

Theologians in place: Thinking about God together

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue



Joanna Brown resides in Albany, New York, and she is a theologian, though she does not have the title. All her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren live in Albany, and their schedules shape her day. She gets up by 5:30 a.m. so that she has time to meditate before her granddaughter goes to work and leaves Joanna to babysit a two-year-old. If she rises early enough, she can also get in a little Bible reading to prepare for one of the study groups she participates in.

Lately she has been enjoying books by Henri Nouwen (“who helps me appreciate what it means to be an elderly person”) and Walter Brueggemann. As her family schedule allows, she volunteers at a food pantry and a homeless shelter, attends Bible studies and takes part in other small groups at First Reformed Church, where she has been a member for the past several years.

Across town, Allan Janssen, Ph.D., gets up early too. He heads to the YMCA for his daily swim, as he has done for 30 years. One of the pleasures of retirement is that he can swim when he wants to, before the crowds come. Then he spends time in prayer and devotion. By 9:00 a.m. he arrives at the First Reformed Church, where he enjoys a quiet office around the corner from an associate pastor. The office used to belong to a minister of visitation. This past October it was given to Janssen along with the title “theologian in residence.”

“I have bookshelves, a desk, a chair to read in. I can shut the door and read,” he said. “I haven’t gotten into a good rhythm yet. But this is where I’ll do most of my writing. It’s not at all like phones are ringing.”

These days he is working on a study of the Belhar Confession, written in 1982 and adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa during the campaign against apartheid. Not too many congregations would take an interest in Reformed confessions—Janssen’s specialty—but First Reformed, one of the oldest and largest congregations in the Reformed Church in America, hopes that his work may have some wider resonance. For several hours he pores over texts in Dutch and Afrikaans. By early afternoon, he will be done for the day.

Who is a theologian? Some would say every baptized Christian or every human being. As Barbara Brown Taylor is fond of saying, “The body makes theologians of us all.” Still, the notion persists that theology is academic work. Once upon a time, of course, it was considered pastoral work. Pastors were the resident theologians, the ones who could answer questions about church doctrine and provide a frontline defense of the faith.

Some congregations, particularly those with leading roles in their cities or denominations, still see doing theology as a central part of their calling. And in a remarkably countercultural gesture, some welcome theologians in residence with the aim of helping laypeople to think theologically as well.

“Theologian in residence” is a provocative term that raises many questions—questions about the relation of pastoral work to theology, about the expectations and responsibilities of clergy, about class and privilege and about how theology grows out of a place. Designating a person in a particular place whose primary role is to think about theology may seem like a luxury. But for the church, making room for such work may be a necessity.

At Eastminster Presbyterian in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Brian Madison has served as theologian in residence for five years. He preaches once a month, presides at communion twice a month and leads several classes for adults drawing on his work as a professor at Western Theological Seminary. Ann Conklin, the church’s senior minister, deeply appreciates his role.

“It has been nice for me as a solo pastor to have a sounding board, a colleague, someone to talk to about theological questions,” she said.

Five years ago, Greg Carey of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania frequently lectured at churches on weekends. Then he was invited to serve as theologian in residence at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster.

“It has allowed me to be in one place rather than travel,” he says, “and to see real growth in the church.” The church has permitted him to raise hot-button issues, and parishioners who want to pursue them further often meet with him for breakfast or coffee. “We’ve found that ministry grows when you’re honest with people, not when you protect them,” he said.

The pastoral theologian Eugene Peterson has long insisted that study lies at the heart of a religious calling. However, he’s not sure about this new designation. “I hesitate to say too much,” he said recently, “but my gut feeling is that the pastor should be the theologian in residence.” The idea of hiring a theologian in residence, he said, is “like a surgeon saying, ‘I’m going to hire a surgeon-in-residence.’ It doesn’t make sense.”

Peterson does see the theological value of doing theology in one place. He recalls his own early dissatisfaction with being a minister in suburbia.

“Then I got a spiritual director and started writing, and it was like sailing into a clear calm harbor. I’m so glad I stayed. . . . And one day, it wasn’t a suburban congregation anymore, but a home for alcoholics and other people who really needed Christ.”

Churches use the term “theologian in residence” in many ways. Sometimes they simply mean a guest lecturer who is in residence for just a few days or weeks. The United Church of Christ in Ames, Iowa, has offered such a speaker series since 1994. Similar programs have begun at the Congregational Church in Coral Gables, Florida, and Immanuel Presbyterian in McLean, Virginia. Most of these churches pay their guest lecturers. The First United Methodist Church of Boulder, Colorado, however, offers a mountain house as a retreat in exchange for hours of service. (Guest theologians must take care of their own transportation and other expenses.)

An altogether different model is that of having a theologian truly in residence, building relationships. That’s been the second career of Gene Davenport, who taught at Lambuth College in Jackson, Tennessee, for 45 years. An elder in the United Methodist Church, he found a spiritual home at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church and, with the blessing of bishops from both denominations, became theologian in residence

there.

“They said, ‘We have an office if you don’t want to get rid of your library,’” he recalls.

Renee Powell, recently hired by Arlington United Church of Christ near Berkeley, California, brings a distinctive emphasis to her theological work—the intersection of theology and art. She is associated with the nearby Center for the Arts, Religion and Education (CARE) at the Graduate Theological Union. Her recent exhibit at the church, *Echoes and Fragments*, mounted on the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, recalls the fragmentary stories of her Jewish parents’ flight from Germany. Powell’s project involves helping members create individual clay tiles that will be part of a mural in the church. “Creativity and spirituality are related—they fuel one another,” she said.

Resources for such programs are scarce. In fact, many pastors may regard them with wonder. But when a church is large enough, financially robust and located near a seminary, such programs may flourish. A decade ago, visionary laypeople at Highland Park Presbyterian Church, in a privileged enclave of Dallas, sought a deeper kind of Christian education program, one more integrated with other spheres of life. At first its theologian in residence program consisted of a series of guest lecturers—“which was an oxymoron,” said Michael Walker. “It took a while to find someone who could become truly in residence. That has been my distinct privilege.”

At Highland Park, Walker works closely with Christian educators, guest speakers and congregants. For example, he counseled a young married couple struggling with infertility and questioned the morality of in vitro fertilization. He was buttonholed by another member for an extended discussion about St. Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Walker noted that the Reformed tradition, with its concept of the “teaching elder,” seems especially congenial for supporting such a role.

In 2013, when Highland Park decided to leave the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Walker was called upon to provide perspective. He had worked on denominational issues before, and he tried to “help folks to see things as they are, in all their complexity, and make a wise decision.”

Living in the community shapes his work. Highland Park may be one of the most affluent communities in the United States, but Walker is struck by members who understand that their blessings don’t belong to them and are looking for ways to

invest those gifts. He's also encouraged by their desire for a richer life of faith.

"Theology is not just for ivory-tower academics," he said. "Folks are tired of superficial pep talks. They hunger to know the Lord more deeply."

Three years ago, John Franke left a seminary teaching job to become theologian in residence at a large Presbyterian church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, hoping to become more involved in the practical aspect of ministry.

The experience was "a revelation for me," he said. "In seminary, we all talk about the importance of partnership with local churches—but I could see how faculties tend to screen out issues that pastors are experiencing. Practical challenges of congregational leadership are clearer now." Teenage kids surprised him with their theological curiosity and seriousness. Then he was caught in a church budget crunch, and his job came to an end.

Now the notion of being in residence seems especially poignant to him. "I wanted to be connected to a community for an ongoing period of time," Franke said. But now he serves three different projects—as executive director and professor of missional theology for the Yellowstone Theological Institute in Bozeman, Montana; as professor of religious studies and missiology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium; and as general coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, headquartered near his home in Philadelphia. "My son's in high school," he says. "We really don't want to move."

A group of Episcopalians is looking for ways to support theologians who choose to serve small, underfunded, out-of-the-way parishes. The Scholar-Priest Initiative, founded in 2012, envisions a day when "theology *for* the Church will be done *in* the Church; and we will stop forcing choices between scholarship and ministry."

Bishop John Bauerschmidt of Tennessee, a patron of the effort, says theology "is part and parcel of the Christian life, not simply the concern of professionals but the common inheritance of the People of God. . . . Leaders of the church (both ordained and lay) will need to be able to practice this craft." Someday, should funds be raised, the Scholar-Priest Initiative hopes to offer fellowships to support local theologians in their studies.

A robust theologian in residence program has been developed at Trevecca Community Church of the Nazarene in Nashville, Tennessee. The church shares a

campus with a Nazarene university, and three professors who volunteer their time to the congregation have been named theologians in residence.

“Originally we did so to bring honor to their service within the church and the denomination—to give praise where praise is due,” said Dwight Gunter, Trevecca’s senior minister. Gunter has also wanted “to merge orthodoxy and orthopraxy,” to emphasize the significant role that sound theological teaching plays in his church’s overall ministry. “And I think it also says to the university with whom we share a campus that we value scholarship at a very high level.”

Gunter regards himself a prime beneficiary. “I’m such good friends with all of them,” he said. “Ray Dunning literally wrote the book on theology for the Church of the Nazarene. He was my teacher in college. He’s over 80 and still writing, still thinking. Tim Green is an Old Testament scholar; I’ll call or e-mail him when I’m grappling with a text. And Steve Hoskins, a church historian, is a lifelong friend—we have lunch maybe once a week. They help me immensely.”

Even though Gunter himself is an adjunct professor of pastoral theology and can speak with them as a peer, “I ask them to teach me. ‘Iron sharpens iron,’” he says. “I don’t know what pastors do who don’t have folks to help them think theologically.”

First Reformed Church in Albany welcomed Allan Janssen as theologian in residence last October. Senior minister John Paarlberg said Janssen’s presence would be “a gift both to our congregation and to the wider church.”

Janssen had just retired after 40 years in parish ministry and 14 years of teaching systematic theology at New Brunswick Seminary. “We’re still working out what this means,” Janssen says.

Janssen introduced himself to the congregation with a letter reflecting on his new vocation:

A theologian thinks about God. All Christians, and many others as well, are theologians in that sense. The pastor of a congregation thinks about God as God engages a specific people at a specific time (which happens to be how God acts in any case).

As a vocation, though, a theologian has the time and the space to think about God, unhurried by the urgent demands of the moment. She or he can take the necessary care to engage the sources of our knowing about God more deeply. She has time for research and for the kind of writing that cannot be forced. Often, he will engage in topics that appear far from relevant but that turn out, on reflection, to be of importance. Or not—hence the research!

A congregation that has that kind of person in its midst has acknowledged the value of that vocation for its own life. But what might it mean for First Church?

I frankly don't know the answer. I hope that it means that there will be space for mutual discussion and reflection. Perhaps there will be times for presentation and engagement on particular topics. Certainly, there can be opportunities for individual engagement. The theologian's task is not solitary. So—we can think about God together, and likely in surprising ways.

Now that he has unpacked his books and moved into the office, Janssen finds that his work could indeed be solitary. He's thinking about a practical application. "My job is not to impose views, but to help people discover their own theological perspectives, to think theologically about where the issues might be," he said. He believes there may be ways in which he could help the congregation think through issues—such as how the historic church building is to be used amid major cultural shifts.

He also thinks about "letting people see what the work of professional theologians is all about." Theologians "go into some pretty abstruse places. That's what you need the time for, and the space. That's why I'm in a space that's away from the house, away from other church offices where people can come in all day long. They're not paying me to be on staff; I don't attend staff meetings. This work may be a window on a life of the mind."

For Janssen and other theologians in residence, it remains to be seen how theology will grow out of a particular place. Albany seems a promising place for that to happen. It's the oldest continuously chartered city in the United States, with a deep Dutch Reformed heritage. The pulpit at First Reformed Church was imported from the Netherlands in 1656 and is the oldest in the country. Albany's primary industries are state government and higher education, which ensure that social issues are part of everyday local conversation.

Albany's blend of religious traditions, social concerns, and study has shaped Joeanna Brown, a resident since 1946. The city has deep personal significance for her: two of her children are buried there. It is a place that has taught her sorrow and hope. She looks forward to classes with Janssen.

"As one who has returned to Christianity, I know how difficult it is to be a Christian all through the week," she said. After years spent raising her family and pursuing a career in higher education, she relishes her hours of Bible study. "I'm learning it like I've never known it before."