

# Connections



A laywoman's monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## God invites everyone in

God apparently wants everyone to be an insider. An essential part of the church's purpose is communicating the invitation that God offers to all people through Jesus Christ.

**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .**  
**Matthew 28:19**

**Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.**  
**Matthew 22:9**

Unfortunately we don't always communicate that invitation convincingly. We too often give people the message that we don't really want them to come into our churches or into the church decision-making groups we're in.

As insiders we may not *intend* to be saying "keep out," but that's what outsiders hear unless we deliberately say "come in" in a way that reaches them. Words aren't enough. Our actions and our failure to act can say "keep out" so loudly that our words saying "come in" go unheard. And the outsiders' perceptions, not our intentions, are what determines whether they feel welcome or not.

## The church outsiders see

You're probably an insider in your local church. You know your way around the building. You know what to expect in worship services. You see friends when you attend church activities. But how does your church look to outsiders?

### What does your building say?



What does your building say to the people who pass it every day? Does it reveal care and activity? From their cars can passersby quickly see readable information about specific church activities that will attract them? If they come on

Sunday morning, will parking lot entrances be obvious to them? Will they find a parking place easily? When they get out of the car, will anyone say

*(continued on page 2)*

## Outsiders on the inside

Sometimes we feel like outsiders in our own church. Church leadership groups, from the bishop's cabinet to local-church staffs and committees, tend to give strong "keep out" messages, often without realizing it. How can we remedy this problem?

One way for a leadership group to avoid giving church members the "outsider" feeling is to function strictly as a working group, not as a social group.

A leadership team needs diversity. To be its most effective it must include varied viewpoints, personalities, skills, and interests. Members of this kind of team may not *enjoy* being together as much as they would enjoy being on a team whose members were all alike, but they will *do the job* more effectively than if they were working in a homogeneous group.

**We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.**  
**Romans 12:6**



For social get-togethers--for mere enjoyment--we usually choose people who think like us, agree with us, and enjoy the same things we enjoy. So if members of a leadership team often socialize together in addition to working together, they will probably choose people they enjoy and are comfortable with when they add new people to the team. They'll choose others like themselves. This is especially true if the socializing also includes their spouses.

This way of functioning makes a group look and act like a clique. It also lessens its effectiveness. The group's weakness becomes the whole church's weakness. The group fails to see the need for spreading news and information to the whole church. Its blind spots become the whole church's blind spots. Members with other viewpoints and skills stay invisible and unheard although the church badly needs their contributions.

How can we diversify our cabinets, staffs, boards, conference delegations, and other leadership groups, to make them more faithful and effective?

*(The church outsiders see, continued from page 1)*

hello? From parking areas, will the newcomers see how to get to the sanctuary?

What about newcomers who need a nursery? They are the church's future, and their expectations are high. Is the route to the nursery obvious from your parking lot? Is the nursery bright and up-to-date? Will parents feel confident that their babies and toddlers are in good hands there?

### What about Sunday School?

**I was a stranger and you welcomed me...**

**Matthew 25:35**

**I was a stranger and you did not welcome me . . .**

**Matthew 25:43**

What if newcomers come to Sunday School? Will they have to search for someone who can suggest an appropriate class and take them to it? Will class members notice them and invite them in?

In the classroom what will the newcomer see? Dusty, faded, plastic flowers? Outdated lesson materials and announcements? Christmas decorations in March, or valentines in August? Peeling paint? Broken shades? Dreary 1930's pictures on the walls? What message do these give?

Will class members introduce the newcomers and bring them into conversations? Will members be wearing name tags that can easily be read at a glance across a conversation group? Will someone

**Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.**

**Romans 15:7**

make name tags for the newcomers? After class, will someone invite them to the worship service and take them from the classroom to the sanctuary?

### Will newcomers feel at home in worship?

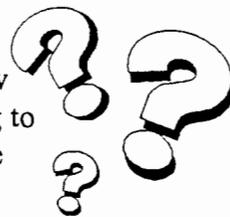
In your worship service, when members stand, sit, kneel, or prepare to take Communion will the visitors be embarrassed by not knowing what to expect or what to do? What if they haven't been to a church service for years? What if they've *never* been to one before? Will they feel like social outcasts when members recite creeds and prayers or sing hymns and musical responses they don't know? Is the liturgy full of words like "didst" and "thine" and "sitteth," that make newcomers feel they must learn a foreign

**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

**Hebrews 13:2**

language before they can take part or even know what you are talking about?

As an insider at your church, how could you help make it more inviting to the outsiders to whom God wants the church to minister?

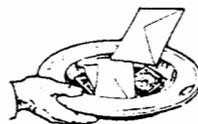


## Laity as outsiders

Laity who are regular churchgoers sometimes feel like outsiders. United Methodist structure and policies and the way our Annual Conference sessions are designed often contribute to this feeling.

A *Connections* reader describes the impression she gets as a lay member of her Annual Conference. "With the overall setup at Annual Conference," she writes, "the message is clear--clergy on the inner circle, laity on the fringes."

She sees this message delivered in many ways. Clergy, but not laity, get a discount at the book display. Clergy and their spouses, but not laity, are memorialized in Annual Conference sessions that both laity and clergy attend.



This laywoman also tells how hard it was for her to get a full explanation of her conference's budget, and to find out what the bishop's salary was. "I was told that it was paid by the general church," she says. "But doesn't the general church get its money from the local churches?"

Another way we keep laity feeling like outsiders is by distributing district, conference, and general-church information to lay members through pastors instead of sending it direct. This saves money, but the cost in bad feelings and in reduced lay participation and interest can be dangerously high.

### Laity's voice is weak

In theory the United Methodist Church structure gives laity an equal voice with clergy by having an equal number of laity and clergy as voters in Annual Conferences and other governing bodies. But in actuality laity's voice is weaker than clergy's.

All clergy are Annual Conference members, but only a tiny percentage of the huge group of laity are Annual Conference members. All clergy are

members for life, but lay members are elected each year, so most serve only for a few years. In effect, Lay Members of Annual Conferences are delegates or representatives rather than members, even though they are officially called members to give the impression that their role is equal to clergy's.



Many laity can't serve as Annual Conference members because they can't be absent from their jobs. This means that lay voters include a disproportionate number of retirees, full-time homemakers, and business people who are their own bosses, while other occupations and perspectives are underrepresented.



### Conference sessions keep clergy in touch

For clergy and for some of their spouses, the Annual Conference session is a cherished and valuable opportunity to compare notes and to socialize with colleagues. And conference publications are the main places where clergy's career histories and family milestones are acknowledged and recorded.

But when we put heavy emphasis on these insider activities at our conference sessions, we discourage potential new lay conference members. We shut out lay voices that we need to hear.

### Clergy know the system

Clergy know much more than laity about how the system works, who its people are, and where the power is. Most clergy in a conference know each other, because they are a relatively small group and they see each other often at meetings that they must attend regularly. They know many laity, too, because they change churches every few years. In contrast, laity have few ways to get to know clergy or other laity beyond their own congregation.

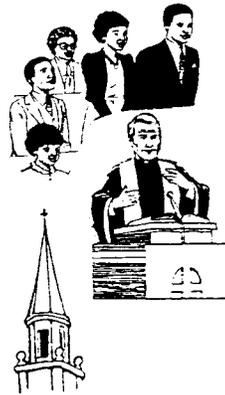


Because the church furnishes clergy's income and their full-time occupation, details of the church's structure matter more to them than to laity. United Methodist clergy are not members or employees of any local church. They are members of an Annual Conference, so their connection to it is stronger than laity's.

### Laity are babes in the woods

Most laity are babes in the woods when it comes to the church system, its personnel, its budget, and its politics, even at the local-church level. But the world, not the institutional church, is primarily where God calls laity to minister, so maybe we shouldn't expect laity to play a big part in the operation of the institutional church.

I think we should. The church is where laity come together to be fortified and equipped for doing their ministries out in the world. And it's where they must cooperate in order to carry out ministries that are too large or complex to be done by individuals working alone. So laity need to be active, knowledgeable participants in all of the church's decision-making bodies.



How can we help our churches to be real communities, in which neither members nor visitors, neither newcomers nor old-timers, and neither clergy nor laity feel like outsiders? Let's work on it together.

*Barbara*

### We discourage new participants

Often we unintentionally discourage new people from participating in district and conference activities. One way we do this is by not clearly letting lay members know when and how members of boards and committees are chosen.

Another way is by making it hard for new attenders--both laity and clergy--to find where district and conference activities are happening. In my conference we don't distribute any list of church locations. To attend a meeting at an unfamiliar church, you have to know who the current pastor is, and look under his/her name in the conference journal. Then you usually find only a post-office box number, not the church's location. Once you succeed in finding the building, there's rarely a clue to where the activity is meeting or even where to ask for information.

In too many ways we inadvertently limit many of our church groups to the present insiders.

**Backtalk: "They hold all the keys"**



Here's how one *Connections* reader sees the insiders of his Annual Conference: "The select group holds all the keys. They move from one Cabinet position to another."

Another *Connections* reader wrote about a situation that other clergy and laity also mention often, in which they feel like outsiders in their own church. "I cannot say how many conference/district functions I have attended where the Cabinet was present," she writes, "only to find this 'elite' group sitting in a tight little knot in one corner of the room. If I were a bishop attending these meetings, I would arrange as often as possible to sit with a lay person or pastor that I didn't know well, and try to get to know these persons better. I would urge my Cabinet to do the same."

**Watch for an article about *Connections* that's coming soon in *The United Methodist Reporter*.**

**Next month . . .**

**God gives us different gifts**



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# Insiders & outsiders . . .

**Backtalk about tradition and taking new steps**



From a clergywoman--"I have lived in many parts of the country, so change in location and in my life style is not scary for me. Rather I welcome it as a sign that God truly works in my life and continually gives me new opportunities for growth."

"Unfortunately," she continues, "it seems that many within the church do not feel that way. Some in this area have never left the town in which they were born. . . . I wonder how to reach those who are basing their ministry on the love of a building, or on the past that no longer exists."



**Are you moving???**

June is moving time for many United Methodist clergy each year. If you're about to move,

please send me your new address right now, so you can get the next issue of *Connections* on time and I won't have to pay return postage. Thanks!



From a layman--



"I am amused at the communication efforts of the church. It is one-way, down. When have you as a layperson been asked for your opinion?"