



# Faith eases potential pains of aging

By HAROLD G. KOENIG  
and ANDREW J. WEAVER

In less than 10 years, one half of all 9 million United Methodists will be 60 or older. This staggering statistic has prompted researchers at United Methodist-related Duke University Medical Center to study the relationship between religion, aging and health.

Published studies from this work, along with research from other scientists across America, have consistently demonstrated a positive association between religious commitment and health in later life.

These studies indicate that one-quarter to one-third of older adults find religion the most important factor that enables them to cope with physical illness and other stresses.

For older Americans (particularly older African-Americans) the local church represents a vital source of support and companionship.

People of faith who attended church frequently have lower blood pressure and fewer strokes; lower rates of depression, anxiety and alcoholism; higher life satisfaction and greater well-being; and adapt better to the rigors of physical illness and disability.

**Religious people perceive themselves as less disabled and experience less pain than do those with similar health problems but without a strong faith in God.**

Furthermore, religious people perceive themselves as less disabled and experience less pain than do those with similar health problems but without a strong faith in God.

Research shows that religious commitment changes over time.

Sixty percent of older people report they have become more devout with age, whereas 35 percent indicate no change.

While religious conversion has been usually considered a phenomenon of youth, a revealing pattern emerges when older adults are asked about changes in their faith.

In a study of 850 hospitalized men age 65 or over, one third reported having a religious experience that changed their lives; 42 percent experienced this change after age 50.

It is quite common for people in their

70s and 80s to experience a change in feelings about religion, particularly when faced with physical illness and disability.

These research findings have very important implications as in addressing the direction of evangelism and ministry for churches now and in the 21st century.

Research documenting the above associations have been published in a book titled *Aging and God*.

Training pastors in the pastoral care needs of the aging is particularly important given that 70 to 80 percent of clergy report having no seminary coursework in gerontology (age-related) subjects.

Studies indicate that clergy as a group generally accept and enjoy working with elders but tend to overestimate their knowledge of the unique needs of older adults and share cultural stereotypes of aging.

Churches in rural America are often the most important and trusted resource, outside of the family, for older persons. In some studies 90 to 95 percent of rural elders have church membership and more than 80 percent attend church at least once a week.

*Dr. Koenig is director of the Duke University Medical Center program on religion and health. Dr.*

# Spiritual development, sense of purpose vital to healthy aging

By ELAINE JUSTICE

People over 55 no longer have to face their lives with a certain desperation, contends an Emory University expert on spirituality and aging.

Instead, older Americans can learn how to see opportunities that don't waste the potential that, contrary to popular concepts, doesn't diminish as one ages.

Eugene Bianchi, an expert on spirituality and aging, asked more than 100 older Americans to share their secrets of successful aging. His new book, *Elder Wisdom: Crafting Your Own Eldershood*, chronicles the results.

"Elders need to think about how to stay in society as central players and not be propelled to the periphery of

life," he explained. "The book is about taking a new look at our individual aging experiences and finding paths that will help us move toward eldershood in more promising ways."

*Elder Wisdom* draws readers into the lives of older Americans so that they can apply the "elder wisdom" of others to themselves.

## See themselves realistically

Some of the book's mentors are celebrities, such as former President Jimmy Carter, an active Southern Baptist layman, and South Africa Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Most, however, are ordinary people with a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds.

"These people have a pretty good

**"Elders need to think about how to stay in society as central players and not be propelled to the periphery of life."**

—Eugene Bianchi

ability to see themselves realistically," said Mr. Bianchi. "They're willing to see the ups and downs of life for what they are and not cover them up."

"One woman said that the best thing about getting older is that you can be more open and speak your mind. There's a tremendous sense of freedom in that."

When it comes to finding meaning in life, these elder mentors stressed the importance of cultivating a sense of purpose.

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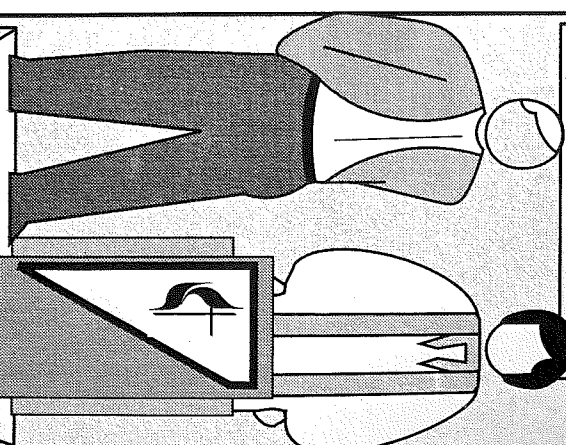
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By 2000...



One half of the 9 million United Methodists will be 60 years of age or older.  
Only 20-30% of clergy report having seminary coursework in gerontology-related topics.

UMR GRAPHIC BY DEBRA MCKNIGHT

Weaver is clinical director of the Church Counseling and Career Center in Los Angeles.

"This purpose doesn't have to be world shaking, but something that enthruses you," said Mr. Bianchi.

Some elders emphasized the pursuit of lifelong learning and teaching; others cited commitment to valuable goals, whether personal, familial, political or social.

For many elders, purpose and meaning in life are tied to spirituality, which may or may not be found in conventional religion.

"A key feature about the religiousness of creative older persons is that their spirituality is in the making; it is a search for meaning based on real life experiences," said Mr. Bianchi.

Sometimes these experiences lead people back to their childhood roots; sometimes the path leads in new direction. But whatever their beliefs, said Mr. Bianchi, "reflective elders are shaping their own spirituality; it's not something dictated to them."

## Not afraid of death

One surprise among Mr. Bianchi's interview subjects was their view of death.

"I noticed that an amazing number of these people were not afraid of death," he said. "That's not to say they weren't afraid of the process of dying: everyone's afraid of being hooked up to machines or of losing mental abilities." How does he explain this truce with mortality?

"I think there's a connection between life satisfaction continuing into eldershood and their attitude toward death," said Mr. Bianchi. "Their view seems to be that since their stories have been pretty good so far, they are less afraid to see the end of the road."

Ms. Justice writes for Emory University's news service.

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# Evangelical caucus remains disturbed by women's 'Re-Imagining' conference

By THOMAS S. McANALLY  
United Methodist News Service

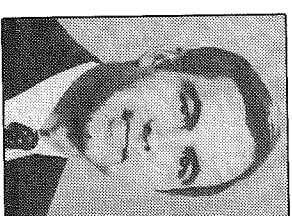
IRVING, Texas—Displeasure with a November ecumenical women's conference permeated a three-day "Summer Celebration" sponsored by Good News, an unofficial caucus of traditionalist United Methodists.

In opening remarks, Good News board Chairman Don Shell of Lake Junaluska, N.C., bemoaned the "church's loss of a vital Christology, particularly as reflected in the recent 'Re-Imagining' Conference" in Minneapolis.

Soliciting comments and suggestions from the nearly 500 participants, Mr. Shell said board members are "disappointed in the lack of response by our institutional leadership to the agony our people are feeling about that conference." Most plenary speakers referred to the controversy, and several leaders publicly and privately declared that the "issue isn't going to go away."

Approximately 400 United Methodist attendees at the November conference as part of an Ecumenical

In his keynote address, the Rev. William H. Hinson, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston, largest congregation in the denomination, chastised the Council of Bishops for not criticizing the Minneapolis event.



Decade for Women observance. The Women's Division of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries paid expenses of 56 staff, directors and other women.

Critics of the event point to praise of "Sophia" (a Greek word usually translated as wisdom), comments by a speaker who questioned the atonement, celebration of a demonstration staged by lesbians and their supporters, and a ritual using milk and honey.

Defenders say United Methodists didn't plan the event, that expressions by lesbians were not part of the official program, and that participants could

discern the appropriateness or consistency with United Methodist teachings of speakers' comments.

In his report as executive secretary and editor of *Good News* magazine, the Rev. James V. Heidinger II of Wilmore, Ky., said "Re-Imagining" may prove to be a "gift from God."

He said the issue is not the church's support of ecumenical events, nor the Women's Division's mission history, nor women's theology, but "a frontal assault on foundational Christian doctrine at a gathering that was supposed to have been sympathetic and supportive of the Christian faith."

He called the event a "coming-out of radical feminist theology... a poignant example of the near-fatal collapse in mainline Protestantism of authority, doctrine, memory and tradition."

To stop a "theological and ethical free fall," he said, "it's time we pull the rip cord on the emergency chute."

In his keynote address, the Rev. William H. Hinson, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston, largest congregation in the denomination, chastised the Council of Bishops for not criticizing the Minneapolis event.

(At its meeting in early May, the bishops agreed to conduct a study of wisdom literature in the Bible but did not comment collectively on the event.) Dr. Hinson described as "intellectual tyranny" and "intimidation" recent efforts to silence critics of the "Re-Imagining" conference.

# Church leaders debating Haitian invasion option

By DIANE HUIE BALAY  
Associate Editor

Church leaders disagree on whether it's ethically correct for the United States to invade Haiti to overturn a military junta and restore President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

In San Francisco, United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert has been conferring with other Christian leaders to consider options at the request of the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, chief executive of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Bishop Talbert, as secretary of the Council of Bishops, serves as the "bearer of communion" for ecumenical purposes.



Emilie Townes

In Kansas City, the Rev. Emilie Townes, an American Baptist clergywoman, assistant professor of Christian sociology at United Methodist-related Spauldine School of Theology.

She said, "The last thing we need to do is use military force. We have a history of using force on smaller countries which leads to an apparent victory for the United States. But, in fact, it increases the suffering of the people who live there. They have to face the consequences."

"In addition, we have a lot of different voices coming out of Haiti. It is a country very, very divided over its own future," she said.

"For the United States to decide future is the height of arrogance."

In the nation's capital, the Rev. Phillip Wogaman doesn't exclude military intervention.

Dr. Wogaman, longtime ethics professor at United Methodist-related Wesley Seminary, is senior pastor Foundry United Methodist Church Washington. His congregation includes such political leaders as President Bill Clinton and Senator and Mrs. Elizabeth Dole (R-Kansas).

"The Haitian military with its severe repression of the people and deliberate human rights abuses is intolerable," Wogaman said.

"We have a series of situations in the world—such as Bosnia and Rwanda where human rights have been abused on a massive scale. In such situations intervention by the world community is proper."

But the form of intervention should be the least severe possible, he said, while recognizing that the "track record for sanctions is mixed."

"The United States, as the remaining great world power, has a responsibility," Wogaman said. "We cannot be isolationist."

But U.S. power should be used under the aegis of the world community, which is represented by the United Nations, he said.

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# FOCUSING FORWARD

## THE IMAGE AND THE IMAGINING

Amid the biting criticism of the "Re-Imagining Conference" held in Minneapolis last November, and the equally sweeping defense by those who attended this gathering, it is not easy to sort out the validity of the one and the other.

The issue is not whether United Methodist women should think and work ecumenically. That is not debatable in these closing years of the twentieth century.

The issue rather is whether the image of women in our churches — United Methodist as well as other participating denominations — has suffered because of the direction taken by the re-imagining process at this gathering.

If it had been clear that the "re-imaginings" were helpful in leading to new and creative ways of thinking about the essence of the faith and to fresh and challenging action to carry out diverse ministries in our churches, that would be most commendable.

But if the reports in the public press are accurate (and one would not need to have been present in order to verify them), then the impression conveyed is that the re-imagining at the Conference gained the upper hand over the image of Christian women in pursuit of the Good Life. There would not appear to have been so much of "fresh theological insights" and "challenges to narrow orthodoxy" as there was playing the ball away out in left field. And that is not an attempt "to discredit and malign women."

What possible value could there be in that sexually explicit ritual that was used and in a workshop on belly dancing? What happens to theology when the doctrine of reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus is questioned? What is the rationale for elevating the personification of wisdom — Sophia — to a part of "the feminine dimension of God"?

The image is adversely affected when the imaginings take us beyond the central and crucial elements of the faith.

RFL

# LAY MINISTRY

"For years," says Rev. Rankin Koch, "I had searched for a tool for guiding lay persons into effective ministry. When I was appointed to 550-member Ferris Heights United Methodist Church at Waxahachie, Texas, June 1991, I didn't realize that the Lord was going to provide that tool. Truly, it was His miraculous leading."

"Upon arriving, I found a good prayer group was functioning. Further, some of these people were interested in going to a powerful Prayer Seminar held in our area. *What a great foundation for building a lay ministry*, I thought to myself. Chris Quigley, a lay person, took the initiative. Out of this ministry came a prayer chain, a prayer group, a prayer corner in our church bulletin, even prayer vigils. Through this network of prayer, needs of the church, and of individuals, plus a vision of possibilities began to emerge. It was the first big step toward 'ministry leadership' on the part of our lay people."

Rankin continues, "As the prayer ministry was developing, David Lewis, one of our lay people, heard about a *Discover God's Call* retreat in Georgia. Encouraged by our District Superintendent, Rev. Tim Russell, David proposed that I go along. I wasn't too excited about taking the time and the trip, but looking for ideas, I went. It was another God-send."

David agrees. He explains. "I and three others went as 'observers'. Soon I was caught up with discovering my own call. It was to get the *Discover . . .* program into our Central Texas Conference. Fortunately, Rankin and I roomed together. I poured out my ideas on him. He guided me."

"But what can we do about our own church now? It takes a while to get a Chapter started," Rankin responded to David.

Fresh from the exhilarating experience of discovering his own spiritual gifts, David proposed that they get some people at their church to do the six-week small group program, "Discovering and Using Your Spiritual Gifts."

Between David and Rankin, they got a "Spiritual Gift" search group started. Out of that first group came new leadership, some renewed commitments, even one or two transformed people. They got other groups started. Today, Ferris Heights has sixty people who know their spiritual gifts, and the Church knows who has them!

"What a blessing!" says Rankin. "We began to match responsibilities with gifts. It was like giving the people and the Church a shot of 'new life!' He goes on, "In place of people being burdened with 'jobs', they were excited with opportunities for fulfilling

## RELIGION

## 'Re-Imagining' Fomented Uproar Among Presbyterians

By Bill Broadway  
Washington Post Staff Writer

In this season of religious conventions and annual meetings, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Wichita, Kan., this month promises to be one of the most dramatic. Beyond the typical fare of polity and politics will rage a debate over orthodox and feminist theologies.

The main issue stems from a quiet ecumenical conference held last November in Minneapolis. Called "Re-Imagining," the conference brought together theologians, clergy and laypeople from various denominations to examine and reconsider the relationship of women to Christianity.

Not only did it prove particularly controversial for the 3.8 million-member Presbyterian Church—55 of the 114 resolutions on the assembly's docket next week deal with the conference—but the denomination stands to lose a lot of money because of it. The church appropriated \$85,000 to help pay for the event and some congrega-

tions have withheld financial support in response.

That has created a budget shortfall of at least \$2.4 million, according to denomination estimates, and raised questions about the church's mission.

The four-day conference consisted of speakers, group discussions, panels, dancing, singing, artistic presentations and responsive readings—nothing remarkable as contemporary gatherings go. It was their theme that set off alarms among those who did not attend.

In the January-February issue of the Presbyterian Layman, an independent newspaper mailed to 500,000 households, a story on the conference ran under the headline "PCUSA funds effort to re-create God."

Wrote reporter Susan Cyre: "Declaring their allegiance to the goddess 'Sophia,' participants catapulted their rhetoric well beyond commonplace themes of women's equality. Instead, they heralded a more



FROM 'RE-IMAGINING' PROGRAM

*"Re-imagining is a vulnerable and creative act."*

—excerpt from conference program

radical agenda: to promote a new religion with a new god."

The response was instantaneous. In editorials, phone calls, letters and faxes, charges and countercharges were exchanged in tones that often were nasty and divisive. The most strident voices called for disciplining national staff members who were involved in the planning and "a public repudiation" of the conference.

"Whatever you think of Re-Imagining, the style of discourse that occurred afterwards is not healthy—the use of words like heretic, pagan, misogynist," said the Rev. David Lee Dobler, outgoing moderator of the General Assembly.

Much of the controversy has centered on Sophia, the "spirit" whose name was invoked in all the sessions. Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom and appears in the New Testament and apocryphal works. Because the form is feminine, some scholars say it echoes the feminine personification in the Book of Proverbs. Conference planners

said they used Sophia as a means of "reclaiming" this biblical tradition.

"Re-Imagining is a vulnerable and creative act," said the 81-page conference program. "It becomes possible through the power of blessing and respect. We invoke Sophia, Divine Wisdom, who chose to play with all the people of the world. Her voice has been silenced too long. Let her speak and bless us throughout these days."

Before each speaker made a presentation, a participant would raise her arms and chant: "Bless Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within."

When word got out, many charged that this gesture was tantamount to pagan worship. Those in attendance disagreed.

"I was shocked to hear that right-wing folks thought we were talking about a goddess," said Barbara Troxell, a Methodist and assistant professor of practical theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill. "Those of us in theology simply mean wisdom being the

See CONTROVERSY, C8, Col. 1

## Presbyterians Grapple With 'Re-Imagining'

CONTROVERSY, From C7

handmaid of God, helping God create the world . . . The Catholic Church and the Orthodox have no trouble with this whatsoever."

Registrants included 1,743 women and 83 men from 27 countries, 49 states and 15 denominations. Presbyterians had the largest representation (405), followed by Methodists (391), Lutherans (313), Roman Catholics (234) and United Church of Christ (144). One-third of the participants were clergy.

The United Methodist Church also has had to cope with concerns about its involvement in Re-Imagining. But it cannot address the issue on a national level until 1996, when it holds its next general conference.

Critics have expressed concerns about some of the 27 speakers, many of whom had published works of feminist theology. Also raising concerns were the substitution of a bread ceremony and a milk and honey ritual for Holy Communion and a last-minute addition to the program that allowed lesbians and bisexuals to make a statement against oppression.

Panel and discussion groups covered such topics as interfaith dialogue, Bible stories for children from a feminist perspective, the dynamics of power in the church, women's spiritual directions and transforming liturgy.

When Cyre called her Layman editors from the conference, "we realized this was a hot one," said Executive Editor Parker T. Williamson, an ordained Presbyterian minister.

He said several of the conference themes are "antithetical to the Christian faith" and denote "seismic shifts" in theology, implying that God is a product of the imagination to begin with and, thus, can be re-imagined. They also suggest, he said, that God is imminent rather than transcendent; that divinity resides in all beings and things; that salvation lies in finding the divinity within oneself; and that the church's teachings are demeaning to women.

In response, steering committee co-chair Mary Kay Sauter said the organizers never espoused a particular theology "other than God is more than anything we've always heard. We wanted to bring people together who had different ideas to explore. We never questioned that God would have a problem with what we were doing."

Troxell and Sauter both spoke of the positive, "spirit-filled" atmosphere of the meeting and said they heard no complaints until weeks later. Acknowledged Williamson: "We observed at conference no demonstration of protest. We really expected it, especially at the end when they did the milk and honey ritual. We really thought a substantial number of people would stand up and walk out. It just didn't happen."

Shortly after the Layman's accounts, the Rev. Sally Hill, the conference coordinator and a Presbyterian clergywoman, responded to criticisms in a letter to the church's General Assembly Council, the church's main decision-making body between assemblies.

"Nearly all conferees were church members, clergy or persons strongly connected to a church tradition," she said. "Many have written letters stating that this conference renewed their hope in the church. Some have actually credited the conference with helping them to reconcile with Christianity."

The council met in February but did not discipline national staff participants. It did, however, call for a review of the controversy. Any further action would have to be taken by the General Assembly, which convenes June 10-17.

Meanwhile, the denomination's damage control efforts have had minimal effect. Williamson said the church has vastly understated the estimated shortfall. "We're estimating \$8 to \$12 million lost in combined budgets," he said, basing his figures on photocopies of letters sent to denominational headquarters in Louisville by at least 520 "sessions" or local governing bodies. Those congregations gave notice they were withholding funds and sent copies to the Layman.

Almost half of the "overtures," or resolutions, before the assembly deal with the Re-Imagining conference. A committee has been appointed to discuss them and present a recommendation for an assembly vote. Denomination spokesman Jerry Van Marter said it likely will recommend appointing a committee to investigate the issue and report back next year.

Summary firings or dismissals are unlikely because that would "go against the grain of Presbyterian policy, which is deliberate," Marter said. "But who knows? This thing is rancorous enough that it could happen."

Mary Ann Lundy, who helped plan the conference and became the chief target of conference critics, resigned last week as associate director of churchwide planning. "Circumstances have made her goal of effective service to the church untenable," an official statement said.

# Women's conference angers church groups in Triangle

By ALISON JONES  
STAFF WRITER

In heated meetings this week, local Presbyterian churches have been ringing with words that may sound strange to modern ears: "paganism" and "heresy."

The uproar, which has reached So local United Methodists as well, is in response to a women's conference held in November in Minnesota that was partially funded by the Presbyterian denomination.

By all accounts, the dispute has but only grown since then, prompting Bi the Presbyterian Church USA to Sopl dispatch envoys to Durham and paga Raleigh to hear from disgruntled icize church members.

Critics are upset by some unorthodox occurrences at the conference, including the presence of lesbian activists, and untraditional prayers and rituals that were performed, such as a "milk and honey" ceremony that replaced the traditional communion.

The furor has resulted in canceled donations to the church and angry letters to church officials. The reaction has been so intense that 229 Presbyterian churches they s nationwide — including 29 in Christianity but a new way of talking about God that has deep biblical roots.

The debate is still raging. North Carolina churches are among those sending angry letters to the Presbyterian denomination's national offices in Louisville, Ky. And in Raleigh, the desk of United Methodist Bishop C.P. Minnick Jr., who is president of the Council of Bishops, the world-

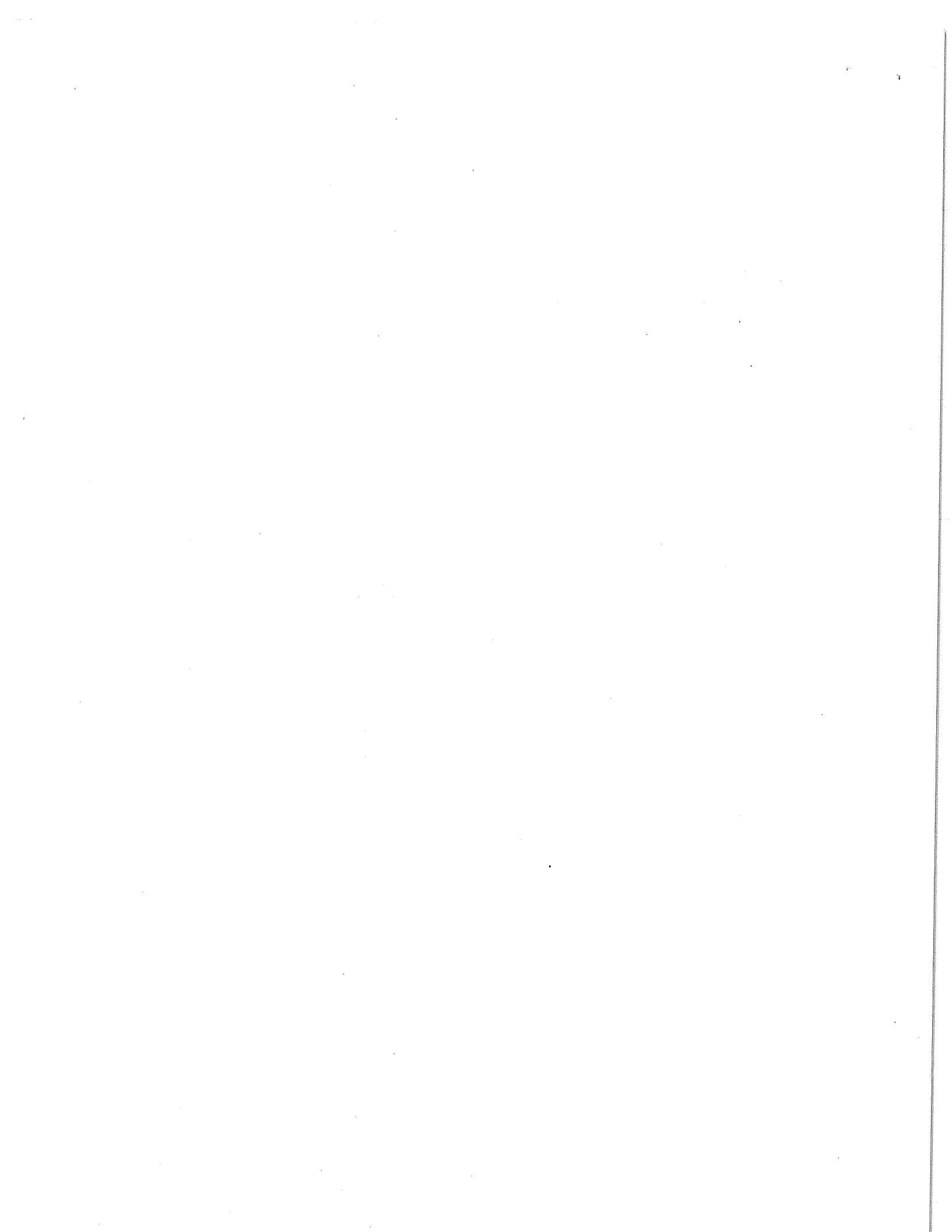
North Carolina — are withholding donations to the denomination's national office in protest. Officials of the Presbyterian Church USA estimate the church may have lost at least \$1.8 million.

In addition to hurting church funding, the dispute has stirred a heated debate touching on bedrock issues of faith, including the role of women in the church, and the question of how religious people talk about God.

"This controversy is about what our church stands for," said Shirley Hamme of White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. "I read things [about the conference] that belittle Jesus Christ, and that hurts me."

The "RE-imagining" conference, the cause of all the ruckus, was an interfaith gathering in Minneapolis geared toward feminist Christians. Generally, the idea was to rethink the Christian faith in a way more inclusive of women. Finding feminine imagery for God, to supplement the traditional masculine imagery, was among the conference's goals.

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ter called to an American Baptist church, claimed that Mary and Martha in the Bible were lesbian "fore-sisters." She said that they were not actual sisters, but lesbian lovers.

Janie Spahr, a self-avowed lesbian clergywoman in the Presbyterian Church USA who was prevented by that denomination from serving a local church, said at the conclusion of her presentation that her theology is first of all informed by "making love with Coni," her lesbian partner. She then gave this challenge: "Sexuality and spirituality have to come together—and Church, we're going to teach you!"

Judy Westerdorf, a United Methodist clergywoman from Minnesota, told the workshop that the Church says God gives sexuality as a good gift, but that 1 out of 10 is a bad gift and you're not supposed to open it. (She was referring to claims that 10 percent of the population is homosexual, statistics that have been proven to be inaccurate.) Westerdorf added, "The Church has always been blessed by gays and lesbians, ...witches, ...shamans." She joked about the term "practicing homosexual," noting that her partner says she's not practicing, she's pretty good.

### *Theological Smorgasbord*

The "Re-Imagining" event presented a smorgasbord of cultural ideas and religions, allowing attendees to pick and choose to their liking. "Be speculative," participants were told by conference organizers, "there is no 'answer.' We can't imagine what God is like. Being together in our own images is the ultimate."

There were other workshops that dealt with feminist theology, politics, music, and belly dancing.

One of the conference speakers lashed out against alleged oppression by Christian missionary teachings in India. Aruna Gnanadason, a native Indian feminist, explained



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*Conference participants celebrating the milk and honey ritual to Sophia.*

that the red dot on her forehead was a form of protest against those who said her forehead was only a place for the sign of the cross. She invited participants to join her in protest by crayoning a red dot on their foreheads as well. Gnanadason said that the red dot represented the "divine in each other." In this instance, the

about 500 individuals, began with singing to Sophia, and "bringing attention to our own bodies" and swaying to and fro. Participants were told that the ideal is to re-image Jesus within the feminist understanding from our cultural roots.

Presenter Delores S. Williams, a

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*"I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all," said one conference speaker.*

*"I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."*

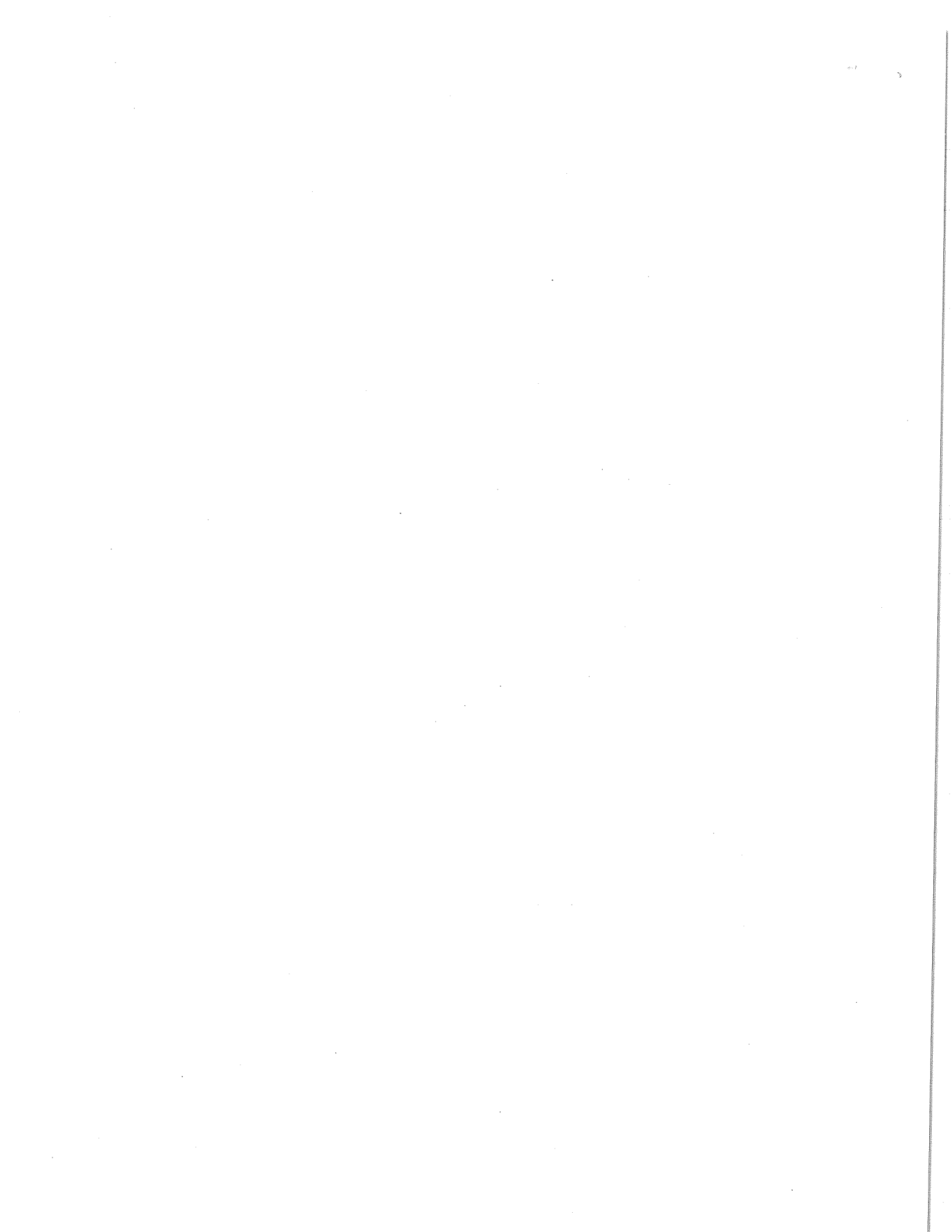
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mark of those not wearing the red dot was a very visible sign of those not fully participating with the conference activities.

Chung Hyun Kyung, one of the speakers, identified herself as a "recovering colonized Christian and a recovering feminist fundamentalist." The ideal is the "reincarnation of good," she said. Kyung explained that Asian theology totally rejects the idea of sinful man, propagating the understanding that humans are good and become better from the god within.

One major seminar was titled "Jesus," although no orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus was discussed. This seminar, attended by

"womanist" theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all." Her remark was greeted by applause. "Atonement has to do so much with death," she said. "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Continuing, she said, "We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within....If Jesus conquered sin, it was in the wilderness and life, not his death (resurrection). The first incarnation of God was not 'some dove on the shoulder,' but in Mary and her body." At this point, all the participants were encouraged to call out



"through a woman's body."

Another feminist theologian who led the "Jesus" seminar was Kwok Pui-Lan. She said the Asian experience can't image any Jesus. She stated, "We cannot allow others to define our sin. What is our sin? Who is this funny God that would sacrifice a lamb. We don't even see a

Interreligious Concerns and a member of the Re-imagining Steering Committee; and Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher (Minnesota). UM funding sources were the Minnesota Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women; Minnesota Conference UMW; Women's Division of the GBGM;

Christian faith of these denominations. To the contrary, the "Re-imagining" conference, the Women's Division's choice as the quadrennium's theological workshop, truly abandoned any form of orthodox Christian theology. As evidence, read the following liturgy of the service of milk and honey dedicated to Sophia:

*"Our maker Sophia, we are women in your image: With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life. With the courage of our convictions we pour out lifeblood for justice...."*

*"Sophia, creator God, Let your milk and honey flow. Sophia, Creator God, Shower us with your love...."*

*"Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image; With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover; we birth a child; With our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations...."*

*"Our guide, Sophia, we are women in your image. With our moist mouths we kiss away a tear; we smile encouragement. With the honey of wisdom in our mouths, we prophesy a full humanity to all the peoples...."*

*"We celebrate the sensual life you give us. We celebrate the sweat that pours from us during our labors. We celebrate the fingertips vibrating upon the skin of a love. We celebrate the tongue which licks a wound or wets our lips. We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water."*

*Dotie Chase is a United Methodist laywoman from Willard, Ohio. She has been a delegate to General Conference and has served on various national program boards for the UM Church. Susan Cyre of the Presbyterian Layman contributed research to this article.*

*More "Re-Imagining" information may be obtained by writing to ECUMW/RENEW, 587 Raford Wilson Rd., Commerce, GA 30529. A donation to cover processing expenses would be appreciated.*

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*"We celebrate the sensual life you give us," read the conference liturgy. "We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water."*

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lamb in the Asian experience. The Chinese do not have a word to compare to the Hebrew/Greek word for God." Dr. Pui-Lan indicated that the Chinese do not believe God stands outside creation but that the humanist Confucian tradition emphasizes the propensity for good in humankind, and that they develop moral perfection and sainthood by maturing and emphasizing enlightenment.

Another seminar focused on the history and future of The Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women. Begun by the United Nations, this program was limping along until the World Council of Churches gave it priority. It was noted that it is "truly amazing" that women have even stayed within the patriarchal churches. Participants were encouraged to ignore any charges of divisiveness; and not to worry about the collapse of unity within the churches.

Named as United Methodist sponsors for this event were: Bishop Forrest C. Stith, UM Co-Chairman of the U.S. Committee of the Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women; Jeanne Audrey Powers of the General Commission on Christian Unity and

and Wesley United Methodist Church as a neighboring host.

"The seminaries and the Vatican can keep on defining orthodoxy largely for the passing-on of the traditions through the ordained clergy," conference speaker and feminist theologian Elizabeth Bettenhausen told the *Star-Tribune*. "But we laity have always crossed our fingers behind our backs when they lay out what orthodoxy is. We know in our daily lives theology has to be much fresher and more flexible than the definitions of orthodoxy can ever be."

For a conference which drew upon the mainline Christian denominations for its supporters, funding, and participants, this event utterly failed to represent the historic



*Conference participants feeling for vibrations from "the Divine Spark Within."*

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