

# Conservatives Gain Ground in Major Churches

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

Conservatives are drawing a good deal of attention and concern in "main-line" denominations, paralleling a similar trend in American society as a whole.



Traditionalist Catholics are getting new attention at the Vatican, while evangelical caucuses are wielding strength in many Protestant denominations. Reactions to the new conservative heft on the part of leaders of the Churches range from serious attention to their concerns and views to alarm and fear that they are seeking to undo the reforms of the last two decades in church and society.

Dan Herr, president of the Thomas More Association, a Chicago-based publishing and distributing firm, recently wrote in U.S. Catholic that "a good many of us, particularly younger priests and nuns, should be a little ashamed of our insensitive treatment of conservative Catholics who clung to their traditional ways and refused to get with it as quickly as the progressives thought they should."

He noted that not all traditionalists have organized into noisy protest groups, but that many have been "silent sufferers: those who tried, frequently in vain, to adapt to the changing Catholic scene and at the same time to clutch desperately to what had sustained them for so long."

But the conservatives who are drawing attention today are not the "silent sufferers." Rather, they are organized groups like the Good News movement in the United Methodist Church, The Good News group's growing influence in the 9.8-million-member denomination recently led to an 8,000-word critique from the liberal Methodist Federation for Social Action, which charged that it represents "the presence and influence of the new Far Right."

Dr. Paul Mickey, associate professor of pastoral theology at Duke University Divinity School and president of Good News, commented that "such attacks are understandable. Many now critical of groups like Good News once held beliefs and positions of influence that were protected by the institutions, but these positions are now exposed, eroding and threatening to break up. The outcome is uncertain and threatening to them."

While conservatives have managed to oppose new proposals in mainline denominations, such as ordination of homosexuals, they have not thus far been able to exert influence in reversing major trends of the past two decades. There are signs, though, that the next generation of Church leaders may prove to be

more conservative than the activists who have held power in recent years.

The latest National Opinion Survey of Who's Who Among American High School Students found that 92 per cent of student leaders believe there is a personal God or "vital force" in the world, 90 per cent said religion plays a significant role in their own moral lives, and 81 per cent belong to organized religious groups.

A study of 327 church-related colleges and universities conducted by the Higher Education Center of the University of Arizona found that the greatest growth in enrollments during the period 1965-75 was in schools having a strong evangelical stance.

Earl J. McGrath and Richard C. Neese, authors of the research report, suggested that religious bodies whose colleges have lost in aggregate enrollment "would do well to analyze whether the forces at work in each case stem from a weakening of the earlier emphasis on their religious heritage and commitments

Dr. Charles Mueller, president of the Southeastern District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, remarked last year that Lutheran youth "are getting so conventional it is almost embarrassing." He asserted that today's youth "believe in the virtues of their grandparents rather than those of their parents."

As they have become a force to be reckoned with, conservative Christians have prompted their liberal counterparts in the Churches to reevaluate some of their stances in the area of worship and doctrine.

Dr. Donald Shriver, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, has asserted that the rise of the evangelical movement "pushes the so-called liberal denominations back to basic theology. It will force them to think through what they think about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the Bible." He noted that "liberal" does not just mean activist; "liberal" may also mean a desire to relate an ancient religious viewpoint to modern life."

At the same time, conservatives are being urged to examine their own presumptions in a responsible way. Father David Tracey, SJ, of the University of Chicago Divinity School, has warned against allowing "that once proud designation" of "conservative" to become a synonym for "reactionary."

According to Father Tracey, "a true conservative ordinarily has a profound sense of our spiritual tradition. She or he knows from lived experience that this tradition works in opening one's self to God. And she or he has a profound sense of the fragility of the tradition, believing it should not lightly be dismissed."

Conservatives sometimes find themselves fighting one another as well as opposing liberals. In the Roman Catholic Church, Herr noted, some traditionalists

"became bitter and attempted to politicize their orthodoxy, only to find themselves in a dilemma because a logical extension of their argument placed them in direct opposition to the Pope, thus violating the very traditions they claimed to be upholding."

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy has also divided evangelical Protestants by its insistence that the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is a watershed of belief and that abandoning it inevitably leads to abandoning other foundational doctrines.

In an editorial focusing on the inerrantists last November, The Christian Century commented that "the evangelical party in Christendom is having trouble enjoying its prosperity. Having run out of targets outside its camp — who's afraid of the World Council of Churches or the modernists or the Catholics? — they are turning their biggest guns on themselves."

Conservatives, like any other group, are not a monolithic entity. Dr. Jerald Brauer, a member of the Lutheran Church in America and professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, has pointed out that "one of the major problems in analyzing the growth and the success of the modern conservative movement is the tendency on the part of mainline Christians to view the conservatives as a monolithic structure. Nothing could be further from the truth..."

Similarly, within the Catholic Church traditionalists are divided into groups that support rebel French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, Father Gommard DePauw's Catholic Traditionalist Movement and readers of periodicals like The Wanderer who may not belong to any organized group of traditionalists.

While some conservatives and Church officials have exchanged charges of being intolerant of dissent, some Christian leaders have called for attitudes of openness and humility and willingness to listen to others on the part of both groups.

Dr. Krister Stendahl, dean of the Harvard Divinity School, noted recently that when St. Paul discussed marriage and divorce in I Corinthians 7 he distinguished between what had come from the Lord and what hadn't. Dr. Stendahl advised that "the church would be wise to make that distinction also."

Bishop R. Marvin Stuart of San Francisco, president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, told that body last fall that "we must recover a positive moral example without linking it to self-righteousness and intolerance of those who believe otherwise."

At the same time, he acknowledged a major stumbling block facing both conservatives and liberals — and, indeed, any special interest group: "To maintain one's convictions and respect the stance of another is one of the hardest tasks before us."

## All in the Family

By Sarah Child

### Violence, Sex Only Part Of Problem

— There are quite a number of situation comedies and dramatic shows on TV which our children are not allowed to watch. In only some instances is the reason violence and/or sex. There are some times when banality is at least as offensive as either of the above.

— A neighbor recently called the house to see if we would be interested in buying the next size violin for the third grader. The violinist herself happened to answer the phone and told the caller that she was not much interested in the instrument any more but

that her mother had said that our family are not quitters. I am curious to know which other of my domestic pronouncements are being circulated.

— Our oldest is now approximately half an inch taller than I am which is not saying much for either of us, but she is extraordinarily pleased over the development. Possibly she feels if I can no longer physically speak down to her I may give it up altogether.

— This same daughter came home recently to report that the home economics class was oversubscribed and one of the teachers succeeded in talking her into taking shop again which was fine except that the next day she revealed the class makeup was 46 boys and two girls.

— The people whose business it is to tell us certain foods and other

things are bad for our health are at it again. First they decreed that caffeine is bad for you — so I switched to a caffeine-less brew. Then I read that the chemical used to wash the caffeine out is even worse than the caffeine itself. I've solved the problem I think. I mix some of each to make a potful.

Shortly after the column on 40th birthdays appeared, a letter from Yvonne Stinson Cain arrived. Her "dreaded day" was fast approaching she said and she was planning to mark it by going to San Francisco, scene in 1906 of one of this country's most famous earthquakes. She said it seemed only fitting that she celebrate both disasters at the same time, sharing as they do the same date — April 18.

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