

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A theologian's story

Hearing about others' spiritual journeys can help us know ourselves better and know God better. These accounts often show us ways in which people see God at work in their lives and the wider world, so they sometimes help us discover how God's presence shows up in ways we haven't previously recognized.



Because I see such discoveries as valuable, I often include parts of my own and others' personal stories in *Connections*. This month I'm featuring the story of internationally known theologian and scholar Joerg Rieger, as he shared it with me.

An active Methodist family

Rieger's story starts in the 1960s in the town of Murrhardt, in the southwestern part of Germany, north-east of Stuttgart. Growing up there, Joerg was as active a Methodist as anyone could be. His family lived next door to the church. His parents, who both worked for the postal service, were active volunteers in the church, and as a child Joerg participated with them in church activities. During his teenage years, he was usually at the church five or six nights a week. He sang in choirs, played the organ, and played in the church's brass band.



A band with a mission

The Riegers' small congregation was conservative, and it saw dancing, drinking, and going to movies as unacceptable. But it had a brass band that was an important part of the church, just as such bands were in other area churches.

Joerg's father was a leader of the band, and he saw it as a way of carrying out the church's mission. With the band, Joerg's family not only played regularly throughout the year at nursing homes, schools,

Early impressions matter

Early in life, Joerg Rieger was given two important impressions that, unfortunately, many other Christians have been given only much later, if at all, about the Bible and the church.



• Learning about the Bible

In his public high school in Germany, Rieger was taught how the Bible originated and developed. His religion course was compulsory, but it wasn't the kind of course that many conservative Christians in Texas and other southern states want in schools. Instead, his school presented the best scholars' findings about the Bible, just as about other subjects.

• Being challenged by the church

Starting in his childhood, Joerg Rieger heard the church presenting what he now remembers as a challenge. And from his family's participation in the church brass band as a mission to the community, to be done even on Christmas morning, he saw the church's mission as having higher priority than personal comfort.

Part of growing up

Information and views that have only come to me and many other Christians relatively late in life, that didn't come from our churches even then, and that many churchgoers never get exposed to, were presented to Joerg Rieger from the beginning. "It was merely part of growing up," he says.

Rieger finds that in the U.S., teaching religion too often amounts mainly to cheerleading for Christianity and often for only a narrow interpretation of it. The teaching also tends to present the most familiar interpretations of Christianity as totally beneficial, instead of presenting their pros and cons. Rieger points out that, in contrast, the early teaching he got in Germany analyzed religion in the same way as other subjects.

What difference might it make?

What might be different about the church and American society now, if early in life more of us had gotten from our churches the information about the Bible that Rieger got from his high school? What if we had heard the challenge he heard from his church?



and other local venues. The family also went with the band to nursing homes at times like Christmas morning when most other families were celebrating at home.



Joerg eventually abandoned his childhood church's view of dancing, drinking, and movies. But from his parents' view of the band as a means of outreach to the local community and a high priority for their personal lives, he got an understanding of the church's mission that stayed with him for life.

Wanting to be sure about his choice

Rieger's years in Gymnasium (comparable to U.S. high school) opened some new perspectives on the Bible for him. Religion was part of the official curriculum in German schools, and his religion course included some "source criticism"—seeing how the work of many authors makes up the Bible. Also, in the Bible his religion teacher saw God liberating oppressed people. This approach made sense to Joerg and seemed natural despite being new to him. It started him thinking about studying theology later.



However, getting into theological school was easier than getting into a good university. So, he says, "I wanted to create a situation in which I wouldn't ever have to worry about having gone into theology only because I couldn't do anything else." Thus in high school he majored in German and physics, worked hard, and ranked second in his school. Then he was admitted to a good engineering school.

He knew engineering would lead to a career more socially and financially rewarding than theology, but theology was where he wanted his life work to be, so instead of entering the engineering school he began studying theology. "I simply wanted to be sure before settling on it," he points out.

No rosy ideas about the church

Before moving on to the study of theology, however, Rieger was faced with the year of military service that was compulsory in Germany. He chose to do Civil Service as a Conscientious Objector instead. For this, he served in the largest Methodist church in Germany, a congregation of about nine hundred members, doing whatever church jobs needed doing.



That was an eye-opener. "I had no rosy ideas about the church," he says. "I knew what the church was like." But his Civil Service in the church showed him an uglier face of the church than he had previously seen. "I realized how troubled the church really was," he explains. "I realized that what was preached and how the congregation lived were two different things."



However, this realization didn't make him give up on the church. Instead, it made him want to do something to help. By the end of his Civil Service, he felt called to try to make a difference by going into the ordained ministry. "I saw the need," he says, "to help the church become more true to what it was supposed to be."



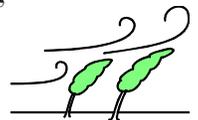
Rieger therefore started toward seminary, but a one-year internship at a church before enrolling was required. For him, that year included preaching twice every Sunday and leading four Bible studies every week.

More emphasis on love than on rules

He found his seminary fairly liberal. "It said we don't need all these old narrow rules any more. We don't need to worry about dancing. It said that humans had written the Bible—that the Bible had not fallen from the sky but had a history—and it said that we were all supposed to love each other. And that basically summed up liberal theology."

This view didn't come as a shock to Joerg. He found it liberating, in fact. The conservative view that he had been given previously, he explains, "said that God was mostly in the church, that you go there to meet God, and that God is mainly someone you have to obey." The liberal view "said that God was also in the world, so you met God in places like nature, human beings, and the arts."

For Joerg, seeing this difference was an important step, but he kept feeling that Christianity included more options than just liberalism and conservatism. Also, he had become active in some peace movements and environmental efforts, but he had little sense of how these related to the heart of the Christian message—"theology and social commitment seemed separate somehow." All of this raised questions for him.



Waking up, asking questions

Joerg's time in seminary raised other questions for him too. "Up to that point," he says, "I had the typical biography of someone who has been raised conservative and becomes more liberal, but now I started asking some additional questions."

Many of those were about how women were treated. Some had vaguely occurred to him earlier. During his growing-up years, his parents had done many church volunteer jobs—"just about everything you can imagine," he says. But what was expected of his mother was different from what was expected of his father. She taught Sunday School and was church treasurer, but because she was a woman who lived so conveniently close to the church, she also was expected to keep its building clean.



What had gone wrong in the church?

About the time Joerg started seminary, however, both of his parents had taken some courses on how to preach and had started doing some preaching. In the Murrhardt area, each pastor served several churches, so couldn't be at every church every Sunday, and lay people were often asked to fill in. Now, his father was being asked to preach several times a year, always at the larger, more prestigious churches, but his mother was sent only to small groups or smaller churches. "What really struck me," Joerg says, "was how differently the church treated my mother."



Seeing how women were treated at seminary raised questions for him too. Women students were asking for courses in feminist theology but were being told by male professors that they were unnecessary. As a result, Joerg and others started such



courses, using recent books by feminist theologians. "I started asking what had gone wrong in the church that had allowed for the oppression of women," he says, "and I saw that liberals as well as conservatives had contributed to it."

A struggle that requires taking sides

Then Rieger got an offer from Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, to come there for a year for a Master of Theology degree. His wife, whom he had met in high school and married during seminary, found a place at Duke too, so they moved there and stayed for Joerg to get a Ph.D. in theology and ethics.



Living in North Carolina made Joerg increasingly aware of widespread racial injustice and then of economic injustice, in addition to the unjust ways in which women were treated. As a result, he says, "I started recognizing theology as a struggle that required taking sides." It required responding actively to injustice. Especially, it required asking, "Where is God in what is happening? Is God on the side of the people experiencing oppression? And where is Jesus in this?" Rieger saw the need to do more than just say "God is everywhere" as the liberals did.

A radical element that was missing

"I realized," Rieger says, "that there was much more to Christianity than my liberal teachers had taught me." He began seeing that although liberalism was less legalistic than conservatism, true Christianity included a more radical element that neither of these positions expressed. It was the element of taking sides and asking, "What does love mean in this particular situation?" He began seeing the need for a critique of power and of how "the system" perpe-



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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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.

trates unjust uses of power. “Most important,” he says, “I saw that the Bible and Christian tradition could be tools for making such a critique and taking sides in the struggle.”



Rieger’s present work thus emphasizes how Jesus opposed the Roman Empire, how Christian minorities throughout history have resisted empire in their settings and made a difference, and how empire shows up today. “Empire,” he explains in his book *Christ and Empire*, “has to do with massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone. ... Empire seeks to extend its control as far as pos-

sible; not only geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously.”

Joerg Rieger feels that Christians urgently need to resist empire today but that our churches rarely challenge us to do that. He sees them congratulating us and patting us on the back instead, trying to keep us happy. He feels we need to dig deeper and find Christianity’s core. “I am hopeful,” he says, “that if we do this we will find something true and life-giving that can make a real difference in the world. We will start to live differently.”

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An international life

Theologian Joerg Rieger, whose spiritual journey I describe in this *Connections*, is a United Methodist clergyman and an endowed professor of constructive theology at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, a United Methodist seminary, at which he has taught since 1994. He has also done extensive teaching and research in South Africa, Argentina, England, Germany, Austria, Russia, Brazil, and Zimbabwe, and he regularly takes Perkins students to other countries to spend time immersed in the local culture. Previous ones of these immersion experiences have been in England, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, and South Africa.

Rieger’s wife, Rosemarie Henkel Rieger, is a molecular biologist and Montessori teacher and is active in Jobs for Justice. She is home-schooling their 14-year-old twin daughters, which lets the three of them take active parts in the travel that is an integral part of Joerg’s work.

Rieger’s books are too numerous to list here, so I’m mentioning only his latest, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Fortress Press, 2009). To see a complete list and to learn more about his other writing, his teaching, his research, and his other professional activities, go to the Perkins web site, www.smu.edu/theology, and click on “Faculty” and then on Rieger’s name.

