**From the Ecumenical Officer February 2020**

Recently I ran across this sentence in a Religion News Service article: “In the U.S. ‘evangelical’ has come to mean white, bigoted, angry, idolatrously devoted to God and country . . .” The writer then goes on to cite some congregations whose ministry contradicts that stereotype.

What does the word “evangelical” mean to you? (It means “having to do with good news.”) Is your congregation a good news congregation?

Much commentary in the United States contrasts mainline congregations or denominations and evangelical congregations or denominations. Certainly there are significant differences in theology and biblical interpretation, but truthfully there is also much more in common. For example, what the mainline-produced NRSV Bible (New Revised Standard Version) and the evangelical-produced NIV (New International Version) have in common is much greater than their differences. Most of our congregations have both persons who would identify as mainline and those who would identify as evangelical, and many who prefer not to be labeled either.

We have always had differences in the church—about biblical interpretation, about the importance of world mission work, about the kinds of music in worship, about what issues preaching may deal with. One thing that is different now is that many persons are more likely to see those persons who differ from them as wrong or evil. And I believe we are more likely to label or condemn on the basis of one item of belief or behavior.

We see this playing out, for example, in the current struggles within the United Methodist Church, which will probably divide at its upcoming May meeting. I have two friends who are “progressive” Methodist pastors. One hopes faithfully that the denomination will stay together. The other feels strongly that the denomination was right to split over slavery before the U.S. Civil War and is more positive about dividing now.

I know pacifist Mennonites who find it hard to understand Catholics who oppose abortion, and Catholics who find it hard to understand Mennonite pacifists—although both of these positions are faith-based convictions (although minority stances within the Christian church) that are not favored in our U.S. culture.

Salvation Army clergy promise to abstain from alcohol and officially see homosexual relations as sinful, but the Salvation Army is one of the main providers of social services to LGBTQ persons and persons struggling with addiction. I mention this simply to illustrate how complicated are our labels of wrong and right, Christian and not Christian.

One of the most helpful and evangelical (meaning, with good news) witnesses we can give at this time in history, is to try to understand, live with, and work with Christian brothers and sisters who may have differences from us in how they live as followers of Jesus.

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