

Social Questions Bulletin

Seeking Global Justice through the United Methodist Church

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Voices of Faith

Excitement is growing as the **Voices of Faith** Conference draws near. If you have not yet registered for this event, taking place in Atlanta on April 25-26, 2003, now is the time to do so. The deadline for early registration has been extended until March 30th due to the fact that information about the conference is just now reaching some areas of the country. Not to worry if you've paid the higher registration fee; we'll refund the difference.

The list of people providing leadership for both plenary sessions and workshops includes some of the most creative leaders in our denomination. (see page three)

A time and place to...

- connect with other Progressive Christians,
- ask questions that matter to you,
- have your thinking challenged,
- engage in Creative worship, and
- plan together to make a difference in the life of the church.

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Originally planned to focus entirely on celebration and exploration of what it means to be progressive Christians at this point in history, we have received several comments and requests to provide some time to strategize. Thus, we have adjusted the schedule to provide time to talk about how we will work together to provide a strong progressive witness at General Conference 2004 in Pittsburgh.

Don't miss this exciting event! ❖

Who Will Decide? The Looming Battle Over Doctrine in the UMC

By the Rev. Scott Campbell

In September of 2002, a group of theologians related to seven denominations in North America met in Dallas to draft a letter to "confessing Christians." The letter sought to respond to three questions, the most basic of which was why confessing Christians should remain in their churches.

Gospel and administer the sacraments.

In the name of reclaiming doctrinal integrity, the conference advanced a number of petitions for General Conference 2004, many of which are designed to force others to conform to what the proponents call "classical Christianity."

...the center of Methodism has never been primarily doctrinal, but has always involved spreading the good news of God's gracious acts in Jesus Christ across the earth. What we are seeing on the right is almost a deification of doctrine.

The most substantive response to that question was phrased as follows: "...ultimately the reason we cannot and must not leave our denominations is that the Gospel can still be freely proclaimed in them and the sacraments administered without hindrance."

This measure has been the test of Christian conscience down through the ages and the "confessing theologians" did well to employ such a standard. Their letter was presented the following month to a group of Christians meeting in Indianapolis under the banner "Confessing the Faith." United Methodist groups participating in and providing leadership at the conference included *Good News*, the *Confessing Movement* and the *RENEW Women's Network*.

A significant portion of the conference was dedicated to working on the legislative agenda for General Conference 2004. It is ironic that, in spite of the counsel from the leading "confessing theologians", much of the substance of the Indianapolis gathering dealt with *limiting* the freedom of other Christians to freely proclaim the

The *Good News* legislative agenda seeks to mandate fidelity on the part of clergy, faculty at UM institutions, and Board and Agency personnel to an undefined set of theological propositions that comprise their notion of "classical Christianity." While not defined in the documents emanating from the **Confessing The Faith** Conference, "classical Christianity" has been defined elsewhere in the writing of these groups as the doctrinal standards identified in *The Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. These would likely include The Articles of Religion (Methodist), the Confession of Faith (EUB) and the General Rules.

It is curious that this one articulation of doctrine has been elevated to such heights. Certainly our tradition as Christians includes different strands of doctrine that might be called classical. And articulations of doctrine are at best a snapshot of the thinking, or perhaps the thoughts of the most persuasive arguer, at a given time in history.

From the earliest days of the church, there

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A Call for Peace, Justice, Openness and Compassion

Draft MFSA GC 2004 Advocacy Agenda

MFSA leaders are once again calling the church to ministries of justice and peace through the articulation of a legislative agenda for General Conference 2004. While still in draft form, this agenda is shared below so that MFSA members and other interested parties might know the priorities being set by MFSA for General Conference. This agenda will continue to be refined, and specific resolutions drafted, to be approved at the April 24th MFSA Board of Directors meeting in Atlanta.

1. **AFFIRM** the openness of our Wesleyan tradition

- Affirm our Wesleyan heritage of theological openness and inquiry as we seek always to deepen our discipleship as faithful Christians.
- Celebrate the freedom of United Methodist pulpits and freedom of thought and expression in our universities and seminaries.
- Oppose all efforts to move the church toward becoming rigid in doctrine and creeds.

2. **CLAIM** the example of Christ's non-violent love

- Call on the UMC to lead in the development of non-violent alternatives to conflict in our personal lives, our communities, our nation and our world.
- Call for the following change in Para. 165, Section C of the UMC Book of Discipline:
— Delete "We therefore reject war as a usual instrument of national foreign policy ..."
— Add in its place "We therefore reject war as an instrument of national foreign policy ..."
• Call on the UMC to oppose current U.S. policy of "preemptive first strike against potential enemies."
• Support efforts of those calling for a renewed emphasis on, and re-release of, the Bishops' document, "In Defense of Creation."

3. **PROMOTE** racial and interfaith justice and reconciliation

Work with the Commission on Religion and Race and the Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns to support their efforts, focusing particularly on: immigration, racial profiling, urging action on offensive sports mascots at the General Conference level, the situation of Muslim Americans, understanding of the gifts of multi-racialism and multiculturalism.

4. **FOLLOW** Jesus in demanding justice for those who are most vulnerable, particularly persons who are poor

- Support the excellent work of the Women's Division as one of the church's agencies that has done this most consistently – especially in ministries reaching out to women and children.
- Promote the Bishop's initiative on Children and Poverty, particularly in addressing the systemic causes of poverty.
- Work with individuals and groups within the UMC seeking justice by addressing issues related to a living wage, pension and health care for those working within the church and in the larger society.

5. **MANIFEST** God's hospitality to all persons

A. Sexual Orientation

- Admit the truth before God and ourselves: concerned, committed Christians within the UMC are not of one opinion about issues related to sexual orientation. Call for the following change in the Social Principles:
— Delete, "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all."
— Add in its place, "Differences of opinion regarding sexual orientation continue to deeply divide the church. We stand before God admitting that we have thus far been unable to reach common ground. As we continue to discern God's will together, we are united in declaring our understanding that God's grace is available to all."

B. Understanding and ministry with transgendered persons

- Call for the General Conference to appoint a study commission, similar to that previously arranged to study homosexuality. The Commission, to be appointed by the Council of Bishops, would be charged with:
 1. seeking to better understand the experience and reality of transgendered persons and their families.
 2. recommending means for increasing understanding of the transgendered reality for members of our churches.
 3. identifying ways to be in ministry with and for transgendered persons.
 4. addressing concerns of those who believe transgendered persons should not hold positions of leadership within the UMC
 5. reporting back to the 2008 General Conference.

6. **PRESERVE** and/or return to annual conference structures that ensure ministries of justice and peace

- Call for the General Conference to ensure that any restructuring efforts at the Annual Conference levels maintain structures that specifically support and promote peace and justice ministries.

Rationale: Restructuring within many Annual Conferences has had a negative impact on ministries of peace and justice in recent years. The elimination of Conference Boards of Church and Society, Commissions on Religion and Race and on the Status and Role of Women, in many annual conferences, for example, has led to a decrease in peace and justice ministries.

7. **WORK** for a fully participatory church where all voices are heard

- Support the current formula for assigning members to the General Boards and Agencies.

Rationale: Proposals are afoot to move to a formula for assigning members to the General Boards and Agencies based solely on numbers of members in jurisdictions. This is unjust. Paying attention to racial,

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The deadline for early registration has been
EXTENDED to March 30th!

April 25-26, 2003

Atlanta, GA

Voices of Faith

New Life in the Christian Church

A Conference for Progressive United Methodists

Save \$30 by registering for the **Voices of Faith** conference in Atlanta by March 30th. This exciting gathering will bring together progressive United Methodists from around the country to connect with other Progressive Christians, ask questions that matter, challenge one another's thinking, worship creatively and plan together to make a difference in the life of the church and the world!.

Plenary Speakers:



John Cobb Minerva Carcano Traci West Hall Taussig

Worship

Leaders:



Mark Miller

Barbara Lundblatt

Saturday Evening Program:

"Daring to Let the Holy Spirit Move Us"

a celebration of diversity

with a banquet dinner, speaker Dr. Hyun Kyung

and creative dancer Melvin Miller



**Save \$30 by registering before
March 30th!!!!**

To download a registration form and to get
additional conference information visit:

www.mfsaweb.org/voicesoffaith.html or
call MFSa at 202-546-8806.

Workshops:

Beyond Denominationalism— Rev. Susan Blackburn Heath

**The Church at a Crossroads: Is it Time to Shake Off the
Dust?** Rev. Greg Dell

Organizing Progressive Laity

Ms. Marilyn Outslay and Ms. Sally Ernst

Journalism: Progressive Voices in Print — Rev. Steve Swecker

Race/Status/Culture/Language & Politics Matters

Rev. Gil Caldwell and panel

New Directions in Theological Education — Dr. Phil Amerson

New Frontiers : The "T" in GLBT — Ms. Ann Thompson Cook

"Just Do It" — Organizing Regionally — Rev. Amy DeLong

Prophetic Preaching — Rev. Mary Jo Cartledgehayes

Persons with Disabilities Creating Community

Dr. Kathy Black

Mobilizing Progressive Students — Rev. Eric Stone

Ecological Stewardship as an Expression of Faith

Rev. Sharon Del Gado

Manifestations of the Spirit in Ecumenical Endeavors

Dr. Jan Love

**Glimpses of the Kingdom — Churches and Communities Alive
with the Spirit** - Ms. Lottie Sneed

Reclaiming Non-Violence — Dr. Mubarak Awad

UM Polity: Friend or Foe for Progressive Christians? -

Rev. Thomas Frank

Restorative Justice - Rev. Janet Wolf

Scripture — What's a 21st Century Christian to do? -

Ms. Lydia Le Bron

Take Action for Peace: Encircle the U.S. State Department With Prayer

Saturday March 1, 2003 -- 11: 30 AM - 1:00 PM

Come join other persons of faith to encircle the U.S. State Department with prayers for peace. Send a clear message to America and the world that there is substantial opposition to a war in Iraq, particularly among millions of Americans who identify themselves as persons of faith. This event is sponsored by an African American led, multi-racial ecumenical coalition of faith leaders that includes MFSA.

Background

Since November of last year, the coalition, along with the Center for Constitutional Rights, has been working together to explore ways and means of promoting justice and peace over violence and war motivated by the Bush administration's determination to launch a "pre-emptive strike" to achieve a "regime change" in Iraq.

The ultimate goal of the coalition has been

to undertake a Pilgrimage for Peace to Iraq to meet with faith leaders in that country and to issue a moral religious appeal to all parties to refrain from any action that would precipitate war. Though the group views itself as a part of an overall movement among progressive faith leaders who oppose the war, it is unique in that African American pastors have come forward to assume leadership of this initiative. Rev. Herbert Daughtry, founder of the National Black United Front, former Congressman Walter Fauntroy, President of the National Black Leadership Roundtable, Imam Madhi Bray, President of the MAS Freedom Foundation, and Rev. John Mendez, former Chairman of the Racial Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches are the African American faith leaders that have been at the core of the leadership of the coalition. Dr. James Forbes, Senior Pastor of the Riverside Church and Rev. Tyrone Pitts, Gen-

eral Secretary, Progressive National Baptist Convention, have also blessed this effort.

These faith leaders have been joined by Rev. Dr. James Fitzgerald, Minister for Mission and Social Justice, The Riverside Church, Rev. Kathryn Johnson, Director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action and Rev. Peter Laarman, Pastor of the Judson Memorial United Methodist Church in forging a multi-racial ecumenical coalition.

While working out the timing and logistics of the proposed Pilgrimage to Iraq, the coalition, in whole or part, has participated in a broad range of activities in hopes of averting war. A powerful ecumenical Prayer Service hosted by The Riverside Church on December 8th and a Prayer Vigil at the State Department January 29th are the two activities which the coalition has sponsored. However, faith leaders in the

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MFSA Endorses April 1st Civil Rights March on Washington to Defend Affirmative Action

Students, youth, civil rights, labor, community, religious and women's organizations will march on Washington on April 1, 2003 in defense of affirmative action and integration, and to save Brown v. Board of Education. This march will coincide with the U.S. Supreme Court hearings on the two University of Michigan affirmative action cases.

At a time in our history when civil rights are being eroded at an alarming rate, MFSA endorses this march and encourages others to do the same.

United for Equality and Affirmative Action (UEAA), the umbrella organization for the student defendants in the University of Michigan Law School affirmative action case, Grutter v. Bollinger, and the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action & Integration, and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), are heading up the mobilization efforts.

A partial list of those endorsing the march includes:

Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow/PUSH

Coalition, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Detroit NAACP, the National Organization for Women (NOW), the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Congressman John Conyers, Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, the Alliance of Black Student Professionals, the Organization of Chinese Americans, the Michigan AFL-CIO, the United Church of Christ, the Progressive National Baptist Convention and many other student, civil rights and labor organizations have signed on to build the march (See UEAA web site for full list of endorsing organizations).

Students and youth from over 100 university and college campuses and high schools are currently organizing buses for this national civil rights march and rally at the Supreme Court.

These organizations and leaders have pledged to mobilize thousands of people to Washington on April 1 in order to demonstrate to the Supreme Court the broad and deep majority support for affirma-

tive action programs in this nation.

The right wing attack on affirmative action has led to what the organizers of the April 1st march are calling "the New Civil Rights Movement." They are confident that the April 1st march will demonstrate the strength and determination of the new student and youth-led civil rights movement.

Suggested Actions:

- Plan to attend the April 1st March
- Inform people in your church and the larger community about what's at stake.
- Sponsor young people from your church to attend the march.
- Make a donation to UEAALDF. All donations are tax-deductible. Checks should be written to UEAALDF and sent to UEAALDF, P.O. Box 24462, Kensington Station, Detroit, MI 48224.

For more information see the UEAA web site at: www.ueaa.net Or contact Tania Kappner or Mark Airgood at 510-502-9128 ❖

WOW2003

August 14-17, 2003

University of Pennsylvania - Philadelphia

WOW2003 will be the largest ever gathering of Canadian and U.S. Christians – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and heterosexual – who support the full participation of LGBT persons in congregations and ministries. From diverse faith traditions, racial ethnic and cultural backgrounds, WOW advocates justice, equality and inclusion of all people. WOW2003 will celebrate and mobilize a broad, diverse and powerful grassroots Christian movement to fulfill God's vision for a welcoming community. To learn more, contact WOW2003, PMB #111; 5250 N. Broadway, Chicago, IL 60640. 1-800-550-3500. www.wow2k.org



Witness Our Welcome 2003

God's Deliverance Is For All

A gathering of sexually and gender diverse Christians from the U.S. and Canada

www.wow2k.org

JusticeWorks

Renewing the Church's Social Witness



A National Conference convened by
Protestant Justice Action

March 28-30, 2003

The **Justice Works** Conference will be the first national gathering of Protestant Justice Action, a network of several unofficial social justice groups in various Protestant denominations.

Taking place at Union Avenue Christian Church in St. Louis, Missouri, the agenda for the conference includes:

- Sharing strategies for enhancing our denominations' work for justice and peace
- Learning more about current debates over such matters as healthcare, military spending, economic justice, welfare reform, and criminal justice, religious liberty, justice for gay and lesbian persons, and educational equity for children.
- Exciting a new generation of church leaders with a vision of the word as God intends.

All persons of faith interested in this agenda are welcome to attend. Leaders in the church, especially those with responsibility for justice ministries are encouraged to attend as are seminarians, whose leadership is obviously crucial for the church of tomorrow.

The groups that currently make up the Protestant Justice Action network include:

Baptist Peace Fellowship
Lutheran Human Relations Association
Methodist Federation for Social Action
Witherspoon Society (Presbyterian USA)
Christians for Justice Action (United Church of Christ)
Disciples Justice Action Network (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ)
Peace and Justice Advocates in the Episcopal Church

The leaders of these networks believe 1) that our churches must recover and expand our social witness, 2) that advocates for peace and justice should often integrate their efforts rather than work only in single-issue coalitions, and 3) that these denominational networks can, themselves, bear more effective witness if we act ecumenically and in concert with interfaith partners.

To register or obtain additional information, contact: Nancy Engel, Eden Theological Seminary. P.O. Box 176, 475 E. Lockwood Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63119, email: nengel@eden.edu. Information is available on the web: www.eden.edu/justiceworks.html.

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CHAPTER NEWS

By Amy Stapleton, Field Organizer

As our world faces continued threats of war and violence, the efforts of many MFSA chapters throughout the fall and winter have focused on nonviolent approaches to working for peace.

MFSA chapters mobilized long before the war became "imminent". On November 17th the **Iowa chapter** held its fall gathering in Ottumwa. The program, facilitated by Tom Mohan, was entitled "The U.S. War against Terrorism: Is This the Beginning of a CRUSADE?" The Iowa chapter will also host a program at Drake University with Rep. Dennis Kucinich speaking on "Making the Peace Movement Visible"

The **Yellowstone MFSA chapter-information** also discussed the significance of this time in our nation's history and concluded at their fall retreat that peace and nonviolence would be their emphasis for the coming year. Shirley Folkwein writes that members made this decision because they realized "many of the other interest areas are connected to that issue."

In **Wisconsin** the MFSA chapter penned a statement expressing their opposition to war with Iraq. Their statement reads in part: "A military attack on Iraq violates the teachings of our faith and fundamental human rights. Such threat and action are both blasphemous and redeemable." Visit www.wisconsinumc.org/IMFSA/ to read the full text.

In addition to peace efforts, chapter development and General Conference organizing have been primary areas of focus for many chapters across the network.

Lee Biggs-Scribner a newly re-located MFSA member now serving in the **Central Texas Conference**, helped bring together a meeting of 37 interested persons from the surrounding area to dialogue and inform others about the witness of MFSA.

The Northern Illinois MFSA chapter gathered several times in the past few months to create a mission statement reflective of the chapter. Out of considerable dialogue and discernment, the Northern Illinois chapter's new mission statement emerged: "MFSA Northern Illinois Chapter is a community of hope committed to a vision of the world that includes every one as beloved of God. As disciples of Jesus

Christ, we work for peace and justice for all creation through prayer, education, and witness." A chapter meeting on January 18, 2003 was followed by a book signing with Bishop Sprague.

On February 1, 2003 the **New England MFSA chapter** held a "candidates day" where they invited clergy and laity who are interested in being delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conference to come and dialogue about their views on issues.

In the west, the **California Pacific MFSA chapter** recently held an Annual Meeting. Frank Wulf, campus minister at UCLA and MFSA member, lead a conversation about the future role of progressive persons within our denomination. In line with the theme "In Whose Hands? The Future of the UM Church", Frank shared an analysis of the current struggle for the soul of the Church. The day also included justice related seminars lead by Rosemary Davis, Patricia Farris, Joyce Georgieff, Diane Kenney, George Leddy, Fernando Santillana, DarEll Weist, Frank Wulf.

The staff of MFSA has made several visits to meet with chapters recently. Field Organizer Amy Stapleton concluded jurisdictional meetings in September when the North Central jurisdiction MFSA leaders met in Chicago. Jurisdictional meetings have now been held in each of the jurisdictions with the intent of strengthening the network of MFSA chapters across the country and in preparation for General and Jurisdictional conferences.

Amy also met with the **Western Pennsylvania Chapter** as they are gearing up to be the host chapter for General Conference 2004 and with the East Ohio chapter to discuss MFSA strategies and concerns for General Conference.

New organizing is continuing to develop. Amy has met with a group of persons interested in MFSA in the **Kentucky Annual Conference** and in the **North Central New York Annual Conference**. Seeds are also being planted in the **North Texas Conference**.

MFSA chapters continue to be the lifeline of MFSA. We live at a time in history when our government claims that neighbors can be suspects. The community being built by MFSA members as they work together for justice and peace is truly a sign of hope in these troubled times. ❖

Advocacy Agenda

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geographic and gender distribution is important to make sure that all voices are heard – not just those with the power of numbers. One of the basic questions here is whether we see our boards and agencies as primarily serving the members of the church or as reaching out in mission and ministry and enabling church members to do the same. If the Boards and Agencies just serve the church, then a formula based strictly on numbers may make sense. But if we believe the role of our boards and agencies should include enabling members of the church to be in mission and ministry to the world – then the variety of voices represented is as, or more, important than a strictly numbers-based formula.

8. ADDITIONAL ISSUES:

MFSA will continue to monitor key justice issues in addition to those listed above. These will include:

- **the environment**
- **restorative justice**
- **Middle East Peace, and**
- **reproductive choice.**

As this newsletter goes to print MFSA is discussing the increasingly urgent issue of violations of **civil rights** in the U.S. and what we believe the response of churches should be. On this, and other issues that emerge, MFSA will support actions of other groups and individuals as appropriate and move issues up to take proactive MFSA action where needed. ❖

Who Will Decide?

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have been matters around which Christians of good faith have seriously disagreed. One need not look beyond **The Acts of the Apostles** or the **letters of Paul** to discover that believers have never been of one opinion around a whole host of issues. Paul's quarrel with the Jerusalem Christians over whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised was but one of the problems faced by the early church. In nearly every instance, believers tended to separate into two distinct camps—those who held out for the purity of the tradi-

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tion and those who sought to apply the principles of the tradition to shifting circumstances. Which of these strains shall we call “classical Christianity”?

Purity vs. flexibility is not an issue with which Jesus is unacquainted. At one point he declares to the purists of his day, the Pharisees, “the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath!” (Mark 2:27) He knows the tension.

John Wesley, too, weighed in on the matter. He had little patience with the idea that doctrine has ultimate (salvific) significance. In his sermon about those who build their houses on the sand, he declared:

How deeply are you concerned to inquire, “What is the foundation of my hope? Whereon do I build my expectation of entering into the kingdom of heaven? Is it not built on the sand? Upon my orthodoxy, or right opinions, which, by a gross abuse of words, I have called faith? Upon my having a set of notions, (supposing them) more rational or scriptural than others have?” Alas! what madness is this! Surely this is building on the sand, or, rather, on the froth of the sea!

So what is the appropriate role for doctrine and for orthodoxy to play in our church? How should the United Methodist Church define doctrinal integrity? What is normative for us?

Every responsible church leader and theologian in every age has acknowledged the importance of sound doctrine. The question is not *whether* a church ought to articulate its theological beliefs, but, rather, *how* such formulations ought to be used to *guide* the faithful. Different communions have adopted different postures in this regard. Some churches are authoritarian in nature, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church. The hierarchy of the church formulates and enforces church law and doctrine. Some churches are traditionalist in nature, e.g. the Orthodox church. Only what appears in the tradition of the church is permissible in terms of liturgy or doctrine. Still other churches are creedal in nature, e.g. the Lutheran and the Anglican Churches. Orthodoxy is defined by conformity to a particular creedal expression like the Augsburg or the Westminster Confessions.

Until now, the Methodist family has chosen a different route from its cousins in faith. With roots planted in our history as a vital reform movement within a classical tradition, we felt no need to form our own Methodist creeds. Methodists have historically been far more concerned about living out the Gospel in encounters with the world than we have been with developing and enforcing theological conformity. Generations of Methodists have reached across significant theological disagreements to declare to one another John Wesley’s words, “If your heart be as my heart, then give me your hand.”

Methodists would have understood exactly what William Sloane Coffin meant when he recently said: *It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post.*

John Wesley once summed up the doctrine of Methodists in this way: *The fundamental doctrine of the people called Methodists is, Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the true faith—the faith which works by love; which, by means of the love of God and our neighbour, produces both inward and outward holiness.*

Does this mean anything goes in the name of love? Not at all. The classical expressions of faith in the church universal and those adapted to and adopted by our Methodist forebears serve as important correctives and guides to our common life. In the history of the United Methodist Church the role played by doctrine has varied considerably. There have been times when doctrine was enforced punitively, with the threat of expulsion from the church held over the heads of transgressors. (One of the chargeable offenses in the *Discipline* remains “Dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church.”) But throughout the bulk of our history doctrine has been understood as a tool to inform and guide the faithful. It has not been used as an instrument of inquisition. Our tradition is, by and large, one of openness, flexibility and breadth of spirit. We do not use doctrine as a club to coerce compliance, but as an indispensable aid to deepening our discipleship.

Wesley, in fact, set the tone for this flex-

ibility. He was a ruthless abridger and amender of the so-called classical doctrines. He took the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England and chopped thirteen off and revised others to suit his own purposes. Albert Outler points out Wesley’s penchant for borrowing notions that were appealing to him and incorporating them into his theology:

The elements of his theology were adapted from many sources: The prime article of justification by faith, from the reformers (Anglican) of the sixteenth century; the emphasis on the assurance of faith, from the Moravian pietists, the ethical notions of divine-human synergism, from the ancient Fathers of the Church, the idea of the Christian life as devotion, from Taylor (and others); the vision and program of ‘perfection’, from Gregory of Nyssa.

The early Methodists continued this tradition of revision and modification of doctrines attractive to them until the General Conference of 1808 introduced the First Restrictive Rule in the Constitution, making further revisions all but impossible. The result of that artificial freezing of one articulation of doctrine is that the Articles of Religion run the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to the mission and ministry of the church. By the time the twentieth century dawned, many within the church viewed them as moribund relics of a distant past.

The Articles of Religion remain important guidelines. They must not be seen, however, as the *end* of the road. They are beacons lighting a path that continues today and into the future. It is our task to continue breathing life into church doctrine, shaping it to speak to Christians in today’s world, some 200 years after the Articles were codified.

None of this addresses the far more important issue of how well Methodists have *lived out* what we say we believe. Proclamation of doctrine has been no guarantor that we would grasp what the Spirit was doing in our midst. Generations of Methodists, for instance, perpetuated racist practices at the core of our polity, leading to schism in the church and, later, the creation of the Central Jurisdiction. It was with an awareness that our doctrine had failed to keep us from sin that the Gen-

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Who Will Decide?

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eral Conference of 2000 was led to repent of our history of racism and to apologize to those we have driven from the church. Even in the midst of this act of repentance, the church was made painfully aware of our sins of racism against black persons who, at great cost, remained in the church. These persons must be named and their pain acknowledged if our repentance is to be adequate. Clearly, we have had to understand in each age, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the specific applications of our doctrine. Indeed, it is this impulse which led the General Conference to include the following words in the section on doctrinal standards within *The Book of Discipline*:

The United Methodist Church stands continually in need of doctrinal reinvigoration for the sake of authentic renewal, fruitful evangelism, and ecumenical dialogue. In this light, the recovery and updating of our distinctive doctrinal heritage – catholic, evangelical, and reformed – is essential.

This task calls for the repossession of our traditions as well as the promotion of theological inquiry both within the denomination and in our ecumenical efforts. All are invited to share in this endeavor to stimulate an active interest in doctrinal understanding in order to claim our legacy and to shape that legacy for the Church we aspire to be.

The point is that the center of Methodism has never been primarily doctrinal, but has always involved spreading the good news of God's gracious acts in Jesus Christ across the earth. What we are seeing on the

right is almost a deification of doctrine. Thomas Oden, a leading UM theologian in the confessing movement, recently wrote that the United Methodist Church only has a right to own its church buildings insofar as the General Conference defends the doctrinal standards of the church. His exact words were: *"The trust clause (which states that the General Conference owns all United Methodist Church buildings) is not written to protect the Conference, but the doctrinal standards, and to protect the Conference only insofar as the Conference protects the doctrinal standards."* What a narrow view of the covenant that binds us together as United Methodists!

The time has come to focus once more upon the riches of our tradition. Let there be open debate about the meaning of the historic formulations of doctrine. The creation of doctrine is, after all, a human endeavor, undertaken in specific contexts throughout the long history of the church. The notion that the canon is closed on doctrine is a betrayal of our birthright. Let there be broad scholarly inquiry into the articulations of our forebears in the faith, and let those expressions of the past continually be made new, incorporating the wisdom and insight of each generation. We must trust that what is of God will not pass away. It is the task of the church always to seek out the revealed Word of God in its own time and place. Rather than attempting to enforce lockstep, backward-looking conformity, the best that is in our tradition calls us to move forward boldly. ❖

Scott Campbell is a pastor at Harvard Epworth UMC in Cambridge, MA. He is also a member of MFSA's Action Committee on Theology and Doctrine.

Prayers Around the State Department

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coalition have also been involved in virtually every major anti-war vigil, rally, march and demonstration in New York and D.C. over the past several months.

As the war clouds become more ominous, the March 1st Prayer Vigil for Peace is intended to convey yet another clear message to the U.S. and the world that there is substantial opposition to the war among people of faith in the U.S.

Contact the MFSA office for further details about participating in the Vigil. ❖



MFSA Director, Kathryn Johnson speaks at a February Prayer Vigil at the State Department. A larger Prayer Vigil to ring the State Department is planned for March 1, 2003.



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