

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 24 - OCTOBER 1994



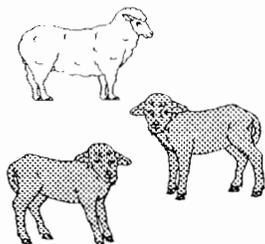
BY BARBARA WENDLAND

505 CHEROKEE DRIVE

TEMPLE, TX 76504

817-773-2625

## Who's feeding today's sheep?



Jesus commands us to feed his sheep. He asks us to minister to the physical needs of the world's people and to give them spiritual food by communicating the Gospel.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "...Do you love me? ...Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "...Do you love me? ...Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "...Do you love me? ...Feed my sheep."

— John 21:15-17

However, many mainline churches are presenting the food only in forms that are unappetizing to the majority of today's sheep. TV ministries, independent local congregations, and

even secular music groups are often delivering our message more effectively than we are.

Our historic churches have the theological depth, the beauty and pageantry, and the organizational structure for ministering much more effectively than these other groups. However, we too often present the Gospel only through quiet organ music, old hymns, outdated words, and lecture-like sermons—communication styles that are meaningless and boring to many people today. No wonder so many of God's sheep are ignoring us!

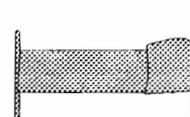


The Gospel can feed God's sheep only if we deliver it in a form that looks tasty to them. Otherwise, they won't recognize it as food and won't even sample it. Using outdated communication methods is like offering sheep the meat that dogs like, or the ice cream that some of us prefer, instead of the grass

(continued on page 2)

## Variety is essential today

When I started college more than 40 years ago, my roommate and I bought bed linens for our dorm room. All the dorm walls were beige, so we chose dark-brown bedspreads to harmonize with them. We got white sheets, of course. Few colored or patterned sheets existed then.

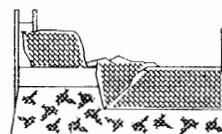
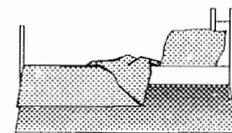


At the end of the year both brown bedspreads became mine, and I used them again the next year in a different dorm. Then I used them for two more years in a sorority house. When I married four years after graduation, I put the brown bedspreads on the beds in our guest room, which four years later became our daughter's room. We retired the brown bedspreads only after we built our current house eight years later.



When my daughter went to college 30 years after I did, however, she chose a bright-blue spread and striped sheets, and in her dorm the rooms were

many colors. Before her first year was over, she wanted new sheets and a new bedspread because she was so tired of the ones she had. By graduation time



she had several, although having that many seemed unnecessary to me because her original ones were still usable.

I often feel the same way when younger people want so many choices in the church and expect everything to be up-to-date and of ideal quality. To me, nurseries and classrooms can be adequate without having the latest decor. Printed lesson materials still suit me fine; I don't need video equipment. And amplifiers and synthesizers for worship don't seem necessary to me.

But if my church offers only what suits me, it won't attract many people younger than 50. We must keep our buildings and equipment updated. We must offer a variety of styles and content in our worship, classes, and other activities. No matter how I feel about it, one old set of plain brown bedspreads simply won't attract the people we need to be reaching today.

*(Who's feeding today's sheep?, from page 1)*

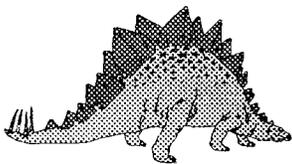
that sheep eat. A recent TV program reminded me of this. It was the annual July 4 celebration on the grounds of our nation's capitol, attended by 450,000 people of many ages and races. The 1½-hour program's main feature was songs sung by a popular vocal group accompanied by guitars and drums. To my surprise, most of their songs were about Jesus.

I didn't care for the group's musical style or agree with all of the theology the songs expressed. But the attenders obviously didn't share my view. They had braved long drives and severe traffic and parking problems in order to attend. They had sat for hours on the ground outdoors in the heat, yet their glowing faces and their clapping and singing clearly said they loved being there. I rarely see this much enthusiasm at church.



An event like this has resources our churches lack, of course, but I don't think lack of resources is our main problem. It's that we're not making wise use of the resources that we have. We could make the Gospel much more appealing to more of God's sheep, and we need to. ❖

## Avoiding the dinosaurs' fate



In his book *Dancing with Dinosaurs* (Abingdon Press, 1993), William Easum warns us about refusing to present the Gospel in forms that today's sheep can recognize as food.

Bill Easum has been an unusually effective United Methodist pastor and has spent years studying and helping congregations all over the U.S. He finds that in spite of having great heritages, many of our churches have stiff necks and nearsighted eyes like the dinosaurs did. "Faced with a radically changing world," Easum says, "many are unwilling to feed where they have never fed before." They risk becoming extinct like the dinosaurs.

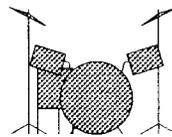
To avoid it, Easum finds, we must deliberately design our worship for today's people, not just for yesterday's. "If your congregation still worships

through long liturgies and stately hymns of earlier generations," he warns, "the odds are your congregation is declining."

Like many other knowledgeable observers of today's churches, Bill Easum sees that if we want people to hear the Gospel message today we must deliver it in new forms. They must reflect today's culture just as those that attracted most of our present members reflect the culture of earlier years. Here's what Easum says we need now.

### ▪ Sounds, sights, movement, and a beat

We need to face the music. In metropolitan areas where church congregations can draw from a large population base, some can fill their sanctuaries by specializing in top-quality presentation of classical music and traditional liturgy, but we can't expect to reach the broad spectrum of today's people that way.

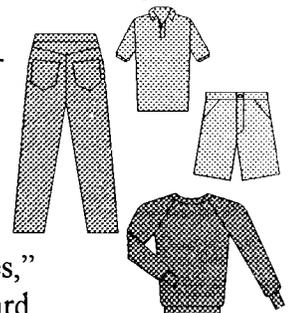


Contemporary music, with its lively and varied sounds, strong rhythm, visual effects, and movement, is the main form in which most of today's younger people can celebrate and communicate in worship. For most younger people today, Bill Easum finds, contemporary music serves the purpose that responsive readings, creeds, and corporate prayers serve for many of us who are older.

### ▪ Lively, down-to-earth preaching



Today's effective preaching, Easum finds, "makes a passionate appeal to emotion more than fact, and it paints a visual picture of the subject." For a sermon to be effective today, the first thing listeners must experience is the speaker's energy and excitement. And the sermon's relation to the circumstances its hearers will confront during the coming week must be direct and obvious.



### ▪ Casual clothing

If suits and ties, "Sunday dresses," and clerical robes are the standard clothing at our worship services, Bill Easum assures us, we can't expect many of the "jeans generation" to attend. Most of them will come only if casually-dressed attenders don't seem out of place. ❖

## Saying no is dangerously easy

We tend to reject suggestions for change like those that Bill Easum and similar writers are making. Clergy may see change as a threat. It's easy and understandable for them to wonder "What if I can't lead a different kind of worship?" and thus to fear that the proposed change would ruin their career or at least make their job harder. So clergy often dismiss needed changes by criticizing the person who is proposing them. It's easy to think "I know better than he does." It's easy to point out a pastorate in which she did less than a perfect job, or to find faults in his theological perspective.



It's easy for lay people to reject recommendations for change, too, because

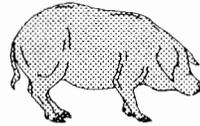
following them would make a lot of us uncomfortable. Besides, we tend to think that because we've kept the church going for years with our money and attendance and faithful service, the church ought to do only what suits us. We forget that pleasing us isn't the church's real purpose.

## We're leaving a lot undone

No one congregation can offer enough variety to reach every segment of the population, of course. Each congregation must identify its particular gifts and calling and then use its resources to pursue that calling rather than trying to do everything that needs doing. But too many of us mistakenly assume that God calls the church to do only what appeals to its current members, and that all congregations need to be alike. As a result, we're leaving a lot of people unreached by the Gospel.

When suggested changes threaten our comfort or power, it's easy to assume that the changes are impossible, unwise, or unfair. But that's dangerous. When so many committed and well-informed Christians are making such similar observations about why our churches' traditional methods aren't reaching new people, we need to pay attention. Despite their human shortcomings, the Christians who are urging the church to update its methods seem very likely to be speaking for God. ❖

## Jesus says "Feed my sheep" but we'd rather pig out

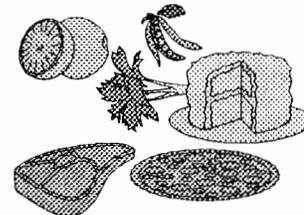


Jesus says, "Feed my sheep," but we often answer, "No! I'd rather just feed myself. I want to be able to pig out on the food I like. All I want the church to do is to keep providing plenty of it for me."

Each of us needs food, but if what feeds us causes a lot of God's other sheep to say "Yuk!", we can't expect the church to offer only our kind of food. We need to help our churches offer what feeds others, too. After all, we may think all of God's sheep *ought* to want what we like and what we think is best, but if many of them *don't* want it, offering it to them is pointless.

## Different kinds of worship services

We can make our existing worship services more appealing by updating our preaching styles and adding liveliness and variety to our music and liturgy, and we urgently need to do that. However, many observers of today's churches find that in order to reach all the people God wants us to reach today, most long-established congregations must have at least two worship services and must make them quite different from



each other. And with our money, votes, and other expressions of support, those of us who prefer the traditional worship service must help make a different one available. We may not

attend it, and we may consider some of its features undesirable and its attenders' expectations unreasonable, but as part of the church we need to help. We need to do it for the same reason the apostle Paul says he did—"for the sake of the Gospel."

**I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel ...  
1 Corinthians 9:22-23**

## If you've just discovered *Connections*

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and a \$5 check to cover printing and postage for a year's issues—Barbara Wendland, 505 Cherokee Drive, Temple, TX 76504. If you want this year's previous issues, let me know. For last year's issues too, include an additional \$5. For more information, write me or phone 817-773-2625. I'm a United Methodist lay woman doing a one-person volunteer ministry and speaking only for myself.

## We need a new answer

We tend to see the church as a religious pension or insurance system. We pay into it only to be able to collect the benefits we want from it. But this doesn't seem to be what God has in mind. According to the Bible, the church's role is to minister and communicate the Gospel to the whole world—to feed all of God's sheep. The church doesn't exist just to feed its members. It exists to bring the world to Christ.



Will we keep feeding only ourselves, or will we get busy being the church that God calls us to be? God keeps nudging us with that same old question. If we keep giving the same old answer, our churches may not survive much longer. ❖

*Barbara*

**Next month . . .**

**We're narrowcasting the Gospel message when we need to be broadcasting it**

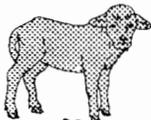


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## Who's feeding today's sheep?

### Asking the right questions

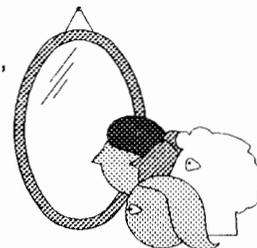
In his book *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Abingdon Press, 1984), Lyle E. Schaller, one of the best-informed observers of today's churches, says that if we want to help our churches communicate the Gospel effectively, we must resolve two basic issues.



First, we must ask "What are we trying to do? What is our basic purpose? Why do we exist as a church? What are our top priorities?"



Then we must ask, "Are we spending a large share of our time, money, and other resources trying to keep yesterday alive, or are we concentrating on the needs of people today and tomorrow?"



Instead of asking these helpful questions, Schaller finds, most church members tend to use four unhelpful standards for evaluating the church's program. They say, "This is what I believe." "This is what I prefer." "This is how we used to do it here." "This is how we did it in the church where I used to be a member." This approach, Schaller observes, merely reinforces differences of opinion about surface aspects of the church's program. It doesn't help the church move forward. To move forward in response to God's call, we must focus on what is essential for the church's faithfulness and effectiveness.