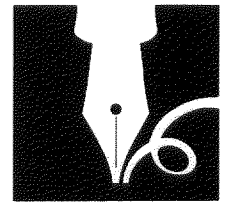


Connections



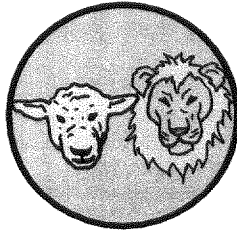
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Searching for unity

At this season of the Christian year we often focus on scriptures that describe what life would be like if everyone obeyed God's will. We understand Jesus to have come to earth as the perfect demonstration of what those scriptures picture. He lived and taught the love and justice that will prevail when God's will is obeyed everywhere.



I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating ...

The wolf and the lamb shall



feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent— its food shall be dust!



They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

—Isaiah 65:17-18, 24-25

Christians call that kind of life the kingdom of God or the reign of God. The Bible describes it in symbolic language. One description of it, in Isaiah, is called the Peaceable Kingdom. Inhabitants of the Peaceable Kingdom don't hurt or destroy each other. Even former enemies live together peacefully, in unity.

A living example

God calls the church to be a peaceable kingdom now, as an exam-

ple of what God wants for the world. God calls us to stop devouring each other, and to live in unity.

Getting the whole world to live that way will obviously be hard because the world doesn't all accept Jesus. What's odd is that living peaceably is so hard in the church, which claims to be following Jesus. We don't even have unity there.

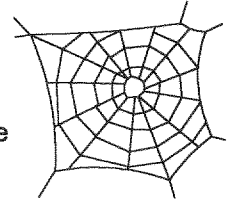
I ask ... on behalf of all those that will believe in me ... that they may all be one.



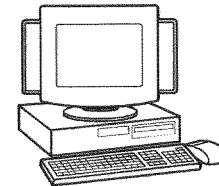
—John 17:20

Connections on the Web

Connections is now available on the Internet! You can find it at <http://www.wisconsinumc.org>, the home page of the Capital District of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The current issue of Connections and some previous issues will be there regularly. I'm very grateful to District Superintendent Chris Bethke, whose idea this was, and Tom D'Alessio, the webmaster who is carrying it out.



Notification by E-mail

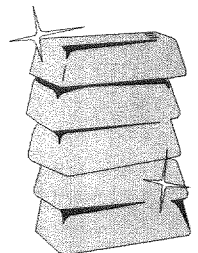


I can't send Connections to you by E-mail because the formatting would be lost. However, you can submit your E-mail address in a box on the Wisconsin Connections page, and you'll be notified by E-mail when a new issue of Connections appears there. Then you can go there and get the new issue of Connections in its original format.

If you'd like to start getting Connections by this method regularly instead of getting it directly from me by snail mail, please let me know and I'll remove your name from my mailing list.

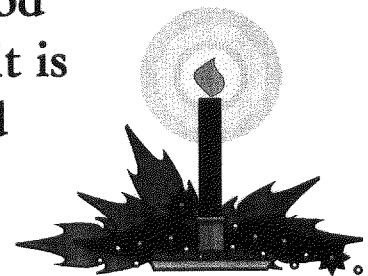
Useful information

By the way, the Wisconsin UMC home page also has a link named "Links, References and Resources" that's a gold mine of all sorts of information. Some of it is UMC related, but it also includes a lot that would be useful even for non-UMC members. I think you'd like it if you're a Web user.



How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

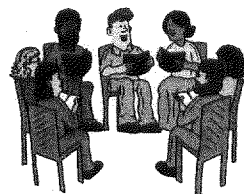
—Psalm 133:1



A big obstacle to achieving unity in the church is that we don't all agree on what unity is. To some of us, unity would require all members to believe the same way (our own way, of course!). To others, unity means permitting a variety of views but not talking about them, in order to avoid the discomfort that open disagreement would cause. To still others, unity would require bringing our differences out into the open and hammering away at them until we reached some kind of agreement or drove out the people whose views were in the minority. To some church members, however, unity means openly acknowledging our differences but staying together anyway because of what we share.



Identifying problems, finding solutions



A group in the United Methodist Church has tried to identify the causes of the disunity that currently threatens the UMC (as revealed especially in disagreements about homosexuality) and the conditions that would have to exist in order to avoid disunity. This group's analysis can help all church members, no matter what denomination they happen to be part of, because many denominations are experiencing similar threats to their unity.



The UMC's General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns brought together a group of UMC leaders that included clergy and laity from both ends of the theological spectrum. They met twice, for several days each time, with a mediator leading them in what was called a "Dialogue on Theological Diversity Within the United Methodist Church."

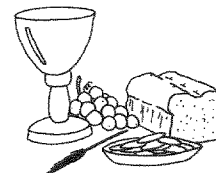
After their meetings they published a document, "In Search of Unity," which is now being discussed throughout the UMC. You can get the complete document at <http://www.gccuic-umc.org/unity.htm> on the Web. Here in *Connections* I'm summarizing and paraphrasing what I see as its main points.

Unity is a gift



"In Search of Unity" reminds us that both the unity of the church and

the diversity within it are given by God through the Holy Spirit. Unity strengthens our ministries, we often find, while disunity puts them at risk. Unity, however, is a challenge to the church as well as a gift. "We often mistake uniformity for unity," the document reminds us, "and we confuse indiscriminate theological pluralism with the diversity of the Spirit's gifts."



Among the factors that have created and sustained unity over the years, the "In Search" document lists worship and sacraments, faith in God, love for the church, determination to seek justice, and some aspects of our organizational structure.

Unity presents challenges

The document discusses three kinds of challenges to the church's unity.

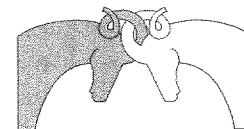
▪ Effects of our innate sinfulness or imperfection.

These are simply the effects of being human. They include our impatience with each other, our tendency to believe rumor and innuendo, and our lack of love and of trust in God and each other. They include our lack of awareness of each other's difficulties, too, and our lack of humility about our own knowledge and wisdom. Our human imperfection also leads us to act selfishly—to use strategies in the church that further our own particular concerns and causes instead of those that would help the church as a whole.



▪ Disagreements that harm the quality of our existence.

These include lack of agreement on what the boundaries of assent and dissent should be. They include lack of trust in official church agencies. Also, we tend to stereotype, misunderstand, and attribute unworthy motives to the church members who disagree with us. These and other factors lead to conflict among various sectors of the church, especially between those we usually label "conservative" and "liberal."



▪ Deeper disagreements that threaten to split our churches.

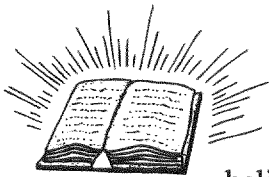
Probably the most influential disagreements are those that come from



having different understandings of the authority of scripture and divine revelation. Disagreements about the boundaries of acceptable opinion within the church also can split it.



Disagreements about boundaries, however, often come from disagreements about scriptural authority. Some Christians apparently feel that certain scriptures should be interpreted literally, applied to all times and cultures, and given more importance than other scriptures. These Christians apparently believe that these particular scriptures present God's total and final message, even though today's meaning of their English translation may differ from their original meaning.



Other Christians, by contrast, believe some Bible verses express only God's message for a particular group at a particular time. These Christians see more authority in the Bible's overall message than in any individual verses. They give higher priority to what the original meaning of the words appears to have been, than to translations that may be more familiar but convey a different meaning. These church members also believe that more of God's will is continually being revealed through the Holy Spirit.

How should we deal with differences?

Some members are willing to allow widely different viewpoints within the church. These members know that isn't easy, but they believe that it's possible and that it bears important witness to the inclusiveness God wants for the church.



Some of these members feel called to work for reform in the church—for what they see as liberating the oppressed and other ways of being faithful to the church's God-given purpose and calling. Other members who are willing to allow diversity, however, prefer simply to aim at mutual respect and to cultivate loyalty to the church while waiting for the Holy Spirit to show a way that all sides can embrace.



Still other church members believe that some points of view can't be allowed to remain within the church because they are mistaken or even

sinful. Some members with this view feel that excluding anyone—even known sinners—from the full life of the church contradicts the gospel, while others feel that knowingly allowing sinful behavior in the church keeps it from being the church.



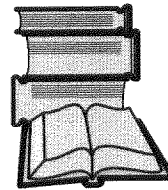
Preserving unity

Although all of the above positions were represented among participants in the UMC's recent Dialogue on Diversity, they joined together in advocating these steps toward unity.

- Praying and fasting persistently
- Expressing compassion through Christ-like dialogue, recognizing that we are held together by God and not by ourselves.



- Exploring our tradition for help in understanding and resolving the complex issues related to unity.
- Looking at church history to see the causes and effects of splits or the threat of splits that have happened in the church in earlier years, especially those based on disagreements about including racial ethnic groups and women.



- Thinking rigorously
- Practicing faith, hope, and love.



Guidelines for civility

The UMC Dialogue participants recommended some "Guidelines for Civility in the UMC." Using them could benefit other Christian groups too.

- Address ideas without personally attacking the people who hold them.
- Be careful when claiming to describe the views of people we disagree with.
- Hear others' stories and share our own, in order to understand the experiences that have led each of us to arrive at our views.
- Listen patiently before responding.
- Don't use inflammatory words needlessly, or in other ways let expressions of personal offense at others' views prevent dialogue.





▪ Recognize that our own positions may turn out to be wrong and therefore need changing.

▪ Be patient with the process of change in others.

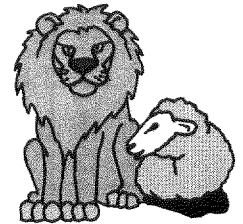
▪ Use facilitators and mediators when doing so can help communication.

▪ Above all, remember that people are ultimately defined by their relationship with God, not by the flaws we see or think we see in their views and actions.



How different our churches would be if all of us followed these guidelines—if we didn't act like devouring lions and wolves! In fact, how different the world could be.

This Advent season is an ideal time to increase our efforts to behave in ways that can move both the church and the world toward being the peaceable kingdoms that God evidently wants them to be.



Barbara



Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, good will among people!”

—Luke 2:13-14



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