

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

May 1984

Methodists Move Toward Reform

The recent General Conference of the United Methodist Church may have succeeded in halting -- and even reversing -- the steady decline and drift of America's largest mainline Protestant body.

Every four years, while the nation is in the throes of presidential election campaigns, the UM Church conducts its own political extravaganza. The General Conference, which attracted 1,000 lay and clergy delegates from around the world to Baltimore on May 1-11, is the top legislative body of the church. The conference rewrites church law and adopts dozens of resolutions which set church policy for the following four years. (Later this summer five regional UM conferences will elect new bishops and select directors for the general church agencies, includ-

ing the Board of Church and Society and the giant and powerful Board of Global Ministries.)

This special report on the UM Church will, we expect, interest the many IRD members who are not United Methodist. The UM Church is one of the bellwethers of American religion. But the IRD also has a special tie to the United Methodists: the Institute on Religion and Democracy itself was conceived at a UM General Conference. In 1980, UM layman David Jessup circulated his preliminary inquiry on church funding which resulted in the landmark full financial disclosure requirements for the denomination. At that conference, Mr. Jessup met others who were concerned about the church's

Continued on page 2

Central America: The Church in the Crossfire

Observers of the May 6 elections in El Salvador included Sister Camilla Mullay, IRD chairman Edmund W. Robb, and IRD Program Consultant Penn Kemble. Following the election, Sister Camilla and Mr. Kemble traveled on to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Sister Camilla offered these observations and insights on her conversations with church leaders.

What were your impressions of the popular support for the elections in El Salvador?

The voter turnout was amazing to me as an American. I was particularly impressed by the Salvadorans' industrious, meticulous, and competent preparations which eliminated the snags that showed up in March.

Most of all, I was encouraged by watching the workers at the polling places -- their amiable spirit, the cooperation between the two parties, their careful following of the procedures, and the high percentage of alert and dedicated young people who served as poll watchers from both parties.

Neither I nor any of the 27 other U.S. observers with whom I compared experiences detected

Continued on page 7



Photo by Rebecca L. Hammel

Sister Camilla Mullay is the former Mother General of the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs, Columbus, Ohio. She is currently on sabbatical in Washington, D.C.

frequent anti-democratic bias. A year later, IRD was born.

The ensuing four years have been tumultuous for United Methodism. Along with other major U.S. churches, the denomination was rocked by last year's media revelations on the NCC and the WCC political involvements. Amidst the flurry of defensive responses and rebuttals, the UM Council of Bishops acceded to requests by regional church leaders to establish a special committee to investigate the media allegations. That committee issued its 99-page report the week before General Conference, including harsh criticism of the Methodist's own mission board (see page 6).

Later in the Fall, shock waves went through the church when a group of 34 influential UM ministers organized an independent missions organization which threatens serious competition to the official Board of Global Ministries.

All of these events made tangible the growing local church frustration with national UM agencies. The UM Church has been characterized as a church adrift, victimized by a "mainline malaise." The General Conference identified and responded to this identity crisis by authorizing three sweeping studies. The first study is on ministry. The second is a theological study, sought by those who feel that Methodism's theological pluralism has gone too far and jeopardizes even minimal coherence in the church. The final study, requested by 130 members of UM theological faculties, is on the mission of the church. The petition for this final study argued that the UMC had "lost the unifying vision which alone could clarify the relations" among its mission activities.

The conference responded to "grassroots" concerns -- and communicated to the agencies a muted "no confidence" vote -- by capping apportionments ("taxes" local churches pay for general church work) to a 26% increase across the next four years. This unprecedented action cut over \$15,000,000 from projected general church budgets.

The UM Church still suffers divisive and destructive problems. But in what IRD chairman Edmund Robb called "the most significant General Conference of this century," there were significant signs of hope. — Diane Knippers

Conference Scorecard

The UM General Conference went on record supporting U.S. recognition of Cuba, opposing military and economic aid to the Philippines, criticizing current U.S. policy regarding Central America, and backing the nuclear freeze. All this comes as no surprise to veteran church watchers. Nevertheless, there were signs of change in Baltimore. "Liberty" is re-entering the vocabulary of the church. Significant moderating actions were taken, in spite of the influence of the church's social action establishment. A conference scorecard follows:

Social Creed The United Methodist Church, while generally eschewing confessional statements, does have a Social Creed which is recommended for frequent use in Sunday worship. The conference made an important addition to one paragraph of the Social Creed as follows: "We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to **freedom for all peoples**, and to the rule of justice and law among nations" (new phrase in bold). This change was one of several proposed by IRD's UMs for Religious Liberty.

Religious Freedom This resolution, also originally drafted by UMs for Religious Liberty, and presented to the conference by Judge James Dolliver (Olympia, Washington), identifies components of religious liberty as outlined by the United Nations. It discusses four types of threats to religious liberty, including government attempts to subvert religion. Finally, it establishes comprehensive guidelines for work on behalf of religious freedom for UM and ecumenical agencies (see page 4). The passage of this resolution was a milestone in the efforts to put religious liberty on the agenda of the U.S. churches.

Central America The Methodists called on the U.S. to end any overt or covert action to destabilize any existing government in Central America and urged human rights certification from Amnesty International or the United Nations in extending military or economic aid to any government. The resolution mentions the long promised elections in Nicaragua, but is strangely silent on the elections that were held in El Salvador during the conference.

The resolution was amended at the conference

Continued on page 3

Religion & Democracy is published by The Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1000 16th St., N.W., Suite LL50, Washington, D.C. 20036 (202/822-8627). Edmund W. Robb, Chairman; Penn Kemble, Program Consultant; Diane Knippers, Managing Editor; Maria Thomas, Administrative Director; Kerry Ptacek, Research Director.

IRD membership is \$25.00 per year; a subscription to the newsletter and information service is \$15.00 per year (and is included in the annual membership fee). Tax-deductible contributions in any amount are welcome.

Continued from page 2

in ways which will impede one-sided church support for the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua or the Salvadoran guerillas. The resolution finally included a quote by Salvadoran Archbishop Rivera y Damas who said that violence against clerics in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua "makes us understand that the church is and will continue to be a hindrance and an object of persecution when it does not accommodate the whims of a totalitarian system of government, be it of the right or of the left...". The resolution instructs United Methodists to "continue to be supportive of Christians...who are participating in the struggle for liberation and self-determination, including freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and open and competitive elections, free from outside interference by any nation, institution or corporation, and against dictatorships of the right and left."

A final amendment, offered by Helen Rhea Coppedge (South Georgia), has sweeping implications for church education and advocacy. It instructs that "curriculum material and, whenever possible, exchanges of visitors between United States and Central American churches should be inclusive of various theological and political philosophies so that our peoples may better understand the diversity of the viewpoints that exist within our communities."

Economic Concerns The sweeping resolution on Common Heritage -- called a "pioneering concept in actual international cooperation and sharing of the benefits of the world's resources," largely under the auspices of the United Nations -- was adopted with virtually no debate. (Common Heritage is an extension of the UN Law of the Sea treaty - in support of which the UM Church gave over \$100,000 in the last 3 years.)

Continued on page 4

IRD Sponsors Vigil

IRD's first denominational caucus, UMs for Religious Liberty and Human Rights, targeted the UM General Conference as its first project. The 14-person steering committee prepared a study paper on religious liberty, drafted legislative proposals, and provided delegates with background information. Right, Helen Rhea Coppedge, a steering committee member and delegate to the conference, addressed a pre-General Conference press briefing. At the conference itself, a monitoring team assisted delegates with research for amendments and speeches.

Mid-point in the conference, UMs for Religious Liberty sponsored a communion service and candlelight vigil commemorating persecuted believers around the world. The communion service was conducted by Bishop Emerson S. Colaw (Minnesota); Bishop Roy C. Nichols (New York) opened the vigil with prayer. Below right, Emerito Nacpil, a bishop of the Philippines UM Church, evaluates religious freedom in Southeast Asia. Witnesses on behalf of religious liberty in Cuba, South Africa, Iran, and Ethiopia also addressed the 125 delegates and guests.

A special briefing on Nicaragua was held to offer delegates a perspective on the Nicaraguan revolution generally overlooked by pro-Sandinista church agencies. Speakers included Adriana Guillen, a former reporter for *La Prensa*; Geraldine de Macias, a former Maryknoll nun who worked in Central America for 12 years; and Prudencio Baltodano, a Nicaraguan farmer and pentecostal lay deacon who was tortured in February by Nicaraguan soldiers who considered him "an enemy of the Revolution." (Mr. Baltodano, whose schedule was handled by IRD early in his stay in the U.S., was named a "designated person" by the U.S. Surgeon General and is eligible to receive free medical care, including surgery to reconstruct his ears.)



Photo by John Goodwin



Photo by James S. Robb

However, a resolution, proposed by the Board of Church and Society, on Economic Justice did not survive. The proposed resolution briefly acknowledged that economic systems are "always under the judgment of God." But the resolution's judgment was aimed exclusively at "capitalistic countries"; "a new international elite of bankers, corporate executives, and technicians"; and military spending. It contained no criticism of socialist or communist systems.

In the committee, the Economic Justice resolution was first amended by deleting the bulk of the resolution and replacing it with the UMs for Religious Liberty proposal for a comprehensive church-wide study of economics. At this point, the sponsors of the resolution maneuvered to refer the whole matter back to the Board of Church and Society.

Peace and Disarmament A proposed resolution on Christian Faith and Disarmament was amended to add "mutually verifiable" to describe the nuclear freeze supported by the church. The resolution acknowledges that deterrence may be tolerated as a temporary expedient, advocates "trust in negotiating postures" between the superpowers, and encourages support for

Christians engaging in non-violent civil disobedience.

Minor revisions were made in United Methodists and Peace, a longer document adopted in 1980. The new sections affirmed the common heritage concept as a contribution toward peace and condemned chemical and biological warfare. The conference rejected a proposal to change the church's Social Principles to "support" conscientious objectors but only "extend the ministry of the church" to those who choose military service.

Cuba The General Conference voted to petition the U.S. government to lift its economic embargo against Cuba and to resume normal diplomatic relations. The Methodist Bishop of Cuba, Armando Rodriguez, was invited to address the conference on behalf of the resolution. J. Fay Cleveland, Jamestown, New York, attempted to add the statement that "in the course of negotiations, we urge that religious freedom and the condition of political prisoners be topics for discussion." The committee chairman opposed the amendment, expressing "sympathy with the idea," but argued that this resolution should be kept "simple and direct." The final resolution

Continued on page 5

Methodists Make Religious Freedom a Priority

The resolution on religious freedom adopted by the UM General Conference outlines the components of religious liberty taken from the UN Declaration of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief. It identifies types of religious repression by governments and concludes with a commitment to work for expanding freedom, including guidelines for denominational and ecumenical action:

Church Action to Expand Religious Freedom

The United Methodist Church places a high priority on the struggle to expand religious freedom in the world. Our actions must include prayer, public witness, acts of mercy, and, inevitably, protests against governments and political movements. It is precisely because church members in totalitarian societies are denied the right of protest that U.S. Christians have an obligation to speak out on behalf of those who do not.

In carrying out this responsibility United Methodist agencies will follow several important guidelines, and shall advocate these guidelines in the ecumenical groups in which our church participates:

1. We will apply a single standard of human rights and religious freedom to all societies, irrespective of their political coloration.
2. We will advocate democratic governance, with freedom of association, speech, and competitive elections, as the best guarantee that ordinary people will have a say

in structuring and maintaining their own political, economic and cultural institutions, including religious institutions.

3. We will reach out to those who seek genuine democratic change and speak against those around the world who would substitute a new form of repression in the name of revolutionary change which would deny religious liberty and human rights.

4. Although "silent diplomacy" has its uses, we, as Christians, will also provide open testimony to help protect persecuted believers by focusing public attention on the actions of their oppressors.

5. We consider it our special obligation to minister to those brave souls who refuse to succumb to the state's efforts to control and subjugate them. Our contacts will not be limited to government sanctioned international religious conferences and institutions, but expanded to include the broad community of believers.

6. We understand why church representatives from totalitarian countries are at times forced to advocate the policies of their governments. But we will be forthright in criticizing the governments that impose such demands on our sisters and brothers. Such criticism will no doubt displease despotic rulers. But it will give oppressed religious leaders in such societies a useful tool for expanding the autonomy and independence of their organizations.

makes no statement on human rights abuses in Cuba -- abuses amply documented by Amnesty International and Americas Watch.

Philippines The action on Cuba stands in revealing contrast with the resolution on the Philippines, about which no Filipino bishop was invited to comment. The latter was harshly critical of the Marcos regime -- arguing that democratic processes have been "dismantled"; the Filipino people are victimized by "unjust and oppressive economic structures"; and that church members working for "peace through justice" have been "targets of harassments, arbitrary arrests, illegal detention, false charges, torture, disappearances, and political killings." No mention was made of the election that would soon be held. All governments were urged to withhold economic and military support from the Marcos government while it continues to violate human rights.

Pedro Ela, delegate from the Philippine Methodist Church, spoke against the resolution. He claimed that there were factors which led to the imposition of martial law which were not all Marcos' responsibility, and that martial law had not been as brutal or unjust as the resolution portrayed it. He argued that "the Philippines is slowly moving towards modernization" and needs the assistance of its friends and allies in its "times of real need." Unlike its response to the Cuban bishop, the conference did not heed the Filipino delegate.

China Two U.S.-China resolutions, one on political relations and the other on church relations, were adopted. The resolution on the church in China fell far short of the standards set in the religious freedom resolution, particularly the instruction to relate not just to government sanctioned churches, but to the broad community of believers. While the China resolution discusses the Chinese government-approved Three Self Patriotic Movement and Catholic Patriotic Association, it ignores millions of Chinese Christians who participate in unregistered house fellowships or Catholics imprisoned for their convictions regarding continuing relationship to the Holy See. The resolution ignores the recent "spiritual pollutions campaign" as well as the brutal human rights abuses which have been such an integral part of the Chinese revolution. The resolution passed in spite of the efforts of a delegate who argued that the resolution did violence to the complexities of the church in China and that "if we cannot speak the truth, we had best not speak at all."

Southern Africa A comprehensive document

on Southern Africa calls on UM members and church agencies to divest from corporations doing business in South Africa and rejects the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola as a condition for the independence of Namibia. Although the resolution referred to the UM Social Principles' rejection of the use of violence, it goes on to "support the role of the South West African Peoples' Organization" in Namibia, ignoring other political parties. (SWAPO is a Soviet-backed, violent liberation movement which espouses "Scientific Socialism.") This resolution urges UM agencies to "encourage study and financial support for the Special Fund of the WCC Program to Combat Racism." This action came just one week after the UM bishop's pastoral letter reassured United Methodists that "No offerings, either regular or general, taken in our churches were used to support the 'Special Fund to Combat Racism'."

How it Works

The process by which the United Methodist Church makes its decisions is strange and wonderful indeed. It is also stacked.

When 1000 delegates from 73 U.S. annual conferences and 23 overseas conferences gathered in Baltimore this spring, they faced the responsibility of revising the 748-page book of church law (The Discipline) as well as adopting resolutions which would reflect the official position of the church on a myriad of topics. The delegates were divided into 10 legislative committees to sort through the approximately 13,500 petitions requesting action by the conference.

The petitions came from national level agencies of the church as well as from annual conferences, local churches, and individual United Methodists. But the agencies have the advantage. A special task force coordinates legislation coming from the agencies (frequently the agencies initiate proposals to guide their own organization). All the agency legislation and resolutions are printed for the delegates and mailed out weeks in advance of the conference, while legislation from other sources does not enjoy this advantage. (One reform adopted this May is that four years from now legislative proposals from regional conferences will also be available in advance.)

Delegates may choose their own legislative committees. So it is perhaps no surprise that 14 of the 25 directors of the General Board of Church and Society who were delegates to the General Conference chose the Church and

Society legislative committee. One half of the 40 delegate/directors of the official church mission agency elected to serve on the Global Ministries legislative committee. In effect, these directors oversee themselves.

Dozens of agency staff members also attended the conference, prepared to explain and defend the legislation they frequently drafted. It was not unusual to see four or five staff members sitting on the edges of a 10-person legislative sub-committee. The expertise of full-time staffers was frequently intimidating to delegates who may have had misgivings about a particular item, but lacked the facts at their fingertips for a quick rebuttal.

The bias in favor of agency-prepared legislation, especially long and complex resolutions, did

not end when these matters emerged from the committees. Thoughtful consideration next fell victim to tremendous time pressures. At the beginning of the conference, the rules allowed for unlimited perfecting amendments and six speeches (of three minutes each) on each item. That was certainly not thorough discussion by anyone's standards, but at least it was something. But by the closing session of the conference, when most of the international issues were considered, the conference was allowing itself one possible amendment and two one-minute speeches on each resolution. During the marathon five hour session on the final Friday night, the delegates plowed through over 75 individual items, adopting only one minority report and one amendment to the legislative committee recommendations. The passage of the resolution on religious freedom -- a minority report -- was a minor miracle in that environment. ■

UM Bishops Shoulder Ecumenical Responsibilities

The United Methodist Church should stay in the NCC and WCC, but the past problems in those relationships warrant a special new standing committee of the UM Council of Bishops to oversee ecumenical relations. That was the recommendation of the special nine-member Conciliar Review Committee, established by the UM bishops after the "60 Minutes"/Reader's Digest furor last year.

The committee's 99-page report is available for \$5.00 from the UM Publishing House, 201 Eighth Ave., Room 409, Nashville, TN 37202.

The report's greatest strength is its excellent analysis of the byzantine organizational procedures of the WCC and NCC. The report points to the current plans to reorganize the NCC as a hopeful sign for the future. If anything, however, the bishops are too modest in understanding the impact that the UM Church, the largest single church contributor to the NCC, could have on that council.

The bishops' harshest criticisms are reserved for the UM General Board of Global Ministries, the agency which probably has the greatest influence over UM ecumenical contacts. The report explains:

The conversations with the board personnel did seem to reflect a well defined but limited viewpoint on how mission was to be understood and accomplished. Also reflect-

ed was a reluctance to be genuinely open to the consideration of other or additional perspectives. As a consequence, something of a "seige" mentality was evident, namely, that the board is correct in its position and is prepared to utilize what resources may be necessary to defend the core and the perimeters of that position. There also appeared to be a reluctance to deal constructively with concerns of a large segment of the United Methodist constituency.

The bishops did declare their willingness to assume responsibility for ongoing reform by establishing a permanent oversight committee on ecumenical relations. The committee noted that "implicit in our report is both a confession and a commitment to do better -- to assist where we can, to correct when we must."

But in some other important respects, the report is disappointing, particularly in its analysis of specific complaints that have been made against the activities of church agencies:

- The bishops reassure United Methodists that their offerings have not gone to the WCC Special Fund of the Program to Combat Racism. They apparently did not understand that the debate is more specifi-

Continued from page 6

cally over support for groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) or the South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) -- organizations which employ terror against civilians and are heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. The bishops avoid any discussion of the aims or tactics of ANC or SWAPO, nor do they inform United Methodists that their own mission board gave thousands of dollars to projects of ANC and SWAPO in the last four years.

- In the section on NCC support for New Economic Zones (forced labor camps established by the Vietnamese government) the bishops attempt a laborious distinction between "government agencies" and "quasi-government agencies" as conduits for aid. To anyone familiar with the nature of totalitarianism, the distinction is peculiar indeed. The bishops seem to accept readily the claim that aid to Vietnam was purely humanitarian, ignoring NCC publicity and testimony before Congress which contain glowing descriptions of Vietnamese communist society.

- The report acknowledges that "it is evident that some GBGM staff are in sympathy with the accomplishments and objectives of the Cuban revolution." The bishops admit that the evidence supports those who charge that religious liberty concerns in Cuba have been neglected. "The committee notes that this willingness to overlook essential issues can and has given rise to accusations regarding ideological bias on the part of the GBGM staff."

The bishops seem unwilling to identify, let alone answer, the central moral questions. They note, in the manner of referees intent on maintaining their neutrality, "Actions which are seen as 'Marxist-Leninist' by one group are seen as at the core of the Christian message by others." They avoid judgments by arguing that there is no commonly accepted definition of "Marxist-Leninist," so it is not possible to evaluate allegations of a Marxist-Leninist tilt.

The committee, before which several IRD leaders had testified, indicated that facts had been relatively easy to identify, but that it was the interpretation of facts over which so much disagreement arose. "We face the very difficult task of providing the means for developing a wider consensus that will free our denomination to move ahead with its mission," they explained. Indeed, they still do.



Adriana Guillen, Sandinista dissident and human rights activist, addresses an IRD-sponsored briefing on Nicaragua at the UM conference. She was a coordinator of the Ministry of Culture in Managua following the revolution and later, a correspondent for La Prensa.

Continued from page 1

any voters who came to vote because of fear. We sensed no atmosphere of intimidation.

Could you compare or contrast the relative militarization of El Salvador and Nicaragua?

Both countries have military checkpoints. In neither country did I sense that the people feared the military in the areas where I traveled. In Managua we were stopped and rerouted on several different occasions while driving through the city. We had no comparable experiences in El Salvador, but, of course, the election observers were given warm hospitality there and VIP treatment.

Did you sense that the church in El Salvador is moving toward a revolutionary stand?

At a reception for foreign observers the night before the elections, I heard an articulate young woman explain that the Pope's visit last year was a kind of watershed in the midst of confusing turmoils. He really taught the people how to know whether someone is preaching a false

liberation. The next day I attended noon mass at the cathedral in Santa Ana. The church was packed, and the congregation listened attentively to the sermon on the true meaning of liberation for the Christian -- an interior liberation from sin. The priest stated emphatically that Jesus was not a guerrilla.

How do Catholics in Nicaragua view the future of church-state relations there?

Someone who considers the true Church to consist of those who support the revolutionary process as defined by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) thinks there is no problem with church-state relations other than the difficulty posed by a counterrevolutionary hierarchy. Other Catholics are much less optimistic about church state relations -- those who believe that the Nicaraguan bishops who warn about the dangerous direction of the FSLN are speaking the truth. The latter are very worried about what seems to them to be an organized campaign against the Church. To judge from my sources, these Catholics -- who are only now beginning to have their voices heard in the U.S. -- are the majority.

This Easter, the Nicaraguan bishops issued a controversial pastoral letter on reconciliation which included a call for dialogue with the contras. Did you hear of any adverse effects on church people in Nicaragua as a consequence of that letter?

There has been a barrage of indignation against the Bishops from certain of the comandantes. There is a continuing campaign by the

regime to identify the Bishops with Somoza's national guardsmen and with the CIA.

And there seems to be evidence that the government is moving further to restrict the church. One Sister told me that in the wake of this pastoral two other Sisters were told they had to leave the country within twenty-four hours. One of these had not made the proper application for a residence visa, the other one had followed the procedure the government outlined. When a representation was made saying the one Sister was legal, the response was that the government could do what it wanted.

Many U.S. citizens, especially church groups, recently have visited Central America, much as you have done. How would you evaluate the reports the U.S. churches are receiving?

The reports I've seen generally follow a pattern and they read like accounts of the same pilgrimage -- same places, same events, same interpretations, and same conclusion, namely that United States policy toward Nicaragua is immoral and should be militantly opposed.

One well-informed Nicaraguan told me it bothers the democratic sectors of his country that visitors from the United States seem interested in Nicaragua only in relation to U.S. politics, and come looking for support for the point of view they had before leaving the U.S.

Other Nicaraguans argued that visiting foreign delegations are used very effectively by the government to convey to their own people the impression that the whole world supports the Sandinistas. One thing is clear: too often our churches are not hearing both sides of the story in Nicaragua. This is my biggest concern. ■

Religion and Democracy

1000 16th Street N.W., Suite LL50
Washington, D.C. 20036