**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***RESPECTING CONSCIENCE***

 A number of petitions have been submitted to the United Methodist General Conference that are of interest to evangelicals. One of these has the title of *Expedited Exit* and would make provision for a congregation to cease to be United Methodist and still keep its property. The legislation would add a new para. 2548 to the Discipline which would read as follows:

 Para 2548 Para 2548. *Surrender of Charter of Local Church and Disaffiliation For Reasons of Conscience – Because of the currect deep conflict over the church’s position on the practice of homosexuality and the blessing of homosexual unions, a local church may surrender its charter from the United Methodist church and disaffiliate based upon the local church’s declaration that for reasons of conscience, witness, or mission it can better serve Christ and his kingdom by not being affiliated with the United Methodist Church and its annual conference.*

 The paragraph would then set up requirements for disaffiliation. These include a period of study and discernment by the congregation, an affirmative vote of two-thirds of the church’s professing members present and voting at a duly called church conference, payment to the conference of any funds invested in that local church in the previous five years, and payment of the current year’s apportionments in full plus an addition sum equal to two years of apportionments.

 If these provisions are followed the local church would be released from the provisions of para. 2501, which states that properties of UM local churches are held, in trust, for the benefit of the entire denomination.

 Several other “plans” which seek a “way forward” in which the denomination would make compromises in order to keep the denomination from division, also make provision for some sort of expedited exit. Most of these are related to some form of local option, in which congregations would decide individually whether they would allow same-sex weddings in the church, or allow practicing homosexuals to be appointed as pastor. In these cases the expedited exit is dependent upon the passing of other legislation.

 No one in the church at this time is advocating for any kind of denominational division. The cries for “unity” come from every hand. Various “plans” are being proposed that will somehow allow the church to compromise and continue to live together. But the truth is that General Conference 2016 has the potential for major disaster. While the vast majority of United Methodists, especially lay people, believe that the matter of homosexuality is far down the list of issues facing the church, the truth is that a coalition of progressive caucuses and action groups are making it THE issue for 2016 and for the future of the church.

 In preparation for that the progressive coalition speaks of a $500,000 budget to influence the 2016 General Conference. Those who believe homosexuality is not the all-consuming issue at General Conference are going to have a hard time convincing the progressive caucuses otherwise. As Rev. Sara Thompson Tweedy, speaking of the LGTBQ members of the church, declared at the recent “Gather At the River” conference held in San Antonio: they “will not accept a ‘no’ vote at Portland, but will be prepared to take additional recourse….The Civil Rights movement taught us to put pressure on the institution until it had no choice but to change.” Thus there will be persons at the General Conference, some not even United Methodist, who will be present for only one purpose: to press the UM Church to approve in all its forms the practice of homosexuality.

 A number of persons want to identify with a “moderate middle,” which is all good and well. But how will the “moderate middle” deal with the pressures on the church to make radical change, except to submit to the pressures by way of various compromises? Proposals to “agree to disagree” are acceptable neither to the significant numbers who wish for the church to affirm Biblical standards, nor to those who wish such standards to be reversed. The position that we all do what is right in our own eyes, is not highly approved by the Bible.

 Thus, the proposal to allow churches to disaffiliate may be as good a way forward as can be expected. If, as Rev. Tweedy said at the Gather At the River conference, the UMC is so stagnant, “it seems like all it is producing is flesh-eating mosquitos,” why be affiliated with such a church? The expedited exit option offers an opportunity for a new start for progressive persons and churches. By the same token, if there are evangelical churches who believe strongly that compromise on the Biblical view of human sexuality is the sign of apostasy, the expedited exit option would offer such churches the freedom of conscience to go their own way. Does the institutional church wish to challenge, pressure and punish all of those who believe they could do better on their own than to link with others with whom they have very little in common?

 There is, of course, an even bigger concern. Pressure to change the standards of the church in regard to human sexuality will affect even more the UM Church overseas. Some of the African conferences have very little property to be lost if they were to disaffiliate from the denomination. Such disaffiliation is almost certain to take place if the church goes in the direction, say, that the Connectional Table wants it to go (take out of the *Discipline* the prohibitions regarding homosexuality). Their sensitivities are hardly even being considered in the present discussion. Recently, the bishops of those conferences issued a statement to the denomination urging the church not to compromise its stance on human sexualtiy. To date there is hardly even a recognition of the statement from the U.S. bishops nor from any official groups in the U.S.

 Pray for the church.