

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Why *Connections*?

“What led you to start writing *Connections*?” readers often ask. “Why don’t you charge everyone for it? Does the money you get for it cover the cost?” “Doesn’t the reading you do for it take a tremendous amount of time?” “How do you keep coming up with topics?”



Connections has gotten many new readers since I’ve answered these questions here, so I’m answering them again. I offer the answers in the hope that they might help you to ask yourself, “What surprising new thing might God be calling *me* to do?”



A lifelong habit of reading

Church experiences furnish *Connections* topics constantly. So does my reading. And I don’t read just for *Connections*. I read for enjoyment and for finding out about things I’m interested in.

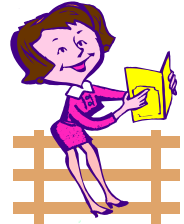
All my life I’ve read a lot. Growing up, I read mostly fiction from the public library. For the first several years of my married life, however, my town had no bookstore and only a tiny library, so whenever I visited large cities I’d browse in bookstores and accumulate several books that looked interesting to me. Sometimes they were about theology.

By mid-life I was reading to find answers to questions I had never considered before. Turmoil in my church congregation was making me think for the first time about what the church’s real purpose was, and about whether our usual activities were likely to accomplish it. I reread the Bible and started reading about its origin and about the church’s history, purpose, and methods. Then I felt drawn beyond those subjects into others that involved looking at aspects of my own life and my future.



Sitting on the fence?

Some *Connections* readers say I too often write about issues without taking any position on them. Some say I too often pose questions without answering them. These readers say there’s no point in writing without taking a stand. Sometimes, however, I see valid points on many sides of an issue and I’m writing to help myself and encourage readers to see it in fresh ways.



Other *Connections* recipients, of course, think I constantly take strong positions on issues, and often the wrong positions. Some feel that I’m not even a Christian.

Talk without results?

Some readers ask why I don’t start some kind of group or project to work for the changes I think the church needs, instead of just writing about them. However, I don’t think organizing or leading such things is my talent or my calling. I think what God has enabled and called me to do instead is to send out ideas and information that may motivate other Christians to take action in the ways they can and I can’t.

I know that working through an organization is often necessary for promoting a cause. However, I simply must hope that what I write will encourage the church members who have that talent and calling—especially those who are in institutional-church power positions—to use their talents and power to promote needed change. Often that requires rocking the boat and refusing to follow some rules and customs. I know that’s risky, but don’t we claim to be disciples of the Christ who did it? And over the centuries haven’t Christ’s most influential followers been those who did it? If I can help motivate more Christians to risk doing it, to promote needed change in the church and the world, maybe that’s what God wants from me.



“You disturb me and make me think”

“Your thoughts sometimes disturb me, sometimes make me chuckle, and most always make me think and ponder,” a *Connections* reader recently wrote me. I suspect that if I accomplish that with a lot of church members I’ll be doing what God is calling me to do.

A bleak outlook

At that time I couldn't see anything encouraging to look forward to. My nest was empty. I'd done the usual local-church volunteer jobs. I'd held all the offices in the community volunteer organizations that interested me. I felt starved for something challenging to fill my time, and for the intellectual stimulation I'd been without for many years. Looking for solutions, I began reading about depth psychology, personality types, religious experience, stages of life and faith, and the meaning of dreams.



My reading felt like a custom-designed course of study that someone was leading me through as preparation for something, but I had no idea what the "something" could be. I felt starved for kindred spirits to talk with about what I was reading and thinking, especially with regard to the church.

A surprising discovery

To find the intellectual activity I felt starved for, I started to consider taking a college course. To my surprise I found that seminaries were the main places that offered the mixture of subjects I wanted. But attending a seminary seemed a very strange thing to do, for a middle-aged woman who didn't want to become a pastor or any other kind of church employee. Besides, from friends and family I'd always gotten a negative impression of seminaries. Also, the closest seminary that offered what I wanted—Perkins School of Theology—was more than two hours away. Driving to it regularly seemed like too much to even consider doing, especially when I had no real reason for doing it. (I'd never previously thought that merely wanting to do something was a legitimate reason, and I'd never openly done unconventional things.)

seminary ???



A surprising pastor

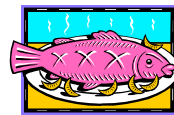
Soon a new pastor came on the scene. Like me he was dealing with mid-life issues, questioning some of the church's ways of functioning, and reading about these subjects. Unlike all other pastors I'd known, he revealed that he read



such things. He spoke frankly about his beliefs, concerns, and even doubts. He didn't stay hidden behind a pastor mask.



Unlike the other pastors I'd known, too, he seemed to see me as a real person instead of just one more church member who obediently taught children's Sunday School, sang in the choir, prepared food, and did the other volunteer church jobs that members (especially women) were expected to do. He asked about my interests and noticed some of my unused abilities. Conversations and church teamwork with him helped to convince me that my main abilities and interests mattered even though they hadn't seemed to matter to the church or society. I began thinking that God might want me to use them.



Starting to feed the hunger

Finally I felt starved enough to take one seminary course, and when I got into it I knew I'd found an important part of the food I was starved for. Some of my friends seemed to think I'd lost my mind, especially when I revealed that the course I was taking was "Interpretation of Dreams," but I soon got over feeling intimidated by what people might think. In fact, I decided I might as well have a degree to show for what I was doing, so I kept going for three years and got one.

About the same time I started seminary I discovered a new United Methodist Church project, the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It would meet in Nashville for five days every two months for two years. It was seeking lay and clergy participants from all over the U.S. Its faculty would include authors of several books I'd been avidly reading, and its curriculum would include many of the subjects I'd been reading and thinking about!



For the next two years I attended both Perkins and the Academy. They made an ideal combination because their content was quite similar but their style was different. The seminary courses had an academic approach. They were intellectually challenging, but they provided little chance to interact with other students because I was commuting and was not preparing for ordination as most others seemed to be. In contrast, the Academy had a more experiential style

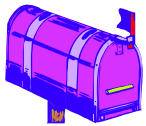
and more opportunity to interact with other participants.

Concerned women who felt alone

To keep finding kindred spirits and interesting uses for my time, after finishing Perkins and the Academy I started attending other church-related activities away from home. In them I found women who like me saw the need for change in the church's view of women's roles and in its all-masculine language that made women seem inferior or invisible. I saw that like me, in their home congregations these women felt alone in seeing this need as important.



By that time I had begun to experiment with doing some writing, so I began thinking about writing a monthly letter and sending it to these kindred spirits, to keep all of us aware that we were neither alone nor mistaken. When I finally got serious about doing that, however, I saw that change in the church wasn't likely to happen until a much larger number of members recognized the need for it.



More members, more topics

I saw, too, that influencing that larger group would require writing not just about the so-called women's issues but about all the issues that I felt needed attention. The need for the laity to become informed and to take more responsibility for the church. The need to recognize culture's influence on the Bible's contents. The danger of focusing only on familiar, comforting verses and ignoring the Bible's more prominent but disturbing messages about promoting social justice.

While I was still considering writing such a letter I was elected for the first time as a lay delegate to the United Methodist General Conference, the worldwide UMC's top decision-making body, which meets every four years. In it I found more of the kindred spirits I'd been wishing for, and I was able to take part in the UMC's consideration of its beliefs, policies, and purpose—the areas of the church that include my greatest interests and concerns.

I had what was needed

As I took part in more new activities I gradually realized that I had all



the necessary resources for the letter I had in mind. Besides years of reading, I now had a theology degree and a certificate in spiritual direction. Yet I was lay, and neither my husband nor I was a church employee who could suffer for advocating change. I had computer experience and software with desktop publishing features. I had some writing ability. I had funds for publishing the letter I wanted to write. I decided to go forward.

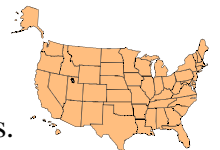
I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"
—Isaiah 6:8

I named my letter *Connections* and sent it to a list that seemed huge to me, about 1200 people. Besides the kindred spirits I'd originally had in mind, I included Academy participants, leaders of my congregation, attenders of Perkins Laity Week and of a regional UMC training event I'd just been to, the UMC's U.S. bishops, and the members of my UMC Annual Conference (regional decision-making body). I didn't ask for money but some recipients sent checks. Many asked to add names to my mailing list. I added all of those, and I started asking new recipients to pay \$5 a year. My list mushroomed.



Still a one-person project

Now, nearly nine years later, *Connections* goes to several thousand laity and clergy. I don't know how many because many get it from others, from the web, or from UMC regional bodies. I personally mail about 5000 every month now, most by U.S. mail and some by e-mail. Those recipients include members of at least a dozen denominations, in all the U.S. states, D.C., and Puerto Rico. A few e-mail recipients are in other countries.



Sometimes I still add names of people who haven't asked to be added. I've added the delegates of the past two UMC General Conferences, and for several years I added each year's new members of my UMC Annual Conference and the Academy for Spiritual Formation. Many recipients pay small amounts, but I send *Connections* to many who pay nothing. What recipients pay doesn't come close to covering the cost, but I'm able to make this contribution and I believe God calls me to make it.

I keep the *Connections* mailing list in my computer (and I never give or sell it to anyone). I write *Connections* on my computer, then take the computer file to a print shop that prints, folds, and tabs the copies. I print and stick the 5000 labels and do the packaging that the post office requires, and my husband takes the boxes to the local post office for me.



Still writing for the same reasons

I write *Connections* to encourage the churchgoers who see the need for change but don't speak up because they mistakenly think they're alone or powerless. I write to make others aware of the need

for change. I write to motivate churchgoers to look at familiar subjects from new angles. I write especially to reach lay members whose only church involvement is in a local congregation, most of whom don't seem to read anything else about the topics I write about, or at least not anything else that presents the views I express in *Connections*. In the hope of furthering the changes I believe the church urgently needs, I want to reach as many church members as I can, especially those in position to influence others. For these reasons I started writing *Connections* and I'm still writing it.

Barbara

Connections by e-mail?

If you're getting *Connections* by snail mail and would like to get it by e-mail instead, I'd appreciate your e-mailing me (BCWendland@aol.com) and letting me know. You'll get it earlier, and it will be in color! And for me, e-mail is faster and cheaper to send. Each month I'll send *Connections* to you as a PDF file attached to an e-mail. You can print the file or read it on your screen. To open it you must have Adobe Acrobat Reader software on your computer, but that's free and most computer users seem to find it easy to use. If you want to get it you can download it from www.adobe.com, to which there's a link on my *Connections* web site, www.connectionsonline.org. If you want to try the e-mail method of getting *Connections* before changing to it, go to my web site and try opening one of the back issues you find there. They're in the same PDF form that you would get by e-mail.



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