

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## A personal story

Hearing scriptures read that were favorites of the deceased at some recent funerals made me think about what my favorite scriptures were. I thought about writing an issue of *Connections* based on them. Then a *Connections* reader wrote urging me to do an issue about my own journey. My favorite scriptures are part of it, I realized. A coincidence? Maybe, maybe not.



I've used these scriptures and told parts of my story in various issues of *Connections*, but I'm putting it all together here. Maybe it will help some readers see something new in their own stories, about what God wants them to do. If it turns you off instead, please ignore it.

## Living a fortunate life



I grew up in Houston as the only child of loving, conservative, church-going Methodist parents. My father was an officer of a small oil company and my mother was a full-time homemaker. I graduated from S.M.U., then worked for a major oil company for four years as a mathematician doing computer programming. Then I quit my job, married, and moved to Temple, a central Texas town whose population is now about 50,000. I became a full-time homemaker and volunteer, which I thought was what all women were supposed to do.



My husband, a Temple native, has been in a family feed-manufacturing business all his life, until he retired four years ago. He's still very busy with church, civic, and business-related activities. We especially enjoy travel and classical music. We have a grown daughter who lives in Houston.

## Beginning to wonder and investigate

I've been an active member of the Methodist Church (now the United Methodist Church) all my

## Speaking in today's "temple"

To me, "the temple" in many scriptures seems comparable to today's institutional church. I believe church members urgently need to speak boldly within it about what they see God calling it to do. That's a big reason for my writing *Connections* and wanting to stay involved in decision-making parts of the church.

In my younger days very few women were included in UMC decision-making bodies. Men made the decisions while women cooked, taught children's Sunday School, and did whatever other background jobs were wanted.

In the 1970s, however, the UMC like many other groups started deliberately including more women in its decision-making bodies. I saw a church-newspaper article saying that my UMC Annual Conference was looking for women who would be interested in being delegates to

General Conference, the UMC's top decision-making body. I very daringly (but very naively, I now know!) phoned my area's District Superintendent and said I was interested. He said, "We already have our delegates." I shrank back into meek silence for years.



## Challenge and inspiration for today

Older and wiser now about how the UMC works, I've been active at all its levels and have been a General Conference delegate twice. I'm often saddened by what I see. In meetings from the local to the general-church level, for example, we spend a high proportion of our time on tiresome and unnecessary reports, and on controversy about relatively low-priority issues. I believe we urgently need to use our gatherings instead for challenging and motivating attenders and for focusing on how to recognize God's call in today's world and how to respond more effectively to it.

I believe we need to shut the doors on church methods that are unfaithful or that no longer work. I therefore feel I must stand in today's "temple" and speak up.

**During the night an angel of God opened the prison doors, brought [the apostles] out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."**

—Acts 5:19-20

**Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!**

—Malachi 1:10

life. Only after about forty-five years, however, did I start thinking about the church's purpose. Turmoil in my local church motivated me to investigate.



I'm a bookaholic, so I investigated by reading.

I soon realized that something odd was happening. I'd always read a lot, and I often read serious books, including some about theology. But now I was devouring one book after another, and some were on topics that I'd hardly been aware of before. Whenever I began tiring of one topic I found myself urgently wanting to read about a surprising new one. It was like being led through a custom-designed course of study that was systematically preparing me for something, though I couldn't imagine what the something might be. Finally I re-

**Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?**

—Matthew 15:2

alized that God was behind this process. It led me to feel that much of what churches did was very unlikely to accomplish their real purpose.

None of the books that I read during these years were brought to my attention by any pastor or church program. In fact, I'd never heard any pastor mention that he was interested in such topics, much less notice that I was. Then a new pastor came and revealed that he was reading and thinking about the same kinds of things I was, and that he wanted to talk about them. It was a very surprising God-send.



### Making eye-opening discoveries

One life-changing discovery I made during those years was personality types. For years I had seen that many activities other people enjoyed were uninteresting to me, and that I often found widely accepted customs and beliefs pointless. I saw no one questioning these, however, and I wasn't brave enough to be the lone questioner. I merely assumed that everyone else was right and I was wrong.

Then I came across a system of classifying the different ways in which people react to the world

**We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us.**

—Romans 12:6

around them and receive and evaluate information. I found that these differences might be innate, that they were unevenly distributed, and that my type

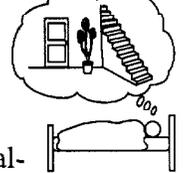
was the least common. No wonder I sometimes felt odd and alone! But what a relief—I realized that it was okay to be the way I really was.

### Breaking a life-long pattern



One day I daringly told my parents, to whom I had always been close, about this and other exciting new discoveries I was making. This was the first time in my nearly fifty years that I had risked telling my parents anything I thought they might disapprove of or disagree with. I told them about how I had realized that I was different from them in personality and some other ways, and about how I was seeing the need to relate to them as an adult instead of a permanent child. To my dismay they heard what I said as a betrayal and a shocking rejection of the loving upbringing they had given me. That night, after seeing how what I had said had hurt them, I had the most memorable dream of my life.

As part of the mysterious course of study I had learned about the many dreams described in the Bible, and about the symbolic language that dreams use. For the first time I had realized that dreams had meaning, and that God sometimes gave guidance through them. When I thought about my dream, therefore, I recognized what it was saying. God was making me aware, I realized, that my life was full of God's presence and power, which I would never have found without making the break from my former childlike way of functioning.



My dream also showed me that I was ready to clear out some useless junk within myself, and to climb to places I couldn't yet see. Finally I saw, too, that the dream showed I was full of anger. I had always been told never to be angry, so I had assured myself that I wasn't. Now I could see that I *was* angry, especially about the church and about leaving my main abilities and interests unused. I saw, too, that anger was a valuable motivation for change.

### Finding kindred spirits

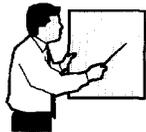
I felt starved for contact with other people who had concerns similar to mine. I had recently found some kindred spirits in a group of women friends who met weekly to pray for our church because of

problems in it. Soon, however, I found that what I was looking for was different from what the others in that group seemed to want.



### Risking new steps

Finally I felt starved enough to get out and look for the kindred spirits I wanted. To my surprise I found them at a seminary—S.M.U.'s Perkins School of Theology. It was a 2½-hour drive from my home and I knew few people who had a good opinion of seminaries, but I enrolled in a course



there. By the end of my first class, I knew I'd found what I was looking for. I commuted for the three years it took to get a master's degree.

In those years I also participated in the Academy for Spiritual Formation, a UMC-sponsored program promoting spiritual growth and giving training in spiritual direction. The Academy met quarterly for two years, in Nashville. To attend, I flew alone for the first time in twenty-five years.

### Feeling like a capable person

In school, growing up, I was always at the top academically. Then I had a fascinating job that was unusual for a woman. Since marriage I had held offices in church and community groups. However, my upbringing and the world around me had convinced me that as a woman I belonged only in the background. I felt that my main interests and abilities were unimportant, and that my role in life was merely to conform to others' wishes and society's expectations.

**Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?**

—Isaiah 43:18-19

At Academy sessions, by contrast, I felt like a person who might have something unique and worthwhile to contribute. For the first time I began feeling like a competent person for whom God might have something specific in mind.

### Starting to write

Soon I began experimenting with writing. I did it as a way of praying and reflecting at first, but eventually I got a few things published. I even co-authored a book about



the ministry of the laity, with a Perkins professor. That made me realize that having standard credentials wasn't always necessary.

During the previous several years I had realized how women had been unjustly relegated to second-class status, not only by society at large but also by the church despite its claim to consider all people equally valuable. I saw how this second-class status was maintained by many church practices, like the use of all-masculine language. I became determined to work toward changing that.

I felt nearly alone in this concern, and when I found a few other women who shared it, I saw that they felt alone too. I began thinking about writing a monthly letter and sending it to the people who shared my concern, to keep us all encouraged by reminding us that we were neither alone nor crazy.

### Writing to promote change

That idea seemed too daring to take seriously, but I couldn't get rid of it so I finally decided to pursue it. I soon saw that if I spent the time, money, and effort to send a letter of the quality I wanted, I could just as easily send it to more people. I saw, too, that sending it only to people who already shared my views wasn't likely to promote change, so I decided to write to a larger and more diverse list than I had originally had in mind.

Also I knew that the church's treatment of women wasn't all that needed changing. I saw the need in the roles of laity and clergy, in our failure

**I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"**

—Isaiah 6:8

**"... Perhaps you have come to royal position for just such a time as this."**

—Esther 4:14

**There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years ... When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free ... " When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.**

—Luke 13:11-14

to communicate in today's languages, and in our habit of focusing on relatively minor issues instead of those that God seemed to consider most important. I felt that someone needed to speak up about these subjects in a way that would bring them to the attention of church

members, especially those who hadn't given such subjects much thought, who rarely read the kind of books or articles I read, and whose main or only church involvement was in their own congregation.

I realized that I had the resources for doing what I felt was needed. I had developed some writing ability, I was financially able, and I had pertinent information and experience. I was already using a computer program that had some desktop-publishing features. And unlike clergy and other church

**"I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."**  
—Esther 4:16

employees and their family members, I could speak without risking income or status. Besides, by now I'd realized it was okay to be a nonconformist.

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...**  
—Romans 12:2

For all these reasons I'm still writing *Connections*. This issue begins its eighth year. If you're still reading, thanks! Maybe together we can help our churches move farther in the directions God is currently calling them to go. That's my hope and prayer.

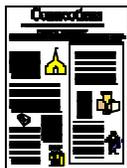
*Barbara*

## A project that grew

I sent the first issue of *Connections* in November 1992 to about 1200 people. I wasn't sure anyone would read it, but to my surprise I soon heard from recipients. I hadn't asked for money, but some sent checks. Many asked me to add a pastor, a relative or friend, or a church group to my list.

I now mail *Connections* each month to about 4600 people. They include clergy and laity in twelve church denominations that I know of, and a few non-churchgoers. They're in all fifty states and D.C. and Puerto Rico.

Many regularly make copies and distribute them to friends or to church groups. Several thousand more people get *Connections* in regular mailings from their UMC Annual Conference or District. Others get it from the Internet, at [www.wisconsinumc.org](http://www.wisconsinumc.org).



I've revised my *Connections* web site. It now includes pictures, book lists, and ways to send me your comments.

I'm still working on improving it, but please take a look and let me know what you think. It's at [www.vvm.com/~bcwendland](http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland).



*Connections* is still a one-person project, so I don't operate a real subscription system. I ask new recipients to pay \$5 for a year's issues, but after that it's up to them. I don't send renewal notices. What I receive covers only part of the cost, and the rest is a contribution on my part. I mail *Connections* to some people who don't pay, simply because I want to reach a lot of church members.