

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Is there a line? If so, where is it?



The November 26, 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine included an interesting article about Rob Bell, a prominent Christian pastor whose views have become less narrow in recent years. I was glad to see a top secular magazine covering such a topic, but in the otherwise excellent article, its author, *New Yorker* staff writer Kelefa Sanneh, says this: “All Christians believe that Jesus will come again, to judge the living and the dead.” I find that statement incorrect, because I don’t believe that about Jesus and I know that quite a few other Christians don’t believe it.

Besides, can anyone know what all Christians believe? I don’t think so. More important, I doubt that there is anything that absolutely every Christian believes. So I wish Sanneh had said “many Christians” or even “most Christians” instead of “all Christians.”

## Is any belief essential for Christians?

Part of what bothered me about what Sanneh said that all Christians believe, however, is that I suspect many Christians do believe it. And many—maybe most—may think that believing it is necessary in order to be a Christian. But if it is, that leaves out many of us who see ourselves as Christians. This is also true of other beliefs: that Jesus was divine in a way that no one else ever was; that he physically rose from the dead; and that believing such things is necessary to avoid going to hell. Many Christians consider these beliefs essential, yet many others consider them nonessential or even false.



Is there anything that a person *must* believe in order to qualify as a Christian? If so, what is it, and who is entitled to say what it is? Is there a line between what’s essential and what doesn’t matter?

## A brave congregation



Elk Grove United Methodist Church in Elk Grove, California, has recently taken a brave step to oppose injustice.

For some time, the Elk Grove congregation has been concerned about the UMC’s discrimination against the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender community. The UMC officially calls the practice of homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching, and it prohibits self-avowed, practicing homosexuals from being ordained as UMC ministers. It also refuses to allow same-sex marriages in UMC churches.

The Elk Grove UMC congregation sees this policy as contradicting the Gospel and denying God’s love for all. Its members thus hoped that the 2012 UMC General Conference would discontinue the policy. When it did not, EGUMC set up a lay working group to develop a way of actively opposing it.

## Two kinds of membership

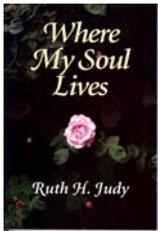
The Elk Grove congregation has now created a “Denominational Dissident Local Membership” for people who wish to be members of the congregation but cannot in good conscience support the UMC’s policy. “We understand,” EGUMC’s resolution states, “that there are diverse, faithful, and prophetic ways to respond to injustice. Some are called to work for justice from within the denomination; some are called to work for justice alongside or outside of the denomination. We want to honor these ways in our community. Until such a time that the UMC welcomes and provides for full participation of the GBLTQ community in the life of the denomination, Elk Grove UMC will offer two categories of membership ...” For a full description of these, see the “About Us/Membership Options” page at [www.elkgroveumc.org](http://www.elkgroveumc.org).



For more, e-mail Pastor Kathy LaPoint-Collup ([KFLC@aol.com](mailto:KFLC@aol.com)) or lay members Rick Kehret ([rick.kehret@gmail.com](mailto:rick.kehret@gmail.com)) or Bill Myers ([wemyers@cal.net](http://wemyers@cal.net)). In these lay members’ view, as in mine, the UMC will not become fully inclusive until it is seriously pushed, and all UMC members need to push.

I'm inclined to think that what separates being Christian from not being Christian is whether we see Jesus as our model to imitate by being loving, just, and peaceful. It's a line based on behavior or at least on intention, not on beliefs about Jesus. And I think that only God can legitimately say which side of that line anyone is on. I don't think any of us can know what God's verdict is, with regard to a particular person. We may have opinions about who is or isn't a Christian, but they're only opinions.

### Christians outside of others' lines



In her book *Where My Soul Lives: Being a Christian Outside the Lines* (St. Johann Press, 2012), Ruth H. Judy reports on interviews with Christians who have struggled with the question of whether there is a line

and who can legitimately say where it is. Dr. Judy teaches spiritual psychology and has taught spiritual direction, and in her teaching she has encountered many men and women who were struggling with their Christian identity and looking for a framework that would hold and guide their experiences.

The interviewees she writes about feel that they have been declared non-Christians by the Christians who feel sure not only that there is a line but also that they know where it is. But these interviewees feel, as I also do, that it's quite possible to be Christian without being inside the lines that others say are the boundaries, even if it's a denomination or other Christian institution that has officially drawn the lines or if the majority in one's congregation or nation claims to know where they are.

### Hunger not fed by the institutional church

Of course, an institution may have the right to say who can and can't be its members, but can one legitimately say who does or doesn't qualify as Christian? I don't think so, and neither do Ruth Judy and the Christians she has interviewed.



Her book reports on interviews with fifty men and women who call themselves non-traditional Christians. They are people whose spiritual hunger was not met by the institutional church but who have found ways to feed that hunger whether or not they

stayed in the church. Their searches have been rooted in Christianity but have inspired them to question the church's dogmas and listen instead to the Divine within.



These Christians have worked hard to listen and respond to an inner call from God. It has pulled them in directions not always understood by others, but it has freed them, they feel, to open themselves more fully to love and compassion for themselves and others. Ruth Judy emphasizes, however, that although her book focuses on Christians who feel that their call pulls them outside the Christian norm and in some cases also the institutional church, others can hear and respond to the inner call "within the lines" of that norm.

### Claiming our uniqueness and potential

Judy's book weaves Christian mysticism and roots with the process that Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called individuation. She sees spiritual development as an inherent part of that process through which we claim our uniqueness and our potential.

Judy observes essentially the same thing that I continually hear from *Connections* readers—that many church members are on this journey but are afraid to make it public. They don't want to risk getting the criticism they think they'd get from members whose views or practices are more conventional. And if they're clergy, they know that expressing disagreement with their denomination's official policy or even with the majority view might endanger not only their income and status, but even their ability to stay in the ordained ministry.



Besides what she has heard from her interviewees, Judy also reports some of her own experiences of doubt, encounters with the divine mystery, and spiritual transformation. Her book, she says, "grew out of my own struggles and concerns with how to deal with what seemed to be conflicts between my developing beliefs and what I understood the institutional church to be telling me. How far could I deviate and still call myself a Christian?"

The most basic question for her became "are there lines in true Christianity for a person to be outside or inside?"



For a long time, she tells us, she resisted some of the conclusions to which she was coming. She found, however, that once she opened the door, she could not close it. That’s apparently why many traditionalist Christians don’t want to risk opening the door: they’re afraid that they won’t be able to close it and that what they find inside it will make them uncomfortable. Yet many who open it seem to find that what is inside is vastly more satisfying than what was outside.



## What about the church?

For Ruth Judy and many of her interviewees, the question of whether to leave the institutional church was hard. There is no easy solution, she assures her readers, to questions of authority and the role of the church. She reminds us that spiritual arrogance—equating our views with God’s will—is a problem inherent in every path. But isn’t it also a problem for the institutional church? Its official beliefs and policies can’t automatically be assumed to be God’s.

Judy sees the church as a vehicle that in some ways we must outgrow, which means no longer seeing it as our destination or as having primary authority over our relationship with God. If our spirituality is growing, no church can confine it.



The institutional church often has difficulty with the spiritual development of its members, Judy finds, because as people honor their spiritual quest, they return to their own integrity, their own listening to God’s word, their own relationship with God. When that happens, the church loses its control over them. Yet if the church extends itself to encompass the individuation of its members, Judy assures us, it retains a wonderful and influential role in their lives.

## “Are we on the same planet?”

Unfortunately, many of us who feel called to go outside the church’s lines don’t find it willing to extend itself in that way. We find that we must leave. Here’s how one of Ruth Judy’s interviewees describes that experience. “I found myself singing a hymn the words of which were absolutely contrary to what [she had come to believe]. It stopped me in my tracks. I had to do mental gyrations to keep myself calm, then I simply went ‘some-where else’ in my head.”



“Often I feel that when I am asked to say certain words,” she continues, “I can’t look at my fellow congregants who say the words in the bulletin or the hymn book. I say to myself, ‘Are we on the same planet?’” After a while of feeling that way, she explains, “having questioned certain words and beliefs in public before, I am simply too tired to do it any more. I get blank stares back from fellow members—a kind of ‘duh’ look.”

Many others whom Ruth Judy interviewed reported similar difficulty in finding people who were interested in exploring the spiritual issues they found so necessary to explore. One put it this way: “Most people don’t want to confront the questions I’ve wrestled with most of my adult life.”



## Relief plus a sense of loss

When we’re in a congregation that doesn’t call us to a journey or support the journey to which we’ve been called, leaving may become necessary. But leaving is not likely to be easy, quick, or comfortable. “Leaving a congregation is like a divorce,” one of Ruth Judy’s interviewees points out, “but there comes a time when I must honor the voice within

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

that says to do it.” And that is likely to be painful even though it is also a relief. “I don’t miss the church,” says one non-traditional Christian whom Ruth Judy quotes, “but this is not to say I don’t have a tremendous amount of grief around it. There is a deep sense of loss.”



### Accepting and loving communities

The individuation process, Ruth Judy observes, may at least temporarily bring a sense of personal isolation and of needing to separate ourselves from “public Christianity.” It is hard, she acknowledges, to work on one’s relationship with God through ways

seen by one’s community as different, especially if they’re seen as unacceptably different. Yet Judy feels that we are called to interdependence as well as to individuation. All of us, even those who feel called outside the lines, need places to share our experiences, express our thoughts and questions, and hear others’ thoughts and questions. We need accepting and loving communities where our human journey is understood with compassion and our journey to realize our higher capacities is supported with intelligence and wisdom. And church congregations need to be these kinds of communities.

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Is there a line? If so, where is it?

January 2013

From Ruth Judy and non-traditional Christians she has interviewed, in *Where My Soul Lives*:

“I often feel I cannot fully express my beliefs. I must ‘walk on eggshells’ to keep from causing a fuss.”



“It’s more difficult, yet I wouldn’t change it. I’m glad to have lifted the lid.”

“Being outside the lines is what has brought me closest to God.”

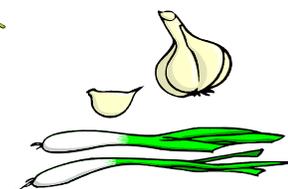
“I see Jesus as a man who lived ‘outside the lines.’ ”

“He was a rebel, a political dissident.”

“I think the paths are infinite.”



“Too often, people bring new seasonings to the table, and too often they are excluded from full participation, unable to blend and nourish the existing structures of the church and community. Nor are they able to be nourished by them.”



“A failure to leave religion open to new awareness and consciousness is to stifle God’s work and our purpose.”