**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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***A PREVIEW OF SOME GENERAL CONFERENCE LEGISLATION--ACCOUNTABILITY***

The next few Happenings articles will identify some legislation that will be considered at the United Methodist General Conference to be held in Portland, May 10 - 20, 2016. While several thousand petitions have been sent to the conference secretary on many different topics, some of these will have special interest to evangelicals in the church.

One area of petitions will address the procedures dealing with accountability in the church. Accountability eventually must deal with violations of church law, which in turn can lead to discipline and perhaps even church trials. In recent months almost all instances of the violation of church law have been related to matters around the church’s stances on marriage (between a man and a woman) and issues related to the practice of homosexuality. Five pieces of legislation will be mentioned.

For the past 230 years God has used American Methodism to be a blessing not only in America but in many places in the world. From a handful of believers at the founding conference in 1784, Methodism grew so spectacularly that by 1850 one-third of all American church members were Methodist. Methodism redefined the meaning of the word *evangelical* in America. Methodism advanced education, missions, and a Christian social conscience. Some of Methodism’s greatest growth was from among the poor, and from minorities. By 1820 20% of Methodist membership was African-American, both slave and free. Through all of this Methodism sought to be faithful its original doctrines expressed in such documents as the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith, and to its moral vision as expressed in the General Rules. Church trials during those years were one means by which doctrinal and moral standards were upheld and the church was united in common mission.

United Methodism has fallen on difficult times in recent years. Since 1968 the American United Methodist Church has lost 3.5 million members. United Methodism has many problems, but let it be emphasized that the problems have not been caused by is history nor its doctrine nor its polity, nor its traditional social stances. Its basic problem is the failure on the part of local churches and individuals and its leadership to the live and preach and uphold the basic truths of the gospel that have been a part of our Wesleyan heritage. One part (among many) of this failure to uphold the basic truths of the gospel has been in the inconsistency of the application of church discipline (which includes church trials). The section entitled Judicial Administration which covers Investigations, Trials, and Appeals cover 39 pages of the Church’s *Discipline.*

Unfortunately, basic Christian truths are today under attack, not from other religions, nor other Christian denominations, but from within the church’s own ranks. The most vocal critics of United Methodism and its doctrine and *Discipline* at the present time are from our own United Methodists who claim that the *Discipline* of the church is oppressive and bigoted. In no area is this more evident than in the area of human sexuality, particularly in the Biblical and United Methodist stance that marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman, and in the area of “faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness.” These critics, known as “progressives,” believe that Scripture revelation is not adequate and the Biblical understanding of sexual purity no longer is applicable in the present age. That once considered sinful must no longer be considered sinful. The church has always sought to be open and welcoming, but welcoming now applies not to persons but to sexual practice and persons involved in those practices. And if the church does not change by democratic means it must be forced to change through pressure or any means possible.

One way of forcing the change is through ecclesiastical disobedience. The Western Jurisdictional Conference in July, 2012, adopted a statement of “Gospel Obedience” which asserted the denomination is in error in regards to its position on homosexuality, and urged United Methodists to operate as if Para. 161F (“practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching”) does not exist. Since then pastors and even bishops are deliberately violating the rule of *Discipline* with the strategy that if enough pastors perform same-sex marriages, for example, the church will so overwhelmed with the cost and the effort and the bad feelings that come from trials that the church will cave under pressure (bullying) and reverse or at least compromise the church’s standards.

Unfortunately, while very clear in some areas (marriage is between a man and a woman) in other areas the *Discipline* was not carefully written. Much of the legislation was not written by lawyers but by well-intended church leaders who believed the intent to the legislation would prevail in church considerations. Not so. Those opposed to United Methodist doctrine are willing to use every ambiguity and every legal loophole to thwart the intent of the *Discipline.* For example, the *Disciplin*e states that “self-avowed” practicing homosexuals shall not be ordained. But persons argue that “self-avowed” means I must personally and publicly admit to being a practicing homosexual. If I do not so publicly admit, even if I am “marriage” or living with a same-sex partner, the paragraph does not apply to me.

In another example, when a complaint is filed the church desires to seek “resolution” of the complaint without the agony of a church trial. Some bishops now declare that complaints have been “resolved” with no consequence as the result of the violation.

Thus the submission of petitions like the following that should help to bring clarity in areas of accountability.

1) Complainant as a party to Just Resolution. After a complaint has been filed against a clergyperson, there is an attempt to resolve whatever the complaint is about without having the complaint go to trial. Bishops presently are declaring complaints resolved when in fact nothing has happened; nothing is changed; nothing is done. There are no consequences. Persons who filed the complaints are not even consulted. The proposed legislation would require that the person who files the complaint must agree that a true just resolution has taken place.

2) Counsel for the Church (Para. 2704). The proposed legislation stipulates that a person who agrees to represent the church should defend the church’s position with integrity. Unfortunately, in some cases those persons chosen to represent the *Discipline* do not themselves support the case they are trying to represent.

3) Church’s right to appeal egregious errors in church law during the trial process. (para. 2715). There have been examples of terrible miscarriages of justice in the complaint system and the trial system. This legislation would allow an appeal all the way to the Judicial Council.

4) Mandatory Penalty. (Para. 2711) This proposed legislation would impose a mandatory sentence of one year’s suspension for the first conviction of conducting a same-sex marriage, and loss of credentials for a second conviction. This is to counteract instances where, for instance, a person was found guilty of violating church law but given only a one-day suspension.

5) Homosexual practice. Clarifies the definition of “self-avowed” practicing homosexual by adding language to the effect that any person who enters into civil union, domestic partnerships, or “marriage” with a person of the same sex or gender, or communicates in any public setting that they are a practicing homosexual shall be considered to be “self-avowed.”

Does any of this legislation have a chance of passing? The legislation assumes that the basic position of the church in regard to human sexuality will be maintained. If the conference for some reason rejects the church’s present Biblical stance, the accountability legislation would be irrelevant. If the conference takes the stance that persons or churches or conferences set their own standards (“agree to disagree”) the accountability legislation also would be irrelevant. If the conference maintains the present position on human sexuality on paper, but indicates no trials will take place, the accountability legislation would also be irrelevant. In that case, however, the church will be facing serious splintering and disintegration and whatever is left of the church will be faced with another set of problems.