

A response to Bishop Coyner

By the Rev. H. A. "Bud" Tillinghast

A [United Methodist News Service article](#) on Oct. 15 reported that Bishop Michael Coyner of the Indiana Area took exception to a recent statement adopted by the Western Jurisdictional Conference. That statement, as reported in that article, was:

[Delegates to the Western Jurisdiction's meeting July 18-21](#) adopted a "[Statement of Gospel Obedience](#)" that says the denomination is in error in its stance that the practice of homosexuality "is incompatible with Christian teaching." The jurisdiction's statement also urged United Methodists to operate as if that stance in [Paragraph 161F of the Book of Discipline](#), the denomination's law book, "does not exist, creating a church where all people are truly welcome."

In his Bishop's Letter to his Conference, Coyner makes three charges. He said the Western Jurisdiction's statement:

- Comes across as a kind of "neo-colonialism." distrusting the actions of the global church's General Conference, which increasingly includes delegates from outside the United States, particularly Africa
- Is a "very poor substitute for the honorable practice of civil disobedience as expressed clearly by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."
- Does not "offer the church any way forward on this difficult issue."

My response

As one who has been a member of the California- Nevada Annual (regional) Conference in the Western Jurisdiction for my 40 years of ministry and who has been an amateur historian, I would like to respond to Bishop Coyner's critique.

1. "Neocolonialism:" I would agree with Bishop Minerva Carcaño of the California-Pacific Conference, The United Methodist Church's first Latina bishop, when she says. "Neo-colonialism is a complex socio-economic, political and historical reality that in my opinion is not appropriately used in this situation."

When one thinks of colonialism, phrases such as "White Man's Privilege" and "Cultural Imperialism" come to mind. Is this the mindset or history of the W. J.? Let's look at that history.

In 1939, when the three branches of Methodism in the United States formed the Methodist Church, they had to decide how to include the Black (Afro-American) churches spread through the country, most of which were extensions of the Methodist Episcopal (northern) Church. In addition, there was the question of how to include Black leadership of bishops, as segments of the denomination were not open to having Black bishops.

This is where the structure of jurisdictions was introduced into our denominational polity. The church was divided into six areas; five of these were geographical, Northeast, Southeast, North Central, South Central and Western. The sixth had an ethnic basis, the Central Jurisdiction. By this means of racial segregation, Black churches would be their own entity and would elect their own Black bishops. An exception to this was the Western Jurisdiction, which included the Black churches in its annual conferences.

Bishops reappointed after 1968 union

In 1968, with the union creating The United Methodist Church, the Central Jurisdiction was disbanded and, as had already been the case in the Western Jurisdiction, the Black churches became part of the Conferences in

which they lay. With no more Black annual conferences, their bishops were appointed to existing conferences.

My California-Nevada Conference received one of the bishops, Charles Golden. Since the 1968 merger, we have had seven bishops, only one of whom was white male. These six have included the first Black woman to be United Methodist bishop and the first Asian-American to be a United Methodist bishop.

Of the last district superintendents I have had, one was Hispanic American, one was Korean American and two were Filipino American.

Of the four district superintendents in our conference now, one is a Hispanic American woman, one is a Japanese American woman and one is a Euro-American woman. There is still an element of “White Man’s Privilege.” My successor at the last church I served has been selected as the fourth superintendent, and he is a white man.

I must add that this jurisdiction, accused in affect of “White Man’s Privilege,” does not have a white man as one of its bishops. Our presiding bishop is Black.

Speaking of my own ministry, as a pastor in the Bay Area, I helped start a Tongan Church and a Korean Church. Three congregations sharing one building required learning how to live with different cultural expectations. There were national and class differences — the mainly Anglo congregation was middle class, the Tongans were from the developing world, and many of the Koreans had advanced degrees. At times, this could be testy, especially when one had to deal with pig fat on the gym floor and an array of rice cookers blowing out the old kitchen’s electrical circuits! There also were variations in theology that covered the spectrum from conservative paternalism that didn’t accept women’s leadership to liberals comfortable with biblical criticism.

And as director of a metro-ministry in Oakland that included nine different ethnic churches, I worked with those churches to begin a Hispanic ministry.

Thus, Bishop Coyner’s charge of neo-colonialism rings hollow to those of us who have experienced — no, celebrated — the ethnic diversity of our denomination! This reality of diversity has laid the foundation for people of the Western Jurisdiction being sensitive to yet another minority in our midst, the homosexual. It would seem obvious in the reverse that those who have lived in an environment of homogeneity would not develop the same sensitivity to the humanity of homosexuals.

Other points

2. Let me deal more briefly with Bishop Coyner’s other charges. He says that the Western Jurisdiction statement is a “very poor substitute” for the honorable practice of civil disobedience as expressed clearly by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Perhaps Bishop Coyner is unaware of who has been the inspiration for our stand of “Gospel Obedience,” in fact, the same person who coined the term, Bishop Melvin Talbert.

I’m not sure I would have the audacity to tell a man who marched with and worked with Dr. King that I have a clearer idea of King’s practice of civil disobedience than he. Certainly, I would not tell Bishop Talbert that his vision of the gospel or of civil disobedience is dishonorable!

3. When Bishop Coyner says the jurisdiction’s statement “does not offer the church any way forward on this difficult issue,” perhaps he is right. If you take it in isolation from the history to date of the jurisdiction’s life it may seem judgmental, arrogant or without positive direction.

But if you look at the history of our Christian life together, maybe we have a story to tell to the rest of the church.

There are large pockets in our denomination, both in the United States and overseas, where the experience of diversity we have come to terms with does not exist. We live the experience of Pentecost — the gospel being heard in many tongues — almost every day of our ministry. We have first had to struggle with living Paul’s words “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.” Is it any wonder that the Spirit has spoken to us saying “neither gay nor straight?”

No, Brother Coyner, neo-colonialism is not the model out of which our jurisdiction has lived. We in the western states have seen ourselves as “pioneers,” those who venture into new territories. Our record is far from pure. Look at how we treated the Native Americans and Mexicans in the west into which we ventured. Our earlier approach to diversity included the Oriental Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Church as ‘social pioneer’

But we’ve learned along the way. One of my teachers in what it means to be a pioneer is the theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr. In his [“Responsibility of the Church for Society,”](#) he developed the idea of the church as “social pioneer.” It is, he says, the embodiment “representational responsibility.”

In ethics it is the first to repent for the sins of a society and it repents on behalf of all. When it becomes apparent that slavery is transgression of the divine commandment, then the Church repents of it, turns its back upon it, abolishes it within itself. It does this not as the holy community separate from the world but as the pioneer and representative. It repents for the sin of the whole society and leads in the social act of repentance. When the property institutions of society are subject to question because innocent suffering illuminates their antagonism to the will of God, then the Church undertakes to change its own use of these institutions and to lead society in their reformation. So also the Church becomes a pioneer and representative of society in the practice of equality before God, in the reformation of institutions of rulership, in the acceptance of mutual responsibility of individuals for one another.

To Bishop Coyne and others in The United Methodist Church, I say the way forward has to include the reality of different stands on current ethical issues, which has been the lived experience of the Western Jurisdiction and it needs to be the way forward for a global church.

To my brothers and sisters of the Western Jurisdiction I say, in the words of an old hymn, truly “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations.”

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