



UMAAction

BRIEFING

Spring 2005

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BISHOP WHITAKER DEFENDS UNBORN CHILDREN AND DENOUNCES ABORTION

For possibly the first time in recent decades, a United Methodist bishop has publicly denounced abortion as a “moral horror.”

Speaking to a United Methodist pro-life group in Washington, D.C., Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida regretted that United Methodist agencies belong to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), which defends unrestricted abortion rights.

The United Methodist Board of Church and Society, which owns the Capitol Hill United Methodist Building in which Bishop Whitaker spoke, is a founding member of RCRC and lobbies against restrictions on abortion. The United Methodist Women’s Division is also a member of RCRC.

Many United Methodists have criticized these agencies for violating the United Methodist Book of Discipline, paragraph 161J. It is a mixed statement. It says “Our belief in the sanctity of unborn life makes us reluctant to approve abortion” but goes on to “support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures” in “tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion”. However, the Discipline strongly opposes abortion



Bishop Whitaker called abortion a “moral horror.” (UMNS)

for birth control, abortion for gender selection, and partial-birth abortion. How do the Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division justify their support for unrestricted abortion?

Whitaker also lamented that the United Methodist Bishops’ Initiative on Children in Poverty, which focused on ministries for children, included “not even scant mention [of] the deaths of unborn children because of abortion.”

United Methodism has succumbed to secular society’s preoccupation with “private rights,” Whitaker noted. But Christianity believes in both rights and responsibilities. “Therefore we cannot endorse a woman’s right to abort an unborn child as a morally neutral decision because we understand that the child also has a right to live and the

ACTION: Ask your bishop what he or she thinks about United Methodist agency support for unrestricted abortion, in conflict with the *Book of Discipline*, par. 161J. Check out www.lifewatch.org for the full text of Bishop Whitaker’s speech at the United Methodist Building and for other information about building a culture of life within United Methodism.

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LESBIAN MINISTER WINS TEMPORARY APPEAL, BUT THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL WILL DECIDE

A church appeals committee overturned the defrocking of openly homosexual minister Beth Stroud. The liberal-dominated Northeast Jurisdiction Appeals Committee voted 8-1 in favor of Stroud, even though the United Methodist Church *Book of Discipline* explicitly prohibits clergy from being sexually active outside of marriage.

The Rev. Scott Campbell, an outspoken critic of United Methodist teachings on sexual ethics, chaired the appeals committee.

Stroud, who attended the appeals committee hearing with her same-sex companion, later told a press conference that she looks to a day when the church is “inclusive of all sexual orientations.”

The appeals committee ruling is not final; it will be reviewed by the Judicial Council of the entire United Methodist Church later this year. If past rulings are any indication, the Judicial Council will almost certainly set aside the appeals committee decision and affirm the original church court decision that Stroud is not eligible to serve as a UM clergy person.

Beth Stroud was defrocked by a church trial last December. She had publicly challenged United Methodism’s teachings by declaring her ongoing sexual involvement with another woman. The United Methodist Church’s *Book of Dis-*

cipline states that clergy must show “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.” It also states that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” may not serve as clergy.

But the appeals committee, dominated by people who do not support United Methodist teachings on marriage and sexuality, chose to overrule the church’s policies in Stroud’s favor. The committee justified its stance by alleging that the church had not defined what “practicing homosexual” means. And it claimed that the prohibition of extra-marital sexual behavior was somehow an illegal new “doctrine” invented by the United Methodist General Conference in recent years.

The governing General Conference of the United Methodist Church has debated homosexuality every four years since 1972 and has always decided in favor



Openly lesbian UM Minister Beth Stroud speaks to reporters. (UMNS)

of traditional Christian teachings. The margins of those votes, typically two to one, will grow larger as the church

continues to become more international and as the most theologically liberal regions in the U.S. continue to decline the most quickly.

Less than 15 percent of United Methodists live in the church’s liberal Northeast Jurisdiction, which is rapidly declining in membership.

The church’s Judicial Council has ruled that church trial jury members who cannot in conscience support the church’s teachings on sexuality must recuse themselves. But the Judicial Council has not ruled on the permissibility of appeals committee members serving even if they oppose church

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ACTION: Please thank LaGretta Bjorn for courageously standing alone in refusing to ignore the standards of the United Methodist Church. She can be reached at Spring Valley United Methodist Church, 2 South Madison Avenue. Spring Valley, New York 10977-5538.

JOY MOORE SHAKES UP PASTORS CONVOCATION

UMAction Advisory Board Member Joy Moore brought hundreds of applauding black United Methodist pastors to their feet at the bi-annual Pastors of African-American Congregations Convocation, sponsored by the United Methodist Board of Discipleship.

Moore preached on “the idea of a purpose-given life,” playing off the title of Rick Warren’s mega-seller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

Over 650 pastors—most of whom were African American—gathered in Atlanta for the event, whose speakers included Bishops James Swanson and Linda Lee.

“We like rules and applications, history and cultural information, religious trivia over telling the old, old story,” Moore exclaimed from the pulpit.

“We’re more offended about racism than we are the fact that most of us don’t even need a Bible,” Moore preached. “See, there’s a reason for the injustice if you never go to the place where you learn what true justice is!”

Moore warned, “God does not sit silently by while

his children indulge in perversion.” God allows us to go our way, but we reap the consequences of our “sinful ways.”

“I’m grateful to be a Wesleyan,” Moore said, because Wesley believed in free will. “But we must acknowledge that every tragedy can be traced back to rebellion against God.”

God never intended for us to be by ourselves, Joy stressed. We are to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, holding each other accountable before God. She said, “God doesn’t love us because of what we’ve done,

and God doesn’t stop loving us because of what we do.”

“We need to remember ... [t]hat we can’t face his resurrection and turn back to the chains of yesterday,” Moore declared. “The practice and purpose that we have as Trinitarian believers is to live so that others see Christ in us and know that God is God.”

Amid shouts of “hallelujah, hallelujah, thank you Jesus,” Moore enthusiastically concluded, “When you stumble, God will pull you up God pulls us up from sin with His grace, word, and blood.”



UMAction Leader Joy Moore preaches. (UMNS)

ACTION: Order a tape of Joy Moore’s sermon at www.gntvmin.org or by calling 478-745-2366.

*Lesbian Minister...
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teachings, an issue clearly in play with the Beth Stroud appeal.

Only one of the nine appeals committee members voted to uphold the church’s standards on sexual ethics. LaGretta Bjorn is a clergywoman in Spring Valley,

New York.

“It is not within the purview of the appellate body to legislate,” Bjorn declared in her lonely dissent. But most of her colleagues decided it was within their power to ignore the General Conference, the *Book of Discipline*, and the Judicial Council in order to rule in Stroud’s favor.



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UM BISHOP, SEMINARY PRESIDENT STRESS IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Garrett Seminary President Ted Campbell and Bishop Scott Jones of Kansas agree that the United Methodist Church needs more emphasis on Christian doctrine.

The two were discussing and debating the essentials of Wesleyan theology at an annual symposium for United Methodist clergy outside Chicago in February.

"Doctrine is crucial for the existence of a religious organization, and we haven't done a good job," Jones said. "How do we stay Wesleyan if we don't heed the *Notes and Sermons* of John Wesley in some way?"

He addressed the responsibility of clergy to uphold the church's teachings. "You need to not preach your personal theology but preach the theology of the church," Jones said. "You are duty bound to be Wesleyan. Dissent from the church is important but must be done appropriately."

Jones said that United Methodists are not supposed to contradict the church's doctrinal standards, but can "go beyond and expand." Disagreeing with non-doctrinal parts of *The Discipline*, such as the *Social Principles*, is less problematic than disagreeing with the *Articles of Religion* or the *Confession*, he added.

"Disapproving of [labor] unions is not as serious as being Unitarian," Jones said. He noted that the model deed that John Wesley developed for Methodist preaching houses specified that preachers must heed Wesley's doctrinal standards.

Recalling that the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"

was "a way for United Methodists to get away from too much emphasis on Scripture," Jones said it was "abused by some parts of the church in the 1970's and 1980's."

Campbell was the primary presenter at the conference, and Jones was his respondent. The Garrett president began by listing the essentials of Christian doctrine as described by John Wesley, which Campbell cited as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement, biblical authority, original sin, justification by faith alone, and regeneration by new birth.

Wesley believed that the doctrine of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was a "fundamental belief" of Christian faith, according to Campbell.

Believing in the "complete divinity" of Christ was also "essential" to Wesleyan Christianity, as Campbell explained. Similarly, Wesley thought there was "nothing of greater consequence" than the doctrine of atonement. Without belief in the atonement, religion becomes merely deism, Wesley feared.

Another traditional Protestant belief that Wesley affirmed and thought essential was justification by faith alone, Campbell said. But Wesley's emphasis was slightly different because he insisted that while faith must include assent to correct doctrine, it must also en-

gage the heart and affections..

Jones explained that doctrine was not necessary for salvation but was essential for "genuine Christian teaching." He recalled that the United Methodist stance on abortion, which speaks of "tragic conflicts of life with life" that might justify abortion was originally conceived by the late ethicist Paul Ramsey. Most abortions in America are for birth control and, according to United Methodist standards, are "immoral," Jones noted. "You don't hear the United Methodist Women and others saying that."

"We elect leaders who are managers rather than leaders," Jones observed of the church. "We don't do doctrine very well because we don't care about it. We care about hymnody and social issues."

Noting that the Kansas Conference (of which he recently became bishop) had suffered a 50 percent loss in Sunday school attendance, Jones complained of widespread membership decline. "The United Methodist Church has become more liberal and the culture more conservative and people have gone elsewhere," he said. "There has to be greater doctrinal discipline."

"There is a bend-over-backwards, don't-offend-anybody attitude in the United Methodist Church that doesn't mention Jesus," Jones observed. 

ACTION: Thank Bishop Jones for his comments about the importance of historic United Methodist beliefs: 9440 East Boston #160, Wichita, KS 67207-3600; fax: 316-684-0044; email: kansasbishop@kswestumc.org.

UM LOBBYIST ATTACKS U.S. ROLE IN IRAQ

Jim Winkler, who heads the United Methodist lobby office in Washington, D.C., sharply attacked the U.S. role in Iraq in a speech to the very liberal Methodist Federation for Social Action.

"The war in Iraq remains a disaster despite the seemingly good news of the [Iraqi] election," Winkler opined. He was speaking in March at a Portland, Oregon church.

"I cannot think of a single person who has been held accountable for this illegal war of aggression," Winkler complained. He blamed the United States for hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed in either the war or previous sanctions. He spoke of "numerous atrocities" committed by U.S. troops.

To illustrate his anti-war point, Winkler asked how Americans would react if a "foreign military invasion force occupied our major cities, arresting and torturing Americans."

Winkler also condemned "extremist" and "Christianist" forces in the United States, who insist on posting the Ten Commandments, displaying public nativity scenes, and opposing "gay and lesbian" people. He likened Christian schools in America to Islamic madrassahs in Pakistan and elsewhere that advocate hatred and terrorism.

According to Winkler, conservative Christians in the United States are creating a "virtual alternative society" that he finds dangerous.

Winkler is general secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society in Washington, D.C., which spends about \$5 million annually for political lobbying. ✚



Jim Winkler. (UMNS)

ACTION: Please express your concerns about Winkler's statements to the president of the General Board of Church and Society: Bishop Beverly Shamana, Post Office Box 980250, West Sacramento, CA 95798-0250; fax: 916-372-9062; e-mail: bishop@calnevumc.org.

*UM Bishop...
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community has a responsibility to care for this child if the mother is unable to rear it," the bishop said.

Whitaker called upon United Methodists to "apply our theological reflection, our pastoral guidance and our public witness against the violence of abortion in the name of the God of peace."

"Can there be any doubt that there is silence and passivity about abortion in our church?" Whitaker asked. He wondered how many United Methodist sermons discuss abortion and how many congregations are supporting crisis pregnancy centers to help women with unwanted pregnancies.

"Do no harm," was the first of John Wesley's General Rules for

Methodists, Whitaker recalled. Being faithful to this rule means, "Do no harm to the unborn! Do no harm to the witness of the Church as a peaceable people! Do no harm to the Gospel of peace!"

Several months later, Whitaker similarly spoke out about the case of Terry Schiavo, the disabled Florida woman kept alive by artificial feeding tubes. "A fundamental moral principle consistent with faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ is to always care rather than to kill," the bishop said.

A person who is in a "persistent vegetative state" is not a vegetable to her loved ones, Whitaker observed. The love that Mrs. Schiavo's parents and siblings showed her was of "immense value" and no expert could judge the effect of that love upon even the severely disabled

woman, he said. For Christians, this kind of love is a witness to God's love in Jesus Christ.

"Moral reflection should include consideration of the value of the love of caregivers as well as the condition of the one receiving care," Whitaker wrote. "I believe it would be better to let her live because she is the beneficiary of abundant love."

Whitaker also criticized the "individualistic perspective" that believes a person may decide for himself whether or not to live or die, without considering the ability of others to love and care. Such "absolute individual autonomy" could lead to physician-assisted suicide and active euthanasia, he worried.

"The church's mission is not to be the chaplain to a culture of death," Whitaker concluded, "but to be a witness to the love of God in the world." ✚

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YOUR OPINION, PLEASE!

Should The United Methodist Church continue its annual \$5 million spending for the lobby office in Washington, D.C. to make political pronouncements in the name of our church?

Yes

No

Not sure