

*Supplement for
Promises to Keep: A Study of the
meaning of Membership in The United
Methodist Church*

Our Promise: Witness

One morning some years ago, a young bookstore clerk named Deborah arrived at work early to open the shop. Standing at the door waiting for the store to open was a man dressed in the characteristic garments of a Hasidic Jew. As Deborah was unlocking the door, the man quietly asked if he could come in. She hesitated; it was nearly an hour before the store was supposed to open, but the man seemed polite and evidently needed something right away, so she decided to let him come in early. After turning on the lights, she said, "Would you like any help?"

Reflection through Story

Softly and with an accent he said, "Yes, I want to know about Jesus." This was not an altogether surprising request, since the store specialized in books on religion. So Deborah guided the man upstairs to the shop's ample section of books about Jesus. She pointed to shelves filled with scholarly volumes of Jesus research and books about the early history of Christianity. Then she turned to go back down stairs, but the man called her back.

"No," he said. "I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. Don't show me any more books. You tell me what you believe." Was this man asking for interfaith dialogue? For spiritual counsel? For evangelism? Deborah was unsure. All she knew was that she was being asked what she had almost never been asked before: to put her faith into words.

"My Episcopal soul shivered," she said later, recalling the encounter. "I gulped and told him everything I could think of..."

(Thomas Long. Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian. 21, 22.)

Theological Reflection

The third chapter of 1 Peter is a decent place to start a conversation about making a Christian witness:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3:15, 16 NRSV)

Consider the phrase: *Always be ready*. Now this doesn't mean we need to study long and hard, and do a lot of homework in order to be ready to make a Christian witness. No, we simply need to be ready to talk about Christ and speak the name of God when the opportunity presents itself.

When you are in love it's easy to talk of the loved one. The beloved is always on your mind, always on the tip of your tongue. We readily speak of the loved one with others. And so it should be with God and Jesus the Christ. If we've made a commitment to be a Christian then we should easily be able to bring up Christ in our conversations. If not it may say something of our spiritual life.

William Fore makes the point that Christian witness is "to help people interpret their existence in light of what God has done for them in Christ. He writes:

The purpose of Christian communication is not to ask, "How can we communicate the gospel in such a way that others will accept it?" This is the wrong question, it's a marketing question, a manipulative question...

Rather, our task is to put the gospel before people in such a way that it is so clear to them that they can accept it, or reject it—but always for the right reason.

Our making a Christian witness means following a way of life. Witness happens as we are going. "As we go about our daily lives—to work, to the grocery, to school, to the neighbor's—we live the gospel. We speak it freely. We display a joy in following Jesus and his Way that invites our neighbors to consider the Truth of his life in us."¹

¹ Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*. 346, 347.

The way in which we witness says something about the hope within us; attitude can influence reaction. We have no need to be anything but gentle and reverent when we tell others of our faith.

Perhaps one reason we do not witness to our Christian faith is that we have not been taught to witness. The Christian faith has become both personal and private. Now our faith is personal, but it was never to be private. We need to share our faith. What we have come to know personally needs to be shared with others. It is not to be private.

If those of us who claim the name Christian were asked to name how we came to the faith, not many would say we learned it from only a book, and nobody would have the notion that it came to us from our own thinking. No, we would remember the people who spoke to us about God. We would remember those who had been a witness for the Christian faith.

Paul writes, “faith comes from what is heard.” (Romans 10:17) “We heard and we believed; slowly or suddenly, in a moment of stillness or in a thunderstorm of passion, we believed. The faith we have, whether large or small, whether born of struggle or comfort, whether grasped firmly or held onto by a thread, that faith is part of our lives because somebody (or somebodies) along the way had the courage and the conviction to talk to us about God and about Jesus Christ.”² As faithful Christians, we need to have places and spaces where we can be vulnerable with one another and share our faith stories. We need to practice this among ourselves. We need to because ultimately our world needs us to reach out and witness. We practice in the church so we can make a difference in the world to which Christ calls us.

Dorothy Day said: “If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.” We pick our times, we can be discerning about the place, but we finally can not be afraid to speak directly to others about our faith.³ It is time we took this vow of membership seriously, and become a witness for God and Christ.

² Long, *Testimony*. 110, 111.

³ Long, 108.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever had a similar experience to Debra? Has your “United Methodist soul shivered” when asked to witness?
2. What does it mean for the Christian to witness? List characteristics of a good witnessing experience. What does it include?
3. Role play different witnessing scenarios (ie. Home visit to a first time church visitor, conversation with another parent at a ball field, a welcome visit to a neighbor, a conversation with a coworker about scriptural interpretation.)⁴

At Home This Week

1. What act of witness could you offer this week?
2. What faith story can you remember that you might be ready to use when the timing is right to make a witness?

⁴ Lay Speaking Ministries: Basic Course, Gilbert & Zoller. Discipleship Resources 2008. 35.