

ONE GREAT DAY

Monday, January 24, 2005, was an historic day for The United Methodist Church in the United States. On that day, in Washington, DC, two United Methodists made extraordinarily strong statements about the dignity of the human person—especially the unborn, human person. One of them is a bishop in our church. The other is the president of our country. Below you will find the bishop's sermon and the president's speech. —Editor

THE 2005 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “DO NO HARM!”

The following sermon was preached by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker, at the 2005 Lifewatch Service of Worship, at The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. It marks the first time, in contemporary American United Methodism, that a United Methodist bishop has addressed abortion in a pro-life way in public.

Isaiah 60:17-18

When John Wesley gave the General Rules to the people called Methodists, the first thing he told them was to do no harm. In order to show evidence that we are a people who are being saved by God, we should do no harm.

The rule to do no harm directs those of us who are Christians to practice non-violence. A Christian is someone who is horrified by violence, refrains from violence in her or his own life, and seeks to restrain violence in the world insofar as possible.

The practice of non-violence is advocated in many religious traditions and philosophical teachings down through history. More than that, it expresses the will of God, who is revealed in the story of the Bible.

There are many different ways of hearing the story of God's revelation in the Bible. One way of hearing the story of the Bible is by listening for the theme of peace that is sounded throughout its pages. When we listen for the theme of peace, we begin to understand by faith that the living God is a God of peace, that God's people are called to be a peaceable people, and that God's purpose is to establish a peaceable kingdom. We also understand that evil is

the force of destruction and death, and sin is the practice of violence.

THE BIBLICAL THEME OF PEACE

Hear again the story that is told in the Bible in order to listen for the theme of peace that is sounded throughout.

The story begins in Genesis where it is written, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” (1:31, RSV here and hereafter) John Millbank has said that the goodness of God's creation means that God has established the world upon an “ontological peace” rather than an “ontological violence.” In other words, God makes the world to be a peaceable place, and violence is an aberration from God's good purposes for the world.

Following the primordial fall of Adam and Eve, the first sin that is committed is when Cain murders Abel. In the generations that succeeded one another, sin continued to multiply until it could be said, “Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” (Genesis 6:11) A new beginning is attempted with the flood and the salvation of Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark. Following the flood, God warns Noah that violence must be restrained; primary in God's will is that the blood of human beings should not be shed, because all human beings are made in the image of God.

When human beings persisted in their ignorance of God's will, God began to call a particular people to know him and obey him. Eventually they would be known as the people of Israel, and Moses would be their great leader. They would be different from all of the other peoples in the world, because God would transform them by binding them to him in knowledge and obedience. It is notable that Moses had been a murderer whom God called to proclaim to his people, “You shall not kill.” (Exodus 20:13)

Over the centuries, the people of Israel became restless with their calling to be different from the other peoples of the world, and they wanted to be a nation like the other nations. They would not heed the warning of God, through Samuel, that their kings would conscript their sons and send them into wars. (I Samuel 8) Over the centuries, they learned the bitter lesson that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52)

Then at the right time in human history, God sent his Son, “who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age.” (Galatians 1:4) When Jesus was born, all of the angels in heaven praised God and promised peace on earth. When he grew up, he inaugurated his ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River. By descending upon him, not as an eagle, but as a dove, the bird of peace, the Spirit of God confirmed that he was the Son of God. He taught the people, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9) As one would expect in a world of violence, the Prince of Peace suffered a violent death. This was to be expected because his enemies were not mere flesh and blood, but the cosmic powers of this present darkness represented by the devil whom Jesus described as “a murderer from the beginning.” (John 8:44) Yet his death was a victory, rather than a defeat, because he refused to play the devil’s game of repaying violence with violence. He signaled his own strategy of nonviolence when he rode to his destiny in Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on the colt of a donkey, an animal used for work rather than for battle. By his violent death, he overcame violence. Then God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. And when he appeared to his disciples, he announced, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19,21,26)

On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon his disciples, and the Church was born. The Church is a community from all of the nations called to be a peaceable people, who follow Jesus until he comes again at the end of history and establishes that kingdom where “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

No wonder, then, that the prophet Isaiah could perceive that the unfolding story of God’s purposes in history could be described as the creation of a reign of peace and the destruction of violence. During the Exile, he declared God’s Word, “I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.” (Isaiah 60:17-18)

A PEACEABLE PEOPLE

In light of hearing the story of the Bible as the revelation of the God of peace, we who are the Church are called to be a peaceable people. In our practices and in our public witness, we are called to make peace in the world. We acknowledge that the ultimate kingdom of peace has not yet been

established by God. We ourselves cannot build the kingdom, but we can build for the kingdom. We can live and witness in ways that can lead to a more tangible peace here and now that points to the coming kingdom of God.

The world needs the Church’s witness to God’s peaceable purposes at this moment in history. We live in a time when nations use war as the primary political instrument in the struggle against terrorism, even to the point of engaging in preemptive war contrary to the moral standards for just war. Genocide is being practiced against thousands of innocents because of their tribe or religion. The violence of economic injustice is justified in the name of globalization. Even entertainment is sold by the titillation of gratuitous violence in movies and video games.

“I suspect that we are silent and passive about abortion because often we allow ideology to trump theology...”

Pope John Paul II has made a powerful Christian witness to God’s peaceable purposes in his 1995 encyclical on “The Gospel of Life.” He warned the world about creating “a culture of death” that is rebellion against “the Gospel of Life.”

He showed us that a culture of death is one that endorses abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. He asserted that the commandment, “You shall not kill,” is integral to the revelation of God. He stated, “Only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man, and history will the words, ‘You shall not kill,’ shine forth once more as a goal for man in himself and in his relations with others.”

OUR CHURCH AND ABORTION

In The United Methodist Church, we ought to apply our theological reflection, our pastoral guidance, and our public witness against the violence of abortion, in the name of the God of peace.

In The United Methodist Church, often many of us are silent and passive about abortion. At the same time, we can be outspoken and active in our opposition to war and capital punishment. Do we not perceive how opposition to violence requires us to be as vigilant in our witness against abortion as in our witness against war as a normal political tool and our witness against executions by the state? Opposition to war, capital punishment, euthanasia, and abortion is a coherent and integral witness to God’s good purposes in a world under the evil spell of violence.

I suspect that we are silent and passive about abortion because often we allow ideology to trump theology in forming our ethical positions on controversial issues. It is no secret that abortion is captive to ideological and partisan-political agendas in American life. The Republican Party is the political party that embraces a position of moral concern about abortion in American culture. Those who do not agree with the Republican Party on its foreign policy, and many of its domestic policies, are reluctant to oppose

abortion, because they do not want to be supportive of this party on an issue that helps it to win elections. Yet we who are Christians cannot let our ideological or partisan-political loyalties constrain our witness to the living God. We need to view abortion as a concern that transcends ideological or partisan loyalties.

I think that our silence and passivity about abortion comes from the difficulty of being a Christian in America. I used to think that being a Christian in America is easy. I thought it would be hard to be a Christian in a country dominated by other religions or in a Communist country where atheism was avowed by the state, but I thought it was easy to be a Christian here. Now I realize that practicing the Christian life in America has its own difficulties. The seductions of American life may seem more subtle, but they are real and dangerous. In America, both the culture and the state view persons as autonomous individuals who have private rights to live as they choose. But we who are Christians have a different anthropology: we view persons as community members who are made in the image of the Triune God and who have both rights and responsibilities. Therefore, we cannot endorse a woman's right to abort an unborn child as a morally neutral decision, because we understand that the child also has a right to live, and that the community has a responsibility to care for this child if the mother is unable to rear him/her.

I suspect that the tension between being a Christian and being an American is reflected in our church's statement on abortion in The Book of Discipline (Paragraph 161J). As good Christians, we say, "The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence... Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion." As good Americans, we say, "But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from an unacceptable pregnancy." What does this "but" mean? If it means that abortion may be necessary under certain, extreme, medical conditions in order to save the life of the mother, then well and good. That would be that "tragic [conflict] of life with life" of which the Discipline speaks so eloquently. Yet I wonder if many United Methodists interpret this "but" as an escape from moral responsibility in the name of one's individual right to choose as an American? Overall our statement in the Discipline is weighted with moral gravity about abortion, and it establishes strong boundaries around abortion. Nevertheless, we are not yet through with our work of continuing to clarify our witness to the world concerning abortion.

Can there be any doubt that there is silence and passivity about abortion in our church? How often is a sermon about abortion, or an educational forum on abortion, offered in our congregations? How many congregations are involved in supporting crisis

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pregnancy centers in their communities or offering tangible support to women with unwanted pregnancies? What kind of pastoral counsel is being offered behind the closed doors of the pastor's office? When the bishops gave splendid leadership in the Bishops' Initiative on Children in Poverty, there was a great mobilization of ministries for children, but not even scant mention was made of the deaths of unborn children because of abortion. At the 2004 General Conference, the church endorsed our agencies' continued participation in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice without much of a debate about how participation in this coalition compromises our public witness against abortion.

We who are United Methodist Christians should continue to seek to embody in our teaching, pastoral guidance, congregational care, and public witness the preservation of human life, and a protest against the killing of human life, in the name of the God of peace.

REVULSION AT THE MORAL HORROR OF ABORTION

I am a bishop, not a philosopher or a politician. I do not profess to understand all the complexities involved in the philosophical debates about when a human being becomes a "person." Nor do I know the answers to all the questions raised about what should be the law of the land in America. Yet I can feel; and as a United Methodist, often I am better at feeling than thinking. What I feel is revulsion at the moral horror that is abortion. This revulsion is magnified when I reflect upon the fact, as Carl Braaten has said, "ninety-nine percent of all murders in the United States are abortions." I would like to be a bishop of a church that knows how to make philosophers and politicians feel the same revulsion of the moral horror of abortion.

Perhaps this feeling of revulsion against the horror of abortion is a feeling shared by most human beings. Certainly Christians have feelings others may not have, because we have been told the Gospel. For Christians, revulsion at the moral horror of abortion is a sensibility shaped by the story of God's purposes told in the Bible.

It is often said that there is no clear prescription against abortion in the Bible. That is because such a horror is unthinkable and unspeakable to the people of Israel and to the people who are called the Church. The grand story of God's gift of peace and God's opposition to the sin of violence compels us to be a people who try to protect the unborn from killing and to work for a culture of life.

From the very beginning, Christians everywhere have felt this revulsion against the killing of human

life. As Christians moved into the wider world, where abortion was not unthinkable or unspeakable, they had to apply the divine commandment against murder to the horrible practice of abortion. They did so because of their knowledge of the God of peace in the story of the Bible.

In our time and place, in our own Christian communion, we who are United Methodists also have a responsibility to live according to our first rule, which is to do no harm. Do no harm to the unborn! Do no harm to the witness of the Church as a peaceable people! Do no harm to the Gospel of peace!

Our General Rules are not legalistic prescriptions, but concrete expressions of how we shall actually live in response to the grace of God. The rule to do no harm is not a harsh law; it is a gracious invitation. It is an invitation to live in communion with the God of peace, to whom be glory, honor, and rule forever. Amen.

—Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker is the bishop of the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church.♥

A PRESIDENTIAL WORD

What follows was spoken by President George W. Bush—over the telephone and through a public-address system—to participants in the 2005 March for Life in Washington, DC.

...Thanks a lot for inviting me to speak. I know it's chilly there in Washington, but weather hasn't stopped thousands of participants from marching for life for the past 32 years[;] and it did not this year, either. And so I'm honored to be a part of this tremendous witness that is taking place in our nation's capital...

You know, we come from many backgrounds—different backgrounds [—] but what unites us is our understanding that the essence of civilization is this: The strong have a duty to protect the weak.

I appreciate so very much your work toward building a culture of life—a culture that will protect the most innocent among us and the voiceless. We are working to promote a culture of life, to promote compassion for women and their unborn babies. We... know that [—] in a culture that does not protect the most dependent [—] the handicapped, the elderly, the unloved, or [the] simply inconvenient become increasingly vulnerable.

The America of our dreams, where every child is welcomed...in life, and protected in law, may still be some ways away, but even from the far side of the river...we can see its glimmerings. We're making progress in Washington. I've been working with members of the Congress to pass good, solid legislation that protects the vulnerable and promotes

*“The America of our dreams,
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the culture of life. I signed into law a ban on partial-birth abortion. Infants who are born despite an attempted abortion are now protected by law. So are

nurses and doctors who refused to be any part of an abortion. And prosecutors can now charge those who harm or kill a pregnant woman with harming or killing her unborn child.

We're also moving ahead in terms of medicine and research to make sure that the gifts of science are consistent with our highest values of freedom, equality, family, and human dignity. We will not sanction the creation of life only to destroy it.

What I'm saying is that we're making progress, and this progress is a tribute to your perseverance and to the prayers of the people. I want to thank you, especially, for the civil way that you have engaged one of America's most contentious issues. I encourage you to take heart from our achievements, because a true culture of life cannot be sustained solely by changing laws. We need, most of all, to change hearts. And that is what we're doing, seeking common ground where possible, and persuading increasing numbers of our fellow citizens of the rightness of our cause.

This is the path to the culture of life that we seek for our country. And on our coldest days, and one of our coldest days, I encourage you to take warmth and comfort from our history[,] which tells us that a movement [—] that appeals to the noblest and most generous instincts of our fellow Americans[,] and that is based on a sacred promise enshrined in our founding document [—]...will not fail.

And so on this day of compassion, where warm hearts are confronting the cold weather, I ask that God bless you for your dedication, and may God continue to bless our great country... (www.whitehouse.gov) ♥

ONCE AGAIN: THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S SUPPORT FOR THE RELIGIOUS COALITION FOR REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE (RCRC)

In early 2003, Ann Loar Brooks and I published a small book entitled Holy Abortion?: A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. The book was published with very strong endorsements from leading theologians, from United Methodism and other traditions: Stanley Hauerwas (Duke), Kendall Soulen (Wesley), Christine Pohl (Asbury), Gabriel Fackre (Andover Newton), Donald Bloesch (Dubuque), Robert Gagnon (Pittsburgh), H. Tristram Englehardt (Rice/Baylor), Richard Neuhaus (First Things), and Frederica Mathewes-Green (NPR/Beliefnet).

Despite these endorsements—not to mention its stinging critique of RCRC—the book has not received the attention we had hoped. Officials at the Presbyterian Church (USA) read and discussed the book; and they did in fact contact me. But no other denominational officer, RCRC staff member, or RCRC supporter, to my knowledge, has responded explicitly and publicly to our book. Not even one official in my own denomination, The United Methodist Church, has responded directly to me or invited me to present and defend my arguments to a denominational body.

RESOLUTION 114

About a year after Holy Abortion? was published, the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted a resolution entitled

“Support for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice,” and numbered 114, in The Book of Resolutions (2004). Given its appearance and passage, Resolution 114 probably was, at least in part, a deliberate rejoinder to our book—as well as to the work of Lifewatch and other United Methodist groups critical of RCRC. If the resolution is a response to our book, it fails completely to address our theological critique, which is based on a thorough analysis of RCRC’s own documents and programs.

The resolution presents eight reasons—in the form of “whereas” clauses—for support of RCRC and for membership in RCRC by United Methodism’s General Board of Church and Society and Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries. The eight reasons for support of, and membership in, RCRC are: (1) we have always done it (since RCRC’s founding in 1973); (2) others are doing it (Episcopalians, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, Unitarians, and Reform and Conservative Jews); (3) the member bodies, despite differences, “share common religious values [and] have official pro-choice policies” and are thus committed to religiously based pro-choice activity; (4) RCRC supports the right to “reproductive health services,” including abortion; (5) RCRC trains clergy to promote discernment and choice; (6) RCRC is accredited by the UN because it contributes to HIV/AIDS education and prevention; (7) RCRC works against pro-life legislation and thus to prevent the imposition of one religious view on others; and (8) there are United Methodist “factions” trying to convince the General Conference to oppose RCRC and withdraw membership.

Not surprisingly, not one of Resolution 114’s points deals with any substantive theological or ethical issue raised by the critics of RCRC. One is tempted to draw the analogy to the support of slavery by a powerful “Christian” elite in the nineteenth

century: we have always done it; other religious people are doing it; we do not want to impose our views on others; outsiders think it is okay; overall, it has a positive effect on society; there are divisive forces opposing our widely and deeply held view, etc.
THE FATAL FLAW

Apart from Resolution 114’s failure to address real theological and ethical issues, it contains a fatal flaw. For the key, underlying claim is simply wrong: that RCRC appropriately carries out the “official pro-choice” policy of The United Methodist Church (the third “whereas” clause)

The main argument of our book, Holy Abortion?, is not that The United Methodist Church (and other supporters of RCRC) should withdraw from RCRC

because United Methodism is (or should be) pro-life. Rather, we argue that RCRC’s beliefs and activities are fundamentally at odds with the existing official United Methodist statement on abortion. Space does not permit a rehearsal of that argument. It will be enough to repeat that we find, in the abortion debate, three major positions, which are similar to the three positions in the debate about war: (1) pro-life (similar to the pacifist position), (2) just abortion (similar to the just-war position), and (3) holy abortion (similar to the holy-war position). We demonstrate that the mainline Protestant statements, including that of The United Methodist Church, fall into the middle position, into the just-abortion position, which is similar to the just-war position. Recall that just-war teaching contends that: war is a last resort, boundaries limit the use of force in war, and war is always a tragedy. However, RCRC holds a holy-abortion position, which is similar to the holy-war position. Holy war is war without boundaries on the use of force and war with alleged divine blessing, and holy-war thinking has been rejected by every major Christian tradition and theologian.

Thus, we argue in the book, the similarities on the subject of abortion—between the position of RCRC and the official statements of the mainline Protestant churches affiliated with RCRC (including The United Methodist Church)—are superficial and limited primarily to the legal dimension of the issue. Theologically, the views of RCRC and mainline Protestantism are worlds apart: “The RCRC position absolutizes, sanctifies, and even deifies choice, but it dehumanizes human life before birth, while the mainline position maintains the sacredness of human life even before birth and relativizes the value of choice by setting parameters for how choice is used.... The RCRC position proclaims, ‘Abortion is holy because God is pro-choice.’ while the mainline position proclaims, ‘Abortion is tragic because God is

“...RCRC holds a holy-abortion position, which is similar to the holy-war position.”

the giver of life.” (Holy Abortion?, p. 61, emphasis in the original)

THE CHALLENGE

It is time for The United Methodist Church to take itself, and its statement on abortion, seriously. I am hopeful that we can engage anew the theological, ethical, and pastoral issues involved in the human tragedy that is abortion. But if we do so, we must at least begin with our current official position. And if we begin there and rigorously compare our own stance with that of RCRC, I think we will inevitably find Resolution 114 wanting, and continued affiliation with RCRC inappropriate.

Let us all hope and pray that this conversation can begin in public, and with the participation of the most significant voices in our church.

—Dr. Michael J. Gorman is Professor of New Testament, and the Dean, of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary & University in Baltimore, MD. ♥

UNITED METHODIST DISCOURSE ON ABORTION

In the Church catholic, public conversation is important. Crucially important. For three reasons, conversation in public is significant in Christ’s Church.

First, God begins and continues, through His Word, the greatest public conversation of all. As a word initiates a common conversation, God’s Word begins a cosmic conversation. In the beginning, God’s Word creates the world. “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3, RSV) And so it goes: God’s Word creates all that is—including people, in His image, who become participants in conversation. Later, as a part of His redemptive conversation, God’s Word elects, gathers, and sustains communities (Israel and then the Church), in this world, that hear, trust, obey, and serve the same Word. It might even be said that the history of salvation is the history of a public conversation between God and humanity: God speaks the Word through various agents, humanity replies in one way or another, the conversation develops and intensifies, and the redemption of the world continues and moves toward the consummation.

Second, serving the Word of God, the Church preaches, teaches, enacts, and embodies the Word it has received; and God’s people respond, in various ways and means, to the preaching, teaching, sacraments, and righteousness they have heard, read, received, and seen. When we stop to think about it, the Church’s proclamation, pedagogy, and practices are simply different styles of public conversation between God and God’s people, and among God’s people.

And third, the Church—especially today, it seems—is always interested in dialogue. Yes,

dialogue. And what is dialogue, if not public conversation about doctrinal, theological, and moral matters?

Public conversation should be especially significant in The United Methodist Church. John Wesley set the standard by considering Christian conference and Christian conversation essential to the people called Methodists (some of whom are now called United Methodists). To this day, eligible United Methodists are charged to participate in Annual Conference for three or four days each year, to attend General Conference for a couple of weeks every four years, and to elect bishops at Jurisdictional Conference over a few days every four years. These conferences are, more or less, days set aside for public conversation among designated clergy and laity. And Wesleyan covenant groups, which involve small gatherings of United Methodists, meet regularly for the purpose of engaging in edifying, encouraging, and accountability-advancing conversation.

For these reasons, public conversation is essential to Christ’s Church in general and to The United Methodist Church in particular. As suggested above, such conversation can take various forms. Public conversation in the Church can be preaching, teaching, celebrating Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, praying, singing, dialoguing, discussing, debating, discoursing, and writing and reading. These are all styles of public conversation in the Church catholic and in The United Methodist Church.

Public conversation that involves the Church is always based on the Word of God (living in Jesus Christ, written as Scripture, proclaimed as sermon, and/or enacted as sacrament), which begins the exchange. Furthermore, at its best, the Church’s public conversation is motivated by, and accomplished in, the power of the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit moves the Church’s public conversation to be conducted in truth and with love. And Holy Baptism into Christ and His Church creates, extends, and sustains the baptismal covenant, which keeps the Church’s public conversation alive, purposeful, and fruitful.

ATTEMPTS AT PUBLIC CONVERSATION

At this time in American United Methodism, public conversation—especially in the forms of discussion, debate, and discourse—is quite difficult to initiate and continue. Since American public life is so fractured—by the culture wars and by political polarizations—the Church’s public conversation is tempted, by default, to follow the general culture’s divisive example. Striving to be in the world, but not of the world, the Church’s public conversation should strive mightily to avoid the bitter divisions of the culture and partisan-political wars. (These deep divisions, it should be remembered, cause more than a few citizens to avoid altogether the public discussion of controverted matters. Thereby, these deep divisions can prevent public conversation from beginning or diversifying or developing.) However, the Church’s

public speech should be different—that is to say, of better quality and of a higher order—than the general society’s public speech.

Since General Conference 2004 and since the March for Women’s Lives (the pro-choice March in Washington, DC on April 25, 2004), Lifewatch has attempted two public conversations—actually, public discussions or debates—with denominational leaders.

First, the September 2004 issue of Lifewatch (“To Tell the Truth about RCRC”) alleged, with much supporting evidence, that a prominent General Conference delegate made false statements to support the continued affiliation of the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and the Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries (WD/GBGM) with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a pro-choice organization. This allegation was not wildly and unreasonably stated. It was carefully constructed and based on The Book of Discipline (2000), General Conference records, and RCRC documents; and it aimed at the truth of the matter. The delegate in question has been personally invited on several occasions—by regular mail, by two certified letters, and by a telephone call—to offer a reply to this allegation. To date, she has refused to engage in discourse about the pro-RCRC statements she made at the 2004 General Conference. To date, she has refused to engage in public conversation, with Lifewatch, about her allegedly false statements about RCRC.

Second, Lifewatch sought justifications from GBCS and from WD/GBGM for their co-sponsorship of the March for Women’s Lives—especially since the March’s pro-absolute-abortion-rights advocacy is inconsistent with The United Methodist Church’s official, stated policy on abortion found in The Book of Discipline (Paragraph 161J, which is a nuanced, not absolutist, pro-choice statement). The General Secretary of GBCS did write two letters, which appeared in full in Lifewatch (September 2004 and December 2004) and which were challenged, in print and in some detail, by the Lifewatch editor. Somewhat offended that he found himself in the midst of a public debate, the GBCS General Secretary, in his second letter, threatened to end public discourse with Lifewatch. Since he has not sent a third letter, it appears that he has ended public debate with Lifewatch. And to date, WD/GBGM has not responded substantively to Lifewatch’s invitation to engage in public conversation about its co-sponsorship of the March for Women’s Lives.

To be sure, Lifewatch’s invitations to public discourse—to the General Conference delegate, to GBCS, and to WD/GBGM—involved matters that are quite contentious and difficult to debate in public.

“What are the alternatives to public discourse in The United Methodist Church?”

And our invitations promised challenging—though fair, respectful, and reasonable—exchanges. Even so, because of the baptismal covenant of which we all are a part and

because of the church’s Discipline to which we all are subject, Lifewatch expected these public conversations to unfold, develop, and reach a conclusion. Instead, one attempt at public discourse ended prematurely (with GBCS), and the others (with the General Conference delegate and with WD/GBGM) did not even get started.

As United Methodists, our public conversation should be better than that. Much better than that. We should be willing and able to engage in such conversation—even when it becomes respectful debate—over the long term. The baptismal covenant, the Discipline, and the Holy Spirit can, and would, hold us in conversation with each other, even when it becomes difficult. But when the covenant, the Discipline, and the Spirit are not trusted, public conversation can and will break down, or not even begin.

ALTERNATIVES TO DISCOURSE

What are the alternatives to public discourse in The United Methodist Church? Authoritarianism practiced by denominational leaders, for one. Evasive silence by the same leaders, for another. But by marginalizing those who desire public conversation, these strategies can heighten anger and polarization within our denomination. Public commentary can sour. Then the only alternatives become political contestation and judicial due process. These are unpleasant and counterproductive alternatives to public discourse. And they look so familiar, for they mirror what is occurring in the general culture, in the partisan-political world.

Lifewatch’s editor would be the first to admit that, over the years, he has not conducted public discourse about abortion in a perfect manner. He is open to correction, and he will remain open to correction. That is a part of the process of public discourse within The United Methodist Church; and that is a part of life in the covenant, under the Discipline, and in the Spirit.

But the leaders and boards of The United Methodist Church must also be held accountable. There is a vague sense among many United Methodists that some of our denominational leaders and boards do whatever they want, follow their own agendas, sidestep the Discipline of the church, and make claims and conduct ministries that are, in part, not accountable to the will of the larger denomination. In this situation, public discourse can play a vital role in re-establishing our leaders’ and boards’ accountability to the baptismal covenant, to the Discipline, and to basic standards of truthfulness. And let it be remembered: accountability achieved through public discourse is far more benevolent, constructive,

and instructional than accountability attempted through political battles, lengthy investigations, church trials, and Judicial Council rulings.

Public discourse about abortion, in The United Methodist Church, is badly needed. Refusing such discourse, The United Methodist Church's moral authority declines, and our church's general boards and leaders lose the respect that they have been granted and that they should strive to maintain. And in the meantime, abortion—which destroys unborn children by the millions, as it wounds their mothers—will continue to plague our church and our society.

Therefore, let us hope, pray, and work for the day when discourse on life and abortion, in truth and love, can be conducted in The United Methodist Church. (PTS) ♥

INTELLECTUAL HONESTY ABOUT ABORTION

While a small, but influential, segment of The United Methodist Church remains rigidly committed to an absolutist pro-choice agenda for the denomination, there is some intellectual honesty (and uneasiness) about abortion appearing in the liberal political community. Take, for example, Ms. Sarah Blustain's "Choice Language," which appeared in the American Prospect (www.prospect.org, 12/06/04).

Ms. Blustain, the deputy editor of the Prospect, begins: "Ok, I've unlisted my phone number, changed my name, and moved to a different (red) state. Now I can safely say it: The Democratic defense of abortion makes me cringe.

"It's the stridency, the insistence, the repetition of a 'woman's right to choose.' It rubs me the wrong way—and I'm one of those classic 30-something, northeastern, educated, pro-choice women who believes the message. I'm tormented by the idea that even as I support Democratic candidates—and, yes, on this issue—I'm turned off by their abortion rhetoric." (emphasis in the original)

Ms. Blustain continues her engaging commentary: "To this generation [which came after Roe v. Wade], the 'choice' of a legal abortion is no longer something to celebrate. It is a decision made in crisis, and it is never one made happily. Have you ever talked to a woman who has had an abortion? Even a married, intentionally pregnant woman who has had a 'D and C' for a dying or dead embryo? A college student whose birth control failed? I promise you, such a woman does not talk about exercising the 'right to choose.' You may accuse her—and me—of taking such rights for granted, and maybe you'd be right. But mainly she will tell you how sad she is, how she wished she hadn't had to make that 'choice,' how unpleasant the procedure was. She is more likely depressed than defiant.

"That's why liberalism's vocabulary of 'rights' when it comes to abortion rings a little hollow. It's

constitutional, intellectual—and not nuanced enough to absorb the emotional or even legal complexity... [But] abortion is a right that ends in sorrow, not celebration. It's not like the women's suffrage or the equal access to public accommodations, rights whose outcome is emotionally unambiguous. The vocabulary that was so powerful in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s means something different today. The national debates—on welfare, on affirmative action, and, yes, on abortion—have underscored the nuances. The question no longer seems as simple as, 'Are you for or against?' We are for. But how are we for, to what extent, and at what cost?"

Then Ms. Blustain addresses the March for Women's Lives: "In April [2004], I attended—ambivalently, reluctantly, and under peer pressure—the March for Women's Lives, one of the largest rallies in American history, with about a million other people on the National Mall in Washington. The anti-abortion lobby had been successful in pushing its agenda on the Bush administration, and the abortion-rights world knew that this election year represented a key moment to rally the opposition. My friends had come in from Colorado and New York. They had traveled a long way, and they made it clear it was time for me to join in. So I marched with the Planned Parenthood delegation from Colorado...

"It was a pleasant spring day. Sunny and clear. Nearly every hand held a pink National Organization for Women sign or a blue Planned Parenthood placard, and there were thousands more for the taking piled everywhere along the perimeter of the Mall. Other signs read 'My Body Is Not Public Property!' and 'It's Your Choice, Not Theirs!' The rally was long, the speeches endless. It was the worst example of liberal politicking at work—every member of every interest group had to say something, often the same thing; a real rainbow coalition in action...

"Finally, after a couple of hours of standing, the entire mass of us began to shuffle circuitously toward the Capitol steps. I just didn't have the heart anymore. I made for the nearest Metro stop. On my way, I passed piles of those pro-choice signs, and a small group of protesters standing silently on a street corner. They were holding signs that read 'I regret my abortion.'

"That, I thought, would be a good starting point for Democratic politicians. It would allow them to acknowledge that every woman would rather not have an abortion, and that might enable them to talk more genuinely about the impossible situations women who consider abortion face..." (emphasis in the original)

How ironic it is that such intellectual honesty is found today in the pro-choice political community, but not in the pro-choice general boards of The United Methodist Church. Some day such honesty will, by God's grace and under God's providence, find its way into the General Board of Church and Society and into the Women's Division/General Board of Global Ministries. Some day soon, we pray. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

• Your monetary support, in large checks or small bills, helps Lifewatch to continue to advance the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church. So while you are thinking about it, please write and send a check to Lifewatch. And you might encourage your congregation, through its annual budget or through a special offering, to give to Lifewatch as well. The witness of Lifewatch depends on you and yours. Because of your faithful and generous financial support during the last year, Lifewatch was able to: report on the March for Women's Lives; encourage General Conference to pass legislation in which our denomination begins to recognize the negative effects on those who seek abortions; develop a list of "contact persons," several of whom provided and staffed Lifewatch display tables at annual conferences last summer; sponsor the annual Lifewatch Service of Worship on Capitol Hill, at which Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker preached the gospel of peace for the protection of unborn children; participate in the March for Life (for proof, see the picture on p. 3 of the 01/25/05 issue of The Washington Post); replace our 1995 computer equipment with a 2004 system; and move our office from Alabama to Missouri. Our heartfelt thanks to you, but please keep the gifts coming.

• When copies of Lifewatch are returned to the Lifewatch office, because they are "undeliverable" for any reason, their addresses on the mailing list will be updated. Copies of the next regular issue will be mailed to the new addresses. If readers want the missed issues, please contact Mrs. Cindy Evans (1564

Skyview Drive/Holts Summit, MO 65043/(573)-896-2582/Lifewatch@mchsi.com), and she will gladly mail them out as requested.

• Our nation's newest voters will break some stereotypes. Commenting on a Pace Poll taken on November 4-11, an article from the New York Post (11/19/04) noted: "America's newest voters to enter the political process are predominately pro-life. Over half (54%) of first-time voters call themselves pro-life, while only 43% say they are pro-choice. Moreover, those new pro-life voters are more likely than the pro-choicers to care enough about abortion to base their vote on it." (National Right to Life News, January 2005)

• On Election Day 2004, Americans generally voted pro-life candidates into office. That is to say, Americans generally voted Republican candidates into office. That will cause some Democrats to reassess their rigidly pro-choice position on abortion. When they do, they might begin by considering a comment from Bob Casey, former Democratic governor of Pennsylvania, which was written before his death several years ago: "Many people discount the power of the so-called 'cultural issues'—and especially of the abortion issue. I see it just the other way around. These issues are central to the national resurgence of the Republicans, central to the national implosion of the Democrats, central to the question of whether there will be a third party. The national Democrats may, and probably will, get a temporary bump in the polls—even, perhaps, one more national election victory—from their reactive strategy as the defenders of the elderly and poor who rely on

BOOK ORDER FORM: ① THE RIGHT CHOICE: Pro-Life Sermons; ② THE CHURCH AND ABORTION: In Search of New Ground for Response; ③ THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT ABORTION; and ④ HOLY ABORTION? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; and ⑤ THE JERICHO PLAN: Breaking Down the Walls Which Prevent Post-Abortion Healing.

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- Bishop Whitaker breaks silence of UMC bishop's on abortion's harm
- Agencies uphold RCRC stance: "Abortion is holy because God is pro-choice."

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Medicare and Medicaid. But the Democrats' national decline—or better, their national disintegration—will continue relentlessly and inexorably until they come to grips with these values issues, primarily abortion.” (*First Things*, January 2005)

- On January 17, 2005—the day Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday was observed—Dr. Alveda King, his niece, made a statement about the African-American community, abortion, and life: “I join the voices of thousands across America who can no longer sit idly by and allow this horrible spirit of murder to cut down. If the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is to live, our babies must live.” (*LifeNews.com*, 01/17/05)

- In October of 2004, Rev. Jim Hill—who is the pastor of North Clairemont United Methodist Church in San Diego, CA—preached a sermon entitled “A Culture of Life.” Rev. Hill’s engaging sermon concludes with a principled call to action: “Indeed, I believe that the womb ought to be the safest place in the world for a child. And of course we know that it often is not, and for many reasons. Realize also that there are some specific, unusual situations of which I have not spoken. Still the principle, I think, stands: Thou shalt not kill the unborn child.

“How might we apply this principle? For some of us, it may mean to repent of past actions, ask God’s forgiveness, and receive it. I have prayed with both men and women, who had remorse over past abortions for which they had responsibility and who asked God for forgiveness and received great release from God. For some of us, it might mean to repent of and change inappropriate sexual conduct that might otherwise put us in a situation where we would be tempted to end an unwanted pregnancy. For some of us, it might mean that we need to discontinue a habit that threatens the wellbeing of a child we are carrying or a child for whom we care. For some of us, it might mean that we

need to appreciate more the children God has given us. For others of us, it might mean that we are led to rejoice more in the life that God has given us despite many threats to that life. For still others, there may well be yet other applications that are prompted by recalling again that God has a preference for life. For each of us, there is some application.

“The call of God upon our lives is to holiness; the blessing of God upon our lives is to empower us to answer that call—when we commit to answer. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it to the full. We are made in the image of God. Rejoice in that. So also is everyone else made in the image of God. Rejoice in that too; and treat everyone else with appropriate honor. Jesus came that we might have life; and for each of us that means that we must surely seek all the fullness He would have us have, but also that we must ask God to tell us how we are to help others have that fullness, which means, at least in part, to promote a culture of life. After all, ‘culture of life’ means ‘the cultivation of life.’ And if Jesus came to cultivate life, then we should too.

“What does that mean to you? What does God tell you it means, when you ask Him? And one more question: What are you going to do about it?” ♥

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.”