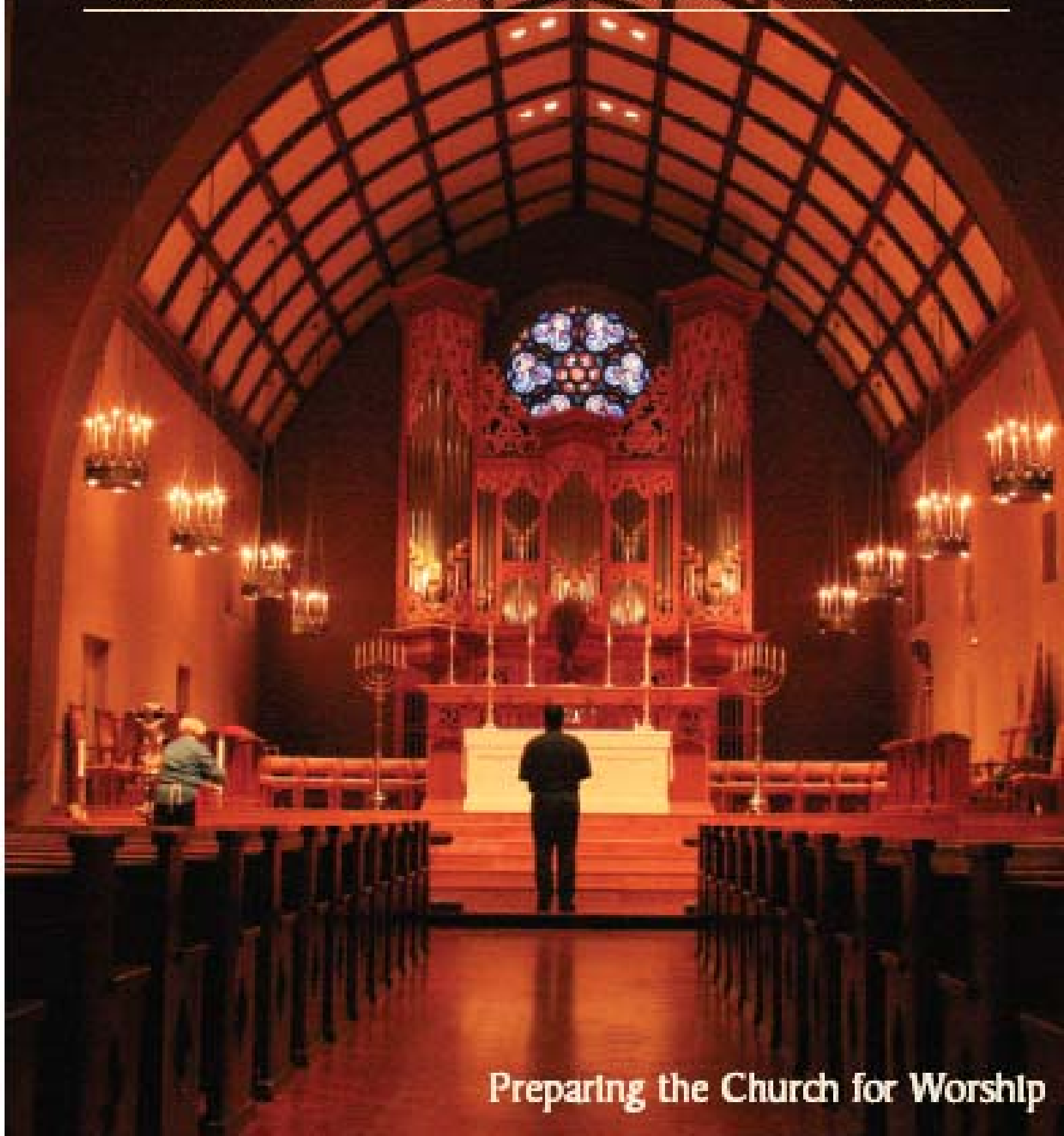


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Preparing the Church for Worship



The procession through the streets of the Old City en route to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

John P. Downey photos

In the Midst of Jerusalem

The experience of one among the crowd during Holy Week

By John P. Downey

"Either one of these churches is right and everyone else is wrong, or we've all got it partly right and partly wrong." I said this to a wise and experienced priest during the course of Orthodox Holy Week in Jerusalem in 2008. His reply was, "And I think we've all got it mostly wrong." This summed up my journey of heart and soul through three trips to Jerusalem over the course of 23 years.

The most recent was in April 2008, when a sabbatical provided the opportunity to experience Orthodox Holy Week and Easter in the company of others taking the annual course offered by St. George's College. We participated in and reflected on the practices and liturgies of contemporary Paschal pilgrims. Some of this can be told. However, much overwhelms the capacity to describe.

My first trip took place in 1985, when as a young and naïve priest, I joined one of the many "clergy familiarization" tours. It was a bit of Holy Land as "theme park," and while I expected to be spiritually inspired, it came in a form I could never have expected (which is so often the way of God). My introduction to the Old City of Jerusalem was distressing as I encountered the divisions and tensions among Christians, Muslims, and

Jews. Most disturbing for me were the divisions between Christians manifested at the Church of the Resurrection/Holy Sepulcher.

Toward the end of the trip, I was on the Mount of Olives looking down at the Old City when something surged up from deep in my soul. The only and inadequate words I can give it are, "This is not what Jesus was about." Jesus was not about setting up one more religion to be in rivalry and conflict with others and with itself. I have spent more than 20 years since that day pondering the challenge of that experience and its implications.

My second trip to Jerusalem was in 2004, when my wife and I took part in the North American Cathedral Deans' Conference, held in Israel and Palestine that year. While there was sufficient introductory touring for those who had never been to the Holy Land, much of the conference was about what is generally called "the situation." That is, the current political troubles. The staff of St. George's told us that "the longer you are here the less you will understand what is going on."

All of this is background to the sabbatical of 2008 and the experience of this Episcopalian at Orthodox Holy Week and Easter in Jerusalem. Again, the good people of St. George's helped us in every way. As usual, the principal lecturer was Canon Hugh Wybrew, former dean of St. George's Cathedral, and sometime vicar of St. Mary Magdalene, Oxford.

Because we arrived late on Palm Sunday, we were

(Continued on next page)



Armenian clergy and Episcopal bishops among those in the procession.

In the Midst of Jerusalem

(Continued from previous page)

not able to participate in its liturgical observances, but we caught up on Monday and Tuesday by visiting Bethany and the Mount of Olives, taking time to walk the traditional way of the palm procession. By mid-week we were ready to join the others for the principal services of what we in the Western Church call the



An overflow crowd watches the foot washing outside St. Mark's Syrian Orthodox Church.

Triduum or three days.

Foot washing on Holy Thursday is generally not practiced in Orthodox

parish churches, but is more a cathedral and episcopal rite with the bishop taking the role of Jesus, washing the feet of other bishops or priests representing the apostles. With due exceptions even to this, we observed the Greek, Armenian, and Syrian Orthodox foot-washing ceremonies on a sweltering day.

The emotional focus of the Good Friday liturgies in the Orthodox world seems to come when after Vespers, the *epitaphion* or "winding sheet" is brought out in procession. This is a cloth icon of the body of Jesus, resting in death. The cross itself is commemorated at other times and in other ways, while the sense here is of a tender recognition that Jesus has completed his work.

The holy fire ceremony on Holy Saturday afternoon is the center of attention for Orthodox Easter in Jerusalem. The Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and an Armenian representative enter the Holy Sepulcher and emerge with flaming torches, the fire of which is passed throughout the church, into the streets, and even beyond to chartered planes waiting to carry them to Greece and Russia. Because of the thousands who attempt to attend it and "the situation," we were cautioned not to expect that we would get into the Church of the Resurrection for the event. In fact, of the 12 of us who set out from St. George's that morning, only four ended up in the church. I was fortunate to be one of them.

We made our way to St. James' Armenian Cathedral. The Armenians graciously make a place for Anglicans on this day, and we processed with them from the cathedral through the narrow streets. The festive atmosphere that prevailed at the beginning turned edgy as we got closer to the church. Several times the procession halted in "gridlock" with not a little pushing, shoving, and shouting. At

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each checkpoint, more were turned away. We were stunned when we finally were admitted into the parvis and an Armenian priest urged us to hurry into the church to find a place to stand. Quickly we found ourselves in the Armenian section near the Holy Sepulcher with a clear view of the door into the tomb of Jesus. It was one hour before the holy fire ceremony was to begin.

Any description of what followed will fall far short of the reality. The Church of the Resurrection is dangerously crowded and unspeakably hot with bodies jammed against bodies on all sides. It is loud, even boisterous, with longstanding national and ecclesial divisions making it seem like a bad sports rivalry, about to break out in a fight.

As the liturgical procession encircles the Holy Sepulcher three times, the crowd becomes quieter. When the patriarch and the Armenian priest enter the tomb, the lights are dimmed. Minutes later cheering breaks out and bells ring wildly as fire is carried from windows on the sides of the tomb and the patriarch appears at the door blessing with two large torches. As the light, noise and heat increase, words fail.

"All of us have got it mostly wrong." Certainly our divisions and tensions indicate that we have not yet gotten what Jesus was about, whatever our claims, our convictions, or our spiritual experiences. My three journeys to Jerusalem, and the span of years they mark, have led me to understand that I am not on the "mount," looking down on others' failings, but rather am in the "midst," one more soul among the crowd seeking to be faithful to Jesus. For me, that means doing what I can, however imperfectly, to help in the reconciliation of those divisions and tensions. We may have got it "mostly wrong," but it is Jesus and his Resurrection that still draws pilgrims to Jerusalem and to our churches throughout the world, and in that there remains hope. □

The Very Rev. John P. Downey is dean of the Cathedral of St. Paul, Erie, Pa.

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