

It makes sense.

God's people are out there in the streets, the offices and stores and factories. Even more of God's people are there than in the churches on Ash Wednesday.

Ashes, as a reminder of our mortality and a call to repentance, belong to the public spaces and the daily work of our lives, not just to the times and spaces of the regular worshiping community.

Jesus did it.

Well, not ashes precisely, but going out into the streets to find, teach, and heal the people who weren't "in church," who had lost the habit or hope of being part of the holy community.

It's easy.

You don't need a lot of set up or preparation. One or two people, in vestments, with ashes, at a place where people gather on an ordinary weekday – and you have a wonderful unexpected moment of liturgy and grace!

Ashes to Go is a ministry that lay people may lead as well as bishops, priests and deacons, and Ashes teams should include both clergy and lay people not only to offer ashes, but also to engage in conversation – about Lent or about life – with people who receive ashes and those simply passing by.

More importantly, it's evangelism.

Our liturgy gives us powerful, portable symbols that can go almost anywhere, and make it very easy for people to discover that God – and the church! – will meet them right in the midst of daily life.

That discovery is good news: a discovery that we are called to share.

At best, that discovery brings people into the community of faith, looking for more. And for those who don't come looking for more, it's still a moment of grace, a reminder that God does not forget us, even if we are dust, unable to remember God without God's help.

But is it "cheap grace"?

In the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, the imposition of ashes serves as our invitation to repentance, and a response to our encounter with the Word of God. Ashes to Go moves the encounter with God (in the form of God's people offering prayer and symbols) and that invitation to repentance out of the church building, into the spaces of everyday life where we live out our response to God. The grace comes from God, the same free gift at the same cost, as God's grace made known inside the church.

Ok, then, what do we do? ----->

Consider: Where are the people who are not in church on Ash Wednesday?

On trains and buses? At the store? Doing shift work? Having lunch on the run? Shuttling the kids to school? Where else?

Choose a place that allows you to meet people where they are, then choose a liturgical option.

- A. A prayer (said together, or by the minister), imposition of Ashes and dismissal.
This gives the imposition of ashes a toe-hold in common prayer, and can go nearly anywhere, from Metra platforms to McDonalds to hospitals. You can do it with a small group of people, or one-on-one.

- B. A Mini-Liturgy, one on one or small group.
Salutation and collect, blessing of the ashes and imposition, a portion of Psalm 51, said together, an adapted form of the absolution, and exchange of peace.
This substantially summarizes the liturgy of the day, and is probably most appropriate for "third spaces" – opportunities to stop, have conversation, and bridge the gap between private and public, but not appropriate for a full worship service.

- C. A Shortened Proper Liturgy of the Word.
Optional Invitation to a Holy Lent, collect, brief scripture reading, prayer and imposition of ashes, prayers of penitence and absolution, exchange of peace.
This can be presented with handouts to share, or by adapting the prayers so that "Amen," is the only response people need. This also accommodates additions like incense or music for greater visibility.
Apt for places where a group of people can gather for 10 or 15 minutes: Downtown at lunchtime, in a park, on the steps of the church, if located in a pedestrian or park-able district. Allows people to essentially "go to church" where they already are; or to *find* church where they don't expect it.

- D. The very simplest option is simply to impose the Ashes, saying:
"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."
This allows for flexibility in the conversation, offering ashes to someone who is late for their train, or engaging in a conversation about repentance and the meaning of ashes with someone else.

Suggested forms of liturgical A, B, and C are available on the Diocesan website at _____.

Gather your team, dress them warmly (it's March!), and go forth to spread the good news, one unexpected liturgical moment at a time.