

MISSION, RESEARCH AND TEACHING

Research Focus

How do persons become Christian? How do they grow in faith? How does the church participate in their faith formation? These are the questions behind Christian faith formation and our mission of educating leaders “to make disciples, renew the church, and transform the world.” They can be asked about persons of different ages – children, youth, and adults, persons of differing abilities, persons from different racial and cultural backgrounds, and persons from different faiths. They can be asked of persons in ministry – laity, clergy, and seminary students. These questions can be asked from the perspective of different faith traditions and different world religions. They can also be asked of persons in diverse socioeconomic and political contexts. I ask these questions because my assumption is that persons continue to grow in faith throughout their lifetime.

When I ask these questions, I do so from the standpoint of a Christian educator informed by the Wesleyan tradition and the ministry of Christian faith formation in the early Methodist movement, the foundation of all of my scholarship and teaching. By studying Christian faith formation in the early Methodist movement, we can learn how John Wesley’s theology shaped his expectations of what it meant to be Christian and to follow a Christian way of life. Wesley’s educational genius is evident in the way every Methodist – children, youth, and adults; participants and leaders – was involved in a formational process including relationships, structures, and practices that supported growing in a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in the practice of love of neighbor.

Scholarship, Teaching, and Mission

My research into the early Methodist movement provides insights for my own writing, speaking, and teaching while sharing my research and ideas in teaching and speaking provides insight for my research and writing. In other words, research and teaching are interdependent and essential for my own scholarly development. My focus in teaching at Saint Paul is on how seminary students continue to grow in faith as they prepare to lead others’ growth in loving God and loving neighbor. My passion in this ministry of teaching is to help students of diverse religious backgrounds discover knowledge and insights for their practice of educational ministry informed by their own faith and cultural traditions. As we learn together in the classroom, each of us is enriched by the perspectives of those whose backgrounds and experiences are different from our own. I intentionally construct my classes to bring in this diversity of knowledge and experience because “educating leaders to make disciples for Jesus Christ, renew the church, and transform the world” requires us to be open to God working through other Christians to transform our lives and ministry. I carry these same commitments into teaching in other contexts. Whether I am teaching a local church Sunday school class, doing workshops or speaking, my goal is to develop leaders for the church who are knowledgeable about their faith tradition, articulate about what they believe, aware of different perspectives on faith and discipleship, and committed to a life of loving God and neighbor through their discipleship, working for peace and justice in their communities.

Scholarship, Teaching, and General Conference Foci

My ministry of teaching in various contexts addresses the General Conference focus on “leadership education” for clergy and laity in the church. It is not going to be possible to “extend the outreach of the church’s ministry and grow the church” in the second focus statement unless leaders have developed an awareness of God’s gifts that come from those who are different from ourselves. In relationship to the third focus, I do not really believe that the church can truly “partner” with the poor until western European Christians are willing to listen first and talk later, opening themselves to being disciplined by the majority of Christians who come from Africa, South America, and the Asian-Pacific corridor. This openness is a skill that I emphasize and that we practice in every class I teach. The Native American immersion provides a particular opportunity to practice entering into another culture with respect and listening to what is being shared. My goal is to use my scholarship in the Wesleyan tradition to help me teach in ways that develop leaders who are aware of issues of poverty, suffering, and illness in the world, committed to finding ways that each person can know that she or he is a child of God, and passionate about working for peace and justice in the world.

Current Scholarly and Teaching Projects

- 1) youTheology Curriculum Project. There are three elements in developing our youTheology program into resources that can be used by the general church.
 - a. *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Ministry with Searching Youth* – Authors of chapters in this book address ministry with searching youth (how they become Christian and grow in faith) through the eyes of their particular discipline. Each chapter is grounded in interpretation of Scripture and the Wesleyan understanding of what it means to love God and neighbor. (Now available at your bookstore or XLibris.com bookstore.)
 - b. *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Pan-Methodist Curriculum* – This component provides several resources so that churches, districts, or annual conferences can develop a similar program and use this curriculum as a resource. It will be available for download on our web site when it is completed (projected for end of 2009).
 - c. *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: The Pilgrimage Project* – Dr. F. Douglas Powe has created a book for youth about pilgrimage and vocation based on his research with youth who participated in the youTheology program. It is in the production process and will be available in DVD and hard copy formats (projected for end of 2009).

- 2) Two books published this year include *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Ministry with Searching Youth* which I edited and *Formation in Faith: The Congregational Ministry of Making Disciples*, a book that takes the research developed in *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* and provides concrete ideas and processes for creating a congregational ministry of making disciples.

- 3) After a number of years of scholarly presentations for the academic community, I am turning now to use my research in local churches with the goal of developing lay leadership to make disciples. Three examples:
 - a. Teaching a local church Sunday school class on the early Methodist movement to help lay persons learn more about our heritage and to think about faith questions that emerge in our lives.
 - b. “A Shared Ministry of Making Disciples” for the Lake Michigan Presbytery uses the research and scholarship developed in my books and extends it into some new areas as I plan for a plenary, two workshops, and a sermon on the Great Commission.
 - c. “Pilgrimage of Blessings,” a workshop for the national Christian Educators Fellowship prepares persons for leadership in educational ministry in the church by reflecting on how persons grew in faith across time and cultures and brainstorming ways the future church could use to make disciples.