

# faith & freedom

REFORMING THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL & POLITICAL WITNESS

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## Human Rights: bringing mainline church advocacy into focus

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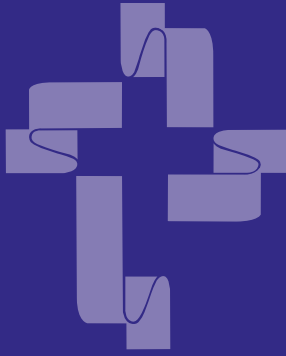
*DIVESTING PRESBYTERIANS RAISE A RUCKUS*

WITH FROM THE PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS, CHURCH NEWS, IRD DIARY & LETTERS

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE INSTITUTE ON RELIGION & DEMOCRACY







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RELIGION & DEMOCRACY

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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 Church Alliance for a New Sudan and the Liberty Initiative for North Korea.

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I was disappointed in your statement in "Religious Voices Must Not be Marginalized" (From the President, Summer/Fall 2004)—"but the United States is a democracy." From a constitutional and historical standpoint you are mistaken. I will concede, however, that with the aid of renegade activist judges we have gradually evolved into a democracy in attitude, if not in fact. Our founders rejected democracy as a form of government and formed a constitutional republic.

I feel that when you refer to our "democracy," you are giving credence to the big lie and are aiding and abetting the demise of our system.

John W. Bailey, Jr.  
Nashville, TN

I read everything that comes from IRD, and have been very impressed with your intelligence and dedication, your obvious ability to see the issues clearly and remain firmly supportive of "gospel truth" where moral issues are concerned.

Thank you for your leadership.

The Rev. Laura Grace Eisenhower  
Prescott, AZ

Congratulations on IRD's hard work covering the United Methodist General Conference (Summer/Fall 2004). Thanks to you, the evangelical/conservative surge continues. I note that a significant number of liberal bishops are retiring before they have to, indicating they know the "battle has been lost." They must be a bit depressed with the news that evangelicals and conservatives can "politic" with as much success as liberals. Regarding the larger scene, the General Conference action will have a positive influence on their Lutheran and Presbyterian counter-parts. Perhaps as a bellwether Protestant Church, Methodists have shown the way out of the homosexual "quicksand."

Walter W. Benjamin  
via e-mail

## NEW, UPDATED IRD WEBSITE NOW ONLINE!

The Institute on Religion & Democracy's website has been completely redesigned. The new site features a more functional layout, improved search engine capability, and an easier online donation form. Please stop by [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org) and let us know what you think!

## Photos

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# Under the Influence

by Diane Knippers

I was shocked, a bit embarrassed, but of course also gratified to be named one of 25 most influential Evangelicals by *Time* magazine in February. While ambivalent about my own inclusion, I am delighted that two IRD board members—Roberta Ahmanson and Richard John Neuhaus—were also listed.

Many things could be said about this list—and the making of such lists. The list is eclectic (it includes two Roman Catholics, for example). I appreciate its breadth—its refusal to fixate on a couple of familiar, high-profile, and controversial individuals, as is the habit of many lazy journalists. I also liked its incorporation of leaders known for something other than political advocacy, including a Bible study teacher, a theologian, philanthropists, a publisher, the head of a relief and development agency, and even a couple of preachers.

Several people on the list, myself included, are hardly familiar household names, but do have a measure of influence behind the scenes. I have been prompted to reflect on the nature of influence—and on those who have influenced me. I've been blessed by innumerable healthy role models, mentors, and others who have touched me profoundly.

Many of us who seek the reformation of our churches have been deeply influenced by one man who recently passed away, Edmund W. Robb, Jr. More than any other single individual, Dr. Robb instigated and directed reform efforts in the United Methodist Church, efforts that have spilled over into the larger American Protestant community. A survey of the ministries he touched is stunning. He chaired the board of Good News, the flagship evangelical renewal group in United Methodism, whose president today also leads the interdenominational Association for Church Renewal. He was an early supporter of the independent Mission Society for United Methodists. He helped launch the UM Confessing Movement.

Arguably, Ed Robb's most lasting effect on United Methodism will be his founding of AFTE, A Foundation for Theological Education, which for nearly 20 years has funded doctoral studies for promising Evangelical scholars. Today, over 40 of AFTE's John Wesley Fellows now teach at seminaries. Two are presidents of United Methodist seminaries.

Ed Robb was also a key founder of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, chairing our board of directors through its first decade. His involvement in the IRD revealed his conviction that

the Gospel of Christ should shape the social and political witness of the churches, his compassion for the persecuted church, and his commitment to orthodox ecumenism. I'll always be grateful that Dr. Robb persuaded the rest of the IRD board to take the risk of inviting an eager—but politically naïve—30 year-old woman from Kentucky to join the IRD staff in 1982.

Dr. Robb's publicly identifiable and measurable influence in church reform doesn't tell the whole story. The impact of his character and ministry was as significant as the organizations he launched. He and his wife Martha, an extraordinary woman in her own right, produced five highly capable children, all committed Christians and several in full-time Christian ministry. Ed was a stereotypical bigger-than-life Texan, who also had a gentle and compassionate side. He was a man of integrity, who exemplified the holiness he preached. He was an evangelist who didn't neglect small churches in small towns. According to Good News president Jim Heidinger, Ed "probably preached in more United Methodist churches than any evangelist ever." Indeed, more than anything, I recall Ed Robb's passion that men and women would know God.

The story of his own conversion is dramatic and, today, poignant. Ed was a carousing sailor, on leave in San Francisco during World War II, when he happened into the then-evangelistic Glide Memorial United Methodist Church. Moved by the message of pastor J.C. McPheeters, Ed accepted Christ.

Tragically, today Glide Memorial is one of the most radically apostate churches in America. I remember listening to a radio report some 20 years ago about a convention sponsored by a prostitutes' organization called COYOTE—"Call Off Your Old Tired

Ethics." To my dismay, but not my surprise, the convention was being held at Glide Memorial.

Dr. Robb spent his life seeking the reformation of the church that had been instrumental in his own transformation in Christ. The United Methodist Church is a better church than it would have been without Dr. Robb. But it, like most of the mainline denominations, has a long way to go. The seeds of genuine reformation were planted by men and women such as Ed Robb. I'm proud to serve with others in my generation, seeking to pass on the legacy of leaders like Ed Robb while nurturing, encouraging, challenging, and equipping the next generation of reformers.

The approbation of *Time* magazine is flattering and pleasant. But I'll be honest: it meant even more to hear the occasional "Well done, I'm proud of you," that I would get from Ed Robb. ✚



Ed Robb, Jr.

### LUTHERAN SEXUALITY PROPOSALS

**O**n January 13, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Task Force for Studies on Human Sexuality released its long-awaited report. The task force offers three recommendations in preparation for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August.

The first recommendation urges ELCA Lutherans to “concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.” It suggests that they should value “the God-given mission and communion we share” more highly than any “issues” of sexuality.

The second recommendation, in regard to blessing same-sex unions, proposes that the ELCA should “continue to respect the pastoral guidance of the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops,” which disapproves of same-sex unions. But the task force seemingly gives permission for such ceremonies, expressing its conviction “that pastors and congregations can and should be trusted by this church to exercise the wisdom of discretion in their ministry to same-sex couples.”

The final recommendation would leave the denomination’s standards for clergy sexual conduct (prohibiting sex outside of marriage) unchanged on paper. But the task force suggests that “this church may choose to refrain from disciplining those who in good conscience ... call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates.”

### UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AD

**I**n early December, the United Church of Christ (UCC) launched an advertisement campaign on major network

and cable channels. The ad depicts two muscular doormen refusing to let non-whites, disabled people, and homosexuals into a church service. Then viewers see the words: “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.” At the end of the commercial are scenes portraying the 1.3 million-member denomination as racially diverse and welcoming of same-sex couples.

UCC officials protested when the CBS and NBC networks rejected the ad as “too controversial” to air.

The Association for Church Renewal, a coalition that includes the IRD, issued a press release. “We defend the right of the UCC to communicate its message in mainstream media,” said IRD President Diane Knippers. “But we believe that this ad is dishonest and insulting to other Christian churches.... The UCC should voluntarily pull this ad.”

The Rev. David Runnion-Bareford, Executive Director of Biblical Witness Fellowship, a UCC renewal movement, commented: “While a friendly welcome is an important first step in bringing people into the church, there is a need to explain what the church has to offer of substance.... The Good News of the Gospel is much, much more than a tolerant, inclusive club.”

### NEW ECUMENICAL BODY GROWS

**O**n November 17, 2004, America’s Roman Catholic Bishops voted to join Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT), a broad ecumenical coalition. Aspiring to be “the most inclusive Christian organization ever” in the United States, CCT seeks to bring together denominations and parachurch groups from all five “families” of American Christianity: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, Evangelical/Pentecostal, and “Racial/Ethnic.”

Significant doubts remain about CCT. One third of the Catholic bishops voted against affiliation, with several expressing concerns that the new body might follow the leftward drift of the National Council of Churches (NCC).

Several large Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God, have declined to join CCT.

NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar, a key proponent of CCT, was dismissive of those who had qualms about it. According to Edgar, the new group includes “those Evangelicals who read the Bible carefully enough to know that God cares about poor people.”

### EPISCOPAL CHURCH OFFERS PAGAN RITES AS “RESOURCES”

**I**n October, the Episcopal Church’s Office of Women’s Ministries released “liturgical resources” on its website that included “A Women’s Eucharist: A Celebration of the Divine Feminine.”

This eucharistic liturgy is addressed to a pagan goddess, with whom women have communion through their own bodily fluids. Toward the end of the rite, the participants are to raise a plate of raisin cakes and say, “Mother God, our ancient sisters called you Queen of Heaven and baked these cakes in your honor in defiance of their brothers and husbands who would not see your feminine face.” The reference is to idolatrous practices that were specifically condemned by the prophets Jeremiah (7:18, 44:19) and Hosea (3:1).

The author of this liturgy was the Rev. Glyn Ruppe-Melnyk, an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. Both she and her husband, the Rev. William Melnyk (also an Episcopal priest), had been active on Wiccan and Druid websites.

Sharp denunciations from the IRD and ChristianityToday.com quickly publicized the story. In response, Bishop Charles Bennisson of the Diocese of Pennsylvania insisted, “I will not allow this situation to turn into a witch hunt of any sort.” But the rite was quickly removed from the Episcopal Church’s website.

In November, the couple sent letters of repentance to Bishop Bennisson. But Margaret Rose, Director of the Episcopal Office of Women’s Ministries, made no apologies for posting the liturgy. She explained that it had been removed from the website to avoid possible copyright infringement. ✚



*The UCC television advertisement features “bouncers” outside a church who refuse to admit non-whites, disabled people, and homosexuals.*



## CHURCHES REFLECT POLITICAL DIVISION IN UKRAINE

The disputed presidential election in Ukraine underscored differences among churches in that former Soviet republic. Leaders of the largest Ukrainian religious body, the Orthodox Church still subject to the Russian patriarch in Moscow, backed the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich. By contrast, leaders of almost all the other Ukrainian religious groups supported challenger Viktor Yushchenko.

Following the fraud-marred November election, leaders of the minority religious groups protested: "We are concerned by the unjust conduct of this election, and especially by the mass falsification of its results." This joint statement was endorsed by top officials of the autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as well as the Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and Evangelical churches. During the campaign, Yushchenko had promised good relations with all faiths, although he himself was Orthodox. Yanukovich had expressed favor toward the Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate.

The Moscow-affiliated Orthodox were open in their support of Yanukovich. Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan gave his blessing to the pro-Russian candidate, saying, "I view him as a true [O]rthodox believer, who would deserve to be our head of state." Another Orthodox priest, Brother Valeri, put it more succinctly: "If you are a believer, you are for Yanukovich. To stand for Yanukovich is to stand for Orthodoxy. We must protect from the demons in the West." But Metropolitan Volodymyr did join other religious leaders in offering prayers for Yushchenko after his January 23 inauguration.

## BRITISH PROPOSAL TO PUNISH RELIGIOUS INCITEMENT

A proposed British bill that would outlaw any "incitement to religious hatred" has provoked an assortment of critics, including Evangelicals, secularists and even professional comedians.

English comedian Rowan Atkinson (best known for his roles on the *Blackadder* and *Mr. Bean* television shows) warned that the bill could stifle legitimate religious satire. "The right to offend is more important than the right not to be offended," Atkinson argued.

Evangelical leaders in England also

voiced opposition to the legislation, claiming that it could limit the preaching of the Gospel. "The planned law, although well intentioned, is not workable. It will create the situation it is aiming to avoid [animosity between religious groups]," said Don Horrocks, chief spokesman for the Evangelical Alliance.

A law similar to the proposed British statute is currently in place in Australia. In December, two Australian Christian pastors were convicted of "vilifying Islam" in a seminar. Both pastors contended that they were merely offering information about Muslim teachings based upon Muslim texts.

## CHINA CRACKS DOWN

In June 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao enacted stricter controls on house church leaders—a move that has resulted in hundreds of arrests and the denunciation of religious repression by church leaders around the world.

Following Hu's endorsement of the campaign against unrecognized churches, nearly one hundred members of the China Gospel Fellowship were arrested. In July, more than one hundred participants in a training retreat sponsored by the Ying Shang Church in Xinjiang were also detained by Chinese authorities. Most of those detained were later released.

In September, the Vatican issued a statement denouncing the arrest and continued detention of 23 Roman Catholics by the Chinese government. "The reasons for such repressive measures have not been made known to the Holy See," said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls. "If the received news turns out to be true, we find ourselves once again faced with a grave violation of freedom of religion, which is a fundamental right of man."

## NCC MEETS WITH RADICAL EGYPTIAN CLERIC

A delegation of religious leaders from the U.S. National Council of Churches (NCC) met with Sheikh Mohamed Sayeed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, in Egypt in January 2005. The 11-member group,



*Newly-elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, with his wife Katherine and daughter Sofia, kneel during a prayer at St. Sofia Cathedral in Kiev.*

led by NCC General Secretary Robert Edgar, was visiting the region to help "get the Middle East peace process back on track."

An NCC press release quoted Tantawi as saying, "Peace is fundamental to Islam, which condemns all sorts of aggression and terrorism." The grand imam rejected any "aggression on human life and people's rights and homelands."

The NCC delegation apparently did not ask Tantawi to explain comments reported by MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute) in April 2002:

...Tantawi demanded that the Palestinian people, of all factions, intensify the martyrdom operations [i.e., suicide bombings] against the Zionist enemy, and described the martyrdom operations as the highest form of Jihad operations... [Tantawi] emphasized that every martyrdom operation against any Israeli, including children, women, and teenagers, is a legitimate act according to [Islamic] religious law....

NCC general secretary Bob Edgar shifted the blame for terrorism in the Middle East elsewhere: "Christians in the region see U.S. policy as the main reason for Islamic extremism.... Increasing tension between Christians and Muslims here is the direct result of the perception that Christians here think like Christian fundamentalists in the West, who support U.S. policy based on their own Christian Zionist theology..." ✚

# Mainline Church Officials Sad, But Not Despondent, Over Election

by Mark Tooley

Some mainline church officials were openly chagrined about the November election results. Speaking at a post-election symposium in Washington, D.C., National Council of Churches (NCC) General Secretary Robert Edgar expressed sadness over President Bush's reelection.

"I hope we moderates and progressives are not too disheartened," Edgar said. He was part of an election analysis panel sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a liberal advocacy group. Edgar stressed that the switch of 70,000 votes in Ohio would have produced a more favorable result.

The NCC includes 36 denominations—most of which are Protestant—whose memberships total up to 45 million Americans. Historically, the NCC is politically liberal. But polls show that members of NCC denominations usually incline more towards Republican candidates. A post-election survey showed mainline Protestants split their votes evenly between President Bush and Senator Kerry.

## TRYING TO REDEFINE 'MORAL VALUES'

Edgar, who is a former Democratic member of the U.S. Congress and an ordained United Methodist minister, lamented the success of the "religious right" in claiming "morality" and "values" for itself. Abortion and homosexuality should not be the "sum total of morality," Edgar insisted. He called these issues relatively "minor" compared to others that involve caring for "the least of these on the planet Earth."

Urging a better definition of the differences between "public morality" and "personal piety," Edgar suggested that issues important to religious conservatives, such as abortion and homosexuality, belong more to the latter category and involve a "narrow" notion of morality. Issues important to religious "progressives" belong in the first category, according to the NCC head.

"A first-strike foreign policy is immoral," Edgar said of the war in Iraq, which he called a morality issue. He also said it was immoral for

the United States to continue to detain former al Qaeda and Taliban fighters at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. "Nine million children who don't have health care is immoral," Edgar continued. So too is air pollution, he said.

Edgar recalled the glory days of liberal religious activists in the 1960s and 1970s, when they organized anti-Vietnam War protest marches and supported the civil rights movement. He admitted that the religious left has been politically less effective than the religious right for the last three decades.

"We shut down the Vietnam war in 1975," Edgar claimed. "After that there was a civil marriage between the religious right and the secular right." He complained that "tele-evangelists" portrayed Ronald Reagan as more Christian than Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

Although the religious right has a more "narrow set of issues," Edgar said it has been more effective than the religious left in setting egos aside to work for political success.

"In the 1950s and 1960s our churches were filled," Edgar recalled about mainline Protestant churches. "In the 1970s we started coasting," he said. All mainline Protestant denominations have been losing members since the mid-1960s. Critics of the NCC say that liberal political activism by church leaders has driven away more conservative church members.

Edgar rejoiced that over

the last two years "progressive" religious leaders have been getting better organized politically in response to the war in Iraq. He noted that 3500 liberal religious leaders marched in Washington, D.C., in protest even before the U.S. military action in Iraq had begun.

In contrast, Edgar claimed it took "50,000 body bags" to organize religious opposition to the Vietnam War. He also said that church members were slow in backing the civil rights movement.

## FINDING HOPE IN KERRY'S VOTE TOTALS

Edgar boasted that liberal religious groups registered more than two million voters for the recent presidential election. He specifically cited the work of his own NCC, Sojourners/Call to Renewal, and the



Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy (D) (left) and United Methodist General Board of Church and Society General Secretary Jim Winkler (right). GBCS positions on public policy have often mirrored those advocated by the Democratic Party.

Children's Defense Fund. Citing the fact that Kerry had received more votes than Al Gore four years earlier, Edgar said, "I have a great deal of hope coming out of this election."

"We can bring hope to this fragile planet we call Earth," Edgar assured the audience. But he also said the Democrats must "not waffle" about their liberal principles. He expressed hope that moderate voters would turn against Republicans during a second Bush term.

Edgar warned that Bush would have a hard time pleasing his supporters from the religious right, whom Edgar named as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham, and James Dobson. "All of us have been hurt by religious fundamentalism around the world, whether Christian, Islamic, or Jewish," Edgar said. "Especially here in this country," he added.

Asserting that "a lot of us were chaplains to world opinion" after U.S. foreign policy became internationally unpopular under President Bush, Edgar said he is opposed to using war to combat terrorism.

"If bombing capital cities helps in the war on terror, then we should have bombed Oklahoma City," Edgar said, recalling the 1995 bombing by domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh. He recommended that terrorism should be combated with "international police action" and getting at the "root causes" of terror, not by war.

### TRIPPING DOWN MEMORY LANE

Many of Edgar's remarks hearkened back to his early years of protest rallies against the Vietnam War. Those protests culminated when the U.S. Congress, of which Edgar was then a member, voted to withdraw aid from South Vietnam, thus ensuring a communist takeover. Edgar did not mention the millions in Southeast Asia who were thereafter killed, detained, forced into exile, or impoverished by their new communist rulers.

Another panelist at the symposium, former Republican presidential speechwriter David Frum, dismissed Edgar's comments as a "trip down memory lane." Frum pointed out that the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopal clergy who participated in the protests of the 1960s "back when they still had congregations" either "don't exist

anymore" or don't have congregations. He was referring to the demographic implosion of mainline Protestantism, which is Edgar's main constituency, and which has been in continuous membership decline since the mid-1960s.

Neither Frum nor Edgar noted that what is left of mainline Protestantism still votes more Republican than Democrat, despite the political stances of leaders such as Edgar. Edgar did not respond to Frum's demographic point. Instead, he challenged Frum to write a speech for President Bush in which the president would acknowledge his "inability" to admit mistakes.

### LASHING OUT AT THE 'RELIGIOUS RIGHT'

There were comments similar to Edgar's at a press conference organized by the pro-abortion Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), to which agencies of the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Episcopal Church,

*Lloyd Steffen, a United Church of Christ minister and vice chair of RCRC, declared that the "agenda of conservative Christianity" is inconsistent with "our democratic values."*

among others, belong.

RCRC officials were clearly disturbed by exit polls showing "moral values" being the number one concern of a plurality of voters, ahead of the economy, terrorism, and the war in Iraq. These moral values voters, motivated by issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, strongly favored President Bush's reelection.

Jim Winkler of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society condemned the religious right for siding with the Republican Party and for being "overwhelmingly white." Winkler said, in contrast, that "we" represent a diverse America. It was not clear whom he meant by "we," since the United Methodist Church's U.S. membership, like the membership of other mainline denominations, is over 90 percent white. No black church group belongs to RCRC. Nor do any Hispanic groups belong to RCRC.

Winkler insisted that the nation faces not a clash between cultures but a clash between "justice and greed." He argued that the "real" problem facing America was not abortion, same-sex marriage, school prayer,

flag burnings, or the display of the Ten Commandments. Quoting Martin Luther King, Winkler said the real problem is that the nation is spending more on military weapons than on programs of social uplift.

It was not clear what Winkler meant here, as only about 20 percent of the federal budget goes towards military spending. Calling his own United Methodist denomination "prayerfully pro-choice," Winkler said, "We offer a vision of hope in contrast to the apocalyptic vision of a fiery end of the world offered by [the] religious right."

Episcopal priest Katherine Ragsdale, former chair of RCRC, regretted that the "radical right" had been successful in its "long-running attempt to hijack and trivialize the language" of faith commitment. She condemned "wars of aggression, crony capitalism, and callous restrictions on medical procedures that protect...women's rights," as well as "abstinence-only education" and other forms of "lies, half-truths, and manipulation."

Frances Kissling, President of Catholics

for a Free Choice, admitted, "All of us in the progressive religious movement feel a sense of passion and urgency in the wake of the election." She

insisted that most Catholics, even though they supported Republicans this election, still favor abortion rights and at least legalized "civil unions" for homosexual couples.

Kissling saw dangers all around: As "liberationist" Catholic bishops have been replaced by the current Pope, the church's hierarchy is becoming more conservative. There is a growing "ultra-conservative" Catholic lay movement that parallels the rise of conservative evangelicals. And conservative Catholics have President Bush's "ear and heart" and will be heard.

Lloyd Steffen, a United Church of Christ minister and vice-chair of RCRC, declared that the "agenda of conservative Christianity" is inconsistent with "our democratic values." Conservative Christianity "seeks to extend its narrow religious influence into our scientific policies, healthcare, government funding of religious groups, women's health, and sexuality issues," Steffen fretted. "Progressive" religious leaders can help the nation understand how some religious groups are "energizing the movement to suppress freedom." ✚



# What Do They Really Want?

Values Voters and the 2004 Elections

by Diane Knippers

On the day after President George W. Bush was re-elected, I got calls from reporters all the way from Norway to California asking, “Who are these Christian conservative voters and what do they want? What will they demand of the newly strengthened Republican administration as ‘payback?’”

The media, which had covered a campaign about Iraq, terrorism, and the economy, was scrambling to understand the moral issues and the religious voters upon which the election was decided.

Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was quick to offer a hysterical warning about “TV preachers calling the shots in Washington” and the possibility that “the culture war may go nuclear.” He warned that the leaders of the “Religious Right” will “expect to be handsomely rewarded.”

So, what do the Christian conservatives really want?

## PRO-MARRIAGE AND PRO-LIFE

The two moral issues most highly identified with Christian conservatives are their desire to protect unborn children and their desire to protect the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. To begin with, they want jurists who faithfully interpret the Constitution and the law—not jurists who invent constitutional rights to secure their own social objectives.

Over thirty years ago, the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision narrowed the definition of a human person in our society. It short-circuited a fundamental and necessary debate within the democratic process—a debate over which lives will be recognized as persons deserving the protection of the state. It’s true that many Christian conservatives would like to see this wrong decision eroded, if not overturned.

Does that mean that abortion would be immediately outlawed in America? Of course not. It would simply mean that we would begin a national democratic debate over whether or not we want to maintain the most liberal abortion regime among Western nations. Those who want broad protections for unborn children will have to work to persuade a majority of our fellow citizens.

It’s called the democratic process. The world will not end.

Conservative Christians learned well the bitter lessons of *Roe v. Wade*. Having watched the courts arbitrarily and undemocratically narrow the definition of protected human life a generation ago, conservative Christians aren’t about to sit back and let the courts redefine our most fundamental social institution—marriage.

Our nation had begun a democratic political discussion over questions such as civil unions and benefits for same-sex partners. Perhaps the debate would have extended to the definition of marriage, although until very recently most homosexual-rights activists themselves were not seeking same-sex marriages. Activist courts—most notably the Massachusetts Supreme Court—forced the issue by defining same-sex marriage as a constitutional imperative. (Some now speculate that it was the Massachusetts court that guaranteed the defeat of the senator from Massachusetts.)

But the big lesson for the media—and for the Democratic Party—is this: defending marriage isn’t an issue of interest only to conservative Christians. It is a concern of the majority of Americans. Ballot initiatives protecting the definition of marriage were considered in 11 states. And they all prevailed decisively, by substantial margins of 13 to 72 points, from the conservative south through swing states such as Ohio to the more liberal Michigan and Oregon. As of today, 17 states, from Georgia to Hawaii, have adopted constitutional amendments defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

*One of the easiest ways to answer the question, “What will these conservative Christians demand?” is to look at their priorities in Washington over the last ten years.*

Many political commentators, including the editors of *The Washington Post*, dismissed the marriage issue as a cynical Republican ploy to garner votes for the President. They need to

look again. This is a genuine grassroots issue, which pro-marriage forces had to push the President to engage. Credit the Republicans with one thing—they noticed what the elite media, political commentators, and Democratic leadership were all too out of touch to realize. The country is not deeply divided on marriage; a strong majority does not wish to tamper with its definition. Americans do not want to embark on a massive court-driven social experiment on an essential social institution.

## THE OTHER MORAL QUESTIONS

On a host of important issues, Christian conservatives are much like other Americans. They care about national security, the economy, health care, and good schools. Studies show that Evangelicals, for example, generally track with the diverse views of their fellow citizens in wanting to address these issues.

Right after the election, liberals began to protest that “moral values” apply to much more than debates about abortion, or stem-cell research, or same-sex marriage. They argue that caring for the poor or seeking peace are moral values too. Of course, they are right. And Christian conservatives know this as well.



## THE 'RELIGION GAP' IN THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

CHURCH ATTENDANCE	BUSH (%)	KERRY (%)
More than Once a Week	68	24
Once a Week	55	40
Once or Twice a Month	51	45
A Few Times a Year	43	53
Seldom/Never	31	62

Source: Pew Research Center

However, differences over these other moral questions frequently involve debates over means, not ends. Conservative Christians care deeply about the problem of poverty. They recognize that strong, two-parent families are the front line of defense against poverty. They know that father-absence is the best predictor of social pathologies affecting children. So they want government policies that do not undermine, but in fact strengthen, healthy marriages. They also recognize the power of faith-based ministries—from the extraordinary impact of the Salvation Army to a local congregation's homeless drop-in center. The vast majority recognizes the need for a secure government safety net, with necessary incentives to encourage personal responsibility, to protect the vulnerable.

Conservative Christians are also increasingly engaged in foreign policy debates. They want Israel to be secure, and they want Palestinian people to live in peace and freedom as well. They want a robust national defense, and they understand that one important antidote to terrorism can be hope—an end to oppression and the expansion of democracy and economic prosperity. They will defend the religious freedom of Christians around the world, and they understand that this means defending the religious freedom of persons of other faiths or no faith. Indeed, they believe that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others are capable of democratic self-government.

One of the easiest ways to answer the question, "What will these conservative Christians demand?" is to look at their priorities in Washington over the last ten years. When Madeleine Albright declared that ending atrocities in Sudan was not

"marketable" to the American people, conservative Christians determined to prove her wrong. They formed the basis of a movement that produced the Sudan Peace Act, saw John Danforth appointed as a special envoy for peace in Sudan, and laid the groundwork for the leadership of the United States in acknowledging genocide in Darfur. It was conservative Christians who successfully urged the president to make a massive financial commitment to combat HIV-AIDS in Africa. Conservative Christians have been key to legislative actions to combat international sex trafficking, attack the problem of prison rape, and, most recently, seek to address the unspeakable human rights abuses of the North Korean regime.

What are moral values? Conservative Christians understand that no area of life is outside the realm of ethical reflection.

*Conservative Christians understand that no area of life is outside the realm of ethical reflection.*

### THE CHALLENGE FOR THE DEMOCRATS

There is a partisan religion gap. The 2000 election results showed that those more firmly attached to the worship, beliefs, and practices of a particular religious body were significantly more inclined to vote Republican. On the other hand, those whose religious attachments were weaker or non-existent tend heavily to vote Democratic. This trend intensified in 2004. The Pew Research Center's final pre-election poll (which, unlike the notorious exit polls, projected Bush's 51-48 percent win) showed that more frequent church attendance correlated with voter preference for Bush.

This religion gap is not good news for the Democratic Party. If the Democratic

*In both 2000 and 2004, religious attendance proved to be one of the most significant indicators of partisan preference—those who attend religious services most often are more likely to vote Republican, in 2004 by a margin of 44 percentage points.*

Party is unable to broaden itself on cultural/moral questions, it will lose several of its traditional bases of support. Republicans made inroads among Hispanic, African American, and Catholic voters in 2004. The Democrats now face the challenge of developing a "big tent"—to include more people of faith and to embrace the moral concerns that compel religious voters.

First, Democrats will need to avoid Barry Lynn-type stereotypes of conservative Christians. It wasn't "TV preachers" or a single "religious right" group that was activated in 2004. It was a broad-based and diffuse coalition of Catholic and Evangelical leaders that galvanized voters.

Perhaps Democratic Party leaders thought that the left-leaning leaders of the historic mainline churches would tutor them in making the case to religious voters. But the blunt fact is that the religious left is political smoke and mirrors—it simply doesn't have a significant voting base to deliver. The pre-

election Pew Research Center poll showed that white Protestant non-Evangelicals (the majority who sit in the pews of the liberal-led historic mainline denominations) supported Bush by 54 to 40 percent.

The continued membership decline of the non-evangelical Protestant churches is well documented. Religious left denominational leaders seem largely unconcerned. They are willing to be "prophetic" (read "unpopular") even if that produces an ever-declining constituency. That's a luxury that politicians can't afford. Numbers matter if you are going to win elections. The Democratic Party needs to begin to close its religion gap. Its leaders would do well to seek out advice from religious leaders who have a genuine and growing constituency. ✚

# Churches Repeating Past Mistakes on Human Rights—and Making New Ones

by Alan Wisdom and Erik Nelson

In July of 2004, former World Council of Churches president Konrad Raiser made an apology that was rather roundabout, but nonetheless stunning. “In retrospect,” Raiser admitted, “it would appear that the ecumenical organizations have not sufficiently recognized—at least at the official level—the historic legitimacy and the political potential of the dissident movements in the Communist countries.”

Raiser recalled that the WCC “gave priority attention [in the 1980s] to the struggles against racism and for justice and liberation in the southern countries” of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But he added that the council and other mainline Western Christian bodies should have been more supportive of dissident groups like Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland in the 1980s.

Necessary as this confession was, it is unfortunate that it could not have come sooner. Raiser’s acknowledgment of past failure to stand up for oppressed peoples behind the Iron Curtain will prove useful only if a lesson has been learned from that failure. Mainline Protestant churches pride themselves on being defenders of human rights worldwide. But are those churches raising a more consistent voice for human rights around the globe today?

## DISTURBING PATTERNS

Some of us at the Institute on Religion & Democracy had doubts. To answer our questions, we analyzed human rights criticisms made by four U.S. mainline Protestant denominations (the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)) and two ecumenical bodies (the National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches) over a period of four years (2000–2003) to determine which nations were criticized for human rights violations and why. We used the human rights assessments published by Freedom House in 2004 as a benchmark for human rights in nations analyzed.

Here is what we found: Of the 197 human rights criticisms made by the churches and ecumenical bodies that we studied, 37 percent was directed against Israel—a “free” nation, under the Freedom House criteria. Another 32 percent targeted the United

States—also “free.” The remaining 31 percent was spread among twenty other nations.

Only 19 percent of the church criticism was aimed at nations deemed “not free,” while eight percent touched upon “partly free” nations. Of the 15 countries rated lowest by Freedom House, only five were criticized during the four-year period. Some of the worst offenders—such as North Korea, China, and Saudi Arabia—were not criticized even once. Mainline churches never criticized any of Israel’s neighbors, despite their mostly dismal records on human

rights. There were no criticisms registered against any governments in Central Asia, one of the least free regions in the world.

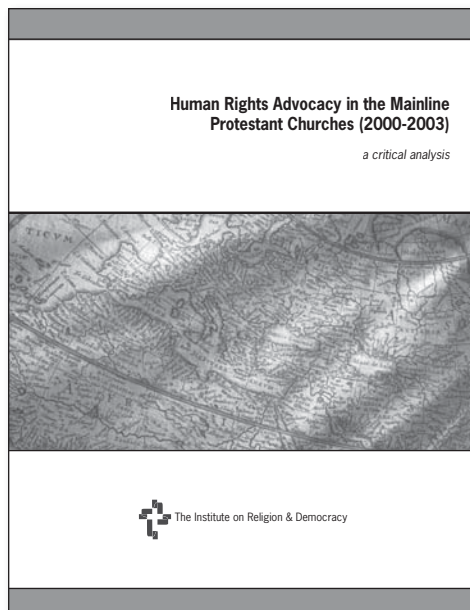
Unquestionably, every nation—including the United States and Israel—can be faulted for some human rights violations. We can imagine a plausible explanation for U.S. churches paying particular attention to their own country. It is the world’s most powerful nation, and it is the nation that U.S. Christians can influence most directly.

But why the wildly disproportionate criticism aimed at the small and solitary nation of Israel? Mainline church leaders typically explain that they are concerned for the suffering Palestinian people. Yet not a single church statement during four years spoke a word against the Palestinian Authority, despite the many abuses that it visited upon its own people and the violence that it unleashed against Israeli civilians.

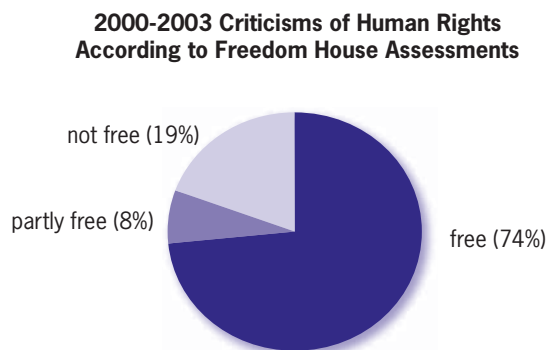
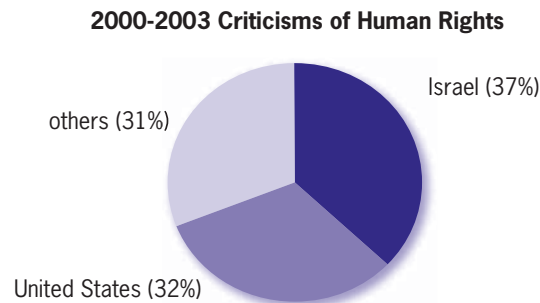
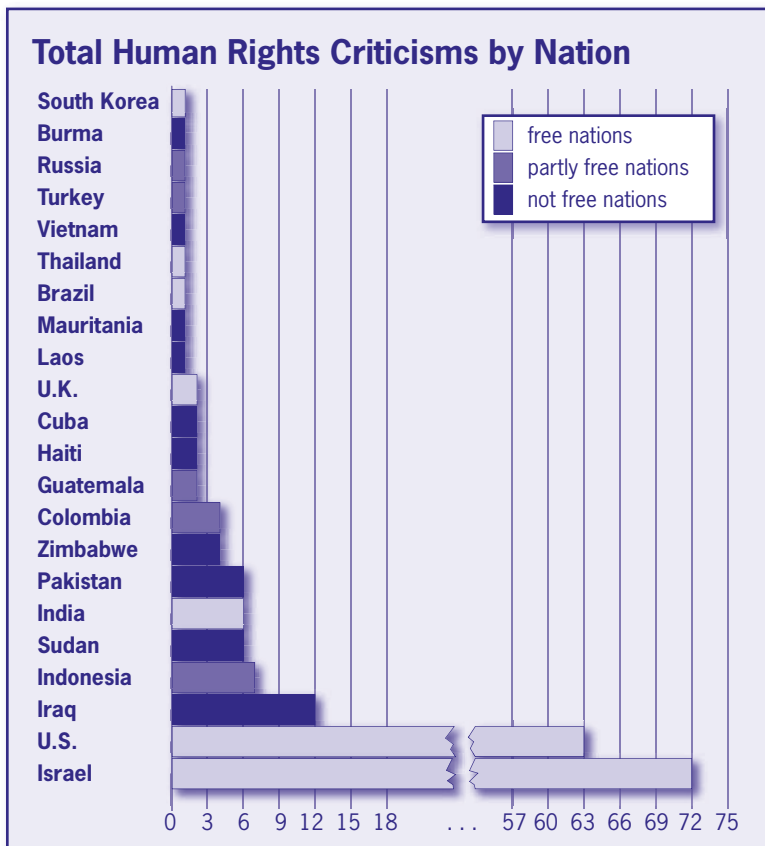
Church leaders often disparage the U.S. role in the Middle East, arguing that our government cannot be an honest broker of peace as long as it is so single-mindedly pro-Israel. But at least the U.S. government occasionally objects to some Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza. Why have the mainline U.S. churches not criticized oppressive policies by the Palestinian Authority? How can they offer themselves as potential peacemakers?

## AN HONEST ANSWER IS REQUIRED

We have to ask the difficult question of what drives this unbalanced approach to human rights. Undoubtedly, motives are mixed. Many hands are at work in shaping mainline human rights advocacy. But we see a pattern that reproduces much of the same thinking that distorted that advocacy during the Cold War. There is an ideological template that identifies abuses only where they can be attributed to Western imperialism (Israel being seen as a Western entity). There is a desire to be in solidarity with movements (such







More than one third of all criticisms were leveled at Israel, and nearly one third at the United States. Only one criticism in three was directed at the dozens of other violators of human rights around the world.

as Palestinian nationalism) claiming to liberate peoples oppressed by such imperialism. There is an eagerness to make peace with America's enemies (such as Islamist radicals) by overlooking their faults. And there is a moral relativism that is reluctant to impose Western ideals of human rights upon non-Western dictators (such as most Arab rulers).

But, even taken together, these explanations do not suffice. Why the fusillade of criticism against the world's only Jewish state, when there are so many other fallible U.S. allies that could be equal or greater targets? Could some kind of anti-Jewish animus be present among "our kind of people" in the mainline elites?

Some Jewish leaders have made the direct accusation of anti-Semitism, especially in the wake of last year's Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) decision to "initiate a phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel." (See article on p.12.)

Let us draw an analogy. Many of these same liberal church leaders have been ready to call the U.S. justice system "racist" because of racial disparities in the application of the death penalty. While

the disparate sentences by themselves do not prove racist motivation in judges and juries, they should provoke a serious examination of the system.

The statistics in our study should provoke the same kind of self-examination with regard to mainline church human rights advocacy. Have our churches really learned the lessons of the Cold War? Are they really being the courageous voice for the voiceless victims around the world? Or are they letting old prejudices drive a very slanted critique of human rights violations? Are mainline U.S. elites falling into the same kind of anti-Semitism that has become a staple of the European left? The good name of the Church depends upon an honest answer.

#### BROADER AND MORE BALANCED ADVOCACY NEEDED

We believe that our churches would be well served by broadening their human rights advocacy. They need to reaffirm the transcendent origins of human rights. They must be willing to confront the world's worst human rights violators. Churches must not allow the desire for "peacemaking" with those violators to silence their

witness to the sufferings of the victims.

Churches should have a strategic sense of the importance of human rights advocacy in "partly free" nations. These are cases in which a certain degree of political and religious freedom might allow indigenous Christians to speak publicly in a limited way, if their U.S. and Western partners back them up. Sometimes such foreign solidarity might tip the balance toward significantly greater freedom in those countries.

Churches must become more balanced in their approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their credibility as mediators depends upon the perception of fairness. Churches must learn how to address human rights abuses in the Muslim and Arab world, including abuses by the Palestinian Authority. And they must take seriously the continuing problem of anti-Semitism. ✚

*This article is a summary of a special IRD report entitled "Human Rights Advocacy in the Mainline Protestant Churches (2000-2003)." You may obtain an electronic copy of that report on the IRD website at [www.ird-renew.org](http://www.ird-renew.org). A paper copy may be ordered for \$5 by contacting the IRD office.*

# Divesting Presbyterians Raise a Ruckus

By Alan Wisdom

It seemed unremarkable at the time: another resolution by another Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly condemning Israel. But the resolution, which deep in its text mandated “a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations doing business in Israel,” has proved to be explosive. It has garnered the denomination more press attention, and more public criticism, than any other General Assembly action of the past decade.

Other oldline Protestant denominations are clearly watching how the PCUSA weathers this controversy. Their leaders share the Presbyterians’ tendency to cast disproportionate blame upon Israel (see article on pp. 10-11). They might be tempted to jump on a PCUSA-led divestment bandwagon, if the public relations price is not too high.

The Presbyterian resolution appealed, with apparent balance, for “the U.S. government, the government of Israel, and the Palestinian leadership to . . . get on with forging negotiated compromises that open a path to peace.” But its more specific demands were directed entirely to the Israeli government: “The occupation [of the West Bank and Gaza] must end; it has proven to be at the root of evil acts committed against innocent people on both sides of the conflict.” And the means of pressure—the threat of divestment—were deployed exclusively against Israel.

A few commissioners voiced reservations about the resolution’s lack of balance. But these were rebutted by official voices from the podium. The Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor from Bethlehem, was brought to the microphone to boost the resolution. Raheb denounced multinational corporations that supply the Israeli military, specifically naming the U.S.-based Caterpillar, Inc. Caterpillar manufactures construction equipment, which is used by Israel to build the “separation barrier” between Jewish and Palestinian communities and to demolish the homes of suspected Palestinian terrorists. “We have to send strong messages to such companies,” Raheb told the Assembly. “Sisters and brothers, this is a moment of truth.”

The Rev. Victor Makari, the PCUSA mission coordinator for the Middle East, argued that divestment might be effective where previous verbal appeals had gone unheeded: “If nothing else seems to have changed the policy of Israel toward Palestinians, we need to send a clear and strong message.” The divestment resolution passed by a 431-62 vote.

## A TEMPEST ON ALL SIDES

Within two weeks of the Assembly action last July, a storm of negative reaction had broken forth in the Jewish community. Abraham Foxman and Gary Bretton-Granatoor of the Anti-Defamation

League wrote to PCUSA Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick that they were “offended and distressed.” Particular offense was taken at the implicit analogy between Israel and the previous regime against which a major church divestment campaign had been mounted: “To assert that there is a moral equivalency between the racist policy of apartheid [in South Africa] and the efforts to protect the citizenry of Israel is unconscionable.”

Two senior rabbis in the Reform Jewish movement also warned Kirkpatrick: “Singling out Israel, while it faces an unending wave of Palestinian terrorism, not only threatens the well-being of the Jewish state but of Presbyterian-Jewish relations here in North America.” They accused the PCUSA of using “a worrisome double standard” regarding the Middle East. Rabbis Eric Yoffie and Paul Menitoff asked, “Are human rights violations by Israel greater than those committed by the Palestinians? By the Syrians? By the Iranians?”

Objections to the General Assembly actions came not only from Jews, but also from many Presbyterians. Local churches and pastors across the country endeavored to reassure their Jewish neighbors that they were not anti-Israel. For example, a group of San Antonio Presbyterians released a statement to the local newspapers criticizing the Assembly resolution. They explained: “As Presbyterians, we acknowledge that Israel’s responses to attacks on its people have some-

times brought suffering and death to Palestinians; nevertheless, we cannot support a resolution that appears to focus blame on Israel alone. The PCUSA may have no leverage comparable to divestment that

it can exercise against Palestinians, but that does not justify taking a one-sided action against Israel. We strongly urge that this imbalance be addressed before the next General Assembly proceeds further with any divestment action.”

Reverberations of the controversy reached even the halls of Congress. Six Presbyterians in the Senate sent a letter of protest to Stated Clerk Kirkpatrick: “The policy of selective divestment as it relates to Israel is misguided and sends a message that Presbyterians view the actions of the Israeli military and the Palestinian terrorists as morally equivalent. That is a position that we absolutely reject and disavow; we urge our Church to reconsider this unacceptable position.” An ecumenical, bipartisan group of 14 members of the House of Representatives registered similar objections.

These direct interventions by federal officeholders in an internal church debate were highly unusual. Stated Clerk Kirkpatrick reacted sharply. He replied to the 14 members of the House: “It is the occupation, not our move to consider divestment that threatens the existence of Israel.” Kirkpatrick lobbed a counter-accusation: “It has been very disappointing to us that the U.S. Congress has not proven to be an ally or a balanced arbiter in the negotiations for peace in the region.

*Objections to the General Assembly actions came not only from Jews, but also from many Presbyterians.*



While Congress has passed repeated statements against the Palestinian Authority, it has never passed a resolution condemning the continuous illegal construction of settlements in the West Bank.”

### DAMAGE CONTROL FALLS SHORT

As these quotes suggest, PCUSA leaders show no signs of backing down on the divestment issue. The opposition has been met not with concessions, but with a campaign to contain the public relations damage. There have been pastoral letters from the Stated Clerk and the General Assembly Council sent out to all PCUSA congregations. In February there was a special conference in Louisville to brief representatives from all 173 local presbyteries on “Steps Toward Peace in Israel and Palestine.” Last September, there was a closed-door meeting in New York between top PCUSA and Jewish leaders.

On such occasions, the PCUSA leaders have stressed that their anti-Israel divestment will be “selective” and “phased.” They have said that they will target companies that they consider especially complicit in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas. They will try shareholder resolutions and other means of pressure before divesting from those companies.

The PCUSA leaders also insist that they support Israel’s existence and its security. They reject terrorism as an immoral tactic for any government or group to use. But, while they continue to criticize Israeli military actions directly, they have not attempted to hold the Palestinian Authority or any other Middle Eastern government explicitly accountable for its sponsorship of terrorism.

Stated Clerk Kirkpatrick emerged from the September meeting with Jewish leaders offering a positive spin. “The conversations here put us on the road toward a more constructive pattern of dialogue,” he told the Presbyterian News Service. Kirkpatrick’s Jewish counterparts, while polite, did not seem as impressed with his vision of dialogue for the sake of dialogue. They remained focused on their substantive grievance against the PCUSA. “There’s a fundamental unfairness in that there are no sanctions against Palestinian ... terror or anything else,” complained Rabbi Eric Yoffie. He vowed continued efforts to dissuade the PCUSA and other denominations

from pursuing divestment.

Subsequent events and statements have done little to assuage the concerns of Jews and Presbyterians unhappy with the divestment decision. In October, the denomination’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) led a 24-member PCUSA delegation to the Middle East. The most controversial part of the trip was

a visit with Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, the commander of the Hezbollah militia in South Lebanon. Kaouk told his Presbyterian guests that his group was “very eager for contacts and understanding” with Americans.

The U.S. government classifies Hezbollah as a terrorist organization responsible for past attacks claiming hundreds of American and Israeli lives. Nevertheless, ACSWP committee member Ron Stone, a retired Pittsburgh Seminary ethics professor, responded to Kaouk: “We treasure the precious words of Hezbollah and your expression of goodwill towards the American people.” He added, “As an elder of our church, I’d like to say that, according to my recent experience, relations and conversations with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders.”

Reports of the Hezbollah meeting generated fresh outrage. Top PCUSA officials issued a statement calling the Hezbollah meeting “misguided at best” and the comments of some ACSWP members “reprehensible.” Three weeks later, two PCUSA staffers involved in the meeting were fired. Published reports assumed that the dismissal was connected to the Hezbollah meeting; however, General Assembly Council Executive Director John Detterick refused to state his reason for acting against the two.

### DIVESTMENT MOVES FORWARD

Meanwhile, the plans for divestment are proceeding. In November, the denomination’s



*The Rev. Victor Makari, PCUSA mission coordinator for the Middle East, urged the General Assembly to “send a clear and strong message” to Israel. Here, he speaks in front of a photo of the Israeli separation barrier.*

Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee adopted criteria to guide the process. Corporations to be targeted would include, for example, those that “provide services to or for use by the Israeli police or military to support and maintain the occupation.”

So far, the PCUSA stands alone in its plans for anti-Israel divestment. But it may soon have company. The World Council of Churches Central Committee passed a resolution in February affirming that the PCUSA divestment move “is commendable in both method and manner, uses criteria rooted in faith, and calls members to do the ‘things that make for peace’ (Luke 19:42).” The WCC urged all member churches “to give serious consideration to [similar] economic measures.” According to published reports, discussions of possible divestment are already underway in the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ.

So another oldline political bandwagon may be starting to roll. But where is this bandwagon headed? Will one-sided pressure on Israel lead to genuine peace with justice in the Middle East? Or will it be just another symbolic gesture to ostracize Israel? Might not this gesture also serve to isolate the oldline churches, demonstrating how divorced they are from political realities in the region? In their fixation on the Israeli occupation, they have blinded themselves to the many other grave human rights violations against Middle Eastern peoples that must also be confronted. ✚

## Iraq's Christians in Peril

by Nina Shea

In the State of the Union address, President Bush asserted that the United States was in Iraq to achieve a specific result: "A country that is democratic, representative of all its people, at peace with its neighbors..." This noble goal, however, is being undercut by the United States' seeming indifference to the persecution and marginalization currently facing Iraq's ChaldoAssyrians, the native Christian community. We ignore their plight at our peril—for their safety and security will directly contribute to American aims of building a more tolerant, democratic Iraq.

In Iraq, the security situation for everyone is volatile. Many Iraqis, irrespective of religion, are being attacked and threatened by terrorists. But Iraqi Christians are being targeted for their faith, and their perceived sympathy to the United States. They have been targeted with a dozen church bombings and assassinations. Thousands have been kidnapped, with an average ransom of \$100,000. Iraq's Immigration Minister estimated that the pressure has driven up to 40,000 of the ChaldoAssyrians into exile since last summer.

Earlier this year, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, described the situation this way: "It is systematic violence against Assyrian people, driving them out of their homes and pillaging them. It is putting pressure upon them to get them to leave." What is happening to this unique ethnic and religious minority raises fears that we could be witnessing the beginning of either a *jihad* by Muslim extremists or an ethnic-cleansing campaign by Kurds, with whom the ChaldoAssyrians live in close physical proximity—or both.

An estimated 800,000 ChaldoAssyrians remain in Iraq, constituting the country's largest non-Muslim minority. Christianity in Iraq dates from the first century. The ChaldoAssyrians are the world's last remaining community to speak Aramaic, the language of

*While most Iraqis celebrated their victory over tyranny by participating in the first free election in over a generation, many Iraqi Christians were unable to vote.*



### *Voting irregularities in the elections prevented as many as 50,000 Christians from casting ballots in Iraq.*

Jesus. They look back to the builders of the tower of Babel as among their ancestors. Some people in Mosul, ancient Nineveh, continue to fast each year in repentance as the Prophet Jonah exhorted them to do. The ChaldoAssyrians also form a separate ethnic community, one that is indigenous to Iraq.

Iraq's Christians have long been a persecuted religious and ethnic minority. Yet they dared to hope that, regardless of the short-term onslaught against them, the January 30 elections would improve their lot and validate their rights to full citizenship.

Their hopes appear to have been in vain, however. According to the chief of staff for the Assyrian Democratic Movement in Iraq, voting irregularities in the elections prevented as many as 50,000 Christians from casting ballots in Iraq. Iraq's deputy prime minister Barham Salih acknowledged in an interview following the elections: "Quite a significant number of Christians in the Mosul area were denied ballot boxes and ballots."

The disenfranchisement of a sizeable portion of this pro-democracy, pro-human-rights minority did not end in Iraq. Some eighty percent of Iraqi Americans are ChaldoAssyrian Christians, and they were supposed to have full opportunity to vote. But the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the intergovernmental body contracted to conduct the out-of-country voting for Iraqis living in exile, limited polling places in the United States to five. Only one of these was located west of the Mississippi, in Los Angeles.

With absentee balloting not an option in the Iraqi vote, this situation effectively disenfranchised tens of thousands of Iraqi Americans in areas distant from the five polling sites. Only a fifth of those expected to vote in the U.S. polling actually did so. In short, tens of thousands of ChaldoAssyrians both in Iraq and in the United States were unable to vote in a pivotal election for a constituent assembly to draft the permanent constitution and shape the next government of Iraq.

The ChaldoAssyrians are essential to promoting the President's vision of a new Iraq. They form one of Iraq's most politically modern, skilled, and educated communities. Excluding them from the new Iraq would substantially reduce that country's prospects of developing as a pluralistic and democratic society. Without a sizeable non-Muslim minority, moderate Muslims who want to keep religion out of government—Iraq's silent majority—will encounter far greater intimidation in raising their voices against the imposition of medieval Islamic law, favored by Iranian-backed parties and clerics.

The U.S. government must take immediate steps to protect the ChaldoAssyrian Christians: First, it must stop channeling its funding for the reconstruction of their villages through Kurdish authorities, who are diverting it for their own purposes. Second, the United States must insist that the permanent constitution of Iraq uphold individual rights to religious freedom and rights for all minorities. If it does not stand firm on that point, the ChaldoAssyrians will see no future for themselves in the new Iraq—and we will all be the poorer. ✚

*Nina Shea is Director of the Center for Religious Freedom at the human rights group Freedom House.*



## Steps to Peace in Sudan

by Faith McDonnell

The government of Sudan and the opposition forces of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) signed a historic peace agreement on January 9, 2005. The agreement was the culmination of over two years of grueling peace talks.

In a Nairobi stadium whose name means "footsteps," African heads of state, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other world leaders witnessed a beaming Ali Osman Taha, Sudanese first vice president, and a radiant John Garang, leader of the SPLM/A, warmly shaking hands. This gesture of friendship between Arab Muslim Sudanese and African Christian Sudanese is a first step to peace, justice, and reconciliation. But true peace must also encompass Sudan's western province of Darfur, where ongoing genocide threatens the credibility of the government in Khartoum.

The people of Southern Sudan rejoice at the promised cessation of aerial bombardment, slave-raids, scorched earth campaigns, government-orchestrated starvation, and other human rights violations. In *The Tablet*, a British Catholic publication, Sr. Gianfranca, provincial of the Comboni Sisters in South Sudan, declared: "Today the people... can sleep in peace at last. For the first time in 49 years, the guns that brought misery to the largest nation in Africa have fallen silent."

In the same report, Fr. Giuseppe Puttinato, director of the Comboni College in Khartoum, agreed. "This peace agreement is a gift from God, even if it is partial and limited." His joy was tempered by realism: "There is hope but not certainty concerning the real application of the accord." It is hard to trust completely a government that seems merely to have switched the focus and location of the genocide of black Africans from south to west. And previous peace agreements have been signed and violated.

Even if the peace holds, problems remain.

The herculean development needs of Southern Sudan make the rebuilding of Iraq look simple by comparison. Southern Sudan without war is a vacuum that must be filled quickly with the creation of an infrastructure: roads, homes, schools, hospitals, churches, farms, and businesses.

Many Southern Sudanese worry about the money that Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries have pledged for Southern Sudan. They fear that their decades of sacrifice and war to resist radical Islam could be undermined now by the promise of prosperity coming from the Arab world. They hope that the United States government and their American church partners will stay closely involved in Sudan.

Another critical issue is the millions of refugees who have been waiting to return home. Archbishop Joseph Marona of the Episcopal Church of Sudan told Ecumenical News International: "They don't have homes. They don't have food. Our challenge is how we can resettle them."

Tragically, while making steps toward peace with Southern Sudan, Khartoum is using Arab militias called *Janjaweed* to terrorize civilians and to suppress the rebels in Darfur. Sudan expert Eric Reeves



Sudan's First Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha (left) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement leader John Garang (right) celebrate the signing of the peace accord. However, the government of Sudan continues its genocide against black Sudanese in Darfur.

of Smith College estimates that total mortality in the Darfur region of western Sudan now exceeds 400,000. The threat of massive secondary death from health-related causes continues to grow. Jan Egeland, UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, has predicted that there may be as many as 100,000 civilian deaths per month if growing insecurity makes the withdrawal of humanitarian relief organizations necessary.

A groundswell of new voices has arisen to cry out against genocide in western Sudan. Until unseated by the South Asian tsunami, the tragedy in Darfur had an amazing hold on the world media. But in spite of all this attention, and a declaration of genocide by Secretary Powell, Khartoum's destruction of the black African Muslims of Darfur has been virtually unimpeded.

One small step for peace in Darfur is coming from the network of Sudanese Christian immigrants living in the United States. Although the Sudanese Army that burned villages and killed so many in Southern Sudan contained many Darfurians, the people of the Sudan Council of Churches USA are reaching out in forgiveness and mercy to their former persecutors. The Darfurians were deeply moved by the team sent to their refugee camps in Chad.

The international community must both stop the brutal extermination of the black tribes of Darfur and monitor the new peace deal. Through the Sudan Peace Act, the work of Sudan Special Envoy John Danforth, and the determination of President Bush, the United States pressured the Sudanese government to make peace with the opposition forces of Southern Sudan. And once more, the United States must take a leadership role.

In his inaugural address President Bush assured "all who live in tyranny and hopelessness...the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you." We must stand with all the people of Sudan who desire liberty—those who continue to stagger towards slaughter in Darfur and those who have made their first steps in peace in Southern Sudan.

*It is hard to trust completely a government that seems merely to have switched the focus and location of the genocide of black Africans from south to west.*



# From Reporter to News Subject



by John Lomperis

I had gone to Chicago last August to cover the retirement banquet for Joseph Sprague, probably the most controversial bishop in the United Methodist Church. My boss Mark Tooley figured that Sprague might say something newsworthy at this event that had been billed as “open to all.” So he sent me to write a report.

Toward the end of the banquet I noticed a series of bright lights in my face. Looking up, I saw Linda Rhodes, Communications Director for the Northern Illinois Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. She was photographing me with a large camera, exclaiming, “You document everybody else, I’m going to document you!”

Not wishing to escalate things, I responded, “Okay, but I’m not all that photogenic.” She replied, “That’s true!” When I suggested that perhaps we had found a point of agreement, this woman who had never met me snapped back that it was likely our “only” point of agreement. As she checked her digital camera, I asked how the pictures turned out. She frowned and said, “*You* still look the same!”

A few weeks later, the official newsletter of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference carried a full-page editorial denouncing me, complete with a photo of my apparently menacing face. Rhodes complained about how “this blatant enemy of everything Bishop Sprague has stood for throughout his ministry ‘crashed’ this final farewell for the Bishop’s friends and family.” She contrasted me to “those of us who really are United Methodists” and who have “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.”

I wrote a brief letter to correct the central allegation of the editorial, that John Lomperis “is not a United Methodist” and “seems to know nothing about the denomination he is trying to destroy.” However, as of this writing Rhodes has not responded to repeated requests to post my letter on the conference website, where her diatribe remains and has been picked up by a number of “progressive” sites. Evidently, she sees no need to be “open” towards the likes of me.

In December, I again found myself transformed from reporter to news subject. I attended another ostensibly “all are welcome” event: a public worship service hosted by the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society (GBCS). I wrote a brief, objective account of what had been said in the sermon, checking my quotes with the bishop who preached. At the service I had seen Jim Winkler, the GBCS general secretary, and greeted him warmly. He refused to say a word to me.

But I heard from Winkler soon enough. After my article was posted on the IRD website, he issued a scathing response. His statement called my reporting a “shameful activity” that had desecrated a “sacred space” and “demean[ed] the worship of Jesus Christ.” Winkler also speculated on the “hate and malice” in my soul.

It is always confusing to see folks get so upset by my presence at such events. If they are not saying or doing anything that they would be ashamed of having people in their denominations know, then they have nothing to fear from my reporting.

Sadly, the responses of Rhodes and Winkler seem to be typical of how “progressive” church officials and activists respond to IRD. They attack the character and alleged motives of the messenger, while avoiding any substantive engagement with our message.

While such encounters are unpleasant, I need to challenge myself not to personalize the conflict. The important question is not who has had his or her feelings hurt the most, but rather what does it mean to be faithful to the Gospel in our words and deeds.

One common accusation for which I have little patience is the charge that IRD is maliciously seeking to “destroy” the denominations to which we belong. We certainly do hope to see changes in the leadership and direction of those denominations. But that desire springs from our personal experience of the ongoing destruction under the current leadership.

In my home United Methodist congregation in St. Louis, where I retain my membership, I have seen the effects that are multiplied a thousandfold nationwide. Progressive pastors, seemingly more interested in a secular political agenda than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, use heavy-handed tactics to systematically fire staff, remove committee leaders, and alienate “pillar” families. Membership and giving plummet and formerly healthy local church communities wither away.

I have sadly watched most of my old youth group friends who have remained actively Christian leave the United Methodist Church, looking for something more deeply rooted in the timeless truths of Christian Scripture. Meanwhile, I know of many United Methodists who say that they would have left the denomination had it not been for IRD and like-minded renewal ministries encouraging them to stay.

What truly motivates me at my job is a fervent desire to see my denomination moving towards our Lord’s vision for Christian unity in John 17. As the passage makes clear, such a unity requires fidelity to the absolute truth that we have received in Jesus Christ. While the IRD’s work of accountability does involve conflict, I believe that it is necessary. We must heed Jeremiah’s warning against those who would cry, “Peace, peace!” when in truth there is no peace in our mainline denominations. ✚



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