



connections

Calling the church to faithful new life

August 2020
Number 284

Barbara Wendland · 505 Cherokee Drive · Temple, TX 76504-3629 · 254-773-2625 · connectionsonline.org



Stop! I want to get off!

Between the pandemic, climate change, the glaring evidence of racism, and the outrageous actions of the current U.S. administration, I'm constantly angry and scared nowadays. I'm concerned about the United Methodist Church, too, and I'm sad to see it in internal chaos instead of more actively addressing the world's urgent needs. Like the main character of a 1960s musical, I feel like yelling, "Stop the world! I want to get off!"



As a financially secure and relatively healthy white person, I have nowhere near as much to be unhappy about as many — probably most — other people in the world, so I probably shouldn't be complaining. My most serious personal problem, I suppose, is feeling stir-crazy from having to stay home for so many months because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I miss being able to get together with friends, and I feel like I look terrible, because it's been so long since I was able to get out and get my hair cut. But I know these aren't very serious problems, all things considered.



Wondering how to help

Since getting off of the world doesn't seem possible, I'm trying instead to learn more about what's happening in it and why. I'd even like to find ways in which an elderly person like me, who no longer has any active role beyond home, could help improve things.



My way of investigating this, just as for other things I've wanted to know over the years, has mainly been reading. This issue of *Connections*, therefore, is largely a discussion of books that I've found especially helpful or at least thought-provoking. You may find some of them too radical for your taste. However, I think we've reached the point where only radical steps will accomplish what is needed.

A personal update

You may be surprised to get a *Connections* suddenly from me after a gap of more than a year. However, for some time I've had the urge to comment again on what's happening in the church and the world, so finally I'm doing it.

Eyes improving

I'm still in mostly good health, for which I'm thankful. My macular degeneration has been stable for more than a year, so that's good. I had a small stroke in mid-May and was in the hospital for three days. Fortunately, however, its only symptom was double vision, and that has now gone.



Hibernating at home

My daughter and I have been hibernating at home ever since Covid 19 arrived. We get out only for curbside grocery pickup, pharmacy drive-in, and clinic appointments. We watch PBS-TV most evenings, and I work crosswords and other puzzles and do a lot of reading as always.

A book of *Connections*

Also, I'm using this time to put together a book of *Connections* back issues. Its tentative title is *Connections and Disconnections: Eighty-seven years in the Church*. Since there are nearly three hundred back issues, I can only use a small portion of them, and choosing those isn't easy. In addition, the layout of the issues doesn't fit a book format, and I'm not sure how to deal with that. I hope to have the book done before the end of this year, but I don't know whether I can accomplish that.



Seventy-two years to get the vote!

In addition to reading, PBS-TV news programs and documentaries have furnished a lot of the ideas and information I've found helpful in recent months. One of the documentaries was about women's effort to get the vote in the U.S., and I was astonished by how long that took--seventy-two years! Seventy-two years from the time when women first tried to get the vote, until they achieved it! Yet that seems like a change that should have been made immediately when it was first requested. It's only logical. Imagine anyone objecting to it! Yet people not only objected to it; they physically attacked and imprisoned the women who advocated it. That seems unbelievable, but of course it's true.



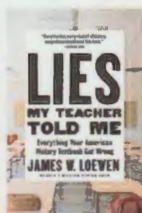
Equally unbelievable is the fact that the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution still hasn't gotten passed. And although women make up more than half of the U.S. population, Congress still includes only a small proportion of women. It's ridiculous.

Racism and white supremacy

Many of the books I've been reading lately have been about the structural racism and white supremacy that have characterized the U.S. throughout its four-hundred-year history but have been mostly ignored. Amazingly, these harmful policies have often even been actively promoted by government agencies, including the Supreme Court.

We've often been misled

A book that especially helped me understand this was *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, by James W. Loewen, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Vermont (New Press, 2018). Loewen has made a study of the American history books used in U.S. schools, and he finds that they've given us a lot of wrong information and misleading impressions. I now know that I got a lot of those as I went through school, so I'm glad to get some corrected now.



Many of those have been about Columbus. He didn't discover America. It had been here and been occupied for many years when he arrived."Chris-

topher Columbus," explains Loewen, "introduced two phenomena that revolutionized race relations and transformed the modern world: the taking of land, wealth, and labor from indigenous people in the Western Hemisphere, leading to their near extermination, and the transatlantic slave trade, which created a racial underclass" Then, following Columbus's example, Spain made a similar system official policy on Haiti. Other conquerors introduced it to Mexico, Peru, and Florida.



"With the transatlantic slave trade," Loewen observes, "first Indian, then African, then Europeans increasingly saw 'white' as a race and race as an important human characteristic."

A navigator and a plunderer

Wealth became important, too. "Gold and silver from America replaced land as the basis for wealth and status, increasing the power of the new merchant class that would soon dominate the world." Loewen continues, "Columbus's importance in history owes precisely to his being both a heroic navigator and a great plunderer."



"So long as our textbooks hide from us the roles that people of color have played in exploration, from at least 6000 BC to the twentieth century, James Loewen finds, "they encourage us to look to Europe and its extensions as the seat of all knowledge and intelligence. ... They imply that whites are the only people who really matter."

Comfort for settlers' descendants

We've also been misled about Thanksgiving; it seems. "The notion that 'we' advanced peoples provided for the Natives, exactly the converse of the truth, is not benign. It reemerges time and time again in our history to complicate race relations."

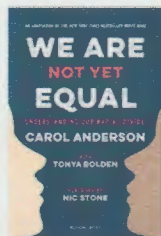
Some Native Americas had enslaved each other long before Europeans arrived, Loewen finds, and then Europeans vastly expanded Indian slavery. Also, colonists sent enslaved American Indians to the West Indies in exchange for enslaved Africans. However, says Loewen, textbook authors still write history to comfort descendants of the "settlers."

Few authors, he finds, mention the important role that Native American ideas played in the creation of our democratic institutions. "Through 150 years of colonial contact," Loewen emphasizes,

“the Iroquois League stood before the colonies as an object lesson in how to govern a large domain democratically. ... Both the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention referred openly to Iroquois ideas and imagery.”

The Reconstruction years

Similarly informative for me was *We Are Not Yet Equal: Understanding Our Racial Divide*, by Carol Anderson with Tonya Bolden (Bloomsbury, 2018). It is a young adult adaptation of Anderson’s book *White Rage*, first published in 2016. She is chair of African American studies at Emory University.



Anderson especially emphasizes what happened in the Reconstruction years following the Civil War. General Sherman, she tells us, set aside nearly four hundred acres of land exclusively for black people after the war, but the land was never given to them.

Retreat from a rights-based society

The fourteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution made former slaves U.S. citizens and citizens of their states, but in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, the U.S. Supreme Court stated that black people had no rights that the white man was bound to respect. The fifteenth amendment granted the

vote to black men. Also, Congress issued Enforcement Acts that prescribed severe penalties for depriving people of their fourteenth and fifteenth amendment rights. However, in most of the southern states, those rights were essentially nullified by later actions of the Supreme Court and by “black codes,” a series of laws to control black people.

“The U.S. Supreme Court,” explains Anderson, “identified states as the ultimate defenders of rights, although Southern states had repeatedly proved



themselves the ultimate violators of black people’s rights.” The court also “created the mythic ‘separate but equal’ doctrine to confirm racial segregation as the law of the land.” In addition, the poll tax prevented blacks and poor whites from voting. As a result of all these actions, there was what Anderson calls “a long, disastrous legal retreat from a rights-based society.”

No tradition of public schooling

Also, Anderson points out, “the South did not have a tradition of public schooling for anyone, least of all poor whites or blacks. ... Those in power knew that an educated population would only upset the political and economic order.” And President Andrew Johnson “remained adamant that if black people wanted schools, they would have to build their own.”



Because of these conditions, thousands of black people began leaving the land below the Mason-Dixon Line. However, as Carol Anderson assures us, the land above the line “was no haven from oppression.” Both above and below, “Jim Crow dominated the lives of black people in America from 1890 well into the twentieth century.”

Healing the racial divide

“In America, we participate in a political system that seems to benefit only those at the top and those who have always been at the top: white males of privilege.” So says Zerlina Maxwell, author of *The End of White Politics: How To Heal Our Racial Divide* (Hachette Book Group, 2020). In the view of Maxwell, a black woman, “It’s long past time for women and people of color to step out of the shadows of being an afterthought.”



“Women need representation in politics,” she finds. “Every study shows that women are more

This issue, all back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, a list of recent books I recommend, and more *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at BCWendland@aol.com. I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.

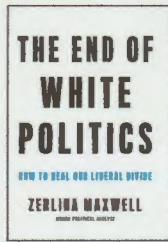


I’m a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

likely to compromise when in office, and in doing so they are able to get more accomplished."

The path to triumph

The term "identity politics" gets a bad rap from all sides, Maxwell observes, but in her view it is absolutely the path to triumph for defeating the present inept leadership of the U.S. And she feels, as I also do, that we urgently need to accomplish that. "We've always been doing identity politics in America; it's just that up to this point in time, white has been the only identity that mattered. We've defaulted to white as if that identity is neutral." Now, however, she feels—and hopes—that with today's rapidly changing demographics "the days of having old white men represent a diverse population that includes mostly women is soon to be a relic of the past." After all, by 2045, a majority of the U.S. population will be people of color.



Equality can feel like oppression

This change will be uncomfortable for some white people, of course, especially for white men. As Maxwell points out, "when you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression. ... When you've only ever known privilege, any righting of the ship to a course of equality for all feels like you're losing control of the wheel." And few people who have control want to lose it.

"White supremacy," Maxwell reminds us, "is the foundation of American society. From its founding, America has been set up as a system of white supremacy and anti-black discrimination that prioritizes the needs and wants of white people over nonwhites." That's becoming increasingly apparent as we get a more accurate picture of American history than we've previously been given, as for example in the two books I've mentioned above.



"The race divide in America," Zerlina Maxwell sees, "stems from America's original sin—the enslavement of Africans, West Indians, and their direct descendants—which has consistently mutated into diverse forms of abuse and exploitation that always result in the subjugation of black and brown people through discrimination and bigotry, while providing social and financial privileges to whites."

"The people that are closest to the pain need to be closest to the power," in Maxwell's opinion. And

in today's America, many of those are black women. What's more, she notices, "black women in particular have an outsized influence on electoral outcomes because they don't just vote—they pull everyone in their entire household along with them to the polls and, in some cases, into activism as well."



No more pale male politics

She therefore finds that progressives who want to bring about change must speak explicitly to black women and women of color, directly addressing the issues that impact them the most. These include especially affordable childcare and healthcare, and she's concerned because she doesn't see the current Democratic presidential candidate addressing these explicitly enough.

Zerlina Maxwell sees diversity too often being whittled down in favor of "pale male politics." In her view, as in mine, "We can't move forward to the future until we're willing to support and get behind the leaders we haven't seen represented in the past."

The beloved community

One that we have seen represented but unfortunately have recently lost has been Congressman John Lewis. He spoke of our goal as "the beloved community," a term used often by Martin Luther King. Lewis described its moral shape as "nothing less than the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God on earth" and as a redemptive society that heals social wounds and divisions.



Author Charles Marsh describes it in his book *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (Basic Books, 2005). He portrays the Christian faith as a set of social disciplines shaped by gratitude, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Such a community would be free of racism, sexism, and white supremacy. Creating it would require dismantling these features of the old order and helping a new order to emerge. As Charles Marsh points out, that movement is a theological movement. It requires acts of compassion and self-sacrifice, and what King and Lewis called "love and unrelenting courage." Our world urgently needs those now.

Barbara