**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***HOW MANY DIFFERENT RELIGIONS CAN THE UM CHURCH SUPPORT?***

I spent some time at the exhibitors’ booths at the church’s General Conference in May. . These booths are a good way to keep up with the ministries, the institutions, the agencies and the various caucus groups in the church. Many good things are happening in the United Methodist Church. At the same time some of the booths reflect the dangerous ideology now threatening to undermine the historic Christian witness in the name of progressive social action. Some reflection on what this ideology is all about helps explain the serious crisis now confronting the United Methodist Church.

One piece of literature that caught my eye at the General Conference was the Spring edition of *Catalyst*, the magazine of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkley, California. While not specifically a United Methodist institution, the Pacific School of Religion speaks of the affirmation and approval of the school by the United Methodist Church through its University Senate. The school is of special interest because United Methodism’s first openly lesbian bishop, Karen Phyllis Oliveto, is not only a graduate of Pacific School of Religion but until recently served as the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the school. Bishop Warner Brown is a trustee.

The featured articles in the spring edition of the magazine are: “Countering Islamophobia” and “15 Years of Queering Faith.”

While most Christians and most Americans are greatly concerned about radical Islamic terrorism, the Pacific School of Religion is greatly concerned about “Islamophobia.” The magazine makes no mention of hundreds of thousands of persons, including Christians, slain by Islamic terrorists in the name of Allah. The magazine says nothing about the pillaging, rape, and persecution of those who do not agree with radical Islam. And while the Pacific School of Religion is obsessed with the rights of homosexuals and women, there is no mention in the magazine that radical Islam is the greatest violator of those rights. Nor does the magazine express concern that the world’s refugee crisis is primarily the result of Islamic terrorism.

At least as it is reflected in the magazine, what the Pacific School of Religion is committed to is to “stand against hate”--not the hatred of radical Muslims toward those with whom they disagree--but the “hatred” expressed by some Americans against persons who are Muslims. To that end the school has gathered Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist persons and institutions as “faith partners” to combat this American and world-wide “hate.”

The celebration of “15 Years of Queering Faith” is about Pacific School of Religion’s Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS). CLGS has been heavily involved in the national conversation about religious liberty and the ways that “religious liberty” has been distorted to create legal avenues of discrimination against Lesbians, Gays, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people. It seems many states are introducing religious liberty legislation which would erode LGBTA equality in the name of religion. CLGS of Pacific School of Religion is a national leader in supporting transgender seminarians. It is also a strong supporter of Black Queer scholarship.

Actually the magazine has much more about the good work of CLGS than just one article. The magazine, and presumably the school, seem obsessed with lesbian gay bi-sexual, transgender and queer issues. Throughout the magazine LGBTQ persons or issues are mentioned 23 times. The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies is mentioned on 18 different occasions.

Meanwhile those key words and concepts that are at the heart of Christian faith are mentioned hardly at all. There is no mention of evangelical or orthodox faith. The word *evangelism* appears not at all. The word *sin* is mentioned not at all. The word *salvation* is mentioned not at all. The *cross* is mentioned not at all. The *resurrection* is mentioned not at all. The *Holy Spirit* is mentioned not at all. This is probably understandable since the school does not specifically identify itself as “Christian.” The school rather seeks to “prepare the theologically and spiritually rooted leaders of tomorrow.” According to the president’s remarks the school is about preparing “changemakers.” And, while the seminary works with churches it is also seeks to build relationships with other communities committed to social change and innovation (presumably with protest groups and secular political action groups).

It is not in the magazine but on the school’s web page that the “radical inclusivity” of the school is disclosed. While the school works with United Methodists, Disciples, and the United Church of Christ, the largest affiliation of students who attend the school is ‘none” or “not affiliated.” This is followed in numbers by United Methodist and Unitarian-Universalist students. There are also students who are Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu. In the Pacific School of Religion understanding of things “radical inclusivity” would not include evangelicals or Pentecostals or Roman Catholics or fundamentalists or most of the world’s Christians.

The only reference to the Bible or to Scripture in the magazine is a negative blurb suggesting the Bible should not be taken too seriously. The blurb advertises a class to be taught by Bishop John Shelby Spong on “Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy.” There is one reference to the prayer about “Thy kingdom come” which in the school’s view of the world, seems to be a society built on justice, peace and sustainability through social and political and economic planning. Actually the “kingdom” is corrected in the president’s remarks to “kin-dom.” The spelling is explained in the school’s web page on the school’s policies on inclusive language (“kingdom” implies a “king” which is masculine while “kin” implies equality, a thought that evidently had not occurred to Jesus).

What else is the school involved in? Black queer theology, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, A multi-Faith Transgender Summit, “Patristic and Contemporary Justification of Looting in Times of Crisis,” Queering Worship, and How secularized Christianity contributes to a “work ethic” in our neoliberal age. The president’s page speaks of the importance of establishing new relationships with communities committed to social change and innovation.

The Pacific School of Religion is free to pursue and advance its deconstruction of Christian faith. But why is it sanctioned and approved by the church’s University Senate? Are not the values and belief system of the school directly counter to the historic stand of United Methodism? I once asked a staff person of the General Board of Higher Education and the Ministry why some major evangelical seminaries were not approved by the University Senate. The answer was they did not reflect United Methodist ethos. As an example the illustration was given that some operate from a confessional stance of faith and do not reflect academic freedom. Imagine! To work from the stance that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and the Bible is the Word of God is objectionable, but to operate with a center whose purpose is to fight against the Unite Methodist understanding of marriage and sexuality is not!

If the perspective of Pacific School of Religion were only that of a fringe group on the edges of the church it would be one thing. But this perspective is openly advocated by numbers in the church, including some bishops, some seminaries, and some boards and agencies. It was also a major basis in the Western Jurisdiction for the “in your face” selection as bishop of a “married” lesbian pastor and former Associate Academic Dean of the school.

There are good reasons why the Wesleyan Covenant Association is being formed.

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