

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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The Future of the UMC: What's At Stake For Women?

by Kathryn Johnson, Editor

If the conservative “renewal movements” within the United Methodist Church accomplish the goals they have set for themselves, the impact on women in the UMC will be devastating.

Among the goals are:

- Eliminating the General Board of Church and Society;
- Eliminating the Commission on the Status and Role of Women;
- Drastically changing the direction of the General Board of Global Ministries, particularly the Women’s Division;
- A return to “classical Christianity as stated in the historic ecumenical creeds”;
- Limiting UM articulation of the trinity to “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” and opposing feminine references to God (e.g. God “giving birth” to creation); and
- Withdrawing UM support for a

woman’s right to choose in regard to her reproductive health, specifically withdrawing from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

I wish I could say the goals as stated here are exaggerated, or that the groups promoting them are so marginal as to be ignored. In fact, each of the above goals is taken directly from documents, United Methodist News Service articles and/or the web pages of the Institute for Religion and Democracy (and its UM program, UMAction), RENEW (a network of evangelical UM women) and the Good News Movement.

As to the strength of these movements, General Conference 2000 served as a wake up call for many people who have assumed that the UMC will always allow for a diversity of theological opinion and expression as we grow in our understanding of God and God’s grace.

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RENEW Wants ‘Reform’ for Women’s Division

by United Methodist News Service

Dec. 10, 2001 - A group of evangelical United Methodist women is calling for a “process of reform” for the Women’s Division of the churchwide Board of Global Ministries, after the unit’s directors passed a resolution in October against the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan.

The call by the 5,000-member RENEW Network (a Resourcing, Enabling Network for Evangelical Women) was backed by the executive committee of Good News, an unofficial evangelical caucus within the denomination, at its Nov. 1-2 meeting. The Rev. James Heindinger, Good News president, said that while the mission work by local units of United Methodist Women (UMW) was appreciated by most pastors, concern continues over the “radical feminist, pro-abortion, virulently anti-American, anti-evangelical, pro-homosexual attitude exhibited by the Women’s Division and its leadership in New York.”

As reported by United Methodist News Service on Oct. 23 (UMNS story #487), directors of the Women’s Division, the UMW’s administrative body, voted to urge President Bush to use diplomatic means, rather than the bombing of Afghanistan, to bring to justice those responsible for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. “The terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11 have deeply affected us as individuals, as a nation and as a people of faith,” the resolution said. “Our prayers and concern go out to the families of many faiths and many countries affected by the tragedy.

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Poverty and Security: Nobel Laureats Speak Out

The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed. Of these poor and disenfranchised, the majority live a marginal

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existence in equatorial climates. Global warming, not of their making but originating with the wealthy few, will affect their fragile ecologies most. Their situation will be desperate and manifestly unjust.

It cannot be expected, therefore, that in all cases they will be content to await the beneficence of the rich. If then we permit the devastating power of modern weaponry to spread through this combustible human landscape, we invite a conflagration that can engulf both rich and poor. The only hope for the future lies in co-operative international action, legitimized by democracy.

It is time to turn our backs on the unilateral search for security, in which we seek to shelter behind walls. Instead, we must persist in the quest for united action to counter both global warming and a weaponized world.

These twin goals will constitute vital components of stability as we move toward the wider degree of social justice that alone gives hope of peace. Some of the needed legal instruments are already at hand, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Convention on Climate Change, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. As concerned citizens, we urge all governments to com-

mit to these goals that constitute steps on the way to replacement of war by law.

To survive in the world we have transformed, we must learn to think in a new way. As never before, the future of each depends on the good of all.

Signed by 100 Nobel laureates including the following Peace Prize winners:

Oscar Arias Sanchez, 1987
Bishop Carlos F.X. Belo, 1996
His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 1989
Mikhail S. Gorbachev, 1990
Joseph Rotblat, 1995
Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, 1984

*Source: Toronto Globe and Mail
December 7, 2001 ❖*

Wanted: 2002 New MFSA Members in 2002

*By Amy Stapleton
MFSA Field Organizer*

One of my first experiences with MFSA was hearing about the prophetic witness that MFSA has made throughout history. I remember reading about the early part of the century when MFSA (then called the Methodist Federation for Social Service) advocated for workers rights, including an eight-hour work-day. As I read about the work of early field organizer Grace Scribner, I remember thinking to myself how very grateful I am to be a part of a group that has

challenged the church and society in so many ways for so many years. I still feel grateful for MFSA and believe, now more than ever, that an independent voice for progressive United Methodists is needed.

MFSA has had an amazing impact on the church with relatively few members. The current membership stands at just over 2000 with another 2000 or so on the mailing list. The quality and commitment of our current members is as strong as ever. Roughly 20% of MFSA members have been with us for over 10 years. There are chapters in 38 Annual Conferences and more chapters are organizing.

But the times calls for us to do more. MFSA has made a commitment to increase our strength – our visibility, our presence and our voice – at this critical time in the history of the church and the nation. In order to do so it is imperative that the membership base of MFSA increase several-fold. In order to begin this growth we have made a commitment to increase the membership of MFSA by 2002 members in the year 2002.

In order for this to happen – for MFSA to grow in its ability to “help the church be the church” we need your help in the coming year.

If you are already a member of MFSA we need you invite others to join. The national office will help by providing resources to your chapters in the coming months on ways to increase membership. Tell the MFSA story and what the organization has meant to you. Begin to think of people in your local congregations, in your women's circle, on the prayer chain, in your Sunday school class, on “Peace with Justice” and “Religion and Race” conference committees. Consider also people you know who are involved with none of these groups because they are not finding community in the United Methodist Church and are not hopeful about its future. Tell them all about MFSA and invite them to be a part of this community, this hope for the church.

For those of you who are not already members of MFSA, turn to the last page of this newsletter and sign on. Then refer to the last paragraph and invite others to join you!

Those of you reading this newsletter are MFSA's best witnesses. “2002 in 2002” can become a reality with your help, your prayers and support. ❖

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RENEW WANTS REFORM

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“As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to choose life over death (Deut. 30:19). We are also called to love our enemies and those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). As United Methodist Women, we are challenged to commit ourselves through prayer, study and action to continue the search for peace with justice.”

The directors encouraged UMW members to reach out to those of other faiths, become educated on the beliefs of Islam, work to prevent racial profiling and acts of harassment or violence directed at Muslims, Arabs and others, and urge President Bush to press for peace in the Middle East. In their Dec. 6 news release, RENEW and Good News expressed dismay over that resolution on terrorist attacks, along with the Women’s Division’s concerns over the Anti-Terrorism Act then being considered in Congress.

Those concerns, which have been raised by various civil liberties groups, include the targeting of immigrants, the expanded use of wiretaps and a broader authority to obtain and use search warrants. RENEW also cited as “appalling” what it considered to be anti-American statements or comments made during the division’s October meeting.

Faye Short, RENEW’s president, mailed a letter about the group’s concerns to each division director in November, along with a survey asking them to indicate whether or not they, as individuals, endorsed the division positions.

Besides items relating to Afghanistan and patriotism, RENEW objected to the division granting continued official status to a UMW district unit in the California-Nevada Annual (regional) Conference that has named itself the “Sophia Circle” and to inviting the Rev. Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran and professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, to speak at the Women’s Assembly next April.

The objections to both Lundblad and the Sophia Circle’s name date back to a controversial 1993 ecumenical meeting called the Re-imagining Conference and its 1998 follow-up meeting. Conservative renewal groups from several mainline denominations, including Good News, formally denounced the conference for “idolatrous worship, false teaching and syncretism.”

Particularly at issue were prayers offered to Sophia (Wisdom) and other feminine images of deity.

In a written response to Short’s letter, Joyce Sohl, chief executive of the Women’s Division, noted that the resolution on terrorist attacks “is in line” with several churchwide statements found in the 2000 United Methodist Book of Resolutions. The church’s Social Principles, she pointed out, also state: “We believe war is incompatible with the teaching and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as a usual instrument of national foreign policy and insist that the first moral duty of all nations is to resolve by peaceful means every dispute that arises between or among them.”

Sohl also disputed charges of anti-Americanism and said that prayers for troops, victims, families, governments and leaders were offered at various points during the meeting.

Regarding the Sophia Circle, she said that UMW units are allowed to choose their own names and the variety of program materials that they use. “The Women’s Division was asked by RENEW to declare them not a unit of the organization,” she added. “The division refused to do this and simply said they were a part of the organization.”

Sohl defended the choice of Lundblad, who spoke at the Re-imagining conferences, as a Bible study leader at the upcoming Women’s Assembly and noted that she has been one of the Lutheran preachers on the “Protestant Hour” radio program since 1983.

In their press release, Good News and RENEW said they are taking just the initial steps “in what will be a protracted campaign for renewal and reform within the Women’s Division.” The call for accountability is necessary, the two organizations say, because of the division’s insensitivity “toward conservative theological beliefs and lack of respect for the diversity of social and political positions” among women in the church.

Sohl said the division is accountable to official bodies of the church, including General Conference, the denomination’s top legislative body, in numerous ways.

“The issue is that RENEW would like all funding and program to be in line with their theology and world view,” she said.

UM News Service News

Linda Bloom (212) 870-3803



From Sandra Olewine in Palestine

Dear Friends,

Walking to the office in Bethlehem this morning, I ran into a friend in the Madbassah. We talked a long while about the situation in the last week. At one point Wa’el said, “It is as if the situation is turned on its head. The ones who are occupied are the terrorists and the ones carrying out the occupation are the victims. Has everyone forgotten that there has been a 34 year occupation? Has everyone forgotten that for the last 15 months Palestinians have been unable to work, have had more of their land confiscated, have lived under siege, have had their homes shelled, have had their children killed? Why do people not understand it is these things which give rise to young people who are willing to blow themselves up?”

Such cries can be heard again and again in conversations with Palestinians and some Israelis.

Obviously, the cycles of violence here cannot just be attributed to cause & effect. Humans have the ability to choose to stop such cycles by finding other means to respond to the violence and terror of the other. But, we also must be willing to look at the root cause of the cycles. And as has been said over and over and over again, the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem certainly gives rise to the overwhelming majority of the violence on both sides.

..... unless we deal with the root causes of the violence here, more and more lives will be lost. With every assassination in Palestinian areas, with every suicide bomb in Israeli cities and with the drop of every 1,000 ton bomb from F-16s on Palestinian cities, the hope of a just peace, a secure future and a reconciled people will remain only a prophetic dream.

May God gives us the courage to continue to work for the dignity and integrity of all.

Rev. Sandra Olewine
United Methodist Liaison
Jerusalem



During 2001 and 2002, MFSA leaders are holding leadership gatherings in each jurisdiction to organize and develop strategies for General Conference 2004. Pictured above are four of the participants in a September 28-29 Northeast Jurisdictional meeting along with MFSA field organizer Amy Stapleton (r). During the meeting these and other participants took time off to attend a peace rally sponsored by groups concerned about U.S. actions in Afghanistan.

AT STAKE FOR WOMEN

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As this newsletter goes to press, over 1,000 clergywomen are traveling from around the country and beyond to attend the 2002 International United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation in San Diego. The invitation to those attending the consultation will be to "enter a time of Sabbath...to rest in God." I pray that the women gathered in San Diego will find themselves refreshed and strengthened through their experience. Further, I pray that they, and other clergy and laywomen across the church, will use the gift of strength and clarity received through Sabbath experiences to claim the church for the God of love, inclusion and diversity. There is too much at stake to do otherwise. ❖

THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IS AT STAKE TAKE ACTION BECOME PART OF MFSA TODAY!

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 working 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 seminars; and hold other events to inform, educate and motivate people to take action for justice.

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 including a request for a small chapter donation.

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