

The History of Renewal in the United Methodist Church
The Crisis of Theological Education
in the United Methodist Church
By Edmund Robb

The following address was delivered July 22, 1975, at the sixth annual Good News Convocation, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. At that time, Dr. Robb was pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Lubbock, Texas, and was second vice-chairman of the Good News board of directors.

It is good to be with United Methodists who are evangelical in their persuasion. My family has always been Methodist. My ancestors entertained Francis Asbury in their home in this very state (North Carolina). In every generation since that time, in my family there have been Methodist ministers. I have a son who is a student at Perkins School of Theology and is an ordained deacon in my annual conference. I have a daughter who is married to a man who is in seminary preparing for the United Methodist ministry. I have another daughter who is going to college this year to prepare to be a missionary in the United Methodist Church. I have a cousin who is a United Methodist preacher. I have a son in school, and he is planning to become a United Methodist minister. I serve a United Methodist Church where we pay all our apportionments including the ministerial education fund. I serve a church where 18 months ago not one cent was given for Advance Specials. This year, \$17,650 will go to Advance Specials through the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. I am a loyal United Methodist. Since I have paid my poll taxes, I have a right to vote and I have a right to speak my piece. Tonight, after much prayer, many days of study, and the advice and counsel of men and women whom I respect very highly, I speak on what I believe to be most important issue before the United Methodist Church today.

United Methodism is a sick denomination. Any objective person will recognize this. Our membership has declined by one million in seven years. Worship attendance has declined by almost the same percentage; professions of faith have declined from 379,390 in 1955 to 214,585 in 1974. At the same time the conservative evangelical denominations are showing very rapid growth. Any business organization that had suffered such a drastic decline would demand radical reform and change in policy and personnel. Shall we do less?

The Rev. Dean M. Kelly, a staff person of the National Council of Churches and author of the book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, told a recent gathering of United Methodists attending a seminar on evangelism that church memberships in their denomination mean very little. Criticizing the UM Church and other mainline denominations, he said, "You will not get members by requiring nothing of them. You have to be serious about the Bread of Life and demand that your members do the same." Mr. Kelly said those who need religion most are not coming to the United Methodist and other mainstream churches because they are offered a seat on a church committee, rather than a chance for spiritual healing. He said that the churches experiencing the most rapid growth today are those churches that are ministering to the individual spiritual needs of their members.

"What does it mean to be a member of The United Methodist Church these days?" Mr. Kelly asks. "Is there anything you can do to get tossed out? What are you demanding of your members—and what difference does it make to them?"

A church prospers or declines because of its leadership. A study of the congregations of United Methodism will reveal that growing churches have strong, capable pastoral leadership with a positive message. Our denomination is suffering from weak, ineffective ministerial leadership. Many of our responsible leaders recognize this discouraging fact! The question is, who or what is responsible for this weak leadership?

I am convinced that our seminaries bear a major portion of the responsibility. *If we have a sick church it is largely because we have sick seminaries.* I have noticed most ministers' personal theology can be determined by the seminary they graduated from, and the decade they graduated.

Bishop Roy C. Nichols wrote in the November 13, 1973, issue of the *Methodist Reporter*: "...Seminaries themselves must effect a profound reorientation of purpose and function if their capability in ministry is to be substantially increased. United Methodism should be making a greater impact on the nation and the world. We can, if seminary faculties will redirect the theory and substance of their ministerial training responsibility toward preparing prospective pastors for the realities of ministries to people today!

"Most seminaries do a creditable job of *academic* preparation; but there must be a greater concentration on the role of the pastor as the spiritual leader of the 'grass roots' people of God. God is what the church is all about. The ministry is not a profession. It is a 'calling.' Congregations have a right to expect the proclamation and practice of certain realities validated in the personal spiritual experience of the pastor. The transcendent God, the incarnate Christ and the indwelling Spirit constitute the theological foundation for seminary education.

"If the seminary is not realistic, it ends up graduating a product that is naive in organizational techniques, ignorant of program and planning procedures, unable to conceptualize priorities and doomed to the continuing judgment of the 'Peter Principle.' *The end result crowds the appointment system with a disproportionate number of unhappy ministerial misfits.*"

Bishop Nichols continues: "It is not enough for the seminary to teach personal integrity, high ethical standards in the classroom. The professors and the campus climate must be carefully consistent with the same guidelines of Christian character, from top to bottom. When exaggerated permissiveness and 'do-your-own-thing' life styles begin to dominate the campus, anarchy follows and clergy potential is drastically reduced. These are not the days, if such ever existed, for willy-nilly, wishy-washy preachers.

"Mature, prepared, totally committed ministers who understand where they came from and where they intend to go, in response to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, is the first essential to local church renewal."

Most United Methodist seminaries, if not all, are committed to contemporary theology. We have seen them evolve from orthodoxy to classical liberalism; to neo-orthodoxy, to existentialism. With the bankruptcy of theistic existentialism, came the advent of secular theology. Then Drs. Altizer and Hamilton boldly announced that God was dead. To our amazement this was taken seriously for a short while. Then later came the theology of hope, realized eschatology, the theology of liberation and the theological and moral confusion of situation ethics. Our seminaries should remember, "He that is married to the times will soon be a widower."

We are told there is room for everyone under the umbrella of United Methodism—the liberal and the conservative; the evangelical and the secularist. We are reminded of Wesley's classic statements, taken out of context I might add, "We think and let think."

The current hypocrisy in some of our professed pluralism can be demonstrated in so many ways. Often a graduate of an evangelical college is told he should go to a liberal seminary for balance. When is a graduate of a liberal college told by the establishment to go to a conservative seminary for balance?

If we are a pluralistic church, where are the proportional number of evangelical professors in our seminaries? Dr. Claude Thompson, that saintly professor from Candler School of Theology, who has since gone to be with the Lord, wrote in *Christianity Today* (1971):

"What can we expect from our pulpits when their occupants are men trained under teachers who profess no faith in God, doubt his existence, regard Jesus as only a good man and not a Savior, have no place for prayer, minimize the authority of the Bible, dismiss any idea of spiritually transformed lives under the Holy Spirit, do not believe in life after death, and have long since come to regard our evangelical heritage as out of date?...Unfortunately, it seems to be more and more difficult to secure evangelicals as faculty members." There are some notable exceptions to this, but they are far too rare. The bias is all too evident!

By pluralism, do we mean that the evangelicals can pay the bills, receive members and follow the program determined and directed by liberals? By pluralism do we imply that it is disloyal to question the program, literature or schools of our denomination? *Is the episcopacy and bureaucracy of our church demonstrating the same attitude toward evangelicals that the Church of England's leadership showed toward the Methodists of the 18th Century?*

We see the hypocrisy in our professed pluralism in another way. There is an ecumenical spirit toward the theological left, but a rejection of the theological right. I personally know of a minister who belongs to an ecumenical fellowship made up of liberals. This same pastor said he could not cooperate with the Billy Graham Crusade. This is one example of the kind of ecumenicity often seen in our denomination.

Tonight I am asking for a new openness to evangelical education in United Methodism. Further, I am asking our denomination to provide opportunity for those seeking such education.

What do we mean by "Evangelical?"

An evangelical affirms the Scripture as inspired revelation—authoritative and normative for our faith—the written Word of God.

An evangelical affirms the necessity of a personal Christian experience—an encounter—the new birth—the rejection of universalism and syncretism as anti-biblical.

An evangelical affirms the priority of evangelism, missions and Christian education.

The evangelical does not see himself to have a negative or critical spirit, which prevails among some fundamentalists. He is not calling for a return to the 19th century. The new-evangelical does not despise scholarship and is not anti-scientific. The evangelical is not a separatist, but a churchman in the best sense of the term. The enlightened evangelical will have a sensitive social conscience and be involved in the world redemptively in the name and Spirit of Christ.

United Methodist seminaries have failed to give an evangelical education with this kind of understanding of the faith.

Where are the professors in our seminaries who affirm, without mental reservation, the deity of Jesus Christ—he is God—he is man?

Where are the Professors who affirm that our Lord was born of a virgin, not just symbolically, but miraculously—biologically? "He had no father on earth nor mother in heaven."

Where are the professors who affirm the bodily resurrection—not just a continued spiritual presence, but who proclaim the empty tomb and glorified body?

Where are the professors who affirm that there will be a consummation—when Christ will personally return in glory to judge the living and the dead?

These issues are absolutely essential to the evangelical.

How many of our theological professors firmly believe in the uniqueness of the Christian faith? Do they have a concern for and obedience to the Great Commission? Do they reject universalism—the doctrine that all will finally be saved? Do they boldly proclaim that Christ is the Way?

Is there an acceptance and advocacy of supernatural Christianity in our seminaries today? Is there a question mark placed on the miracles of the New Testament? How many of our seminaries have courses in prayer and devotional life?

A dismal picture emerges from the final report of the Lilly Foundation Project on the spiritual life in the large denominations' theological seminaries. In a number of these schools "both students and student wives reported that they had met with faculty satire and ridicule when they had asked from them help in prayer. Others sensed deep embarrassment on the part of faculty when confronted with their request for help here."

Students who do come to the seminaries with some degree of faith in God often find their faith shattered after the first year of studies. Professors commonly assert that they are tearing down idols so that the seminary student can find out for himself what is really authentic. Unfortunately, the seminary faculty often fails to present to their students the alternative of a positive faith in Jesus Christ. The Lilly Report declares:

"...Many students testified to the predominately destructive nature of seminary life and study upon their frail faith in God. Exposed to a steady barrage of 'debunking' and skepticism, there was too little help offered them in building up a new, truer, stronger faith in God to replace that which had been destroyed."

The Lilly Foundation study also disclosed that the loss of the disciplines of the spirit extended to the faculty. "A few faculty members even wanted to argue with those who were making the report, whether there is a God that can be prayed to, and if there is, whether communion with him is even possible." A group of students this very month complained to the leaders of an evangelism seminar, conducted in their United Methodist seminary, that there was no one they could go to for help in prayer and devotional life in their school. Of course, no such courses were offered!

Where is the United Methodist seminary that recognizes and encourages the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world today? Where is the seminary that deals sensitively with the holiness and charismatic movements in the church?

For the evangelical the church is the Body of Christ. He believes in the priority of preaching, the necessity of the sacraments, and the need for a community of faith.

Historic Christianity rejects humanism and secular salvation. The world does not set the agenda—the Word does. Freedom and prosperity cannot be equated with salvation. For the Biblical Christian, heaven and hell are realities we must ultimately come to terms with.

Lest I seem unduly harsh, I want to inject here my due appreciation for many of the capable, dedicated professors in United Methodist seminaries. I recognize them as persons of

integrity, and many have made significant contributions to Christian scholarship and reconciliation in the fellowship. There are others with whom we radically disagree, but we do not for one moment question their desire to serve the Lord in the manner they understand the faith. Our quarrel is not a personal one at all, and certainly not meant to be an attack on any individual. Men of good will can disagree and still have respect and appreciation for each other.

However, on the whole there is a misrepresentation of evangelical theology in UM seminaries. Every form of radical humanism is exemplified. I know of no UM seminary where the historic Wesleyan Biblical perspective is presented seriously, even as an option. I do know of a professor who had his facts so confused about the "holiness movement" that he represented H. C. Morrison as a bishop who withdrew from the Methodist Church and founded Asbury College! He had not bothered to check the facts. Is this being objective? Orthodoxy is often ridiculed, ignored or caricatured.

If pluralism prevailed in fact, as well as in theory, then every United Methodist seminary would have faculty and library resources by which the historic Wesleyan perspective was not only taught, but was prominent in the inter-mix of lifestyles and ideological choices.

Dr. Carl Henry says that orthodoxy in the United States in the last 15 years has been the only perceived heresy in a theological education. There is no fair or equal treatment of it in systematic theology, or even in survey courses in theology.

I am concerned that on a systematic and non-defensive basis, students ought to have opportunity for exposure to evangelicals who are serious scholars and dedicated in their faith. Some seminaries, for example, will bring in charismatics and others who are "in vogue" to the day, but this remains a part of a theological circus in which odd courses and odd names are paraded before the student body, without any genuine intention of inviting students to serious intellectual exposure. The evangelical theologian ought to be given equal time, certainly, in United Methodist seminaries.

Humbly may I make some modest proposals for reform in the theological education in United Methodism? I realize that these proposals may well be resisted by the mutual-support system of the hierarchy. By this I mean the strange reluctance to act or even to admit that anything could be wrong with the institution. As I recall, the quadrennial committee on the seminaries, reporting to the 1972 General Conference, complimented the seminaries of United Methodism on their fine job and superior product. One part of the bureaucratic brotherhood automatically affirms every other part. It is a part of the long established survival mechanism and ritual of being a "loyal" United Methodist. Thus all rush to the defense of one who is being questioned or criticized. Even those who might privately admit that they were not happy with our seminaries would simply say or do nothing.

Anyone who has studied the "Hartford Heresies" will recognize the urgent need of reform in theological education. In fact, I am convinced that schools type the denomination. The theological assumptions criticized in the "Hartford Heresies" are the assumptions that dominate United Methodist schools. Unless there is reform, our church will soon cease to be a significant influence in the world.

A study committee in the UMC has recommended that our seminaries be reduced from fourteen to ten. I propose that two of these seminaries be entrusted to evangelical boards of trustees and continued as official United Methodist seminaries. These seminaries would share in all current denominational funding, as well as the responsibilities given to any other United Methodist seminary. Endowments and libraries for these evangelical seminaries are to be maintained and enlarged for all UM seminaries equally. The money and help is available. The students are waiting. I predict in a short time these two seminaries would become among the largest theological schools in our denomination.

These Wesleyan, evangelical, United Methodist seminaries would demand the highest academic standards and a committed spiritual life. Such schools would be loyal to the church, orthodox in theology, Wesleyan in interpretation, twentieth-century in outlook, socially prophetic and involved, evangelistic in spirit, missionary minded and concerned for the local church. Such schools would do more to bring renewal to the church than any other single thing.

I want to ask the leaders of our denomination that if we are truly pluralistic, why can't this be done? The Task Force on Theological Education of Good News stands ready to dialogue at any time!

A second proposal to resolve our dilemma is to establish truly inclusive theological faculties. We are asking for every official theological school to invite competent evangelical scholars to join their faculties, especially in the fields of Biblical and systematic theology. Let us stop being hypocritical about an inclusive church and practice pluralism where it counts—in the schools. Qualified scholars with impressive credentials are available.

A third proposal I would suggest is that greater support be given to the established independent theological seminaries, especially those of the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition. A surprisingly large number of effective pastors and church leaders in our denomination are graduates of such institutions. I know of one annual conference in United Methodism that provides \$1,000 scholarships annually to every student from its area who attends a well known, independent evangelical seminary. This money is contributed by concerned laymen and churches. That conference now has between 25 and 30 students enrolled in evangelical schools. Every cent of this money is sent through the conference treasurer. This is bringing about significant evangelical renewal in that conference. Most conferences represented at this Convocation could support such a program. All we need is vision, courage, daring and faith.

United Methodist students attending unofficial seminaries today do so at great financial sacrifice. For some it is an impossible burden. It is our responsibility as evangelical churchmen to make it possible for young, Spirit-filled students to be theologically equipped for the ministry.

Brethren, it is time we "bit the bullet" and paid the price, financially and professionally, for our convictions. *The battle will be won or lost in our schools.* What shall we do?

If all else fails, then a final suggestion would be in order. Ultimately it may be necessary that the establishment of a new, independent theological seminary be considered. If the denominational leadership is unresponsive to our need, we have no alternative but to provide adequate training for our future ministers. Though the barriers are almost insurmountable, because of accreditation problems, etc., *by God's grace it can be done!* If it needs to be done, it shall be accomplished.

Let us serve notice, here and now, that we will no longer turn over our converts to the theological liberals who neither understand or teach the Biblical faith.

Let us serve notice that evangelicals will no longer be silent concerning the great issues of the church, and follow blindly their impotent policies. We are dedicated to evangelical renewal within the United Methodist Church. *We are not going elsewhere.* Rather, we propose to radically alter the direction of our great denomination. This will come with revival. The revival fires are spreading across the land. Its impact will organizationally and educationally change United Methodism.