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WALKING WITH WESLEY IN SAVANNAH

"Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm."
—Isaiah 7:9

In early March, RENEW held its first leadership meeting of 2010 in Savannah, Georgia.

This historic location was chosen as a way to re-connect with our Wesleyan past while making important decisions about our future. Over the weekend, we explored our theological roots and gained a new appreciation of our rich, evangelical heritage.

We stayed at the Planters Inn on Reynolds Square, the original site of John Wesley's parsonage where he lived while serving as parish priest in the new colony of Georgia, founded by General James Oglethorpe in 1733.

Directly behind the Inn stands Christ Church, the first established church in Georgia and affectionately called the "Mother Church of Georgia."

The RENEW team had a private tour of Christ Church and worshiped with the congregation on Sunday. Steve Dantin, a member of the Vestry, spent time sharing the history of this great church and explaining the present day spiritual battle they are waging. Their current struggle with The Episcopal Church (TEC) has much to teach us in the United Methodist Church as we face similar theological and cultural challenges.

Through almost three centuries, Christ Church has proclaimed biblical truth—that Jesus is the only way to personal salvation, the Holy Bible is the inspired Word of God, and the historic creeds of Christian doctrine are worthy to be upheld. Christ Church was the place where John Wesley and George Whitfield first preached, the first Sunday school in America was established, the first English hymnal was published, and where the founder of the Girls Scouts, Juliette Gordon Low, was baptized, married, and buried.

In 2007, after years of prayerful discernment, the Vestry and congregation of Christ Church voted to leave The Episcopal Church on the grounds that TEC had abandoned the historic teachings of Christianity. Christ Church requested and received permission from The Anglican Church of Uganda to come under its authority and protection.

Christ Church had clearly documented reasons for their historic separation.

Actions at their General Conventions had repeatedly failed to uphold the church's historic doctrines, the authority of Scripture, and the uniqueness of Jesus as the Savior of the world. The Convention also consecrated an openly homosexual bishop and failed to discipline another bishop who denied Jesus was God incarnate.

The people of Christ Church believe these deviations from the historical tenets of the Christian faith are the main reasons for the physical and theological decline of TEC over the past forty years. The church's action reflected their passionate desire to maintain the historic biblical integrity of the Christian faith along with 80 million worldwide Anglicans.



John Wesley remembered in Savannah.

Christ Church is now part of an emerging diocese of the newly-formed Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), representing 700 congregations, 1,000 clergy, and 100,000 Anglicans across America. As a result, The Episcopal Diocese of Georgia and the TEC have sued Christ Church to seize its funds and buildings. The suit has been long and arduous, costing Christ Church over one million dollars. After losing the initial judgment in Chatham County Superior Court, the case is currently waiting to be heard before the Court of Appeals of Georgia. Christ Church is not alone in its battle for the gospel as there are currently about 30 active lawsuits between TEC and realigned dioceses or parishes. In all but three, TEC brought the lawsuit and is the plaintiff.

When asked why they are appealing, the leadership

of Christ Church has responded that “we have not been released from our call to stand firm for the gospel against the heresy of The Episcopal Church...and we are not willing to relinquish the pulpit of John Wesley and George Whitefield to those who preach a false gospel.”

When the RENEW team worshiped at Christ Church on a beautiful Sunday in early March, you could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit within the walls of this historic sanctuary. With an original Tiffany stained glass above the altar showing Jesus with his arms outstretched, we knew we were standing on holy ground. The congregation believes fervently that this battle is about Christianity and the souls of the faithful, and not about a church building.

Many in the United Methodist Church are watching intently as other Episcopal congregations vote to withdraw and join the new Anglican Church of North America. What does the current schism in The Episcopal Church have to teach us in the United Methodist Church?

Ironically, at the 2004 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Rev. Robert Duncan, the Episcopal Bishop of the Pittsburgh Diocese, spoke to us at a Good News breakfast. He fervently warned us to heed the problems The Episcopal Church was facing and the schism they were experiencing. He implored us to never compromise on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Word of God, or we would pay dearly down the road. When the Pittsburgh Diocese eventually pulled out of TEC, Duncan was stripped of his credentials. God, however, had another plan for this faithful leader.

In June 2009, Duncan became the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of North America. While some Anglicans saw him as a deposed bishop that brought schism to the two million member Episcopal Church, others viewed him as a prophetic and brave soul, having the courage and faith to stand against the heretical voices of The Episcopal Church.

At General Conference 2004, another prophetic voice spoke in the person of the Rev. Dr. Bill Hinson. One of the great preachers and pastors in United Methodism, Hinson named “the 800 lb. elephant in the room” during a speech he gave to a room of renewal leaders. He articulated what many had been thinking that maybe it was time for the Unit-

ed Methodist Church to begin discussions of a “just and amicable separation” due to the deep theological differences that divide us as a church.

Hinson said it was probably the saddest day of his life, grounded in a total lack of hope that we could be reconciled around our foundational beliefs. Dr. Hinson’s words and actions were distorted and maligned by factions at the conference and a melee ensued. Hinson was pressured to appear before the body with a hastily drawn up “unity resolution” that was passed on the floor of the Conference. This was followed by a disingenuous kumbaya, hand-holding moment meant to give the impression that the United Methodist Church was strongly unified.

Sadly, Dr. Bill Hinson, this great man of Methodism, died seven months later of a massive stroke at the age of sixty-eight. Those who knew and loved him have spoken of the heartbreak Hinson experienced over the state of his beloved denomination, especially after the 2004 General Conference.

As we spent those four days in Savannah, walking in many of the same places John Wesley walked, I wondered what Wesley would have thought of the current struggles facing his Anglican church home and the Methodist church

he fathered. Wesley wrote that one of his greatest fears was not that the Methodist Church would cease to exist, but that it would exist as nothing more than a “dead sect,” no longer a vital instrument in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

What will happen to the United Methodist Church during these trying times? Will the growth of our Central Conferences be the saving grace of our denomination, as they receive more voice in decision-making at future General Conferences? Our African brothers and sisters are theologically orthodox and have little patience for deviations from the historical tenets of our faith. Will the future of Methodism play out like the future of The Episcopal Church? Does God want to do a new thing among us? Time will tell. But we know God wants us to stand firm in our faith, like our brothers and sisters at Christ Church Savannah.



Christ Church in Savannah.

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Photos courtesy of Christ Church and RENEW.