HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH

SHALL WE HAVE CHURCH TRIALS?

By Riley B. Case

Things are not going well among United Methodists. We don’t like to talk about it, at least not publicly. Of course. When I was still actively pastoring, I did not want to publicize our church situation if families were unhappy and leaving or if we were having financial problems. Companies on the verge of bankruptcy don’t advertise their troubles, lest customer loyalty is eroded even more quickly. Conference news releases speak of good deeds local churches are doing and leadership conferences that will help lead the church to bigger and better things. But of us who have been around for a long time, we know there is another story. Things are not going well among United Methodists.

The major (though not the only) issue has to do with the church’s stand on human sexuality. The United Methodist Church has a position; celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. It is the stance of historic Christianity. Some believe it is legalistic, unloving and exclusionary. Modern culture, at least in America--because of the sexual revolution, the breakdown of the family, the emphasis on the autonomous self, and other reasons--pronounces traditional morality outdated. Both in the secular and religious world persons who identify themselves as “progressive” assert that they and the world are moving onward and upward (progressing) to more enlightened views. According to this position if persons feel something is right it must be. Males can become females and females can become males. In matters of homosexual practice the church needs to catch up with the permissive world. Fundamentalists, right-wingers, the unenlightened, traditionalists and otherwise prejudiced and hateful persons need to step aside, or at least be tolerant. At the very least we should live and let live. We live by “love” and love does not judge persons. For sure it does not justify church trials.

Oh yes, church trials. We evidently shouldn't be having them. Feelings are hurt; we lose pastors and members. Trials are expensive. They don’t solve things.

But if not by church trials how then is church discipline to be applied? Methodism historically has been guided by discipline and rules. The very word “Methodist” is derived from the holy disciplined habits (methods) of the Holy Club. The General Rules come from John Wesley and have been part of our doctrinal heritage from the beginning. It is curious that progressives in the church these days reduce Wesley’s General Rules to: “do no harm; do good; and attend the ordinances of God.” Then in a marvelous display of contorted logic they argue that “Do no harm,” despite what Wesley might have thought, really means we do not stand in judgment on alternate life styles.
It might be good to check the General Rules again. “Do no harm,” as fleshed out in the Discipline, means not taking the Lord’s name in vain, keeping the Sabbath day, not drinking “liquor,” not quarreling, not speaking evil of magistrates or ministers, not putting on gold and costly apparel, not singing songs or reading books that do not give glory to God, and not laying up treasures on earth. Believe it or not, Methodists once (and some still do) seek to live by those rules. And in the days when the church was vibrant and growing, discipline was applied to those who did not take them seriously. Members were removed from classes, and sometimes from membership. And yes: there were church trials. It was taken for granted there would be church trials.

I recently had a book published by the Indiana Historical Society (Faith and Fury: Eli Farmer on the Frontier, 1794-1881) (check it out at rileycase.com). The book is primarily about sectarianism on the frontier. Groups on the western frontier were dividing and realigning and squabbling and experiencing confusion, while all the time growing spectacularly. From 1820 -1840 Methodist membership in Indiana grew three times faster than the population growth. Denominations spoke of “unity” but seldom practiced it, except within their disciplined groups with common values and beliefs. Church trials were a part of upholding the common values and beliefs.

Eli Farmer participated in several of these, usually as a witness. Twice he offered himself up for trial, in each instance after fighting (in one he bit a man’s ear off). He sought a trial to see if he was still in good standing with the conference and, if not, what might be done in order to be restored (he was acquitted in both instances, interestingly).

Institutionalists have not been above using church trials for their own agendas. In 1898 the M.E. Church South passed legislation giving pastors the right to prohibit evangelists from preaching in their parish areas. This legislation was aimed at the Holiness movement and became a major reason Methodism lost a large group of its most zealous members. One person who had to turn in credentials because of this legislation was Henry Clay Morrison who then was elected to General Conference as a lay person. A few years later he founded Asbury College.

For a number of General Conferences I have submitted petitions to delete from the Discipline para. 341.1, a carry-over from Morrison’s day and which is a reminder of an ugly chapter in the church’s history. The paragraph is no longer needed, even if one is convinced the church needs to be protected from fundamentalists and other evangelicals who might not be supporting the institutional program as they should. Like other of my petitions this one has failed repeatedly with the argument that the church still needs to control persons who might not be supportive of United Methodist practices.

But controlling those not supportive of Methodist doctrine did not apply to modernists. Shortly after Holiness persons were forced out of the church, in 1906, charges were brought up against Borden Parker Bowne of Boston. Bowne, basically a philosopher who identified revelation with reason, was accused of denying the Atonement, the Trinity and other doctrines affirmed in the Articles of Religion. He also disdained ordinary Methodists who lived in the “swamps of ignorance and superstition.” Bowne was declared “not guilty.” After Bowne one could be declared unacceptable for Methodist ministry by being too conservative but hardly ever for being too liberal.

Church trials do not represent the church’s brightest hours, but they have been necessary. Without the possibility of a church trial justice would not have been done in the Ed Johnson case in Virginia when, in 2005, the district superintendent and bishop unilaterally intervened and overruled a pastor’s decision on the readiness of a person for church membership (considered the pastor’s responsibility from the very earliest days of Methodism) and then basically fired him without due process. The bishop was overruled in case 1032.
It has been the position of those called traditionalists in the church that if the _Discipline_ is clear about behavior outside the bounds of accepted Christian morality, persons need to be held accountable. That may require a church trial. Should that be controversial? It is the position of progressives and many “centrists” that the Bible needs to be re-interpreted to bring it into conformity with modern culture and the church’s stance needs to be changed in regard to matters of human sexuality. Further, this is not just an inconsequential difference of opinion. To progressives and institutionalists and most bishops and boards and agencies and most seminaries this matter is of such importance that all available means, from demonstrations to shaming to resistance to intimidation to defiance to specially called General Conferences, need to be deployed to force the church to change.

So Mainstream UMC, an activist group made up largely by institutionalists, has solicited signatures calling for a moratorium on “harmful complaints, charges and trials.” They gathered 8,000 or so of these signatures to present to the Council of Bishops meeting in November to ask the bishops to violate vows they have taken to uphold the _Discipline_ of the church and refuse to handle complaints or conduct trials. The argument is made that trials cause harm. Has it not occurred that tremendous harm is caused when morale is dropping among church members because their own leaders are attacking United Methodist sisters and brothers in newspaper ads and labeling the church’s long-standing moral standard stance as “hateful?” At Boston School of Theology, the altar has been draped with a rainbow flag indicating solidarity with the gay cause and a banner placed on the altar declaring “RESIST.” It seems a symbol for what is happening in United Methodism. The rainbow flag replaces the cross and the rallying cry for ministry is RESIST?

No wonder, as stated before, all is not going well among United Methodists. Growing numbers of persons, progressives and traditionalists, are leaving our churches. Apportionment income is down. The logical solution: divide and allow some new expressions of United Methodism. If we cannot agree let us separate and develop new expressions of United Methodism. God is not finished with United Methodism. Let’s believe that and develop a new vision for the future.