

Connections

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BARBARA WENDLAND

505 CHEROKEE DRIVE

TEMPLE, TX 76504

817-773-2625

Finding kindred spirits



God often communicates with us and ministers to our needs by putting us in touch with people we can recognize as kindred spirits. Because these people share our main concerns and communicate in ways that we understand, God's message comes through to us when they speak or enact it.

These soulmates help us see ourselves, the world, and God more clearly. And by reassuring us that we're neither alone nor crazy, they often help us summon the nerve to do what God is calling us to do. Finding these God-given soulmates has been an exciting part of my Christian experience.



Because I read a lot, I find many kindred spirits by reading what they've written. I read thoughts and feelings that I've had, but that I assumed no one else had, and I happily realize I'm not the oddity that I thought I was. Or I read something I've vaguely thought but haven't seen clearly. I read new information or a viewpoint that hasn't occurred to me. Then fuzzy thoughts suddenly come into sharp focus, random bits of information click into a pattern, and I recognize a kindred spirit.

Finding kindred spirits in person is even better than finding them in books, of course, because we can converse with each other, even if it has to be by mail or phone.



Where's the real person?

If you hide or misrepresent what you think, feel, or know, I don't see the real "you" so I don't see how we're kin to each other. My making the first move by revealing my real beliefs or feelings may motivate you to reveal yours, but if it doesn't I'm left feeling trapped and dangerously exposed, and we stay disconnected. We both lose.

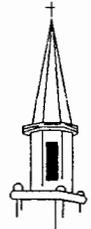
Lack of openness and honesty seems especially inappropriate in the church, but it happens a lot, with both clergy and laity. Clergy often let laity see only a pastor mask, not a whole, real



Kindred souls knit together

In his book *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, a Quaker who lived from 1893 to 1941, describes the exhilarating experience of finding kindred spirits in the church when we find God.

"Some men and women whom we have never known before, or whom we have noticed only as a dim background for our more special friendships, suddenly loom large, step forward in our attention as men and women whom we now know to the depths. Our earlier conversations with these persons may have been few and brief, but now we know them, as it were, from within. For we discern that their lives are already down within that Center which has found us . . . Sometimes we are thus suddenly knit together in the bonds of a love far faster than those of many years' acquaintance. In unbounded eagerness we seek for more such fellowship, and wonder at the apparent lethargy of mere 'members.'"



person. This limits pastors' effectiveness and keeps the church from being a real community.

When for the first time a pastor let me see his real self by revealing his true feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and doubts, each of us was enriched. We became able to help each other grow spiritually and respond more faithfully to God. Also, his openness increased my confidence in the church's integrity, because it revealed depth and substance that unfortunately I hadn't previously seen in any pastor.

Love is the key

You're not likely to be open and honest with me unless you think I will treat your revelations lovingly. If you think I'll be judgmental, inattentive, vindictive, or careless with what you tell me about yourself, you probably won't tell me much.

- ♦ If painful past experience makes you think I will tell you (or imply) that you're stupidly mistaken,

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(Love is the key, continued from page 1)

Backtalk from soulmates

What a treat it is for me to hear from *Connections* readers. I'm finding lots of kindred spirits like these.

- ◆ A Tennessee laywoman with whom I once had brief contact--"I sensed we were probably soulmates. After reading your newsletter, I know we are."
- ◆ A Texas layman--"The main points you touch on are exactly the ones I've agonized over for a long time."
- ◆ A Texas clergyman--"This expression of your hopes, dreams, and insights is very helpful to us who share them. I, too, yearn for a renewed Christianity."
- ◆ A university business-school professor--"I'm *very excited* about the grassroots approach of getting this type of communication going."
- ◆ A Wisconsin layman--"I hope the powers that be give your concerns the attention they deserve. Not enough lay folks are claiming their rightful place."
- ◆ A Texas clergywoman--"I appreciated what you wrote about 'safety, comfort, and power.' You hit the nail on the head! I shared some of what you wrote with my Administrative Board."
- ◆ An Oklahoma clergywoman--"Keep writing! What you have said needs to be said by people like you. I'm making copies for parishioners and friends."
- ◆ A Texas layman--"Your comments relate closely to my thoughts. Laity constitutes the very essence of the church and not all the administrators."
- ◆ An Episcopalian laywoman--"It was like finding a kindred soul. Many of the things you write about I have been concerned about for years."
- ◆ A Louisiana laywoman--"I'm making copies to give to everyone at my conference's annual Convocation of Boards next week. What else can I do to help?"
- ◆ A Maine clergywoman--"I have been passing your letter around in my church and among colleagues."
- ◆ A North Carolina clergyman--"I am making copies for all my Council on Ministries and Administrative Board members. I agree with your observations!"
- ◆ A Texas clergywoman--"Institutionalism works as a pressure cooker on everyone . . . But God recreates outside our imposed limits. . . Keep writing!"
- ◆ A Texas layman--"You encourage us to ask questions we have needed to ask ourselves and clergy."
- ◆ An Oklahoma laywoman--"I found myself nodding in agreement with many of your observations."

or that you shouldn't feel the way you feel, you'll avoid telling me what you really think or feel.

- ◆ Giving full attention is important, too. You're not likely to reveal much to me if I am only half listening or am obviously eager to get away.
- ◆ Confidentiality is especially important. You won't want to reveal your innermost self to me if I report to others what you intend only for me.
- ◆ Kindness matters a lot, too. You probably won't reveal anything to me that you think I will use against you.

Failure to treat each other's revelations with respect, attention, confidentiality, and kindness often keeps laity and clergy from recognizing each other as kindred spirits. Many laity unrealistically expect clergy to be perfect, which means following the particular list of rules that a particular layperson thinks are God's rules. If a pastor reveals any failure



to live up to those rules, laity too often use that information to harm the pastor. As a result, clergy come to feel that for their own protection they *must* wear a mask or even a suit of armor when talking to laity.

And unfortunately, because of the way "power over" is used in the church, clergy often have this same feeling even toward other clergy.

Fearing that any weakness they reveal will hinder their ministry or endanger their career, many clergy habitually use superficial pleasantries, bluster, and barbed humor to cloak their real beliefs and feelings. As a result, many have no spiritual guide for their own Christian journey. And because many see their spouses as the only people with whom they can safely be open and honest, they include their spouses in their jobs in inappropriate ways. Clergy desperately need kindred spirits, but too often they find isolation instead. So do laity.



Resonators

When you find kindred spirits, your thoughts and feelings resonate with theirs. Authors Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins describe a resonator as "a friend or sister or companion so true to her own inner reality that she inspires [others] to be faithful to theirs." Who are your resonators? Are you a resonator for others? Do members and visitors find resonators in your church?

Conspirators

Author Marilyn Ferguson calls kindred spirits "conspirators," using the word's root meaning, "those who breathe together." Christians know them also as those whom the Holy Spirit brings together.

"Whatever their station or sophistication," Ferguson observes, "the conspirators are linked, made kindred by their inner discoveries and earthquakes."

"Brief meetings are enough for recognition," she points out. "Meet them at the produce bins [and they] look like next-door neighbors who'll talk about the price of one pear and what's happening to coffee, unless you share their search . . ."

Kindred spirits in the church

The church needs to be a place for finding kindred spirits. Our worship services, Sunday School classes, and other groups need to be safe and inviting places for laity, clergy, and outsiders to reveal not only faith and strength but also doubts, questions, fears, and weakness.

To grow in love, we must see other people's real selves and let them see ours. To grow in faith, we have to acknowledge our real questions and doubts. We grow only when, under God's guidance, we deliberately open our minds and hearts to new people, experiences, and ideas. They bring the new insights and information we need for expanding our understanding of God, of ourselves, and of the world.

Unless we take these steps toward greater faith and love, we stay isolated even though others are nearby. We stay immature even though we grow physically. We miss God-given chances to be helpful guides and companions to people who need us.

If our churches are to be places where people can find kindred spirits who will help them grow and respond to God, both clergy and laity will have to hear each other's experiences, ideas, and feelings in order to see how faith has grown

from them. This takes time. It requires feeling comfortable and safe. How could you help this happen more often in your church?

"I believe; help my unbelief!"
Mark 9:24

Starting places

Several church programs and institutions have introduced me to people, experiences, and ideas that have helped me grow. I can't begin to list everything that has served this purpose for me in recent years, but here are two I've especially liked.

Perkins Laity Week

For laity I recommend the annual Laity Week at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. This year it's March 4-7. It includes classes, worship, and times for sharing. Outstanding laity teach some classes, and top professional theologians teach others. It's a great opportunity for stretching and renewing your mind as well as for meeting kindred spirits from a wide geographical area. Classes meet Thursday-Friday, Saturday-Sunday, and Saturday-only. You can stay all four days or come only for one part. There's a more concentrated week-long summer session in Dallas, too, and a shorter version in Houston. For full details, call 214-768-2251.



The Academy for Spiritual Formation

Another place I've found soulmates is the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It is sponsored by The Upper Room, a part of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship. Participants are laity and clergy of many denominations, from all over the U.S.

An Academy has eight five-day sessions, one every three months for two years. Each session features two outstanding faculty members and includes worship, small-group sessions, and reflection time. Faculty represent various denominations and theological perspectives.

Seven two-year Academies have taken place in various parts of the U.S. The eighth starts this month. Five-day Academies, samples of the longer program, will happen throughout the U.S. in 1993. For details, phone 615-340-7232 or write Rev. Danny Morris, P.O. Box 189, Nashville, TN 37202.

Many opportunities

Many other excellent opportunities to be with other Christians who want to grow in faith are



available all over the U.S. The Disciple Bible Study program is a great opportunity for expanding your mental and spiritual horizons and finding kindred spirits in your own congregation.

For many Christians the "Walk to Emmaus" program has been life-changing, as has "Discover God's Call."



I urge you to find such a program that is accessible to you and enlist. If you can't find it through your local church, phone the nearest seminary, the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship (615-340-7200), or your conference office.

Backtalk about "If I were a bishop"

These 4 responses, from laity and clergy in 4 different conferences in 4 states, are typical of what I'm hearing.

- "I hope my bishop has one of your letters come across his desk."
- "Your observations are right on target. I hope someone hears you and says 'Amen!', other than myself."
- "Would you send a copy to our bishop, with certain portions highlighted, *i.e.* turning down trips, and taking spouse, to name a few!"
- "I hope lots of bishops see your publication and take its forthright message to heart."



The only bishop I've heard from disagreed with most of what I had said.



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504

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♥
Kindred spirits . . . ♥
♥

Connections for your friends?

Several *Connections* readers have asked about making copies for friends, colleagues, and church groups. I'm delighted for you to do this.

Others have asked about adding names to my mailing list. I'd love to get additional names if they're each accompanied by a \$5 check for a year of *Connections*, but I've reached my limit on the number I can send free each month.

Some readers have surprised me by sending contributions to help with my costs. If you want to do that, of course I'll appreciate it, but for now I'm

still willing to send *Connections* to the people on my current list at no charge.

Thanks again for reading *Connections*, and for your encouraging letters, phone calls, checks, and in-person comments.

Happy Valentine's Day!

♥ ♥ Barbara ♥



Next month . . .

Tradition and change