

connections

Calling the church to faithful new life

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Reconnecting

After a two-year break I'm resuming publication of *Connections*. I've greatly missed writing it, and I've especially missed the responses from readers. Many tell me they've missed getting *Connections*, too. At a Faith and Reason seminar I recently attended, a *Connections* reader I ran into said, "It was my lifeline!" Many others have made similar comments and urged me to restart.



Faith and Reason seminar speaker Sister Joan Chittister (see www.faithandreason.org) stressed the importance of being a "public intellectual" — a "free-lance thinker," a person who expresses her or his views publicly despite having no official platform or authority. Her impassioned plea gave me another nudge toward resuming *Connections*, so I'm finally doing it.

No more *Connections* by U.S. Mail

I'm no longer going to send issues by U.S. Mail, however. If you want to keep getting *Connections*, you'll now have to do it by e-mail or from my website, www.connectionsonline.org. Mailing paper copies was a huge job and a big expense. And many people on my snail-mail list were on it only because I had chosen to put them there — often because they were UMC conference delegates — not because they had chosen to be on it, so I assume that many of those won't mind not getting more issues. So if you got this issue by U.S. mail, it's the last you'll get in that way. If you want future issues, you must change to e-mail. To do that, send me your e-mail address at bcwendland@aol.com.



If you don't use e-mail or the Internet at all and want to keep getting paper *Connections*, phone or write me and let me know, and maybe I can make an exception, though it won't be on yellow paper.

Books I've especially liked

Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance, by Robin Meyers.

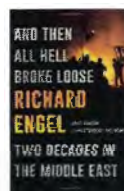


Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior, by Bart D. Ehrman. What scientific studies of memory suggest about quotes and events reported in the Gospels.

Strangers in Their Own Land, by Arlie Russell Hochschild. A liberal California sociologist moves to Louisiana in an effort to understand Tea Party supporters.

The End of White Christian America, by Robert P. Jones.

And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East, by Richard Engel, an NBC journalist.



Convictions, by Marcus J. Borg. His last book.

Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic, by Lloyd Geering.

Plain Radical: Living, Loving, and Learning to Leave the Planet Gracefully, by Robert Jensen.

Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. An African-American father's advice to his son.

Just Mercy, by Bryan Stevenson, about the injustice of the prison and criminal justice systems in the South.

One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America, by Kevin M. Cruse. An eye-opener.

Lights Out: A Cyberattack, A Nation Unprepared, Surviving the Aftermath, by Ted Koppel.

Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars (Even When They Lose Elections): A History of the Religious Battles that Define America, by Stephen Prothero.



Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher's Conversion, by Bob Ripley.

Writing the Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption, by Shaka Senhorg. A memoir of crime, prison, and then change.

I recommend these to you. If I had still been writing *Connections* during the past two years, I would have written about several of them. I may still do that in future issues.

A personal update

As some readers already know, in November 2014 I stopped writing *Connections* because of how my life changed when my husband developed dementia. It had been increasing for several months, and then he fell headfirst onto a concrete sidewalk, making it immediately much worse. He was in hospitals and rehab for a month and then at home for several months. He is now 87 and has been in a local memory-care center for a year and a half. He still knows me and our daughter but can't converse, walk, or remember much.



This change in his abilities made me responsible for financial matters that he had previously handled. It also added other duties and stresses that kept me from having the time and concentration necessary for writing *Connections*. Fortunately I'm still in generally good health, however, though I'll be 83 next month. Our daughter is now living with me, which of course is a big help.

Bright spots

A bright spot for me has been receiving a new national award given to a non-academic person for promoting public religious literacy. It is given by the Westar Institute, the home of the Jesus Seminar, and I was its first recipient. Getting this recognition of my writing, philanthropy, and related efforts was gratifying. If you want to know more about the award, and maybe to nominate someone to receive it next year, see www.westarinstitute.org



I'm planning to attend the fall Westar meeting in San Antonio in November, when it meets with the American Academy of Religion. If you're attending one of those, I'd love to visit with you there. I'll be at the Hyatt Regency River Walk hotel.

I'm looking forward to a February 2 event at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, at which I will speak. Also, an anthology of past *Connections* issues is in the works, with the publisher of my *Misfits* book. That's all my personal news for now. On to wider concerns.

Turmoil in the UMC

I'm no longer participating in any church congregation, but I'm a United Methodist for life. I'm therefore still very concerned about what's currently happening in the United Methodist Church.



UMC members differ about how to interpret the Bible, and the most recent evidence of this is fierce conflict about the UMC's policy regarding LGBTQ people. Forty-four years ago the UMC adopted its current policy, which says "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." It forbids "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" from being ordained as UMC clergy or appointed to serve as UMC pastors. It also forbids UMC clergy from performing marriages for same-sex couples.

The fact that the UMC ever adopted such cruel rules is appalling to me, but even worse is that they've been kept for so long. At every General Conference (the UMC's worldwide decision-making body, which meets only every four years), the rules have been reconsidered and many delegates have tried to get rid of them. Each time, the vote for removing them has been larger, but still not large enough.



Some UMC clergy have disobeyed the policy, either by making their homosexual orientation known or by performing same-sex marriages. And a few bishops and Annual Conferences (U.S. regional decision-making bodies) have chosen not to enforce the policy. But it's mostly in full force.

More conflict than ever

At this year's General Conference, many delegates worked even harder to get the policy removed, but its supporters worked harder, too. The conflict became so fierce that the Council of Bishops (all of the UMC bishops worldwide, whose views on homosexuality are also sharply divided) forbade any vote on this subject to be taken.

Instead, they decided to form a 30-member commission that would meet, beginning this fall, to figure out how to deal with the subject. Then the bishops may call an interim General Conference to make a decision. Of course, calling an ex-



tra GC would be a huge undertaking, as each GC has about 900 delegates, from all over the world. Merely having meetings of the commission will be hard enough, since in order to represent the whole UMC it must have members from several countries.

The bishops asked this year's GC delegates to recommend members for this commission, and more than 300 names were submitted. The commission members have now been selected. There are 32, made up of 8 bishops, 13 other clergy, and 11 laity (increased from 8 after getting complaints about not having enough laity). Three other bishops will be moderators.



A new conservative organization

Meanwhile, a new organization called the Wesley Covenant Association has been formed by some UMC members who favor keeping the present policy that excludes LGBTQ people. This group apparently also wants to preserve most other UMC doctrines and policies. This goal contrasts strongly with the views of many other UMC members, who see the need for changes that will reflect what is now known about the Bible, Christian history, human beings, and the universe, and that, above all, will reflect the kindness that following the teaching of Jesus requires.



Consequently, there's much talk of schism in the UMC now, and schism may happen. But that would cause giant problems about how to deal with church salaries, pensions, buildings, and other property, as well as many UMC agencies. Also, it would do away with the unity that the church has always believed God wants it to have.

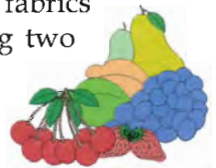
What will the outcome be? No one knows.

The larger question

The question underlying all of this is how to interpret the Bible and what kind of authority to give it. The basic question is whether to take the Bible's words literally and to use only certain isolated verses as the basis for Christian belief and practice, or instead, to take into account how the Bible originated and developed, what it has in common with other religions' sacred documents, and the fact that many of its words contradict what has now been learned from science, history, and other sources.



Should we consider homosexuality an abomination, for example, merely because a few scattered Bible verses seem to say that it is? Or should we instead recognize that what is now called homosexuality was not even known when those verses were written? Shouldn't we acknowledge what science and medicine now seem to have found, that sexual orientation is innate rather than a choice? Shouldn't we acknowledge that the same sections of the Bible that are used to call homosexuality an abomination also say that wearing clothes made of two different fabrics is an abomination, as is planting two kinds of seeds in the same field, which is necessary for growing the hybrid fruits and vegetables that we all eat?



Most important, it seems to me, if we're Christians shouldn't we follow the teaching and example of Jesus? He welcomed all kinds of people, even the social outcasts of his day—lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans, women. Can we convincingly claim to be Christians if we keep excluding people from our churches?



Many years' back issues, a list of back issues, and a list of books I've written about in *Connections*, plus more *Connections*-related information, are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get future issues regularly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country, along with your e-mail address. For paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues. I will no longer send new issues by U.S. Mail.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

No shortage of *Connections* topics

Of course, the topics I've mentioned here are nowhere near the only concerns that I have, about what's happening in the church and the world.

With regard to the church, I'm dismayed, for example, by what has recently happened to one of my favorite authors, Gretta Vosper, author of *With or Without God* and founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. She's a pastor in the United Church of Canada, which has usually seemed to be a forward-looking denomination. But now it has declared Gretta



“unsuitable” because she has openly admitted that she is not a theist—that she does not see God as a person-like being. You can read details at www.grettavosper.ca.

As for the world, the U.S. presidential campaigns are especially disturbing, and it's horrifying to learn what keeps happening in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.



With developments like these continually happening all around us, finding topics for more issues of *Connections* shouldn't be hard. I'm glad to be back in touch!

Barbara



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A book I don't recommend

I greatly disliked the book *Simply Good News*, by N. T. Wright, a British New Testament scholar and retired Anglican bishop. And I'm dismayed that Perkins School of Theology at SMU, a United Methodist Seminary for which I generally have a high regard, is presenting Wright in person November 15-17, for lectures, workshops, and discussions based on the book. (For details, see www.smu.edu/Perkins/Events/NTWright.)

“Everything,” in Wright's view, “pivots around the complex event that had happened: the Messiah died, was buried, was raised, was seen. Take that away and Christianity collapses. Put it in its proper place and the whole world is different.” Also, “what God did for Jesus at Easter, raising him from the dead, is what he will do for all his people in the end.” And Wright emphasizes that resurrection always meant bodies. “In resurrection,” he believes, “people retain their own identity and receive a radically renewed body as its appropriate physical expression.” He believes that Western Christianity has mistakenly moved away from the idea that something happened in the first century as a result of which everything is different. He sees this as “the single and all-important turning point in human history.”

Wright, in other words, sees Jesus as the unique embodiment of God, and his resurrection and second coming as literal, physical events. In my view, this contradicts much that is now known about all religions, the Bible, human beings, and the world. If you're in the Dallas area and you feel similarly, I urge you to attend Wright's presentations and speak up.

