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FAITH MATTERS

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BISHOP OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST

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The Rev. Mary Alice Mathison. Mary Alice says, "It's an image looking inside out through the keyhole of the front doors of the Church of San Juan (now parish of San Nicolas), Portomarin, Spain, on the Camino de Santiago. San Juan was moved brick by brick to its current location when a dam was built in the 1960s and the town needed to move. It's a 12th century church. I took the photo because it seemed to capture the essence of what pilgrimage, or faith, can often feel like, peering through something that only provides a glimpse of what more there is to come. Sometimes it's just light, but sometimes that's enough to keep us going."

EDITOR'S NOTE

If someone were to ask me why do I have faith in God, I would tell them, "God is that something beyond all comprehension, yet is completely inherent in our being, every miniscule cell. I can feel God in others - it's a palpable thing if I can be still enough for recognition to dawn. I can see how God is working through others to show me that love is always the answer, God is always the answer. And simply because I believe God to be so, God is so."

Yours in faith,
Jenn

CONTENTS

LEAN ON ME: AN IMAGE FOR A LIFE OF FAITH

by the Rt. Rev. Russell Kendrick

4

ON THE WATER

an interview with Brad Moore of St. James, Eufaula

6

FOSTERING FAITH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by the Rev. Mary Alice Mathison

8

FAITH UNDER STRESS

by the Rev. Susan Sowers

10

SHARING FAITH DINNERS

reflections by various contributors

18

KNOWING OUR NEED OF GOD

by the Rev. Marshall Craver

20

BEFORE NOW

by the Rev. Albert Kennington

26

Also in this issue:

- 11** POETRY
- 14** SUGGESTED READING
- 22** WHAT FAITH DOES
NOT ASK
- 28** LOOKING AHEAD

WE **UBUNTU**

Give

BE REAL

There is **MORE**





Lean on me

AN IMAGE FOR A LIFE OF FAITH

by Bishop Russell

“A life of faith means pledging our life to a vision that is more than what the world sees. This vision is what Jesus refers to as the kingdom of God.”

Creativity comes at the intersection of divine spark, prayer, persistence and imagination. Such was the case about two months before leading the “Leaders-in-Training” session of summer camp. As dean for the week, I was trying to decide on a theme for the program that would hold the interest of 50 senior high schoolers.

I stumbled upon a video by Rob Bell entitled “Where’s your ladder?” In it, Bell uses the image of climbing a ladder to represent one way of life in the world. Then he asks the question, “Is there another wall on which to lean your life?” He answers by suggesting that there is a different way to live. In that moment, the idea of a program emerged.

I entitled the program “Lean on Me.” Not only is it the title of a great song that young people love to sing, it allowed me to borrow the image presented in Rob Bell’s video. [\[LINKS TO MORE #1, SEE PAGE 7\]](#) Faith is choosing to lean your life [ladder] on Jesus Christ. “I am the way and truth and life,” Jesus tells his friends on the night before he died. And he adds, “This is the way to most fully know God.” Each night at camp, I presented a rung of the ladder pointing out that each one describes an aspect of an authentic life with God that is different from the ways of the world. I share this ‘ladder’ with you not as the only way to discuss a life of faith, but for you to ponder as you consider your own faith in God.

1. A life of faith requires community. One of the most difficult challenges of leaning our life on Jesus Christ is all the other people that come with the deal. I am fine with the idea that Jesus loves me. However, when I promise to follow Jesus, I am also promising to love others like he did. And that means everyone. On the



night before Jesus died, when he was preparing his followers for life after he was gone, one of the refrains in his last sermon [John 14-17] was the importance of staying together. Paul follows suit with his idea of the Body of Christ. I need you, and you need me in order to most fully and clearly know God, and it is in community that we most fully reveal God to the world.

This way is contrary to the way of the world that says you don't need anyone. Such individualism can underlie the popular declaration, "I am spiritual, but not religious." Quite often, such a confession is more a condemnation of the communal demand of faith, than it is an affirmation of faith in God. On the night I presented this rung of the ladder, we discussed the African idea of UBUNTU. [\[LINKS TO MORE #2\]](#)

2. The life of faith is more about giving than it is getting. Again on the night before he died, Jesus told his friends, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you...Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15

Over and over, Jesus says that it is in giving we find true life. [\[LINKS TO MORE #3\]](#) This differs from the way of the world that often tries to measure life by what you can get, acquire, or possess. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* translates Jesus' words this way, "What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving." Luke 12:29 On this night we spent time giving each other the gift of a good word by using post-it notes. [\[LINKS TO MORE #4\]](#)

3. The life of faith is about being real. Religion is necessary. It is good to have a system and structure to our beliefs. However, when religion becomes so focused on rules and dogma, right and wrong, we can lose sight of the living relationship that God yearns to have with each of us. Jesus tells us to "seek first

the kingdom of God." He denounces the hypocrisy of religion that can become perfection-oriented and performance-based. Jesus seeks not perfection, performance or purity, rather it is authenticity and vulnerability that most pleases God. On the evening of camp that we discussed this rung of the ladder, I invited the campers to consider how being real might apply to their own lives. Here are their responses from which I created a litany that we used as a meditation during our evening prayers:

*For me, being real means letting all my worries free
...stepping out of my comfort zone and showing
my goofy side*

*...not sugarcoating things but being honest in a
loving way.*

*For me being real means my opinion matters and I
need to claim that*

*...knowing my worth and beauty comes from
Christ.*

*Being real to me means not worrying that something
bad will happen.*

*Being real means I don't have to be strong all the
time. I am able to be weak.*

*Being real means being seen without makeup on and
showing the all-natural you, the real you*

*...trusting other people, even though they may
accept me or reject me.*

*Being real means being able to show who you really
are to everyone*

*...saying what I think and not having so many
'what ifs'*

*...to believe in yourself even though no one else
does.*

*For me being real means standing up for that I know
is right.*

For me it means giving my all to resist injustice.

*For me being real means not being afraid to show
emotion and embrace it.*

Being real means playing sports for the fun of it,

*...being loyal...being truthful...loving everyone no
matter what. That feels pretty real.*

*Being real means trusting God. Even when I have a
hard time doing so.*



What does being real before God mean to you?

[\[LINKS TO MORE #5\]](#)

4. *The life of faith is focused on the idea that “there is more.”* James Baldwin tells about an important moment in his life when he and his friend, the modernist painter Beauford Delaney, were standing on a street corner, waiting for the light to change. Baldwin recounts in *The Paris Review* that Beauford “pointed down and said, ‘Look.’ I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, ‘Look again,’ which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in that puddle.” In that moment, Baldwin felt he’d been taught how to see, and how to trust what he saw, felt that from that moment on he could see the world differently than he had before.

A life of faith means pledging our life to a vision that is more than what the world sees. This vision is what Jesus refers to as the kingdom of God. It is built with the blocks of kindness, generosity, patience and joy. It is a kingdom that is held together by the mortar of mercy and love and set on the foundation of grace. The name of this kingdom is peace. And yet, we live in a world that tries to convince us that this is all that there is, and that there is no reason for hope.

On the night we discussed this rung, I introduced the teens to a man who has devoted his life to building a cathedral. He has been building his cathedral for over 50 years. He builds knowing that he will die before he finishes. And yet he continues to build. [\[LINKS TO MORE #6\]](#). I then asked the teens to consider the question of what it might mean to build something beautiful with their life.

When we lean our lives on Jesus Christ, we are promising to follow his way, truth and life. His way is quite often a far cry from the ways of the world in which we live, but it is a way that leads to a far fuller life that we call the adventure of faith.

LINKS TO MORE

1



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bFoJnvfzB8>

2



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcQNisY4Kh8&app=desktop>

3



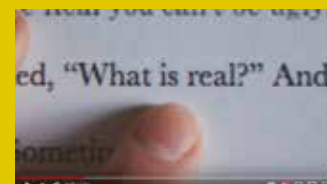
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhU5JEd-XRo>

4



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVgeJ5eqISM>

5



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bok4JRSTCg&app=desktop>

6



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRy3S_fmJ4

ON THE WATER

United Thank Offering Grant gives life to Kayak 4 Kids ministry

DISCIPLESHIP

Q & A with Kayak 4 Kids visionary, Brad Moore of St. James Episcopal Church in Eufaula, Alabama

Two years ago Brad Moore of St. James Episcopal Church in Eufaula, Alabama, had a vision. To share with kids the beauty of water, stewardship of natural resources, and excitement of paddling around in a kayak. A grant from the United Thank Offering (UTO) supplied him with the funds to make this vision come to life. This past summer the program was launched.

What gave you the inspiration for Kayak 4 Kids? I have been a kayaker for over 20 years and love getting out on our Lake Eufaula. There is no better way to experience the beauty of the shoreline and see many birds and other animals around the lake. I have rarely seen children kayaking on our lake. I have longed for an opportunity to get kids out on the water in a kayak. Kayaking is so easy to learn and it gives a paddler real sense of independence.

What part did St. James play in this ministry? The Rev. Drake Whitelaw approached me in early 2016 and mentioned that the UTO had a nationwide grant program. She said the bishop was asking churches to come up with ideas to submit so our diocese could make a grant application. The theme for the 2016 UTO grant program was environmental stewardship. When Drake mentioned the theme, the thought of teaching kids how to kayak immediately came to me. I have wanted to run a kids

kayaking program since I retired in 2009 but have not had the right opportunity to pursue it.

How does kayaking impact your physical, mental, spiritual self? Although I enjoy kayaking with others, I mostly like to paddle alone. I am somewhat of a fitness nut so kayaking fulfills my need for physical exercise that is low impact to my knees while strengthening my upper body. What I really like about kayaking is the chance to go places where people don't normally go and experience nature up close. A kayak can go in water that is only a few inches deep where other boats can't reach. A kayak is quiet so you can ease up on wildlife without scaring them away. Being in nature alone is a spiritual experience for me. I look around and cannot help but praise God for the beauty and wonder around me. I have been paddling on the lake when a V-shaped formation of Canada geese flew over and all you heard was the wind beneath their wings. I have paddled and had a bald eagle unexpectedly swoop out of a tree on the shoreline ahead of me. I have paddled and had an otter pop up and look me with an inquisitive eye. These are experiences where you truly feel the Peace of the Lord is with you.

What was the grant process like for you? Getting to the UTO web site and completing the grant application was actually very easy. It did take some work

researching on the internet and calling companies to come up with the budget and projected costs for the kayaks, trailer, PFD's, instructors, etc.

What actions do you have to fulfill as part of the grant stipulations? First we had to develop a kayaking instruction curriculum and an environmental awareness curriculum. With contacts at the Alabama River Scenic trails organization I was able to get an off-the-shelf kayaking instruction lesson plan for kids. For the environmental awareness curriculum I contacted Camp McDowell of the Diocese of Alabama and they provided me with a lot of good material they use at their summer camp. I also received great input from a local environmentalist who has worked at the Eufaula Wildlife refuge. We also had to keep detailed records of all expenses.

Before the first week of teaching kids, what were your hopes/fears? And did they come to fruition? One of our goals for the kayaking program was to get underprivileged kids signed up. I went to our local Boys and Girls Club, the 4-H group and the Eagles Club (a local ministry that helps young teenagers with school and basic life skills). I did not get any takers. This shocked me in that we were offering a free program. (I think the problem was a fear of water by many of these kids.) So, about two weeks before the first class I was worried about getting

“Being in nature alone is a spiritual experience for me. I look around and cannot help but praise God for the beauty and wonder around me.”

FAITH MATTERS

January 2018

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF
THE CENTRAL GULF COAST



participants. I then went to our local public school system and to all the local churches advertising the program. I then had a number of kids sign up. In addition, I sent pictures and a write up to our local newspaper after the first week's classes. They ran a great article and this brought in new participants. I had hoped to fill all ten slots for each class. In the end we filled about 2/3 of the slots offered. I was also worried about the weather in the month of June. We had numerous thunderstorms rolling through. Fortunately we were able to work around the storms and only had to cancel two days (out of 16).

What surprised you the most about the whole experience? People who live in Eufaula know we have alligators in the lake. Many of the kids and their parents were worried about being out on the lake with alligators. On the first day of each class I gave a presentation about the various fish, reptiles, snakes and birds we might see. I specifically covered alligators and discussed what to do if we saw a one. I also covered that we have never had an alligator attack a human on our lake. I did have a few kids who were very apprehensive on the second day of the class when we paddled on a local feeder creek

2018 United Thank Offering Grants

The 2018 United Thank Offering grant application materials are now available. The focus of the 2018 UTO grants will be *Becoming Beloved Community: Racial Healing, Reconciliation and Justice*. The deadline for submission of a completed application (and required documents) is 5pm (EST) on Friday, March 2, 2018.

Visit <https://www.episcopal-church.org/united-thank-offering>.

where alligators have been seen; however, by the end of the day everyone was having a ball and not worrying about gators. On several trips we even saw an alligator, but our training kicked in - we don't bother them and they won't bother us. So, a surprise benefit of the kayaking for kids program was teaching kids that we humans can coexist with alligators and have fun in the outdoors.

Since hindsight is 20/20, is there anything you would do differently? The biggest lesson learned was that we should have started our sign up about 2-3 months before the first class. Next time I would make sure I had done more early publicity and had 60-70% sign ups complete before the first class. We learned a lot along the way. One thing was playing various games in the kayaks. Games included team ball toss (a team of 3-4 kayaks throws a small ball to each other and tries together it past a goal post), last balloon standing (we tied a balloon on the back of each kayak and told everyone to try and pop everyone else's balloon), who can get the most tennis balls (with all the kids in kayaks we throw out about 50 tennis

balls in the water and see who can collect the most), and find the sunken treasure (we would weigh down an empty plastic water bottle so it floated just below the surface and hide it off the beach in 4-5 ft of water. The kids had to paddle around and the first to find the bottle was the winner) These games were a great way for kids to refine their paddling skills of paddling fast, stopping, turning and going backwards and sideways. I wish we had thought of all these games before the first session; however, they evolved over the four weeks. There were many times when it was hot and we just let the kids swim. I had forgotten how much fun a group of kids will have when they are swimming. I would factor in more time for the kids to just swim and play.

Besides the activity of kayaking what other things did you do with your time with the kids? An integral part of the class was environmental stewardship. On the first day after lunch, I gave an hour long presentation that covered: importance of fresh water on the earth; what was a watershed and specifically our Chattahoochee watershed; what happens

to trash and pollutants that wash into the river; animals they see in and around the lake (fish, turtles, snakes, alligators, birds). As part of this lesson, I had the kids play a game in which teams attempted to pick-up the most trash. This went better than I expected with many teams running all over the lake shoreline looking for trash. The second day of the class was a paddle down a local feeder creek into the lake. We had a great picnic spot as part of that float. After lunch I had the kids play a nature scavenger hunt game. Each day we fed the kids sandwiches, chips, drinks and snacks that were made by members of St. James. Each day we said grace before our meal and thanked God for allowing us to experience his creation. In the presentation on water and wildlife we discussed how they were a part of God's creation and how they call us to appreciate them (even alligators) for what they are and for their part in the web of life.

The pictures and videos speak for themselves, but how successful do you feel in this endeavor? We may not have filled every class; however, I feel the program



was a success based on the smiles and the hugs after each class. Many of the kids said they wanted to come again next year or they wanted to get a kayak of their own.

Will you do this again next year? I would love to run the program again next summer; however, there are some issues that will have to be addressed. The grant allowed us to hire American Canoe Association (ACA) qualified instructors (i.e. not only kayak instruction trained, but lifesaving and first aid trained). Although we have all the equipment - kayaks, trailer, PFD's, paddles, etc., we will not have money to hire instructors. I will be looking into what it will take to get volunteers qualified or raise funds to be able to hire qualified individuals. We may be able to work with the local chamber of commerce to see if we can partner with sponsors.

How do you think the program impacted the kids who participated? Many of the kids and parents asked if we could please run the program next year. I received numerous emails from parents saying how much their kids enjoyed it. I was pleased because I saw over the two day course how many kids felt more comfortable being out on the water and not afraid of alligators - or maybe I should say respecting gators and realizing they could coexist in peace. I had many kids say they wanted to get a kayak for themselves. I truly believe the kids who participated will want to kayak in the future in some flat water, whitewater or ocean experience.

Any advice for someone looking to engage youth in a ministry like Kayak 4 Kids? 1) Make sure you do your homework in planning the course and finding the right location. Make sure to do a dry run with adults. 2) Make sure you have someone on the staff who is ACA, lifeguard and



first aid qualified. 3) Make sure you have high quality, comfortable PFD's (life jackets).

Is there anyone you would like to thank?

The Rev. Drake Whitelaw for asking me to get involved in the UTO grant process and her support in helping make it a success. She even attended and participated in a class. Dwight Babcock and the diocesan staff for their support with the grant process and answering all my questions. All the members of St. James for their support funding and making the lunches for the kids. Whitewater Express (a rafting company in Columbus, Ga.) for the great instructors they had for us and the way they connected with the kids. The city of Eufaula for allowing us to use their Old Creektown Park pavilion and beach for our first day of each class. My wife, Cyndie, for allowing me to be a kid for the month of June. And United Thank Offering for the grant that made Kayak 4 Kids possible.

VIDEOS from each week

Week #1

<http://bit.ly/2CwMdJj>

Week #2

<http://bit.ly/2Ec6W5v>

Week #3

<http://bit.ly/2Cu7YJM>

Week #4

<http://bit.ly/2CMb548>

FAITH MATTERS
January 2018

**THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF
THE CENTRAL GULF COAST**



DISCIPLESHIP

YOUNG & YEARNING

MILLENNIAL SPIRITUALITY

by the Rev. Mary Alice Mathison

Fostering Faith in the 21st Century

“Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This verse from Hebrews 11:1 is my favorite, and it seems to capture what I have experienced in life in so many ways. It allows room for me to ask questions and to have hope, and it helps to explain the deep feeling within that somehow seems connected to something bigger than myself—what I would call God.

Faith is a funny, sometimes complicated thing. There seems to be a plethora of articles in circulation critiquing all the reasons young adults distance themselves from church or how to get young adults back into

church, but fewer that get at the heart of what young adults put their faith in, or what it means for young adults to lose faith. The institution of the Church carries a great deal of baggage, and particularly for those who have been wounded by the Church or who were never invited into fuller participation and ownership in the Church, it can begin to look like an archaic institution that is dying. It's not so much that people have lost faith in a higher power or even in the teachings of loving your neighbor, showing compassion and grace, or forgiving, but they have lost faith in institutions, and the Church does not stand alone in that respect.

In my experience faith is something that is fostered. Being invited into the mystery of faith does not mean showing up and going through the motions of the liturgy or worship program, but it means discussing who/what/when/where/why/how and leaving room for questions, doubt, and growth. Even with extreme exposure to the Episcopal Church, had it not been for my parents, priests, teachers, and youth leaders deeply engaging these topics with me as a curious child, youth, and young adult, I wonder if I would have stayed a part of a faith commu-

“Being invited into the mystery of faith does not mean showing up and going through the motions of the liturgy or worship program, but it means discussing who/what/when/where/why/how and leaving room for questions, doubt, and growth.”

nity. I don't think I would have stopped believing in God, but for me it was the meaning-making tools I had been introduced to when younger that kept me connected to a faith community—that doing faith on my own was not impossible, but being a part of a faith community opened my eyes to new depths and ways God is present in our world.

Many young adults have not had that experience for various reasons, but that does not mean they are removed from seeking, searching, or even having beliefs and faith. In a short clip from PBS Newshour, Capser ter Kuile, a researcher at Harvard, reminds listeners that millennials aren't necessarily losing spirituality or even faith in the divine, but they are seeking these experiences outside of the traditional institution of the Church, and finding qualities of a faith community in places

like CrossFit, yoga, intentional support groups, and various other settings.

So what is an institution to do that seems to be struggling, particularly in matters of attendance and relevance? I would suggest we have a little faith, a little hope, and live into what we have seen and not seen that assures us in our own journeys. But that faith and hope can't be without action. We can't sit around waiting for young adults to come into church, we have to invite, engage, listen, and journey together—not so different than we have in the past—and remind ourselves that filling pews has little to do with faith or God's kingdom, but helping people foster their faith can transform the world.



The Rev. Mary Alice Mathison recently answered the call as canon missionary to Panama City Beach. She will serve as priest-in-charge of Grace Episcopal Church and St. Thomas By-the-Sea Episcopal Church.

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FAITH MATTERS
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**THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF
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FAITH UNDER STRESS

by the Rev. Susan Sowers

“WHEN WE ASK, WHEN WE’RE OPEN, GOD IS VERY PRESENT TO GIVE US THE ‘INNER STUFF’ WE NEED TO MEET THE DAY.”

All of us find ourselves in a “war zone,” at times. For most of us, though we’re not literally in an armed combat zone (like Iraq), life can still be scary, dangerous and uncertain . . . in times like these, I’m reminded of our Post-Communion prayer that we say each week before we’re sent back out into the world: “. . . grant us strength and courage to love and serve you . . .” It is our faith that helps us go on.

In my own experience, serving in Iraq in the Army, I can say that my faith has helped me a lot! I hope

that sharing a story will give insight into what our soldiers, sailors, and airmen are experiencing, which might also resonate with your own battle-worn wisdom . . .

My first trip to Iraq was a one-week command visit to check on morale of several Military Police (MP) and transportation companies that had been deployed from my brigade in Germany and were subsequently attached to other headquarters in Iraq. When a squad of MPs pulled into the headquarters area after a patrol, I went outside to talk to them

about their day. Rarely do soldiers just freely talk to colonels, but they were spilling over with all that had just happened to them.

They had gone out on what had been a standard patrol route. This time, though, they had suddenly been ambushed by an enemy they never saw coming, and were hit with both small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. Everyone made it back safely, but nearly every vehicle testified with bullet holes and gashes. And their stories—my goodness, pretty harrowing!



The Rev. Susan Sowers, then colonel, with Chaplain Sherer, and Brigadier General Halstead at Ur of the Chaldees in modern Iraq where Abraham got his original call. That's a ziggurat in the background. This is most likely the image of Jacob's ladder to heaven at that stairway on the right side, perpendicular to the soldiers in this picture.

Clearly, they knew things had changed, and each recognized that they'd been lucky that day. Even though I was a logistics officer, I risked asking them if they wanted me to offer a prayer before they headed back to their bivouac site to repair their vehicles. There was an instantaneous "Yes!" Of course, I had no idea of their various religious backgrounds—but it didn't seem to matter. Yes, their training had kicked in that day and they had responded well to the threat, but they now recognized their mortality—that some things were outside their control. In retrospect, it was interesting to see that the group's overriding human longing was to pause and take that sacred moment to offer God thanks and ask for His protection. Talking it out with someone who cared, and then being gathered in prayer, helped somehow. These simple things we did together didn't alleviate the growing threat conditions, but it did alter something inside of us.

When we ask, when we're open, God is very present to give us the "inner stuff" we need to meet the day.



The Rev. Susan Sowers serves as rector of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Pensacola, Florida. She became a priest to follow Jesus, wherever he leads. She was raised in an Army family, and followed in the footsteps of her grandfather and father, with her own military career. After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy in 1982, she served as a Transportation Corps officer for 25 years and had the privilege of serving young American soldiers in a variety of leadership positions, including: platoon leader, company commander, battalion commander and brigade commander. While in the service, she received two Master of Science degrees: Civil Engineering from the University of Washington and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College. Before retiring in 2007 and going to seminary, her final Army assignment was as the chief of staff of the Support Command in Iraq. Answering her call to ordained ministry, she was ordained in 2010, after receiving a Master of Divinity from the Virginia Theological Seminary. You can reach Susan at susan@scpen.org.

Sharing Faith Dinners

On June 1, many friends gathered at dinner tables scattered across our diocese for a shared meal and sacred conversation. The process of sharing stories helps to deepen our own personal faith. Hearing others' stories of God's presence in their life brings us into deeper relationship with each other and with God.



CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL - YOUTH

"Tonight was a big step for some of the youth of Christ Church Cathedral as we gathered to share our faith. Twice we went around the room answering the question we each picked out. Some answers were short and simple, some longer and more complicated. For the youth, something like sharing their faith, or even seeing the questions and pondering them, can be a big step. The teenage years in someone's life are hard and confusing. It's good to know that there are people willing to listen and talk to them about life as it is right here, right now, not as it will be when they get older. I think this dinner helped them take a minute to look back on their short lives and see how lucky and blessed they are. It was a time for me to reflect on how blessed I am to work with them." - **Sarah Bolt**

ST. JAMES, EUFAULA

"We had a wonderful group and dinner! It was like being at a reunion group where we shared our hearts and faith! Loved it!"
- **Betsy Lawrence**

"I enjoyed the evening. It's good to hear about other's faith experiences." - **Catherine Lehman**

ST. PAUL'S, DAPHNE

"Tonight was humbling and eyeopening. Listening to truly listen without offering a response gave me a chance to know people I just met on a more intimate level as well as experience their faith. I learned and grew from each person's journey. I would love to see these types of meetings and groups occur more often in the Episcopal Church."
- **Shastady Bridges**



ST. JOHN'S, MONROEVILLE

"We got off to a shaky start, when our host's power went out just hours before our official start time! The hosts, Paula and Stuart Richeson, brought everything to St. John's, all were notified of the change, and the rest of the evening was pure joy. As moderator, I was able to fully absorb the faith stories I heard, and the quiet time following was a natural time to reflect on this person, their story, and thank God for their presence in our church family and in my life. All of us were very thankful for this beautiful experience, and look forward to the next opportunity to do it all over again!" - **Haden Tirey**



ST. STEPHEN'S, BREWTON

"People of faith shared their faith stories as they answered faith questions. It was more than remarkable. It was powerful. It was beautiful. We joined with many others and God was glorified...that is revealed."
- **The Rev. Jo Popham**

Share a story about a time you saw that God was present in someone very different from yourself.

CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL

"Listening to the various stories of the participants was amazing as well as comforting because many times you think you are on this journey alone. It was great to hear how God is working in the lives of others." - **Eleanor Baker**



ST. MATTHEW'S, CHIPLEY

"In the beginning there was a bit of resistance to talking, but that quickly changed and everyone opened up and wanted to share their stories in response to the cards." - **Kathy Foster**



Tell about a time you
embraced suffering for the
sake of Christ and found
new life.

ST. PATRICK'S, PANAMA CITY

"We met for an evening of soup, salad, dessert, and story sharing at our church. Everyone was interested to know what to expect in the "sharing" part of the evening. One thing about St. Patrick's is that we are a small congregation and seem to know each other quite well. However, it proved to be very interesting to listen to each person as he or she answered a question and shared the story his or her faith journey. As we continued around the table the group listened carefully and was deep in thought. One interesting observation was that the silence between stories seemed to be the hardest part of the time together. We did one round of questions and found that we needed to stop for the evening. The group expressed a desire to have another evening of sharing at a later date. It was a wonderful thing to be a part of the first Sharing Faith Dinner in our diocese."
- **Lynn Ferren**

WE HAVE WHAT WE
SEEK, IT IS THERE
ALL THE TIME, AND
IF WE GIVE IT TIME,
IT WILL MAKE ITSELF
KNOWN TO US.
~THOMAS MERTON

NATIVITY, DOTHAN

"I was very apprehensive about this evening. After arriving and realizing all of my group felt the same way, not knowing what to expect. We shared a delicious dinner and became comfortable with each other. I was moved by some of the sharing and felt closer as a group when we finished." - **Kathy Brown**

It was an amazing, safe, and open experience.
- **Josh Hicks**

ST. SIMON'S ON-THE-SOUND, FORT WALTON BEACH

"Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this Place." Those lyrics seemed to aptly express a reality felt by many parishioners who recently attended our Sharing Faith Dinners. Feedback from all six of our host sites has been overwhelmingly positive with emails and conversations yielding comments such as this: "You could just feel God's presence."

Regarding the actual sharing of our faith stories, there were these comments:

"It felt safe and welcoming to share our stories . . . much easier than I thought it would be."

"I loved sharing the stories. I realize that I had been longing for that kind of intimacy in my life."

"I liked the silence after each story. I used that time to pray for the person who had just shared."

Several attendees expressed an interest in repeating the event and/or developing a follow-on type of event. Overall, it seems that the dinners were well received, assisted parishioners in getting to know each other better and encouraged the development of supportive relationships that are grounded in and encouraged by our common faith.

-**Mary Hauge**

GOOD SHEPHERD, MOBILE

"As a moderator for the Sharing Faith Dinner, I witnessed the Spirit of God coming alive. All were transformed by the stories. Almost without fail the questions people randomly chose were the ones that allowed them to find the emotional release that comes with telling the story of how God has shown to be a viable presence in their life; even in troubled times - just ask and you will find peace. I believe that all found a comfort with the silence which allowed for understanding, respect for the story, and for God to speak to us all. I believe, we need to continue the dinners, perhaps shuffling the people so that individuals are like the ripple in the water when a stone is dropped in the water and the circle grows outwardly from the center." - **Robbie Runderson**



Sharing Faith Dinners

IMMANUEL, BAY MINETTE

"We chose to do our sharing during our regular morning Sunday School time. We originally planned an evening dinner but changed plans because our calendar became overloaded for our small congregation. So, the morning of Sunday, June 11, a group of ten parishioners (half of our average Sunday worship attendance) gathered around table with coffee and morning snacks for a lively conversation about our faith journeys. We used the cards, and all remarked on the beautiful photographs and the obvious work put into them. Everyone participated, and our stories ranged from happy testimonies to recollections of painful struggles. All talked and all listened, and all thought it was worthy exercise. No one shrunk from a question, and no question was dodged. Several remarked that everything we do is faith sharing, whether we do so more or less well. It was also remarked that it was important that we do this particular exercise in union with fellow Episcopalians in our diocese. Our thanks to all who coordinated this - and kept us reminded." - **The Rev. Albert Kennington**

REDEEMER, MOBILE

"What a wonderful opportunity to see and hear how our stories intertwine with God's story and dream for us. We shared laughter and tears, glimpses of the raw grace we have received and given. It is my deepest hope that this invitation to share our faith will engender deeper relationships in and beyond our churches and that we will harbor a greater courage to reflect our faith in the various circles in which we live and have opportunities."

- **The Rev. Dr. Joy Blaylock**

"It was a wonderful opportunity to share and join closer as a community of faith. Each of us have a story to tell and it was powerful sharing and listening to others. I am thankful and look forward to another time."

- **Ellen Copeland**



A CLERGY PERSPECTIVE ON SHARING FAITH DINNERS



Several clergy were asked how they felt Sharing Faith Dinners added value to their ability to engage lay members, and the benefit of having lay members take more active roles in creating ministry within the spiritual life of the church to help alleviate some of the spiritual strain that can sometimes overwhelm a priest.

Here are their responses:

I believe the Faith Sharing events were good and useful. Sharing the faith around a table sounds like Gospel and the Eucharist to me, and this means that “faith sharing” should be the norm of all life in congregations - both personally and in community. Growth in Christian discipleship can be enriched by special events and special moments, but growth for leadership is best nurtured within community in what should be the normal life of a faith sharing congregation. I mean that when a vestry considers a budget or a property matter, the underlying question is how this shares the faith of Christ. When choir members rehearse an anthem, or altar guild members polish vessels, or a rummage sale or pork roast raises money, or young folks play in Weeks Bay, the question is still how this shares the faith of Christ. Special events are valuable when they give us a boost, but only when the boost is for us to live and share our faith in community and thus as a witness to the world.

.....

At our Sharing Faith Dinner, I believe we began engaging lay members first by asking a somewhat new parishioner who had been a chef to cater the dinner for us. Using her incredible talents engaged her right away into the process. Our thought was to focus strictly on the sharing time and not have to have people bring pot luck. It really worked. At the outset, we were amazed at how many people signed up for something they didn’t particularly understand. For a pastoral sized parish, this group of 40 seemed to be a great turnout, and was a cross section of ages. Most tables followed the directions which truly fostered honest, and sometimes tearful conversation. At the end of the day, there was a lot of conversation about doing it again at a later date.

We really did see a deeper sense of sharing, which I believe will lead to deeper sense of ownership, particularly because people did not sit with their “best friends” and were intermingled, thus sharing with people whom some had never talked to past just saying hello. Doing this again fosters people relating to people and hearing their story, becoming more involved in the lives of some whose paths haven’t crossed certainly makes people more apt to act in the lives of others, thus lessening “spiritual strain” of priests.

Our ultimate goal is to have another Sharing faith dinner inviting Buddhists, Muslims, and representatives of other faiths here in Panama City, to have a night of sharing, using the same format.

More reflections...

ST. SIMON'S ON-THE-SOUND, FT. WALTON BEACH

"I was privileged to host a gathering of 15 Young Adults of our parish (along with their children). Following a pot luck dinner, the kids were sent to the nursery. The sharing faith stories was tremendous! I was so impressed and moved by their stories and their eagerness, and easiness, in sharing them. This group of friends now know each other in a much different and more important way. Laughter, tears, support, and lots of AMENs were evident throughout the story telling. This group knocked it out of the park! Great evening.

- The Rev. David Knight



CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL

"It was poignant hearing stories of faith from people we have had Bible study with for 45 years. We heard stories that had never been shared." - Carolyn Stephenson



GRACE, PANAMA CITY BEACH

Our Sharing Faith Dinner was held on Wednesday, May 31, in conjunction with our customary midweek Eucharist and supper. In my sermon I noted the beautiful coincidence in having the Sharing Faith Dinner on the Feast of the Visitation, when we remember Mary as the first evangelist: first to share the Good News.

- The Rev. Joseph Hagberg



Time will tell. I have used the Faith Dinners experience in one of my sermons (the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are full). We had about 85 participate, so that's a good percentage of our Average Sunday Attendance – about one-third. We had so much positive feedback I can only hope it is indicative of people WANTING to be engaged more. Now that more people feel, hopefully, they can share a bit of their faith story with others, I am confident that translates to a variety of ministry opportunities.

For the second question, the last part of that question is wrapped up in my answer above. Cursillo has been for me a real gateway for lay leadership. Cursillo reunion groups certainly encourage (require?) members to openly talk about their faith, so the Sharing Dinners could have the same impact for some.

Future events could tag onto the original dinners with some more targeted or focused questions about how your faith journey opens up for you ways to minister to others – what about your shared experience might touch someone else's heart, how have you been inspired by the stories of others to look for ways to serve God you may have been reluctant to explore before?

Sharing Faith question cards are available for any group wishing to use them for dinners throughout the year. Contact the Duvall Center at (850) 434-7337. Additional resources are available at www.sharingfaithdinners.org.

Faith

The indignity of evidence unseen
The agony of things hoped for.
Ineffable trust,
Hesitating forward crawl—
Insight, courage, and endurance.

- The Rev. Deborah Kempson-Thompson

Touched by Grace

We daily trek with our heart, our mind.
We care, we love, we feel, we pray.
We consider, we decide, we judge.
We sin.
We're blessed by God, touched by grace.

- Rebecca Brunson,
St. Peter's, BonSecour

KNOWING OUR NEED OF GOD

by the Rev. Marshall Craver



“Blessed are those who know their need of God,” says Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount (in the J.B. Phillips translation). Please note Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who need God”; he said, “Blessed are those who know their need of God”! So what is it that makes us know our need of God? How about this: Storms.

Suffering. Sinking. Sorrow. As Dostoyevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “our hosanna of belief (of faith, of trust) is forged in the crucible of great doubt,” and nothing produces great doubt like storms and suffering.

One of the greatest Biblical stories of faith to me is the story of Jesus inviting Peter to

step out of the boat, in the midst of a storm, and walk on water (Matthew 14:22-32). In this story, Peter has a personal, “hosanna of belief, of faith.” But pay attention to the progression of faith: first a storm, then a mistaken identification (“It is a ghost”), then a tentative identification (“If it is you . . .”), then a sinking, which is met by the outstretched hand of Jesus leading to Peter’s hosanna of faith—“Truly you are the Son of God!”

Being no strangers to suffering ourselves, we are all good candidates for knowing our need of God. A God, who according to the biblical story, always has his eye on us even when we can’t see him; a God who, come hell or high water, manages to get to us and lift us up! I prefer not to suffer

and sink in life; in fact, I try my hardest to avoid such happenings. And yet the true irony of it all is that when I look back on my own story, like Peter, it has been in the storms, the times of sinking, that I found myself knowing my need of God and crying out, “Lord, save me!” And so far, without fail, in some way or another, the Hound of Heaven has found me and said, “Take courage. It is I, don’t be afraid.” So where does all this leave me on this great journey of faith? Much like another character in the gospels, who said, “Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief.”

Fr. Marshall is currently serving as an associate priest for Christ Church Cathedral and as spiritual director to clergy for the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. He can be reached at marshallcraver@bellsouth.net.



BEFORE NOW...

SHORT STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES

by the Rev. Albert Kennington

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” These words begin the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, perhaps the best known passages on faith in the New Testament. Names of long-ago heroes of faith follow: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and so on. The next chapter begins with this magnificently reassuring line: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .”

While the Bible is our primary book of faith, the stories of the great cloud of witnesses fill a matchless treasure of our Christian heritage. Some of the witnesses lived in our part of the world and in recent generations served Jesus and Jesus’ people near us.

The archives collection of our diocese and our congregations are kept and cared for so that their stories are not lost and are available to inform and inspire us. The work of archivists is to gather, receive, and safeguard them and to make them accessible to all who wish to engage them.

As a priest, I am particularly enlightened and moved by the faith-filled vision and courage of our early clergy. I think of Bishop Cobbs covering the state of Alabama in the years before the Civil War. More than once he waited on the banks of our rivers for several days in the rain waiting for a steamboat to arrive and give him passage. I think of priests during the days of the Great Depression and World War II, when gasoline and tires were rationed and new cars were not made, yet more than one served seven, eight, or nine congregations, and Bishop Carpenter visited

over 100 congregations at least once a year. I think of Bishop Yonge of Florida whose diocese, after the Civil War, included Cuba. I've just recently learned that this same Bp. Young is the poet who translated the German text of Joseph Mohr into the beloved English words of "Silent night, holy, night . . ." Did you know this?

I think of William Johnson, James Scott, Joshua Davis, Mariah John Byran, Hynson Jones, and Lucy Truehart—seven persons of color—who chose to be confirmed as Episcopalians in Mobile a decade before slaves were freed. How did they see the love of Jesus in the church of white slave owners?

Stories of these witnesses and thousands more are in the materials cared for in the archives of our diocese and of congregations who take care of their records.

As we move toward the fiftieth anniversary of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, we are called to remember and reflect thankfully upon our founders in faith—of their vision that a new, small, simply organized diocese could become a faithful offering for living the Gospel.

I invite you to get acquainted with the archival records in your own congregation and to work with your clergy and vestry not only to insure the best care of these records but to make their stories of faith known. I also invite you to get acquainted with the archives in the Duvall Center. You might be amazed at how great a cloud of witnesses really surrounds us.



The Rev. Albert Kennington is vicar of Immanuel Episcopal Church in Bay Minette, Alabama and serves as the registrar-historiographer for the diocese. He can be reached at revsak@gmail.com.



The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast is pleased to join The Good Book Club

February 11 - May 20

The Good Book Club from Forward Movement is an invitation to all Episcopalians to join in reading the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts during Lent-Easter 2018. Episcopalians will start reading Luke on Sunday, February 11 and read a section of Luke's Gospel every day through the season of Lent. The entire season of Easter will be devoted to daily readings from the Book of Acts. Already, individuals, congregations, and organizations are committed to being a part of the Good Book Club, and we hope you'll join the journey too!

Those wishing to join The Good Book Club can sign up for email updates on the initiative's website (www.goodbookclub.org). The website also features printable lists of the daily readings, partner resource links, and more helpful information.

Congregational book clubs are encouraged! The Good Book Club coordinator for our diocese, Sally Crenshaw of Holy Trinity, Pensacola is inviting anyone interested in being a parish coordinator to contact her at crenshs@cox.net.

FAITH MATTERS
January 2018

**THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF
THE CENTRAL GULF COAST**

CLERGY SUGGESTED READING

An Altar in the World

A Geography of Faith

by Barbara Brown Taylor

Not in God's Name

Confronting Religious Violence

by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Speaking Christian

Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power, and How They Can Be Restored

by Marcus Borg

Falling Upward

A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life

by Richard Rohr

Spirituality of the Psalms

by Walter Brueggemann

Convictions

How I Learned What Matters Most

by Marcus Borg

Mending the Heart

by John Claypool

This Far by Faith

Stories from the African American Religious Experience

by Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie

The Return of the Prodigal Son

A Story of Homecoming

by Henri Nouwen

What's So Amazing About Grace?

by Philip Yancey

Accidental Saints

Finding God in All the Wrong People

by Nadia Bolz-Weber

To Bless the Space Between Us

A Book of Blessings

by John O'Donohue

Crazy Christians

A Call to Follow Jesus

by Michael Curry (author) and Katharine Jefferts-Schori (foreword)

Welcome to the Episcopal Church

An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship

by Christopher Webber

God is a Verb!

by Marilee Zdenek

Dynamics of Faith

What Faith is, What Faith is Not, Symbols of Faith, Types of Faith, The Truth of Faith, The Life of Faith

by Paul Tillich

Closer than a Brother

A Reinterpretation of the Great Devotional Classic: Practicing the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence

by David Winter



WHAT FAITH DOES NOT ASK

by the Rev. Deborah Kempson-Thompson

Picture a couple on a warm, sunny afternoon hiking in a wilderness park. The plateau they're walking is as golden toned as the pelt of the cougar approaching them—patiently. The hikers run for their lives—they run until they reach the edge of a steep bluff. Far below the treacherous face of the bluff lies an equally treacherous rock-filled gulch.

They're trapped, and the big cat knows it. Exchanging a look, the couple shrug their shoulders and take their chances on the long drop into the gulch. On the way down they manage to grab the limb of a puny bush clinging to the hillside. Relieved, they ponder their options—until a ground squirrel comes out of its hole and begins to chew on the base of the limb.

"God, help us!" they cry. "We'll do anything you ask, just deliver us from this predicament!"

"Anything?" responds a voice from the heavens.

"Yes, anything!" they exclaim in panic.

"Let go," says the voice.

Eyeing the rocky gulch below, the cougar peering at them from above, and the ground squirrel gnawing away at their security, one of the hikers looks up and hollers, "Is there anybody else up there?"

So much for that leap of faith! Christian author CS Lewis writes, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you."

Faith does not ask, "Is there anybody else up there?" because faith knows who's there. In the New Testament the Greek word for faith is *pistis*, meaning to persuade. The Latin *fides* meaning "trust, confidence, reliance, credence, belief," is the basis of our English word faith. It signifies our being persuaded to trust in God. At the beginning of Luke's gospel Jesus declares his mission to persuade people of God's love by proclaiming:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me,
for the Lord has anointed me . . .
to set at liberty those who are bruised*

Luke's gospel is filled with stories of this liberation. Through intimacy with God in prayer, sacrament, scripture, and experience of the Holy Spirit, we are made mindful of the presence of God—the kingdom of God within us. When out on a limb, we cry to God in faith, persuaded it is God's good pleasure to give us God's kingdom of wisdom and loving kindness.



FAITH MATTERS

The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

LOOKING AHEAD | *full calendar at www.diocgc.org*

JANUARY

13	Episcopal Relief & Development Training Day	Christ Church, Pensacola
19-20	Happening Staff Training	St. Christopher's, Pensacola
20	Congregational Enrichment Venture -- Session II	St. Andrew's, Panama City
24	Pre-Convention Meeting	Grace, Panama City
26	General Convention Deputation Overnight	Ft. Walton Beach
24-28	Cursillo	Beckwith
30	Pre-Convention Meeting	St. James, Fairhope

FEBRUARY

1	Clergy Study Day	Holy Cross, Pensacola
2-4	Happening #54	St. Christopher's, Pensacola
4	Pre-Convention Meeting	St. John's, Pensacola
11	Pre-Convention Meeting	St. Mary's, Andalusia
17-23	Commission on World Mission -- Medical Mission Trip	Dominican Republic
18	Pre-Convention Meeting	Mobile area, TBD
22-24	Diocesan Convention	St. Andrew's By-the-Sea, Destin

MARCH

2-4	Men's Conference	Beckwith
9-18	Commission on World Mission -- Construction Mission Trip	Dominican Republic
17	Congregational Enrichment Venture -- Session III	TBD
27	Clergy Renewal of Vows and Chrism Mass	Christ Church Cathedral

APRIL

7	Smaller Church Cohort Training	St. Francis, Gulf Breeze
14	Discipleship Day	St. Simon's, Ft. Walton Beach
22	Regional Youth Event	Multiple Locations
28	Transitional Diaconate Ordination	Christ Church Cathedral

MAY

5	Congregational Enrichment Venture -- Session IV	TBD
9-13	Cursillo	Beckwith
12	Senior Wardens Meeting	Duvall Center
12-13	Cursillo Staff Training	Beckwith
25-27	Clergy Spouse Retreat	Beckwith

JUNE

6-9	Province IV Synod	Kanuga Conference Center
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JULY

5-13	General Convention	Austin, TX
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