

## Glide Church and the Way Forward

By Dr. Riley Case

There is a most unusual institution in the California-Nevada Conference known as Glide, or Glide Memorial, or Glide United Methodist Church. In the United Methodist institutional world Glide United Methodist Church is one of the leading churches of the denomination. According to the California-Nevada UM Conference Journal, Glide UM Church has 13,039 members, which would identify it as the fifth largest UM church in the nation. Currently it reports an average Sunday attendance of 1,899, though in its recent past it reported 3,000 for a number of years. This is an amazing statistic since its sanctuary seats about a thousand and it only holds two services a week. There was some variation in earlier years. In 1989 Glide reported 2,008 members and 1,225 in attendance; in 1994 there were 4,499 members and 2,700 in attendance. That same year Glide paid \$7,745 to world service and conference benevolences (a paltry sum for the fifth largest church in the nation); in 2001 Glide reported 9,016 members and 3,500 in attendance; the figures for 2006 were 10,981 members and 3,600 attendance.

Apart from the United Methodist world Glide is not always referred to as a church but simply as "Glide." The webpage "Glide" speaks not of a church but of a "radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization." The webpage also posts 30 or so pictures featuring the Gay Pride Parade.

Whatever it is considered now, Glide was intended to be a church. Lizzie Glide, a dedicated Methodist laywoman, bequeathed a large sum of money in 1929 for a church to serve all people. Her bequest was put in a foundation, now known as the Glide Foundation, designed to support the church. During the 17-year pastorate of J.C. McPheeters, it was known as an evangelical stronghold. Some notable conversions took place at Glide including that of Ed Robb II. McPheeters left Glide to become president of Asbury Seminary.

After McPheeters the church fell on hard times, mostly because, like many Methodist churches located in inner cities, white flight greatly diminished the size of the congregation. Enter Cecil Williams in the early 1960s. With a charismatic personality and a zeal for social justice Williams led Glide in a totally different direction. He directed the Glide Foundation to invest millions of dollars into new and largely secular ministries. He was uneasy with Glide's identification as "Christian" and in 1967 removed the cross and other Christian symbols from the sanctuary. Glide became a magnet for a number of causes, including various LGBTQ advocacy groups, the American Indian Movement, the Black Panthers, and Jim Jones and the People's Temple. This was in 1977 before Jones gave "kool-aid" (laced with cyanide) to 918 of his followers in a mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana. Glide also made the news for hosting a Hookers Convention.

Once when I was going to write an article about Glide I was counseled not to, especially by one African-American friend who said, in essence, "Don't touch it." He was wise. Glide has been the darling of progressives and any criticism, especially if came from an evangelical perspective, would be considered uncaring, homophobic, and racist. Glide claimed in the 2017 conference journal that it reached 781,520

persons in outreach, justice and mercy efforts. In 2004 Glide employed 169 people and operated with a budget of 11.9 million dollars, of which 2 million was taxpayer money.

But now there is some criticism, and from a United Methodist Bishop, no less. The present resident bishop of the California-Nevada Conference, Minerva Carcaño, imaged as one of the more progressive bishops in the church, is refusing to appoint a pastor to the church for the current year. On June 23, Bishop Carcaño issued an open letter to the pastors and churches of the California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church. In the letter the bishop comments that there will be an assessment of the Glide situation. According to the letter Glide UM church has not had a UM organized structure, nor has there been a church conference for years; the leadership is not elected according to the UM Discipline, but is hand-picked by the former pastor, Cecil Williams. A pastor appointed to the church in June was accepted by some church people but was rejected by the Foundation Board, which apparently really runs Glides' operations. Appointed pastors have had no access to the full financial records of the church nor do they have say over use of the church property.

For persons with a traditional understanding of the Church, the matter is more than just whether or not pastors receive financial reports. The question must be raised as to how Glide reflects the United Methodist Articles of Religion definition of the Church. According to the United Methodist Discipline, the visible church of Christ is a "congregation of faithful persons in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered..." According to the bishop Glide by its own admission is made up of Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, atheists, agnostics and wiccans and is not at all interested in "making disciples of Jesus Christ." The bishop reports there are but few baptisms (11 were reported for 2017) and these are in the name of the People, not in the name of the triune God. Communion had for some time all but disappeared in the "community's" celebration (it is significant that "Glide" refers to itself as a "community" and not as a "church"). Bishop Carcaño followed her open letter with an article in the San Francisco Chronicle.

The response and rebuttal to the bishop's letter and article was quick in coming, was made by the Glide "board," and was posted on the "church's" web page. While admitting that Glide was "affiliated" with the United Methodist Church the rebuttal made a point that the church and buildings "belong" to the Glide Foundation and not to the church (or the conference). It asserted that Bishop Carcaño wants Glide to "conform" to her personal view of Methodism and Christianity. It noted she has stated publicly and personally that her mission is to create more "Disciples of Christ." The rebuttal then claimed the bishop "disapproves of our openness to people of all backgrounds and religions."

Further comment then came from the former pastor, Cecil Williams, who, calling from his car after gay pride days, said there was no doubt in his mind that the bishop wants to get rid of Glide and all it stands for and replace it with a "conservative Methodist congregation." But, Williams added, "Glide is too big to push around."

Within days after Williams remark, on July 7, the Glide Foundation issued another statement, evidently to demonstrate it is too big to "push around.". By unanimous vote the Glide board voted to update the organization's Article of Incorporation and by-laws and bring governance documents "into conformity

with Glide's modern-day operation." The board will henceforth elect its own members and these will no longer have to be approved by the California-Nevada Conference of the UM Church." Furthermore, Glide will no longer reserve a spot on the board for the UM bishop or any other UM representative. The significance of this is that Bishop Carcano, who until now has been a member of the board, is forced out.

What is the evangelical response to all of this? For one, Caution. We best let this play out from afar. At the same time, we must express our admiration for Bishop Minerva Carcaño, who evidently is the first person with any authority in the past 50 years to openly address the Glide situation. One wonders why Karen Oliveto who pastored Glide for eight years until elected bishop, had and has been silent and complicit all these years. One wonders also why Bishop Warner Brown, former president of the Glide board, and who pastored Glide after Karen Oliveto was elected bishop, has also been silent.

Questions also need to be asked about how "foundations" connected with UM churches are evidently not covered by the United Methodist trust clause about property. It is no secret that dozens of other churches, mostly evangelical churches, have or have considered establishing foundations that would be exempt from denominational claims on church properties if the churches cease to be United Methodist. It appears the church will face more law suits in the future.

Finally, and most importantly, in considering the February 2019 General Conference and decisions about the denomination's Way Forward, it must be pointed out that any local or conference "option plan" opens itself to much more of the free-wheeling and congregational approach to ministry (such as Glide's) that will further erode the authority of the Discipline and make any claims of "unity" ring hollow. We have a crisis because the connection is already being systematically eroded by individuals, churches, conferences and even jurisdictions which operate apart from that which the church has always believed, valued and taught. Do we want even more confusion?

It is quite possible that some who want to identify Glide as a UM Church will find it necessary to separate themselves from the much more secular Glide Foundation. If so, or even if not, would our Way Forward as a denomination hold more promise for effective ministry if it makes provision for amicable separation or division?

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