**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**THE WESLEYAN COVENANT ASSOCIATION – REFLECTIONS**

Approximately 1,800 persons attended the launch event for the Wesleyan Covenant Association in Chicago, on October 7. There were persons from every annual conference in the states and from several overseas conferences. Responses and evaluations from those who attended have been positive: ”I see a future for the United Methodist Church.” “It was so great to be among people who share common beliefs and values.” “I’m in this all the way.”

I express here what I believe is the long-term significance of the gathering and the association.

It should now be apparent that faithfulness to the historic Wesleyan message (in other words evangelicalism) is the best hope for the future of the global United Methodist Church. The realization of this has been a long-time coming. I speak as one who has followed and written about evangelicals in the church for over fifty years. In July, 1966, Charles Keysor wrote an article in the *Christian Advocate* entitled “Methodism’s Silent Minority.” It was not an angry article; it was rather a heartfelt plea for an understanding of a significant number of Methodists who were loyal to the church, supported its doctrines, and “sang gospel songs.” The article came at a time when it was assumed by much of the leadership of the church that “fundamentalism” (the pejorative label attached to all of evangelicalism at the time) was a fast-dying relic of former times. Its place had been taken by any number of faddish theologies: process theology, liberation theology, neo-orthodoxy, Death of God, existentialism--and also by grand schemes promoting “justice” on the earth by mobilizing Methodist resources toward the goal of a new order on the earth. The grand scheme was no better exemplified than by the 1972 General Conference which restructured the church with quota systems, gender and racial identity advocacy groups, independent superagencies accountable generally to no one, a brand new Social Principles statement, a doctrinal statement that depreciated Scripture and introduced the concept of theological pluralism (anything goes) as the lynchpin of the new world of United Methodism.

The overwhelming response to Keysor’s article revealed that those covered by the phrase “Silent Majority” were alive and well and ready to “come out of the closet” in defense of the faith. Most of the “coming out” was done by “little people,” that is, by persons without institutional status. I remember being told a number of times, “I support what you are doing, but because of my position I cannot be involved.” This was especially true of former EUBs and African Americans.

The push-back against evangelical renewal, namely against the newly formed Good News movement—a later against groups like the Confessing Movement-- included charges of “right-wing extremism,” “literalism,” racism,” “out of touch with the times,” and ”contrary to the spirit of Jesus.” Charles Keysor responded to the charges in another *Christian Advocate* article in the fall of 1971. Keysor referred to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and commented it was not helpful to dig up old bones and fight battles from the past all over again. It was a different world with different issues. The liberal argument that “fundamentalism” was isolated and dying was a poor reading of current church developments. The truth was it was not orthodoxy that was ossified and dying, but old-time liberalism. Change was sweeping over the church and it was not favoring the demythologized Jesus and the Secular City but rather the Jesus People, the revival of Christianity in the Third World, the charismatic movement, and the proliferation of evangelical para-church groups. The evangelical presence would no longer be silent and it was questionable whether it was then or ever had been a minority.

Religious progressivism without a firm grounding in Wesleyan doctrine has no future. It is a social program without a theology. It is license without responsibility. Its agenda is presently a minority agenda for United Methodism, if United Methodism is understood as a global church. Despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars and the concerted efforts by the grand coalition of identity caucus groups to force the church to abandon its historic position on sexuality, the General Conference in Portland was prepared to support traditional positions on sexuality issues. The motion to defer the votes and refer the church’s problems to a Commission on a Way Forward was a last-ditch effort to buy time to find a way to avoid division. Over the church hangs a threat: if progressive forces do not get their way on matters of sexuality, they will seek to shut down the churchas it presently exists. These efforts have already begun by the breaking of covenants and by open defiance of church positions and discipline by whole conferences and jurisdictions, and the election of an openly lesbian bishop.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association is a rallying point for those who desire to live and minister to a lost world from the perspective of United Methodism’s historic evangelical doctrines and practice and mission and order. In the broader Methodist world this perspective is no longer a “silent minority;” it represents the majority of United Methodists across the globe and it desires to be vocal in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. It also desires to be in ministry to all persons and to advocate for the Biblical understanding of justice. This, we believe, will be in the context of integrity in relationships, including the upholding of the vows and covenants of the church. This position should not be considered extremist or “right-wing.” It is fully in accord with what was celebrated at the World Methodist Conference this summer which was a gathering of 80 Methodist bodies from around the world.

Many good things are happening in the United Methodist world. . Two weeks before the meeting of the Wesley Covenant Association, nearly 1,500 persons gathered for New Room Conference in Tennessee under the banner “Sow For a Great Awakening.”. Some weeks before that Aldersgate Fellowship gathered in Kentucky. Just before that the list was published of the fastest growing United Methodist Churches in America. The great majority of those churches could be classified as evangelical or moderately evangelical. Ten of the twenty-five pastors were Asbury graduates.

Within the next few months the bishops’ Commission on a Way Forward will be meeting to discuss how the United Methodist Church can proceed through the rest of the 21st century. If the Commission can find a way for the church to proceed while protecting the integrity of all perspectives in the church, fine. If the Commission’s work finds that the integrity of those perspectives can only be protected through some sort of amicable separation, this is also fine. . Either way, we believe God will so lead that the evangelical message that was proclaimed so clearly at the Wesleyan Covenant Association launch event will be an important part of the church’s future..