

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Members need to know

“Something needs to be in our church newsletter and to come from the pulpit about General Conference,” a United Methodist *Connections* reader wrote me last month, referring to the session of the UMC’s worldwide decision-making body that had just ended. She had e-mailed her Sunday School class, the senior pastor, and other staff members, asking them to make the conference known, but to no avail. In her congregation, she says, “it’s as if General Conference doesn’t happen at all.”



That’s usually been true of my congregation, too. In the years when I was a General Conference lay delegate, I was never asked to speak in advance about the issues that were to be decided, or to report afterwards about what had happened.



Now I no longer attend my congregation’s worship services, and I’ve been removed from its mailing

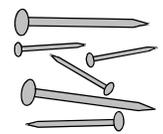
list, but I checked with a friend who still attends every Sunday and gets the church newsletter. She was totally surprised to learn from me that our senior pastor had been an alternate delegate to General Conference. She hadn’t heard or read a word about his going, either before he went or after he returned.

General Conference meets only once every four years. Its decisions have far-reaching effects on the UMC’s organization, finances, and official beliefs and policies. Like the reader who wrote me, I therefore feel that UMC members need to know about General Conference. And members of other denominations need to find out and speak up about what their churches’ decision-making bodies are doing.

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Author Robin Meyers • Courageous lay people
Discussion and sharing • Details coming soon

Is the fat lady about to sing?

Writing about the recent UMC General Conference in *The United Methodist Reporter*, SMU communications professor Maria Dixon Hall tells about wanting to get her deck repaired. She saw that nails were popping out and a new coat of paint was needed. But a landscape man pointed out that the problem was bigger than Dr. Hall realized. “The earth around the deck has changed,” he reminded her. “The sun and rain have taken their toll. The deck is warped and nailing it won’t fix the problem. You must tear it down if you want to do it any good.”



The UMC has a similar problem, in Dr. Hall’s opinion. “The world around us has changed,” she reminds us. “The heat of the culture wars and the rain of a changing demographic are having huge impacts. We are warped and cosmetic changes won’t help.”

She acknowledges that hundreds of UMC groups are doing the work of Christ in wonderful ways, but in her opinion, that’s not the issue. That’s like saying that many boards in her deck are working just fine.

Time to reconnect with our foundation

Like her deck, she sees, the church needs to reconnect with its foundation—its central mission, which she calls the soul-saving and soul-sustaining business. I wouldn’t use those words, because to me, soul-saving sounds too much like keeping people from going to hell, and I don’t think that’s the church’s mission. I see it instead as changing this world by increasing compassion and justice, as Jesus taught and demonstrated. But I agree that we need to focus on our foundation, not just on a few nails and boards, and I share Dr. Hall’s feeling that we may have little time left to do that.



“It’s not over until the fat lady sings,” says the old joke about an opera that seemed endless. “While as a denomination we will not disappear over the next four years,” Dr. Hall writes, “I believe that the fat lady has taken off her kaftan and is looking through sheet music and looking for an evening gown.” She’s getting ready to sing. Will we do something about it in time?

Plenty of ways to inform members

Some pastors may understandably feel that such reports and discussions are inappropriate to include in worship services, but there are plenty of other opportunities to deliver the information and invite questions. Reports can be included in church newsletters. And now that many are being sent by e-mail and most congregations have websites, plenty of space is available for news and comments there, unlike in the limited space that paper newsletters contain. It would be easy, too, to schedule a time during the Sunday School hour when the pastor or a lay member would report on what the denomination was doing and address questions about it, for whatever members were interested.



Scheduling such a presentation during the Sunday School hour might anger the class members whose motivation for attending a Sunday School class is only seeing friends and hearing familiar content rehashed. These members complain when presentations of other material, no matter how worthwhile it may be, take attendees away from their classes. But those complaints don't justify failing to provide what members need to hear.



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Silence can make pastors' jobs easier

My congregation has often followed the "don't let them know what is happening" policy in other ways besides keeping information about General Conference quiet. For several years, all congregation members received a weekly denominational newspaper, but one pastor told me he wished we would stop sending it. Having members know what was happening in our denomination worldwide, he said, made his job harder. It made him have to hear complaints from congregation members who disliked what the UMC was doing. Some of these members might even leave if they learned what the denomination was doing that they disapproved of. And since the pastor wanted to keep members from leaving, he preferred to keep them from hearing denominational news that might make them angry about the church.



Easier to get informed now

In those earlier days, keeping up with what denominations were doing was harder than it is now. It usually required reading a denominational publication or being active at a level above the local congregation. But now, newsletters from various church agencies are available free on the web and by e-mail, denominational news is posted on official websites, and bishops and other officials write blogs.

Besides, all the plenary sessions of this year's UMC General Conference were streamed live on the UMC website, available to whoever wanted to see them. As I watched them, I kept wondering if any other members of my congregation were watching. I also wondered if many lay members of other congregations were watching. Twitter comments about what was happening at General Conference were also shown continually on the UMC website, but most of them seemed to be from clergy.



Important for both laity and clergy

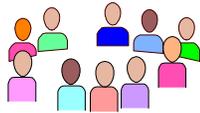
Some of what was being discussed and decided would affect pastors' job security and income in direct, concrete ways. The pension plan for U.S. clergy got a lot of attention, for example, and so did the policy of guaranteed appointments for clergy. So in a way, it's not surprising if clergy are more interested than laity in what General Conference does.

However, beliefs that affect all members were debated at General Conference, too. Changes in the UMC's present policy about homosexuality were hotly debated and finally rejected. And amazingly, during this debate only 56% of delegates agreed to let an official policy statement say that God's grace is available to all people. Don't all UMC members need to know that such things are happening?



Eliminating the UMC's long-standing homosexuality policy might well have caused some members to drop out, and preserving it may now cause others to drop out. Preserving it also seems likely to cause a lot of church avoiders—especially those in younger generations—to keep avoiding the church, because such policies help to keep it from being credible for them. These effects may have special

interest for clergy because drops in church membership and attendance could cause some clergy to lose their jobs or have their salaries reduced. But aren't these developments also important for lay members to know and think about?



Why do few lay members seem to care?

Denominational actions and policies seem to get little attention in most congregations. Why?

- Lay members may feel that nothing they care about is affected by what their denomination does. Their incomes, their relationships with friends, their personal problems, and what they do for enjoyment are what matter to them, and they see the denomination as remote from these aspects of their lives. But isn't Christianity about what happens to others, not just to ourselves? Most denominations work to promote compassion and justice in ways that individuals can't do as well alone or at least that many fail to do. Shouldn't we care about that?

- Lay members' ability to influence what the denomination does, or even to have their views heard, may seem so small that denominational actions don't seem worth thinking about. Like trying to get changes made in the federal government, trying to influence church denominations can seem hopeless. So why even bother to find out what they are doing, much less to try to do anything about it?

- Many members apparently don't want to hear about their denomination's proposed actions because they see the actions as disobeying God or suggesting that some of the members' beliefs might not be true. Like seeing all the Bible's words as somehow having been uniquely spoken by God, many church



members mistakenly see familiar doctrinal statements as being statements of biological or historical information. For the denomination even to consider changing its requirements about the use of those statements in worship, therefore, or changing its claims that those doctrinal statements are literally true, seems like denying undeniable facts about God and Jesus, and that's scary to many members.

For many, even official church policies about homosexuality and marriage also carry this kind of weight. These members see such policies as having come from God, instead of recognizing that they come only from culture-based interpretations of a few scriptures taken out of context. So for these members, changing denominational policies about such subjects seems like refusing to obey God. For these fearful members, the best way for coping with their fear of having their denomination do this apparently is to avoid thinking about it. Thus if their denomination is even discussing such a change, these members don't want to know about it.



Times have changed

Some church members, however, are now paying more attention to what their denominations are doing, and they're speaking up about what they see happening. They see some of it as inconsistent with what Jesus taught and demonstrated. They also see much of it as contradictory to what is now well known from the sciences and other sources of information about the universe, human beings, and other aspects of nature.

Today's younger people, especially, also see much of what churches are saying as contradictory to what they observe from travel and from the digi-

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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.

tal communication that is an ever-present and seemingly indispensable part of their daily lives. Also, today's younger people associate regularly with people of different races, religious views, and sexual orientations in their schools, workplaces, and leisure activities, so they see how ridiculous it is for churches to call such differences sinful.

Many Christians of older generations have become similarly aware of these aspects of today's world from their personal reading and thinking. As a result, many younger people are avoiding the church, and many older ones have dropped out. Some are won-



dering whether denominations still serve any needed purpose. But others are still in the church, many in mainline denominations, and many of these are now forming grassroots networks to consider the questions and work for the changes that they see as needed.



Maybe influencing our denominations therefore isn't as hopeless now as we've assumed it was. But in order to influence them in needed ways, we'll have to find out how they function and what's currently happening in them. I wish more congregations would help members to do that instead of hindering them.

Barbara



Connections

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Features that need attention in all denominations

In the online forum *UM Insight* (<http://um-insight.net>), its coordinator Cynthia Astle describes features of last month's UMC General Conference that she thinks will have major lasting impact on the UMC. They're not only in the UMC.

- Social media took General Conference by storm. Messages being sent constantly on Twitter and other digital media let outsiders as well as delegates participate directly in discussion and analysis if not in actual decisions.



- Global perspectives were continually apparent, and non-U.S. delegates saw proposed restructuring plans as efforts by U.S. members to retain their ecclesiastical power. Whether or not their perceptions were accurate, these delegates were pushing back against the UMC's use of the U.S. corporate model.

- The 2012 General Conference ended in disarray. A deep-seated acknowledgment emerged, Cynthia Astle found, that the UMC is a 20th-century organization unsuited to the demands of a globalized, technology-saturated 21st-century world. "Attempts to answer what are essentially spiritual issues with corporate structure and politics proved futile," writes Astle. We clearly need to discern and focus on God's purpose for our churches, it seems, rather than so much on their institutional preservation and their members' personal preferences.