

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Compassion plus justice

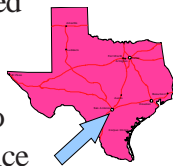
Part of this issue of *Connections* is about the amazing ministry of Bob Guinee of San Antonio, Texas, one of the bravest and most self-sacrificing Christians I know, whom I greatly admire. Bob and I agree very closely, I think, about how Jesus commanded his followers to treat people in need, and Bob obeys those commands to a degree that neither I nor anyone else I know even comes close to. If all or even most Christians practiced even a fraction of the compassion that Bob displays every single day, the world would be a much better place.



Bob and I disagree about other aspects of what being a Christian means, however, and this *Connections* is also about those. How can we follow Jesus not only by working with the poor, but also by changing outdated beliefs in order to promote justice for all people?

A rare inner-city ministry

A recent letter from Bob Guinee brought this question freshly to my mind. Bob is an 83-year-old retired Air Force pilot who singlehandedly created and runs a ministry in inner-city San Antonio. An engineer by profession, he lived alone in a comfortable San Antonio apartment after 21 years of military service from the Korean conflict through Vietnam. But in 1998 he moved into one of San Antonio's poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods. He bought four adjacent lots and built what he calls his dream home on one of them, with more than \$50,000 in donations, mostly raised while preaching at various San Antonio churches.



A United Methodist, Bob started preparing for the ordained ministry, but he soon saw that what he felt called to do wouldn't fit into any official UMC category of ordination. He doesn't even participate in any church congregation now, but I suspect that what he's doing is more valuable and more faithful to the teaching of Jesus than being active in the institutional church.

What Americans do best?

"One thing Americans do better than anyone else is buy stuff. And we've been postponing buying stuff for five years." That's the view of Mark Dotzour, the chief economist for the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, as reported in the May 18 issue of the *Temple Daily Telegram*. At the annual economic summit sponsored by a local firm, Dotzour said that because conditions are so good now, we should no longer postpone buying. He warned that if interest rates go up on bonds, "some people will get crushed," but he apparently didn't see that as anything to worry about.



Spend every dime, live with gusto?

What we all need to do right away, Dotzour told his audience, is spend. Americans currently have a larger percentage of disposable income available than any time in the last 33 years, he said, so we should spend it. "Sixty-five percent of our economy is based on you and me going to the mall and spending every dime we've got."



A leading Temple citizen then seconded Dotzour's recommendation, the *Telegram* reported: "We need to go do what Americans do best ... and not be hampered by what happens in Washington D.C. or in some place on the other side of the world. We need to live our lives with gusto, with enthusiasm, with optimism, and spend money."

What a contrast, I thought when I read this, to what Bob Guinee is doing: spending every dime for poor children's needs, not at a mall for personal stuff. I wondered if any sermons or classes in Temple churches that Sunday addressed how Dotzour's advice related to Christian principles. I hope some did.

Potter's Home Ministries is a 501(c)(3) organization, so contributions to it are tax-deductible. If you'd like to contribute, make your check to Potter's Home Ministries and mail it to Bob Guinee at 2138 S. Calaveras, San Antonio, TX 78207.

Self-sacrificing work with children

Bob Guinee’s 3000-square-foot building, the Potter’s Home, isn’t what most of us would call a dream home. It’s far more functional than fancy. He uses a third for his residence and the rest for the children of the neighborhood. There they can play, get hot meals, encouragement, and help with homework, and have their horizons enlarged in many ways.

A few years ago Bob added a paved basketball court for older children. He has taken children to swimming lessons and to the airport for plane rides. He has brought in police, firefighters (with trucks!), and other community helpers for the children to meet. He’s helped many children to stay in school and do well, and their art work, writings, and school photos cover his walls. He has helped several students to learn about, prepare for, and get into college.

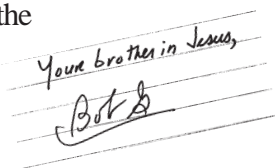


Funds for Bob’s ministry come from his Air Force and Social Security retirement incomes, contributions from his engineering firm, now run by a son, and occasional other gifts. The volunteers who help him include his own children and several mothers of the children who come.



The happiest time, despite dangers

In his “spare time,” Bob corresponds constantly (by snail mail!) with people all over the world who, like him, are working to lessen the mistreatment of children. He often sends them books and DVDs, too, and lets them know about each other.



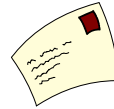
Bob has had bouts of illness and even been in the hospital several times in the last couple of years. He’s been the victim of robberies and vandalism. But none of that has stopped him. When friends and family express concern about his safety, he merely says, “I have an education and an income. What about these families who don’t? What about these children who are living in danger and too often learning the wrong values?” All in all, he still insists, “This is the happiest time of my life.”

What more could anyone ask?

So why am I not just stopping here, having expressed my admiration for Bob’s ministry? It’s

because in addition to appreciating his work, I can’t help also thinking about the big difference between some of his religious beliefs and mine, and therefore wondering how I should respond to his requests for help.

His latest is a letter urging me to write Chuck Hagel, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, and ask Hagel to stop letting a man called Michael L. “Mikey” Weinstein influence our government. Because I have such high regard for Bob, I hate to say to him, “No, I’m not willing to do that.” But after investigating further, I feel I must not only decline, but also speak out about why.

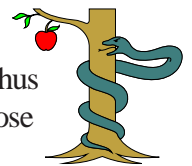


A request to side with fundamentalists

To explain his request, Bob sent me an article by Ken Klukowski, from the *Breitbart News*, a conservative publication. According to the article, Klukowski is a fellow of the Family Research Council and is on the faculty of Liberty University School of Law.

The Family Research Council, formed by author James Dobson, lobbies against the rights of nonheterosexual people, a position that I see as contrary to the teaching of Jesus, who welcomed the outcasts and minorities of his own day. The FRC supports so-called intelligent design as an alternative to evolution, and denies that humans are mainly responsible for global warming, positions I find contrary to today’s best science.

Liberty School of Law is part of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, founded by the ultraconservative Jerry Falwell. The university’s doctrinal statement entirely reflects Christian fundamentalism. It claims that the universe was created in six historical days; that human beings were directly created, not evolved; that all the Bible’s words are the “written true revelation of God” and thus authoritative in all matters; that Jesus arose bodily from the dead; and so on.



All those are essentially the package of beliefs put forth by a group in 19th-century America who deliberately rejected the discoveries of academic knowledge, not only about natural science but about religion, psychology, anthropology, and history.

Such false beliefs not only contradict modern knowledge, they also cause people to act without compassion, in ways that treat others unkindly and fail to serve the world’s needs. I don’t believe that Jesus would have

excluded women or LGBT people, demeaned adherents of non-Christian religions, promoted war, or refused to protect the earth. So I don't see either a Family Research Council fellow or a Liberty University faculty member as a credible authority, much less as a Christian example to imitate.

A struggle for religious freedom

And what about the movement these groups are opposing? Weinstein, who is Jewish, is the founder and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. Concerned when his two sons were harassed by evangelical Christian proselytizing as students at the Air



Force Academy in Colorado Springs, he sued the Air Force in 2005. Although a U.S. district judge dismissed that suit, Weinstein has kept working in other ways to push back against undue influence by conservative Christians over the U.S. military.

Weinstein has pointed out that when an officer urges lower-ranking personnel to attend a worship service or join a Christian group, military policy makes that encouragement seem to be an order that must be obeyed. Unquestioning obedience may be essential for military operations, but when applied to religion, which should be a personal free choice, it is unacceptable.

A problem with worldwide implications

Weinstein's sons were far from alone. Unfortunately, pressure from evangelical Christians is apparently widespread in the U.S. military. A 2010 Air Force Academy survey found that 41% of the Academy's non-Christian cadets felt they were subjected to unwanted proselytizing. As recently as May 29, a *Christian Century* article quotes a U.S. Coast Guard admiral as saying that while he admits that proselytizing should be forbidden, he sees nothing wrong with "gently whispering

the gospel." As a young cadet, would he have felt free to ignore even a whisper from a superior officer promoting a different faith? I doubt it.



Conservative Christian influence is even more troubling within the military than in society at large. Evangelicals may discriminate against female or gay service members, who often have little or no recourse against harassment, given commanders' power under military law. Military leaders who reject modern scientific knowledge but command great power may even be dangerous on a large scale.

In fact, some conservatives who believe that Christians have a monopoly on the truth may believe at some level that God wants them not only to convert people of other faiths, but to defeat and even kill them. Such a crusading mentality can make our military leaders cavalier about deaths of citizens of Muslim countries, which in turn can harden resentment toward the U.S. and put our own military and diplomatic personnel at greater risk. So if people like Michael Weinstein are helping to reduce evangelical proselytizing in the military, I applaud their efforts and hope Hagel will take them seriously.

An uncharitable spokesman

Unfortunately, however, Weinstein has shown scorn rather than charity toward his opponents. In the *Huffington Post* on March 12, he fumed about "our Bronze-Age-mired fundamentalist Christian foes" and a "biased bigot spouting off views that are steeped in the vilest forms of old-school anti-gay prejudice." On April 16 he referred to evangelicals as "monsters of human degradation, marginalization, humiliation, and tyranny." So just as I can't support his opponents as Bob Guinee asks, I also can't support Weinstein's uncharitable methods, even though I see his goals as valid and important.



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a 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. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *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 I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Charity plus beliefs that lead to justice

A recent request for a contribution to build a new homeless shelter run by an evangelical group made me think again about how to balance charity and justice. Shouldn't our financial giving focus not only on meeting current needs, but also on making systems more just? Many Christians feel that continuing to merely deliver charity is futile, even counterproductive in the long run, unless we also combat the economic injustice that leaves so many people in need. And I think that for many Christians, motivation for changing the system will come only from seeing fallacies in their view of the Bible, so I want to promote that kind of insight.



There's no easy answer in practice. My family and I give to groups that serve the poor, the elderly, the homeless, children, black and Latino students, prisoners, and others in need. We also support the fine arts, which we believe reflect the divine and seem increasingly neglected in today's world.

But the groups that really speak to my heart and make me hopeful about the future are those that seek to change attitudes and beliefs through education. If we can encourage people to question their beliefs and think more charitably, I hope it will do even more to spread Christlike compassion, with justice for all.

Barbara



Connections

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Compassion plus justice

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Where can you find more balanced religious journalism, with news and analysis?

While many conservative sources like the *Breitbart News* are intolerant and/or inaccurate, some liberal ones such as the *Huffington Post* can also be overly polemical or sensational. I see a great need for more balanced, thoughtful reporting on religion, covering people of all faiths and none, and views from both within and beyond the U.S. I wish more people would seek out such sources and discuss them in churches and groups, especially with older children and teenagers. Here are a few ideas. If you have others, let me know and I'll list them on my website.

Religion News Report

www.religionnewsreport.com
(includes articles from major newspapers)



Religion News Service

www.religionnews.com

Christian Century magazine

www.christiancentury.org

Patheos www.patheos.com

PBS Religion and Ethics News Weekly

www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics

Worldwide Religious News

www.wwrn.org

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

www.pewforum.org

(includes survey findings)

