

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

IT COMES FROM THE PEOPLE: APPALACHIAN WOMEN CREATING LOCAL THEOLOGY

The movement from human experience, especially the experience of the marginalized, to theological anthropology has been a central focus of this seminar during the past five years. The 1990 seminar combined that ongoing focus with the specific Convention theme of inculturation. Mary Ann Hinsdale (College of Holy Cross) and Helen Matthews Lewis (Highlander Research and Education Center) presented the results of a three-year case study conducted in Ivanhoe, Virginia. Ivanhoe is a small Appalachian town whose existence has been threatened by the loss of its industrial base. Community empowerment, development, and control of its economic future are among the larger issues this study investigates. A video portraying the recent events in Ivanhoe (including a two-volume community history, a drama based on that history, some songs written and performed by community members, and the creation of Jubilee Park out of a corner of the abandoned industrial park) set the stage for the seminar discussion. The two elements of central concern to the seminar were the method of participatory research used in the project and the beginnings of a local theology emerging through bible study sessions as well as other community activities. The summary to follow includes both material from the initial presentation and points that emerged during the later discussion.

Participatory research combines social investigation, educational work and action. It involves members of the community in the actual research process. The whole approach is problem-centered, seeking to understand the conditions underlying a problem in order to transform those conditions. Community members set the agenda and keep ownership of the research. The outside specialists become participants, combining their knowledge and resources with those of the local people in shared dialogue, analysis and reflection, but they also intervene on occasion to aid the process of community discernment and empowerment. Helen Lewis's main intervention occurred in one of the economic education discussions she led. This resulted in a shift in the community's strategy from recruiting another major industry to developing recreation facilities and community businesses. Mary Ann Hinsdale's interventions occurred primarily in the choice of specific passages for the bible study sessions. These interventions introduced new questions and ideas into the discussion (rather than any "shoulds"), thus giving the community new possibilities for its reflection, decision making, and action.

The five bible studies conducted during the project gave the women of Ivanhoe (who comprised the majority of the community workers) an opportunity to uncover their own theology and to understand its role in their empowerment and

in their work to transform Ivanhoe. One of these sessions included some Nicaraguan women who were visiting the town; the text that day was the Gethsemane scene as depicted in *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname*. Maxine Waller, the charismatic leader who spearheaded the community movement, recounted a vision she had had of God at work in the whole world and of the possibilities opening up for achieving justice. Of Jesus she said, "Look what one man has done; let's give women a chance." She sees women from all over the world coming together, dealing with conflict, and receiving acceptance. Clearly this reflects her own sense of empowerment. Other members of the community share this sense as evidenced in a line of one of the community songs, "No one can save us but ourselves." This empowerment, however, appears to be balanced by a recognition of God's role in the process. On other occasions she said, "Jesus is with the poor," and "I walk in faith."

These bible studies show the beginnings of the local theology of Ivanhoe: women reflecting on biblical passages in light of their situation, their problems, and their action. The published study (forthcoming from Glenmary Research Press) will include transcripts of the bible studies as well as three further reflections, one by each of the outside specialists and one by Maxine Waller. The first two additional reflections serve the purpose of making the link with the concerns of the academic community. The third, in keeping with the goals of participatory research, preserves the integrity of the local voices. Maxine Waller's contributions to the entire project have been so central that she is being named as a collaborator in the study. In keeping with the spirit of participatory research it seems fitting to end this summary with another quotation from Maxine. On being told by Mary Ann and Helen of their presentation to this seminar, she responded: "Go there and tell those people what we can do."

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