



## Remembering Dr. Tom Oden

*Patricia L. Miller*

The death of Dr. Thomas Oden has left a void in The United Methodist Church that cannot be filled. That void also exists across the ecumenical church. He was a brilliant theologian

who gave his life and intellect to serving God and our Savior, Jesus Christ. He was a soft spoken, thoughtful, kind and gentle man. Respected as a theological religious leader around the world, Dr. Oden pursued knowledge with a passion. With patience, he was readily available to answer questions or explain theological issues.

Dr. Oden was a leader in renewal within The United Methodist Church. He loved the church, its doctrine and our Wesleyan heritage and tradition. Because of his great concern for the future of our denomination Dr. Oden, Dr. Maxie Dunnam and Bishop William Canon called a meeting of 92 laity, clergy, bishops and professors to consult about the future of the UMC during the first week of Easter, 1994. As a result, "An Invitation to the Church" was issued for others to join in exalting Jesus Christ as the church confronted the crisis of faith within the denomination. April 29, 1995, by unanimous vote during a conference in Atlanta, Georgia, The Confessing Movement was formed. From the ministry's inception until his death, Dr. Oden served on The Confessing Movement's Board of Directors providing wisdom and leadership. He also served on the Board of Directors of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and was the Executive Editor of Christianity Today (1995-2001).

Dr. Oden taught at Yale University, Southern Methodist University and Phillips University before joining the graduate school faculty at Drew University in 1970. He was named Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University in 1980.

Over the years Tom expressed his concern that the work and writings of the ancient religious leaders would be lost, leading him to edit the 29 volume series *Ancient Christian Commentary on*

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- Remembering Dr. Tom Oden
- From the Archives
- Commission On A Way Forward - Initial Meeting
- A Vision of the Church
- Shrinking Church Membership Study
- Decline in Worship Attendance
- On the Church & Ethnic Diversity
- Time For a New Look at the Church's Boards & Agencies?
- New John's Hopkins Study regarding Sexuality

*(Continued on Page 2)*

(Oden, Continued from Page 1)

*Scripture*. He also wrote numerous books and articles including his personal and theological memoir, *A Change of Heart*.

His positive influence on the church is beyond measure. We have been blessed by knowing Tom Oden and his boundless writings. We celebrate his life :

*Well done, good and faithful servant!*

**By Dr. Riley Case**

The death of Dr. Thomas Oden brings to memory his role in the formation of The Confessing Movement and the controversy (almost to the point of persecution) surrounding The Confessing Movement in its early days. In the July 12, 1998 edition of the *Sunday World-Herald in Omaha*, a major article appeared under the headline “Confessing Movement Unofficial Fringe Group.” Written by four current and former district superintendents of the Nebraska Conference, the article was in reaction to an earlier article which appeared in the paper by Mark Tooley of the Institute on Religion and Democracy. Tooley had made reference to The Confessing Movement and spokespersons like Tom Oden and contrasted The Confessing Movement and its leaders to the fifteen bishops who went on record in Denver at General Conference as opposing the church’s stand on the practice of homosexuality. Tooley called the bishops “liberals.”

In reacting to The Confessing Movement the writers referred to it as an unofficial fringe group which did not represent the United Methodist tradition and was a declared opponent of many parts of the official *Book of Discipline*. The Confessing Movement was trying for a take-over of the denomination, according to the writers. While the article claimed to speak for “most United Methodists,” most United Methodists had never heard of The Confessing Movement and would be turned away when they heard the “mean-spirited” conclusions of the authors. And while The Confessing Movement had much to say about Jesus it was criticized for operating from the basic premise that “there is no other name but Jesus through which one can have salvation.” The writers asserted that such misread

ing of Scripture would block non-Christians like Jews, Hindus, and Muslims from heaven.

In contrast to The Confessing Movement, whom the superintendents called a “side group trying to create division and steadily fighting the *Discipline* of the church,” the bishops were described as an “officially” elected body who were “strict constructionists” of the *Discipline*. “There is no liberal or conservative to it. Upholding the *Discipline* is their duty,” said the authors.

This little incident from the archives cannot pass without comment. Tom Oden, for one, never wavered in his stand on behalf of historic Christianity. The Confessing Movement can say the same. Oden was not that much involved in church politics. There never was a thought that he or The Confessing Movement wished to take over the denomination. Oden himself warned against schism.

As for the charge that The Confessing Movement is out of step with United Methodism because it believes that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, The Confessing Movement would stand guilty as charged. The Confessing Movement was formed to stand for theological integrity and to confess Jesus Christ as Son, Savior and Lord. Christ alone is the hope of salvation. It is sad that a large portion of the church does not believe that, either in 1995, or at the present.

And, for the record, The Confessing Movement stands not opposed, but in support of the *Book of Discipline*. We believe its doctrines and support its polity. And if, as the article insisted, the bishops are “strict constructionists of the *Discipline*” we would ask why some have called the *Discipline* a “hateful” book and believe that it need not be followed if one appeals to a “higher law.”

## COMMISSION ON A WAY FORWARD HAS INITIAL MEETING IN JANUARY 2017

Much of the future of The United Methodist Church rests on the special Commission On A Way Forward appointed by the bishops. The commission came into being when it was feared that discussions and actions of the 2016 General Conference were leaning toward church division. Unofficial dialogue behind the scenes at General Conference led the bishops and others to believe a new discussion and negotiating group might be able to find a new structure or some new understandings that would bring together conflicted positions having to do with homosexual practice. Originally it was hoped that proposals might be ready for a specially called General Conference in 2018. However, legislation approved at the 2016 General Conference requires delegates have all petitions for review at least 230 days prior to the opening session of the General Conference. Considering the amount of time it took to name the commission members, the Council of Bishops is looking to 2019.

What might these new proposals look like? Three major options seem to be surfacing.

- 1) Abide by and enforce the decisions that were ready to be passed by the 2016 General Conference which supported the basic teaching of celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage and affirm that marriage is between a man and a woman. This has been the church's traditional view and would be supported by groups like The Confessing Movement and the newly formed Wesleyan Covenant Association. This would be totally unacceptable to progressives who have vowed to disrupt and shut down the church if this happens.
- 2) Restructure the church to allow some form of local option. The argument is: let churches decide themselves if they would ordain or accept a practicing homosexual as pastor. A number of proposals of this nature were rejected in committee by the 2016 General Conference. This is the big tent proposal: let's all love one another and let persons act according to their consciences. The Wesleyan Covenant Association, plus almost all evangelicals, oppose local option or conference option proposals.
- 3) Divide into central conferences or jurisdictions which would have freedom to set some of their own standards and positions but under a global *Discipline* for the entire denomination. Such a proposal would necessitate constitutional amendments and might take a number of years to work out.
- 4) Separation in some form.

There are a number of other ideas and it is too early to project how the commission might be thinking. The Confessing Movement will seek to keep persons informed. Patricia Miller, Executive Director of The Confessing Movement, is a member of the commission.

*The moderators of the Commission On A Way Forward will be posting updates on [umc.org](http://www.umc.org) throughout the process. You can use the following link to go directly to their page:*

*<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward>*

*“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”*

*2 Timothy 1:13*

## **WONDER, LOVE AND PRAISES, SHARING**

### **A VISION OF THE CHURCH-**

A piece of legislation passed by the 2016 General Conference that has received very little comment is a study document entitled “Wonder, Love and Praise” which is an attempt to clarify and reflect on the United Methodist doctrine of the church. The study document, which was prepared by the Faith and Order Committee, is supposed to be studied by groups in the church and then further revised to be presented to the 2020 General Conference. If approved in 2020 the statement would stand as a companion piece to “By Water and the Spirit,” a statement on baptism which can be found in the *Book of Resolutions*, and “The Holy Mystery,” which is a United Methodist statement on Communion. Both of those statements place The United Methodist Church in the catholic or high church tradition (there are parts of the baptism paper that imply baptismal regeneration) and some evangelicals have pointed out that the high church emphasis is inconsistent with how most United Methodist Churches understand baptism and communion. All the same, any study that is related to doctrine and theology should be welcomed by renewal groups like The Confessing Movement.

The Faith and Order Committee of the church was authorized by the 2008 General Conference and structurally placed with the Commission on Christian Unity. The Wonder, Love and Praises document, which is 56 pages long, is not an easy

read. It sounds like it was put together by bishops and seminary professors which, basically, it was. The document makes grandiose statements about unity in the style and wording of World Council of Churches Faith and Order documents.

The document has taken on new significance since the formation of the Commission on a Way Forward, the group that is supposed to bring recommendations to a specially called 2019 General Conference that will hopefully resolve the church’s present impasse over the practice of homosexuality. This is because the document supposedly offers a theological basis for the United Methodist present understanding of the church and the importance of Christian unity.

While there are reasons to be skeptical about the long-range significance of this document there are some good things to be said about the study from an evangelical perspective. For one, Bishop Scott Jones, who is known as a serious theologian and who is the author of the excellent book, *United Methodist Doctrine The Extreme Center* (Abingdon, 2002), is presently the chair of the Faith and Order Committee. For another, the document, unlike some other writings of the church, talks about the doctrinal standards and appears to want to take these standards seriously.

The Confessing Movement will follow the progress of this study and offer up-to-date reports.

## STUDIES LINK SHRINKING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP WITH LIBERAL THEOLOGY

The results of a study on why churches grow or decline have been published in an article that appears in the *Toronto Star* December 6, 2016. The study, conducted and reported by David Millard Haskell, reports that since 1960 the mainline churches in Canada, namely, the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Church of Canada, have lost between 40% to 60% of their membership. However, in the midst of this decline some individual churches are growing.

Haskell identified growing churches and interviewed 2,200 individuals, half from the growing churches and half from the shrinking churches, to determine what factors contributed to the differences between growth and decline. His conclusion: in every instance growing churches held firmly to traditional beliefs, such as the resurrection of Jesus, the truthfulness of the Scriptures, and supernatural answers to prayer. The pastors of the growing churches were the most conservative in beliefs while the pastors of declining churches were the most liberal.

Haskell is the associate professor of religion and culture at Wilfrid Laurier University and lead author of the article "Theology Matters" in the *Review of Religious Research*, Dec. 2016.

While Haskell's study was on churches in Canada another study of some years ago shows similar results among United Methodist churches in the United States. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke are sociologists who have written extensively about growing and declining denominations. Some years ago they compared United Methodist churches in North Indiana who had identified with the Evangelical Fellowship of the conference with those who had not so identified. (*Acts of Faith*, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 266-268). They studied 121 churches which were served by pastors on the Evangelical Fellowship mailing list with 447 churches served by pastors not on the list. Over a three-year period the churches served by evangelical pastors increased 4.5% in attendance. Those served by pastors not on the list fell 1.3% in attendance. Both groups of churches suffered membership loss but the loss among those served by evangelical pastors was 2.3% compared with 3.9% served by pastors not on the list.

### UMC IN AMERICA SEES DRASTIC WORSHIP ATTENDANCE DECLINE IN 2015

News from the General Council on Finance and Administration on statistics in 2015 is not good. According to a recently-released report worship attendance in United Methodist Churches in 2015 fell by 82,313 worshippers, from 2,832,239 to 2,749,926, or 2.9%.

The ten-year attendance figures are even more discouraging. Between 1975 and 1985 the church lost 137,416 in average attendance, or a 3.6% decline. From 1985-95 the decline was 2.2% or 76,007 worshippers. From 1995-05 the decline was 2.4% or 81,617 worshippers. However, from 2005-15 the decline has been 17.7% or 514,392 worshippers.

The United Methodist Church in American counts 32,100 local churches. Of those churches 74% average less than 100 in attendance. 16,090 of the churches average fewer than 50 worshippers per Sunday.



## ON THE CHURCH AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

One of the major concerns associated with United Methodism's declining membership and attendance is the inability of the church to reach minorities. This is despite all of the effort in the last 40 years to address racism in the church and to emphasize diversity. According to official UM accounting the UM Church in America is divided ethnically in the following percentages: White 90.3%; African American/Black 6.1%; Hispanic 1%; Pacific Islander .2%; Native American .3%; Asian 1.3%; Multi-racial .8%.

None of us are proud of this lack of diversity in the American Church. If it makes us feel any better the other predominantly white mainline denominations report even less diversity. The Presbyterian Church USA, for example, is 92% white. But that is no solace at all.

One explanation is that The United Methodist Church has never come to grips with its racist past. Let no one deny that as one examines how the church was operating before the Methodist-EUB merger in 1968, the church leadership was dominated by a privileged white, male (and liberal, it must be added) elite. This is one reason why the church instigated a Commission on Religion and Race, and the Status and Role of Women, and encouraged ethnic caucuses. This was also a reason the church operated basically with a quota system for a number of years. But the new commissions

and the caucuses evidently never saw themselves as charged with the responsibility of reaching new people groups to Jesus Christ. They saw themselves as "advocacy" groups, working to bring diversity into church structures, and, along the way, to fight racism and sexism in the culture.

It seems apparent that groups like Religion and Race and Status and Role of Women want to increase the visibility and the percentage of women and persons of color on boards and agencies, among seminary faculty, and in other positions of leadership in the church but this has not led to more diversity in church membership as a whole. The membership of The United Methodist Church in America is more white and aged than it ever has been.

Meanwhile the Assemblies of God--a Methodist spiritual grandchild, it must be noted--which has been in existence in America for about 100 years, shows a 21% growth in the last decade. Its 1.8 million members make it now larger than the Presbyterian Church USA. Its worship attendance number is around two million weekly. It claims an Hispanic membership of 21%, African American/Black 10%, Asian 4%. Worldwide it claims 67 million members. Somehow it has accomplished this without quota systems, without commissions advocating for women and minorities, and without any mandated diversity for church leadership.

### TIME FOR A NEW LOOK AT CHURCH'S BOARDS AND AGENCIES?

The report on the decline in church membership in The United Methodist Church in America should raise questions about the effectiveness of the general boards and agencies of the church. If, as they claim, the boards and agencies are committed to the church's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, they must bear some responsibility along with seminaries and church leadership for the fact that whatever they have been trying hasn't worked. If the church were a business corporation, staff of the boards and agencies would be fired for incompetence.

Ever since the church was restructured in 1972 The United Methodist Church has been burdened with superagencies which have no clear lines of accountability and operate far removed from the concerns of the local church. United Methodism's new structure in 1972 came at a time when progressive forces were having their way with how the church should be organized for its progressive future. The General Conference set up

new agencies like Religion and Race and the Status and Role of Woman, added massive numbers of members to the boards, and laid out no clear lines of accountability. While whole new progressive agencies like Board of Church and Society were created for this future, the church's former Board of Evangelism was relegated to a minor division in the new Board of Discipleship.

Numbers of persons have been concerned about the effectiveness of the boards. What strategies have the boards advanced to counter forty-five straight years of decline in America? Before 2012 The Connectional Table and the Council of Bishops hired an independent group, Apex Healthcare Group, to study the effectiveness of the agencies. The group reported that the general agencies were "below average" in almost every area of their operation ("below average" might be described as "flunking"). They operated independently from the rest of the church; they were too large; they did not cooperate or collaborate; there was too much "distance" between them and the annual conferences and local churches.

The 2012 General Conference, after much debate, offered a Plan of Action for reform but it was ruled unconstitutional by the Judicial Council. A reform plan was revised to meet constitutional requirements and presented to the 2016 conference as Plan UMC. The plan would have called for folding Religion and Race, the Status and Role of Women, and the Commission on Archives and History into other agencies. These three groups lobbied extensively for the defeat of the plan and it was not approved by the 2016 General Conference.

The Commission on Finance and Administration (GCFA) has warned that with decreased attendance in the United States the church can expect decreased funds and the time may soon be approaching that the church will simply not be able to afford its heavy bureaucracy.

## NEW JOHNS HOPKINS STUDY REPORTS ON WHETHER SEXUAL ORIENTATION IS GENETICALLY DETERMINED

A new study released August 22, 2016 from John Hopkins University concludes that there is "virtually no evidence that anyone gay or straight is born that way if that means their sexuality was genetically determined." The study, which also covers issues related to transgenderism, makes use of twin studies as well as 200 other peer-reviewed studies to reach its conclusions.

The study also states that conditioning children to believe they need a sex reassignment to avoid mental health issues may not be helpful. Furthermore, people who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery are at much higher risk for mental health problems with a suicide rate 19 times higher than that of the general population. The study concludes that environmental factors are primarily responsible for sexual identity.

The study has been condemned by gay-advocacy groups saying the researchers are biased.

While the church needs to hear and be responsive to any scientific studies, its teachings are based not on "science" but on Scripture. Still, this study has implications for the present discussion in the church on sexuality. The pro-gay argument from genetics is that "God made me this way and therefore it is blessed by him." But that is a simplistic argument. Perhaps it would be better to admit that we live in a fallen world and in a society already confused about relationships. We do not understand everything behind sexual orientation but we appeal to Scripture as to how we are intended to live. Marriage is between a man and a woman.

**The Confessing Movement**  
**within The United Methodist Church**

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NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
MAILED FROM ZIP CODE 52761  
PERMIT NO. 338

**Purpose Statement**

**Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord.  
The Confessing Movement exists to enable The United  
Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity,  
and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ.**

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