

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Why I am a United Methodist

The next few months are an especially good time for United Methodists to think about why they're United Methodists, because the UMC's quadrennial decision-making body, General Conference, will meet in April. UMC members thus need to be especially aware right now of what the UMC's distinctive features are, and of how some of them are in danger of being eliminated or weakened by General Conference. If you're in the UMC, I hope my musings will help you think about why you're in it and what its valuable features are.



If you're not in the UMC, I hope my comments will help you look at your own denomination or your reasons for not being in a church. Reexamining our views about the church can help us see where we've been and where God may be leading us.

Why I became a Methodist

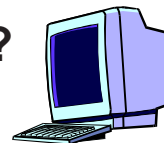
Becoming a Methodist (which wasn't United Methodist then) was automatic for me. My parents were active Methodists so I became one too.

Many of our friends were also Methodists. Those who weren't were in other mainline Protestant churches, and to me those seemed little different from mine. By teenage I saw superficial differences. Baptists baptized by immersion, and Episcopalians didn't abstain from alcohol as my family and many of our friends did. For many years, however, I knew little more than that about how denominations differed.



My husband's church participation had been almost identical to mine, so after marriage I automatically continued that pattern. It was a pattern of passive conformity to whatever my family, friends, and fellow church members seemed to expect.

Did they read the same *Connections*?



Last month's *Connections*, in which I told why I'm a Christian, brought an unusually large number of responses. Most expressed appreciation. Many responders said they could identify closely with what I had written, and they were glad an active churchgoer was saying such things openly. These responders thanked me for reassuring them that they weren't alone in their views of what being a Christian meant. "I want to frame this issue of *Connections*!" one lay woman told me. "I appreciate your candor and agree with so much of what you said," wrote a clergyman. "I wish I had people like you with whom I felt comfortable talking about my own faith and doubt. It is so difficult to discuss personal belief because of people's misunderstanding," wrote another clergyman in a poignant letter.

A few responders, however, expressed a very different reaction. They said, in effect, that what I wrote revealed that I wasn't really a Christian.

A basic disagreement

It's hard to believe these responses all referred to the same issue of *Connections*. Yet they reflect a basic disagreement among Christians, about how to answer some important questions. Did God dictate the Bible word-for-word? Is it a unique, error-free, once-and-for-all statement, giving God's specific rules for all times and situations? Or does it contain mainly principles rather than rules? Is it part of a continuing revelation by God? Is it the story of varied human efforts to discover God's nature and will? Does it include mistaken views along with correct ones? How can we know which are which? Whether we admit it or not, we all accept some but reject others.



I wish we could accept each other as Christians even when our answers to such questions differ. I wish no church members were trying to oust others whose answers they think are wrong. I wish we could use our efforts instead to help each other do what we each feel God calls us to do.

Why I'm still a Methodist

I now know more about my own church and others, and I'm much less inclined to automatic, passive conformity, but I'm still a Methodist. That's mainly for three reasons.



■ Staying in the church I've been in for so long is easier than changing. However, I'm also staying, and staying active in it, for two more important reasons.

■ I don't see any other denomination or any independent congregation that seems any more faithful than the UMC, to what I understand God's will to be. Neither do I see any other with a more effective organizational structure than the UMC, for carrying out what I understand the church's God-given purpose to be.



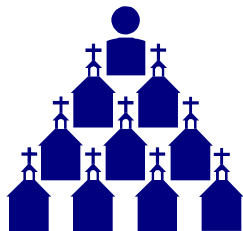
■ I believe God calls every Christian to work toward changing the world in ways that will lead to greater love and justice for all people. I believe I can best do that through a church, and especially through the one I know best and am known in. If I changed, I'd have to start from square one to find out how another church's system worked, and to get a voice in it. Changing would lessen or at least delay my opportunities to work for what I believe God calls today's churches to be doing. And to help the church change in ways I believe it needs to change, I feel that working from the inside is more effective than working from the outside.

Why I'm glad to be a Methodist

Several features of the UMC make me glad I'm a United Methodist, even though there's often a disappointing gap between the UMC's admirable claims and intentions, and its shortcomings in putting them into practice.

√ Its connectional system.

UMC organizational structure helps congregations and individual members join together to carry out ministries that need many people, cover wide geographical areas, or need to address systemic ills through coordinated efforts based on knowing what needs exist and how they can best be met.



The downside of such a system is that like any other large bureaucracy it's susceptible to red tape, waste, rewarding or at least protecting incompetence, and letting leaders get swamped by busy work that doesn't help to accomplish the system's purpose. Still, I feel that the UMC system's advantages outweigh its disadvantages.



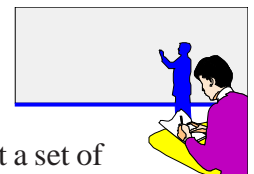
√ **Its clergy appointment system.** I appreciate the fact that every UMC congregation gets a new pastor every few years. Any pastor who turns some people on turns others off. Also, it's easy for members to mistakenly see a favorite pastor's style as the only right one, or for a pastor to see a congregation as a personal fiefdom when he or she has been there several years. Besides, getting an ineffective pastor moved is hard without an outside authority to order the move. Relatively long pastorates can have benefits, but some become too long. It's helpful, too, to know that when a pastor leaves, retires, or dies, a replacement will be furnished immediately without the congregation having to conduct its own search for one. It's also helpful to have pastors assigned on the basis of having abilities that fit the needs of a particular ministry setting.



Some of these good results don't always happen in the UMC, of course. Appointments often seem to be made solely because of where a pastor does or doesn't want to live, rather than because his or her abilities are the ones needed in the setting to which he or she is being appointed. And appointments often seem aimed more at keeping members comfortable, thus avoiding membership decline, than at getting the gospel message faithfully delivered. Despite these shortcomings, however, I find the UMC appointment system far better than any of the alternatives I know of.

√ Its emphasis on education.

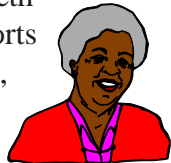
No one can become ordained in the UMC without having met a set of relatively high educational requirements or at least being actively in the process of meeting them. From its beginning, Methodism has promoted education. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, was a



pioneer in establishing schools to teach people to read and to give them the basics of a classical education. Early Methodist schools were especially for women, the poor, and other groups who had no other access to formal education. Throughout its history, too, Methodism has established and supported colleges and universities. In addition, United Methodist seminaries generally present the best of current scholarship along with a broad picture of Christian history and doctrine and a variety of ministry skills.



√ **Its advocacy for social justice.** Some of the earliest and most influential U.S. advocates for women's education and rights were Methodists. Methodists have also led efforts to eliminate slavery, racial segregation, racism, and discrimination against people who are not heterosexual.



Many Methodists have opposed these efforts, however. Even today, groups in the UMC are currently trying to preserve discriminatory policies and eliminate some of the UMC agencies that are working for social justice.

It's disappointing that the UMC and other Christian institutions have often lagged behind government and other secular organizations with regard to social justice. Rather than taking the lead, we've had to be dragged kicking and screaming into making changes that are consistent with

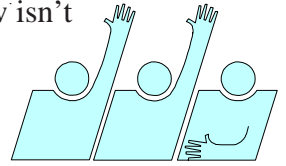


Jesus's teaching and example, that the secular world has already made.

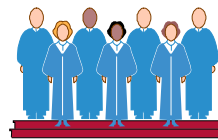
I only hope that the coming UMC General Conference and other churches' decision-making bodies will change this pattern instead of continuing it.

√ **Its democratic system of church government.** Similar to the U.S. government, the UMC has a system of governing bodies, from the local level to the worldwide, whose delegates are elected by church members at each level. This system provides for changing church rules, doctrines, and policies.

Of course, the majority view isn't necessarily the same as God's will. In fact, throughout history many opponents of the majority—especially the religious majority—have turned out to be speaking for God. In a huge organization like the UMC, however, or even in a local church congregation, it's virtually impossible to use any decision-making method other than majority rule.



I'm glad to be in a denomination that at least lets non-majority voices be heard. I only hope the coming UMC General Conference won't make changes that will increase the influence of the segments of the UMC that merely have the largest number of members or furnish the most money.



√ **Its preservation, encouragement, and active use of the arts, especially in worship.**

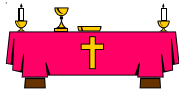
Much Methodist worship features the offering of individuals' best gifts and our culture's best gifts to God. Visual and aural beauty have high priority in many Methodist worship services and buildings. That's important to me. We need to use communication media that will reach all kinds of people, and to use today's media rather than only yesterday's, but I hope we won't stop including top-quality music and art. For many people these products of God-given human creativity are the most powerful evidence of God's presence among us.

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, 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 voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

√ **Its theological and liturgical freedom.** UMC members interpret the Bible in a wide variety of ways, and their beliefs about what being a Christian means cover a wide range. And although most UMC worship services follow a similar pattern, within that pattern a lot of variety exists. However, some members want to limit that variety. They want the UMC to adhere permanently to Wesley's views and methods. They want it to adopt strict definitions of Christian beliefs. They want to require clergy and seminary teachers to commit to a set of officially approved doctrines. I hope this effort doesn't succeed, because



I believe it would limit the UMC to yesterday's understandings instead of opening it to more accurate understandings God may be leading us toward. I don't want us to keep stating our purpose only as "making disciples," either, because to some people that means merely getting more names on the church roll or seeing conversion experiences and personal piety as all that being a Christian requires. I wish we'd make clear that our purpose is to live in ways that more closely match what Jesus taught and modeled. That's the kind of disciples I believe God wants Christians to be.

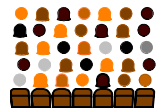
Barbara

Why I am a United Methodist

January 2004

An unreasonable policy

I've recently added to my *Connections* mailing list all of the United Methodist 2004 General Conference delegates who weren't already on my list. They will make crucial decisions for the UMC, so they're a group I want to reach. Reaching them isn't easy, however. A UMC agency collects the lists of their names and addresses from the regional bodies that elect them, then makes the list available for a fee. But the list comes with a warning from the UMC *Book of Discipline*—"No one other than authorized bodies or officers of the Church shall be permitted to use these records." Some lower-level UMC decision-making bodies follow a similar policy.



An obligation to be reachable

I got this year's list in unofficial pieces from helpful friends, so I didn't use the official records and break that rule, but it's a rule we need to get rid of. These delegates are elected by UMC members to represent them in the only bodies that can make decisions for the UMC, yet ordinary UMC members are forbidden from getting the information necessary for contacting the delegates. For the U.S. government the equivalent of that policy would be keeping the names and addresses of senators and representatives secret. If that were U.S. policy we'd be outraged, and rightly so. It's equally outrageous as church policy. Being a delegate to a decision-making body means being obligated to hear members' views on the issues that body will decide.