

# faith & freedom

*Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness*

August 2008

## The United Methodist General Conference: an IRD Report

### ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ California Same-Sex "Marriage"
- ▶ New Efforts for Beleaguered Middle Eastern Minorities





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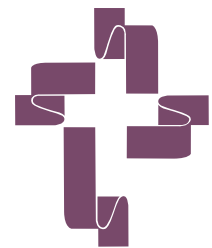
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The Institute on Religion & Democracy

1023 15th Street NW, Suite 601  
Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: 202.682.4131  
Fax: 202.682.4136  
Web: [www.TheIRD.org](http://www.TheIRD.org)  
E-mail: [info@TheIRD.org](mailto:info@TheIRD.org)

### PRESIDENT

Dr. James W. Tonkovich

### EDITORIAL

Alan F. H. Wisdom  
Executive Editor,  
Vice President for Research and  
Programs

Jennifer Zambone  
Editor

Loralei G. Coyle  
Director of Communications

Stephan Hilbelink  
Designer

### STAFF

James D. Berkley  
Director of Presbyterian Action

Nalani E. Hilderman  
Senior Executive Assistant

John S. A. Lomperis  
Research Associate

Faith J. H. McDonnell  
Director of Religious Liberty Programs

Steve R. Rempe  
Website Coordinator

David P. Sheaffer  
Director of Development

Rebekah M. Sharpe  
Administrative Assistant

Mark D. Tooley  
Director of UMAction

Jerald H. Walz  
Vice President for Operations

Jeffrey H. Walton  
Communications Manager



# I am an evangelical. What does this mean?

by Dr. James W. Tonkovich

In the past thirty years, I have read countless articles about evangelical identity – and the tricky, slippery question: “What does it mean to be an evangelical?” And this question is never trickier and slipperier than when “evangelical” comes in with “political.”

The document “An Evangelical Manifesto,” released this past May, begins with an affirmation of identity.

*Evangelicals are Christians who define themselves, their faith, and their lives according to the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth.* (The Greek word for good news was *euangelion*, which translates into English as *evangel*.) This Evangelical principle is the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus. It is not unique to us. We assert it not to attack or to exclude, but to remind and reaffirm, and so to rally and to reform.

It then goes on to state categorically, “We Evangelicals are defined theologically, and not politically, socially, or culturally.”

Evangelicals are not defined politically. The media and others, however, give the impression that evangelical is a political designation. Elliott Abrams, for example, referred to “what is variously called the ‘Christian right,’ the ‘evangelicals,’ or Christian conservatives.” He uses the three terms as synonyms, a fundamental error that results in a great deal of confusion that can compromise the Gospel by locating redemption in the institutions of this world – a common error of the religious left.

Evangelicals are not defined socially. Evangelical includes those who are typically thought of as evangelicals: members of Bible churches, independent churches, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other theologically conservative denominations. But the IRD works in large part with evangelicals who are members of the Protestant mainline denominations: the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and so on. Some theological conservatives in these churches may not like being called evangelicals, but evangelicals are what they are nonetheless. In addition, most African-American churches are evangelical, as are most Asian churches and most non-Catholic Hispanic churches.

Evangelicals are not defined culturally. The social diversity is vast – so is the cultural diversity. Evangelicalism is a global phenomenon.

Henry Luke Orombi, Anglican archbishop of Uganda, wrote an article in the journal *First Things* entitled “What is Anglicanism?” In it he highlighted the need for “a commitment to the authority of the Word of God, a confidence in a God who acts in the world, and a conviction of the necessity of repentance and of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Bishop Orombi’s description of Anglicanism is thoroughly evangelical. And, aside from his emphasis on bishops, African United Methodists, Mexican Pentecostals, Korean Presbyterians and U.S. Baptists share his convictions.

Evangelicals are defined theologically. Saying that evangelicals must be defined theologically, however, does not solve all problems. As Gary Dorrian of Union Theological Seminary and

Columbia University comments in *Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations*:

Today the term “Evangelical” is so widely treasured that it lacks a common point of reference. There is no golden thread that unites the unwieldy profusion of Calvinists, Wesleyans, Pentecostals, fundamentalists, neo-Barthians, nondenominationalists, Emergent Church followers, and others who claim the name.

While these are real concerns, theologians J.I. Packer and Thomas Oden point out in their book, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*, that there is theological and spiritual agreement among those who claim the term evangelical.

Evangelical Christians... are those who read the Bible as God’s own Word, addressed personally to each of them here and now; and who live out a personal trust in, and love for, Jesus Christ as the world’s only Lord and Savior. They are people who see themselves as sinners saved by grace through faith for glory; who practice loyal obedience to God; and who are active both in grateful, hopeful communion with the triune God by prayer, and in neighbor-love, with a lively commitment to disciple-making according to the Great Commission.

Even though evangelical is a theological designation, it is nonetheless the case that certain political positions – as well as social and cultural forms – are more compatible with an evangelical faith than others.

Some have recently argued that since evangelical Christians are defined theologically, we need to be less political. Nothing could be further from the truth. Politics are a subset of “neighbor love,” and so evangelicals cannot in good conscience sidestep politics. No person or entity can create the requirements of that “neighbor-love.” Instead, thoughtful reflection on biblical standards must inform politics.

This is not a political commitment; it is a critical theological commitment that all evangelical Christians should share. Working out that commitment in order to contribute to the just ordering of society is no small task. Yet it is an inescapable part of the Christian life and is central to the mission and vision of the IRD as we seek to think about politics from a distinct theological point of view. ☒

*Jim Tonkovich*



**Dr. James W. Tonkovich** is the President of the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

## International Briefs

### Noted Evangelical Theologian Leaves Anglican Church of Canada

Theologian James Innell (J. I.) Packer, best known as the author of the 1973 best-selling book *Knowing God*, has joined 10 other clergy in the relinquishing of their ministerial licenses in the Anglican Church of Canada.

Claiming that a “poisonous liberalism” has overtaken the 640,000-member denomination, the 81 year-old Packer has announced he will leave the Diocese of New Westminster in British Columbia. Packer and the other dissident clergy will

instead affiliate with the more conservative Province of the Southern Cone in South America.

“While it is always sad when anyone leaves the Anglican Church of Canada, I appreciate that they have made their position clear,” said the Rt. Rev. Michael Ingham, bishop of the Diocese of New Westminster, in an official statement.

Ingham has received much criticism from traditional Anglicans for his liberal positions and policies, highlighted by his 2002 decision to sanction same-sex blessing services. “He is a bishop who appears heretical,” said Packer, comparing the

bishop to controversial Anglican bishops John Shelby Spong in the United States and Richard Holloway of the Church of England.

“I’m simply being an old-fashioned, mainstream Anglican,” said Packer. 🗉

### Christian Bookstore Owner Charged ‘Dangerous Religious Element’ in China

In March, Chinese authorities arrested Shi Weihai, a 37 year-old bookstore owner and travel agent, in Beijing. First charged with the publication of Bibles and Christian literature, Shi was later charged

### Zimbabwean Churches Appealed for Help during Post-Election Violence

Church leaders in Zimbabwe sought the help of neighboring African nations and the United Nations to stem the violence resulting from the disputed presidential election results in that country.

On March 29, Zimbabweans participated in local, parliamentary and presidential elections. Initial results indicated a shift in power from the ruling ZANU-PF party to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. The ruling party, however, did not release the election results until May 2. It declared that opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai had received more votes than President Robert Mugabe, but not enough votes to avoid a runoff election between the two candidates. Opposition leaders disputed the final results, claiming Tsvangirai had received enough votes to be named the winner.

In the months following the presidential election, there were numerous reported attacks on MDC supporters, presumably carried out by government-supported militias. MDC officials claimed over 40 members were killed since the election and over 1,000 homes destroyed.

“As shepherds of the people, we ... express our deep concern over the deteriorating political, security, economic, and human rights situation in Zimbabwe,” said a joint statement of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe. “We appeal to the Southern African Development Community, the African Union, and the United Nations to work towards arresting the deteriorating political and security situation in Zimbabwe.”

Church leaders warned that if left unchecked, the violence could escalate to “genocide similar to that experienced in Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi.” They charged that Mugabe supporters have targeted churches and church hospitals, forcing several of these institutions to close.

AFP PHOTO/DESMOND KWANDE



President of the Zimbabwean opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Morgan Tsvangirai prays holding Anoziva Janhi at the burial of Anoziva's father, on May 28, 2008.

for being a “dangerous religious element,” according to reports from China Aid Association and Compass Direct.

This was the second arrest for Shi, whom authorities had originally arrested on November 28, 2007, for “illegal business practices.” Authorities released him on January 4 due to insufficient evidence.

Ray Sharpe, a U.S. businessman and friend of Shi, has suggested that Shi’s close contact with foreigners through his travel agency business may have aroused the suspicion of Chinese officials. Despite the charges, Sharpe describes Shi as a patriot who has been actively promoting the upcoming Olympic Games. “I know him to be a man that has been promoting the Olympics at a time when many tourists from around the globe would be able to see China, whom he loves so dearly, at her best,” said Sharpe. “He dislikes foreigners who are critical of China, often saying that they do so out of ignorance of the tremendous strides that have already been made.”

### **Bangladeshi Pastor’s Daughter Raped as Intimidation**

Muslim villagers in the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh gang raped the 13 year-old daughter of Pastor Motilal Das. According to Compass Direct, the rape was an apparent attempt to force the pastor to leave the region.

The pastor of United Bethany Church in Laksmipur, Das said he has long been subject to acts of intimidation by local residents. “I did not pay attention to any of the threats or hindrances – I continued evangelical and pastoral activities with prayer,” said Das.

Investigating officer Sanwar Hossen said that five men attacked Das’ daughter, Elina, as she ventured from the family house to an outdoor latrine. After the men raped her, they left the unconscious Elina in the Das’ front yard, where Pastor Das

discovered her the next morning.

“There was no family vendetta or personal clash or enmity of Motilal with the local people for which his daughter would be raped,” said Hossen. “There was even no land dispute between him and the neighbors, because he does not have any land.”

Police have arrested one suspect. Another identified suspect remains at large. The Das family has since relocated to a family friend’s house in Dhaka.

### **Former British Prime Minister Talks about Religion**

Speaking publicly on the subject of religion for the first time since converting to Roman Catholicism, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed an audience of 1,600 people at Westminster Cathedral in London, announcing the launch of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

“For religion to be a force for good, it must be rescued not simply from extremism – faith as a means of exclusion; but also from irrelevance – an interesting part of our history but not of our future,” said Blair. Both extremes, he said, can result in the reduction of religion to “strange convictions and actions” with little perceived relevance to people’s everyday lives. “It is this face that gives militant secularism an easy target,” he said.

According to its website, “The purpose of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation is to promote respect, friendship and understanding between the major religious faiths; and to make the case for faith itself as relevant, positive and a force for good in the modern world.”

Blair did not mention the ongoing war in Iraq during his remarks. Prior to his speech, the liberal Roman Catholic organization Pax Christi held a silent vigil to protest his support for the war during his tenure as prime minister. As the

audience left, protestors beat drums and called for the prosecution of Blair as a war criminal.

### **Palestinian Christians Hint at Conflicts with Muslims**

Despite claims by church leaders in the Holy Land that tensions between Christians and Muslims there have been exaggerated, some Christians are claiming that persecution and discrimination are a reality in the region.

“On the official level you don’t find any discrimination,” an unnamed prominent Christian from the West Bank told Ecumenical News International. “But the problem is with those who enforce the laws. Many of them are racists. ... If there is a fight, immediately they will be against the Christian.”

Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the senior Roman Catholic leader in Jerusalem, noted delicately in a March 1 pastoral letter that “relations between Muslims and Christians have not yet reached their perfect equilibrium.” Lasting peace between the two groups is a “long and slow path that must be perfected every day.”

Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan dismissed much of the talk of tension between Palestinian Christians and Muslims. “Of course there are some cases [of conflict], but people exaggerate them – especially on the Christian right,” he said. Younan blamed increased Islamic extremism on the Israeli authorities’ treatment of Palestinians. Only justice, education and interfaith dialogue can curtail such extremism, he said.



# Church News

## Southern Baptist Membership Down Slightly

For the first time in recent memory, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has reported a drop in membership. Life-Way Christian Resources, the official publishing arm of the SBC, announced a 0.24 percent decrease in membership during 2007 to 16,266,920, down from 16,306,246 in 2006.

Southern Baptists had already reported a decline in baptisms for seven of the last eight years. In 1950 Southern Baptists recorded one baptism for every 19 church members. Today the ratio of baptisms to total membership is 1:47.

While the SBC drop is minor compared to the large drops seen in the mainline Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran and United Methodist denominations, it is consistent with a plateau trend that has been forming for the past several years.

Thom Rainer, president of Life Way, said declining baptisms point to “a denomination that, for the most part, has lost its evangelistic passion.”

Southern Baptists remain the largest Protestant group in the United States, with about 10 million members added since 1950. 📖

## Church Planting Source of Growth for U.S. Churches

A new study has revealed an increased emphasis and interest in church planting in American Christianity. Released by the Leadership Network, the study surveyed over 200 church-planting congregations, more than 100 denominational leaders from dozens of denominations, and 45 church planting networks. It found all but two groups expressed a growing interest in church planting and that there is an unprecedented number of books on the subject.

Once relegated to denominational agencies, church planting now stems from the churches themselves, particularly small churches. Churches with 200

Courtesy CBF



**A Reading from the Book of Nancy:** “To minister to the needs of God’s creation is an act of worship. To ignore those needs is to dishonor the God who made us.”

or less attendees are four times more likely to plant a church than churches with over 1000 attendees. Churches with an attendance of 200–500 are twice as likely to plant a church than bigger churches.

According to the study, most denominations report that only 15 percent of their churches are actually planting other churches, but that a large number of new converts to Christianity are arriving through those churches. 📖

## Pharmacist Takes Case to Wisconsin Supreme Court

A devout Roman Catholic pharmacist is appealing his case to the Wisconsin State Supreme Court.

The pharmacist, Neil Noesen, refused to fill or refer a prescription for contraceptives in 2002. He told his employer, K-Mart, that it was against his religious beliefs to “aid, abet, encourage, refer, transfer, or participate in any way with something that I feel would be impairing the fertility of a human being.”

K-Mart accommodates employees

with a conscientious objection to contraceptives, but the state Pharmacy Examining Board reprimanded Mr. Noesen. It fined him thousands of dollars and placed restrictions on his license. Noesen claimed religious discrimination, but the State Circuit and Appellate Courts upheld the charges, ruling that he “abandoned even the steps necessary to perform in a minimally competent manner under any standard of care,” according to the Associated Press.

Noesen’s legal counsel, the Thomas Moore Society, says that Noesen has a strong case before the State Supreme Court, describing it as a clear case of religious discrimination.

“The Pharmacy Examining Board’s action violates his rights of conscience, clearly protected by the Wisconsin Constitution (Article I, Section 18). We hope the Wisconsin Supreme Court will restore Mr. Noesen’s right to express his deeply held beliefs.” 📖

## Are Quakers Going Pagan?

A small but growing trend – pagan-

## Biblical Scholars Challenge Pelosi's Use of Supposed OT Quotation

Fox News reports that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's oft-used quote about environmental care is not from the Old Testament as she has claimed. In fact, according to biblical scholars, it is not even in the Bible.

Pelosi said in her Earth Day press release, "The Bible tells us in the Old Testament, 'To minister to the needs of God's creation is an act of worship. To ignore those needs is to dishonor the God who made us.'"

Pelosi has quoted the same passage several times to support her push for global warming legislation. But Cybercast News reports several experts say the passage does not exist and does not appear to be a paraphrase.

Claude Mariottini, professor of Old Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, calls it "fictional." Mariottini insists, "It is not in the Bible. There is nothing that even approximates that."

The Rev. Andreas Hock from St. John Vianney Seminary says, "The quote does not exist in the Old Testament, neither in the New Testament. Even in pieces or bits, [it] cannot be found in the Old Testament."

Pelosi's office did not respond to a request for a comment by Fox News. 🗉

ism – is emerging within the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers.

Modern day pagans, who worship nature and earth as "the Goddess," are finding a home in the most liberal of Quakerism's four branches, the Friends General Conference, which counts 30,000 members in North America.

*Christianity Today* reports that the two traditions share many similarities. Both are non-hierarchical and place a strong emphasis on internal divinity. That commonality has sparked Internet discussion forums, seminars, and even

explicitly Quaker-pagan congregations.

According to the article, liberal Quakers identify more with Quaker practices, such as unprogrammed, pastor-less meetings, rather than with Christianity. As a result, many liberal Quakers no longer see Jesus as divine. Some do not believe in God at all.

Marshall Massey, a conservative Quaker in Omaha, Neb., says removing Christianity undermines the stability of the Quaker faith.

"We are an easily acculturated movement," he says, explaining that Quakers' egalitarian, non-creedal tradition makes

it very susceptible to outside influences. "But Quakerism has become, on the liberal end, an indefinable refuge for people who regard themselves as mystics or experientially religious and have problems with sources of authority." 🗉

## Evangelical Official Makes "Time 100" List of World's Most Influential

National Association of Evangelicals Vice President for Government Affairs Richard Cizik is one of only three religious figures to appear on *Time* magazine's list of the world's most influential people.

Cizik joined Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism.

*Time* credits Cizik for his emphasis on "creation care." It commended his advocacy for "a brand of pro-life politics that extends well beyond human conception, up through the care of God's creation itself."

Pope Benedict XVI was not on this year's list but, according to *USA Today*, the Vatican did not object.

"I'm very happy that the pope isn't on the list, because they have used criteria that have absolutely nothing to do with the evaluation of the pope's religious and moral authority," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, papal spokesman. 🗉

## Outrageous Quotes

**"I'm not a member. . . . I'm Jewish, but I am just very touched by [the Rev. Jim St. John's] willingness to open his congregation to people of all faiths."**

—Ellen Goldberg, parish board member at St. Miriam Church, a Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch in Roxborough, PA. Goldberg serves on the church board with a Baptist, a Buddhist, a Methodist, a Lutheran, and three Catholics. Parish pastor St. John joined the liberal offshoot of the Roman Catholic Church after leaving the Episcopal Church because the local diocese would not ordain him as an openly gay man.



# New Efforts for Beleaguered Middle Eastern Minorities

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

**O**ctober 11, 2006: Father Paulos Iskander, priest at St. Ephrem Orthodox Church in Mosul, northern Iraq, is found decapitated and dismembered, three days after his kidnapping by the “Lions of Islam.”

August 14, 2007: Five explosive-filled trucks kill over 700 people, mostly Yazidis – adherents of an ancient Middle Eastern religion – in four villages outside Mosul.

March 13, 2008: Weeks after his kidnapping, the body of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Paulos Fahraj Rahho, is found in a shallow grave.

Christians and other non-Muslims in Iraq face violence and persecution, but they are not alone. Similar acts by extremist groups and governments stain the entire Middle

East with the blood of vulnerable minorities.

In Egypt, Copts and other Christians suffer discrimination and outright persecution. In Iran, members of the Baha’i faith, the country’s largest minority religion, have no legal rights; thousands are in prison for their beliefs. In Lebanon, Hezbollah targets the

Druze, a splinter group from Islam. And since the 1995 empowerment of the Palestinian Authority, the most horrific human rights violations against Palestinians have been by Islamists torturing and killing Arab Christians.

Now, however, a new congressional caucus on religious minorities in the Middle East offers hope to the beleaguered. Through briefings, hearings, and legislation, the caucus will highlight and address the needs of Christians and other persecuted groups in the Middle East, with a special focus on Iraq.

## Focusing on the Forgotten

As the United States sacrifices much to bring democracy, freedom and a better life to the people of Iraq, the focus is on winning the hearts and minds of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds. Christians and other minorities feel forgotten. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) says these minorities face “widespread violence from Sunni insurgents and foreign extremists, as well as pervasive violence, discrimination, and marginalization at the hands of the national government, regional governments, and para-state militias, including those in Kurdish areas.” Since 2007, USCIRF has had Iraq on its watch list of countries with severe violations of religious freedom.

Early in 2008, IRD’s Religious Liberty Program joined with other human rights and religious organizations and with Iraqi-American groups, such as the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America (CAS-

“We have done nothing to support the Christian community or the increased Christian suffering.”

**IRAQI AMERICAN CHRISTIANS (ABOVE)** protesting in front of the White House. (Photo: Faith McDonnell)



CA) and the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, to form the Coalition to Save Iraq's Christians and Other Defenseless Minorities. This new voice urges the U.S. government to help Iraq's defenseless groups.

### Disappearing Minorities

Iraq's 1987 census showed 1.4 million Christians according to British-based Help Iraqi Christians. At the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, there were approximately one million Christians. At present, Christians only number in the 600,000s. The Baha'i are disappearing. And the once-thriving Iraqi Jewish community is now all but non-existent. Other little-known religious minorities, such as the Mandeans, Shabaks and Yazidis, also suffer. (The Mandeans are followers of a Gnostic religion with roots in ancient Babylon. Shabaks and Yazidis follow Middle Eastern religions with Indo-European roots.)

Although Christians comprise only four percent of Iraq's total population, more than 40 percent of all Iraqi refugees are Christians. Refugees often flee their homes with no possessions. In some places such as Jordan they are considered illegal and not allowed to work. They depend on the mercy of local churches and others until they can reach a country of refuge.

### The Forgotten Faithful

But this suffering cannot compare to the suffering of minorities who remain in Iraq. The U.S. advocacy movement Save Iraqi Christians gives several examples of families targeted solely because they are Christian. In May 2006, gunmen broke into a home and killed two little boys. In February 2007, Ansar Islam (God's Warriors) kidnapped a pastor in Baghdad and then imprisoned, tortured and beat him for fifteen days.

"There's no comparison between Iraq now and then [before Saddam]," the Rev. Canon Andrew White declared on CBS' 60 Minutes. "Things are the most difficult they have ever been for

Christians," said White, the Vicar of St. George's Anglican Church, Baghdad. White, who expressed support for the war, still grieved that the Coalition had "failed the Christians." He mourned, "We have done nothing to support the Christian community or the increased Christian suffering."

White voices similar distress about Iraq's Jews. "There are very few of them," he said. "They have been killed as well. They have been murdered. They have been kidnapped. And everybody, including the Christians, is too scared to talk about them or their needs."

Nina Shea, director of the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute, said in National Review Online that the minority communities "have been seen as inconsequential." Ironically, because Iraq's minorities pose no threat and embrace democracy, the United States has no policy to protect them or to advance their development as it has done for Muslim populations.

### New Hope in Nineveh

In a last attempt to stay in their homeland, many Christians and other minorities are moving north to Iraq's Nineveh Plain, the traditional home to Assyrian Christians. Their ancestors first encountered God there through the preaching of Jonah. Later the apostle Thomas preached the Gospel en route to his missionary work in India.

However, a sustainable community in the Nineveh Plain requires security to stand against the terrorists the military "surge" has driven northward. The new Congressional Caucus on Religious Minorities in the Middle East addressed this need at its inaugural celebration on April 15, 2008.

Another sign of hope for Iraq's minorities is the U.S. government's new willingness to admit to the specific targeting of minorities for their religious beliefs. The administration is also beginning to address humanitarian relief, economic development, security requirements, and adequate political representation for these previously overlooked,

vulnerable communities. As Canon Andrew White quipped in a recent British television special, "God can even come to the State Department."

Iraqi-Americans and the broader coalition will monitor closely U.S. policy regarding the establishment of a refuge for Christians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plain. They hope concerned citizens will join this movement to encourage U.S. policy and challenge their members of Congress to join the ranks of the new congressional caucus.

"Should I not be concerned about that great city?" God asked Jonah about Nineveh. Today as we look at the situation of the descendants of Nineveh and at other persecuted minorities in the Middle East, we can look with new hope. God is still concerned about that great city and its counterparts in this troubled region.



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



## California Same-Sex 'Marriage':

The Arrogance of Judges and the Silence of Churches

by Dr. James W. Tonkowich and Alan F. H. Wisdom

According to news media reports, on May 15, 2008, the California Supreme Court “overturned the gay marriage ban.” What the court really did was command a radical redefinition of marriage, the most basic institution of any society. The arrogance of this judicial fiat cannot be overstated.

By the barest 4-3 margin, the court overruled the will of the people of California expressed in a 2000 referendum, when 61.4 percent voted that “[o]nly a marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in

California.” The justices seemed to have forgotten that they are merely interpreters of the law, not Plato’s philosopher kings stooping to undo the will of those they

deem less enlightened than they.

Such decisions compromise the courts and the rule of law. The U.S. Supreme Court squashed the will of the people and their representatives in *Roe v. Wade*, and it has poisoned American politics for over 30 years. As the *Wall Street Journal’s* editorial about the California decision noted, “Judges invent wedge issues. Always have.”

The decision waved aside tradition, which has been called “the democracy of the dead.” Over thousands of years, no civilization has treated same-sex relationships as the equivalent of marriage. Some societies have toler-

ated such relationships, but none so far has equated them with the union of man and woman. Yet the court overthrew all of this accumulated human experience in order to force California to conform its laws to the demands of a social movement that is barely one generation old.

### Marginalizing the Many to Elevate the Few

The decision disregarded the unanimous teaching of all major religions. Each religion has its own peculiar provisions governing marriage, but all recognize the same basic relationship. All understand that marriage involves the union of the two complementary sexes in a sexual relationship that ordinarily serves as the locus for procreation and childrearing.

In fact the decision placed mainstream followers of all major religions (and the vast majority of Californians) in the legal position of being regarded as bigots who defy state policy on a matter of fundamental human rights. The majority opinion stressed that the view that “same-sex couples are in some respects second-class citizens who may, under the law, be treated differently from, and less favorably than... opposite-sex couples” was “now emphatically rejected by this state.” They repeatedly compared the traditional understanding of marriage to the racial prejudices of earlier generations.

The implications of this line of thinking are clear and frightening. The court has elevated a small minority to a specially protected class because of its professed “sexual

**The decision disregarded  
the unanimous teaching of  
all major religions.**



orientation.” The court held that anything that impinges on the interests of that class is subject to “strict scrutiny.” Just as “strict scrutiny” has properly driven almost all overt expressions of racism out of our public life, so now the court will improperly turn the same standard of scrutiny against the large numbers of religious people who see marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

The California justices promised that churches would not be forced to perform same-sex weddings. But they did not offer any protections against the more likely forms of pressure: that defenders of traditional marriage (like racists in an earlier day) would be shamed and driven out of the public square, that public employees who express such views would be disciplined or fired, that corporations would not want to risk hiring supervisors known to hold “bigoted” religious beliefs about marriage, that parachurch ministries with policies upholding traditional marriage would find their tax exemptions threatened and their government relationships severed.

We have already seen this process advance in jurisdictions that treat same-sex couples as if they were married. The Roman Catholic Church has been driven out of the adoption business in Massachusetts and Great Britain because it prefers to place children with man-woman married couples. In Canada, “human rights commissions” are busy prosecuting Christian broadcasters and schoolteachers for alleged “hate speech” against homosexuals.

### **Exalting the Individual, Seeing No ‘Compelling State Interest’**

The judicial arrogance also showed in the unthinking assertion that “the traditional and well-established definition of marriage cannot properly be viewed as a compelling state interest.” It is as though the justices were willfully ignoring the state’s crucial interest in the most basic institution of society. Marriage is society’s way of affirming that every child needs and deserves the care of a mother and a father – not just any two persons, but the child’s own unique mother and father. Marriage

is the socially recognized means by which, ordinarily, children obtain a mother and father who are committed to them and to one another for the long haul.

The social science data are overwhelming: no other relationship has demonstrated the same ability as marriage to nurture healthy, well-adjusted children who are prepared to become productive citizens. If favoring this kind of relationship above all others is not a compelling state interest, what is?

The California court decision reflected an arrogant attitude that increasingly afflicts our society: the apotheosis of the autonomous individual. It treats marriage as if it were the right of an individual – an entirely private matter. The decision states:

*These core substantive rights include, most fundamentally, the opportunity of an individual to establish – with the person with whom the individual has chosen to share his or her life – an officially recognized and protected family possessing mutual rights and responsibilities and entitled to the same respect and dignity accorded a union traditionally designated as marriage.*

But marriage is not an act of the autonomous individual. To begin with, it takes two to marry. Beyond that, people have never been able to marry anyone they wanted. You can’t marry a minor. You can’t marry your sister. You can’t have more than one spouse. And you can’t marry someone of the same sex.

Marriage is an institution – comparable legally to a partnership or corporation. Institutions have rules determining how many persons may be involved and how they relate to one another. Marriage necessarily involves two persons: one from each of the two complementary sexes. Anything that does not fit that definition is not marriage. It is a different sort of relationship, and it is properly treated

in a different fashion. Society is under no obligation to grant every sexual relationship “the same respect and dignity.”

### **Will Churches Speak Up?**

Fortunately, Californians can lead us back out of the quicksand. On April 24, *ProtectMarriage.com* announced that it had collected many more than the 700,000 signatures required to put a constitutional amendment on the California ballot in November. The first state court to invent a right to same-sex marriage was in liberal Hawaii. The Hawaii voters slapped that court down. We can only hope, pray and (if you’re a Californian) work for the same outcome in the Golden State.

Churches, too, should raise their voices in this debate. They know what to say, if they have the courage to speak. They all have significant teachings on marriage, going back to the Genesis account of how “the two [man and woman] become one flesh.”

In late April, the United Methodist General Conference reaffirmed “the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman.” United Methodists also “support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.” Many other denominations have analogous teachings.

Several weeks after the California decision, we have yet to hear a word from any national or California agencies of the United Methodist Church. Indeed, among the ten largest U.S. denominations, it appears that only the Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists have issued any official comment on the decision. (Both were opposed.) In the face of such judicial arrogance, the silence of so many church leaders is deafening. 📢



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



**Alan F.H. Wisdom** is the Vice President for Research and Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

# Mixed Messages on Israel Anniversary

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

Israel recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of its independence. On May 14, 1948, as Great Britain relinquished its mandate over Palestine, Jewish leaders there proclaimed the modern state of Israel. U.S. President Harry Truman, overruling many of his top advisers, was the first to recognize the new nation.

Israel's Arab neighbors immediately launched a war to destroy the nascent Jewish state. Israel survived that war and has survived three more wars and thousands of terrorist attacks over the intervening decades.

But hundreds of thousands of Arabs were displaced in the 1948 war. The plight of the Palestinians has become a permanent grievance. And many actors in the region—Syria, Iran, and the Hamas movement that controls Gaza—are still committed to the destruction of Israel.

Ordinarily, a birthday is an occasion to offer congratulations and best wishes. Although sorrows and regrets may be acknowledged, it is not usually appropriate to spoil the party by dwelling on the negatives.

The IRD issued a press release affirming that, "Israelis have good reason to celebrate today, and U.S. Christians can join them." IRD President Jim Tonkowich observed: "Israel is the longest-lived democracy in the Middle East. It enjoys a vibrant, multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and freedoms of speech and press. Jews, Muslims, and Christians practice their faiths with few restrictions."

"U.S. Christians differ in their understanding of Israel's place within God's plans for human history," the IRD president recognized. "But the vast majority does glimpse some kind of divine Providence in Israel's existence and preservation. We are grateful for Presi-

dent Truman's courageous step in 1948 and proud of our nation's role as one of Israel's few reliable friends."

The IRD statement added, "Our joy is tempered by sorrow. We are mindful of the unresolved conflicts and unrelieved sufferings that date back to 1948." It closed with prayers "that Israelis, Palestinians, and all their neighbors may finally know peace, security, self-determination, and justice."

"Joint Declaration by Christian Leaders on Israel's 60th Anniversary," publicized in religious left circles, took a rather different approach.

Two young pro-Palestinian journalist-activists, Ben White and Philip Rizk, drafted the declaration. Its most prominent endorsers were two luminaries of the religious left, Nobel Peace Prize winners Desmond Tutu of South Africa and Mairead Corrigan Maguire of Ireland. Several prominent evangelicals, including executives of the World Evangelical Alliance, World Vision, Youth with a Mission, Open Doors, and Fuller Seminary, also signed it.

The joint declaration "recognize[d] that today, millions of Israelis and Jews around the world will joyfully mark the 60th anniversary of the state of Israel." But the declaration's endorsers did not seem interested in joining the celebration. The declaration swiftly proclaimed, "Millions of Palestinians living inside Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the worldwide diaspora will mourn 60 years since over 700,000 of them were uprooted from their homes and forbidden from returning, while more than 400 villages were destroyed."

The declaration insisted that "it is vital," in the pursuit of peace, to "hold both of these responses [Jewish and Palestinian] together in balanced tension." It then proceeded to make a one-

sided confession: "We acknowledge with sorrow that for the last 60 years, while extending empathy and support to the Israeli narrative of independence and struggle, many of us in the church worldwide have denied the same solidarity to the Palestinians, deaf to their cries of pain and distress."

This confession was curious, since many of the declaration's signers had extended their empathy far more to Palestinians than to Israelis. Quite a few of the endorsers have ties to the Sabeel Center that promotes a pro-Palestinian "liberation theology." (See *Faith & Freedom*, February 2008, pp. 10-11.) Yet they did not confess their own pro-Palestinian bias; instead they confessed the pro-Israel bias of other Christians.

This is a familiar tactic of the religious left: the harsh condemnation of another's alleged political sins, cloaked as if it were a humble confession of one's own sin. It is not the way that friends help friends celebrate a birthday. ■



**Alan F.H. Wisdom** is the Vice President for Research and Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.



# One-Part Harmony

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

The Rev. Dr. Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), proclaimed a “renewed resolve to join with others in daily praying for, consistently advocating for, and continually working for a lasting just Middle East peace.” Addressing the annual Churches for Middle East Peace conference on April 20, Bishop Hanson declared: “I don’t think we need more soloists when it comes to pursuing peace in the Middle East. I think we need a multi-voiced, full-force, four-part harmony choir.”

Hanson, who also serves as President of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), made a strong theological case for churches to invest themselves in peacemaking efforts. But his specific comments about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fell short of the balanced “four-part harmony” to which he aspired. Repeatedly, the bishop evinced a partiality toward the Palestinian Authority and against Israel. The would-be peacemaker also criticized fellow U.S. Christians who did not share his political commitments regarding the Middle East.

Hanson began by reflecting on how baptism and the Eucharist show that “the finite is capable of bearing the infinite to the world.” The top ELCA and LWF official then pivoted to Middle East politics: “On the basis of that we Christians are bold to advocate for peace and justice in the Middle East, to stand and accompany our Palestinian sisters and brothers in their humanitarian suffering, and to work to alleviate that suffering because we are literally being glimpses of the Messiah.” He did not explain how his theology would justify accompanying only “our Palestinian sisters and brothers” and not their Jewish counterparts.

Hanson cited his Lutheran colleague

in Jerusalem, Bishop Munib Younan, as insisting, “A viable, contiguous, free Palestine living side-by-side in peace with a secure, free Israel is the only solution for us to affirm.” The ELCA head interpreted Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” as mandating negotiations with the Islamist Hamas movement that seeks Israel’s destruction. “More specifically,” he asked, “doesn’t that mean that at the same time we admonish Hamas for their unwillingness to recognize the right of Israel to exist and their



Bishop Mark Hanson (R) joined former Archbishop of Washington Theodore McCarrick (2nd-L), Rabbi Paul Menitorr (2nd-R) and Rabbi Amy Small (L) answering questions following a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. (Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images)

failure to clearly reject and rein in acts of violence, we also must affirm publicly that any final status negotiations must include and engage Hamas, since all Palestinians must be represented at the table for there to be a reconciled, lasting peace.”

Hanson pledged that “we will publicly name and confront the barriers that exist that cause us to stand in need of reconciliation.” He seemed more ready to confront Israel than the Palestinian leadership. He told of how an LWF delegation protested against the Israeli security barrier, publicly reciting “psalms of lament” with “tears stream[ing] down our cheeks.”

The bishop also recalled how he “lost it” in a conversation with then-Israeli President Moshe Katsav: “I proceeded to lecture the president of Israel about the [Palestinian] humanitarian suffering that

is a consequence of [Israeli] occupation.” He did not mention any similar outbursts directed at Palestinian officials or any LWF protests against injustices perpetrated by the Palestinian Authority.

Hanson apparently has not lectured Palestinian officials about the treatment of the dwindling Christian minority in the West Bank and Gaza. On the contrary, he dismissed such concerns, calling for “the public rejection of all attempts to turn Palestinian Christians into political footballs, especially efforts to blame Islamists for their supposed persecution, thus further vilifying Muslims in their Western context.”

The ELCA leader did not hesitate to denounce fellow Christians who disagreed with him on Middle East issues. “Let us as Christians admonish and challenge – publicly and face-to-face – those fellow Christians who espouse the ideology called Christian Zionism,” the bishop urged. He also criticized “members of our own churches who remain silent [about the Middle East] because they believe the issues are too complex.”

Hanson took a jaundiced view of most Americans: “Locked behind closed doors in our post 9-11 world, we have been socialized, politicized and enculturated into being afraid.” Yet the bishop made positive comments about the Bush administration’s Middle East peace initiatives.

Churches for Middle East Peace is a coalition of 22 religious bodies, including old-line Protestant and Orthodox denominations and Roman Catholic religious orders. ■



**Alan F.H. Wisdom** is the Vice President for Research and Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

## How Many Presbyterians Does It Take?

by James D. Berkley

**W**e may not know how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb, although it is rumored to be six: one to change the bulb and five to complain about how much better the old bulb was. But apparently we do know how many Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) officials it takes to run a biennial meeting of the General Assembly: 344.

That's no joke. General Assembly Council (GAC) authorized exactly 344 of its officials to attend General Assembly June 21–28 in San Jose. That was approximately one official for every three commissioners and advisory delegates. Gideon conquered 135,000 Midianites with only 300 troops (Judges 7 and 8), which was 13 percent fewer than it takes to stage a General Assembly.

No one batted an eye as GAC approved this large, expensive contingent in April in Louisville. In fact, the GAC leaders heard that this figure was actually down a little from previous years.

### 344 Expenses

It costs big money to get 344 bodies to General Assembly, house them, and feed them. Let's run some rough estimates.

- With some good fare shopping, the 344 tickets could average \$350 per person. That's about \$120,000.
- Everyone will need a bed, conservatively around \$50 per person per night for a shared room, for about eight nights. Add another \$138,000 or so.
- All 344 will need to eat. Per diem for a Presbyterian

meeting recently was \$64. As some will return some of their excess, figure \$60 per day for nine days. That tacks on another \$186,000.

This totals to \$444,000, nearly \$1,300 per cranium. Roughly, each presbytery will cover the cost of two of these people, to the tune of nearly \$2,600 per presbytery.

### 344 People Doing What?

So how does GAC keep 344 people busy during General Assembly? The rationale given for each person's attendance was divided into five categories:

- **Award/Event: 68 people.** These people give or receive an award or are needed at some particular event.
- **GA Support: 47 people.** These folks make the General Assembly work, often from behind the scenes.
- **Exhibit: 48 people.** These people will staff booths and operate an exhibition hall.
- **Corresponding Members: 21 people.** These are dignitaries, such as recent General Assembly moderators, seminary presidents, and ecumenical representatives.
- **Committee Work: 160 people.** These people support the committee structure and are not supposed to advocate for or against particular items. But, in practice, many of these "resource persons" do function as advocates for the interests and ideologies of their agencies. They make presentations that amount to



a sales job on issues they favor, and they tend to offer derogatory information that undercuts proposals they dislike. Frequently (but, thankfully, not always) renewal advocates and the GAC “resource people” are rivals on opposite sides of an issue.

The problem is that the GAC advocates enjoy special privileges that the renewal advocates lack. GAC advocates operate within the leadership as officials, while renewal advocates often get branded by officials as “outside special interests” to be avoided. The GAC advocates

even disrupted plenary sessions with demonstrations.

- **Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP): 24 representatives; 22 on committees.** Since the ACSWP is only 15 people, it imports a few friends and consultants to lobby GA committees. ACSWP’s eight reports to committees dispense liberal advice on topics from global warming to waging pacifism in Iraq to the social gospel, allowing ACSWP folks to busily push their radical ideology.
- **Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns: 18 total; 17 on**

**Between GAC and OGA team members,  
Presbyterian officialdom will have 393  
representatives in San Jose, costing an  
estimated \$508,000.**

can speak often and freely; the renewal advocates have a minute or two to speak once. The GAC advocates attend General Assembly at the expense of all Presbyterians; renewal advocates must pay their own ways.

Thus, those who oppose abortion, for instance, must help pay the costs for a horde of GAC-sanctioned advocates promoting abortion. Meanwhile, pro-life folks must foot their own costs for counter-advocacy. This hardly seems fair.

#### Representing Whom?

So, then, which entities pump the most bodies into the mix? One look at the top senders indicates the issues that get pushed hardest. The top-five sending entities field committee teams of 16 to 41 members.

- **Racial Ethnic and Women’s Ministries: 51 representatives; 41 on committees.** What a crowd! Anyone wanting to advocate for pro-life issues or in opposition to radical feminism runs into a stacked deck. In years past, some of the representatives have

**committees.** This large contingent covers all issues regarding people of color, and the number allows one per committee.

- **World Mission: 50 total; 16 on committees.** The 16 assigned to committees will deal with such topics as mission funding and international issues, including Israel-Palestine tensions.
- **Compassion, Peace, and Justice: 35 total; 16 on committees.** This group will add 16 more advocates for social-activism and other self-proclaimed “prophetic” causes to the committees that deal with peace, hunger, and Israel, for example.

#### Hold On to Your Hat – There’s More!

Does 344 seem a touch excessive? Add some more. The 344 number is for only the General Assembly Council. From the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) add in yet 49 more.

At an estimated cost of \$1,300 per person, that is an additional \$64,000 in expenses to operate General Assembly. Many of the OGA persons will serve in support roles, such as sound and comput-

ers, rather than in issues advocacy. But no doubt those in charge will proffer some rulings and opinions that will be unpalatable to evangelical tastes.

Between GAC and OGA team members, Presbyterian officialdom will have 393 representatives in San Jose, costing an estimated \$508,000. Lest we forget though, the GAC and OGA are not the only General Assembly entities. The Presbyterian Foundation, Board of Pensions, the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and other organizations will also field denominationally supported teams of staff and other representatives in San Jose. Surely they add several score more heads – and perhaps another \$100,000 or more – to the count

When evangelical and renewal volunteers feel a little overwhelmed at General Assembly by the size, funding, and inside placement of contrary ideology, perhaps this accounting can give them some understanding of their impression of massed resistance. General Assembly is not a level playing field. It is structured with an immense built-in advantage for the plans and ideology of the present administration.

In spite of the way that numbers may intimidate, however, the Lord has frequently and abundantly blessed the faithful work of the outnumbered and underfunded renewal groups. No, it is not a level playing field at General Assembly. Our Sovereign God always retains the upper hand. 📖



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

# Top Presbyterian Court Mumbles Mixed Message

by James D. Berkley

On April 28, General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, the highest court of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA) ruled that “a same-sex ceremony is not and cannot be a marriage.” While that decision would seem to reflect obvious Christian teaching, the court’s other shoe fell with an unpleasant thud. The court went on to deduce that the Rev. Jane Spahr of San Raphael, CA, could not be “found ... guilty of doing that which by definition cannot be done.” And thus, a disciplinary censure against her by a lower church court was removed.

The lower court had censured Spahr for presiding over the “weddings” of two same-sex couples. Spahr’s supporters hailed the Permanent Judicial Commission’s decision as a vindication of her action. “Jan-  
ie Spahr Cleared of Charges,” read the headline for her organization’s web site. “Today’s decision held that the Presbyterian constitution contains no prohibition against marrying same-gender couples,” it proclaimed erroneously.

Spahr, however, has not been vindicated. The court did not approve her defiant practice. It has only spared her temporarily due to a strange reading of a technicality of the law.

## “No More!” Says the Court to Spahr

While setting her free in this instance, the court made it clear that “officers of the PCUSA authorized to perform marriages shall not state, imply, or represent that a same-sex ceremony is a marriage.” The court even further ruled, “Future non-compliance will be considered to be a disciplinable offense.”

In other words, the court spared Spahr from current discipline, reasoning that as there was no real marriage, she could not have conducted a marriage

service. But it also put Spahr and her sympathizers on notice that those who conduct same-gender “wedding” services in the future would be punished. A PCUSA minister simply cannot do what Spahr has been doing.

In explanation, the court noted, “Freedom of conscience must be exercised



The Rev. Jane Spahr (AP photo)

within bounds.... Submission to the current standards of the church may not always be comfortable, but it is not optional.” Thus, the slim “victory” Spahr trumpeted will be cold comfort in the future. She and others cannot continue to practice ministry in contradiction to the constitution of the PCUSA with impunity.

## Future Defiance Guaranteed

Spahr, however, lost no time in declaring her intention to violate the court’s ruling. “I will continue to honor my calling to perform marriages for all couples who love one another and are committed to one another,” declared Spahr. “To not perform these marriages would go against my faith, my conscience and, most importantly, against God.” Unless the PCUSA considers violation of its court’s decisions a virtue, it will have to discipline Spahr for this obvious defiance of the ruling.

It is unfortunate that quibbling over a technicality has blunted the common-

sense application of biblical morality reflected in the denomination’s policies. The PCUSA has consistently held to basic Christian standards, such as “the practice of homosexuality is sin” from the 1978 authoritative interpretation. Its *Book of Order* defines marriage as “a civil contract between a woman and a man.”

This court ruling does not deny or change that theological reality. The decision does say, rightfully, that for Christians a same-sex union could never be a marriage. Christian marriage must involve the Christian understanding of God’s purposes for man and woman since Creation. So in that sense, Spahr did not conduct true wedding ceremonies.

Yet Spahr has officiated at bogus ceremonies held out to be weddings, and she plans to continue doing so. She persists, defying the authority she vowed at her ordination to be “governed by” and the discipline she vowed to “abide by.”

The Bible and the PCUSA’s constitutional standards remain remarkably clear. It remains to be seen, however, what the PCUSA will do. Will it have the courage to say unequivocally: “Sexual relations outside the marriage of man and woman are wrong. They are harmful. We will neither whitewash nor encourage them in any way within church life and by our practices.”? Or will it continue to espouse a lukewarm, fuzzy message that is as universally unpalatable as it is undecipherable? ■



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



# Pentecost, Mother's Day, & Pluralism Sunday

by Dr. James W. Tonkowich and Alan F. H. Wisdom

If asked what our churches – mainline, evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox – need most, the obvious answer is renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit. The history of revivals and awakenings from the first century to the twenty-first is the history of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. And so we pray, to use the words of an old prayer, “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.”

Sunday, May 11, was Mother's Day. Most of us knew this as marketers had

ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The promise was fulfilled in a small room on a Sunday morning 2,000 years ago, with a violent wind and tongues of fire.

Afterwards, the apostle Peter explained to the crowd how Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter invited the bystanders, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

The Church grew by 3,000 that day, and it continues to spread by the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, were it not for the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' death and resurrection would have been long forgotten by now. Without the coming of the Holy Spirit, there would be no Christians and no Church.

Even today, the Church withers where the meaning of Pentecost is lost or suppressed. Yet a group called the Center for Progressive Christianity wants to do just that. Claiming “a network of about 370 churches nationwide,” the center, brazenly urged that May 11 be changed from Pentecost to “Pluralism Sunday.” May 11 was to be a day for churches around the world [to]

dedicate their worship to a celebration of our interfaith world.”

The “progressive” center certainly was not seeking any conversions or baptisms or growth of the Church. In fact, its announcement of Pluralism Sunday made no mention of the Holy Spirit. It did not even call anyone to repentance. Instead, it took an “I'm OK, you're OK” approach.

“By calling ourselves progressive,” the organizers said, “we mean we are Christians who recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.” For this center, Jesus is nothing special. They disagree with the apostle Peter, who declared shortly after Pentecost, “There is salvation in no one else [other than Jesus], for there is no other name given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Such alternatives to Pentecost should cause Christians to celebrate the real feast with all the more vigor and excitement. Were it not for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the incarnation of Christ (Christmas) and his death and resurrection (Easter) would have no effect on the world. As St. John Chrysostom, the fifth century Archbishop of Constantinople, wrote about Pentecost, “Today we have arrived at the peak of all blessings, we have reached the capital of feasts, we have obtained the very fruit of our Lord's promise.” That, even more than Mom, calls for a party.



Mother's Day is great. But Pentecost is more important.

lobbed ads for Mother's Day sales and brunches in our general direction for several weeks. Mother's Day is a very nice thing.

We are all for mothers—ours and everyone else's—and we are all for setting aside a special day to celebrate motherhood. This year, though, Mother's Day obscured the even more important celebration occurring on May 11, 2008: Pentecost.

Pentecost commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples fifty days after Jesus' resurrection. At his ascension Jesus promised, “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the



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



**Alan F.H. Wisdom** is the Vice President for Research and Programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

## Proposed Anglican Covenant: “The Only Game in Town”

by George Conger

**T**he end of Anglicanism is nigh. Divided over doctrine and discipline, the Anglican Communion is unraveling, torn asunder by the consecration of a partnered gay priest as Bishop of New Hampshire.

The Anglican Communion is faced with two choices: expelling dissident minorities – be they conservatives from the Episcopal Church in America, or the Episcopal Church from the wider Anglican Communion—or ratifying a common statement of beliefs, an Anglican Covenant that outlines the parameters of the faith.

The choice of conformity or schism is presented to the bishops at the Lambeth Conference, the July 16–Aug

3 gathering of bishops held every ten years in England. The bishops are reviewing the work of the Anglican Covenant Design Group, the committee tasked by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams to draft a common code.

But whether a binding agreement can keep the communion together is an open question in a church whose roots lie not in a common philosophical or theological ideal, but in a shared historical and cultural heritage. Liberals have already rejected key provisions of the draft agreement, refusing to countenance any diminution of their authority, while conservatives have protested against the absence of any meaningful enforcement mechanisms.

But there is no other option, save for schism, on the table. Thus, in the words of the chief author, West Indian Archbishop Drexel Gomez, “the covenant is the only game in town.”

### “Worst Crisis in the Anglican Communion since the Reformation”

The consecration of a gay priest, Gene Robinson, as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 ignited what the former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey called the “worst crisis in the Anglican Communion since the Reformation.” It sparked protests from conservatives at home and from abroad, particularly the bishops of the “Global South,” the collective name for the churches in the developing world.

Led by Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria, the Global South demanded the errant Episcopalians conform to the agreed statements on human sexuality and church order. Individual churches soon began to “break communion.” By the end of 2003, over half of the Anglican Communion had qualified their ties to the Episcopal Church.

To head off a split, Dr. Williams created the Lambeth Commission on Communion. Tasked with addressing the split, the commission produced the Windsor Report in 2004.

The report chastised both the U. S. Episcopal Church for consecrating Robinson and the African churches that had consecrated traditionally minded American priests as bishops to serve as missionaries in the U. S., arguing that all of the churches had surpassed their legitimate ecclesiastical authority. The Windsor

A covenant would create “a trustworthy means of taking counsel together” in the face of doctrinal divisions.



Report also called for the creation of an Anglican Covenant, which would set limits on permissible Anglican conduct and teaching.

Dr. Williams appointed the senior primate, or archbishop of the communion, Drexel Gomez of the Bahamas to lead the Covenant Design Group. The group released the first draft of the covenant in January 2007.

Support for the covenant process was thin. Mark Sisk, the Bishop of New York, said he was “not persuaded” there was even a need for one. The first draft gave the impression “of attempting to centralize and control the Communion, of policing the process of discernment and implementing conformity in the name of clarity,” he said. The Welsh, Irish, American and New Zealand churches also criticized the draft, rejecting any “curialization” of Anglicanism.

Conservatives welcomed the moves towards setting the communion’s house in order, but feared it was too little too late. Pittsburgh’s Bishop Robert Duncan, a leader of the American conservative movement, called for a covenant that would provide unambiguous doctrinal statements.

### Draft Seeks “A Common Mind”

In February 2008 the design teams released its second draft. It dropped much of the theological language of the first draft and conceded there was no common mind as to the theological distinctiveness of Anglicanism. The draft asked the churches to put aside their own particular views on divisive topics and seek “a common mind about matters understood to be of essential concern, consistent with the Scriptures, common standards of faith, and the canon law of our churches.”

Each church would commit to the words, “professes the faith which is uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures” and set forth in the “historic formularies of the Church of England” as expressed in the Book of Common Prayer, the Articles of Religion and the historic creeds. However interpretation of these formularies would be left to each member church.

It created a four-step process of review to respond to threats to the “unity of the Communion and the effectiveness or credibility of its mission.” It gave the Archbishop of Canterbury power to make “requests” of those churches that were endangering “unity.” It also authorized the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) – a pan-Anglican consultative body – to determine if a church had “relinquished the force and meaning” of the covenant.

However, neither the ACC nor the Archbishop of Canterbury could compel obedience. They possessed no “legislative, executive or judicial authority.” But they did “carry a moral authority which commands our respect,” the draft said.

### Voices Not Calmed

The restrained language of the second draft did not mollify the left. The Brazilian Church urged a re-write, saying the covenant sought to resolve conflict through the “creation of curial instances absolutely alien to our ethos.”

Conservatives were alarmed by its weakness, as well as with a timeline that would not see it come into force until 2015. Such a delay would give “the impression that we are not in a state of crisis and that there is no desire to move towards a solution,” said Dr. Mouneer Anis, the bishop of Egypt. “If we wait until 2015 or even 2012 the communion will be fragmented,” he warned.

Archbishop Gomez responded that to ease the “overheated” situation, “we need to hear a voice of calm. We need to identify the fundamentals that we share in common, and to state the common basis on which our mutual trust can be rebuilt.”

A covenant would not “define some sort of new Anglicanism” but would “state concisely and clearly the faith that

we have all inherited together,” he explained.

A covenant would create “a trustworthy means of taking counsel together” in the face of doctrinal divisions, says Prof. Ephraim Radner, one of two Americans on the design team.

The lack of an agreed structure to resolve conflict had created a situation that had allowed “anxiety to grow, impatience



Bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh seeks a covenant that establishes clear doctrinal positions.

flourish, and precipitous and destructive local action emerge as seemingly inevitable,” Professor Radner told Faith & Freedom. The covenant “would make explicit” the “commitments upon which our actual life in Christian communion is based.”

Rebuilding trust within the Anglican Communion is worth the effort, as the covenant process “goes to the heart” of what it “means to be a Christian living in the Body of Christ,” argues Dr. Radner. While he acknowledged some of the disquiet felt on the left and right, he insists failing to go forward would be fatal. ■



**The Rev. Canon George Conger** is a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida and senior correspondent of The Church of England Newspaper.

## United Methodists Affirm Biblical Standards on Marriage and Sex

by John S. A. Lomperis

At its 2008 gathering in Fort Worth, TX, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC), the UMC's governing body, voted decisively to maintain the UMC's current biblical standards on marriage and sex. Specifically, delegates at the April 22–May 2 gathering voted to:

- Retain the United Methodist Social Principles stances that state homosexual practice is “incompatible with Christian teaching” and the UMC should “support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.”
- Strengthen the Social Principles by saying that “sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.”
- Maintain the current prohibition of same-sex union services and the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

Indeed, this Conference was possibly the pro-homosexuality advocates' last chance for victory.

Pro-homosexuality groups expressed great disappointment with the results of the conference. A sub-headline for a local gay publication declared, “Gays and their allies struggle with decision on whether to stay and fight or leave UMC after church reaffirms anti-gay policies, ruling.”

The UMC has steered away from the direction of the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ, which face schism over homosexuality, thanks largely to its growing overseas membership. United Methodism continues to grow in Africa, where nearly one-third of its membership now lives. The 2008 General Conference included an unprecedented 186 delegates (out of 992)

from Africa. Another 84 delegates came from Europe and the Philippines.

The large number of African delegates was crucial for affirming biblical teaching about marriage. A post on the blog of the pro-homosexuality Reconciling Ministries Network lamented the “clear alliance” between overseas and conservative U.S. United Methodists saying, “We have feared this for years.”

Indeed, this General Conference was possibly the pro-homosexuality advocates' last chance for victory. When the General Conference meets again in 2012, the African Ivory Coast Annual Conference will have an additional 50–70 delegates at the Conference.

Disturbed by this possibility, pro-homosexuality forces are supporting a proposed constitutional amendment creating a new U.S.-only regional conference where liberals potentially could prevail. All local annual conferences will vote on that amendment.

As in the past, pro-homosexuality demonstrators were prominent at this General Conference. After the key votes, over 200 demonstrators walked onto the General Conference floor at the Council of Bishops' invitation. The protesters angrily denounced church



One of many homosexual activists protesting outside the Ft. Worth convention center. (photo: Loralei G. Coyle)



teachings, covered the communion table in black cloth, and likened their defeat to Christ's sufferings on the cross. Demonstrators also staged a "marriage" service between two lesbian activists outside the convention.

### Conference Affirms Pro-Life Actions

While failing to end the denomination's pro-choice official position on abortion, the 2008 General Conference continued the decades-long trend of nudging United Methodism in a more pro-life direction. Delegates voted to:

- "Affirm and encourage the Church to assist the ministry of crisis pregnancy centers and pregnancy resource centers that compassionately help women find feasible alternatives to abortion."
- Replace overly broad, pro-choice language about "devastating damage" from "unacceptable pregnanc[ies]" with the affirmation that "we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child."
- Support adult "notification and consent" for minors seeking abortions.
- Describe abortion as "violent."
- Adopt a lengthy statement decrying sex-selective abortions.
- "Reject euthanasia and pressure upon the dying to end their lives."

The General Conference also adopted an excellent statement against eugenics that included opposition to fertility treatment practices of selectively killing embryos with undesired genetic traits.

However, the General Conference voted to continue the UMC's formal af-



Bishop Donald Ott prays with the homosexual activists after the General Convention voted to uphold traditional marriage. (photo: Lorelei G. Coyle)

### General Conference Backs Radical Political Causes

While it maintained the UMC's traditional stance on homosexuality, the General Conference endorsed dozens of controversial political resolutions with little debate, including resolutions to:

- Call convicted Puerto Rican terrorists "political prisoners" and demand that they "be released from prison."
- Decry the "colonialism" of Puerto Rico's commonwealth status, a status Puerto Rican voters have repeatedly supported.
- Demand that the U.S. Military welcome openly "gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender" soldiers.
- Support amnesty and "sanctuary churches" wherein illegal immigrants can theologically dwell without threat of deportation.
- Urge cooperation with the International Solidarity Movement, which is devoted to "nonviolent, direct-action" for the Palestinian cause.
- Support the Kyoto Protocol on global warming.
- Accuse the U.S. Of "pursu[ing] a global economic agenda that is of, by, and for transnational corporations."
- "Support progressive income taxes."
- Criticize free trade agreements.
- Demand an end to U.S. military aid to Israel. ☞

filiation with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a group that vehemently fights legal restrictions on, and moral opposition to, abortion. RCRC prevailed by just 32 votes out of the 800 cast.

The vote occurred on the final day when over 100 African delegates (who tend to be more pro-life) were not present.

### Evangelicals Celebrate Progress

Although issues concerning homosexuality dominated the General Conference debates, there were other significant actions that United Methodist evangelicals celebrated.

- A defeated attempt to change the church's law book, *The Discipline*, to require all United Methodist pastors to grant immediate church membership to anyone who demands it.
- An overwhelming rejection of divestment against Israel.
- A greatly strengthened recognition in the Social Principles of the negative consequences of divorce.
- A call for "assurances" that

the divisive, politicized National Council of Churches (NCC) will "remain faithful and accountable to the purpose defined in its Constitution," which is for member communions to "make visible their unity given in Christ," through means including "[f]urther[ing] their vocation to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord," "counsel[ing] one another in mutual accountability as a witness to the unity of the Church," and "[c]ultivat[ing] relationships and dialogue with people of" diverse "ideologies."

- Support for a constitutional amendment allowing non-ordained UMC clergy in primarily small and rural congregations to vote for General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates.
- \$4 million appropriated for theological education in Africa.
- The reservation of Ministerial Education Fund Disbursements to United Methodist seminaries only for the benefit of United Methodist students (rather than general operating expenses).
- The elimination of one bishop from each of the declining U.S. jurisdic-

tions, beginning in 2012.

- Maintenance of the right of any individual United Methodist to submit petitions to General Conference.

### Incumbents on Judicial Council Defeated

After having rigorously upheld the church's teachings on homosexuality, three evangelicals on the United Methodist Judicial Council were not reelected. Their successors are clearly more liberal, but whether they will uphold or nibble away at the church's policies remains to be seen.

Evangelical groups formally endorsed only one of the 5 new members on the church's top court. All 5 of the winners were nominated by the Council of Bishops and endorsed by liberal caucus groups. Unusually, the bishops declined to support any incumbents, possibly because they were angered by the incumbents' defense of a Virginia pastor who declined to accept an active homosexual into immediate church membership, contrary to the instructions of Virginia's liberal bishop.

Even though they represent 30 percent of the church, Africans are now unrepresented on the UMC's top court, which includes eight Americans and one Filipino. Evangelical groups had nominated two Africans; liberal caucus groups supported none. The seeming new liberal majority on the Judicial Council almost certainly will ensure further controversy over the next four years about the church's policies on homosexuality. Traditionalists within United Methodism will need to be prayerfully on guard against possible attempts to nullify church law through Judicial Council decisions. ☞



**John S.A. Lomperis** is the Research Assistant at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

### "A Snake that Sunk its Fangs into the Paw... of the Big Dog"

Despite their wins on political resolutions, many liberal caucus groups were enraged over their losses on sexuality issues and by the influence of IRD and other renewal groups. Before the conference began, a film producer in Tennessee mailed U.S. delegates a DVD titled "Renewal or Ruin" that attacked UMAction. The DVD featured Bishop Beverly Shamana of San Francisco, retired Bishop Ken Carder, and Jim Winkler, head of the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), and others denouncing IRD with colorful rhetoric. Winkler asserted UMAction "is really a snake that's sunk its fangs into the paw or into the blood of the big dog [the UMC] and is slowly trying to poison it."

A Tennessee film director was not the only person upset about the influence of IRD. In a public statement released just before the conference, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) declared that "[i]t is a grave error to believe that the Institute on Religion and Democracy and its allies are concerned about women and families."

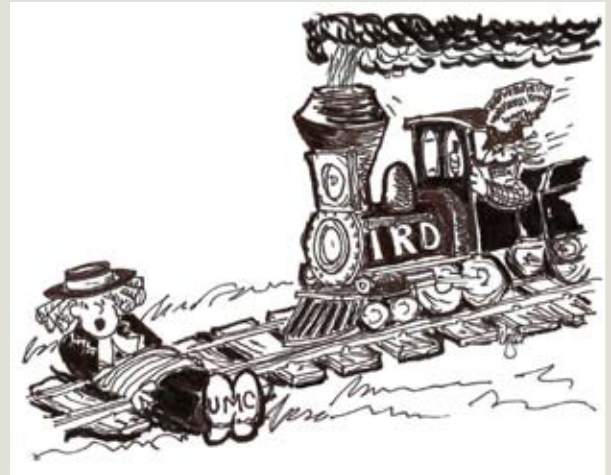
RCRC also called UMAction "the main force behind the effort" to end the UMC's endorsement of RCRC.

At the conference, "Mainstream United Methodists" of Oklahoma distributed an eight-page newspaper that featured cartoons portraying UMAction as a snake and also as an evil, mustached train conductor trying to run over a personified UMC tied to the tracks. The paper also claimed that members of UMAction are not United Methodists concerned for their own church but rather a collection of "Neocon Roman Catholic leaders" and "wealthy millionaires who control billions of inherited tax-free trust dollars."

Soulforce, a pro-homosexuality lobby, hosted a rally featuring the Rev. James Lawson, who charged that the sole aim of UMAction and Good News was "the preservation and domination of white males in the church."

Unfortunately, liberal activist groups were not the only ones disseminating misinformation. At the start of the General Conference, the United Methodist News Service reported that the Renewal and Reform Coalition – a group composed of the Confessing Movement, Good News, Lifewatch, RENEW Network, Transforming Congregations, and UMAction – was "bribing" non-American delegates by offering them the use of cell phones during the conference.

Members of the General Conference felt rather differently about UMAction. The Conference overwhelmingly rejected resolutions from the leadership of two liberal annual conferences to condemn UMAction. The Conference also adopted a resolution from UMAction celebrating our denomination's inclusion of members with diverse political views. It called for Christians "to have the humility to be cautious of asserting that God is on their side with regard to specific public policy proposals." IRD/ UMAction will challenge politicized church agencies to heed this resolution. ☞





# Four-and-a-Half Incredible Years

by John S.A. Lomperis

**A**t the end of 2003, not long after my college graduation, God seemed to arrange a miraculous circumstance. I quite inadvertently stumbled across the announcement for an entry-level position opening at some group called the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

To this the day, I remember reading over the announcement in elated disbelief. During my college years, I had been anguished to learn about the problems with theological liberalism in my denomination (the United Methodist Church). I did not want to abandon my denomination without looking back, but I was only dimly aware of renewal efforts. This job and ministry, however, not only seemed perfectly tailored for me, but it gave me hope. You mean there's a whole movement of other members of "mainline" Protestant denominations who are also evangelicals and committed to steering their churches back towards Christian orthodoxy?!!!

IRD provided me so much more than just a job. It gave me valuable experience. There has never been a dull moment! I've reported on extreme events, worked with incredible people, and was denounced personally by a regional United Methodist newsletter and a denominational agency chief. Even more importantly, my experience here gave me the invaluable theological and ecclesiastical grounding I needed.

Several people have expressed valid concerns about the rather liberalized environment (Harvard Divinity School) in which I will now pursue a Masters degree. But my time at IRD has prepared me well. As I recently told one concerned sister, I am very unlikely to run into anything there more radical than what I have already encountered! While it would be impossible to adequately summarize here all that I have learned at IRD, here are a few highlights.

**The unity of the church deserves great respect.** I have struggled with the temptation to give up on United Methodism. During these struggles, I have been brought back

repeatedly to the wisdom of John Wesley's "On Schism" sermon. In that sermon, the father of Methodism acknowledges that if one could not remain a part of a specific church body "without doing something which the word of God forbids, or omitting something which the word of God positively commands," then one would be obligated "to separate from it without delay." In such a case, the guilt for "the sin of separation, with all the evils consequent upon it" would not lie upon the one who left "but upon those who constrained me to make that separation." In the absence of such constraints, however, abandoning one's church makes one "just chargeable...with all the evils consequent upon that separation." As a friend in the United Methodist renewal movement has reminded me, surrendering contested ground to the Devil is not a sound strategy for advancing the Kingdom of God.

**True ecumenical Christian unity and cooperation does not require sticking to "lowest common denominator Christianity."** I have learned much from working with Anglicans, Calvinists, Orthodox, Catholics and charismatics. None were shy about respectfully sharing their perspectives on historic denomination-dividing issues, yet we continued to work together successfully.

**Those fighting to undermine biblical Christian teachings often fail to follow biblical Christian ethics while fighting.** I am no longer surprised by what church leaders will do to win a point. Yet, I am still saddened by how often church leaders eschew things such as honesty and Christian love.

**"Progressive Christianity" has a remarkable capacity for moral inconsistency.** The most vocal proponents of "a fully inclusive church" tend to demonstrate the most ruthless and mean-spirited exclusiveness when and where they gain power. The loudest voices categorically denouncing the violence of war are often among the

staunchest defenders of the violence of abortion. Among Middle Eastern nations, Israel has a uniquely liberal record on gay rights. Yet those in mainline churches who single it out for criticism are generally staunch partisans of the pro-homosexuality cause. In my denomination, a main liberal caucus energetically seeks to replace the denomination's



John Lomperis hands IRD Daily newsletters to Methodist delegates outside the Ft. Worth Convention Center (photo/Loralei G. Coyle)

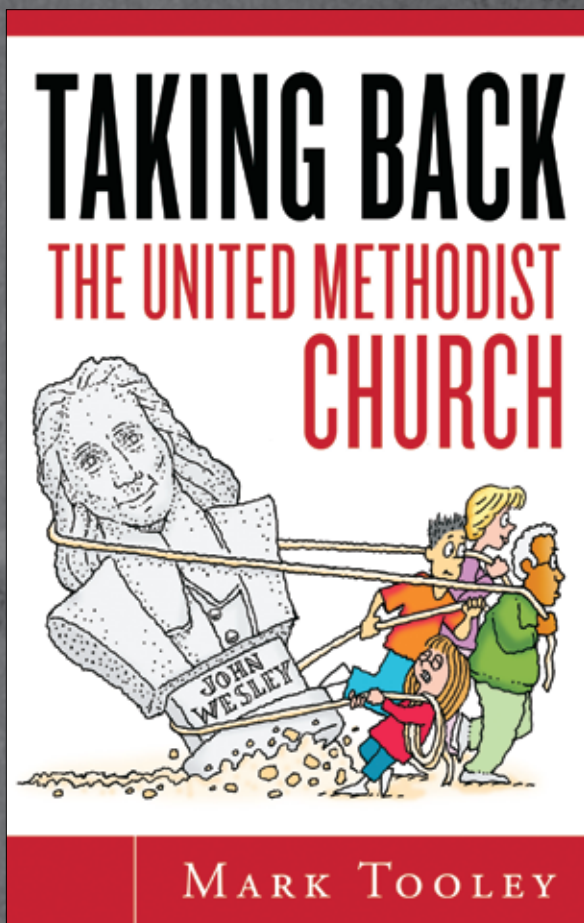
essentially conservative basic statement on homosexual practice. In the name of acknowledging the truth of members' views and not leaving out anyone's heartfelt perspective, it argues the church should declare that it is not of one mind. This same caucus, however, strongly opposes replacing the denomination's basically liberal statement on abortion with a similar declaration.

My evangelical faith is strong. With God's help and regular doses of orthodox Christian nourishment and support, it will continue to be so and so will the important ministry of IRD. ■



**John S.A. Lomperis** is the Research Assistant at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

## The fight for the United Methodist Church begins here...



Explore the history of the political and theological conflicts within the United Methodist Church as Mark Tooley takes you through his years of activism within the reform and renewal movement. Tooley offers not only perspective on the battles waged, but a vision for the future of United Methodism.

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**“If you want to understand** all the controversies that have rocked the United Methodist Church for the past twenty years, this book is a must-read.” — Dr. William R. (Bill) Bouknight, retired former Senior Minister of Christ UMC, Memphis, and former President of the Confessing Movement