

The EUB-Methodist Merger and the Way Forward

By Dr. Riley Case

2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB)-Methodist merger. The Evangelical United Brethren Church was itself a merger of two churches, the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association in 1946. The Methodists merged three denominations--the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church--in 1939. The merger that brought about The United Methodist Church was approved in 1968 by the General Conferences of the Methodist and EUB churches. The decision to merge was the easy part. The difficult part was to figure how to take two traditions, two structures, sets of bishops and superintendents, two understandings of doctrine and social activism, two publishing houses, and make them function as one.

From 1968 to 1972 these issues were discussed and debated with proposals brought to the 1972 General Conference for approval. It was then that the new United Methodist Church accepted a total restructuring of the denomination, reaffirmed its traditional doctrinal standards, set a new direction for Social Principles and how they will be used in the denomination, abandoned some old traditions and set in place some new traditions.

Throughout the coming year there will be some celebrations and some recognition of the 50-year EUB-Methodist merger. For the moment, it might be helpful to see if there are insights from that merger that can apply to United Methodism's present prospects for re-direction, re-structuring, and perhaps even division that will come about when the specially-called 2019 General Conference considers the future of United Methodism in light of serious differences in the denomination over issues of human sexuality (especially the practice of homosexuality), Biblical authority and the meaning of Christian unity.

For sure United Methodism today is facing painful decisions and probably disruption of some kind. "Disruption" does not need to be viewed negatively. The crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrew people was a disruption. Pentecost was a disruption. Martin Luther's Reformation was a disruption. But disruption can also mean a break in relationships, separation and set-back.

In retrospect there are a number of positive things that came about as the result of the Methodist-EUB merger. For one, the merger gave the church the opportunity to do away with the segregated Central Jurisdiction in which congregations, primarily African-American, had been segregated into separate districts and conferences. Secondly, the merger opened the door to "inclusiveness" which meant that other voices in the church needed to be heard in addition to old, white male liberals. For example, in the quadrennium 1968-72 (before the restructuring was approved) the Methodist Board of Education, a key agency in the church which had responsibility not only for church school education but also for higher education, was composed of thirty-nine members, thirty-seven of which were white male liberals. The merger actually called, in some instances, for a quota system outlining how many women, minorities, former EUBs, youth, and persons with handicapping conditions were to be represented on church agencies.

While there were positive things that came about because of the merger there were also some negatives. The EUBs gained much from the merger. The EUB pension system was inadequate and the former Methodist conferences almost universally addressed the unfunded liability of the former EUB pastors. EUBs also had some funding issues with some of their institutions including colleges and camps and homes that the merger helped address. The negative side was that EUBs were sometimes simply swallowed up in the more dominate Methodist structure and church culture. EUBs lost their publishing house, some camping facilities and some traditions. EUBs, for example, had allowed for freedom of conscience in baptism. The EUB Discipline carried a service of infant dedication which implied that there was an alternative to infant baptism. While promised that their tradition would be honored, that never took place.

Evangelicals both won and lost in the merger. On the positive side the merger and consequent restructuring brought about more freedom for evangelicals. Before the merger, in an effort to control evangelical influence, the Methodist Discipline basically disallowed evangelical Sunday school literature to be used in the church school. And it was not just Sunday school material; music and hymn books and audio-visuals were "to be in harmony with Board of Education standards." Doctrinally what was approved was not historic Methodist doctrinal standards but "present Methodist tradition" standards. At that time only one point of view, that of theological liberalism, mediated through modern education theory ("we don't memorize Bible verses in Methodist Sunday schools"), was allowed, at least officially, to function. In addition churches were to support only "approved" evangelists and use only "approved" missionaries. The EUB tradition which allowed for much more freedom, moderated the heavy institutionalism of the Methodists.

The new doctrinal statement spoke of "pluralism." While pluralism on the one hand is an anathema to evangelicals (suggesting there is no central core of truth) it did open the door for discussion as to whether "pluralism," which if properly understood, would allow for evangelical teaching in seminaries and in educational materials. Albert Outler, the father of the new doctrinal statement, so interpreted the intent of the doctrinal statement and the word "pluralism" to evangelicals.

What does any of this have to do with United Methodists' "Way Forward" and the future of the denomination? No matter what course the 2019 General Conference will take, United Methodism is in for a time of disruption. The "disruption" does not need to be negative. Any direction taken will allow for much more freedom for local churches and for annual conferences. It is quite possible that any plan will allow for local churches to withdraw from the denomination and not lose their property. And if some annual conferences will be given freedom to set their own ordination standards, other conferences should be freed up to support what seminaries they wish to support and determine what seminaries will be approved to train United Methodist pastors. It is quite probable that some restructuring will be done with the general church boards and agencies, since these agencies will now be required to serve a more theologically diverse constituency. This new direction will surely deal with the question, "Do we even need many of our present agencies." It is also quite possible if given new freedom in the way forward local churches will have more say as to how apportionment money will be directed.

Whatever happens, things are going to be different. As with the EUB-Methodist merger there will be positives and negatives but the hope is that with more latitude in how ministry will be conducted the church can be strengthened. At least that is our hope and prayer.

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