

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY

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Democracy

November 1990

Gain 1, Lose 3: The Meaning Behind Membership Decline

By Alan Wisdom

The 1990 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* is just out, with the latest complete figures on church membership. For oldline Protestants, the numbers tell a distressingly familiar story.

Membership in the United Methodist Church fell by 69,430 from 1987 to 1988. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was down 38,173, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America down 36,696, the United Church of Christ down 17,787, the Disciples of Christ down 13,549, and the Episcopal Church down 6,878. In total, these six families of faith lost some 180,000 members -- equal to closing down a 500-member church every day of the year.

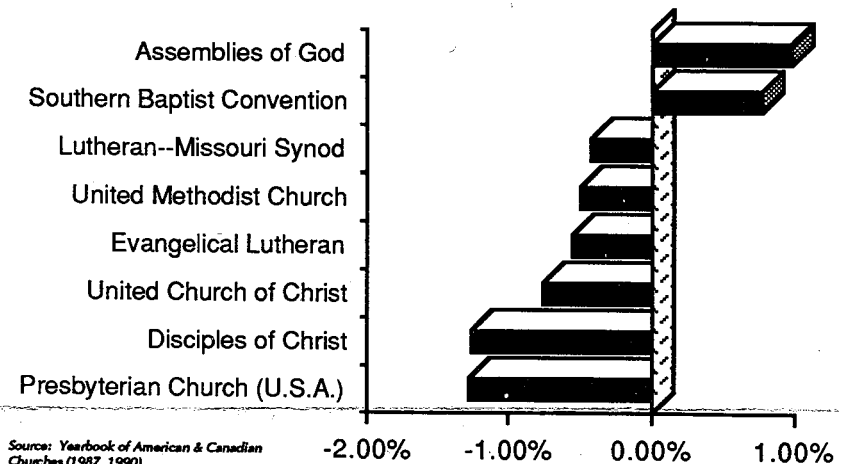
Disturbing trends extend far beyond the oldline. Several of the more conservative Protestant churches have seen a stagnation of their formerly robust growth. The Southern Baptist Convention added only 40,227 to its rolls of 15 million. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod actually lost 10,157 members.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to gain

baptized members -- up 2.66 percent from 1987 to 1988 -- largely because of the infusion of Hispanic immigrants. Nevertheless, the church faces a long-term decline in religious practice among those whom it counts as Catholic. In 1958, 74 percent of U.S. Catholics attended mass weekly; in 1988, only 48 percent did so.

There are some who would say that these statistics do not matter. A healthy church, they would affirm, is

**Percentage Change in Church Membership
by annual average -- 1985-88**



Source: *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* (1987, 1990)

one which obeys God's call -- regardless of whether doing so leaves it larger or smaller. Sometimes a church may be reduced to a "faithful remnant" when it takes an unpopular, prophetic stand against sin.

There is some truth in this line of thinking. If our churches were indeed a faithful remnant, then we should have to accept their statistical slide as nothing other than the unjust reward which God's prophets so often receive. But this explanation cannot be applied where the marks of true prophecy -- zeal for the Lord's word, for instance -- are so often lacking.

And even if our churches were suffering for righteousness' sake, we would not be excused from grieving over the empty pews. For these bespeak the

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IRD's Annual Survey of Action in American Churches

Some general trends during the last year, plus specifics on foreign policy matters, are outlined for oldline Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, and Evangelical churches -- page 4



Why Is Fidel Castro Worried about the Cuban Church?

By Alan Wisdom

Jaime Ortega caught sight of a billboard along a street in Havana, Cuba. "Your Contribution to the Fourth Congress [of the Cuban Communist Party]: Your Opinion," the billboard read. So Ortega decided to take up the invitation. In July he wrote a letter expressing what he most wanted from his nation's communist authorities: a genuine guarantee of religious liberty.

What made Ortega's "contribution" to the communist congress so striking was his place in Cuban society. Jaime Ortega is, in fact, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Havana. His pastoral letter concerning religious liberty appeared in a church bulletin distributed at all Catholic parishes. Such a bold public petition for freedom is indeed rare in Cuba -- and that it was a church leader who voiced it is rarer still.

Cuban church leaders like the archbishop learned long ago to be discreet about their opinions. In the 1960s, when the Catholic Church opposed Fidel Castro's consolidation of a communist dictatorship, the church was brutally repressed. Ortega himself, then a young priest, was interned for one year in a labor camp.

The archbishop was probably encouraged to make his request by signs in recent years that Castro is easing his harsh anti-religious policies. In a 1986 book, *Fidel and Religion*, the Cuban dictator proclaimed the compatibility of Christianity and communism. "We're now at a stage of coexistence and mutual respect between the [Communist] Party and the churches," Castro said.

In 1988 Castro's government gave permission for some 80 foreign Catholic priests and other religious workers to come to work in Cuba. Earlier this year the government let in a team of U.S. Southern Baptist evangelists, who held revivals in 38 churches throughout the island. At a meeting on April 2 with Protestant church leaders, Castro pledged to end discrimination against Christians in employment and

education. He suggested that Christians might even be allowed to join the Communist Party -- the key to most social advancement in Cuba.

But Archbishop Ortega was not impressed with this last offer. He noted in his letter that many Cuban Christians could not in good conscience join the Communist Party -- especially as long as it continued to promote atheism. What was needed was a more far-reaching "normalization of the situation of Catholics in society," according to the archbishop. "A



Cuban police stand outside the gate of the Spanish Embassy last July after 18 Cubans took refuge inside hoping to leave the country. Many have also taken refuge in the church, which is, perhaps, the only independent institution that can offer hope for young people in Cuba. Reuter Photo.

law on religious liberty which would put in practice all that is enunciated in the Constitution of the Republic in this respect would be much more effective for the totality of believers than the entry of some believers into the party," he wrote.

Other recent statements from the Cuban Catholic Church have pointed cautiously to three areas in which believers have been denied their rights: (1) Education, which is totally under state control and aims to impart atheism to all students. (2) The mass media, likewise under state control, which do not give churches any access to communicate their messages. (3) Employment, where entry and advancement in prestigious careers are often granted on the basis of "integration into the revolution." Practicing Christians, usually considered less than fully "integrated," find that their job prospects suffer.

A new movement of lay Catholics has gone a step further in its dissent. In an open letter on July 10, the Christian Liberation Movement (Liberacion) called for a "democratic opening" in Cuba. The movement's spokesman, 38-year-old engineer Oswaldo Paya, declared: "Totalitarian socialism has created a vast

emptiness in the country's social and political atmosphere. We are suffocating."

Liberacion asked Cuban authorities immediately to free all political prisoners and to respect the freedoms of conscience, expression, and association. It also urged a transition to democracy, beginning with an open dialogue involving all sectors of the Cuban people. The movement, founded last year by three Catholic laymen, is not officially affiliated with the church; however, Archbishop Ortega met with the three co-founders in March and expressed his solidarity with them.

Fidel Castro has not taken kindly to this burst of dissent among formerly quiescent churchpeople. His security police briefly detained the three Liberacion co-founders after their March meeting with the archbishop. Oswaldo Paya has been interrogated several times in recent weeks and warned that he risked jail for his activities.

In a blow to the hopes of all Cuban Catholics, the government called off plans for a visit by Pope John Paul II which was to occur this December. As if to justify the cancellation, Castro gave a speech in which he accused the Cuban Catholic bishops of being manipulated by the United States and "waiting to act against the revolution." Here, as many times before, Cuban dictator circumscribed the religious freedom he would permit by warning that he would never tolerate any faith which served "counter-revolutionary" purposes.

It seems odd at first glance that Castro would fear the churches. They were not strong before the 1959 revolution, and most have sadly shrunk since then. Of the ten million Cubans, only 100,000 to 200,000 are practicing Catholics. Protestant churches have an estimated 60,000 active members.

But most indicators of religious activity -- baptisms, attendance at worship, candidates for the clergy -- have shown an increase over the last five years. Perhaps it is this slow spiritual awakening, and its political implications, which Fidel Castro fears. He must tremble when he looks at what happened when religiously-inspired movements of democratic liberation took hold in Eastern Europe.

Taking Action: To express your concern about religious liberty in Cuba, you may write to: Presidente Fidel Castro, Republica de Cuba, Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular, Habana, Cuba. You may obtain a fuller report on religious liberty in Cuba for \$5 from: The Puebla Institute; 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 300; Washington, DC 20005.

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millions of Americans who are alienated from all visible expressions of the Church. It was just such "lost sheep" for whom Jesus gave his life.

Oldline Protestant leaders no longer attempt to deny the seriousness of their churches' 25-year decline. Affiliates of several denominations are now involved in major studies examining why the decline has occurred and what can be done about it.

Some of the most significant and influential insights came in a 1987 book, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*, by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney. Roof, a sociologist, and McKinney, a seminary professor, show with convincing data that the shrinking of the oldline churches is

Recovering the gospel seems a better bet for reversing membership decline than does recovering liberalism

not principally due to present members walking out. All churches lose a certain proportion of their members, particularly young adults, who switch to other denominations or drop out altogether. The oldline churches are about average in their ability to retain their members.

The oldline's problem, in this analysis, appears rather to be that it has not expanded its base. Oldline churchpeople have lower than average birthrates, and they are not attracting as many people of other or no faith background as they lose. There is only one unchurched person who joins an oldline congregation for every three former members who have now dropped all church ties. Indeed, Roof and McKinney argue that the main "competition" for liberal Protestantism comes from the "secularists it has spawned."

One might now expect the two authors to recommend a new stress on evangelism -- making Christ known to the non-believers. Instead they offer a
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Update on Action in American Churches

As the crisis of dwindling and alienated church membership continues, many oldline churches persist in their social and political agendas. The following summaries offer a glimpse of the past year's public activities in the oldline, evangelical and catholic worlds.

Methodists Measure Distance Between Pulpit and Pew

In mid-June the United Methodist General Council on Ministries (GCOM) confirmed the beliefs of many observers by releasing a survey showing that UM clergy and General Conference delegates are far more liberal than the grass-roots membership.

While the survey dealt solely with internal church issues such as revision of the hymnal, homosexuality, and membership goals, it is indicative of the ideological gap that exists between the pulpit and the pew, between the General Conference and the local church. This includes foreign policy issues.

Immediately after the U.S. sent troops to Panama, Thom White Wolf Fassett, head of the UM social action agency, said the action could not be "understood as a valid act of a civilized nation." The response of UM lay people was nothing short of outrage and resentment, ranging from angry letters to calls for censure.

This kind of occurrence has caused many to wonder who speaks for the United Methodist Church, the tithers in the pew or the hired church bureaucrats. It also questions the legitimacy of some of the countless resolutions passed by the UMC.

This year's regional Annual

Conferences produced resolutions calling for varying degrees of U.S. aid withdrawal from El Salvador, maintenance of sanctions against South Africa, support and prayers for recently liberated East European countries, and peaceful solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Many Conferences were on record as supporting various peace initiatives and calling for deep cuts in military spending. The environment drew the most attention. Delegates passed 33 resolutions dealing with the environment, most of which called for the use of recycled paper and a ban on styrofoam products.

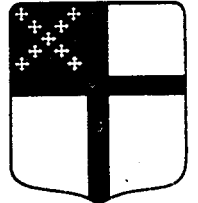
Ecotheology seems to have replaced arms control as the modern-day "social gospel." This trend was made clear when the General Board of Church and Society announced its new restructuring plan. The Peace with Justice Office, whose past activities included "peace convoys" to Nicaragua, was absorbed into the new "Ministry of God's Creation" unit, partly because of a lack of funds and no doubt because of this new emphasis on the environment.

Figuring out the Presiding Bishop

Unlike many other churches, the impetus for public policy involvement in the Episcopal Church, especially between triennial conventions, falls squarely on the shoulders of one man -- Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning.

In typical Episcopal fashion,

Browning has been congenial in his approach. But occasionally it is difficult to determine where he stands, thus making it challenging to map out the "Episcopal" position on a given issue.



Take the Iraq crisis, for example. At the September House of Bishops meeting in Washington, D.C., Browning said that he was "deeply concerned" that we "jumped the gun" on sending troops to the Gulf. At the same time, he acknowledged that it is "hard to criticize at this juncture what has been done."

During a press conference in mid-October, Browning made a point to support the actions of "the United Nations including its economic sanctions against Iraq," and called on "the United States government to honor the U.N. process." Many analysts argue that there would not have been decisive U.N. action had it not been prompted by the United States. Rather oddly, Browning concluded his short statement by asking: "Is it possible that the American 'way of life' - unbridled consumption - has become for millions a 'way of death,' of unendurable poverty?"

Environmentalism has found an open ear and willing advocate in Browning. His public policy speech to the House of Bishops concluded with a lengthy portion explaining why "the earth is our mother," a thought repeated no less than five times.

Browning reminded his fellow bishops: "Our pious platitudes, our fuzzy pronouncements and resolutions, our emotional but vacuous pronouncements, our righteous sentiments stand under judgment." There is something on which all Episcopalians can agree.

Lutherans Struggle for Funds, Identity

Oldline Lutherans continue to suffer through the adjustments necessitated by the 1987 merger that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The young denomination has been forced into staff cuts due to major shortfalls in giving, and is divided over a proposal to centralize church authority in the direction of Anglicanism and Catholicism.



The ELCA also has opened church-wide deliberation over how it makes a social policy witness. But the need to work out and agree on such a direction for such a witness has not slowed the Commission on Church and Society. The Commission, in cooperation with other ELCA divisions and commissions -- but obviously without any church-wide consensus -- has developed a "comprehensive picture" of public policy and private sector advocacy work for the years 1990-92. Emphasis is placed on justice, care of creation, and peace and world order.

Internal conflict over politics came to a head at the ELCA's first biennial Churchwide Assembly in 1989. Delegates voted to divest pension funds from companies doing business in South Africa. The

Board of Pensions opposed the move, though months later it finally agreed to expand the number of so-called "social purpose funds," while retaining other elective, non-discriminatory funds.

With the exception of the Middle East, Central America and Namibia, the ELCA has been "conspicuously quiet" on foreign policy matters in this dramatic year of democratic change, according to David Carlson of Lutherans for Religious and Political Freedom. Bishop Herbert Chilstrom has lobbied strongly to restrict U.S. military aid to El Salvador, and the church has publicized threats against leftist Lutheran Salvadoran Bishop Medardo Gomez.

Some ELCA members evidently believe that the church's struggles are more than a youthful identity crisis. The 900 Lutherans (twice the expected number) attending the independently sponsored "Call to Faithfulness" conference in June raised serious questions about the church's condition. The ELCA was accused of being tossed about by "ideological winds," and of seeing dialogue with other faiths and doing good social works as a substitute for evangelism.

Presbyterians Finesse Differences at General Assembly

After the 1990 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Religious News Service summarized the conventional wisdom on where the church is headed, saying that "extremes on the liberal and conservative sides are moving toward a broad theological center."

Many Presbyterians might welcome the prospect of a more moderate church. And they could indeed see evidence pointing in

that direction. Controversies were few and mild at the assembly in Salt Lake City. A new Brief Statement of Faith -- carefully worded in an attempt to straddle theological differences -- took a smooth step forward toward adoption.

But Presbyterians might also wonder what sort of moderation their church was embracing. The Brief Statement of Faith ignored many contentious theological points, or glided past them with a vague, poetic phrase:



The most discussed action of the assembly also looked more like an attempt to bury differences than to bridge them. The Presbyterian commissioners encountered a crossfire of accusations of misbehavior by "Chapter 9" groups -- special organizations within the church that advocate a particular point of view or advance a particular mission program. These groups, often identified as extremist, previously had been granted a formal relationship with the assembly. They submitted annual reports for its review, and in return they were allowed a role in its proceedings.

But the 1990 assembly moved to end that relationship by deleting the rules governing it. The commissioners apparently decided that it was not worth the trouble to carry on an official dialogue with such nettlesome groups. Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom (PDRF), which recently joined with the IRD, has been one such "Chapter 9" group.

Moderation was not found in foreign policy pronouncements at Salt Lake City. PDRF focused its attention on a resolution which
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urged the United States to normalize relations with Fidel Castro's Cuba. In testimony before an assembly committee, PDRF argued that any such statement on Cuba ought to take a strong stand for the human rights of the oppressed Cuban people. The resolution was subsequently amended to include a brief, general reference to human rights violations under Castro.

But a call for free elections in Cuba was rejected by a 70-percent vote. Opponents alleged that such a call would have "interfered" with the church's pursuit of reconciliation with the Cuban communist government. In other actions, however, the assembly showed no such hesitation to interfere -- at least not when the offended party was a right-of-center government. Sanctions against South Africa and a boycott of Salvadoran coffee were both endorsed.

Catholics Emphasize Internal Issues

Though the U.S. Catholic Bishops have been preoccupied with internal matters, some international matters were unavoidable.

The murder in El Salvador of six Jesuit priests and two women last November elicited a strong and immediate response from the U.S. Catholic Conference. It previously had not condemned U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government, but had insisted that aid be conditioned on improvement in El Salvador's human rights record and the government's willingness to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the conflict. After the November murders, Robert Hennemeyer, Director of the Office for International Justice and Peace, told a

congressional committee that these conditions were not being met, and that the extent and nature of aid should be reconsidered. Three bishops representing the National Conference of Catholic Bishops met with White House officials, making a similar plea.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the U.S. response of deploying troops to the Persian Gulf presented another challenge. Pax Christi condemned the U.S. response as a violation of the just-war theory. Hennemeyer disagreed, and the USCC strongly condemned Saddam Hussein's actions and initially supported the U.S. response. Others, such as Denver Archbishop J. Francis Stafford, issued cautions. Stafford called for self-examination over whether long-term U.S. actions are based on "a policy of maintaining a standard of living for North Americans and Europeans"

With an election year in full swing, the U.S. Bishops found themselves at odds with many active Catholics who as politicians advocated pro-choice legislation. Excommunications and requests for resignation from lay ministries resulted because some Catholics were held to contradict church teaching.

The issue of fidelity to church teaching had broader implications. The Vatican offered guidelines on the role of the theologian in the church, guidelines aimed at curbing public dissent. The result was another round of public debate over academic freedom in Catholic institutions in particular and the Church in general.

Internal matters and issues of



personal morality fill the agenda for this November's semi-annual Bishops' meeting. By discussing the guidelines for funerals without clergy, they are addressing the needs caused by the shortage of clergy; by discussing catechetics, they must consider the need to evangelize; and, by discussing sexuality and substance abuse, they may examine how these affect clergy in modern society. Although the bishops primarily seem to be addressing symptoms, these discussions may reach to the larger problems facing American Catholics today.

Evangelicals Focus Limited Voice

In terms of public action, issues of social morality have dominated the agenda of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Examples range from lobbying for congressional restrictions on funding for the National Endowment for the Arts to "securing religious rights" in child care legislation -- all through NAE's Office of Public Affairs.



The diversity within NAE, which encompasses pacifist and non-pacifist, pentecostal and non-pentecostal, Arminian and Reformed, limits the possibility of the consensus, which the association feels it needs for political action. Broad agreement is reached only on questions that are understood to have a clear biblical mandate. Unlike many oldline churches, none of the 48 NAE member denominations has an office in Washington, D.C. This reflects a belief in the primacy of

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confused prescription, in which many oldline leaders have taken a false comfort. Roof and McKinney contend that "liberal Protestantism" (Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists) does not need to reach out to broader constituencies so much as it needs to recover its "liberal" heritage. They define liberalism as a "socially responsible individualism," which they associate with biblical higher criticism, the Social Gospel, and the New Deal.

"Liberal Protestantism's future, we believe, lies not in a move toward the theological and ideological right, but in its becoming more self-consciously 'liberal,'" the authors assert. They suggest, too, that a message of theological and ideological liberalism would prove more appealing to the unchurched, since these are already the most liberal group in U.S. society. (What a shame that this new missionary strategy of echoing the intended audience's opinions was unavailable to the apostle Paul!)

Is liberal ideology, though, really the key component in the religious heritage of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists? We would hope not -- just as we would hope that conservative ideology is not the defining characteristic of Southern Baptists. If there is one thing that sets any church apart, it ought to be the good news of Jesus Christ.

There are other institutions which can be made to serve liberalism or conservatism -- or whatever social program is desired. But only the Church has been entrusted with the message of Christ. And if we know and live and speak that message, then we have something to offer our unchurched neighbors which they will find nowhere else. Recovering the gospel seems a better bet for reversing membership decline than does recovering liberalism.

If the gospel is to become central, it will indeed take some recovering. Many oldline members lack a full understanding of, and a full confidence in, the biblical message. Roof and McKinney cite a survey in which 34 percent of "liberal Protestants" agreed that "extra-marital sex" (adultery) is not always wrong. With so many having difficulty in accepting one of the least ambiguous points of the law, can it be any wonder that the scandal of the gospel is often not embraced? Christ's awful death, the penalty of sin, is sure to be a stumbling block to those who have not first recognized the enormity of sin.

How, then, does this relate to the public policy debates in which the IRD participates? The connection may be expressed thus: If our churches

are to focus on the gospel, they must take care to distinguish it from other messages. There are a lot of other messages which churches project. Among the oldline churches, the messages have been especially political. These messages may or may not have value, but they cannot be equated with the gospel.

In the name of justice and peace, the oldline churches have committed themselves to a precise political agenda on scores of disputed issues: Nicaragua, South Africa, Korea, immigration, housing, acid rain, farm subsidies, and so forth. Missionaries have been sent and monies allocated to advance that narrow agenda. Frequently the agenda has been

***It is only the Spirit
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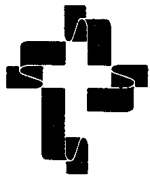
pressed on church members in tones of passion and authority that might better have been reserved for the preaching of the gospel.

What is the effect of these political crusades on the oldline membership figures? It must surely be negative. Most immediately, some members who cannot stomach the politics will leave their churches. Yet most dissenters -- IRD members included -- will stay. The most significant, long-term effect of elevating a political agenda above its proper place lies in the diversion from true evangelism. Faith and commitment that should have been invested in Christ's gospel, which can reach and reclaim the religious outsiders, have instead been misspent on political programs which cannot save anyone.

The oldline Protestant churches now stand at an important juncture. Most of them have officially declared evangelism to be a priority among their ministries. The Episcopal Church is calling the 1990s "the Decade of Evangelism." The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is budgeting \$15 million over five years for an upgraded evangelism program.

But there remains some question of what these denominations mean by evangelism. What sort of gospel will they seek to spread? Will it be the gospel of Christ alone, or will that gospel be mixed with other

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the spiritual task of these churches, as well as confidence that NAE can adequately represent their views to government when necessary.

On international affairs questions, NAE gives leadership to its constituency through its Peace, Freedom and Security Studies (PFSS) Program. While rarely making political statements, PFSS instead works to help evangelicals think more clearly on foreign and defense policy questions. This past year, PFSS helped sponsor a consultation on ministry in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and a college conference series on international affairs. PFSS is generating resources for church leaders, including a Sunday School curriculum and a correspondence course.

PFSS also is helping to develop a Commission on Religious Liberty for World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), the international association of evangelicals with members in over 60 countries (a Romanian Association of Evangelicals is a new WEF member). The Commission will help identify religious freedom problems and provide information on evangelicals for the international community.

Steve Beard, Fr. Stan DeBoe, Fred Jones, Brian O'Connell and Alan Wisdom contributed to this report.

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gospels? Unfortunately, it is not clear that oldline agencies have put aside their political enthusiasms. Looking the world today, they must see the failure of so many of their past "prophecies." Nevertheless, they could simply move on to some new form of political prophecy. Unless the oldline churches change the ways in which they handle political issues, they could well continue along the same sad downward path.

Let us clarify our intent: the IRD has never proposed that any church abandon its concern for social justice and peace. In fact, the IRD has suggested that our churches could show a deeper concern by conducting political discussions in a more responsible, balanced manner. But above all, we must learn to distinguish our political judgments, which we make tentatively, from the eternal gospel of Christ, which we receive by faith.

Of course, a change in the current approach to politics would be but one part of the broad and deep renewal that is needed in the oldline churches. Most important is a movement of God's Spirit that touches all aspects of our faith and practice. It is only the Spirit which gives life and growth to the Church.

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