



Christmas: Advent of a Public Ethic

By John H. Rodgers

Christmas is upon us. Christians everywhere will be celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The heart of the Christmas message was well stated by a fifteenth-century Latin author in the words of the following hymn,

*Oh love, how deep, how broad, how high, how
passing thought and fantasy, that God, the Son of
God, should take our mortal form for mortal's
sake.*

*For us baptized, for us He bore His holy fast and
hungered sore; for us temptation sharp He knew;
for us the tempter overthrew.
For us He prayed; for us He taught; for us His
daily works he wrought: by words and signs and
actions, thus still seeking not Himself but us.
For us two wicked hands betrayed, scourged,
mocked, in purple robe arrayed, He bore the
shameful cross and death; for us gave up His dying
breath.
For us He rose from death again; for us He went
on high to reign; for us He sent His Spirit here, to
guide, to strengthen, and to cheer.
All glory to our Lord and God for love so deep, so
high, so broad.
The Trinity whom we adore forever and forever
more.*

The IRD, as other Christian associations, takes its identity from that wondrous gift of God's grace in Christ, which begins at Christmas. In fact, a number of implications for our public life and action can be seen as we contemplate the birth of Jesus.

The Context of Our Politics / First, we take note that the celebration of Christmas is not primarily about what we do at all. Rather it is about what God has done in coming to us and, of course, what He goes on to do in the entire life, death and resurrection of our Lord. At the heart of the Christian message lies God's gift, not our accomplishment.

Have you ever stopped to ponder why it is so? It is due to the fact that the human scene and situation is so profoundly fallen, so profoundly broken and lost that nothing we can do, including our political activity, can save us. To put it in St. Paul's language, we are not justified by our own good works, but by faith in Christ alone.

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The Sinister Limits of Soviet *Glasnost*

Fall was still in the air on that September evening as we left the Tchaikovsky Music Conservatory. The sweetness and regularity of the Baroque refrains left me with a sense of hope for continued signs of *glasnost* in Moscow. It would be, however, the last time I would ever see my friend Sergei Savchenko.

On the morning of October 23, with winter clearly at hand, Savchenko was alone as he walked along an empty street after another of his beloved concerts. A car rushed onto the sidewalk and struck Sergei; he died before reaching the hospital.

Sergei dearly loved music, but what got him into trouble with the authorities was his love of democracy and the church. A photo-journalist when not working as a physicist, Savchenko was documenting the destruction of Russian Orthodox Churches under the communists. Six of every seven Orthodox Churches which were open in 1917 were destroyed or closed by the authorities; the vast majority

Budapest, East Berlin, or Prague. The communist leadership in Moscow has shown nothing but contempt for a multi-party system. Gorbachev has dismissed such appeals as "nonsense."

Nor is it the first time that someone close to Ogorodnikov has died under highly suspicious circumstances. On November 18 of last year his brother, a 37-year old priest and monk named Rafail, was killed in a car accident.

Just days before Sergei died, Ogorodnikov returned to the Soviet Union after a long trip to the West. Upon arrival in Moscow, he was interrogated for two hours, and 79 books obtained while in the West were confiscated. The latter action violates newly liberalized Soviet customs regulations.

The intimidation and harassment of Ogorodnikov's new democratic union and his publishing efforts have become much more violent in recent weeks. When I met with Ogorodnikov and other editors of the *Bulletin of Christian Opinion* in September, I was told of the recent theft of a computer and the beating of one of their journalists in Leningrad.

When our meeting broke up at 2 a.m., I was moved by a blessing that Fr. Victor Grigoriev gave to Ogorodnikov. Then with a twinkle in his eye, the Russian Orthodox priest and victim of seven years in the GULAG turned to me and asked if a Protestant would like to be blessed in a similar manner. The sign of the cross and his words of assurance and faith were given to me.

On November 7, the commemoration day of the October Revolution of 1917, Father Grigoriev was left alone in the editorial offices of the *Bulletin* to stand guard. It was their policy never to leave their files or equipment unattended. Through a ruse, two strangers gained access to the apartment, beat the priest up, and stole with the help of men waiting

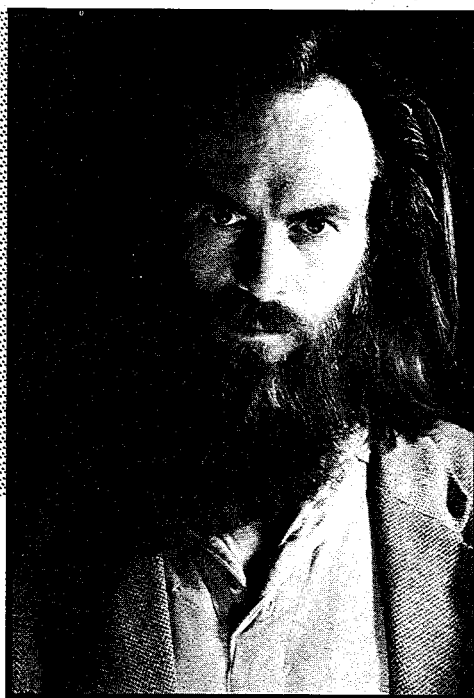
outside the apartment, 3 computers, 2 printers, a fax machine, and some files. Fr. Grigoriev was left bound, gagged, and with a concussion.

Concerns over these human rights abuses and the ongoing repression of democracy in the Soviet Union should be sent to President Bush and Secretary of State Baker; ask them to discuss these incidents when meeting with Soviet diplomats and Gorbachev himself.

-- Kent R. Hill

What got
Savchenko
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and the church.

Self-portrait by Sergei Savchenko, who was killed in an auto accident on October 23.



remain locked up even under Gorbachev.

The factor most likely leading to his death was his association with Alexander Ogorodnikov and the fledgling Christian Democratic Union. Founded in August as an independent party, Ogorodnikov's brave new venture was officially accepted in September at the congress of Christian Democrats meeting in Guatemala as the 54th such party. In an age of *glasnost*, the formation of such a party should not seem so dangerous. But Moscow isn't Warsaw,



Namibian citizens register for November's elections.

The WCC's Action to Free Namibia: Success for Whom?

Namibia, Africa's last colony, took its first step toward independence last month when its people elected leaders to be entrusted with writing a constitution and constructing a new government.

Although the South West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO) received a majority of the vote, it failed to win the two-thirds majority needed to have free sway in writing its own constitution. Consequently, SWAPO will have to form a coalition with more moderate political parties. What remains unknown is whether this coalition will result in any practical moderation of SWAPO's ideology and its preference for single-party rule. If not, the beginning of Namibia's democracy could also be its end.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) can claim partial credit for SWAPO's success. The WCC has long been a supporter of SWAPO, and has given it grants through its Special Fund to Combat Racism totaling nearly \$2 million since 1970. Some voices within the church have questioned these grants because they promoted one group over others -- a group that happened to be a Marxist-oriented military organization engaged in guerrilla warfare.

It was no surprise, then, that in September the WCC announced a grant of \$165,000 to SWAPO -- the largest ever from the Special Fund. At the announcement, Dr. Emilio Castro, General Secretary of the WCC, stated that "the grant was made for

humanitarian purposes to groups committed to the struggle for racial justice." In defense of the grant, Castro said it was made to care for Namibian exiles and, enigmatically, "to help Namibians under SWAPO stabilize their humanitarian duties abroad" News of SWAPO's tactics, however, makes one wonder how the WCC defines "humanitarian."

Returning Namibian exiles frequently report instances of murder and torture in SWAPO's Zambian and Angolan prison camps, where dozens, if not hundreds, reportedly remain. In the months prior to the elections, hundreds reported inhumane incidents in these camps. SWAPO Security Chief Solomon Auala, nicknamed "The Butcher of Lubango" by detainees, is said to be responsible for incarcerating detainees in open pits. Sworn testimonies tell of brutal beatings, rape, physical torture, and the mutilation of limbs. Many, perhaps hundreds, may have been killed. Though SWAPO removed Auala from its slate of candidates, it has yet to allow a full probe into these abuses.

SWAPO long has used violence and intimidation to minimize dissent and further its goals. In the mid-1970s, a major purge within SWAPO led to more than 1,000 deaths and the adoption of a more hardline Marxist ideology. In 1982, the Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism held hearings on Soviet and Eastern Bloc support of terrorism in southern Africa. Among the documents was a cable sent by a SWAPO official relaying Sam Nujoma's (SWAPO's leader and likely head of the next Namibian government) personal order for the assassination of two opposition leaders in Namibia.

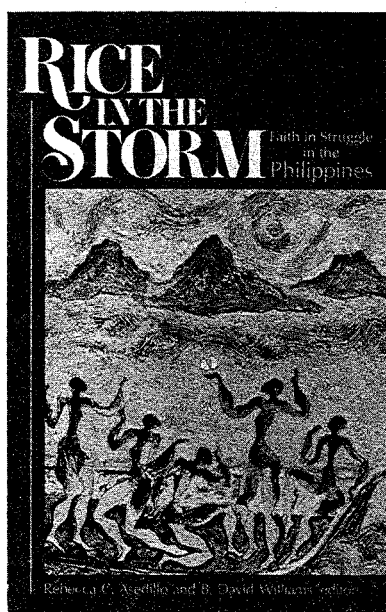
SWAPO has not had unanimous church support in Namibia. In 1985, the parents committee of the Namibian Council of Churches wrote Nujoma after receiving information of the "terrible conditions" in the camps, saying that "SWAPO leadership will have to do a lot to convince us about their ability to lead this country and its people to freedom." The elections, which didn't give SWAPO leaders the big victory they expected, suggest that many in Namibia would prefer not to see SWAPO in power. This casts a deep shadow over the WCC's long-standing support of SWAPO's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people.

Castro said in September that the WCC was "deeply saddened" over the news of the human rights abuses. As contributors to SWAPO's "success," what remains to be seen is whether the WCC will convert that "sadness" into influence on SWAPO -- for the sake of all Namibians.

-- Lonni Jackson

The NCC & the Philippines: Politics by Stealth

Some friends ask us at the IRD: What difference does it really make to a local church in Ohio that the National Council of Churches in New York has fallen prey to the radical Left?



In response, we often point to the mission study materials published annually by the NCC's Friendship Press. Those materials -- a package including a book and study guide for adults, a story book for children, video and audio tapes, and visual aids -- reach Sunday schools and women's circles in thousands of churches around the country.

But the lessons imparted have frequently been quite shameful: a long line of outrageous political pronouncements, from comparing Mao Zedong to

the Good Samaritan (1978) to condemning South Korea's largely anti-communist churches as "Christian McCarthyists" (1984). More recent NCC studies, however, have refrained from siding so blatantly with communist regimes.

This year's study on the Philippines (*Rice in the Storm*, edited by Rebecca C. Asedillo and B. David Williams) follows the trend toward restraint. Local church groups will find no cause for scandal: no blessings of the Philippine communist guerrillas, no anathemas against the democratic government of Corazon Aquino. In fact, both President Aquino and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) seem almost invisible in the NCC materials. Mrs. Aquino is named a scant three times in the entire 183-page text for adults. The CPP is mentioned but once.

This neglect is exceedingly strange. After all, Cory Aquino is among the most widely recognized political leaders in the world, and the communist guerrillas -- 20,000 under arms -- clearly now

present the most serious threat to her government. Has the NCC perhaps ceased to notice the hurly-burly of politics? Hardly! The editors of *Rice in the Storm* admit that their major concerns are political. Asedillo and Williams lard their book with little chunks of liberation theology, Filipino-style, which they call "a theology of struggle."

So what is being struggled against? Here is where a pattern of evasion and manipulation begins to show itself. Asedillo, Williams, and their collaborators do not have the nerve to name the still-popular Aquino as the target of their attacks. Instead, they set about undermining her indirectly. *Rice in the Storm* paints all political forces except the far Left in the darkest of colors, and then ties them all to the (Aquino) government.

Even the late President Marcos is repeatedly dragged out and lashed for his many sins. Then it is insinuated that nothing fundamental has changed under his unnamed successor:

In a brief span of time, the bright new sun that dawned on our land [in the 1986 revolution] is being replaced by a cloud of gloom.... An objective look at our situation will show that the impoverished sectors of our society ... groan under the burden of increasing poverty. Their cries of anguish and protest have been met with repressive measures, or worse, with the thud of a bullet. Traditional politics have returned.

Study participants would never guess from *Rice in the Storm* that a few things have changed under the Aquino government -- for example, the restoration of free elections, a free press, and a six percent annual rate of economic growth.

The description of human rights problems reveals the NCC materials at their most unbalanced. The text and study guide refer often -- a total of 34 times -- to brutal abuses against innocent civilians. Always it is Philippine military, police, and militia units that are blamed; never is a finger pointed at the communist New People's Army (NPA).

But according to U.S. State Department reports, NPA "sparrow unit" assassination squads claimed responsibility for over 300 killings in 1988. This total is close to the numbers of killings attributed to government-linked forces by human rights monitors. Moreover, the communist movement also carried out an internal purge during 1988, putting to death several hundred of its own members. This, too, goes unmentioned in *Rice in the Storm*.

The NCC mission study applies a similar black-and-white analysis to the Philippine economy. The rich -- the alleged constituency of the government -- are portrayed as a bunch of "old selfish oligarchs and bureaucrats," motivated solely by greed. On the

other hand, the poor -- presumed to be alienated from the government and sympathetic to nameless "people's movements" against it -- are held to be the true Church of God.

The source of all evil, in the warped world of *Rice in the Storm*, is the capitalist system -- of which the Philippines is taken to be a typical case. Poor Filipinos are victims in an international "economic and political order that enslaves and impoverishes some so that others may be richer and more powerful." The NCC study evinces particular hostility toward transnational corporations investing in the Philippines, and toward the (Aquino) government's encouragement of such investment. This policy is treated as a sellout to rapacious foreigners rather than a sincere imitation of the free market strategies that have stimulated development elsewhere in Asia.

Aquino's most compromised connection, in the eyes of Asedillo and Williams, may be her friendly relationship with the United States. For throughout *Rice in the Storm* our nation plays the villain. Formerly a colonial exploiter, the United States is now the patron of oppression:

The United States continues to provide massive military aid to the Philippine government for its counter-insurgency campaigns in order to further promote and protect its own military bases and economic interests. This has devastating effects upon people and upon the prospects for true, people-oriented development. There is no hint here that United States has made some key contributions along the Philippines' journey toward democracy. Nor that current U.S. military aid is intended to protect that imperfect democracy from the thoroughly undemocratic NPA.

Indeed, the NCC's editors would prefer to leave the Philippines quite unprotected. They mount a concerted attack on U.S. military bases there, which are regarded as the central symbol of imperialism. *Rice in the Storm* closes with a plea by Williams to end the U.S.-Philippine security relationship:

Will we [the U.S.] stop our insistence on military solutions for the long-standing unrest? Will we withdraw our support from the elitist elements in the Philippines, which are essentially anti-democratic? ...If Filipinos decide not to renew the U.S.-Philippines bases agreement, will we respect that choice?

To show that Filipinos do oppose the bases, the NCC materials resort not to polls but to fictional dialogues among "representative" Filipinos. A "small farmer," for example, complains, "The bases are there for your self-interest, not ours. For us, they simply serve as a magnet for attacks by your enemies, not ours!" In another scene, a little boy from the barrio is shot by "the military" -- for no

apparent reason -- near Clark Air Force Base. The "representative" characters in the drama end up deciding to demonstrate for removal of the bases.

At the end of the curriculum, classes are invited to write to the U.S. President about the bases. Given the slanted information supplied by the NCC, participants in its mission study will doubtless feel compelled to tell George Bush to shut them down.

Only once, in the back of the study guide, do the NCC materials observe that Filipinos are deeply divided on the issue. As the passage concedes, a majority might let the bases stay for a limited period. Nevertheless, the study guide goes on to imply that Philippine churches oppose the U.S. military presence, and that this view should take precedence. It fails to note that Manila's Catholic



The NCC authors do not have the nerve to name Aquino as the target of their attacks.

cardinal, Jaime Sin, and many other Filipino Christians do support the bases.

It quickly becomes clear what Asedillo and Williams stand against: capitalism, the United States, the Philippine military, and (by extension) the Aquino government. What alternative, then, are they pushing? The NCC study materials do speak, often and warmly, of "nationalistic people's movements" -- as if these were specific organizations. A clue to their identity may lie in the following account of the origin, around 1970, of today's "people's movements":

These movements were more articulate than the previous ones and were clearer and more coherent in their analysis, goals, and programs. The movement rolled behind the banner of "National Democracy" which regarded "the overthrowing of U.S. imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and the seizure of political power and its consolidation for the liberation of the great masses of the Filipino people" in the present era as the central task of the Philippine revolution.

To decode this statement, it helps to know: that "national democracy" is the term used by the see Philippines, page 8

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This is a particularly important point when considering our political vocation. Political involvement stirs the passions and often tempts us to place our deepest hopes in some new political system, program or action. This is idolatry. The celebration of the Gospel, of God's coming to us in Christ, helps us put our political life in perspective. Political life *is* important. However, it is *penultimate*, not ultimate. Dr. Peter L. Berger, in an essay entitled "Different Gospels: The Social Sources of Apostasy," makes this point well:

Thus the issue I want to address now is not, emphatically not, the substitution of one cultural or political agenda for another. Rather, it is the issue of placing any such issue into the place that is reserved to the Gospel in the faith and life of the Church.

If I correctly understand his essay, it is precisely this temptation which so often captures many in the oldline churches in our country today, more often than not with a fairly "liberal" political agenda. Be that as it may, whether conservative or liberal, our politics are not the Gospel! Christmas is first and foremost about Christ. That is both an assurance of God's grace and victory, and a humbling of our pretensions.

Next, Christmas has to do with God's *grace*. We note that, in coming in Christ, God identifies with us; He comes to us where we are. It is not we who climb to Him, but He who comes to us. His identification with us involves entering into our situation. He truly assumed our nature; He was actually born of the virgin Mary. "He abhorred not the virgin's womb." Christmas is the celebration of God with us, here, in the midst of life and in our common human nature. Some have felt this active identification, this humbling of Himself, for our sake, to be unseemly or merely a poetic way of speaking -- not so! It is the way of love to give one's self so humbly. "Oh love, how deep, how broad, how high." Not only is it appropriate because it's the path of God in His love, but it's also appropriate because of the depth of our human need. The coming of God into our situation simply assumes that we humans need something other than advice or education; we need One to be with us to deliver us, to forgive us and to lift us beyond ourselves. So, at Christmas we celebrate not only the coming of *God* but the real coming of God *to us*. We matter to God -- broken as we are.

Christmas brings both of these insights before us at the same time. Along with the fullness of God's love, the full measure of our need is disclosed.

Even at the birth of the Christ Child, the Cross casts its long shadow upon the baby Jesus, for we are told "there is no room for Him in the inn." At the end of His life, we see that we have no room for Him in our history. Because of God's grace and mercy the Cross is not only a disclosure of the ungodliness and immorality of human history, it is also God's act and achievement of atonement and forgiveness. With regard to our political involvement, we can say that the Incarnation illumines the divine and human context in which we Christians live out our vocation in the political sphere.

The Christian Shape of Our Politics / If, as we said, politics are not ultimate and cannot be, for all our politics are flawed and reflect the sinful condition of the human race, then what guidance does the Incarnation have for our action in the political realm? Clues are given when we consider how we celebrate Christmas.

We give *thanks*. We know ourselves to be forgiven, loved and of great value to God, as we know others to be of great value also, for Christ came and died not for us only but for the sins of the world. This awareness draws us into the political scene. We engage in the political and social realm with a sense of thanksgiving that people and our life together matter to God and therefore matter to us.

We do more than give thanks to God; we exchange *gifts*. In thanksgiving for God's gift to us, we give gifts to one another around the Christmas tree, whether after Midnight mass or the Eucharist or on Christmas morning. Here is a paradigm for our life together in society. We are called to give gifts to one another -- not only person to person, but in the political and social spheres of our life. Christians, as God's thankful and caring people, are to be an involved people. God gives to us and in response we give to one another. Being a Christian does not call for a pietistic withdrawal from social life; rather, Christ calls us into obedient, thankful, involved piety. The Scriptures often stress this. We read, "But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him,

Being a Christian does not call for a piety that withdraws from social life; rather, Christ calls us into obedient, thankful, involved piety.

how does the love of God abide in him?" (I John 3:17) and, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Our political involvement also has a specific *content* in Christ. The Christ who is born at Christmas, who identifies with us and gives Himself to and for us, is also the Christ who opens our eyes to what it is to be human, to live a truly human life. He becomes our teacher, disclosing true human values. He teaches us, both by His word and by His example. As Christians involved in politics, we are not groping in the dark about what sort of society we wish to help build. We bring Christian values and insights, as best we understand them, with us. Separation of Church and State must not mean the separation of religious convictions from politics and public life. It is precisely our Christian values that we seek to vote and make available in the "naked public square." The "Christmas Presents" which we give have been shaped by the Christ they honor.

Lastly, there is *humility*. The Incarnation humbles us while blessing us. We participate in politics vigorously, but we do so humbly. We know we have not deserved the coming of Christ. We know also that even in Christ we are less than wise and mature about many things. In fact, Christians do not all agree about many of the complicated issues of politics. There are perplexities, complications and failings amongst us. We rightly are called to exercise humility. For example, since we enter into political debate to learn as well as win, we recognize that criticism ought to fall on us as well as others. We do not absolutize our own insights. In addition, we are called to be involved in the political sphere with charity toward those whom we believe to be wrong. What a strange way to engage in politics! But we are reflecting on a strange way for God to involve Himself with us, taking our nature unto Himself and becoming born, indeed, even in a manger. Such humility on His part sets the stage for us as well.

The IRD, since its inception, has been concerned to bring both encouragement and biblical critique upon our involvement in the political realm. We seek to encourage Christians to celebrate Christmas in this wider sense, but we have also been concerned to exercise a critique in the light of Scripture on the absolutist claims of either "the Right or the Left," believing that our political calling, however important in its penultimate way, is always done imperfectly. It needs the disciplines of charity and criticism in the light of Him who has come among

us. We pray we have been faithful and helpful in this vocation.

We thank you, the readers and members of the IRD, for joining with us in this association. We believe that our calling is a deeply needed and noble one; indeed, it is shaped and mandated by the very coming of Christ Himself. We ask that you will pray for us on the Board of Directors and on the staff that we may be able to serve you and all Christians well. Have a most merry Christmas. Celebrate, not only around the table and around the tree, but at the polls and in the community. Give your gifts all year long.



The Very Rev. Dr. John H. Rodgers is Dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. He also is a member of the IRD Board of Directors. The artwork is from the Rosenwald Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. "The Nativity," on page 1, and "Adoration of the Magi," above, are by unknown German artists. The hymn is from Hymnal 1982 of the Episcopal Church, Church Hymnal Corporation.

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National Democratic Front (NDF) and other CPP-affiliated groups to describe their politics; that the quote about "overthrowing of U.S. imperialism" is a description of the NDF program; and that, after the Maoist CPP's breakoff from the old Moscow-line party in 1968, it soon established a network of front groups such as the NDF.

Suspicious about the identity of the lauded "people's movements" are confirmed by an examination of the Filipinos featured in *Rice in the Storm*. Sister Mary John Mananzan, who wrote a survey of Philippine history for the NCC text, is the head of GABRIELA, a women's organization described by the wife of the CPP founder as "part of the legal forces of the national democratic movement." Ex-priest Edicio de la Torre, cited at length as a major expositor of the "theology of struggle," is a founding member of Christians for National Liberation, the NDF affiliate for churchpeople. Catholic Bishop Julio Labayan and Protestant leaders LaVerne Mercado and Erme Camba, authors of various pieces in the book, were among the endorsers of a 1986 manifesto that praised the New People's Army for "providing hope and a sense of dignity to people entrenched in powerlessness." The communist-dominated coalition polled less than four percent in the 1988 Philippine

elections; however, its support appears much stronger among the contributors to the NCC study.

Rice in the Storm attempts, in short, an amazing feat of political stealth. It seeks to lead church study groups right to the brink of rejecting a democratic government and endorsing a communist movement, while barely whispering the names of the government's head and the communist movement. Whether this new, subtle approach will prove more or less effective than the propaganda of the past remains to be seen. One thing is sure: because the NCC chose to tailor its materials to fit a narrow and questionable political agenda, U.S. Christian laypeople have been deprived of the broad view of Christian life in the Philippines to which they were entitled.

-- Alan Wisdom

Correction

Bishop Harold E. Jansen has written to say that he was inaccurately quoted in our article on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America convention (Oct. 1989). The article's author, Russell Saltzman, obtained a transcript of Bishop Jansen's remarks from the ELCA Commission for Communications:

... We are not dealing with an administrative issue, or a matter of program or policy ... uh ... even prudence. It is an issue of outrage. It

goes beyond words. We, as Lutherans, tried to say that some years ago, when we called it [apartheid] *statis confessionis*. We cannot deal with this in a rational ... uh ... simply a rational way. It needs to get to the passion of the church. It touches passion and goes beyond that. And I certainly support the substitute resolution [calling for divestment by September 1, 1999].

We regret the error.



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