



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."

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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.

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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.^[1] “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.”^[2] 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.”^[3] 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.’^[2] 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.^[3] His preaching raised money for a soup kitchen and what is considered one of the first hospitals, the Basiliad.^[4]

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.^[5] 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.^[6] 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.

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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.^[1] “Porque los de Macedonia y Acaya decidieron voluntariamente hacer una colecta y mandarla a los hermanos pobres de Jerusalén.”^[2] 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”.^[3]

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’^[2]. 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.^[3] 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^[4].

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.