

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Still in the wilderness?

A reader who has gotten every issue of *Connections* during my 21 years of writing it asked me this question recently: “After 21 years, do you still feel like a voice crying in the wilderness?” I realized that my answer was both yes and no.

### Responses from kindred spirits

It’s partly no because over these 21 years I’ve heard from so many readers who say something like “I thought I was the only one who felt this way, but now I know I’m not! I’m so glad to find someone saying what I’ve been thinking!” Because of these responses from readers of *Connections* and my book *Misfits*, and from people in groups I’ve spoken to, I now know that there are many other people “out there” who have had church-related experiences similar to mine and who have views, concerns, and feelings similar to mine. I suspected that, 21 years ago, but now I’m sure of it.



### Changes in church participation

Recent surveys that report increases in the numbers of progressive Christians and decreases in traditional church participation have also made me sure now that I’m not as alone as I felt 21 years ago. Overall, the UMC now seems a little less like a wilderness to me because of the growing numbers of UMC clergy who are now bravely disobeying UMC policies that they recognize as contrary to the Gospel, especially those that forbid pastors from performing same-sex union rites and forbid “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” from becoming clergy.

... John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord ...’”

—Matthew 3:1-3

## A brave church in a wilderness

In his October 3 newsletter, Bishop John Shelby Spong describes a brave congregation in Springfield, Missouri, a city he sees reflecting the evangelical, pentecostal, Protestant religion of the heartland—a city that I suspect would feel like a wilderness to me.

The congregation was founded in 2008 by Dr. Roger Ray, a clergyman in the Disciples of Christ denomination. He started the congregation, writes Spong, with a clear vision. He wanted a church committed to social justice, not dehumanizing anyone on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, or social status. He also wanted a church that studied, embraced, and embodied a historical view of Jesus and in addition, was “willing to look, both appreciatively and critically, at Mohammad, Moses, the Buddha, Confucius and Zoroaster.”



### Intellectually engaged, spiritually attuned

He wanted a church that would avoid presenting the “pre-modern images of a supernatural, theistically understood deity,” in which institutional Christianity is still largely mired. He wanted one that didn’t parrot the theology of the 4th-century Council of Nicaea or the “behavior-controlling promise of heaven’s reward and hell’s punishment” that comes from a 10th-century theory of substitutionary atonement.



Dr. Ray left ordained ministry for a while. He sometimes visited churches, but each visit, he says, strengthened his resolve to stay away. Still, he missed some of what he believed a church could provide: a sense of community, and “a place where ideas could be exchanged and challenged and thoughts about evolving faith and religious practices could be shared.”

With members of his book group, Ray started a church that is now “a regional force for a new understanding of Christianity.” It “inevitably threatens some security-seeking believers,” says Ray. It targets “those who want something different, something that has intellectual integrity.” It deliberately tries to live out “a Christianity that is open to all, non-imperialistic, intellectually engaged, and spiritually attuned.”

## An area dominated by fundamentalists

However, in my part of the U.S., change has often been in the other direction. Much of Texas is increasingly dominated by conservative Christians who don't even want Christians with other understandings of Christianity to have a voice. So to me, my home of 54 years feels like a religious wilderness.



The Christian fundamentalists here not only don't want liberal or progressive Christians to have a voice in the church, they also don't want us or adherents of other religions to have a voice in the secular community. Whether it's by presenting 19th-century Christian teachings in public schools, opening government meetings with evangelical prayers, or putting nativity scenes and the Ten Commandments on courthouse lawns, literalist Christians in much of the South are actively working to block the religious freedom that the U.S. Constitution guarantees.



## A congregation moving to the right

That seems especially true in central Texas, where I live. During the years I've been writing *Connections*, my local congregation has moved steadily to the right theologically, and I now feel ignored and unwanted by it. That's a big difference from 21 years ago when I was very active in the church and had at least a small voice not only in my home congregation but also in some UMC decision-making bodies at levels above the local church.

At that time, my congregation also had a progressive, innovative senior pastor. He quoted from current authors in his sermons, and nudged members to promote social justice and become aware of modern scholarship about the Bible. Under his leadership, membership and attendance grew to levels that are still the highest in the church's history. But the growth that came from his forward-looking approach slowed or even stopped when increasingly conservative pastors were sent here to follow him.

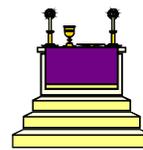


Thinking back over the missed opportunity that the congregation's retreat from modernity represents, I'm reminded of a quotation from Shakespeare.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
omitted, all the voyage of their life  
is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat;  
and we must take the current when it serves,  
or lose our ventures.” (*Julius Caesar* IV.iii)

## A unique chance for progress missed?

The progressive pastor's time in my home church now seems to me to have been such a tide in the congregation's life. But instead of taking that tide at its flood, church members, fearful of change, have kept adding sandbags and building dams to stem it. Since then, Bible studies have promoted fundamentalism and opposed critical thinking. Programs such as Beth Moore Bible studies and the MOPS program for pre-school mothers have encouraged submissive roles for women. A new fortress-like building has been built facing the less affluent part of town, with a high, windowless brick wall and a solid



fence blocking streets and sending unmistakable keep-out messages to neighbors. Most recently, a new worship service was added whose creators plan to enlist helpers from the fundamentalist International House of Prayer. (If you're not familiar with this organization, read about it on Wikipedia and on its website, [www.ihopkc.org](http://www.ihopkc.org). It's shocking.)

## A sad end to decades of gifts and service

By a decade or more ago, my husband and I were already increasingly dismayed by the literalist interpretations of Christianity that were filling our congregation's worship services. Then 7 years ago, its efforts to oust a pastor whose sexual orientation some members suspected was one they considered sinful felt like the last straw. And when a new pastor came, it was clear that he and powerful lay leaders were going to work even more actively than earlier leaders to stifle voices like ours that disagreed with them. We therefore stopped participating, even though my husband had been a very active member all his life and I had been since 1959.



For decades we had both sung in the choir every week. We served on committees and generously supported

budget and building campaigns. I taught children’s Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, enlisted teachers, and planned and taught numerous adult classes. In more recent years, I’ve been to seminary, written *Connections*, started a progressive study in my home, had 3 books published, and hosted 2 large conferences, the second attended by people from 16 states—efforts that I don’t think any other lay member of my congregation has ever made.

### Cruel messages in a time of conflict

But despite this extensive participation, soon after we stopped attending I got an e-mail from one of our associate pastors saying that she had been ordered to have no further contact with me and my husband. She also warned me that everything I said about religious beliefs was being watched, yet if I revealed that she had sent me this warning, she would deny it. She asked me to keep her messages confidential, and for several years I did. But I now think that for the good of the church, it’s past time to speak out.



In fact, I now wish that I had immediately responded to her with some questions: “Who gave you that order, on what authority?” And above all, “Why are you obeying it?” (The answer would evidently have been “to keep my job,” which unfortunately shows that church staff sometimes feel they must sacrifice their integrity to protect their income.)



That was not all. The senior pastor was quoted as using a vulgarity to refer to me and my husband. Later, the congregation’s five top lay office holders sent a letter to all lay Annual Conference (regional UMC decision-making body) members, urging them not to vote for me as a delegate to General Conference (worldwide body). The letter appeared

to speak for the entire congregation, yet only a very few members had had a voice in the decision to send it, and the congregation was never even told about it.

Since getting the shocking e-mail 7 years ago, my husband and I have in fact had no contact, much less any apology, from any of our congregation’s pastors, staff members, or lay leaders. We’ve been removed from the congregation’s mailing list, and I have never again been asked to speak or teach, much less to be a delegate to any church legislative body.

I was so astonished and so deeply hurt by those events, and by the cessation of all contact, that at first I didn’t ask questions, investigate, or even respond. Later, when I eventually began telling some people what had happened, all seemed shocked, but as far as I know, no congregation members, and no UMC clergy in supervisory or other influential positions, have tried to get the situation changed, or have even spoken out to clergy or lay leaders.

So both in the wider UMC and in my congregation, I’ve felt that my speaking more widely would be futile—and now I still feel I’m in the church wilderness, much more than 21 years ago.

### Would quietly moving on be best?

In general, I’ve felt that simply moving on, rather than continuing to agonize over what has happened in my congregation, would be personally healthier, so I’ve mostly tried to forget and mostly kept quiet until now. However, as I have grown older and reflected on it all, I feel that what has happened here must not stay unknown forever, because that would merely help this and other congregations keep following similar policies that shut people out.



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information 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). Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 21 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a lay United Methodist 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 more than 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.

 FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TEMPLE, TEXAS

Coverage from the Laity of UMC, thought  
As a Lay delegate to the Annual Conference, you recently received a packet being someone from which you  
will not be aware of the General Conference.  
It is important that you know of people following membership in the Church.  
Please contact.

## A painful experience, but also a relief

Feeling rejected by my congregation after so many years of having been so active in it has been, I think, the most painful experience of my life. But no longer participating has also been a welcome relief. It's a relief not to sing and say things that I don't believe, or to hear sermons and prayers that I feel contradict what Jesus taught and what is now known about him, the Bible, human beings, and the universe. It's also a relief not to spend time with people who have helped to get me silenced, have been unwilling to speak on my behalf, or have



ignored or even opposed my efforts to grow spiritually and help the church do the same. I know that despite having feelings and views similar to mine, some members keep participating to be with friends, but to me the church is no longer a friendly place.

I'd appreciate some apologies, and I still hope for church change. But even if those happened, I doubt I'd ever return to participating. 21 years ago, I couldn't have imagined I'd ever stop. But now that my congregation and I have changed in opposite ways, staying out seems better for me, and the church doesn't seem to care. So for the foreseeable future, I'm out here in the wilderness.

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Still in the wilderness?

November 2013

### How could scripture, prayers, and music be harmful ?



At a recent social event, a woman I'd never previously met told me that her sister was attending the new worship service that my congregation has recently added, and that she thought it was wonderful. I said that I was disturbed by the church's presenting it because, according to a recent local newspaper article, it is based on worship services that its originator had attended at the headquarters of an extremely far-right fundamentalist organization, and he plans to bring people from that organization to Temple to help develop the service further. (See page 2 of this *Connections*.)



"What could be harmful about it?" my conversation partner asked. "It's only scripture readings, prayers, and music!" I couldn't think fast enough to give a good answer, and besides, a party didn't seem to be the right place for one. But what I wish I could have said was that the choice of scriptures and the reading only of brief verses taken out of context can be very misleading, giving the mistaken impression that those verses can legitimately stand alone and be interpreted literally. I wish I had explained, too, that the words of many Christian prayers and songs are also harmful. Many use all-masculine language that portrays God in a misleading way and demeans women. And many songs and prayers present beliefs that contradict what Jesus taught or what is now known from science and history. So hearing "only" scriptures, prayers, and music can easily lead hearers astray.

