

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 29 - MARCH 1995



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## The church is partly human

Like the Christ whose body the church now is, the church is both divine and human. Even though the church is *more than* a human organization, it is partly a human organization. It is like other groups in many ways, just as Jesus' physical body was like other people's bodies in many ways. So to do effectively what God calls the church to do, we must use what is known about how groups and individuals function.



### God wants us to be effective

Some Christians say the church shouldn't use information, words, or methods that come from the business world, but I find that misguided. We use the findings of science and medicine even though we know that people are more than physical bodies. Hospitals and doctors can't furnish all that's necessary for our health, but we'd suffer needlessly if we refused to use what they *can* furnish. Similarly, we suffer when we ignore what the business world knows about organization and marketing.

I disagree with the Christians who say that business terms like "marketing," "quality control," and "CEO" are inappropriate for the church. After all, Jesus often used the terminology of commercial fishing, farming, vineyard operation, property management, sheep-raising, and the military—the businesses of his day.



### God speaks in many ways

Unlike business organizations, the church's main purpose isn't to sell consumer products, of course, or to make money. But we do have something to sell to the world. We offer changed lives, joy, a new way of living, eternal salvation, and a changed world. To obey God's command, we must discover and use the most effective ways of presenting these to the people of today's world.



We also must find out what makes organizations effective and what keeps them from being effective. Although the Holy Spirit's presence is the key factor in church groups, human factors have a strong influence, too. We can't afford to be unaware of them.

God speaks through lay people and through the world of work, not just through clergy and religious words. We must heed God's voice wherever it speaks.

## The church can learn from the business world

Although I'm not clergy I sometimes get help from magazines, books, and events designed for clergy. I've learned from books and events meant for psychologists, though I'm not a psychologist. And I've learned from articles and books intended for business people even though I'm not in business.



I've found that in order to get the information and opportunities I need for doing what God calls me to do, I often must look in places that weren't intended for my purposes. I can't afford to reject useful information or experience just because it doesn't happen to be in a package addressed to me. I have to put together my own package instead.



### We need all the help we can get

The church needs to do that, too. When our present methods aren't working, we need to try new ones. If the new ones seem likely to be useful and don't go against Christian principles, where they come from doesn't matter. ❖

## A learning organization

I believe the church needs to become what the business world calls a "learning organization." This means an organization that is constantly and deliberately learning how to be more effective in carrying out its purpose, whatever that purpose may be.



Peter M. Senge, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at M.I.T.'s school of management, writes about this kind of organization in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Currency Doubleday, 1990). Senge describes a learning

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(A learning organization, continued from page 1)

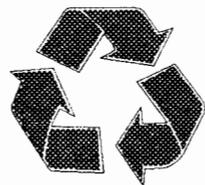
organization as one in which people keep increasing their ability to create the results they want. They deliberately nurture new and expansive patterns of thinking. They set free the hopes of the group's members. To me that sounds like the kind of organization the church needs to be. It's not *all* that we need to be, but it's an important part of it.

## Essential ingredients

How could a church congregation or a regional or national church body become a learning organization? In Senge's view, we would have to start doing these things and do them consistently.

▪ **Looking at the whole system.** We tend to focus on parts of the church separately  instead of seeing how they influence each other. We only address isolated problems, like the fact that Annual Conference sessions are tiresome, or that money is short, or that a worship service is poorly attended. 

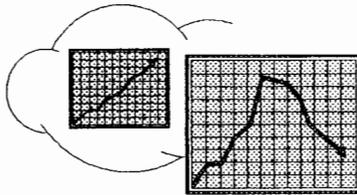
In order to improve our problem spots, we must look at the larger picture. We must consider how we select, assign, supervise, and reward clergy. We must ask how today's culture affects churchgoers' expectations. We must look at why our organiza-



tional structure was designed as it is, and whether it fits our current situation. We must look at all aspects of the church and at how each one influences others.

▪ **Becoming creative and effective as individuals.** Effective people, Senge observes, take deliberate action to influence what will happen in the future. They don't just react to developments after they have happened. Effective people develop a clear picture of what they want to happen. They keep their energies focused on moving toward that mental picture, and they see their present situation realistically. This leads to seeing a gap between how things need to be and how they actually are. 

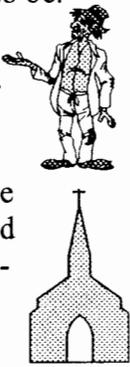
Seeing that gap is uncomfortable, of course. The comfortable way is to pretend that things are better than they really are, or to shrink our vision of how they need to be. The comfortable way is being



satisfied because our conference is adding members when few others are, and ignoring the fact that our membership is growing slower than our area's population.

The comfortable way, however, brings mediocre results at best. The energy and excitement that lead to success come from seeing the gap between where we are and where God is calling us to be.

▪ **Becoming aware of our assumptions.**

We all have a lot of assumptions that influence what we do and what we expect from the church. We assume that only certain words are appropriate for use in church. We assume that all real Christians wear the kind of clothing and hairstyles we prefer. We assume that all church buildings should have steeples, stained glass, and organs. 

We often don't even realize what our assumptions are. We don't notice that some of them are false. We don't see their effect.

To achieve our God-given purpose as the church, we must become aware of our assumptions that influence the church. We must talk about them openly so we can see how some of them keep the church from being what God calls it to be.

▪ **Building a shared vision.** In order to promote commitment instead of apathy, members of a learning organization must continually unearth and share their vision of the organization's future. They can't just adopt a mission statement that a committee has developed. In the church, members must also be sure that their vision for the church matches God's.

▪ **Learning together as a team.**

Learning together starts with talking to each other, but it doesn't stop there. It requires suspending some of our assumptions temporarily and seeing that people who disagree with us may be making some valid points. It's not just throwing our views at each other and trying to get our own adopted by the group. 

**Doing these things in our churches could help them become what God calls them to be. Are we willing to risk that? ❖**

## Aiming at quality

Dr. Ezra Earl Jones, who heads the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship, is asking the church to consider Total Quality Management, Continuous Quality Improvement, and other similar concepts that many businesses are now using, and to apply them to the church. In his book *Quest for Quality* (Discipleship Resources, 1993), Jones describes the three main requirements for improving an organization's quality:

- ✓ **a visionary aim**—a shared picture of the future that the group wants to reach 
- ✓ **a system designed to reach that aim** 
- ✓ **leaders who state the vision** for the group, keep it before the group, and remind the group of the progress being made. 

### New results require a new system

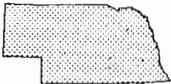
"The system is designed for the results it is getting," Jones reminds us. "If you want different results, you will have to redesign the system." We can't keep doing the same things in the same ways, he assures us, and expect anything to improve. Jones believes the church must do four basic things if it wants to improve.

- ✓ Listen to people's deepest yearnings. 
- ✓ Put together a system that will enable the church to meet people's basic expectations of it.
- ✓ Improve that system so that it goes beyond people's basic expectations, delighting and exciting them.
- ✓ Through leaders, enable all the people to contribute to the effort.



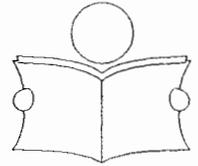
What do you think? Are these the steps we need to take? If not, what steps do we need? Are we willing to risk taking them? How should we start? *When* will we start? We must get into action. We can't afford to keep waiting. ❖

### Welcome, new *Connections* readers!

With this issue *Connections* begins going regularly to the 725 recipients of the monthly conference mailing in the Nebraska Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Welcome, Nebraska United Methodists! 

## Embarrassing nonresults

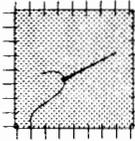
In the February 1995 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, management consultant Peter Drucker writes about organizations that try to improve but don't succeed. He uses the U.S. government as his main example, but many of his observations also apply to the church.



Lack of effort isn't necessarily the reason for an organization's lack of improvement, Drucker finds. "Dedicated people," he observes, often "meet week after week to produce these embarrassing nonresults."

### Patching won't work

"The problem," he says, is that "they are trying to patch and spot-weld, here, there, and yonder, and that never accomplishes anything." In Drucker's view, "There will be no results unless there is a radical change in the way the [organization] and its agencies are managed and paid. The habit of continuous improvement has to be built in ..., and has to be made self-sustaining."



"What is equally needed," in Drucker's opinion, "is 'benchmarking': every year comparing the performance of an operation or agency with the performances of all others, with the best becoming the standard to be met by all the following year."

### Incentives that matter are crucial

Using incentives that really matter to employees is crucial for improvement, Drucker finds. "An agency that did not improve its performance by a preset minimum," he suggests, "would have its budget cut. And a manager whose unit consistently fell below the benchmark set by the best performers would be penalized in terms of compensation or—more effective—in terms of eligibility for promotion." Is this an appropriate incentive to use for our churches' agencies and employees? If not, what is?

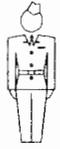


Drucker sees that we must keep asking not only of the total organization but also of every agency and program, "What is your mission? Is it still the right mission? Is it still worth doing? If we were not already doing this, would we now go into it?" Doing this rethinking, Drucker finds, is not mainly aimed at cutting expenses, but substantial cost savings always emerge as a by-product.

### A plan and the right leaders

For real improvement, Drucker says, we must have a plan and the right leaders. In a crisis, he finds, "one turns to people who have thought in advance what needs to be done." The church includes such people, lay and clergy. We must find them, listen to them, discuss their suggestions, and try some of them. We ignore them at our peril.

## Experts are in our churches



Through the business corporations, school systems, hospitals, and other organizations where they work, many lay church members have received



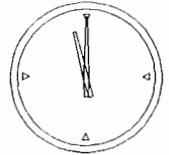
training and experience in using new organizational methods and structures that could be useful to our churches.



We need to draw on this training and experience. When we wait for clergy and other church employees to initiate, promote, and carry out the changes



that our churches so urgently need, we miss valuable opportunities. We waste time that we can't afford to waste. If we keep waiting, God may have to move on without us. ❖



*Barbara*

Next month . . .

A letter to a beginning pastor



**Connections** 3-95

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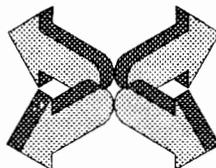


## The church can learn from business

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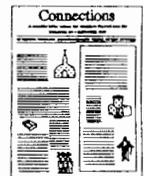
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and *Connections* is a one-person volunteer ministry that I do largely at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand readers in 48 states—laity and clergy in at least ten church denominations, and some non-churchgoers.