

TWO

From Gung-Ho to Godbearer

Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

Let it be with me according to your word.

—Mary, a teenage girl

MY SUPERVISING pastor in seminary was a seasoned Southern parson named Sam Stanley. Sam pastored a little chapel in Arlington, Virginia, and people packed it to the gills every Sunday. You could easily underestimate Sam because of his laid-back style and bone-deep gentility. He wore his considerable clout like an undershirt, unconscious of it. Yet Sam was both the strongest and most subtle pastor I have ever known. Despite his determined opinions, he seldom spoke at meetings. He made himself available for appointments or counseling or coffee. He was an ace preacher; worship was memorable and moving. He and his wife Ruth ate lunch together every day.

But Sam had an ear to the ground like a Cherokee warrior. The least vibration in the grass sent him flying to his Volkswagen Rabbit, which had about four million miles on it. A minute's time would find him standing at a parishioner's front door (unannounced) to "check in," as he put it. "There's really only time for two things in ministry," he drawled one afternoon as we zipped around the beltway to "check in"—without warning—on the fifth or sixth person that afternoon. "Lead a fine worship. Visit the people. The program, leave to volunteers and gung-ho seminarians."

As a gung-ho seminarian at the time, I wasn't sure what to make of that remark. I liked programs; I was good at them. Yet whether he intended to or not, Sam gave me a great gift that day: permission to place the worship of God and the daily needs of human beings at the center of ministry—permission, in other words, to be a pastor instead of somebody bound by a job description. *Being* a pastor, I have come to discover, is infinitely harder than *doing* ministry. And yet who I am with youth, and not what I do with them, is what they will remember twenty years from

now. Who I am with youth ultimately determines whether my ministry points to Jesus Christ or to something else. All those Sunday night meetings, service projects, whitewater rafting trips, and spaghetti dinners matter *only* to the extent that they serve as occasions to live my faith in the presence of youth and to remind youth that they have a faith to live too.

Fatigue as a Spiritual Gift

After a few years of ministry—three, to be exact—the program I worked with began to seem weary. That’s about how long it took to attend enough continuing education events in youth ministry before they all started sounding alike. If God made me gung-ho, God also made me *tired*—and not just because I needed more sleep. My soul was on empty; I was running on fumes, and the ministry entrusted to my care was too. The depressing truth was that youth were not the only ones who needed more substantial faith; *so did I*. The college students I met for lunch were not the only ones in spiritual jeopardy; *so was I*. What a humiliating revelation. Here I was supposed to be teaching them to pray, immersing them in scripture, involving them with the poor—and when was the last time I did any of that for the sake of my soul and not for the sake of my job? God knew I was faking it, and I knew I was faking it; but I didn’t know how to stop faking it without “dropping out” altogether, an option with plenty of appeal but that was out of the question (just ask my spouse and my banker).

Often fatigue is the consequence—and the warning sign—not of too many roles but of too shallow roots. Recently I learned that giant sequoias, weighted by huge branches that by all rights should cause them to fall over, remain upright because their roots actually grow together in an intertwined system. The sequoias hold one another up because they are connected at the root. Despite the fact that our responsibilities to others forever seem to seduce us away from our souls, God intends us to live in community, connected by our roots in Jesus Christ, lest we topple over. “Remember,” Paul wrote to the Romans who were growing in faith, “you aren’t feeding the root; the root is feeding you” (Romans 11:18, THE MESSAGE).

No wonder people who pastor youth stress out, wear out, and burn out faster than people in almost any other form of ministry. Our root systems are in terrible shape. A Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development study identified a “lack of networking” as one of the most devastating problems facing religious youth workers. The absence of these

networks reinforces the image of youth ministry as an alienated, isolated profession.¹ Most of us do not know what the church across the street (much less around the world) is doing with youth, so we reinvent the wheel every day. We are neither connected to Jesus Christ nor to each other in ways that adequately feed our souls or the souls of young people. These connections are not “skills” for more effective youth ministry. They shape who we are, called by God and sent out in the name of Jesus Christ to change the world. Our integrity as pastors depends upon these connections. So does our survival.

In the next few chapters, we will suggest that our connection to Christ and to one another—fundamental to the faith of young people but also to the faith of their leaders—comprises the backbone of authentic youth ministry in which adults as well as youth grow in faith. This kind of ministry requires a significant change not only in the way we approach youth ministry but in the way we imagine ourselves as pastors. Surprisingly, we get some help in this transition from the writer of Luke’s Gospel, whose account of God’s “youth ministry” provides a model for our own.

Becoming Godbearers: Youth Ministry as a Spiritual Discipline

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John the Baptist, one of her young cousins named Mary is “touched by an angel.” In Luke 1:26–38, the story begins this way:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And [the angel] came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” But [Mary] was much perplexed by [the angel’s] words, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Perplexed? Startled from stem to stern is more like it. *Angelos*, or angel, means “messenger” in Greek; an angel is one who bears God’s message to others. Gabriel is having a busy, if not altogether smooth, season. Just six months ago he had made a similar visit to Zechariah, and we can hardly blame Zechariah for being suspicious. “How will I know that Elizabeth will have a son as you say?” Zechariah had demanded. “I am an old man, and my wife is way past the soccer mom years.”

Maybe Gabriel did not expect to be challenged; maybe he thought his angelic appearance provided evidence enough. In any case, the

Annunciation had not gone as smoothly as he had hoped. "How will you know?" sputters Gabriel, groping perhaps for his photo ID. "Because I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God who has sent me to speak to you and bring you good news!" And then Gabriel pronounces the most prolonged case of laryngitis on biblical record: "Because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur" (Luke 1:20).

So here is Gabriel again in verse 26, only the stakes are higher—and God has sent him to a teenager. She is young, probably thirteen or fourteen years old, and a "virgin." She is uncompromised: as whole and unbroken as the day she was born, uncompromised by the outside world. In short, she has integrity. God wants someone with integrity to bring God into the world; and so, as the Gospel writer tells us, Gabriel comes to a virgin named Mary.

Gabriel begins as he always begins, as God always begins (since this is God's message, not Gabriel's), with the affirmation of God's creation. "Greetings, favored one!" Gabriel proclaims to Mary. "The Lord is with you!" Before she hears anything else, God wants Mary to hear this: She is favored. Eugene H. Peterson paraphrases Gabriel's greeting this way:

"Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you" (Luke 1:28, THE MESSAGE).

Although a teenager, Mary need not "find" her self. Her identity is a gift, bestowed upon her by God alone. *Who am I?* Mary may wonder. And God replies, "You are my favored one, beloved and beautiful to me."

In truth, Mary does not stand much chance for an identity *apart* from God. She is too young to have had time to achieve much on which to base her identity. She is too poor to purchase her place in society. Add to this the fact that she is female, which means that even if she did have accomplishments or social stature to her credit, they likely would have gone unrecognized because of her gender. All of this makes Mary a most unlikely candidate for helping God save the world, which is precisely why God enlists her. Nothing about Mary suggests that she can be who she is apart from God's favor of her.

Developmental psychology has taught us that if we gain nothing else from adolescence, we must obtain a coherent sense of self, or "identity," to navigate future life stages successfully. Psychology also tells us that we form our identities through the eyes of other people. Mirrors

matter to teenagers (just ask anyone who has had to share a bathroom with one) and not just because of adolescent egocentrism. Teenagers use mirrors to obtain clues of consistency amidst the sea of changes they see and feel in themselves. They are looking for a center that holds despite the seismic changes in their bodies and the proliferation of roles they now must play. The most important mirrors, of course, are the eyes of peers and respected adults who reflect a "self" that young people accept almost without question.

For this reason, relationships and peer groups (even church youth groups) play a pivotal part as youth navigate the "mirroring" process necessary to identity formation. In young adolescents, the undeveloped self is vulnerable to fusion with outside influences. As a result, the young adolescent's peer of choice is a "chum"—another individual who really serves as a projection of the young teenager's idealized self. Young adolescents do not distinguish between themselves and their "chums," which makes them more vulnerable to peer pressure than their older brothers and sisters and more prone to thinking alike, dressing alike, and wanting to be in the same clubs and sports as their peers.

By midadolescence the self has begun to take shape, so moderate differentiation between the adolescent and his or her peers begins to be possible. The need for relationship is still paramount, especially among girls; differentiation does not require separation, especially not at this point in the life cycle. The clique, a circle of similar others, replaces the chum, who primarily has been an extension of the self. Having many friends is important at this age because no one person offers a totally accurate reflection of the self. Multiple reflections serve as correctives to one another; the overly affirming reflection can counterbalance the overly critical one.

By the time youth reach college or young adulthood, identity formation is well under way (although not usually complete until the mid-to-late twenties or at whatever point the youth chooses and enters into enduring career and ideological commitments). An older adolescent can acknowledge others as truly "other" without jeopardizing his or her own sense of self. In "trying out" this new appreciation for otherness, older adolescents may develop friendships with persons wildly different from close friends of their past. The "clique" diminishes in importance as youth no longer need an endless stream of self-affirmation. In place of the clique arises the "significant other," someone the older adolescent acknowledges as "other" and still values in a relationship that often moves toward intimacy.

The adolescent need for relationships is so strong that teenagers will chart this course instinctively. But for the church to be missing from this process represents a serious, if not lethal, sin of omission. Significant relationships with Christians are crucial if we stand any chance of forming an identity that takes into account who we are in God's eyes. Only God's eyes reflect who we truly are; all others distort, even the loving eyes of peers, parents, and significant adults. Only through the church do we hear God's message to Mary: "Greetings, favored one!" And we hear it before we are old enough to "do" much of importance—whether we have noteworthy accomplishments or none at all, whether we are boys or girls or youth or adults. Of all the mirrors that help us establish identity, only the church allows us to see ourselves as God sees us: favored, beloved, blessed.

So the angel continues,

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

God's message to Mary and to us has two parts—affirmation and expectation. *Because* Mary is beloved by God, *because* she has found favor in God's eyes, God has a plan for her. It is an astonishing plan: never mind the angel in the living room, never mind the impossible conception, never mind the fact that this child will grow up to be king.

The child's name must have caught Mary's attention. *Jesus*, a derivation of the Hebrew name Joshua, means "YHWH will save." Something revolutionary is happening here: God has just asked a *teenager* to bring *salvation* into the world! Gabriel has never delivered a message like this before to an adult, much less to an adolescent! Frederick Buechner renders the scene from Gabriel's point of view:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," [the angel] said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling

with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.²

How much do we ask of youth—ninety minutes on Sunday night? a retreat or a car wash? "Come on," we say enticingly. "Worship only lasts an hour." But God has no qualms about making the most profound request in human history of a teenager. Mary is not altogether naive to the situation: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she wants to know. We always read that question at Christmas with a mixture of awe and wonder, although from the lips of most thirteen-year-olds (not to mention most of the rest of us) it would have sounded a lot more like Zechariah: "Yeah, right—how can this be, since I'm a virgin?"

That is how most of us greet God's call to us. Impossible. Out of the question. There is just no way. When God asks Moses to pack for Egypt: "How can this be, since I am slow of speech and slow of tongue?" When Sarah hears that she will bear a son: "How can this be, since I can't even remember menopause?" When Zechariah learns that Elizabeth will conceive: "How can this be, since we are older than the hills?"

Many people approach youth ministry this way too, and we still use the same excuses. "How can this be, that you're asking me to teach Sunday school? I can't talk to kids." "How can this be, that I should spearhead the mission trip? I'm too old for this!" "You want us to volunteer with the youth? How can this be, since we are virgins?"

Gabriel replies with the obvious but overlooked answer to each of us: This is God's miracle, not ours.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:35-37).

The Holy Spirit is more than a pick-me-up in this story. According to Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, the very power of God, will be sure that credit for this wonder goes to God and no one else. As with every pregnant woman, people gradually will turn their attention away from Mary and toward the miracle within her. As with every new mother, passersby will stop looking at Mary and focus on the child, a foreshadowing of events to come. "He must increase, but I must decrease," observed John the Baptist (John 3:30). "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," proclaimed Paul to the Galatians (2:20). The Holy Spirit will

overshadow you, Mary, so that God's salvation will take center stage. For nothing will be impossible with God.

And so Mary, after "pondering" for how long—minutes, days, weeks, we don't know how long—says, "Okay. Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We quibble over the strength of God's invitation in this story. Is God issuing an invitation or merely informing Mary of her destiny? God's salvation is coming with or without Mary's help. But God does not seize Mary and take her by force. God does not enter this girl, or any of us, without our consent. After all, we don't know how many stops Gabriel made before he got to Mary's house.

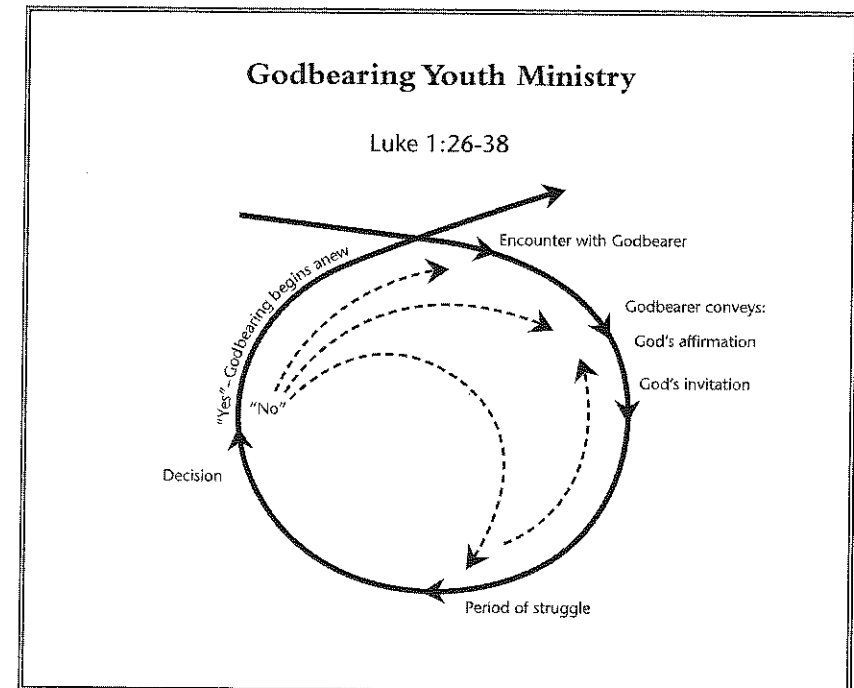
What sets Mary apart from the rest of us is quite simple: She says yes. Zechariah, defined by his adult commitments, had difficulty receiving God's surprising grace. Zechariah understood his identity as a faithful, childless husband and priest. Everything was settled as far as he could tell. God's ability to turn who he was upside down and inside out dumfounded Zechariah. But Mary, a poor, unmarried teenage girl, has no preconceived identity apart from that endowed by her Creator. While Zechariah's reluctance to believe led to silence, Mary's malleability before God erupts in song.

Developmentally, youth are capable of extraordinary commitment to someone who believes in them, of ridiculous fidelity to a cause worthy of their total commitment. God did not choose a teenager to bear salvation to the world by accident. Who else would agree to such a plan? While the coming of Jesus Christ in a virgin's womb is the unrepeatable mystery of God, God invites all of us to become Godbearers—persons who by the power of the Holy Spirit smuggle Jesus into the world through our own lives, who by virtue of our yes to God find ourselves forever and irrevocably changed.

God's yes always comes first: "Greetings, favored one!" Mary, however, meets God's affirmation with a yes of her own: "Let it be with me according to your word"—a yes that changes her life forever and, because of her, the world in which she lives. Mary is actively involved in this transformation, undergoing all of the metamorphoses that occur during pregnancy plus a few that undoubtedly go along with being the mother of God's son. From Mary's yes forward, she becomes "Godbearer," or as the Eastern Orthodox call her, *Theotokos*. Ministry does not end with Mary's transformation; it begins.

Implications for Youth Ministry

If we look closely at the Annunciation story, we can see a process taking place that wins this young girl over to the divine plan of salvation in which she plays a decisive part. First, God employs a third party to bear the good news, a Godbearer of sorts, an *angelos*, or messenger. We think of the Annunciation as a Christmas story, but it is also a courtship scene. God plays Cyrano de Bergerac, wooing Mary through a third party, but the desire for her is entirely God's. The message is organized carefully. First comes God's affirmation, followed immediately by God's invitation. Divine will follows divine love; Mary discovers identity and vocation in one spare text. Mary's experience of God mirrors our own. God's yes to us always comes first. Before we think to ask for divine mercy, God's grace and affirmation are at work in us, bringing us to repentance and holiness. Our true identity lies in the person God created each of us to be: favored, beloved, blessed, unbroken, and uncompromised by the world—virgins, all of us.



After Mary hears and understands God's affirmation, the divine *invitation* follows: God calls Mary to a vocation of her own. Mary strug-

gles with this call; she “ponders,” questions, wonders if the angel has the right address. The messenger responds with gentle persistence, repeating the divine affirmation and invitation. After all, God is courting Mary, not recruiting her. Recruiters drum up business; suitors invite freely offered affection. Coercion plays no part in a love scene; love is a choice. God wants Mary’s willing hand, not her grudging acceptance. But at the same time, God is a skillful and a patient lover. Finally after some struggle, Mary makes her decision. She opens herself fully to God whose Spirit fills her, transforms her, and, by extension, the world she inhabits. Mary’s decision is not the end of God’s ministry through her but the beginning.

What is at stake in imagining ourselves Godbearers with youth is redefining ministry—youth ministry in particular—as a holy pursuit and not a service profession. Theologically (and we can never divorce authentic spirituality from theology), we must work out what it means to place sanctifying grace at the center of youth ministry. Sanctifying grace is the gift of the Holy Spirit who enters us, dwells among us and makes it possible for Christ to enter the world through us. Sanctifying grace allows us to burn without being consumed by ministry. We do not “win” sanctifying grace by avoiding sin or by doing good. Sanctifying grace is the gift of the Spirit that *enables* us to avoid sin and to do good. God makes human beings holy (Rom. 15:16) through this power. If ministry is possible at all, it is only because God dwells in our soul and works patiently and persistently to form Christ within us so that we can bear Christ into the world. God gives us grace in creation, long before we have sense enough to beg for it. This “prevenient” grace works patiently to ply our souls long before we wake up to the fact that the cross was meant for *us*. And yes, sometimes Jesus enters the world through angels unawares, through people who though they deny God’s existence nonetheless bear Christ’s love in ways that change us decisively.

Godbearing ministry, however, begins with a conscious yes to God, a decision that flings open the doors of our souls so that grace no longer needs to sneak in through the cracks. Now the Holy Spirit rushes in “like a mighty wind” and fills us, overshadows us, transforms us by forming Jesus within us, restoring us to the image in whose likeness we were created. Now our soul-wombs, already prepared by grace, can carry Jesus into the world. Now there is no denying that God is at work within us for creation’s sake: a simple yes, and we find ourselves up to our necks in God’s plan of salvation, participants in God’s restoration of the *imago*

dei in every human being. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” No phrase in human history has had more cataclysmic consequences.

Most of us can swallow the doctrine of sanctifying grace up to this point. It sounds sweeping and radical, and it is. But let us be blunt. The upshot of sanctifying grace is sanctification—the making of saints out of sinful people like you and me—a concept lost on many contemporary Christians but front and center to the history of our faith. Godbearing youth ministry stops at nothing short of holiness, perfect love, robust and unapologetic Christian maturity, the setting apart of persons in community for transparent witness to Jesus Christ.

At this point most of us turn tail and run for cover, scrambling for fig leaves and a speedy tailor. After all, on God’s next stroll through the garden God will surely discover us naked. So to avoid lowering our eyes in embarrassment, we simply lower our sights in ministry. Holiness? Sanctified living? Perfect love? Maybe next year. This year we’ll settle for some new members in the junior high group and a decent showing on Youth Sunday.

The word *sanctify* means “to set apart.” It comes from the Hebrew word that means “to separate” or “consecrate.” The Hebrews understood the term to mean separation from the profane, the manner by which people and places were set apart for God and therefore deemed “holy.” God chose Israel not because Israel was a great nation—Israel was the least of all nations—but because God loved Israel and therefore expected Israel to be a holy nation (Exod. 19:6). The writer of First Peter believed the church was likewise “set apart” as a “holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9), and Paul went so far as to suggest that all Christians are called to be saints (Rom. 1:7), people “set apart” because their lives are windows through which we glimpse Jesus Christ.

Since we will discuss this concept further in chapter six, for now let us simply admit that we are advocating impossible ministry. We do so because impossible ministry is the only kind that matters to youth or anyone else. Godbearing youth ministry is impossible: Nothing you and I will ever do can transform a single adolescent, restore God’s image to a single earnest eighth grader, or free a single well-meaning volunteer for perfect love. On the other hand, sanctifying grace makes impossible ministry happen every day. It is by grace that we engage in Godbearing ministry; by grace that somehow God uses us to “get through”; by grace that we dare to “be Christs” to young people; by grace that our lives gradually give us away as Jesus’ followers. And this same grace by the

power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed an unlikely teenage girl to bring Christ into the world.

Youth ministry is a womb, an incubation ward for potential Godbearers as they ponder and struggle with the news that God is crazy in love with them, would die for them and, in fact, has. What youth need more than gung-ho adults are Godbearing adults, people whose own yes to God has transformed them into messengers of the gospel. Youth ministry does not just make Godbearers out of adults for youth; Godbearers convey God's affirmation and invitation to youth so that they become Godbearers, carrying Christ into the culture that adolescents inhale daily. The moment we say yes to God, we become bearers of God's word. From the second we lower our defenses—"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"—the Holy Spirit enters us, fills us, takes us over, changes everything about us, and, through us, the world in which we live.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Dig out your calendar. Would you want God to judge the integrity of your ministry on the basis of your schedule? If God were evaluating your ministry on the basis of next week alone, what on your calendar would you want to keep? eliminate? reprioritize?
2. How would your ministry look different if you began to view yourself primarily as a Godbearer instead of as a youth pastor, Christian educator, parent, or volunteer leader? What would change? stay the same?
3. What is keeping God from entering you? How would your life change if you said, along with Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"?

IDEA FOR THE ROAD

Pass out diaper pins as reminders that Godbearers are "pregnant with the Holy Spirit." Fasten your diaper pin on a partner with the prayer, "You are a Godbearer, called by God to bring Christ into the world."

FARE FOR THE SOUL

Self-surrender, trust and faith, the universal means of accepting the state chosen by God's grace for each one is what I preach. To long to be the subject and instrument of divine action and to

believe that it operates each moment and in all things in so far as it finds more or less good will—this is the faith I am preaching. Not a special state of grace or perfect love but a general state whereby each one of us may discover God. . . . Love is the true way to this surrender. Love always prevails, is never denied. How can it be since it only asks for love in return for love? May not love long for what it gives? Divine action cares only for a willing heart and takes no account of any other faculty.³

—Jean-Pierre de Caussade

Notes

1. See Kenda Creasy Dean, "A Synthesis of the Research on, and a Descriptive Overview of, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Religious Youth Programs in the United States," working paper (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, February 1991), 118.
2. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1979), 39.
3. From *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. by Kitty Muggeridge (Glasgow: Collins, 1981), 31-32.