

The Believers in Exile

A Gift from the Margins?

David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy

They're out there.

What do people do when they are no longer able to recite the historic creeds with integrity? Or when divorce, serious illness, or relationships with friends of different faiths or sexual orientations lead to doubts about what they were taught as the “core” of Christianity? What do they do when their questions are ignored or met with trite platitudes like, “God will never give you more than you can handle?” What do they do when they have questions about the atonement and what seems to be a celebration of violence? Or, when theism itself ceases to function as an accurate reflection of their experience of the Divine? They leave the church, that’s what.

Whatever you call them—members of the “church alumni association” or “believers in exile”—they are a growing and often invisible segment of the American religious demographic. Generally speaking, they’re people who have an intuitive sense that there is more to Christianity than rigid rules and blind commitment to many of the theological constructs of the past. By whatever label you call them, be it “liberal” or “progressive” or “unbeliever,” they cross the spectrums of age, race, and socioeconomic standing, and they simply cannot suffer the shallow message of the churches of their birth any longer.

Far from being extremists, most simply aren’t satisfied with pat answers any more. Perhaps they’ve caught a whiff of what is being taught in seminaries and are intrigued. Perhaps life experience has caused them to doubt a long-held belief. As complex questions create tension in environments where simplistic answers are the stock in trade, these faithful seekers often suffer in silence. Feeling increasingly marginalized, they drift away and simply give up on church.

If some are still in church, they are tired of superficial arguments over music styles or degrees of formality in worship. They have moved beyond debates over inerrancy or whether their eternal salvation depends on their unwavering commitment to theological ideas that have ceased to make sense to them. What they need and deserve are the tools, forums, and pastoral encouragement to critique the belief system that is currently functioning, unchallenged, in many of our churches.

Make no mistake. Reaching out to “church alumni” or those who will soon join their ranks is a dangerous proposition. Even the thought of entertaining their questions is threatening to those who are not comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, be they clergy or laity. Pastors are afraid, and rightfully so from an institutional perspective, of upsetting people who are critical to the financial success of the local church by tolerating the ques-

tions of those who might of “re-vision” the core message and practice of Christianity for today’s world.

A ministry to “believers in exile” is not for the faint of heart. Most are not looking for minor tweaking of theological perspectives. But what many are looking for is something the church can indeed offer: connection to fellow seekers with whom they can engage in a lifelong conversation about the mysteries of faith, life, and what it means to be in relationship with the Divine. The irony is that many clergy are longing for the same kind of fellowship but dare not be open about their thoughts for fear of controversy.

In *The Dishonest Church* (Rising Star Press, 2003), veteran UCC pastor Jack Good expresses his concern over the increasing “theology gap” between mainline pastors and their congregations. In the course of their spiritual journey, it is not untypical for preachers to read, study, and embrace fresh ways of understanding the Divine. But conventional wisdom warns that sharing such ideas would destabilize the equilibrium of the average church. The resulting path of least resistance maintains the institution but lacks the spiritual and theological integrity many “church alumni” cite as their reason for abandoning the church.

So, the first step is for clergy who are exploring contemporary theological ideas to be honest and come out of the theological closet. Just as significant is the need to create an environment where what is important is not “being right” but being in trusting relationship. While John Wesley’s ideal may have been, “If your heart is as mine, take my hand,” it is a sentiment much easier preached than practiced in the real local church. A dominance of sincere believers can develop who, even unintentionally, contribute to a culture of theological intolerance: “This is the unchanging truth of Christianity and from this definition, there will be no deviation.” If a denominational slogan that claims “Open Minds” is to be taken seriously, an atmosphere of openness needs to be forged where theological bullies, whether conservative or liberal, aren’t allowed to shame or shout down those with whom they disagree.

Reaching the potential church alum can be as simple as a book study or the placement of a few books on the book table: something on mysticism or a pre-enlightenment mystic, something “pro-

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gressive” or postmodern. Perhaps a lecture by a professor or speaker known for pushing theological boundaries could start the conversation. A really brave pastor might even preach on a theological subject with which she or he is personally struggling and then not offer a pat answer, leaving it open—and inviting suggestions. The important thing is to be intentional about creating space for and nurturing open dialogue and not giving in to the temptation to provide answers.

There will be conflict. But there will also be gratitude and amazing expressions of thanks from mystics, seekers, and thinkers for whom even the slightest crumb of acknowledgment of their way of thinking is enough to sustain them through whatever theological frustration awaits them.

Faced with just that kind of gratitude and a growing crowd of people hungry for more conversation, we began to seek out curriculum that would support the kind of theological exploration people on the slippery slope to becoming “church alumni” were looking for. Unfortunately, there was little to be had. Many of our mainline colleagues were turning to the Alpha Course and its promise to provide answers to people’s questions. This was just the

opposite approach to what we and many other clergy were sensing was needed for a significant number of our church members. So, we began to pull together video and study resources to create a curriculum for use in our churches in Arizona.

Since many of the ideas and concepts being taught and discussed for generations in our seminaries aren’t “trickling down” to our churches, we set out to collect sermons, lectures, and interviews with many of today’s leading theological voices. While not intending to invent new doctrine or dogma, the aim was to expose people to ideas that are old hat to many clergy, but radically new information to many laypeople. The resulting DVD and web-based curriculum, “Living the Questions” (LtQ), created a catalyst to crack open the door and provide a resource for those yearning for a forum that values questions and sparks open dialogue.

Over two thousand churches across North America, the UK, and Australia/New Zealand are using LtQ, and many

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have reported that it has provided an excuse for potential “church alumni” to stay in the church. In the same vein, the new sequel to LtQ, called “Saving Jesus,” presents a Jesus who is at the same time very familiar (to those exposed to contemporary theological thought) and very foreign (to those who think that Christianity has not changed in the last two thousand years). These resources may not be enough to get back those who have already left the church, but “Living the Questions,” “Saving Jesus,” and similar curriculum may help to stem the tide of those abandoning the church because of its refusal to take their questions or life’s situation seriously.

Facing his fundamentalist critics in 1922, Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “Stagnation in thought or enterprise means death for Christianity as certainly as it does for any other vital movement. Stagnation, not change, is Christianity’s most deadly enemy.”

For many “church alumni” and “believers in exile,” the church has become hopelessly stagnant. They have abandoned the church never to return. If a faith community fosters the notion that spiritual maturity is, in Mark Twain’s words, “believin’ what you know ain’t so,” it will likely continue to lose the interest and participation of those who are moving beyond traditional theological fare.

However, steps can be taken to reach out to those uncertain of whether a dynamic and vital faith is possible in the twenty-first century. Clergy, curriculum, and forums that encourage questions are a start. Likewise, a corporate culture of openness can pave the way to give those with “Open Minds” the opportunity to network and, perhaps most importantly, give them the assurance that they are not alone in their questions.

“Believers in exile” are out there, “alumni” of our traditional communities of faith. They have left behind the Jesus who has all the answers in favor of a Jesus who is with them through the journey of life: weaving stories, playing with parables, and answering questions with more questions: all the characteristics of a dynamic, growing faith. Many could even be said to be at the forefront of a revisioning of Christianity for a new millennium. A gift from the margins? Only if we are open enough to nurture their quest. □

The Latest Word



Why Should I Believe You? Rediscovering Clergy Credibility, by Thomas G. Bandy. Bandy locates the real reasons for the crisis in clergy credibility, and suggests ways that congregational leaders can become people who matter to a culture that desperately needs Jesus, but doubt they need the church.

ZP1-9780687335299. Paper, **\$15.00**



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