

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

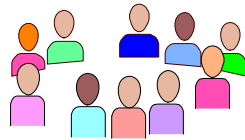
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Trying to describe Christianity

Some *Connections* readers have told me that their Sunday School class has used the [June Connections](#) as a basis for discussing what “progressive Christianity” is. They haven’t all agreed, and that’s no surprise. One reader pointed out that what we’re actually doing is trying to say what Christianity is. There aren’t really different kinds of Christianity; there are just different interpretations and different opinions about what Christianity’s essentials are.



In my opinion, being Christian mainly requires promoting and trying to practice the compassion, justice, and nonviolence that Jesus apparently taught and demonstrated. And being progressive requires looking actively and with an open mind for the most reliable and recent information and insight, then revising one’s beliefs when new information or insight seems to make revision necessary. With regard to Christianity, that means continually basing one’s beliefs on the best available information and insight about the Bible, Jesus, history, religions, the universe, and human beings and the rest of the natural world.



An especially apt description

Recently I read a description of progressive Christianity that I especially like because it acknowledges the diversity of opinion and the need to keep looking, learning, and revising, plus the discomfort that revision brings to some Christians while bringing relief to others. This description is by Canadian UCC pastor Gretta Vosper, whose book *With or Without God* I wrote about in the [June 2009 Connections](#). Her description was originally published in her Toronto congregation’s newsletter and is now on her website, <http://grettavosper.ca>. It appears below with her permission and my thanks.

Barbara

Success and lack of success

In a recent talk, Fred Plumer, President of The Center for Progressive Christianity, reported that response to the TCPC website and mailing list has grown 500% in the past five years. Plumer also pointed out that leading progressive speakers attract crowds by the hundreds wherever they go.



Despite these evidences of success, however, Plumer sees that most churches are unwilling to identify themselves with the progressive movement. The number of churches that have affiliated with TCPC, he reports, has barely grown during the years that have showed such great increase in response from other organizations and individuals. Why?

Leaders unwilling to make waves

“We hear all kinds of reasons,” says Plumer, “but the constant theme is that the leadership does not want to go through anything that might cause waves or conflict.” In contrast, however, Plumer tells us, “I could write a book about the people who contact my office who are members of a church and want their church to change but cannot get the leadership to change, especially the ministers.” He continues, “I have had too many conversations to count with a lay member or Christian education director asking for tips on how to make changes without the minister being involved.” The main reason for this difference, in Plumer’s view, is that “too many of our clergy are frozen or have their hands tied by denominational structures.”



What would feed the hunger?

What many progressives want would not “feel like church” to many of the members who have supported churches for years. For fear of losing these members, therefore, frozen clergy and other leaders are failing to feed the intense hunger that so many others feel today, for a spiritual path and community that interest them and make sense to them.

What form of the Christian message could feed that hunger? The next *Connections* will include Plumer’s and some other progressive Christians’ answers to that question.



Progressive Christianity— one progressive pastor's view

There are a lot of different ways in which the term progressive is applied to Christianity. For many, a welcoming church that encourages the participation of others who were once barred from full participation—nowadays primarily either women or GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender)—is considered a progressive church. In that respect, many mainline churches might label themselves progressive and see evangelical and sacramental churches, most of which refuse ordination to particular groups of people, as less so.



Pushing our comfortable boundaries

Others may consider the justice work in which the church engages to determine whether or not it is progressive. If, in its endeavours to address social, economic, and ecological justice, the church pushes the comfortable boundaries the dominant culture usually assumes, it is very likely considered a progressive church both by its members and those who watch its witness. Such a church will work toward raising the consciousness of its members to the point that they understand and want to address challenging issues, often related to topics that confront and disturb those they engage. Think of human rights issues, international trade, child poverty, global warming, the trafficking of child labour, animal rights—all things that sustain the standard of living most westerners enjoy and are sensitive topics for many to discuss.



Breaking out of a worship mold

For churches that have a prescribed, ritualized worship experience, breaking out of the mould can be considered progressive. Creative uses of liturgy, the patterns through which a leader and the congregation before her or him move through a service of worship, open up new avenues for communities to explore their spirituality. Often, the act of creating new forms of liturgy is so challenging to the denomination, that the elements of the service, its prayers, rituals, and overall message, must be approved for use by the church hierarchy. Refusal to do so can bring dire



consequences upon any official leaders who participate in such a service.



Moving to a new understanding

Christian communities have usually progressed sequentially along each of these and many other paths, parallel movement having the potential to be too disorienting. Progressive thinking moves an individual or community to a new understanding of the world in which they live, work, and play. It threatens ideas that have been traditionally held by exposing them to ideas based on new experience or understanding. In time, often through the very difficult, painful processes of loss and acceptance, progressive thinking completes the move of an individual or community from the comfort of a former belief system, through the disorienting challenge of transition, to a new place of comfort and understanding.



The idea that all human life is sacred is working to overcome the idea that one race, gender, sexuality, nationality, or generation should be privileged over another. The idea that the limits of the earth's resources may not be able to sustain a growing population is working to overcome the idea that those resources are limitless. The idea that there are multiple ways to experience and stimulate one's spiritual self is working to overcome the idea that a particular way is the only way.

Reaching a new status quo

Once an idea has been embraced by the larger community, it settles into the realm of the status quo. No longer representing cutting edge thought about the particular issue it addressed, it becomes accepted as the norm. It is, however, a norm that is decidedly *not* what was formerly believed to be acceptable; indeed the former places of comfort are now places of *discomfort*. Enveloping itself in the term "liberal," the idea identifies itself over and against former perspectives it now classifies as "traditional."

At this point, a community that is committed to the principles of progressive thinking will often look around for the next place to which such thinking might be applied. Thus, the sequential nature of progress. Each new understanding of



an issue applies progressive thinking and moves what was at one time a progressive idea to a place where it is called liberal, a liberal idea to where it is called traditional, a traditional idea to the category of historical, and finally, on to archaic. Each new idea pushes the former back along the historical continuum, like beads on a counting string.



Turning our gaze to beliefs

Churches that have developed progressive postures and that continue to apply them regularly to justice and ecclesial issues often begin to turn their progressive gaze on the theological beliefs they have traditionally held. New experience and understanding, supported by contemporary scholarship, call into question many of those beliefs, based as they are on a document, the Bible, that has been found to be humanly, not divinely, constructed. Although such work has happened outside of church life for most of the century or so it has been developing, it is now affecting the life of communities that are applying it to their understandings of God and Jesus, and the worship life of the church that has made those things central to their faith. These communities also call themselves progressive.



Early on in the development of a church's theologically progressive thought, the realities of heaven and hell, masculine images of God, Jesus as the divine Son of God, the literal truth of the Bible, and the exclusive message of salvation are all challenged. New ideas develop, confront former understandings and eventually replace them. When those new ideas are accepted as the norm, if the community continues to apply progressive thinking to those ideas as well, they move into the realm of liberal Christianity and the community forges ahead.

Some of the earliest examples we have of progressive theological stances are those of a gender-neutral God, the Bible as narrative, and the understanding of its miracles and wonders as metaphor. The acceptance of these progressive ideas has sometimes brought about new ways of speaking and acting in the church: hymns about a Father God are replaced with hymns about a Creator God; the Bible lessons are acted out in modern-day dress and speech; contextual explanations are introduced through sermon and study; interfaith dialogue becomes a focal issue, and so on.



Progressive thought keeps moving on

But the very nature of progressive thought is that it keeps moving on. And so it has. Churches that struggled through the gender-inclusive language debate in the 1980s and 1990s now turn their



attention to the beingness of God and challenge the theistically-exclusive language that has been formerly privileged. Those that contextualized the Bible's message, now struggle through the idea that it is not

only not divinely inspired but that it is potentially dangerous when held up as a moral or ethical authority and should be demoted as a spiritual foundation. Those that have changed the names of God to ones that are less dominated by the traditional pictures the word "God" evokes are now faced with scientific and archaeological findings that challenge the idea of God as creator; philosophical ideas that undermine the ultimate reality of God as a being separate and distinct from human experience; anthropological examination that exposes the human need to create deities and supernatural forces. They struggle to reflect new understandings within their

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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.

worship and congregational life, honouring the old ideas they set aside even as they embrace interpretations, new understandings, and new experiences.

Christianity that can't be nailed down



So it is that the definition of progressive Christianity is a difficult one to make. Any community that pulls itself outside of its own worldview to question its purpose, its practice, its foundations, and its beliefs will be challenged by what it finds. Working through the reality of that challenge will eventually cause it to reject one thing (or many

things) in exchange for something else. Whether it be an understanding of what is just, a belief in a theistic God, or a way of creating a welcoming environment, the communities that employ the elements of progressive thinking, openness, creativity, passion, intellectual rigour, honesty, courage, balance and respect, will see themselves progress along that endless continuum of what Christianity can be.

Progressive Christianity cannot be nailed down to one thing. It lives in flux. It always will because that is its nature. It always will because it must.



—Gretta Vosper



Connections

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When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.



When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

—1 Corinthians 13:11



Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...

—Romans 12:2

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness.



But solid food is for the mature ... Therefore let us go on to perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ and not laying again the foundation ...

—Hebrews 5:12-6:1

