

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

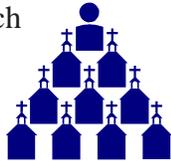


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Looking at what connects us

A letter I read recently in a church publication claimed that the only thing holding the United Methodist Church together was its bureaucracy. The letter's author evidently thought that adherence to certain doctrines and belief statements should be what held the denomination together instead. I disagree. There's plenty of room for Christians to differ on details of beliefs, and such differences have existed throughout Christian history.



Still, that letter writer's statement and other recent ones have made me reconsider the question of what connects congregations in my denomination and others, and what should connect them.

Worship isn't the connection

In recent months I've attended worship services at quite a few different United Methodist churches and events. Although my experience is limited, it's enough to convince me that what connects United Methodist churches isn't the style or content of their worship.



■ The worship atmosphere differs a lot. In most services I've attended, worshipers have talked, laughed, and walked around as they gathered. Some, however, have started with total silence. In some services, loud music played as worshipers arrived, and it continued throughout the service.

In one, snacks were served as people gathered.

■ Use of scripture differs a lot, too. As the basis for the sermon and other parts of the service, some services I've attended have used the day's prescribed scripture from the Common Lectionary—a schedule of scripture readings that many denominations follow—but others haven't. In none



What do our buildings say?

My husband and I make a lot of car trips and have driven through quite a bit of the U.S. We're always intrigued by the church buildings we see as we travel. As we approach a church we sometimes try to guess what denomination it's part of, before we can see its sign.



Often that's easy. Episcopal church buildings usually have beautiful architecture even if they're very small or in a very small town. Their style is often reminiscent of English villages, reflecting their denomination's English origin. They usually have attractive, well-kept landscaping, too.



By contrast, some other denominations' buildings tend to be plain box shapes without even a tree or shrub anywhere near.

Ministry or beauty? Yesterday or today?

Do our church buildings say anything important about us? They may say we believe that spending money on ministry is more important than spending it on attractive buildings, and to some extent that's probably true. However, a beautiful building can reflect the beauty of God's creation and thus help worshipers and passers-by to think of God.

An old-looking church building may say that its congregation is focused mainly on the past. A new one may say the church has moved to keep reaching the demographic groups that are already predominant in mainline denominations today, rather than trying to minister to a wider variety of people. On the other hand, faithful, progressive ministry and teaching can happen in old buildings, and it isn't happening in all the newer ones.



These aren't the differences that matter

Does your building reveal characteristics of your denomination? Does it reveal any of your beliefs about God? What does it say about your congregation's view of the church's purpose? Our church buildings constantly deliver messages, whether we realize it or not, but the differences in these messages aren't the main ways in which our denominations differ.

of the services were all three of the week's lectionary scriptures read. In some, the only reading was one or two verses, not even a passage long enough to make the context or overall message apparent.

■ Music was a big difference.

So-called traditional services included a choir anthem and several hymns, though often only one or two verses of each hymn. Organ or piano accompanied most of them. Most were composed in the 18th or 19th century, but a few more recent ones were included. Ironically, however, most of the recently-written ones used 17th, 18th, or 19th century language just as the earlier ones did.



The "blended" services I attended included various kinds of congregational songs, but the "contemporary" services included no choral anthems and few hymns. They featured instead a large number of recently written praise and scripture songs—the kind that seem to go on forever, repeating the same few



words over and over—accompanied by amplified guitars and electronic keyboards. But even these songs used 17th, 18th, or 19th century language, not today's language. That seems odd.

■ Belief statements were varied. The traditional services usually included congregational recitation of a creed, most often the Apostles' Creed. (None used the UMC's Social Creed, although UMC policy recommends using it frequently in worship.) Often a version of the Doxology and Gloria Patri were sung. Contemporary services, however, didn't include these responses or creeds.

■ Communion methods varied widely. For the bread, some congregations used manufactured wafers. Others used bite-size pieces from a loaf, broken off by the communion servers. One used pieces of flour tortillas.

The "wine" (always grape juice in UMC churches) was served in a variety of ways. In some congregations I visited, it came in little cups, one per person. Other congregations used intinction, dipping bread



into a common cup. In some denominations, each communicant sipped from a common cup.

In some congregations, all communicants knelt at the altar to be served,

while in others they knelt only if they chose. In one small congregation, the pastor walked into the congregation to serve each person.

■ Some of the services I attended, especially the contemporary ones, gave the very clear impression that they were worshiping Jesus instead of God. That bothered me. I see Jesus not as an object of worship but as the prime example of what God is like and how God wants us to live.

**"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."
—Mark 10:18**

Only a few similarities

■ All the worship services I attended, whether traditional or contemporary in style, included recitation of the Lord's Prayer. All used the familiar "Our Father which art in heaven" translation, with the typical Methodist "Forgive us our trespasses." Use of this far-from-contemporary translation seemed out of place in otherwise contemporary services.

■ All the services I attended included some kind of prayer for members' current "joys and concerns," along with announcements about congregational projects and activities scheduled for the coming week.



■ The main way I could tell I was in a UMC was the use of standard



UMC rituals (though sometimes much abbreviated) for baptism, communion, and joining the church, when those observances happened to be part of the service.

Invisible connections

What was totally missing from the United Methodist services I attended was any reference to the pros and cons of the current war or to social-justice issues. I heard nothing about the UMC's official position on such issues. And I neither heard nor saw any announcements of opportunities to support or oppose local or national government positions related to social issues.

The UMC bureaucracy may be what connects UMC congregations, as the writer of the letter I read claimed, but that wasn't apparent in the services I attended. Besides not hearing about the

denomination's position on current social issues, I didn't hear any mention of church organizational structure, bureaucracy, or hierarchy.

In contrast, I was recently with a Roman Catholic friend who went to mass while we were on a trip together. He said that during mass the officiating priest had read to the congregation a letter from the Archbishop of the area, acknowledging a major anniversary of the local diocese. Even though my friend didn't live anywhere near, he appreciated hearing the Archbishop's statement. He saw it as a welcome reminder of the tie that every Catholic congregation has to the worldwide church structure it is part of.



How different this reaction was from what I see in the UMC. Sometimes the UMC Council of Bishops issues a position statement about a current social issue the bishops consider important, and asks that it be read in congregations. In my lifetime of being a Methodist, however, I don't think I've ever heard one of those read. I don't recall even having seen one of them published in my local church's newsletter. They're often printed in denominational publications, but many members never see those.

That apparently suits many pastors, because if such a statement is made known and is controversial, the pastor will have to field complaints about it, or members may even drop out because of it. Lack of such information apparently suits most UMC members, too. Few seem to want to know what's happening in the church beyond their local congregation.

What should the connection be?

If neither worship services nor concern about justice issues nor evidence of bureaucracy connects con-

gregations within a denomination, what does? We might expect some consistency in belief, but that may be appropriate only in the most general way. We can presumably expect belief in God, but I doubt that we can expect total agreement about what God is like, how God communicates with human beings, and how God wants us to respond to current issues. Because God is infinite and not fully knowable, we aren't all going to have exactly the same picture of God.



We can expect all Christians to believe in Jesus as the Christ, but as for exactly what we understand that to mean, we probably need to allow a lot of leeway. I suspect we make a serious mistake if we insist that every member of our denomination adhere to the very same doctrines and belief statements about Jesus. There's room for different interpretations of how Jesus was born and resurrected, how



he saves us, and what he saves us from. And if we look at Christian history, we see that even the earliest church included quite a variety of understandings about the nature and role of Jesus.

Though we need to inform our members about several possible responses to social issues, and about how each of those may relate to Christian teaching, we may not need to declare official denominational positions on all of them. On some issues it may be hard to say for sure what position Christian discipleship requires. Some Christians oppose all war, for example, while others support a just-war position. The Bible simply doesn't give specific instructions or make clear exactly how its message applies to this issue or to some of the other important issues we currently face.



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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 voluntarily make 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 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

The beliefs and methods of our denomination's founders can't all continue to be our distinguishing features, either. Whether our founder was John Wesley, John Calvin, Henry VIII, Peter, John the Baptist, or someone else, that founder was neither perfect nor all-knowing. Besides, our founders lived in circumstances very different from ours.



Methods and priorities distinguish us

A denomination's top priority and methods of pursuing it may be the main features that we can expect

to distinguish it from others. For Methodism, that priority historically has been making disciples who promote the kind of love and justice that Jesus taught and exemplified. In my view, that needs to be our priority still. If we ignore that priority and demand instead that every member commit to specific doctrinal statements, we're likely to harm the whole church.



Barbara

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How wide is your worship experience?

The most active church participants rarely attend worship services outside of their own congregation. They have obligations such as teaching or singing in a choir, or they have close attachments to their fellow Sunday School class members, so they feel they can't be absent to visit other churches. Pastors seem even less likely to worship anywhere besides where they're currently serving.



The result? Many of us experience only one kind of worship service, or when we attend other kinds, some of their features seem wrong to us. Jesus didn't leave any specific instructions about how to take Communion, yet we often assume that our congregation's way is the only right way. We get used to the songs and prayers we're familiar with, and we don't want to try others. If we hear only our own pastor preach (or hear only ourselves, if we're clergy), we may not realize how helpful a different style of preaching could be.

Limiting our experience can make us miss opportunities that could bring us closer to God.