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EVANGELICALS IN THE MAINLINE: SHOULD THEY STAY OR SHOULD THEY GO?

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A renewal of evangelical values within mainline Protestant denominations may seem unlikely amid the current atmosphere of religious liberalism, yet leaders of various renewal ministries remain hopeful and focused on their long-term work.

"We're not thinking any longer in terms of 10 or 20 years. We're trying to think in terms of centuries," said Thomas C. Oden in an interview with the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL. Oden, a patriarch of Protestant renewal movements, offers hopeful words in *Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements Are Changing the Church*, which Baker Books will publish in February.

"It's an announcement of the joy of the gospel coming and renewing the church," Oden said about his new book, which builds on his themes from *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*. "The Holy Spirit is not just bringing individuals to faith, but is renewing fallen institutions."

Ministries working for mainline renewal mention common concerns, including the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of salvation through Jesus, and how churches should engage political issues. The issue that dominates most church debates, however, is sex—especially whether the Christian church should ordain gay clergy and bless gay couples. If the sexuality debate is an important indicator of how renewal groups are faring, one might expect several discouraging words from renewal leaders, as their denominations' headquarters or legislative meetings often are weighed against them.

In the summer of 2003, for instance, gay activists won an important battle when Gene Robinson was approved as the Episcopal Church's bishop of New Hampshire. Nobody pretends that Robinson was the first gay man to be consecrated as an Episcopal bishop. What set him apart was being the first gay man to speak openly about his partner.

Several congregations have left the Episcopal Church since then. Many conservative Episcopalians identify more with their counterparts in Southern Hemisphere countries than with their own bishops or neighboring congregations. Whether those tensions lead to a formal separation from the Episcopal Church will depend on many factors, including the results of the denomination's next General Convention in 2006.

Feudal Lutheran Lords. If other denominations do not have as vivid an example as an openly gay bishop, their legislative gatherings face regular debates on standards for gay ordination or gay blessings. During a convention in Orlando last summer, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) debated whether to give its congregations greater autonomy on ordaining openly gay pastors. While neither side could claim a resounding victory, ELCA's Churchwide Assembly adopted two resolutions that liberal congregations could exploit as they test the boundaries of church discipline.

Mark Chavez, executive director of renewal organization Word Alone, remembers hearing two reporters ask ELCA's presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, whether the church would enforce its existing ordination standards, which affirm the church's historic teachings against sex outside of marriage. Hanson passed the question to Bishop Roy Riley of the New Jersey Synod, who said ELCA bishops trust one another.

“A synodical bishop is like a feudal lord,” Chavez said in interpreting Riley’s remark. “They can do what they want within their synod.”

Chavez’s interpretation reflects what brought Word Alone together: concern about entering into full communion with the Episcopal Church, which includes sharing ordained clergy and adopting the notion of apostolic succession, and how that arrangement would affect historic Lutheran teachings on bishops. Chavez believes some Lutheran bishops already have begun behaving more like their Episcopal counterparts, whether by restricting congregations’ choices in calling a new pastor, or by speaking of themselves as visible signs of the church’s unity.

Though Word Alone formed in opposition to full communion with the Episcopal Church, its board agreed in 2001 that Word Alone would be necessary regardless of that issue.

“The deepest problem in the ELCA centers on the authority of the Word of God,” Chavez says. “Everything is a symptom of the shift from God’s Word as being in authority over us toward our having authority over it. To put it bluntly, we’re engaged in idolatry. We’ve trusted in someone else, or something else, other than the Lord himself.”

Word Alone had considered leaving ELCA in response to its full-communion agreement with Episcopalians, but the movement was surprised by how many bishops have shown pastoral sensitivity to its concerns.

“Once you walk out of a denomination, it’s not that it’s impossible to reach others in that denomination, but you do pretty much cut yourself off,” Chavez said. “Little by little, it’s evident to us that [ELCA leaders] have to acknowledge we’re not leaving, and they have to deal with us.”

“God Is Still Speaking.” As the executive director of Biblical Witness Fellowship, the Reverend David Runnion-Bareford also knows the importance of a long-term presence in a predominantly liberal denomination. Biblical Witness Fellowship works within the United Church of Christ (UCC), which is close to the most liberal of liberal mainline churches. The UCC is far ahead of even the Episcopal Church on pro-gay activism—it ordained an openly gay man in 1972, and UCC congregations are free to do as they please regarding gay blessings.

During 2005 the UCC also became known for its “God is still speaking” campaign. The campaign includes an oversized comma as its logo, and cites a remark attributed to comedienne Gracie Allen, in a letter to her husband, George Burns: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

“The misuse of that quote has been part of the liberal creed in my 25 to 30 years in the denomination,” Runnion-Bareford told the Journal. “They [UCC leaders] really have seen themselves as on the edge of some kind of breakthrough in how we see ourselves and how we see God.”

Despite the UCC’s longtime advocacy for gay rights, Runnion-Bareford believes that the push for gay marriage in Massachusetts will drive more UCC congregations out of the denomination.

Runnion-Bareford sees the UCC as an important symbol of how a denomination responds to a conservative minority in its ranks. UCC president John Thomas has said that there can be only limited tolerance for the intolerant. “It’s actually a move toward a dogma,” Runnion-Bareford says of his denomination. “When we talk about diversity, it’s because we’re not sure we have all the votes.”

Time to Leave. Bill Nicoson, executive director of American Baptist Evangelicals, is one renewal leader who believes the best thing evangelicals can do is break away from the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA).

The ABCUSA’s Pacific Southwest region, which represents more than 300 congregations, has begun to withdraw from the denomination’s Covenant of Relationships.

“If the Pacific Southwest can get through this pretty clean, I think you’ll start to see other regions start to follow” within five to ten years, Nicoson told fellow members of the Association for Church Renewal during a meeting in October. Nicoson believes that if the Pacific Southwest proceeds with further

separation from the ABCUSA, it's likely to work more with parachurch ministries such as the Willow Creek Association.

Nicoson's job is changing as more ABCUSA congregations consider separation. Nicoson said he will focus more on helping individual churches become healthy, rather than trying to change the denomination's structure.

Nicoson also said he hopes to prevent the separating movement from becoming still another institution, or new denomination, for 10 years.

The question of staying or leaving varies with each denomination. "There are lots of responsible people on both sides of that issue," Oden told the Journal. "In the United Methodist Church we've settled that one, pretty much, because [evangelicals] are winning. As long as I'm free to preach the gospel, I'm not going to leave the church that baptized me."

A Revived Methodism. James Heidinger, president of the Good News renewal movement, agrees with Oden that the landscape is looking much better these days for evangelicals within the United Methodist Church. "I really think that liberalism, as I see it in our denomination, is intellectually fatigued," Heidinger said in an interview with the Journal.

Heidinger credits some of the improved atmosphere to geographical and theological fairness. He says about 70 percent of United Methodists define themselves as conservatives on moral and theological issues. Legislation adopted in 2000 now guarantees representation based on a region's populace of United Methodists. So, for instance, the more conservative (and more heavily United Methodist) Deep South is now better represented at General Conference than the sparse United Methodist populace of the West Coast.

Heidinger praises the early Methodist renewal leaders Albert Outler and Ed Robb for starting a foundation for theological education, which has prepared just over 100 John Wesley fellows for careers in seminaries and other academic posts.

He feels more hope for the future of seminary education because the evangelical Asbury Seminary now attracts 1,200 of the total 3,300 theological students within United Methodism. Such gains for Asbury are important, Heidinger said, because other seminaries—such as Iliff School of Theology in Denver—are very liberal.

"Our seminaries have been a bad scene for years and years," Heidinger said. "If I had a son who wanted to pursue ministry, I would lay down in front of a car before I would send him to most Methodist seminaries."

Good News is one of the oldest renewal movements in America. It was founded in 1967, and Heidinger joined the Good News staff in 1981. He said conservative activists already were weary of the sexuality debate then, but circumstances have not allowed them to back away from contending for the faith on that front line.

Heidinger is pleased by the progress he has seen in his denomination. "The liberal movement at General Conference is not nearly as dominant, as arrogant, and as condescending as it was 20, 25 years ago," he said.

Theological liberalism also is declining, Heidinger believes, because it has a hollow heart of nonbeliefs. "It lives off the organism. It doesn't create a vital organism," he said. "It's the negation of Christian orthodoxy. It doesn't create strong churches."

A Struggle Worth Having. Among so many movement veterans who are in their 50s or older, Michael Walker of Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR) stands out because of his youth. Walker, who is a doctoral student at Princeton in the history of doctrine, is 29.

The current central focus of PFR, which works in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), is to challenge a report from the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church.

Walker praises the report for its affirmation of the Trinity and of Jesus as the unique way to salvation, and for its call to holiness of life; but members of PFR are concerned over the report's recommendations, especially one that calls for greater local flexibility on ordination issues. "It would effect constitutional change in the church without going through the normal constitutional process," Walker said of the recommendation.

PFR has proposed its own authoritative interpretation—a binding reading of the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*—as an alternative to the task force's recommendation of local option.

"We have won some significant battles, and there is significant fear that we could lose the next major one," Walker said, referring to the task force's report. Nevertheless, "Jesus Christ will be the head of the church whether or not this recommendation passes."

Like Nicoson, Walker is more encouraged by the health of local congregations than by the PCUSA's institutional condition. He sees two primary stories in today's PCUSA—one about confusion regarding Scripture, accompanied by institutional decline, but the other about thousands of congregations doing the best they can to embody the truth of the gospel.

"We have a disproportionately liberal presence on the key bodies of our church, both at the presbyterial and national levels," Walker says. "On the social issues we are struggling. I think it's a struggle worth having."

As for the choice between staying with a denomination for the long term or the possible greater comfort of separation, Walker favors persistence. "I do believe evangelicals could have a more significant impact on mainline churches if we have a vision of being cruciform communities, being cross-bearing evangelicals."

Thomas Oden agrees: "It's the worst thing in the world to leave an ecclesiastical structure that's already in a state of disintegration. If I were a Presbyterian, I would not want to leave the theological resources at Princeton to a few ideologues.

"For maybe a century, liberals have known how to play the political arena far better than evangelicals have," Oden says. "But evangelicals are getting better at it because of their love for the church."

— Douglas LeBlanc