

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Making what's important interesting

In describing his aim as editor of *U.S. News and World Report* magazine, James Fallows has recently been quoted as saying, "What we're trying to do is to make what's important interesting."



I believe our churches need to aim at that, too. We have important news to tell, but in order to get a hearing for it, we must make it interesting to the people we want it to reach.

We have good news to report

"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."

—Mark 16:15

Our good news is the salvation that God offers through Jesus Christ. We claim to believe that news is vitally important. However, we often fail to communicate it in ways that make it interesting.

In fact, we often express it in ways that actually hide its importance. Sometimes we even claim that saying it or singing it in the ways that are most likely to interest people is wrong.



New ways of communicating it can help

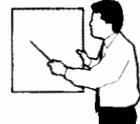
A *Connections* reader recently sent me a copy of a brochure that a church had mailed to all residents of his area. "Ever wonder where your road is leading? Find some direction at church," it said. "Join with some fellow travelers this week at _____ Church. If you haven't darkened the door of a church since who knows when, check us out. Come and visit a church where you can

- understand relevant messages
- wear whatever you want

Mr. and Mrs. Williams
657 Hillside Street
City of Mystery
Evangelical

Making preaching interesting

Talking with a pastor friend recently, I expressed my feeling that for many church members the quality of the pastor's preaching is the number-one factor in whether these members attend worship services regularly. It seems to be a big factor, too, when people choose which congregation to join. Pastoral care is probably as important or at least a close second, and the availability of quality programs for children and youth is important, especially for churchgoers who are parents. But preaching seems to have a big influence on all members' attendance, even if other factors have been more important in their choice of which congregation to join.



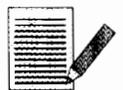
"That's discouraging," said the pastor I was talking with, "because in seminary I had only one three-semester-hour course in preaching, and in it each of us preached only two or three sermons. We had to spend much more time learning skills that seem to matter much less to church members and prospective members."

Lay people's reactions matter most

I recently heard a beginning pastor say that she knew her preaching needed improvement. She was planning to get some clergy colleagues to listen to some of her sermons and advise her about how to improve. I found that surprising, because clergy aren't the main audience for sermons. Lay people are. Their reactions to a pastor's sermons are the reactions that really count.

I heard a lay person say, about her pastor whose preaching leaves much to be desired, "I could help him if he would let me, but he won't." That's sad. She has many skills that would help him express himself more effectively. Many other congregations also have such members. They may be teachers of speech, drama, or English. They may be professional speakers or writers who could help with composition or delivery.

Some pastors use sermon-evaluation forms to get lay members' views, and that can help. At the very least it lets members know that their opinions matter, and that in itself is worthwhile.



Preaching skill may need higher priority than pastors realize. It is vital in making what is important interesting.

- leave your billfold at home
- hear some great music
- expect surprises every week
- discover how much you matter to God."

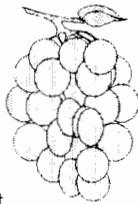


No-cost no-stress, or sour grapes?

The layman who sent me this brochure was turned off by what he considered its portrayal of church participation as a no-cost, no-stress activity. He finds this presentation inappropriate for the faith whose Jesus gave everything for each of us.

This layman also sent me the comments of some pastors whose reactions were similar. One wrote, "It's called 'cheap grace' and I suspect that Bonhoeffer [the German Christian whom the Nazis killed in 1945 for his beliefs] would strongly object." This pastor goes on to say, "It's no wonder that people flock to that church. Something for nothing is a popular sales tactic."

I doubt that this criticism is justified. I'm afraid it's merely sour grapes—claiming that what we haven't been able to get isn't worth having. Certainly the message "leave your billfold at home" is misleading, but I don't believe the others are. They don't mention any cost in being a Christian, and there certainly is a cost, but starting with a full description of the cost is rarely the best way to attract anyone to anything. Many of us might have said no to jobs, moves, marriages, children, and other important steps in our lives if all the costs had been described to us in advance. Seeing the potential benefits first is a lot more persuasive.



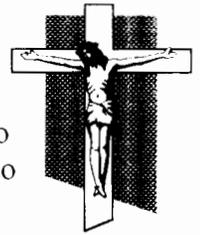
"Come and die" isn't the way to start

None of the people we're trying to reach with the gospel today have the same background of experience that Bonhoeffer had. They don't live in the same world he lived in, either. Our churches need to aim at developing the strong faith that Bonhoeffer had, but I don't think we can expect someone with little or no Christian experience to become an instant Bonhoeffer.



I don't think many people in the U.S. today would respond to a church ad that said, as

Bonhoeffer did, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," even though that statement is true.



Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
—Matthew 10:39

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
—John 12:24

Willingness to die, it seems to me, usually comes when someone is further along in the Christian journey than most of today's churchgoers and prospective churchgoers are.

It seems to me that instead of criticizing churches who use innovative methods, we need to be using some ourselves. We need to be saying some of what was in the brochure the *Connections* reader sent me.

Clothing isn't what really matters

Wearing a certain kind of clothing is not really a requirement for being a Christian, so "wear whatever you want" is probably a more faithful and important message than the unspoken but powerful "wear a coat and tie" message that newcomers often get from churches.



What's wrong with making our churches no-stress in ways like this? If dressing up causes some people stress, it's a stress that serves no purpose and has nothing to do with being a Christian. Christianity has real costs and requires real sacrifices, but they don't include wearing any one kind of clothes.

Expecting surprises isn't a bad thing

I believe that we urgently need to give the message "expect surprises every week." We need to deliver on it, too. Experiencing God's presence is exciting and often surprising, but too often our worship says, "The same old things are all you can expect to find here."



"Discover how much you matter to God" is an important message, too, and it often doesn't get delivered in a recognizable way in our worship services and other activities.



We're talking about evangelism



Many church members talk a lot about the need for evangelism—proclaiming the gospel in ways aimed at leading new people to Jesus Christ and into the church. It seems, however, that few mainline church members are very good at evangelism or very willing to do it.

To remedy this, some members want to have “revivals”—special series of worship services with imported speakers and other features that will create excitement, remind members of their commitment to Jesus Christ and to the church, and bring in new people. Other members advocate programs for *enlisting and training members to go out and visit non-members, inviting them to church.*

Characteristics that make a difference



It seems to me that certain characteristics of our worship services and other regular church activities do much more than these special promotional events, to make the gospel seem important and interesting to non-churchgoers. These characteristics make us willing and able to speak convincingly about our faith and our church to the people we're with daily at school, work, home, and social events. These features also need to be obvious to newcomers who visit our worship services.

▪ Attenders feel good about attending

Above all, I believe that for a congregation to attract new people, current attenders must feel real enthusiasm about what they find when they attend Sunday-morning worship. If attending is a chore for them, they aren't likely to recommend it to anyone. If what happens Sunday after Sunday doesn't even appeal to members, it's not likely to appeal to outsiders.



Maybe worship shouldn't be a tool for evangelizing, but I believe that in our churches' current state, it is. If we import inspiring speakers and musicians to lead a revival, but we offer only blah sermons, music, and liturgy at our regular services, people may be attracted by the revival but they won't be likely to keep coming when it's over.



My husband, who has spent much of his life in the animal-feed business, tells a story that

illustrates this problem. A sales manager was trying to remedy his company's decline in dog-food sales. At the monthly sales meeting he asked the salesmen, “Who has the most nutritious dog food in the industry?” “We do!,” they chorused. “Who has the lowest prices?” he asked next, and again came the required reply, “We do!” “Who has the best advertising program?” “We do!” “Then why aren't we selling more dog food?” Finally a brave salesman dared to answer—“The dogs won't eat it.”



For churches, too, if what we're offering doesn't appeal to the people we're offering it to, even the best efforts to promote it won't help.

▪ Members share their faith stories

Another essential in reaching new people, I believe, is for our congregation members to tell how their faith makes a real difference in their lives.

Willingness to do this comes partly from practice, and partly from hearing it done. We need to hear it done by our pastors, but we also need to hear it done by lay people whom both members and newcomers see as people like themselves.



In a recent survey, most responders reported having had experiences of God that were valuable to them, but only a few had ever been asked at church about these experiences. In our churches we need to provide lots of non-threatening opportunities for that to happen. It is happening in small groups such as Disciple Bible Study and the Walk to Emmaus, but it needs to happen also in the church gatherings that non-members are more likely to be part of.



Personal stories used to be called “testimony” and they were often part of worship. Evidently they often amounted to the same people repeatedly telling the same stories, which often were wordy accounts of what happened fifty years ago. We don't need to revive that method, but there are better ones. By enlisting people in advance, and if necessary helping them get their stories organized and expressed concisely, worship leaders can prevent the rambling, ancient-history tales that will drive hearers away rather than inspiring them.

When we hear a church member tell about their faith or a religious experience, we need to enlist that person to retell it in a worship service or even in an Administrative Board or Finance Committee meeting. That could make a big difference in our meetings and in our ministries!



The stories don't need to be about momentous events like Moses' seeing a burning bush. We need to hear about that kind if they happen among us, of course, but we also need to hear about the satisfaction of being a Sunday School teacher, a youth counselor, a food-bank helper, or a nursing home

visitor. These are ways in which church members often see God at work, and in which others could also see God in action.



Telling our personal faith stories can help make what's important interesting to others. We need to be doing more of that.

Barbara



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Making what's important interesting

Telling our faith stories in print

Visiting the historic building of a church whose formal worship style didn't lend itself to including members' faith stories, I saw a good way of telling them. A rack in the entryway contained several leaflets labeled "Snapshots of God: Brief Witnesses by Members of St. Michael's Church." Each was 1/3 of an 8 1/2" x 11" sheet, and they included various colors.



The brief stories told of recognizing Jesus' reality while looking at the ocean, of finding unexpected help for a flat tire, of helping someone financially and seeing surprising results, of praying with a grandchild. Some included Bible verses and one-or-two-sentence prayers. All were in everyday conversational language. To members and visitors alike, these leaflets gave an important message in an interesting way. How about trying it?

If you've just discovered *Connections*

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want any of the 4 1/2 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write to the address above, phone 817-773-2625, e-mail BCWendland@aol.com, or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.