**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

 *By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***CAN WE LEARN FROM A SURVEY?***

 The United Methodist News Service (UMNS) Daily Digest featured this headline in its September 15 release: “*The willingness of congregations to welcome homosexuals as members --and place them in leadership positions--is one the rise, according to a new Duke University study.”* This news should not be surprising. As the general culture becomes more permissive so goes the church. It is of interest however because the news release came originally from *Duke* *Today,* the publicity organ of Duke University and Duke, despite its alleged United Methodist connections, is mostly secular in outlook and normally does not get too excited about church happenings. But the National Congregational Study was directed by a Duke professor, Dr. Mark Chaves, and since homosexuality is big these days, why not headline such findings?

 The National Congregational Study studied 1,331 congregations (including mosques and synagogues) in a number of areas. Because similar studies were conducted in 1998 and 2006 the study is helpful in revealing trends in congregational belief and practice.

 In the area of homosexuality the study reports that the number of congregations accepting gay and lesbian members rose from 37.4% to 48% between 1998 and 2012. The number of congregations open to gays in leadership roles rose from 18.5% to 26.4% during the same period. If there is any surprise it is that the percentages are so low. If the progressives are to be believed there is such a groundswell of support for homosexual practice as normal and moral these days that the United Methodist Church is out of touch because it still holds that marriage is between a man and a woman and that a Biblical sexual standard is faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness. The truth is that almost all UM churches, including those with an evangelical orientation, receive members by confession of faith in Jesus Christ, and not by a person’s sexual orientation. Evidently, if only 48% of U.S. congregations are so receptive, UM evangelicals should be considered left-of-center, and not right-wing.

 The data from other areas may be of far more significance than the matter of homosexuality (which was only a small portion of the study). For example, the number of church attendees who identify themselves as white evangelical Protestant rose from 33.4% to 37.6% from 1998 to 2012. Meanwhile the number of white moderate to liberal Protestants declined from 24% to 17.1%. The number of African-American Protestants rose from 10.5 to 12.8% At the same time the number of non-affiliated church attenders rose from 10.4% to 15%.

 An important point to be made is that liberal Christianity continues to decline, and by an alarming rate. Perhaps it needs to stated more strongly: liberal (progressive) Christianity in America is imploding. Fewer people are buying in. When the number of African-Americans and the number of non-affiliated (independent churches) Protestants (almost all these churches tend to be evangelical in orientation) is added to the evangelical count the percentage of Protestant attenders who would be considered evangelical approximates two-thirds.

 From the Confessing Movement perspective this is hardly a new revelation. This is what the United Methodist renewal groups have been saying for years. Liberal Christianity has no message. The good news that Christ died to save sinners and persons can be saved by faith, and there is a heaven and a hell, is not being heard in progressive churches. It is precisely because of this reality that the Confessing Movement was organized: to confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

 For some reason this seems to be lost on much of our church leadership who appear to place the protection of the institution above all other values. The crisis in the church today is not over homosexuality, which is only a symptom of a larger problem. It is over whether the gospel is being faithfully proclaimed. It is also over whether we have any common understanding of what it means to proclaim the gospel faithfully.

 More findings from the study: church attendees who see themselves as theologically conservative have increased from 1998 to 2012 from 52.7% to 59%. Those who identify as theologically liberal have increased from 9.8% to 12.2%. Those who identify as theologically moderate from 1998 to 2012 in the National Congregational Study have decreased from 37.6% to 28.8%. These statistics reflect the growing polarization within the Church.

 That polarization can be seen in the UM Church. If United Methodist boards and agency staff persons were surveyed they would probably check out at 100% liberal, or at the best moderate. There is a theological gap between the church leadership and the people. Perhaps the best example of this is the Connectional Table itself which voted 27-4 to submit legislation to General Conference to reverse the church’s historic stance on human sexuality. The Connectional Table represents boards and agencies and caucuses, not common ordinary United Methodists.

 Related to this is the percentage of American worship attenders who believe the Bible is inerrant and to be interpreted literally. It has risen from 63% to 71.3% from 1998 to 2010. For many of us the use of the words “literal” and “inerrant” are not the words that should be used on this type of question. However, it is difficult not to point out ironically that UM and other mainline seminaries have for the past 75 years railed against an “ignorant” and “uninformed” non-progressive laity that believe the Bible to be inerrant. Fifty years ago the seminaries I was acquainted with said this perspective would die out within a generation.

 In politics those church attenders who identify as more conservative decreased from 55% to 52% from 1998 to 2010. Those who identified as liberal increased from 7.8% to 10.8%. The study did not separate out denominational differences. In most studies UM lay members tend to identify as Republican over Democrat by a margin of about 2 to 1. Even then, it is telling that no person politically conservative has ever come close to being employed, say, by the General Board of Church and Society. I once wrote the general secretary and asked if the board had ever in recent history employed a Republican. The response was--as expected--that was not an appropriate question. Perhaps, but it doesn’t take much reading to figure out that the very people who argue so strongly for inclusiveness and diversity are themselves the most exclusive when it comes to political and theological diversity within the church leadership.

 Other interesting statistics. The number of congregations which report that some speaking in tongues takes place during worship has increased from 24% to 28.9% since 1998. The number of congregations which report that adults in worship “jump, shout, or dance spontaneously” has increased from 13.1% to 22.1% from 1998 to 2012. Some of us are sad to hear that the number of churches using the organ in worship has decreased from 70% to 56% in 14 years and the number of churches that have an adult choir that sings regularly has decreased from 72.3% to 57.2%.

 We are living in a time of rapid change. We recognize this in the way homosexual practice is becoming normalized by the general public, and, to some extent, even in the church. At the same time it appears that beliefs and practices associated with evangelical faith are holding strong and, more and more, are becoming and have become the mainstream in American religion. That church leadership ignores of this does not bide well for the church.