

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## Afraid of what we'll see?

A recent newspaper article reminded me that this year marks the 400th anniversary of Galileo's turning his first crude telescope to the heavens. What he saw contradicted thousands of years of traditional belief. He found that the moon was neither smooth nor unchanging and that the earth was not the center of everything.



The article I read mentioned that many of Galileo's contemporaries fiercely resisted his findings. "Some refused to look through the telescope for fear of what they would see. The pope summoned Galileo to Rome, where an inquisition found him



'vehemently suspect of heresy.' He lived the rest of his life under house arrest." And amazingly, not until the 1990s did the Catholic Church finally admit officially that Galileo was right.

## Leaders acting like Galileo's pope

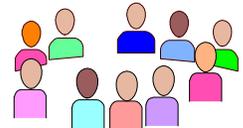
Most of us now see how ridiculous it was for Galileo's contemporaries to refuse to look through the telescope, yet many Christians today are doing essentially the same thing by refusing to look at the findings of today's researchers. Unfortunately that has happened recently in a United Methodist congregation in central Texas. And like Galileo's pope, instead of standing up to the "we refuse to look" members, this congregation's pastor and other leaders have capitulated to those members, trying to keep them from leaving the church and stem the controversy. This helps churchgoers to keep their blinders on, when we instead need to be encouraging them to look outside their blinders.



## Abundant life or spiritual euthanasia?

A wise observation by Sister Joan Chittister—

"I heard of a woman who, finding herself drifting toward the middle of a dangerously feminist conversation, stopped the group in the midst of the process. 'I don't want to hear any more about any of this,' she said, 'because if I did, I would have to change my life.' A wise woman. It is always so much easier to assuage pain than to cure it, so much easier to accept a thing than to question it.



"The ability—the commitment—to question, to examine every aspect of the human journey, is the only form of fidelity worth the price of admission to this sojourn called life. ... It is the questions

we ask that move us from stage to stage of growing, that take us from level to level of our thoughts, however simple the questions may seem. ...

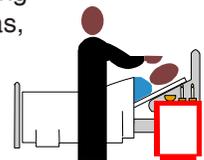


"'Everything that deceives,' Plato said, 'can be said to enchant.' I have been enchanted by far too many falsehoods in life. I would rather go on living the struggle than go comatose in the face of answers that are not true, were never true, cannot possibly be true. Most of all, I have indeed found that the process of examining them has made my life worthwhile."

—from "Afterword: The Power of Questions to Propel: A Retrospective," in Mary Hembrow Snyder, ed., *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001)

In the church, I often see that kind of untruthful answers being presented as if they were truths. I also see many people who seem to have gone comatose in the face of those answers. Even worse, I see many who seem determined to remain comatose.

Worst of all, instead of helping to bring comatose people out of their comas, I too often see the church actively helping them to stay comatose or even to die spiritually. That's spiritual euthanasia, and it's especially disturbing to see happening in an institution that claims to be following one who said he came to bring life.



What some members of this congregation are refusing to look at is the work of some historical-Jesus scholars, members of a group called the Jesus Seminar. (If you're not familiar with it, see [www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org).) They do research about New Testament writings and similar documents, and about the settings in which Jesus lived, the early church developed, and these writings were written.



### Scholars who want their work known

From their research, Jesus Seminar members draw tentative conclusions and make educated guesses about how to interpret parts of the New Testament. They try to determine what familiar Christian concepts apparently meant to New Testament writers and other people in the ancient world, and thus how we should interpret those concepts now. These scholars also try to figure out which parts of the New Testament gospels seem most likely to be actual quotes from Jesus, as distinguished from being interpretations made by the gospels' authors, all of whom wrote long after Jesus's death.



The Jesus Seminar members have recognized the importance of disseminating such findings and speculations not only to churchgoers but also to the general public, in order to promote a more accurate picture of the earthly Jesus, the contents of the New Testament, and therefore of Christianity. For this reason, Seminar members often write books in non-academic language and speak to non-academic audiences, in addition to speaking with fellow scholars. Also, the Seminar sometimes uses attention-getting methods of publicizing its work. The best known of these methods has been voting with colored tokens during its meetings, with each color representing a different probability of a saying's having been spoken by Jesus.

Sounds like Jesus! Probably not Maybe That's Jesus!

As a result, some other scholars have not taken Seminar members' statements as seriously as those of scholars who speak only within academic circles. Some other scholars question the value of Seminar members' views because of how little information about the time of Jesus seems to be available. But

like all other scholars' work, Seminar members' work draws both agreement and disagreement.

### Galileo's attackers are still with us

The fiercest and most vocal critics of the Seminar are Christians who base their faith only on a few isolated Bible passages and ancient church doctrines, creeds, and religious terms that they interpret literally. These Christians assume that every word in their Bibles came straight from God and that every gospel statement attributed to Jesus was actually said by him. They are today's version of the people who refused to look through Galileo's telescope. They're trying to keep Christian scholars and other thinking Christians from being heard, when these thinkers actually need to be heard by the church and also by outsiders.



Unfortunately, fearful church leaders and passive followers often fail to stand up to this "I refuse to look" group. Trying to keep members comfortable and preserve an appearance of unity, hoping to keep church attendance and finances from declining, leaders fail to communicate today's best thinking within the church. As a result, too few churchgoers realize



how the Bible developed, what kind of setting Jesus lived in, how much diversity the early church included, and what issues apparently had top priority for Jesus.

### A good idea that triggered turmoil

Such a failure happened in First United Methodist Church of Georgetown, Texas, recently when leaders reneged on hosting a presentation by Jesus Seminar members. It's one of the programs the Seminar calls "Jesus Seminar on the Road" (JSOR).

The idea of bringing a JSOR program arose in an informal, unofficial women's book-discussion group I'm in, which has existed for several years. It is open to any woman who shares the group's interests and is willing to do the reading and attend the meetings. Most members belong to FUMC-Georgetown, but like me, a few are members of other central Texas churches.

Most of the books we read together focus on the spiritual journey or on aspects of religious beliefs and history—essentially the same kinds of books I often write about



in *Connections*. Our reading has included several books by Jesus Seminar members, all of which we have found immensely helpful for our spiritual growth. Group members recently began wondering, therefore, about bringing a JSOR to our area. Several book-group members and like-minded friends



formed a committee to investigate requirements and then to start making arrangements.

FUMC members on the committee presented the idea to their pastor, who with his program team agreed that the JSOR program could take place at FUMC, at no cost to FUMC. He suggested that the committee enlist other area churches as supporters. Committee members have now enlisted nearly twenty churches and seminaries, about a third of which are United Methodist. They are supporting the event by publicizing it to their members.

### Outrageous claims by church members

When FUMC members learned that their church was the host, however, some became irate. The pastor and committee members started getting angry complaints based on false claims about the Jesus Seminar. “Atheists are being brought into our sacred space!” one FUMC member raged. “How can we sponsor this blasphemy in our sanctuary!”



“I am amazed that any real Christian would buy one of their ignorant books!” one ranted. Preposterous. World-class scholars, ignorant? No. And Seminar members are certainly not atheists or blasphemers.

“Their research has been discredited by United Methodists worldwide,” another FUMC member claimed. Some angry members said they had been told that Jesus Seminar research was banned at all

United Methodist seminaries. But that claim is clearly false. It doesn't even reflect the way in which reputable seminaries and other institutions of higher learning function. Their professors have a variety of views. They constantly read and analyze the work of other scholars and express disagreement with some, but they don't ban particular scholars' work. Yet some FUMC members are citing this false claim as a reason for not wanting FUMC to host the Jesus Seminar on the Road. And by failing to reject and publicly refute all these false claims, church leaders have in effect let the makers of the claims control the church.



### No open hearts, minds, or doors here

Because of irate members' threats to leave and take their money with them if the JSOR event happened at FUMC, its pastor has now withdrawn the commitment to host the program. It has been moved to a nearby Presbyterian church whose pastor and members are eager to host it. So much for the UMC's motto: “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.”

I'm reporting this incident because the kind of closed-mindedness it reflects is nowhere near unique to this one congregation, and because I believe we need to recognize that it's not and to combat it. We need to help up-to-date information and diverse interpretations to be disseminated widely in the church, rather than letting them be stifled.

*Connections* readers sometimes tell me, “My church isn't like this,” or “I've been in many churches in several states, and they aren't like this.” But I see churches in which such things *are* happening, and I hear from many church



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, 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. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

members who assure me that they are happening where they live. Such things may happen most often in the southern U.S.—the “Bible Belt”—but they’re definitely not limited to this area.



Because such things are happening, Christians need to know about them and to stop being passive, silent, and uninformed about them. Even if they’re not happening where you are, I believe you still need to help combat them. I believe that’s what “love your neighbor as yourself” means: “When you see injustice happening, oppose it just as you would want others to oppose it if you yourself were its victim.”

If we want to help transform the world by promoting “the way” of Jesus, we can’t keep caving in to the kind of tactics I’ve described here. We can’t keep being like Galileo’s opponents by refusing to look through today’s telescopes. Instead, we need to find out what today’s best thinkers have learned about the Bible, Christian history, and Jesus and his world, and about how Christian principles relate to today’s most important issues. We also need to discuss these topics openly and constantly in our churches. I hope you’ll help this to happen more often.



*Barbara*



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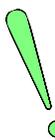
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## Afraid of what we'll see?

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### Don't-miss programs in Texas and elsewhere!



If you live in central Texas, I hope you'll attend the Jesus Seminar on the Road program that I describe in this issue. It promises to be fascinating, and your visible support for this progressive expression of Christianity is especially needed in this area. The JSOR is Friday night and Saturday, April 3-4. Now that FUMC-Georgetown has reneged on hosting it, it will be at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, at 14311 Wells Port Drive in north Austin. That's just west of I-35 exit 247, across I-35 from Pflugerville. Presenters are Seminar members Thomas Sheehan and Roy W. Hoover. The topic of their lectures and workshops is “Jesus in the First and Twenty-first Centuries.” You can register and get full information at [www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org). Register by March 13 for the best price. On that web site you can also find out about JSOR presentations at several other places throughout the U.S. in coming months

Another don't-miss opportunity in Texas this spring will be a seminar presented by the Dykes Foundation. Featured speakers will be Joan Chittister and Richard Rohr. Their topic will be “The Human Spirit and the Times We Live In.” This seminar will be in Houston on April 29-30 and in San Antonio May 1-2. To register and get complete schedules and other details, see [www.faithandreason.org](http://www.faithandreason.org) or phone (800) 882-7424. Cost is only \$35 per person for the Houston event, and optional for San Antonio!

