

Words from West End

Spring 2018

Dust and Ashes in Sixth Grade



For Community Church Without Walls, Ash Wednesday has always been a pickle. Our liturgical ancestors who determined that a service of ashes should fall on Wednesday did not check with CCWW about our weekly schedule. If they had, they would know that Wednesday nights are our youth and kids nights, which means they are not conducive to the quiet reverence of a service of ashes. In the symphony of laughter, squeals, and stomping feet, you're lucky if you can get the volume down long enough to bless the food.

In the midst of all that joy and silliness, what do we do with the heaviness of Ash Wednesday? How do you dump a reflection on mortality onto a gaggle of squirming children and teenagers? As I listened to our children's minister break down the message in simple terms, I wondered—*Is it worth all this trouble? Does Ash Wednesday have something to say to children?*

When the message was over, and the ashes brought forward, one sixth-grader went off script and stood up from her seat. I recognized her immediately. This was a kid with an attitude, a backstory, and no shortage of baggage.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I saw her rise from her seat and walk to the front as Garrett prayed over the ashes. I thought she might be making a joke or trying to disrupt the service, but instead she muttered something to Garrett. He held the ashes out to her, and she took some in her fingers. Worshipers came forward, and, with perfect confidence, she announced to each their finitude – *From dust you were created, and to dust you will return* – before making the sign of the cross on their foreheads.

—Rev. Caitlin Harper

Easter in the Garden

At least once a year (often more!), we stack up the metal chairs, load up some tables, and haul the keyboard and amp down the block and across the street to worship among the honey bees, blackberries, greens, and sweet potatoes. The West End Community Garden began as a joint venture between Community Church Without Walls and our sister organization, Urban Ministry, in 2008, transforming an urban lot into a lush green space. Every summer the okra plants tower like young palm trees overhead and the sun gold cherry tomatoes seem to glow in the cool of the morning light. In the spring, greens dominate the dark beds of composted soil – colorful chard, curly kale, purple-hued mustard greens. What a place to celebrate resurrection!

Not only does worshiping in the garden offer a symbolic and lovely change of space, it also serves as an outreach. Folks who might not *go* to church are often inspired to stop and worship if it's happening right outside their door or on their walking route. Last year, a group children who had just moved into a house nearby skipped across the street to find out what this joyful gathering was all about. It wasn't long before they were popping in at every church function and even singing in the choir!

This year, weather permitting, Easter Sunday will be our first worship service in the garden. Join us at 2:00pm, April 1st as we celebrated the risen Christ among the honeybees and greens!



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The Community Church Without Walls • Pastors Caitlin and Garrett Harper • 1229 Cotton Ave. SW • Birmingham, AL 35211
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Night Walks

Three years ago, Caitlin and I moved into West End and started pastoring Community Church Without Walls. West End is a beautiful place to live, with walk-able sidewalks on both sides of the street. On nice days, neighbors sit on their front porches and enjoy one another’s company. Every morning children stroll past our house to Hemphill Elementary. When Caitlin went into labor, we were only a minute away from Princeton Baptist Medical Center. In many ways I have enjoyed living in West End more than any other place.

On the other hand, there is a reason West End has a reputation. It is not uncommon to hear gunfire at night. Three months after moving into the neighborhood there were three murders within two blocks of our house. West End is no stranger to violence, which can make it a hard place to live.

The violence is not exclusive to West End. Birmingham has the 5th highest murder rate in the nation, higher than Atlanta or Baltimore. Unfortunately, the majority of these murders happen in West Birmingham.

Concerned pastors from all over West Birmingham have come together to faithfully respond by seeking to build relationships with the people committing the violence. Since most of the perpetrators rarely visit our churches, we chose to go out and meet them where they are.

Every Monday night, a group of pastors and deacons gather together to walk the streets of West End to meet people caught up in cycles of violence. We worked with the West End Neighborhood Association and the police department to locate one of the most violent blocks in West Birmingham, which just happens to be only a few blocks from Urban Ministry. We have been walking every Monday night for a month. We have met people in our neighborhood who have never come to our churches, and we have also formed closer bonds with each other.

Our mission is simple: to listen, to learn, and to love. We are not evangelizing or inviting people to our churches. We are simply building relationships with the people we believe are most likely to kill or to be killed by a gun. As we continue to strengthen these relationships, we hope to become liaisons between our community and the police.

Seeing so many pastors from different churches gathering together to walk the streets at night gives me hope. It gives me hope that change can come. It gives me hope that lives can be saved. It gives me hope that many churches can become unified in a common mission. Every Monday night we begin and end our walks with prayer. We pray for our community, for the people we meet, and for strength to keep walking week after week.

Please remember us in your prayers. Together, with the help of Christ, we believe change will come.

—Rev. Garrett Harper

All Hands on Deck for Discovery Weekend!

Each year, CCWW partners with First UMC Birmingham for a weekend of worship, discipleship, and play. Discovery Weekend 2018 brought the wonderful challenge of a massive group of middle schoolers. It’s always amazing to see the ways our high school students rise to the task of discipling the middle school students, and this year was no exception.

This year, we chose the theme *NAME*. Throughout Scripture, names carry a symbolic weight. God makes humans from the dust and names the first one Adam (“soil,” “land,” or “earth”). Sarah is so tickled at God’s promise of a child that she laughs out loud. Her son’s name would be Isaac, or “laughter.” When the prophets talk of a savior from God, they find they must use many names – Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Immanuel. Names reflect identity on a deep level, even for the Son of God.

Any middle school student can tell you that we live in a world of labels and naming-calling. The names we are called are not always true or gracious. We chose the theme *NAME* so that middle school students could not only unpack the power of names, but also so they could resist the unkind labels they may hear and claim the names God gives them instead.

