

# Fellow Students

James C. Howell

**C**hristian 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 far as 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

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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 waltz into a class and overhear the sharing of society's biases. 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. 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 sigh 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.

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. 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 sure were yawning through my last sermon) who put me in the shade when it comes to embodied, generously orthodox faith.

What have I learned from over 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 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 an e-mail or the Web ([www.mpumc.org](http://www.mpumc.org)), while others catch on in a class. Some like videos, while others are hungry for one-on-one moments with the pastor.

Although sometimes I wonder how boldly to teach, I am realizing that church folk actually are waiting for their pastor to

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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?"

[In our congregation] we have witnessed some astonishing marvels when we have engaged in significant congregationwide studies. One year we studied the Apostles' Creed in depth. Another 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 email 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 malfom) 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."

- 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?

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.

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.

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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. □

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