

# Session Two

## “All Saints”

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 48 minutes.

*“But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.” — Mark 4:29–31*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. — Romans 8:28*



John Corbett portrays the Rev. Michael Spurlock, a newly minted Episcopal priest assigned by his bishop to All Saints Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, which is close to Nashville. All Saints is far from being a vital congregation, its remaining dozen or so members being older and tired of the struggle to maintain their church. Barry Corbin plays the elderly parishioner Forrest, who takes an instant disliking to Michael because everyone knows that Michael has been appointed to close the dwindling congregation. His job is not to pastor the people but to inventory all the congregation’s possessions — Forrest disparagingly calls the new pastor the bishop’s “errand boy.” Indeed, when the pastor’s adolescent son, Atticus, declares that he will be bored in such a small place, Michael assures him that they will not be there very long — probably just for the two months needed to close the deal with a prospective buyer.

The other church members are not happy about the closure, but they have bowed to the inevitable, and thus are more accepting of Michael. Then the unexpected happens. A group of Karen refugees from Myanmar come to town. Ye Win is their leader, largely because he is able to speak English. They were Episcopalian in their strife-torn home country, so, to Michael’s and everyone’s surprise, they show up in church. Almost against his will, both the priest and his supportive wife, Aimee, become involved with the Karen, her part being to teach music to the group.

One night as he stands alone outside the church, Michael has an epiphany. The Karen are in dire need, but the church is broke and about to be sold. However, the church does own considerable acreage, enough to plant a variety of crops —and the Karen are farmers, though many at the present are plucking feathers at a chicken factory. He proposes that the members and the Karen plant crops, part of which can feed the refugees, and part of which can be sold for cash to pay off the church’s mortgage. Without consulting Bishop Eldon Thompson, Michael gives the boot to the two developers planning to buy and replace the venerable church with a big-box store. Accepting the priest’s plan, the Karen and church members pitch in to plow the field and plant the crops. Help comes in a variety of forms, sometimes from those not a part of the church. After receiving an offer from a stranger, Michael amusingly asks Aimee if he really heard that. The Karen especially put in long hours, those who work at the chicken factory rising early before going off to work, and upon their return, working past sunset.

However, there are obstacles that threaten to scuttle the plan. First, there is Bishop Thompson, upset that Michael has scuttled the sale of the property without forewarning him. He reminds Michael that he had promised to obey him, and he poses

the disturbing reminder, “Be sure it’s God’s voice and not your own.” Always good advice after wrestling with a spiritual experience! The bishop’s cabinet also needs convincing. Obtaining their permission is difficult, but when compared to the problems raised by nature as spring turns to summer, that task seems easy. There is the hurdle of not enough water, requiring some form of spraying it onto the plants. Then, when that problem is solved and matters seem to be going well, a huge rainstorm threatens to drown the crops, requiring the people to fill sandbags to protect the plants. Much of the produce is lost, but the drenched harvesters manage to save a truckload of produce for which an urban buyer is willing to pay them enough to save the church. But then, still another disaster ...

I am not spoiling matters to reveal that there is an Easter following this crucifixion-like event, so that the results really do take on the miraculous. All of this is made plausible in the excellent script written by Steve Armour and directed by Steve Gomer. And what a joy to see at the end credits shots of the real pastor and the Karen people, many of whom played themselves in the film, which was shot in Smyrna at All Saints.



### For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Michael during the first part of the film? How is Forrest accurate when he charges the new pastor as being the bishop’s “errand boy”?
2. How is All Saints Church similar to so many of the churches in your area?

What is the plan for replacing it? If not torn down, how are old church buildings being recycled in your area?

3. What is it that upsets the bishop’s plans? What do you know about the Karen people? Why have they come to this country?
4. How are Michael and the church members following Christ in their response to the plight of the Karen? How is this the opposite of what many in this country and Europe are saying about immigrants?
5. How does this bring Michael in conflict with his bishop? Obedience to one’s superiors vs. doing what you think is right, or answering WWJD? Note what Michael quotes when he responds to the bishop, “I swore an oath as a Christian to serve the least of these.”
6. What is Michael’s nighttime epiphany? Might we explain that it was God nudging him to see the solution that lay right before him — that is, in the very land that the congregation owned and the farming background of the Karen?
7. How is the bishop’s admonition to Michael, “Be sure it’s God’s voice and not your own,” a good one to always keep in mind? How have people sometimes misidentified God’s will and theirs? To get you started, what about the Pope and preachers who preached the Crusades — “God wills it!” — or Protestants persecuting women as witches or Catholics as evil heretics? You might also revisit Bob Dylan’s song “With God on Our Side.”

8. The farm plan might be God-inspired, but how do we see that this does not absolve anyone from the hard work of implementing it? What did the people gain from all of the heartbreaks that they endured?
9. How is the church living up to Christ's metaphor in Matthew 5:13–15 and that of the apostle Paul's in 1Corinthians 12 and 13?
10. How could the film's title have a double meaning? The first is obvious, but in what way are virtually all of them saints (in the way that the apostle Paul used the word — check the beginnings of 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Philippians)?
11. Of the seven marks of congregational vitality, which ones do we see in "All Saints"?
12. Time now to focus on your own congregation:
- How many members participate in your church's adult education programs? And are your classes focused more on self-improvement and self-fulfillment, rather than informing about issues and how to meet them?
  - Does your church engage in any kind of an evangelistic outreach?
  - Until the Karen started showing up, do you think the people of All Saints had an "outward focus"? What about your church: Do you think that there are more people fondly recalling the "good days when the pews were filled" than those looking to see how the church can serve those in need in the community?
  - Michael's son asks challengingly, "Aren't you God's help?" How does your church "empower every member to discover their individual calling" as "God's help"?
  - Does your worship "challenge, teach, transform, convict and energize" you, or does it just make you feel good? (Or dare I say it, does much of it bore you?) Is the music a preponderance of praise music that repeats phrases over and over, or does it also include traditional and new hymns that call us to challenge evil and right wrongs?
  - What opportunities does your church offer to deepen relationships?
  - A few years ago, when moving to a new town, I visited several churches and attended "coffee hours" where members gathered in little clusters to chat — and even when I walked up and stood at the group's edge, no one greeted or engaged me in the conversation. Could this be your congregation? How might your coffee hour be enhanced as a means of welcoming strangers?
  - How healthy do you think your church is in regard to staff, stated goals, accountability?

