

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Rethinking *Connections*

By this fall, I will have been writing *Connections* every month for 16 years. In those years I've changed some, and the world has changed a lot. Some aspects of the church have changed, too, but not nearly enough. I now believe more strongly than ever that the church must embrace change far more vigorously if it is to carry out its God-given purpose today.

So many churches, including mine, seem increasingly stuck in the past when they need to be moving forward instead. Thus I have become more discouraged about the likelihood of change. This feeling is making me rethink what to do about *Connections*.

## A growing group of readers

In November 1992, I mailed the first issue of *Connections* to about 1200 people nationwide who were active in the United Methodist Church. I wanted to communicate my concerns to people who could help bring about change in the church, locally and beyond.

*Connections* now reaches nearly 1700 people by e-mail (now my much-preferred format) and about 4200 by U.S. mail. My active readership now includes members of most mainline denominations and many non-churchgoers. Also on my mailing list are people in especially influential church positions, such as United Methodist conference delegates, in the hope that at least some will read *Connections* and be motivated by it to vote for change.



Many people outside my mailing list also read *Connections*. Some of you download it from my website. Others forward it to a class, study group, or friends. So I can't say exactly how many regular readers are out there, but I know there are several thousand of you.

Your responses show that many of you also are discouraged about the future of the church. That's sad if it isolates us, but good if it spurs us to take action.



## Other concerned Christians

I'm delighted to have gotten connected in the past few years with Christians throughout the U.S. who are actively trying to find effective ways to bring about needed change in the church. During those same years, however, I've become less connected to my local congregation. I've seen it increasingly promote beliefs about God, the Bible, and human beings that I can't in good conscience support. So after 49 very active years in the congregation, I'm almost a dropout from it now.



## Focusing in two directions

My family and I are now focusing our efforts and financial contributions in two related directions. First, we're doing what we can to promote the kinds of compassion and justice that Jesus modeled. Second, we're trying to help further the efforts and disseminate the findings of today's best Christian thinkers.



As part of this effort, we're working with an exciting group of Christians with similar aims, to focus especially on the southern part of the U.S., where we live and where we especially see the need for change. We have some encouraging possibilities in the works, and I'm not yet sure what role, if any, *Connections* may play in them.

## Considering a short break

This fall I'll be writing a book for Abingdon Press, to appear in 2009. Other personal commitments will also make the fall unusually busy for me. Also, the disturbing change in my local church, along with members' and UMC leaders' passive reactions to it, keeps feeling more painful. The resulting emotional stress I feel has made me temporarily less objective than I need to be for writing *Connections*. In addition, my decreased church participation has made finding fresh topics harder.



For these reasons, during the next few months I may recycle some past issues of *Connections* in updated form, enlist a guest writer or editor or two, or even take a sabbatical for two or three months. I'll appreciate your prayers during this time.

## Lonely, but not as alone as we think

One of the most interesting and helpful aspects of writing *Connections* has been getting feedback from so many of you. Once in a while someone tells me I'm a heretic who's going straight to hell, but the vast majority of responses have been appreciative.

More and more, I sense that people welcome what I write because I express the frustration, even desperation, that all too many of us feel. Many readers have told me, "I'm so glad someone is finally speaking openly about these things!"



Others of you have shared stories of your own lonely church struggles.

Why do so many Christians feel that they must be alone or crazy? Why don't we hear anyone else expressing similar beliefs or concerns? When we find each other as kindred spirits, even by e-mail, it's like water in the desert—perhaps precisely because so many of us still lack spiritual sustenance in our own churches.

## Abandoned by churches and pastors

These lonely Christians actually have a great deal to offer the church. They want to think seriously about their faith and discuss hard topics openly, not just accept whatever they hear preached or taught. Many want to know more about the latest theological insights, based on modern discoveries in archaeology and historical research. They long to live out the compassion and justice that Jesus practiced. They want to work with others to reach out to our society's outcasts. They want the church to set visible examples of radical equality, to spread real good news and encourage our whole society to consider more humane ways of functioning.



The church needs to do all these things, so it desperately needs these people. But all too often, thinkers and innovators find little welcome in their own church.

Many churches seem content to stay in what they think of as the middle of the road, often not realizing that they're actually stuck at the curb, watching the world pass them by. Some pastors and leaders even try to turn back the clock, subtly or even overtly discouraging fresh thinking and spiritual growth.

The more aware of all this I have become, the more determined I have been to keep writing *Connections*,

and to keep speaking out in whatever other ways I can. I still hope that every once in a while, I may encourage just one more church leader to take visible, practical steps to promote change, or just one more church member to speak up and keep speaking.

## Church alumni and church passivists

Some of the readers I hear from have now completely given up on the institutional church. Even though they were once very active in a church, they no longer attend worship or participate in any way. They're members of what Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong has called the church alumni association. These ex-churchgoers are much more numerous than many of us realize. The church urgently needs to reach out to them, and not with the same clichés and evasions that turned them off.



Even more Christians, however, are still in the church but passive. At some level they're aware of some of the church's shortcomings. They may realize that the bland sermons from many pulpits fail to reflect the example of Jesus. They may understand that God isn't really male, and that much of the Bible must be read as metaphor in its own cultural context. They may wish that their congregation would do more to promote environmental stewardship. They may wish it would welcome people who don't neatly fit into the pigeonhole of middle-class "family values"—people of different sexual orientations or ethnic or economic backgrounds. However, when we need activists, these Christians are often passive.

## What holds so many of us back?

Something keeps these church members from putting their thoughts into action. Often it's emotional ties to the status quo, or the comfort of belonging to a group. Also, many of us don't want to risk longstanding relationships by bringing conflict to light. For seniors, the thought of facing old age and illness without church support can even be frightening. I can certainly



understand all these concerns, because feeling cut off from my own church the last few years has been one of the most painful experiences I've ever had.

Tradition and nostalgia can also keep us from taking action, precisely because they bring comfort when we most need it. Even when worship is dull and saccha-

rine, full of dated sexist language, or actively misleading, many members keep supporting it. Joining in well-loved hymns, creeds, prayers, and rituals conceals conflict and creates the comforting illusion of unity. Singing and praying together makes many of us feel better. After all, togetherness is what the church teaches, isn't it?



Thanks to the church's frequent emphasis on unity at the expense of truth, however, many members assume that being a Christian mainly means acting sweet and never confronting anyone or causing conflict. Thus they're not willing to rock the boat or risk offending anyone by mentioning anything that's wrong in the church, no matter how wrong it may be.

### Passivity preserves injustice

All these reactions are understandable. But for the long-term future of the church and for our own spiritual health, they're disturbing. When we don't even try to remedy wrongs, we increase them. When the church is addicted to tradition, uncritical supporters of the church are what recovery programs call enablers. By their gifts, attendance, and above all, their silence, they in effect oppose what Jesus said and did.

**“Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”**  

**—Matthew 15:2**

Because I feel the church so urgently needs change, I get discouraged when Christians don't even seem willing to take small steps toward it. Still, I'm sure

that Christians can accomplish more than they realize.

Even if you've been hesitant so far, what modest steps toward change could you now take? Ask to sing one nonsexist hymn or anthem each Sunday? Suggest

having one recycling day each month? Urge your church to host one community discussion on health insurance? Make one unexpected comment during a Bible study, just to raise the possibility of a different interpretation?

If only a few more pastors and lay members risked such small steps now, the future might eventually be more hopeful for many others. You might find unexpected support, and fewer of us might feel rejected.

### It's not too late for bolder action

When passivity is the norm within the church, however, Christians who see the urgent need for change must seek other avenues outside the church. For me, *Connections* has been such an outlet. But now, even this late in my life, I'm hopeful about a new horizon.

I recently met with six kindred spirits to discuss new options for progressive Christian education, networking, and community action. They're committed, well-informed, thinking, forward-looking Christians. They want to follow the teaching and example of Jesus and to help the church do the same, even if they've given up on being able to do that in their local congregations.



All seven of us grew up in the church and spent years as super-active participants. Three are clergy. Yet only one of the seven still attends church, and she's about to stop. When Christians like these don't feel that their gifts are valued in a congregation, that's a sad commentary on the church. These seven and many others like them are what one of them calls "faithful people who can't stand the church any longer."

They want to promote justice and mercy, to which Jesus seems to have given top priority. They want to know and help make known the most reliable and re-

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.

cent findings about the origin and development of the Bible. They feel sure that Christianity isn't the only route to the sacred. They want to use their brains as well as their hearts to arrive at their religious beliefs. They want to consider how Christian principles apply to current local and world issues and relate to the findings of science and other disciplines. But they don't see the church helping them do these things. In fact, they mostly see it hindering them.



### Still hopeful

I still hope to spur more *Connections* readers to ask themselves, their congregations, and their church

leaders how much progress they have made in recent years in rethinking their beliefs and ministries. I hope to motivate more of you to ask what concrete steps you might take, to encourage fresh thinking and bold action by fellow churchgoers. I hope to keep reaching new readers who will ask these questions, too.

I still hope, too, to contribute as much as possible to the church's effectiveness in furthering compassion and justice. As I rethink how to do this, through *Connections* and in other ways, I'll appreciate any ideas you'd like to share.

*Barbara*



## Connections

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## Rethinking *Connections*

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### Looking for ways to continue

I'm rethinking how best to continue *Connections* in the next several months and years. One reason is that I keep being reminded of the difference between the ways in which today's younger people receive information and communicate with each other, and the ways in which many of us who are older do those things.

Many of the enthusiastic *Connections* readers I hear from tell me they are in their 70s or 80s. Many others are over 50. From these readers' comments I know that their thinking about the church is quite forward-looking—more so than the thinking of many younger churchgoers, in fact. But I can see that reading printed material is still these older churchgoers' main way to get information and to express themselves, just as those are my main ways.

Even though many of us older readers regularly use e-mail and use the Internet to look for information, many don't like to read directly from the computer screen. We print what we find, then read from the printed page. Also, few of us send text messages to our friends. Few of us blog or take part in Internet forums, or put videos on YouTube to express our concerns to the world.



For these reasons, the audience for *Connections* in its present form is probably shrinking. I'm not interested in creating a completely new format myself, but I'd like to see whatever good I've done continue in some form. Any suggestions?