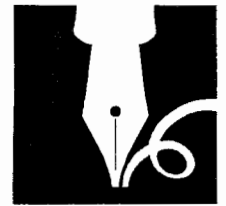


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

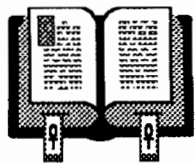
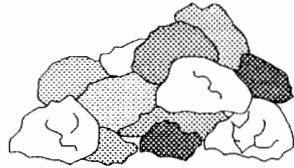
NUMBER 33 - JULY 1995



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What do these stones mean?

Throughout history, people in many cultures have used piles of stones to remind later people of important events that happened where the piles of stones were placed. Often these marked places are considered sacred.



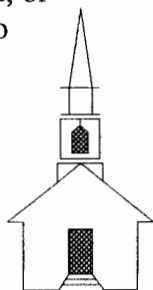
The scripture I've quoted at right describes such an event in the history of the ancient Israelites. God was leading them to a new land that God had promised to give them to live in. To get there, they would have to cross the Jordan River at flood stage. That seemed impossible to them, but to their amazement God stopped the floodwaters, letting the Israelites cross the dry river bed.

God told them to mark the spot with a mound of stones, to remind future generations that God could do what people considered impossible. The stones would also be a reminder that God often called people to go into new territory and enabled them to get there by following God's instructions.

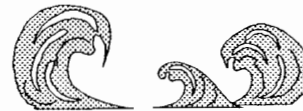
The church is our mound of stones

Today's Christians understand the church to be God's followers now, as the Israelites were in the time described in the book of Joshua. For us, the church's history, buildings, doctrines, and customs are like the ancient Israelites' pile of stones. Each stone represents something that God did, or something that people did in response to what they understood to be God's call.

Over the centuries millions of individuals and groups have contributed stones to the church pile. We've inherited it, and we continually need to ask, "What do these stones mean?"



Stones that tell a story



While all Israel were crossing over [the Jordan River] on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

... The Lord said ... "Take 12 stones ... from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight."



... Those 12 stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground,' ... so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty ..."



—Joshua 3:17-4:3, 4:20-24

For many years I never dared to ask that question. I merely assumed that all traditional church doctrines and customs were valid, because I thought that was what everyone was supposed to do. In more recent years, however, I've realized that in order to be faithful to God I need to examine the church stones from time to time and evaluate them for myself with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I can't just automatically accept all of them as having equal and permanent value.



Forced belief isn't faith

Why? Because real faith doesn't come from trying to make yourself believe what other people say you should believe, even if those people claim to be authorities. Faith comes instead from seeing

(continued on page 2)

God leads us to new places

The officers went through the camp giving orders to the people, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God ..., you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before." ... Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you."

—Joshua 3:2-5

Through their leaders God gave Joshua and the Israelites some instructions that I believe are also important for us if we want to follow God.

▪ **Watch for God's presence.** In this passage of scripture, God's presence is represented by the Ark of the Covenant, a box that usually stayed in the tabernacle of worship but was sometimes carried by the priests during battles or journeys.



Today God's presence isn't usually shown by a box, and it isn't always carried by the clergy. It is shown by the words and actions of God-inspired people, lay and or-

dained, who are at work in the trouble spots of the church and the world. Some of them are reporting new God-given insights about what God is like and what God wants us to do in today's world. Others are doing new kinds of ministry in order to reach new groups of people that God wants reached.

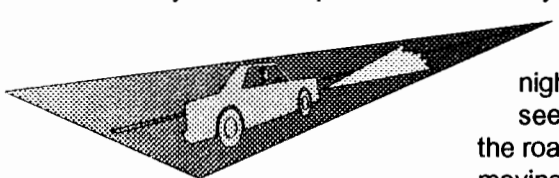


▪ **Move out from your current position.** This can mean physically going to a new place, but more often it means turning loose of wrong beliefs or changing harmful or ineffective ways of behaving. It may mean avoiding the people who discourage us from following God. For doing whatever God may be calling us to do, the first step is getting into motion.



▪ **Only after you start moving will you find out where to go and what to do.** I wish this wasn't true, because I don't like taking risks. Before I do anything new I want to know exactly what to expect. But God rarely allows that.

Following God is like night driving—seeing more of the road requires moving forward.

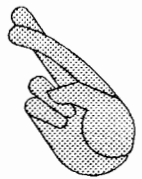


▪ **Expect to be led by a new route, to somewhere you've never been before.** We can't expect to follow God by doing only what we've done in the past.

▪ **God will do amazing things among you if you commit yourselves to God.** Today's world and church need some amazing things done. Will we commit ourselves?

(What do these stones mean?, continued from page 1)

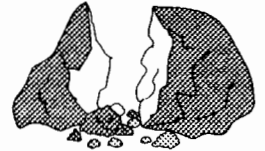
convincing evidence of the value and the truth of what you're asked to believe in. Without this, you're in danger of merely accepting the church's claims with your fingers crossed.



Doing that doesn't bring real commitment. If I'm merely going through the motions of church participation because I've been told that I should, but I haven't really seen a convincing reason for doing it, I'm very unlikely to be strongly committed to the church's mission or to its other members.

More important, I'm unlikely to have a real relationship with the true, living God. Instead, I merely worship a lifeless, powerless idol—a description of God that is incomplete or even false.

Some of our church stones have stood the test of time, but some haven't. If we want strong commitment from our present members, and if we want to attract people who aren't currently in the church, we can't keep asking them to accept stones that they can see are crumbling. We'll have to admit that those stones are faulty and stop using them. ❖



Looking at the church stones

When I examine the huge mound of stones that is the church, I see many different kinds of stones. Many are still usable, but some aren't.

▪ Gravel

These tiny stones were put in the mound by people who joined the church but stayed on the fringes or faded away completely. Unfortunately there are a lot of them.



They remind me of a story I heard recently, about some pastors who were discussing a problem they were having. One said, "Our church building is being overrun by bats. Our belfry is full of them, and they're making an awful mess and scaring our members. We've thrown things at them, and rung the bells, and done everything else we can think of to scare them away, but nothing has had any effect on them."



Another pastor said, "We have the same problem. I called a

pest control company and they put out some poison, but even that didn't discourage the bats."



A third pastor finally spoke up. "I used to have that problem," he said, "but I've solved it. I baptized all the bats and made them members of the church. They left immediately, and they've never come back."

Too many of our members act like those bats. Maybe they saw only the church's faults, and not its God-given purpose and power. Maybe we didn't make them feel welcome, or didn't communicate the Gospel in ways that let them recognize it as good news. For whatever reason, they left the church without ever really having been part of it, and their stones are now barely visible in the pile.



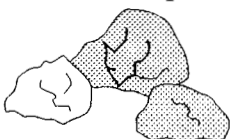
▪ **Cracked stones**

The church pile includes a lot of these, because the church is made up of human beings and none of us are perfect. These stones evidently looked wonderful to the Christians who put them there, but more recent God-given insight has shown them to be faulty. The problem is not that they were put there. It's that we refuse to admit that they're faulty. Unfortunately some of them are the biggest and most obvious stones in the pile, and we're still acting as if they represented God's will.



Some of the cracked stones were contributed by people that we consider giants of Christian history. Saint Augustine, for example, claimed that women were inferior to men and were the source of temptation and evil. His stones are still very prominent in the church mound, even though we now know that his opinion of women was wrong.

Other cracked stones were put into the church mound by Christians who mistakenly insisted that God made the white race superior to all others and wanted white people to be in charge everywhere, and that scripture supported this claim.

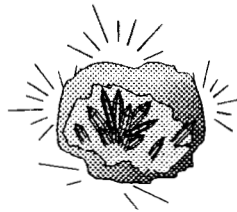


If we want our churches to survive and to be effective in doing God's will, we can't keep

insisting that stones like these represent God's will. We can appreciate the fact that their contributors were obeying what they *thought* was God's will, but we must recognize where God has now shown us that they were mistaken.

▪ **Jewels in disguise**

The other kind of stones I see in the church mound aren't very impressive on the surface. They're like some I saw on a recent trip. At a roadside shop that sold native stones I saw a table heaped with rocks that were just splotchy, lumpy, gray blobs. I wondered, "Why would anyone want to buy one of those ugly things?" When I walked closer, however, I saw one of them that had been cut open, and I realized it was a geode. It was full of sparkling rose-colored crystals.

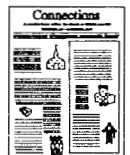


The church stones include a lot like this. They have amazing beauty and depth, but you can't tell that by merely glancing at their surfaces. Some of our worship practices are like this. Communion, for example, has depth and value that often are not apparent in our routine ways of practicing it.

The church's hidden-but-beautiful stones also include selfless acts of ministry aimed at promoting justice, relieving suffering, and freeing people from sinful forces that oppress them. Some of these valuable stones are contributed by famous Christians like Mother Teresa, but many more are put in the mound by unrecognized Christians daily throughout the world.

If you've just discovered *Connections*

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 to cover printing and postage for the current year's issues. If you also want the 2 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write me at the address above, phone me at 817-773-2625, or e-mail me at bcwendland@aol.com.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, neither a church employee nor a clergy wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to more than 8000 readers in 49 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.



These jewels also include bold efforts to lead the church in new directions in response to God's call. Brave laity and clergy are speaking out, saying what they understand to be God's will even when it differs from popular opinion, official church policy, or tradition.

Laying aside the worthless stones

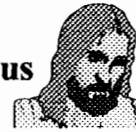
If we want to be faithful to God today, we must dare to stop using the stones that God has revealed as worthless or harmful. We must bring the valuable stones to the surface and help our members see

their value. Most important, we must add our own stones to the pile, trying to make them the kind that will truly reflect God's glory and God's will for the church and the world. I believe that's what the church stones mean for us today. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

Finding the real Jesus



Who do the crowds say that I am?
Who do you say that I am?



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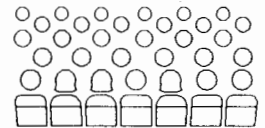
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What do these stones mean?



Connections for U. M. C. General Conference delegates

In the next few months I hope to start sending *Connections* monthly to all of the 996 recently elected United Methodist General Conference delegates who live in the U.S. and are not already getting *Connections*. If you're one of them and this is the first issue of *Connections* you've received, welcome! Maybe we'll get to meet in person at General Conference; I'm a delegate, too.



ministry
bureaucracy
quality
SONIA
mission
sexuality
scripture
heresy
Jesus Seminar
ordination
worship
tradition
membership
future hopes

To help pay the cost of sending *Connections* to this many more people, one *Connections* reader has made a major contribution of funds. I will furnish whatever other funds are necessary, because I want to reach this group with *Connections*, but I would greatly appreciate your contribution, large or small. So far, I'm having trouble getting the entire delegate list, so if your Annual Conference's delegates aren't yet receiving *Connections* and you can send me their names and addresses, I'd appreciate your doing so.

During the months between now and next April, when General Conference meets, I will address in *Connections* some of the issues that are likely to be dealt with by General Conference. Since many *Connections* readers aren't United Methodists, however, I'll mostly avoid specifics of UMC structure, doctrine, and policy. I will focus instead on the broader issues that the UMC's concerns reflect—on some stones whose meaning I believe we need to re-examine regardless of what our church ties may be.