

Giving Up

Jonathan Hill, Lichfield Diocese's Director of Finance contemplates an alternative understanding of 'giving up for Lent'.

We so easily misrepresent Lent as a miserable time of depriving ourselves – of giving up sweet treats or alcohol, other nice things and even joy. But it is really about reflecting Jesus time in the desert in contemplation and resisting temptation, preparing himself for the years of his public ministry that were about to start.

It is a great time for us to each reflect on our own ministries – we all have them, to family, friends and communities around us: some are very public as clergy and lay ministers, others very quiet through supporting neighbours or words of encouragement or praying for others.

It is often said that the last part of a person to be converted when they come to faith is their wallet, yet tales of generosity and advice on using whatever little wealth we have are the most common topics in the Bible. Some preachers vehemently call for each of us to give exactly ten percent of our income to support the local or global church; a number that comes from the Old Testament: others simply urge considered generosity, following the instruction of St Paul to the Corinthians – “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). The Church of England recommends giving 5% to the local parish and 5% to other Christian mission. What we each actually give is up to us, unknown to the vicar or PCC or anyone else.

What we do know is that our churches, despite the challenges of a secularising nation and reduced voluntary activity across the country, remain key to many communities providing practical and spiritual services. Many people who rarely enter the church value the presence of our buildings at various points in life. And keeping them open relies on the tithes of the faithful and the generosity of visitors.

There is good news here – the average regular giver in the Church of England contributes about £15 each week. In Lichfield Diocese the figure is £11.15, not terrible in a diocese with significant pockets of deprivation and amazingly 7% up on pre-pandemic, pre-cost-of-living-crisis levels. And to those who remain faithful givers, both diocese and parishes are very grateful. However, the number of regular givers has fallen, meaning budgets in parishes generally are squeezed.

I find it hard to process the numbers and detailed spreadsheets without a cup of coffee in my hand, and enjoy buying from a well-known retailer on my way to work. But after a few scribbles on the back of a coffee cup, I realised that if I gave up one cup per week and gave it's cost to my parish and every other giver did the same, we'd solve the cash-flow issues in our parishes at a stroke. I have resolved to do that with a direct debit through the Giving Direct scheme which sends funds directly to your chosen parish.

So my challenge to you this lent is to review your generosity – to your parish church and elsewhere, and do as I have

Jonathan Hill is Lichfield Diocese's Director of Finance

12 tips for going Green.

JANUARY Make 'enjoying nature' your priority. From bird watching to writing about or drawing something that inspires you in nature, growing your own fruit or vegetables, or exploring an area of outstanding natural beauty in the UK, be sure to fall in love with nature in a new way this coming year and allow it to lead your thoughts towards God our Creator. Further ideas can be found at arocha.org.uk/ideas-to-enjoy-nature/

FEBRUARY Go green for Lent. The weeks leading up to Easter are a time for self-reflection, repentance and emulating Jesus' obedience to the Father. Is there something you'd like to give up or take up during Lent that will enable you to reflect on God, contribute to our planet's well-being and enhance others' lives through sustainable, ecofriendly living? Explore some of these changes at arocha.org.uk/go-greenfor-lent/

MARCH Celebrate Spring. Immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of the season – breathe in the fragrance of blossoms, observe budding catkins, note different bird songs, spot footprints, or use the

Pl@ntNet app to identify spring flowers. Nature can boost our happiness, so spend time in your garden, on your balcony, and in local green spaces. Dedicate quality time to appreciate creation's beauty, and thank God for the hope that spring can bring with our Lent resources at arocha.org.uk/connect-with-gods-creation-overlent/

APRIL Fit more active travel into your day and daily routine. Reevaluate your journeys: explore walking or cycling options, or modify your route to include some form of active travel, i.e. disembark a stop early and complete the remaining part of your journey on foot, indulge in a leisurely stroll, or opt for a bike ride along a cyclist-friendly route. Consider connecting with your local Ramblers or cycling group for shared experiences. Use the extra steps or the changed travel arrangements as a prompt to pray for God's creation, nature's preservation and the reduction in fossil fuel usage

MAY Say no to the mow. Mowing your lawn less and letting parts grow long saves you time and helps give nature a home. If you want to make an even bigger impact on wildlife, wait to mow your lawn or a section of it until August to support even more animals. Contribute to citizen science and get to know what (and who!) lives in your church's green space - sign up to take part in Churches Count on Nature (8-16 June 2024) at caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churchescount-on-nature-faqs/.

JUNE Join #30DaysWild. One of A Rocha UK's firm beliefs is that we are more likely to nurture and defend God's creation if we spend time enjoying it. The Wildlife Trusts' 30 Days Wild challenge is a great opportunity to engage with nature as an individual, household, or with your church community throughout June. Find some wild ideas at wildlifetrusts.org/30-dayswild

JULY Taste the benefits of seasonal and local food. Plan to incorporate locally grown produce into your diet and shopping list throughout the seasons, as it is harvested at its peak ripeness, ensuring superior flavour compared to imported alternatives that have travelled thousands of miles. If saying grace before a meal is a regular practice in your household, this month, include giving thanks for your local food producers.

AUGUST Assist local wildlife during very hot weather. Provide hedgehogs with hedgehog biscuits (available at many pet stores and online) or dog biscuits (small/ crumbed) as their prey of slugs, snails and worms diminishes, and ensure a safe exit for them and other small mammals if you have a garden pond. Help garden birds by maintaining a filled bird bath and supplying supplementary food including black sunflower seeds, pinhead oatmeal, soaked sultanas, raisins, currants, mealworms, waxworms, and a nutritious seed mixture, when natural supplies become scarce. More tips can be found at arocha.org.uk/looking-after-wildlifeinthe-heat/

SEPTEMBER Step outside this Season of Creation (1 September - 4 October). Connect with nature and dedicate this time to God as the Creator and sustainer of all life. Choose an idea or two from our resource and encourage your church family to take part too! Free to download at arocha.org.uk/stepoutside-this-season-of-creationresource/

OCTOBER Contribute to wildlife conservation. Clean bird feeders to prevent diseases spreading to winter migrants. Install a nest box well before breeding season to provide a cosy retreat for small birds during cold winter nights. Prepare to support more birds next year, with more tips at arocha.org.uk/give-abird-a-home. As you observe the local birds reflect on this verse, 'I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine.' Psalm 50:11.

NOVEMBER Green your home. Combat climate change and reduce heating costs by identifying and sealing drafts around your home. Find the gaps that let the cold air in and warm air out (think keyholes, letterboxes, cracks around the edges or bottoms of windows and doors, loft hatches, floorboards, etc.) and fix these gaps using the correct materials and online tutorials. Additionally, place foil or radiator panels to reflect heat into your room. Pray for those who might be experiencing the cold this winter.

DECEMBER Celebrate a Greener Christmas. Find ways to make your Christmas festivities both a joyous celebration of Christ's coming and environmentally conscious. Explore A Rocha UK's twelve tips for a greener Christmas at arocha.org.uk/our-twelve-tips-for-a-greener-Christmas.

Visit arocha.org.uk/wild-Christian for more eco tips.

