

“Behold, the Gospel of the Lord!”

Jean G. Hawxhurst

One of many fond memories of the urban congregation with whom I currently serve happened during our practice of Holy Communion one Sunday morning. A new family came forward to experience the Sacrament with us for their first time. I had previously explained that all believers are welcome at Christ's table, and so the whole family came, including their very lively three-year-old daughter. The family knelt together at the railing and received the bread and the cup. The holy mystery of the moment was nearly tangible. Then, the family stood and began to return to their pew, the daughter perched on her mother's hip. Loudly, and with great joy, the little girl exclaimed to the rest of the congregation, "I got mine!"

Her mother was embarrassed, and the church stifled giggles, but the child had

given the rest of the congregation something very important. It was a great moment of holy, unselfconscious honesty. This child of God was thrilled with the gift she had received during the Eucharist, so much so she wanted to share that excitement with everyone around her. She was bursting to overflowing with the

Every time we notice and encourage loving relationships among our congregational members, we are helping to form faith. Every time we stand up for justice and equality, we are helping to form the faith of those who are listening and watching. Hospitality is formation. Worshiping together is formation. Confessing, and forgiving, and tolerating each other's failures is formation. Walking with those in need is formation. Being in dialogue with those who differ from us is formational. And, when we name what we are doing, the power of it all increases exponentially.

delight of receiving from God, and her witness of joy gave the rest of us a bit more intentionality as we received the gift as well.

I believe an ingredient of our faith was forever shaped by the little girl's words and actions. And, whether we realize it or not, our faith is formed by vignettes like this all the time. If we allow them to simply happen, without naming them, they can end up being moments of "cuteness" or easily forgotten. If we speak their significance to each other, however, they can truly shape who we are as a people and move us closer to that which is holy.

That is where the resident theologian's role is so very important. When the little girl made her congregational pronouncement, it was then my responsibility to rise up with her and proclaim, "Behold the Gospel of the Lord!"

I believe one of the responsibilities of a pastor is to help congregations understand and integrate how we as Christ's Body are present in this world moment by

moment. That, of course, includes the transfer of information in a straightforward, formal way, but it also includes teaching in more subtle, integrated ways. We tell the Christian story to each other, but we also act it out for each other, and both ways form the congregation's faith. Part of my pastoral responsibility is to uphold them both, and join the two together.

Christian formation is not something that is separate from the rest of congregational life. It cannot be relegated to one hour a week before or after a worship service. Our Christian formation permeates all of our living, even the living outside the Sunday School hour, and even outside the sturdy walls of our buildings. Everything we do and say is formational. It is the theologian who pulls them both together and holds them up for people to see and understand.

So, every time we notice and encourage loving relationships among our congregational members, we are helping to form faith. Every time we stand up for justice and equality, we are helping to form the faith of those who are listening and watching. Hospitality is formation. Worshiping together is formation. Confessing, and forgiving, and tolerating each other's failures is formation. Walking with those in need is formation. Being in dialogue with those who differ from us is formational. And, when we name what we are doing, the power of it all increases exponentially.

I was recently given the opportunity by my conference Board of Ordained ministry to take a six-week personal renewal leave. I decided to use some of that time to visit urban churches similar to Fourth Avenue that have begun to turn around after years of membership decline. It was a fascinating exercise in studying congregational personalities and in collecting "best practices" for reviving urban churches.

Most of the church leaders I interviewed said they knew their congregations engaged in social justice and outreach well. And, they did. The ministries to urban young adults and urban poor I saw were impressive and life-giving. That aliveness probably had a lot to do with the revival in those churches. Most of those same congregations had also learned how to be hospitable to strangers and guests in very caring ways. I met congregations who gave fruit baskets to people who moved into their communities, and who

The New Definition of Biblical Scholarship

**SAVE
30%**

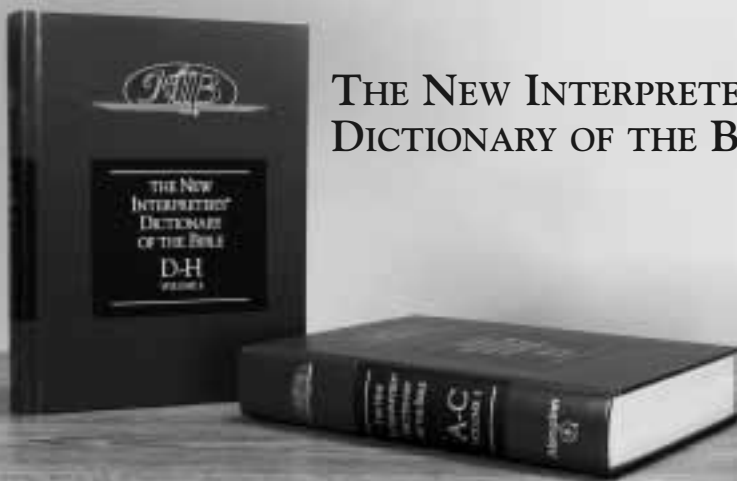
when you subscribe to the 5-volume set.
Regular Price, \$400.00
Subscription Price, **\$280.00**
Place your order now!

Volume 1: A-C
Volume 2: D-H
and
Volume 3: I-Ma
are now available.

Subscription Bonus!

A CD-ROM of the entire 5-volume set will be sent **FREE** to subscribers when the set is completed.

The 5-volume set will be completed in 2009. To subscribe to the complete set of *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, please call Subscription Services at (800) 672-1789.



THE NEW INTERPRETER'S® DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE

Visit NewInterpreters.com for additional resources

Published by
 **Abingdon Press**

Cokesbury 

store, web, phone

Cokesbury.com | 800.672.1789

CIR86610026 PACP00446143-01

A missional church conference for pastors, judicatory leaders, and lay leaders



Featured Speaker:
Lois Barrett

COMMUNITIES of Reconciliation in a Culture of Fear and Revenge

FOR DETAILS:
www.missionalchurch.org
or call toll free 866-752-1596



1448 E. 53rd Street, Chicago, IL 60615

had special informational rooms set up for people new to their worship services.

The one thing I heard frequently, however, was the leader's belief that their church needed to do better with formation and discipleship. Many thought they had been focusing so intensely on outreach and evangelism, they believed they had also been neglecting the development of ministries of teaching in ways that connected with people in our current culture. As I observed these congregations, I would both agree and disagree with that assessment.

I believe formal times of teaching and learning will always be valuable for passing along what we have received from the saints across time and space. In the congregation I serve, Sunday School classes are still important to a large part of our membership. For others, small groups and limited-time Bible Studies have become the means through which they receive formal formation. Within our population of young adults, many of whom did not grow up in the church, we have worked hard to try to find creative ways to offer the traditional faith teaching they so desperately need. (Particularly with our young adults, our congregation is still trying to figure this out, but we are coming to learn any contemporary, formal teaching must be done while standing on a strong foundation of interpersonal relationships.)

While offering these methods of formal education in contemporary settings, however, there is a larger picture of formation in congregations we would do well to emphasize. This is where many reviving churches do get it right.

Healthy congregations know, in addition to formal formation, we also teach with our actions. The little girl at communion taught with her excitement, and these kinds of moments happen all the time. Every time someone observes another member of a congregation modeling Christian behavior, a potential teaching moment occurs.

Those congregations who do so very well with social outreach and justice are forming their members around the importance of John Wesley's works of mercy. Sitting down with a neighbor during a free lunch ministry is formational, and joining a grassroots organizing group to get health care for local children shapes the faith of those who participate. Those congregations who do so very well with hospitality are forming their

members around the Christian principle of welcoming the stranger. Offering a hymnal to a guest who walks in late teaches that person she or he is wanted and valued. Stopping to talk with a child in the hallway before worship forms that child's understanding of what Church is. Using a variety of images for God's presence among us shapes who we believe God is. And, non-Caucasian images displayed in our buildings teach those who look at them that Christ is there for more than just the majority population.

None of this is new information. Religious educators have known these things for years. But, maybe, every once in a while we simply need to be reminded. Maybe we need to re-commit to being conscious about formation within Christ's church and giving voice where we see formation in our congregations happening.

I suggest the resident theologians of every United Methodist church look around and observe where formation is happening in both formal and informal ways. Every Administrative Council can help by using those observations to see what it is we are teaching and if those are the messages we want to send.

I also suggest we train ourselves to articulate moments of formation. Be observant. Explain what our sources of doing are. Intentionally talk about our reasons for doing what we do. And, when a child tells the church she has received the body of Christ, stop, name it, and rejoice with her.

One of the other things I learned while traveling around studying urban congregations is that habit without meaning dies. If we continue to participate in activity without naming its formational purpose, the importance of the activity is diminished. People don't want to be a part of a church with no purpose. We have a purpose, and we have a mission. May we regain consciousness of it, and name it for all the world, in Christ's name. □



Jean G. Hawkhurst is pastor of **Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.**