

Connections



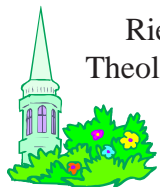
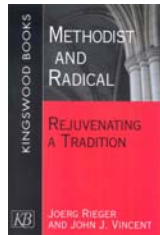
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Joining God on the margins

The church is best shaped and transformed not from the top down but from the bottom up, by perspectives from the margins of society, and the margins are often where God is at work. That's the view Methodist theologians Joerg Rieger and John J. Vincent present in their book *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Abingdon, 2003). Rieger, Vincent, and the book's other contributors from around the world, however, find that most church members, if they recognize such voices at all, see them representing special interests that need little attention. Members also tend to dismiss views from the margins of the Christian theological spectrum.



Rieger, a professor at Perkins School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary, observes that in the U.S. most mainline church members are in the middle or upper class, and they believe they belong in the middle of the range of Christian beliefs and views about current issues. However, Methodism was originally most active on the margins of society. Part of the power of the early Methodist movement, Rieger points out, lay precisely in the fact that it was not a movement of the center. It posed challenges that could only come from the margins.

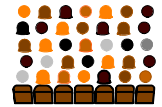
We can't stay at the center

To find out and take part in what God is doing, says Joerg Rieger, we can't just stay at the center. Those who stay there, Rieger finds, risk identifying God with the status quo. They shape God into their own image. The most important challenge for the church, in Rieger's view, is to let our images of God be transformed by people on the margins.



The voice of the middle

During and after the recent United Methodist Church General Conference, several UMC leaders spoke about the need to pay more attention to the voice of the middle. We're hearing too much, they claim, from the relatively few church members with extreme views, and it's tearing the church apart.



The much more numerous members in the middle, say these leaders, need to become more vocal, visible, and active. They need to take more responsibility for the church, and play a larger role in it. Otherwise we can't achieve the unity that's necessary for the church to carry out its God-given mission or even to survive.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

—Matthew 7:13-14

Other Christians equate the middle with lukewarmness, apathy, and even sin. They see the middle as the wide gate that Jesus denounced. They believe that what he advocated and modeled was radical, so in order to be faithful disciples we must be similarly radical. We must take bold stands on social-justice issues, standing up for the poor and for others our society

rejects. We must refuse to go along with the materialism and consumerism prevalent in our culture.

Questions for all Christians

This disagreement isn't limited to the UMC, of course. It raises important questions for all Christians. Is God calling our churches to give middle-of-the-road views more emphasis? To follow the will of the majority?



Who defines the middle? Only the people who feel they are in it? Was Jesus a middle-of-the-road person? Have the most admired and faithful Christian leaders throughout history been middle-of-the-road? If not, why should we stay in the middle?

This would require openly talking about what our images of God really are, and where they come from. It would require looking at where the real pain is in our own time, and where life and death are at stake.

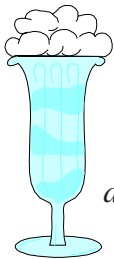
Perhaps most important, it would require including the margins in the conversation. Their perspective often reveals truth about ourselves that we resist but need to see. “The trust that God is somehow in the middle, the ultimate arbiter of the disagreements of those in charge,” writes Rieger, “shatters when we find God at work where we least expected it.”



A sleep-inducing spirituality

Several authors in *Methodist and Radical* speak about the inappropriate blandness of much current spirituality. John Vincent calls it “a harmless, cooing spirituality which ... provides a soporific blancmange mentality that sedates rather than converts.” (Have you ever eaten blancmange? It’s a dessert

whose main ingredients are sugar, vanilla, and whipped cream. This analogy reminds me of the spirituality the hymn “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” seems to describe.)



Theodore Jennings, another *Methodist and Radical* contributor, says much of our worship has lost its power because in it we see ourselves confronted “not by the One who both judges and redeems, but merely by some fantasy plush toy who whispers sweet nothings in our ears while the world around us goes to hell.”

A growing chasm

Jennings urges us to recognize the growing chasm between the relatively prosperous and the increasingly impoverished. Few of the impoverished are in our congregations, and we rarely hear about their experiences of struggle and faithfulness.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Jennings also points out the existence of a strong connection between the challenge of reforming the church in relation to the impoverished, and the challenge of reforming it by fully including people who are not heterosexual. In both of these challenges, he believes, what is at stake is the authenticity of the church’s witness.

Anger can be a defense



Many church members get very angry when they’re confronted with views like these expressed by Jennings or those of other contributors to *Methodist and Radical*. Many Christians apparently don’t think they even need to consider such views seriously. I suspect that these angry reactions are often defenses against what Rieger calls “barbs in the heart” that God wants us to feel. When we’re confronted with claims that we’re sinful or even mistaken, the most comfortable way to deal with those claims can be to try to convince ourselves and others that the claims are untrue. The more accurate they are, the more strongly and angrily we may try to defend ourselves by insisting that they’re wrong.



In reactions to both of the challenges Jennings mentions, fear seems to play a big part. “What alarms churches about homosexuality,” in his view, “is that we are terrified of speaking the truth about sex.” A big reason for this, he feels, is that in the Bible, sin relates to oppression and injustice, to greed and indifference to the poor, but we aren’t willing to offend our members by saying this. Neither are we willing to admit our failures to combat and avoid these sins. Thus we deflect all talk of sin into the sphere of intimacy, and we make sexuality the scapegoat for human moral failure.

A fateful and fatal alliance

“We have made a fateful and fatal alliance in the church,” writes Jennings, “between the gospel and what are today called ‘marriage and family values,’ ” yet Jesus is remembered in every Gospel as opening an assault on the institution of the family. Jesus makes clear that the gospel is in irreconcilable conflict with so-called

Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”
—Matthew 12:49-50

Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”
—Matthew 8:21-22

family values, Jennings observes, yet we declare them as absolute. “The church has determined to reduce talk of sin to talk of sex,” Jennings finds, “yet where sex really does involve sin, in abuse of the weak and defenseless, the church is silent.” Sexuality, he understands the gospel to be saying, is God’s way of helping us find one another, need one another, and rely on one another, but we rarely hear this in church.



Following God into the margins

“Most of us,” says South African Methodist Cedric Mayson in *Methodist and Radical*, “are conditioned to equate ‘proclaiming the Gospel’ with ‘promoting the Church.’” Mayson finds that many of us feel cheated if it is suggested that God is working in the world outside the church, as if the God we own has been hijacked. Yet Jesus proclaimed his gospel in the world, and if our churches’ central structures want life and fulfillment, says Mayson, they must move into the margins where the weight of God’s ruling power is deployed.




We avoid the margins

That’s a hard move to make. If you’re not on the margin of society, as I’m not, like me you may be barely aware of what life on the margin is really like. More important, if you’re anything like me you may not want to become much more aware. Few of us in the upper or middle class want much direct contact with the poor or with other groups that society rejects. Rieger finds that we tend to make them invisible even when they live in our midst.

Contributors to *Methodist and Radical* point out that being in the center makes it hard even to hear

voices from the margins. Rebecca Chopp finds that hearing those voices requires, as Jesus suggested, a certain kind of ears. In her view, the inability to hear God in the midst of the world is a sign and an act of sin. “If the center church cannot hear the Word of God in the voices of the margins,” Chopp believes, “the faithful action of the center church may be reduced to occasional mission trips or paternalistic gestures of charity.”

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”
—Mark 4:9



A barb in the heart

Joerg Rieger finds that even church mission trips to places where poverty is widespread can to some extent help Christians break out of what he calls their religious narcissism. “Unexpected and strange,” he writes, “these encounters can’t easily be done away with.” We can partly turn away the challenge with which they confront us, “but what remains is at least a barb in the heart of those who have experienced God and other people in new ways.”



Reading books like this one puts a barb in my heart, because from my reading of the Bible I feel sure a lot of what they’re saying is correct, yet I’m not willing to spend time with poor people. I’ve never even been willing to go on church mission trips. In my congregation such trips have happened only in recent years when I’ve no longer felt physically able to go, but even if I’d had the opportunity in earlier years I doubt that I’d have gone. I’m too addicted to comfort. Wherever I go, I want air-conditioning, clean and safe surroundings, and a room with a private bathroom and a good bed.

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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.

Also important for me, however, is being able to converse comfortably with others. I find it hard to talk with people whose experiences and interests are very different from mine, whether it's because their main interests are sports or grandchildren and mine aren't, or because they're poor and I'm not.



As a result, I use ways other than direct personal contact to support what I believe God is doing on the margins of society. I contribute financially to groups and individuals that do hands-on ministries with the poor. I also write about the need for such ministries, hoping to motivate others to do them if

that's their gift and calling, or if not, to furnish the funds and votes needed to make such ministries possible. I believe that in these ways I'm using my main God-given gifts and doing what God calls me to do. Still, I wonder if I'm wrong about that. Am I merely making "paternalistic gestures of charity" in an effort to justify avoiding the discomfort of doing hands-on ministry that God wants all Christians to do?

Being exposed to views like those expressed in *Methodist and Radical* helps to keep such questions before us and helps us look for God's answers.

Barbara

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August 2004

Walking to the bottomless pit?

In *Methodist and Radical*, Joerg Rieger quotes John Wesley—"If you are walking as the generality of men walk, you are walking to the bottomless pit." How do you think God wants us to walk differently?



Why not lift people up when we can?

Rieger finds that among both liberals and conservatives in mainline churches, people who have "made it" define success and aim at lifting disadvantaged people up from the margins. We try to help poor people become more like us. But why not lift them up, if it means rescuing them from poverty? Can we do that without also leading them to adopt the materialism of those who do the lifting, who define what's up and what's down?



Why go far from home for mission trips?

Many mission trips from U.S. churches go to another country or at least a faraway part of the U.S. Could they accomplish just as much and save needless cost by going to a nearby area that also had poor people with similar needs?

Would churches' influence be less marginal if they were more active on the margins?