

# Connections

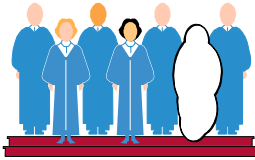
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## The missing misfits



I'm writing this on Sunday morning, December 23, "Christmas Sunday." It's a Sunday when even the rare attenders go to church, but even though I'm a regular one I'm not there. I'm not sick or away on a trip. I just wanted to avoid some of what I knew I'd find at church (which isn't unusual), so I didn't go (which is very unusual).

I'm at home alone, which probably isn't the best way to worship. Yet in an important way I'm not alone. Very much on my mind are some other Christians who probably are also absent from church this morning. I know that even though we aren't physically together, we're together in spirit and the Holy Spirit is with us.



## A welcome respite

My absence gives me a welcome respite from features of church gatherings that distract me from worshipping God and following God's call, rather than helping me. Those features won't drive me out, but some of them have caused other committed Christians to drop out. That should concern us all.

■ **17th-century words.** Being absent from church keeps me from hearing Christian music that has been written in recent centuries but uses 17th century words, like "thee," "thou," and "thy," and "wouldst" and "doth" and "unto." Continued use of this outdated language, not only in music but also in many prayers and liturgies, tells me the church wants to cling to yesterday instead of following God's call

for today, and that message is so discouraging to me that I'm glad to escape it by being absent.

*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet ...*

## ■ Songs without substance.

I'm enjoying not hearing recently written Christian music this morning, because so

## The church's creative oddballs

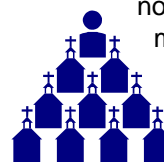
"Saints," says James C. Howell in *Servants, Misfits, and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories* (Upper Room Books, 1999), "in so many ways are simply oddballs in their environments." They're the church's heroes and heroines, but they're also its misfits.

Howell finds, however, that the Christians we consider saints rarely blaze totally new trails. Instead, "they creatively embody in a striking way something that has always been there in our faith, something perhaps too long submerged, some aspect of the faith that desperately needs recovery."



## Church systems reward conformists

We claim to admire certain Christians as heroes and heroines of the faith, as shining examples of what Christianity should be, but we admire only those, it seems to me, who keep their distance. Within our own congregations and denominations, we want conformity, and our organizational systems aim at keeping nonconformists out of leadership roles. We move clergy conformists up the salary ladder and make lay conformists church officers and conference delegates.



"We are trained to be suspicious of misfits," James Howell notices, "for they threaten the status quo." Especially if the status quo is keeping us personally comfortable, we don't want anyone criticizing it, much less trying to change it. We conveniently ignore the fact that the greatest leaders in Christian history, including Jesus, have consistently broken rules and worked for radical change.

## God-inspired misfits reveal the conflicts

"Misfits can point a bright light on the ways we are out of sync with God," Howell reminds us. God-inspired misfits expose points of conflict between the culture and the gospel. "Saints read the Bible," Howell notices, "with a startling naiveté—and they think they are supposed to go and do it." They assume it means what it says. They take it not literally but personally. Isn't that what God calls all Christians to do? I believe it is, even for those of us who don't qualify as saints.



much of it has so little substance. Typical “scripture songs” and “praise songs” merely repeat a few words and melodies over and over, and to me that makes music tiresome to hear or to sing. It doesn’t show the beauty and depth of God’s nature. It doesn’t inspire or challenge me to think about my faith and grow spiritually. It doesn’t motivate me to become more committed to what God calls Christians to do.

■ **All-masculine words.** Absence from church also keeps me from having to hear the all-masculine words for God and human beings, that saturate most church gatherings I attend. Those words distract me from worshiping God, who is neither male nor female and who values women and men equally. Jesus’s frequent violation of religious rules and social customs included acknowledging women as having the same value and as many abilities as men, but in its language the church does otherwise. That practice continually reminds me that the church doesn’t want to follow Jesus very closely, and I don’t need to get that reminder any more often.



■ **Avoidance of hard issues.** When I go to church I’d like to hear presentations about the tough issues that I believe God calls today’s Christians to address. I’d like to hear pros and cons of various ways in which God may be calling us to show love and promote justice in today’s world. I’d like to hear about contemporary people who practice the radical love and justice that Jesus taught and demonstrated. I’d like to get encouragement and support for daring to do more of that myself, or at least for helping others who are doing it. I don’t want to hear merely platitudes about being nice to the people I’m with in daily life.



### An unforgettable conversation

I’m thinking this morning about a recent conversation that I can’t get out of my mind. The conversation was with a church dropout. Some of the same features that make me want to stay away contributed to his dropping out.



Until our recent conversation I knew he’d been an active Methodist earlier in his life but wasn’t in a

church now, but I knew little more about him. As he and I talked, however, I found that we had many similar concerns about the church, even though we had come to it by different routes and our current relationships to it were different.

Unlike me, this man didn’t grow up in the church. Jesus’s teaching and example drew him to it. “I felt the church could change the world in ways that God called me to be part of,” he said, “and I felt it offered the best hope for changing the world.” In time, however, to his dismay he didn’t see the church really trying to change the world. And the church treated him as an unwanted misfit for wanting to practice what Jesus taught and modeled.



### No church to recommend

This friend doesn’t live near me, so he isn’t a prospect for my congregation or any other one nearby. Even if he were, however, I don’t know any congregation I could honestly recommend to him. I don’t know one whose worship has the artistic and intellectual depth that he needs, or whose members and program encourage the social-justice ministries that he feels called to. That realization renews my concern about churches’ failure to reach some of the people who are most committed to following God’s call.



The man I talked with is unusually well educated and well read. He regularly reads, writes, and thinks about ideas and beliefs. He’s well informed about the world’s history, cultures, and religions. He’s a knowledgeable lover of great music, literature, and art. He’s especially interested in preserving the natural environment. He’s concerned about other social-justice issues, too. He believes that treating people as inferior or sinful because of their gender, sexual orientation, or race is unjust and thus unchristian. He has lived and worked in several widely different parts of the U.S. and in some other countries. He’s in touch with many friends and colleagues whose experience and interests are similar to his.



It’s no wonder, I thought as we talked, that this friend so often feels like a misfit in churches. I know of very few churches that offer much opportunity



and help for Christians like him to use their main God-given talents in pursuing the ministries to which God calls them.

I know few churches where such Christians can find the kindred Christian spirits that they need and want, or the kind of worship that helps them focus on God and offer their best to God.

### Longing and not finding

Recalling my conversation with this man is wrenching for me partly because I share many of his views about what being a Christian means. In a lot of ways, too, I feel like a misfit in the church. And I long for but don't find a lot of the same things he wants but doesn't find in the church.



Unlike him, however, I still feel that the church offers the best hope for establishing Christ-like love and justice in the world. That's one of the reasons I'm not dropping out, and one of the reasons I keep writing *Connections*.

### We can't depend on habit, duty, or fear

I'm also staying in the institutional church for other reasons. Among them is the fact that both my husband and I grew up in churchgoing families, and all our lives we've been in the habit of going regularly to church. Also we've moved very rarely, so we're strongly attached to our current congregation.



But the friend I talked with didn't have these motivations. Many of the other people in today's world don't, either. And like some other nonchurchgoers, my friend's observation of the world, and his knowledge of history, culture, non-Christian religions, and religious literature and experience, make him sure that God speaks in other ways besides the Bible, the church, and the Chris-

tian faith, so threats of going to Hell or losing access to God won't bring him to church. We can't expect fear, a feeling of duty, or mere habit to bring such people to our churches. It takes more than that.



### We're turning off committed Christians

Like many other Christians, my friend is motivated by concerns that are important for Christians but often ignored in church—about the natural environment, for example, and economic issues, and the use of military force. Like him, too, many other Christians feel called by God to address such issues by practicing the radical love and justice that Jesus taught and lived. Many have the necessary knowledge and skills for doing that, also, but they find the church unwilling to support them so they go elsewhere, even if they'd rather work through the church.

These Christian misfits may not be numerous, but they're probably the best hope for changing the world in the ways God wants it changed. They may have the greatest potential for leading the church where God is calling it to go.



And what about the Christians, even if they're a minority, who in worship need music and words with depth, substance, and challenge rather than simplicity and comfort, in order to be reminded of God's presence, to offer their best to God, and to be motivated to follow God's call?

How can our churches stop driving these God-inspired Christian misfits away, while still reaching the majority? If we want the church to be the world-changing body God calls it to be, we'll have to consider that question seriously. More important, we'll have to find answers to it and make some changes.



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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. Some readers make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

## God calls Christians to be misfits

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...**  
—Romans 12:2

God calls Christians to be nonconformists, yet we drive God-inspired nonconformists away by refusing to encourage or even permit wide-ranging thought and discussion in our churches. We drive God-inspired misfits away by requiring all pastors to fit the same mold, and by penalizing them for being open about their real beliefs. We penalize both lay and ordained Christians for trying to rock the

church boat—for refusing to be mere cheerleaders for the status quo. We try to stifle both laity and clergy if they say that the emperor has no clothes on, even when he really doesn't.



We need to listen to our God-inspired misfits, help them to pursue their callings, and allow them a greater voice in the church. When we stifle or oust them instead, we reveal more about how the church needs to change than about how the misfits need to change.

*Barbara*

### I'm reluctant but speaking anyway . . .

I believe what I've said here needs saying, but for several reasons I'm reluctant to say it.

- I suspect I'll seem (and I may really *be*) elitist in wanting what appeals mainly to people who've had the most formal education and fine-arts experience. Still, I hate to see churches drive away this group of Christians.
- I probably should participate gladly in church activities that meet other people's needs but not mine, to keep those activities available, and for the most part I do that. Yet in supporting some of them, such as those that use all-masculine language, I feel that I'm opposing what God wants. I'm not sure what to do about participating in those.



- I have no concrete solution to offer, about how more churches could provide the kind of worship and other activities that I and some other misfits feel a need for. I know that many churches can offer only what will reach the majority, and I know I'm not part of it with regard to the issues I'm writing about here.
- I suspect that some members of my congregation will mistakenly see my comments as directed only at it. I hate to risk that, because my reason for making such comments publicly is that I know they apply to many congregations.
- Because misfits are so unwelcome in the church, I'm reluctant to reveal any more evidence of being a misfit.

