

TRUSTING FOR A GOOD FUTURE FOR THE UMC

By Dr. Riley Case

(Even though we will be phasing out of existence at the end of 2022, there is strong hope that several features of the Confessing Movement might continue. These include our podcasts under the direction of Dr. Maxie Dunnam and the “Happenings Around the Church” articles. As 2022 comes to a close, an email will be sent to those currently on the Confessing Movement distribution list to ask if you would like to continue receiving articles. More information will be shared at that time. Stay tuned.)

By now it should be known that the Confessing Movement, after a 28-year witness to the importance of doctrinal integrity within The United Methodist Church, will be phasing out of existence on December 31, 2022. This is because many of our supporting evangelical persons and churches have been part of the disaffiliation process and will be a part of the new Global Methodist Church, or some other expression of Christian faith, that will stand firm for doctrinal integrity. Thus, there is less need (and less support) for a renewal group, at least one patterned after the Confessing Movement.

Many of us sensed for some time that separation within the denomination could not be avoided. We had hoped that the separation would have taken place more gracefully and equitably, but that did not happen. We could dwell on what might have gone better but that will not encourage us for the future. It is now time to focus on the days ahead and what God can do for the Global Methodist Church, for The United Methodist Church, and for other churches as they seek how best to serve our risen Lord.

A number of us, for various reasons, will continue to identify as United Methodist. We admittedly have some fears that the post-separation church will identify much more with liberal progressive institutionalism and will be even more hostile to evangelical faith. Church leaders tell us this will not be so. They want us to believe that on the other side of the disaffiliation chapter of our church’s history there can be a renewed church. We pray that will be so.

A podcast, “Grace at the Table: Conversations of Hope for the UMC Future,” featuring such leaders as Bishop Will Willimon and Mike Slaughter, formerly pastors of Ginghamburg UM Church in Ohio, offers some hope. Slaughter is quoted, for example, saying, that for the UM Church, “Jesus is Lord and everything else is conversation.” Would that we could believe this will guide the future of the UM Church.

Despite words spoken about a new beginning for the UM Church, and the claim that the UMC will be a more vital church after the disaffiliation fuss is over, there seem to be few specific hopeful signs of a future renewed UMC. What would be hopeful signs? Here is a list.

A confession that the structure that was put in place following the 1968-1972 Methodist-EUB merger has not worked. Our loss of 5 million members in the American UMC since that time ought to be evidence enough of this truth. Methodism, which once was known

as a bottom-up movement in which energy and revival and social action moved from bottom to top, is now characterized as a top-down institution in which, it seems, local churches exist for the sake of the bureaucracy instead of the other way around. Boards and agencies need to be eliminated or at least combined. I have seen no polls in which ordinary church members have confidence in our boards and agencies.

A confession that our official seminaries are at present time an embarrassment to the church. Cut off all subsidies and let the seminaries start producing ministerial candidates that can do ministry. Any denominational funds should follow students and not be used simply to prop up financially stressed seminaries which seem more interested in impressing the academic world and social and political ideologies of progressive society than in serving the local church. Methodism had its most explosive growth in the years before it required seminary degrees. Spiritual gifts and evidence of leadership should play a much more important role in ordination than a diploma.

A confession that our bishops in recent years have not served us well. For many years I was proud and supportive of bishops I knew and/or served under. Even when we did not agree theologically, I found them supportive and very much aware of issues facing the local church. Within the last 30 years or so this has changed. Bishops now seem to be elected because of gender, race, social ideology (almost always progressive), and because of institutional loyalty rather than because of proven leadership and their defense of classical Wesleyanism.

A confession that the institutional church has failed to affirm consistently Methodism's historic doctrines, including the affirmations of Jesus as Savior and Lord, and of the Scriptures as our final authority in matters of faith and practice. It was because of the importance of upholding classic Methodist doctrine that the Confessing Movement was launched twenty-seven years ago. A great part of our United Methodist constituency has been encouraged by this witness. But we should not need an unofficial renewal group to do what the bishops, boards and agencies, and our leading churches should be doing. This, of course, is not just a recent problem; it goes back for over a century. I do not remember a single time in four years of my Methodist seminary that there was serious discussion on the Articles of Religion. The more common interpretation of Methodist doctrine has been that Methodism is a big tent theologically and persons can believe pretty much whatever they wish to believe. This includes Unitarianism, universalism, Sophia worship, and the neglect of such classical Wesleyan doctrines as Original Sin and the Atonement. The only heresy today is to believe that there is such a thing as heresy. For upholding Scripture and historic Methodist doctrine, traditionalists in the church have been accused of fundamentalism, rigidity, racism, homophobia, Bibliolatry, and hatred. It should be recognized that even in the continuing UM church the vast majority of our lay people affirm the historic Wesleyan essentials.

Can we have conversations about these things?