



## The Young Are the Poor

*A presentation to the 2013 Deacon Directors' Conference by Aaron Scott, Church of the Good Shepherd, Vancouver, WA. She is currently a participant in The Seven and an aspirant to Holy Orders..*

Hi. My name is Aaron Scott. Kyle [Pedersen, director of *The Seven*] said I should share a little about myself and my journey, so:

I'm a recovering Methodist preacher's kid. At age 15 I was a rural, gay, teenage church drop-out with a substance abuse problem. At age 20 I started coming back to faith through liberation theology, in communities living it out from New York City to Managua. I might have become a Catholic had I not, as a student at Union Theological Seminary, met and fallen in love with my partner who was seeking ordination to the priesthood in TEC.



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That worked out well on multiple fronts, so here I am. I'm 27 now, and an aspirant to Holy Orders in the Diocese of Olympia WA. I'm discerning a call to the diaconate, participating in *The Seven*, and taking full advantage of the resources and mentoring that program has offered me. I want to thank each of you for the work this group has done to make *The Seven* possible. I especially want to thank Kyle, Susanne and Gen for bringing me out to Baltimore so I can eavesdrop on so many good conversations.

So first, I have some questions and reflections for you all. Just shout your answers out.

First: **Why** do you want young deacons?

Second: What have been your **successes** in engaging young leaders in diaconal formation so far?

Third: What have been your **challenges**?

Thank you. It's helpful for me to hear all of that, especially as a young discernor standing on the shoulders of so many people who have come before me. So here are some of my thoughts, and we can do questions at the end.

One of the great blessings of my life in general (and of my discernment process in particular) is that I got involved young in the grassroots movement to end poverty in this country. When I say "grassroots" I mean: a movement led by the poor themselves, the poor fighting for themselves on their own terms. And even as I came into that work

young myself, in my late teens and early twenties, I felt old compared to a lot of the leaders I met. I met public high school students in Philadelphia who had unionized themselves to resist the privatization of their struggling school system. I met teenage mothers in Washington State working together to teach their communities and their legislators that they were human beings who deserved to be treated with support and respect, instead of being treated like statistics of moral decay.

The most talented leaders I've met have been young.

The most talented leaders I've met have been poor.

If you want to engage the leadership of the young, you are going to have to engage the leadership of the poor.

Let me say that one more time: If you want to engage the leadership of the young, you are going to have to engage the leadership of the poor.

The young *are* the poor. The young are disproportionately poor-- disproportionately and increasingly locked out of the basic support systems that offer people a chance of thriving. Every day, the outreach worker at my church receives more calls from young families with children who have lost

(See "Scott" on Page Three)

# Introducing Lori Mills-Curran

*This introduction of Lori Mills-Curran has been adapted from the unanimous recommendation of the Search Committee to the AED Board.*

Lori Mills-Curran brings to AED extensive experience in the Diaconate and the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and internationally.

A deacon for 25 years she has served in four different dioceses. This has informed her understanding of the diversity in diaconal ministry and formation. She was a young mother when she was ordained and understands the tensions of balancing ministry and family. She also has helpful insights into the challenges that formation programs will face if and as they wish to include young people.

Ecumenically, her participation in the discussions of diaconal theology with the Roman Catholic church, the ELCA, and the Moravian churches has given her an understanding of the diaconate across denominational and national boundaries.

Lori has been a regular participant and sometime organizer of Province I diaconal gatherings. She values AED as a place where diaconal theology is developed and fostered.

She also sees its importance as a group that models and promotes the use of best practices in formation, collaboration, and ministry.

Her experience in Latino ministry, working with Brazilian immigrants, will serve



AED well as the Association strengthens its connection to deacons in other areas of the

Episcopal Church both inside and outside the U.S. She is trilingual, speaking Portuguese and Spanish in addition to English.

In her interview the Search Committee was struck by her passion and by her sophisticated vision of the Diaconate. Her comments on the way church structures can inhibit formation and a prophetic voice were thought provoking and spoke to areas of attention for the Association in the future. We were particularly struck by her naming the “emerging church”, with its flattening of hierarchy, as an important challenge to the diaconate.

Listening is important to Lori. She understands that listening is what she will do initially in order to learn what the Association does well and how she can partner with us to improve our effectiveness and to venture into new areas.

Lori’s background, experience, and skills will make her an effective representative of the Association in other venues and with other church organizations.

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their housing and are living in their cars. Last week in Philadelphia, in a closed-door meeting, 23 public schools were shut down. Permanently. The dream of college and continuing education-- even at public institutions-- is rapidly falling out of reach for all young people except those from well-off families. This is personal for me; my cousin turned eighteen on Sunday. He is enlisting in the military and will ship out in August because he got the “talk” this year, that there is no money for him to go to college. On top of praying for his safety abroad during his deployment, I will continually be praying for his safety when he returns home to this nation, which has gutted its services for veterans. I see his future when I look into the eyes of every homeless vet lining the sidewalks and overpasses near the VA hospital in Vancouver, where I live.

So here is the greatest piece of advice I think I can offer you, when it comes to young diaconal leadership development: if you want to find young leaders with diaconal spirit, go to the shelters. Go to the tent cities. Recruit them at the welfare office, at the VA. Recruit them as you are out in the community, organizing with low-wage workers or labor unions. Leaders are people who both know how to make a stand on their own, and also know they can't do it all on their own. Both of these points are old news to poor folks engaged in the struggle to defend their basic human rights. Daily survival requires a poor person to stand up for her own life in both big and small ways, and also requires her to lean into the goodness of others. Some people might call this an unasked-for spiritual discipline-- or, more condescendingly, “a blessing in disguise.” But I think Johnnie Tillmon, former head of the National Welfare Rights Union, said it best when she talked about what she learned about poverty as a welfare mother. She said, “There's one good thing about welfare. It kills your illusions about yourself, and about where this society is really at. It's laid out for you straight. You have to learn to fight, to be aggressive, or you just don't make it. If you can survive long enough on welfare, you can survive anything. It gives you a kind of freedom, a sense of your own power and togetherness with other women.”

Don't we need deacons who can survive anything? Don't we need deacons who share this sense of freedom and power-- not the kind that makes you act like a lone ranger but the kind that radically deepens your sense of accountability to, and togetherness with, the rest of God's children? For too

long, those of us in the church who care about justice have believed and perpetuated the lie that we must become “a voice for the voiceless.” That's a lie. When you start to take the leadership and talent of the poor seriously-- of the young seriously-- you will be forced to confront and up-end this lie. It's like Arundhati Roy said, “We know of course there's really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately

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silenced, or the preferably unheard.” In a living, spirit-filled diaconal ministry, you do not get to speak “for” anybody. You get to 1) speak for yourself, and 2) amplify the voices of others in the world whom the powers and principalities seek to silence. Even when the church itself acts as one of those silencers.

So: how? How can we pull this off? There's always that tension, right, when we talk about the diaconate as an ordained “labor of love” (which is the nicest, churchiest, most insidious way of saying “unpaid”). I struggle with this myself, as a young discerning working full-time with a crushing burden of student debt that I will be paying off for the next 20 years. A full-time volunteer ministry sounds lovely-- if you are retired with a comfortable pension. But one of the gifts given to me by my mentor Gen, Archdeacon of the Diocese of Olympia, has been the consistent reminder that a deacon's ministry is whatever work the deacon is doing out in the world. I wrestled with that for a long time. Given my own experience and training, my first thought was, “Well, what does that mean for someone who feels a diaconal calling and works at McDonald's? What does it mean for someone who is called and is living on a disability income?” And as I wrestled with that a bit longer, I was reminded of the countless places like McDonalds and like the DHS office where I've seen leaders step up-- unpaid, but choosing to lead and choosing to fight for a better world because their lives and families and communities depend on them fighting. And I realized then that our

diaconate might just be a key place where the very best of the church can intersect with the courageous, resurrection-inspiring, empire-leveling spirit of the organized poor.

A deacon's job (among other things) is to say to the church, “It's not all about you. It's about God's liberation of this entire broken and beautiful world.” At the same time, the church's tools of ritual, remembrance, ancient tradition and prayerful discipline are indispensable for building a world-changing social movement led by the poor. I know this is true because I have witnessed it again and again. People who have gathered together to face down death (from hunger, from homelessness, from violence) have usually caught the Spirit regardless of whether they've ever set foot in a church. In my experience, sharing even basic theological tools with those folks catches fire every time. It is often a slow start, if you're just starting out-- we do a thorough job of grinding down the spirits of the poor. But once people have arrived at the collective decision to stand and

defend their God-given right to survive and thrive, there is a profound spiritual shift that occurs. I don't even know what to call it, but I think that's the shift that Christ was referring to when he said “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them.” Where poor youth have gathered, even under threat of arrest and police brutality, to protest the erasure of public education in their communities; where the homeless have collectively and illegally taken over abandoned buildings rather than freeze to death in the streets; where undocumented immigrant nannies have rallied outside the home of an employer who has beaten one of their fellow workers-- Jesus is there. And Jesus is not waiting for The Episcopal Church to show up before he makes his next move. Diaconal calls are already being lived out by young people everywhere-- our job is to see if we can help the church keep up with all of them, to see if we can do a better job of recognizing and supporting them as they arise in these “unexpected” places (and seriously-- CHECK YOUR BIBLES, THESE PLACES SHOULD NOT BE UNEXPECTED).

If you're looking for young deacons, it's time to stop waiting for them to show up at church and eagerly tell you, “I'm interested in becoming an aspirant to Holy Orders.” One thing we all know about young people is that they are overwhelmingly NOT in church. Which is great for potential future deacons-- they shouldn't be spending too much time there anyway! Go instead out

***(See “Scott” on Page Four)***

(“Scott” from Page Three)

into your communities, find the places where young people are making a stand. Find the places where young people are asking the hardest, most unsettling questions, like: “Why does this society think I am disposable? Why do I work so hard and still struggle to survive? Where the hell is God in this terrible mess?” That agitation, that dissatisfaction, that love-fueled anger is precisely one of the things we should be

looking for as we discern the presence of a diaconal calling. Think back to the Exodus, to the moment things really kicked off:

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (*Ex 2:23-25*).

If you want young deacons, find the groaners. Find the young people crying out around you and crying out to one another in their suffering. God is working there. Church is already happening there. If we want this church to matter, we need to be there, too-- not just handing out food and blankets and prayers. We need to be there looking for leaders-- not just for the future of our church, but for the future of a free world for all God’s children.

## Mary, Jesus and Judas

*A sermon preached by Dn. Susanne Watson Epting former AED Executive Director, at the 2013 Deacon Directors Conference just prior to Easter.*

Mary, Jesus and Judas

Six days before the Passover

A very few days before

Jesus kneels to wash the feet of his friends

Mary loves Jesus --

Judas is frustrated with Jesus --

And only Jesus himself

knows what is about to happen.

Mary, Jesus and Judas

Scholars suggest that Mary’s anointing of Jesus quite likely anticipates both the foot washing and Jesus’ death – the foot washing precisely because she anoints his feet and not his head; his death because Jesus himself refers to his burial.

But I’m not sure Mary had those things in her mind.

As I imagine my first century sister, I suspect that this is simply – a sign of love -a sign of loving service.

To take the very best, the most costly, the loveliest perfume of all.

To anoint what was thought to be the very worst in the Middle Eastern world - The feet.

I think that with Mary it is a sign of deep discipleship –

the same sign that Jesus will ask the

Twelve to repeat.

But brought to them first through the loving example of a woman . . . And later as he himself kneels with the basin and the towel.

And so I wonder if this might also be an invitation to us to consider the cost of discipleship.

And Judas – what would we do without Judas – ever the villain? It is hard to know, isn’t it, whether Judas was only pretending to be concerned for the poor. But the response

that Jesus gives him is grounded in the same tradition out of which Judas asked the question. A first century audience would have known that Jesus’ words came straight from the Law of Moses.<sup>1</sup> We read in Deuteronomy: (15:11)

“Give liberally, and be ungrudging when you do, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

Jesus was not dismissing the poor. I think he was fulfilling the law.

In fact, with this reminder of the law set in the context of Mary’s action, he is preparing to give something very costly of his own – He is preparing to give his life.

Instead of contrasting the presence of the poor with his impending absence, as we so like to think, I believe Jesus is preparing, himself, to fulfill the law – to give freely and openly and lovingly . . . and, this, along with Mary’s example – her lavish gift – recasts the meaning of discipleship. Not just to follow. But to . . .

Count the cost.

Count the cost.

Give your all. Give generously, openly – hold nothing back.

And if Jesus could give his life, can we not, as beneficiaries of his death and resurrection, give our best? Not our hand-me-downs, not our ten percents . . . not our you can have what’s lefts . . .

But can we not share our lives? Our friendship? Our best?

Mary, Jesus and Judas. . .

There’s always Judas . . .

I’m not convinced his concern wasn’t real But then we don’t know – he was, after

all, the bad guy

But he did ask out of a tradition that we still share.

So I think I have to ask. . .

How many meals would the maintenance of our church buildings buy for those who have run out of groceries?

How many warm coats could be purchased for the cost of a stole – or a chasuble?

How many safe spaces would our one day a week Sunday school rooms provide for those who need them?

How many songs could be written and sung on our holy instruments?

Or dances danced in our holy spaces?

How much perfume can we pour on the face and feet and heart of Jesus in our neighbors?

And who will count the cost?

Who will say . . . It is precisely because we love Jesus that we give our best --not just enough to get by --not just enough to wash the dust from their feet . . . But to gently pour a costly oil upon them.

There are some things that are uppermost in our minds as we edge ever closer to Holy Week. For some of us that includes the foot washing.

Even if it is not a practice in our community, we will hear the story, and we know we will do it in our hearts.

And so as we prepare for that foot washing, I would invite us to consider the image that Mary so graciously offers.

So Jesus will wash with water, Mary washes with oil

And then, as we kneel to wash feet, perhaps . . .

Just perhaps – we could ask the question:

“How does what we are doing here affect or involve the poor?”

(Endnotes)

1 <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/05/05/973537/-The-Poor-You-Will-Always-Have-With-You>

Deuteronomy 15:11



# CUBA IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

by Vicki Gray, Christ the Lord Church, Pinole, CA

Mid-May last year, I participated in a ten-day “Transformational Journey” to Cuba with a small delegation from All Saints Pasadena, a trip facilitated by San Francisco-based Global Exchange. My purpose in going was threefold – 1) to assess the vitality of the church and stand with the faithful; 2) to contribute through dialogue to a post-Castro transition that is non-violent and that accords with the wishes of the Cuban people; and 3) to close a fifty-year-old personal circle.

## THE CHURCH

Not a part of any ecclesiastical province, the Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba is an autonomous diocese overseen by the Metropolitan Council of Cuba (MCC) comprised of our own Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the Primate of the West Indies John Holder, and Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, who serves as chair. Its 10,000 members are spread across 46 parishes that span the length of the island.

For the first three decades after the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, the Episcopal Church, like religion in general, was subjected to difficult limitations on its work...limitations that eased considerably after the removal in 1992 of the requirement that one be an atheist to belong to the Party and even more so after the 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II. Like the rest of Cuba, the Church writ large has also suffered economic hardship as a result of the continuing U.S. embargo. The Episcopal Church, moreover, had endured internal divisions which led to an inability to choose a successor to the Right Rev. Miguel Tamayo Zaldívar, who served as interim bishop until his retirement in November 2010. As a result, the MCC stepped in to choose as his successor the Right Rev. Griselda Delgado del Carpio who was installed on November 28, 2010, a ceremony attended by Bishops Hiltz, Jefferts Schori, and Holder.

In her installation sermon, Bishop Delgado called upon the faithful to face the future with “hope and optimism.” And she quickly set about laying the groundwork for such a future. At the diocese’s February 2011 synod, for example, she announced a Strategic Mission Plan ensuring funding for the “hardware” of mission, hardware that included providing youth with “alternatives to materialism and secularism,” an annual

youth camp and music festival, and increased cooperation with the Seminario Evangelico de Teologica in Matanzas, a joint undertaking of Cuba’s Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist Churches founded in 1946.

As noted, conditions for the church writ large improved considerably in the 1990s. Already in May 1985, however, it became clear, despite earlier harassment against



the faithful and mutual distrust between church, state, and party, that Fidel Castro, far from harboring animus against the church, remained somewhat nostalgic for his Jesuit upbringing. In a remarkable series of interviews that month with Brazilian Jesuit Frei Betto, for example, he relegated Marx’s axiom that religion is the opiate of the masses from “dogma or absolute truth” to a fungible “truth in specific historical conditions,” adding:

“From a strictly political point of view...I believe that it is possible for Christians to be Marxists as well, and to work with Marxists to change the world. The important thing is that, in both cases, they be honest revolutionaries who want to end the exploitation of man by man and to struggle for a fair distribution of social wealth, equality, fraternity,

and the dignity of all human beings...<sup>1</sup>

Given such an attitude, it should not be surprising that, although Cuba remains a dictatorship in political terms, churches there remained open and, particularly since the late eighties, have operated relatively freely. Church attendance in this predominantly Roman Catholic country, however, has historically been surprisingly low. Harvey Cox, for example, reported in 1987 that only 17 percent of the population attended a Christian church of any denomination in the pre-revolutionary year of 1954 and that by 1976 - after years of discrimination - only 2 percent of Cubans identified openly as Christians.<sup>2</sup>

But both numbers have improved markedly over the last thirty years, the improvement being attributable primarily to two factors.

First, as elsewhere in Latin America (and, indeed, within the United States), there has been an explosive growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in Cuba, nurtured by a large influx of American missionaries... over 200 in the last decade. And, as elsewhere, this growth has been at the expense of Roman Catholic and Mainline Protestant denominations.

Second, the Cuban government has evidently decided that it can live with a church that can live with it. As one French reporter concluded,

*this softening has taken place because, in effect, the Catholic Church in Cuba decided about 1980 to try to live within a society in which an avowedly atheistic government says it is ‘building socialism,’ and to do so as constructively as possible – contributing to the health of the society wherever it can – while at the same time maintaining its Christian identity.<sup>3</sup>*

This is an assessment evidently shared by former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold who, in a 2009 interview, said “I think that the feeling of the churches is that by working with the government, as opposed to against it, they can get further in terms of transforming the consciousness [and] by helping the government see the positives of the religious traditions,” adding that while local church leaders don’t challenge the government, that doesn’t mean “they don’t press on the government in various ways.”<sup>4</sup>

And so, speaking in Havana on World Mission Sunday 2006, Bishop Griswold, as Presiding Bishop, could say in complete honesty that he was “moved greatly by the faithfulness and vibrancy” of the Episcopal

(See “Cuba on Page Six)

### **“Cuba from Page Five)**

Church of Cuba. “My Church,” he added, “is deeply committed to accompanying the Church of Cuba in our common witness to Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

And on our May 2012 trip, an earnest of that common witness, that is precisely what we found – a Church both faithful and vibrant.

### **OUR TRIP**

After an all-day flight from San Francisco and an overnight at a local motel, I met up with the rest of the group in Can Cun, Mexico where we boarded the Cubana TU-104 for the hour-long flight to Havana.

Waiting on the immigration line to present our passports, we were confronted by a dour young man in a red shirt who insisted that our U.S.-issued general license was insufficient. Seems our church-heavy itinerary was inconsistent with the failure of our license to specifically label the purpose of our visit as religious in nature. After considerable one-on-one questioning and consultations with other officials, however, the young man cleared us to proceed.

Beatriz, our guide, gave us a far warmer welcome on the other side of immigration, and we quickly boarded a mini-bus much in need of a new clutch for a bouncy ride into the city. The streets were still wet from an early-evening downpour, and, under darkening skies, the dilapidated shells of buildings along the way seemed to refute the exhortations of the graffiti-like propaganda on their walls.

Arriving at the Plaza Hotel, a once and still proudly elegant reminder of an earlier era - one block from the Bacardi tower and surrounded by newer, higher-priced establishments - the bright lights of the lobby dispelled the depressing gloom of the ride in. So too did the welcoming mojito and the piano stylings of Arian, a young A-Rod look-a-like who honored our request for “As Time Goes By.” The nostalgic mood lingered through a rooftop serve-yourself dinner overlooking Old Havana. One almost expected to see Hemingway, Bogart, and Bergman at the next table.

Soon enough, it was time to turn in. Dollars and credit cards being unaccepted in Cuba (a petty retaliation for our embargo), I converted some dollars for a pocketful of Cuban convertible pesos – the soon familiar CUCs – and headed across the street to a

hole-in-the-wall kiosk that sold everything from ice cream to rum to buy some bottled water. It was a trip that became a nightly ritual.

Next morning was devoted to a walking tour of Old Havana – the tree-covered bookstalls at the Plaza de Armas, the buskers and children’s choirs on the Plaza Vieja, the de-consecrated Franciscan Church on the Plaza de San Francisco, the statue of Junipero Serra but strangely none of Bartolomeo de Las Casas, the “You’re from California?” and thumbs up from the mock-Franciscan doorman, and, everywhere, the scaffolding of much needed restoration work.

And, after lunch, we made the obligatory visit to the Museum of the Revolution



**La Santissima Trinidad**

in Batista’s ornate palace and, outside, to the memorial to the “Heroes of the New Fatherland”, guarded by the only soldiers we saw in Cuba. It was a visit punctuated by haunting music completely unrelated to the revolution. Seems the old ballroom had been converted into a concert hall with remarkable acoustics. As we entered, the strains of “Ave Maria” filled the building and I have to admit to getting a little teary-eyed when another young singer broke into a rendition of “I Will Always Love You.”

Next morning, Sunday, we made the first of two visits to the Episcopal Cathedral of

La Santissima Trinidad and, there, in the Vedado neighborhood of single-family dwellings in western Havana, found ourselves in the company of faithful Christians worshipping openly. It was, we found, a vibrant congregation of about eighty, ranging in age from the eight-month-old peering at me over mother’s shoulder to an over-eighty Veronica who regularly traveled some distance to worship...and, in between, a flock of youngsters, cared for by Vivian, a dynamic lay leader.

Unfortunately, Bishop Delgado was in North America, attending “bishops school.” We did, however, meet with the Dean, the Ven. Jose Angel Gutierrez Ferro, and Finley Middleton, the missionary from The Episcopal Church. Since Rev. Ferro, who was recovering from throat surgery, had no voice and there being no other priest available, we celebrated Morning Prayer that first Sunday.

The next days were a mix of meetings at church-related and secular institutions. Among the latter, perhaps the most rewarding were the visit to a neighborhood health clinic and a meeting with officials of SENESEX, an LGBT research and advocacy group in a very macho society.

The clinic, a block-sized establishment that handled everything from initial triage to rehabilitation, was, like similar facilities I had known in communist Poland, staffed by obviously competent and caring doctors and nurses (witness the director of rehabilitation who remained in the background holding the hand of an elderly patient in a wheel chair while her staff briefed us) but lacking in even some basic equipment. Some of the ER equipment, a nurse in our group reported, was fifty years old. Saddest of all, however, were the shortages of many pharmaceuticals occasioned by our embargo extended to European subsidiaries of American firms.

The priorities of SENESEX were, we were told, anti-bullying education, crafting anti-discrimination legislation, and providing clubs and social outlets for gays, lesbians, and Cuba’s not insignificant transgender population. Interestingly, SENESEX’s Director Mariela Castro, President Raul Castro’s daughter, was at the time in San Francisco attending a conference on transgender issues.

We had other opportunities to interact with institutions of Cuban civil society. At some we were treated to heavy-handed doses of propaganda, like the meeting at the Casa de Amistad that turned icy when our host learned of my Foreign Service background in

Eastern Europe. Others were more positive and memorable for their easy-going honesty. These included a visit to a one-room pre-school/community center, La Nino i Nina, in the slum neighborhood of Cayo Weso where three generations inter-acted in obviously loving fashion; another to a run-down industrial neighborhood where a group of



**At La Nino i Nina**

talented twenty-somethings – they called themselves the *Muraleardos* – had spruced up their streets with murals and hubcap art; and, most memorable of all, an evening block party hosted by the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution - part neighborhood watch, part neighborhood improvement association - in a predominantly Afro-Cuban neighborhood. We were treated like celebrities by Teresa, our host, and her dance students who put on a performance based on Santeria, that syncretic blend of Christianity and African animism, and, afterwards, enjoyed pork stew and lemonade while mixing with their parents and others.

Further afield, we travelled to Pinar del Rio, the tobacco-growing province at the western end of the island, enjoying, along the way, a visit to the impressive and apparently successful Las Terrazas eco-tourism community and a special cup of coffee at Maria's Café. In Vinales, we also visited the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart dating from 1881. It remained in good repair, its doors open to the plaza thanks to German foreign aid.

In Havana, we had a chance for honest conversations with long-term American residents of the capital – the American *charge d'affaires* (our “ambassador” of sorts); Leslie, Global Exchange's on-the-scene representative who arranged an impromptu evening with the marvelously talented young people of the *Opera de la Calle* or “Street Opera”

company; and three American students at the Medical School of the Americas who gave high marks to their Cuban education and who looked forward to practicing in the States thanks to a cooperative arrangement with UCSF Hospital in San Francisco.

Our primary focus, however, remained the church. With that in mind, we traveled to Matanzas, about an hour east of Havana to visit the Seminario Evangelico de Teologica, a beautiful campus situated on a hilltop overlooking the city and bay and, incidentally, a block from the Abraham Lincoln Museum. We were greeted by the school's Vice Rector, the Rev. Oden Marichal, an Episcopal priest. As he spoke, my eyes caught the colorful Pastors for Peace bus parked just inside the gate. With him, we toured the TEC-donated campus church, several classrooms, and, in one, decorated by a wall-sized *Brot für die Welt* painting<sup>6</sup>, enjoyed a long open-ended conversation with Oden who insisted there was no incompatibility between his membership in the National Assembly and his role in the church. Before leaving, we also chatted with an optimistic young Episcopal seminarian, one of three dozen from the three mainline denominations, and enjoyed lunch in the student cafeteria, where an elderly volunteer was meticulously removing debris from the



**Pastors for Peace bus.**

home-grown black beans that would go into the evening's beans and rice.

Back in Havana we spent an afternoon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church and Martin Luther King, Jr. Center. In the sanctuary, we chatted with the pastor, the Rev. Raquel Suarez who explained that the church and center were in the midst of celebrating their 65<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries respectively. With close to 2,000 members, the center, she said, was booming, providing services – some as basic as potable water – to close to 3,000 residents of the poor, mostly Afro-Cuban Marianao neighborhood. Her church

membership numbered about 250 and, she added, Sunday services were packed.<sup>7</sup>

Important, in this regard, were the assistance being provided by American congregations (such as the Prayer Books we presented to La Santisima Trinidad), the lingering reputation of the Roman Catholic Church as a “white church,” and the willingness of the Protestant churches to reach out to Afro-Cubans. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center



**Ebenezer Baptist Church**

drew heavily on the Black Liberation Theology of Andrew Cone and close contacts with Jesse Jackson and Pastors for Peace founder Lucius Walker, who famously said “The Bible says feed the hungry, clothe the poor. It doesn't say to starve the communists.” A portion of Rev. Walker's ashes rests prominently in the Center under a Bible open to the Gospel of John.

Our second Sunday, our last full day in Havana, we returned to La Santisima Trinidad. It was Pentecost and Rev. Marichal was there to preside at Eucharist. To our embarrassment, he invited our group leader Richard, a former Roman Catholic priest, and myself to take communion with the altar party.

I will treasure the many open, hopeful conversations we had at La Santisima Trinidad and hold its faithful in my heart. And, in my heart, the strains of the music of that day still echo – the beautiful solo rendition, in perfect English and perfect pitch, of “I love you for sentimental reasons” (directed, I wondered, at us?) and that closing rendition of “Renuevame” (“Renew Me”) that spoke so well to the transformational nature of our

**(See “Cuba” on Page Eight)**

## “Cuba” from Page Seven

journey and of our shared experience with our Cuban brothers and sisters. And, lest I forget the nature of that experience, there is a reminder on my bookshelf – two popsticks shaped into a cross and adorned by a paper cutout dove and a happy face presented to me by a young boy as I left.

My other memories live only in my heart. They are of people – swaying, arm-in-arm with the youngsters of the *Opera de La Calle*, singing “Imagine,” and, next morning, sitting on a park bench with a bronze John Lennon; Maria, peering from a balcony, while her daughter poured the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had; Arian and the others in the Plaza lobby cheering on Havana’s *beisbol* team, the *Industriales*; the little boys playing stickball; another chasing a pink balloon; a little girl jumping rope; trading pictures and smiles with a young couple on the Malecon; and a young woman beside that hole-in-the-wall kiosk...begging me to buy milk for her babies.

That last memory – of two liters of milk changing hands – reminds me that I haven’t spoken yet of my fifty-year-old personal circle that has yawned so wide these many years. In October 1962, you see, I had watched Fidel respond to Kennedy on a TV screen in the Guantanamo O’ Club and, at 2:00 am that night, boarded the USS Robert L. Wilson headed for a Blockade station. With the passing of those containers of milk that last night in Havana, my blockade ended, my circle closed. It was time to move on.

## THE FUTURE

The Cuban church and people have suffered at the hands of their own government...and ours. Their government remains a dictatorship and freedom of expression remains limited. The economy which worsened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been hobbled by our ill-considered embargo, and kept barely afloat by Venezuelan subsidies.

While they have a natural desire for greater freedom of expression, more freedom to travel, and improved economic conditions, Cubans I met projected a defiant pride in having stood up to the *Yanqui* and what has been achieved in terms of health care and education. Even under current conditions, I expect that the Communist Party might well win a free election. And I cannot imagine the Cuban people tolerating a return to the inequalities of the Batista era.

I found, moreover, very little fear of the sort I had experienced in Communist East-

ern Europe. Freedom of religion – short of open opposition to the regime – is considerable and personal conversations were open, frank, and invariably friendly. The Cuban people seem genuine in their desire for more open relations with Americans.

And, increasingly, the Cuban government, under an increasingly younger, less ideological leadership, seems ready to accommodate these desires. In just the last year there has been expanded scope for private enterprise of the sort we experienced – restaurants, shops, garages, small family-run hotels. Passport regulations have also eased markedly and Cubans, including dissidents, can now travel abroad...and, more importantly, return.

The prospects for a peaceful transformation seem bright. But we have to do our part. Next steps on the governmental level should include the release of political prisoners (e.g., dissidents in Cuban jails and the “Cuban Five” in ours<sup>8</sup>), the lifting of our economic embargo and travel restrictions, and a mutual agreement to allow our diplomats to travel beyond New York and Havana.

People-to-people exchanges will be crucial to the process and the church can lead the way. I hope, for example, that there will be many more journeys like ours, that there will be an expansion of parish-to-parish relations, and a greater effort to educate ourselves about conditions in Cuba and TEC’s positions vis-à-vis Cuba. I stand ready to help in any way I can and can be reached at [vgray54951@aol.com](mailto:vgray54951@aol.com) or (707) 554-0672.

### (Endnotes)

1 Fidel Castro and Frei Betto, *Fidel and Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p.276.

2 Ibid, p.24.

3 Ibid, p.25.

4 *The Chestnut Hill Local*, April 16, 2009.

5 Sermon at La Santisima Trinidad Cathedral, Havana, February 26, 2006

6 Against the background of a *wiphala*, the checkerboard flag of the Andean struggle for dignity, it depicted an indigent Christ arising from the many peoples of Latin America.

7 See: Randal C. Archibald, “Catholic Church Deals with a Diminished Role in Cuban Life,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2012. P. A-10 and “Baptists and Popular Education in Cuba: an interview with Joel Suarez,” *YES! Magazine*, December 2006, for fuller descriptions of the church and center.

Everywhere we went we were bombarded by apparently sincere pleas to free these five Cuban intelligence officers, the common theme being “Give me five, Obama!”

# What do you

by Dn. Rob Sommer, *Iglesia Cristo Rey / All Saints Episcopal Church*,

“What do you claim?” This was the question asked to an Elementary school girl when approached by a gang member. Both the question and the role of identity are critical to the functioning of the well organized community of gangs. In answering the question, youth must draw on a complex series of social issues in which they find themselves. Yet the answer lies far beyond the youth themselves, and is a product of family, community and local context.

## A question of identity

The question of what you claim can be also a statement of faith. For centuries, the church has been involved with the concepts of belief and belonging. Even the emerging churches take belief and belonging as central issues. Both church and gangs are organized communities which deal with belief and belonging. Yet many of the youth today, in their world, are ill prepared to answer the question of what they claim.

When visiting gang members in jail, I had an encounter with an inmate that demonstrated the power of identity. I was interested in him and his decision to drop out. In our initial meetings, as we were getting to know each other, he seemed very interested in the ordination process and church. After describing the process to him, he then described his life in the gang using church terms. I will never forget his next question, “Do you want to hear about my ordination?” His life, the complex issues confronting him, started when he was eight years old. When asked how come he decided to leave the gang, it was a moment fitting of Easter. He had a new son, and was anxious to be for his son what he felt he never had, a father.

The way out was his view of himself in a new identity.

## Big city issues in rural California

In California, for 2009-2011, rural counties had the highest rates of youth homicide. In the most populous state, Monterey County was most violent for youth ranking highest for two years and third highest for the other year. Rural Santa Cruz County, also in El Camino Real, became the 10<sup>th</sup> deadliest where homicides in the first two months of 2013 surpassed the total number in all of 2012.

The majority of victims are Latino. The top two counties for Latino victims are Monterey and Santa Cruz, both well above

# Claim?

the California average, and in Santa Cruz 100% of the victims were Latino. Additionally, these two counties were the leaders in gang related deaths, with over 92% of the homicides being gang related. Lastly, they



**2nd confirmation class of 2012. Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves of El Camino Real and Bishop Laura Aherns of Connecticut are present. In total 32 Youth confirmed their belief in 2012.**

were also the leaders for gun related deaths.

Resources to combat gang violence, however, tend to be shifted to the larger population centers. Gangs thrive in rural California, and the effects of the violence show this. Gangs thrive because they provide something to those that belong; there is a sense of identity and organized community which can appeal to youth in a rural setting. When you couple this with the issues of immigration, poverty, drug trade, family systems and other social issues, one can see a pathway that feeds on the younger in rural communities. For many, this pathway provides the connection youth seek.

In October of 2012, we organized community and participated in a peace procession in Salinas where many churches were present. At the event, the chief of police mentioned that he has never met a hopeful gang member. The sense of community, identity, belonging and family are areas where church and gangs seem to have similarities. The crime and violence, however, are where they differ. We work to create transformation from violence to peace and provide a new identity from at risk to at choice.

## **Gang prevention starts with what is good and right, not with what is bad or wrong**

In 2011, I was called to a ministry in Watsonville in South Santa Cruz County. The population of Watsonville is 82% Latino and has a large mixture of new immigrants, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latino-Americans.

The ministry in which I am engaged has

been called gang prevention. This, however, is not a totally accurate description. Rather than focus on the prevention of something, we start from the good and the right that is in us. Violence is the aim of prevention. To prevent violence, however, we encourage peace and hope within youth. Many have also called this ministry a youth ministry. Again, this is not entirely accurate as the ministry involves not only youth, but the family system, the parents, heritage and history of the family, and active involvement of many generations in the health and development of the youth.

Identity becomes a very important issue for us to deal with in the youth in our community. How youth view their identity as individuals and part of a community influences decisions. Their belief and context, both local and historical come into play in defining who we are.

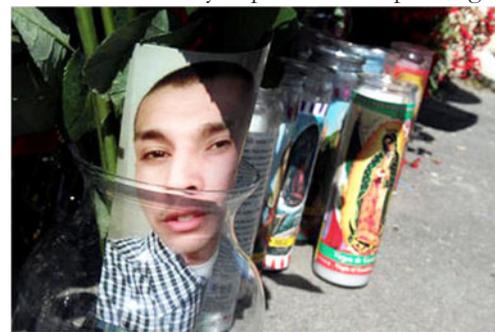
Community Organizing is critical to this ministry. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, we organized, "Peace, Power, and Youth: A Community Conversation," gathering hundreds of people from over 60 institutions to discuss violence and environment facing our youth. The panel was made up of Episcopal and Roman Catholic Bishops, Chief of Police

and City Councilman, Youth City Council Leaders, Probation, Non-profits and School Board. Youth and adults were present in large numbers, and breakout sessions were conducted. The event emphasized working *with* youth and not *for* youth in creating an environment of hope and encouragement.

## **Lent, it just got real**

A popular expression from the youth dictionary is when something "gets real." Its definition comes from any circumstance that takes an ordinary situation and makes it an extreme one, frequently with a potentially volatile situation. On February 28, it got real in Watsonville.

The latest homicide in Santa Cruz happened when Felipe Reyes was stabbed to death in broad daylight. He was a member of Cristo Rey and All Saints Episcopal Church in Watsonville. His 21<sup>st</sup> birthday was three days later. Felipe had been coming to church and had been establishing a new identity for himself, he was beginning to thrive. Ironically, less than a mile away, a Santa Cruz County Supervisor was planting



**R.I.P. Felipe A. Reyes, member of the Cristo Rey All Saints Youth Group. Your journey continues to bring us together to find a way for peace.**

redwood saplings at the church in honor of those youth lost to violence. One parishioner remarked that "these trees will grow, something those who die in violence are denied. It is heartbreaking." For many youth, it got real when they lost one of their own to gang violence.

Many of the youth grow up in an environment where they are inaccurately labeled as illegal or gang members. Recent statistics show that over one in three people incorrectly judge Latinos as "illegal." In many cases, the youth are the first generation born in the United States. Frequently, when reading comments dealing with immigration, you read "they all should have guns and kill each other." Comments like this that remind us of the importance of the work and the impact it has on the wider community.

**(See "Claim" on Page Ten)**

### **“Claim” from Page Nine**

All of these facts are situations in which the youth try to find identity and supports and strengthens the mission to work with the youth to define what they believe and what they can become.

### **Partners in ministry**

Bringing church into community and working with the community is central in this ministry. Together with COPA, the IAF group in Watsonville and Monterey, we seek to bring government, non-profits, families and other institutions into discussion. Law enforcement and education as well as after school programs, recreation and arts are all important to address a thriving community. As budgets are cut and funding is tight for activities, faith groups must take their place in community to actively bring people together, something the church has done historically. Yet the difference is we must be “out there” gathering people. Expecting people to show up at the doors of the church to be a solution will not provide the necessary energy.

When I approached the Chief of Police in Seaside about an event, Chief Myers informed me that the effort must be community lead and not lead by law enforcement. Gang violence is a community issue, not a law enforcement issue. When approaching organizations for the event in Watsonville and building a community group in Seaside, the common answer I heard was, “Finally, the church is getting involved,” and, “we need you.”

Partnering and organizing resources is critical, especially in rural environments. Learning to discuss and work together on points of common interest will help build a community that will help everyone thrive, especially the youth. The church has a history of providing education and formation, not only for youth but also for families. Just as we strive to work with youth and not for youth, we must strive to work with community and not just for community to provide these valuable, needed resources.

Working together with other churches, specifically the Roman Catholic Church is critical, especially in a community that has a huge Catholic history and current large Latino immigrant population. In addition to working Bishop to Bishop in El Camino Real, we are forming bonds with the directors of youth ministry, family ministry, faith formation and catechism to learn how we can work together for the youth.

As this ministry builds in California, I realized a similar situation exists on the other side of the country with great friend and fel-

low deacon, the Rev. Arthur Villarreal of St. James Episcopal Church in Macon, Georgia. Like Watsonville, Macon lies 90 miles south of a major metro area, Atlanta. In both cases, rural youth violence prevention can be addressed with community involvement in providing program, but in the age of budget cuts, being creative is critical. I called Arthur to talk about it:

**Deacon Sommer:** I understand you are working with an after school program in Macon. Can you tell me a little about that?

**Deacon Villarreal:** The state of public education in relationship to the criminal activity in the Macon area has only gotten worse in the past few years. An afterschool program that was funded by an endowment had been renting space from St. James to serve the students from *expression* the local middle and high school for about 15 years. But, recently matters have gotten a little out of hand. So, this endowed program decided to close its doors.

**Sommer:** What did you do?

**Villarreal:** After hosting an old fashion neighborhood ice cream social, the kids came and asked us if we could help them in providing a safe place to hang out after school. So, our Rector, Fr. Joseph Shippen and I took their request as a call and reopened the doors. The ice cream social was our effort to find a way to invite the local community into our church. The prior program was only renting out space on campus and was working to serve the youth. After inviting the youth and their families into our actual parish hall, we realized the importance of working with the youth, not just serving their needs.

**Sommer:** What impact did this have on the parish community?

**Villarreal:** A huge one! St. James is a parish with its history from 1913 when Cherokee Heights was a thriving new suburb of Macon. Today, the neighborhood is part of the inner city of Macon with its share of crime and gang violence. Before, the endowed program was just an outside sourced service. Now, the parish is experiencing some growth from within the community. This family size parish is coming together with a renewed call to community and offering financial and volunteer support for the after school program, Cherokee Heights Programs (CHP). Plus, this has stirred up energy around a rector search that can help them fulfill this new call and work to build a more convocational (Deanery) style ministry at St. James.

### **Believing, belonging, becoming**

Just as important in getting out and working in community, the church needs

to provide a space where youth can explore their beliefs and discover their identity and values. Not only do we do that with our



**Deacon Rob Sommer hearing Jay Jay's story of his brother's death and the expression and meaning of his reality at 2nd Street Coffee Shop in Watsonville.**

confirmation class, where we explore what it is to believe, but we live that out in the youth group. Finding activities to which the youth are drawn and building relationship and value are central to the activity with our youth.

Many have said that the youth are the future of the church. That may be true, but they are also the church now. They are called to be that, just as we are called to be there with them. If we view the youth as an emerging church, we can also apply the themes of belonging, believing and becoming to their world. Church becomes a place for them to ask questions, and to form answers with each other and adults. Listening to Deacon Villarreal describe the situation in Georgia reminded me of Freddy, who told his story about a church in Santa Cruz closing its youth group. He was new to this country, and rather than fall into crime and gangs as several members of the group did, he sought out a new youth group in Watsonville. He wanted to belong. Or Jose's story of his middle school where there are two playgrounds: Latino and non-Latino, where kids frequently say they want to “jump the border” and cause trouble. Meanwhile, school administrators walk by those playgrounds every day.

In Watsonville, the youth decided they want to build a soccer team, for boys and girls. The Episcopal Church in Seaside challenged us to the best of five games. Both churches built a soccer team and play each other. The value comes not only in the forming and teaming, but in the identity the youth have with belonging to a group. In this group leadership is built where they help each other with life issues and become brothers and sisters. One member com-

mented to me how he felt like he was a big brother to a younger youth who is severely at risk. Listening and working with youth to learn their reality and join that with church and community will stem the growth in violence.

#### Our Reality and Our Space

Recently, I attended “Our Reality,” a photography exhibit by high school youth that allowed the youth to depict their realities around the need for public safety. The photographs contained one or two words describing the reality followed by a sentence about that reality. I had a moving talk with JayJay, who had lost his brother to gang violence and took a picture of his gravesite.

Youth realities are often dismissed, yet when we get out and hear them, we can respond. Gathering with community and including youth in those discussions leads to activities that build a thriving environment. This activity is the force with which we transform both the youth and community.

Our Space is the name and location for the youth activities at our church in Watsonville. A computer lab, with refurbished computers from partners Loaves, Fishes, and Computers, and networking from partner Rayne Tech is being built. An outdoor chapel is being constructed with youth from different parishes which will allow outdoor youth services. The community garden is provided by Mesa Verde Gardens and Pajaro Community Orchard. Together with partners, we seek to address the issues of identity and youth violence by reaching out with partners and by bringing them together with church to provide hope and encouragement for the youth and provide places for youth and families to discover leadership and build a thriving community.

## membership

**Joining AED is easy and uncomplicated. Just go to the AED web site - [www.episcopaldeacons.org](http://www.episcopaldeacons.org). You'll find two links under “membership” on the left-hand edge of the page. You can choose to join on-line or by mail.**

## through the dust by Ormonde Plater

The deacons in each diocese “constitute a Community of Deacons,” as canon law is careful to point out (in Canon III.7.2). As I have sometimes argued, the nature of deacons exists not so much in ordained persons, deacons taken individually, as in the order as a whole, deacons taken as a collective body. Each body or fellowship of local deacons, unified and collegial by nature, is thus powerfully important because it expresses the meaning of deacons in the local church.

This local community doesn't happen by chance or desire. A community of deacons isn't just wishful thinking, a concept to be encouraged among those who share similar interests, ideals, and experiences. As the canon implies, the community is already “constituted” as a present reality. If a diocese has deacons, those deacons are a special community serving directly under the bishop. The deacons are a community because they are the deacons, carrying out the will of the church as discerned by the bishop and others. In this the deacons reflect the nature of that greater community, the body of Christ, an assembly of baptized people which is both local and universal.

Being part of any community, not just of deacons, can be a difficult enterprise. David Chillingworth, Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, recently [wrote](#) in *The Sunday Times*: “We are becoming more individualistic, less communitarian, less committed to dreams, visions and ideas. People are no less good, kind or caring. But we seem to have a weaker sense of being part of one community and ‘all in this together.’”

To understand the sacred nature of a community, it may help to look for comparisons in the secular world. To use an extreme example, I would never compare a community of deacons to a prison, a place of rigid boundaries and rigid rules, selection by investigation and trial, special clothing, government from above, and chaos within. Surely we have no dioceses that run their deacons as inmates of that kind of establishment!

Instead, one might imagine, a community of deacons resembles a garden. It needs seedling, planting, nurturing, tending, cultivation, and even pruning. It needs gardeners. A gardener needs wisdom and a gentle touch, the ability to observe, and the willingness to receive and act on fresh suggestions. Surely we have dioceses with gardens of deacons and wise gardeners!

Of course there are several kinds of gardens. There is the Classical Garden, in which the plants are strictly controlled and the gardeners busy and strictly controlling. This genre includes the gardens of certain English manor houses and French chateaux, managed to the hilt, and imitated among the wealthy (the robber barons) of North America.

There is the Romantic Garden, in which everything grows wild, with little, if any, attention from idle or distracted gardeners. This includes the garden of the house in which my wife and I lived for many years, up until about a year ago, in which the weeds outgrew everything else.

And there is the *Mélange* or Hodgepodge Garden, in which discipline and freedom live happily in each other's arms, both potted and wild (even in the same flower). I'm not sure such a garden actually exists, or is able to exist for long, but it's my preferred garden for the cultivation of deacons in a diocese. Another way to say this is that plants should have a say is how they are planted, how they grow, and how they are used, and gardeners should make sure this happens in an orderly manner.

Translate this principle into a community of deacons, and you have:

Ideas flowing from below, decisions made by consultation and agreement of all those concerned, regular meetings (business, learning, and social), communication in which all can say what they want, and ministries in which many join.

And that's how a community of deacons can justify its natural-born importance.

Last March, in Baltimore, Pam Nesbit passed the gavel of the AED presidency on to me. It is an exciting time to be in a leadership position in our Association. Most of my attention has gone toward the search for a new Executive Director and preparation for our Conference in Williamsburg. As this issue of Diakoneo goes to press we are in the last week of preparation for our triennial Deacons' Assembly, *Jamestown: A Mere 400 Years. Weaving a New World View.*

Once the triennial is over I begin the work of helping AED live into our recent changes: our new Executive Director, Lori Mills-Curran will be fully on board and our search for a new Communication Director will be completed. The Life Long Learning committee will be meeting to discern the best way to package and share the many "best practices in Formation" that were brought to our Archdeacon/Formation Director Conference last spring. And there are our ongoing

efforts on Domestic Poverty and engaging young adults in The Seven. The Association continues into its 27th year vibrant and ready to serve deacons in formation, in ministry, and in witness. My hope is to inform you regularly of what your Board is doing and considering. In the meantime I want to leave you with a phrase from the Navaho tradition; for me it speaks to our call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

"walk in beauty"

by tina campbell