

TIME FOR A REALITY CHECK: #2 THE BOARDS AND AGENCIES

By Dr. Riley Case

Those of us who still identify as United Methodist, even after many votes for disaffiliation, want to continue to pray and work that our beloved UMC may be a beacon of hope in a sin-weary world. Some are fearing that with the loss of many evangelical and traditionalist pastors and churches the UMC will become even more identified with liberal progressive institutionalism that will be even more hostile to the evangelical faith. Church leaders tell us this will not be so. But it is time for some reality checks. The church cannot continue to pursue the same path it has for the past 50 years if it expects to thrive. It is time for change. The next few Happenings articles will suggest what some of these changes might be.

#2 – Boards and Agencies. Time to cut back, eliminate and/or merge our bureaucracy. A reality check. We have not always been well served by our boards and agencies. Many lay people have little awareness of what lies beyond the local church. Those who do have some sense of it are not always pleased. They would associate far-off agencies with the “authorities” who tell them how churches are supposed to be run, what people are supposed to believe, and what social causes we are to uphold.

Sunday school is a good example. The Sunday school experience was made for Methodism. Before the Civil War, when the circuit system dominated American Methodism, Sunday school, along with love feasts, were what Methodist churches did when the circuit pastor was not present. Methodist Sunday schools were so successful that it is said that by 1850 one of every ten children in America between ages 5 and 15 was enrolled in a Methodist Sunday school. The curriculum used was the catechism (the first catechism in the Evangelical Church dates from 1809) and the main purpose was to lead children to Christ. 98% of church membership growth came through Sunday school. All of this remarkable activity took place without the benefit of professional leaders and independently from denominational control. Interdenominational Sunday School Unions helped to encourage and resource local churches.

But independence is not easily tolerated in a hierarchical system. In the years after the Civil War, church leaders sought more and more to institutionalize and control the Sunday school movement. By 1868 the new Department of Sunday School Instruction was created in the M.E. Church with John H. Vincent, soon associated with the Chautauqua Movement and later a bishop, as the head. Educational professionals and the ruling class were influenced by Horace Busnell, who taught that children are born good or bad and, with proper training, many persons did not need conversion.

What happened next is well traced by a 1935 book by E. B. Chappell, editor of church school materials in the M.E. South Church. The book, *Recent Development of Religious Education in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, asserted that “earlier leaders,” based their teachings on theological presuppositions instead of sound educational theory. Those persons, lacking in the scholarly equipment, taught an inherited Calvinism leading to erroneous opinions that became a serious hindrance to the development of effective religious education. The “erroneous opinions” were identified as total depravity, emphasis on a blood atonement, and the necessity of radical conversion. The new approach to Christian education would be based on the presuppositions of the psychology of religion and other scientific approaches to human nature. To accomplish this, Chappell stated that John Wesley would need to be reconstructed (Wesley believed in Original Sin and a blood Atonement). The Uniform Lesson Plan, which Methodists had helped to initiate, would be out. Uniform lessons were based on the idea that the purpose of Church school was to attain Biblical knowledge and were content-centered and not child-centered, and that was no longer the Methodist approach.

In addition, the Uniform Lesson Plan, supported by a number of denominations, had fallen into disfavor by Methodists because it was deemed to cover Biblical material unsuitable for children. In 1937 the M.E. Church South published a book by Ethel L. Smither, *The Use of the Bible with Children*, which was very forthright in announcing it was “official,” “authorized,” and “approved” by the Board of Education. The book was straightforward about the need for “universal reconstruction”—old ways were not adequate;

new ways must prevail. The concentration on facts, doctrine, and Bible stories was no longer acceptable. The purpose of Christian education was not to impart knowledge about God or the Bible or salvation, but character growth. Old Testament Bible material should be withheld from younger children so that their picture of God would not be distorted by contact with pre-Christian ideas.

I grew up in that modernist era of the 1930s and 40s. My cousins, when they visited my Methodist county-seat Sunday school, wondered why we did not use the Bible. In seminary, I remember discussing whether Jesus should or should not be pictured on the cross before junior high. Up until the time of the Methodist-EUB merger in 1968-1972 the conference journal listed the churches that used or did not use Methodist Sunday school material. Some of us argued for the merger because we believed the EUB's understanding of what was appropriate for children might influence the new United Methodist Church.

The merger took place but the EUBs were swallowed up and former EUBs had little influence in the new church. The new structure demoted the importance of Sunday school, now called church school, and it became a sub-division in the new Board of Discipleship. It was not just evangelicals but the radical left that was now critical of the work of Christian education. Instead of the Bible or character building, there was now a new emphasis on inclusion and social justice and diversity. The old Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) was labeled (I remember this on various occasions) as "Mickey Mouse."

The result was disastrous. In 1976 I was serving as the conference youth coordinator and attended a special meeting in Nashville. Here were the facts: In 1967 (before the merger) there were 13 staff members in youth ministry serving under the Board of Education, 15 secretaries, 52 full-time conference directors, and 1.2 million pieces of curriculum material circulating per quarter. By 1976 in the merged church there was one part-time youth staff member, one secretary, and 400,000 pieces of curriculum material per quarter. Church school enrollment had declined from 7 million in 1966 to less than 4 million by 1985.

But entrenched bureaucrats do not easily change. The suggestions offered by Good News and other evangelicals to turn around the decline were simply ignored or considered "divisive."

Can it be different in our present day? Despite disaffiliation, there are still many United Methodists who want to see renewal. This means things must change. There is now an opportunity for some new directions.

More on this later.