

Presbyterians Today

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Protecting your flock
How safe is your church?



BLESSING THE ANIMALS

**Building community while
caring for creation**

BY DAVID BENNETT



Inside St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania, are more than 20 murals painted by Croatian immigrant Maxo Vanka in the late 1930s and early '40s. Many of the paintings depict the immigrant experience in America. There is one of St. Francis, though, that shows Vanka's love of animals, especially his fondness of birds. In the painting, exotic birds can be seen encircling the patron saint of animals.

St. Francis wasn't just the artist's muse. Vanka took a cue from the legendary saint, caring for critters that came his way. Vanka's granddaughter once recalled a story of how her grandfather rescued a sparrow and later taught the bird to peck him when it was time for him to wake up. She added that his grandchildren believed that the animals could talk to their grandfather.

The connection Vanka had with animals might have been viewed as unique years ago, but not so today. Many pet owners now refer to Fido or Whiskers as their "fur babies," and the pet industry has noticed. Franchise pet stores sell luxury beds and gourmet food for animals. Doggie day care centers make sure that canines have play dates while their owners are at work. Online pet retailers offer monthly subscriptions of treats and toys to be delivered to a pup's front door.

Pets have become a valuable part of one's family. Just how valuable? A report by the North American Pet Health Insurance Association found that in 2018, 2 million pets in the United States were covered by health insurance — an 18% jump from the prior year.

Dr. Randall J. Hoedeman, a counselor at the Pittsburgh Pastoral Institute in Pennsylvania, speaks to "the deep connection that we can have with animals" and how they can feel very much like members of the family. On the portion of the counseling center's intake form that asks about immediate family members,

Hoedeman has noticed that clients often include the names of their pets.

"This happens with enough frequency that I now routinely ask about pets if they are not specifically mentioned," he said, adding, "Many friends have also attested to the loss of a pet, and its related grief feeling very much like the loss of a family member."

With so much love and joy — and even grief — that pets bring to people, more Presbyterian churches are beginning to take a page from their Catholic and Episcopal brothers and sisters by offering a Blessing of

the Animals service. Traditionally held in early fall to coincide with the Oct. 4 feast day of St. Francis, these services invite members of the congregation to bring their pets to the church to be blessed.

While the service has been a beloved tradition for most Anglican congregations, Presbyterians have tended to "shy away from services of blessings," says the Rev. Laura Blank of Pleasant View Presbyterian Church in Smock, Pennsylvania.

That is changing.

"If we declare along with the psalmist that 'the earth is the Lord's



COURTESY OF PLEASANT VIEW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rev. Laura Blank of Pleasant View Presbyterian Church in Smock, Pa., conducted a Blessing of the Animals for the first time in 2018.



COURTESY OF EAST LIBERTY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Blessing of the Animals is an ecumenical event at East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. Retired United Methodist pastor the Rev. Joe Hajdu and retired Presbyterian pastor the Rev. Henk Bossers have been coming together for several years to bless the animals in the community.



COURTESY OF KERR PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rev. Kelly Jean Norris of Kerr Presbyterian Church in Verona, Pa., left, expanded the Blessing of the Animals service to include not just pets who were in attendance, but also those who had died or who do not travel well. Members were invited to bring a picture of those pets.

and all that is in it,' we understand that God has already blessed and continues to bless creation. Having a service like the Blessing of the Animals invites us to recognize that God is the one who blesses," Blank said, adding that such a service also helps people "take seriously our role as stewards of creation."

Playing a more serious — and active — role in the care of creation is one of the reasons that a service for Blessing of the Animals was included in the 2018 revision of the "Book of Common Worship" (BCW), says the Rev. Dr. David Gambrell.

Gambrell, the associate for worship in the PC(USA) Office of Theology & Worship and co-editor of the BCW, explained that the animal blessing was part of the new "Creation and Ecology" section, reflecting the denomination's "expanded ecological awareness."

"There's a desire to be good

stewards of God's creation and good neighbors to the other creatures that share our earthly home," said Gambrell.

The Rev. Dr. Kimberly Bracken Long, co-editor of the BCW, agrees with Gambrell, adding that such a service "reflects one facet of our giving thanks for, and being good stewards of, all the gifts of creation."

Gambrell said he imagined the Blessing of the Animals service to be used with "household pets, farm animals — or even as a way of seeking God's blessing for wild creatures and endangered species."

Beautiful blessings

Blank, whose congregation is exploring becoming a PC(USA) Earth Care Congregation, held its first Blessing of the Animals last October. Using the liturgy in the BCW, Blank not only wanted to give thanks for the pets in people's lives, but she also wanted

those attending to connect with nature. The service was held outdoors on a Sunday evening underneath Pleasant View Presbyterian's pavilion. The service, Blank says, was a natural fit for the church's context.

"Our congregation includes farmers, folks who worked at vet clinics and feed supply stores, as well as many folks who dearly love their house pets," Blank said. The church, too, was used to working with animals as it holds a live Nativity each Advent. Admittedly, the stars of the Nativity are not Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, but rather Fenn the goat and Diego the donkey, Blank said, laughing.

Still, Pleasant View Presbyterian made sure to set a few ground rules for its Blessing of the Animals.

"To keep the peace between all creatures great and small, we asked that pets remained on leashes or in carriers," Blank said. "We wondered

The church had suffered several tragic losses in the past year, and so the Blessing of the Animals was, in a way, pet therapy.

— Rev. Kelly Jean Norris

if fur would fly, but all participants behaved — human and animal alike.”

Leading up to the service, Pleasant View Presbyterian also held a collection for donations to a local animal shelter.

“As we thanked God for blessing our homes with our pets, we wanted to bless animals who had no home. We had a table heaped high with donations,” Blank said. “The youth delivered the supplies to the shelter and then spent time with the animals, extending the blessing beyond the worship service.”

Blank said that the Blessing of the Animals was also an opportunity to connect with church members who rarely attend on Sunday morning.

“This service honored an important part of their life. Even some folks without pets came, just to experience the fun,” Blank said.

Last October, the Rev. Kelly Jean Norris of Kerr Presbyterian Church in Verona, Pennsylvania, incorporated the Blessing of the Animals liturgy into the traditional Sunday morning worship slot, but she also moved the service outdoors.

“The congregation was very enthusiastic,” Norris said. Not only were animals invited, but church members were asked to bring a photo of either their deceased pets or pets who do not travel well.

“It was a beautiful way to address the grief of losing a loved animal, and to include those pets with special prayers and blessings who could not be there physically,” she said.

The animal blessing was also an unexpected and powerful moment of healing for Kerr Presbyterian.

“The church had suffered several tragic losses in the past year, and so the Blessing of the Animals was, in

a way, pet therapy. It was especially welcomed by the large percentage of pet owners in the congregation,” Norris said.

While Kerr Presbyterian blessed the animals within their traditional Sunday worship slot, some congregations choose to do it as a stand-alone service like Pleasant View Presbyterian’s, or make the blessings an ecumenical opportunity, extending further out into the community.

At East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, retired United Methodist pastor the Rev. Joe Hajdu and retired Presbyterian pastor the Rev. Henk Bossers have been coming together for several years to bless the animals in the community. On the steps leading up to the church, except for two times when rain forced everyone inside, Hajdu and Bossers wear stoles with embroidered animals on them as they share God’s blessings with four-legged, finned or winged worshipers. And even though the service is a hit with children and

teens, the pastors say it is a service that resonates with all ages.

“There have been far more adults than children who come,” Hajdu said.

At Pleasant View Presbyterian, though, Blank sees the Blessing of the Animals worship as “especially meaningful for the young people” in the congregation.

“For them, they see all of God’s creatures as worthy and important. It is the children who lift prayers for sea turtles and manatees during worship. It is the children who gather in my office every Sunday before worship to feed my pet fish. This service fully engaged all generations, but it especially engaged our young people,” Blank said, adding a final word of advice to churches considering such a service: Expect the unexpected.

“In true ‘PK’ (pastor’s kid) fashion, my dog, Bowie, was the worst-behaved there,” Blank said, laughing.

David Bennett is a member of Sixth Presbyterian Church in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. While a librarian by day at Robert Morris University, he is also a professional cellist who enjoys playing sacred music in churches in the Pittsburgh area.

A blessing for animals

Almighty and everlasting God,
Creator of all things and giver of all life,
let your blessing be upon all these animals.
May our relationship with them mirror your love,
and our care for them be an example of your bountiful mercy.
Grant the animals health and peace.
Strengthen us to love and care for them
as we strive to imitate the love of Jesus Christ
our Lord and your servant Francis.
Amen.

—From the “Book of Common Worship”
(2018), *A Service for the Blessing
of the Animals*





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