**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Riley B. Case*

IS THERE A GOOD WORD for 2015?

What’s going wrong with America these days? There seems to be a foul mood in the land. According to an August 5 poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* 76% of Americans do not believe their children will be better off than they are. 71% believe the US is headed in the wrong direction. 60% believe the nation is plunging downward. There has never been a time in our nation’s history when this kind of pessimism about America has been so strong.

This is alarming because Americans have always been known for their optimism. America is the land of freedom and opportunity and progress. Early American evangelicals, from Jonathan Edwards to the Methodist frontier revivalists, were post-millennial. Buoyed by revival fires, they believed the cause of Christ would prosper until the Kingdom of God would be established on earth. After a thousand years Christ would come to claim His kingdom. This optimism fueled social reform. The future was always bright. The ugliness of the Civil War tempered this optimism. In the 1870s some evangelicals did a 160 degree flip and became pre-millennialists. The world was not getting better, but worse. The Kingdom would come only at the time of the 2nd Coming. Wars and rumors of wars, suffering, injustice, immorality and poverty did not suggest a hopeful future. Pre-millennialism was based on a pessimistic view of the world.

This pessimism did not go down well with theological modernism. In 1920 Harris Franklin Rall, Methodist theologian from Garrett, wrote his *Modern Premillennialsm and Christian Hope.* Rall was scathing in his criticism of premillennialism, mostly because of its pessimism. Pre-millennialism was literalistic, Jewish apocalypticism with no interest in social reform and kingdom building. By way of contrast Rall spoke of the modernists’ spiritual-ethical Kingdom based on science, education and new thinking. The world was heading toward the rule of Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Rall did not dwell much on socialism and communism but many of the modernists saw possibilities in the Soviet Union’s classless society.

It was not only the premillennialists but World War II and neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth who pointed out the flaws in modernism. Humankind was flawed, under sin, and not easily fixed by democracy and socialism and decrees announcing that we need to learn to live together. But even when chastened, old-style liberals were still almost always optimistic, gracious and easy to get along with.

What happened? Now, it seems, the progressives, both secular and religious progressives, are angry and cynical, projecting gloom and doom. The incidents at Ferguson, and New York, and subsequent street demonstrations against police brutality, racism, white privilege, and economic inequalities, have reached hysterical pitches. I have read these articles recently: “Why the US and Its Allies Are Responsible for Islam Extremism,” “America’s Decay Into a Violent and Cruel Place,” “Authoritarianism is Creeping Up in America,” ”10 Ways in which America is the World’s Most Corrupt Nation.” Progressives don’t speak much of sin but they see evil on every hand: Walmart, McDonald’s, Monsanto, big banks, the 1% who hold 22% of the nation’s wealth, the US policy toward Israel, and the theocracy-leaning religious right.

But evangelicals, liberal or conservative, are also counted among the 71% who believe the US is headed in the wrong direction. Evangelicals share many of the concerns of progressives: racism, wealth disparity between the rich and the poor, and the descent into violence, But evangelicals add further concerns: the breakdown of the family, sexual promiscuity, a growing secularism, increasing hostility against Christians, and the growing threat of Islam.

And what about the Church? The *Wall Street Journal* did not do a poll among Christians as to whether things are better or worse in the church. If it had it would probably have found even more pessimism. When filling other pulpits I often attend adult Sunday school classes in United Methodist churches and sometimes asked the question: are things better or worse in the Church? Inevitably our adults will say worse. Denominations are losing members; the young people are not in worship; churches are compromising their moral stands. When asked about United Methodism the responses mention loss of membership, controversial social pronouncements, and the gap between the leadership and people in the pew.

I usually try to encourage people to see the larger picture. Evangelicals, of all persons, should be optimistic about the future: for the country and the world and also for the church. We, after all, believe that God is in control. We not only quote but presumably believe Romans 8:26 “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him…” The Bible teaches there will be wars and rumors of wars and pestilence and disease and persecution and trials, but God is greater than all of this. We look beyond social and moral and economic and even religious trends. Progressives who place their hope in social planning and church institutionalism and economic planning and contrived new definitions of “rights” and “justice” have good reason to be pessimistic. The solutions offered by the world offer little hope. But Christians by faith can see the hand of God.

As we move through the year 2015 let us consider:

1) If we are Americans we have been privileged to live in one of the world’s most blessed countries. We should not discount the tragedy of real poverty. At the same time if our annual income is as much as $35,000 we are in the top 1% of the world’s richest persons. Our average household wealth, even when adjusted for inflation, is more than it has ever been. Of course, according to Bible teaching if we are blessed it is so we can be a blessing. Christians ought to be double and triple tithing.

2) 75% of Americans (in one poll it is 90%) of Americans still identify themselves as Christians. The percentage of persons who attend church weekly holds steady at 42%. This number is admittedly inflated (we don’t know if the people who exaggerate on polls want to impress God or the pollsters) but the numbers remain constant. Growing secularism does not necessarily translate into loss of Christian faith.

3) According to the latest Barna study the number of people who live in extreme poverty in the world has decreased by half of the past 30 years. The percentage of persons who do not have access to clean water, enough food, sufficient clothing and shelter, and medicine, has declined from 21% in 2011 to 16% in 2013. The advancements in US agriculture accounts for some of this. Increased wealth the world over accounts for some of this. The number of missionaries being sent from America has never been higher, and this accounts for some of this.

4) Despite statistics showing the millennials in the US have less interest in religion there are still several millions of millennials who attend church once a month. Among these millennials 96% believe the Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life. 46% believe the Bible is the Word of God and is to be taken literally.

5) Despite the number of discouraging developments in the United Methodist Church, United Methodists are some of the finest people in the land. I thank God for the United Methodist pastors and friends who have helped me in many ways. United Methodist people are highly respected in many of the communities across this land.

Let’s be optimistic for 2015.

Of course conservatives are also among the 71% who believe the US is headed in the wrong direction.