

Library Learnings: LtQ: Stirring the Pot and Facilitating Conversations - SSUC Edmonton Spiritual Seekers United in Community

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LtQ: “stirring the pot and facilitating conversations”

Living the Questions is many things; don’t become confused. It is the name of an educational DVD that introduces progressive Christianity. It is the name of the organization that produced this product, and then others like it, with more to come. It is the name of a book that arose out of that DVD, which promulgates, in the words of its subtitle, “The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity”. It is the name of a foundation that strives to support activities near and dear to progressive Christians. And it—all this—is the subject of this essay.

It is—all this—the brainchild of two middle-aged United Methodist Church ministers in suburban Phoenix, Arizona, Jeff Procter-Murphy and David Felten. A dozen years ago, Barbara Wendland, a UM layperson in Texas, writing in her monthly newsletter, *Connections*, described LtQ’s advent in these words: “It’s the outgrowth of [and here she appears to be quoting the two of them] ‘the crazy idea of a couple of United Methodist pastors.’” You should make their acquaintance.

Who’s who at LtQ

Jeff is the lead pastor at Dayspring UM Church in Tempe, a congregation that offers, LtQ reports, “an intellectually-honest presentation of the faith.” And when it declares, “All are welcome,” it means it: “We believe when you embrace diversity,” it avows, “you embrace God.” LtQ pictures him as being “passionate about communicating the gospel message to all, especially those who have been wounded by the church, or have otherwise washed their hands of organized religion.”

A year and a bit ago, he described himself—this during an interview with a reporter for Phoenix radio station KTAR—by stating, “I’d call myself a progressive Christian. And by that I mean, one who seeks to follow Jesus, and live according to his teachings. The emphasis is less on beliefs, and more on practice. We look to Jesus and how he lived his life.” He was a person who, Jeff added, “was constantly pushing the boundaries. He was reaching out to those who had been excluded, ostracized, marginalized; and bringing them into community.”

An alumnus of the University of Arizona, Jeff earned his masters degree and doctorate from California’s forward-looking Claremont School of Theology. A founding board member of Phoenix’s Family Promise, which provides fellowship and transitional housing to homeless families, Jeff is a founding member of an interdenominational group of Phoenix clergy organized to provide “an alternative voice to the Christian right around homosexuality and the church”.

Now pastor of The Fountains UM Church in Fountain Hills (“Our hearts, our minds,

our doors, are always open”), David, in 1998, established a new and uncommon congregation in Phoenix, Via de Cristo, which served, intentionally, and successfully, a niche group of spiritual seekers and those who would otherwise be “church alumni”.

In a celebration of progressive Christianity seer John Shelby Spong [who coined that phrase, “church alumni”], David allowed, “Despite all its flaws, its backwardness, and downright mean-spiritedness, we are still drawn to the promise of ‘the church,’ and its potential to be a force for good in the world. We resist the urge to throw up our hands in frustration, or sink into a funk of reaction.” (In a note to David, Spong’s wife, Christine, ventured, “We hope you are still raising a ruckus!” He reassured her: “...there’s plenty to raise a ruckus about. I’m on it!”)

An Arizona State University graduate, he earned his Mdiv from the Boston University School of Theology, and, as a Rotary graduate scholar, an honours degree from Perth Theological Hall of Western Australia’s Murdoch University. A founding director of the Arizona Foundation for Contemporary Theology, and a founder of a group of clerics advocating for full inclusion of LGBTQ persons, he serves on the board of the local chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

“It was both Jeff and David’s idea,” Jennifer Schwarz attests in an exchange of e-mails with this writer, referring to Living the Questions’ inception, and she would know: she is LtQ’s operations manager; and she is, as well, Jeff’s sister. It’s she who, working out of her home (“with her loyal staff of two pups”), manages marketing, sales, distribution, customer service, and the organization’s website [livingthequestions.com].

There, you’ll find all of the LtQ materials for purchase, resources, links, and more. And a blog, which, it can be noted, makes for interesting reading: new books are introduced, like Michael Morwood’s *Prayers for Progressive Christians*; Q&A exchanges are posted between seekers and Jeff and David; news from elsewhere having to do with progressive Christianity is reported, and podcasts are posted, as an interview with David from Brisbane.

The LtQ Story

It’s like this: today’s practice of Christianity is, as David regretted in that tribute to Jack Spong, “hopelessly damaged and irredeemable.” In a 2008 interview for UM Portal, an early web venture of *The United Methodist Reporter*, he reckoned, “What it comes down to is, we are in the midst of a reformation of what Christianity is, what the core beliefs are, and what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century.”

He went on to say, “I’m on the dean’s advisory board for Boston University,” where he heard one of the professors lament, “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 congregations, has created this increasing theological gap.”

On the other hand, these two clerics, fresh out of seminary, shared with their parishioners what they’d learned...something they wish more clergy would “come out of the theological closet” to do. The response? “What we heard over and over again was, ‘Why haven’t I 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,” David explained in that interview for UM Portal.

“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.” “Christianity will become more and more marginalized if people’s questions are not taken seriously,” David once told *The Arizona Republic*. In their *Living the Questions* book, the two explain that “people are dissatisfied with the core message, dogma, and practice of the Christian faith in today’s world. ...These people have an intuitive sense that there is more to Christianity than the rigid rules and theological constructs of the past.”

So they cast about for tools that they might use—this is how LtQ puts it—“to help people wrestle with basic questions often avoided by the church.” When they came up empty-handed, they realized that any such materials would have to be created from scratch.

And that is what they did. In what must surely have been a Herculean effort, they rounded up and interviewed a couple dozen envelope-pushing scholars and clerics, the likes of Marcus Borg and Matthew Fox and Jack Spong. “We wanted to expose our folks to cutting-edge theological scholarship,” Jeff informed the *Scottsdale Tribune*, “and so we invited prominent voices.” The result? What LtQ calls “a practical tool to bring together, equip, and re-educate thinking Christians”: the first “Living the Questions” DVD.

“When Jeff and David started out,” Jennifer tells the story, “they had no idea LtQ would become what it is today! What started out [in 2005] as just one 12-session DVD has grown into a catalogue of well over a dozen programs. The LtQ curriculum is now in use in over 8,000 churches in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand—making LtQ a leader in progressive Christian DVD resources.” As the two told the *Scottsdale Tribune*, it shows “what a meaningful faith can look like in today’s world.”

And there’s more to come: “We are definitely producing more such resources. Our first release of 2019—this will be in late spring or early summer—will be a study by Michael Dowd...focusing on [such subjects as] eco-theology and praxis, and deep sustainability.” Likely in fall, LtQ will release a DVD that will round up and point up the thinking of the late Marcus Borg.

“While it has not always been an easy road over the years, mostly due to economic downturns and church budgets becoming more and more limited, LtQ has continued to work to provide progressive Christian churches with resources that challenge and promote open dialogue,” Jennifer adds. “We hope to be around many more years!”

Enter the LtQ Foundation. This latest venture came about because, according to the foundation’s website [ltqfoundation.org], “People worldwide have been renewed and invigorated by Living the Questions curriculum, and are looking to give back.” “The spark that started it all,” Jennifer reveals, “was actually a long-time customer who wanted to donate money to LtQ, back in 2013.” In its work so far, the foundation steers its resources to underfunded churches, assists in sponsoring progressive Christian events, and supports prison outreach.

LtQ resources, at hand

“From the beginning, the Living the Questions curriculum has sought to...stir the pot and facilitate conversations.” This is how the “reader’s guide,” which is found at the back of the book, *Living the Questions*, describes...boldly...LtQ’s ambition. It points

“toward something new. How these ideas and this emerging vision develop will be determined through the efforts of those willing to live with the questions, and see what unfolds along the way.”

In a 2005 review, James Adams, then president of The Center for Progressive Christianity, said this of the original DVD...though it applies to everything that's come later: it is, “I believe, exactly what many individuals and congregations in the progressive Christianity network have been looking for—an attractive and thoughtful expression of the progressive approach to Christianity.” It's “designed to help people wrestle with the relevance of Christianity in the 21st century.” What's more, it “features some of the most outspoken and respected voices in today's theological circles....”

What's more, the SSUC Library has six of the DVDs, and the book, too, for you to borrow, to view, to read, and to help you “along the way”. Here, in a sentence or two, is what's at hand, the DVDs first, then the book:

* Both the early “Living the Questions” DVD, and its expanded 21-sessions version, are available. Both present interviews with theological scholars and other mavens, and clips from their lectures and sermons, all upholding, as Barbara Wendland has it in her *Connections*, “Christianity as a faith that can make sense to today's thinking people.”

* “Dream. Think. Be. Do.” This is the DVD that, several years ago, Nancy Steeves and Chris New featured in an adult continuing education series. In 20 succinct sessions, it tackles everything from “thinking theologically” to evil and suffering.

* “First Light” sees biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan on location in Jerusalem and Galilee. They introduce the historical Jesus and his abiding focus on “the kingdom of God”, or what Crossan calls “God's great clean-up”.

* “The Jesus Fatwa”, in just five sessions, puts before the viewer 17 Islamic and Christian scholars, who correct misconceptions about Islam, and encourage the building of relationships between Muslims and Christians.

* “Painting the Stars” is an eye-opener: in seven sessions, it explores evolutionary Christian spirituality, and takes the viewer from Genesis to mysticism. Bruce Sanguin serves as the guide and facilitator; a UCC minister for 28 years, he's now a psychotherapist in Vancouver.

* *Living the Questions* is the between-two-covers version of Jeff and David's DVD-based continuing education materials. It is 230 pages in length...and it so impressed the writer that, in his copy, something or another is underlined or highlighted on 115 of those pages. Obviously, it comes highly recommended.

A leading voice in emerging Christianity, Eric Elnes—he's a pastor, author, speaker, media host—has described, has encapsulated, LtQ in just this one sentence, with which this essay will end: “It is a gift to all Christians desiring to explore progressive Christian faith and practice.”

Ken Fredrick

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke's counsel

Living the questions is something more, still. It is the counsel of Rainer Maria Rilke: “Live the questions now,” he urged. And it was his turn of phrase that David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy took up when they launched Living the Questions.

Rilke [1875-1926] is widely recognized as one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets. And Wikipedia has it that, “Several critics have described Rilke’s work as inherently ‘mystical’.” The Poetry Foundation tells more about him than that he had a way with words: his was “an aesthetic philosophy that rejected Christian precepts, and strove to reconcile beauty and suffering, life and death.” It was in one of the 10 letters he once wrote to a 19-year-old officer cadet at an Austrian military academy, Franz Xaver Kappus, published posthumously in 1929 in *Letters to a Young Poet*, that he called for the unknown to be embraced, and not necessarily puzzled out:

“...have patience with everything unresolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing, live your way into the answer....”