

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

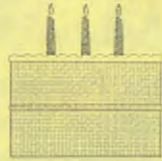
NUMBER 37 - NOVEMBER 1995



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## Looking back, looking forward

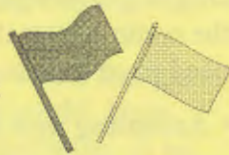
As I begin the fourth year of *Connections* I'm using this anniversary issue to review some of the topics that I believe our churches most urgently need to address. I'm doing this partly for myself, to re-evaluate where I've been and where I'm going with *Connections*.



I'm doing it also because the past few issues and the next few are somewhat different from most of the previous three years' issues of *Connections*. I'm afraid the people who have only recently begun getting *Connections* will be like the blind person who felt only the elephant's tail and got the mistaken impression that an elephant was like a rope.

## Red-flag topics

In recent and upcoming issues of *Connections* I'm addressing some controversial topics—heresy, homosexuality, feminism. I've mostly avoided them in earlier issues because I don't consider them the most important problems facing the church. I'm finally writing about them because many church members evidently give them supreme importance, dangerously dividing our churches. I believe we need to look at these subjects with open minds and hearts, considering the viewpoints of the Christians whose experience has been different from our own.



## A broader picture

I believe, however, that these controversies reveal broader questions that we more urgently need to be thinking, talking, and doing something about. Here are the subjects that I believe are most in need of our attention.

DIFFERENCES  
PURPOSE  
Bible interpretation  
updating effectiveness  
REACHING OUT  
loyal responsibility  
personal experience

## A personal note

*Connections* is still a one-person project, and it keeps growing, but the time that I have available for it has shrunk because I'm traveling more now than I was in the earlier years of *Connections*. If you don't get a reply from me soon after you've left a message on my answering machine or sent me a letter, check, or e-mail message, please don't think I'm ignoring you. I'm just away temporarily, and you'll hear from me when I return.



## Time for travel

As a result of *Connections* some of my travel is for speaking at church-related events throughout the U.S. In recent months I've spoken to groups in Alaska, Nebraska, and Kansas, in addition to places closer to home.



Recent changes in my family have also increased my travel. Early this year my husband sold the family feed-manufacturing company that he headed for years, freeing him for some travel that we had long wanted to do. In May he unexpectedly had to take time out for quadruple bypass surgery and its follow-up rehab program, and with that successfully behind him now, he is more eager than ever for us to make some trips that we haven't previously been free to make. We've just returned from a 3-week trip to Italy, and we'll be making other trips in the coming months.



I greatly appreciate the many letters and phone calls I get from *Connections* readers, and I'm still replying to all of them. It just takes me a little longer now than it used to.

## ▪ Focusing on the church's true purpose



You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

We're straining at gnats like trying to keep homosexuals under control

and to keep Christians from using the word "sophia," while ignoring the camels of communicating

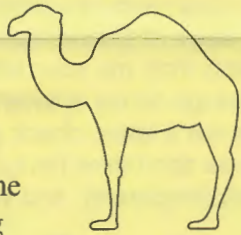


the gospel effectively and promoting the justice and healing that the world urgently needs.

We're also concentrating far too much on keeping our members comfortable by maintaining expensive buildings, reassuring ourselves that all of our beliefs and customs reflect God's will, and having the familiar kinds of church meetings, social activities, classes, and worship that let us enjoy being with people who look, act, speak, think, and experience God like we do.



When I look at the Bible—especially at what it says Jesus spent his time doing—I see something very different. I see Jesus and his followers out in the world, on the move, associating with a wide variety of people. I see them healing people and rescuing those who are being mistreated. And I see Jesus challenging and violating religious and social traditions, not defending them.



Woe to you  
You tithe mint  
and rue and herbs  
of all kinds and  
neglect justice and  
the love of God.



When I look at how the Bible describes the early church, I see a loving community whose warmth and excitement make outsiders want to become part of it. I see a community whose members challenge and help each other to use their God-given resources in ministry. We need to be this kind of community.

▪ **Becoming personally aware of God's presence**



I often hear concerned church members say that what our declining congregations and denominations need is the Holy Spirit, but it seems to me that the Holy Spirit is already

present. We simply need to become aware of the Spirit's activity in our individual lives and in the whole church, and to be receptive to it.

That's not likely to happen, however, unless our churches actively help members recognize God's presence in their lives. Church members aren't likely to be anything more than the passive spectators many of them are now, if they can't see God

acting in their own lives or in anyone else's. Faith often requires trusting without seeing, but without some first-hand evidence that the claims made by the Bible and by church doctrine are true, it's hard to be a convincing spokesperson for the Christian faith or an enthusiastic doer of ministry.



We need to be deliberately providing this kind of evidence constantly in our church gatherings. Pastors need to tell their personal faith stories regularly from the pulpit. Lay members need to be helped, encouraged, and given frequent opportunities to tell theirs.

This means that our church meetings need to include regular built-in opportunities for hearing what the Holy Spirit is doing in individual lives, in the total church, and in the world. Neither making small-talk about football and grandchildren nor sitting silently and looking at the backs of church members' heads, which now seem to be the main things that happen at many of our church gatherings, will inspire the commitment that churches need from their members.



▪ **Accepting new insight from God**

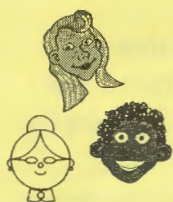
Throughout the Bible and the church's history, God has often tried to make God's followers aware that some of their cherished, long-standing beliefs and customs needed changing. God is undoubtedly still doing that with us. To deny this is to deny that God is still living and speaking.

We need to recognize that not all Bible verses are rules meant for all people to obey for all time. At times we need to recognize the need to revise or abandon some traditional beliefs and customs even though outstanding Christians of earlier centuries may have advocated them.

Of course, we'll sometimes be mistaken about what God wants, just as all earlier followers of God have sometimes been, but we still need to act on our best current understanding of what God seems to be saying. We can't just assume that God's followers who established our doctrines and customs were right about everything.







▪ **Acknowledging that different people experience God differently**

God has no limits but each of us has many. Because we're human we get some mistaken ideas about God, and we can't see all of God. Besides, all our ways of understanding and expressing our Christian beliefs are heavily influenced by our personal experience and by whatever culture we live in, and those aren't exactly the same for any two people.

All of this was true for the writers and translators of the Bible, too, but we tend to overlook that. We mistakenly assume that they all knew all there was to know about God, that they were not influenced by the culture in which they lived, and that they never misunderstood God.



We also mistakenly assume that our own way of seeing God and understanding the Bible is the only right way, that it is completely accurate, and that it gives a complete picture of God. We then take it upon ourselves to act as God's thought police for the church or even for the world. Jesus didn't do this, and I don't believe God wants us to.

There's a fine line between trying to impose our beliefs on others and standing up for what we believe. However, it seems to me that too often in our churches we're more concerned about trying to get everyone else to believe and to express their beliefs exactly like we do, than about doing the ministries that God calls us to do.

▪ **Using effective methods**

Merely having correct beliefs and feeling inspired by God and led by the Holy Spirit isn't all that's necessary to be effective, either as church groups or as individual Christians.

We need to use the methods of communication and organization that can turn our beliefs and inspirations into effective action.



We also need to avoid having so much organizational structure and so many rules that they get in the way



of the ministry God is calling us to do. We can't afford to make our church rules and policies more restrictive than God is. We can't afford to rule out people that God wants in, or ministries that God wants done.

▪ **Recovering lay responsibility for ministry**

We have turned over much of our ministry to professionals, putting the greatest power in the wrong part of the church.



Of course, some of the world's current needs can be met only through the organized efforts of many widely scattered people, and such efforts need full-time people to administer them. Also, some ministries require specialized knowledge and training today.

In addition, today's communication, marketing, and transportation methods have given us easy access to a wide variety of top-quality performers and products and to the people and activities we enjoy most, so we expect our churches to provide those too, and that usually requires a professional staff.

Such changes have let us forget that the early church was lay-centered and that the church still needs to be. We've forgotten that God calls us all to be ministers even though we're not all called to be clergy or any other kind of church employee.

▪ **Offering variety**

No one congregation can be all things to all people, but if we provide only the worship, classes, and other activities that suit our members' personal tastes we become a mere social club instead of the welcoming, world-changing community God that calls the church to be. We need to offer varied styles of worship, teaching, and ministry, in order to reach the wide variety of people that God wants the church to include.



▪ **Being different in the ways that count**

God calls us to be different by demonstrating love and justice, not in superficial, pointless ways like refusing to use today's styles of music for worship, refusing to state our beliefs in today's language, or rejecting people who wear clothing and



hairstyles that we happen to dislike. These ways of being different have nothing to do with being Christian, and they needlessly keep new people from taking us seriously and wanting to become part of the church.



**I'm still concerned**



I don't know how long I'll continue writing *Connections*. I'm still very concerned, however, about what I see happening and failing to happen in our churches, so for the foreseeable future I expect to keep writing. I hope that

*Connections* will plant a few tiny seeds that will eventually bear worthwhile fruit for at least a few small parts of the church and the world. Thanks for your support.

*Barbara*

**Next month . . .  
It's not God  
that wants women  
to stay in the background**



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**Looking back, looking forward**



**Readers respond . . .**

Sometimes an issue of *Connections* brings very different responses. Last month's issue, on heresy, was one of those. Most responses were extremely complimentary. A typical one said "Hooray, hooray, hooray! It's so good to find someone with the courage not to mince words on this important issue. It's hard to express one's own opinions strongly without seeming to put down those who disagree, but you are doing an admirable job of it."



A few readers, however, expressed the opposite reaction. One wrote, "I found much of the tenor of your articles mean-spirited ... the same accusation that you put on those with whom you disagree!"

Different Christians see things differently.

**If you've just discovered *Connections***

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you also want back issues, add \$5 for each of the 3 available years you want. For more information, write to the address above, phone 817-773-2625, e-mail [bcwendland@aol.com](mailto:bcwendland@aol.com), or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland/connhome.htm>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and 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 nearly 9000 readers in 49 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.