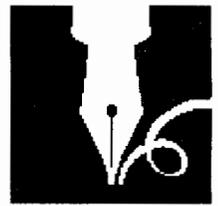


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 817-773-2625 bcwendland@aol.com

Silence isn't always golden

"Silence is golden," claims an old saying. But in the church, some of our silence is deadly. In many mainline churches, most attenders are silent spectators. We need to be real participants in a real community instead, and community requires communication.

We, who are many,
are one body in Christ
... we are members of
one another ...

—Romans 12:5

"Christianity has always championed community," sociologist Robert Wuthnow reminds us in his thought-provoking book *Christianity in the 21st Century* (Oxford, 1993). "But the church, as it has evolved in the twentieth century," Wuthnow finds, "is in many ways ill suited to provide community."

High odds against community



"It brings people together once a week," Wuthnow points out, "... and expects them to forge some intimate bond when they probably will not see each other again for seven days. It adds people to its membership rolls—the more the better—until most of them have no idea who their fellow members are. It places a speaker up front and expects everyone else to sit in rows facing that speaker ... If interaction happens before or after the service, it does so informally, *despite* everything else that has gone on." As a result, Wuthnow claims, "the church is an administrative convenience, created unwittingly by a combination of its history and the programs planned by its leaders. If community is going to take place there at all, it must occur against high odds."

Can we break the silence?

Is Wuthnow correct? If so, how could we increase community in our churches? How could we break the silence?

Speaking the
truth in love, let
us grow up ...
into Christ.
—Ephesians 4:15

We don't talk in the church

Often when I'm at a church meal or reception, whether it's an all-church dinner or Sunday School class party at my own church, or a meal at a regional gathering of some kind or at a church I'm visiting, I find that people are much less inclined to talk to those around them than at other kinds of social events.



At one annual regional church banquet that I attend regularly, which several hundred United Methodists attend, everyone is careful to sit only with the other attenders from their own congregation. Planners say that suggestions for changing this system have always been firmly rejected.



That seems odd to me. Isn't the main reason for having such events to let us get to know other church members better? Why go if we're only going to talk to those we already know well and see regularly?

We could learn from each other

If we talked to church members we didn't already know, we could learn their concerns about the church. That could lead to working together to address common concerns. We could get new insights about how we as Christians might respond to the problems God calls us to respond to, in our communities and the wider world. We could get good new ideas about how to make our church programs and ministries more effective.

We could even discover why some church members' views and beliefs differ from our own, about important issues that divide our churches. From hearing how these issues look to people whose experience is different from ours and our friends', we might see how to help the church become more faithful and also more harmonious.



It won't happen unless we talk

None of these good results will come from sitting in silence or from talking only to our family members and close friends at our church gatherings. Only if we share our stories and see how they are different but also alike, and if we talk about the issues that really matter, can we expect to work together effectively to do what God is calling us to do as the church.

A promising possibility

At an early session of the recent UMC General Conference, all delegates had the opportunity to express their views about the Ministry Study proposals in a way that we could use to advantage in many local and regional church decision-making meetings.



At registration, each delegate was given a number assigning her/him to a discussion group. At a specified time all these groups met in separate rooms. Within each group, members heard each other's views, concerns, and suggestions about the Ministry Study proposals. Areas of agreement and disagreement were then recorded and passed on to the committee responsible for developing proposals for the entire General Conference to vote on.



A chance to hear and be heard

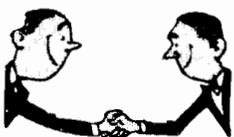
Although the time available for this procedure was tiny compared to the whole length of General Conference, it guaranteed every delegate at least one opportunity to express his/her concerns and suggestions. It also guaranteed that each would hear first-hand the ideas and feelings of some other delegates whose views differed from his/her own and from those he/she was most accustomed to hearing.



Similar opportunities occurred in the meetings of some committees and sub-committees. The result often was greater appreciation for views that differed widely from one's own, and greater likelihood of finding a workable yet faithful consensus on controversial issues facing the church.

What business matters most?

Church members need to get to know each other in order to work together and to feel like part of a real community. But many lay members, especially, have little opportunity to know other lay members or clergy beyond or even within their own congregations. The agendas of many church meetings are so rigidly structured that attenders can't get acquainted or discover each other's real concerns.



UMC General Conference

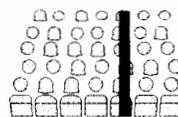
Seeing *Connections* readers and other UMC friends at General Conference was a treat for me, and I appreciated being reminded of the many good things the UMC is doing. However, I doubt that anything General Conference did will contribute much to the increase in faithfulness, effectiveness, or enthusiasm that we need.

- The Conference took admirable steps for ministries with youth and ethnic minorities, but funding was minimal because of members' refusal to increase spending.

- A team was elected to recommend a more effective UMC organizational structure. If members have the necessary talent, discernment, bravery, and power, their efforts will be immensely valuable. If not, they will waste valuable time and money. More non-U.S. members than usual were included in this team. I suspect that this feature, with some other decisions giving non-U.S. members a greater voice in the UMC, may turn out to have more effect than anything else General Conference did.



- General-church boards and agencies were made about a third smaller. This will cut expenses but will give staffs proportionally more power, so it's a mixed blessing. I was sorry that the Conference didn't reduce the total number of boards and agencies and consolidate some of their functions instead.



- The Baptism Study report was adopted, and the Ministry Study report was adopted with changes. Fortunately neither the proposed Lay Ministry Steward nor the assortment of Deacons was accepted. Deacon will no longer be an automatic step toward Elder, and unlike current Diaconal Ministers, Deacons will be grouped with clergy rather than laity in church voting bodies. These changes may be helpful, but I doubt that they're worth the years of money and effort that were spent on the studies.



- An admission that we don't know all the answers about homosexuality was rejected, a step that I find unrealistic and inconsistent with the gospel. 15 of the 68 UMC bishops revealed their disagreement with UMC policy by making a statement to the secular press. I admire their honesty but not their method. It was as if I had put a notice in the newspaper saying that I disagreed with my husband on something, without having told him myself. I wish the dissenting bishops had presented their views to the church first, rather than to the world.

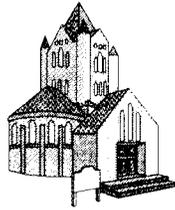


- Monitors at General Conference sessions reported that in proportion to their numbers, clergy were speaking more than laity, men more than women, and white people more than people of color— no surprise, but a valuable reminder of where some change is still needed.

Instead of staying seated and keeping quiet in order not to disrupt the scheduled business, we might accomplish something a lot more worthwhile by moving around and talking with each other, especially with members we don't know.

Having to talk to strangers can be scary

We need to be talking about what we think the real purpose of the church is, and about how to accomplish it more effectively. We need to hear views and experiences that differ from our own and from those of our close friends, spouses, and other family members.



Unfortunately, however, many of us fear that. Some of us are afraid we can't express our beliefs or feelings. Some are used to letting our spouses speak for us and handle all social situations and personal relationships for us, so we're afraid we wouldn't know what to do or say if we suddenly had to take responsibility for ourselves in one-to-one encounters with strangers, especially if any of the strangers were of the opposite sex.



In addition, if we're in church positions of authority that our income or status depend on, we may fear that if we give members the chance to speak they'll say things that will rock the boat and endanger our positions.

Having a voice could promote lay interest

Seeing real opportunities to hear and to be heard at church decision-making meetings might make more lay members want to attend the meetings that many are now unwilling to attend. If members know their time at a church meeting will be spent only in hearing reports that don't even address the church's most important issues, it's not surprising that many refuse to take part.



Maybe an important part of what we need from our leaders is to be nudged out of our familiar, comfortable ruts and into meeting each other and discussing real issues. An important starter would be merely having name tags for everyone at church events, with print that's easily readable from several feet away.



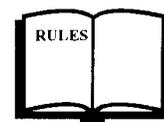
Another help would be having the seating deliberately scrambled so that we didn't just sit with our spouses or friends, or with members of our own congregation at regional meetings. This could easily be accomplished by seating attenders at tables according to their birthday months or birthplaces, or by having each draw a number or colored token that showed the table or section where he or she was to sit or to meet for discussion.

Table 1
Table 3
Table 15

Providing specific non-threatening questions for conversation-starters can help, too. "What do you remember most about your elementary-school years?" "Where were you living at age 15?" "What do you like best about your church?" "What do you see as the main purpose of the church?" The possibilities are endless, but we need to choose some and use them.



Preventing discussion prevents change



Some church leaders say that inviting discussion is unwise because it would merely increase dissatisfaction about features of the system that can't be changed. They say, too, that we can't do away with the boring, unnecessary parts of our meetings because our rules require them, so we can't add time for discussion.

That explanation doesn't hold water. If an aspect of the system is ineffective or isn't serving any real purpose, it needs changing. And we can change it if enough of us see the need for change, take initiative, act together, and keep at it. The change may require a long series of steps that will take months or even years to accomplish, or a large number of votes that will take time and effort to enlist, but that doesn't mean change is impossible. It's impossible only if we refuse to try for it.

Hearing from each other is the first step

Discovering that a lot of other members want the same change is the necessary first step. That step requires having opportunities to talk and listen to each other. So forbidding discussion is really a disguised way of preventing change. We need to recognize that and resist when leaders try

STEP #1

to keep us from discovering other members' real concerns.

Conversation is hard for some of us

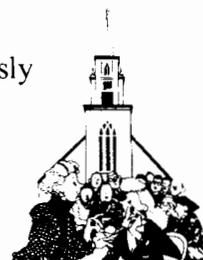
Having opportunities for talking and listening to other church members is important, but for some of us, talking with strangers is hard. A few pointers can help. In the next issue of *Connections* I'll include some.



In other upcoming issues of *Connections* I'll be writing about other missing features of our church

activities that perceptive church observers are urging us to think seriously about. I hope you'll stay tuned. ❖

Barbara



Next month . . .

Making conversation—the loving thing to do



Connections 6-96

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504

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Silence isn't always golden

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergy 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 10000 readers in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.