



# UMAction

## BRIEFING

April 2003

A newsletter for United Methodists working for Scripture-based reform in our denomination. Circulation: 315,000

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## Complaint Against Bishop Sprague Dismissed

**B**ishop Bruce R. Ough, as President of the College of Bishops of the North Central Jurisdiction, dismissed a complaint filed against United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of Chicago. The complaint cited Sprague's public rejection of Jesus Christ's eternal deity, virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and unique atonement for the sins of the world.

The complaint against Sprague was signed by 28 United Methodists from 11 Annual Conferences, led by

*Bishop Joe Sprague*



the Rev. Thomas Lambrecht of Greenville, Wisconsin.


"These positions of Bishop Sprague are all contrary to the standards of doctrine established by The United Methodist Church, particularly as stated in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith," Lambrecht explained.

The complaint alleges that Sprague committed two chargeable offenses as defined in Paragraph 2702 of the Book of Discipline: (1) dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church and (2) disobedience to the order and discipline of the church.

Bishop Ough, speaking for the supervisory response team he appointed, asked Sprague to issue a public statement "clarifying and reaffirming his adherence to the doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church." (Sprague's statement, dated 2-13-02, says "I affirm the historic doctrines of our Church" but does not

withdraw or apologize for his denials of many of those doctrines.) The team also recommended public dialogue between Sprague and the complainants; that the Council of Bishops reflect on issues of Christology and biblical authority; and that the complainants publicly apologize for making the complaint public.

There is almost no modern precedent for any United Methodist clergy, much less a Bishop, to face a church trial for denying key Christian doctrines. Renewal leaders have said the *Book of Discipline* does not provide any effective way to hold a Bishop accountable.

UMAction defends Sprague's constitutional right to believe and advocate anything or nothing. We agree with the complaint that it is "fundamentally fraudulent" for him to attack the traditional Christian faith while serving as Bishop of a Christian church. Decency and integrity require his resignation or removal. 

**Action:** (1) Your Annual Conference will soon elect its delegates to the UM 2004 General Conference. Work for election of delegates pledged to strengthen the *Book of Discipline* to make Bishops accountable for attacking or undermining our church's Christian faith. Ask help from your Pastor and your church's Lay Member of Annual Conference. (2) Thank Rev. Tom Lambrecht for his Christian witness. Faith Community UMC, North 1966 Julius Drive, Greenville WI 54942. Fax 920-757-9539. E-mail: revtom5@aol.com.

## North Carolina Bishop Defends the Faith

**M**arion Edwards, United Methodist Bishop of North Carolina, has joined the Bishop of Florida in publicly criticizing the theology of Chicago-area Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, who has publicly denied Jesus Christ's eternal deity, virgin birth, physical resurrection, and atonement for the sins of the world.

Bishop Edwards, speaking in Raleigh on October 28, said Sprague's comments "strike at the heart of our ecumenical and United Methodist Church doctrine." Edwards quoted theologian and anti-Nazi martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "False doctrine corrupts the life of the church at its source, and that is why doctrinal sin is more serious than moral sin."

Earlier, Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida had issued a public critique of Sprague's denial of key Christian beliefs. (See [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org)) for complete texts of speech or statement by Sprague, Whitaker, and Edwards.)

It is exceptional for United Methodist Bishops publicly to criticize each other's theology. Like Whitaker, Edwards was cordial toward Sprague but said he "profoundly disagrees" with Sprague's beliefs. "In his zeal to make the faith understandable to modern ears, the Bishop (Sprague) seems

to have accommodated too much to the culture," Edwards declared. Edwards cited a Pastor's obligation, in the *UM Book of Discipline*, to ensure "faithful transmission of the Christian faith."

Sprague, in an October 18 column, declared he stood by his comments "without equivocation." He accused his critics in United Methodist renewal groups, including IRD, of using him as a "poster child" for "fund-raising

*Action: Thank Bishop Marion Edwards for his defense of the Christian faith. Box 10955, Raleigh NC 27605.*

*Fax 919-832-4721. E-mail: [bishopmme@nccumc.org](mailto:bishopmme@nccumc.org).*

efforts." He implied that his critics might be "narrow-minded," "theologically bankrupt," and "ethically complacent." And he warned he "will not sit quietly and idly as the well-heeled religious right seeks to take over our beloved Church." In his column Sprague did not mention his fellow Bishops who have questioned his theology.

"For me, the most serious lapse in Bishop Sprague's address...was to diminish the reality of the Holy Trinity," Edwards said. Sprague asserted that Jesus was not eternally divine but became a god through "radical obedience" to God the Father. Edwards said he feared that Sprague's Son of God was merely a "great hero" and not the "eternal fullness of the second person of the Trinity."

Edwards warned that Sprague was potentially "diluting the Trinity by making the Son of God a kind of 'johnny-come-lately' to the godhead." He accused Sprague of teaching the second-century theory of adoptionism, which

taught that Jesus became divine through adoption, and which orthodox Christianity rejected.


Sprague has "omitted" from his conversation the "authority of the canon of Scripture," Edwards noted. According to Methodism's founder John Wesley, the "biblical canon is the authority of the church," Edwards said. Sprague's problems with the virgin birth, resurrection of the body, and the atonement "may spring from not

always letting all of Scripture speak to the rest of Scripture," Edwards observed.

"I believe that the stronger and clearer teaching of the New Testament is the Christian hope for the resurrection of the body," Edwards said.

Edwards challenged Sprague's criticism of Christ's atonement as a blood appeasement of an angry deity. "The death [of Christ on the Cross] is not to make God happy; the death is the sad pay for sin," Edwards explained.

Reacting to Sprague's assertion that the virgin birth is "not historical fact," Edwards said, "Its truth (the Virgin Birth) is clear: God was active in the birth of Jesus, not simply in the miracle of conception, but in the incarnation of what God had to say to us: the Word became flesh."

"I truly believe the Church has been given the faith of the apostles," Edwards concluded. "This faith I have received. This faith, and no other, I truly believe." 



*Bishop Marion Edwards of North Carolina has criticized Bishop Sprague's views. UMNS photo.*

## Our Church In Wonderland? Or In Orwell's 1984?

**D**o words still have meaning in The United Methodist Church?

*Book of Discipline, par. 404.1:*  
"As followers of Jesus Christ called to servant leadership, bishops are authorized to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the church."

**Jesus Christ:** "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6, NIV)

**Bishop C. Joseph Sprague:** "I must dissent from Christocentric exclusives which hold that Jesus is the only way to God's gift of salvation." (Speech at Iliff Seminary 1-28-02)

**Articles of Religion of the UMC:** "Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body ... (Article III)

**Sprague:** "I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot believe that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his

physical body." (Speech 1-28-02)

**Articles of Religion of the UMC:** "The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; ..." (Article II)

**Sprague:** "The myth of the virgin birth was not intended as historical fact ... (Speech 1-28-02)

**Book of Discipline, Doctrinal Standards, par. 101:** "We share with many Christian communions a recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of faith ..."

**Sprague:** "I have chosen here not to deal with John's account of the gospel ... Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe himself as John suggests. ... if Jesus did not possess trans-human, supernatural powers (as I do not believe he did) what sense can we make of the miraculous stories about him in the gospel accounts?" (Speech 1-28-02)

**Sprague:** "I can affirm my faith through the symbolic language, the theological poetic utterances of the ancient creeds, but it is incumbent upon me as believer and evangelist to unpack this ancient, obtuse language about Jesus in order to make a semblance of finite sense out of infinite mystery on behalf of those who find the ancient creedal language confusing or implausible."

(Speech 1-28-02)

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough,** President of North Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops: "The supervisory response team is dismissing the complaints against Bishop C. Joseph Sprague. ..." (Statement 2-17-03)

**What does all this mean? A United Methodist Bishop can and does reject basic Christian and United Methodist beliefs —and is NOT held accountable.**

The great words remain, but they mean anything or nothing —whatever meaning is imposed by anyone who "unpacks" or "makes sense out of" the faith given to us by the Bible and the apostles. ☒

## UM Bishop Appears In Anti-War TV Ad

**B**ishop Melvin Talbert, the Ecumenical Officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops, is featured in a television commercial asserting that a war to overthrow Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein "violates God's law." He did not explain how Scripture or historic church teaching would protect a tyrant and aggressor from overthrow.

Talbert is identified by the commercial as a spokesman for "President Bush's church." President Bush is a United Methodist. Talbert is a retired United Methodist Bishop who represents United Methodist Bishops at ecumenical meetings. The commercial is sponsored by the National Council of Churches and has appeared on the CNN and Fox News cable

networks.

The commercial demands that the U.S. wait for United Nations inspectors to disarm Saddam's regime. It does not acknowledge that the UN inspectors were able to return to Iraq only after the threat of U.S. force, which Talbert and the National Council of Churches oppose. ☒

**Action:** Ask Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher, President of the UM Council of Bishops, to help select a new Ecumenical Officer for the Council who will not exploit that position for political purposes. 400 Chatham Road, Suite 100, Springfield IL 62704. Fax 217-726-8074. E-mail: bishopsabc@aol.com.

## South Carolina Bishop Defends Bishop Sprague

John McCleskey, United Methodist Bishop of South Carolina, has "unequivocally" rejected the suggestion that Bishop Joseph Sprague of Chicago should resign. See the complete text of McCleskey's October 15 speech at [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org).

McCleskey said that interpreting "commonly held Christian affirmations will result in a wide variety of perspectives and experiences."

The ancient church creeds that affirm Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary simply mean that Jesus "originated with God" and

was "born to a human mother," McCleskey said. "They were never intended to be biological statements." He declared the "biological interpretation" of the virgin birth has never been the "unquestioned, required interpretation."

The virgin birth is not an issue "over which persons should be told to relinquish leadership," McCleskey insisted. The same is true regarding the resurrection of Jesus, he said. There is a "wide variety of ways" to understand the resurrection, McCleskey asserted, and the "resuscitation of his physical body" is just one way.

*Action:* Respectfully and prayerfully remind Bishop McCleskey that Jesus Christ's virgin birth and bodily resurrection are more than opinions. They are the continuous teaching of the Christian church since the apostles. 4908 Colonial Drive #108, Columbia SC 29203. Fax 803-754-9327. E-mail: [bishop@umcsc.org](mailto:bishop@umcsc.org).

## Help Us Reach A Million Homes!

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## UM Women's Division Responds Evasively To Call For Reform

The Women's Division has posted an "Information Packet" on its Website (<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/renewresponse1202.html>) in response to the September 2002 *UMAction Briefing* calling for reform of the Women's Division, jointly issued by RENEW Network and *UMAction*.

The *Briefing* reported the Women's Division's support for abortion on demand, pro-homosexuality advocacy, radical feminist theology, and left-wing politics. The Women's Division response was lengthy but failed to answer the specific concerns of the many women working for reform.

"We are encouraged by this action on the part of the Women's Division," said Faye Short

most part, this packet trots out earlier tepid statements that failed to answer specific charges then, and certainly fail to do so now."

Short said the Women's Division was similarly weak when responding to RENEW's white paper called *Our Basis for Concern*. "This documented listing of misdirected programs and policies still stands as a strong witness of the theological, political and social worldview held and promoted by the Women's Division," Short observed.

The Women's Division replied to the *Briefing's* list of liberal secular organizations funded by the Women's Division, but failed to describe any substantive specific inaccuracy. RENEW and *UMAction* stand behind their descriptions of

Short and Tooley acknowledged the sincerity and good intentions of the Women's Division staff. But the Women's Division perspective is too often devoid of the mission mandate to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world, they said. "It is unfaithful to the historic witness of the Church universal in several areas," Short and Tooley said. "It is a narrow and politically partisan worldview that excludes the broader scope of Christian understanding that is at work in the world, transforming all aspects of human existence."

Short and Tooley expressed appreciation for the faithful commitment of United Methodist women and men to the Call for

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*Action:* RENEW has prepared an analysis of the Women's Division "Information Packet." You may get this document at these Websites: [www.renewnetwork.org](http://www.renewnetwork.org), [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org), [www.call4reform.org](http://www.call4reform.org). or send \$3.00 to RENEW Network, PO Box 889, Cornelia GA 30531.

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of RENEW and Mark Tooley of *UMAction*. "It indicates that many contacts have been received, making a response necessary. Unfortunately, their information packet fails to adequately address the concerns that have been raised and documented in the Call for Reform campaign. For the

these groups.

RENEW and *UMAction* strongly encourage United Methodist Women, individually and in their local units, to **avoid undesignated giving** to the Women's Division and instead to fund projects in which they have confidence.

Reform and for the courageous stand many have taken. "It is not easy to question the status quo, or to question boards and agencies that have long gone unchallenged," they said. "However, the cause of Christ and the importance of providing viable women's ministries is well worth the effort." 

# UMAAction

## BRIEFING

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Institute on Religion and Democracy  
1110 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suite 1180  
Washington, DC 20005-3593

202.969.8430  
cregner@ird-renew.org  
www.ird-renew.org/umaction

Don't Leave Our Church!  
Stay and Work for Reform!

† We tell you the painful truth about what has gone wrong with The United Methodist Church: unfaithfulness and far-left partisan politics by too many high church officials. We don't enjoy bringing you bad news, but we must tell the truth.

† The good news is the growing movement to restore Scriptural faithfulness in our church. More and more United Methodists are working together for reform and renewal.

† Don't leave! Our great Methodist heritage is too valuable to be abandoned. Join with us to help The United Methodist Church return to its Wesleyan roots as a growing, evangelical, Christian church living Christ's Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

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## UM Officials go to Baghdad

The National Council of Churches organized a 13-member mission to Baghdad to oppose any U.S. military action against Saddam Hussein. The delegation included Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society in Washington, DC.

Terming preemptive war against Saddam "immoral, illegal and theologically illegitimate," the group alleged a war against Iraq would result in widespread suffering and death for innocent people and would make the U.S. less secure.

"Ours is a religious and not a politi-

cal delegation," emphasized Dr. Bob Edgar, a United Methodist minister who heads the National Council of Churches. But the delegation met with senior officials of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

The delegation included three United Methodists: Edgar, Winkler and retired Bishop Melvin Talbert. 

*United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert (right) and the Rev. Robert Edgar of the NCC greet an Iraqi Muslim leader outside a mosque in Baghdad.*



UMNS photo by Robin Hoeker

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*Action:* Ask your local church's Administrative Board to endorse a resolution calling for abolition of the Board of Church and Society, which constantly embarrasses and divides our church. That resolution is at [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org).

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