



Can anything hasten change?

If you were given a large amount of money, let's say maybe \$100,000, or \$500,000, or even \$1,000,000, to use for promoting needed change in the church, how would you use it? That may sound like a ridiculous question, because nearly every *Connections* reader could probably come up immediately with ways in which his or her congregation or favorite charitable organization could use more money—for building maintenance, a new building or addition, a food pantry or other ministry to the homeless, college scholarships, or even help with paying UMC apportionments or a pastor's salary. But I'm not talking about changes like those.



I'm not talking about combatting society's big injustices, either: racism, unfair immigration, sexism, economic inequality, and so on. I feel sure that combatting these is an essential part of following Jesus. In fact, I believe that actively promoting compassion and justice for all people is the main requirement for following Jesus and is therefore what needs to be the church's main focus. However, I don't think we're likely to get many church members focused on it until we get them to stop focusing on the outdated beliefs that so many now seem to consider more important—even all-important.



It's time for radical change

I believe that to survive in the long run, the church must stop claiming that Jesus was divine, that he was physically born of a virgin and resurrected after death, that belief in these qualities guarantees a place in heaven after death, and that Christianity and the Bible have a monopoly on truth. It also must stop describing God as a Santa-Claus-like male being. To reach today's and tomorrow's people who recognize that such beliefs contradict what is now well known from reliable non-church sources, the church must stop promoting them. I know that such

Our common core?

The United Methodist Church's Commission on a Way Forward has just released some information about what it has been discussing over the past several months. This CWF is the international group of about thirty UM clergy and laity that was named by the 2016 General Conference (the UMC's top governing body) to find a way to promote unity in the denomination at this time of fierce disagreement especially about issues related to sexuality.

Important for history but not for today

I'm dismayed by what the CWF says is "Our Common Core." Its list includes the Apostles and Nicene Creeds; the UMC Articles of Religion/Confessions of Faith; the General Rules (from John Wesley); and the Wesley Hymns.



The creeds in this list say things that if taken literally, which seems to be how most church members take them, are inconsistent with today's knowledge. That's true of some of the words of the Wesley hymns, too.

As for the Articles of Religion and General Rules, how many UMs even know what they say? Among what is expected of all Methodists, the General Rules include "the putting on of gold and costly apparel," and "buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity." Are such rules essential for Christians? Surely not.



Certainly we need to preserve all such parts of our history. However, if they are still part of our "common core"—of what United Methodists still believe—we're in trouble. And we are.

change is a radical thing to want, but I think that being radical—going to the root of the church’s problems— is the only thing that’s likely to help now.



Besides going to the root of its problems by making this change in emphasis, I believe that in order to accomplish its true purpose now and in the future, the church will have to make the change apparent at its grass roots: local congregations and local communities, including rural communities and small towns.

I’m concerned about the church

As longtime *Connections* readers know, I’m very concerned about the church’s current condition and its future. I finally became so upset about my local congregation’s backward moves that I stopped participating in it a few years ago. I felt I could no longer bear to sit through its worship services or support its increasingly literalist theological perspective in any other way.



I’m still a United Methodist, however, even though my congregation shuns me, and I care about the United Methodist Church because I’ve been in it all my life. I want to support it and promote needed change in it in whatever ways I can. But I think the underlying issue of what members believe about the Bible is at the root of the UMC’s current conflicts, so unless it disclaims literalist interpretations of the Bible and ancient doctrines, I don’t think it can be the church God calls it to be.

My main ways— ideas and money

In an effort to follow Jesus, my family and I have consistently made major financial gifts to organizations that promote justice, in addition to making gifts to a UM seminary, to several UMC agencies, and to several UMC congregations for their local needs. Also, through *Connections* and my other writing and speaking over the past 25 years, I’ve personally tried to encourage the church to follow Jesus more closely.

Unlike former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, who is still building Habitat for Humanity houses at age 92, and some of my friends who still cook and deliver Meals on Wheels, visit the sick, and try to follow Jesus in other admirable hands-on ways at similar ages, I think my best ways of follow-



ing are different from those. Maybe I’m just rationalizing because I don’t personally feel good at doing such ministries, but I don’t think that’s the explanation. I think that my most available and effective ways of following, especially at this late point in my life, are promoting thought, helping to disseminate information, and giving money.



I’ve been unusually fortunate

My parents and my husband’s parents all started their adult lives with barely enough money to scrape by, but by the end of their lives they had all become well-off financially. My husband is smart, had a good education, and until he developed dementia in the last few years, invested wisely. Also, he is a white male who has spent his life in a supportive environment, which undoubtedly helped a lot. Besides, having good health insurance has helped us escape devastating financial demands that can be caused by major health problems, and we’ve never been struck by natural disasters.



As a result of my family’s talents, diligence, and good fortune, I am now responsible for looking after a sizeable amount of money. I want to use more of it for the most worthwhile purposes and in the most effective ways I can find.

How can I promote needed change?

Above all, I want to help increase dissemination of the best current information about the Bible, Jesus, Christian history, and non-Christian religions more widely within the church, especially within the UMC. I want to do this as an effort to promote the kind of compassionate and just behavior that Jesus advocated. I believe that if more Christians got clearer on what kind of person Jesus was and what kinds of things he did, more would come to see the need to focus on the compassion and justice that he taught and demonstrated—on what the Kingdom of God on earth would be like, and on how we need to help create it. I know that this change of focus can happen and in fact often does happen, because it has happened to me and to many other Christians I hear from and read about.



Time to examine and question

I want to help persuade churches to stop indoctrinating members with outdated, unbelievable, literal interpretations of ancient creeds and

isolated, out-of-context Bible verses that lead them to focus mainly on what they think will happen when they die. I want to motivate members to stop thinking that unless they profess certain beliefs about Jesus—those stated in ancient Christian creeds and doctrines—they will go to a fiery place of torture when they die. I want to help change their focus from life after death to what we all need to do as Christians to make earthly life better for more people. No one knows what happens after death, except to our physical bodies, but we know a lot about how to improve life on earth.



I therefore want to help persuade churches to encourage members to actively and continuously examine their personal beliefs and their congregations' and denominations' official beliefs. I want to help churches to actively encourage their members to question whether those beliefs seem consistent with what is now known about history, human beings, and the universe, and to revise their beliefs when up-to-date information from non-church sources makes revision seem necessary.

No more evangelizing in schools

I also want to help stop Christianity—especially fundamentalist Christianity—from being promoted in public schools. And I'd like to persuade Christians to actively oppose the use of prayers that explicitly promote any religion in secular settings such as city council meetings and sessions of Congress. All such practices violate the freedom of religion that the U.S. Constitution claims to provide.



I'd especially like to help such changes happen here in Texas. Top state officials are working hard to pass a totally impractical and unjust "bathroom bill," to keep poor women from getting health care,

and to reduce funding to schools in low-income areas. I don't see many Christians openly and actively opposing these harmful actions, and I'd like to help change that.



Can money help?

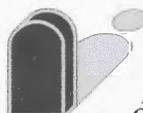
I'm not sure that money can help to bring about the change that I see as so urgently needed. Speaking up, plus individual effort and initiative by more Christians, may be needed more than money. However, money may help some by furnishing the additional staff or equipment that an organization would need for carrying out the initiatives begun by activist individuals, so I want to contribute what I can, in places where it seems likely to help.

I don't want to wait until after I die

During my remaining years of life, I'd like to do something that can have a larger and wider impact than what I've been able to do up to now. But I'm not sure how to accomplish this. I am therefore looking for ideas and information about where some large financial gifts are likely to make a difference. I'm asking you to help me find such places.



I have bequests in my will for organizations that are now doing things I'd like to keep helping, but I don't want to depend only on bequests. I'm afraid that by the time my will takes effect, organizations named in it may have changed so that my gifts will merely perpetuate unproductive bureaucracies or unjust and uncompassionate practices, which I want to avoid doing. I'm not making any bequest to the UMC because I'm afraid that by the time I die it will still not have changed—that it will still be denying full participation to LGBTQ people, supporting other unjust practices, and perpetuating unconvincing beliefs.



This issue, all back issues, a list of books I've written about, a list of recent books I recommend, and more Connections-related information are available free from my website, www.connectionsonline.org. To get Connections monthly by e-mail, let me know by e-mailing me at BCWendland@aol.com. I no longer send new issues of Connections by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I'm a lifelong 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, from personal funds. 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 that I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

UMC control can hinder change

Also, my experience and observation tell me that giving money to church organizations is not likely to bring about the kind of change that I most want to promote. Because clergy pay depends on members' satisfaction, most pastors understandably seem to feel that in order to keep their jobs and thus be in position to do the kind of personal ministry they feel called to do, they must placate the many congregation members who oppose change. Pastors know that if they even question existing church doctrines, much less press for serious change, these anti-change members are likely to leave and take their money with them.



Clergy's unwillingness to push for change is especially unfortunate because surveys continually show that the views of most clergy are more theologically progressive than those of most lay members. Most leaders of other UMC organizations, too, not just congregations, seem to feel that they can't propose serious change if they want to avoid losing their jobs and therefore their organizations' necessary donors. Consequently, I'm afraid that little needed change will happen until more of us congregation members and donors who see the need for change speak with our voices and our money.



Where will contributions help most?

I think that changing the church's focus in needed ways will mainly require supporting progressive groups that are not under institutional-church control. To effectively promote an up-to-date, believable understanding of Christianity, our financial contributions will have to go mostly to organizations that aren't part of the institutional church and thus aren't restricted by its long-standing but no longer credible doctrines.

Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals, and other conservatives seem to have successfully worked outside of the institutional church for years. Their success is apparent especially in the widespread influence of Bible Study Fellowship, Community Bible Study, Beth Moore studies, and other similar programs.



In recent years, some Christian progressives have made valiant efforts to disseminate their understanding of Christianity, but apparently not yet

as effectively as those fundamentalist groups. Notable among admirable forward-looking efforts have been those of progressivechristianity.org, Living the Questions, Westar Institute, the Dykes Foundation (faithandreason.org), and Bishop John Shelby Spong's newsletters.

Why have these two different kinds of efforts not had equal influence? A big reason, I suspect, is that the fundamentalist-Christian study programs form small local groups led by trained and highly motivated local lay people. But also, they claim to furnish certainty and a guarantee of a heavenly afterlife, and although neither reason nor current knowledge supports these claims, many Christians wish they were true and therefore are attracted by groups that say they are true. This attraction is especially powerful because churches aren't countering the unprovable claims with reliable information.



Can anything speed change?

I'm not sure that even big money could help to speed up needed change in the church. In fact, I'm not sure that anything could. Real change may come only after the "regressive" churchgoers who are unwilling to risk the conflict that change always brings are no longer living. However, I'm afraid that waiting for that to happen will mean waiting until too few people are left who still see the need to try to follow "the way" of Jesus or the Golden Rule that non-Christian religions also advocate.



For some people, discovering new information and ideas that contradict their beliefs can be unbearably scary. But for many others, such discoveries bring God-given insight that reveals the need to change beliefs that hadn't previously made sense to them. I hear so many of these saying, when they finally come across helpful, eye-opening information or ideas at midlife or even in old age, "why haven't I ever heard this from the church?" They rightly feel that they've been misled by the church.

I'm ready to help if I can

I hate to see any more forward-looking Christians or potential Christians held back by the church's continued failure to communicate today's best available information about Jesus, the Bible, and church history. I'm ready to help disseminate such information more widely, if I can only figure out how. Any suggestions?

Barbara