**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**KEEPING UP WITH THE RENEWAL GROUPS**

Several of the evangelical renewals groups formed themselves into a coalition, the Reform and Renewal Coalition, to represent evangelical concerns at the 2012 General Conference at Tampa. The coalition conducted itself well, with civility and dignity. While it cannot be said that much of the legislation proposed by evangelicals passed the conference (actually not much significant legislation of any kind passed the conference), the evangelical presence was felt, generally in a positive way. Delegates from overseas consulted with persons from the coalition regularly. Delegates who attended the coalition briefing breakfasts declared the presentations helpful. The newsletters issued by the coalition were insightful.

For those who sometimes criticize the evangelical renewal groups as divisive and disruptive, it should be pointed out that It was not evangelicals who tied up valuable conference time arguing over rule changes or challenging the diversity make-up of committees. It was not evangelicals who disrupted the conference with demonstrations or made haranguing speeches on the floor of the conference. It was not evangelicals who were seen “high-fiving” and rejoicing when the Judicial Council ruled the cobbled together restructure plan unconstitutional. It is not evangelicals who are now arguing that the statements of the church regarding Christian marriage are to be challenged with ecclesiastical disobedience.

The evangelical renewal groups have come of age. They should be considered as partners, not adversaries, in the church’s desire for renewal. The church has sometimes been guilty of racial and gender prejudice. It has also been guilty of theological, political and social prejudice. The days should be over when the renewal groups were painted with such words as *fundamentalist, right-wing, disruptive, racist, sexist, homophobic, hateful, McCarthyite, exclusionary, literalist, out-of-touch, paranoiac, bigots, extremists, and witch hunters*. It has not been a healthy church climate when persons--especially in instances where these were persons of color--have been told that association with any of the evangelical groups would hinder their careers.

It should not be necessary, but we will make the point anyway, to remind the institutional church that the evangelical renewal groups do love the church and over the years have been insightful in their analysis of the church’s problems and in their calls for redirection. Evangelicals, closer to people in the pew than bishops, seminaries, and agency staff people, have sounded the alarm for forty-five years that good, solid, United Methodists are disillusioned with their church because of weak Sunday school material, doctrinal heterodoxy, one-sidedness on social issues, poorly prepared pastors, alien ideology in missions, and confusion on moral teaching. The independent churches are filled with former United Methodists who gave up on United Methodism. The present renewal groups represent those who have stayed with United Methodism and who believe that the church can be renewed and does not need to continue its slide into apostasy and irrelevance.

With this as background, it would seem appropriate at this time to be reminded who these renewals groups are and how they were started and what they are offering the church today. For the next several Happenings articles these groups will be reviewed.

**GOOD NEWS**

Good News is the granddaddy of the modern evangelical renewal movements in the UM Church. Good News was organized in 1967 after Chuck Keysor, a pastor in Illinois wrote an article for the *Christian Advocate* titled “Methodism’s Silent Minority.” Out of the overwhelming response to the article a group of laity and clergy founded Good News. The group published the award-winning (award-winning from the Evangelical Press Association not from the institutional denominational press) magazine, *Good News*, which has been the major voice for renewal since 1967. A gathering of evangelicals drew 2,000 persons in Cincinnati in 1970. In 1974 Good News adopted the Junaluska Affirmation, an interpretation of Wesleyan doctrine. Albert Outler commented that Good News was the only group in the church to respond to the 1972 doctrinal statement challenge to interpret Wesley theology for the modern day.

Over the years Good News has defended historic Christian teaching against tremendous pressure to compromise. In the run-up to the 1980 General Conference UM News Service reported that at the pre-conference briefings all agency representatives and representatives of all caucuses, except Good News, sought to change the Disciplinary statement that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. It was, it seemed, Good News against the world. The statement was not changed.

A major contribution of Good News has been to urge discouraged evangelicals not to leave the church but to work for reform. People in the pew appreciate the fact that even when bishops do not hold the church or other bishops accountable, Good News (and today the Confessing Movement and the Institute of Religion and Democracy) are willing to speak up on behalf of church teaching. An example is when bishops of the church openly urge ecclesiastical disobedience and refer to the church’s positions as “sin.”

Good News has also been involved in the positive improvement of Sunday school and study material. Evangelicals have been recruited as writers; have served on the Curriculum Resources Committee, and have made suggestions that have been incorporated into the curriculum process.

Good News for 2013 will work with a budget of $870,000. The magazine is being sent to 13,000 churches. It has most recently hired John Southwick, formerly a staff person with the Board of Global Ministries, to do research.

**A FUND FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION (AFTE)**

Persons associated today with AFTE might not want to consider AFTE as an evangelical renewal group, but it is a good example of what can be accomplished when evangelicals and those willing to work with evangelicals cooperate for the good of the church. AFTE traces its beginning to 1975 when Ed Robb, chair of Good News, preached a highly-publicized address criticizing the seminaries. In a remarkable turn of events Robb linked with Dr. Albert Outler, one of the church’s foremost Wesley scholars, to start a foundation to fund scholars working on advanced degrees willing to affirm “Core Wesleyan Doctrines.” These core values include affirmation of the divine inspiration and ultimate authority of the Scriptures, the incarnation of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human, and the necessity of conversion as the result of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Robb on different occasions mentioned that Outler, at least in private, was more upset with the seminaries than Robb was. Outler believed evangelicals needed to be involved in academic teaching ministry but needed to be credentialed and thus lent his name and influence to the cause.

The January 25 issue of *United Methodist Reporter* carried a major story on AFTE. Persons who have been funded by AFTE become John Wesley Fellows. There are presently 145 John Wesley Fellows, about a third of whom now serve faculties of theological schools. Other teach in colleges. At least one (Scott Jones) is a bishop. The day is long past from the time when one seminary dean announced that a John Wesley Fellow would only teach in his seminary “over my dead body.” From an evangelical perspective, despite the inadequacies of the church’s seminaries, the seminary situation is much better than 40 years ago, when it was almost impossible to find evangelical presence on the official church seminary campuses. The link for AFTE is [www.johnwesleyfellows.org](http://www.johnwesleyfellows.org).

(More on renewals groups in coming Happenings articles)