

## Practicing a mission strategy of presence

### Mission Enterprise Zone grant helps fund effort in Worcester, Massachusetts

By Sharon Sheridan | June 22, 2015 [Leave a Comment](#) |



When plans to use a local church as a base of operations fell through, the Rev. Meredyth Wessman Ward turned her car into her roving office as she practices a ministry of presence and making connections as urban missionary in the South Main neighborhood of Worcester in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. The Worcester Urban Mission Strategy is funded in part by a New Church Start grant. Photo/Jane Griesbach

*Editor's note: This is the third in a series of stories about The Episcopal Church's pledge at the 77th General Convention to partner with dioceses to begin innovative mission strategies. Previous stories are [here](#).*

[Episcopal News Service] The Rev. Tom Brackett has a word for the [Diocese of Western Massachusetts'](#) urban missionary in the South Main section of Worcester: “nimble.”

The Rev. Meredyth Wessman Ward exhibits the shared qualities of being nimble and humble, said Brackett, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society's missionary for church planting and ministry redevelopment. “She listens really well, so she will do something as long as it needs to be done, and then she will move to something else that needs to be done.”

(The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society is the legal and canonical name under which The Episcopal Church is incorporated, conducts business and carries out mission.)

Western Massachusetts received a \$100,000 “new church start” matching grant for the Worcester Urban Mission Strategy program in the summer of 2014. Mission Enterprise Zones and their companion new church starts are Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society initiatives funded through [the 2013-2015 Five Marks of Mission triennial budget](#), approved by General Convention in July 2012. The budget included \$2 million to establish the zones and support new church starts for the first of the [Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission](#): to proclaim the good news of the kingdom.

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Matching grants were available for up to \$20,000 for a Mission Enterprise Zone and up to \$100,000 for a new church start. Executive Council's [Joint Standing Committee on Local Mission and Ministry Committee](#) considered applications for the grants and recommended to the council which ones it should approve.

General Convention 2015 [Resolution A012](#) proposes a continuation of that funding. And the budget the church's [Executive Council](#) proposed to the convention's budget committee increases the triennial seed money available to \$3 million ([line 27 here](#)).

From the first, things didn't go quite as planned in Worcester.

"My husband, who had cancer, went into hospice at about the same time I got the grant," Ward told Episcopal News Service. "So I requested that we put the grant on hold for awhile. He died in October, and I actually began in January."

"It's actually been a really healing thing to be doing something new in the midst of this," she said. "That's been an unexpected joy."



The Rev. Meredyth Wessman Ward, left, distributes feminine hygiene supplies as part of her urban ministry in Worcester, Massachusetts. Photo/Jane Griesbach

The intent was to create an Episcopal presence in the "challenged neighborhood" of South Main, site of gang activity and home to many recent immigrants and lots of single parents. The expectation was to base that presence in a local church that had dwindled to a few members.

Then they discovered using the church building was impractical because of the cost of fixing problems with mold and significant deferred maintenance.

"I said, 'Okay, it's meant to be a ministry of presence. Maybe I'm not supposed to have an office that I can hide in,'" Ward said.

Her car became her office.

“Not having a physical space took on a whole new challenge, but also a whole new possibility,” said Holly Dolan, a teacher who serves on the board that oversees the program’s grant.

Ward set out, by car and foot, to meet her neighbors and pray with them.

“I’ve seen my work as primarily making connections,” she said, “making connections with members of the neighborhood, helping people make connections with their higher power.”

In recovery herself, she spends time talking to others in recovery or in “sober houses.” She attends community meetings and concerts, drinks coffee in local shops. This summer, she’ll volunteer at a summer program at an elementary school. “On any given day, I will have a handful of set meetings – folks I’ve agreed to have coffee with or folks from the local churches who want to get together. But a lot of it is walking around the neighborhood, talking to people and seeing what grows out of that.”

Ward discovered that some of the people in the neighborhood needed things that the federal government’s [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) benefits won’t cover – “that’s a huge burden for some people” – so she carries a shopping bag with diapers of various sizes and feminine-hygiene products to distribute.

“She’s hit the streets and said: ‘How can we bless you?’ ... and basically formed ministry out of people’s responses after praying with them and listening to them,” Brackett said.

One of those ministries emerged from hanging out with folks at laundromats over the long, snowy winter.

“Everybody in the neighborhood wanders through at one point or another,” Ward said. “I would show up with crayons and coloring books and Matchbox cars and play with the kids and talk to the parents.

“I began to realize how often people ran out of quarters before they ran out of laundry. Middle-class folks like me don’t realize how much it costs to do laundry: \$6.50 for a double-load in Worcester. You get five minutes in the dryer for a quarter. This is a big hit to people’s budgets when they’re already working poor or trying to get by on aid. These folks are walking to the laundromat with loads of laundry, a kid in a stroller, another kid by the hand, in the snow. This is just really hard work.”



First Congregational Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, displays information about Laundry Love, a ministry of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts Urban Mission Strategy program set to begin in July.

Members of local churches will provide free laundry services, pizza and prayer to residents of the South Main neighborhood in Worcester. The Rev. Meredyth Wessman Ward, the diocese's urban missionary in Worcester, identified the need for laundry assistance after spending time hanging out in laundromats during the recent harsh winter. Photo/ First Congregational Church in Worcester.

In July, Ward, her board and members of local Episcopal churches will launch Laundry Love, a program that began on the West Coast and is spreading across the country. Once a month, volunteers will throw a "laundry party" by taking over a local laundromat for the evening and paying for people's laundry, helping with folding clothes, reading stories to the children, feeding everyone pizza, and beginning and ending the event with prayer. ([A video about the original Laundry Love program is here.](#))

The Rev. Jane Griesbach, board member and deacon at St. Luke's and St. Matthew's Episcopal churches in Worcester, is recruiting laundry volunteers. "I feel that's the easiest way for lay people to enter in[to the urban mission] at the moment."

Participants are welcome to "jump in with two feet, or simply collect quarters or detergent and pray for us," she said. "People have gotten very excited and want to be involved."

Other groups are joining in as well.

A local Coptic priest heard about the project and told Ward many Coptic immigrants in the area own pizza shops. "There are Coptic Christians who own pizza shops in Worcester who are donating the pizza to

their brothers and sisters as an act of faith,” Ward said. “So here is another community that is participating in the ministry with us in a real and powerful way.”

Students at nearby [Clark University](#) also may get involved.

“Many of the students who come here are very committed to issues of social justice and outreach into the community,” said Dolan, associate professor in the Clark education department.

Her parish, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, North Grafton, already is on board. Church members support the Worcester Fellowship Program – an outdoor ministry Griesbach and Ward also are involved with that holds weekly Eucharists on the commons – and youth members have done overnights in connection with the fellowship.

“The kids have met with people who have not-consistent housing and kind of heard their stories and gone on walks in the city of Worcester at night with them,” Dolan said. When she talks about Laundry Love in her parish, “They get it, because they’re already attuned to some of what the needs are of people who are kind of living on the fringes.”

Ward envisions helping families with more than laundry.

“There is a coalition of pastors in the neighborhood who are starting to work together to strategize,” she said. “What we realized in talking was that in each of the parishes there were a handful of families that you kind of describe as being on the bubble – folks who, with some help, might be able to make it to the next level of stability.”

The pastors – who come from various denominations – have committed to working together to identify families and link them to services in the various churches. One church runs an English as a second language program, while another mentors young men, and a third is considering starting parenting classes.

“Because I have the freedom of not being in a particular parish,” Ward said, “I have the time and the energy available to help make some of those connections and make sure that people are connected with each other and the services.”

Among the Episcopal churches, Ward sees a spirit of cooperation. “One of the things that I love about working in Worcester is that the various Episcopal churches in Worcester have declared that they are, along with Worcester Fellowship, the Episcopal Church in Worcester, rather than, ‘I’m this Episcopal church in Worcester.’ We collectively are The Episcopal Church.”

They joined with other church communities for a “wild and wonderful Easter vigil” and with the Worcester Fellowship for a Good Friday Stations of the Cross throughout the city, Ward said.



The Rev. Meredyth Wessman Ward, left, distributes feminine hygiene supplies as part of her urban ministry in Worcester, Massachusetts. Photo/Jane Griesbach

“She has a beautiful grace about her that is nonthreatening, and everybody so far, the clergy of all the parishes are on board and very excited,” Griesbach said. Ward likewise has met with chaplains and administrators at Clark University and Holy Cross College, “and the students are going to become involved when they come back in the fall. She’s talented in casting a wide net. ... It’s a very exciting model.”

This fits with Bishop Douglas Fisher’s vision for the diocese. He wants congregations to think about themselves in collaboration with other congregations, Episcopal or not, to find the ways in which God is working already in their neighborhoods and/or is calling them to new ministries that serve the residents of those neighborhoods, he said.

Fisher believes that the diocese should look at mission and church planting in a different way, he said, and so began the Fanning the Flame initiative to “go to places where the Holy Spirit is already active and doing good things, and try to give those places resources so that the Holy Spirit might work even more powerfully, but in a way that not only impacts that particular parish, but also the surrounding parishes.”

The program is funded by a 1 percent per year draw on diocesan investments income. It will amount to \$1 million in three years.

The diocese says congregations ought to be drawing extra from their endowments to pay “for the sake of mission initiative” rather than for building repairs or to cover staff salaries, and the diocese is following suit with this initiative.

Looking ahead in Worcester, the mission hopes to begin renting a storefront if the owners can secure a grant to renovate it.

“This could become safe space where people from the neighborhood, people from The Episcopal Church in Worcester, people from other faith communities could gather and create a supportive community around some of the young families in the neighborhood,” Ward said. “A place where you can not only pick up diapers, but have a conversation about how your life is going; where we could not only have 12-step

meetings with child care but a prayerful space where an 11th-step meeting could take place. The 11th step is when you improve your conscious contact with God.”

Another option might be music instruction. That morning, Ward had walked the neighborhood with a music teacher who belongs to a local Episcopal church. “She started saying, ‘Hmmm, I wonder if we could provide music lessons for some of the kids.’”

“One of the things that I’m really delighted with,” Ward said, “is that people are starting to step up and say, ‘I want to do this with you. I don’t know what this is, but I want to do this with you.’”

— *Sharon Sheridan is an ENS correspondent. ENS editor and reporter Mary Frances Schjonberg contributed to this article.*