**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**GENERAL CONFERENCE – ENCOURAGEMENT AND SADNESS**

General Conference is over. I am home. People are asking me: how was it? What am I thinking and feeling.

The answer would be: encouragement, with some sadness. First the encouragement. The reports are out by now. The United Methodist Church has held the line on the sexuality issues. The Renewal and Reform Coalition, of which the Confessing Movement is part, believed that with evangelicals and traditionalists and with the help of central conference delegates, particularly the Africans, the majority of the votes favored maintaining our present Biblical stance on sexual practice of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage and that marriage was between a man and a woman.

But there was a lot of agitation and lobbying to change or compromise that stance. Lined up against evvangelicals was the most influential agency in the church, the Connectional Table (CT), as well as a number of boards and agencies, a number of bishops (28 signed a statement favoring delating negative references to homosexual practice), a number of annual conferences, and a strong coalition called *Love Your Neighbor*, made up of 13 caucuses of the church, official and unofficial. In addition, a number of ideas and plans from those calling themselves “centrists,” were suggesting some ‘Middle Way,” or “way forward” kinds of compromises which supposedly would allow all to live in harmony. These “Middle Ways” for the most part were variations on live and let live and would have caused more, not less, chaos in the church.

The efforts to change the *Discipline* did not prevail. First of all there was an effort to change the rules of the conference to by-pass Roberts Rules of Order in the consideration of the sexuality issues by substituting a process called “Rule 44,” in which the conference would divide into small groups, all groups would discuss the sexuality issues, and a small committee would determine how to bring the small group recommendations to the floor of the conference. Progressives supported the rule change; evangelicals and traditionalists believed the process was wrought with danger. The debate took three days of conference time (and at $1,400 a minute—the cost of the conference—seven hours of debate cost $588,000). When the vote for the rule change finally was voted on it failed

With this the petitions were referred to legislative groups where the direction of the conference was quickly .evident. The petition by the Connectional Table (CT) to remove the statement that the practice of homosexuality is incompatibe with Christian teaching? Failed, 30-40. The petition by CT to change qualifications for ordination? Failed, 30-40. The petition from CT to change the definition of marriage? Failed, 30-41. Other petitions in other legislative groups to make changes? Failed. All petitions that suggested a “way forward” by compromises such as “live and let live?” Failed. By the end of the first week it was reported that not a single petition making the church more permissive and secular was approved by legislative groups.

On Saturday, May 14, the LGBTQ group, *Love Prevails* summarized the results of the first days in the *Love Your* *Neighbor* newsletter:

**GLBTQ people didn’t just get beat up on the plenary floor at General Conference.. We got massacred in every subcommittee in the Conference Center.**

…. Then the drama. . On Tuesday, May 17, there was a leak that spoke of high level but secret talks between some who wished to maintain a strong Biblical stance in regard to sexual matters, and some who wanted a flexible policy which allow for same-sex marriage and more liberal sexual practices. According to the leak there was mention that perhaps the consideration of some sort of separation was the best way forward. When this thinking was relayed to the bishops there was negative reaction to the idea of separation. On the next morning the new president of the Council of Bishops, Bishop Bruce Ough, read a statement expressing the bishops’ concerns.

What then? Should the conference continue its business and bring to the floor all of the sexuality issues? The votes would have sustained the church’s present stance. Threats had been made that if such votes were taken and if the present stance of the church was affirmed groups brought in from the outside would shut down the conference. At the very least there would be hurt feelings and anger and threats and accusations of hateful action, all of which would be reported in the press. What to do, especially in the light of the revelation that a group had already spoken about irreconcilable differences?

At this point an appeal was made to the bishops to take leadership. A motion was made that the bishops meet and bring back a recommendation on how to proceed. The bishops met and made another statement suggesting (bishops cannot themselves make motions) that a way forward might include a commission to deal frankly with the church’s differences on human sexuality and make specific recommendations on a way forward to the next General Conference. There was even the suggestion that the next General Conference might be a specially-called General Conference in two years. In the meantime there would be no further action on the sexuality issues at the 2016 General Conference. A motion was made to accept the bishops’ recommendation. After debate the motion was approved by a close vote, 428 – 405.

So the *Discipline’*s present positions still stand. The church has not succumbed to secular pressure. United Methodism still stands with the greater part of the Christian world in regard to sexual morality.

This is encouraging, yet one cannot help but feel some sadness. All the energy expended on one issue will not lead to more souls saved. Sexuality issues are still with us and will continue to divide us. There was no reconciliation. There is nothing to suggest a hopeful future. It is almost inevitable that the church will face much more disobedience, many more complaints, more trials or avoidance of trials, more” just” resolutions, more talks described as holy conferencing. .

There were of course many other issues besides human sexuality. Another agenda item for the Renew and Reformed Coalition had to do with sanctity of life and other social matters. The General Conference revealed a UM membership far more conservative than the institutional establishment. Church and Society and Methodists Federated for Social Action (MFSA) and progressive types pushed for divestment from Israel, for cessation of US aid to Israel, for divestment from companies with links to fossil fuel. These resolutions all failed. General Conference voted to withdraw from the pro-abortion coalition Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights (425 – 268). It voted not to continue the pro-abortion resolution on Responsible Parenthood. It voted to open up local church programming to groups other than United Methodist Women. These are all issues dear to the heart for progressives. But the General Conference made it clear the church is not where the institutional progressives are.

Evangelical groups not affiliated with the United Methodist Church are applauding the United Methodist General Conference. Maybe the UM Church will not go the way of the Episcopalians, the Lutherans (LCA), and the Presbyterians, in selling out to a progressive agenda. It is encouraging to see the UM Church presented in a positive light for once from some of the outside groups.

But again, the encouragement is dampened by some feelings of sadness. We weep for the church. We are not united. Our differences seem greater than our shared convictions. Can we see our way forward? Can the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit show us a way where all of our gifts can be affirmed?

As with all of the General Conferences it will take time to sort out the good and the bad. Perhaps the most positive take-away from the conference was the greater realization that we truly are a global church. This was less a US-centric conference than ever before. Our central conference delegates were well prepared and made major contributions to consideration of the issues. If there is a reason for the church staying together it is that we best can make a global witness as people around the world walking in one accord.

This is not to underestimate our problems. These can perhaps be symbolized by the debate over divestment from companies linked with fossil fuels. The central conference delegates were critical of how much time and effort was given to what to them was not a major church issue, particularly when the need for inexpensive energy is so much needed in many countries. The debate took two hours ($168,000 of conference time) and was voted down by an overwhelming margin (11% - 89%). The case can be made that evangelicals, and not the progressives, that have the best feel for the really important things the church needs to be about. Perhaps we will have the chance to communicate those things in the months to come.

(future Happenings articles will deal with more analysis of the General Conference and the state of the church).