

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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The insider-outsider gap

For many years I was on the outside of church politics and decision-making. I did church volunteer jobs constantly, but I never held the offices that were considered leadership positions. I wasn't involved above the local-church level at all.



That changed several years ago. I went to seminary. I attended church events beyond my local congregation. I started writing, and something I wrote was published in our national church newspaper. To my surprise I was elected a delegate to General Conference, the United Methodist Church's top decision-making body. I spoke up at its meetings.



I was delighted to have that opportunity. I felt I could represent the views of other church members who like me felt like outsiders despite being active and interested.

Hoping to make a difference

Soon I had a voice in some regional and global church boards and committees too. I went to their meetings, heard what church insiders from all over the world were thinking, and had many chances to express my views. I was a delegate to General Conference again. I hoped that by speaking for the outsiders in these places I could make a real difference.

All along I tried to keep my outsider viewpoint. But when I mentioned to local church members what I was doing, I saw that I had become much more of an insider than they were. Few of them seemed to know or care what was happening at the conferences and board meetings I was going to. Many didn't know I was a delegate to them. Most didn't even know the conferences and boards existed. Many weren't aware of the issues the meetings were making decisions about.



The what?

I had nearly finished packing my suitcase when the phone rang. It was a United Methodist friend from another city, a longtime Methodist who is very active in her church. "What are you doing?" she asked.



"I'm getting ready to go to the airport," I answered.

"Oh? Where are you going?"

"To Washington DC, for a meeting of the General Board of Church and Society."

Silence. Then, "The what?"



I explained. Then I went to the airport. Among the people waiting for the flight I was waiting for was a friend I see at church every Sunday. He's been in our church since he was a baby. Everyone in his family is a lifelong member. They're as active as any family in our church.

He and I visited while we waited. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To Washington, to a meeting of the Methodist General Board of Church and Society."



I knew what was coming. Silence. A blank look. Then, "The what?"

When church members as active as these, who have been in the same church all their lives, are this unaware of what their church is doing beyond their own congregation, something's wrong. And I'm fairly sure it's not just wrong in the denomination I happen to be in.



Whether we feel like insiders or outsiders, all of us who are active in main-line churches need to start asking questions and speaking up if we want our churches to be part of what God is doing in today's world instead of a hindrance to it. If church agencies are doing worthwhile things, we need to see that our members know about them. If not, we need to urge our churches to make major changes in these agencies or get rid of them.

The gap shouldn't surprise us

Members' lack of awareness shouldn't have surprised me. I know that few members read our national church newspaper. Many local churches, including my own, don't send the newspaper to their members, and few members subscribe on their own.



I know, too, that in their Sunday School classes few church members talk about what happens in the church beyond their local congregation. Sunday School lessons tend to focus on getting help from the Bible for living daily life as class members live it. And what most of them mainly seem to want from worship is a break from the hectic lives they live the rest of the week, plus pointers on coping with the many stresses they face every day.



I know how busy most church members stay, with the demands of their jobs and families. Most spend their few bits of free time on TV or sports or whatever else lets them relax or be with friends. Some manage to find a little time for Bible reading and volunteer work, but finding that time is obviously hard. I can understand why so few members get involved in our denomination's meetings or read its publications. It's no wonder there's a gap between these members' way of being the church and the way of those who keep up with everything their denomination does.



How could insiders help?

Closing the gap will have to be done mainly by the church insiders, because they include the people who now have the most power and know how to use it. If you're in that group, how might you help?

■ **Close the language gap.** Use the kind of words that non-insiders use. Don't use words like those I read recently in a statement by a candidate for bishop. He urged the church to "put forth a socio-political agenda that will establish it as a prophetically viable entity." Instead, be more like the candidate who simply said, "I believe decisions made by groups



are usually better than those made by individuals." And when you talk or write about parts of the church organizational structure, explain what those parts are. You may know

what a Charge Conference is, but few other church members are likely to know.

Losing the church-jargon habit is surprisingly hard. Even though I try to avoid church-insider language in *Connections*, I often find myself using it without realizing what I've done. We need to change, though, even if it's hard.



■ **Publish less in print, more in other media.** Also, when information is needed only by a small group, don't publish it. Send it only to that group, by mail or e-mail. An Annual Conference page of my church's national newspaper recently had a long article about Social Security requirements for clergy. This belonged in a letter to clergy families instead.

For most members, reading even a short local-church newsletter evidently serves less purpose than the many other demands on their time. Yet the UMC publishes nine magazines, a weekly newsletter, a weekly newspaper, and many other occasional newsletters and flyers. I suspect we're expecting too much when we expect members to read these, knowing that many of them, like much of the rest of the population, feel too busy to read much on any subject.

■ **Show how social-justice issues relate to members' concerns about families and jobs.** A lay delegate to the United Methodist General Conference recently told me about going to a preview of it. All the global-level UMC agencies had booths or made oral presentations. She was shocked. "They weren't even talking about what the church members I know care most about—what's happening to families and children." This shows how wide the gap



is, between church agencies' worthy efforts to combat injustice, and what's getting to the local-church level about why these efforts are needed.

■ **Present all sides of social-justice issues.** I recently heard a member railing about a news article he'd read. The top executive of a UMC agency was picketing at the U.S. Capitol, and the church member was horrified. He didn't like picketing, he didn't agree with the pickets' stand on the issue, and he certainly didn't want anyone doing such a thing in the name of his church. I wondered if he had ever really grasped how the issue looked to people on the opposite side of it from him. I wondered if his

Sunday School class ever had guest speakers representing each side, or studied the writings of people on different sides.

■ **Actively promote feedback.** That doesn't just mean putting a suggestion box in a corner of the sanctuary or saying you welcome members' comments. It means setting up easy ways for members to express their views. It also means publicly mentioning the views you're getting, and your reaction. If possible, respond to each person individually, too.

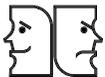


During my years in church decision-making bodies I've very rarely been asked how I was voting and why. Do you ever contact your church's delegates? If you're a delegate to a church conference do you ask members for their views on the issues you'll be voting on? Do you use your denomination's web site for sending comments? Many church web sites give opportunities. A lot are at www.umc.org.

■ **Report before decisions are final.** Members can feel less left-out if they realize when something that especially matters to them is about to be decided, in time to express their views on it. They also need to know who will be doing the deciding, so they can contact those people if they want to. In the local church this means sending all members the list of church officers, or putting it in the newsletter, not just saying it's available. It may also mean publishing names of the members of a particular committee again when it is preparing to make a decision of special interest.



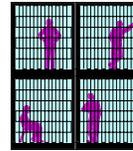
■ **Demonstrate openness.** Openly admit that conflict exists in your church and that some church programs aren't working. Otherwise members think the people in charge don't even realize what's happening. This widens the gap.



Are setbacks in church programs reported in your newsletter, as well as successes? Do you ever hear church conflicts mentioned in sermons? You could set a useful example of how to deal with such things in healthier ways than the usual rumors and gossip.



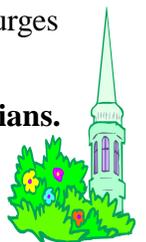
■ **Make clear that Christians can disagree.** As a member of my church's board that deals with social-justice issues, I often see us acting as if there were only one possible Christian position on them. This makes church members think leaders don't live in the real world.



Not long ago a top church leader suggested presenting both sides of the death-penalty issue. Another said, "I guess he wants us to say there's a choice about obeying the Ten Commandments." Remarks like that don't help. Knowing that "Love your neighbor" is God's command doesn't tell us whether to be a pacifist or to send troops to rescue a country being attacked. Do you hear such dilemmas discussed by church leaders?

■ **Promote honesty, starting with yourself.** I often wonder what a pastor really believes about issues of doctrine and justice. I understand pastors' wish to protect themselves from the vicious lay people who will try to get pastors moved or even ousted if they reveal views the lay person disagrees with. However, when pastors and other leaders won't even risk revealing their beliefs, it's hard to see them as convincing advocates for a gospel that urges us to risk our very lives.

■ **Design the church for busy Christians.** Decrease the number of away-from-home meetings and levels of church bureaucracy. Organize the church so that busy members don't have to feel like outsiders.



If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start getting it monthly by U.S. mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. To get *Connections* by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 7 years' back issues that are available, send \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write, phone, or e-mail me (addresses and numbers on page 1), or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland>.



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 voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

What makes someone a church insider?

Have I become an insider, despite feeling that I'm still an outsider in many ways? I wonder. Maybe I don't fit either category now. I'm not a delegate to the General Conference that meets in May. Maybe I'm too much like an insider for the outsiders to want me representing them, but too much of a boat-rocker for the insiders to want me in the boat. ?

What makes someone a church insider? Interest? Knowledge? Those are necessary but not enough. Time for reading a lot and going to meetings? That seems necessary in the present UMC system. Being seen as an insider? Maybe, but some people whom

others see as insiders don't see themselves that way. As I've referred to it here, being an insider mainly means being directly involved in the church structure—holding a major volunteer office or a paying job in the church, especially at a level above the local church, or at least playing an active part in regional or national gatherings. Sometimes it's having influence because of previous positions you've held.



There's a sense in which God wants everyone to be an insider, however, simply by being part of the church. We all need to help that become not only possible but likely.

Barbara

A language gap

“A Covenant Council is a table of spiritual and prophetic lay and clergy leaders . . .

Covenant councils will model relational community . . .

These councils will provide a networked order for our relationship and life together as a ‘connectional’ people . . .”

Do those statements mean anything to you? They don't tell me much, yet they come from a select group at the top level of my church.



How can we persuade our church leaders to use words that make sense to most church members?

