

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 250 – AUGUST 2013



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## Beyond conflict to content

When I was growing up, I got the clear impression that being a Christian mainly required being nice. On a personal level, that meant being “sweet,” having good manners, and not openly criticizing other people’s views or behavior. In society, it meant being a supporter rather than a critic: obeying traditional rules and customs, and being loyal to existing institutions, from schools and clubs to the church and the nation. Conflict or protest of any kind simply wasn’t nice.



## Being nice is not enough

Eventually, however, I realized that as Christians, we can’t just avoid conflict. In the past, Christians were right to work to change unjust practices such as racial segregation and treating women as second-class people, even when it meant protesting in ways that didn’t seem nice at the time. Christians have also been right to question the actions of our government in the world, and to acknowledge our nation’s faults as well as its virtues.



But it’s still hard to lose the impression that being Christian only means being nice. Over the years I’ve discovered many churchgoers who are admirably willing to tackle the practical work of justice and compassion, but I still don’t see many who are willing to risk upsetting anyone or stirring up conflict by talking openly about the real substances of beliefs or policies on which members disagree.

Of course we should be able to disagree on substance without making needless personal attacks. I’m as tired as everyone else of the dysfunction that has become a cliché in government at all levels. And when an occasional irate reader calls my views “garbage,” I can’t take the source very seriously. But is mere civility our only goal? How can we learn to work through conflict to greater insight?

## Wesleyan today?

I keep being amazed by statements that I read by United Methodist pastors, seminary professors, and other church leaders stressing the need for the UMC to keep presenting Christianity in the words and methods of John Wesley, Methodism’s founder.



Wesley lived three centuries ago. He used language that no one uses today. He couldn’t have been aware of the findings of science, medicine, and biblical scholarship that are now available and that surely need to influence religious beliefs now. He would have been much less aware than we now are of what was happening in the world beyond Europe and the U.S.

## Today’s equivalent of what Wesley did

The UMC needs to keep appreciating Wesley for his brave and innovative contributions. He promoted education for those who hadn’t previously had access to it, especially the poor and women. Even in the headquarters of the slave trade, he publicly denounced slavery. He spoke in workplaces to miners and other laborers whose oppressive working conditions cried out for improvement. Today’s United Meth-



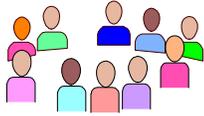
odists and other Christians urgently need to be doing today’s equivalent of those things. But we can’t expect to reach today’s people by using Wesley’s terminology and his literalistic interpretation of the Bible and Christian doctrines.

## Airlines don’t use the Wrights’ methods

Appreciating Wesley is like appreciating other giants from our past. We still need to know about and appreciate the Wright brothers’ contribution to aviation. But can you imagine a CEO of one of today’s airlines urging the current use of the Wright brothers’ planes or methods? The laws of physics presumably haven’t changed since the Wright brothers’ time, but our understanding and application of them has changed greatly. Doesn’t such change also need to happen in the UMC with regard to being Wesleyan?

## Is Wesleyan “conversation” the answer?

In an article in the July 17 issue of *UM Insight*, Kevin M. Watson, a professor at Seattle Pacific University, addresses the subject of being nice. He bases his discussion on what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called “Christian conferencing,” which current United Methodist usage usually calls “holy conferencing” or “holy conversation.” Along with prayer, searching the scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, and fasting, Wesley saw this kind of conversation as a way to experience grace—God’s undeserved favor.



Watson feels uncomfortable when some writers imply that “we are the ones who bring grace to tough conversations because of our mastery of the skill of holy conferencing.” That is, if we all merely got enough training in having the right kind of conversations, and practiced such dialogue consistently, we would reach conclusions that revealed God’s will and were beneficial to all, or at least would let us encounter God’s presence, as Watson defines grace.

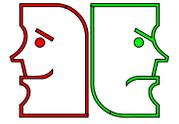
### An admirable but inadequate effort

Watson is also dismayed by not finding much help anywhere for knowing exactly what holy conferencing is. As an admirable yet not really adequate effort, he cites eight “principles of holy conferencing” from a paper by Methodist bishop Sally Dyck.

- Remember that every person is a child of God.
- Listen before speaking.
- Try to understand from another’s point of view.
- Try to reflect the views of others accurately. (This apparently means restating them in a way that the other person accepts as accurate.)
- Disagree without being disagreeable.
- Speak about issues; don’t defame people.
- Pray silently or aloud before making decisions.
- Let prayer interrupt your busy-ness.

I agree with the emphasis on treating our discussion partners as we would like to be treated. But, as Watson says, “at the end of the day, it still looks like the focus is on being nice.” It may be a step in the right direction, but it shouldn’t be our only goal.

Watson isn’t surprised that Dyck sets so low a bar. “When there are areas of profound disagreement among Methodists,” he notes, “it is a way to find something we can agree on.” Wishful thinking, perhaps, but a wish that many of us share.



Of course, profound disagreement exists not just among Methodists, but in other denominations and in society at large. We all must decide whether an emphasis on civil dialogue is enough, or whether we can, and must, go beyond process to substance.

### When civil dialogue isn’t enough

One problem Watson highlights is that the areas of disagreement often go so deep that many people find the mere statement of a particular position to be disagreeable. I understand him to mean that many people see certain positions as contradicting scripture or the teaching of Jesus, and therefore being actually sinful, not just disagreeable.

Thus the “be nice” approach, Watson points out, de-emphasizes the importance of the beliefs themselves. It can also imply that there are no right answers. Many Christians feel that, when it comes to questions about the nature of God and such, there really aren’t any answers—at least, any that humans can discover. But even the Christians who accept ambiguity on such topics generally feel there *are* answers about issues such as how Jesus advocated treating people.



### Beyond conversation to information

Another problem is that having holy conversations that aim mainly at being nice doesn’t provide any way to resolve disagreement. Dialogue proponents’ underlying assumption often seems to be that if enough people could just sit down long enough, be nice enough, and hear each other, agreement would come. Watson finds that view naive, because it underestimates the depth of genuine disagreement.

He also thinks it ignores the existence of “a subtle form of arrogance that believes that I can convince you that I am right if we can just talk about this long enough, because you have never actually thought about this in a careful rational way, or that my beliefs



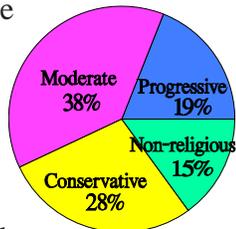
are in themselves rational and logical in some way that yours are not.”

I don't see that as the whole story, because I think there really is a difference between intelligence and knowledge. Many churchgoers are indeed rational and intelligent, but simply lack access to today's best available information. Those who rely only on conservative sources often aren't aware, for example, how common the claim of virgin birth was in the ancient world, or how the Bible's contents reflect the cultures in which they originated, or how similar Judeo-Christian scriptures are in many ways to the contents of other religions' sacred documents. If the church made such information better known, many churchgoers would surely be grateful. They might even ask, as many of us have, “why weren't we told about this sooner?”



### Demographics in the information age

Thanks in no small part to technology, the influence of such basic factual information is apparently increasing. A new survey by the Public Religion Research Institute with the Brookings Institution shows that the ranks of religious conservatives are declining, while religious progressives maintain their share of the population and the number of non-religious Americans keeps growing. Every day, we can learn more about the latest research on any topic, from global warming to agricultural production, family planning, industrial safety, sectarian violence, education, health care—the list goes on and on.



Religious conservatives, the 2013 PRRI survey finds, now comprise 28% of the U.S. population,

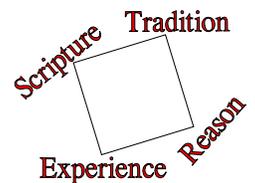
while progressives comprise only 19%. But with each generation, the popularity of religious conservatism has declined. 47% of the Silent Generation (ages 66 to 88) are religious conservatives, compared with 34% of Baby Boomers, 23% of Gen Xers, and 17% of Millennials. If this trend continues, religious progressives, who value current scholarship and information over ancient doctrines and customs, may eventually outnumber religious conservatives.

The progressives are more racially diverse and also more religiously pluralistic, with no religious group making up more than 20% of the whole. And they are scattered through the U.S., which may give them the opportunity to have greater influence than the conservatives, who are more concentrated in the South and Midwest. However, the progressives' diversity, surveyors find, makes them harder to communicate with and harder to organize.

### Substance, not just process, as solution

So how could the church promote more substantive conversation among these groups that disagree so strongly about religious beliefs and social issues? Kevin Watson is concerned by the confusion of process with substance. “The process of coming to theological convictions,” he finds, “seems to be valued above the convictions themselves.”

As evidence, he cites several United Methodists' views about what has become known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The late Methodist theologian Albert Outler presented this quadrilateral as a distillation of Wesley's views. It says that for deciding what to believe, Christians should use four sources: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a 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. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *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 I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

In more recent years, conservative Methodists have insisted that the four parts of the quadrilateral are not equal in value—that scripture must be our primary source. This view essentially assumes a literalist understanding of scripture. It considers the Bible to be a unique, unchanging statement from God, a view that many Methodists and other Christians rightly do not accept.



### Can't we focus on method *and* content?

Keith Watson observes that instead of focusing on doctrine, Outler created a way of thinking *about* doctrine. "The idea," he says, "was that we may not

agree on the outcomes, but we can agree on the method we use to come to our different conclusions." He quotes a UM leader who values that, in holy conferencing, "we have a place to stand together even if we don't end up in the same place at the end." Like Watson, I see that goal as admirable but insufficient. Surely content is even more important than process.

Can't we agree not only that we need to treat each other as children of God in dialogue, but also that we must work harder in education, to disseminate factual information, the results of the latest scholarship? Why shouldn't content matter as much as conflict?

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Beyond conflict to content

August 2013

### Jesus and the prophets didn't shy away from conflict

... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... You blind fools! ... You are like white-washed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. ... You snakes, you brood of vipers! ...

—Matthew 23:13-33

"Being nice" in the way that we usually understand it doesn't seem to have been important to Jesus, if the gospels accurately present his way of speaking to the people who opposed him. And what about the prophets we read about in the scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament? Claiming to speak for God, they seem to have constantly made accusations that we wouldn't consider nice or even civil.

Would we be considered Christian if we spoke in such ways to the church members and other members of our communities whose beliefs or behaviors we believe are wrong?

Scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others ... Their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness ...

—Jeremiah 5:26-28