

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

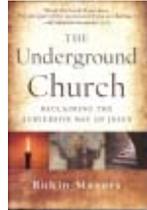


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## The subversive way

“When was the last time you thought of going to church as dangerous?” asks Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the cover of a powerful new book by Robin Meyers. “Once we challenged the status quo; now we mostly defend it,” Tutu observes.



In *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), Oklahoma UCC pastor Robin Meyers reminds us that challenging the status quo is what Jesus calls his followers to do. Meyers therefore urges Christians to do something radical and crazy: to recapture the spirit of the early church with its emphasis on what Christians do rather than what they believe.

Bill Moyers warns, “The contents of this book are explosive and could turn the world upside down.” And in his view, doing that would be a good thing. “About time!” he concludes.

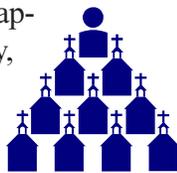
## A defective picture of the early church



In urging us to recapture the spirit of the early church, Robin Meyers emphasizes that we first need to become aware of three ways in which our usual understanding of the early church is wrong.

- We mistakenly assume that in those “good old days” Christianity was a single entity—that all Christians believed alike and were organized alike. We assume that only later did heresies and schisms attack this unified body from the margins.

- We mistakenly assume, too, that apostolic authority took shape right away, and that so did the creeds and hierarchies necessary to preserve orthodoxy. Meyers reminds us that in fact



## Connections Live! 2012

Ever since 130 *Connections* readers from all across Texas gathered in Temple in November 2010 for *Connections Live! 2010*, lots of them have been asking me “When are you going to do it again?” And some who couldn’t come in 2010 have been asking for another chance. Now it’s coming! It will be September 28-29, 2012, at the Hilton Garden Inn in Temple. We’ll start late afternoon Friday and end the formal program late Saturday afternoon, but offer optional dinner and visiting that evening.



You’ll soon get a detailed schedule and information about costs and how to register, but for now it’s time to save the date if you want to take advantage of this opportunity to hear challenging and inspiring presenters and talk with fellow progressive Christians. And I’m not limiting the gathering to Texans this time.

## Inspiring presenters

Keynote speaker will be Dr. Robin R. Meyers, pastor of Mayflower United Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, professor at Oklahoma City University, and author of the compelling book I describe in this *Connections*. You can find more about him at [www.robinmeyers.com](http://www.robinmeyers.com).



Also on the program will be some lively lay activists. When *Connections Live! 2010* ended, Jim and Ruth Klein went home to Houston and changed their lives in some huge ways in an effort to follow Jesus more closely, which being at *Connections Live!* had helped convince them they needed to do. At *Connections Live! 2012*, they’ll tell us their story and let us know how they feel about their big changes now.

No matter how alone you may feel where you are, I doubt that you’re as isolated as Doris Akers, from whom we’ll also hear. She’s a rancher in the Texas Panhandle, but her remote location hasn’t kept her from locating kindred spirits. For the past 9 years she’s hosted a monthly progressive group, some of whose members regularly drive 70 miles to attend.

*Connections Live! 2012* will include all this and more, so to be part of it, save September 28-29 now!

this idea of apostolic authority is a convenient fiction created by ambitious men who wanted to become leaders in what they saw forming.

• Most important for the church, and contrary to our assumptions, Meyers points out, the Roman Empire was not merely the background of the early church. Instead, the first followers of Jesus formed a fiercely anti-imperial movement. They refused to participate in the emperor cult and thus posed a threat to the whole system by which Rome held its client states together.



### An alternative lifestyle, a unifying spirit

What led to the remarkable growth of Christianity for three centuries, Robin Meyers assures us, was not the attraction of competing doctrines but a distinctly alternative lifestyle. “They made a deliberate choice and created an alternative world in which to live. They went underground from the Roman Empire and lived as a self-conscious alternative to its death-dealing ways.”



Early congregations didn’t march to the beat of an orthodoxy drummer, Meyers emphasizes. Instead, a unifying spirit hovered over them and was their source of authority. It was a spirit of generosity, mercy, healing, hope, and radical hospitality.

“In a chaotic and violent world,” explains Meyers, “this radical movement transformed their lives. Not because it promised a heavenly reward for earthly suffering but because it promised a way of life that lifted all followers, regardless of class or ethnicity, into the joy of belonging to a Beloved Community. They were not, after all, called true believers. They were called ‘the people of The Way.’”

And although most of us resist recognizing it, Jesus, the person whose Way they followed, was political. Like many other scholars who have examined the Bible and the early church, Meyers describes him as “a dangerous subversive, not because he wanted to help individuals escape a perishing world and make it ‘up’ to heaven, but because he wanted to



bring heaven’s justice ‘down’ to earth, especially to free those who suffered injustice and oppression.”



### What changed?

Why do so few of us in today’s church act like those early “people of The Way”? Mainly, it seems, because Constantine the Great changed Christianity forever by setting the stage for it to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. What had begun, Robin Meyers explains, as communities of radical inclusiveness, voluntary redistribution of wealth, a rejection of violence as the tool of injustice, and a joyful egalitarianism that welcomed “nobodies” to worship elbow-to-elbow with “somebodies” became something very different when the Empire took charge. It became a top-heavy edifice defined by obligatory beliefs enforced by a hierarchy. And it is essentially still that today.

### Baptism that made them pacifists

As a result, we’ve abandoned some of the principles that were at the heart of early Christianity. For example, scholars now seem to be united in finding that for at least the first two centuries after Jesus, once a Christian was baptized, he could no longer consider military service. “Just imagine,” Robin Meyers asks us, “a baptismal ceremony today that included language prohibiting the initiate from ever enlisting in the armed forces. Imagine being immersed, lifted out of the water, and pronounced a pacifist for life.”



If we were to become an underground church like the earliest church, nonviolence would apparently be our unmistakable mark. Yet many modern Christians are among the most vocal supporters of war and other kinds of violence. And when we call on God to sanctify our wars, Meyers reminds us, we give the church’s critics their best argument.

Also, when we hear the word “justice” today, many of us think first of a criminal proceeding followed by appropriate punishment, but this wasn’t what justice meant to the people of The Way. To them, justice apparently



meant that everyone in the world must have enough, and they practiced that principle in their communities. But in today’s world, efforts to provide enough for everyone, Meyers notices, are quickly called “socialism,” harking back to specific twentieth-century totalitarian movements. In his view, “Making sure that everyone in the world has enough should be called ‘church.’ ”

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need.  
—Acts 2:44-45

He feels that in the church today, instead of following these principles that were so essential for the early church, we are drowning in a sea of shallow sentimentality. I think he’s right about that to



some extent, because we put so much emphasis on acting “nice” and “sweet” and having the church keep us comfortable. And yet in other ways we’re drowning in a sea of hate or at least meanness, trying

to keep out the people whose sexual orientation we disapprove of, putting down those whose religion differs from ours, and even shunning Christians who interpret the Bible in ways different from us.

Is there any hope of our becoming more like the underground church Robin Meyers describes? I’m not sure. I’m not willing to become a total pacifist or to change my lifestyle in the ways that I’m afraid real justice might require, and I don’t see many other churchgoers who seem willing. But I wish the church would help us become more willing. I wish that through its sermons and classes and public statements it would say that if we want to follow Jesus we need to make some moves in such directions,

instead of by its silence encouraging us to keep supporting the status quo of consumerism, militarism, environmental destruction, and economic injustice.

### An ancient and misunderstood parable

As a start, Robin Meyers suggests that our churches take an ancient and misunderstood parable as their signature text. He considers it the most subversive parable in the New Testament and as authentic as any saying attributed to Jesus. Yet we usually think of it in a way that keeps us from seeing its power.

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”  
—Matthew 13:33



Scholars now see that to a first-century Jew, “three measures of flour” would have clearly echoed Genesis 18:1-8, the story of Abraham and Sarah showing hospitality to three visitors, one of whom turns out to be Yahweh announcing the unexpected and influential birth of Isaac. And in the time of Jesus, Meyers explains, everyone would have known that leavened meant “rotten.” It made bread rise but also start deteriorating. Leaven had a negative effect, out of all proportion to size, that couldn’t be stopped once it began. It was often used as a metaphor for moral corruption. So hiding a little leaven in the huge loaf of the Empire meant surreptitiously—subversively—corrupting it in a powerful, unstoppable way.



We think of leaven, however, as the yeast that makes bread become delicious, so to us, being yeast means helping to increase what we like about our culture. But

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 19 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 misses the point of this parable. As leaven, Christians are called to lessen the injustices that exist in today's Empire, by working from within in hidden ways.

How does Meyers advocate doing that? Sabotage? Treason? I don't think so.

Instead, we could actively oppose policies that preserve and even increase the huge income gap that now exists between the rich and the poor. We could openly oppose the use of war to settle disputes. We could actively support policies that lessen global warming.



No one considers the church in our time to be a threat to today's Empire, Robin Meyers observes, but that's exactly what we need to become. To his dismay, he sees that we have adapted the announcement of the coming of the kingdom to our present understanding, instead of considering it a challenge to everything we think we know and believe. Instead of hearing what is truly radical about the gospel, we've preferred to domesticate it according to "accepted community standards." Isn't it time to stop doing that, if we really want to follow Jesus?

*Barbara*



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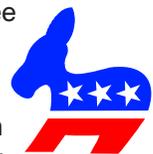
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## The subversive way

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You can find a discussion of Robin Meyers's previous book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, on my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org), in the July 2009 *Connections*. In that earlier book, as in the current one that I discuss here, Meyers points out that today when we hear "don't mix religion and politics," it usually seems to mean only "don't mix them in ways I don't agree with." It means "don't mix them in ways that threaten my way of life—ways that might require me to surrender power, money, or status."



In *The Underground Church*, Robin Meyers urges us to ask ourselves what kind of political action we need to take in order to make this world more like the kingdom of God that Jesus described. How could we help more people have enough of life's necessities? How could we help lessen violence? What kind of church would help? Asks Meyers, "What kind of community would bring us back from the dead? What would transform the Chamber of Commerce at Prayer into a beloved community of certifiably insane people? ... What would make this American Empire realize that we are not called to be its acolyte? ... What would turn Christians from cartoons of hypocrisy into an irresistible force for justice? ... What could persuade us, in the twilight of our relevance and power, to stop fighting over abortion and gay marriage long enough to save ourselves through shared mission?" Good questions.

