



## **Being Church in a Pandemic**

### **Acknowledging the Body's Weariness**

Lisa G. Fischbeck

We've all done pretty well, really. In March we scrambled to move our worship online, to sort out what was possible and what wasn't, what was safe and what would put folks in danger, what was theologically sound and what pushed the boundaries of our customs and traditions too far. We made it through Holy Week and Easter, sad for what we were missing, but grateful for what we could have. Prayers of thanksgiving for technology ascended into the atmosphere.

In the eight months since, our repertoires have expanded. We have gotten creative with videos and live-streams, with fellowship opportunities and support for our neighbors in need. Virtual choirs and other musical recordings comfort and cheer. We have discovered new ways to engage our congregations and even to connect with those who would not be able to attend worship and activities on the church grounds under "normal" circumstances. Though what defines normal is shifting beneath our feet. We have learned the pros and cons of one technology or another. With every passing month we are learning how to do more with what each technology can provide. We are finding silver linings to this COVID season, and we extoll their virtues every chance we get.

### **We're weary, too**

But the silver linings aren't the whole story. Sure, we want to keep our spirits up, we want to be alert to the opportunities that the pandemic and stay-at-home safety provide, but eight months in, we are also weary. Clergy, lay leadership, the congregation near and far, those we know and those we don't yet know – we are all weary. This doesn't mean we are any less faithful or hopeful. Indeed, Scripture reveals time and again, God's people get weary. Moses grew weary, David grew weary, Isaiah grew weary. The Psalmist was weary quite a bit. Jesus grew weary, too.

We who are the Body of Christ are weary in these days. And if that Body is to be tended and strengthened, we need to find ways to acknowledge, address and express that weariness.

People are missing the Eucharist, yes, and they are also missing communion. Not Communion in the sense of blessed bread and wine, but in the sense of being together, being mindful of one another, caring for one another, sharing intimacies, prayers, ideas. At the Advocate we have created an [Instagram account for the church cat](#) and a [weekly video series](#) by the vicar on the women of the church's Great Cloud of Witnesses. Such contacts, even though one-way, are a way for the congregation to connect.

### **Connection and care in online prayer**

We are discovering that people are willing, even eager, to engage in online communion in ways that they never would in normal times. Before COVID, we tried several times to hold Evening Prayer in our Chapel and even online. Only a few were interested, and their interest waned. But a few months into COVID-time we started Compline on Zoom every night at 8:30 PM. People from across the region participate, as they transition from daytime activity to nighttime rest. It provides a space for brief check-in, for shared prayers and for those who live alone to be connected with others in the evening hours. Such tending to one another is essential to care of the Body. Lay people take the lead, the clergy join as they wish.

Other churches are offering the Daily Office. Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City is providing Morning Prayer followed by a Bible study led by the rector. The faithful from across the country can join in. And they do. These offices were previously limited to those who could get to the church for a short period of time on a weekday. Now many can come and go.

### **Online groups and safe in-person gatherings by neighborhood to tend the Body**

Several months of living with the limitations of COVID have opened the way for topical online small groups and book studies. At the Advocate, a survey of the congregation initiated by lay leadership produced Advo-Groups, with subjects ranging from 17th and 20th century Anglican Poets to Cooking to Transforming Our Narratives About Race. Inspired by videos on [small groups from the Episcopal Church's website](#), the Advo-Groups will include significant time for sharing life's joys and challenges and for prayer. All part of tending to the Body.

Still, there are some whose daily school or work lives often keep them in front of a computer for hours on end. When it comes to the weekend, they want no more online anything. Some in-person tending to the Body is needed.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, has started "Community without the Commute," borrowing the title from St. John's Cathedral in Denver. Parishioners meet outdoors in their own regions of the city, in safe numbers, safely distanced. The clergy travel from one neighborhood gathering to another, week by week, offering the Eucharist. People are discovering who else from their church lives nearby, and they are finding ways to connect in relative proximity, to know and be known. At the Advocate we've added more picnic tables on our site, so more people can gather six feet apart for a shared meal or conversation. And we regularly encourage folks to walk our grounds or step into the chapel to pray.

### **Hopeful and alert to God's ways**

In these days of pandemic, we can celebrate the ways God is at work to hold us together as the Body of Christ within the technologies and limitations of our times. And we need to be alert to the ways God is calling us to engage with the community and world around us, albeit with safe distancing. We also need to be alert to the ways God is moving in our individual lives, this year especially by encouraging us to slow down, simplify and notice the clouds in the sky. This month is certainly more hopeful than last – a vaccine and its distribution are on the horizon.

Still, we have months to go. We are a faithful people who yearn for physical presence with one another, who yearn for the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism and all that they entail, all that they represent, all that they are. We know we have a way to go in this time of COVID. We are weary, even as we live in

hope. We look ahead, even as we live in this moment. We long for what will be, even as we stay alert for what is happening now. We do not have to put a positive spin on these days. God's promise to the longing people of God is that God is Emmanuel, God with us. Let all God's people say "Amen."

*The Rev. [Lisa G. Fischbeck](#) is the launching vicar of [The Episcopal Church of the Advocate](#), a 21st century mission with a 19th century chapel, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She is the author of the upcoming book, *Behold What You Are: Becoming the Body of Christ*, to be published April 2021 by Church Publishing.*

#### Resources:

- [Self Care](#) by Ken Mosesian, an ECF Vital Practices blog, July 16, 2020
- [Healing Hands](#) by Richelle Thompson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, October 10, 2012
- [Self-Care for the Sake of Others \(in the Age of COVID-19\)](#), an ECF webinar presented by Chanta Bhan, April 6, 2020
- [Self-care in a Pandemic](#) by Sandra Montes, Vestry Papers, November 2020

### **Annual Meetings Go Virtual**

Greg Syler

Your congregation's upcoming annual meeting may be included on the list of things COVID will continue to overturn. But fear not: like other aspects of this devastating pandemic, it may bring some new learnings and growth opportunities.

Mandated most often in diocesan canons and reflected in congregational bylaws, the annual meeting is generally the only prescribed all-congregational meeting in a given year. It happens once a year, and provides the only time when certain business of the congregation's common life *can* be done. The congregation as a whole, gathered at its annual meeting, elects leadership to the vestry and representation to Diocesan Council. Annual meetings see the budget, even though in most cases they don't act to *approve* it (that's the vestry's job). Annual meetings can revise or adopt new bylaws, given a process of formation and information leading up to the meeting, thus reconfiguring the congregation's common life and moving it in new directions. And even though some think it's called an 'annual' meeting because it only happens once per year, there are often provisions in diocesan canons and church bylaws which allow for special (all-parish) meetings that can have the same convening, directive power as an annual meeting.

In other words, annual meetings are a big deal. They are the very place where necessary actions can be undertaken to keep the congregation's common life and witness moving forward. They are also marked by great opportunity. Even during COVID – or perhaps especially during COVID – it's a great idea to start planning ahead and thinking about how and in what ways you'd like to hold your upcoming annual meeting.

Let me offer seven helpful suggestions to help you plan your congregation's next annual meeting.

#### **1. Press on**

The temptation around so much of this pandemic is to wait. It's wise to go slowly in a lot of church life, to make generous room, so people can feel comfortable and make the best decisions for themselves and their families. In planning for an annual meeting and moving the literal business of your congregation forward, this is definitely not a time to wait. Start planning now, even if your meeting is ordinarily scheduled for the spring. Begin sketching a plan, despite the likelihood that it will most likely be a virtual meeting. To be fair, I can't imagine there will be many *in-person* annual meetings this winter and spring, but that shouldn't stop us. Planning and thinking should start now, if it hasn't already.

## **2. Check the rules**

As our diocese's vice chancellor advised me: "It's always good to check the statute – and, the *most recent version* of the statute." Most diocesan canons provide a baseline set of expectations and, in many cases, specific language that shall be included in parish bylaws. Some other dioceses have external controlling statutes. (In my state, there's an extant holdover from colonial days known as the Maryland Vestry Act, which some of us have to double-check also.) The language in diocesan canons and parish bylaws is generally sufficiently flexible as to allow other ways of gathering, even virtually.

Our parish bylaws, for instance, stipulate that the annual meeting shall be held on "a designated Sunday in January," but they give the vestry the right and responsibility to determine which Sunday, where, at what time and other necessary details. The bylaws also provide that the "date of the annual meeting may be chosen and/or changed by a majority vote of the vestry." The Canons of the Diocese of Washington provide that the vestry "shall determine the date and place of the annual meeting of the parish...and provide notice to the parish of the date and place of that annual meeting."

'Online' or 'virtual' may be the "place" of the annual meeting, but make sure you check your parish bylaws and diocesan canons and check with your diocesan chancellor if you have any questions. If your bylaws stipulate a specific place and time and would not otherwise permit the flexibility to go online, it would be wise to make a call to your diocesan chancellor this week.

## **3. Develop a process**

As you and your congregation's leadership go about making a plan for the annual meeting, even in rough sketches, try to imagine a process leading up to the meeting. Because this pandemic has forced so many into isolated spaces, we've missed hearing about random other things going on in our neighborhoods and communities and congregations. The weekly banter of coffee hour simply hasn't happened for a long, long time, and it turns out that those forums (yes, even coffee hour!) are vitally important to the intangible connections of the local congregation and Body of Christ.

Perhaps you could tie in your annual fundraising (stewardship) campaign, launching that campaign virtually as part of a run-up to the annual meeting. If you, like so many, need to take a sober, hard look at re-forecasting your annual budget, this may be a great time to have virtual groups engage the goal-setting process alongside the finance committee and vestry. Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because people are not coming to in-person functions, they are somehow disinterested in the work of the church and the mission of their congregation. Include them in a process leading up to the annual meeting.

## **4. Launch a series of conversations**

Like the areas I wrote about in developing a process, above, I think this is a great time to launch a series of ways to engage your people. I'm sure there are things you've done or had to do since everything shut down in March. Perhaps you've spruced up your website or made improvements to your buildings. Maybe your congregational leadership, being forced out of the church building, has begun walking the neighborhood, leading some to imagine new missional opportunities. Perhaps you'd like to talk about what we can learn on a deeper, spiritual level from our shared experience of this pandemic. (I recommend a book study of N.T. Wright's excellent new, little book, *God and the Pandemic*.)

The clergy and lay leaders of your congregation have been doing *a lot* since March, and no one has had the forum or opportunity to talk about it. Make that space this winter. Organize sessions and series, and make them a coordinated run-up to the annual meeting. There are also challenges ahead, I'm sure, and not only limited to finances and budget re-setting. Divide the parish list up by vestry members, and ask those leaders to reach out to the people on their contact list. This will not only extend those connections so vital to the Body of Christ, but the vestry members themselves will likely hear some important things in addition to communicating the importance of this upcoming series of conversations.

### **5. Don't fear taking on big issues**

This is an unsteady, uncertain time for everyone, including all those involved in leading the life of a local Christian congregation. I'm sure leaders are already facing hard, scary truths. Make sure they're not alone, be they clergy, worrying about their compensation or funding for their staff, or treasurers and finance committees, fretting over cash flow.

But financial shortfalls aren't the only big issue on the table this year. If your community was working on something, and that work was dramatically interrupted this past March, don't be afraid to continue that conversation, even if it means you have to revise the approach or draw out the timeline. This is not the time to stick our heads in the sand, and do only the littlest, easiest bit to keep the engine room of the local Episcopal parish running. Nor is it the time to pretend like this'll just be a bad year or a temporary blip and everything will return to normal soon enough.

Take on the hard things – the difficult challenges presented by COVID or those big things you already sensed God calling you and your congregation to pre-COVID. Just because your annual meeting is virtual doesn't mean you can't have a real conversation about big issues.

### **6. Use the technology**

We've all certainly learned how user-friendly and accessible Zoom and Google Meet and other virtual meeting platforms can be. They've helped us stay connected during COVID, and provided meaningful forums for worship and small groups, Bible studies and committee meetings. Frankly, I'm excited that some things will *stay* on Zoom, given the ease with which people can join a meeting or participate in Bible study.

We've also learned how to develop good PowerPoint presentations and share screens and go live on social media outposts. All of the skills we've picked up over the past many months will serve us well as we plan for the upcoming annual meeting. Add to that, Zoom and Google Meet each have what they call "polling" functions that can be adapted for casting and recording votes at the upcoming meeting. A Google Meet user needs to add a special extension to enable the polling function – GMP, for [Google Meet Plus](#). Zoom offers a very clear web tutorial, [Polling for Meetings](#), that explains how to set that up

in advance of the session. It'll also be remarkable how much your congregation saves in the sheer cost of printing those massive annual meeting booklets now that you can post the PDF to your website, share it on your email newsletters, socialize it via social media and share the screen on Zoom or Google Meet!

## 7. Make and keep a record

Finally, take minutes of the meeting, record who is present, who is eligible to vote and how many votes were cast for such-and-such. Yes, treat this just like any other annual meeting, except that it'll most likely happen on a screen. Not only are these records essential to maintaining the integrity of the process and sharing the good news you've been hard at work on these many months, it'll also be a fascinating read someday for church historians! You can also record the Zoom or Google Meet session, and share that recording with those who were not able to join at the prescribed time, thus extending the work of the annual meeting to other families and households in your parish.

*The Rev. **Greg Syler** is the rector of Ascension, Lexington Park, and St. George's, Valley Lee – two congregations in the Diocese of Washington that share ministries and are learning to be more focused on mission in the quickly growing region known as southern Maryland. Greg's ministry as a 'shared' rector has a bit to do with cutting out operational inefficiency. One of his hopes is to help communities of faith find healthier, more ministry-first business models, but mostly he and the congregations are focused on spiritual renewal and strategic growth. Greg and his wife, Iman, have one daughter, Carter, and an energetic black lab, Phoebe. Greg blogs at "From the Rectory Porch."*

### Resources:

- [Selecting Leaders in our Churches](#) by Annette Buchanan, an ECF Vital Practices blog, November 23, 2016
- [Making Annual Meetings a Source of Renewal](#) by Richelle Thompson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, February 10, 2015
- [Virtual Community](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, March 9, 2017
- [Burned Out on Being "Connected"](#) by Ken Mosesian, an ECF Vital Practices blog, July 6, 2020

## **Financial Interconnectedness Amidst COVID-19**

Miguel Escobar

Editor's note: *This article is adapted from We Shall Be Changed: Questions for a Post-Pandemic Church, edited by Mark D. W. Edington and published by Church Publishing. The book gathers brief essays from thought leaders around the church that address pressing topics the church needs to consider in preparation for the end of this pandemic.*

An economic tragedy is unfolding across the United States. On November 19th, the *New York Times* reported that [unemployment claims are rising again](#) and that an estimated 7.9 million people are on the verge of losing Pandemic Unemployment Assistance. The [Pew Research Center has found](#) that the sudden loss of jobs is especially hitting lower-income communities of color. In New York, the city where I live, soup kitchens and food banks are now reporting record numbers; a volunteer at just one site in the Bronx shared that 1,000 people had showed up one weekend, and then 700 for two weekends in a row. There are profound disparities in terms of who is bearing the brunt of the economic fallout of COVID-19, and such differences are reflected in our congregations.

Amidst all this, Bishop Mark Edington and Church Publishing asked me to reflect on what COVID-19 is revealing about the financial structures and sustainability of congregations and adjudicatories in the Episcopal Church. This was for his recently-published book [We Shall Be Changed: Questions for a Post-Pandemic Church](#), now available through Church Publishing. More specifically, I was to reply to the provocative question of “Is self-help the only option?”

“Self-help” is the opposite of a faithful approach in times like these. Episcopalians are the inheritors of examples from the first to fourth centuries wherein Christians saw themselves as one part of a larger church body, and pulled together to aid the hardest-hit assemblies and individuals in their communities during times of disaster.

Rather than self-help and financial isolation, it is financial interconnectedness that is in our DNA.

### **Jerusalem Collections for today**

In his letters from the middle of the first century, Paul makes multiple references to a Jerusalem Collection.<sup>[1]</sup> “At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”<sup>[2]</sup> This collection is understood to have been both an expression of unity among the first century assemblies and as a concrete way of helping the ‘poor among the saints’ of the Jerusalem assembly who were experiencing famine and food shortages at that time.

In every diocese, there are congregations that are being especially devastated by infection, mortality and unemployment. Within New York, Episcopal [churches in the Bronx](#) have been particularly hard hit. In addition to [emergency relief grants](#), what would it look like for a diocesan-wide Jerusalem Collection to support the ‘poor among the saints of the Bronx’? The Navajo Nation [is eclipsing](#) other states’ infection rates and mortality. The partnership between Navajoland and the Diocese of Northern Michigan to establish the [COVID-19 Fund](#) and [Indigi-Aid Telethon](#) echo Paul’s first century collection on behalf of the hungry in Jerusalem. Episcopal Relief and Development has created a [COVID-19 Pandemic Response Fund](#) to enable emergency aid to vulnerable communities both in the U.S. and around the world.

### **Presider as guardian of all in need**

In Justin Martyr’s First Apology, written around 155 C.E., he includes a striking outline of how second century Christians assembled for worship. Beginning with “Those who have the means help all those who are in want,” he describes a threefold order of worship that moves from word to table to collection for the poor. This weekly collection for the poor is given to the presider who “aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison and foreigners who are sojourning here. In short, the presider is a guardian to all those who are in need.”<sup>[3]</sup> While many congregations in our dioceses have been inconvenienced by COVID-19, some congregations have been devastated by this pandemic. Clergy in these communities are on the frontlines of providing monies to parishioners who are struggling to pay rent, buy groceries or avoid reliance on payday loans. We should be unafraid to dust off this tradition of a weekly collection for the poor, and well-resourced parishes can follow the example of churches like the Church of the Heavenly Rest, which created a [Fund for the Not Forgotten](#) for those who are ineligible for federal assistance (undocumented immigrants,

asylum seekers, workers in the gig economy, the formerly incarcerated). Importantly, a portion of those funds is also going to support congregations in East Harlem.

### **Bishop as ‘lover of the poor’**

One striking development from the fourth century is that of a bishop’s public role as ‘lover of the poor.’<sup>[2]</sup> Pre-Constantine, aid for the poor had focused primarily on those *within* the Christian assemblies. One of the earliest post-Constantinian understandings of a bishop’s public role was as one who lifted up the suffering of the poor – both Christian and non-Christian alike – to a public that was reluctant to confront these matters. This new role was particularly embraced by [Bishop Basil of Cesarea](#) who, in the wake of a devastating famine in 369 C.E., preached forcefully to the wealthy of the city, laying bare the invisible suffering of the poor in vivid terms.<sup>[3]</sup> His preaching raised money for a soup kitchen and what is considered one of the first hospitals, the Basiliad.<sup>[4]</sup>

Even in our secular age, bishops and other prominent faith leaders command attention through their pulpits, pastoral letters, social media, in letters to the editor, and more. [Bishop David Bailey of Navajoland recently said](#) that now is the time for faith leaders to make visible the hidden suffering of those rendered invisible, and it’s inspiring to see new bishops like the Rt. Rev. Bonnie Perry of the Diocese of Michigan [raising money for food aid](#) as one of the first acts of her episcopate. They stand in a long line of bishops like Basil of Cesarea.

### **Economic alternatives**

Also in the fourth century, Bishop Ambrose of Milan spoke out forcefully against the money-lenders of his city for predatory lending practices, the charging of exorbitant interest rates on loans to people in desperate situations.<sup>[5]</sup> Tragically, predatory lending remains with us today, and [in 2016 the average interest on a payday loan in South Dakota was 652%](#). With unemployment now as high as it was in the Great Depression, some in our congregations are looking for ways to make ends meet, and predatory lenders are circling above. What is the church’s role in condemning predatory lending and offering alternatives?

In the wake of the Rodney King riots, Dr. Gloria Brown, the Diocese of Los Angeles and Episcopal Relief & Development established the [Episcopal Federal Credit Union](#) to help devastated communities avoid the payday loan and pawn shops that were the only lenders left as major banks abandoned the hardest-hit areas.<sup>[6]</sup> Nearly thirty years later, this credit union is proving to be a bulwark against the economic impacts of COVID-19. It is still offering [low-interest, small loans](#) to struggling families and at the end of March they [announced](#) an emergency cash fund for churches whose cash flow has dropped, as well as a 50% reduction in their customary interest rate for congregational loans.

This diocesan credit union brings me to my final point and a deeply-held belief: focusing on economic justice is not only the moral thing to do, it also fosters financial sustainability in the long run. The Episcopal Church runs the risk of losing our moral calling – our saltiness – if and when our wealthiest churches and dioceses self-isolate and neglect the most vulnerable at this time. Now is the time to be remembering our long history of financial interconnectedness, of building relationships across economic divides, and how time and time again the early church was a ‘guardian to all in need.’

### **Possible short-term and long-term actions:**



- Support organizations doing both U.S. and international COVID-19 relief work, such as [Episcopal Relief and Development](#)
- Imagine what a Jerusalem Collection would look like today both in at the diocesan and churchwide level. See Navajoland and the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan's [Indigi-Aid virtual telethon](#) as a cross-diocesan approach.
- Follow Justin Martyr's example by taking a second collection at services specifically for aid to the poor. See the Church of the Heavenly Rest's [Fund for the Not Forgotten](#) as a model for how one well-resourced parish is focusing funding on the most vulnerable.
- Long-term, we need to dust off the fourth century expectation that bishops embody the role of 'lovers of the poor'; we need to encourage public-facing, moral leadership that leverages their platforms to highlight the experiences of the most vulnerable and raise funds to address urgent need. Urge your bishop to do this boldly.
- Long-term, the Episcopal Church needs a working group to explore models of churchwide credit unions which are consistently shown to make communities more resilient in times of economic crisis, including natural disasters.

*Miguel Escobar is Executive Director of Episcopal Divinity School at Union. There he works with the Dean, Kelly Brown Douglas, in building MDiv and STM in Anglican Studies programs aimed at forming social justice faith leaders in the Anglican tradition. Previously, Miguel served as managing program director for leadership, communications and external affairs at the Episcopal Church Foundation. He earned a master of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in 2007 and served as communications assistant to then-Presidenting Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori from 2007 to 2010. Escobar is chair of the board of Forward Movement, a board member of Episcopal Relief & Development and served on the advisory council of Duke Divinity School's Leadership programs.*

#### Resources:

- [Ministry in a Global Pandemic](#) an ECF webinar presented by Joshua Rodriguez-Hobbs on June 11, 2020
- [Prayer and Action In a Pandemic](#) by Yesenia (Jessie) Alejandro, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Connecting Churches to Diocesan and National Resources](#) by Annette Buchanan, an ECF Vital Practices blog, April 30, 2018
- [The Importance of a Mission-Focused Vestry](#) by Betsy Ivey and Kirk Berlenbach, an ECF Vital Practices blog, August 27, 2020

[7] Rom 15:26, 31; 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:14; cf. Gal 2:10

[2] Rom 15:26

[3] Justin Martyr's 1 Apology 67 as translated by Gordon Lathrup in *Holy things: A Liturgical Theology*, page 45

[4] Brown, Peter. *Poverty & Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*. University Press of New England, 2002. Pg 8. I've also written about the evolution of 'bishop as lover of the poor' on *Wealth & Poverty in Christianity* [here](#).

[5] Brown, Peter. *Poverty & Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*. University Press of New England, 2002. Pg 39.

[6] Heyne, Thomas. "Reconstructing the world's first hospital: The Basiliad." *Hektoen International*, Spring 2015.

[8] Ambrose of Milan's homily On Naboth and his exegetical work On Tobit

[9] Miramontes, Jennifer. "[Credit Unions for Economic Justice](#)". March 2020 issue of ECFVP.

## Leading In a Pandemic

Mary Kate Rejouis

On one of the first Sundays of Coronatide worship by Zoom, I choked up as I sang a short blessing over our people. My voice got squeaky and my face got red. A breath and a pause, and I was able to move onward and finish, but what our dear good people remembered was seeing, up close, the depth of grief we were just beginning to feel as a congregation and a country. There's no pastoral distance with Zoom. I serve God as the rector of a small congregation and campus ministry a block from the football stadium at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I'm also a single mother of school-aged children, and this pandemic season unfolds from a corner of the big dining room table that longs for 18 or more around it again, our large backyard, and, of course, the square video of my face interfacing with church and world. As a church, we are sharing the losses with so many others: not gathering, not meeting, not singing in person. We have had more than the usual number of *things* in one year – vandalism, mailbox theft, storm damage. And we also experienced the loss of about 40 percent of our annual operating income when college football was wisely and necessarily cancelled.

In good days, our proximity to campus is a boon for selling parking spaces. In hard times, it's just an empty parking lot to manage along with everything else. Whether it's expectations or math assignments or pastoral care or staff meetings or vastly amended budgets, to manage is to care for. That is what parents and leaders do: we manage.

### **Freedom, transparency and humility**

Almost nine months in, our congregation is doing all right, even thriving in our Zoom Sunday groove and taking care of each other. This is what works for us – and it has to do with *freedom*, *transparency* and *humility*. These leadership gifts matter in hard times and in easier times.

Early in the pandemic, I found a group that prays by Zoom daily for about 15 minutes, at just the right time. It's a group I don't lead, but I do my part when asked. What has been essential to everything is that I have a space to pray. Obvious, right? But easy to forget when home is work is school is playground is recess is leisure...is managing. I also know that I am reaping the benefits of a long-tenure and years of hard work. Here we have the trust and knowledge of each other that has let me lead clearly, knowing that if I make a mistake, I'll learn and re-direct. This season is harder for those who have just started in congregations, and we need to support those colleagues even more.

The boundaryless-ness of pandemic life is real, as are parenting and priesting. But it goes deeper – I find that I am never *not* working, but just changing realms: folding laundry while listening to a meeting, teaching new math while planning a funeral. (Is this the managerial apex of multitasking or just frenetic coping skills?)

Another word for boundaryless is *freedom*. Had we not all been home, I wouldn't have stopped during the day to jump on the trampoline during "recess." I won't ever regret other benefits, like daily lunch together during elementary school. One of the freedoms of priestly work relates to the ontological change at ordination – I am a priest always. A wise friend once reminded me that "parson" is etymologically related to "person." In a season where over-functioning and isolating might seem the best choice, we have the freedom to be human.

There is still a lot to manage, and losing staff and changing the way we do every single thing only increases that. But *transparency* about our humanity matters. I reached a point where I felt I couldn't do much more. So I said so: to the vestry, to the congregation and to colleagues. I asked for help. What unfolded was an abundance of lay ministry. It was the congregation calling each other to check in regularly; it was a vestry agreeing when I said, "I'm not going to learn to be a video editor." It was people having enough courage to lead small groups by Zoom on their own, the first small groups in decades in our little congregation. It was groups and committees staying connected because that was what they could do. They could see each other on screen, and they accepted that faithfully.

### **Transparency and trust foster humility**

We also decided to be transparent about our financial losses – not wringing our hands, not begging, just saying, "This is what we're dealing with and the Finance Committee is starting to work on it and we trust we'll get through it." And God provides. We received a completely unexpected large gift from a stranger who heard our story; some bequests came just at the right time; some gave more, widows mites and also deeper abundance. We are enduring in lean times, seeing the challenges together. We are transparent without being self-pitying.

A third thing follows: good transparency is a kind of *humility*. It's been clear to me that, though there are many things we can't do, we are free to do what the church does. In tiny gatherings, masked and distanced, we've married, baptized and buried, with the church maybe more present than ever before in prayer and love, though not in person. We have led with what little we have, providing more than \$15,000 in matching funds since May to our local food pantry – not because the church doesn't need it, but because we have the humility to know we are all in this together. We have shared these events and others with photos and words at our Zoom services. We leave no doubt that our church loves and lives. Pre-pandemic, I was used to perfunctory silence at the prayers of the people. Now, there are more prayers, spoken out loud or in the chatbox, than maybe ever in our broad-church Episcopal congregation. Thanks. Be. To. God. The word "liturgy" means "work of the people" and every Sunday we share words of hope and comfort, together managing the resources of the household of God with freedom, transparency and humility. I hope we never stop.

*The Rev. **Mary Kate Rejouis** came to St. Aidan's in 2005. Prior to that, she served as the vicar of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Basalt, Colorado, from 2000 to 2005 and as Associate Rector and Priest-in-Charge at St. Michael and All Angels, South Bend, Indiana. She was ordained to the diaconate and priesthood in 1997. A native of Boulder, Mary Kate finds St. Aidan's to be a place of joyful ministry among the congregation and also in the Canterbury Episcopal Ministry. Campus ministry is vital to Mary Kate, who came through the Episcopal Campus ministry at Dartmouth College. She's hoping to get back to swimming and running soon and mostly enjoys spending time with her two young children, John and Elizabeth.*

### **Resources:**

- [Ministry in a Global Pandemic](#) an ECF webinar presented by Joshua Rodriguez-Hobbs on June 11, 2020
- [A Time for Everything](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, March 17, 2020
- [A Liturgy of Longing](#) by Lisa G. Fischbeck, an ECF Vital Practices blog, December 14, 2020
- [A Holy Quarantine: Spiritual Practices Amid Pandemic](#) by Nicole Foster, an ECF Vital Practices blog, September 1, 2020

## **Interconexión financiera en medio de la COVID-19**

Miguel Escobar

Nota de la redacción: *Este artículo es una adaptación de We Shall Be Changed: Questions for a Post-Pandemic Church, editado por Mark D. W. Edington y publicado por Church Publishing. El libro es una compilación de ensayos breves de líderes de pensamiento de la iglesia relativos a los temas apremiantes que la iglesia necesita considerar en preparación para la finalización de esta pandemia.*

En Estados Unidos se está desarrollando una tragedia económica. El 19 de noviembre, el *New York Times* informó que los [reclamos por desempleo están volviendo a subir](#) y que aproximadamente 7.9 millones de personas están por perder su asistencia de desempleo causado por la pandemia. [El Centro de Investigación Pew halló](#) que la pérdida repentina de empleos está afectando especialmente a las comunidades de color de bajos ingresos. En Nueva York, la ciudad en que vivo, los comedores populares y los bancos de alimentos están informando números sin precedentes: un voluntario de un sitio en el Bronx dijo que en un fin de semana habían acudido 1,000 personas y posteriormente 700 por dos semanas seguidas. Hay profundas disparidades sobre quiénes están sufriendo la peor parte de las consecuencias económicas de la pandemia de la COVID-19 y esas diferencias se reflejan en nuestras feligresías.

En medio de todo esto, el obispo Mark Edington y Church Publishing me pidieron que reflexionara sobre lo que la COVID-19 está revelando acerca de las estructuras financieras y la sustentabilidad de las feligresías y adjudicatarias de la Iglesia Episcopal. El pedido fue para el libro publicado recientemente [We Shall Be Changed: Questions for a Post-Pandemic Church](#), que ahora está disponible en Church Publishing. Más específicamente, tuve que contestar la provocativa pregunta “¿Es la autoayuda la única opción?”

“Autoayuda” es lo opuesto a un enfoque de fe en tiempos como los que estamos viviendo. Los episcopales son herederos de ejemplos de los siglos I a IV, en los que los cristianos se vieron a sí mismos como una parte de un gran cuerpo de la iglesia y se unieron en asistir a las personas en sus comunidades más afectadas en tiempos de desastres.

En lugar de autoayuda y aislamiento financiero, lo que está en nuestro ADN es la interconexión financiera.

### **Ofrendas de Jerusalén para nuestros tiempos**

En sus cartas escritas a mediados del siglo I, Pablo menciona la Ofrenda de Jerusalén en varias ocasiones.<sup>[1]</sup> “Porque los de Macedonia y Acaya decidieron voluntariamente hacer una colecta y mandarla a los hermanos pobres de Jerusalén.”<sup>[2]</sup> Esta ofrenda se entiende como una expresión de unidad entre las reuniones del siglo I y una manera concreta de ayudar “a los pobres que hay entre los santos” de la congregación de Jerusalén, que en ese entonces sufrían hambre y escaseces de alimentos. En todas las diócesis, hay feligresías que han estado singularmente devastadas por infección, mortandad y desempleo. En Nueva York, [iglesias episcopales en el Bronx](#) han sido duramente golpeadas. Además de [subsidios de socorro de emergencia](#), ¿cómo luciría una Ofrenda de Jerusalén de toda la diócesis para apoyar a los ‘pobres entre los santos del Bronx’? La nación navajo [está eclipsando](#) las tasas de infección y mortandad de otros estados. La asociación entre Navajoland y la Diócesis del Norte de Michigan para establecer el [Fondo COVID-19](#) y el [Indigi-Aid Telethon](#) se asemeja a la primera campaña de ofrendas de

Pablo para los hambrientos de Jerusalén. Episcopal Relief and Development (Alivio y Desarrollo de la Iglesia Episcopal) creó un [Fondo de Reacción a la Pandemia de la COVID-19](#) para contar con asistencia de emergencia para comunidades vulnerables de EE UU y el mundo entero.

### **El que hace cabeza como guardián de los necesitados**

En la Primera Apología de Justino Mártir, escrita alrededor del año 155 E.C., él incluye una notable descripción de la manera en que los cristianos del siglo II se reunían para rendir culto. Comenzando con “Aquellos que tienen ayudan a todos los necesitados”, describe un orden de culto triple que pasa de palabra a mesa a colecta para los pobres. “Los que tienen y quieren, dan libremente lo que les parece bien; lo que se recoge se entrega al que hace cabeza para que socorra con ello a huérfanos y viudas, a los que están necesitados por enfermedad u otra causa, a los encarcelados, a los forasteros que están de paso: en resumen, se le constituye en proveedor para quien se halle en la necesidad”.<sup>[3]</sup>

Si bien muchas feligresías en nuestras diócesis han estado incomodadas por la COVID-19, para algunas de ellas esta pandemia ha sido devastadora. El sacerdocio en esas comunidades está a la vanguardia de proporcionar dinero a feligreses que luchan para pagar el alquiler, comprar alimentos o evitar depender de préstamos de día de pago. No debemos temer quitarle el polvo a esta tradición de colectas semanales para los pobres y las parroquias pudientes pueden seguir el ejemplo de iglesias como la Iglesia de Heavenly Rest, que creó un [Fondo para los no olvidados](#) dedicado a asistir a los que no cumplen con los requisitos para recibir asistencia federal (inmigrantes indocumentados, solicitantes de asilo, trabajadores en la economía informal, ex-encarcelados). Cabe señalar que una parte de esos fondos se emplean en asistir a feligresías en East Harlem.

### **Obispo como ‘amante de los pobres’**

Algo notable que ocurrió en el siglo IV fue el entendimiento de que el rol público de un obispo es ser ‘amante de los pobres’<sup>[2]</sup>. Antes de Constantino, la asistencia a los pobres se concentraba principalmente en los que estaban *en* las asambleas cristianas. Uno de los cometidos más tempranos posteriores a Constantino fue persuadir a un público reacio a reconocerlo que el rol del obispo era elevar el sufrimiento de los pobres, tanto cristianos como no cristianos. Este nuevo rol fue adoptado especialmente por el [obispo Basilio de Cesarea](#), quien en medio de una hambruna devastadora en 369 E.C. predicó enérgicamente a los ricos de la ciudad, describiendo el sufrimiento invisible de los pobres en términos vívidos.<sup>[3]</sup> Su predicación redundó en recaudación de fondos para un comedor de beneficencia, así como para lo que se considera como uno de los primeros hospitales, el establecido por San Basilio<sup>[4]</sup>.

Incluso en nuestra era laica, los obispos y otros líderes de fe destacados llaman la atención desde sus púlpitos, cartas pastorales, medios sociales, cartas a la redacción y más. El [obispo David Bailey de Navajoland dijo recientemente](#) que ahora es el momento en que los líderes de fe deben hacer visible el sufrimiento de los que han sido relegados a la invisibilidad. Es inspirador ver nuevos obispos, como la reverendísima Bonnie Perry de la Diócesis de Michigan, recaudar fondos de asistencia alimentaria como uno de los primeros actos de su episcopado. Ella es parte de una larga línea de obispos como Basilio de Cesarea.

### **Alternativas económicas**

También en el siglo IV, el obispo Ambrosio de Milán se pronunció enfáticamente en contra de los prestamistas de su ciudad por sus prácticas depredadoras: la cobranza de intereses exorbitantes sobre los préstamos a personas en situaciones desesperadas[5]. Trágicamente, los préstamos depredadores siguen existiendo: [en 2016 el tipo de interés promedio de los préstamos de día de pago en Dakota del Sur era del 652%](#). Ahora que la tasa de desempleo es tan elevada como la de la Gran Depresión, algunos en nuestras feligresías están buscando maneras de llegar a fin de mes y los prestamistas depredadores los están sobrevolando. ¿Cuál es el rol de la iglesia en condenar los préstamos depredadores y en ofrecer alternativas?

Tras los disturbios de Rodney King, la Dra. Gloria Brown, de la Diócesis de Los Ángeles y Episcopal Relief & Development, establecieron la [Unión de Crédito Federal Episcopal](#) para ayudar a las comunidades devastadas a evitar los préstamos del día de pago y de las casas de empeño, que habían sido el último recurso disponible cuando los bancos abandonaban las zonas más afectadas[6]. Cerca de treinta años más tarde, esta unión de crédito está demostrando ser un baluarte contra los impactos de la COVID-19. Todavía ofrece [préstamos pequeños con bajos intereses](#) a familias que luchan y a fines de marzo anunció un fondo de emergencia de dinero en efectivo para las iglesias cuyo flujo de caja había disminuido, así como una reducción del 50% de su tipo de interés habitual aplicable a los préstamos a la feligresía.

Esta unión de crédito diocesana me trae el punto final y a mi profunda creencia de que centrarse en la justicia económica no solo es lo moral de hacer, sino que también promueve la sustentabilidad a largo plazo.

La Iglesia Episcopal corre el riesgo de perder su llamado moral – la capacidad de sentirse indignada – si y cuando sus iglesias y diócesis más acaudaladas se autoaislan e ignoran a los más necesitados en estos momentos. Ahora es el momento de recordar nuestra larga historia de interconexión financiera, de formar relaciones entre divisiones económicas y cómo una y otra vez la iglesia temprana era la ‘guardiana de todos los necesitados’.

#### **Posibles actos a corto y largo plazo:**

- Apoyar a las organizaciones que realizan trabajo de alivio de la COVID-19 en EEUU e internacionalmente, como [Episcopal Relief and Development](#)
- Imaginar cómo luciría una Ofrenda de Jerusalén a niveles diocesano y de toda la iglesia. Ver el [Indigi-Aid virtual telethon](#) en Navajoland y la Diócesis Episcopal del Norte de Michigan como un ejemplo de ofrendas entre diócesis.
- Seguir el ejemplo de Justino Mártir realizando una segunda colecta en los servicios religiosos específicamente para ayudar a los pobres. Ver el [Fund for the Not Forgotten](#) como un modelo de cómo una parroquia pudiente se está concentrando en asistir financieramente a los más vulnerables.
- A largo plazo, necesitamos quitarle el polvo a la expectativa del siglo IV de que los obispos encarnan el rol de ‘amantes de los pobres’; necesitamos estimular el liderazgo moral orientado hacia el público que apalanca sus plataformas para poner de relieve las experiencias de los más vulnerables y recaudar fondos para tratar necesidades urgentes. Instar a los obispos a que lo hagan con valentía.
- A largo plazo, la Iglesia Episcopal necesita contar con un grupo de trabajo dedicado a explorar modelos de uniones de crédito de iglesias que demostraron regularmente haber hecho que las comunidades sean más resilientes en tiempos de crisis económicas, incluyendo los desastres naturales.

Todos los enlaces llevan a contenido en inglés

**Miguel Escobar** es director ejecutivo de la Escuela Episcopal de Teología en Union. Trabaja con la decana, Kelly Brown Douglas, en el diseño de programas MDiv y STM de Estudios Anglicanos con el propósito de formar líderes de fe de justicia social en la tradición anglicana. Anteriormente, Miguel fue director administrativo de programas de liderazgo, comunicaciones y asuntos exteriores de la Fundación de la Iglesia Episcopal. Obtuvo su maestría en teología del Seminario Teológico Union en 2007 y fue asistente de comunicaciones de la entonces obispa presidente Katharine Jefferts Schori desde 2007 hasta 2010. Escobar es presidente de la junta de Forward Movement, miembro de la junta directiva de Alivio y Desarrollo de la Iglesia Episcopal e integró el consejo de asesoramiento de los programas de Liderazgo de la Escuela de Teología Duke.

#### Recursos:

- [Oración y acción en una pandemia](#) por Yesenia (Jessie) Alejandro, Vestry Papers, septiembre 2020
- [Un espíritu audaz de abundancia](#) por Sandy Webb, Vestry Papers, septiembre 2019
- [La Mayordomía en Un Minuto](#) por Sandra Montes, Vestry Papers, marzo 2017

[7] Rom 15:26, 31; 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:14; cf. Gal 2:10

[2] Rom 15:26

[3] La Apología 67 de Justino Mártir según la traducción al inglés de Gordon Lathrup figura en *Holy things: A Liturgical Theology*, página 45

[4] Brown, Peter. *Poverty & Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*. University Press of New England, 2002. Pág. 8. También escribí sobre la evolución del 'obispo como el amante de los pobres' en *Wealth & Poverty in Christianity*, [aquí](#).

[5] Brown, Peter. *Poverty & Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*. University Press of New England, 2002. Pág 39.

[6] Heyne, Thomas. "Reconstructing the world's first hospital: The Basiliad." *Hektoen International*, primavera de 2015.

[8] Homilía de Ambrosio de Milán sobre Nabot y su obra exegética sobre Tobías

[9] Miramontes, Jennifer. "[Credit Unions for Economic Justice](#)". Número de marzo de 2020 de ECFVP.

#### **Pitching Our Tent With God in the Pandemic**

Reagan Humber

Right before the pandemic in February, I went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group of other clergy. We made it out right before hotels, planes and borders began to be shut down. Little did I know how much that time in the land of Abraham, Isaac, Sarah and Rebecca would feed and guide my vocation as a priest and the work of my congregation during these now nine months and counting of the pandemic. I mean, it was as if I were a squirrel and God was filling my belly with enough sunflower seeds to get through the long winter of 2020.

After all that I was able to soak up in those two weeks away, what has stayed with me, is the idea that the holiness of a place arises first out of the actual human experiences in that place, rather than the

buildings we later build to mark them. Much of our time in the Holy Land was spent visiting churches like the Church of the Basilica of the Annunciation and the Church of the Multiplication (as in the loaves and fishes). These are breathtaking, holy spaces, but they aren't holy because the Church eventually built a beautiful building there. They are holy because Jesus first broke bread with outcasts and sinners there, because the people of God first gathered there and God pitched a tent in their hearts.

And so, right there on the dusty roads where Jesus walked, it dawned on me that holiness is always on the move, following the people of God as we move throughout the world and continue to experience God where we are. Buildings are afterthoughts. And such, are not the containers that hold God – we are. God dwells in us first. We are the holy tabernacles, as are the holy stories that arise out of our collective experience, wherever we, in our human societies, find ourselves.

### **God shows up where we are**

These insights were manna for my soul when in March our church buildings had to close and we went kicking and screaming into pandemic exile. All of a sudden, the Church throughout the world was forced to reckon with how much we built our Christian community around buildings, rather than the raw experience of the holy in our own lives, right here, right now, wherever we are. And that's not to say that I don't think buildings are important. I, for one, can't wait until we can gather together again in one place, but since we cannot for now, the Church has no choice but to throw a tent over those places in our exile where we are finding God – and that's likely not in a building right now, at least not a church. I first noticed how God was coming to us and breathing holiness upon us outside the church building during Holy Week. I'm an Episcopal priest and serve an ELCA parish called House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS) in Denver, Colorado. For us at HFASS, Holy Week and the Triduum are the center of our entire year. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil are the most well attended and holy gatherings we hold all year. Which is why I just couldn't imagine holding Holy Week on Zoom. But we had no choice, and so, my partner Brian and I built a bonfire in our backyard so that we could light the new fire and the paschal candle, in as close to our usual fashion as we could.

The actual lighting of the candle on Zoom turned out to be weird, as you can imagine, but the holy part came afterwards. After I took off my alb and chasuble and turned the computer off, I walked outside where Brian was still stoking the flame and kids from the neighborhood were dancing in the billowing smoke. It was as if God was showing me my own version of the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through to the Red Sea, as those kids reveled in the actual holiness that is all around us, right where we are. Like, nothing can stop Jesus from rising from the dead, not even Zoom.

### **In our work for justice and our longing for retreat**

And as the pandemic raged on and we continued to find ourselves in exile, God kept showing up for our congregation and revealing to us that we are indeed standing on holy ground. In June, parishioners banded together to make a video for LGBTQ Pride in Denver. Queer folks and allies made videos in their homes confessing that "We are sorry that the Church has betrayed you...by what we have done and by what we have left undone." And in the same breath, we also confessed that "We are the Church." That no gates of Hell can level against us, including a pandemic, because God is still gathering us, even in 2020.

When George Floyd was murdered and righteous protest erupted in Denver against police brutality, we showed up to pass out water, snacks, sunscreen and first aid, and then we held Compline as bottle



rockets and tear gas were launched around us. We marched with protesters not long after in the Black Queer Liberation March and live streamed Sunday liturgy as we walked and chanted. The words of the Lord's Prayer intermingled with shouts of "No justice! No peace!" in what was like the biggest Prayers of the People our little congregation has ever said. God was indeed before us and our rear guard.

In John 1:14, the Greek literally says that "the Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us." That means God is wild and found in the wild. Which is why, at HFASS, we were sad when we couldn't hold our annual Spring Retreat in the Rocky Mountains. So instead, we took a cue from Scripture and pitched our tent where we were and organized an Adult Summer Camp where we divided the whole congregation into "cabins" and assigned them "cabin counselors." The cabins were all given pandemic guidelines in line with state and CDC regulations, but then each cabin decided how they wanted to gather. Some gathered virtually and others went on hikes, outings to botanical gardens or held picnics in the park. On Tuesday nights, we gathered for "chapel" and brought in speakers who normally wouldn't have been able to join us because of distance, including the rapper Aisha Fukushima who taught us to dance and sing, even as the world was burning.

And then in the fall, we actually pitched some tents, when we organized our first ever HFASS Camping Retreat. There on the grounds of an old Lutheran campground, we gathered under the stars for prayer and Communion, and like incense, we lifted up our hands and hearts to the Lord as wildfires raged across Colorado and the rest of the West. Oh, and we also got to make some mean S'mores and then look each other in the eye for the first time in what felt like forever and once again remember that we are still God's beloved.

As the summer was winding down, it was if God was trying to tell us something, perhaps something that we have always known, but fail to see – like the Psalmist says, "Where can I flee from your Spirit?" If we were writing Psalm 139 today, we might continue: "When I go up to the church you are there, when I gather your people in a busy street full of annoying honking horns for Holy Eucharist because that's the only the place we can meet on Sundays, you are there also. If I rise on the ether of Zoom and Facebook Live and all of a sudden am at church on the other side of the world, even there your hand will guide me."

### **In our weariness**

I should remember these words as we are now back on Zoom and it's unlikely we will physically lay eyes on each other more than once or twice for the next three to four months. Here in Denver we are in Level Red pandemic regulations ("lockdown light") and it's way too cold to do much outside for long. So, here we are again, longing for God to show up in this virtual world that can feel so godforsaken. But the good news is that God is still showing up.

When the election rolled around, so many in our congregation were already so tired by 2020 and the preceding three years of fear, racism, hatred and erosion of our democratic institutions. We, a community full of queer folks, addicts, the mentally ill, kids on the spectrum and children of immigrants, cried out with the psalmist, "I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping." How long, O Lord, how long? And while we couldn't be together and physically hold each other through our sadness and anxiety, we could get on Zoom and know that we were still alive. So, our parishioners and I put together a prayer vigil for the election and every hour a volunteer curated music videos, reflections, poetry and psalms.

And even though none of us knew the results that evening, we knew something more important, more liberating: that in our tears, we are in solidarity with all God's people in every time and place, all of whom God has brought through the tomb of Good Friday and into the everlasting life of Easter Sunday. God had not abandoned us and never will. We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture. And God's pasture is everywhere. We are in it right now. Even as the death toll rises and we face a winter staring at the same walls day after day after day.

### **God's own in all times and all places**

And just like God has continued to feed me with the dew drops of mercy I soaked up in the Holy Land, God is also feeding me and my congregation with the traveling mercies raining down upon us in the barren lands of our pandemic exile. Because of course, everything has not been easy. We haven't found mercy and holiness everywhere. There's so much to mourn all around us. And yet, there is still mercy. There is still holiness. And unless we throw a tent over all that God Kiki and call it what it is, we miss out on all that Jesusy juju. This is the Church in pandemic, and it is holy.

Perhaps the most holy moment, however, for me was the first time we got to celebrate the Eucharist outside after months of fasting from our most sacred duty. We had just moved our congregation and all our stuff from our former building to our new home. We won't actually be able to experience church together in this building until the pandemic is behind us, and so it was bittersweet. It was like cleaning out all your closets after a bitter divorce, not knowing what shape your life would take on the other side and yet knowing that one day all these memories and all this stuff would fuel new stories and new energy.

And so, after we swept the old church and moved into the new, we paused on the church yard and I lifted up my hands for the first time in five months and chanted, "It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should, at *all* times and in *all* places, give thanks and praise to You." Tears streamed down my face and I knew that there was nothing more true in the world. We belong to God, at all times and in all places. And it's all holy.

Those same tears streamed down the faces of my parishioners just a few weeks later, when we held our first baptisms since the beginning of the pandemic. Because we, the Church, across the world are still here and we are setting a table for the Holy One who will indeed bring us again to resurrection. Come, Lord Jesus!

*The Reverend **Reagan Humber** joined the House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS) in Denver, Colorado, as pastor in March 2015. Ordained in the Episcopal Church, he comes from HFASS's big sister congregation, [St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church](#) in San Francisco. Before coming to HFASS, Pastor Reagan served as a hospice chaplain in the Bay Area. He has a B.A. in Religion from Wake Forest University, an M.A. in Italian from Middlebury College and an M.Div. from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California. Reagan moved to Denver with his partner Brian and their dog Ogre. Being Southern, he can often be found eating or making pie, drinking sweet tea or doing Crossfit.*

### **Resources:**

- [Abundant Love in Scarce Times](#) by Gerlene Gordy, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [A Time for Everything](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, March 17, 2020
- [Training for a \(Communicator's\) Marathon](#) an ECF webinar presented by Miriam McKenney, Jeremy Tackett, Sandra Montes and Melodie Woerman, May 18, 2020

- [Ministering From an Empty Cup: A Survey of Faith Formation Professionals and Volunteers - Part 2](#) by Patrick Kangrga, July 21, 2020

### **Pandemic Learnings in Navajoland**

Leon Sampson and Gerlene Gordy

**Leon:** *Ya' at' eeh*, all is well. I greet you today in my *Dine' Bizaad*, Navajo language. My name is Leon Sampson, a curate priest serving at the Good Shepherd Episcopal Mission in Fort Defiance, Arizona. The Southeast region has three churches that serve the majority of the Navajo people on the Navajo reservation. Established in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, the Navajo Nation reservation is about the size of West Virginia. The Navajoland Area Mission has churches in all three states and serves about 170,000 enrolled tribal members on the reservation.

I served the church in my home community of Bluff, Utah, at St. Christopher's Episcopal Mission for four years as a transitional deacon, and graduated with a Master of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary in May of 2019. In July of 2019, I was ordained to the priesthood and called to Good Shepherd Mission to serve as curate priest with Rev. Cathlena Plummer. I have been here in Fort Defiance for a little over a year and have learned so much from this community. I am also learning what seminary could not prepare me for in practical ministry.

#### **A new kind of ministry begins**

In February of 2020, our Executive Council approved the postponing of physical church activities in all our church buildings. Shortly after, Navajo Nation mandated curfew hours for travel for all non-essential workers. All evening and weekend travel within the borders of the Navajo Nation reservation was prohibited, with a thousand dollar fine and time in jail as possible penalties for violating those orders. I started getting calls from church members requesting assistance because of the travel restrictions. Many were unable to get to the grocery store, which for some can take the whole day.

Other struggles became apparent when restaurants, Navajo Nation government and schools shut down, leaving many unemployed workers unable to buy food for their households. Families started seeing a rise in COVID-19 cases, and whole family compounds had to stay isolated, unable to get essential supplies to sustain their households. The Executive Council and regional leaders of the Episcopal church in Navajoland decided that we, as a church, needed to respond to the needs of the community. This was the start of a new kind of ministry for us.

First, a list of possible recipients for food boxes was created, which mainly consisted of church members and their families. This effort began with about fifty boxes, twice a month. After a month, our parishioners started referring neighbors who were having a difficult time feeding their families or in quarantine for possible exposure to the virus. From February to November, our numbers in the Southeast region jumped to about 200 boxes and deliveries once a month. Many organizations, including the Navajo Nation emergency response management team, called on local state resources to help provide drive-thru stations where members of the community could pick up a food box. Good Shepherd Mission staff, serving as volunteers, gave out on average 600 to 700 food boxes a day.

Navajo Nation is still experiencing great need within our communities. Many of the organizations that have provided food boxes and essentials have stopped because they now lack funding or labor. We remain committed to delivering food boxes and other essential items to those who cannot travel to distribution locations and deliver to eight communities surrounding our church. Those deliveries range from a fifteen-minute drive to a four-hour drive, round trip, to meet a family member at a gas station who will distribute food boxes to their communities.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has encouraged us all to begin holding church outside our buildings. To me this is exactly what church looks like – meeting people in their most vulnerable places and showing them that someone loves them and cares for their wellbeing. Many of our food box recipients are not regular attendees at Good Shepherd, but they can tell you that they have been praying to God for help.

### **Food for body and soul**

Our food boxes do not just contain food. We also offer personal protection equipment, clothes, cleaning supplies, Episcopal weekly lectionary readings, Forward Day by Day meditation booklets, family planter boxes with a cubic foot of potting soil and two packets of seeds, a UTO blue box and a Southeast region offering envelope. We are not only feeding a community, we are strengthening their faith in God and allowing the recipients to make the choice to seek Christ while respecting their autonomy.

We ask all recipients to fill out a form that provides personal information and lets us know their basic needs and access to running water, electricity and heating. The form helps account for the funds donated to the Episcopal Church in Navajoland, and also helps us direct them to Navajo Nation Chapter House programs. We may be helping people in the short term, but we're also looking out for their long-term support from local resources. The many social needs among the Navajo Nation have been passed over for so many decades, and living this way has hurt the community physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. That is why I believe our younger generation has higher numbers of suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, poverty and unemployment. At times I feel that we are not making a dent in the needs of our community, but I know that things cannot go back to the way they used to be. We need to be there for the community to offer love, hope in Christ and space for healing.

---

**GJ:** One year ago, I sat at Winter Talk in Seattle, Washington, an annual gathering where Indigenous peoples from across the Episcopal Church meet in song, dance and storytelling to nurture our souls in culture, while learning and building/strengthening friendships. We planned to find ways to prepare for General Convention. How do we engage in the wider Church to show that Indigenous People are part of the Episcopal Church? How do we amplify our voices and find friends that will listen? But first, how do we engage with each other to build bonds and share our rich cultures? We planned trips, visits and mini-conferences, so larger community representatives could engage in conversation and witness each other's culture.

One week after we arrived back in our respective communities, news broke that we had just left ground zero for the first COVID-19 cases in the United States. Then on March 13, Navajoland Area Mission notified our congregations that we would close our doors and move online via social media, email and phone and text messaging. At first, we had mixed feelings about the virus and how severe it was.

Navajoland is in what most know as the Four Corners. The Navajo Reservation is about 25,000 square miles and sits in three states: New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. From our creation stories, we are told that the Navajo Nation sits within the Four Sacred Mountains, the foundation of our life. The mountains

hold the stories of those who lived before us. The prayers, songs, chants and voices of generations of people still linger in the canyons, caves and crevices of each of the mountains. We are given all that we need by the mountains – food, water, a home – and they also provide us with understanding if only we listen.

### **Responding to need in Navajoland**

In late March of 2020, the Navajo Nation began reporting cases of COVID-19 in rural communities. The Navajo Nation President began issuing stay-at-home orders and closed the Nation down. With so large an area, shelter-in-place orders and roadblocks, our people had a challenging time, like many in the United States, to provide for their families' necessities. The main reason being, that as the whole world was struggling and COVID-19 became a global Pandemic, the Navajo Reservation, in all its 25,000 square miles, has only 13 grocery stores!

We have tons of gas stations, however, so people have enough fuel to travel off the reservation to some racist border towns to spend money while price gouging continues in some of the reservation grocery stores. In December 2020, images surfaced of a market on the reservation selling 50-count disposable face masks for \$89. But I digress. These last two sentences are at least three articles in themselves. Let's get back to the story. So, Global Pandemic, and now all the toilet paper is gone.

In all seriousness, the Navajo Nation was struggling before the Pandemic with lack of employment, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, physical abuse and families suffering from food scarcity. A third of the reservation homes are in remote communities and do not have running water, and a fraction of the reservation does not have electricity. With the world shutting down and the numbers of positive COVID cases on the rise, we have become vulnerable to its ravages. Soon into the Pandemic, the majestic, breathtaking Navajoland became headline news worldwide as news agencies reported that we had the highest COVID-19 cases per capita next to New York and New Jersey. As our people began to succumb to this virus, families lost jobs due to closures, food became even more scarce due to frantic buying, and schools, where children are fed two main meals daily, closed.

The Episcopal Church in Navajoland and other groups across the reservation heard the voices of distress and acted. With the worldwide reporting of the ways COVID was affecting Navajo people, donations started coming in the mail. Homemade masks, hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies and monetary donations. A few of our churches had small food pantries that served a few families a month, but with the Pandemic, we now serve more than 2000 families. We've partnered with Giving Children Hope, which provides food and clothing to add to food boxes and purchase fresh produce and meats with online donations.

### **Using technology to be the Church**

How do we remain the Church during the Pandemic? Before the Pandemic, our online presence was not significant. Two years before the world came to a halt, Navajoland created a ministry called Cheii's Dev Shop. Cheii's Dev shop introduced technology to our churches and provided training and teachings to our people who are not tech-savvy. It provided monthly basic web development classes and computer skill instruction. It was a slow process due to funding, but we were able to create our website which offers information about our people and churches.

Then we began talking about how we could engage more on social media. For the first time, we have four new seminary-trained Navajo priests. Pre-Pandemic, Navajoland was planning our future as Navajoland Area Mission. The clergy were busy and focused on building up our nine congregations. New, vibrant ministries developed ideas about cultural revitalization and programs to support individuals in need of spiritual sustenance while walking the road to recovery.

COVID time takes a toll psychologically. How do we continue to provide ministry and support while not meeting in person? While we can never get the full effect of meeting in person while meeting online, tools like Zoom and the various social media platforms have enabled us to reach out in new ways. We use Zoom for all meetings, Bible studies and prayer times. We also use it to offer two crucial sessions to our Navajo People. With the help of assisting bishops and clergy, these sessions cover topics like “Coping in times of COVID” and “Caring for our families and neighbors in times of COVID.” They provide a safe space for small groups to talk, reflect and pray.

Living in isolation and watching the media flooded with news about death and outbreak can take a toll on one's psyche. Each day a mini prayer session can be created at home by reading the daily lectionary and the accompanying reflections and prayers that clergy write. These reflections are sent to our Navajo people via text message because wifi and internet connectivity are not always reliable.

Using technology for Church, we now reach Navajo people who did not know we existed. This time has forced us to stop, listen and serve. We heard the needs and were able to help more. The old ways are gone, and we may not go back entirely. We cannot wait for something to happen. We actively go out into the community because our livelihood relies on it or our ways will become extinct. The world needs healing, and we can offer our prayers, meditations and voice to help heal, comfort and fill space. We stumble, we fall, but we get right back up again.

### **Breathe and pray**

The biggest take away for me during the Global Pandemic is to breathe.  
At times everything feels overwhelming, but with a prayerful heart  
and dedication to make our world a better place, I begin to see the silver lining.  
The practice of prayer is holy and creates a space for inward thinking.  
In the morning at dawn, before the sun rises,  
we bring our offering of corn pollen to Creator God.  
The morning is calm and quiet.  
As we stand to the East, we take some time and meditate to wake our senses.  
We smell the many fragrances of the earth. Damp, earthy, woodsy, and warm.  
We begin to hear life waking up all around us. Birds begin singing and rustling branches.  
We see the changing colors of the horizon: light blues and many shades of yellow.  
We touch mother earth with the palms of our hands,  
blessing ourselves in thanksgiving for life on a new day.  
We offer prayers of thanksgiving, adoration and supplication.  
We taste but a small portion of corn pollen and sprinkle the offering to Creator  
as the sun begins to make its ascent in the sky.  
All is whole again. Amen.

*The Reverend **Leon Sampson** is a curate priest at Good Shepherd Mission Church in Fort Defiance, Arizona. Raised in the Navajoland Area Mission, he has lived there all his life and was called to serve God*

*with the Diné people. His passions are farming, culinary arts and helping young families know Christ in their lives. He loves teaching and learning about who we are as the Episcopal church in Navajoland. He lives with his wife and children.*

**Gerlene Gordy (GJ)** is Navajo from Coal Mine, New Mexico. Her clans are; One who walks around born into the Salt People. Edge Water is her maternal grandparents, and Mud People are her paternal grandparents. Clanship is essential to Navajo people for greeting and establishing relations. She is the Communication Director for the Episcopal Church in Navajoland (ECN) and a web developer for Cheii's Web, which was founded by ECN. She wants to help share our stories. She has a 5-year-old daughter and husband. She has worked with children for 12+ years and enjoys sweet tea on a hot New Mexico afternoon.

#### **Resources:**

- [COVID-19 Resources](#) by the ECFVP Editorial Team, an ECF Vital Practices blog, March 13, 2020
- [Abundant Love in Scarce Times](#) by Gerlene Gordy, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Worry... And Heart](#) by Anna Olson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, August 13, 2014
- [Navajo Millennial](#) by Gerlene Gordy, an ECF Vital Practices blog, June 20, 2019

#### **Lamentations and Learnings**

Haley Bankey

As I sit down to write this, my oldest daughter is upstairs giggling like crazy at her tenth birthday sleepover on Zoom. My baby, the child who made me a mom, has made it to double-digits! This, of course, has set my emotions coursing, and deep sorrow is one of them. I mourn for my daughter who lost out on a big life milestone because of the pandemic. She can't hug her friends, she can't whisper in their ears during Truth or Dare and she can't cuddle under a shared blanket during a scary part of the movie. I am, however, elated and joyful that we have the blessing of Zoom. The girls are being as innocent as 10-year-olds should be, laughing over shared jokes, recording the moment when one was dared to hit herself in the face with a plate of whipped cream and just being kids. Yes, there is such loss right now, but there are also moments of joy and learning in all we do.

As the Executive Director for Gathering of Leaders (GOL), it is my blessing to be able to work with some of the most creative, innovative and *hope-filled* clergy in the Episcopal Church. If you are unfamiliar with this organization you can [read more about it here](#), but one of the cornerstones of our work is to network and equip Episcopal clergy who aren't afraid to innovate and be church for now and the future, however that may look. As the initial lock-down and ensuing pandemic and restrictions have increased, our members have leaned on each other for support, energy and deep lament at the losses they and their congregations were experiencing.

Lamenting our losses is a Christian response to pain and grief. [NT Wright](#) wrote, "It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain – and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell." However, just like my daughter making the most of her Zoom birthday party, the GOL clergy are

finding hope in the grief. They are feeling the pain and loss, but also learning profound lessons about the strength of Christ and Christian community in the midst of this time.

When I asked the GOL network to share their greatest lamentations and learnings in this pandemic, their response was more than I could have hoped for. As you read and reflect on their comments, I hope you can take time to feel your own pain, to mourn what we have lost but also to see the hope-filled future ahead of us, as we learn about the resilience of our faith and our community.

### **Lamentations**

By far the largest loss and source of grief has been our inability to be physically present with one another. During the lockdown and as people began dying, our clergy were cut off from their regular methods of pastoral care and burial. “The toughest part for me is hearing of people dying alone,” shares the [Rt. Rev. Doug Fisher](#). “Clergy have been wonderful in saying prayers over FaceTime as nurses hold iPhones in front of the sick and dying, but it is not the same as presence. The Episcopal Church is not perfect, but we are adept at pastoral care and our burial liturgies are powerful expressions of faith.” The pandemic and quarantine have also impacted the ways our faith communities interact with each other and the work of our priests. [The Very Rev. Kristina Maulden](#) says, “I feel that my job title has changed to be more accurately reflected as *Manager of Disappointment*, offering council when people are unable to plan the life milestones they crave like weddings, baptisms and the ever-growing number of funerals.” The [Rev. Mary Vano](#) shares her fear, “There’s a limit to how much time we all want to spend reading emails, watching videos or participating in Zoom classes. For the most part, it seems that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I worry about people who may never re-engage with the Church.”

### **Learnings**

[The Rev. Dr. Hillary Raining’s](#) comments encourage us to contemplate our learnings: “There can be no resurrection without a death. There is a deep grief that comes alongside a transformation at the magnitude we are living through, and it is always going to mean that something has to die so that new life can come forth.” If we don’t examine our losses and learn from them, we aren’t growing and moving forward. We are a people of faith built around the resurrection, and we can see God’s work bring forth new fruit.

“Too often our patterns can become calcified habits and we begin to hold fast to ‘how we do things here,’ rather than holding fast to Christ and the Spirit which may be trying to pull us in a new direction,” reflects the [Rev. Anjel Scarborough](#). “This pandemic has revealed our vulnerability and reconnected many to their deep need for Christ, but it has disrupted our calcified habits and forced us to try new ways of being the Church. New ministries have emerged along with new worship patterns.” Through these new ministries and because of tools like YouTube, Zoom and opening the Book of Common Prayer beyond page 355, Anjel’s congregation has connected with two generations of young people who were not previously part of her community. The [Rev. Kyle Oliver](#) shares his excitement over digital approaches saying, “The pandemic has reenergized my hope that church leaders can learn to engage thoughtfully and effectively with new media when they recognize the benefits to their work convening community and proclaiming Good News.”

Reading through these responses, repeatedly I see these phrases, “It gave us permission to take risks” and “we were able to try something new without fear.” Bishops from the around the church shared that



they “are witnessing congregations focus less on receiving the Sacrament, and more on being Sacrament in the world.” I am specifically encouraged by the Rt. Rev. Doug Fisher’s comments: “I have learned what great community service our churches can provide when they collaborate with organizations that are already addressing issues like food insecurity. Almost all our churches in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts are now doing this. As Jesus said, we are called to be leaven in the bread. We don’t have to be the whole loaf.”

### **What Now?**

We are at a moment in time when feeling our grief and seeing hope in the future are critical. We must not ignore the hurt and loss, and we must not ignore the opportunities that are unfolding for us. I invite you to look at your life, your congregation, your vocation and ask:

- Have I given myself time to mourn the losses I have experienced personally?
- Have I prayed for acceptance and peace for those things?
- Have I spent time discerning what opportunities are ahead of me that weren’t there before?
- Have I made space in my heart to see where Christ is in all of this?

The [Rt. Rev. Eugene Sutton](#) shared, “The Book of Lamentations has become my spiritual companion along this sad journey of living in the age of COVID-19. I’ve learned, much to my surprise, that there’s a grace in embracing lamentation as a spiritual practice. I believe that we as a nation, as a people and as the Episcopal Church, have largely forgotten how to lament; I certainly have tried to avoid it whenever I could. But even now, as I lament in prayer, I find the comfort of the Holy Spirit reminding me that the journey is not over, the new Day is coming, and I will never, ever, walk alone.”

***Haley Bankey** is Program Director for Leadership Resources at the Episcopal Church Foundation and also serves as the Executive Director for Gathering of Leaders (GOL), where she guides day to day operations as well as long-term strategy and planning. Prior to working with GOL, Haley served as the Director of Operations and Management for her home parish of St. George Church and School in San Antonio, Texas, and ran her own faith-based operations consulting company. She also serves on the Congregational Development Committee for the Diocese of West Texas and is a graduate of the College for Congregational Development.*

*Haley grew up in the Episcopal church in the Middle East and brings an international perspective to her work. Her passion is equipping lay and clergy leaders alike through leadership training and community building to grow God's church into the future. She lives in San Antonio, Texas with her husband and two wonderful daughters.*

### **Resources:**

- [Dealing with Loss and Grief in the Midst of a Pandemic](#), an ECF webinar presented by Lynn Ronaldi, Laura Masterson and Rebecca Roesch, December 2, 2020
- [Pray for Your Priest](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, December 22, 2020
- [How are congregations being affected by COVID-19?](#) An ECF webinar presented by David King and Manoj Zacharia, October 08, 2020
- [Self-Care for the Sake of Others \(in the Age of COVID-19\)](#), an ECF webinar presented by Chanta Bhan, April 6, 2020

## **Pastoring In a Pandemic**

Angelo Wildgoose

As clergy we have all had long days where pastoral calls and visits have tired us out. Days where we have given all that we could and were glad that the day had come to an end. I can remember days of complaining about how draining at times our work can be. During this pandemic one of the things that I have learned is that the very same thing that I used to complain about is one of the things that I missed the most. I miss the intimacy of interaction that this pandemic has taken away.

With the need for social distancing and all of the other protocols and safety measures that we have been made to take, things like visiting a home, a hospital bed or even a simple hug during times of distress as we reach out to parishioners have proven difficult and possibly even a luxury. At times a phone call just doesn't seem to be enough. What has proven to be even harder is having to be pastoral when this reality hits home, when family members are not able to be at the bedside of loved ones who are sick or dying.

### **Harsh realities**

For me this has been a reality several times since March, but none so real as with a couple in my parish who were married for more than fifty years. Mr. and Mrs. H had a good life together. Three children and a few grandchildren. Mr. H had taken ill just before I arrived at the parish and had been in and out of hospital for most of the time since. Mrs. H visited him faithfully while he was in hospital, and when he was home she was his primary caregiver. Her life revolved around his care, but as far as I can remember she never complained, never even said she was tired. After all the years they were married, he was her everything and she was his.

Mr. H went into the hospital shortly before COVID-19 hit, and eventually went into hospice. Because of COVID, for the last month and days of his life she could not visit (at least not inside the facility). She tells of visiting the center where she could only see him through a window. The nurses would bring him to the window and the saying, "so close but yet so far," held true for them.

As his health declined, he could not understand why she wouldn't come inside to see him. He began to fade as the days went on, and it was obvious that Mr. H would soon no longer be with us. Mrs. H would call me from time to time for words of encouragement, but sometimes I really didn't know what to say, because I couldn't even imagine what she was going through. I wanted to visit them both, but I couldn't because they both had health issues and therefore fell into the vulnerable COVID category.

It weighed on me that I couldn't go in to say prayers with Mr. H or even when the time came give him last rites. It weighed on me because I couldn't go and sit with Mrs. H (if even to just be a presence). When he eventually passed, she said to me, "Father I didn't get to say goodbye, give him a hug or even a kiss one last time." At his funeral the numbers had to be small, and everyone had to be socially distanced. There was no placing a hand on the shoulder, giving a hug or any other physical show of support. To me it seemed so cold. Because of governmental guidelines we only had 25 minutes from start to finish for the service.

### **Changes in ministry call for sharing the work and self-care**

My reflection on how ministry has changed during this pandemic offers a reminder of how important human contact and interaction are. As a part of who I am as a person and as a priest, giving a handshake and a hug are simply what I do. Mr. and Mrs. H are a harsh reminder of the way things have changed. Her experience of the harshness of losing a loved one and that of so many others offers us a heartbreaking reality check. To lose a loved one is never an easy thing, but to be unable to say goodbye, give a hug or a kiss one last time seems so cruel and unfair. I have checked on Mrs. H many times since her husband passed, and at times she still brings up how hard his last few days were for her and how some days all she can do is cry. Unfortunately, I am still not able to visit with her because she is also very cautious because of COVID, and rightly so.

Our church has formed a calling and grief ministry aimed at helping each other through these tough times. We, like everyone else, are doing the best we can in these difficult times. I have found that it is especially important to have other members of the congregation involved in the ministry of the church at this time, and the vestry in particular, because this is simply too much for the clergy to take on by ourselves. This, of course, should have been our practice even before the pandemic. Not only does it take some of the weight off of our shoulders, but it also gives us extra ears as issues may arise. I have also found it necessary to find ways to offload some of the burdens of this time.

Taking time to talk to someone (therapist, other clergy, friends) is important. Self-care is paramount, and we must take the time to take care of ourselves. Taking time off, exercise, quiet time, hobbies, etc., are necessary and we must not feel guilty about it. If we don't take care of ourselves, then eventually we won't be able to take care of anyone else.

I pray God's continual guiding hands upon us all, that we may all dwell in safety. Until then, "May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are apart one from another."

*The Reverend **Angelo S. Wildgoose** is rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Plainfield, New Jersey. He grew up on the island of Grand Bahama (Freeport), where he attended Christ the King Anglican Church. In 1999, he graduated from Codrington College in Barbados with a diploma in Pastoral Studies, as well as a BA in Theology from the University of the West Indies. Ordained a priest in 2000, he served several congregations in the Bahamas and also trained and certified as a secondary education teacher in religious studies.*

*Fr. Wildgoose left the Bahamas with his wife and children in 2004, and has since served congregations in the Dioceses of Bermuda, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania prior to coming to St. Mark's in 2016. He has served on the design team for the S.O.U.L. conference put on by the Office of Black Ministries of the Episcopal Church and is currently pursuing a Masters in Ministry Degree from Colorado Theological Seminary.*

**Resources:**

- [Ministry in a Global Pandemic](#) an ECF webinar presented by Joshua Rodriguez-Hobbs on June 11, 2020
- [Pray for Your Priest](#) by Linda Buskirk, an ECF Vital Practices blog, December 22, 2020
- [Dealing with Loss and Grief in the Midst of a Pandemic](#), an ECF webinar presented by Lynn Ronaldi, Laura Masterson and Rebecca Roesch, December 2, 2020
- [Self-Care During the Pandemic](#) by Sandra T. Montes, Vestry Papers, November 2020

## Lecciones de la pandemia en Navajoland

Leon Sampson and Gerlene Gordy

**Leon:** *Ya' at' eeh*, todo está bien. Hoy los saludo en mi *Dine' Bizaad*, en idioma navajo. Me llamo Leon Sampson. Soy un sacerdote que sirve en la Misión Episcopal Good Shepherd en Fort Defiance, Arizona. La región sudoriental tiene tres iglesias que atienden a la mayor parte del pueblo navajo en la Reserva Navajo. Establecida en Arizona, Nuevo México y Utah, la reserva de la Nación Navajo es aproximadamente del tamaño del estado de West Virginia. La misión de la zona Navajoland cuenta con iglesias en tres estados y atiende a unos 170,000 miembros inscritos de la tribu en la reserva. Serví cuatro años en la iglesia de mi comunidad natal de Bluff, Utah, en la Misión Episcopal de St. Christopher como diácono transicional y obtuve mi maestría en teología del Seminario Teológico de Virginia en mayo de 2019. Fui ordenado sacerdote y llamado a la Misión Good Shepherd para que sirviera como sacerdote con la Rvda. Cathlena Plummer. Estoy en Fort Defiance desde hace un poco más de un año y aprendí muchísimo de esta comunidad. También estoy aprendiendo lo que el seminario no podría haberme preparado para el ministerio en la práctica.

### **Empieza un nuevo tipo de ministerio**

En febrero de 2020, nuestro Consejo Ejecutivo aprobó el aplazamiento de las actividades eclesiales en persona en todos nuestros edificios de iglesias. Poco después la Nación Navajo declaró horarios de toque de queda para los desplazamientos de todos los trabajadores no esenciales. Todos los viajes nocturnos y en fines de semana dentro de los límites de la reserva de la Nación Navajo fueron prohibidos. El posible castigo por incumplimiento era una multa de mil dólares y tiempo en la cárcel. Empecé a recibir llamadas de miembros de la iglesia solicitando ayuda a causa de las restricciones de viajes. Muchos no podían ir a comprar alimentos, algo que a algunos les podía llevar un día entero. Otras luchas fueron aparentes cuando los restaurantes, el gobierno de la Nación Navajo y las escuelas cerraron, dejando a muchos trabajadores desempleados y sin poder comprar alimentos para sus hogares. Las familias empezaron a ver aumentos en los casos de la COVID-19 y compuestos familiares completos tuvieron que permanecer aislados, sin posibilidad de obtener suministros esenciales para sus hogares. El Consejo Ejecutivo y los líderes regionales de la Iglesia Episcopal en Navajoland decidieron que nosotros, como iglesia, teníamos que responder a las necesidades de la comunidad. Ese fue el inicio de un nuevo tipo de ministerio para nosotros.

Primero, se creó una lista de posibles beneficiarios de cajas de alimentos, que consistía principalmente de miembros de la iglesia y sus familias. Este esfuerzo comenzó con cincuenta cajas, dos veces por mes. Después de un mes, nuestros feligreses empezaron a remitir gente que tenía dificultad para alimentar a sus familias o que estaba en cuarentena por posible exposición al virus. Entre febrero y noviembre, nuestros números en la región sudoriental aumentaron a unas 200 cajas con entregas una vez por mes. Muchas organizaciones, entre ellas el grupo de gestión de reacción a emergencias de la Nación Navajo, recurrieron a entidades estatales locales para que ayudaran a proporcionar recursos para que los miembros de la comunidad pudieran ir en vehículos a puntos de entrega para recoger sus cajas de alimentos. Voluntarios del personal de la Misión Good Shepherd entregaron un promedio de 600 a 700 cajas de alimentos por día.

La Nación Navajo sigue teniendo grandes necesidades en nuestras comunidades. Muchas de las organizaciones que proporcionaban cajas de alimentos y productos esenciales dejaron de hacerlo por

carecer de fondos o mano de obra. Permanecemos comprometidos a entregar cajas de alimentos y otros artículos esenciales a los que no pueden ir a los lugares de distribución y entregamos a ocho comunidades en los alrededores de nuestra iglesia. Esas entregas requieren manejar entre quince minutos y cuatro horas, de ida y vuelta, para encontrarse con un miembro de una familia en una gasolinera dispuesta a distribuir cajas de alimentos a sus comunidades.

El Obispo Presidente Michael Curry nos estimuló a todos nosotros a que empezáramos a celebrar servicios religiosos afuera de nuestros edificios. Para mí eso es exactamente lo que es una iglesia: encontrarse con gente en sus lugares más vulnerables y demostrarles que alguien los ama y se preocupa por su bienestar. Muchos de los que reciben las cajas de alimentos no asisten regularmente a Good Shepherd, pero les puedo decir que han estado orando pidiéndole ayuda a Dios.

### **Alimento para el cuerpo y el alma**

Nuestras cajas de alimentos no solo contienen comida. También ofrecemos equipamiento de protección personal, ropa, artículos de limpieza, lecturas semanales del leccionario episcopal, folletos de meditación Adelante Día a Día, maceteros con un pie cúbico de tierra y dos paquetes de semillas, una caja azul UTO (Ofrenda Unida de Gracias) y un sobre de ofrenda a la región sudoriental. No solo estamos alimentando a una comunidad, sino que también estamos reforzando su fe en Dios y permitiendo que los beneficiarios escojan buscar a Cristo sin dejar de respetar su autonomía.

Pedimos a los beneficiarios que llenen un formulario que proporciona información y nos deja saber sus necesidades básicas y su acceso a agua corriente, electricidad y calefacción. El formulario ayuda a dar cuentas de los fondos donados a la Iglesia Episcopal en Navajoland y además nos ayuda a dirigirlos a programas de la Sala Capitular de la Nación Navajo. Podemos estar ayudando a gente a corto plazo, pero también estamos buscando apoyo a mayor plazo de recursos locales. Las numerosas necesidades de los habitantes de la Nación Navajo han sido pasadas por alto por muchas décadas y vivir de esta manera dañó a la comunidad física, emocional, psicológica y espiritualmente. Es por eso que creo que en nuestra generación más joven hay cifras más elevadas de suicidios, alcoholismo, drogadicción, pobreza y desempleo. A veces siento que no estamos teniendo un mayor impacto en las necesidades de nuestra comunidad, pero sé que las cosas no pueden volver a como eran antes. Necesitamos estar presentes en la comunidad para ofrecer amor, esperanza en Cristo y espacio para sanar.

---

**GJ:** Hace un año fui a Winter Talk en Seattle, Washington, una reunión anual en la que pueblos indígenas de toda la Iglesia Episcopal se reúnen para cantar, bailar y narrar historias para nutrir nuestras almas en cultura, aprender y forjar y reforzar amistades. Planificamos encontrar maneras de prepararnos para la Convención General. ¿Cómo podemos hacer que la Iglesia en general demuestre que los pueblos indígenas son parte de la Iglesia Episcopal? ¿Cómo amplificamos nuestras voces y encontramos amigos que nos escuchen? Pero primero, ¿cómo interactuamos entre nosotros para forjar vínculos y compartir nuestras culturas tan ricas? Planificamos viajes, visitas y pequeñas conferencias, para que representantes de la comunidad más general puedan conversar y presenciar las diferentes culturas. A la semana de haber regresado a nuestras respectivas comunidades, hubo un anuncio de que acabábamos salir de la zona cero de los primeros casos de la COVID-19 en Estados Unidos. Después, el 13 de marzo, la Misión de la Zona de Navajoland notificó a nuestras feligresías que cerraríamos nuestras puertas y que pasaríamos a estar presentes virtualmente mediante medios sociales, correo electrónico, teléfono y mensajes de texto. Al principio no estábamos muy seguros de cómo nos sentíamos sobre el virus y lo peligroso que era.

Navajoland es lo que la mayoría de la gente conoce como los Cuatro Rincones. La Reserva Navajo tiene una superficie de unas 25,000 millas cuadradas y está en tres estados: Nuevo México, Arizona y Utah. Nuestras historias de la creación nos dicen que la Nación Navajo yace dentro de las Cuatro Montañas Sagradas, el fundamento de nuestra vida. Las montañas contienen historias de los que vivieron antes de nosotros. Las oraciones, canciones, cánticos y voces de generaciones que todavía perduran en los cañones, cuevas y grietas de cada montaña. Las montañas nos dan todo lo que necesitamos: alimento, agua, un hogar y con solo escucharlas nos proporcionan entendimiento.

### **Responder a la necesidad en Navajoland**

A fines de marzo de 2020, la Nación empezó a informar casos de la COVID-19 en comunidades rurales. El presidente de la Nación Navajo empezó a emitir órdenes de permanecer en casa y cerró la Nación. Por ser una región tan vasta, las órdenes de permanecer en casa y los controles de carretera causaron grandes dificultades a nuestra gente -- al igual que a muchos otros en Estados Unidos -- para cumplir con las necesidades de sus familias. ¡El principal motivo era que cuando el mundo entero estaba luchando y la COVID-19 se convirtió en una pandemia local, la Reserva Navajo, en todas sus 25,000 millas cuadradas, solo contaba con 13 mercados!

Sin embargo, tenemos montones de gasolineras, así que la gente tenía suficiente combustible como para aventurarse fuera de la reserva a alguna localidad fronteriza racista para gastar dinero en mercados que aumentaban enormemente los precios. En diciembre de 2020 surgieron imágenes de una tienda en la reserva que vendía 50 mascarillas faciales por \$89. Estas dos últimas oraciones merecen como mínimo tres artículos.

Pero volvamos a la historia. Así que, pandemia global y desaparición del papel higiénico. En realidad, antes de la pandemia la Nación Navajo ya estaba luchando con la falta de empleo, el alcoholismo, la drogadicción, el maltrato físico y la malnutrición. La tercera parte de las viviendas en la reserva se encuentran en comunidades remotas sin agua corriente y una parte de la reserva no tiene electricidad. Con el mundo cerrándose y el número de casos de COVID en aumento, pasamos a ser muy vulnerables a sus estragos. Al poco tiempo de la pandemia, la majestuosa, hermosa Nación Navajo se convirtió en titulares de noticias de todo el mundo, que informaban que nosotros teníamos el mayor número de casos de la COVID-19 per cápita junto con Nueva York y Nueva Jersey. A medida que el virus empezó a asolar a nuestra gente, las familias perdieron empleos a causa de los cierres, la comida escaseó todavía más a causa de las compras frenéticas y las escuelas que proporcionaban dos comidas diarias a los niños cerraron.

La Iglesia Episcopal de Navajoland y otros grupos en la reserva oyeron nuestras voces de desesperación y actuaron. Cuando el mundo empezó a informar las maneras en que la COVID-19 estaba afectando al pueblo navajo, empezaron a llegar donaciones por correo. Mascarillas hechas a mano, desinfectantes de manos, artículos de limpieza y donaciones monetarias. Unas pocas iglesias nuestras tenían pequeñas despensas de alimentos que servían a varias familias por mes, pero con la pandemia ahora servimos a más de 2,000 familias. Nos hemos asociado a Giving Children Hope (Dar Esperanzas a los Niños), que proporciona alimentos y ropa para añadirlos a nuestras cajas de alimentos y compra hortalizas y carnes frescas con dinero de donaciones en línea.

### **Empleo de tecnología para ser la Iglesia**

¿Cómo seguimos siendo la Iglesia durante la pandemia? Antes de la pandemia, nuestra presencia en línea no era significativa. Dos años antes del cierre del mundo, Navajoland había creado un ministerio llamado Cheii's Dev Shop. Cheii's Dev Shop introdujo tecnología a nuestras iglesias y proporcionó capacitación e instrucción a nuestra gente carente de conocimientos técnicos. Proporciona clases mensuales de desarrollo básico de sitios web y de uso de computadoras. Fue un proceso lento por falta de fondos, pero pudimos crear nuestro sitio web, que ofrece información sobre nuestro pueblo e iglesias.

Después empezamos a hablar sobre cómo hacer que más gente participara en medios sociales. Por primera vez, tenemos cuatro nuevos sacerdotes navajos capacitados en seminarios. Antes de la pandemia, Navajoland estaba planificando nuestro futuro como Misión de la Zona de Navajoland. El sacerdocio estaba atareado y centrado en reforzar nuestras nueve feligresías. Vibrantes nuevos ministerios desarrollaron ideas sobre revitalización cultural y programas para asistir a personas necesitadas de sustento espiritual en su senda hacia la recuperación.

El tiempo del COVID afecta psicológicamente, ¿Cómo podemos seguir proporcionando ministerio y apoyo sin reunirnos en persona? Si bien nunca podremos tener el efecto pleno de reunirnos en persona al reunirnos en línea, herramientas como Zoom y diversas plataformas de medios sociales nos han permitido llegar a la gente de nuevas maneras. Empleamos Zoom para todas las reuniones, estudios bíblicos y momentos de oración. También lo empleamos para ofrecer dos sesiones cruciales para nuestro pueblo navajo. Con la ayuda de obispos y sacerdotes, estas sesiones cubren temas como “Lidiar en tiempos de COVID” y “Cuidar a nuestras familias y vecinos en tiempos de COVID”. Proporcionan un lugar seguro para que grupos pequeños hablen, reflexionen y oren.

Vivir en aislamiento y ver los medios inundados de noticias sobre muertes y brotes puede afectar adversamente nuestra psique. En los hogares se puede crear una breve sesión diaria de oración para leer el leccionario diario y las reflexiones y oraciones que escriben los sacerdotes. Esas reflexiones se envían a nuestro pueblo navajo mediante mensajes de texto porque no siempre hay buena conectividad a Internet o wifi.

Empleando tecnología para Iglesia, ahora alcanzamos a navajos que no sabían que nosotros existíamos. Esta vez nos forzó a parar, escuchar y servir. Oímos las necesidades y pudimos ayudar más gente. Las viejas maneras de hacer las cosas desaparecieron y es posible que no volvamos a ellas enteramente. No podemos sentarnos a esperar que algo suceda. Nosotros vamos activamente a la comunidad porque lo que nos sustenta depende de ello, de lo contrario nuestras formas de vida pasarán al olvido. El mundo necesita sanidad y podemos ofrecer nuestras plegarias, meditaciones y voz para ayudar a curar, reconfortar y llenar espacio. Tropezamos, nos caemos, pero nos levantamos inmediatamente.

### **Respirar y orar**

Lo que más aprendí durante la pandemia global fue a respirar.

A veces todo parece ser abrumador, pero con corazón devoto y dedicación a hacer que nuestro mundo sea un lugar mejor, empiezo a ver un resquicio de esperanza.

La práctica de la oración es sagrada y crea un espacio de pensamiento interior.

En la mañana, al amanecer, antes de que sale el sol

llevamos nuestra ofrenda de polen de maíz al Dios Creador.

La mañana es calmada y silenciosa.

De pie hacia el este, dedicamos tiempo y meditamos para despertar nuestros sentidos. Olemos las muchas fragancias de la tierra: húmeda, terrosa, boscosa y cálida. Empezamos a oír el despertar de la vida a nuestro alrededor. Los pajaritos empiezan a trinar y las hojas a susurrar. Vemos los colores cambiantes del horizonte: azules pálidos y muchos tonos de amarillo. Tocamos a la madre tierra con las palmas de nuestras manos, bendiciéndonos en agradecimiento por la vida en un nuevo día. Ofrecemos oraciones de agradecimiento, adoración y súplica. Probamos una pequeña cantidad de polen de maíz y rociamos la ofrenda al Creador en el momento en que el sol empieza a ascender en el cielo. Todo está entero otra vez. Amén.

*El reverendo **Leon Sampson** es sacerdote en la Misión de la Iglesia Good Shepherd en Fort Defiance, Arizona. Nació y vivió toda su vida en esa región y fue llamado a servir a Dios con el pueblo Diné. Sus pasiones son la agricultura, las artes culinarias y ayudar a familias jóvenes a conocer a Cristo en sus vidas. Le encanta enseñar y aprender sobre quiénes somos como Iglesia Episcopal en Navajoland. Vive con su esposa y sus hijos.*

***Gerlene Gordy (GJ)** es navaja de Coal Mine, Nuevo México. Sus clanes son: Un caminante nacido del Pueblo de la Sal. Agua de Orilla son sus abuelas maternas y el Pueblo del Lodo sus abuelos paternos. Pertener a un clan es esencial para los navajos para saludar y establecer relaciones. Ella es la directora de comunicaciones de la Iglesia Episcopal en Navajoland y desarrolladora de la Web de Cheii, que fue fundada por la Iglesia Episcopal en Navajoland. Gerlene desea ayudar a compartir sus historias. Tiene una hija de 5 años y un esposo. Trabajó con niños por más de 12 años y disfruta beber té dulce en las tardes calurosas de Nuevo México.*

**Recursos:**

- [Oración y acción en una pandemia](#) por Yesenia (Jessie) Alejandro, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Un espíritu audaz de abundancia](#) por Sandy Webb, Vestry Papers, September 2019
- [Cuidarse en medio de una pandemia](#) por Sandra T. Montes, Vestry Papers, November 2020
- [Una época sin precedentes](#) por Isaiah “Shaneequa” Brokenleg, Vestry Papers, July 2020