**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**KEEPING UP WITH THE RENEWAL GROUPS (PART 2)**

I once had a superintendent who had been an episcopal candidate and had served on a number of general boards. I remember a remark of his: “Renewal in the church will never come from within; it will have to come from outside the official structures.”

I believe my superintendent was perceptive. If the 2012 General Conference proved anything it is that official United Methodism is stuck in a status quo rut. The very people who claim to be progressive in their political and social agenda turned out to be basically fundamentalists when it comes to the institutionalism. The prevailing philosophy seems to be: “if it was good enough for the 1960s it is good enough for now.”

Who are the outside influences that might offer hope for the church? There are the gender and ethnic caucuses. These are institutionally blessed, and even institutionally funded, but they seem stuck on a single note: inclusion and empowerment for their own groups. Their philosophy has yet to bring healing and hope for the larger church.

The progressive groups are likewise institutionally blessed but have a defective doctrine of the Church, seeing it primarily as an agent for social change, mostly, in their case, for progressive causes. The traditional doctrine of the Church holds that the Church is made up of the redeemed people of God, set aside for His service and living in hope of being joined with Him in the world to come. This really doesn’t work for progressives who believe that since everyone is accepted, there is no distinction between the saved and the lost, and not much incentive to bring the lost to salvation.

The evangelical groups are not, like the others, institutionally blessed, but this gives them more authenticity. There is no institutional or political advantage to being associated with a renewal group, and in some cases there is a price to pay since spiritual renewal sometimes comes into conflict with institutionalism. But people in renewal groups are willing to pay the price if the church can be directed toward a more hopeful future. The evangelical groups believe that renewal comes through commitment to the core values of Methodism, including the clear message of salvation based on the accepted and stated doctrines of the church.

With this as background the Happenings articles are reviewing the evangelical renewal groups, who they are, what are they doing at the present time, and what are their goals for the future. The last article dealt with Good News and A Fund for Theological Education (AFTE).

**THE MISSION SOCIETY**

The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church was the last of the church agencies to be taken over by progressives in the 1960s. As a result evangelical missionaries were sent home and others not accepted for service. Liberation theology and the funding of revolutionary groups became part of the new ideology. One result was that the number of full-time foreign missionaries was reduced from over 2,000 to today when it is (probably) less than 300. When overseas churches requested evangelical missionaries the board’s reply was that was not enough money to send them. In response in 1973 Good News helped to form the Evangelical Missions Council (EMC) which sought among other things to raise funds for evangelical missionaries still serving with the board. The EMC also engaged in conversations with the Board of Global Ministries (BGBM) to express evangelical concerns. After years of non-productive dialogue a group of pastors formed the Mission Society for United Methodists in 1984. The group was designed not to be in competition with but to work alongside the board.

This became difficult when the institutional church saw the Mission Society as a threat. When the first Mission Society missionaries were to be commissioned in 1985 Bishop James Thomas made arrangements for bishops to help with the commissioning. He had to renege on these arrangements under pressure from other bishops. For a number of years after that pastors wishing to serve with the Mission Society were not given special appointment and Mission Society missionaries were in some cases forbidden to itinerate in churches.

But the Mission Society has been faithful to its mission: to mobilize and deploy the body of Christ globally to join Jesus in His mission, especially among the least reached peoples, and has gained more and more acceptance not only with churches in America but with churches and conferences overseas. With a budget of over nine million dollars, none of it from church apportionments, the Society now counts 233 full-time missionaries serving in 42 countries. Within recent months new work has been started in Estonia and South Sudan. In addition 295 international missionaries, pastors, and church leaders outside the United States have been trained for service.

In a very positive development some new relationships have been forged between the Society and the present Board of Global Ministries. With the membership of the United Methodist Church exploding in areas outside the United States, this cooperation is needed as never before. The webpage for the Mission Society is themissionsociety.org.

**BRISTOL BOOKS**

When the Good News movement came into being in the late 1960s its major concern was Sunday school literature. While the *Discipline* charged the Board of Discipleship to produce literature that would service all the groups in the church, there was the strong feeling that evangelicals were not being serviced at all. While there was some encouraging movement, after dialogue, in some areas of curriculum development, confirmation materials remained a problem. In 1974 Good News developed the *We* *Believe* confirmation material for youth, which over a period of 12 years sold nearly 100,000 pieces of material. But Good News was not in the publishing business and in the early 1980s Bristol Books was incorporated as a separate entity to publish books and study materials that could be used in good conscience by United Methodist evangelicals.

Bristol Books presently has about 35 active titles. Even though Abingdon is much more open to evangelical concerns than in years past there are still titles which could only be published outside the official structures of the church. Two recent examples include Karen Booth’s book *Forgetting How to Blush, United Methodism’s Compromise* *with the Sexual Revolution*, and Mark Tooley’s book, *Methodism and Politics in the Twentieth Century.*

Bristol has experimented with Sunday school material and even worked cooperatively at one point with the Curriculum Resources Committee to produce a series. At present Bristol is in partnership with the Church of the Nazarene to publish a full line of Sunday school material. The material is thoroughly Wesleyan and based on the assumption that the Scriptures are fully authoritative. The material uses the basic Nazarene material but edits and changes for a United Methodist constituency.

A positive development is that the official structures of the denomination are now more open to allow churches to select materials that are suited for their needs, as opposed to the past when the Discipline stated that only “official” materials produced by the church were to be allowed in United Methodist churches.

So, encouraging developments continue to take place in the church. The webpage for Bristol Books is Bristolhouseltd.com.

(More evangelical renewal groups will be reviewed in the next Happenings article)