

Pacifism Touted at UM Event

The United Methodist Church's ambiguous stance on military conflict was lamented by several ministers and theologians at the United Methodist Perkins School of Theology in February, many of whom urged a stronger pacifist stance.

Speakers at the three-day conference in Dallas complained of inconsistencies in United Methodism's approach to war. In the program's Women's Lecture, Nicole Johnson of the University of Mount Union fretted that the denomination's "hodgepodge of disciplines" has frustrated United Methodist consciences for 40 years.

Johnson compared the *Book of Discipline* language about homosexuality's incompatibility with Christian teaching to similar language about war. "Those statements about homosexuality have been invoked to oust homosexual pastors from their pulpits," she claimed. "But a pastor does not get ousted from her pulpit for expressing her support for a particular war, despite the fact that war is described in the current doctrine as 'incompatible with and contrary to the gospel and teachings of Jesus.'"

"And I don't recall an outcry in winter of 2003 calling for President Bush, a Methodist, to have his membership revoked because he initiated the war in Iraq," Johnson added.

United Methodist ethicist Stephen Long from Marquette University agreed that rejecting the pacifist position effectively amounts to disloyalty to the "transnational church," and it betrays a lack of faith in the redemptive work of Christ. "The real problem in the Christian churches today is, quite frankly, [that] we subordinate ourselves to the nation," he asserted.

Miguel De La Torre, ethics professor at United Methodist Iliff School of Theology, approached the "just war" debate with cynicism. He condemned the American "church of privilege" for touting peace even while the U.S. holds the world hostage economically.

De La Torre sarcastically charged that only "once the Pax Americana is established, once we have the vast majority of world's resources flowing to the U.S., at that point we can then begin to talk about [how] nobody else should do violence."

"In the back of my mind I have to wonder: 'Is all this talk about nonviolence a way to keep certain people in check?'" De La Torre asked, insinuating that participants in the just war discussion insidiously export American imperialism.

Fuller Theological Seminary ethicist Glen Stassen countered that the debate between Christians whether or not to make war is, contrary to De La Torre's assertion, relevant and very important – but that Christians must first and foremost be ready with a preventative framework that could preclude the waging of war in the first place.

"You can't just go with pacifism and just war. They both intend to prevent war, so [we need to] develop an articulate paradigm" for just peacemaking, Stassen said. He supported the strengthening of supranational authorities such as the United Nations and the complete nuclear disarmament of major powers such as the U.S.

Almost alone in defending the Just War stance, former pastor to President Bill Clinton the Rev. Philip Wogaman said the pacifist tradition was worthy of respect and should "not be discouraged," but that it is ultimately unrealistic. He posited that a military response to clearly horrible atrocities, such as ethnic cleansing campaigns and genocide, would be appropriate if handled within Just War Theory.

"Christians agree that God is ultimately in charge, but we cannot forget that in human events, God acts through the actions of people," Wogaman explained. "We cannot rely upon God to intervene from outside. If sin is real, and it must occasionally be resisted forcibly, then it must be by people – especially people who are responsive to God's purposes." ♦

Action: *Order a copy of Should Christians Always Oppose War? And 11 Other Questions Believers Ask by Rev. William R. Bouknight, available from Bristol House, <http://www.bristolhouseitd.com>; or call 1-800-451-7323.*

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Methodist Board Targets Israel, Defends Homosexuality

Three resolutions critical of Israel were adopted by the United Methodist Church's lobby office during its recent board meeting. Directors of the General Board on Church and Society (GBCS) approved resolutions seeking boycotts and divestment directed against companies called complicit in Israel's presence on the West Bank. The board also voted to affiliate GBCS with the "U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation."

GBCS has a history of adopting anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian resolutions. It has not adopted any resolutions critical of Palestinian terror groups such as Hamas, or of neighboring Arab dictatorships. In 2009 GBCS hosted an event at its headquarters in which speakers portrayed Israel's founding as a disaster.

The anti-Israel resolutions were among the most controversial ones introduced at the GBCS meeting. The first resolution called for boycotting Israeli-produced West Bank products. One director expressed concern that such a boycott might unintentionally cause difficulty for Palestinian workers who benefit from employment provided by Israeli companies. GBCS General Secretary Jim Winkler addressed the concern by saying that the situation was similar to apartheid South Africa, where black groups had encouraged boycotts though they might cause black job loss.

A second resolution called for aligning United Methodist investments with the denomination's criticisms of Israel. The resolution sought to remove companies such as Caterpillar, Motorola, and Hewlett-Packard from church portfolios due to their business dealings in Israeli-controlled areas of the West Bank.

UM Lobby Chief Celebrates Role in Obamacare Passage

Boyed by several legislative victories, United Methodist's chief lobbyist opened his agency's spring meeting on February 9 in Orlando by boasting to the 63-member board about their role in passing Obamacare.

"We helped secure passage of healthcare reform in the United States last year," General Board on Church and Society (GBCS) General Secretary Jim Winkler bragged, highlighting televised thanks to the United Methodist Church by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "You undoubtedly know that was celebrated in some churches and quarters and a source of concern for others."

Winkler said the board and staff had been "intensively involved" in meetings with members of Congress and coalitions to encourage the passage of legislation. But while the United Methodist lobbyist claimed the GBCS had mobilized "thou-



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UM Seminary Event Alleges U.S. Sponsors Torture

United Methodist ethicist Amy Laura Hall of Duke Divinity School organized a March 25-26 conference at Duke called "Toward a Moral Consensus Against Torture" that accused the U.S. of practicing torture on terrorist suspects. The conference focused heavily on forms of coercion such as isolation, forced nudity and sleep deprivation that were deemed unacceptable.

Among the sponsors was the National Religious Committee against Torture (NRCAT), of which the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society is a member. The event was aimed at students, clergy and activists who worried that the U.S. military, intelligence agencies, prison system, and culture itself were feeding a "national descent into torture" that was a "crisis of faith."

NRCAT founder George Hunsinger spoke either of reported U.S. torture practices, or of countries in which reported torture was the direct consequence of U.S. involvement, such as through programs of "extraordinary rendition" in which foreign nationals suspected of terrorist involvement were repatriated by the U.S. to their country of origin and interrogated. Torture not involving a direct connection with the U.S. was mostly unmentioned in the panel discussions and keynote addresses.

In one case, North Carolina activist and panelist Beth Brockman described a trip to Cuba in which she protested the continued operation of the Guantanamo Bay detention

facility from across the no-man's land that separates the U.S. military base from the Communist nation. The torture practices of Cuba's dictatorship were unmentioned, and the U.S. facility was her sole focus.

"Everything you hear [about Guantanamo Bay], it's all true," insisted Stephen Xenakis, a retired U.S. Army officer who spoke on a panel discussion entitled "The Nature of U.S. Sponsored Torture."

"If there's going to be accountability, if there's going to be responsibility by the U.S. government, then it's got to come to the kitchen table," said Xenakis, arguing that the wars had not touched American life as they had in previous generations.

Conference speakers and panelists depicted an America in which acceptance of torture practices – if not their outright promotion – was widespread. "Torture is taught," argued Robin Kirk, Director of the Duke Human Rights Center, saying it was part of a methodology and body of knowledge that had been created over time.

Some speakers, including David Gushee of the Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, blamed torture on "the weakness of the American people."

"Perhaps, as the saying goes, the people get the government they deserve," Gushee said. "And maybe a people get the media, the church and the academy that they deserve. We are a distracted and superficial people."

Many, but not all, of the conference speakers named pacifism as a force behind their opposition to coercion in interrogation and detainment of enemy fighters.

"If we really want to get rid of torture, we probably also want to get rid of the death penalty and of the permission to engage in war," argued Duke University religion professor Kalman Bland. "And that means a total revision of our religious teachings that capital punishment is okay and that there are such things as war. Those two paradigms set the stage for torture as a legitimate instrument of state power. And until we put an end to war and put an end to the death penalty, I am afraid that torture will always be with us." ♦

Action: *For a response to the allegations of U.S. torture, order a copy of Keith Pavlischek's article for IRD's Faith and Freedom by contacting mbell@TheIRD.org.*

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United Methodist Officials Fast Against U.S. Budget “Cuts”

led by Evangelical Left Sojourners chief Jim Wallis and former Democratic Congressman Tony Hall, a coalition of left-leaning churches and organizations announced a fast in late March to protest allegedly “extreme budget cuts” proposed by House Republicans. The coalition’s website, hungerfast.org, lists the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries among its “partners.” The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) also supported the fast.



Pictured here: Ambassador Tony Hall (L), Bread for the World President David Beckmann and Jim Wallis (R) speak at the HungerFast press conference at the National Press Club (Photo: Bread for the World)

“Ultimately, this is a fast before God, to whom we turn when we don’t know what else to do,” said Wallis, addressing reporters at the National Press Club. “We turn in prayer, and hope to change hearts, starting with our hearts, the hearts of our lawmakers, [and] the heart of our nation.” Wallis warned Congress: “Listen to God’s heart as you make your decisions.”

While Republicans are worried about mounting national debt, GBCS chief Jim Winkler complained that “no one is talking about having the rich carry their share of the burden or reducing the vast sums of money spent on war, weapons and spies.”

Winkler targeted Wisconsin Republican Congressman Paul Ryan’s proposed budget reductions “His plan is to cut health care and food for the poor, as well as education, job training, low-income housing, and Social Security, to name but a few of the punishments designed for those on the bottom,” he said. “The rich would get more tax cuts. Rep. Ryan would further skew the distribution of wealth and power in favor of the rich.”

United Methodist Council of Bishops President Larry Goodpaster also signed an ecumenical letter opposing budget cuts. “These deep and unwise spending cuts are a betrayal of our call to love our neighbor,” it complained. ❖

Action: Share your thoughts about official United Methodist opposition to attempted restrictions on federal government spending with your pastor and your local bishop. Ask how they would suggest addressing the nation’s deficit and spending crisis.

UM Bishop: “To Heck with Glenn Beck”

Jesus Christ died for sinners, not well regarded religious leaders, according to United Methodist Bishop William Willimon. Speaking April 3 as a guest preacher at Washington’s Episcopal Church National Cathedral, the North Alabama bishop turned a conventional sermon message on its head and likened a conservative commentator to a modern-day prostitute or tax collector.

“Despite all the ugly unseemly things Glenn Beck has said about you, as a church, I’m glad to be here,” Willimon said to applause from the cathedral congregation. “Hey, it’s America, Glenn Beck, and I think Episcopalians should be as free to be as liberal and progressive and social activist as they please. To heck with Glenn Beck.”

“I can’t stand Glen Beck,” Willimon admitted, pronouncing the conservative talk radio host “Rupert Murdoch’s talking dummy.”

“This mish mash of hate and foolishness Beck markets to a \$23 million empire,” Willimon said. “When more than 200 advertisers refused his show Beck appropriately was picked up by a diarrhea medication.”

Willimon recalled a show by Beck in March of 2009 in which he asked his audience to leave their church if the term “social justice” was used.

“Which Beck says you’re too stupid and blind to see as code for communism and Nazism,” Willimon reported. “Beck’s excuse is, he suffers from ADHD [Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder]. Hey Glenn Beck, I suffer from ADHD, and you don’t hear me standing up in public and spewing out sarcastic venom, do you?” the United Methodist leader shouted to laughter from the congregation.

Willimon said his point was that “Jesus Christ loves Glenn Beck to death.” Christ died for sinners, and people hated him for it, according to Willimon. “I’m very fond of Jesus, until I think; do you think that Jesus actually healed Glenn Beck in a more gracious and spectacular way than Jesus has ever condescended to heal me?” Willimon asked, seemingly referring to Beck’s recovery from alcoholism. “Are you prepared to worship a God like that?” ❖

Action: Pray for Bishop Will Willimon and for Glenn Beck!

UMAction Briefing

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UMAction Briefing



Spring 2011

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UM Reform Groups Uphold UM Stance for Marriage

UMAction, with the Confessing Movement, Good News, and other United Methodist reform groups, responded to 36 retired bishops who urged actively homosexual clergy.

“The path urged by the retired bishops, if adopted, will leave The United Methodist Church barely distinguishable from the culture, particularly in the Christian West,” the reform groups declared. “All this would be done for the sake of expediency and convenience, a desire for ‘relevance,’ and a misapplied sense of social justice.”

Signers of the pro-homosexuality stance, representing almost 40 percent of the UMC’s 85 retired bishops, compared the current ban on actively homosexual clergy to past restrictions on ordination based on “race, gender and ethnicity.” The bishops urged removing the passage in The Book of Discipline that calls homosexual practice “incompatible with Christian teaching,” and instructs that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.” United Methodist clergy are expected to be monogamous if married and celibate if single.

UMAction and the Renewal and Reform Coalition reaffirmed traditional Christian teaching about marriage. “Even though our debates have historically focused exclusively on homosexuality, The United Methodist Church must learn how to provide effective and compassionate ministry to all persons who struggle to live lives of sexual purity,” the statement declared. “All persons, whatever their sexual temptations or inclinations, are welcome in The United Methodist Church, but sexual relationships outside the biblically and historically defined boundary of Christian marriage between a man and a woman must be named for what they are—sin.” ❖

Action: Endorse the UM Renewal and Reform Coalition’s support for United Methodist and Christian teachings about sexual ethics, at www.TheIRD.org.



Pictured here: Supporters of actively homosexual clergy react tearfully to a vote at the 2008 United Methodist General Conference, retaining the church’s position that homosexuality is “incompatible” with Christian teaching. (UMNS/Paul Jeffrey)

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