

BOOK REVIEW

Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., John G. McEllhenney, Kenneth E. Rowe, *United Methodism at Forty: Looking Back, Looking Forward*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. 177 pp. \$16.00.

There's nothing wrong with macaroni and cheese—good macaroni and cheese, made from scratch with quality ingredients is really—well, good. Most church potluckers appreciate a helping of nice, middle of the road mac and cheese.

Reading *United Methodism at 40* is somehow similar to that helping of macaroni and cheese. It tastes familiar, in fact it's quite good and comforting in its familiarity, but there are no surprises or any complexity in flavors. Still, like a good casserole, there are many reasons to add this helping to your plate even if it doesn't fully satisfy.

Authors Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe need no introductions within the United Methodist family. As teachers, church leaders, and historians, their work is well known and gives value to the book in the way that Abel Steven's centenary histories are not just records but also reflections of the values of his time.

Designing this book as a follow-up to their *Compact History*, the trio once again achieved a comprehensive look at the church in a relatively short amount of space. Controversies, developments, challenges, publications of the last forty years all become part of the narrative. Unlike the previous volume, which presented the history chronologically, this time the authors have addressed the time period through themes such as worship, mission, ministry, theology. Given the short time frame being covered, this works effectively and allows the reader to follow easily the unfolding of various issues and ideas.

In addition, the presentation of the book is a strong point not just through this organization, but because it is written in the same accessible style as *Compact History*, making it of value to anyone who wants a basic primer in recent United Methodist history. All the issues are covered, however briefly, with source documents detailed in the end of the book notes and a few reading suggestions following each chapter.

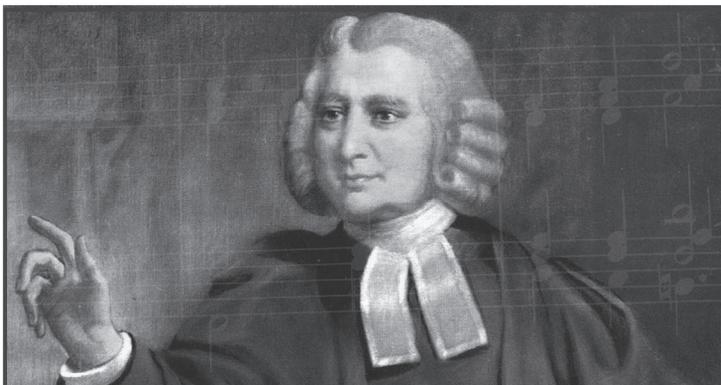
The authors have made every attempt to produce that rare item—an objective report. It turns out that the subtitle “Looking Back, Looking Forward” is not promising analysis but a catalogue of events that have happened followed by a few questions for the future. The underlying assumption is that the church has tried to hold the middle ground as the

forces in the culture have blown first to the left, then to the right. It is a middle-of-the-road book for a middle-of-the-road church. It is, so to speak, mac and cheese.

This attempt to be middle of the road can also produce reasons that the book will sit on the shelf or add little to the discussion of The United Methodist church of the present and future. If the church's goal is to be in the middle, the consequence can be that no one is really interested because people are looking for more definite stands, a place of definite identity.

The same is true of the book itself. Laying out what has happened in the past 40 years may be useful but it is only the barest of beginnings for understanding how to be faithful in the future. Is this report a starter for much needed conversation—dialogue not debate—in the denomination—or is it so familiar, so middle of the road, that the real questions still need to be framed?

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