

UMAction

Briefing



African Church Leader Opposes “Global Segregation Plan” for United Methodists

Speaking to the West African Central Conference in December, Liberian District Superintendent Jerry Kulah warned against the impact on African United Methodists if The United Methodist Church creates a new U.S. only regional conference.

“Because of our biblical perspective and continued growth, the liberals within the Church see their African brothers and sisters as a threat to the control of the Church,” observed Kulah in his speech to the delegates from Liberia, Sierre Leone, Ivory Coast and Nigeria. “Just as about 140 years ago, white Methodists in America saw black people as a threat to the control of the Church. Certainly, this divisive spirit should not be encouraged amongst brothers and sisters who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ.”

The 2008 General Conference approved a plan that would create a separate, U.S. only regional conference to address U.S.-only issues, separate from the international General Conference. This plan, in the form of constitutional amendments, requires approval of two thirds of all the votes at all the local annual conferences this Spring. Liberals in the church are increasingly frustrated by the growing number of African delegates at General Conference, which is preventing acceptance of same-sex unions and homosexual clergy. Many liberals hope that a U.S. only regional conference, divorced from African influence, could potentially overturn United Methodism’s traditional standards on sexual morality.

At the 2008 General Conference, Africans were 20 percent of the delegates. In 2012, they will number about 30 percent, as U.S. churches continue to decline while African churches grow.

“If this regional Conference idea is pursued and sustained, we are most likely to have a fractured church,” Kulah warned. “We might not have a common Discipline and a unified way of doing the business of the United Methodist Church. Regional Conferences doing their own things could keep going their separate ways until new denominations eventually evolve.”

Kulah urged that the regional conference plan, which primarily emerged from U.S. bishops, be further studied by a team that includes Africans. “Leaders from the American UMC cannot plan for us in isolation and tell us what is best for us,” Kulah said. “The period of colonization and paternalism is over for the people and Church in Africa. Any decision regarding the future of the Church must involve leaders of the Church in Africa from its conception stage to the time it becomes a finished product.” ✚

ACTION: *Please urge your pastor and lay member to your Annual Conference this Spring to oppose the constitutional amendments that would creating a new U.S.-only regional conference.*

Winter 2009

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Liberian District Superintendent Jerry Kulah, Speaking at the 2007 UM Reform and Re-
newal Conference. (IRD/Rebekah Sharpe)

Methodist Theologian Explains United Methodism's Decline

Addressing the United Methodist Congress on Evangelism in Nashville on January 6, Irish Methodist Billy Abraham of Perkins School of Theology in Dallas warned against the anti-supernaturalism that undermined evangelism and the church in the late 20th century.

Although Abraham fills the Albert Outler chair at Perkins, he “painfully” pointed to mistakes by United Methodism’s most influential theologian for much of the 20th century.

According to Abraham, Outler was a brilliant scholar and committed churchman whose “vision of Providence” rejected divine intervention in the world even while Outler upheld an orthodox view of Jesus and the Trinity. “The Incarnation and Resurrection involve divine intervention,” Abraham insisted with a chuckle. “Suck it up or get over it!”

Abraham called Outler the “founding Father” of modern United Methodism and praised his “historical learning, extraordinary rhetorical skill, boundless energy, deep desire to face the truth, and an uncanny eye for humbug.” But Abraham said Outler, in trying to preserve parts of orthodoxy, accommodated too much of secular, modern culture. The result was a “kaleidoscope of theological options” and “pluralism” for United Methodism and the church’s steep decline.

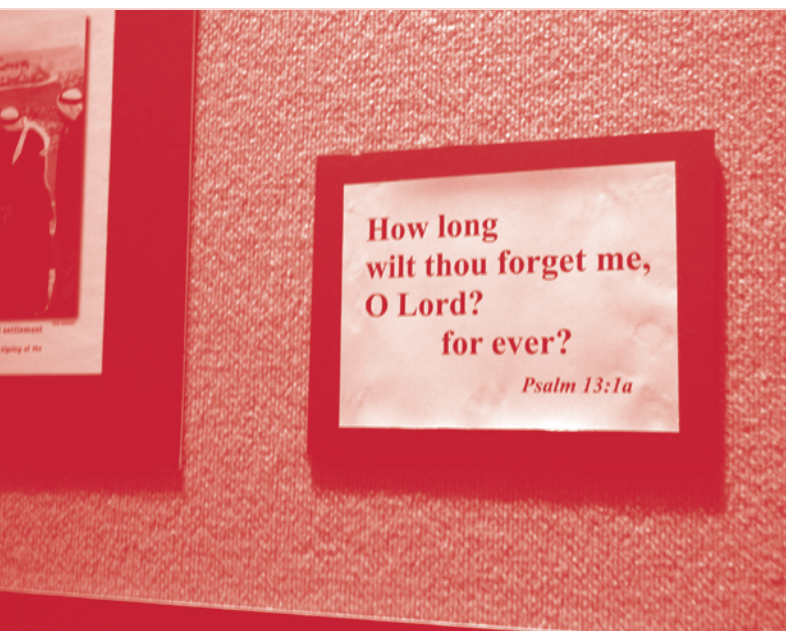
Lacking a theological consensus, Abraham said United Methodism came to rely on the language of “organizational structure” and the business world. Meanwhile, evangelism has been reduced to “communication” and anything that points to Christ’s lordship. This modern perspective “did not begin to fathom the native hostility in the human heart [to the Gospel] due to sin.”

“I’m worried when we ‘improve’ on Jesus,” Abraham said. Modern United Methodism tried to speak in the language of the “university common room, the couch, and the country club,” guided by “process philosophy and psychotherapy,” Abraham regretted. The church became an “endless seminar in search of elusive and ultimately unattainable truth, rather than the carrier of the rich and salutary faith once delivered to the saints.”

“God did not come into the world to hold an endless seminar on who He is,” Abraham declared. United Methodist theologians too often have given up on any “intellectual defense of the faith,” he worried, instead “marrying the intellectual fads of the day.” Without a common faith in the church, Abraham said Jesus would become a “cipher for our own passions and desires.” And the Gospel becomes a “game of smoke and mirrors,” with God’s Kingdom reduced to television slogans like, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors,” Abraham complained, citing United Methodism’s advertising theme.

In his later years, Outler had “significant second thoughts about his early aversion to orthodoxy” and “serious reservations” about his propositions of the 1960’s and 1970’s, Abraham noted. Before his death in 1989, Outler surmised that the church needed a new Pentecost and new reliance on the Holy Spirit. ✚

ACTION: For more information, read *Albert C. Outler: The Gifted Dilettante* by Bob Parrott, available at Bristol House: 1-800-451-7323; website: www.bristolhouseltd.com.



(IRD/Rebekah Sharpe)

Methodist Building Hosts Anti-Israel Exhibit

In February, the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill, from which our church conducts its political lobbying, hosted a photo exhibit from a pro-Palestinian group calling the creation of Israel a “catastrophe.” The building is owned and occupied by the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS).

The photo show was called “Our Story: A Photo Exhibit Commemorating 60 Years of Dispossession.” It originated with Sabeel, a Jerusalem-based group that advocates Liberation Theology for Palestinians and the gradual demo-

UM Bishop Denounces Film Expose of Radical Islam



Bishop Bruce Ough speaks at the 2008 General Conference (UMNS/ Mike DuBose)

West Ohio Bishop Bruce Ough in September attacked the film “Obsession,” while declining to agree that radical Islam poses any special concerns. Ough joined in an anti-“Obsession” press conference with, among others, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which shared his concern about the film’s distribution in Ohio, and elsewhere.

“Obsession” exposes radical Islamists who support terrorism, the imposition of theocratic Islamic law, persecution of non-Muslims, anti-Semitism, and anti-Americanism. The film asserts that 10-15 percent of Muslims globally agree with aspects of radical Islam.

According to Ough, United Methodist beliefs about “doing no harm, doing good and staying in love with God” are “incompat-

ible with the deplorable DVD entitled ‘Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West,’ and its disingenuous distribution in the midst of a national political campaign.” The bishop said his church’s “prophetic” tradition demands naming the “harm that is being done to our neighbors,” which specifically entailed “Obsession’s” dissemination through dozens of newspapers, plus direct mail, resulting in 28 million free copies of the DVD across the nation.

The film “links Islamic radicalism with pictures of Hitler and mass rallies of his Nazi followers,” Ough complained, to “promote fear of Muslims and dark suspicions about Islam.” Ough declared: “This is a time to ask purveyors of prejudice, ‘Have you no shame?’” He denounced the film as “hate speech” whose aim is to incite “prejudice and fear with our Muslim brothers and sisters.”

Acknowledging that “Obsession” emphasizes that “most Muslims are peaceful and do not support terror,” Bishop Ough was still distressed by the film’s assertion that 10% to 15% of Muslims are “radicals” or support terror, the film’s assertion that international polls support. ✚

ACTION: Please politely and respectfully urge Bishop Ough to speak out on behalf of persecuted Christians who suffer in Islamic countries that restrict the free practice of Christianity and other non-Islamic faiths. Email: bishop@wocumc.org; Address: 32 Wesley Blvd, Worthington, OH 43085.

graphic eradication of a Jewish Israel. A kick-off reception in the Methodist Building was hosted by the Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace, which advocates divesting from firms doing business with Israel. Last year, the United Methodist General Conference voted against endorsing anti-Israel divestment.

GBCS chief Winkler was among the speakers at the reception. So too was a Muslim imam, who read from the Koran and pronounced that Israel may have the “might” to exist but not necessarily the “right” to exist.

According to an announcement from GBCS, the exhibit “marks the annual observance of the nakba, the 1948 mass deportation of Palestinians, massacres of civilians and the razing to the ground of hundreds of Palestinian villages fol-

lowing the creation of Israel.” The photo show claimed that Jews willfully roused thousands of innocent Arabs from their homes because of their own greed and imperialism. Not mentioned by the exhibit was the Arab refusal in 1948 to accept a two state solution for Palestine, instead waging war on the new Israel. ✚

ACTION: Please politely urge GBCS chief Jim Winkler to be more even-handed in his Middle East pronouncements. Email: jwinkler@umc-gbcs.org. Address: 100 Maryland Ave, NE, Washington, DC 20002.

Bishop Davis Led United Methodism's Largest Conference

Under the leadership of Bishop Lindsey Davis over 12 years, the North Georgia Conference became the largest conference in United Methodism. The conference now has 350,000 members and is one of only about a dozen conferences in the U.S. church that is growing. Nationally, United Methodism is losing over 60,000 members a year. The declining Virginia Conference was previously the largest conference.

Davis, who last year transferred to the Kentucky Conference, is theologically conservative and has focused on evangelism and church growth. In a sermon he gave at Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church in Marietta, Georgia last June, Davis spoke out against secularism in society. He said: "There is a strong movement in the United States and in Europe, by those who want a very secular culture, to put the Christian voice on the sidelines — to not allow the Christian faith and the Christian witness to have to have its proper place in the public arena, in the



Bishop Lindsey Davis speaks at the 2008 Conference Leaders Convocation (KYUMC)

public square, or in the marketplace."

The Bishop warned against this effort to "sideline our Christian witness, so that we will be weak." He emphasized the importance for the church to proclaim the "whole gospel story." Often churches in America today want to "spend all of our time talking about grace and redemption and salvation," all of which are an important "part" of the story, he said. "But it's also important that we tell the rest of the story — that we tell about sin and the consequences of sin, and that we talk about redemption and the need for redemption, so that then the stories of grace and salvation make sense to those who come after us."

In contrast to the North Georgia Conference, United Methodism nationally has lost over 3 million members over the last 40 years. ❖

ACTION: Thank Bishop Lindsey Davis for his work to expand God's Kingdom. Email: bishop@kyumc.org. Address: 7400 Floydsburg Road, Crestwood, KY 40014

Homosexual Groups Supporting Membership Amendment

This Spring all United Methodist Annual Conferences will vote on a proposed constitutional amendment to our church's constitution requiring that "all" persons be eligible for church membership.

The proposal arises from the controversial case of Virginia pastor Ed Johnson, who declined to grant immediate church membership to a sexually active homosexual attending his church. Virginia Bishop Charlene Kammerer removed Johnson from his church in 2005, but United Methodism's Judicial Council restored Johnson to his pulpit, declaring that pastors have pastoral discretion about readiness for church membership.

Both the Council of Bishops and homosexual groups denounced the Judicial Council for siding with Johnson. Defenders of Rev. Johnson pointed out that the homosexual man was welcome and active in the church but that Rev. Johnson, who was counseling the man, held a traditional Wesleyan view that formal membership involves faithful Christian living.

The United Methodist Church affirms divine love for all people but officially disapproves of homosexual and other non-

marital sexual activity, affirming sex only within marriage.

This proposed constitutional amendment declares: "All persons, upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith and relationship in Jesus Christ, shall be eligible to become professing members in any local church in the connection." It also declares: "All persons shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, and upon baptism be admitted as baptized members."

The amendment seems to compel automatic church membership to anyone, depriving pastors of any discretion. Could a pastor refuse immediate church membership to a racist, pornographer, embezzler, drug dealer, chronic shoplifter, or wife beater? Traditionally, Methodists have welcomed all people to hear the Gospel but have understood membership to include a changed heart and willingness to live for Jesus Christ. ❖

ACTION: Urge your pastor and lay member to Annual Conference to oppose Constitutional Amendment #1 on membership.

United Methodist Lobby Signs Then Withdraws from Abortion Letter

The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) initially endorsed and then withdrew its support from the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA), which is legislation before the U.S. Congress that would prohibit any abortion restrictions by states and establish a “fundamental right” to abortion.

GBCS also removed its name from a controversial “Interfaith Call to Action on Reproductive Health” organized by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), which included an “open letter” to President Obama urging expanded government support for “comprehensive sex education, abortion services and contraceptive information and options.”

GBCS is a member of RCRC, which lobbies against any restrictions on abortion. The United Methodist General Conference in 2008 narrowly failed to withdraw United Methodism from RCRC, but did approve other legislation that restricted church agencies’ ability to promote abortion rights. According to GBGS official Linda Bales, “after further examination of the ramifications of this [FOCA] bill and considering the most recent statement on abortion approved at our 2008 General

Conference, the legislative arm of our denomination, we have withdrawn our support of this bill due to language added by the General Conference.”

Bales noted that the United Methodist Social Principles now support “parental, guardian or trusted adult notification in cases of minors seeking abortions,” and FOCA would overturn state notification laws. The 2008 General Conference declared that United Methodists “respect the sacredness of life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child” and supported “parental, guardian, or other responsible adult notification and consent before abortions can be performed on girls who have not yet reached the age of legal adulthood.”

The RCRC was originally founded in the United Methodist Building in 1973, with GBGS support, to defend unrestricted abortion rights. ✚

ACTION: Thank GBGS official Linda Bales for removing GBGS’s endorsement from the pro-FOCA letter to President Obama. Email: ‘LBales@UMC-GBGS.ORG; Address: 100 Maryland Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002.

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The good news is the growing movement to restore Scriptural faithfulness in our church. More and more United Methodists are working together for reform and renewal.

Don't leave! Our great Methodist heritage is too valuable to be abandoned. Join with us to help The United Methodist Church return to its Wesleyan roots as a growing, evangelical, Christian church living Christ's Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

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The Institute on Religion & Democracy
1023 15th Street NW, Suite 601
Washington, DC 20005-2601

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