

YOUTH AND VOCATION

INSIGHTS

The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary



SPRING 2003

WARDLAW • WIGINTON • RICHTER • LYTCH
OSBORNE • DUNHAM • LABBERTON • HERLIN
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The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary

Spring 2003

Volume 118 Number 2

Editor: Michael Jinkins

Editorial Board: Scott Black Johnston, Timothy Kubatzky,
Michael Miller, and Randal Whittington

Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary is published each spring and fall by Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 100 East 27th Street, Austin, TX 78705-5797.

e-mail: mjinkins@austinseminary.edu

web site: www.austinseminary.edu

Entered as non-profit class bulk mail at Austin, Texas, under Permit No. 2473. POSTMASTER: Address service requested. Send to *Insights*, 100 East 27th Street, Austin, TX 78705-5797.

Printing runs are limited. When available, additional copies may be obtained for \$1 per copy. Permission to copy articles from *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* for educational purposes may be given by the editor upon receipt of a written request.

Some previous issues of *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, are available on microfilm through University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 (16 mm microfilm, 105 mm microfiche, and article copies are available). *Insights* is indexed in *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*, *Religion Indexes: RIO/RIT/IBRR 1975- on CD-ROM*, and the *ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60606-5384; telephone: (312) 454-5100; e-mail: atla@atla.com; web site: www.atla.com; ISSN 1056-0548.

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The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

I Samuel 4:8-9

Perhaps it is no accident that, in the story of God's call of Samuel, the young Samuel at first mistakes God's voice for that of his mentor, Eli. Through the teaching and example of the community of faith, we learn to recognize God's call. As we grow and mature in discipleship, the church helps us to focus and refine vocation, much as Eli helped Samuel to interpret God's word.

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CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

THE X GAMES

Michael Miller

INTRODUCTION

A joke that has been making the rounds goes like this. A minister is asked by the congregation to help them evict the bats from the church's belfry. Nothing has worked. The pastor says, "I know what to do." He climbs the stairs of the bell tower, Bible and catechism in hand, takes the bats through confirmation class, and confirms them—whereupon they all fly out of the church never to return. Grim humor? Yes. Stereotype? Certainly. But there is enough truth in the joke that we can see ourselves in it and wince.

This issue of *Insights* focuses on the church and its relationship with youth. The issue would be noteworthy simply by virtue of the timeliness of its subject and the commitment of a seminary to take up this issue. On the pages that follow, some of the most respected and experienced leaders in the church today share their wisdom and experience with us: Melissa Wiginton, Don Richter, Carol Lytch, and Paul Osborne have written thought-provoking essays. They are joined by Robert Dunham, Mark Labberton, and Ann Herlin in our new Pastors' Panel, and our own Michael Miller in the Christianity & Culture column reflecting on various aspects of the vocational life of youth and young adults.

This issue of *Insights* is noteworthy for another reason. Theodore (Ted) Wardlaw, the new president of Austin Seminary, has written the feature article, exploring the role of the church in nurturing and supporting the call of Christians of all ages, but especially of youth. Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary is committed to serving as a theological resource to the whole church. Our hope is that this issue of *Insights* will be a useful resource to all of those who care about the present lives and discipleship of our young people, and the future of our church.

To make this issue of *Insights* even more useful for study and discussion, we have produced a "Study Guide," including questions for group discussion and a list of recommended resources, which readers can find on page 35 or download from the Austin Seminary web page, www.austinseminary.edu.

Michael Jinkins
Editor



A CHORUS OF VOICES REMEMBERING AND RE-MEMBERING, AN ESSENTIAL ECOSYSTEM

THEODORE J. WARDLAW

Let me begin with an act of memory.

I remember—I've not just read about, but I remember—a time in the life of the American mainline church when there was a vital understanding of, and deep confidence in, the language of vocation. I can actually diagram the way in which, at various junctures, this language got spoken in practical ways, to the end that a whole churchly ecosystem participated in the discernment and encouragement of my own sense of vocation. The word vocation, let us never forget, comes from the Latin *vocare*, “to call,” and I remember the voices, the multitude of voices, through which I gradually heard a primary Voice urging me into the vocation of ministry.

These voices first spoke on my behalf when I was just a few months old in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of Orangeburg, South Carolina. A guest minister in a black robe—the same man who had baptized and confirmed my father, married my parents, and then baptized my older brother—read from the 1937 edition of *The Book of Common Worship*. “Do you acknowledge your faith in Christ and therein consecrate your child to him?” And the voices of my parents said, “I do.” “Do you promise,” he went on, “to instruct your child in the principles of our holy religion, as contained in the Scriptures, to pray with him and for him, and to bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?” And again they said together, “I do.” There was an additional question which, in effect, asked the gathered congregation if they would

Theodore J. Wardlaw is the ninth president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Prior to that calling, Wardlaw was senior pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He earned a B.A. from Presbyterian College, a D.Min. from Union / PSCE, and an S.T.M. from Yale University Divinity School.

serve, in a collective sense and on behalf of every other congregation to which I might belong, as my godparents, and they lifted up their own voices: “We do.” Then, after splashing me with water, the old man spoke to my first community of Christian nurture. “This child, thus acknowledged as a member of Christ’s Church, is commended to your love and care. Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.”

Over the years, and in a number of different communities like this, the Church of Jesus Christ found its voice, over and over again, to challenge me to listen carefully for God’s Voice, and for the claim which that Voice might make upon my life. I remember the grandmotherly voice of Ruby, with whom I often sat in church as a child. During the sermon, she let me play with a fox fur wrap she always wore around her neck in cold weather, and I never tired of making the mouth of one fox move at about the same pace and cadence of the words spoken from the pulpit. Ruby, to be honest, was a terrible singer. Her voice sounded like the croaking of frogs. But, at the time, standing next to her during the singing of hymns was, in my childhood imagination, akin to singing in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And I remember, like it was yesterday, what she said to me once: “Teddy, I hope you’ll think seriously about being a minister someday.”

I remember the voice of a man whose name I have now forgotten, who taught me in Sunday School when I was in the seventh grade. I remember that, Sunday after Sunday, in his opening and closing prayers, he always lifted up “our boys in Vietnam” (he pronounced the word with a long ‘i’), and it was only later that I figured out that one of those boys over there was his. Nonetheless, with all that he must have always had on his mind, he came prepared every Sunday to that seventh grade classroom. And he found the time to tell me once, “Son, I think you’ve got what it takes to be a preacher.”

As a senior high student, I remember presbytery youth camps, and the opportunity of serving on my presbytery’s youth council. Two things stick out about that experience. The first is that I learned at least a street-level sense of my denomination’s organizational life as it was rendered both locally and globally, so much so that I suspect I could have passed the polity section of the ordination exams on my first afternoon of seminary. The second aspect of that experience was the privilege of encountering a number of pastors and laypeople who simply loved their own vocations as servants of the church. Their voices, too, chimed in: “You seem to have gifts for ministry!”

In college, as I pondered the culturally obligatory considerations of law and medicine, this or that professor or chaplain would speak a word on behalf of the church. Once, in my political science professor’s office, as I was asking about which law schools he would recommend, the man—an Episcopalian and a vestry member in his parish—said to me: “God knows we need good lawyers, but we also need good pastors.”

So many other voices. The voice of the admissions director at Union Seminary in Virginia, the voices of a couple of handfuls of professors there, the voice of a particularly pivotal minister and subsequent friend whose ministerial example during an intern year practically turned me and my pastoral priorities upside down. And then, at my ordination, the voices of another community of Christian nurture. From the 1970 edi-

tion of *The Worshipbook*, the question was put: “Do we accept Ted as a minister of the Word, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation, to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?” They answered, “We do.”

So many voices still. The voices of friends and fellow pastors in a cohort group to which I have belonged for over twenty years now, meeting annually to study and share and pray together for a week—voices that have often challenged me, inspired me, nurtured me, and held me accountable to my vocation. The voices of family members—my father’s and mother’s voices (now silenced by death but never forgotten), my brother’s voice, my wife’s voice, my daughters’ voices—often calling upon me to remember, or to clarify, or to question, or to reaffirm my own sense of vocation. The voices of various colleagues in this or that church or presbytery I’ve served, the voices of fellow pastors from other traditions, the voices of parishioners whom I have been privileged to know. How could I have been nurtured in the ongoing, sometimes tedious, and occasionally even majestic, life of service in the church without such voices? They formed, for me, a sort of heavenly chorus. They embodied the church—militant and triumphant—and, taken together, they functioned as an ecosystem.

Reduced to a simple diagram, this ecosystem began with the congregation, and connected in a kind of circle to certain other nurturing, or “feeder,” institutions—the higher judicatory, the denominational college (or, perhaps, a denominational fellowship or para-church organization on the campus of a secular college), and various other communities of faith. Ultimately, when one felt led to follow that Voice of God—mediated as it was by the voice of the church—he or she found the way to seminary and, more often than not, back to service in the congregation; and the circle was completed.

I remember that ecosystem. It was real. It nurtured me, through countless voices, to an encounter with the calling Voice of God.

I offer this memory out of the strong hunch that you, too, are likely to remember this ecosystem. People and churches, and the institutions charged with their formation, were bound together by sinews of denominational relatedness that were stronger than they are now. The same voices speaking at a child’s baptism, or their surrogates in other congregations when that child moved, seemed more accountable then—accountable enough to risk encouraging that child to consider the call to leadership in the church. It was possible for that child, moving from one developmental juncture to another, to hear many voices of encouragement within an ecosystem that still worked, and to be cheered on into the formal embrace of theological education and consequently a lifetime of service in the ordained ministry. Or, as an alternative, it was also the case that the same child might be encouraged by the positive example of a functioning ecosystem into a conscious decision to embrace, as a disciplined layperson, the life of service in a congregation as an elder or deacon or committed church member. In that time, which many of us can remember well, it was not at all likely that a child could grow up in and around the church without hearing some voice, or some chorus of voices, expressing tangible interest in his or her faith development. The ecosystem I’m speaking of was real.

AN ECOSYSTEM UNDER STRESS: SOME CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Yet many would conclude in our time that it is all but gone, or, at the very least, is suffering serious stress. In an Alban Institute Special Report from a couple of years ago titled “The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations,” James P. Wind and Gilbert R. Rendle list three indicators pointing to diminished vitality in established American religious institutions (including the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant “mainline,” and American Judaism). These three indicators, which I believe are inter-related at many critical points, are (1) a shortage of clergy, (2) a decline in the quality of pastoral leadership, and (3) a problem retaining women in ministry. Bad news bleeds across every page of this report and appears to be borne widely on the shoulders of many different religious traditions. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is certainly no exception.

With respect to the shortage of clergy, Wind and Rendle note the smaller number of Presbyterian church professionals entering congregational ministry (50% to 60% of seminary graduates in 1999, compared with fifteen years earlier when the norm was between 80% and 90%—a percentage still accurate for Austin Seminary, by the way), the retirement of clergy (8,800 out of 10,300 retiring by 2025), and shorter clergy tenures (almost 20% of those entering the parish ministry will leave it within five years after ordination, and the average tenure of Presbyterian pastors in parish ministry is only seventeen years).¹ More ominous still, they note the dearth of clergy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presently under the age of 35: 7% in 1999, compared with 24% in 1975. Whatever the long-term effects of these changes, according to Wind and Rendle, “It is clear that many of the assumptions about clergy leadership in congregations require reexamination. Not so long ago, some denominations urged candidates for the ministry to get ‘real world’ experience before ordination; today, they decry the paucity of young clergy.”² It is worth noting that the average age of seminary students today is much older than the average ages of students entering medical and law schools. In addition, African-American and Hispanic students tend to be underrepresented in seminaries, compared with their presence in the general population.³

The decline in the quality of pastoral leadership, another problem which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shares widely with other traditions, is hard to analyze apart from a consideration of what is often the treacherous and sometimes toxic atmosphere in the contemporary church itself, from denominational headquarters down to the local congregation. Common concerns such as these cut across the various religions and denominations: the unmanageable nature of service in a congregation; the difficulty of establishing boundaries between personal and professional time; the variety of roles a minister must fill and the unreasonable expectations and confusing standards of evaluation that often come with this variety; and an absence of efficient and effective models of decision-making, communication, and leadership.⁴ Wind and Rendle note the general sense in the church that the competence of people now entering the ministry has slumped, that new clergy do not have in sufficient numbers the talents, skills, and knowledge they need in order to be effective leaders, and that students are entering seminaries “with low levels of religious literacy and with high personal and therapeutic

needs.”⁵ They note, as well, the breakdown, in terms of recruitment, of the old “feeder system” of church-related colleges; the pattern of high acceptance rates, implying that theological schools are not highly selective (a quite different pattern from, say, medical and law schools); the presence of greater degrees of denominational strife; and mounting evidence that there is great pain in the clergy systems of many denominations.⁶ They cite an article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* lamenting poor performance on standard ordination exams, which listed such alarming attitudes and behaviors as “inability to analyze and understand congregations as systems, poor interpersonal skills, poor leadership skills, lack of maturity, failure to keep ethical norms and boundaries, and failure to take responsibility for self, including personal health;” and which concluded that the time is now for the denomination to raise its standard and recruit “the brightest and best.”⁷

With respect to the problem of retaining women in ministry, Wind and Rendle note that women are leaving local church ministry at far higher rates than male clergy, and that factors include sick denominational systems, compensation inequities, inappropriate congregational expectations, and abuse of hierarchical power.⁸ “It is clear from this evidence,” they conclude, “that while clergy supply is a very pressing reality, we must also attend to the systems to which we are trying to recruit clergy.”⁹

AN APPEAL FOR A NEW ECOSYSTEM

I am very interested these days in the systems—to put it broadly, the ecosystem—through which we are endeavoring to recruit clergy. I am interested enough, in fact, to want to argue, first of all, for new attention to be placed upon revitalizing this ecosystem at many points, because in many ways it has served us well. In spite of an essential congregationalism that has always been at the root of virtually every ecclesiastical polity in America (and which has been the source, in fundamental ways, of the American church’s health), and in spite of the weakening in our time of so many aspects of the old denominational systems, the Church—capital “C”—that nurtured me in so many of its forms could not express its own richness and potential for nurture and formation if reduced to the level of an individual congregation. Not even a very large individual congregation.

H. Richard Niebuhr’s words, written almost fifty years ago, still have great power in their vision of an appropriately large vision of church. In his provocative mid-twentieth century study of American and Canadian theological education, *The Purpose of The Church and Its Ministry*, Niebuhr wrote:

The Church is one, yet also many. It is a pluralism moving toward unity and a unity diversifying and specifying itself. It is, in the inescapable New Testament figure, a body with many members none of which is the whole in miniature but in each of which the whole is symbolized.... Without the members there is no body; without the body no members. Schools cannot prepare men [and women] to work simply in the whole Church but must equip them for particular service; yet they cannot do so unless they keep them mindful of the whole and loyal to it.¹⁰

How can we keep present and future generations of aspiring pastors and other full-time servants of the church “mindful of the whole and loyal to it,” without remembering, and *re-membering*¹—becoming members of, yet again—an ecosystem of nurture and formation that both assumes the local and implies the universal? After all, as Niebuhr goes on to say, “Jesus Christ cannot be there [in the Church] without bringing with him the whole company of his brothers [and sisters], who have heard the Word of God and kept it, who were not created without the Word. He is never present without the company of the apostles and prophets, the patriarchs and singers who speak of him; nor without the least of his brothers [and sisters] of whom he speaks.”¹² In the grandest and most faithful vision of Church, they, too—these apostles and prophets and patriarchs and singers—join their voices to the chorus of voices so many of us have heard over the years of our own journeys, encouraging us into an enterprise bigger and older and more purposeful than we are.

One of the great challenges of our time is that of reviving this splendid chorus once again for the sake of the church. At regional and national levels, such a vision requires that much energy and attention be given to inventing new models of denominational life and relationships. It calls for new infrastructures and peer-group programs that can more effectively nurture and mentor would-be pastors, and pastors themselves, through many of the predictable critical junctures of ministry. It certainly demands that we rethink such persistent problems as inadequate salary levels for servants of the church. It compels us to find more effective ways of responding to the dispiriting levels of toxicity and conflict frequently apparent in congregations and judicatories that distract members and leaders from the church’s mission and often promote their premature departure. It suggests that, for the sake of the church both local and universal, sufficient attention be paid to removing the obstacles that so often discourage talented men and women—young, middle-aged, and older—from even considering a church vocation.

But, above all other needs, the vision of a re-membered ecosystem depends, for God’s sake and for the church’s, upon new voices—in Sunday school classrooms, in college classes, over lunch, on a weekend retreat, or almost anywhere—assisting in someone’s discernment process by articulating a call that is hardly ever heard apart from a “caller.”

The closest we will ever get to touching the future, I believe, is through the privilege of lending our own calling voices to the encouragement and cultivation of a potential future pastor—and through being open, by the grace of God, to those moments when we, too, are the ones who are called.

Four years ago, on the last Saturday before Lent, I took our two daughters—one ten years old and the other seven—to a morning-long, pre-Lenten fellowship and learning event for the children of the urban church I was then serving as pastor. A throng of children was there, buttressed by a nice cadre of volunteers who flipped pancakes and cooked sausages and staffed various learning centers spread throughout the fellowship hall. The highlight of all this was a period of time that we all spent in the sanctuary, where the children had a chance to tour the vast room that houses the organ

pipes and to hear various staff members wax eloquent about the formational power of the various components of our Sunday worship experience.

My favorite moment was when one of my pastoral colleagues interpreted the meaning of baptism. She asked the children to gather at the font, much like they do whenever there is a baptism, and then she talked about the meaning of that sacrament, that rite of initiation. At the end of her presentation, she invited the children to come forward if they wished, and to place their hands in the water of the font and then to sign the cross on their foreheads as a way of remembering that they are baptized—that they are known to God and marked for life as the peculiar people of God. Boys and girls crowded in, eager to get their own turn with the water. It was a powerful moment for us parents and other adults sitting in various pews and watching the whole thing.

Both of our girls, at different times, took a turn at the font. Each signed herself with the water, and then this is what happened next: they each of them, unbeknownst to the other, cupped some of the water to bring back to where I was sitting. Each of them splashed water on my forehead, too, signing the cross there and speaking to me the reminder that I, too, am baptized. “Remember your baptism, Daddy, and be glad.” It wasn’t rehearsed. It was a spontaneous act, and neither girl had the benefit of noticing the other’s action. So, luxury of luxuries, I—who spend so much time thinking and worrying, even, about touching the future—experienced a moment in which the future touched me. The truth of the matter is that my future, and theirs, and yours, belong to God.

My prayer is that they and all those other children will not stop splashing around in that baptismal water and then extending its power out into the world that they know, to make the claim that the world and its inhabitants are signed and owned by God. My prayer is also, of course, that they will all continue to have a church, and certainly to be the church.

My prayer, finally, is that, in that huge ecosystem which supports the church and which the church in turn supports, people will continue to call and be called. People will continue to acknowledge their thirst to know and then to tell the Good News which the world needs so desperately to hear. In a re-membered ecosystem, which is the church at its very best, new generations of leaders persuaded of their vocations as servants of Christ will themselves hear an ancient question: “Do we accept this person as a minister of the Word, chosen by God, through the voice of this congregation, to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?”

Then will come the answer from a chorus of voices: “We do!”



NOTES

¹ James P. Wind and Gilbert R. Rendle, “The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations” (September 2001, The Alban Institute), 7. The Presbyterian statistics cited were compiled in greatest measure by Dr. Kurtis C. Hess at Union Theological Seminary-Presbyterian School for Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

⁶ Ibid., 10, 11, and 12.

⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

⁸ Ibid., 13-14.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of The Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 23-24.

¹¹ I am grateful to Dr. Jack Stotts, former president of Austin Seminary, who has often used this term “re-membering” to mean “to become a member again.”

¹² Ibid., 24.

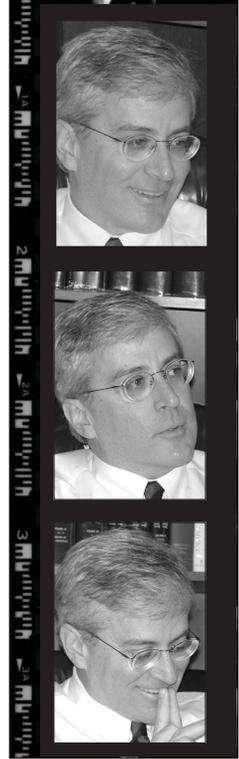
TED WARDLAW: GOD'S CALL AND THE CHURCH'S VOICE

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” How would you describe God’s call?

I can’t improve on that. That’s a wonderful way of looking at it.

God’s call sometimes comes as a delightful gift that sits on your shoulder and suddenly you open your eyes and say: “Well, of course, how could I have missed that?” Other times God’s call comes as a disturbing burden that keeps you awake at

PEOPLE THINK SOMEHOW THAT MINISTERS ARE SITTING IN A ROOM SOMEWHERE, AND ALL OF A SUDDEN SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS, THE COAT HANGERS START RATTLING IN THE CLOSET OR SOMETHING, AND THAT’S A CALL, AND EVERYBODY ELSE JUST GETS A JOB. IT’S NOT THAT WAY AT ALL. THE POINT IS TO ALWAYS BE LISTENING, ALWAYS DISCERNING WHAT GOD IS CALLING US TO DO.



night. A friend and I were going through a discernment process about the same time last summer. I was trying to discern whether to come to Austin Seminary, and he was trying to discern whether to go to Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. In a phone conversation, he recalled the hymn, “Here I Am, Lord.” He said he had never really thought much about that verse, “I have heard you calling in the night,” until he was aware that he woke up every night for weeks wrestling with this call. God’s call, at least for him, was not at all like a butterfly on his shoulder. It was a rending kind of experience. I really resonated with that. Sometimes God’s call is a disturbing thing that gets in your hair like bubble gum. But, fundamentally, I think Buechner’s right. God’s call is where the world’s deepest need and your greatest joy come together. You can’t beat it.

I'm often struck by the surprise, the curiosity, and sometimes the resistance that one finds in the biblical stories of God's call. Reflecting on those stories, what would you say if someone asked: "How do I know God is calling me?"

Well, the persistent thing in all of those stories, as I see it, the thing that is not up for grabs, is the fact that God's call is uttered in so many different settings. My current favorite is the call of Samuel (1 Sam., Chapter 3). If someone came to me with the question, "How do I know God is calling me?" I would try to take the position of Eli, and I would encourage them to keep on listening until they discern God's voice. Often God's voice is mediated through the "Eli"s of the world, the other folks, the church, who help us interpret and discern.

Sometimes when we speak of God's call, we tend to send the message that a "real" calling is to ordained ministry. How can the church regain a larger sense of vocation for the whole people of God that extends beyond the merely clerical?

It is un-Reformed to speak of calling as if only we, ministers, are called, while the rest of the people in the church just have jobs. We have to recover the Christian conversation about vocation. We have to start talking about it again. One of the things I love about being president of Austin Seminary is having the opportunity to be in churches, and to sit down with young people to talk with them about their callings. Wherever I preach now, I always ask the host pastor to set up an occasion when I can visit with people whom they know to be struggling with a sense of call. Just last weekend, for example, I was preaching in Corpus Christi, and at breakfast on Sunday morning I met with thirteen senior high students—an incredible experience. I started off not by trying to pitch how they all ought to go to Austin Seminary and become ministers, but by talking about a sense of vocation. I always lead off with the very distinction you imply in your question, that people think somehow that ministers are sitting in a room somewhere, and all of a sudden something magical happens, the coat hangers start rattling in the closet or something, and that's a call, and everybody else just gets a job. No, it's not that way at all. The point is to always be listening, always discerning what God is calling us to do. Like Buechner, we can ask: "Where is the place of meeting between my greatest joy and the world's greatest need?" In Corpus Christi I listened to the young people: Here's one kid who wants to be a fireman, and another who wants to go into the navy; here's one who wants to be a lawyer, and another who wants to be a landscape architect; here's one who wants to be a doctor, and another who wants to be a minister. I love talking about call to groups like that. I start with the belief that God's voice is loud enough to be heard in any number of professional arenas. That's an interesting word, "profession." When one chooses a profession, one is professing to serve God in this or that capacity, whether it is butcher, baker, or candlestick maker. Or, sometimes, one pursues the sense of call in the intentional volunteer work they do when they're off the clock.

This issue of *Insights* focuses primarily on the church's role in helping youth and young adults discern God's call in their lives. But what about God's calling to ordained ministry and church leadership of those who are of more mature years?

Without a doubt those who come to ministry later in life bring enormous gifts into the church and its leadership. Often because of their experiences and because of a longer opportunity to have been wrestling with life, they come with a certain tenacity and

focus that you don't necessarily get with someone younger who may have a strong sense of God's call but does not yet have a sense of how to follow that call. We need both. The church needs both, and I'm certainly not suggesting that we need to emphasize one at the expense of the other.

Your description of the church as a baptismal ecosystem that nurtures, supports, and encourages people to listen for God's call in their lives is compelling. What two or three things can pastors, directors of Christian education, and lay leaders do to make their churches become vocation-nurturing environments?

The first thing I would say right is that we need to recover a more robust understanding of baptism. Baptism is not an isolated event in the life of the church. It's true that in years past we didn't seem to know exactly where to put baptism or even the baptismal font, what to do with this whole business. We seemed to say that baptism was best done quickly. And if you blinked your eyes you might miss a baptism in a worship service. I think, first of all, we should place baptism front and center in the life of the church. When we celebrate baptisms, we should marinate in them. Baptism ought to be lifted up. And the challenge to remember our baptism ought to be emphasized in some way every Sunday.

Could you give us an example of how we can do this?

In the church that I attend here in Austin, and in a number of churches I've visited, the baptismal font plays a key role in the ordinary liturgy of the church, even if a baptism isn't celebrated every Sunday. The pastor, for example, stands behind the font and pours the water from his hand as he declares the declaration of pardon. Sometimes a pastor stands beside the font at the call to worship, and lifts the water up to remind us that we are there because we're baptized. Thank goodness we are moving away from the notion, once common, that the font somehow appeared only when there was a baptism, and disappeared when there wasn't one. Baptism is the powerful symbol reminding us of our vocation as Christian people. The most important ethical questions we can ask ourselves are: "What does it mean to be a baptized people?" "How should we live if we are baptized into Jesus Christ?" When it comes to vocation, baptism is the door through which we step into a person's life and say: "I've known you since you were in my Sunday school class back in the third grade. I want to encourage you. You have really great gifts for ministry." Baptism becomes the calling card that we present when we have that kind of conversation with someone. I guess what I'm trying to say is how important it is to recover baptism as the central metaphor for the life of the community of faith. Baptism is the glue of our covenant as members in the same community of faith.

What else can we do to support God's call in the lives of our people?

We can lift up the life of the mind in the service to God. At Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, I had a little speech I gave every month when new members were received. The congregation probably could have said it themselves if I lost the words. There were four things I challenged every new member to do. I challenged them to be in church on a regular basis, even when they traveled. I challenged them to avail themselves of the smorgasbord of activities in the life of Central Church, to find at least one place in the church that they could inhale the love of God and one place they could

exhale the love of God. I challenged them to be generous with their time and their money. We have been given so much. It's not a question of having to give, it's a question of getting to give. And I challenged them to be involved in the life of the education and nurture of the church. John Leith says, "Next to the life of love, the most important thing is the human mind dedicated to the glory of God." When you talk about the life of the mind in service to God, you create a culture in which people understand ultimately the way in which the life of the church and the life of the seminary are bound up together.

How would you go about emphasizing the life of the mind in service to God, especially with our youth?

One practical thing I would recommend, for pastors and lay leaders, is to find ways to help youth in their confirmation classes to think about their vocations. Also, there are pastors who go with their high school students every year to look at colleges. These field trips present wonderful opportunities to have conversations about vocation and callings of all kinds. Field trips to the seminary can also be wonderful experiences, introducing young people to an environment where people struggle with God's call, and are encouraged and nurtured in a learning community. Perhaps more than anything, I think that we, pastors and educators and Sunday school teachers and parents and friends and elders, can be more attentive to the people—young and old—in our midst who have any number of vocational gifts. We need to be attentive prayerfully to what gifts people have, including gifts for ordained ministry. We need to be willing to encourage people to be good stewards of those gifts. Sometimes what we most need in the church are cheerleaders and helpmeets, pointing out what people's gifts are and cheering them on.

Your article remembers the days when the church seemed to do a better job of nurturing our vocations than it does now. Are you calling for us simply to restore the denominational vigor of thirty or forty years ago?

Not exactly. The infrastructure of denominational life is changing before our very eyes. And the solution that I'm talking about is not just a simple re-implementation of the past. What we did thirty or forty years ago won't work anymore for a lot of reasons. I'm not so much saying that we need to restore denominationalism as it was, but as we witness the changes in denominational life all around us, we need to make sure that we don't forget how to think ecclesially, and ecclesologically. What I fear is happening in the life of the church in our time, is that some people are deciding that we need to give up being a connectional church and abandon our distinctive Presbyterian ethos and heritage altogether. Some people are advocating a new form of congregationalism. They argue that we should have among congregations a kind of loose association with each other. But the real action, they say, is going to be simply in individual congregations. That's not our tradition. That's not who we are. If we give up on the distinctive Presbyterian understanding of the church catholic, our connectional approach, we will lose something that could be of great value for the future. What I would encourage us to do in this very individualistic culture of ours, which fosters suspicion of anything bigger than the solitary person, is to recover a strong sense of the church as the Body of Christ. I'm encouraging us to recover an ecclesiology, a distinctively Reformed doctrine of the church, which we are in danger of losing. I read something by Sally Brown from Princeton the other day. She was reflecting on the resurrection narrative in Matthew's

Gospel. She observed that the old hymn, “In the Garden,” was based on the encounter of the women with the risen Christ who “walked with them, and talked with them.” There was a wonderful spiritual encounter in this story that is wrapped up in that old hymn: “He walks with me and he talks with me.” Sally observes, however, that the thing that’s missing in an individualistic “In the Garden” kind of ecclesiology is Jesus’ commission to the entire group of women: “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they shall see me” [Mt. 28:10].

There’s something not just Presbyterian but profoundly Christian about our identity as a people (and not just as individuals) marked by an experience of Jesus Christ. The whole ecclesia, the Church, is marked by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The encounter with Christ is always an outward-driving impulse, a movement connecting us with others. It seems to me that we need to keep thinking of ourselves not just as individuals, or even as collections of individuals gathered around a similar subset of religious values, but as a larger reality, as a church with lots of parts, or to use St. Paul’s language, a body that has many members. Some of our conversations these days about boiling down the larger church into a loose association of congregations worries me because they build on this individualism, giving us the impression that the church is just a society of like-minded individuals. Is this really enough? In this kind of church polity, am I as apt to be able to hear the correcting voice of a greater church, a larger church beyond my cul-de-sac of fellow believers when I am wrong? Am I able to hear that voice, the voice of a larger church, confirming me when I’m right?

I ran across a wonderful liturgy the other day that a friend shared with me from an Ash Wednesday service in which this prayer was offered: “Lord Jesus Christ, we are your body not because we have chosen that name, but because you have given it to us.... If through false pride or selfish independence, we have said, ‘I am not part of the body...’ Lord, have mercy upon us.” It seems to me that this prayer reflects a deeper ecclesiology. The church is not just various collections of individuals who come together because they share opinions or convictions. The church is a body, a large body, bigger than anything we could dream up by ourselves, through which we hear the voice of Jesus Christ.

What is the greatest challenge seminaries face in helping the church sustain and encourage persons as they explore and prepare to accept God’s call?

I think one challenge seminaries face is taking responsibility for their role in the process of identification, exploration, and preparation of persons who are discerning a call to ordained ministry. We cannot just assume that people will walk through our front door and say, “I’m here to try seminary out because I’ve got this call to be a minister.” Seminaries need to become far more strategically intentional about their role. We also need to do what we can to encourage and empower churches to understand their own role in identifying and encouraging and preparing people for ordained ministry. In the Reformed tradition, we believe that God initiates the call to ministry, the individual senses and responds to that call, and the church tests and validates that call. That’s the whole notion of the approbation of God’s people. Part of what that means is that churches and seminaries need to play a more catalytic and nurturing role in the whole process, understanding that it may take years before a person finally walks up to the front door of the seminary and says, “Here I am. I’m ready to learn how to be a minister.” 🙏

Melissa Wiginton currently serves as the director of Ministry Programs and the Partnership for Excellence of the Fund for Theological Education, Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia. She holds an M.Div. from Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and a B.A. and J.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Wiginton and her daughter, Betsy Crowe, authored the chapter titled “Truth” in the recently published *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds. (2002).

MELISSA WIGINTON

We don't hear much in church these days about the occupations forbidden to Christians. But back in the early days of the church, those who became Christians had to promise as part of their baptismal commitments to desist from certain kinds of work: acting, charioteering, soldiering, making sculptures of gods, training gladiators, and any other job that propped up Roman culture and its idol worship.¹ Even as recently as the mid-20th century, we know of anecdotal, less formal kinds of strictures: I've often heard stories of artists in Mississippi whose churches demanded they abandon singing the blues after their conversions. These days we don't really talk about occupational choice as a manifestation of our faith. We don't have Sunday school curricula that teach how to discern whether certain jobs are fit work for Christians. Youth in our congregations don't hear sermons about work they should not do—or perhaps even about work they should do. So how do we teach youth about faith and work? How do we form them for vocation?

When I was about eleven years old, I secretly hoped I would become a famous movie star. I imagined the dresses I would wear to the Academy Awards. I practiced throwing my head back and tossing my hair as a charming, witty guest on “The Mike Douglas Show.”² But deep down in my heart I knew that I would never be a movie star. My people were Christians, and while I didn't know that early Roman Christians couldn't be actors, I did know that we just didn't do the things movie stars did. I learned from Scripture, song, and preaching that our treasure is not in this world. Every night during our family devotional I was reminded to think on whatsoever things were just, honorable, commendable, pure, and of good report.³ I was pretty sure most of what I heard about life in the fast lane didn't fit that description. I was spoiled for The Big Time. My formation as a disciple of Jesus Christ shaped my vocational imagination. There is a lesson here: We teach youth about faith and work through the ecology of the Christian way of life, through a way of being that has a natural trajectory toward faithful vocation.

In our work at the Fund for Theological Education (FTE), we come to know young adults who could make it in The Big Time, young people with the gifts and potential for fame, lucrative careers, and high-powered positions. They excel academically and hold positions of responsible leadership. They live in a world that powerfully

reinforces the ethic of always doing more and doing it better than anyone else. We might say they have been formed as disciples of achievement, and I would claim that their vocational imaginations are accordingly impoverished. Still, many of these young adults are considering becoming ministers. They are a pretty remarkable group of people; their willingness to state openly that they might become ministers places them in a tiny minority among their peers.⁴ I am increasingly curious about what empowers them to resist the “bright lights and big city” life that lies at the ready for persons with their accomplishments. As I look closely at their lives, I detect some habits of being—some ways of living—that propel them to resist the dominant ethic of success.

Growing an Inner Life

I fantasize about recruiting young people for ministry by walking across a campus and grabbing the few students who are alone and not talking on cell phones. Those might be the ones with the capacity to be quiet and still long enough to cultivate their inner lives. Little in youth culture supports nurturing the inner life.

However, we see evidence that life in the church can make space for attending to the soul and growing the rich interiority that good ministers possess. Many of the best and brightest who will become ministers are children of pastors. They have been raised with a consistent presence reminding them of the reality and import of the inner life. A significant number of young people with strong inner lives have been wounded by experiences early in their lives. Yet by the means of God’s grace—Scripture, worship, the love of God’s people, and even those means we cannot name—they have attended to the hurt in ways that birth an inner journey toward meaning-making. Perhaps most importantly for honoring the inner life, these young people have been taken seriously by at least one adult. Someone has listened to their lives, asked them real questions, and entered into the hidden mysteries of God by sharing books, prayers, work, and time.

Touching a Sense of Wonder

Christians explore the wonder of God’s mysteries in various and sometimes surprising ways: contemplative prayer, fasting, serving the poor, and chanting, to name just a few. What I find notable about the young people we come to know is how many of them are artists: they play piano, oboe, clarinet, trombone, flute, cello, violin, and guitar. They sing as soloists and with choirs. They are photographers, painters, and poets. They write essays, plays, prayers, and even novels. They dance and act and direct theater productions. Are they preparing for *The Big Time*? Maybe. But I sense that their art is about more than just performance: these experiences hold the possibility of wonder, of self-transcendence, of being transported by the numinous. When congregations make space for the arts, they open a holy space for God’s spirit of creativity. They invite young leaders away from the passivity and cynicism of the consumer youth culture—bred by the media, fashion, and entertainment industries—and toward the mysteries of what-might-be when the self is opened to delight and play.

An Appreciation of Ritual

People who study youth culture comment on the dissociation of meaning from Chris-

tian symbols—for example crosses become merely fashion accessories. Further, they argue, middle-class youth resist attaching meaning to religious symbols because of the contemporary mandate that all meaning systems are equal. You believe what you believe, I believe what I believe, and it's all good.⁵

Young people who claim, celebrate, and appreciate the rituals of a particular tradition as part of their identity are counter-cultural. They do go to church and participate in traditional worship, but they also design and decorate holy spaces in dormitories. They craft group reflections that weave together Native American wisdom, Henri Nouwen, and the Gospel of Luke. They learn to create icons and write liturgies that use healing touch. What I see as significant in these behaviors is their refusal to act as if what they see, touch, eat, or purchase is all that there is to reality. They know that there is something beyond our apprehended experience, and they hunger for symbol and ritual to point us to the Holy that is larger than our own lives.

Engagement for Healing the World

We hear a lot about students on college campuses spending more and more time volunteering. Helping others probably functions in several different ways for most of these students. But those who will be exceptional pastoral leaders are not interested simply in helping people. They are interested in changing the world.

In college, they serve as resident advisors who eventually rise to shape campus life in concrete ways. They establish new organizations to meet a need they have identified on their campuses. Even during college, they are active leaders in the life of local congregations, dedicated to making a difference in a community that is not just about them but has a life before and after their presence. Many of these young people come to seminary after spending a year or two in a volunteer service corps such as Mission Volunteers U.S.A. They cast their lots with faith communities that deeply and over a significant span of time aim to enact justice—this while other best and brightest are beginning their ascent into Big Time careers.

I can't help but think about my own life in light of these qualities. My parents didn't set out to ruin me for The Big Time; in fact, my mother once said she hoped I would be the next Barbara Walters. But the Christian way of life they lived and taught me, embodied in a community of believers, was about giving money away, feasting on a potluck menu with people that weren't all just alike, and getting up early on a cold morning to do something for someone else. That life and all its mysteries made me a person restless until my being and doing found a home in the work of ministry. This is still the task of the church: to form gifted young disciples who can't help but be true to the gospel and to call them into being as ministers of God's mysteries. 🙏

NOTES

¹ Hippolytus, Antipope, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, translated into English with introduction and notes by Burton Scott Easton, (New York: Macmillan, 1934; Cambridge, Eng.: The University Press, 1934), 23-27.

² I'd never seen "The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson" because it came on past my bedtime.

Mike Douglas was on in the afternoon.

³ Philippians 4:8.

⁴ According to *The American Freshman*, only 0.3% of entering college freshman indicated clergy as their career path. Cooperative Institutional Research Program, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2001*, (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 2001).

⁵ Clark, Schofield Lynn. 1998. "Identity, Discourse, and Media Audiences: A Critical Ethnography of the Role of Visual Media in Religious Identity Construction among United States Adolescents." Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder. Find other related research at www.youthandreligion.org.

Don Richter is associate director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a project funded by Lilly Endowment and based at Valparaiso University. He received an M.Div. and Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary.

DON C. RICHTER

Devil’s Playground” (2002) is an intriguing documentary film that portrays coming of age within the Amish community. When they turn sixteen, Amish teens are turned loose and allowed to sow their wild oats—including drugs, alcohol, and sex—prior to renouncing “English ways” and “going Amish.” The Pennsylvania Dutch term for this period of “running around” is *rumspringa*, and filmmaker Lucy Walker was amazed to find that 85 to 90 percent of the teens decide to abandon their barn-hopping bashes and return to the Amish way of life.

To the extent that *rumspringa* works for the Amish, it succeeds because of strong early formation in faith practices that provide a sharp contrast to “English ways.” Amish children absorb parental views and values before their rebellion period. As they approach the threshold of adulthood and decide to run wild, at least they know they’re doing so! Absent such prior formation, the non-stop partying would be an end in itself with no existential leverage for transformation—i.e., no guilt or shame motivating conversion.

The pedagogical strategy of *rumspringa* resembles a rite of passage. A key difference from many rites of passage, however, is the absence of adult companions as tribal elders and tradition-bearers during the intensification period. Instead of being coached or mentored along the way, young people are basically told, “Go see what life is like and how long the fun lasts when you’re separated from the rest of us and left to your own devices. We know enough about you to trust that you’ll come crawling back to our way of life, seeking forgiveness, when the party’s over.” The Amish, it seems, look at sixteen year olds and see the saga of the prodigal son who “comes to himself” after squandering his inheritance in the devil’s playground and then trudges contritely home to dad (Luke 15).¹

While we Presbyterians may shake our heads in bewilderment at the logic behind this tradition of *rumspringa*, we often practice it ourselves without giving it a name. We ride herd on our young people until they complete a confirmation program, and then we turn them loose and leave them to their own devices, especially regarding their ongoing faith formation. We’re glad if they decide to stay involved in church activities, but as “realists” we understand when church has to take a back seat to school, sports, and jobs. We want to support teenagers as they prepare for life after high school, so we

cross our fingers and hope that they will eventually return to active church involvement when it fits their “lifestyle.” And yet we need to ask ourselves: Have Presbyterian youth experienced Christian faith as a life-giving, alternative *way of life* to which they will someday be drawn to return?

An Alternative Pedagogy?

What if, instead of viewing teenagers through the cultural lens of adolescence with its psychology of *Sturm und Drang*, we view them in light of their passion for God and their eagerness to serve others? What if, instead of viewing teens as mere *consumers of culture*, we view them as *creators of culture*? During the past decade, I have been privileged to participate in two projects animated by a different view of teenagers, a view that did not accept *rumspringa* as the necessary and inevitable path for North American young people. Let me briefly describe what I’ve learned from these projects, first from reading theology books with teens and then from writing a book with teens on the life of Christian faith.

Reading Theology with Teens

From 1992-1998, I directed what is now the Youth Theological Initiative (YTI) of the Candler School of Theology (Emory University). Each summer during my tenure, YTI sponsored a four-week residential academy for twenty adults and sixty rising high school seniors from around the country. Through an application process, highly motivated teens were selected and awarded scholarships to attend. Indeed, we called teen participants “scholars” to underscore their status as young theologians, our broad intent being to invite this diverse group of young people to “fall in love with theology” as an ongoing practice and life-long pursuit.² After ten summer academies, seminaries and religion departments throughout the country are now populated with YTI alumni/ae, and some are already serving the church as ordained ministers.

Elsewhere I’ve described some of the key ingredients that made YTI such a powerful experience.³ One of our big concerns as we developed the program was whether we could bring biblical and theological texts to life for teen participants. In the field of youth ministry, the actual reading of texts—other than the devotional reading of the Bible—is generally considered anathema. We’re great with experiential learning and hands-on activities, but we do little to connect young people with the vast resources of theological literature. So even seasoned seminary faculty on our staff had limited experience in how to read theology with teenagers. And some of us were openly skeptical about whether seventeen year olds would be able to grasp the assigned course readings.

“Diane, can’t you find something more current and accessible than Tillich’s *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* for your course?” I asked a faculty member as we planned for the first summer academy. “We shouldn’t shove them into the deep end until we know they can tread water.”

“I realize some of the language is dated,” Diane replied calmly. “But, you see, reading Tillich is what turned me on to theology in the first place. His words still speak to me today, and I believe I can open up this book for students in my class. Besides, Tillich

provides the conceptual framework for what we plan to explore in this course; it's only fair to let the others in on it."

Diane was right. That very fall I read several college application essays by YTI alumni/ae that winsomely quoted *Love, Power, and Justice*. The same thing happened with theologians ranging from Jürgen Moltmann to Ignatius Loyola. What we learned is that teenagers can engage both ancient and modern texts as long as these texts have personal power and significance for their teachers. What scholars see modeled is a passionate conversation between teacher and text. As they come to trust their teacher, scholars find themselves drawn into this conversation with the assigned text as well.

Reading the Bible with teens presents a different set of challenges, mostly because of the special authority claims related to this book. In the words of current YTI Director Faith Kirkham Hawkins, "The Bible is a name; Scripture is a claim." We call this library of ancient texts "Bible," but to relate to the Bible as *Scripture* is to grant it authority over our lives and to do so within an ongoing community of interpretation. YTI introduces teens to basic reading skills that would be featured in "Hermeneutics 101," such as how to read Pauline epistles as letters.

Foundational to our reading of biblical and theological texts is the creation of a "holding environment" in which teenagers and adults can share life together over a period of time and reflect theologically on their daily activities. This is far from a *rum-springa* approach; rather, it is an approach based on multiple levels of accompaniment by a significant number of adults. You don't need TV or even the Internet when community life itself is rich and entertaining. And if leaders don't over-program every minute of the day, space is created for reading and contemplation. In the company of trusted adults, teens will gladly enter that space.

YTI is located on a university campus, so the stage is set for a program that requires reading. Campus life is the near horizon for many teenagers. Every summer, high school students enroll in all sorts of enrichment programs mounted by colleges, from sports camps to science and art courses. And teens often find their vocational bearings through these summer experiences, which is why Lilly Endowment wants to see theology programs for teenagers offered on university and college campuses. Teens capable of reading books about DNA are capable of reading books about GOD.

We need grand initiatives like YTI, yet we also need local congregational initiatives that bring teens and adults together to read theology and reflect on the life of Christian faith. Read Nouwen's *Reaching Out* in preparation for a mission trip, or during the trip. Use Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* to frame a weekend retreat or week of summer camp. Plant a community garden and read selections from McFague's *Life Abundant*. Organize a public reading of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* on MLK Day to give testimony to the tome that inspired the Civil Rights Movement. As church leaders who have had the benefit of a theological education, we have a responsibility to provide teens with access to the soul-shaping literature that has shaped our own souls. We can put copies of these books in the hands of young people and we can guide them in reading these books with trusted adults.

Writing a Book with Teens

Building a community to *read* books is one thing; building a community to write a book is another, especially when the collaborative writing project involves eighteen adults and eighteen teens from around the country. That was our challenge over a two-year period as Dorothy Bass and I assembled a group of authors to write *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Upper Room Books, 2002). Our goal was to produce a book for a teenaged audience to portray the abundant way of life Jesus invites us to live now—in our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, our world. Our hope was to provide substantive guidance and nourishment for teens following believer baptism or confirmation, an alternative to *rumspringa*.

As we prepared the book, our teen and adult group gathered four times for writer conferences, though we didn't jump into writing the chapter right away. First we spent time exploring the different practices in small groups, considering biblical and personal stories, songs, and images related to each practice. We played and worshiped together as we became a community shaped by ongoing practices (in contrast to episodic events). Between meetings, we stayed in touch with others via mail and e-mail. Once we established sufficient trust, we presented drafts for mutual critique, aided by a writing coach. Our young contributors took their roles to heart, keeping teen sensibilities before us as the book took shape. When we met the final time to review our manuscript, we also planned strategies for a leader's guide and website to accompany the book (see www.waytolive.org).

Writing a book with teens may sound overly ambitious. But what about a smaller-scale writing project that could be published on your church's website? Just as the web has given us greater access to books, it has opened new pathways for sharing ideas and information with wider audiences. Are we using the web as a ministry resource with young people, as a place they can create culture instead of just consuming it? Frankly, most church websites could use a face-lift, and it would be exciting to see what teams of teens and adults could be commissioned to produce in the way of stories, music, images, and interactive features to convey the life of Christian faith. Imagine refreshing your site each month or quarter with a special attraction that teens had a hand in crafting. Perhaps folks would actually visit your site and check it out!

Whether we embark on a reading or writing project with young people, the important thing is to build vital partnerships between teens and adults so that, together, we experience the variety of gifts that Paul describes in I Corinthians 12. We can support teenagers as they move from watching to envisioning, from listening to speaking, from sitting passively to acting for the public good. In contrast to *rumspringa*, Presbyterian adults are called to accompany young people during their coming of age so that the Body of Christ might be strengthened and energized for service in the world. 🙏

NOTES

¹ In the *Way to Live* chapter on "Welcome," Joyce Hollyday and Kaitlyn Filar note how the loving father welcomes home his dutiful older son as well as his profligate younger son, both of whom become "homeless" in Jesus' parable.

² In an essay on “The Rhythm of Education,” *The Aims of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 15-28, Alfred North Whitehead describes a movement from romance to precision to generalization. The *romance* stage initiates the learning process by engaging a person’s attention and passion in a particular subject matter. This stage is often characterized by excitement, adventure, and playfulness as the learner becomes aware of a new world waiting to be explored. The *precision* required for map-making can be temporarily suspended until the learner is ready to take the next step. Too often, graduate theological education bypasses or abbreviates the romance stage of learning in order to teach the grammatical precision of the disciplines.

³ “Roots & Wings: Practicing Theology With Youth,” *Agenda For Youth Ministry*, edited by Dean Borgman and Christine Cook (London: Triangle, SPCK, 1998), 132-150; “Reconceiving Youth Ministry,” co-authored with Doug Magnuson and Michael Baizerman, *Religious Education*, Vol. 93, No. 3, Summer 1998.

Carol Lytch is coordinator of Lilly Endowment Programs for Strengthening Congregational Leadership, a program administered through the Fund for Theological Education on the campus of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. A graduate of Mount Holyoke College and Princeton Theological Seminary, Lytch holds the Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion and Christian Ethics from Emory University. Her book *Choosing Faith Across Generations: The Religious Lives of High School Seniors, their Parents, and their Congregations* is forthcoming from Westminster/John Knox Press.

CAROL E. LYTCH

For a ten-month period in 1996-67, I lived the religious life of a high school senior as I conducted field research on high school seniors in three congregations (Catholic, evangelical, and mainline Protestant). Over that period I immersed myself in everything the congregations offered their high school seniors. I attended fifty worship services, thirty-seven youth meetings, four retreats, twenty Sunday school classes, Bible studies and small group meetings, and eleven choir rehearsals. In addition, I attended “drop-ins,” when the youth gathered informally at the church to play ping-pong and hang out with the youth-friendly adults. While I was investigating a larger issue—what holds youth in their religious traditions—I also noted that not once in the period of my research did I hear the church invite its youth to think theologically about the profession or work they would undertake in their lives. How ironic, since high school seniors on the threshold of leaving home are really interested in thinking and planning for the future.

I did hear these three churches introduce the doctrine of vocation to teens in a general way. They presented the notion that each individual has a God-given purpose for their life. Teens were told, “You don’t have to become a minister; every Christian has a ministry no matter what career you choose.” And “Do everything to the glory of God.” Churches may have touched on the doctrine of vocation in this general way, but they never helped teens explore the implications of it for the real life decisions they were facing. Teens were left to their own devices to choose a college or a vocational track, a course of study in college, and various types of work. Vocational exploration appeared to be a taboo subject in the church.

When my husband was a high school senior, his church sent his youth group to a Presbyterian college to take a battery of personality and aptitude tests that were scored by a computer program. Later the results were interpreted to him in a meeting with a vocational counselor. His test results showed he had an aptitude for pastoral ministry, a life’s work that he had never considered. After twenty-five years as an ordained pastor, my husband still jokes that he was called into ministry by a computer. His church also matched each youth with an adult from the congregation in a mentoring relationship. His mentor was a printer who explained to him why he viewed his profession as a Christian ministry. As valuable as that experience was to my husband, it appears that

the church today rarely assists teens with that kind of vocational exploration.

I propose two strategies for the church as it claims its appropriate role with youth as a community that fosters the spiritual discernment of vocation. First, churches introduce into their youth curriculum a theology of vocation that includes conversation with teens about the events, experiences, and relationships that influence their ideas and decisions about what life work they might want to undertake. I plan to try this in my own church this spring as I lead the high school juniors and seniors in a study written by Ginny Ward Holderness with Forrest C. Palmer called *Career and Calling: A Guide for Counselors, Youth, and Young Adults*.¹ I particularly like the way the authors frame one of the key questions. It is not “What do you want to do when you grow up?” Rather, the question is: “What do you want to do *first*?” This not only relieves some of the pressure teens may feel about the weightiness of vocational exploration, it more faithfully reflects how God calls us to respond in particular ways at particular times. The authors are careful not to reduce a life’s call to what you do; it’s also about being in relation to God. Teens are encouraged to ask: “What is God calling me to be and do?” A calling also is presented in the context of one’s whole life. God calls people to a way of life, not just to a career or occupation. The components of the program are tried and true: mentoring by adults, involvement by parents, building a peer group, using Christian practices, studying Scripture, journaling...and a taking battery of computer-scored tests!

For more than ten years, Lilly Endowment has been underwriting a set of programs for high school youth sponsored by theological seminaries of all denominations across the United States and Canada with two aims: (1) to offer more creative and substantive theological education for young people; and, (2) to encourage a new generation of young and bright individuals to explore Christian ministry as a viable option for their life’s work. In residential summer experiences, often followed up by mentored projects in ministry that they develop in their church or community, high school students are demonstrating that they have remarkable capacities to reflect theologically on their lives and the world’s situation.² They are discerning new vocational directions through these programs. They still may major in journalism in college, but now with a second major in religion. They still may pursue law, but now with an emphasis on representing the homeless. They still may go into business, but now with an aim to develop the economic life of the poorer sections of their community. Congregations can take heart from what these programs demonstrate: high school youth want to be challenged to make a difference in the world through the work that they will do. The church can help them find the “place where...deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”³

Second, congregations, seminaries, and other partners can work together to build a “culture of encouragement” that raises awareness of church work as a possible calling.⁴ Several denominations have conducted research on factors that influence young people to consider a vocation in the church. They have found that young people, contrary to popular belief, do not find the idea of being a pastor, priest, or lay minister unappealing. Young people today are as captivated by the call to serve God in the church as they ever have been. Nor are young people discouraged by the relative low pay for the level

of education that must be attained.⁵ Nor are they turned off by church politics. Rather, the key reason why young people do not explore a career in the church is that no one has encouraged them to do so. No one has tapped them on the shoulder and said, “Have you ever thought that you might be called to be a pastor?” Further, studies show that when young people do express an interest in exploring a call to ministry, they often are not encouraged by parents and friends to pursue it. The culture of encouragement that must be built should include family and friends.⁶

Methodists in some parts of the country are instituting “Ministry Sunday,” an annual Sabbath worship service that focuses on the calling to ministry in the church. During the service, members are asked to submit in writing names of individuals they know—their children, grandchildren, and others—who will be contacted by the local seminary and invited to explore theological education. Other denominations and the Fund for Theological Education are producing videos about ministry to be shown in congregations to raise awareness among all the members that they should “tap the shoulder” of those who may be called to a church vocation.⁷ Former Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) moderator Douglas Oldenburg tours the country speaking to young people identified by their congregations about exploring a call to ministry.

It is no surprise that camps, mission trips, conferences, and extended placements in volunteer ministry positions are often the places where young people hear a call to ministry. The home church does the hard work of nurturing youth in the faith and practices day-in and day-out throughout their growing years. But it is in the liminal experiences away from home that youth encounter the Holy in such soul-stirring ways that they return saying, “I am called.” Regional and national church meetings for youth also provide them with the chance to be surrounded by others like themselves who are serious in their faith and to take steps toward a call to serve in the church.

Barbara G. Wheeler reports that today’s theological students are steered toward seminary through post college experiences in congregational life rather than by persons or studies in the college milieu.⁸ Needless to say, they are not steered there as a result of high school experiences either. It is no coincidence that current theological students are older than they used to be, averaging age thirty-five. While the church benefits from the maturity that older students bring, we are missing the multi-generational ministry that we used to enjoy with a greater number of clergy in their twenties and early thirties. If we engender a “culture of encouragement,” we might change that.

Recently I received an email from a college student who is double majoring in journalism and religion. She wrote that her experience in high school at a seminary-sponsored youth program “ruined” her. Since that summer she has been looking for ways to marry her love of writing and her passion for theology with a place of service. Whether young people discover their life’s work in the church or in “secular” employment, it is the church’s joyful responsibility to help young people—even teenagers—to find their calling in what is worthy of their lives, that is, the service of God. 🌿

Continued on page 41

Paul Osborne is the church educator at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and writer and director for Thuma Mina, the Mission Interpretation Theatre Troupe for the Worldwide Ministries Division of the PCUSA. He was formerly associate professor of arts and recreation at The Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. Osborne has served as the plenary speaker for Christian education conferences across the denomination.

PAUL E. OSBORNE

We sat in the parking lot of the Homestead Mennonite Church in south Florida. There were twenty-three high school youth and seven adult advisors. We had traveled from our home church, Central Presbyterian in Atlanta, to Miami to spend Martin Luther King weekend working with urban mission sites, attending worship in a variety of cultural settings, and learning about the economic and political issues facing the city. Several years ago the senior highs had expressed the desire to shift the winter retreat from a ski trip to an urban plunge experience in cities around the United States. Miami was our fourth trip; the first two were in New York City and last year we spent the weekend in the windy (and rather chilly) city of Chicago.

The focus of our discussion moved from sharing our experiences at various mission sites, to the levels of poverty we witnessed to our varying worship experiences. One group worshipped in a downtown Presbyterian church. They reported that the sanctuary was designed to hold 1200 people, but only forty were in worship. The group responded with a mixture of emotions and thoughts. It was clear that they felt a sense of sadness that the church was not thriving, but they also expressed a deep appreciation for our church and its ministry to them and to the community. Some wanted to come back to that church in Miami to help them develop a youth ministry, others wanted to invite them to Atlanta to see our church and to tell them how we maintain an active, thriving, and mission-focused church in the midst of the city.

This group of high school students often amazes me with their theological insight, their knowledge, and their deep commitment to each other and to our congregation. I have known the seniors since they were third graders and the freshman since they were in kindergarten. I have taught them in Sunday school, helped them plan and lead Children's Sabbath Services, directed them in Christmas pageants, and roasted marshmallows with them at our annual church-wide retreat.

In 1993, when Central Presbyterian made the commitment to hire a full-time educator with an emphasis on youth ministry, it was also renewing a commitment to its children, youth, and to the future of the church in its urban setting. Although the entire educational ministry has expanded during the last ten years, and a generous endowment gift has established an educational ministry intern position with a focus on youth, I believe that the consistency of a generalist educator position has created a sense

of continuity and stability for children and youth. The church has also viewed this position as a part of the pastoral staff and included the educator in worship planning, pastoral care, and administrative responsibilities. As each program and ministry is evaluated, attention is paid to the needs of children and youth. This consistency has promoted commitment on the part of youth advisors and children's teachers and provided support for them as they have worshiped, traveled, played, prayed, and worked with the children and youth of Central.

At Central, the goal of Christian education is to provide "traditioning" in the faith. Our church has been described as one of the most "traditional non-traditional" churches in the denomination. Our mission has always been one of service to the community. Throughout its history, Central has maintained a powerful connection with the heart of Atlanta. From the founding of the Well Baby Clinic, which became the Central Health Center, to the Outreach Office and the Child Development Center, the church has sought to serve the needs of the poor and homeless in the city. The church has been radical in its stance, providing space for union organizers to meet, opening its doors to hundreds of travelers in Atlanta for the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, and currently staging peace vigils on the corner across from the State Capitol every Sunday after worship. While actively involved in social justice issues, the church also provides a very traditional experience for its members. Children's choirs meet every Sunday at 9:00 followed by an active Sunday school program. Worship is at 11:00, lunch immediately following. Youth group meets from 5:00 to 7:30 every Sunday evening without fail. There are picnics, retreats, Presbyterian Women's Circle meetings, a Senior Adult Ministry group, square dances, pot-luck suppers, and Rally Day in the fall to kick-off the Sunday school year.

One of the primary aspects of this "traditioning" is active and consistent involvement in worship. Children and youth are engaged in all aspects of the church and its seasons. They are involved at an early age in worship education and worship experiences. At age five, children are welcomed into the 11:00 worship service on Sunday morning. Elementary children are worship leaders both as choir members and liturgists at the church-wide retreat, on Children's Sabbath, during Advent, for the Christmas Eve Pageant Service, and other special occasions. They lead worship at the Sunday school gathering on a regular basis. Youth have worship together on a regular basis and are involved in planning and leading worship for the church-wide retreat, the Advent Event, Shrove Saturday Celebration, Youth Sunday, and this year will play an active part in the Pentecost Celebration and Worship. The youth also plan and lead an evening worship service for our shelter guests. The children and youth choirs are included in all major services throughout the year. Their work in worship is always combined with study and reflection.

Worship has also been an important part of all of our mission partnerships, retreats, and recreational outings. One of the most important elements of our experiences is the reflection on the worship services we attend. Last summer we were asked to plan and lead worship for the Sunday morning service at Iglesia El Divino Salvador, our mission-partner church in San Jose, Costa Rica. The youth chose Scripture, music, and wrote the liturgy. They also provided the leadership and proclaimed the word

through preaching, movement, and mime. The service was a creative mix of elements from the Costa Rican style of worship and the reformed liturgy of Central. The response was overwhelming. One Costa Rican youth exclaimed, "This was amazing worship." In Miami, this year, we split into our five work-groups to attend worship at five different locations: an urban Presbyterian church, a More-Light congregation, a Haitian congregation, a homeless congregation, and a Spanish-speaking church. The youth were able to discuss the focus and elements of worship, the cultural settings, and compare them to our worship at home. They enjoyed the experiences, but their appreciation of what happens at Central was also apparent.

Another significant aspect of creating a "traditioning" experience for youth is the role of advisor/mentors. Michael Polanyi, a Hungarian scientist turned philosopher, noted that certain skills and knowledge could only be passed on or "traditioned" by personal apprenticeship. An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice.¹ At Central this concept is realized through teachers, youth advisors, and elder sponsors during confirmation, and through the intentionally inter-generational quality of many of the programs of the church. Children and youth interact with adults in worship, education, service, and recreation; children are paired with adults for leadership in worship; theatrical productions include children, youth and adults; seventh and eighth graders spend a year in relationship with an active elder as a part of their confirmation experience; older high school youth partner with middle school youth on mission trips, for youth Sunday planning, and throughout the year for a variety of activities and program. In essence, all adults are viewed as "masters" and all children and youth as "apprentices" in the faith. Not surprisingly, the roles sometimes become reversed and adults are taught by the insights of youth and the heartfelt expressions of children. In the church community where we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, the role of the "master" is not confined to one who is older.

The results of the commitment Central Presbyterian Church has made to the work of "traditioning" the children and youth of the congregation are evident in the enthusiasm and dedication of the participants to their own programs and to the whole life of the church. 

NOTE

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958,) 53.

PASTORS' PANEL

Welcome to the inauguration of Insights' new feature, "The Pastors' Panel." In this and future issues of Insights, we will be asking clergypersons to respond to questions that draw on their own expertise and experience in addressing the particular theme. In this issue, we have put three different questions to three wise colleagues: Robert E. Dunham, Ann Herlin, and Mark Labberton.

ROBERT E. DUNHAM

Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

What needs to change in the culture of the Presbyterian Church so that we can better challenge college-aged students to consider ministry as a vocation and theological education as a next step?

In my opinion, three things are needed. First, the whole church must reclaim ministries in higher education as a significant priority. In the past, strong campus ministry programs at state universities and chaplaincy programs at church-related colleges helped to identify and challenge a whole generation of highly capable students toward theological vocations. Some programs are still doing so today, but many campus ministries must wage a constant struggle for survival. When synods and presbyteries regularly trim spending or eliminate funding altogether for campus-related programs, and when church-related colleges relegate chaplaincy programs to the sidelines, not only are undergraduates shortchanged; in the end the whole church suffers.

Second, campus ministers and college chaplains must begin to understand their work as integrally related to the worship, programs, and ministries of local congregations, and, through partnership with local churches, encourage and assist students in finding their way into active participation in the churches. Thirty years ago, when campus ministries nationwide were under fire from some constituencies for their engagement in the struggle for civil rights or against the war in Vietnam, having a primary funding-relationship with a synod or denominational office afforded something of a fire wall from attacks from local congregations. Such safety ultimately came at a cost, however, because it produced at times a virtual wall of separation between campus ministries and local congregational life. What was lost in such antagonism was the accountability and mutuality of support that relationships with local congregations can afford. The church I presently serve housed a synod-funded campus ministry program which suffered in such a way. A wing of our facility was devoted to campus programs, but those programs might as well have been in another state, for all the distance that existed between "them" and "us." Then seven years ago, we developed a partnership with

other area Presbyterian churches with a broad theological diversity to oversee the program of that ministry. In conversation with our constituent synod and presbytery, our session and congregation acted at the same time to bring the position of campus minister in-house as part of the church's program staff. Since that time the program has begun to thrive again. Students are engaged in every aspect of the church's life; in the last three years alone the program has sent a half-dozen very capable students to seminary, while equipping dozens of others for lay leadership in the church and maintaining a prophetic presence. Of course, our design is not workable everywhere, but it does offer one example of the good that can occur when we reclaim the ties between local churches and campus ministry programs.

Finally, the most obvious need: pastors and lay leaders in local congregations need in a systematic way to identify gifted college-age students within their own congregations or in colleges and universities within their communities. We all need to reclaim a willingness to share with such students our perception of their gifts for ministry, to encourage them to consider God's call, and to challenge them to give theological education a try. To demonstrate our earnestness in such efforts, we also need to be prepared to assist such students, wherever possible, in meeting the rising cost of theological study.

MARK LABBERTON

Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California

When is the “right” time to go to seminary?

Over the past two decades, dozens of people from our congregation have gone to seminary. Most of these have been or will be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. I don't really know why this happens. That is, I have no easy explanation for why this occurs so frequently, not least since we do not publically discuss or encourage this choice.

It might be supposed that most of these seminarians are recent graduates of the University of California at Berkeley whose life surrounds our church on every side. True, some of those going to seminary from our church decide to do so during their undergraduate years and go on to seminary directly or quite soon after graduation. But few do that, and most are in the later twenties or older. I am glad. Here are two of my reasons, the first has to do with the maturity of many undergraduates and the second to do with ministry itself:

Since adolescence seems to extend nowadays to at least the mid-twenties, I think a decision to go to seminary should often be delayed as well. Put more positively, I think going to seminary for many college graduates should be explored tentatively while engaging in work and ministry that helps them come to know themselves, their gifts, and their calling more fully. This delay seems more important for those making seminary decisions than for those going on to other forms of graduate study. Why? Because the nature and demands of contemporary ministry specially beg for personal

maturity at every point. I say to each person on our staff that I expect two things: (1) That they will conduct themselves as disciples of Jesus Christ; and (2) That they will conduct themselves as adults. It is by far the latter of these two that seems to be the source of most personnel issues that arise. None of us is fully mature, of course, but this sort of experience reminds me of the value there can be in delaying seminary in order to help some people continue their basic human and Christian development. If pastoral ministry engages us in accompanying people on an endless and uncharted path towards personal and spiritual maturity, then the more mature the young shepherd, the better. Seminary can make its best contribution in the education and training of pastors when the time is ripe in a student's life.

Another reason I am glad many choose seminary later in their lives than sooner is simply that ministry is really hard, both to do (in the cases where it is a call and a good fit) and to leave (in the cases where it is perhaps neither). The enormous attrition rate for those leaving pastoral ministry, and the struggles that many of us face, all provide further justification for that old adage that you "should only go to seminary if you really feel God kicking you into it." I honestly feel like I have the privilege of serving a congregation which has far, far fewer endemic problems than those of many of my ministry colleagues. Yet, I would still say that pastoral ministry is an exceptionally difficult call. The complexity of peoples' lives, the tangle of personal and familial brokenness, the societal disorientation and lostness marks every congregation. (This means that nearly every part of pastoral ministry involves an insatiable hunger for love and a broken vulnerability that demands wisdom and mercy.) Pastoral ministry should not be entered into without as much sane sensibility and awareness as possible. The Body of Christ in a broken and needy world has at least as much potential to devour its pastors as to nurture them. This is no mere exaggeration and those seeking ordination need to be aware of that.

More time growing up in Christ, more time inside a local church, more time experiencing informal, lay ministry, more time watching, asking, discerning, testing call before stepping into seminary potentially enhances the wisdom a seminarian can bring to that context for specialized, formal education and development. I am thrilled to see students enter their seminary training at the right time, knowing themselves and the church sufficiently enough to weigh, to accept, and to mature into the pastors God calls them to be through and after seminary itself.

ANN HERLIN (MDIV'01)

Associate Pastor, Old Presbyterian Meeting House, Alexandria, Virginia

What went through your head when you first thought about being a minister?

The *first* time I was about eight years old, and thought that being a minister could save me from ever having to shop for a house. I don't like making decisions.

The second time came during my senior year of college. Graduation was fast approaching, and I still had no idea of what I wanted to be when I grew up. Doctor?

I'd be terrible. Lawyer? Not my cup of tea. Teacher? Maybe. I've always liked kids. Minister? Hmmm. I might actually be good at that. But don't you have to have a sign from God?

And so I filed the thought away, waiting for... a lightning bolt, perhaps, or a celestial vision. I committed to two years as a first grade teacher, and quickly found myself immersed in sentence strips, big books, and dyed macaroni.

Two years later, the idea of being a minister surfaced again, and this time I tentatively let it stay. It was no longer obvious to me that a sign from God need be something other than a vocational match. The more I thought about it, the more the tasks of ordained ministry seemed to be ones that I could do well and be passionate about. I wasn't certain—I was still considering a career in education, and I longed for an unmistakable sign from God. I also began asking a new question, "What would being a minister mean for me personally?" Quite frankly, I was terrified that all my friends would suddenly be intimidated by my new "holy" status; that no one would be able to look upon me as a normal human being ever again! So as I wrestled with whether my future lay in teaching or lay instead in the pastorate, I breathed not a word to anyone. Even to broach the subject, I feared, would create imaginary walls of sanctity around me.

And then one day, I tentatively, *tentatively*, possibly, maybe wondered aloud to my closest friend. And she, my agnostic Hindu roommate, exclaimed, "Ann! That's perfect! That's exactly what you should do!"

It took me another two years to make my way to seminary— two years of mostly keeping it to myself, of vaguely telling people that I was applying to "graduate school." But occasionally I would steel myself and confess, "I'm thinking of going to seminary." Each time I took that risk, a little of the fear and uncertainty was chipped away. Perhaps most important were the affirmations of those who knew me well, some of whom even said that they'd long held this thought for me. What surprised me even more were my conversations with people I had just met. Instead of a wall, I found genuine curiosity and an openness that allowed me to share what church and faith meant in my life. As I made my way toward seminary, and then through the ordination process, I recognized that not only did these conversations allay my fears, but they also were my sign from God. Studying for the pastorate increasingly felt right, but it was the ongoing affirmation of others that helped me trust I was on the right path. 🌱

STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is being provided in the hope that it might be helpful—with youth groups, sessions, parent groups, and others involved in ministry with young people—in using the materials and ideas in this issue of Insights.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In the Introduction (p.2), Michael Jenkins repeats a variation on an old joke. This is a subtle reference to the long-held and widely repeated Presbyterian idea that although we lose our young people after confirmation, we maintain a hope and expectation that they will return to church when they have children of their own. Is our hope well-founded? Do you think that this is what happens? Is such a notion harmful or helpful to us as a denomination?

2. Ted Wardlaw (pp. 3-15) remembers a time in the Presbyterian Church when there was vital understanding, deep confidence, and many expressions of what he calls “the language of vocation.” He offers this memory in the hope that pastors and laity will also remember a time when, in almost every congregation, strong and confident voices of encouragement surrounded young people from birth and baptism. He then suggests that this is no longer true of our denomination. Is he on target? What have you observed?

3. Wind and Rendle’s suggestion that a declining vitality in American religious institutions is responsible for a shortage of clergy, a decline in the quality of pastoral leadership, and a problem in retaining women in ministry. Discuss Ted Wardlaw’s analysis of these three problems vis-a-vis the Presbyterian reality. What do you find helpful? Are there places where you agree and/or disagree?

4. In his conclusion Wardlaw appeals for “a new ecosystem.” He offers a number of suggestions. What does he mean by “re-membering”? Where is he most helpful from your perspective? Is what he suggests possible for Presbyterians in 2003? How might your congregation put into effect at least one of his suggestions?

5. In her Reflection, Melissa Wiginton (pp. 16-19) suggests that “there is little in youth culture that supports nurturing the inner life.” Is this true? If so, why? If not, why not? Wiginton defines “greatness” in a way that differs sharply from mainstream culture.

How does she see “greatness”? To what extent does her view represent what you understand as Christian theology (and, perhaps, distinctively Reformed theology)?

6. What is the “*Rumspringa* paradigm” described by Don Richter (pp. 20-24)? How might youth experience Christian faith as a life-giving, alternative way of life to which they will someday be drawn to return, or, better yet, never leave?

7. What do you think of the “Youth Theological Initiative”? Seventeen year olds and Tillich? Is this a good idea?

8. Carol Lytch (pp. 25-27) suggests it seems to be rare today that the church assists teens with any kind of vocational exploration. Why is this the case? Although the Presbyterian-related (and other church-related) universities may still be willing, how long has it been since pastors took their interested high school members on a tour of nearby church-related universities? What is your assessment of Lytch’s proposal that congregations introduce into their programs a theology of vocation that includes conversation with teens about the events, experiences, and relationships that influence their ideas and decisions about what life work they might want to undertake? What about her idea of a “culture of encouragement”?

9. Paul Osborne (pp. 28-30) introduces the idea of “traditioning” when a congregation encourages active and consistent involvement of young people in worship from the age of five. Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta makes room for young people in every aspect of congregational life and worship. Mentoring, pairing with adults in leadership, intergenerational activities, openness to the ideas and culture of young people can create an atmosphere of acceptance, interest and encouragement. How could your congregation do more to make the church available and exciting for young people?

10. In The Pastors’ Panel (pp. 31-34), three pastors, Robert Dunham, Mark Labberton, and Ann Herlin, explore key questions of vocation. After reading what they have to say, answer these questions for yourself: What needs to change in the culture of the Presbyterian Church so that we can better challenge college-aged students to consider ministry as a vocation and theological education as a next step? When do you think is the “right” time to go to seminary? How might you be an affirmation of someone’s call to ministry?

11. In Michael Miller’s essay on youth culture (pp. 42-44), “The X Games,” the seminary students in his course asked: Is it possible that American young people are an “interior colony” whose only role and value to the commercial system is as a malleable class easily trained to believe with all their hearts that the chief end of humankind is to buy things? How do you react to that characterization? Have you ever watched MTV with your youth? Do you agree or disagree with the assertion that pastors must take a more vigorous and pro-active role if our denomination is going to reconnect with young people and play a more compelling role in their lives?

Biblical stories of God's call

- 1) Exodus chapters three and four tell the story of the call of Moses and Aaron.
- 2) I Samuel 1:3-28 and I Samuel 3:1-10 tells the story of the call of Samuel.
- 3) Isaiah chapter six tells the story of God's call of Isaiah.
- 4) Jeremiah 1:1-10 tells the story of God's call of Jeremiah.

Read each story together, then answer these questions: What does each story have in common? How is each story different? What do you learn about God from each story? What do you learn about what it means to be called by God?

- 5) Mark 1:16-20 tells the story of Jesus calling disciples to follow him.
- 6) Mark 8:27-38 and Mark 10:2-31 feature Jesus' teaching his disciples about cost of discipleship.
- 7) In Luke 10:25-42 Jesus deepens our understanding of the character of discipleship.
- 8) In Acts 9:1-19 tells the story of the calling of Paul.

Read each of these texts together. What does it mean when Jesus calls people to follow him? How does the cross figure into discipleship? What is the character of discipleship? How does the life of Paul illustrate what we have learned about the character and cost of following Jesus? What might the call to follow Jesus mean for us?

Further reading and reflection

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959).

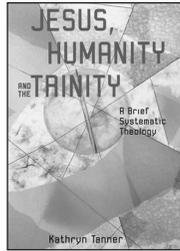
Ginny Ward Holderness with Forrest C. Palmer, *Career and Calling: A Guide for Counselors, Youth, and Young Adults*, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, 2000).

REQUIRED READING

Books recommended by Austin Seminary faculty

JESUS, HUMANITY, AND THE TRINITY: A BRIEF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, Kathryn Tanner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 134 pages, \$15. *Reviewed by Cynthia L. Rigby, W. C. Brown Associate Professor of Theology*



Pastors and laypeople in the churches I visit always want to know how theology is relevant in “real life.” What does Christianity say to how we should live and act in the world? Too often, it is the prevailing impression that the discipline of theology is too abstract—that theologians reside in the “ivory tower” of academia and do not do work that is of much use. Kathryn Tanner shares the concern that, too often, theologians do not make “bold theological statements” about how Christianity matters. She is no ivory-tower theologian. Her latest book, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, is committed to making bold theological statements in the context of reflecting on the shape and relevance of Christianity today.

This does not mean that Tanner aims to prescribe theological statements for others to claim and disseminate. While she hopes, of course, that many will be “convinced” by the arguments she makes, Tanner wants her own efforts to speak boldly to encourage both pastors and “the rank and file in the pew” to “take up the challenge themselves.” It is not only theologians, but all Christian believers, who are called to have something relevant to say.

Tanner begins her book by asserting that every Christian disciple is called to “figure out for him or herself what Christianity is about” (xiii). Such an enterprise takes “intellectual effort,” says Tanner, given the range of convictions that Christian believers have held over the centuries, as well as the complexities of our current context. “One must put together, unite into some interconnected whole, the disparate and often logically disjointed variety of things that Christians tend to think, feel, and do in and out of church” (xv). Such an enterprise is, clearly, a

life-long task. Better put, it is itself a way of life: the way that life is engaged by the Christian believer as a person of “faith seeking understanding” (Anselm).

With this, Tanner dives into the project she plans to expand in coming years. *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* will eventually become a multi-volume systematic theology. The central

themes are already in place: “Jesus” (ch. 1), “The Theological Structure of Things” (ch. 2), “The Shape of Human Life” (ch. 3), and “The End” (ch. 4). In this progression one can immediately see that Tanner is working christocentrically, moving from consideration of the person of Christ to what this tells us about the character of our existence, the place of theological ethics, and the shape of eschatology. Throughout the book, Tanner works with the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity at her fingertips, insisting both that God’s gifts to us are unconditional and overflowing, and that our giftedness obligates us to live graciously in relation to one another.

One of the bold theological statements Tanner develops is that God and human beings exist in “non-competitive relationship.” This means that “God differs differently” than we might expect. To debate about whether the incarnation compromises either on divinity (because the divine one is also human) or humanity (because the human one is also divine) is to think in terms that too narrowly construe “difference,” and therefore inadvertently compromise on God’s transcendence by trying to make sense of it. To think in terms of how humanity and divinity differ from one another, for example, and then to ponder how the two different natures can co-exist, is to forget that the God who “differs differently” lives and acts outside of our assertions about what constitutes divinity, humanity, and even “difference.” Centuries of thinking of the two natures of Christ as “opposites” have led us, Tanner implies, to miss out on embracing the character of our giftedness and the vitality of our agency. This does not mean that divinity

and humanity are not opposites, either, but that God differs so radically from us that our categories of identity, similarity, compromise, and difference get in the way of recognizing God's complete otherness. In a nutshell, despite our inability to comprehend: the transcendent God is free to be neither the same as us nor the opposite of us.

Recognizing God's otherness has profound implications for our lives of faith. It frees us, for example, from having to figure out where we stand, as agents, in relationship to a God who has all the power. God differs differently: we are not in competition with an omnipotent God, since God and creatures do not operate on the same "plane." We are gifted, by the God who creates us, with the capacity and responsibility to act as agents in the world. Living "graced lives," we who belong to Christ act both by his power and by our own, for he "heals and elevates our own capacities" (58).

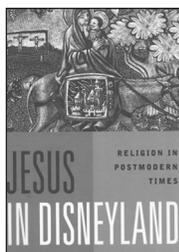
Similarly, Tanner argues that to understand the radical character of God's transcendence is to recognize that any response we make to God is absolutely free. To work at the Christian life is to strive to be what we already are; we can never "pay God back" for what God has done for us "because there is nothing more for us to return than what God has already given us" (85). The God who differs differently does not have anything to gain by our obedient response. At the same time, this God is free to benefit from God's fellowship with us without being needy. Again, Tanner is boldly challenging us to remember that God defies all of our neat categorizations, and that this defiance by God is known to us in the incarnation. The Kingdom of God will come, she concludes, when "everything [is] done" in "conformity with [the] fact" that "everything has already been given to us" (121).

As Tanner's argument unfolded, I kept remembering the parable of the father and two sons in Luke 15. The elder son, angry that his father has thrown a party for the younger son, explains to his father that he thought he had earned a modicum of power and privilege on the basis of his steadfast service. The father, however, never addresses the son's well-founded complaints. Instead, he responds to

his son from the vantage point of an entirely different "plane": "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (v. 31a, NRSV). In *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, Tanner articulates what it would mean for us to live, as Christian believers, with this awareness. What if we struggled no longer to discern where we stand in relationship to God, and instead lived as those who are graced? What if we recognized that Christian ethics and stewardship are not about giving back a small portion of what has been given to us, but living out of the richness of God's superabundant generosity? What if we perceived our lives of faith not in terms of exchanges made between ourselves and God or ourselves and others? What if, instead, we knew that we "share in God's own dynamic trinitarian life" in and through Christ? (120). If we truly knew that everything God has is ours, Tanner argues, and lived according to this reality, everything would be different. Living in non-competitive relationship with the God who shares everything with us would free us to live in non-competitive relationship with one another. Our life together would be marked by mutual sharing and sacrifice, not because sharing and sacrifice are appropriate responses to what God has done for us, but because sharing and sacrifice are the way of the triune, incarnate God who has included us.

JESUS IN DISNEYLAND: RELIGION IN POSTMODERN TIMES, David Lyon.

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, 188 pages, \$26.95. *Reviewed by Timothy Lincoln, director of the David and Jane Stitt Library*



Members of congregations and denominational leaders alike take seriously the need to plot cultural trends and ponder their implications for faith. American Christians believe, as Barbara Wheeler of Auburn

Seminary puts it, that "sociology works." In *Jesus in Disneyland*, David Lyon (professor of

sociology, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario) uses an actual event—the 1999 Harvest Day Crusade conducted at the famous California theme park—as a metaphor with which to analyze the changing landscape of religious practices and to critique the reigning Western sociological theory of religion: secularization.

According to secularization theory, classically articulated by Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, powerful forces unleashed by the Enlightenment elevated the individual and this-worldly achievement over against older Christian values of community, service, and a transcendent God. The result, according to many exponents of the theory (e.g. Anthony Giddens), would be the steady retreat of religion from both public life and human consciousness. The world, Weber said, has become disenchanted. This theory best fits the case of Western Europe, where many openly speak of a post-Christian society and where traditional measures of religious practice (e.g., participation in Sunday worship) show continued decline. However, secularization poorly explains the happy co-existence of Shinto and aggressive corporate culture in Japan, or resurgent fundamentalisms around the world.

Lyon argues that secularization theory needs to be rethought because of the stubborn adaptability of religious practices. In the twenty-first century, many people believe in God yet belong to no church. A more adequate sociological theory of religion would be able to make explainable the self-chosen, eclectic religious identities that seem to satisfy many of today's "seekers."

In search for understanding about religion today, Lyon takes readers on a tour of some of the cultural landscapes of postmodernity. For Lyon, postmodernity means that many modern forces (notably, capitalism and technology) continue to operate. What has changed is that the world has become smaller and more baffling. Communication and information technologies such as satellite television beam messages about soft drinks, Falun Gong, or Pentecostal Christianity to persons worldwide without distinction. The postmodern woman does not accept that only one legitimate cultural script

(wife and mother) is possible for her. She knows there are many choices.

Walt Disney Co. is a leader in creating a profitable synthesis out of the many ingredients of postmodern culture. In the Disney take on reality, epitomized in clean, cheerful, scripted theme parks, the past is simplified into entertainment, free from messy details like chronology and geography; the future is confidently left to technologists. All of this show biz serves us, the happy consumers with ready money, who need only consume and enjoy. In a Disneyesque world, one works very hard to remember that Mickey Mouse is a symbol, like the Nike Swoosh, not an actual rodent.

The *Jesus in Disneyland* event interests Lyon because it shows the fearless adaptability of some Christians, who bring a religious message to the (post)modern world on its own terms, using many of its marketing techniques. Indeed, Lyon notes that many religious groups use communication and information technologies, often without seeming awareness of the difference between communion with God and the sending of e-mail.

Jesus in Disneyland is a fascinating read because of Lyon's ability to synthesize vast literatures of sociological theory and cultural analysis, and to apply them to such cases as the firing of Glenn Hoddle as coach of England's national soccer team in 1999 for his remarks linking disability with retribution for acts committed in previous lives. In another instance, Lyon uses Roland Robertson's concept of "glocalization" (both global and local), which originated as a Japanese business term for adapting a global outlook to local circumstances, to make understandable the global movement of the Toronto Blessing phenomenon, in which falling down laughing is understood as a sign of the Spirit. In another chapter, building on insights from Mike Featherstone about the crucial role being a consumer plays in postmodernity, Lyon makes do-it-myself religion (as seen in North American church shoppers and syncretistic spirituality) understandable, if not less disturbing to those committed to historic orthodoxy.

Where does this leave the theory of

secularization? Religion is most definitely not melting away as the theory requires. However, religion has been deregulated and detached from many institutional moorings. Counting numbers of mosques tells only part of the story of religious vitality. Thus, sociologists need to measure religion differently or else they may miss it. Today religion is better understood as one “cultural resource” among many in a global emporium of lifestyle choices.

The existential question that Martin Luther asked five hundred years ago was, “How can I find a gracious God?” Times and questions have profoundly changed. For believers interested in keeping the Christian faith and in sharing it, *Jesus in Disneyland* is rewarding, if unsettling, reading. 

If you would like to share the articles in this issue of *Insights* with your church, a limited number of additional copies are available for \$1 each:

Insights
Austin Presbyterian
Theological Seminary
100 East 27th Street
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mjinkins@austinseminary.edu

—Michael Jinkins
Editor

Reflections

Continued from page 27

NOTES

¹ Ginny Ward Holderness with Forrest C. Palmer, *Career and Calling: A Guide for Counselors, Youth, and Young Adults* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

² Contact information for the forty-nine programs sponsored by seminaries and funded by Lilly Endowment can be found on the website of the Fund for Theological Education at www.thefund.org. Presbyterian seminaries host two programs: Project Burning Bush by Union/PSCE and Summer Youth Institute by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

³ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 95.

⁴ Methodist seminaries, particularly Garrett-Evangelical, Saint Paul, and Wesley, use the term “culture of encouragement.”

⁵ While prospective ministers do not name salary level as a major hindrance, accumulating an educational debt is cited as a deterrent to preparing for ministry.

⁶ *The Millennial Generation: Hearing God’s Call*, is a national study sponsored by St. Meinrad School of Theology in 2000, surveying over 6,000 high school students (88% Catholic); Michael Wiese, “Summary of Key Findings,” The Samuel II Project: A Study of Pastoral Development in the Church, 1999.

⁷ The Fund for Theological Education is an organization based in Atlanta that promotes excellence and diversity in prospective church leaders and scholars. They sponsor a website for teens and young adults about ministry, www.exploreministry.org.

⁸ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Fit for Ministry,” in *Christian Century*, April 11, 2001, Vol. 118, No. 12, p. 16.



AMY MEYER

THE X GAMES

MICHAEL MILLER

“Extreme sermon, dude!” said a high school boy at the church door. He especially liked my reference to Stryper’s CD “To Hell with the Devil.” Stryper was a controversial Christian heavy metal band that created a head-on conflict with several so-called Satanic heavy metal bands. This was a theological battle of the bands, as it were, generating an ongoing debate among millions of American teenagers in the early

Michael Miller is research professor in the church and higher education and director of the Center for the Church’s Ministry in Higher Education at Austin Seminary. He received an M.Div. from Austin Seminary, M.A. from the University of Texas, Permian, and Ph.D. from Texas A&M University. Miller also serves as synod associate for higher education in the Synod of the Sun.

'90s. Sadly, this nationwide theological discussion went generally unnoticed by the, shall we say, slightly out of touch, or perhaps totally uninterested, mainstream denominations. "Stryper!" he said, leaving the church with a smile, "Extreme, dude."

Extreme. There are many theories as to how everything in fin de siecle culture (1995-2005) got the word "extreme" attached to it. (Extreme houses, extreme cooking, extreme ice fishing, even extreme religion, although we might chalk that up to atavism.)

The origin of this phenomenon is American youth culture, especially skateboarding, where the word extreme became new again as a description of this compelling and dangerous sport invented and displayed by young people for young people. Extreme skateboarding implies taking a chance, risking it all, putting everything on the line, holding nothing back, no fear. From there the word jumped to sports and games of all kinds, especially those where serious injury and even death are a real possibility, such as extreme fighting, extreme drinking, extreme canyoning, extreme rock climbing, extreme piercing and tattooing, and extreme motocross. Of course there are those, especially in England, who argue that the whole extreme phenomenon was created by the Oxford Dangerous Sports Club when they somehow invented bungee jumping.

Before long, with the help of advertising people, the useless "E" was dropped (perhaps it became a television network) and everything got "Xtremed" and commercialized (super-sized in the area of extreme eating), including xtreme dating, xtreme partying, the ESPN X games and so on. Many new magazines were created, most notably "Concussion." There were TV shows like "Fear Factor" and films like "Jackass, the Movie" which has now been seen by nearly every fourteen-year-old boy in the world. Some older folks recently even got into an extreme game called the stock market. Like "Jackass," it was dangerous and lots of people got hurt.

Not long ago some students in my CM229 class (Introduction to the Church's Ministry in Higher Education) thought long and hard about this attraction to all things extreme in American youth culture and came up with an extreme theory of their own. Their thesis goes something like this: What if American young people are nothing more to the commercial power structure than an "interior colony"? What if young people, like all minorities (and, for a long time, women, too), have been assigned and relentlessly trained for a role in the capitalist economic structure, the role of "consumer"? What if their role here is simply to buy things? What if American capitalism does not see youth as our hope for the future as a nation, nor as unique individuals, nor as the precious children of God? What if they are just consumers, a malleable class easily trained to believe with all their hearts that the chief end in life is to buy things with the many hundreds of millions of dollars they control?

My students concluded after many nights of watching MTV, and seeing how young people are portrayed on TV generally, that young people are encouraged to be rebels only as long as they also buy things. They are encouraged to express themselves in alternative ways so long as those ways ultimately lead to the fulfillment of their role as consumers. They came to believe that the life of the mind, the impulse toward idealism, and any form of traditional religious values do not exist in the MTV world because such expressions would run counter to the whole commercial purpose of the network: to sell things. Young people, my students observed, are trapped in this interi-

or colony. My students concluded that taking things to extremes is a way for young people to try to say “No” to a way of life that often leaves them feeling worthless, helpless, confused, angry, and most of all, afraid.

These clergy-to-be also came to the conclusion that each extreme in youth culture is quickly co-opted into the commercial system and loses its juice as a meaningful symbol of youthful rejection of the dominant culture. MTV has more ads per segment than any other channel. Every ad exploits the rebellion and turns it into a mass appeal instrument. In fact, MTV is simply one long ad, a relentless training film. In the same way, extreme sports now have big name commercial sponsors and have been on ESPN for six years. Even beer bongos are commercially sold or given away during the almost permanent “extreme spring break” atmosphere that begins every Thursday night on nearly every campus in the nation. Sadly, nearly everything sold to young people is packaged in the guise of a rebellion that will never happen. The seminary students in my class all felt that the Gospel has an extreme role to play in the midst of all of this. The question is, does the church still think so? Where are the signs that we care? In his now famous article, “Beavis and Butthead Get Saved,” Tom Long said it best. He says the problem in the Presbyterian Church is not the endless debate over sexual issues. The problem is that we have forgotten how to transfer the values of the Gospel from one generation to the next.

The class concluded that we, too, are trapped. Our way of living makes us unable to offer much of an alternative. In an extreme criticism, one student observed, “Our worship is rooted in high culture to which young people cannot connect. Our language is archaic to them, as is our music. We reject their consumerism and their music, but in fact, it’s all most of them have.”

If the church is to begin to reconnect with our youth, these seminary students believe, our pastors must take a more vigorous, pro-active role. As busy as we are, we must make it a priority. They offer four suggestions as a start for pastors who want to connect or re-connect with their young people. (1) Hold some listening sessions in which young people play the music they like and share the reasons they like it. It could be anything from hip-hop to country, but the possibilities for real dialogue are well worth it. (2) Watch some MTV with your young people and discuss some of the music videos and what they are hearing and seeing. Then share what you hear and see. (3) Find and subscribe to the “Ivy Jungle” website on the Internet (www.ivyjungle.org). This site has an amazing amount of data on contemporary youth culture from a moderate to conservative Christian perspective. Campus ministers find this site very helpful. (4) This is extreme! Subscribe to a magazine for people under thirty called *UTNE Reader*, Box 7460 Red Oak, IA 51591-0460. Radical and sometimes shocking, this magazine is a goldmine of ideas and information. The September-October 2002 issue for example, included a series of stories called “30 Visionaries Under 30: People Who Will Change the World.” There was also an alert about the upcoming “Generation Fix: Young People from 8 to 16.” The articles are short, well-written, and good material for dialogue and programs.

The Presbyterian Church can reconnect with young people. The question is, can we be extreme enough to do it? 



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Spring 2003