

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 187 - MAY 2008



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

## Thinking about war

Hearing about war is almost impossible to avoid right now. It raises many questions for thinking Christians. Yet the war seems to be largely a taboo subject in churches.



Congregations are likely to include U.S. troops and their families in corporate prayers, of course. They may also include the citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan. Pastors and congregation members may send e-mails or gifts on behalf of the congregation to members who are serving in U.S. military forces. But open discussion of the pros and cons of war and of how participating in it relates to following Jesus seems to be happening very little.

## Books that deserve churches' attention

I've recently read thought-provoking books about war, which I wish were being widely discussed in our churches. I wish we were actively looking for ways to bring nonchurchgoers into such discussions, too. I suspect that some who are now turned off by what they see of churches would become interested if they saw churches openly examining all sides of such vital issues. Some churches undoubtedly are sponsoring such discussions, but the ones I see aren't.



One book I've appreciated is *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor/Random House, 2002), by Chris Hedges. He is a seminary graduate and a journalist who has covered several recent wars. His war experiences have convinced him, he tells us, that war forms its own culture. "The rush of battle," he writes, "is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug." He sees it having the addictive qualities of "excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty."

## The main question—what to do now?

No one in my family is in the military forces. I don't even personally know anyone who is. My information about the current war comes only from reading daily papers, weekly newsmagazines, and books, and hearing war news and opinions from daily TV news programs. From what I get from these sources and what I know about the teaching of Jesus, however, I've come to some tentative conclusions.



## A bad mistake

It seems to me that attacking Iraq was a bad mistake. The decision and plans were based on inadequate information—not just about what was happening in and around Iraq, but also about the history, religion, and culture of that area. Also, ulterior motives influenced the original decision and continue to

influence U.S. leaders' decisions. And huge amounts of money have been inefficiently spent, resulting in shoddy construction, waste of materials, and payments to unscrupulous people. If these funds had been used for humanitarian aid instead of war, they could have gone far toward combatting poverty and disease and providing basic education, not only in the countries where we're fighting but also within the U.S. Those uses of our funds could also have promoted the good will that our current actions, policies, and official statements are destroying. Because Christianity—at least, nominal Christianity—is so widespread in the U.S. and some of our leaders talk so much about being Christian, our unchristian official actions have given a bad impression not only of the U.S. but also of Christianity.



## We need open discussion in the church

To me, the teaching of Jesus says that following him requires being nonviolent, thus avoiding war. Other Christians disagree, but the same question confronts us whatever our opinion about war is. How can we help move our nation from where it is now to a better place, with regard to this war? To help find answers, we need more frequent and more open conversation in the church about such questions. We can't just keep acting as if the questions don't exist.

## Seeing the news hurts

For me, watching the nightly TV news keeps getting more and more disturbing, especially when it shows one picture after another of U.S. troops who have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the permanently disabling wounds of so many seem almost more tragic than the deaths. The accounts of Iraqi civilians' deaths and wounds are equally sickening. I live near Fort Hood, so the local news, too, reminds me not only of what is happening to our troops but also of what their families are suffering at home. Yet these reports rarely analyze the effects of war that Hedges writes about.



## War lets us be noble



War “dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it,” Hedges finds. In addition, “fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare ... War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us.”

In Hedges' view, “The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent.” Consequently, “war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble.”

## An emptiness afterward

A disconcerting emptiness appears when war ends, Hedges observes. In Bosnia, he reports, even people who had lived in fear and hunger, emaciated and constantly targeted by gunners, said those days may have been the fullest of their lives. When the fighting ended they faced “the disillusionment with a sterile, futile, empty present. Peace had again exposed the void that the rush of war, of battle, had filled.” “Once again,” Hedges saw, “they were, as perhaps we all are, alone, no longer bound by that common sense of struggle, no longer given the opportunity to be noble, heroic, no longer sure what life was about or what it meant.”



“The old comradeship, however false,” Hedges reports, “that allowed them to love men and women they hardly knew, indeed, whom they may not have liked before the war, had vanished.” Even worse, many came to feel that all their sacrifice had been for nothing. They saw that their cause lay forgotten, that corrupt leaders were still in power, and that social ills like unemployment and poverty hadn't been eliminated. The visits of actors, politicians, and artists during the fighting had been seen as acts of gross self-promotion, but life was dull when they stopped.

## War empowers murderers



Chris Hedges warns that “even as war gives meaning to sterile lives, it also promotes killers and racists.” It empowers those with a predilection for murder. “Petty gangsters,” he observed, “reviled in pre-war Sarajevo, were transformed overnight at the start of the conflict into war heroes.” What they did didn't change, Hedges saw, but now they did it with an ideological veneer that made it permissible. “Once we sign on for war's crusade,” he finds, “once we see ourselves on the side of the angels, once we embrace a theological or ideological belief system that defines itself as the embodiment of goodness and light, it is only a matter of how we will carry out murder.”

## War suspends self-critical thought

In Chris Hedges' view, the patriotism that war heightens discourages critical thinking—especially self-critical thinking—when it is needed most. We're seeing that happen in the current political campaigns. Voters are being distracted from important questions by the trivial question of whether a presidential candidate does or doesn't wear a flag pin. “Patriotism, often a thinly veiled form of collective self-worship,” Hedges warns us, “celebrates our goodness, our ideals, our mercy, and bemoans the perfidiousness of those who hate us. Never mind the murder and repression done in our name by bloody surrogates ... ”



“Most of us,” says Hedges, “willingly accept war as long as we can fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher good, for human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning. And tragically war is sometimes the

most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning.”

War can serve as a religion, in fact. “Armed movements,” Hedges finds, “seek divine sanction and the messianic certitude of absolute truth.” Patriotism can furnish these. And its unquestioning adherents, like some unquestioning adherents of Christianity, don’t want to hear from dissenters. “Dissenters who challenge the goodness of our cause,” observes Hedges, “who question the gods of war, who pull back the curtains to expose the lie, are usually silenced or ignored.”



### A call for repentance

Chris Hedges isn’t recommending that we become pacifists. He’s recommending that if we choose war we recognize what will result. In his view, there are times when we must take the poison that is war, just as a person with cancer may have to accept the poison of chemotherapy in order to live. “There are times,” Hedges writes, “when the force wielded by one immoral faction must be countered by a faction that, while never moral, is perhaps less immoral.”



But he asks us to use that force only with awareness, humility, and compassion, not blindly. And if we decide that war is necessary, we must ask for forgiveness. His book, he says, “is not a call for inaction. It is a call for repentance.”

### The mythic aspect of war

Chris Hedges also urges us to become aware of war’s mythic aspect. We fight absolutes. We see ourselves as fighting to vanquish darkness and save civilization. “We imbue events with meanings they do not have.



We see defeats as signposts on the road to ultimate victory. We demonize the enemy so that our opponent is no longer human. We view ourselves, our people, as the embodiment of absolute goodness. Our enemies invert our view to justify their own cruelty. ... Each side reduces the other to objects ... ”



“The chief institutions that disseminate the myth,” Hedges finds, “are the press and the state.” And “the media and most of the politicians often lack the perspective and analysis to debunk the myths served up by the opposing sides.” The press may finally start seeing and reporting events as they really are, but only after the public has changed its perception of the war. In Hedges’ opinion, the press usually does not lead.

### What can the church do?



The church could furnish the missing leadership. Most national myths, Hedges observes, let us find our identity in separateness, making communication with our opponents impossible. They encourage us to push aside the people who understand other cultures and find richness in diversity. Churches could combat this problem by promoting diversity, starting within.

We could do more, too. Hedges’ observations remind us that in our churches we need to be examining, questioning, and discussing the policies we see our nation’s leaders following. The church could furnish the self-critical thought that is so greatly needed during war. We need to hear from people who dissent from the majority view and official policies. We need to admit that faithful Christians can legitimately come to different conclusions about whether war is



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 15 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.

ever right, just as they can legitimately reach different conclusions about other questions of how to apply the teaching of Jesus.

### Providing what people seek from war

We also need to think how the church could provide in a much less harmful way what Hedges says people try to get from war. That includes purpose, meaning, and a reason for living. It includes resolve, a cause, and opportunities to be noble and heroic—to avoid living a life that is sterile, futile, and empty or filled only with trivia. It includes excitement, too. Shouldn't following Jesus provide these?

What about comradeship? Wouldn't being real followers of Jesus provide a common sense of struggle? Wouldn't it let us



love people we hardly knew, whom we may not have previously liked? Wouldn't it let us recognize at least some of our suffering as serving a higher good—a real good, not just an artificial, contrived good?

If our Christian faith isn't having these results, maybe we're not following Jesus as closely as we like to think we are.

*Barbara*



### Connections

Barbara Wendland  
505 Cherokee Drive  
Temple TX 76504-3629

## Thinking about war

May 2008



### Shocking news from a Texas church

The Winter 2008 issue of [Katalyst](#), the newsletter of the Reconciling Ministries Network, reports an incident that is so appalling it is almost impossible to believe. Rev. Bill Taylor, a United Methodist pastor in Conroe, Texas, a large Houston suburb, has been ousted by the congregation of Conroe's First United Methodist Church for refusing to condemn his son for being openly gay.

After serving as a District Superintendent in the UMC's Texas Annual Conference (regional division), Taylor was appointed in 2001 as senior pastor of the Conroe church. During his tenure the congregation grew from 2400 to 3100 members and its budget grew from one million to more than two million dollars. But in June 2006 Taylor's wife, a Conroe High School teacher, accompanied a group of students to the Houston Gay Pride parade and was interviewed there by *The Houston Chronicle*. That summer, too, the Taylors' gay son came out and was ordained as a pastor at a Dallas United Church of Christ congregation. Five laymen in Bill Taylor's Conroe congregation confronted Bill, insisting that the Bible required him to condemn his son. When he refused, the word spread in Conroe that Taylor didn't believe the Bible. As a result, despite his 35 years of ministry in the UMC he has been put on leave and has no idea where he will be allowed to serve or live after May 31. And we're expected to believe that this congregation is following Jesus.

