

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Communicating with church decision-makers

Some people get *Connections* who haven't asked to get it. I send it to them because they're in decision-making positions that give them a bigger voice in the church than other members.



Some of those are getting *Connections* this month for the first time. They're delegates to the 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, the UMC's top decision-making body, which meets only once every four years. As a concerned UMC member, I want to send these influential members views and information that I consider important.

I believe more church members need to become informed about church-related issues and then to make their views known to the delegates who represent them and to other church leaders. Through *Connections* I'm therefore trying to do what I can toward helping that to happen.

## Letting representatives hear from us

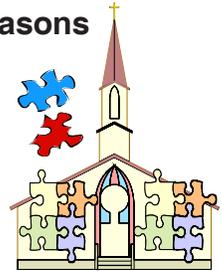


I recently heard from a UMC member, however, who was unhappy about getting *Connections* without having asked for it. "I do not know how or where you got my name and mailing information," she wrote, "but I certainly do not remember requesting your opinions. Please remove my name from your mailing list."

I had gotten her name from the regional UMC decision-making body to which she was a delegate. I believe representatives to such bodies need to hear the views of the members they represent, and I'm one of those members so I wanted her to hear my views. I also wanted her to get some information that I consider important for decision-makers to know but that few congregations give them.

## Still writing for the same reasons

This issue ends my nineteenth year of writing *Connections*. My reasons for writing it are still essentially what they were when I started. I want to reassure the many Christians who see the need for change in the church and the world that they're not alone or mistaken. I want to encourage them to keep looking for new information and insight and then to speak up and become active in promoting the changes they see as needed.



## Numerous and impassioned responses

The *Connections* issues that have brought the most numerous and impassioned responses have been those in which I've written about feeling like a misfit in the church because of having views and concerns that I hear few other members expressing. Many readers tell me they feel the same way.

Some have left the church as a result, but many are still hanging on. Some stay mainly because of habit. Many stay to keep from leaving church friends. And many stay because, despite the parts of the church's message that they find unbelievable or contradictory to what Jesus taught, they feel that following "the way" of Jesus offers the best hope for the world and they

keep hoping the church will start following it more closely. I write to reassure these readers that they're actually far from alone and to urge them to speak up, because many of their observations are correct and need to be heard and heeded by the church.



## We're driving perceptive people away

Some UMC doctrines contradict what is now known about the universe, the Bible, and human beings. Some current UMC policies go against the teaching of Jesus. They're therefore driving away many perceptive people. I want to do whatever I can to stop this from happening. I'm sure UMC General Conference delegates also want that. So in the hope that my speaking up can encourage them to vote for the changes that will help to accomplish it, I've added the new delegates to my *Connections* mailing list.

## Reassuring members who felt alone

When I started writing *Connections* nineteen years ago, I put together a mailing list of names from church-related groups I'd been in. My main aim was to reassure the women I'd been discovering, who like me felt alone in their local congregations in seeing the need for change in the church's ways of treating women as second-class people. Especially, we had all become aware of how nearly all of the words used in worship services portrayed God as male. We'd also noticed how many of the words claiming to mean all human beings, in scriptures, prayers, and songs, actually referred only to men.



As a result, I started thinking about writing a letter to send regularly to the people I'd discovered who saw the need for change in such common church practices. I wanted to keep them reassured that they were neither alone nor crazy in thinking that change was needed.

## More than just preaching to the choir

When I got serious about sending such a letter, however, I realized that it would need to address a much broader range of topics. Many other changes were needed in the church: giving lay members more voice, disseminating more up-to-date information about the Bible and Christian history, and presenting a wider variety of views about how Christian principles might apply to current issues.

I also realized that information and views about these and other important church-related issues needed to reach a wider range of church members, not just the ones who already saw the need for change. Just "preaching to the choir," I realized, wouldn't do much to promote the changes I saw as needed. When I put together my original mailing list for *Connections*, I therefore included not just people I expected to agree with me but also many whose views I didn't know or who I thought were likely to disagree.



## "You're describing how I feel!"

As soon as I sent the first issue of *Connections*, I started getting enthusiastic responses. They said, "You're saying exactly what I've been thinking! But

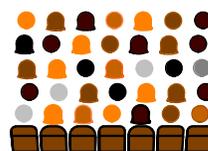
I thought I was the only one. I'm so glad someone is speaking up about these things!"

Over the years I've kept getting more and more responses like these. Many responders have sent me names to add to my list, and many new people have discovered *Connections* and asked to get on my list, so it has kept growing. It now includes members of more than a dozen denominations and some non-churchgoers.



## Delegates are responsible for hearing

I've also kept adding some people who haven't asked to be added, however, especially delegates to United Methodist decision-making bodies. Some of those, like the one who wrote me recently, undoubtedly feel that I'm presumptuous in sending them my personal views, but I feel that church decision-makers need to hear the views of any church members who care enough to send them. In my view, anyone who agrees to serve as a representative to such a body takes on the responsibility for hearing church members' views, just as representatives to city, state, and national decision-making bodies take on the responsibility for hearing citizens' views.



This means that such bodies need to make the representatives' names and contact information available. It would be unthinkable if the U.S. Senate, for example, refused to make Senators' names and addresses available for citizens who want to communicate with them. It's equally unthinkable when at any level the church fails to make names and addresses of its decision-makers available to church members. Yet that apparently happens often. My UMC Annual Conference (regional decision-making body) doesn't make a list of its members' names and addresses available in advance of the session at which they will be voting. And I find that few church congregations list the names and addresses of the members of their congregational decision-making bodies on their church websites.

What about privacy? Many people are now understandably unwilling to have their names and home addresses made public. But should that keep church decision-makers from letting their contact information be known? I don't think so, because

they have accepted the essentially public role of representing other members. And to preserve their privacy, church delegates could give only their e-mail address or give their church's address and let the church forward mail they received there.

### Getting information and varied views

Representatives' responsibility for hearing from those they represent includes hearing not just from those who agree with them, but also from those who disagree. It includes finding out what scholars and other professionals have discovered, too, and hearing the views of others who have first-hand experience with the subjects being considered. I was therefore disappointed by having a United Methodist Conference delegate say that she was offended by my sending *Connections* to her.



I know, of course, that none of us wants to read everything that people may want to send us, and I immediately remove from my mailing list anyone who asks to be removed. (And it's easy: just put "unsubscribe" in the subject line of an e-mail reply, or write "refused" on the address panel of a paper copy and put it back into your mailbox.) But I hate to see the people who officially represent others, in the church or elsewhere, refuse views and information that their constituents want to send them.



Church decision-makers need to hear more views, not fewer. And they need to hear not just from the members whose views are in the majority or who have the loudest voices. I want them to hear minority views too. I also want them to have the best and most recent information about Jesus, about the Bible's origin and development, and about church history.

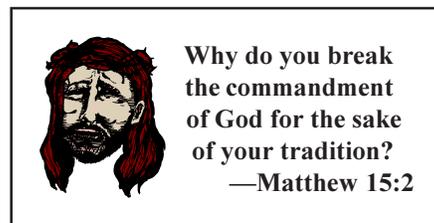
### The majority, or Jesus?



I once heard a pastor say about how he did his job, "I just try to find out what the majority of the congregation wants, and then do that." I was appalled. It seemed to me that his calling was to discern what was consistent with the teaching and example of Jesus, and then to do that. Isn't that also the responsibility of delegates to church decision-making bodies?

Most delegate-election processes result in getting delegates who represent the majority's view, and that's essentially the fairest way for electing delegates. But voting with the majority often means opposing the compassion, justice, and peace that Jesus taught, because following the way of Jesus isn't easy or comfortable. Therefore if the church wants to follow Jesus, its delegates often need to vote in accordance with unpopular views instead of with the majority view.

When I've been a delegate to church decision-making bodies, I've sometimes heard delegates say



they knew that certain changes were needed in order to follow the teaching of

Jesus (changing the UMC's official policy on homosexuality, for example) but they knew that making the change would upset a lot of church members and cause a lot to drop out, so they weren't willing to vote for it. That saddens me, because throughout history some voices expressing minority views have turned out to be speaking for God. If

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.

some of those are speaking now, as they may well be, church decision-makers need to support them.

### Tradition, or Jesus?

Like following the majority, following church traditions can also be unwise at times, because those have often turned out to be contrary to the teaching of Jesus. Think of churches' past support of slavery, racial segregation, and restrictions on women.



I'd therefore like to see the 2012 UMC General Conference remove official statements that say certain church doctrines, policies, and rules can never

be changed. I'd also like to see it remove statements that say all the writings of John Wesley must forever be the basis of UMC policy. Such ways of clinging to tradition ignore what has been learned in more recent centuries. They drive off many of today's best informed and most perceptive people.

I hope the decision-makers of the UMC and other denominations will lead their churches in following Jesus instead of merely preserving church doctrines and other traditions, even if that means opposing the majority. If I can provide a nudge toward that by sending *Connections*, then I want to keep doing it.

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Communicating with church decision-makers

October 2011

### Connections Live! 2012

Last November, *Connections* readers from all over Texas gathered in Temple for *Connections Live! 2010*, the first-ever gathering of *Connections* readers in person.

Here's what the event included:

- ✓ Kindred spirits to meet, talk with, and get ideas from, from Friday afternoon through Saturday evening
- ✓ Inspiring progressive speakers: scholars, local-church pastors, and lay church members
- ✓ New books to buy and get signed, free used books, and information on progressive materials for group use

The second *Connections Live!* is now in the planning stages, and this time it won't just be for Texans.

You'll get more details soon, so keep watching for them in *Connections* and checking my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org).

**IT'S  
COMING!**