

GUEST COLUMN: THE TRULY RIGHT THING TO DO

A version of this testimony was distributed by Lifewatch at the 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh.

It was 1983. That is all I can remember about the date. We were sitting in the waiting room of the Women's Clinic in Roanoke, VA. I was there with my girlfriend, because it was the right thing to do. I had paid for half the abortion, because it was the right thing to do. I had been sexually active, because it felt like the right thing to do.

So why had that little voice kept saying, "This feels like the wrong thing to do?"

This event shaped all my future opinions on the topic of abortion, which I kept to myself. Never would you have seen me engaged in a heated discussion on abortion in college, in seminary, or in the church. No way! The few times I was backed into a corner, out came the official stand from The Book of Discipline's Social Principles, with one addition: God is able to forgive anything. I believed that applied to everyone but me.

Later, in 2001, while I was serving a two-congregation charge on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, God called me to an extended fast from solid food. I asked God to reveal anything in my life that separated us. It was a life-changing experience, as God showed me how I remained in bondage to guilt and shame for things in my past. These were chains that I had forged and chose to wear. But then I received the assurance that God had forgiven me. God delivered me from my "life sentence."

My newly found freedom led me to the local crisis pregnancy center and to its director, who had a caring heart for United Methodist pastors. It was the beginning of a fruitful relationship between the center and one of my congregations.

God also called me to preach a series of sermons on the topic of abortion. With much fear and trembling, I obeyed. The first two weeks were spent comparing the Biblical view with that of the culture. Then on week

three, I shared my personal experience with the congregation. That Sunday, as I walked into the pulpit, a group of about twenty teenagers from the local United Methodist camp were sitting there. Many questions raced through my mind, but I found the Holy Spirit urging me to preach the sermon as it was written.

After the service, as the youth filed past me at the door, many would not even speak. Then I noticed two of them had stayed back until everyone else left the sanctuary. These young women told me of a friend back home who was pregnant and considering abortion. They described the agony of having no words of hope to give her—until now. They thanked me and left. As they left, I realized that God had indeed called me to speak out that day—not to be liked but to bring hope to those in need.

I know the "devastating damage" (The Book of Discipline, Par. 161J) of abortion, both personally and

professionally. Abortion, which was intended to help and free women, has instead brought pain and misery into the lives of many people, female and male. As followers of Jesus Christ, and as The United Methodist Church, we must offer them more than a

quick fix: we can and must love them both.

—The Reverend John A. Bright/Epworth United Methodist Church/4144 W. Lynchburg-Salem Turnpike/Thaxton, VA 24174/(540)586-4203 ♥

"I know the 'devastating damage' (The Book of Discipline, Par. 161J) of abortion, both personally and professionally."

ONE CREATOR OF ALL PEOPLE

"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation...'" (Mark 16:15, RSV)

These words of Chief Red Jacket of the Seneca people, spoken in 1805, carry much truth: "Brothers, the Great Spirit has made us all. But He has made a great difference between His white and red children. He has given us a different complexion and different customs."

Chief Red Jacket's words continue to speak to many issues of history and our time. Within his words is the assumption that the same Creator creates all people.

This was a religious starting point for many of the Native Americans on the North American continent. However, history tells us that this was not always the assumption granted, by those who came to settle, to the Native Americans.

This is not stated to negate the many acts of courage, faith, and nobility that were demonstrated by both sides. Nor is it an attempt to belittle the acts of violence and even atrocities committed on both sides. For both sides acted in human ways: they demonstrated the best and the worst that are within us.

What was Chief Red Jacket's point? Was he not pointing us to an assumption by which bridges over differences can be crossed and all human life celebrated?

One of the defining seeds of disunity, and eventually violence, among God's people is the disagreement over whether a person is truly a person. It is amazing how history seems to repeat itself.

For many in the earliest decades of United States history, the "red man" was a savage. Therefore, he was considered something less than human. This meant acts of violence against Native American humanity could be condoned by some of the settlers, even by some Christian settlers of the day. After all, they reasoned, Biblical truths which applied to themselves did not necessarily apply to those who were not fully human.

Later, during times of slavery, the "negro" was thought by some to be something less than human. This meant acts of violence against African-American humanity could be condoned by slaveholders and others, even by some Christians of the day. After all, they reasoned, Biblical truths which applied to themselves did not necessarily apply to those who were not fully human.

Today, we continue to struggle with the same question. By many, the unborn "fetus" is understood to be something less than a person, something less than a born baby. Therefore, acts of violence toward the unborn and the pregnant mother are condoned by many, even by Christian people of our day. And the growing number of women and men suffering from various forms of Post-Abortion Syndrome must be added to the tragedy of abortion.

When, O God, who is most fully revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ, will we simply hear the good news that you are the Creator of all, including all human life? Therefore, the gift of each life is precious. The gift of each life is worthy of celebration and praise. This basic truth about the human family, by God's grace, can unite us as nothing else can.

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A BRIEF REPORT ON PITTSBURGH

From April 27 through May 7, The United Methodist Church's 2004 General Conference was in session in Pittsburgh, PA. Therefore, one would expect [Lifewatch](#) to provide a report on legislation, pertaining to abortion and homosexuality, that was approved and rejected by General Conference. Sure enough, such a report can be found below.

First, however, step back and consider the larger picture.

The polity (or government) of The United Methodist Church is modeled on the federal government of the United States. As any junior-high student knows, our nation's federal government has three branches—the executive branch, the judicial branch, and the legislative branch. Likewise, The United Methodist Church has three branches—executive, judicial, and legislative. Our

denomination's executive branch is led by the Council of Bishops. At the top of our denomination's judicial branch is the Judicial Council. And the legislative branch of our denomination is guided by the General

Conference. At Pittsburgh, the most powerful bodies of all three branches of United Methodist government—the Council of Bishops, the Judicial Council, and the General Conference—were present and active. Each branch, in turn, receives attention below.

THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

Even before the Pittsburgh assembly officially convened, the executives of the denomination were at work. On April 26, Bishop Ruediger Minor, the president of the Council of Bishops, released a letter addressed to "United Methodist Sisters and Brothers." Writing for the Council, Bp. Minor's letter attempted to create an optimal atmosphere for the General Conference to do its legislative work. Remember the pressing problem on the minds of most Conference delegates: the church-trial acquittal of The Reverend Karen Dammann, an admitted homosexual living in a gay union, in the Pacific Northwest Conference. Therefore, Bp. Minor's letter could be understood as an attempt to quiet the ecclesiastical storm that was gathering. Unfortunately, the letter did nothing but heighten the sense of crisis in the denomination.

Bp. Minor's letter is notable for three reasons. First, the letter is filled with psychological jargon. He writes about "a sense of anxiety in the atmosphere," about people being "concerned," about "stress," and about "fear." To be sure, much of this psychological stuff was in the air of General Conference. But were not the denominational issues that were generating such psychological responses more important than the psychological responses themselves? And could the letter have been more indicative of the psychology of the bishops than the psychology of the General Conference?

Second, the letter is episcopally centered: that is, its focus is on the Council of Bishops. It explains: how the bishops think about themselves ("we consider ourselves

"[Bishop Minor] writes about 'a sense of anxiety in the atmosphere...'"

to be family”), how the bishops behave toward each other (“we love each other, we listen to each other, and sometimes, we vigorously disagree with each other”), how the bishops respect each other (“we do not question the integrity of our colleagues...”), what the bishops know (“we have learned that honest struggle is a part of love”), where the bishops are (“we are united in our commitment to Jesus Christ...to practice and advocate unity...to uphold The Book of Discipline...in our conviction that the critical issues will not be ultimately resolved with legislation...”), and what the bishops have done (“we have spent many hours in dialogue...”). In the midst of a moment of truth in The United Methodist Church, why did the bishop’s letter focus so heavily on the bishops themselves?

And third, the letter confesses that “[o]n some issues, including human sexuality, we are not of one opinion.” Here are bishops of the Church of Jesus Christ stating that they are “not of one opinion.” But bishops are supposed to have teaching, Christian teaching, Church teaching, apostolic teaching—not opinions! Bishops might be wise to leave opinions to those engaged in parlor conversations and editorial writing. At the same time, bishops might be wise to stick with the teaching which they have received from the Church’s faith, and which they are consecrated and charged to convey.

For these three reasons—the psychological emphasis, the concentration on the bishops, and the placing of opinion over teaching—Bp. Minor’s letter failed the General Conference. For some reason, the Council of Bishops, acting as the executive branch of the church, continues not to lead The United Methodist Church through the current challenges. The Council’s refusal to lead is harming the very church it is committed to serve.

THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL

While the bishops were overly and overtly timid, the Judicial Council proved itself to be rather decisive.

On April 28, General Conference directed the Council to rule on two legal claims that had led to the acquittal of Rev. Dammann. On May 1, the Judicial Council read its decisions to the Conference: it ruled that being a self-avowed practicing homosexual is a chargeable offense for United Methodist clergy; and that Paragraph 304.3 is an “unambiguous” declaration against homosexual practice and that, as such, it is church law.

Immediately following the reading of the Judicial Council’s ruling, the General Conference charged the Judicial Council to: (1) apply the most recent Judicial Council ruling to the Dammann verdict, and (2) determine the “meaning, application, and effect of Paragraph 304.3...regarding whether a bishop may or may not appoint a pastor who had been found by a trial court to be a self-avowed practicing homosexual.” On May 4, the Judicial Council ruled that (1) it had no jurisdiction to review the verdict of the Dammann church trial, and (2) a bishop shall not appoint a pastor

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who has been determined by trial court to be a self-avowed practicing homosexual.

Though these rulings did not immediately overturn the Dammann church-trial acquittal, they were strong decisions by the Judicial Council. They set the stage for the Pacific Northwest Conference to discipline, appropriately and lovingly, Rev. Dammann and help The United Methodist Church maintain its orthodox position on homosexuality.

THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

Of particular interest to most United Methodists across the church was how General Conference 2004 would legislate on Paragraph 161G, which is The Book of Discipline’s Social Principle on homosexuality. It

adopted this language: “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Also, to “[w]e affirm that God’s grace is available to all,” it added: “and we will seek to live together in

Christian community.” Before adopting this final language, the Conference voted down the following sentence that had been proposed by the Church and Society Legislative Committee: “We recognize that Christians disagree on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian teaching.”

Also, General Conference passed legislation that clarified chargeable offenses for pastors to include: “(a) immorality, including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not being faithful in a heterosexual marriage; (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teaching, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.” (Paragraph 2702) It also affirmed civil laws that define marriage as the union of a man and a woman. In addition, it rejected adding this sentence to a Social Principle on civil liberties: “We support the right of same-gender couples to receive the same protections and benefits provided by state and national governments that come through civil marriages between men and women.” And it turned down a proposal that would have allowed the various regions of the denomination to decide whether or not to permit gay clergy.

With regard to abortion, the news from General Conference was mixed. To The Book of Discipline’s Paragraph 161J, which states United Methodism’s ambiguous teaching on abortion, General Conference added this helpful sentence: “We particularly encourage the Church, the government, and social service agencies

“The Council’s refusal to lead is harming the very church it is committed to serve.”

to support and facilitate the option of adoption. (See Paragraph 161K.)” This was another step, though a very short step, in the pro-life direction. On another positive note, General Conference did, for the first time, recognize the damage that abortion brings; you will read more about that in

our September 2004 issue. Unfortunately, the Conference affirmed support for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a pro-choice coalition; to United Methodists dedicated to the Gospel of Life and Christian unity, General Conference’s blessing of RCRC was incomprehensible.

How could General Conference be so strong on keeping The United Methodist Church orthodox with regard to church teaching on homosexuality, yet so unwilling to alter the denomination’s pro-choice teaching and affiliations on abortion? Perhaps two reasons stand out. First, General Conference is organizationally conservative. It usually conserves positions it has adopted during previous sessions. Changes are, more often than not, accomplished quite gradually. And second, General Conference delegates were probably fatigued by the politics surrounding the issue of homosexuality. Because this Conference was mainly about homosexuality, it was not going to open up yet another difficult, moral matter like abortion to debate at length. For these reasons, United Methodism stayed with its truthful teaching on homosexuality and with its ambiguous teaching on abortion.

THE CRISIS AND THE CHALLENGE

During the second week of General Conference, informal meetings between evangelical-orthodox leaders and liberal-progressive leaders took place. Not surprisingly, these meetings surfaced and probed the moral-theological denominational divide, which is most powerfully presented by the conflict over homosexuality, and its intractability. During the conversations, a document, which proposed a process through which the two sides would “amicably separate,” emerged from the evangelical-orthodox participants. Though the document was not officially presented at General Conference, it rocked the Conference delegates and provoked an official response from the Conference itself. On May 7, General Conference responded to the idea of an amicable separation of the denomination by overwhelmingly passing this resolution on church unity: “As United Methodists, we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and reaffirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the world.”

It has been commented that The United Methodist Church is the most American of churches. United Methodism’s three branches of government—executive, judicial, and legislative—confirm that comment. Furthermore, United Methodism often reflects what is

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going on in American culture. Currently in American society, a culture war rages. It is between conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans, traditionalists and anti-traditionalists. However the sides are named, they are locked in furious competition throughout

the society. It appears that this culture war in the general society entered The United Methodist Church a couple of decades ago, and it is now threatening to divide the church.

Is there a way out of this ecclesiastical mess? Perhaps there is. But the way out will not be provided by the Judicial Council handing down proper decisions, though good legal reasoning will certainly not harm the denomination. And the way out of possible separation will not happen because General Conference passes this petition or that, though wise legislation can be good for the church. And the way out of our moral-theological struggle will not be insured by repeating pious platitudes or by arranging feel-good experiences or by attempting organizational-management schemes. The way out of the crisis within The United Methodist Church is to be found in the most unlikely of places: in the Council of Bishops and in the teaching office of each bishop. The Council of Bishops and the bishops are charged by Christ, by the Gospel, by the Church catholic, by The United Methodist Church, and by The Book of Discipline to teach truth to the church; and from truthful teaching comes unity in the truth and good order in the truth. When the Council of Bishops teaches the truth of the Christian covenant by which The United Methodist Church exists, when each bishop confidently asserts the truth of the Christian covenant throughout his/her assigned area, then and only then will the crisis facing United Methodism lift and be transformed into a time of renewal.

The crisis within The United Methodist Church is not our denomination’s struggle over homosexuality. Homosexuality is currently the presenting issue of the crisis, but not the crisis itself. Rather, the crisis in United Methodism is the collapse of substantive, truthful, episcopal teaching throughout the denomination. For when the bishops do not teach truthfully, a thousand different, conflicting, and confusing voices fill the denominational public square; then teaching in the church becomes more a matter of politics than of truthfulness.

Until the teaching office of the Council of Bishops and each bishop is rediscovered and reasserted, the crisis within United Methodism will persist, and the separation will threaten. If/when that teaching office—which makes possible the teaching of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church’s faith—is rediscovered and reasserted by our bishops, The United Methodist Church will be renewed in the unity, ministry, and mission she has been given by Jesus Christ. (PTS)♥

THE MARCH FOR WOMEN'S LIVES AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The March for Women's Lives took place in Washington, DC on April 25, 2004. This March was first, last, and throughout about the politics for abortion. That is a factual, not evaluative, statement. Therefore, the March is best understood as a political event that developed and transpired in a political context.

The last, large pro-choice march in Washington, DC occurred in April of 1992. Since 1992, the states have enacted hundreds of pro-life laws—e.g., laws regarding waiting periods before abortions, parental notification and/or consent, and abortion-clinic regulation. During the same time, President Bush has withheld funding from international family planning organizations that offer abortion counseling and from the United Nations Population Fund, and signed the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act. ([Washington Post](#), 4/25/04)

It could be argued that these political advances were possible because American public opinion on abortion is moving in the pro-life direction. Take, for example, the UCLA survey of college freshmen: in 1992 it found 67% of college freshmen thought abortion should be legal, while in 2003 only 55% were discovered to think this way. Also, younger leaders in the activist pro-choice community seem to maintain a more nuanced, less strident, position on abortion. Due to input from pro-choice activists under 30, the name of the April 25th event was changed, to be softened, a couple of times: from the "Choice March" to the "Freedom of Choice March" to the "March for Women's Lives" ([Washington Post](#), 4/24/04).

These developments have created a widespread panic in the pro-choice community. "We are horrified about the backward steps our [pro-choice] policies are taking, not only at the federal level but at the state level," worried Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority. "We feel like we must do something dramatic, because our issues are not in focus, especially with these international crises, and we have got to get them back in focus." The presumptive Democratic candidate for president, Senator John Kerry, joined the pro-choice chorus of concern just before the March: "More than 30 years after Roe versus Wade became the law of the land, it has never been more at risk than it is today." ([Washington Post](#), 4/25/04)

As a result of these political realities, the March for Women's Lives was planned. Major pro-choice institutions—including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the National Organization for Women, and the Planned Parenthood Federation of America—sponsored

the event. Over 1,400 groups—including the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC)—co-sponsored this political effort.

UNITED METHODIST BOARDS SIGN UP

Affiliated with RCRC and perhaps because of RCRC, the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (WD/GBGM), both of The United Methodist Church, became co-sponsors of the March for Women's Lives. James Winkler, the General Secretary of GBCS, composed a January 16th email to describe and explain GBCS's co-sponsorship. In part, Winkler wrote: "On April 25, 2004 a March for Women's Lives will take place in Washington, DC, and GBCS has signed on as a co-sponsor along with the Women's Division, GBGM. Our Social Principles and various statements in the Book of Resolutions, e.g., 264, 181, and 179[,] support our involvement with this event. As a co-sponsor, we will promote and participate in the March, provide information on our Website and work in coalition with other organizations on the planning and implementation of the March. GBCS is contributing no funding from apportionments for this event..." [WD/GBGM, on the other hand, did contribute some money to the March.]

"The four primary sponsoring groups [are]: Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the

National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood Federation of America. The March is not narrowly focused on the 'right to choose' issue, although that is included. Rather, it has a broad focus addressing the need for additional resources and advocacy to lift women from poverty, to provide access to services including health, education and economic [services]—all of which prevent

abortions, [and] infant and mother mortality[;] and improve the quality of life."

Because of a secretarial error, Winkler's email was sent only to the staff of GBCS in January 2004. Not until March 2004 was it finally sent to the clergy and lay members of GBCS. Among some of the members, the news of GBCS co-sponsorship of the March caused some serious dismay. They were concerned because, by co-sponsoring the March, GBCS would be supporting what The United Methodist Church officially rejects—specifically, abortion as a means of birth control and partial-birth abortion (with exceptions). Understandably, a strong suggestion was made that GBCS withdraw from co-sponsorship of the March. However, GBCS remained a co-sponsor, as did WD/GBGM.

THE MARCH FOR WOMEN'S LIVES

In his January 16th email, Mr. Winkler had maintained that the March would cover many issues of concern to women. The Women's Division of GBGM maintained a similar position. ([Newscope](#), 4/30/04) And the United Methodist Church's magazine, Christian

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Social Action, reinforced this claim: “The [M]arch is a broad stand for many of the issues that threaten women, including poverty, access to health care services, education and family planning.” (March/April 2004)

Despite these pre-March opinions of United Methodist officialdom, RCRC maintained clarity about the primacy of abortion in the March: “The purpose of the March...is to demonstrate overwhelming majority support for women’s right to choose safe, legal, abortion, birth control, and women’s right to self-determination.” (RCRC Website) Indeed, said RCRC, “[w]e are pro-choice because of our faiths—and so we will start the March with prayers and meditations on women’s sacred choices.” (RCRC Website) And after the March had ended, Washington Post reporters stated that “[t]he dominant themes of the day were two. Again and again, March participants vowed that abortion was here to stay. And that Bush had to go.” (4/26/04)

According to unofficial estimates of the DC police, the March attracted 500,000-800,000 participants. (March organizers proposed 1,150,000.) Many children, youth, and young adults took part. It was estimated by organizers that one-third of the participants were college age or younger.

The massive crowd assembled on the Mall at mid-morning. After listening to countless brief speeches for a couple of hours, the gathering marched past the White House (twice), up Pennsylvania Avenue toward Capitol Hill, and then to the Mall’s east end. At the conclusion of the March, more speeches were delivered from a large stage in front of the Capitol Reflecting Pool. Huge screens and booming speakers carried the speeches, before and after the marching, so all could see and hear.

Let there be no confusion: the March for Women’s Lives was about the politics for abortion. That is, the March was a political demonstration for abortion rights. The speeches, songs, signs and slogans, and chants made that abundantly clear.

SOME SPEECHES

The pre-March speeches were delivered from a stage that boasted a “March for Women’s Lives” banner above and a “Choice, Justice, Access, and Health” banner down the side. Speakers were the founders and directors of many and various pro-choice organizations, celebrities, entertainers, and others. Generally, their comments were brief, but they were offered with plenty of shouting, fists jabbing the air, and scorn directed toward the Religious Right, the White House, the US House of Representatives, and the US Senate.

Kate Clinton served as the master of ceremonies. She kept things moving along and the crowd in good spirits. At the end of the pre-March speeches, she identified herself as a “faith-based comedienne” and a lesbian. Throughout the day’s events, homosexuality was proudly asserted and worn as a distinguishing badge.

Actress Cybill Shepard stated that this was her third pro-choice march. Then she spoke, in no uncertain terms, against “----- anti-choice fanatics...” She also noted, “The anti-choice advocates are hypocrites...and they make me sick.”

Frances Kissling of Catholics for a Free Choice referred to the “sacred space” of the March, and stirred the approval of the crowd by contending that the 65 million Roman Catholics in the United States are overwhelmingly pro-choice.

Novelist Richard North Patterson, perhaps one of the most articulate of the many speakers, restated the conventional wisdom of the day that “the right to choose has never been more in danger.”

A representative of the National Abortion Federation asked the masses to applaud those who actually perform abortions and provide related services. The crowd responded vigorously.

A speaker from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force declared that the “Queer Movement” and choice movement are “sister movements.” After all, she continued, both assert the right to “use bodies without interference from government,” both have the same enemies (the “forces of intolerance”), and both believe that “limited choice is not real choice.”

Picking up the theme of the separation of church and state, and extending it to morality and politics, Nancy Northrup claimed that government is never a moral teacher, and the “White House is not a Sunday School.”

SOME SONGS

While the music of the day was entertaining, the songs’ lyrics served pro-choice political purposes. Many of them contained haunting refrains, such as: “Have you been to jail for justice? Let me shake your hand.”

Holly Near sang “We Are a Gentle, Angry People.” She ended the number by changing the words and singing: “We are gentle, loving people; and we are singing for our lives.” (emphasis added)

To end the pre-March, Sandy Rap sang about the alleged first victim of the elimination of Medicaid-paid abortions. Her refrain energized the masses to march: “Get your laws off me. I’m not your property. Don’t plan my family. I’ll plan my own. I don’t want to be in your theocracy. Remember liberty. Remember Roe.”

SOME SIGNS AND SLOGANS

In massive political demonstrations, signs and slogans are crucially important. During the March for Women’s Lives, thousands of signs were held, carried, and waved. Then many were left behind as litter. All the more amazing were the many hills of colorful, crisp signs that were piled up throughout the Mall and not used during the day.

The signs and slogans of the March advanced the pro-choice and the anti-Bush agendas. Here is a sample:

“We are pro-choice because of our faiths—and so we will start the March with prayers and meditations on women’s sacred choices.”

“Choice = Freedom;” “My Body, My Choice;” “My Body Is My Sovereign Territory;” “My Body Is Not Public Property: No Trespassing” (provided by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America [PPFA], which in 2002 provided over 227,000 abortions and received \$767 million in income); “Stop the War on Choice” (PPFA); “Stand Up for Choice” (PPFA); “Keep Abortion Safe and Legal;” “Abortion on Demand without Apology;” “Pro-Child/Pro-Choice;” “Pro-Choice/Pro-Family/Pro-Environment;” “Pro-Faith/Pro-Family/Pro-Choice” (RCRC); “Roe, Roe, Roe the Vote;” “Against Abortion? Don’t Have One;” “Reproductive Justice for All;” “No Body of Rules to Rule the Body;” “Queer Rights Are Reproductive Rights;” “Gay Marriage Is a Civil Right;” “Christian Right = American Taliban;” “DNC Democrats: March in April, Vote in November;” “Stop Bitching, Start the Revolution;” “Abortion Rights and Welfare Rights/Support Every Woman’s Choices/ Access and Equality;” “WWWD: What Would Wellstone Do?;” “Mumble/ Grumble/Complain/Wallow/ Hope/Despair/ Worry/ Vote” (on a T-shirt); “Re-Defeat Bush in 2004;” “See us march/Hear us roar/We won’t give Bush/another 4;” “Mr. Bush, if your mother chose abortion, more than 800 American soldiers and over 10,000 Iraqi civilians would be alive today! Abortions save lives;” “I was ----ed by Bush, and must abort;” and “Your fascist patriarchy is killing us.”

Toward the end of the March along Pennsylvania Avenue, there were the signs shaped like women’s panties with pro-choice and anti-Bush messages. Obviously, this was political theater.

Let it be mentioned, last of all, that “the banner of the UM Women’s Division” identified 50 to 100 marchers as they paraded through the streets of Washington. Why did they carry this sign into the March? “According to Julie A. Taylor, executive secretary with the Women’s Division, ‘it’s important for the church to be a visible presence in this march so that we can say, “We’re a safe sanctuary for you if you need counseling, to help with your decision, or to be a supportive shoulder for you in your time of struggle.”’” (NewsScope, 4/30/04)

SOME CHANTS

Political litanies began at the pre-March rally. A speaker on stage would shout: “What are we marching for?” And the crowd would reply: “Women’s right to choose.”

Then while marching, someone in the crowd would yell: “Whose choice?” And those who could hear the question would reply: “Our choice!”

Another went like this. Question: “What do you want?” Answer: “Choice!” Question: “When do you want it?” Answer: “Now!”

Then came the old standby: “Hey, hey. Ho, ho. George Bush has got to go.”

At times, the marchers ventured onto theological terrain. For example, “Keep your rosaries off my ovaries.” And “I asked God, she’s pro-choice.”

When the marchers approached the Ronald Reagan and International Trade Center Building, on the Pennsylvania Avenue side, signs that read “Warning: Dangerous Fanatics Ahead” appeared. Translation: pro-life demonstrators were ahead. Notable among them were the African-American men who held up gigantic photographs, from the Center for Bio-ethical Reform, that graphically pictured human-rights horrors through the years: lynchings in America, Pearl Harbor, the Holocaust, the 9/11 attack on New York City, and, of course, the tiny, bloodied victims of abortion. These documentary photos were accompanied by preaching

from an African-American. As the crowd moved through this area, it chanted: “Pro-life is a lie. You don’t care if women die.” Chanting loudly, the marchers intentionally drowned out the preaching. There were several people who held pro-life signs, most of which were inoffensive. One such person had his sign hit by a pro-choice marcher. Walking past several priests wearing Roman collars, a

marcher yelled that “the Catholic Church abuses boys;” and those who heard this comment laughed in amusement. Then “Leaving Fanatic Zone: Maintain Freedom” signs appeared, and the political tensions eased a bit.

A sidewalk vendor, hawking his goods, pitched to the marchers: “You like freedom of choice. Here, have your choice of ice cream.” Perhaps the vendor was subtly questioning the moral reasoning of his customers.

THE POST-MARCH ASSEMBLY

At the end of the March, there was another massive assembly. Event planners pleaded for help in picking up the heavy litter on the Mall and for donations to help cover the demonstration’s costs. Then there was Whoopi Goldberg, with coat hanger in hand. A musical interlude included a golden oldie originally by Buffalo Springfield; the crowd sang the refrain: “Stop, children. What’s that sound? Everybody look what’s going down.” Since the crowd was fatigued from its participation in “the biggest march in the history of the universe,” it needed a break; so a speaker lifted her blouse to expose her bra. The crowd roared in approval. The “Religious Right” was renamed the “Ridiculous Right.” Dr. George Tiller, a Wichita doctor who routinely performs late-term abortions, was called a “saint.” Julian Bond, leader of the NAACP, argued that reproductive freedom is a basic civil right; and he tied together Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education, civil-rights legislation, and Roe versus Wade. Mr. Bond also noted that the day’s speakers had been “urged to be non-partisan.” If that was the case, most speakers neglected this instruction.

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pitched to the marchers:
‘You like freedom of
choice. Here, have your
choice of ice cream.’”*

Then, to conclude, the politicians appeared. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) said: “If you care about changing the direction of this country, it’s up to you. And you have to be willing to be a good citizen, to stand up for our rights, to stand up for our Constitution, and to show up at the polls in November to elect John Kerry president of the United States.” Sen. Clinton extended the pro-choice, anti-Bush agenda of the March to include a pro-Kerry plank.

Finally, late Sunday afternoon, the March for Women’s Lives ended, and the participants headed home.

THE RELIGIOUS COMPONENT

As noted earlier, the March for Women’s Lives was primarily political in nature. It was also quite secular. That is, it made few references to the one, true God who is the judge of nations and empires. To be sure, there were some references to “spirituality,” but they usually concerned the god who only helps people to feel good about themselves. And there was that circle of people holding hands, dancing, and repeating, “We bring a new way to walk the earth.” The secular assumptions of the event were also on display in its scheduling: the March began on a Sunday morning during the Season of Easter. It was as if the organizers of the March were saying that Sabbath observance, for Christians, does not matter. Its secularity was also suggested by the vulgar and obscene elements of the March. As Hank Stuever of the *Washington Post* put it, “This was a big multi-generational Vagina Monologue, starring everyone. The vibe of the day-long rally was at once good-humored and yet deadly serious. It was aggressive and even occasionally profane...” (4/26/04). This report has intentionally omitted the coarser, cruder parts of the March. Needless to say, foul words, gestures, and images were not rare.

To make the March for Women’s Lives—a pro-choice political event with secular assumptions—acceptable to religious Americans, it needed religious and moral legitimization. This legitimization, for those who need it, was provided by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

Before the March began, RCRC held on the Mall a Service of Worship, which it called a Prayerfully Pro-Choice Interfaith Worship Service. This service was co-sponsored by the Clergy Advisory Board of Planned Parenthood, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, and White Fire Women Spiritual Leaders. It included Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and Sikh participants. Despite the diverse theological traditions represented on the stage, the service’s hymns, litanies, prayers, and speeches seemed to move the person, particularly the woman, into the center of the universe and to place God in the

position of supporting the self at the center.

For example, The Reverend Mark Pawlowski, a Presbyterian Church (USA) pastor and member of the Clergy Advisory Board of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, read the following: “I believe God stands with women as they end pregnancies, just as God stands with women who deliver babies and with women who give those babies to adoptive parents. God does not choose God’s allegiances, God stands with all of us, regardless of where we stand. The challenge is to stand where we are with integrity, compassion, and wisdom. When women choose to have abortions, they are acting with integrity, aware of compassion, and realization of their own wisdom. To doubt the integrity, compassion, or wisdom of women is to insult women and offend God. At times it is and will be difficult to support women in their experiences of pregnancy, but if we are to be faithful to God and Christ, we must stand beside women and support them in lives of their own choosing.”

The REJOICE Choir, a community choir, opened the service. Ms. Genie Bank, President of the WD/GBGM, helped lead the service, as did The Reverend Ignacio Castuera. Rev. Castuera pastors St. John’s United Methodist Church in the Watts section of Los Angeles and is the first National Chaplain for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Proudly wearing his pink, Planned

Parenthood T-shirt (“Stand Up for Choice”), Rev. Castuera departed from his prepared remarks and asserted that “religion is something we do all the time,” a common theme in United Methodist life. And the service concluded with the song “We Are a Gentle, Angry People,” which was to be heard again later in the day.

Immediately before the Service of Worship, the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) held an event, which featured Rabbi Balfour Brickner, on the RCRC stage. The rabbi launched into a diatribe against the Bush Administration and the Religious Right. He declared that today’s battle for choice is part of the larger culture struggle, which is against “plain, damn-fool ignorance.” He also posited that the “Religious and Secular Right are fundamentally wrong.” Lamenting that his political enemies reduce morality to sexual concerns, he asserted that it is truly immoral to: invade Iraq, impose Pax Americana, amend the Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriages, neglect environmental concerns, and deny women health care.

Though these religious events could be theologically critiqued at some length, and though they were not well attended, they helped to legitimate the March for Women’s Lives. In other words, referring to the RCRC Service of Worship, a United Methodist writing for *Christian Social Action*, could cast the March in a more attractive light for Aunt Sarah, a United Methodist living in northeast Texas.

“This report has intentionally omitted the coarser, cruder parts of the March. Needless to say, foul words, gestures, and images were not rare.”

A CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

To be sure, this reporter attended the March for Women’s Lives with certain theological, moral, and political assumptions in play. However, at the same time, his basic goal was to observe the March and offer an accurate report of his observations. That is what I have attempted to do above.

Now, to my conclusions.

The March for Women’s Lives was primarily a political event. It was initiated because of political realities. It was driven by political energy. And it was directed toward political ends. The March was about the politics for abortion, for all abortion, without limits, without qualifications, without restrictions. The Socialist Worker put it best:

“Abortion Rights: No restrictions/No concessions/No

apologies.” (4/23/04) Therefore, the marchers would be happy to have taxpayer-funded abortion at home and abroad. Not once, not one time, on the Mall on April 25th, did this reporter hear abortion depicted as a tragic necessity. There was absolutely no public questioning of abortion, any abortion.

This makes the March for Women’s Lives far more politically pro-choice than The United Methodist Church. Paragraph 161J of The Book of Discipline (2002) declares:

*“Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes

us reluctant to approve abortion.”

*“We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.”

*“We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life.”

*“[A] decision concerning abortion should be made only after thoughtful and prayerful consideration by the parties involved, with medical, pastoral, and other appropriate counsel.”

These statements from The Book of Discipline put The United Methodist Church against the politically pro-choice position pushed by the

March for Women’s Lives—which would not question any abortion, for any reason, and which is predominantly secular. Though United Methodism opposes the March’s politics for abortion, The United Methodist Church’s GBCS and the WD/GBGM co-sponsored the March, assisted in legitimating the March, and advanced the goals of the March. Neglecting The United Methodist Church’s teaching on abortion, GBCS and WD/GBGM soiled our church’s public witness.

This should not have happened. And this should

“The March was about the politics for abortion, for all abortion, without limits, without qualifications, without restrictions... There was absolutely no public questioning of abortion, any abortion.”

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never happen again. The United Methodist Church's name and witness are not for hire. The Church's witness for life and love and loyalty is too great and too good to be dragged into the political theater for abortion that took place on April 25th.

On the way out of Washington late in the afternoon on the 25th, I stopped by The United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. On the building's front door was displayed a sign provided by the United Church of Christ. It read: "God is still speaking, and so are we. Protect women's lives." Well, it is all true. God is indeed still speaking—if we have ears to hear. And we, too, are speaking—by the grace of God. And we should indeed protect women's lives. But one caveat is necessary: with God's help, we can best help protect women's lives by helping women protect the lives of their unborn children. Women's lives are not best protected by helping them end the lives of the tiny women and tiny men in their wombs. The Church's God-given mission is to protect—not legitimate the elimination—of innocent, human life. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Mrs. Cindy Evans' mailing address is 1564 Skyview Drive/Holts Summit, MO 65043. Thanks for making note of it.
- Due to technical difficulties, actually computer problems, Lifewatch recently lost some information. If you (or someone you know) asked to be added to (or removed from) the Lifewatch mailing list, you (or your friend) will probably need to make that request to Mrs. Cindy Evans a second time. Sorry about the confusion and the resulting inconvenience to you.
- As you plan for your 2005 church budget this summer and fall, please remember Lifewatch. Your contributions are especially important due to increased costs associated with our witness at General Conference and with the setting up of a new office. Many thanks for remembering the ministry of Lifewatch, which is dedicated to

advancing the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church.

• Holy Abortion? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (Wipf and Stock, 2003), by Michael J. Gorman and Ann Loar Brooks, is an outstanding book on RCRC, the Oldline Protestant denominations (including The United Methodist Church), and abortion. It has been available in print for nearly a year. Now it is available on CD. The Reverend Kirk vander Swaagh, a New York City pastor who serves on the National Pro-Life Religious Council, is the reader; and he reads very well. For your copy of Holy Abortion? on CD, please send a \$15.00 check to: Lifewatch/1564 Skyview Drive/Holts Summit, MO 65043. ♥

Our Mission:

Out of obedience to Jesus Christ, the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality (TUMAS) "will work to create in church and society esteem for human life at its most vulnerable, specifically for the unborn child and for the woman who contemplates abortion." Therefore, TUMAS's first goal is "to win the hearts and minds of United Methodists, to engage in abortion-prevention through theological, pastoral, and social emphases that support human life."