

## 2008 LIFEWATCH SERMON: “THE POINTLESSNESS OF LIFEWATCH”

*On January 22, Bishop William H. Willimon preached this sermon during the 2008 Lifewatch Service of Worship in the Simpson Memorial Chapel of The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. Bp. Willimon is the episcopal leader of the Birmingham Area of The United Methodist Church.*

“[T]he Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14, RSV)

This morning I wish to speak to you about the uselessness of this organization.

Recently I surveyed sermons preached during the first seventy-five years of Duke University Chapel. Taking particular note of those sermons that attempted to lure listeners toward the Christian faith, sermons that practiced apologetics, I uncovered two predominate ways that we preachers make the Christian faith “credible” to skeptical, modern people: (1) The gospel is reasonable, and (2) the gospel is useful. [1] It is the second mode of apologetics that has now captured American homiletics—the gospel commended on the basis of its utility.

### PRAGMATISM RULES

We North Americans are relentlessly pragmatic, utilitarian, and practical. When confronted by some faith claim, we ask, “Yes, but is this practical? Will it work? Can I dice julienne fries with it? Will it fold out into a bed?”

I attend a service that is allegedly the worship of the God of Israel and the Church. And yet I hear little about God in the service (save that God is pleased as can be with us and is just dying to spend as much time as possible with us). After service, I make the mildest of critiques to the pastor. His defense for this liturgical sacrilege?

“Bishop, look at the full parking lot. This worship works!”

And who can argue with what works?

King Ahaz has a problem. Israel’s enemies are at the gates. All Jerusalem is in terror. (Isaiah 7:10ff.) As Richard Nixon called in Billy Graham, King Ahaz calls in the prophet Isaiah.

“Help! Tell God to get busy and save us during our national security crisis!”

The prophet speaks, “God will help you. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, God with us.”

Ahaz says, “I ask for help. God gives me a baby? What the heck am I to do with a baby? I need an army, not a baby!”

I read that text less than a fortnight ago in a little rural church. These people—ravaged by Katrina, living in FEMA trailers dumped on them by the Bush Administration—need an efficient government. And God sends them a baby?

A pastor reads Matthew’s story of the Nativity. A hand goes up. A kid asks, “What did the Wise Men expect baby Jesus to do with them gifts? The gold, the frankincense and myrrh. What good was them to a baby?”

Held close to that kid’s heart was a copy of The Philosophy of William James.

Lifewatch is called to care for life, prophetically to hold up before us our complicity in the sin of abortion. Our “Culture of Death,” as Jimmy Carter calls us, has many dimensions, multiple sources. [2] Just one of those causes is the degradation of the gospel of Jesus Christ by our indigenous pragmatism. When “What’s the truth?” becomes “Will this work?,” we are on a slippery slope sliding from the nonutilitarian Jesus into the godless realm of William James (1842-1910). [3]

I heard a politician claim that a majority of Americans are against abortion. That is gratifying, but ultimately uninteresting, in a faith that judges itself by revelation rather than by what a majority of Americans can swallow without choking.

I heard a sermon on the controversial topic of the forgiveness of enemies. The preacher wisely noted that enemy love is the distinguishing feature of the message of Jesus, particularly when compared with other religions. Then the preacher unwisely listed the alleged benefits of forgiveness—claiming that forgiveness brings out the best in the oppressor, helps us discover the delightful humanity in our enemies, and so forth.

Where does Jesus commend forgiveness, or nonviolence, or His cross, as helpful techniques for getting whatever it is we wanted before we met Jesus?

Jesus does not recommend forgiveness of enemies as a nice way to make essentially nice people even nicer. He simply commands. “Forgive!” Because this is the way the

true and living God is, and this is what one must do to worship that God.

“In God We Trust” proclaims a billboard on my way to work. “God Bless America, God Bless Our Troops.” But when the chips were down, and our national security was threatened, I do not recall any reaching for the cross. We hoisted the flag. We did not ask God to save us; we called out the Army. After all (at least through World War II), that worked.

At the beginning of adulthood, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) noted that so many bright people in his age were devoting themselves to making people’s lives easier, inventing labor-saving devices. Kierkegaard said that he would take another path. He would be a Christian preacher, thereby helping to make people’s lives more difficult.

Some of you are mystified why poor Pat Robertson would endorse, for President, a man like Rudy Giuliani—a politico whose adulterous, sleazy career is clearly counter to everything Robertson believes. Pat explains it is because, while values are important, the Bush Administration has made him love effectiveness even more than values, and Rudy knows how to get things done. (This brings to mind Luther’s dictum: better to be “ruled by a smart Turk than a dumb Christian.”)

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus was offered some very attractive means of loving the world—stones into bread (think what we could do for the hungry, if Jesus did that), political power (imagine the good we could do for the poor with a really godly administration), and impressive spiritual feats (of the sort any preacher could ride into glory). To all these offers of effectiveness, Jesus simply said “No!”

I am told that one of the reasons why Islam specifically rejects the notion that Jesus died on a cross is that it is unthinkable that a gifted, truthful prophet (which Islam believes Jesus to be) could fail. Which explains why it is difficult to explain to Muslims why God’s condescending, ineffective willingness to be crucified is, for Christians, the most glorious testimony of Jesus’ divinity.

#### IMAGINATION: NARROWED OR EXPANDED

Built into the way of Christ is a kind of uselessness, or at least what appears to me as ineffectiveness. Though here, it must be admitted that claims of “ineffectiveness” are related to prior assumptions about the world. I confess that—when faced with the gospel and my response is “That’s not a realistic course of action”—what I mean is my imagination is so truncated by early 21st century North American pragmatism that I have a very thin definition of God, and my “reality” is severely reduced.

A graduate student I know did her dissertation on why women in North Carolina have abortions. The predominate reason? “I had no other realistic alternative.”

Alas, what these women may mean is, “Given the limits of my imagination, given my illusion that life can be lived without cost or pain, given the limitation of my church which issues ethical slogans but will not pay the cost or risk the pain to help anybody live up to those ethics—I had no other alternative.”

But the Church is here to stoke, to fund, and to fuel

our moral imaginations, to rescue us from the lackluster lives produced by Benjamin Franklin’s bland Unitarian utilitarianism.

Beverly Wildung Harrison (in Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion [Boston: Beacon Press, 1983]) writes, “As the gestating fetus matures biologically, moving toward the point of functional maturation, the pregnant woman has good reason to impute claims to the fetus... But from a moral point of view, there can be no ‘demand’ that she take her own moral claim to life and well being less seriously or as something readily to be discarded. What she—and the rest of us—need to understand [is] that it is best, where possible, to avoid living into a situation where such conflicting claims arise.” (p. 229)

But how on earth do we avoid putting ourselves into situations where such “conflicting claims” arise—if we follow Jesus Christ? Has not God in Jesus Christ put us in a position with God and neighbor where conflicting claims necessarily arise? Note how easily Wildung Harrison glides past the phrase “moral claim to life and well being,” without examining the possible vacuity of her meager definition of “life.” Note how carefully she qualifies “life” with the fuzzy “well being,” as if she inchoately knows that life, particularly young, vulnerable, dependent, new life, is always a conflicting claim upon those of us who are already here and well fixed.

Christianity is lifetime training in wanting lives full of all the conflict, the pain, the cost, the sacrifice, and the engagement that worship of the Trinity requires. The abortion debate has a way of smoking out our theological defects. A church that lacks the imagination, that is engendered by the conflicts that arise out of a Christian definition of reality, is doomed to nothing but accommodation to the governmentally sanctioned status quo. [4]

Almighty God promises us that we will never be thrown into conflict greater than God allowed to afflict his only begotten Son.

There, do you feel better now?

How well I remember a protracted abortion debate at the South Carolina Annual Conference. After much talk and posturing on all sides, my old college religion professor rose and offered a resolution that, in the name of Jesus, all the churches and church-sponsored agencies for children in our conference offer housing, financial support, love, and care for any young woman who wants to bring a baby to term, but who has not the spiritual or financial resources to do so.

The resolution was soundly defeated—not because anybody argued it was not true or not Biblical, but simply because it was not practical. [5]

Martin Luther King, Jr. practiced non-violence, not as an effective strategy, but rather because, as a Christian, this was the only means available to him to change the world.

Not long ago, when I mentioned to a friend in North Carolina that I was to speak to you, he responded that Paul Stallworth was one of the most intelligent pastors he knew—and the least sanguine and sensible. I responded that the remarkable thing was that Paul would take that as a compliment!

So we are down in Haiti, working with students at a mission operated by a woman from Virginia (even more strange than Paul), who left everything she had and went to work with the poor in Haiti in the name of Jesus.

We are riding out to the worksite in an old pickup truck, singing Jesus songs, with this woman driving down a sorry road at a high rate of speed. I detect an odd clanking sound coming from one of the rear wheels. I beat on the roof of the cab. She finally stops. Well, we find that the rear wheel was just before shearing off because the tire had been put on without tightening the lug nuts.

I am incensed. Can you imagine putting these college students' lives in danger, to say nothing of mine? Are we crazy? Is this missionary crazy?

A student philosophizes, "Put this in proper context. We are under the care of someone who actually believes in a God who would order her, at midlife, to leave a million-dollar home in Virginia, learn French, move to Haiti, and run an orphanage. So I would say that there is a good chance that she will be unimpressed by your definition of 'crazy.'"

#### CAPTURED BY THE BABY

We are caught in the season after the Epiphany. We wanted divine help, and all we got was a baby. We have had our lives captured, commandeered by the baby. We worship a baby, giving our gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What will the babe do without inept witness? God only knows. It is not for us to worry about results. The end is in the hands of the babe.

Ah Lifewatch. Bless you for your pointless, useless, crazy-in-the-name-of-Jesus work among us. [6] I cannot figure out anything I use you for to make my life more meaningful or easier, my work in Alabama more productive and efficient.

I mean that as high, peculiarly Christian theological compliment.

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[1] William H. Willimon, ed., Sermons from Duke Chapel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). [2] Carter calls abortion a tragedy "brought about by a combination of human errors." Jimmy Carter, Our Endangered Values (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). [3] Our utilitarianism has nothing to do with John Wesley's "practical Christianity." When Wesley said "practical," he meant the embodiment of the peculiar vision that God is Trinity. [4] Sociologist Rodney Stark shows rather convincingly (in his chapter, "Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion") that a major factor in Christianity's spectacular defeat of the Roman Empire was the dramatic difference in the way Christians responded to the victims of the plagues that swept the Empire between 100 and 300 A.D. Christians, unlike wealthy Romans, stayed in the cities and cared for the suffering and dying whether the victims were pagan or Christian. Bishop Dionysius bragged that, "The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner," confident that the death of one who died in caring for another was the highest form of martyrdom. This witness proved to be too much for Classical paganism to resist. Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). [5] Because the Church believes in a different definition of "reality" than the world's

predominate realities, the Church is able to conceive of answers to the world's problems that the world cannot conceive. As Stanley Hauerwas says, "The church, as a society of the liberated, is thus the necessary paradigm that can offer us imaginative possibilities of social relations others [had] not thought possible." (The Peaceable Kingdom [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1986], p. 76) Some years ago, the then editor of The Christian Century told me that about the only pro-life articles he received from mainline Protestants were written by Methodists. I wonder if we failed to devise and recommend practical, specific, institutional structures that would enable Methodism's basic pro-life sentiments to survive. Perhaps the time spent by Lifewatch in legislative agitation would have been better spent helping United Methodist congregations figure out ways to embody, in congregational life together, their Christian convictions. [6] Will the theological integrity of Lifewatch be compromised by success? It looks to me like pro-lifers are gaining ground not only on the United States Supreme Court but also (as a friend reminds me) in Hollywood (in movies like "Knocked Up," "Juno," and "Bella). What if Lifewatch finally got what it wants? Christians seem to fare better, theologically, when we are in the minority.

### DOCTRINE, DISSENT, AND DEFENSE: THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S SOCIAL PRINCIPLE ON ABORTION (161J)

*One method of conducting theological dialogue on a topic addressed by official, church teaching is this: first, state the church's doctrine in question; second, offer a dissent in critique of the present doctrine; and third, put forward a defense of the standing doctrine. Lifewatch used this method to offer dialogue on United Methodism's current teaching on homosexual practice (see Lifewatch [December 1, 2005] and Lifewatch [June 1, 2007]).*

*Below, Lifewatch will use the same method to structure dialogue on The United Methodist Church's current, official social principle on abortion. As you will note, this way of structuring the dialogue places the Lifewatch community in the position of offering a dissent in response to present denominational teaching on abortion.*

*Lifewatch is most grateful to Rev. Alan Delamater for offering a spirited defense of United Methodism's basic, official teaching on abortion. —Editor*

#### DOCTRINE: PARAGRAPH 161J

The United Methodist Church's social principle on abortion is found in the Social Principles in The Book of Discipline (2004) (Paragraph 161J, p. 102). It reads in full: "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.”

#### **DISSENT: A CRITIQUE OF PARAGRAPH 161J**

by Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth

First of all, a word about the American-societal context of Paragraph 161J is in order. In 1973, the United States Supreme Court handed down Roe v. Wade, which, in effect, overturned all state abortion laws. Roe and an accompanying decision made abortion on demand, more or less, the law of the land. The New York Times immediately declared the matter of abortion in America “settled.” Major institutions of American public life—from colleges and universities to Hollywood to national medical associations to the mainstream media—accepted this judicial settlement and began advancing an ethos of “choice” with regard to abortion. In short order, abortion providers went to work. And there was more than a little work to be done in a society that was in the midst of a “sexual revolution.” From 1973 until the present, over 47 million abortions have been performed in American society. Again, since 1973, because of abortion, over 47,000,000 unborn children have lost their lives and millions of women have been severely harmed in countless ways. Whenever United Methodists discuss and debate abortion, whenever General Conferences in recent times have made decisions on the United Methodist social principle on abortion, this has been the societal context for United Methodist deliberation and legislation.

#### **The Present Principle’s Strengths**

To its credit, the United Methodist social principle on abortion (Paragraph 161J) does not depict abortion as a trivial matter of consumer preference. Again and again, the paragraph in question sets forth the moral gravity of abortion and the issues that surround it. Consider the paragraph’s moral and theological claims. Life’s beginning and ending are “God-given boundaries of

human existence.” We “now have the awesome power to determine...whether new individuals will be born.” “Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.” We “respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother...” “We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control...” “[W]e unconditionally reject [abortion] 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 the practice [with rare exceptions]” “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 all who are involved in circumstances in which abortion is an option].” “We particularly encourage...the option of adoption.” “Governmental laws and regulations do not provide all the guidance...” “[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)

Throughout Paragraph 161J, in moral claim after moral claim, The United Methodist Church generally places a moral presumption against abortion.

#### **The Principle’s Mistaken Sentence**

However, one sentence in Paragraph 161J undermines all the other sentences of the paragraph. The mistaken sentence, in full, reads: “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.” This single sentence tends to undo all the moral-theological teaching that the other sentences of the paragraph assert. Comments on the three major segments of this sentence will explain how that happens.

“In continuity with past Christian teaching...” These two prepositional phrases make Paragraph 161J’s only reference to historic Christian teaching on abortion. As a matter of historical fact, the universal Church through the ages has asserted substantive, consistent teaching against abortion. Since its apostolic origins to the present, the Church (except for contemporary liberal Protestantism in the West) has consistently preached, taught, and ministered to protect mothers and their unborn children from abortion. “[P]ast Christian teaching” has not been primarily or even secondarily occupied with establishing the hard cases in which abortion would be considered morally acceptable, as these two prepositional phrases suggest. “[P]ast Christian teaching” has generally defended mothers and their unborn children from abortion.

“[W]e recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion...” This statement contains much ambiguity. The phrase “tragic conflicts of life with life” is the source of the ambiguity. What exactly are those conflicts? If abortion is to be justified by the Church—in other words, if the taking of unborn human lives is to be justified by the Church—because of certain “tragic conflicts of life with life,” should not those conflicts be explicitly listed? Since the statement does not list the conflicts that justify abortion, moral ambiguity reigns, and moral promiscuity follows. The United Methodist Church’s moral-theological reasoning and guidance

should be much more exacting than that.

“[I]n such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures.” This sentence states that the moral ambiguity of the former sentence should be acknowledged and enforced by civil law. In law, the “tragic conflicts” that are not listed then become all “tragic conflicts” or, even worse, all perceived “tragic conflicts.” So, according to the sentence, all perceived “tragic conflicts of life with life” need to have abortion as a legally available means of resolution.

### Results of the Mistaken Sentence

What are the results of Paragraph 161J containing and maintaining this mistaken sentence?

First of all, this sentence, intentionally or not, becomes a way for The United Methodist Church to support abortion-on-demand rights in the political and legal spheres of American society. It permits the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries to belong to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), an interreligious coalition that strives to maintain and advance all abortion rights in American society. In this way, The United Methodist Church subcontracts its public witness on abortion to a pro-choice political lobby.

While attempting to offer nuanced, moral teaching on abortion that most United Methodists would find acceptable, Paragraph 161J actually makes The United Methodist Church double-minded on abortion. This is how. Paragraph 161J teaches United Methodists, inside the church, that abortion is a morally grave matter that should be generally avoided. At the same time, Paragraph 161J sustains a witness in the general society that works to maintain and advance abortion rights. So United Methodism’s moral-theological teaching on abortion is inconsistent with its public witness for abortion rights. Again, this is made possible by the aforementioned mistaken sentence.

Unfortunately, the double-mindedness of Paragraph 161J—moral teaching for United Methodists and abortion-rights lobbying in the society—helps to conserve the generally pro-choice status quo of American society. While our church maintains this studied ambiguity on abortion, the numbers of actual abortions exceed 1,000,000 each year.

### What Should Be Done?

To correct this moral ambiguity in Paragraph 161J, the mistaken sentence should be edited by General Conference 2008. One way to improve the sentence would be to change the wording from “tragic conflicts of life with life” to “tragic conflicts of the physical life of the unborn with the physical life of the mother.” This change would minimize the moral ambiguity in the present paragraph, and it would make United Methodism’s moral teaching on abortion more consistent with its public witness on abortion. This would help our church’s moral teaching on abortion to have more public influence, for the common good of American society. Furthermore, this

*“[I]f the taking of unborn human lives is to be justified by the Church—because of certain ‘tragic conflicts of life with life,’ should not those conflicts be explicitly listed?”*

change would bring Paragraph 161J more in line with the universal Church’s ecumenical, historic teaching on life that aims to defend mothers and their unborn children from abortion.

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### DEFENSE: AN AFFIRMATION

by Rev. Alan Delamater

I am drawn to affirm the core principles on which the present United Methodist Social Principle on abortion was originally written. I applaud the ongoing prayerful discernment about the statement over the years. First adopted as a Social Principle in 1972, it has been reexamined, amended, and adopted at every quadrennial General Conference since.

Abortion is an emotional subject—one that has, regrettably, been politicized and polarized since making its way into the public arena. Those who seek easy certainty in this matter by claiming they know when life begins avoid the more deeply faithful search for where life and love are *best served* in the individual circumstances of each conception and of each of the lives involved.

This does not mean that we apply some form of moral relativism to the life circumstances of abortion. Rather, we apply a deeply spiritual and faithful application of our own Wesleyan heritage by asking questions such as those suggested in our quadrilateral: What can we bring to this dilemma by consulting scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, and by listening closely to the voice of God’s Spirit who is ever alongside our journey? When one engages in a thorough discernment of this issue by applying the quadrilateral, it can remove most, if not all, ambiguity.

It is my intent to examine the Social Principle statement’s relevancy as a guide for United Methodists being ever mindful that it continues to evolve. History has taught us that if we place ourselves under the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit, God will always bring us to a more perfect understanding of our human calling to love one another as we are loved.

### Historical Reflection

Contextually, the statement’s adoption in 1972 occurred at a time when few legal and medically safe abortions occurred in the United States. Legality and regulation were in the hands of individual states.

It would be a mistake to believe that, prior to Roe v. Wade, abortion itself was vastly less prevalent in our society, or that the lives lost and the women harmed, less significant. John W. Klotz, Ph.D., in a work entitled, A Christian View of Abortion, published in 1973 by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, reminds us of the context in which this Social Principle was formed: “One particular concern is the number of illegal or criminal abortions that are being performed under our present laws. It is believed that between 10 and 20 criminal abortions are performed every 15 minutes in the

United States. Estimates of 2,500 per day are not unusual, and it may be that the actual number is a great deal larger.” Added to this number would be the number of legal and medical abortions in states that permitted it. In addition, Lawrence Lader wrote in his book simply entitled Abortion, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1966, that “almost half of all childbearing deaths in New York City can be attributed to abortion alone.” (p. 3)

Whenever United Methodists discuss and debate abortion, whenever General Conferences in the years since 1972 have made decisions on the United Methodist Social Principle on abortion, this has been the context for deliberation and legislation. Abortion has never been an insignificant occurrence in society.

### **Faithful Discernment**

The brief Social Principle statement on abortion is expanded upon in The United Methodist Church’s Resolution #25—“Responsible Parenthood.” This resolution affirms the church’s call to discuss from a position that considers the circumstances of the individual decision-maker without guilt or shame urging serious discernment: “We reject the simplistic answers to the problem of abortion that, on the one hand, regard all abortions as murders, or, on the other hand, regard abortions as medical procedures without moral significance.” (The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church [2004], p. 129)

The Social Principle has consistently called for a serious and faithful reflection on the sacred dimensions of personhood. The statement claims the highest ground by stating that it does not seek to define when life begins in order to avoid the difficult and soul-searching inquiry necessary to make a choice when called for. It does not pit the mother against the fetus, but rather acknowledges women as moral agents able to make informed decisions.

Of course, men are also called to accountability regarding this issue. Men must assume their responsibility as partners and co-creators to ensure each child has a healthy and nurtured childhood and adolescence—not just participate in their procreation. In the absence of men’s willingness to hold one another accountable and a societal norm which clearly demands the same life-changing responsibility from us for the nurture and commitment to the full-hearted support of this yet potential life, the best response by men is to support the women in our lives and communities as they make critical decisions marking their lives forever.

Social Principles are finite guiding statements written by human beings. Sometimes, when applied to the human condition, the principle itself may in part inform the decision. Other factors may also come into play, too. In many other dimensions of life, to seek absolute answers has the unsought consequence of closing us off from a discourse in which God may speak in the “present” of our living. I believe this possibility of God speaking exists only in the struggle itself.

We attempt always to honor the Hebraic/Christian truth that all of life is sacred. Due to the nature of our existence, though, we are at times placed into situations in which we cannot avoid exercising inherent power that God bestows upon us as human beings. The exercise of

that power needs always to be carried out with all the humility, care, and wisdom we can muster and never without prayerfully inviting God into partnership with us, especially as our decisions have the capacity to affect the lives of others.

### **What Should Be Done...If Anything?**

I believe that our deepest calling as United Methodists lies in living out the values implicit in this Social Principle. It is not so much God’s will that we talk the talk, but that we walk the walk. If any language needs adding to the statement, though, it would address prevention and care. For example:

>We need to ensure that all women and girls around the globe have access to education, leadership opportunities, and health care including reproductive health care. Both women and men should have access to contraception.

>We need to stop the characterization of unwanted pregnancies as the result of simple promiscuity or irresponsible sexual behavior of subsections of our society and return to a concept that envisions all children, planned or unplanned, as the children of our “tribe,” nurtured and raised to each one’s full potential.

But, more important, we need to honor the love we receive in Jesus that always calls us to compassionate responses toward all people, whether or not we agree with the choices they make.

*Rev. Delamater has served on the General Board of Church and Society for eight years and currently chairs the Human Welfare Work Area of the Board. Following an eight-year term as a District Superintendent, he is now appointed as the senior pastor of the Shenendehowa United Methodist Church in Clifton Park, NY. He has also worked as a social worker/family therapist at The Charlton School, a residential treatment facility for adolescent girls, and as a therapist at a Samaritan Counseling Center.*

## **WHAT RCRC DOES**

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) is involved in many tasks. But fundamentally, RCRC is dedicated to preserving the right to obtain an abortion. According to the RCRC’s president and CEO, The Reverend Carlton W. Veazey, “RCRC was founded in 1973 to safeguard the newly won constitutional right to abortion.” ([www.rcrc.org/about/index.cfm](http://www.rcrc.org/about/index.cfm), 12/10/06) Theologically, morally, politically, and legally, RCRC works to maintain abortion rights.

Consider this picture. A facility that provides abortions goes about its business, day after day. RCRC works to help make sure this facility stays open so that abortion services are available to those who would desire them. Theologically, RCRC strives to assure the religious community that abortion rights are ecumenically and interreligiously supported. That is, RCRC provides theological and religious legitimization and cover for abortion rights. Morally, RCRC instructs that moral agency or decision-making authority can and should override any concern for the unborn child. Politically, RCRC lobbies for pro-choice legislation and against pro-life legislation. Also, politically speaking, RCRC advances the notion of the “naked public square,” by attempting to rule out-of-bounds

the public expression of religiously grounded and motivated pro-life claims. Legally, RCRC submits briefs that encourage courts to decide for abortion rights. Again, consider the picture. In part because of RCRC's labors, the abortion-providing facility continues its work, day after day.

Because the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights does what it does, United Methodist institutions—namely, the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries—should be withdrawn from it. May God grant General Conference 2008 the moral clarity and strength to withdraw our agencies from RCRC. (PTS)♥

## HOLY CONFERENCING AT 2008 GENERAL CONFERENCE

It seems that, whether by design or by chance, The United Methodist Church is becoming a denomination in which the legitimate, civil debate of controversial subjects is being marginalized. Official publications of the denomination tend to shy away from pro-and-con articles, and our church's leaders seem committed only to multi-point programs of congregational and denominational renewal. As a result, for example, there is now very little public discussion in the church's official structure of issues related to human life and abortion.

But every four years General Conference mandates that United Methodists, ready or not, engage in Christian conferencing and even debate some very difficult matters.

Since General Conference 2008 is just around the corner, its organizers are probably wise to be concerned about the general tone of the upcoming conference's public discourse. Their concern has turned to action, for

they have adopted "Guidelines for Holy Conferencing—What God Expects of Us."

Here are the guidelines:

"Every person is a child of God. Always speak respectfully. One can disagree without being disagreeable.

"As you patiently listen and observe the behavior of others, be open to the possibility that God can change the views of any or all parties in the discussion.

"Listen patiently before formulating responses.

"Strive to understand the experience out of which others have arrived at their views.

"Be careful in how you express personal offense at differing opinions. Otherwise dialogue may be inhibited.

"Accurately reflect the views of others when speaking. This is especially important when you disagree with that position.

"Avoid using inflammatory words, derogatory names, or an excited and angry voice.

"Avoid making generalizations about individuals and groups. Make your point with specific evidence and examples.

"Make use of facilitators and mediators.

"Remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God—not by the flaws we discover, or think we discover, in their views and actions." (United Methodist Reporter, 08/17/07)

To be sure, these are helpful guidelines for the public dialogue that will be found at General Conference.

However, it would be faithful to the Gospel to remember John Paul II's brief description of dialogue. He once declared that dialogue is "a shared search for truth" ("A Matter of the Heart: Celebrating 100 Years of Prayer for Christian Unity," Ecumenical Trends,

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03/01/08

\* Lifewatch Sermon: Bp. Willimon  
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December 2007, p. 15 ). Again, according to John Paul II, dialogue is “a shared search for truth.” From that description, we can gather that dialogue is hard work. Dialogue or holy conferencing or debate among United Methodists is much more than the sharing of personal opinions in the nicest possible way.

“[S]peaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15, RSV) is the Biblical way to describe the task of dialogue in the Church. As God has spoken and now speaks the truth in love to the world, to the Church, and to us, may He help us to speak—and listen to—the truth in love at General Conference 2008 and beyond. (PTS)♥

**YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT**

• Your personal contributions to the ministry of Lifewatch are absolutely essential. General Conference 2008, which begins on April 23 and ends on May 2, poses many challenges to which Lifewatch will respond. Our response will be costly. In addition, the usual bills arrive every month. Therefore, only with your help can Lifewatch accomplish what we are called to do—that is, witness to the Gospel of Life at the 2008 General Conference and beyond. Please send a gift to Lifewatch/ P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Also, you can give to Lifewatch through PayPal on our homepage at [www.lifewatch.org](http://www.lifewatch.org). As always, our heartfelt thanks goes out to you for the generous support you have given, are giving, and will give.

**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.”*

• Dr. Miriam Grossman is a campus psychiatrist at UCLA. Her book, Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student, is creating more than a little interest. In an interview with Milt Rosenberg, on WGN radio on January 22, 2007, Dr. Grossman made some interesting observations on sexuality trends in the United States. With the increased use of birth control in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a “separation between sexuality and procreation.” In a decade or so, society then “separated sexuality and marriage.” Shortly after that, with the rise of casual sex, “sexuality without commitment” was the rage. In our day, the “hook-up culture” on the college campus demonstrates a “sexuality without any feelings of attachment.” Behind this moral degradation, Dr. Grossman suggests, is the role played by Planned Parenthood, which sees sexuality as just another bodily need to be met. Needless to say, in its messages on human sexuality, Planned Parenthood, the largest supplier of abortion services in the United States, is encouraging the demand side of the abortion industry.♥

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