

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 63 - JANUARY 1998



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

Uncontrollable voices

In recent decades “do it yourself” has replaced “get a professional to do it for you” in many areas of our lives, from filling our cars with gasoline to doing ministry and getting spiritual guidance. Instead of relying on the clergy, many Christians strike out on their own to find the spiritual help they want. When they disagree with church policies, they’re more likely than they once were to speak up or to leave.



This change is often seen as a threat, especially by the clergy who hold top denominational offices but also by other clergy and by some lay members. Uncontrollable, dissenting voices expose disagreement that many members see as painful and harmful conflict. Such voices also can be a threat to power, prestige, and salaries that church officials understandably don’t want to risk losing.

Lay voices are the most uncontrollable

Bishops and other clergy supervisors can (and do!) prohibit pastors from saying what the supervisors don’t want them to say, by threatening to keep them from getting promoted. Church officials don’t have this leverage over laity, however, so lay voices are harder to control. But clergy often try to stifle them anyway. That’s sad and ironic, because the laity are the church.

Some lay people, like some clergy, are uninformed, narrow, and even vicious, but some are speaking for God. We need to hear those, but it’s not always obvious who they are, especially if they disagree with us. So we need to hear all the voices.



What we now know as an ordained clergy didn’t exist when the church began. Only in about the third century did the church begin distinguishing the clergy from the laity. In early years of the mainline denominations that many of us belong to, lay members depended heavily on clergy for

Spiritual picnickers

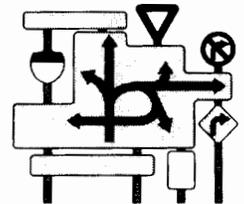
Recent trends toward do-it-yourself spirituality have “opened the land of the interior to unguided and unfettered exploration by ordinary travelers and even by a few weekend picnickers.” So says Phyllis Tickle, in her book *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America* (Crossroad, 1995). Tickle observes that until recent years, most people felt that in order to undertake the spiritual journey they needed pastors or other religious professionals as guides, or at least that they should use only the trip plan given by the institutional church. Now, however, many people are making the spiritual journey without guidance from church doctrines or clergy.



Is this change desirable or undesirable? Don’t we all have God’s permission to make the trip? And isn’t that all anyone needs? What qualifies someone as a real traveler on the spiritual journey, instead of just an ordinary traveler or weekend picnicker?

Packaged tours aren’t always best

For a physical journey, taking a packaged tour or hiring a professional guide is sometimes the best way to travel. However, if you’ve previously been to a place, know the language, have maps and guidebooks, and are physically and mentally able, using a guided tour may not be necessary or desirable. Getting information and advice from other travelers is wise, of course. It can be helpful and can even prevent disaster. But that kind of help is very different from the control that a tour director or a preset itinerary exerts.



I believe this is also true for the spiritual journey. Refusing all help is unwise, but so is letting our journeys be totally controlled by institutional church policies and doctrines, the people at the top of the church bureaucracy, or other religious professionals. Too much control, like too little, can keep us from going where God calls us to go.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.

—Galatians 5:13

theological and spiritual guidance because the clergy had formal education that few lay people had. John Wesley, for example, the founder of Methodism, was educated at England's Oxford University. However, even in these early years, lay leaders played crucial parts. In Methodism they led small groups that furnished essential guidance and accountability. The Methodist system also included larger groups for other important church functions, and they were also largely lay-led.



In later years, lay people's roles came to be seen as less important, and foreign countries became the church's main mission field. Professionally trained pastors, missionaries, and other denominational employees became the indispensable experts at home and abroad. Following their instructions and furnishing the money for their salaries became the main roles that lay members were expected to fill.



Back to greater lay involvement

Limiting themselves to those roles is the easiest way for lay members, and many still prefer it. Many

have now realized, however, that in baptism God calls every Christian to ministry, and that God calls most lay Christians to minister in the world, in the places their everyday activities take them. Jobs and offices in the institutional church aren't the main ministries God intends for most lay Christians.

Lay members expect to have a real voice

We're also seeing an increasing tendency, however, for lay members to expect to have a real voice in how the institutional church functions. Many are no longer willing to be unquestioning followers of the clergy's leadership or to follow a denomination's official doctrines and policies simply because they're official. And many lay Christians have become reluctant to depend on the clergy for spiritual guidance. Ministry and the personal spiritual journey have both become do-it-yourself projects for lay people, to a much greater extent than they were earlier in this century.

This increasing independence of the laity not only means less unquestioning submission to the officially designated authorities within our churches. It also means less uniformity about how we understand the content of



Command and control—still very much alive in the church

A recent *Forbes* magazine special issue about the information age (*Forbes ASAP*, Dec. 1, 1997) describes a far-reaching change that has happened in the U.S. "The defining event of our age," the article claims, "is the collapse of 'command and control' as an organizing principle."



"You need only travel back a few decades," the article continues, "to see how entrenched it once was. [It] won World War II ... It landed Neil Armstrong on the moon. ... The Soviet Union's own form of command and control put Sputnik I into orbit." But it "was not just a military principle. [It] was shot through American life." Three television networks had 92% of the market, AT&T had a monopoly . . . computer industry leaders said the huge computers of the 1950's would have to get even bigger in order to get faster. But now, says *Forbes*, "It's 1997 and command and control is dead. The chip and the Net have killed it."

This may be true in business, but it's not true in mainline churches and their denominational structures. Most of their standard operating procedures still seem to be heavily based on command and control. Why?

Are we defending truth, or merely turf?

Maybe it's because, unlike business, the church is based on a body of truth. God has given us our "mission statement," and we're not free to develop new ones as conditions change. Maybe we keep using command and control because we place a high value on tradition and feel we must preserve it.



However, we must keep expressing the truth in fresh ways to make its importance apparent in new settings. We must recognize how our God-given mission applies to all the different conditions we find ourselves in. We tend to see tradition only as the part of the Christian tradition we happen to be familiar with. We forget how much variety the whole scope of Christian tradition includes. In continuing to use "command and control," we may not be defending truth. Too often we're merely defending the turf we feel entitled to, or defending the comfort of doing only what we're used to. I'm afraid this isn't what God wants.



our faith and about how we believe our churches should function. These changes can be scary. Why?

Why are dissenting voices scary?

▪ Perhaps the biggest threat comes from the fear that the church's dissenters may be right. They may expose the untruth of beliefs that we have depended on. If we're clergy, dissenting voices may expose the ineffectiveness of policies that we don't know how to improve or we feel powerless to change, but that we've staked our careers on. For



both the laity and clergy, therefore, defending current beliefs and policies and refusing to acknowledge the possible validity of others may be the only reaction that seems safe.

▪ Some members find any expression of disagreement painful, and they don't want church participation to be painful. They especially may fear that open disagreement will cause a painful and harmful split in their congregation or denomination.

▪ Some members find traditions and standard operating procedures valuable simply because they're traditional and standard. For these members, change brings unpredictability or even chaos that is very disturbing.



▪ Many clergy efforts to keep lay voices under control result from the fear that open disagreement will make members uncomfortable enough to drop out. Membership and attendance will therefore shrink, making the pastor's record look bad and damaging his or her chances for better appointments in the future.

▪ Open disagreement destroys the control that many leaders feel they must maintain to keep their jobs.

▪ Lay independence can show that clergy aren't as indispensable as they'd like to feel they are, and that can be a painful discovery.

Do-it-yourself politics—more threatening than do-it-yourself spirituality?

A laywoman said to me recently, "It's political assertiveness in the church by lay people—do-it-yourself church politics—that pastors seem to consider the biggest threat. They don't seem nearly as upset by lay people whose beliefs differ from theirs



or from official doctrine, or by those who pursue a do-it-yourself spirituality, as by those who try to influence the institutional church system."

Her observation may not be totally correct, but even wide theological differences don't seem to cause the kind of panic and defensiveness among clergy that lay efforts to lessen the clergy's institutional control do. What does this mean for the church's health and effectiveness?

We reward clergy for the wrong things



Some of the clergy's fear of lay activism comes from the fact that even unreasonable demands and unjustified criticism from congregation members can cause pastors to be demoted. However, clergy's resistance to lay efforts in church politics may mean mainly that our denominational systems reward clergy for the wrong things. We reward them for keeping members comfortable by keeping disagreements and criticism from surfacing. We reward them for raising the money prescribed by our denominational systems, and for increasing the size of church membership rolls. We reward them for serving in administrative positions. We reward them for pastoring the biggest churches in the nicest parts of town.

We don't reward them for preaching and leading worship in ways that inspire commitment. We don't reward them for helping members to identify and pursue their own ministries. We don't reward them for bold faithfulness to the gospel. We don't reward them for serving in the inner cities where ministry is hardest and most dangerous but is badly needed, or for reaching parts of the population that our churches aren't now reaching.



By rewarding pastors for some of the wrong things, and by not protecting them from unjustified criticism, we encourage them to have inappropriate expectations and to pursue goals that often aren't in keeping with what God calls the church to do. Thus some pastors panic at the mere mention of possible institutional changes that might lessen their salary or power. They try to silence members who even question the effectiveness of the present system.

Discouraging reactions

Church members who dare to express their views outside of authorized channels often find clergy reacting in ways that seem far out of proportion to what the members are saying. I've found it painful and discouraging, that writing in *Connections* about subjects that many church members consider vitally



important has brought unduly strong reactions from powerful clergy.

That experience has strengthened my belief that a strong need to keep everything under control is powerfully present in the church and is dangerous to its health and effectiveness. Insistence on control leaves us little room for doing the new things God continually calls us to do.

Barbara



Connections 1-98
Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

Bulk Rate
U. S. Postage
PAID
Temple, TX
Permit # 380

Return service requested

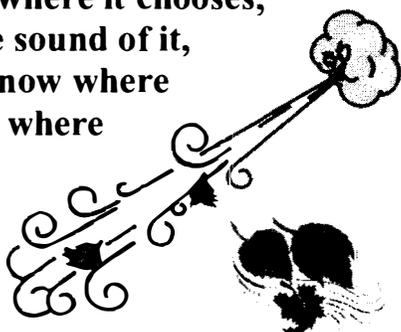
Uncontrollable voices

I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?

—Isaiah 43:18-19

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

—John 3:8



If you've just discovered *Connections*

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want any of the 5 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write me at the address above, phone 254-773-2625, e-mail BCWendland@aol.com, or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.