

Reconsidering the past

Three projects that I've been working on lately have made me take a fresh look at some of my personal history and congregational history.



A relatively new member of my local church congregation has become its historian. She asked me to write my recollections and thoughts about the many years that my husband and I have spent in the congregation, to be put into its archives. Doing that has made me rethink my 57 years in it.

I've also been putting a list of all past *Connections* issues, grouped by topic, onto my website, which has required at least skimming every one of the 271 issues. Reviewing these 25 years of *Connections* has made me rethink what I've written.

Also, I'm thinking about the book that the publisher of my *Misfits* book wants me to write: an anthology of issues of *Connections*. Choosing which ones to include requires deciding which issues' topics I consider most important.

Questions I'm asking myself

Working on these three projects simultaneously has made me ask myself these questions.

◆ Have my concerns about the church changed over the years? What are my main concerns now?



◆ Which aspects of my participation in my local congregation have been helpful to it? Which may have been harmful?

◆ What do I want to be remembered for, after my death?

I'm sharing some of my thoughts about these questions here, in the hope that it may stir readers to ask themselves similar questions and think in fresh ways about their answers.

What do I want to be remembered for?



A question that my congregation's historian recently asked me to answer in what I wrote for its archives is how I want to be remembered after my death.

In the obituaries I see in newspapers, many women near my age are described only as having been a loving wife, mother, and friend, and a faithful church participant and lover of God and Jesus. I'd be glad to be remembered for those qualities, but I hope to be remembered for more than those. Is that an unchristian hope?

I'd like to be remembered also for having some abilities that weren't the same as everyone else, and for having done some things that few other women in my generation and my setting did.



I want to be remembered for having written *Connections*, which was unlike anything I knew anyone else to have done. I'd like to be remembered for having had 3 (maybe 4?) books published, even though none were best-sellers.

I want to be remembered for having asked questions, including some that made churchgoers uncomfortable but maybe helped to bring about needed changes, even though those probably won't happen until long after I'm gone, if ever. I want to be remembered for having spoken up about what I believed being a Christian required, and about the changes that I thought were needed for the good of the church and the world. I want to be remembered for having recognized some injustices in the church and the society and for having tried to help get them stopped. That would be more than enough.

The easiest question to answer

The first of those questions is the easiest for me to answer, because I still have most of the same church-related concerns that I began becoming aware of after I started investigating what the purpose of the church was supposed to be, in the 1970s. They're the concerns that made me start writing *Connections* in 1992 and have kept me writing it.

Here's the conclusion that I came to, about the purpose of the church: it is to follow Jesus by promoting the kind of compassion and justice that he spoke about and exemplified.



Every church member can help

I'm still very concerned about the need for every church congregation to focus on accomplishing that purpose. Exactly how they do that is likely to vary because of their different settings and the different resources available to each of them. The need to help ensure that every segment of a city's population has top-quality schools, for example,



may be an urgent justice issue that one congregation needs to address in its community, while for another congregation, helping to see that elderly citizens have healthy meals may be more pertinent and more doable.

There are some ways, however, in which members of every congregation can promote compassion and justice, and need to. Those ways include voting to make health care available for all. They include voting and speaking in favor of statewide and nationwide efforts to provide quality education for all children. They include avoiding use of language that treats women as inferior to men, and language that promotes racism.

Willingness to do such things, however, requires becoming aware of what Jesus emphasized, and thinking how his teaching may apply to what's happening in today's world. Churches therefore need to inform members of what is now known about Jesus and about the Bible, Christian history, and the doctrinal statements that many Christians still assume are true but may not be true. That includes applying what has now been learned from science, history, archaeology, and other non-church sources, rather than just taking the words of ancient writings and creeds literally.



Avoiding what's not the purpose

Along with promoting its true purpose, avoiding other purposes is also important for every congregation. This includes not claiming that Christianity has a monopoly on the truth. It includes not giving the impression that only expressing belief in Jesus will keep people from going to hell when they die. Ministering mainly to its own members is also not the church's purpose. It is to show love/compassion to everyone, especially those who are poor, sick, hungry, in prison, or being mistreated.



Reasons for *Connections*

In several past issues of *Connections* and on the home page of my website, I've stated my reasons for writing. I find that most of them still apply. They essentially boil down to these.

√ Reminding church misfits, dropouts ("dones," "church refugees," "de-churched," . . .) that if they see the need for changes in the church, to bring it more nearly in line with its purpose, they are neither alone nor mistaken.



√ Encouraging churchgoers and dropouts to speak up about the need for change and to do whatever they can to help bring it about—to be active and vocal, not passive and silent.

√ Reminding Christians that Jesus advocated changes that were radical for his time: treating women as men's equals, associating with social outcasts, and breaking religious rules and traditions, as well as opposing secular authorities. He was not conservative.



√ Helping to disseminate, within the church and beyond, some of what is now known about the earthly life of Jesus, church history, non-Christian religions, and the origin and development of the Bible.

√ Nudging readers to continually examine and when necessary revise their religious beliefs, to reflect what is now known from science, history, archaeology, travel, and other non-church sources.

The hardest question to answer

Have my efforts helped or hurt the church? I'm not sure. I've always thought they would help—

that's why I made them—but looking back on them now, I'm not sure about some of them.

Throughout my 25 years of writing *Connections*, many readers have generously told me that what I was doing was helpful, for the church and for their personal spiritual growth. I have greatly appreciated all of those kind words, and of course I want to believe they're true. But I've gotten a few other responses that were very different from those, which I have to wonder about. Interestingly, most of the negative responses have come from members of my own congregation.



A toxic influencer?

Assembling materials for the congregation's historian recently, I found one of those negative responses that still bothers me. It was sent anonymously but was obviously from a member of my congregation. It was a response to the May 2007 *Connections*, in which I had quoted an article by UMC pastor Dan Dick. It was about the difference between being what he called a "toxic influencer" in the church and expressing what he called "holy discontent."



Holy discontent, Dan Dick wrote, can be a motivator for needed change. It's a good thing. But toxic influencers do harm. They work behind the scenes to poison people's minds against new ideas, change (especially in worship services), innovations, and new people in leadership. Toxic influencers, he explained, have incredible power to undermine the authority of leaders and working groups. They often hold the church hostage through a threat of leaving or withholding money. In that issue of *Connections*, I said I didn't think I was a toxic influencer, because I'd usually promoted new ideas and innovations rather than opposing them, and I had never made threats about leaving or withholding money.

The anonymous response writer, however, said, "You and your husband are, by far, the most toxic people at FUMC and have been for many years. Everything you mention [in this *Connections*] is exactly what the two of you do, from bad-mouthing leadership to withholding money. Your 'holier-than-thou' mentality is just unbelievable, and the fact that you consider yourself a Christian woman is remarkable, considering all the unchristian things you do." Wow! That hurt!



Always in favor of everything?

I've gotten a few other unnerving comments from members over the years, too. I still remember one FUMC friend (?) saying, "I'm willing to be on that committee, but not if Barbara is going to be on it." I also remember a fellow Sunday School class member saying that he had been in several different churches before moving to Temple. "In all the others," he said, "whenever something was proposed, everyone just said 'Let's do it' and got busy doing it, but here, there's always opposition to everything." He clearly saw that as undesirable, and he was looking straight at me when he said it.

In contrast, however, another friend, the head of a UMC-related organization, once told me that he always liked having me as a member of his board. "When the emperor doesn't have on any clothes," he said, "I know I can count on you to say so, and I need that." And I once read a statement by a famous corporate leader, saying that if the views of someone on his board or staff were always the same as his, then that person was unnecessary. What he needed instead was people to bring up things he hadn't seen. Those statements make good sense to me, so I'm skeptical of the churches my friend remembered, in which everyone supposedly was always in favor of everything.



This issue, all back issues, a list of books I've written about, a list of recent books I recommend, and more *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at BCWendland@aol.com. I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I'm a lifelong lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Efforts to get pastors moved

Writing about my church history recently has reminded me that a few times during my 57 years at FUMC, I made efforts to get a pastor



moved. Was that being a toxic influencer? Maybe it was. But one of those pastors allowed some staff members to be verbally abusive—even sexually abusive, in one case—to other staff members continually. He also made a habit of saying one thing to one member and the opposite of that to another. And he once told me that his way of deciding what to do was to find out what the majority of the congregation wanted, and then do that. It seems to me that what's needed instead is to try to discern what following Jesus requires, and then do that. So to me, that pastor's behavior seemed to be clear evidence that a change was needed.

My efforts to get an earlier pastor moved, however, were mainly because he and his wife and a staff member that he had brought were presenting a liberal interpretation of Christianity, which my family and friends and I saw as wrong and harmful. A large number of members left, because they also saw it as wrong. But many of my religious beliefs have changed greatly since then. My theological perspective is now more like what that pastor and his wife and staff member were expressing, or even more liberal/progressive than that.



Should I have kept quiet about that pastor? I'm not sure. Ironically, my anger about the congregational turmoil and loss of members during his pastorate was what first motivated me to investigate what the church's real purpose was supposed to

be. That investigation expanded greatly over the years and is still going on. It has opened my eyes in many helpful ways and has led me to make much-needed changes in my beliefs and my life.

I wonder if that pastor and his wife could have presented their views in a different way that would have made me able to see validity in their perspective and thus motivated me to change mine, or if I simply hadn't reached the point at which that could happen. If I treated them unfairly, I'm sorry. But I wonder what I was capable of doing differently at that time in my life.

Harmony isn't necessarily helpful

I'm not the team player that leaders of companies and churches now seem to want their subordinates to be. I may actually be harmful in the eyes of the many church people who seem to agree with a friend who recently commented to me that her main desire in groups was for harmony. But I don't see constant harmony as helpful, because change is often needed, and change inevitably causes some conflict.



For about the first 40 years of my life, I was a quiet conformist. When I was skeptical about what authorities and majorities said, I assumed that I must be wrong, so I kept quiet and obeyed. Was that wise? Is it what all citizens and church members should do? I don't think so. It is undoubtedly the most comfortable behavior for pastors and government leaders to deal with. But when I see something that I think is wrong, I'm going to keep speaking up, even if it rocks the church boat and makes me unpopular. I hope you will do that, too.

Barbara

Find *Connections* issues listed by topic on my website

I've finally succeeded in adding a page to my website, www.connectionsonline.org, listing all of the issues of *Connections* in order of their topics. The list isn't perfect, because several of the topics I've written about overlap, so I had a hard time deciding which topic seemed to be the best fit for each issue. That's especially true of the ones about dissent, about feeling like a misfit in the church, and about tradition and the need for change. Also, some *Connections* issues have dealt with more than one topic, so I've listed them in more than one place. But despite these problems, I hope that having at least an approximate list will help readers who want to see what I've written about a particular topic.



If you want to see the *Connections* issue in which I wrote about a particular book that you're interested in, please look instead at the list under the heading "Books" at the top of the website. That list could probably use some cleanup, but most of the books I've written about are listed there.