

Religion & Democracy

A Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

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Mainline Leaders to Critics of Church Left: No Compromise, No Dialogue

UM Bishops March Left — Members March Out

Many moderate United Methodists had been encouraged by the reasonable spirit of the 1984 UM General Conference. One year later, a series of dismaying actions -- not by the social action or mission agencies but by the bishops themselves -- have made a mockery of those hopes.

Some of the bishops, to their credit, have expressed alarm about the dwindling membership of the United Methodist Church. (Preliminary figures show a 72,000 drop last year.) Yet none of the bishops has publicly linked this deterioration to the once trendy Leftism that is still stifling church agencies and is so troubling to those in the pews.

At least one UM bishop, Richard B. Wilke, chairman of a committee charged with doubling church membership, used tough language regarding the decline. He told his colleagues,

Our danger is not that we fail to have twenty million members by 1992. For us that is a ludicrous goal, and I suspect will handicap us. But our great danger is that we cannot even turn the ship around.... We do not reproduce because we are misfocused. We are like modern couples who decide not to have children because they want to fulfill themselves.

UM bishops, cont'd on page 2

Many responsible Christians, who worry about the strength of their churches in a sometimes hostile culture, have hesitated to join in criticism of the political extremism that rules mainline church activities in world affairs. One explanation often heard is that church leaders would, in time and in their own gentle manner, eventually set right the problems raised in sometimes sensational exposes of church support for the far Left. This faithfulness, however attractive, has proved naive. In a series of important meetings this year, denominational leaders have made it clear: there will be no compromise with those who object to the political bias of mainline Protestantism.

New NCC leadership seems willing to take a critical look at every facet of the Council, except those substantive issues of political philosophy which have sparked recent fierce controversy. The United Methodist Council of Bishops, which many hoped would impose greater responsibility on the sprawling UM bureaucracy, outdid itself in catering to Sandinistas, unilateral disarmers, and anti-American ideologues. And the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church acted to choke off debate and diversity in that denomination by denying official caucus status to a group of Presbyterians seeking discussion within the church on democratic values. This issue of Religion and Democracy is devoted to providing more details on these and related developments.

NCC: Confessions Without Repentance

New NCC General Secretary Arie Brouwer issued his first report on the Council since he took office at the May Governing Board meeting in Chicago. He indulged in a poignant confession by acknowledging that:

...the flesh is weak -- and deeply wounded. For at least two, or perhaps three decades...the Council has been the object of increasingly bitter and virulent attacks. These attacks have taken their toll, in personal pain and in institutional suffering -- in decline and disorientation and dismay --

and sometimes in despair. These are facts almost universally acknowledged in private. I confess them here openly, and invite you to confess them with me as an essential step toward healing.

But Dr. Brouwer's curious confession stopped short of guilt, repentance, or conversion. "It is not my purpose to assign guilt," Dr. Brouwer continued. "Guilt trips do not lead to ecumenical commitment." Although Dr. Brouwer declared that the Coun-

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UM bishops, cont'd from page 1

But a survey of bishops' activities this Spring prompts fear of a greater danger -- they themselves may be leading the church even deeper into decline.

The bishops -- with no dissent -- followed the recommendations of their January "fact-finding" delegation to Nicaragua (see Religion and Democracy, May/June 1985). Their representatives discovered that, "The people of Nicaragua, through hours of Bible Study...have received a new vision of what they ought to be and can be as children of God.... The revolution and those improvements in the quality of life that have come as a result of the revolution have filled the people with new hope...."

The bishops ignored an editorial plea by the UM Reporter that they should support a national dialogue, under the auspices of the Nicaraguan Catholic Bishops, between the Sandinistas and the opposition forces -- a dialogue the Sandinistas are determined to avoid.

Then, in a retrogressive and institutionally defensive action, the bishops reversed their President's gesture of reconciliation to the new unofficial Mission Society for United Methodists. (This society was formed by church members who were disturbed by the UM Board of Global Ministries' emphasis on radical politics over evangelistic missions.) Bishop James S. Thomas at first designated three bishops to attend the new society's first commissioning service in May. But in a closed door session, the entire council voted to reject his gesture, and to send just one bishop "only as an observer." Bishops who are

also elected directors of the official Board of Global Ministries led the effort to plan strategy and draft the proposal finally adopted.

The 1984 General Conference had asked the bishops to seek reconciliation between the two mission groups. At that time, the Council harshly criticized the denomination's Board of Global Ministries, charging it with a "limited viewpoint on how mission was to be understood and accomplished," a "reluctance to be genuinely open to...other perspectives," and a "seige" mentality. This year's Council seems to have ignored that judgment.

But the United Methodist bishops outdid themselves in their preparations for a study document and pastoral letter for their two year Nuclear Crisis Project. The bishops have contributed \$66,000 to this project, which they say was "inspired" by the Catholic Bishops 1983 pastoral letter. But United Methodist Bishops promise to go farther than the Catholic Bishops. Bishop C.P. Minnick, Jr. (North Carolina), one of the two project coordinators, said that the UM leaders will probably "go beyond the Roman Catholic position of total support for nuclear deterrence as a viable position." According to the Religious News Service, such an "opposition to deterrence, in any event, would probably amount to a call for unconditional nuclear disarmament."

At their May Council meeting the bishops also heard several guest speakers offer inspiration for their project. The Rev. James Lawson told the bishops that the U.S. had become the "number one enemy of peace and justice in the world today."

Lawson advised the bishops that, "Our primary concern is to address the United States and the Western World," because the militarism and injustice of the world "is, in large measure, of our own making."

The Rev. Barbara Green, of the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, suggested that the Methodist bishops develop a theology on enemies, based upon the premise that groups become our enemies only when we choose to think them such. The U.S. made the Soviet Union an enemy so that it would have a reason to build up arms and have an evil entity it could feel superior to, Ms. Green argued. She identified an "obsessive demonology of the Reagan administration" that "theologizes that our enemies are God's enemies." To help break the enemy status of both nations, she said, United Methodists need to be much more involved than previously in friendship tours to the Soviet Union. She advocated that U.S. churches should supply literature from the Soviet Union to their members in order to better understand the people there. She clarified her point by adding, "I don't mean literature that is smuggled out and published in the West, but that which is published legally in the Soviet Union."

As Religion and Democracy goes to press, the UM bishops are conducting two days of hearings in Washington at which they will hear the likes of Carl Sagan, Betty Bumpers, and, again, Barbara Green. Meanwhile the grassroots grow increasingly restive. The May 10 issue of the UM Reporter, which covered the Spring Council meeting, broke new records in attracting angry letters-to-the-editor.

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cil needed to reorganize in terms of worship, evangelism, ecumenism, and financial accounting, he explicitly repudiated any inclination to change the NCC's political agenda.

Dr. Brouwer had earlier announced that he simply will refuse to respond to criticisms from groups not officially related to the NCC, specifically mentioning the IRD. But he promised that the NCC will listen and respond quickly to the concerns of NCC member denominations. At least some member denominations are beginning to express their own criticisms. In April, the Episcopal Church's Executive Council concurred with the Presiding Bishop's characterization of the NCC's plan for restructure as "overly complicated." According to The Episcopalian, Council members said that the current reorganization is "not going fast enough or far enough. We want to send a message that the Episcopal Church is restive. We're not interested in going on if there's no action."

Presbyterians Rediscover Heresy

The good news this spring is that at least the Presbyterian Church (USA) has not lost all capacity for moral and theological judgment. In fact, it seems to have discovered an actual heresy.

The bad news is that this heresy is so unrelated to the Church's traditional beliefs on faith and morals. The new heretics are those who question the church's programs on Third World revolution and the Soviet Union.

All this was revealed during last month's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Indianapolis. A newly formed Presbyterian group, Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom, asked the denomination for recognition as a special organization of the denomination under Chapter 9 of the Form of Government -- in part, to show that the critics of the bias of the denominational staff were willing to work constructively within the church's polity.

The PDRF was formed last January in order to bring a different point of view on the relation between the demands of the Gospel and world mission before the members and governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (USA). (See below for excerpts from the PDRF Statement of Purpose.) The PDRF also organized forums at the General Assembly to present the delegates with information on Central America and US-USSR church relations which is denied to them by the denominational staff. Some members of the PDRF are members of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, others are not.

The General Assembly rejected the PDRF's request for recognition as a special organization. The vote was by voice, and was lopsided, as such votes often are on the Assembly floor where the denomination's staff and committee system are mobilized on one side or the other. The PDRF's application had been

Heresy, cont'd on page 4

From the "Statement of Purpose"

Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom

Democracy, while falling far short of our vision of the Kingdom of God, permits the greatest possibility and freedom for carrying out the Christian calling to proclaim as well as to live out the Gospel. Democracy respects the dignity conferred on every human being by God, who knows every person by name and calls on every person to be His covenant partner. Our support for democracy is also based on the nature of the church, which must have the freedom as an institution but especially as individual church people, to hear and obey the word of God in its own life.

Our support for religious freedom is inspired by The Great Commission to proclaim the Gospel to all people. The proclamation of the Gospel is furthered when Christians have the right and ability to travel, write, speak and assemble freely. But we also recognize that Christians must live out the Gospel in ways that may be divergent and often will be considered political. Since democratic governments permit the greatest diversity of religious and political activity, the fullest expression of religious freedom can only be achieved in a democracy.

The Christian pursuit of justice is hindered by regimes which deny democratic rights and religious freedom to their people. Democratic institutions and

churches independent of state control are generally the most reliable allies for those particularly vulnerable to oppression in this world.

In supporting the struggle for democracy against all dictatorships, Christians must seek to ensure that such regimes are not replaced by an even more oppressive totalitarian system. Totalitarianism of the Left or the Right makes total demands on the individual's life and conscience that should be reserved for our ultimate sovereign: Christ Jesus. Totalitarianism is therefore a form of idolatry and a principal worldly foe of Christianity and democracy. The primary exponents of totalitarianism today are movements and governments shaped by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, or Communism. Church agencies and representatives should offer no support -- financial, organizational, or moral -- to movements or apologists for totalitarianism in any form. It is particularly important to adhere to this principle in mission and humanitarian work among peoples under dictatorial governments.

The church's mission to proclaim and live out the Gospel must include a special denominational commitment in international affairs to seek the expansion of religious freedom and democracy.

Heresy, cont'd from page 3

considered earlier by the Assembly Committee on Confessionalism and Diversity. This committee made a strong negative recommendation but did not base its decision on any alleged failure of the PDRF to comply with the provisions of the Book of Order or the Guidelines for special organizations. The PDRF was denied recognition, in the words of a staff member, for reasons that "went beyond the guidelines."

For one thing, it was argued that PDRF was the creation of an outside group, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, which was characterized as a political lobby representing the interests of the Reagan administration. But the PDRF relationship to the IRD is similar to that of other special organizations to non-Presbyterian groups. Indeed, the PDRF is not so strongly linked to the IRD as, for example, the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, another "Chapter 9" organization, is to the Frontier Fellowship. And unlike the Presbyterian Renewal Ministries, still another "Chapter 9" organization, the PDRF does not include in its ranks persons who are not members of the PC (USA).

Another even more far-fetched reason for rejecting the application was given by the secretary of the Committee on Confessionalism and Diversity. She explained that the PDRF's application raised "church-state" questions. The basis of that assertion was the IRD's co-sponsorship with the U.S. State Department and others (the American Jewish Committee and the National Association of Evangelicals among them) of the International Conference on Religious Liberty last April. Some mainline church officials -- stung by criticisms at the conference of the religious liberty record of the National Council of Churches and the World

Council of Churches -- have raised the specter of ominous church-state entanglement. The complaint was made in spite of the fact that at least eight NCC-related individuals turned down invitations to speak.

Robert Maddox of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (an organization most zealous in maintaining the separation of church and state) has challenged this line of criticism employed by the NCC. He argued in Christianity Today that the conference was "an acceptable use of the public square."

The real reason for the rejection of the PDRF evidently was that it has criticized denominational policy on Central America. Most of the more than ten speakers against the PDRF at the open hearings on the application raised the PDRF's stand on Central America, and related it to the IRD's positions. One speaker, James Goff, said that the IRD spread the "big lie" that the Sandinistas are Marxist-Leninist. If that is the case, the Sandinista leaders themselves must be lying when they affirm their commitment to Marxism-Leninism (see right). Goff works on behalf of the PC(USA) for a pro-liberation theology institute -- the Antonio Valdivieso Ecu-menical Center -- in Nicaragua.

One opponent of PDRF recognition called its support for democracy "political," therefore disqualifying the application, because there could be no Christian rationale for democracy. The PDRF Statement of Purpose, however, clearly states that although democracy falls far short of the Kingdom of God, and is nowhere endorsed in the Gospel, nevertheless, it provides relatively greater opportunities than other systems for responding to the Gospel.

Of course, the denomination's Witherspoon Society, a Left-oriented "Chapter 9" organization, has never been considered

to be too political. Nor was the denominationally sponsored Presbyterian Advocates on Central America, which lobbies Congress for a cessation of U.S. military aid to Central American democracies. Apparently an organization is only "political" when it disagrees with the politics of denominational officials.

Marxism-Leninism is the scientific doctrine that guides our revolution, the instrument of our analysis of our vanguard to understand the historical process and to create the revolution....(Marxism-Leninism and Sandinismo) are indissolubly united and because of that our moral strength is Sandinismo and our doctrine is that of Marxism-Leninism.

Humberto Ortega, Est et Ouest (Paris), 8/25/81

I told (my mother) that I would not be blackmailed by her gentleness and naivete and that I was a Communist.

Tomas Borge, Playboy, 9/83

The principles of Marxism-Leninism, wisely applied to the reality of our society, guided the revolutionary actions of the FSLN over the dictatorship...

Hugo Torres, 4/23/82, Radio Sandino

The views expressed in the committee illustrate the problem that led to the formation of the PDRF. The leaders of the PC(USA) are so captivated by an ideological bias that they can break their own ecclesiastical rules with impunity. There is a clear double standard. The PDRF was formed, not to deny a voice to the Left on international affairs, but to provide a voice within the denomination for all Presbyterian proponents of democracy -- be they right, left or center.

The latter are in all likelihood a majority of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Fear of that possibility is all that can reasonably explain the fervid efforts of the bureaucracy to stifle criticism of its programs, rather than to debate them.

BRIEFS

□ A delegation sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) visited Nicaragua May 22-28. Planned as a non-political trip, each of the seven participants represented denominations which have churches in that country. Billy Melvin, the NAE Executive Director, reported that conditions in Nicaragua are causing evangelical churches to reach out to each other. For example, Dr. Melvin said that the National Council for Evangelical Pastors, the ecclesiastical body of evangelicals, now represents some 520 pastors, 40 denominations, and more than 200,000 members. In spite of capacity crowds and decisions for Christ, Dr. Melvin concluded,

...The evangelical churches are hurting. Inflation is averaging about 300%. This touches everyone, including our evangelical brothers and sisters. Ministry outside the church building is not without difficulty and pastors not in sympathy with the Sandinista government have experienced harassment. Together they are growing, but they are hurting.

□ Now that the South African government has repealed the law prohibiting racially mixed marriages, a minor but symbolic step toward reform, differences have emerged in the pro-apartheid Dutch Reformed Churches over whether to perform such marriages. Dr. Pierre Roussow, chief executive officer of the largest Reformed body, said his church's policy prohibiting mixed marriages is based on Scripture and remains unchanged. A church pastoral warns against mixed marriage "in view of the complicated South African society." What seems uncomplicated is the fact that Christian churches are withholding the ministry of the church -- some would say denying a sacrament -- to believers.

□ On his first official visit to the United States, Emilio Castro, new general secretary of the World Council of Churches, presented a \$20,000 check to the San Francisco-based National Sanctuary Defense Fund (NSDF). In the meantime, the WCC Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service has issued a worldwide appeal for contributions totaling \$150,000 for the defense of U.S. sanctuary workers. The Presbyterian General Assembly also voted to give \$100,000 to the NSDF.

American Baptists, at their biennial convention this summer, joined the roster of U.S. deno-

minations encouraging congregations to join the sanctuary movement.

Meanwhile, nine United Methodist congregations, three bishops, and representatives of the boards of Global Ministries and Church and Society met for a national sanctuary consultation in June. The participants asked the two boards to designate a staff person to promote sanctuary nationally, to publish a sanctuary movement directory and newsletter, and to create means for influencing legislation. "This is a time when it is increasingly inappropriate for any congregation to be uninvolved," said Bishop Kenneth Hicks in a closing worship. "God is calling people like us together in clusters and coalitions...to realize we are part of a new network...."

□ The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, at its June meeting, voted to express support for the Free South Africa Movement by inviting Oliver Tambo, head of the African National Congress, to address its 1986 synod. The ANC is no doubt admired by many South African blacks, who see it simply as a vehicle for protest against the vicious system of apartheid. But it is also deeply influenced -- perhaps even controlled -- by the Soviet Union and its dominions. For just one example, the head of the ANC's military operation is also a top official

Briefs, cont'd on page 6



Officials of the U.S. National Association of Evangelicals meet with leaders of Nicaragua's National Council of Evangelical Pastors (CNPEN). CNPEN was the subject of a January, 1985, IRD briefing paper, "Who Speaks for Nicaragua's Evangelicals?"

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of the South African Communist Party. The ANC, moreover, has taken responsibility for wanton acts of terrorism in South Africa, such as car bombings in Durban and Pretoria, in which the victims were civilians, the majority black. There are, ironically, many militant anti-apartheid groups and figures in South Africa which reject such odious associations.

Delegates to this summer's General Synod of the United Church of Christ were challenged by UCC President Avery Post to face up to "very delicate issues in internal and external relations." American churches, including the UCC, are quick to criticize U.S. foreign policy, as in Central America, but are silent "about what is clearly a Soviet attempt to achieve a military conquest of the people of Afghanistan," he said.

Other "delicate" issues -- perhaps handled with less nicety -- had to do with Catholics, Jews, and the IRD. Dr. Post expressed concern about the "seeming putdown" of liberation theology within the Catholic Church. Turning to Jewish-Christian relations, he said that real anti-Semitism is a problem, but that a tendency among some Jews to perceive criticism of the policies of Israel as springing from anti-Semitism is also a problem.

Dr. Post's strongest words, according to the Religious News Service, were reserved for the IRD -- in spite of his earlier endorsement of our point regarding the mainline church imbalance on foreign policy issues. Post said that the IRD "fronts for some far-right critics of the churches" and that it appeals to some church members "who feel alienated and without access and who seem to tolerate personal attacks on churches by the IRD, as well as that organization's appalling practice of innuendo, distortion,

and unbrotherliness and unsisterliness." (This "unsisterliness" charge will take some getting used to.)

The General Synod got off to a rousing start with an emotional service featuring the Rev. Jesse Jackson. "You're the most progressive church in America," Jackson admonished the delegates, "but, church, don't stop there!" One worries that they may not stop until they're off the deep end.

United Methodist Bishop Emilio de Carvalho of Angola writes that his comments on the cause of hunger in Africa, reported in the official UM Interpreter magazine and later in Religion and Democracy (May/June), were taken out of context. "I did not only cite war as the cause for hunger in Africa," the bishop writes. "I also mentioned imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, unjust international economic order, exploitation of world resources by a few countries." Of course.

In mid-May an American tourist, Regina Sipple, was detained in the Moscow airport customs for carrying small bound copies, in English and Russian, of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as tapes of children's music. According to wire service reports, Ms. Sipple was strip searched and ordered to leave the Soviet Union. "Billy Graham said there was freedom of religion here," said Ms Sipple, "so I didn't see why I couldn't bring these things."

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