

Mapping the Life Together

B Y D E B R A D E A N M U R P H Y

Our life together in Christ need not be measured in terms of numerical growth, clever programming, or congregational busyness. The resources reviewed here share the conviction that membership in the body of Christ is a gift to be received and nurtured, and that faithfulness in our common life will not always look like success.

For fifty years, the narrative of decline has dominated the discourse of “church membership” in North America. Decades of loss in oldline Protestantism (the *hemorrhaging* of members, numerical *freefall* – pick your jarring metaphor) have been understood primarily as a matter of negative accounting. The dreary statistics have motivated a range of strategies for upping the numbers: television advertisements, marketing campaigns, church-in-a-pub, and a host of others.

The decline in church membership has many roots, many reasons. There is no shortage of studies, no dearth of opinion on the myriad causes – cultural and ecclesial – for the current state of affairs. A commonplace assumption, more implicit than overt in the conversation, is that expecting too much of potential church members is a deterrent, a disincentive, a turn-off. *Enticing* would-be members, however, with everything from coffee bars and stadium seats to denim-clad pastors and multiple worship “styles,” is deemed a sure way to attract and retain the discriminating church shopper/consumer/potential member.

In recent years a counterintuitive idea has gained traction: perhaps people desire more rigor, not less, in their experience of church life. Maybe ancient, corporate disciplines like *lectio divina* or praying the Psalms or confessing our sins to one another have a renewed appeal in this age of digital loneliness. It might be, despite opinion polls and much conventional

wisdom, that potential church members long for accountability and the demands (and joys) of discipleship.

Two deceptively slim volumes by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *The Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004, 234 pp., \$21.00), have long been weighty resources for those with such hunches. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer made public the theology that undergirded the experiment at Finkenwalde – a covert seminary for training Protestant pastors, established by the Confessing Church in 1935, and shut down by the Gestapo less than two years later. *Life Together* was enormously popular from the beginning, undergoing three additional printings in its first year of publication (1939). English-speaking Christians were also voracious in their appetite for Bonhoeffer's wisdom on Christian community. While illuminating "the day together," "the day alone," "service," and "confession and the Lord's Supper," Bonhoeffer also exposed and named and attended with pastoral care to such hazards of community as "disillusionment," "pious wishful dreaming," and "internal poisoning."

In this recent critical edition of these classic works (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 5), textual issues that plagued many of the early (and not so early) English translations (of *Life Together*, especially) have been addressed. And since all of Bonhoeffer's writings have been included in the *Works* translation project, there is consistency "throughout the corpus, with special attention paid to accepted English equivalents of technical theological and philosophical concepts" (p. viii). Moreover, the editor's introductions to both *Life Together* and *Prayerbook* (written by Geoffrey B. Kelly) and the afterwords to the German editions offer rich insight on the historical context of these works and on particular textual issues within them. For instance, Kelly describes in some detail the origins of the Brothers' House within the seminary at Finkenwalde and how Bonhoeffer "had to fend off accusations that he was catholicizing the seminarians" (p. 20). And he also notes the challenges of "consistently rendering into English Bonhoeffer's German terminology and capturing as closely as possible his style of writing" (p. 21). He does this in part by explaining the difficulties (and recounting the earlier failures) in translating *Gemeinschaft* and *Gemeinde* (rendered in this volume as "community" and "congregation" respectively), and by describing one of "the thorniest of all problems faced in this book...the issue of gender-inclusive language" (p. 22).

In the Afterword to *The Prayerbook*, Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr remind contemporary readers of the need in Bonhoeffer's Germany "to fight for the value of both the Old Testament and the Old Testament people of God within the Christian church" (p. 178). And they elucidate a key feature of Bonhoeffer's treatment of the Psalms: that all prayer is christologically mediated. "Christian prayer," they write, "is not a natural self-expression directed to God, an uttering of spiritual needs, but rather a way to God. Only Jesus Christ can go this way. ... He himself prays the Psalter in the humanity he has assumed" (p. 180).

But it is the power of Bonhoeffer's own vision of Christian community and of the life of prayer that most makes this volume a treasure for those who care deeply about what it means to be members of one another in the body of Christ. "Like the Christian's sanctification," Bonhoeffer says, "Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim. Only God knows the real condition of either our community or our sanctification.

For congregations exhausted by their efforts to *create* community, to project strength and significance for the sake of growth in membership, Bonhoeffer's words are a restorative balm—gentle permission to stop the frenetic striving to accomplish a task not given to us.

What may appear weak and insignificant to us may be great and glorious to God" (p. 38). For pastors and laypersons and congregations exhausted by their efforts to *create* community, to project strength and significance for the sake of growth in membership, Bonhoeffer's words are a restorative balm—gentle permission to stop the frenetic striving to accomplish a task not given to us. And when Bonhoeffer

writes of the gifts of daily disciplines such as silence—"real stillness, really holding one's tongue" (p. 85)—his wisdom serves not only the growth in maturity of the individual but that of the community as well.

In *Prayerbook*, Bonhoeffer, true to his christocentric hermeneutic, challenges our interpretive narcissism: "If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the Psalms, we must not, therefore, first ask what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ" (p. 157). When we do this, we discover that the Psalter "is the prayer of the human nature assumed by Christ" and "it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer" (p. 160). After offering some preliminary observations about the Psalms (their authorship, musicality, and centrality in worship), Bonhoeffer classifies the psalms according to the themes of Creation, the Law, the History of Salvation, the Messiah, the Church, Life, Suffering, Guilt, and Enemies. In regard to this last theme, he notes the "shocking frequency" with which psalms of vengeance "penetrate the entire Psalter" (p. 174). His insights are remarkable:

God's vengeance did not fall on the sinners, but on the only sinless one, the Son of God, who stood in the place of sinners.... So the psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God by myself, only the crucified Christ can; and I can forgive through him. So the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ. (p. 175)



A Shared Christian Life by Ben Witherington III (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012, 200 pp., \$14.99) is a recent contribution to the cottage industry of books on Wesleyan spirituality. Designed for small group study, the book's two parts – Spirituality as Life in the Body of Christ and The Individual Context: the Believer as a Member of the Body – address Witherington's concern to "get away from certain unhelpful models of spiritual formation and practice" (p. ix). These include "extreme monastic models of piety" which are not conducive to "the normal Christian life" (p. x) – a phrase that appears several times in the book. Other dangers include individualism, self-centeredness, and an obsessive regard for feelings in gauging one's spiritual health.

A Shared Christian Life makes extensive use of John Wesley's observations and recommendations regarding spiritual formation for individuals and communities, including Wesley's familiar advice on the means of grace (prayer, scripture study, holy communion – avail yourself of them often!), and his perhaps lesser known views on "the wilderness state" and its dangers for thwarting wholeheartedness in Christian living. This state is not the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross – a condition, Witherington contends, that Wesley found "unbiblical." Rather, according to Wesley, "the want of striving, spiritual sloth...keeps your soul in darkness" (p. 63).

A quibble with Witherington's thesis: In the book's introduction, he warns against the kinds of advice in the literature of spiritual formation "that promote extreme introspection, individual isolation and individualistic seeking, spiritual athleticism of various kinds, and even spiritual navel-gazing of a sort" (p. viii). More than once, and perhaps unintentionally, he seems to equate such tendencies with monasticism past and present, striking a dismissive tone when he (mis)quotes Shakespeare to report that "it seems almost as if ordinary Christians are being told 'get thee to a nunnery' if you want to be truly spiritually formed" (p. viii). Witherington does not want to discourage the earnest disciple – fair enough. But Methodism historically has valued the gifts of the church catholic – including the varied riches of monastic spirituality – for understanding and living the shared Christian life.



"Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period." So argues James C. Wilhoit in *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 240 pp., \$23.99). Writing, he says, as an evangelical and out of his experience teaching Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College, Wilhoit's aim is to "set forward a curriculum for Christ-likeness grounded in the gospel and the grace that makes it possible" (p. 205). The book bears many of the marks of a pedagogical framing of

formation: graphs, tables, charts, and other visuals, and a detailed, wide-ranging account of what Wilhoit calls “the four Rs” of spiritual formation: receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. We receive “the healing, vitalizing, sustaining, and strengthening grace of God” through a stance of openness/brokenness — “a disciplined ‘showing up’ to meet God” (p. 57). We remember that we are God’s beloved through “a willing humility to learn” (p. 104). We “respond to God’s gospel of love and forgiveness with love and service to God and to those around us” (p. 147). And we are designed “to live and grow in relationship with [our Creator] and in human community” (p. 177).

One might take issue with some of Wilhoit’s claims that seem to lack nuance — for example: “Spiritual formation is at the heart of [the church’s] whole purpose for existence” (p. 15). And while his urgency is warranted, given the sad state of substantive formation efforts in most churches, his “lifelong course of study designed to promote spiritual transformation” can feel at times a bit too tidy and prescriptive (p. 50). Here Bonhoeffer’s admonition in *Life Together* comes to mind: “The existence of any Christian communal life essentially depends on whether or not it succeeds at the right time in promoting the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God’s reality” (p. 45). Yet *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* — vast in its vision and execution — is deeply rooted in Scripture, generous with its many interlocutors, and rich in wisdom born of experience and a love for the Church.



The “Church Membership” pamphlet produced by the Ekklesia Project (www.ekkesiaproject.org) deals practically and specifically with “the great adventure” of becoming part of a congregation or parish. Written in an accessible style by John McFadden and David McCarthy, this brief document is dense with wisdom on a range of matters that newcomers to the faith and seasoned Christians alike can benefit from. Noting that Christian community is called and gathered by God (not established or sustained by us), McFadden and McCarthy spell out what this calling looks like:

We are called to depend upon one another. We are called to a way of *peace* where we reject vengeance, not returning violence for violence. We are called to a way of reconciliation, taking the first step to peace with our enemies. We are called to *love* — not just a sentimental ‘feeling good,’ but a love that can heal broken relationships and resist injustice. This is the kind of love that stands with victims of abuse, the kind of love that fills us with passion for the good things in life. This is the love that moves us to extend hospitality to our neighbor. We have been called by God to a common life, in God’s name and not our own. This is a daunting, breathtaking, and wonderful call. (p. 4)

The pamphlet also looks at some of the failures surrounding church membership: that, statistically, nearly half the people who join a local church will drift away within two years; that many new members never succeed in moving into a deeper experience of Christian community (this second failure explaining much of the first). In noting these realities, McFadden and McCarthy outline five disciplines, five “habits of faith” by which we “learn to see ourselves and the world through God’s eyes” (p. 5): corporate worship, friendship, service to the community, housekeeping, and Christian ministry in the world. Their discussions of friendship and housekeeping, especially, are rich with insight and describe practices that are rarely well attended to in the discourse of church membership.



Our life together in Christ need not be measured in terms of numerical growth, clever programming, or congregational busyness. The resources reviewed here, in their various ways, share the conviction that membership in the body of Christ is a gift to be received and nurtured, and that faithfulness in our common life will not always look like success. With Bonhoeffer we pray that each Christian community would understand itself as “part of the one, holy, universal, Christian church, sharing through its deeds and suffering in the hardships and struggles and promise of the whole church” (*Life Together*, p. 45). And with the apostle Paul we trust in the one whose “power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).



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