

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Joining what God chooses to bless



In his book *Waking to God's Dream: Spiritual Leadership and Church Renewal* (Abingdon, 1999), United Methodist pastor Dick Wills tells about getting a valuable new insight after years in the ordained ministry. "Most of my ministry," Wills says "I had been trying to persuade God to bless my good ideas. In a way I was trying to be God. Now I was beginning to see that what God wanted was for me to simply join God in what God was choosing to bless."

What a contrast this attitude is, to the one touted in the recent bestselling book *The Prayer of Jabez*. "Oh that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory," that book's author Bruce Wilkinson urges us to ask of God.

A comfortable pseudo-Christian mind-set

"Sadly," Wills observes, "a lot of churches have bought into having a comfortable, pseudo-Christian mind-set." Wills has tried to overcome the harmful effects of this mind-set by taking a fresh look at his calling and trying to give more attention to the Holy Spirit than to the institutional-church system. Wills's outlook changed, he says, when he started choosing to be part of what God wanted to bless instead of trying to get God to bless what he was doing.



Let's look at some of Wills's findings. Whether or not we agree with all of them or want to adopt his methods, Wills's observations can help us look at our own churches and our personal Christian commitment in valuable ways.

Good people doing what they were taught

When Wills thought about his congregation after seeing his ministry in a new light, some things about the congregation became clear to him. "The church

Linking a vision with a task

"A task without a vision," writes Dick Wills, "is pure drudgery." Wills reminds us that "without a vision the tasks of church life deteriorate into endless dreary committee meetings." But a vision isn't worth much by itself. "A church that has a vision with no task," observes Wills, "is just a church that dreams while it decays."



"God plants the vision secretly in the hearts of people," finds Wills. "They cannot see the vision until the person God has chosen reveals it." But that's not all. "Once the vision is announced," Wills says, "it must be confirmed by the people for whom the vision is given." And it will usually have these characteristics.



- You will see it in the Bible. "The Bible," Wills reminds us, "is the key to understanding what kind of things God gives us to do."
- It will be larger than you or your church can do by your own energy. To make it happen you will have to depend on God.

- It will be clear, not fuzzy.
- It will have to be accomplished by a group.

The vision may come through the laity

The vision won't necessarily come through the clergy. Wills tells about a small group of men who got the vision for their church to buy land and relocate. The pastor said it would be impossible, but while he was out of town the church voted to do it. (Would your church allow that?) The relocated church, Wills says, now has one of the strongest congregations in Florida.

The vision must be the driving focus

Wills has found that as pastor he must lift up the vision continually in worship services and church meetings. He must be sure that every new member becomes able to say it from memory. (Can members of your church do this, even if your church has an official vision statement?) "My responsibility," says Wills, "is to keep the vision as the driving focus for Christ Church. It is a task that has no end."





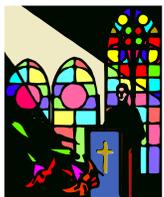
“I expected, initially, to be assigned to a little church with a handful of sheep. If I did well with them, then I would be assigned to another church that would be larger, pay more in salary, and have more sheep. I understood that I would keep doing that until one day my denomination would recognize me for being successful and give me an assignment that did not have any sheep.” That’s how Dick Wills says he understood his denominational system to work, when he entered its ordained ministry. Sound familiar?

Wills did all that the denomination told him to do, he says, and it kept rewarding him, but he finally realized that although he was on the success track in his career, he had lost track of his calling. He was bone-weary, he writes, “because of the emotional strain I had been under for such a long time trying to get this church to do better. I was weary because without the power of the Holy Spirit, the work I was doing was all on my own.” His life and his congregation’s life both improved when he stopped trying to please all of its members and his denomination and started letting the Holy Spirit lead.



was composed of good people who were doing what they had been taught for many years,” he realized. “For many of the members, being part of a church was as important as being a good citizen. Belonging to a church was something you did if you wanted to be a good person. I confess that my own ministry ... had helped foster that orientation to Christianity. Belonging to Christ Church for many people was like belonging to a club rather than to the church of Jesus Christ.”

“The general mind-set,” Wills saw, “was of giving one hour a week to religious activity if you did not have anything better to do.”



For the church members with this mind-set, Wills realized, Christianity was to be learned, not experienced. They assumed that if they attended worship they were Christians.

Asking them to choose

When Wills started seeing his calling as joining what God was choosing to bless, he changed his preaching style. “I began to see my preaching,” he tells us, “as an invitation to become a follower of Jesus.” This change seemed very odd to him, and no doubt to some of his members, too. “I must admit,” he writes, “that I thought it strange to begin preaching basic Christianity to an established congregation.”



But he did it anyway. He started preaching as though his hearers knew nothing about Christianity. He asked them to make a deliberate choice about whether to be fully devoted followers of Jesus and to experience the new life God wanted for them.

Wills knew there were already some deeply committed followers of Jesus in his congregation, of course, but strange as it may seem, he hadn’t felt good about them in the past. “I had tolerated them,” he says, “as people who were just a bit odd.” Now he realized that they had been praying for him and for the church, and that their prayers evidently had been effective. What a surprise!

Rediscovering small groups



Small groups within the congregation became a crucial ingredient in Wills’s new way of leading. To his surprise he was able to enlist a South African couple to join his staff as missionaries, to teach a unique kind of small-group ministry whose value he had seen when he attended a meeting in South Africa.

Five ingredients make the groups work, Wills finds. Each group, he explains, finds its own best proportion of these ingredients.

- √ Fellowship, with snacks, as members gather.
- √ Bible study, either topical (from life to Bible) or biblical (from Bible to life). The church provides sample copies of most small-group Bible study ma-

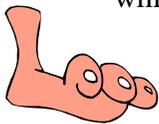
terial published today, from which each leader and group choose the material they will use.

√ Accountability. At first, members want to be held accountable only for a list of behaviors they choose, such as reading the study material. Gradually, however, they become willing to be asked about less comfortable aspects of discipleship, such as their use of money or time.



√ Worship and prayer, which usually includes closing by standing in a circle in which each member has an opportunity to express his or her prayer.

√ Mission or outreach, the journey outward to which the journey inward must lead. Without this, Wills believes, the group is like an ingrown toenail. It eventually brings pain to the whole body.



Leaders of these groups are lay, and when the time for starting a new group comes, the leader recruits the group. Three-hour training sessions for leaders are offered monthly on Sunday afternoons, and each new leader is expected to attend one of these sessions. Every new church member is asked to be in one of the groups for six weeks, and the church finds that 98% of the members who try a group for six weeks will stay.

In Wills's congregation all members who lead ministries are considered lay pastors. They are asked to meet four requirements:

- √ commit to daily prayer and Bible reading
- √ focus spiritually on their area of ministry
- √ let the church office know monthly who is working in their ministry area
- √ attend a monthly training session.



Voting rarely happens

When Wills reread the New Testament when he started trying to be a new kind of leader, he could find only one account of decision-making by majority vote. It was in Acts 27. Paul told a boat crew not to set sail, but by a majority vote they decided to sail. The boat sank.



This discovery led Wills to believe that neither his opinion nor that of the church's committees mattered, and that the church was never meant to be a democracy. "The only thing that really matters," he finds, "is the will of God." In his congregation, therefore, if a proposed activity focuses on the church's vision statement and is supported by scripture, the people proposing the new ministry can begin. No vote is needed.



This makes me wonder who decides whether the activity is consistent with scripture, because Christians often come to very different conclusions about that. Maybe the opinion of the proposers, who presumably will be the doers, is all that counts. This would mean that the church program could include ministries with opposite aims—for example, one that supported homosexual people and another that tried to get them to become heterosexual. That wouldn't bother me—I think it's simply part of the unavoidable ambiguity and disagreement that come with applying scripture to concrete situations—but I suspect it would bother a lot of church members.

Giving up on pleasing everyone

Wills knows that when a church operates like this some members will become angry or even drop out. They're the ones, he says, who continually ask the church "What are you going to do for me?" But despite the pain of losing them, he believes that his

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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.

church's new system comes closer to God's will than the old system of trying to please everyone.

Change is uncomfortable

Personal change precedes organizational change, Dick Wills finds. He believes that deep spiritual change is needed for leading today's church into the future. He's trying to foster that kind of change in himself, his staff, and his congregation, but it's hard. The more we hear about needed change, he observes, the more tightly we tend to grip what we're used to.

That observation strikes home for me, and it's uncomfortable. Although I see the need for change

in the church, I'm not willing to be part of changes that would require giving up things I enjoy. Earlier in my life I've been in small groups



that met weekly, and I've done daily Bible reading, but now that my schedule is flexible otherwise, I'm unwilling to make such regular commitments. I see the need for worship that uses today's music, but I'm not willing to take part in it. In fact, I'd rather not even have to think about such things . . .

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.
—Luke 9:23

Barbara

Living in a sentimental haze

“Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from stained glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes.” That's how author Chad Walsh describes the church in a 1972 book (*Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*, Greenwood Press) that Dick Wills quotes.



To describe today's church we'd have to update this description. In many churches, soft organ music and stained glass windows have been replaced by loud music, amplified electronic instruments, and videos, in plain auditoriums. However, the emotional quivers divorced from the will and intellect seem as prevalent as ever. So do the lip service and the harmless platitudes.

Are we willing to do what would be necessary to make the church different from this? I'm not sure that I am, even though I'm convinced that it needs to be different. What about you?