



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 3.9.18

By Dr. Riley Case

DIVISION AND UNITY

Within a few weeks the bishops will be making a recommendation that will address the main proposal to come before United Methodism's 2019 special called General Conference planned for February 2019. It is quite certain there will be some alternative proposals from other individuals or groups as well. Presumably one proposal will be accepted that will offer a directed path for the church forward and yet still allow groups and individuals not to have to compromise their integrity in matters of Scriptural authority especially as it relates to matters of human sexuality, and specifically, the practice of homosexuality.

There is reason for concern. The bishops are divided. And if the bishops are divided how are we to expect that they can lead us in unity to a hopeful future? It is not quite true to say the bishops are divided about all things. On one matter they agree: we must have unity. This unity is a mantra that is repeated every time bishops open their mouths. Unfortunately, the "unity" the bishops speak of is not the same unity that Jesus refers to in John 17 when he prays: "...that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee..." That is a spiritual unity. That is unity we have across denominational lines. The bishops' call for unity appears to be an appeal for institutional unity, that is, the holding together of an organization known as The United Methodist Church. Or, to put it another way, maintaining the status quo.

In the Fall of 2017 some of our seminary professors met in a colloquy at Candler School of Theology to hear papers on some of these topics and the crisis in the church. One paper stands out, at least for many people: that given by Dr. Russell Richey, professor emeritus of Church History at Candler School of Theology, entitled "Today's United Methodism: Living with/into its Two Centuries of Regular Division."

The paper makes three key points which are as follows:

1. "Successive 19th century contests over important society and ethical issues broke Methodism into competitive denominations, encouraged their aggressive evangelistic/missionary outreach, so faced the separated competitive churches outward, and yielded their overall growth.
2. In the 20th century, the-to-unite-Methodisms avoided such schisms, sought unity in various ways, permitted difference and disagreement to take conviction, cause and caucus expression, so facilitated denominational self-absorption, faced the uniting churches inward and so helped produce decline.

3. Caucuses and campaigns since the 1960s onward and the gradual polarizing of United Methodism furthered the focus within, eroded support for and reliance upon the general agencies and perhaps threatens to divide Methodism once again.”

The paper itself elaborates on the three points. What follows is not Richey's commentary but reflections on Richey's commentary and points.

1) Division, separation and schism is very much a part of Methodism's (and United Brethren and Evangelical Association) history. The very act of organizing the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784 was an act of schism: from the Church of England, from the American Anglicans, and from British Wesleyanism. Then in 1792 there was the O'Kelly schism over the rights of preachers; a few years later African-Americans formed the Africans Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and a few years later the AME Zion. This was followed by the Wesleyan Church schism, the division between the M.E. Church and the M.E. Church South, and the Free Methodist division. After the Civil War the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church formed (now Christian African American (CME). With the rise of the holiness movement within the M.E. churches numerous individuals and groups left M.E. churches to form groups like the Church of the Nazarene and various Churches of God, some of which led to Pentecostal groups.

Despite all of the divisions and schisms Methodism (and its descendants) suffered few mortal wounds. Indeed, the divisions caused renewed vision and growth. Today, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing form of Protestantism in the world. At the end of the century (1900) Methodism could claim 8% of American Protestantism.

The lesson: division does not necessarily bring decline and disintegration.

2) Dividing by conviction, cause and caucus. In the twentieth century Methodism suffered few outward divisions. There were major unification “successes.” The Evangelical Church merged two alienated groups in the 1920s, the EUB Church was formed in 1935. The M.E., the M.E. South, and the Methodist Protestant Church merged in 1939; the Methodist and EUB Churches merged in 1968. One might suppose Methodism would be much stronger because of these outward displays of unity.

On the contrary the church was still being divided, only the division has been internal. Issues, causes and movements: fundamentalism, feminism, racism, holiness, poverty led to caucuses, advocacy groups, and coalitions joined not so much to confront the world but to confront other groups in the church. Russell Richey identifies 29 present caucus groups by website. In addition there are 25 additional affiliated groups. Since many of these groups are in conflict with other groups in the church the church has turned inward, upon itself, instead of outward, to confront the world.

I think my most discouraging moment in the ministry was when I represented my conference on the jurisdictional nominating committee. It was my hope that I could help place some of the talented overlooked persons from our conference on general boards. Not to be. Around the table side by side were not only nominating committee members from other conferences but also eight representatives of gender, ethnic and age caucuses. We were told by the chair of the committee on our first nomination we could only place a young adult, female, lay Hispanic to represent our conference. So it goes with the church. At the start of the 20th century there were more Methodists than any other Protestant group. We were soon passed by the Baptists.

3) Since the Methodist EUB merger in 1968 our internal divisions have increased. The merger gave us not a brand new start with a revitalized structure and a new vision and a new sense of mission, but an increase of internal division. With this has come institutional defensiveness, leadership committed more to the groups who put them in power than to the church's mission, and an ugliness toward one another

not fitting for persons who claim to be sisters and brothers. This is a contributing factor to the fact that the American church has lost nearly 4 million members in 50 years.

Those committed to a new sexuality and the celebration of alternative life styles and heterodoxy in doctrine feel restricted by the Bible, the *Discipline*, and criticism from traditionalists. Evangelicals, on the other hand, restricted in a different way, are aware that classical Wesleyan doctrine and morality are not supported by most of our seminaries (and the pastors who graduate from them), by many of our boards and agencies, and by many of our bishops.

What is ahead? Any way forward should be sensitive to some theological and sociological church trends. We hear from secular media sources that Christianity is in trouble. Fewer people are affiliating with churches; millennials are disinterested in religion; more people are declaring for atheism. The secular media gets a lot of things wrong, and the presumed death of Christianity is one of them. Christian faith in America is alive and well, but it is taking different forms. What is alive and trending are mega-churches, independent churches, para-church ministries and Christian small groups traveling under the media radar. What is in trouble is institutional denominationalism, especially the institutional denominations of what has been called "the mainline." The Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church (LCA), the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, the Disciples, and the American Baptists are in a downward spiral. Their members are old and greying and white. Their compromise with basic Christian beliefs and values in the name of progressive thinking, especially around issues of sexuality, is speeding the decline. The United Methodist Church is in its own decline, which, serious as it is, is not as dramatic as of the other denominations. At least yet.

Is there time yet to restructure and revision for a new future? Not if we insist that long-held standards of doctrine and morality must be compromised for the sake of an unrealistic "unity." Yes, if different groups can be free to pursue the mission and ministry that they believe comes from God. Perhaps the option of some sort of "branches" or "central conferences" where churches and conferences could restructure on their own and yet be in some sort of connection with others might work. Perhaps a formal separation would be the best choice. Russell Richey's analysis must be taken seriously. We cannot continue down the same path we have been traveling for the past few years.

Lord, save your church!