



## A personal update

If you've been wondering what's happened to *Connections*, it's because I haven't published any issues since May 2018. In this issue I'm explaining why.



## Erroll's death

A huge change happened in my life at the beginning of June: my wonderful husband Erroll died at age 88. We were married for 58 years. He lived a productive and admirable life, as you can see from his obituary on the "Meet Barbara" page of [my website](#).



He started developing dementia in 2013 and it became steadily worse. For the past 3 years, he was in a local memory-care center. Toward the end, he became confined to bed and a geriatric chair and became almost totally unable to communicate. However, he still recognized me and our daughter.

For handling most of the estate process, I'm fortunate to have excellent legal and financial helpers with whom Erroll and I and our parents have worked for many years. Also, my daughter has been living with me ever since Erroll started having dementia, so that's a help even though I find our different ways of functioning stressful at times.

## Many computer problems

During the summer, I started having what seemed like every imaginable problem with my computer system. That has added to my stress and has contributed greatly to my no longer publishing *Connections* regularly. For some time, my Windows desktop computer, on which I wrote *Connections*, had had some apparently unsolvable problems. Finally it died not long ago, so I had to get a new desktop computer. Unfortunately, the version of the database program



## A gift for you from Westar Institute

Westar Institute is dedicated to fostering and communicating the results of cutting-edge scholarship on the history and evolution of the Christian tradition.



It aims at raising the level of public discourse about questions that matter in society and culture. It communicates the results of its research in non-technical terms, equipping the general public with tools to critically evaluate competing claims in the public discussion of religion.

## An opportunity for *Connections* readers



Westar does this partly through its subscription magazine, *The Fourth R*. We all know about the three R's (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic), but the fourth R of basic literacy is religion. *The Fourth R* magazine shares the latest thinking from religion scholars and writers, in non-technical language aimed at a general audience.

I encourage you to become a Westar member to receive *The Fourth R* regularly; you don't have to be a scholar to do that. But for now, you can click [here](#) to get the complete current edition of *The Fourth R* free in digital form, as a sample.

**Religious literacy is especially needed now**

The need for religious literacy in our society is at an all-time high right now, and Westar is an ideal source of sound, scholarly reflections addressed to a popular audience. I hope you'll help to spread religious literacy by accepting this free gift of *The Fourth R* as an introduction.



that I'd used for years for storing my mailing list, Alpha Five, couldn't be used on the new computer, and my existing files have turned out not to be fully usable with the new version. That has also happened with Quicken, the software that I've used for years for financial record-keeping. Software updates are a huge nuisance!



Soon after my desktop computer stopped working, my wi-fi also did. The remedy was getting a new router, which of course doesn't work exactly like the old one. Fortunately my foster daughter and her husband, who both are knowledgeable about computers, visited from Bogotá and chose a new router and got it set up for me. However, despite lengthy FaceTime sessions with them after that, my wireless printing still doesn't work reliably, and none of us can figure out why.

As if all of that weren't enough, for several months I haven't been able to get my *Connections* website to open. A helpful friend has gotten it fixed, and it is now mostly updated and is back in operation.



## Generally good health through it all

Whether it's from stress or old age or a combination of those (I now attribute every discomfort to one or both of them), I've recently been having more frequent and severe lower-back pain, for which I've been having some physical therapy. Also, I can't walk as far or as securely or stand as long as I could earlier, and I've gained unwanted weight. If I'd been exercising regularly and consistently eating healthier food throughout my life, these changes might not have happened. However, I gave up exercise and regular calorie counting years ago, and the occupations that I enjoy are all done indoors, seated, in air-conditioning: reading, writing, working crosswords, watching PBS-TV, and attending the Metropolitan Opera movies that are shown many times during the season at a local movie theater. Unfortunately, none of these promote physical fitness.



The macular degeneration that I developed a year or so ago has greatly improved now, with one eye now okay and the other one stable, so that's a welcome relief. And the deaths and serious ailments of many of my contemporaries keep reminding me of how fortunate I am to still be in generally good health even though I turned 85 a few days ago.

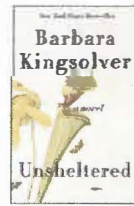
## More reading than ever



In my younger years, I always assumed that when I became old and no longer able to be physically active, I could always happily occupy myself with reading. I couldn't imagine ever getting tired of reading. I sometimes get tired of it now, yet I'm doing more reading now than ever. I've been reading almost a book a day in recent months.

I now read most books on my Kindle. Its print is easier to for me to read, and its e-books don't add to my already over-full shelf space. I also appreciate being able to get free samples on the Kindle, of books I think I might want to read but am not sure about.

Lately I've been reading a lot of mysteries and some other fiction, which I hadn't previously read that much. A novel I've especially liked is *Unsheltered*, the newest by Barbara Kingsolver (Harper, 2018). It's very long, however, and its main point didn't really become clear to me until near the end, so appreciating it required persistence.



## National and world issues

Much of my reading is still non-fiction, especially about important religion and justice issues. I'm appalled by President Trump's crude personal behavior and his incompetence as the leader of our nation. I'm concerned about the injustice in our nation and the world, based on race, gender, lack of economic and educational opportunity, and other related issues. Much of my recent reading has thus been about these subjects. Here are three like that.

*Incarceration Nation: How the United States Became the Most Punitive Democracy in the World*, by Peter K. Ennis (Cambridge, 2016). Its title is self-explanatory.



*Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History*, Kurt Andersen (Random House, 2017)

*Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, by David Grann (Vintage, 2017). I found this book's content definitely worth becoming aware of, as I hadn't previously known about the outrageous mistreatment of a Native American tribe in Oklahoma. It contained more tedious historical detail than I could get completely through, but I found what I read very worthwhile.

## Memoirs

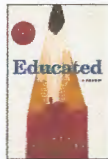
I nearly always find memoirs interesting. If they're by someone whose experience and feelings are similar to mine, I appreciate being reminded that I'm not alone. But if they're by authors whose lives have been very different from mine, I appreciate learning about what goes on in circumstances I've known little about. All that I list here are of the "very different from me" kind, so have been eye-opening.



Two address aspects of the U. S. government as experienced by the authors. One is *Reporter* (Knopf, 2018), by Seymour M. Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. The other is *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence*, by James R. Clapper (Viking, 2018). He has been an officer in the U.S. Air Force, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Pentagon's top intelligence official in the Bush and Obama administrations.

The other memoirs I list here address other aspects of our society as experienced by people whose lives also have been very different from mine.

*Educated: A Memoir*, is by Tara Westover (Random House, 2018). She grew up in a remote part of Idaho. She was the seventh child of a domineering father who believed that school, medical care, and governments were the work of the devil and must be avoided. Tara thus had no formal schooling until she entered college against her father's wishes. But as a result of reading surreptitiously on her own and being fiercely determined, she graduated from Harvard and then got a doctorate from Cambridge. The physical and verbal abuse that her father and an older brother inflicted on her and her siblings was painful to read about, but her courage and her accomplishments were inspiring.

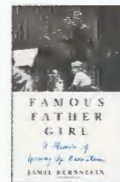


*Undaunted: Surviving Jonestown, Summoning Courage, and Fighting Back* (Little, 2018), is by Jackie Speier,

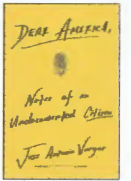
a lawyer and now a congresswoman from California. Several years ago she went on a fact-finding trip to Guyana with the congressman who was then her boss. She suffered near-fatal bullet wounds inflicted by Jonestown's leaders. That left her determined to pursue a life of public service after she recovered, and she has successfully done it.



I was intrigued by *Famous Father Girl: A Memoir of Growing Up Bernstein* (Harper, 2018), by Jamie Bernstein, the daughter of world-famous composer and orchestra conductor Leonard Bernstein. His homosexual promiscuity caused his family great pain at times, but he was a loving father and his fame brought them many rewards. Constantly surrounded by celebrity friends, the family's home life reminded me of the "salons" hosted regularly by famous women of earlier centuries. They were like constant "open house" attended by famous authors, musicians, and thinkers. A cloud-nine wish of mine has always been to host such a salon, but of course it would require having a staff of full-time servants to provide housekeeping and food and drink 24/7, in addition to living in a place where such authors and thinkers lived. Those aren't available to me, but I enjoy experiencing them vicariously through reading.



A book that I've found especially compelling and timely is *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, by journalist Jose Antonio Vargas (Dey Street Books, 2018). He was brought to the U.S. from his native Philippines under a false name at age 12 by a coyote hired by his mother. He thus had no entry documents and is ineligible to become a U.S. citizen, yet this is his home. I believe every citizen needs to know what he tells about our immigration system.



The next four books are by African-Americans. Reading about the feelings that have been triggered

This issue, many years' back issues, a list of back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections*-related information are available free from my website, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* by e-mail, e-mail me at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com) and let me know you want it. I no longer send new issues of *Connections* by U.S. mail. To get paper copies of any of the 1992-2014 back issues, send me \$5 (address on page 1) for each year or any 12 issues that you want, and let me know which ones you want.



I'm a lifelong lay United Methodist 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. Some readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself, from personal funds. For over 25 years, *Connections* has gone to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics that I think Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

for them by the racism and racial segregation they lived in the midst of was often painful to read but also very helpful.



The one I appreciated most was *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Orbis, 2018), by James H. Cone. He died earlier this year after many years as a theology professor at Union Theological Seminary.



Another I found quite eye-opening was *My Brother Moochie: Regaining Dignity in the Midst of Crime, Poverty, and Racism in the American South* (Other Press, 2018), by journalist Isaac J. Bailey.

Also informative was *Heavy: An American Memoir* (Scribner, 2018), which is by Kiese Laymon, a University of Mississippi creative writing professor who grew up in Jackson.



*The Grace of Silence: A Memoir* (Vintage, 2010), is by Michele Norris, a journalist who has been co-host of "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio. In some ways her early life was quite different from the two authors above, but like them she says much that's important for non-African-Americans to hear.

## Concerns about the UMC

Besides being concerned about many current aspects of the U.S. government and society, I'm also very concerned about what I see happening in the United Methodist Church. In my opinion, there's little chance of what I see as urgently needed change happening in it anytime soon or even within my lifetime. Currently the UMC is in a sad state of turmoil. On the surface, it's about the UMC's official position on homosexuality, but it really is about how we interpret the Bible.

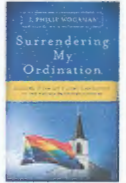


A recent book addressing this situation is *United Methodists Divided: Understanding Our Differences Over Homosexuality* (Global Parish Press, 2018), by Dale McConkey, a UMC pastor and professor of sociology. This easy-to-read book could be especially useful for UMs who aren't yet fully aware of the reasons for the turmoil and the proposals for change.

A book that goes into more depth on the same subject is *Surrendering My Ordination: Standing Up for Gay and Lesbian Inclusivity in The United Methodist Church* (Westminster John Knox, 2018), by J. Philip Wogaman. He is Professor Emeritus at Wesley Theo-

logical Seminary and was senior pastor of Foundry UMC in Washington, DC for many years. I'm an admirer of his, but when I read this book I realized he has many views that I don't share about the UMC.

He's much more devoted than I am to the UMC's institutional structure and official doctrines and traditions. My feelings about the UMC are similar to what James Baldwin once said about the U.S.: "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."



I love the UMC, but for that reason I feel the need to keep pushing it to change. I'd like it to acknowledge, for example, that the institutional authority given to clergy in the UMC, which Wogaman seems to fully support, may not be totally appropriate. I'd also like the UMC to admit that Christianity is not the only religion with the truth, that the Bible's words can't all be taken literally, that Jesus was not uniquely divine, and that God is not a man in the sky. That would mean no longer having worshipers sing and recite statements that claim otherwise.

If we made these changes, we'd have to admit that the statements about homosexual behavior in the Bible were not said by God and that they contradict much of what now seems to have been learned from science. We'd have to eliminate the statements in the UMC *Book of Discipline* that call homosexuality sin and restrict church participation for LGBT people.



We'd also have to admit that the main requirement of being Christian is enacting and promoting the kind of love and justice that Jesus apparently advocated, rather than professing literal belief in doctrines and writings that originated centuries ago but long after Jesus died. As much as I appreciate Phil Wogaman for brave steps he has taken, I wish that he and other UMC leaders with similar prominence would be even braver by pushing for change in the UMC's theological claims as well as in its institutional structure.

## Merry Christmas!

I don't know when I'll write the next *Connections*. It's not likely to be in January or even every month now as it has previously been, but I'll probably still write an issue now and then. For now, I wish for you and your family a merry Christmas and happy and healthy 2019!



*Barbara*