

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Dropping out, staying in



I often hear from devoted Christians who are agonizing over whether to stay in a church or drop out. I also hear from some who have already dropped out. I feel for them because although I've never seriously considered dropping out I've sometimes wanted to, and I understand why some Christians do.

It's no surprise when churchgoers who were only lukewarm to begin with drop out, but those aren't the ones I'm referring to. I'm thinking instead of people who are strongly committed Christians but find the institutional church a hindrance rather than a help in acting out their commitment.

All Christians are in the church

Dropping out of the institutional church doesn't mean leaving the universal church. The true, universal church isn't composed only of structured groups named churches. The real church includes all Christians, and the form that's most familiar to us isn't the only form in which the church can exist. Members of an informal, unstructured group can be the church for each other.



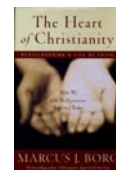
Dropping out of the institutional church, then, isn't necessarily faithless. In fact, in some circumstances dropping out may be the most faithful thing to do. If staying in helps the church continue an injustice it is committing, and if our efforts to help eliminate that injustice are having no effect, we may need to drop out.

Results may only become apparent later

The fallacy in that view, however, is that continuing to work from inside for needed change may be having valuable effects that aren't yet apparent. That's my hope and a big reason for my staying in.

Paying attention to God

In his newest book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), Marcus Borg discusses reasons for staying in the church. He sees churchgoing as the most important of the practices that Christians do together and individually as a way of paying attention to God.



Besides paying attention to God, Borg finds that the purposes of Christian practice include forming Christian identity and character, being nourished, acting with compassion and justice, and living "the way"—the way of life that Jesus taught and modeled and that the other major religions also stress.

A nourishing and stretching church

For Borg, however, for a church to serve those purposes it must be "a congregation that nourishes you even as it stretches you." If we are in one that leaves us hungry and unsatisfied, he advises us to find one that instead nourishes and deepens our



Christian journey. He urges us to find one that makes our hearts glad, so that we can wake on Sunday morning filled with the anticipation of the psalmist—"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"

"Choosing a church is not primarily about feeling good, of course," Borg admits, "but church is meant to nourish us, not to make us angry or leave us bored." The kind of church that will nurture us depends partly, he finds, on our background and psychological temperament. Different Christians are nourished by different kinds of worship, and their intellectual and devotional needs differ. Still, for all of us it's important to worship in some way and to receive education that shows us a way of seeing Christianity that makes sense to us. We also need collective opportunities for practicing compassion and justice. Borg sees these as reasons for staying in.

Unfortunately, finding a church that nourishes and stretches us can be hard. That's why deciding whether to stay in or drop out isn't always easy.

Varied reasons for joining

People join churches for a wide variety of reasons. As I recently said in *Connections*, I became a Christian and a Methodist mainly because I was born into an active Methodist family. Being an active Methodist churchgoer was merely part of doing what I assumed was the right thing to do.



Some other church members evidently join because most of their friends are in a church. Joining thus seems necessary for having friends and being socially acceptable. In addition, some members apparently join because they see church participation as essential for succeeding in business in a community where most people are churchgoers.

Some may even see church participation as necessary for getting elected to political office. Recently we've seen U.S. presidential candidates claiming belief in God and making unaccustomed appearances at churches, apparently for the sole purpose of appealing to voters who consider church participation an essential qualification for a President.



Many people apparently go to church mainly because they fear something terrible will happen to them if they don't. They see Christianity as the only route to God and the only way to escape going to hell when they die.

Many Christians, of course, join the church because they see the teachings and example of Jesus as the best or right way to live. Some have had compelling religious experiences that drew them to Jesus Christ and to the church. Some people who originally joined only because it seemed like what "everybody" did or at least expected, become committed more strongly to the church later in life because of a compelling experience or a new awareness of what the Christian faith means and requires.

Varied reasons for staying or leaving

Some of these reasons may not bring strong enough commitment to keep anyone in the church. But what motivates strongly committed Christians to drop out of a particular congregation or denomination, or to leave the institutional church completely?



It seems that many who drop out of a particular congregation or denomination do so because they believe it doesn't adhere closely enough to what they understand to be essential Christian doctrine, or to a literal interpretation of certain Bible statements. However, this works in the opposite direction, too. Many Christians leave conservative, literalist churches because these Christians no longer find such narrow interpretations credible.



Some Christians leave churches that fail to promote social justice. Those are the Christians I hear from most, and the ones whose views I find most convincing, so they're the ones I'm most concerned about. It saddens me to see the church losing these strongly committed Christians.

She finally gave up



Not long ago I heard from one of these. She had been extremely active and held numerous key leadership positions in a congregation whose denomination is considered theologically and socially progressive. After trying unsuccessfully for years to get the congregation to stop using all-masculine language in worship, however, she finally gave up. She finally stopped being willing to sit through worship services that portrayed God as male and made women invisible.

She had been disturbed, too, that although her church was in a multiracial setting, its members all looked alike, so that fact also influenced her decision to leave. She's now in a congregation whose language doesn't exclude women or portray God as a man, and whose membership includes people of many racial and ethnic backgrounds.

"Where was my church?"



I've recently heard also from a man who has painfully decided to leave the United Methodist Church after having been in it all his life. His decision was far from hasty. Despite his long years of active church participation, he's been concerned for a long time about the church's failure to address glaring social-justice issues. "In the 1950's," he wrote me, "I couldn't help wondering why black kids had their own schools in

my hometown. I also thought it was unfair for the black kids and Mexican-Americans to have to sit in the balconies of our movie theaters.”



“Where was my church during all this?” he asks himself. “Going along to get along. Fitting in. Not making waves.” And he sees today’s church as no different with regard to the injustices he’s especially aware of now. He doesn’t see the church speaking up about war policies that in his view contradict the teaching of Jesus. He doesn’t see it willing to risk persecution by letting people of all sexual orientations participate fully in the church.

“I want something more,” he writes, “and I believe I have found it in secular culture among people who share my views. So in a few weeks I will quietly resign my membership in an organization in which I have never felt I completely belonged. I regret that I could not do more to help the church during my years of leadership participation.”

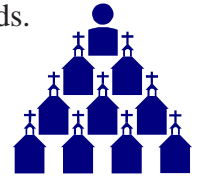
[Jesus] came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded ... And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.” And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

— Matthew 13:54-58

I doubt that what this man finds in secular culture will turn out to be what he wants, for very long. Still, I understand his frustration in trying to carry out the ministry to which he strongly feels God calls him, within a church that doesn’t appreciate his talents and calling and doesn’t support his efforts.

Also, I hate to see the UMC lose this man. For years he’s been working in the church almost full-time as an unpaid layman, and he’s loaded with talents, skills, commitment, and other resources that the church urgently needs.

Is the system an obstacle?

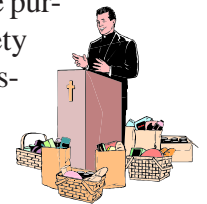


Is there something about the nature of the institutional church that is an almost insurmountable obstacle to members like these? Is it necessary to work outside the church to be most effective in helping to change the world in the ways God apparently wants it changed?

Are the obstacles even greater for clergy than for lay members? In response to what I wrote in last month’s *Connections* about prophetic voices so often being outside of the church, here’s what a clergyman wrote me. “The creative good work of prophets seems more likely to be accomplished after they have gone off the scene, not while they are still playing on the stage. This is unfortunate. Their dramatic voice for creative change takes another generation to bear fruit. This is sad but true.”

Which way will help most?

For committed Christians, the question of whether to stay in or drop out is mainly the question of which of those responses is most likely to help the church carry out its God-given purposes. Christians who see the church already accomplishing its purposes adequately are likely to decide to stay in it. For many Christians, those purposes focus mainly on personal piety and charitable deeds. For these Christians, believing officially adopted doctrines often has high priority. So does following a set of rules



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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.

taken selectively from scripture, as if they were eternal rules laid down by God and applicable to all situations.



Other Christians believe instead that God calls the church to work for change not just in personal behavior but also in social systems and customs that cause suffering. These Christians thus wonder how best to promote such change. Is it by staying in the church and speaking up about what's wrong and what kind of change may be needed? Or is it by dropping out and working through other channels? I'm not sure.

Many Christians seem to believe working for systemic change is futile, so they don't try. They don't even want to know what efforts their own denomination is making, because they're turned off by the bureaucracy and political maneuvering they see.

As for me, I continually get frustrated and discouraged by various aspects of my church but I'm not willing to stop working for change in it, so I'm not dropping out or even keeping quiet. I'm staying in, hoping to help bring about the kind of changes that I believe God wants, even if I can't live long enough to see those changes happen..

Barbara

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Those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized ... They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common ...

—Acts 2:41-44

In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... Indeed the body does not consist of one member but of many. ... God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

—1 Corinthians 12:13-25

