



FAITH PERSPECTIVE -

Holy Hikes ministry

Holy Hikes ministry seeks God in nature by celebrating Eucharist one footstep at a time

By David Paulsen



The Rev. Justin Cannon presides at Holy Eucharist on one of the Holy Hikes outings of the original chapter in the San Francisco area.

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The Blue Ridge Mountains have always been God's country. Now they have a liturgy to match.

"I call it giving credit where credit is due," said Laura Snow Hawkins, founder of the Holy Hikes chapter in Greenville, South Carolina. "The woods, the nature, the creation — that's God's. That's God's handiwork."

Hawkins is a member of [St. Peter's Episcopal Church](#), which is sponsoring the Holy Hikes chapter, one of about a half dozen chapters (and counting) around the country modeled after the original [Holy Hikes](#) in Northern California. The Upper South Carolina Holy Hikes held its first official hike on April 14 at [Conestee Park in Greenville](#).

The concept is simple and could be described as Holy Eucharist in the wilderness. Most hikes are short, easy loops that people of all abilities can join, and the leader, typically a priest, presides over an Episcopal liturgy along the trail, complete with hymns, readings, prayer and communion spaced out along the hike route.

"It's kind of a stational Eucharist," said the Rev. Justin Cannon, Holy Hikes' founder and the rector of [All Saints Episcopal Church](#) in San Leandro, California. He received \$5,000 this year through a Stewardship of Creation grant from the Episcopal Church to help expand the reach of the hiking ministry as it sets up new chapters like the one in Greenville.

"For me, the Earth is our home. We are connected to the wind, to the water, to the creatures, to the sun," Cannon said. "Our life, and therefore our life in Christ, and everything we do spiritually and secularly has its roots in the Earth, so this is really for me about honoring that relationship, reconnecting with our home and rebuilding communion with the Earth."

Hawkins has felt a love of the outdoors since childhood hikes with her family and their camping outings in western Pennsylvania. As an adult, she found natural beauty all around her in South Carolina's mountain region, but Hawkins hadn't thought of the liturgical potential of those surroundings until an August 2016 church hike in [DuPont State Recreational Forest](#) just across the border in North Carolina.

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That hike was a one-time outing organized by the Rev. Dorian Del Priore, who was assistant rector of St. Peter's at the time. He led the hike, celebrated Eucharist and spoke of care of creation. "It was just awesome," Hawkins said, and responding to her interest, Del Priore told her about Cannon's Holy Hikes ministry.

Holy Hikes, while inspiring similar ministries around the country, was itself inspired by an earlier ministry called [Worship in the Wilderness](#) that was led by the Rev. Jon Anderson in Santa Fe, New Mexico. While Cannon was attending seminary, he received a grant to spend summer 2008 exploring the connections between his faith and his love of the outdoors, and that exploration included experiencing Worship in the Wilderness first hand.

Liturgical hiking

Anderson called it "liturgical hiking." To bring church outside, he organized monthly gatherings to celebrate Holy Eucharist in natural settings in and around Santa Fe. The experience spoke deeply to the connection Cannon felt between the Earth and his Christian spirituality.

Worship in the Wilderness ended in November 2011 when Anderson left Santa Fe for a new call. By then, Cannon was already following in Anderson's footsteps, launching Holy Hikes in 2010 as he began diocesan ministry.

At each call, Cannon has asked his parish to sponsor Holy Hikes, and it [now is a ministry of All Saints](#). Cannon tries to design the monthly hikes to be as accessible as possible, including for children and people with handicaps. Most are led by Cannon, though California Bishop Marc Andrus, wearing jeans and carrying a crozier, has been known to join the group and preside over the Holy Eucharist on some hikes.

And while the hikes average about a dozen participants, some have drawn as many as 40. At the beginning of each, the hikers are asked to say where they are from and what congregation, if any. Some have been invited by friends, adding a light evangelical element to the hikes.

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“I think people are more prone to bring their friends on a Holy Hike than they are to a church,” Cannon said.



Worshippers walk the labyrinth at Lands End in San Francisco during a Holy Hike service.

San Francisco’s Lands End in the [Golden Gate National Recreation Area](#) is a favorite destination among Holy Hikers because it is close to the ocean. The group hikes out a mile and a quarter to a stone labyrinth overlooking the waves and surf.

“It’s just breathtaking,” Cannon said.

One of the unique aspects of Holy Hikes is the sermon: silence. Instead of a preacher addressing the congregation, the hikers are encouraged to wander quietly for 10 to 20 minutes so they can experience nature and let God speak to them through the trees, flowers, animals, rocks or waterfalls.

“I just tell people, here is the Earth, and God’s spirit is above and through all God’s creation. ... May this be a time for the Earth to speak to you and minister to you,” Cannon said. After the group comes back together, everyone is encouraged to share some of their “silence sermons.”

“That’s my favorite part,” he said. “It’s always amazing to hear from people what their experience of that hike is.”

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Two dozen people joined the inaugural hike of Holy Hikes Upper South Carolina in Greenville.

It's an experience that can be felt anywhere, which is why Cannon has been helping other Episcopalians [start their own monthly hiking groups](#) in places like northern Wisconsin, central Pennsylvania, northeast Ohio, southern Indiana, Vermont and West Virginia. Hawkins' chapter in South Carolina is the newest. Its first Holy Hike last month was led by the Rev. Furman Buchanan and drew two dozen participants. The next is planned for May 19 at [Paris Mountain State Park](#).

Hawkins was raised Methodist, and her husband was Baptist. Several years ago, they began looking for a new congregation to call their own and found a home in the Episcopal Church, partly because of its emphasis on preserving God's creation, she said.

After working for a couple years in Key West, Florida, Hawkins settled with her husband in Greenville, and in February 2017 she retired from her customer service job at Southwest Airlines to spend more time pursuing her interest in the outdoors and outdoor education.

The time was right for her to start a local Holy Hikes chapter.

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Cannon helped Hawkins step by step with details like picking liturgies, getting approval from the vestry and setting up a Facebook page for the chapter. “I couldn’t have done it without him,” she said.

Now that her chapter’s hikes have begun, Hawkins’ voice readily conveys her excitement about the ministry. Like Cannon, she appreciates how it combines her twin passions for faith and nature.

“When I’m outside I can truly see the majesty and the amazement of God out there the creation,” Hawkins said. In something as common as the variety and complexity of the wildflowers on the trail, “I see and feel the presence of God.”

– *David Paulsen is an editor and reporter for the Episcopal News Service.*

Footnote - The Abundant Table, a land based ministry in Ventura County, CA just north of Los Angeles invites all who are interested to join us for our monthly “Out in the Watershed” service. These services are part of our weekly **Sunday evening Farm Church gatherings** and take place every Second Sunday of the month, 4:30-6pm. Each outdoor service explores a different geographical part of the Ventura River Watershed and weaves together creation based readings, Biblical texts and reflection in a “travelling liturgy” form that concludes with the breaking of bread. To receive more information and/or to be placed on our Farm Church email list, please contact me at nicole@theabundanttable.org

