



"Enter gates with thanksgiving; go into God's courts with praise."

—PSALM 100:3

Churches celebrate the whole of creation

By Carole Ann King

As a movement to set aside a liturgical season to honor all creation and the Creator grows across the world, congregations in the Diocese of Newark stand among the earliest innovators of "creation liturgies."

A recent Internet search highlighted sample liturgies in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In June, British church leaders called upon Christians throughout England to use Sept. 1 to Oct. 4 "to put the environment at the heart of their worship" and to dedicate the time "to prayer for the protection of creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that reverse our contribution to climate change."

This "Time for God's Creation," according to a news release, "follows a resolution made at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in 2007 by representatives from Europe's Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches."

Within the Diocese of Newark, a 1994 convention resolution recognized and affirmed the creation season. Two years earlier, Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, had inaugurated a creation liturgy. The Rev. Franklin "Skip" Vilas, then rector of St. Paul's in Chatham, subsequently began an eight-week celebration of the creation season at his church in 1992 and later sponsored the diocesan resolution.

The handful of diocesan congregations that have created liturgies typically celebrate the unofficial season of creation at the end of Pentecost, from St. Francis' Day to Christ the King Sunday.

Early on, Vilas said, some accused him of wanting to "abandon the prayer book" and of being a "Pantheist" and a "nature worshiper." But, he said, "affirming God as the Creator makes it easier to



The Rev. Phillip Wilson, rector at Redeemer, Morristown, models the church's Creation Season vestments. Above, a special altar frontal highlights the creation theme.

understand the Trinity."

The Rev. Phillip Wilson, Redeemer's rector, noted that "the creation season expands the story of God to the whole creation, not just human history."

Redeemer's worship notes describe the season as "one in which we look at our 'oneness' with nature, rather than our domination of it. As stewards and trustees, we confess our abuse of this trust and pledge to reform our ways."

The liturgy, which Wilson said Vilas created in 1992, includes a scriptural reading and a "contemporary" lesson that celebrates creation, such as a poem or reading from an environmentalist. Each week, a different gift from the earth is presented – water, fire, moss and grass, a branch from a tree – at the offertory. The Prayers of the People are adapted from prayers used at the United National Environmental Sabbath and Earth Day in June 1990.

The creation season provides more than a single day's celebration.

Vilas, who helped found the Episcopal Ecological Network and had served as a religious adviser to the United Nations

Environment Programme, has recounted in sermons and articles Wilson's belief that "single days of observation, such as the church's Rogation Sunday, or the more secular Earth Day, did not do much more than scratch the surface of people's awareness of the environmental crisis. Furthermore, such a brief exposure to the spirituality of ecological stewardship usually touched only the rational mind."

Celebrating the season, however, presents challenges.

The Rev. Susan Sica, vicar of St. Gregory's in Parsippany, inherited her congregation's tradition of celebrating the creation season from her predecessor. While the congregation loves it, she said, she struggles to integrate the season into the lectionary.

"For me, the issue is selecting where and when to merge this into what is prescribed by the lectionary and still have it make sense," she said. "The bottom line, for me, is the gospel."

"Once you engage in this," she added, "virtually every part of the liturgy is up for consideration."

She also wonders what was missing from the Pentecost cycle that it required enhancement and whether observing the creation season does much to affect the environment, she said. The congregation, however, loves the season and apparently gets a lot out of the contemporary readings she chooses, she said.

The Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton, the current rector of St. Paul's, said that while her predecessor was deeply committed to eco-justice, she sees the issue as an integral part of all concerns of justice for all Christians and believes that there is no hierarchy of concerns. After using the creation season liturgy in her first year at St. Paul's, Kaeton said, "it was instructive to learn how much of a trinitarian I am."

While St. Paul's still celebrates the creation season with the apricot vestments and altar hangings that were purchased in 1992, Kaeton said, she uses Eucharistic Prayer C and the Revised Common Lectionary and "looks for creation themes on which to preach, if appropriate."

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