

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH: MOVING TOWARD THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

A version of the following was presented by your editor during workshops on September 23, 2005, at the national conference of The Confessing Movement within The United Methodist Church, "Unity: That the World May Believe," which took place in Cincinnati, OH.

INTRODUCTION

"Unity: That the World May Believe" is the excellent title of this Confessing Movement conference, and "A United Methodist Pro-Life Ethic" is the given name of this workshop. Taken together, these titles claim that Christian unity—even United Methodist unity—includes a pro-life ethic and encourages the world to believe in Jesus Christ. In other words, the Church's faith, with a pro-life moral dimension, advances Christian unity and evangelical outreach. Again, a pro-life ethic, Christian unity, and evangelism go together. These are lofty, churchly goals for us.

This afternoon, with regard to moving toward the Gospel of Life in United Methodism, we will address five topics: The United Methodist Church's current culture, United Methodism's problematic position on abortion, what to teach, how to teach, and what to do.

UNITED METHODISM'S CURRENT CULTURE

First of all, consider our denomination's contemporary culture. After all, this culture shapes, more or less, our church's current position on abortion.

A. It must be admitted that United Methodism's "working theology," in contrast to our official doctrine, is inclusivity. Critiquing the Episcopal Church (USA), Dr. Philip Turner, the former Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, comes up with the notion of "working theology." Dr. Turner writes: "The Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the incarnation is to be understood as merely a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love, pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ's death no judgment upon the human condition. Rather, one is to see an

affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us.

"From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion: God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other. From this point we can derive yet another: Accepting love requires a form of justice that is inclusive of all people, particularly those who in some way have been marginalized by oppressive social practice. This mission of the Church is, therefore, to see that those who have been rejected are included—for justice as inclusion defines public policy. The result is a practical equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and a particular form of social justice." ("An Unworkable Theology," First Things, June/July 2005)

Dr. Turner then points out the fundamental division in his church: there is "a theological chasm—one that separates those who hold a theology of divine acceptance [i.e., a theology of inclusivity] from those who hold a theology of divine redemption."

As in the Episcopal Church (USA), in The United Methodist Church today, many of those in positions of denominational leadership—bishops, general board and agency executives, and so on—hold to "a theology of divine acceptance." Not surprisingly, they advance their theology of inclusivity throughout our denomination.

B. The trouble is that theological inclusivity erodes or eliminates any notion of truth. Again and ironically, theological inclusivity excludes truth. After all, when definite doctrinal and moral truths are served, other doctrinal and moral claims are found to be wanting (or in dissent), and therefore they are set aside (or engaged). So, if inclusivity is to reign, truth claims—except for the alleged truths associated with inclusivity—must be avoided as much as possible.

Inclusivity's problem with truth has powerful implications for the church's life. Consider three illustrations.

First example. It is said by many that, in ordained ministry, love and trustworthiness are the primary virtues for the pastor to practice. That is, if the village pastor will love his people and maintain their trust, all will be well in his ministry and congregation. To be

sure, pastoral love and trust are essential for parish ministry. But why are not truthfulness and faithfulness also listed as primary pastoral virtues? It would seem that faithfully speaking the truth of the Church's faith to the congregation is a high form of pastoral love, and such truthfulness can certainly increase a sense of trust between the pastor and the congregation.

Second example. In reading through The Christian as Minister with a man and a woman who sense calls to ordained ministry, I was struck by an apparent assumption of the book: United Methodism's ordained clergy can be good pastors even if they will bracket and set aside the matter of truth. In other words, the book seemingly assumes that truth and truthfulness are not essential ingredients for ordained ministry in the local church.

Third example. Members of a Methodist group decided to watch, on DVD, a brief segment of a three-hour C-SPAN interview with Reverend Richard John Neuhaus. The group, in rapt attention, watched a portion of the interview. There was Rev. Neuhaus, freely and unhesitatingly speaking of the truth of the Church's doctrine and morals. His orthodox Roman Catholic world contrasts sharply with a liberal Protestant world, whose residents hesitate even to mention the word truth. The group saw the contrast.

C. There are United Methodists, swimming against the stream of inclusivity, who are ready, willing, and able to serve truth in love. For example, Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker declares this about truth: "While it is the case that our minds play a role in the way knowledge is acquired through sensation and intellectual faculties, a Christian perspective is that truth is located, first, not in our own minds, but in God. For Christians, God is not only transcendent, but also immanent. The classical Christian view is that God is Being and all other beings participate in God. Moreover, Christians trust that God creates all things through the Word or 'logos' of God, which is the principle of rationality and communication between God and us. We trust that God is always communicating the truth to us. This truth is not something we manufacture, but something we receive." ("What Is Truth," e-Review Commentary, www.flumc.info/cgi-script/csArticles/articles/000013/001335-p.htm, June 14, 2005)

Even in a denomination where theological inclusivity runs the show, all is not lost. "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him." ("A

Mighty Fortress Is Our God," The United Methodist Hymnal, v. 3) What or who shall defeat the Prince of Darkness? "[O]ne little word shall fell him." And that word is truth. For when truth is admitted into the Church's vocabulary, speech, and life, everything changes. That is to say, when truth is admitted into the Church's thought and practice, reformation follows.

D. When truth is kept outside the Church's household when inclusivity continues to reign, the resulting ethos is emotional inoffensiveness. "Please do not hurt anybody's feelings, so let's not discuss anything important or difficult," becomes the plea of the day.

Ms. Cynthia B. Astle was, for years, an editor of The United Methodist Reporter. Recently resigning from the Reporter because it had chosen to downplay, in its pages, moral-theological issues and arguments

within United Methodism, Ms. Astle analyzed: "The rationale for this move typically asserts that dissent distracts from the church's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ

[—] i.e., that dialogue blocks efforts to increase numerical membership, and therefore economic viability, of the institution.

"This trend comments sadly on how poorly we Christians in the 21st century are failing in our Gospel-mandated task: to witness to our life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ so that the world might be transformed into God's realm where peace and justice prevail." (Zion's Herald, July/August 2005, p. 33)

Today, homosexuality is the main moral-theological matter that many, if not most, United Methodists are doing their best to avoid. The protracted dialogue over homosexuality—which has been initiated and sustained by those who dissent from our church's established teaching—has sapped our denomination of theological energy and will. Because of this issue, many United Methodists no longer have the stomach for challenging conversation or teaching—or the truth about any doctrinal or moral matter. (Ironically, that is probably because the leaders of United Methodism—starting with our bishops—have been unwilling to frame their address of homosexuality in terms of Christian moral truth.)

Such bracketing and suppressing of truth, and the discussion of matters related to truth, are happening throughout The United Methodist Church—from Council of Bishops gatherings to Annual Conference sessions to Administrative Council meetings to local-church pulpits to church-school classes. "Do not offend anybody." "Do not hurt anybody's feelings." "Do not distract us with more discussion, debate, or argument." "Do not press any agendas." The reasons given for these pleas vary, but they all lead to a kind of Norman Vincent Peale ethos for United Methodism.

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A PROBLEMATIC POSITION ON ABORTION

A. The United Methodist Church has teaching on life and abortion. General Conference 2004 edited The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 161J, to read:

“*Abortion*— The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born. Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from an unacceptable pregnancy. In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection. We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life. We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of conditions that may warrant abortion. We commit our Church to continue to provide nurturing ministries to those who terminate a pregnancy, to those in the midst of a crisis pregnancy, and to those who give birth. We particularly encourage the Church, the government, and social service agencies to support and facilitate the option of adoption. (See Paragraph 161L.) Governmental laws and regulations do not provide all the guidance required by the informed Christian conscience. Therefore, a decision concerning abortion should be made only after thoughtful and prayerful consideration by the parties involved, with medical, pastoral, and other appropriate counsel.” (emphases added)

Thanks be to God, the 2004 General Conference also added this paragraph: “*Ministry to Those Who Have Experienced an Abortion*— We urge local pastors to become informed about the symptoms and behaviors associated with post-abortion stress. We further encourage local churches to make available contact information for counseling agencies that offer programs to address post-abortion stress for all seeking help.” (Paragraph 161K)

B. Paragraph 161J on abortion deserves moral-theological evaluation and critique. This paragraph is obviously a compromise statement that attempts to be morally inclusive. It is not a pro-life statement, though it contains sentiments and claims that are protective of the unborn child and mother. Neither is it a pro-abortion statement, though it permits our church to affiliate with the Religious Coalition for

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Reproductive Choice, a pro-abortion political lobby. So Paragraph 161J comes down as a pro-choice statement concerned about the “unacceptable pregnancy,” for which the abortion procedure should be available “after thoughtful and prayerful consideration.”

We could spend many hours picking apart this disciplinary paragraph on abortion. Instead, we will go straight to its main weakness. Critiquing earlier Lutheran statements on abortion, Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, now of First Things, also points out the central problem with United Methodism’s statement on abortion: “The language about ‘tragic option’ [or the Discipline’s “tragic conflicts”] notwithstanding, the statement says that it is morally permissible to terminate human life— or at least this human life— when we decide it is morally permissible. The quality of thought, prayer, anguish and consultation that goes into that decision would seem to be rather beside the point. In no other instance would we say that it is permitted to take innocent human life if one has thought and prayed about it enough and consulted with one’s ‘spiritual counselor.’ On the contrary, anyone who pleaded that excuse for taking an innocent human life would be viewed as a religious fanatic, and the spiritual counselor would, if approving of the action, be deemed an accomplice in murder. Clearly, there is a radical incoherence in these earlier Lutheran statements. We cannot speak of the unborn in terms of God’s creative purpose and our communal responsibility, and then sign off with a statement of laissez-faire morality that tosses the question to individualistic choice.” (“That Troublesome Question,” Forum Letter, September 21, 1988)

Neuhaus continues: “We have become a society that routinely kills its children. More than [3,600] are being killed the day you are reading this. Some say this is progress. Some of us view it as regression to sub-pagan barbarity. Among those of us who find it abhorrent, some of us think something can be done about it, others think not, yet others are not sure. Who knows? What Christians should know for sure is that, underlying the practice, is a principle of cost-benefit analysis [or utilitarianism] with respect to human life, a principle that can hardly be squared with the One who said, ‘Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these...’”

C. At this point, the Lifewatch community needs to be clear about the ecclesial position we are in. The United Methodist Church’s official teaching on abortion is softly pro-choice. (And it could be said that bureaucratic Methodism— namely, the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries/Women’s Division— advocates

a harder, harsher pro-choice ethic.) At the same time, the Lifewatch community and many other United Methodists favor protecting the unborn child and mother from abortion. That puts Lifewatch and its friends in dissent. Again, we dissent from The United Methodist Church's official teaching on abortion.

However, please note that ours is a dissent with a difference. Our dissenting position is in line with the Great Tradition of the Church catholic. That is, our position is consistent with ecumenical and historic Christianity. Our dissent is not a new thing, a recently revealed thing. Our dissent comes out of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church's faith, which includes protection of the unborn child and mother from abortion.

After commenting on our denomination's general culture and abortion position, we now turn to constructive responses that might be attempted.

WHAT TO TEACH

What to teach is the first challenge. It is a theological challenge, a pastoral challenge, an intellectual challenge.

A. First, we must, with God's help and to the best of our ability, get the Gospel right. That is no small task. The Gospel is more than inclusivity. The Gospel has more content, and is more scandalous, than that. Furthermore, the Gospel is not about "a God without wrath bringing [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America)

Indeed, it could well be claimed that the Gospel is about a Triune God, who is sometimes wrathful, but who brings rebelliously sinful people into a kingdom that includes judgment through the death and resurrection of a God-man Messiah, Jesus Christ. In brief, the Gospel is about the godly One dying and being raised from the dead for the redemption of the world, so that the ungodly can die to sin and be raised to new life, as a part of the redemption of the world. By God's design, this Gospel is transmitted most powerfully through the Church's Word and Sacrament ministry.

It should be no secret in the Church that, contrary to conventional ecclesiastical wisdom, the Gospel involves not only grace but also judgment. Furthermore, the Gospel, rightly understood, includes a place (actually, several places) for the Law. And finally, the Gospel has much to say about the doctrine of creation. In other words, the Gospel is more than grace, grace, grace.

B. Second, we must, with God's help and to the best of our ability, faithfully teach basic Christian morals. This includes teaching the Gospel truth about the God-given dignity of human life and violations of that dignity— such as abortion. Life and abortion should be singled out as pressing moral teaching because abortion is so common in our society today (over

3,600 abortions now occur each day of the year in our nation), and because there are some sectors of the churches that have, on this issue, fallen away from the faith of the Church catholic.

Since The United Methodist Church does not have clear, decisive teaching on life and abortion, we United Methodists are wise to revisit the Church's Great Tradition on these matters. In the Great Tradition of Church teaching, we will find a classical Christian consensus, to use the language of Dr. Oden, on abortion. That is, the Church has everywhere, at all times, from the Didache to "The Gospel of Life," taught that the unborn child and mother are to be protected from abortion. In addition, the Church's ministries and missions through the ages have embodied this teaching by defending and supporting the little one and mother from the false promises of death by abortion. An essential component of this ministry is the offer of forgiveness and new life to those who have fallen for these false promises. Such teaching and such ministry make the Church light and salt in a world that is often dim and bland.

United Methodists might also visit ecumenical resources to become well grounded in the moral theology regarding life and abortion. John Paul II's encyclicals— particularly, "The Splendor of Truth" (1993) and "The Gospel of Life" (1995)— and the Catechism of the Catholic Church are unexcelled sources.

HOW TO TEACH

Arriving at what to teach does not complete our task. Discharging how to teach moves us toward the goal of reforming The United Methodist Church's teaching and practice on abortion.

A. It might be interesting to discuss, first of all, how not to teach. Our teaching style should not be humorlessness. Teaching about life and abortion is indeed very serious business, but it should be decorated with good cheer. Because of the glory of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and because of the hope in the providence of God, we can and should teach the Gospel of Life without a sense of desperation. While doing our part in advancing the Christian truth about life and abortion, we are not responsible for making United Methodism more pro-life. That is God's responsibility, not ours. God is in charge of His Church, not us. Motivated by God's grace, our words should be as generous and loving as much as they are truthful and bold. Witnesses for the Gospel of Life do not demagogue, demean, or degrade their opponents. Witnesses for the Gospel of Life propose this Gospel. We do not impose it on anybody. And witnesses for the Gospel of Life do not treat abortion, first of all, as a political matter. We understand abortion, first of all, as a matter of Christian moral theology and Church teaching.

B. How to teach suggests that we consider our spheres of influence, and we teach in those spheres. We do not believe abortion is the only matter about which the

Church should be concerned. We do not believe abortion is the only issue challenging the Church and the world. But the eliminating and wounding of millions of human lives—that is, of unborn children and their mothers—makes it a very important matter. Therefore, out of faithfulness to the God of the Gospel of Life, we should address this matter, on occasion, in pertinent, patient, and persuasive ways where we have been given the responsibility to teach.

Here, an encouraging word to pastors is in order. In most cases, whatever the pastor preaches and teaches, on abortion or any other subject, sets the moral-theological ethos in the parish. So if the pastor occasionally preaches from the pulpit, or teaches through the congregational newsletter, the Gospel of Life, the Gospel of Life will become the established ethos of the parish. The pastor need not hammer this issue, week after week. Rather, the standard can be set and then occasionally reinforced—even with brief references. (Along the same lines, remember that pastoral silence on abortion more likely than not fosters a pro-choice ethos in the parish.)

The laity also have responsibilities. Those who have pastors unwilling to address life and abortion can urge and encourage their pastors to break their silence. Give to your pastors literature—from “The Gospel of Life” to the latest issue of Lifewatch—that would embolden them. Remember: pro-life laity should never attack or undermine their pro-choice clergy. Laity are to love and support their pastors—and not otherwise. Laity can also teach the Gospel of Life in church-school classes, in lay sermons, and in conversations during daily rounds in their churches and communities.

C. Learning how to teach involves practice. Clergy and laity should regularly practice using the vocabulary of the Gospel of Life. In conversations around the dinner table, among friends at the post office, and in covenant group meetings, clergy and laity should learn to speak wisely and freely about the Gospel of Life. That is, Wesleyans in Christian conversation should talk about life and abortion. As time goes on, this practice will embolden clergy and laity to develop a sermon, a lesson, or a newsletter article on the dignity and protection of human life.

D. Teaching also mandates careful listening. Obviously, the pro-life message will not please everyone in a congregation. Therefore, when a Gospel of Life message goes forth, expect some resistance. Seek out those who disagree for follow-up conversation. Be quick to listen. Listen and listen carefully to their points of disagreement. Only after clarifying the disagreements should we once again propose, in respectful and winsome ways, specific truths of the Gospel of Life. Again, in follow-up conversations, listen mostly and propose carefully. Our God-given duty is to serve the truth of the Church’s faith, not to win arguments.

PLAN NOW TO ATTEND

THE ANNUAL LIFEWATCH SERVICE OF WORSHIP (9:30 a.m.)

Dr. R. Kendall Soulen,
Wesley Theological Seminary, Preaching
and the

THE ANNUAL LIFEWATCH BOARD MEETING (3:00 p.m.)

both on January 23, 2006 (Monday)

at The United Methodist Building
100 Maryland Avenue, NE—Washington, DC

Fill a van or bus with brothers and sisters from your church, and join us for these events, which will serve the Gospel of Life.

WHAT TO DO

An all too brief laundry list of things to do might be most helpful.

- A. Pray for wisdom, for a servant’s spirit, for your congregation, for the unborn child and mother, for pro-choice advocates, for your bishop, for the Council of Bishops.
- B. Study the Gospel of Life from the many excellent sources that are available.
- C. Lead a sanctified life—including sexual purity, extravagant giving, frugal spending, care for the little people, moral instruction of family members, and so on—that is consistent with the Gospel of Life.
- D. Establish deep, covenantal friendships.
- E. Maintain fellowship with pro-choice United Methodists, and learn to discuss life and abortion with them.
- F. Teach, preach, and write about the Gospel of Life.
- G. Lead your congregation or a group within your congregation to support a woman tempted by abortion.
- H. Minister to those wounded by abortion.
- I. Encourage your congregation to support, with gifts, a crisis pregnancy center in your community or the ministry of Lifewatch.

CONCLUSION

We will close with a statement by Martin Luther and a comment on that statement.

Said Luther: “Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or Emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.” (Professor David C. Steinmetz, “The Nature of Luther’s Reform,” The Duke Divinity School Review, Winter 1979)

Professor Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School applies Luther’s claim to United Methodism: “There is an irony in Luther’s rather cavalier approach to reform of which United Methodists at least should be aware.

Wesley divided the agenda of early Methodist conferences into three parts: what to teach, how to teach, what to do. Modern United Methodists have a lot of time for the last question [what to do], some for the second [how to teach], and almost none for the first [what to teach]. But it was the question, what to teach, and not the question, what to do, which lay at the heart of the Reformation as Luther understood it. Luther concentrated on doctrine and shook Europe to its foundations. We concentrate on program and strategy and make almost no difference that matters to the world around us. The comparison is instructive.” (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- When copies of Lifewatch are returned to the Lifewatch office, because they are “undeliverable,” their addresses on the mailing list will be updated.

Later, copies of the next regular issue will be mailed to the new addresses. If readers want the missed issues, please contact Mrs. Cindy Evans (P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338/(636)-294-2344/Lifewatch@charter.net), and she will mail them out as requested.

- Mr. David Heim, the Executive Editor of The Christian Century (for years, *the* magazine of liberal Protestantism in America), has written a powerfully thoughtful article entitled “World without Roe?” (August 9, 2005). With the reconfiguration of the United States Supreme Court underway, the chances of a reversal of Roe v. Wade, “the 1973 ruling that defined abortion as a constitutional right,” are increasing. Mr. Heim believes “[t]he prospect of a world without Roe does concentrate the mind. But not just in the ways that the pro-choice groups imagine. A world without Roe might actually be one of the best things that could happen to liberal politics...” “A world without Roe would mean that liberals would no longer feel compelled to defend abortion as an absolute right—a position that is hard to defend morally, politically and constitutionally...” “A world without Roe would free politics from the sterile debate of the past three decades, which pits the rights of women against the rights of the fetus, as if those sets of interests are fundamentally opposed...” “A world without Roe would free liberals from having to appear aggressively indifferent to the value of the fetus...” “A world without Roe would relieve liberals of the debilitating rhetoric of ‘choice’ ... Politically, the emphasis on an individual’s ‘right to choose’ has made it seem that liberalism is indifferent to public morality and is devoted to individualism... Morally, the rhetoric of choice is empty...” “These criticisms of Roe should not shock mainline Protestants... The United Methodists’ statement of social principles

“A world without Roe would free politics from the sterile debate of the past three decades ...”

declares that ‘our belief in the sanctity of unborn life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.’ It acknowledges ‘tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion’ and says that ‘in such cases we support the legal option of abortion,’ but adds that ‘we cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.’ Though these pronouncements [from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and The United Methodist Church] are compromise statements, laboriously crafted to articulate a middle ground in divided denominations, they are not without substance. They clearly distance mainline churches from the arguments routinely offered by pro-choice groups. One can peruse the literature of groups like NARAL and NOW without finding any mention of the ‘value of unborn life,’ any acknowledgment of ‘tragic conflicts’ or any hesitation in asserting that the right to abortion

is absolute. For that reason, it’s hard to see how mainline Christians can wholeheartedly endorse their cause—or enthusiastically defend Roe.” “A world without Roe would also offer practical political

advantages. As long as Roe prevails, conservatives can fly the ‘pro-life’ flag, talk about the ‘culture of life’ and contrast themselves with ‘abortion-on-demand’ liberals— without ever having to offer a concrete alternative to present policies...” “Finally, a world without Roe would allow a liberal pro-life movement to get off the ground... With the politics of abortion no longer defined by Roe, the goal of making abortions rare could make possible the forging of a new coalition on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. That seems like something liberals should want.”

- Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr. is a United Methodist and Professor of Theology Emeritus at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, CA. In Zion’s Herald (July/August 2005), he reviews Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances (Rutgers, 2005) by Tom Davis. In his review Dr. Cobb demonstrates a certain fairness and charity: “...few would declare abortion to be a pure moral good. In itself it is the destruction of a potential human life, and that is tragic. That it is sometimes the lesser of the tragedies among which a choice must be made does not eliminate the ambiguity. One must respect one’s opponents’ concern for the helpless fetus even when one places the needs of the mother and society first.” (Remember that Paragraph 161J of The Book of Discipline [2004] speaks about “the sanctity of unborn human life”— not Dr. Cobb’s “potential human life.”) He carries on with his sense of fairness and charity: “The greatest and most inescapable ambiguities circle around women’s control of their bodies. The current pattern of sexual mores certainly raises, among concerned people

of faith, questions that are not answered simply by pushing for women's rights. And concerns for the fetus cannot be dismissed as irrelevant or irresponsible. It is in this ambiguous situation that we are called now to struggle for justice." However and unfortunately, Dr. Cobb concludes: "Wealthy and middle-class women will always have access to contraception and medically responsible abortion. Poor women will not. And it is often they who have the greatest needs. There is no ambiguity about this! With respect to so basic [a] right, justice demands that all women have access to the aid they need." Dr. Cobb's argument is respectful and even helpful, even if it ends by advocating universally available, lethal discrimination against the unborn children for the sake of justice.

- Richard Payne directs the Duke Institute on Care at the End of Life, which is affiliated with The Divinity School at Duke University. He had this to say on the matters surrounding the death of Terri Schiavo: "The most disturbing feature about the Terri Schiavo case is the intrusion of political forces into the process of family decision-making at the most vulnerable of times in the life of a family and person." (*The Seattle Times*, March 21, 2005, as quoted in *Divinity Magazine*, Spring 2005). On the other hand, some would say that the spectacle of courts, judges, laws, doctors, and medical institutions defending the removal of a feeding tube from a severely brain-damaged woman is even more disturbing.

- Every so often *Circuit Rider*—a magazine for United Methodist clergy from Cokesbury/The United Methodist Publishing House—ventures into treacherous waters. In "The Ministry of Good Death,"

Rev. Len Delony and Dr. Rebekah Miles, both members of the Arkansas Conference, claim: "For all of their differences, many of [the aforementioned] deathbed scenes held something in common—a hope for a good death. Euthanasia comes from the Greek and means 'good death.' By its most literal meaning, then, every pastor is in the ministry of euthanasia. Pastors seek not to hasten death artificially but to nourish whatever goodness and holiness can be found in death and the moments surrounding it. The ministry of euthanasia—a good death—is part of a pastor's job description." (September/October 2005) While their intention "to nourish whatever goodness and holiness can be found in death and the moments surround it" is good, the naming of this ministry—"the ministry of euthanasia"—seems inappropriate. After all, today euthanasia is understood by most people and institutions to mean "mercy killing." And according to The Book of Discipline (2004, Paragraph 161N), "[t]he Church opposes assisted suicide and euthanasia." In these post-Terri Schiavo days, it is quite important for United Methodist clergy and laity not to be involved in "the ministry of euthanasia."

- Eric Rudolph, who ran and hid from the law for five years, was found, arrested, tried, and found guilty for the bombings of abortion clinics and other locations. Murderous actions such as Rudolph's were, are, and will be directly denounced by the pro-life community, including Lifewatch. Assumed by many to be a radical, anti-abortion, Christian activist, Rudolph is nothing of the sort. In a rather frank letter, he described those who had reached out to him in prison: "Most of them have, of course, an agenda; mostly born-again Christians looking to save my soul. I

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United Methodists on
Abortion and Sexuality

P.O. Box 306, Cottleville MO 63338

12/01/05:

- * Moving toward the Gospel of Life
- * Salvation and Sexuality:
What The UMC Teaches

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suppose the assumption is made that because I'm in here I must be a 'sinner' in need of salvation, and they would be glad to sell me a ticket to heaven, hawking this salvation like peanuts at a ball game. I do appreciate their charity, but I could really do without the condescension. They have been so nice I would hate to break it to them that I really prefer Nietzsche to the Bible." (emphasis added, New York Times, July 6, 2005)

- Back in September, Molly Yard died. From 1987 until 1991, she had served as the president of the National Organization for Women, one of the main, radically pro-choice institutions in American public life. The obituary in the New York Times revealed a surprising fact: "Mary Alexander Yard was born in Shanghai on July 6, 1912, and raised in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, where her parents were Methodist missionaries." Furthermore, "[t]he Yards lived in China until Ms. Yard was about 13, when her father angered church superiors by proposing that their missions in China be turned over to the Chinese. The family moved to the United States, where Mr. Yard became the director of religious activities for Northwestern University..." (September 22, 2005) For decades, it seems there has been an easy alliance between Methodism and pro-choice activism. More about that will follow in a future issue of Lifewatch.
- From February 27 through March 1, Bishop Scott Jones of Kansas took part in a symposium on Wesleyan theology, which was sponsored by the John Wesley Institute, near Chicago. During the symposium Bp. Jones asserted that there are three levels of doctrine in The United Methodist Church. Level one includes the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, the General Rules, and Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. Level two includes the teaching statements adopted by General Conference. And level three includes the denomination's liturgy and hymnody. Then the good bishop referred to the current United

Methodist position on abortion, which speaks of "tragic conflicts of life with life" (The Book of Discipline [2005], Paragraph 161J). He went on to report that most abortions in the United States are performed for birth-control reasons and, according to United Methodist teaching, are immoral. "You don't hear the United Methodist Women and others saying that," Bp. Jones claimed. (Institute on Religion and Democracy, www.ird-renew.org, September 2, 2005) Indeed.

- A retired United Methodist bishop scribbled this note around his address on the September 2005 issue of Lifewatch: "Please remove me from your mailing list. [signature] Thank you. I do not share your positions." To which the editor replied in a letter to the bishop: "I humbly submit that Lifewatch attempts to serve the ecumenical, historic teaching of the Church catholic on theological and moral matters related to human life. (The operative word there is attempt. Sometimes we succeed; oftentimes we fail.) Therefore, with due respect to you as a brother in Christ and to your ecclesiastical office, I would think that a retired bishop of The United Methodist Church would sense an obligation to skim such material, even if he does not agree with it. Because of this reasoning, I am asking Mrs. Evans to return your name to the Lifewatch list. Even if you will use each issue to wrap fish!" ♥

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."