

MRS. RUTH BROWN: A LIFE FOR LIFE, BECAUSE OF CHRIST

For over eleven years, Mrs. Ruth S. Brown has been essential to, and a main agent in, the ministry of Lifewatch (or the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality). Operating out of an office in her Dothan, AL home, she served first as the Director of Lifewatch. Later, when travel became nearly impossible for her, she became the Administrator of Lifewatch. At the end of December 2003, she will retire from her official Lifewatch duties. The retirement of Mrs. Ruth Brown from Lifewatch presents an uncommon opportunity to celebrate a ministry for life selflessly offered.

Mrs. Brown is a devout United Methodist Christian. As a follower of Jesus Christ, she lovingly lives out her vocations in the Church and in the world. As a member and officer of Dothan's Cloverdale United Methodist Church, a member and officer of the United Methodist Women, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and a banking executive, she has tended and tends to her ecclesiastical and worldly responsibilities with thoughtful, heartfelt care.

But then came the United States Supreme Court's 1973 decisions which, in effect, established abortion on demand as the law of the land. On abortion, The United Methodist Church's leadership was heading in the same direction as the Court. At some point soon

after the Court's decisions, Mrs. Brown was awakened to the problem of abortion in American society. Mrs. Brown also learned of how The United Methodist Church was accommodating herself to the pro-choice culture legalized by the Supreme Court. Responding to Christ's call, Mrs. Brown became active as the founding Director of Sav-A-Life, a crisis pregnancy center in Dothan. Then she began participating in the Lifewatch network, became the Director of Lifewatch, and presented a paper at The Durham Declaration Conference in 1992.

Over her years with Lifewatch, Mrs. Ruth Brown has been an outstanding servant of the Gospel of Life. She has given undivided attention, prompt service, encouragement, friendship, and wise counsel to hundreds of United Methodists and others committed to the protection of innocent, human life. Many in the Lifewatch community have been blessed by her ministry with a personal touch, which is always loving and always truthful.

*"Many in the Lifewatch
community have been blessed
by her ministry..."*

Mrs. Ruth Brown has been, is, and always will be a wonderful colleague. This is because she has been, is, and always will be a true sister in

Christ. Her person-to-person skills are unexcelled. Her written word is clear, concise, and often powerful. Her administrative labors are completed in timely and exacting ways. Through it all, Mrs. Brown is a virtuous woman, a woman of her word.

Soon, Mrs. Brown will be stepping down from her work with Lifewatch. Not surprisingly, she is doing so in the interests of

the dignity of human life: she requires additional time so that she can offer merciful ministry to her beloved, elderly mother in need.

Mrs. Ruth Brown will be greatly missed by Lifewatch, by all of us, but especially by this pastor. However, let us not concentrate on our loss, tempting as that may be. Instead, let us thank God for this woman, for her mighty faith and marvelous ministry, for her life lived for the Gospel of Life.

Ruth, continue faithful. (PTS) ♥

THE EVOLUTION OF OUR SOCIAL PRINCIPLE ON ABORTION

In what follows, the most significant changes in The United Methodist Church's paragraph on abortion are indicated in rough form. Please note how, with each successive edition of The Book of Discipline from 1972 until 2000, the paragraph becomes increasingly protective of the unborn child and mother.

“Birth and Death. [1]—The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born. Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from an unacceptable pregnancy. In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion. [5] We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of conditions that may warrant abortion. [7] We support the removal of abortion from the criminal code, placing it instead under laws relating to other procedures of standard medical practice. [2] A decision concerning

abortion should be made only after thorough and thoughtful [3] consideration by the parties involved, with medical and pastoral counsel [4]...” (The Book of Discipline, 1972, Par. 72D) (The 1968 Social Principles neither suggest nor mention abortion. However, Par. 96.III.A does state: “We believe that planned parenthood, practiced with respect for human life, fulfills rather than violates the will of God...”)

Chronological notes:

[1] This rather misleading heading is replaced with “*Abortion.*” (The Book of Discipline, 1976, Par. 71E) To call a deed what it is—in this case, to call abortion abortion—is always a moral achievement. [2] This sentence is deleted, due to the United States Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton decisions, and the following statements are

inserted: “We support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. Nevertheless, governmental laws and regulations do not necessarily provide all the guidance required by the informed Christian conscience.” (The Book of

Discipline, 1976, Par. 71E)

[3] The phrase “thorough and thoughtful” is deleted and replaced with “thoughtful and prayerful.” (The Book of Discipline, 1980, Par. 71G)

[4] The phrase “medical and pastoral counsel” is deleted and replaced with “medical, pastoral, and other appropriate counsel.” (The Book of Discipline, 1980, Par. 71G)

[5] This sentence continues with an added phrase: “and in such cases support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures.” (The Book of Discipline, 1984, Par. 72G)

[6] Here, this sentence is added: “We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection.” (The Book of Discipline, 1988, Par. 71G)

[7] These sentences are added: “We call for the Church to provide nurturing ministries to those persons who terminate a pregnancy. We encourage the Church to provide nurturing ministries to those who give birth.” (The Book of Discipline, 1992, Par. 71H)

[8] These two sentences are edited and broadened:

“...[F]rom 1972 until 2000, the paragraph becomes increasingly protective of the unborn child and mother.”

“We commit our Church to continue to provide nurturing ministries to those who terminate a pregnancy, to those in the midst of a crisis pregnancy, and to those who give birth.” (The Book of Discipline, 1996, Par. 65J)

[9] Here, this sentence is added: “We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life.” (The Book of Discipline, 2000, Par. 161J)

The United Methodist Church’s current statement on abortion, which is found at Par.

161J in The Book of Discipline (2000), describes a pro-choice-with-qualifications position. And it is pro-choice enough to permit parts of The United

Methodist Church (namely, the General Board of Church and Society and the Women’s Division/General Board of Global Ministries) to affiliate with the decisively pro-abortion Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC). Lifewatch believes that, with regard to life and abortion, General Conference 2004 has the opportunity to take two very significant steps: first, to withdraw United Methodism and its general boards from the pro-abortion RCRC; and second, to edit lightly Par. 161J so that United Methodism becomes presumptively protective of the unborn child and mother, and thereby rejoins historic, ecumenical Christianity. (PTS) ♥

TO PROPOSE

United Methodism @ Risk: A Wake-Up Call (Information Project for United Methodists, Kingston, NY), by Leon Howell, has just been released. Written from a decidedly left-of-center perspective, this book offers a review and critique of various “conservative renewal groups” within The United Methodist Church—including the Confessing Movement, Good News, the

Institute on Religion and Democracy, Lifewatch, and others.

A paragraph from the book’s preface cuts to the chase and claims: “The ultimate goal of these groups is to control The United Methodist Church. Their strategy is to attain top leadership positions in the denomination. One tactic they use is spreading misleading and inflammatory charges about groups and individuals to United Methodists across the country. They indulge in character assassination and seek to drive the church apart by the use of wedge issues, calculated to cause dissension and division. Their desire is to impose not to dialogue” (p. 4, emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the aim of the book is to deny the renewal groups their alleged goal of taking over the church.

We will leave it to others in other places to answer the somewhat overheated charges and insinuations, one by one, of this book. We would, however, like to

comment on the above underlined sentence, which states the book’s foundational assumption.

From the standpoint of United Methodism @ Risk, indeed from the standpoint of liberal Protestantism in America today, there are two and only two theological positions that are currently available to United Methodists. The first position, the liberal-Protestant position, desires “dialogue” more than anything else. How disappointing that liberalism has moved from justice for the weak to dialogue for the privileged. According to liberal Protestantism, dialogue is the theologically and morally superior position for United Methodists of our day. This position, call it liberal Methodism, assumes that every doctrinal and moral issue in the denomination should be open to continual and endless dialogue. (While claiming that dialogue is always in order, more than a few denominational leaders do not make much room for dialogue when the chips are down. For example, when the Coalition’s war against the Iraqi government was in the daily news, many United Methodist leaders were making strong, anti-war statements that allowed little or no room for substantive

Response to: *United Methodism @ Risk: A Wake-Up Call*

dialogue.) If followed all the way down, the dialogical position, in which all churchly matters are up for discussion, would lead to something that might be called the Church of Choice. Lacking agreed-upon doctrine, morals, and liturgy, the Church of Choice would be satisfied with turning most everything over to individual preference. (A serious hypocrisy within the Church of Choice model is that it is actually quite authoritarian in practice: it rules any and all authoritative Church teaching out of order. That is, the Church of Choice model makes authoritative Church teaching just another option among other available options.) The book under consideration argues that the United Methodist version of the Church of Choice is at risk. On this point, the book is probably correct.

The second position, according to liberal Protestantism, involves the willingness of some to “impose” their teaching on United Methodists and on The United Methodist Church. That is, the “conservative renewal groups” seek to impose by political means their will, regarding doctrine and morals, on the greater denomination. This option, according to the liberal-Protestant side, is at least “authoritarian” and perhaps even “fundamentalist” in its style and substance. Furthermore, it is allegedly rather mean-spirited, unthinking, and rigid.

Yes, the above descriptions of these two positions are caricatures. But they attempt to capture the vision that inspires liberal Protestantism to promote dialogue and to demote imposition, that romanticizes liberal Methodism and demonizes evangelical-orthodox Methodism.

Beyond Dialogue and Imposition

Those of us in the Lifewatch community and many in the other “conservative renewal groups” are convinced that there is another option, another position, beyond the options of dialogue and imposition. We firmly believe that to be the way of proposal. In other words, wishing to push beyond a dialogue in which all perspectives are assumed to be acceptable and beyond a political imposition of

theological will, we United Methodists are dedicated to proposing the truth of the universal Church’s faith. The Church’s faith is a gift received from God through Scripture, through the Holy Spirit, through the Church, and through the Church’s Great Tradition. The faith of the Church is not ours to manipulate, add to, or subtract from. The faith of the Church is not ours to dilute or otherwise change, for the sake of increased acceptability by the general culture. Nor is it ours to force, by means of intimidation or power politics, on others. Rather, the faith of the Church is ours to propose.

To propose is to witness, to offer, to persuade. To propose is to attempt to serve the truth. To propose Christian truth, one assumes that not all perspectives are doctrinally and morally equivalent. And to propose Christian truth, one assumes that faithful service of the truth is more important than political victories in the conferences, annual and general, of the denomination.

Specifically, with regard to the Gospel of Life (which is most certainly the Church’s

historic, ecumenical faith), Lifewatch has attempted to propose the truth about life and abortion in and to The

“...truth is more important than political victories ...”

United Methodist Church for over 15 years. To be sure, at times our proposals have been stronger and more truthful. At other times our proposals have been less solid, too polemical, and less persuasive than they should have been. That is to say, our proposing of the Church’s truth about life and abortion has been far from perfect. Even so, though we at Lifewatch have fallen short of the mark, our lofty goal has remained to propose the truth, to speak the Christian truth in love about life and abortion, within our beloved church. After we have proposed the Christian truth about life and abortion, others will do with our proposal what they will—engage it or ignore it, agree with it or disagree with it, vote for it or vote against it, be motivated to act in its behalf or be motivated to act against it. But despite the varied responses that our proposal evokes, Lifewatch will have done its part: and that is to propose, as faithfully and as lovingly and as

consistently as possible, the Gospel of Life within The United Methodist Church.

When there is “no place for truth” (David Wells), or when there is only a very limited place for truth, within The United Methodist Church, as liberal-Protestant thinking on the Church contends, the only available modes of operation become endless dialogue and political imposition. But when a place for truth is granted in our church, the mode of operation becomes proposing reflections on the truth and responding to those reflections.

The Church cannot casually assume there is no Christian truth. And the Church cannot ruthlessly impose Christian truth. But the Church (including her laity, clergy, and bishops) can and should propose and serve the truth—with humility, with steadfastness, and with good cheer. Only after proposing the truth, let the Church dialogue and/or let the Church vote. For whether recognized or not, the Church, including The United Methodist Church, is first, last, and always ruled and run by truth. And in theological and personal terms, the truth’s name is Jesus Christ.

(PTS) ♥

“THE OLD GRAY LADY” TREMBLES

By the way, “the old gray lady” is an old nickname for The New York Times. This nickname was obviously coined before the advent of color in the Times.

For almost twenty years now, your scribe has read The New York Times on a nearly daily basis. (Attempting to observe the Sabbath as an aspiring Wesleyan, I have neglected and now neglect the Sunday edition.) This habit of reading the Times, be it good or bad or indifferent, began during our years in New Jersey and New York; then the Times was purchased from the box at the Edison train depot. Upon returning to North Carolina, we maintained a mail subscription to the newspaper for over a decade. And when the mail delivery became too erratic—have you ever tried to read, in one evening, three issues of the Times that arrived earlier that day?—we resorted to reading the daily at night at www.nytimes.com.

Reading The New York Times can be a

pleasure. Despite its sadly predictable political and cultural slant, the newspaper contains countless interesting and provocative articles. (For example, even its obituaries can be fascinating.) Professor Albert Outler, the great Methodist theologian, thought along the same lines. There was a time in Outler’s life when he had some time to burn. So he obtained stacks of this particular newspaper, methodically read through them (how else for a Methodist?), and clipped and filed articles to which he might refer in his future preaching, teaching, and writing. Evidently, reading the Times, for Outler, was better than watching movies.

Needless to say, The New York Times, during most of its century and a half, has possessed and exercised a tremendous amount of journalistic, political, and cultural power in American society. For generations, what the Times printed set the agenda for many other newspapers across the nation, for radio news, and for network television’s news. Boasting “All the News That’s Fit to Print” on page one of each issue, the Times was the self-confident, left-of-center voice of elite opinion in our society. Its news articles, its editorials, and most of its guest editorials maintained a party line that was not often broken. For example, regarding the issue of abortion, the Times was always pro-choice, if not pro-abortion. Therefore, when the United States House of Representatives passed the partial-birth abortion ban in June, the Times editorialized on “‘Partial-Birth’ Mendacity, Again” (6/4/03).

All of this is to suggest that The New York Times has played an essential role in sustaining the legitimacy of the abortion liberty in American law, politics, and culture. The Times, with all its prestige and all its power, has aggressively supported Roe v. Wade from January 1973 until the present. During these three decades, the Times has misrepresented Roe by routinely asserting that it legalized abortion only “during the first trimester of pregnancy.” Furthermore, discussing abortion, it has used the language of rights and laws, not the language of rights and wrongs. And in the eyes of the Times, there are those who are “pro-choice,” and there are those who are “anti-abortion.” The

term “pro-life” is not to be found in the vocabulary or in the pages of the Times. Unfortunately, the Times probably plays a major role in informing and forming many denominational executives of The United Methodist Church in New York City and Washington, DC on the issue of abortion.

But now The New York Times is experiencing some major, internal troubles. In April of this year, Mr. Jayson Blair, a Times reporter, was discovered to have filed many “falsified and erroneous stories” (Shelley Emling, The News & Observer, 6/13/03). So Mr. Blair was gone. Then Mr. Rick Bragg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter at the Times, resigned because of his habit of running unattributed reports as his own. Then the scandal deepened: the resignations of Mr. Howell Raines, the executive editor of the newspaper, and Mr. Gerald Boyd, its managing editor, which were related to the Blair and Bragg problems, were received in mid-June.

To many, this might seem like “a tempest in a teapot.” If it does, the tempest is indeed rough and tumble, and the teapot is relatively large. For this journalistic scandal, coupled with declining sales of the Times, could well be leading to a major shake-up at this national newspaper of record.

We should not jump to conclusions and dream that The New York Times will, in the months to come, become pro-life in its political and social positions. But we might well hope, with regard to life and abortion, that it will begin reporting with more honesty and with a bit more objectivity, and that it will bring more diversity to its editorial page.

The Bible, as Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us, has more than a little to say about the pride of humanity. Human pride, the Bible makes clear, leads to an arrogance that can neglect its critics, and then become slothful and reckless. This applies to institutions as well as individuals. When institutions or individuals pridefully bracket or subvert the truth, in the service of a political or cultural agenda, the truth will inevitably snap back sooner or later. Then a fall of some kind will follow, and an opportunity for humility and truth-telling will arise.

While The New York Times trembles, a time for a little more truth, even about abortion, might be at hand. But the operative word is might. (PTS) ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- As the first article of this issue indicates, on January 1st of next year, Lifewatch will be in **need of a new Administrator**. This position averages 30 hours per week, and it pays a small, monthly stipend. If you sense God’s call to the ministry of Lifewatch within The United Methodist Church and would like to apply for this position, please send your resume to: Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth/111 Hodges Street/ Morehead City, NC 28557. Consider November 1st the deadline for application. Thank you, in advance, for your attention and response.

- Please consider placing a contribution to the ministry of Lifewatch in **your 2004 congregation’s general budget**. Since next year’s budget is now (or should be...) under construction, please call your pastor or a committee chair to suggest and encourage a congregational gift to Lifewatch. Many, many thanks for your attention and response.

- Throughout the annual conferences of United Methodism, many **Services of Repentance and Reconciliation**, regarding racism, have recently been held. In a decade or a century, if our Lord tarries, will similar services, with regard to abortion, take place? We do not know. But we do know that it took a long time for Methodism to teach consistently that slavery, according to the Church’s faith, was wrong and deserving of elimination. “At the [American Methodist-] founding Christmas Conference the anti-slavery plank of the discipline was written into the rules. And early on it became a badge of virtue among converted Methodist slaveholders to free one’s slaves. But as the bulk of [Methodist] membership, little by little shifted south, the commitment fell to the tempting compromise of mainline convenience. A committee was formed. By 1816, it was compelled to report to General Conference: ‘The committee to whom was referred the business of slavery beg leave

to report, that they have taken the subject into serious consideration, and, after mature deliberation, they are of the opinion that under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice. They are sorry to say that the evil appears past remedy; and they are led to deplore the destructive consequences which have already accrued, and are likely to result therefrom.” (“Unholy Alliances” by Bill Wylie-Kellerman, Christian Social Action [July/August 2003], p. 12) In 1816, the Methodist Episcopal Church was deeply compromised on slavery. In 2003, The United Methodist Church is deeply compromised on abortion. Then the wheels of justice turned slowly. And now the wheels of justice are turning. Slowly. But they are turning.

- Commitment to proposing the truth can lead to proposing the question, or so suggests **Mary Meehan**: “[I]n the commotion of intellectual battle, we sometimes forget that a question may be more effective than a declaration or a long speech. Placing one or two good questions in someone’s mind may do more good than an hour’s debate.

“A thought-provoking question for a politician might be: ‘But *why* are you

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personally opposed to it? What is it about abortion that bothers you?’ For someone who discusses the issue in a totally abstract way: ‘Have you actually seen the results of abortion? If not, would you be willing to look at a couple of pictures?’ For a lawyer: ‘Given both abortion and euthanasia, I wonder if we’re headed for a time when the only people with legal protection of their right to life will be the powerful—those who need it least?’ For a psychologist or teacher: ‘Have you considered the effect of abortion on small children? Don’t you think that knowledge of it might terrify them?’ For a liberal: ‘Hey, whatever happened to standing up for the little guy? And why not consider a nonviolent approach to this issue?’” (The Human Life Review, Winter 2003, pp. 57-58)

- **Mr. John Carroll** is the editor of the Los Angeles Times. On May 22, 2003 he wrote a memo to colleagues at the Times on “[c]redibility/abortion.” Wrote Mr. Carroll: “I’m concerned about the perception—and the occasional reality—that the Times is a liberal, ‘politically correct’ newspaper. Generally

BOOK ORDER FORM: ① THE RIGHT CHOICE: Pro-Life Sermons; ② THE CHURCH AND ABORTION: In Search of New Ground for Response; ③ THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT ABORTION; and ④ HOLY ABORTION? A Theological Critique of the Religious Coalition of Reproductive Choice.

I wish to order: ___ copies of The Right Choice (\$10.00/copy); ___ copies of The Church and Abortion (\$5.00/copy); ___ copies of Thinking Theologically about Abortion (\$7.00/copy); and ___ copies of Holy Abortion? (\$8.00/copy). These prices include shipping/handling.

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Lifewatch
Taskforce of
United Methodists on
Abortion and Sexuality

512 Florence Street, Dothan, AL 36301

* Evolution of The UMC's social principle on abortion
* *United Methodism @ Risk: New book, old diatribes*

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speaking, this is an inaccurate view, but occasionally we prove our critics right. We did so today with the front-page story on the bill in Texas that would require abortion doctors to counsel patients that they may be risking breast cancer.

“The apparent bias of the writer and/or the desk reveals itself in the third paragraph, which characterizes such bills in Texas and elsewhere as requiring ‘so-called counseling of patients.’ I don’t think people on the anti-abortion side would consider it ‘so-called,’ a phrase that is loaded with derision.

“The story makes a strong case that the link between abortion and breast cancer is widely discounted among researchers, but I wondered as I read it whether somewhere there might exist some credible scientist who believes in it.

“Such a person makes no appearance in the story’s lengthy passage about the scientific issue...

“The reason I’m sending this note to all section editors is that I want everyone to understand how serious I am about purging all political bias from our coverage. We may happen to live in a political atmosphere that is suffused with liberal values (and is unreflective of the nation as a whole), but we are not going to push a liberal agenda in the news pages of the Times.

“I’m no expert on abortion, but I know enough to believe that it presents a profound philosophical, religious, and scientific question, and I respect people on both sides of

the debate. A newspaper that is intelligent and fair-minded will do the same...” (www.laobserved.com)

That kind of institutional self-criticism and honesty is always a welcome development—especially at a publication so important to American public life.

● **John Paul II** has written: “What kind of society is worthy of the human person? The Church responds with the unique perspective of salvation history. She proclaims the truth that the Word of God, through whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh and dwelt among us. He entered the world’s history—our history—as a man, a human being, a divine Person; he took on our history and made it complete... Truly great must be the value of human life if the Son of God has taken it up and made it the instrument of the salvation of all humanity.” ♥

Our Mission:

Out of obedience to Jesus Christ, the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality (TUMAS) “will work to create in church and society esteem for human life at its most vulnerable, specifically for the unborn child and for the woman who contemplates abortion.” Therefore, TUMAS’s first goal is “to win the hearts and minds of United Methodists, to engage in abortion-prevention through theological, pastoral, and social emphases that support human life.”