**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**DEMISE OF THE UNITED METHODIST REPORTER - A SAD DAY**

Evangelicals in the United Methodist Church join their voices with almost all others across the church in expressing our sadness at the announcement that the *United Methodist Reporter* is ceasing publication. At a time when the church is deeply divided the *Reporter* was one publication that bridged a number of gaps and gave us a sense that we are part of one church. As a subscriber for over 50 years the closing of the *Reporter* for me personally is like the loss of an old friend.

The closing of the *Reporter* presents an opportunity for commentary on the importance of an independent and responsible news gathering agency related to the church. United Methodist Communications (UMCom) is the agency responsible for the gathering and dissimulation of news in the UM church. The problem is that UMCom is also, and primarily, a public relations agency. A public relations agency for any organization has the responsibility to present that organization in the best possible light. It therefore is not about to do investigative reporting on the weaknesses and problems of the organization. In other words, UMCom has a conflict of interest. It claims that it wants its news gathering arm to be objective but that simply does not happen.

When I was a pastor I never pretended that my church newsletter was objective. I made sure that what was in the newsletter presented the church in the best possible light. The same was true when I was a district superintendent responsible for a district newsletter. Its motto might have been: “where never is heard a discouraging word and the sky is not cloudy all day.”

So also with conference papers. While I have appreciated what conference communications directors do, I have not found any whose primary dedication was not to the institution. I once wrote a private eight-page critique of our conference paper to the communications director in my area. Among other things I pointed out the paper was unbalanced geographically; it avoided conflict; it never offered criticism of conference programs or agencies or institutions; finally I noted the number of column inches given to bishops. The director, whom I respected and knew well, gave a careful response but summed up all he had to say with these words: “You must remember my office is right next to the bishop’s and I see him every day.”

Of course. UMCom by its very nature must serve the institution. It does that well but in the process the people only get a portion of what really goes on in the church. I was attending a general board meeting on one occasion when some rather unflattering statistics were reported. When the report was finished the instructions to those present were given: what is being discussed here must not leave the room. Independent reporters would not take well to those restrictions.

This is why for many years the *United Methodist Reporter* has been a breath of fresh air. This was especially truth during the editorial reign of Spurgeon Dunnam, who served from 1970-86.

Evangelicals in those years, and before, had a lot for which to thank the *Reporter*. In contrast to the official press the *Reporter* believed that evangelicals existed in the church and their activities were worth reporting. When the *Good News* magazine published its first issue in 1968, Spurgeon Dunnam, writing for what at that time was *Texas Methodist*, (Sept. 6, 1968), editorialized that it was good to have a conservative voice of opinion in the church, basically to serve as balance as *Christian Advocate*, *Concern*, and *Together*, which were offering liberal opinion. The official press, of course, was not agreeing that they were opinionated and biased on the liberal side. But Dunnam was correct. The official press response to the inauguration of Good News was basically non-existent.

When Good News held its first national convocation in Cincinnati in 1970, there was official commentary, which was basically that if Good News helped in the cause of evangelism well and good. However, it would need to guard against divisiveness and an individualist gospel devoid of social action. Once again Dunnam wrote a bemused editorial (Sept. 20, 1970) entitled “Constructive Divisiveness.” The editorial was classic and because it is so relevant for today, deserves to be reprinted.

*The question which remains is: are the evangelicals a divisive force within the church? Yes, they are divisive. Divisive in the same way Jesus was to first century Judaism. Divisive in the same way Martin Luther was to sixteen century Catholicism. Divisive in the same way that John Wesley was to eighteenth century Anglicanism. And, strangely enough, divisive in the same way that many liberal “church renewalists” are to Methodism in our own day.*

*A survey of Methodism in America todays reveals these basic thrusts. One is devoted primarily to the status quo. To these, the institution called Methodism is given first priority. It must be protected at all costs from any threat of major change in direction….*

*The other two forces do question the theological soundness of institutional loyalty for its own sake. The progressive, renewalist force has properly prodded the Church to take seriously the social implications of the Christian gospel….The more conservative, evangelical force is prodding the church to take with renewed seriousness its commitment to the basic tenets of our faith…*

When Dunnam was writing those words the *Reporter* was reaching a million persons per week and was the largest-circulation religious paper in the world. It investigated both liberal and conservative activities. It one day would take on arch-conservatives and the next day arch-liberals. It wrote extensively about the New Inclusive Lectionary of the National Council of Churches and whether either the defenders of the lectionary or the critics had their facts straight. It wrote about the Religious Roundtable, a fundamentalist group, and the Riverside Church Conference on South Africa, a Communist-led gathering that claimed (falsely) United Methodist sponsorship. It examined racism in Mississippi.

When David Jessup wrote his paper on the funding patterns of U.M. and ecumenical agencies, a report that eventually led to the forming of the Institute of Religion and Democracy, UMCom responded on Oct. 17, 1980, with a major white paper mailed to all clergy in the UM Church. The white paper defended the agencies and attacked the messenger with language about “people troubled by shifting power in the world,” “right-wing extremism,” “persons who are fearful,” and “irresponsible tactics that need to be exposed.” No official news agency asked any questions as to whether the accusations were true. The *Reporter*, however, did its own investigation, primarily on the National Council of Churches, a study done well enough that some bishops were convinced some changes needed to be made at the NCC.

When Good News published its “Junaluska Affirmation” in 1974, the *Reporter* printed the affirmation in full and gave it major commentary. The official press only reported that the affirmation had been published and wondered whether this meant Good News was wanting to start a new denomination. No less person than Albert Outler responded that the doctrinal statement of 1972 had encouraged expressions such as the Junaluska Affirmation as part of the ongoing dialogue on doctrine and that evangelicals were the only group that had taken the challenge seriously.

Boards and agencies did not always take kindly to the *Reporter*. On March 15, 1991, the Women’s Division issued a white paper: *Interpreting the Women’s Division/United Methodist Women Official/Unofficial Sources of Information* which linked Good News, *the United Methodist* *Reporter*, and the Mission Society for United Methodists as being “unofficial” and thus unreliable and susceptible to “distortion” and “misrepresentation.” The Women’s Division perspective is probably one of the best reasons an independent and free news gathering agency is needed in the church. The view that only “official” and institutional sources of information can be trusted should be seen as nothing less than thought control.

Unfortunately, the Reporter was not able to continue its investigative reporting through the 1990s and into the 21st century. I once wrote one of the editors to ask why. The response was, according to him, money. The United Methodist Church was in a retrenching mode, which translated out to less money, budget cuts for ministries like the *Reporter*, and fewer staff. The Reporter also cut out its hard-hitting editorials and even its Letters to the Editor section.

All the same the *Reporter* continued to be a balanced voice in an increasingly polarized denomination. Columnists like Andrew Thompson and Donald Haynes often gave comment that was in contrast to the institutional party line.

With the demise of the *Reporter* where shall we turn for a reliable news source? At the moment the *Good News* magazine is the only general readership journal available. Of course there is Facebook and blogs on every side but these offer mostly opinion and not news.

We at the Confessing Movement will pledge ourselves to be transparent on our reporting. We will operate from a perspective, that of the church’s evangelical tradition, but we will seek to be fair with those who disagree with us, and civil at all times. We trust that the official media and others might be willing to do the same.