**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

**BY DR. RILEY B. CASE**

***OLD CROACKERS (Part 2)***

“Old Croakers” was a term in Methodism given to retired preachers who gloried in the good old days and complained about the present. Some of us may qualify as the old croakers of today. The moral and spiritual trends of the nation appear to be headed in the wrong direction. The number of unmarried co-habiting couples has increased from .5 million in 1970 to 8 million today. Single-parent households have increased from 6.7 million in 1970 to 21.7 million today. Statistics like these suggest a breakdown in America’s traditional morality, a morality derived in large part by the Christian founding principles of our nation.

Related to this some studies try to convince us that the present younger generation is less committed to Christianity. Our own United Methodist Church in America has lost 3.5 million members over a forty-five year period. Religious freedom, and in some instances Christianity itself, is under attack by an increasingly secular society. A *Wall Street Journal* poll reported August 5 revealed that an all-time record 76% of Americans do not believe their children’s lives will be better than their own.

There are plenty of reasons for old croakers to croak. But things are not always as they appear to be. There is another side.

Consider:

1. The good old days were not all that good. I grew up in the 1950s. They were great years. We had stable families. We had chapels in our public school. The mainline churches had people. The one thing I remember about the first preacher’s meeting I went to was the preachers bragging about how great their Easter church attendances were. But all was not well. The church was an institution run by white male liberals. Evangelicalism (called “fundamentalism” in those days) was, I was told many times in seminary, a relic of the past. The rebellion against religion in the 1960s was not so much against Christianity as it was against the white male liberal institutionalism of the times.

Liberal mainline Christianity started its slow, and sometimes not so slow, decline in the late 1960s and 1970s. Like modernism before it, it coveted “relevance” and in the process became irrelevant because it had nothing unique to offer. It failed to offend. It became, like the liberal secular culture around it, reduced to liberal politics and schemes of social planning. No one ever accused mainline Christianity of the 1950s of trying to set up a theocracy. It was properly restrained and in its place.

I recently returned to my home county, LaGrange County, Indiana. I remarked to several people I knew that there were more churches with more people doing more exciting Christian ministry than I ever remembered from 60 years before. Church attendance has perhaps doubled. The mainline churches struggle but independent “ministries” flourish all about. More interestingly, the Amish community has doubled. In the 1950s “knowledgeable” observers said the Amish could not hold their young people and would fade away in a generation. Not only were the pundits completely wrong, the Amish community has doubled and at 15,000 persons represents 40% of the whole county. Those commentators who speak grandly about studies and government programs to deal with poverty and violence in the world should be told there is a county in Indiana with the lowest per capita income in the state which has the lowest percentage of children receiving subsidized school lunches. It also has one of the lowest crime rates and the lowest divorce rates and lowest percentage of single-parent homes. It also has one of the highest percentages of individual home ownership. Furthermore, the county receives one of the lowest per capita amounts of government funding. A group does not have to succumb to the culture around it to flourish.

America presently is sending more missionaries than ever before. It has more parachurch youth ministries than ever before. There are more Christian groups operating on college campuses than ever before. Some statisticians claim that religion is losing its influence but the people who run surveys admit that there are so many Christian churches starting and changing that they cannot guarantee accurate results. 84% of Americans identify as Christian (Barna). Americans are the most generous people in the world. 84% of Americans donate to a church or non-profit organization. As far as we can tell, the percentage of Americans attending church has not decreased over the past 50 years. Visitors from Europe, where Christianity is in trouble, marvel at the vitality of Christian churches in America.

2. God has blessed Methodism through the years and will continue to bless it. Methodism once set the moral tone of the nation. At the close of the Revolutionary War deism ruled in the new republic and only 10% of the population were church members. In the midst of despair Bishop Francis Asbury proclaimed a counter-cultural conviction: “O America, America, God will make it the glory of the world for religion!” In the next 100 years Methodism sparked the Second Great Awakening and so grew that by the late 1800s it claimed 12% of the population. At that time Bishop Matthew Simpson, perhaps the greatest of the 19th century bishops (after Francis Asbury) analyzed Methodism’s greatness and declared why: a) its doctrine; b) its piety and zeal; and c) its system of government. The doctrine taught the natural depravity of the human heart and the atonement made of the Lord Jesus Christ as a sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Its zeal and moral purity was brought about by not lowering of the moral standard or catering to the tastes and prejudices of society.

What happened? Our doctrine and our moral fervor have been compromised. In areas where it is most compromised the church has lost the most. In the metropolitan New York area, once a significant stronghold of Methodism, but now a progressive center of United Methodism, the UM Church holds the allegiance of but .008% of the population. In the Boston metropolitan area, the home area of the once proud Boston School of Theology, where Borden Parker Bowne once railed against the “superstition” of most Methodists, Methodism today has the support of .0078 of the population (figures from the Association of Religious Data Archives). There are no UM churches in the New England Conference that qualify as large churches.

But God has honored what Methodism has been and what it has done. In lands where Methodist and EUB missionaries proclaimed the gospel faithfully the church has grown dramatically. If UM membership stands at 12 million today it is because African conferences have more than made up the losses in the American church.

The fastest growing portion of world Christianity today are Methodist-derived Christian groups, spawned by that portion of Methodism--the populist, evangelical, revivalist, Holiness wing--that remained true to Wesleyan doctrine and practice. These would be the Pentecostal and charismatic groups. The Assemblies of God is presently celebrating its 100th year of existence. In 100 years it has grown to 67.5 members in 366,000 churches. It reports 24 years of consecutive growth. Its growth rate among millennials is 24%. 54% of its members are under 35. 40% of its members are ethnic minority. Somehow it accomplished this without ethnic caucuses or quota systems or monitoring agencies or public demonstrations against its own denomination at church conferences.

What is the way forward for United Methodism and for America? The church does not need moral or doctrinal compromise. It does not need to follow the secular entertainment world to reevaluate its moral teachings to see how they can be “relevant.” It does need institutional reform. It does need leaders who keep covenant. It does need to rediscover and proclaim United Methodist core values. The Confessing Movement and other evangelical renewal groups are committed to the restoration of these values. Thomas Oden has just had published a four-volume set of books entitled: *John Wesley’s Teachings*. Billy Abraham has just had published a work*: Dialogues Amongst the People Called United Methodist.* Rob Renfroe of Good News has just had published a book *The Trouble with the Truth: Balancing Truth and Grace.* These are offered to the church with the hope that we can find a better “way forward.”