**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

***By Riley B. Case***

**UNITED METHODISM’S CORPORATE CULTURE AND CHANGE (PART 3) --MUSIC AND HYMNALS**

One--among many-- of the serious problems facing the United Methodist Church in America today is the disconnect between the church’s “mediating elite,” symbolized by boards and agencies, seminaries and bishops, and the ordinary people in local churches. The problem is greater for United Methodists compared with, say, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, because United Methodism originally grew out of the underclass brought into United Methodism by way of revivalism. Methodism basically defined the word “evangelical” for the American setting. However, when many Methodists became educated, sophisticated, and institutionalized they sought to put distance between themselves and the church’s revivalist past. In the process of re-imaging the church as culture-affirming, academically respectable, and as a politically active social institution, they alienated and have been alienating the very people who give life and vitality to the church.

There are a number of areas of church life where the disconnect is evident. Future Happenings articles will deal with some of these and suggest possible ways forward for bringing the church together. In this article the matter of Methodist music and hymnals will serve as a case study in how progress has been made in at least one area.

For nearly 200 years European religious music dominated the American church scene. That changed with the Methodist revivals and camp meetings and the introduction of American indigenous religious music. An early writer James Fry, writing in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* (MQR), explained how this happened. .

*At the commencement of the revival those familiar (Wesley) hymns…were used; but it was soon felt that they gave but imperfect expression to the ardent feelings of the worshipers. The deficiency was principally supplied by the preachers. Hymns, or “spiritual songs,” as they were more frequently called, to the cultured ear rude and bold in expression, rugged in meter, and imperfect in rhyme, often improvised on the preaching stand, were at once accepted as more suited to their wants. These were quickly committed to memory, and to a considerable extent usurped the place of the older and more worthy hymns* (1859, p. 407).

Another writer reported:

*It was not only at the meetings they (spiritual songs) were sung, but making so deep an impression upon the minds of the people of the period, they were soon learned by the thousands, who made the shops, the fields, the woods, the hills and the vales to echo with the melody of their voices…When one was started at their meetings, hundreds would unite, and being divided into many companies when singing, would be going on, the sound of their voices “was heard afar off.”….Under the singing the greatest power appeared generally to be displayed. Its charms disarmed and then melted into tenderness the hard hearts of sinners*…” (MQR, 1819, p. 304).

Not all were pleased. As early as 1808 Bishop Asbury, despite his support of camp meetings, wondered if the new music was a good thing:

*If you have any respect for the authority of the conference… purchase no hymn books, but what are signed with the names of your bishops.*

What were those “hymn books”? The first “official” M.E. hymnal of 1848 was one of the most successful hymnals ever published in America (except perhaps for the UM hymnal of 1988), but it contained no “spiritual songs.” Of the 1148 hymns, only two were of American origin. Following Asbury it carried the admonition to use no hymnals except the ones signed by bishops.

The admonition was ignored. Camp meeting spirituals were developing into gospel music on the one hand, and “Negro” spirituals on the other. Methodists were producing hymnals by the dozens. Jane Lorenz Porter identified at least 42 of these different Methodist-related but independent hymnals published between 1811 and 1875. (*Glory, Hallelujah*, Abingdon, p. 134)

The mediating elite did not take this sitting down. The M.E. hymnal of 1878 was put together by a committee composed of “…college presidents, professors, presiding elders, a pastor, and one lawyer (who were) representatives of distinct classes of culture, position, and experience.” (MQR, July 1879, p. 527). How did this group plan to direct Methodism’s musical future?

Of 307 authors in the hymnal 66 were Episcopalian, 22 Congregationalists, 20 Presbyterians, 14 Unitarians, 13 Lutherans, 13 Roman Catholics and 10 members of the M.E. Church. Only 7% of the hymns were of American origin. Of the 1,117 hymns , only 3 were identified with anyone west of Rochester, N.Y, or south of Washington, D.C. The 1889 hymnal of the M.E. South hymnal was only a bit more diverse. Its writers included 25 Baptists and 15 American Methodists. Within a decade Methodist hymnals were being stacked in furnace rooms while churches used other hymnals.

One of the other hymnals was edited by the Methodist S.S. Superintendent Ira Sankey. *Gospel Hymns 1-6* in its various forms would eventually sell 50 million copies, or enough for every household in the United States to have one. Only 7% of the authors in the “official” M.E. 1878 hymnal were women. In Sankey’s hymnals about 30% were women, almost all of them were Methodist.

The United Brethren, meanwhile, were more in tune with their constituency. The 1890 *Otterbein Hymnal* stated in the preface that the characteristic feature of the United Brethren was “experimental religion,” specifically the revival effort, and while other phases of church life would not be neglected, songs with practical value and spiritual purpose (gospel songs) would stand side by side with hymns of highest artistic merit.

In 1925 the Sunday school board of the M.E. Church South surveyed 2,209 Methodist Sunday schools to determine what was the primary hymnal used in Sunday schools. To their dismay they discovered only 8% were using the official hymnal; another 33% were using the *Cokesbury* *Hymnal*; the rest were using one of 111 different titles.

The 1935 hymnal, designed to serve the M.E. Church, the M.E. South, and the Methodist Protestant Churches, paid no heed to what numbers of churches wanted or were actually using. The hymnal reduced the number of Wesley hymns from 558 in the 1849 hymnal to 56 in the 1935 hymnal. Sections on “Need for Salvation,” Judgment,” “Warnings and Invitations” “Retribution” and “Heaven” were dropped in favor of sections on Brotherhood,“ “Service,” and the “Kingdom of God.” “O For a Thousand Tongues,” traditionally #1 in Methodist hymnals, a salvation hymn, was replaced with a new #1, a worship hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The favorite hymns sung by Methodists of that time--*He Lives*, the *Old* *Rugged Cross*, and *In the Garden*, all Methodist-connected--were pointedly ignored. The hymnal boasted that it had added many “new hymns for a new day.” Almost all of the “new hymns for a new day” are now lost in obscurity. Use of the hymnal was a mark of denominational loyalty (the very first question I was asked by my Board of Ministerial Training was, “What did I think of the Methodist hymnal?). The hymnal did have one weakness, according to my worship professor in seminary: it had failed to rid itself of all the Fanny Crosby-type “ditties.”

In the 1980s, the clamor for a new United Methodist hymnal came most strongly from groups like the Status and Role of Women, a group convinced that the major weakness of the 1964 and all previous hymnals was sexist language and male-dominated or war-dominated images. For once, however, wiser thought prevailed. The General Conference put responsibility for the hymnal in the hands not of special interest groups but of the Publishing House, a market-driven agency. A conscious decision was made to publish a hymnal for the people. 200 gospel hymns would be included in the new hymnal, as well as s a large number of Black spirituals. References to Jesus blood were restored. Wesley hymns were increased. Most of the traditional language of hymns was maintained. At the same time, new hymns also included creative hymns by new hymn writers.

The 1988 hymnal has been perhaps the most successful denominational hymnal ever produced in America. Meanwhile hymnals published by Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and United Church of Canada, politically correct and theologically compromised, have been largely ignored.

If the hymnal experience could be duplicated in other areas of church life, the disconnect between the mediating elite and the people in the pews might be narrowed.