

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS OF CRISIS IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Many years ago, when a great controversy arose within the United Methodist Church, the Reverend Bob Dickerson, then senior minister of the First United Methodist Church of Pensacola, wrote a letter to the Chair of the Board of Church and Society in which he expressed his personal feelings,

“I feel like a coal stoker in the bottom of the Titanic, faithfully shoveling my coal to keep this ship afloat, hoping and praying that someone up on deck is looking out for icebergs to make sure this ship is moving in the right direction.”

Looking back across the years that I have served as a United Methodist Church minister, I feel that I have sought to “shovel my coal” to keep this great ship afloat. In every church that I served for 40 consecutive years, I led each congregation to pay 100% of our apportionments. Whenever there was a special campaign for Blue Lake, Huntingdon College, Birmingham Southern, United Methodist Children’s Home, Homes for the Aged, and Nellie Burge (Mary Ellen’s Hearth), the churches I served paid far more than their fair share. Today, hundreds of clergy all across the Alabama-West Florida Conference are faithfully doing the same thing, including our fine staff at First United Methodist Church of Montgomery, while going about their daily tasks of preaching the gospel, teaching Bible studies, visiting the sick, and officiating at weddings and funerals.

While “shoveling my coal” over the past 55 years, I was given the rare privilege of being elected to eight consecutive General Conferences (1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008). I also had an opportunity to serve as Chair of the Finance Committee of the General Board of Global Ministries, the largest program board within the United Methodist Church. In addition, I later served as Chair of the Finance Committee of the World Methodist Council.

Serving as a clergy delegate to General Conference for 8 consecutive times gave me an “inside” look of our once proud denomination. As I profess my own faults and failures through the years, I want to share with you my personal views as to why we find ourselves today as a denomination in crisis. Be mindful that I am elderly and may be in error in my observations and assessments. However, these are my views, and if I am in error, I pray that you and the Good Lord will forgive me.

1. Our United Methodist Church is in deep, deep trouble, so deep in trouble that I see only a dim future for our denomination within our Alabama-West Florida

Conference. Our problems did not spring up overnight, but they have been brewing for a long, long time. While I affirm my love and support of Bishops Lawson Bryan, David Graves, Mike Watson, and the wonderful memories of Bishops Paul Duffey and Joel McDavid, the vast majority of the members of the present Council of Bishops are extremely liberal and completely out of touch with the majority of the members, both clergy and lay, of our Alabama-West Florida Conference. Of the approximate 45 members of our Council of Bishops within the United States, no more than 8 of them would even affirm, much less enforce, the stance of the 2016 Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality. When our elected episcopal leaders take adversarial positions regarding the very laws of the church to which they have been elected to give oversight, you have chaos. Can you imagine any business or non-profit in America having 45 chief executives and 37 of them are choosing to totally ignore the policies of the company and doing the exact opposite? You would have anarchy! That is exactly what you have today in the United Methodist Church. These same 37 episcopal leaders have been elected to enforce accountability on the part of the pastors they appoint, and yet, there is seated among them one who is serving in violation of the 2016 Book of Discipline.

First United Methodist Church of Montgomery, under the capable leadership of Dr. Jay Cooper, is doing wonderful and mighty things! However, there are “loose cannons” in the Council of Bishops willing to drive our United Methodist Church in the ground just to get their way on certain controversial issues. That is indeed sad! Since the most liberal bishops have completely taken over the Council of Bishops and are now in total control, I never anticipate another true conservative being elected as a United Methodist bishop.

2. A conservative bishop shared with me a painful observation, “Our United Methodist Church has traded the cross of Jesus Christ for a weather vane, waking up every morning just to see which way the wind is blowing.” In so doing, the vast majority of our bishops find themselves like Don Quixote “chasing after windmills,” of every known controversial social issue, rather than focusing on our basic task of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

In light of this, our United Methodist Church has taken the beautiful words of “inclusive” and “diversity” and put those words on steroids, and in so doing, effectiveness and good old common sense have been discarded. It is my humble opinion that some groups within our denomination shouting “inclusive” are the most “exclusive” if you do not agree with them. Some of those who are shouting

“diversity” the most are the biggest advocates of “sameness.” We have gone absolutely nuts on both of these issues!

When the special-called General Conference was held in St. Louis in 2019, a day was aside for prayer that we desperately needed before the business session began the following day. Brenda and I felt a great need to go to that prayer vigil. As we sat there that day, I was pleased that there was music appropriate for the occasion, along with some inspiring scripture readings and prayers. However, during the time set aside for prayer, I could hardly believe my eyes when a bishop walked up to the microphone to make an announcement. She bluntly stated that it had been called to her attention that some of the delegates were not using inclusive language and the continued use of non-inclusive language would not be tolerated during the remaining days of the General Conference. Now get the setting. That special Conference was costing approximately \$10,000,000 and the future of the United Methodist Church was at stake. Yet, she wanted to make sure that no one dared use “Father” for God nor “Him” for Jesus. Even last Sunday on Father’s Day, we United Methodists could not dare sing, “God of Our Fathers,” in our hymnal because it would be insensitive, cause bruised feelings, and the hymn had to be changed to “God of the Ages.”

When the United Methodist Hymnal was being revised at the General Conference at St. Louis in 1988, Dr. Ernest Emurian, a United Methodist hymn writer from Virginia, was obviously upset with the ridiculous extent to which the hymnal revision committee had gone to change all of our hymns. Dr. Emurian, as a delegate, went to the microphone and said, “Jesus Called God, ‘Father.’ If it was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me!” Yet, now we have United Methodist ministers everywhere falling all over themselves to change, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” in reference to our Triune God. More recently, every female has been encouraged to let their “preferred pronouns” be known.

In response to all of this silliness, today whenever there is a sizeable, official United Methodist Church meeting held anywhere in the world, United Methodist monitors are sent to each meeting to make sure that a female delegate from Angola has the same opportunity to speak as a male from Sweden. These monitors usually sit on the front row, especially at Jurisdictional and General Conferences, and valuable time is taken each morning at the assembly for the monitors to give their report card from the previous day. These monitors are paid out of your apportioned dollars.

While our United Methodist leaders obviously feel that the younger generation is attracted to all of the liberal issues of our church, I think the very opposite is true.

I have observed that the most intelligent, most insightful, most committed students to Jesus Christ on college campuses today are overflowing conservative churches. They are having difficulty finding seats in their churches on Sunday morning or evening. They are distancing themselves from churches with non-traditional Christian values.

My good United Methodist friend, David Housel, former Athletic Director at Auburn University, has written a new book, *From the Backbooth at Chappy's*. He devotes one sentence to a whole article that he entitles, "Decline of the Methodist Church." He writes, "Is it me, or has the Methodist Church been going downhill since it quit using the Cokesbury Hymnal?"

I don't know whether or not David is right, but I do know that the extent to which we have gone to change the wording of our familiar hymns has not been a positive. When I was a little boy growing up in a small country church, I responded to an invitation at a revival one night to give my life to Jesus Christ. I knelt at the altar while the congregation was singing, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord." I can remember that experience like it was yesterday. The second stanza of that hymn included the words, "Whiter than snow, Lord, wash me just now." However, the Hymnal Revision Committee determined that those words were racist, and had to be deleted. So today when you sing Hymn No. 382, you have to repeat the words, "Wash Me Just Now, Lord, Wash Me Just Now" because you cannot sing, "Whiter than snow, Lord." When I first discovered this silly action of the Hymnal Revision Committee, I scratched my head and wondered whether the members had ever read their Bibles, more especially Isaiah 1:18, "Come now, let us reason together says the Lord. Though our sins are as scarlet, they shall be as WHITE AS SNOW." Along the same vein, I discovered that, oftentimes, the most vocal proponents of "diversity" are the ones that are most "exclusive." As a United Methodist Church, we love to talk about celebrating "diversity" but in reality, we choose "sameness." John Ed Mathison served for 36 years as the senior minister of the Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery. During his 36 years there, his church paid 100% of their apportionments, including 100% of the Ministerial Education Fund that supports all of our 13 United Methodist seminaries. Across those 36 years, Candler School of Theology invited guest speakers from all across the United States and even foreign countries to speak at their Cannon Chapel. Their guest list included defrocked bishops, excommunicated ministers, and many well-known non-United Methodist leftwing radicals. During those 36 years, John Ed was serving the fastest growing United Methodist Church with the largest Sunday School attendance in the United States. Even though John Ed was a

distinguished graduate of the inclusive Candler School Theology living only 2 ½ hours from campus, he was never once invited to speak at a chapel service there in 36 years. Inclusive? I don't think so. That is what I would call leaders of a seminary "taking stupid pills."

While John Ed was never invited to speak one time at the Cannon Chapel in 36 years, a vacancy occurred in the office of the Dean at Candler School of Theology. Emory University chose a lay person whom I have called a friend through the years, but she had never taken one course on a seminary campus. A conservative bishop called me the night that it was announced and said, "No medical school would ever hire a Dean who had never taken a course in medicine; no law school would ever hire a Dean who had never taken a course in law; if a white male who had never taken a course in seminary had been chosen as Dean, the screams, howls, and protests among United Methodists would have been heard around the world."

While all of this extreme craziness is going on regarding inclusiveness and diversity at all levels of the United Methodist Church, old Bubba is sitting on his nail keg down at the General Store in Slap Out, sipping on his Coke, eating his boiled peanuts with a puzzled look on his face. There are more "Bubbas" than you realize in today's United Methodist Churches all across the Alabama-West Florida Conference. They are not caught up in all of this foolishness. They are not asking much from our denomination. They merely want some humble servant to stand in the pulpit on Sunday morning and preach a sermon that points them to Jesus. They merely want to learn more about their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in a Sunday School Class. They merely want someone who will visit their family member in the hospital and offer a prayer for healing. They merely want someone to read a few verses of Scripture and offer a few words of comfort when a loved one dies. They merely want someone to officiate at the wedding of their daughter who has fallen in love with Buster down the country road. And yes, they would even hope that someone out there that they call a bishop, who gives oversight to their church, has a little common sense. If we continue this craziness as a denomination, these good old God-fearing folks like Bubba are going to increasingly say, "I am not leaving the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church has left me."

It is most unfortunate, but in the not too distant future, clergy and laity within our United Methodist Churches will have to discern what they will do. Faithful senior pastors will be caught in the middle, and it is inevitable that United Methodist Churches will lose members whatever they decide to do. It is my personal opinion

that the vast majority of United Methodist members today are totally confused and will need a sharp Philadelphia lawyer to explain to them the issues at hand. Members of our United Methodist Churches all across our Conference are bewildered and cannot understand how the special-called General Conference in St. Louis strongly affirmed the traditional stance on marriage, and yet, the members who have faithfully obeyed the 2016 Book of Discipline are labeled the “trouble makers” or “dissidents.” Amazingly enough those who have not obeyed the 2016 Book of Discipline will retain the name of the United Methodist Church. Several options will be open to United Methodist clergy and laity, including that of retaining membership within our current United Methodist Church, or becoming a part of a new expression of Methodism.

While I believe that the United Methodist Church is in deep, deep trouble, I am not losing hope in God’s church of the future. I still believe that “The Church is of God and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship, and the due administration of God’s Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.”

I still have hope of a brighter tomorrow! God is continuing to call young men and women into the ordained ministry. There has never been a time in the history of our nation when we needed stronger voices to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The good news for our Foundation is that we are independent and can support all of our seminary students who are a part of our United Methodist Church and those who choose to become a part of the Global Methodist Church or any other denominations within our Wesleyan tradition.

I long for the day when all of the fussing and fighting in the United Methodist Church comes to an end and all of us can get back to “stoking our coal” in support of the amazing good news of Jesus Christ!

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