**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**LONG AFTER CHRISTIANITY HAS DIED AWAY THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH WILL GO MARCHING ON**

I was at a meeting a number of years ago where Elton Trueblood made a remark about the Methodists: “long after Christianity has died away,” Trueblood quipped, “the Methodist Church will go marching on.”

Trueblood was making a comment on the organizational structure of Methodism. No part of church life is left uncovered by the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, now 875 pages in length. When I became a district superintendent in the mid-1980s, I thought it would be good to study more thoroughly the *Discipline* in preparation for my new appointment. I found 175 references to the local church. I found myself reading about why a local church, even small local churches, needed coordinators for children, youth, younger adults, older adult, and family. We also needed work areas for Christian unity and interreligious concerns, church and society, education, evangelism, higher education and campus ministry, missions, religion and race, status and role of women, stewardship and worship. This meant, at one of my churches with only four members, that every person had to have ten jobs. Before one charge conference, some early comers were looking over the Nominations Committee report, and asked “what is this Status and Role of Women work area?” I explained that according to the *Discipline* it was felt churches needed a group “to devise strategies to eliminate sexism in all its manifestations from the total life of the United Methodist Church.” Like loyal United Methodists the eleven women present (there were no men) shrugged their shoulders and took it all in stride.

Before the Methodist-EUB merger the Methodist Church was already organized to the hilt. We were directed in the *Discipline* to what kind of Sunday School material could be used (only official material), what kind of hymnal could be used (only the official hymnal), what kind of audio-visuals could be used (only official audio-visuals), what kind of missionaries could speak in our churches (only officially approved missionaries), what kind of evangelists could preach in our churches (only official evangelists unless we had special permission), what kind of seminaries our ministers could attend (only officially approved seminaries). The Church was our Big Brother (or Sister) guiding us in all matters. In a church which eventually would celebrate its diversity, in the case of bureaucratic management one size was meant to fit all.

No wonder when Roy L. Smith, sometimes known as “Mr. Methodist” wrote his *Why I Am a Methodist* in 1955 he commented that Methodism had not been plagued by the doctrinal disputes other denominations had because the present generation of Methodists had grown up with one, official standard of Sunday School material and its ministers had been trained in seminaries offering one official course of instruction. According to Smith through the process of standardization an impressive unity of viewpoints had been achieved.

The Methodist-EUB merger 1968-1972 gave the church more bureaucracy, not less. The 1972 *Discipline* authorized independent superboards, accountable only to themselves. It committed the church to COCU (Churches of Christ Uniting) a failed ecumenical effort whose time never should have come. It decreed a Board of Ordained Ministry path to ordination so complicated and confusing that every General Conference since then, save one, has authorized a new study to try to clarify and improve the process. The merger also launched the quota system, the beginning of the balkanization of the denomination in which loyalty to identity groups often supercedes loyalty to the whole body. It gave us the *Book of Resolutions*, now 1,000 pages in length, with 39 resolutions alone for Native Americans, instructing not only the church in group think, but also directing the U.S. government on how it ought to be run..

It is understandable, therefore, that the *Advanced Christian Advocate*, uses 20 pages to guide the delegates to the 2016 General Conference in behavior and speech. Delegates, for example, should not assume persons are “he” or “she” because some may be transitioning in transgenderism. To make sure there is proper conformity monitors will record proceedings.

This is the stuff, the extensisve institutionalism, that impressed Elton Trueblood years ago. But something far more serious is now taking place. We might ask whether institutional United Methodism will carry on without Christianity not because Christianity has died, but because institutional United Methodist has simply abandoned it. I thought of this when I was on the campus of a church-related college not long ago. There is no longer a “chaplain.” There is an Office on Spiritual Life with the purpose of helping students explore interfaith engagement. Mission trips have been replaced with “service projects” and the cross replaced with a rose. Ordained UM clergy cannot teach religion classes. The school has been ranked as one of the better “party schools” in the nation. The campus church which once worshipped 600 now worships less than 100. The church claims this as United Methodist but one searches to find any evidence or reference to Christianity.

Our Articles of Religion define the Church as the gathering of faithful persons where the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered. In many parts of the denomination it is questionable as to whether the pure Word of God is even understood, let alone being preached. Our denomination has as its mission statement to make disciples to Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Our denomination once was told “you have nothing to do but save souls.” Our denomination once preached simplicity and moral living and holiness. Our dictionaries once defined the word “evangelical” as the preaching of original sin and the atonement “as preached by Baptists and Methodists.” On an institutional level much of this appears to be lacking as the church prepares for General Conference 2016.

So is the institutional church abandoning John Wesley and the Articles of Religion and what has up to now been identified as United Methodist? Daniel Dick who blogs under the title Methodeviations must think so. In his April 6 blog he writes:

**Our divisions are grounded on poor biblical interpretation, flawed historical and theological understandings and a pure lack of comprehension of our sacraments. The Bible offers a cultural/purity code that has absolutely nothing to do with the post-enlightenment morality codes of Western civilization.**

So, evidently, according to Dick, the Bible doesn’t apply to our present day. We ought to be looking to the morality codes of post-enlightenment Western civilization. We should be keeping up with the gender studies pronouncements of the secular universities, and with the tweets of Miley Cyrus and the latest movies featuring zombies, vampires, slashers and werewolves.

The values of the religious progressives: inclusivity, diversity, personal autonomy, and new definitions of rights and justice and equality, don’t need the grounding of the Christian faith. They may be admirable values but by themselves they do not heal the sin-sick soul. Some forms of secularism promote the same values. The idea that all are acceptable in society or in the sight of God regardless of belief or practice and that freedom is doing whatever we want to do when we want to do it can be, and is, developed without reference to Biblical faith.

“Long after Christianity has died away….”

Just for the record Christianity is not about to die away. Whether in institutional United Methodism or not, and whether among progressives or not, the gospel will be preached and believed and there are plenty of United Methodists that will be seeing to that. Jesus Christ will be proclaimed, even as the Articles of Religion, state: “very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of persons.” If there are morality codes to be followed there will be plenty of United Methodists, if not from the progressive centers in United States, at least from congregations all over the world, who will march to the tune of God’s truth in Scripture, and not from Western civilization enlightenment.

Let us pray that this is the message that will prevail at Portland, 2016. May God be praised.

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