

Editorial

Reflections on Passing the Torch

By James V. Heidinger II

For readers not yet aware of it, we are in the midst of a leadership transition here at Good News. I will be retiring effective June 30. In the news section, we carry the full story about this and about our newly-elected leadership. We have already informed our constituency by mail, shared this with United Methodist news outlets, and have posted the news on our web site. But some of you may just be hearing about it.

I am excited about the board's selection of the Rev. Rob Renfroe, pastor of adult discipleship at The Woodlands United Methodist Church in Houston, to be the new President and Publisher. Additionally, I'm also very pleased that the Rev. Walter Fenton will be the Chief Operating Officer (read the complete news story on page 25).

Rob and Walter are two outstanding and gifted men who will bring excellence of leadership and maturity of faith to their roles. I am blessed, personally, to tell you how much I admire and respect them both.

The conclusion of 28 years here at Good News (gasp, can it have been that long?) leads one to pause and reflect on those years, to try to discern just what things, if any, are better within the church.

Let me begin by admitting the difficulty most of us have in discerning change, perhaps because we can be too close to it. I remember Mrs. Terry Schlossberg, a leader in Presbyterian renewal ministries, writing that we often don't read the times well. She attended a conference on the

Persecuted Church in 1989, and heard Jane Ellis, an expert on the churches in Communist-dominated countries. Ellis was asked, "Is there any hope for change for those churches in communist-dominated countries?" She paused a long moment, and then said, "No, unfortunately, I see absolutely no prospects for change." Only a few months later, the Berlin Wall fell and a great deal began to change.

Terry went on to say that long periods of bad conditions can change suddenly. She added, "What is, is not necessarily what has to be, or what is going to be" (emphasis hers). This is helpful as we consider the future.

As I reflect on changes in the church during the last 25-30 years, I don't do it with a forced, chirpy optimism. I confess that I have at times learned more about the United Methodist Church than I ever wanted to know. But we have challenged doctrinally-muddled church leaders whose theology was light years from Apostolic Faith, and so must also note positive changes that improve the ministry climate for our 35,000 UM congregations.

I will note here some of those changes that are encouraging, and then identify some remaining challenges that threaten the health and unity of the denomination. Many of the former are clearly answers to earnest prayers.

First, we have an abundance of effective resources available now for local church ministry. Thirty years ago, local churches seeking good resources for evangelism and

discipleship often had to look outside the denomination. Now, we have *Disciple Bible Study* I, II, III, and IV, *Walk to Emmaus*; *Christian Believer, Witness, Discover God's Call*, and also the Alpha Course from England, which is being used in hundreds of our UM churches. More recently, Bishop Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* is getting widespread use in our local churches.

Second, there are signs we may be recovering from our 1970s and '80s wilderness wandering of "theological pluralism." The church's doctrinal defection and revisionism have been at the heart of Good News' concerns from the start. This quadrennium, not only is the denomination focusing on "Living the Wesleyan Way," something evangelicals have longed to see for years, but just this past January, the Publishing House released its acclaimed Wesley Study Bible, which has had an enthusiastic reception across the church. We just might be, to borrow Prof. William J. Abraham's book title, "waking from doctrinal amnesia." When I entered the ministry in 1967, the "Wesleyan Way" was either neglected or caricatured. Today, it is being rediscovered as a treasure. We rejoice in that and pray it continues.

Third, I find myself encouraged by the significant impact our largest churches are having on the denomination. I speak of churches such as Frazer Memorial (Montgomery), The Woodlands, Windsor Village, and First UM Church (Houston), Church of the Resurrection (Kansas City), Ginghamburg (Ohio), Christ (Memphis), Mt. Pisgah and Mt. Bethel (North Georgia), Asbury Church (Tulsa), and Granger Community Church (North Indiana), just to mention a few. I am fully aware most of our churches are much smaller. But these large churches are not only having extraordinary ministries, many of them are holding their own training conferences—teaching hundreds of other clergy how to do effective ministry. And

denominational leaders are beginning to take notice.

Fourth, a new generation of clergy is entering the ministry. Many of them are second career, evangelical, and mature in their faith. They are passionate about doing ministry and willing to take risks. Many are ready to be unconventional, even entrepreneurial. This bodes well for the future.

Fifth, evangelical United Methodists increasingly have become involved in annual and general conferences, learning how to make their voices heard. It's difficult to describe just how different the mood and spirit of the 1980 General Conference in Indianapolis was compared with the last three General Conferences. The evangelical presence in 1980 was miniscule and went virtually unheard. At the last three conferences, evangelicals were well-represented and their participation was vigorous, if not always procedurally savvy. Writing in his book *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, UM theologian Tom Oden described the gains that he saw at the 2000 Conference in Cleveland as an indication that the UM Church is "re-centering itself around the 'Apostolic Faith.'"

Sixth, our bishops and cabinets are perhaps learning anew the importance of dealing justly with clergy according to the guidelines of the *Book of Discipline*. Of all institutions, the Christian Church should deal justly and fairly with its clergy, not using the heavy hand of fear and intimidation.

So, there are reasons to be encouraged. The ship is, in many ways, in the midst of a course correction.

However, there are serious challenges that remain which threaten the health and unity of the denomination. Those following our church debates and exchanges are aware of them. I will mention just two.

First, United Methodism still has the troubling issue of unfaithfulness to historic Christian doctrine and our own Wesleyan doctrinal stands. This long-time problem speaks to the need for serious attention to reform in our denominational seminaries. Decades ago, the late Claude Thompson, beloved professor of systematic theology at Candler School of Theology, asked what is to be expected from our pulpits when men and women are trained under teachers “who profess no faith in God; who doubt His existence; who regard Jesus as only a good man—not a Savior; who have no place for prayer; who minimize the authority of the Bible.” Such training is like a medical school that doesn’t believe in surgery or medicines.

The liberal and revisionist themes have been around a long time. You’ve heard them before: The Scriptures are simply of human origin, Jesus was not born of a virgin, nor raised from the dead, and never claimed divinity for himself. And humankind is basically good, not sinful, etc. Tragically, we have not been “rightly handling the Word of truth,” as Paul insisted to Timothy. When our UM bishops are consecrated, they are given the charge, “As servants of the whole church, you are called to preach and teach the truth of the Gospel to all God’s people” (emphasis mine).

The question we must face is whether the church is entrusted with an authoritative divine revelation that is normative truth for its life and work today, or whether there are new norms to guide and inform the church. For those biblical in their faith, Richard John Neuhaus has answered this question: “Christianity is not based upon experience, reason, or our inherited wisdom, but upon God’s self-disclosure in history. Christian thinking, whether about God, about Christ, about moral life, or culture must always begin with what has been made known.” Foundational for us all must be God’s special revelation of Scripture.

Second, the continued effort to impose upon the church a new understanding of human sexuality remains a threat to the health and unity of the church. United Methodists should look carefully at the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church USA to see the tragic fragmentation taking place because of this fractious issue.

The Reconciling Ministries Network, in its push for a new ethic, attests it will “continue to engage in a difficult struggle to discern God’s will in this area.” It would appear that for them and perhaps others, that God’s will concerning human sexuality has not yet been “discerned”—that somehow it still remains unclear. This is deeply troubling as it reflects a denial of Scripture’s clear teaching, of two millennia of Church tradition, and 35 years of General Conference actions. When human sexuality becomes severed from its biblical foundation, then our sexual behavior choices become a matter of mere personal preference. This simply must not be.

Good News and the other renewal and reform ministries in the church seek no new thing for the church. Our primary concern has always been faithfulness to our church’s doctrine and polity, during a time when we seem to have lost our way. To this end, for these past 28 years, Good News has been for me a blessed, challenging, and fulfilling ministry. I am thankful to God for the privilege of ministering here, and for those of you who pray for, follow, and support this renewal ministry.