

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A golden opportunity

For the past thirty years, a series of wrenching events has caused many people in the U.S. to give new attention to the sacred. That's the view Phyllis Tickle, an active Christian, expresses in her book *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America* (Crossroad, 1995). As the religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, the journal of the book industry, she has gotten a thorough view of American patterns of religious faith and practice.



Many other well-informed observers of current trends in our society are expressing views similar to Phyllis Tickle's. They're seeing a strong interest in spirituality, which Tickle defines as an attitude about the sacred and a set of personal choices and disciplines for living in accord with it.



If these observers are correct, they're describing a golden opportunity for the church. They're saying that many people in the U.S. today are vitally interested in a subject that the church has been an expert on for centuries.

The real God

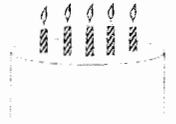
Of course, "spiritual" doesn't refer only to what Christians call God or the Holy Spirit. However, people who yearn for spirit but haven't found God are likely to respond to the kind of approach the Bible says Paul used in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Like Paul we can say, "We know the spirit you're really looking for. We can show you the true God."

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athe-nians, I see how religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it ..."

—Acts 17:22-24

Five years of *Connections*

This issue begins the sixth year of *Connections*. My aim in publishing it is still what it was five years ago when I began—to encourage as many church members as possible to think and talk to each other about subjects that I believe are crucial to our churches' faithfulness and effectiveness. Here are some of those subjects I listed in the first issue of *Connections*.

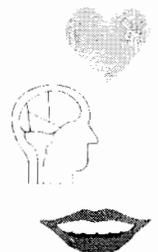


- God calls every Christian to a ministry and gives her or him the abilities needed for it.
- When we fail to discover God's call and respond to it by using our gifts, ministries that God wants done go undone.
- Most Christians are lay, yet much that we do in the institutional church seems designed mainly for clergy.
- God calls us to minister to the world, not just to church members. The church and the world suffer when we don't make the value of the gospel apparent to outsiders.
- Our churchy language often turns outsiders off and contradicts what we claim to believe. God calls both women and men to be leaders, yet our language and policies often make women invisible.
- Our traditions can be valuable, but they also can keep us from doing what God is currently calling us to do.
- Local congregations, not denominational bureaucracies, are where most of the church's ministries can be done most effectively.
- We give top priority to issues that have very low priority in the Bible, and ignore some that have high priority.



Still needed—heads, hearts, and mouths

I still believe these subjects urgently need our attention. I believe that in order to bring about needed changes we need many heads thinking, hearts praying, and mouths speaking. I believe we need to get clear on what the real purpose of the church is, and to start using the methods that are most likely to accomplish that purpose in today's world and tomorrow's. I hope that *Connections* will contribute toward helping that to happen.



A rebirth triggered by wrenching events

Phyllis Tickle believes that a dozen to two dozen separate events, discoveries and circumstances that have bombarded us in the past hundred years have triggered the current interest in the sacred. She finds that these wrenching events have made us feel



cut loose from everything we previously felt sure of. "The last time something similar happened," she believes, "history labeled the whole thing the Renaissance, or in plain English, the 'Rebirth.'"

Here's what she sees as the wrenching events.

- **Hiroshima.** Before the atom bomb fell in August 1945, we had seen cataclysmic destruction as resting only in the hands of the gods.

- **The Vietnam war.** From it we learned not to trust authority. Individuals' perceptions of right and wrong, and of believe and don't believe, became the litmus test, Tickle observes, for commitment, moral responsibility, and judgment.



- **The closing of the American frontier.** Tickle finds that for Americans the geographical frontier has represented adventure to dream of. It has served as a safety valve that seemed to offer escape from unbearable restrictions. When it vanished, we had to accept ourselves as confined to Earth and to each other.



- **Drug use.** Drugs, both illegal and legal, started enabling us to change consciousness and behavior, Tickle observes, leaving us uncertain about what exists and what is unchangeable.

- **The universal unconscious.** We discovered it through drug-born information and also through writers and their popularizers—Freud, Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Bill Moyers. It became our new frontier, and we weren't sure how it was related to the sacred, the spiritual, or the divine.

- **Catastrophic illness.** From the beginning, Tickle reminds us, illness has wedded the sacred to the theological, but until recent years cures for illness seemed to rest "in the hands of a cajolable god." People tended to feel that supplication and sacrifice

would cure illness, and that moral adherence to religious law was necessary to prevent it. Now many of us, Tickle finds, "swap theology for psychiatry," or we think that because we've learned to cure many illnesses we're relatively safe.



This assumption, in Tickle's view, has freed the sacred from its ordained gatekeepers. It has, she observes, "opened the land of the interior to unguided and unfettered exploration by ordinary travelers and even by a few weekend picnickers." But it has also, she finds, "exposed us as a society to epidemic proportions of some very terrible agonies of body, soul, mind, and spirit."

- **Mass communication and massive immigration.**



These, Tickle believes, have made us aware of being part of a global village. They have eroded some old ways but reintroduced older ones such as tribalism and use of the home as the workplace.

- **Television.** Because it is a cold medium, Tickle says, it has changed our emotional life. It has made the yearning to feel again "almost a phrenetic agony for many Americans and has directly governed what we see as, and seek from, the sacred."



- **Urbanization and the move from a goods-based to a money-based life.** This change, in Phyllis Tickle's view, has cut us off from our own abilities and needs.



- **Disgust at exposures about clergy.** Tickle cites the exposure of some faith healers as fakes in recent decades, the scandals about televangelists in the 1980's, and the revelations of sexual abuse by clergy in the 90's. She finds that the distrust of earlier years has now to a great extent become disgust, often causing mainline, established clergy to become "almost impotent pastorally."



- **Rosie the Riveter, the symbol of the women who went to work during World War II.** Phyllis Tickle suspects that this modern development may turn out to be the most far-ranging of all. "Rosie had

stood *beside* her man before, of course,” Tickle observes, “but now he was a world away and she was alone and doing it.” The result, in Tickle’s view, was that “beside” wasn’t nearly so attractive anymore. “More to the point,” she says, “‘beside’ wasn’t even necessary anymore.” What’s more, Johnny, Rosie’s soldier husband, “was war-weary and totally innocent of Rosie’s private evolution during the years of their separation.”



Thus this change merely simmered, Tickle points out, waiting until 1961 and *The Pill*. “Now the shift in gender roles became political, because now Rosie was biologically free as well.” And “as Rosie’s bandanna changed slowly into pantyhose and a three-piece business suit,” says Phyllis Tickle, “so too did our sense of the sacred begin to pick up its first hint of

the nostalgic.” Surely the sacred, we felt, must still be resident in “the ordinary, the domestic, the shared table, the homemade and the handmade” where we had previously assumed it was. In addition, families began moving, Tickle reminds us, so they tended not to have the anchor of extended family nearby. “It was as if,” Tickle says, “not only the altar stones but the whole sacred grove were gone.”



Another rebirth?

Who knows whether we’re on the brink of some kind of rebirth. Maybe we are. Maybe it will be a flowering of the arts similar to the Renaissance. But maybe it will be a different kind of rebirth. Maybe it will be a rebirth of the church.



I’m intrigued by that possibility. Maybe I’m way out in left field somewhere, in speculating about this, but it seems to me that if the church were reborn into a different form it wouldn’t be surprising. After all, the body of Christ has undergone some drastic and unexpected changes already.

For 33 years, about 2000 years ago, the body of the Christ was the physical body of Jesus. Then, to Jesus’ followers’ great surprise, that earthly body died. Even more surprising, however, a different kind of physical body took its place. All the human beings who make up the church became the body of Christ.



A different kind of body?

God gave them—and still gives us, as church members—the job of carrying out the kinds of ministries that Jesus earthly body had been doing previously. This new and greatly expanded body of Christ eventually spread throughout the world. That’s very different from being just one man’s body, and it probably was a change that few if any of Jesus’ followers during his earthly lifetime could have imagined.

Could it be possible that the present body of Christ—the institutional church as we now know it—is going to die too, and be reborn or resurrected in a different form? If so, it may be a form that we

Readers respond

During these past five years of writing *Connections* I’ve gotten hundreds of responses from readers, and I greatly appreciate all of them.



The response I get most often is still what it was in the first year of *Connections*. Lay people and clergy tell me, “You are saying what I’ve wanted to say. I am so glad someone is speaking out about these subjects.” United Methodists often say, “You are describing my Annual Conference!” or “You are describing exactly what happens regularly in my congregation.” Members of other denominations say, “You may not use the same terminology that we use in my church, but I certainly recognize what you are writing about. It’s happening in my church too.” Clergy and laity alike are especially dismayed, as I am, about leaders’ unwillingness to reveal information that members feel entitled to know about the church they’re part of.



Some responses are critical, but the vast majority are complimentary. Some take issue with what I’ve written, or offer different perspectives, which is helpful. The most responses have been about the lectionary (which surprised me), pro and con, and the UMC appointment system (which didn’t), almost all affirming what I wrote. The fiercest criticism was on that subject, from the bishop of my Annual Conference.



On this 5-year anniversary, I welcome the opportunity to say a hearty “Thanks!” to every reader who has responded. And I look forward to hearing from more.

can't even imagine yet. Maybe that's what's beginning to happen. Maybe the present form of the church is dying so that something much greater can come into existence.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
—John 12:24

That would be consistent with much of God's design for the world, it seems to me. Human bodies don't last forever. Many plants go through several different stages, from the elements in the pollination process, to seeds, to stems



 and leaves, to buds, to flowers, to fruit. And no one of these has much resemblance to any other one. It's a drastic change each time, and one that we probably couldn't even conceive of if we had never seen it happen.



Maybe we now have the opportunity to be part of such a process by participating in new ways of being the church, in response to the current interest in the sacred. If so, it's a golden opportunity.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few ...
—Luke 10:2

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A golden opportunity for the church

Topics in the works—

Finding topics is usually the easiest part of writing *Connections*. In my computer I often have rough drafts on several topics I'm considering. Currently those include racism, worship (again), and being a "religious tourist." I'm always reading new books, too, from my ever-present stack, and some will undoubtedly trigger ideas for *Connections*.



Several United Methodist readers urge me to write about the UMC apportionment system (our way of assigning portions of the general church budget to all congregations), and I may do that eventually. However, the financial side of the church isn't where much of my interest or experience is, and *Connections* readers aren't all in the UMC, so I hesitate to write on that subject. Time will tell.



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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.