

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Connections readers speak

This month's *Connections* is essentially written by readers of last month's issue, about my feelings of being in a wilderness because of living in a very conservative area and being a member of an increasingly conservative church congregation. I've gotten a steady stream of responses to the November *Connections*—probably the largest number I've ever gotten to any one issue—and some are still coming.



(Unfortunately, that issue isn't on my website, because the software I've been using—Microsoft FrontPage—can no longer post additions. I'm having to completely redo the website from scratch, a big job that will take a while. If you missed the October and/or November issues and want them, let me know and I'll e-mail or snail-mail them to you.)

“Your story breaks my heart”

Most responses have expressed great sadness about the conditions I described. “My heart broke reading of your treatment at the hands of sisters and brothers in Christ,” wrote one, echoing many others. “Your latest issue nearly broke my heart,” wrote another. “Your pain was so much deeper and more tragic than I had realized. I cannot imagine being treated with such lack of compassion and concern by my community of faith. Your encounters were far more direct and alienating attacks than I can imagine.”



“I know that an apology from me probably means very little,” wrote a United Methodist pastor (who was wrong about that, by the way—it meant *a lot* to me). “But I want to offer an apology on behalf of the church. Nobody should be treated the way you have been treated! I am very saddened by your story.”

Many expressed shock, too. “I am stunned by the shunning you have received!” said one of those.

Zombies that keep coming back

In response to the November *Connections*, one reader sent me the 11-1-13 *E-Note* by John Elford, senior pastor of University United Methodist Church in Austin. Elford said he had been thinking about the current popularity of zombies—brain-chomping, undead monsters—in B movies and other pop culture. It had led him to create a sermon series titled “Jesus and the Zombies: How the Dead Ideas of the Church Keep Coming Back and Back and Back.”



Bad ideas that can't seem to die

What Elford calls zombies are the bad ideas that have popped up at various misguided moments in the church's history and, for whatever reason, can't seem to die off. They keep coming back, he observes, and in some cases, exert a kind of stranglehold on the life of Christians and the ministry of the church. The way to fight them, says Elford, is with better ideas—good, solid theology that reflects the grace of God, the compassion of Jesus, and the life of the Spirit.



Many de-churched folks, Elford finds, can trace their journeys out of their congregations to the day they stopped believing fantastical things they were being asked to believe. Elford mentions few specific ones, but we can probably all think of several. Some that immediately come to my mind are virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and the belief that women and people of certain races or sexual orientations are second-class or even sinful.

A zombie that Elford mentions is the claim that all Christians must have certain beliefs. He sees it reflecting a huge distortion of the original meaning of the word “believe.” Its earliest meanings come from an Old English word that means “to hold dear”—to *belove* someone. There's a light year of difference, John Elford assures us, between saying “I believe in God,” meaning “I believe certain things to be true about God,” and saying “I believe God,” meaning “I trust God with my whole heart.”



One put it this way: “Your ‘family’ has turned against you.” And one who was part of that “family” years ago was especially dismayed by learning that the congregation and the local area had now become so narrow. “I had no idea of the magnitude and direction of the changes that have taken place in Temple since we moved away 30 years ago,” he wrote. “I am saddened and ashamed.”



“Like a truck had been lifted off my back”

I was especially grateful for the many responses saying how much their authors always appreciated getting *Connections*. “You have breathed into us, your readers, hope and courage,” one wrote. And another wrote, “All of your issues are encouraging for guiltless discussion in the lifelong development of a meaningful relationship with God.”



Wrote one, “Your e-mails have held me together.” And another, “Many years ago when a friend introduced me to your writings, I felt as though a truck had been lifted off my back. You spoke of things I only dared to think.” And another, “Each month I am uplifted, renewed, and refreshed by your messages.”



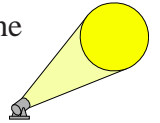
“I had abandoned all hope”

An unusually gratifying response came from a reader who hadn’t read any previous issues. His wife had been reading *Connections* for years, but last month’s issue was the first this writer had read. He had been a churchgoer earlier in life, in 3 denominations, but for many years hadn’t been one. “Having long ago encountered some of the disagreeable things that were going on in the religion community,” he wrote me, “I had in the past made no attempt to read your letter, because I had abandoned all hope of finding honest religious dialogue.” But to his surprise, he apparently found it in the November *Connections*. He thus felt it needed to be “read and thoughtfully pondered by all persons who say that they are believers and not just attenders.”

“We have lacked the leadership”

A United Methodist who said he was concerned about the fundamental tack our denomination has

taken expressed his feelings this way: “You are the one bright spotlight I can count on each month to tell it like it is. ... We have the pastors who believe as we do, but we have lacked the leadership to go there.”



Several responders told about pastors who instead of supporting them had urged them to leave. A Presbyterian said, “You have been a voice of hope for me. When our latest pastor came, it was not long before he suggested that I might want to find another church. It took me 5 years to actually make a complete break and join another congregation.”

Others also told of having changed churches, but the churches’ denominations didn’t seem to make near as much difference as what specific congregations were like. One responder wrote, “Especially in the Bible Belt, some of my denomination’s members could be mistaken for Southern Baptists, but in my particular congregation, I am loved, accepted, and heard. We teach many progressive texts and have even studied *Connections*.”

“My husband and I were forced out of the Methodist Church in the late 1960s,” wrote another, “frustrated by its lack of response to the racial and peace issues of our day. We joined the UCC.” Another wrote, “You are brave to keep on. I gave up and became an Episcopalian.” And another said he was a “recovering United Methodist now in the UCC.”

But another said, “The decision to leave a Disciples of Christ church that I had been a member of for over 30 years was painful but necessary. I wanted to be part of a congregation where there was a desire to really live what I read to be the mandate of Jesus—to serve the marginalized.” He is now happily in a diverse UMC in an inner-city community.

Attracting “the wrong kind of people”?

Unfortunately, several pastors I’ve heard from or learned about from responses to last month’s *Connections* have been forced to move instead of being allowed to try to move congregations forward or attract people who differed from the majority of current members. One of these wrote about meeting with his new District Superintendent to get his first appointment, in the 1960s. “After a lot of chit-chat and a



lot of smiling,” the pastor said, “he informed me that I wasn’t the kind of minister they wanted in that part of Texas, and that I would be happier ‘up north.’ Then it dawned on me that my having been outspoken in my opposition to racial segregation kept me from being wanted.”

I heard also about two new UMCs in a conservative Annual Conference, which have recently been closed soon after being started. One had even acquired the necessary money and land already, but its pastor was told that the blue-collar and LGBT people she was attracting would never fit in, and that with those members the congregation would never be able to attract the people it was supposed to be attracting. Thus it was closed, and its money and land were moved to an Annual Conference evangelism fund!



The pastor of the other new congregation, who apparently is especially gifted at attracting non-churched and de-churched people, was told that with such people it wasn’t likely to become financially self-sufficient anytime soon, so it was being closed.

Shrinking into passive silence



Quite a few responders reported having shrunk into silence or at least passivity, even though friendships or habit had kept them participating in a congregation. “Like you, I see the church moving to a more conservative point of view and leaving others like myself outside,” wrote a United Methodist layman. “I guess that is why I have moved further outside of the community. The people in the church don’t want to accept anyone who doesn’t move along the same path as themselves. They are too afraid that they may be shown to be wrong, so they shut down diverse interpretations of faith.”

Another wrote, “I still remain active in my local UMC but only marginally so, and I must keep most of my opinions and beliefs to myself, due to the 18th/19th-century traditions that are the overriding viewpoint of most members. They value their antiquated biblical interpretations rather than open themselves to truly growing in the faith. The ugliness at all levels of our church is so disheartening, disturbing, disappointing.”

“How can one grow if never challenged?”

Many said they had stopped participating, despite friendships and years of membership. “I have been where you are, in two churches,” wrote one of those. “Thank you for giving it voice for me. Like so many, I am no longer in a church, and I feel relief.”



These responders feel that the church’s role should include leading people toward greater maturity in their faith, not helping them stay where they are. “I come from a very fundamentalist beginning,” wrote one. “I have found my theology expanding over the years and have experienced a growing frustration with many of the positions of the denomination.” Another wrote, “I don’t remember when I started to wonder about what was happening in our worship, or really thinking what I was saying in the repeating of the Apostles’ Creed, but I could sense an inner shift that was leading me away from what I had always known and held dear. All I know is that the more I learn and read, the more I know I need to move away from what has become familiar but not helpful to my soul.”

“Apparently your UMC bishop and DS are not willing to challenge your congregation by sending a prophet into their midst,” wrote one responder. “But how can one grow if never challenged?”



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.

“You have frightened the leadership”

“I believe the UMC is in a state of sin,” wrote one responder, “not just on how it treats the LGBT community but also for many other repressive practices.” And another wrote “I firmly believe that it is the church that is in the wilderness. You have frightened the leadership and they will isolate you as much as possible.”

Several therefore advised me to follow Jesus’s

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

—Matthew 10:14

advice to his disciples and “shake the dust off.” And several assured me that revealing what I had experienced had been wise. “You did need to expose that,” wrote a UMC clergywoman. “What you exposed reeks. It continues to reek. It is oppression.”

By the way, the responses I’ve gotten to the November *Connections* have come from all over the U.S., but only one has come from a member of my local congregation. None have come from any of its pastors, its supervisory clergy, or any of the clergy who were in those positions during the seven years I wrote about.

Barbara



Connections

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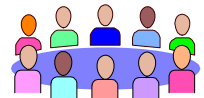
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Fear seems to be the problem

“How sad that your congregation has been led the way it has gone! And how sad that members of your congregation have not had the courage to make a difference in a positive direction by challenging church leadership or affirming you,” wrote a Texas lay woman in response to the November *Connections*. “I think that you hit the nail on the head,” she continued, “when you described the problem as fear.”

“Our church school class,” she reported, “often discusses what is happening in our country that is causing the religious and political Right (What a wrong name!) to strengthen. Fear of change and uncertainty seem to us to be a major cause.”



“Fearful people,” she observed, “act in what they mistakenly think are self-protecting, community-protecting, tradition-protecting ways to defend their often-mistaken religious, political, and scientific views. And some who may hold more progressive views are prone to be silent because of their fear of the stigma of holding minority positions in opposition to what may not be such a large majority but seems so because it is so much more vocal. ... Jesus modeled a better way for us, but how often we followers don’t practice his freedom and courage.”