Come to the river of life — 
Lessons learned from a 400+ mile 
spiritual pilgrimage down the 
Connecticut River 
Ian T. Douglas
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In final reports from committees and task forces that I’ve heard and read over the years, a consistently listed recommendation is for more communication.

Follow-up conversation on this is sometimes reworded as, “We want to get the word out.” When prompted, most groups can come up with different kinds of media to use: create print and electronic newsletters, arrange in-person conversations, post on social media, design flyers for mailing with cover letters, attempt to interest a television station or newspaper staff writer… lots of ways.

We care, and we’re sure there’s someone else out there who shares our values and who cares, too. Don’t we all want that? Doesn’t God want that, too?

So we focus on the audiences and talk about the need to listen to them. What are they already listening to? What values do they hold? What media do they use? What are they reading, and watching? This listening to others is the hardest part, yet it’s critical to real communication.

While brainstorming types of media is worthwhile, “getting the word out” focuses on only half of the story. What most of these groups mean by “we want more communication” or “we want better communication” is really: “We want people to listen to us and care about what we’re saying.”

While the context for my communication conversations is unique, this whole issue turns out to be about listening — in different ways. Listening to God in creation, along the Connecticut River and the Appalachian Trail. Listening to our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are. Listening as part of peacemaking and peacebuilding. Listening in love when there’s conflict.

May you find others to listen to you, and be heard — and may you listen to others, and hear them.

May God listen to you, and hear you — and may you listen to God, and hear God.

from the **EDITOR**

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In an era of fractured community, who is my neighbor?

Dwight Zscheile

“My neighbor is the person next door, in the next cubicle at work, in the fields where the food I eat is grown, in the factory far away where my clothes are made. My neighbor lives in the parts of town I may rarely visit but where life is shaped by systems in which I am embedded, whether willfully or not.”
“Who is my neighbor?” is an old question that presents new dilemmas today. America faces a moment of deepening tribalism and disintegrating community. While we are interconnected by technology, migration, and social media as never before, powerful forces are pulling our society and world apart. Old enmities have resurfaced in a time when pluralism is rising and increasingly undeniable. What does it mean to love our neighbors in such a moment?

“Who is my neighbor?” a lawyer asks Jesus in Luke 10:29 during an exchange about how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story that provocatively redraws the traditional obligation to love one’s neighbor. The Samaritan (a religious and cultural outsider) demonstrates neighborliness by his acts of mercy and compassion, unlike the religious and cultural insiders (the priest and Levite) who keep their distance from the wounded traveler. It is the outsider who embodies the neighbor-love that God desires.

The question of who is my neighbor is tough today because how Americans live and relate with one another is undergoing some major shifts. Relatively stable geographical neighborhoods (whether urban, suburban, or small town/village) once offered people primary relational connections. Being a good neighbor meant getting to know the people who lived around you, sharing tools and child care, and participating in voluntary civic organizations.

As Mark Dunkelman describes in his book The Vanishing Neighbor, now being a good neighbor often means keeping to yourself. People spend more time with their intimates (close family and friends) on social media. Or one might be connected via Facebook to long-lost friends on the other side of the country while ignoring the people next door. In public spaces now, we’re all huddled over our screens rather than talking to each other.

The institutions that offered the common spaces for people to connect with strangers and neighbors, such as clubs, service organizations, adult sports leagues, and congregations, are all facing marginalization and organizational decline. The paradox of a technologically-interlinked society is increasing aloneness. Technology has also sped up life for many people who feel they lack the time to be present with neighbors. The open, democratic, participatory nature of social media makes it a space of massive creativity, contribution, and sharing. There are genuine connections possible there that would otherwise not be taking place. But it is also making “neighbor” less and less a geographical descriptor.

**THOSE WHOSE LIVES ARE CLOSELY LINKED WITH OURS**

In the process of wrestling with the question of neighbor, a line from the Prayers of the People in the Book of Common Prayer has come to mind for me: “those whose lives are closely linked with ours” (BCP p. 388). This doesn’t just refer to our intimates because our lives are in fact closely linked across many levels in today’s world. We live within systems and structures of housing, work, food production and distribution, culture, and economic and social life that are both profoundly globalized and highly local. We depend upon our neighbors — and they upon us — in far more ways than we often imagine. Our lives and fates are closely intertwined, whether we recognize it or not.

In today’s America, the question of who is my neighbor must be answered expansively, recognizing the complexity of patterns in how people connect and are disconnected. My neighbor is the person next door, in the next cubicle at work, in the fields where the food I eat is grown, in the factory far away where my clothes are made. My neighbor lives in the parts of town I may rarely visit but where life is shaped by systems in which I am embedded, whether willfully or not. My geographical neighborhood may be a meaningful space in which to love my neighbor and thereby share in God’s mission of forming and restoring community. But so might my workplace, the sidelines of my child’s soccer games, the school across town where I might be called to join with neighbors in helping children thrive, the places I am called to be present and form relationships. There is no easy answer.

“Who is my neighbor?” in today’s world is ultimately a matter of ongoing discernment. Discernment is not the freedom to choose who our neighbors are like any other lifestyle or consumer choice. Discernment is about hearing, submitting to, and participating in the Holy Spirit’s leadership in the thick of daily life. The Holy Spirit works both within us and also between us and our neighbors in creating and restoring relationships of just and merciful flourishing. For many congregations, discernment is an underdeveloped dimension of the Christian life.

As followers of Jesus, our calling is to discern the Spirit’s gifts and leading wherever we are, in whatever local spaces God has set us, whether they be geographical neighborhood blocks or social media chat rooms. In a society that has lost many of its common spaces for connection as well as its practices of neighborliness, the church has an opportunity to be a public community defined not primarily by lifestyle affinities, but by its witness to the God of reconciliation in Christ. This means claiming and living deeply into its core gospel story and connecting its practices of baptism and Eucharist with the ambiguities, divisions, and dilemmas of life in contemporary America. In a world of eroding, shifting, and fragile community, the church stewards a most precious gift: God’s restoration to wholeness in Christ of those once estranged. That gift is meant to be shared.

**Here’s an exercise to try in your congregation:**

Gather people into small groups of four or five and invite them to translate the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) into your context. Who would the priest, Levite, and Samaritan be? What would happen on the road? Then discuss and pray together about what you are called to do in your time and place with those with whom God has linked your lives.

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One of the parts about traveling and living in other places that I love most is that it always seems to tap into my spiritual self. I am forced to completely trust and rely upon God because the comforts of home are gone, my loved ones are far away, and I am stripped down to just me. Upon arriving in Brazil, that burst of spirituality shot through me and I felt a new zest for life ... actually that did not happen at all. Instead of this complete surrender I felt distance and even a wall rising up between me and God. For example, while in church I looked at the beauty of the building and could not draw out that same sense of wonder and joy that I usually do from being in a holy place. Prayer did not seem authentic and I did not feel particularly missionary-ish. About two months in, this "spiritual feeling" started to come back and I’m not sure why or how. Since then it has hit highs and lows, to the point that I had begun to write this several months ago and never finished. A few weeks ago I again experienced everything that I’ve written about above and continue below. I began to write about this experience of spiritual awareness again only to discover that I had already started.

While reading one of my social work books, I came across this quote: "My spirituality has become a call and challenge to be who I am and to become who I am meant to be." My vision of spirituality had begun to evolve.

My vision of spirituality and prayer was further amplified after a conversation with one of the brothers from Holy Cross Monastery. He advised that I think of my capoeira practice (a Brazilian martial art) as a form of prayer. This was something that I hadn’t considered and vaguely remembered from our orientation over the summer. That night, I didn’t go to practice but the following day I was invited to go to a hula-hoop class. I was expecting a fun class and hoping to make new friends; what I encountered was a beautiful spiritual experience in a place I wouldn’t have expected to find it. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense, as we are using the bodies that God has given us to create beautiful movements, test its limits and use it creatively in his presence.

I offered up a few words of thanks as I was learning to manipulate the hula hoop around my hands, arms, head and waist. Positive energy radiated from all five of us women there and I was able to appreciate the loveliness of each one of them. All extremely different, but equally glowing. We each supported each other’s efforts to gracefully move and sway. We learned new stretches and how they can each support our bodies.

The end of the class was particularly moving as we all sat in a circle to exchange massages. We each offered our left foot to the person on our left and massaged the foot of the person on our right. Immediately, I thought of the symbolism of the feet. During the whole class we had been barefoot and the floor in the building where we practice is far from clean. Basically, I was handing over my repulsive foot to an acquaintance so that she could take care of it and perform a rather intimate gesture. I also had to embrace the foot of someone and manipulate it as if it were my own foot so that she could experience some relief and healing.

Our teacher walked us through the massage and soon, I didn’t care that I was massaging a dirty foot. It reminded me of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples who must have had feet equally as dirty as our own. Here I was with a group of people who were of diverse religions or spiritualties and we were doing something very similar to what Jesus had done. Upon massaging the first foot, we exchanged feet and massaged the person on our left. After we had finished, the love and positive energy continued and we all began hugging each other and giving each other even more massages on the head, the back, neck and arms.

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a half ago, I was visiting friends in Puerto Rico and one of my friends organized what she calls a “Blessing.” Usually it is done for pregnant women in lieu of a baby shower at which her most intimate friends bless her and her pregnancy. But as my friend was noticing that her group of friends were running around stressed, she organized a Blessing between friends. It was really lovely.

We lit candles and turned off the lights. We each took turns washing the hands of our neighbor in scented water afloat with rose petals. This practice relaxed all of us both mentally and physically. My friend then led us to each speak. While I can’t remember exactly what words she used to prompt us, we each began somehow to let fall our largest and most intimate burdens. I don’t think that there was a dry eye in the room after all had shared. We completed our time with an activity of support by writing down the strengths of the others in the group to create a banner for each person. The evening was filled with vulnerability, laughter, tears, and solidarity.

Because of these experiences and conversations, I have begun to see prayer and spirituality in new ways. At first it seemed odd and I stumbled through but now it seems natural. I hope to continue to create these sacred spaces in unexpected areas as well as look for opportunities in the ordinary.

"My spirituality has become a call and challenge to be who I am and to become who I am meant to be."
The idea of paddling the length of the Connecticut River — 400+ miles — as a spiritual pilgrimage emerged at the 2015 annual Advent Retreat of the Episcopal bishops in New England, where we were also joined with our Lutheran brother bishop, Jim Hazelwood. Bishop Rob Hirschfeld of the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire first raised the idea as he, a competitive rower, had rowed on the Connecticut River his whole life. The prospect of paddling the length of this great river, which passes directly through four of the seven dioceses in New England, was just bold enough, just crazy enough, that it captured the imagination of the bishops gathered.

Over the next year and a half, a planning leadership team, which included many of the bishops in New England or their representatives, worked together to secure financial and logistical resources as the idea of a paddle trip grew to become the “River of Life Pilgrimage.” Imagining and planning such a pilgrimage was an immense undertaking. It would not have happened without the faithful and hard work of Kairos Earth, an environmental ministry located in Concord, New Hampshire led by an Episcopal priest, the Rev. Steve Blackmer, and Jo Brooks, a logistics specialist whose organizing gifts and attention to detail made the whole pilgrimage possible.

Guides Mark and Lisa Kutolowski provided spiritual leadership and wilderness expertise. Mark and Lisa, a young married couple from Vermont, have dedicated their lives and ministry to helping individuals and groups connect with God in and through the fullness of creation and wilderness experiences. By leading us in silence and in corporate prayer, inviting us to try on ancient and new spiritual practices, and preparing our campsite and river meals daily, Mark and Lisa became the “abbots” of our floating religious community.

For 40 days, from June 25 through July 9, nearly 100 pilgrims paddled the 410 miles of the Connecticut River from its source to the sea. Mark and Lisa, supplied by Jo, were the constants on the pilgrimage traveling the length of the river. “Core river pilgrims” participated in one or more of twelve three-day, two-night segments organized around weekly spiritual themes such as: “The Call to Wilderness,” “Baptism and Immersion in God,” and “Transformation and Resurrection.”

The length of each day’s paddle ranged from as little as five miles to as many as 20 miles, and included stops along the way for prayer and the honoring of sacred places of both blessing and tragedy. Nights were spent camping in river access only campgrounds or in churchyards of Episcopal parishes along the way. Sundays were sabbath days off for rest and renewal. Fifty-two pilgrims participated in one or more of the three-day, two night segments, with approximately 40 additional day paddlers.

I was blessed to participate in the last four segments of the pilgrimage paddling 150 miles from Brattleboro, Vermont to Old Lyme, Connecticut.
All along the river, Christian communities turned out to welcome and host the pilgrims. In Connecticut, hundreds of faithful Episcopalians welcomed the paddlers to their churchyards and sanctuaries, and offered sumptuous parish potlucks, barbecues, and breakfasts. Significant liturgical, educational and celebratory events were offered in Hartford, East Haddam, and Essex. Episcopal parishes in Connecticut that opened their doors and their hearts to the pilgrims included: Holy Trinity, Enfield; Christ Church Cathedral and the parishes of Good Shepherd, St. Monica’s, Grace, and Trinity in Hartford; Church of the Holy Trinity in Middletown and Holy Trinity in Portland; St. James’, Higganum; St. Stephen’s, East Haddam; St. John’s, Essex; and St. Ann’s, Old Lyme and Grace, Old Saybrook.

Upon reflection, I can say that the River of Life Pilgrimage was one of the most spiritually transformative experiences of my life. I was so blessed by the incredible beauty of God’s creation found in the Connecticut River watershed — including the overwhelming number of bald eagles, great blue herons, ospreys and egrets. Time spent with fellow pilgrims in shared silence and in corporate prayer, paddling down the flowing river, and exchanging stories around campfires of our lives “back home,” drew us together and formed us as the Body of Christ. We experienced God in the beauty of creation, in the heat of the noon-day sun and the cold of the rain, and in the miraculous showering of fireflies at night. The great Connecticut River, on whose shores I am blessed to live, became for me a River of Life as I pursued my pilgrim passage.

continued
Litany of the River

God of all creation, we your people lift our prayers to you.

May your Spirit flow through us.
For rain in thirsty lands and hope in times of drought.

May your Spirit flow through us.
For all people who have lost their homes, communities and livelihoods to floods and rising tides, and those whose sacred places are threatened.

May your Spirit flow through us.
For those encumbered by contaminated water, especially the children, and those who walk miles to obtain the clean water many take for granted.

May your Spirit flow through us.
For the just and wise use of the water you have given us, that we may be gracious stewards of your creation and good neighbors to all people, protecting and sharing the natural resources you have given all of us.

May your Spirit flow through us.
For city councils and church councils, county commissioners, tribal governments, state authorities and national leaders; that they may have your courage and vision to make hard decisions for the common good.

May your Spirit flow through us.
God who calls us forth from the dust and watered our lands with countless streams and great rivers, we thank you for this garden of Earth you have created for us to dwell in. Send your living waters upon us. Remind us of all the thirsts in this world: the thirst for justice; the thirst for peace; the thirst for opportunity; the thirst for reconciliation; the thirst for hope. And when your blessings rain from the sky, as assuredly they will, and we kneel again at the pools and the fountains, teach us to cup our hands and gently, gracefully, in solidarity, turn first, and share with one another. Amen.

Gathering the Waters

The first is filled with water from the source of the Connecticut River, from Long Island Sound, and from rivers of Vermont and New Hampshire saying:

Waters from...

The Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant

Almighty God, who through the water of baptism has raised us from sin into new life, and by the power of your life-giving Spirit ever cleanses and sanctifies your people: We ask you, this water for the service of your holy Church; and grant that it may be a sign of your cleansing and refreshment of your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Together: We reaffirm our renunciation of evil and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ.

We believe and trust in God who holds in existence all that is, and yet is father and mother to us all.

We follow Jesus, God’s Anointed, God’s beloved, who showed us the mind and the heart of God and whose love is stronger than death. Through him we have life, life in all its abundance.

We open ourselves to the Spirit of God, who moved over the face of the waters at the beginning of time, who moves through the waters of baptism, and who today moves over the face of this beautiful river; the Spirit who now lives within us and by whom we cry out to God with sighs too deep for words, knowing ourselves to be God’s beloved children.
PILGRIM OBSERVATIONS

Returning home from being a pilgrim on the Connecticut River, I came away with three observations about the nature of pilgrimage.

First, a pilgrim is called to travel lightly. When one travels over land or water as a pilgrim, one cannot take an abundance of items with them. While canoes can handle a bit more cargo (thank you Lisa and Mark for carrying our food and water!) kayaks like mine are limited by the amount of space in their holds. A backpacking tent, sleeping bag and pad, an extra change of clothes, and a few small personal items is all that can be carried. Living for weeks at a time with only the bare essentials showed me how easily I am preoccupied with and distracted by the manifold accoutrements of our Western consumer lives. Jesus said: “See how the lilies of the field…”

My second observation is closely related to first. When traveling lightly, a pilgrim necessarily has to rely on the hospitality of others. Mark and Lisa, as an extension of their vocations as our spiritual and wilderness guides, attentively prohibited the pilgrims from participation in the preparation and clean-up of our meals. They invited us pilgrims (all accomplished leaders in our own right) to receive their hospitality as a spiritual discipline. In addition, each night that we arrived at a new parish destination we were graciously showered with hospitality and welcome. We never really knew what the parish had planned nor what our eating and sleeping arrangements would be. We had to rely on the hospitality of others.

And third, as we traveled lightly relying on the hospitality of others, we had to trust that God would show up in new, surprising, and life-giving ways. And God did. I felt the presence of God palpably each moment of each day of the pilgrimage. In the prayerful space of each morning’s great silence, in the water rushing under us, in the birds flying over us, in the beauty of the trees and river banks around each bend, in the faces and embraces of our parish hosts, and in the Eucharist shared each Sunday with sisters and brothers in Christ along the way, God was there ahead of me, inviting me, holding me, calling me forward. Living provisionally as a pilgrim, with unknown venues and vistas opening before me, I experienced anew the fullness of God in creation. Discovering God in new, surprising, and life-giving ways as I traveled the River of Life has liberated me to rest in the One who will make all things new.

As I reflect on these three pilgrim observations — the call to travel lightly, to rely on the hospitality of others, and to trust that God will show up in new, surprising, and life-giving ways — I find that they are also pretty good lessons for the church at the end of Christendom. Like the 70 sent out two by two by Jesus, (Luke 10: 1-11) we are to travel lightly, “carrying no purse, no bag, no sandals.” And whenever we enter a village and are welcomed, we are to eat what is set before us. And when we do, when we are welcomed in the Peace of God, God will show up, the sick will be healed and the Kingdom of God will be near.

The church today, especially the church in New England, has lost much of the power, privilege and prestige that we once enjoyed in “Christian America.” Dwindling congregations and declining budgets make it harder and harder to pay the bills that come with keeping up the many churches inherited from the past. No wonder the faithful are becoming increasingly tired, anxious, and sad trying to keep the church going as they have known it. What would it look like if Christians in New England, Episcopalians in Connecticut, tried on traveling lightly into God’s future? Can we let go of the encumbrances of the vestiges of Christendom? Can we dwell in God’s Word, and not the perceived securities of the past? Can we travel with no purse, no bag, no sandals, participating in God’s mission?

And when we move out into the highways and byways traveling lightly, when we go into our neighborhoods, can we really rely on the hospitality of others? Can we seek the peace of God that precedes us? Our call is not to bring the church as we have known it to those who have never — or might never — darken the doors of our dwindling ecclesial institutions. No, our call is to discover what God is up to in the world around us. It will take much faith to go into the uncomfortable, unknown, and unforeseen places where God is calling us to go, where God awaits us.

And when we travel lightly, relying on the hospitality of others, God will be revealed. God in Jesus, the incarnate one, in the power of the Holy Spirit will show up in new, surprising, and life-giving ways. The kingdom of God will come near. The sick will be healed. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will be made real.

It’s time for us to become a pilgrim church, traveling lightly, relying on the hospitality of others, and trusting that God will show up in new, surprising, and life-giving ways. Come and be a pilgrim. Come to the River of Life.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.
Peacemakers and peacebuilders, it’s the work God has called us to do

Laura J. Ahrens

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” This familiar and often-quoted passage calls us to the work of peace and reconciliation in God’s name. It is a call to action that requires from us deep listening, honest self-reflection and reinvigorated commitment to our Lord and to one another.

In ECCT, we are already involved in some important peacebuilding ministries. To strengthen that work, this past summer I took a deep dive into the world of being a peacemaker and a peacebuilder. A three-week course on conflict resolution and peacebuilding offered at the Middlebury Institute for International Studies (MIIS) in Monterey, California introduced me to new tools, new concepts, and new ways of being a peacebuilder in the world. Exploring peacebuilding through multiple lenses, I found new ways and strengthened former practices of being about this holy work.

MIIS seeks to prepare graduate students and others for the work of being global peacebuilders. Graduates of the program might work at the World Bank, join the CIA, serve in the UN, and/or work for countless not-for-profit organizations around the world. The Rt. Rev. Mary Gray-Reeves, bishop of the diocese of El Camino Real and I took their summer peacebuilding course. We were the only two Americans in the class. Eighteen students — from Hong Kong, Thailand, Nigeria, Nepal, India, South Africa, Jamaica, Mexico, Egypt and Afghanistan — and ranging in age from 18 to 55 — participated in this class.

We learned methods and techniques from various practitioners for being peacemakers and peacebuilders. Each one emphasized different aspects of the peacebuilding process, and yet there was one common theme: It’s all about relationships.

Peacebuilding is about building healthy relationships. I personally grounded this theme in our Baptismal Covenant. “Will you respect the dignity of every human being? I will with God’s help.” Respecting the dignity of every human being, including myself. Respecting the dignity of another means creating space to hear their stories, acknowledging that some of their opinions will differ from your own, and with a posture of curiosity and imagination, create space for relationships to be built.

PEACEMAKERS AND PEACEBUILDERS

Being a peacemaker means working to end a conflict, solving whatever tension or violence caused brokenness or hurt. “Peacemaking is the diplomatic process of brokering an end to conflict, principally through mediation and negotiation,” according to one of our reading assignments. Ending the conflict includes negotiating with the various parties so that they can find a common ground in which to co-exist.

My coursework moved us from peacemaking into taking the next step into the much deeper and richer holy work of being a peacebuilder. Seeking to create sustainable and life-giving relationships, it’s a process that involves hard work and it is well worth the time and the effort of everyone involved.

Being a peacebuilder involves deep listening to the emotion, the hurt and the brokenness, and for all parties being willing to acknowledge their roles and for everyone to be willing to grow. It means creating safe space for honest conversation, story-telling and willingness for all parties to lean in. It’s holy work. It’s the work that South Africa did as part of the truth and reconciliation process. It’s the work countless individuals have done or sought to do within their personal relationships and their family systems. It takes time and mistakes will be made. It’s about process. And I truly believe it’s the work we’re called to do as Christians seeking to follow the Prince of Peace.

Whether the peacebuilding process involves individuals, communities, governments, or humanity’s relationship with the environment, the process of listening, and hearing, are vital. Safe space to hold the conversations and explore new possibilities can make all the difference. Sustainability and the development of healthy relationships and structures is the goal.

It’s no surprise that the key to this work is listening. Deep listening. So often peacemakers and peacebuilders with the best of intentions go into systems and communities and impose well-meaning solutions. My course work focused on creating new models for peacebuilding. These models included some ideas that were no surprise — they recommended that we ask open questions, listen deeply, notice our thinking and replace righteous or contemptuous thoughts with respectful ones. Other methodologies highlighted the need for peacebuilders to be curious about the local context and tap into local knowledge to explore how healthy change might occur, living into processes that emerge as a result of these new social connections and nurturing this new connective tissue.

PEACEBUILDING IN CONNECTICUT

I think what resonated for me most in the work this summer was how much this work resembles our work around participating in God’s mission in our local neighborhoods. In our neighborhood we are seeking to listen for the hopes, the places of brokenness, and the places of new life in our communities. Peacebuilding work is very similar. Listening to and seeking to hear longings for hope, honesty about the pain of brokenness, and exploring opportunities for new life, we begin the work of being a peacebuilder.

God calls us differently into this work. Some of us are passionate about addressing racial reconciliation and the places of brokenness in our communities and/or in our country where race divides us or brings out unresolved conflicts. Some of us
are passionate about addressing conflicts which emerge around differing opinions on immigration policies or welcoming refugees. Some seek to build bridges of communication and understanding between different political parties. And some of us see our work as working to heal humanity’s relationship to the land. These are just three of the many areas of brokenness that I believe Jesus is calling us to explore.

While some topics may seem like they are too big, too challenging, and too complex, the reality is they are all big and challenging and complex. How can we build bridges to development and sustainability so that healthy conversations filled with space for differing opinions and possible solutions can take place? That’s bold. I believe as long as we stay grounded in our work as being part of the Jesus Movement, living a gospel of love and wanting to be in a relationship with our neighbor, we can honestly be about this work. It doesn’t mean we compromise on justice, it means we recognize the humanity of all people and seek to respect the dignity of all.

**CASE STUDIES: VISITING A PRISON; STUDYING MYANMAR**

My course work this summer took me to a minimum-security prison in Salinas, California where I participated in a small group with 20 inmates and three of my classmates. We shared stories of brokenness and spoke of longing for healthier relationships and new life. I experienced how their focused small group work in the prison gave them healthy ways to seek to be in a relationship with others, helped them to be more in touch with their own emotions and provided healthy tools for them to use both while they were in prison and after they were released. They were developing skills that they would later draw on to sustain peaceful lives. These men made a conscious decision to do this small group work, opting not to be a part of the gang culture that is so present in the California prison system. They tried to be realistic about what relationships might be restored, which ones would require work, and which ones they might need to let go of when they return to their old communities after they were released. They also recognized that they may fail at using their new tools and fall into old patterns. I felt that they wanted to keep at this growth work. They wanted peace-filled lives. I wept with these men, I learned from these men, and I pray for these men.

One of the things that they shared was the importance of role models, healthy role models, in their lives. They spoke of teachers, coaches, and employers who respected their dignity and cared for them. When they spoke of their choices that led to their time in prison, they were very aware of how they have lost touch with those adults that grounded them. Their stories were profoundly complex and I was moved by how powerfully they spoke of these mentors and role models.

I thought about how important it is to stay connected to people when they’re going through challenging times, times when sadly many of us, myself included, might
find the emotion too strong and the burden too big and so we pull away. I’m not naïve enough to believe that if mentors stayed involved, those men would not have made the choices they did, and it was clear to me what a breath of fresh air these mentors were in these men’s complicated lives.

Stay engaged, stay in the process, stay with the humanity of the other. To judge, to stereotype, to dismiss, is not the Jesus way. If I didn’t believe that before I took this course this summer, I sure believe it now. Peacebuilders engage, peacebuilders listen, peacebuilders sometimes fail, and peacebuilders are patient.

My final project was to study the Rohingya in Myanmar. Learning about the conflict between the predominately Muslim Rohingyas and the Myanmar army, my eyes were opened to a new story and it gave me fresh eyes to stories I knew too well about brokenness and judgment — areas within myself, in my own communities and in the church. My small group explored ideas about how we might empower those closest to the conflict to listen to one another and share stories. Our studies connected us to the work that Kofi Annan is doing with the United Nations to help create similar structures of listening in Myanmar. And we were also very aware that the first step in this healing process needs to be peacemaking, ending the conflict so that space might be created for new relationships to emerge. As the news tells us daily, this conflict continues. This is a harsh reminder that all parties need to be willing to listen and learn, exploring models of negotiation and mediation. The UN and others are seeking to help the people of Myanmar engage that work. It is a long road and a journey I hold in my prayers.

BLESSED WORK

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who seek to end conflict. Blessed too are those who take the next step, to be about peacebuilding. They are building the kingdom of God. We can do this work together. We will make a lot of mistakes. We will disappoint one another and fall back to old ways. We will forget how important this work is and be consumed by our own consumer and competitive mentalities. And God is faithful and God will constantly call us back to this work.

As with all the Gospel work, it’s the easiest message and the hardest way to live. It involves love and it begins with listening: Listening to God in prayer; listening to places of conflict; listening to the pain, staying with the pain, exploring the brokenness and finding the pieces that can be pulled together, rebuilt or added that can build a bridge to new life. I believe in that holy work.
Connecting church to community in Simsbury

The Rev. Rebekah Hatch

Frances Grandy Taylor

On an early fall day at St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in Simsbury, some visitors came to church in carriers and on leashes. A few of them barked. It was time for the Blessing of the Animals, and parishioners brought their best pet friends to church for the Saturday afternoon occasion.

The Rev. Rebekah Hatch, who was balancing on a crutch due to recent foot surgery, bent down to touch each pet and say a few words of blessing for the animal and their owner. Hatch has been rector of the Bushy Hill Road Church in Simsbury since arriving in Connecticut two years ago when her husband Anthony joined the faculty as an associate professor of sociology at Wesleyan University. They have two children, Ruth, 11 and Elias, 7.

Ruth, who brought her hamster Humphrey to the event, read a passage adapted from Genesis during the ceremony. “God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind, cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth... and it was so, and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them,” she said.

Church members say Hatch has brought a new vitality to the church, which over the years has become a small, aging congregation. Robin Guzzo, who brought her Bichon Frise named Remy, said Hatch “fit right in,” to the church community at St. Alban’s.

“I think it has become a happier place — we’ve been through a lot of struggle and transition,” said Ann Hall, who has attended the church for the past 30 years and brought her 14-year old dog Ashley for a blessing. “She has stabilized us - she has brought a lot of energy, talent and compassion.”

Hatch is a former chaplain of an Episcopal school in Atlanta and former rector of Church of the Good Shepard in Ruxton, Maryland, and a graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary.

A long-time member of the church, Guzzo said Hatch has brought fresh air to a church that has been through many changes over the years. “It’s a very loving church. People are here for all the right reasons, which is what church is about. I like her sermons. You leave feeling good, like you have received a gift to go try and be a better person.”

Hatch said she found a congregation ready for change despite the transitions they had already experienced. “They are curious, they are willing to take on new ways of thinking and doing things,” she said during an interview in her office. “There is an openness to their being together that really drew me in, and I found that to be more of the case since I have been here.”

Hatch said the congregation has grappled with what it means to be a smaller, aging church. “One of the things we recognize is your age does not dictate how much God cares about you, God loves kids, but he loves you, too.”

Her former church in Atlanta could have as many as 500 people on a Sunday morning, she said. “We have about 40 or 50 on a Sunday here. But the percentage of people who are really plugged in is higher than any church I have ever been to. When I look out there if you are not in church I know why — so and so went to visit their family or is on vacation. There are not a lot of people who just don’t just show up.”

Charlotte Desilets, a member of the church vestry, credits Hatch with putting the church “on the map,” by connecting it to the larger community. “People know we are here now. We had a booth at Septemberfest for the first time, and over three days we probably talked to about 80 people,” which has resulted in a few members, Desilets said.

Hatch is a member of the local interfaith clergy group and meets regularly with Episcopal colleagues. “I try to keep up with what’s going in the community, and be aware of what I need to know about.” she said.
“I think I kept waiting to hear no — you’re too young, you don’t have the right qualifications, you don’t know enough about the Bible...I kept waiting to hear no...instead I kept hearing yes.”

The Rev. Rebekah Hatch

Hatch, who once thought her career would be as a musician, balances life between being a mother and being priest. “Every parent struggles with this I think — to make sure we are able to be with our children. I am thankful to be mother to my children but that is just a piece of who I am.”

She says that as her children have grown some of the stress has changed from the time when she was a full-time assistant pastor with an infant, and she continues to seek that equilibrium between family and work.

“[These days] I drop my kids off at school and pick them up at the end of the day, and my work happens outside those hours,” she said, following up on phone calls and other work after the children have gone to bed. Hatch notes that her children have learned to be independent and be more responsible as they grow up. But sometime, she admits, “I don’t feel like I’m getting ahead in either arena. And I’ve made peace with that over years.” Her husband is a full time professor who has published one book and is working on a second book, and is often a guest lecturer as well. “And it’s also important to him to have that balance of being present with our children — we share both the burden and the blessing,” Hatch said.

Hatch switched from being a piano and voice major to graduating with a degree in comparative religion. At some point, she recalled, “someone asked me if I had ever thought about becoming a priest. I don’t remember who said it or how it happened, but somehow the seed got planted. My senior year of college I remember calling a parish priest and saying, what do I do? How to I decide if this is something I want to do?”

She described her youth as being “a church nerd.” “I had a close relationship with church most of my life, I grew up going to the same church most Sundays, I sang in the choir and I was an acolyte — I did all the things you do in The Episcopal Church.”

When Hatch embarked on her journey to the priesthood, “I think I kept waiting to hear no — you’re too young, you don’t have the right qualifications, you don’t know enough about the Bible... I kept waiting to hear no, I waited for them to kick me out. Instead I kept hearing yes.”

But it wasn’t all smooth sailing, she said. “Discernment is hard, wrestling with what it is that I want to do ... it’s not just going somewhere to pray for 40 days, it’s time and emotional energy spent, which of course prepares you for the work you are going to do,” she explained. “But I think that, through the people around me, and my own stubbornness to stick to the process, it allowed me to continue to hear that call somehow.”

And over time, she has come to rely as much on her faith as her formal education, and her experience as a pastor has given her more tools as she is called on to comfort sick parishioners, perform last rites, or move a church community into a new era.

“It’s an ongoing process. I now have a confidence in accessing this spiritual well in myself. The further I get away from seminary,” she said, “I feel more and more capable of relying on just my relationship with God alone.”

Her journey has been a transformation, she said, “from thinking, there is no way, I am not faithful enough to do this — to a feeling of, I don’t know what else I would have ever done with my life.”
Robert (“Rob”) Page not only works with water as his living, but volunteers globally to help communities gain access to water resources and to manage them. He is a soft-spoken and humble man who considers himself extremely blessed — “lucky,” as he puts it — to have the opportunity to volunteer.

Rob is a longtime member of St. Paul’s, Wallingford where over the years he’s served as vestry member, volunteer landscaper, usher, and junior choir member. He met and married his wife there and they’ve raised three children in the church.

As a day job for the last 25 years Rob has worked for Aquarion Water Company of Connecticut — recently bought by Eversource. Previously he’d worked as a land surveyor. Rob is supervisor of the company’s Geographic Information System (GIS) and records management. GIS is computer-based mapping that links a database to mapped features.

It was a comment by a co-worker in the early 1990s about volunteer service that led to Rob’s ministry. At a performance evaluation, Rob said, his supervisor suggested that Rob consider doing more “on the outside.” So that year he signed up to help at a work-related charity golf tournament. It must have lit a spark, or perhaps God whispered through the words, because Rob has continued to serve on volunteer projects ever since then — and still volunteers at the golf tournament, as well.

Rob says he likes to help people with the skills he has, but he’s personally not ready to call it his ministry.

“In the sense that ministry is something good I can participate in, maybe,” he said. “I’m lucky to be able to do it.” He’s also emphatic that his global work isn’t about “what he does for others,” but, as he puts it, how he “gets to join others in what God is doing.”

WATER FOR PEOPLE & EL PORVENIR

The national professional association for Aquarion and its employees, and for other water companies and workers, is the American Water Works Association (AWWA), an “international nonprofit scientific and educational society dedicated to the improvement of drinking water quality and supply,” founded in 1881. One of its committees is, “Water for People,” which has a vision of, “A world where every person has access to reliable and safe water and sanitation services.”

The “Connecticut Section” of AWWA has about 600 members, Rob among them. He serves on the CT Section’s Water for People Committee, which has contributed more than $300,000 to Water for People since 1994. (The golf event is one fundraiser).

Water for People established the World Water Corps in 2006 as its technical volunteer arm to support their programs outside of North America in its effort “to reach Everyone Forever.” People assist in one of three areas: monitoring, water quality, and water resource management.

Rob volunteers as part of World Water Corps, at first helping to survey and map areas of need, and more recently teaching GIS to local communities to help them manage their water resources.
This has taken him to Nicaragua, Honduras, Peru, and Malawi. He’s been a volunteer since 2007 and travels at least once and often twice a year.

One year in Nicaragua, his group worked with a local nonprofit organization, “El Porvenir,” which shares a similar focus and goals. Rob met members of an Episcopal church in Portland, Oregon who were there on a work trip through El Porvenir, and got the idea that his parish might be interested in a similar trip.

Indeed they were. Their first trip was in 2014. They go back annually and maintain a page on their website about the mission partnership and stories from the trips. Rob travels with them, as have one daughter and a son-in-law. In 2017 the team from St. Paul’s worked with the local community of El Sauce, Nicaragua to build a bathing house/washing station and “to dig a big hole.”

Through the efforts of St. Paul’s, El Porvenir received a sustainability grant from the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, to support sustainable forestry.

Rob’s volunteer work has taken him to places where he’s also seen abandoned wells, churches, and other projects, during his travels. That’s why it’s been so important to him that World Water Corps, and El Porvenir, emphasize listening to and working with community members, building relationships, and taking the long view. While neither of those organizations are faith-based, they fit his values as a Christian.

A number of people, including Rob, aren’t comfortable calling their volunteer service their ministry, especially when they think the term properly belongs only to the ordained, or to the church. Others say they don’t feel like they received a divine commandment to do the work, or they don’t see their gifts as worthy.

The catechism of the Church, found in the Book of Common Prayer, is more expansive: “What is the ministry of the laity?” It asks on page 855. And answers: “To represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.”

So call it what you will, ministry, or volunteer service, a faithful Christian is bringing his compassion, respect, and GIS skills, collaboratively with others, to help bring about a future where more people have access to clean water and sanitation services.

“A lot had to happen for me to be able to do these things,” he said, referring to his former supervisor’s comment, the support from his company, and meeting the group from Oregon in Nicaragua as examples of those — “and they don’t seem all coincidence. I do believe that God has helped me on the way.”

Karin Hamilton serves as Canon for Mission Communication & Media for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.
Glastonbury parish runs pantry for paper goods

Carol’s Closet open monthly to the community

Pam Dawkins

St. James’ paper pantry gives bags with paper towels, toilet paper, facial tissue, shampoos, toothbrushes, toothpaste, bar soap, deodorant, and feminine hygiene and incontinence products to Glastonbury residents in need.

In a 1999 Super Bowl ad, two guys who were short of cash chose to spend their money on beer rather than a roll of toilet paper, but made sure to pick a paper bag instead of plastic and grab the receipt. But for clients at Carol’s Closet, a paper pantry operated by members of St. James’ Episcopal Church in Glastonbury, doing without paper products is a function of hard times, rather than a punchline.

“We have people at all different places in their lives,” from young families to seniors, said Marie Dixon, co-director of Carol’s Closet, of the people they serve. “They never stop amazing me … their strength is incredible, because so many of them are alone.”

The paper pantry is set up once a month on Saturday, in the atrium and nave — the main body — of the church. Volunteers meet the Wednesday before to fill the bags, which they store in the church basement until Saturday morning.

“We’re pretty prepared by the time we get there Saturday,” Dixon said.

St. James’ paper pantry gives bags with paper towels, toilet paper, facial tissue, shampoos, toothbrushes, toothpaste, bar soap, deodorant, and feminine hygiene and incontinence products (if appropriate) to Glastonbury residents in need, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on the third Saturday of every month. These items are not covered by food stamps (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP). Dixon said they thought about giving diapers but the town’s social services agency advised against it, because they would need too many sizes.

Carol’s Closet is named for Carol Hilton, a long-time Glastonbury resident who died in February 2015.

Hilton spent 20 years as executive director of “A Place of Grace” food pantry in Hartford; she came across a paper pantry while visiting St. David’s Episcopal Church in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts, and brought the idea home to St. James.

At the time, Dixon said, the woman who ran the church’s outreach committee had charged everyone with checking out what other churches were doing, to bring in new ideas. Dixon, who didn’t really know Hilton at the time, liked the idea, and researched it, then the church created a committee to bring it to life. That process took a year.

“She was a really good organizer,” said Carol Hilton’s husband, John C. Hilton. “Carol always thought there are plenty of people who need help here.”

The paper pantry was still in the planning stages when Carol Hilton died, and didn’t even have a name yet, said Dixon. “When she passed away, we knew what we had to name it … Carol was a very, very giving person …”
“It’s too bad she isn’t around to know about this,” said Hilton, whose granddaughter sometimes volunteers. He credits Dixon and the other volunteers with the growth of Carol’s Closet. “I guess they’re doing pretty well with it.”

Since its official start in September 2015 through August 2017, Carol’s Closet has given 12,376 items to 814 individuals, Dixon said. It has grown from serving five people its first month to 59 in July 2017, its largest group so far. Growth, Dixon said, has been steady.

And its mission doesn’t stop with the physical giving of goods.

“We now have somebody there every time we’re open,” to offer healing prayers, Dixon said. The response, she added, has been incredible. “They are so comfortable with what we have created,” clients come in, sit, eat, and talk.

The Rev. Denise Cabana, rector of St. James’, called Carol’s Closet “one of the premier examples” of how you can make an effort like this work. “They created this atmosphere that is just filled with love and hospitality.”

Cabana suggested offering coffee and cookies, Dixon said, and now there’s a full table of food, including sandwiches.

Volunteers greet patrons in the atrium, where they can take some food. There are comfortable places for them to sit and talk, and music plays; they go into the nave to pick up the bags.

“The volunteers who are there engage people in conversation,” said Cabana, who came to St. James’ in May 2015. The patrons often ask for prayers, she said. “It really builds community. We’ve had people come to church because they felt so welcome here (at Carol’s Closet).”
Carol’s Closet is even building the interfaith community with other Glastonbury religious houses.

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, The Lutheran Church of St. Mark, Buckingham Congregational Church, First Church of Christ Congregational, and Congregation Kol Haverim collect goods, raise funds, and send volunteers, Dixon and Cabana said. The core team is about 16 people, but others join in.

They have also worked with the Glastonbury Food Bank and Naubuc Elementary School to identify community members who Carol’s Closet could help, Dixon and co-director Becky Lee wrote in the church’s 2016 annual report. They only serve Glastonbury because they don’t have the funds or storage space for a larger area, said Dixon, who would “absolutely” suggest other parishes look into paper pantries.

They staffed a table at the Annual Convention last year, and talked to a number of people about what they do. The volunteers even put on a training session in April for ECCT’s Spring Training and Gathering; only one woman came, but she was very excited, Dixon said.

“They’re more than willing to get out there and share” information, Cabana said of the Carol’s Closet team, a sentiment Dixon echoed.

The need is certainly out there. Last year, nearly 400,000 state residents received money from the federally-funded SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). According to a June 2016 report by the Office of Legislative Research, Glastonbury was home to 1,019 SNAP recipients in 2015, which amounts to 3.6% of the population. That’s a far cry from the more than 30 percent who are on SNAP in cities like Hartford, Waterbury, and New Haven, but still potentially startling to people who think Connecticut’s more affluent suburbs are immune to these problems.

Hilton, however, was not surprised by the need, even in Glastonbury. “You’d be surprised by how many people are living below the poverty line,” and not just seniors, he said.

“It’s still mostly an older group. However, recently, we’re seeing more young families,” Dixon said of their clients, adding she doesn’t know why the demographics are changing.

The need did not surprise Cabana, either, who has worked as a shelter director and in other social services capacities. Every community, she said, has its poor and marginalized, people who are living on the edge. Social services agencies, Cabana said, could learn a lot by seeing how the volunteers run Carol’s Closet.

“We have all these resources and can fix things, but [we] need to connect and have relationships and share,” Cabana said. Carol’s Closet doesn’t just hand out a bag: “It’s about building community and relationships.”

Once the doors open, clients can pick out their toothbrushes and deodorant, but the paper products are already in the bags.

On their first visit, and then every quarter, Dixon said, clients get the non-paper goods, including shampoos, toothpaste, toothbrushes, as well as the toilet paper, tissue, and other paper products. In the months in between, they can pick up “supplemental” bags with just the core paper products and soap. Dixon gives each client a slip of paper, which they pass to the volunteers; that paper shows which bag the client receives.

The incontinence products came in as a donation, she said; Dixon purchases the feminine hygiene products, which are a recent addition.

They frequently get donations, Dixon said, but those are not usually put in the bags. She keeps the items in a plastic tote and, once they have enough for their clients, they will give them away.

Marie Dixon with Tina Sparrow preparing for the monthly paper pantry at St. James’, Glastonbury.
According to the Connecticut Department of Social Services, which administers the SNAP program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), a household with four people whose monthly net income is less than $2,025 qualifies for assistance; the limit for a one-person household is $990 a month. The maximum benefit ranges from $194/month for one person to $649/month for a household of four (the benefits and income limits rise for households of five or more). Recipients can only use the money for breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish, and poultry, dairy products, and seeds and plants to produce food for the household, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Carol Hilton’s daughter’s family has donated items for children, and a friend of a member brought in boxes of clean, neat clothes. Dixon donates anything that is left over after the Carol’s Closet clients take what they need to other organizations.

In the beginning, they mostly handed out donated items, because they didn’t have the money to buy them, but now, they mostly buy the items. “Over time, I think there’s been a realization that we can do more with their money than they can,” she said.

Dixon generally buys the items at dollar stores. A bag with all the items for one person costs about nine dollars, while a bag for a family of five is 14 dollars; a supplemental bag costs five dollars. They have approached manufacturers about donations but “what we found out is that they don’t give to churches,” she said, adding they don’t know why this is so.

As of August, Dixon said, they had spent $5,400 on the products for the bags. “It’s hard to budget because of our growth. We didn’t really know [how many people we’d serve].”

Most of the funding comes from the parish, she said. A fundraiser last year netted just under $3,000.

Glastonbury social services refers people, she said, while others see their signs. “Our best marketing has been word of mouth.”

She tears up when talking about another type of donation: a prayer shawl ministry at St. James’ donates “pocket prayer shawls” — small knitted swatches infused with prayer by the knitter and designed to bring comfort like larger shawls but small enough to fit into pockets or purses — to Carol’s Closet.

The volunteers don’t know in advance the color of the shawls in the bag. Dixon has asked clients what their favorite color was before looking in the bag, and twice, she said, the only shawl in there was that color. “If that’s not the Holy Spirit at work I don’t know what is.”

It can, sometimes, become a rather intimate relationship.

One young woman has a husband and three children; she lost her job and her husband, who was self-employed, had a heart attack. “She said, I never thought this would happen to us. Who does?” Dixon said.

One man, a veteran, and his wife raised their grandson and are now raising their granddaughter. Another young couple comes to pick up a bag for her parents, who were sick; her mother has since died, Dixon said. They had accumulated quite a lot of money while working but went through it all paying for medical treatments.

The connection between volunteers and clients works both ways. When somebody misses a month, Dixon said, the volunteers miss them and worry if they are ok. And one client being treated for multiple myeloma wrote “Your love, and kindness, and prayers for me is endless …” on a thank you card. Another, Dixon said, came in with a “thank you” sign across her chest.

“We don’t know everybody’s story,” Dixon said. What she has learned, however, has changed her outlook.

“I don’t think I’m as quick to make assumptions about other people,” she said.

“It certainly has strengthened my faith,” Dixon said, adding she sees God’s handiwork in what they are doing.

“If we can make them smile that one day out of the month … I know it’s small but that’s the way we can help,” she said. “We will never let somebody walk out without anything.”

Pam Dawkins is a Bethany, CT based freelance writer. She is the former business section editor of The Middletown Press and the Connecticut Post.
“Welcoming refugees is our finest foreign policy. It’s our nation’s oldest and noblest tradition. And it is an exhilarating and satisfying community project.”

Chris George,
Executive Director, IRIS, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services

Pictured throughout these pages, the Al-Zoibi family enjoyed an evening at a New Haven park last summer. They are refugees from Syria who arrived last year and were resettled here through IRIS.
Love God, love neighbor: support and get involved in refugee ministry

Refugee ministry and Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services in Connecticut

Karin Hamilton

BACKGROUND

In fiscal year 2016, the U.S. government invited 97,263 refugees from all over the world to come to this country, after a rigorous Department of Homeland Security screening process that can take up to three years. Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), with its network of affiliates, has been helping more than 5,000 of those refugees annually. EMM’s affiliate in Connecticut is New Haven-based IRIS (Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services), one of three refugee agencies in the state. Last year IRIS welcomed 475 refugees. Although the current U.S. administration plans to limit the total number of refugees to fewer than 50,000, EMM and IRIS remain committed to help however many they can.

HISTORY

IRIS was founded in 1982 by the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut initially as the “Diocesan Refugee Services Committee,” with a staff of one, to explore whether Connecticut parishes might be interested in welcoming and resettling southeast Asians fleeing Vietnam. Since that time it has resettled more than 6,000 refugee women, men, and children in Connecticut. It been renamed several times, changed office locations, and expanded its staff and volunteers to provide many direct services. As IRIS, it continues to work with churches — and other faith groups and non-faith-based community groups — to help welcome and resettle refugees, including through its co-sponsorship model.

AFFILIATION

IRIS has continued its affiliation with the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, including ECCT representation on its board of directors as well as budgeted financial support and insurance coverage from ECCT. In 2014 the Annual Convention of ECCT approved a Covenant between IRIS and ECCT that recognized IRIS’ desire for independence and self-governance. Among other provisions, the vote allowed for IRIS to pursue recognition as a separate legal entity with 501(c)3 status and for ECCT’s financial support to end in 2020. The Covenant reaffirmed that the mutual partnership in God’s mission would continue.

* Sources and for more info: episcopalchurch.org/episcopal-migration-ministries; irisct.org (“About” and “History”); and, Journal of the 230th Annual Convention

HOW YOU CAN HELP: OPTIONS FOR PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN REFUGEE MINISTRY THROUGH IRIS

Donate: Make a tax-deductible donation online; donate furniture or home goods; donate winter coats; donate English learning materials; donate to the Early Learning Program; donate school supplies; donate a car; make a bequest; host a fundraiser; participate in the annual 5K road race. IRIS has a Wish List on amazon.com, and a donations page with more information (irisct.org/donate/).

Advocate: Stand up for refugees! IRIS recommends the resources of Refugee Council USA, find them at: rcusa.org/advocate-now

Volunteer: Serve at the IRIS office in New Haven, or as a “Cultural Companion” with an IRIS adult refugee client, or as an intern (typically but not always college/university students). All volunteers and interns must complete an application and an interview before they are accepted. Visit irisct.org for a list of opportunities for volunteers and for interns, for the “Cultural Companion Handbook,” and to apply. Volunteer positions and internships are unpaid.

Help a refugee get a job: If you know an employer willing to hire a refugee with limited English, let IRIS know! (more info at: irisct.org/employment/)
OPTIONS FOR PARISH INVOLVEMENT IN REFUGEE MINISTRY THROUGH IRIS

Donations and volunteer service: A parish may want to include a donation to IRIS in their annual budget; host a fundraiser; collect needed items; send a team to the annual road race; offer prayers and educational information for refugees and refugee ministry throughout the year; observe World Refugee Day June 20; advocate collectively; set up and staff a table at a concert, festival, or fair to spread the word about supporting refugees and IRIS; encourage volunteer service with IRIS, and more.

Co-sponsor a refugee family with IRIS: (alone or with other churches/groups)
Co-sponsorship is a collaboration among IRIS, your parish (or other community group), and a refugee family. In a co-sponsorship, IRIS delegates most resettlement tasks to your group. The Episcopal Church in Connecticut has encouraged co-sponsorship since the early 1980s. “Community Co-sponsors play an integral role in helping refugees become self-sufficient and get off to a strong start in their new home country,” writes IRIS. Tasks may include:

- Secure affordable housing;
- Collect furniture and other household items;
- Help refugees access public benefits (HUSKY/Medicaid, SNAP/food stamps, and TFA/cash assistance for eligible families);
- Enroll children in school;
- Facilitate job searches;
- Perform other necessary tasks.

Steps to becoming a Co-sponsor
A co-sponsoring community needs a core team of at least 10 dedicated volunteers. Co-sponsors will also need to raise $4,000-$10,000 (depending on the cost of living in your area) to provide a refugee family with short-term housing assistance. If your group doesn’t have enough volunteers or fundraising capacity, you can pool your resources with other groups in your area. IRIS can connect you with potential partners.

1. Fill out the interest form online. IRIS will put you on an invitation list for an information session at IRIS.
2. Attend an information session at IRIS.
3. Complete and submit a co-sponsorship application.
4. IRIS will invite community groups with strong applications to participate in a full-day training session at the IRIS office in New Haven (trainings are one Thursday per month, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 235 Nicoll Street in New Haven).
5. Trained groups will notify IRIS when they are ready to resettle a family.
6. Once IRIS identifies an arriving family that is a good match for your community group, IRIS will send you information regarding the family and their arrival date. Your group will get a chance to decide if you are capable of resettling them at that time.

(Visit irisct.org for a full list of criteria for co-sponsorship and a list of co-sponsors’ roles and responsibilities. Due to the drastic reduction in the number of refugees who will be allowed into the U.S. in 2018, IRIS anticipates a drop in the number of available co-sponsorship opportunities.)

“At IRIS we are busy helping the thousand refugees who came over the past three years, and we continue to welcome relatively high numbers of refugees — especially from Afghanistan. But federal funding has been cut, so we need all the support we can get.”

Chris George
SAINT HILDA’S HOUSE (SHH) is an intentional community for young adults discerning their vocation. A limited number are accepted for the ten month-long program. Most, but not all, are Episcopalians. “Hildans” serve 30-32 hours a week, serving the poor and vulnerable at one of many New Haven area agencies or organizations, which pay them a small stipend for their service. They live and worship together as a community, taking time to build relationships and reflect theologically on their lives. It is a ministry of Christ Church, New Haven, where the House is located. It is a member of the Episcopal Service Corps and a partner of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut and Berkeley Divinity School at Yale in New Haven. Their program director and Christ Church curate is the Rev. Carlos de la Torre, who also serves as Southwest Region Missionary. Part of the work of the program director is to find placements and funding for SHH placements.

IRIS (Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services) depends on its volunteers and interns. When possible, they take two corps members from Saint Hilda’s House. While most IRIS interns serve 10-25 hours a week and may leave after a semester, Hildans serve 32 hours and are present for the entire academic year. This summer, due to a reduction in the number of refugees that will be allowed into the U.S., IRIS decided it would only take one corps member starting in the fall semester.

At the same time that IRIS made its decision, a second planned corps member placement fell through. A New Haven agency that had previously placed a Hildan notified de la Torre that, due to State of Connecticut budget cuts, they didn’t have the funding. De la Torre then faced the prospect of having to find and fund two placements, quickly. He shared his dilemma with the Bishops of Connecticut.

The Episcopal Church in Connecticut includes a line for “Emerging Urban Ministries” in its Budget of Convention, which has in recent years supported Saint Hilda’s House. After consultation and deliberation with the leadership of IRIS and of Saint Hilda’s House, ECCT decided to increase its support for Saint Hilda’s House and also for Hildan placements. It is funding one corps member to be placed at The Commons for the 2017-2018 year, and one Hildan to be placed at IRIS for half a year. When IRIS learned about the funding support, it decided to take on a second placement.

Karin Hamilton serves as Canon for Mission Communication & Media for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.
Following Jesus led me to people: all types of people, in various places and stages in their lives...
Following Jesus

Following God’s call to hike meant letting go of personal goals

Allison Huggins

On March 8 of this year, I followed Jesus into the woods of Georgia. My plan was to become a thru-hiker on the Appalachian Trail and walk the whole 2,189.9 miles from one end at Springer Mountain in Georgia to the other end at Mount Katahdin in Maine.

That plan, much like any other plan I’ve ever had, changed. As a matter of fact, every plan that I attempted to make while spending five months in the wilderness changed, including the number of miles I actually hiked. There is a lot of flexibility required when you choose to follow Jesus, which for someone as impatient as me is infuriating.

This thru-hike had been a dream of mine for nearly five years. Not only that, it was very much how I saw my call to serve God, my call to ministry, for those five years. I had read all of the best-selling books about long distance hiking, blog articles about lightweight gear, watched YouTube videos on how to properly pack your backpack, and I had visited every REI, Inc. in Connecticut. I understood the trials and tribulations that one commonly faces when undergoing a feat such as this: unfortunate weather, aching bodies, and gear failure. I was prepared, I had a plan.

Yet on a foggy August morning, I found myself standing on Mount Greylock in Massachusetts, 1,387 miles walked, a shot of cortisone in each foot, and a heavy heart. My hike for this season was over, and I did not reach Katahdin.

HEARTACHE AND PERFECTION

Sometimes following Jesus brings about heartache, and it’s only when you reflect on your experience that you’re able to realize how absolutely beautiful and perfect the journey was, because Jesus is perfect, and your experience is holy.

In the five months that I walked from Georgia to Massachusetts (minus 198 miles in Pennsylvania), the trail led me across stunning forests coated in Spring Beauties, a delicate flower, as well as terrifying 5,000 ft. bald mountains in 100-mph winds and dense fog. It led me to water sources when I had been out of water for eight miles, and the cooling shade of rhododendron tunnels after hiking through a smoldering open cow pasture.

For the most part, the trail (unlike the journey itself) is predictable, and having a map on you at all times reinforced that. Following the white 2-by-6 inch blazes painted on trees and posts indicating the direction of the trail will eventually lead you to beautiful sights, water sources, and a rewarding descent after a nearly impossible climb.

However, following Jesus is unpredictable. Jesus opened my eyes to both the sheer beauty of creation and the damage of human development. I witnessed sunrises over mountainous horizons that looked endless, the moon’s reflection on crystal-clear lakes, and the process of spring flourishing to summer. Jesus also revealed dams dried up from overuse, cleared forests for a potential pipeline, and a charred national park and town caused by teenagers playing with fire.

Following Jesus also led me to people: all types of people, in various places and stages in their lives. Jesus led me to people craving to witness the beauty of creation and to people absolutely devastated by the damage done to creation. God’s call for me in this ministry would have me interact with both.

FOGHAT: HIKING FOR HEALING

In five months, I met a plethora of hikers. I met seasoned backpackers — well, I saw them as they breezed by me, not fazed by the incline I was crawling up. I met hikers seeking a physical change who had never hiked a mile in their life. I met hikers escaping debt, addiction, and abusive circumstances. And, I met hikers craving the relieving effects of the natural beauty of creation. Foghat was one in the latter category.

Like many hikers “Foghat” (his trail name, a nickname usually given by others on the trail)
Allison ("Alli") Huggins is the Digital Communication Associate for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. She took off six months in 2017 to hike the Appalachian Trail.

was on the trail for several different reasons. One afternoon hike, I found myself sitting on top of a beautiful saddle-back mountain with 360-degree views, deep in conversation with Foghat. I had met him a couple weeks and states back, and had been “leap-frogging” with him ever since. That’s when you pass a hiker back and forth over several days or weeks. With a peculiar trail name, I was drawn to learning about his story.

After his son passed away from a heroin overdose, Foghat decided to hike the Appalachian Trail in honor of his son, and to seek the restoring beauty of creation. He carried with him a vial of his son’s ashes and it hung from the straps of his pack, over his heart.

Weeks before he set out for his hike, Foghat also acquired mementos of a deceased young hiker from Massachusetts, who passed away Christmas 2016 while hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire (Foghat’s home state). Foghat said he felt a deep connection to this hiker’s story and reached out to the family to ask if he could hike in memory of their deceased child.

As we descended down the mountain, Foghat told me about his trail name. It was a nod to a 1970s rock band and an office joke he had with a former co-worker who died by suicide years before Foghat left for the trail.

Foghat carried a 38-pound pack and all of this with him every step of his hike. His plan was to hike in honor of his deceased son, but God’s plan was for him to hike for so much more — for the young hiker and all the joy that hiker brought to their family and friends, and his co-worker and the light that co-worker brought to his office. Foghat was no longer hiking for himself, but for all who seek healing and restoration.

BILL BLACK: MINISTERING HOPE IN DESPAIR

On a side excursion off the trail into a town in Tennessee for supplies, I got a ride from the Rev. Bill Black, a pastor with the Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries, a ministry primarily focused on the tourists, employees, and residents of the local resorts near Gatlinburg.

We spent a late morning together driving out of the Smoky Mountain National park and into Gatlinburg in a ministry van that he later lent me to shuttle hikers in town to and from the grocery store and laundromat. Bill and I talked about the ministry work he does around the national park and town: working with college and international students working in the park in the summers, partnering with local congregations in the area for worship and community events, and providing on-call response to employees and visitors.

Once we were in town, the aftermath of the 2016 Smoky Mountain fires was present throughout the crowded streets. As we passed by the remnants left by the fire, our discussion shifted: he shared memories of trails and overviews in the park that are now scorched and closed, he pointed out the ruined homes of people he knew personally, he described what burned hotels used to look like, and he spoke of the ongoing restoration the community is undergoing.

We pulled up to a stoplight and a tear streamed down his face. “These are my people, and they are broken, and I, too, am broken,” he said. This tourist town, Bill’s home, was in the midst of rebuilding itself every day. And although he still holds the anguish of the community with him, it was evident that Bill’s initial plan for ministry had changed. In this mass devastation, God called him to be a source of hope and a sacred vessel to hold despair for his community.

WHEN THE JOURNEY ISN’T THE DESTINATION

Following Jesus means being vulnerable to a change of plans. The reason one decides to set out on a multi-month-long journey such as hiking can change, it can expand. The idea of one’s ministry can shift, adjusting to fit the needs of God’s people, at any moment. But a personal plan for how to serve God’s mission may not actually match what God’s plan really is.

My plan may have been to hike all 2,189.9 miles of Appalachian Trail in one season, but God’s plan did not include me reaching Katahdin this season. And while at this moment I may be filled with heartache, mourning the loss of this personal dream and plan I had, I am filled with hope because I know that following Jesus is more beneficial and beautiful than anything I could ever plan.

“I know that following Jesus is more beneficial and beautiful than anything I could ever plan.”

Allison ("Alli") Huggins is the Digital Communication Associate for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. She took off six months in 2017 to hike the Appalachian Trail.
ECCT “Trail Magic”  
Karin Hamilton

“Trail Magic” — unexpected random acts of kindness for hikers along the Appalachian Trail — and other long distance trails — like providing a cooler of soft drinks or a BBQ at a road crossing, or offering rides to town or a place to take a warm shower. Individuals, groups, and even churches along the Trail get involved.

There are 52 miles of the Appalachian Trail that cut across the northwest corner of the State.

St. John’s, Salisbury hosts an Internet café offering business-class internet and collects new socks for hikers. Trinity, Lime Rock has set out boxes of snack food along the Trail.

Both churches helped to organize and lead an ECCT day of “Trail Magic” last July 23 at the power plant in Falls Village on the Housatonic River, along the Appalachian Trail route. It offered an outdoor Eucharist followed by a picnic lunch, attended by about 30 people including parishioners and hikers. Bishop Douglas joined after his morning visitation in Norfolk. ECCT staffer Alli Huggins (see her article in this issue) was temporarily off the trail due to injury but came back for the event.

Photos by Karin Hamilton

Counterclockwise from top left: from left, the Rev. David Sellery, Bishop Ian Douglas, Alli Huggins, a thru-hiker, and the Rev. Heidi Truax; hiker’s feet wearing different kinds of gaiters to keep dirt and debris out of their shoes; the Rev. Heidi Truax and the Rev. David Sellery lead an outdoor Eucharist.
W

e “strive for justice and peace among all people,” and commit “to respect the dignity of every human being.” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 305) What does this require in 2017, when our culture is polarized, values being right more than being in right relationship, often fails to protect the most vulnerable, struggles to meaningfully engage issues of power and privilege, and promotes talking over each other rather than listening and speaking to each other?

Seeking justice and peace, while respecting the dignity of others, is holy work. Jesus shows us that at the core of all we do, there must be love. Jesus acted out of love; he healed, taught, and accompanied others. He engaged, valued and treated others (even outcasts and sinners who had done reprehensible things) with dignity. Jesus did all this while speaking the truth, staying on message, and never wavering.

The challenge of always respecting the dignity of others — of acting out of the love that Jesus taught — can be overwhelming. Moreover, as anxiety and fear increases, our ability to be reflective decreases as the most primitive structures in our brains activate in an effort to protect us from perceived dangers.

As Canon for Mission Integrity & Training, I engage with congregations where there’s been a breach of trust, conflict, failed boundaries, or other evidence of broken relationships. As we work together to seek justice and peace, I can struggle to treat every human being with dignity and respect, particularly when someone does something repugnant, hurts me or someone else, or apparently fails to see that my opinion is correct (even though I have provided ample evidence of my correctness). Rather than acting out of love, righteous indignation can lead me and others to engage in verbal attacks, name calling, belittlement, shaming others for perceived shortcomings, and attempts to badger others into doing what we have decided, ourselves, is right. The urge to use these tactics is strongest when we feel called to defend a principle we hold dear, or to protect another.

Christian love does not shame, humiliate or dehumanize another — no matter what the other has done. While we are called to dismantle unjust structures, we are never called to dismantle, shame or humiliate those who think differently than we do — even if they support unjust structures. A certain degree of vulnerability or openness of heart is needed to be able to see the humanity in the other. If we lose sight of the other’s humanity, we lose sight of Christ.

For me, and others I’ve worked with, hardness of heart blocks out the vulnerability that is necessary to see the humanity in the other; hardness of heart does not allow room for Jesus’ presence. We are at risk of believing that the end justifies the means, thereby rationalizing shaming, blaming, and humiliation of others. Our personal behaviors begin to mimic that which we found reprehensible in the other, and further distort and break relationships. Besides, these behaviors are unproductive, as shaming, blaming and humiliation rarely promote a change in heart and behavior in another person.

Some warnings signs that I am acting out of hardness of heart are:

• I want to win an argument at all costs. I devote energy into building my case so that I can prove I am right and the other is wrong.
• I focus on the past wrongs of others and refuse to move forward until they completely understand just how wrong they are, accept responsibility and make amends to my satisfaction.
• I refer to others in ways that are demeaning and dehumanizing.
• I craft rationalizations to justify my behavior, i.e., “I’m doing this to save the church.”

While I pray that Christ opens my heart and transforms relationships to restore us to unity (not uniformity), I also need touchstones to guide me in daily life.

The bishops, staff, and many other leaders in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (ECCT) know and empathize with the struggle to respect the dignity of all people in these polarized times, and in situations of conflict, change, and turmoil. They have adopted, practice, and teach...
the Guidelines for Mutuality,¹ which are now used across ECCT.

The Guidelines invite us to:
• “try on” a new way of seeing a situation or person;
• assure us that it is good and holy to have differences with others, as God created each of us to be different from another;
• remind us that it is never acceptable to blame, shame or attack ourselves or others;
• suggest that we focus on ourselves (including our feelings and motives) rather than solely focus on the other;
• encourage us to practice “both/and” thinking rather than automatically accepting and acting out of dualistic thinking;
• prompt us to notice both process and content;
• caution us to always be aware that our impact on others may differ from we intend and that we are responsible for any impact we cause whether intended or not; and
• maintain confidentiality by not repeating the stories others have shared and entrusted to us.

As we are called to live and work in community, I invite you to join me in practicing the Guidelines for Mutuality in all your interactions, and ask that we hold each other accountable, by gently reminding one another to return to these practices if we go astray, as we together strive for justice and peace among all people while respecting the dignity of every human being.

¹ The Guidelines for Mutuality ©VISIONS, Inc. Dorchester, MA, VISIONS-INC.ORG

Changing pathways in parish clergy transitions

Lee Ann Tolzmann

(Editor’s note: Cultural and social changes impacting the local churches has resulted, in many cases, smaller congregations. There’s also been an overall decline in the availability of part-time, as well as full-time, clergy. The Canon for Mission Leadership, who works with parishes in clergy leadership transition, along with the Bishops of ECCT and others, reviewed the pathways for those transitions in the current context and developed the following models. These are now available for parishes in transition in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.)

In a world and church undergoing rapid change, we are called to flexibility, agility, and — most importantly — attentiveness to what God is doing among us. These pathways represent an attempt to do all of that, and are for today’s reality. I know it can be frustrating that we are always changing the way we do things. I ask your patience and your prayers as I, along with all of you, try to keep up with whatever it is that God is doing in God’s Church.

It’s “rector” or “priest-in-charge”
The canons of the Episcopal Church specify two titles for clergy who are in charge of parishes: rector and priest-in-charge. A rector is called by the vestry (the bishop has sixty days to approve the call), and a rector has tenure. A parish cannot “fire” its rector without engaging in a lengthy and complex canonical process that includes the involvement of the bishop. A priest-in-charge, or PIC, fulfills the roles and responsibilities of the rector and is appointed by the bishop for a time certain. In Connecticut, our bishops normally send the proposed PIC to interview with the vestry for their feedback before an appointment is made.

When a rector resigns
In ECCT, when a rector resigns, whether for another call or for retirement, the bishop, generally through the office of the Canon for Mission Leadership, consults with the lay leadership of the parish. Canon for Mission Finance and Operations Louis Fuertes often conducts a thorough financial review. While there are different “transition pathways” open to parishes, every one of them will involve the appointment of a priest-in-charge.

Interim priest-in-charge
If the parish will be calling another rector, an “interim priest-in-charge” will be appointed. The position we have historically called “interim rector” is canonically a priest-in-charge, and we are now calling them by that name. The interim PIC is appointed by the bishop for a time certain, normally as long as it takes for the parish to accomplish the work of discernment, recruitment, and calling their next rector. As was true of the “interim rector,” the interim PIC may not be a candidate for rector at that parish.

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continued
Provisional priest-in-charge
At times, a parish begins a clergy leadership transition under circumstances when “business as usual” is no longer possible because the parish system has shifted or is shifting in some significant way. These may occur when, for example, there’s a move from full-time to part-time clergy; the use of the building needs rethinking; there is significant conflict; or, the departure of the last rector was somehow complicated. In such cases, the bishop appoints what we are now calling a “provisional priest-in-charge.”

A provisional PIC is appointed for three years when serious other work must be attended to before calling of a rector. In cases where the parish is stable, and planning to replace a half-time or three-quarter-time rector, a provisional PIC’s term might be only two years. The provisional PIC can be a candidate for rector once the PIC work is done, provided the PIC, the parish vestry, and the bishop all agree it’s a good fit.

Less than half-time: missional PIC and conditional PIC
A parish must be able to offer a position of at least half-time in order to call a rector. For those who cannot, there are now two transition pathways forward.

The bishops, through the office of the Canon for Mission Leadership, are now asking parishes with limited resources to discern whether they want to work with either a “missional PIC” or a “conditional PIC.” (These models replace the single “missional priest” category that’s been in place over the last several years.) A parish with a missional PIC will make a commitment to envision a different future with a focus on being out in its neighborhood; have a regular rotation of lay leadership; work with collaboration partners; and actively participate in their Region and ECCT life. A parish choosing a conditional PIC indicates its decision to maintain its status quo, or, sees closing as a faithful option at this point in their life.

More information about Transition Pathways is available on ECCT’s website, episcopalct.org.

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Introducing your Region Missionaries
Following a multi-year process of listening, researching, and discerning led by the Taskforce for Reimagining the Episcopal Church in Connecticut (TREC-CT), and approval of its proposals at the Annual Convention in 2015, ECCT reorganized its structure and governance to more effectively serve God’s mission. Part of the change involved reorganization into six geographic Regions and hiring a Region Missionary for each of those, funded by the Budget of Convention. The inaugural Region Missionaries began work in June 2017.

By virtue of our baptism we all are called to participate in God’s mission — restoring all people and the world to God in Christ (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 854) and engaging the Spirit’s regenerative power to reconcile differences and make “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Region Missionaries serve parishes and worshiping communities by assisting Episcopalians in Connecticut to live our baptismal call to God’s mission in four ways, namely to:

1. Catalyze — with imagination, innovation, and ideas — to unite parishes, worshiping communities, and Ministry Networks in service to God’s mission within the Region and across ECCT.

2. Convene — as a host, to gather people, share ideas, and build momentum within the Region and its various communities and throughout ECCT.

3. Connect — Ministry Networks, parishes, and worshipping communities to build an awareness of and appreciation for collaboration in all aspects of life and ministry across the Region.

4. Expand Capabilities — with a particular focus on lay leadership — through the sacred practices of prayer, discernment, trying on missional experiments, and growing as disciples (formed) and apostles (sent) to fully engage God’s mission.

In their work, Region Missionaries will challenge parishes and worshiping communities in their Regions to expand their reach into local neighborhoods by collaborating with potential community partners — from other faith-based institutions to social service organizations to government agencies.

Region Missionaries work together as a close-knit team, upholding each other in prayer, shared retreats, and other spiritual/ wisdom practices. They report to the Bishop Diocesan and are directly supervised by the Canon for Mission Collaboration. They establish quarterly goals, participate in an annual job performance review, and, with colleagues from the Region, participate in an annual Mutual Ministry Review with the Bishop Diocesan, facilitated by the Canon for Mission Collaboration.

For more information about Regions and Region Missionaries contact Gigi Leackfeldt in the office of the Rev. Canon Timothy Hodapp, Canon for Mission Collaboration, at gleackfeldt@episcopalct.org or 203-639-3501, ext. 136.

Learn more about your Region Missionaries in the following pages as they describe their first few months in their newly established roles.
One of my favorite memories so far as missionary for the Northwest Region is of a driving tour of my new neighborhood, Torrington, given by the senior warden of St. Michael’s in Litchfield. Sarah drove me all around the city showing me where the neighborhood has changed over the years. There were signs of death as a result of de-industrialization as well as signs of resurrection through arts, entertainment, and community services. After driving, we had dinner together and I learned about her life as a part of the church, including the ways she joins God outside the four walls the church, particularly in her efforts to find loving homes for stray or neglected cats.

Even more incredible, this was neither the first, nor last time I enjoyed sitting in the passenger seat for a tour of a neighborhood in the Northwest Region. From Salisbury to Pine Meadow, down to Brookfield and Wolcott, I am continuously hearing stories for people’s hunger for God, connection to community, and local ways of joining the living God, who is so clearly ahead of us in our neighborhoods. Each church, each town, is divinely precious and unique, each a beautiful reflection of the image of God.

My favorite thing about being a Region Missionary is the opportunity to hear people speak to the vitality of God’s mission in Connecticut, and the ability to bear witness to our churches that are building the kingdom of God in their neighborhood. Over the summer I learned about lush community gardens that have helped to feed the neighborhood, and music series that have nourished the bodies, minds, and spirits not only of those who attended but the people with whom they are connected.

I have been a witness to food pantries and soup kitchens that seek to care for the whole person and create relationship between those who serve and those who are served. I have touched the fabrics of clothing collected and distributed with such care, that it not only warms the body but lifts the spirit and restores dignity. And, I have heard multiple stories of youth coming together across denominations to serve their community as one body in Christ. If God is Love, and where truly love is God himself is there — then I can say without hesitation that God is here in our midst working alongside the many people of ECCT who have said YES to God’s mission and who are trying every day to lean into God’s work of healing and reconciliation.

At St. James’ in Glastonbury I talked with Kay, who is full of the light and love of Jesus. She told me how at home she feels at St. James’ and how active their outreach programs are. At St. Philip’s, Putnam, the Rev. Don is developing a chapter of the International Order of St. Luke, a healing ministry. He has even invited some folks from St. Alban’s, Danielson and Trinity, Brooklyn to join. At Christ Church, Pomfret, I had a lengthy conversation with Bill about a town in Colorado where people of Christ Church are sending funds for impoverished school children. During my visit to All Saints, East Hartford, I was chosen to receive $25 as part of their Pay It Forward ministry. I was honored to be able to contribute to a charity of my choice on behalf of the folks of All Saints.

I also took part in National Night Out, in Rockville, with some of my new friends at St. John’s, Vernon. This great event was free to the community and brought all kinds of organizations together in a centralized location. There were around five different churches, plus first responders, schools, the town’s recreation department and even an ice cream truck. I thought this was a great step in collaboration between ECCT and other organizations within the town.

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In August, I was fortunate to attend the Come and See event at Saint Stephen’s in Ridgefield, a collaborative event between them and Christ Church, Redding. It was a wonderful event with great preaching, prayer, food, and mutual conversation. You could feel in the room a strong sense of renewal in our common Christian identity. A true sense of God’s love — “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1).

A few weeks later I spoke with the rector of the parish, Whitney Altopp, and I asked her how this event came together. She told me she had an idea for a gathering but that’s all that it was for a while, until she sent out a group email introducing this bubbling idea to a few colleagues. Finally, she heard from someone who was excited about the idea. All it took was one person to say yes. From this one yes, along with prayer and hard work, a spirit-filled revival was born. We know we have God our side guiding our path, filling us with love, and from our end all it takes is a yes.

People had already started to gather among the three rows of chairs looking out over the Sound when I arrived at Bradley Point beach on Sunday morning. For the next hour, a group of faithful Christians from Good Shepherd in Orange, Holy Spirit in West Haven, Grace and St. Peter’s in Hamden, Christ Church Bethany, Trinity in New Haven, St. Thomas’s in New Haven, St. Peter’s Cheshire, and some curious passersby all joined in worshipping God as one voice.

The parishes who organized the beach worship committed to meeting together out in the community. As I sat listening to the Gospel that morning about Jesus meeting his disciples on the beach and watched people walk by our service, I was struck by the courage of those dozen people who left everything to follow Him. And there we were, 2,000 years later, with the same courage and the same willingness to follow Christ out into the world wherever He calls us to go.

God is speaking here in South Central Connecticut. God is constantly inviting us all into new and unfamiliar territory, and we have the opportunity each in our own way to respond to that call.

A key moment in my first three months as a missionary in the Southeast Region happened when I went to pray outside the New London Community Meal Center with Hilda Zeigler from St. David’s, Gales Ferry, and the Rev. Ann Perrott, Executive Director of New Life Ministry of Southeastern Connecticut (a prison ministry of the SE Region). We talked with those who came to eat and offered to pray with them. It was a powerful, eye-opening experience; we encountered great faith and great pain.

This time of prayer was not a random event. It happened because Hilda already had ties with the Meal Center, through years of volunteer work. She knew many who came. She knew the need, and the people running the Center. She was there first, and we built on her relationship.

What I learned from this, and have been seeing over and over again, is that there are many people in this Region already engaged in following the way of Jesus: feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, sheltering those in need. Relationships are being formed in the love of God. Faithful Episcopalians (and others!) are expressing their desire to see God restore all things and all creation to unity in Christ Jesus.
An interview with Melina Dezhbod

An interview with Melina Dezhbod

I am a Christian

An interview with Melina Dezhbod

Karin Hamilton

Melina Dezhbod, 21, graduated from the University of St. Joseph in West Hartford last May and currently is taking a one-year intensive leading to a master’s in social work. She interns at Rushford in Meriden (which provides clinical services in behavioral health and addiction recovery care).

In her limited free time now she enjoys spending time with friends and dancing. As an undergraduate she was involved in many clubs and as a freshman she started, “True Beauty Celebration,” an event to celebrate inner beauty, which has continued annually since then. It includes an art show, talent show, and fashion show. Melina entered the ordination process in ECCT as a sophomore in college and is currently a postulant for Holy Orders. Next year, she is headed to Virginia Theological Seminary.

On a more personal note, Melina was born in Iran and came to this country with her family as refugees. Her paternal grandmother converted to Christianity as a young adult, and her father was ordained a deacon in Iran. He is now a priest serving parishes in ECCT, as well as a hospital chaplain.

Q. Do you consider yourself a Christian?
A. Yes.

Q. Do you recall making a choice about being a Christian?
A. Yes. My parents raised me in Christianity, but never pressured me to decide. Eventually, as I got older, I found Christ in my life and decided being a Christian was something I wanted in my life. The moment that it changed for me came in my sophomore year in high school. There was a lot going on in my family, and a lot of going in and out of hospitals. The ambulance came often. One day, my grandmother and my mom were going out somewhere, and my grandmother tripped and started to fall. My mom caught her, but they both fell on concrete steps, at home. They had to go to the hospital. At first I was really angry with God, asking, why me? Why is all this happening? I had been going to church, physically, but emotionally and mentally I wasn’t there. Later that day at the hospital, the whole family was together. Everyone was ok, and we all prayed together. When we did that, I felt something sparked. I really felt a holy presence that day. It all came together. After that, I started reflecting on my life as a Christian. Even to this day, I’m still learning and growing and figuring out my faith.

Q. What does it mean, in practical terms, to be a Christian?
A. For each person, it might be different, but I think there’s a relationship with Christ, strengthening every day; and there’s reading and using the Bible. Also, it means being able to spread love. That’s a key teaching of Christ. I take that to heart, being able to spread that love, to everyone.

Q. Do you have friends who are not Christian?
A. Yes. One of my closest friends is Muslim.

Q. Do you experience any kind of negative social consequences for being a Christian?
A. No. With my friend, we are very open with each other. We talk a lot to each other about faith in a non-judgmental way. We have a lot in common.

Q. What kind of responsibilities do you have as a Christian?
A. Nowadays, there are a lot of preconceptions about what it means to be a Christian. For me, I think you have the responsibility to set an example, to focus on spreading love, and being kind to all. Sometimes it’s as simple as smiling at someone, giving positive words to someone in need. It’s leading by example.

Q. What church do you attend and how are you involved with it?
A. I attend St. James’s, West Hartford every Sunday that I can. I’m currently a chalice bearer, and I attend events when my schedule allows.
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