



United Methodist Agencies Mark Father's Day by Defending Abortion, Obamacare

This year, two organizations heavily funded by our United Methodist apportionments chose to mark the week of Father's Day in an ironic way: lobbying to defend taxpayer-funding for abortion!

The General Board of Church and Society (GBCS)—our denomination's controversial Washington, D.C., lobby office—and the National Council of Churches (NCC) were among the few church groups to publicly endorse a June "Advocacy Letter" to the U.S. Senate. It was organized by the misleadingly named Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a partisan political group that takes far-left positions on issues that have nothing to do with civil rights, such as decrying even moral disapproval of abortion.

Among other things, this letter urged U.S. Senators "to oppose ANY attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA)" [emphasis added], aka "Obamacare," going far beyond merely critiquing the details of any particular alternative health-care plan. It just as broadly urged Senators to oppose "ANY attempts to defund Planned Parenthood" [emphasis added], America's scandal-plagued largest abortion provider.

The United Methodist section of IRD's website (www.theird.org) includes docu-

mentation of how abortion is increasingly far more central to Planned Parenthood's work than its supporters admit, how even funding other parts of Planned Parenthood indirectly frees up funds for its abortion work, the group's extremely partisan involvement in divisive elections, and numerous recent scandals of Planned Parenthood leaders selling body parts of aborted babies and expressing their willingness to cover up statutory rapes, among other things.

But the GBCS and NCC evidently don't care. Their letter uncritically repeats dubious factual claims about the alleged urgency of forcing taxpayers to donate to Planned Parenthood, citing Planned Parenthood itself as the only source of information. It ignores how plans for "defunding Planned Parenthood" would redirect such funds to support genuine medical services at other clinics.

While the UMC's official position on abortion is not as pro-life as we would like it, it has become increasingly pro-life, thanks to efforts of UMAction and others. At the 2008 General Conference, it was amended to add that "we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child." In 2012, we added an explicit commitment to lowering abortion rates. In 2016, we ended our denomination's affiliation with the Religious Coalition for

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Supporters of Planned Parenthood hold signs at a New York City rally on February 26, 2011 (Photo: Charlotte Cooper / Flickr)

GOOD NEWS: UMC Planting, Growing New Churches in Communist Southeast Asian Nations

Did you know that the United Methodist Church has an active and growing presence in Vietnam and throughout Mainland Southeast Asia?

There's rightly lots of talk about growing United Methodism in Africa, which is on track to soon have a majority of our global denominational membership. But our church's presence in con-

of less than ten percent of the population being even nominally Christian and Communist governments imposing serious restrictions on basic religious freedom. Our church is struggling to achieve official registration with the government, and the added rights that this would bring, in both countries.

God has been wonderfully using the current size and strength of American United Methodism to make new disciples and spread the Gospel in some notoriously "closed" countries. American United Methodists can learn much from the sacrifice and vitality of such overseas churches, which have few if any of our advantages but nevertheless bear great fruit through the Holy Spirit.

Although they are growing, these churches remain in a small, vulnerable, embryonic stage, dependent on GBGM and on partnerships with theologically diverse U.S. annual conferences. As American United Methodists consider pursuing liberal agendas that drive away faithful members, or proposals for splitting the denomination—either of which would serve to drastically reduce the size and financial strength of what would be left of the UMC—we must think carefully about the devastating effects this could have on the work God is doing in Southeast Asia. What are we willing to sacrifice for the sake of the soul-saving, life-transforming missions led by Asian church leaders making far greater personal sacrifices for the Gospel than most American Christians will ever have to make? ✝

FOR REFLECTION: Luke 10:2; Romans 10:13-15.



(Photo: Vietnam UMC)

A 2014 Masters of Divinity graduating class at Wesley Theological College in Vietnam (Photo: Vietnam UMC Archives)

tinental Southeast Asia is quickly growing and may eventually become a significant portion of our denomination.

Vietnam has over 320 United Methodist churches, with 248 pastors. Vietnamese United Methodists have set a goal of planting 800 new churches by 2020. They even have a seminary, Wesley Theological College, which partners with orthodox United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. Like the Methodist circuit riders of old, modern-day Vietnamese United Methodist pastors travel two by two on motor bikes to reach unchurched areas. A special focus of Vietnamese United Methodism is caring for orphans, who often are vulnerable to sex trafficking.

Meanwhile, United Methodism in neighboring Laos now includes 72 congregations with 62 lay pastors, and continues to steadily grow. The UMC's General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) recently reported that nearly half of these congregations' members were younger than 14.

All of this has grown from a United Methodist missionary presence that only began in 2002. Imagine if U.S. portions of United Methodism were growing that rapidly! And this growth has been despite the very challenging contexts in both countries

Former UMC Seminary President Promotes Religious Liberty

Rev. Dr. Wendy Deichmann, Professor of History and Theology at the UMC's United Theological Seminary and its former president, recently posted several YouTube videos promoting the value of religious liberty for Christians and all others, lamenting how "Two-thirds of the world does not have this but desperately yearns for it," and alluding to some recent American religious-liberty controversies (see "Two Northeastern Annual Conferences," page 4). In one video, she directly rebutted militant secularist rhetoric by citing a major study of 1,763 wars throughout human history finding that only 123 (7 percent) were "religious in nature," and other studies finding that "having less religion in a country does not make it more peaceful."

She also agreed to be interviewed by IRD/UMAction on this important topic.

She told us that "many people, including many United Methodists in the U.S., don't understand what's at stake.... We are largely unaware that the majority of the world does not have religious liberty or that that we have a moral and ethical responsibility to defend and promote this basic human right, not only in the US, but also throughout the world."

She lamented how United Methodist seminary education has often missed opportunities to teach about religious liberty, especially in the context of American history, "except for developments in our own respective denominations."



Former United Seminary President Wendy Deichmann (Photo: United Seminary)

She noted how the higher levels of persecution experienced by Baptists and Roman Catholics in colonial America have shaped those traditions to have "more focused appreciation" for religious liberty.

She especially encouraged United Methodists to consider our theology about "the prevenient grace...that is active throughout the world leading people to Christ" and warned, "This holy work of God should not be curtailed anywhere in

God's creation by a lack of religious freedom." She added, "Sanctifying grace is the power of the Holy Spirit helping us to do what is right, including when we advocate for religious freedom."

She encouraged U.S. congregations to advocate on behalf of the persecuted church as a way of "standing by their side bearing this burden with and for them." She continued,

"Their suffering, pain, hope and joy in Christ are ours. As persons who enjoy the gifts of freedom, we have the responsibility to advocate on their behalf, to bear the costs of this discipleship, and to help prevent unnecessary suffering in the future." ✝

ACTION: For education and advocacy resources, visit the "International Religious Freedom" and "Domestic Religious Liberty" pages of the website of the Institute on Religion & Democracy (IRD): www.theird.org

UMW Props Up Post-Christian Bishop

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and others filed a formal complaint against Sprague for "dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church," **Bishop Bruce Ough** (who is now president of the UMC Council of Bishops) arranged for a process that ultimately required Sprague to issue a statement affirming "the historic doctrines of our church," but required no retraction or further accountability.

This year, Sprague used his UMW platform to, among other things, distance himself from "fundamentalist Christians" and bemoan "the increasingly reactionary state of the church." While there are many other active and retired bishops who could have been featured preachers at this environmentalist conference,

apparently UMW believed that no one was more appropriate than Sprague to be given this platform. ✝

FOR REFLECTION: 1 Timothy 6:3-6.

ACTION: Talk to women in your congregation about concerns with the radical theology and partisan politics routinely promoted by UMW. Make sure your pastor knows that the 2016 General Conference added a sub-paragraph 256.7 to the UMC's governing Book of Discipline to explicitly allow and encourage congregational women's groups unrelated to United Methodist Women. For guidance on establishing and growing biblically faithful women's ministries in United Methodist congregations, contact: Renew Network / c/o Good News / P.O. Box 132076 / The Woodlands, TX 77393 / 832-381-0331 / renew@goodnewsmag.org / www.renewnetwork.org

GOOD NEWS: Two Northeastern Annual Conferences Reject Own Bishop's Liberalism on LGBTQ 'Pride,' Opposing Religious Liberty

Given the power and deference United Methodist bishops enjoy, it is very rare to see an annual conference directly break with a priority of its own bishop. Furthermore, our denomination's Northeastern Jurisdiction is known as a liberal region.

But recently two Northeastern annual conferences surprisingly rejected the liberal direction in which Philadelphia area **Bishop Peggy Johnson** has tried to lead them.

Bishop Johnson chooses to be an outspoken advocate of the LGBTQ liberationist cause, and even posted a picture of herself marching in Philadelphia's Gay "Pride" parade with the **Rev. Herb Snyder** holding a sign proclaiming the "genderqueerness" of God. However, when this same Rev. Snyder presented a resolution to this year's Eastern Pennsylvania Conference session promoting participation in LGBTQ "pride" events, he did not get his way. The conference decisively rejected this agenda by amending the resolution so dramatically as to take out strong, controversial LGBTQ-affirming statements, fundamentally changing the resolution into more broadly asking congregations to welcome everyone. After the resolution was redirected from its original, liberal purpose, its sponsors withdrew it in protest.

Not long ago, Bishop Johnson chose to co-sign a public letter with a couple of other bishops advocating gay rights. This letter alluded to recent news stories about Christian small business owners (florists, cake bakers, photographers, etc.) who face extreme punishments ranging from six-figure fines to forced loss of livelihood to even threatened jail time for not wanting to offer their services to support pastorally harmful same-sex "wedding" rituals. Bishop Johnson and her colleagues callously ignored the suffering of these brothers and sisters in Christ, instead indicating their support for the government forcing the business owners to participate in damagingly unchristian ceremonies.

Perhaps emboldened by their bishop's public stand effectively supporting punishment for religious conscience, activists in the Peninsula-Delaware Conference affiliated with the Reconciling Ministries Network submitted a resolution that would have affirmed the same basic anti-liberty approach as their bishop by putting the conference on record as broadly opposing any government or private actions that "misuse the principle of religious freedom in ways that do harm by denying services...to anyone." But surprisingly, this resolution provoked significant pushback and discussion and was ultimately rejected by that conference.



Bishop Peggy Johnson marches in the Philadelphia Gay Pride Parade, celebrating the participation of some area United Methodists.

This year's Peninsula-Delaware Conference also overwhelmingly voted to amend a proposed resolution on the vulnerabilities of "youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender" to add the goal "that they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to fully embrace and live out their true identity in Jesus Christ." ✚

FOR REFLECTION: 1 Corinthians 12:26.

ACTION: Write to Bishop Johnson and ask her to set an example by publicly apologizing for her callous, unloving disregard for traditional Christians facing the loss of their careers, life savings, and basic freedoms: Bishop Peggy Johnson / Eastern Pennsylvania Conference UMC / P.O. Box 820 / Valley Forge, PA 19482 / amy.botti@epaumc.org / bshpajohnson@aol.com

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Reproductive Choice (RCRC) and repealed a 40-year-old denominational resolution that endorsed the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision and contained euphemistic language to imply support for taxpayer-funded abortion.

The GBCS has long routinely ignored official UMC positions with which its monolithically liberal staff disagrees. But the NCC, claiming to represent a coalition of 38 member communions, is sometimes more cautious on such issues. The UMC has long been the single-biggest funder of the NCC. The NCC is often portrayed as representing you and every other United Methodist. Do they represent you? ✚

ACTION: Write to our denomination's new Ecumenical Officer and respectfully ask him to ensure that no more United Methodist funds are given to the National Council of Churches until a process is established requiring the NCC to consult with him before endorsing such statements, and until he receives assurances that the NCC will offer no further public support to Planned Parenthood: Bishop Michael Watson / UMC Council of Bishops / 100 Maryland Avenue NE - Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20002 / ecumenicalofficer@umc-cob.org

GOOD NEWS: Indiana Youth Take a Stand

At the 2017 session of the Indiana Annual Conference, a resolution was proposed to express concern for teenagers identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) who often face bullying, homelessness, and/or suicide.

On the one hand, this is a legitimate concern. Bible-believing Christians must have no less compassion here than anyone else. Furthermore, this resolution did not explicitly attack our denomination's official, biblical standard that sexual relations are only for "the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage."

But on the other hand, some believed the resolution's exclusive focus on defending "LGBTQ youth" implied support for wider LGBTQ agendas. After all, it was submitted by two clergymen affiliated with the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), an unofficial caucus primarily devoted to ending our denomination's disapproval of homosexual practice. There was particular concern about the harmful ways that liberal leaders in the conference might apply the resolution's advocacy mandate for Indiana UMC congregations to "work with local schools to encourage and support educational opportunities, ... safe spaces, [and] policies for reducing bullying" for this minority of youth.

Among those who felt that this exclusive focus ignored other vulnerable youth were some of the conference's own youth members.

Seventeen-year-old **Leah Padgett** went to the microphone and bravely shared how she had felt "very hurt and almost started crying" as the resolution was being discussed, given her own past struggles with depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts, and how several of her friends have had similar struggles, but they were being left out of this resolution. She proposed an amendment to expand the church's

concern to ALL youth, while leaving in place acknowledgment of struggles particularly faced by youth who identify as LGBT. Her amendment also ended up effectively fixing the problems with

the advocacy mandate by replacing that portion with a broader encouragement for combatting suicide, bullying, and homelessness.

The Padgett Amendment provoked mixed reactions from "Reconciling" activists. Some were sympathetic, others less so. Later, one older woman who identified herself as a supporter of the original resolution even angrily confronted the young Miss Padgett in the ladies' room!

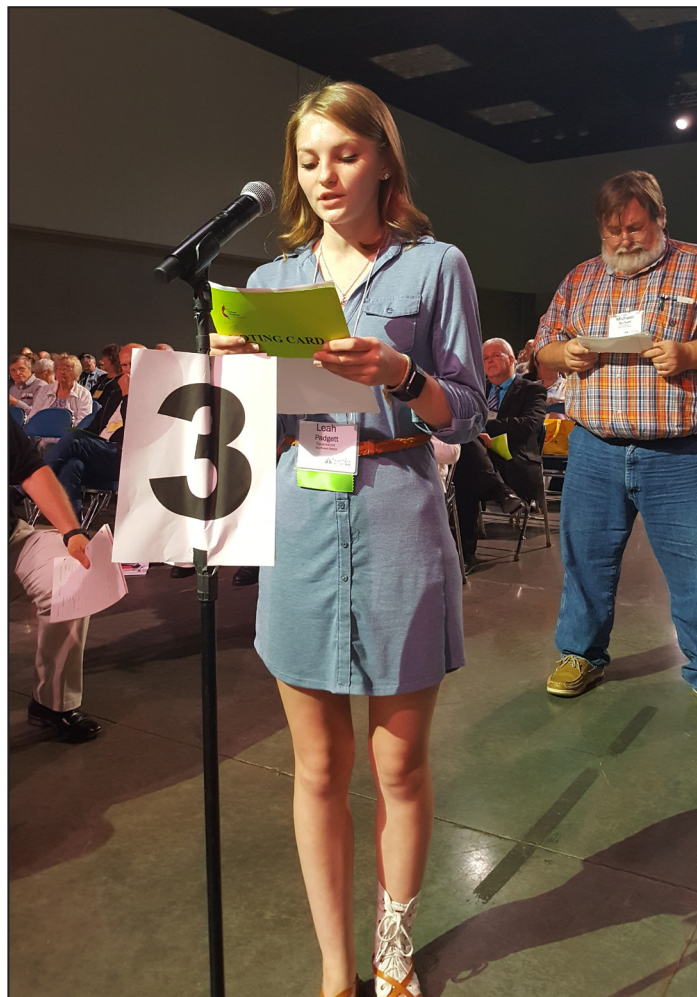
The only other youth who spoke on the resolution was **Katherine Land**, who urged support for the Padgett Amendment so that non-LGBT friends of hers with similar struggles "are not only not overlooked, but supported and cared for."

Ultimately, the resolution passed overwhelmingly with the Padgett Amendment, thanks to the brave willingness of these two young women to step up.

In other business, other "Reconciling" activists pushed a "recall election" to prevent Indiana's 2016 General Conference delegates from automatically continuing as delegates to the specially called 2019 General Conference. This was seen as targeting UMAction Director John Lomperis and other conservative delegates. Thankfully, it was overwhelmingly defeated. ✚

ACTION: For more resources on being in compassionate ministry with members of the LGBT community without compromising biblical values, check out the Transforming Congregations ministry within our denomination: www.transformingcongregations.org

The Padgett Amendment provoked mixed reactions from "Reconciling" activists. Some were sympathetic, others less so.



Leah Padgett at the microphone (Photo: John Lomperis/IRD)



Controversial retired United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague (center, in dark suit) was arrested twice for protesting at the 2000 United Methodist Church General Conference (Photo: Spirit of a Liberal blog)

UMW Props Up Post-Christian Bishop

By far the most controversial United Methodist bishop in modern times has been **C. Joseph Sprague**, who was elected in 1996. He retired early in 2004 and had planned to work for our denomination's D.C.-based General Board of Church and Society as its "chaplain on the Hill," but this scheme was abandoned, after public protest by **UMAction**. Since then, he has largely faded from view.

But he was back in the spotlight earlier this year as a featured speaker at the National United Methodist Caretakers of God's Creation Conference. This gathering in a suburb of Washington, D.C., was promoted and "co-organized" by United Methodist Women (UMW).

A self-described theological "radical," Sprague led the Northern Illinois Conference in marginalizing faithful evangelicals there. In 1999, he urged its clergy to read a book by **Marcus Borg**, a self-described "panentheist" who has asserted that beliefs about Jesus as messiah were invented by the early church. At the 2000 General Conference, Sprague went out of his way to get himself arrested in protest of our denomination's disapproval of homosexual practice.

Most notably, in 2002 Sprague spoke at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, where he openly denied Christ's virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and atoning death, and further declared that Jesus was not born divine but become divine through the faithfulness of his earthly walk, with the implication that others could follow suit. His book repeating this theology, *Affirmations of a Dissenter*, was published the same year, moving him far beyond any worldview that can be called "Christian" in any meaningful way. This prompted public rebuttals from **Bishop Timothy Whitaker** of Florida and **Bishop Marion Edwards** of North Carolina, breaking UMC bishops' longstanding code of never publicly disagreeing. After the **Rev. Thomas Lambrecht**

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UMAction Briefing

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