**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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**UNITED METHODISM’S CORPORATE CULTURE AND THE INABILITY TO CHANGE (PART 2)**

I have sometimes used the phrase “mediating elite” is refer to church leadership (though it could be used in politics or any other discipline) that believes its calling in life is to control and guide the church to keep it respectable, progressive and free from dissession. The phrase is not original with me. It is used by Nathan Hatch in his classic work, *The Democratization of American Christianity*. Hatch uses it particularly in tracing the rise of the Methodists, the Disciples, the Baptists, and the Mormons in the early 1800s. During that period respected religious leaders--who were mostly Congregationalists, Episcopalians, or Unitarians--were appalled at the behavior of the uneducated, populist, unruly religious upstarts like the Methodists. They felt it important to inform, refine, correct and otherwise redirect these groups for the good of Christian civilization and the future of America. They were quite aptly labeled as “the mediating elite.”

Much has changed from those early days. Now, it seems, United Methodism has its own mediating elite. United Methodism is no longer a movement but a religious institution complete with governing boards and bureaucracies and a corporate culture. In some ways it is an entity to itself with its own ways of thinking and acting and doing church. As an institution it spends an inordinate amount of time and effort not challenging the world with the gospel but seeking to order and reorder its own internal life and to advance such causes as institutional unity, proper political thinking, and loyalty to the denomination. While this understanding of the church as a religious institution might have had some validity in the earlier years of the 20th century it can be argued that it is a model that is not working in the 21st century. This is a time of decline for organizations in general, whether Masonic Lodges or Rotary Clubs or religious denominations or perhaps even political parties. Religious vitality these days is encountered in new ways of doing church: house churches, independent congregations, mega-churches, local mission initiatives, and creative ways of using technology in education. There is less vitality in top-down institutional operations, and what usually goes with them: visioning, planning, committees, coordinating, programming, steps into the future, conversations, missional priorities, dialogues, hearings, and initiatives. Also general disinterest.

Methodism once operated from the bottom up. The Methodist revival was not planned by a committee. It was not approved by the bishops of the Anglican Church. It was a work of God directed by the Holy Spirit through new practices and strategies. Wesley preached in the open air to poor miners. He organized class meetings and love feasts and used lay preachers and testimony meetings and introduced hymns with popular tunes, all to the horror of the established church. In America the open air preaching led to camp meetings which led to the introduction of the altar call and women exhorters and persons who preached and evangelized without credentials. Jesse Lee, early Methodist historian, commented that almost all early Methodist growth was revival growth. Revivals were not legislated by General Conferences. Methodist camp meetings never were “official.” That is, they were not authorized or even mentioned in the church’s *Discipline.* The camp meetings attracted poor people and persons who would never otherwise set foot inside a church. This included blacks, both slave and free. The preachers introduced the cold-call evangelistic pastoral visit. They started churches in homes. The preachers also created a new hymnody, the spiritual, which would morph into Black spirituals and gospel music.

Along the way Methodists took on sin in every form they could identify. They believed in the moral life: they opposed gambling and card-playing (associated with gambling) and dancing (associated with prostitution) and alcohol. They supported the family. They preached sexual purity. These moral positions came not from denominational resolutions but from Methodism’s preached convictions. From 2% of the religious population in 1784 Methodism multiplied until, in their several forms, Methodism claimed 33% of the religious population by 1850. In the process they disdained the recognition and acceptance of the secular society. In 1850 the value of the average Methodist Church building was less than the building of any other denomination including Baptists.

Then Methodists became respectable. They introduced robed choirs and rented pews and brick churches with steeples. They started colleges and then seminaries. They began to shed their austere habits of dress and behavior. The story is told that in the late 1860s Bishop Matthew Simpson and his wife were being entertained in the home of a prominent Presbyterian clergyman. The wife of the Presbyterian minister, wanting to respect the Methodist convictions on simple attire, came to dinner plainly dressed without jewelry or finery. Mrs. Simpson, on the other hand, evidently wanting to identify with the Presbyterians, came to dinner in finery heavily laden with jewelry. The incident as it was reported drew two different responses. From Methodists moving up in the world it was a sign of Methodism’s coming of age and taking its place among the respected citizens of society. From the Holiness wing of the church the incident was a sign of Methodism’s loss of soul and compromise with the world.

Following the Civil War church leadership sought to bring the Sunday school, which to this point was operating with lay leadership, under control of professional church educators. In 1908 Methodists of both the M.E. Church and the M.E. Church South were instrumental in founding a new organization, the Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations, in competition with and repudiation of the International Sunday School Association. The new council would be run by trained professionals with the goals of introducing and advancing new understandings of religious education. According to E. B. Chappell, editor of publications in the M.E. Church South this meant, among other things, that educational principles and not theological presuppositions would be the guiding principles of the material.

In the early 1900’s Borden Parker Bowne of Boston would speak of the “swamps of ignorance” characterizing the church and the need for “trained intellectuals” who would “adjust religious thought to the ever advancing thought of cultivated intelligence so as to remove endless misunderstanding.” In that spirit the M.E. Church South added 21 new professional staff positions in its Sunday school department from 1911 to 1918. In 1924 the General Conference of the M.E. Church consolidated all educational work under one board, the Board of Education, advancing a comprehensive program of education, which really meant everything would then flow from the top down. In 1923 the M.E. Church brought all of its agencies under control of a super-coordinating (and controlling) group called the World Service Program.

In 1955 Roy L. Smith, pastor of First Church Los Angeles, the largest church in all of Methodism, author of 30 popular books,and perhaps the best-known Methodist of his day, authored *Why I am a Methodist*. After he spoke glowingly of Methodism’s liberality of viewpoint, Smith, evidently not noting the irony of his comments, went on to explain Methodism’s policy of insuring unity (uniformity) in the church bought about by allowing only official system of Sunday school material and one official way of choosing and training ministers, and holding to one official approach to spiritual truth. He might have added the Methodists also showed their “liberality of viewpoint” by supporting only official missionaries and only official traveling evangelists. In more traditional denominations the purpose for “official” and “approved” was to guard against heresy. In Methodism the purpose was to distance Methodism from its own independent, populist and revivalist past, and to bring Methodists to heel under the thumb of the mediating elite. By the 1960s Methodists, by restraints in the Discipline, were mandated to use only “official” Sunday school material, “official” hymnbooks, “official” audio-visuals, and “official” confirmation materials. Everything that went on, in fact, was supposed to meet the standards of the Board of Education.

Thanks to the Methodist-EUB merger some of the restrictions have been removed. However, the church has added many more. Some of these will be addressed in future Happenings articles. They include such areas as monitoring agencies, church pronouncements from the top down, the standards set by Boards of Ordained Ministry, the actions of the University Senate in regard to seminaries, and the assumption that the corporate culture, can trump what parts of the Discipline are to be enforced and what parts aren’t.

Can the Church change its corporate culture? Many of us believe United Methodism’s future as a viable Christian Church depends on it. Given the present leadership, the mediating elite, it is difficult to understand how this change might ever take place.

Still, God is a God of miracles. And we pray for one.