

WE NEED THE GLOBAL METHODIST CHURCH

By Dr. Riley B. Case

Three conversations with my grandma of 100 years ago (the last three Happenings articles) have given some added perspective and impetus for the importance of approving “the Protocol,” or some form of amicable separation, if there is to be any future for Methodism in America. This observation is based on the following considerations.

The United Methodist Church is imploding. Something needs to be done and done fast. Despite the vitality and the growth of United Methodism worldwide, United Methodism is in serious trouble in America. For years Methodism was the most American of all of the denominations. It, along with Baptists, made evangelical faith the religious basis of American culture. In the process, it dominated the American religious scene. By 1850 one-third of the religious adherents in America were some form of Methodist. Methodism’s declining influence after about 1890 can be attributed to several factors: a growing elitist class in the church, an abandonment of the poor; a serious doctrinal compromise brought about by theological modernism, and a casting off of Biblical standards of morality, especially in regard to human sexuality.

Persons may contest this analysis but let me explain why. Since 1921, while the nation’s population grew from 100 million to 345 million, there were more United Methodists then (adding EVs, MPs, UBs, and MEs) than there are today. The major loss has been since the 1968 merger, a decrease of 4.5 million members (after we had grown to nearly 11 million at merger). The United Methodist Church now records over 50 straight years of membership decline. If we were a business corporation the stockholders would have fired management a dozen times.

What is troubling is that the majority of persons who have deserted United Methodism have been evangelicals. Many testimonies speak of moving from a denomination that no longer reflects the values and beliefs which once sustained them.

Help is hopefully at hand. Since nothing else has worked, we turn to amicable separation and dreams of a Global Methodist Church.

Our stated United Methodist doctrine, polity and standards for morality (the foundation of which made Methodism a strong spiritual force for good) still stand. Evangelicals and traditionalists affirm this; others may believe some of this but are not committed to the whole. From the evangelical perspective, the present problems in the church are not with doctrinal and teaching standards which are now outdated, but with the neglect, compromise and (in some cases) defiance of those standards. It can be argued that if

there is divisiveness in the church, it comes not from those who uphold the standards but from those who would defy them.

Methodism has been (and still is in many parts of the world) Protestant theological orthodoxy with an evangelical cast. Wesley spoke of such “essentials” as Original Sin, the Atonement, the Trinity, and the Incarnation which places Methodist doctrine firmly in the center of traditional, catholic faith. At the same time, Methodists have shown openness for flexibility, creativity and adaptability. Methodism has been amazingly pragmatic: it has contributed to the (evangelical) Christian world such innovations as revivalism, camp meetings, the altar, the gospel “spiritual,” the circuit system and the class meeting. Its distinctive doctrine of Unlimited Atonement (Christ died for all, and therefore all can be saved) was a major factor in its ability to reach the poor, the disinherited and persons of all races. Its distinctive doctrine of Assurance (the experience of Christ in us giving confidence in our salvation) is now a mainstay of generic evangelicalism. Its distinctive doctrine of Christian Perfection (we can have victory over the power of sin) has been a key element in the development of Pentecostalism. Its moral vision is well summarized in Wesley’s General Rules. Its polity features a unique form of connectionalism in which the church is connected through a series of conferences under episcopal leadership. Methodists the world over, and many United Methodists in America, still hold to these doctrines and principles.

Unfortunately, a number of church institutions and persons in leadership do not. One hundred years ago editors of Methodist Sunday school literature declared Wesley was wrong about Original Sin and the Atonement. Modern science and psychology declared that doctrine needed to be adjusted to fit the present age. The adjustment would be made by those who were enlightened. This was stated quite forthrightly by Borden Parker Bowne, a professor at the University of Boston in the early 1900s and one of the best known and most influential of early progressive Methodists:

"The Church has need of a body of scholarly investigators to do its intellectual work. They will have the function of formulating the spiritual life so as best to express it and keep it from losing its way in swamps of ignorance and superstition. They will have to adjust religious thought to the every advancing thought of cultivated intelligence so as to remove endless misunderstanding." (The Present Crisis in Methodism and How to Meet It: G.C Ridout, Pentecostal Publishing Co. n.d. p. 29)

Bowne, made it clear that fundamentalists, revivalists and ordinary Methodists and bishops were the ones mired in the swamps of ignorance and superstition. He and his colleagues would guide the church in the way of progress. By the mid-1920s every Methodist seminary had declared itself for modernism (progressivism). With this “the

gap” appeared---the great chasm between the seminaries and some leaders and ordinary Methodists who still held to historic Methodism.

Even with all of this, Methodists in America lived in relative harmony. Methodism was a big tent and offered a great deal of freedom to its pastors and congregations. However, major changes came with the 1968 merger between Methodists and EUBs. The merger took place at the exact moment in history when the nation itself was in the midst of major political, social and cultural upheaval. Theological progressives dominated the merger. The new structure created powerful super boards which operated like independent fiefdoms. The General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) began to dismantle the missionary outreach of the church. From 1,300 missionaries even at the depth of the Depression, the board reduced the full-time overseas missionaries to something like 330 today. Liberation theology replaced evangelism as the major focus of the board. Youth ministry on the general church level simply evaporated. The new doctrinal statement enshrined such foreign ideas as “pluralism” and the “quadrilateral.”

The most serious fracturing has come, however, with the capitulation of church leadership to the gay lobby agenda. Disruptive demonstrations have become commonplace at every General Conference since 1972. Some delegates and even some bishops have stood in solidarity with demonstrators. To make matters worse church leadership was continually putting out calls for unity. It is incongruous that calls for love and unity come at the very same time when church leaders label ordinary United Methodists as racist, sexist, homophobic, hateful, rigid, and literalistic.

God does not intend that we should defame and undermine each other. Given the fact that we cannot reconcile incompatible views, the most Christian thing to do is to bless each other, pray God’s gracious favor over each other’s ministry, and separate. This is what is behind the Protocol, negotiated and affirmed by persons both from the progressive camp and the evangelical or traditionalist camp.

The new Global Methodist Church will be made up of churches and conferences who choose to join the new denomination and wish to witness to the power of the gospel through the perspective of historic Methodism. In solidarity with our overseas churches, it will operate from a Biblical worldview that affirms a unified system of truth and an appreciation for how God works supernaturally in the world. Churches will be freed from institutional heavy-handedness. The new church will not impose language restrictions and politically correct speech nor restrict the kinds of seminaries that can educate clergy. It will not seek to reorder the world by sociological engineering. It will not place the institutional church above the local church. It will affirm Methodism’s historic stance on human sexuality and the family.

Lord, hasten the day.