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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and Lent will begin for us. Every year we gather our thoughts, intentions and prayers around preparing for Easter and for many of us, the renewal of our baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil. That service is particularly festive when we are fortunate enough to have baptisms as well.

This year, by General Convention Resolution, the First Sunday in Lent will be celebrated around the church as Episcopal Relief and Development Sunday (ERD). And we will join the wider church in marking the fabulous ministry ERD has around the world and re-commit ourselves to its mission and ministry. We don't do this just because they are a good outfit and we are generous people. That would be enough, in some circles, but for us, there is something far deeper in this endeavor and that spiritual ground for us is none other than our baptismal vows. The last two that we make for ourselves or others, if we are sponsors of youngsters, are:

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will with God's help.

To engage in these two vows, we need to not only get our spiritual sense in sync with God but we also need to reflect the intention with action. And to that end, I will be proposing something that we can do as a community in Christ which not only addresses those vows but also the challenge found in the **Millennium Development Goals** which are endorsed by Episcopal Relief and Development. In particular I will be asking us as a parish to commit to working toward the third goal which reads, **Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.** Much hangs on the fulfillment of this goal, more than one would think at first glance.

Over the last weeks, I have been reading Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book, *Half the Sky*. It chronicles two things. The first is that horrible treatment of women takes place in countries all over the world, but especially in those countries found in many parts of Africa, and the Far, Middle and Near East. The atrocities that afflict women, range from slavery and the subject of human trafficking, to being so discarded by society that they are left to die on the outside of the villages, when old or sick. For us, what they go through is unimaginable. The second major theme in this book is what can be done about it. And to that end, the key, argues the authors, lies in the third of the Millennium Development Goals, printed above. So, to that end, **I will be asking all of us to take on a parish project to help fund education for young girls in**

these countries, which evidence seems to prove does more to tackle this outrageous treatment of girls and women throughout these areas of our globe. Basically, education provides these girls with the tools to understand their bodies, gives them self worth and dignity to stand up to cruel behavior and makes them economically powerful which can turn an abusive husband and village to being respectful. I will have more about this on Sunday, February 21st, at the services.

As well, we will be introducing a special ministry for the women of the parish. Rebecca Blickenstaff has become a part of the organization, Women for Women International and part of their ministry is to simply write letters, offering support to women in all parts of the world. While you and I can't imagine this as being critical, it absolutely is and reports say that the mere possession of a letter from someone else is miraculous for shoring up the attitude, courage and resolve of these women who are treated not as second class citizens but as sub-class people. I'm delighted that Rebecca has volunteered to help in our parish's involvement in this ministry.

Finally, on the First Sunday of Lent, we will be distributing booklets from ERD as well as the traditional coin boxes for all of us to collect money for their mission. Hopefully we can assist them in every way possible in making the types of differences they do around the world, and especially at this time, in Haiti.

I am asking us to join hands and hearts around this effort this Lent because it not only helps fulfill a vow we have taken through baptism but because we can do something about this. One individual can and does make a remarkable difference. While international laws, treaties and the like are commendable, they do not effect change to the degree that thousands of us can make if we not only care but then show that care sacramentally by prayer and giving.

I also want to call your attention to our **Lenten Wednesday Night Soup Suppers** and Program. This year, we will be discussing the book, *Jesus was an Episcopalian and You Can Be One Too!* Chris Yaw, the author, has written a fresh, entertaining and wonderfully complete survey of the Episcopal Church. While it is especially good for those interested in joining the church, it is also a very fine review for those of us who have been in this expression of the faith for years. **We have had someone pledge to donate all the copies we will need but you must call the office or sign the sign-up sheet in Memorial Hall to reserve one. Please do so by Thursday, February 18th to enable us the time needed to send for the copies.** We will also have a sign-up sheet for those willing to bring salads, bread, soup as well as for those willing to clean up after the event. **We will begin this on February 24, 2010, at 5:30 p.m. for supper with the program beginning around 6:00 and we will end by 7:15 in the evening. The series will run Wednesday evenings from February 24th through March 24th.** And then, because I don't think we will be through with the book, we will resume the suppers on Wednesday April 14th for what ever remaining time we will need. For those adults who want to be confirmed or received into the Episcopal Church, this can serve as a great inquirers' class.

Lent can be a very fulfilling time in the life of the Christian. It is one of those very intentional moments when we can focus on those beyond us through the love we share in Christ. I am hoping that our parish project will unite us with those Jesus particularly loves, the last, the lost, the least and the little, as Robert Capon would put it. And through Jesus working through us, we can share with them in a newer day, one filled with hope, peace and grace.

Faithfully yours,

Bradley S. Wirth