**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**COVENANT AND SCHISM IN THE UMC: A TIME TO SPLIT?**

”Covenant and Schism in the UMC: A Time to Split?” is the title of the featured article in the April 16 issue of *Christian Century*. Though progressive in perspective, the *Christian Century* is a highly respected journal not so intimidated by denominational institutionalism as to gloss over serious problems in the church. The thrust of the article is to the effect that the “divide over homosexuality in the UMC may have grown too wide to bridge.”

Let us be thankful for some forthright reporting. Someone (besides the evangelicals) is willing to trouble us with uncomfortable truth. There is no admission of a “divide too wide to bridge” from the Council of Bishops, nor from the general boards and agencies, nor from the annual conferences, nor from the official church media in the United Methodist Church. The mantra that is repeated *ad nauseam* from progressive bishops and boards and annual conferences is, that if there are tensions in the church: “let us have conversations, dialogues, holy conferencing, and studies,” which, it should be noted, almost never admit to the enormity of the problem of dealing with irreconcilable differences, but instead assume that if we better understood each other we would make some adjustments (as in, change our convictions) and live together in unity. There seems no recognition that after a while all of the “holy conferencing” tends not to unite the church but to further divide the church.

Sometimes the response after such talks is: Can’t we just agree to disagree? That is like counseling an abusive husband and an abused wife to live together in peace without any expectations of changed behavior. The husband continues to be abusing, the wife abused, but they respect their differences. This means the wife continues to be abused. That does not work well in marriage and it does not work well in the church.

The *Century* article quotes Jack Jackson, professor of mission at Claremont School of Theology who has stated that it may be time for the church to cut its losses and separate. “Every four years we have this vitriolic conversation that has only gotten worse and worse….I think we are stuck. How can we get unstuck? How long can the church in progressive areas hang on and continue to decline? Or would it be better to say, we are brothers and sisters in this Methodist movement, but really we can’t live together anymore? Let’s bless each other in our different ministries and move on.”

For years evangelicals have been accused of being divisive, disloyal, and wanting to divide the church. Let this truth now be known: it is the progressives who are dividing the church. Evangelicals have supported the doctrine and discipline of the church. Progressives on the other hand speak of “new truth” and of the churches needing to “progress” beyond the Bible, beyond historic faith, and beyond our United Methodist *Discipline.* Curiously, they have used the term “Biblical obedience” to mean to declare the Bible wrong, the tradition of the church wrong, the *Discipline* of the Church wrong and hateful.

So the progressive group *Love Prevails* proclaims it is time to declare the vows of church membership loyalty are null and void. Progressives should no longer uphold the United Methodist Church with “prayers, presence, gifts, and service” because to support the United Methodist Church with prayers is to be complicit with un-Christian and unconscionable practices (a prayer boycott?). This is called “divestment.” Evidently some pastors and even bishops have taken the divestment strategy even farther since some pastors and bishops believe they no longer are bound by ordination vows or any clergy covenant understandings. Since church teaching is “hateful” and “unjust” they answer to a higher authority, which seems to have a lot to do with personal preferences. Where are the voices who will label this for what it really is: bullying and divisive?

Along with “divestment” the *Love Prevails* group vows to practice “disruption.” This was the strategy at the 2012 General Conference at which progressive demonstrators and disrupters were able to shut down the conference for some hours (if time is money the cost was several hundreds of thousands of dollars), kill the voting on further legislation having to do with human sexuality, as well as a lot of other legislation, and kill the Call to Action legislation that promised modest reform in the bureaucracy. When the vote was announced that Call to Action had failed, Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) supporters cheered and gave each other high fives.

Not all progressives advocate disruption, but they seem to respond positively to it. The Connectional Table (CT), the most powerful church agency which exists to coordinate United Methodism’s vast maze of bureaucracies, allowed itself to be disrupted and then harangued by *Love Prevails* in November of 2013, resulting in the promise to re-arrange the agenda to deal with *Love Prevails* concerns at the CT meeting in April of 2014. It should be mentioned that the Connectional Table has 68 persons either *ex officio*, staff, or voting members, only ten of which are pastors serving local churches. Most of the rest are bishops or professional bureaucrats or members of various ethnic caucuses (not less than 30% of the members of CT are mandated to be from ethnic/racial groups but Africans don’t count). Africa, with nearly 40% of UM members, has 6% of the voting members of CT (49 voting members).

After presentations at the April CT meeting Bishop Minerva Carcaño of the California-Pacific Conference made a motion for CT to petition the 2016 General Conference to remove all language in the Book of Discipline disapproving of homosexual practice. Bishop Carcaño, it will be recalled, is the one who remarked after the 2012 General Conference that the Africans need “to grow up” (a remark so prejudiced that if she had been owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, might have gotten her banned from the league). The motion was later amended but it passed, thus putting the Connectional Table in conflict with the General Conference (to whom it is supposedly accountable).

How do these actions, and others, relate to the *Christian Century* article “Covenant and Schism in the UMC: A Time to Split?” Quite directly it would seem. Every day, it seems, brings developments that seem to belie the claim that United Methodists are a connectional people who are united in a common doctrine and a common moral vision. How long can the church continue down this path?