

Becoming church: A visit to the Ekklesia Project

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

For many years Stanley Hauerwas has been attempting to return the church to the center of Christian theological and ethical reflection. He argues that “liberal” and “conservative” voices in the church tend to mimic the groups that share those labels in the wider political culture. He also maintains that on ethical issues Christians have too often made the nation, rather than the church, their chief focus of concern. Hauerwas insists the first task of the church is to be a people, an *ecclesia*, called out from the world (the root meaning of *ek-klesia*), whose task is not first to change the world but to form a people who live in accordance with the nonviolent way of Jesus.

Such a description makes Hauerwas sound like an Anabaptist, as was the Mennonite theologian from whom he so deeply draws, John Howard Yoder. Yet he combines this radical reformation vision of a church living the costly life of discipleship with a Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition, sacraments, and the importance of the virtues to the moral life.

Hauerwas, who teaches theology at Duke, holds these seemingly eclectic commitments together with a Reformed (via Barth) emphasis on the priority of God’s Word over any human attempt to think of or live well before God, and a Wesleyan insistence on God’s call to complete sanctification in this life. Only that last doctrine comes from the Methodist Church to which he actually belongs (though with which he does not now commune—the Episcopalians down the street have drawn him in with weekly celebration of the Eucharist). He often refers to himself as a “high church Mennonite,” an intentionally paradoxical formulation that describes well his thought and life.

This ecclesial ambiguity may point to a problem at the heart of Hauerwas’s work. How can he return the church to the center of Christian reflection when his very use of the word “church” has no obvious referent?

The Ekklesia Project, begun in 1999, is something of an attempt to answer that question and close the gap between Hauerwas’s academic project and the concrete life of churches. A dozen or so of his graduate students met with him to discuss starting something—but what? They were dubious about founding a new institution. Their goal was to connect those drawn to Hauerwas’s vision from various ecclesial traditions and to link them for friendship and the sharing of ideas so they might better serve their own churches. They didn’t want to sponsor just another academic conference. Repeatedly Hauerwas and his students have been told by church members that they are drawn to a vision of discipleship at odds with a world bent on violence, but that they need some more accessible materials, if not an outright plan of action. Their question: If Hauerwas’s approach is right, what do we do tomorrow?

That conversation in 1999 yielded a document: “A Declaration and Invitation to All Christians.” It lists as a first priority an allegiance to the God of Jesus Christ over every other competing loyalty. As might be expected from authors primarily based in the academy, the document decries the difficulty for Christians of maintaining a robust intellectual life when faith is so marginalized in the university. It also laments the failure of the church to teach its members the basic stories of the gospel, and refers to the difficulty of raising children in a culture of consumerism and violence.

The signers pledged to offer one another a “network of mutual support” as they celebrate instances of faithfulness in their various churches and challenge church practices that “presume a smooth fit between killing and discipleship.” More than an intellectual manifesto, the invitation pledges signers to specific spiritual

practices: maintaining a vital prayer life, conducting works of mercy and engaging in a regular Friday fast “as a form of prayerful resistance to the idolatrous practices of our culture.” (The document is available on the Project Web site: www.ekklesiaproject.org).

The document attracted hundreds of signers, including academics, pastors and laypeople from all over the country. It now has over a thousand signers. The Ekklesia Project has also produced about a dozen booklets, with more to come, on specific practices of the church, such as preparing for marriage, hymn-singing, reading scripture, evangelizing and so on. The EP has also started a popular book series and is set to begin a scholarly one. Its Web site offers further resources.

The EP has started an intentional Christian community of students at three Chicago-area seminaries, aiming to demonstrate to future pastors that theology is lived and not just thought. Finally, the group has received a Lilly Endowment grant for church development, through which parishes interested in learning more about EP’s vision can invite a scholar-pastor team from the project to visit their church.

The EP’s annual summer meetings offer papers and seminars like any conference, though without the competitive back-biting of, say, meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Questions hang open, inviting space for uncertainty and lament, rather than a reputation-making brilliant response. “Should Christians vote, or is that just Caesar’s little game?” asked one participant at this year’s conference. How can we recommend nonviolence without addressing our own economic and social advantages as a well-educated and mostly white male group? How should Christians respond to the brave new world of biologically enhanced babies?

The meetings also feature liturgy, which is a challenge when members come from divided churches, and especially since large numbers of Roman Catholics and Mennonites have joined the largely mainline Protestant organization. Last year’s gathering focused on communion, which the participants could not share. So they conducted a footwashing. Sam Adams, pastor of a nondenominational church in California, called the ritual a powerful demonstration that everyone present is equally struggling to be a disciple rather than trying to impress or lord it over one another. A far cry from the average academic gathering or, indeed, from many gatherings of clergy.

The sense of ecclesial community to which Adams refers is a key to understanding this group. During the July gathering at DePaul University in Chicago, Hauerwas spoke of the project as “an attempt to overcome loneliness”—the loneliness, that is, of pastors and academics whose vision of the Christian life—in which discipleship means opposing the war-making powers of the state—puts them at odds with parishioners and colleagues.

Phil Kenneson, who teaches at Milligan College in east Tennessee, said he needed the gathering as a reminder that he’s “not crazy” and that it is the world, not a church dedicated to the radical politics entailed by Jesus’ way of peace, that it is out of line. That sentiment fit with the gathering’s theme from Mary’s Magnificat—“Singing Mary’s Song: Practices of the Upside-Down Reign of God,” with its scriptural insistence that the lowly are blessed, and the mighty destined to be cast down from their thrones.

But it is precisely this sort of cathartic venting and self-reassurance that has some critics of Hauerwas’s project worried. Jeffrey Stout, a distinguished professor of religion at Princeton, recently wrote a scathing criticism of Hauerwas, accusing him of permitting his followers to absent themselves from the American political scene. Instead of complaining of their loneliness and congratulating themselves for their righteousness, shouldn’t they be hitting the pavement, working for justice? Hauerwas insists that the first task of the church is not to make the world more just, but to make the world the world—by which he means that the best favor the church can do for the world is to live as a different sort of people, and thereby at least offer the world something interesting in which *not* to believe.

Stout, however, looks at American politics and sees only conservatives and fundamentalists making religious arguments for public policy. He wonders what happened to the religious muscle once marshaled by the civil rights movement. He thinks he has an answer: those who would constitute that muscle are off reading Hauerwas, busy making the world the world, rather than working for justice. “There is no doubt that the main effect of [Hauerwas’s] antiliberal rhetoric . . . is to undercut Christian identification with democracy. No theologian has done more to inflame Christian resentment of secular political culture” (*Democracy and Tradition*).

I placed this criticism before several participants in the conference. They did not submit to the terms of Stout’s description, but they did suggest that their efforts to make their churches more faithful yields greater service to the world, rather than less.

Adams spoke of his efforts to preach from 1 Corinthians 12, with its insistence that eating or drinking at table without “discerning the body” can issue in divine judgment. Normally in reading that passage Christians focus either on the elements of bread and wine or on the presiding minister at the Eucharist. But what if Paul was speaking of those gathered *around* the table? What if Paul’s point is that church members are taking the Eucharist unworthily if they fail to discern the absence of those who ought to be present but cannot—for example, the poor, the sick, those without transportation, and the disabled who cannot make it to church?

Adams found that the result of such preaching was that his small, multiracial church was filled with people with special needs. The church became convinced it could not be church without such neediness. Adams’s reading of Paul resulted directly from an ecclesial stance at odds with a world that values only strength and power. “I wish God would send us some rich people,” Adams joked, “so I wouldn’t have to work part-time. But he keeps sending us more needy people.”

Michael Bartlett told a story arising out of his campus ministry at Oklahoma State University. Some students had offered to have their Wesley Foundation serve as a kind of collective pastor to a church that could no longer afford to pay a preacher and was slated to close. The students offered to lead the congregation for no pay. They proceeded to lead the church by inviting residents of a housing project next door and the mentally disabled residents of a nearby group home to a Bible study. This sounds like a conventional “churchy” sort of activity, but it evolved into a nightly meeting, and then a nightly potluck supper. Those with scarce resources now feed one another every day, and the student-pastors eat last. Bartlett speaks of them daring to believe God might actually provide. In doing so, they revitalized a church and a neighborhood.

Hauerwas told a story about his former church in Indiana. After several murders took place in the area in quick succession, church members began arming themselves. The pastor heard that this was happening and—from the pulpit—ordered it to stop. He insisted church members turn their guns in to him so he could turn them over to the authorities. “Don’t worry,” he promised, “if you’re killed, we’ll take care of your family.” The story illustrates Hauerwas’s insistence that Christian pacifists ought not think that being nonviolent will make the world safer; it might well make it more violent. The issue is not success, or even safety, but faithfulness—showing an alternate set of priorities to Americans, who are convinced that arming oneself is not only a God-endowed right but the route to peace.

After several such stories, it became clear that the Ekklesia Project is in part about hagiography in the best sense—telling the stories of the saints so future saints might be encouraged. But the stories also reveal how particularly Christian service to the world is an exercise of power at a basic political level—which should impress a radical democrat like Stout.

The exercise of power gets no smaller nor more particular than in the decision to have children. Michael Cartwright, one of the original student founders of the EP and now a dean at the University of Indianapolis, explains that he grew up in a difficult family situation in rural Arkansas. On his own, he said, he would have

been captive to typically modern questions about whether it is “meaningful” to bring children into the world; for him, the answer would have been no. Hauerwas helped him to see children as a gift from God, and to see that a properly Christian question is how we can be open to receive the gifts of life God might give. Christians should see a certain “power” in hospitable openness to the gifts of God, and so offer the world an alternate vision of “politics” in such contested areas as parenthood, family and the appraisal of the “value” of human life.

Cartwright’s professional work also suggests political engagement of the kind for which Stout is pressing. In a speech in March 2003 he asked whether President Bush’s United Methodist Church had failed him, and the world, by catechizing him so poorly that he could speak of preemptive war as a divine blessing. Cartwright and others have also accused President Bush of blasphemy for quoting St. John’s prologue, “The light shines in the darkness,” with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop, thereby equating American foreign policy with messianic and divine power. In this way, Cartwright and others in the EP are indeed attempting to hold elected leaders “accountable,” as Stout demands, but accountable to specifically churchly ways of speaking and acting.

The 1960s antiwar tradition of making dramatic public gestures is indeed alive and well in the EP. I heard stories of protesters holding candles outside nuclear facilities, Christian Peacemaker Teams venturing to Iraq just before the fighting, and so on. Hauerwas himself stresses more mundane political acts. Would it not be a sort of success, he asks, to challenge the terms of the phrase “get us out of Iraq”? Who, precisely, is the “us”? It would be a success, argues Hauerwas, for Christians to see they are not the “us.”

Stout has been relentlessly critical on precisely this point. Insisting that Christians separate themselves from the “us” is, he contends, a way of allowing them to sit back in comfortable judgment of the wider political society. The Ekklesia Project and Hauerwas’s followers generally respond to this critique by insisting that there is a variety of “publics,” and that the nation-state is not the premier one for the church.

There is also, clearly, a variety of churches in which project members are trying to change minds and inculcate more faithful practices. In this task they look much like Lutheran pietists, or early Wesleyan holiness clubs, with their efforts to offer a “church within a church.” The Lutheran pietists were pleased with Luther’s efforts to reform church teaching and subsequently wanted to see ministers and laypeople reform their actual lives toward a more biblical vision of piety. Wesley and his early followers similarly sought to reform the Anglican Church from within through eucharistic practice, the pursuit of holiness within disciplined small groups, and ministry for and with the poor and dispossessed. The EP repeatedly stresses its desire to have its members stay in the churches in which they are baptized and to work for faithfulness there. This is important insofar as there is a tendency among Hauerwas students to leave low-church denominations for higher ones.

The success of the EP and other followers of Hauerwas in incarnating his ideas in church practice may finally determine his “success” as an academic. Hauerwas himself is by nature an intellectual. He lives in a world of ideas, he deals deftly with theory, and he trains other academics to do similar things. Yet his vision for the church compels him to help others with specifically ecclesial gifts to raise up patches of nonviolent resistance to the war-making power of the state and to the tendency of churches to bless that power. Pamphlets, book series, gatherings for mutual support, and stories of faithfulness are all small things. Yet if these can help foster churches whose first political allegiance is to Christ’s peaceable kingdom, something important—and genuinely political—will have taken place. For that outcome we shall have to wait and see.