

# Connections



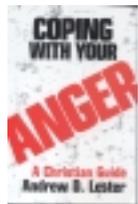
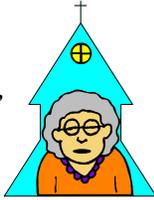
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Responding to anger

As I said in last month's *Connections*, two books and some recent church events have brought the subject of anger freshly to my mind. (If you missed last month's *Connections* and want it, see [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org) or write me for a paper copy.) The books are by Andrew D. Lester, a professor at Brite Divinity School. One is *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). This book mainly addresses professional counselors who deal with angry people, so I didn't find much of it very useful, but it included a few helpful thoughts.



Lester's other book speaks to the angry people themselves, so it interested me much more. It is *Coping with Your Anger: A Christian Guide* (Westminster Press, 1983). It doesn't say anything specific about the church as the trigger for anger, but as I read I thought about how Lester's advice might apply to church-related anger.

## A moral response to evil

Besides the ways I listed last month, in which anger can be a spiritual ally, another way is especially important.



Anger can be a moral response to evil. Getting mad about what's wrong makes us want to change it. Anger thus is a powerful tool for combatting injustice and is the basis for hope. This kind of anger cries out in lament, gives voice to pain and suffering, and believes God hears and will act on our behalf or on behalf of others who are suffering because of unjust treatment. This anger works to promote change and believes change can happen.

Andrew Lester quotes John Wesley as saying that getting angry about sin is not itself a sin but rather a

**How baffling you are, oh Church,  
and yet how I love you!**

**How much you have made me suffer,  
and yet how much I owe you!**

**I should like to see you destroyed,  
and yet I need your presence.**

**You have given me so much scandal,  
and yet you have made me  
understand sanctity.**

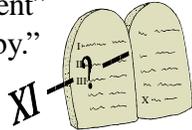
**I have seen nothing in the world  
more devoted to obscurity, more  
compromised, more false, and I have  
touched nothing more pure, more  
generous, more beautiful. How often  
have I wanted to shut the doors of  
my soul in your face, and how often  
have I prayed to die in the safety of  
your arms.**

**No, I cannot free myself from you,  
because I am you, although not  
completely.**

**And where should I go?**

— Carlo Carretto  
*The God Who Comes* (Orbis Books, 1974)  
Used with permission

duty. Similarly, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel says an appropriate “eleventh commandment” would be “Thou shalt not stand idly by.”



## God’s values or ours?

Of course, we can’t faithfully carry out that duty unless our moral values express God’s values, and unfortunately we often deceive ourselves and claim God’s stamp of approval for values that are only ours. In the church, those values may be our desire for the comfort of the status quo, our feeling that conflict is always bad, our desire for the church to minister only to us rather than to the world, or our attachment to incorrect beliefs or Bible interpretations.

It’s dangerously easy to interpret threats to ourselves as if they were threats to God. We often claim that our anger is on God’s behalf when in reality we are merely defending our own immaturity, arrogance, insecurity, or incompetence. That kind of anger is self-righteous. It tries to punish and destroy enemies



rather than inviting them to become transformed. By contrast, righteous anger reacts to injustice. It acknowledges enemies’ humanity and aims at repentance, reconciliation, and transformation.

## Fear of anger perpetuates injustice

A big reason for the church’s reluctance to be a champion of justice, it seems, is our fear of getting angry. Christians who are afraid of anger are unlikely to feel compassion and take courageous action in the face of evil. However, anger is the most loving response to some situations. Where injustice exists, naming and expressing anger is part of a healing process. It helps victims find a way to support other victims. Being courageous is hard in isolation, so dealing with anger in community is essential for finding needed power and motivation. As Andrew Lester reminds us, communal anger can become real, though risky, social power.



Being angry about injustice and thus being motivated to work for justice expresses the love that Jesus commanded and modeled. In our culture, justice is assumed to mean punishing guilty people, but in the Bible, justice more often means God’s concern for the right of all persons to be treated with respect

and to have their basic needs met. Our failure to get angry and express our anger about injustice perpetuates injustice and supports its perpetrators.

## What to do with anger



Andrew Lester recommends eight steps for dealing with our anger.

**[1] Become aware of it.** Recognize the combination of feelings and behaviors that we experience when we’re angry. Recognize the need to belong, the fear that people we need will abandon us, the fear of retaliation, or the need to be in control, that our anger may reflect. Ignoring our anger or pretending it doesn’t exist makes it more likely to harm us or someone else. In addition, we lose control over anger that we ignore. Unexpressed, unreconciled anger



festers in a storehouse and makes future situations elicit more anger than they otherwise would. When a new situation resembles one from the past, we dredge up the anger we’ve felt in the past and feel it again in the present.

**[2] Acknowledge our anger, name it, and claim it.** This helps us overcome our fear of it or our embarrassment over being angry. That embarrassment may come from our wish to look like a totally rational person to ourselves and others—to be logical and in control of our emotions at all times. Yet that’s an unreasonable expectation.

**[3] Tame our physical reactions.** They can damage our health in addition to harming others with our words and actions when we overreact. Taming physical reactions and relieving tension is not the same as suppressing anger, however. It’s not pretending we aren’t angry. If we never show our anger, we lose the ability to express or even recognize any of our feelings.



**[4] Figure out why we are angry.** Identify the assumptions that are being threatened. Recognize what is wrong or isn’t what we expect or want. Test our view of reality, looking for where it may be faulty.

**[5] Evaluate the seriousness of the threat we’re perceiving.** Some things aren’t really important enough to justify making ourselves or others miserable about them.



**[6] Revise our interpretations of what has happened to us in the past.** They can make us unnecessarily vulnerable to current threats. Bring those interpretations into line with reality and with Christian principles. A parent may have punished us when we behaved in a certain way, but that doesn't mean we'll be punished for that behavior now.

**[7] Change our long-standing but ineffective or harmful ways of dealing with anger.** It's important to notice which ways work and which don't. If our habitual way turns people against us or keeps them from taking our concerns seriously, we probably need to find a more effective way.

**[8] Take responsibility for expressing our anger creatively rather than destructively.** Learn to avoid wounding people with our ways of expressing anger, even if the anger is justified.

### Direct communication can help or hurt

Making our anger widely known to others without ever speaking directly to the person we're angry at can be unkind. The best way of expressing anger thus may be speaking directly to the person we're angry at, and having one or two witnesses may make that person more accountable. Those ways may not bring about the change we want, however.



They may even be harmful, in fact. It's often unwise to express anger to someone who has the power to hurt us emotionally, socially, financially, or physically. Unfortunately, when we're angry at that kind of person we often dump our anger on a scapegoat instead, especially a family member, but that's unfair and unkind to that innocent person.

### Writing can help



When we need to express anger but can't safely express it to the person we're angry at and don't want to express it openly, finding other ways of expressing it is important. Expressing it to someone who isn't involved in the situation we're angry about can help. Writing what we want to say can also be useful. We can write a letter to the person we're angry at, but not send it. The writing can be journaling—putting our thoughts and feelings onto paper or into our computer where they'll stay private. These methods help us acknowledge the anger to ourselves. They can be especially useful when the target of our anger is someone who is no longer living. They let us acknowledge our anger to God, too. Such writing is really a prayer.

Writing about our anger can help us examine why we're angry and what we need to do about it. Having a written record of situations in which we get angry also helps by letting us investigate and recognize the kinds of threat to which we are most vulnerable, making recurrences of them less likely to surprise us and trigger harmful reactions.

### Worship can help

Worship is a constructive place to deal with our anger. Honest, well-designed worship provides opportunities for us to practice naming, claiming, taming, and appropriately expressing our anger. Many Psalms, for example, are examples of people expressing their anger about how they feel God is treating them, or about their enemies.

**May his children wander about and beg ...  
May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil ...  
—Psalm 109:10-11**

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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 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 nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

## What if we're angry about the church?

Having considered all these possible steps, what should we do when the church is the source of our anger? If we're clergy should we tell our supervisors or members why we're angry, even though that's likely to get us demoted?



If we're lay, should we express our anger to our pastor or other church leaders, even though that's likely to keep us from being included in future church decision-making? Should we stop attending, even though few kindred spirits and no satisfactory worship opportunities are available elsewhere? Should

we keep attending, even if it hinders our awareness of God rather than promoting it? Will our continuing presence support practices that we believe God opposes? If so, won't it be unfaithful? Such questions deserve our continual consideration.

At different times when I've been angry about the church, I've responded in different ways, some helpful and some unhelpful. I know of no one-size-fits-all, all-purpose solution. What seems essential is to keep looking to God for the insight we need.

*Barbara*

## Responding to anger about the church

July 2003

### Anger that started a journey

Years ago, getting angry about the church started me on a journey that's still going on. Before that, I'd been a quiet, unquestioning, uncomplaining conformist in most aspects of my life, including the church. Then things went wrong in my congregation. Lots of members were getting mad and leaving. I was mad too, but I wasn't interested in leaving. I started investigating instead.

I reread the Bible. Then I started reading about what the real purpose of the church was. Soon I felt I was being mysteriously led through a custom-designed course of study that was preparing me for something. I had no idea what the something might be—I wonder now if it was mainly *Connections*—but I kept reading. As soon as I tired of one subject, I knew another one I wanted to read about. I discovered a lot about myself as well as about the Bible, theology, Christian history, how faith develops and grows, and how the church system works. I gradually ventured beyond my home church and found other Christians who had interests and concerns similar to mine.

What I learned led me to change my pattern of quiet conformity to others' expectations. It made me a better informed church member and a more committed Christian. It led me to advocate change in the church. It led me to keep looking for new insight about God and to keep trying to clarify what I believed. I'm still doing all that, continuing the journey that anger motivated me to begin. Maybe God put my anger to good use.

