

Connections

A laywoman's monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 6 - APRIL 1993



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Claiming the new life God offers



After Jesus' hideous crucifixion and his disciples' despair came his amazing resurrection and his promise of new life for his followers.

At Easter we're especially aware of the new

**Because I live,
you also will live.
John 14:19**

life God offers through Jesus Christ.

Glorious flowers and new green leaves burst forth from branches that looked dead not long ago. In central Texas, fields and roadsides that were brown a few weeks ago are now covered with bluebonnets.



Butterflies will soon emerge from ugly, dead-looking cocoons. Surprising new life appears all around us, reminding us that God can also bring new life from what seems dead in us.

If you feel trapped in an ugly cocoon it's hard to imagine yourself as a butterfly. Even if you've realized that a butterfly is what God intends you to be, it's still hard to do what's needed to break out of your cocoon.



**I came that they
may have life, and
have it abundantly.**

John 10:10

It's important to begin acting in new ways that reflect the new you, once you've gotten a glimpse of the new life to which God calls you. Poking

the first hole in your cocoon may be hard, but once you've done it you begin to see hope of getting out. Making the first tiny changes in your life gives you the confidence you need for making bigger ones.

Little steps can be important

Often a new step you need to take is one that doesn't seem the least bit hard or daring to anyone else. But it may be crucially important for you.

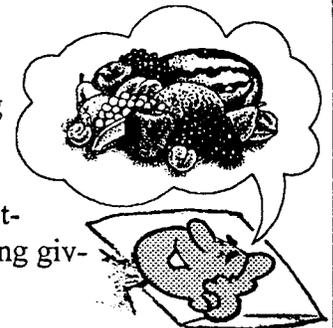
When I realized God was nudging me in some new directions a few years ago, one of my tiny-but-

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Family and friends may not help

People around you often discourage you from doing anything new and different. Without intending to, they may make responding to God hard. They're likely to give you the impression that you are being unwise, unkind, illogical, and maybe unchristian to even consider acting or thinking in any new way. As a result, you feel like a criminal when you take even the tiniest new step.

When new life is beginning to emerge in you, your dreams often picture this feeling. You may dream that you are committing a crime or that you are being given forbidden fruit to eat.



When you change, it shakes up the system

In families, churches, and other such groups, each member tends to play a part that helps to keep the group functioning in its present way. That way may not be serving its intended purpose. It may even be harming most people in the group. But they tend to keep playing their familiar roles anyway because maintaining the status quo is easier and more comfortable than changing.

If you stop playing your usual role, you disrupt the system. In effect, you force change onto the other people in it, who have not chosen to change. So when you start to change they're likely to complain, resist, and criticize you. Then, because they act so sure of themselves and you still feel unsure about the changes you're considering, it's hard for you not to cave in and assume they're right., even if deep down you know that change is needed.



If you want to know more about how the tendency to keep playing familiar, habitual roles prevents needed change in families and churches, I highly recommend the book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, by Edwin H. Friedman (1985, The Guilford Press).

(Claiming the new life, continued from page 1)

important new steps was learning to fill my own car with gasoline. All gas stations were full-service in the years before I married, so I never filled my own car then, and after I married my husband always filled our cars. As a result, I had no occasion to operate a gasoline pump.

Readers ask, "May I make copies?"
"May I quote from *Connections*?"



 A United Methodist bishop-- "I've read the issues I've received cover to cover, and have been challenged, guided and helped by each one. Are you willing to allow portions to be reproduced through newsletters, conference papers, etc.? Expanding the dialogue would be great."

 A United Methodist clergyman-- "Would you be willing for me to copy the entire 'Power' issue of *Connections* and mail it to the 1300 lay and clergy members of my Annual Conference?"

A physician who teaches a Disciple class-- "May I copy the whole 'Traditions' issue to give to all my class members?"

I'm more than willing for you to quote or copy *Connections*! I'm delighted, because my objective is to get more church members thinking and talking about the topics I'm addressing. All I ask is that you acknowledge where the quotes come from. If you have space, I'd appreciate your also including my address when you quote, and letting your readers or hearers know they can contact me to subscribe.

"How can I get on your mailing list?"

"May I send you names to add?"



I'm delighted to add names to my mailing list. However, I ask that each new person pay \$5 to cover the cost of receiving *Connections* for a year.

"How many issues of *Connections* have you sent? I'm not sure I've received them all."

Beginning with November 1992 I've sent an issue every month, so this is the 6th one. I plan to continue sending *Connections* monthly. I find that 3rd-class bulk mail can easily go astray, however. I'll be glad to send you issues that you've missed if you'll let me know. If you're moving and don't want to miss *Connections*, please send me your new address before you move. "Address correction requested" is far from fool-proof, I find, and it's very slow.

By the time I began making some car trips alone in recent years, however, gas stations were self-service. I felt stupid and helpless when I was away from home and needed gasoline. I realized that filling my own car instead of letting my husband do it for me was a change I needed to make.

Making out-of-town car trips alone was an even larger one. My cautious parents always insisted that it was dangerous for a woman to be on the highway alone, and for many years I meekly accepted their opinion, despite plentiful evidence against it.



Plane trips alone were another new step. I had made frequent plane trips alone on business when I worked as a mathematician for an oil company before I married. But after I married and "quit work" my husband was usually with me when I flew anywhere. In fact, he was usually with me whenever I traveled to new places or met new people.

Unlike me, my extrovert husband usually seems to feel totally confident about what needs doing, and to feel comfortable talking with unfamiliar people. So for years I let him do the talking for both of us when we were together in public, just as I had gladly let my mother play that role when I was growing up. I was a silent partner, a spectator, a follower. In this regard I was acting like a child, even after I had chronologically been an adult for years.

In new places you can try your new wings

Being with new people on your own gives you good opportunities to try new ways of functioning. Getting some practice and encouragement elsewhere helps you hold your own when you encounter the resistance that you're likely to find at home where everyone expects you to stay the same forever. Being accepted as a capable adult individual by strangers helps you realize that you have valuable ideas, skills, spiritual gifts, and talents.

One of my daring new steps was to enroll in the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It was a new program, and no one I knew had heard of it. All I knew about it was what I had read in the *United Methodist Reporter* and in the materials the Academy sent when I wrote for information.

The Academy met for five days every three months for two years, in Nashville. To attend, I flew alone for the first time in 25 years. I talked to people in adjacent seats on planes, which was totally uncharacteristic for me.



Silly as it may seem, merely not having anyone pointing out the rest rooms to me in the airports or telling me when to cross the streets was a much-needed reminder for me that I was a capable, intelligent adult! At home, I had come to see myself as someone who needed to be looked after.

At home I had come to feel that my interests and abilities were unimportant, and that my calling in life was simply to conform to others' interests, opinions, and expectations. But at Academy sessions, I felt like a person who had something unique and worthwhile to contribute.

On these trips I felt as if I had emerged into the sunlight after spending years in a fog. For the first time I felt like a competent adult for whom God might have something distinctive in mind.

Some players stake their claims early

In most groups people claim the leadership roles quickly, like making a preemptive bid in a bridge game. At the very beginning of the bidding in bridge, if anyone has an unusually large number of powerful cards he quickly makes a bid that is high enough to keep everyone else from being able to mention what they have to offer.

This has happened in our churches and in our whole society. Clergy, white people, men, and certain other groups claimed the powerful and prestigious roles early. As a result, women, laity, people of color, and other groups have traditionally been expected to stay in the background and keep quiet. When you've been one of these background people for years, summoning the nerve to step out in new directions is especially hard.

Old patterns can stifle new life

God calls us to be in marriages and other relationships, but not to let other people live our lives and make our decisions for us. It's dangerously easy to get used to accepting your spouse's or your parents' opinions and beliefs without question. You get

used to letting other people think for you and look after you in ways that keep you childlike. Without realizing, you lose some of your ability to function as the unique, capable adult God calls you to be.

The remedy for this problem isn't dropping out of marriages, family groups, churches, or any other important groups or relationships. It's deliberately choosing to function in some new ways *within* those groups and relationships.

How about trying a tiny new step this week, to pave the way for larger ones that God might be calling you to take? Sit in a different place in the sanctuary for worship this Sunday. Start doing something for yourself that your spouse, parents, or others have always done for you. Sign up for a class that interests you, even if no one you know is willing to go with you. Plan a trip to a new place. Go somewhere where you will meet new people and hear new ideas. I think you'll be glad you did!

Backtalk from readers



A Southern Baptist laywoman-- "*Connections* gets better with each issue. It is like a breath of fresh air after being in a smoke-filled room."



An Episcopalian laywoman-- "It is a poignant reminder of how things in the church must change 'in order to remain the same.' Thanks for moving us along."

A United Methodist District Superintendent-- "Applause, applause to you, and thank you! I have enjoyed your fresh insights and lovingly frank dialogue. Ours is a new church and a new day and we are called to speak and respond with 'holy boldness.'"

A United Methodist laywoman-- "Your heart-provoking *Connections* is read, discussed, and passed on... Thanks for keeping the Scriptures front and center without the 'authority' approach. Thanks for no soap boxes. Thanks for simplicity of speech and an attitude of empathy."



I'm still getting enthusiastic comments from readers about "If I were a bishop," and some readers have sent their own ideas. A Texas layman says, "If I were a bishop I'd spend some time being wallpaper, traveling incognito through worship services and church meetings." I'll include some other readers' suggestions on this topic next month.

A new effort bears fruit!



Writing has been a big new step for me in recent years, and I've recently received some exciting news about one of my efforts. A book I've co-authored with Dr. Stanley Menking, Associate Dean of Perkins School of Theology, will be released this fall by Judson Press. Its title is *God's Partners: The Work of the Lay Christian*.

More about it later . . .

Step into new life

What new step is God calling you to take? If it's a step toward God-given new life it's important, even if it's tiny by the world's standards. Dare to take it! This season when we celebrate the new life that God brings forth from death is the ideal time.

Barbara

Next month . . .

**Insiders and outsiders
in the church**



Connections 4-93

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 **Step into new life . . .**

 **Readers say, "I want to let more people know about *Connections*. How can I help?"**

If you want to let others know about *Connections*, you might like to use a flyer that I've put together to hand out at some church-related events I've attended recently. It's an 8½" x 14" sheet that contains some of the enthusiastic comments I've received from readers, plus a section that anyone who wants to start receiving *Connections* can tear off and mail to me with their check. You could make copies of this flyer to post on bulletin boards or to distribute at events you attend and in church groups you belong to.

Your Annual Conference this spring would be an ideal opportunity. I'm already sending *Connections* to the Central Texas Annual Conference members, but if you belong to a different one I'd greatly appreciate your distributing my flyer at your Annual Conference through whatever channels you have access to.

  The cost keeps me from enclosing the flyer with this issue for everyone on my mailing list, but if you'll let me know you want it I'll be glad to mail it to you.