

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Ten years of Connections

This issue finishes ten years of *Connections*. My basic concerns about the church haven't changed during those years, but on some subjects my awareness has expanded and my feelings have intensified.



I've become more concerned about growing efforts by groups in the church to require strict conformity to doctrines, language, policies, and cultural influences that come from earlier centuries and yet not from the earliest church. That trend worries me, because I believe that while we of course must not abandon basic Christian principles, we need to abandon beliefs, policies, and language that aren't basic and that perpetuate injustice or error.



We've made progress on some justice issues—racial segregation, and the subjugation of women come to mind especially. However, we spent years falsely claiming that the Bible supported those unjust and unreasonable practices, and we lagged behind the rest of society in changing them, when the church should have taken the lead instead. We're lagging again now, I fear, in refusing to combat injustice related to homosexuality, the natural environment, and relations with other religions.

Welcome responses

My views about such issues, and my increased awareness of the importance of some I hadn't previously recognized as important, have been influenced by reading and by attending church events but also by conversing with *Connections* readers. I get responses from readers continually, in person and by snail-mail, e-mail, and phone, and I appreciate them immensely. They're nearly always interesting, often helpful, and sometimes surprising.



Still the same concerns

After ten years of writing *Connections* I still want to let thinking, forward-looking Christians know that although they may feel alone in their views, they're not alone, and the church and the world need to hear from them. I also still want to increase awareness and discussion of topics that I believe urgently need more of the church's attention. Here are the ones that concern me most.



■ People experience and understand God in different ways. Christians thus need to avoid claiming that what they experience or prefer is the only right way.

■ Jesus advocated and modeled radical change. He associated with his culture's social outcasts and chose some of them as his disciples. To follow him, Christians must also advocate and promote social justice, not only by helping suffering and mistreated individuals but also by working to change customs, laws, and mistaken beliefs that cause the suffering.



■ Jesus directed his fiercest criticism at religious traditionalists. He didn't advocate enforcing doctrines or keeping a religious hierarchy in power. When we refuse to question our traditions, our methods of church operation, or our favorite words from our favorite Bible translation and doctrines, we're not following Jesus.



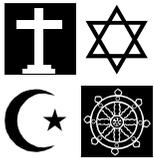
■ Many of our religious and social customs, and many words we use for people and for God, misrepresent God and put women down, contradicting what we claim to believe.

■ God calls every Christian, lay or ordained, to some kind of ministry and gives him or her the abilities and other resources necessary for doing it.

■ Ministering to its members and keeping them comfortable isn't the church's main purpose. It's showing people what God is like and how God wants them to live, and ministering to the world and changing it.

Concern about these subjects keeps me writing *Connections*.

The most surprising number of responses came in response to a *Connections* issue in which I merely suggested that basing worship on the lectionary might not be totally desirable (October 1996). That response surprised me because I had no idea so many churchgoers felt so strongly about that subject. To me it seemed interesting but relatively unimportant compared to many other issues affecting the church, and totally unlikely to be controversial.



The fiercest attacks I've received came in response to two issues about Christianity's relation to other religions (December 2001 and January 2002). I keep being surprised by the

ferocity of some Christians' response to people who disagree with them. I especially wonder why they feel such a strong need to condemn or oust fellow Christians who don't happen to fully share their understanding of Christianity or of how it applies to current events. I wonder if they're mainly trying to keep themselves convinced of beliefs that aren't really convincing even to them.

John said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him. ... Whoever is not against us is for us. ..."
—Mark 9:38-40

Impassioned responses from misfits

The most responses I've received, and in general the most impassioned ones, have come from this year's three issues about church misfits (February, April, and June). One longtime *Connections* reader says I'm his only contact with the church, and I've found I'm nearly the only contact for several others also.



Ironically, some of those are among the most committed Christians I know. I consider church participation important for Christians, but I don't think being a member of a traditional congregation is the only valid way of being part of the church. I suspect that actively working to promote love and justice is more important than being in any organization.



Also, attending conventional church activities isn't the only way of joining with other Christians. I've be-

come aware of some virtual churches on the Internet, for example, and I know that Christians also gather in other ways besides being part of a traditional congregation. These may not be ideal ways of being the church, but they're far better than having no connection with other Christians.

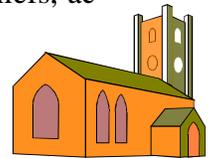


As for me, although I'm something of a misfit in my church I haven't dropped out and I'm not going to. I believe God calls me to stay active in the church and work for change, not to drop out. Still, I can see why some other Christians feel they must leave the institutional church in order to do what they understand God to be calling them to do.

God's followers are often misfits

It's sad and shocking when strongly committed Christians feel rejected by a church merely because they express their beliefs and experience God and Jesus Christ in ways that differ from the majority of the church's members. Many of the most obedient and influential followers of God, from the earliest ones mentioned in the Bible to some in today's news,

have refused to conform to the beliefs, actions, and demands of the majority of the religious people of their day. They've seen that following God often requires being a misfit in society or even in the church.



Connections readers' responses continually remind me that the church includes a much wider range of views and experience than we assume it includes. Members who feel like misfits aren't as alone as they think they are. Members with majority views are so much more visible and vocal, often claiming that their views and experiences are the only right ones,



that other members often hesitate to speak out because they assume they're wrong or at least alone. But they may be neither, and many have views the church needs to hear.

Actions show beliefs

Expressing our views is important. Speaking only in the words of official creeds and doctrines, however, can be unconvincing. It's unconvincing if our actions say we don't really believe those words, or

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Answering readers' questions



If you're a longtime reader of *Connections* you may already know the answers to the questions I'm answering below, but readers ask them often, so I'm taking this opportunity to answer them.

How many people get *Connections*? I don't know. Currently I send nearly 5000 each month by U.S. mail and nearly 500 by e-mail (which is easier and cheaper than U.S. mail, and thus preferable for me). Also, for several years I've been putting each issue of *Connections* on my web site (www.connectionsonline.org), and I hear from people who get *Connections* regularly from it. In addition, some United Methodist Annual Conferences (regional divisions) include *Connections* regularly or occasionally in their mailings, and some UMC conferences and other organizations have links to my web site on their web sites. In addition, I often hear from readers who regularly make copies of *Connections* and distribute them to a Sunday School class, study group, or group of friends. I have no way of knowing how many people who aren't on my list get *Connections* in these ways.



Who helps you? While I'm working on an issue my husband usually reads a draft of it and tells me his reaction to it, and he takes the fifteen boxes of *Connections* to the post office for me each month. A local print shop prints, folds, and tabs the paper copies that I send by U.S. mail. I do everything else—writing, label-printing and label-sticking, and maintaining my web site and mailing lists (which, by the way, I never give or sell to anyone), and I reply to almost all the responses I get.

Doesn't this take a huge amount of time? Yes.

When does my subscription expire? I keep a record of what recipients pay and when, but I don't have time to operate a real subscription system. I don't send renewal notices. Some people keep paying \$5 yearly

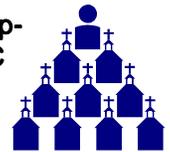


or whenever they think of it, and some pay more. I send *Connections* to many people who pay nothing, however, because I want to reach the most churchgoers that I can reach, especially those in decision-making positions.

\$5 a year doesn't cover your cost, does it? No. That's really just a token amount. Many recipients pay more, and I greatly appreciate whatever anyone chooses to pay. I pay most of the cost, as a contribution toward something that I believe needs doing and that I'm fortunate enough to be able to do. (And incidentally, it's from personal funds and isn't tax-deductible.)

Why don't you write about the UMC apportionment system and other UMC issues?

As a UMC member I'm of course especially concerned about the UMC, but similar issues also confront other mainline denominations and need attention throughout the church, not just in any one denomination. Besides, my mailing list includes members of at least twelve denominations, so I mostly avoid writing about subjects that pertain only to the UMC.



How do you keep thinking of topics? That's usually the easiest part of doing *Connections*. I read a lot about church-related topics, simply because I love to read and these topics interest me, and my reading, my conversations and correspondence with *Connections* readers, and my attendance at church gatherings continually bring to mind topics I want to write about.

Why do you write *Connections*? Partly because doing it helps to feed my hunger for interaction with kindred spirits and for challenging mental activity, a hunger that I don't find much food for elsewhere. I write also because I believe that bringing these subjects and these viewpoints to the attention of more church



members is something that needs doing and isn't being done very widely elsewhere, and that it is what God calls and enables me to do, at least for the foreseeable future.

If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start getting it monthly by U.S. mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. To get *Connections* by e-mail, which I'd prefer, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 10 years' back issues, all of which are available, send me \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write, phone, or e-mail me, or on the Internet, see www.connectionsonline.org.



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. Some readers make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

if the words contradict what our hearers know about human beings and the world.

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. ... He said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "... What is that to you? Follow me!"
—John 21:20-22

We help each other

People who disagree with what I write sometimes tell me it shows that I don't have a real relationship with Jesus Christ. I think that accusation is wrong, and I think expecting one's own way of experiencing and relating to

Christ to be everyone's way is dangerous and arro-

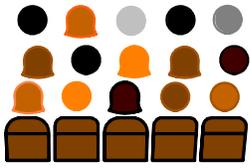
gant, but the accusation still makes me a little uneasy because I know that each of us can be wrong and our opponents can be right.

Acting on one's beliefs is important, but so is staying aware that they may include error. Actually they're sure to include error, since no one can know God completely or discern God's will perfectly. By sharing our views and listening to others', however, we can help each other refine our beliefs and see God's will more clearly. I'm therefore still writing *Connections* in the hope that it will encourage sharing, listening, and thinking.

Barbara

Whose will should the church follow?

A magazine I've recently come to appreciate is *Zion's Herald*. In its current issue I especially like what an author says about the role of church decision-making bodies. "Many church members assume," says We Hyun Chang, "that the church and its agencies exist only to represent the will and wish of the majority of its members." But that assumption is wrong, Chang believes, and so do I. "They exist," he points out, "to represent the will and wish of God and Jesus Christ first and foremost. Their task is not to discern what the majority of members want but to discern what God wants from us."



"When we fail to get this priority right," Chang continues, "we make God our puppet. When our foremost concern is the will of the majority of our members, our churches may be filled with people. But there will be no room for God." It's hard, of course, to find a way of giving the greatest voice to our most discerning members if they aren't part of the majority, but I wish we'd at least recognize the need to find such a way, and look for it more diligently than we now do.



Also in the current *Zion's Herald*, Editor Stephen Swecker emphasizes the need for discerning church members to speak about what they observe. "The challenge to mainstream and progressive religion in our time could not be greater: to lay the groundwork for a mature spirituality that shows us a way out of the pickle we're in. ... The only way I know to begin," he tells us, "is to take a close, hard look at the pickle and to tell others what I see." That's the only way I know, too, and that's why I write *Connections*.

