

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Finding kindred spirits



I continually hear from Christians who want opportunities to discuss what following Jesus requires with regard to today's most pressing issues. They want to work with others to combat the injustices they see. They want to learn what the best scholars have discovered about the Bible and Christian history and theology. They want to keep examining their beliefs and revising them when new insight seems to require that.

These Christians can't believe that these practices and all their observations are wrong. Yet they fear that something is wrong with them, because in their communities and churches they don't hear anyone expressing such observations or beliefs or discussing what they see as so important. They feel alone.

## Some stay in, some have given up

Many of these Christians are active in churches despite feeling alone in them. Many have friends in the church whom they don't want to stop seeing regularly, so that keeps them participating. Many have the impression that being in a church is essential—maybe for going to heaven when they die, but at least for being the right kind of person now. Many recognize that the church does a lot of good, and for them, that fact outweighs the doctrines they find unbelievable and the church actions they realize are harmful.

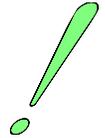
Other Christians who can't find kindred spirits in the church, however, have stopped participating in it. Some have found a community of kindred spirits elsewhere, but some still haven't found that community they so fervently wish for.

## Suggestions worth trying

If you share these Christians' concerns and yearn for kindred spirits but haven't found them, how might you find some?



## A shocking discovery



I was shocked to learn from the January 9 issue of my local newspaper that the annual Mayor's New Year's Community Prayer Service the next day would take an offering to support evangelizing by an international fundamentalist-Christian organization. The service was led by the mayor of Temple and the mayor of an adjacent town. The Temple mayor says the service wasn't an official city event, but a lawyer friend tells me that being led by a mayor using his official title, as this service was, implies that an event is official.

## Evangelizing by governments is wrong

The organization for which the offering was taken is Child Evangelism Fellowship. I urge you to look at its website, [www.cefonline.com](http://www.cefonline.com), and especially to read its Statement of Faith there. Read also about the Good News Clubs it establishes in elementary schools. Our mayor tells me they now exist in five Temple schools. The Community Prayer Service offering was to help establish more. These "clubs" use materials published by CEF, for a ten-week after-school Bible study taught by volunteers from local churches.



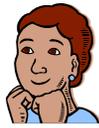
I'm especially appalled by the interpretation of Christianity promoted by this organization for which my city helped raise funds. It ignores what is now known about the Bible's origin and development and also much that is now known about human beings and other aspects of the universe. But for a city to help evangelize for any interpretation of Christianity or for any other religion is outrageous. Evangelizing means trying to convert people to a religion, and our constitution forbids our governments from doing that.

## Speaking is important



I've expressed my concern to our mayor, and I've sent a Letter to the Editor. But I wonder if many other citizens have openly expressed their opposition. Unless a lot do so, change is unlikely. So if you live in Temple, or if anything similar is happening where you live, I hope you'll investigate and then speak—kindly, but firmly, publicly, and persistently.

I know how lonely and discouraging it is to feel that no one in your church or community shares your concerns or is even willing to consider them. But I've partly solved that problem for myself by finding kindred spirits elsewhere and even finding a few who live near me but I hadn't previously been aware of. Consequently I'm suggesting ways in which you might do that too. I hope you'll find some of them helpful.



## Look actively

Above all, finding a community of kindred spirits requires actively looking for the people whose views and concerns are similar to yours. Once in a while such people may cross your path without your having made any effort to find them, but if you wait for that to happen, you may have to wait a long time. Much more effective is taking the initiative to look.



If you have access to the internet, that's your best starting place. In a search engine such as Google, enter "progressive Christian" and see what turns up. It will probably be much more than you can use, but it will include websites of several national or regional organizations that can be helpful. So look at each of the websites you find.

## Find out what's available

Some of these websites will contain lists of progressive congregations or study groups. Mainline denominations' websites can also help. Use their search features to find their congregations in or near your zip code. Your community, especially if it is small, may not have any progressive congregations. Or like me, you may not be willing to join a different church after being active in one for many years. But if you find there are churches in your area that you might be willing to change to, investigate further by visiting them.



Pastors tend to frown on "church shopping," and it's true that becoming part of a congregation instead of drifting from one to another has advantages,



but shopping can be worth doing. Staying in a congregation that promotes injustice or discourages real learning and honest examination of one's beliefs can do more harm than good. So consider doing some shopping.

But when you visit churches, don't just visit their worship services. In a phone call or visit, ask what classes, study or discussion groups, and service projects the congregation offers, and then visit any that seem the least bit promising.

## Find the groups with minority views

In looking for a congregation, be aware that even a generally conservative congregation sometimes has a progressive class or book-discussion group that you'd feel at home in. But to discover such groups, you may have to dig.



A member of one tells me, "We meet in a corner of the church basement, and hardly anyone knows we're there." Another says, "We discuss books that have been life-changing for us, but we can't mention them out loud in our congregation." It's unfortunate that some congregations refuse to encourage or publicize these groups whose views and interests



differ from the majority, but it happens, and those may be the very groups in which you'll find your kindred spirits.

## Attend events for two reasons

Besides helping you to find progressive congregations, links on progressive Christian organizations' websites may also let you know of talks, workshops, and classes that leading scholars and other interesting authors and teachers will present near you. Several mainline seminaries sponsor annual events that include such presentations, so in addition to looking at the sites of progressive organizations, try searching on the web with the words "seminary" plus the name of a denomination whose offerings sometimes include forward-looking projects, events, and teaching. On the website of a seminary near you, follow a link to "continuing education" or "lay education" and see what it leads to.

Attending such events can have two important benefits for you. First, you're likely to be informed and stimulated by what the presenters present. But also, if you introduce yourself to other attendees, you'll probably find some whose interests and concerns are similar to yours.

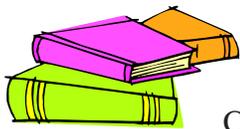


As an introvert, striking up conversations with strangers like this isn't easy for me, but by doing it in recent years, I've discovered that I can do it. More important, after I've summoned the nerve to do it, I'm nearly always glad I've done it.



Attending events and meeting other attendees may lead you to interesting further contact with some, or even to opportunities to use your gifts and pursue your interests. But even when that doesn't happen, you'll at least have an interesting conversation or two. You also may get welcome reassurance that you haven't found elsewhere, that you're neither alone nor mistaken in what you've been thinking about religious beliefs or current issues.

### Find kindred-spirit authors



Looking at progressive organizations' websites is likely to lead you to lists of books, CDs, and videos you'll like. It also may lead to articles you can read or videos you can watch right there on the website. Other links may lead to the websites of publications you haven't been aware of but will find interesting. In these and other ways, you're likely to find kindred-spirit authors. In whatever ways you can, do what lay theologian Val Webb advocates. She urges, "Find the authors who groan in your language."

Becoming aware of such authors and their writings may alert you to opportunities to hear them speak in person. In addition, many authors have their own websites or pages on their publishers' websites, so look for those, once you've found an author whose



writing rings your bell. You might even get to know one or more authors in person or at least correspond occasionally. I used to think that all published authors were remote people who wouldn't want to be bothered by hearing from a nobody like me, but I've found that's not necessarily true. Best-selling authors may be too busy to respond, but many



authors, especially the less-than-best-selling ones, are delighted to hear from someone who has read their book carefully enough and thought enough about it to ask the author a question or express an opinion about what he or she has said. If a book or the author's website doesn't include an address for contacting the author, you can probably get a message to him or her by sending it to the book or magazine's publisher and asking that it be forwarded to the author.

### Reveal your views and concerns

To find a community of kindred spirits to be part of, whether in person or only on the web or by correspondence, you'll have to reveal some of your own views and concerns openly. Unless you do that, your kindred spirits won't know you're a kindred spirit.

Many of us who have minority views and thus feel like misfits with regard to the church preserve a vicious circle of silence. If I don't hear anyone else in the church expressing what I believe, what I'm most concerned about, or what I think about current issues, I'm tempted to keep quiet. But if the person who has similar views and beliefs doesn't hear me or anyone else expressing them, he or she is likely to keep quiet too. As a result, we all think we're alone when we're actually not alone. We think our observations are wrong when they're actually correct. By keeping quiet we're harming ourselves



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* 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). To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, 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 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.

and each other. We're keeping ourselves and others from finding the kindred spirits we all yearn to find.

But our silence harms the church too. It deprives the church of strengths that it needs and we could contribute. So we all need to be speaking up about our beliefs, concerns, doubts, and questions. They can't be addressed honestly or help the church unless we bring them out into the open.

### Join the theological conversation

Years ago, I read a book that mentioned the church's "theological conversation," and I thought, "That's the aspect of the church I want to be part

of!" But I knew that was impossible. I assumed that conversation was carried on only by bishops, scholars, and other such people, all of whom were male at that time and in every way were far removed from me. But now I know it's not impossible, because I've done it. More important, I know all of us need to get into the conversation. The web and other electronic methods of communication, plus the increased diversity of the institutional church, have now made it easier than ever. So I hope you'll join the conversation. If you do, you'll find some kindred spirits there.



*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Finding kindred spirits

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Numerous recent news reports have let us know that the U.S. and three of its allies have been furnishing their troops in Iraq and Afghanistan with rifles whose sights have Bible references embossed on them. Trijicon, a Michigan arms company, has been putting the small scriptural references on its products for years, a January 21 *New York Times* article reports. The company's Christian founder started the practice. The *Times* article mentions John 8:12 and 2 Corinthians 4:6 among the verses stamped on Trijicon's rifle sights. As a result of current complaints, Trijicon is now generously providing the Pentagon with 100 free kits for removing the lettering.

It's incredible that Christians—Trijicon's founder and then presumably Christian military procurement officials who chose that manufacturer and approved specs for the product—would use guns as a vehicle for spreading the teaching of Jesus, which opposes killing. But it's equally incredible that U.S. military and government leaders, who include both Christians and non-Christians, would allow the dissemination of any religion's teaching by means of equipment that our government provides.

