



HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH

One Hundred Years of Progressive Leadership in United Methodism

By Riley B. Case

One of the responses following General Conference 2019 from progressives and some “centrists” is that in accepting the Traditional Plan United Methodism has lost credibility in the larger religious and secular world. In championing the Traditional Plan, the church has refused to accept the realities of the emerging American culture in which homosexual practice is affirmed as a normal expression of human sexuality. As a consequence, our church is not only open to charges of hatred and homophobia but has also declared itself on the wrong side of history and will sink into decline and irrelevancy.

It must be hard to be a religious progressive and keep using this same argument. It takes ingenious logic to keep claiming, decade after decade, that history is on the side of progressive religion. Progressives posit a world getting better, more humane, more inclusive, and more loving. Back in its modernist phase (we’re talking 100 years now) progressives spoke of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man covering the earth. They could sing, as they did in the 1935 Methodist hymnal, “These things shall be a loftier race than e’re the world hath known...” (# 512). A sizable portion of the modernists supported World War I to make the world safe for democracy. They also backed eugenics to upgrade to the “loftier race.” Of course, there were (and are today) barriers on the way to this brighter future, such as fundamentalism (or evangelicalism or orthodoxy). Outdated “fundamentalism,” according to the progressive narrative (then and now), disdains the proven findings of science and new learning, is legalistic in regard to doctrine, and literalistic in regard to Bible interpretation. Though the 2019 General Conference only reaffirmed what the church has always taught about sexual morality, progressives and with them some “centrists,” cannot think up enough ways of expressing how tragic the conference was and how the future of the UM Church is being waylaid by the obstinacy of evangelicals, their rejection of modern culture, and their racist, exclusivist, homophobic and legalistic mindsets.

The problem for progressives is that “fundamentalism” or “evangelicalism” is supposed to be withering away, and it isn’t. Let’s go back 100 years. Methodism at that time was doing

quite well. According to the Federal Census for Religious Bodies of 1926 in America, the churches that now make up United Methodism could count 7,344,158 members of which the M.E. Church counted 4,080,777, the M.E. South 2,487,694, the Methodist Protestants 192,171, the U.B.s 377,436, and the Evangelical Association 206,080. These together accounted for 18% of all Christian groups. Since then American population has grown from 115 million to 327 million and the UM Church in America has shrunk to 6.7 million (a 9% decrease despite the population growth) and accounts for about 5% of all Christian bodies in America.

May we point out that the dramatic decline has come under liberalism's watch? About 100 years ago the new ideology known as "modernism" arrived on the theological scene with a message for the new age: the Bible should be read critically; science should be accepted uncritically. When E. B. Chappell, editor of church school materials in the M.E. Church South, wrote *Recent Developments of Religious Education in the M.E. Church* he explained "earlier educators, though well-intentioned, did not understanding the larger meanings of Methodism." John Wesley, for example, had been too influenced by "Augustinianism" (mostly by the doctrine of Original Sin and the Atonement) and would need to be corrected. Children don't need to be converted because they can grow up Christian.

The conservative push-back against modernism in the early 1920s was labeled "fundamentalism" and the ensuing conflict known as "The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," in a sense a forerunner to the progressive-traditionalist conflicts of today. It wasn't much of a conflict, at least in modernist minds. In 1924 *The Christian Century*, the prestigious voice for modernism, charged (editorial, 6-24-24) that fundamentalism and modernism were incompatible. They were two worldviews, two sets of moral ideals, two systems of personal attitudes, and two separate religions. They could not both be "right" (we might compare that to evangelicalism and progressivism today). But the *Century* did not stop with that. History was on the side of modernism and that was the future of Christianity. A follow-up editorial in the *Century* (6-24-26) then rather grandly announced the obituary for fundamentalism. The editorial said essentially that the battle was over and fundamentalism had lost: "It is henceforth to be a disappearing quantity in American religious life, while our churches go on to larger issues."

The Methodists, at least its institutional leaders schooled in the new learning, agreed. Methodism's capitulation to modernism, at least among the institutional elite, was rapid. By 1925 modernists in both the north and south church controlled the colleges, the seminaries, the pastors' schools, the Courses of Study, the Church press, the Sunday school material, the church agencies, and finally even, the Council of Bishops. In 1923 all church agencies in the M.E. Church were consolidated in one big bureaucratic big brother entity known as Church World Service. In an article "Modernism: A Calm Survey" printed in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* (July, 1925), a study of twelve M.E., M.E. South and M.P. seminaries, revealed that nine considered their orientation modernist and one moderate (two did not comment).

Of course, no one bothered to ask ordinary Methodists what they believed about things. At the time of the seminary survey only 8% of M.E. South pastors were seminary trained. Methodists in the pew seemed rather unimpressed with modernism. They did seem impressed by other developments that would arrive on the religious scene. By the 1940s “fundamentalism” became better known as “evangelicalism” and all kinds of new ministries were springing up: Inter-Varsity, Youth for Christ, Young Life, and numerous new mission societies. Billy Graham came on the scene in the 1950s. Seminary students were flocking to schools like Fuller, Gordon-Conwell, Trinity, and Asbury Theological Seminary.

When I entered a Methodist seminary in the 1950s professors generally were oblivious to most things happening in the evangelical world. They did know about Karl Barth (fortunately) but in their minds every mention of the word “evangelical” defaulted to “fundamentalism” and that brand of Christianity had no place in a respectable seminary, nor in Methodism, nor in Christianity’s future. It could be understood sociologically as a longing for a rural, simpler past, psychologically as fear of change, and theologically as prescientific. It was bad theology and an embarrassment to thinking people. Any remnants of fundamentalism would soon disappear, except, as one professor commented, “perhaps among the supply pastors and in pockets of lay people.” In the 1960s these seminary types were more fascinated by “Death of God,” letting the world set the agenda, liberation theology, The Secular City, and the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) in which mainline churches would band together to be a major force in American social, political and religious life (now on hospice care).

And common, ordinary Methodists? Charles Keysor wrote about these in an article “Methodism’s Silent Minority” which appeared (4-14-66) in the Christian Advocate and drew more responses than any other article had in the history of the magazine. According to the article Silent Minority persons in Methodism don’t say much but they love Jesus, believe the Bible and support their church. They also don’t always buy in to the institutional programs. For example, Keysor dropped the statistic that 10,000 Methodist churches did not use official Methodist material (this was disputed but Keysor had worked for David C. Cook and knew). Keysor’s article launched the Good News movement. Groups like the Confessing Movement, Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) and Wesley Covenant Association would soon follow.

In another article in the Advocate (10-14-67) Keysor responded to an article “An ex-Fundamentalist’s looks at the Silent Minority” which had charged that the religion Keysor was espousing was ossified and dying. Good News was an “ultra-fundamentalist” movement and a “theological divider to weed out dissenters from the rules and regulations of literalism contrary to the spirit of Jesus and the present age.” Keysor’s answer: it was not orthodoxy that was ossified and dying but old-time liberalism. “We had better be reading the signs of the times...a hurricane is battering the Church and the name of the storm is change...As United Methodist drifts deeper into the tempest it will be forced to jettison more of the proud ‘liberal’ superstructure...”

Is there any evidence to support that charge? Is it true that it is not orthodoxy that is ossified and dying but liberalism (progressivism)? In 1925 the churches that made up the Federal Council of Churches could claim 72% of all Protestants. Today in the National Council of Churches that number is somewhere around 25%. As for the “fundamentalist” denominations that the Century claimed to be “a disappearing quantity in American church life,” the Southern Baptists have increased from 3,524,378 in 1926 to 15.7 million today. The Assemblies of God (a Methodist offshoot) numbered 47,950 in 1926 and 2.6 million today. The Church of the Nazarene (a Methodist offshoot) numbered 63,558 in 1926 and nearly 700,000 today.

Perhaps even more dramatic is the fact that apart from the dying churches of Europe, there are almost no groups world-wide that seem very interested in progressive Christianity. Unitarian churches have not done well in Africa, or South America, or anyplace for that matter. On the other hand, those churches in the tradition of historic evangelical Christianity are thriving in Africa, in China, in South America. The Assemblies of God claim 44 million members outside the United States. United Methodism itself claims 5 million members in Africa.

The percentage of Christians who announce for progressive religion is really quite small. It seems restricted mostly to the United States and Europe among persons mostly white and privileged. It thrives in liberal seminaries, in the boards and agencies of mainline denominations (where there are exceptions), among persons still attracted to the National Council of Churches, in the United Methodist Council of Bishops (where there are some exceptions), and to persons in religion departments of church colleges.

Is it time for amicable separation? If progressive religion has a future, then it should be given a chance to set up a new church entity unencumbered by folk who maintain a traditional, Biblical view of human sexuality and marriage. It could start with those entities and groups already in its orbit of influence: most of the seminaries, most of the boards and agencies, the colleges and most of the Council of Bishops. Soon whether history is on the side of progressive religion should quickly become evident. While that plays out the rest of us can use our financial stewardship and ministry to “spread Scriptural holiness” and other outdated ideas here and around the world.