

# Going deeper

From the Editors in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

When theologian Stanley Hauerwas sought to join a Methodist church in Indiana some years ago, the pastor asked him about his prior church commitments. Hauerwas admitted that he wasn't sure where or when he had last been a formal member of a congregation. The pastor replied that this showed what "a sorry churchman" Hauerwas must be. "He then told me that, before he would let me join the church, I would need to come to a class he was beginning for people like me. I dutifully and gladly did for a year." (Hauerwas recounts this story in his memoir *Hannah's Child*.)

It's rare for a pastor or church to lay down that kind of requirement for a prospective member, much less for a professional theologian. Most pastors are happy if they can get people to attend a handful of sessions or a one-day retreat on the church's beliefs and practices.

In this issue, Frank G. Honeycutt [describes](#) an adult catechism program that Hauerwas's pastor—and Hauerwas himself—might endorse. The class meets weekly for eight months, beginning before Advent and ending at Pentecost. Honeycutt acknowledges that only a small number of people are willing to commit to a sustained group program of biblical study, spiritual reflection, vocational discernment and mutual support, following the themes of the church year. But there can be little doubt that the experience is life-changing for those who do. And as Honeycutt suggests, the very existence of the program is likely to renew the congregation.

However practical Honeycutt's program may be for individual churches, he puts the issue of catechesis—intentional formation in faith—front and center, where it needs to be. A wakeup call to the church on this front was issued last year by Kenda Creasy Dean in her book *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. The focus of her book is the startling inability of churchgoing teens to articulate the meaning of Christian faith. Dean's complaint is not with teenagers, however; it is with the adults in the church who are themselves unable to

talk about the difference that faith makes in their lives and who are therefore unable to share their faith with youth in a way that makes a difference in teens' lives.

Dean describes the difficulty she had lining up adult mentors for her confirmation students. She wanted the adults to converse with the students about Christ and help them grasp the basics of the faith. She got no takers. "People who selflessly supported youth ministry with money, phone calls, baked goods, and prayer chains came unglued at the thought of mentoring a teenager." These adults were willing to coach soccer or lead Girl Scouts, but what they "seemed to be afraid of was *faith*. They lacked confidence in their own faith formation."

Dean's message, like Honeycutt's, is simple: formation in faith does not happen by accident. It happens when churches puts commitment and creativity into the process and believe that the Holy Spirit is sure to show up.