

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

October 2007

Same Song, Different Verse

The ELCA Postpones Decisions on Sexuality . . . Again





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The Institute on Religion and Democracy is an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians working to reform their churches' social witness, in accord with biblical and historic teachings, thereby contributing to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad.

IRD committees work for reform in the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The IRD also sponsors the Church Alliance for a New Sudan and the Liberty Initiative for North Korea.

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We're listening!

Enclosed with this issue of *Faith & Freedom* is an **important survey**. Please help us by taking a moment to complete it. Your feedback will provide insights for ways we can improve our communications with you and thousands of others.

*Thanks in advance,
David Sheaffer
Director of Development*



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Tolerance's Paradox

by James W. Tonkowich

The IRD is regularly criticized as “intolerant”—the great sin of the 21st century. For example, an Episcopal priest wrote:

You say you are “committed to the free pursuit of religious truth.” On the contrary, the only truths to which you are committed are those which you already have accepted as dogma. So “religious liberty” isn’t really on your agenda, nor is “interfaith tolerance.” (The choice of the lukewarm word “tolerance” is a dead give away.)

Note the false dichotomy. The writer (we’ll call her E.) believes that a commitment to religious freedom and interfaith tolerance is incompatible with a belief in religious dogma. That is, if I believe the ancient creeds to be statements of truth, it follows that I cannot be tolerant of those who disagree. I must be coercive even if I seem to be a nice person.

This false dichotomy is an example of the fuzzy-headed thinking that plagues American Christianity. It is an indication that most people have no idea what toleration—a strong and vitally important word—actually means.

First, understand that toleration is not a modern idea. It comes, in fact, from early Church fathers who were arguing for religious liberty in the Roman Empire. Toleration rightly understood, they said, is the result of paradox.

The paradox is this: the nature of truth is such that it demands that we put up with (tolerate) some falsity. This paradox connects directly to religious freedom. Since God does not coerce belief, we should not coerce belief either. People’s consciences may never be violated in the name of truth, and so we must tolerate that which is not true even as we affirm and declare what is true. We may lovingly persuade others, but never attempt to force belief.

The lukewarm idea of toleration actually comes from those of E.’s ilk. This is a notion of toleration that is based not on paradox, but on what Dr. J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas calls “incoherence.”

While Church fathers urged toleration because of their view of the nature of truth, this modern position argues that we must suspend all judgment about truth. After all, while the orthodox Christian sees the truth in one way, the progressive Christian, the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, and agnostic each sees truth in a different way.

Since these truth systems can’t all be true and since each is more or less reasonable, the most common modern solution is

to privatize them all—and in so doing relativize them all. It says, in effect, no one’s “truth” is true and so keep your own truth to yourself. This solution, the argument goes, creates an environment of neutrality because we treat everyone the same way.

Nonetheless, as Budziszewski points out, this view of toleration is not tolerant at all. Instead it is thoroughly intolerant. It privileges some ideas of truth and suppresses others. Any system of belief that is relativistic and easily privatized is privileged. But any system of belief (orthodox Christianity for example) that by its very nature makes universal truth claims is suppressed. Truth be told, the toleration that results from incoherence is really nothing more than a thinly camouflaged grab for power.

The current state of E.’s Episcopal Church and much of the rest of the Protestant mainline is a reminder that where orthodoxy is simply tolerated as one option among many, it will soon be marginalized and suppressed—all in the name of this misguided notion of toleration.

The free pursuit of truth, religious liberty, and freedom of conscience are thereby smothered.

By contrast, it is only those who have a commitment to theological truth (dogma) and, embracing the paradox, refuse

to coerce others who can be properly tolerant. It is to this kind of toleration, to the free pursuit of religious truth, and to religious freedom (“dogmas” if you must) that the IRD is wholeheartedly committed.

IRD board member Richard John Neuhaus has repeatedly cited Pope John Paul II’s notion that “the Church imposes nothing, she only proposes.” There is no coercion, but rather freedom to believe or disbelieve what is proposed. Neuhaus then goes on to note, “What [the Church] proposes, however, is the truth, and the truth does impose itself.” And the truth is a threat.

Toleration rightly understood and religious freedom at home and abroad have been two of the IRD’s core values since our founding. And it is our unwavering commitment to biblical and historic Christian orthodoxy that forms the foundation on which these two rest. 📖

While the Church fathers urged toleration because of their view of the nature of truth, this modern position argues that we must suspend all judgment about truth.

Jim Tonkowich



James W. Tonkowich is the President of the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Protest and Prayer

The Campaign for North Korean Refugees in China

by Faith J.H. McDonnell

On July 17, 2007, in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, the Korean Church Coalition for North Korea Freedom (KCC) launched “Let My People Go,” a campaign for North Korean refugees in China. Korean pastors and congregations came to the Washington, DC, kick-off rally from all fifty states. American church and human rights leaders, as well as members of Congress and other U.S. government representatives, also participated.

The KCC includes 3,000 pastors and represents millions of Korean Christians. It was formed to pray for and aid the people of North Korea and to bring awareness of their suffering. “Only the Sovereign God can free North Korea,” says the KCC, “and prayer is our greatest weapon.” The new “Let My People Go” campaign coincides with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the possibility of pressuring China to recognize North Koreans within its borders as refugees and stop sending them back to North Korea.

According to Human Rights Watch, anywhere from 10,000 to 300,000 North Koreans have attempted to escape their nightmarish existence of starvation, brutality, and oppression and have fled over the border into China. Some of the refugees are Christians, trying to reach a place where they can worship God in freedom. Once in China, life is little better for most of the North Koreans. In the words of Sam Kim, the Executive Director for the KCC, “Our brothers and sisters in North Korea are forced into slave labor for food and shelter. The young girls are kidnapped and sold by sex traffickers. They are bought and chained to the closet and repeatedly raped. They have babies that are abandoned.”

Even those refugees who are not trafficked into slavery live in terror of being discovered by the Chinese authorities. Forced repatriation means almost certain death. If they are not immediately executed, North Koreans who have been repatriated from China will most likely die in a prison camp. North Korean refugees told Human Rights Watch that consignment to one of these camps is a fate “worse than death.”

One component of the KCC campaign is a visual reminder of the captive North Koreans. At the kick-off rally KCC pastors and other speakers unfurled a banner that declared, “Let My People Go! Free North Korean Refugees in China before the Beijing Olympics.” Similar banners and bumper stickers will be showing up across the United States in the months to come. The banner campaign is modeled after the campaign to bring freedom to Soviet Jews during the 1970s. That campaign culminated in the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 Trade Act, which made normal trade relations with the Soviet Union dependent upon its treatment of Jews desiring to emigrate.

The campaign also includes the 50 State Resolution, intended to inform every state in the Union about the current human rights violations by the Chinese government towards the North Korean



KINDER, GENTLER, FREER A North Korean refugee protests China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, due to that country's human rights record, particularly toward North Korean refugees who have escaped to China. (Faith McDonnell/IRD)

refugees who are within its borders. The resolution demands that the Chinese government recognize the fundamental human rights of the North Korean refugees, grant them “refugee status,” and provide them with at least the minimum protection of the law according to the Geneva Conventions and the UN protocol relating to the status of refugees. It further urges that the North Korean refugees in China be permitted to go safely to a third country that will accept them, and it demands that China grant the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees access to the border area for monitoring.

Lastly, the resolution calls upon all Americans, regardless of race or religion, to work together to bring liberty to North Korean refugees in China. In the 1970s, it was not just Jewish synagogues that displayed messages demanding freedom for Soviet Jews. Many churches expressed their solidarity with the Jewish people by placing a banner on their own front lawns. In the same way today, it should not be only Korean-Americans working for the freedom of North Korean refugees. All Americans can show their solidarity with the suffering people of North Korea by joining the campaign. When American churches display the “Let My People Go” banner with their Korean brothers and sisters, it will be a visible reminder not only of the captive North Koreans, but also of the unity of the worldwide Body of Christ. ✚



Faith J.H. McDonnell is the Director of Religious Liberty Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

International Briefs

Church Representatives Discuss a 'Conversion Code of Conduct'

A consultation among leaders of nearly 30 Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, evangelical, and Pentecostal church bodies took place in Toulouse, France, on August 8-12, with the intent of establishing a standard of conduct for Christian missions. The initiative was a response to allegations by some non-Christian groups that Christian missionaries were using deception, bribes, or coercion to win converts.

The conference, co-sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, sought to arrive at rules that would allay such suspicions. Emphasis was placed on distinguishing between "evangelism"—a right and duty for Christians—and "proselytism," seen as "aggressive" and unethical. A final code is expected to be released by 2010.

"'Evangelical' and 'ecumenical' Christians have never been as close in this regard as they are today," said Thomas Schirrmacher, chairman of the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance. "It would be the first time ever that such a broad Christian backing is given to an agreement of this kind."

The Rev. Dr. Hermen Shastri, co-moderator of the WCC Faith and Order Commission, insisted that any code must be based on a respect for the religious beliefs of all. "Religious leaders need to be told that no religion has a monopoly on the truth, and that there are many ways to find salvation," Shastri said.

By contrast, the World Evangelical Alliance delegation declared in a press release that "the spreading of the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ alone is the central core of the Gospel and all Christians have the right to assert the claims of the Gospel even if persecution ensues." ❏

Han Jae-Ho/Reuters



ANSWERED PRAYERS Korean Christians hold a candlelight vigil for 23 missionaries taken hostage in Afghanistan. They were released in late August, but not before the Taliban murdered two of them.

Churches Respond to Afghanistan Hostage Situation

Church leaders from around the world responded to the kidnapping of 23 South Korean Christian missionaries in Afghanistan. The hostages were abducted by the Islamist Taliban militia on July 19 while serving as volunteers to provide medical services to the war-torn nation. Two of the hostages were murdered by the Taliban, while the other 21 were released by the end of August.

Most of the hostages were young women from Saemmul Presbyterian Church in the Seoul suburb of Bundang. The Rev. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, met with several of their families during a trip to South Korea. Kobia assured family members that the "prayers of millions of Christians" were being offered on behalf of their loved ones. He also expressed the hope that in the future "our world will become the kind of world where human beings can express support of other human beings, without our acts of charity being viewed with suspicion."

In the United States, the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society encouraged Methodists to sign a petition asking "our Muslim brothers and sisters in the Taliban" to honor the Islamic code of showing hospitality to strangers. The petition, written by Methodist minister Ken Suhr, was sponsored by Avaaz.org, an advocacy group co-founded by the liberal activist organization MoveOn.org.

Much criticism was focused on the missionaries for allegedly offending Afghan Muslim sensibilities and putting themselves at risk. The National Council of Churches of Korea declared that all "missionary activity in Afghanistan, where abductions and dangers to life continue, must be stopped."

After the 21 remaining hostages had been released, Pastor Park Eun-jo of Saemmul Church accepted "strong responsibility for the two lives that were lost" and "remorse" at having caused an international incident. But the pastor added that his church intends, when possible, to send more missionaries into the Muslim world. "We believe that this is God's providence leading us to other Muslim countries," he said. "I don't want this to be a stumbling block for missions." ❏

Christian Converts Suffer Persecution in Egypt

The director of a Christian rights group in Egypt has been detained by police after taking part in an online chat session with a recent Muslim convert to Christianity, reports the Christian news service Compass Direct.

Dr. Adel Fawzy Faltas was arrested August 8, following the public discussion with convert Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy. Three computers were confiscated, as were many books. Prosecutors are considering charges of converting Muslims to Christianity, destroying the reputation of Egypt, and insulting Islam.

Hegazy has been the center of a nationally-followed court case concerning the legal recognition of his conversion. Hegazy has sued Egypt's Ministry of the Interior for rejecting his efforts to change his personal identification papers to reflect his conversion. A Christian identification card would allow Hegazy and his wife to worship openly as Christians and to attend Christian classes.

In July, Eman Muhammad Al-Sayed, a young female convert to Christianity, was held in "protective custody" after having being threatened with death by her relatives. While in police custody, Al-Sayed was subjected to intense interrogation procedures and physical torture, including electric shocks, according to Compass Direct. On July 23 the police returned her to her family. She was last seen being severely beaten and dragged into a family minivan outside the police station. 🚫

Cris Bouroncle/AFP/Getty Images



IN HIDING Twenty five year-old Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy and his pregnant wife Zeinab, 23, read from the Bible. They have gone into hiding after receiving death threats for their "apostasy."

Japanese Christian Group Urges End of Nuclear Power

The National Christian Council of Japan has called for the dismantling of the country's nuclear power program, in response to the damages to a nuclear plant in Kariwa caused by a recent earthquake.

On July 16, an earthquake registering 6.8 on the Richter scale struck central Japan, causing the death of eleven people and the displacement of tens of thousands. The Kashiwazaki Kariwa nuclear power plant in the Niigata Prefecture suffered significant damage. Officials from the Tokyo Electric Power Company have estimated that 1.2 square meters of radioactive water escaped into the Sea of Japan, but deny that the surrounding environment has suffered any long-lasting effects.

In a July 24 statement, the Rev. Aika Tiara, chairperson of the Peace and Nuclear Issues Committee of the National Christian Council, urged the Japanese government to "stop all the nuclear power plants and change your direction to a nuclear-free society." The statement also demanded a complete examination of all

nuclear power plants in Japan, with a full disclosure of the study's results.

There are currently 55 nuclear power plants in Japan, accounting for roughly one-third of the nation's electric power output. The July 24 church statement did not suggest how this energy source would be replaced. 🚫

Canadian Anglicans, Lutherans Reject Same-Sex Blessings

The Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada—meeting simultaneously in Winnipeg, Manitoba—defeated proposals that would have allowed churches to perform ceremonies of blessing for same-sex couples.

On June 24, a proposal allowing individual dioceses to determine whether or not to perform such blessings was defeated at the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, when the denomination's House of Bishops voted 21-19 not to approve. Both lay delegates and clergy had voted in favor of the resolution, but the measure required the support of all three bodies for passage.

One day earlier, a similar proposal made at the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada was defeated by a vote of 200-181.

Prior to the Anglican vote, six retired Canadian archbishops issued a statement urging the approval of same-sex blessings, claiming such a move would display "justice, compassion, and hope for all God's people." They contended that further delay in taking this step would distract the church from its mission to address issues like "child poverty, racism, global warming, economic injustice, concern for our aboriginal brothers and sisters, and the growing disparity between the rich and the poor."

"A majority of people voted in favor," said the Rt. Rev. Michael Ingham, Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of New Westminster. "I think everyone's a loser. Traditional Christians can't take comfort in the vote and those who want to move on are held back by a small number of bishops." Ingham was rebuked by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in 2003 for performing same-sex unions without the support of the Anglican Communion. 🚫

Church News

Former Disciples of Christ President to Lead New Ecumenical Organization

The Rev. Richard Hamm has been appointed as the first executive administrator of Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT), a new ecumenical organization of evangelical, oldline, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and ethnic churches and agencies.

Hamm served as President and General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) from 1994 to 2004. During his tenure, membership in the denomination dropped nearly 20 percent.

"I have always been drawn to the vision of the various parts of the church of Jesus Christ in the United States seeking common ground and working together in all ways possible," Hamm said in a press release announcing his hiring.

In 2002, when CCT was being planned, then-IRD Chairman Thomas Oden and President Diane Knippers warned that the new group would not be successful unless it were "freed from the control of liberal Protestantism." But Hamm appears to come straight out of the old liberal Protestant elite.

As the Disciples' top official, Hamm oversaw the adoption of domestic partnership benefits for church employees. At a "prayer vigil" during the Disciples' 2003 General Assembly, he likened the United States to "schoolyard bullies." When our nation "turns in on itself and ignores the rest of the world, except to exploit it economically, we breed enemies," Hamm asserted. "Enemies so resentful that they are willing to fly airliners into our buildings!" It remains to be seen how more conservative U.S. Christians will respond to Hamm's leadership of CCT. ☒

Lesbian Couple Sues for Right to Marry at Methodist Campground

Ocean Grove Campground, a United Methodist retreat center on the New Jersey shore, is having its policy on marriages

Methodist Relief Agency Partners with Muslim Group

The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) announced in July a new partnership with British-based Muslim Aid, with which it hopes to spend up to \$15 million on joint relief projects around the world.

"No one should underestimate the potential for good that Christians and Muslims can do in the UK and in the rest of the world," said Stephen Timms, a top British Treasury official, at a London press conference unveiling the partnership. "This shows what distinctive faiths can achieve when the focus is on shared values."

It was not clear exactly what the "shared values" might be. The Rev. R. Randy Day, who heads UMCOR's parent group, the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries, said that "while we come from different theological positions, we have the same humanitarian values to relieve the suffering of those in need." UMCOR's website offers no information about its theological position. There are no references to God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible on the website.

By contrast, Muslim Aid advertises its Islamic mission with quotes from the Koran. It sponsors a major initiative helping needy Muslims fulfill their *Qurbani* obligation for animal sacrifices. "All Muslims are required to offer the sacrifice of a small animal such as a goat, or offer jointly with others the sacrifice of a larger animal such as a cow," according to the Muslim Aid website. Muslim Aid spent over a million dollars on *Qurbani* programs in 2006.

There is one possible area of agreement: politics. Muslim Aid, like several United Methodist agencies, has been sharply critical of U.S. and Israeli policies in the Middle East. During last year's conflict in Lebanon, Muslim Aid's chairman called the Israeli military strikes against Hezbollah targets "a naked act of aggression" and "a cruelly disproportionate response." ☒

PARTNERSHIP The Rev. R. Randy Day (center) and Farooq Murad (left) shake hands following the signing of an historic partnership between the United Methodist Committee on Relief and Muslim Aid.



Ginny Underwood/JUMINS

challenged by a lesbian couple seeking to use the campground's boardwalk pavilion for a same-sex union ceremony.

The couple, Harriet Bernstein and Luisa Paster, submitted a request to use the facility in September. When told by campground officials that United Methodist policy did not condone same-sex unions, the two women filed a complaint

with the New Jersey Division of Civil Rights.

The complainants cited the state's law against discrimination based on sexual orientation, as well as the recent decision by the state legislature to grant legal status to same-sex unions. "In an apparent distortion of the First Amendment, [camp trustees] are claiming that they have the

right to discriminate against people who do not share their religious tenets,” said Bernstein.

The campground, founded in 1869, regularly hosts religious services at the pavilion. Of the 188 official events held at the pavilion in 2006, almost all were specifically religious in nature.

The New Jersey public advocate has argued that the structure bears no religious marks, allows access to the general public, and is therefore a “public accommodation” that cannot claim a religious exemption from the law.

Camp trustees have initiated a lawsuit against state officials in order to avoid being compelled to host the same-sex union ceremony. 📄

Muslim, Christian Groups to Fast on Columbus Day to Protest Iraq War

A group of ecumenical and interfaith organizations will take part in an “interfaith fast” on October 8—“the day officially known as ‘Columbus Day’”—in an attempt to “educate people in our religious communities about electing a president and representatives who are committed to ending this war [in Iraq].”

Organizations participating in the fast, officially entitled “From Conquest to Community, From Violence to Reverence: An Interfaith Fast to End the War in Iraq,” include the National Council of Churches, the Islamic Society of North America, the Council on American Islamic Relations, *Sojourners* magazine, and the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society.

“American culture, society, and policy are addicted to violence at home and overseas. The day we officially call ‘Columbus Day’ is overlaid with a history of violence and conquest,” claimed event organizers in a press release. “In our time, the hope of a decent future is endangered by an unnecessary, morally abhorrent, and disastrous war.” The press release lumped together Isaiah, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, and Cesar Chavez as examples of those who have used fasting as a means to social and political change.

Organizers noted that many religions “share a season of sacred self-assessment and self-transformation” in the fall. They saw this common theme in the Jewish High Holy Days, Christian Worldwide Communion Day, Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday, and the Islamic “Night of Power” during the Ramadan fast. 📄

“Sinners,” “Repentance” Viewed as Exclusionary Terms at Lutheran Assembly

An initiative encouraging Bible reading among members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was adopted at the denomination’s biennial Churchwide Assembly, after amendments were made to remove the words “sinners” and “repentance” from the proposal.

The assembly, the governing body of the 4.8 million member denomination, considered the initiative “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible.” The initiative

aimed to raise the church’s “individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency, deeper worship and devotion, and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture.”

A proposed amendment sought to emphasize “the distinctive Lutheran focus on God’s use of Scripture to bring sinners to repentance and salvation in Christ.” After some objected that the term “sinners” was exclusionary, 86 percent of assembly voting members chose to substitute “all” in place of “sinners.”

Voting member Jason Dey of the Maryland-Delaware Synod then moved to replace “repentance” with “faith,” arguing that “salvation comes through faith, not repentance.” His motion was passed on a 54 percent vote. The significantly altered amendment was then defeated by 71 percent of the assembly, and the original proposal was adopted overwhelmingly. 📄

Outrageous Quotes

“But I must tell you, I have a hard time even thinking of [the IRD and other reform-minded groups and individuals within the mainline church denominations] as sisters and brothers. But you, who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and others who work so hard to create and restore human relationships, are doing the will of God. You are my sisters and brothers.”

Shanta Premawardhana, Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations for the National Council of Churches (NCC), addressing the Islamic Society of North America on September 2, 2007.

“Paganism has an important role to play in American religious culture as it explicitly regards women as capable of embodying the sacred. It has been my personal experience that conservative Christianity in particular regards all women, regardless of their faith, as vaguely Pagan. Christian conservatives do not value women’s religious leadership as highly as that of males. Women are called the ‘weaker vessel’ and considered less capable of embodying the sacred. This is why women are not ordained by Catholics and conservative Protestants. Women are deemed incapable of ‘imaging Christ.’”

The Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite, President of Chicago Theological Seminary (UCC), in a July 6 article for The Washington Post blog On Faith.



Barack Obama and Bill Moyers Rouse Birthday Fete for United Church of Christ

by Matthew May

The United Church of Christ (UCC) celebrated its 50th birthday with rousing addresses from Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) and PBS commentator Bill Moyers, both of whom are UCC members. Also speaking was disgruntled former Republican strategist Kevin Phillips, another PBS commentator. This line-up of speakers lent a sharp partisan edge to the gathering of the liberal denomination, which advertises its “extravagant hospitality” to all.

All three speakers fingered the “Religious Right” as a threat to American democracy. Moyers specifically warned against the Institute on Religion and Democracy for supposedly attempting to disrupt the UCC. None of the three offered any criticisms that might apply particularly to the left-leaning UCC audience.

The 1.2-million-member UCC has lost nearly one million members over the last 40 years. Its decline has accelerated since its formal endorsement of same-sex “marriage” two years ago.

Although tracing its origins back to New England’s early Puritans, the UCC was formally organized

in 1957. Its 26th General Synod met June 22-26 in Hartford, Connecticut.

Wasting no time getting political, the UCC leadership unveiled an anti-Iraq War statement on the synod’s first day, to enthusiastic applause. The statement condemned the “arrogant unilateralism of preemptive war” and apologized for the UCC’s supposed “silent witness” to the deaths of Americans and Iraqis.

UCC General Minister and President John H. Thomas said at a press conference preceding the opening session that the Iraq operation was “conceived in deception, carried on in arrogance, and has led to legal and moral decay in both domestic and foreign policy.”

Moyers Congratulates the ‘Prophetic Voice’

On June 23, PBS commentator and former Lyndon Johnson aide Bill Moyers congratulated the UCC for its “prophetic voice against the militarism, materialism, and racism that chokes our nation’s arteries.” For this stand, Moyers added, the UCC “has been attacked” by “well-financed” groups who endeavor to “stifle speaking truth to power.” Later, Moyers specifically warned against the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) and recommended *Steeplejacking*, a recently published book accusing groups like the IRD of a deliberate campaign to destroy the UCC.

Moyers interspersed his critique of conservative Christians with complaints about a general erosion of accountability in government and the media. Arguing that poverty and injustice have historically been “intentionally-willed priorities,” Moyers declared that

Moyers specifically warned against the IRD for supposedly attempting to disrupt the UCC.

HIJACKING (ABOVE) Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama chose the 50th anniversary of the United Church of Christ as the opportunity to give his first major speech on faith and politics. In the speech, he accused his political opponents of “hijacking” faith. (ZUMA Press)

“nothing seems to embarrass the political class of today.”

The famed PBS commentator cited statistics indicating growing income and educational disparity, lower wages, and 45 million Americans without health insurance. Moyers also noted that a recent UNICEF “report card” ranked the United States among the most dismal of industrialized nations regarding child well-being.

These conditions directly result from a coordinated conservative strategy to establish a society of haves and have-nots, Moyers claimed. Conservatives aim to “destroy public resources and take them for private interests.” Moyers specifically blamed “corporate activism, intellectual propaganda, the rise of a political religion of fundamentalism deeply opposed to any civil and human right that threatens its paternalism, and a series of political decisions favoring the interests of wealthy elites who bought the political system right out from under us.”

Moyers linked President Bush to disgraced former Enron chief Kenneth Lay, citing the alleged close connection as an example of the “ruthless war” being prosecuted against average Americans. “What is happening in America is not right,” Moyers charged. The United States “was not meant to be a country where the winner takes all,” he maintained. During his childhood and adulthood, Moyers said, “America was a shared project. Not now.”

Arguing that “America’s revolutionary heritage is under siege” and that “we can lose our democracy” if churches such as the UCC fail to take a stand, Moyers issued an “altar call.” When Jesus overturned the moneychangers’ tables, there was “no cheek turned there,” Moyers said. “Jesus passed judgment and took action. Indignant at a profane violation of the sacred, Jesus threw the rascals out.”

To sustained applause, Moyers complained, “The religious right hijacked Jesus.” Conservatives have “turned him

into a militarist, a hedonist, a lobbyist,” Moyers alleged. But to see whose side Jesus is really on, he directed the audience to “go to the record.”

“Poverty and justice are religious issues,” Moyers concluded, “and Jesus moves among the disinherited. Let’s call that Jesus back to duty, and drive the moneychangers from the temples of democracy.”

Obama Delivers a Campaign Address

Moyers was the UCC’s morning keynote, with Barack Obama serving as the afternoon keynote. The presidential aspirant’s speech was billed in advance as his first major campaign address on faith and politics.

Americans are “hungry for change, desperate for change,” and looking to “relieve a chronic loneliness,” Obama

To sustained applause, Moyers complained, “The religious right hijacked Jesus.” Conservatives have “turned him into a militarist, a hedonist, a lobbyist,” Moyers alleged.

observed from his experiences on the campaign trail. Obama remembered his own faith journey and called his decision to join the UCC “a choice, not an epiphany.” He said, “I felt I heard God’s spirit beckoning me” to carry out good works.

Recalling the UCC’s political heritage from the Boston Tea Party to abolition and the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s, Obama said that as to the notion of a complete separation of church and state, “I dispute that.” He pointed to Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address and John F. Kennedy’s reminder that “God’s work must truly be our own” as examples of elected officials using their faith to unify citizens. “But somehow,” Obama said, “faith started being used to drive people apart. It got hijacked.” When groups such as the Christian Coalition “determined that its number one priority was tax cuts for the rich,” Obama said he “didn’t know what Bible they were reading.”

There is an awakening in America, Obama said, and a growing realization that “I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper, and that I can pray all day but I must do the Lord’s work.”

Obama said the country’s values should be expressed through government. “Our problems are moral problems,” he contended. “There’s a spiritual dimension to everything we do. Our conscience cannot rest.” Obama vowed to “care for the least of these” as president. He gave a “solemn pledge to sign universal healthcare legislation” by 2013.

Demanding the immediate closure of the U.S. detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Obama insisted that the United States must “stop tolerating torture. That’s not what we are, UCC. That’s not what we are, America. It offends our conscience to suspend *habeas corpus*.”

He did not suggest what should be done with the terrorism suspects detained at Guantánamo.

As for Iraq, which he called a “moral problem,” Obama drew his loudest applause when declaring that the war “never should have

been authorized or waged.” He added that he had been against the war from the start, prior to his election as a U.S. senator. He noted that he had unsuccessfully introduced legislation to bring all U.S. troops home from Iraq by March 31, 2008.

Historian Kevin Phillips, the author most recently of *American Theocracy*, predicted that the United States would likely decline as a great power. Citing parallels between America and earlier imperial powers such as Rome, Spain, and Great Britain, Phillips blamed the sinister influence of Christian conservatives, the weight of public debt, over-dependence upon a single energy source, and military overreach in places like Iraq. He echoed the warning in his book that the “Bush coalition,” if unchecked, “will bring a preacher-ridden, debt-bloated, energy-crippled America to its knees.”

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Same Song, Second Verse

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Postpones Decisions on Sexuality...Again

by Steve R. Rempe

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

In 2005, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was to vote on three recommendations by a task force on human sexuality. The resulting tally was to once-and-for-all determine the position and trajectory for the 4.8 million-member denomination as regards matters of same-sex unions and the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

However, a less-than-definitive conclusion to the 2005 Assembly assured the return of these issues to future assemblies. Now the 2007 Assembly, held August

6-11 in Chicago, has passed the buck on to 2009. Moreover, its actions have added to the sense of indeterminacy in the denomination. While refusing to change the ELCA's standard that "[o]rdained ministers who are homosexual in their

self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships," this year's Assembly has asked church officials "to refrain from and demonstrate restraint in disciplining" those in violation of the standard.

A Return to the Issues

The stage was set in Chicago for yet another clash on sexuality issues. Opponents of the church's standard were riled by the decision of an ELCA discipline

hearing committee in February to remove a sexually-active gay man from his Atlanta pulpit. They came to Chicago determined to push resolutions that would end the denomination's "discrimination" against homosexual relationships and clergy members involved in such relationships. Twenty-one ELCA synods sent such resolutions to the Assembly's Memorials Committee. Most of these resolutions were drafted by Goodsoil, the main group coordinating the push for affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) behaviors within the ELCA.

The Memorials Committee recommended deferment of all these issues until the 2009 Assembly, which will receive a proposed social statement on human sexuality from the denomination's Sexuality Task Force. The Goodsoil activists, however, were not inclined to wait until 2009.

The first issue brought before the Assembly was the blessing of same-sex unions. The Rev. Nancy Nord-Bence of Minneapolis encouraged voting members to envision the Holy Spirit, not as a dove, but rather a rabbit, darting unpredictably in many different directions. "The rabbit is bounding through the ELCA now as we consider full inclusion," she said. "I encourage us to put on our running shoes and chase that rabbit!"

But the Assembly was not in a mood to chase rabbits. It voted, 733 to 278, to follow the Memorials Committee recommendation and refer the issue back to the Sexuality Task Force.

The more complex issue of rostering clergy in active homosexual relationships followed. Bishop Paul Stumme-Diers of the Greater Milwaukee Synod introduced a substitute resolution that sought to remove the expectation that

A less-than-definitive conclusion to the 2005 Assembly assured the return of these issues to future assemblies.

SPINNING (ABOVE) Bishop Paul Landahl tries to explain the ELCA's actions in a press conference after the conclusion of the Assembly. (Courtesy ELCA)

Presiding Bishop Re-elected, Swartling Elected Secretary

The two most visible positions within the ELCA were up for election in 2007.

The reelection of Mark Hanson as the presiding bishop of the denomination was hardly unexpected. Only a quirk in the assembly voting rules kept the popular presiding bishop from receiving the 75 percent approval necessary for election on the first ballot. Hanson was elected overwhelmingly on the second ballot. His second term will conclude in 2013.

While the presiding bishop remained the same, the office of denominational secretary promised its first change in 20 years. The Rev. Lowell Almen, elected to the position at the first Churchwide Assembly in 1987, had decided to retire.

The position of secretary in the ELCA is one of significant influence. The secretary serves as gatekeeper for information coming in and out of the denomination's Chicago headquarters, primary historian, and constitutional interpreter.

After several ballots, David Swartling, an attorney from Seattle serving as the Assembly's parliamentarian, was elected as the new secretary. A lay member, Swartling appeared to be a compromise selection—a bit of an unknown entity with impeccable qualifications and no real track record—whose greatest asset was that he had no apparent ties to either the conservative WordAlone/Lutheran CORE group or the liberal Lutherans Concerned/Goodsoil contingent.

ministers “abstain from homosexual sexual relationships.”

Ultimately, the proposal from Stumme-Diers was defeated 581-450. A second proposal to allow a “local option” for individual synods was also defeated 520-472. The decision to refer the matter to the task force was then approved by 83 percent of the Assembly.

Gutting the Rules

Things got more complicated on the last day of Assembly business, when Bishop Paul Landahl of the Chicago Synod offered another substitute motion. Landahl wanted to “urg[e] and encourag[e]” synods and bishops “to refrain from and demonstrate restraint in disciplining those congregations and persons who call into the rostered ministry otherwise-qualified candidates who are in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same gender relationship.”

“The hospitality we claim is not being carried through,” declared Landahl. “There has to be something for those of us who live in this context. We pray that someone here today will listen to us and grant us some breathing space to do what God is calling us to do [i.e., to ordain persons in violation of the ELCA standard].”

Others agreed that a “ceasefire” would be the “pastoral thing to do,” but the Rev. Timothy Whiteman from the Northwest Washington Synod raised an objection: “I think it is very important that if we are going to talk about a ceasefire, if we are going to talk about restraint, then we need to stop ordaining and placing those people

who would be subject to the provision of the discipline of the church. The ceasefire needs to come from both sides, not just simply stop prosecuting, but stop placing.”

Whiteman's sensible observation was largely ignored, and the assembly adopted Landahl's substitute motion 538-431.

Confusion Reigns

There was almost an immediate sense of confusion as to what this vote actually meant. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson was quick to point out that—officially—the church policy was unchanged. “These are words of counsel,” he said. “They are not words that change the standards of the church.”

Secular media outlets struggled to understand the implications. “Lutherans to Allow Pastors in Gay Relationships,” said a Reuters headline, while the *Chicago Sun-Times* proclaimed, “Lutherans Don't Change on Gays.”

Those involved in the process, however, seemed to have a clearer understanding.

A Goodsoil press release entitled “A Crack in the Dam” predicted that this would be just the first step in an inevitable process of undoing the ELCA's historic standard. “Today this church moved one giant step from the punitive rejection of partnered LGBT ministers to the willing tolerance of them,” Goodsoil proclaimed. “We see this decision as interim. Full inclusion and acceptance is still down the road, but the dam of discrimination has been broken.”

Conversely, a press release from the orthodox WordAlone group lamented:

“While the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America shut the front door for now on allowing ministers in same-sex relationships to serve the denomination, they essentially told them to go to the back door and come in.”

What Does This Mean?

So, in the words of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, “What does this mean?”

The resolution urging restraint will affect most directly those moderate churches, synods, and church leaders that value adherence to denominational standards. The Goodsoil activists have already demonstrated a willingness to ignore church policy on these matters, and have routinely acted outside their authority in ordaining and placing practicing homosexuals in church office. They will likely continue in the same pattern, perhaps with greater boldness.

On the other hand, congregations and synods firmly committed to traditional and biblical teachings are not likely to alter their practice. It is the moderates, however, who will be put in the tightest bind. Should they continue to uphold the ELCA rules barring ministers in homosexual or other non-marital sexual relationships? Or should they take a hint from the Churchwide Assembly and turn a blind eye to violations of those rules?

The end result is the implicit establishment of a practice that will then be used as evidence for the acceptance of the behavior come 2009. Revisionists will be able to point to gay and lesbian clergy installed during the amnesty period and claim that to remove them at this point would be too disruptive. The argument will be that the church is too far “down the road” to return to the old expectation that clergy should abstain from non-marital sexual relationships.

Can the current policies be sustained in the wake of this subtle but significant shift in practice? It remains to be seen. The next “final” conclusion to these issues will occur in August 2009. ☞



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Ralph A. Webb

Worlds Apart

The Episcopal Church's Executive Council and the Anglican Communion Network

by Ralph A. Webb

This summer, two important meetings illustrated the divergent directions of progressive and orthodox Anglicans in the United States.

First, the Episcopal Church's Executive Council met in Parsippany, NJ, from June 11–14. The Executive Council is one of the major leadership bodies within the denomination; it meets three times a year to deal with Episcopal Church governance in the three years between General Conventions.

Second, the Anglican Communion Network (ACN) held its annual council meeting in Bedford, TX, from July 30–31. The ACN is, as its name suggests, a network of orthodox Anglicans both inside and outside the Episcopal Church. Since its formation in early

2004, it has been a major voice of orthodox Anglicanism in the United States.

Both meetings were held against the backdrop of a tense time in the international Anglican Communion. The primates of Anglican Communion provinces had issued a communiqué that followed their February meeting in Tanzania. In it, the primates had requested the following of the Episcopal Church:

- That the denomination's House of Bishops would, by September 30, 2007, assure the primates of the denomination's reversal of course regarding the blessing of same-sex unions and the consent to the

consecration of bishops in same-sex relationships

- That the Episcopal Church would participate in a "pastoral scheme" designed to provide pastoral relief for orthodox Anglicans in the Episcopal Church and mend the deep divisions between the Episcopal Church and the rest of the Anglican Communion
- That all parties involved in lawsuits over church property—including the Episcopal Church itself—would end their legal actions immediately

Against this backdrop, the two meetings proved to be vastly different. In fact, they demonstrated vividly the gap in worldviews between the groups.

Different Foci

Liberal Social Action

Other than dealing with budgetary questions, the Executive Council paid primary attention to a variety of liberal social action issues. Immigration, racism, abortion, and gay and lesbian rights were just some of the topics touched upon by the council:

- It passed a resolution supporting the New Sanctuary Movement, a movement that aims to give illegal immigrants church-based support. (See p. 1 of the Summer 2007 *Anglican Action Briefing*.)
- John Vanderstar, chair of the National Concerns Committee, urged the council to follow up on the work of the 2006 General Convention's resolution A123, in which the Episcopal Church apologized for slavery and instructed its Committee on Anti-

The two meetings proved to be vastly different—in fact, they demonstrated vividly the gap in worldviews between the groups.

Racism to study what amends could be made by the denomination.

- Vanderstar also expressed the church's commitment to staying in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a pro-abortion organization. In response to controversy, however, he claimed that membership does not mean that the Episcopal Church agrees with everything the RCRC does.
- Davis Mac-Iyalla, a gay Nigerian who founded and heads the Changing Attitude Nigeria gay rights organization, told a story of persecution. He asked the council to fund his organization and also advocated starting a progressive Anglican church in Nigeria. (The council did not respond positively to either notion.)

Unity

The ACN, in contrast, was concerned with unity as its overarching theme and consequently spent most of its business time discussing documents aimed at bringing orthodox Anglicans together. The ACN is one of 10 partners in the Common Cause Partnership (CCP, also known as "Common Cause"), a network of North American orthodox Anglican bodies.

Nonetheless, there were differences even among the ACN members that threatened to prevent them from ratifying two Common Cause documents: the Theological Statement of the Common Cause Partnership and the Articles of the Common Cause Partnership. The most controversial issue was women's ordination. Most members of Common Cause do not approve of women's ordination, but some do, and the members of the ACN itself hold mixed views. The concerns led The Rt. Rev. Robert Duncan, Bishop of Pittsburgh, to say, "If we're not able to trust each other ... then we may as well all go home."

In the end, the two documents were ratified, but with some suggested amendments that would be sent to Common Cause for consideration. Regarding women's ordination, the Rev. Jim Simons of the Diocese of Pittsburgh was instrumental in crafting a resolution that

proposes adding a new article to the Articles of the Common Cause Partnership. The suggested new article reads, "Members of the CCP recognize that they hold differing views regarding the ordination of women and pledge themselves that they recognize and honor the positions and practices on this issue of others in the CCP."

Different Views Regarding the Anglican Communion

An Underlying Hostility

While they clearly are highly motivated to pursue progressive causes, Executive Council members could not ignore the need for the Episcopal Church to respond to the Anglican Communion primates. In March, the denomination's House of Bishops had determinedly rejected the primates' pastoral scheme and urged the Executive Council to do the same.

At its June meeting, the Executive Council followed the House of Bishops' advice and asked Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori to refrain from participating in the pastoral scheme in any manner. It also argued that the House of Bishops should not respond to the primates' requests regarding same-sex blessings and consents to the consecrations of bishops, arguing that only the Episcopal Church's General Convention could do that.

The council's conclusions on Anglican Communion issues were expressed in a final document entitled "The Episcopal Church's Commitment to Common Life in the Anglican Communion," dated June 14. In that document, despite its expression of "most earnest hope" to pursue "mission" with other Anglican Communion provinces, and its declaration of concern for "our relationships as Anglicans," the Executive Council essentially made no movement toward the primates. Instead, it chastised the primates for their requests.

A Reform Movement

While the prevailing *modus operandi* at the Executive Council was to stay on course regarding what is commonly called the "full inclusion" of gays and

lesbians, the ACN bishops were embarked on a new course. They saw their network as a reform movement that would have impact far beyond Anglicanism. Bishop Keith Ackerman of the Diocese of Quincy concluded that there is a "new orthodoxy" across denominations that will reform the entire Church, not just the Anglican Communion.

From Duncan's perspective, reform within Anglicanism will likely occur only through establishing new Anglican structures, not depending on the old ones. Regarding the September House of Bishops meeting, at which the bishops will meet with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams before they respond to the primates, Duncan said, "We don't see any likelihood that the Episcopal Church will turn around ... we see such a hardness of heart that we wonder whether God is not hardening hearts so that his glory can be shown."

And reform, from the network's position, means unity among orthodox Anglicans—practical unity in smaller matters now, and unity in one church body later. "We do have the charism for unity among our partners, and we ... with God's great help and protection, fulfilled that yet again in supporting the Common Cause partnership," Duncan concluded at the end of the council. One symbol of that unity was the presence of representatives of five different Common Cause partners at the council meeting, including members of two church bodies that had left the Episcopal Church decades earlier.

And so Duncan affirmed, "The purpose [of the Network] is certainly to be the Church." As he had spoken pastorally at the beginning of the council, so the moderator did at the end: "We are in the midst of a Good Friday ... but I'd say the evidence of this council is that Easter's approaching." 📖



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The Anglican Communion Network and the Episcopal Church on Marriage: A Study in Contrasts

by Ralph A. Webb

While it was not on the agenda at the Anglican Communion Network (ACN) meeting July 30–31 in Bedford, TX, the defense of marriage was a topic that surfaced repeatedly.

Archbishop Gregory Venables, Anglican primate of the Southern Cone, was the first to raise the issue. Speaking during a devotional time, Venables cried, “Marriage is God’s idea, and it’s holy! You can’t bless something that isn’t marriage! ... You cannot imagine that Holy Marriage can be coupled up with something else!”

Would that the passion so evident in Archbishop Venables were echoed by the Episcopal Church! For despite its wonderful marriage liturgy, the Episcopal Church has lost sight of one of the most wonderful treasures over which God has permitted it to keep watch.

The Undermining of Marriage

“Marriage is God’s idea, and it’s holy! ... You cannot imagine that Holy Marriage can be coupled up with something else!” Many Episcopal Church clergy praise “faithful, committed, monogamous, loving relationships.” Accordingly, in some localities, they bless unmarried heterosexual or homosexual couples. In doing so, they undermine the very institution of marriage.

One of the more extreme examples of this tendency comes from the Diocese of Vermont. A 2004 diocesan task force report equated same-sex unions with marriage: “What is blessed is the same. What is asked of the couple is the same. What is asked of the community is the same love and support.”

Even more astonishing is this statement from St. George’s Episcopal Church, Maplewood, NJ: “St. George’s, in full accordance with the policies of

the Diocese of Newark, offers same sex couples recognition and access to all sacraments, including Civil Unions.”

The idea that civil unions are *sacraments* is not directly stated on the Diocese of Newark’s website, but the belief that they are *sacramental* is clearly there. Just-retired Bishop John Palmer Croneberger announced in his January 2001 diocesan address that he had approved liturgies “to sacramentally make real that which is already true in the lives of gay and lesbian persons living in faithful, committed, monogamous relationships.”

Extending Blessings Beyond Marriage—or Stopping All Blessings

“You can’t bless something that isn’t marriage!” To the contrary, the Episcopal Church allows local parishes to use liturgies of same-sex blessing, given approval from their diocesan bishop.

But there’s another trend occurring in the Episcopal Church: one in which parishes and potentially dioceses either temporarily “fast” from marriages or stop performing weddings altogether. In the latter case, the churches bless only marriages that already have been performed by the state—thus turning all marriages or civil unions into essentially a civil, not religious, matter. Both trends reflect a point of view that basically argues, “If gays and lesbians can’t be married, no one should be able to be married.”

At perhaps the most extreme end, Grace Church in Amherst, MA, is “fasting” from marriages until the spring of 2008 because its rector and vestry feel that it is unjust for gays and lesbians to be denied the opportunity to marry. They want to bless something that is not marriage, and so they refuse to celebrate real marriages.

Such an attitude is not limited to

one local parish. Diocesan resolutions asking for the church to stop performing weddings, and to bless only marriages that have already been recognized by the state, failed this year in both Massachusetts and New Jersey. Similar resolutions undoubtedly will arise elsewhere.

A Countercultural Stance

Archbishop Venables told the ACN members that they would have to “[set themselves] apart” from the Episcopal Church in their higher view of marriage. Bishop Robert Duncan of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the ACN moderator, drew the distinction in criticizing the Episcopal Church’s responses to two bishops-elect: “The [2006] convention approved a bishop [the Rev. Canon Barry L. Beisner, Bishop Coadjutor of Northern California] who was in his third marriage. Conversely, the Episcopal Church cannot approve the new Bishop of South Carolina [the Rev. Mark Lawrence] who has only had one wife.”

Other ACN bishops also spoke of the importance of upholding marriage, as a countercultural witness against the revisionist actions of the Episcopal Church. Bishop Keith Ackerman of the Diocese of Quincy stressed that marriage involves “dispens[ing] grace” in a way that is impossible with any other type of relationship. He, like other ACN bishops, saw the need for the Christian church to “[p]roclaim, guard, and defend what [it] has ... received” from God—including Holy Matrimony. ☩



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When Goals Coincide

Vermont's New Same-Sex Marriage Commission and the Episcopal Church

by Ralph A. Webb

The only clergy member on a new 11-member commission studying whether Vermont is ready for same-sex marriage is an Episcopal priest involved in a same-sex “civil union.”

According to an article in the August 12 *Burlington Free Press*:

The Rev. Nancy Vogeles, an Episcopal minister in White River Junction, is apparently the only gay member of the commission. She said she has a civil union and would like marriage herself, but emphasized that the commission's work is not about her. “I think we're here to listen to what Vermonters have to say.”

Vermont legislative leaders stacked the commission with proponents of same-sex marriage.

They left out religious people who understand marriage as the God-ordained union of one man and one woman. The *Free Press* reported Vermont House Speaker Nancy Symington's explanation of why she rejected the idea of appointing the Roman Catholic Bishop of Burlington: “The Catholic bishop ... cannot by the nature of his position have an open mind about the issue. ‘That would be an impossible position to put the bishop in,’ Symington said.”

Apparently, Symington and her colleagues did not have the same misgivings about the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Vermont. Twenty-four of its clergy, including Vogeles, have signed the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force's (VFMTF's) “Vermont Declaration of Religious Support for the Freedom of Same-Gender Couples to Marry.”

As during last fall's state marriage amendment referenda and at the Executive Council earlier this year, Episcopal Church leaders have taken an active political

stance against traditional marriage. Additionally, some local parishes openly practice same-sex blessings. Others have spoken out against any accommodation of the request, from the provincial primates of the international Anglican Communion, that Episcopal Church bishops should halt all same-sex blessings.

For example, the vestry of St. James Episcopal Church in Arlington, VT, wrote a June 30 letter in which it commended its bishop, the Rt. Rev. Thomas Ely, for his “unwillingness to sacrifice justice for gay and lesbian people in our church ‘for the sake of a false and deceptive unity.’” In this case, “unity” would have meant going

Vermont legislative leaders stacked the commission with proponents of same-sex marriage.

along with the primates' requests.

A St. James parish committee did not like the idea of a covenant binding Anglican provinces to “seek with other members ... a common mind about matters of essential concern, consistent with the Scriptures.” The committee warned, “The [covenant] proposal originates in a ‘Devil's bargain’ between some American churches and some African Bishops who take a bigoted stance toward homosexuals.” It took particular umbrage at the thought of “some Primates ... decid[ing] what is ‘moral.’”

The Diocese of Vermont as a whole is no less resolute in its revisionism. A 2004 diocesan task force report on same-sex blessings equated civil unions with marriage: “What is blessed is the same. What is asked of the couple is the same. What is asked of the community is the same love and support.” The report also contained two “trial liturgies” for civil unions.

A 2005 diocesan resolution took a

strong stand against biblically “literalistic approaches that have oppressed/marginalized certain groups ... especially ... gays and lesbians.” Not content to stop there, the resolution drafters outrageously linked biblical literalism with pro-slavery attitudes. The clear message was that those today who uphold the scriptural prohibitions against homosexuality are comparable to 19th century apologists for slavery.

The diocese also has summarily dismissed the proposed Anglican covenant: “We consider the type of Covenant proposed ... a betrayal of what we pray for, what we labor to make present and what we daily welcome ... The very concept

of a Covenant is a new phenomenon within Anglicanism, and the model of communion it proposes is unrecognizable and unacceptable.” The diocese argued that a covenant contradicts the example of Jesus Christ, who it believes “had little patience with [a] multitude of laws.” To the diocese, a covenant that sets any boundaries and imposes any type of discipline is unthinkable.

Given the diocese's clear direction in favor of same-sex marriage, it's not surprising that a state commission stacked in that same direction would include an openly gay, partnered Episcopal priest as one of its members. The Diocese of Vermont, in its internal life as well as its public witness, well reflects the Episcopal Church as a whole. It is a denomination whose presiding bishop has stated candidly, “The full inclusion of gay and lesbian people is part of our mission.” ☒



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Presbyterian Social Witness Committee Not Happy Merely Advising

by James D. Berkley

“It’s hard for me to understand how one can be a Presbyterian and not have an active social conscience,” mused Gloria Albrecht, a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). Albrecht and others at the committee’s June meeting evidenced uneasiness with ACSWP’s relative obscurity and lack of influence. Nor were they happy about Presbyterians’ propensity to ignore or even to oppose the committee’s work. Indeed, ACSWP apparently wants to arrogate further powers to itself.

Members in general evidenced great uneasiness with their committee’s relative obscurity and lack of influence.

Three themes kept appearing at this meeting: First, ACSWP was wrestling with its role and authority, itching to expand its influence. Second, it kept lamenting—Rodney Dangerfield-like—about how it “don’t get no respect.” And third, ACSWP evidenced a rather low opinion of Presbyterians in general, and a rather high estimate of how greatly they need the committee’s direction.

What Is ACSWP’s Role?

“We’re not to advocate, but to advise,” counseled ACSWP member Ron Kernaghan at one point in the meeting, “and then the General Assembly decides on its policy.... Our existence is in response to what is put before us by the General Assembly.” How true! But then Kernaghan couldn’t help slipping in, “Occasionally we

will propose something to go before General Assembly.”

Barry Creech, denominational Coordinator of Information and Planning, understands how things ought to work. “It would seem that your basic audience is [General Assembly] commissioners,” he proposed, “and your message is ‘This is our best advice to give on this policy.’” Creech understood something the ACSWP members were still struggling to admit: The committee exists to advise General Assembly in regard to social witness issues. The committee’s charter is not to champion its own pet causes or to proactively instruct the denomination on whatever it thinks others should advocate.

But ACSWP veterans weren’t quite prepared to give up. “Advisory [as in Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy] has a formal meaning in regard to General Assembly,” Coordinator Chris Iosso acknowledged, “but it also has an informal meaning.” And then Iosso deftly stretched the ACSWP charter: “The committee’s primary identity is to be in synch with the church’s primary identity, which is spiritual formation and nurture.” In other words, Iosso claimed that ACSWP is supposed to be about anything the church does.

Should the ACSWP role include twisting arms? ACSWP appears eager to move from advising General Assembly to serving as an instructor of the church. For instance, is it legitimate for ACSWP task forces to use General Assembly money to go out and lobby the church to adopt their papers?

Historically, according to Sara Lisherness, Director of Peace and Justice, ACSWP’s responsibility was never intended “to help people really wrestle with and engage



MISSION CREEP ACSWP leaders ruminate over their mission, but are discontented with their charter's limitations. Rather than fulfill their advisory function, members prefer to see the body in an activist role. (James D. Berkley/IRD)

the issues." ACSWP was expected to help people understand what a paper is saying, but it wasn't tasked with convincing people to buy into it.

But longtime staff social activist Vernon Broyles disagreed. "I can't imagine that it is not in the overall [ACSWP] mandate to find ways to get [a policy] interpreted and integrated into the life of the church," he pronounced. "It shouldn't be a problem to use the money not only to make the policy but to get it introduced into the life of the church." Thus, apparently by his decree alone, the job of ACSWP has grown from modestly advising General Assembly into using General Assembly money to convince it to accept whatever ACSWP proposes!

No Respect?

An annoying reality kept dogging ACSWP: the fact that not many people pay all that much attention to its work. Ron Kernaghan put it this way: "There is a big disconnect between General Assembly policy and acceptance on a congregational level."

"There is no question there is apathy [about ACSWP's work] in presbyteries and synods," Chris Iosso agreed. "We have to skip over synods and presbyteries; we have to go directly to the church members.... There are disconnects in almost every aspect of General Assembly's work."

Indeed there are! But until General Assembly and ACSWP in particular start hearing from and representing those they consider the vast unwashed masses in the church, ACSWP's speaking louder and more stridently is not going to bridge that gap.

"We have an ever-increasing critical

problem," Kernaghan persisted. "The problem is of such proportions that ACSWP can't interpret itself to the whole church. It can interpret itself only to parts of the church." The problem is that ACSWP's opinion is not respected by a large portion of the church, whose concerns remain largely unrepresented, devalued, and ignored by ACSWP.

What Does ACSWP Think of the Rest of Us?

In general, ACSWP considers the rest of the church sorely in need of its instruction. "We work hard on an issue that we

An annoying reality kept dogging ACSWP: the fact that not many people pay all that much attention to its work.

think is hot and on fire, but can we light a fire under the people out there?" asked ACSWP member Jack Terry wistfully. In other words, how can we get them to be as worked up as we are about our particular analyses and solutions?

The problem is that "national policies don't get to the local church," according to member Gloria Albrecht, apparently adhering to a top-down model of church government, where the local church is on standby, waiting for instructions from the home office. Albrecht further voiced concern that "what churches around the world are saying to First World churches is not getting down to congregations." Apparently the local church, while waiting for headquarters directives, should tune in its short-wave radio for international orders, as well.

"If we contend that the PCUSA is a

community of significant discourse, we kid ourselves," warned Joe Small, Director of Theology, Worship, and Education. He lamented the shallow level of consideration of most matters in our governing bodies. "We are no longer in the church a cohesive community of shared belief," Small observed. "We've spent decades celebrating diversity, so it should come as no surprise that there is no cohesion in regard to theology." That explains a lot!

Because We Want to!

At one point ACSWP member Bill Saint narrowed in on a key issue. "We could have our goal be: Because we want to publish this report!" he offered, only partly in jest. ACSWP mixes a large measure of cocksure "Because we want to!" into its actions, along with a healthy dollop of altruistically wanting to change lives.

ACSWP appears certain that its brand of religious socio-political theory is something every church and every thinking Christian should want to adopt. Because of this mindset, it can hardly constrain itself to dutifully perform only the necessary tasks General Assembly assigns. Instead, it yearns to arrogate responsibilities not delegated to it, to the end that every congregation, yea the entire nation, turn into its ideological twin, which, ACSWP might argue, would only be appropriate. ☒



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United Church of Christ (Almost) Learns From Presbyterians

by James D. Berkley

This June in Hartford, Connecticut, the United Church of Christ (UCC) took a major step toward evenhanded treatment of Palestinian and Israeli interests. At its General Synod meeting, the UCC adopted a resolution somewhat similar to the Israel-divestment retraction issued by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at its 2006 General Assembly.

The UCC General Synod resolution acknowledged that two of its resolutions from 2005 focused criticism entirely on Israel and that the General Synod “has yet to fully address other forces contributing to the ongoing violence, oppression and suffering in the region.”

The statement also indicated significant reconsideration of the 2005 resolutions: “The escalating violence between Fatah and Hamas now calls us to consider whether we may have overlooked many aspects of an extraordinarily complicated situation.”

“As a peacemaker,” the resolution rationale explained, “the Church in all of its settings must continue to speak out whenever violence, hatred, and oppression occur, standing in support of all who are oppressed and subjected to injustice.” Therefore, the General Synod established “a Task Force to engage in ongoing and balanced study of the causes, history and context of the conflict.”

The IRD praised the magnanimity of the United Church of Christ in this action, saying in a press release that the UCC “has recognized the narrow partiality of its previous resolutions and is willing to admit that the situation in the Middle East is not readily reducible to good-guy Palestinians versus bad-guy Israelis—or vice versa.”

The IRD recognized that it was difficult to admit error and pursue a fairer and more faithful course of action that no longer placed the UCC in the untenable role of strident champion of the unsupportable. IRD also noted that in June 2006, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly set an example by replacing a 2004 resolution threatening anti-Israel divestment with a balanced resolution seeking the welfare of both Palestinians and Israelis.

How Dare You Call Us Fair!

Official UCC response to the IRD press release was immediate and astounding. Upon being congratulated for their

magnanimity and fair play, top UCC leaders lashed out at the IRD. In effect they were growling, “We most certainly were *not* trying to be fair!” The indignity expressed over the notion that perhaps UCC was being wise and evenhanded was nearly comical.

All too often the IRD finds itself needing to blow the whistle on something going wrong. Thus, commending the UCC had been a joy. Because the IRD press release was warm and generous, one would have thought that the UCC response would adopt a similar tone. Perhaps something like: “Thanks for the compliment. That’s good of you.”

However, UCC President John Thomas “expressed outrage at how some outside groups are distorting a recent action on the Middle East by the United Church of Christ.” Thomas seemed to be saying that people should have known the UCC would never be that reasonable, or that the hierarchy would never allow such fine General Synod work to remain unspun.

Even though the language of the resolution was clearly generous, and the General Synod approved it, and the public at large recognized it, Thomas appeared not about to let such technicalities ruin a perfectly good anti-Israel ideological prejudice. Instead he plowed ahead with the claim that “General Synod policy related to Israel and Palestine remains today what it was before our Synod convened.”

Not necessarily. A UCC task force will be taking a second look at factors that complicate the current policy and may recommend changes. That much was clearly set in motion by the General Synod.

The UCC leaders also seemed unwilling to pass up an opportunity to say something spiteful about the IRD, even though we had just commended them. An article distributed by Ecumenical News International noted how J. Bennett Guess, a UCC spokesperson, “said that the institute’s ‘repeated and ruthless attempts to attack, distort and demean the work and witness of mainline Protestant churches, including the United Church of Christ, are not to be trusted.’”

Upon being congratulated for their magnanimity and fair play, top UCC leaders lashed out at the IRD.



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Presbyterian News

Labor Leaders, Like PCUSA, Reject Anti-Israel Divestment

In recent years, activists for Palestinian causes have sought to rally a number of institutions into making harsh condemnations of Israel, including a call for divestment. That same bandwagon approach is now being applied to organized labor.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) first hopped on the divestment bandwagon in 2004, resolving to pursue “phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel.” After a two-year firestorm of protest ensued, both within the denomination and without, the General Assembly in 2006 wisely replaced the 2004 divestment resolution with a resolution seeking the social and economic welfare of both Israelis and Palestinians. Presbyterian Action helped commissioners reach this gracious conclusion.

Other Christian denominations and many universities have backed off of divestment or have refused to be co-opted. And now, more than two dozen trade union leaders have signed a statement urging caution and good sense to avoid being pushed into harsh calls for Israel divestment.

“Rather than divestment from Israel,” the labor leaders wrote, “we believe that investment of time, energy and material aid is the best means to alleviate the ongoing suffering of Palestinians and Israelis.” They stand opposed to union, trade, academic, and journalistic boycotts of Israel. Signatories of the statement include AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney, as well as the heads of unions representing teamsters, mine workers, electrical workers, communications workers, government workers, and other trades. ☞

Notes from the Presbyterian Washington Office

Elenora Giddings Ivory directs the Presbyterian Washington Office, a

denominational entity that lobbies the federal government, generally for liberal causes. “We try to do things within a theological context,” Ivory claimed recently. “When I hire [associates], I try to get people coming from a theological context, rather than people who know Capitol Hill.” One would only wish that the “theological context” from which Ivory draws were more mainstream Presbyterian!

Much of what the Washington Office does is far more oriented to and coordinated with activists from other denominations than it is with the actual beliefs and concerns of Presbyterians in the pew. But the number of ecumenical collaborators appears to be diminishing. “We have 50 percent less staff in all the [mainline denominational lobbying] offices to work on issues,” Ivory lamented. “As you cut our funding, we have cut funding on some of the [parachurch activist] groups.”

So how large is the Washington Office constituency? “We have about two thousand on the list—hard-core activists,” Ivory stated, roughly a tenth of a percent of some 2 million Presbyterians. About 99 percent on the list share the Washington Office’s political viewpoint, Ivory estimated. “But we are continuing to be challenged by a few people who don’t seem to like the General Assembly speaking out on issues.”

Ivory, who is resigning effective October 31, apparently does not fathom that Presbyterians can be upset with the Washington Office’s unique viewpoint on many issues that badly misrepresents what the bulk of Presbyterians profess. ☞

Activists Target PCUSA, Other Churches for Political Operations

A group called the Human Rights Campaign is spending perhaps \$20,000 or more in advertising targeted at Presbyterians and other mainline

Christians. The objective is to co-opt these churchgoers into a secular lobbying effort to legitimize homosexual practice. Churches and church groups are thought by activists to be fertile territory for their political operations. The powerful gay lobby especially covets the political wallop that religious people would deliver, if only churches could be diverted from evangelism, discipleship, missions, and ministry.

A 2006 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force entitled “David v. Goliath” thoroughly mapped out the church territory the gay lobby would love to occupy for its purposes. Of particular interest is the fact that the umbrella organization for many denominational gay caucuses—the Institute of Welcoming Resources—became essentially a wholly owned subsidiary of the secular National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in March 2006.

“The more than 1 million individuals in the 1,300 congregations supported by IWR are some of our movement’s most valuable allies in the fight to reclaim ‘moral values’ from those who try to justify anti-gay bigotry as ‘deeply held religious beliefs,’” said Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman.

Michael Adey, field organizer for the PCUSA caucus More Light Presbyterians, gushed that being subsumed by this high-power, deep-pockets, non-Christian lobbying effort was “a remarkable moment in the LGBT Movement as political and religious advocates join hands.”

Thus the advertised political attempt to re-imagine Bible passages to repudiate Scripture’s unbending counsel on sexual morality comes as no surprise. Churches have one job and one job alone, according to this crowd: to be used in an attempt to justify and normalize homosexual practice. Spending twenty grand to get more people to read a website is just part of the plan. ☞

United Methodist Annual Conferences

All Over the Map

by Rebekah M. Sharpe

While this year's Annual Conference cycle again spotlighted Methodists' differences over homosexuality and abortion, some less predictable issues also found their denominational debut in the 2007 resolutions.

North Carolina, Mississippi, Holston (East Tennessee), South Indiana, and Northwest Texas annual conferences all passed resolutions calling for the 2008 General Conference to withdraw its support from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). A similar resolution had garnered only 33 percent at the 2006 Holston Annual Conference.

The RCRC attempts to provide a faith-based rationale for affirming unrestricted legal abortions under any circumstances. United Methodist membership in RCRC allows the coalition to claim all 8 million of the denomination's U.S. members as part of its constituency.

The North Carolina and Mississippi conferences produced resolutions that would strengthen the denomination's counsel against abortion in most circumstances. Under these resolutions, abortion would be approved only in cases that threaten the mother's physical life. If the entire United Methodist Church were to accept this policy into its *Book of Discipline*, it would become effectively pro-life.

But the more liberal Minnesota Annual Conference was blazing a trail in a different direction. It passed a resolution that would give healthcare coverage to "domestic partners" of lay members receiving conference benefits. This action not only implicitly condones cohabitation of homosexual couples and unmarried heterosexual couples, but it also treats those relationships as morally equivalent to the marriage of man and woman. The West Michigan Annual Conference opted to continue providing similar domestic partner benefits. Such benefits would seem to run contrary to the *Book of Discipline* provision that

"sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond."

Meanwhile, the pro-homosexuality Reconciling Ministries Network won passage of all thirteen of its 2007 resolutions in the California-Nevada, Pacific Northwest, and Oregon-Idaho annual conferences. Several conferences passed resolutions asserting that "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" should not be factors in admitting persons to membership in the United Methodist Church.

In one peculiar turn of events, the South Indiana annual conference passed one of these "open membership" resolutions, while it also passed a resolution endorsing the Transforming Congregations ministry to persons trying to overcome sexual sins (including homosexuality). It was not clear whether the conference wanted to call people to repentance or to accept whatever "orientation" they claimed.

It appears that youth delegates were particularly important in passing the "open membership" resolutions in the Desert Southwest and Dakotas conferences. While these resolutions may be motivated by a well-intentioned desire to show Christ's love and forgiveness to homosexual people, their "inclusivity" language seems to undermine the membership vows. In keeping with ancient Christian tradition, United Methodist members are required to declare publicly their renunciation of sin. Conflicts arise when a candidate simultaneously affirms an intention to practice a homosexual lifestyle that the *Book of Discipline* calls "incompatible" with Christian teaching.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy and its *UMAction* committee were the subject of condemnatory resolutions in both the Desert Southwest and New York annual conferences. The delegate body of the New York conference passed its anti-IRD resolution, sponsored by a local chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, an unofficial liberal caucus. The resolution

called on United Methodists to "reject... [the IRD's] agenda" because the organization supposedly employs "hardball tactics."

The Desert Southwest Annual Conference referred its anti-IRD resolution back to a "Covenant Council." The council is slated to address the legislation, which calls on United Methodists to view the anti-IRD video *Renewal or Ruin?* this autumn. It seems unusual that annual conferences are being used as a venue to propagate accusations intended to marginalize groups of fellow United Methodists, without any opportunity being given for those groups to speak for themselves.

The IRD was not the only target of criticism. The Holston Annual Conference came within seven votes of calling for the United Methodist Church to pull out of the National Council of Churches. The highly politicized NCC was, until recently, led by the Rev. Bob Edgar, a United Methodist minister and former Democratic member of Congress. A key factor in derailing the anti-NCC resolution was a blistering speech against the proposal delivered by the Rev. Jim Green, a committee chair who was supposed to be presenting the resolution in an even-handed manner.

The East Ohio Annual Conference resisted making a statement urging "the U.S. Congress to pass legislation requiring the prompt removal of all U.S. troops from Iraq and discontinue funding for military purposes in Iraq..."

Finally, the Arkansas Annual Conference resolved to study the U.S. United Methodist Church's loss of 3 million members. The conference hopes to uncover the reasons for this marked decline. ☛



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Where is the Next ‘Global South’?

by Jeffrey H. Walton

One of the great privileges of working at the IRD is the ability to meet Christian leaders from all parts of the globe. Hardly a week goes by that either Faith McDonnell or Mark Tooley do not host visiting pastors or bishops, many from the Global South. I have been very fortunate in having been given the opportunity, through my Anglican church in Virginia, to travel to both Africa and Asia to meet with Christian leaders.

Those of us within the mainline renewal movement often speak of looking to the Global South for spiritual leadership during times of denominational strife. That churches in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia have now assumed strong leadership roles is a testament to earlier mission movements coming out of Europe and North America. These movements sent evangelists into difficult and even hostile places. Spiritual seeds that were planted in largely animist regions have now grown into healthy crops that are sending their own missionaries out into the world.

This remarkable story has left me to ask, “Where is the next ‘Global South’? What currently hostile places will one day send out their leaders to spread the Gospel?” My hope is that one day we will see mature mission movements in China and Central Asia, just as we now see in the Global South.

On a trip to southwestern China in July, I met with several pastors and other Christian leaders from different ethnic minority groups. During a visit to a Hmong village, our hosts repeatedly emphasized to us how important they found spiritual leadership from Britain and the United States. Evangelized in the 1920s by British missionaries that came from India, the Hmong population is now over 70 percent Christian.

In some ways, today’s China parallels the situation of early 20th century Africa: a growing church in the densely populated coastal areas, and a still largely unreached interior, populated by other religious



SEND-OFF Hmong villagers give an emotional send-off to IRD staff member Jeff Walton during his July visit to southwestern China. (Jeff Walton/IRD)

groups—in this case, Muslims, Buddhists, and those that practice folk religions.

The Chinese church still faces government treatment that fluctuates somewhere between bureaucratic harassment and outright persecution. Registered churches struggle to get the required permits to build new facilities necessary to accommodate swelling congregations, house churches attempt to avoid the attentions of sometimes over-zealous provincial officials, and underground Catholic bishops often face extended prison sentences. Still, the church grows. It now makes up over 10 percent of the country’s eastern population, by some estimates.

What has changed most noticeably is that the Chinese church no longer finds itself in survival mode. Thirty years out from the legalization made possible by Premier Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, the church is filling the social services vacuum that has been left by the communist state. It sends unofficial missionaries to minister quietly among previously unreached people groups. The Hmong village I visited now sends people outside of its province, something that was unthinkable just a few years ago.

Here in the United States, it is not unusual to find churches devoting the entirety of their mission budgets to already-reached

areas. We often send teams and resources to South America and Africa. It is as if the original disciples had partially obeyed Jesus’ command, taking the gospel to Judea and Samaria but not “to the ends of the earth.”

Sometimes, there is good reason for this reluctance: the difficulty of sending a westerner to do mission work in a country that prohibits religious conversion, or the threat that accompanies civil strife. Often, however, these were the same situations our forbears faced when they went to the Global South.

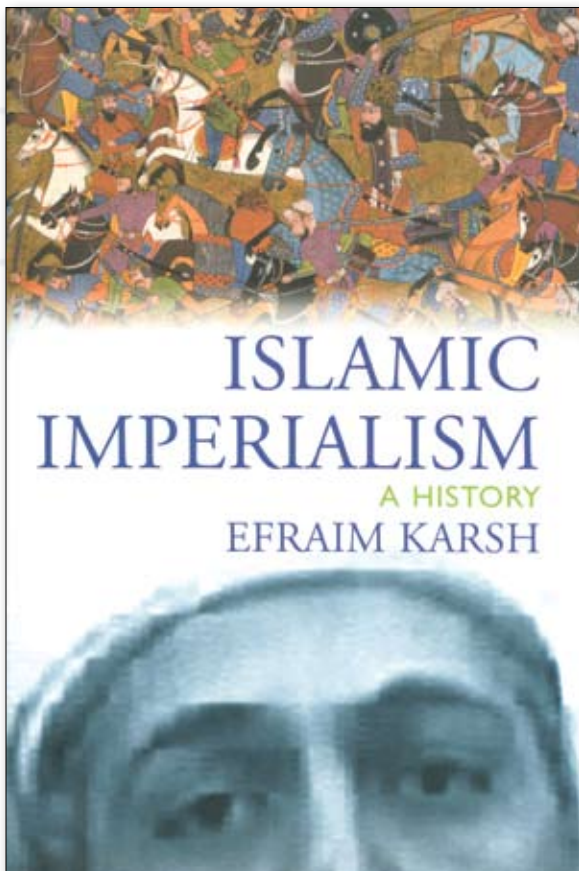
The renewal movements of Christianity in the West, and the most vibrant parts of the mainline, are due to successful mission efforts. If we are to continue to see spiritual leadership come from abroad, it is my sincere hope that one day we will see Chinese and Central Asian pastors and bishops come to visit the IRD: yet another group of passionate Christian leaders ready to carry the Gospel forward to other unreached lands. 📖



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Manager at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

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—Amir Taheri, *Daily Telegraph*



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