

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Following the party line

In our churches we tend to expect all members to accept, support, and abide by all of the congregation's or denomination's official statements of policy and doctrine. Doing that can often be a problem, however, even for clergy and laity who consider themselves loyal members.



Even if I don't like organizational methods or worship styles that my church has decided to use, I'm still willing to take part. However, accepting a decision that I disagree with about an issue of belief is very different. I can't make myself believe something that seems wrong to me. And I'm not likely to act on that belief or to persuade anyone else that it is true. Even when believing comes from faith rather than from visible evidence, it requires being convinced, not just being told.



In earlier years members were more inclined to accept whatever church authorities and traditions said, but now many feel free to choose what to believe. Is this increasing refusal to conform helping the church or hurting it? I'm not sure. It seems to be making church leadership jobs harder, but it may be bringing us closer to God's will for the church. I don't believe God wants us to be mere robots.

A greater problem for clergy

Being expected to promote and conform to all official policies and doctrines—to follow the denomination's "party line"—is more likely to be a problem for clergy than for laity. Unlike laity, clergy are seen as official spokespersons for their denomination, so they are expected to support all its policies and beliefs. A United Methodist clergyperson must advocate infant baptism, for example, and he or she is held responsible for



Doctrine is not enough

"Doctrine is not enough, will never be enough," says religion writer and reviewer Phyllis A. Tickle in her book *God-Talk in America* (Crossroad, 1996), "not, that is, until the fire has fallen on us and those in community with us ..." Tickle finds that the yearning for experiential religion within an affirming community often causes people to rebel against religious systems. Rebellion that defies an established religious body often energizes its participants, Tickle finds, because it lets them feel something. Some protest, she observes, comes mainly from indifference to traditional religion that the protesters see as sterile. They are looking for something spiritually and religiously invigorating.



In Tickle's view, many Americans are looking for wisdom that churches once represented. We want this wisdom to protect us from the shock of the "raw, new information" that seems overwhelming. And when people miss the traditional safeguards that churches used to provide, they don't care much, Tickle finds, about "doctrinal niceties."

A yearning toward the Mystery

Many people today, Tickle observes, feel that the church "has come between the believer and the belief, between the Christian and Christ, by inserting all the institutional impedimenta of doctrine, structure, and vested interest." These Christians, Tickle says, long to feel and to know. Nostalgic efforts to get back to the real Jesus, to personally experienced wisdom, to Genesis, and to the earliest church represent a "yearning toward the Mystery."



"We are consumed," says Tickle, "with the thought that if only we could get through the veil of differing substances and the scrim of accretion and time, we could commune again and please again and conform again. We could be at peace again."



Two faces of one head

Phyllis Tickle points out that Christianity has historically distinguished between the content of our belief and the institutional exercise of it. Now, however, instead of seeing these as two faces of one head as Christians once did, we often feel we must choose between them.

seeing that his or her congregation pays its apportioned share of the UMC's worldwide administrative and missional costs. In contrast, most lay UMC members probably believe in infant baptism, but some don't. And most may agree in principle that an apportionment system is necessary, but some feel free to refuse to pay if they don't fully approve of how all the apportionments are spent.



Different kinds of official statements

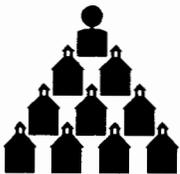
The official belief and policy statements of most Christian denominations seem to fall into four broad categories.

- First is basic Christian doctrine that most denominations agree on. This includes belief in God, and belief that God is known to us mainly in three ways—in a parent-like role as creator, through Jesus Christ as savior, and through God's Holy Spirit that guides us. This category also includes a basic belief that the church is God's instrument.



- A second category includes beliefs and practices that are distinctive to the denomination. Here's where the method of baptism comes in. For United Methodists much of the theology originally expressed by John Wesley also falls in this category, such as belief in what Wesley called "preventive grace"—God's grace that is available to each of us before we need it or are even aware of it.

- A third group of official church position statements have to do with how the institutional church is organized and administered. In the UMC, for example, this category includes our connectional system of congregations, our requirements for ordination, our system of appointing and supervising clergy, and our apportionment system of financial support.



- The fourth broad category includes official statements about how our beliefs apply to specific situations. For the UMC this is mostly covered by our Social Principles. They don't carry as much weight as doctrinal statements, but they express the church's official



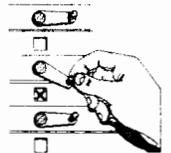
position on a wide range of contemporary issues such as marriage and divorce, sexuality, abortion, the environment, human rights, health care, education, criminal justice, military service, and numerous other issues.

Statements of the UMC's official beliefs and rules in all of these categories are contained in *The Book of Discipline*. Additional statements of the UMC's official position on subjects in the fourth category are found in *The Book of Resolutions*. But the *Discipline* is a thick book and *The Book of Resolutions* is even thicker, so very few United Methodists know all that these books contain. In fact, few UMs own a copy of the *Discipline*, and few know that *The Book of Resolutions* exists. It's not surprising, therefore, that lay members are often



upset when a UMC official publicly expresses a position on a controversial political or social issue, which those members didn't know was the UMC's official position.

We all have a voice in deciding what the church's position on these issues will be. However, just as in our national government, our individual voice is only one of many, and it is heard only through many layers of elected delegates to official bodies. And just as in our national government, we often aren't even aware of when the decisions we care about are being made. Despite this, we're obligated to abide by them.



This may not be a big problem when we recognize the subject as a mere matter of opinion about how to accomplish something, but when it's something we consider a question of right and wrong, it can be a *very* big problem. Disagreeing about whether abortion is permissible is very different from disagreeing about which boards and committees our congregations should have.

When we have so many official positions, can we expect to agree about all of them?



For many of us (for most?) the solution usually seems to be choosing the denomination that most nearly represents our beliefs, but knowing we won't agree with all of its official positions because there are so many of them.

Clergy, however, aren't usually allowed to do this, at least not openly. They're expected to be advocates for all of their denomination's official positions. When they believe some are wrong, therefore, clergy often avoid expressing their real beliefs. Unfortunately this destroys their credibility and the whole church's, with many lay members as well as many seekers.



Lay members also can find themselves torn between loyalty and conscience. I've seen this through serving on one of the UMC's general boards—the agencies that oversee the worldwide program of the UMC. Many board members believe their duty is to represent the church's membership in deciding what policies and programs the board should pursue. However, some officers and staff seem to feel that all board members should automatically become advocates for the board's previously chosen agenda.



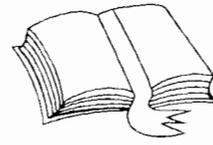
When a denomination adopts detailed position statements on a large number of subjects, it puts many members in an untenable position. They believe church participation is important, and they find their denomination's positions more consistent with God's will than those of any other denomination, but Christian conscience keeps them from supporting some of the denomination's policies.



Maybe it would be more realistic and honest, and more effective in the long run, if we stopped expecting all clergy and laity to support every official position of the denomination. More important, maybe we need to declare fewer official positions.

We often speak where the Bible is silent

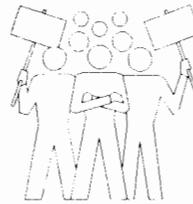
We often get more specific than the Bible is, about how Christian principles apply to concrete situations. We may all agree, for example, that Christian love requires us to feed the hungry and heal the sick, but when it comes to which political party's proposals are most likely to promote that, Christians have legitimate differences of opinion.



Maybe instead of adopting more and more official positions we need to help our members become more aware of what the Bible says about love and justice. We need to help them become aware of the pros and cons of proposals that are being put forward for dealing with today's social problems. And we need to emphasize Christians' God-given obligation to become informed and then to support the proposals they consider consistent with Christian principles. But then we must acknowledge that Christians can legitimately come to different conclusions about which proposals those are.



This may lessen our effectiveness, however. Focused, strategic actions planned by people with specialized knowledge and experience and taken on behalf of a whole denomination often accomplish more than scattered actions taken individually by members. There's strength in numbers.



The trend is away from unified action now, and from letting anyone else decide or speak for us. We all want a direct voice, not just one that speaks through delegates and thus may not reflect all of our personal views. This trend presents a tough challenge for our denominations and congregations, and it seems to be weakening their influence.

As I write this, the past few weeks' newspapers and magazines have had numerous articles about ways in which mainline denominations are experiencing dissent. Some Episcopal bishops are adamantly refusing to accept female priests even though the Church approved women's ordination years ago. Some Presbyterians are dissenting from an official church rule about homosexuality. A



large group of United Methodists is rebelling against what its members see as a dangerous drift away from Christian and United Methodist doctrine.

How can we know if dissenters are right?

We need to evaluate carefully what our churches' dissenters are saying. God often calls Christians to refuse to obey rules, policies, or



doctrines of religious institutions they belong to, when those official positions are contrary to God's will. But God also uses religious institutions to be God's agents. How can we know which of today's dissenters are following God's will and which are hindering it?

There's no mistake-proof way, I'm afraid. As with every other decision we make as Christians, we simply have to do our best to discern God's will and then act on what we believe it to be, knowing that we may turn out to be wrong and thus may need to revise our decision.

Insisting that clergy or laity merely parrot the official institutional-church line is dangerous. It can drive away our most faithful and perceptive members and seekers. More important, it can stifle God's voice, which our churches so urgently need to be hearing.



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Following the party line



Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed ...

—Romans 13:1-2

The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders ... " But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

—Acts 5:29



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