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The Work+Shop: Faith in everyday life

Two Episcopal priests in San Antonio combine scholarship and discernment to help ordinary Christians 'live life in full color'

by [Lynn Gosnell](#)



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At 6:45 a.m., the park-like grounds of the Bishop Jones Center, headquarters of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, are clothed in darkness and the rustling of night animals. Gradually, women and men make their way to a small lighted outbuilding along familiar paths shadowed by live oaks.

One by one, participants arrive and greet each other. They settle into cushioned chairs, juggling Bibles and coffee mugs. The Rev. Dr. John G. Lewis, the leader, says a prayer and asks, "Does anyone have an event to share?"



A young teacher describes a situation at school. A conflict with a colleague has her feeling bewildered and embarrassed, even fearful for her job. Each person listens attentively, asking a few questions, until Lewis draws the telling to a close.

"Let's think about biblical passages that might shape our imagination about how to respond here," he says.

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Though it lacks a formal name, participants call this process a reflection or discernment group, or even “backward Bible study.” It’s backward because the story or event is what organizes the search for biblical guidance, not the other way around.

This act of gathering, sharing a story and discerning biblical guidance is the core activity of [The Work+Shop](#), a ministry of faith in everyday life in San Antonio, Texas. Founded in 2001 at [St. Mark’s Episcopal Church](#), a landmark downtown parish, The Work+Shop occupies a unique place in Christian ministry, combining seminary-level scholarship with the long-term, face-to-face relationships of a congregation.

Questions to consider:

- How can Scripture be used imaginatively to open dialogue about personal and social situations?
- In what ways can biblical scholarship nourish Christians in their discipleship journeys? How can scholarship be presented in appealing ways?
- Every Christian disciple is in ministry, not just the ordained. How are laity and clergy formed to do ministry and to be witnesses in all contexts?
- How can Christian history be a catalyst for contemporary Christian formation and creativity?

The Work+Shop ministry owes its name to two sources: the history of its meeting space as a workshop, nestled next to a gently flowing stream, and St. Benedict’s notion of the monastery as the “workshop” where the tools necessary for spiritual life are acquired.

Far from being isolated from the world, however, The Work+Shop is a setting where individuals who wish to develop a deeply integrated spiritual life are given abundant opportunities to, in St. Benedict’s words, “toil faithfully and mindfully at all these tasks.”

Led by the Rev. Dr. Jane L. Patterson and Lewis, who are biblical scholars and Episcopal priests, The Work+Shop’s programs model a way of living faithfully that harks back to the earliest days of Christianity.

It’s an approach to ministry that’s as imaginative and creative as it is deeply rooted in history.

“It really comes out of the Letters of Paul and how he uses this practice we’re trying to emulate as part of his congregational formation,” Lewis said. Lewis and Patterson call the members of the earliest Christian communities the spiritual ancestors of the

contemporary participants.

Underlying their activities is the desire to address questions such as, How do we take what we hear in church out into the world and actually follow Jesus, acting in ways that respond to his call? How do we step into and experience the kingdom of God in the midst of earning a living, nurturing a family, participating in the community and being a friend?

During the course of this day’s one-hour gathering, participants search for, read and discuss biblical passages -- Matthew 18, Luke 12, Mark 8 and others -- to help discern a way forward for the young schoolteacher, as well as other members.

Often, participants give the Scripture a metaphorical twist. In this case, the story about Jesus restoring a blind man’s sight after leading him “out of the village” inspires a suggestion: Could the teacher invite her colleague to get together outside of work (their village) for some honest dialogue?

In this way, the participants weave modern-day challenges into ancient biblical stories -- drawing meaning from verses that may look disconnected from contemporary life.

“We bring life to the Scripture,” said Nancy Nowak, a longtime participant who joined one of the reflection groups that were a forerunner of The Work+Shop’s current ministry.

Priests bring the academy to laypeople

In addition to these core small-group gatherings, The Work+Shop’s mission of “strengthening Christian communities by equipping them over time to practice discernment and discipleship in all areas of daily life” plays out in many settings.

This year Lewis and Patterson, working separately and together, have led weekly and monthly

reflection groups, Sunday classes, and Bible studies. Patterson has taught a semester of seminary classes, and Lewis has taught biblical Greek in the Sudan. Each has led weekend-long retreats.

“I think that what makes us unique is that we have what are essentially academic degrees, designed for teaching graduate students, but we use our training to teach ordinary church people,” Patterson said.

They work with vestry and other congregational groups at St. Mark’s and consult with churches in the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas and across the country. At any time during the year, they’re working with about 400 people.

For every audience, the central question that The Work+Shop’s programs ask is, What does it mean to live out Christian faith?

Lewis and Patterson revel in extending the wisdom and imagination they experienced in the academy to a larger audience.

“We thought what we were learning at the doctoral level was really great stuff for non-ordained people,” Patterson said. “People should know this! One of our frustrations is that most laity have benefited almost not at all from the last 200 years of biblical scholarship.”

“What we discovered is that many laypeople have the hunger and capacity for the depth of learning that we come with from the academy,” Lewis said.

Not your grandmother’s Bible study

That’s certainly true for the men and women who attend a midweek Bible study at St. Mark’s. On a fall morning, about 25 men and women gather in a meeting room, study guides on their laps, eating homemade apple cake.

The class includes retirees, young mothers and people who work nearby. For several months, they have been parsing the letters of Paul to the Galatians and Thessalonians. This day’s passage centers on Paul’s anguish with the Galatians over their abandonment of the law-free gospel he had proclaimed among them (Galatians 1:8-10).

To unpack the meaning behind these three verses -- so that participants can see their own stories in the text -- takes effort. Lewis and Patterson go through the passage line by line, reading from the original Greek and bringing in historical context.

The content is difficult, but the delivery is easygoing and laughter is abundant. At one point in the lesson, Patterson explains Paul’s strong language: “He didn’t know he was writing Scripture. He was mouthing off.

“What if you were mouthing off and someone turned it into Scripture?” Class members laugh at the thought.

Throughout the class, the teachers ask participants to consider how the Scripture applies to them, what Paul’s experience as a “vehicle for God’s justice on earth” might mean today.

By the end of the class, by studying just three verses, the group has gained some knowledge and insight into Paul’s world, how various and conflicted early Christian communities were, and how these conflicts play out in the New Testament.

“When I’ve asked questions in the past [about how] in part of the Bible you get one answer, in another, a different one, the response has been ‘It’s in the Bible. It’s the truth.’ Well, the Bible has conflicts. It helps to know this,” participant Tookie Spoor said.

Faith in and out of the workplace

What is today known as The Work+Shop was founded at St. Mark’s as the Center for Faith in the Workplace, with Lewis as founding director.

The ministry began modestly as an outreach to men and women who worked downtown, providing a place for participants to reflect on the role of faith in their life and work.

A former attorney who left the practice of law in 1994 to pursue a call to the priesthood, Lewis attended Virginia Theological Seminary before earning a D.Phil. in New Testament studies at Oxford University.

He started the Center for Faith in the Workplace after returning to San Antonio from England. His original goal had been to teach in a seminary, but for complicated reasons that career move didn't pan out.

"I began to look for a way that I could integrate my legal experience in the workplace, my highly specialized Ph.D. training in New Testament, and my desire to serve the church as a priest," Lewis said.

The quest to integrate faith and the workplace grew out of Lewis' experience practicing law, a time when he often sought the help of a spiritual director in interpreting his business life through the lens of his faith tradition.

In 1991, during an economic downturn, Lewis' firm of 100 attorneys split over a dispute about laying off one-third of the workforce.

"A group of us in leadership did not think that was a faithful thing to do, and our unwillingness to take such drastic action led to half the firm walking out one weekend," Lewis said. "Several of my closest friends at the time led the walkout."

This turning point fueled a passion to help people of faith use biblical tradition to imagine faithful solutions to contemporary workplace issues. This kind of workplace ministry is not about hanging a cross in the office and evangelizing.

"The question is more how do I *be* in the workplace, as opposed to how do I share my faith or evangelize. We're not about your going out and preaching. We're about your going out and *being*," said Emmet Faulk, community formation director at St. Mark's and an early supporter of the project.

Patterson signed on as co-director in 2005, the same year the ministry moved off-campus and adopted its current name, which reflects both its mission and its location.

Regarded as one of the diocese's most gifted prophetic voices, Patterson uses her capacious scholarly imagination and deftness with "non-churchy" language to full effect in The Work+Shop's groups.

In her teaching, she connects the theological with the practical in ways that invite people, in her words, "to be as Christ wherever they are."

A third partner, the Rev. Mary C. Earle, is retired from active ministry but is associated with The Work+Shop as author-in-residence. A published author on topics of Benedictine and Celtic spirituality, Earle leads occasional retreats under the auspices of The Work+Shop.

Although no longer located downtown on the St. Mark's parish grounds, The Work+Shop is still affiliated with the church, and Lewis and Patterson each hold part-time appointments there.

"We're a ministry in partnership with St. Marks and an ecumenical community of supporters," Lewis said.

Check doctrinal baggage at the door

Through The Work+Shop, Lewis and Patterson strive to create an encounter between individuals and the sacred text, fully understood in its historical context. This is different, they say, from many Christian traditions with strong doctrinal frameworks.

"What Jane and I do is we just approach the Bible from the point of view of the text itself as stripped away from church doctrinal theological commitments," Lewis said.

The approach is not for everyone. One of the very first small groups that Lewis started, a lunchtime Bible study, was contentious from the get-go, Lewis said.

Attorney Drew Cauthorn attended that group and remembers the arguments.

“So many people who showed up already knew what the Bible had to say,” Cauthorn said. “So they weren’t interested.” After a year, Lewis ended the group. Lesson learned.

“What won’t work [for discernment groups] is really strong doctrinal views, because if you’re reading the Bible for doctrine, it’s really hard to apply it to daily life. You can’t work with it metaphorically,” Lewis said.

“You can’t live off that.”

Cauthorn is now an enthusiastic attendee of a men’s Bible study that meets for dinner, discernment, lessons and conversation once a month.

People who attend The Work+Shop’s small groups say their participation changes them and affects the way they deal with everyday issues.

Chris Lopez, who has been attending the ministry for many years, believes that she now approaches difficult situations at work with an attitude of being open to change, especially “change that the Holy Spirit might bring.”

“It’s less about what I think and more about the community,” Lopez said, adding, “At first, I felt uncertain of the approach. It felt less efficient and maybe less effective, but in the end, you usually get a better outcome.”

“It isn’t just about Sunday or ordained people,” Patterson said. “What we’re really after is helping ordinary Christians live life in full color as Christians.”