



Don Ross: Philosophy, Theology & Religion (PTR) Sunday School Teacher

How long have you been a member of BUMC and how did you initially get connected here?

My wife Patty grew up in this church. I started attending sporadically after we were married in 1970, whenever we were in town. But we lived in other parts of the country until 1980, when we moved back here.

Tell us a little about some of the ways you've served in ministry at BUMC.

My service at BUMC has mainly been through music, with the Sanctuary Choir and lately Church Folk, and through teaching Sunday school.

Under your leadership, the PTR Sunday School class has been meeting every Sunday for many years with a dedicated group of BUMCers in attendance. How long have you been teaching PTR and what inspired you to offer the class?

This is our thirty-eighth year. I started teaching it when my one-year appointment as a philosophy professor at the University of Maryland ran out. I couldn't foresee then all the part-time university teaching I would be doing over the next four decades. So I started the PTR class as an outlet for my passion for learning.

For those of us not well versed in this subject, can you briefly describe the relationship between philosophy, theology and religion. What would you like others who might be considering joining in to know about the class?

I'll answer both questions at once. What is religion? All human beings require a context within which to interpret what they learn about the world, whether through their own experience or the accounts of others. Religion provides such a context. Our religion, Christianity, insists on a context that is (if I had to reduce it to a single word) optimistic. While fully cognizant of the power of evil, it stubbornly focuses on the good—in people, in society, and in history. What is theology? The Bible contains no theology; rather, it contains the data for theology. Theology itself is a theoretical discipline that seeks to understand those religious data. You could say that theology is to religion what physics is to observation or experimentation. What is philosophy? Philosophy also investigates the contexts presupposed by our need to integrate experience within an overall framework. Unlike theology, however, it does not confine its purview to just the religious. More than anything else, philosophy is an attempt to think clearly and critically about those fundamental ideas that structure our understanding of reality.

Can you share with us a few of your favorite memories from your years at BUMC?

My favorite memories are too numerous to count. Let me just say they fall into four areas. First, my friends: BUMC has given me the chance to see once or twice a week so many people of whom I am so very, very fond. Second, PTR: every week I get to revel in a simulating discussion about ideas that are absolutely fascinating. I have profited enormously from the comments of others. Third, choir: I have been privileged over the years, though just an ordinarily decent musician, to sing some of the great choral masterworks of all time. Amazing! Fourth, the church service itself: each Sunday I am reminded to at least try to become a better person. I think I am one of those people who need a lot of reminding.

Are there other ways that you have enjoyed serving in our community beyond BUMC?

I do a fair amount of outside teaching, most notably now at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at AU. It's just like PTR, except there are more people involved.

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