

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Lay voices in the church



God calls lay Christians to be the church scattered in the world, by ministering and witnessing in our daily life. But we also are mem-

bers of the gathered church—the institutional church. We minister through it and depend on it for opportunities to worship God, to find Christian friends, and to get nurture and guidance. We want and need a voice in the institutional church.

## We feel unheard

We often feel that our voices aren't being heard in it. Often we don't even see anywhere to express our views. We



get the impression that the clergy and a small inner circle within the laity are making all of our church's decisions without our even knowing how or when they are made. If we're in a connec-tional church we often feel that far-away people whose views and circumstances are quite different from ours are making many of the decisions that affect our local church, and we feel powerless to influence this giant system. It's discouraging.

## We can get our views included

Because the church includes many people, no one of us can expect to call the shots in it as an individual, just as we can't expect that in our city, state, or nation. But in all these institutions there are ways to make our views known and to have them considered when policies are set. We need to make use of these ways in the church. And we need to avoid ways that make leaders think our voices aren't worth listening to. If we want to be heard, we must choose the ways that are most likely to be effective. ❖



## Our voices must reflect God

If we want the church to listen, we can't just push our personal agendas. The church may need to ignore our voices if we're merely asking for what will keep us comfortable. After all, the church's God-given purpose isn't keeping its members comfortable. It is making Christian disciples and ministering to the world. Our churches need to listen to us only if we are advocating effective ways of accomplishing that purpose.

Here's how you can find out what God wants you to be saying to the church.

- **Bone up on the Bible.** Refresh on how it was written and what its overall message is. Above all, get clear on what Jesus says is the purpose of his ministry and the church's. Look for new insights, not just for confirmation of your present beliefs and opinions.



- **Pay attention to prophets.** Look for people in your church and in the wider church and world who may be speaking God's message to today's church. Don't write them off just because they're unattractive or because what they're saying isn't what you want to hear. God's prophets are usually like that. They attack things that God knows are idols but we treat as sacred.

- **Learn about today's churches and the world's response to them.** Notice what's working and what isn't. Read church-related news in religious and secular publications. Find books and workshops by people who have analyzed what makes the difference between effective and ineffective churches today. Discuss their findings with your pastor and church members.



The seven last words  
of the church —  
*"We've never done it  
that way before"*

- **Encourage experiments.** Help your church to try new programs and methods that might be more effective than your present ones in communicating the Gospel to today's people. Don't ask for continuation of methods and programs that aren't working.

- **Pray with an open mind and heart.** Don't reject any answers just because they aren't what you expect. Be ready to let God show you more than you now see.

## How can you have a voice?



Having a voice in your local church usually requires expressing your views convincingly to your pastor. You may also need to express them to other church staff members and to influential lay members. If you're in the United Methodist Church or another connectional denomination, you must sometimes communicate your views to regional and national leaders, too.

▪ **Get to know each other.** Let your pastor and other church leaders know you care about them as people. Find out what their interests, worries, fears, strengths, needs, and sore points are. Reveal yours. This can be risky, of course, but it's evidently the way God intends all of us to relate to each other in the church. Make opportunities for conversation with your pastor. Include him in social and recreational activities with your family members and friends. Don't depend on starting from scratch when disaster strikes or you want a hearing for something you consider important.

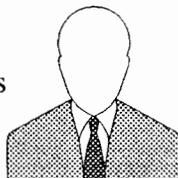


▪ **Be kind.** Honey really does catch more flies than vinegar. When we feel strongly about something and feel ignored, our first impulse is often to lash out with harsh personal attacks and sarcasm, but these repel the people we want to influence. If you claim to be a Christian but you speak in mean, ugly, unchristian ways, you aren't believable.

▪ **Get the facts.** If you spout misinformation, you can't expect to be taken seriously. Don't speak only on the basis of rumors or your friends' opinions. Before you speak, get several people's views on the issue you're concerned about, and get the facts from the people who actually know them.

▪ **Speak for yourself.** Claiming to speak for other church members is unconvincing to pastors. They must assume that members who really feel strongly about an issue will speak for themselves.

▪ **Claim your views.** Don't phone or write anyone anonymously. Your views won't be taken seriously unless you're willing to claim and discuss them.



▪ **Express compliments, not just complaints.** Let church leaders know what you like that's happening in your church. Don't let criticism be all they ever hear from you.



▪ **Don't just drop in.** If you want your pastor to give full attention to something you consider important, make an appointment to talk with him about it. When you drop in unannounced at the church office, he may not be able to give your concern the time and attention that it needs.

▪ **Don't use Sunday morning as the time to express your views to your pastor about an important issue.** Sunday morning is a pastor's busiest and most hectic

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time of the week. She has to think about her sermon and the details of the worship service, and maybe a Sunday School class she's teaching too. She wants to speak to as many members as possible. And she's bombarded by a jillion questions and bits of information, from minor ones like "Where's the key to the storage closet?" to major ones like "I have just learned that my husband has cancer." There's no way a pastor can give serious attention to your concern or even be sure of remembering it if you present it in the midst of all this.

▪ **Put your money where your mouth is.** This carries a lot of weight with pastors and lay leaders, and understandably so. We hold them responsible for providing the buildings, services, and programs that we expect from our church, but



they can't do it unless we provide the necessary money. What's important to these leaders, however, is not so much the amount you give as the proportion of your income it represents. If you drive a Mercedes, travel to Europe, send your children to Harvard, wear Neiman-Marcus clothes, or have season tickets to Cowboys games, and yet you give less to your church than you spend on these, you can't expect to be seen as a person who cares about the church and deserves much of a voice in it.

▪ **Put your body where your mouth is.** Attend your church's activities regularly. Make your time and talent available. Be dependable, and do well whatever church jobs you agree to do. But don't run off mad if something you offer to do in the church

isn't accepted. Using volunteers is often harder and slower for pastors and other church employees than doing a job themselves. And when they're held responsible for its quality, they're reluctant to turn a job over to volunteers whose abilities and dependability they aren't sure of. This is unfortunate, but until all members stop holding the pastor personally responsible for everything that happens in the church, it's understandable.

▪ **Scope out the system.** Find out how official and unofficial decision-making happens in your church. Notice who has the greatest opportunity and power to cause or prevent change. Know which decisions are made locally and which ones



come from higher in the denominational structure. Know how lay delegates to regional and national policy-setting bodies are chosen.

▪ **Get involved.** Regional church meetings and jobs can be time-consuming, but having the kind of voice you want in your denomination may require taking part in them. In the United Methodist Church this can mean attending Annual Conference and serving on district and conference boards and committees. At this level of the church, clergy have the upper hand because they know each other and the system better, but lay members whose income and status don't depend on the present system have more freedom to advocate change. Assertive, knowledgeable, and articulate lay voices are urgently needed in the connectional system.

▪ **Remember the other voices.** You may want more familiar hymns, but others in your congregation want more new ones.



There's no way a pastor can do what every member wants. And

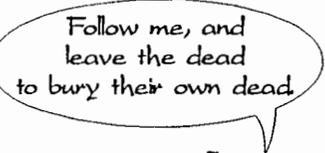
in addition to church members' voices he must obey the voices of his superiors in the institutional system. Infinitely more important, he must obey what he understands God's voice to be saying.

▪ **Join forces with kindred spirits.** Notice who else is not being heard. They have the most to gain and the least to lose from change, so they're the most likely to help promote it. Find your church's

forward-looking members. Help to get them into leadership positions. Find ways to work with them.

▪ **Associate with activists.**

Don't spend your time with the "pew potatoes," the dropouts, or the "ain't it awful!" members who merely complain and focus on the past. Even if these dead church members are your friends, don't stay behind with them. Follow Jesus instead.



▪ **Go around the obstacles.** Sometimes when you try to speak through the prescribed church channels, you're stymied by a powerful person or group whose position your views threaten. In this kind of situation you may have to ignore some rules and traditions and go around the resistant person or group. Don't keep hoping to persuade them. To get

### We need innovative lay leadership but we discourage it

God calls lay Christians mainly to ministry in the world rather than within the institutional church, and God often calls them to be innovative leaders. But in our churches we applaud lay members mainly for the jobs they do within the church, not for their ministries in the world. We encourage them to preserve the status quo, and discourage them from taking initiative and promoting God-inspired changes. Unquestioning obedience and conformity have their place, but they aren't always what God wants.

At a recent church meeting I attended, I was dismayed when the recipient of a lay award was cited only for her willingness to do whatever she was asked to do. Nothing involving initiative or innovation was mentioned, nor were any activities outside of the institutional church.

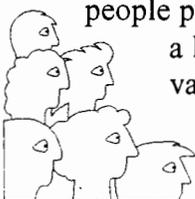
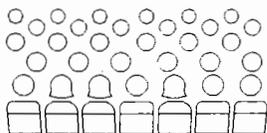


At an annual laity banquet that I attend, much time is spent on recognizing lay members who participate in one packaged church program. We don't acknowledge lay people like the one who has on his own initiative created a free clinic for the poor, involving hundreds of volunteers and serving thousands of people, or another who has started a center for retarded adults and has given much of his personal time and money to keep it going.

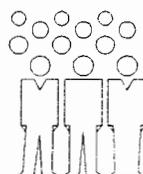
If we want to help Christians follow God, we can't keep ignoring innovative lay efforts and complimenting only docile obedience and conventional church participation.

the results you feel God is calling you to work for, you may have to address your concerns to someone in a different position in the church structure.

▪ **Don't give up.** In the church just as in any other huge, long-established institution, change rarely happens without a lot of people pressing for it over



a long period of time. Your voice is valuable even when you can't see it having any immediate effect, so if you are speaking in response to God's call, keep speaking.

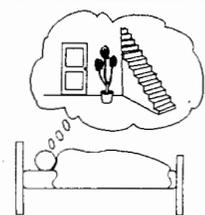


When lay voices speak in accord with God's voice, our churches urgently need to hear them.

*Barbara*

**Next month . . .**

**Listening for God's voice — you may find it in your dreams**



**Connections** 8-94

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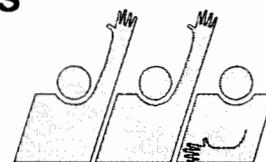
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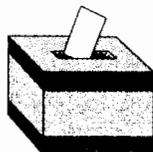
## Lay voices in the church

### It's time to have a voice in choosing church leaders

Late summer and fall are times when many congregations nominate and elect lay office-holders for the coming church year, so it's an important time for concerned lay members to have a say in choosing the church's official leaders. For United Methodists this fall's local-church elections are especially important because they are the first step toward the 1996 General Conference, the official governing body of the UMC that meets only once every four years.



This fall each UMC congregation will elect one (or several, in larger congregations) of its members to represent the congregation at its regional Annual Conference next spring. These members will elect the lay delegates who will go to General Conference, and the ones who will vote on new bishops at the 1996 Jurisdictional Conferences. We need to elect Lay Members of Annual Conference who will help to get our most knowledgeable, perceptive, forward-looking, articulate, and Spirit-led lay members elected as General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates.



Too often we Methodists choose our Annual Conference Lay Members on the basis of who's willing and available to attend. But we must do better than that if we want to help our church do God's will in today's world. We need to enlist our most capable members to represent us at Annual Conference. Attending it can be inconvenient, costly, and tiresome, but our churches' best lay voices need to be heard there.