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Methodists, Mascots, and Morality — What's Going On Here?

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In 2004, Richmond, Virginia was host to the national denominational meetings of the Presbyterian Church USA, the Pentecostal Church International, and the American Baptist Churches USA. In 2012, the United Methodist Church was to hold its General Conference in the same city. It's not going to happen. The Methodists aren't going to Richmond.

Why? Because the denomination belatedly discovered that Richmond is host to a AAA minor league baseball team known as the Braves. No kidding. The Methodists aren't upset because they can't get tickets, but because the name and mascot of the baseball team violates a resolution adopted when the denomination met in Cleveland, which claims (and sometimes celebrates) a Major League Baseball team known as the Indians. The Methodists were embarrassed. Big time. The committee assigned to watch out for violations of political correctness failed spectacularly.

Here's how the denomination's official [press service](#) reported the decision to move the meeting from Richmond to Tampa, FL:

The United Methodist Church's top legislative assembly won't be meeting in Richmond, Va., in 2012, as announced last fall, but will convene in Tampa, Fla., instead. In making the change, the United Methodist Commission on the General Conference cited a church policy regarding meeting in cities that are home to professional sports teams with Native American names. At the time of the initial selection, commission members were unaware that Richmond is home to the Richmond Braves, a minor league baseball team affiliated with the Atlanta Braves. The General Conference meets every four years to set policy for the church and adopt or renew resolutions on hundreds of issues and concerns. It draws nearly 1,000 delegates from around the world. The 2004 conference was held in Pittsburgh, and the 2008 gathering will be in Fort Worth, Texas.

A resolution passed by the 2004 General Conference called for United Methodist agencies and organizations to avoid holding meetings and events in cities that sponsor sport teams using Native America names and symbols. "The United Methodist Church rejects the use of Native American names and symbols for sport teams, and considers the practice a blatant expression of racism," the assembly stated.

"We reviewed many issues when considering the finalists, but the name of the minor league sports team never came up in our discussions," said Gail Murphy-Geiss of Centennial, Colo., chairperson of the Commission on the General Conference. "We had earlier eliminated Atlanta from consideration because it was home to the major league baseball team, the Braves.

Participants at the 2004 General Conference gather for opening worship at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh. The United Methodist Commission on the General Conference has announced a change of venue for the 2012 legislative assembly from Richmond, Va., to Tampa, Fla. The earlier choice of Richmond conflicted with a church policy that discourages meeting in cities that are home to professional sports teams with Native American names. A UMNS file photo by John C. Goodwin. Photo #06-162. Accompanies UMNS story #091. 2/16/06

"When the minor league Braves issue was quickly brought to our attention after the original announcement, we believed we were obligated to revisit the issue. "We are sad for the great United Methodists in Virginia who were excited about hosting the General Conference but are pleased to take a strong stance against teams with offensive names.

However well intended, sports teams named after Native Americans demean the heritage of native peoples. They perpetuate unhealthy and unfair stereotypes.”

Mark Galli, managing editor of *Christianity Today*, was on the mark with his analysis of the controversy:

The reason the Methodists have taken this courageous stand is because they drop about \$20 million every four years at these General Conferences. They don't want to contribute to the economy of a city that lets privately owned sports teams with offensive names operate in its boundaries.

Given that logic, I'm surprised that Methodists have continued to LIVE IN cities that have sports teams with offensive names. By paying taxes and shopping in these cities, they support cities with sports teams with offensive names, and probably spend more than \$20 million over a few years collectively.

It doesn't take an endowed-chair theologian to extrapolate that this prophetic insight should apply to all Christians. Other cities to consider abandoning include:

New York and San Francisco (Giants demeans people who suffer from gigantism, a condition due to a malfunctioning pituitary gland). Oakland (Raiders—pirates again, though the Methodists might want to put this city on their short list for 2016).

Portland (Trailblazers were insensitive pioneers who trampled the rights and sovereignty of Native Americans as they trekked west across the Great Plains). Minnesota (yes, the entire state, since it is associated with Vikings, essentially medieval pirates. Again, Methodists, take note).

Okay, pause the sarcasm. Sometimes a team name is indeed insensitive or racist. Of course. The worst I've heard of is the high school Chinks of Pekin, Illinois (fortunately dropped some years ago). And I can understand why some consider Redskins (as in Washington) a problem. In a pluralistic society, we are wise to reconsider the effect such names have—though we ought to make sure that the bulk of the ethnic group, and not just an elitist clique with a particular political agenda, is really offended.

And here's the thing when such matters are driven by political agendas: Had there been no major team names associated with Native Americans, many of the same critics would be charging professional sports with racism because none recognize our Native American heritage in their choice of names!

To put it in another light: Sports is about play, and a society that has lost its ability to smile at its cultural stereotypes (Yankees, Cowboys, 49ers, Oilers, and yes, Chiefs, etc.) has become holier than itself and certainly no fun to be in. Despite the many self-righteous prophets American Christianity is producing these days, not everything is a huge moral issue requiring a prophetic stand.

I'm disappointed with the Methodists because they showed so little discernment in this matter. Given their great heritage of moral crusading about significant issues (like slavery and urban poverty), why have they decided to major in minors? Why are they so righteously indignant about offensive names, but seemingly indifferent or unaware of the deep-seated moral problems that plague modern sports and have such devastating consequences for society? Why focus on offensive names while giving a complete pass to drug abuse, greed, sexual exploitation, and violence.

I would not argue that the names and mascots of professional sports teams are of absolutely no moral significance. Nevertheless, Native American groups are split over the question of whether names associated with their identity are offensive at all. Where does this end? More importantly, is this any way for a denomination to make a point on behalf of the Gospel?

