Mark Johnston Retires from the Best Job in the World

The Rev. Mark Johnston has announced that he will retire as the executive director of Camp McDowell on May 31. Johnston has served as the executive director for 26 years. In that time, Camp McDowell has grown to a staff of 50 full time employees and has become the largest camp and conference center in the Episcopal Church.

Under Johnston’s leadership, Camp McDowell has added numerous programs and greatly increased the acreage and number of facilities. Camp has continued to offer summer camp programs on Clear Creek for youth, as well as hosting Bethany’s Kids, Special Session, and numerous conferences and retreats. Camp McDowell is home to the McDowell Environmental Center, Farm School, Alabama Folk School, and most recently the Magnolia Nature School. In Johnston’s time, camp has expanded to include Miller Commons, and with the completion of Bethany Village, the camp now offers 770 beds.

In considering his 26 years at Camp McDowell, Johnston says that his favorite thing “has been making so many strong friendships. It has been an incredible experience to love so much and be loved. I have also enjoyed watching so many people blossom and bloom here.” While Camp McDowell has doubled in size under his leadership, Johnston sees his biggest achievement as continuing the tradition of Camp McDowell being the heart of the Diocese, and “growing a community of people, a staff, who love this place and who know that they are making a difference in the lives of people every day. They know that their job is important and that it contributes to our ministries, no matter what it is.”

Johnston has frequently described being the executive director of Camp McDowell as “the best job in the world,” but serving in this ministry has constantly humbled him in regard to his faith. “I am always learning a bit more about who God is calling me to be, and I am constantly meeting people of great faith who are often struggling, questioning, growing, or discerning faith.” When asked what his “go to” verse of scripture is, Johnston responded Matthew 10:39. Jesus said “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” He explains, “It is a saying by Jesus that a person must lose one’s self in order to find one’s self. I have learned that when I have poured myself into serving others that is when I find the strongest glimpses of my spiritual self.”

Bishop Sloan and the Department of Camp McDowell are working with the staff to design and implement a transition plan to continue the tradition of Camp McDowell as the heart of the diocese. Sloan says, “I certainly wish my old friend well as he pursues what he understands to be a calling. I want to assure you that Camp McDowell will be fine, and the work of the Lord goes on and on, in different shapes and sizes and directions beyond our understanding or imagination. We’ll thank Mark for all his good work and stewardship in several ways, but I want to use a little bit of ink to express how much he is loved and appreciated. Thank you, good friend.”
A Glass Half Full

I think of myself as a glass half full sort of guy, but sometimes I do wonder what happened to all the rest of that water. It’s easy for us to focus on the problems and difficulties of the day, and not see the positive all around us.

Someone asked me recently what I was excited about in the Diocese of Alabama. I think she wanted me to talk about diocesan programs, and really there’s a lot of things to be excited about, things we do as a diocese that a parish couldn’t do on its own. But many of the things I’m excited about together are being done by parishes small and large: outreach ministries, educational opportunities, fellowship gatherings, beautiful and meaningful worship, authentic community, loving relationships—all in the name of Jesus Christ, all sharing the Good News of redemption, salvation, the limitless love of God for all of us.

Meanwhile, our friend Mark Johnston is retiring from his job as the Executive Director of Camp McDowell, which might well be the best job in the world, to toss his old Camp hat into the ring for our next governor’s election, which might be one of the worst. Of course I can’t endorse any political candidates, but I certainly wish my old friend well as he pursues what he understands to be a calling. I want to assure you that Mark and Maggie will be just fine however this works out, and that Camp McDowell will be fine, too— the work of the Lord goes on and on, in different shapes and sizes and directions beyond our understanding or imagination. We’ll thank Mark for all his good work and stewardship in several ways, but I want to use a little bit of ink to express how much he is loved and appreciated. Thank you, good friend.

It’s my honor to visit each of the parishes, worshiping communities and chaplaincies of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama, and to see and hear about the ministries and programs of all the places I go. We have challenges and problems—it’s not like everything we try turns out golden—but we are doing fabulous work, and I’m proud to play my little part in it. Thank you for all of your dedication, for all of your time and energy and talent, for giving freely to support the work of this part of God’s Church, for hanging in there through the frustrations, for sharing the love of God.

In the Diocese of Alabama, our glass is half full. I’m grateful for all of you, even those good people who disagree with me. (And who knows—you might be right.) Call me an idealist (which I am) or an optimist (pegged me again), but I think the great thing about being a glass half full is that we have room for more: more people, more ideas, more ministry, more love.

God bless and keep you all.

From Bishop Sloan

Fund the Farm! Thank you, Mark!

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11 (ESV)

After 26 years of service at Camp McDowell, the Rev. Mark Johnston will retire from the best job in the world. Hopefully, you have run into Mark a time or two at Camp and you know about his vision to double the facilities at camp by expanding into the physically accessible Bethany Village that adds the McDowell Farm School, room for the Alabama Folk School to grow, and inclusion summer camp sessions just to name a few.

As a way to honor Mark for his wonderful, wonderful years of service, Bishop Sloan invites us all to “Fund the Farm.” Mark’s Farm at Bethany is where school groups come to learn about the Creation, where their food comes from, and how to prepare fresh foods. It is also a place of beauty where seasonal vegetables sprout, new kids (baby goats), rabbits, and piglets are born and relationships among staff, teachers, students, and chaperones flourish. Help us honor Mark with a gift to Bethany. The goal to “Fund the Farm” is $950,000. Please be generous and send your tax-deductible contributions to Bethany at Camp McDowell, 521 20th St. N, Birmingham, AL 35203.

Additionally, you may honor Mark by sending a check made payable to Mark Johnston to Rob Morpeth, P.O. Box 1484, Birmingham, AL 35201-1484. This gift will presented at the Pasture Party on June 2. Please note that this gift is not tax-deductible.
Honor Your Gifts: Complete the Episcopal Asset Map!

Many parishes have begun completing the Episcopal Asset Map survey. It can be a bit daunting as you realize how engaged your parish is in serving each other through worship, fellowship, and mission. FEAR NOT! YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Deacons Judy Quick and Lou Thibodaux have begun meeting with parishes to help guide the discussion about individual, parish, and community “assets” or gifts. The parishes who have completed the survey are happy to offer suggestions as well. Feel free to contact Deacon Judy Quick for questions, guidance, help, or a personal visit.

The Episcopal Asset Map, a joint project between The Episcopal Church and Episcopal Relief & Development, is an online tool for showcasing where and how we are the hands and feet of God in the world. Episcopalians are doing incredible work in a variety of ministries, and we need to tell our story!

The Episcopal Asset Map is a wonderful way for our congregations to tell their sacred stories of ministry. It is also a useful tool to capture all of the assets of your parish for disaster preparedness. Simply visit www.dioala.org and click on the icon Episcopal Asset Map, update your info now!

This blog from Episcopal Relief & Development offers insight into the beauty and benefits of taking a deeper look at the life and work of your parish and how you may be called to partner in new ways with your community.

As the reflection states: “There is power in beginning with the basic assumption that every congregation has gifts — strengths or assets. We are all gifted by God, no exceptions.” (The Reverend Canon Jason D. Lewis, Diocese of Kentucky)

http://www.episcopalrelief.org/stories/mapping-assets-power-for-growing-our-future-together

Register NOW for the 2017 Global Mission Conference in God’s backyard at Camp McDowell, May 24–26, 2017!

This year’s theme reflects God’s urgent call to the Church in a time of division and conflict: “Reconciliation: God’s Mission—and Ours”

Bishop Sloan will welcome guests from around the country and around the world and will preach at the Closing Eucharist at St. Francis Chapel.

At our 2017 conference you will:

1. Enjoy keynote presentations by and conversations with:
   a. The Right Reverend Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, Anglican Church of Canada
   b. Ms Heidi Kim, The Episcopal Church’s Staff Officer for Racial Reconciliation
   c. The Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, author, Episcopal priest, mission partner with the Episcopal Church, Interfaith Advocate, and Founder/President of CARAVAN, an international peace-building arts non-profit

2. Participate in hands-on mission workshops, including mission budgeting & fundraising, planning & leading short-term mission trips, mission best practices, short- and long-term mission engagement, building global partnerships, applying Asset Based Community Development and Indaba in your ministry, discerning a call to mission.

3. Enjoy mission education programs; meet mission partners and current missionaries; enjoy networking, small group discussion, mission displays, and more.

4. Explore in depth the theme of reconciliation in our mission engagement including restorative justice, interfaith, racial, and environmental reconciliation, art as reconciliation.

For those who want to delve more deeply into global mission, consider the Global Mission Formation Program, which will be held on Tuesday, May 23, from 9am-3pm. The cost of the program is $75.

On Thursday evening, come and enjoy the music of a local Alabama band The Paybacks in Hall Hall.

Conference fees, per person, include meals (Tuesday dinner-Friday lunch), All Materials and Activities, Wednesday, May 24, 8:00am-Friday, May 26, 1:00pm. Register now:

Local fees are available for the Diocese of Alabama:
1. Three-Day Local Fee: $395
2. Two-Day Local Fee: $215
3. One-Day Local Fee: $125

Cost of lodging at Camp McDowell is $110 per night (Single rate)/ $120 per night (Double rate, $60 per person).

Learn more about GEMN and its resources at www.gemn.org. Discover the joy of God’s mission!

For more information on the Global Mission Roundtable, contact the Reverend Judy Quick, Deacon, (jgquick@bellsouth.net) or consult www.dioala.org/globalmission.
Our Companion Diocese Relationship with the Diocese of the Virgin Islands is flourishing. In late 2015 and throughout 2016, we have welcomed our friends from the Virgin Islands to Alabama and they have welcomed us there.

Following are some of the planned events for 2017:

April:
Four Virgin Island clergy will join Alabama clergy at the April Clergy Retreat at Camp McDowell. Bishop Gumbs and Deacon Judy Quick will offer a workshop on clergy exchanges and parish to parish relationships. Some clergy will visit parishes in the diocese while they are here.

May:
ECW President and Vice-President, the Reverends Andrea Peacock and Pearl Slay, Deacons, will join the Virgin Islands ECW for their annual meeting on St. Thomas. Rumor has it that there will be a sharing of southern and Caribbean recipes.

June:
The Reverends Mary Bea Sullivan and Catherine Collier will lead a spiritual retreat on St. Thomas for the women clergy in the Virgin Islands.
Youth from Christ Church Tuscaloosa will join Reverend Collier on St. Thomas to work, via Skype or Facetime, with a Vacation Bible School and Children’s Camp with our partners there. The youth will also establish “pen pals”. Future plans include sharing music experiences with guitar and steel pan drums via Facetime.

July:
Emily Collette Linton, Senior High Youth Director and almost Seminarian, St. Mary’s on the Highlands, Birmingham, will lead a team of youth and adults, to share fun, begin new friendships, and serve the local community on Tortola with St. Paul’s Mission and with youth from other Virgin Islands parishes.

Ongoing:
Plans continue for a revitalization of Cursillo in the Virgin Islands.
Clergy Exchanges are welcome. Visiting clergy to parishes on the Virgin Islands will have lodging. In addition to serving at the altar and preaching, visiting clergy will be invited to offer educational experiences for congregational development.
Parish to Parish relationships are beginning, such as St. Mary’s on the Highlands with St. Paul’s Mission Tortola, St. John’s St. Croix with the Church of the Nativity Huntsville, and others in discernment.
Parish to Parish partnerships are a wonderful way to become more deeply engaged. As you get to know the congregation, you may discover similar interests and gifts for all ages. Mission projects may emerge as you engage each other in your shared missions. There are opportunities for small, medium, and large parishes.

Pray about this additional possibility to discover the joys of walking with Christ together.
And continue to pray for our Companion Dioceses of Alaska and the Virgin Islands:

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we ask your blessings and favor upon our Companion Diocese Covenant among the Dioceses of Alabama, the Diocese of Alaska, and the Diocese of the Virgin Islands. May we fully commit to praying diligently and unceasingly for the success of all our missions, that through this relationship we are bound to share our love of Christ and of each other, to share our knowledge and resources, to further the understanding of the reconciliation of all Christians to God, to support and to help those who are in need, and to nourish the spiritually deficient for the furtherance of God’s kingdom. Amen

For more information, contact the Reverend Judy Quick, Deacon (jjquick@bellsouth.net; 205.669.6862 (home); 770.366.4034 (cell))
Mission Work In Louisiana

Ellen Hamilton, Parishioner at St. Francis of Assisi, Indian Springs

A group from St Francis of Assisi, Indian Springs recently returned from a mission trip to Louisiana. The group included Judy Franklin, Irene Lanca, Bing Lingle, Archie Creech, Susan Adams, Tim Shaffer, and Bruce and Ellen Hamilton. Sponsored by Episcopal Relief & Development, the Diocese of Louisiana is helping individuals whose homes were damaged by the floods of 2016.

Our group worked on the home of a very nice woman who told us the story of the water rising in her neighborhood of ranch style homes that had never before flooded. It came up the street and gradually made its way up into her yard. As she waded up the block to the waiting bus, the water reached her thighs. It eventually climbed 3 feet up the walls inside her home, ruining everything. Since she lives in an area that never floods, she did not have flood insurance. Episcopal Relief & Development has been instrumental in getting her home repaired, but there is a long way to go. As of this weekend, her bedrooms are now habitable, but she lost her kitchen cabinets, refrigerator and stove so her kitchen is unusable. She has been living in a FEMA trailer nearby.

We were hosted by Grace Episcopal Church in nearby St Francisville, a beautiful old town full of live oaks, perched on the shore of the Mississippi River. We had a great time and would recommend others go down and help while Episcopal Relief & Development is still working there, through the end of June.

Reflections on Academy for Spiritual Formation

I n October 2016, the Rt. Rev. Kee Sloan joined Dr. Amy Oden to lead a 5 day Academy for Spiritual Formation hosted at Camp McDowell. This is a program of Upper Room Ministries, and the academy provides an opportunity for clergy and laity to deepen their relationship with God through daily rhythm of prayer, worship, learning and reflection. The Academy was sponsored by The Upper Room, the Alabama-West Florida and North Alabama Conferences of the United, and the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. Others serving as staff included Pat Luna, Kathy Norbert, Bunny Cox, the Rev. Marc Burnette, and Jennifer Roth-Burnette.

Reflecting on the retreat, Bishop Sloan writes, “Who would have thought that five days with a bunch of Methodists could have been so much fun, or so rewarding? What I found at Academy was not only a good bit of spiritual common ground, but also an opportunity for deep spiritual learning and growth. I was glad to find myself in a truly ecumenical community – I’d expected Methodists and Episcopalians, but there were a few Presbyterians and Catholics, and even a Baptist or two! It was a time of Christian learning and fellowship, not trapped behind denominational walls, and not watered down. It was a time for reflection and sharing, a place for spiritual and theological growth.”

The Academy for Spiritual Formation in Alabama has been cosponsored by the Upper Room Ministries and the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama for the past three years, led on the Episcopal end by the Rev. Marc Burnette and Jennifer Roth-Burnette. Bishop Sloan hopes that it is a partnership that continues, and one that Episcopalians will take advantage of.

Another Academy is scheduled for September 10-15, at Camp Sumatanga near Gadsden, Alabama. For more information go to http://academy.upperroom.org/events/five-day-academies. “I invite and encourage you to consider taking this five day opportunity to enter the Academy community, to experience its Benedictine rhythm, and to be fed by this remarkable shared ministry,” writes Bishop Sloan.
Have you ever thought of the Episcopal Church as a beautiful patchwork quilt? The mission of our Church is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” and each of the congregations that comprise the Diocese of Alabama do this work in their own colorful way. One of the things that strikes me most when I visit one of our lovely churches is how different it is from all of the others in our diocese. Our congregations also share in the good work of many ministries—from Camp McDowell and Sawyerville to Campus Ministries and Episcopal Relief and Development—and we stitch all these patches together in one big diocesan quilt in an effort to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ here in Alabama.

As members of the Episcopal Church we all have the ability to make a difference in how far this mission might be carried out, in how much we are able to wrap this quilt around God’s people. One important way is to make a financial offering now or, in celebration of life, at our death. A gift to strengthen the work of our congregations and ministries strengthens the work of the Episcopal Church in Alabama. Our corner of God’s Kingdom is made more stable and more fruitful. More restoration work happens.

Have you ever considered leaving a gift to your parish or a diocesan ministry in your will? Did you know this type of gift has a name? “Planned giving” is defined by DonorSearch.net as "a contribution that is arranged in the present and allocated at a future date" and is “commonly donated through a will or trust.”

A planned gift is a very important tool for maintaining available funds that build up our mission because almost everyone can leave a gift to the church in their will. Your estate does not need to be of a certain size for your gift to make an impact. All it takes to leave a gift in your will is to include language such as this:

“I give and devise to [Name of Parish] Episcopal Church OR [Name of Ministry] of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama, located in _______________, Alabama.

(Cash bequest) the sum of _____________________ Dollars ($__________).”

(Stock bequest) ___________ shares of common stock of ____________ Corporation.”

(Estate percentage) __________ percent (_____%) of the residue of my estate.”

I hope that you will consider making a planned gift to your parish, a diocesan ministry, or create a fund of your choosing. The time to plan that gift is now and I am available to help you with that process. Together we will maintain a strong and viable Church that restores all people to unity with God and each other. Every patch in the quilt helps hold the others in place and keeps the quilt strong and warm. Thank you for all of your gifts to the Episcopal Church in Alabama.

For more information or to let Danielle know more about your estate plans, please contact her directly at 205.358.9234 or ddunbar@dioala.org.

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The National Altar Guild Association held their annual board meeting at beautiful Camp McDowell, March 17-19th. President, Lynn Hendricks, a parishioner of All Saints’ in Homewood, AL, welcomed members from across the country. The Rev. Bill King served as chaplain and celebrant at a corporate communion in St. Francis Chapel. Focus of the meeting was the 2018 triennial meeting which coincides with General Convention in Austin, Texas. The theme is taken from our Book of Common Prayer “Send us out to do the work you have given us to do.” An important part of that is serving as the altar guild for the daily Eucharist of the general convention. Speakers, workshops and fellowship will allow participants ample time to explore and share this vital church ministry. A limited number of scholarships will be available. For more information on the work of the National Altar Guild Association go to our web page at nationalaltar-guildassociation.org or contact Lynn at Lvhend@mindspring.com.

The 2016 Diocesan Convention approved the continuing work of the Commission on Race Relations of conducting anti-racism training for everyone in leadership in the Diocese. This includes but is not limited to all ordained persons, diocesan professional staff, those elected as delegates to General Convention, and those elected or appointed to serve on diocesan committees, commissions, and boards. The Commission also encourages the participation of members of parish vestries.

The Commission on Race Relations conducts two workshops per year and is hosted by a local parish. Canterbury Chapel in Tuscaloosa hosted the Spring workshop on Saturday, March 11th from 8 am – 5 pm. Participants were invited to examine their own relationship with each other and their call as people of faith to work for racial reconciliation in their parishes and communities. Comments from participants following the workshop included, “very educational, enlightening and challenging”. They also indicated their desire to become a transformative change in their communities after being equipped with tools from the workshop. The goal of anti-racism training has always been about being transformed. If you have never participated in a workshop or if it has been some time since you have, you are encourage to sign up for the Fall Session.

The Fall Session is scheduled for Saturday, September 23rd at St. Mark’s in Prattville. You can pre-register online at https://goo.gl/A378ll. For more information contact Rev. Deacon Carolyn Foster (carolynjfoster@bellsouth.net) or Rev. Deacon Tom Osborne (trosborne@una.edu).
A few weeks ago, I let my passion get the better of me, and I made a mistake that I wish I could take back. I had driven up to Bowling Green, Kentucky, to support my friend and colleague Steve Pankey and the people of Christ Episcopal Church, where he has recently begun his ministry as their rector. I had been looking forward to the trip ever since I saw that they had scheduled the service for the Celebration of a New Ministry on a Tuesday night, when a clergyperson with regular Wednesday–evening commitments like me could go. Not surprisingly, my efforts were rewarded.

Church music in a university town is almost always resplendent, and the choir did not disappoint. Another colleague and friend of mine delivered a compelling sermon that effectively combined humor and exhortation, leaving me with a renewed sense of vocation and possibility. The bishop, although remarkably formal in his liturgical style, conveyed a genuine love for Steve and the people of Christ Episcopal Church that reassured everyone in the room that God would use this partnership—bishops, priests, and people—for the building up of God’s kingdom. Everything worked well. The people were warm and inviting. The worship was beautiful and inspiring. And, then, it happened.

As expected, the bishop explained during the announcements that the offering would go to Steve’s discretionary fund to help him meet the needs of the poor in that community. Eagerly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. Not one to carry much cash, I had made a special stop on the way to ensure that I would have something to put in the plate. I always look forward to making my offering, and I wanted to show my support for Steve and his ministry in a particular way. When the ushers brought the plates forward, however, they looked at the choir and visiting clergy, who were seated in the first few pews, and then skipped right over us.

“Excuse me,” I whispered to the usher nearest to me too softly to be heard over the offertory anthem. “Ahem!” I said more loudly as I mock-cleared my throat, again to no effect. Finally, in a full, sharp voice, I barked, “Sir! Come back! Don’t skip over us!” at which point the red-faced usher returned and passed the plate down our pew. Immediately, I realized with embarrassment what a spectacle I had become. A visitor who had been welcomed with true hospitality, I had let my desire to give and my frustration both at having been passed over and the theological and cultural crisis that that exclusion represented bring me to a disproportionately disruptive response. I sought the usher out after the service to apologize, but I never found him.

On the drive home, I had plenty of time to relive that moment and ask myself why I had reacted so strongly and negatively. My nature prefers decorum over disruption, and the recklessness with which I hollered after the usher had been an out-of-character and almost out-of-body experience. Initially, I identified the root as a perceived sense of wrong at having been excluded from the people’s offering. As a clergyperson who usually receives the alms basins at the altar rather than passes them down the pew, I have fallen into the shortsighted habit of paying my pledge electronically rather than adding my own offering to the plate before placing it on the altar. This was my chance to do what everyone else gets to do every Sunday, and it had been denied me. Soon, however, I realized that there was more to it than that.

Most people do not like asking others for money. We have convinced ourselves that it is rude, burdensome, and uncharitable, when, in fact, it is the opposite. When the usher passes the plate down your pew, she is giving you the opportunity to be a real, actual, tangible part of the community of the faithful. The plate is an invitation to give something that matters to you back to God. As such, it is an invitation to freedom—freedom from the falsehood that you need every penny in your pocket in order to survive, freedom from the idolatry of your bank account, freedom from the delusion that you are the only thing keeping yourself and your family alive. Even if you pay your pledge through an online bill pay as I do, touching the plate is an opportunity for you to engage the practice of making your offering by recalling the check that will be written and mailed to the church on your behalf. The realization is even stronger, of course, if you place an extra dollar or two in the plate, but to wave off the usher and miss the chance to touch it entirely removes you from that moment in our worship—a moment that is absolutely and unequivocally focused on presenting the offerings of our lives and labors to the Lord.

That is why a deeply held anger and resentment bubbled up from within me in that moment—not only because I was left holding my money but because an usher who would skip over the choir and clergy is a symptom of a much more serious problem, and that problem starts with the clergy. Of course the usher passed over us! Collectively, we the clergy are worse than anyone else at discussing stewardship. Many assume that the clergy, who already work for the church, have no need of offering anything else back to God, and we are guilty of allowing that falsehood to persist. Why? Because we do not enjoy asking people for money either. It touches on that awkward balance between inviting people to give and inviting people to pay one’s own salary, but that discomfort reveals an unbiblical understanding of stewardship. When we invite people to contribute, we are not asking them to fund a budget or a salary. We are inviting people to grow in faith, and we have no reason to be shy about that.

Just as Moses warned God’s people in Deuteronomy 8, we have spent generations living in cedar-paneled houses and reaping the harvest of our bountiful land, and we have forgotten the life-giving nature of offering the first fruits of our harvest back to God. We are scared of stewardship, and our money-obsessed culture is desperate to rediscover it. I wish that I would have held my tongue that night or, perhaps, that I had skipped quietly to the back of the church where I could give my gift to the usher, but I do not regret the passion that it reawakened within me. I believe in the power of stewardship. I believe that giving away more of our resources is the most important thing we can do to deepen our faith and grow closer to God. I believe that the church is not faithful when it fails to encourage people to give. And I believe that each of us has an opportunity to share the good news of God’s limitless bounty by inviting others to take stewardship seriously.

This article originally appeared in the March 26, 2017, The View, a newsletter of St. John’s in Decatur, and is reprinted with permission.

Almsgiving
The Rev. Evan Garner, Rector, St. John’s Decatur

In celebration of Sandra Allen’s 40 years of faithful service as organist and choir director at Grace Church, Mt. Meigs/Pike Road, the choir gave Sandra a party, and the congregation gave her 40 roses at a recent parish meeting. Additionally, the congregation sent Sandra to London for a week last summer to visit with a college friend who was giving an organ recital at Westminster Cathedral.
Jonathan Daniels’ Pilgrimage

This year’s annual observance of Jonathan Daniels and the Martyrs of Alabama is Saturday, August 12th in Hayneville, AL. The keynote speaker will be Dr. Bernard LaFayette, a Civil Rights Movement activist, minister, educator, lecturer and an authority on the strategy of Nonviolent Social Change. Dr. LaFayette was a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. He was a leader of the Nashville Movement Lunch Counter Sit-Ins in 1960, and the Freedom Rides in 1961.

This pilgrimage marks the 21st year for this observance and is attended by pilgrims from around the country. Jonathan Myrick Daniels was a young seminarian in March 1965, when he responded to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call to come to Selma to help black citizens register to vote. A shotgun wielding unemployed construction worker and special duty deputy killed him on August 20, 1965 in Hayneville, AL when Jonathan and his companions were released from jail and they attempted to enter the Cash Store to buy something cold to drink. He took a blast meant for 16-year old Ruby Sales. The Episcopal Church designated Jonathan Daniels a martyr in 1991, observing his feast day on August 14th. The Pilgrimage begins at 11 am in the Hayneville Courthouse Square.

Pre-Register for Special Forum Following Pilgrimage!

Following the pilgrimage and lunch, attendees are invited to “deliberate” race relations and the future of our communities in a forum moderated by Dr. Mark Wilson of Auburn University. Participants will share stories and weigh the pros and cons of various approaches to the issue using a non-partisan guide published by National Issues Forums (NIF). There is no cost to participate but space is limited. We encourage you to pre-register online at https://goo.gl/uQ5esQ. Forum materials will be distributed to those who pre-register. The Commission on Race Relations strongly encourages you to plan ahead for this Pilgrimage so you can participate in this important forum.

Contact Deacons Carolyn Foster (carolynjfoster@bellsouth.net) or Tom Osborne (trosborne@una.edu) if you have questions.

Vocare 17

Vocare 17 was held at Camp McDowell March 3-5, 2017. This year’s Vocare welcomed 45 pilgrims and 34 staff members from across Alabama, as well as from Tennessee, Florida, and Louisiana. This year’s Vocare was led by co-rectors Megan Briggs (of Trinity Commons Birmingham) and Dillon Green (of Canterbury UNA, Florence/Ecclescope Service Corps). Mary Nix Roberson of Trinity Commons, Birmingham, will serve as lay rector for Vocare 18.

“Vocare” is a form of a Latin word meaning “to call.” The Vocare weekend is a renewal weekend addressed to young adults in the time when they face many serious decisions that set the direction for much of their adult life. The purpose of the Vocare weekend is best summarized in the Vocare prayer: “Lord, Let me know clearly the work which you are calling me to do in life. And grant me every grace I need to answer your call with courage and love and lasting dedication to your will. Amen.”

Vocare is a peer led ministry, and is supported by the Vocare Steering Committee, which includes Megan Briggs, Dillon Green, Mary Nix Roberson, Emily Linton, Bartlee Linton, the Rev. Dr. Callie Phanket-Brewton, and the Rev. Kelley Hudlow, Deacon. Vocare is held at Camp McDowell in February or March of each year, and is open to young adults age 18-30. For more information please visit www.dioala.org/vocare.
In July 2012, Susan Oakes began as the first full-time Youth Ministry Coordinator for the Diocese of Alabama. She served as a Youth Minister at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Birmingham, for five years. In her capacity as full-time youth coordinator for the diocese, Oakes coordinated a variety of diocesan events including, Happening, Awakenings, summer camp programs, Young People Paint Birmingham (YPPB), Sowverville Day Camp, and various retreats. Additionally, she provided consulting in youth ministries for smaller parishes, as well as training and networking for youth ministers in the Diocese of Alabama.

When Oakes began her work with the Diocese, she inherited a ministry that was healthy and stable, and that allowed her plenty of space to make the job her own. When asked about her work over the past five years, Oakes identified three areas that she is most proud of: implementing CREATE, a work week for ninth and tenth graders at Camp McDowell; working with youth ministers; and working with the Youth Department. "I think [the Youth Department] has taught me the most about love, mercy, and grace. We have worked hard and played hard, we have succeeded and had some disappointments. We have loved and served and grown together in our love for this community and our relationship with Jesus," Oakes said.

Oakes believes that her primary call is to be a mama, which she has gotten to do for her three children, Logan, Kathryn, and Bradley. When she was led into youth ministry in 2005, she did not expect to discover another way of being a mama. At a Winter Weekend in 2006, a group of junior high youth gave Oakes the nickname of "Mama Oakes," which soon was shortened to "MO," and stuck. Youth, volunteers, and even parents call her MO, and each time her heart leaps with joy.

In the Fall, Oakes will begin the Seminary of the Southwest, in Austin, TX. Oakes describes this transition in this way, "It feels like I’m doing the big Trust Swing at Camp McDowell. The ropes course director has fastened all the straps and buckles to make me safe and a group of people are ready to help raise me up. They all ask if I trust them and I say that I do, and then they begin pulling the ropes to hoist me to the top. Then they ask me if I am ready and I say that I am. Everyone is cheering me on to go for it. So here I am, sitting at the top of the Trust Swing, supported by a host of witnesses who have gotten me to this place. Without this whole team of people, I could not have made it to the place of being ready for the next part of the adventure on my own. And now it’s up to me to pull the cord to release myself so that I can begin this huge, exhilarating, terrifying, and glorious swinging."

Reflecting on Oakes’ work with the Diocese, Sarah Sartain, Staff Officer for Ministry Development & Clergy Transitions, offers "Susan Oakes was the perfect person to have at the helm when youth ministry required a full time coordinator. Susan brought to us a wealth of knowledge and a passion for mentoring parish youth ministers. I think the most impressionable mark she has made on the program is not only her deep commitment to her relationship with Christ but also her loving and supportive relationships, built through the years, with young people and young adults. I am grateful for her commitment to this special ministry as she has the program poised for the next coordinator to step in and lead us where God intends."

Oakes offers, "I am full of joy and gratitude for the chance to serve this great diocese in such a meaningful way. I want to thank you for your love, for sharing your lives and faith journeys with me, and for growing together through the joys and the pains, and above all I want to thank you for being Jesus and showing me the way to love and grace."

“I love you so much.”

Photo by Susan Oakes of last Senior Camp 2012. “It reminds me of how powerful it is to experience worship during Senior Camp, especially Compline and singing the Song of Simeon by candle light.”

Oakes with her children: Logan, Bradley, and Kat at Senior Camp 2015


Photo from Young People Paint Birmingham 2016 at the Closing Eucharist at Christ Church Fairfield. Fun fact: Oakes staffed the first YPPB in 2006, and has staffed almost every one for the next 12 years.

Oakes at a recent visit to the Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, TX, where she will begin her seminary studies in August 2017.

Oakes with the leadership team for the first CREATE camp at Camp McDowell, 2014.
Kate Murphy: Director of Marketing & Business Development

Camp McDowell now has a full-time Director of Marketing and Business Development. Kate Murphy has been working part-time at camp since August, managing the Camp Store and helping out with camp publications and social media. She has been a friend of camp for the past fourteen years, frequently volunteering for various camps and programs and has been an active member of the Cursillo community and diocesan family.

Before joining the camp staff team, Kate worked in the public and private sectors in corporate executive management in operations, marketing, sales and general management. She obtained her undergraduate degree at Auburn University and her Master in Industrial Organizational Psychology from the University of Alabama. When asked how she felt about switching gears and working in a non-profit environment, Kate said, "It's extremely fulfilling knowing that every ounce of my efforts and minute of my time spent working is going towards directly benefiting a place like Camp McDowell – which has the real and significant purpose of enriching the lives of others….I finally feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be!"

Kate lives near camp, in Jasper, with her husband, Tim Murphy (rector of St. Mary’s, Jasper) and three daughters (Brooke, Keeley, & Reagan Davis) and has not missed the commute to and from Birmingham since leaving her previous role.

"Guest Services Staff” becomes "Conference Center Coordinators” and grows by one!

If you have come to Camp McDowell for a retreat, conference or meeting, chances are you had an encounter with "Guest Services." "Guest Services" was the name given to the one person on the camp staff responsible for ensuring that all conference center guests had what they needed on-site for an excellent camp experience! As camp has grown, it has become apparent that this role is too big for just one person. So, to ensure we continue to provide high levels of service for our guests, we have added to the team and are now referring to them as our "Conference Center Coordinators.”

Lee Auman has held the "Guest Services” role solo for over a year and will continue in the role as one of camp’s "Conference Center Coordinators.” The other Conference Center Coordinator has been filled by our very own James Ryder, who is thrilled to be stepping into a role that allows him to have more interaction with guests, providing for them what they need.

Before joining Lee in this new role, James was serving in a “utility” role at Camp McDowell, working on various projects such as wifi expansion, recycling center development, and various carpentry projects. As a youth and young adult, James was formed and transformed in Christian camping at Camp Caroline on the North Carolina coast and has held leadership positions at camps in North Carolina, Maryland, and Oregon. Prior to joining the Camp McDowell staff a year ago, James and his wife, Lisa Marie, co-directed Camp Langusa, a year round camp and retreat center in Southern Oregon.

Before working in camping full time, James was a high school social studies teacher and a press aid on Capitol Hill. James received a Bachelor of Science in Social Sciences Secondary Education from Appalachian State University in 2005 and a Master in Professional Studies in Political Management from The George Washington University in 2010. James is also an avid Washington Nationals baseball fan.

Lee and James look forward to serving all the different groups that call McDowell home, whether attending on a personal retreat, a parish retreat, or while hosting a large conference, their goal is for you to have a transformative and positive experience at "Wonderful, Wonderful" Camp McDowell!

James Walawender: New Farm Manager

The Farm School and all of Camp welcomes James Walawender as the new Farm Manager for the teaching farm at the McDowell Farm School. James moved here in March from South Carolina with his wife, Casey, and their two young children. James and Casey both grew up going to camps as children. James has done farming and farm education at other camps and will be working to help create and maintain the farm space so that it’s accessible for all people to come reconnect with where their food comes from and to see how to grow food for a community. They are already proving to be a wonderful addition to our ever growing community. The Magnolia Nature Preschool is also excited to welcome the Walawender’s children to their group.
The Magnolia Nature Preschool at Camp McDowell is winding down its first successful year in God’s Backyard! We are almost at capacity with 11 students and fully expect to be at capacity next fall with 12 students. During this school year, we partnered with Head Start, which introduced children in the Winston/Walker County area to other children and places they might not have otherwise been exposed.

If you are feeling nostalgic or just missing Camp, go to our Facebook page to see Camp McDowell through the eyes of a preschooler.

www.facebook.com/magnolianatureschool

We have explored most of the trails, hillocks, creeks and streams on this side of Clear Creek! This summer we are looking forward to welcoming a group of four to six year olds to our second year of our nature program day camp! For more information, please contact Madeleine Pearce at mcdowellpreschool@campmcdowell.com.

Thank you to Clyde’s Crew!

Since 1994 Clyde and Charlie Pearce have spearheaded an annual weeklong service project at Camp McDowell. Their team has affectionately come to be called “Clyde’s Crew.” Though you might be unaware that this has been going on all these years, you would be hard-pressed to look around Camp McDowell and not see the results of their service.

If you’ve ever stood on the back porch of Eppes Hall and looked reflectively at the cross on the other side of Clear Creek, you can thank them. If you’ve ever witnessed the childhood glee that exists perpetually on our playgrounds, know that it can be attributed to the labor and sweat of the hammer and nail of their hard work. From win-

terizing and squirrel-proofing many of our buildings to the echo-reduction in Stough Lodge and Randall Commons, their handprint on McDowell’s campus is an enduring testament to the immense love that they and their team hold in their hearts for this sacred place.

In 2016 they completed the docks for the paddleboats at Sloan Lake. They also fenced in the outdoor area of Magnolia Nature School so that the children there could have a large but safe place to learn and grow. In 2017, they are poised to build another playground, and will likely surprise us with some wonderful project yet to be named. If you have ever served on Clyde’s Crew and have pictures or stories you would like to share with us, we welcome them (send them to guestservices@campmcdowell.com).

This is the time of year when the trees are alive with color and we feel the warm approach of summer. On walks through the grounds of Camp McDowell we’re reminded of the roots, lying under the surface all this time, that have fed new life into the trees year after year. Just as the trees are grounded and sustained by their roots, Camp McDowell has always been grounded and sustained by the holy act of service. With the fullness of our hearts we, the staff of Camp McDowell and the Diocese of Alabama, thank Clyde’s Crew and all other servants who have offered their time and resources over the years. You are our roots, and you continue to bring new life and wholeness into our mission: to show the way the world could be through worship, learning, rest, and play in the beauty of God’s Backyard.

The McDowell Farm School - How we STAY Farm Strong!

Farming is all about planning ahead! As we transition into our summer seasons, we are looking back to the plans we started in 2016 and making moves to prepare for 2018! The summer will be full of vegetables, collaboration with our summer camp programs, teacher workshops and program development, and oh, so many BLUEBERRIES!!!

Students have been learning about perennials, planting and naming over 75 more blueberry bushes at the farm. The blueberry bushes, donated by Richard Davis (Farm School Agricultural Consultant Level III and dear friend), now total over 200 – all to be eaten by guests of all programs! Many of our schools return to camp, or can pass on the lesson of growing food for others as they work the soil and prepare plants for years to come. Campers will indulge in the harvest and bring blueberries to the dining hall for dessert.

We also believe in lifelong learning at the farm. While our leadership farmers are out discovering and trying new systems in the summer, we invite school teachers to the farm for Southern Roots: The Edible Garden in the Classroom, June 12-14. With Legacy: Partners in Environmental Education on our team, we will take teachers through the design of a garden, what plants are good for schools and how to cook with kids! We are also partnering with Auburn University with experts on plant biology and native pollinators to bring to the garden. Our hope is to share the love and mission of curiosity to anyone that comes to the farm!

And, as true farmers do, we will be looking ahead to the future. Fall will be close by, and preparation for school groups starts in June. We will review our past couple of seasons and make hopes and dreams for the future! We are also tinkering and working on projects to make our farm and education program more sustainable. Follow along on all our social media and see how we continue to improve and evolve!
Another Successful School Year Completed with Summer Fun to Come

By Jen Kopnicky, Director of MEC

As the weather is heating up and the days are getting longer, McDowell Environmental Center will wrap up another successful school year during the month of May. We had over 120 schools visit us during the 2016-2017 school year! One great learning adventure after another, with hikes across the swinging bridge, students stretching their comfort zones to reach for the next rock on the climbing wall, and hands digging in the detritus at the pond to find aquatic macroinvertebrates. Who knew that school could be so much fun?

We will continue our student-centered experiential learning with a few more school-based groups throughout June: Tarrant Elementary, Girls Inc. of Birmingham, and Project Horseshoe Farms of Greensboro. They will enjoy the perks of coming during our hot summer days by spending class time in Lethie Brook, Sloan Lake and Clear Creek, investigating the aquatic habitat and adaptations of the creatures living at Camp McDowell. During our aquatic bioassessment, students will scoop up Dragonfly Nymphs, tadpoles and possibly even some slimy salamanders. We will also spend time sparking curiosity in the shade-covered forests in pursuit of terrestrial animal communities. Hopefully we will find decomposers, such as the wood roach and centipede, pollinators like the Tiger Swallowtail butterfly and Luna Moth, and fierce predators such as the Praying Mantis.

June is not just for students at MEC! We will also be hosting our annual Teacher Advisory Board (TAB) meeting to grow as an organization, getting better and better every year. Many of our teachers have been bringing their students for upward of 10+ years and have a vested interest in the betterment of our curriculum and programmatic on-goings. We are so grateful that the TAB crew joins us each year to hear our new ideas and provide us with feedback. A reward for their hardwork and dedication will be wading at Tiller’s Beach and enjoying some much needed R&R in the famous Camp McDowell rocking chairs.

We will invite teachers and educators from all over the state again in mid-June for our workshop Rocking Inquiry Based Science (RIBS): Helping Teachers Make Geology Place Based and Fun. We will hike into the sandstone canyons of Camp McDowell and use inquiry based learning to explore and gather facts about what created them. Educators will not only learn the geology of Alabama, but how to transform their classroom into a more creative and fun environment. For more information, please contact Maggie Johnston at maggie@campmcdowell.com with “2017 Educator Workshops” in the subject line.

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Bring a friend to Camp McDowell - Now’s the perfect time!

By Stratt Byars; Summer Camp & Events Coordinator

I f you were to be asked what every person who has ever been to summer camp at Camp McDowell share in common, you might think that the answer would be something about how they are all better people because of their time at camp, or that they enjoy the great outdoors or that they are seeking a deeper relationship with Christ. There’s a good chance that all those are true. However, what is definitely true is that everyone who has experienced the joy and wonder and excitement of a summer camp session at Camp McDowell had to be invited by someone else to attend. Maybe it was a parent that remembered how great summer camp was for them. Maybe it was a well-intentioned friend that wanted to share their Christian camp experience with someone else. Or, maybe it was the local priest who knows how powerful the camp setting can be for valuable Christian Formation. Whoever it was that invited someone to attend summer camp, they were definitely being a friend in that invitation.

For the summer of 2017, we are celebrating all the friends that have invited us to camp. One way we are doing that is by starting a new campaign to encourage all of our current summer campers to invite a friend to join them at their camp session. We’ll happily give the one who invites the friend a new free camp t-shirt! Claim yours by reaching out to stratt@campmcdowell.com after your friend has successfully registered for your camp session. We can’t wait for you and your friends to join us this year!

We want you to come CREATE! with us this summer! CREATE! camp is a camp session in Bethany Village for rising 9th and 10th graders where participants will build and create together for the Kingdom of God and Camp McDowell. In previous years, we’ve landscaped portions of Bethany Village and built picnic tables and raised flower beds. This year will be just as fun—who knows what kind of community we’ll create together!

CREATE! @ Camp McDowell
June 6-9, 2017
Register here: http://campmcdowell.com/registermake-a-payment-for-summer-camps-or-retreats-in-bethany-village

Bethany’s Kids is coming up soon for the 3rd year in Bethany Village at Camp McDowell. Bethany’s Kids is an inclusion summer camp for rising 4th-8th grades WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES (such as Downs Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy, and developmental delay). Enjoy all the favorite camp activities – hiking, swimming, field games, singing, talent show, and silliness – in a camp that celebrates inclusion and lifts up acceptance and a respect for differing abilities. More information, as well as registration can be found here: http://campmcdowell.com/registermake-a-payment-for-summer-camps-or-retreats-in-bethany-village

Dates for this year are: 4th-6th--July 19-22
6th-8th--July 27-30

2017 SUMMER CAMPS & RETREATS at CAMP MCDOWELL
Clear Creek (“down the hill”)  
Ovewight summer camp for 1st-12th rooted in the teachings of the Episcopal Church, where all are welcome with love and joy.

Registration opens January 11
Visit www.campmcdowell.com or call 205.387.1806 for more information.

2017 SUMMER CAMPS & RETREATS at CAMP MCDOWELL
Bethany Village (“up the hill”)  
Camp McDowell is a family friendly camp-style retreat for all ages!

Online registration opens January 11
Visit www.campmcdowell.com or call 205.387.1806 for more information.

BRING A FRIEND TO CAMP MCDOWELL 2017  
Bringing your family, bring your friends, and come to the heart of the diocese for a weekend of camp-style fun! Diocesan Homecoming is a family friendly retreat for ALL AGES. Swimming, rocking chair visiting, hiking, a Pasture Party, music, and time for worship are all part of this special weekend. It’s quality time with quality people!

Registration is open NOW on www.campmcdowell.com in the “Opportunities to Come to Camp” section

JOIN US FOR THE BEST FAMILY SUMMER CAMP VACATION EVER!
CLERGY NEWS

Five to be Ordained to the Transitional Diaconate

The Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee have given consent for the following candidates to be ordained as transitional deacons:

All are invited to attend the ordination services. The festal color is red.

Jay Gardner will be ordained on May 13 at 11 a.m. at the Cathedral Church of the Advent in Birmingham. He will serve at Calvary-St. George’s, New York, NY.

Katherine Harper will be ordained on June 2 at 11 a.m. at All Saints’ in Birmingham. She will serve at St. Thomas, Huntsville.

Corey Jones will be ordained on June 2 at 11 a.m. at All Saints’ in Birmingham. He will serve at St. Francis of Assis, Indian Springs.

Jamie Osborne will be ordained on May 13 at 5 p.m. at St. Thomas in Huntsville. He will serve at St. John’s, Montgomery.

Worth Stuart will be ordained on June 3 at 11 a.m. at St. John’s in Montgomery. He will serve at Holy Apostles, Hoover.

BISHOP’S VISITATION SCHEDULE

May 3, 6 p.m. Holy Trinity, Auburn (Deacon Quick)
May 7, 9 & 11 a.m. Cathedral Church of the Advent (Deacon K. Jacob)
May 7 5 p.m. St. John’s, Montgomery (Deacon TBD)
May 10, 6 p.m. Church of the Nativity, Huntsville (Deacon Serio)
May 14, 10 a.m. St. Mary’s on-the-Highlands, Birmingham (Deacon Venable)
May 21, 10:15 a.m. Ascension, Montgomery (Deacon Smith)
May 28 9 a.m. Holy Comforter, Gadsden (Deacon Beckett)
June 4, 10:30 a.m. St. John’s, Decatur (Deacon Beckett)
June 11, 9:30 a.m. St. John’s Forkland (Deacon Slay)
June 18, 11 a.m. St. James’, Livingston
July 9, 10 a.m. Emmanuel, Opelika (Deacon Quick)
July 16, 9:30 a.m. Epiphany, Tallassee (Deacon TBD)
July 23, 10 a.m. St. Mark’s, Birmingham (Deacon Foster)

CLERGY NEWS

The Rev. CJ Van Slyke has been assigned to St. Stephen’s in Birmingham. Her first Sunday was March 26.
Episcopal Deaf Ministry in Alabama


A group of teenagers listen with rapt attention as a priest who is deaf and blind in one eye tells them about marrying a man and a woman, both of whom are completely deaf and blind. The place is Camp McDowell. The time is 1950. The priest is the Rev. Dr. Robert C. Fletcher, the Episcopal Church’s Missionary for the Deaf in nine states in the southeast. His four children are close friends of ours.

I was one of those teenagers. A few days ago I mentioned that memory to the Rev. Jay Croft, a priest who is also deaf. He was, from 1996 until 2005, the third rector of St. John’s Deaf Church that Fletcher organized in the Birmingham area in 1935. He told me that the couple who were both deaf and blind, Mr. and Mrs. Colvin Harper, came to New York by bus later in their marriage. He gave them a tour of the Cathedral Church of St. John’s the Divine. Again, I try to imagine the lives of this couple and give thanks for those who knew how to communicate with them.

On another occasion at Camp McDowell Dr. Fletcher entertained some of us by telling about baptizing several people who were deaf in Clear Creek. He humorously acted out how ridiculously difficult it was, slipping on rocks in the shallow water below where the dam is today. At that time, before Smith Lake, the water there was swift and shallow as it passed over a rocky bottom. He acted out what it was like to need both hands to speak (sign) while those he was baptizing were keeping their balance by holding on to his wet veiny arms as they attempted to answer the baptism questions by signing with both hands. Somehow they were also trying to read the responses from a Prayer Book. Our laughter filled Eppes Hall. We were highly entertained by this charismatic man’s dramatic motions as he acted out a difficult event with great humor.

We were inspired. One eye and no hearing, and yet for over two decades he visited about 40 congregations of deaf people in the nine states of the Fourth Province of the Episcopal Church. What might each of us be able to do with our lives, we who had two functioning eyes and ears?

For twenty-two years Dr. Fletcher was gone from Birmingham on a majority of the Sundays as he tended to deaf Episcopalians around the southeast. His wife, Estelle, also deaf, kept things on track at St. John’s and St. Simon’s in Birmingham while he was away. The Fletchers were also raising four remarkable children who would go on to have very successful lives.

Son John’s final position was Professor of Biomedical Ethics in Internal Medicine at the University of Virginia Medical School.

Louise won an Academy Award for starring in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest in which she was Nurse Ratched. When she received the award, she talked on her hands to the congregation of deaf people in Birmingham.

Roberta became a teacher. Her daughter, Delia Ray, has published Singing Hands. The novel claims to be fiction, but tells in detail the story of her mother and siblings growing up with deaf parents in Birmingham, and what the life of their father, a deaf minister, was like.

Georgianna became Admissions Director for the Model Secondary School on the Gallaudet University Campus after over two decades of travel across the southeast. Dr. Fletcher “settled down” to spend most of his time with St. Mark’s for the Deaf in Mobile, which he established in 1948; St. John’s in Elyton where he began having services in 1931; St. Simon’s, a black congregation in Birmingham begun in 1954; a small group in Jasper, and the Alabama School for Deaf and Blind in Talladega.

His congregation for black people, who were deaf, St. Simon’s, grew to over fifty members. A photograph of the congregation on one occasion when Bishop Carpenter was there for Confirmation, and another of a time when Bishop Murray confirmed, show a large group of about sixty people.

In spite of his schedule, I witnessed again and again how he gave close attention to each person he met, both hearing and deaf, making us feel appreciated and special. His outreach to the whole community, which is the fuel for church growth, was always evident, and he was well known in many places. On March 26, 1952, he said the prayer to open the United States Senate.

Congregations that grow and thrive are ones that minister, like Dr. Fletcher did, outside as well as inside their congregations. A congregation’s outreach to others is a primary cause for congregational growth. This is even more important in deaf churches. In hearing churches, the congregation can depend in large part for growth on the children of members. People who are deaf very rarely have deaf children to help assure parish growth. The hearing children go to hearing churches, and the parents often follow the children, leaving the deaf congregation.

Long before the Fletcher era, and long before there was a city of Birmingham, and before Alabama was a state, land in Jones Valley, Alabama, played a large role in the development of deaf education in the United States.

In 1815, the Rev. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, whose wife, Sophia Fowler Gallaudet was deaf, travelled from Connecticut to Europe to find out how deaf people could be educated. In Paris at the Institution for Deaf-Mutes he met Laurent Clerc, a man who was deaf and was teaching advanced classes. Clerc agreed to come to Connecticut to help begin deaf education in the United States. As they crossed the ocean by ship, Clerc taught Gallaudet French sign language and Gallaudet taught Clerc English.

Since there were very few educated people who were deaf in the U.S., those whom Clerc met were amazed at his intelligence and ability to communicate. As a result Henry Clay, at that time Speaker of the House of Representatives, persuaded congress to give 23,000 acres of “unallocated land” in the territory that would become Alabama four years later in 1819. The land was to be sold to raise money to build in Hartford, Connecticut, the first American school for the deaf.

Captain William Ely, a prominent Hartford man who had retired from making his fortune in the India Trade, agreed to come to Alabama in 1815 to sell the land. Much of it was in the area where Elmwood Cemetery is now located. Ely established a trading post there that gave the name Elyton to the area. In 1850, St. John’s, the first Episcopal Church in Jefferson County, was established in Elyton. By 1955 most of the congregation had become members of the Church of the Advent which had been established in 1872. The St. John’s building was given to Dr. Fletcher’s congregation of people who were deaf. They kept the same name of St. John’s.

There continued to be a strong connection between St. John’s and the Advent. For example from 1948 – 1951, Dr. Fletcher worked closely with the Junior League’s School of Speech Correction that was located at the Advent. The program began with 30 deaf children ages 3 and a half to 5 and a half. As this program grew and began to include older children it was known as the Junior League Speech and Hearing Center. In 1951 this work was taken over by the public education system.

St. Mary’s on the Highlands was also strongly connected with Dr. Fletcher’s work. They provided him with an office in their building when he began his deaf ministry.

The 23,000 acres that Captain Ely sold for $10 an acre in 1815/1816 assured the building of what is now The American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut.
It was established in 1817 by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Dr. Mason Cogswell, and Laurent Clerc.

One of Gallaudet’s sons, Edward Miner Gallaudet founded Gallaudet University in 1864, a college and graduate school dedicated primarily to the education of deaf students. His other son, Thomas Gallaudet, started the first Episcopalian congregation for the Deaf, St. Ann’s, in New York City. The Rev. Christine Selfe, who was ordained Deacon by Bishop Henry Parsley at St. John’s Deaf Church, Birmingham, 6/12/2004, and priest by Bishop Catherine Roskam in New York, 12/18/2004, served as Rector of St. Ann’s until 2007. She later served at the Chapel of St. Francis in Los Angeles before retiring.

Dr. Fletcher graduated from Gallaudet, and that is where he met his wife who was deaf, Estelle Caldwell, who was from Texas. Dr. Fletcher died in 1988, and ten years later an admirer of his work, Miss Mary Brigham of Augusta, Georgia, left her in her will $1,000,000 to be divided between two churches for the deaf, St. Mark’s in Mobile and St. John’s in Birmingham. She had been a long time admirer of Fletcher’s work and for many years had sent him $10 per month. Others have contributed in his name to a diocesan fund for the education of deaf ministers. His life was greatly admired, and one can learn from his life what qualities are found in an ideal parish priest.

In 2016, In Our Own Hands, Essays in Deaf History 1780 - 1970 was published by Gallaudet University. One entire chapter, written by Jean Lindquist Bergen, is devoted to Fletcher and his work with 4,000 deaf Episcopalians in the Province of Sewanee. She helped in the writing of this article and sent pictures from the Fletcher Archives at Gallaudet University.

After Dr. Fletcher’s retirement in 1971, the Rev. Cam Desmarais was called to take his place as Archdeacon for the Deaf in the Diocese of Alabama and the second Rector of St. John’s. Unfortunately, the congregation of St. Simon’s for the Deaf (Colored), Birmingham, had disappeared from the Diocesan Directory. Cam Desmarais and his wife, Marjorie, were both deaf. They had known Dr. Fletcher at St. Mark’s in Mobile. Cam had been so impressed with him that he wanted to follow in his footsteps. He had already been to Gallaudet College for three years from 1948 to 1951, so he went back and graduated in 1963. He graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 1966 and began his ordained ministry in Hartford, Connecticut. In the early years that Cam was rector of St. John’s in Birmingham, his wife, Marjorie, developed a special Episcopal Hymnal to be used in churches for the deaf.

In the seventies Cam Desmarais made modifications and improvements to St. John’s church building in Elyton, and in the early 1990s he began looking for a better location for the parish. The congregation accepted St. Stephen’s invitation to move onto their property in Cahaba Heights, and construction of the new $500,000 St. John’s building was completed and completely paid for in 1994. This may be the only place where two Episcopal Churches are directly across the street from each other, and it is one of the very few (possibly the only) church buildings constructed especially for the use of the deaf. One hope was that deaf parents with hearing children could attend St. John’s while their children were across the street at St. Stephen’s, thus keeping the family closely connected in their church life.

Both the architect for St. John’s, Katherine Owens, and the builder, J. M. ”Chip” Barganier, were members of St. Stephen’s, and St. Stephen’s led the campaign to raise the construction funds.

Cam Desmarais retired from St. John’s in 1996, two years after his daughter, Marianne, was ordained. She began her ordained ministry at All Souls Church for the Deaf in Philadelphia, and would later become the fourth rector of St. John’s.

The Rev. Jay Croft became St. John’s third Rector in 1996. He and his wife, Frances, are both deaf. In addition to being the spiritual leader of the congregation, Jay gained a reputation as a tireless advocate for Deaf Rights. He was successful in several civil rights cases that improved medical and health services in Alabama. He also helped Episcopalians to be more mindful of people with limited mobility and different languages.

Since the movement for civil rights for deaf people resembled the movement for civil rights for black people, Jay brought an exhibition, History Through Deaf Eyes, to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute that recently was made part of a “National Monument” by the Obama Administration. Jay Croft also brought about the captioning of the videos at the Institute.

His wife, Dr. Frances Ralston, who earned her clinical psychology doctoral degree from Gallaudet University, chaired the Alabama Association of the Deaf Mental health Task Force for several years. Being the only deaf psychologist in Alabama, she was much sought out by patients who used American Sign Language.

After retirement in 2005, Jay and Frances lived for a few years in Montgomery where she continued her work in psychology, and he worked to establish a deaf congregation in Montgomery and served as Priest in Charge of St. Mark’s Deaf Church in Mobile. They now live in Maryland where they remain active in their ministry among the deaf.

Jay received the Meritorious Service Award from the Episcopal Conference of the Deaf plus commendations from the Alabama Department of Vocational Rehabilita-
tion, the Alabama Association of the Deaf, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Council of Organizations Serving Deaf People. He also received an award from the Gallaudet University Alumni Association even though he is not an alumnus.

Marianne Desmarais Stuart, the current president of the Episcopal Conference of the Deaf, served as St. John’s fourth Rector from 2006 until the end of 2016. She was the first hearing rector, but, having grown up with deaf parents, she was familiar with communicating and understanding people who are deaf.

In addition to her parish work, Marianne has provided a home over the years for nine foster children. While at St. John’s she also provided sermons electronically for deaf congregations who are without a priest.

On coming to St. John’s, Marianne found an aging congregation with no children or young people. It is difficult to attract new members to a congregation of elders, so there was a decline in attendance as more and more of the congregation became housebound or in nursing homes.

Finally the difficult decision was made to have the final service. To add to the pain of this, Marianne’s husband, Peter F. Stuart, suddenly died of a heart attack at that time.

Now we are called on to thank how we can creatively use the facilities of St. John’s church in a way that honors the traditions and rich history of that parish. We are also called on to rethink what our responsibility is to the deaf community in Birmingham and in the diocese, realizing that there have been many changes since St. John’s first service in the early 1930s. Please keep this search to understand what we are to do next in your prayers, and share your thoughts.

How is the life of people in Alabama who are deaf different now than it was in the early 60s when St. John’s had more than a hundred members, St. Simon’s had fifty members, St. Mark’s, Mobile, had over fifty members, and large groups of deaf people had meetings at Camp McDowell?

Hearing people find it is much clearer and more intimate when a hearing person speaks through an interpreter. And this is certainly true in pastoral situations.

The loss of congregations for the deaf in the Episcopal Church is not limited to Alabama. When I asked the Rev. Jay Croft about this, he replied, “Yes, they are disappearing. At one time North Carolina had the largest number of Deaf Episcopalians in the Episcopal Church. They’re all gone now. The diocese thought they could get by using interpreters. There is no pastoral connection if there is an interpreter in the middle.”

Think about these things as we seek to understand what has happened. Reflect on the history of the ministry of the Episcopal Church among deaf people as we plan for the appropriate use of St. John’s facilities and resources in the future. The money raised and the work done to establish St. John’s at 3794 on Crosshaven Drive was given for those with special needs. There will continue to be opportunities for that building to be a place of sanctuary for those who could use a helping hand or who are being overlooked.
Rites of Spring & EYC Convention
March 24-26, 2017 • Bethany Village at Camp McDowell

The last hoorah for the DioAla EYC was held recently at camp where 60 people gathered to celebrate a wonderful year together and the passing of the torch from the outgoing 2016-17 Youth Department members to the newly elected members for 2017-18. This year’s YD had their own distinct personality and style. It can be easy to fall into the trap of “this is how we do things” but they did a really great job of stretching and bringing their own ideas and energy to this work. As we closed out our year together, we hosted a fun event led by Betsy Fetner and The Rev. Rusty McCown serving as our event chaplain. As usual, there were several college age friends and youth ministers who also helped support this event, along with a very impressive group of advisors. In addition to this event being the end of the YD year, it was also the end of six years of coordinating the YD by Diocesan staff member, Susan Oakes (Mama Oakes), who will be leaving to go to seminary next fall. Rites of Spring was a festive celebration to mark the end of a really special year for everyone!

Here are the reflections from this year’s outgoing members:

Ava Claire Mattox: Youth Department, as cliché as it sounds has changed my life tremendously in the past year. Promising to delight in God’s will and walk in his ways is normal in the Episcopal community. I gained a completely different perspective on this promise and it became my daily prayer. I take this as constantly serving and doing so in God’s love. In serving the Youth in the past year I met many new faces, danced in the silliest manner, opened my mind, heart, soul and learned A LOT about the Book of Common Prayer. However, looking back on the past year, the number one thing that stands out is the love shared and received. This experience has enabled me to find out new things about myself and find out new things about my relationship with “The Big Man.” Progressing through this self-discovery I have learned this: God truly is in the little things, no matter how far away he seems, and I love sharing his love and being a servant.

Josh Carter: This past year on YD has been absolutely incredible for me. I have grown so much serving the youth of this diocese and I feel that I have really come into my own as a leader. I will always remember all of the love, laughs, and fun shared this year. Thank you to all the other members of the Youth Department, all the advisors, all the youth of this amazing diocese, and especially to MO for making this year as special as it was.

Ellen Waller: During Rites of Spring, I was once again called to center myself and to shift my perspective. As a high schooler, it is so easy to lose focus of the things that truly matter. You quickly become caught up in shallow, meaningless activities and suddenly you forget the things that have shaped you. As a person. But Rites of Spring, as with every other Episcopal event, has pulled me back to the important things: fellowship and Christ. My time spent serving Youth Department has ultimately given me much needed perspective.

Meredith Schoel: The past year on YD has truly been one of the greatest years of my life. I’ve changed so much, and it is all because of this community. I’ve had the opportunity to watch Christ’s love in action, to watch joy spread from person to person, and it has been an amazing experience. I’ve built so many relationships, and those on YD with me have become some of my best friends. I am honored to have served this community as I did, and I look forward to what is to come. It is hard for me to go, but I know the love here will continue doing great things.

Andrew McDowell: Serving on the Diocesan Youth Department for this past year has been a truly humbling experience. Not only did I have the opportunity to work alongside ten of the most wonderful friends I have ever come to know, but also to share the experience with countless youth and adults from throughout the diocese. Being part of this group has constantly reminded me that these youth are not the church of the future, but the church of right now.

Congratulations for a fantastic year to the outgoing 2016-17 YD Members: Ava Claire Mattox, Liv White, Mama Oakes, Meredith Schoel, Annie O’Neill, Isabel Boyd, Nic Parmer, Andrew McDowell, Alec Bonner, Josh Carter, Ellen Waller

Incoming District Members:
Northern: Ethan Evans, St. Timothy’s Athens and Cricket Powell, St. John’s Decatur
Central: Annie O’Neill and Ricky Gould, both from St. Stephen’s Birmingham
Southern: Sarah Lane, St. Mark’s Prattville, and Will Hamlett, St. John’s Montgomery

Hayden Dunbar: Endings are always tough, especially this one. It’s hard for me to let go of something that has been such a big part of my life for the past two years, but I know that I leave the YD in good hands. These past few months of Buddy the Elf and twin pajamas are ones I would not trade for the world. I am so glad to have gotten to be a part of this year’s YD and for the once in a lifetime chance to be apart of another amazing group and am excited for what is to come.

Isabel Boyd: Having the opportunity to serve the youth of the best diocese in the world has been the most important gift I have ever received. Knowing that I can spread unconditional love by creating an elaborate scavenger hunt or choreographing a dance has shown me that spirituality is whatever you make it. The youth of DioAla’s spirituality looks like stargazing, razor scooters, off-beat clapping to songs about Jesus, Complain at the end of a long day, and so much more. I’m so thankful to have been able to be a part of it.

Liv White: This has been the best year of my life so far. Through strengthening my relationship with God, making amazing friendships, and becoming the leader I never knew I could be, I couldn’t ask for more. Thank you for this beautiful year.

Alec Bonner: This was the best year of my life! I was a little nervous going into my first event district day, but once Josh and I got the ball rolling it went really well. After that I had gained the confidence I needed to be a leader in the diocese and once Christmas Conference rolled around I was ready. I think Christmas Conference was the first time in my life where I felt fully prepared and ready for action, and I was! Between CC and Diocesan Convention was a weird gap that left me thirsting for more YD and once I got to convention I was so glad to see so many familiar faces in one place. I struggled to pay total attention throughout all of the presentations and voting periods but I think I got the hang of it. Rites of Spring was a really hard time for me because it marked the end of such an amazing year with such amazing people. I cried all night Saturday and half the morning Sunday, but now I have the privilege to be apart of another amazing group and am excited for what is to come.
What was your very first job? Maybe you babysat or mowed lawns. Maybe you worked at a fast food restaurant or a movie theater. Whatever it was, you should be proud of it! Getting your first job can be a tricky process. That’s why Sawyerville Day Camp hosted our first ever Work Ready Workshop.

On Saturday, March 11th, students from Greensboro High School who have either served on staff or attended camp as a camper, joined us for a full day devoted to learning how to apply for a job, succeed in an interview, and even get promoted.

Tracie Bates from the Tuscaloosa Career Center shared the do’s and don’ts of filling out an application and dressing for the part. She also brought applications from dozens of local employers and invited the students to write their own pocket resumes.

Thomas Goldsmith, Director of Admissions at the Altamont School, talked about the importance of a good first impression, how the little things like a strong handshake and sitting up straight can really add up in your favor.

Patrick George, the Career Coach at Greensboro High School, offered tips on how to impress employers in an interview and how to answer that not-so-simple question, “Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?”

Finally, Charlie Stevens, from Thompson Tractor, concluded the program with advice on how to be a great employee, one who gets promoted. He talked to the students about the importance of being responsible and taking initiative.

The students left the workshop with a certificate that states they have successfully completed the Sawyerville Day Camp Work Ready Program and have earned the distinction “Certified Work Ready.” They’re off to do great things!

100% of participants said that the workshop was “very helpful” and that they would recommend the workshop to a friend. One student said the most important thing she learned was “to be engaged, ask questions, and to be calm” in an interview.

This event was made possible by lots and lots of wonderful and generous volunteers! Besides all the amazing speakers, several people from different business backgrounds sat alongside the students and answered their questions and helped them create their pocket resumes. Volunteers from St. Mary’s on-the-Highland’s, Birmingham, and St. Paul’s, Greensboro provided breakfast, lunch, and a snack for all participants. Others donated ties for the male students to take with them. This was truly a community effort, and we’re so thankful for everyone’s support!

We’re especially grateful to the Work Ready Workshop’s planning committee - Kay Donnellan, chair, Liz Edwards, Lisa Miller, and Charlie Stevens. Thank you for your dedication and creativity!
Introducing 2017 Interns

This summer, seventeen young people will take on big responsibilities at both Sawyerville Day Camp and the Yellowhammer Learning Program. These interns will do everything from plan field trips and teach chess to serve meals and register campers.

We can’t wait to welcome this crew in May! Visit our blog to learn fun facts about our interns like who wanted to be Dr. Phil when they grew up and who dreams of being an Olympic curler! http://bit.ly/SDCBlog

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A lot of work happens behind the scenes to make camp successful. The campers and counselors are certainly the stars of this show, but the show would not go on without hundreds of volunteers who provide donations, meals, time, and prayers.

Check out all the many behind-the-scenes activities and find one that speaks to you!

COLLECT SUPPLIES

Parishes, Sunday school classes, reunion groups, and other groups can collect books, bathing suits, pool towels, or snacks to donate to camp this summer. This is a wonderful and very tangible way to be connected to the camp.

AMAZON WISH LISTS

We’ve created Amazon wish lists where supporters can purchase items we need for the day camp or the learning program. This is an easy way to give directly to the kids! Simply purchase the item, and Amazon will ship it to us.


MEALS

Making a meal and serving it to the staff is a huge gift to SDC! We have a few slots left that have yet to be claimed. Could your parish, reunion group, or Sunday school class take on one of those meals?

PRAYER PARTNERS

Every staff member is matched with a prayer partner who sends them encouraging letters and prays for them throughout their time at camp. Serving on staff can be tiring and sometimes even difficult - prayer partners provide much appreciated support.

DONATE

All donations are tax deductible and go directly to the day camp and the learning program. You can make your gift through our secure online giving site here: http://bit.ly/SDCYLPgive

To learn more about these opportunities, contact Claire Cotten at ccotten@dioala.org. If you are interested in volunteering, contact Crystal Jones at cjones@dioala.org. Thank you!
Join Baxter Kreuger, author of The Shack, Revisited, to explore the Trinitarian Life, how Jesus included us and what this reality means for us now on earth— in work, play and relationships. The Renewal Conference, scheduled for June 25-30, brings families and friends together for a week of teaching, worship and healing. For more information and to register, visit www.kanuga.org/renewal.

We are living, not in an era of change, but a change of era. Learn how to develop an ecosystem of intergenerational relationships and faith experiences at church and home from John Roberto and team of formation leaders at Kanuga’s Christian Formation Conference June 12-16. John Roberto is an author and president of Life-longFaith Associates. For more information and to register, go to www.kanuga.org/christianformation.

Join Baxter Kreuger, author of The Shack, Revisited, to explore the Trinitarian Life, how Jesus included us and what this reality means for us now on earth—in work, play and relationships. The Renewal Conference, scheduled for June 25-30, brings families and friends together for a week of teaching, worship and healing. For more information and to register, visit www.kanuga.org/renewal.
**Around Our Diocese**

**Young People Paint Birmingham 2017**

**JUNE 19-23, 2017**

- **What:** A local mission week like no other! Participants will work throughout the week scraping and painting houses in West Birmingham. Youth will also have nightly program time discussing poverty and homelessness.
- **Where:** We will be hosted at the Joe Rush Center.
- **Who:** Rising 7th-8th graders (CIT positions available for high school seniors and recent graduates.)
- **Cost:** $175
- **More Info:** Contact Betsyfetner@me.com or Emily@stmarysoth.org

**THE ONE CONFERENCE * MAY 4 *
@ ST. STEPHEN’S BIRMINGHAM * TO REGISTER: HTTP://BIT.LY/ONEO50417

#WHAT WOULD JESUS TWEET?

**THE ULTIMATE PARISH WEEKEND**

**May 5-7 @ Camp McDowell**

**WORSHIP, SWIMMING, DANCING, & FUN!**

**SAVE THE DATE!**

**NOVEMBER 3-5**

**@ ST. STEPHEN’S BIRMINGHAM**

**WWW.DIOALA.ORG/YOTHEVENTS.HTML**

**THE JOURNEY**

**A Day on Addiction and Recovery**

**SAVE THE DATE!**

**NOVEMBER 18**

**@ ALL SAINTS’ HOMEWOOD**

**Looking for a great way for the whole family to enjoy CAMP MCDOWELL this summer?**

**DIOCESAN HOMECOMING**

**DIOCESAN HOMECOMING (JUNE 9–11, 2017)**

Is just about the best summer vacation opportunity around! Formerly known as “Camp Day,” Dioecesan Homecoming is the evolution of Family Camp – where old friends gather and new friends meet in God’s Backyard to rest, play, worship, and ENJOY GOD’S CREATION with others. It is open to all ages and we encourage you to bring your family and friends. Children under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. There will be lots of Camp Activities in the new Bethany Villages for all to Enjoy. Activities will include the Rope Courses, swimming, boating, arts & crafts, a visit to Camp McDowell’s farm and many more!

— CHILDREN 5 AND UNDER ARE FREE TO THIS EVENT! —

**Single Occupancy $275**
**Double Occupancy $175 per person**
**Additional person (ages 11 & up) $45**
**Additional person (ages 6-10) $35**
**Additional person (5 & under) FREE**
**Day Rate (9am-7pm) $45 per person**

**Registration includes lodging, all meals, activities, hospitality and snacks**

Register at www.campmcdowell.com
Contact Georganne Perrine 205-355-9230 or gperrine@dioala.org with questions

**JUNE 19-23, 2017**

**REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!**

Register at: http://www.dioala.org/youthevents.html#summer and follow the registration link
Thy Kingdom Come: Change Begins with Prayer

Our theme for the 186th Convention of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama was “Why Jesus? Telling the Compelling Story of God’s Love.” We were invited to focus on our role as evangelists, and to begin to practice telling the story of our salvation through Jesus Christ. Convention was just the beginning of this work. There are many Evangelism resources available at www.dioala.org/evangelism. These resources have been compiled by the Evangelism subcommittee of the Department of Parish Development. For many Episcopalians, evangelism through words can be difficult, and the resources offered are designed to help folks in our Diocese grow and change how they think about and do evangelism.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, writes “Prayer is the first thing God calls us to, before we think or do anything else. Prayer is also the place where change begins.” With that in mind, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, have joined together in inviting all Christians to focus on prayer between the Ascension (5/25) and Pentecost (6/4). They are encouraging everyone to ask for the Holy Spirit to help them be witnesses to Jesus Christ and to pray for others to discover that living faith.

This initiative began in May 2016, and more than 100,000 Christians from different denominations and traditions took part from the UK and across the world. Thy Kingdom Come is working in partnership with many of the main Christian denominations, including support in the UK from the Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostal churches. Internationally many of the Provinces of the Worldwide Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council have committed to join the wave of prayer.


Composting: Preparing for Easter

A as a young environmental science student, in my first ever environmental science class, I remember the part of lecture that highlighted the major soil types of the world. It featured the sandy loams of the Midwestern Bread Basket, the frozen arctic soils in Alaska, and even our local Michigan soils under our hardwod stand just miles from the campus of Northern Michigan University. What sticks out in my mind about this survey was what was under the most lush vegetation in all the world – the tropical rainforest. Ironically, this area that held evolution’s finest and wildest terrestrial creations, is held together on feeble, anemic soil. How can this be? Lushest vegetation, highest biodiversity, but poorest soil? To quote Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible, which took place in the jungle of the African Congo, “The forest eats itself and lives forever”, or in other words: compost – nature’s recycling.

I’m sure most are aware of the basic tenants of composting – the accumulation and breaking down of kitchen scraps or yard clippings, maybe in a bin in the back yard, hidden away. But once aged enough, it produces a rich dark matter that coaxes plants to flower and produce fruits in the height of summer harvest. But I would say few are aware or conscious of this process’ gritty details. The recycling comes from a small army consisting of things that are generally despised or feared – Bacteria! Fungi! Worms! Bugs! Yikes! These are the sorts of things our urbanized life generally avoids or manages in the pursuit of a sanitary life. But for those with first-hand knowledge of this process of death and decay, they see these organisms as comrades and will culture, baby, and cheer on as they dutifully digest those things considered waste or excess to bring renewal and abundance in the next season.

Isn’t this the process that we like to ignore the most in our own lives? When do we like to skip the steps of processing the old, the wasted, and tired parts of ourselves? When do we avoid bringing in those things that make us uncomfortable, or give us the ‘willies’? But who will aid in the digestion and wearing away of those parts that are unfulfilling or toxic? When do we avoid the process of decay that might bring about a more abundant life?

As we edge ever closer to Easter, we know this anticipation well. We, of course, are most acutely called to a practice of evaluation and casting off of excess in the season of Lent, when, as the ashes are spread on our forehead, we are reminded of our most modest physical origins and our modest physical ending. But this practice of growth out of death is a year-long and life-long endeavor. As Nadia Bolz-Weber once said, “The Christian life is one of constant death and resurrection.”

This practice, both with our carrot tops and stale bread, as well as our failings, hesitations, selfishness and prejudices, can all be subjected to the same mechanisms that bring about this beautiful, but messy rebirth. And isn’t that the best possible promise? From our waste, our death and decay, comes new, fresh life and a rebirth into a better tomorrow in Christ? What must the Holy Spirit do in order to bypass the sanitizers, the zappers and bleach in order to take hold of us and help cast away the comparing, the jealousy, the apathy, the judgment, or toxic political divides that distracts us?

As we enter the alleluia time again, let us remember the lush rainforest above and the constant renewal underneath that sustains, nourishes and is enough for abundant life.