

# OD NEWS

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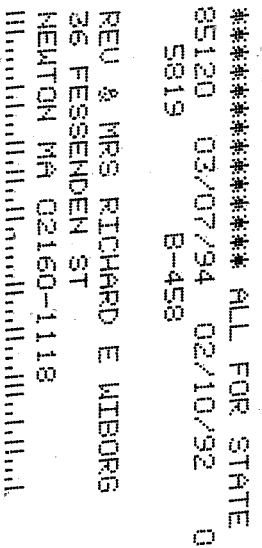
Y MAGAZINE FOR UNITED METHODISTS

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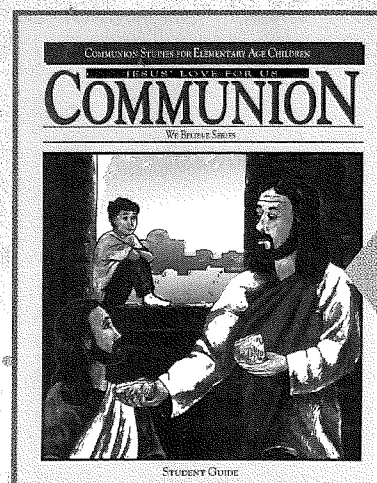
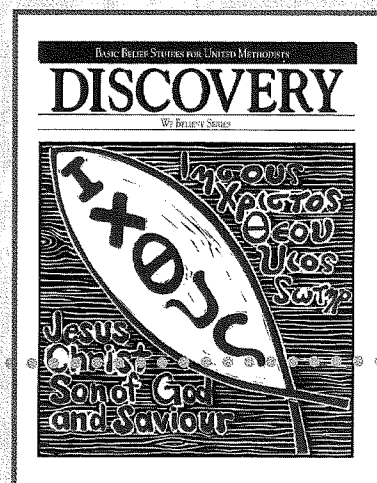
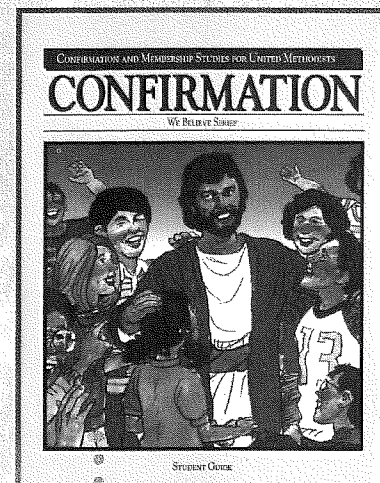
# Responses to "Re-Imagining"





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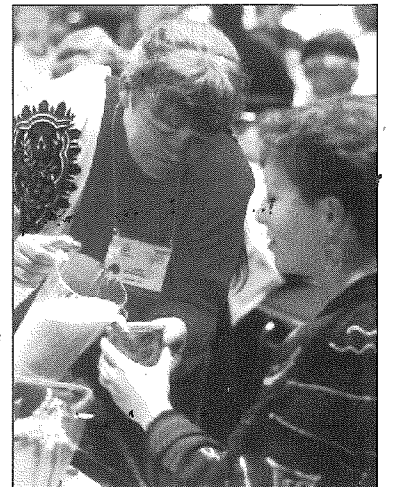
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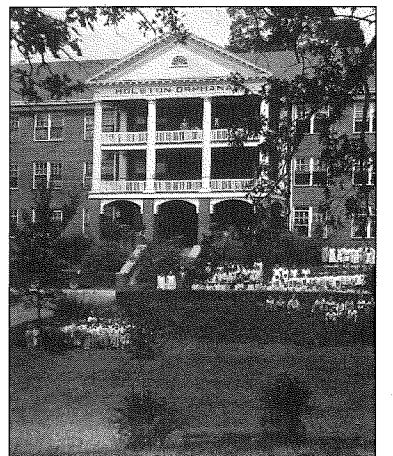
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The cover photo from the "Re-Imagining" event is courtesy of The Presbyterian Layman



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### Sophia Worship is Theologically Ignorant

I have been fighting against heresies of different varieties all my life. Now comes news about the "Re-Imagining" Conference in Minneapolis which was reported in the January/February issue. What is to be said about the use of Sophia in services of Christian worship? The following:

It is theologically ignorant, however embellished with references to the Book of Proverbs and to Gnosticism.

It is ontologically superstitious. (Ontology has to do with what is ultimately real, the doctrine of God, etc.)

It is cosmologically mythological. (Cosmology pertains to the doctrine of the creation and sustenance of the physical universe.)

It is Christologically blasphemous. (Christology has to do with the doctrine of Jesus Christ as Son of God and his atoning and redeeming grace.)

It is ecclesiastically irresponsible. (Ecclesiology pertains to the doctrine of the Church.)

In view of the ancient introduction of the Sophia myth to explain the natural evils and imperfections in the universe, it is ethically repulsive.

It is religiously sterile. The attempt to start what amounts to a new religion, with Sophia as a basic ingredient, is infinitely pathetic.

And it is obviously contrary to the doctrines of the biblical revelation and hence to the doctrines of The United Methodist Church.

Mack B. Stokes  
Bishop (retired)  
Atlanta, Georgia

### Dividing the UM Church

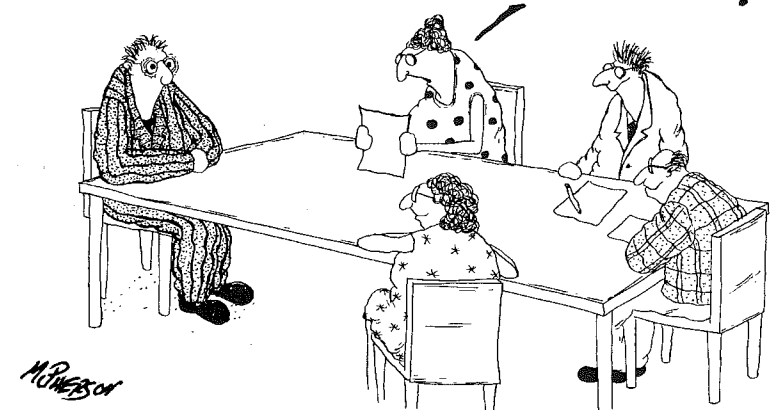
We write this letter to you out of concern. The first is the matter of the "Re-Imagining" Conference which you also seem to have supported by attending. That is to say, presence at this event does

not necessarily make one agree with it, nor does it condemn those many women who attended in good faith. Responsibility lies with those who planned the event and the liturgies which attended it. Our concern is not with the use of a feminine term "Sophia" to describe the wisdom of God, otherwise we would be at odds with the Bible itself, cf. Proverbs 8. Sophia, as you know, was the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, *Hokmah*, for the word wisdom in Proverbs 8. However, when Sophia is elevated to the level of the name of God, and/or is identified as a goddess, that is pushing beyond what is scriptural to a gnostic heresy which the Church judged in its earliest discernment to be unchristian. It is critical that we remain clear about this distinction, otherwise we fall into our own heresy if we say that the wisdom of God cannot be illustrated by a

feminine image.

The second area of our concern is the evident attempt you make to divide the UM Church for your own gain. Already you have begun, or at least supported, a break-off from the United Methodist Women. We want to affirm with you that the UMW continues to carry out extremely effective mission work around the world, and to educate its members in a way that is far ahead of the rest of the denomination. Do its leaders sometimes make mistakes in judgment? Of course they do. All of us do. That is why we are a people of grace and with Jesus reject the harsh judgmentalism of any who profess a perfection that allows them to assume they can work to divide the church with impunity. Of all the sins cited in the New Testament, to divide the Body of Christ is among the worst. What we are saying to you is, you seem to use the worst in the church to separate us rather than unite us. It sometime seems you are interested in bad news, not good news. We are not defending the use of Sophia as a deity, far from it. We are Trinitarian Christians, without apology. Rather we ask you to ponder your own motivation, for a number of pastors feel they get your magazine when there is something sensa-

IF YOUR CHURCH WAS A '68 MUSTANG CONVERTIBLE WITH AN EIGHT CYLINDER 351 ENGINE AND DUAL OVERHEAD CAMS, WHAT GRADE OF MOTOR OIL WOULD YOU USE AND HOW OFTEN WOULD YOU CHANGE THE PLUGS?



THE GLENVIEW SEARCH COMMITTEE HAD A KNACK FOR COMING UP WITH REALLY ANNOYING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.



# GOOD NEWS

March/April 1994  
Volume 27, Number 5

*The mission of Good News is to be an evangelical voice within the United Methodist Church, urging the church to be faithful to the biblically-based principles of its historic Wesleyan heritage. We seek to unite and encourage all Christians who affirm the church's basic traditional doctrines and values.*

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tional and negative. The rest of the time, they do not seem to get it. Perhaps you can tell us if this is true. Furthermore, the annual conference UMW officers received your magazine only on this issue. Clearly, your goal is not just to inform, but to inflame.

A person who attended the gathering from this annual conference was in disagreement with certain parts of the meeting and has clearly said so. She feels that you are suggesting that she is unable to decide for herself what is acceptable and what is not. She firmly disagrees with the last paragraph, column 1, page 35 in the article by Faye Short.

Elizabeth Hoffman,  
UMW Conference President  
Neil L. Irons, Bishop  
New Jersey Area

*Two points of clarification are in order. First, Good News most certainly does not exist to divide the UM Church for its own gain. Participation in and support of events such as "Re-Imagining" are the divisive elements within the UM Church. Furthermore, the Evangelical Coalition for United Methodist Women (ECUMW) is not a "break-off" from the UMW. Its stated purpose has always been to promote "renewal and accountability within the organization of United Methodist Women."*

*Second, informing United Methodists about inflammatory statements at national conferences may indeed inflame them.—the editors*

## Disturbed

I was disturbed by the information concerning the "Re-Imagining" Conference. I've been an active member of United Methodist Women (UMW) for over 25 years and to know that some of my UMW pledge money was used to support this conference upset me. I have been disturbed for some time with the direction in which the Women's Division has been moving but, until now, never took the time to make my feelings known.

Please keep your readers informed about these "off-the-wall" movements within the UM Church.

Jean H. Day  
Ocoee, Florida

## Shoddy Journalism

We are in agreement with one sentence of James Heidinger's editorial: "This issue of Good News carries the most disturbing news story we've ever published." However, the reason we find it disturbing—even appalling—is the extent to which the shoddy journalism in the editorial and the articles misrepresent facts and mislead by innuendo. At least the editorial and one article appear to have been written by persons not even present!

We are two retired persons among the 391 United Methodists who attended. We chose to attend the conference at our own expense—as did the vast majority. It seemed to be (and was) a logical and helpful follow-up to the study on the "Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women." Obviously it was not the "Women's Division's theological workshop for the quadrennium," but rather one opportunity offered for participation by directors and staff for those who chose.

Perhaps most misleading is the misinformation about Sophia, presenting her as somehow out of the scriptural tradition. That simply is not true! The conference's own official information about Sophia, presented in the daily news sheets, was totally ignored. We excerpt just a few comments here as a corrective:

- "Sophia" is the Greek word for Wisdom, and the reference in the original Greek texts is to "Sophia," rather than to the more impersonal term, Wisdom. Two different words were actually used which in English have been translated "wisdom," of which "Sophia" is one.

- Wisdom/Sophia appears throughout the Bible. The first nine chapters of Proverbs focus on her. Proverbs 8 refers to Sophia's/Wisdom's part in creation, working

beside God "as a master worker." Jesus quotes Sophia in Luke 11:49, and Sophia is likewise associated with Jesus in Matthew 11. Paul associates Jesus with Wisdom/Sophia in I Corinthians 1:18-25.

- Sophia is found in many other places in Christian tradition as well as in the Bible, for example in the writings of St. Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen and others. She has always been a part of the Greek Orthodox Church. Several Roman Catholic religious orders are also dedicated to her.

- For one theologian from Fuller Theological Seminary (scarcely a hotbed of radical feminism!), "Sophia is the mother of incarnational Christology. As such she should be honored, not relegated to the footnotes." Reference is also made to several other contemporary theologians who have written in depth on Sophia.

Another major concern is the number of times quotes—or partial quotes—are taken out of context to misrepresent the overall content, tone, and impact of the conference. Probably no one there agreed with everything that was said. But then, when have any 2000 people listened to 13 major presentations plus extra activities and agreed about everything? We found the conference to be stimulating and thought provoking, as well as worshipful. It did offer a corrective to the false image of God often portrayed in far too many of our churches, as only male, very hierarchical, and very exclusive.

Jesus said nothing in his recorded words about homosexuality (a topic on which the writers of the editorial and article spent much of their time.) However, Jesus *did* offer an admonition against bearing false witness, an admonition that I fear these writers failed totally to heed. If anyone needs to offer apologies, it is they.

Joyce Anderegge  
Elaine Gasser  
Maryville, Tennessee

*We did in fact read the daily news sheets on "Sophia" and found them to be theologically unsound. Readers who are interested in an in-depth treatment on Sophia may refer to the remarks on page 20 of Dr. John Oswalt, a distinguished Old Testament scholar.—the editors.*

## Bright Light

Thank you for shining a bright light in a very dark place by reporting about the "Re-Imagining" Conference. I am beside myself in grief over the direction our once-great denomination has taken.

I am currently on the Oklahoma Conference Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. This has been an educational and broadening experience. What I have learned is that although I may not agree with the theology of the other religions, I am to respect them and not ridicule or demean what they hold sacred.

In light of Ms. Sohl calling the "Re-Imagining" Conference an "ecumenical event," they should have

walked out when Delores S. Williams said, "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." This is not a respectful ecumenical attitude (much less orthodox).

It is becoming clear to me that pluralism, inclusiveness, and tolerance are tools of power wielded by those in power to keep their power and to force the more conservative to compromise their convictions. It is also a convenient shield to hide behind so that there is no accountability for abandoning orthodoxy. Consequently, the teeth are taken out of any church discipline.

I grew up in a cult. I had a radical conversion experience and have been studying cults for the past 20 years. Sophia worship and the "Re-Imagining" Conference has all the earmarks of a cult, especially the New Age.

With a sad and heavy heart I ask, where will it end? Is there Wesleyan orthodoxy anymore?

Randy Little  
Lamont UM Church  
Lamont, Oklahoma

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### Selective Negativity

I was a registered participant in the "Re-Imagining" Conference and I found the critique to be selectively negative, highlighting some comments and aspects of the conference which were sensational in nature, a tactic used in media reporting. The report totally missed the whole concept of "Re-Imagining."

As a woman church leader I am excited to be living in a time when the church is being challenged to examine its doctrines, its rituals, and its traditions. The timeworn era of total submission to the desires, decisions, and whims of men is over. Lot's offer of his daughters to strangers is Scripture; would you make such an offer of your daughters? We have changed; we are changing; we will continue to change. Part of the change that is occurring is that women are feeling liberated enough to celebrate that our physiological differences are good, that the uniqueness of who we are as women is part of God's plan and that we are not sub-anything to our male counterparts. Some of our newly discovered energy and excitement about this has manifested itself in rather radical actions, but then look at the behavior of brand-new converts—often it is radical.

Marilyn B. Stevens  
The United Methodist Church  
Oswego, New York

### The Red Dot

I am a woman from India, a Methodist, former leader of the Methodist Church in India, past president of our local UMW unit for four years and officer of the Maryville district UMW for two years. My husband is a retired UM missionary.

I have been well familiar with the rising feminist trends within the women of the church in America. While I firmly stand for equal opportunities for women in church and society, I am saddened by the news and views of the "Re-Imagining" Conference.

What is more frightening is to see that overseas invitees find it easy to

misrepresent their countries' cultures and religions because they find an uninformed audience whom they would rather please than educate.

I know Ms. Aruna Gnanadason from India. I heard her present her papers in a few conferences there.

The "red dot" which she popularized at the conference is purely a religious orthodox Hindu tradition for married women. It is symbolic of a man preserving the honor of his wife with his blood. Before leaving his home to go to war, the man would slit his thumb and put the mark on the forehead and the middle parting of the hair of his wife, thus protecting her from rape and molestation by the invaders.

Ms. Gnanadason may use it to represent her divinity, but this is not at all the significance of the "red dot." I wonder how many such superficial theories and symbols will fill in the "wisdom and dreams" of the Sophia worshippers?

Doris Franklin Rugh  
Sevierville, Tennessee

### Parental Religious Protection

I attended the "Re-Imagining" Conference. As an ordained pastor I am proud to have attended this conference, and pleased that the Women's Division supported it financially, either directly or indirectly. So I take issue with James V. Heidinger II in his statement that "no UM women should have been subjected to this conference." This smacks of parental religious protection of grown adults who have the

right (and responsibility) to think for themselves, to pray and study, and then to come to their own conclusions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As an older woman in ministry, I grew up with a view of the Scripture (and of life) which was heavily patriarchal. This approach, being vertical and hierarchical, omitted the very real activity of the Holy Spirit in more horizontal ways among those naming Christ's name both as individuals and as a community.

At the "Re-Imagining" Conference, prayer to Sophia God was holy and honorable. I never understood that we were worshipping a goddess. Background information was provided every attendee as to the scriptural basis for Sophia. As the feminine aspect of God the father, Sophia was valued as Wisdom, and was not seen in an idolatrous or heretical sense. Activities, liturgies, yes even the entire flow of the plenary sessions helped participants include and express the body, the bodily sensations, and experiences of the soul in safe and truly holy ways. The more feminine aspects of artistic expression, dancing, singing, drawing, etc., offered me a needed balance to all the "head-work" of theologizing and administering in my local church.

No one at this conference said I must abandon my traditional understandings of God, or Christ as Savior and Lord. But many sought, as did I, a way to experience the faith as a woman in ministry today. Many spoke of oppression, particularly our

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Roman Catholic sisters. One UM pastor recounted her experience of harassment at the hands of her parishioners, *because she is a woman in ministry*. This yet, in 1993! We were at the "Re-Imagining" Conference seeking the Spirit in each other so that we might be freed enough to share our guts. We were "re-imagining" what it might be like to be heard!

Of course, to me it is sad that our lesbian sisters are regarded as unacceptable by the Good News movement. Having struggled with my own son's sexual orientation, I do not think such persons are victims of a sinful disease which they can renounce, or that they are living a life in defiance of the Scriptures. I was one at the conference who stood in support of Melanie Morrison's [lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual] statement. There are too many, now, who are fine Christian leaders, but for whom a same-sex relationship is the norm. You are invited to talk to them, *listen to their stories*, and you will see God's hand in who they are and what they have become by God's grace.

Finally, it is clear that I will not denounce what took place at this meeting. Rather I would affirm the pushing out of the boundaries, I would affirm the way we were encouraged to see God at work in each other, no matter what our stated beliefs, and I would affirm this fresh approach to spirituality and the living of the Christian life.

Donella Siktberg  
E. Windsor, Connecticut

### Commendation

Dottie Chase and Susan Cyre are to be commended for their intestinal fortitude in wading through that which was promulgated at the "Re-Imagining" Conference. I hope they wore heavy boots.

Those people have a right to speak, and I spent 29 years of my life in the military to help defend that right, but that right does not include foisting heresy on UM women and then asking them to pay for it. We

need to keep supporting RENEW Women's Network, now more than ever.

Keep us informed, please! And, keep up the good work. You continue to have our support.

Clarence E. LeMasters  
Captain, Chaplain Corps.  
United States Navy (Ret.)  
Lakeland, Florida

### Hearing Is Not Approval

I have seen your editorial about the "Re-Imagining" Conference and would like to respond from my personal experience.

I was one of the 36 Women's Division directors who attended the conference. My reason for going was to gain an ecumenical perspective from women of faith, some of whose lives are very different from mine. The directors had no inkling of the specific contents from preconference publicity, although it was evident that the presenters came from all over the world and from varied backgrounds. I feel that it is imperative to hear those other voices, especially those of younger women, if we are to function in a pluralistic and global society. Hearing does not mean approval or adoption!

After we arrived at the conference and received our packets, many of us searched the Scriptures for references to Sophia and learned, as you know, that Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom. I feel that wisdom is one aspect of God—the God whom I worship, with guidance from the Bible and the Wesleyan tradition. At no time did I feel called or guided to worship a deity or entity called Sophia.

The workshops and reflection groups which I attended were not mentioned in your article. I bought two tapes of other sessions and listened carefully, and those presentations also lacked offensive materials. Perhaps I was lucky.

If all I knew of the conference was what was presented in your article, I would be disturbed. My personal experience was like attending a large buffet meal. Some of the things

I tasted and enjoyed, some I tasted and did not care for, and some I did not even want to taste.

I cannot judge others for their expressions of faith, some of which were upsetting to me, but from those expressions I have examined my faith more deeply, and am convinced that the example of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible and theology of The United Methodist Church and stated in the *Discipline* is my foundation and guide.

I realize that my prayerful response to your article doesn't provide such lively and entertaining reading as your editorial, but it does present the truth from a person who was present.

Jo Eva McClellan  
Palco, Kansas

### Seminary Defense

Just what is the relationship between the seminaries and our theologically diverse denomination called United Methodism? This is the issue that was addressed in articles written by Thomas Oden and Riley Case in your January/February 1994 issue. As a recent graduate of Duke Divinity School, one of our denomination's seminaries, and as an ordained pastor serving a local church, I have had an experience contrary to the authors' observations that affirms the theological training, pastoral experience, and spiritual growth that one UM seminary offers.

According to Oden, seminarians are encouraged to accept alternatives to "orthodox" reasoning; and in their critical scholarship, are exposed only to modern writings that have no relationship to the community of faith. However, in my training to be a "resident theologian" and pastoral shepherd within a congregation, I was afforded the privilege of spiritual reflection *in the context of* UM theology and doctrine, taught to me by gifted, impassioned, and faithful faculty. From the beginning of my theological education, which actually started in a UM-related undergraduate university, my studies were firmly rooted in biblical teachings, ancient



readings of Christianity's fathers and mothers, and Wesleyan theology.

Both Oden and Case attack the UM seminary as an institution. Case even uses a scare tactic to imply that with the demise of the seminary comes the destruction of the denomination, hence falling "second" to another mainline denomination, Southern Baptist. What both authors fail to recognize and address is that the "Values esteemed by the seminaries—inclusiveness, relevance, relativity, tolerance, and modernity" (Case) are esteemed by a larger institution called the UM Church. These values, therefore, are not isolated to the seminary's curriculum or faculty, but they mark the rich theological diversity of our denomination; a diversity that John Wesley himself wrestled with in his formation of doctrine, theology, and polity.

In closing, Oden suggests that "If I stay, I cooperate with a corrupted and corrupting system." Our faith tells us, and I affirm, that any human institution will be a sinful institution, always to be redeemed and renewed in light of our faith and witness for Jesus Christ. My reply to Dr. Oden and the Rev. Case is that as we critique the institution that trains our pastoral leaders, we also critique the greater institution of the church that ultimately teaches and transmits the faith. As with any critique of an institution, it is not enough to say it's wrong. Our theological mandate is to create an alternative or reform the institution so that it remains faithful to God's will and to Jesus' call to be transmitters of the Word and the Witness.

Amy Gearhart Sage  
Webster Hills UM Church  
Webster Groves, Missouri

### Oden and Case are Right

Amen and amen! to Thomas Oden's and Riley Case's articles about seminary education in the UM Church. As a recent UM-related seminary graduate, I can attest firsthand to the treatment of orthodox theology in my education. In an

institution that claims and advertises inclusiveness, when it comes to orthodox, conservative theology, such institutions are exclusive.

As a recent graduate, truly strapped with "heavy debts," I am appalled at the way the modernists still hold onto their little pieces of the pie! As our denomination, which I love dearly, continues to decline, one must point one's finger to our seminaries which are training our pastors in such atmospheres. Many students graduate biblically illiterate, not being able to preach, and don't believe much of anything! But, we did learn how to speak in very politically correct ways and we did learn that Paul Tillich is truly the newest father of all "real" theology!

As we continue to pump out such seminary trained theologians, our leadership continues down that same path of liberalism as well (another good reason for our decline, I would argue). The only thing that I would differ with is that Charles Keysor was wrong, we are not the "silent minority" in the UM Church, but the "silent majority." Now is the time to begin speaking out.

Thank you, Dr. Oden and the Rev. Case, for such insightful articles.

Harvey K. Gaither  
Ashkum, Illinois

### Striking Indictment

The January/February issue of *Good News* is the most striking indictment to date on the state of the UM Church. At the same time it is a challenge to more concentrated prayer and concern.

Riley Case's article summarized the situation of our seminaries. Most outstanding was his statement of hope that United Methodist "seminaries might some day be known for their defense of the faith rather than their questioning of the faith."

Thanks for a great issue of articles, editorials, and news.

Eugene M. Westley  
Lemon Springs, North Carolina

### Enlightening and Disturbing

The articles by Thomas C. Oden and Riley Case are both enlightening and deeply disturbing. Most of us in the pews are relatively ignorant about how our seminaries operate and what they do or do not teach. But we don't have to be insiders to know that something is very wrong with the system.

Is it terribly naive of us to expect Christian seminaries to be Christ-centered? Should not those responsible for perpetuating the Wesleyan tradition be true to the "essentials of the faith"? Why not a litmus test for one of the most important positions imaginable? If one chooses to deny the deity of Christ; to reject the concepts of original sin and substitutionary atonement; to scoff at the bodily resurrection, then one is exercising the choice presented to every person when confronted by Christ. But let not that person so choosing be called Christian; and certainly let not that person teach others false doctrine in our Christian seminaries!

In spite of our seminaries (not necessarily because of them), God continues to call faithful men and women to his service who are able to maintain and nurture their faith and vision through their formal education to become effective pastors and leaders. And committed lay people continue to respond to God's grace and to become effective witnesses through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, God's will is being done! Sadly, for those of us who are concerned about the future of our church, fewer and fewer of these "miracles of life" are occurring under the auspices of the UM Church.

R. Duane Brim  
Winchester, Indiana

Because of the overwhelming response, there will be more letters on the "Re-Imagining" Conference in the next issue of *Good News*.

## Editorial

### Wrestling with "Re-Imagining"

November's "Re-Imagining" Conference in Minneapolis provides a painful glimpse into the theological malaise in America's mainline denominations. These churches used to be referred to as "mainstream" Protestant. This controversy, however, reminds me of the question asked by Riley Case in a *Good News* article a few years ago, "Has the Mainstream become a back-yard trickle?"

Of course, the "Re-Imagining" event did not represent "mainstream" Protestantism or mainstream United Methodism for that matter. In fact, thousands are incensed at reports about "Re-Imagining" and will not be placated by smooth public relations efforts that gloss over or ignore the serious issues involved. Let me clarify what some of those issues are:

First, what was wrong with the "Re-Imagining" event? The conference, attended by some 2,200 participants (391 of whom were United Methodists), included: 1. prayers to and worship focused on the goddess "Sophia;" 2. derision and denial of essential Christian doctrinal tenets (incarnation, atonement, original sin, etc.); and 3. the public celebration of lesbianism. Rather than affirming the great themes of the Christian faith, speakers attacked the Church and its doctrines as the source of oppression of women, racism, classism, *ad infinitum*.

Second, what was the nature of UM participation? The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries took action at its spring meeting last March to cancel its own "staff and director theology workshop" and "approved" in its place involvement of staff and directors in the "Re-Imagining" event. The Women's Division has acknowledged its full financial support of 36 direc-

tors, 9 staff members, and 11 UMW conference vice presidents, plus a grant of \$2,500 in response to a request from the Minnesota Conference UMW for scholarships. This involvement clearly represents "official support" on behalf of the Women's Division.

In addition, the "Re-Imagining" program book listed several other United Methodists related to the conference. Named were Bishops Forrest C. Stith (New York) and Sharon Brown Christopher (Minnesota). Also involved as program leaders were Kathi Austin Mahle, a UM clergywoman who was co-chair of the "Re-Imagining" steering committee, and Jeanne Audrey Powers, associate general secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, who also served on the steering committee. Ms. Mahle and Ms. Powers would no doubt have been involved in the planning of the event. All this represents significant UM involvement in both planning and participation.

Third, didn't the Women's Division "Fact Sheet" and "video letter" adequately explain its involvement in the conference? Quite simply, no. Neither the "Fact Sheet" nor the video provided substantive or satisfactory answers. Trying to calm the storm, the Women's Division has asked innocently, "Do UM Women have the ability to evaluate information they hear when presented with new, diverse views?" But what were these "new, diverse views?" They were not subtle nuances or fresh insights about biblical truth. They were radical departures from historic Christian doctrine and teaching.



James V. Heidinger II

At "Re-Imagining," Sophia was center stage. The entire gathering prayed to her, blessed every speaker in her

name, and joined in the highly-offensive "Milk and Honey" service on the final day. One clergywoman who attended told a conference edition of *The United Methodist Reporter*: "This was the first time I had encountered Sophia worship or praying in the name of Sophia or invoking the spirit of Sophia."

What distresses many of us is that after three months, the Women's Division has expressed no regret or reservations whatsoever about the offensive content of the conference. Some of their comments have even seemed intentionally evasive.

This controversy reflects the theological crisis already present within United Methodism. We don't all need to walk in theological lock-step. But we do need to walk within the guardrails of classical Christianity—respectful of that which has always, everywhere, and by all Christians been believed about God.

By now, all UM bishops have transcripts of enough of the questionable content of "Re-Imagining" to know there were serious substantive problems with it. The *Good News* board took action at its January meeting to ask the Council of Bishops to address this theological crisis. The Council should assure anxious United Methodists, in no uncertain terms, that the substance of the "Re-Imagining" conference was, indeed, unacceptable in terms of our UM theological tradition. The church needs a clear response from its episcopal leaders.

This issue of *Good News* is dedicated to "The Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity With Women." In order to properly celebrate this midway point of the Decade, we have called upon several mature and discerning women from various mainline denominations—the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—to comment on the recent controversy surrounding the "Re-Imagining" Conference. You will find their thoughts and opinions throughout this special issue.

The response within the UM Church to our coverage of the conference in the last issue has been, well, colorful. For example, one bishop reacted this way in his conference newspaper:

"The mission of defining what is orthodox is dangerous to the definer and to all for whom he or she would speak. It is a painful reality that those most fervent in defining truth, even God's truth,

# STRAIGHT TALK

## News, Views, & Uproars

have with grave consistency perpetrated the greatest violence against the church, themselves and others. The Crusades, Jonestown, the Branch Davidians, the unfettered sectarianism of Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland, of Jew and Arab, of Muslim against Christian, etc., are all strongly laced with angst and a self-serving orthodoxy with a conspicuous absence of grace."

He continued: "Accountability? Yes! Faithfulness guided by Scripture? Yes! The spirit of grace? Yes! The keeper of the purse of doctrinal purity? No! That smacks too much of the Pharisees

who, on the grounds of a litmus test they wrote and applied, did violence to the Son of God."

Another bishop remarked that some "statements I have read [criticizing the conference] fall short of basic Christian humility, compassion, and commitment to the church's mission. Sensationalism, self-righteousness, distortion by half-truths, hidden

power agendas, and manipulation through negativism are equally irresponsible and out of bounds. Also, sexism expressed in refusal to acknowledge and explore feminine images of God is at least as idolatrous as the goddess Sophia."

The Women's Division has even mailed out a 10-minute "video letter" to 600 UMW presidents at the annual conference and district levels. This public relations damage control is apparently unprecedented in UMW history.

United Methodists who are interested in hearing the "Re-Imagining" proceedings for themselves are invited to order the full

set of 24 official tapes for \$60 by calling "Resource Express" at 612-891-3069.

If you would like to help the victims of the Los Angeles earthquake, you may make a financial contribution to the United Methodist Committee on Relief through **Advance** No. 901330-8 (Earthquake, California-Pacific Conference).

It was recently announced that Dr. **Maxie D. Dunnam** will be the next president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. He will be succeeding the retiring Dr. **David L. McKenna**.



Dunnam, the pastor of the 5,800-member Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, is a world-renowned UM leader. He is the former world editor of *The Upper Room*, chair of the World Evangelism Committee, and an executive committee member of the World Methodist Council.

No stranger to controversy, Dunnam was one of the key leaders in the church-wide efforts known as the Houston Declaration in 1988 and the Memphis Declaration in 1992, both of which called their respective General Conferences to be mindful of evangelical concerns within the UM Church.

Although Asbury is not an official UM theological school it does graduate more persons into the UM ministry than any of the 13

official UM seminaries.

**Charles L. Dennis**, general evangelist in the South Georgia Conference, was elected president of the National Association of United Methodist Evangelists (NAUME) for the next two years.

In other news, NAUME granted their annual "Philip Award" at the recent Congress on Evangelism to radio broadcaster Dr. **James Dobson** and Dr. **Larry Lacour**. Dr. Dobson, famous as the host of the "Focus on the Family" broadcast, was the non-UM award recipient for his tireless work on behalf of the American family.



Dr. Lacour is professor of homiletics at the Graduate School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University. He was the UM recipient for his ministry to pastors and lay people by helping them find a deeper level of faith to carry out their ministry.

If you are a UMW vice president and were not able to attend the "Re-Imagining" Conference as the quadrennial theological workshop, perhaps you could ask the Women's Division if they would instead sponsor your attendance at the 1994 Good News Summer Celebration. Of course, there will be no Sophia worship, lesbian demonstrations, or milk and honey services. You will,

however, hear some of United Methodism's most dynamic leaders in the areas of church growth, evangelism, and spiritual renewal. You don't want to miss **William Hinson**, pastor of America's largest UM church; **Cornelius Henderson**, president of Gammon Theological

Seminary; **Ed Robb**, legendary UM evangelist; **Joe Harding**, co-author of *Vision 2000*; and **Elizabeth Brown**, a nationally-known author. Join us in Dallas for a wonderful experience.

What a turn around with President **Bill Clinton**. As candidate he stated emphatically, "Frankly, I'm fed up with politicians in Washington lecturing the rest of us about family values. Our families have values, but our government doesn't." Pretty catchy stuff, huh?

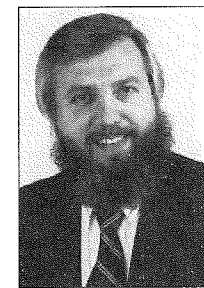
Yet in his 1994 State of the Union message he told the country that "our problems go way beyond the reach of government. They're rooted in the loss of values, in the disappearance of work and the breakdown of our families and our communities." He then went on to announce that "we cannot renew our country when within a decade more than half of the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage." Congratulations, Mr. President. **Dan Quayle** couldn't have said it better.

Bravo to ABC News! That network has hired **Peggy Wehmeyer** to be religion correspondent for

World News Tonight—a first for a network news show. Apparently, ABC anchor **Peter Jennings** persisted for three years to convince the network that they were in need of a full-time religion reporter.

Although America is an actively religious country, there has always been reluctance within the media to treat it with the importance of, say, sports or the stock market. As Jennings points out, "It's one of the great untapped areas in our national life."

Notable Quotable: "If I could be the 'condom queen' and get every young person who is engaged in sex to use a condom in the United States, I would wear a crown on my head with a condom on it! I would!"—Surgeon General **Joycelyn Elders**, a United Methodist.



Good news from the National Council of Churches! "Through the gospel we are set free from sin, restored to true dignity as persons created in God's image and introduced to a life of holiness.... We are born from above by the Spirit as we put our faith in the crucified and risen Lord." That is just an excerpt from a proposed NCC policy statement entitled "An Invitation to Evangelism: Jesus Christ and God's Reign."

Dr. **William Abraham**, UM professor at Perkins School of Theology and one of the paper's drafters,

remarks: "We would like to see the churches seriously owning the 'E' word again."

### The Good News Mission

*Good News is a renewal movement within the United Methodist Church. Founded more than twenty-five years ago, Good News has been a voice to unite and inform evangelicals within our denomination. Our goals are to:*

- Encourage evangelicals to witness effectively for Christ within United Methodism.
- Proclaim biblical truths.
- Sound the alarm about unbiblical philosophies.
- Discuss vital issues facing our church.
- Provide much needed fellowship within our church through our Summer Celebration.
- Deepen appreciation for our Wesleyan heritage.

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Wilmore, KY 40390

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### Resources

The following "Re-Imagining" resources are available from Good News for a donation to defray postage and handling costs:

1. Printed excerpts from the conference.
2. An audio tape of excerpts from the conference.
3. **Don Wildmon's** radio interview with United Methodist **Dotti Chase** and Presbyterian **Susan Cyre**. Both women relate their eye-witness account of the "Re-Imagining" Conference.
4. Reprint of "Wisdom's Feast or Gospel's Famine," a 1990 *Good News* cover story which explores the history of Sophia worship.

To order any of this material, write: Good News Resources, Box 150, Wilmore, KY 40390.





## Special Report: Reaction to "Re-Imagining"



# Mainline Denial How our churches are responding to "Re-Imagining"

by Susan Cyre

As the content of last November's "Re-Imagining" Conference continues to be made known, members of congregations in mainline denominations are responding with horror. Not only has this been the reaction within the United Methodist Church but it also has become a common occurrence within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the American Baptist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (USA). In some cases, congregations have notified their denominational leadership that they are withholding funds until the denomination adequately responds to the charges of heresy and paganism.

In the Presbyterian Church (USA), Executive Director James Brown defended his staff's participation at the conference and the use of \$66,000 of denominational monies used to support the conference by saying, "Those I've talked with saw this as not a place where orthodoxy is being put to the test, but a place where...folks bring in speakers who are stimulating, [and] they agree with part of what they say or they disagree..."

Mainline denominational executives are justifying their participation in the conference with three explanations. Each of these needs to be addressed.

1. We attended "Re-Imagining" because this was an ecumenical

event. Of course, there may have been things said that not everyone would agree with. That is to be expected.

Joyce Sohl, deputy general secretary of the Women's Division of the UM Church, followed this line of rationale by declaring, "In line with the ecumenical stance of the denomination, the Women's Division spon-

*"[The] Christian Church has been very patriarchal. That's why we are here together to destroy this patriarchal idolatry of Christianity." —"Re-Imagining" speaker Chung Hyun Kyung*

sors attendance at many ecumenical events."

The traditional understanding of ecumenical gatherings, however, demands that those present affirm their own faith but refrain from denigrating the beliefs of others. Also, ecumenical gatherings have historically been respectful and faithful to the parameters of orthodox Christian beliefs, as set forth in historic creeds and confessions. At the "Re-Imagining" Conference, however, not one of the 34 major speakers represented orthodox Christian faith as expressed in the classical creeds or confessions. Rather than being ecumenically grounded in the Christian faith, this meeting was interreligious,

with its major emphasis being nonchristian belief.

The speakers attacked the Christian Church and orthodox Christian doctrine as the source of oppression of women, racism, classism, violence in our cities, abuse of children, abusive rejection of gay and lesbian sexuality, and pollution of the environment.

Asian feminist Chung Hyun Kyung said, "[The] Christian Church has been very patriarchal. That's why we are here together to destroy this patriarchal idolatry of Christianity." Lois Wilson, the immediate past president of the World Council of Churches, said, "Christianity as practiced in today's world demonstrates more of a nightmare than a vision." Aruna Gnanadason, staff member of the World Council of Churches, said that the church "centered its faith around the cruel and violent death of Christ on the cross, sanctioning violence against the powerless in society." Radical feminist Virginia Mollenkott told the group, "I can no longer worship in a theological con-

text that depicts God as an abusive parent and Jesus as the obedient trusting child. This violent theology encourages the violence of our streets and our nations."

Chinese feminist Kwok Pui-Lan told the group, "We cannot have one savior—just like the Big Mac in McDonalds, prepackaged, shipped all over the world. It won't do. It's imperialistic." She offered China's 722 gods and goddesses as an example of "radical inclusivity." With reference to the Trinity she said, "I see three as more inclusive, diversity in unity.... If you have one and only one we are even more oppressive."

2. This was a theological smorgasbord. Women in attendance were free to agree or disagree with the content of the conference.

"Because it was an event that was ecumenical and global," said Annie Wu King, a Presbyterian Church (USA) executive, "there were expressions of ways of doing things that were different, but I tried to be open."

Unfortunately, the "Re-Imagining" Conference was not an academic lecture format in which attendees were invited to critically evaluate the speakers' position. Instead, this conference had a worship format in which attendees gave their assent to the content by their participation in the songs, dances, litanies, demonstrations, and rituals.

Any dissent or disagreement by attendees was defined as "listening to an inner critic" or being unwilling to grow. During the first evening, participants were told that "2000 men and women [are] pushing out boundaries of our lives, our traditions, and our understandings of the divine, and community, and the church, and creation...we invite you to enter the process of music and art, dance and the spoken word, even if it feels funny or awkward or strange to us at times. We are midwives of the new life that will be born from our work."

The group was then led in "scribbling." They were told, "Some of you have a tiny little voice inside that says, 'this is silly. You can't do this.'"

Well, welcome, that's the inner critic." They were instructed to write the words that kept them from enjoying the experience on a piece of paper and then to tear it up and throw it on the floor. "Tear out those words that aren't useful. Tell them they can't be part of you. Banish them."

When Chung Hyun Kyung led the conference through New Age pantheistic healing techniques, she labeled the reluctance that anyone might have felt as their unwillingness to "stretch themselves."

She told the group that when they

Two members of the "Re-Imagining" Conference steering committee have defended the references to Sophia. Jeanne Audrey Powers, an executive at the UM Church's Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, simply defined Sophia as "the encountering of divine wisdom." She also declared her disappointment that some feminist scholars who have "begun to find feminine elements in the godhead and who are seeking to remain within the church are sometimes condemned as radicals for trying to find elements



Theologian Kwok Pui-Lan talks with Mary Ann Lundy, a member of the "Re-Imagining" steering committee.

are tired they should "go up to a big tree and ask the tree 'give me some of your life-energy.' Or ask the sun to give you some life-energy. Then you spread this life-giving energy to your brothers and sisters in hurt and pain." She explained, "I want to practice with you this energy sharing.... If you feel goose bumps you don't have to do it. But, you know, it's wonderful sometimes to stretch yourself so you grow more than you think you can."

When a United Methodist Women's director was concerned that the activities were not consistent with her faith and refused to participate, she was quickly informed by a table facilitator that the conference leadership wanted everyone to participate.

3. References to Sophia were consistent with the Old Testament use of wisdom.

in Scripture and tradition that they can relate to as women."

Mary Ann Lundy, a high-level Presbyterian Church (USA) executive, defended the references to Sophia by saying they were to "invoke God's blessing of wisdom on the speaker." She continued, "For me, the whole thing about goddess worship is really ridiculous because part of what the conference did was raise up many of the biblical images."

The god that was celebrated at the "Re-Imagining" Conference was not the Christian God. It was not simply using a new name for the biblical God of the Old and New Testaments. The religion promoted at the conference was pantheism and monism in which a universal divine energy permeates all matter thus making the material world, including human

beings, sacred and divine.

Conference speaker and dance leader Carla DeSola told the group to "feel your being, this being is sacred like the earth....When we really move in an integrated way of body and soul together we know who we are on a deeper level; and knowing who we are, we can garner that power and energy into our prayer. It becomes

*"I can no longer worship in a theological context that depicts God as an abusive parent and Jesus as the obedient trusting child. This violent theology encourages the violence of our streets and our nations." — "Re-Imagining" speaker Virginia Ramey Mollenkott*

hood. Firstborn only in the sense that he was the first to show us that it is possible to live in oneness with the divine source while we are here on this planet."

Rita Nakashima Brock told the group that they must reject a transcendent personal god and instead view god as a verb. The women become the incarnation of god as

and our sexuality is part of creation's available riches."

One wonders how any of this can be construed to be consistent with the Old Testament use of wisdom.

At the closing milk and honey ritual, complete with a pseudo-sexual responsive reading, the group invoked the goddess by referring to her as: "Our maker

Sophia," "Our mother Sophia," "Our sweet Sophia," "Sophia, Creator God," and "Our guide, Sophia." Are these the terms we would use simply to encounter divine wisdom?

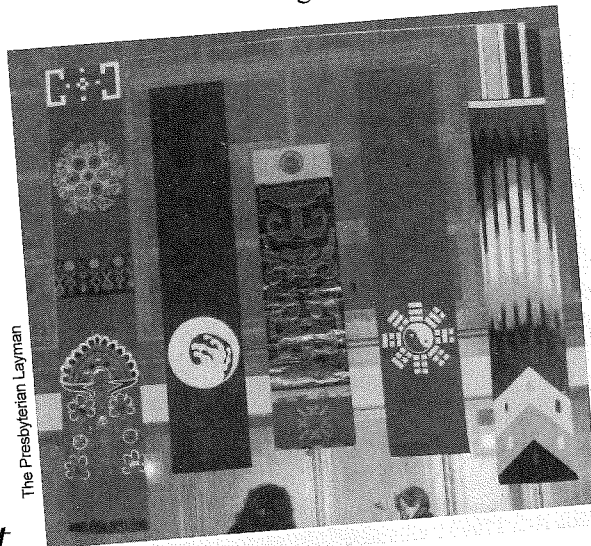
Through their participation and funding of the "Re-Imagining" Conference, staff and elected lead-

ership of mainline denominations have supported a gathering which turned away from Jesus Christ and worshiped a false god. As leadership, as shepherds having responsibility for the flock, they have violated and jeopardized the trust of their denominational membership and have led the world outside our denominations to question our fidelity to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. If our denominations are to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, our grassroots membership must insist that our leadership repudiate the heresies promoted at the conference and reaffirm the lordship of Jesus Christ.

"[we] use our power to love, to nurture, to enable freedom and willfulness of others"

Explaining this new religion, Kwok Pui-Lan said, "If we cannot imagine Jesus as a tree, as a river, as wind, and as rain, we are doomed together. If we are forever anthropocentric in our search for the redeemer we are doomed." She then directed the group to stand and "imagine yourself a tree, move as a tree."

In the new religion where the material world is divine and sacred, all sexual acts become sacred. Radical feminist Mary Hunt said during one seminar that it was time to substitute "friendship as a metaphor for family." She said, "imagine sex among friends as the norm...pleasure is our birthright of which we have been robbed in religious patriarchy. Responsible relational sexuality is a human right. I picture friends, not families, basking in the pleasure we deserve because our bodies are holy



The Presbyterian Layman

the full expression because we are in touch with our deep self and we release the spirit into the world. We become like Sophia, a tree of life for the healing of ourselves and the nations."

The conference participants were led by Aruna Gnanadason in putting red dots on their foreheads, supposedly representing the divine within each of them. They then bowed to each other—to this divinity.

Virginia Mollenkott explained this pantheism or monism saying, "everything that lives is holy....The monism I'm talking about assumes that god is so all-inclusive that she is involved in every cell of those who are thoughts in her mind and embodiments of her image....Like Jesus, we and the source are one....We would understand Jesus to be our elder brother, the trailblazer and constant companion for us who are here in time and space, but ultimately one among many brothers and sisters in an eternally, equally worthy sibling-

Susan Cyre

attended the "Re-Imagining" Conference as a press representative of the Presbyterian Layman, a bimonthly, independent newspaper. She is currently a candidate for Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA).



# Theology Should Start With God, Not Women's Lives

by Sally Nelson

As a woman, I suppose I ought to have felt affirmed by news of feminists coming together to deify their own femaleness. But my hormones just didn't come through for me, and I was only saddened and disgusted.

The people who gathered at the "Re-Imagining" Conference desired to concoct a "theology" dependent on "women's daily experiences." This is indeed an innovation, for how can the starting point of theology (literally, "talk about God") ever be anything but God? The proper talk about God begins with God—what God has done, proclaimed, and promised—not with humanity or what it thinks it has experienced of the divine.

But it is inevitably the human desire to place ourselves at the center of conversation. We want to talk about God purely on our own terms, make God into just one more thing that must revolve around our own demands. Thus, we imagine that we are speaking of God when we are only talking endlessly about ourselves. The theological scene has become cluttered with customized theologies: liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, etc. Such "theology" always produces a god of its own, one that closely resembles whoever is doing the talking.

And so it came about that the participants of the "Re-Imagining" Conference decided to worship "Sophia, the biblical goddess of cre-

ation." In seminary I learned that *sophia* is simply a Greek word meaning "wisdom." In other words, these people have produced the first cult devoted to the worship of a noun. Idolatry is an absurd thing, after all—as Isaiah showed when he spoke of the faithless Israelites burning half of a block of wood in their kitchen stoves, and making the rest into an idol before which they fell down in worship and adoration.

In a similar way, both absurd and self-glorifying, the conference participants prayed to Sophia in a litany of praise to their own bodily fluids ("the hot blood of our wombs," "nectar between our thighs," "our moist mouths," and on and on, *ad nauseam*). Is the explicitly sexual nature of the prayer to their idol an acknowledgment that idolatry is, as declared by the prophets, an act of adultery?

But these people (and others who want Christ's Church to accept similar absurdities and abominations) claim to be prophets themselves. They hope to grasp for themselves an office that is laid only upon those called and ordained by God, not to mention the fact that this office came to an end when John the Baptist pointed to Christ as God's chosen Messiah. They claim, further, to be undertaking "the second Reformation." The true Reformers undertook their task only with fear and trembling, knowing the gospel to be the timeless and priceless treasure of the Church. They saw themselves

not as rebels, radicals, or innovators, but as preservers and protectors; and they knew that the price of carelessness with such a treasure is faithlessness before God, the betrayal of Christ and Christ's Church. Such care for the gospel and such humility seem to be universally lacking in all those who put themselves forward as modern-day reformers.

In the very midst of their idolatry the conference participants still resist being known as heretics or pagans. A heretic is one who distorts the gospel. A pagan is one who casts it aside in favor of an idol. Sadly, these people have done both, and it is time for the Church to discipline those who still claim to be its own. It is time for pastors, bishops, presbyters, church councils, and religious orders to call to repentance those who worship false gods, and to remove from the clergy rosters and membership rolls those who refuse to repent.

There is a line between Christianity and paganism. When people choose to cross that line it is right and proper for the Church to recognize that fact.

The Rev. Sally Nelson

is pastor of Sion Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Lancaster, Minnesota. She is a graduate of Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.







# The Cult of Sophia

by William R. Cannon

The cult of Sophia is the strangest phenomenon to arise in the church in this generation. In many ways it is reminiscent of the "God is Dead" movement of 30 or more years ago. There is, however, one major difference between the two. The "God is Dead" movement was confined to the works of less than half a dozen religious philosophers and was limited to academic circles. It never got off college and university campuses. It had no influence whatsoever in the life of the church or society in general. It was short-lived, lasting little more than a year, so that one might say it was dead almost as soon as it was born. In contrast, the cult of Sophia is more general in its manner of expression, appealing to the popular rather than to the academic mind. It is not limited to literary and oral exposition but is accompanied by rites and ceremonies, bringing with it an agenda for worship, a program for action, and its own ministry and mission. Its purpose is to enhance the value of women in society, and its manner of doing this is to project feminism onto ultimate reality or to enshrine womanhood as such in the very nature of the Godhead itself.

The Sophia cult gained attention through *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*, a book written by two United Methodist ministers and a Roman Catholic in 1988. It provides liturgies and services of worship to Sophia. One such service was conducted in the chapel of the

Theology School of Drew University, as a substitute—so we have read in news reports—for Holy Communion. It would appear, therefore, that the present day Sophia cult is prominently promulgated by some pastors of the United Methodist Church.

It is further assumed that they got their justification for the worship of Sophia from a series of ancient gnostic manuscripts discovered in upper Egypt in 1945. We have known of Gnosticism long before this discovery was ever made through the writings of the Fathers of the Church, as early as the Second Century, when Gnosticism was declared a heresy and its adherents were expelled from the Church. These manuscripts provide no new information, though one of them may well be the writings of Valentinus, the most important of the gnostics.

The promulgators of present-day Sophia worship claim that they are using Sophia as just another name for God, and they do this in order to show that there is a female side to God and that God must no longer be referred to by male names and images alone. From a historical point of view, the name Sophia is a very unfortunate choice. Ancient Gnosticism did not depict wisdom in either the Greek or the Hebrew meaning of the word, or as we understand wisdom today. Sophia was a clever, mischievous, misguided, and misplaced entity at the very end of the chain of emanations. She produced the demiurge, who at her behest, cre-

ated a world so evil that God had to send help in the form of another emanation named Jesus to rescue us from it and return us through knowledge (*gnosis*) to an ordered existence.

The whole gnostic system was a tapestry of speculation, fantasy, and mythology, with no basis in fact and history. And the same seems to be true of present-day Sophia worship. Those who promote it offer their own thoughts and theories as truth and, as did the gnostics of old, substitute their beliefs for the New Testament account of the nature of Christianity.

In contrast to all other religions which advance teachings or the thoughts and opinions of their founders, Christianity rests on the mighty acts of God in history. It is a religion of fact which antedates and creates faith. It begins with a babe in a manger in Bethlehem, focuses on a teacher and performer of miracles in Galilee, points to an old rugged cross, and a man dying on it, and culminates with an empty tomb in a garden outside Jerusalem and a Savior risen from the dead. Christianity rests on history, not ideology.

It is pitiable that a group of feminist enthusiasts within the church find that the only way they can advance the cause of women in this "Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women" is to modify the doctrine of God to the degree that the feminine principle is made a part of the Godhead. If they only thought through carefully the teachings of Christianity, they would realize that this is unnecessary, even redundant. There is more than enough in the Bible that affirms the importance of women and gives them their opportunity of leadership and creativity in

society alongside and equal to that of men. In the Old Testament there are Miriam, Deborah, Naomi, Ruth, and Queen Esther, who serve as role models along with David, Solomon, and the prophets. In the New Testament there are Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, Mary and Martha, Mary-Magdalene, Lydia, and Priscilla, all of whom either played an important role in the earthly ministry of Jesus or else joined and supported the apostle Paul in the formation of the Church. Except for our divine Lord himself, there is no person in the Bible more significant than the Virgin Mary. It was through her, a woman, that the incarnation took place. It was Mary, a woman, who was the mother of the Incarnate God. Mary said of herself in the Magnificat, "All generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me" (Luke 1:48-49). It is not possible to conceive a position more noble than that of the Virgin Mary—a woman—mother of Christ.

There is not a single instance to be found in the Bible where the name Sophia is used as a female name for

God. To be sure, Wisdom is personified by the use of the feminine gender in chapters 7-10 of the Book of Proverbs, but this is purely a literary device used to enhance the value of wisdom and its importance in the conduct of life. Never is wisdom in those passages equated with God. On the contrary, wisdom is equated with us. Our marriage to wisdom and her marriage to us is essential to our success and happiness in life.

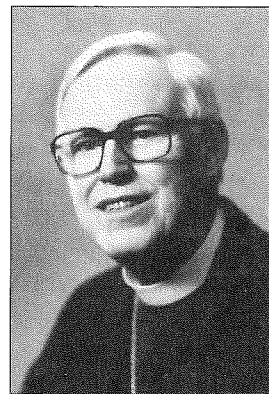
Since this Sophia cult appears to offer a service to Sophia as a substitute for Holy Communion, in which milk and honey take the place of bread and wine, this act contradicts history. When God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, he took the form of a man, not a woman. No matter how one feels or how intensely one wishes it might have been otherwise, it is impossible to alter history. Historically speaking, we cannot transpose the principle work of Jesus on to someone else. We cannot change Jesus of Nazareth into Sophia.

When any person or group of persons, male or female, exalts its own interests and values above everything

else, especially to the extent of trying to alter the concept of reality to suit its own aims—then that person or group of persons collapses into idolatry, worshipping self and class rather than God. They are described correctly by the pre-Socratic philosopher who said, "If horses and oxen had hands, they would make God in their own image." This is precisely what the adherents of Sophia have done. These extreme feminists have made for themselves an idol and they call that idol God. Without knowing it, they are worshipping themselves.

Christianity rests on God's own disclosure to us. It cannot tolerate our projection of ourselves on to God. We are bound, body and soul, to the teachings of the Bible. One dares not add to or subtract anything from those teachings. St. Augustine deals succinctly with this matter when he writes: "If you believe what you like, and reject what you dislike in the Gospel, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourselves."

*William R. Cannon is a retired bishop of the United Methodist Church, former dean of Candler School of Theology, former chairman of the executive committee of the World Methodist Council, and author of 14 books.*



Bishop Cannon

## Bishop Hunt Addresses Sophia

Recent efforts by some Christians to fuse worship of "Sophia" with Christianity is nothing more than an "attempt to reconstitute the godhead," a heresy that "staggers the religious mind," said UM Bishop Earl G. Hunt at the January meeting of the Congress on Evangelism.

"No comparable heresy has appeared in the church in the last 15 centuries,"

observed the retired bishop from Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

"When the church seems to be losing its struggle with powers and principalities, weird things begin to



Bishop Hunt

happen," he told the convention of more than 1,000 lay people and clergy.

Bishop Hunt called the current interest in Sophia "a weird prostitution of the Eastern Orthodox idea of Saint Sophia" and said that "this is material which must be eradicated from Christian thinking now." He called

upon his fellow bishops to deal with the heresy "forthrightly and firmly."

In a list of steps that could be taken to renew the denomination, Hunt said that the church must be

"cleansed of heresies old and new."

He warned that "one of the danger signs is that church leaders, in effect, have declared ours to be a post-heresy age" in which almost anything can be construed as "Christian."

Hunt said emergence of such trends signals a need for a "deep and sweeping change, a radical transformation" across the denomination.

Bishop Hunt is president of the Foundation for Evangelism, which raises money to fund evangelism professorships at United Methodist seminaries.

*Adapted from United Methodist News Service*



# Sunday with Sophia

by Katherine Kersten

According to "Re-Imagining" Conference participants, critics have got it all wrong. The gathering was not theologically aberrant, they insist, nor did goddess worship take place there. Many women protest that the prayers they offered to Sophia were holy and honorable and were merely intended to revere the female aspect of the Christian God.

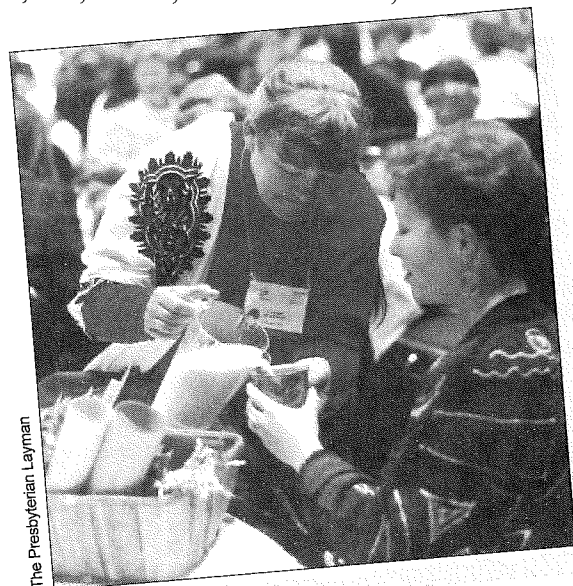
I was present at "Re-Imagining," and I cannot understand how women who attended the conference can make such claims. These women, I suspect, were misled by their leaders' perfunctory attempts to link Sophia—as "spirit of Re-Imagining"—with

*"While one could legitimately use either term, use of the name 'Sophia' rather than the more abstract, 'Wisdom' reminds us that the Scriptures portray this Wisdom as a someone who walks, talks, plays, cries, eats, creates, and loves." Presto, changeo! One goddess coming up!*

Christian Scripture and tradition. Indeed, "Re-Imagining" organizers devoted all of five paragraphs in their daily conference newsletter to what should have been a critical issue—Sophia's ostensible Christian roots.

"Re-Imagining" was, in fact, an

exercise in theological sleight of hand. Biblical Wisdom is an abstract attribute of Christianity's triune God—like justice, love or mercy. But when conference leaders pulled this Wisdom out of their theological black hat, they produced "Sophia," a personified Wisdom conjured up out of thin air and worshiped for her own sake. The "Re-Imagining" newsletter offered this rationale for the transformation: "While one could legitimately use either term, use of the name 'Sophia' rather than the more abstract, 'Wisdom' reminds us that the Scriptures portray this Wisdom as a someone who walks, talks, plays, cries, eats, creates, and loves." Presto,



The Presbyterian Layman

to "dream wildly" about "who we intend to be...through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia." As each speaker took the podium, she received a chanted blessing from the entire assembly: "Bless Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within." Sophia's voice, the program declared, "has been silenced too long. Let her speak and bless us throughout these days."

Sophia was in her full glory at Sunday's grand finale: a communal "blessing of milk and honey" reminiscent of the Eucharist meal of bread and wine. As the "gifts" were blessed, leaders intoned a lengthy prayer: "Our maker Sophia, we are women in your image...Sophia Creator God, let your milk and honey flow...shower us with your love...Our mother Sophia...Our sweet Sophia...Our guide, Sophia...we celebrate your life-giving energy...we celebrate the sensual life you give us... We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water."

One wonders where the women were who deny that Sophia was worshiped as a goddess during these goings-on. One wonders, too, about the women who claim that they felt no pressure to join in the festivities. The "Re-Imagining" organizers clearly intended to exert such pressure.

changeo! One goddess coming up!

Whatever they chose to call her, at "Re-Imagining" Sophia occupied the place that Christian churches have reserved for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Leaders welcomed participants in her name, and urged them

Throughout the conference, 50 monitors stood guard around the room, admonishing and exhorting attendees whose participation seemed less than heartfelt. Though participants had initially been told that joining in was voluntary, the conference newsletter advised that hanging back in Sophia-worship would not be tolerated: "[P]articipation is intended for ALL in the gathering—rituals are not spectator events.... We thank you all for your full, active, conscious participation. May Sophia continue to bless

Holy Spirit." She suggested that Jesus "appear[ed] as the child...and the envoy of Sophia.... In all [his] compassionate, liberating words and deeds are the works of Sophia."

When I asked participants, "Who is Sophia?", they seemed surprised and uncertain how to respond. One woman volunteered that "Sophia is the divine energy in women being unlocked by the goddess rituals." Another said, "She is the god who has been ignored too long—she is liberating the energy of all women

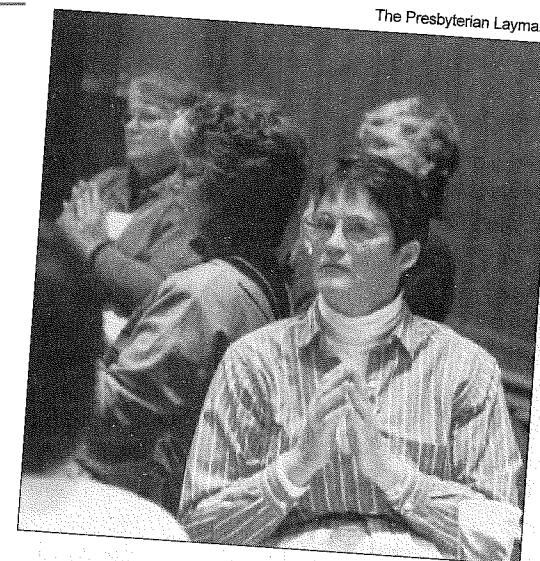
They wanted what human beings have always craved—a god/dess we can find by simply looking in the mirror.

Clearly, as the deity of "Re-Imagining," Sophia is the answer to the prayers of a multi-cultural, therapeutic world. She is "tolerant"—she does not judge, nor does she recognize any sin but the corporate transgressions of racism, sexism, and classism. Sophia has only one commandment—"Freely bless your own experience."

At first blush, it seems strange that those who contemptuously reject Christianity's most fundamental tenets should persist in calling themselves Christians, and wish to locate pow-wows such as "Re-Imagining" within Christian history. In fact, their behavior is easy to understand. Those who claim to be re-imagining Christianity get headlines about a "second reformation." They get endowed chairs at seminaries, money, power, legitimacy, and a captive audience that must be the envy of the self-declared followers of

Wicca. "Sophia" serves "reformers" of this ilk as an invaluable *tabula rasa*. Their adherents' ignorance of Sophia—far from being an obstacle—is essential to their project of fashioning a new religion while retaining tenuous and self-interested links to the Christian faith.

*"Sophia is the divine energy in women being unlocked by the goddess rituals." Another said, "She is the god who has been ignored too long..." One woman's response seemed particularly illuminating: "Sophia is the wisdom within me."*



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your pilgrimage."

As I watched 2000 United Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian women clink glasses filled with milk and honey, I was struck by a paradox. These women flocked happily to Sophia's altar, yet few seemed to have a clear idea of who she was, or to exhibit curiosity about how she might be associated with the creeds and confessions of their home churches. Even speakers such as the Rev. Barbara Lundblad, pastor of Our Savior's Atonement Lutheran Church in New York City, seemed to raise few eyebrows. Lundblad declared that she "did not need Jesus" as long as she had Sophia. To cheers, she noted that "we have done nothing in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the

for the good of the community." One man told me that Sophia "is the incarnation of wisdom in the women I have known." But one young woman's response seemed particularly illuminating: "Sophia is the wisdom within me."

This woman helped me understand why the excitement at "Re-Imagining" seemed so infectious, and why those caught up in it seemed loathe to question its source. The "Re-Imagining" participants were happily engaged in that most modern of enterprises: worshipping themselves, right down to the "bodily fluids" that figure so prominently in their prayers. They wanted to believe the conference program's heady words: "Sophia is the place in you where the entire universe resides."

Katherine Kersten,

*an attorney, attended "Re-Imagining" as a press representative of Religion and Democracy and the Lutheran Commentator. She is a member of the board of directors of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and Lutherans for Religious and Political Freedom.*







# Feminist Theology Examined

## Sophia and the Bible

by John Oswalt

The recent proceedings at the "Re-Imagining" Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have been a cause of great concern throughout the mainline denominations. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the gathering was the worship and adoration paid to Sophia. In their desire to educate the attendees the propagators of this form of worship have put forward several theologically unsound concepts. At their roots, these propositions are a reflection of feminist theology, and as such, deserve our critical investigation.

Unfortunately, the feminist theological view cannot be called a valid interpretation of biblical intent, because it refuses at the outset to let the Bible say what it will from within its own self-understanding. The feminist interpretation focuses not so much on what the biblical text says, but upon what it might have said *if* certain things included in the text were not in the text, and *if* certain things which are not in the text were in it.

The new teachings about Sophia are not the result of scholarly and objective look at Christian doctrine. They are an attempt by persons who have rejected the biblical teachings about Christ to remain within the "Christian" Church. Susan Cady, a

UM minister and co-author of *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*, asked herself a very interesting question as she celebrated communion one day. She asked: "What am I doing? Celebrating the experience of some man? What does He have to do with me?" Later that same week Cady wrote about a vision of Sophia, peering through the window of a door and calling to her, "What are you afraid of anyway? Do you think I care about your old theology? Do you think I care what name you name me?" When you are dealing with this kind of rationale, argumentation is of little use.

The feminist outlook makes a very selective use of biblical evidence to support its case that there is a warrant for the Christian worship of a goddess called "Sophia." Furthermore, a good deal of the argumentation consists of conjectures about what the Bible might have said about the goddess if certain conjectured developments had taken place. In other words, we very frequently find a conjecture resting upon conjectures which rest upon still others.

It has been asserted that the personalization of wisdom is a prominent feature of the "Old Testament." In fact, the only place in the entire Old Testament where wisdom is personified is in three passages in the

early chapters of Proverbs, where the personalization is heavily qualified by the context. The chief support for the theory is actually drawn from the apocryphal books of Baruch, Sirach, and Ecclesiasticus, which the Jewish community never accorded canonical authority. Yet many feminist scholars have chosen to gloss over this very important fact. They then proceed to use the phraseology "Old Testament" to include the Apocrypha, with the result being that uninformed audiences are misled into believing that the canonical Old Testament contains a significant number of these instances of personalization. This is not responsible use of data.

When it comes to the actual biblical statements, feminist scholars show a distressing tendency to assign meaning without paying adequate attention to context, whether within the passage or around it. This is especially true with regard to the Proverbs passages. For instance, *hokma*, "wisdom," is regularly treated as a synonym of "understanding" and "discretion." It is perfectly clear in this context that these latter two words are not proper nouns and that therefore "wisdom" is not either. This setting tells us that, far from declaring that the Jews believed in the existence of a goddess named *Hokma*, the passages are personalizing an

abstract concept for the purposes of impact. Attention to these and other clues within the Proverbs passages themselves makes it abundantly clear that the literary device of personification is being used and that no statement about divine personages is intended.

This contention is further strengthened by a study of chapters 1-8 of Proverbs in the light of chapter 31 and the entire book. Such a study shows that the purpose of the book is to attribute wisdom to the kind of a wife who if clung to faithfully, will build up her husband; and folly to an adulteress who promises everything, asking nothing while actually taking everything and giving nothing. Far from speaking about a Hebrew goddess who can give credence to the agenda of 20th Century western feminism, these chapters are urging us to cling to the accumulated principles for living which the book contains just as one would cling to a spouse



*Susan Cady, a UM minister and co-author of Wisdom's Feast, asked herself a very interesting question as she celebrated communion one day: "What am I doing? Celebrating the experience of some man? What does He have to do with me?"*

who will do nothing but good for her mate.

These scholars completely ignore this contextual shaping of the materials and thus produce an interpretation which is totally at odds with the book; or, if the contextual shaping is finally addressed (as in the previous paragraph), they swiftly categorize that understanding with a hotly pejorative "sexist" label. They then undertake a convoluted consideration of the possible social context of wisdom literature to explain how this unfortunate condition could have come to exist. But their own research

concludes that it is impossible to determine why the supposed goddess might appear in such a setting. It hardly warrants mentioning that if feminists had paid adequate attention to the context in the first place, the hypothetical goddess would never have appeared and would need no explanation.

Furthermore, there is a tendency among these scholars to read much more into a statement than plain sense will bear. Several cases in point appear in Proverbs 8. In books such as *Wisdom's Feast*, it is suggested that this chapter points to an Israelite belief in a female consort of God who sexually creates the world with him. But a straight-forward reading of the text says none of this. What it says is that wisdom was the first of God's creations, and was with him as he created the rest of the world, delighting in all he did. Wisdom is a creation, not a divine being. Wisdom does not create, but only accompa-

imagery, a common feature of wisdom writing, the chapter is insisting that the wisdom principles of the Bible are inherent in creation itself. In fact, these principles were built right into creation by God. That is why it is so important to live by them, and that is why they will be such a blessing to the person who does live by them. There is no goddess here.

### The New Testament

The feminist treatment of the New Testament is similar. Scattered passages are read in ways which neither their espoused world view nor their contextual shaping will permit. Then, when these scholars are asked why even with this kind of radical surgery there are still so few passages to support their case, they answer that the other statements (which do not exist) were suppressed. This is not responsible use of the text nor of the rules of evidence.

A reading of Paul's half dozen references to wisdom in their contextual settings makes it clear that for him God's wisdom is God's determination to save the world by means of the death and resurrection of his son. Thus, Jesus is the embodiment of that wisdom, and it is an offense to the Jews and folly to the Greeks. There is no female figure either implicit or explicit here. Even more to the point, the independent female deity which these scholars have constructed is not here.

The case is somewhat different in the book of John. Here the general similarity in language with some of the apocryphal wisdom literature does suggest that John has appropriated some of the descriptions of personalized wisdom to talk about Jesus. But what does that say? Not nearly what feminist scholars claim for it. First of all, this connection of Jesus to wisdom is far from being the organizing principle of the book.

Secondly, they do not understand the program of the Gospel of John. Quite clearly, the evangelist is saying that all the fragmentary philosophies

which were current in the religious culture of the period between the Old and New Testaments have found their goal and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. What none of those philosophies could do in saving the world, he has done! For their incompleteness he gives completeness. All that is right and true about them is to be found in him, and it is by



*We are told that the worship of Sophia was very important in the early church, but almost no evidence is given to support the assertion, and what is given is highly ambiguous.*

comparison with him that what is right and true about them emerges. Thus, John is far from identifying Jesus with the hypothetical wisdom goddess in an effort to garner some of her supposed fame for his messiah candidate, Jesus. Rather, John was saying to those Jews of his day who were viewing wisdom as their own equivalent to Greek philosophy, that what they were actually looking for was Jesus. John is not identifying Jesus with the supposedly glorious Sophia; he is incorporating wisdom into Jesus! According to John, it was Jesus for whom the Jews were groping in their increasingly elaborate images of wisdom during the intertestamental period.

It might be surprising that Sophia proponents give so little attention to the book of James, which is the one book in the New Testament that could be called a wisdom book. Their inattention is explainable, however, because the wisdom discussed in James is so clearly connected to principles for living that there is no room for the hypothetical goddess.

### **The Early Church**

The treatment of early Church history by feminist scholars shows the same kinds of errors which characterize their biblical exegesis. Particularly distressing are the draw-

ing of large conclusions from small amounts of evidence and the use of hypotheses as though they are facts. We are told by some proponents of Sophia worship that their practices were very important in the early church, yet almost no evidence is given in early Christian documents to support the assertion, and what is given is highly ambiguous. It is then

argued that Sophia worship was lost because it became associated with Gnosticism in the Christological controversies and became a casualty when gnostic theology was defeated.

First of all, we know almost nothing directly about Gnosticism; what we do know is largely by implication from the writings of its opponents, and those implications are subject to multiple interpretations. Second, it does not follow that the supposed Sophia worship was part of Gnosticism merely because we believe the gnostics sponsored salvation by means of intellectual accomplishment. Third, to say that what does not now exist—that is, evidence that any Christians ever believed in a goddess of wisdom—does not exist because it was rewritten and ultimately written out, is to beg the question in a most serious way. But even if all the above could actually be shown to be matters of fact, which they cannot, since those who gave Christian theology its distinctive shape would have declared Sophia worship heretical, how can we now lift it up as a worthy choice for Christian belief?

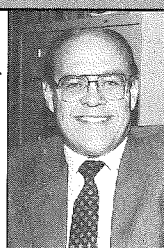
### **Conclusion**

In their reaction against what they see as the sins of Western Christendom, feminist scholars have chosen a way which, throughout its

long history, has produced the very opposite effects of those they hope for. What they have chosen is the way of paganism, in which the gods are simply an expression of this world. This is the world view of all the great world religions except Judaism, Christianity, Islam—all three of which have been shaped by the Old Testament. The feminist world view, known as continuity, holds out the hope that we can be one with "Mother" earth and, in so doing, overcome the tragic limitations which life seems to impose upon us. But it is all a mirage. Continuity and the religions it spawns are a false hope. Where in those religions are women treated as persons? Where in those religions are the poor seen as possessing rights? Where in them is oppression attacked? Where in them is wholeness of persons and communities and nations and the world seen as a goal? It is only finally in the Christian faith that these understandings are to be found. To be sure, we Christians have often fallen far short living up to them, and it is very probably because of many of us men. But if so, the way back is not to destroy the faith. Insofar as feminist spirituality denies the biblical world view and adopts an alien one—to that extent it separates itself from anything rightly called Christian and sells itself into prostitution to a way that has never produced anything but bondage. If Sophia is God, we all, men and women alike, are lost. If God, the transcendent God of the Bible, is the dispenser of a wisdom far above that of human imagination, there is hope for us all.

John Oswalt

is the chair of the Biblical Studies Division and Beeson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is a noted Old Testament scholar in the area of Ancient Near Eastern cultures, literature, and language. Dr. Oswalt is also a contributing editor to Good News.



# **The Women's Division Response to the "Re-Imagining" Conference**

by Joyce D. Sohl

*The following is the statement issued by the Women's Division in response to inquiries about their participation in "Re-Imagining."*

Both recent fund-raising letters of Good News and RENEW/Evangelical Coalition of United Methodist Women and the January/February 1994 issue of *Good News* magazine attack the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries for participation and "support" of the "Re-Imagining" Conference. A December 15 letter addressed to members of the Council of Bishops says the event was "supported officially" and suggests that the Women's Division had "full knowledge of what the contents would be" and states that if this is true, "the Council of Bishops must consider how to call the Women's Division to accountability."

Staff and directors who attended this event are all mature women able to make discriminating theological judgments. They are aware that presence at an ecumenical event does not indicate approval of everything that happens. Good News and RENEW had their own representatives present.

The Women's Division is committed to ecumenical dialogue and freedom to discuss a wide range of theological ideas among Christians of different backgrounds. Attendance at

ecumenical events includes the risk of encountering ideas that are not in harmony with United Methodist positions. For example, the expressions of some participants concerning homosexuality differs from our official United Methodist position. Hearing does not mean agreement. The Women's Division operates within the framework of the United Methodist *Discipline* and its theological statement.

Now to some questions and answers.

- Who sponsored the event and why were Women's Division staff and directors present? The "Re-Imagining" Conference was sponsored by the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Minnesota Councils of Churches, November 4-7, 1993, to mark the mid-way point in the "Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women." It was held in Minneapolis.

The United Methodist Church has been supporting participation in "Decade" events for several years. A 1988 United Methodist General Conference resolution called upon all United Methodists to "participate fully in the 'Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women' (1988-98)." In 1993 the United Methodist Council of Bishops strong-

ly recommended activities on the implementation of the Decade's goals in every annual conference.

Women's Division directors were informed about the event and those who wished to attend had their expenses paid. Conference vice presidents were offered the opportunity to apply for a limited number of scholarships to the conference.

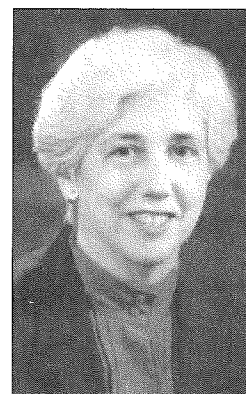
- Did the Women's Division sponsor the conference? No. It did not sponsor the event and it was not represented in the planning. Its only funding was expenses of attendees.

- Did the Women's Division have "full knowledge of the contents" in advance? No.

- Was the event the theological training for the quadrennium? No.

- Why did the Women's Division sponsor attendance? In line with the ecumenical stance of the denomination, the Women's Division sponsors attendance at many ecumenical events. Our church, as indicated above, has promoted the issues relevant to Decade. The 1988 General Conference passed a resolution supporting the Decade.

- How many persons attended at Women's Division expense? Thirty-



Joyce D. Sohl



six directors (there are 65) chose to attend this conference. Nine staff members attended. There were 11 United Methodist Women conference vice presidents who attended because of their responsibilities for ecumenical and women's concerns.

In response to a request from the Minnesota Conference United Methodist Women, \$2,500 was granted for Minnesota scholarships. The remainder of the nearly 400 United Methodists paid their own expenses.

• What does the Women's Division think of the theology articulated by speakers at this conference? The Women's Division subscribes to

the theological concepts of The United Methodist Church as outlined in the *Discipline*. We are placed within the tradition and practice of The United Methodist Church and operate within that framework. We believe in freedom of religion and the rights of individuals to articulate differing beliefs.

• Did the United Methodist Church or the Women's Division "officially" participate? The Women's Division and the United Methodist Church have supported the Decade but neither were official sponsors or funders of this regional conference.

• What was the reaction of those who attended? The reactions varied. Some thought it was challenging, while not agreeing with all aspects. Some were disturbed by some of the ideas advanced. All are mature Christians rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, and are acquainted with the doctrines and positions of the United Methodist Church. They understood that they were attending an ecumenical event where a variety of opinions would be expressed.

*Joyce D. Sohl is deputy general secretary of the Women's Division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries.*

## The Good News Response

by Faye Short and James V. Heidinger II

We have read the official response from the Women's Division concerning the "Re-Imagining" Conference. Unfortunately, it provides no satisfactory explanations about United Methodist participation in an event so far removed from Christian teaching and tradition. We are troubled, as well, by the absence of any expression of regret or even second thoughts about participation in an event which made a mockery of Christian doctrine and morality.

In fact, we find the Women's Division official response to be evasive, misleading, and ultimately unresponsive to the theological crisis now facing the UM Church.

What we are asking the leadership of the Women's Division to do is simple—to repudiate the false gospel promoted at the "Re-Imagining" Conference and to apologize to United Methodist Women for this misuse of their tithes and offerings. This, they have thus far refused to do.

The Women's Division's response refuses to address the numerous offensive, heretical, and derisive

attacks upon historic Christianity. In noting that the staff and directors who attended were "all mature women able to make discriminating theological judgments," the statement neatly avoids any comment about the conference's repeated denials of historic Christian doctrine. The comment that "The Women's Division is committed to ecumenical dialogue and freedom to discuss a wide range of theological ideas" explains nothing. To say such offensive presentations were acceptable because this was "ecumenical dialogue" is a spurious attempt at justification and only gives "ecumenical dialogue" a bad name. The character of "Re-Imagining" was not that of dialogue, but rather of indoctrination in a feminist/womanist/lesbian agenda.

A few points need to be further addressed.

• In justifying the presence of staff and directors, the statement notes that those who attended were "aware that presence at an ecumenical event does not indicate approval of everything that happens. Good

News and RENEW had their own representatives present." That statement implies that the Good News and RENEW representative attended simply to participate. We believed that the content of the "Re-Imagining" event might be highly controversial and thus deserving of careful coverage. Therefore, Dottie Chase attended as a press representative of Good News and RENEW. However, Mrs. Chase and several other mainline press representatives (Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.) indicated they would have left in protest after the first two hours had they not been there as press observers.

• The official response also cites Good News' December 15 letter to the members of the Council of Bishops, which states that the event was "supported officially" by the Women's Division. And most certainly it was. The Women's Division took official action at its March 1993 meeting to be involved. At that spring meeting, the Women's Division's Section of Mission and Membership Development put for-

ward a report which "rescinded the decision to have the staff and director theology workshop on May 14, 1993," and "approved that in place of a Women's Division-sponsored theology workshop, directors and staff attend (as schedules allow) the Re-Imagining conference on the Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women in Minneapolis, MN November 4-7, 1993." (This is found on page 3 of the section's "Report and Recommendations.") This action indicates that the Women's Division did "officially support" the "Re-Imagining" event.

• The statement also cites Good News' letter to the bishops which, it says, suggests that the Women's Division had "full knowledge of what the contents would be." For the record, the letter stated "One must wonder whether their [the Women's Division] participation was done with full knowledge of what the content would be." Since the Women's Division selected "Re-Imagining" as its major theological training event for the quadrennium, it is difficult to believe this was done unknowingly. When the Women's Division took the action at its spring meeting to participate in "Re-Imagining," a part of the rationale for doing so included the statement that "The 'Re-Imagining' workshop has drawn an excellent list of women theologians." The list of presenters had been published and must have been recognized by enough Women's Division staff for them to feel comfortable "rescinding" their own training event and making "Re-Imagining" their officially endorsed theological training event.

• The Women's Division statement denies that the "Re-Imagining" Conference was the theological training event for the quadrennium. Yet according to Exhibit II from the

spring meeting of the Women's Division, entitled "Women's Division Staff and Director Retreat, 1994," the Women's Division "quadrennial pattern of retreats and theology workshops for staff and directors is: Year 1: Theology Workshop; Year 2: Spoken Retreat; Year 3: Silent Retreat; and Year 4: Individual Retreat." This document indicates "Re-Imagining" was the theological training event of the quadrennium for the

Women's Division, an event set for Year 1 of the quadrennium, or 1993.

• While so many across the church are responding with shock and disgust at reports about the "Re-Imagining" Conference, the Women's Division appears unconcerned and unresponsive to the theological crisis reflected in the presentations at the Minnesota gathering. The citing of General Conference action urging participation in the "Ecumenical Decade" as well as encouragement from the Council of Bishops is a weak attempt to transfer elsewhere the responsibility the Women's Division should accept for its participation. Is this really the kind of event that encourages spiritual or theological growth?

• The sad truth is that the Women's Division encouraged—and funded—participation in an event which applauded heresy and celebrated blasphemy. The Women's Division has acknowledged financial support of thirty-six directors (of 65 total), nine staff members, and eleven UMW conference vice presidents who attended. The Women's Division also gave \$2,500 in response to a request from the Minnesota Conference United Methodist Women for scholarships.



Faye Short

Page 66 of the program book was entitled "Thanks to Our Funders." Listed among the funding organizations on that page was the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church.

• The Women's Division response states that "presence at an ecumenical event does not indicate approval of everything that happens" and restates the Women's Division commitment to ecumenical dialogue and freedom to discuss a wide range of theological ideas among Christians of different backgrounds. These are noble but irrelevant points. The question is: will the Women's Division repudiate the unacceptable moral and theological substance of this conference?

We are left wondering why none of the United Methodist Women who attended "Re-Imagining," identified by the statement as "mature women able to make discriminating theological judgments" have not spoken out to denounce the heresy of Sophia and the rejection of so much of our Wesleyan theological heritage.

If the Women's Division sees the feminist/womanist/lesbian emphasis as the cutting edge for tomorrow's United Methodist Women, that is clearly unacceptable for the majority of UM women in our local churches. We ask the question once again about the matter of accountability.



James V. Heidinger II

If the Women's Division is a part of the United Methodist Church, which it undoubtedly is, then the Council of Bishops must have the same responsibility of theological oversight of the women's unit as it does the entire UM Church, according to Par. 514.2 of the *Book of Discipline*. The UM Church awaits and desperately needs some expression of episcopal oversight concerning the "Re-Imagining" Conference.

# Rediscovering Your Bible

by Steve Harper

It happens to all of us sooner or later. Our love for Scripture declines. We begin approaching our time of Bible reading more as a duty than a delight. We come to a familiar passage and feel like skipping over it because "we know what it says." If we are ministers, Sunday school teachers, or Bible study leaders, we may experience this in the feeling that we're using the Bible as a place to "find" an idea or an outline. All of us come to the time when we need to recover the joy and meaning of searching the Scriptures.

We can be thankful we have somewhere to turn when we experi-

matter) in a way that allows God to speak to you through it. It is a process that has helped untold numbers of Christians to personalize their reading of Scripture, the devotional classics, etc. It is one way many have used to find their Bibles again.

The term *lectio divina* may seem quite new to you, but I expect you have already engaged in a form of it, even without knowing it. Take your Bible in your hands and open it. If you have ever underlined a passage, or otherwise marked it, you have experienced a type of sacred reading. There have been times in the past when a portion of a passage has real-

*It is a process of mining Scripture (or any other text, for that matter) in a way that allows God to speak to you through it. It is a process that has helped untold numbers of Christians to personalize their reading of Scripture, the devotional classics, etc.*

ence times like this. Our predecessors in the faith have left us a precious legacy called *lectio divina*. In English it goes by various terms: sacred reading, formative reading, and devotional reading, to name a few. It is a process of mining Scripture (or any other text, for that

ly "spoken" to you. That is a kind of *lectio divina*. It is what my colleague, Dr. Robert Mulholland, provost at Asbury Theological Seminary, calls being "shaped by the Word." It is something that has happened to all of us, and it is something each of us can enrich and improve.

In this brief article, I want to do two things. First, I want to give you an overview of the sacred reading process so you can begin using it. Second, I want to conclude the article with some of the benefits I've personally received as a result of using *lectio divina* in my own reading of the Bible.

In describing the process, let's keep the goal clearly in mind. The purpose of *lectio divina* is to enable us to encounter the Word of God through the reading of God's Word. It is our goal to attune ourselves, so that as we read we may hear and respond to the particular message God has for us in this moment.

We want to come away from our times of Bible reading able to say, "I have met the living God." To be sure, no methodology is fool-proof; nothing works every time. But I do believe that formative reading is a process that will enable this contact with God to be your experience much of the time. So, with that goal clearly in

mind, what are the steps of the process?

## Prayer

We begin with prayer. The ancients call this the Prayer for Illumination. Today, we might pray it like this: "Lord, I am grateful for this opportunity to read and reflect on your Holy Word. I ask you to prepare my mind and my heart so that I can hear what you want to say to me. Come, Holy Spirit, and inspire my reading, even as you originally inspired the writer. I ask it in Jesus' name, amen."

Such praying is an opening to God. It is our recognition that we are not "in control" of the text. Rather,

we want it to "control" us. We are not trying to master any -

thing; we are seeking to be mastered by God's Word. We have become accustomed to reading for information, reading to pass a test or acquire

a promise we need to claim or an instruction we need to follow. Whatever it is, we stop where we are, accept it as God's particular message

*We enter the text itself, mining it in the hope of discovering what God has to say to us. For one thing, we read slowly, lectio divina has no set amount in mind. We are seeking to be deep, not broad. We are going for quality, not quantity.*

additional knowledge. In *lectio divina*, we are reading in order to meet the living God. Information and knowledge may or may not be involved; encounter is the key. The act of reading may fill our minds or warm our hearts (or both). We do not care; we only pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Prayer is the first action in *lectio divina*. Indeed, it is the action that saturates the whole process.

## Reading

The second step is reading. We enter the text itself, mining it in the hope of discovering what God has to say to us. For one thing, we read slowly, *lectio divina* has no set amount in mind. We are seeking to be deep, not broad. We are going for quality, not quantity.

We may read three chapters or three lines. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we read slowly enough to sense when and where we need to stop, look, and listen. And whenever we sense that halt, we pause and dig in right there. It may be a word that captures our attention. It may be an idea that speaks to something going on in our lives. It may be

for the moment, and allow it to penetrate our lives.

Our slower reading is accompanied by a systematic approach. To be sure, we can skip around and still use the sacred reading process. But ideally, we read systematically and sequentially. We do this because we believe the Holy Spirit inspired the original author to write with a certain progression. We believe we shall encounter God more authentically in the text if we follow the same progression of inspiration. So, the second step is reading, slowly and systematically, in order to hear and respond to God.

## Meditation

The third step is meditation. That word has unfortunately taken on negative connotations in our day. But it merely means that we "walk around" the idea which has seized us in our reading. Hugh of St. Victor called meditation, "piercing the core of a particular truth." In the reading step, we have latched onto a particular truth. In the meditation step, we seek to pierce that truth and get all we can out of it.

Here is where we can bring any and all skills we have to bear on the passage. If we know Greek or Hebrew, we can do full-fledged exegesis. If we have learned inductive study skills, we can apply that methodology to our "particular truth." If we have a chain-reference system, we can trace the idea through the Bible. We can use our





concordances, commentaries, maps, cross references, etc. We can use anything and everything that enables us to derive more and more meaning and inspiration from the passage on which we are focusing. Meditation is the step in which we probe, explore, research, compare and contrast, illustrate, and otherwise walk around the text, seeing and hearing as much as we can.

### Contemplation

The fourth step is contemplation. This is the step in which we personalize and own the text. In the phase of meditation, for example, we may have found out what six Bible scholars think about the passage. In contemplation, we now determine what we think about it. We appreciate what we have learned in the meditation stage; now, in contemplation we integrate all the "words" into that personal "word" for ourselves. In contemplation we come to the place that some of our predecessors called, "the Bible according to you." To illustrate, in contemplation we come to the place where John 3:16 is as much "ours" as it was John's when he first wrote it down. Needless to say, contemplation is a holy moment and a precious privilege.

### Application

The fifth and final step is application. What else could it be? We have prayed for God to speak. We have read in a way that enabled us to select a meaningful portion of Scripture to focus upon. We have meditated by using every means at our disposal to ruminate on that portion. And we have prayerfully and sincerely sought to make that text our own, to integrate its message and inspiration into our lives.

Now, in application, we seek to allow the power of that Holy Word to flow through us for the sake of others. We end our sacred reading realizing that "to whom much is given, much is required." In the first steps, God has blessed us. In application, God is challenging us to

become a blessing to others. That blessing may flow out in our words, in our deeds or in both. But in the step of application we are now praying, "Where, when, and how would you want me to live out your Word, O God?"

Do you see what we've done? A little while ago, we approached the Holy Bible with no idea what God might want to say to us. Through the process of *lectio divina*, we not only have received a word from the Lord, we also have received our marching orders for putting it into practice.

*God is challenging us to become a blessing to others. That blessing may flow out in our words, in our deeds or in both. But in the step of application we are now praying, "Where, when, and how would you want me to live out your Word, O God?"*

The Bible comes alive as the written Word of God becomes the living Word within us and through us.

I do not mean to suggest that this always happens. There are days when even sacred reading seems dull and uninspiring. But I have come to see that this approach to the Bible (and other literature as well) is a precious means of receiving and responding to God. *Lectio divina* is one way of actualizing the prayer, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." It has been a way for many to find the Bible again when it has become somewhat dull and routine.

At the beginning of the article, I promised to share some of the blessings I've received by using this process. As I have moved along, I'm sure you've picked up some of them in the way I've described the method itself. Sacred reading has made prayer and study all one fabric. It has freed me from the obsession to read a certain amount whether I get anything out of it or not. It has given me a deepening appreciation for the way each book of the Bible unfolds and progresses.

It has enabled me to utilize many other tools in gleaning truth from the Scripture. And it has challenged me to validate the intention of Bible reading in the first place, that is, to live the message.

In addition to these important things, I would add some others. Sacred reading has increased my sense of intimacy with God. It has enabled me to see that I do not have to wait until some expert tells me what the Bible says. It has given me a sense of anticipation for sharing what I am learning with others, both

as a check and balance and also as the basis for fruitful discussion. *Lectio divina* has enriched my sense of communion with the saints, in that I realize I am using a method which Christians have used for centuries.

Ever find yourself going through a time when you need a boost in your use of the Bible? Try *lectio divina*. Plug into the process of sacred reading. I predict you'll be pleasantly surprised at what you discover. I predict you'll be grateful that God indeed speaks when we use this method to listen. God bless you in the quest!

Steve Harper

is the executive director of A Foundation for Theological Education, and Founder of Shepherd's Care, a ministry to ministers. For information on either of these new ventures, write him at 160 Moore Drive, 207-B, Lexington, KY 40503. This article is reprinted by permission of The Asbury Herald.



# God's Window of Opportunity

by Elizabeth B. Brown

I took my ten-year-old son, Brad, to Burger King for a hamburger yesterday. We noticed a teenager, the victim of cerebral palsy, who was busily at work. Brad had never seen anyone working within a spastic-challenged body before, so I explained the cause, the difficulties, and the spin-off problems. Brad watched for a time, and then said, "Mom, he seems so happy!" What a window of opportunity to share insight with my son—that someone had helped this teenager see his possibilities instead of his impossibilities. Even more importantly, the young man himself had chosen to see his possibilities. I explained to Brad that we all face different trials—the tragic, the unfortunate, and the challenging—but if we choose to focus on the possibilities, as this cheerful young man had, there is no limit to the positive influence we may have on others.

God may be calling you to offer a world of possibilities to someone in need by giving an encouraging word or offering a helping hand. Needs are not respective of age, sex, wealth, or education-level. They can reign in



any arena.

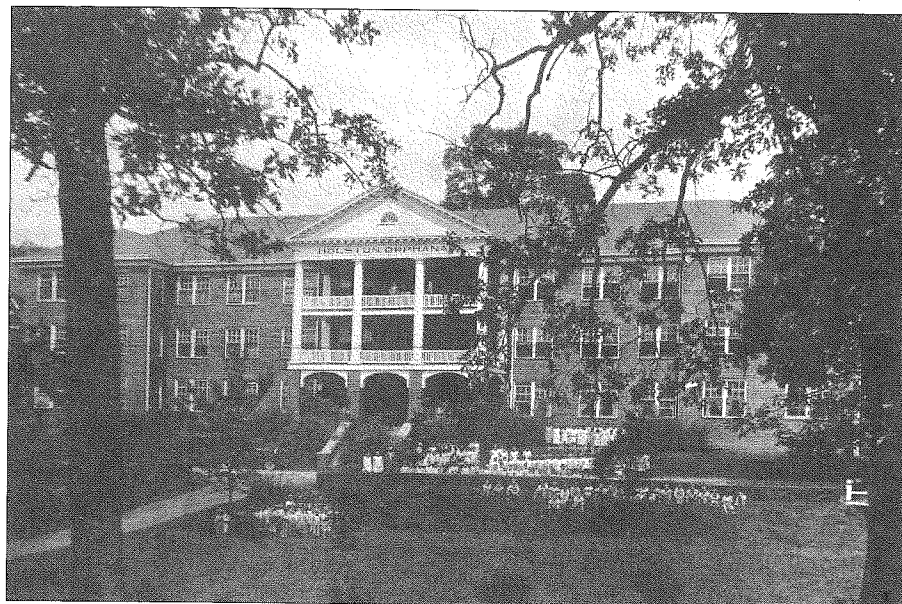
Overwhelmingly, children are the most needy and most victimized group in our society because they have no collective voice, no power, no political-action committee. For many, childhood is a time of hopelessness and trouble. It may even be terminal. One hundred years ago unwanted children were left on doorsteps; today, they are aborted. A century ago we had sweatshops and used children as commodities or expendable labor; today, even with many technological advances, we continue to have glaring problems:

- In the 1960s, the number-one problem listed by teachers was children chewing bubble gum in class. Today, elementary schools are having drop-to-the-ground drills in preparation for drive-by shootings.

- There are many American cities that have as many abortions as live births.

- In a nearby school system with terrific curriculum and quality teachers, one-fourth of the students drop out before high school graduation.

- In a local high school sex education program, the presentation of



The three-story dormitory at the Holston Home for Children, built in 1923.

"how-to-put-on-a-condom," illustrated by means of a condom and a banana, brought cries of outrage from irate parents. The school board, however, supported the right of the teachers to teach—using whatever reasonable and moral methods they felt best illustrated their lessons.

- In a typical American small city in Texas, four high school cheerleaders became pregnant, but are unsure of the name of the fathers. One of the girls chose to have an abortion; three plan to give birth. The community is divided: throw the girls off the cheerleading team or uphold each girl's right to choose her own morality.

- The latest national statistics indicate that 50 percent of all students have had sexual intercourse before reaching high school age; 79 percent have had sex by the time they graduate.

- With the elimination of almost all the diseases that killed our children a century ago—polio, pneumonia, etc.—our children should be living longer, our projected life expectancy should have soared. Instead, we are witnessing such massive numbers of teenagers dying through acts of violence, suicide,

drugs and/or alcohol related accidents that our longevity statistics flattened several years ago. Incredible!

To meet the needs we see in our world, we can either become a fluttering fan or accept God's call as he opens windows of opportunity and excites our heart. Too many of us opt for the first choice. We whirl in chaotic inactivity, stirring the air with our endless list of ills and woe-begones! We bluster and drive people away with our hot air and negative focus. In direct contrast, those who follow God's inner guidance gain a quiet spirit that reflects peace, even in the midst of the world's woes. At God's direction, they move out to change and better the world within their reach.

Might God be calling you to create a home with a heart, as he led Elizabeth Reeves Wiley to do? One hundred years ago, a man and a woman arrived at her boarding house in Wise, Virginia, with the woman's nine-year-old daughter. "If you don't take Cynthia, we are going to leave her in the woods," they exclaimed. Mrs. Wiley was the widow of a Methodist minister—an older woman who had raised her own three children and was trying to

live on the meager income from her boarding house. She could have shut the door—to her home and her heart. Instead, she felt God's nudging and refused to listen to the voices that always cry out with reasons why something won't work: "You're too old. You have no money. What are you going to do with a problem child?" She held out her arms to a hurting, abandoned child. From that small beginning, Elizabeth's heart was filled with a love and compassion that moved her to organize a Methodist women's home mission society. Within two years, a white farmhouse on fifteen acres in Greeneville, Tennessee, became an orphanage and home to 25 children.

Elizabeth Wiley's husband had been president of Emory and Henry College, but ministers and former presidents of small colleges are rarely wealthy. Mrs. Wiley's willingness to consider God's urging instead of her economic level, was the catalyst that opened a world of possibilities to thousands of children. God needs only one person to begin a vision, but he will also call others to help in the task. Mrs. Wiley did not try to work alone. She involved the local community, her friends, and even the state. Methodist churches and women's groups helped support the home; farmers and merchants often donated food.

The Orphan's Industrial Home and School that Mrs. Wiley started in 1893 has grown to become the Holston Home for Children in Greeneville, and has an expanded, multi-faceted treatment center to meet the changing needs of children. In 1925, the three-story dormitory was replaced by cottages, each of which are home to eight children and their house parents. Today's children are not orphans. They come from dysfunctional families, as did the original Cynthia; but in the Holston Home, they grow to become a family within a loving Christian environment as they share in the normal activities that develop healthy children—art, music, sports, housekeep-

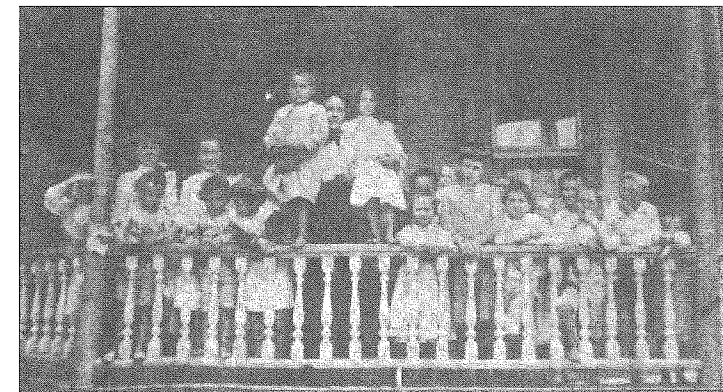
ing, homework, etc. Each day begins and ends with prayer and devotions, so that these "throw-away" children can learn that they are very wanted and valuable because God created them.

Just as Mrs. Wiley's focus was on Cynthia, an individual child, Holston Home continues to have concern for the individual. Each child is important. "This is the only home I have," said one young man who had come to Holston Home at the age of eight. He is now eighteen and lives in the home's independent living program. Lillian Kyte grew from a four-year-old to a teenager in the Home. Now 70 years old, Kyte says: "We were loved and taken care of. We were taught to live a good Christian life. Coming back to Holston home for our annual family reunion is like visiting with my sisters and brothers again."

As children's needs change, Holston Home for Children brings to fruition new programs and directions under the leadership of Dr. Bob Bostick. The facility operates a school with small classes for children who are unable to function in the local city and county schools. They have small group homes; a home for developmentally-delayed women, a foster care program, an adoption agency, a counseling and diagnostic center, a day-care program for preschoolers, a center for boys with emotional or behavioral problems, and an independent living program. There are also adolescent group homes for children

who would otherwise find themselves wards of the state. The lives of 7,000 children have been touched through residential or foster programs and 1500 children have been adopted—all because someone cared and did not say, "I've done my duty! Someone else will have to help!"

God may be opening a window of opportunity within your heart to meet the needs of a Cynthia, a Chris, or a John. You don't have to be wealthy, brilliant, educated, or politically correct to make a difference. You simply have to care and make a move from fanning the air to stepping out in faith. The need in your



Mrs. Wiley and her children at the home.

area may not be for an orphanage. Perhaps you have older people in your community who are without family; or maybe, locked behind the doors of individual families, there are those who have challenged bodies or minds that preclude them from participating in normal life activities. They may be yearning to have a "home" in which they can meet friends and have fellowship. Perhaps your heart is longing to help the divorced, or children who are victims of divorce. Maybe God is stirring you to reach out to the single adults within your community. The needs are endless.

In Johnson City, Tennessee, parents responding to the need for a residential care center for their own head injury family victims are joining together to fund a home similar to Holston Homes' Bewley Center. Bewley Center was brought into

existence by parents, who, caring for their own developmentally-delayed child's emotional and physical welfare, established a home for 15 women. No longer locked into the more isolated home environment, the young women support and care for each other. The Bewley Center frees the families of the young women from many pressures and concerns, not only by solving the immediate needs, but also by eliminating the fears of what will happen to their loved ones after supportive family members are no longer living.

Mrs. Wiley made a difference because she cared. She did not make excuses. She simply stepped out, doing what she could. You can do the same. You simply need to begin allowing God to use you to plant seeds of possibilities, so he can change the impossibilities. You don't have to make it happen; but you must move. Your steps in faith allow God to

work through you, filling you with the necessary courage to energize and free you from the negatives that would inhibit you from being the catalyst to love-filled change.

Do you feel a stirring in your heart? Perhaps God is offering you a window of opportunity and the chance to touch someone's life with possibilities. How exciting!

Elizabeth B. Brown

is author of *Happiness is an Inside Job: The Joy Choice and Sunrise Tomorrow: Coping with the Death of a Child*. She is on the board of directors of the Mission Society for United Methodists and GET Ready Ministries. Mrs. Brown will be a plenary speaker at the 1994 Good News Summer Celebration.



For more information about the Home, or to make a financial contribution, write:

Holston Home for Children  
P.O. Box 188  
Greeneville, TN 37744  
(615) 638-4171



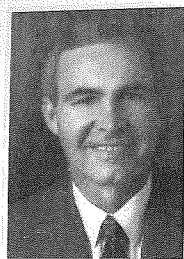
# Mark Your Calendar!

## A Celebration of Church Growth, Evangelism, and Renewal

July 21-23, 1994  
The Harvey Hotel / Dallas, Texas

# 1994 Good News

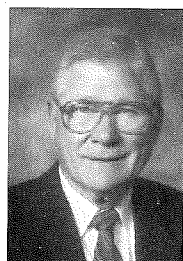
# Summer Celebration



**William H. Hinson,**  
pastor of First United  
Methodist Church,  
Houston, Texas



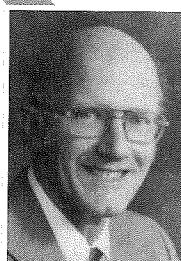
**Cornelius L. Henderson,**  
president of Gammon  
Theological Seminary



**Edmund W. Robb Jr.,**  
UM evangelist and founder  
of A Foundation for  
Theological Education



**Elizabeth B. Brown,**  
author of  
*Sunrise Tomorrow*



**Joe Harding,**  
co-author of *Vision 2000:*  
*Planning for Ministry*  
*into the Next Century*



**Kenneth Cain Kinghorn,**  
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- *Vision 2000*—Joe Harding
- *Disciple Bible Study*—Ira Galloway
- *ECUMW/RENEW: Refreshing Winds for UM Women*—Faye Short
- *AFTE: Changing Theological Education*—Dan Hawk
- *Training Youth for Battle Zone Living*—Bob Swan
- *After the Revival*—Curtis Schofield
- *Our UM Evangelists: How They Can Help Local Churches*—Rod Barnett
- *Prayer: To Change You, Your Church, Your World*—Terry Tekyl
- *The Healing and Wholeness Ministry of Christ in the Church Today*—Jim Wagner

For more information, write:

**Ms. Ginny Chase, Registrar**  
**Good News Summer Celebration**  
**P.O. Box 927, Justin, TX 76247**  
**Or Call 1-817-636-2743**

## If You Ask Me

### Our Abortion Culture

"We think abortion is a bad thing. No woman wants to have an abortion." —Kate Michelman

The above remark sounds reasonable. After all, who in their right mind believes that abortion is a good thing? Even devout feminists would defend its legality without justifying its goodness. Right? Interestingly enough, Ms. Michelman happens to be the head of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL).

Is she having second thoughts? No, instead, she claims that she was misquoted by a reporter from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. A few days after the quote hit the street, NARAL issued a denial reading in part: "Michelman has never said—and would never say—that 'abortion is a bad thing.'" Ms. Michelman even told *The Washington Post* that she would "never, never, never, never mean to say such a thing."

The whole episode has been an untidy mess for Ms. Michelman. After all, the exact quote was on tape.

This is a new day for abortion. No longer is it exclusively presented as the last resort for the frightened victim of rape. Instead, it is now the great liberator of modern women who carry "Day-Timers" and cellular phones, those who have places to go and people to see. It has become America's most common non-therapeutic surgical procedure.

One year ago, Carolyn Hax wrote a provocative editorial in the pages of *The Washington Post*. She noted that abortion was "being left undefended by its true champions—by women who owe not their lives, but their lifestyles to the convenience of legal abortion. Yes, convenience."

Her argument is supported by the statistics cited in her article.

According to the most recent data, 75 percent of women who chose abortion said that "having a baby would interfere with work, school or other responsibilities." Ms. Hax properly points out that "although abortions involving health problems, rape and incest may be abortion-rights advocates' favorite case studies, in this study they fall at the very bottom of a 12-item list."

Her candor and honesty is refreshing, even if it is morally haunting.

She tells the story of a friend who spent one summer enjoying the "dizzying freedom" of lively night life and an older boyfriend whom her parents would have despised. But alas, the frolicking young woman got pregnant. "It is a rare young woman these days who indulges in a summer like that—or any candid search for sexual freedom—without being aware of that possible consequence," Ms. Hax reports. Not to worry, we are told, the young woman still looks fondly upon that summer. After all, her abortion allowed her to head back to school without missing a class.

Another of Ms. Hax's friends aborted a pregnancy because she had accepted a better job. Still another admitted that she had "unprotected sex" without much concern. "Spontaneous sex, brought to you by the safety net of abortion—shall I upgrade convenience to a luxury?," observed Ms. Hax.

"Other perks of abortion on demand include extended travel, higher education, unbroken career paths, choosing a different father, limiting family size," she states. And the list gets longer: "spending teen years at the mall with friends, living



**Steve Beard**

in a college dorm room, going out and getting drunk after work."

These are the whimsical concerns of those raised in the

age of abortion. This is the generation that knew not abstinence, let alone delayed gratification.

"We came of age as women in the eye of the abortion storm, a relative calm of acceptance during which millions of women learned to take abortion for granted, as a means to a lifestyle that would allow them to view sex as a pleasure and being single as a way of life—a lifestyle that allowed room for irresponsibility," remarks Ms. Hax.

Speaking at the recent National Prayer Breakfast, Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a different message—one of self-sacrifice and compassion. She spoke as President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and their spouses looked on. She called abortion the "greatest destroyer of peace today" and reminded the audience that love means being willing to "give until it hurts." (Talk about speaking truth to power.)

"Many people are very, very concerned with the children of India, with the children of Africa where quite a few die of hunger, and so on," the frail nun said. "Many people are also concerned about all the violence in this great country of the United States. But often these same people are not concerned with the millions who are being killed by the deliberate decision of their own mothers."

The biblical prophet is portrayed as a voice crying in the wilderness. In this case, the prophetess was speaking in Washington, DC. We would all do well to lend her an ear.

## Teaching That Touches Head and Heart

In my first full-time youth ministry position I came face to face with several sobering realizations. I had graduated from a respectable seminary and had gained enough confidence in my training and experience that I felt God had given me a gift of teaching. That's why I was a bit surprised when I found myself teaching the Bible to a group of high school students who didn't seem to have the gift of listening!

I think I awoke to "smell the coffee" one night when I said to the kids, "Turn with me in your Bible to John..." and I looked up to see one kid actually turning the pages of his Bible, another kid thumbing through the table of contents, and the rest staring at the ceiling because they hadn't thought to bring a Bible to Bible study.

If we are serious about trying to nurture a faith in our youth that affects both their heart and head, we need to remember that the most important part of education is not what we teach, but what the kids learn.

*The Law of the Teacher:* Teachers must know what they would teach.

Sometimes we are deeply intent on communicating to our students the importance of Bible study, but they do not hear our lessons because they do not see that commitment lived out in our own lives.

Nobody wants to learn about navigation from the captain of the Titanic. Nobody wants to learn automobile design from the creator of the Edsel. If we want kids to get excited about what the Bible can mean in their lives, they must be able to observe that it is making a difference in our lives.

*The Law of the Student:* Students must be interested in the truth to be

learned. At the beginning of every Bible study, our first responsibility is to somehow convince our students that this is material they need.

Most of us who have flown in an airplane have heard the flight attendants give their little pre-flight pep talk about safety belts, cushions that float, exits in case of fire, and oxygen masks that drop from the ceiling. What I have noticed is that these announcements are made on every flight, and on every flight they are routinely ignored by virtually all but the newest passengers. I'm convinced it is because these friendly flight attendants have neglected the *Law of the Student*.

Maybe it's because I fly a lot. Maybe it's because, as a youth minister, I can identify with these people. I have often wondered about how they could make this presentation a little more gripping. For instance, they might begin that nifty video with some footage of a recent crash. That would probably get our attention (and it may help to solve the overcrowded seat situation).

Or they might announce, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're glad you're flying with us today. Under your seats you will find a flotation device in the unlikely event we have to make a water landing. We apologize that they are still a bit damp from our last flight." Or this announcement might spark our interest: "Ladies and gentlemen, we would like to go over some of the safety features of this aircraft. We'd like to begin by pointing out the exits nearest you, but before we do we need to tell you that our right wing is on fire."



**Duffy Robbins**

The airlines need to make us want the information they are so anxious to give us. Otherwise, we will not learn it. That is the *Law of the*

*Student*. It is a law that is proven every week in Bible studies and Sunday school classes all over the country when youth workers stand up to give kids some teaching from the Bible that is literally life-saving information, and find themselves confronted with a nearly unanimous yawn.

How do you get adolescents to reach out for new information when they either think they know everything or, at least, think they know everything worth knowing? You may have to toss a little water on their sand castles to provide a lively demonstration of their limitations.

When I began working with teenagers, I was fired up and zealous in my Bible studies, ready to give them all the right answers. The only problem was they didn't have the questions.

What I have learned over the years is that I can sometimes teach kids more about God by asking the right questions rather than giving all the right answers. Somehow, the questions get them more interested in learning a new truth. It forces them into cognitive dis-equilibrium. They find themselves in a situation where they need to learn.

That doesn't mean that we have to begin Bible study with a brain teaser every week; but it does mean that if we want to communicate Christian content to our kids, we should be prepared to convince them that this is information they need.

# NEWS ANALYSIS

## The Tupelo Tornado

*The unpretentious culture warrior*

by Steve Beard

Whoever said that perception is reality, has never met Don Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA). The caricature of Wildmon is that of an ignorant and reckless culture grouch. Reality, however, paints a very different picture.

Wildmon is vastly more intelligent than his detractors would ever admit. He discusses cutting-edge radio technology with the ease of an electrical engineer. His forays into the culture war are marked with the strategic sophistication of a military operation. Wildmon is endowed with what the experts call savvy "street smarts." Although he has a keen sense of right and wrong, he lacks the smugness of moral superiority.

Not one moment in his busy day

is wasted. With the speed of a tornado, Wildmon darts around his 20,000-square-foot headquarters, rummaging through stacks of mail and dropping into offices unannounced to discuss his latest crusades. For an easygoing southern community like Tupelo, Mississippi—birthplace of Elvis Presley—Don Wildmon runs on a higher level of adrenaline than most folks.

Wildmon is one of America's original culture warriors, the most formidable pain-in-the-neck for television network executives to ever walk the planet. He surfaced on the cultural radar screen back in 1977 as a concerned United Methodist minister who encouraged his congregation to protest Hollywood's portrayal of sex, profanity, and violence by shutting off their television sets for a week. "Turn-The-TV-Off Week" gained national media attention and catapulted Don Wildmon into the spotlight.

From those humble beginnings, Wildmon has built one of the most effective grass-roots organizations in America. With an \$11 million budget, AFA

can wage some of the most impressive battles for traditional family values. The AFA Journal, Wildmon's no-frills, information-packed monthly publication, goes out to 750,000 families and 170,000 churches across the nation. His mailing list has grown by 50 percent over the last year, primarily through full-page newspaper ads.

His most recent barnstorm is the war against *NYPD Blue*, a new ABC television series laced with nudity, foul language, and graphic violence—something that producer Steven Bochco calls "pushing the envelope." Wildmon's efforts have been very successful. No, the show was not canceled; but it is losing a bundle of cash. "The name of the game is money," Wildmon told *Good News*. "That's their god."

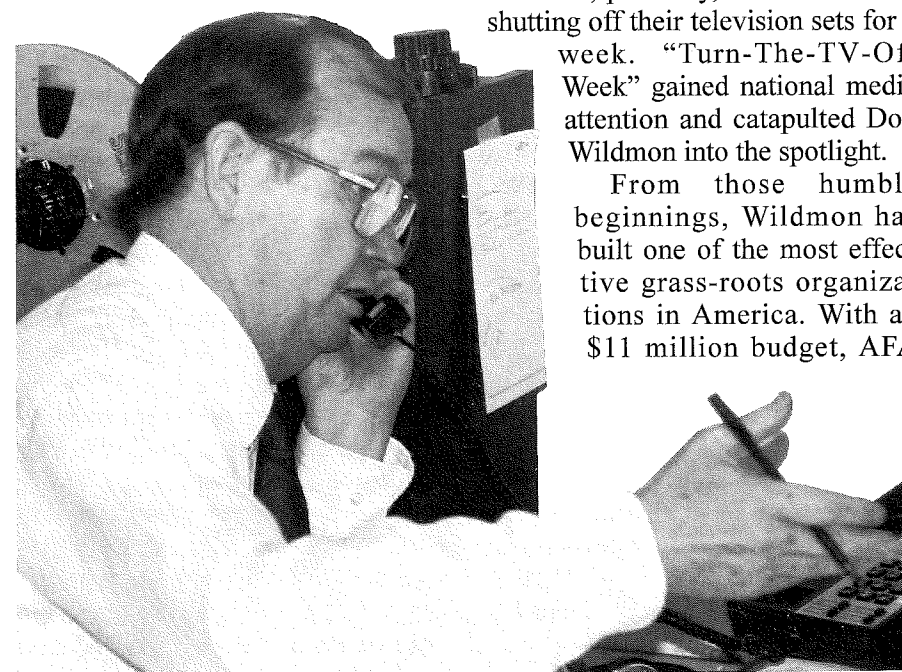
Not only have many local affiliates refused to air the series, ABC has also been unable to land mainstream, high-dollar advertisers. A program with *NYPD Blue*'s ratings should be attracting first-rate sponsors. Instead, Wildmon believes the network is losing \$1 to \$1.5 million per show.

"You can't keep it off the air," he says. "If they're determined to show it, they'll show it. But you can make them lose financially."

Wildmon has gone after all the advertisers on local ABC affiliates, not just those found on *NYPD Blue*—mostly R-rated movies and new products. AFA sent out 1.6 million letters to supporters asking them to call the chairman of General Motors person-to-person to request that he pull GM's advertising from ABC. As network executives are well aware, Wildmon plays hardball.

Wildmon's efforts have made a difference. ABC President Robert Iger recently announced that the program is a financial loser. "The revenue it's bringing in is less than that of a program with its ratings. It's losing money," he said. "The reason is content."

The media reaction to the *NYPD Blue* flap has been predictable: "the

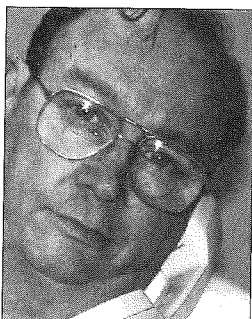




Rev. Don Wildmon and his menagerie of reactionary bozos have risen to the bait like largemouth bass," writes one television critic. Undeterred, Wildmon responds, "They think they've won, they think it's over. It hasn't even begun."

His efforts have even become somewhat enjoyable. "It gives me a bit of joy to be able to deal effectively with ABC," he says. "It's getting to be a little fun now—winning a few."

Long before Attorney General Janet Reno began testifying before Congress, or MTV's *Beavis and Butt-head* became part of the national debate on television violence, Wildmon was doing something about it. He has always gone straight to the financial supporters of television programming: the advertisers. If you want to talk about a problem, call your senator. If you want to get something done, call Don Wildmon.



**Wildmon is one of America's original culture warriors, the most formidable pain-in-the-neck for television network executives to ever walk the planet.**

His philosophy is quite simple: "Networks can show what they want to show. Advertisers can sponsor what they want to sponsor. And the consumer can buy what he wants to buy." Those who accuse Wildmon of censorship are "either intentionally misleading or dumb," he observes. "The biggest censors in the business are the network people who decide what they're going to show and what they're not going to show. Technically speaking, censorship means prior restraint by the government, which was never advocated by AFA."

Wildmon knows a thing or two about censorship. Not long ago, 65 newspapers refused to run a full-

page ad of his that listed the top commercial sponsors of sex and violence on television, the AFA "Dirty Dozen," along with quotes about the responsibility of advertisers. The ads did not even mention boycotts, but *USA Today* refused the ad because two of their largest sponsors were on the AFA list. These are the same people who talk about censorship and professional ethics, and all this other good stuff," he says with disbelief.

"Sixty-five newspapers can refuse to run my ad, but none of them will end up on anyone's censorship list," he says. "Yet if parents go down to complain about a filthy library book, they will lead the list, even if the book stays in the library."

If you doubt Wildmon's effectiveness, mention his name to any television executive. Talk to the publishers of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Call up John

Frohnmyer, former head of the National Endowment for the Arts, who called him "shrewd and relentless." They have all witnessed his capability firsthand.

"In the early years, I nearly lost my religion. Not because of the arguments. Not because of the networks. Not because of people calling me an S.O.B. or anything else." His crisis of faith came when he met preachers and other Christians who would not lift a finger to clean up society because they were more worried about prestige or status within a denomination. "There should be no need for AFA to be in existence. There's no excuse. We're doing the work the church won't do."

Wildmon believes that American society is suffering because the church is not engaging the culture. "Christians are going to have to seek careers in movies, radio, and television," he says. "Preachers should be telling young people not only to go into the entertainment industry, but to go into law, politics, and education—into all these fields," he says passionately.

Wildmon puts his money where his mouth is. Radio is his newest adventure. AFA's radio station devotes about 70 percent of its air time to Christian contemporary music; the remaining 30 percent is devoted to Bible teaching or talk shows. Through satellite technology, his radio station is also heard in 22 other cities, soon to be more.

Not everyone was thrilled when Wildmon got into radio. The public broadcasting people in Mississippi protested so loudly that his application for a radio station license took four years to process, rather than the normal nine months.

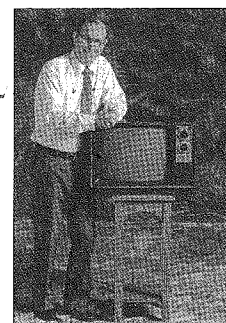
As much as he loves radio, Wildmon maintains a steady focus on AFA's main purpose. "Jesus didn't get himself crucified by helping hurting people," he says. "He got himself crucified by opposing the powers that be, those that were corrupt and wanted to corrupt other people, too."

AFA has 450 local affiliate organizations scattered throughout the nation. "These people are truly the champions of the family," says Buddy Smith, AFA associate director. "They do more than talk. They are out there taking action." The groups are involved in initiating letter-writing campaigns to TV advertisers, organizing pro-life demonstrations, fighting local pornography peddlers, and providing information about local and state family-oriented legislation.

The newest AFA project is a nationwide counseling referral service for those addicted to pornography. Wildmon has always been an arch-nemesis to the porn industry.

He is singlehandedly responsible for getting *Penthouse* and *Playboy* out of 7-Eleven convenience stores, which cut the magazines' sales by 30-35 percent overnight.

For several years, AFA has been trying to figure out the best way to bring healing to those who are addicted to pornography. They have begun to locate reliable Christian



**"I'm not trying to win a popularity contest. Money doesn't motivate me. Power doesn't motivate me. This is what God called me to do. I'd work here for nothing if I could."**

counseling centers around the country that treat porn addiction. Ever since they offered this service, AFA's phones have been ringing off the hook with calls from both porn addicts and their spouses.

A few years ago, Wildmon also decided to hire a legal team to help fight his battles more effectively. The AFA Law Center began to "defend the First Amendment rights of Christians and to help in the prosecution of obscenity," he says. AFA's four attorneys have defended a variety of people, from those arrested for picketing abortion clinics to open-air preachers. Of course, in-house legal counsel comes in very handy, especially when you get sued or threatened with law suits as often as Don Wildmon.

One year ago, AFA opened its Washington D.C. office to monitor federal legislation as it affects the American family. Pat Trueman, AFA's director of governmental affairs, was the former head of the Justice Department's Obscenity Task Force before the Clinton administration came to town.

A radio station. A law center. Effective national boycotts. A Washington, D.C. office. A national porn addiction referral service.

Local AFA chapters, many of which are self-supporting. Is all of this simply the toil of an ignorant and reckless culture grouch? Don't you believe it.

Don Wildmon is a hard-driving, southern gentleman who has dedicated his life to God. Because of that, he has only one fear in life: embarrassing the Lord. "I'm not

trying to win a popularity contest. Money doesn't motivate me. Power doesn't motivate me. This is what God called me to do. I'd work here for nothing if I could." He is utterly unconcerned with what the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* think about him, and is certainly not worried about being left off of the A-list for parties in Hollywood.

Wildmon heard God's call when he was nine-years-old. "I struggled until I was 39 years old before I figured out what it was. And this is what I'm supposed to do," he says confidently. "I don't care about retiring. I'll be doing this when I die." (Wildmon has survived two heart attacks.)

Yet, one question remains: Does Don Wildmon watch TV? "I watch the Discovery channel and old movies," he reveals. He does not recall recently watching an entire network program. "Hardly anything is funny on television anymore. If they didn't put laugh tracks in, nobody would know when to laugh," he continues. Wildmon likes the good-old-days of television: "Andy Griffith was funny, *I Love Lucy* was funny. The comedy today is sick comedy."

A friend convinced him to go see *A River Runs Through It*. "It could have been a pretty good program," he reports, but he didn't like all the profanity or the ending. He also saw *Wayne's World*. "I guess it was supposed to be funny. The humor was sick. It wasn't funny a bit."

Wildmon does not have embroidered Bible verses hanging around his office. In fact, his small office has absolutely nothing hanging on the walls. His desk serves as a cluttered filing cabinet, yet he knows where everything is. He does not wear Christian lapel pins or try to impress you with his importance. "I'm not profound. I'm a fighter. If you ask me how to deal with ABC, I'll tell you how to do that."

Perhaps this is why so many people love and trust Don Wildmon. It may also explain why the networks hate him like they do.

Does anyone in Hollywood understand what Wildmon is all about? Yes, he reports. He has even gotten calls from closeted Hollywood allies. Surprisingly, most of his support comes from responses to ads that he places in the nation's most notoriously liberal newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

In some ways, Don Wildmon is an unlikely national celebrity. He is not a charismatic leader, *per se*. He does not turn heads when you walk with him into a restaurant. He does not wear Armani suits, and his shirts do not have stitched monograms, let alone cuff links. He does not try to turn up the charm when he talks to the press. Wildmon is thoroughly unpretentious. He would much rather be making life miserable for some television executive than singing his own praises. He is too busy to toot his own horn. Besides, there is a culture war going on. He seems to be saying, "Don't you see it? Can't you hear it?"

Steve Beard is the executive editor of Good News.

## Re-Imagining Family, Liberty, and Ecumenism

The controversial "Re-Imagining" Conference, held last November in Minneapolis, and endorsed by the UM Women's Division, was supposed to be a theological conference. The problems with the theology offered there have been well-documented in *Good News* and other publications. But speakers at the conference—and Women's Division leaders later trying to defend their participation—have also sparked serious questions over their teachings on the family, their understanding of religious liberty, and the quest for Christian unity.

First of all, anyone who looks objectively at our own society will admit that our frayed and fractured families are a central and growing social problem. Speakers at the Minneapolis conference sought to re-imagine the family, advocating, among other things, that "sex among friends" be considered normal and appropriate, that sexual pleasure is a "human right," and that fidelity is a kind of idolatry.

This is exactly the wrong message for our desperately needy society. Rather than re-imagine the family, our churches must work to rebuild and renew family life—including the virtues of lifelong faithfulness to one's partner in marriage and a sacrificial commitment to one's family.

Secondly, there is religious liberty. In defending its involvement in the "Re-Imagining" Conference, the Women's Division published a fact sheet which implied that Division critics somehow were questioning religious freedom.

This is spurious and false. No one has denied the right of American citi-

zens to organize this conference, nor called for any government action to prohibit such conferences. But those of us who criticize the conference have strongly objected to support offered by Christian churches to the blatantly nonchristian teachings. We believe genuine religious freedom must include the right of religious groups to define themselves and exclude those who do not share essential elements of their faith.

Perhaps worst of all, the Division's use of the "red herring" comment about religious liberty is an affront to Christian men and women who even today risk their lives by living and proclaiming the gospel in societies which do indeed deny religious freedom. For their sake, we must not tolerate in our own churches the denigration of the very faith for which they suffer.

Finally, participation in the "Re-Imagining" Conference has been defended as involvement in an ecumenical event. Such a claim demeans the urgent quest for Christian unity. Ecumenism is not syncretism, of which the "Re-Imagining" Conference was a particularly clear example. The "Re-Imagining" Conference offered teachings that are contrary to the truth affirmed by the first ecumenical councils of the Church—truth to which the Church has been faithful in the intervening centuries.

What was proclaimed in Minneapolis was indeed another gospel, another faith. The way of true



**Diane Knippers**

ecumenism is to lift high the cross of Christ, not to denigrate it. And even dialogue with those of other faiths calls not only for respectful listening, but also for a bold, loving witness to the Gospel we have received. There was no such witness coming out of the "Re-Imagining" Conference.

The women who gathered in Minneapolis set out to re-imagine god. Christians worship the one true God, who first imagined us, who created us in his image, and who revealed himself to us, ultimately by sending his Son, Jesus. From the first, women have joyfully worshiped and followed this Jesus. Martha became one of the first Christian theologians when she confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Mary Magdalene and other women were the first to testify to his resurrection. And women today, including those who are a part of RENEW, worship him still.

*Diane Knippers is the president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and a consultant to RENEW.*

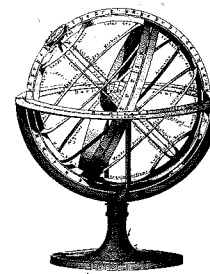
**Take Ten minutes each Tuesday to pray with and for us.**

- Pray for the family of Haik Hovsepian Mehr, a major Protestant leader in Iran, who was martyred for his faith earlier this year. Pray also for the suffering Church in Iran.

- Please join with RENEW and Good News in making the Lenten season a time of repentance, prayer, and fasting for spiritual renewal within the UM Church.

*The Evangelical Coalition for United Methodist Women (ECUMW) is a coalition between Good News, The Mission Society for United Methodists, and the Institute on Religion and Democracy. This coalition serves as a voice for evangelical United Methodist women, providing support, information, and program materials. Contributions for the work of the coalition may be sent to Good News, P.O. Box 150, Wilmore, KY 40390, earmarked for the ECUMW.*

# NEWS



## Abortion Rights Group Moves Out of Methodist Building

The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR) announced in December that it is changing its name to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; and moved out of the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in January to larger, downtown Washington, D.C. offices.

The organization is made up of representatives of Christian and Jewish religious groups, including the Women's Division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries and the Board of Church and Society.

A new mission statement says the coalition's purpose is "to ensure that every woman is free to make decisions about when to have children according to her own conscience and religious beliefs, without government interference."

"We are very happy to learn that RCAR is moving, though we realize that they are not moving for any religious reasons or pressures," said Ruth Brown, executive director of the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality (TUMAS). "Now, we call for the UM Church to sever all ties to RCAR by removing UM staff from RCAR's Board and removing UM Church agencies from RCAR's organizational support groups."

"This group has a 20-year history promoting the most radical abor-

tion rights," she continued, "whereas, the church draws from its roots in 2000 years of Christian faith which upholds the intrinsic value of every human life."

RCAR, founded in 1973 following the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe vs. Wade* decision, grew out of the clergy efforts that contributed to the legalization of abortion.

RCAR's relationship with United Methodism has always been controversial. In a sharply critical 1989 *Good News* column, former Senior Editor James S. Robb called for the removal of RCAR from the United Methodist Building. The ensuing debate led to the General Board of Church and Society purchase of a full-page ad in the January/February 1990 issue of *Good News*. At its 1990 meeting, the Good News Board of Directors



**Ruth Brown, TUMAS executive director**

called upon "all general boards and agencies of the UM Church to discontinue and/or avoid membership in the RCAR, withhold all monetary, programmatic or 'in kind' support from the RCAR, and cease and/or avoid providing, renting to or otherwise making available office or meeting space for

the RCAR."

Good News' call was based on the conviction that the UM Book of

*Discipline* supports the legal option of abortion only in those "tragic conflicts of life with life" and specifically rejects abortion as a means of birth control and gender selection. RCAR, on the other hand, supports the *Roe v. Wade* decision which allows unrestricted abortions in the first trimester, thus putting RCAR in conflict with the social principles of the UM Church.

United Methodist support for RCAR was the subject of action in the 1992 General Conference. By a vote of 485-448, General Conference delegates narrowly rejected a petition calling for discontinuing all forms of support for the organization.

A subsequent 1992 ruling by the church's Judicial Council found support of RCAR by the United Methodist agencies to be consistent with the church's official stance on abortion. The unanimous decision upheld the 1992 General Conference action.

Neither of the United Methodist member agencies had contributed financially to the coalition since about 1986, according to officials of the two agencies.

The coalition's board members include representatives of both bodies, and Chiquita G. Smith of the Women's Division was president of the coalition in 1989-1992.

In announcing the move and name change, the Rev. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale, coalition president, said the interfaith community "is reclaiming its leadership role in the pro-choice movement."

"We can no longer permit a minority religious viewpoint to dominate the national discussion," she said.

The coalition will advocate a full range of family-planning options, including prevention of teen pregnancy, "reality-based education" about sexuality and reproduction, and access to abortion and voluntary sterilization, according to the statement.

*Adapted from United Methodist News Service*



## Good News Asks UM Bishops to Address Theological Crisis

At its spring meeting, the board of directors of Good News took action calling upon the UM Council of Bishops to address the current theological crisis facing the United Methodist Church. The crisis is reflected in the involvement of UM bishops, Women's Division staff and directors, other agency staff, and additional UM women in the "Re-Imagining" Conference held November 4-7, 1993, in Minneapolis. The gathering, in which some 391 UMs participated, included prayers to and worship focused on the goddess "Sophia," denial of foundational Christian doctrine, and the celebration of lesbianism. The Good News board urged the bishops to repudiate Sophia worship and affirm United

Methodism's historic doctrine and teaching.

In a related action, the board called upon United Methodists to make the Lenten season (the 40 days leading up to Holy Week) a time for repentance, prayer, and fasting during which time UMs may seek church-wide renewal, including renewed faithfulness to the doctrines of historic Christianity, especially our unreserved acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The board expressed grave concern about the worship of Sophia and the denial of such essential doctrines as the incarnation and atonement at the "Re-Imagining" Conference. Directors were shocked that the redeeming death of Christ was publicly and derisively demeaned, with no protest from Women's Division or other UM leaders present. Nearly three months after the fact, there has yet to be any repudiation or expression of regret from the Women's Division about "Re-Imagining's" devastating attack on essential Christian doctrine, its exaltation of Sophia, or its celebration of lesbianism.

The board took action expressing appreciation to the *Good News* editorial staff for its accurate reporting of the November "Re-Imagining" Conference. It expressed keen disappointment with the Women's Division's evasive responses about its participation in and support of the event. Board members were also disturbed by Women's Division's suggestions that *Good News'* reporting was not factual or accurate.

The Good News board also reported it had received more than 43,000 signatures on petitions that will be sent to the Council of Bishops affirming the UM Church's "historic, biblical standards con-

cerning homosexuality, including the rejection of same-sex 'covenant services.'" The petition urged the Council of Bishops "to reject any UM participation in same-sex 'covenant services,' and to assure the church of its [the Council's] intent to enforce the church's law and standards on these issues [homosexuality and same-sex covenants]." The signatures have come at the invitation of Good News following the indecisive rulings of the UM Judicial Council in November.

Good News directors affirmed the report of the Council of Bishops' task force, headed by Bishop Robert E. Fannin (Birmingham), which had been charged by the Council to prepare two "model definitions" for controversial terms related to the church's debate about homosexuality. The board was pleased that Bishop Fannin's committee concluded that in the concern about the addition of the word "status" to the UM Constitution, "The General Conference did not intend to override its established position about the candidacy, ordination or appointment of self-avowed practicing homosexuals by recommending the [constitutional] amendment."

Dr. Donald Shell of Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, chaired the meeting of the Good News board, beginning his second year in that position.

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## Bishops Define Controversial Terms on Homosexuality

"A self-avowed practicing homosexual is a person who engages in sexual acts with a person or persons of the same sex, which are either witnessed or openly acknowledged."

That's one of two "model definitions" for controversial terms released in January by the executive committee of the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

Church policy bars "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from candidacy, ordination or appointment as clergy; but the denomination's Judicial Council ruled in October that the term must be defined before it can

be used to exclude anyone.

After that ruling, the Council of Bishops appointed a subcommittee to come up with a definition that could be offered as a model to annual conferences.

The subcommittee, headed by Bishop Robert E. Fannin of Birmingham, Alabama, was also asked to define the word "status," which was recently added to a list of attributes (sex, race, etc.) that cannot be

used to bar persons from church membership and participation.

The 1992 General Conference approved the amendment to Article IV of the church's constitution. It was subsequently ratified by a sufficient number of votes in the 1993 annual conferences.

Controversy quickly arose about what is meant by "status." Although proposers of the amendment said it refers to marital status, others expressed concern that it could refer to sexual orientation.

"Status," according to the second model definition released by the bishops is "a legal relationship or legal condition of a group of persons based on race, gender or national origin."

In his written report to the executive committee, Bishop Fannin noted a lack of "evidence that the amendment...was intended to relate to behavior or orientation."

His committee concluded "the General Conference did not intend to override its established position about the candidacy, ordination or appointment of self-avowed practicing homosexuals by recommending the [constitutional] amendment."

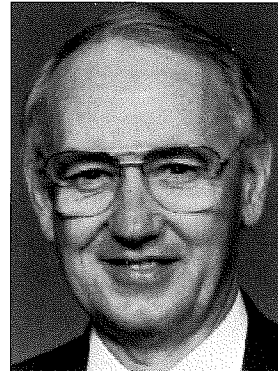
Regarding the definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexu-

al," Fannin reported that "it is clear that the understanding of the [1984 General] Conference was that this legislation be related to 'practice,' not orientation. The prohibition has to do with behavior."

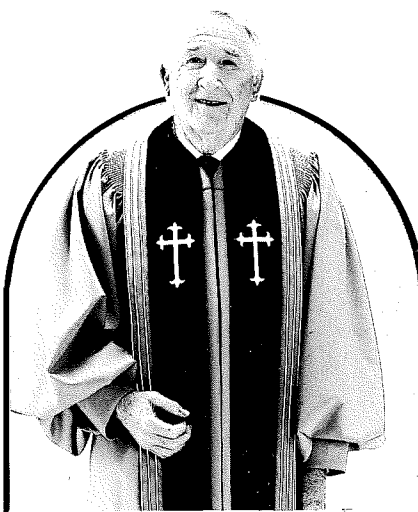
He also noted that "the responsibility to determine whether or not a person's behavior fits this definition is 'still the responsibility of the annual conference through the board of ordained ministry and the clergy session of the conference.'"

Bishop C. P. Minnick Jr., Raleigh, North Carolina, president of the Council of Bishops, said the definitions, created with the help of legal counsel, are not mandatory but are "suggested models" for consideration by annual conference leaders. They are being mailed to all bishops and boards of ministry chairpersons.

Adapted from United Methodist News Service



Bishop R. E. Fannin



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## Judicial Council Rejects Bishops' Request for Rehearing

Declining a request from denominational bishops, the United Methodist Judicial Council has said it will not reconsider this spring three rulings it issued last October.

In a November closed session, the Council of Bishops decided to ask the church's high court to rehear cases involving services of blessing for same-sex couples and other church-related issues.

Some bishops deemed unclear the court's response on same-sex covenant services. The justices said, in part, that an annual conference of the church "has no authority to establish or alter" official church rituals, and that pastors are responsible to "preach the word" and "oversee the worship life of the congregation," performing their duties "in compliance with the *Discipline*" and in obedience to "the order and discipline of the church."

In a January 31 telephone interview, the Rev. Wayne Coffin of Oklahoma City, Judicial Council secretary, did not rule out the possibility that the justices may reconsider the rulings at a later date, "but we will not be rehearing these cases at this [spring] meeting."

Tom Matheny, the Hammond, Louisiana, attorney who heads the council, polled the nine-member court on whether to grant a rehearing, Coffin said.

Bishop C. P. Minnick Jr. of Raleigh, North Carolina, president of the Council of Bishops, reports that as of January 31 he had received no direct word from the Judicial Council on the rehearing sought by the bishops. He said if the justices had indeed turned down the request, "I regret it very much. It's disappointing. We felt it was important that they reconsider these cases."

Eight cases are on the docket for the court's April 27-30 session in Lexington, Kentucky.

A case from the California-Pacific Annual Conference again brings before the court recurring questions about the church's ban on ordaining or appointing as clergy "self-avowed practicing homosexuals."

Justices will review a decision by Los Angeles Area Bishop Roy Sano, who last year determined that a recommendation from the conference's board of ordained ministry did not explicitly violate church law.

Asked to provide a definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual," the ministry board declined to do so "after careful thought and discussion." If clergy or candidates for ordination so identify themselves, "appropriate church bodies" should make recommendations based on standards for ordained ministry set forth in the church's *Book of Discipline*, the board report said.

*Adapted from United Methodist News Service*

## Mission Society Marks Decade of Service

Ten years ago, The Mission Society for United Methodists (MSUM) was created to send missionaries around the globe.

Since that time, the Georgia-based Mission Society—a supplementary, voluntary mission agency—has sent more than 140 missionaries to 30 countries, including places in South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union.

"Inquiries from people interested in serving with the Mission Society have come in steadily in the past 10 years," says the Rev. Dick McClain, MSUM's director of missionary personnel. "Recently there has been

a marked increase, largely because of our new ministries in the former Soviet Union. If this pattern continues, as I expect it will, I anticipate we will add 20-40 new missionaries this year."

The Mission Society, an "unofficial" mission agency, was founded by UM leaders—including pastors, seminary professors, and former missionaries with the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM)—who had been distressed for years that United Methodism's official mission board was "increasingly...abandoning the Great Commission of our Lord for a radicalized and politicized theology."

Determined to form an alternative, unwaveringly evangelical, missionary-sending agency for United Methodists, the 33 founders provided \$135,000 in start-up funds.

Today the Mission Society has an annual budget of \$3,200,000 and receives funding from more than 2000 local churches and organizations, and 5500 individual donors.

"I think the reason the Mission Society has seen consistent growth," says Julia McClean Williams, MSUM president and former GBGM missionary, "is because United Methodist people really do want what the Mission Society wants: that the world can know about Christ. That's a job that isn't finished yet!



Julia McClean Williams

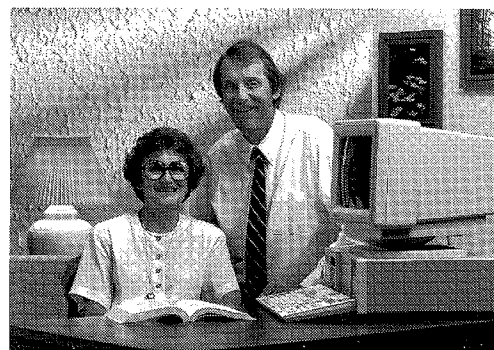
And until it is, that must be our (all Christian's) aim."

To that end the Mission Society has cooperative agreements with more than 15 other sending agencies. (Approximately 40 percent of the Mission Society's missionaries are assigned through cooperating agencies.)

The former Soviet Union is among the many fields in which the Mission Society is present. Since early 1993, it has had a team in Central Asia, and will have sent its first eight CoMission missionaries to Khabarovsk, Russia (the Russian Far East) by the end of January 1994. (The CoMission is a joint effort of more than 60 Christian organizations to respond to the invitation by the education officials of the former Soviet Union to teach Christian ethics and morals in its public schools. The Mission Society is a "sending member" of The CoMission.)

Mission Society missionaries are women and men committed to the Wesleyan tradition who raise their own support, primarily by appealing to local United Methodist churches.

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## Easter Life

I recently saw a greeting card with this wonderful message: "Easter is not a hunt—but a find; not a greeting—but a proclamation; not outward fashions—but inward grace; not a day—but an eternity." Jesus offers us abundant life, resurrection living. We can find a friend in him, proclaim his good news, and be awed by his amazing grace forever. He is risen. We can be crucified with Christ and live!

Jesus said to his disciples: "As you know the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified" (Matthew 26:2). The events that followed are familiar. The chief priests plotted to arrest and kill Jesus. Mary perfumed the Master. The disciples prepared the Passover and Judas jingled ransom coins.

As you know, Easter is near. The events that will fill the next days are well-known: Lenten sacrifices, cantatas, seders, Good Friday services, and sunrise rejoicing on resurrection morn. Passover was as familiar an event to the disciples as Easter is to us. Familiar? Yes. Commonplace? Never! At least it doesn't have to be. Many Easters have come and gone. Will this one be any different? Are you full of Easter life?

There is no abundant life apart from God. To know what life is, perhaps we should see what it is not. Let's look at Genesis. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). But, what was it like before God breathed everything into existence? Genesis 1:2 tells us it was "formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep." What did God do to bring life out of nothing? He spoke to the darkness. "Let there be light," he

said. Next, he gave form to the formless by separating the waters from the land. The final touches came as he filled the emptiness. Vegetation sprung up. Creatures roamed. Man was cast in God's image and woman was called alongside. It was good, very good.

Our lives without form, fullness, or light are mere existence, but with God's caress there is exhilaration. We can yield to God's touch on any of our emptiness or dark places. If you've never agreed with God that you need him, this can be an extraordinary Easter for you, as you say yes to Jesus' invitation. It's not easy. Everything around us shouts: "Make up your own boundaries. Be your own person. Fill your emptiness with money or things, rituals, power, or personal achievement. After all, everyone has some dark times." But there can be no lasting life in that.

Perhaps you've been a follower of Christ for some time, but lately you feel as if you're just going through the motions. You've lost the excitement of your first love. Maybe your pursuits seem empty or your relationships stale. You may even feel as though you're stumbling around in the dark, unsure of what it is you're tripping over. You will find restoration in God's Easter touch.

Life without Jesus is chaotic and desolate. But, "In him [Jesus] all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). He was forsaken so that we would not be abandoned.



**Marilyn N. Anderes**



We do not have to live empty lives. We can be inhabited by Jesus—The Life. He emptied himself so that we might be filled. We can be "redeemed from the empty way of life...with the precious blood of Christ the lamb" (1 Peter 1:17-19).

Jesus is the light of the world and "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts" (II Corinthians 4:6). He went to the darkness of hell so we could have light.

Don't settle for an imitation of life. Choose to find your purpose in God. Opt for filling yourself with him. Find delight by looking at the light of his face. We want abundant, resurrection life, but to experience it we'll need to yield. Death must precede resurrection. We can choose to be crucified with Christ and really live.

*The nails held God.  
God!  
He could have said "No!"  
to it all.  
But He didn't.*

*The nails held me.  
Me!  
I could have said "No!"  
to God's all.  
But, I didn't.*

*So, now what?*

*Will I just exist daily  
trying to pry the nails free,  
or will I choose abundant life,  
bound to the Christ of That Tree?*

## All they ask is to earn their way!

For over forty years, Mustard Seed evangelical ministries have trained tribal youth in Taiwan, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. Most of these minority youth face hardships far worse than our own native Americans.

Modernity comes painfully hard for tribal people. In Irian Jaya, Indonesia, the local people have sometimes been cheated out of their land by immigrants. The recent introduction of alcohol and drugs by these immigrants has caused severe problems. *But Mustard Seed schools are a strong force for Christ and stability there and elsewhere.*

**Give a person a fish and you feed him  
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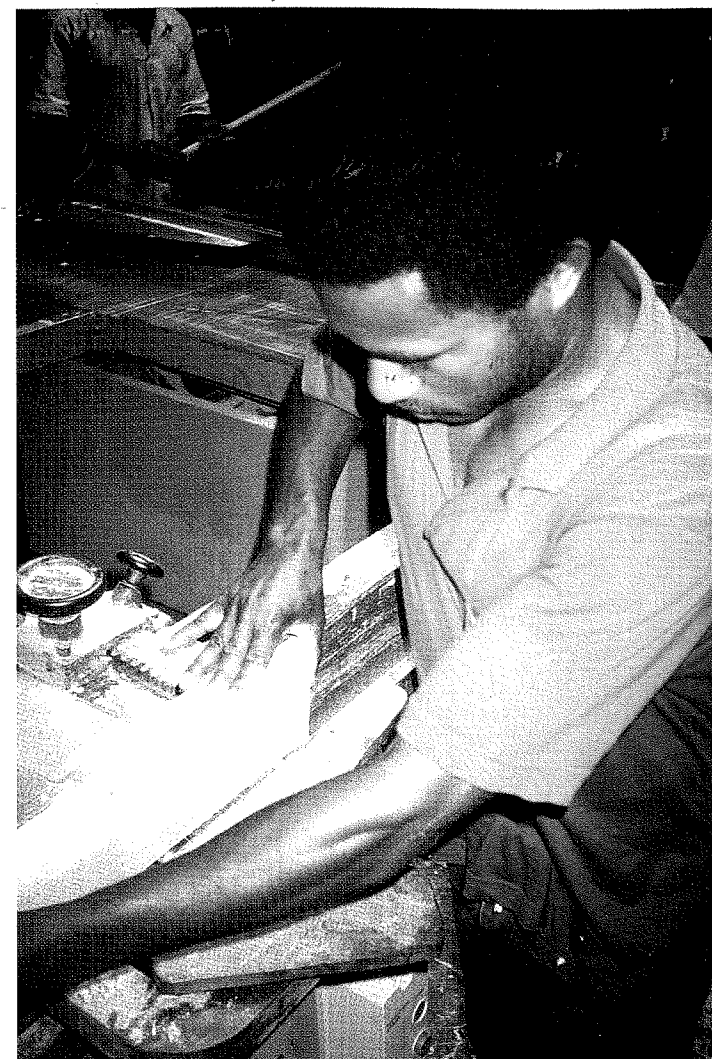
**"Mustard Seed really cares  
about tribal people!"**

*Don Richardson  
Author, Peace Child  
Mustard Seed Board Member.*



### Meet Mustard Seed's President Garry O. Parker

Rev. Parker is a United Methodist minister from the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference. He serves the Mustard Seed under appointment from his Bishop. Rev. Parker served as a field missionary in Indonesia, as well as a pastor and mission executive in the United States.



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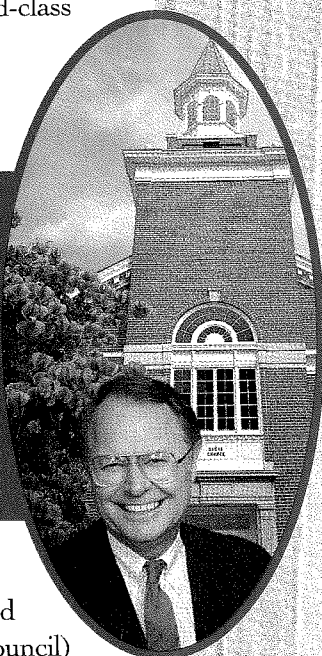
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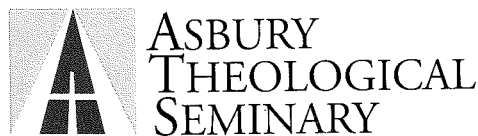
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