strategies to invite and then commit to being in relationship with new people are the beginning of that mission of restoration for all people.

MORE VOICES
The words spoken in Exodus speak to the heart of the Latino: “I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves.”

This is the God in whom the Latino believes and connects with — a God that is present with God’s people. God walks with them and is compassionate, feeling their pain and suffering. Since the conquest more than 500 years ago Latinos have experienced oppression, abuse by those in power and to a degree slavery. Latinos have cried out for help — and in their experience they have been heard by God just like the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt.
Latinos have often left their countries of origin, as well as their homes and family, in search of economic freedom and freedom of expression. When they arrive here they go to church because for most of them the church is synonymous with God. The church is where they hope to find a home and family in this foreign land. They come to connect with the God that was their hope and courage all through their journey. Sadly the church has not always been receptive to their presence. The church struggles with doing what is right as St. Paul so aptly describes in his words to the Romans.

Jesus cleanses the Temple as he reacts to the injustices that he sees evident in the moneychangers. Like the moneychangers in the Temple, the church becomes a part of the institution of oppression when it connects with the economic power that oppresses the people who come to the church to find God.

— (The Rev.) Anthony Guillen
Latino/Hispanic Missioner for the Episcopal Church

What is the best way to live? Many of us hunger for an answer to this question. We hunger for inclusion, to be known and to be loved. We forget we are God’s beloved and turn our backs so we can be comforted and filled by the various distractions our culture provides. We praise the god of the rugged individual, as if we belong to no one and have no responsibility to those around us or God.

We speed through our day. We eat fast, drive fast, talk fast, respond without listening; not noticing any of the gifts God places in our paths. The relationship that Christ calls us into is one full of abundant, unearned Grace. There is nothing I can do to earn it. Nor is there anything I can do to lose it. Christ knows me, my name; my heart. Christ’s greatest desire for me is unity with God; to be reconciled to God and each other. That’s Good News.

Being woven into a community of faith can be a time of profound transformation and growth. We can try new ways of being; we can be supported as we attempt to follow the path God sets before us. However, just as the disciples often missed the meaning Jesus’ teaching so do we; just as the Israelites forgot about God so do we. We want to advance and desire success defined in ways Jesus never defined success. We crave control. I ache to experience what life would be like if I put all that energy into my dedication to Christ. I wonder what it would be like to slow down and attend to the presence of God in all things and take care of myself, my family, my spirit.

I have great hope for our sacred places of worship. At their best they offer ways to decelerate, to renew, and to be blessed in spite of how much we got wrong the week or month before. We bring our whole lives; our joys, our challenges, our grief, our celebrations, our doubt, and our faith to the altar to which Christ invites us all. We re-member the Body of Christ and are cleansed, fed and sanctified as are all the parts of our lives we offered.
Then we are sent out. We are to be people who remember we are loved by God, embraced by the grace of God and restored to wholeness. We are to strive to be examples of the Good News by what we do and what we say. It is hard to work toward forming a fabric of life focused on God where we are open to the unknown or what the Holy Spirit places before us. To decide to pursue Christ with a passion we didn’t know we had inside us takes courage. Remember God made a promise to us and God has kept God’s part of the bargain.

This Lent let yourself catch a glimpse of what it is like to allow God to be first, to follow humbly and to experience the kingdom all around you. And be gentle with yourself; after all, we are just human.

— Kesha Brennom

Episcopal Staff Officer for Children’s Ministries and Christian Education

I have come,
And I’ve not come in vain.
I have come to sweep
The house of the Lord.
Clean, clean, for I’ve come,
And I’ve not come in vain.

With my broom in my hand,
With my fan and my flail,
This work I will do,
And I will not fail,
For lo! I have come,
And I’ve not come in vain.

— Shaker Hymn

Suggested Activities

Track One — Welcome and Incorporation

Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem, turned over the tables of the money changers, and cast out the religious merchants. Why? Because they had gotten it wrong. God wanted the holy temple to be “a house of prayer for all people,” but this primary purpose had become obscured. Jesus takes this radical action to help them get it right.

This Sunday’s Welcome and Incorporate Activity requires us to enter the temple of our own church. It is a tour of the building and facilities with a purpose. We are asked to take a good, hard look at this temple of faith. We are asked to open our eyes as if we were visitors for the first time. How do our buildings invite? How do they keep people out? How do we get it wrong? How do we get it right? You can find suggestions on how to conduct this tour at www.episcopalchurch.org/growth_4600_ENG.htm
Track Two — Congregational Advertising

Commandments, Covenants, Commitments

Talk show host David Letterman has in recent years brought the concept of the “Top 10 List” to new levels as a familiar and often humorous part of his nightly program. How might Dave respond if asked the top 10 reasons for your congregation to advertise? But a better question is probably this one: What do you believe are 10 reasons why your congregation locally — and our church nationally and regionally — should advertise our mission and ministries? After you develop this list, please consider and apply the following guidelines provided by the Episcopal Church’s Office of Communication.

Ten Commandments for Episcopal Church Communication

1. Thou shalt provide broadly appealing messages of Christian hope and grace instead of institutional self-promotion.

2. Thou shalt form a parish/diocesan communication task force and support its work diligently.

3. Thou shalt devise a written, long-lead, annual parish/diocesan comprehensive communication plan and adhere to it faithfully.

4. Remember to achieve effective local print and broadcast advertising as part of the communication plan.

5. Honor thy website and keep it current as the increasingly primary form of communication with the general public as well as your local constituency.

6. Thou shalt be hospitable and welcoming of all people at all times; speak not only English but Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, and other languages as applicable.

7. Thou shalt reinforce, wherever possible, the message: “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You: Come and Grow” (see also churchwide visitors’ site at www.comeandgrow.org)

8. Thou shalt not withhold local funding from advertising and communication.

9. Thou shalt not go unlisted in local telephone directories.

10. Thou shalt enjoy the satisfying and challenging work of communication, and apply creativity and fresh approaches at every turn.

Ten Commandments for Episcopal Church Marketing

1. Find thy niche and expand it: in other words, identify the unique ministries of your congregation, and promote them effectively.
2. Know thy audience and target it (see also this track’s suggestions for Lent IV).

3. Use branding (professional cohesive use of logo, graphics and typestyles) to reinforce message (see also this track’s suggestions for Lent II, and related online resources).

4. Thou shalt always plan ahead — by at least six months’ time.

5. Follow the three marketing cycles recommended for churchwide use (see posting online at www.episcopalchurch.org/adcollaborative)

6. Remember such photo-ops as the Blessing of the Animals, the Hanging of the Greens, the Easter Vigil — and always call the local press and television stations to cover.

7. Study your neighborhood demographics, and target strategically and with culturally competent approaches. (Consult “Percept” research online at www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev)

8. Consult the Episcopal Communicators national organization (www.episcopalcommunicators.org), and join and learn.

9. Remember the children, and keep them involved. Great ways to involve families in parish life include activities for kids and teens.

10. Remember, there is no substitute for the personal invitation.

**Ten Commandments for Episcopal Church Advertising**

1. Determine your audience, and target strategically (see the Seventh Commandment for Episcopal Church Marketing, above).

2. Budget an affordable amount for advertising and build on your successes annually.

3. Phone the Episcopal Media Center (800.229.3788) for a free consultation about best options for print and broadcast ad placement. Sample church-wide ads are posted at www.comeandgrow.org; www.episcopalchurch.org/adcollaborative; and www.episcopalmedia.org.

4. Build positive professional relationships with advertising representatives at your local newspaper, radio and television stations, and cable channels.

5. Do not consider cable television advertising too expensive: there are numerous local opportunities as affordable as $25 per placement.

6. Honor the Yellow Book, and keep your listings current.

7. Do not adulterate your message with insider jargon or other confusion: keep it simple.
8. Place an ad in the local newspaper, perhaps on the religion page. Your ad should give clear and consistent exposure of your congregation's service times, address, phone number and web site.

9. Remind parishioners that each person is a “walking advertisement” for the local congregation.

10. Remember that a great form of advertising is often free and is achieved via effective media relations (see next section).

Ten Commandments for Episcopal Church Media Relations

1. Phone the local religion writer, city editor, TV news assignment editor, and develop friendly and professional working ties with them. Invite these professionals to first-rate parish programs, especially concerts and adult-forum offerings on current affairs. As appropriate, invite them to speak to the congregation.

2. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Always remain truthful when dealing with reporters and editors.

3. Thou shalt not say “no comment.” Alternatives: “Under the circumstances, I am unable to provide further details.” . . . “We are researching these matters in greater detail.” There is usually something that you can tell a reporter; it’s the part of the story that you want told.

4. Remember to prepare two or three talking points in advance for every interview and media project.

5. Honor thy talking points by using them as a bridge from a reporter’s question to your answer. One does not have to answer every question posed by a reporter, but can transition to desired talking points.

6. Thou shalt have a written crisis-communication plan in place, with a designated layperson as media liaison. Use it faithfully.

7. Thou shalt assist the clergy, especially when commenting on difficult situations. At times it is helpful to have a lay spokesperson rather than a member of the clergy.

8. Thou shalt remember the thank-you note, and send them often, especially to reporters and editors who have been helpful.


10. Thou shalt consider professional “media training” for ordained and lay leaders.
Ten Tips for Overall Marketing Considerations
(from the Episcopal Media Center in Atlanta www.episcopalmedia.org)

1. Strategy: Identify parallel language of theology and marketing, and then develop strategy. Become comfortable with the language of communication.

2. Consistency of message: Align with internal and external communication. Conduct audit of effectiveness in both areas.

3. Simplicity: In all things, keep it simple. Watch to avoid jargon and code language.

4. Use experts: Most congregations have untapped talent. If not in the parish, look in the community. Cultivate experts in advertising and public relations agencies, media buying organizations, and so on.

5. Allocate funds: Give communication its own line item.

6. Experiment in a variety of media: Determine what works best in your community.

7. Keep at it: Never just advertise seasonally, or “do it for Lent.”

8. Technology: It’s the last question to ask, but too often it’s where we start.

9. Teach Anglicanism: Do it over and over, and especially when you have a critical mass of people present.

10. Get the rector/vicar involved: It’s more than a job for a committee. In addition to the clergy, involve the entire congregation.

Track Three — Covenants and Commitments

Commitment to New People and Visitors

We put many objective obstacles in the way of new people and visitors. These obstacles must be overturned. Our strategies and processes for welcoming and including new people should be explicit and clear. Such contracts must be owned widely in the congregation and shared with new people and visitors.

- Meeting all together, present your current and existing response to new people and visitors.

- In small groups explore what you would like the congregation’s response to be on a person’s first visit to your congregation, the second visit, the third visit, etc., and when they become members or are identified as belonging. Prepare a report for the whole group.
• Receive the small group reports. Ask the question, what do we desire our response to be and what are we able to consistently provide? You may need to go back into small groups.

• Again meeting all together, ask what the congregation expects of visitors and new people. Record these expectations. Ask how you communicate your expectations of visitors to them.
Lent IV — Abundant Opportunity

Theme: God has given us so much. God is truly rich in mercy and abundant in love. Do we really believe this? So often we worry about whether we will have enough, or whether there really is enough to have. We work harder and harder to consume more and more. We worry about whether God can or will provide. Congregations do the same thing. Churches miss the gifts, the goodness, and the strengths of their own mission. We can miss the opportunities for love, for mission and for ministry. God offers abundance. God feeds us. God loves us. How do we recognize the abundant opportunity that God has given us?

Scripture

- II Chronicles 36:14-23
- Psalm 122
- Ephesians 2:4-10
- John 6:4-15

Introduction

God offers abundance. God feeds us. God loves us. These are basic and foundational realities of faith. The Scripture for the Fourth Sunday in Lent begins with a historical recollection and reflection. It’s a terribly repetitious story for God’s people. God offers fulsome compassion and love. God offers consistent mercy and forgiveness. God offers abundant opportunity after opportunity for mission and service. Unfortunately, God’s people have trouble believing in this abundance, so they turn their backs on the God of life. They believe that they have to make their own way and, in turn, they miss many opportunities and make bad choices and decisions. The Chronicler of the Hebrew Scriptures narrates the saga of God’s abundant love, human resistance to that love, and the consequence of that resistance.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians extols the abundance of God’s love and mercy. “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him.” This mercy, this life, this grace, and this opportunity are all gifts. The writer makes it clear that God freely give us these gifts from the abundance of God’s love. We can’t create them ourselves, and the good news is that we don’t have to create them ourselves.

The theme of God’s abundance is most fully represented in this Sunday’s passage from John’s Gospel. IV. Jesus and his disciples are confronted by multitudes of hungry people. The disciples panic. “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” They are paralyzed by the fear that there cannot possibly be enough. Jesus isn’t. He takes, blesses, breaks, and offers
food, and there is enough. In fact, there are leftovers. Jesus proclaims and portrays God’s abundance. He feeds the people.

We live in a culture in which we are a constantly bombarded with messages of scarcity. We don’t have enough. We need more. We must have the right thing. There is a gnawing fear of scarcity. The Gospel offers us a different message. It is the message of abundance, of lavish gifts of love, grace, mercy, hope, and life. It is the good news of abundant opportunity for life and compassionate service. God feeds us in a variety of ways in body and soul. Can we believe it?

Congregations are at their best when they are witnesses to abundance within their larger communities and neighborhoods. In our congregational life we meet abundance and are fed by the grace of God. From the earliest times of the Christian Church, the Eucharist has reflected the fourfold action of Jesus shown in the feeding of the multitudes: taking, blessing, breaking, giving. Holy Communion itself is a manifestation of God feeding us. God is rich in mercy, compassion, and love. We are given these gifts in their fullness. Congregations need to take stock of their gifts, to examine their strengths and assets, because these are God’s gifts for mission. Congregations also need to assess how they are feeding people spiritually and physically and how they intersect with the communities and neighborhoods in which they live. Every congregation should examine the abundant opportunity for mission that God gives to them and discover how to seize that opportunity.

MORE VOICES

The magnanimity of God is replete throughout the three scripture lessons chosen for the fourth Sunday of Lent.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians that we are God’s gift to humankind. This is the sort of gift that does not ask anything in return; a gift unearned and for which no amount of work on our part could either compensate or purchase.

God formed us from dust — fashioned us in a likeness of his image, dusted us off and set us beside him in a place of honor in Christ Jesus. God gave us the gift of salvation and is good to us at all times. But we frequently forget God’s magnanimous love for us and forget his promise that he will be with us always.

In times when we need him most, we turn away from God and focus on ourselves. We see the example of Peter who attempted to walk on water but began to sink as soon as he concentrated on his own efforts.

In John’s gospel we are again faced with God’s bigness. Jesus puts Philip to the test possibly to determine how well the disciples understand who Jesus really is. Is the man with whom they are engaged in ministry simply human with extraordinary powers? Is this man willing to be their king
or is he the Son of God whose accomplishments the human mind cannot begin to imagine; the one whose kingdom is not here on earth but with the Father in heaven? People probably cannot help but put God in a box. They parallel their own abilities and gifts with God’s, such as the disciples did in failing to recognize what Jesus could do with little.

Another purpose of the test Jesus put before Philip could be that Jesus wanted to teach the disciples and us about hospitality. Rather than send people away either by actions that say “you are not welcome here” or even by words spoken, congregations must consider the radical hospitality that needs to be extended to those who do not look like them, sound like them or think like them.

For this and other reasons many congregations are not very welcoming. They do not give of themselves and their gifts but instead focus on how little they have or on what they will have to do accommodate others who are not in their circle. They look at how their church might change rather than look toward the opportunity and blessings that have come their way.

God who is rich in mercy, out of great love for all humankind made us alive together with Christ. We have been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life to glorify God in all that we say and do especially in God’s name.

— (The Rev.) Angela Ifill
Missioner for Black Ministries for the Episcopal Church

We believe that God has given us so much and is rich in mercy and abundant in love only if we have faith in the future. As life becomes more stressed “we work harder to consume more” or just to survive in our surroundings. As “churches get caught in paralysis,” it’s the lack of true leadership in faith that is scarce and needs to be refreshed during Lent. Talk to God, open up with the truth from your heart, of what you need for fulfillment with God, what hurts and what wrongs need healing.

This Sunday’s Scripture passages it make me think that to be asked “in the house of the Lord to serve his house” is peace enough for all. Grace, love, kindness are the gifts of Jesus’s life and death for us all to know and be a part of living. The message is that there is always plenty if you want it to be so.

Do God’s people turn their backs on God, or have they never been taught that God cares about them unconditionally?

“God who is rich...” But if we are full of guilt and shame we don’t always understand that we are worthy of God’s love. That is where the Lenten message should be for people to learn and hear. Lent should be an opportunity to reach those wounded of heart and soul and to heal their hurt emotions.
“Can we believe it?” Only if we know that these gifts exist for all people. When people hurt and suffer, we who are in God’s service are responsible to express this truth.

“Congregations are at their best when they are witnesses to abundance . . .” Many times right we stifle the very gifts from God and therefore lose our already granted assets. We must remember that when we think we have no wealth, God has provided it to us with our congregations and the hope that we, as his servants, will bring forth this wealth in our ministry. These free gifts of God come with assets that can fulfill the community. But to ignore the greater need of the mission is to sell short God’s opportunity given to you.

— (The Rev.) Janine Tinsley-Roe
Missioner for Native American Ministries for the Episcopal Church

God, food of the poor;  
Christ our bread,  
Give us a taste of the tender bread  
From you creation’s table;  
Bread newly taken from your heart’s oven,  
Food that comforts and nourishes us.  
A loaf of community that makes us human,  
Joined hand in hand, working and sharing.  
A warm loaf that makes us a family;  
Sacrament of your body,  
Your wounded people.

— From workers in community soup kitchens in Lima, Peru

Suggested activities

Track One — Welcome and Incorporation

God’s abundant love is magnificent and full. God is truly rich in mercy and feeds us with compassion, grace, and love. We are given so much. Part of what we are given is the opportunity to share God’s love. This opportunity is all around us in our daily living, in our friendships, in our encounters, in our communities, in our families, in our neighborhoods.

Every congregation needs to reflect on the opportunities it has and assess how well it takes advantage of those chances to serve the needs of their communities. This Sunday’s Welcome and Incorporation Activity helps us to do just that. We are asked to consider the demographics of our local community. Who lives in this community? What are they like? What are their needs? How might they be invited into our congregation? Answering these questions helps us to respond to the opportunity for mission and evangelism. You can begin by looking at the Percept data available at www.episcopalchurch.org/growth_60791_ENG_HTM, htm?menupage=50929.
Track Two — Congregational Advertising

Abundance and Audience

This module, featuring demographic research and case studies from congregations and dioceses, is posted online at www.episcopalchurch.org/adcollaborative.

A PowerPoint presentation can be downloaded for viewing.

Track Three — Covenants and Commitments

Commitment to Your Community

These days many parishioners do not live in the communities where they attend church. This sometimes makes “local responsibility” for participation in the immediately surrounding community a challenge. It also offers great opportunity for engagement in many local communities and a larger picture of the arena of our concern.

Jesus traveled from town to town, always involved in healing and caring for those who were most in need. His message of freedom and liberation pulled worshippers beyond the walls of the synagogue and institutional survival as he cared for those among whom he preached and traveled. Today, even as we are good stewards of our parish, Jesus calls us out into the community as a priority for discipleship.

1. Meeting all together, describe the demographics of the community in which the church is located. Describe the communities from which parishioners come. Where are the schools, public and private? Are there any prisons nearby? If not where are they? What about homeless shelters or soup kitchens? Libraries? Public spaces? Sidewalks? Reflect on the question of who would care if the parish were to close down tomorrow. During the week, check the library (or the Internet) for the economic and social/racial statistics of your community? Were they what you expected?

2. In small groups, discuss what it would take for each community — or neighborhood or zip code — truly to live abundantly. What would be necessary? For some it might well be food, shelter, safe streets. For others, it might be more time, more sidewalks, less stuff, regular trash pick up, or voter registration.

Meeting all together again, discuss what are one or two issues in your community that your parish might organize around. Pick something close to home that a group of you really cares about. Suggest making a Lenten or Easter commitment to making a concrete difference in that issue.
Lent V — Seeing Jesus Through Us . . .

**Theme:** It’s a simple request found in the Gospel according to John. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Indeed, we do. We want to see Jesus in our own lives and experiences. We want to see Jesus in our church. So then, how do we? The first step is to open our eyes to seek him. We need to take a look in our own hearts and experiences to see how Jesus is present, what he looks like, and how he is active as a companion, guide and friend. We also need to open our eyes to seek and to see Jesus in our congregations. Where is he most visible? How do we present him and make him known? How do we invite others to see him as well? We need to ask how others see Jesus through us?

**Scripture**
- Jeremiah 31:31-34
- Psalm 51
- Hebrews 51:11-16
- John 12:20-33

**Introduction**

The Scripture for this Sunday invites us to take a look. We are to open our eyes to see God at work in us, in the church, and in the world. The prophet Jeremiah announces a new covenant that God will make with God’s people. It will be an even stronger covenant than the one which God made with the people when they were redeemed from slavery and oppression in Egypt so many years before. There is a strong intimacy in this relationship. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Human beings will see God and will know God’s forgiving and restoring love.

The Letter to the Hebrews gives a different viewpoint of God and God’s work. Using the imagery of the temple in Jerusalem and the high priest who ministers there, the writer invites readers to open their eyes to see Jesus. Jesus is the new high priest who offers himself in the deepest love possible. When people look at him, they see an unending love that is freely given to anyone anywhere. To behold him is to see new life and redeeming love.

It is a simple and direct request that begins the Gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday in Lent. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” It is a request from some Greeks who are visiting Jerusalem for a festival. They are not children of Israel and really have no right to make such a request of a faithful rabbi and teacher. But they come searching for Jesus because, in a way, they have already seen him. They see his identity and meaning. They see him as the one who will lose his life to give life to others just like grain is buried in the earth so that it might grow and give life and sustenance. They see him as a welcoming, inviting, loving redeemer who will draw all creation to himself through his sacrificial love.
“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Where do we see Jesus in our own living and believing? How is he present with us? How do we perceive him as inviting us more deeply into his love? These are questions of faith based on the belief that we are not alone in this world. God is with us as our friend, companion and guide. God is inviting us ever deeper into relationship with God. For our part, we need to take a look. We need to open our eyes to seek and to see Jesus.

The same questions apply to the Church. Where do we see Jesus? How is he present in this community? How is he inviting people more deeply into his love in this community of faith? How is Jesus seen through us? The purpose of the Church is to make Jesus known through worship, service, proclamation, learning and community. Our call is to invite people into the love of God and to see Jesus in our life and action as a congregation with our arms outstretched just as Jesus arms were stretched open in love and invitation. Congregations need to take stock of how they reveal Jesus and invite others to live the Good News with them. They need to commit to being intentional about how they welcome people and how they proclaim the Good News. Congregations particularly must become aware of new populations that are emerging in their own communities and context.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.” We live in an age where the dominant spirituality is seeking, searching and yearning. People are inquiring and investigating. It is our call, covenant and commitment to present Jesus. It is our commitment, as we promise in our Baptismal Covenant to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” Jesus must be seen through us.

MORE VOICES
“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

The Greeks, outsiders in the Jewish world of Jesus, nevertheless wanted to see him face to face. With almost a relay response, Philip and Andrew rush to bring Jesus into conversation with them. And just as he would to his own people, Jesus tells the very basic lessons of his theology in everyday images: The grain of wheat must die and be planted deep in the earth before it can bear fruit.

The suffering that sometimes accompanies life, can also be the precursor of new life, new vision, new possibility, new adventure, indeed new birth. The death and resurrection which Jesus forecasts here, speaking of his own future, is one which makes possible resurrection and redemption from the seeming deaths in our own lives and communities. This is Jesus’ gift to all humanity — to the Greeks, the Jews and all others.

In Jesus’ words of hope about the wheat we are invited to seek him not only in the familiar places of our lives where we are comfortable and safe, but also in the places that are less familiar — in the broken places of our own hearts, in our — fear or vulnerability where the seeds of hope may seem almost invisible.
We are invited to seek Jesus in the dark shadows of the aftermath of flood or hurricane or earthquake, within our own communities and well beyond. Here is where the grain of wheat might sprout bearing new fruit, where hope may well emerge amidst despair, where new communities, not like the old, may form to bear fruit in unexpected configurations.

As we too yearn to see Jesus, may we have the enthusiasm of Philip and Andrew who ran to find him and the curiosity and fearlessness of the Greeks who did not hesitate to ask and benefit from his words. May our eyes be open not only to the death which may seem to press in on every side during this season, but also to resurrection which is promised in ways we least expect.

— (The Rev.) Margaret Rose
Director of the Office of Women’s Ministries for the Episcopal Church

We are told in Eucharistic Prayer C that “through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous law.” We also know what that law is: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all of your mind and all of your spirit and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But according to Psalm 51, “[we] know [our] transgressions and [our] sin is ever before [us]. For against [God] have we sinned and done what is evil in God’s sight.”

Thus we are faced with our two natures as St. Paul reminds us by saying that the good that he would do he does not do; it is the evil that he does not want to do, that he does.

That is the bad news but, thanks be to God, there is hope.

The coming of Lent usually marks the end of the coldest of the winter season and reminds us that spring, that unique season of renewal and hope, is soon to come. The coming of spring was exalted by the ancient ones as a sign that the gods once again forgave humankind for their transgressions. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we, too, thank God for new life and new growth as evidenced by the budding of the trees and the delicately beautiful colors of the spring flowers.

The psalmist repeatedly asks, what can I give to Almighty God to thank God for the many blessings that I receive daily? Today’s psalm and the prophet Micah remind us that God does not want sacrifices or burnt offerings. God wants, in Micah’s words, for us to “love mercy, do justice and to walk humbly before God.” Psalm 51 tells us that, “the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” And our Savior, Jesus, told us that unless a grain of wheat falls to earth and dies, it remains alone, but when it dies, it bears much fruit.
Let us use this opportunity on the Fifth Sunday of Lent to die to our own sinful selves so that we will be reborn to new life in Christ.

— (The Rev.) Jayne Oasin  
_Social Justice Officer for the Episcopal Church_

O God, we pray for the gifts of ministry. Inspire our minds with a vision of your kingdom in this time and place.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our eyes, that we may see your glory in all creation  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our ears, that we may hear from every mouth the hunger for hope and stories of refreshment.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our lips, that we may tell in every tongue and dialect the wonderful works of God.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our hearts, that we may discern the mission to which you call us.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our feet, that we may take your Good News into our neighborhoods, communities, and all parts of the world.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

Touch our hands, that we may each accomplish the work you give us to do.  
_Hear us, O Christ._

from “A Litany for the Mission of the Church”

Complete litany available on page 196 of “Reports to the 74th General Convention” (otherwise known as the Blue Book) or at www.churchpublishing.org/general_convention/pdf_blue_2003/18-LiturgyMusic.pdf

**Suggested activities**

**Track One — Welcome and Incorporation**

We are all seeking and searching, even those of us with a faith community to call our own. The Gospel request “Sir, we wish to see Jesus...” is a yearning of our hearts. This Lenten Sunday has us reflect on the ways that Jesus may be seen through us. We are the ones who present Jesus to each other, to newcomers, to the world, and to people who are seeking and searching.

The Life Cycle activity is a helpful way of asking how Jesus is seen through us in the present and in the past. This activity assists us in examining the life our congregation. It is a lens for looking at times of growth and vitality, and the times of stability and decline. This assists us to see where
we are now and how we might increase our capacities for proclaiming Jesus and his love. You can find a PowerPoint version of a parish’s life cycle at www.episcopalchurch.org/growth_23212_ENG_HTM.htm and more information at www.episcopalchurch.org/growth_4585_ENG_HTM.htm.

Track Two — Congregational Advertising

What’s Ahead for Your Congregation?

Keeping an eye to the future is essential for effective congregational evangelism and communication. Long-range planning is useful in this context, as is careful evaluation of current programs. Both activities help gauge how others are “seeing Jesus,” as suggested by the themes of this week’s lectionary readings.

Looking ahead, what is your community’s shared vision for ministry one year, two years, five years and 10 years ahead? How can strategic communication, marketing and advertising assist the achievement of these goals?

An effective exercise for the parish communication task force and the vestry is to collaborate on such forward-looking plans, if such resources are not already in place.

How will the parish neighborhood be different in the years to come? What are current demographic trends that may be considered indicators?

For a clear read on current population trends by zip code, log on to the Percept guide at www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev).

What are new initiatives that can emerge from the grassroots? Fresh approaches are often attractive. What works for one age group does not always work for another.

Regarding program development, a few specific trends bear careful consideration.

First, alternatives to Sunday-morning liturgies and education opportunities are needed throughout the week. Increasingly, individuals and families do not always reserve Sunday mornings for church attendance but instead use the time to fit in other activities that strain for attention.

Second, care must be given to culturally competent communication that reaches across traditions and ethnicities.

Third, electronic-mail listserves greatly enhance promotion of program activities. A weekly e-mail to parishioners and other constituents is invaluable in terms of creating awareness and bolstering attendance.

Fourth, online resources are essential for parish support in today’s communication environment. A minimum standard for each congregation should be a website that provides even the most basic church-related
Given these realities, building capacity for web development and electronic communication — in addition to priorities set for advertising and marketing — can be strategic additions to every long-term plan.

A helpful exercise for a congregational task force at this point may be to begin work on drafting a five-year plan that incorporates some of the suggestions offered here. For evangelism and communication to succeed, planning is a key component for the “groundwork” outlined in these pages.

**Track Three — Covenants and Commitments**

Many people engage in rigorous “spring cleaning” of their homes as a way to prepare for the new season of light and warm weather. There is a personal “spring cleaning” that needs to be done by God’s people in anticipation of the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord.

One discipline that we can adopt is a Lenten self-examination by means of a “self audit.” That is, to humbly and honestly examine our lives and note those places where we have fallen short of the promises that we have made to God. Of particular value are the five questions to which we respond when we renew our Baptismal Vows.

These are:

- Will you continue in the apostles’ fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in prayer?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

**Instructions**

A facilitator or discussion leader will pass out five sheets with one of the five Baptismal Questions (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 304-5) at the top of each sheet. Under the question, a line is drawn down the middle of the page making two columns. Over the left-hand column is the words Transgression or Sin; over the right-hand column are the words Corrective Actions.

1. Using the five questions at the end of the Baptismal Covenant, under
each question, list specific actions that we have done and left undone which have been contrary to the promises that we made to God.

2. Look at all of those actions to determine if there is a pattern to your transgressions: are they mainly sins of pride, of jealousy, of prejudice, greed, etc.

3. In the column across from the transgression, list a corrective action or actions that will help you to change your ways and return to a right relationship with God.

4. While this is essentially a task for one’s own discernment, you can turn to your neighbor(s) and share if you like. This self audit will probably not be completed at this session but it is good work to take home and continue during Lent.

5. The leader should have prayers to share with participants at the end of the session.

6. The self-audit should be culminated during Holy Week when we lift up our transgressions to God, ask for forgiveness (perhaps go to Confession) in preparation for greeting the risen Christ at the end of the Easter Vigil or on glorious Easter morning.

May each of these Lenten disciplines aid the groundwork begun by individuals and congregations to widen the welcome of new members into the Body of Christ and the Episcopal Church.