

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Two different reactions

The May *Connections*, about what I see as harmful clericalism and inconsistencies in using the clergy-appointment system in the United Methodist Church, has triggered enthusiastic compliments from most readers I've heard from. Some, however, have strongly disagreed. Some of the responses are so different from each other that it's hard to believe they could be about the same subject. Consequently I'm using this issue of *Connections* to report some of the responses and to address some concerns that objectors have raised. Next month I'll get to the topic I previously announced for this month.



## Most responders say "Yes, yes, yes!"

The vast majority of readers I'm hearing from are saying, "I am so glad someone is finally saying openly these things that so many of us constantly see and discuss privately." These responses have come from laity and clergy—even a bishop!—in many different United Methodist Annual Conferences (geographical areas) all over the U.S., and most of them obviously reflect very strong feelings. And responses are still coming as I write this.

Here are some quotes typical of what most responders are saying. Only two are from the same Annual Conference, and none are from the one I'm in. To my knowledge, no laity I'm quoting here are church employees.

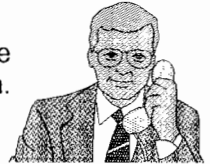


### ✓ From a United Methodist bishop—

"So much of what you say resonates with my experience as a bishop ... Clergy have a tendency to protect each other. ... I despair at the amount of time given to clergy issues at Annual Conference sessions. I was the preacher for one that spent over

## Reasons for changing?

These objections came from a top UMC leader who was displeased by the May *Connections*. I disagree with them.



▪ "You mislead people by presenting merely your personal opinions."

I continually say in *Connections* that I'm speaking only for myself, so I don't believe I'm misleading anyone.

▪ "You don't know all the factors (some of which are confidential) that go into the decisions of bishops, cabinets, pastors, and other church decision-makers."



That's true. However, if we hear about the church only from those insiders, we get a view that is one-sided. And it's a view that reflects the self-interest of people whose jobs depend on preserving many aspects of the status quo. We need to hear how the church looks to non-insiders.

▪ "You don't see enough of the church to know. You're generalizing on the basis of a few situations." Requiring full information from everyone who spoke publicly about the church would mean that only the top clergy or professional researchers or pollsters could speak. Most lay people see less of the church than most clergy, and certainly less than top clergy leaders or professionals who study the church. But lay members need to be heard anyway—they are the church. Besides, widely held perceptions influence the church whether or not they give the total picture, so they need to be heard and taken seriously.



▪ "*Connections* doesn't have the needed safeguards that come from being responsible to a board or institution or even having a 'Letters to the Editor' section." I report most of the critical responses I get, even though I get very few. And I find that publications that represent church boards and institutions are often so bland and noncommittal that many church members ignore them.



▪ "Some views you hear are from disgruntled members who don't represent many other church members." True, but those are usually recognizable, and I hear many others that aren't like those and need to be heard.

Are these objections reasons for keeping quiet or for changing *Connections*? I don't think so.

two-thirds of its time dealing with these types of questions, and it was most depressing to laity present. ... You are on target in seeing a church with a schizophrenic system. ... *Connections* is a prophetic journal that I hope continues and grows in readership.”



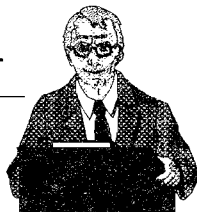
✓ **From a lay man, a management professor—**

“Your writings in the May *Connections* hit home at my church. Our current pastor was appointed here because he was a good buddy of the DS. He is as insensitive as a person can be ... His sermons are lectures with no sense of how a message might affect the congregation ... He has repeated sermons within a year (we have them on tape) ... Church offerings are off and apathy is great. But the Staff-Parish Relations Committee is afraid they will anger the DS and get a worse pastor if they recommend a move for him. What you describe is hurting our church and the UMC in general. ... We will only change when the UMC hurts enough and wants to change.”



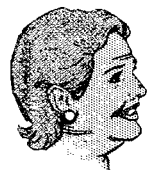
✓ **From a clergyman who has served 6 years as D.S. and 6 as Annual Conference Council Director—**

“You are on target about our two systems. ... I can testify to the truth of what you say. The women clergy were not the only victims. Sometimes the preferential treatment was in their favor. However, you are right in your overall assessment.”



✓ **From a lay woman active throughout the UMC for many years, from the local to the General Conference level—**

“An excellent edition of *Connections*. ... Abilities are matched to needs, but it's the abilities of the congregation that are matched to the needs of the clergy person. ... You are absolutely right that Annual Conference sessions are about clergy and clergy issues.”



✓ **From a lay man, an Annual Conference Lay Leader and General Conference delegate who works with UMC members all over the U.S.—**

“If anyone does not believe that the scenarios you described are alive and well ... (not in every place all the time, but in all places some of the time), then they need to get out of their boxes and experience what the real world is like. Tell them to talk to the

people who gather in the hallways and outside the church after the Charge Conferences and PPR meetings. Of course, any bishop and cabinet will say, ‘That is not us. Surely you are talking about someone else.’ ... It ends up being, ‘Well, you know, we kinda had to make an exception in this case because . . .’ It is the ‘because’s that have created low morale among the clergy and distrust among the laity. Only visionary and courageous bishops and cabinets can correct that!”



✓ **From a clergywoman—**

“I really appreciated your May edition. It sounded like you were talking about my Annual Conference. ... My father is UMC clergy, and I have seen evidence of ‘two different systems’ for as long as I can remember. ... One of the difficult problems for a bishop and cabinet to overcome is the desire to minimize conflict. Sometimes conflict is the way people learn to change their views ... It is precisely through confronting these evils and working through them that the church will become more Christ-like and mission minded.”

✓ **From a clergyman, a retreat center director who leads retreats for many laity and clergy—**

“You are right—the rules are not the same for everyone ... You have started a dialogue that has three dimensions: justice, consultation, and effectiveness. All need to be open.”



✓ **From a lay man, #1 General Conference delegate from his Annual Conference and chairperson of a General Conference committee—**

“Of course the ‘what happens instead’ system is rampant in my Annual Conference and in all others. ... A blatant problem that you lay out SO eloquently is the glass ceiling for clergywomen. ... Gender and ethnic inclusiveness and advancement among clergy rises little above tokenism. ... You are more than justified in your views.”



**A cabinet says “No!”**

After reading the May *Connections*, the bishop of my Annual Conference expressed some concerns about what I had written. He asked me to discuss it with him and his cabinet at one of their meetings,

and I have done that. The atmosphere was cordial, and I appreciated getting to present my views and to hear the cabinet's. However, most of their views were quite different from nearly all I've heard from other readers. Their main objections to what I said in the May *Connections* were these.



▪ **“The tone was inappropriately harsh.”** They may be right about this. A few other responders also mentioned it. But anger is the only appropriate reaction to some situations, and many responders found my comments quite restrained for the subject I was writing about.



▪ **“You gave the wrong impression that all bishops and DSs always misuse the appointment system.”** I'll concede this. I'm sorry I didn't acknowledge that not all bishops and DSs abuse the appointment system, and that many appointments are good for congregations and their surrounding communities as well as for their pastors. However, all that I hear, see, and read tells me that the abuses I described are extremely common and widespread.

▪ **“Your description of the ‘two different systems’ gave the mistaken impression that one was used for all men and the other for all women.”** If I gave that impression, it was unintentional.



▪ **“You didn't acknowledge that women have more opportunity in the UMC than in many—maybe most—other denominations.”** True.

▪ **“Connections is most useful when you tell your feelings and experience rather than generalizing.”** I feel that widespread problems are most important to write about. And when I claim that one is widespread, I do so on the basis of what I consider reliable and extensive information, not just my speculation or my personal experience.

▪ **“Your description of the reasons for using the itinerant system omitted the main one: it can promote the church's mission most effectively.”** I agree that this is the main reason, and I felt I was including it when I said that itinerancy enabled the church to meet the needs in many different congregations and communities. Maybe that wasn't clear.



▪ **“You were undoubtedly writing about your own Annual Conference”** I never write about what I see only in my own congregation or Conference. Sending *Connections* nationwide would be pointless if I were not writing about problems that I believe to be widespread throughout the church.



▪ **“This cabinet never shows favoritism or does the other harmful things you described. Your accusations were painful as well as wrong.”** I find this incredible because of what I see and what I hear from people who have experienced the problems I described.

▪ **“Your claim that clergy consider salary as a big factor is wrong.”** I'll leave that for readers to decide.



### Kind of humorous?

The two responders I'm quoting next wrote after learning that I had met with the cabinet. Neither of them is in my Annual Conference.

✓ **From a clergywoman whose job at a UM seminary has involved working with clergy and laity from a wide geographical area—**

“The thing that strikes me is the whole cabinet seeming to ‘call you on the carpet.’ Though you say it wasn't an inquisition I still get that image, as you are voicing the thoughts of so many United Methodists and the cabinet is finding it so offensive. It shows how much they don't hear from people directly or choose to ignore.



The picture I have is of the cabinet gathering in full numbers to somehow prove a point to one author—it's kind of humorous.”

✓ **From a lay woman active in her Annual Conference—** “You've touched a nerve with those leaders that has made them more heavy-handed than they would want known, I expect. ... The defensiveness comes when caught in a system that keeps delivering the same old thing. ... Your insightful letter is exposing the system, but it feels like *them*. ... We walk together yet often do not ‘put the skunk on the table’ so that we can all talk together.”



### It's time for brave action

The UMC system has many advantages, so we need to save it, but that will require bold action.

✓ **Church members** must pray for the church, get clear about the church's real purpose, and be willing to accept pastors whose gender or race isn't what they've been used to. They must learn how the UMC system works, and then express their views to lay and clergy leaders, locally and at higher levels.

✓ **Pastor Parish Relations Committees** must inform themselves (going beyond what their pastor

and DS tell them) about the system, its people, and their congregation's views. They must act when change is needed, remembering that the church's mission is more important than any pastor's wishes.

✓ **Cabinets** must give laity and clergy full information about appointment policies, about congregations, and about pastors' salaries, experience, and qualifications. Secrecy breeds speculation, error, anger, suspicion, and distrust that hurt the church.

It's time to clear the way for doing the ministries God calls us to do.

*Barbara*



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### Two different reactions



#### UMC Annual Conference—mainly for clergy?

Most responders to the May *Connections* who commented on what I said about Annual Conference sessions agreed with it. However, one responder insists that AC is for strengthening our leaders, and that clergy are the leaders, so the content of AC sessions should be geared to strengthening the clergy. But laity need to be strong leaders, too, and clergy meet often without laity, so why use a joint meeting to do what pertains only to clergy?

Another responder insists that because clergy's membership is in the AC rather than in a local church, recognition of their personal milestones must be done at AC. Besides, some longtime lay members of AC know many clergy and thus enjoy being part of their personal recognitions. However, for the many lay first-timers it's a different story, and we need to hold their interest too.

#### If you've just discovered *Connections*

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.