

Lifewatch

03/01/17
A Quarterly Newsletter
for United Methodists

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 29th Annual Lifewatch Service of Worship! Rev. Paul Crikelair, Mr. Steve Wissler, and I are so thankful that you made a pilgrimage to Washington, DC—and to The United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill—on this day.

Our heartfelt thanks to Rev. Paul Crikelair—a faithful United Methodist pastor of congregations in Stroudsburg, PA—for ordering and leading today's Service of Worship. Paul, you have done this so long, so well!

Also, our thanks to Mr. Steve Wissler of Ephrata, PA. Steve is actually the father of the Lifewatch ministry. Now he is the publisher of the quarterly newsletter—which means he has to put up with my compulsive editorial calls every three months! Steve, though you are not here this morning, thank you for all you do for Lifewatch!

Our preacher this morning is The Reverend Dr. Stephen W. Rankin. Dr. Rankin is married to Joni, and they have four grown children. He is an elder in The United Methodist Church, and he is now the Chaplain at, and Minister to, Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. He is also an adjunct professor of Church History and Ministry at the Perkins School of Theology at SMU.

Dr. Rankin earned degrees at Kansas State University, St. Paul School of Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Northwestern University/Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He pastored churches, and then he was called into the ministry of higher education. His book is *Aiming at Maturity: The Goal of the Christian Life*. Reviewing Dr. Rankin's accomplishments, one is struck by the range and depth of his knowledge and commitments.

Steve, we want you to remember that a sermon written by Dr. Thomas Oden was preached from this pulpit at last year's Lifewatch service. So yours better be pretty darned good.... Just kidding! We thank God you are here, preaching, this morning! Welcome! (PTS)

2017 LIFEWATCH SERMON: "WINNING STRENGTH OUT OF WEAKNESS"

(Hebrews 11:32-38)

Dr. Stephen W. Rankin

The Apostle Paul, in the fourth chapter of Second Corinthians, summarizes the experience he and his traveling companions had as witnesses and ministers to Christ: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not

forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...." (vv. 8-9, NRSV) In spite of the qualifiers in this statement, most of us would likely look at it and conclude, "I'm not up to that kind of witness." But Paul went a step further, even boasting in his weakness.

Paul's witness challenges us to stiffen our spines and renew our resolve. In the West, the Church looks weak, weary, worn out, broken down, seemingly on the verge of defeat. We struggle to persist in living fully as Christ's followers in what seems like an increasingly hostile culture. Some of us—many of us?—feel like the proverbial ninety-eight pound weakling. While we seek to do good, sooner or later someone comes along and kicks sand in our faces and makes us feel like, whatever it is we are trying to do, we are not very effective. The recent Women's March on Washington, which scorned the participation of pro-life women, is only one such example. If one were to pay attention to the dominant news stories about the Church, it looks like bad news all the time.

But then, a Washington Post article indicates that the number of abortions performed in this country has fallen to its lowest level since the institution of Roe v. Wade. I will leave it to brighter minds to decipher the reliability of the statistics, but any reduction of this tragic practice surely is good news, and we give thanks to God for His great mercy. ALWAYS STRUGGLING, ALWAYS ADVANCING

It seems that the Christian faith is always struggling against apparently much stronger forces, always losing ground to the much better resourced powers. And then we look up and find that, in fact, the Body of Christ, filled with and led by the Holy Spirit, constantly advances.

From the beginning, followers of our crucified and resurrected Lord faced opposition. In the early phases of the spread of that strange and, to many, loathsome faith throughout the Roman Empire, these fledgling congregations did things that neighbors found strange. They would take as their own the newborn babies, exposed and left to die, that others had discarded. When people fled Rome in the 160s because of an outbreak of plague, Christians stayed behind, nursed the sick, and risked their own lives for the sake of sometimes total strangers. They provided loving care for the dying, but their simple ministrations also helped a significant number survive. The steadfastness of their faith under great pressures and the winsomeness of their witness bore fruit in every place such that, by the middle of the fourth century, so many people had joined the faith that Christians made up more than half

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“.... throughout the Roman Empire, these fledgling congregations did things that neighbors found strange. They would take as their own the newborn babies, exposed and left to die, that others had discarded.”

— *The Reverend Dr. Stephen W. Rankin.*

of the entire population of the Roman Empire. For the vast majority of those centuries, however, it would have looked as if the Church were failing.

During another crucial time in the early 700s, St. Boniface, the Apostle to the Germans, led his team deep into areas yet to be evangelized. Sometimes the locals were none too happy with this intruder proclaiming a rival god who came to displace their local deities. But Boniface stayed with it. He and his co-workers faced the risk and danger of the mission, until hundreds of new congregations had begun and many thousands of people were baptized into the faith. In 754, bandits murdered the aged Boniface and his fellow servants. Expecting to find gold or silver and other valuables, the thieves opened the apostle’s trunks and found nothing but books—the Scriptures that announce Jesus as Lord and other writings to help catechize new believers.

Our Wesleyan tradition is replete with examples of faithful witnesses, who, though they were weak, were made strong. John Nelson, a bricklayer and early convert under the ministry of John Wesley, became a bold and effective preacher. Though he refused on principle to fight in war, he was press-ganged—basically kidnapped—into military service. Since he refused to fight, he was held in camp as a prisoner. He continued to share the love of Christ with anyone who would listen, so much so that the commanding officer finally let him go just to get rid of him!

And in our generation, Dr. Fenggang Yang, director of the Center for Religion and Society in China at Purdue University, has projected that, in view of current growth trends, the number of Christians in China could reach a quarter of a billion people by 2030 (<https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/>). At the ascent of the Maoist revolution, the Church in that great nation appeared to be all but obliterated. Now look at things!

The Church has always struggled, and it has always advanced. Around the world, at this very moment, faithful Christians are winsomely sharing the powerful love of Christ, many of them at great cost to life and limb. Out of weakness they share, but Christ’s power is made perfect in their weakness.

STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

The Christians to whom the writer of Hebrews addresses his book were struggling to remain faithful. Some were flagging in their faith. They had begun to worry about

whether Jesus was really the Christ, whether their faithfulness was worth the hassle, whether the pressures they were feeling from a hostile culture made their faith worth maintaining. The writer reminds them of all those who, by God’s grace, persevered in the world and won strength through their very weakness.

Some years ago, the Christian artist Michael Card beautifully captured this mysterious outcome of strength won through weakness portrayed in Hebrews 11: “By faith one was commended for the sacrifice he made./Another out of holy fear built an ark the world to save./Another left his homeland and as a stranger he’d reside./But none received the promise then and so, in faith, they died.

“Others conquered kingdoms, quenched the fury of the flames./Some made strong in battle, some were raised to life again./Many more were martyred midst the crowd’s loud clamoring./By faith they would not bow the knee or kiss the emperor’s ring.” (“Soul Anchor,” 2000, emphasis added)

They would not bow the knee to idols. They would not stop living for Christ and talking about Christ. They wandered in deserts and lived in caves, people of whom the world was not worthy. They suffered and won strength out of weakness.

Why? How? Because God is 100% faithful to His promises. This they knew. This we know. Let us never forget.

FOR US, IT IS THE SAME

The witness that knows the strength won through weakness is as pressing as ever. This is a particular kind of knowing. We do not expect service to be easy. In a sense, opposition to the Gospel and interference from many quarters are regarded as par for the course. No matter the resistance or the feeling of weakness that creeps upon us, we will not stop. At stake are the lives of many precious people.

To illustrate this point, let me turn, if I may, to the context of my own ministry: college students. For a couple of years at least, we have been hearing about the “nones,” those persons who no longer claim a religious identity. Not just a religious preference, but literally no religious identity at all. Among those in the age range of eighteen to thirty-five, the percentage of “nones” may rise as high as three, or more, in ten. Lay this statistic alongside those students who claim the Christian faith, but who do almost nothing to foster and grow their faith, and the picture looks pretty daunting.

But, as the research also indicates, marking “none” for

religious identity does not mean that one is an atheist or an agnostic. Many “nones” believe in God, pray sometimes, read their Bibles, and even occasionally attend worship. We have in front of us, then, a generation desperately hungry for God. Let us not let them down.

And there are many of them. More than twenty million students attend college in this country. Counting those in the same age range, but not going to college, the number swells to close to forty million people. They are, as one book title puts it, a generation on a tightrope ([Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student](#) [John Wiley & Sons, 2012] by Arthur Levine and Diane Dean).

If you spend significant time with young people, you will find some of the attitudes and behaviors that are the stuff of caricature. And caricatures work because they are partly true. Many emerging adults, as they are now known, drink too much and party too hard. There is such a thing as the “hookup culture,” with young people engaging in risky activity even though they have had the “safe sex” training. Too many of them are anxious to the point of distraction. They seem to lack grit. They do not know how to persevere through disappointments. They desperately fear “looking stupid.”

At the same time, a full twenty percent of college students do not drink alcohol at all. They know how to avoid the risks associated with party culture. The faithful (though imperfect) ones—who get involved with campus ministries, who attend worship regularly, and who read their Bibles and pray and have fellowship with other believers—do much better than their cohort who do not. The young people who know Christ, who have adult mentors in their lives, who walk in integrity, you will not be surprised to know, are happier than their peers. They handle stress and disappointment more effectively. And they want to live lives of purpose.

These generalizations point to the need for us who are older to invest in our young. The faith that has been committed to us, we must pass on to them, just as our forebears in the faith handed on their faith to us. Those faithful witnesses, on whose broad shoulders we now stand, have shown us time and again that our strength will be won through weakness. If we risk letting our hearts to be broken by the brokenness around us, inevitably we will feel desperately inadequate. At times we will feel our energy flag and our vision go out of focus. Nevertheless, let us not grow weary. Let us not grow faint in the struggle. Let us continue to fight the good fight.

And let us always remember that in our weakness, Christ's strength is made perfect. We are never alone and never left to our own resources. Ever. Thanks be to God.♥

Dr. Rankin preached the above sermon on January 27, 2017 at Simpson Memorial Chapel in The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. A video of Dr. Rankin's sermon can be found on the Institute on Religion and Democracy's Facebook page and its Juicy Ecumenism website: <https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/01/27/video-stephen-rankin-sermon/>.

THE 2017 MARCH FOR LIFE: NOTES ON BEING THERE

The annual pilgrimage to Washington, DC—for the Lifewatch events and the March for Life—always involves not only a whirlwind of a trip but also many surprises and blessings. This year was no exception.

For the first time, Rev. Paul Crikelair and I attended the Opening Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life. It took place at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception at The Catholic University of America. The Basilica provided a beautiful sanctuary. The worship service was stately and majestic. The congregation enormous, so large that Rev. Crikelair and I followed the worship leaders by watching a screen in the side Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary. The music was powerful. The sermon—by Timothy Cardinal Dolan, the Archbishop of New York—lifted up the many ways God has used, and now employs, sanctuary for the good of His people and creation, including the sanctuary of the womb. The atmosphere was reverent in the highest degree. This entire event brought to mind covenant renewal, in the Old Testament, with God's thousands and thousands of people recalled to their covenantal character and calling. The Opening Mass was glorious.

On the Friday morning of the Lifewatch service, we gave a ride to Capitol Hill to a vegan for life. She had driven all the way from Michigan to demonstrate that her moral concerns most definitely extend to the unborn child and mother threatened by abortion. The conversation with her was most interesting.

The Lifewatch Service of Worship was well attended. United Methodists from across the church and nation were present. Included among them was Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, and Ms. Susan Burton, Director of Women's and Children's Advocacy of the same general board. We were thankful for their presence. Dr. Stephen Rankin preached a powerful sermon to bolster the hope of Christian witnesses for life, as you have read above. And be informed that Mr. Ken Steward, a faithful and energetic participant in Lifewatch events through the decades, was missed for the second year. He had crossed the Jordan back in June of 2015. May our good-natured, “long-haired” (as we used to kid him) brother Ken rest in the peace of our Lord.

The March for Life was massive. And joyful. And hopeful. And loving. (In contrast to the Women's March in Washington on January 21, which seemed to include quite a bit of hateful, vulgar expression.) Hundreds of thousands of people—including countless young people—gathered near the Washington Monument to hear many speeches and then march up Capitol Hill. Vice President Mike Pence spoke with abundant moral clarity, as did many others.

Though the Lifewatch Board Meeting, after the March for Life, involved fewer than usual, its participants engaged in a substantive conversation that will bolster the Lifewatch witness in the months and years ahead.

Another pilgrimage. Another Lifewatch Service of Worship. Another March for Life. Another Lifewatch Board Meeting. Another set of unexpected blessings. Thanks be to God. (PTS) ♥

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S TEACHING ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

The working pastor's duty is to propose, to the Christian community, the Church's teaching (or doctrine). Not impose. But propose. In word and deed. As persuasively as possible.

And it is the responsibility of each member and friend of the Church to receive the teaching, consider the teaching, accept or reject the teaching, and live accordingly. If after due consideration there is rejection of what the Church proposes, a congregation's member or friend, aspiring to be teachable, will enter into a season of exploring more deeply the Church's teaching.

That is one way we United Methodists are the Church. We assume the Church, with 2,000 years of time-tested experience, has something to teach us.

Currently, The United Methodist Church is in conflict over matters related to human sexuality. Therefore, in the paragraphs below, I will propose, in brief, the Church's teaching on human sexuality for your consideration.

THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

The United Methodist Church's doctrine (or teaching) is found in The Book of Discipline. Regarding human sexuality, the Church teaches, in summary, from the Discipline: "Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed [by the Church] only with [*within* would seem to be the more appropriate word] the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage." (Paragraph 161F on Human Sexuality, The Social Principles, The Book of Discipline [2012 and 2016])

This is The United Methodist Church's standing teaching on human sexuality, in the briefest possible form. There is a more extensive, more detailed, teaching on this topic in the Discipline. However, the above quotation can be understood as a basic summary of what the Church teaches.

This teaching is established by General Conference—with the help of the Father's grace, the Son's reign, and the Spirit's presence—that is consistent with the witness of Scripture and Tradition. With this brief teaching on human sexuality, The United Methodist Church stands with the witness of historic Christianity—through the ages and around the world. (Yes, there are exceptions. A few denominations in the United States have recently revised their traditional teaching on human sexuality; all of them—without exception, it is worth noting—are experiencing schism.)

The United Methodist Church—along with the larger Church—teaches that sexual relations are reserved for marriage and only for marriage. All other sexual activity is outside the boundary of what God intends and wills.

Where does the Church get that idea? After all, today it seems, well, a bit out-of-step with post-modern society.

THE BIBLE'S FOUNDATION

Here is the simplest and most direct way to respond. In frank conversation with some Pharisees about divorce, Jesus speaks clearly about marriage: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Mark 10:6-9, NRSV, here and below; see also Matthew 19:4-6)

In these verses, Jesus declares very clearly the context for sexual relations: marriage. In marriage, through marital relations, the two become one. Two people become one. The marital act is not a mere physical or biological act. It is a union—a union—of two people. The union of two bodies demonstrates a union of their souls as well. This union is so powerful that it can beget a child (or children), whom the two-who-are-one can then protect and raise.

To make His statement on marriage, Jesus draws from "from the beginning of creation." (Mark 10:6) That is, our Lord quotes from Genesis twice. The first time: "[M]ale and female he created them." (1:27c) And the second: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." (2:24) In other words, Jesus is reaching back to His Father's creation of humanity as male and female, and to what His Father intends for humanity. Even at the creation, God's plan for marriage—for the husband and wife becoming one flesh—is made plain.

Later in the New Testament era, in his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul also discerns the marital union of husband and wife, and he understands it as an illustration of the powerful union of Christ and His Church. Paul writes: "'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church." (5:31-32)

So, the Christian truth about marriage, which is established at creation, appears across the entire Bible, The Story of the World, as we often call it. This truth is first revealed in Genesis, then quoted by Jesus, and finally assumed and put to work by St. Paul. This is a powerful, life-giving truth. This Biblical witness on human sexuality provides the foundation for the teaching in The Book of Discipline.

MANY WAYS TO WANDER, ONE TOWARD RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Church at her best does not look down on, or condemn, those who depart from Church teaching on human sexuality. Rather, the Church occasionally proposes her teaching so that people are given the opportunity to live righteously—and to repent when necessary, to receive forgiveness, and to live transformed lives of true freedom, with Christ and for Christ.

Most of the conflict in The United Methodist Church today focuses on homosexuality. That seems odd.

Homosexual activity is indeed one way to wander from the Church's way. However, the vast majority of sexual sins have to do with heterosexual desire and behavior. Lust. Pre-marital sex. Drug abuse, alcohol use, and pop-culture immersion that can lead to sexual promiscuity. Extra-marital affairs. Pornography. Digital exhaustion. Married men who refuse to leave their families of origin. Married women who refuse to create a home. Married men and women who put their jobs above the ones to whom they are married. All of these behaviors miss the mark. They are sins—for which Christ died, and for which there is forgiveness, and from which there is deliverance.

The Church's teaching on human sexuality does not just bless whatever people are going to do anyway. That is the easy way, the wide way. Rather, the Church, following the Word of God, proposes the difficult way, the narrow way. As one who has wandered and now wanders from this way, who has been forgiven and is being forgiven, this pastor acknowledges the difficulty, and narrowness, of this way. But this is the best way. True love and abundant life, and authentic freedom and God-given righteousness, are found on this way. And only on this way. (PTS) ♥

This article first appeared in the February 2017 issue of The Methodist Messenger, the newsletter of Whiteville United Methodist Church, Whiteville, NC.

WHERE IS DISCIPLINE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH? THE PROMISES

General Conference 2016 adopted “An Offering for a Way Forward.” That statement's concluding section contained this significant promise: “We [bishops] will continue to explore options to help the church live in grace with one another—including ways to avoid further complaints, trials and harm while we uphold the *Discipline*.” In their statement, the bishops promise to do what they can to limit unpleasantness in church life (by the avoidance of “further complaints, trials and harm”), all while they “uphold the *Discipline*.” According to their promise, the bishops promise continually to “uphold the *Discipline*.”

After General Conference, Bishop Scott J. Jones, one of The United Methodist Church's boldest teaching bishops, sent a letter to the Great Plains Area, which he then served. Bp. Jones' letter repeated and reinforced the earlier promise made by the bishops in “An Offering for a Way Forward.” His letter declared: “The Bishops will uphold the discipline of the Church while these conversations [around and within the Commission on a Way Forward] continue. All provisions of the *Book of Discipline, 2012* on matters of human sexuality will remain in force until a General Conference changes them.” (emphasis added) In his letter, Bp. Jones promises, as did “An Offering for a Way Forward,” that “[t]he Bishops will uphold the discipline of the Church...” during these trying times.

On July 12, the Southeastern Jurisdiction's College of Bishops released a letter which joined the earlier promises

of “An Offering for a Way Forward” and Bp. Jones. This College of Bishops strongly declared: “We also view the acts of nonconformity as a violation of our covenant and as divisive and disruptive. As a College of Bishops, we are fully committed to keeping the promises we made at our ordinations and consecrations...”

The Southeastern Jurisdiction's College of Bishops clearly calls “acts of nonconformity” (i.e., acts that are inconsistent with church doctrine and discipline) what they are: “violation[s] of our covenant and...divisive and disruptive.” Even more importantly, they promise to keep their ordination and consecration vows. So, they promise to accept The United Methodist Church's “order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God's Holy Word” (ordination vow). In addition, they promise “to guard the faith, to seek unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church ...” and “to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church against all that is contrary to God's Word...” (consecration vows) This College of Bishops states that, as bishops, they are taking personal responsibility, as they promised to do, for maintaining The United Methodist Church's discipline—no matter what.

The promises of the bishops are consistent and clear. They promise, again and again, to uphold the discipline of The United Methodist Church without qualification.

THE BEHAVIOR

However, during the spring, summer, and fall of 2016, there have been numerous instances of the The United Methodist Church's discipline being broken. Annual Conferences have voted that they would act, on the human sexuality issues, in “nonconformity” with church discipline. Conference boards of ordained ministry have declined to apply the church's moral standards on human sexuality to candidates for ordained ministry. There have been instances of United Methodist clergy presiding at “gay marriage” services. Ordained clergy have “come out.” And so on. In other words, the revisionists, who favor changing The United Methodist Church's doctrine and discipline on human sexuality, are continuing a full-court press to get their way. The problem is this: they are running over the church and the church's discipline to get their way.

What has been the response of the bishops to this rough treatment of the church? Oftentimes silence. This situation—of the revisionists boldly and loudly and repeatedly making their case, which is then frequently followed by the silence of the Council of Bishops (COB)—was perfectly illustrated by an incident at a recent Council of Bishops meeting at St. Simons Island in Georgia. Early in the morning, with many bishops in the room, Dr. Dorothee Benz, a leading activist for LGBTQI+ concerns, stood on a chair and delivered a prepared speech with the assistance of a bullhorn. This was an obvious disruption of the COB meeting and agenda. The response of the Council? Silence. A few bishops apparently stood in solidarity with the speaker; others sat at their tables; others left the room; but all were silent. Dr. Benz was allowed to complete her disruptive action, which involved other speakers as well. But still, no one stood up for The United Methodist Church,

ANOTHER DIMINISHMENT OF TRUST

A version of the following paragraph appeared in a letter of admonishment recently written, by your editor, to a United Methodist bishop. His “just resolution” of a complaint, filed against a United Methodist pastor for performing a same-sex service, appeared to lack discipline for the offending pastor and transparency for the good of the larger church. Once again, a bishop of the Church seems fearful of the wrath of the revisionists, insipid in upholding the Church’s doctrine and discipline, and unaware of the great harm such “leadership” inflicts upon the Church. (PTS)

It is exactly this kind of episcopal behavior—ignoring and not teaching church doctrine, refusing to discipline pastors who blatantly break church law, and using the principle of confidentiality to avoid the demands of accountability—that causes United Methodists, clergy and

laity, to experience a diminishment of trust in The United Methodist Church. This is how it goes, time and again: word of yet another one-sided resolution (or another apparently Discipline-defying act) reaches the larger church through various media outlets. As a result, a congregation leaves the connection. A family is never seen again on Sunday mornings. A pastor becomes discouraged, even demoralized (literally de-moralized). But everyone is afraid to discuss, with the involved bishop, what has happened. And the involved bishop avoids mention of the church’s standing doctrine and discipline (when that is precisely what should be proposed to his flock and to the larger denomination). Drip. Drip. Drip. The distrust deepens and spreads, and it harms the church. All this occurs under the banner of ‘do no harm,’ while great harm is actually being done to The United Methodist Church.

the church’s common good, the church’s doctrine, the church’s discipline. It is as if the church has no engaged, committed leadership. (To watch a video of this disturbing incident, go to https://www.facebook.com/loveprevailsumc/video/1007712426005520/?hc_ref=PAGES_TIMELINE.)

This silence, from the bishops, is undermining the entire church. Why? Because The United Methodist Church’s public square is now filled with the rhetoric of the revisionists—that is, those who desire to change the church’s doctrine and discipline to accommodate the LGBTQI+ agenda. United Methodist New Service (UMNS) dutifully reports the stories of Annual Conferences voting for “nonconformity,” “just resolutions” of complaints that do not in any substantive way hold discipline-violators accountable for their actions, and the latest press releases of those organizations pressing for accommodating change. Since all of this revisionistic rhetoric is greeted with the silence of the bishops, the perception of the acceptability, popularity, and inevitability of revisionism grows. And the perception of the goodness and gravitas of The United Methodist Church’s doctrine and discipline is diminished.

WHO IS STANDING UP FOR THE CHURCH?

So, with the bishops adopting a pose of silence, who is standing up for the church? Who is teaching church doctrine and upholding church discipline? Who is reminding The United Methodist Church of her ecclesiology, of her unity in the Body of Jesus Christ? Some isolated pastors and a few denominational renewal groups. That is all.

But this is a perfect time for the bishops truthfully to teach church doctrine and firmly uphold church discipline. The United Methodist Church, as a church, is yearning to hear the truth taught by bishops and see that truth embodied in the discipline upheld by bishops. The church desires, more than anything else, truthful teaching (doctrine) and faithful ordering (discipline). Doctrine taught and discipline practiced, by the bishops, would certainly not please all United Methodists. But were the bishops to inject doctrine and discipline into the church’s life, most clergy and laity would gladly and gratefully respond—perhaps as never before.

This comment is not meant to bash the Council of Bishops. This comment is meant to plead with the Council of Bishops to tend to the whole church, to look after the common good of the whole church, to teach the church, to lead the church, to maintain order and dignity within the church. Please, Council of Bishops, do what you have been called and consecrated to do. At present, you, the bishops, seem more threatened by the LGBTQI+ minority in the church and less committed to the welfare, order, doctrine, and discipline of the church.

BISHOPS, STAND UP FOR THE CHURCH!

So, bishops, here is a call from Lifewatch to do three things.

1. Be faithful to your promises. You have promised to uphold the discipline of the church—so, with God’s help, uphold the discipline of the church. In the event of an apparent violation of church discipline, do not search for the easiest way around the discipline. Do not game the discipline. Do not trim the discipline. Uphold the discipline. As you have repeatedly promised you would.

2. Bishops, when you uphold the discipline, teach why you are doing what you are doing. In other words, teach the church doctrine that lies behind the church discipline.

This teaching will be difficult and challenging, for the church is obviously divided and conflicted. This teaching will involve references to Biblical and Wesleyan foundations. This teaching will require courage on your part. This teaching will require faith in God and obedience to God. But in the end, our Lord will use your teaching for the good of The United Methodist Church. Vast numbers of United Methodists will turn to each other and say, “Thanks be to God that the bishops are finally leading us.”

3. Bishops, in your upholding of the discipline and in your teaching of the doctrine, remind The United Methodist Church that there are always two ways confronting the Church and the Christian: the way of compromise and the way of faithfulness. The way of compromise always tempts, for it appears to be easier and perhaps even conflict-free. The way of faithfulness always looks impossible and

forbidding, but it is the way God desires the People of God to take.

So, United Methodist bishops, stop trying to lead The United Methodist Church according to your own lights, according to your own calculations for minimizing conflict and damage. Lead The United Methodist Church according to the promises you have made, according to the church's doctrine and discipline, according to God's word and will. It will make no earthly sense. But that is okay. That is best. God will help you. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Thank you so much for responding to Lifewatch's December 1st "fundraising letter." (I have never particularly liked that term.) Your support for the witness of Lifewatch—including your prayers, your notes and letters, and your financial gifts—are essential to sustain our witness for the Gospel of Life in The United Methodist Church and beyond. Remember that a gift to Lifewatch can be given in two ways. You can send a check to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Or you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. Mrs. Evans and I are sincerely grateful for your steadfast support of all kinds. (PTS)
- As you know, Dr. Thomas C. Oden crossed the Jordan back in early December of last year. May Dr. Oden rest in God's glorious and everlasting peace. In the next issue of Lifewatch (June 1, 2017), Dr. Les Longden, a former student of Dr. Oden, will offer a remembrance of his teacher, mentor, and friend. Look forward to a good word.
- Bishop Ken Carter, of the Florida Area of The United Methodist Church, has written an important essay entitled "Just Resolution as an Expression of Restorative Justice" for

his blog. It is worth the reading. Also, you might notice two responses at the end of Bp. Carter's essay. To find this material, just google "The Bishop's Blog Carter," and you will be there in no time.

- Perhaps "grace" has become the oil that greases the affirmation machine that is The United Methodist Church at her worst. However, God's grace, real grace, forgives real sins, transforms real sinners, purifies real corruption, inspires real hope, and results from the bloody execution, and glorious resurrection, of one Jesus of Nazareth so long ago. Let's be careful how we understand and use the word "grace" in our ministries and lives.
- "Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion." Those memorable words were spoken by Mother Teresa—now Saint Teresa of Calcutta—at the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. At the end of her speech, there was an extended, standing ovation—except for then-President Bill Clinton, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton, then-Vice President Al Gore, and their entourage.
- When that deeply flawed candidate Mr. Donald Trump stood up, during the third presidential debate on October 19, 2016, and expressed moral disapproval of third-term or partial-birth abortion, he might have taken a major stride toward winning the presidential election of 2016. And when that deeply flawed candidate Secretary Hillary Clinton, during the third presidential debate, stood up and defended the availability of third-term abortion, she might have lost significant ground in the same election.

The vice-presidential debate on October 4, 2016 included an illuminating exchange on faith, values, and abortion. Then-Gov. Mike Pence eloquently challenged partial-birth abortion and the federal funding of abortion. In

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this pastor's opinion, this part of the vice-presidential debate also helped to determine the presidential election's outcome.

The debates, especially regarding abortion, helped clarify a significant difference between the two tickets. This difference helped the American people make up their minds about the votes they cast.

- Boniface (672-754), who was mentioned in Dr. Rankin's sermon above, wrote this in his "Letter 78:" "The Church is like a great ship sailing the sea of the world and tossed by the waves of temptation in this life. But it is not to be abandoned—it must be brought under control.

"As an example of this we have the Fathers of the past, Clement and Cornelius and many others in the city of Rome, Cyprian in Carthage and Athanasius in Alexandria. Living under pagan emperors, they steered the ship of Christ, that is the Church, his beloved spouse. And they did this by teaching, defending, working and suffering even to the shedding of blood.

"When I considered the example of these men and of men like them, I was filled with fear. Dread came upon me and trembling, and the darkness of my sins almost overwhelmed me. I should have been only too glad to give up the government of the Church which I had accepted, if only I could have found some support for this course of action in the example of the Fathers or in sacred scripture.

"Therefore, since this is the situation and since the truth may become wearied but cannot be overcome or deceived, I take refuge in my weariness in the one who spoke through Solomon: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." And elsewhere: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." Let us stand firm in doing what is right and prepare to face

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temptations, so that we may hope for support from the Lord and be able to say to him: "Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to the next."

"Let us trust in the one who laid this burden upon us. What we cannot bear on our own, let us bear with the help of the one who is all-powerful and who said: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

"Let us stand firm in battle on the day of the Lord, because days of distress and anguish have come upon us. Let us die, if God wills, for the sacred laws of our fathers, so that we may be worthy to share an eternal inheritance with them.

"Let us not be dumb watch-dogs or silent spectators: let us not be hirelings that flee at the approach of the wolf. Let us be watchful shepherds, guarding the flock of Christ, preaching to great and small alike, to rich and poor, preaching all that God has decreed to men of all degrees and ages, insofar as God gives us the power." (For All the Saints: A Prayer Book for and by the Church [American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1994], Volume I, pp. 311-312)

- *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* "Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail." ♥

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