



# UMAction

## BRIEFING

August 2003

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

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## Church Officials Attack President Bush's Faith

**M**ore than 100 United Methodists, including several senior church officials, have published a paid advertisement condemning President George W. Bush, criticizing his Christian faith, and demanding that he "repent."

Signers of the full-page ad in the April 5 *Christian Century* magazine include UM Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of Chicago; six retired Bishops, including Melvin Talbert, Ecumenical Officer for the Council of Bishops; and General Secretary James Winkler of the Board of Church and Society, the church's lobby office.

Their ad is titled "A Prophetic Epistle from United Methodists Calling Our Brother George W. Bush to Repent" and begins, "We the undersigned members of the United Methodist Church call George W. Bush, a member of the

United Methodist Church, to repent ..."

The ad asserts these accusations against President Bush:

- ♦ "domestic and foreign policies that are incompatible with the teaching and example of Christ;
- ♦ some policies advanced by your administration give evidence of the spiritual forces of wickedness;
- ♦ "you threaten the very earth and all its inhabitants with open discussion of the use of nuclear weapons;
- ♦ "Your domestic policy is also incongruent with Jesus' teaching;
- ♦ "an idolatry of oil and wealth and dependence on weapons of mass destruction; and
- ♦ "taking a path away from God and the power of God's abundant love."



Church & Society head James Winkler with Senator Ted Kennedy

The church officials and other signers then "implore you to honor your allegiance to Christ by speaking and working on behalf of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized." They clearly are asserting that President Bush does not honor his allegiance to Christ and does not seek to help the poor and oppressed.

Bush became a United Methodist more than 20 years ago after he married Laura, his United Methodist wife. □

**ACTION:** What is your opinion of this attack on President Bush's faith by some United Methodist officials? Is a person a bad Christian and a bad United Methodist if he or she disagrees with the politics of UM officials and agencies? (UMAction's position is stated below.) Respectfully share your thoughts with your pastor, your Bishop, and James Winkler of the Board of Church and Society: 100 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington DC 20002. Fax: 202-488-5619. E-mail: [jwinkler@umc-gbcs.org](mailto:jwinkler@umc-gbcs.org)

## How Should Christians Debate Political Issues? Where Does UMAction Stand?

**U**MAction strongly defends freedom of speech, including everyone's right to criticize governments, officials, and their policies.

We believe the ad attacking President Bush (see page one) is extreme and unfair – condemning him as un-Christian because he disagrees with the signers' political views. The ad as a whole is a judgment that President Bush

rejects the teaching and example of Christ and does not honor his allegiance to Christ. That is dangerously close to the final judgment that God has reserved to Himself.

The message of this ad is that Bush is a bad Christian and a bad Methodist because he does not agree with these church officials in their equation of compassion with a large federal welfare state and in

their opposition to a strong military defense for the United States.

UMAction believes there is a clear, binding Scriptural position and Christian consensus on some issues – for example, racism, religious freedom, and pornography.

However, there are many more political issues on which honest Christians can and do honestly disagree, such as the Iraq war, national defense policies, and

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## Bishop Sprague Assails “Christo-Centric Exclusivism”

**T**here he goes again! Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of Chicago, speaking at a United Methodist seminary, assailed “Christo-centric exclusivism that ipso facto prepares the soil of stiff-necked, exclusivistic arrogance.” This kind of Christ-centered theology must be disavowed, he insisted.

Sprague has

repeatedly denied Jesus Christ's virgin birth, bodily resurrection, miracles, and unique role as Savior of the world. In speeches April 22 and 23 at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (Methesco), Sprague defended his theology as stated in his recent book, *Affirmations of a Dissenter*.

Sprague said he was “incredulous” that seminary faculty and other “well-informed clergy and laity” still “passionately advocate a virgin birth and physically resurrected” Jesus.

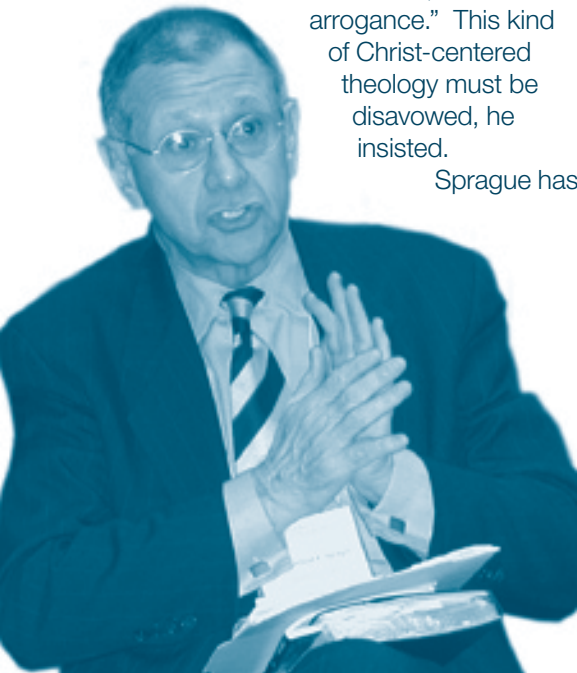
Sprague said it was “baffling” that some “sophisticated so-called post-modernists” insist on an “intervening, supernatural, can-do anything-God” that was conceived by the early church.

“Why do the time-influenced constructs of the early church fathers hold such awe and reverence for them, given the oblique and rather slippery language employed?” Sprague asked.

Sprague went on with a long list of condemnations: United Methodist renewal and reform groups; President Bush, a “Christology-from-above proponent of personal piety;” United States “arrogance;” the war with Iraq; and United Methodism's “arrogant and unethical statements regarding gay and lesbian people.” He apparently was referring to the church's stand that homosexual behavior is not compatible with Christian teaching and the church's prohibition of ordaining homosexual clergy and celebrating same-sex unions.

Sprague did not attempt to reconcile his beliefs with Jesus Christ's words in John 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

In a 2002 speech, Sprague rejected John's Gospel and said “Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe himself as John suggests.”



# Methodist Women's Magazine Condemns Religious Conservatives

The official *Response* magazine of the United Methodist Church women's organization devoted its April 2003 issue to attacking religious conservatives. United Methodist Women (UMW) at one time had over 1 mil-

lion members and has boasted of being America's largest women's organization. It has declined to about 800,000 members but still is huge and wealthy. Its national office in New York City has an annual budget of over \$30 million. The beliefs of local United Methodist Women often differ from the agenda of the New York-based Women's Division. UMW officials have long labeled conservatives, within their own church and within society, as enemies of women. The April issue of *Response* magazine was headlined "Religion's Role in the Backlash

Against Women." As evidence, it cited evangelical men's groups like Promise Keepers, the pro-life movement, the Southern Baptist Convention's resistance to female clergy, and opposition within the UMC to the UMW's political

agenda. All were condemned by *Response* together with radical Islam's restrictions on women, as part of alleged "Religious Right" activity against women's rights. UMW official J. Ann Craig criticized Christian "fundamentalism" and said it is defined by belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus Christ, Jesus' substitutionary death for our sins, and Jesus' physical resurrection and ultimate return to rule the earth. An article by Azza Karam of the World Conference on Religion and Peace alleged commonalities between Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers and conservative Christian churches. Pro-homosexuality activist Susan Fried linked "growing conservative religious movements" with "domestic violence." She claimed the U.S. government's exportation of "abstinence-only sex education" hinders women's ability to "negotiate safer sex." The incidents of religiously-sanctioned violence that she listed were all Islamic or Hindu. The only U.S. examples of domestic abuse she mentioned were "drugging and date rape;" she did not explain how conservative Christians are responsible for these abuses.

Jean Hardisty wrote an article condemning the Bush Administration for promoting heterosexual marriage. ☒



UMW Leaders Demonstrate in Washington, D.C.

**ACTION:** Ask the UMW President in your local church whether she has read the April 2003 issue of *Response*. Ask her if she is aware of the political agenda of the United Methodist Women's Division in New York.

*UM Action Briefing* is the quarterly newsletter of the United Methodist committee of the ecumenical **Institute on Religion and Democracy**. Mark Tooley, Editor. IRD was founded in 1981 to promote reform of America's mainline churches, with a special focus on their political activities. For more information call, write, or e-mail us. We are a 501 (c) (3) organization. Contributions to IRD and UMAction are tax-deductible.

## Good News: Bishop Affirms “Beautiful Belief”

**B**ishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida, speaking late last year at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, passionately described the “beauty” of Christian belief as expressed through its ancient creeds.

Whitaker approvingly cited recent books affirming that “believing Christian doctrine has a salutary effect upon our attitudes” and also that heresies are dangerous because they mislead people



*Bishop Timothy Whitaker*

into destructive attitudes. But, he said, while Christians focus on the truth of Christianity they often fail to appreciate its innate beauty.

Whitaker spoke of “the attractive charm” of the divine revelation itself. “The grace of God fully disclosed in Jesus Christ is charming, and it casts its spell upon us in a way that attracts us.”

He suggested that the church in the postmodern world should teach Christian belief as both beautiful and true. One obstacle is over 200 years of “Enlightenment” thinking, which relies too much on human reason. Whitaker said the church began to disavow miracles and to deny the Bible as history. The ancient creeds were deconstructed to recover the “simple Gospel.”

“There is something grotesque about the appearance of Christian

belief once the jaws of reductionism and deconstruction have mangled it,” Whitaker warned. But today’s postmodern people are more open to “mysteries that transcend...human logic and human observation.”

Whitaker suggested that to teach Christianity as beautiful there must be confidence in the ancient Christian creeds, including the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Where there is confidence in the ancient creeds, the church is growing, he said. And “the brightest and most competent scholars” are taking the creeds seriously.

“Beautiful belief is characterized by a confidence in the creed, an ability to synthesize the symbols of the faith, and a willingness to allow room for a spiritual sense of the scriptures,” Whitaker concluded. ☒

**ACTION:** Read the full text of Bishop Whitaker’s speech at [www.flumc.org](http://www.flumc.org). Thank him for defending the traditional Christian faith in an articulate and beautiful way. Address: United Methodist Florida Conference, PO Box 1747, Lakeland FL 33802-1747. Fax: 863-687-0568. E-mail: [Bishop@flumc.org](mailto:Bishop@flumc.org).

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whether more government spending is the best way to fight poverty. The Bible does not give definite answers on these issues. Most are “means” issues – what is the best way to work toward a Christian goal such as world peace or helping the poor?

When we disagree with UM officials who constantly promote

the far-left position on political issues in our church’s name, we don’t question their Christian faith. We do question their judgment and their abuse of power. (If officials choose to reject the Christian faith, we oppose their holding office in a Christian church; that is a different and even more serious concern.)

We support vigorous debate

among Christians on government policies. However, on public policy issues where there is no clear Scriptural mandate, Christians are free to disagree – and all should refrain from condemning their opponents’ position as un-Christian. Neither side should be allowed to use the church to promote one political position on these issues. ☒



# Talbert Takes Extreme Positions on Jesus as Savior and on Iraq, But Receives Bishops' Applause

Despite his controversial role in opposing the liberation of Iraq, and his nationally televised remarks that implied opposition to evangelism among people of other faiths, Bishop Melvin Talbert received a standing ovation at the United Methodist Council of Bishops meeting in April 2003. Talbert is the Ecumenical Officer for the Council of Bishops.

salvation. Talbert was asked if religions other than Christianity were wrong. Talbert said Jesus Christ was the way of salvation for himself but strongly implied that other religions also included equal roads to salvation.

"I have talked with Muslim leaders," Talbert told Larry King. "They are on their way just as certain as I'm on my way. And what we need

Garofalo.

Noting he was criticized for meeting in Baghdad earlier this year with senior officials of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, Talbert said it would not have been "polite" to decline such a meeting.

"Religious tolerance was valued in Iraq," Talbert enthused about the situation there during Saddam's rule.

**ACTION:** Contact your Bishop. Respectfully suggest that the Council of Bishops needs an Ecumenical Officer who will more faithfully represent our church and who will help unite rather than divide United Methodists.

Talbert called his appearance on CNN's *Larry King* program a wonderful "opportunity" he could not pass up. During the interview with King, Talbert denied that Jesus Christ is the only way of

to do is to be tolerant with each other and not assume that our way is the only way."

Talbert also defended his appearance in an anti-war television ad with comedienne Janeane

"I have yet to hear valid reasons for the U.S., alone and unilaterally, to send our sons and daughters to die in a war against Iraq," Talbert said, ignoring the participation of other nations in the war.

After Talbert concluded his remarks to the Council of Bishops he initially received moderate applause. But Bishop Violet Fisher of Rochester, New York offered her "personal support and thanks" to Talbert for his work. "He is a gift to the United Methodist Church," she said. The Bishops then gave Talbert a standing ovation. During the public session, no Bishop asked Talbert any question or expressed any disagreement with his actions.

But not all Bishops agreed with Talbert. "I agree with [Defense Secretary] Donald Rumsfeld when he said that never have so many been so wrong about so much," one Bishop said privately about the critics of the war to liberate Iraq.



Bishop Melvin Talbert

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August 2003

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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)

## Help Us Reach A Million Homes!

Yes, I (we) want to help UMAction inform one million United Methodists and their families about the urgent need for church reform and faithfulness. Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift of:

\$50       \$75       \$100       Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Please send *UMAction Briefing* to the United Methodists on the enclosed list of names and addresses.

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