

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Progressive Christians' dilemma

Should progressive Christians who want to promote justice focus their efforts on the church or mainly on injustice outside the church? I'm in a group that's trying to decide.



Participants at a recent gathering of the group were well aware of injustice in both areas. They included scholars, pastors, lay church employees, and lay "volunteers." All have been active in churches for years. Some still participate in a church, but some have dropped out. Most are better informed than most churchgoers about the Bible and Christian history and theology. All want to follow what they understand to be the teaching and example of Jesus.

This group therefore seems especially able to help the church do that. But introductions at the beginning of our meeting revealed that several in the group felt unwanted by the church or had even been rejected by it. Because they'd expressed beliefs or opinions that the majority of members in their congregations disagreed with, some had been fired from church jobs or had stopped being allowed a voice in church decision-making bodies. Some were being officially shunned. What should be done about this?

How could the church stop driving such people away? How could it benefit from what they have to offer, instead? Don't we need to combat the injustice they're experiencing?



The church claims to be different

Many church members see only harm coming from people like these, who often question the truth of beliefs that centuries of tradition have said are true. And these members apparently feel that like all other organizations, the church must be ruled by the beliefs and wishes of the majority. What's wrong with that?

What is "progressive Christianity"?

The answer to that depends a lot on who you ask. But in my view, what especially distinguishes progressive interpretations of Christianity from those that emphasize mere declaration of belief in Jesus and passive acceptance of ancient Christian doctrines is becoming informed, being open to new insight and varied views, and actively promoting justice. The following are key features of the understanding of Christianity that I think of as "progressive."



- Using the message of Jesus as the model for the institutional church's actions and our own
- Discovering what is now known about the Bible, the life of Jesus, and Christian history, as well as other religions and the nature of religion in general
- Disseminating up-to-date information and insights about these topics, including scholars' findings and speculations, within the church and beyond it
- Considering diverse views about how to interpret the Bible and apply its content to today's life
- Revising religious beliefs and practices when new insight or information seems to show the need for it
- Focusing on earthly life, not on what may happen after death



- Recognizing, exposing, and actively opposing injustice of all kinds, including but not limited to economic, gender-related, and racial injustice
- Working to lessen both the causes and the harmful effects of the injustices that exist in today's world
- Acknowledging the validity of other religions' insights and practices that help adherents to experience the divine and that motivate just, compassionate, and peaceful action.



For another description, see "The 8 points" of The Center for Progressive Christianity, at www.tpcp.org.

One thing wrong is that in important ways the church claims to be different from other organizations. It claims to be the body of Christ in which all parts are needed. If it tells some members “I have no need of

... There are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:12-27



you,” it can’t legitimately claim to be that body. And it can’t if it treats some members like cancerous body parts that need to be removed for the body’s protection.

Something else is wrong, too. All of the people the church now claims as its heroes and models, including Jesus, have had minority views with regard to the religion of their time and place, and they have actively promoted those views.

For Jesus, the majority religion was the Roman Empire’s emperor worship, which even the Jewish priests supported. Many of Jesus’s later followers lived where Christianity was the majority religion. Yet it was an interpretation of Christianity that served mainly the church hierarchy or the upper classes of society instead of showing the concern that Jesus had advocated for the poor and other social outcasts. In those times, faithful followers of Jesus therefore refused to conform to the majority. Some of today’s interpretations of Christianity also don’t follow Jesus’s example, and their adherents need to refuse to conform, too, instead of trying to stifle or oust members who refuse.



Why focus efforts on the church?

In the meeting I was part of, some participants who had not experienced rejection by the church wondered whether publicizing reports of rejection by churches might hinder our aim of promoting justice. These meeting attenders recognized the injustice of rejecting minority voices and the need to stop it, but they feared that hearing many such accounts in meetings would make people reluctant to be part of future meetings. They also feared that revealing churches’ injustice by making such experiences

known might keep people from wanting to be part of churches.

Others in the group, however, felt that such accounts needed to be heard, for three reasons.

√ Rejected church members need to feel heard and understood. They need others to acknowledge the value of their talents and knowledge for the church. They need reassurance that many of their observations about the church are accurate and that they’re not alone in seeing what they’re seeing. And they need reassurance that the problems they’re seeing need the church’s attention.



√ These church members also need help in responding to rejection. They need advice about how to be effective in promoting the change they recognize as needed and in confronting the church leaders and other members who try to silence them.

√ Above all, rejected members need others to join them in working to stop the stifling of minority views. That means making more church members aware that such treatment is happening and that it is unjust. And getting it stopped requires more members to express their objection strongly and persistently to the church leaders whose positions give them the most power to promote change. Expressions of sympathy may feel good to the rejected members, but they don’t help to get the rejection stopped, and getting it stopped is what’s needed.



Hard to know what needs top priority

Meeting attenders sympathized with the hurt that many had experienced at the hands of churches, but most seemed to feel that focusing our group’s efforts on other kinds of injustice was more necessary and maybe also more likely to be productive. They especially emphasized the urgent need to combat the economic injustice that is so prevalent in our society. And that kind of injustice may well be causing more harm to more people, thus in need of more attention from Christians. Not having enough money for life’s necessities is undoubtedly more serious than being rejected by the church.

Several meeting attenders seemed to think that because changing the institutional church is so un-

likely, our efforts are better spent elsewhere. They apparently feel that a narrow, backward-looking interpretation of Christianity is so firmly entrenched in the church that getting it changed is unlikely, especially in the South where most of us at the meeting lived. Thus several meeting attendees seem to believe that we progressives need to spend our time and effort combating the injustices that are widespread outside of the church instead.



What should unwanted members do?

What does that mean for those of us whose views and concerns are being stifled because they differ from official church doctrines or policies? Some are being stifled merely because of questioning majority views or wanting more information made available. Should we give up on getting changes made in the church and quietly keep participating in it? In effect, that means helping to perpetuate the injustice we see it inflicting. Should we drop out instead? That's a tough question.



Usually one can have more influence on an organization as an active participant rather than as an outsider. Yet when we keep contributing money to the church and letting our presence contribute to the attendance counts that churches cite as evidence that what they're doing is right, we help to preserve the status quo that we feel needs changing.

So what's the alternative? Changing to a different church? Maybe, but especially in smaller towns, there's often nothing different available with regard to the beliefs and policies that we feel we must stop supporting.

Do we need what the church provides?

If changing congregations or denominations isn't an option that seems likely to make any real difference, should we simply stop participating in any church? Maybe so, but maybe not. Many analysts of religion believe it provides much that is valuable and that other aspects of society don't provide. Religion may provide a type of community that we don't get elsewhere. Unlike other forms of community, religion seems to have the potential for forming a community whose members recognize and acknowledge that their connection is based on a connection with something infinite that embraces all aspects of the natural world.



Organized religion usually also provides myth and ritual, which can be valuable for experiencing and expressing our connection with the sacred and which rarely comes from other aspects of our lives.

Some kinds of groups don't help

Some progressive Christians whom the church has ousted or stifled, or who feel that promoting change is hopeless but that they can no longer in good conscience support the status quo, find other groups that in effect become their church. These may include study groups or prayer groups that meet in homes and aren't attached to any congregation. They may be groups whose main connection is through e-mail or Internet social networks.



If our views are in the minority in the church, these other kinds of groups can be personally helpful. They can keep us from feeling so alone. But if they're not willing to speak openly and take action, they won't do anything to stop the harm that

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 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, 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 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.

churches are doing by rejecting minority views. To accomplish that, visible numbers of people will have to join forces to actively, deliberately, and publicly address the need for change in the church, as well as for changes in the wider society. Otherwise, our silence and failure to act will help the church to keep excluding people it needs to include—those who look different from the majority of its members, whose sexual orientation is different, who haven't had the educational opportunities of the majority, or simply whose opinions and beliefs differ from the majority's views.



We may manage to stay reasonably comfortable within the church by finding a little church-school class of kindred spirits, like those some progressives tell me they've managed to find. They meet in a corner of the church basement where most members aren't aware of them, or they avoid mentioning out loud in the church the controversial books they're reading. But until we come out of comfy church closets like these and make our concerns known and take action, injustice will needlessly continue in the church as well as in the wider world.

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Must-read speeches and interview



Within the past month I've read some outstanding statements by progressive Christians—an interview with a courageous progressive Christian pastor and some speeches that were given at a recent conference. Each one of them made me say "Yes, yes, yes!" repeatedly to myself as I read. I hope you'll read each one, so I'm including links from which you can get them.

The interview is with Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. You can get it from the St. Andrew's web site, www.staopen.com.

The speeches were given at a conference of progressive Christians in Melbourne, Australia. Links to them are on the web site of The Center for Progressive Christianity. They're by Fred Plumer, President of TCPCC; Gretta Vosper, a Canadian UCC pastor whose book *With or Without God* I wrote about in the June 2009 *Connections*; Val Webb, a lay theologian whose books I've quoted from several times in *Connections*; and Gregory C. Jenks, Dean of St. Francis Theological College in Brisbane, Australia.

