

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## Affirming and dissenting

Lately I've been on even more of a book binge than usual, and I've read several books that I consider especially important for church members to read. The latest one is *Affirmations of a Dissenter*, by C. Joseph Sprague, a bishop of the United Methodist Church (Abingdon, 2002).



Sprague and what he says in this book have been in UMC news a lot recently. They're likely to stay there, too, because during the next few months United Methodists will elect delegates for next year's General Conference, the UMC's top governing body, which meets only once every four years, and Sprague is addressing issues about which crucial decisions will be made at that meeting.



## An attempted takeover of the church

Most of what Sprague is saying, however, pertains not just to the UMC but to most other churches too. He deals mainly with false understandings of Christianity that turn it into something very different from what Jesus demonstrated and taught, and that often lead people to avoid churches or drop out.

Sprague forcefully dissents from common but misleading ways of interpreting the Bible. He accompanies his dissent, however, with strong affirmation of the Christian faith and the Bible's true message. He offers his book, he explains, "for all who affirm Jesus as Liberator and Savior, but who are vexed in the deepest recesses of their souls with the attempted takeover of the church by closed minds and fearful hearts, which seek security in rigid literalism, narrow parochialism, and hurtful exclusivism." Sprague affirms Jesus's role but says, "I dissent from much that is said, done, and not done in his name in today's church."



## Dissent can be powerful

Expressing opposition to official church policies and disagreement with official doctrines can cause lay members to lose their voice in the church. The losses can be even greater for clergy, however, when they disobey or even express disagreement with official church positions. Failure to conform is likely to make clergy lose income and status, and if at ordination they've had to promise to support all of their church's policies and doctrines, they also break that promise if they express other views or beliefs.



### Tough questions for clergy



What should clergy do, then, if they feel church policies are ineffective or even contrary to God's will? What should clergy do if they feel church doctrine contains error? Should they stay in their jobs and keep quiet to protect their status and income? Should they stay but speak up, risking demotion or even expulsion? Should they leave and keep quiet, staying true to their beliefs but protecting the church by keeping its faults hidden? Should they leave and let the world know why, hoping to motivate outsiders to press for needed change in the church?

### A bishop's dissent has special power

Such questions can be especially hard for bishops. Staying in office rather than resigning lets them work for needed change. Also, because they can get access to many church congregations and usually to the public press as well, their dissent can have wider impact than dissent by pastors lower in the church hierarchy. Bishops' dissent can give the pastors they supervise permission to dissent, too, spreading the effect. So dissent by a bishop can be especially powerful.



I'm therefore grateful when a bishop dares to speak publicly about beliefs and policies he feels are wrong, as UMC Bishop Sprague is doing. I hope members of many churches will heed what he is saying. I fervently hope his critics won't succeed in ousting or even silencing him. He's saying some things I believe God wants us to hear.

## The real issue

For the people on each side of the most controversial issues that divide today's Christian community, according to Joseph Sprague and many other Christians, the real issue is biblical authority. Sprague sees two aspects of this issue as fundamental and highly divisive in the church today.



### ■ The nature of biblical authority

"I have been both angered and saddened," Sprague tells us, "that biblical conservatives, whom I am calling neoliteralists, given their inconsistent literal reading of scripture, ... have assumed that they are the only Christians who are faithful to biblical authority." He dissents unapologetically, he says, from what he sees as the neoliteralists' "nearly unchallenged takeover of the biblical high ground."



Sprague's dissent, however, comes with an affirmation. "I do strongly affirm that the Bible is and ever shall be the primary source of authority for all Christians and that biblical authority must not be viewed as static truth that falls off the pages of the Bible. Instead, it is a dynamic process that is empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the faith community's discernment processes through prayer, dialogue, informed scholarship, and application to the issues of today."

"The Bible," Sprague emphasizes, "simply is not the literal Word of God. Such an assertion is idolatry." Sprague adds, however, that even if literalism were a valid way of interpreting the Bible, the neoliteralists' method would be invalid, because it is inconsistent. He gives several examples of this.

**"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..."**

—Matthew 5:38-44

With regard to taking human life, neoliteralists ignore Jesus's statements, like those found in Matthew 5:38-44. Also, neoliteralists oppose abortion but favor capital punishment, war, gun availability, and military might.

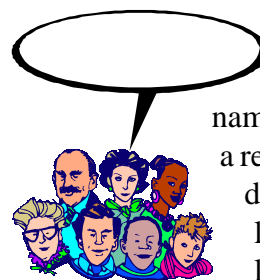
The neoliteralists accept divorce and remarriage despite the opposition to it attributed to Jesus in the gospels. Yet they claim that homosexuality is sinful, even though the Bible's position on this subject is what Sprague describes as "murky at best."

In addition, Sprague says, "I know of no neoliteralist who advocates slavery, polygamy, or infanticide despite biblical words supportive of these practices. Rather, neoliteralists pick and choose biblical passage to suit their own needs." Says Bishop Sprague, "I question and dissent from the neoliteralists' inconsistent approach to the Bible that makes of scripture a theological and political cafeteria line ..."



In contrast, says Sprague, "progressive readers seek to understand the text in its ancient context and then attempt to interpret, translate, and correlate it with our present life situation." He finds this method "essential if the Bible is to be God's vehicle for the eternal Word to emerge beyond our finite words."

What especially upsets Sprague is that progressive Christians have made little sustained challenge to the neoliteralists' method of taking passages out of context and reading a particular theology into them. "To the detriment of the whole church," he believes, "in failing to foster informed debate on biblical authority, progressives have been lax in calling neoliteralists to task. Neoliteralists have been allowed to pick and choose certain texts to buttress their own predisposed position in the name of scriptural Christianity." As a result, says Sprague, "I do hereby dissent from the arrogance of neoliteralism and the cowardly silence of progressives."



### ■ The meaning of Jesus Christ

"I affirm," says Bishop Sprague, "that ... God was uniquely and normatively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. ... I must dissent from Christocentric exclusivism, which holds that Jesus is the only way to God's gift of salvation. Such an arrogant claim stands over and against the inclusive Jesus of the Synoptics and limits God in ways that humans cannot."





Like other discerning Christians, Sprague finds that neoliteralist claims about Jesus picture God as something less than God. “God is not a Supreme Being ‘out there’ in the great beyond,” Sprague reminds us. “Rather, the word *God* is the sound image we humans employ to point to the very Essence of it all that is both in our midst and yet beyond the boundaries of time and existence.”

That understanding of what we mean by God implies something about who Jesus was. “Jesus the Christ in his full humanity did so trust and follow this loving Essence ... that he committed himself unequivocally to doing God’s will in words and deeds, body, mind, and soul.” Sprague goes on to say that he finds the substitutionary atonement theory, which is only one of several Christian theories of atonement, to be at odds with other images of God reflected by the witness of Jesus.

Why does all this matter? “I am convinced,” Sprague says, “that quite often such unexamined thought repels many intelligent, sensitive, searching people and drives some of them from understanding and following the God revealed in Jesus ... ” If we keep repelling those people, we fail to carry out an important part of the church’s God-given purpose.



### Restoring hope to the church

Following his discussion of the damage being done by neoliteralists, who are in all churches, Joseph Sprague deals with some aspects of the United Methodist system that he feels urgently need changing. The most important issue facing the UMC today, in his view, is “the near absence of hope, espe-



cially among clergy, that creates fear on the right and cynicism on the left.”

Sprague feels sure that merely talking about hope won’t restore it. “Speaking platitudes of hope, without embracing strategic, informed, and intentional actions, is mere pious illusion.” Congregational vitality tops Sprague’s list of characteristics that would show active and intentional hope. He sees the main marks of congregational vitality as these.



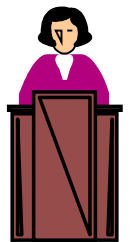
√ Passionate worship in diverse styles, biblically centered, with faithful preaching, soulful music, and active sacramental practices.



√ Sophisticated education for adults, added to the education for children and youth that we already consider essential. This adult education would be “not theological pabulum but the solid food of our best thinking, especially in theology and biblical studies.”

√ Intimate care groups that let every willing adult learn to pray and to know and be known by others.

√ Risk-taking, all-encompassing, hands-on mission, social justice, and evangelism that give busy people conduits through which to make a difference with and for others.



“The key to congregational revitalization,” Sprague believes, “is clergy leadership.” It is pastors who will “dare to color outside the lines.”

Other signs of active and intentional hope that Sprague feels the church needs are regional bodies that support and extend vital congregations while challenging those that aren’t vital, and general-

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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 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.

church agencies that aren't fiefdoms of personal power, and bishops who dare to lead with courage and resolute commitment.

### **Kindred voices, honest minds, welcoming hearts, and candor**



Bishop Joseph Sprague writes not to answer his critics, he assures us, as he knows his book will only increase the fury of some of them. "Rather," he explains, "I write especially for those on the way who need kindred voices, honest minds, welcoming hearts, and the gift of candor to 'keep on keeping on' in a church that

often talks about Jesus but fails to be the institutional expression of that One whose hospitality was inclusive and universal."

There are many of those "on the way" who continually feel the need Sprague describes. I'm one, and I know there are many more because I hear from them constantly. Some are still hanging on in the institutional church but many aren't. Our churches need to avoid losing any more of them, but that will require making some changes soon.



*Barbara*

## Affirming and dissenting

April 2003

United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague's book *Affirmations of a Dissenter* is the bravest statement I've ever read by a UMC bishop on the topics he's writing about. It says some things that urgently need saying in the church. I wish many more bishops and other clergy would dare to say publicly what this perceptive and courageous bishop is saying. Lay members need to be saying it too. Whether or not you're in the UMC, I urge you to read this book.



If you are in the UMC, I urge you to help get progressive lay members and clergy elected as delegates to next year's UMC General Conference, to end the "cowardly silence" of progressives and prevent the attempted takeover by neoliteralists that Sprague writes about. In most UMC Annual Conferences, delegate elections will be happening this May or June. The members attempting the takeover have already been working hard for a long time to get their supporters elected. The rest of us need to move quickly out of what Sprague calls "the silent middle" and make our voices heard.