

Do you love the liturgy and worship of our church, but back slowly away when we start to talk about “evangelism.”

Episcopalians are often better at *doing* church than talking about church, especially in a public setting. And our liturgy gives us powerful, portable symbols that can make it very easy for people to discover that God – and the church! – will meet them right in the midst of daily life.

At best, that discovery brings people into the community of faith, looking for more. And for those who don't come looking for more, it's still a moment of grace, a reminder that God does not forget us, even if we are dust, unable to remember God without God's help.

Even people who are not regular church goers have a sense of ritual, and look for that at significant moments in our lives. With liturgy, we can bring God and community to people who need both and don't know where to look for either.

Consider your own community. What concerns and events have people talking? Can you offer a blessing for a new skate park after a long campaign by local youth for a safe place to play?

Where are people going when they need inspiration, or assurance? Can you bring liturgy to them? Calvary Episcopal Church in Lombard, Illinois partners with the local vet to offer an annual memorial service for people who have lost pets. We hold the service at the veterinary hospital because that's where people are already going in search of meaning when a pet dies. That also helps make it accessible for people who need the church but don't feel sure of their welcome.

And finally, ask yourselves where people are when they aren't in church – especially on church feasts and fasts. On Ash Wednesday, many of God's people are rushing to work, to pick up the kids, to get through the places and chores of our overscheduled lives. Thus: “Ashes to Go.”

“Ashes to Go” is one way to bring the gifts of worship out of our buildings and into the byways of life, where those gifts may be most needed. The tips here draw on the experience of congregations in the Diocese of Chicago in 2010 and 2011. Congregations in St. Louis, San Francisco and elsewhere have also developed public Ash Wednesday liturgical outreach.



Why Ashes to Go?

It makes sense.

God's people are out there in the streets, the offices and stores and factories. Even more of God's people are there than in the churches on Ash Wednesday.

Ashes, as a reminder of our mortality and a call to repentance, belong to the public spaces and the daily work of our lives, not just to the times and spaces of the regular worshiping community.

Jesus did it.

Well, not ashes precisely, but going out into the streets to find, teach, and heal the people who weren't "in church," who had lost the habit or hope of being part of the holy community.

It's easy.

You don't need a lot of set up or preparation. One or two people, in vestments, with ashes, at a place where people gather on an ordinary weekday – and you have a wonderful unexpected moment of liturgy and grace!

And, of course, it's evangelism!

Our actions speak louder than our words. If you aren't ready or able to come to church, then the church is willing and able to come to you with God's invitation to relationship, repentance and healing.

But is it "cheap grace"?

In the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, the imposition of ashes serves as our invitation to repentance, and a response to our encounter with the Word of God. Ashes to Go moves the encounter with God (in the form of God's people offering prayer and symbols) and that invitation to repentance out of the church building, into the spaces of everyday life where we live out our response to God. The grace comes from God, the same free gift at the same cost, as God's grace made known inside the church.



Planning Ashes to Go:

Choose a place that allows you to meet people where they already are on a Wednesday.

Where are the people who are not in church on Ash Wednesday? On trains and buses? At the store? Doing shift work? Having lunch on the run? Shuttling the kids to school? Where else?

Places with a lot of pedestrian traffic and an opportunity for drivers to pull up are ideal for brief Ashes encounters. You are looking for a place where people can pause for a few minutes without blocking traffic. If your church opens onto a busy sidewalk, you are in luck. Public sidewalks near transit or shopping might be good options. If you are on private property (such as shopping centers) you may be asked to leave, unless you make arrangements with the property owner.

Ashes to Go can also mean encounters at the tables of a coffee shop or somewhere people have to stand and wait. Do you and your congregation have a good relationship with a coffee shop or local business?

Choose a liturgical option that fits that place.

The liturgical action can be as simple as offering the ashes themselves ("Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."). A prayer (the Collect of the Day works nicely, or the prayer over the ashes from the Ash Wednesday liturgy) before imposing ashes, and a simple "Go in peace," give the symbol a toe-hold in our common prayer.

This option can go nearly anywhere, from transit stops to McDonalds to hospitals. You can do it with a small group of people, or one-on-one. If you wish to use the Lord's Prayer, remember that different traditions learn it differently!

In a location where you may encounter people in groups, or with more leisure, you can use more of the day's liturgy and enrich the symbol. Several forms of suggested liturgy are available on the Ashes to Go website at: <http://www.ashestogo.org/resources/>

Recruit a team

Ashes to Go is a ministry that lay people may lead as well as bishops, priests and deacons. It's great to have teams that include both clergy and lay people not only to offer ashes, but also to engage in conversation – about Lent or about life – with people who receive ashes and those simply passing by.



Ashes to Go

Tips for congregations planning liturgical outreach

Let people know what you're up to

In addition to recruiting in the congregation, let local media know that you'll be doing something new and interesting. Ashes to Go is photogenic, and makes great copy for local papers. Chicago congregations found themselves in the traffic and transit reports and on the evening TV news in 2011, as well as in local papers.

Equip your team

Dress for the weather and dress for the liturgy. For liturgy on street corners and transit stops, it's probably a good idea for at least half of your team to wear vestments. This makes you stand out in the crowd, and gives passers-by a sense that something special is happening.

A sign isn't usually necessary, but consider your location, the style of your congregation, and what will help make you visible. If you use incense every Sunday, take a thurifer as part of your team. For a rainy transit platform, our team borrowed patio umbrellas from a parishioner, which doubled as shelter and a way to locate us.

It's good to bring ashes in a sealable container, especially if the weather is windy or wet. You can often find small screw-top jars sold for travel toiletries which work great for ashes.

Give people a take-away

The liturgical moment speaks for itself. But participants may want to find a way to reflect on the encounter, or know who it was who met them with a moment of grace in a busy weekday.

Prepare a give-away. Consider Lenten reflection booklets from Episcopal Relief and Development. Or create a prayer card or leaflet that includes prayers for Lent and information on your congregation's Lenten program. Make sure to include your contact information and weekly service times!

Pray

Pray for the people you will meet, for your team, and for all God's people looking for a moment of grace.

