

**What's The Story?  
In Magazine Advertising  
Marilyn deVeer, Luther Seminary March 2002**

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**Engaging the Questions**

Just one trip to Barnes and Noble will reveal the extensive variety of specialty magazines available to the consumer. The frames or perspectives of these magazines are apparent in their grouping and titles around art, sports, women, teens, spirituality, travel gardening and homemaking, and technical magazines, to name a few. On a Sunday afternoon at least a half dozen people browse, flip pages, and pick a topic of interest from several hundred publications there.

Leo Bogart in his article "The American Media System and Its Commercial Culture," points out that

"Magazines get about one half of their revenue from readers in a field that supports an enormous array alternative choices. But advertising's contribution to magazine revenues has dropped substantially, precisely in the era of specialization with its presumably greater responsiveness to reader interests. To put it another way, advertisers tend to support a somewhat different assortment of magazines than readers do, in spite of the fact that new magazines, as I have noted, are designed with potential advertisers specifically in mind. (p11)

Some of the magazines I browsed through on a Sunday afternoon had more advertising than others, but most of the ads were related to the topic of the magazine. For example, the Spirituality and Health magazine had a large ad about a way to focus and meditate by using some special gadget, which I didn't fully explore. All kinds of promises for well-

being were made in this ad. The ad contained quite a bit of writing as well. This magazine ad had not forgotten one focus of our times: more information is better.

My thesis in using ads for a Sunday school curriculum is that magazine ads have dual messages which address questions of mythic and parabolic proportions and which can be used to explore faith issues and “meaning-making.” Here is a quick illustration. The text (from a Sunday advertising magazine for Herbergers) for a man’s polo shirt says: “

every day **Economics**  
invest in **versatile** variations  
and subtle **patterns**  
**Then watch the upward trend**  
of your business casual wardrobe climb

The ad is placed over his heart. What are the hopes and fears that lie behind this text? How are they connected to the hopes and fears in our everyday faith walk? What answers do we find in our faith community or in the Bible or in stories? How do our Biblical understandings inform our perceptions of an ad, if they do at all? Would our experience with this ad contribute to our expectations of God?

### **The Good News and the Bad News**

The good news stories are a way out of the bad news. The story of redemption in Jesus Christ (I have given away my theological world in just a phrase.) is the story of deliverance from sin, separation and death. Good news, bad news. The story of the clay jars captures the parabolic (the contradiction) and the mythic (God’s work) in our faith stories.

NRS 2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

When we look at an ad, a story is within its images and words. What does that story tell? Is it an honest story? On what level are the stories disclosed? The parabolic aspects are hinted, but often not fully disclosed. Yet they play a powerful part in believing the text of an ad. The text and images can be full of promises, as well. How are these messages mixed to increase our desire for a product?

Magazine ads are chosen for this project, because they appeal to visual senses, to the written word and images. They are easy to handle in creative ways. The great variety of magazines offers versatility in regard to intergenerational work. In using magazines I would collect as many types as I could from the congregation. This would give me a small glimpse of what the congregation is reading.

### **Biblical and Theological World Views**

As well as becoming aware of the parabolic and mythic aspects of advertising, an awareness of theological worlds would help make deepen a person's understanding of how they interpret a story that is told in an ad. I use ideas from W. Paul Jones, Worlds Within a Congregation: Dealing with Theological Diversity. The questionnaire for identifying each of the five worlds is long. It would be cumbersome for a Sunday morning, so I am going to use Bible verses as a part of that exploration. It will be much more informal, but work better. Jones points out another approach by Alfred C. Kass and also a modification of his approach on page 88 of Worlds Within a Congregation. Other models are available as well. I am both curious and wary about the criteria for the questions chosen by Jones. People need to be advised that a certain world is not a complete description of them. Questionnaires like this have their failings, namely by

being caricatures of viewpoints. I would express to class participants that these descriptions refer to their primary world and are a pointer to their particular frame of reference. I hope that the awareness of differences in theological worlds would bring a new appreciation for each other's perspectives. Again this opens another level of dialogue and questions among the class participants.

### **What's the Story?**

A Five Week Intergenerational Study of  
Magazine Advertising Messages in Light of God's Story for Us

**Setting:** The setting is church, with about 150 worshipping per Sunday, is located in a medium-sized city, part of a metropolitan area. The people here have a variety of vocations and incomes. The congregation has a variety of ages with a thriving Sunday school. Everybody's dream for a Sunday morning.

**Configuration of the Class:** This will be a five week class, early fall or January. About 15 adults will probably attend. This class will be for adults the first and second week. The next three weeks will include a particular Sunday School class ranging from pre-school to young adults. The combination for the third week would be, adults and the high school class; the fourth week, adults and gen-X 20 somethings; and the fifth week, a kindergarten or first grade class. I would be working with particular teachers that were willing to try this idea. The age of the children might vary from my plan, depending on teachers and children willing to come.

**Some general observations about content and teaching styles:** The teaching style is interactive, with teacher class interaction and small group interaction. The class and activities are designed to bring a multi-sensory learning experience that would reach different kinds of intelligences: verbal, visual, kinesthetic, maybe smell (a perfume ad or a food ad might work with this), perhaps musical (connecting a hymn or a song at the end of a class) and creative (making something that expresses a learning). The advertisement for young children would be from age-appropriate magazines. These classes are meant to be a lively, fun class where generations can talk with each other over a specific subject. This class could be adapted to other forms of media.

**Goal: to explore the “meaning” messages of magazine ads so that the participants discover and compare with each other the presence of messages that reveal the God’s story in our lives or deny or distort it.**

**Objectives:**

**For everyone**

- To become aware that God can use media to teach us
- To foster intergenerational conversation around the subject of advertising
- To be able to recognize the elements of mythic and parabolic in magazine ads
- To articulate the messages in an ad, at different levels

**For adults** (*with the hope that their understandings from the first two weeks would be incorporated into conversations with younger people*)

- To be more aware of the way our understanding of God's salvation in Jesus Christ affects our perspectives on the media culture that surrounds us (theological world)

## **Week 1: How do we see God's salvation story?**

### **1. Opening a song and prayer: 5 minutes**

The class would sing this hymn. It would reflect a particular theological world.

### **2. String game: 5 minutes**

Ask people to make a circle

Start a ball of string around the circle, until it comes back to leader

Have them look at how they are holding the string.

Notice the variety of ways it is grasped and the variety of hands.

Analogy to our faith, that the center is God in Jesus Christ, but we see the center of our faith, through varying lenses.

This game would be used as an introductory and get acquainted game to get them hooked.

### **3. A look at a Bible story: John 4: The Samaritan woman at the well (10 minutes)**

Read the story asking people to read the character parts.

See appendix ( from my John class, Craig Koester)

Notice the differing perspectives of the Bible characters.

What do you think shaped those perspectives?

This activity is putting forth a concrete example of varying views about Jesus.

### **4. What's your favorite? 15 minutes**

This activity is designed to be an informal way for a class participant to get an idea of their theological world. The leader would ask the class to choose a verse which attracts them most and move to one of five areas. Then they would be given paper and pencil to record why that Bible verse attracted them. See appendix for scriptures

**1. World 1: Separation and Reunion**

Psalm 8: 3-4, Romans 5:8-10

**2. World 2: Conflict and Vindication**

Romans 8:22-23,  
Amos 5:24

**3. World 3: Emptiness and Fulfillment**

Ecclesiastes 1:13-14  
Colossians 3:12

**4. Condemnation and Forgiveness**

John 8:34-36

**5. Suffering and Endurance**

Romans 5:1-5

Here are listed Bible verses that reflect the five theological worlds in W. Paul Jones, Worlds Within a Congregation. Other resources or configurations could be used here, based on other readings. Some of these worlds may overlap, but we are looking for the primary theological perspective of each person. A differing situation may bring another world into predominance, but that may not be the primary view. The purpose of this exercise is not to lock a person into a certain view, but rather help them become aware that we do grab onto our faith in differing ways. These ways are not right or wrong. Their theological world is part of the diversity of a community of faith. Valuing those differences is hopefully an outcome of this exercise. Another aspect of this exercise is

the aspect of mythic and parabolic messages. This will be examined more closely in week 2.

**5. Reporting to the Rest of the Class: 10 minutes**

Each group will share their ideas with the class. This may bring some surprises. The worlds may not correspond to W. Paul Jones' categories. However, it may demonstrate the differences of perspectives anyway.

**6. Hymn: 5 minutes**

Sing one stanza of the hymn again. What do they see as the theological world of the hymn?

**Materials needed:** hymn books, string, paper and pencils

**Week 2: What's the story in magazine advertising?**

**1. Opening:** A poem that reflects a theological world followed by prayer. Quick summary of last week emphasizing world view. Keep chart papers and hang on walls. Weave in the parabolic and mythic into this opening time. Then ask what theological world they observe in the poetry

**2. What is the importance of telling a story? Discussion with class.**

Suppose I asked you to tell me about your last Easter? Or the funniest thing that happened to you? Or what you love to do and why? Leader tells a story about herself. Elaborate on the sentences below.

- a. "Thus our story telling could be envisioned as having an internal purpose (making sense of the world) and an external; purpose (communicating ourselves to others)." Anderson and Foley, p. 13
- b. "Understanding our story in relation to God's story is necessary for persons of faith." Anderson and Foley, p. 12

### 3. Teaching about parabolic and mythic

- a. Do a combination of reading and telling Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation," to demonstrate the parabolic. What is the function of the parabolic?
- b. Use a shorter illustration of the mythic

### 4. What stories do ads tell us?

- a. Join your last week's theological world group
- b. Each group examines the same ad
- c. Compare the responses of the groups
- d. Using a paper with a hole cut in it, cover all of the ad except what you see as a mythic aspect. Then using the red paper cover what you see as the parabolic. Can you see the parabolic or is it just inferred?

3. **Materials:** paper pencils, "Revelation" by Flannery O'Connor, 5 red and 5 blue colored paper, scissors

### Week 3: "What's Up, God?" with the high schoolers

This is the class I chose for my advertisement demonstration. Attached is the ad. It has many messages and includes both genders.

**Opening:** A song. One that the youth director knows the teens like. Prayer. (5 minutes)

**Introduction:** (2 minutes) We have all heard stories for all of our lives. Some were read to us. Some are family stories that we tell over and over. Some are faith stories. Some are stories of God and his people – the Bible. Stories can help us find out about ourselves, about the meaning of life, about God, about others. Stories help us understand the world.

### **Advertisements Tell Stories (15 minutes)**

Ask the group to look at the ad for Redkin in March 2002 Seventeen magazine, which would be on a color transparency on a screen. For this activity I would ask the class to work in groups of 3. The class participants would draw a colored piece of paper out of a hat to help mix up the adults with the high school students. The groups will work in response to a number of questions to get them started. Ask a question then let them go into discussion. Then the leader can let them go on their own.

The following questions might be asked.

#### **What is valued in this ad?**

Ideas might include intimacy, a certain sense of beauty, control, creativity, speed, receiving inspiration.. This woman looks like a mannequin.

#### **What images do you take in?**

Lips, blue, on public transportation system, necklace leaning.

#### **What is the need behind the images?**

Loneliness, being out of control, being unacceptable, not having style, not being employed.....and so on.

#### **Group Sharing: 10 minutes**

Ask groups to share their observations. List them on the board or chart. Talk together about the differences and similarities.

#### **Restructuring an Ad: 15 minutes**

Pass out copies of the ad, markers, glue sticks, and scissors to class participants.

They may work in teams of 2-3. Ask them to take the elements of the ad and rearrange them into a message that would reflect God's story for us. They may take all or some of the elements of the ad. They may use markers if they choose.

**Discussion:** 10 minutes Have each group share their ideas. Display their interpretations.

**Closing:** When we look at ads, be aware of the story the ad is telling. Remember the stories of our faith. What answers does God provide?

### **Week 4: God? Where? A forum with 20 somethings, gen x-ers**

This could be a discovery lesson using many magazines. Comparing ads would work.

The collage exercise by Mary Hess would work here. Another activity altogether would be to tape all the ads surrounding the TV show survivor. To what audience are they aimed? What are the messages?

### **Week 5: "Where's Waldo?"...I mean God?**

#### **with preschoolers or early elementary**

In working with this age child, remember that they think primarily, if not always, on the concrete level of operations. The activities here would just be a fun exploration with the children to see how they respond to an advertisement. I think this activity would be helpful in encouraging adults to take some time to talk about this with their own children.

This class would involve mostly advertising directed at children, but it might be interesting to put a car ad or a home improvement ad or the like to see how they view other ads. Some drawing would work here; also some finger plays or fun songs.

#### **Conclusion**

Mary Hess, in her article "Practicing Attention in Media Culture," begins with a quote from Brian Eno: "familiarity breeds content." Mass media brings so many images with

such rapidity that we take them in without thinking. We are not only familiar with logos, but also with genres of images (such as in the ad used in this paper). The result is, that even in a cursory passing glance, we begin to assimilate meanings of which we are hardly aware. This intergenerational class is meant to heighten our awareness of not only what we bring to the media culture, but also what we take from it. It is meant to raise the questions found in advertising, so that we might talk with each other about them. In the activities of week 3 with the high school students, the activities and dialogue are meant to encourage a change of frames and to encourage creative interaction with the media of magazine advertising. Questions run at a second level when we bring in the mythic and parabolic aspects of advertising. Perhaps the varying generations will have a chance to continue their conversations in other times, activities and situations in the faith community.

## **Appendix 1: Bible verses that reflect theological worlds**

### **World 1: Separation and Reunion**

NRS Psalm 8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

NRS Romans 5:8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9 Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

### **World 2: Conflict and Vindication**

NRS Romans 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first

fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

NRS Amos 5:24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

### **World 3: Emptiness and Fulfillment**

NRS Ecclesiastes 1:13 applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. 14 I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

NRS Colossians 3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

### **World 4: Condemnation and Forgiveness**

NRS John 8:34 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

### **World 5: Suffering and Endurance**

NRS Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

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