

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## What should seminaries do?

Recently I've heard some seminary professors and administrators tell what their goals are and how they try to reach them. I hear pastors and church members say what they think seminaries should do, too, and as a seminary graduate, board member, and occasional donor and special-event attendee, I often think about such things. In this *Connections* I invite you to think about them with me.



Many seminaries offer Ph.D. degrees that seem mainly for people who want to teach at the college level. Some offer degrees preparing people to be professional Christian educators or musicians or missionaries. Some offer a degree designed for lay people who want to remain lay. Many seminaries sponsor events for lay churchgoers. However, most seminaries seem to focus mainly on preparing people to become ordained as clergy and serve as pastors of churches. This also seems to be what most lay churchgoers expect seminaries' top priority to be.

## What do members expect?



I get the impression that most lay churchgoers think seminaries' main function should be teaching the practical, how-to skills necessary for being effective as pastor of a church. Preaching is probably number one among these. Maybe it should be, because it's the role in which the most members have the most contact with their pastors. Also, it's a role that only clergy are allowed to fill, except on rare occasions and in congregations too small to support an ordained pastor.

With many lay people, administrative skills seem to be a close second in what they want pastors to be taught. They want pastors to be at least relatively good at raising and managing church funds and su-

## Can you help?



I keep getting more concerned about our churches' need to put more emphasis on what Jesus apparently emphasized most, and to communicate the timeless truths of Christianity in ways that are consistent with what is now known about the Bible, Christian history, and the universe and its inhabitants. I know that many Christians share this concern. But unfortunately they are mostly staying quiet, passive, and unorganized, and few are supporting their concern with money. Meanwhile, the Christians who advocate using only the words and beliefs of earlier centuries and focusing only on private piety keep getting better organized and better financed and thus more influential.

## Gifts that can make a difference



Some groups and projects are working to combat this imbalance, but they urgently need major financial help. I suspect that some *Connections* readers could make the kind of large gifts that are needed. If you could, but you need suggestions about where to give, please e-mail me or call me at the phone number above and let me offer some suggestions. Small gifts are important, but what I'm asking about here are the larger gifts that can sometimes make a difference in whether a project or organization can have a really noticeable impact or even survive.

## Revising our priorities



Because my husband and I have become so concerned about the church's need to present a more forward-looking, less narrow, and better informed understanding of Christianity, we're refocusing our giving. Instead of continuing to give smaller gifts to a variety of projects and groups, we're starting to make larger gifts and to give mainly to organizations and projects that specifically aim at promoting and implementing progressive Christian views.

Whether Christmas or tax planning is the reason, in December many people give special thought to their financial giving. If you're doing this and want suggestions for promoting progressive Christianity with your year-end giving, please let me know.

pervising staff (if their church has any) and volunteers. Skill with today's communication technology is often part of what members now expect, too.



Most church members, of course, take for granted that seminaries will teach students what the Bible says. They expect pastors to know the contents even of books like Habakkuk and Nahum, that few members seem to know or care about. A related expectation is teaching all the official doctrines of the church and the meaning of terms like epiphany and atonement.



### Indoctrination or searching?

In the eyes of many Christians, the main reason for teaching prospective pastors church doctrine and the Bible's content is making sure that they believe what they're supposed to believe, and that they can communicate it convincingly to others. That's indoctrination—teaching the church's official beliefs.

When I heard a theology professor speak recently about the importance of theological education, however, he didn't emphasize indoctrination. He wants students to learn what Christians have believed in the past, but he also emphasized research. That brought a question from one of his hearers. "What is there to do research about, in theology?" she asked. Her question implied that full knowledge of God became known centuries ago, through the Bible and through Jesus as described there. She implied



that what's needed now is merely to tell people what the Bible and official church doctrines say, and to assure them that it's the whole truth and the only truth about God.

### We can't know all about God

The theology professor didn't buy that, and neither do I. He pointed out that we can never know all there is to know about God, thus there is always more to discover. That can include corrections to some beliefs held by Christians in earlier centuries or even by most of today's church members. If we want to keep learning more about God, this professor reminded his hearers, we will always need people searching for new insights and considering new ideas and possibilities—doing research.

We especially need their help in revealing blind spots that earlier Christians have overlooked and that many of today's Christians overlook. One that scholars are now discovering and pointing out, for example, is how the Roman Empire influenced Jesus and the early church, and how empire shows up in today's world and is often promoted rather than opposed by today's church. Such insights come from the kind of research that scholars do.



### Research isn't just digs or surveys

How do professional theologians and other scholars do their research on such topics? Archaeology can contribute. It can show who wrote parts of the Bible and how their cultural settings and political maneuvering influenced what they wrote. That kind of research is important, too, for discovering what the early church was like—very different in different places, it's now apparent—and how the church reflected the cultures it was part of. Such



research can also be essential for discovering how and why the writings we now know as part of the Bible became part of it. Research can also turn up other such writings that for some reason—often political—didn't make the cut.

However, I've found that when scholars refer to research they aren't necessarily talking about digging for ancient documents and artifacts, conducting surveys, or testing various teaching methods, although those can all be useful. When today's scholars talk about research they also include travel that enables them to interact with colleagues all over the world. They include organizing gatherings at which leading thinkers present their findings, triggering the kinds of discussions in which sharp and inquiring minds stimulate each other to new insights and raise new questions for each other to investigate.

### What about prayer?

Yet for getting to know God better and learning more about what God is like, many Christians give much more importance to what they see as a very different way of searching. I've thought especially about this as I've heard theologians and biblical scholars speak recently about what they do.



A lot of Christians apparently feel that we don't need anyone doing the kind of thinking and speculation that scholars do. These Christians say praying and relying on the Holy Spirit are enough. All that's necessary, they claim, is reading the Bible and praying for God's guidance to reveal its meaning.



**If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.**

—James 1:5

To me that view seems too narrow. We need other sources of information in addition to the Bible, and for interpreting it we need a variety of sources too.

### I used to be suspicious



Years ago when I first read some books by famous theologians, I suspected that they never went to church or Sunday School and never prayed. Their views, their vocabulary, and the topics they wrote about were so different from what I heard at church and from the only kind of prayer I knew of, and I saw Sunday School and church attendance and that kind of prayer as essentially what defined being a Christian. Thus these theologians didn't seem like Christians to me.

Still, what they were saying intrigued me. It dealt with questions I'd wondered about but hadn't had the nerve to admit to myself, much less to anyone else. These authors expressed some of the same doubts I had, about things I heard regularly in church and didn't think could possibly be true. In those years, however, I assumed that if I didn't believe what "everyone" believed, that meant I was wrong, so I kept quiet. But I kept reading the famous theologians' books every so often, and kept wondering.

I'm now much braver about admitting my real beliefs. Also, I'm convinced that disagreeing with the majority or with what I hear in church doesn't necessarily mean I'm wrong. I've seen that questioning widely accepted beliefs and behavior leads to growth, in fact. I've seen that by openly admitting my real questions, doubts, and beliefs, I can get clearer about the teachings and example of Jesus, and sometimes help others get clearer too.



### Prayer has different forms

I've also realized that prayer happens in many different ways. It isn't just what we hear in church or other public places. It doesn't have to use a special set of words. It doesn't have to use *any* words. It doesn't have to be spoken aloud. It doesn't require any particular body posture. Those practices may help some people, but they hinder others, and God apparently doesn't require any of them.

Plenty of Christian scholars pray, but their thinking and research is likely to be their prayer. Therefore I no longer have the suspicions I used to have about the theologians whose books I read years ago. I don't have those suspicions about the theologians I now know or those whose books I now read. I believe the Holy Spirit guides many of them in their work, just as the Holy Spirit

**Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others. ... But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door ... When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words ...**

—Matthew 6:5-8

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](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto: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 15 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 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.

guides the rest of us when we pay attention. Scholars sometimes get the Holy Spirit's messages wrong, of course, just as all the rest of us do, but they also get God-given insights that need to be heard.

I will pray with the spirit but I will pray with the mind also.  
—1 Corinthians 14:15



## Helpers in the search

I believe it's important for our seminaries to teach both practical skills and information about Bible content and Christian history, but I don't want them



telling students what to believe. For the good of the church and the world, I want our seminaries to sponsor scholarly research, and I want them to teach their students how to think and ask questions and look for new insight about God. I also want them to teach students to be open to other people's and other religions' insights. I don't want seminary graduates to emerge thinking that they know or that anyone else knows or can ever know everything about God. Instead, I want them to learn how to help all of us search for more, and to inspire and challenge us to put our findings into practice.

*Barbara*



## Connections

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# What should seminaries do?

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Besides teaching the Bible's contents and familiar skills needed by pastors, I wish seminaries taught more ways of nudging church members to think about what is now known from biblical scholarship and from other sources such as history, science, and medicine, and about how this knowledge relates to what the Bible says. I wish seminary students were more strongly encouraged to stress what all religions' sacred documents have in common—the symbolic language they all use, and the truth they all contain.



Pastors could convey such information to members in only a few sentences if they inserted those regularly in sermons and accompanied scripture readings with them regularly. "This wasn't written until 90 years after Jesus died, so we can't assume it's a direct quote, but it apparently reflects what had high priority for him." "This emphasis on justice and compassion is in all the major world religions." "This view of the universe is many centuries old, so we need to ask what it means for us in light of today's science." "This reflects how women were seen by a patriarchal culture, and it differs from how Jesus treated women, so we can't assume that it expresses God's view."

I'd also like more prospective pastors taught and urged to help members share their faith stories. I'd like more students informed about innovative small-group programs such as "Living the Questions," which I wrote about in [last month's Connections](#). I'd like to see them encouraged and helped to lead discussions of current social-justice issues and books and movies. Learning what the Bible says and how to preach is important, but it's not enough.