

“Reversing Course” and United Mission

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When we are united in God’s mission, our United Mission will grow.

A congregation or a denomination cannot “reverse course” in order to change without having a willingness to risk and to experience pain. The past several years have seen a decline in giving to United Mission among American Baptists. Can this trend be reversed? I believe that it can, although reversal does not come easily or quickly.

An example of the difficulty of reversal in the non-church world can be found in the long and painful struggle of women in the United States to secure the right to vote.

In the United States, a number of women, including Susan B. Anthony, were *tried and convicted of voting*. They died, convicted criminals, simply because they were women. In 1995, in Seneca Falls, New York, hundreds of people gathered to participate in the 75th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 that gave women the right to vote. The long struggle had begun in Seneca Falls in 1848 when a group of women and men made the first public demand that women have the right to vote. The journey to obtain the vote for women carries with it many stories of courageous people.

The climactic vote to ratify the 19th amendment came on a hot August morning in 1920 in Tennessee. A 24-year-old, first-term legislator named Harry Thomas Burn was to cast a single ballot that would give millions of women the right to vote. Congress had passed the 19th amendment a year earlier. By June, 35 of the 36 states needed for ratification had approved it. The issue was dead in nine states and four were undecided: Tennessee, Delaware, Vermont, and Connecticut. Of those four states, Vermont and Connecticut refused to call special legislative sessions; Delaware chose not to take any action. That left Tennessee. President Woodrow Wilson urged the governor to call a special session. Governor Albert Roberts agreed.

The battle line was drawn in Tennessee. It had become known as the War of Roses: Suffrage supporters wore yellow ribbons; their opponents red. Ultimately, it was a letter from Febb King Ensminger Burn, mother of the state’s youngest legislator, that made the difference. As Harry Burn left for the legislative session on that hot morning of August 18, he slipped the letter into his pocket; in his lapel he wore a red rose.

The day before, a motion had been made to table the resolution until the next session in January. The vote was 48 to 48. A second vote was taken after both sides claimed a miscount. It also was 48-48.

Thus, on August 18, Tennessee had no choice but to vote on the amendment *itself*. A tie vote would defeat the amendment. A change of one vote could defeat the amendment, or give women the right to vote. Burn believed women should have the right to vote. But his constituents in the East Tennessee community of Mouse Creek, now Niota, were divided on the issue. And he had a race to run.

The clerk began the roll call vote. When the clerk called his name, Burn said, “Aye.” A dead silence was followed by cheers and jeers, applause and hisses. The resolution had passed. Eight days later, on August 26, 1920, the 19th amendment to the Constitution became law. Incidentally, Burn was reelected by the voters in Mouse Creek.

And what was in that letter from his mother? It read: “Dear Son, Hurrah and vote for suffrage! Don’t keep them in doubt. I notice some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching you to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet. Don’t forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put rat in ratification.” God used the words of a mother to reverse the course of history.

God causes reversals: the resurrection of Jesus the messiah from death is the supreme example. A legislator willing to risk political defeat for what he knows is right is another example. Can the reversal of our giving trend to American Baptist United Mission be on the list? I pray so.

In 1920 the influence of a mother in Tennessee was vital in giving women the right to vote in the United States. Who will be decisive in righting the course in giving to United Mission in 2012, and beyond? One thing I do know: it will come only with the work and the power of God’s Holy Spirit—a new Pentecost if you will!

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NRSV).

Help all ABC ministries in the United States and around the globe come alive with your support of United Mission.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron

P.S. I encourage you to share this letter electronically or in print with others in your church.