

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Connecting with worship

“When I read the first two paragraphs of the latest *Connections*,” a reader writes, “I almost jumped up and shouted, ‘this is exactly how I feel.’ ”



“When I read your August issue,” says another, “I repeated over and over, ‘You are speaking to my condition,’ as the Quakers would say. You wrote as I feel deeply.”

And another, echoing many others, “I believed somehow there was something wrong with me, that I was the problem, that I just couldn’t get it.”

“For too long I have sat in church and been bored to tears,” still another reader writes. “I went because, well, because it is Sunday and you go to church.”

Important messages for the church

I’m getting a steady stream of responses like these, from people of all ages, from all over the U.S. An 85-year-old retired clergyman writes,



“My wife and I both search for things to do to escape having to go to church these days.” We might think this pair is merely burned out from so many years of service, but that can’t be true of the youth pastor who says, “I don’t get anything out of worship of late, even the ‘contemporary’ worship style. I feel like the only progressive voice in my area, and it drives me crazy.”



The comments I’m getting bring three main messages: many people feel deadened by our worship; absence from worship services doesn’t necessarily mean lack of faith or interest; and interacting with thinkers and questioners is vital for growing in faith.

Leaders who design worship services need to be taking these messages to heart. So do church members who don’t want their church to change.

Nostalgia is not enough

My comments last month about hymns brought varied responses. Some responders said they just ignore the words of hymns. If a hymn brings back fond memories of beloved family members or churches of earlier years, that’s enough. But for many others it is far from enough. One of these, a lifelong Methodist, explained, “I have minister friends that tell me to sing the songs from a nostalgic perspective. I’ve tried that. It doesn’t work.” It doesn’t work for me, either.



Several responders said they’re as turned off by “Amazing Grace” as I am. “For several years,” wrote one, “I’ve had no intention to sing about being a wretch.” But another reader said, “Realizing that I am a wretch has been one of the most positive experiences in my life,” and, not surprisingly, I suppose, some others I heard from expressed similar views.

Substituting words is not enough



Several mentioned substituting other words for offensive ones, in hymns and other things we’re expected to sing or recite during worship. That’s been my solution for years, though it’s not totally satisfactory. “I also cannot sing many of the hymns,” said a reader who uses this method. She went on to say, “One Sunday I even softly sang my own version of some ‘blood’ song, with new and better words I made up on the spot. Another time I came home and crossed out a hymn in my personal hymnal and wrote a new verse.”

Why settle for brainwashing?

One person I heard from saw a redeeming aspect of ‘7-11’ songs despite finding them shallow and often misleading. “They work like a mantra,” he finds. “Much of the language is not helpful but they can create a ‘thin place’ where I can grasp for God, in which I am not having to focus on the words but rather focus on the God those words point to.” But couldn’t that function be served also by repeating words that don’t misrepresent God’s nature? I think so, and that would avoid the brainwashing we now too often get.

We're not alone

Above all, the responses I'm getting let me know that those of us who feel disconnected from most worship services are far from alone. We may be a minority in the church, but we're numerous.



Because we rarely hear others speaking up about how they feel, however, many of us assume that we're alone and that there's something wrong with us for feeling the way we feel. Consequently we mostly keep our true feelings hidden. That makes those who feel similarly think *they're* alone and avoid saying how *they* feel. This vicious circle of silence keeps us from working for needed change.



Here's how one layman described it to me. "Your August *Connections* addresses some issues that have troubled me for a long, long time, but I was never able to understand what the problem was.

You have helped identify the trouble spots for me, and, even more important, I realize now that I am not alone out here. There may be only two of us who feel this way, but I now know there are at least two, and that is one more than I expected." I don't know how many of us there are, but I know there are many more than two.

Closet Christians seeking like minds

"You describe my experience of 'going to church' very accurately," a lay woman writes. "I seldom go to church any more, though I think my Christian faith is stronger than ever. I seek out like minds who are open to discussion of scholars' and scientists' discoveries, and I have hope and am enlivened by these shared ideas. It's like an underground or 'closet Christian' experience." How aptly that describes

"You are the light of the world. ... Let your light shine before others ..."
—Matthew 5:14-16

many of us, but how unfortunate it is, because Jesus tells us to be seen and heard.

What I found especially important about what this reader wrote was that even

though she seldom "goes to church" now, she finds that her Christian faith is stronger than ever. Many Christians say that meeting together is essential for being Christian, and to some extent I think they're

right. However, I think we need to take a careful look at that claim, rather than merely assuming that attending a worship service every week is essential for being Christian. It may not be.

What creates community?

A *Connections* reader explains. "My wife and I pretty much share your views on worship, including the lack of a felt need to 'go to church' in the conventional sense. What we do miss, though, is the experience of community that we have at times found among like-minded folk, regarding religion and life. We find it among people who are not locked down by tradition. Perhaps the quests for meaningful worship AND for authentic community go hand in hand. A common element to both is a passion for truth, and where that is permitted to emerge, the effects on both worship and community can be potent."



A requirement for community for many of us, this reader recognizes, is being among people whose passion for truth keeps them from merely following tradition because it is tradition. That passion, rather than agreeing with all of each other's views, is what makes them "like minds." It leads them to examine many views, and sometimes to do untraditional things as a result.



I don't find community through momentary times of greeting or "passing the peace" during worship services. I find those distracting instead. Yet they are often considered evidence of community and ways of creating community. And for some Christians those times may actually serve those purposes, though for me and many others they don't. I suspect the difference has a lot to do with personality differences, which I'll say more about in next month's *Connections*. The problem is our failure to recognize such differences when we plan worship and other church activities.

Leaving home to find kindred spirits

Many Christians find that they must depend on a widely scattered group for the community they need. In their local church congregation they may have good friends but not the kindred



spirits they need for helping them to grow in their faith and encouraging them to pursue their God-given callings. These Christians find that they must look farther afield to find people with a similar understanding of the Bible's message and of what being Christian in today's world requires, and with a similar interest in thinking and conversing in fresh ways about questions of religion and life.



Little churches within the big church

“Our hearts and social responsibilities often won't be fed in and by the 'little churches,'” writes one of these Christians, referring to local church congregations. “Personally,” he finds, “I am most at home at assemblies of the 'big church,' the World Council of Churches.”



Others of us won't find our kindred spirits in that kind of organization but will find them by attending other kinds of church-related events away from home and by staying in communication with people we meet at those. Others find kindred spirits by reading and discussing books, and sometimes corresponding with their authors. Still others of us find our community among the people who share our concern about particular social-justice issues that are our special focus.

These people, who are close to us in spirit even if they're far from us geographically, become our little church within the wider church. In our interaction with them we find the community we need. Finding it in a local congregation might be ideal, but finding it elsewhere is far better than not finding it at all.



We worship in many ways

Our real worship may happen not in attending conventional worship services but rather in communicating with our kindred spirits, as well as through appreciating nature, serving with the poor or the ill, or working for justice. Attending worship services isn't the only way to worship. Depending on what the person and the worship service are like, it may not even be the best way.



One responder wrote me, “I am finding more and more than I can better experience the reality of God outside the church when the view inside has become so narrow.” If we're given a narrow view of God by the worship services available to us, we may be better off avoiding them, because God isn't what's really being worshiped there. A worship service that focuses on a capricious, controllable, fully predictable being, up in the sky somewhere, instead of the infinite, uncontainable God, is worshipping something other than God, and that's idolatry.

Helpful comfort and harmful comfort



“I can no longer sit through a standard church service. I get too angry,” one responder wrote me, and she's far from alone. But is the discomfort that comes from anger a good reason for staying away? It may be, at times. Anger can be a powerful motivation for needed change. It may be telling us that for now our worship needs to be activism out in the world, rather than attending worship services.

Being comfortable in worship isn't necessarily a good thing. The comfort of being able to recognize God and express ourselves to God during a worship service is valuable, but if comfort comes from be-

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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 12 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

ing assured that we individually and the church as an institution need to keep doing and thinking only what we're already doing and thinking, it can be deadly.

Faith is the reason for questioning

"You have put your hands on one of the crucial issues in the life of the church," a theologian wrote me about last month's *Connections*. "How frustrating it is to deal with a church that does not expect any challenges or surprises from God and that acts as if we know all there is to know about God. I know many people who share your feelings, seminary fac-

ulty included. My school-age children could not agree with you more. Even in other countries, people have similar feelings. Some have been active in church for decades but don't know any more how to relate to it."



"There is no lack of faith in God," he finds. "Faith in God is the reason for questioning the church. We have something of a movement here, of faithful people who can't stand church any more. This does not seem to be about demanding small changes here or there. It seems to be about fundamental issues." I think he's right about that.

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Coming next month—worship, personality types, and stages of faith

Several responders to last month's *Connections*, and some to earlier issues too, have asked me what kind of worship service I would find helpful, since I've often mentioned features that for me are a hindrance to worship.



I've been thinking about that question for a long time, and I want to answer it in *Connections*. At first I thought I'd answer it in this issue. However, I think how each of us answers it depends on several personal characteristics, two especially. It depends a lot on some personality characteristics that apparently are innate—characteristics like whether being in groups of people energizes us and is easy for us, or makes us feel drained of energy and requires effort. Our worship needs also depend a lot on where we are in our faith journey, and what experiences have led us to our present place in the journey. So I don't want to describe my personal worship preferences without also saying some things about those two influences. I'm planning to do that in next month's *Connections*.