

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## An amazing congregation

What's in the water in Omaha? Hearing recently about the many outstanding ministries happening at First United Methodist Church there has made me wonder. I had previously become aware of the innovative ministries at Omaha's Countryside UCC (see the [February 2012 Connections](#)), so hearing about [First UMC Omaha](#) now has made me think there must be something about Omaha that causes its churches to be especially notable. What could lie behind their success? I asked a few people who seemed to be in a position to know.



## A climate that lets questions be raised

Dr. Joerg Rieger, an internationally recognized theologian from Perkins School of Theology in Dallas who recently spoke at FUMC Omaha, told me that he found the cultural climate there noticeably more open than in much of Texas. "It's a climate," he says, "that allows for questions to be raised."

The United Methodist District Superintendent in Omaha, Dr. Dan Flanagan, agrees in part. "Nebraska is more progressive than people give it credit for," he told me. He points out that Omaha is very eclectic, and that many younger people have moved into it from surrounding areas that were mostly rural and agricultural, attracted partly by new tech companies.



Yet despite a demographic that sounds conducive to religious openness, inclusiveness, and change, Flanagan finds that only a few Omaha-area churches are taking much advantage of the opportunity. FUMC is evidently among the most distinctive. "It is by far the UMC most open to all kinds of people," he says.

So while the water in Omaha may help, there must be other key factors. What are they?

## History on the cutting edge

Founded in the mid-1800s as the first church in Omaha, FUMC Omaha has been on the cutting edge of Christianity since the congregation's beginning, says longtime member Joan Byerhof. Its first pastor, she told me, would not acknowledge the rights of Native Americans during the "Indian wars" and the settling of the West, so when he was reappointed, the congregation refused to take him back.

Decades later, the congregation promoted racial integration when it was unpopular. Then in the late 1990s, FUMC's pastor was put on trial twice by the UMC for conducting same-sex-union ceremonies and finally had his clergy credentials removed, and the congregation's support of him made many members leave. Evidently they thought their church had gone too close to the edge, or even beyond it. Yet far from destroying the church, these members' leaving may have actually made it stronger, because those who stayed grew more determined and more focused on their goals.



## Smaller but more focused

Perhaps this reminder that they were on the cutting edge gave core members the strength and courage to keep going. They stayed and kept actively working for social justice. "There's always been that kind of bedrock here," Byerhof says.

I'm encouraged by that history. Isn't the cutting edge where all churches need to be? After all, it's where Jesus was.

Even though FUMC Omaha now has only 660 members, its impact is amazing for its size, with an impressive lecture series and a vibrant downtown ministry centered on ideas and discussion in casual settings. Lay members and pastors continually read and talk with each other and outsiders, and apply their insights in their local community as well as in the wider world. I wish more churches followed their example.

Keep saving **September 28-29**  
for **Connections Live! 2012** in Temple  
with Robin Meyers. More details soon . . .

## Courageous, innovative pastors

Interestingly, four innovative women seem to be FUMC Omaha's main current leaders. One is its present senior pastor, Rev. Jane Florence, its first female senior pastor in its more than 150 years of existence. After working as a schoolteacher and principal, she graduated from Perkins School of Theology and pastored several southwest Texas United Methodist congregations. Then five years ago she was appointed to FUMC Omaha. (As it happens, the present bishop in that area is also a forward-looking woman, Ann Sherer-Simpson.)



One goal of Jane Florence's ministry, she says, is making sure that the word gets out about the many people who have been wounded by churches and as a result have dropped out. She wants to let these people know that many others have had similar experiences and feelings. And she wants the church to heal the woundedness by making all people feel welcome and providing opportunities for them to think, question, and explore. "Our faith becomes genuine and authentic," she believes, "only as we are allowed to question, process, and explore meaning in the context of our own lives." *(Does your church allow such exploration? More important, does it actively encourage it?)*

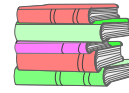


To promote the exploration process, Florence has created a ten-week course for adults and youth. She describes it as an examination of Christian systematic theology from a progressive viewpoint. A couple of its sessions deal with John Wesley and topics from the UMC *Book of Discipline*, but the rest would be ideal for any denomination. You can find the course on the [Links](#) page of my website, and you have Rev. Florence's permission to download and use it.

## Books, ideas, cutting-edge hospitality

An especially important part of FUMC's ministry is Urban Abbey, its satellite ministry in the Old Market district of downtown Omaha. The church's original downtown building burned in the 1950s and the congregation moved to what was then the far west part of the city, but now it's active in the downtown, too. Two United Methodist clergywomen have played key roles in making that happen.

About twelve years ago, after pastoring numerous congregations and then serving as District Superintendent in Omaha, Rev. Susan Davies stopped pastoring churches and opened [Soul Desires](#), a full-service bookstore in the Old Market area. It specializes in books for the spiritual journey,



from the world's major religious traditions. It also offers bestsellers, local-interest books, free wireless internet, a Saturday children's time, book-discussion groups, and a quiet environment for relaxing and meeting friends. Volunteers and a paid manager keep the bookstore open from 6:30 A.M. until 10:30 P.M.

## Imagining church in a new way

FUMC's newest woman leader, recent Perkins graduate Debra McKnight, became its associate pastor in 2008. She wanted to get people in their twenties and thirties, her own age group, back into the church, and especially into discussion of faith-related topics. "As I finished graduate school," she explains, "I began imagining church in a new way."



"Telling classmates and professors I wanted to open a pub rather than start a church brought smiles, laughter, and warnings regarding the teetotaling Methodist tradition and our historic solidarity with the Women's Christian Temperance Union," McKnight says. But FUMC was willing to try her idea anyway. *(Would your congregation be so willing?)* Her idea became the Wesley Pub in Urban Abbey, which also houses the Soul Desires bookstore, the church's informal Sunday-night services, and a coffee shop whose proceeds go to a different community-service agency each month.

## A safe space for serious exploration

[Wesley Pub](#), says its web page, features progressive theology, good spirits, and compassionate people. Every Wednesday night, Debra McKnight explains, "we gather for music, reflection, and conversation. It's not a lecture or a concert; it is an experience and an invitation."



"Rather than preaching," says McKnight, "I pose a question and, before bringing any voices to bear on it, whether from scholars, ancient narratives,

modern poets, or Stephen Colbert, I ask you to think what you know about the subject and how you know it. . . . It's safe space for serious exploration. We have explored questions ranging from worker justice and food sovereignty to human sexuality and atheism." Groups from the community bring varied voices, says McKnight, and she is always seeking more. "We invite you to bring your voice and your beverage of choice."



### Lay members can drive change

One woman who has been a persistent voice for progress in the congregation is Joan Byerhof, a long-time lay member who spearheaded the annual lecture series at which Joerg Rieger spoke. In telling me the church's civil-rights history (p. 1), she emphasized that FUMC Omaha has always been lay-driven. When she said that, I wondered at first, "Is that really a good thing?" When lay members drive their congregation to focus mainly on keeping them and their families comfortable and on believing only what they were taught in childhood, as many unfortunately still do, then being lay-driven can keep congregations from following Jesus.



But if, as at FUMC Omaha, lay members are thinking about their faith, seeking out new information, and actively helping their church to apply the teaching of Jesus, being lay-driven can be the key to real progress. *(Which pattern do most members of your church follow?)*

### A phoenix event that rose from ashes

After the widely publicized actions of FUMC's pastor in the late 1990s, says Byerhof, and the resulting loss of members, she wanted a way "to let people see that we were doing all right." Many

church members were already reading progressive ideas, but she also wanted to help make both the congregation and outsiders more aware of the work of progressive theologians. As chairperson of an FUMC governing body in 1999, she felt moved to say, "We can do this." She called a steering committee together and was pleasantly surprised by its members' response. "They trusted me," she says, "even though they weren't sure what I was doing." *(Do members of your congregation treat fellow members' innovative efforts that way?)*



As a result, FUMC's first annual "Horizons of Faith" weekend happened in 2001, with John Shelby Spong as its speaker. "It was a phoenix event that rose out of the ashes," says Byerhof.

In successive years, the event has featured other prominent progressive authors and scholars. The most recent was Joerg Rieger, speaking on "Empire, Economics, and Christ." He found that many attenders had read his book *No Rising Tide*, and that Jane Florence had just preached a sermon series on it. Thus, to his delight, attenders asked very specific questions of him during the weekend. *(Do your congregation's members and pastors take learning about their faith this seriously?)*

Because "Horizons of Faith" is a complete weekend rather than only a lecture, it draws attenders from all over the U.S., not just Nebraska. Many experience the weekend as a yearly reunion of a community of kindred spirits that they don't find elsewhere. The event is even financially self-sustaining. Over the years it has given more than \$80,000 to FUMC and church and community service organizations, and its committee always sets aside enough from the year's proceeds to cover the next year's expenses.

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](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto: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 19 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 more than 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.

## Looking back, looking forward

What does this picture say about how much more our own congregations could be doing? Mine has three times as many members as FUMC Omaha; many big-city churches have far more. Yet what a contrast there is between FUMC Omaha's offerings and the bland, narrow fare of so many other churches! Just hearing about Omaha has made me deeply sad for my own congregation. I can't help thinking . . .

What if the most forward-looking of our pastors had received stronger, more outspoken support, from both members and supervisors? What if newcomers

and young adults had been finding bold, distinctive content in sermons and small groups? What if we had pressed ahead with an emphasis on serving and educating the whole community, not just nurturing our own members and their families? What if we had tried to nudge the institutional church forward rather than letting ourselves be pulled back by it?

Even for FUMC Omaha, with its cutting-edge history, innovative leadership, and supportive members, the road forward hasn't been easy. But their example gives us hope and challenges us. I hope you will find it as inspiring as I have.

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## An amazing congregation

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### Progressive pastoral leadership and congregational involvement can feed each other

Membership and attendance are likely to grow when the content of worship services and classes becomes more substantial, more up-to-date, and thus more interesting, especially to former church avoiders and drop-outs. Numbers often increase, too, when ministries more recognizably promote the justice and compassion that Jesus taught. Such changes happened in the 1980s in my own church, led by a courageous, forward-looking pastor. Participation and membership grew higher than at any other time in my 50+ years there. But he experienced constant opposition from traditionalist members, and since that time, sadly, the congregation has moved so far backward in theological content, openness, and community involvement that I no longer attend.

How can congregations move forward even when their history has included little innovation? Either pastors or lay members who are energetic and open-minded can lead a congregation to take needed steps forward. But holding newly gained ground can be a challenge. Bishops and other supervisors must keep appointing and supporting progressive pastors whether or not they attract large numbers. With or without clergy support, lay members must speak out, form alliances, and build a critical mass in favor of innovative proposals and ministries. All of that can be a struggle that lasts for decades. Yet FUMC Omaha shows that it is possible.

