

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A vision that became reality

“If you have built castles in the air,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, “your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” Arizona United Methodist pastors Jeff Procter-Murphy and David Felten not only put foundations under their castles. They turned them into structures that are now helping thousands of people recognize Christianity as a faith that can make sense to today’s thinking people and can change the world in much-needed ways.



These two pastors turned their castles into the excellent study course “Living the Questions.” Now, ten years later, it is being used by 2500 churches and many individuals and continually being discovered by more. I’m writing about it here because I don’t want you to miss it.



Wondering about the difference

Also, I believe we all need to keep examining our religious beliefs and revising those that aren’t consistent with the best available information about the Bible, the universe, and its inhabitants. I think it’s important, too, to keep asking how the teaching and example of Jesus apply in today’s world. I’m always wondering what leads some Christians to do these things while others focus only on earlier centuries when they read the Bible, and don’t question what they learned in childhood or hear at church.

Consequently I like to find out what motivates the Christians who ask questions, think about their faith and revise it when new information demands, and nudge the church in new directions. I wanted to know what led the originators of “Living the Questions” to do that, so I phoned one of them and asked him.



An exciting study

More than two years ago I saw an ad for the course “Living the Questions” that made me want to do it with a group. My church wouldn’t sponsor it, so I contacted the *Connections* readers in my area and found enough interested to start two groups on my own. Twenty-three of us met weekly at my home all summer, for the course’s twelve sessions. We found them so fascinating that our discussions often were still going on my front porch an hour or more after the scheduled ending time. The group included members of several denominations and some nonchurchgoers. Many of us were amazed to discover each other—kindred spirits we hadn’t even known of before, right here in our local area. The experience made LTQ fans of us all. Several still meet regularly, and some additional participants have now joined us.



A safe place for questions

The LTQ publishers call the course “a progressive alternative for Christian invitation, initiation, and spiritual formation.” They describe its aim as providing “a safe environment where people have permission to ask the questions they’ve always wanted to ask but have been afraid to voice for fear of being thought a heretic.” The course is “addressed to people who know that at its core Christianity has something good to offer the human race, but who feel they are almost alone in being thinking Christians.” Some, the authors find, even see salvaging Christianity as a hopeless task.



Thirty of today’s leading thinkers

A new revised and expanded version of “Living the Questions” is now available, usable for two-hour sessions like the original course or for shorter sessions to fit typical Sunday School schedules. Each session includes a video, discussion guide, and brief materials to read in advance. The videos feature thirty of today’s leading religion-related thinkers, including John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, John Cobb, Tex Sample, Nancy Ammerman, Lloyd Geering, John Dominic Crossan, and Amy-Jill Levine. To find out more about LTQ, see www.livingthequestions.com.

Serving people, seeing hope for change

When I asked Jeff Procter-Murphy if he'd always been a churchgoer, he said "Well, more or less." Only when he was in college at the University of Arizona, however, after having grown up in Arizona, did he become interested in the church's role in society and its ability to bring about social change. He felt called to the ordained ministry because of his desire to serve people and his hope that the church could in fact effect the social change that he saw was needed.



To pursue this calling he attended Claremont School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary in California, and what he found there was eye-opening. He was exposed to the findings of biblical scholarship, presented by several prominent Christian scholars, including John Cobb and Burton Mack. He found this exposure liberating and life-changing.



Afraid to share what had liberated them

As he pastored churches and got to know other clergy, however, Procter-Murphy became increasingly dismayed at how fearful many of his fellow clergy were. For them as for him, the findings of Bible scholarship they had learned about in seminary had been liberating and faith-strengthening, but unlike him they weren't sharing these findings with the members of their churches. They were afraid doing so would drive people away.

Procter-Murphy has found, however, that thoughtful lay people welcome discovering what scholars have learned about the Bible in recent centuries. They find it a breath of fresh air. Thus he was discouraged when he saw so many pastors failing to share this liberating information with their members.



A better course wasn't available

During these same years Jeff Procter-Murphy saw many of his clergy colleagues using a popular small-group study course that presents a narrow interpretation of Christianity and largely ignores what has been learned about the Bible, the universe, and hu-

man beings in recent decades. These pastors had resorted to this course, they told him, because it was the only thing available for small-group training in the Christian faith



Creating what they saw was needed

As he kept seeing this discouraging situation, Procter-Murphy became increasingly alarmed. Finally he and his clergy colleague David Felten realized that getting the kind of small-group program they saw such a need for would mean creating it from scratch. Gradually they hatched the idea of producing what was to become "Living the Questions," to help people wrestle with the basic questions so often avoided by the Christianity they grew up with.

These two pastors saw that today's technology made such a project doable. They enlisted savvy help in marketing, editing, and distribution and went forward. "Modern technology being what it is," they say, "it's amazing what you can pull together in four years with a vision, a couple of cameras, professional video editing software, and a lot of talented friends, lay people, and supportive family members."



Their start from scratch happened nearly 10 years ago. The "Living the Questions" course, the first result of their efforts, is now used in 2500 churches on three continents. Yet it is not the product of any big publishing house or denominational work group, its creators emphasize. It's an outgrowth of "the crazy idea of a couple of local United Methodist pastors."

A passionate visionary, a labor of love

The LTQ web site describes Jeff Procter-Murphy as a visionary, yet it says he manages the company and oversees production and marketing, in addition to being pastor of a church. I found that surprising. Visionaries often aren't good at translating their vision into reality or doing the continuing work necessary to keep a project going. But Procter-Murphy insists there's nothing unusual about his wearing all these hats. LTQ is still a very small enterprise, he explains, and Jennifer Schwarz, its total "staff," does the day-to-day part of the operation.



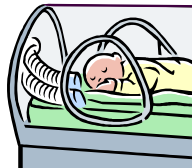
Jeff Procter-Murphy sees passion as the key to turning his vision into reality. Others have had similar vision, he observes, but haven't done the work necessary for realizing it. To bring the LTQ vision to reality, he finds, has required being passionate, seeing the project as a labor of love, and believing that the church can really be an agent of change.

A congregation as incubator



Having a supportive congregation has helped a lot, too. His congregation, Asbury UMC in Phoenix, Jeff told me, is very open to diversity of people, ideas, and viewpoints. Its lay members have a high level of commitment. The congregation has been an incubator of "Living the Questions," he explains, "incarnating progressive theology and seeing that it can work."

That's a vital part of what every congregation should be, I thought as I heard Jeff describing his—an incubator for the ministries to which its members find God calling them. That's especially true for ministries that involve opposing the majority, exploring new insights, or doing what hasn't been done before.



Real people with personalities

Procter-Murphy's congregation has brought outstanding speakers to their area, he explains, "exposing the broader community, not just the congregation, to these luminaries." By bringing today's leading thinkers into their midst, the congregation and wider community have been able to see that these scholars and authors are real people, addressing issues important to the church and the world. The scholars become individuals with personalities.

That's an advantage Jeff Procter-Murphy sees in using video as a basic part of "Living the Questions" and the other courses LTQ now offers. He points out that Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, John Shelby Spong, and several other speakers featured on the LTQ videos are now popularizing findings about the Bible and Christian history that in earlier years were reported mainly in scholarly language and style, in books aimed mainly at academic audiences, and the medium of video conveys these thinkers' personalities in ways that don't always come through in books.



Consequently each "Living the Questions" session is built around a short video that features several of the course's thirty presenters. Some appear on their own, while others are shown being interviewed by Felten or Procter-Murphy. (At right, Felten, pastor of The Fountains UMC in a Phoenix suburb, interviews Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine.)



Seekers, churchgoers, and alumni/ae

LTQ's web site says the course is for both seekers and "church alumni/ae" who are convinced that Christianity still has relevance in the 21st Century. I've found, however, as have many other church members, that it is also a godsend for current churchgoers who are also convinced of that but are continually dismayed by hearing Christianity presented in ways that don't match what they know from other sources. LTQ addresses the questions they've thought about but have been afraid to ask, and top-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 15 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

ics they know are important but don't hear mentioned in church. And they're glad to find that, unlike many other courses about the Bible and Christianity, LTQ doesn't try to indoctrinate or convert participants.

LTQ now offers several courses, all with a similar format. Each is arranged topically rather than as a sequential study of a section of the Bible. Already available is "Saving Jesus: A revolutionary exploration of Jesus Christ for the third millennium," which my group has done and liked. There's also a course about early Christianity's relation to empire in the first century and today, featuring John Dominic Crossan. In another, Walter Brueggemann compares

"Pharaoh's production/consumption society" to ours. Another features Helen Prejean discussing capital punishment. Coming next year is a series about Paul (from which this picture of Marcus Borg comes), featuring Borg and Crossan filmed in Turkey, and a series filmed in Israel.



If you haven't already discovered "Living the Questions," I urge you to do it now. I think you'll be very glad you did.

Barbara



Connections

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A vision that became reality— "Living the Questions"

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Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.



-- from "Letters to a Young Poet," by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, 1903