

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A plea for prophetic voices

All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice (Soft Skull Press, Brooklyn, 2009) is one of the most compelling books I've read in a long time. The Robert Jensen who wrote it is very different from the eight-year-old Bob Jensen who peeks from its cover, holding the Bible he received from the Presbyterian church of his childhood. Jensen is an active member of a Presbyterian Church now, which doesn't sound like a big change, but his journey from the first of those congregations to the second has included some very big changes.



No longer free to opt out

He describes his early experience with church as life-threatening. "I was bored nearly to death," he tells us. "I experienced church as a boring social club and religion as a banal approach to life. Literature and music, politics and philosophy all seemed far more fruitful and exciting paths to explore." Consequently, he says, "I have spent most of my fifty years studiously ignoring theological debates, which seemed annoying and irrelevant."

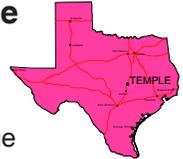
Jensen still finds some of the debates annoying, but he feels he no longer has the luxury of opting out of theological conversations. He has become actively involved in them, in fact, and his challenging book urges us all to get involved.

My heart is broken within me, all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord and because of his holy words.
—Jeremiah 23:9

We need politics and theology

"To imagine a just and sustainable world," Bob Jensen finds, "we need not just a politics but a theology that can help us face the delusional arrogance

A gathering of progressive Texas *Connections* readers



I continually hear from concerned readers who see the need for change in the church and the world. They see the need for churches to disseminate up-to-date information and views about Jesus, Christian history, and the Bible. They see the need for letting varied views be heard and for discussing openly what following Jesus may require in today's world. They see the urgent need to promote justice actively and to oppose injustice actively, within the church and elsewhere. Many of these readers, especially those who live in the South, tell me they feel alone in their local churches and communities because of having these concerns. For a long time, therefore, I've wanted to



bring some of these kindred spirits together to meet each other and consider how to promote the changes they see as needed.

Finally I'm doing that. I'm hosting a gathering of Texas *Connections* readers on Friday evening and Saturday, November 19-20, in Temple. Keynote speaker will be Dr. Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin, the progressive pastor and congregation who have meant so much to Robert Jensen, whose book this *Connections* tells about.

If you're interested, please let me know

If you're in Texas and want to consider attending this gathering, please let me know immediately, preferably by e-mailing me at bcwendland@aol.com. If space at the event is still available when I hear from you, I'll send you details about its content, cost, and lodging, along with an opportunity to register. (If you got my e-mail message about this event and you've told me you're interested, you don't need to let me know again. I'll send you the details when they're available.)



I should know by now that it's not smart to say what will be in the next *Connections*, because I might change my mind. That happened this month, so what I said was coming this month is now coming later.

and disastrous self-indulgence of humans, especially humans of the modern industrial era.” He feels that because it was humans who developed the doctrines and ceremonies to express spirituality, we humans can change and update those traditions as we learn more about ourselves and the world around us. And he believes we urgently need to update them. Why?



“These are the end times, of a sort,” he explains. “I am not talking about rapture and tribulation, but about rupture and triangulation. The challenge isn’t to anticipate the return of Christ but to face the reality that we modern humans have created unsustainable social and ecological systems that have ruptured the world.” As a result, Jensen continues, “we



need the insights of all our best traditions to triangulate from multiple viewpoints and devise new ways to live.”

Time to grow up and buck up

Both religious and secular fundamentalists tend to be convinced, Jensen observes, that they really know what they claim to know. These are childlike claims, in his opinion, so the first step that’s necessary for us to move forward is for the fundamentalists who make such claims to grow up.

“Moderates, both religious and secular, typically are less insistent about the absolute truth of what they claim to know, and as a result often are hesitant to judge,” finds Jensen. But these positions are irresponsible, in his view, so the second necessary step is for the moderates to buck up—to take action based on what changes they think may be needed.

“The crucial work of knowledge today,” says Jensen, “is to help us abandon the pretense of secure knowledge, but at the same time provide the confidence and courage to judge—and act on those judgments—despite the inevitable risks that come with human limits. ... We have to accept the radical uncertainty of our lives, yet meet the challenges that life puts in front of us.”



What kind of theology?

“To help us cope,” Jensen asks, “what kind of theology—what ideas about what it means to be a human being at this moment in time—will we need?” In trying to deepen his politics through the-

ology, he found that the first step was to pose questions clearly. As a framework, he used the scripture in which a scribe asks Jesus what is the most important commandment and Jesus says it is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28-31). Thus Jensen’s book discusses how to love God in each of these four ways today.



He starts with mind, examining what “love” and “God” really mean. “The more people try to describe and define God,” he observes, “the more it becomes clear the idea of God is beyond description and definition. So to claim to know God would be an act of incredible hubris: God appears to be unknowable.” He sees, too, that we can truly love only whom and what we know well. These observations lead to asking, “if we can truly love only that which we know, how are we to love God?”

Names for mystery

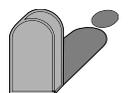
In Jensen’s view, “God” is essentially another name for mystery. Therefore, “the command to love God can be understood as simply another way of saying that we must strive to love the mystery around us and in us. ... To seek to always love God means ... to seek always to accept our place in a Creation that will always be mystery, no matter how much science teaches us about specific parts of the Creation around us and in us.” This conception there-

fore asks us “to deal with our frailty both with humility for what we don’t (and can’t) know and responsibility for what we can (and must) do if we are to be fully human.”

Wondering how to love God with all our soul, Jensen finds little to hold onto in the many efforts to define “soul.” But his guess is that “soul” can refer to the mystery within us, while “God” is the term we use for the mystery of the world around us.

Dogmatic certainty comes from fear

Asking what it means to love God with all our hearts leads Jensen to consider how our emotions influence us. “Perhaps the most dangerous of the emotions,” he observes, “in terms of religious faith, is fear.” He especially sees fear making people gravitate toward dogmatic certainty in religious doctrine. Fear of death leads to having a rigid faith in God without reflection.



Fear that there is no purpose to human life leads us to make meaning for ourselves—to merely assume meaning that satisfies us. Fear of being powerless in the face of a complex world that we can't control leads us to theologies that offer definitive answers.



This fear of a world that is beyond our understanding, Jensen observes, leads many to believe that such a varied collection of writings as the Bible could have an obvious, plain meaning on which all right-thinking people could agree. We see this response when Christians claim that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and that no interpretation of the text is necessary. And challenges to this kind of belief tend to intensify the fear, Jensen reminds us.

“I don't want to get pushed out”

Jensen tells of a mainstream church member who was questioning the belief that one had to accept the literal fact of Jesus's resurrection or be condemned to hell. She had spent her life assuming that the belief was true, so she was afraid to give it up even though she now found it unbelievable.



She especially feared how her doubts would be received by others. “I asked if she had any friends in her congregation,” Jensen reports, “who might have a position similar to hers. She said that she was fairly certain there were at least some others, but they weren't talking about it either. She had no trouble explaining this fear: I have spent my whole life in this church, and I don't want to get pushed out, she said.”

A place for community

Loving God with all our hearts, Bob Jensen finds, includes not only facing our fears but also recog-

nizing the need for a communal space where we can find ways to open our hearts and go deeper into them together, with awareness. He points out that the role of church is to provide a feeling of community, in the sense of others committed to our common life. But it is also to provide a common space in which we can be alone for reflection.

“That's why the practice of praying endures,” in Jensen's view, “even for those of us who are not trying to communicate with a God out there. Rather, we recognize we are trying to reach each other and a deeper place in ourselves.”



Claiming a stubborn hope

To love God with all our strength, Robert Jensen believes, we must claim what he calls “a stubborn hope.” We can't just manufacture a sense of hope that ignores reality. Instead, we must face up, while not succumbing, to the possibly hopeless situation in which we find ourselves today.

In his view, we live in a dead culture based on “power-over,” on dominance and submission and thus on competition. “In this world,” Jensen points out, “I am powerful if I can bend others to my will while remaining unbent to the will of others.”



“Such a system,” writes Jensen, “can never be truly creative—it cannot create a world in which all people flourish, create new ways of understanding, or create solutions to the problems power-over inevitably creates.” These much-needed results, he finds, come from “power-with,” which is based not in assertions of independence and destructive dominance but in an embrace of interdependence and creative cooperation.”

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.

We all must be prophets now

In Robert Jensen's view, our present situation cries out for prophets. "It is time," he feels, "for each of us to take responsibility for speaking in the prophetic voice." And he explains that "we should understand the prophetic as the calling out of injustice, the willingness not only to confront the abuses of the powerful but to acknowledge our own complicity. ... We must confront the powers that be and ourselves."

Jensen reminds us that the Old Testament includes many models for this—ordinary people who didn't seek their calling or feel they had special status.

These prophets didn't only speak in generalities that everyone could safely endorse. They condemned corrupt leaders and called out the privileged people who had turned from the demands of justice.

This didn't make them popular, and it won't make us popular, either, but as Bob Jensen powerfully reminds us, we need to do it anyway. "In those authentically prophetic moments," he finds, "we come closer to God."

Your rich men are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

—Micah 6:12

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A plea for prophetic voices

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A surreal church experience

Robert Jensen, whose inspiring and challenging book I review in this *Connections*, is a professor at the University of Texas in Austin and an active member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin. His motivation in turning to theology and then joining a congregation after years of avoiding the church, he says, was his increasing focus on the question of how to live fully and responsibly in the here and now.

Jensen had paid attention over the years, he explains, when the St. Andrew's pastor, Jim Rigby, popped up in the news. Usually that happened because his efforts for gay rights or reproductive rights had landed him in hot water with church officials and led to attempts to strip him of his ordination. When a friend suggested Jensen visit the church, and later an e-mail from Rigby complimented an antiwar article Jensen had written, they met to discuss mutual interests. As a result, Jensen became a regular St. Andrew's visitor. Later he was asked to preach a sermon, and he soon became a member. Some of his writings that denominational officials saw as denying the denomination's official profession of faith, however, led to a church heresy trial in which Jensen, its main focus, was not allowed to speak. "It was one of the most surreal afternoons of my life," he says. His, Rigby's, and the congregation's denominational affiliation survived, but unfortunately not without pain for everyone involved.

For more about this lively congregation and its brave pastor, see their website, www.staopen.com.

