

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 60 - OCTOBER 1997



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## Challenges for the church

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- Transferring ownership to the laity
- Finding organizational methods that work.
- Finding a passionate spirituality
- Meeting the world's need for community
- Reaching out and embracing the world.

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I believe Mead is right. Here are the challenges that he feels make these tasks necessary and urgent.



### [1] Clericalism

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In the church, clergy are the power group that makes the rules. This kind of power group believes that the rules they make are good for the whole community, but actually the power group benefits most from the rules. Thus they aren't likely to advocate change or even to see the need for it.

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- We spend a high proportion of our money on our clergy, and we've encouraged them to feel they're entitled to church



## A lonely position

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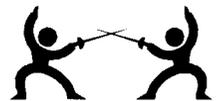
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### Can we make the needed changes in time?



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- "Those with the most at stake in preserving the status quo," he sees, "are the ones who have most of the power to change our systems."
- Many of our leaders have short tenure, when we need leaders instead who can look further down the road and make hard choices for the future.
- The financial resources necessary for supporting our institutions keep eroding, yet we aren't paying attention to the financial crises that seem inevitable for the future.
- Lack of trust is increasing, Mead, finds, among the people, the agencies, and the institutions that make up our denominational systems. They seem to be constantly competing with each other for scarce resources, for supremacy of viewpoints, and for avenging past losses.



### We treat our members like children

Too many church leaders assume, Mead observes, that lay members are too weak to be told these things. "And if the truth is soft-pedaled," he warns, "who can be surprised that there is little urgency for transformation?" Mead is hopeful, however, because he remembers that the church has often recovered from what seemed a dead end. "God somehow raises up the new people, the new ideas, the new energy," he reminds us, "with which to address whatever it is that comes down the road." The question is whether we will recognize and support them.

jobs even if they're not very effective in those jobs. Besides, we don't clearly reveal what we actually pay our clergy, especially those in the system's top administrative positions.



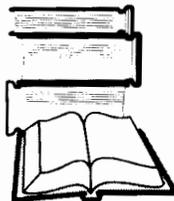
- Our policies for rotating lay leadership, while they may be meant to give more lay people a voice, actually have increased clergy power and ownership. In many of our voting bodies clergy are permanent delegates and all clergy are delegates, but lay members rotate, so at any meeting of the body a high proportion of lay delegates are newcomers. Thus the clergy delegates know the issues and how to use the system, but many lay delegates don't.



- Congregations that can't afford a full-time clergyperson as their pastor are seen as second-class or even "at risk," even though many congregations do well without ordained clergy to lead them.

- Lay members of larger congregations are under-represented in many church decision-making bodies. In United Methodist Annual Conference sessions, for example, even the tiniest congregation has a lay delegate. This delegate represents a much smaller number of members than each delegate from a large church.

- The language of academic theology is the approved language of debate about beliefs and policies of the church. Few lay people know this language or see any need to learn it, so their voices aren't taken as seriously as clergy's.



- All major denominations invest heavily in the training and education of their clergy, Loren Mead reminds us, but they invest only modestly in educating laity.



- To a great extent, clergy control how the rules can be changed. "Clergy cannot make change happen by themselves," Mead observes, "but they almost always have veto power."

What all this amounts to, in Mead's view, is that "we have built a system of ownership and decision making that institutionalizes conflict of interest." Clergy-dominated bodies make many decisions in which clergy have a direct stake.

Anywhere else, we wouldn't allow this.



We've also created an unhealthy relationship in which clergy see their actions as help that is needed by someone who depends on them—the laity. This attitude encourages lay people to avoid claiming the authority they're capable of and entitled to. It creates a dominant class of overfunctioners and an underclass of underfunctioners.

Our history, customs, and rules have trapped us into harmful clericalism, Loren Mead finds, and we urgently need to release ourselves from the trap.

## [2] Structures that no longer work

"Every generation is tempted," says Loren Mead, "to preserve the structures rather than the insights of the previous generation." In the church we've succumbed to that temptation. Some of our words and methods "now block communication of the insights of faith," so we face the critical task of changing what is no longer effective. We need, according to Mead, to "help the insights—if they are still viable—find structures more adequate for a new time."



What makes this harder than ever is that the world is now changing faster than it once did. Change now requires quick responses, and we're not used to making quick responses.

Besides, Mead observes, "an assumption of suspicion has now replaced the assumption of trust" that many of us (especially those in today's older generations) have been used to. As a result, few people are willing to let anyone else make changes. The result is what Mead calls "organizational paralysis."



Mead finds that some of our organizational problems relate to our unwillingness to lower the boundaries between denominations. "Most of our denominational differences," in his view, "represent territorial and theological feuds now three or four hundred years old." A few genuine differences exist, he acknowledges, "but the ordinary church member finds the rationale for those differences increasingly trivial."



### [3] Cool spirituality

In the parish he grew up in, Loren Mead tells us, he rarely came across the word "spirituality." "It was assumed," he observes, "that any needed nourishment was provided in the ordered structures of the worship and preaching. ... I lived with a "cool" spirituality." It was real, he believes. It had depth and power that helped people through trials and gave them a sense of communion with God. "But," Mead says, "it was a spirituality that nobody much talked about."



Also, that spirituality was surrounded by "oughts." "The way to God was a long, difficult road," he tells us. "There was not a lot of joy associated with the walk." In seminary, he found that little changed. "Knowing and being close to God was described and analyzed but rarely witnessed to or experienced."



When Mead began doing research, he found that everyone his researchers talked to could describe powerful, personal experiences with God. Many had been life-changing. Some had happened in a "religious" setting, but most had not. What was odd was that none of these people had ever been asked to tell their story to their congregation or pastor, and none had thought of bringing it up. "It was as if the churches and parishioners," Mead found, "had an implicit understanding that experiences did not matter in the church or to the church. It felt to us like a collusion of silence."



Structured religion, Mead finds, is uncomfortable with "the unpredictable power of the Spirit who comes and goes without regard to our plans." In Mead's view, the challenge for us is to find new expressions of faith that have room for the cool spirituality that emphasizes form, analysis, discipline, and rationality, but also for the warm spirituality that allows for spontaneity and feeling.

All of us, Mead observes, are sometimes unable to recognize gifts from God that don't fit what we expect God's gifts to be. We don't want to admit that God paints outside the lines we recognize. However, Mead assures



us, to face the future we must find ways to bring the gifts of warm, experience-oriented spirituality to the heart of church life without denying the gifts and contributions of the cool spirituality that many mainline church members have been used to.

### [4] Lack of real community



We've suffered a loss of community, Loren Mead reminds us. Church activities aren't the source of community that they once were. Neither is the typical workplace.

Sports, music, and theater that were once home-made activities have mostly become spectator activities now. Yet community is a matter of life and death, not just something we feel nostalgic for.

And while churches may furnish community for insiders, Mead observes, what outsiders see is rarely the kind of community that they are hungry for. "People simply do not look to the church," Mead finds, "for what is supposed to be one of its greatest values." Not only are people not looking for the church, observers of churches find, but for the most part "churches are not looking for people, but focus instead on their institutional survival."



To remedy this, according to Mead, we need to make existing church groups more of a community than they are. Even church boards, Mead suggests, "have a special calling to transform themselves from places noted for slogging, depressing work to places of community and spiritual growth." We also need to generate new small-group opportunities constantly, and to encourage house-church groups rather than seeing them as threats.

Especially, in Mead's view, we need to give attention to the quality and content of our worship, because great worship builds community. "It is the doorway," Mead says, "through which God tells us who we are and empowers us to be what God calls us to be. It is not something to fool around with or treat lightly."



### [5] Missions that aren't God's mission

Finally, Mead observes, we must recognize that to be part of the church is to be sent—to reach out as a caring servant of others, like Jesus did. We

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