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FAITH & FREEDOM

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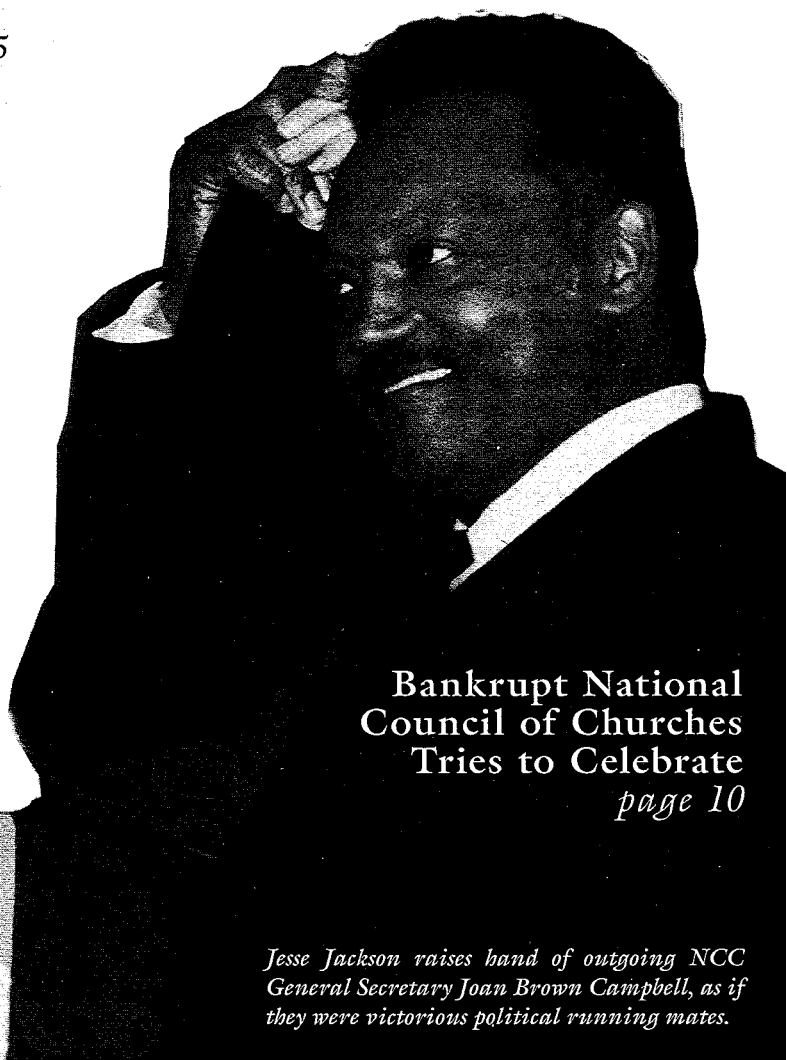
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*Jesse Jackson raises hand of outgoing NCC
General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell, as if
they were victorious political running mates.*

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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. Your gifts are tax deductible. Thank you for your support.

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LETTERS

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PROMPT ATTENTION TO OUR need for material on Sudan. Your speed in getting the materials allowed me to concentrate on putting it together with video materials we amassed and getting it off in an expeditious fashion helping to guarantee a program utilizing the issues Sudan raises in the fall on *Touched by an Angel*.

It is this unity in effort... responsive to the move of the Spirit that has been the most fulfilling part of my job these past two years. People like you have given Prayer for the Persecuted Church life—and helped forward all of our aims in supporting our brothers and sisters worldwide.

Steve Haas
President,
Prayer for the Persecuted Church

HANG IN THERE AND DO NOT LET GO!

...There are many in California who have fought the battle for a long time and we sometimes grow weary. But your letters bring us encouragement and new insight into avenues that need heavy prayer and support. Our Bible study class has strong prayer warriors who continue to do everything possible with God's help to see that your work does not end and is repeated wherever anyone will listen. And the population of support is growing on a daily basis as the cancer grows louder and those who had their heads in the sand can no longer assume all is well and all this aggravation will just go away.

As we study about the beginning Church in Acts, we realize that this battle has been going on from the beginning, and that we must remain strong in the Lord and in our faith, and continue to grow in our knowledge of Scripture. You continue doing your part, and we will remain strong at our end.

Acts Bible Class Study
Bakersfield, CA

I ADMIRE YOU WHO ATTACK THE PROBLEMS WITH courage and enthusiasm. Accept the fact that you can be successful—somehow, some way. We can earnestly pray that God will give you the ideas to take the actions that will lead you down the path that he wants you to walk and the grace to make the right decisions. The positive words you choose will inspire positive emotions—courage, optimism, faith and confidence. Choose them carefully and positively....The greatest hazard in life is to do nothing.

Chelsie E. Uglow
Sandy Hook, VA

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

NEW LEADERS IN A LONG STRUGGLE

by Diane L. Knippers

Last year brought some important personnel changes on the IRD board and staff. Dr. Thomas Oden was elected our IRD board chairman. He succeeded Helen Rhea Stumbo, who ably and sacrificially chaired our board from 1994-1999. I'll always be especially grateful to Mrs. Stumbo, who with her husband John gave me enormous support, encouragement, and advice when I was "learning the ropes" as the IRD president nearly seven years ago.



Tom Oden, a United Methodist theologian on the faculty of Drew University Theological Seminary, is the general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary series, a collection of biblical commentaries by the early church fathers being published by

Intervarsity Press. He assisted the IRD in leading a group of North American evangelical observers to the 50th anniversary Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe, December 1998. An observer at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, Dr. Oden more recently has represented Evangelicals in international Evangelical-Orthodox and Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogues. One of his recent books, entitled *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (1995), chronicles the demise of orthodoxy in some American seminaries.



In October, **James Nuechterlein**, a layman in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was elected to the IRD board. As editor of *First Things* and associate director of the Institute on Religion and Public Life in New York City, Mr. Nuechterlein sits at the center of much of the most creative contemporary thinking on religion and society. Before moving to New York, Mr. Nuechterlein was

Professor of American Studies and Political Thought at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

We also welcomed two new staff members in 1999. Steve Rempe, also a Lutheran, received his B.A. in Political Science from Miami University (Ohio) and his M.A. in Public Policy from Regent University (where

he wrote a paper on the IRD's 1981 founding statement, "Christianity and Democracy"). He is the assistant editor of *Faith and Freedom* and also is responsible for liaison with Lutheran reform groups.

Our newest staff member is Abigail Noll, a 1999 graduate of Wheaton College (Illinois) majoring in English literature. An Episcopalian with a special interest in helping the urban poor, Abby's IRD responsibilities include bookkeeping, working with our Episcopal Action program, and liaison to a new coalition fighting international sex trafficking.

Did you catch the article about the top news stories of the millennium now ending, as selected by contemporary religion news writers? The writers' choice as the number one story of the past thousand years was the Protestant Reformation. The number two story is obviously related—the widespread dissemination of the Bible and other printed religious materials. Other top stories included the 1054 schism between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, the Holocaust, the expansion of Islam and the Crusades, and the flight of religious dissidents to America.

These stories are not just bygone history. Most of them relate to two concerns that are critical for IRD today: first, church reform, and second, religious conflicts that often lead to horrifying persecution. We work tirelessly for church reform at home and we energetically seek an end to religious persecution around the world.

I suppose one might be tempted to discouragement at our inability to get beyond these millennial struggles. But especially in this Jubilee year, we must remember that our hope lies in God—not in our own schemes of human progress. Two verses of the Isaac Watts hymn we sang in my own church on the first Sunday of the New Year offer the right perspective:

*A thousand ages in thy sight,
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.
O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while life shall last,
and our eternal home.* ■

REFORMING THE CHURCH

CHURCH PUBLICATIONS EQUATE CONSERVATISM WITH 'HATE'

By Mark D. Tooley and Alan F. H. Wisdom

Last October 7, on the first anniversary of the Wyoming murder of the young homosexual Matthew Shepard, over 100 religious and secular leftist organizations sponsored a "Stop the Hate Day." The Rev. Welton Gaddy, executive director of the National Council of Churches-linked Interfaith Alliance, spoke at the press conference for the event. Gaddy painted a dark picture of America. "Profligate hatred fills the population of this nation," he warned. "Violence inspired by that hatred is rampant in our midst."

On the surface, speaking out against hatred sounds like a worthy Christian endeavor. But read the not-so-fine print. "Hate" by this new definition includes any opposition to the Left's agenda regarding homosexuality, abortion, welfare, and affirmative action.

Recent publications from the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) highlight this new political strategy. The February 1999 issue of the United Methodist Women's Division's magazine, *Response*, and the September/October 1999 issue of the Presbyterian *Church & Society* magazine were both

devoted to the theme of "hate."

In *Response*, Unitarian official Meg Riley voiced her distress at the published testimonies of former homosexuals who had become celibate or happily married. She branded these as an attempt to "disguise hate" under "a mask of love." Because they implied disapproval of homosexual acts, they could not be truly loving.

Riley applied the same analysis to other conservative causes. Welfare reform laws, she charged, were really intended to stigmatize the poor as "lazy, dishonest and passive." The Promise Keepers movement is just a camouflage for efforts to subordinate women to their husbands. The pro-life movement is a subterfuge to deprive women of their equality. Riley characterized black conservatives who speak against affirmative action as marionettes of nefarious "right-wing groups."

Riley's article in the Methodist magazine was illustrated with a stunning (and arguably "hateful") example of innuendo. Juxtaposed with pictures of the murderers of Matthew Shepard and the African-American James Byrd were photos of a Promise Keepers worship service and evangelical psychologist James Dobson.

Another writer, Mab Segrest of North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence, attacked United Methodist and other church policies disapproving of homosexual conduct. In a publication paid for by faithful Methodists, Segrest alleged: "On the question of anti-gay violence and hate, the Christian church has blood on its hands.... Within Christianity, church fiat is the equivalent of [the] pistols" employed by Shepard's killers.

Church & Society reprised the same indictment of Christian conservatives. Editor Sara Lisherness opened by suggesting that "the facile platitude, 'hate the sin, not the sinner,' actually begets hate-motivated violence against the homosexual community." Gay activist Chris Glaser charged that Presbyterian policies upholding "fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness" had "excommunicated" homosexuals. "In the wilderness of Wyoming [his murderers] executed that sentence upon Matthew Shepard," Glaser concluded. None of the other authors contested that grave accusation against the denomination funding their writings.

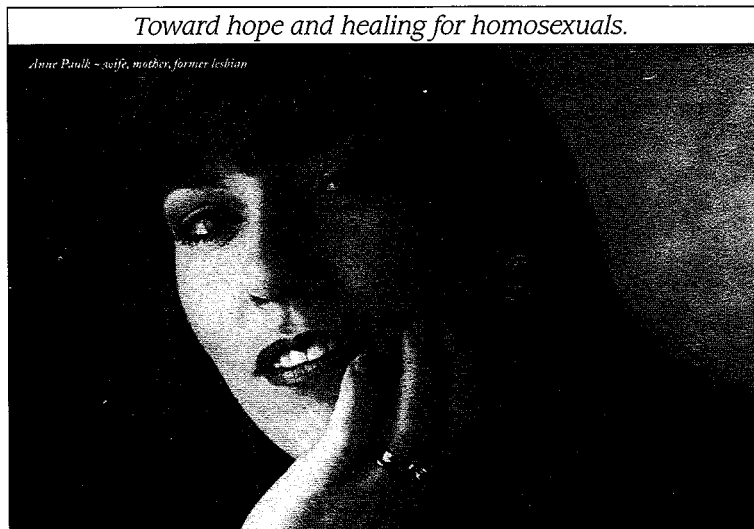
Also featured in the Presbyterian magazine was Gilbert Schroerlucke, a United Methodist minister and abortion rights activist. Schroerlucke blamed the assassination of abortionist Barnett Slepian on the "patriarchy" nourished by "the anti-abortion fever which is pervasive throughout the United States." Similarly, he tied the death of James Byrd to "political operatives [who] oppose affirmative action" and "parents [who] home-school their children." And, of course, he agreed that Matthew Shepard was a victim of ecclesiastical "homophobia."

This Religious Left crusade to stigmatize conservative beliefs as inherently hateful is not only a smear; it is intellectually sloppy. It falls into the ancient *ad hominem* fallacy, seeking to prevent consideration of conservatives' arguments by impugning their motives. Perhaps revisionist church leaders believe they can win the culture wars without engaging a genuine debate.

Orthodox Christians acknowledge that nobody's motives are pure. They know that everyone—regardless of race, income level, sexual history, or political affiliation—is a sinner in need of God's grace. That is why they gain both comfort and instruction from the falsely-maligned "platitude" of "hate the sin, love the sinner."

Toward hope and healing for homosexuals.

Anne Paulk - wife, mother, former lesbian



I'm living proof that truth can set you free.

In newspaper ads sponsored by a dozen conservative Christian groups, Anne Paulk told how she left lesbianism and embraced Christian faith. The pro-homosexual Religious Leadership Roundtable charged that the ads used "language of violence and hatred."

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

SUDAN

Genocide in the New Millennium

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

Across the globe, from New Zealand to Zambia, the Year 2000 was welcomed with parties and prayers. People were happy to find that the promised Y2K catastrophes had failed to materialize. Life would continue on as usual.

For the victims of Sudan's genocidal war, life also continues as usual in the Year 2000. The catastrophes never fail to materialize in Sudan. The National Islamic Front (NIF) regime ruling from Khartoum is relentless in its attempts to impose Islamic law on southern Sudan—and to wipe out the Christians and animists who resist. Over two million people have died and five million have been driven from their homes in the 16-year civil war.

It would seem that the recent opening of a new oilfield and pipeline in southern Sudan would be a blessing for the beleaguered nation. But the free-flowing oil actually increases the suffering of those who live nearest it. Thousands have been killed as NIF troops cleanse the area around the oil fields of all suspect villages. And the oil revenue is being plowed back into the war. Sudanese Catholic Bishop Macram Gassis declares, "They are robbing our resources from under our feet, taking it north, selling it and using the money to exterminate us." The regime built the pipeline in cooperation with Canada's Talisman Energy, Inc., the China National Petroleum Corporation, and other oil companies.

In 1999 IRD's fight against religious persecution and genocide in Sudan became even more intense. We worked with many church and human rights groups and began to mobilize grassroots America to work towards ending the genocide. Tens of thousands of e-mails to Congress, inspired by the Center for Religious Freedom's Student Campaign of Conscience on Sudan, sent a clear mes-

*IRD Religious
Liberty Associate
Faith McDonnell
and Sudanese
Catholic Bishop
Macram Gassis.*




sage about young Americans' concern for the persecuted in Sudan. As a result, both houses of Congress adopted resolutions on this issue.

In late September, millions learned about Sudan on the season premiere of CBS's "Touched By An Angel." IRD gave input to the script and provided contacts with Sudanese living in the United States to act as technical advisors and to appear in the episode. We also created a new web site, www.Angelsinsudan.com, to provide viewers with more information about how to help Sudan.

In November, IRD co-sponsored a Sudan summit held on Capitol Hill. Over 350 activists and policy makers came to discuss how Christian ministries and the U.S. government might alleviate the terrible situation in Sudan. The event was covered by CBN, Fox, and other television and print media. Christian singer/songwriter Michael Card, who has been an exemplary advocate for the persecuted church, sang at both conferences. Senators Sam Brownback and Bill Frist and Representatives Frank Wolf and Donald Payne received awards for their leadership on this issue, as did Sudanese Bishop Gassis. Professor Eric Reeves of Smith College and

www.vitrade.com founder Dennis Bennett inspired listeners to push for divestment from companies involved in Sudan's oil pipeline.

Finally, IRD, together with the Center for Religious Freedom, released a letter addressed to President Clinton, signed by over 200 national religious and civic leaders. The December 9 letter called for the President to "take a visible, personal stance on the genocide now taking place in Sudan." It urged him to support the "Sudan Peace Act" and requested that he tighten U.S. sanctions against Khartoum and support the divestment campaign underway against Talisman Energy.

On December 31, Reuters News Service portrayed the bleak New Year's Eve of displaced Sudanese living in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. "A simple message scrawled in black paint on the side of a mud hut is one of the few signs that the new millennium is being recognized," according to Reuters. "Welcome to happy New Year 2000," it says." That brave little message indicates poignantly that, in spite of the ongoing genocide, the Sudanese still have hope in the new millennium. 

FOR THE RECORD

CHURCH LEADERS ON THE CLINTON SCANDAL

By Steve R. Rempe and Alan F. H. Wisdom

As the scandal and impeachment process regarding President Clinton developed, public debate over the president's behavior took on a religious timbre. Terms such as "confession," "repentance," and "forgiveness" became surprisingly commonplace on the lips of cynical politicians and reporters. Christians were given an unusual opportunity to explain biblical teachings and demonstrate their relevance.

How did our church leaders use this opportunity? A large number of them remained silent, perhaps wishing to stay clear of what had become an ugly personal and political situation. A few evangelical leaders—notably from the president's own Southern Baptist Convention—condemned him and urged him to leave office. Even a few mainline Protestant officials found it impossible to accept conduct like Clinton's in our nation's executive.

*Under no circumstances would
Clinton's ecclesiastical apologists
contemplate his departure from office.
Such an outcome would be an
intolerable victory for the president's
political enemies.*

But the most prominent mainline voices were steadfast in standing by the president. They expressed some disapproval of Clinton, of course, but without specifying which of his actions they disapproved. Instead, they quickly moved on to arguments that would minimize the seriousness and diminish the consequences of his conduct.

Clinton's ecclesiastical defenders were eager to separate his private behavior from his public performance in office. The latter, they held, was much more important to God and the American people. The social good accomplished under the Clinton Administration outweighed any personal shortcomings of the man himself.

Insofar as Clinton owed any apology to the Ameri-

can people, his religious backers reasoned, his repeated protestations of pain should suffice. According to this interpretation, the biblical doctrine of grace required all citizens to grant the president the forgiveness that he desired. And forgiveness meant that he should not be forced to suffer any further consequences for his actions.

Under no circumstances would Clinton's ecclesiastical apologists contemplate his departure from office. Such an outcome would be an intolerable victory for the president's political enemies. In the church left's moral calculus, those Republican adversaries were always far more reprehensible than Clinton.

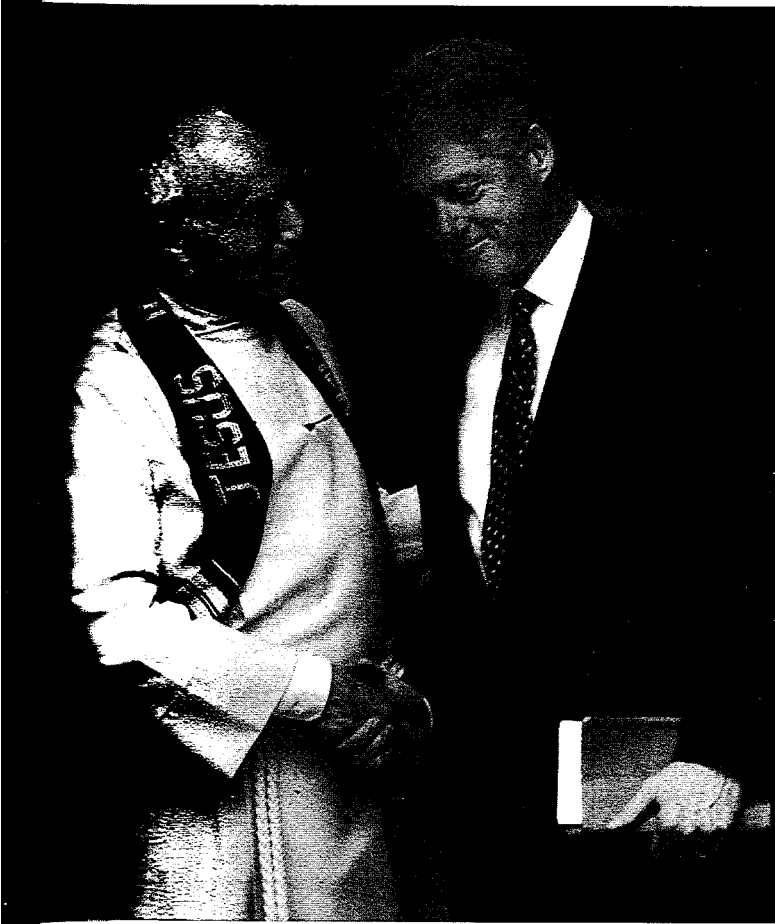
Below is a collection of statements by church leaders on the Clinton scandal.

Among those defending President Clinton:

- On August 28, 1998, several religious leaders issued "An Appeal for Healing." "We want our country back!" the appeal demanded. "We urge a return to the real needs of people. Urgent issues are before us. We want our presidents to be allowed to be president.... The president has confessed, 'It was wrong.' What more must we know?" Signatories included Joan Brown Campbell and Andrew Young of the NCC and Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance.

- More than 100 Clinton-friendly ecclesiastics attended the September 11 White House prayer breakfast at which the president made an emotional but vague confession. The audience responded with reverence. "It felt like a real holy moment," exclaimed the Rev. James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York. "There was not a single false note. Here is a man who has been anointed by grace and awaits restoration." James Dunn, head of the Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs, compared hearing Clinton's confession to "being present for the unveiling of the Sistine Chapel."

- Another collection of religious leaders released an October 7 statement urging Congress "to put [the scandal] to rest" and avoid an impeachment inquiry. "We applaud the good sense of the American people, most of whom have indicated that they can separate the idle from the urgent, the frivolous from the fundamental, violations of personal morality from the great moral issues facing our society as a whole," the leaders said. Besides the NCC's Campbell, the group included denominational heads Paul Sherry of the United Church



Clinton's pastor Wogaman praised the president as "a moral man."

of Christ, Richard Hamm of the Disciples of Christ, and Daniel Weiss of the American Baptist Churches.

- On January 7, 1999, Campbell and Episcopal Bishop Craig Anderson (the outgoing NCC president) joined five top Jewish rabbis in a letter opposing Clinton's removal from office. "We together urge the Senate to censure the president so that the people are not punished for his wrong," the signers said. "Censure the president, yes, and lift us to a higher way, so that as a united people, we may pursue a path of justice."

Leaders of historically black churches were also quick to grant absolution.

- The Rev. Henry Lyons, in his presidential speech to the 1998 session of the National Baptist Convention, USA, declared: "We accept President Clinton's apology. We love him. We appreciate him.... We want...the American people to get off his back and let him go on and be the president that he's capable of being." At the time Lyons was fighting to retain his own position in the face of charges of adultery and embezzlement. He was forced to resign after being convicted of the latter.

- Bishop P.A. Brooks, Secretary of the General Board of the Church of God in Christ, asserted, "We are a forgiving people.... Surely we can forgive President Clinton who has done so much for minorities, women and African-Americans."

- Delano J. Ellis II, Presiding Bishop of the United Pentecostal Churches of Christ, exhorted the president to stand firm against the "innuendoes" spawned by Satan. "By your lifestyle and devotion to Christ, you've

brought well being and improvement to every quarter of our nation," Ellis wrote to Clinton

The stated clerk, moderator, and General Assembly Council director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) issued a carefully modulated joint statement in September 1998. The three declared that Clinton's conduct was "a violation of that sacred trust with which the nation's highest office is endowed, and he must be held accountable for his actions." But church members should "keep the matter in perspective," according to the Presbyterian officials. "Our particular faith tradition suggests that public officials who fail to tend the 'widows and orphans' under their care are under at least as great condemnation as any who err in their personal behavior."

In contrast to the Presbyterian statement, some Clinton apologists displayed little semblance of balance.

- Catholic priest and novelist Andrew Greeley acquitted the president of lying: "President Clinton may well have told untruths in the Paula Jones deposition and in his initial public denials of the games with Monica Lewinsky, but he did not lie." Greeley reasoned that Clinton could not have lied to those—the federal courts and the American people—who had no right to hear the truth about his private life.

- The Rev. Carter Heyward, a champion of lesbian and feminist causes within the Episcopal Church, took inspiration from the president's behavior: "I suppose most of us like Bill Clinton ..., because we see he is alive and hungry, just like the rest of us. Through his sex play—some of it boorish, none of it coercive as far as we know—we sense some stirrings of our own most deeply human, passionate, and even sexy places of desire for connection."

Two of the president's three publicly announced "spiritual counselors" were among Clinton's foremost clerical defenders:

- Baptist evangelist Anthony Campolo advanced various arguments to shield the president from his critics. For example, he insisted: "All of us are entitled to secrecy. Jesus talks about two types of prayer: public prayer and the kind of prayer where we go 'into a closet' and meet God in secret. We are all entitled to our closets."

- The Rev. J. Philip Wogaman, pastor of the United Methodist church the Clintons attend in Washington, appeared often on television talk shows and published a book. Wogaman praised Clinton as "a moral man" of "great talents and sensitivity" who had an "effective presidency." He compared his parishioner to Israel's greatest king—"and King David, if I read my Bible correctly, was not impeached." Regarding Clinton, the Methodist pastor said the American people had a choice between responding in "love and hope" or fostering "a context of vindictiveness." He faulted the president's opponents for falling into the latter. The Starr investigation was "a moral outrage," Wogaman said. "I do not wonder that the president invoked every available legalism to counter the barrage of legalism he had to confront."

continued on the next page

continued from page 7

A number of church leaders, however, were less sympathetic to the president.

- Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America, called for Clinton to resign. "Our society needs repentance from widespread attitudes that personal morality is no one's business and has no public consequences," he asserted.

- Herbert W. Chilstrom, former presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, also recommended resignation. "Most of us believe that you cannot make a sharp distinction between how you function at your desk in the Oval Office and how you behave in a side room only a few feet away," Chilstrom told the president. "To fall once and be sorrowful is one thing; to fall again and again, and only admit to an 'inappropriate relationship' when one is caught is another."

Statements made by officials of President Clinton's own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, were particularly harsh.

- R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, asked, "How can President Clinton claim to be a Southern Baptist and persist in this public display of serial sin?"

- Southern Baptist Convention President Paige Patterson advised that Clinton should resign "before he is instrumental in corrupting all our young people."

Other evangelical leaders were more reserved in their remarks. Billy Graham, in a March 1998 *New York Times* column, refrained from pronouncing on the specifics of the Clinton case. His main contention was that "those in positions of leadership [should] be held to a higher standard of moral and ethical conduct." During the congressional votes on impeachment, the National Association of Evangelicals asked its constituents simply to pray.

Surprisingly absent from the national discourse was the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Perhaps John Cardinal O'Connor of New York spoke for many of his fellow bishops when he asked, "Do I advance the salvation of souls by publicizing my own speculation or by offering my own verdict? I don't think so."

In what might have been the most thoughtful contribution to the controversy, a number of mainline scholars issued a "Declaration Concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency." Among the points made in the declaration:

- "We challenge the widespread assumption that forgiveness relieves a person from further responsibility and serious consequences."

- "We reject the premise that violations of...ethical standards should be excused so long as a leader remains loyal to a particular political agenda and the nation is blessed by a strong economy."

- "The widespread desire to 'get this behind us' does not take seriously enough the nature of transgressions and their social effects."

In a November 17, 1998, letter, 32 mostly mainline renewal leaders urged the president's resignation. "A godly man will strive to avoid sin," the letter stated. "But equally importantly, when he does fall, he will prove his character by the completeness of his repentance from sin, the humility with which he bears its consequences, and the fullness of his restitution to those he has wronged. Your resignation would be a symbol and means toward achieving those ends." The letter was drafted by IRD President Diane Knippers and endorsed by ten IRD board members.

Church historians have observed that most Christian doctrines are worked out under the pressure of high-stakes controversies. If this pattern holds true today, then perhaps the Clinton scandal will be remembered as a significant stage in the development of mainline Protestant moral teaching. The emerging doctrines—that sexuality is a "private" matter of little moral weight, that personal sins should be overlooked when the individual has favored "progressive" social causes, and that forgiveness means relieving a person of all consequences for his errors—will surely be applied in future situations.

In fleeing the advances of Potiphar's wife and enduring an unjust imprisonment, the Hebrew patriarch Joseph can be contrasted with President Clinton. Right, a 1634 drawing by Rembrandt.



ELECTION MONITORING

RELIGION AND THE CANDIDATES

By Steve R. Rempe

One of the more intriguing aspects of the 2000 presidential race is the increased role religion has played in the campaigns of several candidates. Perhaps more than any other campaign of recent years, the year 2000 is quickly developing into a presidential campaign where candidates speak openly of their faith, discuss issues of a moral and religious nature, and even evoke the name of Jesus in political discourse.

Nowhere was this emphasis more apparent than at the Republican debate of December 13 in Des Moines, Iowa. When asked his favorite political philosopher, GOP front-runner George W. Bush cited Jesus Christ, "because he changed my heart." The response provoked a national discussion as to whether Jesus qualified as a "political philosopher," what the motivation was for the statement, and whether such a statement was even appropriate for a candidate to make.

Not to be excluded from this rush to reveal personal belief, Republican Senator John McCain, in a radio advertisement, is remembered by a colleague as the "chaplain" of the prisoner-of-war camp in which he was held during the Vietnam War. Democratic Vice President Al Gore also joined the fray, declaring on the television program "60 Minutes" that he was a born-again Christian.

For many Christians, it is heartening to hear such public figures affirm openly their faith in Jesus Christ. Yet believers who are "wise as serpents" will also understand the ulterior motives that may affect political candidates.

In Governor Bush's case, drawing attention to his current religious convictions diverts the focus from the well-publicized wildness of his youth. Senator McCain is intent on dispelling rumors of a violent temper by presenting himself as a serene prisoner of war comforting his fellow captives with Scripture. Vice President Gore, on the other hand, must struggle with the legacy of the Clinton administration scandals.

Another potential explanation for the increased religious tone in this election is the perceived weakening of an organized conservative Christian voice. The vacuum created by the decline of the Christian Coalition has resulted in a more wide-open battle for its claimed constituency. Even Republican candidate Steve Forbes, who was spurned by conservative Christian voters in 1996, is now supplementing his economic message with a call

for a return to a traditional moral code. Surely Al Gore would do well to reclaim some of the evangelicals who once composed one of the more loyal contingents of Democratic voters.


Notably absent in this rush to declare religious conviction is Democratic Senator Bill Bradley. Bradley was a prominent evangelical during his days as an all-American basketball player at Princeton University, speaking to groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes

*Indeed, the very presence of
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from the public square.*

and actively witnessing to teammates. In recent years, however, Bradley has made a point to downplay the religious fervor of his youth, even repudiating what he refers to as the "absolutism of fundamentalists." Today, Bradley claims only to "seek my own individual faith."

Bradley's position may also serve to enhance his political persona. In a race where everyone seems intent on declaring faithfulness, to downplay such convictions may appeal to others who are non-religious, or disillusioned by other public officials whose public life has failed to live up to their religious rhetoric.

While it is important to examine the potential political motivation behind the candidates' religious statements, however, it is important that such a consideration does not descend into rank cynicism. Indeed, the very presence of Christian themes in this or any other campaign helps to counter the denuding of transcendent truth from the public square. The fact that God has been featured so prominently in the presidential race provides Christians with a unique opportunity to share the Gospel with others.

As the campaigns proceed, IRD will be conducting an "Election Watch" project, monitoring what the candidates say regarding religious faith, as well as what church leaders say regarding the candidates. 

Bankrupt Church Council Tries to Celebrate

By Mark D. Tooley

In November, the National Council of Churches tried to celebrate its 50th anniversary in Cleveland, the place of its founding. Hoping that five days of hoopla would help revive its sagging fortunes, the \$750,000 event instead added perhaps another \$150,000 to the NCC's nearly \$4 million debt.

Many thousands braved a snowstorm to attend the NCC's founding in 1950. Fewer than a thousand bothered to celebrate its anniversary, despite the balmy weather.

Founded as an outgrowth of America's post-war optimism, the NCC once embodied the liberal mainstream. Anti-communist, pro-New Deal, anti-segregation, and pro-union, the new church council sought to unify America's denominations behind a vague affirmation of Christian faith and a strong injunction to Christian social responsibility. The nation's most prestigious Protestant churches were founders, the Eastern Orthodox joined so as not to be left behind, and the NCC hoped the Roman Catholic Church would soon follow. Conservative evangelicals were seen as too irrelevant to consider.

Five decades later, Roman Catholics still see no need to join, the Orthodox are conflicted about their membership, and mainline Protestants are now entering the fourth consecutive decade of membership decline. Meanwhile, evangelical churches are thriving, with the conservative Southern Baptist Convention (never an NCC member) having long since surpassed the liberal-dominated United Methodist Church as America's largest Protestant communion.

Fewer than one in three American church members now belongs to an NCC denomination. But with 35 denominations and 55 million church members still in the NCC, the gray old lady should still have some clout. Instead, the NCC is unpopular or irrelevant to most of its own constituency.

BEGGING FOR A BAIL-OUT

Federal dollars (mostly for refugee resettlement) now outrank denominational gifts as an NCC income source. To make up its huge deficit, the NCC in September appealed for help from its traditional pillars: the

United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ denominations. These "seven sisters" account for 90 percent of the NCC's denominational funding.

The first response to the council's bail-out appeal was not encouraging. The United Methodist Church declared that it would withhold over \$300,000 in previously scheduled payments, demanding fiscal reforms in exchange for renewed funding. *The Christian Century*, the flagship publication of liberal Protestantism, published a cover story urging the "orderly, intentional dissolution of the NCC." The author was the Reformed Church in America's general secretary, who is also an NCC board member.

The NCC is placing its hopes in a new leadership team. Former Pennsylvania congressman Bob Edgar has replaced Joan Brown Campbell as the general secretary, while former Atlanta mayor and United Nations ambassador Andrew Young has assumed the presidency. Both men are reputed to be good fundraisers.

Both are also politicians who share the NCC view that genuine Christian faith is inextricably tied to left-wing political themes. The collapse of Marxist "liberation" movements around the world left the NCC and its global counterpart, the World Council of Churches, somewhat perplexed about their future direction. To some extent, the NCC has since tried to tame its political radicalism, aligning itself closely with the pragmatic Clinton administration.

Not that the NCC has any apologies about its controversial Cold War role. For years it praised communist regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola and China, while condemning U.S. military actions in Grenada, Libya, Panama, and Iraq. The head of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, congratulated his NCC colleagues in Cleveland for their "prophetic cultural witness" during the Cold War, when they "built bridges to Eastern Europe and challenged McCarthyism."

Raiser especially thanked the NCC for "exposing the complicity of the United States government in dictatorship and repression" around the world. A film to commemorate the NCC's 50 years claimed that the council's cozy "dialogue" with the state-intimidated Russian Orthodox Church had precipitated the fall of the Berlin Wall. Concerns about collaboration with communist regimes were dismissed scornfully.

FUMBLING TO

RE-LIGHT THE ACTIVIST FLAME

The search for a new political crusade was evident in Cleveland. For the NCC, environmentalism is the most promising vehicle for promoting a newly repackaged global socialism. Jay Lintner of the NCC's Washington office cited the need for an "international environmental authority" to enact "global regulation of the environment." Lintner also listed universal health care,

gun control and campaign finance reform as key issues for the NCC.

None of these topics is likely to re-ignite the NCC's old activist flames or refill its depleted coffers. The NCC's non-relief spending this year totaled about \$16 million, which supported 122 employees in New York. To help erase the almost \$4 million deficit, the NCC wants an additional \$2 million from its member churches. It also aims to siphon off \$1.45 million from its relief agency, Church World Service, by levying new "service charges" on the agency's income. As many as 34 positions at the NCC might be eliminated.

There were also questions about the NCC's Burned Churches Fund, for which the council raised over \$9.1 million in cash. It turns out the NCC spent only \$6.4 million on actual church reconstruction, with the rest going to overhead and political efforts to remove the "root causes" of racism.

Recollections of the NCC's role in the civil rights movement provided the rare moments of genuine celebration in Cleveland. At a special NCC service in the Roman Catholic cathedral, Jesse Jackson made a surprise appearance. "We are winners," he enthused as he recalled long-ago civil rights rallies in Cleveland. Jackson saluted Joan Brown Campbell and Andrew Young for their contributions to that struggle.

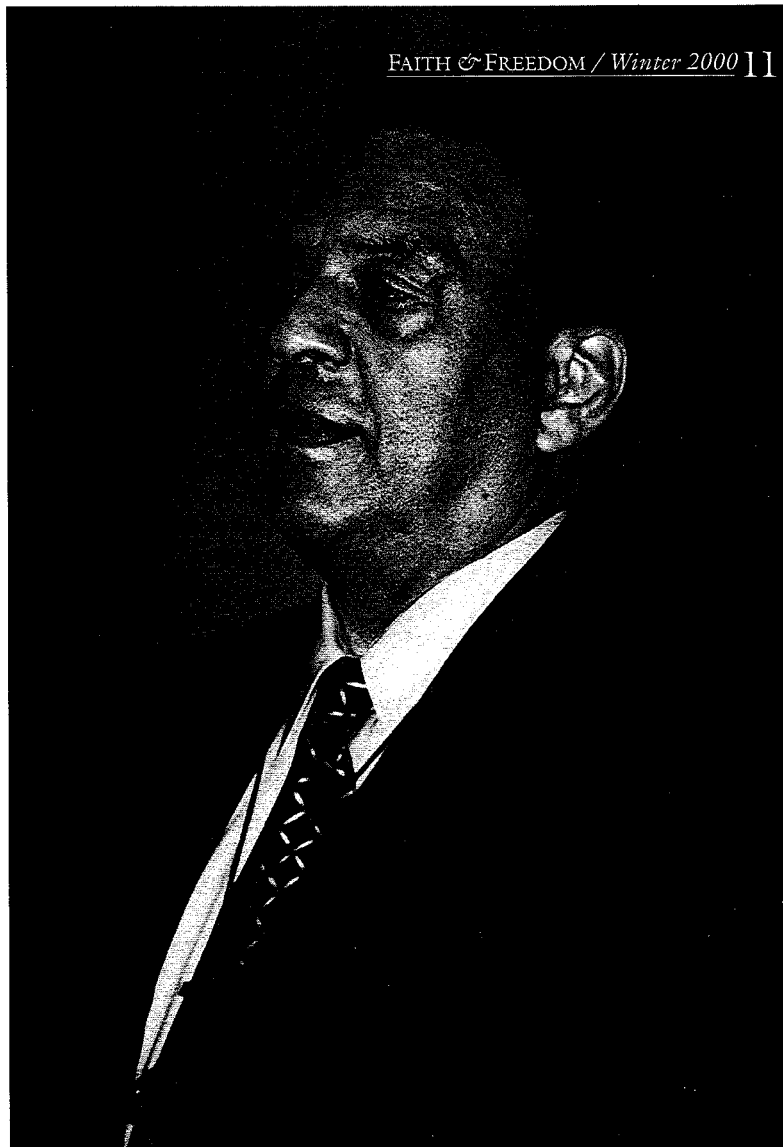
At a subsequent celebration banquet, there was an encouraging message from Dwayne Andreas of Archer Daniels Midland. The agribusiness tycoon had pledged \$100,000 to the NCC. There was applause, followed by a few amens. The money would at least help pay for the dinner.

Later in the year, the United Methodist Church rescinded its withholding of funds from the NCC, claiming that some improvements in financial practices had been instituted. The NCC member denominations are now weighing proposals to chip in their shares of the bail-out: the Methodists \$700,000, the Presbyterians \$500,000, and \$300,000 apiece from both the Lutherans and Episcopalians.

A DIFFICULT 'SALVAGE' JOB

Bob Edgar, the NCC's new general secretary, is himself a former United Methodist minister who, after 12 years in Congress, led a Methodist seminary out of difficult financial straits. Calling himself a "salvager," he hopes the NCC will develop closer ties with Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals. Andrew Young also hopes to win the Church of God in Christ, a black Pentecostal denomination with over 5 million members, as the NCC's next member.

It seems unlikely that the NCC's constituency will greatly expand, as long as its theology remains so squishy and its politics so leftist. Both Edgar and Young offered words of support at a breakfast for the Interfaith Assembly of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucuses and Affirming Organizations. Many NCC staffers wore rainbow buttons of solidarity. The council already



Jesse Jackson called new NCC President Andrew Young (above) "the glue that holds us together."

protects "sexual orientation" in its hiring practices and offers "domestic partner" benefits to its employees in sexual relationships outside of marriage.

The Interfaith Assembly has been demanding the admission of the predominantly homosexual Metropolitan Fellowship of Community Churches to the NCC. Yielding to that demand would precipitate a walk-out by the Eastern Orthodox and possibly others. Evangelicals, Catholics, and Pentecostals would not likely be attracted to a body that had just jettisoned 3500 years of Judeo-Christian teaching on sexual morality.

"We're like an aging city with a crumbling infrastructure," Joan Brown Campbell admitted in her farewell remarks to the NCC. "The infrastructure is sadly in need of repair, and it is not cheap to repair it."

Yet the mainline churches, despite their membership losses, are well-endowed financially. Thanks to their centuries of institution-building and the current strong economy, they are flush with funds. Will they resuscitate the ailing NCC? They may not resort to euthanasia, but neither will they administer life support forever. ■

CHURCH BRIEFS

BIBLE UNDER FIRE

God's revelation is found through various interpretations of the Bible, and not directly in the biblical text, according to the outgoing head of Bible translation for the National Council of Churches (NCC). David Lull, Director of Bible Translation and Utilization for the NCC through the end of 1999, was speaking at a United Methodist-sponsored consultation on scriptural authority held December 7-9 in Nashville.

The Bible is "pluriform," or contains many meanings, Lull said. He disagreed with the traditional understanding of Scripture as containing "univocal" propositions called "doctrines." The Bible does not focus on literal events but on remembrances in idealized forms, he claimed.

Lull implied that traditional understandings of the virgin birth or the atonement are based, at least in part, on possibly faulty translations of the Bible. The original texts of the Bible are "relatively fluid and can be molded into different and even competing doctrinal formulae," he suggested. To make his point, Lull claimed that the Bible at times endorses polygamy, slavery, the subjugation of women, and anti-Jewish prejudices.

As head of the NCC's Bible translation, Lull was the primary consultant for "The Bible Under Fire," a documentary that aired in November on the Odyssey cable network. The documentary tells of the 1952 publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and of subsequent translations that have drawn criticism.

WCC SPEAKER CHALLENGES
"SACRED INTERPRETATIONS"

The U.S. Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) met last December 9-11 in Atlanta to focus on "reconciliation." Most speakers gave benign messages unlikely to spark controversy. The meeting's worship leader, however, dramatically assailed Jesus' parable of the talents.

The parable (Mt. 25:14-30) tells of a master who gives various amounts of

money, or talents, to each of three servants. Two servants invest the talents and return them with profit, but the third returns only the principal, having buried the money rather than risk it. The master castigates this last servant for his unfaithfulness.

"Why does the master assume the servant's laziness?" asked Jacqueline Grant, a religion professor from Atlanta. "Why did the master treat him so unfairly?" She charged that the church participates in the "sinful practice" of some masters by measuring valuation only in terms of profit. According to Grant, the master created a system "that doesn't represent justice but defines elitism from the top down."

Grant complained that the parable had been used to justify the plight of the poor, who are portrayed unfairly as incapable of self-government. Third World governments and minority institutions especially fall prey to this stereotype, she said, so elite power structures justify their control by claiming the less privileged need this control.

Admitting there are other interpretations to this parable, Grant was still reluctant to accept their validity. "The inequities in society are justified by religious language," she warned. "Let's challenge those sacred interpretations."

The moderator of the U.S. Committee of the WCC thanked Grant for her presentation. "We're deeply indebted to you for challenging our thinking," enthused Kathryn Bannister, a United Methodist minister from Kansas.

EVANGELISM AND HATE CRIMES

A Chicago interfaith council is condemning plans by the Southern Baptist Convention to target the city for evangelism next year. The council warns that the Southern Baptists' missionary zeal could provoke "hate crimes" against religious minorities in Chicago.

According to the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago—which includes mainline Protestants, the Roman Catholic archdiocese, Unitarian, Jewish, and Eastern Orthodox groups—the shooting of six Jewish Chicagoans, a black man, and a Korean-American last July and the

vandalism of a Chicago mosque are evidence that Chicago's religious minorities are vulnerable to such hate crimes.

The Southern Baptists say their "Strategic Focus Cities" initiative is an effort to expand their church's racial diversity. During the year 2000, they are hoping that 100,000 volunteers will come through the city at some point to participate in social service projects, organize block parties, and witness to their faith. Southern Baptist officials insist that their evangelism is motivated by love and does not coerce anyone.

Only 13 percent of Southern Baptists in Chicago are white. Half are black, and most of the rest are Hispanic or Korean. As America's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention has over 40,000 local churches and strives to start 1,500 new churches every year.

A NEW GOSPEL
FOR BLACK CHURCHES

At its annual "Breaking the Silence" summit on black sexuality, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) renewed its call for full availability of abortion, and advocated the distribution of condoms to sexually active children and the acceptance of homosexuality by traditionally black congregations.

Although the RCRC consists mostly of predominantly white religious bodies, the summit allows the organization an opportunity to lobby the traditionally socially conservative black churches for support. "This movement is really picking up speed," proclaimed RCRC's president, the Rev. Carlton Veazey. "The work we are doing is holy work." Veazey expressed hope that the black churches are beginning to change their longstanding opposition to homosexuality.

Speakers at the summit were quick to challenge traditional Christian teachings. Kelly Brown Douglas of Howard Divinity School condemned "the white, eurocentric view of the body as evil." Douglas asserted that "it is our sexuality that allows us to put into action Jesus' words to love one another." Worship leader Jay

Cooper, a student at Morehouse College, compared the plight of inner-city blacks to the holocaust. "I don't dislike white people," he said, "but I don't particularly like them, either."

ELIAN AND THE NCC

The National Council of Churches has offered itself as a vehicle to facilitate the return of six-year-old Elian Gonzalez to his native Cuba. Styling itself as a disinterested champion of "family values," the council sponsored the U.S. travels of Elian's two grandmothers in their attempt to reclaim him. Besides NCC officials, the grandmothers' other escorts were Cuban government representatives in constant contact with Havana.

"Make no mistake," declared the new NCC general secretary, Bob Edgar, "the National Council of Churches is unequivocally in favor of reuniting the boy with his father and closest family members." Edgar denounced as "unseemly" any "delaying tactics to prevent this child from going home." His predecessor at the NCC,

Joan Brown Campbell, denied that there was "any governmental influence" in the demands made by Elian's father for the boy's return.

During her tenure as general secretary, Campbell frequently met with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, commending him for advances in socialized medicine and his "open attitude" toward religion. She has been less willing to criticize Castro for the absence of free speech, political debate, economic liberty, and religious freedom. Campbell indirectly faulted Elian's mother for trying to leave Cuba in a small boat, but said nothing about Cuba's repression and closed borders, which have forced thousands of Cubans to flee their country in unsafe vessels.

CHURCHES SPLIT ON SCOUTS

A New Jersey Supreme Court ruling requiring the Boy Scouts of America to allow homosexuals to serve as scout leaders has met resistance from many church groups that sponsor Scout troops, while other religious leaders have praised

the decision.

The National Catholic Committee on Scouting, the General Commission on United Methodist Men, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are among several religious groups to sign an *amicus* brief on behalf of the Boy Scouts. The brief argued that the Scouts, in exercising their freedom of association, have the right to set their own moral standards and membership requirements.

Support for the New Jersey decision has come from the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Diocese of California. These bodies hailed the decision as a breakthrough in curbing anti-homosexual attitudes.

Currently, 65 percent of all Scout units are sponsored by churches. Roman Catholic parishes sponsor over 9,600 Scout units and 355,000 individual scouts. United Methodist congregations are second only to public schools as a sponsor of individual Scouts.

The case will be reviewed this year by the U.S. Supreme Court.



The Rev. Bob Edgar, new General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (left), and the Rev. Oden Marichal of the state-sanctioned Cuban Council of Churches meet with reporters as they chaperone U.S. tour by Elian Gonzalez's grandmothers.

CHURCHES BLOW THE TRUMPET OF JUBILEE

But Will It Really Help the Poor?

By Alan F. H. Wisdom



Forever in your debt?
Eight poor nations and the G-8
Millennium debt relief for eliminating poverty

A brochure from the British group Christian Aid makes an emotional appeal for debt cancellation.

"Drop the debt!" chant the protesters outside every World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting. They are part of an international movement that calls itself "the Jubilee 2000 Coalition." The coalition's stated objective is that the Western democracies would "cancel the unpayable debts of the world's poorest countries by the end of 2000." This sudden, sweeping fiat would save the lives of millions of children, according to Jubilee 2000. Funds now being spent to repay Western loans would supposedly be redirected into necessary health care and education.

Claiming member groups in over 60 nations, and over 17 million signatures for its petition, the coalition has energized a largely leftist constituency. At international Jubilee meetings, debt cancellation has been hailed as a blow against "the new viciousness of Northern capital manifesting itself in the form of globalization."

This kind of anti-capitalist rhetoric rings "prophetic" in the ears of many Religious Left activists. But even more moderate church people are often impressed by the movement's biblical allusions. It claims as its inspiration the Old Testament provision for a Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), when slaves were to be freed, debts set aside, and land returned to its original holders.

Among the denominations represented on the Jubilee 2000/USA Steering Committee are: the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ. On its website the coalition boasts of endorsements from the Pope and Billy Graham. But when the two leaders' words are read carefully, it becomes clear that they support only the general principle of debt relief for impoverished nations.

Indeed, many developing nations are severely burdened by foreign debt. The World Bank has identified 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), which owe a total of about \$220 billion. Thirty-three of these are located in sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly, some form of relief for this burden would be helpful.

But would the quick fix proposed by Jubilee 2000 be effective? How do we know that the funds released through debt cancellation would really be used for the benefit of the poor? How can we be sure that rulers would not perpetuate the unproductive spending and shortsighted economic policies that first put their nations in such a deep hole?

Unfortunately, the Jubilee movement rejects any effective conditions on debt forgiveness. It regards any demands imposed

by Western lenders as a violation of the sovereignty of developing nations. It denounces the "structural adjustment programs" that the International Monetary Fund requires of its borrowers. These typically require a government to balance its budget, stabilize its currency at a realistic rate, decrease its imports, encourage exports, lower barriers to trade, reduce state payrolls bloated with political loyalists, and cut back or sell off unprofitable state industries.

Jubilee advocates express confidence that the proper use of released funds could be guaranteed by forces inside the poor nations. Ann Pettifor, Jubilee 2000 director in Great Britain, speaks of "ensuring that the voices of elected bodies and non-government organizations are heard at all stages of the [debt forgiveness] process." But what if the country is under a dictatorship that does not allow a freely-elected legislature or independent private groups? Pettifor has no answer for this very common case.

Robert Snyder, a former missionary in Rwanda, was not satisfied with Jubilee's answers. "Forgiving debts is a worthwhile enterprise, consistent with biblical teachings," he observed in an article in the liberal *Christian Century* (June 30-July 7, 1999). "But the admonition to fight for the oppressed must equally be kept in mind." Snyder opposed extending debt cancellation to countries with a large, repressive military. For such regimes, he warned, "debt relief will provide only a temporary respite, a time when leaders can rest more peacefully in their expensive villas." Ultimately, the only solution is for "the people themselves [to] rise up and say no to their corrupt power elites."

We should not be surprised that, in this fallen world, putting into practice the biblical call to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Leviticus 25:9) requires more than a single dramatic gesture.

INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS

CHINESE CRACKDOWN

The Chinese government's 1999 crackdown against the Falun Gong organization was not an isolated incident. The same fear that drove Beijing's communist authorities to suppress the meditation/exercise group also makes them hostile to many other independent religious movements.

The actions against Falun Gong represented the most widespread, publicized, concentrated campaign against a religious group since Mao's bloody Cultural Revolution. Over 5,000 practitioners of the Falun Gong exercises have been sent to labor camps, according to the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights.

At the same time, long-simmering campaigns against non-conforming Christians continued and even intensified. A new law against "cults," initially directed against Falun Gong, was also the basis for prohibiting ten little-known Christian groups. Beginning in late November, over 100 members of these groups have been detained, according to the Information Center. Six Protestant leaders in central China were sentenced to labor camps in late December.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government is keeping the pressure on Catholics loyal to Rome. A Communist Party document

dated August 16 suggested that Beijing was interested in establishing diplomatic ties with the Vatican, but not in easing the restrictions on Chinese Catholics. "The normalization of relations with the Vatican," the document asserted, "is an occasion favorable for gaining the majority of members of the underground church and making sure that the hard nuts among them coming out of clandestinity do not take power in the patriotic church." These "hard nuts" would be defrocked, relocated, or forced into retirement, according to the document disclosed by a Vatican news agency.

JUDGING GENERAL PINOCHET

A senior World Council of Churches official applauded the arrest of Chilean General Augusto Pinochet, expressing the hope that the former dictator could be tried and convicted of "crimes against humanity." Genevieve Jacques, Executive Secretary of the WCC's Commission of the Churches in International Affairs, exulted that "a breach has opened in the wall of impunity against one of the most symbolic representatives of the dictatorships in Latin America responsible for countless deaths and disappearances."

The WCC official rejected the idea of releasing Pinochet on grounds of compassion for his ill health. "What about


compassion for the victims of Pinochet?" she demanded. "Judgment is essential," Jacques insisted. "How the sentence is applied is another matter."

CHURCHES ON KOSOVO

Pacifist tendencies won out over the inclination to support the Clinton administration when mainline church leaders denounced the NATO military actions last spring in Kosovo. Since then church leaders have not expressed any regrets that some of their "prophecies" turned out to be false. Indeed, National Council of Churches General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell claimed that her trip to Serbia during the conflict acted as a "circuit-breaker" to halt the hostilities.

Campbell was part of an interfaith delegation, led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, that met with Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic last May. After Milosevic granted the release of three captured U.S. servicemen, the delegation proclaimed: "The violence suffered by all people in Yugoslavia must end. Bombing and more war cannot bring peace." Campbell later credited her delegation's diplomacy for the subsequent resolution of the conflict.

Several other mainline U.S. church officials expressed similar sentiments last spring. General Secretary Thom White Wolf Fassett of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society equated the NATO campaign with the Serb atrocities that it was supposed to stop. "We question a policy that brings further suffering on thousands of innocent people in Kosovo," Fassett said.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick wrote a letter to President Clinton on May 20 expressing his church's "growing concern over the impact of the NATO bombing campaign." Kirkpatrick contended that there was "little evidence that it has actually diminished the violence against the Kosovars." The Presbyterian official urged Clinton "to seek with renewed energy a negotiated peace" under the United Nations. Barely two weeks later, Milosevic capitulated to NATO demands that he withdraw his troops from Kosovo. 



Literature from the banned meditation sect Falun Gong is burned on a street in the Shandong province of China.

GETTING ALONG NICELY

By Steve R. Rempe

Lutherans are, above all, polite. This truth was ingrained in me during my youth spent attending a Lutheran church in Ohio. Decorum is the primary objective of any Lutheran gathering, and provided the coffee is fresh, it is usually achieved.

Thus, it was with great interest that I prepared to attend the August 1999 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). With several potentially divisive issues on the agenda at the Denver gathering, the Lutheran penchant for peaceful coexistence would be severely tested.

The proposal for "full communion" with the Episcopal Church loomed largest as a potential source of discord. As floor debate began, however, civility seemed to prevail. Each speaker went out of his way to acknowledge the sincerity of his adversaries. Full communion proponents scored rhetorically by arguing that it would be "rude" not to accept the proposal, since the Episcopalians had kindly agreed to revisions after an earlier version had been rejected at the Lutheran assembly two years prior.

Ultimately, the Lutheran desire for propriety won out. The full communion proposal passed by the required two-thirds

majority, and the Lutherans were able to maintain their benevolent image.

The next hot issue was the ordination of non-chaste gay and lesbian clergy. A motion was made that the rule prohibiting such ordinations be suspended until such time as a proposed study on the issue was completed.

Voting members rightly saw this proposal as a major shift in church policy, and the proposal failed by a considerable margin. Advocates for ordination took solace in the fact that, for the first time, a Churchwide Assembly was forced to vote specifically on the issue of homosexual ordination. One pro-lesbian activist confided to me her hope "that once the rest of society has accepted the homosexual lifestyle, the church would ultimately follow."

Perhaps no statement more succinctly underscores the Lutheran condition. The church founded by Martin Luther is no longer seen as an engine for social change. Rather, it is seen as a reflection of the culture surrounding it. Instead of transforming the world in which it exists, the Lutheran church seems intent on assimilating it, or, at the very least, getting along nicely with it.

When Luther stood in front of the Diet

of Worms and declared, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise," he boldly challenged the thinking of his day and set into motion a revolution that would change the world. The thought of a modern Lutheran causing such a ruckus borders on absurdity.

The problems of the ELCA extend beyond its shrinking rolls and its aging congregations. They extend beyond its hierarchical structure, its left-leaning economic statements, and its flirtations with sexual immorality. As long as the church insists on building its foundation on the shifting sand of current issues and public opinion, it will continue its ebb into oblivion. Only by re-establishing itself as a church devoted to the proclamation of the Gospel will the ELCA regain its influence on society.

In the week I spent in Denver, I met many people that are firmly committed to returning the church to Luther's three pillars of *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, and *Sola Gratia*. Should the church recommit to this calling, it will once again gain the voice it so longs to have on societal issues. As for my role in the Lutheran church—I feel more committed than ever to standing for doctrinal fidelity.

Here I stand....



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