**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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**HOLY CONFERENCING AT GENERAL CONFERENCE? -- NOT**

Church leaders are again urging that United Methodism’s General Conference, meeting in Portland, Oregon, May 10-20, be committed to “Christian Conferencing,” in which believers discern God’s will by prayer, by civility, by listening and respecting one another, and finding the way forward. We have urged this, or “Holy Conferencing,” a John Wesley phrase, many times (this will be my ninth General Conference, five of which I attended as a delegate). In my previous eight conferences I came away not convinced that I had witnessed Holy Conferencing as much as brutal secular politics.

Holy Conferencing can work. I once was serving in a rural church in which the problem of what to do with all the children was brought up to the church council. Before the evening was over the council had decided to add two rooms to the sanctuary, had approved a plan (a builder was on the committee) and had started a fund drive. Another church I served always used Holy Conferencing in its annual programming retreat. I have seen the annual conference work through thorny problems on several occasions. But in each of these situations there was a great deal of trust among those who were conferencing, and there was a real openness to whatever future God had for the group. Holy Conferencing works best in determining budgets and policy decisions and visioning for the future. It builds on the contagion of excitement that builds as new possibilities open. It works best in small groups. It also works best when there is enough of a sense of unity to start with so that persons, whose opinions do not prevail, are willing to abide by the final decisions of the conference.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that these conditions are in place for successful Christian Conferencing in Portland, 2016. For one thing, The United Methodist Church is a polarized church, primarily because of the issue of the practice of homosexuality. One morning at the last General Conference as I made my way to the conference center I passed through a gauntlet of seventeen different persons, distributing special interest hand-outs, pins, devotion sheets, newsletters, snacks and stoles. The stoles were being urged on people by Soul Force (not even a United Methodist group) and by its United Methodist gay-advocate allies, to mark those who would stand in unity with the gay agenda.

In addition the church is polarized because of identity politics based on race, gender, age, doctrinal understandings (and a few other things), so that at the last general conferences persons were wearing various kinds of badges or insignia to identify what special interest group they represented or were supporting. The legislative groups spent inordinate amounts of time on issues relating to the proper gender and ethnic and age representation on task forces and study groups. This in turn led in the one legislative group I was observing, to a thirty-minute discussion on the proper age range of a “young adult.” On another occasion there was a discussion on what is an “ethnic minority.” The legislative group dealing with the Call to Action report spent the entire first week and could not come up with a recommended proposal. The chairs of the conference reminded the body on several occasions they were not using words like “defeated” to refer to legislation that was being voted down, since “defeated” reflected war language, and we were not at war with one another. Except that it did indeed feel like a war. We were instructed not to cheer after speeches or after votes but that did not preclude sighs and murmuring. After the session on “Holy Conferencing” intended to understand one another and hear each other’s stories, the accusation was made that the session had been used for “bullying.” Through all of this conversations were being “monitored” for sexist or hurtful language. These activities led to a serious disconnect with at least some of the African delegates who between having to work with translators and being led down paths of how to speak correctly in ways totally foreign to them, got lost in the process.

After the first key votes that indicated the church would maintain its historic and Biblical stance in regard to marriage and the practice of homosexuality, the conference was subjected to its usual disruptive demonstration. This was the fifth or so of these which in the past had included smashing the communion chalice, covering the altar with black, and defying all appeals to clear the floor, all of which were taking up precious conference time at the rate of $1,500 a minute. In 2000 two bishops were arrested for breaking civil laws in order to protest church actions. The ill will generated by these disruptions have not been good witnesses for Holy Conferencing, nor for any positive witness to an observing world. They speak much more of angry secular politics than behavior within the family of God. In 2012 the disruptors were able to effect an agenda change agreed to by bishops and the Calendar Committee (but not by the conference itself) that no more votes would be taken on any issue relating to homosexual practice and abortion.

When the General Conference was over there was not an agreement that the church would abide by the decisions made at the conference. When the Western Jurisdictional Conference met following General Conference a resolution was passed indicating that since the General Conference had defied God’s will (evidently they have insight into what God’s will really is) the jurisdiction did not feel obligated to abide by the actions of the church. And they didn’t. One bishop, Melvin Talbert, openly defied, challenged and undermined the Church and the Discipline and even the Council of Bishops by entering another jurisdiction uninvited and performing a same sex marriage. Of course there was no accountability and no consequence. There are more serious threats promised for 2016 if the General Conference once again upholds the Biblical and traditional position on marriage.

Love Your Neighbor Coalition, a collation of 13 activist groups and caucuses, some supported with denominational apportionment money, has sought funds (up to $500,000) from within and from outside the church (the Collins Foundation has donated $46,000) to overwhelm the conference with its gay agenda. The purpose is not to encourage “Christian Conferencing” but to convince the church to abandon its historic view on human sexuality. The opinion has been expressed that moral persuasion does not work; what works is economic and political pressure. As a part of the strategy 350 – 500 persons will descend upon Portland to be trained in “non-violent conflict.” Outsiders, not delegates, talk about “shutting the conference down” if the conference does not submit to this pressure.

One assumes that the conference will not be shut down. One assumes also that the United Methodist Church will continue to exist in one form or another. One must also assume that God (if not the bishops) is still in control and can do a great thing and cause hearts to be changed and unity and harmony to result from the General Conference. Prayers of many groups are being offered up asking for such a divine intervention.

At this point it is uncertain what divine intervention would look like. Various individuals and groups of moderates and centrists are calling for “ways forward” in which polarized groups in the conference can compromise in order to live together. Some of these appear to be desperate “peace at any price” solutions. Persons proposing these solutions are fine people and their intentions are good, but good intentions do not always solve problems. Most of these “ways forward” involve some form of “agree to disagree” or letting local churches or conferences or pastors in charge of churches, make decisions about what the church’s teaching really is. Any “agree to disagree” plan is really a form of “we all do what is right in our own eyes and all others are to respect our actions, beliefs, and behavior.” This is a formula for confusion, chaos, and bad feeling. It is also a formula for the disintegration of United Methodism as we know it.

What is the best “way forward?” Let delegates and all who attend the conference, including observers, commit themselves to civility and respect. Let the conference operate fairly by accepted parliamentary procedure, by *Robert’s Rules of Order*, which has been proved to be the fairest way to conduct meetings such as the United Methodist General Conference. Let there be discussion and debate. Let the votes be taken and let the church abide by the results. If, after all of this, persons, churches, groups, or caucuses, by conscience cannot agree to abide by the results, let there be an opportunity for amicable separation, or some kind of exit from the denomination with honor. No one wants this, but let it be recognized that it might be better than what are the alternatives. It might also be God’s way of working.