

CALENDAR ■ RELIGION

"Encounter." 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. today. Cross-denominational prayer training conference. Promiseland Church, 1504 E. 51st St. Free; optional lunch \$8. 407-9460.

"Brotherhood, Choir & Usher Annual Service." 11 a.m. Sunday. Guest speaker is the Rev. L.L. Her. Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church, 385 FM 2810, Houston. Free. 303-0280.

Men organ series. Noon to 12:30 p.m. Wednesdays through April 20. Patrick Scott performs. Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, 7127 Bee Cave Road. Free; donations for lunch. 327-1116, www.whpc.org.

Contemplative service. 12:15 to 12:45 p.m. Wednesdays through April 20. First United Methodist Church, 1201 Lavaca St. Free. 478-2444, www.mcaustin.org.

Prayer service. Noon Thursdays through April 20. Ross-Stockenberger and Mary perform. St David's Episcopal Church, 1201 Lavaca St. Free; optional lunch \$8. 478-2444, www.mcaustin.org.

Worship series. 12:05 to 12:35 p.m. Wednesdays through April 20. First United Methodist Church, 1201 Lavaca St. Free; optional lunch \$8. 478-2444, www.mcaustin.org.

Sharing the Bread." 6 p.m. April 14. Lenten gathering. Faith Community, 1201 Lavaca St. Free. 478-2444, www.mcaustin.org.

Worship. 7 to 8 p.m. April 14. First Baptist Church, 1201 Lavaca St. Free. 478-2444, www.mcaustin.org.

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Author finds meaning in questioning of church

Like so many outspoken Christians before her, Barbara Wendland is either a heretic or a hero.

A heretic in the eyes of some church leaders for questioning traditional views on the Bible and God and criticizing what she sees as sexist, outdated language and customs. A hero to thousands of Christians who struggle with belief and feel lonely in their congregations.

Wendland, a lifelong Methodist who lives in Temple, has another word for people like her: misfit.

In her new book, "Misfits: The Church's Greatest Strength," she recounts her midlife spiritual awakening, which led her to re-examine her faith and find her own voice but also alienated friends and family and ultimately cost her the church she had served for 50 years.

The book challenges the church to embrace members who have questions and doubts — a particularly poignant plea given the painful rejection Wendland recently has encountered in her own congregation.

"I continually feel more strongly that the church could change the world in much-needed ways," Wendland told me in an email interview, "but only if it changed itself rather than continuing to speak ancient language and make claims (about Jesus, the Bible, Christianity's supposed monopoly on the truth, etc.) that are unconvincing to many of today's people."

"Misfits" emerged from "Connections," a monthly four-page letter Wendland began publishing almost two decades ago. In it, she looks critically at church doctrine and policies, addressing topics ranging from sexuality to the nature of God.



EILEEN FLYNN

The role of agitator is a radical departure from the woman she describes in the book's first chapter: "For the first 40 years of my life, I was a quiet, docile, stay-in-the-background, do-what-you're-told, don't-even-ask-questions conformist."

Growing up in a conservative Houston church, Wendland was at times confused by certain religious customs and Bible stories, but she rarely spoke up. When questions did arise, her mother would assure her that the rules had a purpose she would one day understand.

When she married, Wendland left her career as a mathematician and joined her husband's church in Temple. The expectations, she writes in the book, were clear. She would keep the home, become a mother and volunteer at church. And she complied, making casseroles, baking cookies and teaching Sunday school.

The questions from her childhood persisted, though, and new questions kept forming. She had for so long accepted the status quo, whether it was racial segregation or the subordination of women — issues her church never addressed. Now she was pulling back the veil on everything.

Wendland sought answers in books that challenged conventional views of morality and pushed the theological boundaries she was so accustomed to. She re-read the Bible; she took a seminary course and spiritual formation classes. As she gained more knowledge about Scripture and religion, the

message of Jesus became more meaningful to her. Being a Christian meant following the example of Jesus, she decided, not necessarily following the rules established by an institution.

Wendland was eager to share her new discoveries, but her church friends didn't seem interested. As her views on Christianity had broadened, theirs seemed more conservative than ever. Exhilaration led to loneliness. And the nagging feeling that she didn't quite fit in her church became an undeniable truth.

In 1992, Wendland reached out to fellow misfits by writing her first edition of Connections. Responses from readers began pouring in, many expressing relief.

"I thought I was the only one who felt this way," they would tell her.

In finding her own voice, Wendland realized she had given voice to others — far more than she could have imagined. Connections now reaches several thousand readers on Wendland's mailing list plus an unknown number who read it on her Web site.

As she continues to challenge the institutional church and offer guidance and support to alienated Christians, Wendland is adrift herself. At 77, she is for the first time in her life without a church home. Her congregation in Temple, she says, does not welcome her anymore.

But she doesn't dwell on that experience. This isn't a book about regrets. Wendland's message centers on possibility.

"Our churches may see us as misfits, even as heretics who need to be shunned or ousted," she writes. "But if we care about helping to make the world more loving, peaceful and just, we can't let that deter us. We need to be cheerleaders for the church when we honestly can, but to be persistent, vocal critics when we see the church failing to follow the teachings of Jesus."

Eileen Flynn blogs at eileenflynn.wordpress.com.