



Introducing Word & World

by Bill Wylie-Kellermann published in *The Witness*

In January 2001, some fifty activists gathered in retreat just outside of Detroit to imagine a school of discipleship, one which might help in the renewing and rebuilding of a movement for justice and non-violence in this country. Some of us had, in effect, been talking about this gathering for years. The retreat was a word of mouth affair. And frankly, the time had come to put up or shut up. Pull it together or quit the talking. What a wondrous and odd lot collection of folk we were: Catholic Workers, hip hop poets, retreat center directors, youth and community organizers, mendicant movement scholars, street actors and preachers, magazine editors and freelance writers, seminarians and professors with a foot on the margin, theologians, spiritual directors, jazz and gospel singers, convicted felons, and urban pastors. Of course there was newsprint sufficient to paper the walls (pages to fill with brainstorming curricula and structure) but we spent the much of our time together, not so much in planning a new institution, as in simply telling the stories of how we had come to the circle. All of us had seen our own lives altered and transformed by some process of movement formation which we knew to be the crucial matter. It was really that which we were after. And we all brought diverse pieces to the vision taking shape. For some of us, myself among them, this gathering marked the resurrection of a project with historical roots in the Finkenwald experiment which Dietrich Bonhoeffer had headed up in late thirties at the behest of the Confessing Church in Germany. In our experience that same vision had been reanimated in a sequence of events hatched more recently in this country by William Stringfellow and Daniel Berrigan: an ad hoc series of Bible study weekends convened specifically to nourish the non-violent resistance movement of the late seventies and eighties. Mentored in that tradition, we tended to reference the whole idea broadly as "the underground seminary." Others of us came to the idea out of the memory of the Freedom Schools – a tradition which could gather up the alternative high schools of the Northern Student movement, the sort of strategic conversations held at the Highlander Center, and the constant host of training sessions required to organize campaigns of direct action in the civil rights struggle. Some of us came to the circle having been awakened by the fierce and whimsical pedagogies of Christian feminism, including alternative theological reflection offered in places like Grailville, or in the struggles either for womenchurch or for ecclesial inclusion of sexual minorities. And others yet, arrived among us walking the path of liberation theology, tutored and tested in the base-community movement where the language of preference is Spanish and the pedagogy entails a risky cycle of action and reflection. These were not tidy but overlapping and echoing stories. One's which resonated, each in their own way, with the biblical narrative which we held in common esteem. Which is to say, we also spent time doing bible study together. One evening an astonishing session: prompted by an obscure and appended passage from II Samuel about the grief of Rizpah for her sons publicly impaled and tortured... we found ourselves hearing from one another accounts of grief and death: friends bloodied by Klan bullets dying in someone's arms; death row inmates, befriended in constant visitation, executed by the state before our very eyes; others more distant disappeared and tortured out of sight by death squads; and yet other

friends suffering the slower but relentless assaults of cancer. We were suddenly and abruptly a community of grief and solace, a community which had tasted the fire, one which was beset by death and yet lived nevertheless. This calls to mind another point, mysterious, crucial, and providential. All of this was convened and set in motion prior to September 11 and its aftermath. And yet throughout these recent months, it has all but seemed the calculated groundwork of the Spirit. I've clung to it personally as a constant source of hope for the future. The proper and precise response required by events. When the symbols of global power come crashing down...When the military machine is abruptly unleashed and finally unconstrained by the last vestiges of the Vietnam syndrome...When the major media speak as one, hyping an atmosphere of patriotism which silences conscience and brooks no alternative...When legislation (the Patriot Act) creates a new crime of "domestic terrorism" which could readily be applied to civil disobedients...When the same law sanctions unchecked powers of surveillance and investigation (already applied against Denver antiglobalization groups)...When borders close and xenophobia runs rampant...When profiling is officially justified against Arab Americans and others...When security becomes the primary function of the state...When prisoners sit in jail uncharged...What then? Seems like just the appropriate time to start a training center for movement renewal, a freedom school of discipleship, an alternative institute for building biblical and social literacy, a educational forum for the renewal of church as movement (and renewal of the movement as church). I can't help but think that in all these regards the Spirit was ahead of the historical curve. The need, of course, had preceded in other ways. In the days of the Stringfellow seminary underground, one of our gatherings was convened around the following summons: The seminaries we come from tend to be parochial in their concerns, and those concerns narrow daily as financial problems make "survival" a deathly institutional preoccupation. We would gather to connect with one another, and broaden our vision of ministry. The seminaries we come from tend to follow cults of academia, worshiping professionalism and expertise. We would gather free of idolatrous enslavements. Seminarians and seminaries seem to have forgotten how to read the Bible, reducing it to an intellectual exercise, to a matter of proper critical technique. We would gather to help each other become radically biblical and biblically radical. In short, the seminaries we come from are more and more swallowed up by the culture. We would gather to come out, to turn again. How I wish it didn't still ring so true. Only a few years prior Paulo Freire had introduced the perspectives of popular education and conscientization, and yet even now thirty years later, the prevailing teaching practices, let's say in seminaries just to stay concrete, still tend to breed dependence rather than empowerment; privilege content over process; and nurture intellectualizing abstraction rather than concrete praxis. In short they function largely as a form of gatekeeping which fosters (nay, guarantees) the professionalization of the clergy. Sad to say, the academy of scripture and theology has long been separated from the sanctuary, but even moreso from the street. Ched Myers, one of the January retreat participants, has written: The social location of most seminaries make them accessible only to educated, middle class persons, remote from the life of the poor, and insulated from social movements. And most seminary curricula fail to address the whole range of practical skills needed for contemporary ministry: one can learn preaching and the theology of pastoral care, but not community organizing, social analysis, or nonprofit administration. This is the breach into which the January retreatants and a wider circle of ongoing conversants are praying to step. When we moved from roots and storytelling to constructive imagination we began to feature something which would have rigorous substance but travel institutionally light, something which could have a common curricular heart, but be flexible to the needs of place and moment. We conceived of what has since come to be called Word and World: a People's School. The name echoes many things, not the least of which is Karl Barth's old line about doing theology with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. Think of Word and World as a moveable, one-week institute which is hosted and organized by local/national collaborations. Let it be said and frankly, these are not intended as conferences open mostly to those with the time and money,

but intensive schools requiring and presuming commitment. The hope is that they be more than “entry level” encounters to “taste and see” but be designed for people already actively engaged in movement work (broadly defined as involvement in some significant way with service, education, advocacy, or organizing for social change). The aim is to help a new generation of such folk go deeper, developing the gifts and skills which movement work demands. Our intention is that each school would be a momentary educational village, heavy on mutuality and shared responsibility. Like any good village, we are seeking out a circle of movement elders, wise ones to anchor us in Spirit and history. We have, likewise, set goals to balance local, regional, and national participation. We want these gatherings to grow the capacity of local movement efforts (which means a baseline of regional participation), but we also want local resources and work to cross-fertilize and nourish efforts elsewhere (which summons the national participants). To guard such a balance, to ensure that commitment rather than means should predominate, and to factor affirmatively for diversity (youth, women, people of color, poor folk, gays/lesbians, and disabled people), we have instituted, with some sense of trepidation, a simple process of application and admission. And for this first round it seems to be working. Those interested produce a personal statement of their history and commitments in faith-based social change work for a joint regional/national committee to consider. The curriculum for these events is being broadly structured around what we are calling “church practices” and “social practices.” For example, focal points for nurturing competence include: biblical literacy; political, social and cultural analysis; Jubilee/Sabbath economics; the history and ethics of movements for social change; spirituality of praxis; and building alternative communities, institutions and networks. Pedagogical practices will be ecumenical, contextual, inclusive, applied, and holistic. Almost all of the courses in the first round are being team taught. The first go round was in Greensboro, NC and picked up strongly on the Freedom School tradition. (See sidebar). The next is scheduled for Tucson, AZ and will necessarily draw more heavily on the popular education of the base community movement. And more are on the horizon: a Philadelphia gathering in the mold of the alternative seminary, others in Detroit or Chicago, and one hopefully in the northwest. It’s budding and building as we go. [The Tucson School was also a success as described below and in its Report, as was the Philadelphia School that followed it. — ed.] All this has been done (and perhaps properly so) on a shoe string. A couple grants have enabled us to put some part time staff on the project, but the base of the funding has been small and regular gifts from individuals. And the lions share of the work has been done on a volunteer or in-kind basis. A circle of fine, fine folks have put their heart and soul into making this happen. Let this be a bald-face solicitation. Send money. Which is to say, let this also be a candid invitation: join us dear friends. The times bode ill, but the Spirit, thank God, is on the move and way ahead of the curve. Take heart. Bring your need, your labor, your gifts. It’s happening.

Bill Wylie-Kellermann, a contributing editor to The Witness, is on the National Board of Word and World. He is Director of Graduate Theological Urban Studies for SCUPE in Chicago and lives in Detroit with his daughter Lucy.