

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Connections readers speak

Readers have sent a deluge of responses to the August *Connections*. This issue consists of representative quotes from them, because I believe the church needs to heed what committed, thinking Christians like these are saying.



### They're lonely

"When I first heard about *Connections*, I was a progressive pastor appointed to an extremely conservative UMC. In my decades of ministry I'd fortunately not served in a church with this southern style of literalism. I was confused, hurting, angry, and feeling very much alone. Your monthly *Connections* served and still serves as a drinking fountain of fresh, cool water and affirms that we are not alone."



—a New York pastor

"I so look forward to *Connections* each month. It, along with a small book club, has kept me spiritually alive these last 8 years. My wife and I moved here from a very alive and active, forward looking and thinking church. The switch from the intellectual influence of my former UMC Annual Conference has made me an 'alumnus.' I had grown up in the church and had spent my life turning on my brain, head, and heart when I went to church. The challenge was to live up to the scripture and not live around it. My first encounter with the 'other' Christianity was in a Bible study of Matthew here. I commented that 'Jesus was a Jew,' and it was as if I had blasphemed. I was told directly by the pastor that he 'was not a Jew, but a Christian.' Needless to say, I didn't go back. After searching for a Methodist church here that wasn't just a rehash of right-wing evangelicalism, I've quit going. I read from Jim Wallis to Marcus



### Some miss the church, many don't

"I've essentially disconnected from the institutional church. I haven't attended regularly the past few years. I've become just a Christian tourist. ... But so many times my friends and family have 'talks around the table' that feel as spiritual as any church experience. They're never planned, they just happen. Also, a spirit-filled and faithful connection to God connects us, your readers." —a Texas laywoman

"It is affirming to know from *Connections* that I am not the only person who feels that my soul may never recover from the assault by some in my very own church. I could weep at the myopia of so many of our UM lay and clergy. ... It has been well over a month since I have attended worship, and to be perfectly honest, I have not missed it at all and truly feel no desire to go back. I see some of my 'spiritually connected' friends, and that helps fill my spiritual void."



—a Wisconsin laywoman

"You can count me in the church alumnae. I can't go any more. For generations our family has been active in the UMC, but now we are gone. The church is moving backward and we want to go forward. I can't find a church home, so I am staying home. Someday I hope to stop crying about my church homelessness. It just doesn't feel right." —a central Texan

### They're in many denominations

"Like you, I have become more and more detached from church. I have friends—long time faithful members—who feel the same way. This doesn't mean that we don't continue to search, read, and pray. It is just that organized religion is no longer relevant for us." —a New Mexico Episcopalian



"I recently resigned from our local Presbyterian Church. I was a member for more than 50 years and was commissioned as an elder. It's a long story that mirrors many of the same issues you write about in *Connections*." —an Ohio reader

"We're active in our Presbytery, but it is such an uphill struggle. Almost no other congregation is willing to risk saying or doing anything that will break the hold of the die-hard conservatives." —a Californian

Borg to Paul Tillich and Henri Nouwen. But I miss the community and the partnership along the pilgrim's way." —*A central Texas layman*

"My journal over the past 20 years is replete with longings for vitality, freshness, openness, focusing on the important things, the things you talk about in *Connections*. My wife and I are now, and sadly have been for almost a decade, dropouts for good reason. We've visited almost every church in our town. ... I would like to find more of the encouragement toward change that I find when I read your publication, to be reminded that I am NOT



alone in thinking what I think, hoping for what I hope for, and yearning for what I yearn for!" —*a Texas mayor*

"I completely understand your discouragement, as that is where I am. But the fact that there are thousands of people reading and relating to *Connections* has got to be a good sign. We're all probably feeling up against a wall, unable to bring about change in our local churches. I'm just about to drop out altogether, but before I do, maybe I'll print off a bunch of copies of *Connections* and leave them around the church. Or write an article for the church newsletter suggesting your website. We've got to do something!" —*a Texan*



## They want to hear and discuss many views

"I have been a member of the United Methodist Church for over 40 years. For 20 years I have been in an adult class of couples who are now nearing 60-70. When we joined the class it was known for lively discussions and acceptance of diverse opinions regarding faith. Recently, the leader argued for a precise definition of a word in a scripture passage. I said we can't know for sure because we don't have any original scriptural documents. The leader told me I was wrong. I asked our associate pastor to reassure her that what I had said was true. She listened to me and suggested I visit the Unitarian Church across town. I have effectively been excommunicated. ...



Those of us in the Bible Belt need a way to share what is in our hearts. Our churches are not allowing us to do that." —*an Oklahoma laywoman*

"I am beginning my next-to-last year in ordained UM ministry. After my first year of college, I joined the then Methodist Church due to one overarching reason: the local pastor took me under his wing and encouraged me to read widely, to ask all my questions ... I joined because I had found a church where having a brain wasn't an automatic negative, reading and deep study was a virtue, and I could raise my questions and share my doubts without recrimination. ... Sadly, the area where I've served all my life is now more hooked into institutional and personal survival than ever. And reading? studying? being confronted with new theological insights? Forget it. I've sought out various oases to stay sane and focused. In them I've encountered Borg, Spong, Wink and others who've kept the fire alive in me. But it's been a lonely journey in many ways, with few companions." —*an Ohio pastor*



"The people who were once open and accepting have now become very judgmental. It breaks my heart. The current pastor tries to be of some influence but it is frustrating. The fundamentalists have taken over the Sunday School. All the people of a more traditional understanding, who once attended, slip silently out the door after the worship service. And they have no voice. I find myself being less and less involved." —*an Illinois laywoman*



"I long for a safe place to ask my questions and express my faith perspective. ... I have recently signed up for a Disciple Bible Study class at my local church because I want to support the effort. But I just know someone is going to say (and it might be the pastor!) God created the world in 6 days, and that's that. And I will have to bite my tongue and go home and scream." —*a church agency employee*

"I am tired. I am tired of continuing to struggle with the same limited thinking that I have struggled with for years. I can't imagine what I will do when I retire, but it will not have to do with the organized church." —*a Texas pastor*

"I share your frustration, including a pleasant church perpetuating archaic theology in our young as well as everyone else." —*an Arizona layman*



## They want stimulation and challenge

“I have found what you have offered us to be stimulating and thought provoking. It has been more so than most things I have heard in church. ... Thanks for your efforts in introducing me to new ideas or, rather, encouraging me to think differently about old ideas.”  
—a Washington layman



“I know that you often shake me from my complacency. I often resent change, when change is the way to greater spiritual growth. *Connections* has been a catalyst to make me look with freshness at my own thoughts and those of our church.”  
—a Houston laywoman



“Thank you again for making me think and consider topics that I really didn’t want to consider. I feel that through your writings I have grown as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.” —a Louisiana laywoman

“I have supported changes in our church and have spoken out on occasion. *Connections* helps me think through issues and try to convey more views than the ‘party line’ when I teach classes. ... I am always surprised how people tend to ‘think in groups’ and how small their areas of interest are. Your writing is making a difference, causing debate and change.”  
—a Texas businesswoman

“You have encouraged me in this faith journey. I can’t believe it took me so many years to have the nerve to act on what I really believe.” —an Oklahoman



## They want to follow Jesus

“I, too, mourn for the church of today. It seems as though few people are taking the time to think about their faith. A sort of passive, mellow drifting seems to be the norm. It’s unfortunate that the common expression of faith is so bland, when Jesus was anything but bland. I see the Jesus of the Bible as a rabble-rousing radical, who took on the political leaders and power systems of his time and taught and demonstrated a better way.” Instead of seeing the church doing what Jesus did, this writer finds it too often being “an extension of outright consumerism.” He observes, “We want the best at the lowest price. We’ll change congregations and denominations to find it. A price we’re unwilling to pay is upset, stress, or change. Better to be entertained than to be challenged to find ways to change the systems of society. We have concentrated so much on personal salvation to be enjoyed in an afterlife, that we’ve forgotten that Jesus went about trying to change things for the better right now!” —an Arizona layman



“If the church is going to make a difference in the world today, changes have to be made. The theology that we preach and teach is enormously important. The kingdom of God as preached by Jesus is a vision of a radical transformation of human beings and human institutions (social, political, economic, and religious) to a form that expresses the character and nature of God. It is not really about heaven or paradise, or the future, or life after death. And yet the church, as I see it, has not really understood the true nature of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. ... I am an agent of change but sometimes I feel helpless because the church has become like a



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 16 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.

club, promoting its needs as an institution. I also dream of serving a church where people of all races, backgrounds, lifestyles, worship God together and are transformed into loving people. In all the churches I have served, I've tried to promote this but have always encountered difficulties because of lack of support from the people." —a Kansas pastor

### Many Christians saying the same things

Many other churchgoers and ex-churchgoers are also saying these things. They want to hear recent findings and insights about the Bible and Christianity. They want to keep re-examining their beliefs and

revising them when new information or insight seems to make revision necessary. They want to hear varied views about how Christian principles apply to current issues, and to discuss the pros and cons of those views. They want encouragement and help in doing what seems to have had top priority for Jesus.

When these thinking Christians don't find help and companionship in churches, they look elsewhere. Yet few churches seem to care. Why? That's an urgent question for all of us who care about the church and see its potential for promoting needed change in the world.

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Connections readers speak

September 2008



### Coming to Kentucky

I've accepted an invitation to speak in Paducah, Kentucky on Sunday, October 12, at Broadway United Methodist Church. If you live near Paducah and would like to come, I'd love to meet you. I will speak at the 10:30 A.M. worship service and at a District Laity Rally at 2:00 P.M. For more information, contact UMC District Superintendent Rick Dye. You can e-mail him at [rcdye@comcast.net](mailto:rcdye@comcast.net).



"We have never been casual churchgoers. Yet we are so done-in by the stale, exclusive teaching that we hear. It would be heart-breaking to leave the church, but it is oh so hard to stay. What has been comforting is to know we are not alone, thanks to *Connections*." —a central Texas laywoman

"I find little desire to return to the weekly public nap." —a Florida pastor who stopped attending church

"Even here in liberal northern California, I mourn the antiquated theology and practices of ministry represented by far too many of our churches. I despair at the entrenched congregations who fight against change of any sort. ... You have been like water in the desert for me." —a California pastor

