

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

April 2008

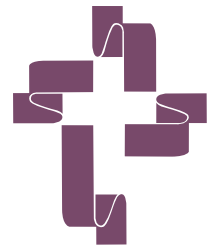
VOTER GUIDES

**A NEW DENOMINATIONAL VOTER GUIDE
CLAIMS TO BE IMPARTIAL, BUT IS IT?**

ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ World Council of Churches Twice Stunned
- ▶ United Methodist Officials Urge Anti-Israel Divestment to General Conference Delegates





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A Pledge for the Environment

by James W. Tonkowich

In spite of (false) assertions of a scientific consensus, there is a great deal of disagreement about climate change and what is or isn't causing it. But there is something about which most people—liberal and conservative, climate change believer and skeptic—agree: we want to care for the poor.

This is as it should be. Caring for the poor is a biblical mandate incumbent on the Church and a matter of natural law incumbent on everyone. And the poor are most vulnerable to climate variation. Heat or cold, drought or flood, blizzard or hurricane, the poor suffer the most because the poor are the most vulnerable to the economic climate. Economic problems, regardless of their cause, hurt the poor most by limiting their choices and cutting off their access to the resources that protect us in the developed world.

For example, ethanol has been touted as a way to reduce auto emissions of greenhouse gasses—the cause, we're told, of catastrophic, human-caused global warming. If there is global warming, it will impact the poor most: and so if burning ethanol controls global climate, it's a good way to help the poor, right?

No. It doesn't help the poor at all. It harms them.

Ethanol is made from, among other food crops, corn. Tortillas and *masa* flour, two staples in the diet of the poor in Latin America, are also made of corn. Ethanol production has increased demand for corn, which in turn has driven up prices. That means higher prices for tortillas and *masa*. And the poor suffer.

In an article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled "How Biofuels Could Starve the Poor," C. Ford Runge and Benjamin Senauer note:

The world's poorest people already spend 50 to 80 percent of their total household income on food. For the many among them who are landless laborers or rural subsistence farmers, large increases in the prices of staple foods will mean malnutrition and hunger. Some of them will tumble over the edge of subsistence into outright starvation, and many more will die from a multitude of hunger-related diseases.

Ethanol is just one example of a scheme to control the climate "to help the poor" that, in fact, has precisely the opposite effect. But it's not the only example.

Another is resisting electrification. If the global poor have electricity, the story goes, their demand will drive the production of greenhouse gasses, which increase global warming and thus harm the poor. The problem is that by refusing to give the poor affordable energy, we guarantee that they will continue to cook over dung fires, eat unrefrigerated (and often rancid) food, and be locked into subsistence agriculture and poverty.

We can do better for the world's poor and the environment by finding ways to lift the poor out of their poverty. That will give them the means and the desire to improve their environment, thereby benefiting us all.

This is why the IRD has joined with the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation and others to promote "We Get It," a campaign for creation and the poor that kicks-off in mid-April—right around Earth Day.

The "We Get It Pledge" is simple:

God Said It

God created everything. He made us in His own image, and commanded us to be fruitful and multiply and watch over His creation. Although separated from God by our sin, we are lovingly restored through Jesus Christ, and take responsibility for being good stewards.

We Get It

Our stewardship of creation must be based on biblical principles and factual evidence. We face important environmental challenges, but must be cautious of claims that our planet is in peril from speculative dangers like man-made global warming.

They Need It

With billions suffering in poverty, environmental policies must not further oppress the world's poor by denying them basic needs. Instead, we must help people fulfill their God-given potential as producers and stewards.

Let's Do It

We pledge to follow our Lord Jesus Christ and honor God as we use and share the principles of His Word to care for the poor and tend His creation.

There has been a concerted attempt by global warming alarmists to foster a split among evangelicals over the environment. We need to counter that effort. We need to do it for the sake of the poor, who are being harmed by ill-advised policies, and we need to do it to protect the Church from this error that has the potential to lead to greater and more egregious errors.

For more information on "We Get It" and how you can be involved, visit the IRD website or return the mailer in this magazine. There's a world of good we can do for God's earth and its people. ☒

Jim Tonkowich



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

International Briefs

Malaysian Officials Crack Down on Bible Distribution, Use of 'Allah' in Print

Christians in Malaysia are objecting to two separate instances of censorship in the majority Muslim nation, claiming a systematic erosion of religious freedoms by the Islamist government.

Malaysia's weekly Catholic newspaper, *The Herald*, has been told that it cannot use the name "Allah" to refer to the Christian God. Fr. Lawrence Andrew, editor of *The Herald*, told *Asia News* that the newspaper's publishing permit had been renewed only one week prior to the dictate, with the understanding that it would be permitted to use the name.

"The use of the word 'Allah' by non-Muslims may arouse sensitivity and create confusion among Muslims in the country," according to Datuk Abdullah Mohd Zin, the Minister for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia. He also indicated that it has long been the understanding in Malaysia that "Allah" refers only to the God of the Muslims.

"The publication is only for internal circulation," objected Fr. Andrew. "We have no Muslim subscribers."

The Catholic Church has petitioned the Malaysian Supreme Court on the matter. It is being joined by the Evangelical Church of Borneo, which has received an injunction over Christian books containing the name Allah.

In another case of religious censorship, Malaysian officials have confiscated 32 English-language Bibles brought into the country by a Christian woman seeking to use them in a study group. The Royal Malaysian Customs Department has claimed the confiscation was due to suspicion the Bibles would be used for "commercial purposes."

"The Council of Churches is flabbergasted that such acts are happening in our country with such frequency and

Revised Good Friday Prayer Causes Tension between Jewish Leaders, Vatican

The Vatican's release of an updated version of a controversial Holy Week prayer has been met with criticism by Jewish leaders, who claim the decision could severely damage relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish community.

The prayer, a part of the Tridentine (traditional Latin) Rite, was re-introduced by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 for use in Good Friday liturgies. The original version called for God to enlighten "faithless Jews" to acknowledge Jesus in order to be "delivered from their darkness." The word "faithless" was removed in 1960, and the rite was discontinued after the Second Vatican Council convened in 1962. The rite was reinstituted by the Pope in response to traditionalists who favor the Latin mass.

In an attempt to avoid the controversial language, Pope Benedict has offered several revisions to the original text, omitting controversial references to the "blindness" of the Jewish people living in "darkness." According to the *New York Times*, an unofficial version of the prayer reads: "Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord Our God enlighten their hearts so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men."

Some Jewish leaders embraced the proposed change. Rabbi David Rosen of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations told the *Telegraph* newspaper in London the changes were an indication that the Pope was "deeply committed to advancing the relationship with the Jewish community."

Other Jewish representatives have been less supportive of the proposed changes. "I think [the re-introduction of the prayer] really turns back the clock a bit and reverts to some sense that the church is pulling back from the positions it took in Vatican II," said Rabbi Joel H. Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, in an interview with the *New York Times*. Meyers indicated that leaders of the Reform and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism had been in contact to discuss a possible response to the proposed revision.

Ammar Abd Rabbo/ABACAUSA.COM



PRAYERFUL REVISION Rabbi David Rosen was supportive of revisions offered by Pope Benedict to the Tridentine prayers which offended some Jews. Other Jewish leaders were less supportive.

impunity," said the Rev. Hermen Shastri, General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia. "For a country that has celebrated, cultivated and sustained

fifty years of religious freedom and harmonious living between all faith communities, this latest episode is another example of how the unilateral actions of

certain government agencies are undermining the government's stated claims of protecting religious freedom in the country." ❏

Egyptian Converts Win Recognition Rights

The highest administrative court in Egypt has ruled in favor of 12 former converts to Islam seeking to return to Christianity, allowing the converts to hold identity cards identifying them as Christians.

The February 9 court decision, issued by Judge El-Sayeed Noufal, ordered the Interior Ministry to issue "Christian

Documents" to the twelve Coptic Christians, with the provision that the cards note their status as ex-Muslims.

Mamdouh Nakhlah, the attorney for the converts, praised the decision, calling it a "victory for human rights and freedom of religion in Egypt," and claiming the ruling "will open the door for many others to return to Christianity."

Human rights activists have greeted the court decision with some skepticism, noting that the decision applies only to those converts who had originally been Christian. It does not appear to extend to converts who have been born Muslim.

Others have argued that the

identification of the converts as "ex-Muslim" is discriminatory. "It's obviously a stigmatization to have ['ex-Muslim'] on your I.D. card," said a representative for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, in an interview with Compass Direct News Service.

A week prior to Judge Noufal's ruling, Judge Mohammed Husseini ruled against Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy, a convert to Christianity from Islam (October 2007 *Faith & Freedom*, p. 7), claiming such a conversion to be a violation of *shari'a* law. "He can believe whatever he wants in his heart, but on paper he cannot convert," said Husseini. ❏

Church of England Encourages "Carbon Fast" for Lent

Senior officials of the Church of England joined with Tearfund, a church-based development agency, to promote the reduction of the personal use of fossil fuels during the 40 days of Lent. The desire is to reduce the "carbon footprint" of fast participants during the period between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

"Traditionally people have given up things for Lent," said the Rt. Rev. James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool and vice president of Tearfund. "Last year in the Diocese of Liverpool many parishes took part in a Carbon Fast. Through it we focused on God's earth and its poorest people in whom, Jesus said, we were to find him. This year in Lent we invite you to join us in a Carbon Fast."

During the proposed fast, participants were encouraged to take practical steps to reduce energy use. For each of the 40 days of Lent, a particular discipline was proposed. Among the suggestions:

- Day One (Ash Wednesday): Remove one light bulb and live without it for the next 40 days.
- Day Five: Can you talk about your Carbon Fast at church today? Encourage others to join in.
- Day Twelve: Tell politicians to take action on climate change today.
- Day Eighteen: Cut the air miles. Don't consume any food that you know has been imported by plane.
- Day Thirty-Nine: Could your church be greener? Talk to your church leaders.

"It is the poor who are already suffering the effects of climate change," Jones told *The Guardian* newspaper in London. "To carry on regardless of their plight is to fly in the face of Christian teaching.... There's a moral imperative on those of us who emit more than our fair share of carbon to rein in our consumption."

According to a Tearfund survey, three out of five adults in Britain are willing to take part in some kind of energy-saving fast during Lent. ❏

istockphoto.com



THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE One suggestion for the lenten "carbon fast" is to remove one light bulb and live without it for 40 days.

Church News

Obama Appearance at UCC Synod Draws IRS Attention

The United Church of Christ has announced that it is being investigated by the IRS. The investigation is due to a speech given by Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) at the UCC's national meeting in Connecticut last year after he became a candidate for president. (For more on the speech itself, see the October 2007 issue of *Faith & Freedom*.)

In a letter the 1.2 million-member denomination received February 20, the IRS said it was initiating a church tax inquiry because "reasonable belief exists that the United Church of Christ has engaged in political activities that could jeopardize its tax-exempt status."

Nonprofits such as churches are allowed to invite candidates to speak at their events, but they are not allowed to endorse or provide support to candidates.

Both the denomination and the Obama campaign have denied any wrongdoing, telling the *Associated Press* that the Obama speech was not a campaign event and pointing out that it was scheduled well before Obama's candidacy had been announced. The IRS has not commented on the investigation due to the confidentiality of tax information.

Clintons' Former United Methodist Church Skirts Discipline with Same-Sex 'Celebrations'

The prominent United Methodist church formerly attended by Bill and Hillary Clinton has announced that it will begin to host services that recognize same-sex unions. According to Foundry United Methodist Church of Washington, DC, homosexual couples can now have their associations recognized and honored at the church.

The United Methodist Church officially prohibits any ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions and involve United Methodist pastors or church buildings. In a Foundry newsletter, Se-

Carter, Clinton Convene Moderate and Liberal Baptist Groups in Atlanta

The mainline American Baptist Churches, the largest black Baptist denominations, and Southern Baptist dissidents came together in Atlanta for a "New Baptist Covenant" initiated by former President Jimmy Carter.

The three-day event, which started January 30, was heavily weighted with speeches by Democratic politicians—including former President Bill Clinton and former Vice President Al Gore, as well as Carter. Workshops and speeches were given on the topics of global warming, poverty, the war in Iraq, education funding, religious liberty, and religious diversity. A discussion of evangelism was not part of the schedule.

Notably absent were participants from the largest Baptist group in the United States: the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention, which declined to formally take part in the convocation.

Dr. Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, offered some criticism of the meeting. "If they were strong on evangelism, then all of these groups would not have declining membership," observed Land, in an interview with One News Now. "And every one of the groups that was there either has declining membership or is stagnant in its membership growth."

Land also suggested the timing of the meeting, less than a week before the Super Tuesday primary elections, was no coincidence. He expected there would be a lot of rhetoric from the "New Baptist Covenant" leading up to the November elections, but not much afterwards.

Courtesy CBF



MOSTLY POLITICS Former Vice President Al Gore spoke about global warming at the event, which featured much talk of politics by Democratic politicians, and little to none of evangelism.

nior Pastor Dean Snyder said he would provide worship leadership for such services, but would not conduct vows at same-sex commitment ceremonies in order to stay within church bylaws. According to Foundry, which describes itself as having a large gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender membership, at

least two other congregations already host such recognition services.

"Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches," United Methodist church law states.

In an article in the *Washington Post*,

Bishop John R. Schol of the Baltimore-Washington Conference claimed that the Foundry services do not violate church law.

“Foundry Church is working hard at being faithful to the United Methodist Church,” Schol said, adding that Foundry is “also a congregation that is seeking to minister to the broad community that it serves.” ☒

PCUSA Judicial Commission Upholds “Fidelity and Chastity” Standard

The San Francisco Presbytery is moving ahead with the candidacy of a self-avowed practicing lesbian for ordination. The candidate, Lisa Larges, could find her candidacy headed for complications from a church court, however. The San Francisco case is one of a handful of similar cases appearing around the country, including the re-instatement of a gay minister in the Twin Cities Presbytery.

The 2006 “Peace, Unity, and Purity” report interpreted the denomination’s constitution as allowing candidates for ordination to hold scruples about matters of doctrine and practice that were not among “the essentials of Reformed faith and practice.” And its rationale suggested that the constitution’s “requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness” was one such matter that might be optional.

The San Francisco Presbytery voted to proceed with Larges’s candidacy on the grounds that her objection of conscience to the church’s standards of “fidelity and chastity” was an allowable scruple.

Soon after Larges’s candidacy for ordination was put back on track, the highest court in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ruled in a separate case that no exceptions can be granted to the denomination’s ordination standards involving sexual behavior. In a February 11 ruling, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial

Commission (GAPJC) said candidates for ordination must meet the requirement of practicing fidelity if they are married or chastity if they are single. ☒

Wheaton College Leaders Back Out of Christian-Muslim Statement

Following a flurry of intense criticism, three administrators from Wheaton College have removed their names from an open letter signed by 300 Christian leaders. The letter was written in response to the “A Common Word Between Us and You” statement issued by Muslim leaders.

The Muslim statement and subsequent Christian response were billed as conciliatory gestures aimed at improving relations between the religions and focusing on a common love for God and neighbor. Wheaton College president Duane Litfin, provost Stanton Jones, and chaplain Stephen Kellough decided to remove their names from the letter after it came under fire from respected theologians like John Piper and Albert Mohler.

Piper rejected the letter’s emphasis on the common ground of the love of God, arguing that Christians understand the love of God very differently from Muslims.

“The love of God is ... uniquely expressed through Jesus Christ as the propitiation for our sins because he died on the cross and rose again. All those things,

Islam radically rejects,” Piper wrote in a public statement. “So they do not believe in the love of God we believe in.” ☒

Iowa State University Professor Denied Tenure in Intelligent Design Controversy

A professor from Iowa State University has found himself embroiled in controversy after being denied tenure.

Guillermo Gonzalez, an assistant professor in physics and astronomy, was denied tenure in 2006 by ISU faculty leaders. His appeal of the decision was recently rejected. Gonzalez insists that the action was due to his support for intelligent design.

In an article appearing in *The Des Moines Register*, Gonzalez’s attorney says he has proof that the tenure rejection is solely about intelligent design, found in e-mail messages from faculty members who supported Gonzalez’s tenure bid. The attorney said the messages show those who participated in the tenure vote were prejudiced against Gonzalez and intelligent design.

Andy Baumert, the interim executive director of the ISU board of regents, said the messages were not allowed as evidence because they were not considered in Gonzalez’s previous appeals.

“You can’t do justice when you exclude the most important evidence,” Gonzalez’s attorney told the *Register*. ☒

Outrageous Quotes

“The United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which disturbed the writer [of a previous editorial column] for being found in a Christmas sermon, most would agree, are the beatitudes of the 21st century.”

—The Rev. Pierce Klemmt, Rector of Christ Church (Episcopal) in Alexandria, Virginia, writing for the *Alexandria Times* newspaper.



The World Council of Churches Twice Stunned

by James D. Berkley

On February 13 as the World Council of Churches Central Committee began its meeting in Geneva, clarity flowed from a stream of the church nearly unknown to most Americans. Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Vienna and Austria, delivered a bold statement that he certainly knew would not tickle all ears in the room.

"I would like to draw your attention to the danger of liberal Christianity," he began. "The liberalization of moral

standards, initiated by some Protestant and Anglican communities several decades ago and developing with ever-increasing speed, has now

brought us to a situation where we can no longer preach one and the same code of moral conduct. We can no longer speak about Christian morality, because moral standards promoted by 'traditional' and 'liberal' Christians are markedly different, and the abyss between these two wings of contemporary Christianity is rapidly growing."

The room grew quiet, and many eyes were no longer looking directly at Bishop Hilarion. People knew well the elephant in the room. But, unlike Bishop Hilarion, the others declined to actually talk about it

Hot Buttons

Bishop Hilarion brought up homosexuality: "We are being

told by some allegedly Christian leaders, who still bear the titles of Reverends and Most Reverends, that marriage between a woman and a man is no longer the only option for creating a Christian family, that there are other patterns, and that the church must be 'inclusive' enough to recognize alternative lifestyles and give them official and solemn blessing."

He didn't shy away from naming abortion: "We are being told that human life is no longer an unquestionable value, that it can be summarily aborted in the womb ... and that Christian 'traditionalists' should reconsider their standpoints in order to be in tune with modern developments. We are being told that abortion is acceptable...."

"What, then, is left of Christianity?" asked Bishop Hilarion. "In the confusing and disoriented world in which we live, where is the prophetic voice of Christians? What can we offer, or can we offer anything at all to the secular world, apart from what the secular world will offer to itself as a value system on which society should be built? Do we have our own value system which we should preach, or should we simply applaud every novelty in public morality which becomes fashionable in the secular society?"

As he stood at the mike—a picture of cultural otherness in his distinctive black Russian Orthodox cassock—the bishop was telling it like it is! His message was the message of Protestant renewal groups, the message of Scripture, of the Apostle Paul. One could almost imagine a "Preach it, brother!" ringing out from the evangelical amen corner.

Bishop Hilarion is only 41 but looks even younger. Yet he is already a noted scholar, an author, and a musi-

**Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev delivered
a bold statement that did not
tickle all ears in the room.**

DEPARTURE (ABOVE) WCC General Secretary Samuel Kobia announced, unexpectedly, that he would not seek another term as the head of the ecumenical body. (Peter Williams/WCC)



CHALLENGE Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev challenged the WCC on the threat of liberal theology and its acceptance of homosexuality and abortion. (Peter Williams/WCC)

and he chose to end his work at that time. Thus, the Central Committee was plunged into discussion about his succession. It apparently was not of one mind on the matter, pushing consideration nearly three hours past the intended ending time for the day's entire business.

Kobia had entered the meeting amid rumblings concerning his leadership style, his extensive travel, and staff discontent. He had been embarrassed recently by the revelation that his doctorate was from an unaccredited

diploma mill. At the same time, however, many delegates had risen to extol his leadership and the value of his travels. Kobia gave "personal reasons" as the grounds for his decision, and neither he nor any other source would elaborate on what those reasons might be.

The Central Committee moderator expressed "deep gratitude" for the "dedicated services [Kobia] has given to the council since becoming general secretary in January 2004." The delegates painfully put together a search committee to come up with a nominee to be elected in September 2009, when the Central Committee next meets. An interim will be chosen to begin serving in the fall of 2008 and continue until the successor is in place.

Kenya Social Witness Done Well

The Central Committee stumbled on a statement about global warming. For instance, it reflexively contrasted developed countries' "mindless production and excessive consumption" that led to "continuous desecration of creation, including global warming" with beatifically described indigenous peoples who continued "to live in a respectful way relating with the environment."

Similarly, a Gaza resolution vilified Israel's defense of its people and called for churches to stop their governments from "providing financial assistance to the occupying power." However, the Central Committee also could get it right, as it did

concerning Kenya.

"Not Kenya. Not Kenya. Not *Kenya!* It can't happen in Kenya!" The anguish was palpable in delegate Dr. Agnes R. M. Abuom's description of her dismay about intertribal violence that left hundreds dead, thousands wounded, and hundreds of thousands displaced following the December 27 election.

The at-times Christian-versus-Christian aspect of the violence was particularly disturbing. "I am concerned that many church leaders have taken a political side and seem to be equally partisan," noted Samuel Kobia, himself a Kenyan.

"The church in Kenya, on the whole, is aligned ethnically," explained the Rev. Dr. Mvumelwano Hamilton Dandala, the General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches. Denominations are largely composed of a single tribe and located in a particular region of the country. This arrangement "is not good for nation building," according to Dandala. Only ecumenism provides the breadth to possibly approach a situation such as Kenya from other than a parochial viewpoint tainted by self-interest.

The Central Committee statement on Kenya realistically took responsibility, recognizing "that churches were among those implicated" and were "unable to effectively confront these issues" because of partisanship. It called for churches everywhere to learn lessons from Kenya about speaking jointly, promptly, and consistently for the protection of lives. In particular, the statement affirmed "the need for church members and leaders to promote a culture of dialogue" where "partisan political alignments are avoided and the common good prevails."

"For Kenya, church unity is not just an optional activity," pled Dandala. An *ecumenical* Christian response within Kenya remains imperative. ■

cian and composer. He has been a bishop since age 35. He is also a champion of orthodoxy—both the capital-O and the lowercase-o variety. "When are we going to stop making Christianity politically correct and all-inclusive?" he asked. "Why do we insist on accommodating every possible alternative to the centuries-old Christian tradition? Where is the limit, or is there no limit at all?"

He placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of his fellow Central Committee delegates. "Many Christians worldwide look to Christian leaders in the hope that they will defend Christianity against the challenges that it faces.... Our holy mission is to preach what Christ preached, to teach what the apostles taught, and to propagate what the holy Fathers propagated."

"I am convinced that liberal Christianity will not survive for a long time," predicted Bishop Hilarion. "A politically correct Christianity will die.... [T]raditional Christians will consolidate their forces in order to protect the faith and moral teaching which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved."

A One-Term General Secretary

Later, an intended 90-minute closed session for routine personnel matters became a 9-hour marathon when General Secretary Samuel Kobia delivered a surprise decision not to seek an extended term. Kobia's initial term was set to expire at the end of 2008,



James D. Berkley is the Director of the Presbyterian Action program at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.



Passing as ‘Nonpartisan’

A New Denominational Voter Guide Claims to Be Impartial, but Is It?

by Steve R. Rempe

In November 2007, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) released *Called to Be a Public Church*, a “voting and civic participation guide” for church members and congregations of the 4.8 million-member denomination. According to the preface, the document seeks to “encourage, empower, and equip Lutherans to engage responsibly in the 2008 election cycle.” As the ELCA attempts the delicate dance of being political without being partisan, others who face the same challenge can learn

from the Lutherans’ successes and stumbles.

The 73-page resource seeks to be a comprehensive resource for all matters related to churches and the upcoming elections. The report is divided

into four basic sections: a review of the IRS guidelines for church activity and the maintaining of tax-exempt status, directions for providing nonpartisan lobbying and “electoral activities,” a suggested list of potential activities for church members and congregations, and briefing papers on select issues produced by the ELCA Washington Office (the church’s public policy arm).

“Our Christian faith compels us to attend to the world through the lens of our relationship to God and to one another,” writes ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson in his foreword to the materials. “As a public church,

we have a responsibility to step outside our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to address issues that affect families, communities, and neighbors throughout the world.”

As is apparently required when any mainline church leader addresses public policy, Hanson cites Micah 6:8 as a foundation for any kind of advocacy, claiming that engaging on issues “is an excellent way to get to know our local and global neighbors and their concerns, and become better equipped to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God through our actions in the public square.”

Hanson declares, “The ELCA uses its prophetic voice boldly to address important political, social, and economic issues that affect local and global communities.”

Partisanly Nonpartisan

A heavy emphasis on the importance of impartiality pervades the document. Not including the table of contents, the word “nonpartisan” appears 48 times in the body of the document, with “partisan” appearing 13 times, and “bipartisan” occurring on five occasions.

Most of these occurrences take place in the first two sections of the report, which establish guidelines for appropriate church activity. The first deals specifically with IRS guidelines for 501(c)(3) organizations, and lists examples of both permissible and non-permissible activities for churches and church members. Events such as “get out the vote” campaigns, registration drives, hosting screenings and discussions of broadcast debates, and—naturally—the distribution of nonpartisan voter guides are listed as “do’s”; while contributing to

Throughout the document there is a heavy emphasis on the importance of impartiality.

INFLUENCE (ABOVE) With the 2008 presidential election in full swing, it was inevitable that church public policy bodies would attempt to exercise their influence.

candidates, explicitly or implicitly endorsing candidates, organizing groups to work on behalf of parties or candidates, or allowing candidates to raise funds on church property or in church publications are included in the list of no-nos.

The list is helpful and informative, albeit a little commonsensical. Of course, such common sense can be a rare commodity among some mainline church leaders. Witness the case of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and its member, presidential candidate Barack Obama (see “Church News,” p. 6). In June 2007, Obama addressed the denomination’s General Synod in Hartford, Connecticut. Despite claims by UCC leadership that Obama was asked to speak before he declared his candidacy, the denomination’s website promoted him as a “presidential candidate,” and Obama himself made reference to his candidacy twice during his remarks. Regardless of how the IRS rules in this situation—and we at IRD are not keen on government agencies regulating what’s said at church meetings—there is no question that the UCC could have done much more to avoid the appearance of partisanship.

The second section of the guide looks more closely at lobbying efforts by church bodies, and their relationship to IRS regulations. In a warning that would have been well-heeded by the UCC, the guide offers directions for inviting a candidate to speak at a church or church function. Among the guidelines are to make explicit in all related literature that the presentation is nonpartisan, and to make sure that the individual speaks “only in a non-candidate capacity.” The guide also instructs that “[n]o campaign activity (including distribution of campaign literature) occurs in connection with the candidate’s attendance.”

The guide suggests that “issue-based appeals” are the best approach to public activity, “as long as they do not favor any candidate or party.” Even then, there is a warning. “Issue discussion can be risky, particularly when social issues are being discussed and especially when the issue is sharply divided on party lines.” Pastors are warned that “even a well-intentioned sermon, for example, can be interpreted

as partisan when particularly contentious issues are being discussed.”

The solution to this conundrum? “The ELCA Washington Office recommends that the issue discussions focus on the issue briefings provided in this guide ... as a clear ELCA stance has been established.”

What Is Said and What Is Left Unsaid

With that exhortation, the reader is pointed to the last, and most controversial, section of the voter guide—the social policy briefings produced by the ELCA’s Washington Office.

The ELCA Washington Office has a well-earned reputation as being one of the more vocally liberal elements of the church’s infrastructure. In the introduction to the “Issue Education Briefs” section of the guide, the office describes itself as “stand[ing] with the poor, the powerless, and the vulnerable to achieve effective interactions between the whole church and the federal government. ... [T]he office is the legal mechanism through which the ELCA, as an institution, is able to speak truth to power in this country.”

The briefs provided in the voter guide deal with domestic hunger, domestic housing, domestic healthcare, global poverty and hunger, global warming, immigration, and the conflicts in Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Darfur. One would think in a presidential election year, issues such as human cloning, embryonic stem cell research, abortion, and marriage and family would also be issues worthy of discussion in the public arena. They are conspicuous in their absence.

Each brief is composed of an ELCA policy base establishing the church’s position on the particular issue, background collected from various outside sources outlining the need for a policy change, and sample questions designed to be asked of candidates running for local, state, or national office.

According to Bishop Hanson in the document’s foreword, the briefs are based on established social statements of the ELCA, which have been adopted by the Churchwide Assembly—the main legislative body of the denomination

that meets every two years. The choice of which social statements to use for this purpose, however, appears to be selective. Social statements on issues like abortion and the death penalty do not warrant briefs. On the other hand, the briefs on homelessness and immigration cite only ELCA messages, which are not adopted by the wider assembly, but rather by the ELCA Church Council, and do not require assembly ratification.

In several instances, the briefs extend beyond the general platitudes and exhortations suggested by the social statements, encouraging very specific policy solutions not included in the source documents. The issue brief on global poverty and hunger urges readers to ask candidates to “commit at least an additional one percent—roughly an additional \$29 billion in 2010—of the U.S. budget for poverty-focused development assistance,” although the ELCA social statement does not make such a request. The same brief also suggests candidates be asked to expand debt cancellation to all countries needing relief; support providing \$9.4 billion in fighting HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria worldwide; give \$3.3 billion a year to achieve universal primary education by 2015; and give \$1.3 billion per year to provide clean water. None of these specific proposals can be found in the social statement.

As the 2008 election season advances, it is likely that other denominations and ecumenical organizations will attempt to create voter guides similar to the one produced by the ELCA. In many ways, they can do worse than *Called to Be a Public Church*, which contains many helpful guidelines for church interaction. However, they would also be well-advised to avoid a guide that ignores some controversial issues, while pushing others beyond what many in their churches would support. ■



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My Shari'a

by Ralph A. Webb

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the “first among equals” of bishops and archbishops in the worldwide Anglican Communion, shocked people around the world on February 7. In a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio One interview covering a lecture titled “Civil Law and Religious Law in England” that Williams gave at the Royal Courts of Justice, the archbishop argued that partial implementation of *shari'a* (Islamic law) in England “seems unavoidable.” That single comment set off a firestorm of criticism around the world, and the rest of his lecture and interview only added more fuel to the fire. While

Archbishop Rowan Williams argued that partial implementation of *shari'a* in England “seems unavoidable.”

Williams had his defenders, they were in the distinct minority. Later analysts said that it was the low point of Williams’ five-year career as Archbishop of Canterbury, and it

resulted in several public calls for his resignation. The archbishop’s handlers reacted defensively, apparently caught off guard by the intensity of the criticism. They suggested that the archbishop had been misunderstood, but while both they and Williams purposefully clarified the remarks, no one backtracked on them. “[M]any Muslim majority countries do distinguish clearly between the rights of citizens overall and the duties accepted by some citizens of obedience to Islamic law,” the archbishop asserted in his clarifications before the General Synod. “It is this that encourages me

to think that there may be ways of engaging with the world of Islamic law on something other than an all-or-nothing basis.”

The Larger Context

Significantly downplayed in the furor was the context within which Williams’s remarks took place: He was addressing the issue of how religious beliefs could be accommodated in a secular society. “[D]anger ... occurs when secular government assumes a monopoly in terms of defining public and political identity,” he warned in his lecture. The archbishop bemoaned the way that secular society sometimes dismisses religious beliefs as “belong[ing] exclusively to the realm of the private and of individual choice” instead of the public square.

Williams asserted that religious beliefs may particularly be threatened with marginalization when societies exalt rights that oppose religious beliefs.

Williams argued that the law in secular states needs to account for religious consciences, and that one way of doing this is to allow for religious law rulings in cases where that law does not oppose fundamental civil rights. He held open the possibility that Muslims could use *shari'a*, as opposed to secular law, as a basis for resolving marital disputes and financial matters. He claimed that this model was already being followed in British society, with Jewish courts being allowed to settle some Jewish matters. (In a question-and-answer session held after the lecture, he clarified that he did not mean that Jewish law was incorporated into British law, but that British society had accommodated certain Jewish customs through the Jewish courts.) The archbishop did not think that imple-

menting this proposal of “supplementary jurisdiction” would be easy, but that some accommodation would be necessary in pluralistic societies where people hold diverse religious beliefs and cannot conscientiously agree with prevailing secular law.

Serious Concerns

Yet Williams’ remarks provided serious reasons for concern, even given the archbishop’s valid interest in the rights of people of faith in secular society. Perhaps most fundamentally, the archbishop clearly gave great weight to progressive Muslim understandings of *shari’a* and downplayed *shari’a* enforced and applied by traditional Muslims whom he called “primitivists.” He told Radio One, “it seems to me ... that the [British] court is regarding [*shari’a*] as a single fixed entity and a great many Muslim jurists would now say that this is not how you need to see it.” The archbishop claimed that “the great body of serious jurists in the Islamic world would recogni[z]e ... political plurality as consistent with Muslim integrity.”

But political plurality has *not* been held in high esteem in countries around the world where *shari’a* dominates and oppresses other people. The Anglican Archbishop of the Diocese of Jos in Nigeria, the Most Rev. Ben Kwashi, when interviewed by the BBC in response to Williams, warned that people cannot eliminate the more inhuman aspects of *shari’a*. “[O]nce you ask for the first step of [*shari’a*] law you are going to get to the last of it,” he said. “By 1960 when Nigeria got [i]ndependence, it began as penal code. Once it came to this generation they upgraded it to full blown [*shari’a*]. So it is only a matter of time when you begin from somewhere that you get to the real thing.”

That “real thing” is far different from the more peaceful forms of *shari’a* advocated by Muslim progressives. Kwashi spoke ominously to the BBC of hands being cut off and stonings, and lesser problems are not unknown in Western countries. In England, some Muslim communities have set up *shari’a* courts to rule primarily on marital and financial

issues, but criminal cases are also sometimes heard. Many Muslims have had issues resolved informally in these courts and never have brought matters before British courts. Critics of the *shari’a* courts have also expressed concern that *shari’a* regarding marital issues favors men and restricts women’s rights.

A second concern raised by many critics of Williams was that the archbishop’s calls for “supplementary jurisdiction” in effect amounted to a repudiation of Western jurisprudence, which revolves around the idea that all people are equal under one law. Williams himself clearly was aware of this implication. “It is uncomfortably true that this introduces into our thinking about law what some would see as a ‘market’ element, a competition for loyalty” between different systems of law, he admitted in his lecture. “But if what we want socially is a pattern of relations in which a plurality of divers[e] and overlapping affiliations work for a common good, and in which groups of serious and profound conviction are not systematically faced with the stark alternatives of cultural loyalty or state loyalty, it seems unavoidable,” the archbishop concluded.

Critics strongly disagreed. The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey, warned, “There can be no exceptions to the laws of our land which have been so painfully honed by the struggle for democracy and human rights. [Williams’] acceptance of some Muslim laws within British law would be disastrous for the nation.” Similarly, the Rt. Rev. Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester, called Williams’ proposal unworkable, arguing that *shari’a* would harm the “integrity” of English law and “would be in tension with the English legal tradition” on many issues. (Nazir-Ali has recently received death threats from radical Muslims offended by his recent statements that it’s not safe for non-Muslims to enter some Muslim-dominated areas of Britain.) Several government officials also criticized Williams for undermining the British ideal of equality under one law.

A third concern raised by those who lived in areas with *shari’a* was a very practical one: How could Williams speak up

for those suffering under *shari’a* after his recent comments? Kwashi raised the issue before the BBC: “When [the] Archbishop of Canterbury ... comes to visit us, we will take him to our leaders, some of whom are Muslims and some of whom are Christians, and he can then speak on our behalf where we are not having a fair share. Can we now look up to him as a man who can speak on our behalf?” Kwashi also noted that Williams’ comments would make life difficult for Christians in Nigerian states where *shari’a* was implemented. “[I]f he, the primate of England, is the one asking for [*shari’a*], now what he has done is to arm those who will now have more arguments against us who are saying ‘We don’t need [*shari’a*].’” It seemed that Williams’ comments could well hurt Christians and others persecuted by *shari’a* law in their plight.

Survival

In the end, Williams survived the worldwide criticism, thanks partially to his defenders. Prime Minister Gordon Brown praised him as “a man of integrity.” Carey, Williams’ immediate predecessor as Archbishop of Canterbury, called his successor “a great leader in the Anglican tradition ... [who] has a very important role to play in the Church.” Both men had serious concerns over Williams’ statements but rejected any idea that Williams should leave the office. Some people, as well, were willing to forgive Williams, a former professor, for expressing a very academic point of view that would have been welcomed for debate in that setting but which had been disastrous politically. The Archbishop of Canterbury would face more trials in the days ahead, but he had survived this skirmish, even if it had resulted in the worst press and most controversy of his career. 📺



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Episcopal Urban Caucus Preaches a Progressive Form of Peace—but Not for the Anglican Communion

by Ralph A. Webb

The Episcopal Urban Caucus's 2008 assembly was held March 13–16 in Oakland, CA. The theme this year revolved around issues relating to peace and the peace movement. However, some of the caucus's stands undeniably would not contribute to peace in the larger Christian body of which the Episcopal Church is a part, the worldwide Anglican Communion. The caucus is an unofficial gathering of the Episcopal Church's progressive activists.

Progressive Causes

This year's keynote speaker, Eva Jefferson Paterson, a prominent California lawyer, currently serves as president of the Equal Justice Society (EJS), which bills itself as "a movement to reclaim progressive justice." The causes she advocated included ones that either went against historic Christian social principles (e.g., abortion rights), were at best debatable (e.g., the alleged need to oppose corporate power), or were laudable goals on which Christians differ as to how to address (e.g., reducing poverty). The progressive laundry list also included stopping war, speaking against violence, and working against the Christian right.

Pacifism, Environmentalism, and Immigration

The assembly theme of peace also had a strong pacifist and anti-U.S. military element. Ethan Veseley-Flad, a long-time Episcopal Church peace activist, promoted the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization that opposes all "militarism." FOR's Iran program sends interfaith delegates to Iran, a "countr[y] labeled as 'the enemy' by [the U.S.] government." The Colombia program opposes all military aid to that nation (and charges the United States with allegedly supporting an army that

has caused 60,000 civilian deaths). FOR's Youth and Militarism program is an effort that, among other activities, runs a Not Your Soldier campaign that attempts to persuade 17-to-29-year-olds not to join the military.

The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, the Diocese of California's Canon for Environmental Ministry and President of the Regeneration Project, opened her workshop on global warming with a Native American prayer directed not to God, but to the Earth. Each line of the prayer began with the phrase "Earth, teach me." The goal of the prayer, according to Bingham, was "[t]o get us centered around Earth Mother." Bingham argued that climate change "is the most important issue in the world today, a moral and spiritual issue." She called apathy for the care of the Earth a sin. Bingham told caucus members that global warming could not be denied and that human beings were partially responsible for it. She claimed that "[t]here's [only] one or two, maybe a handful of scientists around the country" who dispute the science that global warming activists find persuasive.

Immigration was also a major topic at the 2008 assembly, with one workshop led by the Rev. Anna Lange-Soto and the Rev. Lisa Hlass. Lange-Soto expressed concerns about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) actions. According to the Episcopal priest, while such raids have decreased, when ICE goes to pick up one person, it often picks up many people who look like undocumented immigrants, leading even American citizens to be detained unjustly. Both Lange-Soto and Hlass felt that the United States should be, generally speaking, as open as possible to immigrants. They did not clearly delineate where a government should draw the line between being open to immigrants and providing restrictions

on illegal immigration.

Mobilizing to Open Way for More Gay and Lesbian Bishops

The Rev. Susan Russell, President of Integrity, an Episcopal gay and lesbian lobbying organization, held a workshop with Jan Adams, a field organizer for Integrity's sister group Claiming the Blessing. They announced their goal of electing 440 General Convention deputies and bishops at diocesan conventions who will support their 2009 General Convention efforts. They want at least one deputy from each diocese to attend one of five "inclusion activism" workshops in the late winter and spring of this year. The workshop included a proposed resolution to be introduced at diocesan conventions against B033, the 2006 General Convention resolution that calls for "exercising restraint" concerning the consecration of non-celibate homosexual priests as bishops.

This summer, the bishops of the Anglican Communion will meet for the once-a-decade Lambeth Conference. Integrity and related organizations have made no secret of their plans to be at the conference in an attempt to move the communion more toward "full inclusion"—a goal also shared by the Episcopal Church as a whole. Such efforts will *not* bring peace to the communion, which is facing potential schism in large part due to the Episcopal Church's actions on this issue. ☒



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Common Ground or Giving Ground?

A Response to “A Common Word” and “Loving God and Neighbor Together”

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Matthew 10: 16

At the end of Ramadan, October 2007, 138 Muslim clerics and scholars from around the world sent an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders calling for peace based on common ground shared by Muslims and Christians concerning loving God and neighbor. Some Christian leaders responded to *A Common Word Between Us and You* with great enthusiasm. But abstract concepts of love of God and neighbor translate into such different realities within the two religions that the proffered peace actually would depend on the abdication of Christian doctrine.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Durie, an expert in Islam, warned that some Christians might not realize that within *A Common Word* they were entering “an Islamicized dialogue” in which the tenets of Islam are the premise for all conversation. For instance, “love of God” would, for Christians, refer to God’s unconditional love, expressed in salvation. But *A Common Word*, as in Islam, refers to God’s favor upon those who submit to him.

Some Christian leaders responded to *A Common Word* with sensitivity and wisdom. Pope Benedict invited Muslims to meet with him in the spring of 2008. Far from giving ground on theology, the Pope proposed dialogue on issues not mentioned in the letter—the need to respect the dignity of “every human person.”

Another respondent, Mor Eustathius Matta Roham, Archbishop of Jezira and the Euphrates, Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, engaged the letter’s theology with extraordinary courage. He noted *A Common Word*’s deliberate choice of a

word for “neighbor” that denoted geographical proximity rather than brotherhood. He inquired of them if someone of a minority religion was a neighbor. “When legislations are passed in a country based on a religious majority, what happens to the minorities?” he asked. “Their practice in countries with a Muslim religious majority continues to cause bitter suffering for Christians and followers of other religions.”

Unfortunately, some responses to the Muslim “call” gave up theological ground to reach the common ground. Notable in this regard is *Loving God and Neighbor*

Unfortunately, some responses to the Muslim “call” gave up theological ground to reach the common ground.

Together: A Christian Response to “A Common Word Between Us and You,” a letter written by Yale scholars Miroslav Volf, Joseph Cumming, Harold Attridge, and Emilie Townes. The letter was endorsed by hundreds of leaders, including pastor Rick Warren, author Brian McLaren, and National Association of Evangelicals president Leith Anderson. *Loving God and Neighbor Together* welcomed *A Common Word* as “a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide.”

In the preamble, the Yale responders confessed the need to remove a great log (the Crusades and the war on terror) in their Christian eye before dealing with the speck in their neighbor’s eye. Unfortunately, *Loving God and Neighbor Together* never does deal with such “specks” as slavery or the wide-scale persecution and killing of Christians, Jews, and others in the Islamic world.

Another bit of ground goes with the

Yale letter’s references to “the Prophet Muhammad.” The Rev. Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo of the Barnabas Fund inquires, “Do the authors of the letter and the signatories really accept Muhammed as a true prophet of God? If so ... they should be Muslims.... It would be wrong to give Muslims the impression that Christians accept his status as a true prophet of God.”

In their eagerness to find common ground with the Muslims, these Christians marginalize themselves. According to Sookhdeo, “[t]he tone of the Muslim letter is condescending, given from a position of superiority and strength.” The

Yale response, in contrast, is “one of abject humility, guilt, and subjugation.” This “self-humbling, grateful tone” fits the “classical Islamic understanding of the role of Christians as *dhimmi* (subservient) in the Islamic state.”

A Common Word uses common Christian language to portray Islamic doctrine as common ground for Christians. *Loving God and Neighbor Together* agrees to that mistaken common ground, rather than attempting to propose true common ground that should exist between all people of reason and good will.

In his response, Archbishop Roham advised, “For dialogue to be fruitful to both sides ... it should be entered into with transparency, sincerity and good intentions. If ... there is any veiling of the truth ... ‘We deceive one another, but Satan deceives us all.’” *A Common Word* and *Loving God and Neighbor Together* both would benefit from that advice. ■



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Presbyterian Action Knows the Way to San Jose

by James D. Berkley

Presbyterian Action eyes are upon the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly in San Jose, June 21–28. Every two years, another General Assembly calls Presbyterian Action into dual tasks: vigorously promoting *biblical* social witness and steadfastly standing against potentially disastrous novelty.

Presbyterian Action will be highly visible and intimately engaged in sunny San Jose. A team of staff and volunteers will work with voting commissioners to press for a social witness that is more clearly centered on basic biblical teachings, more consistently derived from an open process, and more fully expressed in action in the lives of 2.3 million Presbyterians.

Work to Accomplish

The list of issues demanding our attention grows by the week. While Presbyterian Action focuses on social-witness issues, it also assists renewal partners generally in upholding Presbyterian standards and pressing for denominational reform. Issues of concern include:

1. **Effecting evenhanded Middle East actions:** Left to themselves, PCUSA officials seem inclined to dangerously isolate Israel. Divestment lurks, and now moves are afoot to eliminate military support. Presbyterian Action seeks simple fairness and truth, advocating a broader Middle East policy concerning human rights and religious freedom in all the countries of the region.
2. **Reducing ACSWP initiative and influence:** We seek to diminish the self-generated work of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and the proliferation of overreaching policy papers, which impose troubling budget and advocacy implications for years to come. Papers on such subjects as energy policy, Iraq, and Columbia are only part of the controversy from ACSWP that Presbyterian Action will oppose.
3. **Reworking ecumenical funding:** PCUSA ecumenical activities and donations are paid by the per capita “tax” imposed on every congregation. We are supporting overtures to remove ecumenical funding from per capita and to otherwise recalibrate massive entitlements for the National and World Councils of Churches.
4. **Opposing the Social Creed:** A hundred years ago, social-gospel enthusiasts edged churches from ministry into politics. A new “Social Creed for the 21st Century” would continue that slide into liberal secular do-goodism. We will counter one-sided boosterism for the creed.
5. **Ensuring open meetings:** Presbyterian Action—frequently excluded from meetings—has become a leading voice extolling the benefits of sunshine policies. We will once again toil to preserve or even strengthen the Open Meeting Policy.
6. **Defending biblical standards and Presbyterian government:** We will labor with other renewal groups to preserve Presbyterian moral standards for ordination and the sanctity of marriage. We will also seek to defeat or postpone a decision on a

drastically rewritten Form of Government, which, if approved, would weaken constitutional standards and fragmentize decisions.

Comprehensive Presbyterian Action

Any General Assembly is part family reunion, and so Presbyterian Action will be working to present a prominent, proficient, and professional public presence: a booth in the exhibition hall, staff and volunteers offering assistance, and a noontime “Action Briefing” will put a public face on our advocacy.

Presbyterian Action has no General Assembly authority. It cannot introduce business or vote. It can pull no strings and can throw no weight around. What it can do, however, and what Presbyterian Action has done well over the years, is to provide consistently useful, pointed, and reliable information and analysis, not only for the commissioners, but also for Presbyterians at large and for the welfare

of the church. The power of truth and reason are enormous, and Presbyterian Action shines in this respect.

We develop sample overtures, commissioners’ resolutions, and motions that either counter troublesome aspects

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of business items or initiate appropriate action toward biblically based social witness. We helpfully alert commissioners and advisory delegates about crucial business, pointing out problems and providing arguments useful in debate. And we also produce briefing papers on several key topics to aid in advocacy.

Presbyterian Action partners with other renewal groups to identify, befriend, orient, and coach friendly commissioners, advisory delegates, and overture advocates, helping them be

faithful and effective. Members of our team attend General Assembly to offer testimony, counsel, insight, and prayer.

From the assembly, we provide news and commentary that clearly and accurately demonstrate a biblical approach to social witness. We issue press releases on major news items, explaining to the church and secular media a conservative, biblically based viewpoint.

This exhaustive and exhausting ministry places Presbyterian Action in the middle of faithful and responsible contention for the trajectory the PCUSA will take. When the final gavel falls on June 28, the General Assembly will have been doggedly tugged by Presbyterian Action in directions more faithful to God’s will and purposes for his church. ☞



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General Assembly Council Briefs

The PCUSA General Assembly Council (GAC), meeting February 12-15 in Louisville, heard mostly good financial news. The denomination’s mission budget has recovered some stability after years of steep decline.

Between 2000 and 2006, mission budget receipts shrank from \$144 million to \$111 million. The budget for 2007 anticipated a further drop to \$92.5 million. But by December 31, \$94.5 million had come in. Expenditures totaled \$100.2 million, which was \$3.1 million less than budgeted. With the use of restricted funds already available, the deficit was only \$700,000.

But the number of PCUSA international missionaries has fallen from 250 in 2006 to 220 currently. Attrition is expected to bring that number down to 190 by next January. In 1959 the PCUSA’s predecessor denominations fielded 1,849 missionaries.

The GAC and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) joined in a common statement to uphold the per capita assessment in its current form. The two bodies downplayed the rising number of congregations that are withholding per capita payments to protest General Assembly actions. The system “fundamentally is not broken and does not need to be fixed,” the two bodies declared. They brushed aside overtures that would stop per capita funding of controversial ecumenical agencies such as the National and World Councils of Churches.

COGA and the GAC warned against a change proposed in the new Form of Government (FOG). “From time to time,” the two bodies observed in clear reference to the new FOG, “calls are made to abandon our system of per capita and mission budgets and simply move to a coordinated budget that would fund both ecclesiastical and mission functions.” They predicted that such a change would have “disastrous financial consequences to our presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly.”

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) announced its desire to weaken the denomination’s Open Meeting Policy. ACSWP chair B. Gordon Edwards suggested allowing “closed meetings for discernment.” Edwards wanted church leaders to have “the privilege of confidentiality” to “struggle to share what the Spirit is saying to them ... without the presence of the press.”

It's Amateur Hour as Presbyterians Pontificate on Iraq

by James D. Berkley

A sour-on-the-U.S., armchair-political-scientist version of a resolution on the war in Iraq is making its way from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to the General Assembly in June. The resolution laments a “tragic pattern of military intervention going back well before Vietnam” and intones that we need to “repent of engaging in an unnecessary war.” The statement implies that we have been “stampeded through fear of terror” and we need to prevent “the false demonization of other societies and the false sanctification of our own,” resisting the “idolatry and tyranny” of our own government.

The resolution favors “the significant increase of funding for [the] United Nations” and a “corresponding decrease in the funding of the military.” The resolution also invents more business for ACSWP: “to convene a seminary- and college-wide review of peace studies and peacemaking opportunities,” which is bound to introduce even more controversy.

A Flawed Process Produces Flawed Papers

As an example on how *not* to do social witness policy, this method takes the cake. First, the drafts illustrated a case of an *advisory* committee straying into a self-appointed role of *advocacy*. The General Assembly had not assigned ACSWP to produce an Iraq resolution. The committee simply *decided* to interject itself as an advocate of a viewpoint not necessarily shared by Presbyterians as a whole.

Second, staff member Chris Iosso urged his resolution on the elected committee. Several ACSWP members voiced reservations, and yet Iosso pressed harder. Members sought to clarify wording and tone down some overheated prose,

such as Iosso's calling for “massive” defunding of the military or referring to “fortresses” rather than bases. Iosso assumed the role of *advocate* with a committee he is expected only to *advise*.

Third, the resolution was pompous and scattershot. ACSWP member Gloria Albrecht argued that “early paragraphs introduce so many various ideas that they may get in the way and be distracting.” Another member, John Knapp, referred to the Iraq resolution draft as “a laundry list of topics, many of which are given only cursory attention.” However, Iosso pushed back so hard that Albrecht eventually gave up in exasperation, and Knapp had gone home.

Fourth, as Knapp wrote in a memo, the resolution's “theological content is thin,” and “without a theologically informed rationale as the basis for our recommendations, we merely echo so many voices in the public square.” The resolution seemed to be about 75 percent political analysis, 20 percent opinion, and 5 percent theology. It reeked of the arrogance of dilettantes with questionable credentials dabbling in a complicated field and yet plenty willing to propose copious opinions masquerading as advice.

And finally, last-minute hurry by only a fraction of the committee diminished any sense of clear, informed decision making. The ACSWP eventually approved a somewhat-reworked version of the resolution in principle, but deferred final approval until February, when the ACSWP executive committee signed off on yet a different version.

Fundamental Questions Never Raised

When the resolution is presented at General Assembly, accompanied by a lengthy study paper, it will vilify our country's military forces, international intentions, and political leadership. Yet, throughout

consideration, the thought was never: “Should we even do this? Is this assessment fundamentally fair and correct? And what commends us as a group to dispense such ample and self-sure political, military, and diplomatic advice?”

Each voice raised seemed to assume that the judgmental *direction* the resolution took was certainly justified, even obligatory. The resolution condescendingly grants that “every Presbyterian has the right to arrive at their own judgment” on the matter. However, while Presbyterians as a whole differ widely concerning political judgments as to how best to embody their faith in civic life, the resolution presumes to speak as if all do share a monolithic perspective. Here, once again, the ACSWP's ideological clubbiness failed to help the committee members articulate a variety of viewpoints wide enough to resemble the denomination.

The ACSWP is delivering to General Assembly a resolution ambitious and undisciplined in reach, disdainful of U.S. actions, cynical of our country's intentions, heavy on amateur political judgments, and light in Reformed theology. Until the ACSWP opens itself to a broader ideological spectrum that reflects Presbyterian thinking as a whole, such flawed resolutions are nearly assured.

Surely there must be some things—such as this—that Presbyterians simply don't have to say collectively, especially if they know too little and agree even less. ☒



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Pray for Kenya

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

Kenya has long been a sanctuary in the midst of violent conflict: an answer to prayer for refugees from Sudan, Rwanda, Congo, and elsewhere. But since the December 2007 presidential election, Kenya itself has become a place of violent conflict. And Kenyans have been forced to flee. Over 1,000 have been killed and up to 600,000 displaced in this once stable country.

Church leaders of all denominations began efforts to mediate the conflict. Kenyan church leaders have been joined by international church groups like the World Council of Churches and the All African Conference of Churches to “break down the dividing wall of hostility” and encourage the Body of Christ in Kenya to model reconciliation to the rest of the country. Christians the world over are joining in prayer for peace in Kenya.

When the polls opened on December 27, 2007, the *New York Times* noted “a record turnout” for the two main presidential candidates: incumbent Mwai Kibaki and challenger Raila Odinga. Some believed that Odinga, a Luo, would help provide equality of political power and economic prosperity for all Kenyans who feel disenfranchised by politicians such as Kibaki of Kenya’s largest ethnicity, the Kikuyu. One journalist called the election “a protest vote against years of inequalities.”

In early returns, Odinga was in the lead. But on December 30, after what international observers called “blatant vote rigging,” Kibaki won with a very narrow margin. Immediately the announcement triggered rioting and violence. Kenyan filmmaker and writer, Simiyu Barasa, observed in the *New York Times*, “[w]hat began in late December as protests against election irregularities has spiraled into killings based on which tribe your identity card and speech indicate you belong to.”

Two examples of the horrific post-election violence took place in the scenic Rift Valley region. On January 1, 2008,

some 50 women and children, mostly Kikuyu, were burned to death in a church in the Rift Valley town of Eldoret. One woman who escaped told the BBC, “We have never seen anything like this before, burning churches. These were friends of ours before the election, now they are trying to kill us like dogs.” On January 27, the *New York Times* reported that 19 Luo, including 11 children, were burned to death in Naivasha, another Rift Valley town. Naivasha, ironically, was a location for the talks leading to Sudan’s North-South peace agreement.

International leaders are trying to help bring peace and stability in Kenya. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, have met with Kibaki and Odinga. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Ghanaian President John Kufuor, president of the African Union, have also offered assistance.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan is trying, with Kibaki’s government and Odinga’s Orange Democratic Movement, to form a coalition government. As of February 21, both sides tentatively agreed to make Odinga prime minister. But the International Crisis Group reported on February 25 that “serious obstacles remain.” On both sides, armed groups were mobilizing and leaders remain inflexible over power-sharing details.

Many Kenyans have been deeply disappointed that the political rivals seem to be using the conflict to advance their own agendas, not cooperating to stop the violence. Kenya’s Christians are asking God to intervene. One woman told Reuters, “Our leaders have ... brought this catastrophe upon us. So now we are turning to the Almighty to save Kenya.” The Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly Stated Clerk, described a World Council of Churches visit he led

to Kenya January 30–February 3. What brought him hope, he said, was that “the churches, who themselves have at times been compromised, are now committed to being a force for peace and reconciliation.” For instance, the National Council of Churches of Kenya has sponsored face-to-face encounters for Christian leaders from various ethnic communities, as well as inter-religious forums with Christians, Hindus, and Muslims (see “World Council of Churches Twice Stunned,” p. 8). Forum chairman Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi commented that although religious leaders have been “pulled so much by their tribal feelings, they have been working hard together before, during, and after the election asking people to choose peace and prevent chaos.”

Not just church officials believe God can save Kenya. Sue Sprenkle, an overseas mission correspondent, told how in a small Baptist church in a Nairobi slum, over 200 children from 13 to 17 have been praying daily. Sprenkle heard one boy pray “for the people hurting others who are not from the same tribe,” asking God to “help them all be brothers and sisters and one people.” The church pastor informs Sprenkle that there has been no violence in their neighborhood since the children started praying together. Boniface, 12, tells Sprenkle that they can “change the country through prayer.”

In face of difficult political mediation and recalcitrant opposing leaders, it is all the more important that we join those of all ages who are praying for peace and justice in Kenya. We can help to change the country through prayer. 🙏



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Methodist Agency Officials Defend Transgendered Clergy Cause

by John S. A. Lomperis

Officials with the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) have gone out of their way to defend the cause of transgendered clergy. For the fall 2007 meeting of the Judicial Council, the GBHEM's Robert Kohler, an assistant general secretary, and Sharon Rubey, director of candidacy and conference relations, filed a brief defending the decision of Baltimore-Washington Conference Bishop John Schol the previous spring to re-appoint a transgendered pastor to a church.

Ann Gordon Becomes 'Drew Phoenix'

At the 2007 session of that annual conference, delegates were treated to the surprise announcement that a Bal-

GBHEM officials filed a brief defending the decision to re-appoint a transgendered pastor to a church.

timore clergywoman, Ann Gordon, had undergone sex change surgery to assume the new, male identity of "Drew Phoenix." This is at least the fourth known case in recent years of a United Methodist minister undergoing elec-

tive sex-change surgery. Bishop Schol pushed through Gordon/Phoenix's reappointment with little opportunity for the conference delegates to assess the implications of this unusual situation. Two clergy members questioned aspects of this process by requesting rulings of law from the bishop, which church law requires be subsequently reviewed by the Judicial Council.

A Judicial Council brief filed in the Gordon/Phoenix case by the Rev. David Simpson, one of these clergy, outlined how "there seemed to be a concerted effort

to keep the information and issue [of the transgender pastor] carefully controlled." Instead of a "collaborative process" with adequate opportunity for full discussion of the issue, Simpson says, "Bishop Schol chose a unilateral process that has the effect of allowing a single bishop to establish church law regarding qualifications for appointment of clergy." In doing so, the bishop overturned the precedent set by the conference's challenge a few years ago of another transgender minister. The bishop asserted for himself "unprecedented and perhaps unconstitutional power" in a way that "diminishes the duties and functions reserved to the Board of Ordained Ministry [BOOM], the legislative and judicial branches of the church." Affirming Bishop Schol's rulings of law upholding his re-appointment of Gordon/Phoenix would effectively make church law on the issue "decided by episcopal fiat," Simpson warned the Judicial Council.

Simpson pointed out that had BOOM members been given the courtesy of advance notice of the issue regarding Gordon/Phoenix, "the board would have had the opportunity to reflect on the guidelines provided by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry." Simpson argued that the GBHEM's Behavioral Health Guidelines for Boards of Ordained Ministry and a related addendum oppose transgenderism among clergy, interpreted in light of the American Psychiatric Association's listing "gender identity disorder" as a mental disorder.

A brief filed by the Rev. Dr. C. David Jones, another conference member, made a similar argument. Jones admitted that the denomination's top rulebook,

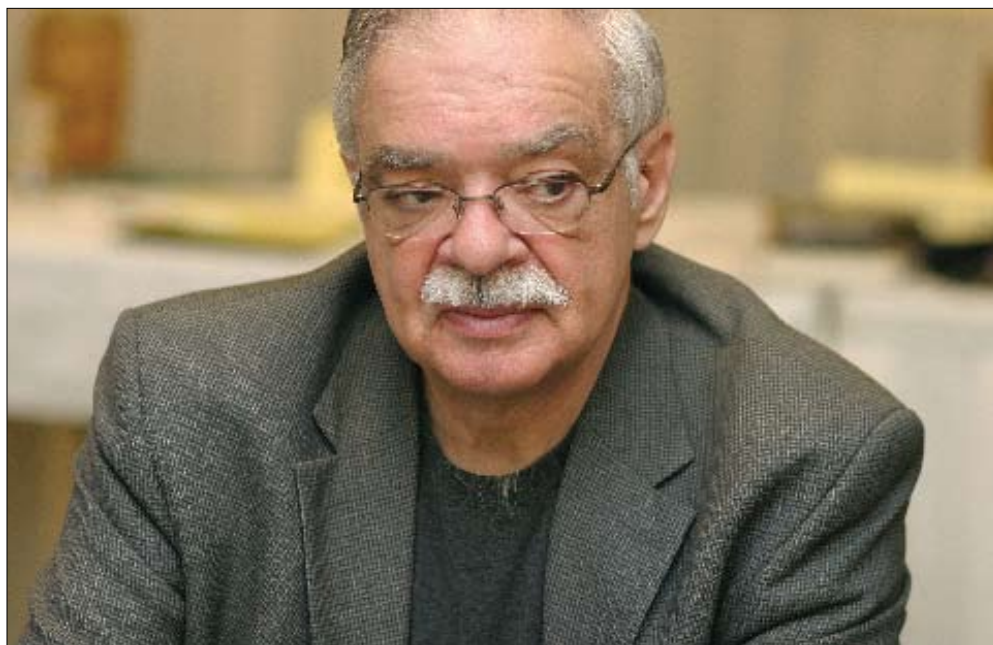
the *Book of Discipline*, “does not specifically address the issue of sexual identity change.” But he noted that relevant principles are found in the Bible and in historic Christian teaching, such as God’s creating all humans as male or female and the Old Testament proscription of cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5). In the section of his *Explanatory Notes* addressing the latter verse, John Wesley highlighted the need to “not confound those sexes which God hath distinguished.”

Only Guidelines

But the GBHEM’s Kohler and Ruby urged the denominational high court to reject such arguments and uphold the right of a bishop to make unilateral decisions on transgendered clergy. The GBHEM officials also diminished the relevance of their own standards cited by Simpson and Jones, arguing that they “are but guidelines” that “have not the force of Disciplinary canons.”

With their brief, the GBHEM leaders made common cause with the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), with which Gordon/Phoenix’s congregation is affiliated. RMN promotes within the United Methodist Church the acceptance of homosexuality, transgenderism, and other non-traditional sexual practices. Bishop Schol is a strong supporter of RMN. He declared at its 2005 “Hearts on Fire” conference that “certainly it’s my commitment to make sure that gay and lesbian, transgendered and bisexual persons are also in leadership positions, elected by the annual conference.”

In its own brief, RMN argued (as does a separate brief filed by Gordon/Phoenix herself) that the question of Gordon/Phoenix’s appointment is settled by the *Discipline*’s requirement that all ministers “in full connection and in good standing” are entitled to guaranteed appointments. The RMN brief also maintained that since the denomination decided decades ago “that gender is not an impediment to ordination” for women, it would “turn back the clock and reinstate prohibitions based on gender identity” if ordination were now



IGNORE OUR STANDARDS The Rev. Robert Kohler, a GBHEM official, issued a brief urging the denomination’s high court to ignore his organization’s own official standards for clergy. (Kathy L. Gilbert/UMNS)

denied to transgender persons.

At one point in her brief, Gordon/Phoenix described her church, which is affiliated with RMN, as “growing and thriving in its ministry and mission.” However, a different story is told by recent revelations that the congregation has relied on an anarchist collective to pay its utility bills. Average worship attendance is reported to be 25.

Narrow Ruling

The Judicial Council issued a narrowly worded decision that explicitly avoided a direct ruling on “whether gender change is a chargeable offense or violates minimum standards established by the General Conference.” Thus, it essentially left it up to the denomination’s quadrennial General Conference, which will meet April 23–May 2, to establish clearer church law on transgenderism.

In recent interviews with IRD, other bishops have indicated different positions than Bishop Schol’s on transgendered clergy. Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida said that he was “more cautious about that,” and Bishop G. Lindsey Davis of North Georgia said that he was “not personally comfortable with appointing a transgendered person at this time.” Davis also argued that “a very practical issue which ought to be part of the discussion”

is whether it is “fair to ask bishops and cabinets to be in the position of appointing transgendered persons to congregations.” Such bishops may be forced to do so in the future if the General Conference does not explicitly make transgenderism a chargeable offense.

The Kohler-Rubey brief was not the first time the GBHEM has injected itself into sexuality debates. Last summer, GBHEM chief Jerome Del Pino sent an e-mail to church leaders urging them not to be overly restrained by the *Book of Discipline*’s prohibition on the use of church funds “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.” He argued that this prohibition should not apply to unrestricted financial support of campus ministries formally committed to undermining the denomination’s teaching on marriage and sex. Del Pino also offered the services of the GBHEM to defend such pro-homosexuality campus ministries from “attack” by supporters of the denomination’s biblical teaching. ❧



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United Methodist Officials Urge Anti-Israel Divestment to General Conference Delegates

by Mark D. Tooley

United Methodist officials urged leading General Conference delegates to support church divestment from Caterpillar, Inc., for selling products to Israel. Stephen Sprecher, a director with the Board of Church and Society, and Susanne Hoder of the Interfaith Peace Initiative of the New England Annual Conference made their arguments in a panel discussion at the Pre-General Conference News Briefing sponsored by United Methodist Communications January 24–26 in Fort Worth, Texas.

On the same panel, Douglas Mills of the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Dave Zellner of the United Methodist Board of Pensions obliquely questioned the wisdom of divestment. Leading delegates from all the U.S. annual conferences were present, as were United Methodist communicators. Several representatives from Jewish groups also attended out of concern over the divestment issue.

“It tears me up to see the pain and suffering in the Middle East,” said Sprecher, a Church and Society director from Oregon. Speaking on his board’s divestment proposal, he argued, “It’s not anti-Semitic and it’s not anti-Israel.”

Sprecher said the anti-Caterpillar proposal is aimed at Caterpillar’s sale of bulldozers to Israel, which he said uses them to build the “illegal” security wall against Palestinian suicide bombers. He noted that Israel bulldozes Palestinian homes, without mentioning that homes are targeted for housing weapons depots or terrorist activities. Sprecher cited a 2003 incident where pro-Palestinian activist Rachel Corrie died (perhaps accidentally) while trying to block an Israeli bulldozer built by Caterpillar. Caterpillar is “involved in suffering caused by its products,” Sprecher said. “We also condone it if we do nothing.”

Representing the New England

Conference, Susanne Hoder alleged that United Methodist investments with Caterpillar help “sustain the occupation.” She alleged that the church is “deriving income from the persecution of Christians,” because a small minority of Palestinians is Christian. “We need to stand with Jews who stand against oppression,” Hoder insisted, citing a very small number of Jewish groups that support divestment aimed against Israel.

Questioning the push towards anti-Israel divestment was Dave Zellner of the United Methodist Pensions Board. “It’s uncharted territory to divest from a particular company,” he said, explaining that United Methodism had never specifically practiced divestment before. “If you divest from Caterpillar you take away our voice [as shareholders],” Zellner pointed out. “It’s important to hear all sides of the story.”

Doug Mills of the Commission on Christian Unity similarly questioned the anti-Caterpillar initiative. “Perceived simple solutions don’t always serve the church well,” he said. “This will have an impact on interfaith relations.”

Both Mills and Zellner were indirect in opposing the divestment proposal. Sprecher and Hoder were far blunter in their advocacy. “This is a legitimate American response to injustice,” Hoder insisted, warning against “powerful Israeli lobby groups.” Hoder also claimed that “money goes into the pockets of Israeli leaders” and that U.S. support for Israel fuels “income disparity” among Israelis, whose “wealthiest people are associated with the military.”

During a question and answer session, two liberal Jewish clerics in the audience endorsed anti-Caterpillar divestment. “You are not anti-Semitic,” one



NOT ANTI-ISRAEL? Stephen Sprecher argued that the divestment proposal was not anti-Semitic or anti-Israel. (Marta W. Aldrich/UMNS)

declared. “You stand for justice.” Another told the pro-divestment panelists: “I admire your bravery.”

In the few moments he was allowed at the microphone, Rabbi Gary Greenebaum of the American Jewish Committee disagreed. “There are more people today who are Jewish who are concerned about this meeting than who are United Methodist,” he told the panel, illustrating widespread Jewish concern over United Methodism’s possibly endorsing divestment. “Don’t give in to the demonization of Israel.”

Tim Bias, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Peoria where Caterpillar is headquartered, asked Sprecher whether the board had any discussions with Caterpillar before endorsing divestment. Sprecher regretted that there had been no such conversation before the vote. “We would serve ourselves better if we had conversation before passing resolutions,” Bias responded. ■



Mark D. Tooley is the Director of the UMAction program at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

A Labor of Love

by Erik R. Nelson

Having grown up in a nondenominational evangelical church, I had the benefit of remaining largely ignorant of the theological and political controversies plaguing the mainline. Of course, it was impossible to be completely ignorant of some of the players, including Bishop Spong and the Jesus Seminar. Most of the controversies in the mainline were out of view. If Christianity was one big building, the theological brawls were in a different wing, on a different floor.

That changed in college, when I was assigned (as part of a course for first-year students) to attend a denomination different from that in which I was raised. I attended a nearby Methodist church, primarily because I didn't have a car and it was within walking distance. I remained mostly unmoved by the experience, though it did pique my interest in more formal, liturgical worship.

It wasn't until a favorite professor of mine gave a short apologetic for his own church in a lecture, that I decided to try again. But I was nervous. It was an Episcopal parish, All Saints West Newbury. It was about as far from what I had grown up in as possible while still remaining Protestant.

I continued to attend that church until I graduated a few years later. In fact, there were a number of us Gen-X age students at the time—most of which had grown up in the rather bare, modernist trappings of nondenominational churches—who had begun to walk the Canterbury trail, all for the same reasons: the sense of connection to the Christian tradition, the rich symbols of faith that none of us had experienced before, the liturgy, the sacraments. And it didn't hurt that the parish I found was not only

strongly committed to the orthodox faith, but also deeply intellectual and fervently charismatic.

There is no small irony that so many of us theologically conservative evangelicals found a spiritual home in an Episcopal parish north of Boston. Later, when I had the opportunity to really understand how deep the theological problems in the denomination ran, I hesitated in actually becoming an official member of the church. Eventually, though, I realized that however flawed the denomination was, there were parishes that were doing work that needed to continue. And later still, I learned that there were people, like those working at IRD, who were commit-

Despite the chaos, IRD's mission has remained the same: to bring reformation to our churches and to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

ted to doing what they could to move the denomination back toward its theological roots.

It's been over a dozen years since I first attended that Episcopal parish, that has since put itself under the oversight of the Anglican Church of Kenya. Its priest, the Rev. Bill Murdoch, is now a bishop in Kenya's provincial synod. The church I attended in Virginia (Truro Church) is now a part of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA) associated with the Anglican Church of Nigeria.

There has been a great deal of disappointment, division, and distress. Like so many of us who have worked to keep the Episcopal Church faithful, I've been front row for some of the worst moments over the last five years and some wonderful

moments. I've seen churches leave for a variety of other Anglican bodies in a variety of nations, and I've seen the beginnings of some healing among the Anglican diaspora.

In all this chaos it's been difficult to know exactly what to do, where to go, or when (or if) it felt right to leave. Many have done just that. And I've been blessed to work at IRD, where despite the chaos, our mission has remained the same: to bring reformation to our churches and to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

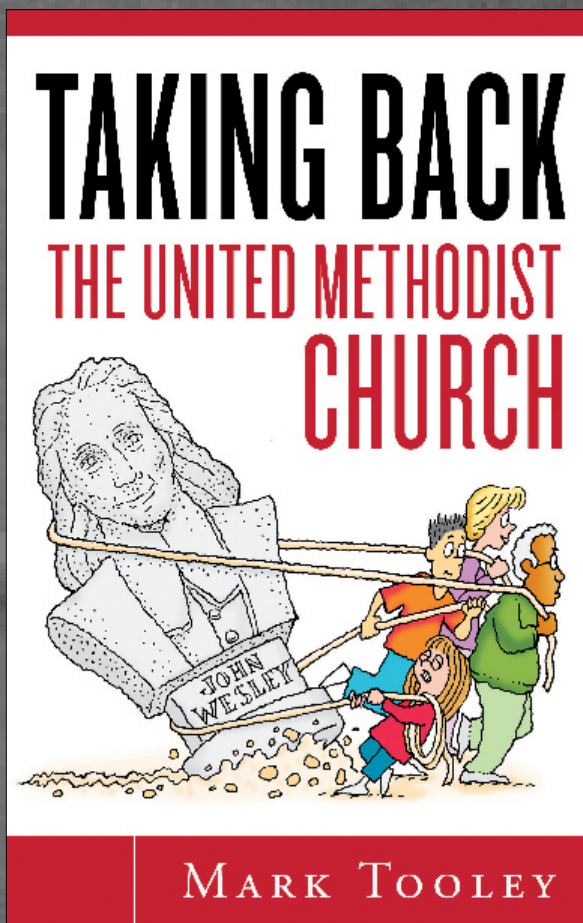
Unlike the religious left, which seems eager to call itself and its mission "prophetic," IRD has refrained from doing so about its own mission. But I'm going to say it now, just this once. We at IRD are often maligned, and stones are often cast at us. We are accused of wanting to divide and even destroy our denominations. But we follow our calling. We do so because we love our churches, and want to see them preserved and engaging in God's work.

We all feel deeply about the future of our denominations. And we will continue to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints," and continue to call our churches to account for what they say and do. And in our desire to see our churches return to orthodox faith, we attempt (however imperfectly) to be the prophetic voice the church needs in the midst of confusion. ☒



Erik R. Nelson is the Managing Editor of *Faith & Freedom*.

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