

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Prophetic voices in the wilderness

Who's speaking for God today? What God-inspired voices are crying in the wildernesses of our world, some of which are right in our midst? Might God be speaking through voices we're ignoring because they're pointing out sinful aspects of our governments, churches, social customs, religious beliefs, or personal lifestyles, which we can't bear to acknowledge? In the church, are we listening for such voices?



Unauthorized members and church dropouts

Some prophetic voices are coming from church members, though not often from those officially authorized to speak for the church. Some of the voices are coming from former members who dropped out when they finally got tired enough of beating their heads against the walls of rejection, indifference, or timidity they kept encountering in the church.

I often hear from such people or read what they write, so I know there are a lot of them out there. Some are among the most faithful and committed followers of Christ that I know of. They're people our churches especially need to be hearing, paying attention to, encouraging, and helping. However, we tend to stifle or oust them instead, or at best we ignore or dismiss them without even considering the possibility that they might be expressing God's will.

A stunning new book

I'd like you to hear what I've recently heard from one of these voices. It belongs to the author of a tiny but powerful new book. Some of its contents and even its title may give you a jolt, but I suspect it's the kind of jolt God wants us all to get every now and then.



Jargon and platitudes in the church

I recently read statements from nine United Methodist clergymen who are candidates for United Methodist bishop positions, for which elections will take place at a UMC regional meeting this summer. A lot of politicking and negotiating about the election will happen during the UMC General Conference this spring, so campaigning and interviewing of candidates are already in full swing.



The same voice over and over

Many parts of the nine candidates' statements, which were their answers to questions furnished by an official committee, made me think I was hearing from one person over and over instead of from different people. Most candidates assured us they were collegial and collaborative. Several mentioned being the son and in some cases also the grandson, father, or brother of a UMC clergyman. Most claimed to have "a pastor's heart," whatever that may be. All emphasized their love for the UMC, and most assured us they would gladly support all of its official doctrines and policies.



Only one candidate said any official UMC doctrinal statement needed revision to reflect current knowledge or understanding. Only one said where he stood on today's hottest social-justice issue.

Challengers as well as cheerleaders

These features of the bishop candidates' statements aren't surprising, of course. Getting elected to a top position in any group tends to require supporting the group's traditions and policies, and effective institutional leadership usually requires being a cheerleader more than a critic.

From church leaders, however, we also need courageous voices that urge us to avoid merely going along with the crowd, even if it's the church crowd. We need challenging voices in addition to soothing voices. We need prophets as well as cheerleaders.



Disturbing but important

The book I'm urging you to read is *The Unauthorized Bible*, by Gary Holthaus (BW Press, 2003). He happens to be a friend of mine, but that's not why I'm recommending his book. I'm recommending it because he is an excellent writer who in an especially compelling way is saying some things I consider very important for Christians to hear and take seriously.



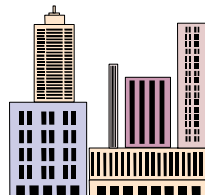
Some of the views expressed in this book may disturb you. Some disturb me. But that's not bad. Hearing views that disturb us can be valuable if we let it. It can make us think about issues or aspects of them that we need to consider or reconsider. Some views that offend us turn out to be correct, so it's unwise to write any off without considering the possibility that they're correct. Some turn out to be views that God is trying to bring to our attention. The very fact that they make us angry or uncomfortable may show that we're too firmly attached to beliefs, traditions, and behaviors that keep us comfortable but that God wants us to question or change.

A lesbian daughter, a migrant worker



The Unauthorized Bible's title invites comparison to the various "standard" and "authorized" versions of the Bible. This "unauthorized version" addresses topics that the Bible also addresses, but in the way that Holthaus believes the Bible would address them if it were written today. Instead of telling about a good Samaritan who rescues a robbery victim on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, Holthaus's Jesus tells of a modern Israeli who is beaten when he stops to change a flat tire on his way from Jerusalem to Ramallah and is rescued by a Palestinian.

The Prodigal Son becomes a daughter whose parents and sister reject her when she reveals she is lesbian. She leaves home and solicits on the streets of a faraway city but fearfully returns when her food stamps have run out and drugs no longer dull the pain of being beaten by pimps.



The parable of the poor Lazarus who meets a rich man in Hades becomes the story of Arnold, a rich employer of migrant workers, and Miguel, a worker who lives with sixteen other men in a trailer that has no potable water. His job includes spreading chemical fertilizers and pesticides that are labeled with warnings in a language he can't read.



Holthaus's picture of this pair is frighteningly familiar. "Arnold the businessman has his friends over on Sunday after church. They feast on roast beef, fresh vegetables, bountiful salads, desserts a la mode. When Arnold has a toothache he goes to the dentist. When Arnold's wife stubs her toe she goes to the doctor. When Miguel's hands begin to peel, he keeps on working. When Miguel's wife miscarries, they stop the bleeding with towels."

Miguel and Arnold die of cancer and meet in the afterlife, where Miguel rests under leafy oak trees with his water jug while a parched Arnold gasps in the hot sun. " 'If this is the way the system really works,' Arnold croaks, 'Can you at least send Miguel back to warn my brothers?' " But the Foreman answers, "You and your brothers made much of Sunday church. ... If you all did not believe then, your brothers will never believe a man like Miguel."



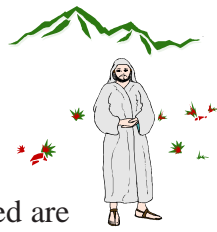
A sermon on a bleak hillside

In *The Unauthorized Bible* the Sermon on the Mount becomes a sermon on a treeless hillside above

Gary Holthaus has degrees in Sacred Theology from Boston University. He began his adult life as a Methodist clergyman but no longer is in the institutional church. He has been a regional program officer of the National Endowment for the Humanities and has taught in Alaska. He spent time in Nicaragua in the "Witness for Peace" program and in Iraq several times as an invited delegate to an international conference of poets.

Holthaus now lives in Red Wing, Minnesota, where he works with a nonprofit group that looks for ways to relate farmers' concerns to the state university and recommends policies to state and federal agencies. He is the author or editor of several published books of prose and poetry.

Jenin. "Blessed are you one billion who hunger and thirst, without access to clean water," says the Jesus of Holthaus's Beatitudes. "And blessed are you who toil for minimum wage ... Blessed are you who are ignored by your government because it believes you have no power and cannot think for yourselves. You shall find your real power."



The Unauthorized Bible's Jesus continues. "I did not say, blessed are the rich who hide in gated homes. Your gates will come down. ... I did not say, blessed are you who are heterosexual. Your abuse of those who are not is anathema to me. ... I did not say, blessed is free trade or a capitalist economy, for your faith in them is naïve, idolatrous, cold-hearted."

A little man with a '74 Ford Pinto

Holthaus's Jesus is a little man who drives a '74 Ford Pinto that keeps needing repairs with make-shift parts to stay running. To me this portrayal is one of the book's most important features. Some Christians may find it offensive, but ironically they're likely to be the same ones who believe some words in

... He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

and as one from whom others hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him of no account.

—Isaiah 53:2-3

Isaiah are a description of Jesus, and Gary's portrayal is consistent with those words. I find his picture a helpful and appropriate contrast to the sweet, glamorized, European Jesus pictures that so many of us have in our heads and on our church walls.

God speaks again

Holthaus's portrayal of what some sections of the Old Testament might say if they were written today is as powerful as his New Testament selections. "I hardly know where to begin ...," says God at the beginning of *The Unauthorized Bible*. "Last time I spoke, things happened! But that was long ago. I don't have much expectation that anyone will listen this time. ... That first time so many people misunderstood I must have been mumbling."

I hardly know where to begin...

Last time I spoke, things happened!

But that was long ago.

Gary's poetic words portray God describing the earth, the purpose of creation, and our God-given duty to protect it. "In the beginning was the Gift called Earth. It was not my first creation, nor my last, but it is one of which I am fond," says God. "I gave it to you freely, not for your use but for your understanding so you could participate in something larger than yourselves, find a place, a purpose to fulfill, a meaning for your existence."



A version that's obviously about us

We can rather easily dismiss biblical statements about the sinfulness of ancient priests, kings, customs, and cultures, but similar accusations about our own governments, customs, and churches are hard to ignore. They *should* be hard to ignore. Thus *The Unauthorized Bible's* powerful way of expressing the message of biblical texts in terms of familiar parts of our daily lives is one of the main features that make this book important for Christians to read.

Similar claims about how the Bible's message may apply to life today are coming from many voices. That may mean they're saying some things

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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. Many readers voluntarily 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 plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

God wants us to hear. That's why it's important for us to hear them and take them seriously.

Like the voice crying in the wilderness that Isaiah describes, prophetic voices in today's wildernesses are also pointing to God's way, which Jesus followed and calls us to follow. I believe Gary Holthaus is one of these voices that Christians need to hear.

**A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness
prepare the way of
the Lord, make
straight in the
desert a highway
for our God. ..."
—Isaiah 40:3**

Heart-wrenching, stirring, lyrical

Although *The Unauthorized Bible* has only recently been published, many clergy are already quoting it in sermons and teaching. Lay and ordained Christians are using it for classes, study groups, and devotional reading. They're calling it "heart-wrenching," "remarkable and stirring," "an epiphany," "lyrically expressed," "visionary," "tender," "refreshing," "provocative," and more. It's a book that merits serious and prayerful consideration.

Barbara



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You can order *The Unauthorized Bible*, which I describe in this issue of *Connections*, from The Genesis III Group, by phone toll-free at 888-829-2947 using MasterCard or Visa, or by mail to P.O. Box 336, Deerfield NH 03037, with a check payable to The Genesis III Group. You can also order on-line at www.zionsherald.com. The cost per copy is \$15.95 plus \$4.50 for shipping. However, if you mention having learned of the book from *Connections*, you'll get a discount of \$2.40 per book. And if you order several copies, ask about a volume discount on the shipping cost.



Bookstores will soon be able to order copies for you.



The book's publisher has sent copies as gifts to all UMC General Conference delegates, so if you've received one of those please be sure not to overlook it in the deluge of mail you're getting. General Conference delegates can also get a \$2.40 discount when they order additional copies from the publisher.