

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 18 - APRIL 1994



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Sunday School—does it help or hinder hearing God's word?

Recently I heard a clergyman lamenting that despite their regular participation in Sunday School many church members know little about the church, the Bible, or how the Christian faith relates to current events and issues. "Not much learning happens in typical adult Sunday School classes," he observed. "Most of them just socialize and re-hash what their members already think. They rarely present new information or challenge people to grow in their faith."

SUNDAY SCHOOL



Unfortunately his observations apply to a lot of Sunday School classes. Many use the same kind of lesson material and hear the same teacher Sunday after Sunday for years. They don't expose members to new viewpoints. Their members don't talk about how the Bible's contents apply to their own lives or to current issues. As a result, members don't grow in their faith or in their relationships with each other. In fact, by reassuring them that conventional church participation is all God wants, these classes keep members from noticing when God is nudging them to take bold new steps.

What do our classes need to provide?

▪ The Gospel message

This is primary, of course. But because attendance is voluntary, we must present that message in ways that will cause people to find it interesting and to recognize it as valuable for their everyday lives. Otherwise they won't even be present to hear it.

... continue in the faith,
not shifting from the
hope of the Gospel ...
— Colossians 1:23

▪ Christian friends with common interests

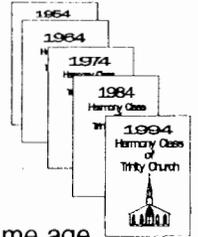


Many traditional groups classified by age, sex, or marital status serve this purpose, and it's important. It

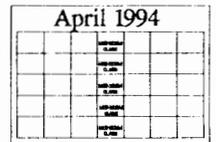
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Continuity and change

Some church members consider Sunday-School-class membership a life-time commitment. And although they value their class's lesson material and the format in which it is presented, the personal relationships that the class provides are its main attraction. In this kind of class, most members are about the same age.



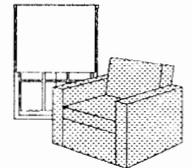
Other church members prefer short-term classes designed to study and discuss specific subject matter—Jesus' parables, maybe, or Methodism, or recovery from divorce. These classes often include varied ages, and attending doesn't mean joining. Although attenders often form valuable new relationships through the group, its content and format are the original attraction.



Each kind of class has benefits and dangers

Staying uncommitted is easier when we only attend short-term classes. Long-term groups are more likely to provide the mutual accountability we need as Christians. Also, friendships are more likely to develop in groups we attend regularly for an extended period of time.

However, long-term classes often become cliques if they're small or mini-churches if they're large. Loyalty to the class replaces loyalty to the total church. Members assume that what their fellow class members think is what everyone thinks and what everyone *should* think. The class meeting room and its furnishings take on inappropriate importance. So lifelong attachment to a class can hinder our growth as Christians.



Changing classes can be helpful

Moving from one class to another exposes us to a variety of viewpoints and teaching styles. It helps us meet more church members and find those who share our main interests and our most pressing concerns. Being with new people can help us make a fresh start or go in new directions in response to God's nudges. Familiar groups tend to encourage us to stay put and to keep acting the way we've always acted, and that's not always helpful. It's often the opposite of what God calls us to do.

At different times in our lives we need different kinds of groups. The church needs to include many kinds.

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helps us find Christians to enjoy socializing with, and some who share our interests or are dealing with problems similar to ours. But our church school classes need to be much more than just places to find friends and enjoy their company.



▪ **Information about the Bible and the church**

Class members also need to learn about Christian history and theology, about the Bible's origin and meaning, and about what is happening in the church—in the universal church as well as in their own congregation and denomination.

▪ **People who notice, care, and respond**

When members have problems or good news to share, they need a group small enough to notice and respond. They need a place to be known.

▪ **A place to talk about what really matters**

Our church groups need to provide opportunities for attenders to talk safely about their personal lives, their faith journeys, and other serious concerns. The church shouldn't be just another place to find the same kind of superficial small-talk that is easy to find elsewhere.



▪ **Challenge, support, and accountability**

We need to encourage and help our members to find what God is calling them to do. We must help them to identify their talents and spiritual gifts and to use them in response to God's call. We need to challenge church attenders to discover more about God's nature and God's will, and to reexamine and occasionally revise their beliefs and their behavior in accordance with new God-given insight.

To be faithful, the church must serve these purposes, and we can serve them best through small groups. But it won't happen automatically. Each of us must deliberately help it happen, by making needed changes in the church groups we're in, and by helping new ones get started. After all, we are the church.

How could you help in some new ways? ❖



Three disappointed women

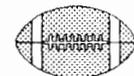
From three women who live in three different parts of the U.S. I've recently heard comments that were sadly alike.

One woman is 30 and single. She grew up in the United Methodist Church and is now very active in a large UMC in a large city. She is bright and well-read and has many interests, including but not limited to the Bible, the church, and theology. She would like to meet other Christian single young adults who share some of her interests, but she has given up on her church's singles class. It offers only fluff and trivia. She tried a Bible study program at her church, but whenever class members raised questions about the origin or meaning of a scripture, the teacher merely said, "Let's move on to the next passage."



The second woman is in her 40's. She is married and lives in a medium-sized city. Like the first woman she grew up in the UMC and is well-educated and bright, with wide interests. She told me excitedly about a long article in a secular magazine, which she had found intriguing. It was about some recent findings of biblical scholars and some ideas of contemporary theologians. It made her think about important faith issues she'd never thought about before. It helped her make sense out of some aspects of the Bible that had never made sense to her before. "Why haven't I ever heard about any of this in church?" she asked. When I asked her if she was currently active in a church, her eyes dropped. "No," she said sadly. "I've given up. I'd be in one if it had a class that discussed current issues and seriously examined a variety of viewpoints, but I can't find a class like that."

The third woman is in her 70's. A long-time Methodist, she is currently in a small UMC congregation in a small town. Like the other two women, she is bright, well-informed and widely traveled, with many interests. She yearns for opportunities to talk seriously with other Christians about how our faith relates to current issues, but she can't find any such opportunities in her church. "My husband and I aren't in a Sunday School class," she said. "The class for our age group in our church is large and popular, and we've tried it, but I just can't take it. All their conversations are about football and grandchildren and other things that aren't the least bit interesting to me, and the teacher has never had a new thought in his whole life." She went on to talk about her frustration with her church's worship. "I love music," she said, "but we just sing the same old hymns over and over. Nobody wants to sing anything that isn't in the Cokesbury hymnal, and I'm so tired of those."



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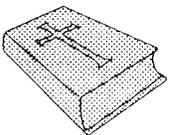
If one of these women visited your church, would she leave disappointed? How could you help to keep that from happening? And if you aren't finding what *you* want in the church, how could you help your church provide it?

Enlivening our classes

Sometimes we can make our church groups more effective by adding variety to their content. Sometimes we need to enliven our way of presenting it. Often we need both.

Current newspapers and magazines can be a welcome change from traditional lesson materials. So can video. So can discussion in which members can express their thoughts, feelings, and questions. Here are some possibilities to consider.

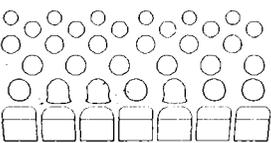
- Have a lesson series based on church music, using the newest edition of *The United Methodist Hymnal* or your denomination's hymnal. If your church has a music director, she/he would probably be glad to lead such a series. It could include learning some new hymns and then asking your pastor to include them in worship.



You could use the words of Christian songs, new and old, as a basis for class discussion. Discuss how they compare to your beliefs and to the Bible's message. Consider how the songs reflect the eras in which they were written.

Class members who don't know how to read music could learn during your class sessions. It's not hard, and it would make worship mean more.

Newcomers find a group quickly or leave



When newcomers don't quickly find a small church group they feel comfortable in, they soon disappear from the church. For most people, just

sitting in a pew on Sunday morning, looking at the backs of strangers' heads, doesn't furnish much motivation for continuing to attend.

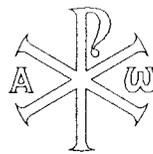
Despite group members' good intentions, long-standing church groups often seem forbidding to newcomers. Members are so comfortable with each other that they forget to stay on the lookout for newcomers and to bring them into the group.

Our churches therefore must start new groups often, if we want to attract newcomers. And we can't insist on Sunday morning as the only time for them to meet. Many "Sunday School" classes now are actually "Monday School" or "Thursday School." They meet on weekday evenings or at whatever other times people can come.

- Ask each class member to bring an interesting article from a current newspaper or magazine, about an issue that raises questions of ethics or faith and is important for your local community or the wider world. Talk about parts of the Bible's message that might relate to the issue. Discuss what you think Christians should do about it. Discuss the pros and cons of several different possible responses. If your class is large, divide into groups for this, or have different members bring articles on different Sundays.



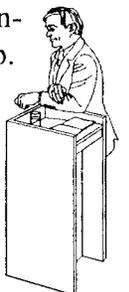
- Do something similar using articles about current ideas, issues, and events in the world of religion and theology. These might come from Christian magazines like *The Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, or *Daughters of Sarah*, from news magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek*, or from church periodicals such as *The United Methodist Reporter*. Some classes use *Connections* for this purpose.



- Have a refresher course about basic Christian history and beliefs, or about the history and the distinctive beliefs and policies of your denomination.
- By studying a book or hearing a guest teacher, learn what makes churches effective in reaching various segments of today's population. Look at demographic information about the population that surrounds your church, and discuss how your church could more effectively reach this population with its ministries and worship services. As a class project, help your church develop some new programs designed to reach population segments that you are now missing.

- Invite guest speakers. Ask someone who is involved in an innovative project aimed at remedying a problem in your local community. Ask her/him to tell why she/he created the project or got involved in it. Learn how your class might help.

Or invite a person who has taken some other unusual step in response to God's call. Ask him/her to tell you about his/her spiritual journey and how it led to this new step.



If you need help in finding such speakers, ask your pastor and members of other groups within your congregation. Ask outside people, too. Even if your congregation or your city is small, it

probably includes people who have interesting faith stories that you're not aware of.

▪ If your class has a regular teacher, exchange teachers with another class for a few Sundays. No matter how capable your own teacher is, hearing someone different occasionally can be helpful.

▪ For the summer or another limited time, discontinue regular Sunday School classes and offer short-term classes instead, with members choosing one or more to attend instead of their usual class.

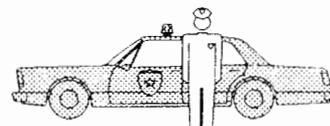
There are plenty of possibilities, but making them realities depends on us, and especially on

those of us who are lay church members. We can't expect our pastors or other church employees to do it for us, and the changes may not be comfortable for us. But to be faithful we must make our groups so interesting, so helpful, and so welcoming that people will want to attend and will grow as Christians when they do.

Barbara

Next month . . .

Do Christians need to be God's police force?



Connections 4-94

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Sunday School— does it help or hinder hearing God's word?

Reaching more church members with *Connections*

Many *Connections* readers tell me, "You are saying what I wish I could say!" If you feel this way, let's work together to say it to more church members. You can get *Connections* to people that it won't reach without your help.

United Methodist Annual Conferences will meet soon, all over the U.S., and these are ideal opportunities for letting new people know about *Connections*. If you're willing to distribute some *Connections* flyers or sample issues at the sessions of your Annual Conference, please let me know right away and I will send you some.

Connections readers are finding many ways to spread its message. A Sunday School class uses *Connections* as lesson material. Several *Connections* readers duplicate every issue and distribute it to all members of their class regularly. Pastors have distributed copies to entire congregations. Some distribute copies to their Administrative Boards and other such groups. Some D.S.'s distribute *Connections* to their district pastors. One enthusiastic reader has recently volunteered to provide the funds for adding the approximately 900 United Methodist General Conference delegates to the *Connections* mailing list when they are elected next year!

The possibilities for using *Connections* to help enliven our churches are enormous. Will you help me turn some of those possibilities into realities? If so, please let me know what help you need from me.

