**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

By Dr. Riley B. Case

*GLIDE CHURCH AND THE WAY FORWARD*

There is a most unusual institution in the California-Nevada Conference known as Glide, or Glide Memorial, or Glide United Methodist Church. In the United Methodist institutional world Glide United Methodist Church is one of the leading churches of the denomination. According to the California-Nevada Conference UM Journal, Glide UM Church has 13,039 members, which would identify it as the fifth largest UM church in the nation. Currently it reports an average Sunday attendance of 1,899, though in its recent past it reported 3,000 for a number of years for worship. This is an amazing statistic since its sanctuary seats about a thousand and it only holds two services a week. There was some variation in earlier years. In 1989 Glide reported 2,008 members and 1,225 in attendance; in 1994 there were 4,499 members and 2,700 in attendance. That same year Glide paid $7,745 to world service and conference benevolences (a paltry sum for the fifth largest church in the nation); in 2001 Glide reported 9,016 members and 3,500 in attendance; the figures for 2006 were 10,981 members and 3,600 attendance.

Apart from the United Methodist world Glide is not always referred to as a church but simply as “Glide.” The web page “Glide” speaks not of a church but of a “radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization.” The web page posts 30 or so pictures featuring the Gay Pride Parade.

Whatever it is considered now, Glide was intended to be a church. Lizzie Glide, a dedicated Methodist laywoman, bequeathed a large sum of money in 1929 for a church to serve all people. Her bequest was put in a foundation, now known as the Glide Foundation, designed to support the church. During the 17-year pastorate of J.C. McPheeters, it was known as an evangelical stronghold. Some notable conversions took place at Glide including that of Ed Robb II. McPheeters left Glide to become president of Asbury Seminary.

After McPheeters the church fell on hard times, mostly because, like many Methodist churches located in inner cities, white flight greatly diminished the size of the congregation. Enter Cecil Williams in the early 1960s. With a charismatic personality and a zeal for social justice Williams led Glide in a totally different direction. He directed the Glide Foundation to invest millions of dollars into new and largely secular ministries. He was uneasy with Glide’s identification as “Christian” and in 1967 he removed the cross and other Christian symbols from the sanctuary. Glide became a magnet for a number of causes, including various LGBTQ advocacy groups, the American Indian Movement, the Black Panthers, and Jim Jones and the People’s Temple. This was in 1977 before Jones gave kool-aid to 276 children in the jungles of Guyana. Glide also hosted a Hookers Convention.

Once I was thinking of writing an article on Glide but was counseled not to, especially by one African-American friend who said, in essence, “Don’t touch it.” He was wise. Criticism of Glide by anyone identified with the evangelical world would be considered of racist, homophobic, hateful, and would not serve any good purpose. Furthermore, how could anyone be critical of an operation which claimed in 2010 (according to the conference journal) that it ministered to 1,009,875 persons. In 2017 Glide reported that 781,520 persons were reached in outreach, justice and mercy efforts. Glide feeds the hungry, houses the homeless, gives hope to the forlorn. All with a big budget. In 2004 Glide employed 169 people and operated with a budget of 11.9 million dollars, of which 2 million was tax-payer money. Out of all the abundance Glide gives from $7,000 to $10,000 a year to United Methodist world service and conference benevolences.

One time I received a call from someone in San Francisco asking me to comment on Glide. Glide was to receive an award or a grant (I confess I did not take notes on the conversation) and the caller wanted to know how Glide was regarded by United Methodism. My response was to the effect that I probably was not the person to ask since many others were more acquainted than I with Glide. I did comment that Glide, while highly regarded by many, at least among evangelicals had a questionable United Methodist identify.

It is the United Methodist identity that is presently under discussion. The present bishop, no less a person than Bishop Minerva Carcaňo, imaged as one of the more progressive bishops, is refusing at the moment to appoint a pastor to the church for the current year. On June 23, Bishop Carcaňo issued an open letter to the pastors and churches of the California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church. In the letter the bishop comments that there will be an assessment of the Glide situation. According to the letter Glide UM church has not had a UM organized structure, nor has there been a church conference for years; the leadership is picked not according to the UM Discipline, but is hand-picked by the former pastor, Cecil Williams. A pastor appointed to the church in June was accepted by some church people but was rejected by the Foundation Board, which apparently really runs Glides’ operations. Appointed pastors have no access to the full financial records of the church nor do they have say over use of the church property.

For persons with a traditional understanding of the Church, the matter is more than just whether or not pastors receive financial reports. According to John Wesley and the United Methodist *Discipline*, the visible church of Christ is a “congregation of faithful persons in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered…” The bishop raises the question of “faithful persons.” According to Bishop Carcaňo, the congregation by Glides’ own admission and confession is made up not only of Christians but also of Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, atheists, agnostics and wiccans and is not interested in considering the claims of Jesus Christ nor the Bible. As for the sacraments, Carcaňo observes, there are but few baptisms (11 were reported in 2017) and these are in the name of the People, not of the triune God. Communion had all but disappeared from the community’s (it is significant that Glides identifies itself primarily as a “community” rather than a church) “celebrations.” Bishop Carcaňo followed her open letter with an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The response and rebuttal to the bishop’s letter and article was quick in coming, was made by the Glide “board” and was posted on the “church’s” web page. While admitting that Glide was “affiliated” with the United Methodist Church the rebuttal made a point that the church and buildings “belong” to the Glide Foundation and not to the church (or the conference). It asserts that Bishop Carcaňo wants Glide to “conform” to her personal view of Methodism and Christianity. It noted she has stated publicly and personally that her mission is to create more “Disciples of Christ.” The rebuttal then claimed the bishop “disapproves of our openness to people of all backgrounds and religions.”

Further comment comes from the former pastor, Cecil Williams, who, calling from his car after gay pride days, said there was no doubt in his mind that the bishops wants to get rid of Glide and all it stands for and replace it with a “conservative Methodist congregation.” But, Williams added, “Glide is too big to push around.”

What is the evangelical response to all of this? For one, Caution. We best let this play out from afar. At the same time, we must express our admiration for Bishop Minerva Carcaňo, who evidently is the first person with any authority in the past 50 years to openly address the Glide situation. One wonders why Karen Oliveto, the lesbian and pastor of Glide church for eight years before she was elected bishop, has evidently been compliant all these years. One wonders also why Bishop Warner Brown, former president of the Glide board, has also been so silent.

Questions also need to be asked about how “foundations” connected with UM churches are evidently not covered by the United Methodist trust clause about property. It is no secret that dozens of other churches, mostly evangelical churches, have or have considered establishing foundations that they believe (or hope) control properties that they believe are exempt from denominational claims on church properties that cease to be United Methodist. It appears the church will face more law suits in the future.

Finally, in considering the February, 2019 General Conference and decisions about the denomination’s Way Forward, it must be pointed out that any local or conference “option plan” opens itself to much more of the free-wheeling and congregational approach to ministry (such as Glide’s) that will further erode the authority of the *Discipline* and make any claims of “unity” ring hollow. There will be many of Glides, progressive or evangelical, that will simply do as they please. Is this what we want?

Stay tuned.