

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

March 1984

Crisis Deepens for NCC and Mainline Denominations

Mainline church officials have argued that criticism of political extremism in church and ecumenical agencies has had little direct effect on the operations of the National Council of Churches and its major constituents. But there is now evidence that dissent and organized opposition may be growing toward what could become a critical new stage.

- * The NCC now admits that in 1982 it was forced to dip into its reserves by \$400,000, and that preliminary financial data for 1983 already shows a deficit of \$218,000 in just five of the Council's administrative units.
- * A group of important United Methodist leaders, long frustrated about the direction of the UM Board of Global Ministries, has established an alternative missions agency which could cause serious financial and organizational strains in that denomination.
- * A growing number of churches and individual members of the United Church of Christ are forming the Biblical Witness Fellowship, which will provide information to UCC churches and others about "alternative giving options" to those promoted by denominational agencies.

These developments are evidence of a mainline church crisis already made manifest in declining membership figures; disputes over theological, social, and political extremism and organizational incompetence; and the recent resignation of NCC President James Armstrong.

Equally significant is the growing and open talk of crisis. Noted ecumenical figures Martin Marty and Albert Outler discuss the mainline Protestant "malaise" as if it is a fact of life (Christian Century, Feb. 29, 1984). And a survey of delegates to this spring's United Methodist

General Conference identifies among its major hopes for the conference a new yearning for unity within the denomination and a clear set of directions for a church that seems to be drifting.

All this is having very practical consequences. Much of the NCC's funding comes through voluntary contributions, or "askings," from member communions. According to a report in UM Newscope (Dec. 16, 1983), Jim Styer, an assistant general secretary of the NCC, explained that "In 1982 only 9 of 33 denominations gave an amount equal to or greater than their asking." The report adds that askings for 1983 were likely to fall well below the amounts requested.

Continued on page 2

Shot in the Foot

On February 16th the United Methodist Board of Church and Society's "Committee to Research IRD Connections" finally issued its laboriously-prepared report. Its findings included the judgment that the IRD favors apartheid in South Africa because the IRD has received funds from the Pittsburgh-based Scaife Family Charitable Trusts. The report, citing author Leon Howell, asserts that "Scaife connected groups have promoted interests of the Government of South Africa."

But the United Methodist inquisitors apparently overlooked the fact that during the 1970s their own church, including the Board of Church and Society itself, received 14 different grants totaling \$1,056,000...from none other than the Scaife Family Charitable Trusts.

If you would like to see a copy of this amusing report, along with IRD's response, you may request it from our Washington office.

IRD Engages Church Leaders

Another informative article on the NCC's financial crisis appeared in the Ecumenical Press Service, a news agency affiliated with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. This article (EPS "Backgrounder" -- Dec. 11, 1983) notes that NCC leaders such as Claire Randall have "played down" the U.S. ecumenical body's financial predicament.

"A background consideration," the EPS story states, "is that talk of financial crisis could reinforce calls for the NCC to alter its socio-political orientation, and NCC opponents could claim success in their attempts to cut its financial jugular, the focal point of recent attacks." The report also noted that "other sectors of American Christianity, however, do seem to find ways of financing ever-expanding programmes."

The EPS report sees evidence of hope for the NCC in Church World Service, its ecumenical relief agency, which, EPS says, "enjoys the best financial health of any NCC unit." (The report does not take account of the fact that one reason for CWS's relative health is that over half its money comes from the U.S. government. CWS already pays over a million dollars a year into the central NCC treasury and there are sure to be objections to the idea that even more relief money go to overhead costs.)

The rise of alternative program agencies within the mainline denominations -- the new UM missions effort, or the Biblical Witness Fellowship -- could further threaten the NCC in several ways. Those backing such agencies say they are seeking primarily the voluntary or discretionary contributions of local givers, but sooner or later they are bound to compete with funds upon which many NCC-related programs also must rely. Nor is it likely that leaders of NCC member communions will be eager to help the embattled NCC when they are busy with disaffected groups within their own ranks.

But despite what NCC leaders may suspect, some critics of the Council are not altogether gratified by its problems. IRD Chairman Ed Robb, for example, has warned that the NCC may become a scapegoat for the failures of policies and programs that were foisted upon it by the bureaucracies of the large mainline denominations -- the United Methodists, the Presbyterians, the UCC, and other Left-leaning denominations.

This would not only do unjustified harm to the ecumenical idea, Robb argues, it would also leave unchanged the unrepresentative denominational leadership that often has caused the problem. □

Committees of the United Methodist and Presbyterian Churches which are investigating charges of church support for left-wing extremists have invited IRD representatives to testify.

In a prepared statement to the UM bishops' investigative committee which met in Chicago on February 14, IRD chairman Edmund Robb warned, "Practices which stirred public controversy a year ago continue virtually unchangedUnless the Bishops' Conciliar Review Committee takes thorough, far-reaching, and energetic measures to bring these practices to an end, it is likely that our church will suffer a deep and permanent wound."

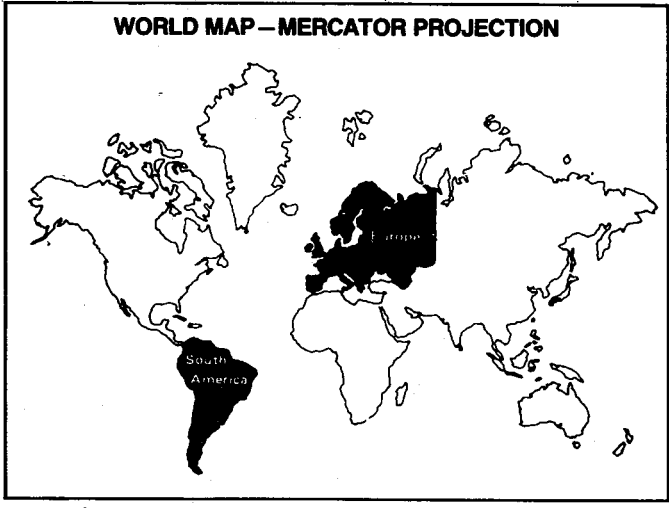
David Jessup and Diane Knippers joined Ed Robb in urging the bishops to encourage philosophical pluralism in the denomination. "This will necessarily require additions of persons with diverse points of view on our boards and their staffs. It will require reforms in election procedures to allow for greater representation. It will also require opening up our publications, education programs, conferences, and mission study material to allow greater diversity of opinion," they said.

The UM meeting was intense, but cordial. Nevertheless, it remains unclear what actions the bishops will actually propose.

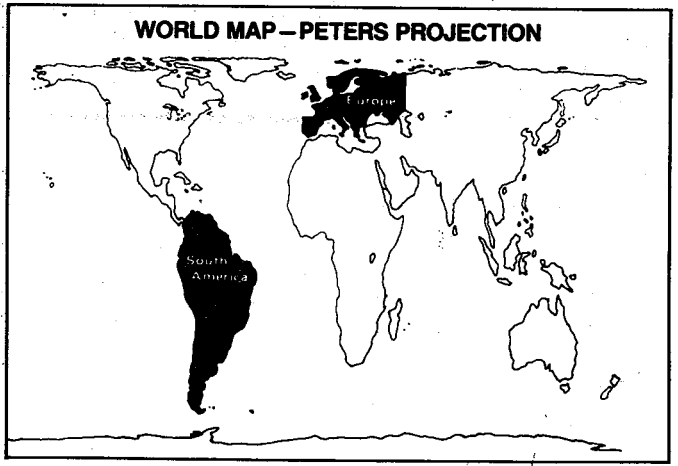
IRD's Research Director, Kerry Ptacek, is to meet with the Presbyterian investigative committee this March 14 in New York.

The head of the Presbyterian committee, J.R. Shirek, writes in the March 12 issue of The Presbyterian Outlook, "...information, which the committee has carefully examined, certainly underscore(s) what already is known -- there is substantial unrest in the church, and this unrest represents serious concern to a significant number of our Presbyterian brothers and sisters." The committee, in a somewhat more open fashion than the UM committee, plans to conduct open hearings for two days at the 1984 General Assembly. Mr. Shirek notes that comment, both pro and con, is being widely sought. You may contact Mr. J.R. Shirek at P.O. Box 2073, Orlando, FL 32802. The names and addresses of the committee members are included in The Presbyterian Outlook or are available by contacting the IRD office. □

MAP MANIA

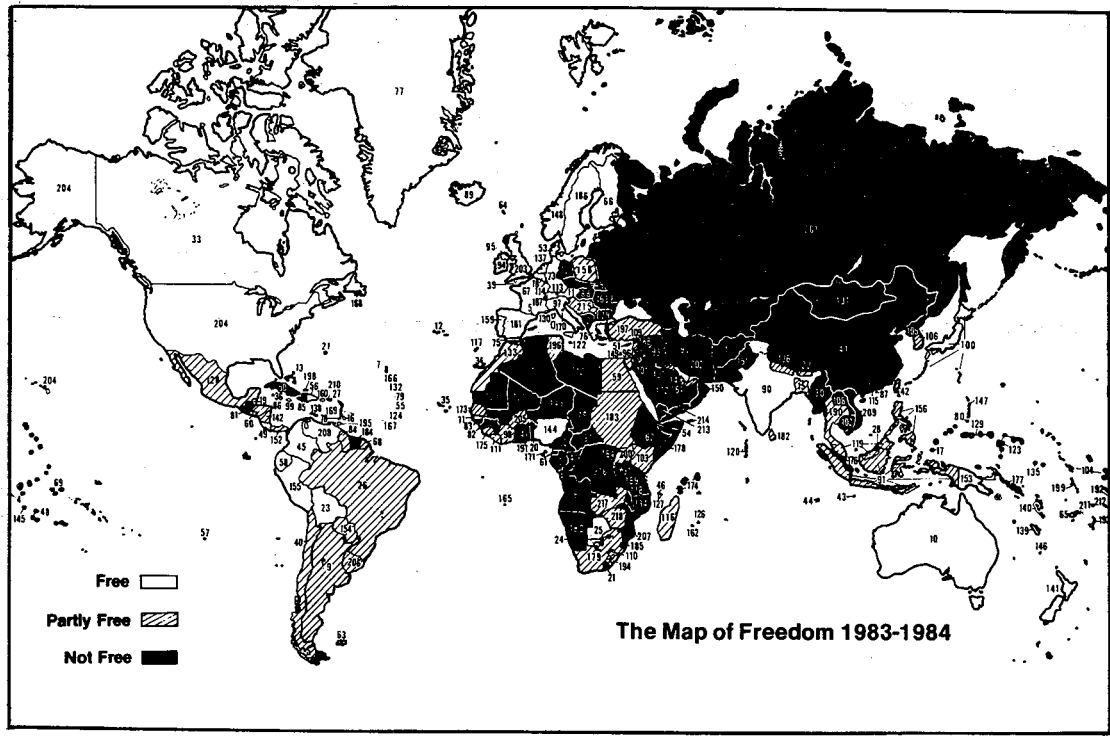


This is the world as seen by colonialists, imperialists, and high school students.



This is the world in ideological fashion at Response, the magazine of United Methodist Women. By using what is supposedly a true proportion of land masses, it corrects our bias which, Response charges, "favors the Northern, mostly industrial countries over developing countries to the South." (Professional cartographers reject the claims of the Peters Projection, for reasons which may be obvious.)

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The Map of Freedom 1983-1984

At left is an even more revealing map, published yearly by Freedom House, 20 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018 (the map sells for \$5.00).

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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.

BRIEFS

■ The NCC's Church World Service (CWS) is planning to send another quarter million dollars worth of aid -- medical supplies and equipment -- to Vietnam. According to CWS executive director Paul McCleary, the projects are part of the normal emergency relief given by the agency, and "a way of reconciliation between former enemies." Is "reconciliation" really appropriate at a time when the Vietnamese government is forcing Vietnamese religious movements -- both Christian and Buddhist -- to accept government control?

■ George Weigel, a member of the IRD Executive Committee and author of our study book, Peace and Freedom, has been awarded a year's fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. Mr. Weigel will study changes in American Catholic thought on war/peace issues since 1965, looking at the influences on the church as well as the impact of the church on the country at large.

■ Leaders of twelve mainline Protestant denominations have signed a letter to every member

of Congress urging them to "repudiate" the current U.S. policies in Central America. The letter criticizes the report of the bi-partisan Kissinger Commission as being based on "false premises" about the Soviet role in Central America. The letter identifies U.S. aid with "slaughter" and "torture" in El Salvador.

Signers of the letter included representatives of denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the American Baptist Church, USA, the Church of the Brethren, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the United Methodist Church.

A thoughtful analysis of the Kissinger Commission report, as well as some of the current U.S. political reaction, appears in an article, "The Democrats and the Kissinger Report," in the March 1984 issue of Commentary magazine. The article, by IRD Executive Committee member Penn Kemble, is available from the IRD office upon request.

■ Last month we read the following in Christian Century (Feb. 15):

"The traveling exhibit 'Cambodia Witness,' featuring photographs documenting the systematic massacre of the Cambodian people from 1975 to 1979 by

their government, is raising questions once more about the United States' refusal to sign the United Nations Genocide Convention...."

Might we suggest that the exhibit also raises questions about the kinds of governments that now prevail in Indochina?

■ Richard J. Neuhaus, a prominent Lutheran member of the IRD Board of Advisors, has begun a new Center on Religion and Society, based in New York City. The Center's Assistant Director is Paul Stallworth, a member of the IRD-related United Methodists for Religious Liberty and Human Rights.

■ IRD chairman Edmund Robb received the 1984 Philip Award for outstanding contributions to evangelism by the UM Council on Evangelism.

■ You may order copies of IRD's new Briefing Papers, including the following interviews: "The Subversion of the Church in Nicaragua" with Miguel Bolanos Hunter; "The Captive Churches and the Ecumenical Movement" with J.A. Hebly; and "The Grenada Documents: Archive of Church Subversion" with Michael A. Ledeen. Papers sell for \$1.50 each and may be ordered from IRD, 1000 16th St., N.W., Suite LL50, Washington, DC 20036.

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