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Barbara Wendland

Barbara Wendland is author and publisher of *Connections* (www.connectionsonline.org), a monthly newsletter dealing with matters of interest to church members, both clergy and lay. A lifelong active Methodist, she was a lay delegate in 1996 and 1988 to General Conference. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Southern Methodist University with a degree in mathematics and earned a Master of Theological Studies degree from S.M.U.'s Perkins School of Theology. She is co-author (with Larry W. Easterling) of *Spiritual Family Trees: Finding Your Faith Community's Roots* (Alban Institute, 2001) and co-author (with Stanley J. Menking) of *God's Partners: Lay Christians at Work* (Judson Press, 1993). She's written articles for numerous periodicals, including *The Upper Room Disciplines*, *Circuit Rider*, *Zion's Herald*, and *Christian Social Action*. ZH interviewed Mrs. Wendland on March 13 at her home in Temple, Texas.



ZH PHOTO BY KATHY PALMER

ZH: *Connections* is one of the most unusual Christian publications around—funded, written and published by just one person, Barbara Wendland—and distributed to some 5,500 appreciative readers. You've been doing it for more than 12 years. And, you haven't made a nickel from it?

BW: That's right. In fact, just the opposite.

ZH: So the question is, "What are you up to?"

BW: Well, my main reason for writing *Connections* is to encourage church members to think about issues that are important to the church and about different sides of those issues—different, maybe, from what they've assumed was the only valid side.

ZH: What got you involved in doing *Connections*?

BW: It was part of a much larger pattern of mid-life changes. I started questioning consciously and openly a lot of things that I'd never questioned before. Some turmoil in my local church caused me to think about the real purpose of the church. I started reading, and re-read the Bible. Then I began reading about the church: its purpose, history and theology—just to satisfy my curiosity. It seemed as if I were being led through a custom-designed course of study that was preparing me for something.

ZH: Sounds like you experienced a calling.

BW: What came through to me really strongly was how desperate I was to be in contact with

other people who read and thought about the things I was reading and thinking about. To my great surprise, I found that the kind of place where I could find such people was at seminary! Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Dallas is a two and a half-hour drive from where I live. I ended up commuting for three years and getting a masters degree. Simultaneously, I discovered The Academy for Spiritual Formation sponsored by The Upper Room. When all that ended, though, I was back to square one without those people to talk to, read with and discuss with.

ZH: And *Connections* became your way to re-connect with those people?

BW: The idea occurred to me that I might want to just write a little letter to these kindred spirits, something that I would send out once a month to remind us that we weren't alone and that these issues, particularly women's issues, really were important. But I began realizing, too, that nothing is likely to change in the church until a cross-section of the membership



becomes aware of the need for change. To write only to people that already agreed with me was not likely to help that cause. So what I needed was a much broader list that included people who did not share my concerns. Also, I needed to write about a broader range of issues if I hoped to have any influence on some of the change I thought was needed. That turned out to be *Connections*.

ZH: Do you have any idea what difference your efforts have made?

BW: A lot of people tell me that they feel it's important and that it's having a big effect, but there's no way to measure that. It goes now to people in all 50 states and a couple of other countries. It's important just knowing a lot of people are working in various ways to promote change. A lot of us are making small dents in our own way.

ZH: Do you see yourself as a reformer?

BW: Yes, I guess so. At least as a person who aims at reform.

ZH: My graduate school advisor, Paul Deats, used to ask, "Who, or what, are you fighting?" In traditional theological language, one might ask, "What is your understanding of sin?"

BW: That's a hard question. I think a lot of Christians have a much narrower view of sin than I do. Christianity has often focused on a very narrow range of personal behavior— issues related to sexuality or to what we see as merely the basics of being law-abiding and "nice," such as not stealing and not using bad words. I see it as much broader than that, having to do with social justice in addition to our personal behavior.

ZH: So, if you're a reformer, then, what are you reforming us from?

BW: I'd say from a narrow understanding of what Christianity is all about, from the idea that we have all the answers, and from a literalist understanding of the Bible that sees it as a unique and authoritative document in the way that no other religious writing is.

ZH: What makes that a battle worth fighting?

BW: I believe that such a narrow point of view has harmful effects on individuals and on the world. It keeps people from treating each other kindly and from helping other people make the best use of their abilities. The world would be a better place if we were more focused on how we treated others than merely on how we behaved in our personal lives at home.

ZH: Have you personally experienced

these harmful effects?

BW: I think all women have experienced them personally by being treated to some degree as second-class people in the church and in society. That is not what Jesus advocated or demonstrated.

ZH: Where do you see the biggest problem in the church today? Is it women's issues?

BW: The so-called women's issues are important but still often not regarded as such in the church. In our language, for example, we still make very little effort to avoid using masculine language to refer to all human beings. And we certainly use almost all-masculine language for God, which I think is very misleading. That is damaging to women. If there are two groups of people in the world and we're saying God is a member of one group, that says the other group is less important. The church continually reinforces that mistaken message.

ZH: Yet some would say, sure, but things have really changed in a generation. Women comprise half the population in mainline seminaries these days, for example. And it's commonplace for women to be elected bishops. So, some might say, maybe language doesn't make that much difference.

BW: I think they're wrong. For example, even though there are a lot of women in seminaries now compared to what there used to be, clergy women drop out of the ordained ministry at a higher rate than clergy men drop out. It has something to do with a church culture that is more hospitable to clergymen than to clergywomen.

ZH: Is that why you didn't pursue ordination?

BW: No, no, I've never had any desire to pursue ordination. That is not my calling in life.

ZH: You've been remarkably vulnerable at times in *Connections* about your personal life. For example, you once shared how you have struggled with the use of money, particularly as one who has inherited wealth. Could you reflect on that some more?

BW: I find it interesting that money is one of the subjects mentioned very often in

the Bible, and that Jesus had a lot to say about it. Yet, we're very timid about saying anything about it in church because we don't want to offend people. But, I think it's hard to know what the really Christian way is to deal with money. We read the Scripture about the rich young ruler and Jesus telling us to go sell everything we have and give it to the poor. It poses a serious question about whether that's what any of us needs to do. If you have more money than you need for your personal day-to-day existence, for example, should you give it all to the poor? Or, should you try to make wise use of it in other ways that would be most helpful to society or the church? And if you were to just give it to the poor, how, exactly, would you do that? Would you give it to an organization that tries to help the poor, or is it more effective in the long run if you are a person whose talent is investing money, say, and knowing how to make it more productive. Are you better using that talent as a Christian, to try to do good things with money, as opposed to just giving it all away and it not being as productive as it otherwise could have been? I think we just have to measure what we do against what we find in Scripture and what we discern as the route we're called to take.

If you have more money than you need for your personal day-to-day existence, for example, should you give it all to the poor?

ZH: This is really one of the deep discussions in society today. The issue of Social Security, for example, raises the question, Does everybody have a right to basic needs...food, shelter, clothing and basic security?

BW: I think it's hard even to decide what are basic needs. What is basic health care, for example? Does it include a liver transplant? Or, does it include going to

the emergency room if you have the flu? Different Christians will come up with different answers to what's basic.

ZH: Do you think Christianity has anything distinctive or unique to bring to these discussions?

BW: Oh, yes. I think Christians need to participate in these discussions in ways that will be taken seriously by the world. And I think that Christians will come to different conclusions about what the answers are, and we need to recognize that within the church. I wish the church did a better job of presenting more than one side of issues such as capital punishment, for example. Some Christians see capital punishment as necessary for the protection of society from criminals. Other Christians see it as inexcusable and needing to be eliminated. It seems to me that it would be helpful if the church did more to present different sides of such issues rather than making it sound as if there were only one right answer.

ZH: Where do you see signs of hope in the church?

BW: I would say in individual people who are speaking out openly. I'm discouraged that people who are advocating what I see as needed change do not seem nearly as vocal, organized and well-funded as those who are pressing for a return to the past—for example, groups that want to continue seeing Adam and Eve as two individuals that actually were the first people on earth, or that believe the world was created literally as described in Genesis, and so on. That simply doesn't match what we now know about reality.

ZH: Some critics, such the Westar Institute, contend that clergy are letting churches down by not being good educators regarding what you just described. Do you share that criticism?

BW: Yes, on the whole I do. Unfortunately, there are things about our church system that encourage clergy not to be more open about the meaning of the Bible, the kind of document it is, where it came from and what is now being discovered by biblical scholars. I think that church members, like everybody else, are threatened by change. So, when somebody in the church starts

saying, "Well, you might need to look at the Bible in a little different way than you previously looked at it"—that's very scary to a lot of people. Clergy who risk saying those kinds of things often get criticized and lose status and income if they're too outspoken. Understandably, it's hard for them to risk that.

ZH: I often ask people where they find their sense of community. For you, it would be the newsletter?

BW: That is a big part of it. And within that is a sub-category, certain individuals scattered around the U.S. with whom I feel a particular rapport. I also experience community with authors whose books or articles I read. I don't know them personally, but I recognize a certain kind of community or communion with them.

ZH: The proverbial "cloud of witnesses"?

BW: Something like that. That's another reason I feel motivated to keep writing *Connections*, because I think there are a lot of us out there in the church—the church in the larger sense—who feel alone. We need to know that there are kindred spirits that we can communicate with even if we don't have them right there as part of our day-to-day life.

ZH: Is there anything that you didn't get to say? Now's your chance.

BW: Part of what I see that concerns me about the church is that, if you read the Bible, you see Jesus is not a conservative person in any sense that we use that word, theologically or socially. Jesus did not advocate preserving religious tradition or customs just because they were traditions or customs. He certainly didn't advocate what we now call doctrine, or clinging to preserve it. By our standards, he would be described as a radical. But we get so upset in the church about people who are non-conformists or radicals. I find that incongruous.

ZH: Is there anything that readers of *Connections* don't know about you that might change their perception of you if they did?

BW: Well, if so, I don't want to tell them.

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