
FAITH & FREEDOM

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Fall 1996

Vol. 16, No. 3



**The Institute on Religion and Democracy
Celebrates Its 15th Anniversary**

pages 8-11

**NCC Turns Alleged Arson Epidemic
to Political and Financial Advantage**

pages 4-5

Feminists Still 'Re-Imagining God'

pages 6-7

'Let's Be Civil Now'

IRD Diary by Alan Wisdom

page 16

✂ ✂ ✂

(plus From the President, Church News, International Briefs and more)

FAITH & FREEDOM

published quarterly by
**the Institute on Religion
and Democracy**

1521 16th St., N.W., #300
Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 202-986-1440
Fax: 202-986-3159

E-mail: 102676.56@compuserve.com

The IRD is a non-profit organization committed to reforming the Church's social and political witness and to building and strengthening democracy and religious liberty, at home and abroad. IRD committees work for reform in the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The IRD also sponsors the Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society.

*Contributions to the work of the IRD are critically needed. The IRD is a not-for-profit organization and your gifts to the IRD are tax deductible.
Thank you for your support.*

Diane L. Knippers
President and Editor

Alan F. H. Wisdom
Vice President

Mark D. Tooley
Research Associate

IRD Staff: Jennifer Caterini, Faith J. H. McDonnell, David Sheaffer, Craig Smith, Kendrick Mernitz Smith

Newsletter Design: James S. Robb

IRD Consultants: Patrick Gray, John Stumbo

In this issue

The linoleum cut print reproduced on page 8, "St. Francis" by Edward Knippers, is inspired by frescoes depicting Pope Innocent III's dream of St. Francis holding up a church. Knippers did the print on the occasion of his wife's installation as IRD President in 1993. It is a tribute to the IRD's work to defend and uphold the Church, as have reformers in earlier periods.

It is not possible to acknowledge the photographers whose photos appear on pp. 8-11 and on the cover. Thanks to all.

Other photos are by David Schaeffer (pp. 2 & 15), Parker Williamson (p. 4), Mark Tooley (pp. 5 & 13), Christine Reyes (p. 7), David Crosby (p. 12) and Dennis Balcombe (p. 14).

► [I] have always admired the great work you are doing—trying to save the Christian Church...and making some progress, too.

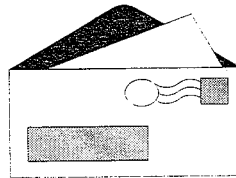
Anyone who can write, "...my most faithful service to the church may be time spent weeping on my knees," is bound to be inspired. We are impressed.

*Joanne and Mac Cook
Vienna, VA*

► I appreciate so much receiving your publication. It is so well written and contains such enlightening articles.

I especially identified with the

LETTERS



piece in the Summer issue by David and Jean Stanley [on the United Methodist Church]. The name "United Church of Christ" could have been substituted throughout, and it would reflect the views of many of us "Biblical Witness Fellowship" within the UCC.

The Stanleys are so right about encouraging those of us who are disheartened with the direction of our mainline denomination to stay on the inside and continue the battle. As the Stanleys said, we know who will win in the end.

*Genevieve Anderson
Janesville, Wisconsin*

► We support the petition ... to close the Washington Office [of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)], and apply the funds thus saved to other more important and effective mission activities of the Presbyterian Church.

We have come to this conclusion after years of observing this office engage in partisan political activities that do not honor the Lord Jesus Christ, His Church at large or the membership of the Presbyterian Church.

*James E. and Elizabeth L. Vincent
Republic of Korea*

► I was thrilled to receive information on UMAction. I have been so burdened about the UM Church and not sure what I could do or should do to help.

Like many, my husband and I struggled with the question of leaving the UM Church. We have mournfully watched strong Christian friends leave our home church, but understood.

We have always felt the majority of United Methodists are Bible based, Christ centered Christians and that is our main reason we haven't left. My burden is to have our church always scripturally based.

I was affirmed in my belief when I read Acts 18:9-10.

We are the majority. Thank you for what you are doing!

*Luann LeBaron
Laingsburg, MI*



FROM THE
PRESIDENT

The Church in America

In Dissolution or Convergence?

Is the church breaking up in America, or is it coming together?

Undeniably, the forces for dissolution are powerful. Breaking up comes naturally to individualistic U.S. Christians. American Protestantism has a long history of churches splitting and resplitting—for good reason or no reason.

It's all too rarely that Christians offer a counter-cultural witness to sacrificial commitment and community.

I'm grieved by the increasing talk of schism which I'm hearing among moderates and conservatives in mainline church circles these days. In a couple of denominations, serious plans are being soberly drawn up to effect a split.

I know that the reasons are often weighty. I've wept with friends who are leaving the denomination in which they came to faith.

They wouldn't take such a painful step unless confronted with something outrageous and intolerable—whether it be the sight of church leaders offering worship to pagan goddesses, or the sinking realization that the cross of Christ has no place in their children's Sunday school curriculum.

But still I hate the divisions. I think they are not what our society needs. They are not what the Church needs. Most of all, I'm convinced our divisions wound our Lord by tearing apart His Body.

I don't know the future for our various denominations. But I know that dissolution is not the only process ongoing in the church.

There is a counter-movement which gives me great hope. I've heard it called "convergence." It's the new ecumenism, a new way to express the unity to which Christ calls us.

Let me point out several evidences:

- ◆ **Within denominations.** Increasingly, renewal and reform groups are working together in the various denominations. Reform group leaders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have met twice a year for some five years now. Episcopalians have formed a new umbrella group—the American Anglican Council. Orthodox, Bible-believing church members are putting aside their differences to make a common witness within their own denominations.

IRD staff members are prominently involved in these efforts.

- ◆ **Between denominations.** This fall, reform leaders from various mainline Protestant groups formed the Association for Church Renewal (ACR).



Diane Knippers

"Given the devastating moral crisis in our society, and the abandonment by many official church leaders of a public witness to biblical faith and practice, we have a new urgency for working together and speaking out together," said James V. Heidinger, II, the chairman of the new association.

The association will address common concerns, including defending orthodox faith, promulgating holy living, countering threats of neo-pagan syncretism and moral relativism, and supporting world mission and evangelism.

The ACR will also "seek to envision and model a genuine ecumenism for the church in the 21st century."

Again, the IRD is playing a key role in this new organization, for which I have been named vice-chair for program and research.

- ◆ **Between the historic branches of Christendom.** IRD board members Richard John Neuhaus, George Weigel, and Kent R. Hill have given leadership to the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" statement. Another IRD board member, Thomas Oden, participates along with Kent Hill in Protestant-Orthodox conversations.

All these instances of "convergence," with major IRD involvement, are ironic. We at the IRD are sometimes accused of being "anti-ecumenical," because we criticize policies of the World and National Councils of Churches.

The charge has always been ridiculous. We fault the WCC and NCC not for being ecumenical, but because their ecumenism is so shallow. It's a kind of bureaucratic, political ecumenism that weakens and divides internally the denominations that it purports to unify externally.

We in the IRD are seeking a deeper convergence of Christian faith that can withstand the all-too-powerful forces of dissolution. We do this in obedience to God.

IRD

by Diane Knippers

NCC Turns Alleged Arson Epidemic To Political And Financial Advantage

The National Council of Churches (NCC) captured the nation's attention and tapped its generosity by spotlighting the spectacle of black churches burning in the night. In possibly its greatest publicity and fundraising coup of the decade, the NCC succeeded in spreading the image of an epidemic of racially-motivated attacks against black churches across the South.

Most of the major media and even the President accepted the notion planted by the NCC, that these arsons were the work of a surging white supremacist movement drawing strength from the conservative mood of the country. And Americans poured over \$8 million into the council's coffers, for the purpose of rebuilding the burned churches as a gesture of racial reconciliation.

But as some media and the IRD looked more closely at the NCC-contrived story, it began to fall apart. Questions arose: Exactly how many black churches were burning, and what were the reasons? Was there really a documented increase in these arsons? Was the NCC fair to portray conservatives as violent racists fomenting the desecration of houses of worship? And why was the NCC using over \$1 million from its Burned Churches Fund to underwrite radical leftist political seminars on how the United States is an oppressive society in need of revolutionary change?

The facts – as established by the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the Associated Press, and the U.S. Justice Department – show the situation to be much murkier than the NCC has portrayed. There are no comprehensive data to show that black churches are more vulnerable to arson than non-black churches. Nor has it been shown conclusively that black churches are burning more frequently in 1995-96 than in earlier years. Studies indicate that about one-third of the black church arsons are connected to racist motivations. On the other hand, about one-third of persons arrested for burning black churches have themselves been black.

Still, unquestionably some black churches have been

targeted by racial animosity. Rebuilding those destroyed places of worship and condemning the hateful intentions of their arsonists is an obligation for America's religious community. But the NCC has gone further, exploiting church arsons to revive its politicized "racial justice" program.

The NCC's radical "racial justice" agenda was on full display at an October 24-26 "emergency" anti-racism conference underwritten by the Burned Churches Fund. Speakers at the Columbia, SC, event recklessly stuck the label "racist" on any and all institutions of mainstream America. Capitalism, the media, President Clinton, the U.S. Justice Department, stiff sentences for criminals, and welfare reform were all branded as "racist." Christian conservatives were called "fascist."

Several speakers suggested that narcotics be legalized, and that the federal government pay reparations to aggrieved minority groups.

The "Rise-Up" conference was part of an anticipated series of nationwide anti-racism events sponsored by the NCC Burned Churches Fund. The fund receives support not only from NCC member denominations, but also the U.S. Catholic Conference, several Jewish groups, and major foundations such as Ford, Rockefeller and MacArthur. The NCC will spend at least \$1.1 million of money raised for destroyed black churches on such events to expose the "root causes" of racism.

There was little talk of racial reconciliation at the "Rise-Up" conference. Nor was there marked appreciation for the many Americans from across the political and religious spectrum who have condemned church arsons and contributed to church reconstruction. Instead, most speakers vented rage against political opponents to their right.

"White supremacy is allowed to live unquestioned and unchallenged in America," declared NCC senior racial justice officer Mac Charles Jones. He discerned racism in welfare reform legislation, questions about affirmative action, constraints on immigration, and "three-strikes-and-you're-out" crime legislation. Jones called for reparations to black Americans similar to federal payments to Japanese internees from World War II.

The Ku Klux Klan has taken off its sheets and become the Christian Coalition, according to the Rev. Calvin



Don Rojas, Burned Churches Fund administrator

IRD has a 7-page question and answer about church arsons and a 7-page special report about Don Rojas. If you would like copies, call IRD at 202/986-1440.

Butts of New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church. "We don't need their money," he said about the \$750,000 that the Christian Coalition had raised for burned black churches. Butts derided the Rev. Billy Graham as the "high priest" of America who has abetted racism by "eating meat at the king's table."

Ron Daniels of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights denounced Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas as a "brother who's about to break our whole civil rights movement." Daniels also advocated racial reparations, urging that "we break up this monopoly of power by the few." Communist Party USA activist Anne Braden of Louisville told the crowd that "African-Americans have been written off as expendable in America."

Dexter Ross of the Center for Democratic Renewal in Atlanta criticized the media for "backing away" from the NCC's church arson theory. "They're going to tell us it's a hoax," he lamented. He charged that the U.S. Department of Justice was "skewing the numbers and fabricating the results" to hide the racist "conspiracy" behind church arsons. The Center for Democratic Renewal and the Center for Constitutional Rights have served as the NCC's main partners in the politicization of burned churches.

"This nation is racist at its core generated by capitalism," declared the Rev. E. Randel Osburn of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He insisted that capitalism must be "defeated." Osburn accused the CIA of flooding the black community with drugs, and he called for a "redistribution of wealth."

Damon McGee of the Ad Hoc Coalition Against Racism in Chattanooga accused "Bill Clinton's FBI and ATF" of blaming blacks for church burnings. "We are revolutionaries," he affirmed. "A rifle deserves a hal- lowed place in the black home." Warning against police brutality, he predicted, "The pigs are coming to get you," as the crowd cheered. "We need to get into the streets."

Eric Sterling of the Washington-based Criminal Justice Foundation called for drug legalization, blaming anti-crack cocaine legislation on prejudice against blacks. "I accuse Attorney General Janet Reno and the Justice Department of racism and prosecutorial malpractice," he declared. Sheryl Epps of the Drug Policy Foundation, also of Washington, said, "Whites get better drugs at the

pharmacy than blacks do on the streets." She likened illegal drug use to her own taste for champagne.

Confronted with earlier signs of this extreme political manipulation by the NCC, IRD President Diane Knippers had called publicly for "immediate action to bring new leadership and direction to the Burned Churches Fund and the NCC racial justice program." In a September 19 letter to the NCC Executive Board, Knippers urged the replacement of both racial justice officer Mac Charles Jones and fund administrator Don Rojas. She also requested "a public guarantee from the Burned Churches Fund that all money collected will go directly towards the reconstruction of destroyed churches."

The IRD president charged that Jones had "embarrassed America's mainline churches by mishandling the story of church burnings." Jones had "distorted the facts, maligned fellow Christian sisters and brothers with false accusations, and exploited the situation for unworthy political and fundraising purposes," she said.

Knippers added that Rojas "has a disturbing history that makes him a very poor choice for this sensitive position" with the Burned Churches Fund. She cited his service in the 1980's as a propaganda officer for the deposed Marxist government of Grenada, for a Soviet-front group in Czechoslovakia, and for a Cuban-front group based in Havana. More recently, Rojas has edited the radical *Amsterdam News* in New York City and assisted the controversial Benjamin Chavis at the

NAACP. Prior to his employment with the Burned Churches Fund, Rojas had never worked for any religious organization.

But at this writing, Jones and Rojas remain defiantly in their posts at the NCC. At the South Carolina conference, they wrapped one another in a bear hug as the audience cheered. The message was clear: The radical, divisive political agenda that Jones and Rojas have championed is moving forward, fueled now by \$1.1 million dollars which were given for the cause of racial reconciliation.



Mac Charles Jones, NCC Senior Racial Justice Officer



Communist Party USA activist Anne Braden

IRD

by Mark Tooley

Three Years Later

Feminists Still 'Re-Imagining God'

In the fall of 1993, American Christians were shocked by the "Re-Imagining" Conference. The radical feminists at Re-Imagining denigrated Christ's atonement, offered worship to "Sophia" rather than the Triune God, experimented with New Age and Eastern religions as alternative paths to God, exalted lesbianism as a liberation from traditional marriage, and, in general, ventured into territory beyond the outer limits of orthodox Christian belief and practice. The Re-Imagining controversy put the spotlight on theological ideas which had been fermenting in seminaries, women's movements, denominational agencies, and some clergy circles for quite a while.

Since the 1993 conference, the worship of Sophia and similar Re-Imagining innovations have not only endured, but have quietly made deeper inroads into the main-line churches. This new feminist theology is often amorphous. It is sometimes blatantly heretical and sometimes so subtle that it is difficult to recognize. Traditional church women are often caught off guard when it appears.

Re-Imagining: The Churches' Most Serious Challenge

We in the IRD believe that this continuing Re-Imagining movement constitutes the most serious and organized challenge that the U.S. churches face within their own ranks today. If these influential radicals succeed in remaking our denominations in their preferred image, those denominations will cease to give the Christian witness that has defined their identity and mission. And without the foundation of that historic Christian witness, our society (and its women) will be spiritually impoverished.

For this reason, the Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society (ECWS) was established as a project of the IRD. Its purpose is to monitor the development of radical feminism within our church institutions, and to teach Christian women how to recognize it and respond to it.

As ECWS women have attended various events directed toward church women, we see radical feminist theology cropping up all over.

We have identified seven major themes that recur most often: (1) Rejection of transcendent monotheism and God the Father; (2) Rejection of Jesus Christ as divine Savior and Lord, and the drawing of false distinctions between the man Jesus and "the Christ"; (3) Embracing other faiths (syncretism); (4) Abandonment of the responsible use of our God-endowed reason; (5) Rejection of a natural created order; (6) Denial of the ingrained sinfulness of

humans, and a naive attraction to utopian political schemes; and (7) Pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification as ends in themselves. Below we illustrate two of these themes. Other themes will be considered in future articles.

Syncretism: Romance with Other Religions

As radical feminists throw off the restraints of exclusive commitment to a sovereign God, they feel free to cross the line from Christianity into other, incompatible religious practices. And having put aside the image of Jesus as the incarnation of God in human flesh, they have left a vacuum at the center of their religious life. They attempt to fill this vacuum by inventing or borrowing other symbols for God.

The new feminist goddesses include "Sophia," a personified distortion of the abstract quality of "Wisdom" that is praised in Proverbs, and Gaia, the Greek earth goddess. With Christian worship, elements are introduced from various Eastern, Native American, ancient pagan, and New Age religions. Even witchcraft is accepted under the guise of expanding women's worship experience. These experiments in syncretism are often done in a playful spirit. But for orthodox Christians who believe that evil is a spiritual reality, it is frightening to see women opening themselves up to spirits that have little to do with the one holy God.

- ◆ In the Fall 1994 issue of *Wellsprings*, a publication for United Methodist clergywomen, there was an enthusiastic account of a Wiccan (witchcraft) ritual to celebrate the 50th birthdays of two UM clergywomen. "In women's tradition [i.e., witchcraft], the fiftieth birthday is especially revered as being the year in which a woman becomes a 'crone,'" the article reported. "Fifty years of wisdom have been gathered through all of the richness of joy and sadness, gain and loss, planting and reaping, springtime and harvest. These two clergywomen represented such wisdom to the circle of seven [who witnessed their 'crowning']."
- ◆ The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's women's convention, held in Minneapolis in July 1996, placed a heavy emphasis on Native American religions. The conference opened with a keynote address from Wilma Mankiller, former chief of the Cherokees. Mankiller described herself as a follower of "ceremonial Cherokee" religion, which she claimed had made her spiritually strong. The Friday evening worship used a technique called "smudging," in which worshipers were cleansed by the release of a strong

odor. The biblical creation story in Genesis was equated with Sioux stories about how "Skywoman" made the Earth.

◆ The United Church of Christ women's gathering, held in Boston in June 1996, gave major attention to "Sophia." She was blessed in song, as the UCC women asked her to "share the wisdom dwelling deep within." This conference also included a "Gaia Rising" workshop led by "Sea Raven," a leader in the UCC Central Atlantic Conference who described herself as a "baby crone." As reported by Liz Claver, an observer from the evangelical Biblical Witness Fellowship: "The session was overtly a Mother Earth pagan worship time complete with a guided meditation into a cave to meet with an old woman who would give us wisdom and knowledge about our white racial tribal roots.... [We] were introduced to the idea that we are one with the universe and all is sacred and divine. Scripture was read, making it seem that this was an OK expression of Christian worship."

Anti-Rationalism: Fulfilling the Old Stereotypes

Biblical faith has always demanded that we love God with our minds as well as our hearts and souls. While certainly some Christian traditions have neglected the aesthetic and mystical sides of faith, the radical feminist movement is determined to jettison the rational side. Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh asserts that logical thinking is "just a white male construct." Women's style, McIntosh claims, is "spiritual, relational, and inclusive," stressing "our connectedness with the world." Religious feminists have exchanged the discipline of propositional theology for the playing of intuitive, non-verbal, relational games. It is a great irony that the stereotype of women as irrational creatures driven by their emotions—which earlier feminists had fought to dispel—is now being reinforced by a new generation of feminists.

Church women's conferences increasingly feature workshops promoting esoteric routes to "discover the inner self" and "experience the power within." Entries on the list of

seminars at the June 1996 UCC women's meeting included: "Papercutting for Contemplation and Worship," "Pretty Things," and "Healing Touch: Integrating Body, Mind and Spirit through Therapeutic Massage." By contrast, one sees less and less systematic study of the Scriptures.

Frequently, the radical feminists seize upon legitimate practices of Christian mysticism focused on the transcendent God and turn them toward the exaltation of the feminine self. The latest craze in some circles is "walking the labyrinth." This ritual originated in medieval cathedrals, where pilgrims would end their penitential journeys by traversing on their knees a winding path that was inscribed on the floor. The labyrinth symbolized the course of life, which has many turns but ends at the altar of God.

But the modern builders of religious labyrinths appear to have a different idea. They have turned this ancient penitential symbol into a tool for New Age emotional healing of the self. One feminist touting the new

labyrinths sounds more pantheist than Christian: The labyrinth is "a web woven of all beings and forces.... In the labyrinth, earth and heaven, substance and spirit, past and future, body and soul, are lovers and creative partners." Lauren Artress, an Episcopal priest, plans to construct labyrinths all over the world to "aid the transition into the new millennium."

Undoubtedly, this world needs all the help it can get in preparing for a new

millennium. There is a grave moral crisis—manifested in broken families, racial hatreds, rampant crime and drug abuse—that undermines the foundations of democracy. Christian women (and men) require nothing less than the Gospel in all its fullness to prepare them to meet the crisis. And their churches owe them a Gospel that fortifies their minds with truth, as it also fills their hearts with love and their souls with righteousness. "Feel-good" exercises in papercutting and dreams of one's inner crone will not heal a wounded woman—much less give her power to change the world around her. She needs the knowledge of the one true God—the God who was revealed once and for all in our Lord Jesus Christ.

IRD

by Jennifer Caterini



Members of Capacitar, "a women's empowerment and healing group," travel the labyrinth together.

IRD CELEBRATES

15th Anniversary

“The democracy and freedom which we affirm is always imperiled.” So declared the IRD founding statement in 1981. And the statement still rings true in 1996. Large parts of humanity are still under communist, Islamist, and other dictatorships. Here in the U.S., the religious and cultural bases upon which democracy was built are being undermined. At the IRD 15th anniversary celebration in October, Judge Robert Bork spoke of court decisions that “make religion appear to be a dangerous force to be kept away from everything else.” In the photo from left to right: IRD board member Mary Ellen Bork, Judge Bork, and IRD President Diane Knippers.

IRD has had the privilege of being present at decisive moments of struggle between the democratic prospect and its enemies. Above, Father Gleb Yakunin speaks at an IRD-organized press briefing during the 1992 coup attempt against Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Yakunin, a longtime dissident Russian Orthodox priest, has received the IRD Religious Freedom Award.



Not Afraid to Speak the Truth



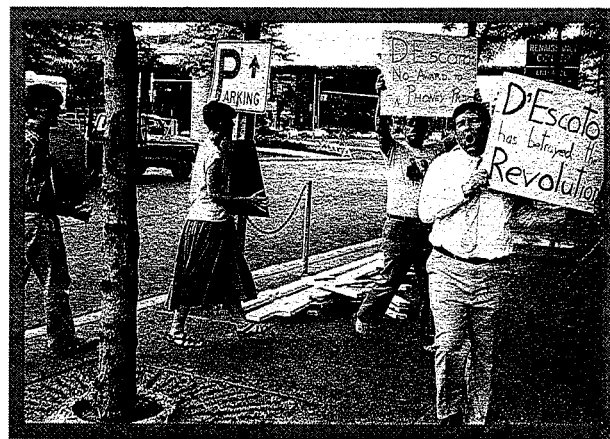
Rep. Chris Smith (above) at an IRD workshop at the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. Smith urged steps toward religious liberty in China. Below, IRD Chair Helen Rhea Stumbo stands for church reform at the 1984 United Methodist General Conference.



Many church leaders, in tragic imitation of the false prophets of old, repeat, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They are too often silent while



Christians are persecuted abroad, while democracy is under attack at home, while the very integrity of the Church is at stake. The IRD has spoken up for 15 years to break the silence. Above, fomer IRD President Kent Hill leads a May 1987 demonstration at the Capitol on behalf of persecuted Soviet believers.



IRD is not just another "think tank." We cultivate an activist mentality. Above, members of IRD's Episcopal committee protest a 1988 General Convention event at which an official of the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime, Miguel D'Escoto, was to be honored.

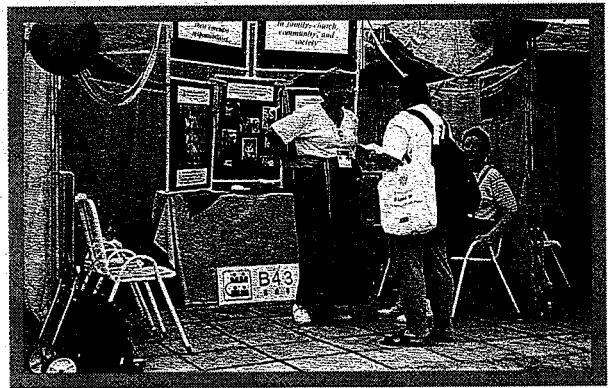
IRD Working For Freedom Worldwide



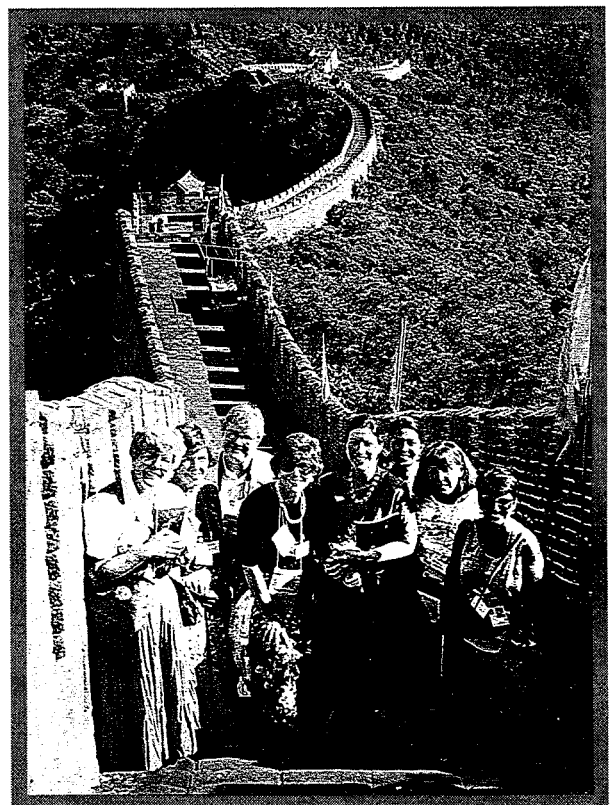
Catholic Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno (left) of Santiago, Chile, receives IRD Religious Freedom Award in 1989. Presenting the award were former IRD President Kent Hill (center) and Catholic Bishop Rene Gracida of Corpus Christi, TX, then an IRD board member.



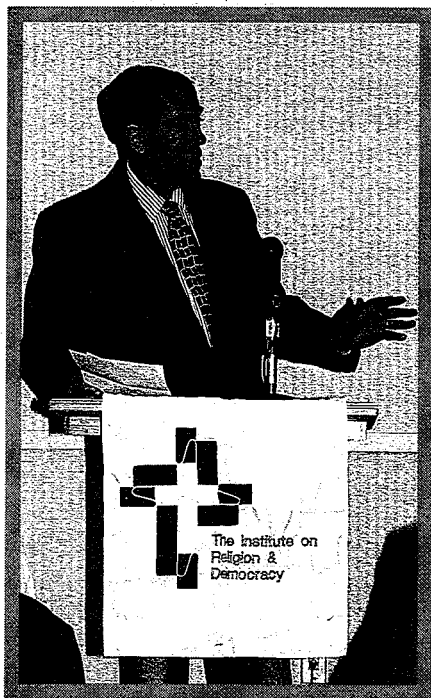
In 1983, the Religious Freedom Award went to former Cuban prisoner of conscience Armando Valladares. Above, Valladares (second from left) is seen with (left to right) IRD board member Penn Kemble, Kent Hill, and founding Chairman Edmund W. Robb, Jr.



A Delegation of the IRD-sponsored Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society went to the 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing. The eight women gave a forthright witness to the connection between Christian faith and freedom. Above, the IRD booth in Beijing proclaims, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Below, members of the delegation on the Great Wall of China.



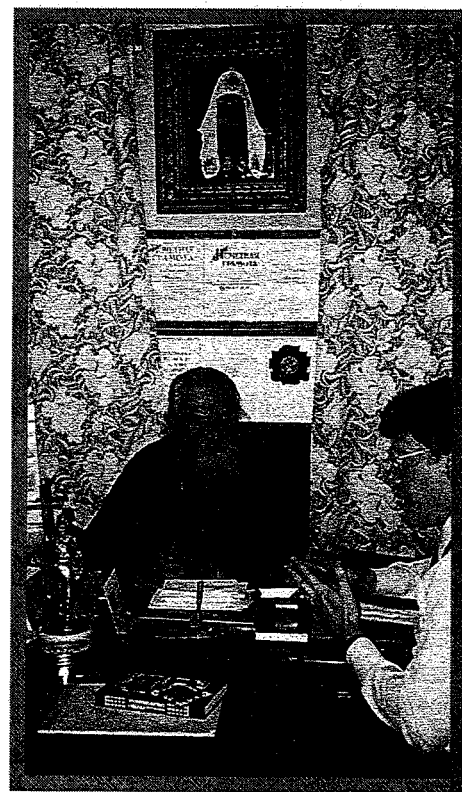
Challenging Our Churches To Reform



The IRD aims to give information and skills to church members committed to reclaiming their denominations for an orthodox Christian witness. Above, Diane Knippers (center, seated) works with a group of United Methodist women in the evangelical RENEW network to design alternative women's program materials.



IRD committees focus their work on the United Methodist, Presbyterian (U.S.A.), and Episcopal churches. Below, David Stanley, chairman of IRD's UM Action committee, unveils our new "Reform Agenda for United Methodists" at an IRD-sponsored luncheon at the 1996 UM General Conference in Denver.



The IRD demonstrates a new kind of Christian ecumenism. Above, Kent Hill meets with a Russian Orthodox archbishop in 1991. Left, two prominent voices of Christian conscience talk at the IRD 15th anniversary reception: Catholic thinker and IRD board member Richard John Neuhaus (left) and evangelical author Charles Colson.



Taking the Long View on Re-Imagining

A Review of Parker
Williamson's *Standing Firm*

Parker Williamson carries controversy with him wherever he goes in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At the moment he walks into a Presbyterian meeting, church officials start to sweat. Everyone in the room knows that they are on record and under scrutiny. Williamson will tell the 500,000 readers of his *Presbyterian Layman* newspaper what their denominational leaders are doing. And if those actions do not measure up to many Presbyterians' theological convictions or sense of fairness, the *Layman* editor will surely document the discrepancy. For this reason, Williamson is a controversial man. And he is not ashamed.

Surprisingly, Williamson's new book is not another journalistic rendering of the latest Presbyterian ruckus. Instead *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* is a meditation on church controversies long past. The main focus is the ferocious fight in the 4th century A.D. that yielded the Nicene Creed—the most ecumenical of Christian creeds, and the touchstone for the doctrine of the Trinity.

But this book is no detour from current debates. The struggles of 4th-century Trinitarians and the trials of today's defenders of Christian orthodoxy are closely connected, Williamson believes. For example, both are accused of being troublemakers who tear the Church apart. Williamson responds: "Historically, controversies that have swirled around the meaning and implications of the Gospel, far from damaging the Church, have contributed to its vitality. Like a refiner's fire, intense theological debate has resulted in clarified belief, common vision, and invigorated ministry."

Williamson demonstrates the value of controversy by pointing to Nicaea. He describes how Athanasius and the Trinitarians won the battle to uphold the

full deity of Christ. They focused on the central point of faith that had been challenged. They refused to be diverted by personal attacks and political maneuvers. They rejected shallow compromises. They insisted that the Church say an unequivocal "yes" to biblical orthodoxy, and an unequivocal "no" to heresy. They clung to the truth through decades of wrenching conflict—until the Nicene formulation of faith was firmly established.

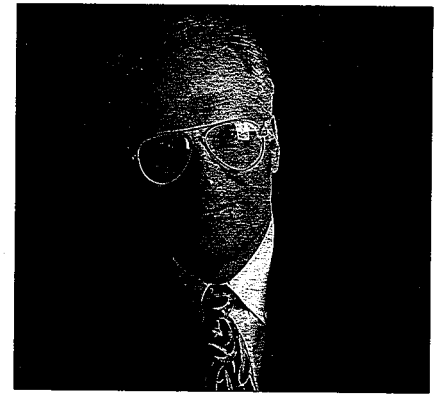
That Nicene faith held undisputed sway throughout Christendom for more than a millennium. Williamson credits it with shaping important features of Western civilization, such as the esteem for the arts and sciences and the priority given to the human person above all impersonal forces.

But, Williamson warns, the Nicene faith has been severely undermined in the modern era. And, as in the 4th century, the most dangerous sappers of the Church's orthodox foundations come from within the Church itself.

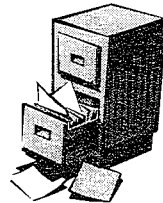
Williamson draws an extended

comfortable" to them. And anyone who doubts the "re-imagined" God is judged to be insensitive toward the heretics' sincere religious feelings.

More subtle than the heretics themselves, in Williamson's account, are those who protect them. These indulgent church leaders dismiss arguments over the nature of God and the person of Christ as "petty theological squabbles." Their main concern, they say, is the unity of the Church—meaning its smooth functioning as an institution. They prefer to cut short the debates about theology and shift the discussion to proper church



Parker Williamson



RESOURCES

comparison between the 4th-century Arian heretics and the current radical feminist movement to "re-imagine God." Both movements assume the impossibility of what the Gospel asserts: that God showed himself directly in the flesh of Jesus. Both movements look at theology as merely human speculation about an indescribable, impersonal God. Thus religious faith becomes more a matter of feeling than of truth. What 4th and 20th century heretics propose is a revised notion of God that "feels more

procedures. And their foremost procedural principle is "inclusiveness"—that everyone's opinion must have an equal place in the Church. Church decisions are therefore made by consensus, in language that makes little attempt to separate truth from error. Williamson observes that it took generations to establish the Nicene formulation of faith, and more recently it has taken generations to erode it. He now sees signs that a reclamation of Nicene faith has begun in various branches of Christ's Church.

In the long struggle ahead, many besides Presbyterians may find inspiration in Williamson's words.

Standing Firm may be ordered from PLC Publications at (800) 368-0110. Cost is \$12, plus \$3 shipping.

IRD

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

Liberal Church Leaders Denounce Welfare Reform

Liberal church leaders responded with rage to President Clinton's approval of welfare reform legislation passed by the Republican Congress. "By sacrificing hundreds of thousands of poor children to his bid for re-election, Bill Clinton failed the most serious test of his presidency," warned Jim Wallis of the left-leaning Call to Renewal movement. Wallis condemned the welfare reform bill as a "great national sin."

Just before the bill's passage in Congress, the National Council of Churches (NCC), the U.S. Catholic Conference, and several Jewish groups staged a Capitol Hill press conference warning the President not to sign the legislation. "Abandoning the poor is not the way of an America we want," intoned the NCC's Joan Brown Campbell, who predicted the bill would "plunge" millions into poverty.



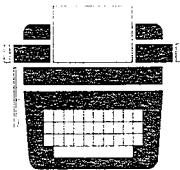
The NCC's Joan Brown Campbell and John Carr of the U. S. Catholic Conference oppose welfare reform legislation at a July 18 Capitol Hill press conference.

The legislation that so upset Campbell will shift many welfare responsibilities to the states, while requiring most welfare recipients to find a job within five years and limiting the ability of non-U.S. citizens to receive welfare.

"This bill is not about ending welfare as we know it," argued the

Rev. David Beckmann of Bread for the World. "It's about creating child poverty as we haven't seen it." John Carr of the U.S. Catholic Conference alleged that the legislation was merely a "bunch of sound-bites thrown together [to] reflect the needs of politicians rather than the needs of the poor."

The church leaders were especially critical of "cuts" in food stamps. But the bill actually allows annual spending to increase from \$24 billion in 1996 to \$27 billion in



CHURCH BRIEFS

2002. The "cuts" are merely reductions in projected spending increases. Church leaders still predicted that "children will be living under bridges" as a consequence.

Thomas Hart of the Episcopal Church's Washington office spoke harshly of the legislators who passed welfare reform: "Congress is much like a dentist who uses a jackhammer to drill a cavity." Albert Pennybacker of the NCC's Washington office prophesied that welfare reform would make the U.S. a nation of "meanness and greed."

Anna Rhee of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society took to the streets in her protest. Shouting "Shame!" outside the White House gates, Rhee marched with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the National Organization of Women, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights, and various homosexual groups.

NCC chief Campbell pledged that churches would continue to "challenge" the legislation at the

state level. "Ending welfare as we know it is a political goal, not a moral goal," opined Campbell, ridiculing a phrase that President Clinton often employed to express his support for welfare reform.

Mainline Fights Against Religious Equality

Mainline church offices joined groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Humanist Association, the Unitarian Universalist Association, Americans for Democratic Action, and People for the American Way in denouncing a proposed "Religious Equality" constitutional amendment.

The proposed amendment reads as follows: "In order to secure the right of the people to acknowledge and serve God according to the dictates of conscience, neither the United States nor any state shall deny any person equal access to a benefit, or otherwise discriminate against any person, on account of religious belief, expression or exercise. This amendment does not authorize government to coerce or inhibit religious belief, expression or exercise."

At a Capitol Hill news conference, liberal religious leaders called the idea "radical," "dangerous," and "potentially devastating to religious freedom in America." According to a United Methodist spokesman, the "misplaced fervor" for school prayer was "distracting" from the "real issues" like jobs, universal health care, housing for the poor, and education.

Church groups opposing the amendment included the Washington lobbying offices of the American Baptist Churches, the Episcopal Church, the National Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ. Church groups supporting the amendment included the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention. **IRD**



RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM

The Enduring Church

The NCC's Spin on the Persecution of Chinese Christians

The roll of Chinese martyrs grows every year. This past May 26, according to a Voice of America report, house church pastor Zhang Xiuju was dragged out of her home and then beaten to death by police. Two other house church pastors, one from Zhejiang province and one from Shaanxi, were killed in April.

Human rights organizations refer frequently to the fierce "crackdown" on unregistered churches by Chinese authorities. Amnesty International in July 1996 accused the Chinese government of imposing harassment, fines, and imprisonment on Christians who belong to religious groups independent of the state.

So why does the National Council of Churches find it so hard to call these actions "persecution"? This September, Victor W. C. Hsu, the NCC's top staffer for East Asia, told Ecumenical News International that he would "definitely not use the word 'persecution'" to describe what Chinese Christians experience. He had not heard of any Christian leaders beaten to death "recently."

These sorts of denials are common in *The Enduring Church*, the 1996 mission study on China and Hong Kong published by the NCC's Friendship Press. The book is a tour de force of euphemisms and understatement implying that the totalitarian government of the People's Republic of China is reasonable, and that its chokehold on the churches is justified. Since 1994, when the U.S. government "de-linked" human rights from other issues in its relationship with China, Evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic house churches have been targeted as "a principal threat to political stability" by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. But NCC author Gail Coulson reduces the repression to a public relations problem: "Although the administration of President Bill Clinton 'de-linked' trade from the issues surrounding China's human rights record, human rights as perceived in the West continue to bedevil China's international image" (p. 36).

The Enduring Church presents the regulations imposed by the Chinese government's Religious Affairs Bureau as merely sensible supervision. There have been "abuses and needless

actions by local cadres to curtail religious freedom as well as interference by government officials in the internal affairs of the Christian communities," admits Coulson. But this "interference" is excusable. The government is trying to shield Chinese Christians from "misguided foreigners who thought they had the best way to proclaim the faith." The Religious Affairs Bureau regards the behavior of house church Christians as "abnormal" and "does not protect it."

The destruction and death wrought during Mao Zedong's "Cultural Revolution" is recounted in the NCC text. But then comes the disclaimer: "However, some Chinese would

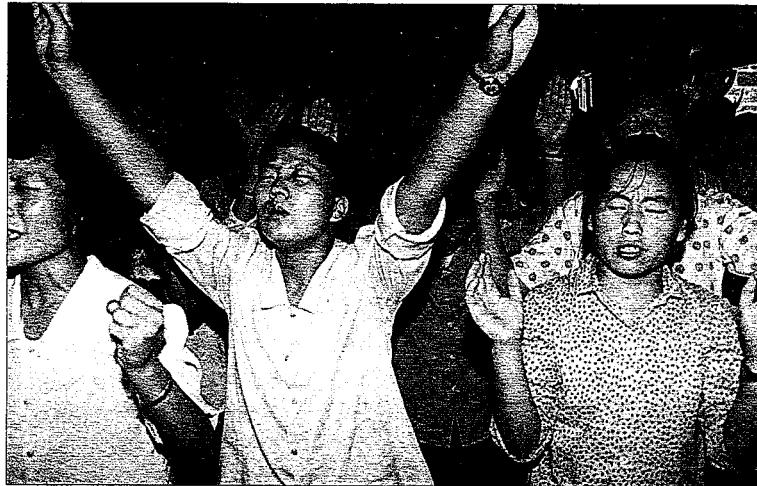
consider it unfortunate if all aspects of the Cultural Revolution were discarded in the effort to divest Mao's political heritage of errors and distortions.... Without excusing the hardship and brutality, Chinese church leaders have said, for example, that their understanding of rural people is appreciatively different, after having been sent to work on farms and in villages." With a few

lines, *The Enduring Church* whitewashes the millions of

deaths for which Mao was responsible. This is only marginally better than the 1978 NCC mission study, in which Mao was glorified as China's "Good Samaritan" who "healed the wounds made by the imperialist robbers."

Coulson paints a rosy picture of life for Chinese Christians who submit to state regulation. She exults in how they have matured from dependence on Western missionaries to become a uniquely Chinese church. She never admits that a church controlled by a communist government might be no more "uniquely Chinese" than a Western-influenced church.

Coulson never mentions the "devil's bargain" that the state-sanctioned churches must strike with their communist overlords. She is blind to the powerful reasons of conscience that compel millions of house church Christians to refuse to worship under the watchful eye of the Chinese authorities. And so, though faced with the decades-long suffering of those Christian brothers and sisters, Coulson and the NCC see no persecution.



Chinese house-church Christians at prayer

IRD

by Faith McDonnell

Indonesia Burnings

While U.S. Christians remain uncertain about the motives behind church arsons, Indonesian Christians have no questions about why churches are burning in their nation. It's anti-Christian persecution.

A riot started October 10 when Mohamad Saleh, a Muslim leader in the Java town of Situbondo, was sentenced to five years in prison for blasphemy against the prophet Muhammad. More militant Muslims, who had demanded the death penalty, turned their ire against local Christians.

According to the news service Compass Direct, the rioters "traveling by motorcycle ... torched seven churches in Situbondo, as well as two Christian schools and an orphanage, then fanned out to neighboring cities."

The Communion of Churches in Indonesia reported that six persons died and 25 churches were burned in the rampage. In the face of such attacks on churches, observed Ingrid Subagyo of the Indonesian Baptist Women's Fellowship, Christians no longer feel free to evangelize.

WCC and NCC Tell U.S., 'Hands Off Iraq'

The World and National Councils of Churches criticized President Clinton for authorizing limited military strikes against Iraq in early September. A WCC press statement on September 4 called the U.S. bombing of Iraqi air defenses "indefensible on moral grounds." Later in September, the WCC Central Committee demanded that all nations "respect the territorial integrity of Iraq."

Meanwhile, the NCC released a "Statement of Concern" on September 13 that rejected almost all possible U.S. retaliation against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The statement "strongly urge[d] the U.S. government to pursue a course of military restraint and multilateral

diplomacy."

It condemned "those who exploit the need for reprisal or play upon a sad but popular thirst for U.S. military action."

This statement was endorsed by denominational officials such as Episcopal Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning, United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert (the current NCC president), United Church of Christ President Paul Sherry, and Presbyterian Church Associate Stated Clerk Eugene Turner.

The NCC leaders professed to



INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS

"have no sympathy for the policies of the present government of Iraq." But they recommended no measures that might be taken against that government when it defied UN resolutions, abused its own people, and threatened its neighbors. The NCC statement specifically opposed any retightening of the economic embargo against Iraq.

This incident raises, once again, the question of whether the WCC and NCC have become—for all practical purposes—pacifist. The two councils seem unable to find any military measure—even the smallest pinprick against the most loathsome regime—of which they can approve.

Communist Comeback?

In Russia and Nicaragua, top church officials intervened in election campaigns to forestall a communist comeback. While not directly endorsing a democratic

candidate, both Patriarch Alexei II of the Russian Orthodox Church and Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo in Nicaragua issued powerful reminders of how much their churches stood to lose if the Marxist candidates won. The two churchmen's warnings may have swayed many voters.

During the Russian campaign earlier this year, Patriarch Alexei held numerous events to commemorate Orthodox priests and nuns who were martyred under the communists.

"It is not possible to forget the past," the patriarch declared. "All that we lived through should not happen again. The people must not let it happen."

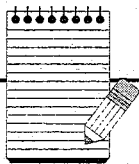
Cardinal Obando took a very similar approach in the Nicaraguan campaign. During one homily he told a parable about a man who saw a vicious snake out in freezing weather. The snake begged the man to help it survive, and it promised not to harm him.

The man took pity and put the snake inside his shirt to warm it up. Thereupon the snake revived, bit the man, and killed him.

Nicaraguan voters did not need to be told who was the snake. Former Sandinista dictator Daniel Ortega had been campaigning as a new man. Dressed in white, entering rallies to the strains of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," Ortega had been proclaiming his love of peace, human rights, the free market, the Church, and the U.S.

But most Nicaraguan voters had not forgotten Ortega's record of militarism, repression, property confiscations, religious persecution, and hostility to "the Yankee, the enemy of humanity."

Cardinal Obando must have breathed a sigh of relief after the October 20 victory of conservative candidate Arnaldo Aleman, as Patriarch Alexei was surely thankful for Boris Yeltsin's win in July. **IRD**



IRD DIARY

'Let's Be Civil Now'

In the recent campaign we heard quite a few calls to "restore civility" in our nation's political life. The Interfaith Alliance—a group mostly led by liberal Protestant church officials—asked candidates to sign a "Pledge of Civility." Signers of the pledge promised to "conduct my campaign without any appeal to prejudice or discrimination." They vowed to "repudiate the use of religion as a weapon to demonize those whose religious or political beliefs are different from mine."

It Seemed Almost Harmless

On the face of it, the Interfaith Alliance pledge seemed harmless—and useless. The wording was so vague that almost any candidate could feel comfortable in signing it. But, on second thought, a suspicion arose: Maybe these apparently vague terms like "prejudice" and "demonizing" were actually code words. For example, "prejudice" might mean a refusal to grant state recognition to homosexual relationships. "Demonizing" might mean taking a strong moral stand against abortion.

My suspicions were aroused by the political leanings of the Interfaith Alliance and other religious groups pushing this theme of civility. They came mostly from the left, and their target was usually "uncivil" behavior on the right. Alliance publications were always and exclusively on the attack against the "hostile, narrowly self-serving and intolerant" agenda of the "extreme religious right." In the Alliance's dictionary, obviously, "incivility" is merely a synonym for conservatism.

But conservative Christians should not be intimidated. They should remember that civility is not the supreme virtue. They might recall Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" These words of our Lord sound rather like the kind of "demonizing" that the Interfaith Alliance would prohibit.

If civility is a virtue, then, it must be a subordinate virtue. Perhaps we need to clarify the purpose to which

this virtue is subordinate. That purpose, it seems to me, is healthy democratic decision-making. Civility would consist in those qualities of discourse that contribute to an open, informed debate about the common good.

This definition of civility exposes some of the misuses of that term. It is not uncivil, for instance, to raise questions about the character and qualifications of a candidate for public office. It is not uncivil to declare that particular actions or policies are immoral. It is not uncivil to warn that particular policies, if pursued, would have the gravest consequences. It is not uncivil to affirm that the Scriptures teach some principles relevant to contemporary politics. All of these kinds of assertions must be allowed if the American people are to have a full debate about our common good.

Still, there is much that is truly uncivil in today's political discourse. For example, it diverts the debate when we stereotype our opponents as captives of greed and fear and "prejudice." It short-circuits the discussion when we presume that certain other citizens are so "extreme" that we need not listen to them. It does not help our discernment to speak as if all members of a given religious or ethnic group—all "Bible-believing Christians" or all Methodists or all African-Americans—hold the same views.

Where True Civility Should Begin

These types of incivility appear not only in the political arena, but also within our churches. Some of the same mainline officials who issue appeals for political civility have been unwilling to hold civil debates with dissenters in their own denominations. Perhaps the pledging of true civility should begin within the household of God.



Alan F. H. Wisdom

IRD

by Alan F. H. Wisdom



The Institute on Religion and Democracy

1521 16th Street., N.W., #300
Washington, DC 20036

