**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley Case*

KEEPING UP WITH THE RENEWAL GROUPS (PART 4)

This article continues the survey of the evangelical renewal groups. It is our contention that at a time when the United Methodist Church is bogged down in inertia, fractured over doctrinal and moral issues-- at least in the United States--and reporting staggering membership losses, the evangelical renewal groups offer hope for the church.

**INSTITUTE OF RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY (IRD) UM ACTION**

In 1979 David Jessup, a layman from Virginia, became interested in the funding patterns of agencies of the United Methodist Church. Jessup was hardly some sort of political right-winger. He had served in the Peace Corps and had been active in civil rights and farmworkers movements in California. He was employed by AFL-CIO and had worked in the Jimmy Carter For President campaign. But through his job he was knowledgeable about organizations that had been identified by the state department (in a Democratic administration) as political liberation movements identified with communism, revolution and societal disruption. He was surprised, after reading some of his daughter’s Sunday school material, to see that some of these extreme political movements followed by the state department were being funded by agencies of the United Methodist Church.

Jessup did more research, eventually linked with persons associated with Good News, attended the 1980 General Conference on his own to support Full Disclosure legislation (after he had repeatedly been denied information about agency funding from the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), and shared his information with others.

A number of persons at that point realized that it was not just the United Methodist Church but other mainline churches plus the National Council of Churches (NCC) whose social witness had been severely compromised by liberal extremists. Out of their conversations and with the help of Good News the Institute of Religion and Democracy (IRD) was formed in 1981. IRD saw itself as an alliance of Christians wanting to reform the church’s social witness and address issues neglected by mainline churches such as religious freedom and the persecution of Christians. Richard John Neuhaus penned the founding document entitled “Christianity and Democracy.” In addition to the subgroup, UM Action, relating to United Methodists, there were also subgroups relating to the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church USA.

IRD was conservative in its approach to political and social issues but sought to be non-partisan; that is, it did not seek to take positions on specific treaties or pieces of legislation.

No matter. From the beginning IRD was labeled not only “far-right” but “fearful of change,” “unofficial” (because IRD was “unofficial” ordinary UMs should not pay attention to what it was saying), and “working against the best interests of the church.” But the IRD research was telling. *Reader’s Digest* did a story on IRD, as did *Sixty Minutes* and *Time* magazine. Lay persons began asking questions. The institutional establishment, instead of addressing the concerns, attacked the researchers. Staff persons from GBGM tried to have Jessup fired from his job with AFL-CIO; the Council of Bishops met in closed session to discuss how to combat IRD. UMComm issued a white paper (written mostly by agency staff) comparing IRD to the extremist right-wing groups of the 1950s and 60s. GBCS secretly (without its board’s knowledge) hired an investigator to try to find IRD links with extremist groups. Before the 2004 General Conference a group of progressives (including some bishops) released the book, *United Methodism @ Risk*, which was a frontal attack on all the evangelical groups, but especially on IRD.

What the liberal establishment was so quick to label as “right wing” was the social perspective shared by the majority of believers in mainline denominations. UM believers did not believe church money given so that the church could make disciples for Jesus Christ should instead support Castro in Cuba, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and the Nicaraguan revolution, while ignoring the persecution of Christians in China and Russia.

IRD has grown in influence and support since the 1980s and is now highly regarded in many circles (with the exception of the UM institutional establishment). Perhaps because of IRD the NCC and UM GBGM have committed fewer funds to radical and controversial causes, including political causes with no direct Christian connections.

IRD employs up to seven researchers and writers, including a number of young adults, to report on matters of social and political concern to Christians. Its blog, “Juicy Ecumenism - The Institute on Religion and Democracy Blog,” has three or four articles each day and is widely read, even beyond the persons in the mainline churches. In January, 2013, IRD writings were referenced by thirty-nine different media outlets. IRD’s director, Mark Tooley, is frequently quoted and often interviewed by the public media. The webpage for IRD is [www.theird.org](http://www.theird.org). .

**CONCERNED METHODISTS**

Another evangelical group, Concerned Methodists, is not as well known but shares some of the same concerns as IRD.

Concerned Methodists dates from 1989 when some military personnel stationed in North Carolina became aware of and began to ask questions about why some of the United Methodist general boards were supporting Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua. Not only were their questions not seriously addressed, the group then began to discover a number of other causes funded by United Methodist apportionment money that seemed questionable. At that point Concerned Methodists was organized. Sixteen of its eighteen Advisory Board members are laypersons

Concerned Methodists focuses on the dissimulation of information through its monthly newsletter, *Concerned Methodists*. Often the information shared is taken from UMComm and official UM sources.

Allen O. Morris of Fayeatteville, North Carolina is editor of the newsletter. He has also written a number of books, including: The Church in Bondage: *Problems and* *Trends in the United Methodist Church* (2000), *Homosexuality and the United Methodist* *Church* (2001*), At the Crossroads*, (2004), *Stewardship Perspectives 2207 A study of* *Finances within the United Methodist Church* (2008), *We’ve A story to Tell…(*2008), *On the Brink Important Issues of Great Concern Facing the United Methodist Church* (2009); *Misguided Shepherds Leadership Priorities, Problems, and Issues in the* *United Methodist Church* (2010).

The web page for Concerned Methodists is: http://cmpage.org.