

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Curiosity that led to growth

Curiosity is a favorite word of mine. Curiosity can lead to questions, which can lead to research and contemplation. Curiosity has led me to a passion for theology. I am not sure I realized just what this passion was until perhaps twelve years ago.



So that you can understand why I have it, where I am in my faith today, and how that influences my reaction to controversy within the church, I want to tell some of my story.

A mixture of influences

We are all products of our past. Influential voices from our past keep speaking to us. Where we grew up, our family, the teachings we have heard since our first encounter with a church, our education, our experiences, all of this contributes to who we are.

I grew up in California, yet my parents, who hailed from Minnesota, with my mother's Lutheranism and my father's Methodist background, are a part of me. Their religion was mainstream Christianity, and their faith was more about personal character than theological matters. We were middle class, and we valued education, music and theater. It



was my mom who most frequented the church on Sundays, so I was confirmed in a Lutheran church.

Trying to be like the early church

Our religious life was fairly ordinary until my high school days. But then my "passion for religion" was tapped. A male friend invited me to church, and thus began my introduction to a form of Christianity I had never met before. Presented with the reasons this church believed as it did, I was impressed and became involved. Its goal was to believe and to be as much as possible like the early church. Because

A guest author from Central Texas

The guest author of this issue of *Connections* is Julie Fuschak, a lay United Methodist who lives in Georgetown, Texas. She is one of the best informed and clearest thinking lay Christians I know. She delivered this personal statement to the Sunday School class in which she teaches, on the Sunday immediately after her church had refused to host a presentation by historical-Jesus scholars.



I asked Julie to share an abridged version of her statement here, because it addresses questions that I believe are vital for Christians and the church to consider. Should we avoid new information and ideas related to our faith, or should we welcome them—even seek them—and grow from them? Should the church avoid revealing information and ideas that might make members question some of their beliefs, or should it actively make such information and ideas known? Must all Christians believe exactly alike?

Hearing each other's stories



Julie's background differs from mine in many ways. Yet at midlife each of us belatedly started examining our lives and our faith, letting our real questions surface, and looking for answers. As a result, we each found beliefs that made more sense to us than what we'd previously heard and that helped us follow Jesus more closely. We also found kindred spirits to support and enliven our journeys. Thus when Julie shared her story with me, I saw that our stories were a lot alike despite their differences.

Some of her story may resemble yours, too. If so, I hope it will reassure you that you're not alone. If it doesn't do that, I hope it will at least be a reminder that if our experiences had been different, some of our beliefs might also be different. I hope it will be a reminder, too, that we can be Christians without agreeing on every detail of what that requires, and that there's room in the church for a variety of views.

Julie's story also reminds me that in order to grow in our faith, we need to hear each other's stories in the church. If you're in a church, I hope you'll help that to happen more often in it.

Barbara



the early church immersed people for baptism, my friend's church (which became my church) taught immersion as the only form of baptism that really counts. Members of this church believed people are only saved if they have been immersed. They also taught

that the church is to be led by a pastor, with deacons and elders elected by the local community. Women do not participate in these positions. Women are to teach women and children only.

This new church of mine said the Bible was the revealed, inerrant word of God and called on the church to be like the community of Acts and Paul. These practices and teachings made sense to me. At least they did to my mind at that time. I even decided to go to Joplin, Missouri, and attend a seminary, Ozark Bible College (OBC), in the fall of 1960.

As you can imagine, my parents were not happy with my attachment to a church that saw Christianity in ways very different from their ways. Nor were they happy to see me go off to Missouri, but they did not prevent me from going.

Delving into scripture

OBC prepares missionaries, men for preaching and women for Christian education. Its professors were learned men who knew Greek and taught such courses as church history, Bible, music, and evangelism. They taught sensible principles of Bible interpretation, too, emphasizing the importance of understanding each author's purposes and intended audience. In its way, the education at OBC was scholarly. I enjoyed my studies there, because the classes delved into the deep and serious meaning of scripture. OBC's particular bent, however, was on what one must do and believe to be a Christian. Its concern was "right belief."



A sheltered time

During my first year at OBC, I met Dean, the man I later married. He grew up in Eagle Pass, Texas. His parents began a small college that still exists, for Spanish speaking students, most of whom were Mexican nationals. Dean impressed me with his leadership skills and his preaching ability. He

planned to go to Mexico City as a missionary upon graduation. We married in the summer of '62, and on weekends we began serving a small Missouri church attended mostly by local farmers. Our living wage for this part-time job as a young married couple was only \$25, but our years in Joplin, during which our two daughters were born, were good. The church members were good people, and we were sheltered from what was going on in the rest of the world. I paid little attention to the tumultuous events of the '60s.



In '64 we moved to Mexico City to live and establish a church that met in our home for seven years. I could tell you many stories of our adventures there, including having Dean's plane confiscated and having to pay a huge "mordida" to the Mexican police and border officials to get it back. Two more daughters were born to us in Mexico—blond, nearly bald babies whom the women of our church called "jicamas." (If you know what that vegetable looks like, you know why!) But moving on . . .

God's call through the flip of a coin

In '73 a Bible College in San Jose, California, invited Dean to be its Dean of Students. He prayed and then flipped a coin, a kind of "casting of lots" as the disciples did in the book of Acts when deciding who would replace Judas. (I later learned that the casting of lots was also how Dean had decided to ask me to marry him.) Dean's coin toss told him God was calling us to go. We moved to California in a big pickup truck with all our stuff in back.



After three years in San Jose, however, Dean's father was retiring as president of the college he had established, where he had always assumed that Dean would succeed him. We went through the game of "of course, it has to be all right with Julie." And, of course, well taught as per Timothy to be a "good Christian wife," I said yes. But I knew my heart was not in it.

This move became the straw that broke the camel's back, creating anger and resentment that I couldn't overcome. For personal and also what I now recognize as religious reasons, I chose in '79 to divorce and return to California.

Being led to what was credible

When I divorced, I could not yet formulate in my mind the doubts and questions that would come later. I just knew I needed to leave that environment. But I eventually, gradually, allowed myself to think for myself. I came to recognize my love of religion, theology, church and spiritual things that had existed deep down for so long. I saw why my own mental processes had led me to reject what could no longer be credible to me. As a friend of mine puts it beautifully, "I have to live with what is in my mind." The way I frame it now is that my heart and mind must lead me to beliefs that are credible to me. Just me. I do not claim that anyone else must believe as I do.



The Wesleyan tradition of United Methodists values faith and reason together. The great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has said, "To think with the mind and heart one actually has, is the task of doing theology." I am doing theology for me now, and for no one else.

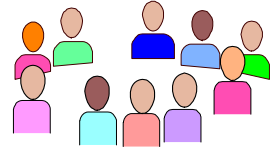


Recognizing the questions

I have been doing this for the last twelve years. The call that I now know touched me in high school resurfaced after Frank, my present husband, and I retired from Lockheed in '94 and moved to Georgetown. These last twelve years have been some of the best of times for me, because since retirement I've had time to recognize how many questions I've had. I've seen how much there is to learn about the church, its history, its theologies, its scholarship, the formation of the Bible, and ideas about God.



The teaching and gentlemanly ways of a Sunday-School-teacher colleague were the impetus I needed to begin my own search. I began to study the same biblical scholarship that mainline-church pastors study at seminary. Added to this was forming a group of women who have sought together to answer questions about our religion and our faith and our beliefs. The books we have read and discussed have been a great gift, the best gift ever to my faith and relationship with God.

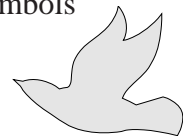


In my search, I sought to determine exactly how I understand the scripture as the Word of God. I now understand that the Bible has been written by people of faith, out of their faith experience, their world view and their culture, as they felt led by the spirit of God. With that understanding, I find God speaking to me through their faith stories. I am free to question, doubt, ponder, experience, and listen to my heart and mind for the leading of the spirit.

Christians speak different languages

In our religion, some words and symbols have been used over 4000 years. Yet, because cultures and knowledge and worldviews change over time, words and symbols can change in their meaning and interpretation. Add to that what each individual chooses to do with the new knowledge accumulated over time. New knowledge and new experiences have led me to use a different language and see different meanings and use different symbols now from those which OBC uses.

I have found my language, with the meaning and symbols that accrue to it through my experience. And I've seen that nei-



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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 16 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 U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen 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.

ther OBC nor I have the right to tell the other what language they must speak. I adamantly disagree that there is one language, one defining faith, one set of beliefs, and one method of biblical interpretation that I must agree to in order to be a Christian.

Who counts in the body of Christ?

The language of historical-Jesus scholars is one language among many within the world of Christianity. When churches refuse to let this language be heard, their refusal raises the question of who



is included in the body of Christ. Must we all speak the same language?



We each speak our own language, and our languages often differ. Yet I think we all share a love of God and Jesus. I hope that each of us can be heard in love and with respect. For this reason, I have told my story. I will continue to pursue my call and passion to “do theology.” When the opportunity arises, I enjoy sharing what I have learned. I appreciate your listening.

—Julie Fuschak



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I appreciate guest author Julie Fuschak’s saying that she now recognizes that her heart and mind must lead her to beliefs that are credible to her, just her. I feel the same way about my beliefs. Yet I suspect that some readers of this *Connections* will find these statements unacceptable for Christians. They’ll say, “You can’t just use yourself as the authority for what to believe! The Bible is the only valid authority!” Others may say that church doctrines must be Christians’ authority. But even if you choose to accept the Bible’s words or church doctrines as your authority, your final authority is yourself, because making that choice has been your decision.



I also sometimes hear Christians saying that they don’t use any Bible commentaries or other such materials. They use only the Bible, they say, not any interpretation. But that’s a meaningless claim. In deciding to consider only certain words from the Bible and to take them literally, these Christians are in fact making an interpretation.

So we each decide for ourselves what to believe. The problem comes in refusing to recognize that. Or worse, in claiming the right to decide what others should believe.

Barbara