

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Christian misfits— lifelines for each other

Evidently there are a lot of church misfits. The February “misfits” issue of *Connections* has brought more responses than any other issue I’ve ever written, and they’re still coming, even though the “misfits” issue is no longer the most recent one. (If you missed it and want it, get it at www.connectionsonline.org, or let me know and I’ll send you a copy by U.S. Mail.)



Nearly all the responses have been appreciative, and many have been unusually impassioned. Many have described the pain that comes from being rejected by the church these responders care so much about, merely for trying to do what they believe God calls them to do. Above all, these writers have

thanked me for reassuring them that they aren’t alone in their views. “Oh, my dear lady,” writes one, “you have spoken from my heart ... Wow!” Another writes, “That issue strikes such a deep chord ‘Yes!’ in my soul that I had to let you know.”



Having been reminded how many of us misfits there are, and how painful being a misfit is for so many, I want to say something else now about being a misfit. It’s this. For Christian misfits, connecting with other misfits is vital. We can be lifesavers for each other. When we can’t fit into the institutional church, we can be the church for each other.

The “fits” may need to know

If instead of a misfit you’re a “fit”—a person who fits comfortably into the institutional church as it presently exists, who feels nourished by what it provides, and who finds ways of using your gifts and carrying out your God-given calling within it—you may want to stop reading this. However, even if you’re a fit, I



What if misfits drive others out?



Several pastors who responded to the “misfits” issue of *Connections* admitted getting very nervous when a misfit church member asks about a controversial topic that the pastor would rather not have to address for fear of driving other members away. I loved one of these pastors’ examples of such topics—homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment, and use of the church kitchen.



One pastor responded with thought-provoking comments about pastors’ difficulty in dealing with congregation members who are misfits. “We have a small group of ‘misfits’ in our congregation,” he wrote, “who are struggling to find their place. (It was one of them who originally gave me a subscription to *Connections*, by the way.) I wish I had a good answer to the question of how to stop driving God-inspired misfits away. I think one thing we must do is give them a voice.” However, this pastor finds that giving them a voice often alienates others in the church. “Even though these misfits are in the minority,” he writes, “they have the power to push others out of our church by treating them as if their beliefs are not welcome. They tend to look down on others in the congregation as unenlightened and uninformed.”

What does this say about God-inspired Christian misfits and how the church should deal with them? To what extent should we protect the members who actually are unenlightened and uninformed and don’t want to become enlightened or informed?

If some of our misfits are speaking for God, as many misfits throughout the church’s history have been, should we stifle them or drive them out, in order to avoid disturbing church members who are offended by their God-given messages? Most of us believe the church should welcome everyone, but how do we reconcile that belief with the need to let God’s disturbing messages be heard in the church?



Both fits and misfits are asking these questions. Maybe they’re questions God is nudging us to ask.

urge you to keep reading. I believe it's important for the church's fits to recognize what some God-inspired misfits in their midst are experiencing. I believe it's important for the fits to see that many of the misfits aren't trying to hurt the church. They're trying to help it instead. And some are crying out in pain.



A like mind across the room

Some misfits are turned off mainly by church jargon and standard operating procedures that fill meetings with busywork and ignore the need for quality. Many are upset, too, by the lack of honesty and openness they often see in the church. They're encouraged by finding kindred spirits who also recognize these disturbing features and speak up about them.



After attending a recent series of church meetings I heard from one of those fellow misfits. He wrote about the welcome reassurance he got from knowing that I often shared his views about what was happening. "Great to be with you," he e-mailed me as soon as he got home. "I treasure the many times I glance across the room and see a like mind!"

Comments like these remind us that it's important to speak up even when we know we're misfits. Our speaking is often a valuable encouragement to others with similar views. As long as no one expresses them, we each think we're the only one with those views so we keep quiet. For the church's good, however, our views may need to be heard.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...
—Romans 12:2

7-11 songs and all-masculine words



Many responders have let me know they were my fellow misfits in being distracted by the shallow Christian music that's often used in worship services. One called it 7-11 music. It uses only 7 words and repeats them 11 times.

Other responders shared my frustration with worship services whose language gives the mistaken impression that all human beings and God are male.

One brave woman told about having dared to speak out during worship one Sunday morning, taking her pastor to task when he kept saying "men" to refer to a group that included both men and women. Needless to say, that pastor was shocked and so were most congregation members, but I uttered a silent but fervent "Bravo!" when I read that woman's account of her protest. I suspect God was cheering for her too.



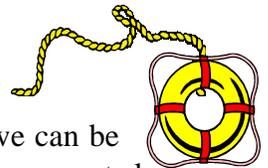
Pastors can be misfits

I've been surprised at how many pastors have written me, telling how they feel like misfits in the institutional church system even though they're conforming to it. Some have stuck it out for many years because they were dependent on the income their job provided, and they didn't feel they had the training and experience necessary for making a change, but now to their delight they've retired. Finally getting free from a job in which they've felt like misfits is like having a huge burden lifted, they say.



Other pastors have told about leaving the ordained ministry early. Some have gone into related occupations like counseling, in order to escape the system they found so burdensome because of being misfits in it. Still other pastor misfits have completely dropped out of the church despite continuing to feel a deep commitment to the gospel and a strong calling to give their lives to it. "I am an ordained pastor," writes one, "who has always been a misfit. It has become so difficult that I will be taking early retirement from the ministry. If I stay in I will drown."

A lifesaving connection



When Christian misfits find other misfits drowning, we can be lifesavers for each other. Getting connected with another misfit can be like being given an oxygen supply when you're gasping for breath. It's like being given a lifeline when you're drowning.

Fellow misfits can furnish a lifegiving connection to a deep and vitally important part of a drowning misfit. We can connect to his or her strong commitment to the gospel, which hasn't found support or an outlet in the church. The greatest difficulty seems to come to the Christian misfits who under-



stand and express the gospel in a way that many church members happen to consider unacceptable. These misfits thus feel not only alone but also rejected by the church, which despite appearances to the contrary, matters tremendously to the misfit. That kind of rejection and aloneness is extremely painful.

To be revived, the drowning misfit needs to get connected to someone who recognizes that he is about to drown in the sea of people who misunderstand and attack his way of understanding and expressing Christian beliefs. The drowning misfit is gasping for air, for spirit—for what traditionalists call the Holy Spirit, and for human kindred spirits too. By staying in touch and speaking the drowning misfit's language, the rescuer doesn't just throw the drowning misfit a lifeline and then leave. Instead, she *becomes* a lifeline for him by being a continuing and readily available source of air, breath, life, spirit. She becomes a lifeline to God.

Lifegiving conversation



Being or receiving this kind of lifeline includes having frequent conversations with a fellow misfit, in person or in writing, about the subjects that matter most to each of us. That means talking about each other's most important personal experiences and deepest feelings and beliefs.



Depending on personalities and interests, the lifeline may also include reading and talking about mutually interesting books, or about a job's challenges and rewards.

Honesty and openness are vital, as is confidentiality. So is remembering what has been shared. It shows that each of us cares about the other's most cherished and most painful feelings, experiences, and thoughts, and thus cares about each other.

Nourishment for each other

What Christian misfits can furnish for each other is like food for a starving person. A God-inspired Christian misfit often feels starved for another who not only is knowledgeable about religion, the Bible, and the church but who also recognizes and to a large extent shares the other misfit's understanding of them. One misfit thus affirms the ways in which the other misfit understands the Christian faith and must express it in order to find it believable—ways that the fits in the church often misinterpret as faithlessness.



The spiritual food that someone else likes won't necessarily satisfy a God-inspired misfit's starvation. What feeds the fits often doesn't feed the misfits. It may sicken them, in fact, although that is hard for the fits to understand and accept.

Offering either fits or misfits the wrong kind of spiritual food is like offering someone the wrong kind of physical food. Giving a diabetic person food that's full of sugar, or giving someone food she or he is allergic to, is more harmful than helpful. To be helpful, food must be of a kind that the person can swallow and digest, and that's as true of spiritual food as of physical food.

Stimulation of insights and growth



When they're connected to each other, God-inspired Christian misfits tend to stimulate God-given insights in each other, which wouldn't otherwise become apparent to them. They promote growth, courage, and creativity in each other. They can strengthen each other's Christian faith, even though they may not express it in the words that the institutional church uses and the fits consider essential. These are lifegiving results.

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, simply let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 9½ 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 (addresses and numbers on page 1), 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.

Being the church for each other

I can't speak for the fits, because I'm not one. I've observed a lot about them, however, because they're so numerous in the church. Evidently traditional rituals, prayer styles, hymns, language, devotionals, church gatherings, and organizations nourish the fits, connect them with God and other Christians, and help them do the ministries to which God calls them. And those features that apparently meet the fits' religious needs are readily available in the church, so the fits evidently don't experience the starvation and pain that misfits so often experience.



For a lot of God-inspired Christian misfits, however, the standard features of the institutional church simply don't provide much nourishment, connection, or help. Whether or not we stay in the institutional church and take part in all its activities, therefore, we misfits have to find a lot of our nourishment, help, and support elsewhere.



In effect, we have to be the church for each other. And, thank God, that's what we often are.

Barbara

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

—Luke 19:40



 "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal position for just such a time as this." Then Esther said, "... I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

—Esther 4:14-16

The high priest questioned [Peter and the apostles], saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name ..." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ..."

—Acts 5:29

Connections by e-mail?

If you're now getting Connections by U.S. Mail but are a computer user, how about changing to e-mail? You'd get each issue earlier. (And the pictures would be in color!) I send to a large e-mail list every month, and it's easier, quicker, and less expensive than snail-mail for me. If you'd like to change to e-mail, please e-mail me at BCWendland@aol.com and let me know. Thanks!

