

## GUEST COLUMN I: NEEDING A MORE CONSISTENT STAND ON ABORTION

*A version of the following article first appeared in the Southwest Texas Conference paper, Witness. It is by Linda J. Martin, M.D., who is a member of Lytle United Methodist Church of Lytle, TX.*

“Children are a gift from God to be welcomed and received.” That is the opening sentence of Paragraph 161K on adoption in The Book of Discipline (2000), and it immediately follows the mushy, ambiguous, pro-choice language of Paragraph 161J on abortion.

Is Paragraph 161K a radical, pro-life statement? Yes, it is. What a contrast to Paragraph 161J!

The paragraph on abortion starts out well: “The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence.” It then asserts that we “now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born,” when, in fact, we have had that power for millennia. The early Christians in ancient Rome fought against abortion and infanticide.

Christians have been pro-life against the culture for 2,000 years. Only in the last century were parts of the church convinced that abortion was compatible with what God commands.

Underlying the language of the abortion paragraph (161J) is the assumption that abortion presents a conflict between the best interest of the mother and the best interest of the child. But in the vast majority of cases, there is no such conflict. In fact, such conflicts are very rare. Where there is a conflict between the life of the mother and the life

of the child, every effort should be made to save both.

It has been shown conclusively that abortion, besides killing a unique human being, does great damage to the mother. The list of possible medical complications is extensive, including severe bleeding, infertility, future miscarriage and premature births, higher rates of breast cancer, and death. The psychological complications of guilt, regret, depression, suicide, drug abuse, promiscuity, and increased abuse of other children are equally devastating. Women who suffer most from these psychological problems are the very ones we most want to help—women in difficult circumstances, victims of rape or incest, mothers of children with handicaps or deformities (see David Reardon’s Aborted Women, Silent No More). These women report the most problems after an abortion.

Carrying a child to term and giving birth in a difficult pregnancy allow a woman to triumph in adversity, whereas abortion teaches her that she is

too weak and fragile to do the right thing, often confirming or worsening already low self-esteem. Thus, abortion increases the very psychological problems it purports to avoid.

The United Methodist statement on adoption (Paragraph

161K) should guide the statement on abortion (Paragraph 161J). The value of a child is not determined by whether he is inside or outside the womb. Both are God’s creation. And God tells us that children are a blessing from Him (Psalm 127:3, for example).

The United Methodist Church, faithful to Jesus Christ, needs to stand for children (born and unborn) and their mothers. ♥

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## GUEST COLUMN II: LOVE AND RIGHTS

*What follows is by The Reverend Bruce Birdsey. It was written while Rev. Birdsey was on a Woods Fellowship at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA, and it appeared as the conclusion of "The Question Answers Itself: An Evolving Society Will Provide Fetal Rights" (The [Raleigh, NC] News & Observer, 7/28/03).*

About the time the June 9th Newsweek (with "Should a Fetus Have Rights?" on the cover) arrived, I learned of the death of Peggy Cook, who occasionally attended the [Episcopal] church where I formerly was rector. She was born 53 years ago with Williams' Syndrome, a rare condition that took a succession of doctors a couple of years to diagnose. The one who finally did so said to her mother: "I would put her away in an institution and forget about her."

But Margaret Cook was appalled by the suggestion and rejected it. It was not a matter of rights (hers or her daughter's). It was a matter of love. Human beings often love other human beings who are incomplete or imperfect. Often, humans who cannot care for themselves are cared for by those who love them—even when it is inconvenient.

So Peggy Cook had a life that was markedly more rich in love than would have been the case had her mother turned her over to strangers.

And I believe Margaret Cook has had a richer life as well, despite the infringement on her freedom by the needs of a handicapped daughter.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," declares our nation's Declaration of Independence.

The liberal tradition in the United States has, over the centuries, given a gift of inestimable value to our national consciousness: the gradual enlargement of understanding about who is included in the category "all men." The abolition of slavery, the extension of voting rights, laws against discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, sexual identity—all these are

profound contributions toward a more humane polity and society.

Is a fetus less worthy of consideration than a specimen of an endangered species—a spotted owl, say? No. Should a fetus have rights? Yes. ♥

## JOHN PAUL II: 25 YEARS AND COUNTING

This is written on November 16, 2003. Twenty-five years ago today, Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II. And all the world—and especially the Christian world—should be deeply grateful that he did.

John Paul II is a magnificent, teaching pope. Indeed, Father Richard John Neuhaus has commented that "fifty years from now they'll call him John Paul the Great." (Catholic New York, October 2003) In his

theological instruction, the pope gives special, extended attention to the dignity of the human person—as revealed in Jesus Christ. His encyclicals—including "Centesimus Annus," ("The Hundredth Year," 1991), "Veritatis Splendor" ("The Splendor of Truth," 1993), "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life," 1995), and "Fides et Ratio" ("Faith and Reason," 1998)—are landmark teaching documents for the Church in and beyond the Roman Catholic world. Solidly grounded in Scripture and the Great Tradition, The

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994)—initiated, developed, and completed under the pope's oversight—is a comprehensive summary of basic Christianity for the whole Church. And his sermons, speeches, and writings are always engaging and instructive. Yes, John Paul II truly teaches the whole Church, in and beyond Rome, and the whole world.

In his international and ecumenical ministry, John Paul II's central concern is to elevate the human person—as one created by God, in the image of God, for fellowship with God. This concern leads the pope to challenge communism and politicized liberation theology, consumerism and autonomous individualism, the culture of death and attacks on the weakest among us. Always and everywhere, there is his constant witness for the protection of the unborn child and mother. Needless to say, when the pope speaks, the Church catholic and the world listen. Though agreement with his word is not universal, still the whole Church and the

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whole world listen. Not surprisingly, Cardinal Avery Dulles, the Fordham University theologian who is also the dean of Roman Catholic theologians in the United States, noted that “[h]e [John Paul II] made himself the number one moral leader of the world. His voice really counts.” (CNY)

In a post-modern world where everything seems open to change, in a popular culture that promotes vice over virtue, in an academic environment where deconstructionism runs amok, and in churches where Biblical-ecumenical doctrine and morals are coming under increasing fire, Pope John Paul II stands as a sure and solid sign of contradiction. He can be relied upon to stand up, to propose the Christian truth about humanity (including the humanity of the unborn child and mother), and to persuade others to see and follow the light of Jesus Christ. The Lifewatch community thanks God for the truthful and graceful ministry of John Paul II over these twenty-five years.

Back in the early nineties, after becoming the editor of Lifewatch, this United Methodist pastor was hesitant to quote from, or refer to, the pope. I must admit that I feared there might be an anti-Catholic backlash, small or large, from a few United Methodists who read the newsletter. But as the years have passed, and as the pope’s faithful words and deeds have come to mean so much to those of us attempting to witness for the Gospel of Life, this editor has freely quoted the pope in these pages. And the backlash that was once feared never materialized. As should have been remembered from the start, United Methodists are a generously ecumenical bunch.

Now, toward the end of John Paul II’s long pontificate, the major media continue their deathwatch. It is almost as if they long for his death. After all, he stands for the Gospel of Life, which is a frontal challenge to many of the deepest convictions of the most prestigious pundits. But with quivering lip, with quietly spoken words, with unsteady hand, this pope, afflicted with Parkinson’s disease, witnesses on. Therefore, we United Methodists would do well to continue our “lifewatch” of his grand ministry.

But in God’s time, John Paul II will die. And

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when he does, we will be able to say that, for years, his words and deeds taught us how to live faithfully for the Gospel of Life, and in his last years, his words and deeds taught us how to die for the Gospel of Life.

During his life and after his death, we United Methodists in the Lifewatch community can and will joyfully thank God for the life, thought, and ministry of John Paul II. (PTS) ♥

## **ON REMAINING UNITED METHODIST**

This summer the General Convention of the Episcopal Church confirmed V. Gene Robinson as the bishop of its New Hampshire diocese. The House of Deputies, made up of clergy and laity, approved this action by a 2-1 margin, and the House of Bishops voted approval 62-43. This was nationally, indeed internationally, newsworthy because Bishop Robinson is open about his homosexual lifestyle and union. The Archbishop of Canterbury responded to this confirmation in the Episcopal Church by calling a special meeting of Anglican primates held in October.

The official confirmation and consecration of Bp. Robinson kicked up discussion of the possibility of schism in the Episcopal Church and beyond. And indeed it should.

This event causes United Methodists to pose similarly unpleasant questions. For example, what if The United Methodist Church changes its current teaching on homosexuality? What will United Methodist clergy, laity, and congregations, dedicated to the apostolic faith of the Church, do if General Conference 2004 changes our teaching on homosexuality? These are questions that must be faced in the Lifewatch community and beyond.

These are questions that are even now faced with regard to other issues. Every so often Lifewatch receives a letter from one who announces that he or she has left The United

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Methodist Church, for another ecclesiastical household, because of discontent over the denomination's long-standing, pro-choice position on abortion. That is understandable. Very understandable. After all, for over thirty years, United Methodism has been officially pro-choice and has allowed denominational institutions to belong to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a pro-abortion political lobby. In addition, our Council of Bishops has remained silent while millions and millions of unborn children have been eliminated and their mothers maimed in countless ways. That is cause for great angst, alarm, and anger.

Several months before the confirmation of Bp. Robinson, "Bonhoeffer"—a new documentary film by Martin Doblmeier on the life, ministry, and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—was released. In a powerful way, this documentary tells the story of Bonhoeffer standing up, on the sturdy foundation of the Church's faith, to oppose the Nazi tide as it corrupted the German churches and degraded German society. (This is a wonderful documentary to show in your church and community. For more information, simply go to [www.bonhoeffer.com](http://www.bonhoeffer.com).)

"Bonhoeffer" is an illustration of the virtue of Christian courage, the courage to oppose what has gone wrong in church and society. For years Bonhoeffer the man found himself drawn, time and again, to engage in the German church struggle and in the Christian witness against the Third Reich. That it to say, Bonhoeffer did not depart a pathologically sickened nation for greener pastures. To be sure, he was tempted to remain in New York and London, but he did not. (Here it should be firmly declared that Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler does not in any way morally legitimate the very few extremists who attack abortion doctors and facilities. The two situations are starkly different.)

It can be argued that the courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a reminder that our relationship with the Church is covenantal, not contractual, and covenantal in a baptismal way. In response to the baptismal grace of God, which incorporates us into the Church, we promise "faithfully to participate in

the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." (And through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are regularly renewed in the baptismal covenant.) Here, please permit bluntness: our promise to be faithful does not depend on The United Methodist Church's faithfulness. If it did, we would be free to depart from United Methodism when the church falls into doctrinal or moral error. Rather, our promise to the God of the covenant demands our faithfulness, no matter what degree of faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) is found in the church.

The covenantal faithfulness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates that the faithful act on behalf of the Gospel, on behalf of Jesus Christ, on behalf of "the least of these" (Matthew 25). Often that means staying put in a difficult situation and being a witness for the truth of the Church's faith. Again, that is based on the covenant into which we have been so graciously and divinely received by baptism.

Some laity, clergy, and congregations will, at various times and for various reasons, decide to depart from The United Methodist Church for another church. Often, their reasoning is understandable. However, this United Methodist pastor believes that faithfulness to Jesus Christ, including the Church (the Body of Jesus Christ), requires the more difficult road:

staying put and offering witness to the Church's faith. (PTS) ♥

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## **POLITICAL HISTORY AND ABORTION**

John T. McGreevy is a historian at Notre Dame. His most recent book is Catholicism and American Freedom (Norton). McGreevy's book is reviewed, at some length, by Richard John Neuhaus in First Things (August/September 2003). The Neuhaus review of the McGreevy book brings out some history that will surprise many.

It is no secret that many Democrats of our day, particularly those on the national stage, are

decidedly pro-choice (or perhaps even pro-abortion). How they reached that position is quite interesting.

First, it should be remembered that most American Catholics became Democrats when, before the Civil War, the Republican Party replaced the Whig Party and received the anti-Catholic American Party into its political fold. That is, since Republicans were understood to be hospitable to anti-Catholics, most Catholics became Democrats. Catholics, in the main, continued to be Democrats for generations.

Then came the 1960s and the political push for liberalized abortion law. Neuhaus picks up the story there: "Against the advocacy for liberalized abortion law in the 1960s, Catholics stood alone. Evangelical Protestants, today so prominent in the pro-life movement, were then on the other side. When the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision came down from the Supreme Court, the Southern Baptist Convention hailed it as a victory for 'religious freedom' against Catholic efforts to 'impose' their doctrine on others...

"It may be hard to remember now, but McGreevy is surely right in saying that 'well into the 1960s the Democratic Party arguably stood to the right of the Republicans on issues of sexual morality.' The party of big business, what came to be called country club Republicanism, stood sniffingly aloof from moral and social questions. But in 1972, the Democrat George McGovern could choose the staunchly pro-life Thomas Eagleton as his running mate, and when Eagleton was forced to drop out, he replaced him with Sargent Shriver, also pro-life. In the early 1970s, the number of prominent anti-abortion Democrats was striking. For example, Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill, and Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who wrote of his 'personal feeling that the legalization of abortion on demand is not in accordance with the value which our civilization places on human life.' Kennedy hoped his generation would be remembered as 'one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a decent living for every family, and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the moment of conception.'

"All of that would soon change, and nobody played a larger part in the change than Jesuit law professor and, later, Massachusetts Congressman Robert Drinan. In the 1960s, Drinan proposed 'that Catholics simply abstain from the abortion debate, since to condone any abortion, even for the health of the mother, meant Catholics would be guilty of regulating, and implicitly approving, an abhorrent

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practice.' It was a disingenuous proposal, and Drinan would later become a reliable supporter of the abortion license, supplying Catholic politicians with a moral cover for their switch to a pro-choice stance." With that moral cover in place, the party of the Democrats welcomed radical feminism into its fold and secured its pro-choice/pro-abortion position.

"In the early 1980s Mario Cuomo, Governor of New York, was probably the most popular Democratic politician in the country, and, with the aid of Fr. Richard McBrien of Notre Dame, he offered an apparently sophisticated argument for the 'personally opposed, but...' position of Catholic politicians..."

Like we said, it is a surprising political history. And this political history played a part in leading Methodism to take a pro-choice turn. For with key Catholic Democrats and the largest Protestant denominations taking the pro-choice side, United Methodism was content to swim with the stream.

But the surprises have not ended. For as American society becomes increasingly pro-life, as evangelical Protestants swing strongly in the pro-life direction, and as Protestants and Catholics are showing forth the fruits of ecumenical labor, The United Methodist Church seems poised for a change of heart and mind on the matter of abortion. At least that is the hope and prayer of Lifewatch. (PTS) ♥

## YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Lifewatch is still in need of a new Administrator. You will recall that this position involves an average of 30 hours per week and pays a small, monthly stipend. If you are interested, please send your resume to: Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth/111 Hodges Street/Morehead City, NC 28557. And thanks for your consideration.

- Because of miscommunication in the publication process, the September 2003 issue of Lifewatch contained a couple of errors. In the article entitled “The Evolution of Our Social Principle on Abortion,” and in the paragraph which begins with “*Birth and Death*,” [6] should immediately follow [5], and [8] should immediately follow [7]. Sorry for the confusion.

- Newscope (10/10/03) and United Methodist News Service report that Bishop Melvin Talbert, a retired United Methodist bishop who is the chief ecumenical officer of our Council of Bishops, will soon become the interim general secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. The Lifewatch community hopes and prays that, in his new assignment, Bp. Talbert might wisely downplay his outspoken pro-choice advocacy. This could and should be done for the sake of ecumenical engagement with evangelical Protestants, the Orthodox, and Roman Catholics. Better yet, perhaps serious moral engagements with these brothers and sisters in Christ might well open Bp. Talbert to the truth of the Gospel of Life. Or so let us hope and pray.

- Now and then Lifewatch has offered a critique of the work of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). For example, the March 2003 issue contained a model resolution which calls for The United Methodist Church to withdraw from RCRC, and the June 2003 issue included an extended review of Holy Abortion? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (Wipf and Stock, 2003) by Michael J. Gorman and Ann Loar Brooks. Though

certainly critical, these critiques have attempted to be careful, precise, and based on reasoned argument and evidence. It is important to note that, to date, neither RCRC nor its advocates have responded to these critiques. Again, in the face of reasoned criticism, RCRC has remained silent. Why? We would not presume to answer that question. But we do know that, in the realm of public discourse and debate, when reasonable critiques are not answered, they stand. That said, we would welcome responses from RCRC and would engage them in a way that would strive to serve the Gospel of Life.

- Again and again, Lifewatch has urged United Methodists toward “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:16) about the Gospel of Life.

That is, neither a ruthless presentation of the truth nor a spineless sentimentality devoid of truth will do. In addressing the matter of life and abortion, we know that both truth and love are required by the God whose Son is Truth, by the Triune God who is love.

That said, preaching and teaching about abortion in The United Methodist Church remains a difficult task. It is difficult, in large part, because we United Methodists often act as if we believe that hurting someone’s feelings is one of the most immoral deeds in the world. With that constraint in mind, we often dance around

and avoid challenging subjects, like life and abortion, in our public presentations and personal conversations. To be sure, it must be granted that no true Christian aims to upset or hurt other people.

However, it might be wise to consider the consequences of consistently avoiding emotional distress to others. In our life together as Christians, this avoidance leads to the avoidance of serious moral conversation. For in avoiding emotional upset, one avoids challenging moral matters altogether. Therefore, feelings rule. Indeed, feelings rule out of order any moral discourse that would cause discomfort.

Putting a premium on emotion is part of the burden of living in a society where the therapeutic

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has triumphed. But should we Christians give in to “the triumph of the therapeutic” (Philip Rieff)? We think not. Rather, we Christians, recognizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ, should concern ourselves with truth and love. Loving truth and truthful love, regarding life and abortion, might cause some emotional distress at times. But by the grace of God, such distress just might be a first step along the way toward conversion to the Gospel of Life.

*“[T]he directors of the Women’s Division...have voted to add their name and their money (\$5,000 to be exact) to ‘Save Women’s Lives: March for Freedom of Choice.’”*

be invited to participate. The report went on: “Mary Gates, a division director who has worked with the Religious Coalition [for] Reproductive Choice [RCRC], told other directors, ‘We do not promote abortions in any way... For those who choose it, we want them

to have safe options.’ The Women’s Division is a member of RCRC.”

First of all, just for the record, be informed that RCRC is a pro-abortion, political lobby. Understanding abortion as a good and then politically working to protect its availability, RCRC promotes abortion. (See Holy Abortion? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, [Wipf and Stock, 2003], by Michael J. Gorman and Ann Loar Brooks.)

Will this pro-choice march, which the Women’s Division of The United Methodist Church has now officially joined, politically support the abortion choice in any and all circumstances—not just when there are “tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion,” as our Book of Discipline (Par. 161J) states? Will this march, unlike The United Methodist Church, support abortion “as an acceptable means of birth control” (BOD)? Will this march, unlike The

- Every once in a while, we are jolted into remembering exactly why Lifewatch exists. The October 31st issue of Newscope carries such a jolt. Under the title “Women’s Division Cosponsors Abortion Rights March,” Newscope, with the help of the United Methodist News Service, reports that the directors of the Women’s Division (of the General Board of Global Ministries) have voted to add their name and their money (\$5,000 to be exact) to “Save Women’s Lives: March for Freedom of Choice.” This will be a pro-choice march on Washington, DC—now with official United Methodist participation—on April 25, 2004. According to Newscope, 20 Women’s Division delegates will attend, and United Methodist Women from around the DC area will

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

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\* Women's Division backs April 25th  
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United Methodist Church, support abortion "as a means of gender selection" (BOD)? Will this march, unlike The United Methodist Church, unqualifiedly support partial-birth abortion (BOD)? We presume that Yes is the answer to all the above questions.

It makes no ecclesiastical, doctrinal, theological, moral, or common sense for the Women's Division to participate in this march on Washington. By participating in this march, the name of The United Methodist Church is politically used, and our admittedly flawed teaching on abortion is totally neglected.

- John Paul II's most recent encyclical, "Ecclesia de Eucharista" ("Church of the Eucharist"), is a grand essay on the grace and glory of Holy Communion. Here are two samples of the encyclical that concern Holy Communion and pro-life ministry: "Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end. And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a 'globalized' world where the weakest, the most powerless, and the poorest appear to have so little hope[?] It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love. Significantly, in their account of the Last Supper, the synoptics recount the

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institution of the eucharist, while the Gospel of John relates, as a way of bringing out its profound meaning, the account of the 'washing of the feet,' in which Jesus appears as the teacher of communion and of service (cf. Jn. 13:1-20).

The apostle Paul, for his part, says that it is 'unworthy' of a Christian community to partake of the Lord's Supper amid division and indifference toward the poor (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-22, 27-34)." (20)

"In the humble signs of bread and wine changed into his body and blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey, and he enables us to become for everyone witnesses of hope. If in the presence of this mystery, reason experiences its limits, the heart, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, clearly sees the response that is demanded and bows low in adoration and unbounded love." (62) ♥

**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."*