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## A Disunited Methodist Church

by Paul T. Stallsworth

Just as the Roman Catholic Church was shaped, in part, by the culture of the Empire, so Methodism in America was influenced by the democracy of the New World. In their beginnings, American Methodism and the United States of America created three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial.

Today, the United Methodist Church's legislative branch gathers every four years for General Conference. Hundreds of delegates from around the world (half laity and half clergy) meet for a week and a half and do their business under an ecclesiastical constitution. The General Conference employs democratic ways and means to consider all kinds of legislative proposals, most of which edit the church's *Book of Discipline* (though the church's most basic doctrines are constitutionally protected from revision). The *Discipline* states in full how the church officially orders United Methodists' life together, and that

includes both doctrine (teaching) and discipline (government).

The bishops serving their episcopal areas and the Council of Bishops (composed of both active and retired bishops) make up the executive branch in the denominational democracy known as the United Methodist Church. Through their ministries, the bishops and the Council of Bishops are charged to advance by word and deed the decisions of the General Conference into the faith and life of the church. The Judicial Council functions as a United Methodist Supreme Court.

For all its imitation of the long-running American government, this three-branch structure is struggling to help the church survive the challenges of modern life. The sexual revolution, particularly its legitimation of homosexual activity, has been roiling the United Methodist Church for nearly fifty years. Somehow through this turbulent time, by the grace of God, the church has maintained, in

the *Discipline*, a sexual morality and denominational discipline that are more or less consistent with historic Christianity. Recently, General Conference votes on sexuality-related matters have favored historical doctrine and discipline, largely because of the increasing number of African and other non-U.S. delegates. Indeed, with the number and proportion of its U.S. delegates decreasing each quadrennium, the General Conference is unlikely to change its mind on the matter of sexual morality any time in the future.

This leaves many progressive United Methodists immensely frustrated, particularly in the American church on the coasts and across the Rust Belt. In response, they have waged a kind of insurrection against the larger church. Gay and lesbian clergy have "come out." Clergy have presided at same-sex services. Progressives have urged ordination committees in their annual conferences to ignore matters of sexual morality. Some have persuaded their annual conferences to declare that they would live in "nonconformity"—that

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is, they would not conform to the doctrine and discipline on sexual morality established by the General Conference. Most significantly, they have elected an admitted lesbian, in a committed relationship, to the office of bishop. All of these provocative actions have drawn much attention both inside and outside the church.

Acting as the church's executive branch and as the church's chief executives, the Council of Bishops and the resident bishops have had to respond to the progressives' provocations. It is their duty to do so. But most often, their responses have been ambiguous and minimal, to put it respectfully.

Last year a bishop resolved a complaint that was filed against one of his pastors for performing a same-sex "wedding" service. Although the resolution remains confidential, it appears to be disconnected from the church's doctrine on sexuality. It lacks substantive discipline for the offending pastor, and it is wholly devoid of the transparency necessary to the integrity of the larger church. This resolution was finalized just before the bishop departed for retirement. In response to this disappointing leadership, I wrote to the bishop a letter of admonition.

My point was simple:

It is exactly this kind of episcopal behavior—ignoring and not teaching church doctrine, refusing to discipline pastors who blatantly break church law, and using the principle of confidentiality to avoid the demands of accountability—that causes United Methodists, clergy and laity, to experience a diminishment of trust in the United Methodist Church. This is how it goes, time and again: word of yet another one-sided resolution (or another apparently *Discipline*-defying act) reaches the larger church through various media outlets. As a result,

a congregation leaves the connection. A family is never seen again on Sunday mornings. A pastor becomes discouraged, even demoralized (literally de-moralized). But everyone is afraid to discuss, with the involved bishop, what has happened. And the involved bishop avoids mention of the church's standing doctrine and discipline (when that is precisely what should be proposed to his flock and to the larger denomination). Drip. Drip. Drip. The distrust deepens and spreads, and it harms the church. All this occurs under the banner of "do no harm," while great harm is actually being done to the United Methodist Church.

Why do our bishops lead in such ecclesiastically unhealthy ways? For several reasons.

First, many of them were theologically and morally formed during earlier days of American Christendom, before secular forces in the culture became dominant. During those days, the church and the culture mostly got along. If they did not, the church simply tried to catch up to the culture. The church and her leaders were seldom at odds with the culture and its leaders.

Second, there are theological reasons for inept episcopal leadership. Liberal Protestantism's God—the "God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (as H. Richard Niebuhr put it)—has trouble saying "No" to anything except the racism, sexism, and other ills denounced by progressives. So do bishops who worship this God. As you might guess, these bishops believe this God is all—and I mean all!—about the grace of acceptance.

Third, some key bishops are progressive in their moral theology, or at

least they have progressive sympathies. They have clearly taken sides in the current church struggle; they do all they can to support the progressive cause; and they are all too willing to intimidate the more evangelical and orthodox bishops on the Council of Bishops.

And fourth, more than a few bishops lead in this way because of an articulated, or assumed, organizational calculation. This is what they figure: If they play the middle in this disagreement in their church, if they "reach out" to the progressives and the moderates and the traditionalists, if they try to please as many United Methodists as possible, if they create as many moral choices as possible for clergy and laity in the church, if they offend as few United Methodists as possible, if they work hard to "accommodate diversity," if they talk incessantly about the "unity" of the church (without substantive reference to doctrine, scripture, or truth), then they and their ministries will hold the United Methodist Church together. Instead, their goal of accommodation is leading to a slow, continual erosion of the church.

The United Methodist Church, as a democratic denomination, requires a strong executive branch during this time of division and disruption. Submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the Council of Bishops and the resident bishops would be wise to set aside personal preferences, and then to propose persistently the church's doctrine and uphold faithfully the church's discipline—with engaging pedagogy and maximum transparency. Until that occurs, countless United Methodists, laity and clergy, will wait. Not for the Godot of Samuel Beckett's play. And not for a St. Benedict, for whom Alasdair MacIntyre hopes at the conclusion of *After Virtue*. But for a latter-day St. Athanasius or even a John Wesley.

Prayerfully, patiently, hopefully. We will wait. ■