

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

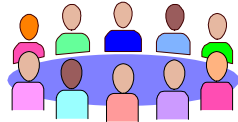
NUMBER 232 – FEBRUARY 2012



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Opportunities for explorers

Several years ago when the outstanding DVD-based study series *Living the Questions* was new, I wanted to offer it in my local church. The series featured fifteen leading Christian scholars and authors, many of whose books I had liked, so I felt sure it would be interesting and helpful. But my church wouldn't allow it.



Reactions that should raise red flags

Connections readers often tell me about similar reactions to their efforts to disseminate and discuss what today's best thinkers are saying. One reader says her book group is called "The Exiles" because her church isn't willing for the group to be part of the church program. Another wrote, "the books we read together are so helpful to us, but we can't mention them out loud in our church."



Such reactions to church members' efforts to explore and to join other explorers should raise huge red flags. Information that churches try to keep members from discovering is likely to be information they need to know, and views that churches don't want presented are often views that members most need to take seriously.

Renegade exploration at the outer edge

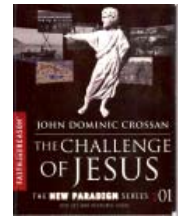
In this *Connections* I want to let you know about three excellent opportunities that have recently become available for exploring, connecting with other explorers, conversing about each other's discoveries, and applying them.

An especially intriguing opportunity has been created by Omaha UCC pastor Eric Elnes. It's called Darkwood Brew. You can find it at www.darkwoodbrew.org. Elnes describes it as "renegade exploration at Christianity's outer edge."



The Challenge of Jesus

A valuable new resource for Christians who want to discover and discuss the findings of today's leading Christian scholars is the DVD-based study course, *The Challenge of Jesus*, recently published by the D. L. Dykes, Jr. Foundation.



The Challenge of Jesus features John Dominic Crossan, who is widely regarded as today's leading historical Jesus scholar, presenting what he considers a culminating statement of his life's work.

Ideal length for church classes

This study is ideal for Sunday School classes and also for independent study groups. Its video material, on 2 DVDs, consists of 18 segments of 15 to 18 minutes each. That's short enough to leave plenty of time for discussion in a typical church class period.

The sessions deal with four basic themes: The World of Jesus, The Life of Jesus, The Death of Jesus, and The Resurrection of Jesus. The videos include unusually informative maps and diagrams as well as pictures of ancient artifacts, all helping to show clearly the matrix from which Jesus emerged.



Accompanying the DVDs is a beautiful book that contains amplified text of Dr. Crossan's presentations, discussion-starter statements and questions to promote interaction among group members, and numerous illustrations, mostly from the videos.

Many ways to explore your faith



The Dykes Foundation also presents seminars featuring top progressive scholars, at locations throughout the U.S. You can learn about these, register, and order *The Challenge of Jesus* and DVDs of past seminars from the Foundation's website, www.faithandreason.org. And you can learn more about the Foundation and its founders from the October 2008 *Connections*, which is on my website, www.connectionsonline.org. Don't miss these excellent ways of exploring your faith.

5th century practice, 21st century technology

Elnes calls Darkwood Brew “a groundbreaking interactive web television program and spiritual gathering that explores ‘progressive’/ ‘emerging’ Christian faith and values.”



“Based on the structure of the Lectio Divina, an ancient spiritual practice developed by Benedictine monks in the 5th century, and using cutting-edge technology,” Eric explains,



“Darkwood Brew explores the unexpected love of God in relevant, challenging, and surprising ways.” It does this

through world-class jazz musicians, live interviews with international guests, and a variety of interactive media that let people all over the world take part.

Live on Sunday afternoons

Many components of Darkwood Brew are available on its website 24/7, but the main live part of it happens every Sunday afternoon at 5:00 CST/6:00 EST, on the website and also at a physical location—a coffee house with a high-definition web studio. It’s in the remodeled fellowship hall of the United Church of Christ congregation of which Eric is the senior pastor, Countryside Community Church, at 8787 Pacific Street in Omaha, Nebraska.

Anyone who is in Omaha at 5:00 on a Sunday afternoon is invited to attend the live session in person. But if you’re not in Omaha and want to watch the session live on the website at that time, you can do that. You can also take part in a live online chat that goes on during the session.

If you’re not available at 5:00 CST Sunday, however, you can watch a re-broadcast on the website at 9:00 CST that night. And at any later time, you can watch a video recording of the session from the website.



Interviews with guests from all over

During each Sunday session, Eric interviews a guest by means of Skype, the Internet software that provides audio and video of someone speaking into a microphone and camera that are attached to his or

her computer, wherever that person may be. Some interviewees are Christian scholars and authors. Recent ones have included Diana Butler Bass, Brian McLaren, and John Shelby Spong.



Other interviewees are pastors or lay people. Some are well known and some aren’t, and they’re from all over the world.

In the January 1, 2012 session I was the interviewee, speaking with Eric about what my church experience has been, why I write *Connections*, why I wrote my most recent book, *Misfits*, and what I hear from *Connections* readers. You can watch this episode anytime at www.darkwoodbrew.org. It’s among what are labeled “Special Episodes,” meaning it wasn’t part of a series, and the interview starts about thirty minutes after the start of the episode.

A wide range of content

Besides the interview, the session I took part in, which apparently was typical, included these parts.

- music by a top-notch jazz ensemble during most of the session
- a musical number by a very young and contemporary vocal group, in a genre so far from what I typically listen to, that I don’t even know what to call it



- several short, contemporary video skits, also apparently aimed at people a lot younger than I and partly leaving me feeling somewhat blank, but evidently very appealing to the Omaha coffee house participants, as shown by their delighted laughter
- conversation among the leaders and others present in Omaha, more or less about the day’s topic
- reports of some of the online chat
- readings from Christian classics or other faith-related writings, and time to reflect on them



- scattered comments and a brief, pithy, sermon-like statement by Eric, about the session’s overall topic

- Communion led by Eric, in a style very appealing to me and very different from almost all Communion observances

I've seen elsewhere, in which the Omaha group participated in person and website watchers could participate simultaneously while watching wherever they were.

Videos of past episodes are on the Darkwood Brew website, along with blogs that more or less address the topics addressed by the episodes.

Christian practice for today's world

In Elnes's view, "This is Christian practice for our world today. From the Darkwood Brew coffee house, the stage is set weekly for a hearty exchange of ideas, and the way is made clear for insights and directions for your unique faith journey. It's scholarly, it's entertaining, it's fun, and it's enlightening."



That's a tall order, he admits, but it's working. So he urges potential participants to "grab a latte, get comfortable—but not too comfortable—and join the growing number of individuals and groups large and small around the world who are stirring things up with Darkwood Brew."

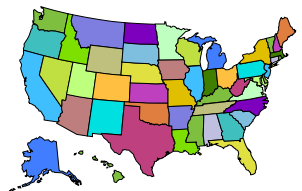
"You might not like it," Eric warns. "But, then again, you might." More and more people are finding that they like it a lot.

A home for the spiritually homeless

In 2006 when he was pastor of a church in Scottsdale, Arizona, Eric cofounded CrossWalk America and led a walk from Phoenix to Washington, DC. (I wrote about him, his walk, and his book about it, in the January 2008 *Connections*, which is on my website, www.connectionsonline.org.) During the walk, Elnes and his companions fostered



conversations along the way, about what it means to be progressive Christians in an age of fundamentalism. He wanted to help change the face of Christianity in America to a more compassionate, inclusive one, which would recognizably reflect Jesus's core values of love of God, neighbor, and self. And he wanted to help the people interested in this progressive, authentic kind of Christianity to find each other and to explore and articulate their beliefs.



Hungry for conversation and community

On his walk, Eric found thousands of people whom he calls "spiritually homeless." They were hungry for relationship and conversation about what it meant to be Christian, but in the churches near them they hadn't been able to find what would feed this hunger. Realizing that there were millions of such people "out there," Eric created Darkwood Brew especially for them. He sees that through today's technology, even people who are widely scattered geographically can get together. They can have the conversations and be part of the kind of community they long for.



Eric saw that these spiritually homeless people also needed top-quality, up-to-date resources for personal reflection or use in small groups. So Darkwood Brew now provides that, on DVDs that you can order from its website. Each DVD contains edited versions of the four to six Sunday sessions in a series that focuses on a single topic or book of the Bible. You can go to www.darkwoodbrew.org/ccdiscount to buy these DVDs at a discounted price.

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 19 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.

More than its parts

Darkwood Brew has many components, and it's each of them but more than any one of them. It's more than a show. More than a website. More than jazz music. More than a resource for small groups. More than a worship service. It's an experiential, groundbreaking, mind-opening exploration of Christian faith for the modern world. It's an interactive webcast that combines ancient spiritual practices, arts, and biblical scholarship with cutting-edge media technology. It's an interactive focus point for thoughtful people.



Who participates? College students, the elderly, shut-ins, people on vacation. Pastors who otherwise don't get to be mere worship participants. Fringe dwellers who prefer the nontraditional life, especially in the artistic and spiritual sense. Christians who feel they're crying in the wilderness. Former churchgoers who have been either bored to tears or offended beyond belief by what they found in churches.



Some Darkwood Brew participants call it a soul feast. If you haven't yet discovered it, I suggest you give it a try.

Barbara



Connections

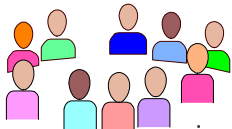
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Opportunities for explorers

February 2012



Opportunities from *Living the Questions*

The excellent *Living the Questions* DVD-based study course originated several years ago, but in recent years the original version was expanded from having 15 presenters to having 30, and the 30 represent greater diversity than the original 15. They include clergy and laity, academics and non-academics, members of several church denominations, and men and women of different racial backgrounds and sexual orientations. The expanded version also addresses more topics and addresses some of them more fully than the original version. So while the LTQ course was excellent to begin with, it's even better now. In addition, the next course published by the same organization, *Saving Jesus*, has recently been expanded and other courses have been added.

Each course includes DVDs and also information to download and print for class participants' use. The printed materials expand on the topic of each session and suggest discussion questions. You can find out more about the courses at www.livingthequestions.com and order their materials there. So if you're in a group whose members want to explore their faith and its application to today's world, or if you want to start such a group, here's an outstanding source of materials. And if you want to know more about LTQ and its founders, please see the November 2007 *Connections*, which is on my website, www.connectionsonline.org.

