

GENERAL CONFERENCE 2019 POSTMORTEM (PART 2)

by Riley Case

The statement has been made by many of us that the average UMC church member in the pew in the US holds fairly traditional Christian beliefs. Of course this does not go unchallenged. One response stated: "If that's true, why did 2/3 of the US delegates vote for the One Church Plan...as usual logic escapes them." The assumption behind statements like that is that the real United Methodism is progressive in outlook and belief but was somehow hijacked by a minority to thwart the will of the many at the GC2019.

If there is to be honest conversation in the church in the coming months as to a Way Forward (wasn't that the purpose of GC 2019, to lead us to the Way Forward?) the question of understanding the person in the pew demands some attention. Who really are the United Methodists? What really do they believe? And, what is the difference (the Gap) between church leaders and this "person in the pew?"

I was a delegate to the General Conference (GC) of 1984 in Baltimore. This was the last GC before electronic voting, meaning that delegates stood to have their votes counted. As with every GC since 1972 there was a concerted effort to liberalize the Disciplinary statements regarding the practice of homosexuality and, as with other GCs, there was a series of votes taken. Our delegation from North Indiana was divided on the votes but in the delegation next to ours, with 24 delegates, the votes were almost always 23-1 (except on several occasions 22-2) in favor of liberalizing. At a break I mentioned to the person who was the ("1") that his delegation was pretty much united on this issue. His response: "Would you believe that our last annual conference a resolution passed indicating that our conference supports upholding the *Discipline* as it now is?" Yes, I could believe. I had seen this before, though perhaps not quite as dramatic. The annual conference passes a resolution to express the will of the conference, but the delegation almost unanimously votes the exact opposite. And they never vote the opposite in a more conservative way, but always in a more liberal way.

In those days the point was being made that the persons sent to GC from the annual conferences were "delegates," not "representatives." They did not go to GC to "represent" the conference but to vote their own consciences on what they believed was in the best interests of that annual conference. We had had these discussions in our own conference. There was no obligation to vote the way the annual conference believed or passed resolutions for or against. I did not argue with that but I did state that those seeking to be elected to GC should be open about what their convictions were. In those days it was not always apparent because it was in a day when conference old-timers and institutional leaders were frequently elected and they seemed to believe that GC was like a reward for years of faithful service. They deserved to go (the good ole

boys club) and what they believed and how they voted was not anybody else's business.

We were in those days not too far removed from the times when almost everyone who was elected as a delegate to GC was an older white male, institutionally loyal, liberal. In one way it worked. They were the people with experience and expertise. We would have little reform and renewal, but we would have stability.

Then--to follow to the next step--the GC delegates would be the ones to be elected to the general boards and agencies of the church. From this pool episcopal candidates were drawn. I have sat through eight jurisdictional conferences and I don't remember a single instance in which an episcopal candidate did not have experience with a general board or agency.

One year a friend who was progressive in outlook and I designed and sent a questionnaire to those who were expected to receive votes in the annual conference for GC. We did it together so no one could accuse the questionnaire of being slanted. We said we would share the responses. Most of those receiving the questionnaire were friends and colleagues but nevertheless, the questionnaire was not received gladly by everyone. Aspiring candidates did not seem to object. Old-timers, though, at least several, resented that we were questioning them. They had been faithful and loyal. Was that not enough? The answer was, "No, it was not enough because we have no idea what you believe or how you are voting and it matters to us."

Now the question. How much do these GC delegates who then became board and agency board members and then are elected to the episcopacy, reflect the ordinary UM persons in the pew?

The answer: Often not very much. I reference several studies.

In 1990 the General Council on Ministries of the UM Church did a major study "An Analysis of Major Issues Addressed by the 1988 General Conference and a Comparison with Beliefs and Attitudes of Local Church Members." Unlike other studies this one involved people in the pews. While the percentages would change if the same questions were asked today, the basic percentages would be similar. In 1990 75% of lay male UM non-delegates and 65% of lay female non-delegates indicated they were conservative or very conservative. 55% of male clergy non-delegates and 28% of female clergy non-delegates described their orientation as conservative or very conservative. Of the delegates 65% of the male lay delegates and 35% of the female lay delegates polled conservative. However, among clergy only 41% male and 19% of females indicated they were conservative. Among jurisdictions 66% of the SE non-delegate clergy polled conservative while the western jurisdiction polled 19%.

In a question even more revealing “The Bible is the literal Word of God” -- 62% of UM non-delegate laity said yes compared with 26% of the lay delegates. Among clergy 25% of clergy non-delegates said yes. Only 11% of clergy delegates said yes. (It should be stated that the word “literal” is not a word evangelicals favor in testing attitudes toward the Bible.) So, compare 62% of the laity who believe the Bible literally compared to 11% of the clergy GC delegates. The hymnal was an issue that year. To the question: “Hymns should be included that refer to God as Mother and having feminine characteristics...” 55% of the clergy delegates said yes compared with only 16% of the lay non-delegates.

So, if the question is asked, “What do UMs believe?” do we reference people in the pew or only bishops or clergy delegates to GC. Or, we might want to answer, “what the General Conference legislates.”

Some conclusions from the 1990 study: clergy were consistently more liberal than lay respondents; non-delegates were consistently more conservative than GC delegates. Clergy were more highly educated than lay (99% of clergy delegates had advanced academic degrees compared with 54% of lay delegates). Only 13% of non-delegate laity had advanced degrees. 99% of the clergy had served on an annual conference committee and 44% had served on a national board or agency. Among laity only 3% had served on an annual conference committee and 0% served on a general church agency. Clergy delegates were more often from large urban churches while the great percentage of non-delegate laity was from rural areas or towns with fewer than 25,000 persons.

Out of this and other studies we would offer some interpretative statements:

1. The average UMC church member in the U.S. holds fairly traditional beliefs. This is not to challenge the survey that indicates that about 2/3 of US delegates to GC in 2019 favored the One Church Plan; it is to say that the persons elected to GC are not nearly as conservative in their beliefs as the people who are in the pews. The recent study conducted by UM Communications reporting that 44% of UMs self-identify as conservative/traditional in religious beliefs, compared with 28% who are moderate/centrist, and 20% who are liberal (8% did not respond), should be fairly accurate. In politics according to a Pew poll in 2014 54% of American UMs lean Republican compared with 35% who lean Democrat. When one realizes that bishops and persons related to seminaries and boards and agencies identify overwhelmingly as Democrats, the conclusion should be made that we have serious disconnect/gap problems in the UM Church.
2. We have not been served well by our leaders and, particularly, by our bishops who seemingly operate with a different view of unity, a different view of Wesleyan doctrine, a different view of Biblical authority, and a different view of personal morality from a great part of the church. The leader responses from bishops and others following GC2019 have not been healing or helpful to the majority of UMs who seem to be under attack by their own leaders. These

public statements have been overwhelmingly critical of GC actions and have sometimes been downright hostile. As a result, persons who seek to serve Christ in their daily lives, who seek to be faithful to their local churches, who wear the UM label proudly, wonder why all of the sudden ads appear in secular newspapers by church leaders condemning their own church. They wonder why they and other UMs are now branded as judgmental, hateful, racist, homophobic, bigots, literalists, and exclusionary, by persons hitherto respected as spiritual leaders. All of this when what the GC basically did was to reaffirm the position of the church on human sexuality that has been part of the church's *Discipline* for nearly 50 years. At the moment it is not only the LGBTQ community in pain but also numbers of faithful UMs who are feeling betrayed by their own leaders.

3. Something different needs to happen before the General Conference of 2020. The church cannot afford a rerun of 2019. Would bishops be open to conversation with evangelicals? Could the matter of amicable separation be placed on the table for discussion?