

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Similar concerns from all over

This issue ends twenty years of *Connections*, and as I write it I'm finishing preparations for *Connections Live! 2012*, the gathering of progressive Christians that I'm hosting at the end of September. I'm delighted by how many people are coming, and amazed at what a wide area they're coming from. I had to close registration at 200 because the hotel's meeting space can't accommodate more, and the 200 are from 16 states, including several that are a long way from Texas.



That response says a lot, of course, about the popularity of the books of keynote speaker Robin Meyers. But it also says a lot, I think, about how many Christians share the specific concerns that he expresses in his books and I express in *Connections*. It reflects how strongly many Christians feel about these and feel the need for change in the church. And it reflects how alone many of them unfortunately feel in their home churches and communities.



Concerns that need attention

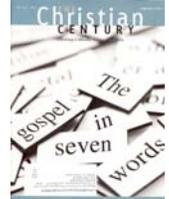
The registration form for *Connections Live! 2012* asked registrants what topics they'd especially like to hear addressed at the event. In their answers, many of the same concerns showed up repeatedly. To me, that means these are widespread. It also means that churches need to give them much more open, frequent attention and to make the people who have such concerns feel much more welcome.

■ Wishing for supportive churches

Many registrants want to be reminded that although they feel alone, they're not actually alone in their concerns and observations. Many have an understanding of Christianity or a position on current

Christianity in seven words

The September 5 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine included several Christian authors' efforts to summarize the Christian message—to proclaim the gospel—in no more than seven words. Each author was also allowed to add a brief paragraph elaborating on his or her seven words, and many of these paragraphs quoted Bible verses or favorite theologians or other authors. You can read the published efforts and others at christiancentury.org/7words, and you can also post your own effort on that website.



How would you say it?

How would you state the Christian message in no more than seven words? It's hard, I found when I tried. Seven is very few words for covering such a large subject!

Predictably, many of the website responses and the statements published in *The Christian Century* portray God as a person-like being. Several present Jesus as the unique and complete embodiment of God in human form, or they present Jesus and Christianity as the only source of truth about God. Several statements emphasize that Christ somehow cancels or lets us overcome the effects of sin.

What to believe? Or what to do?

The statement that seemed best to me came straight from the Bible. It used only five words, and it made no claim about sin or God or Jesus. It was about how to act, not what to believe. It simply said what Jesus taught people to do: "Love your neighbor as yourself."



My best effort to summarize Christianity in seven words is also about what to do, and it acknowledges Jesus as Christianity's model: "Like Jesus, promote compassion, justice, and nonviolence." But I might say something different later. I see an important aspect of Christianity as continuing to think and investigate, and doing that sometimes changes one's views.

issues that is in the minority in their congregation or geographical area, but they don't see this as a reason for churches not to welcome them. They definitely don't see it as a valid reason for the church to ostracize or try to stifle them.

They know that having views that are in the minority doesn't necessarily mean those views are wrong. In fact, they know that following Jesus can mean refusing to conform to the majority's views and behaviors.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...
—Romans 12:2

Thus when these Christians' efforts to follow Jesus put them in the minority, they feel they should get encouragement, support, and appreciation from the church. They also feel that congregations need to present minority views in addition to the majority view about what the Bible and Christian doctrine mean and what following Jesus requires today.



These Christians want to be in a church that is moving forward and helping its members think about their faith and mature in it. They want what one *Connections Live! 2012* participant calls "lively conversation, stimulating, challenging ideas and perspectives," but they don't find those in the churches in their area. They yearn for what another calls "a sense that I am not completely alone on my journey," but few find that in the church.

■ Information that churches ignore

What especially discourages many *Connections Live! 2012* participants is that all the congregations in their local area present such a similar perspective on Christianity. And it is one that ignores much of what is now well known from science, medicine, historical research, and other sources whose findings most of today's people accept and even actively seek in their work, school, and other parts of their lives.



Many of the Christians I hear from feel that if a congregation presented interpretations of the Bible and Christianity that acknowledged the findings of such sources, it would be likely to attract people

who want to follow the teaching of Jesus but are now avoiding the church. It would fill a distinctive role in the local community and the wider world instead of being just one more copy of what's already so plentiful. These Christians feel that for a church to offer only the same interpretations and limited information that other area congregations are offering is unwise. It lets aspects of the teaching of Jesus be ignored. It also deprives the church of the support of some people who see the value of Jesus's teaching.



For use in worship and in Sunday School and other study groups, the Christians I'm hearing from especially want materials that reflect today's best scholarship. They also want advice about how to persuade their churches to use such materials. One writes, "We need tactful ways to approach the leaders of our children's Sunday School, to get them not to teach things that the children will have to unlearn later."

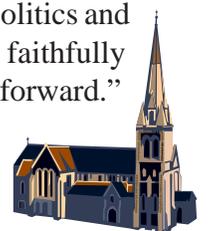


The senior pastor of a congregation asks, "How do we teach unfamiliar information and preach controversial ideas to a congregation that is antagonistic?" It's hard to believe that a congregation would be antagonistic to receiving information or merely considering a variety of ideas, yet this attitude unfortunately seems widespread in the church. It too often causes our bravest and best-informed pastors to be penalized instead of getting the support they deserve.

■ To stay or not to stay?

"Should we stay in the church? If so, why?" one *Connections Live! 2012* registrant asks, echoing many others. "How can a progressive Christian find nurture in mainline churches?" asks another. "How do we work within the denominational institution?" And "How can I stay with the church when it does not reflect my beliefs about extending God's love and grace?" Many of these Christians are asking, as one puts it, "how to rise above the politics and divisiveness of the church to live faithfully while somehow moving the church forward."

Especially when these Christians don't see any way to help promote the changes they know are needed in the church, many struggle with the



question of whether to stay in it and keep trying, or drop out in order to avoid supporting policies that they believe ignore or even contradict the teaching of Jesus. They know that influencing an organization from outside is unlikely, but they also see that being inside without having any voice seems futile.

They want to see examples of people becoming courageous enough to be more vocal locally. One asks, “What action can we take to implement change, especially if we’ve left the church?” Another asks for suggestions that will help her help the church to be more open.



■ **Help for connecting with conservatives**

Several *Connections Live! 2012* registrants say they want advice about how to be a progressive Christian and promote needed change in a conservative environment. “How can I respond truthfully and faithfully but also kindly?” one asks. “What are some practical ways to connect with the right-wing church?” asks another. And another, “What are practical means of subverting the pervasive literal Bible?” Writes one, “I can’t remain silent any more when others spew hatred or what I see as nonsense.”



These Christians yearn to explain what has led them to their present understanding of what being Christian requires and how to interpret the Bible, to fellow Christians who are in their congregation or denomination but have such a different understanding from theirs. But they haven’t found ways or opportunities to tell their personal stories in a way that conservatives will listen to. “How can we work within our denomination to be disciples of Christ,” one asks, “when we are in such different places?”

■ **Combating injustice, promoting justice**

Many *Connections Live! 2012* participants wish for but don’t find support from the church in exposing and opposing the injustices that they see, and in actively promoting justice. They’re dismayed by that lack, because they see justice as such a major part of the teaching not only of Jesus but also of the Hebrew prophets.



Some of these Christians are most aware of the need for the church to promote economic justice, to help lessen the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Many see the need for Christians to try to get health care and related services made available to all.

Others I’ve heard from are more aware of the need to combat racial injustice, within the church as well as in the wider society. Still others feel called especially to address issues of gender justice. For some, this especially means promoting just treatment of non-heterosexual persons, by enabling them to be ordained ministers as well as giving them full access to other aspects of church programs and non-church activities. For others, it means promoting equality for women in various ways, from using gender-inclusive language for God and human beings, to seeing that women have needed access to health care and that they get the same pay as men when they do the same work as men.



These Christians want their churches to address specific justice issues, including immigration reform, birth control, the death penalty, and poverty. Many *Connections Live! 2012* registrants ask about how to get support for progressive positions on these

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.

issues in conservative small-town settings. Many feel called to take concrete, self-sacrificing action to promote justice, but they find that hard to do in a church or community that not only doesn't share their views but that in many cases actively opposes their efforts.

Issues that need attention from all of us

As I write this, I'm looking forward excitedly, just as the other attenders of *Connections Live! 2012* apparently are, to being together "live" with other Christians who share these concerns and want to help the church give them more attention. But I hope that all *Connections* readers will also take this opportu-

nity to think more seriously, speak more openly, and act more bravely with regard to the issues I've written about here. In addition, as you watch the presidential and vice-presidential debates and hear other campaign messages this month, I hope you'll notice where the candidates stand on the justice issues I've mentioned here. Especially, I hope you'll vote for the candidates you see as most likely to help promote the compassion, justice, and peace that are so sorely needed in our nation and the rest of the world.



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Connections

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Every few months now, I start thinking that it's time to stop writing *Connections*. Some aspects of getting old keep making my daily life and my husband's harder to deal with. And when it comes to current methods of communication, I'm far behind the curve. I own a Kindle and I Skype, but I don't have a smart phone or an I-Pad. I'm on Facebook but I dislike it and look at it only rarely, and I don't Tweet or look at YouTube. And when I read articles about the newest computer software or hardware, a lot of the words don't even mean anything to me. But I'm about to start my 21st year of writing *Connections*, anyway. Why?

- I feel that if the church could persuade more people to practice the compassion, justice, and peace that Jesus taught, life would be noticeably better for more people, so I still want to help the church accomplish that.
- I see the church often being ignored or opposed because of its continuing to make claims about God, Jesus, human beings, the Bible, and Christianity that seem unlikely to be true in light of what has now been learned through science, medicine, historical research, and other fields, and through today's exposure to non-Christian religions. I still want to help disseminate information that I believe shows the need to deny or at least question some of those claims.
- I see many congregations, including my own, trying to stifle members' efforts to learn and to mature spiritually, when the church needs to appreciate and promote such efforts instead. I still want to do whatever I can to change this.