

## 2006 LIFEWATCH SERMON: "ELECTION, NOT SELECTION"

*The text of the 2006 Lifewatch Sermon—which was preached at this year's Lifewatch Service of Worship, on January 23, at The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC—is found below. Dr. R. Kendall Soulen, the preacher of this excellent sermon, is an ordained elder who belongs to the Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church, and he teaches systematic theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in DC. His publications include Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations (Eerdmans, 2004) and The God of Israel and Christian Theology (Fortress, 1996), and many articles. God and Human Dignity (forthcoming from Eerdmans, 2006), which Dr. Soulen is co-editing, extends the argument of the following sermon.*

Texts: Deuteronomy 7:7-8, John 1:1-5, and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

### UNITED METHODISM AND ABORTION

The nature of abortion is changing in our society and around the world. In the 1960s and 70s, when abortion laws were liberalized in many Western countries, the issue of abortion chiefly concerned women with crisis pregnancies and dealt with whether or not they should have children. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of abortion increasingly arises outside the context of crisis pregnancies and concerns what kind of child an individual or couple wishes to have. This is a change with vast implications. If unchecked and unchallenged by church and society, it will gradually transform us into a culture of widespread eugenic selection, in which humans routinely claim for themselves the power to separate the fit from the unfit before birth.

This is a development that all Christians, pro-life and pro-choice, should unite in deploring and opposing with active spiritual and practical measures. All Christians, pro-life and pro-choice, know clearly something that the world knows only vaguely, if at all: God loves all members of the human family whatever their genetic make-up. What is more, they know something that the world can scarcely be expected to know at all: God is especially zealous on behalf of those whom the world judges unfit, unwanted, and undesirable. Indeed, by time and again preferring just

these as the bearers of salvation, God upsets the standards of human wisdom. A society that silently tolerates the routine abortion or destruction of the undesirable before birth will become ever more disfigured in its own visible make-up, and ever more hardened to the wisdom of the Gospel. Before we become that society, we need to pause and examine the path that we are on, and earnestly ask ourselves where that path is taking us.

I believe that most United Methodists share many core convictions that touch on the issue of abortion. As stated in our Book of Discipline (2004, Paragraph 161J), we affirm "the sanctity of unborn human life." We also recognize the existence of "tragic conflicts of life with life" that makes us reluctantly believe that abortion should be legal in some circumstances. We agree that crisis pregnancies should be addressed by church and society in a holistic way that recognizes and acts on the sacred worth of both mother and unborn child. We believe that special attention must be given to redressing the social and economic circumstances that lead desperate women to seek abortion in the first place. We agree that abortion for certain purposes, such as sex selection, is intolerable in all circumstances.

Where United Methodists, and other Christians, disagree is on the nature of the legal framework that is best suited to express and defend these common commitments. In the confident spirit of the 1960s, many Christians believed that the best way to assist women with crisis pregnancies was to seek the liberalization of abortion law, in effect, to rebalance historic protection for the unborn with increased concern for the autonomy and well-being of women. In 1973 Roe v. Wade, from the US Supreme Court, liberalized abortion law to a far greater degree than many early advocates of legal abortion desired, and to a far greater degree than is the case in most modern Western societies, even in the present day. Nevertheless, many Christians regard Roe as the cornerstone of a just legal resolution of the abortion question.

The question is whether Roe is really what its initial Christian supporters (including Harry Blackmun, a United Methodist fondly remembered by those of my seminary who knew him) hoped it would be, a lasting framework in keeping with the church's

core theological commitments.

From the beginning, many United Methodists, and other Christians, from across the theological and political spectrum have doubted that this is the case. Like many other pro-life Christians, I share few of the traits that identify the "pro-life movement" in the popular mind. I am not an evangelical, a Republican, or particularly conservative on many issues. I come from a family of progressive Methodists with a proud, multi-generational commitment to social justice and expanding civil rights. And yet, as far back as I can remember, it has seemed fairly obvious to me that Roe is a terribly flawed framework that fails to do justice to the church's core commitments on this difficult issue.

#### THE COSTS OF ROE

I believe that the signs of Roe's failure were evident at the beginning and have only accumulated over the past thirty years.

Roe's first and most fatal failure was that it broke faith with the noblest trajectory of American history, along which America has stumbled with great effort and agony, namely, of living out its commitment to the proposition that "all men are created equal." Christians know the value of that commitment because they understand that its ultimate source and foundation is God, but the commitment itself is the most precious inheritance of every American, whether they understand its source or not. Prior to Roe, American society had moved convulsively but steadily in the direction of expanding the community of human beings who enjoy the protection of law. With Roe, that movement was reversed, if not for the first time, then at least for the first time since the Jim Crow era in the South. For Roe not only invalidated hundreds of existing laws restricting abortion throughout the United States, it also declared that human beings before birth are not "persons" under the Constitution with any rights that the state is obliged to recognize or protect. It was inevitable that this ruling would immediately call forth bitter and passionate opposition, as indeed it must so long as it stands. For Roe's core finding conflicts too frontally with the general human intuition that the unborn child is indeed a member of the human family. Moreover, it stands in ever sharper conflict with the growing body of knowledge that has sharpened and deepened this intuition with scientific evidence, and which underscores our understanding of the fundamental biological continuity of every human life from conception to birth and beyond. Roe anticipated these conflicts and attempted to soften them by endorsing the notion of a sliding scale of human worth from conception to birth, while stopping short of according the fetus legal rights at any stage of

development. But this effort had to fail, and in fact it has been scuttled by subsequent US Supreme Court decisions. For the notion of a sliding scale of human worth is obviously incompatible with the proposition that "all men are created equal," and with the divine revelation that gives this proposition its truth and force. America already has a long and tragic history with the notion of a sliding scale of human worth: slaves counted as two-thirds persons for constitutional purposes in the Old South. Such experiments will always take a terrible toll on the moral and spiritual integrity of our society, and they can never be successful in the long term.

Roe has inflicted other costs on American society, costs that have only become more evident as time has passed. The ready availability of abortion has undercut our society's will to address the social and economic conditions that lead many poor and minority women to seek it. The effort of defending Roe has skewed the rhetoric and moral frameworks of many of those who embrace it, leading them to defend abortion on the grounds of personal autonomy and "choice"—

frequently in stark contrast to their own better political principles— while requiring them to deny arbitrarily legal standing to those whose humanity they cannot, in good conscience, deny. As

*“The ready availability of abortion has undercut our society's will to address the social and economic conditions that lead many poor and minority women to seek it.”*

Rev. Jesse Jackson once pointed out (before becoming active in Democratic Party politics), this is the rhetoric and moral framework that was once employed to defend the southerner's right to own slaves: “There are those who argue that the right to privacy is of higher order than the right to life. I do not share that view. I believe that life is not private, but rather it is public and universal. If one accepts the position that life is private, and therefore you have the right to do with it as you please, one must also accept the conclusion of that logic. That was the premise of slavery. You could not protest the existence or treatment of slaves on the plantation because that was private and therefore outside of your right to be concerned.” (“How We Respect Life Is the Overriding Moral Issue,” Right to Life News, January 1977, [www.no-violence.net](http://www.no-violence.net))

Roe has inflicted a steady, long-term hemorrhage of moral authority on those otherwise often praiseworthy movements that have embraced it, from the feminist movement to the Democratic Party to progressive Christianity (although they have not been uniform in their embrace of Roe). And, of course, Roe has inflicted damage on the US political system and above all on the process of judicial selection and confirmation, as recent events clearly show. In view of this, it is scarcely surprising that almost no one now attempts to defend the original Roe decision on the merits of its legal reasoning, no matter how much they favor its general outcome.

## ROE AND EUGENICS

Yet I believe the true costs of Roe are greater yet. For Roe blocks the capacity of church and society to name, recognize, and address our gradual cultural drift toward becoming a eugenic society, precisely because Roe has done much to create the conditions that make that drift possible. By denying all legal standing to the unborn, and declaring abortion a matter of personal private choice, Roe has set us on the path toward a new eugenics.

Modern eugenics can be traced to Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, who coined the word in 1883. For Galton, eugenics is using our understanding of the laws of heredity to improve the stock of humankind. (Daniel Wikler, "Can We Learn from Eugenics?," Journal of Medical Ethics [April 1999], p. 183) Galton's vision inspired the creation of eugenic movements in countries around the world, including the United States. Only a few staunchly Roman Catholic countries resisted this trend. Margaret Sanger, founder of the Planned Parenthood movement, was an enthusiastic proponent of eugenics, but so was Theodore Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Only after the World War II did public opinion turn decisively against eugenics, after the Nazis amplified and revealed the coercive and racist elements of international eugenic policy. Until recently, there has an international consensus that eugenics is flawed in principle and must never be implemented again.

Nevertheless, many people from across the political and religious spectrum warn that we are in danger entering a new eugenic era that is vastly more efficient than the old, one that operates not by coercion but by choice. The old eugenics could not intervene directly or easily in the reproductive process. It operated clumsily by encouraging or discouraging couples from having children. Thanks to genetics, prenatal testing, embryonic screening, and abortion, it is possible to operate much more efficiently and directly on the coming generation itself. As Christian ethicist Gerald McKenny observes: "The goal of an optimally healthy and productive population no longer requires suppression of the desire of some to procreate but now operates through stimulation (by means of everything from health information to advertising) of the desire of couples to have perfect children, through myriad forms of prenatal and neonatal monitoring and screening, and through the fear of having an imperfect child in a normalizing society that values persons according to their usefulness and that constantly measures their chances of success according to societal standards of success. Power no longer requires draconian policies but operates through our choices." (To Relieve the Human Condition, p. 206)

The power of personal choice, and cultural bias, to shape the composition of human population is already a powerful force shaping US society and societies around the world. In the US it is estimated

**PLEASE JOIN US ON THE FIRST TUESDAY OF EACH MONTH IN PRAYING AND FASTING FOR LIFEWATCH'S CONTINUING MINISTRY.**

that upwards of 80% of all children diagnosed with Downs Syndrome are aborted. Selective abortion of female fetuses in Asian countries has led to massive shifts in the overall population. In India alone, the number of "missing girls" is estimated to be as high 40 million or more. If genetic testing for conditions such as deafness should become routine, one may reasonably foresee similarly broad eugenic impacts over time.

Not everyone agrees that such a free-choice, market- and culture-driven form of eugenics is undesirable. According to Jacques Testart, the process of, for example, selecting "the best" genetically endowed embryos from a given set will be "benevolent and learned, painless and efficient." ("The New Eugenics and Medicalized Reproduction," Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics 4:3 [Summer 1995], p. 304) And as for the charge that this process leads directly to the phenomenon of "designer babies," the bioethicist John Harris replies: "The best I can do here is repeat a perhaps familiar thought, namely that although this is often taken to be a difficult question and indeed the idea of parents being able to choose such things very often causes outrage, I have found difficulty in seeing this question as problematic. It seems to me to come to this: either such traits as hair colour, eye colour, gender, and the like are important or they are not. If they are not important why not let people choose? And if they are important, can it be right to leave such important matters to chance?" ("Rights and Reproductive Choice," in John Harris and Soren Holm, eds., The Future of Human Reproduction, Ethics, Choice, and Regulation [NY: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 29)

## THE BIBLE AGAINST EUGENICS

Yet I believe that Christians, pro-life and pro-choice, can agree that they have strong reasons to believe that eugenics is deeply flawed in principle. A eugenic society may still mouth the principle that "all men are created equal," but it will not be able to believe it. Still less will it be able to believe the promise that "the last shall be first" (Matthew 19:30) or organize its resources in a way that cares for those whom Jesus calls "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40,45)

Eugenics draws its moral authority from the fact that it can pose as a doctrine of benevolence, in sync with the modern project of reducing suffering and increasing well-being. Yet this appearance of benevolence is a conceptual sleight-of-hand or optical illusion. In reality, eugenics does not seek to make people better or more fortunate. (This section draws heavily from Wikler [p. 187].) Rather, it seeks better or more fortunate people. Eugenics prefers healthy

people over unhealthy people, smart ones to stupid ones, hearing people to the deaf, and so on. To the degree that eugenics can be said to confer benefits at all, it does so not by improving the condition of those who are needy, but rather by selecting for existence those for whom life can be expected to go well. Even when eugenic interventions are successful in their own terms, they do not cure any person's disease or raise anyone's intelligence or confer longevity upon anyone. Instead, they bring about a world filled with people who enjoy these advantages from their beginnings. In this respect, eugenics does not really require us to have hopes for our fellow human beings, to bear their infirmities, or to labor on their behalf. Rather, it requires us to exercise a preference for the sort of neighbors we will have, namely, the kind who are least likely to trouble us with their infirmities in the first place.

Today's epistle reading reminds the Christian community that we live by a very different vision—a vision of election, not selection: “For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:25-29, RSV)

The God attested by the Scriptures is a God who chooses the least likely: Moses the stutterer, or David the youngest of eight brothers, or the Suffering Servant without form or comeliness. In God's household, it is not only the weak who are dependent on the strong. Time and again, the well-being of the strong turns out to be dependent on those who by human reckoning are least.

This is the basic point: the Christian faith holds that human worth does not vary according to genetic endowment, nor does a person lose his or her moral worth or purpose in life simply because he or she suffers genuine afflictions such as mental retardation, physical malformation, or disease. Such conditions should not be sentimentalized, but neither should they be treated as insurmountable obstacles that render a person unsuited to God's electing purpose. Indeed, paradoxical and offensive though it may seem, human weakness is often the very place where God's strength is revealed.

#### A BETTER WAY

Roe has been a tragic failure and its toll on human life and social comity has been great. Is there another legal framework for addressing abortion that would be

truer to the moral-theological convictions articulated in The Book of Discipline and truer to the principle to which Abraham Lincoln believed the whole American experiment consecrated, namely, "all men are created equal?" I am not a constitutional scholar or even a lawyer, but I think that the answer is Yes, and there are others with sounder legal credentials who would agree. A first element of that framework would be to extend at least the most basic constitutional protections to every member of the human family, regardless of stage of biological development, from conception onward. (This step would, in fact, build in part upon the legal reasoning found in Roe, which observed that ethical lines drawn after conception are inherently artificial, given the biological continuity of the developing human organism; it would simply draw the logical conclusion which Roe strangely fails to draw, namely,

that therefore such lines should not be drawn. It would also build on important US commitments under international law [e.g., the “Declaration of the Rights of the Child” (1959), “The American Convention

on Human Rights” (1978), and the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (1990)].) The second step then would be to address the specific cases of conflict in which the constitutionally protected rights of the unborn could be overridden by the countervailing claims of the mother. While the first step simply extends, yet once again in American history, constitutional protections already enjoyed by the many to a new class of currently unprotected human beings, the second step would be a matter of prudential political judgment on which reasonable people would certainly disagree, and which would best be resolved by legislative means.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of moving from our present political location to such a framework. Yet I think it is quite possible that Roe will eventually be overruled, and then something will have to take its place. I do not think that the framework I suggest would be a panacea for the problem of abortion—legal changes alone would be largely impotent without changes in the economic and cultural conditions that have contributed to the increase in the incidence of abortion since the 1960s. But I do think that a framework like this would be truer to the soul of the American experiment and to the theological convictions that most United Methodists share on the topic of abortion, because of our common conviction that all parties involved in every abortion are jealously loved by a righteous God. Finally, I do not think such a framework as this would by itself stop our drift toward becoming a eugenic society. But I do think it would serve as a powerful check on our proclivity toward becoming such, and direct us in a worthier direction. ♥

*“The God attested by the Scriptures is a God who chooses the least likely: Moses the stutterer, or David the youngest of eight brothers, or the Suffering Servant without form or comeliness.”*

## WORDS MEAN THINGS

Words mean things. If people discussing the abortion issue do not understand the terminology in the same way, then they will talk past each other.

Consider the definitions of some words frequently heard in the debate over abortion.

As most readers understand it, the word health refers to “soundness of body; freedom from disease or ailment” (American College Dictionary, 1951). However, according to the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), “[h]ealth is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

In other words, a woman who says, “I can’t afford this baby,” “I’ll go crazy if I have to have a baby,” or “I’m afraid to have a baby,” can have an abortion for her health.

This illustrates why denominational and national leaders who support abortion insist on the inclusion of a “health exception” in every piece of legislation. They know that under the WHO definition, all abortions remain legal; therefore, there really are no restrictions.

Conception and pregnancy are two other terms which some are trying to redefine.

The American College Dictionary (1951) defines conception as “fertilization; the inception of pregnancy” and fertilization as “the union of male and female gametic nuclei.” The textbook Human Biology: An Exhibition of Ourselves (1977) states: “Pregnancy begins when a sperm cell fertilizes an ovum inside the mother.”

In 2003, Planned Parenthood’s website for teens ([www.teenwire.com](http://www.teenwire.com)) defined conception as “the beginning of pregnancy, which occurs when a fertilized egg attaches to the wall of a woman’s uterus” and pregnancy as the “process of embryonic and fetal development that begins with implantation of the pre-embryo” to the wall of the uterus.

(Implantation occurs approximately 7-10 days after conception. The term pre-embryo was created by Clifford Grobstein in 1979, shortly after the 1978 birth of Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby.)

By redefining conception and pregnancy in this way, abortion proponents seek acceptance of the morning-after pill, emergency contraceptives, therapeutic cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and perhaps RU-486, because “it” is not a pregnancy, and the woman is not pregnant!

Words mean things. Definitions matter. All people in the abortion debate must understand the definitions of specific terms that are in play. That does not mean that they have to agree with the definitions, only that they must understand the definitions (and/or redefinitions) of the words or phrases being used.

Be prepared, in the defense of life. (CE) ♥

## THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS AND THE COUNSEL OF LIBERALISM

Last fall the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church adopted and released a couple of statements—on homosexuality and on the war in Iraq—that are of more than a little interest. These public statements could be taken to be representative examples of the contemporary, public voice of the Council of Bishops. (Again, the public witness of the Council of Bishops, not the teaching of individual bishops, is the concern of this article.) As representative examples, these recent statements might reveal much about the current theological orientation of the Council.

These episcopal statements became public about the same time that your editor ran across a stirring July 11, 2005 letter from Lutheran theologian Dr. Carl E. Braaten, to Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), about the theological “brain drain” from the ELCA to Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. (To read the letter, see [www.wordalone.org/docs](http://www.wordalone.org/docs)). According to Braaten’s report, analysis, and argument, more than a few outstanding theologians have recently left the Lutheran fold for Catholicism and Orthodoxy because the ELCA has become dominated and driven by “liberal protestantism,” as Dr. Braaten terms it, and its attendant problems.

That phrase—liberal protestantism—is a phrase seldom heard or read in United Methodism today. That is perhaps because liberal protestantism itself—as a theological school, style, and disposition—has so successfully permeated The United Methodist Church’s faith and life, mission and ministry. Liberal protestantism is so much in us, among us, and around us that we United Methodists have a difficult time recognizing it, acknowledging it, considering it, and critiquing it. Indeed, since liberal protestantism is us, we United Methodists have not been very thoughtful about it.

Though most contemporary United Methodists could not define, describe, or illustrate liberal protestantism, it is a particular, specific, identifiable tradition of Christian theology and practice. Scholarly theological dictionaries—for example, The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought (Oxford, 2000), The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford, 1983), and A Handbook of Theological Terms (Macmillan, 1964)—include excellent, detailed articles on “liberal protestantism” or just plain “liberalism.” To be sure, the phenomenon of liberal protestantism is big and broad and a little hard to grasp. According to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, it has “many different shades of meaning.” Still, it can be generally described.

Liberal protestantism is, more than anything else, a response to the Enlightenment and its demand that the Church ground and justify its faith in rationality or

reason. Acknowledging this demand, some segments of protestantism—what came to be called liberal protestantism—conformed to Enlightenment thinking by becoming “non-dogmatic, non-ecclesiastical, non-sacramental, [and] non-legalistic.” “[N]on-dogmatic, non-ecclesiastical, non-sacramental, [and] non-legalistic” is Michael J. Hollerich’s way of describing Adolf von Harnack’s liberal Christianity of the late 1800s and early 1900s. (See Hollerich’s outstanding article entitled “Retrieving a Neglected Critique of Church, Theology and Secularization in Weimar Germany” in *Pro Ecclesia* [Summer 1993]). “[N]on-dogmatic, non-ecclesiastical, non-sacramental, [and] non-legalistic” is also a general way of describing liberal protestantism by describing what it is not.

Again, abiding by Enlightenment requirements, liberal Christianity—or liberal protestantism—reordered its faith, life, mission, and ministry by trimming back, as much as possible, its doctrinal, ecclesiastical, sacramental, and legal structures. This means that the protestantism that is liberal loosened and lessened whatever is authoritative in the Church. That is another way of noting that liberal protestantism took a “turn to the self.” That is to say, it took the unfettered Christian more seriously than the authoritative Church. It maximized the freedom of the Christian and minimized the authority of the Church.

So, when liberal protestantism swept away the binding, communal, structural elements of Christianity, what exactly was left to guide and inform? The culture, reason, and choice. That is all.

#### CASE STUDIES

Three illustrations, from the Council of Bishops, might be helpful to point out the liberal protestantism evidenced in the Council’s public witness.

First, the recent batch of statements from the Council did not include a statement on life and abortion. Indeed, since 1973, since the United States Supreme Court handed down its infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision which knocked down all the abortion laws of the states, and since the ensuing 40 million and more abortions, the United Methodist Council of Bishops has not said a word about abortion. Not one word.

Actually, most of the United Methodist bishops who have addressed abortion have actually promoted a pro-choice agenda, which is diametrically opposed to historic, ecumenical Christianity’s position on life and abortion. Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker, of the Florida Area, is the lone exception. His 2005 Lifewatch Sermon was a clarion call for renewed faithfulness to the Gospel of Life and for unfaithfulness to the gospel of choice.

By remaining silent on abortion, the Council of Bishops has, by design or by default, helped turn the

matter of abortion over to the choice of individual United Methodists. This is a simple reflection of elite American culture, which understands abortion primarily as a matter of choice. Therefore, by deciding to remain silent on life and abortion, the Council of Bishops seems to be demonstrating, in good liberal-protestant fashion, a diminishment of authoritative teaching from the Church and elevation of the unfettered freedom of the Christian individual.

Second, the bishops published a pastoral letter in response to the Judicial Council’s decision to support Rev. Ed Johnson in his refusal to receive into congregational membership a gay man in a gay union. (The letter from the Council of Bishops is critiqued briefly below in the You Should Know That section of this newsletter.) The bishops’ letter strives to

counterbalance the alleged exclusivity of the Johnson ruling by emphasizing the inclusive hospitality of The United Methodist Church toward all. Furthermore, the bishops base the church’s

hospitality on the Biblical foundation of justification by grace through faith.

Yes, hospitality in and by the Church is a Biblical necessity. To be sure, when it comes to being the Church, hospitality is one, nonnegotiable characteristic of our life together. But the Church’s common life is based on several nonnegotiable characteristics, not one. For example, the Nicene Creed declares belief in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. The Church’s catholicity points to a deep and wide-ranging hospitality, but not to the point of undermining its unity, holiness, and apostolicity. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that the Council of Bishops, in its pastoral letter, elevates hospitality to the overriding characteristic of the Christian community.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of “cheap grace” might be understood as the motivating force behind a hospitality that is the be-all-and-end-all description of the Church’s life: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” It should be noted that “baptism without church discipline” suggests church membership without church discipline. Bonhoeffer is arguing that grace without command (or law) is not true grace at all.

So why does the Council of Bishops’ pastoral letter fixate exclusively on the Church as a hospitable community? Perhaps because concern for hospitality is all that is left, after the Christian community’s doctrinal, communal, sacramental, and legal structures are deemphasized. That is, concern for only hospitality is growing in liberal-protestant soil.

*“So, when liberal protestantism swept away the binding, communal, structural elements of Christianity, what exactly was left to guide and inform?”*

Third, on November 4 of last year, the Council of Bishops approved a “Resolution on the War in Iraq,” which was drafted by Bishop Marshall L. Meadors, Jr. of Atlanta, GA. (Here it should be understood that the war in Iraq is a matter about which Christians can and will disagree.) Resonating well with claims advanced by a particular partisan-political agenda, the resolution demonstrates an unqualified optimism about human nature. The Council’s resolution states, in part: “Therefore, The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church...[c]alls for the United Nations to appoint a Peace Envoy to encourage and cooperate in talks with Iraqi groups opposed to the occupation to explore a political settlement to the conflict.”

Back in 1937, Professor H. Richard Niebuhr, in *The Kingdom of God in America*, depicted such exaggerated optimism, in theological terms, as “a God without wrath [bringing people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” The liberal protestantism that concerned Niebuhr seems to have found expression in the Council’s resolution on the war. After all, liberal protestantism allows no room for tragedy, or tragic necessities, in history this side of the coming of the Kingdom in fullness. According to the cheerful optimism of this form of protestantism, faith and good works can conquer even the most vicious foe, including al Qaeda and its ilk.

#### A COUNCIL CONSTRAINED

To claim that the Council of Bishops seems to have become an institutional voice of liberal protestantism is not so much a charge. That is, liberal protestantism is not altogether flawed. It is well known that this particular school of protestant thought has, at times, freed the Gospel from stifling institutionalism and traditionalism. Rather, to claim that the Council seems to have become an institutional voice of liberal protestantism is a proposed explanation of why the Council of Bishops declares what it declares in the public arena. But if this explanation is accurate, there is reason for concern among United Methodist clergy and laity.

For starters, if indeed the Council of Bishops speaks out of a liberal-protestant framework, the chances are that the Council has cut itself off from many, if not most, of the riches of the Church’s Great Tradition. Furthermore, by attempting to lead The United Methodist Church without taking doctrinal, ecclesiastical, sacramental, and legal structures as seriously as they should be taken, the Council is left with religious sentiments and cultural platitudes to employ in its public witness.

Cut off from the Great Tradition, diminishing what is authoritative in the Church’s faith and life, and relying on the culture for its agenda and content, a liberal-protestant Council of Bishops is not free. Rather, it is constrained. It is severely constrained, though this constraint is seldom, if ever, acknowledged. The bottom line is this: constrained by liberal protestantism, the Council of Bishops of The

## Pastors and counselors are invited to attend **ABORTION RECOVERY FACILITATOR TRAINING** taught by “Victims of Choice, Inc.”

April 18-19, 2006

Faith United Methodist Church, Charles, MO  
Learn how to bring healing and forgiveness to those hurting from abortion (The Book of Discipline, Par. 161K). For information or registration forms, contact the Lifewatch office.

United Methodist Church might have become a living, working example of the Christ-of-culture model that Prof. H. Richard Niebuhr described generations ago (see Christ and Culture, 1951).

Thoroughly counseled by liberal protestantism, the Council of Bishops simply reacts against authoritative forms of Christian community, and retains its Enlightenment-related habits of maximizing the freedom of the Christian and a reliance upon culture. Because of liberal protestantism’s power, more generously orthodox versions of the Church and the Church’s faith—which preserve, protect, and pass on what is authoritative in the Christian reality (doctrinal, ecclesiastical, sacramental, and legal structures)—become inaccessible to the Council and its public witness.

The time has come for the Council of Bishops to: recognize how liberal protestantism holds sway over its public witness; break free of the confining nature of its liberal protestantism; widen its theological horizons; and get more serious about how the Church’s doctrine, ecclesiology, sacraments, and government might guide its public witness. This would most definitely assist the Council of Bishops in responding to the challenges the Gospel and the Church present to abortion, homosexuality, war and peace, and most everything else. And this would be good for the Gospel, the Church catholic, The United Methodist Church, society, and the little people at the margins of society who are aided by faithful witness. (PTS) ♥

## A CONGREGATION’S LETTER TO ITS BISHOP

*On November 10, 2005, the Administrative Council of St. Peter’s United Methodist Church (Morehead City, NC) unanimously approved the following letter. —Editor*

Bishop Alfred W. Gwinn, Jr.

The Raleigh Area of The United Methodist Church  
P.O. Box 10955

Raleigh, NC 27605

11 November 2005

Dear Bp. Gwinn:

Grace and peace to you.

St. Peter's United Methodist Church hopes that you are having a renewing late fall, even as you anxiously await the arrival of college basketball—and most particularly, UK basketball.

You should know that, during its 2005 Charge Conference on October 2, St. Peter's United Methodist Church accepted in full its 2006 apportionments. Because of obedience to Jesus Christ and His Body the Church—which is made concrete in obedience to the baptismal covenant and to the Discipline of The United Methodist Church—St. Peter's Church gladly accepts this opportunity for connectional mission and ministry.

Because of our commitment to Jesus Christ and to the baptismal covenant, to the Church catholic and to The United Methodist Church, we also have some concerns that we are compelled to declare. Our concerns center on the Council of Bishops—and particularly on episcopal teaching and oversight.

It is no secret that these are conflict-filled days in American Methodism. The main source of the conflict, of course, is the matter of homosexual practice. The “Hearts on Fire” Conference and the recent Judicial Council rulings (regarding Ed Johnson and Beth Stroud) were significant events in the recent history of this struggle. Our concern is that the Council of Bishops is not exercising its teaching authority to instruct United Methodists on the Church's understanding of human sexuality. (Yes, the Council did release a Pastoral Letter on November 2. Unfortunately, this Pastoral Letter, which seems quite defensive in tone, raises more questions than it answers.)

Many United Methodists seem to think that the church's Book of Discipline and Judicial Council will solve our denominational problems in this area. We disagree. Dissent in the Church is best met by teaching, truthful teaching, winsome teaching, from the Church authorities who are consecrated to teach—that is, the bishops. As long as this teaching is neglected, dissent will grow and gain momentum. The contemporary problem in The United Methodist Church will not be solved by General Conference legislation alone. Nor will it be solved by judicial rulings alone. This problem will be solved only when the Council of Bishops, and individual bishops in their areas, propose the Church's received teaching on human sexuality.

Please consider the recent “Hearts on Fire” conference. Those in dissent attracted the vast majority of the press's attention. Therefore, through the various media outlets, many dissenting claims and ideas were repeatedly set before church and society alike. And sad to say, these dissenting claims and ideas had no serious challengers. Unfortunately, the Council of Bishops was not teaching. It was silent. So the dissent could grow. Only the Judicial Council ended up teaching for the church; and not surprisingly,

ecclesiastical jurists are not our denomination's most engaging instructors.

Please do not misunderstand us. We are not calling for a ruthless, merciless assertion of the Church's teaching on human sexuality. We are asking—indeed, pleading—for a full, calm, loving, thoughtful, clear statement of what The United Methodist Church, as Church, knows to be true about human sexuality; and, therefore, how we, as United Methodist Christians, should most faithfully live our lives, and order our life, together.

Our second concern relates to the oversight of our general-church's boards and agencies. A member of the conference staff in Raleigh mentioned here, during the last year, that currently there is no annual “missional audit” of the church's boards and agencies. (Presumably, a “missional audit” would check to see if the ideal mission, as stated in the church's materials, is basically consistent with the real mission, which is actually advanced in the field.) It seems to us that bishops, who are “set apart for a ministry of general oversight and supervision” (The Book of Discipline [2004], Paragraph 404.1), should be ready, willing, and able to oversee and supervise—if not missionally audit—the boards and agencies which they serve.

Lacking such oversight, certain general-church boards and agencies are tempted to go their own way, instead of the Church's way. For example, by co-sponsoring the March for Women's Lives on April 25, 2004 in Washington, DC, the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division/General Board of Global Ministries blatantly acted against The Book of Discipline's official teaching on abortion. Demonstrating the lack of episcopal oversight, this situation was never addressed; therefore, it is likely to be repeated in the future. Such oversight, such accountability, is simply a part of being the Church today. A call for oversight of the general boards and agencies does not come from a factionalist impulse; rather, the call for oversight is one way to avoid factionalism and advance unity in the Church.

As our Administrative Council said last year, St. Peter's Church will “pay [apportionments] in full and protest [concerns] in public.” In paying and protesting, we are attempting to respond to the call and command of our Lord, to our promises made in the baptismal covenant, and to our vows of faithfulness and loyalty to the Church catholic and to The United Methodist Church, respectively. At the same time, we encourage you, as our bishop and as one bound by covenant obedience, to do all that you can, whenever you can, however you can, to move the Council of Bishops and individual bishops toward bolder teaching (especially on human sexuality), and greater oversight of our general-church's boards and agencies.

Be faithful in all things.

In Christ,  
(Mr.) Patrick Mann, Chair/Committee on Finance  
(Mr.) Larry H. Miller, Chair/Administrative Council  
(The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth/Pastor ♥

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

● Please consider giving a gift to Lifewatch from your congregation's missions budget. Your local church's contribution to Lifewatch—however small or large, whether once or more often—will help support our witness to the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church and beyond. Thanks for considering, and responding to, this request.

● Ms. Robin Russell is the Managing Editor of the The United Methodist Reporter. In the December 30, 2005 issue of the Reporter, in an article entitled "Let's Stop the Hearsay in UM News Coverage," she took issue with the claim that the Reporter has backed away from covering controversial church matters: "It's sheer fallacy that the Reporter is part of any movement—as one non-reader put it—to 'limit theological argument,' or that the Reporter has shifted its attention away from controversial theological matters." If these critics had actually read the paper lately, they would know that we've jumped in where some angels might fear to tread." While some have disagreed (and may still disagree) with Ms. Russell's defense, we hope that the Reporter is, and will remain, engaged in the great debate(s) in The United Methodist Church today. If so, the Reporter will serve the cause of Christ and His Church.

● In the midst of all the debate before the US Senate confirmed the nomination of Judge Samuel Alito to the US Supreme Court, it was good to read this in The United Methodist Reporter: "A spokesperson for the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church said that chief executive Jim Winkler 'did not weigh in on any of the candidates'

nor does the agency usually comment on nominees." (11/04/05) (By the way, the same article quoted "editor Bill Kristoff of the conservative Weekly Standard." Actually, that should be William Kristol, not Bill Kristoff. Nicholas D. Kristof is an opinion columnist for The New York Times.)

The same evening that nugget was discovered in The Reporter, a visit to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) website revealed a RCRC letter-writing campaign against Judge Alito. Why? Because "[t]he Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has grave concerns about Judge Alito's past rulings on privacy and reproductive freedoms." Then RCRC offered a couple of anti-Alito paragraphs that could be added and sent to the senders' US Senators.

Regarding this matter, let's look at the positive side. On the Alito nomination, the General Board of Church and Society and Mr. Winkler have practiced what Professor Paul Ramsey of Princeton once called the "self-denying ordinance" of silence.

Now, let's look at the not-so-positive side. Because of its institutions affiliated to RCRC (namely, the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division/General Board of Global Ministries), The United Methodist Church is associated with anti-Alito lobbying efforts. This is one more reason why United Methodist institutions should not be affiliated with RCRC and its pro-choice, actually pro-abortion, politics.

● Following the Judicial Council's rulings on the case of Rev. Ed Johnson, the Council of Bishops wrote a Pastoral Letter, which was released on November 3. In

**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; 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.**

I wish to order: \_\_\_ copies of The Right Choice (\$12.00/copy); \_\_\_ copies of The Church and Abortion (\$5.00/copy); \_\_\_ copies of Thinking Theologically about Abortion (\$7.00/copy); \_\_\_ copies of Holy Abortion? (\$8.00/copy); and \_\_\_ copies of The Jericho Plan (\$8.00/copy). These prices include shipping/handling.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Please enclose your check, payable to "Lifewatch," and mail to: Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville MO 63338.

### SEND LIFEWATCH TO A FRIEND!

Extend your outreach—and ours—with a free subscription to a friend. Simply provide the information requested below. Also, your contributions—however large or small—will help advance the ministry of Lifewatch by inspiring United Methodists to love both unborn child and mother. Thank you for caring enough to act.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail to: Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville MO 63338.

Lifewatch is published by the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization.



**Lifewatch**  
Taskforce of  
United Methodists on  
Abortion and Sexuality

P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338

03/01/06:

\* **2006 Lifewatch Sermon: "Election, Not Selection"** by Dr. R. Kendall Soulen of Wesley Theological Seminary

\* **The Council of Bishops and the Counsel of Liberalism**

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Lancaster PA  
Permit No. 507

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**

the main, the Council's letter reminds The United Methodist Church of its hospitable nature and vocation. Well and good. But the Council's letter includes this ambiguous sentence: "While pastors have the responsibility to discern readiness for membership, homosexuality is not a barrier." The first part of this sentence—"while pastors have the responsibility to discern readiness for membership"—is qualified by the oversight of bishops and district superintendents, according to the Council's Pastoral Letter. In a sense, that is true because of the intricate web of checks and balances throughout The United Methodist Church. No office, no position, no person in the church has absolute, unquestioned authority. But the sentence's second part—"homosexuality is not a barrier [to church membership]"—is unclear and demands a further word. If "homosexuality" in this clause refers to a quiet homosexual inclination and/or orientation, then certainly it "is not a barrier [to church membership]." On the other hand, if "homosexuality" in this clause refers to homosexual practice—which includes an unwillingness to repent of (and struggle with) the practice, an in-your-face attitude that defends the practice, the belief that homosexual practice should be morally legitimated by the church, and/or the ecclesiastical and civil promotion of homosexual behavior—then the person in question certainly could not, in truth, affirmatively respond to the vows of the baptismal covenant and church membership. Therefore, "homosexuality," if understood as blatant homosexual practice and/or activity, might well become "a barrier [to church membership]." Unfortunately, when the Council of Bishops blurs such moral and ecclesiastical lines, this can create confusion in, and harm, The United Methodist Church. Bishops, please choose your words carefully -- for the sake of The United Methodist Church, a part of Christ's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

- Rev. Ignacio Castuera, of St. John's United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, is also the National Chaplain of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. (Please remember that, in 2004, Planned Parenthood performed over 255,000 abortions in the US.) Recently, Rev. Castuera visited Christian leaders in Kentucky. Or at least he tried to. It seems that they refused to meet with him. Rev. Castuera is convinced that he was snubbed by the Methodists and evangelical Protestants because he is doing the Lord's work. The Planned Parenthood chaplain theologized, "The closer Jesus got to the cross, the smaller the crowds got. [T]his is pretty close to the cross because [pro-abortion] people have to take derision, ostracism, all that." ([www.Lifeneews.com](http://www.Lifeneews.com), 11/11/05)

When some children are challenged for making blatantly false statements, they respond with "My world!" to their challengers. Unfortunately, in making the above statements, Rev. Castuera appears to be admitting that he lives only in his own little world, and that his world is not open to correction or charge. Better to "live in the truth," as John Paul the Great used to say, about the Lord's work and human life. ♥

**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."*