**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***SOME THOUGHTS BEFORE GENERAL CONFERENCE***

I have been a United Methodist all my life. I grew up in Sunday school. I attended church camp and made a pledge for total abstinence which I have kept to this day. When I was called into the ministry I read John Wesley and debated Calvinists. I went to a Methodist seminary. I have pastored twelve different UM churches and served as a district superintendent. I have been a delegate to five general conferences and with Portland in 2016, will have attended five more. I love UM meetings. I attend them in retirement, even when I don’t have to. Most of my friends are United Methodist.

Why then do I have apprehension about the General Conference May 10-20, 2016? The truth is that while I have been inspired and uplifted by Methodist meetings, including annual conferences, my General Conference experiences have sometimes been less than positive. General Conference reflects a different kind of Methodism than I am used to. It is institutional United Methodism. It is boards and agencies and bishops and speeches about unity and whether young adults are adequately represented on committees. It is about inclusive language and proper speech and monitors to ensure the same. It is about caucus groups and regionalism and candidates running for the episcopacy. It is sometimes about adversarial relationships.

But even with all of this there have always been positives associated with General Conference. The music is always good. The sermons sometimes uplifting. There are impassioned speeches from the floor. There are many people, even among those I disagree with, who truly love the gospel. We are part of a great church. We are engaged in ministries of justice and compassion. We have a challenging mission statement: to make disciples to Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We work from a common *Discipline*.

But in recent times we note the church is under fire, not only from other religions (militant Islam) and secularism but from within its own ranks. The trigger issue is the practice of homosexuality although there are deeper issues: the authority of Scripture and the nature of the gospel itself. These are not minor disagreements as among friends. Melvin Talbert, a bishop of the church no less, says of the *Discipline* that it is to be resisted because of derogatory language and punitive laws that are immoral, evil, and unjust. Dorothee Benz, a delegate from New York and a college professor, says: “An anti-gay majority at General Conference, a combination of U.S. and international conservatives, led and whipped into a hateful frenzy by southern white Americans, has refused to consider our humanity. We are told we are prostitutes, pedophiles, and murderers. “ This is not the kind of language used by brothers and sisters in Christ.

Benz adds: “We are in thrall to an unjust book of rules and told the only way to change it is at General Conference, but a General Conference tyranny of the majority is hellbent on destroying our humanity.”

Bishop Talbert has performed two different same-sex “marriages,” in defiance of the *Discipline*, the request of other bishops, and the clergy covenant. For this he is treated by some as a hero. Talbert claims he defies the church because he answers to a higher call. He is in obedience to God and this takes priority over what the church says, not just the United Methodist Church but presumably, the Church at all times and at all places. Scripture as traditionally understood has been superseded because of new truth being discovered. Enlightened progressives, with the help of secular culture, have been given special insight in regard to new truths about marriage and inclusiveness (all are accepted into the kingdom regardless of belief or behavior). Normally when persons believe they have been entrusted with new truth they start a new religious group. Not these folk. Their new truth needs to be imposed on United Methodism regardless of whatever the consequences might be. Speaking of the UM General Conference in Portland, Dorothee Benz argues: “If there is to be a different outcome we must take matters into our own hands and somehow force the system to recognize our humanity.” So hundreds of thousands of dollars, not all of it United Methodist money, is being poured into the effort to force General Conference to change. Benz admits that an analysis of the votes indicates that the majority would uphold the church’s historic standards. Thus the need for radical measures, to “force the system.” With this in mind up to 500 persons have been recruited to come to Portland and in “non-violent” confrontation help in the “forcing.”

No wonder then the apprehension on the part of those who love the church. No wonder some of the Africans delegates have expressed concern about their safety. No wonder thee conference has declared that security checks will keep out guns and dangerous weapons from the convention center. This is beginning to suggest not a church conference but war.

Let it be understood that the Mel Talberts and the Dorothee Benzes represent only a very small minority of the United Methodist Church. The number of United Methodists worldwide who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who believe that the Scriptures are the inspired record of God’s actions on behalf of humanity; who support the doctrinal standards and the General Rules and seek to follow the *Discipline* still represents the vast majority.

Unfortunately, some even of this group, many of whom are kind and sincere and adaptable United Methodists, would be willing to search for some middle ground that would give lip service to Biblical morality but allow those who want to live by a new moral code license to do so. Perhaps, they would argue, there is space for all points of view in the church. Perhaps the Biblical writers were not aware that same sexual relationships in the 21st century would be seen differently than in Bible times.

The “middle ground” suggestions would be a disaster. The “war” would be moved into local churches and conferences and the exodus from the United Methodist Church would be accelerated.

In the midst of this the Commission on the General Conference and other planners continue to speak of “Christian conferencing,” in which, presumably through rational discussion, and trying a process other than Roberts Rules of Order, with “monitors” checking each person’s speech to insure political correctness, a solution can be found so that a divided church will not be divided, issues can be resolved, things will work out, and we can leave Portland singing, “We Are One in the Spirit.”

Can that work? Perhaps, with some kind of miraculous lightning from heaven. But it has not worked at any of the General Conferences in the past.

What should happen at this year’s General Conference? Let the conference be bathed in prayer. Let the delegates (as well as the observers) treat one another with respect and civility. Let the arguments be made and the votes taken. Let there be no disruptions or demonstrations or bullying which simply are not fitting in a community of faith where persons relate to one another as sisters and brothers. Then let us abide by the results. If persons or groups believe in good conscience they cannot abide by the results or continue to be associated with a church with which they feel has departed from the Christian faith let them withdraw or separate with good conscience and with the blessing of others.

Then let us carry on the work of Christ through the United Methodist Church. And if not in the United Methodist Church, in the place where God has led us.