

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## What is effectiveness?

What makes a church effective? Last month I suggested that we should evaluate pastors on their effectiveness as leaders, not just on how well they love and serve church members. But pastors aren't the only people responsible for the church's effectiveness. All members need to claim their God-given responsibility and to take the initiative in evaluating and improving effectiveness. Even when they're not church officeholders, lay Christians can be catalysts for needed change.



The catch, of course, is that opinions differ widely about what effectiveness is. Members' expectations of pastors, as well as pastors' and supervisors' evaluations, all depend on how we define and measure effectiveness in the church. How we evaluate a church's effectiveness depends to a great extent on what we believe the church's purpose is.

## Recognizing God's goal for us

What goal are we aiming at? And is this the goal God wants for us? Doing low-priority things well is pointless, even counterproductive. We may pride ourselves on driving fast in a first-class car, making good time and getting great gas mileage. But if we're on the wrong road in the first place, we may just be spinning our wheels, going nowhere fast.



From my reading of the Bible, I believe God wants us to show the world what God is like and to help people be more like Christ. We are called to imitate Jesus's example by meeting people's needs and acting in their best interests, as described in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 25, and elsewhere in the Gospels. Anything that doesn't promote this goal may actually distract from it.

## Our methods matter

In the church, knowing where we're trying to go is a key part of being effective. But so is choosing which methods we use to get there. In fact, effectiveness may require seeing the means as the goal.

Sometimes our methods contradict what we say we believe. We may seek to minister to the world, but in fact serve mainly ourselves. We may claim to be concerned about ordinary people, yet stack committees with wealthy professionals in high-status jobs.



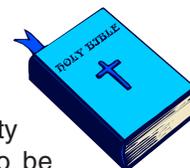
We may value women equally with men, yet keep choosing mainly men for key tasks and using all-masculine language that makes women invisible. We may long for racial equality, yet balk at learning another language or visiting another part of town. We may bemoan the spiritual emptiness of our fast-paced consumer society, yet offer church services as trivial and repetitive as any slick top-40 hit.

## Sometimes the means is the goal

If our means are to be goals in themselves, they must reflect the goals of the Bible. Should we soothe the comfortable majority or listen for the prophetic voices? Is God on the side of the top dog or the underdog? Is Christian community about giving and taking orders, or about talking and listening?

Choosing the right method may mean resisting formats for meetings that encourage rubber-stamp decisions and discourage new ideas. It may mean paying less attention to the twelve disciples, the in-group, and more to the Samaritan woman, the persistent outsider with insight into God's will. For pastors, bishops, and church committee leaders, it may mean seeking opportunities to talk one-on-one with church members and staffers as equals, not just to give orders or announce decisions, but to share experiences and ask for feedback.

We may fear that these methods will make us *less* effective. Certainly they all take more time and effort. But isn't quality our yardstick? Shouldn't we try to be most effective at what's most important?



## Goals or distractions?

Sometimes what we think are our main goals may only be parts of the real goals. Many churches, for example, focus on evangelism, but persuading people to accept Christ should be only the beginning, and merely adding names to the roll accomplishes little. Effective evangelism aims at the whole process of making disciples, helping people change their lives and the world by living out a mature faith as Jesus taught and modeled.



Some tasks that we do well can actually distract us from God's purpose. Focusing mainly on providing activities, facilities, and support for members may be aiming only at our own comfort, however unconsciously. Vigorously defending familiar

traditions such as particular methods of communion or baptism, or creeds, doctrines, and forms of organization, may merely divert our attention from our God-given purpose. Some cherished traditions can even contradict that purpose.

**For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.**  
—Matthew 15:6

Some things that make us uncomfortable are clues that the church is having a much-needed impact on our thinking. A Bible study that informs us about modern historical scholarship may disturb us if it destroys outdated beliefs by pointing out contradictions in different versions of the nativity or passion stories, but it may also deepen our understanding of the myth and symbolism that all sacred writings include.

## Effectiveness may mean discomfort

In fact, many things that make us comfortable may make us less effective as a church. Patriotism is effective if it reminds us of our nation's commitment to justice for all people, yet flags and martial hymns in worship may effectively glorify war instead of reminding us that Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. Tradition can provide a sense of continuity, but it can also make us resist needed change. Emotion can inspire us to do God's work in the world, but wallowing in warm, fuzzy feelings can also effectively block critical reasoning.

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The church is effective only if it keeps reminding us how far we have yet to go before God's will is done on earth. An effective sermon on poverty and disease in our own community may leave us feeling rightly uneasy about not doing more to help. An effective media campaign against hatred or injustice may startle us out of complacency.

## Measuring effectiveness

We can nearly always get closer to our goal. Once we've identified what it is, how can we measure whether we're progressing toward it?



### • More than just minimal efficiency

People who do church jobs, whether as clergy or staff, committee members or chairpersons, can't be effective if they just coast, trying only to keep the wheels turning and avoid accidents. I'm often discouraged by leaders whose idea of a good meeting is one that's as short as possible, or whose idea of a good budget is one that spends as little as possible. Of course we need to plan well to avoid wasting time or money. Yet deliberately doing only the bare minimum is rarely the best way to be effective.



Another barrier to effectiveness is spending most of our time and energy on day-to-day administration instead of on what will have the greatest effect on the most people. For pastors, that's usually the sermon. For lay members, it's likely to be helping people in need, and discussing possible Christian responses to current issues, at church and also in their homes and workplaces.

Leaders also can't be effective if they merely assume that they're already doing a good enough job. More useful may be visiting other churches to gather ideas. For pastors, help may come from listening to tapes of sermons by outstanding preachers. Both pastors and lay members can often improve their effectiveness by discovering what congregations in other cities and denominations are doing.

### • More than just assuming things are fine

For everyone, evaluating effectiveness means deliberately seeking feedback. Waiting for complaints or crises to arise is asking for trouble. Like a

good manager in business, a good church leader, whether lay or staff, makes a point of keeping her ear to the ground. She doesn't micro-manage but makes time to talk informally with others. For information, she can't rely solely on scheduled meetings, close friends, or people who agree with her. Instead, she must constantly ask everyone, "How are we doing? What can we do better?"



• **More than just quantity**

Usually we measure by numbers. We count bodies and money. Do these numbers actually measure effectiveness? Yes and no.

Low attendance may mean people find our worship boring. It may be a clue that churchgoers neither sense God's presence nor feel inspired to go out and serve others. It may mean newcomers don't feel very welcome. When attendance sags for reasons like these, the church clearly isn't effective.

However, being large doesn't always mean being effective. Larger congregations may have a high proportion of lukewarm members who worship only occasionally, seeing the church mainly as a provider of services such as child care and social events.

**You will know them by their fruits ...**  
—Matthew 7:16

Nor does being smaller necessarily mean being less effective. If a church boldly and publicly expresses the gospel message on social-justice issues, some people may drop out, but those who remain may be more effective than a larger but less strongly committed group. Similarly, a dwindling congregation whose elderly members tutor low-income children after school or teach English to immigrants may have a ripple effect far beyond its tiny size.

• **More than just isolated success stories**

Last month a reader wrote me about a pastor whose congregation had meager attendance, a deteriorating building, and other typical signs of ineffectiveness. One year, the only new member was a little boy. But that boy grew up to be a famous Bible translator and missionary. My correspondent saw this as proof that the pastor had not failed.



Personally, maybe not. But individual success doesn't make an entire church effective. Like the occasional person who emerges from poverty or an abusive family to accomplish great things, the missionary succeeded in spite of his childhood environment, not because of it. How many chances to motivate others might that church have missed?

• **More than just meeting expectations**

Pastors observe that some church members want only chaplains, not pastors. These members mainly expect clergy to be constantly available, to greet them by name and ask how they're doing, and to visit hospitalized members daily. They don't want sermons to go beyond soothing platitudes and mildly humorous anecdotes. They don't want to be spurred to new insights, to ministry beyond the local congregation, or to new methods that might attract unfamiliar people to the church.



Failing to meet members' unreasonable expectations may increase effectiveness. Forming a lay team for hospital visiting, for example, and acknowledging that the pastor isn't the only person who can act as the church, can free the pastor to spend more time on issues that affect the whole church. It can also strengthen bonds among members.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

## Taking active responsibility

To some degree, keeping the church focused on God's purpose needs to be every member's responsibility. Even in larger churches, we can't just assume that the main way to get the church's work done is to hire or delegate other people to do it.

The people who contribute most to making a church effective, then, are those who are active rather than passive. They keep learning about the Bible and thinking about the church's purpose. Even when they don't currently have an official church job, they feel a sense of personal responsibility. They take initia-

tive to learn how the church system works, locally and beyond, and to get to know its decision makers.



They inspire others to consider new ideas and to improve on longstanding practices. Avoiding personal attacks, doing their share of the necessary jobs, and expressing support whenever they can, they aren't afraid to be constructive critics.

What more could your church do to encourage all its members to help make it more effective?

*Barbara*



## Connections

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## What is effectiveness?

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### How effectively is your church organized?

**Information flow** – Does information pass freely among people in various groups, rather than trickling slowly through channels or being blocked by leaders protecting personal turf?

**Communication** – Do all church members have easy access to names of members of church decision-making committees, times and places those committees meet, and agenda items?

**Technology** – Does your church effectively use e-mail and internet forums to discuss issues and ideas?

**Planning** – Does your church have, and publicize, a full-year calendar and a long-range plan?

**Feedback** – Does your church actively and continually solicit feedback and ideas from all its members, and not just during pledge month?

**Efficiency** – Does your church accomplish minor, everyday things with a minimum of fuss and wasted time, leaving plenty of time and energy to focus on big visions and important ideas?

**Quality** – Do people in your church try to do everything as well as possible, from practicing music to proofreading printed matter? Is it clear at a glance that every person involved is dedicating his or her talents as gifts to God?

