

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

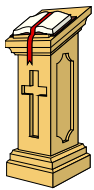
NUMBER 192 - NOVEMBER 2008



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Noticing and acting

As a young preacher over in Union County in the mid-sixties, in the light of the burgeoning civil rights movement I became convinced that the good ol' Mississippi segregated way of life was incompatible with the gospel as I understood it. I began to get involved supportively in the movement, determined to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Pretty soon I was removed from my pulpit and effectively blackballed in the Mississippi and Southern Baptist Conventions.



I have spent my life for the most part working in civil rights, anti-poverty, and community organizing. But to me, this work has been no less ministry than was being a pastor before. And I maintained my connection with the greater church in various ways, including serving with the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches. I also do some writing for Christian publications and some speaking and preaching when I'm asked to.

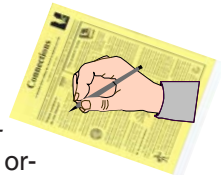


Action is the purpose of thinking

Over the years I've become something of a jake-leg theologian. Now for many people nothing seems duller than the idea of being a theologian. But properly understood, doing theology is not for devotional or inspirational purposes, not for intellectual learning, and certainly not for spiritual amusement. As one of my favorite theologians, Dorothee Soelle, says, "thinking theologically is not an end in itself, but for the purpose of right action." It is for finding the right way of being in and engaging this world around us from the perspective of the Christian faith. From that approach, doing theology is one of the most exciting and relevant imaginable pursuits.



Guest author— a first for *Connections*



The guest author of this *Connections* is Don Manning-Miller, an ordained Baptist minister who lives in Oxford, Mississippi. A native Mississippian, Don is Vice President of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, a liberal-arts college related to the United Methodist Church. A member of the Alliance of Baptists, he is a lay theologian and writes on theology and politics.

Ecumenical, progressive, contemporary

Don describes his work as an ecumenical ministry for progressive, contemporary Christianity. His work has been mainly in anti-poverty and civil rights, mostly in the South. He was forced out of his pulpit in the 1960s for his civil rights activities. He has been Senior Field Representative for the Office of Economic Opportunity and the then Department of Health, Education and Welfare during poverty-program days and Director of Program Operations for one of the nation's largest Head Start programs. He was Director of the Mississippi Hunger Coalition and a member of the activist board of the National Council of Churches Commission on the Delta Ministry.

For four years in Bloomington, Indiana, Don was Chair of the Congregations for Justice and Peace. He was active in the Berea Peace and Justice Task Force in Kentucky before returning to Mississippi



1997. He has been an executive in various nonprofit and economic development organizations, has been a community organizer, and has worked in progressive political causes and movements. His wife is Coordinator of the Graduate Program for the Journalism Department at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

He noticed and took action

When Don Manning-Miller noticed that the racially segregated way of life was incompatible with the gospel, he took costly action to help change that way of life. His is an example we'd all do well to follow: noticing what doesn't match the gospel, and taking action to help change it.

Barbara

While engaging in that strange behavior, I have done a lot of thinking about the church and the state of the church. It's no news that the old mainline white denominations are in a state of near terminal shrinkage and the trend has affected significant segments of the black church as well. Even the Southern Baptist Convention, which has bragged about its numbers, has seen its growth stall in the last few years.



Too timid and too religious

As I think about and observe churchly activity it seems to me there are two problems that stand out, and they are connected to one another. One is that we have often been too timid. We have been afraid to speak the word of the Lord as uncompromisingly as our biblical base would have us do. We're afraid that it might be controversial, displease somebody and hurt our numbers.



Secondly, maybe most importantly, we have consciously or unconsciously defined our goal and mission as that of trying to make people religious. Our doing that is ironic when Jesus in his day in many ways was one of the most anti-religious of role models, railing against the religious institutions of his time, urging people to do their giving and praying in secret, attacking religious leaders for turning letter into law, and upsetting the temple. Yet we measure the success or failure of our efforts by how many people we can get into the church building how many times how long and how religious we can get them to act.

Look around you for the Spirit

When Dr. King came to Mississippi in the sixties, he didn't come to tell us people weren't going to church enough. In fact, the white folks who were causing the problems and the black folks who were suffering from them had all been going to church for centuries—granting that seeds of change were being sown in many of the black churches.



Dr. King challenged us by asking, "Where is the Spirit of God at work? Look around you!" The answer was "*in the streets*" beginning to tear down

the façade of segregation and legal discrimination and unravel the ropes of an oppressive society so the people God loved could have a Jubilee experience.

Faithful, not religious



The reality is that the biblical God does not call us to be RELIGIOUS but to be FAITHFUL! The issue is not religiosity or piosity, but living the faith in the real world. It's about being agents of God's Kingdom in the nitty gritty affairs of this concrete world where the rubber of faith meets the road of life—in the most practical ways loving, mending, and caring for the world and its people.

As Dr. King (whom we honor more with our lips than with our commitments) said, "A religion that professes a concern for the souls of [people] and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion."

Two great mandates



I think much of the malaise in the church today is the coming to fruition of that prophecy. For the church the heart of the matter turns on the two great mandates that we know as The Great Commandment and The Great Commission. It is here that we find the key to an integrated and faithful concept of the Christian life and our mission. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all our soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And, the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-38) The love of God is simply inseparable from love of neighbor—what some might call "social concern."

To be authentic, the love of God must be expressed in the reality of everyday life in actions, programs, use of influence and resources in ways that enhance the quality and dignity of life for our world-wide neighbors—those far or near whose well being is affected by what we do or leave undone. And this is especially true of those referred to



in the New Testament as “the least of these our brothers and sisters,” who are hungry, poor, disenfranchised, discriminated against, excluded, denied opportunity, oppressed and vulnerable



Faith in tension with the culture

It is in the context of that Great Commandment that what we know as the Great Commission is given: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you....” And the key issue here is the making of disciples or learners, pupils, followers—perhaps apprentices might be best or even activists since authentic Christians are people actively living the faith in tension with the culture.



For we are called (or saved if you will) not just *from* something but *for* something. And that something is a life centered in and lived from the alternative perspective of God’s Kingdom—lives of discipleship. Called to be part of God’s redemptive purpose in history, responsible for history, representing the compassion of God in every area of life and society. Transforming the world in the image of the Kingdom. This is what Audrey Chapman refers to as “God’s Distinctive Agenda” and Dr. King called building the “Beloved Community.”

Making people religious isn’t the goal

For truly when we let making people religious become our goal rather than preparing disciples for work in the world, the religious activity itself often becomes a form of idolatry. Church programs be-

come ends in themselves rather than places to recharge our batteries for our mission in the world.

When attending or serving the church with little or no worldly component becomes confused with serving God, then the religious activity itself can be an exercise in unfaithfulness, often an act of idolatry and irrelevance. Verbal expressions for the idea of love for God, when not accompanied by organized efforts to make life better for real people in the real world, are pure self-indulgence. They make a mockery of the gospel imperatives. Or as Robert Cooper says, “Love without strategy is little more than a fleeting feeling.”



You can’t be neutral

Some might say, “Well, I prefer to just remain neutral on all those outside issues.” But the harsh truth is that you cannot be neutral. For the church to do nothing to address the culture is to do something. By its silence the church is implicitly affirming the status quo as being acceptable to God. If the church does not give leadership, there are plenty of other false prophets ready to take the lead.



Doing nothing is simply an ethical cop out. It is to abandon God’s concern for the least of these and become passive cheerleaders for what is instead of what should be. At this point, religion truly becomes an escape from responsible mission. There must be areas where we are not for sale.

True patriotism is not simply agreeing with everything our nation does, however wrong it might be. True patriotism is loving our nation critically and constantly calling it back to its highest and best ideals.



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



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 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 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.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve ...
—Joshua 24:15

Get on record

As the great Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown said, “It’s important to get on record as opposing evil.” And, as one of the leaders of the anti-apartheid move-

ment in South Africa put it during those dark days, “Neutrality is the most reprehensible partiality there is. It means choosing for those in power, choosing for injustice, without taking any responsibility for it. It is the worst sort of politics, and the most detestable sort of ‘christianity’.”

Those of us who believe in the reality of God should not, cannot, and do not suppose for a minute that we will build the Kingdom of God on earth by our own efforts. But we know that our faithful response to the call of God, to God’s Distinctive Agenda, opens the deep wellsprings of God’s love to immerse and ultimately overcome the world with divine justice, peace, and reconciliation.



Don Manning-Miller



Connections

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Noticing and acting

November 2008

Noticing and opposing what’s incompatible with the gospel

While traveling in Germany recently, I saw on a church building a banner whose message I wish a lot of U.S. churches were brave enough to display. It said, “Rechtsextremismus und christlicher Glaube sind unvereinbar.” In English, that’s “Rightwing extremism and Christian faith are incompatible.”

A big part of being Christian, it seems to me—probably the main part—is noticing what is incompatible with the teaching and example of Jesus, and then doing what we can to oppose and change it. Don Manning-Miller, the guest author of this issue of *Connections*, did that when he noticed that the racial segregation that was standard operating procedure where he lived was incompatible with the gospel. He started working for change, at great personal cost.

Imagine how different the world could be if more of us did that!

