

UNITED METHODISM'S GROWING POLARIZATION By Riley Case

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2019 Annual Conferences are over and the news is not as good as we had hoped. Four or five annual conferences elected their entire slates of progressive nominees as delegates to the 2020 General Conference. From an analysis of the elected delegates, however, the evangelical renewal groups continue to believe that the traditionalist position still holds the majority. But close votes, no matter which way they go, are not apt to lead the church toward oneness of spirit.

Are there bishops still talking about “unity” and “love”? If so, those bishops have a poor understanding of both “love” and “unity.” For nearly ten years the Confessing Movement has suggested that perhaps the cause of Christ would be best advanced by amicable separation. One reason for this is that the positive relationships that once existed between persons of differing points of view in the church have so disintegrated that the damage can probably never be repaired. Good will and respect have been replaced with just plain ugliness. But there is another more important reason. Our “connectionalism” is unraveling. “Connectionalism” is a United Methodist word that might be described as the glue that holds us together as a denomination. This connectionalism is defined in the Discipline, para 132. According to para 132 United Methodist connectionalism is based upon a common tradition of faith, including the Doctrinal Standards and the General Rules; upon a shared constitutional polity; upon a common mission; and upon a common ethos.

What we are seeing instead of a coming together is a polarization over our understanding and living out of our historic connectionalism. In this Happenings article and the next there will be an attempt to examine this polarization, determine how serious it is and consider what sort of actions might work that offer any hope for a future for United Methodism.

It should be mentioned up front that the words “tradition” and “traditionalists” refer not just to the historic teachings of human sexuality and the Christian faith but also to what the church has always understood “connectionalism” to be about. In other words, those of us who hold to the traditional understanding of connectionalism should not be the ones who are criticized for disrupting the unity of the church; the disrupters of unity are those who are ignoring and/or deconstructing our long-held understanding of the things that hold us together.

Connectionalism: A Common Tradition of Faith. Early Methodists in America were divided about any number of things, but they were committed to a common tradition of faith which was basically Wesleyan doctrine applied to the American setting. Methodists had nothing to do but save souls and reform the nation. Saving souls was linked to preaching and teaching Wesleyan “essentials,” namely the doctrine of Original Sin, the Atonement, the New Birth and a commitment to Scripture. Whatever else they were divided about, they stuck together when debating Unitarians, Socinians, Universalists, Calvinists, Antinomians, the Baptists and “New Lights.” This unity was challenged by modernism in the late 1890s which, especially among Christian educators, denied Original Sin (we are to be made Christians by nurture not necessarily conversion), and then the Atonement and then the inspiration of Scripture. I remember a discussion on the theology subcommittee of the Hymnal Revision Committee around Wesley’s hymn “Arise My Soul Arise.” Several wanted it out, including a well-known seminary professor. When the remark was made, “But it is one of Wesley’s clearest hymns on the Atonement,” the response was, “But Wesley wasn’t right about a lot of things.”

At least the professor was honest. Far more United Methodist leaders compromise on the essentials but still want to claim they are Wesleyan. It was precisely for this reason that the Confessing Movement was started in 1995: to rally the church behind our common doctrinal tradition. The

original Confessional Statement which launched the Confessing Movement was meant to appeal to “moderates” and “centrists” who had stayed arm’s length from groups like Good News and IRD because they were “too controversial.” Five bishops signed the original statement. The push back against the Confessing Movement and this common tradition was not long in coming. After the 2000 General Conference Church and Society’s official journal Christian Social Action (no longer publishing) devoted 80% of its Nov.-Dec. issue to the conference. Most of the 80% coverage was spent on the sinister “conservative shift” in the church. In addition to space spent on “homosexual exclusion” writer Harry Kiely weighed in against the Confessing Movement which, Kiely said, wanted to make church members confess that “Jesus Christ as Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of history and the church.” This, said Kiely, would deny a “Wesleyan tradition that other world religions were also means of salvation.”

The Wesleyan tradition that other world religions were also means of salvation? Where did that come from? It is sloppy thinking like this that is the reason for groups like the Confessing Movement. The present fanciful reinterpretations of Wesley and of our doctrinal standards illustrate why it is time for some sort of separation.

Connectionalism: a Shared Constitutional Polity. All of my adult life I have heard and have taught the special polity that seems uniquely Methodist: bishops, conferences, church law, Discipline. When I became a district superintendent I passed on to churches (in those days district superintendents actually spent time in local churches) what I had received: the value of the appointment system and the value of our “conferences”: the general conference, the annual conference and the local church conference. All of this was based on a very important assumption: to make it work our United Methodist people needed to be committed to this connectional polity.

All that is now disintegrating under the deliberate and blatant disregard and rebellion against our Discipline and the General Conference actions of 2019. Boards of Ordained Ministry, whole conferences, one jurisdiction, bishops and pastors are publicly disavowing our shared constitutional polity. These people and groups claim the General Conference did not express the will of God and therefore the actions of the conference are to be resisted. Evidently these people have discovered some higher law that trumps our United Methodist Connectionalism. Public statements question the motives of the delegates; “hateful,” “unloving,” and “exclusivistic” are just a few of the pejorative phrases that come to mind. There has been nothing more discouraging than to see bishops and boards and agencies and seminaries and otherwise respected leaders, who did everything in their power to sway and influence legislation before the 2019 General Conference against the traditional stance of the church, apologize to the world for United Methodist hatefulness when the historic stance in regard to sexual morality was reaffirmed. This has been followed by an organized resistance, including even the withholding of apportionment monies against the established order of the church. Under these circumstances the church simply cannot continue to function as it has been.

Connectinalism: A Common Mission. The church’s mission statement states: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” For evangelicals (and others) this is a continuation of John Wesley’s admonition: “You have nothing to do but to save souls” and early Methodism’s charge that they were to “reform the nation.” At least we agree on the language. We appear to be agreeing less and less on the meaning. For evangelicals “making disciples” has to do with leading persons to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. For many others, it seems, “making disciples” means getting persons to join an institution with or without conversion. For evangelicals, transforming the world means to let the power of the Holy Spirit work through transformed Christians to influence and permeate all of the society to bring about justice, high moral standards, opportunity for all, and to make society and culture “Christ-influenced.” For groups like Church and Society and other progressives, however, transforming the world appears to be linked with following a particular social, economic and political agenda. To simplify, this agenda leans heavily toward positions held by the Democratic Party. The polarization is evident when polls show our United Methodist constituency as a whole identifies as Republican over Democrat something like

60-40%, while a poll of board and agency staff, seminary faculty and bishops would identify as Democrat over Republican something like 90-10%.

We are a divided people.

Connectionalism: A Common "Ethos." Ethos is a tricky word and means different things to different people. According to the dictionary ethos has to do with "distinguishing character," sentiment, moral nature, and guiding beliefs of a person, group or institution. For most of my growing up years I thought I knew what Methodist ethos was. It was Methodist music and church camp and pot-lucks and high moral standards, including standards regarding human sexuality. It was emphasis on family. It was temperance and Rural Life Sunday and Race Relations Sunday and accepting Christ and living for Christ. Community leaders attended the church I attended. The Methodist Church was a respected church.

The first time I ran into a different understanding was when I was on the Good News Seminary Task Force and was asking questions of the University Senate as to why good evangelical schools like Trinity Evangelical, Gordon-Conwell and Anderson were not acceptable for training United Methodist pastors. The best answer I received was that a seminary must reflect United Methodist ethos. I tried to solicit a definition of what United Methodist ethos was (I could never get anyone to define it). I finally determined on my own it had to do with quota systems, freedom from confessional statements, politically correct language and racial and gender inclusion. It also meant, regardless of the United Methodist Discipline, gay and lesbian advocacy. So schools like Harvard which doesn't even claim to be Christian (A School of Religion) and University of Chicago and any progressive school qualified but many evangelical schools did not.

Among some conferences and some bishops and some Boards of Ordained Ministry and most of the seminaries United Methodist ethos now means full acceptance of the LGBTQ agenda. It also appears to mean a progressive social agenda.

Who these days should lay claim to be loyally United Methodist? Obviously, our answers differ. Best we wish each other God-speed and go our separate ways.