**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**KEEPING UP WITH THE RENEWAL GROUPS (PART 3)**

Persons who love the United Methodist Church are looking for signs of hope in a denomination that, at least in the United States, has lost 3.5 million members over a 40-year period, and which seems to lack focus as to its doctrine, its core moral and ethical beliefs, and its mission. There are some bright spots here and there: some dynamic local churches; the overseas church especially in Africa and the Philippines; a greater commitment to evangelism and Wesleyanism in seminaries like United and Asbury; some very promising young leadership. Still, for the most part the reports are not encouraging. While some individual bishops are highly respected and are offering inspiring leadership in their respective areas, the Council of Bishops as a whole gives the impression of being dysfunctional. The general boards and agencies are stuck in the rut of the 1960s. The General Conference of 2012 cost the church about 9 million dollars and despite all the talk of change and reform in the months leading up to the conference, accomplished no reform and very little of anything else.

It appears that renewal will not come from the leadership of the institutional corporation known as the United Methodist Church. If there is to be renewal, then, it will have to come from a new spirit, a new hope, from the bottom up, and from outside groups.

The evangelical renewal groups are committed to be a catalyst that can bring this new spirit. With this in mind it has been the purpose of these Happenings articles to offer reports on what the renewals groups are doing.

**THE CONFESSING MOVEMENT**

Started in 1968, Good News had fought for the evangelical cause but was battle-scarred. In 1978 and 1979 the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) circulated an eight-page “exposé” accusing Good News of being neither evangelical or orthodox but of having “a rigid, traditional fundamentalism” with a social and political agenda which was the New Far Right. Another caucus, composed largely of staff persons of liberal agencies, raised up specifically to combat Good News before the 1980 General Conference, was called the Coalition for the Whole Gospel. Michael McIntyre, staff person for the caucus, criticized Good News as a “new form of ‘know-nothingism’” well outside the whole of Christian tradition.

Given the negative press and the hostility toward Good News on the part of official Methodism, a number of evangelicals were hesitant to identify themselves with Good News. To associate with Good News, some pastors were told, would “not be good for their careers.”

Was there another way to address the evangelical concerns for the church? This was the question asked by a number of large-church pastors who had been meeting together. They saw that the disconnect between the pew and the church bureaucracy was getting worse rather than better. They understood the church was drifting doctrinally and morally. They understood too that the leadership of the church, including the bishops, seemed hopelessly caught up in the drift. The 1972 doctrinal statement had diminished the place of Scripture, had disdained confessions of faith, and had touted “pluralism” which, practically, communicated the idea that for United Methodists “anything goes.”

Other persons also sensed a doctrinal crisis in the church and the need for another approach including some bishops, several seminary professors, and Good News itself. In December, 1987 eighty-seven persons met in Houston, Texas, and issued the Houston Declaration, a call to arms for doctrinal integrity. The Declaration was printed in a paid ad in the *United Methodist Reporter* and received 58,000 positive responses. A few months later, at the 1988 General Conference a new doctrinal statement was approved by the church.

Another consultation was held in in Memphis in 1992 and issued the Memphis Statement. This statement was supported by 200,000 signees. In April 1994, a Consultation on the Future of the Church was held in Atlanta. Out of this meeting came an invitation to those in the church who would join in “exalting Jesus Christ as we confront the crisis of faith within the United Methodist Church.” The next year, in April, 1995 some nine hundred persons gathered in Atlanta and adopted a confessional statement (the statement can be seen on the Confessing Movement web page). Several seminary professors and five bishops supported the statement.

Out of this meeting the Confessing Movement was organized. Ira Gallaway served as an interim executive director until a new board selected Senator Patricia Miller of Indiana in 1997 as the executive director. Besides serving with the Confessing Movement Senator Miller serves in the Indiana State Senate.

Since that time the Confessing Movement has engaged in conversations on the church whenever there been an opportunity, has published a series of papers on doctrinal themes, circulates a newsletter and sends e-blasts (like the Happenings articles). The Confessing Movement has also established relationships with a number of overseas bishops and church leaders. However, if persons thought that forming a new group would deflect criticism of evangelicals, they were mistaken. The usual progressive accusations of “rigid,” “right wing,” “divisive” that had been leveled at Good News were now also directed to the Confessing Movement.

Perhaps the most exciting project currently is the Doctrine and Renewal Project which is being jointly sponsored by the Confessing Movement and United Theological Seminary. The project will involve some leading U.M. scholars, including some who are John Wesley Fellows, who by study, writing and publishing will seek “to recapture the theological vision that once gave Methodist its spiritual power and appeal.” Stay tuned as this project develops.

At present over 700,000 persons, 7,400 clergy, and nearly 1,600 churches have identified themselves as supportive of the Confessing Movement. For more information link to confessingumc.org.

**LIFE WATCH - TASKFORCE OF UNITED METHODISTS ON ABORTION AND SEXUALITY**

In the radical period of 1968-72 when the Methodist-EUB merger led to re-working the doctrine and structure of the church, a Social Principles statement was adopted which, among other things, called for the legalizing of abortion. Since that time many have assumed that the official stance of the church is what has been termed “pro-choice.” At that same time the Women’s Division and the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) became founding members of a group called Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (now Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice) (RCRC). The coalition claims to speak for “faith communities” and argues basically for abortion on demand including late-term abortions. RCRC today claims a membership of 37 groups, twelve of which are Christian-related and three of which are denominations (Presbyterian Church USA, the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ). The other 15 groups are Jewish, Unitarian, lesbian, feminist, and humanist. None of the groups is predominately African-American or Hispanic.

The church has moderated the extreme view of 1972 considerably and now opposes abortion for purposes of birth control (which would rule out 98% of abortions) and late-term abortions. The Social Principles statement also makes mention of the sanctity of unborn life. This is much more in line with the thinking of ordinary United Methodists, very few of whom would support the kind of abortion on demand stance that is advanced by RCRC and GBCS.

A great deal of credit for the moderating of the church’s present stance goes to Lifewatch -- Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality. Persons concerned about issues of life began networking and meeting in the late 1980s. Both Good News and the Confessing Movement had expressed pro-life sentiments but were reluctant to stress social issues at the expense of doctrinal issues.

In 1991 a group of persons, some of whom were connected with Duke Seminary, met at Durham and wrote the Durham Declaration. There were originally 30 signatories including four retired bishops and other well-known theologians and leaders such as Tom Oden, Paul Mickey, Stanley Hauerwass, Don Wildman, James Heidinger and Ed Robb. The Durham Declaration has been a rallying document for United Methodists concerned about pro-life issues.

Lifewatch has done much to rally pro-life sentiment in the United Methodist Church. There is a strong sense that the 2012 General Conference would have voted to cut official ties with RCRC if the issue could have reached the floor of the conference. Progressive forces were able to block that from happening. Today Lifewatch publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Lifewatch*, and helps sponsor the United Methodist presence in the annual March of Life in Washington D.C., one of the largest annual public gatherings in Washington with up to 500,000 participants. Paul Stallsworth is president of Lifewatch and the newsletter editor. Mrs. Cindy Evans of Cottleville, Missouri is the Administrator/Out reach Coordinator. The webpage is lifewatch.org.