**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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**WHAT UNITED METHODISTS MIGHT LEARN FROM THE TRUMP ELECTION**

Like many others I was taken by surprise by the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. I suppose I was too influenced by the media which predicted a disastrous loss for Trump. According to the media Trump had no chance to win. The only group he had supporting him, it seemed, was angry white males. He did not have African-Americans, nor Latinos, nor women, nor powerful lobbying groups. He did not have the media; he did not have big business. . He did not have people in the educational establishment, nor the political establishment. He did not even have full support of all the Republicans. Even some leading evangelicals had distanced themselves from Trump. He was far outspent in the campaign.

On election night I was channel surfing for a while intending to go to bed when Hillary Clinton’s victory was announced. It never happened. I watched on MSNBC, the progressive channel, as the commentators moods shifted from optimism to caution to concern to despair. Donald Trump, to everyone’s horror, was going to win the election.

From that time on there have been analyses, excuses, blame, soul searching, and demonstrations. Commentators on the progressive news channels spiel out their usual rants: aging and raging white Christian superstition, intolerance, bigotry, racism, homophobia, islamophobia, misogyny, and white privilege elected Donald Trump. But there have also been some thoughtful self-analysis and sincere questioning: How could we have missed this so badly? How could the pollsters have been so wrong? What is out there that we did not see?

I will comment on what the secular media did not see: common, ordinary people who do not live in Washington D.C. or New York city, or San Francisco and who not think the same way that college professors or television commentators think. It is telling that Hillary Clinton won Washington D.C. by 92.8% to 4%. People who live in a city where their political choices correspond with 93% of the population tend to believe that the rest of the world thinks like they do. But the rest of the country does not necessarily think the way people in Washington D.C. think. There are many reasons why vast numbers of people voted for Donald Trump: concern about the Supreme Court, concern for lack of good jobs, concern over immigration and terrorism, concern for religious liberty, reaction against political correctness; intrusion of Big Brother government in their lives. There were also, no doubt, reasons not so noble. Either way, a great percentage of persons, especially those in the hinterlands, believe the country is galloping in the wrong direction and perhaps it is time to change horses.

At any rate, lots of intelligent people armed with latest technological research tools, missed the depth of discontent. Election results point to large gaps in the country. Trump won rural counties by 90.5% to 9:5%; Clinton won counties where 50% have bachelor degrees or more by 79% to 21%; Trump won in counties with fewer than 10,000 persons by 94% to 6%; Trump won those counties where the median household income is less than $50,000 by 88:5% to 11.5%. He evidently won the white evangelical vote by 82% to 18% (a figure I believe needs far more analysis). Clinton did well in wealthy counties, in urban areas, in educated areas, in places like southern California and Connecticut. It is the wealthy, urban, educated areas of the country which tend to believe the country believes like they do, and do not have the inclination to find out otherwise. Often the rest of the country is scorned or, in the words of Hillary Clinton, is “deplorable.”

However we voted, those of us who prayed fervently for the country and the election, should believe that since we have entrusted this election and our country to God in prayer we should respect the election process and honor the results. We have an obligation to heal the nation, and especially work to bring understanding between various groups.

But this article is not just about the national election. There should be a lesson for United Methodists. Many of the gaps that are evident in our national life are also present in the United Methodist Church. The church also has a gap between the common people and the elites. The church also has a city-rural gap. Perhaps more seriously it has a clergy-laity gap. Lonnie Brooks, himself a progressive leader from Alaska, nevertheless understands our problem and explains it in a blog in this way:

*With only a slight bit of hyperbole I have observed that United Methodist clergy leadership has greeted the election of every Democrat candidate for president of the United States since John F. Kennedy as the dawn of the Messianic age, and it has greeted the election of every Republican candidate for the same office as the beginning of the age of the Anti-Christ*

The church press, the boards and agencies, much of the episcopacy, and the seminaries and those who graduated from the seminaries, live in a bubble. They share a corporate culture bound up in a morass of identity caucuses, quota systems, and institutional protectionism. Meanwhile the church’s doctrine is ignored if not cast aside and its mission statement neglected. After forty years of seeking inclusiveness the church is still overwhelmingly aging, white, middle class, and Republican.

When I went off to a Methodist seminary years ago my biggest surprise was the seminary’s isolation from ordinary Methodism. I expected liberalism. I expected good scholarly teaching. What I did not expect was the inability on the part of the seminary community to understand, much less relate, to people in the pew. One day the seminary revealed the results of a political poll among the faculty. 88% of the faculty identified as Democrat. In the churches I was serving probably 75% would identify as Republican. The seminary corporate culture could not understand, let alone sympathize with political conservatives. Nationally United Methodists identify something like 2 to 1 Republican over Democrat. Yet there are no staff members in Church and Society that would identify as Republican, or as conservative in any way. The religious press reported in 2008 when the election results were announced at the Council of Bishops meeting that Democrats had won the bishops cheered.

Nor could my seminary understand evangelicals. One day a student in class asked, “What am I going to do with these people in my church who still believe the Bible?” The answer was ”Bear with them the best you can; by the next generation we won’t have those problems.” I recently picked up a book on a used book table from that era. (*A Handbook of Christian Theologians* ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman 1965, Abingdon). The book summarized the work of 26 theologians. Not a single one of the 26 was from the evangelical perspective.

Matters have not changed much in the last fifty years. Gaps still exist, perhaps now greater than in previous times. It is not encouraging to read the tweets and the blogs of United Methodist clergy and church leaders. We need not just an inclusiveness of gender and race and age, we need an inclusiveness of theological perspectives and church cultures and regional differences.

When the 2016 election map of blue and red states is superimposed on a map of where Methodist strength is the greatest the red states correspond to the areas where United Methodist membership is greatest. The blue political states correspond with the areas of United Methodism where the church’s strength is in the greatest decline. And along with the decline, these areas are where we see anger and covenant-breaking and an inability to understand people not like themselves.

The church is presently entrusting its future to a Commission on a Way Forward. The presupposition is that the church is divided and needs to find a way to unity. It is a commentary on the times that the unity most often discussed is institutional unity—how to keep the structures of the institution intact. This is little discussion about the unity that comes from shared values and beliefs.

However, just as we should give our election process a chance so we should also give the Commission on a Way Forward a chance. If the national election has taught us anything it is this: that sometimes the unexpected happens.