

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## Leaving without leaving

In her book *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), whose cover shows a bird leaving its cage behind, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells why she recently stopped being a pastor of local congregations. A big reason was that she kept seeing members feeling pressured to believe official doctrine that didn't match their experience of God or the world.



## Two groups learned to keep quiet

"I had spent hours talking with people who had trouble believing," Taylor explains. "For some, the issue was that they believed *less* than they thought they should about Jesus." They felt sure that virgin births and bodily resurrections didn't happen, "but they had suffered enough at the hands of true believers to learn to keep their mouths shut."

Taylor found that others, however, realized there was *more* to God than what they'd been told about Jesus, yet they also felt they had to keep quiet. "They found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said that it should not be."

This had happened, people told Taylor, in a Lakota sweat lodge, in a sacred Celtic grove, at the edge of a Hawaiian volcano, and in dreams and visions that they were afraid to tell anyone about. "These people not only feared being shunned for their unorthodox narratives," she saw, "they also feared sharing some of the most powerful things that had ever happened to them with people who might dismiss them."

## A lamentable state of affairs

"Given the history of Christians as a people who started out beholding what was beyond belief, this struck me as a lamentable state of affairs," says

## Is attendance the test of commitment?



A pastor recently wrote me that in church conflicts he will deal only with members who are "actively involved in the community of faith." To him that means that "by their continued presence they demonstrate a commitment to the church." He feels that members who stop attending don't deserve any voice. I disagree with that.

People who stay away because they don't care may not deserve a voice. However, some Christians stop attending because they care so much. They believe they can't in good conscience keep supporting activities that oppose what following Jesus requires. Theirs are voices the church especially needs to hear. Without them, mainly the voices of yes-men and yes-women will be heard, and in the history of the church, those have rarely spoken for God.

## How should we react to dissenters?



How, then, should a pastor deal with Christians who stop attending for reasons of conscience? How should she or he treat those who have been pushed out by the majority because they have minority views? Ignoring them is the easiest way. Demands on pastors' time and energy are often so great that they feel they can only provide what the majority wants. Pastors may be especially likely to do that if they agree with the majority. But doesn't a pastor have a responsibility to hear minority views and give them a voice?

Should the pastor therefore include in the church program activities that he or she doesn't favor but some members want? Should he let a class study a Spong book if he believes Spong is a heretic? Should she allow a Beth Moore Bible study if she believes it misrepresents the Bible's message? Should she use gender-inclusive words for God in worship if most members believe only masculine words are permissible? Should known dissenters be deliberately included in church governing bodies? These are hard but vitally important questions for the church to answer.



Taylor. She considers it lamentable for those who have stayed in the church and felt restricted to seeing only what they are supposed to see, but also for those who have excused themselves from traditional churches because they see too little or too much.



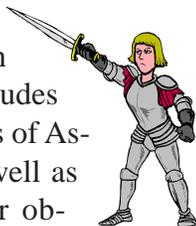
“If it is true that God exceeds all our efforts to contain God,” Taylor asks, “then is it too big a stretch to declare that coming together to confess all that we do not know is at least as sacred an activity as declaring what we think we know?” She thinks it’s not, but she kept feeling pressured by the members who didn’t consider doubt or disagreement permissible. “The poets began drifting away from churches as the jurists grew louder and more insistent,” she says. “I began to feel like a defense attorney for those who could not square their love of God and neighbor with the terms of the Nicene Creed.”

### The best things have happened at the edge

This problem especially bothers Barbara Brown Taylor because she knows that for the first three centuries of the church’s existence “a wide variety of people who all called themselves Christian understood the Christ in a wide variety of ways.” That changed, she reminds us, only after the emperor Constantine “understood that a faith with no center would never anchor his crumbling empire.” He therefore got the bishops to meet and sort through the choices and agree on one that the church could go forward with. This process required many meetings and some theological bloodletting as well, Taylor explains. When the bishops had finished developing a central confession of Christian faith, people who didn’t choose that particular option became known as heretics, a term that comes from the Greek word for “choice.”



Among the people who have been put into this category, Taylor includes Martin Luther, Joan of Arc, Francis of Assisi, Galileo, and Copernicus, as well as Jesus. “All these people,” Taylor observes, “made unauthorized choices in their love of God. They saw things they were not supposed to see or said things they were not supposed to say. They wondered about things they were



not supposed to wonder about, and when Mother Church told them to stop they did not obey her. Some of them died for their disobedience while others were locked in their rooms. Still others were sent out of the house and told to never come back.” But of course, “many of them are spiritual heroes now. At least one of them is revered as the Son of God.”



“Given their amazing comebacks,” Taylor asks us, “might it be time for people of good faith to allow that God’s map is vast, with room on it for both a center and an edge?” Here’s what she feels we especially need to keep in mind in answering that question. “While the center may be the place where the stories of the faith are preserved, the edge is the place where the best of them happened.”

### Leaving the house but not the relationship

Barbara Brown Taylor found that she needed to move away from the center. In her view, “the way many of us are doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it. We proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we continue living with hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture. We follow a Lord who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own. We speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium.”

Taylor’s increasing concern has led her to change her role in the church, though not to leave completely. “I may have left the house,” she explains, “but I have not left the relationship. After twenty years of serving Mother Church at the altar, I have pitched my tent in the yard, using much of what she taught me to make a way in the world.”



Although clergy may identify more closely than laity with much of Taylor’s story, it was especially interesting to me because of recent changes in my own story. I definitely haven’t left my relationship with the church, but in the last few months I’ve “left the house” to the extent of not attending my congregation’s worship services. After a lifetime of regular Sunday morning attendance, I’ve finally stopped being willing to keep going through the

motions of traditional worship and being a captive audience for statements I find offensive. I feel that supporting those and some current church policies by being present hurts rather than helps the church. More than ever now, I know that for me many parts of typical worship services are a hindrance to worship, and that real worship happens more often for me in other ways.

### Prizing holy ignorance

One of the most important ways, to which Taylor says she also gives high priority, is communicating with the people I think of as kindred spirits. Her kindred spirits seem very similar to many of mine. "I have learned to prize holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty and to seek companions who have arrived at the same place," she writes. "We are a motley crew, distinguished not only by our inability to explain ourselves to those who are more certain of their beliefs than we are but in many cases by our distance from the centers of our faith communities as well."



### Awareness and gratefulness

I've found only a few of these kindred spirits who live near enough to get together often in person, but I cherish our times together. They include the meetings of a book-discussion group of women who, like me, regularly read about beliefs, current issues, and church-related concerns and who think seriously about such subjects and want to talk about



them to help clarify their thoughts. My opportunities to meet with kindred spirits also currently include the meetings of a group that originally got together for the

study "Living the Questions."

By e-mail I also stay in touch with other kindred spirits who don't live close enough to meet in person. All these groups include members of several different congregations and denominations, plus some members of what Bishop Spong calls "the church alumni association."



I'm fortunate to have many other friends and caring family members, all of whom I enjoy and share interests with, but there's an important difference between my relationship with them and with the kindred-spirit friends. The kindred spirits seem to speak the same language or to be on the same wavelength in a special way. We can bring up controversial topics with each other without getting shocked looks or silence in response. We can express doubts or beliefs that differ from official church doctrines without being written off as heretics. We go beyond superficialities to talk about what matters most to us. Thus when we converse



I'm especially aware of God's presence that connects us, and I'm grateful for it. To me those are the main parts of worship.

### Stimulation for thought

Something else that makes me aware of God and grateful is learning what thinking people believe and why, and how they experience God. Authors may tell this through their writing. Some do it on TV, as in the recent PBS series *Faith and Reason*, in which writers from several religious traditions spoke about their religious beliefs and experiences. Speakers of that caliber may not be available locally, but local worship services could provide such awareness if they had varied speakers addressing similar topics.

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 14 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 plus 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.

In addition to conversing with kindred spirits and reading and hearing about religious questions, beliefs, and experiences, hearing top-quality music is an important motivation for worship for me. In my area a regional classical-music station presents what it calls “choral classics” at 11:00 on Sunday mornings, and I’m finding that a welcome partial replacement for the worship services I previously attended at that hour.



## Appreciating the wider church

Fortunately, therefore, I’m not without the ingredients of worship to which I give top priority, even

though I find few of them through the congregation I’ve been part of for so many years and am still part of. However, it saddens me that many members of it apparently feel that my not currently attending our church’s worship services means I’m no longer part of the church.

That’s making my conversations with kindred spirits and other members of the wider church seem more important than ever. They help me clarify my beliefs. They help me stay aware of God’s presence, in my own life and in the world. They remind me that church isn’t just on Sunday mornings.

*Barbara*



## Connections

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## Leaving without leaving

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**Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? ...”**

**He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ...”**

—Matthew 15:1-3