Helping theology matter: A challenge for the mainline

by William C. Placher in the October 28, 1998 issue

Several years ago, in the midst of one of its well-publicized battles about sex, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) proclaimed, "Theology matters." At first glance, this was a slogan to warm the heart of a theologian. But then I started to wonder why our denomination even had to say such a thing. After all, theology means thinking about our faith, and for Christians our faith ought to lie at the core of our lives. So why *wouldn't* theology matter?

Yet anyone looking at pastors' lives, seminaries' curricula or denominations' priorities these days recognizes full well why it needed to be said that theology matters. "Theology" is a word that scares off most Christians today, and changing that state of affairs seems low on nearly every list of priorities. We've too often defined theology as something done by experts, and once we assume that theology isn't a part of the lives of ordinary people, then the work of those experts doesn't seem very important. If most of us don't need to reflect about our faith, how necessary can such reflection be?

Thanks to a grant from the Lilly Endowment, I recently had the chance to spend six months talking to all sorts of people about how theology might better connect with Christian laypeople. I'm particularly grateful to Westminster John Knox Press and the *Christian Century* for offering me homes away from home for parts of that time. I had a hunch, based on my own work with local congregations, that in the "mainline" Protestant world that I know best, lots of laypeople really do want to think seriously about their faith, and somehow they aren't getting enough help in doing that well.

I found good news and bad news. The good news is that I was right about the potential interest among laypeople. Even if they react negatively to the word "theology," they're in fact hungry for it. A year and a half ago, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York began a program of adult education, offering classes on topics as demanding and varied as "The Nature of God the Father" and

"Renaissance and Reformation: The Formation of the Protestant Tradition." They now have an enrollment of 1,500, and the adult education program is the single most effective way of attracting new members to the church. Courses in theology and Bible consistently draw the greatest interest.

Christ Church Cathedral in Houston began a Lay Academy of Theology a year ago, attracting students from churches across the city. The academy had 150 students its first semester, 250 in its current semester and anticipates continued growth. Rabbi Leonard Schoolman, the executive director of the academy (this really is an ecumenical program!), is convinced that this isn't an aberration and that similar success is possible in any reasonably large American city.

Less direct evidence points to even larger numbers. Over half a million people have completed Abingdon Press's Disciple Bible study program in the past ten years. Participants sign up for a 30-week program of weekly discussions, and busy people who thought they couldn't spare the time are soon canceling all sorts of other engagements because "they can't miss their group Bible study." In response to many requests, Abingdon is developing a similar program on the doctrines of the church. Secular magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, regularly run cover stories on religion, in part because they find that those covers sell more magazines. People want to think about religious issues.

In churches or out, theological reflection isn't for everyone. Most contemporary Americans aren't regular readers of books-about anything. So churches need to find ways of connecting with those who don't read. But those who like to read and reflect are often potential leaders in congregations, and even a small minority can make a program feel like a success. After all, a few hundred people aren't a lot in a city the size of Houston, but the enthusiasm that the education program generates makes Christ Church Cathedral an exciting place.

Moreover, done right, education efforts get wide publicity. In an environment where so many of the "unchurched" have an image of Christianity derived exclusively from childhood Sunday school and from television evangelists, the announcement of substantive discussions-with hard questions welcome-provides an alternative image of Christian faith. It can keep Christianity alive as a real option in the minds of religious "seekers."

What do successful programs like this have in common? They're carefully planned and presented with enthusiasm. It almost seems that the more ambitious the better. For a large church, at least, the impressive-sounding name, the catalog of courses, the registration fees and the substantive topics all help. People look for signals that this is a serious enterprise. To be sure, the word "theology" does carry heavy negative connotations. It implies something very complicated, something that gives you set answers rather than inviting you to open-ended conversation. But if you say, "We're here with lots of questions, wanting to learn about religious traditions, wanting to think about the meaning of faith for our lives, and we hope you'll join us," it turns out you can draw a crowd.

So what's the bad news? Most institutions aren't doing much to serve the needs and desires of laypeople who are hungry (consciously or not) for theology. The problem begins with academic theologians, whose education prepares them to write for a guild of fellow experts and whose careers can often be harmed by more popular writing. One university divinity school dean told me that he himself values the writing his faculty does for laypeople in the church, but tenure decisions are made by a universitywide committee, and chemists, economists and other scholars will dismiss more popular writing as "obviously not scholarship." Wise mentors advise young scholars that there is the sort of writing "you don't put on your vita." Even denominational seminaries often buy into criteria of "excellence" that serve the universities-which means faculty members need to publish more distinguished specialized scholarship.

Surely, though, by a certain point in your career, you've made it, and you can write what you please? Well, maybe. But it's not easy, in mid-career, to switch to a kind of writing you haven't been practicing. Moreover, while you can persuade yourself that a monograph or scholarly article represents a contribution to scholarship even if hardly anyone reads it, something written for a wide audience that doesn't sell is neither scholarly nor popular-it's just a failure. Perhaps above all, it's often hard to find the outlets that really connect to the audience you want to reach.

This magazine, for instance, has 33,000 subscribers, 80 percent of whom are ordained. So that's fewer than 7,000 lay subscribers (subtract library subscriptions, and it's fewer than that) for the most successful journal of mainline Protestantism. (Some other circulation numbers for purposes of comparison: the *New York Review of Books*, 125,000; the *Nation*, 85,000; *Commonweal*, 18,000; *Theology Today*, 16,000; *Interpretation*, 9,000; *Journal of Religion*, 2,200.)

Could such a subscription list be expanded? Well, perhaps, but at considerable risk. A modest ad for new subscribers in *Newsweek* would shoot the advertising budget for the year. Even the New Yorker is now losing money, thanks in part to offering too many cut-rate subscriptions to new readers. The *Century* pretty much breaks even, whereas I've been told every secular general audience magazine of opinion except the *New York Review of Books* is losing money. So better not tamper with modest success. A magazine for laypeople wouldn't have to "dumb down" its ideas (lots of laypeople are smarter than lots of clergy), but it would have to change-to explain more terms, to address different topics. A magazine can lose its old audience in the process of trying (maybe unsuccessfully) to get a new one.

Religious book publishers face different but analogous dilemmas. It's important to grasp the remarkable difference in scale between the religious publishers of mainline Protestantism and the big-name secular publishers. A denominational press can feel good about sales of 6,000 to 10,000 over the lifetime of a book; HarperSanFrancisco does not want to publish a book unless it is likely to sell at least 15,000 in the first year.

Thus big publishers need an author with a very famous name or a pretty dramatic gimmick. Religious publishers work hard at developing books for laypeople, and they sometimes have breakthrough successes, but they face the same marketing problems as the *Christian Century*-a limited budget makes it impossible to run ads in major "secular" magazines or to do a really big direct mail campaign. Sales representatives visit bookstores; ads appear in this magazine and others like it: catalogs go out to academics and pastors. But it's hard to do more than that. You can buy mailing lists of faculty members in religion or of clergy, but there isn't a list of names and addresses of "thoughtful laypeople interested in reading accessible theology." Mailing an ad out to something more like the population at-large produces too small a return to justify anything like the expense.

Denominations might offer some help for both readers and writers, but most of them don't. Institutionally, "mainline" Protestant denominations have generally bought into our culture of technical expertise. One longtime denominational executive remarked to me that when he came to his church's headquarters many years ago, almost everyone there had at least a seminary degree. There were formal and informal discussions of books and theology. Gradually, though, it came to seem that you shouldn't have a former pastor running a multimillion-dollar pension fund or a complex educational program, and so the denomination started hiring experts in

such fields. Now this executive is one of the few people around his office with theological training. For instance, in the Curriculum Publishing Area of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which produces adult education material for the denomination, only five of 42 employees currently have even seminary training.

Such changes in hiring practices, common to a number of denominations, change the character of the conversation among decision-makers. Those who raise theological issues report that they are often perceived as inappropriately "showing off" by colleagues without theological education. In such an environment, theology gets marginalized, and the chance of a major initiative focusing on theology nearly disappears. The relatively small denominational programs explicitly charged with attending to theological issues tend to devote their limited resources primarily to working with pastors, with the hope that that's the most cost-effective way to reach laypeople. But neither the amount of money available nor the level of commitment from the denominations as a whole encourages bold initiatives to reach laypeople directly.

As I was interviewing people from the mainline Protestant world about these issues, many of them urged me to "talk to the evangelicals; they're the ones who know how to do this." But the most thoughtful evangelicals with whom I met did not feel nearly so optimistic. To be sure, the numbers look encouraging; compared with the *Christian Century's* 33,000 circulation, *Christianity Today* has about 180,000 (and Today's *Christian Woman*, published by the same company, 300,000). But it's not a comparable magazine. *Christianity Today* is careful about the demands, whether ideological or intellectual, that it makes on its readers. It markets itself to a wide evangelical consensus that holds together only by not bringing up controversial issues. It's not an audience that wants to be stretched or challenged very much, and the magazine respects its readers' wishes. (No doubt that's one reason it has so many of them.) Its new offshoot publication, *Books and Culture*, does aim to stretch its readers intellectually, but its circulation remains at 16,000, and it's unclear that it could survive without its current subsidy.

Evangelical success in selling books has rested principally on "CBA stores," whose owners belong to the Christian Booksellers Association. These chains and locally owned stores, found all over the country, are usually run by people who think of their work as a real vocation. They offer outlets unmatched by anything in "mainline" Protestantism. But in terms of my concerns, they're changing for the worse in two respects. First, they are growing ideologically narrower and more

conservative. Owners of such stores dread the angry customer who returns with a book and says, "I thought I could trust what I buy here, but this challenges the inerrancy of scripture." Safer not to stock such a volume.

Second, stores that once had substantial collections of serious evangelical theology now carry mostly celebrity biographies and very simple books about Christian life. Books issued by a publisher with as solid a sense of evangelical mission as Intervarsity Press are marginalized as "too academic." Such caution doesn't come only from the evangelical world: editors from one well-known "secular" publisher told a successful evangelical author who wanted to challenge her readers a bit and move toward the mainstream that they wouldn't publish the new book if she did that-they didn't want to threaten her evangelical audience.

It's frustrating. In theological circles, one can sense an exciting rapprochement between "progressive evangelicals" and moderate adherents of the "mainline." But out closer to the ground, the evangelical world too often remains a place where issues of biblical literalism and opposition to evolution are nonnegotiable. Moreover, much of this world seems to be losing the kind of intellectual rigor which, whatever narrowness it may sometimes have had, used to be one of its virtues. It is a symptom of what Mark Noll has called "the scandal of the evangelical mind" that our country's most developed system for selling Christian books doesn't want to sell intellectually serious books.

So what's to be done? Suppose there is an audience of thoughtful laypeople who could be persuaded to get interested in theology. Suppose our churches could be more interesting, more faithful to their calling, and more attractive to thoughtful "seekers" if some of their members were invigorated by such study. How could it happen? I think there's no one answer. All sorts of individuals and institutions will need to play a part. Here are some suggestions.

Whatever else, we need writers. Occasional geniuses from outside academic and ecclesial establishments like Kathleen Norris may write the best books of all, but we'll never have many of them. Pastors and journalists can help. But advanced academic work does have a point to it; there are great riches in the Christian tradition, and it's often only the trained theologian who will see the dangers to which an argument might lead or remember the beautiful passage from one of Augustine's sermons that best illumines a point. So those of us who have that kind of training need to start taking some of the risks entailed in writing for a wider audience. The

occasional bad review or loss of a chance at a more prestigious job, even falling on one's professional face, is a small price to pay in service to one's vocation in the life of the church.

Book and magazine publishers need to take some risks too. If the right kind of book gets written, a publisher should try a more aggressive marketing campaign. Maybe we need a new magazine; maybe some old ones need to reimagine their audience. Either way, they too will need to think of new ways to market the product. I do not speak casually of "risks." The world of religious publishing is a world without much money, and one failed initiative can spell disaster.

I asked one religious publisher, "What would you do if you suddenly had a lot more money?" and he instantly replied, "I'd like to take a couple of our mid-line books-good books we think could reach a big audience but without a really big-name author-and market the hell out of them. If we could prove that a really big campaign can pay for itself in increased sales for a book like that, we could do it more often. But just now, we can't risk spending that much money."

Similarly, the editor of a thoughtful religious journal said, "I think we have the talent and imagination to produce writing as lively and excellent as the *New Yorker.* But when writers are producing articles for free or for $100, they can't fly off somewhere to do research or spend a month polishing the piece."

So it becomes a vicious circle: writing or marketing that isn't quite first-rate doesn't generate enough revenue to pay for really topflight writing or marketing, and so it goes. It does involve risk to spend money in hopes of breaking out of that circle when it might not work, and foundations and other institutions ought to think about cushioning those risks.

We also need readers, and much of the energy in encouraging them needs to come from local congregations. Partly, that's just because no one else is going to do it. But local congregations also have rich opportunities. Ken Arnold, editor of *Cross Currents* , recently conducted an informal survey of some successful pastors. One of the things they had in common, he found, was that they all sought to shape their members' reading by their own reading. They mentioned books and articles in their sermons; they made copies of articles and sent them to people; they talked about what they'd been reading. They also read things that people passed on to them; they learned from what members of their congregations were reading. One pastor

made a standing offer to read anything anyone put in the offering plate. Various members of her congregation, she reported, systematically clipped things from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Science* and the *New England Journal of Medicine* that they thought their pastor would find helpful. It must be like having a congregation of Martin Martys!

Congregations want to make contact with the seekers, the unchurched but religiously interested. At least in urban settings, many of the brightest among them have found a surrogate community center at the large local chain bookstore-Barnes and Noble, Borders or whatever. Making contacts there may be as important a form of outreach as joining the Rotary Club used to be. Such bookstores are generally hungry for events. They'll stock books that sell. If a pastor says, "Here's a book I'm going to be mentioning often in the next few weeks; I'd like to be able to tell people you'll have copies available," they will stock copies. If a minister or priest says, "I see you have this new book on Christian-Jewish relations; the local rabbi and I thought we might lead a discussion of it some evening here at the bookstore," they'll make the arrangements and do the publicity.

Pastors who can undertake such work need the kind of seminary education that will prepare them for it-for their role as what Presbyterians used to call "teaching elders." That means at least two things. First, pastors need the encouragement to think of those three years of seminary as the *beginning* of their theological education. So often, what students seem to learn from their theology or exegesis course is that this sort of thing is too hard to do without the teacher's help-so they give up trying to do it after graduation. But those few semesters are a pretty thin basis for a lifetime of ministry. Maybe the emphasis needs to be less on content and more or learning how to learn, though that might work only if denominations built expectations for continued study into the way they think about the careers of their pastors.

Second, seminary courses in theology or Bible or religion and literature need to include discussions of appropriate books and teaching techniques to present relevant parts of the material to laypeople. My hunch would be that a course in how to teach theology to your congregation might even be the best kind of introductory theology course.

Let me not, as writers typically do, get obsessed with the printed word. Each generation reads less and watches more-whether the TV screen or the computer

screen. When bored, I've always looked for something to read, but I've found that when bright undergraduates are bored these days they look for a computer. I can't yet figure out how to make good use of the Internet (though I suspect that someone who took on the calling of typing in enthusiastic reviews of good Christian books on the amazon.com Web site might make a remarkable impact), but I'm sure videos ought to play an important part in the kind of education I've been trying to describe. A big church can bring in experts to lead classes; smaller churches have fewer resources and very busy pastors. But given a 20-minute video featuring an engaging expert and a list of questions to follow it up, most pastors or laypeople can lead a lively discussion with minimal preparation.

One person who produces such resources told me that her denomination literally couldn't put out enough 20-minute videos with accompanying study guides to meet the market. The founder of the Teaching Company, starting with a camera in his basement, has made a fortune selling video lectures on everything from Greek philosophy to British literature. Surely there's a modest market for a series or two on the Reformation or the Old Testament. Individual seminaries often have many such tapes, but they rarely market them widely.

In this and other matters, I'm talking about spending money. An average video, for instance, costs about $1,000 a minute to produce. Institutions with limited resources and competing demands will be reluctant to spend big money on projects that may fail, and this audience of potentially interested folk may be a figment of my imagination. But we have to try something. So many of our churches have become boring and depressing places. So many of the brightest children of our church members are going to Buddhist retreats or reading about Celestine prophecies or God knows what. They aren't seeing churches as places where they might go to think seriously about their religious questions.

Serious talk about faith can't be the only answer to revitalizing a congregation or recruiting new members. Still, if what we believe lies at the core of who we are as Christian communities, then meaningful growth and revitalization need to involve reflection on what we believe-in other words, programs that invite us all, even without mentioning the word, to do theology.