**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley Case*

*TRY HARDER, DO BETTER (Part 2)*

The State of the Church Report is a combined effort of the Connectional Table, the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) and the Council of Bishops. The report offers statistics, analysis, and vision for the future. For several years leading up to the 2012 General Conference (GC) the State of the Church Report emphasized the Call to Action study and recommendations which would have set forth some hopeful efforts to bring reform and renewal to the church. Unfortunately, the legislation was muddled by the GC (now being called the “do nothing” General Conference) which spent an inordinate amount of time arguing the politically correct make-up of church committees. Then, what was finally presented was declared unconstitutional by the Judicial Council. All of this is to say there is presently no visionary plan to lead the church for the coming years except to “Try Harder, Do Better.”

With this as background, it would seem appropriate, since official agencies of the church cannot articulate a vision for reform, that suggestions come from individuals, churches, and renewal groups.

First, it must be acknowledged that the possibilities for real reform are not bright. This is because what is needed is a new church culture, a radical change in theology, and an entirely different approach to doing church. If the Call to Action proposals, which represented a tiny step toward reform, were waylaid by entrenched interest groups during the 2012 General Conference, how can we expect anything far more radical to succeed? Plus at this point there is not the slightest recognition on the part of most church leaders that the present ideology and culture of the church is in any way flawed.

Nevertheless, we must keep trying. The evangelical groups, particularly Good News and the Confessing Movement, have for a number of years sought to articulate a vision for reform. It includes these provisions.

1) It is time to tell the truth about the ideology of inclusivism and diversity which now pervades much of United Methodist culture, especially among seminaries and boards and agencies. Our present approach is bearing no fruit. The church seems to make diversity as the end goal rather than a means to an end. Despite all the work of monitoring agencies and the quota systems, the church membership is less diverse today in terms of age, gender, political identity and ethnicity than it was a hundred years ago. The church today--that is the church in the pew--is increasingly aging, white, middle class, and, interestingly, Republican. If we want more political diversity, for example, the approach is not for the Board of Church and Society to keep endorsing Democrat ideology, and pretending that this represents United Methodism, but to win Democrats for Jesus Christ.

2) We must replace the failed ideology of inclusiveness with commitment to Wesleyan theology and the stated mission goal found in our Discipline: *to make disciples of Jesus* *Christ for the transformation of the world*. By Wesleyan theology we mean proclaiming with integrity the basic Wesleyan truths of original sin, blood atonement, repentance, salvation by grace through faith, and sanctification (holy living). If we are United Methodist let us be faithful to our Wesleyan heritage and its transforming gospel. Our Boards of Ordained Ministry and our seminaries are not producing enough pastors committed to our stated doctrine and our mission statement. Sad reports from a number of Boards of Ordained Ministry indicate that Boards are obsessed with inclusive language, whether or not prospective pastors are open to practicing homosexuals as a part of the congregation, doctrinaire views on infant baptism, institutional loyalty, and whether the busy work has been duly submitted. Seminaries seek academic recognition, inter-faith dialogue, and diversity in the faculty. By these means we perpetuate the very ideology that has contributed to the loss of 3.5 million U.S. members in forty-five years.

We would do better to prepare pastors with a clear call to preach, with passion for souls, with moral and doctrinal integrity, and a commitment to the United Methodist’s understanding of its mission. I have read a number of local church mission statements which emphasize following Jesus (as if Christianity is reduced to moral effort) and being open to all persons. We need to understand how foreign this is to the gospel. As far as I could tell none of these statements represent vital, vibrant churches.

At this point, then, we can talk about diversity and inclusiveness. If we truly want diversity we need to be inclusive of the poor, the marginalized, immigrant groups, youth, persons whose natural inclination in worship is toward Pentecostalism, and right-wing conservatives. Growing churches have ministry with all these types of persons. This would mean our preparation for ministry would have to undergo radical revision. . Many of our colleges and seminaries have their own mission statements and their own goals as institutions, and they do not understand themselves primarily as serving the church, except as they have their own definition of “church.”. Let these institutions be independent. Our seminaries want our money but their obsession with academic freedom precludes them from having to have any confessional stance to historic Wesleyanism and ministry among those they disdain. We need about half the seminaries we have now and we need seminaries committed to historic Wesleyanism.

When there is a positive report of the 2012 General Conference there is reference to $5 million for theological education in the Central Conferences and $7 million to recruit and train young clergy in the U.S. This is embarrassing. Our two most ineffective U.S. seminaries will receive more than $5 million in the next quadrennium. $7 million to recruit and train young clergy sounds good, but it is feared this money will perpetuate the same kind of church culture that is so unproductive today. There are more young persons wanting to do ministry than there are places to put them, but our present church leadership either doesn’t know who these persons are, or where they are, or are reluctant to recruit them because they are basically evangelical from independent churches and/or with a para-church ministries background.

Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) in Indiana presently has 420 persons in its ministry track. Sixty of these are United Methodist. I know of no United Methodist college or university that can come anywhere near these kinds of figures. The IWU students are committed young people trained in Wesleyan theology, interested in making a difference in the world. Will any of the $7 million be used to seek out these persons?

3) We must reach outside our US institutional walls to partner and cooperate and seek wisdom from those who are doing effective ministry today. At the moment this would mean opening up to the influences and the vision of evangelical groups. As long as we are limited in our ecumenical efforts with the old mainline denominations that are in worse shape than we are, we will only continue down the path to demise. How about bringing some Africans to pastor churches in the US?

4) The key to any reform would rest with bishops, who up to now have not distinguished themselves by visionary leadership. The bishops seem incapable of calling agencies to accountability and making tough decisions that would upset special interest groups. The present Council of Bishops cannot even hold accountable those within its own ranks who are encouraging disobedience to the discipline of the church. “Plan UMC,” which was approved by the General Conference, was ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Council because it would have violated the *Discipline* which places oversight and accountability responsibility with the bishops. Has anyone noted that if the bishops had been doing their job in the first place there never would have needed to be a Call to Action and a “Plan UMC?”

Can there be a hopeful future for the United Methodist Church in America? Yes. To that end the renewal groups will pray and work and believe.

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