Fellow students: Theological formation in the parish

by James C. Howell in the February 20, 2007 issue

A quarter century ago, I dreamed of being a teaching pastor. I burst out of seminary like a wild mustang in the rodeo, an impatiently raring dean of a parish about to become a mini–divinity school. Congregations under my care would learn sound theology and be shaped as faithful disciples. I would implant my newly marshaled information on scripture, doctrine and practice into the brains and souls of parishioners. I would be Martin Luther writing catechisms for families in Wittenberg, or Karl Barth diligently instructing his confirmands in Safenwil, or Evelyn Underhill leading deeply spiritual retreats.

Looking back now, I must say that although my career as teaching pastor has been punctuated by some surprises of grace, it's also been embarrassingly insipid at times. I can echo the lament of Gail Godwin's Father Melancholy, Walter Gower: "My ministry has been a stop-gap one. I came along too late you see. The Church I wanted to serve started crumbling a long time ago. . . . Nobody gives a damn about symbols anymore, but they're the language in which we listen and speak to God."

Christian formation in the parish has proven difficult for a thicket of reasons. Most people aren't coming to the church asking to be formed, or re-formed. As best I can tell, their predominant hunger is for an experience. They want to feel better, and if I'm not careful, I put on my apothecary hat and dole out a few Jesus vitamins, pour a bit of spiritual caffeine and get a substantial tip for my efforts.

Many are looking for answers. To these people, I am the tech help guy they phone up when they can't get their spirituality to work quite right. Worst of all, the people out there who care about theological formation frequently feel that they have already been formed, and they are checking me out to see if my theology is up to snuff.

Sunday school, which theoretically ought to be the bastion of theological formation, is typically banal. Children glue cotton onto construction paper and Voila!—it's Jesus,

the good shepherd. Pleasant enough, except that adult classes don't seem to have matured beyond these little pastel lessons in triviality. Or I waltz into a class and overhear the sharing of society's biases. In my last parish we dubbed one class "The Young Republicans" and another "The Aging Liberals." What in modern-day Sunday school would be recognizable to Luther or Barth?

Mind you, people do need to feel better. They need answers, and many find meaning and a sense of belonging in Sunday school classes. Some formation does happen, despite the silliness of church programming. As a writer I should be more decisive, but I can never be sure if church is failing miserably at formation, or if formation is happening at fantastic levels. Of course, it's both. Maybe the simultaneous failure and success is a maddening sign of the kingdom of God: the failure being some kind of Barthian witness to the glory of God, who stupefies even the most brilliant theologian, the success being a tiny nugget of hope the Spirit wafts into the mix to keep us getting up in the morning. Jesus did speak of a field with wheat and tares, so perhaps one can just let them all grow.

Yet as soon as I am bowled over by the theological ineptitude of the parish, I find myself in awe of the simple yet doggedly determined Christianity of many who sit before me each Sunday. The laity surprise me if I give them the chance. I keep bumping into people I thought were totally malformed and discovering they know the Bible well, read it daily, have a sense of basic doctrine, and are offended if dogma is disrespected. They make me wonder: Do I read the Bible as well? Do the authors I admire, who strut through academic corridors, read it daily, and as humbly?

When I remember that the adventure is about the obedience of the body of Christ, I see church members who take their vacation time to go to Latin America on building and medical teams, I see volunteers serving soup every Tuesday. I continually learn about real disciples (some of whom I'm pretty sure were yawning through my last sermon) who put me in the shade when it comes to an embodied, generously orthodox faith.

What have I learned from 25 years of this labor? You can't download theology directly into people's brains. They think, they love, they question, they are reckoners. If I help them at all, it is by the tone I set, my own observable zeal for the material, and my trust that God is the agent of formation. I create nothing but the space where discipleship might happen if the Spirit blows.

I have learned to worry about technology. Not that technology is somehow inherently evil. But when my staff and I scramble to learn PowerPoint, snazz up the Web site, craft hands-on activities that involve everybody, the unspoken assumption is that theological education will happen if we just get our technique right. I wonder if Christian education isn't comparable somehow to kissing or even to having sex: it's not the mastery of technique that is essential; it's the love. The fumbling, awkward misstep elicits mercy and tenderness, and a profound sense that love is happening precisely in the thick of faltering technique. Do parishioners look at me, at our staff, at the teachers, and think, "There is someone who loves—who loves me, who loves God"?

I remember my sixth-grade Sunday school teacher, Floyd Busby. Mr. Busby would score a flat zero on teaching technique or age-appropriate planning. He was old and had a whiny voice, and his "technique" was to open his Bible and read—for an hour. But I remember Mr. Busby's name, and the profound moment when he simply stopped reading. We suspected that he had died. But when we looked up, we realized that he was crying—back in the '60s, when men didn't cry. We were tempted for a nanosecond or two to poke fun at him—but even as 11-year-olds we knew the moment was to be reverenced. Mr. Busby gathered himself and read further, about how they arrested Jesus, mocked him, beat him, pressed a crown of thorns into his forehead. He stopped again, looked up at us boys with tears streaming down his face and dripping onto his open Bible, and pleaded with us: "Don't you boys see what they did to my Lord?" I will never forget it. This was my first encounter with someone who was so deeply in love with Christ. Can I teach like that? Can I deploy teachers like Mr. Busby?

I figured out a few more things. For one, I never assume and never belittle what people know. Years ago I stopped saying dumb stuff like "You'll recall what Ezekiel said" or "We all grew up treasuring this hymn" or "Of course Jesus was raised from the dead" or "Turn in your Bible to First John." I start from scratch. Here is a Bible. What is a Bible? Does it read like a novel? Well, no, so how do we approach this thing? You have questions? Superb. Keep them flowing. You believe God shields good people from harm? Can you think of any exceptions? Of course you can. What is that about?

Can I be as patient as I want teachers and learners to be, as patient as God must be? I try multiple approaches, remembering that not all parishioners learn the same way. Some pick up on e-mail or the Web, while others catch on in a class. Some like

videos, while others are hungry for one-on-one moments with the pastor. Can I try this, try that, be willing to fail, then try something else?

Although sometimes I wonder how boldly to teach, I am realizing that church folk actually are waiting for their pastor to function as dean or theologian in residence. And gradually I'm flexing a kind of veto power, thoughtfully exercised with restraint: superficially cute but heretical curriculum items creep into church life—and who else but the pastor can lovingly say, "There is a better, truer way. Try this"?

For all the good of the lectionary and denominational curricula, we have witnessed some astonishing marvels when we have engaged in significant, congregationwide studies. Year before last we studied the Apostles' Creed in depth. (My book *The Life We Claim*: *The Apostles' Creed in Preaching*, *Teaching and* Worship is the result of that fascinating time.) Last year we took four months and read Matthew. We had the little children read Matthew as well as the adults. Matthew was used as the devotional at the finance meeting, Matthew was the focus of house groups, Matthew appeared in e-mail boxes, Matthew was preached and sung. Someone asked us what the desired outcome was—and our answer was: "That everyone read Matthew."

Superb things happen when an entire church reads the story of Jesus together, and we are realizing the virtue to this kind of formation over the piecemeal video one week, a cobbled-together devotional the next week, a Q&A on "the empty-nest syndrome" the following week. I don't think we'll ever go back.

No one told me about all the formation that happens outside the official Christian education hour. We form (or malform) each other when we vote on building-use policy, when we wield the scalpel in a budget decision, and when we converse in the hallway about a personnel matter. Perhaps it is the peculiar responsibility of the pastor, and then of the leaders with whom the pastor has breakfast or coffee, to notice when something gets off pitch and to "lead with questions" (as Ron Heifetz wisely suggests). Does our retirement package say anything about who we are as the body of Christ? Does our registration scheme for vacation Bible school connect with the way Jesus welcomed outsiders? Does a facility-use fee glorify God or ostracize the one person we simply must reach?

Sometimes my parishioners laugh about the variety of subjects I am loony enough to stand up and teach. But they witness the mirror image of my personal reading discipline, which might not work for everyone but has been splendid for my own

private education. I plan a few months ahead to teach a class on something I know nothing about, or want to know more about, or perhaps on a subject they want to learn about, or should learn about. Then I nab a few books and am forced to read them and digest their contents so as to avoid embarrassment when the class time rolls around. So those who show up get a one-hour introduction to the theological revolution of Martin Luther, or to the holy life of Mother Teresa, or to the peacemaking of St. Francis. Together we explore theological themes in film, or why bad things happen to good people.

Teaching compels me to attend to my own formation, which for the pastor only begins in seminary. I read what is orthodox, and regularly. I read theology that is out of the box and let the questions dispel my pet illusions. I avoid the how-to-be-an-effective-minister treatises that just might reshape me into a frightfully efficient and boring CEO. There is so much drivel in denominational bookstores.

Perhaps I help best when I take the long view. Isn't it the pastor's job, after all, to help every teacher understand how today's lesson isn't just something to be endured, something you're "willing" to do? Isn't each lesson part of a lifelong theological education? Gluing cotton on construction paper is a piece in a quest to glue together a real education so that an adult in his 60s will have a sense of how Luke is different from John, and that the Pelagians who fill nearby churches really do have it wrong. You can deal with some spilled Kool-Aid if you know you're part of a bevy of educators shaping a budding lay theologian.

Admittedly, my efforts at theological formation feel futile at times, but it's my job, it's my vocation, and I have all the advantages on my side. The truth of the gospel is truer than the fluff that society serves up as gospel. And although it requires some fortitude to hang in there long enough to get people to think in more complex ways, the chiaroscuro of a deep faith is truer to life than the simplistic silliness of pleasant, flat-footed platitudes.

My quest isn't theological correctness. At the end of the day, I want people to grasp the inner workings of salvation history, to understand the hiddenness of God in Christ, to grapple with the inevitable mystery that shrouds the Trinity, because the truth is beautiful, good and helpful. It will win the day because it is strong enough to carry the freight, to answer the hard questions, to dispel illusion, to broker life.

Of course failure is inevitable. My best work is feeble. After I spend a lifetime striving for theological excellence within the congregation, the tares of bad theology still

sprout up. People still lunge after the kookiest newfangled belief they heard at the water cooler. Then I try to remember that my task isn’t to succeed famously, but to try humbly. At the end of my ministry, I want to be able to confess that while I was trotting people calmly around the track, I did make them a little nervous. I pray that one day my daughter might echo the reassurance of Father Melancholy’s daughter: “I believe in symbols, too, Daddy. . . .The results are still coming in.”