

From the Margin to the Mainstream: United Methodism's renewal movement

By Riley B. Case

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have been studying American religious developments for a number of years. Their two best-known studies are *The Church of America, 1776 - 1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, and *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*.

Stark and Finke have noted the difference between what they call "sect" and "church" (which correspond roughly to what I would call "populist evangelicalism" and "establishment institutionalism"). Religious groups known as "sects" have a "high-tension" faith, at odds with the culture around them. They have strict standards and well-defined boundaries. Much of the church growth in America, according to Stark and Finke, has come from groups showing these sect-type characteristics. Almost inevitably, however, as these groups become successful, they make their peace with the world; move toward education, wealth, secularization, and sophistication; and seek to become adaptable and acceptable to the larger culture. Along the way they exhibit more and more church-type characteristics and a "low-tension" kind of faith. And in every case, a "low-tension" kind of faith is a weakened and declining kind of faith. Though Stark and Finke test their observations on such diverse groups as Baptists, Mormons, and Roman Catholics, they are especially intrigued with Methodists.

High tension religion

Stark and Finke note that from 1776 to 1850, the percentage of Methodist church adherents grew from 2.5 percent of American adherents to 34.2 percent. During that time, Methodists operated essentially without colleges or seminaries, with minimal church structure, and with a heavy reliance on circuit-riding preachers and lay pastors. They represented "high-tension religion." There was a price to be paid for being Methodist. There were moral, behavioral, and doctrinal expectations.

As Methodists coveted the status and prestige of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists, they began to develop the characteristics not of a sect, but of a church. They added colleges and seminaries, built prestigious church buildings, and added "professional ecclesiastics." Theological liberalism (an attempt to make the faith acceptable to the modern world), a "low-tension" characteristic, was added to the mix after 1900.

In 1890, Methodists could still claim 84 of every 1,000 American adherents to religion. But with the exodus of many of the Holiness people, who epitomized most clearly the various sect-type characteristics in the denomination, and with the increasing movement toward liberalism, Methodism began its steady decline. By 1990, the Methodist market share had been reduced to only 36 out of every 1,000 American adherents to religion. In other words, the Methodist share of the American religious scene had been reduced by more than one-half, from 8.4 percent to 3.6 percent in the 100 years between 1890 and 1990.

At the same time, the Southern Baptists, a "high-tension" religion, had increased their share of adherents from 33 per 1,000 in 1890 to 61 in 1990.

Is there any possibility for "church-type" forms of religion ever to reverse their decline? According to Stark and Finke, it is improbable; but if there were a reverse, it would come through a movement from church-to-sect, that is, from religion that was "low tension" to a religion that is "high tension."

It is at this point that Good News enters the scene in the Stark-Finke analysis. A movement from church-to-sect in United Methodism is most unlikely from within the official structures of the denomination. From the Good News perspective, there seems to be no recognition on the part of either the bishops or the boards and agencies that the policies, and the ideology, and the leadership style of the past 50 years have been a major factor in the denomination's disintegration and decline. Pluralism, "tolerance," and institutional loyalty are not the paths to renewal.

Stark and Finke, of course, do not comment specifically on the present internal affairs of United Methodism. In their analysis, they conclude that a movement from church-to-sect, and from a religion that moves from "low tension" to "high tension," would most likely come from outside of the official structures as a movement alongside official structures. It would be a new "Holy Club," not unlike the Holy Club the Wesleys established at Oxford.

Stark and Finke suggest that, within United Methodism, the Good News movement, as well as the Confessing Movement, possibly offer that kind of church-to-sect, "low-tension" to "high tension" possibility. These movements have attempted "to increase tension with the dominant culture by reestablishing clear boundaries" (Acts of Faith, p. 267). The question is whether these groups have had any effect on the denomination.

North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship

Stark and Finke sought to answer the question by studying churches pastored by persons involved in Good News and the Confessing Movement. They chose North Indiana to make their study and compared the ministry of the pastors associated with the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship with other pastors in the conference. Using 1995 statistics, they discovered that of 568 ministers in the conference, 21 percent (121) were on the Evangelical Fellowship mailing list. That number increased to 31 percent among "full connection" pastors.

Their conclusions? First, pastors in the Evangelical Fellowship were younger than other pastors. Sixty-two percent of the Evangelical Fellowship pastors entered the conference after 1980. This was to be compared with 43 percent of the pastors not on the list who had entered the ministry after 1980.

In terms of churches served, the study revealed that in the years 1993 to 1995, churches served by pastors on the North Indiana Evangelical mailing list increased an average of 4.5 percent in attendance, while churches served by pastors not on the list decreased by 1.3 percent. Of those pastors on the mailing list who came into full connection after 1980, the increase in attendance was 7.9 percent.

In terms of church finance, churches served by pastors on the Evangelical Fellowship mailing list increased during the same period by 21.6 percent compared with the 6.2 percent increase of those churches with pastors not on the list. Of those pastors affiliated with the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship who came into full connection after 1980, expenditures increased 41.4 percent.

Annual Conference Renewal Groups

Mention of the Evangelical Fellowship in North Indiana serves as an introduction to one more piece of the Good News story, that of conference renewal groups associated originally with Good News and later also with the Confessing Movement. If, as this study has suggested, Good News is best understood as a populist, grassroots, bottom-up form of Methodism, displaying, in Stark and Finke terms, "high-tension" faith, then the question can be asked how this has been demonstrated practically.

The North Indiana Conference group will be used as an example since that is the one I helped start and have worked with.

In early January 1971, I was with a number of pastors from North Indiana who attended the Congress on Evangelism held in New Orleans. A rather raucous group of us were at a restaurant one evening when I noticed a single figure over on the side eating alone. It was Charles Keysor. I had shared correspondence with Keysor (and, in fact, was one of the original responders to his article "Silent Minority"), but we had never met. I can remember my first reaction: I wanted to meet him, but he and the group he represented were so controversial that I was reluctant to meet him in front of my fellow pastors. I did meet him when our table scattered, and Chuck Keysor and I made arrangements to have breakfast together the next day.

I discovered the next morning how much Chuck Keysor and I had in common. We had graduated from the same seminary (Garrett); we had read many of the same books, we agreed that the most serious problem of the church was the official Sunday school curriculum. Charles Keysor was informed (in a way other Methodists I knew were not) about the growing renaissance of evangelical thinking and influence. He really believed that evangelicals working together could bring renewal to the Church. He convinced me that I should take the lead in starting a Good News group in North Indiana.

And so a group of five pastors put together a mailing list of persons, lay and clergy, that we considered might be interested in an evangelical group. In our first meeting in spring of 1971, about forty persons showed up.

There was an instant sense of unity. The conference was experiencing stress that in some instances verged on trauma. The Methodist-EUB merger in Indiana sought to re-form five conferences into two. Despite all of the talks about unity and common purposes and a "new day," there was a lot of mistrust and maneuvering based on former conference traditions and loyalties. The merged conference was already in serious decline in membership and attendance (and would remain so for the next fifteen years).

The sense of oneness of the evangelical group crossed all former conference and denominational lines. We got acquainted, told our stories, and prayed and worshiped together. We also talked about the kind of group we wanted to be. Some were prayer and fellowship groups, others were activist groups (with some conservative agenda). Some were angry-sounding, some were not. Some were initiating evangelical

programming-primarily in the areas of camping and youth-and others were not. Some were closely aligned with Good News, others were not.

But the interest of the institutional church was not in evangelical renewal. That interest was rather in a radical social and theological agenda-the Secular City, Death of God, Feminism, Black Power, Vietnam, Marxism, and liberation movements of all varieties. The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of great turmoil. In this climate, Good News was viewed by many as a last-gasp sort of fundamentalism. Others expressed a conviction that the evangelical presence was needed, but even these were continually urging caution. The sin to be avoided at all costs was not unfaithfulness or heresy, but "divisiveness."

The result of this climate in the church was that some of the evangelical groups forming found it expedient to claim some distance from Good News. My vision for the North Indiana group was that it would be a study and discussion group that would deal with theological and social issues of the day. It would not be just a front for Good News.

Whether a front for Good News or not, what many craved was evangelical fellowship. The phrase "spiritually starved" was heard not infrequently. The group wanted encouragement. It wanted a place where evangelical concerns could be openly discussed.

And so the earliest every-other-month meetings became praise and testimony meetings. They were basically Methodist class meetings where we spoke about how it was with our souls. We took the name the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship. And, whether we desired it or not, the group became a "Good News" group. The Good News magazine immediately listed us along with fifty or so other groups known as Good News renewal groups.

One of the first efforts to reach out beyond the group was to offer to sponsor a (7:00 a.m.) prayer and praise service during each of the mornings at annual conference (this effort would become a regular part of the conference program). Because of an expressed concern about the camping program, several of the group volunteered to be camp directors. Some of the group took the leadership of the Bible Conference, an (approved) evangelical alternate conference senior high camp, with emphasis on preaching and Bible study. The group offered a Labor Day weekend (Sunday afternoon and Monday) at Oakwood Park, one of the conference campgrounds. It was called a mini-convocation and was patterned after the regular Good News convocations, with preaching, workshops, and programs for children and youth. For nearly twenty-five years, this group brought in the best-known names associated with evangelicalism within the United Methodist Church and attracted up to three hundred in attendance.

The North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship impact

Did the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship have any effect in the life of the annual conference? If there was a positive effect, it was in the immeasurable area of changed attitudes and spirit. Angry people became less angry. A number of pastors and churches felt free to pursue an evangelical ministry, believing they would be supported, not hampered, by the conference. Others simply felt better about being United Methodist.

In a period of eighteen years, from 1968 until 1985, the North Indiana Annual Conference had lost fully one-third of its entire membership. Worship attendance had declined by 22 percent. It was obvious that something needed to be done. A decision was made to secure the services of Carl George of Fuller Seminary as a church-growth consultant. Out of those consultations, the conference committed itself to some new goals: to start new churches, to profile pastors in a different way to determine better how they could be deployed, and to revamp the old style of conference staffing. Instead of assigning staff to resource boards and agencies, staff would be deployed to resource local churches.

The conference then adopted a new program that grew out of the consultations with Carl George. One hundred and fifty churches signed up to be part of the New Generation Program, which involved training and a commitment in several areas: ministry to children (primarily establishment of Kids' Clubs); invitation, emphasizing teleministry (phone calls); an emphasis on nurturing of newcomers; and effective worship, emphasizing contemporary worship. For many churches, the conference had suddenly become friendly. It was giving instead of taking.

The argument can be made that when the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship became less active in the mid- and late-1990s, it was not because of failure but because of success. For whatever reason, the climate of the annual conference had become more evangelical-affirming. Prayer groups and the sharing of testimonies were becoming a part of district activities. The conference began encouraging the very kinds of programs that the Evangelical Fellowship had advocated: Walk to Emmaus, Alpha, John Maxwell, covenant groups, Disciple Bible Study, and church growth seminars. The camping program had renewed its commitment to evangelism and discipleship. In 1995, the annual conference approved a resolution, "To Affirm a Confessional Statement of the Confessing Movement Within The United Methodist Church."

The experience of the North Indiana Evangelical Fellowship is not necessarily typical in the denomination. Every conference evangelical group has its own story. Some are stories of success, others of ineffectiveness. Some groups faced open hostility (and still do).

Are there signs of renewal in the United Methodist Church? One would be hard-pressed to be hopeful if the only knowledge of the church were through contact with its Council of Bishops, its boards and agencies, and some of its seminaries. But the essence of the church is not in the Council of Bishops or the boards and agencies or the seminaries. The essence of the church is in the faith of its people, gathered together in local churches for worship, service, and prayer. In this faith, in many local churches, vitality is found. That is the hope for United Methodism.

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