

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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The unheard minority



In the church we talk a lot about the importance of not letting minorities be overpowered by the majority. For the most part, Christians recognize this as a justice issue, not only for the church and its decision-making bodies but also for the society as a whole.

This makes sense, of course. Welcoming all kinds of people is an important part of following Jesus Christ. He taught and modeled the importance of including people who were in the minority in their society or who for some other reason were treated as second-class people or even social outcasts.

We at least talk a good game



In the church when we talk about minorities we most often mean racial or ethnic minorities. Sometimes we also mean people who are not heterosexual. And although women are the majority in the population and an even larger majority in the church, we often speak of women as if they were a minority, because they often are in the minority in church leadership positions and decision-making bodies.



We don't always actually include women or racial minorities in numbers anywhere near proportional to their presence in the church or the wider population, but mostly we at least admit the need to include them. We talk a good game even though we don't always play a good one.

A minority we leave out of the game



A minority whose inclusion we rarely even give lip-service to, however, is the Christians who don't totally share the majority's understanding of what the Bible's words mean or of what being a Christian means.

Who speaks for God?



Throughout history many of the most outstanding followers of God have disagreed with the majority in the religious institutions of their time. The will of the majority has turned out not to be God's will. Many Christians today, however, complain that their church leaders and decision-making bodies don't reflect the views of the majority of church members.

When I hear that complaint I think, "So what? What matters is not whether church leaders or policies are expressing the will of the majority but whether they are expressing God's will."

A two-party church?

In the UMC and other Protestant denominations, the top decision-making bodies don't seem to reflect most members' views. Top Protestant decision-making bodies also seem to be moving toward what amounts to a two-party system. They are becoming more sharply divided between theological liberals and conservatives. A two-party system evidently works better than any other for the U.S. government, but such a system seems unlikely to help the church follow God's will.



A middle-of-the-road church?

Most United Methodists and other mainline Protestants are theologically nearer the middle than either of the two most prominent positions. We rightly consider majority rule or at least consensus as a necessary decision-making method in most church bodies, because we know the harm that autocratic rule can cause. The middle, however, has rarely if ever been where God was, so moving toward it probably wouldn't take us where God calls us now. Jesus wasn't a middle-of-the-road person, nor was he a religious conservative.



We can't please the majority or the two main church parties without stifling minority voices that may speak for God. How can we maintain the democratic decision-making methods that we know are important, and yet also pay more attention to the minority voices we need to hear?

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. ..."

—Mark 9:38-40

Jesus apparently didn't see any need to stifle people who expressed his message in a way different from the majority of his followers. He specifically warned his disciples not to try to stop some people who claimed to be following him but weren't part of the insiders' group (the group we

misleadingly call "the disciples," as if Mary Magdalene and other devoted disciples weren't real disciples). Jesus's story about not gathering the weeds also warns us about claiming to know who's a real Christian and who isn't.

If we classify other Christians as heretics because their understanding of the Bible is different from what we think is correct, we're acting like the people Jesus most strongly berated.

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat ... The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them ...'"

—Matthew 13:24-30

I'm afraid we're trying to take over God's role if we insist that in order to be a Christian one must commit to specific doctrinal statements. All religious movements tend to codify their beliefs into doctrines and creeds as they age, it seems, but if

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them."

—Matthew 23:13-14

we go even further and try to make acceptance of particular doctrinal statements a requirement for being part of the church, we're straying far from what Jesus apparently requires of his followers.

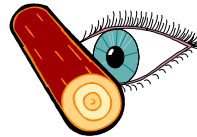


What's our motive?

Even when in our church groups we're willing to include Christians who disagree with us, it's sometimes for reasons that are questionable at best. Our reason may be only that we think including them will give us the chance to show them they're wrong. We rarely consider that our opponents' views could be right and ours could be the ones that need to change.

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

—Luke 6:41



Any of us could be wrong, however, since none of us is perfect, none of us can know all there is to know about God, and we don't all experience God in the same way. Our own views therefore could always be at least partly mistaken. They may be the log that needs removing from

our eye. Unfortunately, recognizing a mistaken Bible interpretation or religious belief as a log often is even harder and more uncomfortable than recognizing other kinds of logs.

Tradition can be a log

Many of us are quick to say, "My beliefs and my church's doctrines are part of Christian tradition. They can't be wrong!" Or at least we say, "They're part of my denomination's tradition," which for United Methodists may mean they're in the UMC's *Book of Discipline*, along with a rule that says they must never be changed.



Reluctant as we may be to admit it, however, parts of our tradition have at times turned out to be contradictory to the total message of the Bible or to true Christian principles. That has happened with traditions of slavery, racial segregation, and subjugation of women. Those were once vehemently claimed as coming straight from the Bible, but gradually we've realized that they came merely from culture and human power structures.

We like to think of our tradition as all having come from God, free of error and reflecting God's



will perfectly, but there's no way it could be like that. Much of Christian tradition was undoubtedly inspired by God and started by people who believed they were hearing God's message correctly, but since they were human they're likely to have made some mistakes in understanding God's message.

Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? ..." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

—Matthew 15:2

Jesus dealt with this topic often. In the gospels we often see him informing people that following God's will required abandoning certain religious and social traditions.

Broadening our worship

What if we designed our worship services to include more of the total range of Christian views? In worship services that include recitation of a creed, what if we used a variety of creeds instead of the same one or even the same two or three all the time? In a United Methodist Church that might mean using on different Sundays the Apostles' Creed, the Korean creed, the UMC Social Creed, and others found in the *UM Hymnal* and *Book of Worship*. This would remind worshipers that the Christian faith can be validly understood and expressed in more than one way. It would also keep members who didn't share the view of the majority of the congregation's members, from feeling that they were being falsely declared unchristian.



What about having variety in sermon content, too? That could mean hearing a statement about a current social-justice issue one Sunday, giving pros



and cons of several ways of responding to it, and the next Sunday a soothing sermon that furnished more comfort than challenge.

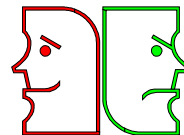
Beliefs don't blend like music styles

Many churches have what they call "blended" worship services, but this seems to mean mainly including in each service some super-familiar hymns and some that aren't so familiar, and including several styles of music. Including both Bach and Amy Grant is an effort to appeal to the wide range of musical tastes that the congregation's membership and the wider population include. Some observers feel that musically blended services merely turn off everyone, because each of the included styles turns off part of the congregation.



Presenting a variety of Christian interpretations and beliefs often brings an even greater risk. That's because we don't see questions of belief and of scripture interpretation as mere reflections of differences in taste, preference, experience, or culture. We see them instead as questions of right and wrong. Expressing certain kinds of beliefs and scriptural interpretations can be seen as denying truth.

I believe that using only masculine language for speaking to God and about God, for example, contradicts the Bible's overall message about what God is like, and that it reflects a cultural characteristic, not a timeless truth. Christians who disagree with that view, however, believe that using non-masculine words for God gives a false picture of God and contradicts the picture given by Jesus. These two beliefs directly contradict each other, so we can't express either



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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.

of them without denying the other. Similarly, we can't say that the virgin birth or resurrection of Jesus happened physically, and also say that stories of these events are only metaphorical ways of expressing something important about the nature and role of Jesus. Saying what one group of Christians considers essential means saying what another group considers heretical.



A different kind of blend

Does this problem rule out having theologically blended worship services or focusing on different parts of the Christian belief spectrum on different

Sundays? I hope not. Doing that could keep some faithful Christians from becoming church dropouts. It could help some nonchurchgoers see that the church has something to say that's important to hear, when they find the majority theological positions unconvincing. Wouldn't achieving those results be worth more of us putting up with the discomfort that comes from having to hear views we disagree with? Christian churchgoers with minority views have to do that constantly. I only wish those with the majority views were willing to do more of it, for the good of the whole church.

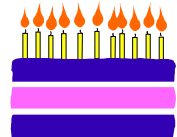
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November 2003

Another birthday for *Connections*

This issue starts my 12th year of writing *Connections*. Many readers have been with me from the very beginning, but for some this is the first issue they've received. Whether you're a newcomer or a longtime reader, I thank you for your interest.



Thanks for your responses, too. One of my reasons for writing *Connections* is my desire to keep readers reassured that they're not alone in their concerns about the church, even if in their local congregations and social groups they don't find many other people who share those concerns. For me, a lot of that much-needed reassurance comes from the responses I continually get from *Connections* readers, so I greatly appreciate them. (For a different reason I also appreciate knowing when readers disagree with what I've written, as when a reader recently said the September issue convinced him beyond all doubt that I was part of the lunatic fringe of United Methodism.)

Connections by e-mail?

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