

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

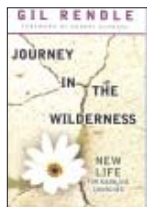
Living in the wilderness

Gil Rendle, a pastor who for many years has worked with congregations and governing bodies of several church denominations, believes that the church is in a wilderness right now. In his book *Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches* (Abingdon, 2010), he compares the church's present situation to the situation of the Israelites whose exodus from slavery in Egypt the Bible describes.



In Rendle's view, in recent decades relationships in congregations have shifted from being mainly social to being also purposeful. "This shift," he observes, "is difficult news to many congregations, which continue to think of their only strength as being warm and friendly relationship providers."

The shift, Rendle finds, has made churches feel like they're in a wilderness. Members are uncomfortable in it and want to be back in Egypt. But the wilderness is part of the route to a better place. Like the Israelites described in the Bible, today's church, says Rendle is "being shaped as a new people with a new identity, fresh purpose, and if we allow, new hope."



Our stories have become safe and weak

What got us into this wilderness? In Rendle's view, we've ended up here because in an effort to avoid becoming demoralized we have learned to tell only the more comfortable, less challenging parts of the stories that identify us, and doing that has made them safe and weak. The wilderness therefore needs to be a place for regaining our strength.

That will require us to do some learning, says Rendle. In the wilderness, we must "learn to again

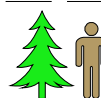
What kind of change?



Many church leaders see that change is needed in the church, and many churches have made big changes in recent years. But most of the changes seem to be only in methods. I see few churches making changes in content. I see few changing or even considering changing what they say about Jesus, God, and the Bible, yet that's what's turning many people away.

Even worship services called contemporary make statements about Jesus that ignore archaeologists' findings that terms like "son of God" and "savior" were commonly used about many gods and leaders in the ancient world. Also, much worship presents scripture interpreted literally as history, biology, or quotes from a person-like God. That practice ignores what is now known about how the scriptures were written, compiled, and translated. In much worship, too, prayers ignore or even deny what is now known about the universe, by addressing God as a man up in the sky.

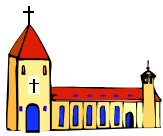
Clearer explanations or a different focus



Maybe God really is like a person in the sky. (Though what does "up in the sky" even mean now?) Maybe this person-like God does deal with everyone individually and control everything. Maybe Jesus was born of a physical virgin. Maybe his body somehow went "up into the sky" after he died. Maybe having these beliefs guarantees our going to an ideal place up there when we die, and seeing our deceased loved ones there, instead of going to a terrible place "below." And maybe only the people who commit to those beliefs about Jesus will go to a good place.

I find these things impossible to believe, and so do many other Christians. But maybe they're true, as most churches present them as being. If they are, the world needs to hear clearer explanations of how they fit with today's other knowledge, in order to make their truth apparent. If not, the church needs to stop making such claims, in order to stop driving away the many people who see them as baseless. It needs to focus instead on the behavior that Jesus taught and to encourage seeing God in a variety of ways.

live in a new way, because the old supports are gone, old assumptions no longer hold true, and old practices either fail or are no longer possible.”



The kind of learning Rendle refers to is learning how to be a disciple of Jesus who can help transform the world. That goal is worthwhile, of course, and appropriate for Christians, but it seems to me that pursuing it must include learning some information too. That would include learning what is now known and even conjectured about Jesus and the Bible. It would also include learning where familiar church doctrines came from and how they relate to what we now know from non-church sources. People need to know such things to see that a guarantee of heaven is not the reason for being a disciple of Jesus, and to see what the real reasons are.

We can't wait for everyone to be ready

Getting such information and looking honestly at its implications, however, is likely to be more challenging and thus less comfortable than what most lay church members do in church now. Starting to do it therefore would be likely to cause the church to lose some people.



Churches hate to lose anyone, but giving top priority to not losing people is a mistake, in Gil Rendle's opinion. "Negotiating the wilderness is like building a new prison using the bricks from the old prison without losing the prisoners," he observes. It's an outcome that can't happen. "You can't go through a wilderness exodus and not lose some people. You can't wait each day for everyone to be ready and eager to move. ... Not moving until all are ready is a commitment not to move."

He's undoubtedly right about this. But what disturbs me about many congregations is that the members they're losing aren't just the ones who aren't ready to move. Many who are being lost are the very ones who are most ready and eager to move and could even help with the move. They are members who are well informed and are thinking seriously about their beliefs, the true meaning of Christianity, the church's true purpose, and whether or not the status quo is serving that purpose. These are people we



can't afford to lose if we want to get through the wilderness and come out stronger. Yet we're losing them now by failing to move in the ways they recognize as needed. We're losing them by not letting a variety of voices be heard in the church.

Creative deviants need to be heard

Prominent among the people whose voices the church especially needs to hear, in Gil Rendle's view, are those he calls "creative deviants." They're often the youngest people in a congregation or the newest and youngest leaders in a denomination.



"They represent new insights and understandings that come from fresh eyes," Rendle explains, "which can see beyond the norms and practices developed by 'we've always done it this way.'" Unlike the members with close ties to the system, these newcomers feel free to ask questions that tread on the paths of sacred cows.



Because they aren't so heavily invested in the present system, the creative deviants feel free to ask why things can't be different, and in asking, they offend. They may seem insensitive to what the insiders have worked long and hard to accomplish, so the insiders try to shut their voices down. But Rendle reminds us that we need to protect and pay attention to them instead.

Voices of this kind, it seems to me, aren't coming only from the newest and youngest church participants that Rendle writes about. Some are coming from longtime churchgoers who for some reason—the Holy Spirit's influence?—have been finding new information and insights in recent years. As a result of what they're finding, they're now looking at the system with eyes that are relatively fresh, and they're questioning the status quo.



Seeking purpose and meaning

As I read Rendle's book, I wondered how these longtime members whose eyes have been opened differed from the newer people Rendle says are now coming to the church. "People now come to congregations because they want a purposeful relationship with others who are seeking a purpose and meaning in response to the questions they feel in their lives," he says. But that's essentially the same

thing that many *Connections* readers I hear from say they want. Are the questions they're feeling different from those that Rendle sees today's newcomers feeling?



Beliefs? Justice issues? Personal life?

The people I most often hear from are thinking especially about what the Bible means and what God is like. They're wondering about the nature and meaning of Jesus. They're wondering about what following him requires and why following him matters. They're wondering how to apply Christian principles to the injustice and violence that are so visible today. And in the church they want to find a purposeful relationship with other people who think about these subjects and want to talk about them.

Unfortunately, many aren't finding that in the church. Some don't even find pastors willing to address the questions. A Texas *Connections* reader recently told me that she had asked her United Methodist pastor to discuss the ascension of Jesus with her, because she had been reading and wondering about it, and the pastor refused. That's shocking.



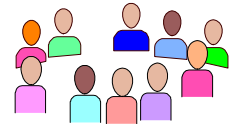
As I read Rendle's book, however, I got the impression that the questions he saw newcomers asking weren't about beliefs or justice issues. Instead, they're evidently about how to cope with daily life in family and work settings and how to find meaning through those personal parts of life.

He says that to attract these newcomers the church must use languages understood by the culture, not just by the church, without being captured by cultural practices that contradict what "the faith" teaches. Yet he says that this is not "a moment to examine the postures of Christ for or against the

culture." By contrast, many Christians I hear from see that examination as basic to the church purpose.

Purpose, relationship, or both?

"Both purpose and relationship must be present for an organization to thrive," Gil Rendle observes. But he sees that while denominations often give priority to purpose, local congregations tend to give higher priority to relationships, with local leaders being sensitive especially to what gives members pleasure.



Attention to purpose at the denominational level, Rendle finds, is often affirmed at the congregational level at first but then followed by resistance based on not upsetting personal relationships. Many members want their denomination to emphasize making disciples, but they don't want their congregation to get too deeply involved in it. They know that making current congregation members into disciples or reaching new people to make disciples could disrupt the current balance of relationships that is comfortable to most current members. It thus tends to result in conflict and disgruntled people, and churchgoers tend to want harmony and comfort instead.

Being guided by those churchgoers' wishes hurts the church, Rendle points out, because what most churchgoers define as harmony is having everyone agree. "Having only one idea and being able to do only what has been done in the past may feel like harmony, but it is actually a precursor to death."



Purpose needs more attention

To avoid dying in the wilderness, Gil Rendle feels the church must start giving more attention to pur-

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 18 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.

pose. “A membership organization will ask if the members are satisfied,” he observes. “A purposeful organization will ask if people’s lives are being changed.” That means going beyond helping them find more meaningful personal lives. It means helping them change their relationships, their families, their work, and the world.



The kind of changes that the church needs to make in order to carry out its God-given purpose would be uncomfortable for many churchgoers, Gil Rendle reminds us, but if we want to follow Jesus, discomfort must be part of what happens in this wilderness. In fact, he writes, “leaders pursuing change must

work to make people, including the leaders themselves, appropriately uncomfortable in order to give reason, energy, and direction to change.” Doing that invites resistance, even sabotage, and it doesn’t promote harmony. But if we want to emerge from this wilderness as true disciples of Jesus who can change the world, we’ll have to accept and even encourage it.



Not only Gil Rendle but also many other perceptive observers of today’s church are saying that. Evidently it’s time—past time, actually—to pay attention to what they’re saying and act on it.

Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

Living in the wilderness

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Outdated methods and doctrine—a barrier to needed change?



The United Methodist Church’s *Book of Discipline*, the official statement of all the UMC’s official doctrines, rules, and policies, includes provisions for changing many UMC policies and organizational structures. However, it says that the UMC’s reliance on some doctrines that were formulated many centuries ago can never be changed. It also forbids changing the UMC’s reliance on the writings of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, even though he wrote in the 1700s. And the *Discipline* forbids changing some belief statements that were also written several centuries ago.

Because such writings from earlier times have played key roles in Christian history, the church needs to preserve and appreciate them. It probably needs to let today’s members know how they originated, too, and why they were important in their time. But requiring these statements to remain the basis of church doctrine and policy forever seems unwise. It seems like a prescription for decline. Why, then, are we surprised that decline is what we’re now seeing?

Some Christian leaders are now making us aware that although the church must always stay committed to following Jesus, its ways of understanding and expressing that commitment must change if it is to keep reaching new people. Wesley and other denominations’ founders led that kind of change for their day. Shouldn’t we do it now for our day?