

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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The insight that age can bring

Older *Connections* readers often write me about how some of their religious beliefs have changed as they've aged. The broader perspective that age and experience have brought has led these older Christians to rethink, revise, and even abandon some beliefs that they earlier took for granted or at least felt they couldn't openly question.



Some of their present beliefs differ from familiar creeds and official doctrines and policies of the institutional church. Many differ from the literalist Bible interpretations and person-like portrayals of God that are so prevalent among Christians.

Insights that need to be heard

The insights and observations of Christians like these I hear from could help the church if they were made more widely known, because beliefs that they now see as baseless or even false include some that we're told are needlessly keeping today's younger people from finding Christianity credible and worthwhile. These Christians who are still thinking about their beliefs might therefore be among Christianity's most effective spokespersons now. How could we help them to be heard?



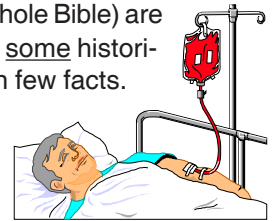
We'd need to be selective

If we gave them platforms within the church, we'd of course have to make clear what we were asking of them. From retired pastors we'd need to hear updated theological views, not recommendations for using methods that may have worked during their active ministries but aren't likely to work now. Visiting all members' homes and hospital rooms as these pastors may have done, for example, may not be the best way to make contact in today's world of hospital privacy laws and gated apartment complexes.

Views that need consideration

"After retiring from 43 years of pastoring," a pastor I've shared with for years wrote me recently, knowing that his death was imminent, "I am left with three primary truisms which may interest you:

- All persons of faith are delusional in their beliefs, especially me. The most common delusion has to do with salvation and the heaven-hell continuum.
- The Gospels (actually the whole Bible) are mostly fictional accounts with some historical connections. They contain few facts.
- Almost every story in the Gospels contains important spiritual truths if not facts. They were never meant to be taken as facts to form a faith for all time."



Two months later, a week before dying, he wrote, "The Christian journey is about this life's vocation on the love-compassion-kindness-forgiveness continuum, NOT about a next-life destination. Jesus' message to us was clearly about behavior, not belief."

With another older pastor, I've been discussing recently by e-mail what the value of typical worship services is for the many Christians who don't see God as a person-like being, don't see the Bible as a unique collection of historical accounts and direct quotes from Jesus and God, and don't see a guarantee of going to heaven as the reason for being Christian.



I wish more churches promoted examination of such views. Hearing from older, still-thinking Christians could help with that. Failing to give these views serious thought and to become informed about why some Christians hold them seems very unwise.

Correction!

In last month's *Connections*, I mistakenly got 36 when I subtracted 1964, author Adam Hamilton's birth year as given in his book, from 2010. His age is really 46.

Evidently the effects of my degree in math and years as a mathematician have worn off with age . . .

Lecture-style sermons won't reach the people the church needs to reach in today's world of Facebook and Twitter and i-phones.



Testimony based on theology that ignores later findings of scientists and insights of theologians seems especially unlikely to help. In fact, it could further turn off the younger people who are already being turned off by Christians' unconvincing beliefs and unchristian behavior. We need to hear instead how older Christians are "seeing the light" that they didn't see or didn't have the nerve to reveal earlier in their lives.

Some retired pastors feel sad and angry



Some of the retired pastors I hear from say they now wish that they had dared to let their congregations know more of what the best theologians and other scholars have found about how the Bible and church doctrines originated and developed. They're now seeing that by avoiding controversial subjects and failing to take unpopular positions they gave the wrong impression of what being Christian really means. They're seeing that keeping members comfortable by concealing information and views that might make them question their present beliefs kept those members from growing rather than helping them grow.

As a result, some of these retired pastors are angry at themselves now. They're angry about what they feel they should have seen but didn't see early enough in their ministries, or about what they saw but didn't do. But many are angry at "the system" they spent their lives in, for what they see as its focus more on doing whatever is necessary for adding new members and keeping present members from leaving than on actively promoting the compassion, justice, and peace to which Jesus apparently gave top priority.



Because they see so many churches still following these harmful patterns, some of these retired pastors can no longer even bear to participate in a church. Here's how one describes his present situation: "I have totally distanced myself from the church. I don't talk to other clergy, I don't go to meetings. I just accept my pension checks, and live on. After my years of being a District Superintendent, I was pretty fried. I managed

to do some needed work in a church here for a while, but finally I just had to get away."

"All they wanted was a guitar player"

What I find especially sad is that I know this pastor is far from alone in his feelings. Here's what another retired pastor writes of his more-than-forty-year ministry: "I was trained to be a theologian and pastor, but all the congregations ever really wanted was a good guitar player! It would be funny if it weren't so wasteful of a well-trained life."



"I was SO pumped up when I started this journey," he continues. "I was excited by what I was finding at seminary, excited about the cultural revolution that seemed to be starting, and excited that I was part of a denomination with the good sense to encourage education, leadership development, and social outreach. I didn't know that this denomination, like so many others, would cave in to the dominant, conservative, self-centered institution that Jesus himself fought against in his lifetime."

Why keep obeying?



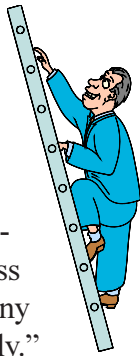
I got a phone call recently from another pastor who has a background similar to those I've just quoted but who has taken a different route in retirement. He has pastored some good-sized churches and has been a D.S., and now in retirement he's pastoring a tiny congregation part-time and doing another church-related job.

But besides thanking me for *Connections*, he was complaining about "the system." He is especially dismayed by the letters he and the rest of his area's clergy get constantly from their bishop, warning them not to do anything that might make the denomination's membership decline worse. "I'm sick of getting these letters!" he exploded, and went on to elaborate at length about his feelings.

I finally asked him, "Why do you feel you have to pay attention to those letters, now that you're retired? How could you be penalized if you ignored them or even spoke openly against the policy they're pushing? Your pension couldn't be affected, could it? And you couldn't be moved down the appoint-

ment ladder, could you, since you're no longer on it?"

He was silent for several seconds. He seemed to have been surprised and taken aback by being asked such questions. Then he said quietly, "I guess nothing bad could happen to me, really. I guess I've just been in the system for so many years that I can't imagine acting differently."



Pastors the church needs to hear from

I wish retired pastors like these, who are beyond being penalized for expressing minority beliefs, advocating unpopular activism, or saying how they feel the system needs changing, would speak more openly. They could promote needed change without the risks that they would have incurred earlier in their ministries.



Active clergy who are at the top of the appointment ladder could also help by speaking more bravely, of course. And risking a salary cut probably wouldn't be as crucial for these pastors as for those with lower salaries and younger families. Still, conveying information or expressing views that made members uncomfortable might cause such a pastor's congregation to shrink too much to pay off its debts. And losing his or her high position could keep the pastor from being elected to leadership positions in which needed change could more effectively be promoted. For these reasons, retired pastors may be in a better position to express the views that need to be heard but are likely to make members uncomfortable.



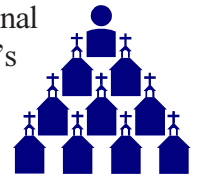
What about the risks that active bishops could take, in nudging church members to

consider new information and ideas? Bishops have platforms and visibility that few others in the church have, and aren't they beyond being penalized for expressing unpopular views? A bishop might risk being ousted for taking a stand that he or she considered faithful but that many members disapproved of, but ousting a bishop is very unlikely, isn't it? And what if it happened? A bishop could surely afford the resulting decrease in salary, and the resulting publicity would bring needed attention to the faithful and brave position he or she had taken. It might even attract some new people to the church, who had previously avoided it because they hadn't seen its leaders taking such admirable stands.



Mature understanding, new freedom

What's most encouraging to me about what I hear from older pastors and lay Christians is how the religious beliefs of many have now matured. Their understanding of what "God" represents and what being a Christian requires have expanded in helpful ways in their later years, along with the feeling of being free to reveal their real views. Some of the retired clergy say they feel free now for the first time to admit openly or even to themselves what they really believe and what they care most about. Some say they now also feel free for the first time to say how they see the institutional church system hindering the church's pursuit of its God-given purposes.



I even heard recently from a pastor who is only in his early sixties, who isn't retired, who had found that a recent birthday somehow gave him the nerve to start acknowledging his minority views and supporting

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.

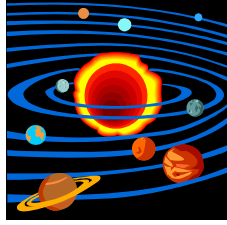


I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in 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.

faithful but unpopular behavior in ways that he hadn't previously risked.

We need their insights

The mature insights of many of the older Christians I hear from include understandings of God that go beyond the Santa-Claus-in-the-sky picture that is so common but so unconvincing to many. They include the recognition that Christianity isn't the only way to God or to a happy life after death. They include the awareness that many findings from science, medicine, and other



secular fields give a more credible view of human beings, of the universe, and maybe even of God than the literalist Bible interpretations that so many Christians still cling to.

How can we give a platform to the older Christians who are still growing spiritually, who have revised some of their beliefs, and who are looking honestly at the church? How could we help them to communicate their thoughts in ways likely to reach today's younger people? The church's need for their mature insights is too great not to make these insights more widely known.

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Connections

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The insight that age can bring

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Speaking each other's language

Sometimes I know the approximate age of older *Connections* responders because they mention being retired. But sometimes one says "I'm 76," or "I'm 89," apparently to let me know that he or she considers having reached that age as an accomplishment to be proud of. So in various ways I learn that quite a few *Connections* readers are in their seventies, eighties, or nineties. I suspect a big reason for having so many older readers is that I'm also in that age group and therefore speak its language.

I learned last month that speaking these older readers' language includes having similar feelings about how young younger people seem. When I e-mailed a correction to my *Connections* e-mail list last month, saying that I had mistakenly said that author Adam Hamilton was 36 instead of 46, I got e-mails back immediately from some readers who like me are in their 70s. "Well, Barbara," wrote one, "in my experience, 1964 happened about six months ago. So your calculations are clearly much better than mine." Another wrote, "Hey, in my book 46 is very young. I'm moving fast to 77, so what's 10 years one way or another!" I knew exactly how they felt. When you get to our age, all ages under about 50 seem a lot alike!

