

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 183 - JANUARY 2008

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

## Hearing the spiritually homeless

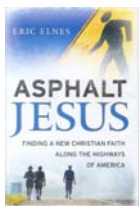
Eric Elnes is very concerned, as I am, about the people he calls “spiritually homeless.” They’re the people, he explains, who identify themselves as Christian but feel so alienated from the faith community that they no longer actively participate in any such community.



Elnes is senior pastor of Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ, in Scottsdale, Arizona. You may remember seeing news about his leading a group on a walk from Phoenix to Washington, DC. When they set out on Easter 2006, Elnes and his companions dreamed of fostering conversations along the way, about what it means to be progressive Christians in an age of fundamentalism.

## Changing the face of U.S. Christianity

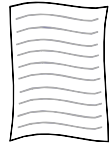
Elnes is cofounder of CrossWalk America, the organization created to host the walk. It is committed to changing the face of Christianity in America to a more compassionate, inclusive one—to one that recognizably reflects Jesus’s core values of love of God, neighbor, and self. CrossWalk America aims to help the people interested in this progressive, authentic kind of Christianity to find each other and to explore and articulate their beliefs.



In his intriguing book *Asphalt Jesus: Finding a New Christian Faith Along the Highways of America* (Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2007), Eric Elnes tells about the discoveries he made through his unusual walk. He tells how the walkers found thousands of people who welcomed them and shared their hunger for relationship and conversation about what it means to be Christian. They found these people in every kind of church and in both “red” states and “blue” ones. They got a

## “The Phoenix Affirmations”

Before Eric Elnes definitely decided to make his walk across America, he started trying to outline a vision of a more generous and affirmative Christianity in a document that he could share with the public as he made the walk. He wanted to list the essential, basic principles of Christianity for this purpose.



What eventually came from his efforts was a one-page document named “The Phoenix Affirmations.” Created in 2005, it reflects not only Eric’s efforts but also what he describes as the contributions of pastors, laypeople, biblical scholars, and theologians from around the country, representing all of the major mainline denominations and some people outside of them. “The Phoenix Affirmations” are only a page long, but that’s too long to include here. You can read them at [www.CrossWalkAmerica.org](http://www.CrossWalkAmerica.org). If you don’t have Internet access and want to read them, let me know and I’ll mail you a copy.

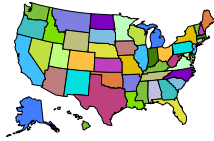
## The three great loves



“The Phoenix Affirmations,” Eric Elnes explains, arise from the three great loves that the Bible reveals—love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. They reflect commitments to environmental stewardship, social justice, and artistic expression as well as openness to other faiths. The affirmations, says Elnes, “seek to articulate what the path of Jesus looks like in the modern world, following the principles Jesus identifies as central.” They express what Elnes finds that many Christians inside and outside of churches believe about the true nature of Christian faith yet have no words to say or are afraid to say.

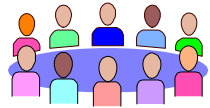
In telling the story of the 2006 walk across America, each chapter of Eric’s book highlights one of the twelve Phoenix affirmations. The book includes a discussion guide “written to spark readers’ stories and reflections and to stimulate private journaling and group conversation.” A related video, *Asphalt Gospel*, is being shown in several cities in coming months. To find out where and when, and to get details about what I’ve said about CrossWalk America in this issue of *Connections*, see [www.CrossWalkAmerica.org](http://www.CrossWalkAmerica.org).

glimpse of Christianity at the grass roots that they found quite different from what is usually portrayed in news media and by the most visible religious leaders. The experience convinced Elnes that there are millions of spiritually homeless people out there across America.



The picture he got, says Eric, was “both surprising and encouraging for those of us who have been critical of the excesses of Christian fundamentalism and the sterility of liberalism. The picture ... is of no less than the emergence of a new form of Christian faith at the grass roots that transcends traditional labels and stereotypes. This faith is more concerned with honesty than morality, more with embracing differences than with judging others, and more with pushing boundaries than with creating them.”

### A ridiculous idea



Eric Elnes’s vision of a walk across America started as a mental picture of a group sitting around a table, drafting a set of basic principles of the Christian faith. What this group would come up with, he pictured, would be more inclusive, joyful, and compassionate than what had been proclaimed in the news media by certain Christian leaders. He envisioned this group taking these principles and walking them across the country, then nailing them to a church doorway in Washington, much as Martin Luther is said to have done with his Ninety-five Theses several centuries earlier in Germany.

The whole thing struck Eric as ridiculous at first. He’d never done any major walking, and he felt sure that even if he made the kind of walk he was envisioning, no one would be willing to go with him.

For quite a while he therefore tried to shake the idea. He tried walking twenty miles, thinking that would convince him that the walking part of his vision would be impossible. But the opposite happened. The twenty-mile walk left him more pumped-up than ever about the idea of walking from Phoenix to Washington. Then he started telling church members and other friends about his vision, feeling sure they would tell him that getting the necessary time away



from his church would be impossible and that no one else could get away long enough to walk with him. But here, too, he got the opposite reaction.

### A congregation that was ready

His congregation, he explains, had been praying for a way to change the face of Christianity and had become ready for something crazy. The group was in turmoil about how they felt Christian fundamentalism was harmfully influencing American culture, politics, and religion. Church members with a wide variety of perspectives theologically and politically were wondering, “Are we destined to live as embarrassed Christians for the rest of our lives?” Thus the congregation was ready to support what Eric envisioned, and several were even ready to join him in the walk though it meant quitting their jobs and spending several months away from their families.



Reading this reminded me of what I heard recently from one of the creators of the “Living the Questions” course, that his congregation had been an incubator for his efforts. It almost made me want to move to Arizona, where both of these brave and innovative Christian pastors and their congregations are. I started wondering if something special is in the water or the air there, that is missing where I live!



### Face-to-face with thousands of people

With prayer, determination, perseverance, planning, and hard work by many supportive people, Eric’s vision soon turned into a reality. A six-member core walk team, a support driver, and a two-member film crew, with all their equipment, set out from Phoenix on Easter Sunday 2006. They traveled the 2,500 miles to Washington, DC, sharing meals, speaking, and spending the nights in homes, church basements, seminaries, and campgrounds along the way. They were joined for parts of the journey by additional individuals—some famous and some unknown—and by groups, large and small.

During the walk, Eric and his companions met face-to-face with more than 11,000 people. “With few exceptions,” he reports, “no one told us to get out of town. Indeed, the most frequent com-



ment we heard was ‘Thank you—you’re walking for me.’” Interestingly, that echoes what I hear from many *Connections* readers—“you’re saying what we wish we could say!”



## Finding other ways to scratch the itch

Here’s why. Here’s how one woman who lives on a ranch far out in the country from a tiny town actually named Podunk described what she and her husband hear at their church. “It’s like you’ve got to check your mind at the door and turn the clock back a few hundred years to listen. So we scratch our intellectual and spiritual itch in other ways.”

She described their main way. “There’s this group we’re part of that really keeps us sane. It gathers at our home each month to explore progressive faith and values. There’s nearly twenty of us now. We read books together or watch videos and discuss them. In this group you can ask the kinds of questions and explore the kinds of issues that people are uncomfortable addressing in church. ... It helps us feel connected and not so alone.” When



I read this, I thought fondly of the similar group that meets at my home.

## What really matters?

I thought sadly, though, of the church group I heard about recently. It forbids mentioning uncomfortable issues. Its leader told a member not to come back if she was going to say anything else political, like something she had said that Sunday about war.

It’s unfortunate that such a group doesn’t have the attitude a pastor in a generally conservative part of the U.S. expressed to Eric, speaking about her congregation. “As long as you speak honestly, from

the heart of what you believe, without patronizing them with lines like ‘I believed as you did once, but I’ve grown ...,’ they’ll respect you even if they disagree with your beliefs. This congregation believes that as long as people are trying to be faithful to God and grow to the best of their ability, that’s what matters.”



She continued, “You’ve got supporters here ... because you didn’t come with your guns out. You came with the desire just to make some new friends. And that’s how change is going to happen in this country. Many people won’t ever deal with liberalism in Christianity until their friend is a liberal Christian. And then they’ll have to understand. By coming here you helped me start a silent conversation with some of my parishioners that I’m sure will continue long after you’ve gone.”

Reading these quotes made me uneasy, however, because I’m sure that at times I’ve said, “I once believed as you do, but now I’ve grown.” It made me wonder, too, if people see me as coming with my guns out. However, these quotes also made me think of the impression I repeatedly get, that for many people I know, trying to be faithful to God and grow is apparently far from enough, and so is being a friend. For them, believing exactly what they believe, and expressing those beliefs exactly as they express them, seems to be what matters, and they try to stifle or oust whoever is different. That makes me sad for the church.



## The real church is coming to life

Reading Eric Elnes’s reminder that these narrow people aren’t the only people out there is encouraging. As he reports one pastor saying, “The institution of the church may be dying, but the church is

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 15 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 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.

more alive now than ever. The true church is made up of people led by the Spirit. ... Collapse is actually waking the church up.”



“Many Christians who yearn for a more inclusive, compassionate, and intellectually honest form of faith feel so alone,” Eric observes, “like they’re the only ones who feel the way they do, but they’re not. Even in the smallest towns in the most conservative areas, many people are not only sympathetic to these same desires but also are actively gathering in house fellowships, book groups, and unsung churches ... , or are yearning mightily to do so.” Years

from now, he therefore believes, people are likely to look back and see that those who got most of the publicity represented a dying tradition, while those on the forefront of something wonderful were the last ones the news media were interested in. “The media are so busy covering the funeral,” Eric Elnes believes, “that they’re missing the resurrection!”

What might you do to help this resurrection along? The spiritually homeless need homes. Few of us could do what Eric Elnes did in order to find and hear these people, but it’s time for each of us and our churches to get busy doing what we can.

*Barbara*



## Connections

Barbara Wendland  
505 Cherokee Drive  
Temple TX 76504-3629

# Hearing the spiritually homeless

January 2008



## A note to California *Connections* readers

I’m coming your way in early February, and I’d love to see you. On Sunday, February 3, I’ll speak in 8:30 and 11:00 A.M. worship services at Elk Grove United Methodist Church (8986 Elk Grove Blvd., Elk Grove, which adjoins Sacramento) about my journey from being a quiet conformist to being a vocal nonconformist.

That afternoon at 2:00 I’ll lead a workshop at St. Mark’s UMC in Sacramento (2391 Saint Marks Way), about what I see as the church’s need to notice and listen to the people who feel like misfits in the church or find it unwelcoming because their understanding of Christianity or the Bible doesn’t match the understanding of most church members. I’ll include suggestions about how to find and welcome these thinking, questioning people. This, by the way, is the topic of a book Abingdon Press has asked me to write, which is due to become available in the spring of 2009.

Finally, I’ll speak at Elk Grove UMC’s annual Shrove Tuesday pancake supper, Feb. 5. My topic will be what I see as our need to think more deeply about what makes someone a Christian—about what Jesus apparently emphasized most in his teaching and his treatment of people, and how that applies in today’s church and world.

The public is invited to all these events. For details or for workshop or supper reservations, contact Elk Grove UMC member Bill Myers ([wemyers@cal.net](mailto:wemyers@cal.net), 916-689-6943), who is coordinating my visit.