

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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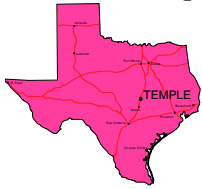


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## Connections Live! 2010

November 2010 was a notable month for me. Two projects I've been thinking about, working on, and wanting to accomplish for years finally became reality. One was the publication of my most recent book, an especially personal statement and the first book I've written alone rather than with a co-author. The other was a gathering of *Connections* readers in my own town.

On November 19 and 20, 130 Texas *Connections* readers and friends gathered at the Hilton Garden Inn in Temple for *Connections Live! 2010*. They came from cities like Amarillo, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Waco, and Houston, and from many smaller towns like Boerne and Booker, Hico and Leander. There were even a few guests from out of state. In the month that started my 19th year of writing *Connections*, this long-wished-for event finally happened.



### “All evening, I could not stop smiling”

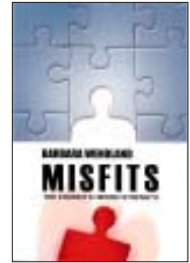
More than an hour before the announced starting time, eager guests were already crowded around book tables and engrossed in lively conversations in the check-in area. Attendees could browse brochures and resources and purchase books by progressive authors who were present, as well as videos and other materials from the Dykes Foundation and other sources. A used-book exchange table was heaped high when we began and empty when we left. Two lucky people even won video series as door prizes, donated by *Living the Questions* and by *Faith and Reason*.



One of the best parts, especially for those of us who feel isolated without strong local or regional support, was simply the chance to visit with kindred spirits and share experiences. One participant wrote in her evaluation: “All Friday evening, I could not stop smiling.” I felt a little like that myself.

## My book is here!

You can order *Misfits: The Church's Hidden Strength* from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) and other booksellers, and you can look inside it on Amazon.com. However, ordering from the publisher, St. Johann Press, may be faster; e-mail owner Dave Biesel at [d.biesel@verizon.net](mailto:d.biesel@verizon.net) or phone 201-387-1529. The book is \$18.95 from either St. Johann or Amazon. St. Johann's shipping is \$5 for the first copy and \$1 per additional copy. For signed copies, mail me your check for \$24 each, including shipping.



In *Misfits* I use my own story and quotes from many authors and *Connections* readers to describe changes we all feel the church needs to make, for transforming the world by following Jesus. Chapters include “What misfits want to know” and “What the church and the world need to know,” which many churches aren't making known. I also suggest “What misfits can do” and “What congregations can do” to help give both the misfits and the church a realistic basis for hope.



### Following Jesus means being a misfit

David Dykes of the Dykes Foundation says this about *Misfits*: “Barbara Wendland lays out a provocative process for transforming our anonymous misfit experiences into bottom-up institutional change.”

Gary Holthaus, author of *The Unauthorized Bible*, says, “Barbara Wendland has been one of the church's most eloquent and persistent spokespersons for a renewed vision of what our religious and spiritual life might be. The story of how she arrived at this place is deeply compelling and important to the church.”

Theologian Joerg Rieger asks, “What if the true nature of church is found in the margins, with those who push beyond its current domestication? What if those who raise questions are more faithful than those who always nod in agreement?” And he observes, “The lives of Jesus and the prophets testify to the importance of misfits and, as Barbara Wendland rightly notes, ‘following Jesus means being a misfit.’”



## The church that the world needs

Opening and closing presentations were given by Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Austin. He asked us to think about what kind of church the world needs and what our part in it needs to be.



Saturday sessions featured panelists Glenda Whitehead, Julie Fuschak, David Dykes, Joerg Rieger, and Robert Jensen. (See past issues at [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org) for information about most of them.) They spoke about what progressive Christianity means, what they have experienced in Texas, what each of us is called to do, and how to move past resistance. Question time and discussion at tables followed. Table groups during the first two sessions let everyone meet new people and hear varied perspectives. For the final table discussion, seating was by geographical area, in the hope that groups would plan steps to take together after they got home.

Some attendees stayed for a nontraditional communion service late Saturday afternoon and then met at a local restaurant for a Dutch-treat dinner and came to my home for drinks, desserts, and more conversation. It was a long day and a half, especially for the many who were seniors, but I wanted the schedule to take full advantage of all the available time.



A few participants said they wished for rest time. Others would have liked prayer, meditation, ritual, or song to connect the group spiritually. Several panelists spoke about Christians' need to oppose the injustices of heterosexism, capitalism, nationalism, and other majority positions that benefit insiders but hurt those on the margins, and some participants felt that was too much political talk. I understand that feeling. Such talk is uncomfortable for those of us who benefit from the majority positions. But following Jesus requires not only hearing this talk but acting on it.

## Overwhelmingly positive reactions

Far outnumbering wishes for a slightly different schedule or content were comments such as "exhilarating," "provocative and challenging," "opportunity to speak openly," "so well organized," "much-appreciated statements about the need for political action," "ideas about how to communicate our vision," and "positive spirit."

As much as I appreciate these enthusiastic reactions, my big question now is: What concrete, visible results will come in the long run? That elephant-in-the-room question is like the question that one of my seminary professors used to push his students to ask: "So what?" Why does it matter, and what must we do about it?

## So what? The need for education

Many attendees agreed with one of my main concerns: education. Our churches and schools urgently need to publicize the best modern thinking about the Bible, Jesus, church history, and all world religions, not only to stop current injustices but to prevent an entire younger generation from dismissing the church as unbelievable and ineffective.



One younger attendee pointed out that, while some 20- to 40-somethings are attending megachurches, many others have already simply left the church. How can we do more to offer them a viable alternative, a Christianity that makes rational sense?

## What next? The need for social action

Many also agreed that more organized, visible public action is needed to oppose injustice and promote compassion, and that such action inevitably means taking a political stand. Some participants wondered what current justice issue could motivate Christians to work actively for change, as slavery, civil rights, women's rights, and other issues did in the American past.

Is that issue the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people? Some participants told of church groups' isolated successes in being openly inclusive, yet many struggle against official disapproval.

Isn't another major current issue the rights of immigrants? Immigration reform is the number-one topic of this century in the Hispanic community, and it's key here in Texas. Yet how can we who are not Hispanic encourage dialogue and progress, without imposing our views on people whose experiences we don't share?



What about the rights of all low-wage workers and the unemployed, here and around the world, who bear the brunt of economic downturn, yet benefit only marginally when times are better? Even if we feel depen-

dent on capitalism, surely the least we can do is to regulate and lessen its injustices and question the premises of the existing system. Why is the gap between rich and poor widening, not narrowing? Can't we urge our fellow Christians not only to dispense Christmas charity, but to ask publicly why food pantries and toy drives are needed in the richest country on earth?



We heard encouraging stories of a few groups who had ignored prohibitions and followed their hearts, publicly welcoming people that the majority shuns, or actively working for economic justice. But what happens if these groups stay so small that their very survival is at risk—Sunday School classes that leaders try to evict, or 50-person congregations whose financial status is precarious?

### The heart factor: What about spirituality?

Some of us may at least feel clear on what education and social action is needed, but in worship and spirituality we have more questions than answers. Can we reject sexist, archaic language and images without rejecting the music and art we love? Can we nurture each other, celebrate milestones such as births and deaths, and share the awe that nature inspires, without praying to a deity too person-like to be believable? Can we put rituals such as communion not only in the context of ancient rites, but of modern needs? Can we work seriously enough at new liturgy to give it enough substance to feed the spiritual hunger of today's people?



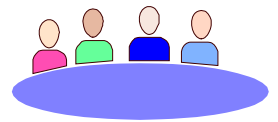
### Addressing all progressive concerns

In order to be effective, don't we as a group need to address education, social action, and spirituality in an organized way? How can each of us focus on the

areas that match our main concerns and talents, yet not neglect any one in which change is needed?

*Connections Live!* 2010 wasn't a meeting of any existing group, and it wasn't set up for decision-making, so not surprisingly, no decisions emerged from it. But will that be the end of the story, or can we find effective ways to stay connected with each other and be influential as a group? I'm not sure.

In panels and in table groups, we discussed practical options for bringing about real change. I suggested speaking up in groups, taking out ads, writing letters to the editor, and donating money. We encouraged each other to speak up to pastors and leaders when church policy is unjust, and to join existing groups that support justice and human rights. Some attenders from city churches and "progressive islands" discussed how they could do more to reach out to isolated individuals and congregations.



I was encouraged by hearing that before they left on that Saturday, some groups had agreed on new steps to try together when they got home. But I was discouraged by others who showed little such interest.

### Does change begin at home—or not?

My meeting with the group from my own area—the most attenders from any one place—was one disappointment. No one even seemed to want to talk about taking any action. Some weren't convinced of the need; others were unwilling to risk losing friends or familiar church ties; others felt burned out or simply tired. And I share some of those feelings. I myself often wonder if it's worth keeping at it this late in my life.

Yet my group's lack of motivation was painful in the face of what I had heard earlier from one resident of

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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.

our area who was present. He told me that what he had heard was almost exactly how he felt, but that he hadn't previously realized there were others in our area who felt the same. He had been looking for a community of people searching for the truth, like him. I asked if he was in any church. He said yes, but he could hardly bear going any more.



This is exactly what I hear continually from *Connections* readers who are “out there” in various places. They've thought they must be crazy or at least mistaken, because they hear no one else expressing what they have come to believe or at least suspect. But the man who

said this to me is not “out there.” He is right here where many of us live. Why aren't more of us willing to risk going public, to let people like him know we're here?

### Will we do what we can?

I don't know what else may come from *Connections Live! 2010*, but I hope it has at least motivated some participants to make their views more public wherever they are, using whatever resources they have. Maybe it will only be by speaking to a key person or two; maybe it will be by writing a letter, giving money, or joining a group. But I hope that in some way we will help to change the world.

*Barbara*

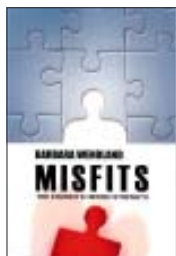


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## Connections Live! 2010 and Barbara's new book

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### More about *Misfits: The Church's Hidden Strength*

- UCC pastor Eric Eines, author of *The Phoenix Affirmations*: “This book is a *must read* for anyone who thinks they are crazy or unfaithful for resisting the pious platitudes and corrosive self-righteousness dispensed by many churches these days—fundamentalist, evangelical, and even mainline. It is also a *must read* for progressive pastors who have yet to realize the damage they do, not only to themselves but also to their congregations, when they shy away from preaching and teaching what they truly believe.”
- Theologian Val Webb: “At last, Barbara has written the book for which we have all been waiting! Every person occupying a church pew—and all who have left—should read this excellent book.”
- Gretta Vosper, author of *With or Without God*: “Barbara Wendland has taken a long, hard look behind the proverbial curtain of faith and now wants to have a conversation about what she's found. What makes her effort extraordinary is that she wants to have the conversation in *church*, an institution not particularly given to open-ended questions and almost universally closed to questions with answers it doesn't ‘approve.’ ”

**Just in time to read and share with friends over the holidays or in the new year! To order, see box p. 1.**