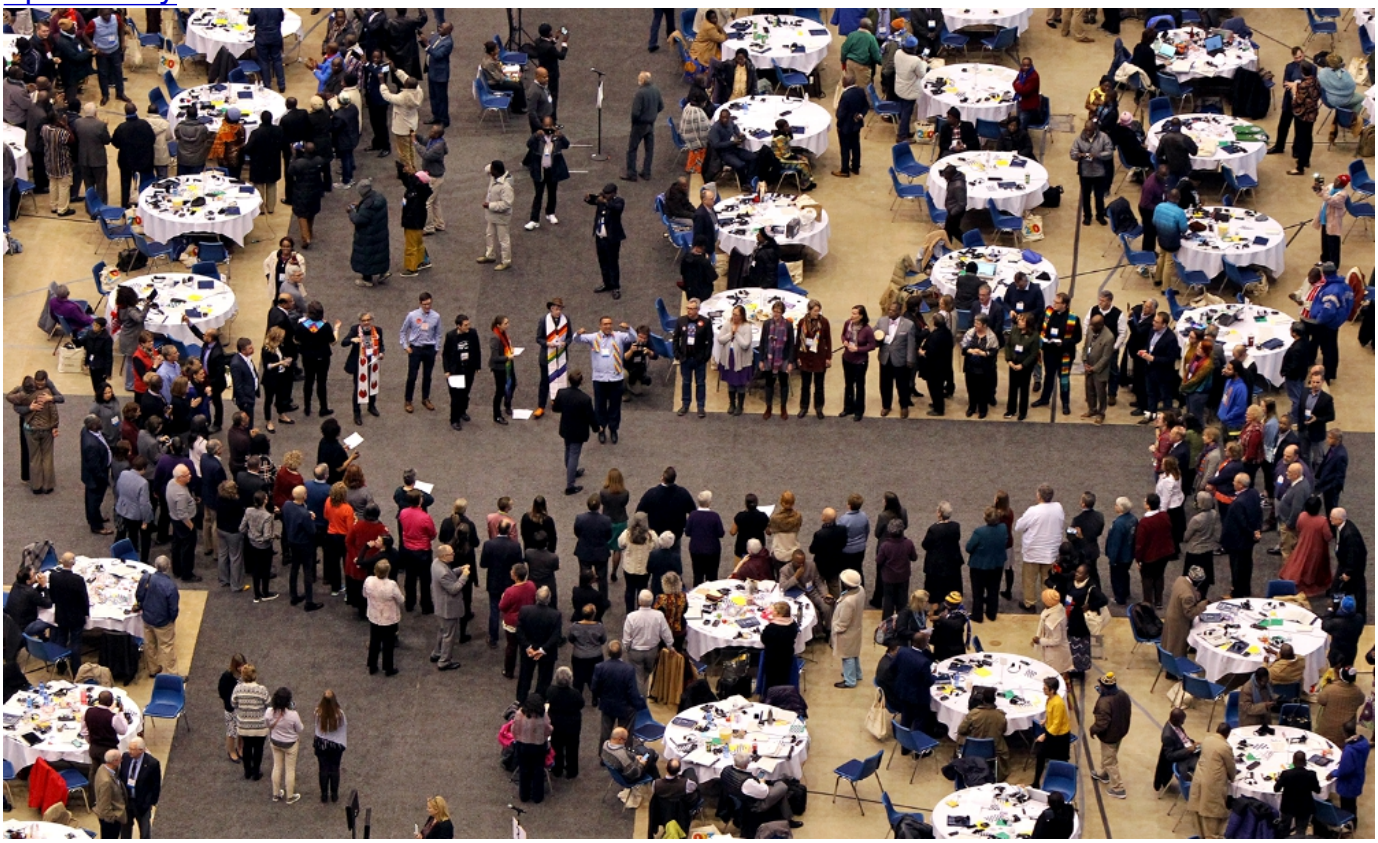
Opinion
Spirituality



United Methodist delegates who advocated for LGBTQ inclusiveness gather to protest the adoption of the Traditional Plan on Feb. 26 during the special session of the General Conference in St. Louis. (RNS/Kit Doyle)



by Ken Briggs

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I was raised in small New England Methodist churches among people whose faith arose from rousing hymns, fervent prayers, rivers of Scripture and stirring preaching from a pulpit never far from the pews so you couldn't miss it. Part formal, largely folk, warmed by church suppers. Last week, that Methodist heritage reached the verge of fracture and destruction.

Did the Holy Spirit do this?

The United Methodist's highest assembly, the General Conference, rejected a move to accept gay and lesbian marriages and the ordination of homosexual ministers. The heated controversy over that issue had flared for many years and finally came to a head. The struggle as similar to those in other Protestant denominations, but Methodism is bigger and its assembly thereby drew more attention.

It was a bitter, exhausting grind, decided by a thin margin: Just 53 percent voted for the Traditional Plan, which strengthened the ban on same-sex marriage and ordaining LGBT people.

The liberal side was preparing to leave the church on grounds that they could not abide a church that so denied same-sex full participation. Conservatives insisted that their aversion to homosexuality was based on certain Bible verses that supported their view. The outcome left the assembly largely dismayed.

My point here isn't to rehearse what have become difficult, passionate moral and theological arguments pro and con, which have become common across the mainline church spectrum, but to wonder that what the Holy Spirit, invoked on both sides, had to do with it, if anything at all.

The Holy Spirit's backing is regularly alleged by all sorts of religious causes, often in opposition to each other. Pro-segregation, anti-segregation, pro-New Deal, anti-New Deal, women's rights, limiting women's rights, and a host of other quarrels acutely incited by modernity. Contrary arguments have been likewise couched as the Spirit's vote for the status quo.

In theological terms, the Holy Spirit is seen as the entity leading Christians through time until the kingdom comes, guiding, nudging, awakening Jesus' followers to their mission, widening their perspectives and correcting their flaws.

To that extent, the Holy Spirit is, in secular terms, the best consultant you could engage. Except there is tension and confusion about what the consultant says. Over the centuries, Christians have identified the Holy Spirit with monumental purposes regarding human equality and just treatment. By the same token, resistance to change has been justified as upholding a divinely mandated order.

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The turn of the 20th century marked a stunning upsurge in Holy Spirit enthusiasm, partly on grounds that its role had been neglected. This gave birth to the Pentecostal movement and a spate of books devoted to the gifts of healing, prophecy, "tongues," spiritual ecstasy and renewal flowing from the Holy Spirit. Later in the century, that newfound vitality took shape among Catholics as the charismatic movement. It has been quite explosive and, at least for a time, the source of hope to revive sinking church fortunes.

Meanwhile, the quandary remains: How would you tell on a daily basis, faced with tough choices, what the Holy Spirit, the ultimate dispenser of truth and wisdom, has to say to resolve the dilemma or conflict? Contemplatives, spiritual devotees and biblical seers who explore passages in Scripture that prefigure the dawn of the Pentecost Spirit suggest methods of discernment, but the means of solving the problem remain elusive.

The closest I've come to a resolution rests mostly on pragmatism. While we human beings invariably inject our own opinions everywhere, including what we believe the Holy Spirit is bidding us to do, the right or wrong of our decisions and actions as reflecting the call of the Holy Spirit is at best elusive. One means of seeking answers is to look at the results in retrospect. The proof, as it were, is in the pudding. Does a church's stand enhance the dignity of the person, create a more loving, more tolerant, more forgiving, more open and fair-minded church climate, more attuned to the common good — or not?

Winners in the Methodist conflict no doubt believe that holding the line against inclusion of gays in marriage and ministry is the Holy Spirit's "tough love." To the losing side, the open and confirmed embrace of homosexual equality advances of the Spirit's "unconditional love." Looking at the character of church communities that arise from the ashes of these visceral battles therefore seems like a good place

to grasp what strong stands have produced, allowing for an inevitable dose of subjectivity.

For lack of a better alternative so far, I've adopted the "results" rule of thumb. Perhaps you've done the same or might like to.

I take my cue from Jesus' many allusions to the nature of growth and decay. The definitive metaphor is that only healthy trees bear fruit; the rest are simply cast aside. Accordingly, Scripture says, "As you sow, so shall you reap," indicating a tie between quality of purpose and worth of yield. He also mysteriously curses a barren fig tree and uses the example of a man who was required to return a coin to his benefactor because he hadn't used it productively.

Using a string of such examples, Jesus counsels his followers not to despair if evil appears to triumph because that which doesn't yield growth will simply be cast aside or tossed in the fire. When John the Baptist is asked whether Jesus is for real, he suggests they take a look at what Jesus is doing. Is he healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, or just talking a good game? In other words, what kind of evidence do you see?

Likewise, St. Paul says that a vital community will generate peace, truthfulness, mutual concern, generosity, humility, an open door to outsiders, among other signs of health.

The aftermath of recent conflicts over gay marriage and ordination reveals a pattern of broken communions and lingering friction. The Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) are among those that have undergone splits and defections after ending those barriers. Until now, Methodists have coexisted uneasily without resolution. That degree of unity may soon end.

A sweeping, results-oriented search for the Holy Spirit's preferences in similar disputes hasn't been done, and while I couldn't predict how such a study would turn out, I will offer my unscientific findings from a small sample. Over the years, I have spent time with churches that have suffered splits, sometimes both sides. I viewed one up close in the course of research on a book. It was a prominent Presbyterian parish where feuding reached the breaking point over a few years. The side favoring exclusion of gays from ordination won the fight but lost occupancy of the church. The formal division went forward but the anguish remained.

While breakaway groups that favor restrictions commonly exude sincerity, confidence and warm welcome, I've usually sensed among them a mood of defeatism tinged with defensiveness. Heightened efforts to feel at ease, in my view, mask lingering anxieties over the wisdom of the church split that often evince self-assured awkwardness.

If you've done similar evaluations of results, you may have reached quite a different conclusion, but that is mine, at least for now.

To the extent that breakaway church groups become known for what they stand against — especially in terms of human rights — they will, I believe, send a message of negativity that will limit their ability to attract newcomers. Their focused struggle may also have left them inward-looking and hemmed in by a restrictive-sounding identity. That relates to a trend toward increasing approval of homosexual marriage and equality by the American public.

There is precedent in the history of humanistic causes in recent centuries, none larger than the push for racial and gender justice, that many Christians attribute to lobbying by the Holy Spirit, though churches themselves were typically latecomers to activism in behalf of those causes. The results of those campaigns are still uncertain but it seems to me a gathering consensus is that the causes are just and here to stay as features of genuine progress. The Holy Spirit may indeed be a longsuffering egalitarian.

My Methodist heritage may be too broken and conflicted to carry on together, but I hope the struggle may continue without total divorce. Methodism has a depth of resources to heal a rift in a manner that could provide a model of faithful listening to that mysterious source whose messages have difficulty getting through.

[Ken Briggs reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times, has contributed articles to many publications and written four books.]