Practicing Bless in the Way of Love, Pt. 2
“The Annual Appeal is really about providing one way for us to be God’s blessings in this world. The truth is, we were put here, as Genesis 1 says, ‘to care for God’s world, to care for each other—to bless it as God blesses.’ It is through our own giving and living that we can be God’s blessing in this world. Whatever you do, however you do it, be a blessing. Bless the world and bless others as you have been blessed. That’s been true in my life, and I know it’s true in yours.”

-The Most Rev. Michael Bruce Curry
Presiding Bishop and Primate of
The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church’s Annual Appeal is one of the many ways that we as Episcopalians can help to bless this world.

The Annual Appeal supports the church-wide ministry and work of the whole Episcopal Church through Racial Reconciliation, Evangelism, Armed Forces and Federal Ministries, Church Planting and Redevelopment, Creation Care, Episcopal Migration Ministries, and so much more.

We invite you to read the stories of those whose lives and ministries have been blessed by The Episcopal Church through the Annual Appeal, and hope that it inspires you in your own journey of blessing, as you seek to share faith and unselfishly give and serve. The following interviews have been edited and condensed for length.

The Way of Love

More than a program or curriculum, the Way of Love is an intentional commitment to a set of practices. It’s a commitment to follow Jesus: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest.

Want to learn more about the Way of Love?

Visit episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love for resources including our Way of Love blog, print materials, video series, and podcast with Presiding Bishop Curry.
Garrett Davis, Class of 2020, Saint Augustine’s University

Tell us a little bit about yourself.
My name is Garrett Anton Davis, and I am a sophomore at Saint Augustine’s University (SAU), from Rochester, New York. I am an English major studying literature and writing. I was raised Episcopalian from my childhood. I’m interested in screenwriting and am also the sports editor of our school newspaper. With my schedule, I don’t have a lot of spare time, but when I do, I like to spend it reading.

How have you felt blessed in your life?
I feel that my education is one of the biggest blessings in my life. When representatives from Saint Augustine’s came to my church and talked about how much students are able to grow and build their self-esteem at SAU, I decided it was a place I really wanted to be. Some parts of school are hard, but I always remember what a blessing it is for me to be at this university and it helps me get through the challenge. I also feel very blessed by the love and support of my parents. They never questioned my decisions and have been 100 percent supportive of me all the way. My advisor and my creative writing teacher are people I can always talk to and who give me encouragement.

In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?
I help out during services in the Saint Augustine’s University Chapel. Sometimes I’m the crucifer or the acolyte. I’ve assisted during the past two Absalom Jones celebrations, and I like that service because so many students and faculty attend. Over the years, I have tried to give back by volunteering, such as through Jack and Jill of America before I started college. I have visited nursing homes, helped deliver Meals on Wheels, and volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House.

What about the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?
My faith has been important to me since my childhood. There were moments when I could have made some bad decisions, but I heard the voice of my conscience telling me to stop and think and to remember that I want to be a good person. I think that the more people connect with their faith, the more they will make the choices that help them be the people God wants them to be.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.
Psalm 25:4
Tell us about your relationship with The Episcopal Church and the Office of Armed Forces and Federal Ministries.

Growing up back home in Nairobi, Kenya, I was always involved with the Church. I did part of my seminary training in Kenya and part in the United States. I was the first deaconess in Kenya at that time because they were not ordaining women to the priesthood. I was ordained a priest in 2000 in the Diocese of Oklahoma, and my bishop from Kenya came for my ordination. I lived in Oklahoma for a while and was a chaplain for the military.

I was recruited by a fellow military chaplain and received an age waiver as there was a great need for military chaplains. Everywhere I went in the U.S., I was involved with soldiers in the Army and was counseling them. I served as a military chaplain for almost 10 years, and I found my way back to serving with the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Serving military and prison populations was not that different to me. I was ministering to populations that were both in difficult, oftentimes dangerous situations. The difference was that one group was there willingly and the other was not.

Share a story in your current ministry or studies about a time when you felt blessed.

I am a woman in a male-dominated environment, and all I have with me is a thousand keys on my belt and a radio. But these inmates are our brothers, our fathers, our uncles. Some are there for things they did deliberately, while some are legitimately innocent of whatever they’re accused of; however, they all yearn for someone who is honestly there to help them, and they can tell whether you are genuinely there for them or not. They look forward to someone they can trust and empty their hearts to. They are more or less alone in this world. You become the only source of support, and you show them the love of Jesus.

It doesn’t matter who – at the end of the day we are all human, whatever our sins, and we all need someone. When they see that they can trust you, then they can cry on your shoulder, they can empty their baggage to you, and you lift it to God. They hide so much pain because they have to be strong in prison and cannot show weakness. These guys are not scary, that’s why I make sure I said they’re our brothers. They made mistakes, just like we do; they just took things one step too far. Once I win them over to the fact that I’m not judging them, that I know they made mistakes and they’re paying for them, and that I accept them regardless of the crime, then I can bring the word of God to them. I go back to Matthew 25: “I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Blessing is about being part of the cycle of giving and receiving, and practicing generosity and compassion. In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?

I’ve learned through my time serving in prisons that, in the simplest of things, we can become a blessing – just being able to shake a hand with an inmate, letting people know that I’m praying for them. They don’t get that from the other officers. No one else is giving them hope. To the other officers, they might be just a number. Even when they’re called up over the intercom, they’re called by their inmate number. When I call them, I call them by their first and last name. Just simple dignities that we take for granted can be a great blessing.

How has your work through Armed Forces and Federal Ministries affected you and your community?

It’s helped make my prayer life a big part of sustaining me and my ministry. There is no way I can do this work by myself. I believe in being on my knees daily – not once, not twice, but multiple times. When I get to the office parking lot, the first thing I do is put up my sun visor in my car and I say my prayers before I go into the prison. Every day, that’s my routine. I keep that word of God with me and pray that if I can be a blessing to just one person that day, I will have done my work.

What about the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?

I receive great hope through my work with prison populations. It’s so easy to lose your faith and any hope you have when you’re in prison. The hope these men still have humbles me. It’s an important lesson for us: It is not easy, but there is hope as long as you’re alive today. It might be pitch dark now, but light will always come in the morning.

Are there any other thoughts about the practice of Bless that you’d like to share?

Don’t take your life or freedom for granted. Count your blessings. When I look into the eyes of these men in prison, they could be any one of us – they are us. There but for the grace of God, go I. God did not create something bad in his own image. He created us in his own image. What we have done is wrong, but even so, we are not bad people. The fact remains that we are all something beautiful in God’s eyes. Lastly, I’d also like the Church to know that your support and contributions are not in vain. It falls in the hands of God, and God’s children are touched because of your commitment.
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Seattle, Washington received a grant through The Episcopal Church Office of Church Planting and Redevelopment.

The Rev. Canon Britt Olson

Share a little bit about yourself.
I have served as the vicar of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Seattle, for the past four years. Before answering this call, I was the Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Northern California, and I’ve also worked in the dioceses of Oregon, El Camino Real, and Nevada. St. Luke’s is located in a neighborhood northwest of downtown called “Ballard.” Ballard is one of the hottest neighborhoods here for young people. People call it “the Brooklyn of Seattle,” and they call me “the Vicar of Ballard.”

Share a story about a time when you felt blessed.
I like to say that St. Luke’s is a 125-year-old church startup. When I arrived, there were about 10 or 15 people gathering for worship on an average Sunday. Despite the small numbers, I could tell that there was an incredible energy and ministry here. For example, there was this group of women who were coming in every single morning at 5:30 a.m. to prepare breakfast and meals to feed members of the community. They were serving home-cooked meals – oatmeal, cereal, eggs, and vegetables – really healthy stuff! It was like walking into your grandma’s kitchen to be fed. For most of the people, the Edible Hope Kitchen is their place to warm up, wake up, be welcomed, and receive what might be their only meal of the day.

My first day on the job was a Thursday, which is when the volunteers prepare and serve a family-style lunch. Walking into that lunch was like entering the Kingdom of God. I experienced community, service, love, and generous hospitality, and I realized that in the midst of this small, struggling congregation that could barely keep the lights on was an incredible abundance of hope. I felt blessed by God and blessed to get to be a part of this ministry here at St. Luke’s.

Now, four years later, this blessing has multiplied in countless ways. We regularly have 60-70 people in church with an average age of under 40. We serve meals to nearly 200 people a day and offer multiple ministries, including an overnight shelter, a community garden, honey beehives, a clothing closet, and a music school. Our meals program was named by a guest who said, “You serve more than food, you serve hope, edible hope.” We are called to feed people both physically and spiritually.

In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?
Seattle has the third highest homeless population in the country and is at the epicenter of a drug and mental health crisis. We have been able to pass on the blessings we’ve received by lovingly serving the homeless in our community with dignity. We have had funerals here for homeless people and provide pastoral care to families who have lost loved ones to the streets. We are able to share faith, give, and serve by offering a space where when you’re here, you are home, no matter what your circumstances. We never turn anyone down. Everyone gets fed.

How has your ministry impacted your community?
St. Luke’s has been doing this type of ministry for more than 30 years, before my time, and I couldn’t begin to quantify the impact of this legacy of service. One impact of the economic boom here in the Northwest with Amazon and Microsoft and other major corporations establishing themselves is growing income disparity and gentrification. St. Luke’s is doing what it’s always done but picking up the pace to try to keep up with the scale of the human misery we’re seeing arrive at our front doors.

What about the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?
One of the messages in Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s Way of Love that resonates with me is that we all have a place at the table.

If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

Isaiah 58:10
Tell us about your relationship with The Abundant Table.

I’m an Episcopal priest who found The Episcopal Church (TEC) when I was in college studying religion. I was raised Roman Catholic in a wonderful, progressive community, but was thinking pretty seriously about ordained leadership and found TEC through that journey. And then kind of, somewhat classically, I went on to do what is now a recognized Episcopal Service Corps program in Los Angeles, the Episcopal Urban Program, and then went to seminary after that in NYC at Union. Then, I landed back in the Diocese of Los Angeles, where I really wanted to serve.

The Abundant Table (AT) was initially founded as a campus ministry to California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI). It was looking to connect to its local community in a profound way, and the local context in Ventura County, where the university is located, is agriculture. It is some of the most expensive and fertile farmland in the world, and the food grown there is shipped worldwide. So, the AT (which it wasn’t yet called) was created through the help of startup grants through The Episcopal Church Center. The AT was looking for an executive director, and I had been at University of California, Santa Barbara for eight years, so it seemed like the right time for me. I was also looking at pursuing a master of public of health degree. Abundant Table offered these really exciting opportunities, including with public health and the ministry component. I was really excited to be part of this church-based organization that was reaching out to the community in different and varied ways.

Share a story in your current ministry or studies about a time when you felt blessed.

I know that I am blessed for the better by eating the products of the land week in and week out with my family. I receive the love that the farmers have poured into the land on a weekly basis, and I’m eating this amazing nutritious food that God has provided.

“I have provided all kinds of grain and all kinds of fruit for you to eat; but for all the wild animals and for all the birds I have provided grass and leafy plants for food” – and it was done.

Genesis 1:29-30
I am being changed by the conversations that our farmers are pushing us to have around equity on the farm. We have been very successful at getting grant funding at AT, and that’s been stabilizing for the organization and for our program-based offerings, but has not shifted the financial reality for our farmers. I’m being pushed to have that conversation, and it’s a gift our farmers are giving us to have it.

This community is deeply ecumenical and lay-led and clergy supported. Many churches are clinging to a 1950s model of doing ministry, and AT pushes me to think outside that box. It helps me think about what new models of ministry are possible, and is making an imprint upon me and I hope upon the greater Church.

**Blessing is about being part of the cycle of giving and receiving, and practicing generosity and compassion. In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?**

There’s this deep sense, when it comes to the land, that it really blesses us through its natural beauty and with its produce we bless it back through our tender love and care of it, but it’s almost inadequate in the cycle of giving and receiving when we receive so much! I really hope we can be a model and an inspiration to churches to take back even just a piece of what we’re doing and put it in their own context.

**How has The Abundant Table impacted you and your community?**

We see more and more people across TEC doing something similar. We started farming around 2008-2009, so I think we were among the first of what you might call a “model.” We’re a church plant and operate with a three-pronged approach: farm to table, farm to school/institution, and what we call farm to faith. Under the farm to faith umbrella, we have “Farm Church,” which is a church plant that evolved out of the campus ministry model. I would describe it as an ecumenically based community that is lay-led and clergy supported. It meets weekly in locations around Ventura County, California with the majority of attendees young adults and young families. Eucharist is a part of every service but not always as we would understand it in an Episcopal context. Then, we end with a larger breaking of bread, such as a potluck dinner that includes vegetables grown on our farm, we have a community-supported agriculture program (CSA) at the farm, so many Farm Church members are subscribers.

The other piece under farm to faith is our continued commitment to working with young adults at a number of local college campuses, onsite as well as inviting them to the farm where the transformation really happens. We also have an internship program through which local young adults learn from farmers about the land and leadership and sustainability. Part of our mission is also giving CSA boxes to local farm families and providing education in immigrant and lower-income communities. A mission-piece that is close to our heart is being in community with these populations.

**What about the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?**

One biblical snapshot that we often hold up at AT is Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. There’s this idea that Jesus fed people, and that’s one way he expressed his love for the world is through this food, this nutrition. Our name, “The Abundant Table,” was dreamed up a few years into the life of the campus ministry piece, and we just fell in love with that image. We want to build this long table that is full of nutritious food, and we want that food to have a connection to the land. We want it to be grown with respect for the earth, and we want to participate in this act of sharing food with our community, just as Jesus shared food with his tribe. And projects like The AT really give me hope for the Church. The wide range of people we’re connecting to in our communities, whether that’s through a farm project or a simple encounter in a public square or an education effort or Rural and Migrant Ministries, that’s what gives me hope.

**Are there any other thoughts about the practice of Bless that you’d like to share?**

I try to be really open with people that have these dreams of marryng agricultural work with church-based work. We (Abundant Table) like to say that we try to spark conversations in the Church and the world around issues of caring for the land, equity, and food growing and sharing. We very much see that as a part of our ministry, and ultimately, we see ourselves as offering the Church this outdoor sanctuary where they can come and have an encounter with the “Divine,” with one another, with a number of The AT staff and really be transformed, inspired and moved by it.

TEC as a whole has been incredibly generous and helpful to the AT. If TEC had not be been behind the AT since its inception, we simply wouldn’t be here today. It’s because of your funding through various pathways and Church connections that we’re here, so thank you!
The Rev. Canon Melissa Hays-Smith  
Canon for Justice and Reconciliation Ministries.  
The Episcopal Diocese of Southwestern Virginia received a grant through The Episcopal Church Office of Evangelism for a revival and pilgrimage during its 100th anniversary celebration.

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.  Psalm 51:10

Share a little bit about yourself.
I have been a deacon for 12 years, which is my primary call. As a longtime professional social worker, I recognize the level of injustice in the world but felt called to address it not just through social policy and programs but more comprehensively, in a spiritual approach. My goal is to open the eyes of my fellow Christians to the work that needs to be done in the world and, perhaps, help them to see how to go about it.

Tell us about your relationship with the Office of Evangelism and The Episcopal Church.
My relationship with the Office of Evangelism has been just prior to and since our January 2019 revival. When we first began talking about a diocesan revival in Roanoke, Virginia, with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, we had to stop and think about what that might mean for us – the revival service itself, as well as its aftermath throughout the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia. Planning for the event itself was time-consuming and important. We took a team approach, with each of us on the bishop’s staff taking lead on certain parts. My part was to organize and implement the Gainsboro Pilgrimage on the day before the revival. Reconciliation and justice pilgrimages are part of The Episcopal Church’s long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice - a recommended vehicle for practicing the Way of Love. The day of the pilgrimage, we received an overview of urban renewal in Roanoke and then walked in the Gainsboro neighborhood. Along the way, we stopped at key sites to reflect on what was destroyed by urban renewal and what were the long-term effects on residents, mostly African American.

We sang as we walked and offered prayers at each stop. The pilgrimage ended at the Dumas Center, where adults who grew up in the Gainsboro neighborhood and lived through urban renewal, shared their stories. This required months of making new connections/renewing old ones within the African American community to get their buy-in and collaboration. I think the revival really worked to energize and revitalize our diocese, congregations, and communities. We had more than 2,000 people, and at least 500 were not Episcopalian!

Share a story in your current ministry about a time when you felt blessed.
Since the revival, there have been new opportunities to make progress in racial reconciliation. Just the presence and message of Presiding Bishop Curry opened people’s hearts, as did our broad welcome to the community to join us at the civic center that Sunday morning. New work groups focused on justice have cropped up, old ones have new energy, and people that we didn’t know before see us (The Episcopal Church) as allies.

What about the practices of the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?
I see a future in these practices and not in continuing to “do church” as we have been doing. I believe that especially young people are looking for meaning in their lives, not membership. We can offer this meaning through revisiting our explanation of what church is and can be, walking as Christians in the world around us, as well as through more flexible worship times, etc.
What was your road like to becoming a YASCer? Why did you feel called to this ministry?

I want to use my life to give back in some way - to create goodness instead of harming it, to speak for others who aren't always able to speak for themselves. That's one of the reasons I was drawn to the YASC program - it's a mission of service. And that service takes on many different forms based on each person's gifts and, of course, the needs of our partners out in the world. I didn't know anything about YASC and one January evening my mother told me about a post she saw, and I jumped right in. The deadline was the next day, and I did it.

Share a story in your current ministry about a time when you felt blessed, perhaps how you were transformed through your time as a YASCer.

I came back more "me," if that makes sense. The things I valued and believed were stronger. I have always valued international experiences, and being able to experience this as an adult, separate from my family, allowed me to really grow and live into that. I've realized how much I value the very physical ways we live out our faith and give back the blessing that's been given to us.

Blessing is about being part of the cycle of giving and receiving, and practicing generosity and compassion. In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?

I was really receiving an awareness of this connection we had across the world of what it means to be an Anglican andEpiscopalian – a sense of community – but also a chance to learn and meet these incredible people who were doing these incredible things. My second week on the job was helping out the communications team with the Primates' Meeting. I learned about a reconciliation program out of Lambeth Palace called "Women on the Front Line": how they're training clergy wives, particularly bishops' wives, to be leaders of reconciliation. These are war-torn communities where blood has been shed on both sides, and these women are learning how to bring about reconciliation. They are a witness to the Gospel, and I got to tell the ways in which they live it out. The chance to tell these stories on their behalf was a way I could give back. I learned that there's more than one way to pass on "blessing". When I came back, I had this great story to tell and it was very important to be able to share this story and experience with other churches in the diocese, my parish, my friends, and my family. At one time, I would've thought I had to do something big to reflect this ideal of giving back this blessing I've received, but I've realized that no way is too small.

What about the practices of the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?

When I think about what gives me hope right now it is the power of faith. One of the major issues facing the Church is reconciliation and the many forms that it needs to take, but I think that starting with the knowledge of being reconciled in Christ, which our faith is based in, gives me enormous hope. Also, being able to hear these stories from around the world of great faith and much harsher environments than what we face here in the U.S. The fact is that you have people around this country who want to represent Christ in their communities, but we don't always see the fruit of that right away.

Are there any other thoughts about the practice of Bless that you'd like to share, or anything about your ministry as a YASCer you'd like us to know?

I cannot recommend the YASC program highly enough. It was transformative for me and for other members of my cohort. We're all different people with different gifts, callings, and viewpoints, and that's what makes the YASC program particularly special – the many different ways we are able to give and the equally different ways we're able to receive.
Share a little bit about yourself.
I am the supervising priest for three Episcopal congregations at Standing Rock Sioux Nation in the Diocese of North Dakota. I was called to serve on Standing Rock 28 years ago and have lived in the diocese with my family ever since.

Share a story in your current ministry about a time when you felt blessed.
When I first started my ministry at Standing Rock, I began hearing from the community about a desire to make use of a property at St. Gabriel’s called Red Hail’s Camp. The original church building on the property had burned down in 1970. With more than half of our population under the age of 20, it was clear to me that our work needed to focus on engaging youth and that there was a real opportunity to move that ministry forward at St. Gabriel’s. With a grant from United Thank Offering, we were able to build a lodge at the camp that could be used year-round.

However, after the fire, we had to really take stock and think about how the building and the camp were being used, and we decided that it needed to be not only a facility to accommodate youth groups, but also an interpretive center to help visitors from outside the community learn about justice with Native American culture and peoples. Because we also felt it was important that the building represent our love of and care for God’s creation, we designed it with geothermal heating and solar panels – a model for using these technologies in the area.

This September, out of the ashes of the old Red Hail Lodge, we will open an expanded, enhanced, and eco-friendly facility for the community that can also help build bridges between people and foster racial reconciliation. This is truly a blessing.

Blessing is about being part of the cycle of giving and receiving. In what ways are you called to pass on blessings to others?
Because we received this gift of a new home for future youth ministries, we felt it was important to offer up a thank you to the spirit of a beloved member of the community who died suddenly and tragically in 2014 – Deacon Terry Star. He was a member of Executive Council and died while at seminary preparing for the priesthood. Terry’s ministry went straight to the heart of Standing Rock, and it was his great-grandfather who originally donated the land. So we named the lodge after him – Star Lodge – to honor his advocacy for indigenous rights and his love for all people. This recognition has been a gift we’ve both given and received, a lasting legacy for all to see and remember Terry Star’s life and work.

How will the rebuilding of Star Lodge impact your community?
When it is fully functional this coming fall, Star Lodge will serve each week upwards of 80 young people who are surrounded by poverty, violence, and upheaval. The Lodge will provide a safe space where our youth can learn about themselves and their relationship with God, who creates and sustains them. For the outsiders who visit – mission groups and others – we hope that their time at the Lodge will help them to become better allies of indigenous communities and advocates for positive change on Standing Rock and in the area.

What about the Way of Love or the Jesus Movement gives you hope for the Church?
The Way of Love is important to me because I believe, with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, that the love of God is the only thing that can change our hearts and bring about reconciliation between peoples who are carrying long-term bitterness toward one another. The love of Christ can transform how we relate to one another. Nothing else out there has that power.
How To Give

The blessings that we find for ourselves in The Episcopal Church, we long to provide for others. Please make a gift and support the many ways in which we, together as The Episcopal Church, witness to the loving, liberating, and life-giving way of Jesus Christ.

There are many ways you can participate:

• Return the accompanying envelope with your credit card gift or check made payable to ‘The Episcopal Church,’ with ‘Annual Appeal’ in the memo.

• Give securely online at episcopalchurch.org/give/annual-appeal.

• Text ‘APPEAL’ to 91999 (standard messaging and data rates apply).

• Call (800) 334-7626 ext. 6002 to make your pledge or gift over the phone.

Thank you, in advance, for gifts that do so much!

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5
BLESS

Share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

Freely you have received; freely give.
- Matthew 10:8

Jesus called His disciples to give, forgive, teach, and heal in His name. We are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion, and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions. We can share our stories of blessing and invite others to the Way of Love.