

# connections

Calling the church to faithful new life

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## Addressing divisive issues

A magazine article and a book that I've recently read suggest ways of addressing current social issues on which Christians disagree. The article, "How One Pastor Is Bridging the Partisan Divide," by Yoni Applebaum, in the June 27 issue of *The Atlantic*, describes a way of addressing such issues in worship services. It's the way of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, which claims 20,000 congregants in its four congregations in the Kansas City area.



Its senior pastor, Adam Hamilton, estimates members to be 60% Republicans and 40% Democrats. They're slightly more liberal than the communities from which they come, he finds, but it's still a decidedly red-state congregation. "We try to bring both the evangelical and social gospel together regularly,"



Hamilton explains. To accomplish this, he teamed up with a local TV station. Its newscasters create video segments to be aired at the church for Hamilton to discuss with his members. For presenting the issues, a smaller congregation that couldn't afford to get videos custom-made would have to use a method somewhat different from this, but the principles would be the same.

### "You could feel the discomfort"

An early video segment for Hamilton's church dealt with the struggles of the city's public schools, whose accreditation had recently been revoked after decades of "white flight" had left them with inadequate resources. When Hamilton presented this topic, he reports, "you could feel the discomfort in the room, because our folks lived in the suburbs with the best school systems." However, he says, "we took this thing that was uncomfortable for people and forced them to grapple with what it meant, through the prism of their faith." He asked his hearers, "Do you think God cares about the 32,000 children, or

## A big change for me

For about the first 50 years of my life, I had a very different view from the one presented by the book I review in this *Connections*. My family and most of the families who were our friends and fellow churchgoers were part of companies' management. As a result, I heard mainly the views of business owners and other executives who saw labor unions and government regulations as unjust and unreasonable hindrances. I never heard the views of their employees, especially those who did manual labor and depended on hourly wages.



I found the college courses that I took in economics and mathematics of finance deadly dull, so I never wanted to pursue such subjects any further. I've always managed my own bank account and have been moderately well informed about the stock market, mainly because of my father's and my husband's interest in it, but that's been the extent of my awareness of economics and finance.

In recent years, however, I've realized that there are other valid viewpoints besides those I hear from my family and friends. I've therefore taken a new look at economic and financial matters that I'd never previously thought much about. Some of what I read about them is still like Greek to me, but the book I write about here is a welcome exception. It gives clearer explanations than those I've usually found elsewhere, and it presents views and facts that I now know deserve attention. Many even relate to actions that following Jesus requires, like feeding the hungry and healing the sick. What a surprise!



the teachers? And if not, what do you think God cares about?"

After the sermon, Hamilton had offering plates passed around, but not for the usual money donations. Instead, he used the plates to distribute postcards with the contact information of public-school teachers and administrators, urging members to contact them and offer help. Today, the article says, the congregation gives more than half a million in donations every year to six area elementary schools and supports a variety of tutoring and enrichment programs.



## Finding inspiration in the Gospel

Adam Hamilton says he looks to the Gospel for inspiration in presenting such issues. Among Jesus's disciples, he points out, Jesus chose Matthew, the tax collector, who was a collaborator with the Romans. He also chose Simon the Zealot, who was absolutely opposed to the Roman occupation and was willing to kill and terrorize to drive the occupiers out. Today's equivalent, in Hamilton's view, would be asking both a hardcore Democrat and a hardcore Republican to be his disciples.



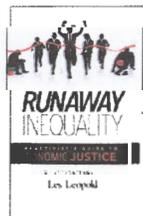
Hamilton emphasizes that finding ways to respect divergent views doesn't mean

getting people to agree. He stresses that Christians can share goals even as they disagree over the means of achieving them. He admits that after his sermons about current issues, some people stop coming to church, but he doesn't see this as reason to stop addressing the issues.

I'd love to be in a church that regularly addressed current world, national, and local issues like this. I'd love to be in one that openly discussed how the teaching of Jesus might relate to these issues, and how we might need to respond if we were serious about following him. The Gospels show him regularly addressing such topics during his earthly lifetime. Can we do any less and claim to be his followers?

## An ever-increasing gap

Besides reading the article about Adam Hamilton's effort to bridge the divide that exists in the U.S. today, I've also recently read a helpful book about the divide. It's *Runaway Inequality: An Activist's Guide to Economic Jus-*



*tice*, by Les Leopold (Labor Institute Press, 2015-2016). He cofounded and directs the Labor Institute in New York City, a nonprofit educational organization that designs programs on occupational health and safety and the environment and economics, for unions and community groups.



"The United States is among the richest countries in all of history," Leopold points out. But anyone who's not part of today's corporate or political elite, he finds, is not likely to recognize that. "In the world working people inhabit," his research tells him, "our infrastructure is collapsing, our schools are laying off teachers, our drinking water is barely potable, our cities are facing bankruptcy, and our public and private pension funds are nearing collapse." Also, many consumers, students, and homeowners are loaded with crushing debt, and their real wages haven't risen since the 1970s.

"How can we be so rich," Les Leopold asks, "and still have such poor services, so much debt, and such stagnant incomes?" The answer, in his view, is "runaway inequality—the ever-increasing gap in income and wealth between the super-rich and the rest of us."

## We don't see the big picture

"We see ourselves as leading the world in just about everything that is good and just," he observes, but the facts tell a different story. We have the most



homelessness and child poverty, for example, and we have a higher percentage of people in prison than China or Russia.

Leopold finds that few of us see the big picture. "We hear snippets about stock markets, government debt, trade, unemployment, and inflation," but we don't hear why any of this is happening or how it relates to our daily lives, and we aren't encouraged to ask the critical questions. Also, because we recognize that the economic system is complex and very hard to control, we overlook the fact that its fundamental direction is set by humans who serve particular interests. Leopold shows how powerful people chose to dramatically change the economy's direction a generation ago, and how working people have been paying the price ever since. "Runaway inequality is not an act of God," he assures us. "It is the result of a system designed by and for wealthy elites."



“Perhaps the biggest reason we are so misinformed,” in Les Leopold’s opinion, “is that it is not in the interests of our political parties for us to see the truth.” Neither party has addressed rising inequality in a meaningful way, he observes. Both major parties depend heavily on wealthy donors who would revolt if their wealth seemed threatened.



## A shift in fundamental philosophy

An especially eye-opening part of Les Leopold’s book for me was his account of how economic conditions in the U.S. have changed in recent decades, and why. “From the New Deal through the Cold War (1933 to 1990), it was American policy to boost job and income levels as much as possible to make sure our workers and middle class were ‘the envy of the world.’ That’s a half century of rising prosperity for working people. Also during this period, income taxes on the wealthy were extremely high, more than 90 percent for people at the highest income bracket during World War II and the 1950s. As a result, the top 1 percent, while living extremely well, saw their share of total U.S. wealth decline.”



Around 1980, however, worker wages began going flat while both productivity and CEO salaries soared. Also, other important economic trends began in the same period: rising consumer debt, student debt, government debt, prison population, homelessness, and child poverty. These changes, in Les Leopold’s opinion, “were part of a clear, intentional shift in the fundamental philosophy driving American economic policy.” The new policy, says Leopold, has three major economic prescriptions.



◆ Cut taxes, especially on the wealthy and large corporations. This policy claims to provide more

money for investment in new ventures and improvements. It will supposedly yield stronger industries, more jobs, and higher wages.

◆ Cut government regulations, especially on high finance. Conservative economists, Leopold explains, argued that these regulations increased the cost of doing business and decreased efficiency. “Our economy didn’t need government policing, these economists argued. Free markets with intense competition would police themselves.”



For many corporations, labor regulations were the most onerous of all, because unions and the rules that protected them limited management’s ability to maximize production and profits. But also, to boost its profits, Wall Street wanted to escape from government rules that were created to prevent a repeat of the 1929 stock market crash by curbing speculation, stock issuance, bank competition, interest rates, and many other aspects of high finance.

◆ Reduce government spending. This change weakened the governmental social safety net. Cutting social programs like food stamps and welfare payments, it was claimed, would force more low-income people into the work force, increasing the supply of low-cost labor for a growing economy.

But advocates of this view didn’t want to reduce *all* government spending. They claimed that military spending should be protected and even increased, to promote global economic growth. “Besides,” Leopold notes, “the military establishment had very strong corporate and political backing.”



In Les Leopold’s view, this 3-part model became the operating policy for all Republican and Democratic administrations since 1980, and it still is. It is pushed today by the current administration.

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](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto: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.

## The boats didn't all rise

This model, which Leopold sarcastically calls “the Better Business Climate model” and academics call neo-liberalism, has achieved its goals, he points out, when it comes to taxes, regulations, government safety net spending, unionization and strikes. But he and many others assure us that it hasn't achieved the rising tide that an old saying claimed would lift all boats. “The yachts of the super-rich,” Leopold points out, “certainly were crafted and took sail. But we working people are still in our dinghies, and they're taking on water.”



## The main culprit

In Les Leopold's opinion, which he bases especially on a 2012/13 “eye-popping” study of 71 countries by the International Labor Organization, one element of the model bears more responsibility for inequality than all the others. “The ILO study suggests,” reports Leopold, “that the deregulation of Wall Street beginning in the 1970s is the main culprit in our story.”

“Until the 1980s,” Leopold observes, the basic philosophy of corporate America was ‘retain and reinvest.’ Corporate survival and prosperity depended on plowing back most of a corporation's profits into increased worker wages and training, research and development, and new plant and equipment.” Stringent regulations kept high finance in check. But now, Leopold points out, private equity and hedge fund managers extract value out and away from the corporation and into their own pockets.



His explanation of how they do this was clearer than any I've read elsewhere, so I especially appreciated it. The ethos of today's corporate raiders and extravagantly paid CEOs advocates these actions, he explains: buy a company with borrowed money and then use earnings from the company to pay back the loans; take a hefty fee for pulling off the deal; change the way CEOs are paid, rewarding them with stock options or similar schemes that tie compensation to the value of the company's stocks; and raise the stock price by using corporate revenues to buy back the company's own stock.

Nearly all corporations, Leopold observes, whether raided or not, now follow this lucrative model, which he calls corporate strip-mining.



## We pay a steep price for inequality



Les Leopold's book repeatedly makes what he considers this essential point: “Runaway inequality comes at a steep price. The money that enriches the few is extracted from all that we hold dear — our public life, our incomes, our health, and the education of our children. It is making the richest country on earth poor ... Until we do something about it.”

What he feels we need to do is start a mass movement. Thousands of individual groups are working on issues that contribute to the problem, but we don't have a coherent national movement with a clear and bold agenda that links us together, Leopold observes. And the political system, in his opinion, will not move unless we organize on a mass level. “Economic elites will only give up power and wealth when they're forced to do so by a powerful social movement.”

## What can we do?

That may well be true, but starting a mass movement is beyond what most of us feel able to do. As individuals and as church congregations, however, we can become aware of harmful financial conditions at the community level, make them more widely known, and push for needed change.

An Austin newspaper recently reported that renting a 2-bedroom apartment in Austin requires a wage of \$23 an hour! That's appalling, and it needs to be more widely known. Our local news media need to report prominently and frequently what percentage of local public-school students are homeless or living in poverty. We need to find out and make known, too, what insurance plans our local hospitals and clinics accept, and how that availability or lack of it affects working-class residents of our community. We can find out and publicize which local businesses provide or don't provide health-care and retirement benefits for their employees, and take this into account when we shop or eat at restaurants. For a corporation whose stocks we own or whose products we use, we can find out what size its CEO's compensation package is and speak up if it's far out of proportion to employees' pay.



Runaway inequality is undoubtedly a huge and harmful problem, and stopping its run will require help from all of us.

*Barbara*