A Lenten Message from the Bishop

In the past couple of years, an increasing number of congregations and their clergy across mainline protestant denominations have offered the imposition of ashes in the marketplace and busy intersections of the communities they serve. While many appreciate the context of the full Ash Wednesday liturgy to begin the Lenten journey, there is merit to taking the church to the world and reminding those who might otherwise overlook the start of this penitential season that it is available to them, whoever and however busy they are. It is a faithful act of an inviting church.

Of course, wherever ashes are imposed, whether in the church or in the streets, they are always “to go.” They mark the start of a journey with Jesus back to God, signifying the mortality and humility with which we embark. Thus, in receiving ashes, we commit to that journey, to going along the path of self-examination and repentance that leads to Golgotha, the empty tomb, and new life. The ashes are an outward sign of our commitment to “the observance of a holy Lent,” as the Prayer Book invitation puts it, to going on this journey with Jesus, the end of which is giving ourselves more fully to God.

When ashes are imposed outside of the formal Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is important to distribute to the recipients a card with the name of the parish, its address, website, service hours, Lenten programs, and contact information. It provides them with some direction to where the “ashes to go” suggest we are going, and identifies those with whom they might get there. Likewise, for those who receive ashes in church, the reminder of our destination and the Lenten disciplines that help us along the way is essential.

I wish each of you a holy Lent and the great blessing of faithful companions as you go.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.

Bishop of Ohio