

FAITH & FREEDOM

REFORMING THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL WITNESS

MAKING MARRIAGE CONTROVERSIAL



God's blessing of marriage used to be taught by all Christian churches. Now demonstrators from the pro-homosexual group Soulforce (right) picket the U.S. Catholic bishops' meeting in Washington, denouncing church teachings on marriage and sexuality. Such pressure dissuaded neither the bishops nor top Evangelical officials from endorsing "A Christian Declaration on Marriage" (p. 10). But National Council of Churches head Bob Edgar buckled under pressure and retracted his signature.

NCC TURNS ITS BACK ON ECUMENISM

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Plus From the President, Church News, International Briefs, and Letters.

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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

OUR CHURCH began a most worthy mission project, which grew out of their desire to be active participants in the life of the body of Christ. They began taking up a special "coin offering" on Sunday mornings during worship, asking the congregation for the coins in their pockets, to be used for God's work in various missions which the children chose.

We believe, as you do, that feeding God's sheep and proclaiming the good news of Christ's love should be priority number one for United Methodists. We are saddened that our denomination has gotten bogged down in debate over issues that do nothing to serve that goal. We stand with you in your quest for scriptural holiness, sound Christian doctrine, and faithful adherence to the teachings of the Bible and the Book of Discipline.

Our young people have chosen to send you this check to take a stand with you as you "fight the good fight." This comes from our children's special coin offering, but it really comes from the bottom of their hearts, even as it comes from the bottom of the adults' pockets.

We appreciate your efforts to keep United Methodists informed of the major issues facing our church, and your desire to prevent our beloved church from succumbing to narrow political agendas and the shifting "theology" of the popular culture. For this reason, we consider this gift to you a great investment, given in order to keep the flame of Christ's spirit burning brightly, both now, and in generations to come.

Pastor Don Baldwin
Crockett Spring United Methodist Church
Shawsville, VA

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Brief letters from a variety of viewpoints will be published in upcoming editions of *Faith and Freedom*. Letters may be edited to fit the space available.

CHECK OUT IRD'S NEW WEBSITE!

IRD has just completed a redesign of our website. The new site includes breaking updates on issues within the churches, as well as information on religious liberty online. Sign on to online petitions, and contribute to IRD by credit card via our secure server. Come and visit us at www.ird-renew.org.

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*The youth group at Crockett Springs
United Methodist Church.*

FROM THE PRESIDENT

NEW WAYS TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

By Diane L. Knippers



Christian unity isn't optional for Christians. Christ's final prayer for the Church was that we would experience it. Unity is essential to our Gospel mission. It is a reflection of the very unity of God—three persons in one.

My 19 years with the inter-denominational IRD have taught me much about the blessings and difficulties of seeking Christian unity.

It's become a passion of mine, leading me to service both as an officer of the National Association of Evangelicals and on the Episcopal Church's Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations.


Recently, leaders of both the World and National Councils of Churches have expressed interest in expanding their ecumenical dialogues to include Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals. A cynic might question the motives for this new emphasis: Is it a desperate search to find some new constituencies to shore up the crumbling bastions of liberal Protestantism? But I prefer to think that NCC and WCC leaders have realized that an ecumenism that neglects the largest and healthiest aspects of Christendom is no ecumenism at all.

Tragically, the political extremism and theological revisionism of the two councils have tarnished the quest for Christian unity. Particularly among Evangelicals, I have learned that the word "ecumenical" has a unwelcome ring. It evokes church leaders who doubt the divinity of Christ, but who have no reservations about the virtues of socialism, the blessings of homosexuality, and the delights of goddess worship. NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar's repudiation of the Christian Declaration on Marriage (see page 11) just made matters worse.

So I talk to my Evangelical friends about "Christian unity" rather than "ecumenism." I tell them that we have an obligation to test whether the oldline Protestant officials are serious about seeking greater unity. Here are some tests:

1. Christian unity must be centered on the person of Jesus Christ. It is only in the "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5) that we all have

received that we have any possibility of unity. It is nice to find a few common political agendas to pursue; however, the plain fact is that Christians of various denominations and backgrounds are not united politically and will never be united by human politics. We are truly one only insofar as we focus on the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

2. The Church is "one o'er all the earth." But too much of contemporary ecumenism is captive to the sensibilities of Western liberalism. The remedy to this defective vision is to develop a genuinely global Christian perspective. Our fellow believers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are no longer spiritual "children"; they are partners in the Gospel. Indeed, they have often sacrificed far more than we to hold onto that Gospel. We need to listen to them.
3. Ecumenical dialogue needs to take place core-to-core, not edge-to-edge. Too often, oldline Protestant leaders select as their interlocutors persons who are marginal to their own traditions, but more comfortable in a liberal theological and political environment. They talk with renegade feminist nuns and imagine that they have engaged Roman Catholicism. They talk with leftist Pentecostal academics and imagine that they have engaged Pentecostalism. Instead, oldline officials must seek out the authoritative mainstream voices that have the confidence of large bodies of fellow Christians.
4. For the same reason, the ecumenical representatives from oldline churches must speak from the heart of their own tradition. True dialogue cannot take place when the oldline delegates are persons who reject important teachings of their own churches. It is folly, for example, when the top ecumenical officer of the United Methodist Church (Bishop Mel Talbert) is working to undermine his own denomination's standards of sexual conduct. United Methodists deserve a spokesperson who whole-heartedly defends the church's teachings.
5. Finally, the new ecumenical dialogue must start within the oldline churches themselves. Every major oldline communion has faithful members who feel themselves closer to Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, or Catholicism than to the liberal elite of their own denomination. Sadly, these members are often maligned and marginalized by the same church officials who now promise to extend an ecumenical olive branch outside the denomination. Ecumenical should begin at home, where it is toughest. 

CHURCH NEWS

CONFERENCE ATTACKS MAINLINE REFORM GROUPS

A panel of speakers at an October conference at Union Theological Seminary in New York City blasted the conservative renewal groups within the mainline churches. All the presenters agreed in portraying the renewal groups as a nefarious conspiracy to destroy mainline Protestantism as a citadel of democracy and social progress.

The conference, co-sponsored by the Institute for Democracy Studies (IDS), corresponded with the release of *A Moment to Decide*, a book published by IDS that chronicles the rise of renewal groups within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Speakers included the executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, an official of the United Methodist Women's Division, and a former moderator of the PCUSA.



Former Presbyterian moderator Robert Bohl said of conservatives in his denomination: "Damn them! They will not go away!"

The Rev. Robert Bohl, the former Presbyterian moderator, was particularly incensed that reform elements in the PCUSA had challenged him during his tenure in office. "Damn them! They will not go away!" Bohl exclaimed repeatedly. He argued that renewal groups are less concerned with biblical authority than they are with "control and power." Bohl cited the Covenant Network, a pro-homosexual lobby within the PCUSA that he helped to found, as an example of a group committed to fostering dialogue within the church. But in an exercise in self-fulfilling prophecy, he also predicted that any dialogue with the "Religious Right" would not be successful.

Other speakers, including J. Ann Craig of the United Methodist Women's Division, cited criticisms of the radical feminist Re-Imagining Conference of 1993 as evidence of reform groups "promoting dissension." "We are targeted by so-called renewal groups," Craig said of the Women's Division, "but this is not news to us. Women following Jesus have always faced criticism."

ELECTION REVEALS RELIGIOUS DIVISION

In a season of partisan conflicts, the most significant division highlighted in the 2000 presidential election might have been along religious lines.

Post-election polls indicate that weekly church attendees among white Protestants, white Catholics, and Mormons voted Republican in greater numbers than years past. By contrast, it was black Protestants, Hispanics, Jews and other non-Christians who formed the foundation of support for the Democratic Party. Nationwide, three-fourths of George W. Bush's support came from weekly white churchgoers, while two-thirds of Al Gore's votes came from

religious minorities, secular Americans, and non-attending white Catholics.

Traditional divisions between denominations were less decisive than degrees of church attendance. Among those who never go to church, 61 percent voted for Gore and 32 percent for Bush. For those who attended more than weekly, the numbers were reversed: 62 percent for Bush, 36 percent for Gore.

In the two local jurisdictions with the lowest church-going rates—New York City and Los Angeles—Gore won by landslide margins. Bush, on the other hand, won 84 percent of the vote among regularly worshipping white Evangelicals and 57 percent among Catholics who attended mass at least weekly.

"We have two massive, colliding forces," said Republican pollster Bill McInturff. "One is rural, Christian, religiously conservative. [The other] is socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular, living in New England and the Pacific coast."

Other commentators downplayed the division. "I'm not sure our society is deeply divided," said political scientist John C. Green of the University of Akron. "[Americans] disagree with their neighbors. They don't hate them."

ECUMENICAL VIDEO SERIES "TALKS ABOUT GOD"

"Talking About God" is a 7-part video series produced by EcuFilm, an ecumenical film consortium that includes most major mainline Protestant denominations, the Maryknoll Missioners, and the National and World Councils of Churches. Aimed at Sunday school classes and other discussion groups, the series poses basic questions about God to a select group of 14 people professionally involved with religion.

Unfortunately, that group is so select that the participants seem to include only one outspokenly orthodox Christian, the Rev. Bill Hinson of Houston, Texas. Most of the other speakers—including Jesus Seminar veteran Marcus Borg and radical Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong—take turns denying key doctrines of classic Christianity.

Borg says that he thinks of "God, or the sacred, or the spirit, as all around us, as well as within us." Borg describes his theology as "panentheism," or a belief that all things are a part of God. He says that the God of "supernatural theism" is the God he "stopped believing in."

Bishop Spong, recently retired from the Episcopal Church, goes further than Borg in separating experience from objective reality about God. Spong says: "I'd like to draw a distinction between the experience of God and the explanation of that experience. I believe the experience of God is real... I don't think there's anything eternal about any explanation." Spong continues: "I do not know who God is. I know only what my experience of God is."

A.J. Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, says she doesn't "want to give God all the benefits and none of the responsibilities" for what goes on in the world. Levine doesn't elaborate on what God does. But she is certain if he does any good, he also does some evil.

Throughout the seven videos, only Methodist minister Bill Hinson provides a firmly orthodox Christian view of the topics discussed. Most of the speakers deny that God is one being in three persons, at work in the world, known throughout history, having redeemed humanity through the work of Jesus, now calling all people to repentance and faith in Christ, and coming one day to judge the whole world. Also denied is the fallen condition of humanity, and the inspiration and trustworthiness of the Scriptures.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE BURNED CHURCHES FUND?

Was the great church arson story of 1996 part of a scheme to prevent the financial collapse of the National Council of Churches (NCC)? There is evidence pointing in that direction.

In 1996, the NCC persuaded the media that black churches were burning all across the South, the apparent victims of a nationwide upsurge in racial hatred. The NCC's Burned Churches Fund collected millions of dollars ostensibly for church reconstruction.

The NCC raised over \$10.8 million in cash, along with at least \$3.4 million more in in-kind assistance. But of the \$10.8 million, only \$6.6 million can be accounted for in grants for church construction. The NCC has not fully explained what happened to the remaining \$4.2 million in cash.

The NCC has been wracked by deficit spending for years. Monies from the Burned Church Fund may have temporarily delayed the financial crisis that finally exploded in 1999, after Burned Churches fundraising had virtually come to a halt. The NCC's own auditor questioned the transfer of the fund's final \$330,000 to the council's general administration.

The NCC had originally promised that 15 percent of the Burned Churches Fund would go towards administration and political efforts to combat the "root causes" of racism. Fifteen percent of the \$10.8 million raised in cash would be \$1.6 million. This figure contrasts with the \$4.2 million that appears to have been spent on non-construction purposes, which is about 38 percent of the cash raised for burned churches by the NCC.

RELIGIOUS LEFT TARGETS ASHCROFT

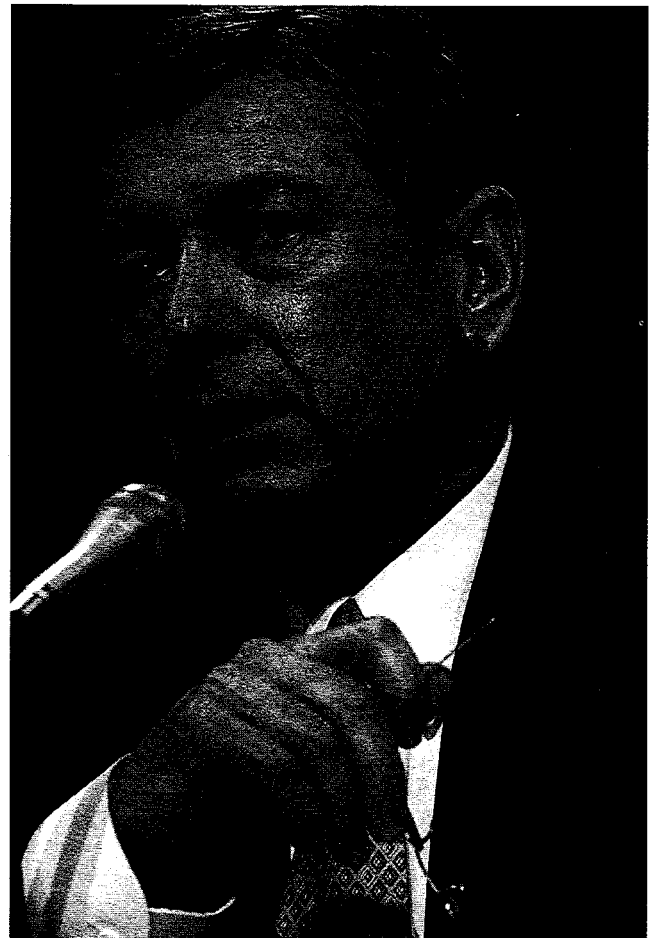
According to the Interfaith Alliance, an organization of liberal clergy of various religions, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft is a foe of religious liberty and a threat to religious minorities in America.

"I have grave concerns about Senator Ashcroft's ability to serve as Attorney General of the United States, a position in which he would be charged with upholding and fully enforcing the constitutional rights and liberties to faith groups that he clearly judges to be wrong and in need of correction,"

opined Interfaith Alliance Executive Director C. Welton Gaddy. He offered no details as to what faith groups Ashcroft could be expected to suppress or coerce.

"The highest post in the land dedicated to protecting the rights of all citizens should not be offered as a reward to religious political extremists," warned a statement from John Buehrens, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Buehrens was worried about the "legitimacy" that Ashcroft's "stridency and moral righteousness" might give to the "radical fringe."

Most strident was Muslim Imam Ghayth Nur Kashif, who drew a connection between Ashcroft and the "religious-right wing Oklahoma bombing of a federal building, the series of bombings and killings at health clinics and the past history of lynching and killings by the Ku Klux Klan and other religious extremist groups." f



Attorney General John Ashcroft, a Pentecostal, was condemned as a "religious political extremist" who would attack the constitutional rights of religious minorities.

REFORMING THE CHURCH

RE-IMAGINING IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By Abigail G. Noll

The potter reached down and tapped the mound of three bodies, then retreated to the side of the stage. One body coaxed the other two bodies to life, massaging their frozen arms. Slowly, the two still bodies responded with fluid body gestures. Before long, the three figures, the metaphorical clay, were dancing together.

This brief performance was emblematic of the Millennial Re-Imagining Conference, held last October 26-28 at the Minneapolis Convention Center. There was a lot of artful play evoking religious images, but the meaning remained ambiguous. God (the potter?) was



Former Boston College professor Mary Daly is a "post-Christian" who puts her faith in "quantum leaps."

on the scene somehow; however, it was hard to get a grasp of the character and the role of the Re-Imagining god. There was none of the willful, passionate personality of the God who burst into history to save humankind in Jesus Christ. Instead the emphasis at the conference fell upon human acts of creation, love, and justice. It was women who had to liberate one another from the forces that held them all in bondage.

The Re-Imagining Community, sponsor of the conference, became famous in 1993 for its heretical theological pronouncements and shocking new rituals. The goal appeared to be to challenge "patriarchal" Chris-

tian faith and devise a substitute set of beliefs and practices more affirming of modern women. But when criticized, the Re-Imaginists insisted that they were Christians. They described themselves as an "ecumenical movement" exploring the possibilities for a "new Reformation" of the Church.

The theme of the 2000 conference—"From Vision to Vessel: Creating Communities of Justice"—indicated a shift in the thrust of the Re-Imagining movement. The program did not feature so many trips into new theological and liturgical territory. Instead the focus was on extending the movement into new constituencies.

The conference organizers wrote in advance that they saw their movement confronting numerous "barriers of justice." Those barriers included "sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, institutionalized prejudices against people with disabilities or people from different cultures or people of different religions...." The organizers said that they "recognized the need to do more than critique. How can we be creative in overcoming these problems?"

TRYING TO CRAFT A COALITION OF VICTIMS

The speakers included an array of women who could claim to have suffered exclusion by the above barriers. The diversity of these speakers seemed to represent the kind of broad coalition that the Re-Imagining movement aspired to bring together.

On opening night Kathy Black—a United Methodist minister and Chair of Homiletics and Liturgics at Claremont School of Theology—spoke of how church theology had contributed to her oppression as a disabled person. She offered a "healing homiletic" that discounted the traditional view of an omnipotent God. "The all-powerful God has to be re-imagined," Black proclaimed to loud applause. "I don't believe God is a great puppeteer in the sky."

The Claremont professor also discounted the atonement, because she did not believe that God intended the sacrifice of Jesus. "Resurrection can happen without God causing the suffering...that's our problem with the atonement," Black said. "God doesn't have to cause it to heal it."

Rebecca Walker, a young exponent of the "third wave" of feminism, spoke of painful memories of a childhood torn between the black culture of her mother (novelist Alice Walker) and the Jewish culture of her

father. She suggested that healing from such memories could occur through the creative use of narrative. Reconstructing one's life through stories would allow the soul to "morph" across lines of race, class, and gender, Walker asserted. She added that Buddhism had taught her that narrative is spiritual work and requires accepting pain.

Later that day, long-time feminist ideologue Mary Daly received a standing ovation as she made her way to the stage. Her stream-of-consciousness discourse ranged from bashing "necro-technology" (bio-technology) to bashing Boston College (from whose faculty Daly was dismissed for refusing to permit men in her feminism seminars). Daly spoke of a "radical elemental feminism" that required "courage to sin, to leave, and to live." After other obtuse references to living in the sixth dimension and quintessence, Daly concluded: "God is DOG spelled backward. Goddess is a good word for interconnectedness. I have faith in quantum leaps."

Thandeka, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Meadville/Lombard Theological School, shared stories of people who were distorted by institutionalized racism. Children were forced to deny their affections for friends of another race, for fear of being rejected by their home communities. Thandeka urged the gathering to "overturn the doctrine of original sin" as an explanation for such abuses. She claimed that humans were not "bad," but rather "broken" by the "toxic environments" of a "shame culture."

Thandeka suggested that resurrecting "the desecrated self is the start of our renewal." She encouraged the audience to start "covenant groups," because humans can find healing and restoration only through community. "We can do this because we are the ones for whom we've been waiting!" she announced.

Womanist theologian Delores Williams, arriving at her third Re-Imagining conference, provided the culminating address. Williams, the Paul Tillich Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Seminary in New York, posed the question: "What must we do to birth our vision for justice-building communities?" In answer she expounded her own "trinity" of "tough love, tough justice, and tough righteousness."

For Williams "tough love" means "the church opposing the church in a fierce struggle" to free it "from the deadly virus of the Right." But power to win that struggle will come only when talk becomes action. Moving from vision to vessel requires action that upsets old reference points and reconfigures traditions, images, and symbols, according to Williams.

MOVING FROM 'ECUMENICAL' TO 'INTERFAITH'

Non-plenary sessions at the Millennium Conference appealed to varied interests. Workshop topics included:

~ Womansong, a group that practices "praying

with the body" through spiritual exercises such as *Tai Chi*.

~ a presentation of the Shower of Stoles, a traveling display of clerical stoles meant to protest the denial of ordination to gay, lesbian, and transgendered persons in most churches.

~ a walk through a labyrinth, described as "a spiritual tool meant to awaken us to the deep rhythm that unites us to ourselves and to the Light that calls from within."

There were caucuses for Re-Imaginers in the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Other caucuses addressed the questions: "What is the role of the GODDESS in the church?" and "Can I reconcile my non-theistic beliefs with Christian doctrine?" There were further caucuses focused on African-American women, younger women, Benedictine nuns, lesbians, and bisexuals.

In view of this dizzying pluralism, the future identity of the Re-Imagining movement was very much up for grabs. Some, Re-Imaginers began to ask whether "interfaith" is now a more accurate adjective than "ecumenical" to describe their movement. Many of the speakers did not profess any Christian faith—much less an orthodox one. Rebecca Walker is a practicing Buddhist. Mary Daly is a "post-Christian" who left the Church thirty years ago. Thandeka is a Unitarian. Perhaps Re-Imagining no longer sees itself as a reform movement within the Christian churches; it may be evolving as a separate religious community.

In any case, it is a community stressed by internal tensions. Resentments came out in a sharp exchange between Mary Daly, representing the older generation of feminists, and Rebecca Walker, speaking for younger women. Daly complained that ungrateful younger women were acquiescing as the "right wing is saying feminism is dead." Walker replied that her generation needed to take ownership and action in a new way.

But the most serious contradiction was between the image that the conference organizers tried to project—the broad coalition of victims struggling for justice—and the actual profile of the women who came to Minneapolis. The 500 predominantly older, middle-class white women from church backgrounds were a much smaller, more homogenous, and more privileged group than the organizers had envisioned. It remains to be seen whether the promised new efforts to start Re-Imagining chapters at the local level will remedy this deficiency. ■

Abigail G. Noll, an Episcopal laywoman in Montgomery, Alabama, was formerly on the IRD staff. Some material for this piece also came from an article written for the RENEW United Methodist women's network by Karellynne Gerber, a doctoral student in New Testament and Evangelism at Boston University. That material is used with the permission of Ms. Gerber and RENEW.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

NEW HINDU MILITANCY LEAVES INDIAN CHRISTIANS FRIGHTENED

By David C. Scott

For those who keep in touch with events in India, the attacks on Christians there over the past couple of years have seemed perplexing. Who would have expected such violence against Christians, especially as they are a tiny minority of some 2.5 percent in a country whose culture has been renowned for its tolerance?

It is important to note that a long national ideological struggle led up to the present explosive situation. The emergence of the explicitly "Hindu" BJP (*Bharatiya Janata* or Indian People's Party) as the dominant political force in the present coalition government is the realization of a vision for India kindled by a variety of Hindu nationalist reformers, ideologues, preachers and politicians for over a hundred years. The vision has been to "awaken" India to the inner strength, the richness of cultural resources, and the essential unity of its *Hindutva* (Hindu nature).

This ideology challenges the secular, liberal assumptions upon which the Indian state was established in 1947. It does not brook the possibility of any form of pluralism. Muslims, Christians and Communists alike are identified as unwelcome non-Indian enemies.

HISTORICAL RESENTMENTS TARGET MINORITIES

Most crucial was the founding in 1925 of the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh*) a "non-political" nationalist cultural renewal movement. The web of influence wielded by the RSS is pervasive and powerful. Some reports claim that there are as many as 20,000 local branches and that infiltration into the instruments of power – including the police and the educational system – is now well advanced. Most of the explicitly pro-*Hindutva* leaders within the current government were nurtured within this network.

Some RSS leaders do seem to be more accommodating. Their definition of "Hindu" includes any that believe in the "one-culture and one-nation" theory. As long as religious minorities accept the *Hindutva* of India, they can all form part of the one nation. This concession hardly allays the fears of the minorities, though; for they have seen the thuggish extremists carry out their atrocities on the assumption that they are doing what their leaders want, whatever those leaders say publicly.

Surely the recovery of ancient traditions can be a laudable aim. But *why* all this nationalist militancy? There are multiple resentments at work that must constantly be remembered. Up to 1947 the context within

RECENT ATTACKS ON INDIAN CHRISTIANS

"Phulbani, Orissa – Tension gripped areas under two police stations in Baliguda subdivision of Phulbani district following attacks on four Christian prayer houses last week." (*Indian Express*, Nov. 10, 2000)

"Bangalore, Karnataka – A blast rocked one of Hubli's oldest churches early this morning, triggering off arson and rioting in the north Karnataka city." (*Hindustan Times*, Dec. 27, 2000)

"Bhubaneswar, Orissa – The father [Catholic priest Lameswar Kanhar] and the cook of the Betticola Church under the Ghumsar Udayagiri police station in Kandhmal district were attacked by a group of ten to fifteen people when they protested against grazing of cattle in the church compound." (*Asian Age*, Jan. 19, 2001)

Similar incidents have multiplied in recent months. Within a single week: an Evangelical church in Gujarat was seized by 400 Hindu militants on November 26, a 64-year-old Catholic priest was beaten by a mob in Gujarat on November 28, a Catholic girls school in Bihar was robbed on December 1 with a nun and a cook sexually assaulted, a priest in Manipur was shot dead by motorcycle gunmen on December 2.

Some of these incidents may be the work of common criminals; others clearly are the work of organized political groups. But the conclusion that Indian Christians draw is the same: they are vulnerable, and they cannot always rely on the protection of the authorities.

which these pro-Hindu nationalist movements emerged was the humiliating experience of having been politically impotent colonized people for generations. They were subjected to the social, cultural, and economic domination of the Christian British for 200 years. And there was the even longer earlier period under Islamic forces. The traumas of that period are still seen by Hindus every time they visit some of their most ancient temples, where sacred iconography was disfigured by zealous Muslims.

It should be noted that until very recently it was usually the Muslim community that was at the receiving end of mob violence. Militant Hindus constantly allege that Muslims are essentially "alien," not only because they are said to despise Hindu religion and culture, but also because they are accused of being ultimately loyal not to India but Pakistan.

The upsurge of violence has also come at a time when feelings against "globalization" have never run higher. The opening of India to international flows of money and media is felt as the continuation of earlier western imperialism. Linked to all this is the nationalist Hindu belief that the Christian religion and its followers are to be identified with this western threat to India's independence and its long-held values.

THE PERILS OF 'COMMUNALISM'

It is likely that the present crisis for Indian Christians is caused more by "communalism" than by religion. Communalism means that people's primary identity is based on belonging not to the nation, but to a particular group within the nation. Thus nationalist sentiment comes to be identified with the religious loyalties of the majority. In the case of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India, this "communalism" is obviously not based on ethnic differences. Each "community" is composed of people from many different caste and tribal origins.

It is true, however, that at least 60 percent of Christians in India derive from among the many groups once called "Untouchables." These groups now proudly claim the name *Dalit* ("oppressed" or "crushed") as part of their struggle for a new, unified identity. Legislation

by the Indian government outlawing any form of discrimination on the basis of caste was passed long ago. Yet there are almost daily reports of violence against *Dalits* virtually throughout the country, especially as they become more aware of their rights and fight for them.

In recent correspondence with this writer, Dr. K. Rajaratnam of Chennai, the President of the National Council of Christians in India, reiterated a common perception: "As Christians are identified with the *Dalit* struggle it is natural for them to be targeted by right-wing Hindu nationalists." Few would argue with the analysis that wide-ranging social changes – including the struggle against the caste system – are a prime cause for the emergence of militant pro-*Hindutva* forces. There are economic interests that have a stake in resisting those changes.

THE THORNY QUESTION OF CONVERSION

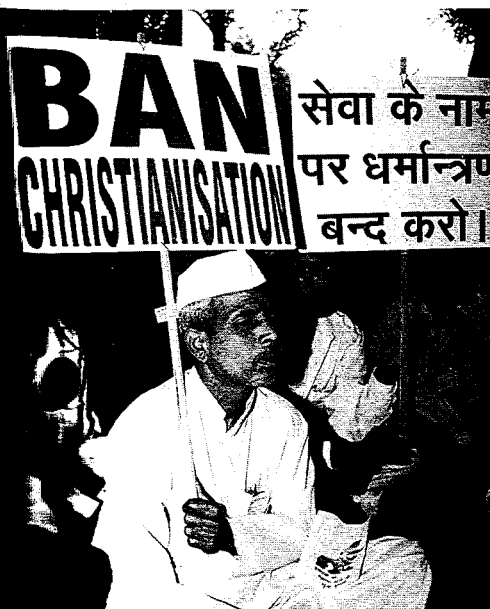
It is this "communalist" character of Indian society that makes the question of religious conversion such a sensitive issue. Conversion is invariably understood not only as a break away from Hindu religious tradition, but also as a change of community. Baptism is seen as a renunciation of that to which one is born, of all the sacral structures that form the integrating basis of family and community life. Conversions to Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism) have frequently involved whole families, even whole villages. Even less aggressive neo-Hindu teachers oppose such conversions, arguing that they wound the all-embracing bosom of the Hindu community.

In this context, conversion is a thorny issue. Christians affirm the inalienable right of everyone to hear the "good news" of a new beginning, new freedom, a new status, and so to respond by "turning" to God in a new way. Moreover, as groups such as the National Commission on Minorities and the Dalit Solidarity Movement claim, the alarm spread by militant Hinduism that Christians are practicing extensive "enforced conversion" among *Dalits* and tribal peoples is but one of numerous "myths" lying behind the present violence.

Yet the depth of feeling on the part of many very moderate Hindus on this issue of conversion cannot be ignored. While proclaiming Christ and defending religious freedom steadfastly, Christians themselves must reject the pull of communal hatreds. They must avoid giving offense for non-Gospel reasons.

Instead Christians must seek to offer the hand of God-loving friendship to their Hindu neighbors. Many of those neighbors abhor the kind of militancy in the name of Hinduism that has emerged lately. It is only together with such neighbors that Indian Christians can stem the brutal attacks that they have been experiencing. Likewise, U.S. Christians must offer their prayer support based upon an understanding of the complex Indian situation in which the persecution has arisen. ■

David C. Scott has been Professor of Religion and Culture at the United Theological College in Bangalore, India, for the past twelve years. Born and raised in India, he is currently an adjunct professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.



A Hindu nationalist protests alleged forcible conversions by Christian evangelists. This accusation has sparked recent acts of violence against Indian Christians.

A Christian Declaration On Marriage

The following declaration was released November 14, 2000. It was signed by an extraordinary set of ecumenical partners:

- Bishop Anthony O'Connell, Chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family Life;
- Dr. Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention;
- Bishop Kevin Mannoia, President of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Initially, Dr. Robert Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, also endorsed the declaration. But he later retracted his signature (see p. 11).

As we celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, entering the third millennium, we pledge together to honor the Lord by committing ourselves afresh to God's first institution—marriage.

We believe that marriage is a holy union of one man and one woman in which they commit, with God's help, to build a loving, life-giving, faithful relationship that will last for a lifetime. God has established the married state, in the order of creation and redemption, for spouses to grow in love of one another and for the procreation, nurture, formation, and education of children.

We believe that in marriage many principles of the Kingdom of God are manifested. The interdependence of healthy Christian community is clearly exemplified in loving one another (John 13:34), forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32), confessing to one another (James 5:16), and submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21). These principles find unique fulfillment in marriage. Marriage is God's gift, a living image of the union between Christ and His Church.

We believe that when a marriage is true to God's loving design it brings spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, and social benefits not only to a couple and family but also to the Church and to the wider culture. Couples, churches, and the whole of society have a stake in the well being of marriages. Each, therefore, has its own obligations to prepare, strengthen, support and restore marriages.

Our nation is threatened by a high divorce rate, a rise in cohabitation, a rise in non-marital births, a decline in the marriage rate, and a diminishing

interest in and readiness for marrying, especially among young people. The documented adverse impact of these trends on children, adults, and society is alarming. Therefore, as church leaders, we recognize an unprecedented need and responsibility to help couples begin, build, and sustain better marriages, and to restore those threatened by divorce.

Motivated by our common desire that God's Kingdom be manifested on earth as it is in heaven, we pledge to deepen our commitment to marriage. With three quarters of marriages performed by clergy, churches are uniquely positioned not only to call America to a stronger commitment to this holy union but to provide practical ministries and influence for reversing the course of our culture. It is evident in cities across the nation that where churches join in common commitment to restore a priority on marriage, divorces are reduced and communities are positively influenced.

Therefore, we call on churches throughout America to do their part to strengthen marriage in our nation by providing:

- ~ Prayer and spiritual support for stronger marriages
- ~ Encouragement for people to marry
- ~ Education for young people about the meaning and responsibility of marriage
- ~ Preparation for those engaged to be married
- ~ Pastoral care, including qualified mentor couples, for couples at all stages of their relationship
- ~ Help for couples experiencing marital difficulty and disruption
- ~ Influence within society and the culture to uphold the institution of marriage

Further, we urge churches in every community to join in developing policies and programs with concrete goals to reduce the divorce rate and increase the marriage rate.

By our commitment to marriage as instituted by God, the nature of His Kingdom will be more clearly revealed in our homes, our churches, and our culture. To that end we pray and labor with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

May the grace of God, the presence of Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit be abundant in all those who so commit and be a blessing to all whose marriages we seek to strengthen.

NCC TURNS ITS BACK ON ECUMENISM; EDGAR RENOUNCES MARRIAGE DECLARATION

By Diane L. Knippers

In America, we've managed to do something extraordinary: We've managed to make marriage, the most basic of all social institutions, controversial." In making this depressing observation in the February 2001 edition of *Crisis* magazine, Maggie Gallagher could have cited as Exhibit A the marriage controversy incited last fall by National Council of Churches (NCC) General Secretary Robert Edgar. He not only managed to make supporting marriage controversial, but he also set back ecumenical relations and further damaged the NCC.

Since Edgar took his new post a year ago, he has been proclaiming that it's a new day for the NCC. He has promised to pay off the council's debts, balance its budget, and restore the confidence of member denominations. Most ambitiously, the NCC under Edgar has declared its intention to "join with other Christian communions (such as the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical churches) in discussing a new vision in the new millennium for ecumenical ministry in the United States of America." The NCC Executive Committee announced that it would "look hopefully towards the birth of a new ecumenical vehicle" by 2003.

This new ecumenical outreach is a tacit admission that the NCC can no longer so readily presume that it holds trademark rights to the label "ecumenical." NCC member denominations now comprise barely thirty percent of U.S. Christians, and that percentage is declining. The council's leftward-veering theological

and political adventures have alienated large portions of its own claimed constituency—not to mention the more conservative churches outside the NCC fold.

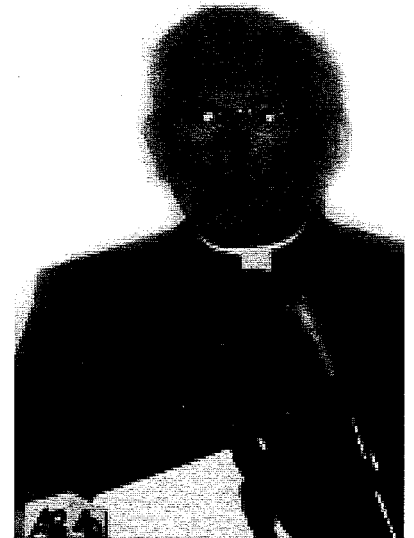
It is worth remembering that this notion—that the NCC can save itself by expanding its ecumenical embrace—is hardly new. The idea has been floated before, with few results. Last summer when I was packing boxes for the IRD's move, I found a

decade-old news report. The article bemoaned the NCC's financial troubles of that time; hailed the council's then-new general secretary, Joan Brown Campbell; and suggested that she could chart a more hopeful future by reaching out to Evangelicals and Catholics. Ten years later, the situation has not improved. What evidence do we have today that Bob Edgar will fare better than Joan Brown Campbell?

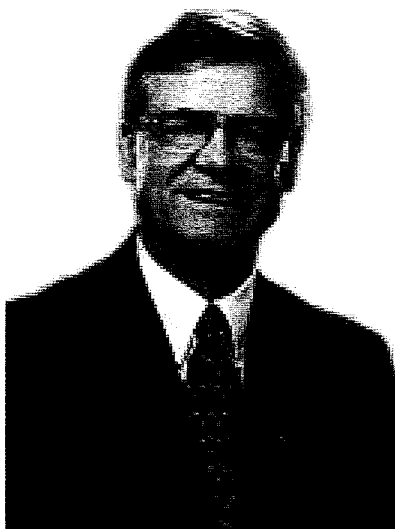
At first there were some encouraging signs. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) acquired a new president, Kevin Mannoia, in 2000. Part of Mannoia's vision was to build bridges between Evangelicals and other churches, based on applying common biblical teachings to the challenges of contemporary American culture. The NAE had no interest in folding itself into some NCC-controlled ecumenical umbrella; however, Mannoia was willing to see whether the NAE and NCC could work together in limited areas. He resolved to test Bob Edgar's offer of closer cooperation.

A TEST CASE OF ECUMENISM

The attempt to strengthen Christian marriage became the test case of these new ecumenical relationships. In May 2000, Mannoia convened a task force on marriage, with representatives from the Roman Catholic bishops, the Southern Baptist Convention, the NAE, and the NCC. The Catholic bishops, in particular, took this initiative seriously. In addition to Washington-based staff, two bishops participated in meetings, Cardinal William H. Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, and Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell, chair of the bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life. Bob Edgar himself did not attend any of the meetings,



Bishop Anthony O'Connell, Chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family Life, was one of the signatories of "A Christian Declaration on Marriage."



NCC head Edgar characterized the marriage declaration as "controversial" and "offensive."

but he sent the Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner, NCC Deputy General Secretary for Research and Planning, as his representative.

The task force worked in face-to-face meetings and by phone for several months, drafting a "Christian Declaration on Marriage." The declaration (see page 10) urged churches to develop programs "to reduce the divorce rate and increase the marriage rate." Signers pledged to uphold "God's first institution—marriage." They defined marriage as a "holy union of one man and one woman in which they commit to build, with God's help, a loving, life-giving, faithful relationship that will last for a lifetime." All the participating church leaders, including Edgar, agreed to endorse the declaration.

The church leaders then selected November 14 as the date to release the declaration at a Washington press conference. Mannoia cleared the date in a phone call with Lindner, who assured him that the NCC would be able to send a representative to the press conference, even as the NCC's annual assembly was being held that week in Atlanta. But, in the end, no NCC spokesperson came to the press conference.

Then on November 17, in a stunning turn-about, Bob Edgar withdrew his name from the ecumenical statement. He told the delegates at the NCC General Assembly that he had made a "mistake" in joining the other Christian leaders to endorse the marriage declaration.

Edgar's reversal followed strong pressure from homosexual elements within the NCC that objected to the single phrase in the declaration defining marriage as "a holy union of one man and one woman."

That particular line of the declaration had been formulated at one of the very first task force meetings. "Could the NCC agree to that?" the other task force members explicitly asked Lindner. She assured them that the NCC could. She had even done some preliminary research and told the task force that this was the definition of marriage held by 34 of the then 35 NCC member communions.

A FATEFUL CHOICE

The Christian Declaration on Marriage thus confronted Bob Edgar with a fateful choice: He could make common cause with the vast majority of Christians inside and outside the NCC, in support of a divine institution—marriage—that is honored in all major branches of the Church across history and around the world. Or he could cater to a small extremist minority within the NCC that is campaigning to legitimize homosexual relations. He chose the latter.

*True ecumenical progress may
have to go around the NCC
rather than through it.*

Edgar told the NCC delegates gathered in Atlanta that he was offering a "personal apology to those I hurt by that signature [of the marriage declaration]." In previous statements, he had characterized the declaration as "controversial" and "offensive" in parts. He implied that it touched on issues on which there were divisions between NCC member denominations. Yet virtually all bodies inside the NCC continue to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Edgar himself is a minister of the United Methodist Church, which explicitly bans "same-sex unions" in its Book of Discipline. Nevertheless, Edgar affirmed to the NCC Assembly that he supported "a blessing of [same-sex] partnership, marriage of people who love each other."

While Edgar caved in to a radical portion of his constituency, Mannoia had his own problems. Officials of one of the largest NAE member denominations told him that they

would not promote the marriage declaration if the NCC were a part of the effort. Mannoia was willing to try to persuade them to come on board, for the sake of building the broadest possible pro-marriage movement in American churches. And, even though Edgar has retracted his signature, the other three declaration sponsors have extended an invitation to the head of every NCC member communion to endorse the declaration.

At this point, true ecumenical progress may have to go around the NCC rather than through it. The council's potential partners will need to ask themselves: If the NCC cannot even uphold the widely-held Christian understanding of marriage, on what meaningful issues can it possibly cooperate with the majority of the nation's Christians?

Bob Edgar was hired as the NCC's general secretary to reverse its long demise. Instead, he may be ensuring its ultimate collapse. The Edgar administration appears set on a course every bit as extreme as his predecessor's.

The financial indicators are also not looking bright for Edgar's NCC. A report to the Atlanta Assembly suggested that balancing the NCC budget for the first six months of 2001 would be difficult. At least 17 of the council's 64 employees would have to be laid off, and more than \$1 million in new, uncommitted funds would have to be received. At the same time, it was also reported that almost half of the NCC member communions had not so far contributed a penny in 2000. And one of the council's financial pillars, the United Methodist Church, announced that it would be reducing its gifts in future years.

At some point even the council's fiercest defenders must consider: Who needs the NCC? We can do ecumenism better without this encumbrance. **f**

NEXT GENERATION

UNFORGETTABLE DIVISION

By Will Adams

God has directed my life thus far to serve the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a number of capacities. I started out as a delegate to the international Presbyterian Youth Triennium Conference. In 1999 I was a Youth Advisory Delegate to the General Assembly—the highest governing body of the PCUSA. Since then, I have worked part-time for a renewal group that focuses on getting youth involved in the national church. As soon as God guided me onto the path of involvement in the PCUSA, my eyes have been opened to the “diversity” of opinions in the church on startlingly fundamental issues of faith.

You would be hard-pressed to find a Christian who revels in the division of Christ’s church. Christians refer to the division in the church with hate, wishing we could be unified as a single salt and light in a dark and tasteless world. It would seem legitimate, therefore, that a church faced with division would try to eliminate that division.

Church leaders in the PCUSA do this in a peculiar way—they put together plans for nationwide conferences on “Unity in the Midst of Our Diversity.” These conferences center on dialogue as the key to reconciliation. The presumption is, “If we talk about particular divisive issues for long enough, the divisions will eventually disappear.”

“Unity in the Midst of our Diversity” suggests either that our diversity does not divide us or that our unity is much greater than our minor divisions. When I think of this theme, I think of the beauty of the Christian community: we come from different backgrounds and are very different people, but we hold up the same God as true and unchanging. My vision is based on the same assumption that the theme has—the differences in a Christian community are not important.


The assumption is not true. Consider the response to an overture brought to the 2000 General Assembly by Beaver-

Butler Presbytery in Pennsylvania. The presbytery simply sought recognition of a theological division in the PCUSA on basic issues such as the authority of Scripture. After a week of “unity” at the assembly, however, the pastoral language of the GA’s response—“we choose rather to see differences positively and believe that differences in fact have the potential to make our unity in Christ even stronger”—was no surprise.

The vote on the overture was scheduled for Thursday, before the 268-251 vote on Friday to approve an amendment

one delegate’s voice on the floor, could have switched the outcome.

After the vote I spoke to a youth delegate who had been a strong proponent of the ban on same-sex unions. She looked into my eyes and started bawling. “Did I make the right decision?” she asked. I asked why she voted for the amendment. Her reasons hadn’t changed, but her feelings had. They changed because of the tangible pain of the gay activists who were weeping behind her. The reiterated message of unity will not cause that memory to be easily forgotten.

The division is real. It is over big issues. It has touched people’s lives. It would be healthy for the life of the church if we recognized the division in order to take steps towards dealing with it, instead of vainly hoping that it will go away. 

*The illusion of unity
built by the messages
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tangible division.*

Will Adams is a member of the Village Church in the Presbytery of San Diego, CA. He is now a freshman at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD.

that would ban same-sex union ceremonies in the church. This begs the question: What if the vote on Beaver-Butler had been taken after the same-sex union vote? Would the vote have changed? The rhetoric certainly did. The same people who in effect called the Beaver-Butler proposal ridiculous on Thursday admitted that the church was “not of one mind” and “divided” on Friday.

Friday was an alarm clock for the dream of unity for many at the General Assembly. The illusion of unity built by the messages of our leaders met the truth of a tangible division. With the vote as close as it was, there was an element of personal accountability for one’s vote. A few commissioners’ votes, perhaps even



INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS

RUSSIAN REGISTRATION
FOLLIES

As the year 2000 ended, thousands of Russian religious bodies found their future existence threatened. If they failed to register with local authorities by December 31, as required under the restrictive 1997 Russian Religion Law, they could face "liquidation." They would lose their right to hold services in public places, distribute literature, own property, or host foreign guests.

Small, unusual, and foreign-connected religious bodies appeared to have the greatest difficulty in gaining state recognition. On November 28 a Moscow appeals court denied registration to the Salvation Army. Col. Kenneth Baillie, head of the group's Russian operations, explained the court's reasoning: "Since we have the word 'army' in our name, they said we are a militarized organization bent on the violent overthrow of the Russian government." Closure of the Salvation Army's Moscow branch would shut down programs that include providing about 6,000 meals a month to the city's poor.

Two of Russia's four Roman Catholic dioceses had encountered another obstacle to registration. The 1997 law required that the head of a religious organization must be a Russian citizen or permanent resident. But the two foreign bishops had been unsuccessful so far in their applications for Russian citizenship. In an interview with Religion News Service, the bishop of Irkutsk in Siberia, Jerzy Mazur, recounted a conversation with local officials about how he might expedite his citizenship application. "They explained that I can achieve citizenship by marrying a Russian woman," according to Bishop Mazur.

FILIPINO CHURCHES PUSHED
FOR PRESIDENT'S RESIGNATION

Filipino church leaders played a prominent role in the protest movement that forced President Joseph "Erap" Estrada from office in January. As impeachment proceedings began against Estrada, top



A Roman Catholic nun joins a demonstration against then-Philippine president Joseph Estrada. Church leaders played a part in Estrada's removal from office.

church officials joined to call for his resignation. A crowd of 80,000 gathered in Manila December 7 for a "protest Eucharist" celebrated by Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Sin.

"Mr. President, do not be afraid to resign," Sin said in his homily. "I will take care of you. Resignation is not defeat. Only brave men do that." Also present at the prayer rally were several other Catholic bishops and officials of the Protestant National Council of Churches in the Philippines.

Estrada was charged, on the testimony of a close associate, with having received \$8 million in bribes from gambling syndicates. "The hour has come for President Estrada to confess and repent," declared the NCCP Executive Committee. "This means stepping down from power to pave the way for forgiveness and reconciliation. The president has lost any moral ascendancy to govern." Filipino Protestant leaders also criticized Estrada for flaunting his extramarital affairs, heavy drinking, and compulsive gambling.

DOCUMENTS DEMONSTRATE
VIETNAM PERSECUTION

In November the human rights group Freedom House released Vietnamese government documents showing a concerted campaign against the country's growing Christian community. One of the documents expressed concern that Vietnamese churches might imitate the role of their Eastern European counterparts in undermining the communist system. It recommended that the state "work hard to control religious leaders, officials, and missionaries" and "be sure that the 'religious law' yields to the 'secular law.'"

Another document banned religious study groups. It urged that local officials be informed "if a stranger arrives to preach religion." Also included was the text of a pledge by which Christians could renounce their faith.

"These documents are the smoking gun," asserted Nina Shea, director of the Freedom House Center for Religious Freedom. "They show that church closures, arrests and Bible burnings are not isolated acts of overzealous cadres, but are the policy directives of the Vietnamese Communist Party."

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS
FAULT ISRAEL

Engulfed in escalating violence and cut off by Israeli roadblocks, Arab Christian leaders in Jerusalem and the West Bank have made a concerted appeal to world opinion. Their statements since the outbreak of violence last September have contained a highly charged mixture of anger at Israel, gloom about the prospects for their own communities, and perseverance in the hope of some day attaining peace and freedom.

Archimandrite Theodosius Hanna of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem accused Israel of "practicing ethnic cleansing against the Arabs, Muslim and Christian." In a press briefing at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Theodosius asked "all the churches in the WCC to make visible the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people."

Jerusalem's Latin [Catholic] Patriarch, Michel Sabbah, used his Christmas message to make a pitch for Palestinian statehood. "In this feast, we have one main wish, that the Palestinian freedom be born," Sabbah wrote. "Indeed, when it will be born, it will be an agent of tranquillity, stability and salvation for us, for the region and for the world."

In an interview with Ecumenical News International, Sabbah seemed to justify the Palestinian rioters. The patriarch characterized them as martyrs in a crusade for justice: "Those, young and old, who are offering their lives are not doing it to aggress anybody: they are only defending their holy places, their freedom and their life."

Many Arab Christian leaders expressed worry about the survival of their communities. "The number of Christians in Palestine is dwindling so much that the situation is becoming dangerous," Armenian Patriarch Torkom II told a visiting delegation of U.S. mainline leaders in Jerusalem. Over the past century the proportion of Christians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza has declined from perhaps 20 percent to two percent.

The U.S. delegation's final statement on December 13 reflected the political tilt of its Arab Christian hosts. It urged "all people who love mercy to recognize and condemn this new apartheid that oppresses the Palestinian people." National Council of Churches General Secretary Robert Edgar likewise cast all blame upon Israel: "The fundamental source of the present violent confrontation lies in the continued failure to make real the national rights of the Palestinian people to a sovereign independent state in their own homeland."

EVANGELICAL POLITICIAN IN KEY MEXICAN POST

Pablo Salazar, the newly-elected governor in the troubled state of Chiapas, has an unusual distinction in Mexican politics: He is a Protestant. A Nazarene lawyer, Salazar has a record of defending Indian evangelicals in Chiapas who have been attacked and driven out of their communities.

Salazar has a difficult task in turning around the situation in the southern Mexican state. Aside from the problem of religious persecution, he will have to deal with the military threats of the leftist Zapatista guerrillas, as well as the most extreme poverty in all Mexico.

"Pablo Salazar has a well deserved reputation with the Indians of Chiapas," observed Dale Kietzman, a longtime evangelical missionary in the area. "They trust him, and this will be very important." Kietzman recalled a 1998 incident in which Salazar dissuaded a mob of Zapatista militants from lynching an Indian pastor whom they accused of being a government collaborator.

Protestants are still a small minority in Mexico; however, they comprise as much as 40 percent of the population in Chiapas. Salazar was elected with the support of a broad coalition including the conservative Party of National Action and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution.

CHRISTMAS CRACKDOWN IN CHINA

Reports in early December told of a significant crackdown against unregistered churches in the southeastern Chinese province of Zhejiang. State-run media in China indicated that more than 1,500 unrecognized religious sites had been demolished or shut down in Zhejiang since early November.

A *Washington Post* correspondent traveling through the area wrote: "The countryside here is dotted with the ruins of churches the government has torn down or blown up in recent weeks. Other churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, have been seized and converted into schools and recreation centers."

A spokesman for the local government defended the crackdown: "In rural areas, religious superstition is still very rampant.

The government's goal is to demolish those illegal buildings as well as correct those decadent rural lifestyles."

Meanwhile, the World Evangelical Fellowship reported a growing campaign within the state-recognized China Christian Council to purge more conservative evangelicals. In May 1999 three students were expelled from the flagship Protestant seminary in Nanjing for their excessive evangelistic zeal. This year several faculty members were dismissed from the seminary because of their links to more evangelical "house churches."

Across China, according to the World



Hu Songlin stands in front of her former church in Zhejiang province. The Chinese government seized the building and turned it into a school. The cross on the front was replaced with a red star.

Evangelical Fellowship, pastors and seminary teachers have been forced to attend study sessions on the theology of China Christian Council leader Ding Gungxun. Ding's works challenge classic Protestant teachings such as the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the call to evangelize non-believers. ■

ORDINATION QUESTIONS

by *Luther Herche*

I recently attended Exploration 2000, a United Methodist conference designed to help young people “discern God’s call to ordained ministry.” I was one of 1300 who came to Dallas, presumably to clarify the ministry to which God was calling us and to see whether the United Methodist Church would be the best place to exercise that ministry. So what was the denomination’s top “selling point” that was stressed to us potential recruits? Again and again, it was United Methodism’s “rich diversity” that was commended.

“We are,” proclaimed Lynn Westfield, a professor at Drew Theological Seminary, “rich, poor, black, white, fat, thin....” Thus far she was following the thought of the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” But then Westfield continued her list, praising moral and theological differences that are dividing the church today. “We are gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gendered,” she boasted, and “some believe that He [Jesus] was ransomed for our sin.”

Neither Westfield nor most other speakers ever got to Paul’s final point. They never discussed what is supposed to unite United Methodists. The design team, I imagine, wanted to make everyone feel welcome. One college student in

my small group remarked (approvingly) about how one speaker was “purposefully vague,” so as not to offend anyone who might have disagreed.

But in taking “inclusion” so far, the speakers left out many things that are important when directing young folks into ministry – not the least of which was the Gospel. How could we discern God’s calling in our individual lives when we

*What makes the
church today any
different from
McDonald’s?*

received so little teaching on God’s calling to all humanity in Christ?

There was some talk about how God calls us to serve. But from these and other speakers there was no mention of whom we are to serve, or what we are to serve them. But one speaker – Steve Long, a professor at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary – cut through the ambiguity.

“Do you want to serve?” Long asked. “I’ve got the perfect job for you. It’s

called, ‘Can I take your order?’ Thousands are served every day.” I might add that it would be easy to find a fast-food chain whose employees are more diverse than the United Methodist Church, and whose service is done better and with a smile. So what makes the church today any different from McDonald’s?

Steve Long answered that we, as Christians, are first and foremost to serve God. He went on to say that our service is to God only when it stems from “Word and Sacrament.” He talked about recovering the “language of faith” and participating in the one ministry – that is, the ministry of Jesus Christ. That ministry cannot be separated from *Jesus* being the incarnate Son of God, *Jesus* being born of the virgin Mary, *Jesus*’ three years of ministry, *Jesus*’ sacrificial death, and *Jesus*’ resurrection.

Long pointed out that many people want to get rid of the cross because it is alienating. “It’s supposed to be; that’s the point!” was his resounding reply. If we want to be acceptable to all, we must get rid of the cross. But, if we want to be ministers of Jesus Christ, we must proclaim the cross in all of its offense.

Yes, like McDonald’s, we do welcome all people. But we welcome all people to come and embrace the cross of Christ, to believe on Him for their salvation. 7



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