

GUEST COLUMN: RISKY COMMITMENT

by Amy Laura Hall

Christians are called to a very different kind of witness, a very different kind of double-speak, than a bikini-chastity chic. We are called to encourage sexual discipline outside and inside of marriage, while also affirming, in the very same breath, that no pregnancy is outside of God's reach.

This does not mean that Christians cannot say it would have been preferable had a young woman not shared herself intimately with a boy who hardly knew how to appreciate the intricate beauty of her body and the vulnerability of her love. Christians are surely called to teach girls and young women that their bodies are not primarily "in waiting" for sex with a man, but rather actively in service today for the work of the Holy Spirit. But as we affirm the blessings of holy chastity, we must also consider the incipient life embedded inside an image-bearer of God as within the purview of God's providence. A young couple's coupling in the backseat is morally barren (even if ultimately procreative), because it is outside the sacramental gift of marriage. Yet the pregnancy conceived by such a couple in the backseat (even if it is ill-conceived) is well within the reach of God's profligate grace.

During the last century in the United States, many mainline Protestant leaders, committed to the eugenics movement, deemed it their business to determine which births were with the grain of God's plan for the evolving progress of human history and which births were a drag on the movement forward. Christians are called to more humility and more confidence than that—more humility about the grievous harm that has been done in the name of social progress, and more confidence in God's ability to turn even regrettable human choices to good.

Happily, many Christian churches are already offering a different "welcome to reality" than those offered by the eugenics-influenced. These congregations, along with neighborhoods and kinship networks, name pregnant girls to be children of promise, worthy recipients of hands-on care and communal sacrifice. They refuse the calculus of life that draws a distinction between accidental and providential babies, between the right sorts of people and those sorts of people with teenage mothers.

There are such congregations, but I believe that, in answer to God's call, there could be many more.

Such advocacy, born of holy double-speak, is a stretch for many in my cohort of Christianity. But it is not so much a stretch for many African-American congregations and Latino-Catholic communities. It is my prayer that more mainstream evangelicals, in both "red" America and "blue" America, will cross over into risky solidarity with a third color of Americans.

We could do so by advocating for, and working within, alternative high schools where pregnant girls may continue their education. We could work for maternity leave and flexible schedules at all levels of education and enterprise, especially at institutions overtly committed to Christian witness. To be a people committed to the incalculable gift of life may mean myriad commitments that interrupt our plans for our own families. It may mean that a young couple without children find themselves babysitting a child not their blood kin several evenings a week, rather than watching their favorite science fiction series on DVD. A single man may find himself fixing a young single mother's clogged sink on a lunch break or building her toddler a swing set during a holiday weekend. For many mothers and fathers, it may mean adapting their entire life and career to care daily for an unexpected grandchild. And by my own political reckoning, witness for the common good not only means hands-on local action, but also advocating for systematic acts of mercy through a matrix of services to offer single mothers a safety net of care.

After hearing me give a talk on abortion, eugenics, and teenage pregnancy, my oldest daughter, with whom I had not yet initiated a talk about birds and bees, looked up at me and said frankly, "Mom, if God gives me a baby before I married, I won't worry. I know that you and Dad would take care of it so that I could stay in school."

After taking a deep breath and squeezing back tears of sheer parental terror, I agreed that she was right, that we would help her and her baby no matter what. I pray that the situation will not arise, but I also pray that should it arise, her father and I, as well as the congregation into which she has been baptized, will be worthy of her confidence, for to fail her would be contrary to whom we hope to be. To fail her would be the true shame.

—Dr. Amy Laura Hall, a member of the Lifewatch Advisory Board, teaches moral theology at The Divinity School of Duke University. The above article first appeared as the concluding section of "For Shame: Why Christians Should Welcome, Rather Than Stigmatize, Unwed Mothers and Their Children" in *Christianity Today* (September 2006) and www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=38484 ♥

RCRC BRIEF LINKS UMC WITH EFFORT TO KEEP PARTIAL-BIRTH ABORTION LEGAL

First of all, remember what we are talking about: partial-birth abortion. The New York Times, a reliably pro-choice publication, defines this particular abortion procedure in horrifying detail: “Sometimes called D and X, for dilation and extraction, it [partial-birth abortion] entails partly extracting an intact fetus from a woman’s uterus and killing it by collapsing and removing the brain from the skull so that the fetus can pass through the birth canal.” (Julia Preston, “Appeals Court Voids Ban on ‘Partial-Birth’ Abortions,” NYT, July 9, 2005)

In the 2004 Book of Discipline’s paragraph on abortion, The United Methodist Church employs our strongest anti-abortion language against partial-birth abortion. The

pertinent sentence reads: “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.” (Paragraph 161J, emphasis added)

Recalling the gruesome definition of partial-birth abortion, and United Methodism’s “call for the end of this practice” (with rare exceptions), we should also remember the congressional passage and presidential signing of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003. Because of action by appellate courts, the United States Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of the 2003 act. To influence the U.S. Supreme Court to decide against the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003—that is, to keep partial-birth abortion legal in American society—the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) filed a brief, in September 2006, before the oral arguments were presented. However, in April of this year, the Supreme Court disagreed with the arguments of RCRC’s brief and ruled, 5-4, that the 2003 law does not violate the U.S. Constitution.

Two official institutions of The United Methodist Church—the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries—belong to RCRC. Not surprisingly, in making its case in favor of partial-birth abortion rights, the RCRC brief to the U.S. Supreme Court includes the name of our denomination and selections from our church’s official statements.

So, we can be clear about what is going on here. United Methodists give our “prayers...presence...gifts, and...service” (Baptismal Covenant I, The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 38) to a United Methodist congregation, which in turn help to sustain the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries. These two

United Methodist institutions belong to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. RCRC files a brief, which argues in favor of partial-birth abortion rights, to the United States Supreme Court. Therefore, by association, The United Methodist Church, its clergy, and its laity were collaborating, some knowingly and most unknowingly, in an effort to keep partial-birth abortion legal. Again, United Methodists were complicit in an effort to keep partial-birth abortion legal. This took place even though The United Methodist Church, in its Social Principles, calls for ending the vast majority of partial-birth abortions in the United States.

Again, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive

Choice believes in, and lobbies for, the continuing legality of all partial-birth abortions in America. The United Methodist Church, in our Social Principles, “call[s] for the end of this practice” (with rare exceptions). Yet RCRC used the name of The

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United Methodist Church to influence the U.S. Supreme Court to decide in favor of the legality of partial-birth abortion in American society.

It is time—indeed, past time—for The United Methodist Church and its institutions to end their relationship with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. On the matter of partial-birth abortion, RCRC does not represent The United Methodist Church—in any way, shape, or form. (Paul T. Stallsworth)♥

ON BEING READY TO VOTE

At the 2007 Annual Conferences, we United Methodists shall elect delegates to the 2008 General Conference. As in recent General Conferences, General Conference 2008 will be deliberating on The United Methodist Church’s positions on countless matters—including abortion and homosexuality. Therefore, it behooves us to be ready and informed as we vote for delegates to General Conference.

Before the 2007 Annual Conferences take place, evangelical and orthodox fellowships in many of the Annual Conferences will be drawing up slates of the most suitable and electable candidates for General/Jurisdictional Conference elections. Past experience shows the wisdom of taking such slates of candidates into the election process.

The Lifewatch community—with Good News and the Confessing Movement—will want to know about the candidates’ positions on abortion and homosexuality. We will want to know, to the best of our ability to know, that the candidates we vote for are committed to: (1) the dignity of each and every human life, including the unborn child and mother, (2) the withdrawal of the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), and (3) United Methodism’s current teaching on

homosexual practice and on traditional marriage. These moral-theological commitments are consistent with the Wesleyan tradition, and with Church teaching and practice through the ages.

The bottom line is this: be ready to vote, and vote wisely, at your 2007 Annual Conference.

—Rev. Robert B. Mussman/Fort Thomas, KY♥

BEYOND PARTISANSHIP

Partisanship appears to be a very real and pressing problem in American political life. Perhaps it has also become a problem in The United Methodist Church in our time.

According to the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, a partisan is "one who takes the side of or strongly supports a side, a party, or another person: often said of an unreasoning, emotional adherent." Therefore, a partisan is one who puts loyalty to a party or a person above everything else—certainly above the reasoning and reasoned arguments in play. Because of partisanship, many Democrats, who are disgusted by the Republican Party and the President, cannot and will not listen to the political reasoning and arguments of their opposition. Because of partisanship, many Republicans cannot and will not listen to the political reasoning and arguments of Democrats. Therefore, because of partisanship, political discussion and debate, conducted in a context of civility, are nearly impossible in American political life today.

Perhaps a similar partisanship is at work in United Methodism. Partisanship allows evangelical United Methodists to pay no attention to the General Board of Church and Society and its General Secretary, Mr. Jim Winkler. Also, partisanship permits progressive United

Methodists to ignore or negate everything that comes from the Confessing Movement, Good News, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and Lifewatch. Partisanship in the Church makes public discussion and debate a rare commodity.

In The United Methodist Church today, how do we get beyond partisanship? The answer is not from Rodney King, who suggested that everybody should just try to get along with each other. The answer is this: in the unity established by the baptismal bond and in the patience provided by the Holy Spirit, we should engage in reasoning and reasoned arguments; that is, we should not simply react to institutions, groups, or people "on the other side." It is a tall order. But with God's help, all things are possible. (Paul T. Stallsworth)♥

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- Please remember that your personal contributions to the ministry of Lifewatch are essential. Preparing for General Conference 2008, Lifewatch has much to do. With your continuing assistance, we can accomplish what we are called to do—that is, witness to the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church and beyond. Please send your check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Also, you can give to Lifewatch through PayPal on our homepage at www.lifewatch.org. Our heartfelt thanks to you for your response.

- During the summer of 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, preached a useful sermon titled "The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today." In his sermon, Archbishop Williams noted that today the contentions over homosexual practice have revealed three parties competing within the Anglican

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communion. According to the Archbishop, the three parties within Anglicanism are: evangelicalism, catholicism, and liberalism. The same parties exist within The United Methodist Church.

Evangelicals are driven by Biblical authority, and they bring moral and theological decisiveness to the table. Catholics (including institutionalists and traditionalists) are guided by the Bible and Tradition, and they contribute a sense of the Church and its unity to a denomination. Liberals are motivated by inclusiveness and justice, and they offer their experience of contemporary culture to the Christian community.

It appears that, within Anglicanism, most evangelicals and most catholics serve common Christian truths—on Christian doctrine and morals, including life and abortion—that are not held by most liberals. Within United Methodism, the same coalition of evangelicals and catholics, more or less, is probably emerging and strengthening.

- Last October, Dr. Richard B. Hays, the George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, delivered a lecture at St. Peter's United Methodist Church in Morehead City, NC. Entitled "On Biblical Authority: A Lecture and a Discussion," Dr. Hays' presentation states how the Church best reads and understands the Bible.

For example, toward the end of the evening, Dr. Hays noted: "People can read Scripture and have it speak to them, in very powerful and immediate ways, that go beyond what one can claim as formal Christian doctrine on the basis of ecclesial statements of confession. One of my favorite examples of this comes from the experience of the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the 1930s. He had been studying in New York for a certain period of time and ran across a text from Second Timothy. Paul, writing to Timothy, says, 'Do your best to come before winter' (4:21). In the original context, Paul was simply asking his assistant in mission, Timothy, to try to get back to him before the Mediterranean was closed down to sailing for the winter period. But Bonhoeffer read that text and said to himself something like, 'I cannot get it out of my mind. I hear this as a

summons to go back to Germany and engage in active resistance against the Nazi regime.' And so he did. That is an example of the devotional reading of Scripture. Bonhoeffer heard something in the text that was not simply communicated to him by an official, ecclesial body or by an official Christian creed. Nonetheless, I believe that was the Word of God to him in that setting...

"But there is a danger always attending such devotional reading. The danger is that people can hear voices, speaking through Scripture, that are demonic. Such people can think that they are being instructed by Scripture to do things that are wrong and terrible. And that is where the confirming witness of the wider community of faith becomes crucially important in discerning how Scripture is to be heard rightly."

If you would like a transcript of Dr. Hays' excellent presentation, please send your request with a dollar to: St. Peter's United Methodist Church/ 111 Hodges Street/ Morehead City, NC 28557♥

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