

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Religious tourists or real Christians?

“Religious tourists often fail to realize the pain, struggle, good intentions, hard work, sacrifice of time, creative successes, and all other in-depth experiences of an office or task.” A United Methodist bishop wrote this to a *Connections* reader who had complained to the bishop about his having criticized some recent issues of *Connections*. The recipient of the letter gave it to me.



The bishop’s letter implies not only that I’m a religious tourist but also that all other lay and ordained Christians who aren’t in the church’s top-level positions are.

A label that makes me wonder



“Opinions or judgments without immersion,” his letter continues, “can miss the mark. Tourism, whether it is in religion or travel, may take notice of many collapsed old shrines and speak disparagingly about their ugliness, but never commit to the hard work and time that may bring about their restoration.”

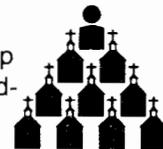
Having devoted quite a bit of time, effort, and money to the church for years, as many other lay and clergy members have, I wonder what more it would take to be “immersed” in it and thus qualified to speak. Besides, I don’t believe that restoring old shrines is what God calls us to do. I’m uneasy, too, about the bishop’s use of “miss the mark.” That’s a well-known definition of sin.

So I wonder—am I really a religious tourist? Are you? What makes someone a real part of the church? Are we sinning when we express our views about the church? Let’s look at what being a religious tourist might mean.



An all-important difference

Although I don’t identify other *Connections* responders, I’m revealing that a bishop wrote the letter I quote here, and some readers will know which bishop. I’m doing this because I see an all-important difference between a bishop’s response and responses from lay members or other clergy. It is like the difference between an opinion about U.S. policy expressed by the President, and an opinion expressed by some other U.S. citizen.



A private citizen’s opinion may be valuable for its content or simply as an example of citizens’ views, but the citizen’s identity is relatively unimportant. However, the President seems to be speaking officially when he speaks about U.S. policy, and he has the power to act on his views, so when he speaks, his identity is important.



A difference in power

Similarly, a bishop’s voice has unique power behind it and seems to represent the church. In fact a UMC bishop’s power may be even greater within the church than the U. S. President’s power is within the nation. Unlike the President, a UMC bishop doesn’t have to keep winning elections to stay in office. And unlike other UMC clergy, bishops’ only real accountability comes from church members’ knowing and speaking up about how the bishops function.



There’s another reason, too, for identifying a bishop but not identifying other *Connections* responders. If I identified responders who are relatively powerless in the church structure, I would be putting some of them at serious risk. Their views might be used against them if the views were seen as deviations from official policy or as threats to the power of higher-ups. That’s why I usually don’t identify *Connections* responders. But when the responder is at the top of the power structure, that reason doesn’t apply.



Church members need to know

Undoubtedly many bishops and others in the church hierarchy don’t see church members as “religious tourists,” but many lay and clergy members find that condescending attitude to be shockingly widespread. So when evidence of it appears, members are entitled to know. In fact, for the good of the church, they need to know.

Being a tourist has benefits

For spiritual journeys as well as for physical ones, being a tourist has some important benefits.

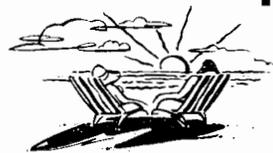


- Tourists see how people live, think, and worship in places other than where the tourists live. That can help them recognize both the advantages and the shortcomings of their own ways.

▪ Tourists can learn about other areas' history and culture, getting a better perspective on their own. For the spiritual journey, broadening our view lets us realize that a variety of religious practices have been used by Christians throughout history. We find, too, that all of the forms in which the church has existed reflect the cultures they were in. When we look beyond our own experience, we see that the kind of church we happen to know and prefer isn't the only valid kind.



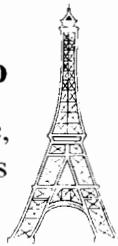
- Tourists often see unusually beautiful parts of the natural world. This experience can increase their awareness of God and their appreciation for God's creation. Similarly, exploring the world of religion can reveal beauty in the varied ways that people use for praising God and communicating with God.



- Travel can provide a needed break from the pressures of day-to-day responsibilities, reducing stress and letting us approach the responsibilities with fresh strength and enthusiasm.

Being a tourist has drawbacks, too

- If we stay only for a short time in a place, see only its most obvious or most famous sights, see only what a guide shows us, and don't understand the local language, we may get an inaccurate picture. This can happen with the spiritual journey, too, if we switch churches or dabble in spiritual disciplines without staying long enough to see their real worth.



- When we travel we sometimes unreasonably expect the host area and its people to be a carbon copy of our home territory, and to provide all that we're used to for our comfort and convenience.



I was reminded of this at a recent church committee meeting in the U.S. A member from Norway and I were both coughing and sneezing. I laughingly said to her, "I got this ailment in Norway when I was there recently. I was so hot when the temperature and humidity were high and no buildings were air-conditioned." She replied, "I get a cold every time I come to the U.S., because every building has such cold air-conditioning. I freeze the whole time I'm here."



- Tourists' lodgings, meals, clothing, and entertainment are often extravagant and wasteful compared to the living conditions of the host area's residents, creating understandable resentment. And isn't this the way our mainline U.S. churches often look, too, when much of what we do is geared to upper-class and middle-class lifestyles and educational levels?



- Some tourists disrupt worship in famous church buildings, or routine activities in other buildings, treating them as mere curiosities or as objects provided for the tourists' enjoyment rather than respecting their real purpose.

- The money and time spent on tourism might be better used for direct help to people who lack necessities. However, in many areas tourism furnishes the local residents' main income.

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

—Mark 10:21

This aspect of tourism raises the much larger question of how to help people who have fewer material resources than we do. Should we get rid of the resources we have, or use our God-given abilities to put them to productive use so we can give financial help?

"You ought to have invested my money ... and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him ..."

—Matthew 25:27-28

Tourism also raises the question of whether being a completely faithful follower of Christ would

permit doing anything purely for enjoyment. It's hard to know how to apply scriptures to such questions, or what to do in situations that scripture doesn't seem to address.

A put-down of most members

Although tourism has both positive and negative aspects, the bishop's use of "religious tourists" seems to refer only to the negative aspects.



It's a put-down of all of us who aren't top church officials. And based on what I read and hear from all over the U.S., I'm afraid it shows an attitude that is found often at the top of church hierarchies.

- It's an attitude that portrays us as mere visitors, not as real parts of the church.

In the one Spirit we were all baptized into the same body.
—1 Corinthians 12:13



- It pictures us as passive receivers who contribute nothing worthwhile.
- It pictures us as intruders who interrupt and hinder the church's real work.

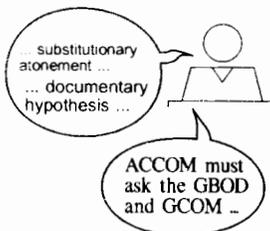
- It portrays us as spectators instead of participants.

- It pictures us as people whose view is too limited to have any value, simply because we don't have all the information that top church office-holders have. "How sad for the church," a laywoman wrote me, "that this bishop feels it is only those who are ordained who have all the answers for the church. I guess the Pope felt the same way



in the time of Martin Luther." Another laywoman wrote, "That sort of patronizing attitude will contribute to the decline of our churches. No wonder there's so much apathy. It may be God's way of pointing to a problem."

- The "religious tourist" image pictures lay church members as people who can't understand or participate fully because they don't speak the language. It implies that members who want to be taken seriously by the church must learn the language of the institutional church and of academic theology.



... In one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function.
—Romans 12:4

- The "religious tourist" image also contradicts what the Bible says about having different gifts and being called to minister in different ways. It portrays some God-given callings as more

valid than others. As one layman wrote me about the bishop's letter, "It strikes at the core of what being a Christian means. It raises the question about whether there are levels of being Christian. It says the most valuable level is the clergy, headed by the bishops."



No voice without experience?



"Commentary, without experience in the areas you are critiquing," wrote the bishop, "leads to large misconceptions and gross misunderstandings about the office." Such comments imply that only the people holding top church offices like his have the right to express opinions about how such offices should be conducted.

Of course it's a lot easier to say how a job should be done when you aren't the person who has to do it. However, I don't think this means that only church officials should speak about how their jobs should be done. As a layman who read the bishop's letter wrote me, "By this logic, only former and current presidents and members of Congress should vote in U.S. elections."



Non-office-holders' views are needed

When you've been an employee of a bureaucratic system for a long time, it's easy to think that the way you're doing your job and the way the system is functioning are the only reasonable ways. When a job is furnishing your income and status and letting you use your abilities, it's very hard to see that another way of doing that job would serve the organization's purpose better. If your job isn't needed at all, that's even harder to see.



For that reason every organization needs to have frank opinions expressed continually by people who aren't the organization's employees or top

office-holders. And for this to happen, members must know that neither seeking information nor expressing opinions contrary to the leaders' opinions will cause a member to be demoted, denied leadership roles, or punished and silenced in other ways.

We're all tourists, but God calls us all



In a sense we're all merely tourists on the religious journey. None of us—even bishops, clergy, or the most active lay church members—can go all the way into God's presence and take up residence there.

But despite this, God invites all of us farther in—even occasional church attenders and non-participants. God also calls us to travel together. Can any of us legitimately say that our fellow travelers aren't qualified to make the trip? I don't think so.

Barbara



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During the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought [the apostles] out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life." ...



The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name ..." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

—Acts 5:19-29

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