

Consulting the Faithful

A response to the voting on the Constitutional Amendments

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In 1859, John Henry Newman wrote an article entitled "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine." It was printed in a Roman Catholic periodical, *The Rambler*, of which Newman was the editor. It caused such a controversy and the bishops of the church were so upset that they asked Newman to resign, which he did.

Newman not only affirmed the critical role of laity in the church, he insisted that the consensus of the faithful may preserve important doctrines even when the bishops fail. This elevated view of the laity did not become important in the wider Roman Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council...where it became a "big" issue and Newman's article played a significant role in the discussion.

Newman made the case that there is lodged in the Church...the Body of Christ which is comprised primarily of laity...a depository of profound practical theological wisdom.

If the Roman Catholics can positively entertain that notion, how much more should we be able to do so as Protestants who champion the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of the whole people of God?

It's an expansive issue that needs the attention of our United Methodist Church. I hope the issue will become a concern of our theological seminaries, the ministry study task force and the General Committee on Faith and Order, established by our last General Conference, and certainly The Connectional Table.

I believe our recent dealing with the Constitutional Amendments is related in part to this issue. Our church is wise in requiring that our constitution can be changed upon the ratification by two thirds vote of annual conferences. Enough of the votes on these amendments have been reported by the annual conferences to make it possible to reasonably know the results. The sense of the faithful has been registered...not alone in terms of laity, but faithful lay and clergy across the connection.

Let me quickly register the fact that the doctrine of the church is not to be established by popular vote. That's the reason our General Conference, though it is the final authority for the church's life and ministry, cannot change our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith. However, how our doctrines are lived out in the concrete realities of life and ministry are determined in large part by the sense of the faithful.

In light of this issue of the "sense of the faithful," I have been reflecting on the dynamics of our recent involvement with the Constitutional Amendments. I believe that most members of the General Conference would agree that we gave far too little time to these amendments when they were debated in plenary. It was a travesty, really.

How could the General Conference approve (even barely so) what the church has now overwhelmingly refused to ratify? Could it be that we simply did not take enough time for study, prayer, and holy conferencing to discern the sense of the faithful? Could it be that ideological interest groups and small geographic areas of the church dominate the organizations and structures of influence? Or, could it be that the way the issues were brought to General Conference was prejudiced?

I'm thinking particularly of the amendments related to worldwide nature of the church.

These amendments came out of a non-representative task force and were brought to the General Conference endorsed by the Council of Bishops and approved by the Connectional Table. Somewhere there is a disconnect...either in communication or in leadership. There was little "public" support of these amendments by bishops other than those who were on the task force. It was clear early on that the bishops were not "of one mind" on this matter, yet that was never "publicly" registered. I imagine the Council of Bishops might have a discussion as to why the church in its vote on this set of amendments did not follow their lead. Indeed, if it was their "lead," what does the vote say about the church's response to their leadership?

As I understand it, the vote of the Connectional Table was 75% in favor of the worldwide nature amendments. Early reports indicate that the vote of the church may be just the opposite...60 to 75% in opposition. Where is the disconnect here? How representative of the church is this body, and to whom do they pay most attention?

The same questions are applicable to how the "2009-2012 Worldwide Nature of the Church Study Committee" will function. This committee is composed primarily of persons who championed the amendments the church refused to ratify. Also, the vote not to ratify is a "universal" vote, reflecting the "whole" church, not a region of it. While it is very important that the task force address the issues important in how we express ourselves as a "world church," it is hoped they will not hold tenaciously to what the church has said "no" to.

Another amendment of particular interest is the amendment that would change paragraph IV in the constitution. This amendment was "pitched" as an effort to open the doors of the church to everyone. The church is already open to everyone, but there are requirements for membership. It was clear from the beginning, though some proponents tried to disguise it, that this was another effort on the part of a passionate minority to undermine the church's position on the practice of homosexuality.

Back in July, the Episcopal Church of America voted decisively to allow the appointment to all orders of ministry persons in active same-sex relationships, and to prepare liturgies of blessing for same sex unions. In the wake of this deliberate schismatic action in relation to the worldwide Anglican family, the voting on the amendment that would have opened the door for the same schism within United

Methodism, indicates that we will not go that way. At the last report, the amendment had not received 50% of the vote, when 66.7% is needed.

How long will bishops, pastors, seminaries, and general boards continue to force an issue which diverts focus, resources and energy from mission and ministry? Does the sense of the faithful not matter? Sure, there is the craving on the part of human kind for a variety of sexual expression. We have all sorts of deep-rooted, passionate desires and inclinations; the question is what do we do with them. The Jewish and Muslim faiths, along with Christianity, have always insisted that marriage between a man and a woman is the proper context of sexual intercourse. This is not a matter of a "private response to Scripture," as some would claim; it is not the witness of a few verses in St. Paul, but the uniform teaching of the Bible, Jesus himself, and the entire Christian tradition.

A few in our family try to make the ordination of practicing homosexuals a justice issue. N.T. Wright, world-known New Testament scholar, Anglican Bishop of Durham in England, rightly says the appeal to justice begs the question of justice altogether. "Justice never means treating everybody the same way, but treating people appropriately, which involves making distinctions between different people and different situations. Justice has never meant the right to give active expression to any and every sexual desire."

Isn't there a measure of arrogance in a small part of the body continuing to passionately push their convictions which they know threaten the vitality and unity of the church?

I believe the vote on the amendments is a positive vote for the church, reflecting the "sense of the faithful." If we are going to fulfill our mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," then we must respect the integrity of the faithful in order to engage them in our kingdom ministry.