



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH

THE ONE CHURCH PLAN – A DENOMINATIONAL DISCONNECT

By Dr. Riley B. Case

A friend is newly appointed to a new charge this year and was asked about what was going to happen to The United Methodist Church in regard to human sexuality issues and where he stood on such things. He explained at the church's board meeting that he stood with the church's *Discipline* and wondered if it would be helpful for the church to be transparent on its stance by stating so in the wedding policy. There was discussion but no vote. That was enough. The word went out via Facebook that the church would not allow gays and lesbians at its services. The 304 Facebook responses to the posting were overwhelmingly nasty ("hateful, homophobic Christians" and the other usual accusations) to the extent that the television station at a nearby city called to question the pastor and to schedule an interview. Fortunately, the television station, realizing there was an irrational reaction, cancelled the interview but The United Methodist Church had already dumped on it another load of bad publicity.

There is a lot of misinformation and confusion in the church these days because of discussions over the practice of homosexuality and the future direction of The United Methodist Church. The incident reported is an example of this. The rumor is out, even before the 2019 special called General Conference, that The United Methodist Church is about to reverse its stance on human sexuality. If the church removes the language that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, the implication will be that the practice of homosexuality is compatible with Christian teaching for United Methodists. If the church no longer says that marriage is between a man and a woman but now is between any two adults, the implication will be that The United Methodist Church approves of same-gender unions. Individuals or churches or even conferences may hold to the Biblical and traditional teachings on human sexuality, but the official position of The United Methodist Church would be that almost anything is allowed. At that point an individual church that takes a stand for the historic Christian position on human sexuality will be publicly challenged just as my friend's church was, only this time the local church would not be supported by the church's official position.

This is the situation in the church because of a proposal to be presented to the General Conference in February 2019 originally referred to as the Local Option Plan but now called the One Church Plan. This is the plan favored by the majority of US bishops. The plan calls for the removal of all negative language regarding homosexual practice. There are other options that will also be considered but the One Church Plan is the plan promoted by the Council of Bishops as

well as some special ad hoc groups, a number of persons associated with the seminaries, and a number of persons associated with general boards and agencies. It might be helpful for the discussion if we better understood the kinds of people supporting and not supporting this plan. The present divide within United Methodism is not just between Progressives and Traditionalists, but also between rank and file United Methodists and what might be labeled the institutional elite. Gay advocacy groups are not generally found in the small towns of middle America but on many university campuses, in the entertainment world, in the secular media, and in major urban areas like New York, San Francisco and Chicago. Furthermore, these groups are not found so much among the poor and disadvantaged as among many of the wealthy, the educated and the well-connected. These kinds of people seem to attract our institutional leaders who seem to believe that the church will best advance by "being relevant," that is by identifying with the cultural trends, including the sexual revolution. Though it would compromise our long-established views of sexual morality, this identification would align us with new ideas of freedom, which basically means people set their own moral standards guided by their own conscience and preferences. Under that banner, so the implication, we remain united by being tolerant of all to do as they wish.

We'll see. It needs to be pointed out that the "institutional leaders" have been recommending for the past forty-six years that the church follow the more enlightened path and change its stance on homosexual practice to be more in line with secular thinking and modern culture. If the Council of Bishops has ever made a public statement in which they have indicated that by conviction they support the church's stance, it has not been known to most of us. If the General Board of Church and Society has ever sought to defend the church's stance it is not known to most of us. So far the church's official stance, at least as legislated by General Conference, has remained firm. Before the 1980 General Conference UM News Service reported that support to change the church's position was backed by most of the agencies of the church and caucuses except for Good News. Nevertheless, the General Conference supported the traditional position. In 1992 after spending \$200,000 of church funds, the Committee to Study Homosexuality (made up mostly of "institutional leaders") recommended by a margin of 17-4 that the church change. Nevertheless, the General Conference supported the traditional position.

That support has not come without controversy. For the past forty years each General Conference that affirmed historic Christian sexual morality has been challenged and berated by demonstrations, disruptions, marches and anguished cries charging the church with hatred, bias, homophobia, fear and a few other things, because it would not conform to gay advocacy. It has been pointed out (with little success) that these demonstrations are hardly a witness to love, unity and a church devoted to the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Finally, at the 2016 General Conference, when it was apparent that the church would again affirm the historic Christian position in regard to human sexuality, and especially after it was discovered that a group had been engaged in serious discussions regarding possibilities for the future of the church, a strong appeal was made (by institutional leaders of course) for bishops to guide the church to a Way Forward that would allow the church to stay intact and live together in harmony (it must be pointed out that the appeal had to be based more on wishful thinking than strong conviction that some new way was just waiting to be discovered).

And so we have The Commission on the Way Forward which, with input from bishops, is presenting three plans, none of which is generating a lot of positive excitement. The least

desirable, at least for evangelicals, and the one under discussion here, the One Church Plan, posits that we “move forward” by rejecting much of the past that has made United Methodism one of the leading Protestant denominations not just in the United States, but in the world. Methodism originally and historically, at least in Great Britain and in early America, was counter-cultural. Despite Wesley’s Oxford education Methodists were never imaged as persons of social and economic standing. What they were known for was “enthusiasm” and moral living. Like Jesus in the gospels Methodism railed against extravagant living. It preached modesty. It disdained fashionable dress. In the 1850 federal census the value of the average Methodist church was lowest of all the denominations covered by the census. Methodism preached against alcohol and dancing and gambling, including card playing. Methodist morality was not based on top-down decrees, pontificated by academic intellectuals and institutional elites. It was republican (small “r”) bottom-up morality growing out of revivals and class meetings. Prohibition would not have been possible in another country based on democracy, and it would not have been possible in America except for the Methodists. Presently, as a part of our doctrinal standards we include in our Discipline *The General Rules of the Methodist Church* which date from the days of John Wesley and which are covered by the Restrictive Rule, which means they cannot be changed without constitutional amendment. Let it be said clearly that the General Rules are not about diversity, inclusion, compromise and unity but about holy living and separation from the world.

And so the disconnect. Capitulation to the world on the one hand or holy living and separation from the world on the other. It is not just a disconnect between liberals and conservatives. It is a disconnect between the institutional elite and ordinary United Methodists. A majority of United Methodists, especially if the central conferences are factored in, are evangelical in their understanding of the gospel. They believe God really has intervened in history in the person of Jesus Christ who, by his death on an atoning cross, has made possible salvation and eternal life for all who believe. By way of contrast modern progressives, both secular and religious, tend to deny the doctrine of Original Sin and assume that persons naturally are rational, responsible autonomous selves who, if not restricted by repressive traditions, unenlightened deplorables, and superstitious extremists, can on their own (with help from social planning) love and accept everyone, to the end that all can live in peace and harmony.

The naivete of this kind of thinking is alarming. The One Church Plan and the assumptions from which it has been generated would link us with other imploding and increasingly irrelevant mainline progressive churches like the Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA and the LCA Lutherans, and separate us from 90% of the holy catholic church.

Is this what we want?

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