

(from the front page of the Spiritual Life Section, East Valley Scottsdale Tribune, March 3, 2005 edition)



Program Co-founders: The Rev. David Felten, pastor of Via de Cristo United Methodist Church in Scottsdale, left, and the Rev. Jeff Procter-Murphy, pastor of Asbury United Methodist Church in Phoenix, right, stand with the Rev. Culver "Bill" Nelson. (Photo credit: Ron Hattie, for the Tribune)

‘Salvaging’ Christianity

United Methodist pastors hope to reform faith by asking questions

A new reformation is taking place in Christianity, two United Methodist pastors in the Valley argue, and they say believers are eager for a deeper understanding that challenges their intellect and goes beyond historic doctrines and teachings.

Christians can grow more in their faith from the questions they ask than from what they are being taught as irrefutable truth, say the Rev. Jeff Procter-Murphy of Asbury United Methodist Church in Phoenix and the Rev. David Felten, pastor of Via de Cristo United Methodist Church in Scottsdale.

The two recently produced "Living the Questions," a seven-hour DVD program "for Christian invitation, initiation and spiritual formation." It features 24 theologians or religion explorers, many of them authors, scholars and thinkers who have challenged Christian orthodoxy.

"We wanted to expose our folks to cutting-edge theological scholarship, and so we invited prominent voices," Procter-Murphy says.



Challenging: "Living the Questions" is a seven-hour DVD program that features 24 religious scholars who have challenged Christian orthodoxy.

Among them are Marcus Borg, professor and author of "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time"; Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, author of "Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism" and "Why Christianity Must Change or Die"; John Dominic Crossan, former co-chairman of the Jesus Seminar and author of 20 books, including "Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography"; Methodist theologian John B. Cobb Jr., author of "Reclaiming the Church"; and the Rev. Culver "Bill" Nelson, founding pastor of the Church of the Beatitudes in Phoenix and a founder of the Jesus Seminar.

"We want to provide a vehicle for lay people to tap into the reformation that is already happening in Christianity," says Felten, 42, who was ordained in 1988 with Procter-Murphy. People don't need to feel alone about their dissatisfactions with Christianity as it is commonly defined and presented, he said.

"We just realized that the church had a real need for resources that are aimed toward progressive Christianity, and we just recognized that vacuum," says Procter-Murphy, 41. "It seems like our colleagues in mainline United Methodism were resorting to what we believe are more orthodox or traditional approaches to Christianity, including the Alpha Course," a 10-week Christian exploratory course widely used around the world, including well over 100 Arizona churches.

Five years ago, the two pastors set out to "create progressive alternatives for our own churches," which would cover such areas as member orientation and spiritual development and formation. "Living the Questions" is intended to be used across 12 weeks for small groups to show "the significance of Christianity in the 21st century and what a meaningful faith can look like in today's world."

The audience especially targeted are Christians who are considered moderate to liberal. The program "comes as a breath of fresh air because these mainstreamers know that the far-right Christians, at least those so prominent in the media, have politicized the faith and reduced it to two or three issues," says Tex Sample of Goodyear, an author, church consultant and former academic dean of a school of theology. Sample, who tells many faith stories in the DVD program, said younger Christians won't have to "sacrifice their minds nor abandon more thoughtful approaches to the Christian faith" and will discover understanding faith "as a journey into the rich mystery of God and not a lock-step, doctrinaire theology."

The title of the program - "Living the Questions" - comes from a letter by poet Rainer Maria Rilke to a young writer: "Be patient in all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now."

"It is about being open," Procter-Murphy says. "It is not about being closed and having a grasp on everything and boiling down reality to black and white. It is rich rainbow."

During a recent celebration to launch the program, held at Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Bishop Spong said he doubted the Christian church would die from controversy. "I think it will die of boredom," he says in touting the Living the Questions program. Boredom comes when "no one is engaged when it speaks a language that doesn't translate into your world," he said.

Religious fundamentalists - be they in Judaism, Islam or Christianity - reject the modern world. "They are people who cannot embrace the reality of the world in which they live, so they build a defense against modernity. They sing their hymns and close their minds" and proclaim, "We have the truth. The Bible is inerrant, the pope is infallible, there is only one way to God, and we possess it," Spong says. Such statements, he said, "become the language of their security."

One response to it, he says, is to drop out. "The fastest-growing organization in the Christian West" is what he calls "the church alumni association," where "people check out every day."

The program, intended to be used in 2 1/2-hour segments, emphasizes faith as a "journey and not a destination" and also uses sermon clips, conversations, comedy and spiritual exercises.

"We wanted to make the product something that was contemporary, that people could access on the Internet," says Procter-Murphy, who marshaled many volunteers from their two congregations and were able to get their two dozen speakers to volunteer to be interviewed, some from as far away as England. Some theologians were invited to speak to groups, allowing their remarks to be videotaped and excerpted. Among other Valley faces in the program are Bishop Minerva Carcano of the Desert Southwest Conference of the United Methodist Church and Pat McMahon, host of "The God Show" heard Sundays on KTAR (620 AM).

Many people "have a sense that they are alone in being a 'thinking' Christian and that 'salvaging' Christianity is a hopeless task," the two pastors say in their materials. "What is needed is 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."

CONTACT WRITER:

(480) 898-6522 or lgriffiths@aztrib.com