

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Granddaddy or Jesus?

Years ago when racial segregation was standard operating procedure in the South, Habitat for Humanity co-founder Clarence Jordan spoke in an all-white southern church about the need for Christians to promote racial integration. Afterward, it's said, an angry member fiercely berated him. "My granddaddy was a lifelong member of this church," she fumed, wagging her finger in his face, "and he would be horrified by what you've just said!"



"Well, madam," Jordan is said to have replied, "that means you have a choice. You can either follow your granddaddy or follow Jesus."

The choice is more urgent now

We're still faced with that choice. But choosing to follow Jesus instead of our ancestors may be even more urgent now that it was when Clarence Jordan was alive. Change has happened so fast since then, and so much more information has become available about the universe, the earth and its people, the tiniest features of cell nuclei, and the Bible, that we can't expect today's nonchurchgoers to pay attention to the church if it's still presenting outdated views and following unjust customs. The "old-time religion" that singers of an 1873 gospel song didn't want to go beyond simply won't cut it today.



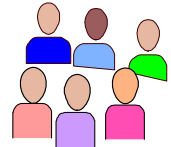
The message of Jesus is still just as powerful today as it ever was, of course, but yesterday's ways of interpreting, stating, and applying it are not. They're turning off a lot of the people we need to turn on.

Change that seems too much, too fast

In these times when so much is changing so fast, we may be tempted to stick with our present views and methods. Their familiarity may give us a feel-

Strikingly similar answers

An especially thought-provoking part of the recent **Connections Live! 2012** gathering was Robin Meyers's session in which he asked all participants to talk in small groups about two topics:



- What frustrates you most about the church in our time? If you could change just one thing, what would it be?
- What gives you the most hope about the church in our time? Despite our failures, what do we do well?

Spokespersons from each of the approximately 30 small groups then reported. They included pastors, lay churchgoers, and dropouts. Most were United Methodists, but some were in other denominations.

"What happens in seminary stays in seminary"

What was most striking to me was how similar all of the groups' answers were. Most said that what gave them the most hope was churches' ministries of compassion: feeding the hungry and trying to lessen other kinds of suffering. As for frustrations, most mentioned two that weren't related to each other: the church's mistaken labeling of homosexuality as sin, and pastors' failure to share discoveries from recent biblical scholarship, which they learned in seminary. Here's how one group put it: "What happens in seminary stays in seminary."



Excited about getting to be heard

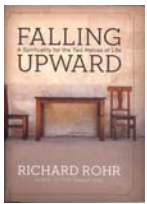
What also struck me powerfully about these groups' reports was how excited the spokespersons all were about getting a chance to express their concerns and to be with people who took those concerns seriously and admitted sharing many of them. So many **Connections Live! 2012** participants commented on what a treat it was for them, and how rare it was, to have the chance to talk about the church-related topics they considered important. How could we encourage our churches to provide members and even visitors with more opportunities to talk within the church about their main concerns? Let's try it!

ing of security that we're afraid to turn loose of. But if we're serious about following Jesus, we can't just keep thinking and acting like our grandparents or any other ancestors.



Not a nuclear-family man

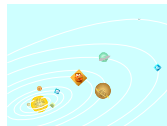
Apparently Jesus himself addressed this problem during his earthly lifetime. According to Luke 14:26, he warned his hearers in very strong words not to do merely what their family members or the people around them did: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."



Catholic priest Richard Rohr says about this passage (in *Falling Upward*, Jossey-Bass, 2011), "I always wonder what so-called family-values Christians do with shocking lines like that? Jesus was not a nuclear family man at all, by any common definition." Rohr points out, "Most of the calls of the disciples in the New Testament are rather clearly invitations to leave 'your father and your nets.' (Mt. 4:22)"

Good things and not-so-good things

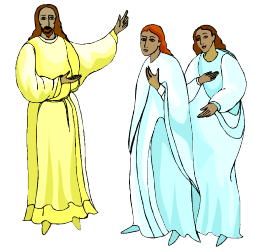
Many of our ancestors were admirable in many ways, but like everyone else, they were products of their times and cultures. They weren't aware of a lot that science has now discovered about what the universe is like. The limited transportation and communication of their day kept them unaware even of a lot that was happening on the earth beyond their immediate surroundings. They all had some blind spots about how Jesus wanted his followers to treat other people, too, just as all of us do. So these ancestors did a lot of good things but also some that we can now see were not good. Isn't it time for us to move on from the not-so-good ones?



That's true about imitating our spiritual and national ancestors, not just our biological ancestors. The "Founding Fathers" of our nation bravely fought for its liberty and established a system of government that is still unmatched, yet many of these

"Founding Fathers" owned slaves, and they treated women as second-class citizens.

Many "fathers of the church" led Christianity forward in admirable ways, yet many went along with oppressive practices of the Roman Empire instead of opposing them. Many "church fathers" also kept women subordinate. It's time for us to treat women as equals like Jesus did, instead, and to oppose empire in the forms in which it shows up in our world.



Denominational ancestors

Many current church members still cling to the ways in which their denominations' founders—their ancestors in the faith—expressed their faith and interpreted the Bible, even though many of those ways are now outdated in both style and substance. Some United Methodists still want the UMC to base its official beliefs on John Wesley's sermons, and during the recent UMC General Conference, some delegates even advocated making his "General Rules" the UMC's main basis of faith.



Yet one of these rules says that being Christian requires not wearing gold jewelry. Another says that membership in the "Methodist societies" requires having "a desire to flee from the wrath to come." Can we expect today's people to see such statements, which use the language and the Bible interpretation of the 1700s, as a convincing basis for faith today? I don't think so. United Methodists may need to know and appreciate the innovative steps that Wesley took, but we need to do what is equally innovative for our day instead of what fit the world in which he lived.

Christian, whether Wesleyan or not

What if today's UMC leaders put more emphasis simply on being Christian, rather than so much on being specifically Wesleyan? What if today's United Methodists, instead of just continuing to sing the hymns that the Wesleys wrote, did what was as radical for our day as John Wesley's methods were for his?



In Bristol, England, which was then the center of the world-wide slave trade, John Wesley preached in a public square against slavery. What would be the equivalent of that for today's United Methodists? Standing in the local mall and denouncing the materialism of our society, maybe, or the aggressive advertising of high-calorie foods that contribute to the current epidemic of obesity? Could that be part of what being Wesleyan would include today?



We're not connecting what we know

We're learning about Mars now from the daily news, and continually learning more and more about how the cells of the human body work, but many of us are not connecting what we now know from science, medicine, and other such sources with our Christian beliefs. Many Christians still act as if God were a Santa-Claus-like man up in the sky above a flat earth. And in too many worship services we're still parroting the claims of doctrinal statements that were not adopted until several centuries after the death of Jesus or that were made official by a Roman emperor whose main motive was to solidify his political power.



In many of our churches we're still singing hymns and anthems that express a theory of atonement—only a theory, though many Christians treat it as a fact—that wasn't put forth until more than a thousand years after the death of Jesus and is only one of several atonement theories suggested by the Bible. Many Christians, too, are still trying to prevent all marriage arrangements except the one they're in, claiming that it is the only one



approved by God. Yet it is only one of eight forms of marriage described in the Bible. To follow Jesus, we urgently need to move on from this outdated thinking and focus instead on more actively promoting the compassion, justice, and peace that Jesus demonstrated.

That means, among other things, that we need to stop treating people as second-class citizens merely because they're female. Many churches treat them that way every Sunday by using songs and prayers whose words present God as male. (Yes, I know that Jesus called God "Father," but that made sense in his culture. It doesn't in ours.) And as a society we put women down when we pay them less than men for doing the same work that men do. We also do it if we let the government control what can and can't be done to women's bodies. Following Jesus instead of these ways of our grandparents would take brave action by a lot of Christians pushing for change. Will you help?



Learning from the best current scholars

We'd also need to stop clinging to outdated claims about Jesus, when those claims contradict what the best scholars have now discovered. That change would include recognizing that in the ancient world, saying someone was born of a virgin impregnated by a god and thus was divine was a common way of claiming that a person deserved special honor and obedience. The claim wasn't about biology, scholars now know from examining recently discovered ancient documents and other artifacts. And it wasn't made only about Jesus. It was said of some Greek gods, of Buddha, and also of secular leaders, including Alexander the Great and



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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.

some Roman Emperors. Besides, the statements that say it about Jesus were unknown in the earliest Christianity. So an important part of the change we need to promote is making this kind of information known, rather than letting our ancestors' claims about Jesus stay unexamined.



What else might following Jesus instead of our grandparents require in today's world? Undoubtedly to stop treating our earth in ways that scientists have now shown to be destructive. Also, to stop bad-mouthing adherents of non-Christian religions, which would probably require recognizing that the Bible

wasn't dictated or dropped from the sky by God, just as other religions' sacred documents weren't.

We can't legitimately claim, although many of our ancestors claimed it, that Christianity is the only religion with the truth. Neither can we legitimately criticize other religions merely because some of their adherents are cruel. Many Christians over the centuries have been cruel to those who didn't share their beliefs, and some are cruel today. Following Jesus means opposing cruelty no matter who does it.

Granddaddy or Jesus? For Christians, it's now a more important choice than ever.

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Connections

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Speaking at **Connections Live! 2012**, Robin Meyers listed what he sees as the four main characteristics of a vital and progressive faith community. In his view, such a community is biblically responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant. What do these characteristics mean to you? What specific ministries or policies would be evidence of a congregation's having or failing to have these characteristics? How does this list compare with what you consider important for a church?

Meyers mentioned ways in which churches might demonstrate the characteristics, and he classified each as low, medium, or high risk. Low-risk steps included these: find out what other churches are doing and join them in mission; adopt a local public school and learn what it needs and how you could make it better; join other faith communities in responding to hate crimes with public declarations. Medium-risk steps included these: form a class for reading and discussing the latest in biblical scholarship, with or without clergy approval; bring biblical scholars to your community; let laypeople create and pursue mission projects without undue interference from church staff; allow direct giving to missions in addition to regular church pledges. Steps that Meyers classified as high-risk included these: change the way communion is served (in ways such as making it a real meal) and invite the poor; change worship language to use "trust" instead of "faith" and to say "these are our sacred stories" instead of "this is the word of God;" establish your church as a center for studying non-violent social change. Do you agree with Meyers's evaluations? What makes an action feel risky to you—differing from your friends? from the majority? from what you've always done?