

Ashes for wanderers

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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A [comment](#) on my recent rush-hour-communion [post](#) mentioned the Episcopal Church's recent practice of Ashes to Go, a form of "liturgical evangelism" that has brought congregations out into streets, bus stations, train stations and subway stations to dispense ashes on Ash Wednesday.

When I started to read about Ashes to Go, I had many of the same questions that I brought to early-morning communion. At first I thought, ashes to go? Whatever happened to liturgy and community? Aren't we just feeding into our culture's unwillingness to stop for anything at anytime? Can ashes really be offered like a fast food item at a take out window?

But once again, in the midst of these restless and protesting thoughts, another reality has stepped in: I am currently a homeless Christian, a wanderer without a congregation. The reasons for my homelessness are, like most homelessness, complex. Since I have no readily available religious community, I have been worrying endlessly over where and how to receive ashes this coming Wednesday. Every option seems fraught with difficulties and problems. Ashes to Go speaks to me

with an innate appeal.

Two years ago, an Episcopal congregation in St. Louis offered Ashes to Go for the first time, and since then the idea has spread rapidly. Last year, 25 congregations offered ashes on the street in Chicago alone, and the offerings are rapidly multiplying at subway stations and bus stops all over the country.

The idea is to bring the church, with its rites and symbols, to the people--not to force anything on them, but because forgiveness, repentance, introspection, a moment of connection and quiet are needed everywhere. Bishop Jeff Lee, of the diocese of Chicago, recalls a woman, who, upon receiving ashes from him said that she never imagined that "the church would come out here to us."

[Writing about Ashes to Go last year](#), Sara Miles tells of her fellow ash dispenser, Deb, being transfixed by the way that liturgy inserts timelessness in a place where people are constantly rushing. Miles writes,

"It's so intense," she told me. "Whenever your fingers touch the forehead, it's like time stops, over and over and over."

I will absolutely place myself in these ash dispensers' path tomorrow, a hungry supplicant. And I will probably say "thank you" instead of "amen" after a kind stranger tells me that I am dust and to dust I will return.