

THE BIRMINGHAM CONFERENCE

As planned, the Pastoral Praxis (that is, Practice) for Life conference took place on September 11, 2012 at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, in Birmingham, AL. While the latter-day 9/11 was peaceful on the Birmingham campus, the conference participants learned later that day that four (4) Americans in diplomatic service had been killed in the Middle East.

The conference aimed to help seminary students, pastors, and priests to become more faithful to the Gospel of Life in their places, in their congregations, in their vocations. The one-day event was sponsored by the National Pro-Life Religious Council (NPRC), to which Lifewatch belongs.

Beeson Divinity School is a wonderful place to study theology and prepare for ordained ministry. It is both evangelical in theology and ecumenical in truth. Beeson and its staff most graciously and generously hosted the conference.

The divinity school's chapel, Andrew Gerow Hodges Chapel, is a truly beautiful, and truly sacred, space dedicated to the worship of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Standing in the pulpit and welcoming seminary students and conference participants, this pastor had a wooden statue of George Whitefield (1714-1770) in a preacher's posture on the front of the pulpit, paintings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and John Wesley (1703-1791) looking down from the "great cloud of witnesses" painted on the underside of the chapel dome, and a stone statue of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) apparently keeping watch over the pulpit and the entire assembly. Evangelical and ecumenical, indeed!

The Reverend Dr. Timothy George is the dean of Beeson Divinity School. He proposes, embodies, and demonstrates his school's evangelicalism and ecumenism. During the late-morning chapel service, Dr. George preached a powerful keynote sermon, which was entitled "Loving the Least of These."

LOVING THE LEAST

Dr. George began by recalling The Manhattan Declaration, which intends to advance in public life the dignity of each human life, the goodness of marriage, and the crucial importance of religious liberty. (If you are not acquainted with The Manhattan Declaration, on your computer please google the title, go to the declaration, and then read it.) To date, Dr. George reported, over 530,000 people have signed the declaration. Said he: "[The Manhattan

Declaration] is not just a statement of opinion. It is a declaration of conscience and a call to commitment." Furthermore, it concerns theological and moral matters that are foundational truths that are currently "under assault" in American society.

In his sermon, the divinity school dean set forth three of the Church's distinctive truth claims regarding life.

(1) "Every human life is irreducibly precious because [each] is made in the image of almighty God, our heavenly Father."
"We often...speak of the right to life. But before life is a right, it is a gift...from almighty God."

Dr. George recalled how much he admired Prof. Stanley Hauerwas, of Duke Divinity School (and the Lifewatch board), for his commitment to human life and for his framing of moral matters related to human life in theological terms. According to Hauerwas, children should be received as gifts from God—not as clay to be molded into the image of their parents, not for the purpose of fun, not as a means to alleviate loneliness, not as a manifestation of marital love, not as a way to make the world a better place, not as an attempt to create the perfect child, and not for any other reason. Again, children are to be received because children are a gift from God.

Dr. George contended: "Every person made in the image of God is irreducibly precious in His sight, because [each person] is a gift—whatever [his/her] condition, whatever [his/her] health status may be. A gift! Precious! Worthy of protection in law and to be welcomed fully in life!"

(2) "In Jesus Christ, God has given Himself for us....It is all about the Incarnation."

Dr. George quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer on abortion: "In Christ's Incarnation, all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of people, attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in Himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance." According to Dr. George, the faces of the "least of these" change from time to time. Now, in American society, many of the least are unborn children, for they have little standing, little protection. Over 53,000,000 of them have been killed since Roe v. Wade.

The preacher reminded the congregation that 9/11 was indeed a "disaster...devastation, destruction, terror." The day of the conference, September 11, 2012, the names of 9/11's victims were to be read aloud. "How long would it take to read the names of the 53 million, if we even knew most of

their names? How long?" Dr. George asked.

"In Jesus Christ, God has taken us unto Himself. He has come among us, as one of us, as a baby in a manger, as a man on a cross. By doing so, God has put his stamp of approval upon every human life, as inherently worthy and [full] of dignity and [demanding of] respect."

(3) Dr. George's third point concerned the Christian ethic of courageous hospitality, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ's outreach to and for all.

Because of Jesus Christ, William Wilberforce (1759-1833) stood against slavery and the slave trade in England. Wilberforce refused to give up. Through courageous, patient engagement and action, he remained faithful to this cause until Parliament finally abolished the slave trade. Dr. George also recalled Mother Teresa at the 1993 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. She courageously spoke truth to power and stood up for the dignity of each human being, born and unborn. He also pointed to young, pregnant African-American women who are often embraced by their churches so that their children can be born.

Dr. Timothy George concluded: "An ethic of hospitality begins when life begins, when God gives that gift of precious life, but it does not end when birth happens. It continues to be embracing and welcoming to all God's children."

PROPHETIC MINISTRY FOR LIFE

Rev. Frank Pavone, the national director of Priests for Life and the president of NPRC, taught—and demonstrated—how pastors and priests can offer prophetic words for life. According to Rev. Pavone, the Gospel is the Gospel of Life. That is, the Gospel of Life is not an add-on to the Gospel; the Gospel of Life is the Gospel. In other words, the Gospel of Life is not a response to Roe v. Wade; the Gospel of Life is a response to Jesus Christ. Therefore, to be silent in the Church about life is to be silent about the fullness of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is life, exalts life, rules life, has dominion over life, saves life.

Rev. Pavone noted that the poor, in the Biblical understanding, are those who have no help but God. Therefore, the unborn child should most certainly be counted among the poor.

Considering the case study of Moses, Rev. Pavone joked that "when God wants something done [such as prophetic ministry], He goes to those who do not know what they are doing." How true then. How true now.

The challenge is this: to move people from saying "abortion is wrong" to promising "abortion is wrong, and therefore I will work to stop it." This challenge is met, in part, by recognizing that Christians who serve the Gospel of Life are working for the victory of life, from the victory of life in Jesus Christ's resurrection. In other words, in serving the cause of life, Christians are simply applying a victory already won.

The culture of death at the abortion clinic says, "This is my body, with which I can do as I please." The culture of life at the sanctuary's altar says, "This is my body, which is given for you."

Rev. Pavone reminded the conference that to stand for life is a matter of social justice, since the right to life is fundamental to every other social-justice concern.

PRIESTLY MINISTRY FOR LIFE

Mrs. Georgette Forney, the director of Anglicans for Life,

Due to 2013 marking the 40th anniversary of US Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision on abortion, Lifewatch will join the National Pro-Life Religious Council for its annual Service of Worship.

This will replace the 2013 Lifewatch Service of Worship.

BOTH EVENTS ON JANUARY 25, 2013 **(FRIDAY)**

**NATIONAL PRO-LIFE
RELIGIOUS COUNCIL
SERVICE OF WORSHIP** (8:30 a.m.)
at DAR Constitution Hall, 1776 D Street, NW/
Washington, DC

**THE ANNUAL LIFEWATCH
BOARD MEETING** (3:00 p.m.)
at The United Methodist Building
100 Maryland Avenue, NE, Washington, DC
Organize a group from your church to attend!

challenged the group to meet the pregnant, abortion-prone woman where she is, and to enable her to see the unborn child as her child and to fall in love with her child. This is more difficult, requiring more patience, than might first appear. That is because so much fear can be involved in the lives of these mothers, Mrs. Forney said.

Mrs. Forney noted that, according to reliable statistics, around one-third of all women under 45 in the United States have had an abortion. Oftentimes, abortion causes these women to "shut down," to become numb to life. That is, abortion can destroy their souls. Such women require special love, encouragement, and forgiveness, so that they might be healed. Aborted women, forgiven by God, become "billboards for the truth."

Archbishop Fulton Sheen was quoted: "Right is right, even if no one is right. Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is wrong." In this quotation, Mrs. Forney reminded the conference that priestly ministry, lovingly engaging one person at a time, relies upon not only loving encounter but also the truth about life.

KINGLY MINISTRY FOR LIFE

Dr. Dennis DiMauro, the author of A Love for Life: Christianity's Consistent Protection of the Unborn (Wipf & Stock, 2008) and a leader in Lutherans for Life, spoke about kingly ministry, or engaging in action, for life. He based his presentation on a film clip taken from the heat of the Civil Rights Movement. In the clip, a Southern sheriff spoke to a young, black man who was engaged in a civil-rights action. Said the sheriff: "Take your prayers back to the church [and away from the court house]. That's the proper place [for them]....God'll hear your prayers down there just as much..." The young man stood his ground and patiently offered reasoned responses. In a powerfully exemplary way, he embodied the Gospel. That is necessary, for if the Gospel is not embodied, it lacks witness and power.

Dr. DiMauro suggested the following ministries to the conference: break the silence on abortion, preach and teach on abortion, receive special offerings for local crisis pregnancy centers, participate in Life Chain, write an article on life for

the parish newsletter, write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, write a pro-life article for a denominational publication, support a denomination's pro-life ministry, and so on. In other words, use personal and church resources in the service of the Gospel of Life. Listen to Jesus Christ, and act.

The above is simply an attempt to hit the high points of an excellent conference that contained many other high points. For a closer examination of the conference, go to your computer and to YouTube. Then google "Pastoral Praxis for Life," and the four presentations will appear. That way you can become a latter-day participant in a memorable conference for life. (PTS) ♥

REFLECTIONS: ON THE GROUND IN TAMPA

by Mary Byerman and Cindy Evans

For decades, General Conferences of The United Methodist Church have featured protest actions in support of the pro-gay position. Following those actions, one could wonder: Why can't pro-life United Methodists do something to advocate for life?

In the autumn of 2011, John Lomperis, a Lifewatch board member, mentioned in a telephone conversation that it would be good to have a peaceful, pro-life presence at the 2012 General Conference. Later, in January of 2012, that idea was presented at the Lifewatch Advisory Board meeting in Washington, DC, and it was approved.

In short order, an email was sent to the Florida-area Lifewatch supporters whose addresses were known. In the email, the idea was presented, and the need for someone in Florida to coordinate the action was stated.

We prayed and waited.

Within a week, Mary Byerman, wife of a Tampa-area United Methodist pastor, called. She volunteered to coordinate and lead the Lifewatch action at General Conference. Unfamiliar with General Conference customs and processes, Mary, along with other Florida Lifewatch volunteers, agreed to participate in a series of telephone conference calls to discuss the ways and means of General Conference.

Within a couple of months, God raised up more volunteers from at least seven different United Methodist congregations in the Tampa Bay area. Because Bishop Whitaker, then the episcopal leader of The Florida Area, had written and preached a pro-life sermon entitled "Do No Harm," those words became the message on the tee shirts that one of the volunteers designed for the conference. Signs were made that displayed the staggering worldwide abortion statistics for the ten days of General Conference—1,150,000! Pro-life pamphlets were printed and handed out by four different United Methodist churches, and at least five pastors joined the cause. God provided a graphic artist to design the tee shirts, and church buses to transport volunteers to downtown Tampa. A businessman donated the signs. The most amazing thing that happened was the number of prayer warriors who came forward. Since General Conference took place during the National Day of Prayer, Tampa-based prayer events were asked and encouraged to pray for Biblical truth to be upheld by The United Methodist Church. Even though the

atmosphere of General Conference was politicized, the Lifewatch presence provided "light and salt"—that is, love, truth, and holiness.

During the two weeks of General Conference, 50-plus Lifewatch supporters wore orange tee shirts with "Do No Harm" on the front and "Choose Life" (from Deuteronomy 30:19) on the back. They prayed. They distributed literature. They intently listened to debates during sub-committee, committee, and plenary sessions. They quietly and peacefully supported and encouraged delegates to end The United Methodist Church's affiliation with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Although the final outcome was not as we had hoped and prayed, we know our presence made a difference at the conference.

After the conference had ended, a strange yet wonderful thing happened. Laity from various United Methodist churches, who had met and become friends at the conference, have continued to pray for The United Methodist Church. We repent for the abortions in which our denomination and its local churches are complicit, and we pray for change throughout the church. This is an ongoing result of the Lifewatch presence at General Conference.

Join us in trusting and obeying the Lord of life!

Mrs. Byerman lives in the Tampa area. Mrs. Evans is the Lifewatch administrator and publicity/outreach coordinator, and she resides in Cottleville, MO. ♥

RCRC WATCH: "REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE"

The new president and CEO of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), Rev. Harry Knox, has written "A Call to Reproductive Justice: A Reflection on Deuteronomy 16:20." (For your information, the verse declares: "Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you.") This article appeared on The United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society website (at <http://umc-gbcs.org/faith-in-action/a-call-to-reproductive-justice>, which was accessed on 09/18/12).

Early in his article, Rev. Knox declares: "I am trying to keep Deuteronomy 16:20 constantly before me. It seems a good practice, not only spiritually and personally, but also because RCRC recently adopted a policy that calls for all of its future programming to be carried out within a framework of 'reproductive justice.'" A bit later in the article, he claims that RCRC leaders "have taken seriously Wesley's admonition that controversial issues like access to health care, women's self-determination and moral agency, and comprehensive sexuality education require all the benefits of attention to scripture, tradition, reason and experience."

Let's connect the dots. Deuteronomy commands justice, so RCRC talks about "reproductive justice." "Reproductive justice" includes many dimensions; among them is access to abortion. And abortion is the taking of the life of an unborn child and the wounding of his/her mother. All this is then blessed with John Wesley's stamp of approval.

In response to Rev. Knox's introductory essay in a United Methodist forum, this editor has two questions to set forth.

First, how can the destruction of a voiceless, defenseless, helpless human being possibly be called "justice?"

And second, how can John Wesley possibly be invoked today to bless a practice—that is, abortion—that, during his ministry in the eighteenth century, he condemned through written word and spoken word?

We are sure that Rev. Knox is a decent man with many good character traits. But his "Call to Reproductive Justice" is a powerful lesson in how cultural and political ideology can distort Biblical application, moral reasoning, and historical reference. (PTS) ♥

FOR YOUR INFORMATION: A FRIEND OF THE COURT BRIEF

The following brief was submitted to assist the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church reach a decision on a case regarding the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). Unfortunately, on October 27, the Judicial Council ruled: "The Judicial Council does not have jurisdiction since the matter does not involve annual conferences or the work therein (Par. 2610.2j of the 2008 Discipline)." —Editor

DOCKET 1012-5
REQUEST FROM THE NORTH ALABAMA ANNUAL
CONFERENCE FOR A
DECLARATORY DECISION AS TO THE LEGALITY OF
MEMBERSHIP IN AND/OR
MONETARY SUPPORT OF THE RELIGIOUS
COALITION FOR REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE BY
AGENCIES OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Brief Submitted by
The Reverend Paul T. Stallsworth
Elder in the North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church

OCTOBER 2012 SESSION OF THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL
October 24-27, 2012, Evanston, IL

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1. Circumstances Surrounding the Request

The General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (WD/GBGM)—both agencies within The United Methodist Church—are current members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). Though GBCS and WD/GBGM pay no funds directly to RCRC, United

Methodist funds do support agency executives and/or staff, from GBCS and WD/GBGM, who participate in RCRC activities and meetings, and who advance RCRC's agenda through GBCS and WD/GBGM.

The 2012 session of the North Alabama Annual Conference passed a resolution submitted by Rev. Edgar L. Plunkett, Jr., a full-time local pastor in the conference. Rev. Plunkett's resolution "request[ed] a ruling from the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church as to the legality of the membership in and/or the membership dues (and/or any monetary support or support of any kind) being extended to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice by the General Board of Church and Society and by the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (and/or its successor body)." The approval of Rev. Plunkett's resolution by the assembled annual conference led to this request for a ruling from the Judicial Council.

2. Relevant Sections of The Book of Discipline

The following sections of The Book of Discipline are especially relevant to this ruling:

- a. The United Methodist Church's paragraph on "Declaratory Decisions" (Paragraph 2610);
- b. The United Methodist Church's teaching on abortion, which is located in the Social Principles at Paragraph 161J; most relevant is Paragraph 161J's phrase "the unborn child;"
- c. The United Methodist Church's constitutional article on the "Inclusiveness of the Church," which states in part: "The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth." (Paragraph 4, Article IV);
- d. The United Methodist Church's "Nondiscrimination Policies," which include: "1. It shall be the policy of The United Methodist Church that all agencies and institutions, including hospitals, homes, and educational institutions, shall...(b) fulfill their duties and responsibilities in a manner that does not involve segregation or discrimination on the basis of race, color, age, sex, or disability, including HIV status..." (Paragraph 715); and
- e. The United Methodist Church's statement on the General Board of Church and Society's "Responsibilities" includes: "Through conferences, districts, coalitions, and networks, it [GBCS] will assist Church members as they identify and respond to critical social issues at community, regional, national, and international levels. All the above shall be consistent with the Social Principles and policies adopted by the General Conference." (Paragraph 1004)

3. Relevant Decisions of the Judicial Council

Four prior Judicial Council decisions are relevant to Docket 1012-5. They are: Decision No. 635, Decision No. 683, Decision No. 821, and Decision No. 1047. Decision No. 635 and Decision No. 683 relate to RCRC's predecessor organization, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR). Decision No. 821 focuses on a particular abortion procedure, partial-birth abortion. Decision No. 1047 concerns whether an annual conference can belong to RCRC.

4. Relevant Arguments

- a. Paragraph 2610 indicates that the request for a declaratory

decision, by the 2012 session of the North Alabama Annual Conference, on the legality of United Methodist agencies belonging to and supporting the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, is in order and properly before the Judicial Council.

b. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church speak, without ambiguity, of "the unborn child."

c. The Constitution of The United Methodist Church asserts, without ambiguity, the "inclusiveness" of the Church. This inclusivity extends to "the unborn child," who might even be understood as a constituent of a local church.

d. The Discipline of The United Methodist Church forbids, without ambiguity, discrimination by United Methodist institutions against any people—presumably including discrimination, based on age, against unborn children.

e. The Discipline of The United Methodist Church requires, without ambiguity, that the General Board of Church and Society do its work in a way that is consistent with the Social Principles and policies adopted by General Conference.

As the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice unqualifiedly supports abortion rights—including partial-birth abortion rights—in the public arena, RCRC: (1) opposes what The United Methodist Church teaches about "the unborn child;" (2) contradicts the inclusiveness of The United Methodist Church by helping to make it legally possible for people to choose to exclude (by abortion) the youngest from the human community; (3) discriminates in ways The United Methodist Church forbids of itself—that is, discrimination based on age, against the youngest members of society (i.e., unborn children); and (4) works against the United Methodist morality that sees the reality of the unborn child, that is stated in The United Methodist Church's Social Principles and policies (Paragraphs 161J) and that is required of the GBCS (Paragraph 1004).

5. Conclusion

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) is radically out of step with The United Methodist Church. While The United Methodist Church maintains a Social Principle that speaks of "the unborn child," RCRC ignores this child. While The United Methodist Church strives to practice inclusiveness, because of its constitutional mandate, toward all people (including the unborn), RCRC lobbies to make it possible for people to exclude the unborn child from continued living in this world. While The United Methodist Church works, because of its disciplinary law, to oppose discrimination within the church's own life, RCRC promotes discrimination against the unborn child. And while The United Methodist Church recognizes both the moral and political dimensions of abortion (see Paragraph 161J) and charges GBCS to do the same (Paragraph 1004), RCRC reduces abortion to a purely political issue.

Stated differently, the Social Principles,

Constitution, and Discipline help to form The United Methodist Church's ethos—which involves recognition of the unborn child, inclusion of the unborn child, nondiscrimination against the unborn child, and politics with morality as related to the unborn child. This United Methodist ethos stands in bold contrast to the ethos of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, which tends toward nonrecognition and exclusion of the unborn child, discrimination against the unborn child, and politics without morality.

6. Recommended Action

Therefore, to help The United Methodist Church live more in line with its own ethos, as stated in The Book of Discipline, the Judicial Council should find that the two United Methodist agencies—the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries—that currently belong to RCRC should immediately be removed from membership in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

In accordance with the Rules of Practice and Procedure of the Judicial Council, I certify that copies of this have been distributed to the following...♥

ONE STEP FORWARD

by John Lomperis

With very little publicity, the 2012 General Conference added new language (drafted by Lifewatch leaders) to our denomination's governing Book of Discipline (2012) charging the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) with "ensuring that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall expend United Methodist funds in a manner which violates the expressed commitment of The United Methodist Church to 'oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice [with rare exceptions]' (Paragraph 161J)."

Since The United Methodist Church's Social Principles are technically not church law, I believe this is the very first time that our denomination has adopted a clear, firmly binding pro-life policy. While the scope is somewhat limited, and while the immediate practical ramifications are unclear, this is a very important, historic milestone. We pray that it will be the first of many.

Mr. Lomperis, a member of the Lifewatch Advisory Board, can be reached at johnlomperis@yahoo.com.♥

Please remember to pray and fast for the ministry of Lifewatch on the first Tuesday of every month.

IS THE CHURCH A VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION?

To the July/August 2012 issue of Good News the magazine, Rev. Thomas A. Lambrecht, the vice president of Good News the renewal ministry, provided an article entitled "Time to Move beyond the Church Protests." Rev.

Lambrecht's article contains these two paragraphs that are relevant to the above question: "The proponents of protest tactics in the church are making a mistake of categories. They are treating the church as if it were a secular government. But the reason that civil disobedience and other pressure tactics are accepted as valid in dealing with a secular government is that the average person has no alternative but to live under that particular government's authority. The only way to change the perceived unjust circumstance is to change the government's policy.

"A church denomination, on the other hand, is a voluntary association. It is made up of people who have gathered together voluntarily because they agree with the beliefs and goals and polity of that denomination. If one does not agree with a particular denomination's beliefs, goals, and polity, one has other alternatives. This is even more true today with regard to homosexuality, as most of the other mainline denominations welcome practicing homosexuals in membership and ministry. There are other alternatives to The United Methodist Church." (p. 19)

So, according to Rev. Lambrecht, and probably according to most laity and clergy of Protestant churches, and most certainly according to most sociologists of American religion and society, the Church (including The United Methodist Church) is a voluntary association. The Church—present in the world through denominations and congregations—is represented there in the neighborhood with its faith and practices. You are free to join that particular congregation on your own free will—if you approve of what you observe in the local church; and you are free to voluntarily depart—if you disapprove of what you observe in the local church. Hence, according to widespread conventional wisdom, the Church is a voluntary association.

Viewing the Church as voluntary association carries some very serious, even devastating, consequences for the Church herself. It places the Church at the mercy of popular opinion and/or the market. It allows people to freely join the Church (for good reasons or bad) and depart from the Church (for good reasons or bad). For the most part, it deprives the Church of the practice denominational and congregational discipline. It takes away from the Church's pastors and priests the will and the willingness to engage, on Christian terms, the moral and political issues of the day. Indeed, the Church as voluntary association will possess very little public gravitas. Mainly, it will exist to service the perceived religious needs of its own people and otherwise try to make the world a better place. Obviously, a voluntary-association take on the Church is not a very elevated view of the the Body of Christ in this world.

While many call the Church a voluntary association, that involves a misunderstanding of the Church. As United Methodists consider the Church, we should think about Holy Baptism and consider The Baptismal Covenant. When baptized into Jesus Christ and His Church, we enter The

Baptismal Covenant. In that covenant, God promises us "[initiation] into Christ's holy [C]hurch," "[incorporation] into God's mighty acts of salvation," and "new birth through water and the Spirit." "All this is God's gift, offered to us without price." (p. 33, The United Methodist Hymnal) In other words, through baptism into Christ and His Church, God promises us the gift, and joy, of salvation.

In The Baptismal Covenant, in response to God's offer of the grace that saves, we United Methodists make six (6) promises to be responsive and responsible. Through these solemn vows, we promise to: (1) "renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of [our] sin;" (2) "accept the freedom and power God gives [us] to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves;" (3) "confess Jesus Christ as [our] Savior, put [our] whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as [our] Lord, in union with the [C]hurch which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races;" (4) "remain faithful members of Christ's holy [C]hurch and serve as Christ's representatives in the world;" (5) "be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in [our] power to strengthen its ministries;" and (6) "[faithfully participate] in [a local church's] ministries by [our] prayers, [our] presence, [our] gifts, [our] service, and [our] witness." Again, those are our vows. Those are our promises. Those are our responsibilities. Those are our duties—to Christ and His Church.

To this pastor, those vows are sturdy. When those vows are made, they are not made to be broken. They are in place. They demand much from us. That is, they are not temporary, nice-sounding words that are in play until we become disenchanted with the denomination or congregation in which they were first read to us. In other words, The Baptismal Covenant (under Christ's Lordship) is bigger than we are. Through this covenant, God leads us, directs us, corrects us, and even compels us to act for reform. The Baptismal Covenant is not ours to enter here; leave for over there; stay for a while, and then go elsewhere.

So, is the Church a voluntary association? I, for one, do not think so.

The Church-as-voluntary-association basically suggests that its laity and clergy are free to come and go as they please—as long as they have really good "Biblical" or "spiritual" reasons for doing so. (Such as a General Conference voting to accept homosexual behavior as morally legitimate, the ordination of persons who practice homosexual behavior, the "marriage" of same-sex couples, and/or the promotion of abortion on demand.) Letting go of the voluntary-association assumptions, one is left with The Baptismal Covenant—through which God demands much more from us, for the good of His Church and for our own good. (PTS) ♥

LETTERS TO LIFEWATCH

September 24, 2012

Dear Rev. Stallsworth:

I was moved by the testimony about abortion as a solution to pregnancy resulting from rape in the letter written by Nicole W. Cooley and published in Lifewatch (09/01/12). This

woman, a United Methodist, recounts her experience of having an abortion (which was recommended by her pastor) after she became pregnant after being raped. Her pastor had assured her that abortion would help her to get on with her life and move past the rape. But, as the author of the letter reported, "The abortion felt like being raped again, only worse, because this time I had consented to the assault." She went on to say that the church should promote life-affirming options instead of referring women for abortions, which may further traumatize them and cause them to believe wrongly that God wished them to do so.

It is interesting that Ms. Cooley's letter was published at roughly the same time that US Representative Todd Akin (R-MO), who was a candidate for the US Senate in that state, was being chastised for a response he gave in an interview about the same subject (08/19/12). He was asked whether he would support induced abortion for women who became pregnant following rape. He responded by saying that "legitimate rape" results in physiological changes in the victim that prevent pregnancy. This statement is politically and scientifically incorrect; and, when this was pointed out to him, Rep. Akin promptly apologized for the error and withdrew the statement. However, whether or not he said it explicitly, his comments implied that he does not believe that induced abortion is the best solution for a woman who becomes pregnant as a result of rape. For expressing or even implying this politically incorrect position, Rep. Akin became a pariah not only among his opponents in the Democratic Party, but also among many of his would-be supporters in the Republican Party. In fact, many establishment Republicans urged him to withdraw from the race, and many stopped supporting him financially.

Let's think about this.

Fact: Induced abortion involves the killing of a human being (the fetus).

Fact: There are three human beings involved when rape results in pregnancy:

The woman who is the victim of the rape.

The man who commits the rape.

The fetus whose life began as a result of the rape.

To maintain that induced abortion is a proper response to pregnancy that results from rape, one must assume that abortion will in some way be helpful or even therapeutic for the woman. (For example, the position taken by Ms. Cooley's former pastor.) There is no study on women who have become pregnant as a result of rape that compares the long-term psychological consequences of induced abortion versus continuing the pregnancy (whether the mother raises the child or relinquishes the infant). In the absence of such data, one cannot assume that an abortion will erase or assuage the tragic psychological impact of rape. In fact, the knowledge that she has been complicit in the death of her unborn baby may, for some women, compound the psychological trauma associated with the rape.

An induced abortion does not punish the man who committed the rape, and it does not prevent him from committing a similar crime in the future.

The one thing that is an undeniable consequence of an induced abortion is the death of a completely innocent victim of the rape, the fetus.

Ms. Cooley's letter, perhaps more eloquently and more persuasively than Rep. Akin's comments, supports a life-affirming position about the tragedy of rape and a pregnancy that might ensue. However, both Ms. Cooley and Rep. Akin are correct. The Republican establishment—indeed, all of us—should learn a lesson from them.

Faithfully,

Watson A. Bowes Jr., MD/Emeritus Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology/ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill/211 Huntington Drive/Chapel Hill, NC 27514/(919)929-3323/wbowes@gmail.com ♥

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• In an article entitled "Church Agencies Look Forward" (by Linda Bloom, UMNS) in Newscope (August 29, 2012), Rev. Larry Hollon, the General Secretary of United Methodist Communications, makes this off-handed comment: "[Because the mainline denominations, as a whole,] 'have lost their voice in public conversation and in cultural influence'..." What should this be called? A candid admission? Better yet, a truthful word. (It would be interesting to hear what the General Board of Church and Society—its executives, staff, and directors—would say in response to Rev. Hollon. After all, Church and Society aims a barrage of words at the public arena most days of each work week.) There are historical and theological reasons for the loss of the mainline Protestant voices, including the United Methodist voice, in the public square. And, if I may be bold to assert, the public square is diminished by the absence of these voices. But this situation need not remain as it is. If United Methodists would take the Church seriously, including her doctrine and her moral teaching, this pastor believes that our public voice just might return. First, it is a matter of making first things first.

• "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." That is the claim of The Book of Discipline (2008), Paragraph 120 at p. 87. Derived from The Great Commission of our Lord (Matthew 28), our denomination's mission statement, for better or for worse, has added "for the transformation of the world" to the words of our Lord. "For the transformation of the world." That is a mighty tall order. But at least that mission is unambiguous about exactly what is to be transformed: the world. In so many instances, it seems that the opposite is happening: that is, the world is transforming the Church and Christians. But our hope is that God will make disciples, through The United Methodist Church, who through faithfulness in discipleship, will serve as a means for God transforming the world.

• *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* "Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail." ♥

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