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Q & A

Q&A: Helping Methodists voice their questions

Mary Jacobs, Jul 11, 2008

You might assume that people come to church looking for answers. David Felten would disagree. People come to church, he argues, looking for a place to honestly air their questions and doubts.

Along with Jeff Procter-Murphy, Mr. Felten created *Living the Questions*, a video series featuring interviews with "progressive" Christian thinkers such as John Shelby Spong and John Dominic Crossan. The pair recently produced a sequel, *Living the Questions 2*.

Mr. Felten is the pastor of The Fountains, a United Methodist Church in Fountain Hill, Ariz. He spoke recently with staff writer **Mary Jacobs**.

When you created the first LTQ series five years ago, was there something missing in adult-education materials that you were attempting to provide?

People in our congregation were expressing interest in what we had learned at seminary, which is what we were talking about in our sermons. What we were heard over and over again was, "Why I haven't heard that before?" People would bring friends who had left the church because they had a conflict with what they perceived to be trite, pat answers. What Jeff and I discovered was that there was a huge number of people who were looking for fellow seekers to engage in a conversation about where they were at, rather than be instructed as to what the answers were.

We found that many of our clergy colleagues were, for whatever reason, not in a position to talk about what they really believed. And yet when we would bring speakers like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan or John Shelby Spong to town to lecture, there were all our clergy colleagues, too. They would say, "Wow, that is right where I'm at, but I couldn't dare talk about this in church." So we were looking around for what to do.



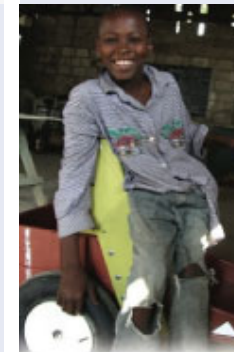
Some people are going to find this threatening. They might say, "Life's already complicated and confusing enough. Shouldn't we be giving people answers?"

One of my professors, the late Harold Beck, a professor of Hebrew Scripture at Boston University, said, "True wisdom is asking the questions for which there are no answers." If you look at the biblical witness, a lot of the Bible is wrestling with those questions, and there are no simple answers provided.

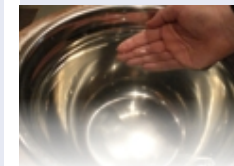
Take Job as a case in point. Job does not answer all the questions of evil or the questions of suffering. All of the



David Felten



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so-called answers that Job's friends give him are just examples of the shallow, unsatisfying answers that we give one another when we are in the midst of suffering. Those friends are held up as examples of how unhelpful these answers are.

What we're trying to do is expose people to the content of what is being expressed in our seminaries and among theologians and scholars and clergy, and a lot of lay people. But everybody thinks they're alone. They don't know that there are a lot of other people who have the same questions. If they would only be honest

about their doubts, and what they feel are their core beliefs, they would have companions for the journey. That's part of our idea of Living the Questions: You find people to travel with on this journey.

Marcus Borg said: "It's not about believing the right stuff. It's not about being good. It's about being in a relationship with Jesus. The rest is all opinion."

How did you choose the contributors?

Our criteria was, "Who are people that have really good things to say who are not being heard in the mainline churches, even though they are professors and teachers in mainline seminaries?"

There are people like Amy Jill-Levine. People watch her in the video and they just fall in love. She's profound, funny, engaging—and she's also an Orthodox Jew teaching New Testament at a Methodist school. I mean, what could be better? And you know, for some people it's news that Jesus was Jewish. We're dealing with really basic understandings here.

Someone asked us, "Why didn't you feature people like Luke Timothy Johnson?" My answer is those guys have all of Cokesbury and Abingdon [Press] at their disposal. We're trying to present the voices of people who will speak to the theologically marginalized.

Even if people don't see your video, is there a lesson here for United Methodists?

The lesson is, "Be honest," that it's not about technique. You can go to every workshop on how to do worship and how to do small groups, how to do this, that and the other thing. What it comes down to is, we are in the midst of a reformation of what Christianity is, what the core beliefs are, what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century. That's the lesson to take away. The word we get from people is, "Thank you for giving us permission to rethink the core message and the practice of Christianity." Because it's just been dumbed down to the point where people say, "I don't have time to waste with this kind of nonsense because it's so pat and simplistic."

I'm on the dean's advisory board for Boston University. One of the professors said: "It's a real challenge. We get these new students in, and they are shocked because many of the professors are not even theists. They come in with this very simplistic idea of Christianity and faith and they are blown away." That's because what's going on in seminary and what's being taught by mainline pastors to their congregation has created this increasing theology gap.

We're 100-150 years behind in our churches. I can tell people about stuff being talked about 100 years ago, and they're like, "You're kidding? Is that some kind of radical new theology?" No, it's from 100 years ago.

Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" is on my Web site at church. That has brought people to the church. They read that sermon from 1922, and they say, "Wow, if it's OK to talk about that in this church, then this church is for me!"

Fosdick says, "The Virgin Birth? Not so much. Not so important. Second Coming? Not so much. Inerrancy of the Bible? Please. You have got to be kidding me." If you were to preach that Fosdick

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sermon today, in most of our UMCs, there would be pandemonium. I think that quite a few of our clergy would agree with what Fosdick says. They would say, "Yes. That's where I'm at." But they wouldn't share that with laypeople.

Let me be the devil's advocate. Some people will make the argument that without standing for something, the church won't stand at all. Your response?

Let me remind you of the denominational slogan "open minds." And let me remind you of the poor young man who got up in General Conference in 2004 and said: "We don't know what to believe any more because our pastors don't teach us the creeds. How can we know what to believe?" This young man was never informed that the Methodist church is not a creedal church. We don't expect people to adhere to creeds. Wesley took the creeds out because, I think, he was afraid people would take them literally. They're not literal. They're metaphors.

The root of the word "belief" comes from "to give one's heart to." It has nothing to do with mental assent. It has nothing to do with believing "stuff." It's about what you give your whole self to. Wesley's gift to Protestantism was the inclusion of our personal experience in the quadrilateral. As long as you're holding on to what someone else has said you have to believe in order to be a Christian, then your own personal experience is not being exercised.

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