

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

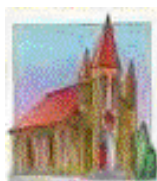
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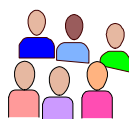
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What makes church church?

A recent seminary board meeting that I attended included a fascinating discussion of this question. Previous meetings had mostly consisted of reports from faculty and staff members—also interesting, but considerably more passive for us attendees. The active discussion segment of this meeting especially appealed to me because it invited our own contributions and spurred us to think further. I wish more church meetings included that kind of participation.



For part of the meeting, we broke into small groups to talk about what the church's and therefore the seminary's basic purposes should be. The overall questions we were asked to address were, What are the needs of the church going forward, and what is the role of theological education in meeting those needs? More specific questions included what makes church church, what makes a pastor a pastor, and how theological education should equip Christians to live faithfully and fruitfully in their vocational context.



Participants were from the south central U.S. and included lay members as well as some seminary faculty and staff, mostly United Methodists but a few from other denominations. Most of the many clergy were relatively high-status—bishops, district superintendents, and pastors of large congregations. Given that inherent bias, it wasn't surprising that many of these gave fairly traditional answers, but it was also refreshing that the meeting gave voice to some of us with less predictable ideas.

Is Jesus the main or only requirement?

What are the two or three elements necessary for a group of people to be the church, and what makes church distinctive from other community enterprises of goodwill and service? My own answer was that for a group to be a church, it must take Jesus as its model.

Does our lack of prayer matter?

In the March 22 issue of *United Methodist Insight: A Forum for Discerning God's Will for the United Methodist Church*, clergyman Dan R. Dick bemoans the lack of prayer he sees in the UMC. In his post "Prayerheads" from his blog *United Methodeviations*, he asks, "Do we see any 'practical' value in being a people of prayer?"



Is prayer outdated? Impractical?

Dick finds that prayer is taught in few modern congregations, and that many laity seem to delegate the task of praying to clergy. "A majority of United Methodists report praying in time of need, stress, or anxiety (and before meals)," he writes, "but very few report engaging in a regular, disciplined practice of prayerful time with God." He also finds that few church "professionals" pray or consider prayer worthwhile. When Dick as a consultant advised a month of prayer and reflection, a pastor complained, "We called you for your expertise in planning, and you offered a bunch of fluffy hocus-pocus instead of practical ideas!"

Should we give prayer one more try?



Dan Dick fears that we may be too hasty to discard "a key practice central to our very identity as Christians." How much does prayer matter, and how much does it matter *how* we pray? Is talking to God only like writing letters to Santa Claus? How can it be more?

One useful approach may be to acknowledge more activities as prayer. When I write a journal entry, review my dreams, answer e-mails, or talk through tough issues with a spiritual mentor, all of that is prayer for me. Perhaps my most important form of prayer in recent years has been reading, where I find a much-needed kinship with like minds even when I feel personally isolated. Many find solace in disciplines such as yoga, tai chi, meditation, or physical exercise. Work that helps others can also be a kind of prayer, from gardening to cooking to (my least favorite) cleaning.

What if we thought of prayer not as a plea to a stern, patriarchal judge, but as simply an openness to the universe—a willingness to listen, wait, hope, and be changed? How can we learn to pray better?

Without Jesus as example and motivation, the group is something else, not a church. It may do valuable things for good reasons, such as making people happy or meeting important needs. But unless the group exists because it attributes some kind of authority to Jesus, and thus sees the need to do what he did and what he commanded, then the group is not a church.



To me, Jesus Christ as the sole basis is both necessary and sufficient. A group doesn't qualify as a church without Jesus, and if a group seeks to embody Christ, it doesn't need anything else in order to qualify.

How important are sacraments?

Most other board members, however, seemed to feel that the Jesus reason was necessary but not sufficient. Above all, many would also require traditional Christian sacraments. Since most of this group were United Methodists, for us that meant baptism and communion. Other Christians, especially Anglicans and Catholics, would add others.



Are sacraments really essential parts of being a church? No doubt some ritual and discipline is useful, but why must it be only what is officially approved? Why is it not a sacrament to feed Christ's sheep, to visit the sick and those in prison, to serve "the least of these"? What is really holier, liturgy or practical engagement? What can sanctify even our most everyday actions?

It concerns me when sacraments seem to be little more than a kind of secret handshake, a ritual of honor granted to insiders purely by virtue of being insiders.



What is essential about worship?

Many board members also mentioned corporate worship as being necessary for making a gathered group a church. Are they right about that? I'm not sure.

Many traditional worship services seem to depend on seeing God as an autocratic being who requires subjects to be subservient. I don't see God like that, and I know that many other Christians don't. In fact, such a portrayal, while it has "personal" aspects that many Christians value, can be a barrier to worship unless it is combined with other ways to reflect and portray God.

To me, "God" means instead something like an all-pervasive, impersonal order in the universe—in all that exists, whatever that may include. Demanding unthinking subservience from humans doesn't seem to me like what such a God would do.

Instead, such a God would inspire awe and reverence, often silence. But inspiring is very different from requiring. In too many typical worship services, awe, reverence, and silence are absent, and what is required is merely parroting traditional texts.

If we are really to be in awe of the universe, it seems to me that we must first experience it at its best. And that means seeing and hearing the best, the most beautiful of what the universe has to offer. To experience awe, we must see not just TV reality shows, but also science, first-hand experience of how wolf packs are threatened by the encroachment of human settlement, or how rhinos are being poached and coral reefs are dying around the world. Not just popular entertainment, but liturgy, the work of the people; not just electronically amplified praise music or easy responses, but *a cappella* Renaissance masses, organ chorales, Anglican chants, all shared by everyone, rich and poor, black and brown, not just Western cultural elites. A pop song



from Nashville simply can't inspire awe in the way an ethereal chant by Hildegard von Bingen can, or a gospel song from the Underground Railroad.

In order to return to authentic worship, we must be willing to revisit our musical and literary past, not just stick with today's creations. If worship inspired our youth to fill in missing links in their family and social histories, wouldn't it enrich the whole congregation too?

Doctrines? Creeds? Beliefs?

Familiar, traditional Christian doctrines and creeds were also mentioned often in our discussion. Many participants felt that certain specific beliefs, especially about Jesus, had to at least be officially claimed by a group, even if not actually believed by every member, in order for the group to be a church. Among these beliefs were, predictably, that the Bible was the complete and only written statement from God; that Jesus was uniquely divine; that unlike anyone else he was bodily resurrected after having died; and that declaring belief in these things about Jesus guaranteed that believers would go to an ideal place



after death while everyone else went to horrible eternal punishment.



But these beliefs arose in times and cultures whose awareness of the world and knowledge about the universe was much more limited than what is now available to us. Consequently, many of today’s Christians feel that accepting these claims about the Bible and Jesus as literally true and reciting them regularly in our gatherings misleads churchgoers and keeps outsiders from finding the church credible.

That may be an important part of why the Pew Research Center now finds that one-fifth of the U.S. public and a third of adults under 30 are religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentages ever in the Pew Center’s polling. In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated—those who answer “none” when asked to state their religious preference—have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults.

Not sufficient but probably necessary

Community is another quality that several board members felt made a church a church. It’s found in many groups that aren’t churches, so having a feeling of community isn’t enough to make a group a church, but it’s undeniably important—maybe necessary, in fact—for churches to have.

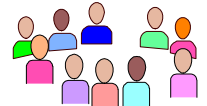


Coming together and being mutually aware of a shared reverence for God and a shared desire to follow the way of Jesus is part of what makes church church. This motivation for coming together and the tie that it leads Christians to feel with each other reflect the influence of what we call the Holy Spirit. It’s what makes us see the church as the body of Christ—the physical form in which Jesus now exists.

Do we have to come together physically to experience this tie? Or can people be the church if they merely see themselves as part of a community and maybe even communicate with each other somehow? This question is especially pertinent now that we have smart phones, texting, e-mail, Skype, social media, and other ways of connecting without physically being in the same place.

What makes a church relevant?

Relevance is a quality we often hear called necessary for churches that want to reach today’s people, and this topic was included in the recent discussion I was part of. Some participants mentioned “talking about God” as necessary for relevance. Most of us probably think of this as something that all churches do, but evidently it doesn’t happen as often as we might think. Some people who avoid the church say that they do so because they’ve never seen any church addressing their real questions about God. They don’t see churches openly talking about the varied understandings of what the word “God” may refer to.



Relevance, it seems, also requires taking seriously what is now coming from sources other than the Bible and Christian doctrine, about human beings and the universe. For the church, relevance requires acknowledging recent findings of medicine, science, archaeology, historical research, and other scholarly fields. It requires discussing, when such findings contradict statements found in the Bible and Christian doctrines, which of these sources now seem the most credible and why.

To be relevant, the church must also address today’s most pressing social and political issues—immigration, war, drones, gender issues, public education, the growing gap between rich and poor—and openly discuss what following Jesus may require us to do about them.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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. Many 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.

In addition, relevance requires speaking today's language and stating Christian beliefs in today's language, not the language of the King James Version of the Bible or the founders of our denominations.



What do we need to do?

The overall aim of the discussion I was part of was to ask what today's pastors and other church leaders need to be doing, and how seminaries and other parts of the church need to be motivating and helping them.

Part of what is needed, it seems, is to openly address questions like those I've mentioned here, and to

look actively for answers that will make sense to today's people. We need to talk openly about the questions and possible answers, within the church and also outside of it. Merely continuing to parrot answers that were declared many centuries ago in cultures that had little resemblance to ours won't serve the purpose. Letting ourselves be shaken up by hearing other possibilities and giving them serious consideration, rather than automatically assuming they're wrong, is essential if we want to help transform the world in ways that Jesus advocated.

Will the church ever become brave enough and energetic enough to do more of these things? I hope so.

Barbara



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What makes church church?

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What about health care?

It stays in the news, and opinions about plans for providing it keep bombarding us. Caring for the poor and the sick seems to have been a huge part of what Jesus talked about, and the Hebrew prophets had a lot to say about it, too. Shouldn't that make it an important subject to be talking openly about in the church? Yet dealing with health care is a political issue, and many churchgoers insist that politics doesn't belong in church. Supporting a particular political candidate or party may well be out of place in church, but discussing the principles involved—who needs our help and why, and the pros and cons of various ways of giving the needed help—seems not only appropriate but actually necessary if we want to follow Jesus today.



Many Christians say the government shouldn't provide health care for the needy. But until we fix the system, who else will provide it? I don't see many churches or individual Christians doing it. I fantasize about contacting my local clinic and asking it to send me from now on the medical bills of at least one person who, unlike me, is unable to pay. If that person had no health insurance, I would pay for her to belong to the health plan I belong to. If she had a heart attack, I would pay for her treatment. I don't have the nerve to do that, but wouldn't it be today's equivalent of being the Good Samaritan that Jesus told about? I suspect it would. What if all affluent churchgoers did it? What if sermons in our churches urged us to consider it? That's really a fantasy, isn't it! But why?