

## **"UNITED METHODISM: UPPER GRADE CLERGY"**

*By Riley Case*

The May 20, 1926 issue of *Christian Century* carried a four-page editorial titled, "What Is Disturbing the Methodists?" The editorial commented that Methodism seemed much less disturbed by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy than other denominations. There were several reasons for this. For one, Methodists, it seems, were quite disinterested in doctrine and basically didn't believe in heresy. Another reason was that Methodists had bishops and bishops spent a great deal of time keeping the peace. That was their job. Bishops denied unrest really existed and sought to downplay issues that would lead to problems.

All of this worked, according to the *Century*, because of the unique way Methodism functioned. Methodism was dominated by clergy and in Methodism the clergy came in three grades. The "upper grade" consisted of bishops, secretaries of agencies, men in seminaries, men in detached services and men who served "big" churches. They were influential, prestigious men who had attended seminary. They were also progressive and liberal. Through them the Sunday school material had advanced (that is, became liberal) beyond any other denomination except, perhaps, for the Congregationalists. The upper grade ran things and they had no problem with any of the "new" thinking.

The "second grade" consisted of those men who aspired to be grade one. They usually had entered the conference through the Course of Study and pastored the medium-sized churches. The "third grade," by far the largest number of pastors, consisted of the rest. They were lay pastors and pastors in rural areas. They had less education. In the southern church only 12% of the pastors had seminary training. Within Methodism itself 3,500 of the pastors had never passed the seventh grade.

The *Century* article, written over 90 years ago, is perceptive not only for 1926 but for nearly 100 years before that and for 100 years after that. It offers insight into the UM crisis of today over issues of marriage and human sexuality.

By 1926, when the *Century* article appeared, Methodism had been pretty much operating according to the *Century's* analysis for nearly 100 years. The first Methodist conferences were clergy only. The first bishop, Francis Asbury, was called a dictator by some. He was also a keeper of the peace. It was no easy task. Frontier revivalists were creating new Americanized forms of the faith inherited from John Wesley. Despite Methodism's top-down structure and a strong attempt to be true to the Wesleys, a lot of energy was being created from the bottom up. It was this bottom-up faith that did a lot to change the religious culture of America.

Methodist music serves as an example. Perhaps the most successful of all-American denominational hymnals was the first official M.E. hymnal of 1848. It was fully orthodox and, if the term can be used, very "traditional." But it was not an American hymnal. 1,146 of its 1,148 hymns were of British or European origin. Meanwhile, alongside the official and approved hymnal, camp meeting and American indigenous gospel music was taking America by storm. The first official hymnal added a stern admonition: Methodists were to use only those hymnals signed by the bishops. The warning was widely ignored. Methodists were writing and producing their own hymnbooks, known as "spirituals," by the dozens. So there was one group in Methodism moving toward respectability and the middle class and another group which represented the masses. The respectability groups sought to reform the nation by civilizing it which meant, among other things, advancing high cultural values which in music did not include spirituals, ditties and choruses. The revivalists sought to reform the nation by conversion and used populist music, or whatever was available, to reach that goal.

The music war heated up by 1878 when the next "official" M.E. hymnal was published. It was an upper grades hymnal. The noted hymnologist Louis Benson made the comment that "the hymnal had hardly appeared before complaints began..." Many of the hymnals ended up stacked in furnace rooms. Why? A clue is in the make up of the committee which planned the hymnal and, according to the *Quarterly Review*, consisted of "men" of "repute," "college presidents, professors and presiding elders... representatives of distinct classes of culture, position, and experience." It is telling that of 307 authors 66 were Episcopalian, 22 were Congregational, 20 Presbyterians and only ten members of the M.E. Church. None of these were from Methodism's holiness or revivalist wing. Only 7% of the hymns were of American origin and of the 1,117 hymns, only three were identified with anyone west of Rochester, New York or south of Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, by this time, forty-four hymnals had been published by Methodists unofficially, often from places like Cincinnati or Chicago. Ira Sankey, a Methodist Sunday school superintendent when he was discovered by Dwight L. Moody in 1872, published Gospel Hymns 1 to 6 which in various forms sold 50 million copies. It might be of interest that in the official hymnal only 7% of the authors were women while gospel hymnals were running about 30% women. Of course, the 1878 M.E. hymnal still carried the admonition that only books signed by the bishops were to be used in Methodist churches. The hymnal contributed part of the reason why large swaths of Methodism's holiness wing and Christians less-privileged splintered of into groups like Assemblies of God, Nazarenes and the Pentecostals.

The first two questions, as I recall, asked of me when I had my first interview with the Board of Ministerial Training (forerunner of the Board of Ordained Ministry) was did I smoke and what did I think of the Methodist hymnal. When I became a district superintendent one of the first things I did on my first round of the churches was to survey how many churches were not using the UM hymnal as their primary hymnal. The answer was 29 out of 72 churches. (For the record the UM hymnal of 1988 was a much more inclusive and popular hymnal.)

These paragraphs have been about the hymnal. A similar analysis could be done with Sunday school material or church colleges or seminaries or missions or evangelism. There is a gap between the leadership of the church and ordinary UM church members or, to put it another way, between the upper grades clergy and everyone else. Much of it is a theological gap but certainly not all (especially if we go back to the 19th century). The upper grades clergy (in the words of the *Christian Century* article) ran things, or at least gave the impression that they did. The old-timers called them "the authorities" or in more recent times, the "ruling elite." At one time, at least, this was not a bad thing. These pastors were more educated, gifted and skilled. At the same time Methodist broad-mindedness allowed many diverse expressions to thrive. I can remember (in the days before the 1968 merger) when this upper grade was almost entirely old, white male liberals. They were the clergy elected to be general conference delegates. They served on boards and agencies and some were elected to the episcopacy. Some of these men were my mentors. But some things changed after the merger; mostly, the upper grade group became ethnically and gender and age inclusive. But nothing much else is different. The circle was enlarged but it was still a specialized group with values of institutional unity, peace, avoidance of conflict and a desire for status in the world. It wanted to relate to the ecumenical world and the academic world and the entertainment world and the media world. It cared less about relating to the group down at the gas station. In a recent survey conducted by Mainstream UMC (a centrist group), a favorable view of boards and agencies is affirmed by only 18% of traditionalists.

This inability to be sensitive to or even to understand the rest of the church has been quite evident in the discussions and debates on homosexual practice, marriage and human sexuality in the past few years. The institutional establishment is so obsessed with the idea of "unity," which in almost every case means institutional unity, that other values get cancelled out. The discussions on "compatible" and "incompatible" are revealing. For the "upper grades" institutional clergy it is inconceivable that church presently should set theological boundaries which, if they are breached, will have serious consequences.

Nor has it been admitted (until some in the last few months) that the cause of Christ might best be served by giving one another freedom to pursue a different vision of the church, as in separation.

As far as we know the bishops in the time leading up to the 2019 General Conference never held serious conversations with traditionalist and evangelical groups. Out of their wisdom and status, evidently, they simply rejected the Commission on a Way Forward proposals about the Traditional Plan being a serious option and the idea of gracious exit. It was like they wore blinders: the One Church Plan was obviously God's will. For this plan they lobbied unabashedly and openly citing, among other things, the overwhelming support the plan had from a majority of bishops, from the seminaries, from the colleges, from the boards and agencies, and from groups calling themselves centrist or mainstream or moderates (in other words, the "upper grades"). Then, to make matters worse, significant numbers of the upper grades cried foul after the conference voted to uphold the Traditional Plan. They would apologize to the gay community, defy the actions of the general conference, and scheme again for 2020.

But perhaps there is hope. The upper grades' vision has not worked. Need we be reminded that the American church has lost 5 million members in 50 years under their watch? Perhaps we are presently having a reality check. Perhaps we are at a point in the church where we can really begin to listen to one another. Several of the plans for the future offering some form of separation, or at least space, might well be able to trigger a new day for United Methodism.

Now is not the time for name-calling, for accusations, or accusing each other as being less loyal. Now is the time for some risk-taking for some vision, for letting the Spirit lead."