

the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

“CONFIDENT WITNESS” CONFERENCE REPORT

THE COMMUNITY THAT GATHERED

“Confident Witness in a Changing World” was the theme explored by over 240 participants in the March 20-23 GOCN conference in Chicago. The conference was designed to play out the implications of a vision for the renewal of the church’s sense of its missionary identity in North America.

For three days, a community formed around table groups of 8-9 people each to worship, pray, share, listen and discuss. Plenary addresses stimulated those conversations and Bible studies provided a centering for the reflections. A total of 33 workshops were offered on the two afternoons, each led by a person or a pair or a group engaged in the practical encounters of the gospel with our North American culture and the nature of our life and witness in light of that encounter.

The participants comprised a vivid array of people. Thirty percent were women. Twenty were from five different provinces of Canada, more than half of them from Ontario. People came from twenty-seven USA states, with four or more people coming from fifteen of those states. The largest groups were from Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky, California, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Texas, which states accounted for almost eighty percent of the USA participants. Four people were from other European or Western nations (Finland, New Zealand, Wales, and Italy) where the church faces challenges similar to ours. Fifteen participants were people from countries of the so-called Two-Thirds World who are presently located within North America for graduate studies or in some ministry capacity.

The group was denominationally diverse as well. Thirty three denominations were represented among the participants. A third of them were represented by four or more people. The largest groups were from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church, and there were also sizable groups from the Roman Catholic Church, the Mennonite

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GOSPEL AND CULTURES—A GLOBAL CONVERSATION

A global series of reflections on the way the gospel engages diverse cultures has been underway for several years under the auspices of the World Council of Churches. Christopher Duraisingh has coordinated the effort as director of the Gospel and

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ONE OF US?

David Landegent
Fulton, Illinois

Whenever I hear God's name on pop radio, my internal radar starts beeping. Lately it's been beeping a lot. George Michael confides that his latest love is to him "like Jesus to a child." Natalie Merchant, formerly of 10,000 Maniacs, celebrates a healing with the words, "I must be one of the wonders, God's own creation." But the most arresting use of God's name is on Joan Osborne's "One of Us," from her *Relish* CD.

Osborne, a contemporary urban blues singer transplanted from Kentucky to New York, uses her "cat scratch" voice to sing of the spirit and the flesh. On *Relish*, she mixes together songs like "Dracula Moon" and "Let's Get Naked" with the profoundly theological "One of Us" which has enjoyed a long steady climb up the charts. Consider some lyrical highlights from this jangly pop song:

If God had a name what would it be? And would you call it to his face if you were faced with him in all his glory? What would you ask if you had just one question?

Jacob, our patriarch in the faith, faced the same riddles. When he wrestled face-to-face with the Almighty, he asked his one question, "What is your name?" God did not give out his glorious name, for he does not want to be called on as if he were nothing more than a supernatural chum. Although Christians know God's name, we dare not let familiarity breed contempt.

If God had a face, what would it look like? And would you want to see, if seeing meant that you would have to believe in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?

If God is only a faceless cosmic force, then truth will remain vague. But if God has a face, then Osborne is right—we cannot avoid specific truths like heaven, Jesus, saints and prophets. Her question really hits home in a world enamored with spirituality. Many claim to be searching for God, but do they really want to find him if it means believing in Jesus?

Yeah, yeah, God is great. Yeah, yeah, God is good. Yeah, yeah...

Osborne is doing more than saying "Amen" to a familiar children's mealtime prayer. Her deadpan delivery sounds more like, "Yeah, yeah, I know the textbook definitions about God, but I want to know more." Osborne won't settle for a quick catechism answer, and neither will our world.

What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home?

A skeptic might wonder if Osborne's catchy chorus is trying to sneak in some New Age ideas that we are all gods (especially after seeing the video in which various people put their faces in a cardboard cut-out of God on his throne). But her question is not "What if we are gods?" but "What if God was one of us?" Osborne sounds open to the possibility that "the Word became flesh" and lived among us (John 1:14).

But can we really think of God incarnated as a slob like us? Not if we're thinking of a sleazy, beer-bellied couch potato. But if we're thinking of a slob who is despised and rejected, without form or comeliness, numbered among the sick, the imprisoned, the poor, and the nameless "least of these" who ride cross-country on Greyhound buses—then we're on the right track.

Many will wonder if Osborne is "one of us," a follower of Jesus Christ. She has said that her Roman Catholic background gave her an appreciation of ritual, beauty, and mystery, but her out-spoken support of abortion rights and jabs at the pope suggest that she's disaffected with her heritage. In her own words, "It's a shame religion has become such a huge institution with all its political and authoritarian power, as opposed to something that can release you—which was

obviously its original intent."

But whether or not Osborne knows the God who has become one of us, the song's lyrics are helping people ponder important questions. God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for this tune.

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BLOOD TIES

Thomas Boogaart
Western Galilee
April, 1996

We have never stood so close to armed conflict before. Proximity both focuses the mind and shuffles it. We lie in bed at night now not counting sheep, but counting katyushas. Over the very hillside where Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," the

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The Gospel and Our Culture

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CONVERSATION

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Cultures Programme of the WCC. The study process will culminate in the WCC World Conference on Mission and Evangelism on November 24 - December 3 in Salvador, Brazil. The theme of the World Conference will be "Called to One Hope—The Gospel in Diverse Cultures."

From the beginning, the GOCN has played a key role in the USA part of the study process. A number of us assisted in preparing a study guide for use in numerous grassroots groups across the country, an effort coordinated by Jean Stromberg, the Executive Director of the US Office of the WCC. (The USA guide has been picked up and put to use in other countries as well.) Many more of us have been coordinators for the network of local groups that have contributed their reflections regarding how we in America see the relationship between the gospel and our culture (and cultures).

Our continuing reflections within the GOCN on these issues—in consultations, work groups, conferences and publications—are also a part of the picture. A summary of our reflections is being prepared by a team of people who will also represent the GOCN at a national gathering on May 31-June 2 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. That gathering will bring together people from the local study group process, the GOCN, the Church World Service and Witness unit of the National Council of Churches of Christ (USA), and the 30 people who will be representing their churches at the World Conference in Brazil later in the year. The national gathering is designed to achieve two main purposes: 1) to gather the several strands of reflection on issues of gospel and culture and draw them together as the U.S. contribution to the global WCC study project on the theme; and 2) to prepare the people who will be representing their churches at the World Conference.

The team which will represent the GOCN in the national gathering will

include Craig Van Gelder, Darrell Guder, Charles West, Pete Hendrick, George Hunsberger and several others. They welcome suggestions from others in the network as they prepare their report on our reflections as a network. Specifically, they will be responding to the four central questions, or *foci*, which the global study process has engaged and around which the sectional work of the World Conference will be done:

1. *Authentic Witness Within Each Culture*. This section addresses primarily the *missiological* question in regard to the content/message of the gospel and the witness to it in relational to cultures, i.e., "the contextual proclamation of the gospel and the transforming power of the gospel in each culture."

2. *Gospel and Identity in Community*. This section is concerned with *the gospel and the structural dimensions of culture*—for example, the role culture plays in shaping and legitimizing power structures in societies, such as the status of women in church and society.

3. *Local Congregations in Pluralistic Societies*. This section focuses on *the equipping and nurturing of local congregations* in culturally plural societies, exploring how genuinely local and contextual congregations may become credible agents of God's inclusive and reconciling love.

4. *One Gospel—Diverse Expressions*. This section explores two central *ecumenical issues in relation to the plurality of Christian faith expressions and witness*, exploring the relation between the catholicity and contextuality of the gospel and addressing issues related to mission in unity.

In addition to hearing the GOCN team's specific response to these *foci*, all the participants at the national gathering will receive in advance a copy of the recently published *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, the volume published by Eerdmans which captures the main lines of reflection in the GOCN to date (see insert).

BLOOD TIES

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cobra attack helicopters fly.

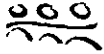
The conflict I think can only be understood in the light of the economy of blood. The middle east is an oriental world, not occidental. In the West, the individual pursues self-actualization through a variety of forms of consumption, and self-actualization often entails release from the body. The individual believes him or herself to be self made and gradually becomes unaware of blood and blood ties. It is no accident that Reformed Christians today have lost interest in, or question the doctrine of atonement. Blood plays no role in the world they have constructed for themselves. Blood talk is primitive.

Blood talk is everything here. Blood ties identify and give life. Life, personhood, humanity only exist in the clan. Everyone outside the clan lacks reality, lacks what we in the West would call basic human rights. There are many biblical stories where people are caught outside of the clan and their lands. They are vulnerable. They must find a house or a host or they will be robbed, raped or killed. They do not carry inalienable rights with them across borders. When they travel, they to some extent risk their humanity. Stories like these in the Bible I have encountered in Israel almost every week. There is a constitution which speaks of rights of individuals, but this is an overlay on the tribalism here.

I have been confused by the seeming lack of remorse on both sides when innocent people are killed. Both sides respond passionately to the loss of blood within their group, and indifferently to the loss of blood outside the group. I do not know how you solve such conflict. I as a Westerner am so used to appealing to the inalienable rights of individuals to solve conflict, I do not know what to say when these are not assumed. Here is where perhaps the atonement needs to be rehabilitated, for it offers a nonenlightenment approach to conflict resolution. Jesus unites enemies in his

blood. The Bible is oriental, it speaks the language of blood. It offers an oriental way out of the cycle of blood vengeance.

These thoughts are just emerging but seem to help process the conflict here, the blood-letting that is so close to us. It is not a simple matter, and if we as Christians hope to say something meaningful in the Middle East, we need to learn the language of blood again.



CONFERENCE

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Churches, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, Canadian Baptist Churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Episcopal and Anglican Churches of the USA and Canada respectively. In all, these groups accounted for eighty percent of the participants. For many participants, the experience of this denominational diversity was a profound part of their experience of the conference as a whole.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES

Several themes emerged in the plenary addresses which anchored the emergent vision. Several speakers underscored ways in which the missionary location of North American churches in societies that have been rapidly moving beyond Christendom recalls us to our missionary character. Richard Mouw stressed how we need to know our culture by attentive observation and companionship. He used examples from missionary experience in other parts of the world to encourage a new missionary way of seeing what we are doing. Douglas Hall pushed us farther still to recognize in the passing of that what it means for the church to continue to be hearing the gospel in fresh ways challenge our culture as we ourselves inhabit it. In a culture of "managed risk," what will it mean to be disciples of Jesus who live under the sign of a

cross which is not sterile and beautiful but is a symbol of offense? His emphasis was on the kind of radical trust in God, radical loyalty to Jesus, and radical love in the Spirit to which we are called.

A third major theme was that the witness of the church to the gospel of Jesus Christ depends on the church first of all being a community that gives a living demonstration of that gospel and what it means to live as though it is true. Bill Burrows emphasized that the church is a creation of the Spirit and that demands a posture of waiting on God, even in the midst of the faithful activities we know to be following. He shared the vision of Gerry Arbuckle's book *Earthing the Gospel* in which he calls for a re-founding of the church. Al Roxburgh and Scott Young led us in an evening that brought to light — via video interviews and live reports — tangible ways that various communities are finding such a "re-founding" to be taking form.

Mary Jo Leddy, in the concluding and "summing up" address of the conference drew us to envision the spirituality of the way on which God is calling us to walk. She challenged our response to the culture of money in which "we have to have more to be more." We need, she said, to move beyond our tendencies to either paralysis or busy-ness and live out of a desire for God that can be satisfied when our lives are grounded in gratitude. The vision she gave was one of a church that lives as a parallel culture, an undercurrent to the dominant order, grounded in what we are for, not what we are against.

ROOTS IN EXPERIENCE

The conference "Daily" newspaper highlighted ways that, for each of the speakers, the themes they addressed grew out of their own life experience. They were each asked: "Why is this important to you?" These reports by Laurie Baron captured what they said:

RICHARD MOUW

As a child, Richard Mouw dreamed of being a missionary. As he grew, however, those plans changed. Eventually he became a philosopher-theologian instead, teaching and learning primarily in the area of social ethics.

But somewhere along the way Richard's academic life fooled him. He discovered that his subject had made him a missionary after all. "It wasn't," he says, "the sort of tropical jungle setting I fantasized about as a child; but I did find myself in a 'mission field,' and even a 'jungle' of sorts." "It wasn't," he says, "the sort of tropical jungle setting I fantasized about as a child; but I did find myself in a 'mission field,' and even a 'jungle' of sorts."

It's the "jungle" of southern California he sees outside his window now. He wonders, like many Christians, how to speak "good news" to people in that culture. How to help Christian disciples serve the Lord in the broken worlds of business, entertainment, family life, education, and politics.

And people he cares about deeply, family and friends, live in that jungle with him. Some of them are almost totally contained within the culture, and their lives aren't going well. It's caring about those very real people that brings Richard's work home, transforms it into something far beyond a classroom concern.

If Richard were ever to strap on his backpack, lock his office door and head out into the streets to be the kind of missionary he once imagined, what would he do first?

"I'd learn the language," he said. "Missionaries go in to learn the culture. Listen. Look for openings for the gospel. Study the tribal customs. Where I am living now has much to do with the industry that shapes culture: movies, television, computers, journalism. But listen first. Christians need to do a lot of listening."

Douglas John Hall

"Ever since I can remember," says

Douglas Hall, “I have sensed an abiding discrepancy between the gospel and the church. The Christian message draws upon wisdom of immense depth and evokes in one the best that one can muster by way of authenticity and understanding. But so much that is ‘church’ seems impervious to that call, and conveys a kind of boredom with life.”

Douglas believes that anyone who takes seriously the story that is told in the Bible will have difficulty reconciling that biblical story with what one hears on Sunday morning in most North American churches.

His work in Eastern Europe, particularly East Germany, between 1972 and 1990 revealed a much different church. There, Douglas experienced a new reality of “church.” People faced some risks to come to worship. Their motivation was high—they were there because they wanted to be. “I learned more about the reality of the gospel there than I have anywhere else.”

Now, he believes, the discrepancy between the gospel and the life of the church can be to a great extent corrected, because “it is no longer necessary for the Christian movement to play the role of official cult to the official culture. Being liberated from the burden of constantinian religion, the church may now begin to be the church.”

Bill Burrows

Bill Burrows swam deep in the waters of religion as a priest; climbed out and became an “ordinary layman” for several years when, “I cleared my head of religion”; and dove back in to become editor of Orbis Books. As an editor, Bill has noticed in the last few years that theology has lost its roots in the community of faith. “I see book proposals coming,” he says, “and I wonder what in the world they have to do with discipleship? That’s driven me more and more to look deeper into my own life of faith.”

It was working closely and slowly with author David Bosch through *Transforming Mission*, the

book that has now become the “Bible of missiology,” that most clearly focused Bill’s thinking. He began to understand that a church without a sense of mission isn’t the church.

Bill started to remember the people he had worked with in his “ordinary layman” years at the American Medical Association in Chicago. “The staff was absolutely wonderful, with first-class people. But even for those who went to church on Sundays and identified themselves as Christians, Christianity wasn’t the organizing principle of their lives. There seemed to be no connection between their lives in the world and their sense of mission.”

That experience convinced Bill that “the churches were in much worse trouble than they thought they were.” It now drives him to discover what is necessary to stir up faith and to insure that it is not just internally focused. As he sees it, the real mission in the transformation of the world is the mission of the laity. The church exists for them.

Jim Brownson

Jim might not be here at all if he hadn’t failed at the sermon he was writing one week about three years into his first pastorate. He recalls, “I was working on a sermon based on a text in Acts, studying the passage in the original language, reconstructing the historical context, delineating the structure of the passage. I finished all my work and realized that I hadn’t a clue as to how I should *preach* the text. The world of the bible seemed strange and remote, and I didn’t know how that world could engage my own, which seemed so vastly different. The problem was substantial enough for me that it sent me off to graduate school, seeking answers.” It was one of those moments, Jim remembers, that shake the foundations of the way you’ve constructed the world—when you know you have to start over.

Jim pursued his question all the way to a doctorate in New Testament studies, but the strangeness of the New Testament is a recurring issue for

him—and that strangeness, as he sees it, isn’t all bad. “Strangeness calls us to question the things we’ve always taken for granted. That can be a creative process.”

Where does that strangeness touch Jim personally? “In the ambiguous status of institutions in the presence of the gospel. I’m deeply involved in institutions (Western Theological Seminary, where he is a professor and soon to be dean, and the Reformed Church in America), institutions which are attempts to respond to the gospel, but which are prone to all the foibles of human projects. How do you hold to the radical edge of the gospel from within institutions that are always trying to domesticate it?”

As he looks around, Jim catches glimpses of that radical gospel at work in the world outside the church’s institutions. His most recent such glimpse was the movie, *Dead Man Walking*.

If you haven’t yet seen it, Jim recommends the movie as a powerful and hopeful look at someone who tries to hold the radical edge to which the gospel has called her.

And, by the way, he never did finish that sermon on Acts.

Alan Roxburgh

Alan Roxburgh comes naturally to the themes of this conference. He was transplanted at a young age from his native England to Canada; consequently, he couldn’t avoid questions about who he was in relation to the culture around him. His training in philosophy also leads him to look for the questions that lurk underneath the surface of the way things work, the “hows” and the “whys.”

“I’ve pastored churches, I’ve taught in seminaries, and I’ve been in on the founding and directing of an urban training program. In all of those contacts, the thing that has driven me is the question of how to make sense of the gospel in the context in which we find ourselves.”

He’s back in a pastorate now because, despite trends of ministry that come and go, the congregation

seems to keep on forever. Or, as Alan more colorfully put it, "The church is like a cockroach. If you set off an atomic bomb over a city, the city would be devastated but the cockroach would still be alive. At the end of all the models, you've still got this thing called congregation."

That fascination with congregations may also be why Alan has gone looking on our behalf for the stories that provide signs of where the Holy Spirit is at work among ordinary—and not so ordinary—local groups of Christian disciples.

Mary Jo Leddy

Mary Jo Leddy has lived for the last five years in Romero House, a Toronto Christian community in which at any one time you could find about thirty refugees from various parts of the world and about six volunteers. Members of the community pray together every day and reflect once a week on what they're doing.

Mary Jo became involved "by accident" when a friend asked her to stand in temporarily as the night manager, but it felt right and she stayed. "It was as if being with these people, the gospel just walked off the page of the book and was right there," she said. "In the house where I live, right now there are men, women, and children from Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Eritrea, and Somalia. If we can do that, if we can live together relatively well, then there is hope for the world."

Not that such a life is easy, Mary Jo is quick to point out. The refugees have suffered every extremity of violence and pain, on top of extreme dislocation. Still, she's learned from them about real joy in the midst of suffering and to keep her priorities straight.

"The thing we take most for granted is that we're alive. Most of us spend a lot of time adding up all the plusses and minuses of our lives and forget that we've got life itself."

FOR MORE ON THE CONFERENCE

A more complete report of the contents of the conference is available in several forms. Audio tapes of the plenary addresses and a selection of the workshops is available for purchase (see the order form on page 8). The book which served as a reader in preparation for the conference, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, is available now from Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (see the insert in this newsletter). Also, copies of the conference Worship Guide and the list of Books Available at the conference book stall may be obtained through Judy Bos at the GOCN office for \$2.00 to cover reproduction and postage.

Preliminary work is also being done to gather manuscripts of the major addresses and many of the workshop presentations with a view toward the possibility of another publication in the Gospel and Our Culture Series. News about that will be included in a future issue of this newsletter.



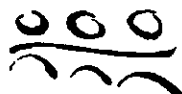
TWO CONSULTATIONS ANNOUNCED

The next major event sponsored by the GOCN is our annual working consultation, which is scheduled to take place on October 24-26, 1996 at the Techny Towers Conference Center just north of Chicago. This will be the fifth such event held by the GOCN, and the topic being addressed will be *The Postmodern Condition: Understanding the Gospel and Being Missionary Congregations*. This theme emerged as a significant one in many of the workshops and addresses in the recent GOCN conference and has many implications in the pursuit of the Gospel and Our Culture agenda.

The consultation is being directed by Craig Van Gelder. Its design includes major presentations, time for personal and group discussion and interaction with the perspectives presented, and exploration that builds upon those insights. Full details regarding this consultation are included in this issue of the newsletter on page 7.

A year later, on October 23-25, 1997, there will be another consultation at the same site. It will focus on the theme *Theology for the Renewal of the Church: Towards a North American Ecclesiology Centered in Mission*. This consultation is designed to be a response to the work of the GOCN Ecclesiology Project.

A team of six people in the Network has been working since 1994 to research and identify the components of a missiological ecclesiology for North America. Its findings will appear in a book scheduled to be published in 1997. The consultation in that year will examine their findings and explore the implications for the missional renewal of the church. The consultation will be directed by Darrell Guder, Coordinator of the Ecclesiology Project.



Announcing

the Gospel and Our Culture Network

Fifth Annual Working Consultation--Fall 1996

***"THE POSTMODERN CONDITION:
Understanding the Gospel and Being Missionary Congregations"***

October 24-26, 1996

Event

Each year GOCN sponsors an annual consultation on a particular theme relating to the discussion of "the gospel and our culture." This event is designed as a "working" consultation. Prepared papers/materials are presented in the plenary/workshop sessions. These are followed by discussion and response in various work groups structured around different issues raised in the presentations. The intent is to help participants clarify critical issues and apply them in a relevant manner to their ministry.

Participants

Persons participating in this event include local church leaders and pastors, para-church mission personnel, denominational agency administrators, and theological educators. The group typically ranges across a broad cross-section of denominational affiliations and cultural diversities. The key integrating factor is a shared interest in trying to understand the gospel and live as the church within our shared North American cultural context.

Registration and Costs

Anyone interested in participating in this annual GOCN working consultation is welcome to join us. The following information details the specifics of the event.

Place Techny Towers (located in North Chicago area)

Dates/Times 1:30 p.m. Thursday, October 24 to 11:30 Saturday, October 26, 1996

Costs Housing and meals as package \$125.00

Registration Registration can be made by sending name, address, phone and fax numbers, along with full payment to:

*Judy Bos
Western Theological Seminary
101 East 13th Street
Holland, MI 49423-3622
Phone 616-392-8555
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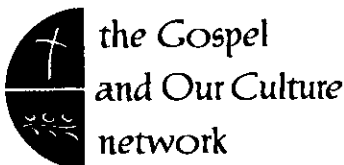
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PLENARY SESSIONS

- WS600 **The Missionary Location of the North American Churches** (Richard Mouw)
- WS601 **Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora** (Douglas John Hall)
- WS602 **Hearing the Gospel Again for the First Time** (James Brownson)
- WS603 **Witness to the Gospel and the Refounding of the Church** (William R. Burrows)
- WS604 **Signs of the Future Church** (Alan Roxburgh and Scott Young)
- WS605 **The People of God as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel** (Mary Jo Leddy)

WORKSHOPS

- WS606 **Faith Twisted by Culture: Syncretism in North American Christianity** (Walter Hobbs) ...two cassettes \$18.00
- WS607 **Faith Living in Culture: Four Models in the North American Context** (Steve Bevans) ...two cassettes \$18.00
- WS608 **Beyond Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture Categories"** (Barry Harvey)
- WS609 **The Cross and Contemporary Culture** (Mary Motte)
- WS610 **Worship: Truth as Public Statement** (Kristin Ofstad)
- WS611 **Ecclesial Practices Which Cultivate Missional Communities** (Ingrace Dietherich and Paul Dietherich) ...two cassettes \$18.00
- WS612 **Leadership in the Missional Church: Using Every Member's Gift for Ministry** (Lois Barrett)
- WS613 **Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for Today's Congregations** (Marva Dawn)
- WS614 **Preaching to Postmodern People** (Lee Wyatt)
- WS615 **The Gospel in the Digital Age** (Robert Fortner)
- WS616 **Hearing the Gospel with Asian-American Ears** (Stanley Inouye)
- WS617 **No Trinity, No Mission** (Gary Simpson)
- WS618 **Reclaiming the Good News from Gospel Reductionisms** (Darrell Guder)
- WS619 **Reinventing the Denomination** (Ken Bradsell)
- WS620 **Can We Talk? Moral and Theological Discourse in Christian Community** (L. Gregory Jones)



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