

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Our traditions aren't God

"... Christianity is not the all-embracing faith that it is said to be. You must find the church that suits you, that you can stand and that can stand you, and stick with it." That's the view expressed by a character in *The Cunning Man*, a recent novel by Robertson Davies, the Canadian author who died a few months ago.



Unlike this fictional character, I believe Christianity *is* all-embracing. It comes to us in so many different packages, however, that we miss what they have in common. We lose track of what the all-embracing part is. Christianity comes through individual people, groups, creeds, various kinds of music, and all sorts of other ways. Some inspire and enlighten us, but others leave us cold or turn us off. Finding a congregation or denomination that we can stand and that can stand us thus becomes very important.

There's nothing wrong with that unless we assume that the worship, music, and belief statements that suit us best are the only right ways of expressing Christian faith. Christian tradition includes quite a bit of variety, but we tend to forget that. Without realizing, we make our favorite traditions into gods. We replace God with them.

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
Matthew 15:2

Our experience can't be the standard

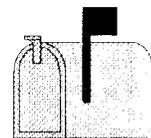


If we're long-time churchgoers we're likely to measure all congregations by the ones we've spent the most time in. If we're new at churchgoing, the congregation we first joined is likely to be the standard by which we measure others.

We may make a favorite pastor's style the standard

Tradition becomes a weapon

A *Connections* reader complains that in the issues he's read I haven't mentioned "having any experience of a personal relationship with the living Christ." He goes on to say that "many hold this to be of ultimate significance," and that in their view the first step in the journey of continued growth in holiness and godliness is "knowing Jesus Christ through a conversion moment."



This letter-writer is evidently among those many, though he doesn't come out and say so. Because he's not aware of my having reported the experience he considers necessary, and described it in the words he considers necessary, he assumes I'm "someone who talks about the Christian life before becoming a Christian."

I consider this kind of arrogance outrageous. It claims, in effect, that all Christians' experience must be exactly alike and must be expressed in exactly the same way. It also claims that the speaker has been authorized by God to judge who is and isn't a Christian.

Conversion—a moment or a lifetime



This view claims, too, that conversion in order to be legitimate must happen in a moment and must be recognizable as soon as it happens, so that the converted person can say, "On January 28, 1976, at Trinity Church, I was converted."

I believe this understanding of conversion is far too narrow. Some Christians can identify and remember a specific moment in which their conversion occurred, but others can't. For many, conversion happens over a long period of time. For others, it happens within a relatively brief period but becomes apparent only after considerable time has passed. And I'm not aware of God having authorized anyone to say that one of these ways is acceptable and the others aren't.

Our Christian experience differs

Besides, people can have similar experience but use different words to describe it. The words we use for speaking to and about God and about our religious experiences reflect our personalities and the religious and cultural traditions we've been part of. Insisting that every Christian must have the same experience we've had, and must describe it in the same way, is using tradition as a weapon. To me, that doesn't seem Christlike.



by which we measure what the church does.

None of these are valid standards. They are only tiny parts of the huge and diverse Christian tradition. Along with other factors we need to consider tradition—Christians' experience—in deciding what to believe, but it can't be just our personal experience or the experience of other people like us.



Our founders can't be our standard



A *Connections* reader recently wrote me, referring to some current church controversies, "If one does not have the beliefs stated by the *Book of Discipline* [the UMC's official doctrines and policies], why does one remain a United Methodist? One may not have to hold these beliefs to be a Christian, but I believe that one does have to have them in order to be a Christian in the Methodist tradition."

I don't give any one part of Christian tradition as high a priority as this letter-writer does. I don't believe the what the founders of a denomination did should automatically be its standard forever.

Christ is our standard

It's important to remember and appreciate our founders' contributions, of course, and as long as those contributions still reflect our best understanding of what God is calling the church to do, sticking with them is fine. But if we discover that some of them conflict with what we now realize is God's will, it's time to preserve them as part of our history but to stop using them as our standards for Christian discipleship and church membership.



Being in a denomination whose worship and ways of expressing the Christian faith fit our preferences is helpful. However, following our denominational tradition is justified only to the extent that it truly reflects our understanding of who God is and



of what God is calling us to do, together and also as individuals.

What we need to use as our standard is the example that Jesus set, and the guidance and insight that we continually get from the Holy Spirit. ❖

Being a Christian means continuing to grow



Many United Methodists—the vast majority of them, I suspect, including many who are very active in the church—joined the UMC without being exposed to the Articles of Religion, the UMC's official belief statements. I suspect that many members of other denominations are similarly unfamiliar with their denominations' official doctrinal statements. To what extent, then, can denominations require or even expect total commitment to those statements?

Joining seemed like the right thing to do



As a baby I was baptized in the Methodist Church (it wasn't "United" then), and I've participated in it regularly ever since. When I was in the 4th grade I "joined the church" (it wasn't called confirmation then). I joined mainly because my parents and all the other authorities of my life gave me the clear impression that I was supposed to. I didn't see any recognizable evidence of the reality of God, the living Christ, or the Holy Spirit until many years later.



I have no idea what beliefs I was required to profess when I joined the church. I'm sure that I didn't have to commit to the Articles of Religion. I'd been a Methodist for about 30 years before I'd even heard of them.

I'd appreciate your help . . .



If you like *Connections*, I would greatly appreciate your contributing toward its cost if you're financially able. For sending *Connections* to you for a year, postage and printing alone cost me about \$5. When new people ask to get on my mailing list I ask them to pay this minimum amount, but I don't send renewal reminders or remove people as soon as their \$5 runs out.



Because *Connections* is a one-person project, I can't operate a strict subscription system. Also, I've chosen to send *Connections* to some people without requiring them to pay, because they were in position to influence the church and I wanted to reach them. The cost of that has been my contribution to a cause I consider important. But if you've been getting *Connections* free and you think it has value, I'd appreciate your help with the cost now. Thanks!

Many other long-time church members seem to have had similar experience. And many who have been members for a shorter time have also joined without ever having been exposed to all of their church's official doctrinal statements and being required to commit to them. Our churches may have been unwise in allowing this, but that's what has happened. And because so few of us made a commitment to our denomination's official belief statements when we became members, expecting all current members to adhere to those statements seems unrealistic.



God-given insight leads us to change

Besides, even if I had been fully aware of the contents of the Articles of Religion when I joined the Methodist Church, my view of them would probably have changed by now. In the 50+ years since I joined the church, I've gained experience, information, and presumably some God-given insight and guidance. I believe I have grown and matured in my faith as well as in other ways.



As a result, I couldn't commit to every statement in the UMC's Articles of Religion now. I'm not willing to say, for example, that "the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men." But does that mean I should change denominations? I don't think so. More than any other denomination the United Methodist Church reflects most of the beliefs that I still see as correct, and it has the organizational structure that I believe has the greatest potential for effectiveness in carrying out the universal church's God-given mission.

We can't expect total agreement

I don't believe anyone can realistically expect more than that from a denomination. All that we can expect when we choose any group, whether it's a church or a political party or a club, is to agree with most of what it does, or at least with the parts we consider essential.



Besides, abandoning the denomination I've been in for 60 years would be like abandoning my husband or daughter merely because I discovered they believed something that I felt was a mistake.

And although I don't consider my commitment to the UMC permanently binding as I do my commitment to my family members, I believe that abandoning it might actually mean failing to carry out a God-given responsibility.



Coping is not enough



I heard recently from a *Connections* reader who feels uneasy about staying in the church because he doesn't really believe everything that

he feels all members are expected to believe. "What do I do?", he wrote. "Do I quit Methodism, trying to find theological consistency or at least people who think more or less like I do? Or do I live the life of a hypocrite, mindlessly repeating creeds that I don't completely believe, and having to guard against letting my fellow church members know my true feelings?"

Fortunately, this reader reports, he's in a Sunday School class that has "an open and honest spirit of inquiry" and therefore is his "lifeline to Christianity" at present. "Right now I'm coping," he says, but he wants and needs more than that.



We all do, and no one should have to leave the church to find it. What we can usually do instead is to find kindred spirits within the church. That's likely to require a search, because they may be hiding their real beliefs to avoid feeling like oddities, but they're probably there. We can also look for the parts of Christian tradition that will be real lifelines, and avoid those that lead us away from God and leave us at sea. We may have to do our own revising of creeds, prayers, and hymns whose words go against our beliefs. We'll also have to keep searching prayerfully for God's will, and for ways to do the ministries that we find God calling us to do, whether or not they happen to fit anywhere within our church's organizational setup.



It's time to stand and speak

I believe that just as God called some of Jesus' early followers to speak within the traditional religious institutions that

During the night an angel [of God] opened the prison doors, brought [the apostles] out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."

Acts 5:20

were not receptive to the good news that Jesus had brought, God calls us to stand up and to speak up within the institutional church today.

When God brings us out of prisons and gives us new insight about God's will, we need to stand in the religious institution we're part of, and

to speak up about what we're hearing. And what we say must be the whole message about the Christian life. It can't be merely one of the narrow and

distorted messages that claim to be Christian but actually represent unfaithful or misguided parts of Christian tradition.

Knowing all the answers isn't necessary

We don't have to wait to know all the answers before speaking up. Instead, we simply need to say what we believe God's answers are, while staying open to corrections. And we need to beware of blindly assuming that our tradition has all of God's answers. ❖

Barbara



Connections 5-96

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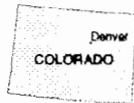
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Our traditions aren't God

No news here about General Conference

Because I was a delegate to the United Methodist Church's General Conference, which met April 16-26, some readers may expect this issue of *Connections* to say something about what happened there. It doesn't. I had to write this *Connections* and take it to the printer before I left for General Conference. In later issues I may comment on what happened there, but I may not. It depends on what happens.



Meanwhile, please be patient if you recently written, phoned, or sent a contribution. I will respond, but it will take me a while to catch up after being away for 2 weeks. Also we're having some remodeling and repainting done, so I may not even be able to get to my writing equipment for a while, but I'll reconnect before long.

This is a day of new beginnings,
time to remember and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing,
laying to rest the pain that's gone.



For by the life and death of Jesus,
God's mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference,
as faith and hope are born again.

Then let us, with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past and leave behind
our disappointment, guilt, and grieving,
seeking new paths, and sure to find.



Christ is alive, and goes before us
to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings,
our God is making all things new.