

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 238 – AUGUST 2012



BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

## An assortment of topics

Usually I focus each issue of *Connections* on a single topic, but this month I'm writing about several different and essentially unrelated subjects that are currently on my mind. You may consider one of them really quirky and another one heretical, but I'm offering them here anyway for your consideration.

Maybe I'm making a mountain out of a molehill in what I say about the first of these topics, but I don't think so. I think it needs Christians' attention.

## I'm not a guy! (and I don't think God is . . .)

I'm very often called a guy nowadays, and that bothers me because "guy" is a masculine word and I'm not male.



For some reason, where I'm most often called a guy is in restaurants. "Where would you guys like to sit?" a host or hostess often asks when customers enter the restaurant, even when some or all of the group of customers are female. Then at the table, a server asks, "What would you guys like to drink?" And then "Are you guys ready to order?" And later, "Do you guys need anything else?" or "Would you guys like to see the dessert menu?"

I almost dread going to one particular local restaurant, even though its food is excellent, because its owner, its hosts and hostesses, and most of its servers continually call me a guy when I'm there.

## An astonished reaction

Sometimes I speak up to a server who does this. "I'm not a guy," I point out. But this usually brings merely an astonished look, as if I'd suddenly said something in a foreign



God  
Prayer  
guys

## Connections Live! 2012— registration and hotel deadline Sept. 5!

Don't miss this unique opportunity to

- **Hear Robin Meyers**, author of *Saving Jesus from the Church* and *The Underground Church*



- **Hear lay activists**

**Jim and Ruth Klein**, who after hearing the speakers at **Connections Live! 2010** went home to Houston and sold their house and car, changed churches, and started promoting justice more actively and visibly as volunteers

**Doris Akers**, who lives on a cattle ranch in the Texas Panhandle and hosts a monthly study group that some participants drive 70 miles to attend

**Joan Byerhof**, the sparkplug behind the annual *Horizons of Faith* event at First United Methodist Church of Omaha, described in the May 2012 *Connections* (see [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org))

- **Hear Scott Griessel**, producer of *Darkwood Brew* and the film of the 2006 *CrossWalk America* walk from Phoenix to Washington, plus videos for *Living the Questions* (see the 11-07, 1-08, and 2-12 *Connections* at [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org)).



- **Buy books** and DVDs
- **Get free books** at the used-book-exchange table
- **Win door prizes**—videos, tickets to seminars . . .
- **Get information** about progressive Christian study materials, organizations, and coming events
- **Meet kindred spirits**, share your experiences and beliefs, and get ideas about how you might locate and join with others to put your faith into action.

**Don't miss it—September 28-29, Temple, Texas!**

Remember—registration deadline is Sept. 5, and unfortunately we can't accept registrations at the door.

For a registration form and more information, go to [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org).

language. At times, however, it makes the server go to the other extreme and start calling the women “ladies.” But I find that equally undesirable. “Ladies” connotes an outdated pattern of behavior that sees women as sweet, fragile, vulnerable, incompetent creatures who should wear ruffles and pastels and be shielded from life.



### More than just a habit

Many people now realize that using “he” and other masculine pronouns to refer to women is inappropriate, but that same realization about the word “guy” apparently hasn’t yet dawned very widely. Calling everyone a guy is mainly a current habit, I realize, but it’s harmful. It’s also unnecessary. Why not just say “you” instead of “you guys” or “you ladies”? Why can’t waiters say, “Where would you like to sit?” “Are you ready to order?” “Do you need anything else?” That seems so simple, and it would be so much kinder. It would acknowledge that women exist and that they’re just as capable and valuable as men.

### Unprofessional as well as inappropriate

I find servers in restaurants to be the most frequent offenders in calling women guys, but they’re far from alone. Recently I had to take part in a three-person phone conversation that included a female employee of an accounting firm and a female I. R. S. employee, to arrange for my making a tax payment electronically.



Throughout the conversation, the I. R. S. employee kept calling me and the accounting firm employee “you guys.”



That struck me as extremely unprofessional, in addition to being totally inappropriate for speaking to two women, but I kept quiet about it until we were ready to end the conversation. Then I finally said to the I. R. S. employee, “We’re not guys.”



Her reaction was silence. She apparently had no idea what I was talking about. I explained briefly, then said good-bye and hung up. I hope my challenging her didn’t mark me for an I. R. S. audit as her revenge, but I felt I had to say something. I only wish more women—and men—would speak up when they hear women or girls being called guys.

### Why does it matter?

Many people apparently think that calling women guys doesn’t matter. Some of the people to whom I say “I’m not a guy” insist that “guys” applies to everyone. That’s the same claim that we heard in the church and elsewhere for years, about using only masculine pronouns to refer to everyone from God all the way down. That claim has come—and unfortunately still comes—not just from many men but also from some women, and it’s wrong.

Using masculine pronouns for groups that include both men and women makes the women invisible, in effect. It says they don’t matter enough to mention. Most important, it engraves this mistaken impression into us at an unconscious level where its effect is especially powerful because we’re not aware of it.



That’s what also happens when we use only masculine pronouns for God or use only masculine titles like Lord and King. Largely without realizing what is happening, we get the impression that God is male, which in effect says that being male is infinitely more valuable than being female. And this usage, especially when it is combined with seeing the man Jesus as uniquely divine, as so many Christians do, often contributes to believing that only men are entitled to represent God officially in the church, as some Christian denominations still claim.



(For more on aspects of this topic that I consider important for Christians to consider, please see the December 1995 and January 1996 issues of *Connections*, at [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). Fortunately some aspects of how women are treated—especially women in generations younger than mine—have improved in the years since I wrote those issues of *Connections*, but I find that most of what I wrote then still applies. It applies especially in the church, and it applies especially to how we talk about God.)

Now I’ll move on to a different subject, about which some readers may say my views show that I’m not even a Christian. But I know that many other Christians, not just the two I’m about to quote, have concerns very similar to those I’m about to men-

tion. To me that means these concerns need to be discussed openly in the church. Christians need to feel safe in admitting them.



## How to respond to someone in crisis?

Murray Gregory, chairperson of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, writes about such a concern in the June issue of the CCPC’s newsletter, *Progressions*. In a discussion he was in, Gregory writes, someone asked, “Once you have decided that there is no god to pray to, how do you respond to someone who is having a crisis in life?”

I understand this person not as having decided that there is no God but rather as having decided that there isn’t a Santa-Claus-like being who responds to prayers in the way that many Christians assume—a capricious being with supernatural power to relieve suffering, who sometimes does what people ask for and sometimes doesn’t, for reasons that we can’t fully know.



## A hard question to answer

“I don’t know about you,” Murray Gregory tells his readers, “but I found this question difficult to answer. There are many times I want to say to others that I will keep them in my prayers, but I know that is not true. I want to say that I will keep them in my thoughts, but that seems kind of weak. I still want them to know that I support them and want to focus on them with all my being. So I struggle with the words I’m going to use. I try to be honest with myself and with them. I want them to know I will surround them with my love.”

“I don’t know if you struggle with these kinds of questions,” Gregory continues. Yet I think he does know that many Christians struggle with them. That’s why he’s writing about them. I know it, too, because I struggle with them myself and *Connections* readers and other Christian friends tell me that they also do.



## What should we say?

What came to my mind immediately when I read Murray Gregory’s article was a conversation with one of my closest friends who died from cancer a few years ago. Shortly before he died, he told me about having heard from one of our mutual friends and fellow church members when he learned that further treatment was not likely to help and that he probably had only a short while to live. The friend told him that she was praying for him and that she had put him on our congregation’s prayer chain. He felt at a loss to know how to respond, he said, because he knew that this friend’s understanding of God and prayer were very different from his.



Yet he of course appreciated her intentions, which he felt were totally good. So he replied to her, he told me, by saying, “Thank you. I appreciate your concern.” And to me, that seemed entirely appropriate.

But when we’re the ones from whom a suffering friend seems to expect prayer, which he or she obviously sees as indispensable spiritual help, what should we say? What if we simply don’t see God as the kind of being who will ease our friend’s suffering as a result of our prayer, yet we hate not to offer what the friend considers the most powerful kind of help? How can we be honest with ourselves, with the friends whose beliefs differ from ours, and with God?

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my website, [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.

## Time to discuss the hard questions

A big help in promoting honesty could be discussing the hard questions about God in our churches, and including in the discussions a variety of different opinions about what God may be like. Recent news about scientists having discovered what some are calling “the God particle” would contribute useful up-to-the-minute fodder for such discussions.

Merely sticking with the picture of God as a Santa-Claus-like man in the sky above a flat earth, which



is so often the only picture people get from the church, won't help. It's outrageous, in fact, for churches to present that picture as something to be taken seriously in a world that's full of news and speculation about black holes, dark matter, an expanding or contracting universe, and a God particle.

If we refuse to consider such possibilities and talk about them in church, merely because we're afraid they might show that our kindergarten picture of God is no longer likely to be true, we shouldn't be surprised if fewer and fewer people care about what churches are saying.

*Barbara*



## Connections

Barbara Wendland  
505 Cherokee Drive  
Temple TX 76504-3629

**Are women guys?**

**Is God a "he," a Santa, a particle?**

**What to say to those who disagree about prayer?**

August 2012

## Connections Live! 2012

As I write this, registrations are steadily arriving. So far, they've come from Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Montana as well as from many places in Texas.

I hope you'll join us!

Remember, September 5 is the deadline.

