

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

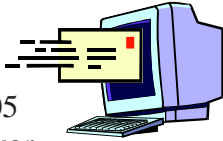
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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Seeking community and truth

The most responses I've ever received to any issue of *Connections* have been to the August 2005 issue. In it I said I'm attending worship services more and more reluctantly because I find so much of the content disconnected from everything else I observe, experience, and have learned, about what the world and human beings are like, and about the Bible and the life of Jesus. The vast majority of responders have expressed feelings similar to mine. Responses have kept coming throughout the fall, from readers who also feel disconnected.



Concerns too prevalent to ignore

The previous biggest response to *Connections* was to three issues about feeling like a church misfit—February, April, and June 2002. Those issues' message was closely related to the message of this fall's issues. (You can see all of these at www.connectionsonline.org, or let me know and I'll mail you paper copies.) All these issues have expressed concern about the sadness, loneliness, and anger many Christians feel because of the unconvincing theology and the lack of community they find in their churches, causing them to drop out, attend less often, or at best feel angry, bored, or disconnected from reality when they attend.

Responses to these *Connections* issues assure me that even if those of us with such concerns are in the minority, we are numerous. The concerns are too prevalent for our churches to be justified in ignoring.

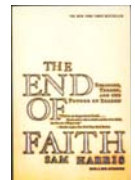


Similar messages from many Christians

√ The people I've been hearing from this fall aren't lukewarm, irresponsible, uninterested, uncommitted, or unchristian. They care deeply about the

We don't require evidence

"Most of the people in this world believe that the Creator of the universe has written a book. We have the misfortune of having many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility. People tend to organize themselves into factions according to which of these incompatible claims they accept." That's what neuroscientist Sam Harris claims in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (Norton, 2004).



Evidence everywhere but in religion

Harris worries because "our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—antithetical to our survival." He feels that "words like 'God' and 'Allah' must go the way of 'Apollo' and 'Baal' or they will unmake our world." What amazes Harris about this dangerous situation is that "these rival belief systems are all equally uncontaminated by evidence."

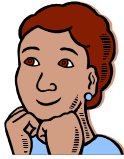
In all other areas of life, Harris observes, we require evidence before believing claims about what the world is like or what is happening in it, but not in the area of religious belief. "Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible," Harris finds, "and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever."

Time for asking hard questions?

Many people who do want evidence aren't hearing it from the church. That's apparently why many of them stay away, drop out, or at best attend reluctantly. If our churches have the evidence, it's time for them to reveal it clearly. If they don't, it's time to ask some hard questions about its absence.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
—Hebrews 11:1

church, at least in the wider sense—about the purpose they believe the church is called to pursue, based on what Jesus taught and demonstrated. Ironically, many of them feel their faith is stronger and their understanding is clearer now than it was in earlier years when they were attending church more regularly.



√ They haven't decided hastily or impulsively. Their decision to drop out or attend less often has developed over a long period of seriously examining their beliefs, the Bible's contents, and the views of a variety of writers and speakers. Says one of these Christians, "It has been a slow process for me to arrive at my present place. My gradual 'drop-away' from the church has taken at least twenty or more years."

√ Because they so rarely hear anyone else expressing similar feelings or views, these Christians have thought they were alone. Many therefore couldn't understand the reason for their feelings. Unfortunately we tend to make people who question what they hear at church feel that they don't belong there, so many of them simply keep quiet.



√ The Christians I've heard from don't necessarily expect worship services to "feed" them. They just want the services not to hinder them. Wrote one, "I just want a worship setting that doesn't get in the way of my experience of God." They don't want what they hear in church to keep them from being aware of God's presence and God's nature.

√ They're surprised to find they don't miss worship services, even after many years of attending regularly and participating actively in other ways.

√ These Christians' concerns are not mainly about worship styles. They're not complaining because worship services feature rock music instead of classical, or organ instead of guitar. Their complaints aren't mainly about having projection screens on sanctuary walls.



√ They're concerned instead about what is being communicated by whatever style of worship services they attend. They're concerned about what is being said about the world, the nature of God, hu-

man beings, the Bible and its relation to other religions' "sacred writings," and the nature of religion in general. In prayers, songs, and rituals they want to hear a portrayal of God that fits with what is now known about the universe. They don't want to be a captive audience for hearing about a capricious God looking down on a flat earth from the sky.

One reader wrote, "I cringe when the prayers are offered." Another wrote that when he goes to church and hears a portrayal of God that seems to contradict everything else we know, he feels that "it's as if the church is insulting God with its worship, or if that's too harsh, at least selling God short."



√ Many of the Christians I've been hearing from feel an urgent need for community but don't find real community in the church. They write about feeling desperate for kindred spirits with whom they can talk seriously and openly about religious beliefs and how those may apply to current issues. To find safe places for this kind of conversation, however, they say they've had to look outside the church.

Here's how that problem looks to one person who says she's finally stopped attending after years of regular involvement in her church. "I really miss having a loving community, but that wasn't one anyway. When I raised questions or mentioned the possible need for change, people resented me as though I had invented the idea or was the only one trying to change ..."



What kind of community is it, that these Christians want but aren't finding in their churches? What kind of evidence are they looking for and not finding in the worship services and other church activities they've attended, to satisfy their search for truth?

Different kinds of community

Community comes in different forms. There's a sense in which Christians see themselves as part of a community that includes all of God's creation—not just human beings but also animals, plants, rocks, water, air, and whatever else our universe includes. In a narrower sense we may see ourselves as the community that includes all Christians, past and present—the "communion of saints" that some of

our creeds refer to. Or the community we're aware of may simply be our denomination, our local congregation, Sunday School class, study group, choir, or other small church group we're part of.



I was a bit surprised when a fellow church member said to me recently, "I find it so good just to be surrounded on Sunday mornings by all the other people in our congregation. That's all I really need from worship." I couldn't identify with that. It's nowhere near all I feel the need for. I'm aware of the sense in which that group is a community, and I appreciate it, but if that were my only source of community I'd feel very lonesome.

I need another kind of community too. I find some members of it nearby but most farther away, so we can connect only by e-mail. They're people who think about the issues I think about, read some of the same books, and want to talk about these things and to work for change in the church and the



world. They're what one reader called "like-minded folk regarding religion and life, who are not locked down by tradition."

We need like minds and unlike minds

We also need to associate with unlike minds, of course. Otherwise we come to think our views and beliefs are the only correct ones or even the only possible ones. If we listen only to the church members who agree with us and whose church experience has been similar to ours, we may get the mistaken impression that the church traditions we're familiar with are what the church has always done. We may come to think that our particular ways of practicing



baptism or communion were commanded by God, and that they're what God considers the only right ways. When we hear only from people who agree with us, we're likely to dismiss other views as heretical or unacceptably radical, without seriously considering the possibility that they may include truth and that some of our own views may be mistaken.



If we don't also have like minds to associate with, however, we're not likely to get the reassurance and encouragement we need for pursuing our God-given calling. People who share our faith-related views, questions, and interests are essential for real community, it seems, especially when God is calling us to consider beliefs or take actions that differ from those of the majority. So we need kindred spirits in the church.

Leaving the door open

We also need the church's help in searching for truth. All churchgoers presumably want to know the truth and to act in accordance with it, but they don't all agree on where to find it. Does the Bible contain it all? If so, which interpretation of scripture will reveal it? Can we rely completely on Christian tradition? Our church's official doctrines and policies? The views of most church members? An inner voice? The findings of science? A combination of these?



I'm getting increasingly concerned about the church's reluctance to look for truth. Too often we act as if we've already found all of it. If we're really looking for truth we probably can't ever completely close the door on any possibilities. We'll need to leave the door at least slightly ajar so that corrections and new information and insight can get in.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, 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. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

It can be hard, of course, to act with conviction on our present understanding of what the truth is, while still acknowledging that we may be wrong. Yet we can never fully or perfectly know all of the truth. Our present understanding is always incomplete and thus needs to stay somewhat tentative.

Can our goal, then, legitimately be merely converting people to Christianity? Or do we need to be presenting our message in ways that encourage people to draw their own conclusions about what parts of it may be true and what parts may not be, and thus whether or not becoming a Christian is the only route or even the best route to God and the truth?

Is it faithless to even ask such a question? Some church members apparently think it is, but I don't, and for me real community in the church requires being with people who are willing to ask such questions openly and thus to look for truth wherever the search may lead. I therefore need worship services that focus on the kind of God who doesn't forbid but welcomes that kind of search, and I'm becoming increasingly aware that there are more than a few other Christians out there who also need that kind of worship.



Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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Seeking community and truth

December 2005

I've been thinking lately about how to define what's being called progressive Christianity. I wonder how it may relate to the feelings I've been expressing and hearing about worship services. Many of the readers I'm hearing from seem to wish for worship services that present what I think of as a progressive understanding of God, the Bible, and Christianity, and for a community of progressive Christians to be part of.



I see progressive Christianity as focused more on the present and the future than on the past. It requires being informed about the history of the church, the Bible, and the earthly life of Jesus, but distinguishing the timeless aspects of those from the aspects that merely reflect customs and knowledge of earlier times. It requires trying to apply those timeless aspects in ways that fit our time. That includes, for example, accepting what science has found that the universe and human beings are like, instead of seeing the book of Genesis as a factual account of how the world began and what its inhabitants are like. Being a progressive Christian, I think, also includes copying Jesus by trying to act with love and justice toward all people in today's world, as he apparently did in his world, instead of by doing things like wearing the kind of clothes he wore or speaking of God only as masculine as he apparently did.

Are Christians at all stages of faith equally likely to have a so-called progressive understanding, or does it come mainly at what James Fowler calls stage 4 or stage 5? Is it more likely for people of some personality types than others? How does it compare to what is popularly called liberal Christianity? Intriguing questions to think about . . .