



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 6.27.17

THOUGHTS ON CHURCH UNITY

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Several General Conferences ago (I don't remember for sure which one it was but it could have been any of them) I noted that at every single morning worship service at which bishops preached there was some appeal or some reference to church unity. Church unity is on our minds these days, as well it might be. United Methodism is in danger of dividing over the issue of Scriptural authority as it relates to sexual ethics and marriage. A quick checking of just a few of the blogs related to United Methodism reveals the concern: "Church Hanging on to Unity Despite Cracks In the Wall;" "A Plea for Unity in the United Methodist Church;" "United Methodist Young People Urge Denomination to Promote Unity;" "Prayer and Fasting Urged for the Unity of the Church."

Christians should by no means discount the importance of "Unity." It is, after all, a theme of the New Testament. Especially in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 that believers "might all be one, even as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee..."

However:

1) The Unity referred to in Scripture is much more than the institutional and structural unity that appears to be the focus of most United Methodist discussions. Spiritual unity is a linking of Spirit growing out of common life together. All of us long for those times of oneness that come when we are united in prayer, or as we together witness mighty acts of God in our midst, or as we commit ourselves to common goals and mission. I associate these times with growing up in my Methodist Sunday school and youth group, at our Methodist church camp, and with fellowship with other believers in my Christian (Methodist background) college. I have experienced wonderful times of spiritual refreshing in churches I have served, with the people I have worked with, and in fellowship meetings. These times of spiritual refreshing I also associate with cluster, district and annual conference meetings.

I draw the line there. I have not personally sensed this unity at general board and agency meetings or at General and Jurisdictional Conferences I have attended (I have attended eleven General Conferences). At these occasions, despite planned worship experiences, we appear absorbed not with the convictions and practices we share in common but with institutional

matters of who gets money and who doesn't or who is included and who isn't. When we are called to repentance it is not because of how we have failed to reach persons for Christ but because we need to address sins of our forbearers. Sometimes I have returned home not rejoicing because I am part of a great spiritual force in the world but saddened because we have become so adversarial.

I believe that in the obsession with Christian unity we protest too much. Continual harping on unity suggests that we are sensing disunity.

2) Unity in the Bible is based on shared values, beliefs and practices and these, it seems, presently are in short supply within United Methodism. Connectionalism in the United Methodist Church (para. 132) is defined as a sharing of a common tradition of faith including Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules. But what if these doctrinal standards are openly scorned? What if a small but vociferous minority in the church wishes to reinterpret the Scriptures, discard our Christian (and United Methodist) tradition in regard to matters of sexual morality, defy our church's *Discipline* and call it "hateful," impose an agenda that has more in common with secular sociology than Christian faith, and threaten to bring the church to its knees if the church does not change to comply to new understandings of rights and inclusiveness?

At the annual conference I just attended the first question on our evaluation form was: "Please rate on a scale of 1-5 where you experienced diversity during our Annual Conference Session" with the following areas to be rated: worship, hospitality, volunteers, plenary, accessibility, communications. The second question was: "How would you like to see more diversity during our Annual Conference Session?"

No wonder we have problems. Continual obsession with themes of diversity and inclusiveness make us more aware of our differences rather than what it is we have in common. In times of unity I am less aware of differences in regard to age, race, gender, ethnicity, theological perspectives, and educational disparities. In times of disunity I am aware of all our differences, and more.

Whatever happened to rating our excitement for the cause of Christ, or whether the conference challenged new (or old) forms of ministry? I read in one blog that our diversity is a celebration of our unity. This makes no sense at all. Diversity, if anything, is today a cause for disunity rather than unity when it means we keep track of whatever groups or interests or perspectives or races or genders or ages or standing in the conference have been properly included in planning, speaking, and decision-making. It matters not to me who leads as long as we are indeed being led in the task of building up the body of Christ.

3) What is needed if "unity" is to have a chance in the United Methodist Church? We need serious discussion, not so much about human sexuality on sociological and psychological levels, but about the theological bases that lie behind how we decide issues around human sexuality. Do we have any agreement at all on the Biblical and theological bases for our decisions? What are the irreducible essentials which we supposedly share? While the blogs and public statements of some individuals and groups are not official, and probably do not represent the thinking of the Commission on the Way Forward, it is discouraging to read of

people who believe that our unity consists of "the words of Jesus," or "our diversity," or "love," or even "our baptism." We are not baptized United Methodists but Christians. Thus baptism may be a mark of unity, but it is the mark of unity with all believers, not just with United Methodists. Appeals to qualities like "love" or "grace" as the basis on unity make no sense since there is no special United Methodist understanding of what is uniquely United Methodist about "love" and "grace." Appeals to "diversity" are as confusing as the reference in the 1972 doctrinal statement about "pluralism" as the identifying mark of our United Methodist theology. Words like pluralism and diversity have more to do with relativism and confusion than with the gospel.

There is currently unrest in the trenches of United Methodism. Someone has said it will take a miracle for the Commission to come up with a proposal for a way forward that can satisfy a majority of United Methodists. That is true. However, miracles have been known to happen.