

UMAction

briefing



United Methodist Bishops Denounce Iraq War as “Immoral”

The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, at its November meeting, nearly unanimously approved a resolution condemning the U.S. military presence in Iraq. A separate unofficial statement, signed by over half of the active U.S. bishops, even more harshly denounced the “unjust and immoral invasion and occupation,” while charging that Americans are being “sent to Iraq to kill and be killed.”

At the same meeting, the bishops approved a brief statement on the crisis in Darfur. They urged prayer for the situation, but pointedly refrained from criticizing the Islamist Sudanese government for its genocidal campaign against the Darfurians.

The United Methodist Church has 8.2 million members in the United States, including both President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney.

The bishops’ official statement on Iraq faulted the U.S. government for claiming that Saddam Hussein’s regime had weapons of mass destruction and ties to al Qaeda. It also blamed the United States for the “denigration of human dignity” and “gross violations of human rights of prisoners of war.” There was no mention of Saddam Hussein’s human rights record nor of the type of repressive regime that would result if the insurgents in Iraq prevailed. The statement urged the withdrawal of all U.S. military troops and bases from Iraq while seeking a greater United Nations role.

In the unofficial statement, signed by 96 active and retired bishops, Iraqis were described as “needlessly” dying. But the bishops did not identify who was killing the most Iraqis (i.e., the insurgents), nor did they describe how this killing would stop if the United States were to withdraw. Neither of the statements from the bishops mentioned the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed by

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The Rev. Bob Edgar of the National Council of Churches (left) and Bishop Joe Wilson (right) with an anti-war protestor. (UMNS)

Lesbian Minister Defrocked

The United Methodist Church's highest court defrocked an openly lesbian Philadelphia minister who defied the church's prohibition against clergy sexually active outside of marriage. The Judicial Council, meeting in Houston, also ruled that the bishop of Virginia was incorrect to suspend a pastor who refused to accept into church membership an openly homosexual man who would not accept the church's teachings.

Beth Stroud was a Philadelphia United Methodist minister who was defrocked by a church jury last year after she publicly announced she was sexually involved with another woman. The appeals committee for the church's Northeast Jurisdiction overturned the jury decision, claiming that the church's policies were contradictory. But the Judicial Council, in a 6-2 decision, ruled that the church's expectation of celibacy for single clergy and monogamy for married clergy was very clear.

Ed Johnson is a Virginia United Methodist pastor who declined to accept into church membership a man who was active in his congregation and openly involved in a sexual relationship with another man. Johnson was counseling the homosexual man, who sings in the choir of Johnson's church. But the bishop of Virginia, Charlene Kammerer, intervened, telling Johnson he must accept the homosexual man into immediate church membership. The bishop seemed to deny that local pastors had any discretion in terms of who is accepted into church membership. Johnson was placed on involuntary leave without pay.

The Judicial Council, in a 5-3 decision, ruled that pastors in United Methodism in fact do have such discretion about church membership. Johnson has been restored to the pastorate and will be reimbursed for the salary that has been withheld from him. The Judicial Council did



Beth Stroud (left) and her partner Chris Paige, after the trial. (UMNS)

not directly address the issue of homosexual practice and church membership.

Meeting at the same time as the Judicial Council was the Council of Bishops. In their unanimous statement, the bishops affirmed that "homosexuality" is not a bar to church membership. But like the Judicial Council, they carefully did not address whether homosexual practice is a bar. The bishops declined to ask the Judicial Council to reconsider its ruling about Ed Johnson, as some liberal church officials have suggested.

Officially, the United Methodist Church describes homosexual practice as "incompatible with Christian teaching" and requires clergy to be celibate if single and monogamous if married. The church prohibits any celebration of same-sex unions and any church funding of pro-homosexuality advocacy. United Methodism affirms God's love for all persons, including homosexuals, and affirms sex only within marriage. ✚

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Saddam's regime or the millions who were oppressed by it. Nor did either mention the national elections held in Iraq since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Nor did either acknowledge that the United States is spending tens of billions of dollars on Iraqi schools, hospitals, electrical grids, water supply, and other infrastructure.

The official Council of Bishops statement partially quoted the United Methodist *Social Principles*, which call war "incompatible" with the teachings of Christ. But it

neglected to acknowledge the very next sentence of the church's *Social Principles*, which states that war might be justified in cases of genocide, brutal suppression, and aggression. ✚

ACTION: Contact the Council of Bishops and share your thoughts about their Iraq statements: Bishop Roy Sano, Secretary, The Council of Bishops, 100 Maryland Ave., NE, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20002; Phone: 202-547-6270; Fax: 202-547-6272; e-mail: cob@umc.org.

UM Lobbyist Criticizes UM Judicial Council

The head of the United Methodist Church's lobby office in Washington, D.C., criticized the church's top court for its rulings about homosexuality.

"I think the rulings are potentially very far reaching and disastrous for the United Methodist Church," said Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society in Washington, D.C. He was interviewed in the *Christian Post* published on November 3.

Winkler warned of growing conservative influence in The United Methodist Church. "If we don't address what the Judicial Council has done, we will be heading down the wrong road—we will be on the road down to the take-over of our denomination similar to that of the Southern Baptist Convention 30 years ago," Winkler warned.

The Board of Church and Society routinely lobbies the church's General Conference every four years to abandon the church's disapproval of homosexual practice. On that issue, as well as on many others, Winkler's agency is often criticized for not representing the whole church. The agency is funded by church apportionment dollars and from revenues from the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill.

Officially, the United Methodist Church declares homosexual practice to be "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Winkler, in his interview, suggested President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney should also be ineligible for church membership, since the church also opposes war.

"The United Methodist Church says two things are incompatible with Christian teachings: war and homosexuality.



Jim Winkler (right) with liberal Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA). (UMNS)

But I don't hear anybody saying that people who started wars are ineligible," said Winkler. He neglected to mention that the United Methodist *Social Principles* acknowledge that war might be justly "employed only as a last resort in the prevention of such evils as genocide, brutal suppression of human rights and unprovoked international aggression."

Winkler was dismissive of the church court's rulings. "Frankly, I think it is purely a political ruling," he said. "The judicial division is similar to what is happening in the Supreme Court, and I think this is purely a simple abuse of power."

"Given the present climate in the United Methodist Church, you would have to be blind to say this ruling has no impact," Winkler said. "Everyone is completely aware of what this decision is about. It is about denying membership to the gay and lesbian people in the United Methodist Church." ✚

Action: Contact Jim Winkler about his comments on the Judicial Council rulings: General Board of Church and Society, 100 Maryland Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20002; Phone 202-488-5620; Fax 202-488-5619; e-mail jwinkler@umc-gbcs.org.

Episcopal Group Cancels Event at Lake Junaluska

A mission organization for Episcopalians has cancelled plans to meet at United Methodism's Lake Junaluska conference center. The cancellation came in response to Lake Junaluska's hosting the pro-homosexuality "Hearts on Fire" event over Labor Day weekend.

The New Wineskins Episcopal Church Missionary Community (NWECMC) typically attracts over 1,000 people to its regular "New Wineskins" gatherings. In reaction to "Hearts on Fire," NWECMC rescheduled and relocated New Wineskins away from fall 2006 at Lake Junaluska to spring 2007 at Ridgcrest, a Southern Baptist-owned facility not far from Lake Junaluska in

western North Carolina.

NWECMC is an advocate for evangelical missions within the Episcopal Church. In light of the Episcopal Church crisis springing from the 2003 consecration of openly homosexual Gene Robinson as a bishop, NWECMC was especially determined to affirm traditional Christian teachings regarding sexuality. ✚

Action: Please thank NW ECMC for its stance: Sharon Steinmiller, Director, New Wineskins Missionary Network, 1098 Melrose Ave., Ambridge, PA 15003; E-mail info@newwineskins.org.

Agency Rejects Church & Society Audit Over Methodist Building

The controversial Washington, D.C., lobby office of the United Methodist Church is facing increasing trouble over use of income from its prominent headquarters building on Capitol Hill.

In September, the Audit and Review Committee of the General Council on Finance and Administration ruled that Church and Society might be legally vulnerable because of its non-compliance with the original 1965 trust agreement governing the board-owned United Methodist Building. Citing potential “illegalities,” the committee unanimously refused to certify Church and Society’s audit for 2004.

In response, Church and Society chief Jim Winkler vigorously defended his agency’s controversial spending of Methodist Building Endowment Trust Funds. “We continue to use the money exactly as intended,” insisted Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the Board of Church and Society.

Winkler’s agency is preparing to ask the D.C. Superior Court

to “interpret” how that agency may spend income from the Methodist Building and other assets transferred to Church and Society 40 years ago by the church’s Old Temperance Board.

The 1965 Building Endowment Trust Agreement governing that transfer stipulates that all income from the trust should be devoted to alcohol and temperance issues. But Church and Society for much of the last 40 years has interpreted the trust agreement to mean that it can spend the income on general operating expenses. Such expenses include lobbying on Capitol Hill for a wide array of liberal political causes, such as abortion rights, opposing U.S. foreign policy, advocating a larger welfare state, and urging more stringent environmental regulation.

“I have found not a single shred of evidence to indicate any abuse of funds,” declared Winkler, who said he has been studying 40-year-old documents. He asserted that the money given early in the 20th century to the Old Temperance Board for construction of the Methodist Building was “given to address a broad range of social concerns.”

Winkler said that the “fight against the abuse of alcohol” remains an “historic concern” for Church and Society, which is the “legal successor agency” to the Old Temperance Board. He insisted that the boards of directors of Church

and Society had “sought sound legal advice over the years” to justify their spending temperance money on general operating expenses.

Church and Society expedited plans to go to court after the denomination’s financial oversight agency recently refused to approve Church and Society’s 2004 audit. “We cannot state with assurance that there have been no illegal acts; and cannot accept the 2004 Financial Disclosures regarding the Building Trust, as they are presently written,” said the report from the Audit and Review Committee of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA).

The trustees of the United Methodist Building reported to the Church and Society directors that attorney David Webster would seek a declaratory judgment from a court of competent jurisdiction regarding the 1965 Building Endowment

Trust. The purpose would be “to ascertain if the proceeds expended by Church and Society and its predecessor groups from this

fund were used properly.” The trustees also urged that Church and Society leaders meet with GCFA leaders to “better model” how Christians “handle differences of opinion.”

Church and Society expects to spend \$40,000 to \$50,000 on legal costs this year, well beyond the \$25,000 that it had budgeted, thanks largely to the Building Endowment Trust Fund controversy. It also expects to spend a similar amount next year.

At the October Church and Society directors meeting, Winkler said there “has not been a day including weekends, that I haven’t had to spend on this issue” of the trust fund. Church and Society director Jo Ann Fukumoto expressed indignation that GCFA would “accuse” the directors of possible “illegalities.” But director Rob Renfroe of Houston responded that “we should be concerned rather than angry.”

Bishop James Swanson, as chairman of the Methodist Building’s trustees, several times affirmed that the D.C. Superior Court’s interpretation of the trust would be accepted without further contention or litigation so that this dispute could be “put behind us.”



The Audit and Review Committee ruled that Church and Society might be legally vulnerable because of its non-compliance with the original 1965 trust agreement.

ACTION: Go to www.ird-renew.org and review UMAction’s special section about the United Methodist Building Endowment Fund dispute.

Bishop Sprague Denounces Conservatives

Retired United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague lamented that IRD, Good News, and the Confessing Movement have “captured the soul” of the United Methodist Church. The bishop was speaking at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., in October. The occasion was commemorating that church’s tenth anniversary as a pro-homosexuality “reconciling” congregation. Foundry is perhaps best known as the church attended by Bill and Hillary Clinton during his presidency.

“To be theologically and politically progressive—let alone gay, lesbian, or allies thereof—at such a time like this, both in the church and in this nation, demands an integrated perspective of hope,” Sprague declared.

As bishop of Northern Illinois, Sprague was deeply controversial for denying the eternal deity, bodily resurrection, and virgin birth of Jesus Christ. He also disagreed with church teachings reserving sex for the marriage of man and woman.

Regretting United Methodism’s refusal to bless homosexual practice, Sprague described the denomination as “besieged by neo-literalists and neo-cons who would rather win than open the UMC to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.”

“What do we do in the midst of such seemingly hopeless circumstances?” Sprague asked the congregation.

He spoke of the current debate over homosexuality as part of a larger struggle for the “very soul” of the church. “The issues related to homosexuality...are indicative of deep theological matters related of the authority of scripture, the nature of revelation, the person of Jesus, and the ongoing human question of ‘Who’s on top?’” Sprague asserted.

Pointing out that his disagreement with orthodoxy is not simply on sexual issues, Sprague said, “God’s power to reveal who God is was not entombed when the creeds were negotiated, politically I might add, or the Bible canonized.”

Sprague urged greater opportunities for “gay and lesbian brothers and sisters” to “tell their faith stories” to counteract the “caricatures of deviant behavior.” He also urged “truth telling” to counter the “false interpretation of scripture that is in vogue in the church today,” apparently referring to the 3,500-year-old Judeo-Christian consensus against homosexual behavior.

“...Too many bishops simply remain quiet while neo-cons and neo-literalists suggest that there is a condemnatory position vis-a-vis homosexuality in the Bible when we know better,” Sprague contended. “Anybody who has read the seven passages in question knows there is no such thing.” The bishop insisted that the Bible condemns only those sexual practices that “destroy” the sacred worth of a person, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

The bishop recounted the pain of watching the United States supposedly “embrace an ideology of empire building that tramples on the least, the last, and the lost.” And he condemned the “immorality of the Bush Administration’s preemptive, first-strike ideology that plunders resources and bankrupts good will while clipping the wings of the angel of this nation’s historic goodness.”



Retired Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, here being arrested during a protest. (UMNS)

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Action: Contact Bishop Sprague with your thoughts: 2583 West Choctaw Drive, London, OH 43140; Fax 740-845-1012.

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We tell you the painful truth about what has gone wrong with The United Methodist Church: unfaithfulness and far-left partisan politics by too many high church officials. We don't enjoy bringing you bad news, but we must tell the truth.

The good news is the growing movement to restore Scriptural faithfulness in our church. More and more United Methodists are working together for reform and renewal.

Don't leave! Our great Methodist heritage is too valuable to be abandoned. Join with us to help the United Methodist Church return to its Wesleyan roots as a growing, evangelical, Christian church living Christ's Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

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The Institute on Religion & Democracy
1023 15th Street NW, Suite 601
Washington, DC 20005-2601

(202) 682-4131
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umaction@ird-renew.org

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YOUR OPINION, PLEASE!

The Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church has ruled in a 6-2 vote to maintain the defrocking of actively lesbian minister Beth Stroud, and in a 5-3 vote to reverse Bishop Charlene Kammerer's punishment of a Virginia pastor who refused to admit a practicing homosexual into congregational membership before he agreed to repent. Do you agree with these decisions?

- Agree with both decisions.
- Agree with defrocking of Beth Stroud but disagree with reversing punishment of Virginia pastor.
- Agree with defending Virginia pastor but disagree with defrocking Beth Stroud.
- Disagree with both decisions.