

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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PCCS—action close to home

Recently I've been working on a new connection. A group of friends and I share a vision of a new way to help people help each other in our own region. We are starting an informal network called the Progressive Christian Center of the South (PCCS). Its mission will be



- to promote constructive, self-critical thinking about biblical and theological traditions
- to encourage individuals and small groups in the church to resist top-down, narrow, self-serving interpretations of Christianity
- to raise awareness about systemic injustice
- to engage in grass-roots justice efforts, especially in communities across the South.

Who and why?

Who are our core planners so far? David and Deborah Dykes of Mississippi work through a nonprofit foundation to offer seminars and videos by famous Christian scholars and activists; I wrote about their story in the [October 2008 Connections](#). Joerg Rieger is an author and SMU theology professor. He is quite active in social-justice work in the Dallas area, as is theologian David Brockman. My husband, daughter, and I, all lifelong lay Methodists, are trustees of a small family foundation.

We all grew up in the church and have spent most of our lives actively supporting it. We all want to follow the example of Jesus and help the church follow it. But because we see so many local congregations and church denominations so resistant to needed change, we want to help more people get involved in progressive education and community action, right now, within the church and outside of it.



Why the South?

PCCS will welcome all progressives but will focus especially on the South, starting in Texas and then spreading farther. Why? Partly because that's where we are, but also because of a sad irony. Similar problems obviously exist all across America—yet somehow, the gap between words and deeds is unusually visible in the South. With our above-average churchgoing and Bible reading, why?



Injustice, misinformation, exclusion

Like many of my readers, when I look at the South, I see a cruel parody of justice. Our prisons burst at the seams while social and economic inequality grows. Christians sing sweet songs about heaven and Jesus, but their idol is often uncritical patriotism. Too many vote for leaders who glorify war and discourage access to health care, education, and employment.

In the South, I also see a flood of misinformation. Bible studies and sermons reject ideas from scholars and scientists. Children are urged to pray in school but aren't taught basic facts about the Bible and the church. Christianity is worshiped with no mention of its own sins or the virtues it shares with other faiths.

When I look at the South, I see more racism, sexism, and heterosexism inside churches than outside. Congregations invest in buildings and programs but ignore children from across the tracks. Women are told to be dependent and submissive; God is praised as male. Witch hunts target members and clergy.

And in the South, I see minority views scorned or stifled. Self-proclaimed church "moderates" preach unity and inclusion, yet reject uncomfortable truths outright. As one southern friend observes, "Where we live, you can't stick your neck out without someone chopping it off."



If not us, who? If not now, when?

We can't wait for anyone else to do it for us. If anyone is going to work for justice and compassion, it will be those of us who see the greatest need. Through PCCS, we hope to encourage all progressives to come out of the shadows, speak up, and take action.

What is progressive Christianity?



My journey has led me to see five features that not only set progressive Christianity apart from other Christian interpretations, but are, I believe, the core of all true religion.

- **Active, lifelong searching.** Continuing throughout life to seek information and insight about the divine; about the natural world; about oneself and other human beings; and about one's own and other religions, their history, sacred texts, and practices.

- **Continually reevaluating and revising one's own beliefs.** Deliberately comparing traditional concepts with what the world's best-informed, most perceptive, most compassionate, and most just thinkers have discovered about God, Jesus, the Bible, human beings, and the universe. Telling one's own story and listening to the stories of others; Questioning and challenging one's own biases and blind spots, with help from others.



- **Reflecting on what difference centuries-old creeds and doctrines might make today, instead of making their longevity all-important.** Valuing the truths discovered in the past, while also recognizing their shortcomings. Remembering doctrines and creeds for their roles in history, but professing them only if they point us to what really matters in Christian faith. Honoring ancestors' efforts for their worthwhile intentions and accomplishments, but discontinuing the practices that are now seen as unjust or as no longer effective.

- **Focusing on good for others, not only for oneself.** Working to make the reign of God a reality in earthly life for all, not merely seeking personal salvation or an ideal state after death. Expanding one's vision beyond the self, beyond the family, beyond the local community, beyond the nation. Learning to accept defeat, suffering, and sadness, yet trying to lessen them for others.



- **Actively practicing and promoting compassion (love) and justice.** Following the example of Jesus. Generously giving one's time and talents; recognizing how institutions promote injustice; speaking out against wrongs and actively working to right them. Honoring and supporting all people who practice compassion and justice.

Of course, I am only one progressive Christian; others will undoubtedly give different answers. As PCCS gets underway, we will be sharing more perspectives and reactions on a new website, www.pccsouth.org. In the next few months, plan to check back there to see what's new and add your own ideas and comments.

What will PCCS do?



- √ **Education.** Through PCCS, we hope to help publicize today's best theological thinking and most reliable findings about Christian history and the origin and development of the Bible. We want to promote open discussion of how Christian principles apply to local and world issues. To encourage learning and dialogue, we plan to present public events and develop educational materials for use within and beyond the church.

- √ **Community and communication.** PCCS aims to help progressives find each other, exchange ideas, stimulate each other's thinking, and support each other's efforts. We want to encourage progressive people to speak up in their churches and communities, to be the voice of the Spirit in today's world.

As part of this effort, I will continue *Connections*, and PCCS will offer new opportunities through the Internet and other media, as well as local and regional retreats and study groups for people to meet and share in person. Acknowledging that Christianity is not the only route to the sacred, we will also welcome dialogue and cooperation with non-Christians.



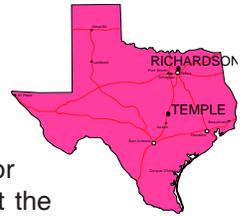
- √ **Academic research and teaching.** PCCS will seek to increase practical support for progressive educators and students, especially those in Christian seminaries. It will serve as a hub for active research as well as for the exchange of ideas and information, and it will encourage outreach from academic settings to lay people and to the wider world.



- √ **Justice activism.** PCCS will promote hands-on, grass-roots efforts to combat injustice, especially through groups that actively work for economic, racial, and gender-related justice in communities in the South.

Exciting opportunities in Texas—October 23-25

If you live in or near Texas, I hope you'll attend one or both of two new FAITHANDREASON seminars this fall featuring John Dominic Crossan and Joerg Rieger. The first seminar will be at First United Methodist Church in **Richardson**, just north of Dallas, 7–9 PM Friday and 8:45 AM–3:30 PM Saturday, **October 23-24**. Registration is \$45 including a box lunch, or \$35 for the seminar alone. The second will be in **Temple**, between Austin and Waco, at the Cultural Activities Center, 2:30–7:30 PM Sunday, **October 25**. Its \$35 registration includes a box supper.



Meet progressive-minded people and hear scholars known around the world

John Dominic Crossan is one of the world's leading historical-Jesus scholars. His provocative work has captured the imagination of traditional churchgoers and secular audiences alike through groundbreaking books and articles; hundreds of radio and TV appearances; insightful teaching in video series such as the *Living the Questions* courses; and lectures to both lay and scholarly audiences throughout the U.S. and in numerous other countries. A lifelong Roman Catholic, originally from Ireland, and a former priest, Dr. Crossan taught on the Religious Studies faculty of DePaul University in Chicago for over 25 years and remains Professor Emeritus there. For many years, he co-chaired a group of eminent American scholars who research the oldest known Christian scriptures and discuss what careful historical reading implies for modern faith and practice. Five of his 23 books have been national religious best-sellers. His latest book is *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome Then and Now*.

Writer and theologian **Joerg Rieger**, a United Methodist clergyman and a native of Germany, is a highly respected international scholar. Based in Dallas, he has also worked and taught in Mexico, South America, Europe, and Africa. For well over two decades his writing has addressed key issues of theology and public life, especially the relation of theology to politics and economics, from the local to the national and world stage. With a deep personal commitment to helping students and laypeople expand their horizons and make a practical difference in the world, he is actively involved in grass-roots justice efforts in the Dallas area. Already known as a cutting-edge scholar, a prolific author of books including the recent *Christ and Empire*, and an inspiring teacher at SMU's Perkins School of Theology, he was recently named the Wendland-Cook Professor of Constructive Theology, a new endowed chair at Perkins. His next book, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, is due out in October. With this seminar, Dr. Rieger moves into the realm of public events at which laypeople, students, and clergy meet top scholars to discuss what Christian theology really means for us all in today's world.

Register now—don't miss these unique events!

Both Texas seminars will feature Dr. Crossan and Dr. Rieger in short talks, dialogue with each other, and responses to questions from the audience. Their books will be available for purchase. To help Texas-area progressives and other interested people get to know each other, seminar participants will also have the opportunity to share mealtime discussion in small groups. The Progressive Christian Center of the South will co-sponsor the events, along with SMU's Perkins School of Theology, the D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation, the Joe B. and Louise P. Cook Foundation, and local groups in each area. Scholarship assistance is available for those with financial need.

I'll look forward to seeing you there! To get details and to reserve your place, please visit www.faithandreason.org, phone 1-800-882-7424, or mail your check with the blank on page 4. Even if you can't attend either seminar, I hope you'll watch for more on videos, study materials, discussions, or projects that may grow out of these two events.

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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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.

PCCS welcomes you

As PCCS begins to grow, we will be counting on participation, ideas, and support from many more people with an interest in progressive issues—lay and clergy, students and professors, churchgoers and what some progressives have called “the spiritually homeless” or “church alumni/ae.” Several of you have already expressed an interest. I hope many more of you will join us along the way.



If you’re in the South and can participate actively, or even if you’re not in the region but would like to connect with this effort, please plan to visit the new PCCS

web site at www.pccsouth.org. As the site expands, you’ll be able to read comments by progressive thinkers, get materials and ideas for study and discussion, join the conversation online, sign up for e-mail or snail mail, and find more information about events and progressive groups in your area. I’ll hope to see you there soon.

Barbara

If you live in or near Texas, or if you’re on my e-mail *Connections* list and I don’t know where you live, you’ll soon receive from me a mailing containing the schedule, topics, and other details about the October Crossan-Rieger seminars.



Connections

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PCCS—action close to home

September 2009

To register for one or both of the October Crossan-Rieger seminars in Texas, go to www.faithandreason.org or fill out this blank and mail it with your check to



D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation, 200 S. Lamar St. Suite 130-S, Jackson MS 39201

- Richardson - 7-9 PM Fri. & 8:45AM-3:30PM Sat., Oct. 23-24 - First United Methodist Church, 503 N. Central Expressway
Enclose check payable to D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation - \$45 to include box lunch or \$35 for seminar only
- Temple - 2:30-7:30 PM Sunday, Oct. 25 - Cultural Activities Center, 3011 N. 3rd St. (I-35 exit 303 to east access road)
Enclose \$35 check payable to D. L. Dykes Jr. Foundation, for seminar with box supper included

Name (please print) _____

U. S. Mail address _____

E-mail address _____