

United Methodism at Forty

Reviewed by Benjamin L. Hartley, deacon in the EPA Annual Conference and Assistant Professor of Christian Mission at Palmer Theological Seminary.

Telling our stories – as individuals and as a church – is often a complex undertaking. We have to ask ourselves: Where should we begin? What should we emphasize? What themes – if any – pulse through our story, driving it forward like a riff in a piece of soulful jazz? The authors of this book – who are all clergy members of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference – had to grapple with these questions, and I imagine a spirited debate took place amongst themselves on how best to proceed.

The authors choose to organize the story of United Methodism at Forty in a thematic way as they note the debates and discernment United Methodists have engaged in over these years. The opening two chapters review the history of Methodist origins in England and provide a thumbnail chronological sketch of United Methodist history on a decade-by-decade basis since the 1960s. The next six chapters review changes in our denominational structuring, doctrine and theology, worship, understanding of ordained and lay ministry, mission in North America and overseas, and promotion of social justice. A strength in all of these chapters is the way the authors have sought to remind the reader of the currents in world affairs which have occurred alongside the changes we have experienced as a denomination.

The authors do an excellent job of sketching the basic contours of United Methodist debate. As one can imagine, an entirely objective portrayal of these debates would be an impossible task for anyone who has voted on contentious issues in Annual Conference for the preceding forty years. The reader will easily detect that the authors do not artificially hide their own take on things, while they also seek to be judicious in their comments about people and movements with whom they disagree. Advocates of any number of particular issues will undoubtedly be disappointed that “their issue” did not receive more comprehensive treatment. Such disappointments are inevitable.

In terms of specifics, this reviewer was struck by three things in particular which were especially well handled. The authors provide a nuanced – albeit brief – analysis of changes in the “Our Theological Task” doctrinal statement from 1972 to 1988. No two documents illustrate the doctrinal changes our denomination has undergone more than these two, and clergy would do well to refresh their memories of what was said in them. The 1988 statement was more conservative than the 1972 statement in many ways, but in other ways – such as in its emphasis on global Methodism – the 1988 statement strikes one as more embracing. Second, on the subject of Methodist missions, this reviewer was delighted to see the authors note the importance of another 1988 statement on our denomination’s theology of mission, *Grace Upon Grace*. Although approved by General Conference and still the best statement of our theology of mission, it is almost entirely unknown today – save for a few seminary professors of mission and United Methodist studies. Third, *United Methodism at Forty* does an excellent job of honoring the history of the Evangelical United Brethren denomination, even though the book focuses on events after the merger took place. Too often this history is not well understood in terms

of the effects it continued to have on the UMC after 1968. It is fitting that three Eastern Pennsylvania clergy are the ones to remind the wider denomination of this heritage.

For all of its strengths, however, this reviewer was left wondering about the book's portrayal of the worship debate as well as its discussion of global Methodism. The polarization between "traditional" and "contemporary" worship – while still strong – seems to have become less pronounced in recent years in many churches as pastors strive to "mix it up" a fair amount. The authors' claim that "[a]lready there is evidence that younger people favor more traditional styles of worship" would benefit from more empirical support, which any number of books on the "emerging church" could provide. On the topic of global Methodism the reader receives very little insight into how Methodism outside the United States has changed over the past forty years. For example, in the case of Africa, the 1968 merger corresponded with many countries gaining their independence from colonial powers. How the church navigated these post-independence years is a story that deserves to be told in more detail than was possible in this book.

Charles Yrigoyen, John McEllhenney, and Kenneth Rowe have done the denomination a great service in their attempt at a responsible retelling of our story. As one who was born a year *after* the 1968 merger that created the United Methodist Church, this reviewer finds this bit of storytelling especially valuable. My prayer, however, is not that we simply read this book for the nuggets of wisdom and insight that it contains, but that as we gather for our Annual Conference meetings over the next few years, this book will prompt us to ask our lay and ordained colleagues to tell us how they remember our story over the past 40 or 50 years. These colleagues will inevitably choose different events and debates to highlight which may be just as important as those covered in this book.

United Methodism at Forty has no concluding chapter. This is an effective decision on the part of the authors. It reminds us that like a good piece of jazz music the riff – our story of debate and discernment as United Methodists – will continue as we seek to prayerfully and faithfully improvise as a fellowship of Christians seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance.