

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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How can we protest effectively?

As I write, protest is in the news. Huge crowds have demonstrated for democracy and human rights in Africa and the Middle East, many facing down violent opposition from cruel regimes. State employees are protesting for labor rights in Wisconsin; rallies in other states are supporting or opposing them.



What makes some of these protests effective in bringing about real change? Can other protests be worthwhile even if they fail in the short term? Above all, what practical lessons can we apply to protest inside and outside the church?

A brave protest by retired bishops

Within the past month, 36 retired United Methodist bishops issued a protest statement bravely expressing their disagreement with the United Methodist Church's official position on homosexuality. The number of dissenting bishops may have grown by the time you read this. However, the president of the UMC Council of Bishops, which includes the 69 active bishops plus all 85 retired bishops, issued a response reaffirming the bishops' obligation to uphold the official position: "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." Both statements are online at www.umc.org.

Most UMs probably aren't even aware of these statements, but the retired bishops' protest represents a step forward for the church, where all too many clergy have kept silent for too long. Even if this protest causes no visible change in the short term, it raises important questions, and not just for UMs.

Stay or leave, but work for better results

If we believe that an official policy of our denomination contradicts the teaching and example of Jesus, should we support it by staying in the church?

When even mild protest goes nowhere

An 83-year-old's response to last month's *Connections* confirmed the struggle that many older Christians face when their faith keeps maturing but their churches are stuck at kindergarten level. Her pastor has a PhD, she reports, but nothing in his sermons ever challenges her. He hasn't led any class or study in the three years he's been there, and she finds no other opportunity to share what she's reading and thinking. "I would go elsewhere," she says, "except that I live in a very small town and have invested over 60 years in this congregation."



Had she told him, I asked, that she felt starved for opportunities to discuss beliefs and issues, and that she would like his help in doing that in the church? Her answer saddened me: "After he referred to Leslie Weatherhead's book *The Will of God* in a sermon, I tried to talk to him about it. But he merely said, 'You have studied that more than I have.'"

Niceness doesn't excuse inaction

Another reader, about to turn 80, says she had to pretend to believe many things for years because she was married to a pastor. Now widowed, she finally feels free of pretense, but sad because she has so little time left to feed her intellectual curiosity. "Occasionally I try out on my pastors some information or ideas," she writes. "But I get only evasive courtesy, or most likely, no acknowledgment at all." When she e-mailed a recent pastor, he didn't even answer. "He is in line for bigger appointments," she recognizes, and "there was no way he was going to endanger his position by encouraging anything controversial."



A disappointed younger reader writes, "My pastor is past retirement age. He's a kind guy and big on social justice; yet he preaches the 'party line' stuff of atonement, Santa Claus God and all the rest. I stopped attending worship years ago and he knows why."



Unfortunately, I hear such accounts often. These pastors and churches may never grow unless our protests nudge them forward. How can we provide the necessary nudges?

If we stay, how much can we protest while still participating? If we leave, how can we still protest effectively, rather than just abandoning the church to regressive views?



What can we do to get better results?

■ Try to work within the system

Most church members probably don't even know all their denomination's official rules and doctrines. So the first step for concerned members may simply be to find out what official church policies are, and what steps are required to change them.

Like other UMC rules and policies, the UMC's position on homosexuality is determined by its *Book of Discipline*. Its content can be changed only by a vote of General Conference, the UMC's top governing body, which meets every four years and will meet next in 2012. Voters will be lay and clergy delegates elected later this year throughout the worldwide UMC. Neither active nor retired bishops can vote; they can only make recommendations. So although the 36 retired UMC bishops have made an admirable effort within the system, they can't directly change church policy.



■ Use biblical and historical context

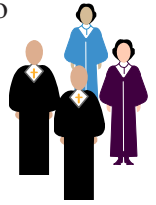
But they, and we, can at least ask questions openly. For instance, why should homosexuality be considered worse than planting two different grains, wearing two different fabrics, or playing football, all of which Bible verses forbid? We can also nudge members to compare the homosexuality issue to other injustices that the church officially failed to oppose for years—slavery, racial segregation, and denial of women's rights. How would these injustices have been stopped, if some courageous clergy and church members had not been willing to speak out against the majority and against official policy?

We must openly question other justice issues, too. Would Jesus treat people as criminals for crossing borders to find work to feed their family? Does the Bible teach that healthier people deserve more affordable medical care, or that richer people deserve better education? Where are the voices of churches and pastors on these current issues?



■ Find strength in numbers

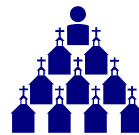
Many clergy see the need for change in church and social policies, but too often they merely commiserate privately with like-minded colleagues instead of organizing those colleagues to resist the policies or vote for change. Acting as a group is more likely to be effective. It could also lessen any penalty that might otherwise be inflicted on individual nonconforming pastors.



■ Publicize personal, emotional stories

How could each of us who has come to see the need for change do more to make our own stories and feelings known? How can we also make known personal stories of people more directly affected by injustice? If we're protesting discrimination against LGBT people, immigrants, or those who lack health care, how can we get their stories into church settings? Neither statistics nor abstract reasoning carry as much weight as emotion and personal experience.

■ Hold leaders publicly accountable



Like managers in any other hierarchical organization, pastors are expected to promote the policies laid out by their superiors. That makes sense, of course. Any group is more likely to accomplish its purpose if its leaders all have the same focus. Nevertheless, in an organization like the church that is specifically built on ethical principles, leaders have a special responsibility to question the system continually and promote change when needed.

How can we press church and political leaders to respond to injustices? Could we get a group of people to request a hearing? Can we record and publicize each leader's response? Unless we work together to make it more uncomfortable for leaders to keep supporting harmful aspects of the status quo, they aren't likely to change.



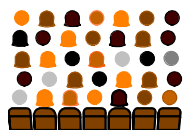
■ Openly resist harmful policies

How can we encourage leaders to disobey church rules that contradict Jesus's teaching? I wish that all UMC bishops and other clergy who believe that being Christian means officially treating people the

same no matter what their sexual orientation, would act on that belief and publicly acknowledge it rather than continuing to support the current UMC position. Waiting to see how the 2012 General Conference vote happens to turn out, before deciding whether to treat homosexual people with the compassion and justice that Jesus taught and demonstrated, seems to deny what it means to be Christian. Yet that's what the recent statement from the president of the UMC Council of Bishops advocates.

■ **Organize visible, nonviolent protest**

We can study methods used by grass-roots resistance movements, from Gandhi to the civil-rights marches of the American South to the recent protests in Africa and the Middle East. If we hope that a silent majority already sees the need for change,



how can we mobilize others to go public? What could happen if thousands of Americans protested as determinedly as the occupiers of Tahrir ('Liberation') Square in

Cairo? What if more bishops, clergy, and lay members protested at church meetings?

If a majority still seems to oppose a needed change, how can we raise people's awareness of suffering and injustice? Can we use methods developed by community organizers? Could our own group choose one specific issue to target and publicize in our local community?

■ **Use modern media and technology**

When the young protesters in Egypt first took to the streets, they didn't know whether 30 people would turn out, or 300, or 3000. But once they got there, they realized that they had already been reaching far more people than they could have hoped for,

via social media such as Facebook. How can we position ourselves to reach as many people as possible, even if only a fraction of them are moved to concrete action?

Many *Connections* readers are in the older age group I'm in. It's hard for some of us even to contemplate using technology like smart phones and video conferencing. Others are also rightly concerned about commercial control of the internet, as ever more intrusive advertising methods violate individual privacy and security.



Still, we could find out how to post views and personal stories safely on social media sites. We could blog about our concerns. We could submit comments on the blogs of bishops and other leaders. And of course we can send letters to bishops, editors, and legislators without using the internet.

■ **Target donations to promote change**

We don't all have funds to give, but those who do need to choose where they're likely to have the greatest effect in promoting needed change. Groups can also join forces and pool financial resources.

■ **Be braver than you think you can**

The mere thought of layering newspapers under my clothes and marching out against police armed with guns, clubs, and tear gas, as we've just seen people doing in Egypt, or as civil-rights



protesters did in Alabama in the 1960s, is terrifying for me. I'm not cut out to be a martyr! Rather than risk being beaten or jailed to defend Christian principles, I would recant at the drop of a hat.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a 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. 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.

But in the United States in 2011, how much would any of us really risk by protesting only a *little* more courageously while still not risking physical danger? And wouldn't we all be safer if we joined together?

We might surprise ourselves

Being an isolated voice for change can be scary, no matter how you do it. You may worry that your voice will be drowned out by all the opposing voices. You may wonder if by speaking out you'll lose friends, or even if it will be safe to go home at night. I understand those fears all too well.



But we're not actually as alone as we may fear. Not only do we have God's promise, we also have ways to contact each other. Even those of us who feel too old or too scared to march, or too hesitant to speak out, can at least support others who have greater courage, determination, or stamina.

With all that going for us, what could we accomplish if we really got organized? How effective could our protest be? Could we even surprise ourselves, or let the Holy Spirit surprise us? I suspect we could. Let me know what you think.

Barbara



Connections

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Facebook finally . . .

I've finally joined the modern world to the extent of getting on Facebook. So if you use it and want to be one of my Facebook "friends," send me your request and I'll say yes to it. I've set up a personal page and pages for *Connections* and for my new book, *Misfits*. However, I find Facebook's instructions very inadequate and unclear, so I'm still not sure how to use all its features. It can't be too hard, I keep telling myself, since millions of people are successfully using it (even to start revolutions!), but a lot about it still escapes me. Maybe it's my age . . .

Connections readers occasionally ask me to set up an Internet forum or blog for discussions with readers, and now I'm hearing from *Misfits* readers asking for something similar. But I feel that *Connections* is in effect my blog, and I can make it more concise and focused than most of the blogs I see. Besides, I converse by e-mail with most of the readers who want to discuss what I've written. That doesn't provide for discussions that include several readers simultaneously, but I haven't felt I could spend the constant time that maintaining a forum or blog would require.

Using Facebook seems to have that problem too, but I'm giving it a try anyway, as a possible forum for discussing the topics I address in *Connections* and *Misfits*. If you want a reply from me, an e-mail to me is still the way that's most likely to get one. But I'll appreciate hearing from you about *Connections* or *Misfits*, in whatever way you choose!