Age-old Lent gets a 21st-century makeover

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald
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(RNS) For Janis Galvin fasting for Lent has long meant saying no to candy for the 40 days before Easter. But when the season begins this year on March 9, it's apt to mean something more: walking when she'd rather drive, for instance, or turning the thermostat way down.

Galvin, an Episcopalian, will join with about 1,000 others who've signed up for the 2011 Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast, a daily regimen for reducing energy consumption and fighting global warming.

Lent is getting a makeover, especially in some Protestant traditions where it hasn't always drawn strong interest. The carbon fast is one of several initiatives aimed at reinvigorating Lent by linking themes of fasting and abstention to wider social causes.

"It's exciting because it's not just suffering" for its own sake, said Galvin, who lives in Everett, Mass. "It's doing good."

For the first time, the United Methodist Church is urging its 7.8 million U.S. members to refrain from drinking alcohol during Lent. Teetotaling is familiar turf in United Methodism, and now Lent provides a framework to consider the role alcohol plays in individual lives, families and society, according to Cynthia Abrams of the UMC's General Board of Church & Society.

"To ask United Methodists to give up alcohol for Lent is provocative because we like to think United Methodists don't drink," said Abrams, who works on alcohol and other health issues. "We decided ... to confront the elephant in the room by doing something provocative and engaging in conversation about it throughout Lent."

In the United Kingdom, the Christian Vegetarian Association is aiming to revive the ancient Christian practice of foregoing meat during Lent. (Many Orthodox Christians still eat a vegan diet in Lent). It's self-denial for a purpose, organizers say, noting how vegetarian diets improve health, enhance animal welfare and reduce strain on the environment.

Fasting from anything is never an easy sell in a culture that values convenience, according to Jim Antal, who heads the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ.

But as a spiritual practice, he said, personal sacrifice can be a key driver in advancing larger movements.

"We're trying to deal with the mingling of individual Lenten disciplines with social change," said Antal, whose conference is spearheading the carbon fast. "And that is precisely what will save the Earth -- if individuals who begin to get it... begin to say, `Gosh, I need to change my life, and I need to become an activist."'

Lent has never been a strong tradition among evangelicals, with some worried that it smacks of presumptuous efforts to earn God's favor. But some are finding that new types of Lenten fasting might serve a useful purpose in a world coarsened by electronic media.

Adam Rick of Beverly, Mass., will be fasting from Facebook and otherwise minimizing time spent online. It's a bid to temper the perceived vanity that comes with constantly gratifying urges and trying to get noticed.

"So much of the dysfunction in our relationships has to with exactly that -- we're not happy because we didn't get our way, or we didn't get recognized," said Rick, who's exploring a call to priesthood in the Anglican Church in North America. "Facebook just feeds that fire if it's not used carefully and intentionally. Sometimes just taking a step back from it is helpful for me."

Some observers of evolving Lenten practices see them as steps -- albeit small ones -- in the right direction for a culture that tends to

bristle at the idea of voluntary self-denial.

"In a culture as consumer-oriented and materialistic as ours, it is not surprising that churches are seeking in small ways to remind us of those obsessions," said Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion at Princeton University. "These are welcome developments, even though they may be rather feeble."

Others who hope for a wider awareness of social problems at Lent nonetheless take a dim view of the initiatives' staying power.

"The religious conventions that call for giving up this or that ... are shallow reflections of a bourgeois, self-indulgent society culture; they deserve about as much attention as the Easter Bunny," said Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall.

"Christ's discipleship today ought to have more to do with our Lord's concern for the poor of the earth, and for the earth itself, than with our individualistic lifestyles."

Conventional ways of fasting and abstaining at Lent haven't disappeared. Sixty percent of American Catholics -- even those who seldom attend church -- abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, according to Mark Gray, senior research associate at Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

In some cases, old traditions are becoming new -- at least for those who used to disregard Lent altogether.

Benjamin Keaster, a 27-year-old social worker in Spring Arbor, Mich., never observed Lent while growing up in an evangelical Church of Christ congregation. Five years ago, he converted to Orthodoxy.

For Keaster, Lent now means no meat, no dairy, fasting on certain days and lots of worship services with proscribed Lenten behaviors, such as lying prostrate before one another in a sign of repentance.

"Fasting is always hard," Keaster said, noting how he dreads going to bed hungry. "We kind of try (in our culture) to keep the feast and the holiday parties, but you realize after you've done this for a few

years that you can't really feast without fasting. You gotta have both."

This article was corrected on March 1.