

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Disaster raises questions

Shocking. Unbelievable. Terrifying. Devastating. It's all that and more. How will U. S. Christians respond?



I'm glad we're showing more appreciation for our country and its freedoms. I'm glad we're trying to put an end to the terrorism that keeps destroying more and more lives. However, I hope we'll also give new attention to questions that the recent terrorist attacks and the reactions to them raise.



The questions can help us grow

I hope these events will make us take a hard, fresh look at what we believe and why we believe it. I hope we'll ask who our neighbors are in today's world, and what loving them requires. I hope we'll reconsider what God's view of justice might be, and what role God plays in human deaths. If we open ourselves to the questions that the current disaster presents, we can grow in our faith as a result. These questions aren't new, of course, but for some of us this crisis is giving them new urgency.



I don't claim to know the answers to them. I suspect that people who do claim to know all the answers are the people furthest from knowing them. But I believe we need to look again at the questions and to admit that some of what we previously assumed were the right answers could be wrong. That's why I'm addressing some of the questions here.

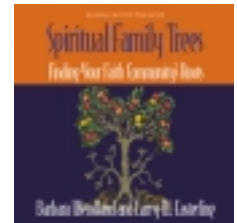
How patriotic can a Christian be?

Lots of church members evidently don't even consider this a legitimate question. Many



Spiritual Family Trees Finding Your Faith Community's Roots

Barbara Wendland
Larry W. Easterling



An Alban Institute Publication

Available mid-October, \$12

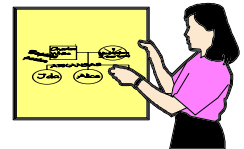
Order now from the Alban Institute at www.alban.org or 1-800-486-1318, ext. 244, send me your check for \$12 per copy, or order through your bookstore.

For centuries Christians have shared their personal faith histories as a way of recognizing what God has been doing in their lives and what God may be calling them to do next. For years genealogists, genetic counselors, and family therapists have used family tree diagrams called genograms, for describing families and their ancestry.

In our new book, Larry Easterling and I bring these two strands together and show you how to use genograms in your congregation or small group, to promote spiritual growth, build community, and enhance communication through sharing spiritual histories.

Larry is a United Methodist clergyman with extensive experience and training in counseling and in family systems. After several years as a teaching chaplain, he is now Vice President of Mission and Spiritual Care for a Chicago-area hospital system.

You may remember my account of sharing spiritual family trees in the Sunday School class that Larry and I were in, in the July and August 2000



Connections. Now we relate personal stories of how other lay people and pastors have used spiritual family trees and found them to be a powerful tool for building community and promoting spiritual growth. We also give many suggestions of ways to lead groups in this exciting process, in a variety of settings.

We think you'll like our book!

U.S. Christians assume that our “founding fathers” were all Christians and that the U.S. is therefore meant to be a Christian nation, but I’m afraid that’s a mistake. Our founders believed in God, but they weren’t all Christians.



We understand our system of laws to be based on God-given principles, but we can’t legitimately expect Bible verses to be binding on all U.S. citizens.

Many churches display the U.S. flag prominently at their altars. Some have included the Pledge of Allegiance in worship services in recent weeks, and sung the armed forces’ official songs during worship. To me, these practices take patriotism too far. They give the wrong impression of what we’re worshipping. They come dangerously close to idolatry. They can keep us from realizing that uncritical support of a nation—even ours, with its admirable commitment to freedom—can lead to disobeying God.

I hope that when we sing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” in our churches, we’ll pay attention to the part that asks God to mend our country’s flaws, as well as the part that’s a prayer for self-control. For Christians, patriotism has limits. I hope that during the current crisis our fear and outrage won’t make us forget where those limits are.



Is the church at the disposal of Caesar?

Shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, Peter Storey, a Methodist church leader in South Africa, wrote a letter to Americans. Here’s what he said about the recent worship service at Washington’s National Cathedral, at which President Bush spoke.

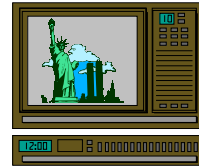
“It was sad to see the church and other religious traditions laid so abjectly at the disposal of Caesar. It is one thing for the church to offer opportunity for the leaders and people of the land to come, like any others, to pray and seek God’s healing and guidance under God’s word. It is theologically an entirely different matter to provide a pulpit to the head of state, enabling him to use a house of worship to

rally the nation for war, exactly contradicting some of the scriptures that were read. When uniforms and flags crowd God’s house, it is hard for God’s word to be heard.”



There’s undoubtedly room for Christians to disagree with some of what Storey is saying, but if we take Jesus seriously we must at least consider the possibility that Storey and others expressing similar views are making some valid points.

Does God choose who dies and who lives?



In the days since the September 11 attacks, newspapers, magazines, and TV have been full of accounts by occupants of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon who narrowly escaped. Many say that God saved them. News reports have also included comments from relatives of people who died in the attacks. I heard one relative claim that her family member had died because God wanted the man’s company, as if because of the man’s special worth, the man had been chosen by God for a special honor.

We often grasp at such explanations when a beloved person dies or we narrowly escape death, and that’s understandable. We feel a desperate need to explain and justify something that seems unbearable. But I wish that at times when we’re not in the grip of disaster, our churches would help us to consider other possible explanations of God’s role in human death.



If God personally rescued certain people from disasters in which others died, wouldn’t this mean that God cared more about some people than others? That God valued the saved ones more than the ones whom God allowed to die? I can’t believe that’s

how God operates, but what else could we conclude, if God deliberately saved some people but let others die? What else could we conclude, if God chose certain people to honor by causing them to die early, merely in order to have their company sooner?



How many prayers are enough?

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks we’re continually being urged to pray. On a car trip through several states a few days after the attacks, in every town I saw signs saying “Pray.” That’s good advice, but does the quantity of prayers matter to God? I doubt it, but current events keep me wondering.



Recent news reports tell about two Central Texas missionaries who are captive and on trial in Afghanistan. They're accused of preaching Christianity in that country where propagating any religion other than Islam is forbidden. In a newspaper article quoting the women's pastor, he told how church members were praying in round-the-clock teams. Then he said, "If we can raise up another 200,000 or 300,000 people, to say a prayer on their behalf, maybe that will be just enough to tip the scales and lead them to a way out." Is that how prayer works? Does God respond only if we can enlist a large enough number of people to pray, like enlisting votes to elect a candidate or pass a law? Are 200,000 prayers more effective than 100,000, or 10,000, or 1000, or 1? Maybe so, but I doubt it.

How should we treat people who aren't like us?



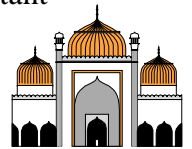
This question goes far beyond the current responses to terrorist attacks, but it's currently showing up in two especially important ways. First, we see it in the outrageous mistreatment that innocent people are experiencing merely because someone thinks their clothing or physical features are like those of terrorists.

It's hard to believe we're still doing this. In World War II ugly caricatures of Asian faces were widely displayed, and making scathing remarks about "Japs" was considered acceptable. Innocent American citizens were put into concentration camps merely because they had Japanese ancestry. I thought we'd now recognized such behavior as cruel and unacceptable, but current news reminds me that we haven't yet accomplished that. Surely all Christians are called to avoid and combat this kind of cruelty.

The second way in which we encounter people unlike ourselves is through their statements of beliefs and opinions. And we don't always treat people kindly when we disagree with them. A Congressman recently responded with a fierce verbal attack, to the Congresswoman who had voted against giving the president permission to take action to combat terrorism. Even if the Congressman strongly disagreed with the dissenter, I wished he had at least given her credit for standing up for what she saw (mistakenly or not) as the wisest response to a question that related only to policy and not to truth.



To some Christians and also to some followers of other religions, having different religious beliefs from theirs apparently seems like a denial of truth and an offense against God. It's thus a call to defend God and God's truth. For some believers, that even justifies mistreating people who believe differently, and vandalizing their places of worship. Religious differences therefore raise the important question of whether our own religion is the only way to God and to truth.



In the U.S. this question is now confronting us more than ever before. Harvard professor Diana Eck points out that we are now the most religiously diverse nation on earth. Since 1960's changes in immigration laws, Eck finds, our religious constituency has changed forever, yet most of us don't realize that the changes have happened. Race has been our main social issue up to now, observes Eck, but religious diversity is



emerging as the main challenge of the 21st century. I'll say more about this new challenge soon in another issue of *Connections*.

If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start getting it monthly by U.S. mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. To get *Connections* by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 9 years' back issues, all of which are available, send me \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write, phone, or e-mail me (addresses and numbers on page 1), or on the Internet, see www.connectionsonline.org.



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. Some readers make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

How will we Christians respond to the challenge? Even within the church we tend to stifle nonconforming voices, not only when they express differences about belief, but even when they refuse to be cheerleaders for official church actions and positions. Yet throughout history, the dissenters and misfits have often been the ones who turned out to be speaking God's message to the church and to the world. More about that in another *Connections*, too.

Even Christianity includes extremists

I'm inclined to believe that the one and only God is the God that most religions seek to worship. They may use different names for God, and each religion

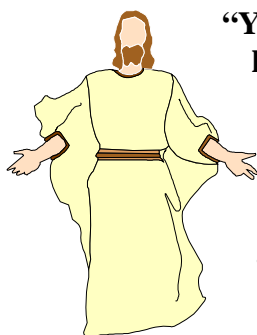
(including Christianity) probably includes some mistaken or at least incomplete understandings.



In addition, all religions include extremists whose harmful actions contradict their religion's true beliefs. And that includes Christianity. Remember the Crusades, and look at Northern Ireland today.

If the September 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. were done by religious extremists, I hope our inadequate knowledge about the religion they claimed to follow won't keep us from looking at the questions this disaster raises.

Barbara



“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...”

—Matthew 5:43-44

“... My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Thus says the Lord God.

—Isaiah 56:7

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars. For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

—1 John 4:20-21