

## Speaking Out

# Encountering the Goddess at Church

Recently I went to the regular Thursday Holy Communion service at the theological school where I teach. A highly visible feminist leader led the service. She is an ordained United Methodist minister who has for some time had an uncommon fixation on the worship of the goddess Sophia, or *Wisdom*, poetically described as the agent of creation in a few biblical passages.

I come from a tradition that views Communion as a sacrament that unites the body of Christ. In all my 60 years of participation in the United Methodist Church, I have never seriously considered withdrawing from a Communion service because of a scrupulous conscience. This time I struggled with whether to attend at all. At one point I told myself I should not, because I might be tempted to do or say something rash. (The ugly fantasy of dumping over the Communion table flitted through my mind.) No, that would merely cause a stir and tend toward scandal and disunity. And this *is* my worshipping community, so I felt I had a right to receive the sacrament duly administered, even if occasionally by an unworthy minister. I decided I must go.

### Bad poetry, worse theology

Our first hymn, entitled "Sophia," sang the praise of the goddess Sophia, who "ordains what God will do." "She's the teacher we esteem, and the subject of life's theme." This was bad poetry, sung to the tune of *Salve Regina*, which Roman Catholics sing in honor of the mother of the incarnate Lord.

With this surrogate hymn I began to feel more queasy. I wondered if I was in a place where some Lord other than Jesus Christ was being

worshipped.

Then came the homily, addressed solely to feminists and those who readily make concessions to radical feminists' demands. In the name of inclusiveness, all other audiences were demeaned and excluded.

The sermon focused not on a Scripture text, but on an event in the woman's experience as a feminist preacher. It was a "victory" story in which a pious United Methodist lay leader and other members were driven out of her church and forced to join another after they challenged her authority to offer the Lord's Supper in the name of the goddess Sophia. She recounted triumphantly how she had preached on the virtues of doctrinal diversity and invited all members who did not agree with her to look for another church. She was apparently oblivious to the fact that in the name of inclusiveness she was practicing exclusion.

Scripture was imported occasionally into the service, but it was culled chiefly from the Apocrypha, Proverbs, and Psalms. She quoted the apocryphal Sirach, but only passages that seem to reify Wisdom into a deity distinguishable from the triune God. Then, incredibly, she likened the yoke of discipleship to sadistic and masochistic sex.

Could I in good conscience receive Holy Communion under these circumstances? I began to consider how I might inconspicuously withdraw from the service. And I confess that for a brief moment I did ponder a comic response: going calmly to receive Holy Communion while holding my nose. But that seemed out of sync with the very



Thomas C. Oden

nature of the service of Communion. I prayed for wisdom to know what to do—not to her goddess but to God, who by grace illumines

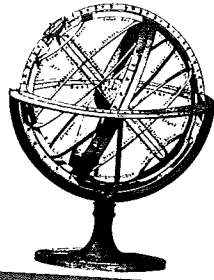
our hearts and minds. The preacher herself gave me the decisive clue. She offered the invitation to come to the Lord's table, not in the Lord's name, but in the name of the goddess who was speaking through Christ. We were invited to Christ's table, but only in Sophia's name.

That did it. I decided that she was inadvertently correct, that I could not delay in attesting the authority of Christ in the worship service. As we greeted one another before communion was served, I grasped the hands of two or three women nearby, then quietly left. I went down the steps from the chapel, giving hearty thanks to God for his kind counsel of wisdom in a profoundly knotty situation.

*Author's note: It is not my intention that this curious narrative be interpreted as a cantankerous challenge to my own seminary or its leadership or its liturgical planning processes. In my view liturgical life at Drew Theological School is on the whole healthier now than it has been for sometime. What happened in this instance was not typical of Drew but extraordinary, and this is what made it memorable and worthy of reflection.*

Thomas C. Oden is the Henry Anson Buttz professor of theology and ethics at the Theological School, Drew University. He is a contributing editor to *Good News* and author of numerous books, including *After Modernity ... What? Agenda For Theology* (Zondervan), and his three-volume *Systematic Theology* (HarperCollins). Reprinted by permission of *Christianity Today*, August 16, 1993.

# NEWS



## United Methodist Women Get Taste of Sophia Worship

by Dottie Chase

A standing ovation for lesbians. A service of milk and honey to the goddess Sophia. A presentation denying the atonement of Jesus Christ. What is going on here? And why are there so many United Methodist women attending this conference?

Billed as "A Global Theological Conference By Women; for Women and Men," this meeting was promoted by Christian churches. Orthodox Christians, however, would find little historic Christian theology. Convening in Minneapolis, this was "Re-Imagining," an ecumenical gathering associated with the World Council of Churches (WCC) for those of the feminist, "womanist," or lesbian perspective. Many of the speakers voiced similar themes: condemnation of patriarchy and the exclusion of lesbians and homosexual men in the church.

Of the 2200 registrants, 391 were United Methodist. The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) staff and directors were urged to attend this conference as this quadrennium's theological workshop (Women's Division staff and directors expenses were paid for by the division).

"They are exploring the sensual and sexual side of the divine, rooting around in the contemplative and introspective interplay with God," observed reporter Martha Sawyer Allen of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, "and talking about women's daily experiences of the

divine in every culture as central to theology today."

Participants gathered around "talking" tables and were asked to scribble out spiritual thoughts with crayons, re-imagine God through emotional images, and sing a song of blessing to Sophia, the goddess of Wisdom.

When asked what she thought of the Sophia-oriented liturgy, one United Methodist Women (UMW) director said that she had never heard of Sophia before, but was sure she would learn more about her. This same UMW director decided not to participate in one of the table activities, but was encouraged to join in by her table facilitator even though participants were told from the podium

that they were either free to participate in activities or to abstain.

At one point in the conference, Melanie Morrison, co-founder of Christian Lesbians Out Together (CLOUT), requested time to celebrate "the miracle of being lesbian, out, and Christian." Then she invited all other lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual women to join hands and encircle the stage.

Religious News Service (RNS) estimates that "roughly 100 women converged upon the dais, many smiling. One held high the rainbow flag, which has become a symbol for the diversity among lesbians and gay men. Many of the women remaining in the audience rose to their feet and began to applaud."

The Rev. Kittredge Cherry, a minister in the predominately homosexual Metropolitan Community Church, was one of the women holding the rainbow flag. She told RNS that the goal of the demonstration was to help people "re-imagine" the church as the embodiment of justice for everyone, including lesbians and homosexual men.

The lesbian theme was heard repeatedly from major speakers. In a workshop called "Prophetic Voices of Lesbians in the Church," Nadean Bishop, the first "out" lesbian minis-



Participants greet lesbian demonstrators with a standing ovation.

RNS PHOTO/Carlton Smith

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

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

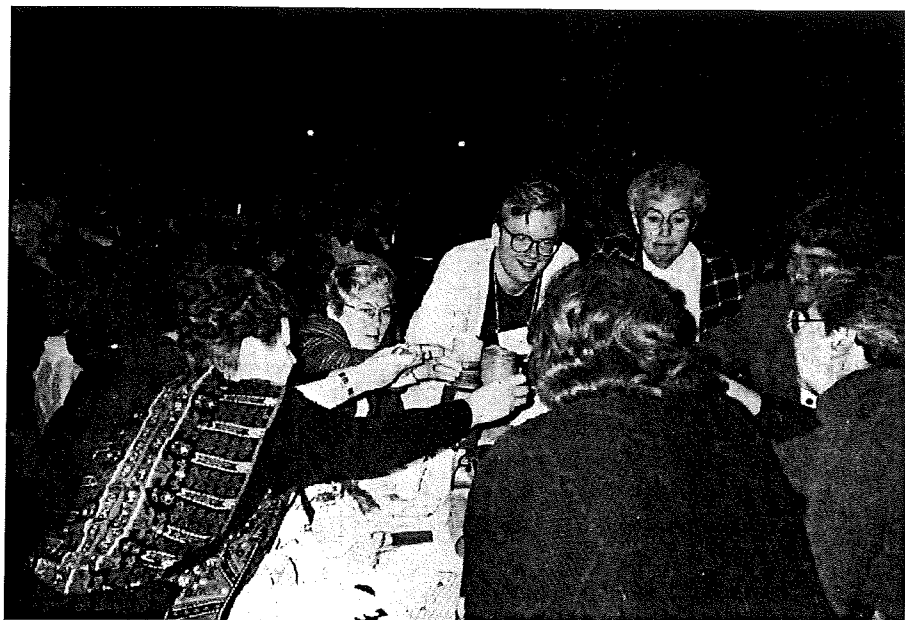
Judy Westerdorf, a United Methodist clergywoman from Minnesota, told the workshop that the Church says God gives sexuality as a good gift, but that 1 out of 10 is a bad gift and you're not supposed to open it. (She was referring to claims that 10 percent of the population is homosexual, statistics that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

### *Theological Smorgasbord*

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

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

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



The Presbyterian Layman

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

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

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

Presenter Delores S. Williams, a

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

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

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

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

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

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

"through a woman's body."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

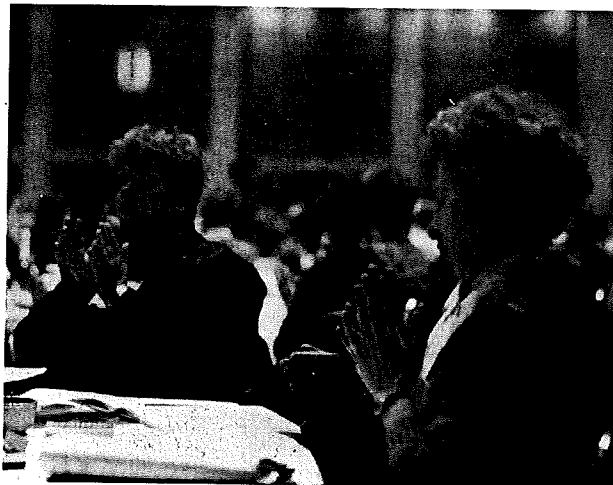
Another seminar focused on the history and future of The Ecumenical Decade/Churches in Solidarity with Women. Begun by the United Nations, this program was limping along until the World Council of Churches gave it priority. It was noted that it is "truly amazing" that women have even stayed within the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

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

and Wesley United Methodist Church as a neighboring host.

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

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



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

The Presbyterian Layman

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

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

## Shocking Conference Challenges Orthodoxy

"Heresy," "neo-paganism," "blasphemy." All strong words. And all went through my mind as I read reports on the recent so-called theological conference, Re-Imagining, which was in part sponsored by the UM Women's Division.

The Evangelical Coalition for United Methodist Women (ECUMW) cooperated in a joint press coverage effort at the ecumenical Re-Imagining Conference held November 4-7 in Minneapolis. Staff and directors of the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries were encouraged to attend this event—all expenses paid—as this quadrennium's theological workshop. But the evangelical women who covered this event as press agree that "this was no Christian meeting."

The re-imagining of God began in the first session on Thursday where all repeated the litany: "Most of all, it is time to state clearly and dream wildly about who we are as people of God, and who we intend to be in the future through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia." This statement was followed by a chorus often repeated throughout this event: "Now Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within."

Naming God Sophia was only the beginning. Conference speakers praised every imaginable religion or spirituality, except orthodox Christianity, and recognized the power of every deity, except Jesus Christ.

Participants were led in a Native American Tobacco Ritual and they

took part in the "Anointing with Red Dots," a custom from India which speaker Aruna Gnanadason identified as "a beautiful symbol of how we are always conscious of the divine in each other..." Regarding the passage from Joel ("I shall pour out my spirit on all humanity"), Lois Wilson, immediate past president of the World Council of Churches, asked, "Surely God didn't mean all humanity; did he mean neo-pagans, did she mean the Wiccans, the Sikhs, the Muslims, the Hindus, the men and the women? Or did she?"

In a session on re-imagining Jesus, "womanist" theologian Delores S. Williams said to the 500 participants, "We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within..." Another presenter, Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan stated, "We cannot allow others to define our sin. What is our sin?" Dr. Pui-Lan indicated that the humanistic-Confucian tradition emphasizes the propensities in human nature for good, not evil. Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran pastor, acknowledged: "some would call our worship of last night verging on heresy.... We did not last night name the name of Jesus. Nor have we done anything in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Laughter and cheers followed her observation.

This re-imagining conference was indeed rife with heresy. It was worse than we could have possibly imagined. Among the funders listed



Faye Short

were: Minnesota Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women, Minnesota Conference United Methodist Women, and the Women's

Division of the UM Church.

The women of the church must denounce what took place at this meeting. By participating in and supporting this event, the Women's Division has betrayed our trust.

Will you join ECUMW/RENEW in a postcard campaign to the Women's Division asking the directors to repudiate and repent of their participation in the Re-Imagining conference?

It is important for many voices to be heard. In the past, the Women's Division assumed that when they received only a small protest, there was acceptance of controversial activities. Dozens of events like this one are now being planned across the country. We must speak out now.

You are encouraged to read the special report on the Re-Imagining conference featured in this issue of *Good News* (pages 36-38). A packet of materials can be obtained by writing to ECUMW/RENEW, 387 Raford Wilson Road, Commerce, GA 30529. A donation to cover postage and copying expense would be appreciated.

Above all, please send the enclosed postcard to the Women's Division expressing your opposition to participation in and funding of this conference and any similar events. We must not allow our silence to be taken as consent.

*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.*

## "Re-Imagining" Rejects Historic Christianity

This issue of Good News carries the most disturbing news story we've ever published. It's a report on the "Re-Imagining" conference held November 4-7 in Minneapolis. Without question, this event was the most theologically aberrant I have ever read about, far removed from Christian tradition. (See related articles on pp. 35 and 36.)

The Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) urged staff and directors to attend "Re-Imagining" (all expenses paid) as its theological training event for the quadrennium. Some 391 UM women attended.

Having read transcripts of tapes from most presenters, I am convinced that no UM women should have been subjected to this conference. Consider the following:

- Melanie Morrison, co-founder of Christian Lesbians Out Together (CLOUT), was given time to celebrate "the miracles of being lesbian, out, and Christian," and invited all other lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual women to come forward, join hands and encircle the stage. More than 100 women responded and Ms. Morrison said, "I'm pleased and honored to lead you in prayer and to talk to earth maker Mauna, our creator."

- Nadean Bishop, the first "out" lesbian minister called to an American Baptist church, said that Mary and Martha in the Bible were not actual sisters but lesbian lovers.

- "Womanist" theologian Delores S. Williams said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all....I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Applause followed.

- Judy Westerdorf, a UM clergywoman, told a workshop, "The Church has always been blessed by

gays and lesbians...witches...shamans...artists."

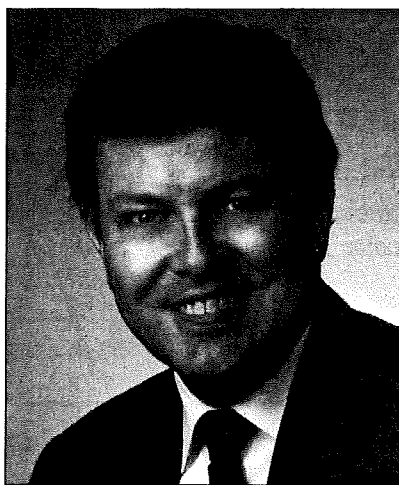
- Theologian Mary Hunt said, "I have far more hope in substituting 'friendship' as a metaphor for family....Imagine sex among friends as the norm, young people learning to make friends rather than to date. Imagine valuing genital sexual interaction in terms of whether and how it fosters friendship and pleasure...."

The above excerpts are representative of the tone and substance of "Re-Imagining." While wading through transcripts, I counted at least ten presenters who were self-identified lesbians. Prayers were offered repeatedly to the goddess Sophia, including the offensive prayer in the "Service of milk and honey," which said, "Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image; With nectar between our thighs we invite a lover, we birth a child."

This blending of sexuality and spirituality is more Canaanite than Christian.

Most disturbing of all, many doctrines essential to orthodox Christianity were repudiated at this conference, often in a spirit of derision. This includes the doctrine of God, the deity of Christ, his atoning death, the sinfulness of humanity, creation, the authority of Scriptures, the church, and the biblical understanding of human sexuality. In a word, what was "presented" at "Re-Imagining" was a different religion.

Our UM participation in such an event leaves many of us shocked and angry. Aside from being unacceptable, what does it mean? Clearly a theological polarization in the UM Church is emerging. The doctrinal



*James V. Heidinger II*

defection many of us have suspected from nuances and wafflings in the past has surfaced here as defiance of the historic faith.

An international gathering that publicly trashes historic Christian doctrine and celebrates sinful behavior cannot be ignored. Our UM bishops must decide how they will respond to UM participation. Is such teaching acceptable to them? If this event goes unchallenged, then the church is adrift in theological anarchy. This is not a time for dialogue, but for church discipline.

The Women's Division has betrayed its trust with the UM Church. It should disavow the radical substance of this conference and apologize to the church for supporting it. But I doubt this will happen. The Women's Division knew what it was supporting.

Therefore, our UM bishops must intervene. They have the specific disciplinary mandate: "To guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim...the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and Tradition..." and "To teach and uphold the theological traditions of The United Methodist Church" (Par. 514.2,4). The radical nature of "Re-Imagining" makes imperative some action of theological oversight by our bishops.

In the meantime, local church UMW units must re-think their financial pledge support of the Women's Division if public refutation and apology is not made. Also, conference UMW leaders should call for change in the Women's Division's national leadership. Until that happens, we can only expect more of the same—or worse.

Dear Ms. Sohl:

We are shocked and angered by the involvement of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries in the "Re-Imagining" Conference held November 4-7 in Minneapolis. We call upon the Women's Division to repudiate the radical teachings of the conference and make a public apology to the church for its participation in and financial support of such an event. This is a tragic betrayal of the trust of tens of thousands of faithful United Methodist Women who now need from you a promise of no further involvement in similar feminist/womanist/lesbian gatherings.

Sincerely

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from Good News Jan/Feb 1994



# Participant defends controversial conference

By DIANE HUIE BALAY  
Associate Editor

For at least one United Methodist laywoman, the events at the November ecumenical "Re-Imagining" conference in Minneapolis (see related editorial and interpretive analysis on the Faith Forum pages of this issue) were not heretical, as some people have charged, but "a definite opportunity for the spirit of God to enter our lives."

Mary Edlund is the editor of the Minnesota Annual Conference *Leader*—an edition of the *United Methodist Review*.

She was one of some 1,700 women and 80 men who attended the conference. In a telephone interview with the *Review*, she made it clear that she was speaking as a participant and not as editor of the Minnesota United Methodist newspaper.

Of particular concern to some critics of the conference were frequent blessings, chants and a special worship service of milk and honey to Sophia (Wisdom), whom some consider a goddess.

## Never said 'Goddess'

"[Conference leaders] never said, 'Goddess,'" Ms. Edlund said. "They said it was that part of God who was with us at creation."

"Sophia, to me," she continued, "is that part of the Holy Spirit—that creative, powerful force—that brings new life, new birth."

It is the part of the Holy Spirit, she said, that, as a woman, she can best understand.

"We named that part of the Holy Spirit 'Sophia' for that week of the Re-Imagining conference. We have got to grow in our vision of who God is. God is more than Father, Son and Holy Spirit."



Mary Edlund

Although the conference was a regional event sponsored by state and local councils of churches in Minnesota, it was attended by people from 27 countries. The conference was held in support of "The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women," an emphasis of the World Council of Churches.

Ms. Edlund said participants were divided into "talking circles" of 10 people per table. Each group represented a variety of cultures and/or faith traditions.

"The whole event was about how each of us comes to God through our

own culture, through our own family environment which has made us as we are.

"Too often," she continued, "the environment women have grown up in has caused them to have a loss of self-esteem, to have the feeling that we are not worthy of God's attention."

"We need to feel God's acceptance of us as worthy, because we feel so unworthy."

She said that, for her, the experiences at the conference pointed toward God.

"Some speakers said some things I didn't agree with," Ms. Edlund continued, "but I realized they were speaking out of their own culture and experience."

## Didn't have to believe

The ideas put forth at the conference were not something participants "had to believe," she said.

Some women experienced healing by attending the conference, she said. At the end, "people were on a high," she said. "They felt loved, felt accepted. I was really thrilled."

But some people were not thrilled. Besides the highly controversial liturgy of milk and honey to Sophia, a "ritual moment" added to the Saturday morning events has outraged the evan-

gelical press in at least two denominations: United Methodist and Presbyterian.

In this "moment," according to the conference's "Re-Imagining Newsletter," Melanie Morrison, the co-convenor of CLOUT (Christian Lesbians OUT Together), invited every "lesbian, bisexual and transsexual woman who is willing" to come forward and join hands in a circle around the speakers' platform.

Some 100 women reportedly did so while those who were "in solidarity" with them were invited to stand in place and sing.

This moment was described in some news reports as a "celebration of lesbianism."

Ms. Edlund said she did not agree with the reports.

"Basically, it was a celebration that these women were able to admit who they were, who they were created to be. The mode of the conference was not to judge."

The conference was about churches in solidarity with women, she continued, but if the churches can't be, then women can be in solidarity with women.

"We don't have to agree," she said, "but we can love them for who they are and where they are."



# Be alert to old idol's hazards, opportunities

The recent eruption over Sophia—whose name and imagery were invoked during an ecumenically backed theological conference in Minneapolis—carries significant implications.

Indeed, the event itself is a "straw"

## Editorials

in a mounting theological hurricane that blows toward Christian hazards we should avoid and opportunities from which we may benefit.

The hazards: Sophia's apologists may contend that she's a new understanding of the Christian faith. In reality, she's a centuries-old idol with a fresh coat of paint (see related interpretive analysis at right).

The greatest danger to Christianity comes not from Sophia's feminine imagery but from the teaching that salvation comes through supernaturally imparted knowledge rather than through God's action in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

This reality makes the use of Sophia liturgies—which in effect displaced Christ—during the recent Minneapolis conference all the more insidious.

the woman who sweeps her house looking for a lost coin and the story of the woman at the well who brought her entire village to Christ.

Most of all, however, the Sophia theology challenges us to witness more effectively to the equality of women in church and society.

The attempt to reconfigure the Godhead to include a distinctly feminine personage indicates more than a bid for ecclesiastical power. At its core the effort underscores a painful worldwide reality:

**Devaluation and debasement of women—often in the name of God—are so rampant that some find the only appropriate response to be radically re-imagining the ultimate**



**sophia:  
new wisdom or  
old heresy?**

# What should we make of Sophia theology?

By STEPHEN L.  
SWECKER

*Contributing Editor*

Who is Sophia and what does she (or her supporters) want?

Furthermore, why should any Christian care?

These are fitting questions to ask in light of recent vigorous and competing efforts to:

- 1) Promote worship of Sophia as the long-suppressed feminine side of God, and
- 2) Denounce Sophia as an insidious departure from Christian truth.

Don't feel left out if you have never heard of Sophia. The fact is, she simply hasn't been one of us throughout most of Christian history. It took a chance discovery of ancient texts dating from the earliest days of Christianity to bring Sophia onto the contemporary theological scene.

**Electrifying impact**

## Interpretive Analysis

symbolizes and validates women's growing convictions about their place in the church. Both an object of worship and a source of reassurance that it's OK to be female, she provides a formidable ally for reforming Christianity's traditionally male-dominated authority structure.

Second, the use, shocking to some, of sensuous and erotic Sophia imagery at the Re-Imagining Conference is a reminder that Christians have been particularly, even peculiarly, repressed in their ability to affirm matters dealing with the body and/or sex. What might counteract such expression, however, is some serious discussion by Protestant Christians about what it means to have bodies.

Third, the above notwithstanding, Sophia, as a carrier of Gnosticism, is perceived by her critics as heretical precisely because, in some expressions, she displaces from the Godhead a flesh-and-blood human being. *Jesus. In this respect,*

Christ—during the recent Minneapolis conference—all the more insidious.

Under the cloak of participating in a worthy observance, namely the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, conference organizers propagated this old heresy in such a way that it may well have deluded some unwary Christians.

**The opportunities:** Heresies such as those built around Sophia sometimes can show us where we've failed to proclaim and live out the Gospel sufficiently.

For instance, a primary appeal of Sophia's feminine imagery can be traced to mainstream Christianity's failure to employ fully the Bible's authentic feminine models. Two such examples are Jesus' parable of God being like

are so rampant that some find the only appropriate response to be radically re-imagining the ultimate authority, the God in whose name these evils are committed.

Consequently, we Christians must bear some responsibility for the growing appeal of Sophia theology. If we had proclaimed and demonstrated how Christ transforms us from oppressors and victims into loving sisters and brothers, such a heresy could have gained no foothold, let alone a radicalized following.

Ultimately that may be how God will use Sophia theology for good. In our efforts to counter the distortions of Sophia, we will clarify for ourselves and the world the Truth that is Christ.

## Confession of error needed

It's unfortunate that the event which ignited the latest controversy over the Sophia heresy (see related editorial above) had apparently uncritical participation by the Women's Division of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries.

It is likewise unfortunate that Women's Division representatives failed to recognize the likely controversy from some of the conference's content immediately, rather than waiting until criticism emerged.

Finally, doubletalk by the Women's Division staff ("No, we were not a funder of the conference, but, yes, we did pay expenses of 56 women to attend") in response to criticism only serves to compound the original error.

We encourage Women's Division staff and directors to own up publicly to what seems at the very least to have been a misjudgment over how people across the church would react to the division's

cal scene.

### Electrifying impact

These texts came to light in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. The discovery there of 13 papyrus books containing writings of early Christians known as "Gnostics" revealed a virtually unknown side of the ancient church.

("Gnostic" means knowledge or insight.) The impact of the Nag Hammadi findings on church scholarship and liturgical reform has been electrifying. No part of those findings has been more dramatic than those describing the leadership role of women and the belief among Gnostic Christians that God, or a major dimension of God, is female.

The name given to that female dimension was Sophia, which is a Greek word meaning "wisdom."

Gnosticism generally and worship of Sophia particularly were branded as heresies by Christians who, by the year 200, emerged as the dominant segment of the church. Sophia wasn't heard from again until publication of findings from Nag Hammadi began in the 1970s.

As word spread among feminist church circles about the Gnostics' favorable attitude toward women and about an early Christian goddess, efforts began to pull Sophia into the 20th Century.

Growing availability of information about Gnosticism and mounting interest in Gnostic texts have fueled suspicion and alarm among church leaders about the conference's emphasis on Sophia.

What's a typical church member and non-Sophia worshiper to make of all this?

First, interest in Sophia is not a passing theological fad. To many Sophia

conveyed by... because, in some... places from the... blood human being, Jesus. In this respect she is consistent with much of early

### Uncritical appropriation of a heresy can result not merely in reshaping faith but in replacing it, perhaps with something unexpected and unwanted.

Gnosticism which minimized the importance of the actual historical Jesus.

Critics are right on this one. Any attempt to dilute or eliminate Jesus from the core of our faith is, by definition, anti-Christian. That places the burden on church groups that sponsor events promoting Sophia to justify doing so. Christians in the pew shouldn't be expected to support anti-Christianity.

### A new religion?

Finally, it is possible, as some observers have suggested, that Sophia worship is the makings of a new religion, one that is not necessarily anti-Christian but definitely non-Christian.

Supporting this possibility is the heavy (but not exclusive) reliance on noncanonical texts (the Nag Hammadi papyri) as the authority for beliefs and practices not warranted by the Bible.

The warning here should be clear: Uncritical appropriation of a heresy can result not merely in reshaping faith but in replacing it, perhaps with something unexpected and unwanted.

Hence, use of Sophia imagery by Christians who intend to remain Christian should not automatically be rejected. However, it should be subjected to the same test as any other innovative expression of faith: Does it glorify God as revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth?

If the answer is no, consider the possibility that Sophia may be an interesting acquaintance but not the type you'd want to be caught with in church.

*It is likewise unfortunate that Women's Division representatives failed to recognize the likely controversy from some of the conference's content immediately, rather than waiting until criticism emerged.*

participation in the Minneapolis event. We also encourage the rest of the church to accept whatever statement of error the Women's Division may provide but not to attempt to punish this invaluable mission-minded unit by withholding support from it, financial or otherwise. Such punishment is not the way for Christians to behave when one of us



# Two terms defined by bishops

United Methodist News Service  
DALLAS—“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 recently 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 Oct. 30 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, Ala., was also asked to define the word “status.” That word was recently added to a list of attributes (sex, race, etc.) that cannot be used to bar persons from church membership and participation.

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

The General Conference, the church’s top legislative body, approved an amendment to Article IV of the church’s constitution in 1992

# Women’s Division sends video-taped response to criticism from conference

By DENISE JOHNSON STOVALL  
Associate Editor

A “video letter” mailed last week from the top two leaders of United Methodist Women defends the right of the General Board of Global Ministries Women’s Division to send representatives to ecumenical meetings.

This, the letter makes clear, includes the recent “Re-Imagining conference” with prayers, chants and a worship service dedicated to “Sophia” (see Review, Jan. 28 and article on next page).

The video-letter effort to address concerns among 1.2 million United Methodist Women was considered unprecedented in Women’s Division history. Some 600 copies of the 10-minute videotape were mailed Feb. 2 to UMW presidents—70 at annual conference levels and 530 at district levels.

The tape, titled “A message to United Methodist Women from the Women’s Division,” features UMW national president Carolyn Johnson of West Lafayette, Ind., and Joyce Sohl, the Women’s Division chief executive officer.

## National policymaking body

The church’s *Book of Discipline* identifies the Women’s Division as the national official policymaking body of United Methodist Women and designates the division’s officers as the UMW’s national officers.

According to Global Ministries spokeswoman Betty Thompson, the video letter was produced by the mission board to respond to growing criticism by United Methodists—men as well as women—of Women’s Division attendance at the “Re-Imagining” meeting last November in Minnesota.

Some 600 copies of the 10-minute videotape were mailed to UMW presidents—70 at annual conference levels and 530 at district levels.

The meeting was held in celebration of the midpoint of the “Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women.” The international observance is a programmatic emphasis by the World Council of Churches.

The Minnesota gathering prompted accusations of blasphemy and heresy from *Good News* magazine, published by the Kentucky based Forum for Scriptural Christianity, and from *RENEW*, a newsletter of the Georgia-based Evangelical Coalition for United Methodist Women.

The Women’s Division paid registration fees and travel to the conference for 36 elected directors and nine staff members. The division also awarded grants to 11 United Methodist Women’s conference vice-presidents. Total division expenses related to the Minnesota gathering were \$22,000.

In the video letter, Dr. Johnson identifies key questions she says United Methodist Women must ask:

Should women attend ecumenical gatherings?

Aren’t our faith and our God strong enough that they won’t break in the midst of differences?

“I think the answer is, ‘Yes,’” she said.

“Our history of wanting to be in places where we want to share our story is so great. I trust that we have common

ground—not just in our purpose—but that we have common sense,” said the UMW national president.

“Four days in November, 96 hours, is not something that will totally change, eradicate, reshape, transform, throw away United Methodist Women as we know it.”

In the video letter, Ms. Sohl said, “No matter what ecumenical event we go to, [we] bring to it our own faith.

“We hear and see some things that we might not agree with. But what does it enable us to do? I think it enables us to bring to our own faith story a better understanding, perhaps even a better grounding in who we are as Christian women, who believe in God, who believe in Jesus Christ, who accept Jesus as our savior and who are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

## ‘Ability to discern’

In addressing the particular area of “wisdom literature” called Sophia and concerns about United Methodist Women who attended the event, Dr. Johnson said she trusts their ability to discern this diverse theology for themselves. “But more than that,” she continued, “I trust that their involvement in United Methodist Women over the years and over the decades [will cause them not] to totally embrace something new without inquiry.”

Besides producing and distributing video letter, Women’s Division staff have responded to some 120 letters from members of local units. The division has also received at least 1,000 preprinted postcards taken from *Good News* magazine asking for a public apology from the Women’s Division for its participation in the “Re-Imagining” event.

- The nine congregations in the **Austria Conference minister to people from some 25 different nations**. In conference sessions, members: 1) published a statement concerning the "Year of the Family"; 2) opposed government policy limiting the admission of asylum seekers; and 3) celebrated the opening of a house in Linz for young people in serious difficulties.
- The political division of the **Czech Republic and Slovak Republic** made it necessary to **form two districts**. In sessions, members: 1) noted that the Czech Republic has established a fund to help pastors who have had their salaries reduced, but limited resources may mean a future reduction in the number of pastors; 2) lifted up the importance of prison ministry, care of handicapped and homeless persons, and youth and women's work; and 3) noted that four new congregations are supported by U.S. churches; and 4) sent one pastor to serve as a missionary in Vojvodina, Yugoslavia.
- **The Poland Conference expects** parliament to recognize the UMC, which will result in the **return of previously confiscated church property**. In conference sessions, members: 1) celebrated the ministry of popular radio programs; 2) noted that UM-related Jan-Laski Seminary in Konstancin/Warsaw is discussing the possibility of working with Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw to offer a graduate degree recognized by the government; 3) lamented inadequate finances that prohibit the recruiting of new pastors and the continued deterioration of church facilities, but still collected money for UMs in the former Yugoslavia and the Republic of Macedonia.
- **The Switzerland/France Annual Conference:** 1) passed statements against racism; 2) learned that several conference bookstores will have to be closed due to financial problems; 3) agreed to provide financial support to build a new dormitory at the Reutlingen (Germany) Theological Seminary; 4) **realigned districts** so all French-speaking congregations would belong to the same district; and 5) adopted the Disciple Bible study program. Membership stands at 10,234, down 165.
- **The Hungary Annual Conference reluctantly agreed to close down a carpentry and sewing factory** that was created for unemployed gypsies. They cited "spiritual, financial, and personnel problems." In sessions, members: 1) noted the publication of a new book of hymns; 2) celebrated the renovation of a heart-lungs sanatorium in Budakeszi; 3) celebrated radio and television ministries, prison ministries, youth work, and ministries with the elderly; 4) re-elected Frigyes Hecker superintendent for another two years; and 5) observed the ordination of one woman as deacon, and the sending forth of a couple as missionaries to Szeged and two missionaries to work with gypsies. — *Urs Schwiizer, secretary to Bishop Heinrich Bolleter*
- **Transforming Congregations (TC)**, an organization of UMs that believe homosexuals can be changed, held its first national board meeting, July 19-21 in Fort Worth, Texas. **Jim Hill**, pastor of North Clairemont UMC in San Diego, was **elected** as the **first chairperson**. Robert Kuyper, pastor of Trinity UMC in Bakersfield, Calif., will continue as executive director. Thirty-two churches in seven conferences have declared themselves to be "transforming congregations." Kuyper told *Newscope* the organization plans to have a presence at the 1996 General Conference and that if time is given to homosexuals, TC will ask that time be given to ex-gays.
- Ginena Dulley Wills, a Washington-D.C.-based UM Committee on Relief executive, was among those from private voluntary organizations invited to a July 28 White House briefing on assistance to Rwandan refugees.
- A **South Central Jurisdiction task force is proposing boundary changes** to create urban-center episcopal areas in St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo. The task force, led by Bishop A. Fritz Mutti (Kansas), proposes: 1) a **St. Louis Area** composed of the Southern Illinois Conference and all of Missouri except three districts, and 2) a **Kansas City Area** composed of three Missouri districts and all of Kansas. Mutti said the task force believes creating two one-conference episcopal areas from five conferences would be "beneficial." Conferences involved in the proposal are: Southern Illinois, Missouri East and West, and Kansas East and West (merger vote set for 1995). The proposal would have to go to General Conference, as it would move Southern Illinois from the North Central to the South Central Jurisdiction. That move would reduce from 10 to nine the number of bishops in the NCJ. — *Thomas S. McAnally, UM News Service*
- **Every summer for nine years, Native American UM families** have come from all over the U.S. to a **week-long camp**. From fewer than 90 persons at the first camp, the event has grown to more than 600 at a July 25-30 camp at Lake Junaluska, N.C. — *Garlinda Burton, UM News Service*
- Addendum—The **East Ohio Conference** voted 462-455 to **call upon the Women's Division "to develop and implement new and clearer standards of sensitivity** concerning the legitimate diversity of theological thought in the UMC" and asked church members to discuss various theological issues.

## IDEAS FOR ACTION TO AFFIRM WOMEN DOING THEOLOGY

- Collect more signatures for a "A Time of Hope - A Time of Threat." Send to **THE NINE OF US**, P.O. Box 1574, New York, NY 10025-1574.
- Order a copy of the press conference video. Send \$10 check (includes cost of mailing) to: Beryl Ingram-Ward, UTS Box 77, 3041 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.
- Order the "Re-Imagining" special issue from the Presbyterian Church and Society, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396. Phone: 1-800-524-2612. Cost: \$2.50 per copy, \$2. per copy for 10 or more.
- Use the enclosed brochure to become a member of the Re-Imagining Community. Duplicate for others.
- Complete the enclosed questionnaire describing any positive or negative results including incidences of public criticism or intimidation you experienced after attending or defending the Re-Imagining Conference.
- Join the UM Women's Caucus and receive the publication, "The Yellow Ribbon." Send \$25 to Judith Johnson Siebold, 1917 Castle Garden Road, Vestal, NY 13850.
- On March 22, 1995 at Drew University the Nelle Morton Lectures will be devoted to Sophia. The main presenter is Dr. Joan Englesman. For more information call Victoria Erickson, University Chaplain, 201-4089-3597.
- Heather Murray Elkins is being threatened with legal action for her public presentation concerning the Sophia dispute at Drew University. She has already incurred almost \$4000 in legal expenses. If you'd like to make a contribution, make the check to the Methodist Federation for Social Action, noting it for the Elkins Defense Fund (address: MFSA, 76 Clinton Ave., Staten Island, NY 10301.)
  - Other things you can do:
    - Pray for women who are experiencing reprisals and condemnations for their stands following the Re-Imagining Conference.
    - Use feminine metaphors for God publicly.
    - Write legislation for General Conference. This is very important since there will be many pieces of legislation that condemn as heresy any use of Sophia/Wisdom as an image for God
    - Elect General Conference delegates who are friendly to women's leadership. Elections come up in the spring of 1995. Find out what's going on --get involved.
    - Create "Re-Imagining" type events and networks in your area. Have an evening, day or 2-day event for women doing theology. Inform the Re-Imagining Community newsletter so we can extend the network.
    - Start saving money to attend the "Re-Imagining" event at the end of **The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women: 1988-1998**, which will happen if we make it happen.

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## **A TIME OF HOPE -- A TIME OF THREAT**

### **A GATHERING OF PERSONAL STORIES**

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The Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a part of the Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women, has generated many kinds of responses. Please tell us how you have grown and changed in the months following the conference. In this survey we are also concerned with responses that have impacted your life in ways you did not imagine. Your response to the following questions will help an ecumenical body of church women to monitor and to understand what has happened to conference participants and their supporters. **Please use the back of this sheet and additional sheets to respond.**

#### A Time of Hope:

1. The 1247 respondents to the conference evaluation expressed appreciation for the freedom and the spirit they experienced. Has this sense of freedom and spirit of togetherness, as ecumenical Christian women, remained with you? If so, in what ways?
2. As a participant in the conference, have you engaged in further opportunities for study, mission, teaching, and leadership that you attribute to the conference?
3. How have you been supported [family, friends, church, community] in your new sense of freedom and growth in the Spirit?

#### A Time of Threat:

4. Have you experienced public criticism that goes beyond theological disagreement to an attempt to cause you public shame? Please describe.
5. Some women have experienced backlash in forms of job harassment, write-in campaigns, threats of withholding funds for their programs, calls for disciplinary action against them, cancellations of speaking engagements; withdrawal of invitations, letters that question the validity of their Christian identity, anonymous phone calls, and other responses that limit their participation in Christian fellowship. Have you experienced any of these or other undesired responses? If so, please describe.
6. How have you been supported [family, friends, church, denomination, community] in the controversy that has surrounded this conference?

#### **Research will be done by:**

**Victoria Erickson, Assoc. Prof. Sociology of Religion, Drew University**  
**Heather Murray Elkins, Asst. Prof. of Worship, Drew University**  
**Drew University**  
**36 Madison Avenue**  
**Madison, New Jersey 07940**

**Results of this study will be shared with the Re-Imagining Community**

Confidentiality will be protected; supplying your name is voluntary but would be helpful to us.

**THE NINE OF US**  
P.O. Box 1574  
New York, NY 10025-1574  
October 18, 1994

**To: All who signed "A Time of Hope - A Time of Threat"**

**From: Its Authors, THE NINE OF US**

Dear Friends, we want to express our thanks for your act of witness in signing the Statement "A Time of Hope - A Time of Threat." In that silent and wintry period in February following the attacks on the Re-Imagining Conference and its participants by Good News and others, we felt compelled to speak out. We understood that more than an ecumenical conference was under attack. You, too, saw the bigger picture related to the life of the United Methodist Church, the participation of women, issues of inclusiveness and authority.

By March 8 (International Women's Day), only two weeks after the nine of us had gathered, when we held our press conference in New York, we had received the signatures of approximately 800 women. On that day we invited men to join us, as well. Since March, we have received an additional 1100 signatures of women and men, although we have not made a special point of soliciting them. We are glad, however, to continue receiving names, thus expanding the network of folks who affirm that "A Time of Hope - A Time of Threat" speaks for them. Several Annual Conferences also adopted the Statement or supported its primary points. MFSA has circulated it widely. We are deeply grateful for the way your voices joined ours in a great "yes," when others were saying "no," or raising angry and anxious questions out of confusion and misinformation.

You probably have read reports of the March 8 press conference which was a wonderful teaching and learning experience. Some of you have already appreciated the 80 minute video, available for \$10.00 (inclusive of cost and mailing). A shorter 30-minute version was edited and prepared by the Drew University School of Theology and a copy is available at your Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

We have been disturbed by the controversy that has occurred during this past year. At the same time we are encouraged by the potential for serious and creative dialogue within the United Methodist Church and the