



Goats, Gospel and New Approaches

By John La Boone

"Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them." – *Isaiah 42:9*

One of the greatest challenges for congregations, as well as for individual human beings is looking at new ways to do things. Too often our lives are ruled by the dreaded *Eight Deadly Words*, which are: "But we've never done it that way before!" Opportunities great and small can go by unnoticed because of a too-strong attraction to the familiar and its attendant desire for the illusion of security.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Take the example of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in West Valley City, Utah. They recently found themselves with the task of clearing a vacant acre-and-a-half plot of overgrown, weed-choked church land. They could have hired someone with a lot of expensive heavy equipment or they could have possibly just rented some equipment themselves and

attempted the job with volunteers. Those ideas were considered. But when a member of the congregation suggested that they rent goats from a local farm instead, they opted to employ a herd of goats.

That's right, they got the goats to do it. They hired a small herd of 108 goats from 4 Leaf Ranch in Kamas, Utah. The ranch provided a goat herder who lived on the premises in a camper during the project to supervise the operation, plus they set up an electric fence to contain the goats within the area to be cleared. There were a few hijinks – you know how goats are. Some of them managed to break out of the fencing but they were quickly recovered. Joggers passing by sometimes helped the goat herder. In one case a few escapee goats ate some of a neighbor lady's flowers but 4 Leaf Ranch covered the cost of the damage. When issues arose, people talked to each other and came up with solutions, just like a community is supposed to work. All in all, things went very well.



St. Stephen's is a mission church so the Diocese of Utah paid \$1,250 for the goats to stay long enough to tame the vegetation. It took nine days. Goats munch grass, weeds and shrubby plants so close to the roots that one visit has taken care of the property for the year's entire growing season. It would have cost more to hire professional landscapers to whack down the overgrowth and then cut at least a few more times over the summer. Using the animals was an option that proved more environmentally friendly. The goats were also quite pleased with the good food and the change of scenery.

The herd of goats not only did a superb job in clearing the land, they sort of became evangelists as well. When people passing by saw them they stopped to take pictures and the church was featured on the evening news. Sometimes people came up to look at the church building. Three baby goats were born during their stay at St. Stephen's to everyone's delight. Lots of people noticed and the public relations bonus was good for the church.

All this is not without precedent. Another Episcopal church, St. Peter's in the Great Valley, located in Malvern, Pennsylvania, has maintained a flock of sheep since 2003. People were concerned that the gravestones in the historic cemetery would not stand up well to the rigors of modern lawn care equipment,

so the church accepted the donation of the sheep and it has worked out perfectly. These solutions may not be what works best for every church campus but the more important point is all about being open to new possibilities.

St. Stephen's is innovative in other ways, too. The church generates its own electricity using donated solar panels – something every church should look into. It is also home to a thriving Hispanic congregation, *San Esteban* (Spanish for St. Stephen), with Sunday morning services in Spanish every week, as well as a service in English. Not what you find in most Episcopal churches, but excellent ideas that do a lot of good.



Lawncare may seem like a very mundane consideration when there are more important matters for churches to be concerned with. But how we approach the mundane can give us a useful reading on how we will handle larger challenges. So, should churches – even churches that value tradition – be thinking outside the box? Yes, yes, yes! Opportunities abound for progress and good works if we only look for them with a willingness to use new approaches.

Christianity is not a movement whose goal is to maintain churches as museums glorifying the past. The living future belongs to those who can recognize the need for change and embrace the challenges. One of the best examples we have of religious leaders thinking outside the box is Jesus, himself. When the situation called for it, he consistently used non-traditional methods and ideas to reach people who needed him. Can you imagine Jesus saying, "But we've never done it that way before!"? Neither can I.