

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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God Forgive Us

Editorial by Kathryn Johnson

Federal executions have resumed after a 38-year hiatus. Even before the recent high profile executions of Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza, renewed attention has been given lately to this critical criminal justice issue. Factors for the current focus on capital punishment include: the accelerated use of the death penalty in the U.S., discussions of moratoriums on the death penalty, and editorial commentary questioning the fair imposition of the death penalty.

Since 1980, the United Methodist Church has opposed capital punishment through General Conference action. The Social Principles of the UMC state that we "oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes."

A UM Resolution on "Capital Punishment" pp.576-579, 2000 Book of Resolutions reads: "In spite of a common assumption to the contrary, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" does not give justification for the imposing of the penalty of death. Jesus explicitly repudiated the *lex tallionis* (Matthew 5:38-39), and the Talmud denies its literal meaning and holds that it refers to financial indemnities."

The United Methodist Church General Conference has also expressed its views on this and the broader context of criminal justice reform in the following Resolutions:

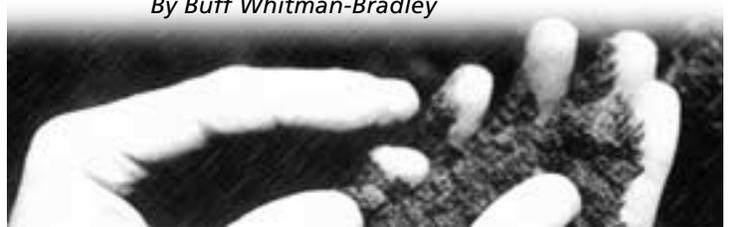
- In Opposition to Capital Punishment, p.594, 2000 Book of Resolutions (BOR)
- Prisons and Criminal Justice, p. 597, 2000 BOR
- Prison Industrial Complex, p. 600, 2000 BOR
- Restorative Justice, p. 603, 2000 BOR
- Seek Moratorium on Capital Punishment, p. 611, 2000 BOR
- Victims of Crime, p.612, 2000 BOR

MFSA urges members to work for the abolition of the Death Penalty and to support the work of the Restorative Justice Ministries Office of the UMC. To do so, contact:

Harmon Wray, Restorative Justice Ministries Office
 General Board of Global Ministries
 1008 19th Avenue South
 Nashville, TN 37212
 (615) 329-2279
hwray@gbgm-umc.org
<http://gbgm-umc.org/restorative-justice/>

A Handful of Wet Earth, for Rudolph Roybal

By Buff Whitman-Bradley



i

The death row visiting room at San Quentin is filled with cages.

Each cage has two doors
 one for visitors and one for the inmate
 In the inmate's door there is a slot about waist-high
 where a guard can reach in
 to remove handcuffs
 and put them back on
 The inmate and his visitors sit facing each other
 in blue plastic chairs
 with a small green plastic table in between them

Yesterday we sat in one of the cages
 with a man who has become our friend
 A late winter storm raged outside
 roiling the waters of San Francisco Bay
 but inside we heard nothing
 except air being blown through the heating vents
 and from cages up and down the line
 the low murmur of voices
 like the conversations of lovers in airports
 or parents putting their children to bed at night
 We spoke as we always do
 about ordinary matters —
 his family and ours, the news in the papers
 the latest lock down
 how he and other inmates on his tier
 sometimes share meals they cook
 with packaged food from the commissary
 and the kind of heating coil used in motel rooms
 to warm coffee

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MFSA Chapter News

MFSA Annual Conference Highlights

by Amy Stapleton,
MFSA Field Organizer

Across the country, chapters of MFSA were visible and vocal in their Annual Conferences. MFSA chapters are now active in 39 Annual Conferences and in every jurisdiction. Even though many chapters were not allowed to have displays or distribute information on behalf of MFSA because of conference rules regarding caucus groups, this did not stop our chapters from witnessing in a wide variety of creative ways. In addition to providing MFSA literature and local chapter information, many chapters hold a yearly gathering at Annual Conference, often hosting speakers, honoring people for their service, and planning for upcoming events, actions and strategies for the next year.

The “We Will Not Be Silent” statement (adopted last year at the Western Jurisdictional Conference) was promoted this year by MFSA chapters in Western Jurisdiction Annual Conferences. In the statement, Western Jurisdiction delegates said “[we] will continue to be in ministry with all God’s children and celebrate the gifts diversity brings...[and] we cannot accept discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender persons and, there-

fore, we will work toward their full participation at all levels in the life of the church and society.” The following MFSA Chapters actively worked to support the “We Will Not Be Silent” statement at Annual Conference this year: Oregon-Idaho, Rocky Mountain, California-Pacific, and California Nevada.

From their efforts, specifically in California-Pacific and Oregon-Idaho, a call has been issued to the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops and Leadership Team “to explore ways of reflecting on the response of the Christian church to diversity, both within the church and in our society.” Such ways might include a special session of the Western Jurisdictional Conference and/or other gatherings of the entire Jurisdictional Conference.

During the Yellowstone Annual Conference, about 30 people gathered for an MFSA organizational meeting and showed great enthusiasm for forming a chapter in their conference. The Yellowstone group is planning a retreat this fall and will be a wonderful asset to the MFSA presence in the West.

The Oregon-Idaho Chapter, through their commitment to farm worker justice, continued to support the boycotting of NORPAC and many chapter members participated in the National Walk for Farmworker Justice. Part of their focus on

economic justice included a keynote address by Lutheran pastor Rev. Alexia Salvatierra of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE). As a chapter, Oregon-Idaho members also provided nourishment for the mind, soul, and body with their fundraiser booth of refreshments and used books.

The California-Nevada Chapter was instrumental in passing a conference resolution opposing the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in its current form. The resolution calls on the U.S. Trade Representative to withdraw from any further negotiations on the proposed FTAA until there has been full public disclosure of its proposed text, open public debate, and a place at the negotiating table for representatives of the diverse sectors of civil society who would be affected by this agreement. The resolution calls churches and church members to become educated about the FTAA, North America Free Trade Agreement, the World Trade Organization, and other trade agreements. By passing this agreement churches are also called to direct action through lobbying State Legislators, U.S. Senators and Representatives, and urging them to oppose both Fast Track and FTAA. Churches are asked to build coalitions with community groups who are organizing in opposition to the FTAA, to make meeting space for such groups available in local churches, and to purchase Fair Trade Coffee and other products as they become available through fair trade networks.

Over the last several months MFSA chapters in the Western Jurisdiction have been meeting and organizing with an aim to work more collaboratively with each other at the jurisdictional level. Chapters in other jurisdictions, including the Northeast and North Central, are discussing similar initiatives.

The Western North Carolina (WNC) MFSA chapter had a wonderful turnout for their Annual Conference luncheon which was also attended by the conference preacher



The Rev. Dr. Philip Wogaman addresses MFSA members in the newly formed Arkansas MFSA Chapter.

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and Bishop Charlene Kammerer. MFSA's presence was an active testament to the theme of that Annual Conference, "Do Justice". The WNC MFSA conference display included educational materials and resources. Water was given away to symbolize the "thirst for righteousness." MFSA members also participated in a "Women in Black" demonstration in solidarity with those facing oppression in Palestine and introduced a petition calling for a moratorium on the death penalty that passed.

Two members of the MFSA chapter in Florida introduced a successful resolution at the Florida Annual Conference concerning capital punishment. At the Annual Conference dinner, the chapter hosted over 100 people and listened to the words of Bishop Llyod Knox who shared with them inspiration to "keep on keeping on and do it in love".

The first-time Annual Conference MFSA dinner in the Tennessee Conference was a success with over 45 people gathering to hear Tom Gray speak about gambling and to discuss with each other how to further develop an MFSA presence in the TN Annual Conference. An MFSA conference resolution against gambling passed with overwhelming support.

On Memorial Day evening, the Arkansas MFSA Chapter hosted the Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Philip Wogaman of Washington, DC. Dr. Wogaman, visiting Little Rock for a series of lectures entitled "Christian Ethics and Social Justice", was a guest of Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church and their Forum Series of adult studies. Dr. Wogaman told stories about the rich history of MFSA from its beginning to the present and commented on events at last year's General Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Wogaman concluded the evening by answering questions from the group and discussing issues confronting the UMC and MFSA and the work to be done. The newly formed Arkansas MFSA Chapter now has over 100 persons involved from across the state.

The Elimination of Poverty

About half of the US population blames poor people for their poverty and the other half says that poverty is beyond poor people's control, according to a recent NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll. When asked whether welfare recipients really need help from the government, the poll respondents were likewise evenly split. (The poll shows that low income Americans are more likely to believe that welfare recipients truly do need government assistance.)

Of those who know about the 1996 welfare reform legislation, 61 percent think that this law is working well, primarily because it requires people to go to work. Yet, at the same time, 73 percent know that those who have left the welfare rolls are still poor.

Three out of five Americans are willing to pay higher taxes to fund government programs that would help people get out of poverty.

It is evident that public policies affecting poor people are often driven by a point of view, an ideology, which can lead to an oversimplification of complex issues. A predisposition to blame poor people for their poverty may prevent a more nuanced analysis. For example, some people will read Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickled and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* (Henry Holt & Co., 2001) with deep empathy. Others will find her experiment flawed in many ways.

Supporters of welfare reform often blame poverty on moral failure. This makes no sense to us at the Employment Project. After years of researching the role of employment in our economy we firmly believe that most poor people are victims of economic circumstances beyond their control.

Wealth distribution based on employment is innately unjust. Millions of full-time, long-term workers are still impoverished. There are countless skilled and willing workers who can't find lucrative employment. Jobs are not the key to economic justice.

The elimination of poverty will depend on policy initiatives: a fair minimum wage, affordable health care, subsidized day car and transportation, better schooling and job-training programs; and direct payments for people who are not in an income-producing job, including parents of young children.

Enacting such programs depends on a change of attitude—a change of theological proportions: The creation is for the common use of all creatures and not to be unevenly appropriated according to some arbitrary human criteria such as "deserving" and "undeserving."

Changing attitudes towards poverty will contribute mightily to its elimination.

This article is reprinted with permission from the June 2001 issue of *No More Jobs*, the newsletter of the Employment Project, www.nomorejobs.org.

To learn about and become involved in initiatives for Economic Justice being taken by MFSA, order the Priority Action Guide (\$10 plus \$2 shipping and handling) from the National MFSA Office at 212 East Capitol St., NE, Washington, DC 20003. Phone: 202-546-8806. Web: www.mfsaweb.org

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A Handful of Wet Earth, for Rudolph Roybal *continued from page 5*

He hadn't gone out onto the yard all week he told us
because of the rains
The yard for death row inmates is on the roof of North Seg
and on dry days he goes out there
to walk or run laps
Sometimes he stands on a table to look over the wall
at the top of Mt. Tamalpais
near where we live
"I miss dirt," he said
"I haven't touched dirt in eleven years."

At the end of the visit
we asked a guard to take a Polaroid picture of us
through the bars
Then, handcuffs back on, our friend was taken away
and we were let out of the cage and cleared to leave
The remote control door to the visiting room
slammed shut behind us with a heavy, metallic finality
and we walked out into the rain

ii

Today there was a break in the weather
One by one the late winter storms that had soaked us all week
exhausted themselves and drifted away
and I woke up to a cloudless morning

In the back yard I added seed to the bird feeder
and stood and listened to the quiet, irregular
drip . . . drip drip . . .
from the branches of the fig tree
as juncos and finches and chickadees
took quick nervous turns at the feeder
The air was chilly and tasted like leftover rain

After breakfast now I walk up
into the heavily forested hills near our house
The creeks are rushing
and the trails are slippery with mud
I pause now and then to warm myself
in small bright patches
where sunlight has broken through the dense foliage overhead

Higher up on the trail
I come to a partial clearing
where a stream, alive with light, spills and tumbles
down a steep, rocky gully
I find a dry place to sit
on a boulder at the water's edge
and reach down to scoop up a handful of wet earth
and hold it tightly in my hand

iii

I close my eyes and this picture comes to me:

I am looking down from some high place
onto an empty beach where the Pacific
like a great blue foaming horse
gallops up and down the white sand

Two people appear on the beach
They are surprised to be there
and dazzled by the sunlight
They shield their eyes with their hands
as they gaze out past the breaking waves
at the vast prairie of ocean
between the shore and the horizon
They do not look at each other
He is a murderer
and she is a murdered woman

They begin walking toward the water
Their steps are slow and tentative
and they hold themselves stiffly
as they make their way down the sloping sand
They step into the surf
and the water rises around them

And suddenly it is as if their bodies were filled with birds —
their arms fly about wildly
they leap and splash and dive
and see each other at last
and begin to play together like two dolphins
throwing their bodies into the surf
riding the curling waves
tumbling through the foam headlong toward the shore
swimming out again under the breakers
and shooting up out of the water
gasping for breath and laughing
and looking into each other's eyes

And now there are more on the beach
murderers and the murdered
all stunned by the light
all stumbling down the sand
The shooters and the ones gunned down
The stabbers and the knifed
The stranglers and the asphyxiated
The batterers and the broken

Wave after wave they come
the quick and the dead
Out of prisons and out of graves
Out of shacks and tenements
Out of tidy bungalows in the suburbs
and county hospitals
and mansions on manicured hillsides
Out of grubby little offices and penthouse boardrooms
Out of bars and morgues and cathedrals

The tortured and the torturers
The executed and the executioners
The death squads and the disappeared
The ones blown to bits and the ones who dropped the bombs
and hurled the grenades
and fired the cannons
and aimed the missiles
and made the policies
and prayed for victory

The ones who starved
and the ones who got fat
The ones worked to death
and the ones who counted the money
The ones who died of silence
and the ones who said nothing

We are all in the water now
The sea is filled with us
The surf crashes over us again and again
scrubbing away the grime and the old dead skin
The new skin underneath
glistens like apples in the rain
Salt spray and tears shine on our cheeks
Tenderly we touch each other's faces
Tenderly we say each other's names

iv

I open my eyes
and then I open my hand
to let the dirt fall into the stream

The day has grown warm and as I stand up
I take off my heavy shirt and tie it around my waist
I brush the last few crumbs of soil off my fingers
pick up a buckeye to carry in my pocket
and head back down the trail toward home

Buff Whitman-Bradley is a writer and early-childhood educator. Cindy and he are training to become family mediators and are volunteering with the Prison Activist Resource Center in Oakland. They visit weekly with Rudolph at San Quentin and with a woman in the federal correction center in Dublin, CA. They are members of San Rafael's First United Methodist EarthChurch and drafted the annual conference resolution, "Prisons and Restorative Justice."

"Oxbow " becomes "Protestant Justice Action"

For two years, MFSA has been in conversation with representatives from a number of similar networks of Christian activists in other denominations including: Christians for Justice Action in the UCC, Disciples Justice Action Network in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Witherspoon Society in the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Human Relations Association, the Baptist Peace Fellowship and individuals within the Episcopal Church. The gatherings of this group have been called, "Oxbow," a term that describes the new channel carved into a stream when it is made to change direction.

All of the groups and individuals related to Oxbow are connected to their denominations, but like MFSA, are unofficial. All are protestant and multi-issue, finding faith connected to life both socially and politically. All are unapologetic and unrepentant about being liberal.

As activists motivated by our faith, the group has agreed that mainstream Protestantism continually needs to risk exploring more progressive channels. We find the oxbow metaphor apt as it suggests the way in which new paths are formed when an obstruction is placed in a stream.

The group has found, however, that each time we address a public issue or a public official we need to explain what "Oxbow" means. Thus at our February meeting in Washington, DC, Oxbow became Protestant Justice Action (PJA). The hope is the Protestant Justice Action (PJA) will more quickly and concisely convey the purpose of the group.

Protestant Justice Action will meet again in early September in Chicago and continue to share information, ideas and resources as we seek to more effectively bring a progressive voice to our denominations.

STAFF TRANSITIONS

Josh Zmroczek joins the MFSA staff this month as the new Office Manager. Having graduated in May with a B.A. in Communications from Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, Josh brings a variety of valuable skills with him to MFSA. His long-term goals include working in communications in the non-profit sector.

Having grown up a Catholic, Josh is currently attending Dumbarton UMC in Washington, DC. He is quickly learning the structure and history of the UMC and becoming familiar with the noble history of the MFSA. "I'm interested in working for organizations that make a difference in the world," says Josh. We think MFSA will be a good fit.



New office manager Josh Zmroczek (pronounced Zim-ROW-check) joins the MFSA staff. Departing office manager, Laura Folkwein (r) will begin seminary in the fall at Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

BECOME PART OF THIS EXCITING MOVEMENT AT THE HEART OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH!

Are you a member of MFSA? If not, now is the time to join! Working primarily through the ministries of the United Methodist Church, MFSA supports and augments peace and justice ministries at the local, conference and national levels. As an independent organization, we call our church to expand its understanding and embodiment of the radical call of the Gospel to be the inclusive, justice-seeking, risk-taking Body of Christ.

MFSA has chapters in annual conferences throughout the country. Becoming a member of MFSA means you will be joining other activists who care about justice issues and actively work to make a difference.

At the annual conference level, chapters publish newsletters, work cooperatively with Boards of Church and Society and other conference agencies, introduce legislation at annual conference sessions, sponsor seminaries and hold other events to inform, educate and motivate people to take action for justice. **JOIN MFSA!**

To join MFSA send the following form to the national office (address just below):

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Annual Conference: _____

Annual National Membership dues are \$35/individual, \$53/family and \$20 or less/low income and student. If you are in a conference with a local chapter you will receive information from the chapter soon.



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