

A Fresh Method

How the Holy Spirit is moving within the United Methodist Church

As a Spirit-filled pastor, I love to periodically slip away to be fed, renewed, refreshed and refilled. I recently returned from two different conferences where those very things happened—and more. Surrounded by 1,500-plus fellow worshippers, I sang the latest Jesus Culture tunes, listened to anointed sermons and watched dozens receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit while many others received deliverance/healing from evil spirits, addictions and sexual brokenness. I was slain in the Spirit—twice. I came back from both conferences absolutely “wet” from swimming in rivers of the Spirit.

What may be surprising is that both of these conferences—Aldersgate and Rekindle the Flame—are under the United Methodist umbrella. Many core charismatics don’t realize that tens of thousands of active United Methodists are tongues-talking, demon-expelling, Jesus-loving, Spirit-empowered believers who choose to remain in a mainline denomination better known for the ungodly actions and remarks of a very powerful libertine, political/religious fringe. (OK, it’s a prettythick fringe.)

So why stay in the denomination? Because Methodism still honors and often adheres to Wesleyan theology, balancing grace and truth in ways that are frequently lost in other streams of the church. Here, women are equally redeemed with men; holiness is about the Spirit’s presence and not clothing choices; and Scripture is taken seriously, not just literally. United Methodist pastors fearlessly can preach the Word because they are appointed, not hired; thus no local church can fire them. The denominational structure truly places pastors “under authority”—therefore *in* biblical authority.

Friendships among fellow Methodist clergy come easily, allowing for deep fellowship with both like-minded—and not so like-minded—colleagues. (Theological challenge can stimulate great spiritual growth.) Truthfully, many who pastor in non-denominational and independent settings envy the job security, theological breadth, collegiality and genuine accountability that United Methodist pastors regularly enjoy.

However, let's face facts: Mentioning United Methodisto some outside observers elicits responses like: "social gospel," "empty buildings," "liberal theology," "shallow sermons" or, my favorite, "gray-headed country clubbers." (The averageUnited Methodist is almost 60, with above-average income.)

"The truth is," a long-time insider candidly shared, "many United Methodists measure their spirituality by the amount of free-trade coffee they drink from recyclable paper cups while dreaming of a gluten-free Communion service. Many more support efforts to justify homosexuality and promote gay marriage—oblivious to the fact that Jesus continues to deliver and heal people from such bondage. Still others have reduced the gospel to a war on 'global warming,' looking down on anyone who doesn't drive a Prius."

Ouch! Does it all sound a bit schizophrenic? Welcome to my world.

Officially, United Methodism continues to adhere to very biblical and orthodox theology; yet many of our clergy and more than a few of our members do not. Some United Methodist churches are among the most lively Spirit-filled places that can be found anywhere in the body of Christ; yet others are as dead as doorknobs. In some Methodist congregations, spirits of witchcraft are bound and cast out; yet in others, those same spirits are welcomed and loosed in yoga classes, prayer labyrinths or even sermons.

How do leaders of United Methodist renewal cope with such a confused situation? Hopefully they do it in the same ways the early church leaders dealt with it 2,000 years ago, and in the same way the Wesley brothers dealt with the confusion that gripped Anglican England 250 years ago.

Bringing Clarity to the Confusion

Jonathan Dow, executive director of Aldersgate Renewal Ministries—a renewal movement within the United Methodist Church (UMC)—says the confusion is best dealt with by looking through a couple of scriptural lenses.

“One comes from Nehemiah 6; the other from John 21,” Dow says. “Both incidents are invitations to be faithful to God’s call. Nehemiah chose to stay focused on what he identified as a ‘great undertaking,’ and Jesus responded to Peter’s questioning the actions of others by saying, ‘You follow Me.’ While there are many, many opportunities and causes, we believe our priority is to be faithful to what we’ve been called to do: Equip the saints. Fully empowered and equipped saints will, as described in Acts 17:6, ‘turn the world upside down.’”

Wesleyan scholar Robert Tuttle, a long-time leader in Methodist renewal whose distinguished teaching career included stints at Fuller Theological, Oral Roberts University, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Asbury Seminary, reminds us that “United Methodists are the one mainline denomination best equipped to speak of the work of the Spirit. In fact, early Methodist leader John Fletcher first coined the phrase ‘the baptism with the Holy Ghost’ in his *Checks to Antinomianism*.”

Tuttle continues: “Grace and the work of the Holy Spirit were synonymous terms for Wesley. He spoke of prevenient grace as the Holy Spirit woos us from the moment of conception to conversion. It prevents us from moving so far from the way

that when we finally understand the claims of God upon our lives, we are guaranteed the freedom to say yes. Justifying grace is the work of the same Spirit at the moment of conversion so that the Holy Spirit moves inside of us. He then continues as sanctifying grace between conversion and death.”

Rick Bonfim, a fiery Brazilian-born, Georgia-based Methodist evangelist, has seen much of the spiritual confusion lift from the North Georgia Conference, United Methodism’s largest conference by membership. While the UMC has experienced dramatic declines in membership in areas of the North, Northeast and West, it has held its own in the South, where biblical orthodoxy and openness to the Holy Spirit are more prevalent.

“In the early 1970s, God began to move in the power of the Holy Spirit in the Methodists of North Georgia,” Bonfim says. “It all began when Charles Boleyn, a retired district superintendent, was used by God to start small fires of revival all across the state.” (These fires of the Spirit impacted two friends and future evangelists—Mark Rutland, now president of ORU, and Bonfim, who has taken thousands from the U.S. on life-changing mission trips to Brazil.)

“While there has been much resistance on the part of Methodist clergy over the years,” Bonfim says, “the fire is prevailing—nearly half of the 700 clergy in the [North Georgia] Conference has now experienced renewal and revival.”

As Dow aptly says, “We don’t have a cookie-cutter mentality as to what renewal looks like in the UMC. We believe renewal will look different in every local church as members of that local body of Christ, uniquely created and gifted by the Spirit, learn to keep in step with the Spirit.”

Dow’s gift of encouragement has helped many local churches begin the process of renewal.

Preaching Prayer and Presence

Another UMC renewal movement leader, Texas preacher and teacher Terry Teykl, is passionate about seeing pastors and congregations rediscover the power and priority of prayer—and for praying congregations to truly become presence-based churches, not consumer-based. Teykl, who has written extensively on these subjects, says he has witnessed an increased awareness among United Methodist pastors to attract the presence of God.

“There is a growing hunger for more of God so that when people do come, they encounter His presence for healing and change,” Teykl said. “In other words, our need is not to be in control, but to let go and let God. ... If the church is not defined by the presence, we become nothing more than a well-oiled business. And if His presence does not make us distinctive, then we become like any other religion. So in a sense, I see hope. We are repenting of consumer-based tactics and giving over to an emphasis on prayer and worship as lifestyles. We are asking, ‘How can we give spiritual leadership? What will it take to attract more of His presence?’”

Florida pastor Jacquie Leveron shares Teykl’s enthusiasm.

“The Holy Spirit is moving mightily among the Methodists who invite Him to come in and have His way,” she says. “These are the ones who do not quench or grieve Him, but instead are desperate for Him. They know that He is the only one who can give them the unction to function(His anointing).”

Calling the Courageous

The consensus among the dozen or so leaders interviewed for this article is that pastoring renewal in the UMC is not for the faint of heart—or spirit. A pastor called to shepherd renewal in the UMC typically faces significant opposition and resistance, often from the congregations he or she serves rather than from other clergy or the hierarchy.

For one thing, many of the 30,000-plus United Methodist

churches in this country have gone without the manifest presence of God for so long that His return greatly “riles the churchaphiles.” Religiosity and churchianity are formidable obstacles as pastors face “controlites” who hate change more than they love Jesus.

In addition, many who have experienced the fullness of the Spirit have tired of the slow pace of renewal—and the resistance to it—and have opted to leave the UMC for more hospitable congregations. Their absence creates an immense void while populating a number of Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches, many of which are pastored by former Methodists.

However, God is not finished with those who have stayed behind. The Lord continues to call men and women to follow Him in a “great undertaking”—to pastor especially where there is resistance and confusion.

Leveron offers encouragement to those called to lead: “The Spirit is moving among those who understand that there is a major crisis in the natural realm, and it can only be conquered by a supernatural endowment of the Holy Spirit. The only question should be: *How much of me does the Holy Spirit have?*—not *How much do I have of the Holy Spirit?*”

The Epistle to the Methodists

The Epistle of Jude succinctly describes the present situation within United Methodism. Through Jude, God spoke to a faithful remnant that was confused and traumatized by libertine false teachers who were “grumblers and complainers, living only to satisfy their own desires” (v. 16, NLT).

Jude characterized the false teachers as “spots in your love feasts” (v. 12, NKJV) and “the ones who are creating divisions among you ... because they do not have God’s Spirit in them” (v. 19, NLT). Methodists today know all about these Spirit-less false teachers. Sadly, we have more than a few, even among

leadership.

However, Jude's letter—written to faithful, Spirit-filled, Jesus-loving people—well describes the true core of Methodism.

I regularly pray His prayer of blessing over the people called Methodist: “Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (vv. 24-25, NRSV).

The One who keeps us from falling is exposing the confusion, even as He empowers a new generation with hearts strangely warmed to passionately live and share scriptural holiness.

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