

Wordcare

Hauerwas, Language, and the Church

EDITED BY

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

WORDCARE

HAUERWAS, LANGUAGE, AND THE CHURCH

Edited by Stan Wilson and Kyle Childress

Pamphlet 15 in the *Renewing Radical Discipleship*
series of Ekklesia Pamphlets.

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Printed by Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave. Suite 3

Eugene OR 97401

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INTRODUCTION

STANLEY HAUERWAS loves to begin some of his presentations with the joke about the Lone Ranger and Tonto finding themselves surrounded by thousands of Sioux warriors. The Lone Ranger says to Tonto, “We’re surrounded and we must find help.” Tonto replies, “What do you mean ‘we’ Kemo-Sabe?” To which Stanley usually follows with his distinctive cackling laugh and the crowd laughs too, although they might be laughing because they love Stanley’s laugh more than the joke.

But the laughter quickly dies down when Stanley begins to explain that it makes all the difference who the church of Jesus Christ understands the “we” to be when the President of the United States says, “*We* must go to war.” The lesson has begun and a crowd, often full of pastors and laypeople, begins to learn that language is important and that the “we” who have gone through waters of baptism to follow Jesus Christ is not the same as the “we” who are citizens of the United States and follow the dictates of the White House and Pentagon. No doubt these overlap for most of us, but the “we” is not the same, and part of the task of Christian discipleship is to begin to understand and live out the difference.

This pamphlet is a compilation of the testimonies of eleven pastors and three laypeople who have learned from Stanley Hauerwas who the “we” is. They have learned to practice disciplined attentiveness to what the church says and what the world says, as well as *how* these things are said and heard. They are also witnesses who are helping the church do better in its use of language because of what Stanley has taught them. Four of the pastors, Jenny Williams, Michael Gulker, Kent McDougal, and Randy Cooper, speak of different aspects of the church’s primary language: worship. Another three, Michael Bowling, Jessie Larkin, and Jim McCoy, tell about the language of truthfulness. Roy Terry learned to be careful about “becoming God’s church” while Stan Wilson’s vocation was clarified as he faced the daunting challenge of being a pastor to a man about to be executed by the state. John Varden wrestled with

a congregation over the language of war while John McFadden demonstrates that a truthful community is one that recognizes suffering and diversity. Nancy Bullock, Rodney Clapp, and Brian Volk testify to the ways they have learned to think about formation, stories, and friendship respectively due to the work of Stanley.

These brief reflections are not academic essays or even sermons but, as I've said, they are testimonies. A testimony is defined as "a declaration by a witness" and its root comes from the Latin *testis* which means "witness." These are testimonies by witnesses who point not to themselves but to the God we know as Trinity. They are in honor of Stanley Hauerwas but only as a way of reminding us all that underneath his work as theologian, ethicist, teacher, and writer, he too has always most assuredly been a witness to God and of the gospel.

Stan Wilson, who did the bulk of the work of putting this pamphlet together, went to the University of Mississippi in Oxford a few years ago to hear Stanley give the inaugural Will D. Campbell Lecture. The lecture was followed by an invigorating hour-long question-and-answer dialogue. Afterward, Stan and some students, another minister and several laypeople went to someone's house and talked about God for another hour or so. They didn't talk about Hauerwas or Will Campbell, both of whom are interesting conversation subjects. They didn't discuss ethics or books or engage in church shoptalk. They talked about God.

That's who we are. We are witnesses who are learning to talk about God in clear language and who seek to embody the Way of God known in Jesus Christ with fidelity and clarity. It is fitting that we're putting this pamphlet together the week the church celebrates Pentecost, for it was at Pentecost when the church was given its vocation – the gift and task of gospel-infused language. Our testimony is that Stanley Hauerwas has helped us recover our calling.

Thanks be to God.

Kyle Childress, pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church,
Nacogdoches, Texas
Pentecost, 2010

Eucharist

FOR STANLEY

*Jenny Williams, pastor of Wesley United Methodist Church,
Kingwood, West Virginia*

DALE FIRST came to worship on a Sunday on which we were sharing in the Eucharist. He was rough-looking: dirt under his nails, a work shirt with his name on the patch above the pocket, long hair pulled back into a ponytail. He came with his girlfriend Brandy, who had just given birth to their first child and who had a child by a previous boyfriend. They didn't look like anyone else sitting there that Sunday morning. But Dale was absolutely gripped by the liturgy of Communion. It was unbelievably beautiful to him.

Dale and Brandy lived a hard life. They had been drug users and were not totally clean. They argued like crazy, left the kids with Brandy's grandmother when they felt like it, and generally were not very responsible people.

On Maundy Thursday that year, Dale called me at 5:45 a.m. He woke to find that Brandy had packed up all her things and left. He didn't know where she was. She left the kids behind. He was sober but devastated. We talked and prayed for a bit on the phone, and he eventually went to work. He called me a few hours later. He'd found out from one of Brandy's friends that she was with another man. He walked off the job, left his car at the worksite, and was walking along the side of the road in the snow. As I drove to pick him up, the irony of these events was painful to me. She'd left him on the day that Jesus tells us to love each other and that the world will know us by that love.

Dale and I eventually ended up at the church because he wanted to sit in the sanctuary to talk. We sat in the chancel for about two hours—him talking and sobbing, me listening. Wrapped up in his misery was the story of his search for God.

I really didn't know what to do besides listen. I finally told him that this was a moment where some might tell him he'd hit rock bottom and that he needed to follow four easy steps to salvation. I explained that that language, however, cheapened God's grace as if it were some sort of magical fix for his life. He said he was grateful that we were not going to have that conversation.

At that moment I happened to glance at the stained glass windows in the sanctuary, and noticed that we were sitting right by four windows which depicted images from Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. I asked him if he knew about the significance of that very day in the life of the church. He didn't, so I proceeded to tell the story of Holy Week, using the stained glass windows as a guide. The narrative of the betrayal of Christ by the ones who loved him and His subsequent forgiveness of them gave Dale new eyes to see his own situation. Honestly, he was changed in an instant.

Later that evening he came to the Maundy Thursday worship service, beaming with the knowledge of the grace of Jesus Christ. His situation with Brandy was not any better, but he now knew that he was part of something larger, something mysterious.

It was the grace evident in the Eucharist which grabbed Dale. It was the language, symbols and observances of the liturgical year which plainly revealed to him the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice. It was Stanley Hauerwas who taught me about narrative theology, a church life grounded in the sacraments, and the richness of the church year—all of which helped Dale to inhabit a new reality. The solid grounding I received through Stanley's teaching and friendship has helped me resist the hollow, fleeting language of "quick fixes" which so pervades the church. We don't need a "plan of salvation," "strategies for evangelism," or "tools for church growth." We have the language of the gospel, the sacraments, and the liturgical year to guide us in our lives together. I owe my approach to pastoral ministry to Stanley's emphatic yet careful guidance in the language and grammar of faith.

Liturgy

Michael Gulker, associate pastor of Christ Community Church,

Des Moines, Iowa

Kent McDougal, pastor of Christ Community Church,

Des Moines, Iowa

STANLEY IS (in)famous far and wide for his language, and it is for his language that we at Christ Community Church give thanks. Born out of a schism from a mega-church, CCC is a kind of bastard child without proper parentage or family tradition. Instead, we inherited the market's totalizing tradition of managerial utilitarianism. However, God's steadfast love to even a violent and angry child like CCC kept us from living comfortably with the market's limited vocabulary of competition and scarcity. Such words lacked the tenor of praise for God's abundant goodness that longed to find its home in us. Lacking fluency in the Christian tradition, we had only rough words for others and for ourselves. As children borne of violence, we welcomed Stanley's rough words to the Church. They felt smooth in our uncouth mouths and were easily aimed first at those who spawned us, and later at each other. But this violence isn't the whole story.

Stanley's rejection of liberalism, the market's politics, along with his strident insistence upon the Word as the Church's legitimate politics, sowed in us the courage to believe that theology really is *our* mother tongue. This gave us the fight we needed to resist the market's language of efficacy and security. Stanley taught us that Christian theology is made up of words the saints used and continue to use to describe our Gentile experience of learning to rest in Israel's God. These ideas came as good news to a bastard church: that we of all people might be saved from the language and lineage of idolatry, adopted instead into the worship of the True Word of God through the True Son of Israel. But these ideas aren't the whole story.

By God's mercy, Stanley has made explicit for us that the True Word does not flourish in us as ideas apart from the practices of the Church. The Word made flesh does not take up its proper role for us cut off from a liturgy formed by the life, time, and body-politic of Christ. So we low-church post-evangelicals began to say some new high-church words like lectionary and liturgy, Eucharist and catechumenate. In the saying of these words, we have begun to see the world, and sometimes even ourselves, anew. We have begun to mark our time by a new Event, by an Epiphany of what God is doing in the world. We are discovering that these new words of the Word speak into being new realities. Seeing these new realities requires that we act differently. In order to see and welcome the Risen Lord, we must repent of our habituation to the old realities passing away, ordering our time and speech toward the Reign of Christ. As we learn to receive God's own hospitality through the sacraments and the prayers of the church, we are beginning to see the strange God of Israel in the stranger. But these words aren't the whole story.

As we begin to welcome this strange Stranger, we find that we have little use for Him. Jesus, in his naked flesh of the poor embarrasses us. Despite our words, the Word is still strange in our mouths and even stranger in our homes. And yet in this gap between our words and our lives, some beautiful strangers interrupted us. The Mennonites are a strange and gentle people, so gentle that they have become the means by which God has adopted this lost child called Christ Community as a member of his own family. Because of the gentleness of these strangers, we have come to love the strangeness of Christ just a little bit more. We now find ourselves in the odd and perhaps trendy Hauerwasian position of expressing that love as high-church Mennonites, our checkered past becoming just one more reason to give thanks as it is redeemed by Christ through his Church.

And at the same time we find Stanley using the words of a gentle stranger, too. Jean Vanier's life is strange. L'Arche is strange. Jean Vanier might, if we follow the example of his Example, teach us the gentleness of the Word, gentleness so deep that we might even learn to be gentle

with ourselves. Perhaps this gentle Word will one day allow us to stop being afraid of the Truth, and even see the Truth in ourselves. This hasn't happened fully yet, but this isn't the whole story now, is it?

Thank you, Stanley, for teaching us your language, the language of the Church, which isn't just yours, but is given to all us bastards, thanks be to God.

Hearing the Word

WITH THANKSGIVING

*Randy Cooper, pastor of First United Methodist Church,
Martin, Tennessee*

LIKE NEHEMIAH, I carry out my work and witness amidst the scattered stones and ashes of a Christendom in ruins. For example, the week that I write this, my Annual Conference has sent us United Methodist clergy a brochure encouraging us to attend a “creative worship” seminar. Apparently, I continue to operate out of “old, text-based mindsets.” I am “stuck in... analysis” and must “discover the power of metaphor.” If I were as passionate about worship as the seminar leaders claim to be, I would use “the digital language of film, television, and computers” to create “powerful worship experiences.” And I would be open to using “highly emotive graphics, animation and video.” I need to be more innovative in leading worship. Or so I am told.

Also, this same week I have spent several hours with a church member whose marriage is disintegrating and whose life is hanging together by a thread. She has become quite articulate in the therapeutic language provided her by her professional counselor. Yet how wonderful to see that she also hungers and thirsts for the Kingdom of God! Her heart is open to a new way of seeing if she can first find a new way of speaking. As her pastor, I can only hope for the Holy Spirit to help us together find the right words for her life.

I believe Stanley Hauerwas throughout his ministry as a theologian has understood what pastors like me are up against. He knows we live in a time of the “humiliation of the word” (Ellul)—a time when we pastors are tempted no longer to believe in the words of our worship liturgy, the frail words of the preacher, or even the Word of Scripture. Hauerwas also knows that some, not all, within our congregations cling for dear life to the faith of the church, even as they reside in a culture whose Enlightenment narratives and language cannot rightly

form us. And Hauerwas joins with pastors like me in thanking God that even yet some within our congregations yearn for words of the gospel that will give life and empower them still to stand, after having done all. As I think about Stanley Hauerwas, I therefore think of a man who has worked harder than nearly anyone within his guild to see that we pastors know the Word, trust the Word, and allow the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly.

I first began to read Stanley's books and essays some thirteen years ago. We then met two years later when we spent a day together with a small group of United Methodist clergy and spouses. We hit it off, so to speak. He graciously told me at the end of that gathering that he wrote letters and that if I wrote to him, he would write me back. He had no idea that I suffer the incurable habit of writing letters. So I mailed him a letter within a week (the first of many). I still recall a portion of what I wrote. I thanked Stanley for helping me find ways to "speak the Word of the gospel more faithfully." In retrospect, I believe I was thanking Stanley for helping me to be a faithful witness, for giving me a sure and certain hope that what I do Sunday after Sunday and week after week is not in vain but is indeed a small and vital part of God's plan set forth in Christ to gather all things in him.

Upon the wall of my church study hang portraits of people who have meant the world to me—Wendell Berry, Elie Wiesel, Flannery O'Connor, Karl Barth, and a host of others. Stanley Hauerwas's picture is among them. Together their voices comprise the harmony of the gospel, as I have come to hear it. They lead me deeper into the mystery of dying and rising with Christ. And thank God that Stanley's high-pitched Texas twang can be heard, loud and clear, among them.

Truthfulness

TWO WORDS AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD'S KINGDOM

*Michael J. Bowling, Pastor of Englewood Christian Church,
Indianapolis, Indiana*

IMAGINE MY excitement! I am about to hear one of the most respected theologians in the world wax eloquent as a participant in a panel discussion. Given that the event is the Ekklesia Project's Summer Gathering, there will be no reason for him to "tone down" or soften any of his comments...nothing like a room full of academicians and curious church folk to get an unfettered discussion going. My hope for a nugget of wisdom was heightened when the theologian in question, Stanley Hauerwas, teased the audience with the following statement: "I tell my students that Christian ethics can be summarized in two words." Then came a dramatic pause followed by these less than impressive words: "Don't lie!" There was laughter from my EP friends... more of a response to Hauerwas's own maniacal laugh than to his surprising statement. I sat stunned and disappointed. "Don't lie!" That's it?

For the remainder of the week and in the weeks ahead, I could not get those two words out of my head. Eventually, disappointment turned to curiosity. Could this two-word admonition, which I heard hundreds of times from my mother and repeated many times to my own children, be an essential key to life in the Spirit? What is the witness of Scripture on this topic? What is the witness of the Church throughout history? What was my own experience of 26 years' work with congregations in two different inner-city communities? These questions began to spark memories of every sort.

The problem with lying is the two-fold consequence which results when someone intentionally misrepresents their perception of reality. There is the implied failure of trust which creates on-going relational havoc, and there is the continuing destruction which follows work based on a lie. Ask a brick mason what happens when you work off of

a line which is not plumb. How could I have missed the salient wisdom of “Don’t lie!” which drives my everyday work in the church and in the community? From the homeless guy off the street to the long-time member of the church, I start every conversation with, “Please tell me the truth so that the church can work effectively with you in this situation.” I am rarely shocked by the truth, but I am often devastated when a lie is exposed by the light of truth.

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus includes the sage wisdom of “Don’t lie!” Firmly establishing the Church as the primary agent of God’s transformative work in the world through Christ (Ephesians 1:10, 22, 23), Paul writes of a reconciliation and a peace which results in the growing presence of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Ephesians 2). He envisions a unity foreshadowed to the nations in the Church; this was God’s eternal purpose of making known the variegated Divine wisdom to the fallen powers of this age (Ephesians 3:9-12). God’s glory ought to be on full display in the Church (Ephesians 3:20, 21). God’s Spirit has been poured out upon her in such a way as to facilitate growth into such a lofty vocation (Ephesians 4:1-13), but maturity of this sort requires two essential virtues from her members, love and truthfulness (Ephesians 4:15). In the Spirit-given life of the congregation or in our work in the greater community, God is forming a new humanity which will bear the mark of a community which heeds Paul’s admonition: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” (Ephesians 4:25)

My neighborhood desperately needs an embodied witness of the One who is “the way, the truth and the life.” It needs to see a community where truthfulness is met with love and forgiveness...a community where signs of immaturity are to be expected, but hiding those signs from one another is unacceptable. My neighborhood needs to be welcomed by a congregation which is honest about her own sordid past, but equally honest about the sacrifices necessary for a redeemed future. My neighborhood needs to see a church which worships the Crucified and Risen One in the Spirit of “Don’t Lie!”

Dirty Words

*Jessie Larkins, associate pastor of Mt. Sylvan United Methodist Church,
Durham, North Carolina*

I WAS 14 years old. My family was new to Aldersgate United Methodist Church, and Stanley Hauerwas—revered teacher and churchman—was talking to my parents in the narthex after worship. It was hard not to hear his distinct Texas twang from across the room. What caught my attention on that particular day was that from his mouth poured words that I used only under the threat of punishment at home or school. Who was this man who got away with cussing in church? Didn't people take offense at his language?

Well, yes, I learned later, most people took offense to his language. It was the way he spoke, however, that revealed the most to me about who Stanley Hauerwas was: unafraid to be himself (even if a bit brazen and rough around the edges), and fearless in his proclamation of the gospel. It was this, his willingness (perhaps determination?) to step beyond the bounds of politeness and civility by refusing to whitewash the offense of his language, that taught me a most important lesson about language and the Church.

I learned quickly that the vocabulary of discipleship is messy, hard, offensive language. Because of this offense, we have made churches places of nicety rather than places of truth telling. Very few of us are willing to tolerate the challenge of words and phrases such as repentance, or tithing, or Jesus is Lord. These are the dirty words of faith that make us uncomfortable. These are the phrases that question the way we spend our money and time. They question our allegiance to nation, to family, and to self. The dividing line between the pious and the truly religious lies in one's ability to sit in church, to hear words that make one squirm uncomfortably in the pew, and to not then run and find a less demanding club to join.

I don't make a practice out of cussing around my congregants. My skin is not nearly thick enough to endure the sort of criticism I would have to deal with as a result. However, on the days when I find myself swallowing my words for fear of offense, I often think of the lessons I learned from Stanley Hauerwas. At the hospital bedside I ask myself, "Am I being polite in asking about this woman's granddaughter because I am afraid of looking into her eyes and telling her that she is going to die?" When my confirmands tell me that they cannot come to worship on Sunday morning because of soccer and baseball games, do I accept their answer because I am afraid of asking what the phrase "Jesus is Lord" really means to them? When it comes to be the time of year for the stewardship campaign, do I skirt around defining a tithe as a full 10 percent because I don't want to jeopardize what amount folks are already giving, even if it allows them to remain under the illusion of faithfulness and generosity in giving?

Stanley Hauerwas taught me that the gospel is an offensive beast. The gospel forces us to confront the truth through words and phrases that challenge our greed, our anger, our violence, and our pain. By replacing or dulling the vocabulary of faith with the vocabulary of self-help therapy and polite society, we have instead made the church into a place where it is okay to offer to God what is left of our time, money, and energy; a place where we go only when we need or want the consolations of God. We have made the church into a place where we are afraid or unable to speak truth to one another any more. The truth that we so desperately need to hear is written right into the language of our prayer books, liturgies, and hymnals. From Stanley I have learned that hiding just below the surface of most polite and genteel congregations is truth waiting for someone with enough courage to speak once more these challenging, offensive, messy words.

Till the Lightning Falls

*Jim McCoy, pastor of First Baptist Church,
Weaverville, North Carolina*

AT A dramatic moment in *The Lord of the Rings*, several companions of the Fellowship, the unlikely gathering of creatures called together to save Middle Earth, burst into the court of King Theoden of Rohan. The king is slumped on his throne, eyes glazed over with a thick, milky film. Theoden's chief counselor, Wormtongue, has almost succeeded in his intent to render the king useless as the kingdom falls into darkness. With a flash of light, Gandalf the Wizard silences Wormtongue and thunders, "I have not passed through fire and death to bandy crooked words with a serving-man till the lightning falls." Theoden rouses to life and takes up his role in the Fellowship's purpose.

On my bad days as a preacher, I am Theoden. On my worst days, I'm Wormtongue. Stanley Hauerwas is a voice from the blessed fellowship that can break the deadly spell of crooked words, especially with regards to church and politics. *Resident Aliens* opened my eyes to a kind of politics that was neither a veneer for liberal or conservative secular agenda nor a spiritualist withdrawal. Soon after I moved in 1991 from campus to local church, I read "Abortion Theologically Understood" and saw how a Christian could speak about divisive issues in terms and categories not dictated by the wider society. Over the years I've tried to pay attention to the way Hauerwas uses first-order speech by reframing basic questions, exposing tacit assumptions, and jolting customary positions. I've felt the sting of his description of the pastor trained to be so politely compliant and "thoughtful" as to be thoroughly without conviction, and, at the same time, have seen how he "leaves the unsaid unsaid" and lets the listeners figure it out.

So, when a reporter from the local paper asked for an interview about the upcoming liquor-by-the-drink vote, I thought, "I can do

this.” Three years earlier our little town had approved beer and wine sales, but voted against mixed drinks by a two-vote margin. The obvious story angle was to make alcohol consumption the major issue and to get a little apocalyptic fury from a presumed abstainer. When asked what I thought about the upcoming vote, I replied, “Both an AA and an Al-anon group meet at our church. Knowing even a little about some of their situations makes the issue of having Jim Beam for dinner instead of Bud Light seem like a gigantic case of missing the point.”

The reporter finished writing and then waited. After a short silence he asked, “Is that it?” When I said “yes” twice, he hesitantly left. Not long afterwards, the by-line reporter called with a string of questions: Does that mean you’re for or against it? Are you going to vote? Do you have moral concerns about people with drinking problems? What’s Al-anon? Try as I might to stick only with my quote and leave the unsaid unsaid, I apparently gave him enough responses for him to publish an entirely predictable article, a “balanced report” with an obligatory quote from a Baptist Fascist Teetotaler. A very kind agnostic friend shrugged and said, “I guess that article just needed a Baptist minister in it.” Several days later the vote passed 564 to 269, a whopping 68% of the vote.

This is sure harder than it looks!

Most probably, my words did nothing to disturb anyone’s moral universe or to jolt anybody’s moral categories. Like former Senator Everett Dirksen’s prediction of the death of an opponent’s bill, the words likely had “all the impact of a gentle snowflake falling on the broad bosom of the Potomac.” All the more reason to keep practicing the lessons of a demanding theologian, that is, the speech habits of “an unapologetic Christian speech that’s doing work and the politics necessary for it to do work”—till the vision clears and the lightning falls.

Church

STANLEY HAUERWAS, CHURCH PLANTER?

*Roy M. Terry, IV, pastor of Cornerstone United Methodist Church,
Venice, Florida*

IT WOULD seem odd to place Stanley Hauerwas's name amongst the many "Church Planting" consultants that litter the landscape of American Christianity. After all, Hauerwas is a prophetic voice testifying to the horrors of accommodating to culture and bowing to the idols of a market driven consumerist church.

Upon my graduation from Duke I received the call to my first appointment. "Roy!" the District Superintendent proclaimed, "We would like for you to launch a new church!" There was a moment of silence as I considered the invitation, and I could tell it was a silence the District Superintendent wasn't expecting to hear. When I gathered my thoughts, I responded with great affection and respect, "I really don't have any desire to launch a new church, but if that is where the Bishop would like me to serve, I will go!" The very next day the District Superintendent called me back to let me know I was heading to Naples, Florida, to launch what is now Cornerstone United Methodist Church.

When everything had been confirmed, and my appointment as a "church planter" was set, I decided to seek wise counsel from those I respected the most. I wrote letters to several professors, friends and fellow clergy asking them for the top five things they would do if they were called to plant a church. Stanley Hauerwas was the first to respond. He said . . .

Don't start a Sunday School.

Never have a Men's or Women's Group.

Don't have a men's softball team—we do everything together.

Get the congregation involved in a soup kitchen or helping the homeless.

Never use the language “New Church”, instead use “Becoming God’s Church.”

To this day Cornerstone has been about Becoming God’s Church. Sure, we followed all of Stanley’s other suggestions, and even drew upon the advice of others, but the language of “becoming” has defined our community and provided us with a connection to the greater work and witness of the church throughout the ages. The term “new church” is a self-centered statement which indicates that what we are about to do is better than anything else that has come before it. It bears a false witness to the world that what Jesus the Christ has to offer has been changed or accommodated to fit within the definitions of the world’s culture. It is the language most used in product placement and marketing campaigns. “New and Improved!”

“Becoming” on the other hand, moves the focus away from self and acknowledges that what’s happening is God’s work and not our own. The language of becoming connects us with all of God’s people, from every denomination, every nation and every tongue. To “Become God’s Church” is to rest in the work of the Holy Spirit and live into the means of grace which God has given the church throughout the ages. “Becoming” is an invitation to participate in the practices of faith which transcend time and culture and set us apart from the world. Such practices, after all, invite us to explore the language of faith as we become together ambassadors for Christ who seek and offer reconciliation, forgiveness, hope, healing and peace.

It would seem odd to place Stanley Hauerwas’s name amongst the many “Church Planting” consultants of our day, and yet oddly enough maybe that is where Stanley just might fit best: reminding us that Jesus is the Lord of the church and we have been invited along for the journey; not creating something new to fit our own ideals of what the church should become but rather “Becoming God’s Church” for the world; celebrating the means of grace which are not bound by any particular time or culture.

The World

THE EMERGING CHURCH

*Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church,
Clinton, Mississippi*

WHEN I received a last-minute invitation to serve as the “spiritual adviser” to Bobby Wilcher, in the Mississippi State Penitentiary on the day of his execution, I agreed without thinking, but by the time the sun rose on that dark day, I was overwhelmed at the responsibility and unclear of my role. It was too early to call my usual advisers for help, but then I remembered that Stanley Hauerwas would likely be at his desk already working.

Stanley graciously took my call, listened carefully, and then responded without hesitation: “Take a prayer book. Offer Mr. Wilcher the rite of ‘Reconciliation of a Penitent’ and perhaps the ‘Litany at the Time of Death.’” After a bit more reflection, he counseled me to offer communion, which meant that of course I would inquire about baptism. “You may want to take some water.”

In just a few words, Stanley offered me alternatives I had not fully considered. I had been asked by the state to serve as a spiritual adviser, but Hauerwas reminded me that I was a pastor, called and authorized to administer the rites of the Church. He gave me the language of the prayer book, and in turn I was able to offer Mr. Wilcher much more than grim, spiritual advice; I was able to offer him fellowship in the Church across the ages, a flesh and blood spiritual reality which points to “the kingdom of God’s Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14).

In offering me the careful speech of the Church, Stanley helped both the Church and the world come into view, if only in fuzzy relief against one another. Of course, I saw the world, “those aspects of our individual and social lives where we live untruthfully by continuing to rely on violence to bring order” (*Peaceable Kingdom*, 101).

The world came most clearly into view in a conflict over the serving of communion. When I first showed my communion set to the authorities, I was refused permission to use them because we had not filed the necessary requests in advance. After pressure from Mr. Wilcher's attorney, and a call to the governor's office, permission was granted, but only under strict conditions: We were told that it would be impossible for us to touch Mr. Wilcher.

Some states allow physical contact with prisoners up to the moment of execution, but not Mississippi. We were told condemned prisoners become especially dangerous after a date is set for their execution, but we suspected a subtle distortion of the truth. After all, calling a man "untouchable" conveniently dehumanizes him. Still, we were left with no option. We would have to pass communion by a circuitous route - to a guard, around the unit, to another guard, through a chaplain.

Mr. Wilcher decided not to receive communion under these circumstances, reasoning that he did not want to spend his last hours waiting for the state to perform one more bureaucratic liturgy. But, in a press release the prison officials announced Mr. Wilcher's decision this way: "Wilcher Refuses Communion." It was propaganda carefully designed to assure the public that Mr. Wilcher was inhuman and that his execution was just. The world came into view, distorting the truth to justify violence in the pursuit of order.

But I also saw the Church in prison. If only in fragments, I saw a visible social body of those who were trying to find their lives in the story of God in Jesus. I met guards and prison workers praying for forgiveness. I saw three nuns who were given a small, roped off area for protest, reclaiming that ground for the kingdom. I was welcomed by a condemned prisoner, and I prayed with him and his visitors. At the hour of execution I waited alone and found a prayer "for Prisons and Correctional Institutions" (BCP, 826). I prayed, "Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned. Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment ...". The Church was there, in prison.

Just a few simple words helped bring the Church into view. Thanks be to God.

Formation

*Nancy Bullock, Development Director, AllforOne Youth and Mentoring,
Santa Barbara, California*

WE PRAY the Lord's prayer every Sunday morning, but then we go forth Sunday afternoon, and into the rest of the week, I dare say, with a completely different image of what we want—not God's desires, but our own. Sure, God's kingdom come, but perhaps, at least a tiny bit, "my will" be done. We all want our way, don't we?

Our desires are an integral piece of who we are. And we very clearly know what those desires should be from the rhetoric of our culture, via every medium. Are our desires, as formed by capitalism and commercialism, our given identity?

In comparison, we, Christians, must always remember that we are not "stuck" with our desires. Our desires are formed, and since formation is always happening, our desires are constantly being molded and changed and refined.

Our town is in a wealthy part of Southern California, where most of our neighbors and friends are living "the American Dream." Their desires appear to have been met. However, there is no end to that Dream; the drive for more success and more wealth continues inexorably. We live in a crucible of everything that draws us from the love of God, and it is a worrisome place to minister. How do we, as Christians, re-form our desires from achieving the American Dream to building the Kingdom of God?

Stanley Hauerwas says, "Christianity is the proclamation that God gives Christians a gift that they don't know they need. The gift then transforms their lives so that they are trained to want the right things rightly."

How do we transform our lives to want the right things? From Stan's influence, as well as that of his friend, Phil Kenneson, and particularly through the Congregational Formation Initiative (CFI) of the Ekklesia Project, we are working together in a confessing community to rightly order our desires.

First of all, we are trained to want the right things by worshipping together. We come together, week after week, to hear Scripture read and illuminated for us, to sing together the story-songs of praise, and, especially, to share in Holy Communion. When we are gathered at the Lord's Table, we are taking action to transform ourselves by taking the body and blood of Christ into our own bodies and lives.

Second, we also use Christian practices to transform our lives. Through individual practices, prayer, study, fasting, we train our desires. Through corporate practices, feeding the hungry at the local homeless shelter every Tuesday, furnishing new homes for migrant workers in our area, raising money to drill clean water wells in Africa, we train our desires.

Third, we know that we are not alone in our struggle to "want the right things rightly." Christians don't deny our desires; but we know that by God's grace, we can re-order them. Gathering together in our CFI group, every Sunday night for three years, we prayed and talked and shared about our own struggles to be formed after the mind of Christ. Discernment within our community of what were the right desires was of paramount importance. We knew that such formation is impossible alone; only with our Christian community, our friends in Christ, can we begin to hope for transformation.

We also know that wanting what God wants often means something difficult, something painful, something counter to our heart's desire. But God's desire is for us, always seeking us, always available to us, always longing for us, and God rejoices when we accept the gift of salvation and eternal life.

We must re-order, then, our language of desire. We are cautious of the phrase, "I want..." and even "I need..." We are trying to learn to say instead, "your will be done." When we are trained to desire God's desires, then their attainment is true joy. God does not force us to desire God; instead, by God's grace, we can become a people who evermore long for Jesus the Christ and the gift of eternal life.

War

*John Varden, Pastor of Center United Methodist Church,
Snow Camp, North Carolina*

THE MOST important thing I have learned about language from Hauerwas is that most Christians do not have the language to understand war *as Christians*.

In the days, weeks and months after September 11, 2001, when war with Afghanistan was the topic of news and dinner table discussion, there was particular attention paid to the idea of “Just War.” Was it just to go to war in Afghanistan? Was this a just war? In the midst of this banter, I realized I did not know the language of Just War: *Jus ad bellum* (just cause, legitimate authority, etc), and *Jus in bello* (proportionality and discrimination). I had learned the language of pacifism and non-violence in Ethics with Stanley Hauerwas, but not that of Just War. In subsequent study, I realized that the church I served needed to know this distinctive language of war. So I planned a study on Pacifism and Just War.

I expected resistance to pacifism. These were “Greatest Generation” folks, with a few Korean conflict and Vietnam era veterans. Surprisingly, they got pacifism. They had some disagreement, but they understood this point of view, and could sympathize with those who anchored their pacifism in biblical teaching. I am not sure there were any converts, but we had healthy and civil discussion.

I did not expect what came next. To my mind pacifism, though biblical, is counter to our fallen human nature, is not always logical, and sometimes even antithetical to reason and logic. Just War, on the other hand, is deeply philosophical and logical. It makes ‘sense’ in a world of war and violence. As we studied, as we went through the tenets of Just War, I felt the tension rising. There was a growing hostility toward notions that once we are in war, we must limit the force used to obtain victory.

I distinctly remember the open anger expressed when discussing cluster bombs (a weapon that is dropped from a great height, explodes several hundred feet above the ground, separating into smaller bombs, or bomblets, that disperse over hundreds of square yards). I suggested that a cluster bomb is not a just weapon because it is indiscriminate, and that unexploded bomblets pose a significant risk to non-combatant populations for decades after a conflict is ended. As hostility rose, one gentleman articulated the sentiment of the group: in war, we must use all means necessary to win. Any restraint is a sign of weakness.

The tense resistance to the language of Just War is a sign of how much is at stake in our speech about war. The tenets of Just War struck very close to home for my parishioners, provoking more resistance than did the stance of pacifism. Just War language revealed and challenged their unquestioned allegiance to American concerns. Once we start using the language of Just War, we realize that most of us have operated not as Just Warriors, but as Holy Warriors, ready to sacrifice all, including our ethical commitments, for the nation.

What I could not articulate then was that Just War is a way to distinguish between war and organized slaughter. This I learned years later from Hauerwas. I wish in that study I could have expressed Just War not as a distinction between just and unjust war, this war more just than that one. Either it is a *just* war, or it is not war at all. It is murder.

Looking back to the fall of 2001, I remember the looks on their faces, the tension and hostility as the language of Just War was presented, this idea that was antithetical to the at-all-cost maintenance of the nation state. Since then I have not had a chance to teach such a study again. The church needs the language and vocabulary of Just War. Perhaps with time and emotional distance from the images of planes crashing into towers, there is an opportunity to try again. Before there is another war.

Suffering

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT DISABILITY:
HOW LANGUAGE PROPERLY USED EXPOSES LIES

*John McFadden, Workplace Chaplain for Goodwill Industries
Appleton, Wisconsin*

WHEN MY spouse (a psychologist) and I set out to co-author a book about dementia, friendship and flourishing communities, one of my assigned tasks was to reflect theologically upon dementia. However, despite the growing number of persons who will be journeying into dementia in the coming years (alarmists express this in terms of “apocalyptic demography”), theological writings on this topic remain rare. Because disability raises many of the same challenges to liberal culture’s distorted understanding of personhood and the *imago Dei*, I turned to the rich body of theological reflection on disability (by Vanier, Swinton, Reinders, Reynolds and others) for help.

It is hardly surprising that much of this work is grounded in the pioneering essays Stanley authored three decades ago that were collected in *Suffering Presence* (Notre Dame, 1986). What is less obvious is that those essays provided a linguistic framework that continues to shape the conversation in a focused and constructive manner. Let me offer two examples of how his thoughtful, precise use of language in *Suffering Presence* has informed more recent writings on disability.

The final essay in *Suffering Presence*, a talk originally given in 1977, is titled “Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality.” In this essay Hauerwas challenges “the principle of normalization” through which we seek to minimize the ways in which the intellectually disabled are different, thereby dismissing the contribution those differences can make to the fabric of a healthy, diverse community. We do this because “we are creatures that fear difference” (213). Tyranny is a strong word, but its strength is needed to expose the pernicious lies

that there are no differences among persons, or that these differences do not matter.

The word “suffering” is critical to the argument he develops in these essays, and he takes great care to differentiate between the externally imposed suffering that causes pain or sorrow (whether from deteriorating knees or natural disaster) and the suffering that is inseparable from our identity as creatures whose very selfhood is socially formed through our relationships with others: “We suffer because we are incomplete beings who depend upon one another for our existence . . . Suffering is built into our condition because it is literally true that we exist only to the extent that we sustain, or ‘suffer,’ the existence of others” (169).

In *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Brazos, 1998), Thomas E. Reynolds devotes a major section to exploring “the cult of normalcy,” tracing the formation of our cultural consensus on what constitutes “normal” personhood through the work of Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman and others. It is sound and helpful work that would not have been possible had Stanley not linked the words “tyranny” and “normality” in a manner that made it clear that “normalcy” is a culturally-constructed lie that denigrates personhood and destroys authentic community. The cult of normalcy, Reynolds argues, seeks to label and exclude persons with disabilities because they confront us with a truth we wish to deny: “we are incomplete, vulnerable, and need others to be complete” (106). He argues that we tend to regard persons with disabilities as victims to be pitied and sympathize with their suffering (whether or not the persons themselves are experiencing pain, discomfort or unhappiness). Clearly he is drawing upon Hauerwas’s careful distinction between the unavoidable suffering born of our innate vulnerability and dependence upon others (which we fear and therefore deny), and the suffering that can be avoided, cured or “fixed” (which we readily project onto those who fall outside the bell curve of “normalcy”).

Stanley is hardly unique in having laid intellectual foundations that others then build upon. It is less common to also provide those

who follow with the linguistic tools (I know I am dangerously close to a bricklaying metaphor here) that increase the chances that they will build well. Many of his ideas (and a few of his stories) are woven into the book that Susan and I have written, and it is a better book for that. But I also hope that we have used language in a manner that is sufficiently clear and precise to expose the lies that undermine authentic community and awaken the imagination to the salvific truth that we are all vulnerable, and we are all dependent upon God and one another.

Stories

STORIES

Rodney Clapp, Executive Editor, Brazos Press

Glen Ellyn, Illinois

FROM PRACTICALLY as far back as I can remember, I loved and thrived on stories. Each Sunday after church, my mother and father, with my two siblings and me, would gather for lunch with our grandparents. These were regular occasions not only for delicious and abundant meals, but for family storytelling. Often the stories concerned some minor (and hilarious) mishap on the farm that week. At other times old and favorite family stories were rehearsed. Here I learned about great-grandparents and other late relatives; I met them and learned what it was to be a part of their family through these stories shared over what we called Sunday dinner.

I'm sure these autobiographical circumstances account for an intuitive sense I gained, a sense that stories were not merely entertaining but very important. Stories were generative and formative. Of course, I did not use this language to describe stories when I was a child. I did not use that language because at the time I did not have, or know, such language.

Later I would study journalism, political science, and theology. Obviously journalism was constantly preoccupied with stories. I also had some vague notion that stories were centrally important to politics and theology. But I had little idea how to name or claim the importance of story and storytelling to politics and theology. And political science and theology as I then learned these disciplines, in college and graduate school, were, so to speak, "unstoried." By that I mean these disciplines never explicitly and formally centered on stories or a story. Political science was exactly that, the learning of principles and practices of a *science*, universally and abstractly applicable. And theology, when it turned to biblical stories, attempted to extract the kernel of

theological principles or morals from the (then disposable) husks of those stories.

You can imagine my excitement, then, when in the mid-1980s I discovered Stanley Hauerwas's work through his *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Here was a clearly sophisticated and stimulating theologian who flatly stated, "There is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in a story." He approached doctrines as the "outlines" of the Christian story and worship as "an enacted story." Through pages that were positively thrilling, I followed Stanley's argument that humans are narrative creatures because we are contingent and historically formed beings. And Christians are a people most crucially shaped by the story of "God's particular dealings with Israel and Jesus."

"If we can see, so we can speak," Hauerwas wrote summarily in the same book. What his seeing and language gave me was nothing less than an ability to name why story was so important not only to me, but to all of us as historically constituted creatures, and especially profoundly as Christians. Hauerwas's language enriches our lives as worshipers and as church members and women. In short, through the language Stanley has taught us, we can accept and reinforce the great, life-sustaining gift that story is for each and all of us.

Stanley's relentless criticism of liberalism and his appetite for argument have, fairly enough, gained him a reputation as a contrarian. But for me (and I suspect for many, many others) it is not his negations but his basic affirmations that have provided the most energy and sustenance. We have read and reread Stanley's work because it opens us up to what we already but inchoately suspected, as creatures and as Christians. The love that moves the sun and the other stars—to quote Hauerwas quoting Dante—meets us in the stuff of history, and invites us to participate in The Story capacious enough to contain all our lesser stories. In this regard, the reverse of Hauerwas's maxim also holds true: "If we can speak, so we can see."

Friendship

FRIENDS

*Brian Volck, MD, pediatrician,
Cincinnati, Ohio*

I HAVE a habit of writing people whose work—especially written work—makes a difference in my thinking, my habits, my life. Engaged reading is more conversation than monologue, and letters—mailed the old fashioned way,—are my attempt to keep the conversation alive. Some authors are kind enough to write back; Stanley Hauerwas does so reliably.

It's appropriate Stanley befriended me through written words. He is, after all, a man of words, of his word, of the Word. He writes sentences the way a farmer lays seeds in a furrow: with economy of effort learned through a lifetime's practice. He encourages his readers to attend to truth. He shows those he meets how words are embodied.

His first letter to me began, "I don't know if you realize this, but I think you've just started a long friendship." He was right, of course, and he's forever teaching me, by example, the importance of introducing friends, of bringing good people together. "You must meet him," Stanley will insist in mid-conversation, the "him" or "her" in question being a member of Christ's body awaiting introduction. I learned to take Stanley at his word, which proves nearly inerrant.

The people he directs me to are enjoyable company, to be sure. More than that, they share my commitments and sometimes my work. Their examples are tacit encouragement to do my best. Stanley's a friend in all these ways, and I pray for the grace to someday return that favor.

Stanley introduces me to words, too. During a phone conversation, he'll pick up what he's reading and share a passage aloud. He'll speak highly of a novel, insisting, "You owe yourself the treat of reading this." He sends me an essay he's working on and asks my thoughts.

He shares a joke and laughs long and well, his wiry frame quivering with delight at a story well told.

I don't know when or where Stanley learned his generous practices of friendship, but he pursues them with joy and unforced enthusiasm. He's like a monk whose lifetime of "receiving all guests as Christ," has made the practice of hospitality truly second nature.

One aspect of Stanley's life is distinctly unmonastic: the particular friendship with his wife, Paula. Stanley's love for Paula is at once intensely private and immediately visible. Perhaps "tangible" is the better word. To witness Stanley in Paula's presence is to feel a force so strong only the sturdy practice of marriage dares channel it.

Stanley says, "God is just not there for me...the way God is there for Paula." While I take Stanley at his word, I'm confident Paula is there for Stanley, perhaps in the way Beatrice was there for Dante, schooling his love, forever pointing beyond herself.

What Stanley's friendship means to the rest of us may be as varied as his friends, though few speak of Stanley without invoking the word "truth." His profession attracts the feisty and cantankerous, and it's the rare reader of theological ethics who knows Stanley Hauerwas's work and remains neutral. Yet those who reject Stanley's conclusions insist he's wrong, not untruthful.

Stanley's more interested in speaking the truth than winning an argument. He challenges others to greater clarity, and argues when he thinks them wrong. He does so out of friendship. Why call someone a friend who is more interested in appearance than substance, whose affection is too flimsy for disagreement?

Stanley likes to tell the story of the Mennonite man accosted on the street by an earnest evangelical preacher demanding to know if he was saved. The Mennonite closed his eyes for a minute before writing several names on a piece of paper he then handed over. "These are folks who know me," he explained, "and not all of them like me. I suspect you'd better ask them."

I pray for that confidence. Stanley shows me it's possible. I've heard him say, more frequently now than when we first met, "I've had

a wonderful life because I've had so many wonderful friends." With his example and God's grace, I'm learning to say the same.