

From This Corner
Reflections on General Conference III
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Last month I promised to share with you what, in my opinion, is important for The United Methodist Church to be doing, and what is not. This was before I was nominated as the Episcopal candidate from our conference. I say this because what I am about to share will probably upset some folk among us, and if I were to take the usual route through Episcopal candidacy I would try to offend no one. On the other hand what we do not need are more bishops whose sacred calling is “to offend no one.” For those who are embracing the new contemporized mantra of the general rules of “Do no harm; do good; stay in love with God,” I do not see what I am about to share in conflict with those. Perhaps that is another article.

So here goes. My overall impression of General Conference is that resolutions are the bane of our church. This quadrennial’s Book of Resolutions may well have to be two volumes as we churned out a precedent setting number of these statements. Last quadrennium, General Conference called upon all United Methodists to boycott *USA Today* because of unfair labor practices and also expressed concern over the high cost of seminary education and the debt load many of our candidates carry as they enter full-time ministry. As near as I can tell *USA Today* was unaffected by this resolution, and we did absolutely nothing or very little to solve the issue of seminarian debt as a direct result of that resolution.

I am reminded of a song in one of my favorite musicals “1776.” In it John Adams sings these words:

*You see, we piddle, twiddle, and resolve
Not one +++++ thing do we solve
Piddle, twiddle, and resolve
Nothing's ever solved in
Foul, fetid, fuming, foggy, filthy
Philadephia!*

Now this is not to say that the church should not be concerned about a host of issues that affect the world. Methodists have a long heritage of working on social justice issues, and we continue to do so today. This does not, however, equate with the necessity of making General Conference the clearinghouse for everybody’s concerns, opinions, and political agendas. I agree with one woman who bravely stood early on and pleaded with us to try to get this under control. My recollection is that she was quickly dismissed as we had too much on our plate to consider such a thing.

My suggestion is that we as a denomination do more of what we have tried to do in the local churches I have served. I tell my congregations that they should not expect to hear sermons that are largely statements of social issues. Rather, I invite them to consider what Scriptures say, and the Gospel proclaims, and then sit down with other Christians who can do something about it and work on specific application. This way they struggle with it and quite often own it in such a way that it gets carried out in real life. Some of the best education offerings in these churches have been just that. My favorites were

classes like “Going Further” which discussed the sermons and worked on application. Let’s be honest. Christendom is over and what the United Methodist Church says about every issue in every locale is most often ignored by the world. We need to address “the large issues” and leave the lesser ones to congregations, districts, or conferences where there may actually be members involved and in positions of influence to actually effect change.

Now on to what in my opinion is the great celebration of our church. It can be simply stated. Whenever we teach and promulgate the historic, orthodox, Wesleyan faith the people who embrace it transform their part of the world, and the church grows spiritually and numerically. We saw this in the African delegations, and in particular in the person of Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. We have seen this in the history of our own nation. Here is our biggest celebration and our biggest problem. In the United States in particular we do not have doctrinal consensus and it is the main factor in our Church’s destabilization. James and Molly Scott include this in their excellent book and plan forward entitled Restoring Methodism: 10 Decisions for United Methodist Churches in America, Provident Publishing, 2006. Ironically what brought General Conference together and moved us unanimously to leap to our feet in celebration is absent in American Methodism. Everything about which we were most excited was nurtured in the orthodox Wesleyan faith, and is sustained in the same theology today. In many places in our country we have abandoned our doctrine, even though our clergy are asked before ordination whether they have studied it, believe they are in harmony with Holy Scriptures, and will support and maintain them. We find ourselves in a dilemma which if unresolved will continue the rapid decline of United Methodism in the United States. At General Conference we see both our hope and our penchant for undermining it. There is good news on the horizon. More and more of our seminaries are including faculty who passionately teach and proclaim the historic orthodox Wesleyan faith. More and more we see young clergy from these seminaries doing the same. God apparently hasn’t given up on us yet.