

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Peace, comfort, and truth

“Does your message bring peace?” A *Connections* reader asked me this about my belief statement in the November issue. By peace, she seemed to mean peace of mind—feelings of serenity and security—and she implied that what I believe doesn’t bring that. But the vast majority of readers I’m hearing from in response to the November *Connections* tell me that for them it does.



That contrast raised a question that I ask myself often: What’s wrong with people holding whatever religious beliefs comfort them—whatever brings them peace—whether or not those beliefs are true?

Some beliefs lead to mistreating people

What’s wrong, it seems to me, is that some religious beliefs lead to mistreating other people. Believing that Christianity is the only route to God and heaven, for example, can lead to being hostile to the many people who don’t believe that—non-Christians, and even Christians who interpret the Bible differently. Believing that every word of the

Bible came from God also does harm. It leads to giving undue weight to verses that merely reflect ancient customs. Sins such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism are the result.



Wrong belief may not lead to direct, personal mistreatment of individuals. Most Christians are nice enough to those they consider sinners or heretics, when they casually encounter them. But many traditionalist Christians support systems that inflict mistreatment. When they fail to oppose government policies that deny to some people rights that should be available to all, they help to perpetuate those unjust policies. When they fail to oppose church policies

The church’s once-a-year opportunity

Many people who don’t go to church at any other time will be in Christmas worship services this month. Some will come because family members or friends want them to come. Some will come because of the special Christmas music and decorations or the Christmas pageant presented by children.



Some of these Christmas attenders will come only reluctantly, because they expect to hear a story they find implausible, with its claims of a virgin birth, a unique baby sent by God, and a star that led people to his birthplace. When they come this year, will they also hear anything that seems more credible to them, and more relevant to life today? This may be the church’s one chance to hook their interest.

Turning on the turned-off people

What will your church do with that chance? How could it show the reluctant, once-a-year attenders the compassion and justice that Jesus taught, instead of merely emphasizing his miraculous birth? Could the sermon somehow acknowledge that the Christmas story, like other parts of the Bible, may convey truth without being historical, and that it doesn’t have to be interpreted literally in order to have valuable meaning?



Along with the beauty of Christmas music and decorations, could you give the Christmas-only attenders a sample of the peace they could get from having their real questions acknowledged? Could you give them a hint that if they came back to your church after Christmas they would hear pros and cons of today’s world issues discussed openly?

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, good will among people.”

—Luke 2:13-14

Above all, what could inspire all the attenders of your church’s worship service—including those who come only at Christmas—to leave wanting to promote the justice, compassion, and peace that Jesus came to promote?

that deny some members full participation in the church, they're mistreating those excluded members. When they remain quiet and passive instead of coming to the aid of minority individuals or groups when others reject them, they might as well be actively doing the rejecting themselves.



Beliefs that lead to these and other harmful behaviors aren't justified, it seems to me, by the mere fact that they provide comfort for the Christians who believe them. If what comforts the believers harms other people, then those of us who see the beliefs as false need to speak up about why we think they're false. We need to work toward getting our churches to stop promoting these harmful beliefs.

One's comfort is another's boredom

For me, thoughts about how religious beliefs bring or don't bring peace also raise the question of whether we should think of peace only as personal comfort. Is peace merely the absence of disagreement or open conflict? Or is it more than that? Is it the presence of something, rather than just absence?

These questions remind me, too, that what brings comfort is very different for different people. People with different experiences or different personalities tend to have different requirements for comfort. One person's comfort or peacefulness is another's deadening boredom or even dishonesty.



Freedom to consider and discuss

For me and many of the *Connections* readers I hear from, comfort requires being honest and open with oneself and others. It requires being free to consider a variety of options and discuss them openly with others, especially within the church. It requires active, open, continuous searching for new information and insight, using the best of modern scholarship and the findings of many disciplines of knowledge in addition to methods we may consider more religious.



In response to the November *Connections*, I'm hearing from a steady stream of readers whose requirements for comfort are similar to mine but apparently quite different from those of the reader who asked me if my beliefs brought peace. Like the re-

sponses to previous issues in which I've said I had a hard time accepting some of what I saw and heard in church, almost all of the responses I'm currently getting are expressing the comfort and peace that the writers have gotten from having beliefs like those I described, from finally admitting them openly, and from finding they're not alone in having them.

These readers thank me for assuring them that it's okay to relax in this comfort. It's a secure comfort that comes from taking up-to-date information and many views into account in forming their religious beliefs. It's nothing like the comfort that can be maintained only by dismissing or trying to ignore or even avoid new ideas and information. The comfort that depends on keeping blinders in place is precarious. It can be destroyed at any moment by a new thought or bit of information that accidentally manages to get in.



The comfort that honesty brings



Here's a representative sample of what I'm hearing from readers.

"You put into words what I have been thinking for a LONG time!!!! You articulated my beliefs so well. It is a relief to know that there are others out there who feel the same."

"You have been writing about things that I have been feeling for so long ... I truly believe that unless things change drastically in the church as an institution, it will continue to see those of us 'in exile' leaving in even greater numbers."

"You have expressed such a freeing and challenging point of view."

"Your words brought me, as I think they will bring others, great comfort. The comfort I'm talking about is the kind that comes when I get to tell the truth without reservation, without intending any hurt to anyone else. ... When I am as honest as you have been, I experience much more compassion for people."



"I am glad, so glad"

A 91-year-old retired UMC clergyman wrote me, "Just in the last five years have I begun to raise the basic questions." He acknowledges that this questioning has aroused the disturbing feelings that I also

hear described by many other older clergy—feelings that are understandably hard to face despite bringing relief. This 91-year-old admits that raising the questions fills him with mixed feelings. “Have I wasted my life espousing a ‘gospel’ which now I see as false or severely compromised?” he wonders. “Do my new insights give me any sense of comfort or assurance?” But also like many others I hear from, he reports, “With all of the uncertainties this transition exposes me to, I am glad, so very glad, that I have wakened to a fresh and more promising view.”



Responses like these, so numerous and so impassioned, remind me that even though for many Christians, beliefs like those I expressed are uncomfortable or even unacceptable, for many others such beliefs bring peace. It’s the peace that comes from being open and honest with oneself and others.

Different ways to provide comfort

What can churches do about this difference? If they want to provide comfort for members, they need to provide different kinds of comfort. They can’t focus only on the members whose comfort comes from avoiding information and ideas that would make them question their present beliefs.

What would the people who are now staying away or barely hanging on in the church find comforting when they came to a worship service or other church activity? Many would like the comfort of knowing that they wouldn’t hear or be expected to say or sing things that their outside learning, observation, and experience make impossible for them to believe. Many women would be comforted

by not hearing men put in the same category with God and women omitted from it, by the use of all-masculine language. Worship attenders who differ from the majority in some way, including having different religious or political views, would like the comfort of feeling welcomed, not just tolerated, and certainly not shunned or treated with hostility or disdain.



These are passive ways in which some of us could experience comfort, but there are active ways too.

Discussing beliefs and issues

Many of us would like the comfort of being in a church where the most important current issues were openly addressed. In the church, we’d like to discuss how various ways of dealing with them might be consistent or inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus. Such issues currently include how to provide health care for all. They also include wars, wide disparities in income, and the need to provide education, food, clothing, and shelter for all. All of these relate directly to what Jesus taught, yet for many churches, addressing them in church is taboo.



All are controversial, of course, but that means they’re the ones Christians most need to be addressing. The ones that everyone agrees on could well be given lower priority. But too many churches act as if the most important issues don’t exist, or at least as if being Christian has nothing to do with them.

I hear from many Christians who would also like the comfort of hearing frequent acknowledgment by churches that Christianity isn’t the only route to God or heaven, and that Christians aren’t the only advocates of love and justice.

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 17 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.

We're chosen to help

We'd like to hear reminders, too, that the world's poor, hungry, sick, and social outcasts, not financially comfortable American Christians, are apparently God's chosen people. Who are those suffering people in our society today, like Joseph and Mary were in the Christmas story? Illegal immigrants, maybe? Civilians who get killed as "collateral damage" in the nations where we're at war? The many people who are poor, sick, and hungry in our own country as well as elsewhere?



The teaching of the man the Christmas baby grew up to be seems to have made clear that if God has any chosen people, these are among them. Being chosen may mean that God chooses for them to get the most attention from the rest of us.



Christmas, then, may be the best time for churches to say to all who come, "You are welcome here. You are called to make a difference in the world by reaching out to people in need. This congregation will help you do that, through thinking about your beliefs and joining others in acting on them."

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Connections

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Churches are for thinking how to change the world and working toward changing it



One *Connections* reader's response to the November issue reminded me of how rarely churches show evidence of helping people think about their beliefs. "I do not have a church group," this reader wrote. He went on to say that he had participated in a church twice earlier in his life but had fallen away each time. He explained that he saw religious belief as a very personal part of a person's belief system, implying that being in a church group wouldn't contribute anything worthwhile to it. "Most of my church attendance in recent years has been at funerals," he said, "where a church can provide great comfort. A major attraction of church affiliation is the fellowship and comfort that goes with active participation."

This man reads widely and thinks deeply. He has obviously thought a lot about what he believes. But he hasn't seen any church offering any help with thinking, so it's no wonder that he's not part of one. Far too many give the same impression this man has gotten: that churches are only for fellowship and comfort. Yet religious belief needs to include learning and thinking, and its results affect how we treat other people.



Being in a faith community is valuable because being with others can stimulate our thinking as well as providing comfort when we need it. The church needs to provide nutritious food for thought, not just fellowship and comfort.