

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A family of Christian dynamos

In 1955, D. L. Dykes, Jr. was taking a few weeks off before moving to his new appointment as senior pastor of First Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. Dykes and his wife were spending the night in a Baton Rouge motel when he saw something that changed his life. He saw evangelist Oral Roberts preaching on the motel room's tiny black-and-white TV.



Roberts was spouting a portrayal of Christianity that Dykes couldn't stomach, but he was reaching people in numbers that Dykes knew would never attend a church. The idea of communicating the gospel on the new medium of TV made lights go on in Dykes's brain.



Today, through a foundation established by a wealthy admirer and led by Dykes's son, the results of D. L. Dykes's brainstorm are reaching numbers far greater than those Oral Roberts reached in 1955. More important, Dykes's brainchildren are communicating the Christian message in terms that reveal its timeless value to today's thinking people.

Ready when the brainstorm came

When his brainstorm about TV struck, D. L. Dykes, Jr. was ready. As a teenager he had felt "called to preach." His mother was an active Methodist and he had done many typical church volunteer jobs with her. Then while attending Centenary College he had been attracted by a Bible professor's forward-looking Christian views. After graduation Dykes had moved on to Methodist seminaries Perkins and Candler and become ordained.



Dykes's first pastoral appointment didn't seem promising. It was in the tiny Louisiana town of Zwolle, which had originated as a sanctuary for thieves and other criminals. Also,

How could you help?



D. L. Dykes, Jr. saw that the church needed to become informed and to deliver its message in new ways, to reach thinking people and change the world. Today's church needs that, too. Many of today's pastors know that it does, but unfortunately, many of those are afraid to say this publicly.

Some of their reasons are easy to understand. These pastors see that the system tends to punish pastors who drive members away or even offend them by expressing views the members disagree with. Pastors feel that their income depends on not doing anything that might cause them to be ousted or even moved to a lower-paying, lower-status appointment. Also, like most of the rest of us, pastors want to be liked. They want to feel that they're doing a good job, too, as shown by getting appreciation rather than flak and by seeing people attracted to their churches.

Lay members' efforts are crucial

To give forward-thinking pastors the confidence and income they need for taking brave steps, lay Christians therefore need to support them actively. We need to encourage them to express their real beliefs and to do what they believe following Jesus requires. We need to defend these pastors when members try to drive them off for taking such steps. If we're able, we need to give financial support to such pastors' efforts, as D. L. Dykes, Jr.'s wealthy admirer did. Or we might underwrite some of the income a forward-looking pastor would risk losing by speaking out.

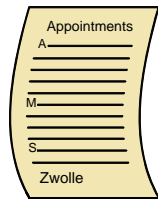


I've recently seen a pastor driven off by members' vicious attacks. I've seen an unusually competent pastor and strongly committed lay members move many miles away, merely to get away from constant bombardment by uninformed, narrow, misleading portrayals of Christianity. I've seen outstanding pastors and lay members change churches or totally stop attending church to avoid having such views taught to their children.



Many more of us lay Christians need to use our voices and money to help end the conditions that make such steps seem necessary.

Zwolle was the last appointment in the alphabetical list read at the Annual Conference session, so until the very end, Dykes was left wondering if he was going to be appointed anywhere.



He served in Zwolle for a few years and then in Shreveport. Then he was moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas. There, lights started turning on in his head more than ever before, because Fayetteville had a bookstore that he went to weekly. He saturated himself with the ideas of Elton Trueblood and other famous Christian authors and scholars of the day.

A new realization

As Dykes passed his 30th birthday, however, he began to realize that he needed to get clear on what *he* thought, not just on what all those famous authors thought. That awareness led him to start writing his sermons differently. He started basing them on Bible themes that didn't come from an arbitrary

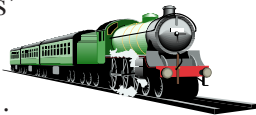
list of scriptures but rather were brought to his mind by current news headlines and his current experience. The result? In his son's words, "His preaching took off."



His current thinking furnished plenty of fodder. Dykes's father-in-law, also a Methodist pastor, had recently introduced D. L. to the idea that God's love was universal. D. L. had become convinced that all people would be "saved," not just those who happened to live where they were exposed to Christianity and who accepted certain doctrines.

Current events were providing plenty of sermon topics, too. The Korean war had just broken out, and Fayetteville clergy had been recruited to pray for soldiers as they left the local train station. But what these pastors had been instructed to pray for was the soldiers' safety and their side's victory.

That didn't seem quite right to Dykes. He felt that Christians should pray also for the other side's soldiers.



With all these thoughts and experiences still churning in his mind, Dykes got a new appointment, as pastor of First Methodist Church in Shreveport. On vacation that summer, before moving, he saw the eye-opening TV program that inspired the video-

based ministry methods he so creatively developed and so effectively used for the rest of his life.

Using visual media was in his blood

When D. L. Dykes got back to Shreveport that summer, after seeing the surprising TV program, he got busy. Like many other families, the Dykes family didn't even own a TV set then. But Dykes realized that TV would soon be widespread and that the church therefore needed to start making good use of it quickly.



By the next fall, he had arranged for the only Shreveport TV station to broadcast his 11:00 worship service live every Sunday morning. And these worship services were something to see. "Dad always had an eye for how to get people's attention," D. L.'s son David remembers. "The idea of using visual media to communicate was in his blood."

He especially went to great length, David Dykes recalls, to make big experiences of the biggest days of the church year—Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and others. He designed those days' worship services to move and inspire crowds.



Why not record lessons?

From 1955 on, Dykes kept learning more about what video recording could do. In the early 1970s, magnetic tape became available that made higher quality recording possible, and Dykes's church bought a camera that recorded with the new tape. The equipment's capabilities triggered a new brainstorm for him. Why not record material to use as the basis of Sunday School lessons?

He set up a makeshift place for recording, in the church foyer. He enlisted professors and other experts to record video presentations of their specialties. The church not only made films of these experts speaking. To train pastors and lay volunteers, it also made videos of people role-playing scenes that showed how to do jobs such as counseling and fund-raising.

By then, David Dykes had graduated from Centenary and Candler, had become ordained, had been a pastor in Baton Rouge, and had joined his father in the video-



production work. They began creating video series that presented up-to-date information about the Bible and Christian history and beliefs in a systematic way, for use as the church's Sunday School curriculum. Then they started a series of Monday lunches for Sunday School teachers, to show them how to use the videos to augment their teaching.



Teachers too good for less than the best

D. L. soon persuaded all the adult-class teachers at his church to use the video series instead of the International Bible Series or miscellaneous materials they had been using. The church got all its adult classrooms wired, and soon all twenty adult classes were using the video materials regularly.



Knowing how unwilling many adult classes are to be told what materials to use, I was amazed when I heard about these Sunday School changes. How did Dykes persuade all of his church's classes to use the new video materials, I wondered. He told the teachers, David explained, that they were too good to have to use less than top-quality materials!

Burning crosses and I.R.S. audits

The church held a weekly midweek lunch for its adult teachers, at which the next Sunday's video lesson material was shown and followed by discussion. This brought the congregation's pastors and teachers into an ongoing dialogue, David pointed out, and in these groups D. L. tested and refined his increasingly progressive views.

He came to see racial desegregation as needed, simply because it was the right thing to do. He regu-

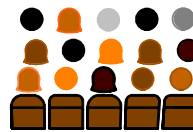
larly said so from the pulpit, even though it caused some families to leave the church and crosses to be burned in the Dykeses' yard. Later, D. L. publicly opposed the Vietnam war and criticized Nixon's handling of it. As a result, he was audited by the I.R.S. yearly for the next seventeen years.



In the 1980s, First United Methodist Church of Shreveport built a major TV studio at the church and began producing videos for the wider church. In 1983, FUMC started a network housed at the church, the "Alternate View Network."

The next spring, D. L.'s health started failing. He sank into extreme depression, partly as a result, apparently, of the stress of being attacked continually for publicly expressing unpopular views. He took medical retirement in 1985 and soon had a heart attack and stroke.

He recovered enough, however, to serve as president of the AVN network for the two years preceding his death in 1997. And he kept innovating. The church added a satellite transponder to provide up-links all over North America, and it built a studio that seated 150 in a classroom setting. In that studio, for the rest of his life, D. L. Dykes taught "The Alternate View Class," which was aired nationwide.



The legacy continues

Meanwhile, David Dykes taught Bible and then philosophy at Centenary for several years, then did filmmaking in California and Denver. In Denver, his work introduced him to Debo, who is now his wife. She had been a finalist in NASA's "Teacher in Space" competition for a spot on the fateful Chal-

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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 16 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 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.

lenger voyage. Perfecting science experiments and training films for that program had led her to producing science programs for satellite TV. Then she felt called in a new direction and was ordained as an Episcopal priest. Now director for the Mississippi diocese's Center for Formation and Mission, she is also an active supporter of David's role as CEO of the Dykes Foundation, headquartered in Jackson.

What about us?

I never knew D. L. Dykes, Jr., but from learning of his brave steps and innovative accomplishments, I know he was quite a person. And knowing David

and Debo Dykes has let me know that outstanding Christian bravery and innovation run in this family. Becoming aware of activist Christians like these reminds us that following Jesus means taking risks. It reminds us that speaking publicly about needed change, especially if it's unpopular, is essential. It reminds us that supporting others in their brave steps is also essential.

What could you do now to take a stronger and more visible stand for justice and compassion in the church and the world? How could you also help others to do that?



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Connections

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A family of Christian dynamos

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Bringing faith and reason together in constructive dialogue

The founders of the Dykes Foundation recognized that religious faith without solid, critical thinking was dangerous and destructive. The foundation thus aims to bring the best critical thinking to consideration and discussion of religious issues, to expand Christian thought and understanding, and to nurture all spiritual paths that seek compassion and justice. The Foundation distributes videos that combine snippets from some of D. L. Dykes's talks with panel discussions by leading thinkers of today, addressing faith-related topics. It also presents public seminars throughout the U.S. at unusually reasonable prices, featuring today's leading scholars, and it sells videos of these seminars. In the [June 2006 Connections](#), you can read about one of the seminars I attended, which featured Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Joan Chittister.

The Foundation is now starting to expand its offerings to include presentations by leading younger scholars and authors. To read more about what it offers, and to buy its videos or sign up for upcoming seminars, see the foundation's web site, www.faithandreason.org.



If you live near Paducah KY, I'd love to meet you when I speak at Broadway United Methodist Church there, Oct. 12, 10:30 A.M. and 2:00 P.M. For more information, contact District Superintendent Rick Dye, rcdye@comcast.net.