

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

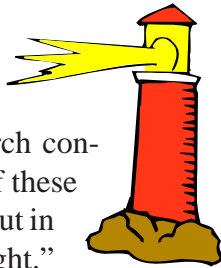
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Beacons in their communities

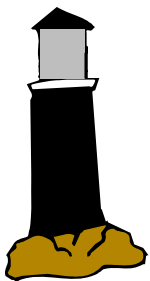
In the July 26 issue of his weekly e-newsletter, retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong tells about four outstanding church congregations he has visited. Each of these congregations, he writes, “stood out in its community like a beacon of light.”



“It was always the church in that community,” Spong explains, “that engaged the issues of the day. It was the congregation in that community that encouraged people to think and study. ... It was a congregation willing to be controversial, willing to stand up for truth in the public marketplace. It was a church that did not require that the brains of its people be checked at the door prior to worship.”

“These churches also projected vitality,” Bishop Spong continues, “and they were all growing.”

What about your church?



How does that description compare to what your church is like? Does it stand out like a beacon in your community?

Mine doesn't, and neither does any other church in my area, and many *Connections* readers tell me their situation is similar. Neither the congregations they're participating in, the ones they've dropped out of, or any other nearby congregations are at all beacon-like. These readers, like me, believe God calls all churches to be beacons, and they'd like to be part of such a church. And some of them could help one to become more beacon-like. But they don't see any opportunity to do that.

What would a church have to be like, for Christians like these to feel really connected to it and enthusiastic about being part of it?

Still time—*Connections Live!* 2012

If you receive this *Connections* by September 5, you can still register for ***Connections Live!* 2012**, the gathering I'm hosting in my hometown of Temple, Texas, on Friday and Saturday, September 28-29. Featured speaker will be Robin Meyers, author of *The Underground Church* and other outstanding books that present a progressive understanding of Christianity.



At ***Connections Live!* 2012** you can also hear lay activists, meet other progressive authors, get books free from a used-book exchange, buy books and videos, learn about other materials and opportunities, and meet kindred spirits from all over the U.S. I've already received registrations from 12 states.

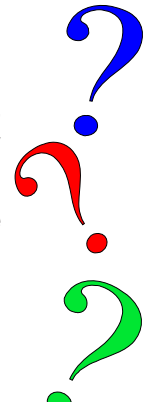
To get a registration form and full information, please see my website, www.connectionsonline.org. But if you're going to mail me your registration form and check very near the September 5 deadline, please phone or e-mail me first so I'll know to include you. I regret that I can't accept any registrations closer to the time of the event or at the door.

Topics to hear and talk about

***Connections Live!* 2012** registrants are mentioning these concerns that they especially want to hear and talk about.

- ✓ How can progressive Christians be more effective in local congregations?
- ✓ How can we influence the conservative communities in which we live?
- ✓ How can we influence public policy?
- ✓ How can we help the church to be more open?
- ✓ Where can we find pluralistic, non-theistic interpretations of the Christian faith?
- ✓ How can we persuade our churches not to teach children things they will need to unlearn later?

Especially if you share these concerns, I hope you'll join us at ***Connections Live!* 2012!**



Churches in the heartland of America

The four beacon-like congregations that Bishop Spong writes about are in what he calls the heartland of America. In each of these four churches' cities, most residents have a conservative or at least traditionalist view of religious, social, and political issues. Many have fundamentalist Christian views. In each of these cities, the compassion and justice that Jesus emphasized are unpopular, yet these congregations are bravely promoting those qualities.



No longer fighting yesterday's wars

The first congregation is in Kansas. It's in a conservative area, Spong observes, but in the congregation no one is fighting yesterday's wars against Darwin or opposing the equality of women or gay and lesbian people. And especially important, Spong reports, "the Bible is not seen as a cudgel to be used in debate to shore up the conclusions of a long-dead past."



Not perpetuating biblical ignorance

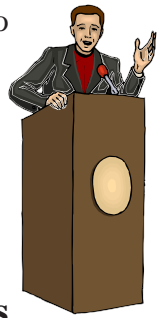
The second congregation is in Colorado, which contains the national headquarters of many fundamentalist groups. Despite being in a university town, this congregation finds itself mostly surrounded by conservative and often fundamentalist views. Consequently, the congregation feels called to speak to the university as well as to the city, Spong tells us, "with an understanding of Christianity that is well-informed and not dedicated to the perpetuation of biblical ignorance."



Bravely announcing the church's presence

The third congregation that Bishop Spong describes is in Oklahoma. It is a new, still-small congregation whose formation was led not by a pastor who had been appointed to start a new church, but rather by a physician. The congregation, Spong explains, was formed to fill a vacuum in a city where fundamentalists and evangelical Protestants are the overwhelming majority despite the city's being the home of a large university. Assisted by pastor and author Robin Meyers (the main speaker at *Connections Live!* 2012), the congregation contracted with

a retired pastor on a part-time basis to lead it. Then, "undaunted by their newness and smallness," congregation members presented a public lecture by Spong, on progressive Christianity, as their way of announcing their presence in the city.



A haven for thinking Christians

The fourth congregation that Spong describes is the one that especially grabbed my attention. It's in a small North Carolina town.

"Calls to repent, invitations to be saved, and warnings to prepare to meet your God are painted on signs on almost every nearby highway," Spong tells us. "Three crosses adorn the countryside in more than one field. On the radio dial is a steady diet of evangelical preaching, punctuated by the ranting of Rush Limbaugh."

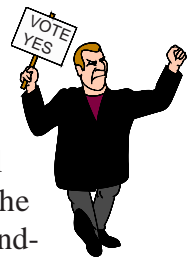
Yet some residents of the area don't fit this pattern, Spong explains. The climate and scenery bring retirees to the area, and some of them want a church that doesn't spout fundamentalism. They were having a hard time finding one, so the congregation Spong writes about moved into the vacuum.



A layman who was a classics scholar with an Oxford degree started an adult Bible class that "opened the congregation to a whole new way of being Christian." The congregation became the one church in town that was a haven for thinking Christians. Now a lectureship endowed by the widow of this teacher brings well-known Christian scholars twice a year and attracts people from miles away.

Publicly supporting justice issues

What especially impressed me about this congregation was its public expression of unpopular views on controversial current justice issues. Like several other states, Spong reports, North Carolina recently held a referendum to ban gay marriage by constitutional amendment. Pastors throughout the state came out in support of the amendment, claiming that it was consistent with the Bible



and the will of God. But the brave congregation ran a large ad in the local paper every other day for a period of time prior to the vote, stating their opposition to the amendment and calling for its rejection.



Dramatically lifted into public awareness

In the ad, they stated the historical tradition of their denomination as a supporter of social justice and civil rights. They pointed out that their denomination had ordained America's first African-American pastor, its first female pastor, and its first openly gay pastor. The ad also reminded readers of their Pilgrim forebears who had come seeking freedom.

The ad dramatically lifted the congregation into public awareness and caused it to be attacked and ridiculed by most other churches in the area. However, Spong points out, the ad also caused people who hadn't previously been able to find a church they were willing to be part of "to discover a new possibility for their religious lives." New people starting showing up on Sunday mornings.

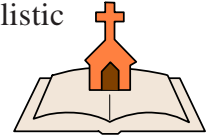


Inspiring the needed reformation?

Bishop Spong points out several characteristics that these congregations have in common. But the one that seems especially noteworthy to him is that they all belong to the same denomination, the United Church of Christ. He feels that the UCC may be the one Christian denomination that will inspire, bring about, and participate in the reformation that is necessary to break the Christian faith out of its dying patterns. In Spong's view, these patterns include no longer believable theological understandings and

medieval worship practices. He believes the UCC may be able to be the church that will break the traditional Christian paradigm that is based on human depravity, and transform it into a paradigm based on human wholeness. "Until these aspects of Christianity are faced, engaged, and changed,"

Spong writes, "there is little realistic hope for a Christian future."



Is he right about this? I'm not sure, but I think he's close. I believe that until a lot of churches stop interpreting the Bible literally and calling all of its words unique communications from God that apply to all times and places, we can't expect many people in today's world to take the church seriously. Until churches stop making statements that contradict what is now well known from science, historical research, and other such sources, about God, Jesus, human beings, the earth, and the rest of the universe, we can't expect well-informed people to listen.

As for whether the UCC is more likely than any other denomination to make these changes, I can't say. But Spong points out that the UCC encouraged the pastors of the four congregations he writes about

to "press the edges" with regard to the topics I mention above, and to my dismay I almost never see United Methodist bishops or district superintendents doing that. I more often see them actually discouraging UMC pastors from "pressing the edges." The UMC hierarchy seems unwilling to risk anything that might increase the UMC's membership decline. I can't say how often the Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Lutheran church urges its pastors to "press the edges," but I don't see much of that happening. Neither do I see it in the news that I read about the Catholic Church.



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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 19 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.

As for history of promoting justice, the UMC has plenty. John Wesley publicly preached against slavery, in the headquarters of the worldwide slave trade of his day. Later UMC history has included suffragettes and many other justice advocates. Yet we're not very good about making these parts of our history known, even to our members. Also, the UMC has an excellent social-justice agency, its General Board of Church and Society, yet many UMC members oppose its efforts instead of supporting and publicizing them.



We could all become beacons of light

Maybe the UCC is ahead of the rest of us in “pressing the edges” that need to be pressed and in publicly promoting the kind of justice that Jesus so strongly emphasized. But any of our congregations, no matter what denomination they’re part of, could become brave, visible “beacons of light” in their local communities if they dared. How can we help them to do that?

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ... Let your light shine before others ...
—Matthew 5:14-16

Barbara



Connections

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Beacons in their communities

September 2012



I was intrigued and amazed by reading about the North Carolina congregation that I report on in this *Connections*, which put a big ad in its local newspaper opposing the state's proposed anti-gay-marriage amendment. Unfortunately I can't imagine my congregation or any other Temple-area congregation expressing support publicly for an unpopular position on a controversial justice issue.

It might be impossible to get even a progressive congregation to agree on a statement to put in an ad, however, because Christians who value diversity rarely want to have anyone else claim to speak for them. They're likely to insist on each composing their own statement. But maybe a group of like-minded congregation members could at least join together and list their names in an ad that supported a particular issue or candidate.

Churches who considered speaking officially would of course need to check on IRS regulations that forbid tax-exempt organizations from supporting particular candidates or parties. However, a church can speak about issues, and right-wing groups do that constantly, so I wish liberal and progressive groups would at least do it occasionally.

An ad would probably be the most attention-getting way for a progressive group to promote its views, but letters to the editor are another way and an easier and cheaper one. The Temple paper includes letters to the editor almost daily, and most of them express fundamentalist Christian views. I keep wishing that the progressive Christians in this area, a small and mostly silent minority, would write at least a few as a contrast to this deluge of fundamentalism.