



UMA Action

WINTER 2003-2004 BRIEFING

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METHODIST SENATOR WARNS UM BISHOPS

The United Methodist Council of Bishops, during their November meeting in Washington, D.C., heard from several members of the U.S. Congress, including one Republican senator who urged them to be more cautious in their political pronouncements.

"We can't be a political organization," Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama told the bishops. "The liberal churches - politics has hurt them. Conservative churches will be hurt too if they get too close to that flame. We have to be careful."

"I believe in this church," Sessions said. "I want us to be a prophetic voice in the world."

"But I don't want to see it [United Methodism] in decline and failing to reach its potential," Sessions continued.

Sessions is a member of Ashland United Methodist Church in Mobile, Alabama. He is a frequent lay member of the Alabama/West Florida Annual Conference, and he attended the 1996 General Conference as a delegate.

Speaking about the issue of homosexuality within United Methodism, Sessions approvingly recalled reading *A Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard Hayes, a Duke Divinity School professor who opposes homosexual practice. The senator read the book at the recommendation of his

bishop, Larry Goodpaster.

Sessions also spoke about the Bush Administration's nomination of Alabama attorney general Richard Pryor to a federal judgeship, a nomination fiercely opposed by liberal senators because of Pryor's opposition to abortion.

Referring to Pryor as "my good friend," Sessions lamented that Pryor's nomination has been blocked because Pryor is a devout Roman Catholic who supports his church's teaching about abortion.

"Will we disqualify a member of the greatest church," Sessions asked, pointing out that Pryor's stance on abortion is the same as the Pope's. "He [Pryor] and his

wife have guided their lives by it [the Roman Catholic faith]," the senator observed. "They deserve respect."

"We're all religious nuts, aren't we?" Sessions asked bemusedly. "We were founded by them." He wondered how a devout Orthodox Jew or Muslim could be confirmed to a federal position if devout Roman Catholics were to be excluded.

Sessions complained, "My church is using the same rhetoric," as has been employed against Pryor's nomination.

Similarly, Sessions said President Bush, also United

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Senator Jeff Sessions with Bishop Michael Watson and Robert Fannin.

THREE UM BISHOPS JOIN NEW LIBERAL LOBBY

Frustrated that they continue to be overshadowed by conservative religious leaders, a new association of politically liberal clergy was announced in Washington, D.C. in November. Mostly comprised of old National Council of Churches (NCC) types, the Clergy Leadership Network (CLN) (www.clnnc.org) will focus on opposing U.S. military action and fighting for a larger federal welfare state, while criticizing religious conservatives.

CLN's national committee includes retired United Methodist bishops Dale White, William Grove and Marshall Meadors, all of whom attended the Washington, D.C. press conference. Also a member,

but not in attendance, is former United Methodist Board of Church and Society general secretary Thom White Wolf Fassett, now a district superintendent in the North Central New York Annual Conference.

Other CLN leaders include the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, and former National Council of Churches chief Joan Brown Campbell.

Rev. Albert Pennybacker, a former National Council of Churches official, said the CLN, of which he is chairman, will model itself after the Hebrew prophets, the "champions of justice in Muslim history," and the "man from Nazareth."

"We stand for change," Pennybacker exhorted. "Change in the failed policies [of the current Bush Administration]." He claimed that CLN's

"progressive" clergy had been "turned away" when they had petitioned President Bush for change. Elsewhere, Pennybacker has spoken of the need for "regime-change."

A special emphasis for CLN will be the "unilateral foreign policy atmosphere of imperialism and bullying that runs counter to the inclusive commitments of all religious communities," Pennybacker explained. He bemoaned that the deaths of U.S. military personnel in Iraq have "no clear reason or explanation." CLN will also target current economic policies that show "favoritism for some."

Justice is "not just about converting one heart at a time," Joan Campbell insisted, nor is peace a private matter. "Changing the nation will mean changing the policy makers," she asserted. †

ACTION: Should United Methodist Church officials serve as leaders of partisan lobby groups? Find our news release about this on www.ird-renew.org.

SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION REWARDING - AND FUN

As believers, we don't need to be reminded that memorizing key Bible passages is critical to our Christian discipleship. How many times - in crisis, joy, thanksgiving, fear - have we recalled appropriate verses we memorized as children?

Yet, memorization of any kind, let alone Scripture memorization, seems to have gone out of style. Think what our children are missing!

Bristol House, Ltd., offers the *Order of St. George* as a scripture memory resource for churches. Within the program children are awarded high quality patches for seven levels of memorization. The first levels are appropriate for

even young children, and each level builds on the next. Adult or youth volunteers work with children weekly, helping them with their required scripture passages.

Churches make a one-time purchase of a photocopyable book with required verses in both the King James and New International versions. The package also includes one complete set of award patches. The church then orders patches only as needed.

Otterbein United Methodist Church, in Robinson, Illinois, began the program in the fall of 2002 "with 12 children and a handful of volunteers" writes Becky Wiggs,

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ACTION: To receive a catalog and more helpful information on Otterbein's ministry with the Order of St. George, please call 1-800-451-7323 and mention *UMAction*. You may also visit [www. BristolhouseLtd.com](http://www.BristolhouseLtd.com). Bristol will provide free shipping on your first purchase of Order of St. George materials. Bristol House offers Sunday school material for all ages, discipleship resources, confirmation material for youth and adults, VBS programs and more.

Capitol Hill...
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Methodist, has probably been disappointed by the criticism of his policies by his church. "I'm sure it was hurtful for him for his church to question his faith," Sessions said. The United Methodist bishops and other denominational leaders have been especially outspoken about the war to overthrow Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

"President Bush has a high degree of moral commitment," Sessions pointed out. "His belief is that the U.S. has a leadership responsibility to liberate people from oppressions. It's a deep moral belief coming out of his faith."

Sessions cited some of his colleagues in the U.S. Senate who, in trying to model themselves after British evangelical statesman William Wilberforce, try to "improve the culture of America on abortion, pornography, honor and responsibility, and commitment in marriage."

"Maybe we could work together," Sessions said. "Let's affirm rather than undermine marriage."

Retired Bishop Don Ott asked Sessions if the bishops should not make political pronouncements.

"You've got every right to do that," Sessions responded. "But I'm not sure bishops know much more about Afghanistan than lay leaders in your churches."

When retired Bishop Melvin Talbert asked Sessions why President Bush had declined to meet with United Methodist bishops as a group, Sessions said, "Presidents are people too. They get hurt. He's usually pretty open to meeting with people."

Sessions called himself a "conservative Methodist Christian" and said, "It's a great blessing to have a United Methodist heritage."

Other members of the U.S. Congress who spoke to the Council of Bishops were Senator Richard Lugar (Republican of Indiana), Rep-

BISHOP SPRAGUE PLANS FOR NEW POSITION ON CAPITOL HILL

United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague of Chicago has said he is planning to come to Washington, D.C. after he retires next year to serve as a chaplain in the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill.

A chaplaincy at the United Methodist Building would be a new position for which staffers at the United Methodist Board of Church and Society are reportedly trying to raise an endowment.

Sprague likely is his denomina-

tion's most controversial bishop, having publicly denied the eternal deity, virgin birth, atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Sprague is also a prominent proponent of homosexuality within the church, having been arrested twice in demonstrations at the 2000 United Methodist General Conference while performing acts of civil disobedience in protest against the

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ACTION: Do you believe that Bishop Sprague, who denies key Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ, is an appropriate chaplain for the Methodist Building in the nation's capital? Send your comments to us and we'll pass them along to bishops on the Board of Church and Society.

representative Barbara Lee (Democrat of California), Representative Elijah Cummings (Democrat of Maryland), Senator Craig Thomas (Republican of Wyoming) and Senator Paul Sarbanes (Democrat of Maryland), along with former Representative Lee Hamilton (Democrat of Indiana). Lugar, Thomas and Hamilton are United Methodists.

During a break, Bishop Joe Sprague of Chicago took the floor.

"The greatest experience of my life took place here," Sprague recalled of his arrest earlier this year while performing civil disobedience outside the White House in a demonstration against the war in Iraq. "Seventy-seven of us were arrested [for protesting] against an immoral war," he observed. "It's been said that I'm an incompatible bishop, but on that occasion I was in good company."

Later in the meeting, Bishop Felton May also spoke politically.

"We have in our denomination compassionate Christians," Bishop May said. "'Compassionate conservative' doesn't hold water. It's an oxymoron, but a compassionate Christian is one who follows Christ and the Lord who we serve is not conservative but liberal in every way possible, abounding in grace and power with peace and justice."

During their November meeting, the bishops decided to appoint an executive secretary for the Council of Bishops who will work in Washington, based in the Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. Retired Bishop Roy Sano will serve in this position.

The cost of this will be \$240,451 for the quadrennium, including at least \$15,600 per year for a residential apartment in the Methodist building, at least \$5,000 a year for a one room office there, and salary for the executive secretary. This will be paid out of the Episcopal Fund. †

*Bishop Sprague...
continued from page 3*

church's policies disapproving of homosexual practice.

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have also aroused Sprague's ire. Earlier this year he was arrested while performing civil disobedience at an anti-war demonstration outside the White House.

Sprague's liberal theological and political views will fit comfortably with the United Methodist Board of Church and Society's staff, who want to hire him as a chaplain to serve in the United Methodist Building where it is headquartered.

The United Methodist Building is prominently located across the street from the U.S. Capitol and the U.S. Supreme Court. Its several dozen tenants include the lobby offices of most mainline Protestant denominations and a host of liberal advocacy groups, plus some private residences.

Speaking at a "Bishops' Forum" in late October in Downer's Grove, Illinois, Sprague said he has been asked to serve as the "chaplain on the Hill" with the Board of Church and Society starting in 2005. This will place him in Washington, D.C. 2-3 days a week, during which he will lead Wednesday chapel ser-

vices and will be "the front-runner on certain issues."

In comments elsewhere, Sprague has referred to spending time in Washington, D.C. after retirement, serving as a "preacher, pastor, teacher, and advocate."

However, a spokesperson for the North Illinois Conference where Sprague is bishop expressed some surprise about Sprague's public comments. She said the plans for Sprague to be chaplain in the United Methodist Building are in the works but not finalized.

According to other sources within the Board of Church and Society, staffers in that agency are attempting to raise an endowment that would pay for Sprague's new position.

Sprague's working for the Board of Church and Society undoubtedly would be controversial. Apparently the topic has not been brought before a full meeting of the directors of the Board of Church and Society, whose last meeting of the 2000-2004 quadrennium was in October.

In his "state of the church" address earlier this year, Sprague said his decision to retire has not been easy. "It is not my intention to abandon those who look to me as a role model, who expect me to be their voice in the wilderness," Sprague said. "Clearly my critics have not dictated this decision. In fact the virulence of some prompted a near reversal of this decision. But that would have been unwise, unfaithful, even. Better to go when most want you to stay than to stay when most want you to go." ✝

PRESIDENT BUSH IS HONORED BY UM MEN

The United Methodist Men Foundation inducted President George W. Bush as a member of the Society of John Wesley Fellows to honor him for his statements of faith and his call for the nation to be in prayer following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

President Bush is a member of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas. He is the first Methodist president since William McKinley over a century ago.

The United Methodist Board of Church and Society and the Council of Bishops are frequently critical of President Bush. But the leader-

ship of United Methodist Men, which tends to be more conservative than other church agencies, seems to disagree.

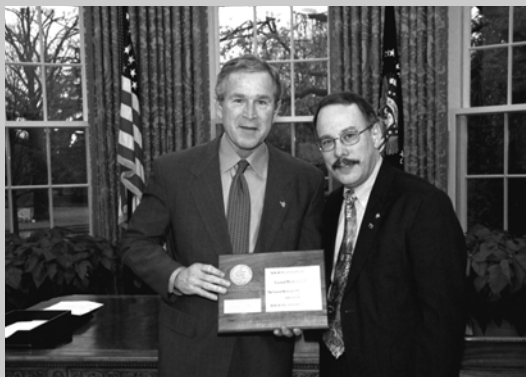
In December, United Methodist Men's president Gilbert Hanke awarded a plaque to President Bush in a White House meeting. Hanke also prayed with the President.

The United Methodist Men Foundation supports scouting, evangelistic ministries, a prayer line and other men's ministries.

"The recognition of President Bush as a John Wesley fellow emphasizes the significance of

this award and honors him for his daily walk with Christ," said Joe Harris, the top executive of the

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The President of the USA with the President of UM Men

ACTION: Contact United Methodist Men's President Gil Hanke and thank him for the ministry of United Methodist Men: 803 Wildwood Dr, Nacogdoches, TX 75961-4776, fax: 936-560-3554.

RETIRED BISHOP BLASTS RENEWAL GROUPS

Retired United Methodist Bishop Dale White made a blistering attack on renewal groups within United Methodism, alleging that they have a “polarizing style” and “intimidating tactics” that are “calculated to spread fear” and “impugn the motives of others.” He warned against their “dirty tricks politics” and “right-wing ideology.” White made his remarks at a First United Methodist Church in Schenectady, New York in October.

The bishop specifically criticized the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), Good News, and the Confessing Movement among the groups that he was criticizing. “They aren’t accountable to anybody but themselves,” he complained. The bishop helped to organize the recently published *Methodism at Risk: A Wake-up*

Call, which decries the renewal groups as a non-Methodist conspiracy to take over the United Methodist Church and dismantle its supposed tradition of support for liberal political causes.

According to White, the IRD promotes “conservative policy goals” such as increased military spending, more U.S. foreign intervention, and opposition to social welfare programs and the environmental movement. “Their goal is not a spiritual quest but a political takeover by the extreme right.”

In fact, IRD rarely makes direct political statements but instead challenges church officials who do, believing that the institutional church lacks a biblical mandate for routine, detailed political activism. But Bishop White did not explain this.

Bishop White said that for the first time “progressives” are talking about the “dissolution” of the denomination. He blamed some of its current problems upon the alleged historic baggage of his theological adversaries.

“Some of the former EUB folks are the ones giving us the fits,” Bishop White said of the Evangelical United Brethren, which merged into the United Methodist Church in 1968. “They are German pietists, not Wesleyan,” he recalled another bishop saying of them.

Bishop White also speculated that the southern church still has “lingering resentment” over losing civil rights battles, a resentment that might still fuel criticism of national church policies.

Countering the complaint that liberalism is destroying the denomination, Bishop White maintained that United Methodism has actually been conservative and yet it is “dying.” He lamented that “they [conservatives] are blaming everybody but themselves.” †

ACTION: Check out the websites of the major United Methodist renewal groups and make up your own mind about them. IRD/UMAction: www.ird-renew.org, Good News: www.goodnewsmag.org, Confessing Movement: www.confessingumc.org.

Scripture Memorization... continued from page 2

Director of Children’s Ministries. “We now have 30 children on our attendance roster and a dozen volunteers.

“Otterbein Church uses ‘the order of St. George’ as more than a scripture memorization time,” she continues. “We have the children get together for a time of games, songs, activity sheets and a Bible story before they separate into groups to work on scripture memory.” The church supplements the program with Bristol House’s ArmorQuest, VBS program and their own creative ideas.

Otterbein’s program is a community-wide outreach funded partially by a grant from the Illinois Great Rivers Conference and the Bishop’s Initiative on Children and Poverty. As part of the grant requirements, the church offers a meal to the children, feeding their bodies as well as their spirits. In the meantime, they are following the example of the psalmist, who said, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I may not sin against you” (119:11). †

President Bush... continued from page 4

General Commission on United Methodist Men.”

Bush showed Hanke a framed piece of calligraphy with the words of a Charles Wesley hymn that hangs in the Oval Office. “And now I have this award named for John Wesley,” Bush told Hanke. “Thank you so much for coming all the way from Texas to give me this.”

Hanke told Bush that he was the first president to receive the award. “How many Methodist presidents have there been?” Bush asked.

“I don’t know, but you’re the best,” Hanke replied.

“Right answer,” Bush jokingly responded. †

UMAction

BRIEFING

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YOUR OPINION, PLEASE!

1. Should Bishop Joe Sprague serve as Chaplain of the Methodist Building on Capitol Hill?

YES NO

2. Do you agree with Senator Sessions that the institutional church should be careful about not becoming too political?

YES NO

3. Would you prefer that United Methodist bishops not publicly affiliate themselves with partisan political causes?

YES NO