**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**FLOPPING, BULLYING, PROPAGANDA, WEDDING CAKES AND THE INDIANA RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LAW**

Several years ago when I was still pastoring I tried to place an ad in the local newspaper for a church secretary. The ad indicated the person should be a Christian. The editor of the paper called me and said that the paper could not run the ad because the request that the person be a Christian was discriminatory (against non-Christians) and the paper had a non-discriminatory policy. I deleted the word “Christian” and consequently wasted time interviewing several totally non-appropriate persons for the job. An attorney later told me the paper was wrong because as a Christian church we had a religious exemption from the non-discriminatory policy. But the perception was there in the eyes of the editor and others: to favor Christians over non-Christians violated the government’s non-discriminatory policies. And while it might be OK for churches to desire Christians over non-Christians it would not have been OK if I owned the Golden Rule Plumbing Company to advertise for a Christian even though I would be seeking to operate my business by Christian principles. Government policy trumped the General Rules of my United Methodist Church which entreats me to do good “especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.”

Because there are so many gray areas in matters of government policy and religious expression the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was passed.in Indiana. The law was intended to clarify the relationship between government and religion when the government proposed policy was in conflict with the free exercise of religion. The law stated specifically that government should have a compelling interest in such restrictions; those interests must be narrowly tailored and implemented in the least restrictive way.

It really did not matter what the intention of the law was. It did not matter whether there was record of any serious incidents where Christians were discriminating against others (supposedly my Plumbing Company still could not advertise for a Christian secretary). It did not matter that there was no serious discussion of this law. The law was pre-judged (as in prejudice) as an attack on gays and lesbians. For those gay activists who judge every action in society as to whether it will further or hinder the gay agenda, this law was like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a declaration of war on their very personhood. This would--horror be--enable Christian bakers to refuse to bake a cake for a gay wedding.

Enter the phenomenon of “flopping,” a sports term indicating a player falls down and plays victim to an imagined foul. The whole LBGTQ community did a massive “flop” when Indiana passed RFRA. They began screaming discrimination, bigotry and hate. The call was to discredit and destroy any person who supported the RFRA law, whether Christian bakers, the governor, the business of the parents of the person who wrote the law, or, if necessary, the whole state. A highly funded, well organized LBGTQ campaign of destruction, headed by such lobbying groups as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), dissimilated a new narrative. According to this narrative it would now be impossible for Indiana to recruit talent because of RFRA; the act was so shameful major companies would boycott. The louder the newly created narrative line was shouted the more believable it became. Mark Benioff, CEO of Salesforce, in California, tweeted to the world, “Today we are canceling all programs that require our customers/employees to travel to Indiana to face discrimination.” Other corporations began capitulating like falling dominoes; CouldOne, Salesvue, then the NCAA, the governor of New York, the local newspapers and the national media piled on.

I checked again a study that greatly influenced me years ago (in the 1960s actually). The book *Propaganda* by Jacques Ellul, the French sociologist, traced how Germany, the most highly educated country in the world, succumbed to Nazi propaganda in the Hitler era. Ellul argued that it was (and is) not uneducated, but educated people who are the most susceptible to propaganda. The educated absorb the largest amount of secondhand, unverifiable information; and the information absorbed is most frequently that which affirms their own prejudices. The educated also have a need to have an opinion on every important question of the times, consider themselves capable of “judging for themselves” and believe they are always right. But propaganda needs technology. When technology is commandeered for ideological propaganda, it dominates what perspective which interprets facts. Add to the mix half-truths shouted loudly and incessantly in order to drown out all other voices. Eventually public opinion supports the message. Ellul was not only inciteful; he was also prophetic. Whether in advertising, or politics, or public relations, propaganda works. And it is more effective than at any other time in history.

Social media became the technology of choice to spread the LGBTQ propaganda on Indiana’s RFRA law. Tweeting, Facebook, webpages--the messages were vile and ugly. Christians in particular but people from Indiana in general were characterized as hateful, backward, and fundamentalist. It is estimated that only 6% of the millions of tweets originated in Indiana. Persons from far off joined the crusade and vowed never to visit Indiana. The entertainment world gave whole-hearted support. Cyrus Miley informed her 19 million fans that Indiana’s Governor Pence was an “a..hole.” Then for good measure she included Tom Cotton and Arkansas and said to followers, “Let’s stir some s..t up.” It is estimated that the number who stirred it up was over 100,000.

By now hysteria had set in. *The Indianapolis Star*, normally a supporter of things Indiana, suddenly discovered a lot of things wrong with Indiana, and opined that Indiana, and Governor Pence and Republicans particularly, were backward and on the wrong side of history. A growing number of Republicans began to distance themselves from the RFRA and from Republican leaders. Businesses put up signs saying “We serve all” implying that the businesses across the street did not. Even the Disciples of Christ, a group that one would think would have some Christian sensitivity, if not common sense, declared they would move their National Convention from hateful and bigoted Indiana.

By this time what was developing was not just “flopping,” propaganda, and hysteria, but also bullying and intimidation. It is indicative of the irrational nature of the reaction that no real bigots had been uncovered in Indiana, even though these numbered in the thousands. One gay man wrote: “Why a Gay Man Like Me Is Going to Make It Hard for Indiana Shopkeepers to Exercise Their ‘Religious Liberty.’” The media joined in the search. While they located no cake bakers, they did find a pizza-maker, the O’Conners of Walkerton (pop. about 2,000), a man and his daughter, who when asked by a reporter if they would cater a gay wedding, said because of Christian conscience they would not feel right about doing so.

Villains discovered! The cause vindicated. The social media fired up: shut the haters down! The harassing phone calls came. The *Indianapolis Star*, by now a fellow traveler with the propagandists, carried an article by Ed Robinson of the *Washington Post* under the headline, “Pizza Served with a Slice of Hate.” An Indiana teacher (actually a school lay coach) put out the call, “Who will come with me to burn the place down.” Within hours hate calls and harassment was so great the pizza parlor was shut down. Another person wrote an article indicating the O’Conners got what they deserved. The threats, bullying, and intimidation were so extreme that the police had to be called in to protect the pizza parlor.

For all the talk about bigotry and hate, no one mentioned the bigotry and hate on the part of those fighting the war against RFRA. Evidently the newspapers felt that it was justified. What the state was experiencing was discrimination in the name of anti-discrimination, hatred in the name of fighting hatred, and exclusivism in the name of inclusivism. Finally, there was one modest push-back. Conner Friendensdorff wrote an article in the *Atlantic* entitled “Should Mom-and-Pops That Forgo Gay Weddings Be Destroyed?” He concluded no, because destroying such businesses would appear to be more hateful than failure to cater pizza at a gay wedding. The article presently has posted over 11,000 comments. A very mild rebuke, but a rebuke nonetheless.

Have we learned anything from the Indiana RFRA and the Wedding Cake Fiasco? Several things:

1) Bullying and intimidation pay off. The LGBTQ reaction to the RFRA act was blatant in its “Buy into our agenda or we’ll ruin you” strategy. Businesses, ever sensitive to lost revenue, were particularly vulnerable. We can expect to see more of this in the future.

2) Propaganda has advanced far beyond what Jacques Ellul imagined. Social media is and will be a major means of spreading propaganda. It is virtually unchecked and unregulated. The media, the universities, and businesses, in trying to please and placate their own audiences, are not antidotes to propaganda, but the biggest perpetuators of propaganda.

3) Our nation has problems.

4) The United Methodist Church has problems. The church is not finding any “middle ways,” or “ways forward” or even common ground in its discussions on human sexuality, and especially around matters like the ordination of practicing homosexuals. The General Conferences in past sessions have already been subject to demonstrations, disruptions, bullying and threats. Is there any hope that it will not be even worse in Portland in 2016?

(Next Happenings article: Indiana’s RFRA story and the developing war against Christians)