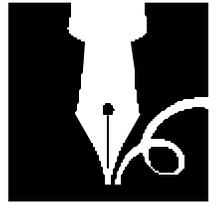


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 87 - JANUARY 2000



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Y2K—a time for seeing clearly

The much-publicized Y2K is here at long last, but so what? Writing this in advance, I can't even be sure about Y2K's immediate effects. When this *Connections* arrives will we be in the dark and the cold, without electricity because power companies' computers weren't Y2K-OK? I doubt it, but who knows? I'm even more doubtful that the world will have ended or that Jesus will have returned to earth.



 What's ironic about the millennium furor is that except for the effects of computer programmers' failure to use enough digits to distinguish 2000 from 1900, the arrival of the year 2000 has little real meaning. Our third millennium begins with 2001, not 2000. Besides, our year-numbering system is arbitrary. We think of it as being based on Jesus's birth, yet Jesus evidently wasn't born at our system's zero point. What's more, not everyone uses our system, and in other systems there's nothing unusual about this year or next year.

Asking the hard questions

Seeing this time as the start of something new and big may be useful anyway. Even when ordinary years end, many people give special thought to what has happened in the past year and to changes that their personal lives need. Giving more importance to this year can motivate needed thinking about larger concerns, in the world and in the church.



What events have been most important during the past thousand years? What seems likely to happen during the next thousand? What changes are needed? How might we help bring them about? These questions probably need our attention more than the ones about whether every computer is Y2K-OK or about when Jesus will return.

The century of religion?

I read recently that the name of The Christian Century magazine was chosen because its founders expected Christianity to become the world's majority religion in the twentieth century. That hasn't happened, however.



The author of a recent book says that the twentieth century belonged to science and technology, but that the twenty-first century is likely to belong to religion. Will this prediction be more accurate than The Christian Century's? It's closely related to what a lot of other observers of the church and the world have been saying lately.

A surprising observation

In a way such an observation seems odd, because the number of members in some Christian denominations keeps shrinking, and in some, attendance and monetary contributions are also shrinking. In addition, increasing numbers of people are unappreciative or even unaware of the Bible's contents, of Christian history and theology, and of the treasures found in traditional Christian liturgy, symbols, and music.



Still, spiritual hunger evidently is higher now than it has been for years. Many people are adopting spiritualities with virtually no content or with false content, which can't feed the real hunger, but despite that, there's a lot of desire for what churches should be able to provide.

What religion will it be?

The century of religion? Maybe, but what god will the religion worship? If we Christians want it to be the God revealed in Jesus, we may have to do a better job of making the world aware of that God.



Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed ... For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

—Luke 17:20-21

They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ... But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ... Keep awake.

—Mark 13:26, 32-37

Unwelcome wrinkles and scars



Thinking about the future can be exciting if we expect good things to happen. It's discouraging, though, if we can't see anything good coming. It's especially discouraging if we see reasons to expect trouble. I've recently experienced that in a relatively small but still unnerving way.

I turned up unexpectedly this fall with a detached retina—one of those ailments that we're all vaguely aware of but that we think of as happening only to other people. I never realized how serious this ailment was until I had it myself. Fortunately it could be repaired, so after the initial jolt I assumed I'd soon be back to normal seeing. Then came the really discouraging news—my retina is reattached, but the probability of its detaching again and of the other one detaching is now higher than before. Also, the retinas of both eyes have become scarred and wrinkled over the years, and becoming unwrinkled is unlikely. That means my vision isn't likely to improve.



In the last few years I've kept finding more and more body parts wrinkling and sagging and showing the scars of the accumulated years, but I never thought of that happening inside my eyes. Wrinkled retinas—who ever heard of such a thing? And I got this news on my birthday, of all times! If it wasn't so scary it would be funny.



What will last? What won't?

Acquiring wrinkles and scars, many of which can't be undone, seems to be an unavoidable part of life. Recognizing the wrinkles and scars can be discouraging, but it's necessary if we want to make the most of whatever time we have left. That's true for institutions as well as for individuals. It's true for the church and maybe even for our whole civilization.



We're constantly torn, it seems, between assuming that our civilization will last forever and thinking that it could rather easily be destroyed by terrorists wielding bombs, germs, or even computer viruses. We Christians tend to console ourselves with the

thought that the church (meaning our preferred, familiar form of it) will last forever, too. Yet we also worry sometimes about what looks like evidence of its dying.



Continuing forever in its present form may not be what God has in mind for the church. After all, Jesus's physical body died and a much larger and very different physical body, the church, replaced it. Will this current body of Christ die too, at some unknown time in the future, and be reborn in a form that we can't even imagine? I don't think we can rule that out, based on what we know about God's past actions.

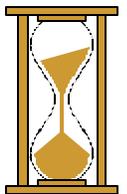


We can't in good conscience, however, sit idly by and knowingly let the church die, much less contribute actively to its death by failing to help it thrive. Surely its earthly life isn't meant to end yet.

A time for births and deaths

What needs to happen at this time in the life of the church? We probably need to make new efforts in some directions. Some of our familiar church activities and some aspects of our present church systems undoubtedly need to be preserved or revived. Others, however, may need to die. They are like malignant growths that sap the body's strength and thus need to be removed. Which is which? That's the really hard question, and efforts to answer it raise sharp disagreements among church members.

God calls us to make those efforts anyway. Maybe this new year is a year in which we need to make them more diligently than ever. Whether or not it's the start of a millennium, it's a year that will bring unusually big opportunities for making needed changes. As a United Methodist I'm especially aware of the opportunity that comes with this year's UMC General Conference, the decision-making body that meets only once every four years.



What needs to be born?

What needs to be born in our churches as a new millennium begins? Above, we need to give more deliberate thought to what the church's real purpose is. We need to become very deliberate, too, about

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- a time to be born, and a time to die;
- a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- a time to kill, and a time to heal;
- a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- a time to seek, and a time to lose;
- a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- a time to tear, and a time to sew;
- a time to love, and a time to hate;
- a time for war, and a time for peace.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-8



trying to discern how God is calling us to accomplish that purpose in today's world, which will be different from some of the ways that accomplished it in yesterday's world. We need to focus on what Jesus seems to have given top priority to—showing love, promoting justice, and caring for the poor. To let us do that most effectively, some of the ways in which today's church functions will need to die.



What needs to die?

■ Preservation of needless bureaucracy

Most UMC employees whom I know anything about, whether they work for local churches, Annual Conferences, or General Boards, are strongly committed to the church and to the particular part of its mission they work with. Many feel called to do what they are doing. Because of that commitment to one part of the church, however, they can easily ignore the larger picture—the church's overall mission and the need to support other parts of it.

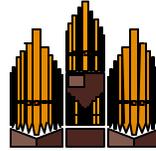


When the understandable desire for job security increases that single-minded focus, it helps to perpetuate the status quo in a way that is hard to overcome and can be harmful. It can easily lead to inappropriate defense of one's own agency's present budget, and to destructive turf battles with other agencies or officeholders.

That narrow focus can cause the church to hire or keep employees whose jobs could be done more effectively by others or could be eliminated without harming



the church's mission. It can lead to needless duplication of effort and to failure of agencies to work together. These features of the church, which were planted in the previous millennium, have now become weeds that are sapping the church's strength. They need to be plucked up.



■ Stifling of minority views.



Such views may simply come from people whose personality traits are in the minority in church staffs and congregations. They may come from people whose cultural or educational backgrounds differ from those of most other church members. Some views that get stifled reflect theological perspectives that differ from the majority. Some reflect appreciation of worship styles, music, and liturgy whose value isn't apparent to other members.

Too often we fill church staffs and governing bodies with people who think alike on most issues. Too often we let issues be decided behind the scenes by only a few people, rather than in meetings where a wider range of views can be considered. And to achieve surface harmony and maintain control, many leaders surround themselves only with so-called team players, who too often are merely yes-men and yes-women. When tactics like these prevail, voices that the church urgently needs to hear and heed get stifled. Some of them may be speaking for God.



If you've just discovered Connections

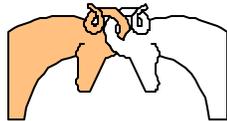
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I'm a United Methodist laywoman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. Connections is a one-person ministry that I do largely at my own expense. Connections goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, plus some non-churchgoers.

■ **Battling without clear insight**

It's time to admit that some of our battles may not be about essentials of the Christian faith, and to follow John Wesley's advice to "think and let think." It's time to admit that Christians disagree about what God's will is on some issues. It's time for peace rather than more war about those issues in our churches. We need to keep talking about those issues, however, in an effort to discern God's will more clearly. We don't need the peace that merely comes from refusing to talk about our problems and disagreements, in order to keep members comfortable.



A time for seeing and hearing

As a new millennium arrives I hope we'll become more aware of the scars and wrinkles in our present way of seeing. I hope we'll find out which ones can be remedied and which can't, and get to work on repairing those that can. I especially hope we'll start talking more openly about these things, and let a wider variety of voices be heard and heeded in the discussion. That would be a worthwhile accomplishment for the church in the next millennium.



Barbara



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