

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

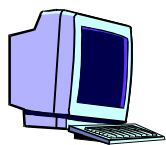
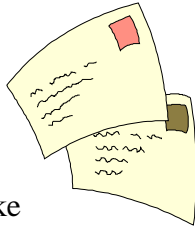


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Misfits again

To my surprise I'm still hearing from both lay and ordained Christians who feel like misfits. For a long time I'd known that feeling like a misfit in the church was discouraging to a lot of Christians and quite painful to some, but I'm now seeing that it's of even greater concern to more Christians than I had previously realized. Consequently I'm addressing it this one more time. (If you want the two previous "misfit" issues, February and April 2002, see www.connectionsonline.org or let me know and I'll send you paper copies.)



What surprises me most about the response I'm getting is that everyone I'm hearing from feels like a church misfit in some way. This makes me wonder, aren't there any fits in the church? To me they seem extremely numerous.

Why are the fits silent?

■ **Very few fits read *Connections*?** I believe Christianity has strengths that other religions lack. I know the church does a lot of good. I consider my denomination's organizational setup better than any other. I rarely say those things in *Connections*, however, because plenty of other publications cover them thoroughly and constantly. Instead, I express views that I don't see being expressed elsewhere but that I think Christians need to consider. I write about topics that I think need attention but get little or none in the church. I write about changes that I believe are needed.



The fits, however, are evidently too comfortable with the status quo to risk the temporary pain that most change brings. So instead of evidence that change is needed, they want reassurance that the status quo is good enough, and *Connections* doesn't provide that.

Are all critics misfits?



I heard a TV ad recently for a talk by a writer whom the ad called a political essayist and social critic. It made me see that I'm an essayist and critic, too, though not a political essayist and not mainly a social critic. I wondered, what's the name for what I do, and does it guarantee being a misfit?

Connections is in newsletter format but it's not really a newsletter. It doesn't contain announcements or pleas to attend events or support particular programs. Each issue is more like a personal letter instead. Each one is really a personal essay.

I'm a critic, but in my view not the negative kind that people most often mean by that word. One dictionary definition of criticism is "the art of analyzing and evaluating with knowledge and propriety," and that's what I try to provide in *Connections*.



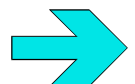
Since my essays and criticism are church related, maybe I'm an ecclesiastical essayist and critic. I've never heard of such a label, but maybe it's one I need to claim. Then again, maybe staying unlabeled is better.

Critics need detachment

Honest analysis and evaluation often requires being somewhat detached, and doesn't that mean being something of a misfit? Having a high-salary or high-status role in an organization, or merely depending on it for income, attaches a person firmly to that organization. It makes him or her very unlikely to advocate change or even question the status quo. Less firmly attached members feel freer to question it. They don't mind urging members to ask whether it serves the group's intended purpose. And that kind of questioning tends to make the questioners misfits.

Forward change, or backward?

Instead of urging forward movement, some critics advocate going back to an earlier status quo. They criticize people who are trying to move forward. Are these critics misfits too, or are they instead the ultimate fits? The answer to that may depend on who's doing the answering.



■ **There aren't any fits?** An institution as large as a church denomination or even a large congregation probably can't fit any member perfectly, because every person is unique and a large institution has to be generic. Maybe that means that every church member will be a misfit to some extent. That doesn't seem to explain my not hearing from fits, however, because plenty of church members are in congregations small enough to fit all members' needs and wishes. Still, this reason may be possible, and to solve the mystery of the unheard-from fits, I'm trying to consider every possibility.



■ **Fits don't want to talk or even think about such things?** Some fits are very uneasy thinking about what they believe and why they believe it.

In addition, they don't want their friends and fellow citizens to see them as odd. Also, some fits consider criticism of the church taboo. Above all, some evidently fear being rejected by God, and they assume that God requires them to believe all official church doctrines and follow all church customs. (Never mind that God knows about their crossed fingers.)

■ **Fits think I'm too far out in left field to bother with responding to?** That possibility probably doesn't even need any discussion. I'm sure it applies to some of the fits.



How could pastors help?

A pastor who replied to the most recent misfit issue of *Connections* (one who feels like a misfit, of course) asked about this. "If you were suddenly made the consultant to the pastor or worship committee at your church," he wrote, "what would your specific proposals be, about the design of worship, study opportunities, and ministries?"

Not being clergy, I can't say what clergy supervisors and other officials could do to keep misfit clergy from feeling lonely, mistreated, or rejected. And I certainly might be wrong about what I'd do to help lay misfits if I were a pastor, but I know some ways in which I think I would try to help.

These suggestions relate mainly to the church characteristics that make me feel like a misfit. What's needed to address the features that make

other people feel like misfits would undoubtedly be different, so as you read my suggestions I hope you'll consider your own.

√ If I were a pastor I'd try to have more than one worship service. I'd use "7-11" songs (which one *Connections* responder called "musical cotton candy") at one, and a different kind of music at the other. No staff for this? Sometimes volunteers or part-timers with the necessary talents show up when they hear that you want to start the kind of service they would like.



√ As much as possible, I would avoid using all-masculine language and King-James-Version language. Doing this in worship is hard when it comes to hymns and anthems, of course. Most of them (even the ones written in recent years) use King-James-style English and all-masculine words for both God and human beings, and change is often impossible because of copyright requirements and the need for the words to be singable and fit the music.



Worship elements like the Gloria Patri, and the Doxology with the 1674 words and "Old 100th" tune, bring similar problems. If I were pastor, however, I'd work on weaning the congregation away from those. The United Methodist Hymnal has a doxology with non-masculine words, #94, and other hymnals probably include something similar.

The most-used and beloved-by-many translation of the Lord's Prayer presents problems, but if I were pastor I'd use a contemporary translation of the Lord's Prayer at least once in a while—one Sunday a month, maybe. I'd introduce it each time with a couple of sentences reminding the congregation that the more familiar words did not come from the mouth of Jesus, as Jesus did not speak English and our familiar translation was made and came into use a long time after Jesus. The "Ecumenical Text" of the Lord's Prayer (UM Hymnal #894) avoids outdated language and thus would be a step in the right direction, despite the fact that it still addresses God as "Father."



In the other prayers I included in worship, however, if I were the pastor I'd definitely use much more "God" and other metaphors for God, and much less "Father." The Bible contains plenty of other



choices—"rock," "holy one," "creator," and many others. I wouldn't even have to risk "Mother," though I probably would, at least occasionally.

√ If I had a staff I would also strongly encourage its members to avoid all-masculine and King-James-style language. I'd occasionally speak to a meeting of church-school teachers, too, especially the teachers of children, explaining why I considered this practice important.

√ In my sermons I would avoid jokes and anecdotes that present women as incompetent, as airheaded, as spenders of "their husbands'" money, or as people interested only in trivialities. Too often I hear male pastors tell supposedly funny stories about their wives, portraying them as interested only in shopping, or telling about their having to ask their husbands for money or for permission to buy something. Even though some couples follow this pattern, it's one that the church needs to discourage rather than perpetuate.

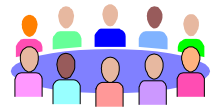


√ I would ask a misfit who reads a lot, to start a new Sunday School class that would meet for a specific number of Sundays to study and discuss a recent book that presents a forward-looking view of Christianity. If enough people showed up and then wanted the class to continue, it might move on to some books that relate to social-justice issues. I'd urge this class (and others!) to include study of controversial issues such as poverty, abortion, racism, homosexuality, feminism, or religious pluralism. Or it might study new understandings of Christian doctrines, language, or spiritual disciplines.



If there were a time when the church was having a weeknight series at which several classes or other

activities were offered for members to choose from, I would include such studies among those choices. If one met at a non-Sunday-morning time and was well publicized outside the church, it might even attract attenders from other churches or from no church, who yearned for kindred spirits who read and thought about such things. Groups like this would also furnish a way for Christian misfits to find each other and become much-needed lifelines for each other.



√ To locate misfits and discover their interests and abilities, I'd talk to members individually as often as possible. And I wouldn't assume that what I saw on the surface was all there was. I was an active adult church member for twenty-five years before any pastor saw me as more than a choir member, children's Sunday School teacher, and bringer of food to church social events. It was a lifesaver for me when finally a pastor discovered that I continually read and thought about theology and other church-related subjects, and began talking about them with me. Because I hadn't heard a pastor mention reading serious books or considering varied viewpoints, I hadn't mentioned to any pastor that I did it.



√ If I were a pastor who read and thought about such things, I'd also mention it in my sermons. That would alert and reassure some misfits who had similar interests, and make them feel less alone.

√ During worship I'd often have a lay member give a brief description of a ministry she or he was doing, saying why it was important and rewarding. This would let other members know of ministries they wouldn't otherwise know were available for doing.

If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start getting it monthly by U.S. mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. To get *Connections* by e-mail, simply let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 9½ years' back issues, all of which are available, send me \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write, phone, or e-mail me (addresses and numbers on page 1), or on the Internet, see www.connectionsonline.org.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm 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.

√ I would address social-justice issues in my sermons occasionally, presenting some pros and cons of various ways in which Christians might respond to them. I would regularly remind my hearers that Jesus often spoke about such issues, including concrete and controversial ones like the use of money, and that he often broke religious and social rules and customs (in his treatment of women, for example). He rarely emphasized personal piety or comfort.



Following Jesus always offends some

Wouldn't doing these things offend some members, even causing some to leave? Probably so, but

Blessed is anyone who
takes no offense at me.
—Luke 7:23

Very truly, I tell you,
unless a grain of
wheat falls into
the earth and
dies, it remains
just a single
grain, but if it
dies, it bears
much fruit.
—John 12:34



doesn't that go with following Jesus? Yes, I hear you saying, but look what happened to him! I know that, but look at the impact he had on the world. Jesus was a misfit, and following him will offend some people and make us misfits, but I believe God calls us to follow in spite of that.

Barbara

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it."

—Mark 8:34-35

