

Books Worth Reading

United Methodist renaissance?

By Matthew May

Spend any time among strident, politically-motivated leaders of the United Methodist Church and one would come away with the impression that Mark Tooley is a spawn of the underworld. Directing the United Methodist committee (UMAction) of the Institute on Religion and Democracy for the last 14 years, Tooley has been accused of launching sinister, covert operations designed to undermine the Methodist denomination (he used to work for the CIA, don't you know?), has been labeled "unprofessional," and is routinely denounced for dishonesty, distortion, and calculated fear-mongering.

Such vituperation has no doubt intensified with the publication of Tooley's book *Taking Back the United Methodist Church* (Bristol House), which interweaves Tooley's own Methodist faith journey—including his prominent role in the denomination's renewal efforts—with the political activism of the church leadership and its seminaries. Such activism is often manifested in a reflexive America-as-Empire worldview simultaneously sympathetic to political and social movements that stand in direct contradiction with the Scriptures and the guiding principles of the church found in its Book of Discipline. Not coincidentally, the timeline of such activism parallels the dramatic, uninterrupted decline in church membership beginning in 1965.

Tooley traces the change in focus of those in leadership at the General Board of Global

Ministries (GBGM) from traditional evangelism to liberation theology alongside political and social revolution—under the guise of "social justice" and "prophetic witness," phrases universally unleashed by the left to shield itself from criticism. Such witness includes support for pro-abortion organizations, financial and moral support for the likes of Fidel Castro and other Marxist governments and terrorists in Latin America, efforts to divest in companies that do business with the government of Israel, and—as it relates to the struggle against Islamic jihad—undermining and ignoring "just war" theory in the canons of the church. Tooley also creatively presents the story of the Methodist building in Washington, D.C., as a revealing allegory for the tumult within the denomination.

For all the support for dictators and lambasting of fellow congregants by the left—whether they be presidents or laity—with whom they happen to disagree, Tooley accurately points out that the fundamental theological differences among United Methodists take shape in the rancorous debate over the church's stand on homosexual activity. He does this through vivid examples of the ideological warfare waged at the quadrennial meetings of the church known as General Conference. These debates come at the expense of unity that may be impossible to reconcile. As Tooley explains:

"Both conservatives and liberals shy away from debating the real issues that have divided United Methodism for decades: scriptural authority and

the identity of Jesus Christ. Conservatives believe that the Bible is God's wholly reliable, revealed authority. They believe that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God, the supernaturally born son of a Virgin, who was boldly resurrected, the Savior of the whole world, who was dispatched by God the Father to redeem fallen humanity. Liberals, in contrast, see the Bible as human stories that illustrate humanity's search for God. For them, Jesus is a social liberator, giving hope to oppressed peoples, much as Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi did.

“Conservatives see homosexual behavior as a consequence of humanity's innately sinful nature. For conservatives, Jesus Christ is the Good News, who can break the bondage of all sin. Liberals see people as basically good, and therefore sexual preference is God-ordained and meriting affirmation. For liberals, good people do not need salvation from a Savior so much as affirmation from a Liberator.”

Tooley's summations of these last few General Conferences (though unfortunately the book was published before the latest General Conference in Ft. Worth this past April and May) illustrate the wide gulf between the church leadership and its rank-and-file on the issue of homosexuality. This is most notably reflected in the many resolutions that attempt to completely alter the Discipline regarding homosexuality, which have ended in defeat—including a resolution at the 2008 General Conference, which would have failed to affirm that the covenant of marriage is between one man and one woman in heterosexual matrimony.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is the story of the significant growth of United Methodism overseas, especially in Africa; this bloc represented the margin of victory that defeated the aforementioned resolution

regarding marriage, and is quickly becoming a powerful voice for traditional apostolic mission within the church. Tooley notes that, on a typical Sunday, there are nearly 2 million people in the Congo alone worshipping in United Methodist churches, which is equal to or perhaps more than those worshipping in United Methodist congregations in America.

Throughout the book, Tooley treats ideological foes with an equanimity seldom reciprocated. The author graciously offers examples of civil exchange with those who would take the church right off the cliff. *Taking Back the United Methodist Church* could have easily devolved into a bitter recitation of a denomination gone mad. However, Tooley matter-of-factly provides a meticulous outline of why and how the United Methodist Church has faltered by presenting the words and deeds of its radical elements. He succinctly and patiently explains the goals of renewal efforts like IRD/UMAction to counter left-wing political activism. Tooley enthusiastically and hopefully notes and describes the rise and influence of African United Methodists who may well save the church from extinction, a remarkable story in its own right.

United Methodists in particular and other mainline Protestants interested in the survival of their denominations—as well as anyone interested in the intersection of religion and politics—should read Tooley's latest effort.

Matthew May is a United Methodist layman and freelance writer, editor, and historian.