

CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT OVER ABORTION

The 2010 National Right to Life Convention was held in Pittsburgh, PA late in June. In the convention's "We Are the Sheep. Where Are the Shepherds?" seminar, Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth represented Lifewatch. He was asked to respond to this:

"Sometimes a pastor wants to say and do more about abortion, but is opposed by influential leaders or factions within the congregation. How can we help in a situation like that?" In response, Rev. Stallsworth offered the following statement to an imagined congregation.

"It is good to worship with you here, at First Church, on this Sunday morning. Today marks the end of my first year of being your pastor. My family and I are thankful to be in service to this congregation and thankful to be a part of this town.

"Last Sunday, as you may know, I mentioned abortion during a sermon for the first time. Since last Sunday's worship service, a few of you have let it be known that you did not like hearing about abortion from the pulpit. I understand that your previous pastors did not speak about abortion in their sermons, and a few of you do not want me to speak about abortion in my sermons. Here is my pastoral response to your sincere concerns.

"First, I am grateful to have brothers and sisters, in this church, who care enough about First Church to question your pastor on a matter. If you disagree with me about abortion, or any other subject, I invite you to bring your disagreement to me. Let's discuss or debate or even argue (in the best sense of the word) the matter on your mind.

"Furthermore, I promise this: whenever addressing abortion from the pulpit on a Sunday morning, I will schedule a congregational meeting that evening at which you can dissent from what I have preached. Your dissent will be invited and welcomed by your pastor, and your dissent will be answered by your pastor.

"God has called me to be a pastor with you, not a bully over you. Following the example of the Good Shepherd, I am ordained to be a servant leader of this

flock. Any authority or power that I am granted is to be used for the good of this congregation—not for my self-gratification, not for my personal agenda, not for my self-aggrandizement. Therefore, your dissent from my preaching and teaching will be taken seriously and seriously engaged.

"Second, I believe that God's love and God's law, the Bible and the Tradition, as well as moral law and natural law, challenge the Church and the society to protect the unborn child and mother. This is the Church's truth about life. My challenge is to propose to you the truth about life—not impose this truth on you. To propose is to offer the truth about life to you, and then allow God to apply it to your hearts and minds. To impose this truth on you is to crush your conscience and perhaps your spirit. That is not my intent. My aim is to propose the truth about life to you.

"Third, allow me to speak very candidly to you. I believe that abortion is the greatest and gravest problem facing American society today. Since 1973, there have been over 50 million abortions in our country. Each year there are over one million. Each day there are over 3,000. Each abortion ends in the destruction of a tiny, innocent boy or girl and the harm of the mother. Each abortion represents an assault on the human dignity given by God to each unborn child and mother.

"Consider earlier issues. Slavery and racism were serious enough matters to be opposed by the American Church—but not very well. The Holocaust against the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s was a serious enough matter to be opposed by the German Church—but not very well. Abortion is a serious enough matter to be opposed by the Church today. Now it is our turn. Now it is my turn. I must try to hold up the truth of the Church's faith. This truth, that I am to hold up, shines hope into First Church, hope into the larger Church, hope into society.

"I cannot remain silent. I must speak. I will lovingly propose the truth about life. I will listen to your dissent, and I will lovingly respond to you. But I am compelled, by the Lord of life, to speak.

"Thank you for listening to my response to your concerns." ♥

AN ECUMENICAL CONFESSION FOR LIFE: TEACHING TRUTHFULLY AND MINISTERING MERCIFULLY

Statement by the National Pro-Life Religious Council, May 1, 2010

Our Situation

In our time and place, the dignity of the human person is under attack. Year after year, horrendously high numbers of abortions are performed in American society. Also, the proliferation of embryonic stem cell research, eugenics, euthanasia, and other similar problems exhibit a casual disregard for human dignity.

Occasionally, in the political arena and within church life, the great debate regarding human dignity surfaces. But most often, literally fearing disagreement, churches simply remain silent about these matters. Through their silence, churches in America prove themselves accommodated to American society and deepen their accommodation. Thus routine attacks on the dignity of the human person, in our country, can continue with few serious challenges.

In our time and place, it is crucial that churches (Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) rely on God's Word and grace, demonstrate the unity that Jesus Christ gives, set aside fearful silence, and strive to teach truthfully and minister mercifully, "in season and out of season" (II Timothy 4:2, RSV here and following), with regard to abortion and other life issues. To assist churches in those tasks, the following ecumenical confession is offered.

Our Confession

I. We believe in the one, true, living, loving, Triune God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God reveals Himself in history—through faithful encounter with Israel, most fully through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) in Word and Sacrament. This God speaks and acts. This God is not the creation of humanity's pious imagination or spiritual enthusiasm.

II. We believe that God the Father is the Creator of humanity—that is, of each and every human person. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) People are not just products of biological processes.

III. We believe that God the Son, Jesus Christ, is the Redeemer of the world. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself..." (II Corinthians 5:19) Because of the Redeemer Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, no person in this world is without reason to hope. Even those who have participated in abortion or other degradations of humanity, in any

way, are lavished with divine forgiveness upon repentance.

IV. We believe that God the Spirit gathers the Church to teach God's truth and to minister God's mercy. "[S]peaking the truth in love..." (Ephesians 4:15) "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40) The Church has no authority to develop teachings or initiate ministries that contradict God's Word and will.

V. We believe that God commands the Church universal, for the sake of justice, to protect and defend the unborn child and mother from abortion—and other weak, defenseless, and voiceless people from violence. This divine command has been heard and understood since the earliest days of the apostolic Church. "You shall not kill." (Exodus 20:13) In a society that now hosts 1,200,000 abortions a year, in a society that convinces many of its citizens that a US Supreme Court decision that permits abortion also makes it right, in a society that seduces some churches to forget and/or resist God's Word about life, the Church's message and ministry on life will often be rejected.

VI. We believe that God calls the Church to be public about her position on life and abortion. "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13-14) When the Church is silent or inactive on abortion, she rebels against the Lord of Life and His Gospel. Because Jesus Christ is Life, and came that we might have life, His Gospel can be called a "Gospel of Life."

VII. We believe that God, at The End of History, "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4) Until the glorious End, the Church will neither grow weary nor pause for rest in proclaiming and celebrating the Gospel of Life, and serving the Lord of Life.

Signed by NPRC Board Members: Georgette Forney, Anglicans for Life; Rev. J. Kirk van der Swaagh, Conservative Congregational Christian Conference; Rev. Terry Gensemer, International Communion of Charismatic Episcopal Church; Dennis DiMauro, Lutherans for Life; Marie Bowen, Presbyterians for Life; Fr. Frank Pavone, Priests for Life; Ernie Ohlhoff, Outreach Department of the National Right to Life Committee; Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth, Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality/Lifewatch; Ed Szeto, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; and Rev. John Brown, United Friends for Life (UCC).

Please copy "An Ecumenical Confession for Life," and distribute copies to clergy and laity, family and friends, and congregations. Thank you.

RANDOM, RELEVANT CONFERENCE NOTES

“The Morally Divided Body: Ethical Disagreement and the Disunity of the Church” was the title and theme of a conference, sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, at Loyola University in Baltimore, MD back in June. What follows are some notable ideas gleaned from the conference itself or generated in the mind of this editor. (Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth)

- * Loyola University/MD has the motto “Strong Truths Well Lived” on its crest. The presenter’s podium at the conference carried this motto for all to see and consider.
- * The historic ecumenical councils concerned not only Church dogma but also Church ethics.
- * Dr. Robert W. Jenson, of the Center of Theological Inquiry (Princeton, NJ), contended that today agreement on the truth of the Nicene Creed is not sufficient for Church fellowship. Agreement only on the creed neglects moral truths, that are essential to Christian faith and practice, that are revealed in the Bible and asserted by Church Tradition.
- * Dr. Jenson asked: Which ethical disagreements are serious enough to divide the Church? He answered: Those disagreements that involve the Ten Commandments.
- * Dr. Jenson noted that so-called “same-sex marriage” is an example of “society’s suicidal attacks on its essential institutions.”
- * A gay man, during a church convention, once confessed to the assembly: “I do not want my church to decide that my sexual practice is okay.”
- * Claims regarding Christian doctrine are true or false. Claims regarding Christian ethics are also true or false; in addition, they involve right and wrong, good and evil. (PTS)
- * The papal office helps to rescue the Church from being both culturally accommodated and culturally irrelevant.
- * At her best, the Church offers “affirmative orthodoxy” (John Allen), which includes moral practices that lead to human flourishing. This “classical Christianity” contributes much more to human flourishing than paganism.
- * Christians committed to the truth of the Gospel need to be open to learning from the other side. For an historical example, Christians who opposed slavery and its racism might have asked, What is to be learned from the Christian slaveholder?
- * Compared to other churches, the Roman Catholic Church is preserving the apostolic faith most faithfully.

- * Dr. Joseph D. Small—of Theology Worship and Education Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (USA)—declared that a denominational assembly of strangers, voting on moral matters, is not the best way for a church to preserve the Christian faith.
- * Dr. Small also contended that alternative cultures, such as renewal ministries, need to be created and nurtured in the various churches. Those cultures should encourage living in the truth, serving the truth, and organizing for service.
- * According to Dr. David S. Yeago (Lutheran Theological Seminary of Columbia, SC), morally divided churches experience an “impaired communion.”
- * “Theological arguments over slavery...were settled by armies rather than by arguments,” because Biblical interpretation failed. Slavery divided churches, then divided the nation, and finally led to a war that took 700,000 lives. (Dr. Beth Barton Schweiger of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville)
- * A “pro-slavery Christianity,” which understood slavery as a human good, once existed in the United States. (Dr. Schweiger)
- * Three lessons from American history regarding slavery and racism are: (1) good theology matters; (2) do not assume easy moral progress (i.e., “They’re dead. We are better.”); and (3) Biblical interpretation can fail because of unacknowledged blinders. (Dr. Schweiger)
- * Contemporary secularism—which claims to be a liberation from Christianity, and which commands “Bow to no god. Serve no master.”—is as intolerant and zealous as any fundamentalism. (Rev. Andrew J. Archie of The Church of St. Michael and St. George, St. Louis, MO)
- * The power of God is greater than the principalities and powers in this world. God’s power is seen most clearly in changed lives. People changed by Christ are people who are much more interesting than a popular-culture icon. (Rev. Archie)
- * It is often said that, in the Church, while we can agree on Christ, we cannot and need not agree on morals or moral law. However, to mention Jesus Christ is to recall the story of Israel and to call into play Israel’s law. Also, Christ’s commands are law, and they are given for our flourishing. (Dr. Yeago)
- * Law proposes. Gospel provides.
- * Morality is embedded in Trinitarian, Christological, sacramental, and ecclesiological doctrines. (Dr. James J. Buckley, Loyola University/MD)
- * On matters of doctrine and morals, the challenge is to “think with the [one, holy, catholic, and apostolic] Church.” (PTS) ♥

A LETTER TO A BISHOP

The following letter is reprinted in the sincere hope that other congregations will write their own letters, about matters of great concern, to their bishops.
(PTS)

Bishop Alfred W. Gwinn, Jr.
The Raleigh Area of The United Methodist Church
P.O. Box 10955
Raleigh, NC 27605
02 December 2009
Dear Bishop Gwinn:

Early Advent grace and peace to you and yours.

First of all, we wish to thank you for your letter of March 4, 2009, which was your response to our letter of January 16, 2009. Your letter was distributed throughout, read by, and received well by St. Peter's United Methodist Church. In your letter you demonstrated an authentic willingness to engage our concerns. We thank God for your thoughtfulness, in both senses of the word, toward us.

St. Peter's United Methodist Church held its 2009 Charge Conference back on September 23. At the Charge Conference, St. Peter's Church accepted in full her 2010 apportionments. Like most United Methodist congregations, St. Peter's Church made this commitment to fully pay her apportionments out of covenant obedience—which is, essentially, obedience to Jesus Christ and to His Body the Church.

As noted before, several years ago our Administrative Council voted that St. Peter's Church will “pay [apportionments] in full and protest [concerns] in public.” This is our sixth year of paying in full and protesting in public. What follows are observations about our church, which contain a protest.

The United Methodist Church, especially at its leadership levels, is a very busy church. Leaders are busy listing goals for mission, studying the life and structure and ministry of the denomination, and teaching leadership principles.

In recent years, missional lists have been developed and advanced. Three simple rules for living in a Wesleyan way, four areas for focusing the entire church's mission, and seven pathways for directing the church's life and work have been developed and promoted throughout the church.

Presently, the denomination's identity, mission, ministry, and order are being formally and officially discussed by:

* the Call to Action Steering Committee from the Council of Bishops (“to guide our denominational response to the urgent opportunity for further alignment of the mission of the church and the four areas of focus, and to refashion and reposition the church for the 21st century;” and to bring forward “...

a plan of action that will lead to reordering the life of the church” [“Progress Report,” November 2009]);

* the Commission on General Conference;

* the new Committee on Faith and Order Committee of The United Methodist Church (to “give leadership to The United Methodist Church in reflecting upon, discerning and living out matters of faith, doctrinal teaching, order, and discipline in the midst of mission and ministry in the church and the world” [Paragraph 1908, 2008 Book of Discipline]);

* the Connectional Table (“to discern and articulate the vision for the church and the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church as determined by General Conference and in consultation with the Council of Bishops” [“About the Connectional Table,” www.umc.org]);

* the Study Committee on the Worldwide Nature of The United Methodist Church (to “study the denomination's changing worldwide demographics as well as its structural needs and take recommendations to the 2012 General Conference” [“New Group Will Study Church's Worldwide Nature,” 03/03/09, www.gb-gm-umc.org]); and

* the Study of Ministry Commission, which you chair (to continue the 2004 Commission and “to explore the theological foundations of ordained ministry: ordination, sacramental authority, orders, and candidacy” [Vicki Brown, www.gbhem.org]).

Add to this mix the increasing attention paid to leadership development. Leadership approaches, initiatives, and principles are often set forth by the Council of Bishops, and then disseminated into the Annual Conferences by the bishops.

All of these projects—the missional lists, the denominational studies, and the leadership emphases—seem to be leading to the creation of a new vocabulary for The United Methodist Church. This vocabulary appears to put a premium on organizational theory and management technique. While this vocabulary (or language) is spoken, with ease, by the leaders of the denomination, it is not employed with fluency by the work-a-day clergy and laity of the church. Unfortunately, this new vocabulary seems to be replacing our primary Biblical-doctrinal language about God and man, creation and redemption, Israel and Church, cross and kingdom, grace and sin, salvation (justification, sanctification, and perfection), Scripture, and Sacraments. It should be mentioned that this vocabulary replacement comes at a cost of hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars and hundreds of work-days.

What should be considered essential, to our various denominational studies and conversations, seems to be missing. And what is essential is serving the truth in love. We observe and claim that the many attempts to reorder the life, ministry, and mission of The United

Methodist Church are being undertaken without reference to the truth. (“God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action,” the Council of Bishops’ recent pastoral letter, also lacks a foundation of Christian truth. But that is for another time.) The truth, Jesus Christ, is the Lord and Head of the Church. He gathers, guides, and rules the Church through Word and Sacrament and ministry. He provides content and correction to the Church’s teaching and preaching, mission and ministry. These are not pietistic claims intended to give all United Methodists a warm feeling. They involve substantive truths—Biblical and Traditional, doctrinal and moral—that can deeply influence The United Methodist Church as a body. If these truths are not spoken in and heeded by the denominational projects now underway, those projects will end up being guided and determined by a democratic ethos spiced with interest-group fervor (as seen in American political life today).

The United Methodist Church today and all her denominational studies cry out for loving servants of the truth. Not quiet committee members. Not fanatics. Not know-it-alls. Not politicians. Not facilitators. Not organizational specialists. Not revivalists. But theologians for the Church. Servants of the truth, who stand for Jesus Christ and for Christ’s Church in The United Methodist Church, who display a Wesleyan courage for the sake of Christ and His Church, who are deeply formed and informed by the Great Tradition of the Church catholic.

Bishop Gwinn, we urge you to remind the Council of Bishops, in its life and decisions and

direction, to be dedicated, first of all, to the truth of the Church’s faith. Encourage the Council to raise its windows, be done with a “be nice” collegiality, and welcome substantive disagreements engaged in love. Serve the truth, in love, in season and out of season—even when that is difficult.

Thank you, in advance, for your response
In Christ,

(Col.) Andy Kowalski, USMC (Ret.), Chair,
Committee on Finance
(Mr.) Larry H. Miller, Chair, Administrative Council
(Ms.) Brenda Roberts, Treasurer
(Mr.) Jay Smith, Lay Leader
(The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

P.S. On December 1, St. Peter’s United Methodist Church’s Administrative Council voted unanimously, 15-0, to amend and send this letter. ♥

OUR BISHOP RESPONDS

March 1, 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

May these days of Lent provide special blessings for you as you seek to truly prepare your hearts to celebrate our Lord’s resurrection.

Please know that I have not just read your December letter, but I have thought about it and prayed about it several times. Always I admire your spiritual maturity that leads you to “pay in full and protest in public.” The possibility of bringing renewal to our faith family is always much greater as you couple your faithfulness to the family with your

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09/01/10

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- * Take our church-wide survey of actions for life

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prayers. I salute you for this stance.

I want to assure you that I am praying and trusting that many of the studies undertaken by our Council of Bishops will do much more than simply create a new vocabulary! I am earnestly praying that this attempt to focus our energies will move us to centering more in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. If renewal comes to our church, it will be because we humble ourselves, truly seek his face, and yearn to do his will, not because of any programs that we may create. I am trusting our present efforts will move us more toward this posture. Please continue to pray for us that this may be so!

I want to assure you that I desire to help our Council be true to the Church's faith and often pray for God to help me speak firmly, lovingly, and boldly to my colleagues regarding the importance of this fact. Your encouragement to do so and assurance of prayers for me mean much, as we all seek to be found faithful.

Grace and peace,
[Bishop] Al Gwinn
Raleigh Area of The United Methodist Church
Raleigh, NC

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YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- This is interesting. Father Frank Pavone, who is the National Director of Priests for Life and the Chair of the National Pro-Life Religious Council, recently noted that in the United States there are over 2,300 pregnancy resource centers and about 740 abortion clinics. ("Pregnancy Resource Centers: Turning Despair to Hope," Family Resources Center News, January/February 2010, p. 4)

- "If we wish to build true peace, how can we separate or even set at odds, the protection of the environment and the protection of human life, including the life of the unborn? It is in man's respect for himself that his sense of responsibility for creation is shown." This word is from Pope Benedict XVI. (News Brief from Anglicans for Life, February 2010, p. 4)

- Ray Bradbury, whose most famous novel is Fahrenheit 451, is nearly 90 and lives in California. According to Jennifer Steinhauer, whose article first appeared in The New York Times, Bradbury "has long been known for his clear memory of some of life's events, and that remains the case... 'I have total recall,' he said. 'I remember being born. I remember being in the womb, I remember being inside. Coming out was great.'" (The Charlotte Observer, June 20, 2009) Stranger things have been claimed. But right now, we cannot think of any.

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

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