

### All good gifts: stewardship and harvest

Autumn stewardship programmes can be enhanced by the celebration of harvest festival. This paper suggests ways of integrating harvest into Giving in Grace and offers some ideas to enrich local harvest celebrations.



Clergy and planning groups preparing for Giving in Grace in the autumn may well need to consider how best to integrate harvest into the programme. The festival itself is rich with stewardship themes: care for creation and the challenge to generous living in a world of injustice and inequality resonate with the biblical steward's commitment to social justice. Likewise the harvest themes of God's provision, abundance, gratitude and the offering of our harvest gifts offer rich teaching and liturgical possibilities for stewardship.

Where harvest is largely a congregational celebration, the integration will pose no problems. However, harvest is a valued community celebration, often with many visitors to the church. We must avoid any appearance of a crude appeal for money to a larger-than-normal congregation. That said, a creative approach can blend harvest celebrations with a challenge to generosity and to support the ongoing ministry of the church.

#### Rejoice; remember; rely!

A fully resourced and structured all-age service for harvest is offered that can be used for Eucharistic or non-Eucharistic worship and can be adapted for adults only, for separate children's groups and, of course, all together in church. This all-age service will richly repay some prior preparation. It is themed around the Old Testament Festival of Shelters (*Sukkot* or Tabernacles), which celebrates the fruit harvest. The twin themes of this Jewish festival are reflected in the materials: that of **rejoicing** in the harvest and **remembering** the time the people spent in the desert after being set free from Egypt. The challenge is for us to rely on God's goodness and to give from what is given to us.

The all-age materials can be used with any of the preaching streams and there is an obvious fit with the Exodus preaching resources.

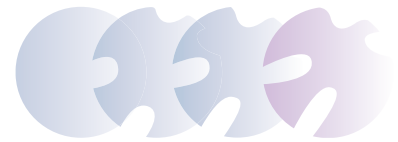
#### Building the shelter

To this day, many Jewish families construct a simple shelter outside their homes for the week-long celebration of the Feast of Shelters. By tradition, the roof must have gaps so that the stars can be seen – a reminder of the promise to Abraham – and the shelter is decorated with many types of fruits. The harvest resources suggest building and decorating a shelter as a visual aid and as an all-age activity. Full guidance on this and a full harvest liturgy can be found under Designing the Programme in More Resources at the Harvest Festival tab.

#### Integrating harvest and stewardship

The following options may be considered by clergy and planning groups; doubtless other possibilities will suggest themselves.

- Practically speaking, harvest may simply be something that sits within the preaching series. This should not present a problem. Even if harvest is effectively 'time out' from the Giving in Grace programme,



the harvest themes of celebration and response mesh neatly with the thrust of the preaching. Both preachers and service leaders can make the necessary links of the harvest themes and the Giving in Grace programme.

- Use the harvest liturgy for a joyful and possibly a low-key *launch* of the Giving in Grace programme. The themes of rejoicing, remembering and gift giving, of God's abundant provision and our grateful response offer a rich model of our stewardship teaching. In many churches, the harvest gifts are then shared with the wider community and therefore address the theme of mission and meeting needs. Depending on the length of the rest of the preaching series, consider distributing the programme literature at the end of the service, linking the invitation to respond with our response to the goodness of God who calls us to rejoice, remember and rely.
- Plan for harvest to include the Thanksgiving Service, usually a fortnight after the end of the preaching series, at which congregational response forms are offered to God in our worship. The offering of our harvest gifts provides an apt liturgical and celebratory context. This can be done as the harvest gifts of food are brought to the front of the church. Preferably, however, it is a separate liturgical act as indicated in the notes to the harvest liturgy. Consider using the Thanksgiving Litany at this point in the service, found under Designing the Programme in More Resources at the Thanksgiving Service tab.

### Other ideas to enrich harvest

Be creative in how you celebrate around the harvest festival. Again, the following are starters for ten; local creativity will suggest many more ideas.

- Turn coffee time after the service into *The World Café*. Serve a range of fairly traded beverages, chocolates, nuts and fruits from around the world. This may be something young people in the church could offer to the congregation
- A temporary shelter might form the centrepiece of a *World Café* or be a focal point of its own. Provide some simple information explaining the thinking behind the shelter and its construction. Better still, have some young people ready to explain it.

- As someone once said, by breakfast we have depended on half the world. Consider offering a harvest breakfast before the usual service time, perhaps linking together the congregations of two morning services. The food should be something easy to lay on, e.g. croissants or doughnuts and with an emphasis on fresh fruit and drinks. Read the Bible passage from Leviticus 23:33-43 and explain the significance of this Jewish festival and the practice of building shelters.



- A harvest lunch is a common feature of church life so try a world harvest lunch. Provide or ask people to bring food as far as possible from around the world, with plenty of fruit.
- Hold a traditional harvest supper over harvest weekend and enhance it with reference to the Festival of Shelters. A shelter is an obvious decoration but consider also some fruit and other food from around the world and the use of leafy branches that are waved during the processions at the Feast of Shelters.
- As part of harvest, invite the local school into the church and hall one evening for crafts and light refreshments organised by the staff and church volunteers. The shelter will provide the focal point for an informal assembly to end the evening.

Sensitivity and creativity are at a premium when thinking about Harvest Festival. Done well this popular festival offers rich possibilities for developing themes of gratitude and generosity and a worship context for thinking about our giving response to God's grace.