

BOOK REVIEWS FOR PENN CENTRAL UCC NEWSLETTER

FOR PASTORS

Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission David Fitch (IVP/Missio Alliance) \$19.00

Several years ago John Davison Hunter wrote an impressive, much-discussed work on Oxford University Press called *To Change the World* which brought incisive sociological and theological insight to how, actually, we “make a difference” and “change the world.” It was a devastating critique of the politics and strategies of both the Christian right and left calling for a more allusive, sensible goal of Christian lay folks simply being faithfully present in whatever places they find themselves. Salt and light and leaven, we might say. It was a very thoughtful, important book.

The question that pastor and Northern Seminary professor David Fitch asks in this rich, sophisticated new book, is what kind of churches create members who are able to be “faithfully present” in but not of the world around them? What practices of the local church can form and shape and inspire and equip followers of Jesus to be present in the world as wise salt and light? Fitch names seven ecclesiological disciplines and demonstrates how these long-standing practices can revolutionize the church’s presence in our neighborhoods, forming folk who are able to embody Christ in the real world. He writes with an appealing blend of scholarly care and great passion, helping us practice the presence of the Kingdom in the way we do church. From how we celebrate the Lord’s Table to how we relate to children to how we experience reconciliation to how we do the disciplines of prayer, and more, *Faithful Presence* will help offer fresh ways to think about standard church stuff – shaping all to become a faithful presence.

FOR ANY CHURCH LEADERS

Love Big, Be Well: Letters to a Small Town Church Winn Collier (Eerdmans) \$16.99

Everywhere we go we find that this creative novel – a set of fictional letters from a thoughtful, eloquent, but unconventional pastor to his ordinary, if colorful, small town church – is one of the most popular books we promote. Readers have loved the cranky, exceedingly normal small congregation and the way their new pastor calls them to kindness, to love, to grace, but always in charming prose that is smart and yet down-to-Earth. As the letters unfold, Jonas McAnn, the fictional preacher, shares his love of literature, his penchant for rural authors like Wendell Berry, and his deep trust in the goodness of God and Christ’s church.

Thoughtful Presbyterian pastor and Bible scholar Eugene Peterson has said of this story that it is “a tour de force – and angle on understanding the life of both congregation and pastor that exceeds anything I have ever read.” It would be a delightful book study and good for anyone, really, but church leaders really should ponder its deep message about simple faith in a funky church that is powerfully deep in the things that matter most.

FOR ANYONE IN THE UCC

Courageous Faith: How to Rise and Resist in a Time of Fear Emily C. Heath (Pilgrim Press) \$20.00

The official publishing house of the UCC, Pilgrim Press, is the oldest publisher in the US and while they do not publish many books, they have been enthusiastic in presenting this new one by Heath, the Senior Pastor of the Congregational Church of Exeter NH. Her first book, *Glorify: Reclaiming the Heart of*

Progressive Christianity, made quite a splash as an easy-to-read primer on what some call progressive theology. In this new one she reminds those in mainline churches that we dare not be afraid of deep faith, of exuberance, of spiritual renewal. In fact, although her radical faith perspective call her to be open, inclusive, and an advocate for all society shuns, her basic convictions about Christian discipleship are surprisingly conventional. She does solid Bible study, invites us to personal faith and trust, explores the meaning of daily discipleship. Her rugged and relevant faith isn't overly sentimental but it is passionate. In fact, on reviewer says she shares a "rare combination of wisdom, honesty, warmth, integrity, character, and courage."

Our Penn Central pastors had the opportunity to be with Emily at a local clergy retreat and Heath touched them with moving stories and challenged them to be clear about how God's grace can truly transform us; only then we God use us to transform the world, bearing witness to Christ's Kingdom coming "on Earth as it is in Heaven."

The first half of *Courageous Faith* offers six chapters under the phrase "Rise – The Courage to Change Our Lives" while the second half shares six chapters working out the theme of "Resist—The Courage to Change Our World." What a combo, showing how lively faith should lead us to robust resistance. Very nicely done.