**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Riley B. Case*

***IS THERE HOPE IN 2016?***

New Year’s traditionally is a time for hope. In some of the years when I was actively pastoring I offered a New Year’s Eve service using John Wesley’s Covenant Service. It is a service of repentance, commitment, and aspiration. The theme always centered on good things coming: what God will accomplish in our lives, in the church, and in the world, in the coming year.

I don’t know of many churches offering a Watch Night or a New Year’s service these days. Nor am I hearing many messages of hope for the days ahead. In the Associated Press’s ten major stories of 2015, not one could be considered a hopeful story. A *Wall Street Journal* poll from August 5 reports that an all-time record 76% of Americans do not believe their children’s lives will be better than their own. Seventy-one percent believe the United States is headed in the wrong direction. In *Time* magazine’s article for what can be expected in 2016 the prognosis is generally discouraging: an absence of international leadership, a weakened West, ISIS, growing refugee problems, terrorism and the fear of terrorism in the world and in our own communities. Over all of this is the spector of disastrous climate change: rising temperatures leading to unmitigated disasters in the world.

One would think that whether or not others are discouraged at least “progressives” would be expressing optimism. They, after all, are getting the world they have been working for. Progressive philosophy is based on the assumption that new truths and new ways of doing things and a changing culture will bring about a better society, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that new truths and new values are are being discovered every day. There is no part of society that is immune to change. The constitution of the United States? In the hands of progressive justices the constitution evolves according to cultural realities. So progressives redefine “rights,” “freedom,”“justice,” and “equality” to mean what progressives desire them to mean. Advancing science gives hope for medical cures, to say nothing of new everyday gadgets that supposedly will make our lives better. Several commentators announced in 2015 that the cultural war is over and the progressives won.

Why then are progressives so angry? The liberal blogs are full of disenchantment with America and its institutions: the police are out of control; the poor get poorer because of oppressive government policies; the country is being run by greedy corporations; the educational system is in shambles; various inequities are leading to homelessness and violence and failing prison systems and other untold evils. And to make matters worse religious fanatics spew out homophobia and racism and sexism and other evil “isms” which are being discovered daily.

Regardless of whether we identify as progressive or traditional there are serious concerns for society and the world. There is a loss of civility (one only needs to mention the name Donald Trump); there is a mistrust of the political system; there is growing poverty in the midst of plenty. The break-down of the family is creating problems we never thought possible. Poverty for one. . In California, one of the wealthiest and most progressive states in America, 34% of children in poverty live in single parent homes. In1976 there were 6.7 million households headed by single-parents. Today there are 21.7 million. In 1970 there were a half million co-habitating couples in America; today there are 8 million.

Given all of thisl, it might be imagined that evangelical Christians would be the most discouraged of all. Culturally speaking, evangelicals have had little to cheer about in 2015. Secularists gleefully quote a recent survey by Barna that indicates that the percentage of persons in America identifying as Christian has decreased from 77% to 70% in less than 10 years. The percentage of persons belonging to a mainline denomination has decreased from 18% to 14%. And Christians are quite aware of the gay agenda tsunami, a tidal wave that would sweep away Biblical values and crush all who resist its bullying tactics. Before this progressive secular gay agenda tsunami educational institutions, business corporations, and even conservative politicians, are caving like paper soldiers.

For United Methodists there is concern verging on the edge of alarm as the church faces General Conference 2016 in Portland, Oregon, May 10 – 20. While there are many crucial issues facing the church, for progressives there is one issue only--the issue above all issues—acceptance of the practice of homosexuality. The fact that progressives presently do not have the votes to accomplish this does not deter the Connectional Table, Church and Society, a number of bishops, a number of progressive (and in every instance declining) annual conferences, to say nothing of eleven caucus groups (some receiving apportionment monies) from joining the cause to change the church’s *Discipline.*  The cry is out for pro-gay activists, United Methodist or not, to descend on Portland to join the battle.

A number of individuals and groups, most of which wish to identify themselves as “centrists,” believe some middle way can be found which will be acceptable to both progressives and traditionalists. Almost all of these propose some form of “live and let live,” or tolerance for the views of others, or love and respect even when we disagree. None of the proposals can possibly bring unity. Most will lead to chaos on the local church and conference level to say nothing of what will happen in the conferences in Africa. If there is a prediction to be made it is that the Portland General Conference will not be the church’s finest hour.

So, is there hope? Of course. The affirmation of the Confessing Movement (as well as the Church of Jesus Christ) is: Jesus Christ is Lord. Christians, at least evangelical Christians, do not base hope on the latest news report or the latest survey. God’s truth is not based on the changing whims of modern secularism but on the Word of God. On the local level, and in many United Methodist cluster groups and even in annual conferences, one does not see the despair or the anger that is reflected in progressive circles in the social media and on the web pages. The Barna survey, even as it reports a lower percentage of the population identifying as Christian, reports that the number of evangelicals as a part of America’s population remains steady at about 23%. A number of evangelical churches are thriving as never before. Many of these are reaching millennials, the very group that secularists like to report are abandoning religion. Church attendance remains constant. The global Church, despite all of the persecution in places like Africa and the Middle East, continues to grow. Many of these churches are sending missionaries to advance the gospel.

And it should be pointed out that evangelicals are not among those who continually express disenchantment with America. Evangelical Christians are proud to be Americans, despite America’s problems. Evangelical United Methodists still affirm classical Wesleyan theology and believe it to be a faithful interpretation of Biblical truth.

God is not through with us yet. We look forward to 2016.