

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

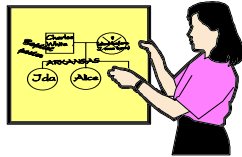


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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Seeing how faith grows

In sharing our spiritual family trees, members of my Sunday School class became closer to each other and more aware of how our faith has grown.* We learned some things about how faith matures. We became more aware of what had led us to our present attitudes toward the Christian faith and the church. We saw some reasons for our having arrived at our present religious beliefs and our ways of acting on those beliefs.



Recognizing our spiritual ancestors

Parents and other close family members shape our religious habits, beliefs, and attitudes during childhood. That influence probably never leaves us completely, but through people beyond our families we may see the need to revise our previous views and habits. Those people can become spiritual ancestors for us.



My class members saw that when we reevaluated and changed childhood religious patterns, it was usually because certain people crossed our path and got our attention in new ways. For some it was a pastor, Sunday School teacher, or youth director. For some it was a college professor. For some it was an older friend that we admired. Sometimes what influenced us was the person's dynamic personality or speaking style or outstanding achievements. Often it was merely the person's taking a special interest in us and spending time with us.

When the religious views we got from our home and our home church were satisfying, these outsiders' appeal



Sharing family trees could help the church

Because of the benefits members of my Sunday School class saw in sharing spiritual family trees, we wish that the members of every church group, whether it's a class, a choir, or a committee, could share theirs with each other. Doing that would be harder for large groups, those that meet infrequently, and those that must transact business when they meet. Such groups could find a way, however, and we feel that finding it would be worth the effort. A retreat could provide the time, and a large group could break into small ones for sharing. Some people wouldn't want to present their spiritual family trees, but the group would benefit from those who did.



What if pastors presented their spiritual family trees one Sunday morning during their tenure, instead of preaching the usual kind of sermon?

Imagine how much closer congregation members might feel to their pastors. They might also be more tolerant of the pastors' human imperfections and of pastors' views that differ from church members' views.

If members shared spiritual family trees they might become more aware of what their churches need to be doing. They'd see the long-lasting damage done by ineffective pastors and blah church activities and leaders. They'd also see the great, long-lasting influence for good that dynamic pastors and lay people, challenging classes, and exciting worship can have.

Revealing the Holy Spirit at work

God has lots of children but no grandchildren, it seems. We don't get faith or become Christian merely by having a Christian family. Our family may start us in useful religious habits, but to be Christians we still must make our own decisions and commitments. And of course the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in our faith journey. Many people become Christians despite being in a family with no church involvement or interest in being Christian.



Spiritual family trees don't tell the whole story of our faith and where it comes from, but they can play an important part in showing us where both human influences and the Holy Spirit are at work in our lives.

* Last month's *Connections*, in which I described our way of sharing, is at www.connectionsonline.org. If you want a copy by mail, let me know and I'll mail you one.

may have come mainly from their confirmation of those views. If what we got at home wasn't convincing, however, outside people and events appealed to us because they gave us a different and more satisfying view. They offered a convincing alternative that we hadn't previously known about or seen as permissible.



The leader of a church Youth Week when I was in high school did this for me. His dynamic personality and powerful sermons during dramatic worship services were a surprising and welcome contrast to what I had seen in routine Sunday School lessons, worship services, and youth activities. He made me realize that being a Christian could mean experiencing God's presence. He made me aware that being a Christian meant being committed to bold action. It didn't mean the mild, automatic participation in routine church programs that was all I'd previously been aware of. Neither did it mean having a bland, colorless appearance and personality like most of the church leaders I'd seen.



For Laura* the motivation to reevaluate came from her grown daughter, Amy. Amy had grown up in the church, but only as a young adult did she realize what

Christianity really meant. A Bible-study group at the stockbrokerage firm where she worked opened her eyes. That led Amy to report her new insights and questions to Laura. A big increase in Christian commitment for Laura was the result. Even our children can be among our spiritual ancestors.

How do spiritual ancestors influence us?

Some people influenced us, my class members saw, by deliberately and openly communicating their convictions. Some did it publicly, from a pulpit, a Sunday School or college class lectern, or a prominent position in the secular community. Some wrote books or letters. Some influenced us by visibly taking unpopular stands on issues or refusing to go along with shady-but-common practices in the church or the business world.



Some people who became our spiritual family merely noticed us and en-

gaged us in conversation. Others invited us to a worship service, Sunday School class, or study group. The owner of a bed-and-breakfast where Arlene lived as a young adult invited her to church. Arlene went, joined that church, and never went back to the denomination she had been in since childhood.



My spiritual ancestors include many authors, though I never saw more than one or two of them in person and some were no longer living when I read their books. Especially at a time when church turmoil made me wonder if there was any real point to the church, by acknowledging and answering my questions these authors changed me from a robot-like churchgoer to one who was committed and confident that the church's true purpose was important.

Painful events can trigger spiritual growth



Even events that seem negative, like the turmoil that motivated me to think about the church's purpose, can become life-changing spiritual ancestors for us.

Sharing her spiritual family tree reminded Anne how the civil-rights turmoil of the 1960's had influenced her. After growing up in a rural area with little racial or religious diversity, Anne lived during her young-adult years in a city where violent civil-rights protests tore apart not only the city but also its churches. For the first time Anne realized how African-Americans and Jews were segregated and mistreated, and she was horrified to see churches supporting these conditions instead of taking the lead to get rid of them. That eye-opening experience permanently did away with Anne's naive view of the church. It also showed her the important role that promoting justice plays in being a Christian.

A family crisis was a key part of Fran's spiritual ancestry. As a child she was responsible for her little sister during a church service. The little sister went forward during an altar call, and Fran saw no reason to stop her, but their parents were furious at Fran when they found out. It was a sore subject for a long time, but remembering it and thinking about why it happened has contributed to Fran's reevaluating her beliefs and coming to appreciate the church more.



* Names of all class members except Larry (whose permission I have) have been changed to protect their privacy

Evidently the Holy Spirit somehow put these people and events in our path and caused us to notice them. In some cases we had knowingly asked God for help, and an experience or a person showed up as God's answer to our prayers. In other cases God seems to have led us to the event or person without our having known we were looking for help or needed any. Some of the influential people deliberately offered themselves to God to help others—by choosing the ordained ministry, for example, or lay leadership roles in the church or the secular community. Some chose positions like leading scout troops or teaching school, choosing to give guidance of some kind but not thinking of it as spiritual guidance.



Some people who were God's instruments in our lives may not know they were. Larry reminded us of Steve's comment in class several years ago when Larry was going through a divorce, a move, and a job change. "You have Easter with you all the time, in your last name—Easterling," Steve had reminded him. "It can be your constant reminder of the resurrection and new life that's available to you." If someone who unknowingly helped you is still living, how about thanking him or her now while you still can?

We gained new insights

In sharing spiritual family trees, members of my class gained new insights about ourselves, each other, our faith, our spiritual gifts, and the church.



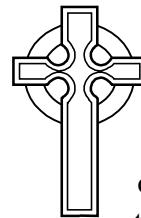
■ We became closer to each other and better able to appreciate each other's beliefs and feelings, because we became more aware of what those beliefs and feelings were. We're closer now, too, because we now have in common the experience of sharing spiritual

family trees. We also know we have experiences, beliefs, and feelings in common with each other.

■ Anne says our experience made her want to do something similar in a non-church group she's in. She and most of the group's other members have been in it for years, and they're friends who have many other opportunities to be together, but she now realizes she doesn't know those friends as well as she thought she did or as well as she'd like to.



■ Describing our spiritual family trees helped us to clarify and become more aware of our beliefs. It's easy to think you know what you believe and why, until you try to put it into words to tell someone. We also became more aware of some of our values, feelings, and attitudes toward the church and other church members.



■ Several of us saw ways in which we're continuing our parents' ways of acting out their Christian beliefs. A lot of our attitudes toward the church are copies of theirs, too, we realized. Some of those are helpful, but others aren't.

This awareness came as a surprise even to some of us who already had thought a lot about how our parents had influenced us. More than ever, I realized the extent to which I grew up seeing conventional morality, good manners, niceness, and church participation as what being a Christian meant. I saw for the first time the similarity between my recent efforts and my father's efforts in the 1950's to combat church trends that he saw as dangerous, even though the changes he felt were needed were almost the opposite of the ones I now consider necessary.



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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.

■ We saw how influential our actions and words can be, even when we don't realize it. We saw how important merely giving personal attention to someone can be. We saw that even if all we do is serve as a sounding board or provide a listening ear for someone at a crucial time (which we may not know is crucial), especially during that person's youth and young-adult years, we may be making a life-changing contribution to that person's faith.

■ Our appreciation of the church grew. We saw how disillusioning its failure to practice what it preaches



can be, but we were reminded of how much it has meant to each of us despite its shortcomings.

As an extra benefit our class attendance improved during our family-tree series. We all hated to miss a single Sunday, because being absent meant missing the chance to hear someone's story and thus to know that person and ourselves better.

Many ways of sharing faith stories help to increase faith and build community. My Sunday School class found sharing spiritual family trees to be an especially effective way. We recommend it.

Barbara



A risk worth taking

The kind of sharing that I've described here may seem strange to you if you've never been in a group that shared so openly. It may seem too risky. I urge you to try it anyway.

Invite your hearers to ask you questions and make observations about the possible meaning of what you tell them. They're likely to notice some things you hadn't noticed, that you'll benefit from seeing. Their comments and questions may remind you of things you'd forgotten but need to include. We all tend to avoid seeing aspects of our lives that are uncomfortable to see, but that keeps us from making those aspects available to God for healing and growth. Open sharing helped make the Methodist movement spiritually powerful in its early years. Only recently have churches become places where people mainly listen, or talk only about the superficial topics that casual acquaintances talk about at social events.

Drawing your spiritual family tree and thinking about it by yourself would be more helpful to you than not examining these aspects of your life at all, but sharing with someone close to you would be even more helpful, and sharing in a wider group could be the most helpful of all. I hope you'll try it. I think you'll find some welcome kindred spirits. I suspect you'll feel closer to God, too.

