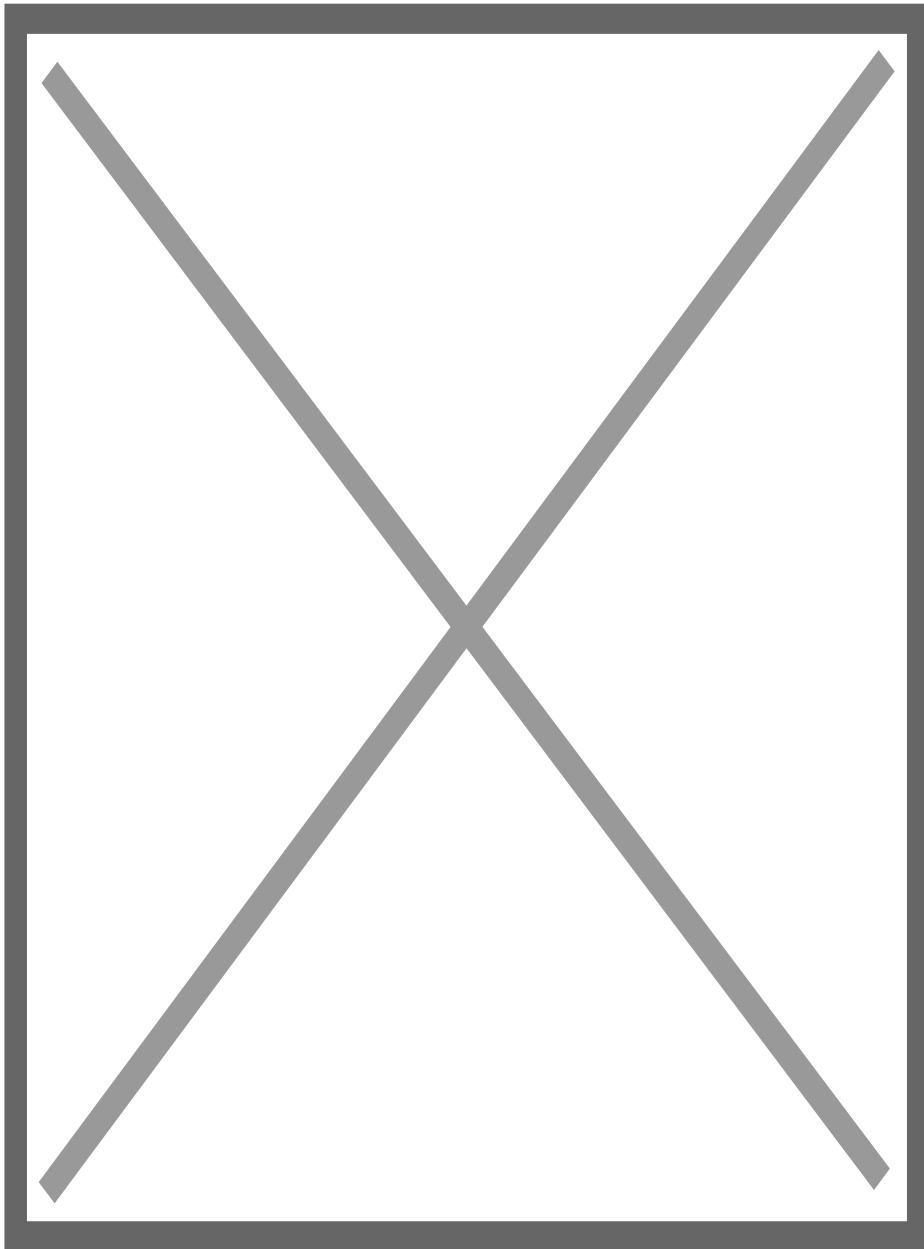


Formed for solidarity

Each year, Episcopalians gather in Alabama to enact a liturgy remembering Jonathan Daniels and other civil rights martyrs.

by [Emilee Walker-Cornetta](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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Activists Ruby Sales (left) and Jonathan Daniels (right). Daniels was killed in 1965 while helping register Black voters in Lowndes County, Alabama. (Illustration by Martha Park)

Last summer my team at Episcopal Divinity School hosted a screening of the 1999 documentary *Here Am I, Send Me: The Journey of Jonathan Daniels*. Daniels, a White man from New Hampshire and a student at EDS (then called Episcopal Theological School), was killed in 1965 while volunteering with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to register Black voters in Lowndes County, Alabama.

After being released from jail for picketing, the 26-year-old seminarian walked to a grocery store with fellow activists Richard Morrisroe and 17-year-old Ruby Sales to buy soda. In Sales's account, Tom Coleman, a deputy sheriff for the county, stood in the doorway as they approached and said, "The store is closed. If you don't get off this goddamn property, I'm going to blow your damn brains out." As Coleman raised his shotgun to fire, Daniels pulled Sales behind him. Shot in the stomach, he died at the scene.

In 1994, Daniels was added to the Episcopal Church's calendar as a martyr and witness to the gospel. Morrisroe, a Catholic priest, was also shot; after months in the hospital, he recovered. Sales escaped and went on to become a nationally recognized human rights activist and public theologian, earning her MDiv from EDS in 1998.

On trial before an all-White, all-male jury 40 days after the shooting, Coleman claimed he acted in self-defense and was summarily acquitted. The documentary includes news footage from after the trial in which a White journalist asks Gloria Larry, a young Black woman and SNCC worker who witnessed the murder firsthand, "Why do you think he would be released?" She replies, with a wry and seasoned smile, "It's the Southern way."

In August—60 years after Daniels's death and Coleman's acquittal—several hundred people gathered in front of the Lowndes County Courthouse in Hayneville for the 29th annual Jonathan Daniels and the Martyrs of Alabama Pilgrimage, hosted by the Episcopal Dioceses of Alabama and the Central Gulf Coast. The liturgy began with the designated prayer for Daniels's feast day: "O God of justice and compassion, you put down the proud and mighty from their place, and lift up the poor and the afflicted: We give you thanks for your faithful witness Jonathan Myrick Daniels . . . we pray that we, following his example, may make no peace with oppression."

The crowd, led by a verger pointing the way with a staff and by a contingent of young people carrying posters of 14 civil rights movement martyrs from Alabama, walked to the jail in which Daniels, Sales, Morrisroe, and others had been held before the shooting. From there, it was just a few steps to the site of the grocery store where Daniels was shot, now home to an insurance agency. People wove their way out of the crowd to kneel and touch their hands and faces to the ground near the building.

Bishop Michael Curry preached, encouraging the crowd not to remember Daniels "as a fond memory, but to reconstitute within our soul a commitment to [that for] which he gave his life." Adrian Johnson, the district judge of the Alabama circuit court that serves Lowndes County, welcomed the crowd to the courthouse, admitting that it was "the site of many injustices." His bench served as the communion altar.

During the prayers, we read the names of the 14 martyrs, followed by a brief statement of why and how they died. For example: "Willie Edwards Jr., a truck driver, was on his way to work when he was stopped by four Klansmen. The men mistook Edwards for another man who they believed was dating a white woman. They forced Edwards at gunpoint to jump off a bridge into the Alabama River. Edwards's body was found three months later, January 23, 1957, Montgomery, Alabama."

After each name, the young person holding the martyr's poster stood and raised it high, announcing, "Present."

Each year, the two local dioceses invite people from across the church to join them in Alabama for this commemoration. I have attended before on behalf of EDS and have always appreciated it. But this last pilgrimage struck a different chord for me. In the August heat, as democracy was being dismantled and history

aggressively whitewashed around us, there was something electric and subversive about ordinary people uniting to create their own experience of remembrance. For three decades, Episcopal communities from Alabama and beyond have returned each year to the courthouse, jail, and grocery store: ordinary places where holy and unholy things happen, where history is made. We use the ancient forms (the Eucharist, the procession, the prayers) and cultivate them in this soil, with these hands, under this sun. What grows are the practices of ritual remembrance we need here now.

In *The Politics of Ritual*, philosopher of religion Molly Farneth explains that a central function of ritual is “boundary work,” meaning that rituals create, maintain, and transform boundaries around and within communities of practice. The book opens with a story of Jewish protesters sitting shiva in a New York City street the day that Daniel Pantaleo, the police officer who killed Eric Garner in a chokehold in 2014, was indicted. After reciting the Mourner’s Kaddish for Garner and saying the names of others who had been killed by New York City police, they repeated the words, “I am responsible.” In reciting the Kaddish for Garner, who was neither Jewish nor biological kin of the assembled protesters, they redrew the boundaries of the assumed community for whom and to whom they were accountable.

When the 14 martyrs of Alabama were named and registered “present,” I saw the boundaries of the crowd—diverse in some ways but mostly Episcopalian and mostly White—being drawn to include them. The gathered community affirmed that these martyrs are ours; the struggle for which they died, past and present, is ours. We are responsible for them and to them. Their presence here, as we celebrate the Eucharist, makes a claim on each one of us.

At certain moments, I wondered what else the symbology was doing. Farneth describes rituals as characteristically moving “between reproduction and disruption or between tradition and critique.” In the crowded courtroom, even as the pilgrimage challenged traditional boundaries of Episcopal community in Alabama and elsewhere, it also mirrored and reproduced the tradition’s entanglements with White supremacy. The Episcopal Church has historically been identified with middle- to upper-class White people, and in the South it was a church of enslavers. Its colonial ethos is readily discernible in its liturgy. One could witness the Jonathan Daniels pilgrimage and ask—as I’m sure many have—why, when innumerable Black people have died as victims of White supremacy in Alabama, and when Black people have led and continue to lead justice movements, does a young White man receive this amount of attention and reverence? To what extent does the ritual center and reinscribe Whiteness even as it attempts to challenge it?

An artistic rendering of Daniels featured on a commemorative button given to pilgrims shows a young White man sitting with a small Black girl on his knee, based on a photograph of him with a young member of his host family in Alabama. The image unsettles: What kind of White saviorism is this? When we gather to remember one White man whose faith compelled him to upend his life for the work of racial justice, are other White people compelled to do the same? Or does it reassure us that we haven’t been so bad after all? Does making an altar out of a judge’s bench challenge state power or reveal a friendly, almost familial comfort with it?

Rituals are by definition dense and multivalent; they can do many things, even contradictory things, at once. They are not clean—and I think that is part of their power. If we want our rituals to herald the reign of God, we must be ready to recognize that they reflect and reproduce modes of oppression, and we must be willing to remake them. For me, the Alabama pilgrimage was an icon of that process and a reminder that when it comes to forming Christians for the work of justice, now is a time for dedicated practice, not purity.

Putting my body through the motions, I could feel how the pilgrimage ritual, with all its contradictions and limitations, worked on me. We were being acculturated to a holy, historical reality in which people—even when they have nothing material on the line, or don’t think they do—take real risks to mitigate violence toward their neighbors and in doing so find freedom. Lingered inside this reality—singing it, walking it, hearing it, touching

it, eating and drinking it—we were acclimating to a different Christian story, one that cuts against the rhetoric of Christian nationalism and the norms of exclusion and supremacy within and outside our own traditions. In Farneth’s words, rituals are not simply performative; they are formative. They do not just state who we are and what we believe; they create conditions for the emergence of something new.

In a recent conversation on the podcast *How to Survive the End of the World*, writer Rebecca Solnit described how she has come to see the fundamental binary in American political life: not left versus right but a politics of inseparability versus a politics of division. While many people are trying to tell a story of connection—what’s happening to the earth is connected to racial capitalism is connected to nationalism and colonialism—the MAGA world preaches divisibility and hierarchy between people and nature, men and women, straight and queer, White and not White, Christian and not Christian, English and not English, American and un-American. The Department of Homeland Security is using Christian rhetoric and imagery to sell the holiness of this agenda and recruit people to its payroll.

At a time when fascism looms ever more menacingly and state violence against the vulnerable is again dramatically unmasked, our rituals must be a place to practice belonging—not just with those immediately gathered, but with all beings who have a claim on us and our lives. For Christians, this practice of solidarity has a particular starting place: the cross and, through it, those most targeted by state violence. Beginning there, our rituals can provide not just an experience of belonging to and responsibility for the collective but also our freedom and power to fulfill that responsibility, as so many have done before us.

The EDS publication *EDS Now* interviewed Sales in 2014. “I was there with Jonathan” in Lowndes County, she said, “because I had made a choice and he had made a choice to participate in this moment. And we both knew that in doing that kind of work, you ran a risk of being killed. But at the same time, all of us understood that we were going to do what the Spirit says to do.”

What we need now—and what we can offer to the world—are rituals that fashion worshipers to keep on participating, to move deeper, to do what the Spirit says to do. And we have them: they are at once ancient and inventive, local and universal, complex and trenchant. They bind us to a communion of saints who, generation after generation, join the creative action of God in their midst, saying, “Here am I. Send me.”