

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



NUMBER 140 - JUNE 2004

BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Pebbles and steamrollers

“We were like a pebble in the path of a steamroller,” said a delegate to last month’s United Methodist General Conference who was dismayed, as I was, when it strengthened rather than softened the UMC’s official claim that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. There were signs that the pebble was larger at this General Conference than it had been at previous ones. Some votes were closer this time. But this evidently has made the steamroller operators even more determined to crush the pebble. They’re already compiling updated lists, I hear, of people they want to keep from getting elected as delegates to the next General Conference, in 2008, and as members of UMC Annual Conferences between now and then.



How can we protect minority views?

How can we keep the majority rule that we consider essential, and yet also keep from stifling minority views? Keeping minority views alive is even more important in the church than in secular organizations, because the church’s purpose specifically includes discerning God’s will. The views of dissenting individuals and minorities, rather than of the majority, have often turned out to be God’s will. Thus when we refuse to include minority views in our church policies and actions, we risk opposing God and failing to carry out our God-given purpose. We make a serious mistake when we let the majority act like a steamroller in the church.

Dissenting voices are essential

A recent essay by Edward Hoagland (Harper’s Magazine, August 2003) reminds us how valuable dissenting voices are for all institutions. “Dissent is

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort ...

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,

So that you may live deep within your heart.



May God bless you with anger ...

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,

So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears ...

To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war,



So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them

And to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness ...

To believe that you can make a difference in this world,



So that you can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.

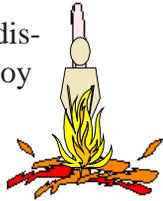
I heard this prayer read by Rev. Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ, at a General Board of Church and Society event while I was at the recent United Methodist General Conference. Do we dare to pray for these blessings? They could transform the church and the world.

the sourdough that starts bread rising, the reckless protest that ignites reform,” observes Hoagland. “Dissent is innate to both honesty and altruism. ... Dissent is essential—it coughs up germs and clarifies the spirit ... ”

“Dissent can be a dicey business,” Hoagland finds, however. “If it’s not at least a bit uncomfortable, it’s probably not real. ... Argumentative, confrontational, it’s seldom a path to career advancement.” Dissent, he warns, is not a soothing cream to prevent itching or to make rough places look and feel smooth. It’s the opposite of that. We need dissent to keep us aware of the itches and rough spots.

Early dissent can be fatal but important

Dissent can be dangerous for the dissenter, of course. “Other people enjoy railing at a stationary target,” Hoagland notices, “and if you state a belief in something not majoritarian, you become that.” Dissent has often been fatal for dissenters, in fact, especially when it has come before many other people saw the validity of the dissenters’ views. Hoagland mentions William Tyndale, for example, who was burned at the stake in 1536 for translating part of the Bible into English.



Hoagland gives more recent examples, too. “Forty-six years passed before the U.S. government, in 1988, apologized for interning 80,000 American citizens of Japanese descent in scuzzy barbed-wire camps during World War II,” he points out, “but imagine the reception that would have been accorded some hair shirt who proposed releasing or apologizing to them in his local bar decades before that.”



“As for ‘colored people,’” Hoagland continues, recalling the customs that were taken for granted in his childhood, “it was nice of you to use that polite term but somewhat screwy to object to their treatment.” A few brave dissenters did object openly, of course, and finally were heard, but decades went by before much change took place.

The church has lagged behind

What’s unnerving about these examples is that so few churchgoers paid attention to these early dissenters who pointed out customs that were contrary

Coming in Connections

Protest demonstrations—are they admirable or harmful?

Sharing our stories—can it be a bridge when we disagree?

Have mainline churches been sidelined? If so, how can we reverse the trend?

And some provocative books, including these—

Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do about It, John B. Cobb, Jr.



The Ice Cube Is Melting: What Is Really at Risk in United Methodism?, Lyle E. Schaller

The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World, Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson



to the gospel that the churches proclaimed. In fact, many Christians during those years adamantly cited Bible verses as proof that slavery and segregation were God’s will. Instead of taking the lead in combatting this injustice, the church lagged behind the larger society. We’ve seen the same delay in churches’ failure to stand up for equal treatment for women.



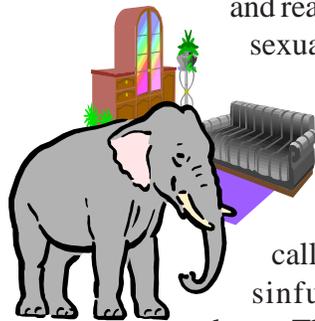
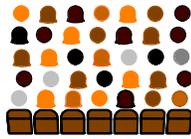
We’re still misusing scripture

Most Christians now realize that scripture was being grossly misinterpreted and misused when it was used to preserve those injustices, yet we’re letting the same thing happen again now with regard to homosexuality. Dissenting minorities are pointing out the fallacy of using scripture to justify calling homosexuality sinful, but the majority of church members refuse to recognize the resemblance between this error and our earlier ones.

Christians who call homosexuality sinful say that unlike race and gender it’s a chosen behavior. However, although we still don’t know exactly why some people are homosexual and some aren’t, the difference seems likely to be innate. As long as we don’t know that it isn’t, can’t we at least give homosexual people the benefit of the doubt? If we err by ceasing to call homosexuality a sin, we’ll at least be erring in the direction of kindness rather than cruelty.

An elephant that won't go away

Some UMC members regret that last month's General Conference gave so much attention to homosexuality rather than to other issues facing the church and the world. But this issue is an elephant in the church's living room. We can't just ignore it and continue with other business. Until we get rid of the elephant, nothing else we do to the room will be noticeable. Until we adopt a kind



and reasonable position on homosexuality, our other actions will seem irrelevant and our credibility will keep shrinking.

Of course, if we stop calling homosexual behavior sinful, many members may leave. Thus many who see the need for change say we shouldn't stop yet. We need to give unconvinced members more time, they say. But why wait to stop doing harm, once we've recognized the harm? Our continuing refusal to stop is a cruel tragedy for the church.

Should the majority subsidize minority views?

A prominent United Methodist recently told me he felt that the majority in the church should not subsidize minorities by letting UMC policies and actions reflect any minority views. He acknowledged that a minority view may turn out to be God's will, but he believes we should wait for that view to succeed from outside the church first—to become the majority view—before we spend any church funds to support it.



When they heard [that the apostles had disobeyed the high priest's order], they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people ... said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. ... If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. In that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

—Acts 5:33-39

I disagree. I don't think church policies and actions should reflect only the views of the members who are most numerous and contribute the most money. And why should we use only the world's acceptance as our proof that something is God's will?

To avoid opposing God, the church needs to let minority and majority views exist together within the church. Some of our pebbles will turn out to be from God, so we need to keep the steamrolling majority from crushing them before their value is recognized.

When church members have different understandings of what God's will is, why not admit this and let separate groups within the church promote each view? We could include both a pro-life advocacy group and a pro-choice group, for example, in the same congregation. I'm not sure there's any real need to adopt an official policy about every issue and to prohibit ministries that differ from it. When

Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

—Matthew 13:30

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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 voluntarily 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 believe our churches need to address.

it's obvious to the world that sincere Christians don't all agree on how to apply Christian principles to a particular issue, maybe the most faithful thing we can do is to admit that, while we keep trying to discern God's will with regard to that issue.

God often calls us to dissent

God doesn't call us to be a soothing cream for the itches and rough places where people are hurting. Instead, God calls us to keep the church and the world aware of the sore spots that need healing. That often requires dissenting from the majority. During his earthly life Jesus often dissented from both the

world's majority and the religious majority. Shouldn't the church follow his example?

When we refuse to combat an injustice because only a minority recognizes it, we let that injustice keep harming people needlessly while we wait for the majority's recognition. Keeping our steamrolling majority from crushing our pebbles is vitally important for the church and the world.

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
—Matthew 15:3



Barbara



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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June 2004



Comfort or aggravation?

"I like the Methodist Church because you stand up for people who will never attend your church, and you aggravate the people who do. You've got to admire a denomination like that!" Evangelical author Tony Campolo, an American Baptist clergyman, made that comment at the May 2002 National Hunger Summit sponsored by the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society, the Society of St. Andrew, and Wesley Seminary.

Many United Methodists don't share Campolo's view. Instead, they want their church to minister only to people who attend it or at least seem most likely to attend it. They also want to be soothed, not aggravated. Which kind of church do you think God admires?

