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Follow Me

BY DONALD SCHELL

In 1987, my teenage daughter was attending a Catholic girls school in San Francisco, and she and her schoolmates were recruited to serve as ushers for Pope John Paul II's Mass at Candlestick Park, the baseball stadium where the Beatles sang their last public concert in 1966.

Each usher was issued a brilliant yellow Papal windbreaker.

The planners who had given a lot of thought to the special platform where the Pope, surrounded by rows of Catholic priests, would stand at the altar, gave less attention to a design for administering communion. When it came time for people to receive the Eucharist, clergy distributed communion from stations located close to the altar platform. People poured into the stadium's stairs, heading towards the central communion stations. This created chaos as those surging

forward to receive communion were blocked by those who had already received and were pushing their way back to their seats.

At 17 my daughter was calling herself a Buddhist, though she attended St. Gregory's Episcopal for liturgy every Sunday. With a compassionate, problem-solving eye and her good courage (and the authority of a yellow windbreaker bearing the Papal triple crown in red) she pushed through the crowd directing one priest after another to, "follow me." She led them up and down stairways and stationed them in underserved portions of the stadium: She had no master plan and couldn't worry about doing it perfectly.

St. Gregory's helped my skeptical teenaged daughter find enough confidence in her legitimacy as a leader and comfort and ease in the presence of sacrament and

ritual that she could help solve the congestion problem during this very large and very public Mass. She'd learned it Sunday by Sunday in a congregation where she saw lay leaders and clergy trusting one another's judgment in the moment to respond to what was happening, moving things along as planned and simply, without perfectionism, dealing with the surprises that appeared.

But is the liturgy meant to be a place where *lay people learn to lead*?

I believe it is. With no compromise of our commitment to sacramental reality or holy mystery, we can (and I believe should) shape our congregational practice (what we do together) to form us. With appropriate attention to one another (the gathered Body of Christ) our week-by-week liturgies form us. Together we learn and practice holy courage and blessed, practical creativity.

In "Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices," Brian McLaren and Phyllis Tickle tell us people are hungry for spiritual practice, and as they explore the big practices of constant prayer, fasting, liturgical year, sacred journey, sacred meal, Sabbath, and tithing they remind us that the parts and detail of what we do in liturgy are our

"communal practice." I'm suggesting we pay careful attention in our liturgical actions to the actions shared over time that nurture our authority to act freely. In "Just What is Church For?," I suggest that what church is really for is to enter God's presence to offer our worship and to find ourselves in Christ, in other words *to find our freedom to act gracefully and compassionately*.

Contemporary society and culture can make it hard for us to see the formational power of ritual. Haven't we heard that doing the same thing over and over again is a sure formula for boredom and an invitation to conformity and passivity? Most of us know that the repetition in the liturgy takes us deeper. And what I've seen is how the ritual practices of liturgy, what we do together, frees us to be courageous, compassionate, and creative.

I should add to my story that my daughter didn't learn her resourcefulness for the Papal Mass by serving as an usher or an acolyte in church (though that can be valuable practice too). While she helped out some in Sunday School, she mostly just attended Sunday liturgy (sometimes reluctantly) week by week participating as we all do - finding her place in the assembly, helping visitors find their way through

the service and join in, finding her voice as she sang with people, negotiating pitch and rhythm as we all must to sing together, and watching the service unfold and guide us imperfectly toward new dimensions of gathering, listening, speaking, singing, and acting as one.

I'm not talking here about a liturgical 'style.' Attention to the practice of congregants can shape our way doing a high church, low church, contemporary, emergent, or whatever other description fits our liturgy. What shared actions in our worship services make it clear to us (without commentary) that we make our worship offering together, respectfully, perhaps sometimes clumsily, without falling into perfectionism?

Martin Luther was convinced that Christian liturgy is meant to teach us. He may have picked that up from Orthodox Churches who also say the liturgy is the center of the church's teaching work.

I've mentioned perfection a couple of times. Learning and graceful formation can't happen if it's impossible to risk a mistake. Perfectionism kills learning. A common example - some people avoid offering an explicit welcome to a stranger for fear of welcoming a regular who attends another service or perhaps offending

someone who has been away for a while and expects to be recognized. Every time we take this small risk of possible embarrassment, we grow in our practice of attending to the needs of others.

Learning stops when we can't risk failure. Perfectionism, not repetition, will make ritual numbing to the Spirit.

Whatever your churchmanship, I invite you (lay and clergy) to find the gracious moments of risk in your liturgy, whether they're for the sake of compassion to a stranger, loving service to a regular, or – did someone ever tell you that you shouldn't sing? - even risks to help make something beautiful in the worship of God.

Donald Schell is president of All Saints Company, a teaching and consulting foundation serving churches and church leaders. He also serves on the board of Forma, the Episcopal Network for Christian Formation. After work as a college chaplain at Yale and a country vicar in Idaho, he and his wife joined Rick Fabian to found St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. He was a founding member of the Coordinating Council of Spiritual Directors International.

Resources

- All Saints Company: <http://www.allsaintscompany.org>
- "Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices," by Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, et al: <http://www.thomasnelson.com/finding-our-way-again.html>
- "Just What is Church For?" by Donald Schell: <http://www.allsaintscompany.org/just-what-church>
- St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, San Francisco: <http://www.saintgregorys.org>
- YouTube clip, Pope John Paul II's 1996 mass at Candlestick Park: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQbHPDMgtQo>

Editor's Letter

When recent converts are asked why they chose to join an Episcopal Church, many share they were drawn by the beauty of the liturgy. As Episcopalians we gather regularly to participate in liturgies that back to the 16th century. Week after week, year after year, we join our voices – in song and in prayer – in faithful celebration of Jesus' sacrifice for us all.

But is the liturgy meant to be a place where lay people learn to lead? At the end of the Holy Eucharist the congregation is dismissed with a call to discipleship and leadership, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." For our November and December ECF Vital Practices' Vestry Papers we have reached out across our church to find leaders who are using liturgy, music, and the Bible to inspire and empower people to live into their baptismal covenant. We hope their stories inspire you.

Our November content includes:

- "Follow Me" by Donald Schell of All Saints Company, San Francisco shares the story of how his daughter's regular presence at "Sunday liturgy

(sometimes reluctantly)" led her to unexpectedly claim a leadership role during John Paul II's 1987 Mass at Candlestick Park.

- "The Bible Challenge" by Marek Zabriske, founder of the Center for Biblical Studies, introduces an accessible way for congregations "to form Christians who are deeply rooted in the Bible and possess a well-formed and contagious faith that leads them to Christian service." *This article is available in English and Spanish.*

- "Finding Our Voices" by Ana Hernandez, a well known composer/arranger and workshop and retreat leader explores how moving outside our comfort zone and trying something new can open us up to a fuller understanding of what God is calling us to do in the world.

- "Las Posadas: Hospitality & Evangelism" by Bob Williams, canon for community relations in the Diocese of Los Angeles, introduces this traditional Latino evening and celebration to people unfamiliar with the practice of reenacting Mary and

Joseph's search for shelter for the imminent birth of Jesus.

- Sam Portaro's invitation to think about Advent through Joseph's eyes as he travels to Bethlehem with Mary. In "What Fresh Hell is This?," Sam challenges us to embrace a form of spiritual leadership that demands courageous truth telling.

- In "Baptismal Covenant," Howard Kently Williams offers a look at the way his Brooklyn, NY, congregation lives into the familiar phrase "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself," by building congregational teams reaching both inside and outside church walls.

- "Collective Prayer" by Karen Montango is a reflection on the power of community prayer and reminds us that the freedom to assemble for worship, taken for granted today, was not possible for enslaved blacks during slavery.

■ “Transform Your Congregation: Read the Bible” by Scott Gunn challenges us to “stop finding excuses to avoid reading the Bible,” citing research showing a relationship between our denominational allergy to reading the scriptures and our denomination’s continued shrinkage.

Consider adding a link to ECF Vital Practices to your website. Here’s how: Using your website’s ‘add a link’ tool, insert our full URL – <http://www.ecfvp.org/>.

Following each article is a list of resources offering additional information and/or practical tools.

I invite you to add to this content by sharing the ways your congregation uses liturgy and music to help lay people learn to lead. Post your stories, tips, and resources in the Your Turn section and in the comments box at the end of each article, blog post, or resource.

Faithfully,

Nancy

Nancy Davidge

PS: To make it easier for congregational leaders to find the resources offered through ECF Vital Practices, please con-

The Bible Challenge

BY MAREK ZABRISKIE

Studies reveal that the number one factor by far in church growth and spiritual development is regular engagement with Scripture. This, however, has not been a strong suit for most Episcopalians. Church historian Diana Butler Bass notes that Episcopalians are the best educated of the more than 20,000 Christian groups in the United States, but rank almost last in terms of biblical literacy. The irony is that almost all of the growing churches in the United States excel at encouraging and supporting their members in reading the Bible on a daily basis.

Episcopalians rely instead on reading the Bible aloud in worship. Studies reveal, however, that 95% of what is heard is forgotten within 72 hours. Episcopalians offer Bible studies, but less than five percent of our membership participates in a Bible study.

A new ministry called The Bible Challenge, (add link) which my parish and I started in 2011 at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, has harnessed the Bible in a new way that is having a national and global impact.

The Beginning

The Bible Challenge was born on Christmas Day 2010 as I sat by the fireside and read in a friend's newsletter that he was inviting his church members to read the entire Bible with him in a year.

I was struck by the idea. With January fast approaching, there did not seem to be enough time to invite my parish to join me, but I could see the benefit of doing this on my own.

For over 20 years I had faithfully read the Lectionary, knowing that it omits many of the most challenging portions of Scripture. I believe that many of these omitted passages relate to what we read on the front page of the newspaper, thereby preventing Episcopalians from engaging in many difficult theological questions.

The idea of rereading all of the books of the Bible in sequence and seeing how the narrative cohered seemed like a great challenge.

Feeling spiritually and physically exhausted, I took up the task to replenish my own soul. I began reading Genesis and soon added

a psalm each day and a chapter of the New Testament to the three chapters of the Old Testament I was reading daily. Before I knew it, I had developed a reading plan to read through the entire Bible in a year.

I was so spiritually enlivened by rereading the Bible, that by January I decided to invite some friends in the parish to join me. Having marketing in my bones, I sent personal invitations to members of our church and later to friends beyond. The response was amazing. Many replied, "Thanks for the nudge. I have always wanted to do this. Count me in." In a month, we had over 180 members and over 90 friends participating in what we called The Bible Challenge.

The Results

We live in a culture where people want a challenge and like to measure what they have achieved. Reading the entire Bible in a year is such a challenge. So, I invited people to make a spiritual resolution for the New Year and created a system of accountability to offer support and help participants sustain their commitment.

Two years later, the biblical literacy in St. Thomas church has increased greatly, and a large portion of our members have developed a daily spiritual discipline of reading the Bible.

Spreading the Word

We created The Center for Biblical Studies to share The Bible Challenge nationally and globally. One year later, over 2,000 congregations in 27 countries are participating and 30 Episcopal and Anglican bishops are leading their diocese in The Bible Challenge. The General Convention endorsed The Bible Challenge and is encouraging every Episcopalian, Episcopal church, and diocese to participate in it.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams supports The Bible Challenge, as do the archbishops of Wales, Cape Town, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, and Mexico.

Why Accept?

The Bible Challenge is designed to help Episcopalians and Anglicans develop a daily spiritual practice. The average Episcopalian now attends church once a month, and we cannot make progress by doing anything once every 30 days.

Trying to comprehend the Bible by reading a few verses aloud in

church each Sunday is like trying to listen to eight measures of Mahler's Ninth Symphony once a week for 52 Sundays. It's impossible to comprehend its beauty and hear how it coheres. And, important parts of the Bible such as Proverbs or even the story of Noah's Ark are rarely read in church. In his 1549 Book of Common Prayer, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer did not propose reading the Lectionary, but rather the reading of the entire Bible.

The ultimate goal of The Bible Challenge is to help individuals develop a life-long daily discipline of engaging Scripture and thereby become a more dynamic Christian. As one of our Vestry members notes, "This is one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. My favorite time is getting up first on weekend and sitting with my cup of coffee and Bible. I almost get disappointed when it is time to stop reading."

Getting Started

Many Bible Challenge participants read a printed Bible, but about half have downloaded the Bible on an iPad, iPhone, Kindle, Nook, or Droid. They read it on the airplane, as they commute by train or bus at any time of the day that they desire.

They can read the Bible as slowly as they desire or focus on one gos-

pel or the New Testament. Each parish and diocese can adopt The Bible Challenge as they deem best.

We also encourage churches to offer support groups called The Good Book Club or Intelligent Talk about the Bible, but not to insist that participants must attend.

"The time is ripe for such a challenge," notes Bishop Shannon Johnston of the Diocese of Virginia, where 122 churches are participating in The Bible Challenge.

The Rev. Paige Blair, Rector of St. Peter's Church, Del Mar, California notes, "The Bible Challenge is enriching every aspect of our parish's life, from worship to fellowship to formation to mission. We're talking about this experience in every corner of the parish, making associations with the biblical stories and our daily lives."

To learn more and see how The Bible Challenge can impact your life or the life of your congregation or diocese, visit: www.the-centerforbiblicalstudies.org or email me at: mzabriskie@stthomaswhitemarsh.org

Marek P. Zabriskie has served as rector of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania since 1995. Prior to being called to St. Thomas'

Church, he served as the associate rector of St. James's Church in Richmond, Virginia and as the assistant to the rector at St. George's Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Originally from Boston, Massachusetts, Marek studied philosophy and graduated from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia before attending seminary at the Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. Between college and seminary, Marek studied French in Paris, France and worked for three years as a journalist in Atlanta and Nashville.

Resources

- The Bible Challenge: <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-bible-challenge/>
- The Center for Biblical Studies: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org>
- Read the Bible in a Year: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/read-the-bible-in-a-year/>
- Tip Sheet on the Bible Challenge: <http://www.ecfvp.org/yourturn/tip-sheet-on-the-bible-challenge/>
- What is the Bible Challenge? (video): <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/what-is-the-bible-challenge/>

Finding Our Voices

BY ANA HERNANDEZ

What does your voice sound like to you? To others? How well do you listen? How well do you hear? How do you nurture your voice to be of greatest benefit to the community? Are you able to ask for what you need, and offer what you have to deepen your spiritual life?

What if a part our liturgical work is to pay attention to what God is birthing among and between us, and to deepen our experience of the holy through interaction and possibly even play? What if all creation is co-creation? Is there a connection between finding – and raising – our voices and the Holy Spirit?

Singing and chanting together in worship is about more than praising God and making a joyful noise. If we allow singing and chanting to work their magic, they can be lifelong spiritual practices that enable us to join with others in deepening our ability to trust one another. They can allow to let go and reassess our perceptions and expectations of what it means to walk together in faith. And, they may help us to see the face of Jesus in the faces of those we

encounter.

Begin with a New Song

I recently worshipped in a very traditional church in upstate New York. They'd decided to take a tour of Prayer Book liturgies from around the Anglican Communion, and the liturgy of the day was from the Kenyan Book of Common Prayer. I had been invited to help them with the music. Throughout the service I was reminded me how uncommon and beautiful common prayer can feel.

When people entered the church that Sunday, they found the back half of the church roped off so that we all could sit closer together. This led some to be taken out of their comfort zones before they even sat down. The choir was spread out throughout the assembly, sitting in small groups or with their families. The music director sat toward the back, where he could support the singing, and I was at the front.

The priest was nervous, but supportive and curious.

When I introduced the music, I mentioned that no one knew the

tunes we were about to sing, or what was going to happen, so they would need to listen closely. I added if they needed help, the words were printed in the bulletin and they could turn to their neighbors and listen, as everyone in the room had a piece of what was needed to make this service as amazing as it could be. I encouraged them to take turns improvising other parts. Finally, I reminded us all to try thinking of this morning as group spiritual practice. I noticed they began to turn and look around at their neighbors. Then we made church.

We sang new songs in four different languages after only a one or two sentence explanation to convey pronunciation and translation and a few sung vocal cues that were already built into the hymns. We sang the Psalm over a drone (C-G), and a short while later we improvised underneath the Prayers of the People on the same drone. There was deep listening and graceful harmony. The singing of each tune became more confident as it progressed, and the end of each service felt like the last hallelujah in the Hallelujah chorus! There were many joyful,

thankful, and teary people amazed at the beautiful experience they had made together. For some it was the first time they'd been encouraged to interact and sing together in church.

Helping Others to Sing

Sometimes God sends us to people: Are you willing to be changed by the people you meet? Sometimes God sends people to us: How do you stay open to the people God sends along? How do you invite and encourage them? What if the joy we find singing our favorite tunes can be magnified by helping others to sing their favorite tunes?

Being open to and trusting the people whom God has sent us to work with can be the antidote to any discomfort that arises. When we find ourselves standing in a roomful of people we don't know very well or are asked to sing words we've never said before from a pew we don't usually sit in, we can get very anxious and self-conscious. By letting go of our discomfort we free ourselves for a deeper connection with God and those God has sent to us.

Singing and chanting can help us to find our voices. Singing together with intention can help us to stay present and give us a place from which to practice staying open and curious. When we lend

the strength of our heart's voice to a community in song, the self-consciousness that we often bring to singing falls away, our walls fall away, our egos fall away. The anticipation that something transformational might happen shifts to the realization that something wonderful is already happening and we are a part of making it happen.

We have an incredible opportunity in worship services to travel with a group of people committed to a weekly gathering where discernment of gifts and lifelong spiritual growth can be invited, encouraged, and practiced together. Let's sing it from the mountaintops.

*We come to join in
the banquet of love,
let it open our hearts
and break down the fears
That keep us from loving each
other.*

- Dominican nun's grace

Ana Hernandez is a composer/arranger, writer, workshop and retreat leader. Her passion is using sound to transform prayer and build openhearted, engaged communities. She has produced seven CDs, and is author of *The Sacred Art of Chant: Preparing to Practice*, about the use of chanting as a spiritual discipline. Her

music has been published by Church Publishing, Inc. in *Music by Heart: Paperless songs for Evening Worship*, and *Voices Found Hymnal* among others. She also accepts commissions for the musical composition of hymns and chants.

Resources

- Drone: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_(music))
- Music that Makes Community Intensives: <http://www.allsaintscompany.org/resources#videos>
- Support Your Local Sacred Musician blog: <http://www.anahermusic.blogspot.com>
- The Sacred Art of Chant: Preparing to Practice and Ana's appearance schedule: <http://www.anahermusic.com>

Las Posadas: Hospitality & Evangelism

BY BOB WILLIAMS

In Los Angeles, at the Cathedral Center of St. Paul, the sure sign that Christmas is nearing is the faithful observance of Las Posadas, a traditional evening procession and celebration with 400 years of history and a fresh approach for hospitality and evangelism.

“In this way, we reach out and welcome in the whole community into evenings of prayer and song -- and fun for the children, especially with the piñatas each night,” said Bishop J. Jon Bruno, provost of the Cathedral Center and its Congregation of St. Athanasius, located in the city’s Echo Park district.

“For many immigrants, posadas are expressions of personal faith and family traditions brought to Los Angeles from other places in Latin America,” Bishop Bruno said. “They are meaningful and joyful times that mark each person’s ongoing spiritual journey.”

Spanish for “lodgings” or “accommodations,” posadas re-enact Mary and Joseph seeking shelter for the imminent birth of Jesus. Posadas usually occur each evening Dec. 16-24 when groups of Christians

walk together in procession, stopping at homes where lodging is refused, but eventually reaching a destination where a fiesta – usually replete with warm tamales and cups of atole or ponce – awaits participants.

Estella Garcia, parishioner and lay leader in the Congregation of St. Athanasius, says the observance holds meaning and joy for participants of all ages. “Posadas remind us what Mary and Joseph went through as they were looking for lodging and a place for Mary to give birth,” said Garcia. “This also reminds of what other families go through in struggling to find shelter and food today.

“At the same time, the celebrations are joyful for everyone, and the young people look forward to the fun,” Garcia said, also noting the sense of remembering through the years and generations, marking time, and keeping cultural customs that were once part of her own family’s heritage in El Salvador. “This is another part of our spiritual journeys, and preparing for Jesus’ renewed presence in our lives,” she added.

Central to each observance is the nacimiento, or nativity scene, often large and intricately designed with succulents, moss, and other plants; decorative rocks; numerous animal figures; and the eventual placement of statues of the holy family, shepherds, and – on Epiphany – the magi. The Congregation of St. Athanasius – the first and oldest Episcopal parish in Southern California – offers just such a rich display.

Through the years, other posadas within the six-county diocese have taken up community-action themes, sometimes focusing on response to homelessness while also increasing cross-cultural awareness. Similarly, in the 1990s, the annual Pasadena Posada – an early-December walkathon-type event launched through the AIDS Service Center and All Saints Church – was a popular, successful citywide fundraiser for HIV/AIDS ministries.

Los Angeles Bishop Suffragan Diane Jardine Bruce – who shepherds multicultural ministries in the diocese – helped coordinate posadas while a parish priest in Orange County, California.

“Everyone,” she said, “benefits from participating – through song and walking home to home – re-living the journey of Mary and Joseph to the manger.”

Robert Williams is canon for community relations in the Diocese of Los Angeles.

Resources

- La Posada @ Iglesia Episcopal de San Pablo [http \(video\):
http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=Rk3BaEbtPJg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk3BaEbtPJg)
- Las Posadas: [http://www.ecfvp.
org/posts/las-posadas/](http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/las-posadas/)
- Las Posadas: The Stewardship of a Warm Latino Welcome (video): [http://www.tens.org/
newsletter/newsletter-blog/
las-posadas-the-stewardship-
of-a-warm-latino-welcome](http://www.tens.org/newsletter/newsletter-blog/las-posadas-the-stewardship-of-a-warm-latino-welcome)
- More on posadas in Los Angeles and in other dioceses of the Episcopal Church:
[http://archive.episcopalchurch.
org/79425_126248_ENG_HTML.
htm](http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/79425_126248_ENG_HTML.htm)

El Reto de la Biblia

POR MAREK ZABRISKIE

La mayordomía es sobre la vida, la Los estudios revelan que de lejos el factor número uno en el crecimiento de la iglesia y en el desarrollo espiritual es tener un vínculo constante con las Escrituras. Esto, sin embargo, no ha sido algo predominante para la mayoría de los episcopales. La historiadora de la iglesia Diana Butler Bass señala que los episcopales son los más instruidos de los más de 20,000 grupos cristianos en Estados Unidos, pero que se clasifican casi últimos en lo referente al conocimiento de la Biblia. La ironía es que casi todas las iglesias en expansión en Estados Unidos sobresalen en estimular y apoyar a sus miembros a que lean la Biblia a diario.

En lugar de ello, los episcopales leen la Biblia en voz alta durante el culto. Sin embargo, los estudios revelan que el 95% de lo que se oye se olvida en un plazo de 72 horas. Los episcopales ofrecen estudios de la Biblia, pero menos del 5 por ciento de nuestros miembros participan en un estudio de la Biblia.

Un nuevo ministerio llamado The Bible Challenge (El Reto de la Biblia) (add link) que mi parroquia

y yo iniciamos en 2011 en la Iglesia Episcopal St. Thomas en Fort Washington, Pensilvania, ha utilizado la Biblia de una nueva manera que está teniendo un impacto nacional y global.

El Principio

El Reto de la Biblia nació el día de Navidad de 2010 cuando estando sentado junto a la chimenea leí en el boletín de un amigo que estaba invitando a los miembros de su iglesia a que leyeran la Biblia completa con él en un año.

La idea me llamó mucho la atención. Debido a que faltaba poco para que empezara el nuevo año, no parecía haber suficiente tiempo para invitar a mi parroquia a que se me uniera, pero podía ver el beneficio de hacerlo por mi cuenta.

Por más de 20 años había leído fielmente el Leccionario, sabiendo que omite muchas de las partes más difíciles de las Escrituras. Creo que muchos de los pasajes omitidos están relacionados con lo que leemos en la primea plana de los diarios y que, por lo tanto, previenen que los episcopales hagan preguntas teológicas difíciles de

responder.

La idea de volver a leer todos los libros de la Biblia en orden y de ver la manera en que la narrativa forma una unidad parecía ser un gran reto.

Sintiéndome espiritual y físicamente agotado, emprendí la tarea de reponer mi propia alma. Empecé a leer el Génesis y pronto añadí un salmo todos los días y un capítulo del Nuevo Testamento a los tres capítulos del Viejo Testamento que estaba leyendo a diario. Poco tiempo después elaboré un plan de lectura para leer la Biblia completa en un año.

Al releer la Biblia mi espíritu se revitalizó de tal manera que el 1º de enero decidí invitar a algunos amigos de la parroquia para que se me unieran. Recurriendo a mis conocimientos de mercadotecnia, envié invitaciones personales a miembros de nuestra iglesia y posteriormente a amigos en otros lugares. La respuesta fue realmente notable. Muchos respondieron, “Gracias por el empujoncito. Siempre he querido hacerlo. Cuenta conmigo”. En un mes teníamos más de 180 miembros

y más de 90 amigos participando en lo que llamamos El Reto de la Biblia (The Bible Challenge).

Los Resultados

Vivimos en una cultura en la que la gente desea tener un reto y poder medir lo que logró. Leer la Biblia completa en un año es uno de esos retos, así que invité a la gente a que adoptara una resolución espiritual para el año que se iniciaba y diseñé un sistema de rendición de cuentas para brindar apoyo y ayudar a los participantes a mantener su dedicación.

Dos años después, el conocimiento bíblico en St. Thomas ha aumentado mucho y una gran parte de nuestros miembros han desarrollado una disciplina espiritual de leer la Biblia a diario.

También está teniendo un enorme impacto en nuestra iglesia. Hasta ahora los donativos prometidos para 2013 aumentaron un 27%. Siempre hemos tenido una buena mayordomía, pero nunca como ésta. El Reto de la Biblia nos ayudó a formar cristianos profundamente enraizados en la Biblia con una fe profunda y contagiosa que los encamina al servicio cristiano.

Diseminar la Palabra

Creamos el Centro de Estudios Bíblicos (<http://thecenterforbib->

licalstudies.org) para compartir el Reto de la Biblia nacional y globalmente. Unos años después más de 2,000 feligresías en 27 países están participando y más de 30 obispos episcopales y anglicanos están liderando sus diócesis en el Reto de la Biblia. La Convención General refrendó el Reto de la Biblia y está instando a todos los episcopales, así como a todas las iglesias y diócesis episcopales, a que participen en él.

El arzobispo de Canterbury, Rowan Williams, apoya el Reto de la Biblia, como lo hacen los arzobispos de Gales, Ciudad del Cabo, Asia Sudoriental, Nueva Zelanda y México.

¿Por qué Aceptar?

El Reto de la Biblia está diseñado para ayudar a los episcopales y a los anglicanos a crear una práctica espiritual diaria. En la actualidad, el episcopal promedio va a la iglesia una vez por mes, y no se puede progresar en ninguna cosa haciéndola sólo cada 30 días.

Tratar de comprender la Biblia leyendo unos pocos versos en voz alta en la iglesia todos los domingos es como tratar de escuchar ocho compases de la Novena Sinfonía de Mahler una vez por semana por 52 domingos. Es imposible comprender su belleza y oír cómo forma una unidad.

Y ciertas partes importantes de la Biblia, como los Proverbios o incluso la historia del Arca de Noé rara vez se leen en la iglesia. En su Libro de Oración Común publicado en 1549, el arzobispo Thomas Cranmer no propuso leer el Leccionario, sino la Biblia completa.

El objetivo final del Reto de la Biblia es ayudar a las personas a crear una disciplina vitalicia de hacer que las Escrituras sean parte de su vida y por lo tanto convertirse en cristianos más dinámicos. Como lo señala uno de los miembros de nuestra junta parroquial, "Ésta es una de las experiencias más gratificantes de mi vida. Mi momento favorito es levantarme primero los fines de semana y sentarme con mi taza de café y mi Biblia. Casi me siento desilusionado cuando es hora de dejar de leer."

Para Empezar Muchos participantes en el Reto de la Biblia leen una Biblia impresa, pero cerca de la mitad descargaron la Biblia en iPad, iPhone, Kindle, Nook o Droid. La leen en el avión, cuando van al trabajo en tren o en autobús, a la hora del día en que desean hacerlo. Pueden leer la Biblia lentamente o concentrarse en un evangelio o en el Nuevo Testamento. Las parroquias y las diócesis pueden adoptar el Reto

de la Biblia como les parezca mejor.

También estimulamos a las iglesias a que formen grupos de apoyo llamados el Club del Buen Libro o Conversación Inteligente Sobre la Biblia, pero no insistimos en que los participantes tengan que asistir.

“El tiempo está maduro para ese desafío”, señala la obispa Shannon Johnston de la Diócesis de Virginia, donde 122 iglesias están participando en El Reto de la Biblia.

La Rev. Paige Blair, rectora de la Iglesia St. Peter’s, en Del Mar, California señala, “El Reto de la Biblia está enriqueciendo todos los aspectos de nuestra vida parroquial, desde el culto hasta la hermandad hasta la formación de misión. Estamos hablando sobre esta experiencia en todos los rincones de la parroquia, vinculando historias bíblicas a nuestras vidas cotidianas”.

Para obtener más información y ver cómo el Desafío de la Biblia puede tener un impacto en su vida o en la vida de su congregación y diócesis, visite: www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org o envíeme un mensaje por correo electrónico a: mzabriskie@stthomas-whitemarsh.org

Marek P. Zabriskie ha sido rector de la Iglesia Episcopal St. Thomas en Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania desde 1995. Antes de haber sido llamado a la Iglesia Thomas fue vicerrector de la Iglesia St. James en Richmond, Virginia y asistente del rector en la Iglesia St. George’s en Nashville, Tennessee. Originariamente de Boston, Massachusetts, Marek estudió filosofía y se graduó en Emory University en Atlanta, Georgia antes de asistir al seminario en Yale Divinity School en New Haven, Connecticut. Entre la universidad y el seminario, Marek estudió francés en París, Francia y trabajó tres años como periodista en Atlanta y en Nashville.

Recursos

- The Bible Challenge: <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-bible-challenge/>
- The Center for Biblical Studies: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org>
- Read the Bible in a Year: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/read-the-bible-in-a-year/>
- Tip Sheet on the Bible Challenge: <http://www.ecfvp.org/yourturn/tip-sheet-on-the-bible-challenge/>

- What is the Bible Challenge? (video): <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/what-is-the-bible-challenge/>

What Fresh Hell is This?

BY BY SAM PORTARO

“What fresh hell is this?” Surely Dorothy Parker’s expression or something very much like it was Joseph’s response to the decree mandating a trip to Bethlehem in the final days of Mary’s pregnancy. Burden heaped upon burden. In years to come songs would sweeten that trek to the little town of Bethlehem, but just then Joseph could barely manage the weight of Caesar’s decree and his wife’s condition. From where he stood, Joseph’s predicament was a study in hopelessness.

Many can feel Joseph’s pain; these aren’t easy times for a lot of people or for the church. Resources are tight; spirits flag. Few know this better than those who, like Joseph, bear the responsibilities of relationship. As Diana Butler Bass notes, “Hopelessness...has worked its way into the spiritual DNA of many churches and denominations. It is hard to hope for the future when your congregation is declining, the Sunday school is empty, people are arguing about the issue du jour, and there is little money to pay the pastor—and when programs to increase numbers and vitality have failed.”

A rich, mature spirituality acknowledges and embraces difficulty. To the extent that we allow the frenetic frivolities of the holiday season to distract us and encourage us to denial, we waste the opportunity to engage the hard truths that gave the birth of Jesus its deepest meanings as the incarnation of hope. As Bass rightly acknowledges, “Hope and courage begin with honesty.” Thus this is the season to embrace the difficult truths of our lives, to acknowledge the darker, depressing side of the holiday that is for far too many their experience of this season—to see these weeks from the perspective of the central characters in the biblical narrative. Beneath sweet, endearing reenactments of the tale and melodious carols to the same, there lies the crushing sadness of it all. We’ve no need to preach the shadow of the cross that falls upon the manger; the story supplies all the shade needed to convey the despair it embodies. Without this reality, hope lacks context.

Genuine spiritual leadership demands a courageous truth telling. The apostle Paul was bold to acknowledge that hope is made of those sufferings that call us to

endurance, that endurance builds the character within which hope may be born. (Romans 5:4), and that hope itself is manifest in patience that waits for what we do not see, a patience accessible only through abiding faith that God will ultimately prevail. (Romans 8:25).

Advent’s characteristic waiting is not the anticipatory expectation of envisioned gift—like the child’s wishful waiting for Santa, or even the pregnant mother’s and expectant father’s apprehensions of birth—but a more difficult waiting, a waiting with no tangible outcome accessible to us, exactly the kind of waiting demanded of us just now: waiting for that which we cannot yet see. Or even imagine.

We’ve no idea what the future holds for us, for the church. We forget (to our peril) that neither Mary nor Joseph could’ve anticipated the fullness of their child’s life, much less its enduring power in our own lives. Any and all suggestions to the contrary have been read backward into the story, many centuries after those at the heart of the story had lived and died. None of the apostles could ever have imagined the church as we

experience it; none lived to see even an approximation of it. The human aspirations and apprehensions met in Bethlehem's manger were overlooked by all those present and many who followed for centuries after, for their hopes and fears were founded upon models of messiah and kingship Jesus steadfastly refused. None could've imagined what God was accomplishing—would accomplish—much less how and in whom.

This isn't say that we're to despair, but rather that true leadership in the community of the faithful is unafraid of truth and steadfast in trust. When we let go our own fantasies of a personal or congregational future conforming to our own desires and designs, we open a space ready to receive God's surprise, the life promised us. We've no idea what awaits us but in the darkness of that scary not knowing, the light of Advent shines. We take our places with Joseph and Mary at the center of that fresh hell—that wearying trip, compounded by advanced pregnancy, to comply with an onerous imperial order of census and taxation, to a city lacking adequate provision for them—to find ourselves at a stable, staring into the face of a baby whose future is as tenuous and as unknown as every child's.

That's what we're called to, what we come to in this and every Advent. A new life is being born and though we'll not live to see it fully grown, we hold fast to the assurance of that "God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20) And we rejoice to be here.

Sam Portaro is an Episcopal priest, a graduate of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, and Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned a DMin. He served at The College of William & Mary and Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, and retired in 2004 after twenty-two years as Episcopal Chaplain to The University of Chicago. He is on the faculty of CREDO Institute, conducts Quiet Days and retreats, has served as a consultant and preacher nationwide and in England, and is a Trustee of the Pullman Educational Foundation in Chicago. He is author of eight books.

Resources

■ Advent Meditation Blog from Young Adult and Campus Ministries: <http://episcopal-commons.org/2012/04/09/hello-world/>

■ *Daysprings: Meditations for the Weekdays of Advent, Lent, and Easter* and other books by Sam Portaro: <https://rowman.com/Action/Search/RLPG/portaro>

■ *Inquiring and Discerning Hearts: Vocation and Ministry with Young Adults on Campus* by Sam Portaro: <http://www.amazon.com/Inquiring-Discerning-Hearts-Vocation-Scholarly/dp/1555408923>

■ "Redemption Awaits," by Diana Butler Bass, *Reflections*, Volume 99, Number 2, p. 7. <http://reflections.yale.edu/redemption-awaits>

■ *Transforming Vocation* by Sam Portaro: <https://www.church-publishing.org/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=productDetail&productID=3270>

■ *Veni: Reflections on Spirituality* blog: <http://credoveni.wordpress.com/>

Baptismal Covenant

BY HOWARD KENTLY WILLIAMS

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Through Holy Baptism, lay and ordained church leaders are called to share in the priesthood of Christ. That means that we are not only to believe the concepts embodied in the Baptismal Covenant, but we are to become what we believe. Each time we, as a community, renew our Baptismal Covenant, pieces of our self begin to atrophy and die, so that we may become more Christ-like in our interactions with God's people. Respecting the dignity of every human being is not an easy thing to do for many people. With God's help, however, respecting the dignity of another person becomes the only thing we can do because we are incapable of seeing anything other than Jesus Christ in the faces of humanity.

The Baptismal Covenant is the solemn promise, or sacred agreement, in which God, the principal actor, adopts human persons as his children, and makes them members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. As black Episcopalians, what is even more heartwarming is that God will never revoke this action,

and nothing anyone does can change what God has done.

This is indeed good news, because many of us share in a heritage which, at one time, was violated by slavery, and today years after its abolition, still worship in churches and live in communities where we are expected to contribute financially and otherwise, [yet] do not always feel welcomed. It is even more good news for those of us who are elderly, young, gay or homeless, since we are many times treated as persons to be pitied, forgiven or ostracized.

I serve in a large, vibrant and thriving, Caribbean congregation with a few members from Africa and the USA. This congregation is not the norm in the Black Episcopal Church, which is made up of about 80 percent of congregations with a membership of 150 or less. St. Augustine's, Brooklyn has an average Sunday attendance of 600 and an Easter attendance of 1,700. It is a congregation that seeks to focus on its mission "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ," and is committed to the Baptismal Covenant in which all persons are welcome and accepted

as God's own children.

We are so excited and thankful to God, that in loving trust, we confess belief in One God who we see in three different ways. We see God as the Father who creates, the son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies.

We promise, in loving obedience, and in response to God's generosity, and steadfast love to us:

1. To live lives that are grounded in a sacramental worship, which is true to who we are as black Episcopalians. For example, we ensure that this happens, in our Bible studies, sermons, liturgies, vestments, and the language(s) used in worship, and music. Our Anglican Choir, Gospel Choir, and three Children's/Youth Choirs lead us in music from the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and the USA. As we lift our voices in praise, instruments such as the organ, piano, drums, a 40-piece steel band, and at times, trumpets and a bass guitar may be heard raising their strain in satisfying accompaniment.

2. To honor our humanity, acknowledge our sinful nature, and always return to God for forgiveness.
3. To share the Good News with others, of what God has done and continues to do in our lives. Members share freely, formally and informally the many blessings they receive. For example, a liver transplant, the wonderful report cards from school, the birth of a granddaughter, or a deep spiritual moment or experience.
4. To seek to see Christ in all persons and to serve all persons as we would serve Christ himself.
5. To work for just and peaceful communities in which all persons are treated with dignity and respect. One example may be seen in our relationship with the New York Police Department (NYPD). In New York and in many parts of this country, black people and the police do not trust each other. In recent years there have been several charges of abuse on the part of the NYPD especially towards our young black men. St. Augustine's decided to help in finding a solution to this problem. We started a Police/Fire Fighters' Sunday, in which police officers and fire fighters come and worship, eat and speak with us.

This has led a few parishioners and me to take a 14-week course at the police academy to better understand the police from their perspective. Also, when new police officers come into the community, they meet with me for an orientation in order to gain insight into the community, and the community's expectation of them.

With the advent of airplanes, and more recently the Internet, the world has shrunk to what some have called the global village. That means that we are able to communicate with each other much more readily, and move around the earth, no longer in 80 days, but in a matter of hours.

People travel physically, and virtually. So, literally and figuratively, we are in each other's "face," producing a closeness which is a challenge to many. When people from so many different backgrounds and cultures come together in such close communities, oftentimes they react in ways that deny the Christ in all of us, and grieve a loving God.

Black Episcopalians know firsthand atrocities such as racism, classism, and discrimination against the aged, homosexual people, and recent immigrants.

We have seen the effects of oppression resulting in expressions of poverty such as homelessness, addiction, substance abuse, domestic violence, human trafficking, and elder and child abuse. These evils are not always as a consequence of poverty, alone, but poverty provides a fertile environment for greed, hate, and other forms of bigotry to take root and flourish. But these are antithetical to what our Christian actions should be as we promised in the Baptismal Covenant.

How then are we able to be true to our Baptismal Covenant? The church must constantly and consistently facilitate authentic, sacramental worship, teaching and training. Who is responsible for this?

The onus must be placed squarely on the shoulders of church leaders - both clergy and lay together. I am convinced that the most effective form of congregational leadership happens when clergy and elected, appointed or informal lay leaders work as a team. There have been too many stories of negativity between clergy and lay leaders, because each views congregational leadership as theirs [alone].

Such is not the case at St. Augustine's. Clergy and elected

lay leaders realize that the life and work of the church is for “all.” The work is too much for any one person or entity. Also, God reveals God’s truth and will to ALL God’s covenanted people, not only to the ordained.

We organize our life and work into three areas, which are owned by the entire congregation:

1. **Spirituality and Formation** - the **food** for all Christians. This includes the ritual worship and other pastoral rites of the church, bible studies, retreats, and other formational opportunities. This is coordinated by the rector.
2. **Mission and Ministry** - the **work** of all Christians. More than 20 groups in the church have organized themselves to engage the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals, along with all the other community commitments. This is coordinated by a warden.
3. **Management and Finance** - the **infrastructure**, which provides the support needed for Christians’ food and work, includes my 7Ps: property, personnel, policy, procedures, polity, planning, and program. Finance is the Big Four: budget, endowments, investments,

and fund raising. This is also coordinated by a warden.

The Baptismal Covenant requires an awareness and acceptance of who we are as black Episcopalians, our religious traditions and the social, political, and economic concerns in our communities. Living into the Covenant requires an inward journey into us and willingness, and readiness, in a developmentally appropriate way, to confess publicly, through word and deed, that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives.

This article was first published as part of “Stories of Transformation: Worship, Witness, and Work in the Black Community,” a new resource from the Episcopal Church’s Office of Black Ministries and was reprinted by permission.

The Rev. Canon Dr. Howard Kently Williams is the rector of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. A native of Jamaica, West Indies, he is the former archdeacon of Brooklyn in the Diocese of Long Island. Williams holds a Certificate in Ministerial Studies, a Licentiate in Theology, a Master of Arts in Christian Education, and a Doctorate in Ministry from the United Theological College of the West Indies, the University

of the West Indies, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the Graduate Theological Foundation respectively. His Doctorate is in Management and Spirituality.

Resources

- St Augustine’s Episcopal Church: <http://www.staugustinesbrooklyn.org/>
- “Stories of Transformation: Worship, Witness, and Work in the Black Community,” a resource from the Episcopal Church’s Office of Black Ministries: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/black_theologian_writing_project.pdf

Collective Prayer

BY KAREN B. MONTAGNO

Let Us Pray

I pray. You pray. We pray. We pray one unified prayer, the collect, as we join our hearts, minds and our voices. This one prayer with many voices is like an ocean wave that builds energy from the wind. The multitude of voices, powered by the Holy Spirit, mimics the swelling of the wave until the prayer, like the wave, crests and finally breaks. With its energy released, the prayer rises to God. Imagine the remains of a foamy whitecap when the wave crest breaks and reaches the shoreline of the beach. A wave no more, the calm, foamy water quickly rolls back into the source from whence it came, retreating into itself, yet present. Let us release our prayer for all baptized Christians to God, and may the foamy "whitecap" calm us and remain present with us as we conclude the collect with, "Amen."

The Collect is a short but powerful prayer because it "collects" the community and God into common spiritual ground. Collective prayer, the simple act of praying together, seems like an ordinary experience for many of us today. Community prayer, however, is a privilege that did not always exist for Black people.

During slavery in the U.S, enslaved blacks did not have the freedom to gather together in worship. They could not be full members or pray freely as a community in some churches. In many places, it was against the law for enslaved people to be taught to read and write.

They could not own a Bible, let alone read it. The inhumane treatment they received at the hands of their enslavers, and the dehumanizing experiences were, in direct contradiction to the Gospel. The word that was preached was twisted to promote the interest of the enslavers.

In spite of this, the Gospel was heard. Black people interpreted the scripture, and prayers they heard for themselves. Scripture became a prophetic and liberating force in lives of hardship and oppression. They took for their own, the story of the Exodus and the Israelites' escape from bondage.

Daniel in the lion's den was their story of God protecting the faithful. It was a story of deliverance. Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers was a familiar story. Many had experienced being sold

into slavery by black brothers and sisters.

Jesus embraced the outcasts and broke bread with them. Jesus shared in their suffering when he suffered on the cross. Jesus became their friend, sharing their stripes, humiliations and troubles. Black people would "steal away" to be with their friend Jesus. They would gather in secret at appointed times and places to pray, preach, sing, lament, celebrate, strengthen, and encourage each other.

They would slip away to remote places at night where they could not be seen, or heard. These times would supply the hope, and endurance they needed to actively resist the enslavement of their spirits as well as their bodies. The singing of the hymn "Steal Away to Jesus" was the signal for the gathering.

An important part of setting the stage for their prayers was what has become known as a Prayer Kettle and kettle prayers. The prayer kettle was a big cauldron or pot that would be placed upside on the ground.

Rocks might be placed under the

rim so they could speak into the kettle. Kettle Prayers were the prayers people offered into the pot so they could not be heard in the night. Like the Prayer Book collect, the prayer kettle became a container for all their hopes, and dreams collected there, and lifted to God.

Many descendants of enslaved people pass the Prayer Kettle from generation to generation as a touchstone or a cherished and sacred connection to their ancestors. It is a reminder of their suffering, and the comfort, healing, and release they found in prayer together.

It is cherished because it connects them with the past, in a tangible and poignant way. The Prayer Kettle is sacred because it is filled with their prayers and conversations with God. As we gather to say our collect, and other prayers, we stand in that tradition. Now, the house of worship is our Prayer Kettle, its walls are steeped in our prayers.

Today, the prayers we share come from the pages of a book as well as our hearts. In those pages, we read the prayers of many people. We can even write our own. Let us remember the privilege we have to gather in the house of God, and pray together.

Collects are short prayers found throughout the Book of Common Prayer. It is a prayer purposefully constructed to gather our hearts, hopes, and intentions—our collected prayers—into a few words. The shape of the prayer is simple with three ideas.

It begins with something about the nature of God, and describes some way that God is present in the world. For example, “O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature.” (For Stewardship of Creation, BCP 259). The next words form a request. Collects usually end with the name of God or Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The prayer leader begins with these words, “The Lord be with you.” These words are a pronouncement (a statement) and a hope. We respond, “And also with you.” With these words we acknowledge, and welcome the marvelous reality that God is present among us. We invite God into our collective prayer.

“Let us pray,” is an invitation that many of us miss. It is not simply an introduction to the next words that the celebrant will say. It is a pregnant moment. There is excitement in gathering. Now is the moment to sit, and breathe in the spirit.

In those moments, after “Let us pray”, comes a settling of the Spirit among us. As we arrive in the sacred space, we carry a variety of concerns, and joys on our hearts, and minds. For example, looking at members of our church, we might observe Toni. She sighs and her children are restless from all their rushing to get there. Maybe now they will settle down.

Marie arranges her sweater, relaxing herself. She too, barely made it on time. She thinks of her mother no longer able to get to church. Yvonne can barely sit still anticipating going off with friends at the end of service to celebrate her engagement, and new job. John is grateful. His ride came, and he is able to be here.

At the back, Bernice paces, looking forward to coffee hour, her meal for the day. She wonders, will there be leftovers this time. Johnnie is in his usual place in his crisp suit. He smiles, and nods but understands little of what is said to him.

There is excitement in church today because there is going to be a baptism. God is at work among the people. The collects used at baptism, stand in a long line of prayers from the past, today’s prayer, and prayers for the future.

The invitation to the Collect of the Day offers an opportunity for each one to ponder their unique cares and concerns. It is a dialogue where we can also offer that which is yet unspoken to God. A collect is also used to designate special occasions, like baptism or seasons of the Church.

When we gather for worship, we come together from many places and experiences. In Holy Baptism we are drawn together to celebrate our initiation and adoption, our sister and brotherhood as Christ's own in a physical and spiritual body.

We begin this service of Christian initiation in a dialogue framed by the words of the opening acclamation and the dismissal. These words begin a liturgical conversation in sacred moments of prayer, scripture, sacrament and singing. These are all ways we proclaim the blessedness of God and our unity as a people in that blessedness through God.

The marvelous thing about baptism is we are witnesses to a miracle of transformation. We gather as many in Christ, we are united in one Body, one Spirit and one hope. Each time we come together we celebrate Christ.

This bond grows deeper and wider with each baptism, each time we

bow our heads in collective prayer and each time we recommit ourselves to aspire to Holy Living, renouncing evil, and sin and turning with our whole heart to Jesus.

We dedicate ourselves to God and each other to be a community that preaches the Gospel and upholds others in their life in Christ. We vow to uphold the dignity of every human and strive— move with our whole being —towards justice and peace. These are strong words but we trust in God's will to help.

As we gather as community, there is often much excitement in greeting one another, greeting God, anticipating what is to come. But soon it is time to settle down into prayer, to acknowledge God with us.

With the praying of the collect, the mood changes into one of collective reverence. In that silence, we can appreciate having the freedom to gather and pray. In that moment, we connect with all those who have experienced any kind of bondage.

We acknowledge our call to be instruments of peace. We lift our prayers to God.

This article was first published under the title "Collect of the Day" as part of "Stories of Transformation: Worship, Witness, and Work in the Black

Community," a new resource from the Episcopal Church's Office of Black Ministries and was reprinted by permission.

The Rev. Karen B Montagno is director of congregational resources and training (CRT) for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. CRT equips and supports congregations, lay and ordained ministers in mission, formation and creating vital and viable congregations and communities of faith. Montagno, second vice president of the Union of Black Episcopalians, also serves as priest at St. Cyprian's Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. She is co-editor of *Injustice and the Care of Souls*, which addresses issues of injustice in pastoral care with marginalized groups and individuals. As a colleague of the Bethany House of Prayer she joins the Sisters of St. Ann Bethany in their ministry of prayer and hospitality. This ministry involves retreat work, refreshment days and sharing in sacred conversations.

Resources

- "Stories of Transformation: Worship, Witness, and Work in the Black Community:" http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/black_theologian_writing_project.pdf

Transform Your Congregation

BY SCOTT GUNN

If you pay much attention to goings-on in the Episcopal Church, you've probably heard of The Bible Challenge. Right here in the Vestry Papers, it's been covered a couple of times.

The Bible Challenge, [<http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-bible-challenge/>] a systematic way to read the whole Bible in a year, might seem like a gimmick, but it's much more than that. In fact, I think projects like this have the capacity—more than anything else—to transform and animate the Episcopal Church.

A few years ago, the parish I was serving began to read the entire Bible together. Despite having several theology degrees, I had never read the Bible this way: fast enough to get the flow of the narrative. Reading the Bible with others was invaluable, as we shared insights, puzzlement, and encouragement. For the first time, I must confess, I began to grasp the astounding sweep of God's love for us and our part in God's story.

I'm not alone in claiming that engagement with the Bible has changed my life. There are some

researchers who have studied spiritual practices and vitality at hundreds of congregations of all denominations, beginning with the Willow Creek Church. As it turns out, church programs have almost no impact on spiritual growth. Instead, the survey paints a remarkably consistent picture of something entirely different.

The research identified stages of spiritual growth, ranging from seeker ("exploring Christ") to fully Christ centered. Study of the data also revealed the key catalysts for advancing from one stage to the next. The most effective practice for fostering spiritual growth is engagement with scriptures.

In other words, people who reflect on or study the scriptures are more likely to become spiritually mature. This practice is more effective than other practices, according to the research. You can read more in *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson.

Ironically, we in the Episcopal Church have shackled ourselves into a spiritual world that looks much like the pre-Reformation

world. These days, in the Episcopal Church it is too often the clergy alone who are thought competent to read the scriptures. At first, when I encourage lay people to read the whole Bible, they'll say something like "I can't" or "I don't know enough."

But with encouragement and a bit of perseverance, anyone can (and should!) read the Bible. Not only do we learn some facts, but more importantly, we learn the truth of our lives, the very meaning of our humanity. For centuries, some Christians have insisted that reading the Bible is akin to a sacramental experience: the very act of encountering God's word opens up our hearts to receive the Word. I can testify to that!

To be sure, the Bible Challenge isn't the only way to engage with the vast sweep of the scriptural story. There are other read-the-Bible in a year plans. One can pray the daily office (for convenience, using the Forward Movement prayer website [<http://prayer.forwardmovement.org>] or our iPhone app [<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/forward-day-by-day/id561455965>]).

If you decide to try out the Bible Challenge, Forward Movement has published a companion book of essays to go with each day's reading, with contributions by clergy, lay leaders, and scholars from around the Anglican Communion. Among the contributors is Bishop Justin Welby, the next Archbishop of Canterbury.

However you decide to read the Bible, I think you'll find that it will change your life. If your congregation can find a way to do this, amazing things will happen in your church. Really. I've seen it with my own eyes, and I've heard the stories from others.

By all means, let's continue to gather for worship on the Lord's Day. Let's serve those in need (another key catalyst for spiritual growth). But let us Episcopalians stop finding excuses to avoid reading the Bible. Our denominational allergy to the scriptures is closely related to our continued shrinkage. The good news is that it's easy to fix. Let us open our Bibles. And in that we will find the Good News.

***The Rev. Scott Gunn** is executive director of Forward Movement, whose mission is reinvigorating the life of the church.*

- The Bible Challenge: <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-bible-challenge/>
- The Bible Challenge: Read the Bible in a Year by Marek Zabriske: <http://www.forward-movement.org/Products/2114/the-bible-challenge.aspx>
- The Daily Office (for the iPhone): <http://prayer.forwardmovement.org>
- Forward Day by Day app: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/forward-day-by-day/id561455965>
- Forward Movement: www.forwardmovement.org
- Forward Movement Prayer website: <http://prayer.forwardmovement.org>
- *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson: <http://www.christianbook.com/what-churches-reveal-about-spiritual-growth/greg-hawkins/9780310325253/pd/325253>

Resources