**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

 *By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***CAN THE CONNECTION BE SAVED - ETHOS (Part 4)***

 Ethos is a way of thinking, believing and acting that makes a group distinctive. United Methodist (UM) ethos would be the UM way of worshipping, speaking, and believing that would in some way distinguish us from other religious groups. According to our *Discipline* (para 132) it is this “ethos,” along with our common tradition of faith, including our doctrinal standards, our common mission, and our episcopal system of church government that work together to give us a sense of *connectionalism*, of belonging to one another and being together in the common journey of faith.

 This connectionalism is presently under attack because of persons, some in leadership positions, who claim that the church as presently constituted is not worthy of their support. Primarily, but not totally because of the church’s position on marriage (between and man and woman) and the church’s belief in a sexual morality which includes celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage, there is a movement now which urges church members and pastors to disrupt the order of the church by defying church teaching in regard to the practice of homosexuality, to tie up the church’s energy and finances in church trials, and otherwise to cause chaos until the church changes its position to one more to their liking. A retired bishop, Bishop Melvin Talbert, has labeled the church’s historic position on human sexuality as “wrong and evil…and no longer calls for our obedience.”

 This cannot be good news. It seems that public demonstrations, new statements, and further denounciations of the United Methodist Church are taking place almost daily. On December 7, two active women UM clergy, Rev. Joanne Brown and Rev. Christie Newhill were “married” in Seattle by their district superintendent, Rev. Patricia Simpson. When Rev. Frank Schaefer of Eastern Pennsylvania, was asked to surrender his credentials because of his officiating at a same-sex “marriage,” he was invited by Bishop Minerva Carcãno of the Cal-Pac conference to join that conference. Whatever Eastern PA says, or whatever the *Discipline* says, Bishop Carcãno and the Cal-Pac conference have declared they believe the Discipline violates the spirit of Jesus, and the United Methodist Church is in error in its stance on sexual morality, and that persons like Frank Schaefer are invited to join their ranks.

 Rev. Michael Love of Palo Alto, CA, blogs about such things (*Pastor Michael’s Blog*). He represents the progressive perspective. He claims he church presently is out of step with the great traditions of Methodism (???). According to Love, in a blog on Nov. 19, on the one side are those who believe in inclusive hospitality, which he believes is the true ethos of Methodism. On the other side are those “legalists,” who are driving the UM Church “into the ditch,” who use the *Discipline* to tailor the church to a reactionary and bigoted form that crushes the church’s credibility.

 In Love’s view: “The witness of justice, reconciliation, healing and mercy is the true core of the Methodist ethos.” Thus…

 *What we have here is two different, possibly irreconcilable, views of the church. One is that above else we are to preserve order, to correct and discipline vile sinners to come to faith maybe in Jesus but most certainly in the Church itself. The second is deeply concerned with making sure that our walk matches our talk, seeing the Christ in everyone, eager to act as if God’s Kind-dom actually came as Jesus said it did. We need to decide which Church are we.*

 Time to ask: where does this stuff come from? United Methodist ethos for most of us has to do with our hymnal, decisions for Christ, growing in grace, living moral lives which include faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness; UM ethos is church camps, missions trips, feeding the hungry. United Methodists are rural and city, Democrat and Republican, rich and poor, female and male, American and African, old and young, Hispanic, White, Black. What we share in common is that the belief that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself through the cross, and that we have given the ministry of reconciliation. That is, we seek to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

 Progressives speak about “justice, reconciliation, healing and mercy” as the true core of Methodist ethos, but where does this claim come from, at least as the words are defined by progressives? Where is it in the church’s history, in its tradition, in its *Discipline*, and in the Methodist ethos that most of us have grown up with the lived with all our lives? Progressives decry “legalism,” which they associate with abiding by the standards of the *Discipline.* But Methodism has been defined by standards. Our General Rules (on which the “Three Simple Rules” are taken) end with the charge that if our members do not observe these rules, and fail to repent when admonished, they have “no more place among us.”

 Our Methodist heritage has always taught inclusiveness, based on Wesley’s understanding of unlimited atonement, which is that Christ died for all persons and all persons, barring none, can be saved by faith. This inclusiveness has nothing to do with the idea that all are acceptable, no matter what their beliefs or their life style.

 Michael Love is correct that “what we have here is two different, possibly irreconcilable, views of the church,” though the two views could be better stated:

 One the one hand there is the historic faith, the core beliefs are affirmed not just by United Methodists but by Christians of different churches in all places and at all times. That faith is proclaimed in the historic creeds and found in the traditions of the churches. In United Methodism this tradition is through John Wesley, the Methodist societies, and in the various Methodist bodies found throughout the world. It is based on a recognition of Original Sin, on the plan of Salvation derived from the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, saving faith, and on the working out of that salvation by good works. This view of what Christianity is, and what the church is, has been tested many times by ideologies, by cultural trends, by heresies, but it has stood the test of time and it is affirmed by Methodists around the world. For the church presently, this understanding of what Christian faith is and what the church is set forth in our church’s *Discipline*.

 The second view of the church is that of modern progressives who believe that new truth has been discovered which renders the historic truths of the church obsolete, if not simply wrong. This view is represented by a small, but significant minority in the United Methodist Church of the United States and Europe, which believes that modern culture, and the societal trends found in many of the secular (and not a few “church”) colleges, trump Biblical truth, trump church tradition, and trump the UM *Discipline*.

 In this view the church as presently constituted is “hateful,” “biased,” “prejudiced,” “racist,” “homophobic,” ‘legalistic” “reactionary,”, “bigoted” and needs to be deconstructed (taken apart) so that it can be reconstructed by those with more enlightened views. Let it be clear who all is covered by this indictment. This would include St. Francis, John Wesley, Martin Luther, and all the saints of all ages. This is a frontal attack on Christianity, all of this is in the name of “justice, reconciliation, healing and mercy.”

 More, much more, will be written and spoken on these things from various quarters in the days ahead. For the moment three observations can be made:

 1) It is time for some serious conversation in the church. This conversation should not be built around the progressives’ agenda of homophobia, racism, and sexism, and evangelical bullying, but around the nature of UM ethos, its doctrine, and its mission. The seminaries, some of which seem to be the farthest afield on these things should be required to be involved. The monitoring agencies, and indeed, all the boards and agencies need to make clear to the rest of us, how it is that they claim to be “connectional” according to the Discipline’s definition.

 2) The progressive position does not represent the vast majority of UM church members. This is especially true for overseas UMs, whose sensitivities progressives appear to discount as primitive. But even in America UMs tend to be more evangelical than progressive, more Republican than Democrat, and would be, if they were aware of everything taking place, appalled at how the church and its beliefs and moral standards are under attack by its own leaders..

 3) The Church of Jesus Christ will stand this test, just as it has stood every other test through the ages. This is not to say the United Methodism as part of that Church universal will stand the test. No one at this point can predict the future of the UM Church. If persons are determined to bring it down it might well be brought down. If the progressives win this war what is left of the UM Church will probably look like the United Church of Christ today, imploding numerically, spiritually dead and religiously irrelevant. United Methodist ethos will not matter at that point.