

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BY BARBARA WENDLAND

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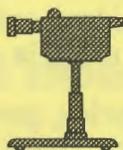
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Broadcasting or narrowcasting

**"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."
—Mark 16:15**

God wants us to reach all people with the Gospel, but we often present it in ways that are guaranteed to reach only a few. The pastor of a leading United

Methodist congregation realized this when he asked a TV producer to evaluate some videos he had made. They explained the United Methodist Church's theology, structure, and apportionment system. The TV expert said, "The trouble with these videos is that they will interest only a few people. In them you are narrowcasting when you need to be broadcasting."



The pastor realized that this was also true of many features of his church's worship services. He often preached on topics that only a few people would find interesting or important. Often his illustrations related only to a few people's interests and experience. Most of the music was in a style that only a small segment of the population likes. The anthems, hymns, creeds, and prayers used many words that are unfamiliar to most people today.

All the difference in the world

When he saw this, he changed. "I started preaching about what people lie awake at night worrying about," he says. "I became very specific about how the Gospel applies to the main problems that most people face. I started using everyday language. It has made all the difference in the world."



The path God asks us to travel is narrow, but that's because few people are willing to risk loving in God's way. It's not because they must wear only one kind of clothes or like one kind of music or use one set of words in order to be allowed on the path.

(continued on page 2)

Reaching today's people

Here's what many well-informed observers of today's churches say we must do if we want to reach many people younger than fifty.

- Find out what attracts today's younger people and what turns them off. Provide sermons, music, and other activities that speak their language and stress their main concerns. Make these features available through new worship services, groups, and classes that are different from the existing ones that current members like. To publicize the new offerings, use methods and content that will attract young people.



- Pay special attention to the music used in the new worship services. Include the kinds of music that are played on the radio stations that prospective members (not current members) listen to. Classical music represents less

than 5% of album sales today, and God calls us to reach a much larger segment of the population.

- For seekers and new Christians (which includes many of today's younger church members), stick to the basics of the Gospel. Focus mainly on what Jesus said and did, and emphasize his humanity, not just his divinity. Save the details of theology, history, and biblical scholarship for other church groups whose members want to go deeper.

- Show concretely how the Christian faith applies to the daily world of work. Most people spend most of their time there.



- State Christianity's truths in the language of today's people and their experience. Use short, vivid, contemporary, familiar words that are easy to recall. Don't use a "stained-glass voice" or churchy words that aren't heard elsewhere.

- Personalize the Christian message. Appeal to people's hearts more than to their heads. Use more stories and personal experiences than explanations.

- Don't make the Good News sound like bad news. Emphasize the hope that God offers.



(Broadcasting or narrowcasting, continued from page 1)

Of course we must continue to offer the worship and other activities that our current members need, but we must also provide what will reach other people who aren't like us. We must stop narrowcasting and start broadcasting. ❖

The Gospel in many forms

Some people will reject the Gospel because it demands too much. But many of today's people are rejecting it only because they aren't seeing it presented in any form that lets them see its true value.



We must offer the Gospel in many ways, not just those that our present members prefer.

One of the many perceptive observers of today's churches who are urging us to expand our ways of presenting the Gospel is Dr. Tex Sample, a professor at a United Methodist seminary. For years he has studied what attracts people from different cultural backgrounds and age groups.

Hearing, talking, seeing, doing

Dr. Sample finds that about half of the people in the U.S. live in what he calls an oral culture. In his book *Ministry in an Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, & Minnie Pearl* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) he explains that these tradition-oriented people learn and express themselves mainly through hearing, talking, and doing, instead of through reading, writing, or using words for precise thinking and analysis.

Most people who function this way can read and write, Sample assures us, but they do it mainly for purposes like writing checks, reading the sports page, and writing necessary documents at work. Reading and writing aren't their preferred ways of getting information or expressing themselves.

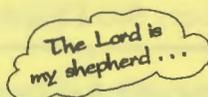


✓ They leave a lot undefined and unsaid.

Sample finds that oral people know, do, and feel a lot that they can't put into words and don't feel any need to put into words. They don't feel the need to use consistent, precise definitions. They don't worry about expressing their opinions and beliefs in ways that will withstand the whipsaws of academic critique.

✓ They depend on memory and repetition.

When oral people use words to understand and express their beliefs and feelings, Tex Sample finds, they depend on simple, pithy, statements that they have learned from regular repetition,



whether in the form of familiar Bible verses and hymns, or of rap or country music.

✓ They don't look inward.

For people who rely mainly on oral communication, religion isn't a reflective search for deeper meanings. Psychology isn't their way of getting to know themselves or others.



✓ They learn by apprenticeship, not by study.

Oral people learn best by hearing, watching, and doing. They do very little of their learning by reading and writing key information and ideas, or by analyzing and comparing statements in order to be thorough, clear, and exact.

Stories, proverbs, relationships

These tradition-oriented people, Tex Sample observes, make sense of the world mainly through stories, proverbs, and relationships.

▪ **Stories** are the lifeblood of oral culture. Children and other newcomers learn the family tradition by hearing the family stories from older members. The stories present beliefs and concerns in a concrete, personalized way that is directly based on daily life.



▪ **Proverbs** are also important for oral people. Proverbs are short, down-to-earth sayings that explain behavior and give shrewd advice and moral guidance. They often use exaggeration or mix humor with a serious point. And their advice isn't necessarily consistent; the same person who says "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" may also say "the good is the enemy of the best."

▪ **Personal relationships** rather than abstract concepts form the basis for thinking in an oral culture. Issues and religious beliefs are evaluated mainly in terms of family, friendship, and community ties.



Personality and age make a difference

In addition to the cultural backgrounds that lead a large proportion of our population to choose talk, action, feelings, and stories as their main ways of learning, personality traits that are apparently innate cause another big segment of our population to function very similarly. So when our churches' worship services and other activities don't speak this language (which is most of the time), we turn off a lot of the people to whom God calls us to communicate the Gospel.



Age also influences how we learn and communicate. Tex Sample tells about being asked to look at a videotape designed for college students. He thought its fast, disconnected sequences were too frantic to keep up with, but a twenty-five-year-old viewer found the same tape too slow. ❖

We can reach them if we choose

Most of our worship services, Tex Sample observes, include many features that oral people and many younger people find meaningless and boring. We offer music that leaves them cold, and a lot of abstract doctrinal statements and material to read.

Here's what Sample thinks we must do through new congregations, new worship services, and other new activities, to reach the people we're currently turning off.

I don't like it. It makes me mad. But we need it!

Stanley Menking leads a nationwide mentor program for pastors. He tells about a pastor who added a new worship service. It was on Saturday night. It used contemporary music. It was very different from the church's traditional Sunday-morning services.

The pastor warned church members, "If you like our present services, don't come to the new one. You won't like it, and it will make you mad." But after it had been in operation for a few weeks a curious long-time member went anyway. The pastor asked his reaction.

"I didn't like it," the layman said. "It made me mad." Then he added sheepishly, "But I saw a totally new group of people there, and they are people our church has never succeeded in reaching before. We need this new service. Let me know how I can help keep it going."



▪ **Communicate in images instead of explanations.** To reach the majority of today's people, we must express the Gospel mainly through feelings and experiences, not through ideas and doctrines. For most people today, an academic or literary style is a turn-off.

▪ **Use sound and rhythm.** Sample tells about a shopping mall that was being overrun by teenagers who weren't buying and were keeping paying customers away. The mall management solved the problem by playing "easy listening" music. It caused the teenagers to stop coming. Our churches need to reach young people, but we drive many of them away when we use only yesterday's music.

▪ **Teach through dialogue, interaction, and video.**

The generation raised on talk shows, music videos, and computers won't get our message from "reading the lesson" for Sunday



School or hearing lecture-style sermons. They won't even be present to hear the Gospel if that's the only way we offer it.

▪ **Don't expect strong commitment to organized, institutional religion.** Put more emphasis on the personal spiritual journey with God. Offer programs that are easy to recognize as worthwhile in themselves. Don't expect people to attend a meeting or program just because it serves some institutional purpose or vague long-range goal.

▪ **Emphasize short-term programs and jobs.** Don't make newcomers feel they would be getting trapped permanently if they attended a class or accepted a volunteer job in the church.

▪ **Build relationships** with newcomers first, then help them develop deeper commitment. This is the opposite of the way in which many long-time church members came into the church, so it's hard for us to accept, but we need to face it.

▪ **Provide hands-on mission opportunities.**

Offer some that newcomers can sample before committing themselves. Offer mission projects that invite emotional expression and have visible, heart-warming results.



**Make new friends, keep the old.
The first are silver, the second gold.**



Maybe this old saying tells what our churches need to do today. We must preserve our heritage and keep meeting the needs of our current members. We must keep providing the classical music that for many of us is an indispensable route to God. We must keep providing the familiar hymns and other traditional worship features that have led many of our enthusiastic current members to God and kept their faith strong. They're our gold.



But we also need to make effective, faithful disciples of people who are now outside the church, and of our lukewarm church members. God values them, too, and our present methods aren't reaching them.



Barbara

Next month . . .

Here comes Jesus!



Connections 11-94
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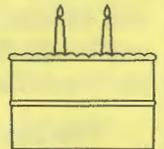
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Broadcasting and narrowcasting

A birthday

With this issue, *Connections* is 2 years old. I now send more than 4100 copies every month. Recipients live in 48 states and belong to at least 10 Christian denominations. Many readers make copies of *Connections* regularly for a group, so I don't know how many people *Connections* eventually reaches each month. During these 2 years several hundred readers have phoned, written, spoken to me in person, or sent checks, and said, "Keep it up!" If you have, I thank you. I'm encouraged by the concern for the church that so many readers express to me, and by the brave, innovative, God-inspired steps that many are taking.



I write *Connections* in an effort to stimulate the fresh thought, open discussion, and bold, innovative, faithful action that I believe the church urgently needs in order to do God's will in today's world. I also want to reassure forward-looking clergy and laity that they aren't alone in seeing the need for change. Because *Connections* is a one-person ministry and I want to reach as many church members as possible, I depend on readers' contributions and cover much of the expense myself rather than using a strict subscription system. So if you like *Connections* and haven't paid for the copies you've received, I'd appreciate your doing so. Postage and printing for sending you a year's issues cost me about \$5. Thanks for your help. If you've just discovered *Connections* and want to get it monthly, send me your name and address and \$5 for each year's issues you want. Two years' back issues are available at \$5 per year.