

# The Monthly Update

Volume 18, Number 2

June 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This “May Update” contains ongoing news of issues affecting our United Methodist Church along with items of interest in this country and around the world. We are including news of Iraq, grim information of this very necessary conflict. I predict that history will judge how we meet this challenge as determining the future of this country – and perhaps the world – as we know it.

You may ask, “Why are we receiving this and it is still April?” This, of course, would be a good question. Right now we are involved in multiple activities and it seems as if we are going a mile a minute! While people associated with Concerned Methodists will be leaving for General Conference at different times, I shall be leaving earlier than the others and had wanted to get it into the mail so it would be on the way to you. By the time that some of you receive this we will be heavily involved in Fort Worth. We hope that you have been praying for this milestone event.

A second reason is to give you our web address as a reminder that we intend to post updates on a daily basis of what is happening there. The web address is: <http://www.cmpage.org>

A third reason was to give you a bit of “behind the scenes” information on what we have been doing at Concerned Methodists. As you know, we had been working on the book *Stewardship Perspectives – 2007* which we had hoped to get to you in January or early February. At the same time and unknown to virtually all of our supporters was that we were simultaneously working on the book “*We’ve a Story to Tell...*” This latter book we were going to mail to the General Conference delegates to give them background information on two of the three petitions to General Conference, which dealt with local church property and the integrity of the local church. We had to keep this very close hold because we needed for the delegates to receive and look at it before anyone else (i.e., clergy superiors) could prejudice their minds against the contents of the book. This was accomplished. A disadvantage of doing it this way was that production of the book *We’ve a Story to Tell...* hindered the production of *Stewardship Perspectives – 2007* and has delayed our getting it to you. As of now, it will arrive while some of us are at General Conference, but we shall expedite it to those of you who have requested it just as soon as we can – probably in the latter part of April or early May.

Fourth, I hesitate to bring this up, but I do need to make you aware of our needs. If you have not already done so, please make a generous donation to the support of Concerned Methodists. You have been very kind in our previous requests – and for that we are so grateful – but our expenses in preparation for General Conference have been higher than anticipated. For instance, just the cost of sending the mailing to our overseas delegates alone (in Africa, Norway, Germany, Russia, the Philippines, etc.) was over \$1200. In addition, we are in the midst of a massive mailing of The Christian Methodist Newsletter that, as we have said, will be a “double issue” and contain the equivalent of two newsletters, which is more labor-intensive and expensive.

Please be in prayer for us as we are involved at General Conference and continue to do what the Lord has called us to do. Also, we also thank you for standing with us financially. Our Lord Jesus Christ is working through you to make this ministry possible.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,  
Executive Director

## June 2008 Update

### Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

*One man with courage makes a majority. - Andrew Jackson*

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#### **The Good Stuff *Great story about the Star Spangled Banner***

(Editor's Note- Near the end of his life, the great science fiction author Isaac Asimov wrote a short story about the four stanzas of our national anthem. However brief, this well-circulated piece is an eye opener from the dearly departed doctor.....)

["I have a weakness -- I am crazy, absolutely nuts, about our national anthem. The words are difficult and the tune is almost impossible, but frequently when I'm taking a shower I sing it with as much power and emotion as I can. It shakes me up every time."]

#### ***No Refuge Could Save: by Dr. Isaac Asimov***

I was once asked to speak at a luncheon. Taking my life in my hands, I announced I was going to sing our national anthem -- all four stanzas. This was greeted with loud groans. One man closed the door to the kitchen, where the noise of dishes and cutlery was loud and distracting. "Thanks, Herb," I said.

"That's all right," he said. "It was at the request of the kitchen staff"

I explained the background of the anthem and then sang all four stanzas. Let me tell you, those people had never heard it before -- or had never really listened. I got a standing ovation. But it was not me; it was the anthem.

More recently, while conducting a seminar, I told my students the story of the anthem and sang all four stanzas. Again there was a wild ovation and prolonged applause. And again, it was the anthem and not me.

So now let me tell you how it came to be written.

In 1812, the United States went to war with Great Britain, primarily over freedom of the seas. We were in the right. For two years, we held off the British, even though we were still a rather weak country. Great Britain was in a life and death struggle with Napoleon. In fact, just as the United States declared war, Napoleon marched off to invade Russia. If he won, as everyone expected, he would control Europe, and Great Britain would be isolated. It was no time for her to be involved in an American war.

At first, our seamen proved better than the British. After we won a battle on Lake Erie in 1813, the American commander, Oliver Hazard Perry, sent the message, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." However, the weight of the British navy beat down our ships eventually. New England, hard-hit by a tightening blockade, threatened secession.

Meanwhile, Napoleon was beaten in Russia and in 1814 was forced to abdicate. Great Britain now turned its attention to the United States, launching a three-pronged attack.

The northern prong was to come down Lake Champlain toward New York and seize parts of New England.

The southern prong was to go up the Mississippi, take New Orleans and paralyze the west.

The central prong was to head for the mid-Atlantic states and then attack Baltimore, the greatest port south of New York. If Baltimore was taken, the nation, which still hugged the Atlantic coast, could be split in two. The fate of the United States, then, rested to a large extent on the success or failure of the central prong.

The British reached the American coast, and on August 24, 1814, took Washington, D.C. Then they moved up the Chesapeake Bay toward Baltimore. On September 12, they arrived and found 1,000 men in Fort McHenry, whose guns controlled the harbor. If the British wished to take Baltimore, they would have to take the fort.

On one of the British ships was an aged physician, William Beanes, who had been arrested in Maryland and brought along as a prisoner. Francis Scott Key, a lawyer and friend of the physician, had come to the ship to negotiate his release.

The British captain was willing, but the two Americans would have to wait. It was now the night of September 13, and the bombardment of Fort McHenry was about to start.

As twilight deepened, Key and Beanes saw the American flag flying over Fort McHenry. Through the night, they heard bombs bursting and saw the red glare of rockets. They knew the fort was resisting and the American flag was still flying. But toward morning the bombardment ceased, and a dread silence fell. Either Fort McHenry had surrendered and the British flag flew above it, or the bombardment had failed and the American flag still flew.

As dawn began to brighten the eastern sky, Key and Beanes stared out at the fort, trying to see which flag flew over it. He and the physician must have asked each other over and over, "Can you see the flag?"

After it was all finished, Key wrote a four stanza poem telling the events of the night. Called "The Defense of Fort McHenry," it was published in newspapers and swept the nation. Someone noted that the words fit an old English tune

called, "To Anacreon in Heaven" -- a difficult melody with an uncomfortably large vocal range. For obvious reasons, Key's work became known as "The Star Spangled Banner," and in 1931 Congress declared it the official anthem of the United States.

Now that you know the story, here are the words. Presumably, the old doctor is speaking. This is what he asks Key:

Oh! say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,  
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.  
Oh! say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave,  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

("Ramparts," in case you don't know, are the protective walls or other elevations that surround a fort.) The first stanza asks a question. The second gives an answer:

On the shore, dimly seen thro' the mist of the deep  
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,  
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,  
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?  
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,  
In full glory reflected, now shines on the stream  
'Tis the star-spangled banner. Oh! long may it wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

"The towering steep" is again, the ramparts. The bombardment has failed, and the British can do nothing more but sail away, their mission a failure. In the third stanza I feel Key allows himself to gloat over the American triumph. In the aftermath of the bombardment, Key probably was in no mood to act otherwise. During World War I when the British were our staunchest allies, this third stanza was not sung. However, I know it, so here it is:

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion  
A home and a country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave,  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

(The fourth stanza, a pious hope for the future, should be sung more slowly than the other three and with even deeper feeling):

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation,  
Blest with victory and peace, may the Heaven - rescued land  
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.  
Then conquer we must, for our cause is just,  
And this be our motto -- "In God is our trust."  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

I hope you will look at the national anthem with new eyes. Listen to it, the next time you have a chance, with new ears. Pay attention to the words. And don't let them ever take it away ... not even one word of it.

Note: Then this comment was added to the above message: "AND IT'S SUNG IN ENGLISH!"

- Source: Received from Capt. W.E. Saunders. Sent: Saturday, June 2, 2007 3:45 PM

## Of Interest

### + *Commentary: Finding new ways to attract new clergy leaders*

[Note: With the UMC projected to be short of pastors in the near future, this will increasingly become a problem.]

It's a phrase heard a lot these days: Leadership development. Bookstore shelves overflow with "how to" guides for employees, managers and CEOs. Service organizations, high schools, colleges and universities profess leadership development as a core value as they work to attract students. Young children are even part of the leadership emphasis. Every morning on my way to work, I pass Tomorrow's Leaders Pre-School!

Equipping the right people with the right tools, and training them with the necessary skills to do a good job today and in the future, has always been important. Samuel grew up in the temple, where he received training and guidance from Eli. When God called Samuel to serve, Eli taught him how to respond. Mordecai gave Esther the guidance, motivation and instruction to confront the king at the right time and save the Jews from destruction. As a young man, Paul trained Timothy so that as he matured he would learn how to lead his faith community.

The church needs well-trained, well-equipped, effective leaders. That hasn't changed; but the world has. And the church is therefore challenged to respond to today's culture in meaningful, relevant and appropriate ways. Indeed, in The United Methodist Church, leadership development is the first of the four churchwide areas of focus for program development and funding for the next four years. In 2005, the Rev. Lovett H. Weems Jr. reported that 850 of the 18,141 probationary or ordained elders in the United States were 35 years of age or younger. Only 4.69 percent of elders were in this age group--down from 15.05 percent of elders in 1985. This alarming percentage has helped to crystallize the church's need to critically reassess and retool its efforts to invite, train and retain young adult clergy. Today's young adults approach the world differently than young adults did 50, 25 or even 10 years ago. Programs and structures that may have worked in 1985 will not engage today's young adults in the life of a local church, annual conference or even the general church.

At all levels--local church, annual conference and globally--The United Methodist Church must ask itself: Are we prepared to respond to young adults in ways that invite them into meaningful service and allow them to learn new skills and hone their gifts and talents? Furthermore, are we prepared to change outdated or ineffective practices to respond to the way that young adults are leading in the church today?

### Missing the picture.

As part of my work, I am regularly involved in conversations about the critical need for young adult leaders. The conversation often turns to the reasons we need them. More often than not, people say these new young leaders must be prepared to lead the church 20 years from now. They insist that we need people who we can train to "take over the reins" when today's leaders retire. While this may be a legitimate goal, they are missing the big picture. Young adults are not only leaders for tomorrow's church. They are leaders in the church today.

If the church is to fully integrate young people in ordained leadership positions, all levels of the church must find new ways to invite them to consider ordained ministry and then respond to the gifts and skills that young people already bring.

The first goal of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry's strategic plan is to "reach young people to assist and support them in identifying and forming their vocations as Christians for leadership in the global church and the world."

I work with both the Division of Higher Education and the Division of Ordained Ministry to address systemically how the church can invite, train and retain youth and young adults as church leaders. In addition to several ongoing programs (EXPLORATION, Student Forum, the United Methodist Student Movement and the Young Adult Seminarians' Network), three new emphases are under development: [www.ExploreCalling.org](http://www.ExploreCalling.org), The National Leadership Development Advisory Team and The Campus Ministry Internship Program.

### New resources for new leaders

[ExploreCalling.org](http://ExploreCalling.org) is a Web site for youth, young adults and those who work with them that provides tools for discerning God's call to vocation. The site has links to United Methodist colleges, universities and theological schools; a resource page of books and articles about vocation; information on loans and scholarships available to United Methodist students; details about upcoming leadership development events; and links to other relevant sites. New downloadable resources are added about every two weeks, and news stories are updated weekly.

Additionally, visitors can e-mail questions about ministry and sign up to receive e-mail updates. It's the one place in The United Methodist Church where information about vocational discernment and answering God's call to ministry is centralized.

The National Leadership Development Advisory Team creates tools to train those involved in all stages of the invitation and candidacy process for young adults. The team writes articles and resources that can be used to ensure that young adults receive the information they need as they work through the candidacy and probationary processes. These resources will be used by pastor/staff parish relations committees, district committees on ordained ministry, annual conference boards of ordained ministry, district superintendents and bishops as they work with young adults.

The Campus Ministry Internship Program, based on a program created by the Northwest Missouri State Wesley Foundation, will replicate throughout the United States an effective tool for engaging college students in vocational discernment and ministry development. Students will work with a team of other students and their campus minister or chaplain to serve a local congregation where they will lead worship and preach regularly.

### Changing world

Just as the world has changed, the church must change to meet the needs of the Millennial Generation--those born between 1982 and 2000. Most of us would agree: We need young adult leaders! But how does the church accomplish this? We must use the tools that work. We must build relationships, equip and train young adults for leadership, find ways to assist them in the discernment and candidacy process as they explore ordained ministry, and work with annual conferences to find ways to retain young adult clergy.

You can make a difference as an individual. Find ways you can encourage young people and develop relationships with them as they discern how God is calling them to serve. Look to make changes that enable our church to invite, train and retain its newest leaders.

- *A UMNS Commentary by the Rev. Meg Lassiat; Feb. 19, 2008. Lassiat is Director of Student Ministries, Vocation, and Enlistment at the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Linda Green, Nashville, Tenn.*

### **+ Denominations Join Episcopalian Diocese in Fight Over Church Property**

Judge says Methodists, Worldwide Church of God, and others can participate in oral arguments.

Sixteen Protestant denominations and regional districts have joined a friend-of-the-court brief supporting the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia in contesting a Reconstruction-era state law that governs church splits. The post-Civil War splintering of Methodist and Presbyterian churches in 1867 prompted the Virginia law, which allows congregations to keep their property when seceding from a church or "religious society" that's dividing. However, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), two of the largest U.S. mainline Protestant denominations, side with the Episcopal diocese in saying that the law is unconstitutional.

On Friday, May 16, a judge in Fairfax County, Va., ruled that the UMC, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Worldwide Church of God may participate in oral arguments May 28 to assess the law's constitutionality. The amicus curiae brief is a sign of how closely Protestants are following the multimillion-dollar battle between the Episcopal Church and 11 conservative congregations that left to join the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, which is sponsored by the Anglican Church of Nigeria.

The Protestants' amicus brief says the law draws "civil courts into a theological thicket" and favors congregational-based denominations over hierarchical churches. The Episcopal Church, the UMC, the PC(USA) and other denominations argue that local congregations hold property—from the stained glass to bank accounts—in trust for the denomination. Their hierarchical structures, they say in the amicus brief, are religiously based, and civil courts have no business resolving "fundamentally religious questions."

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and Virginia-area districts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Church of the Brethren have also joined the amicus brief. Virginia Attorney General Bob McDonnell and lawyers for the Congregation of Anglicans in North America, the umbrella group of breakaway churches, will defend the law at oral arguments. Jim Oakes, co-chair of the Anglican District of Virginia, which is part of CANA, said Protestants' concerns are not relevant to the lawsuit. "It's almost like they're hyperventilating, saying, 'This will destroy hierarchical churches,'" he said. "It will do nothing of the sort."

The property dispute is expected to take years to settle; Oakes said CANA has already paid \$2 million in legal fees.

- *"This article first appeared in May 20, 2008, Christianity Today's website: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/>. Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL 60188."*

### **+ What, after all, is patriotism?**

Note: We may not necessarily agree with this definition but it is interesting to examine this concept. For me, patriotism is an appreciation for the finest country in the world – with all of its problems and benefits. We have freedom, the strongest economy and the finest military fighting force in the world. I pray that we will experience spiritual revival so that we can also be a positive moral witness to the rest of the world. Our country was founded on belief in Jesus Christ; let us pray we shall return to Him.

Personal patriotism is emotional and voluntary. The patriot adheres to certain patriotic values, such as respect for the flag. They may insist that the entire citizenry shares adherence to these values, or that they be legally enforced, see Flag Desecration Amendment. Governments promote an official patriotism which has a high symbolic and ceremonial content. It is a logical consequence of the state itself, which derives legitimacy from being the expression of the common good of the political community. National monuments, and veterans days and commemoration ceremonies are typical examples. Often official patriotism is highly regulated by protocol, with specific methods for handling flags, or specific pledges and displays of allegiance. Patriotism relies heavily on symbolic acts, such as displaying the flag, singing the national anthem, participating in a mass rally, placing a patriotic bumper sticker on one's vehicle, or any other way of publicly proclaiming allegiance to the state. Symbolic patriotism in wartime is intended to raise morale, in turn contributing to the war effort. Peacetime patriotism can not be so easily linked to a measurable gain for the state, but the patriot does not see it as inferior. There are historical examples of individuals who fought for other countries, sometimes for their independence - for example the Marquis de Lafayette, Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski in the American Revolutionary War, and the "Philhellenes," western Europeans who fought in the Greek War of Independence. Was Lafayette an American patriot, or the Philhellenes Greek patriots? Alasdair MacIntyre would claim that they were not; that these and similar cases are instances of idealism, but not of patriotism. Under this view, Lafayette was only devoted to the ideals of political

liberty that underlay the American Revolution, but was not specifically patriotic for America. For MacIntyre, patriotism by definition can only be a preference for one's own country, not a preference for the ideals that a country is believed to stand for.

- Source: *the internet website: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriotism>*

### **(UM) General Conference 2008. *Wrap up: Assembly retains stance on homosexuality***

FORT WORTH, Texas – After a long and emotional debate, the 2008 General Conference voted April 30 to retain statements in the Social Principles that the “United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” The final action replaced a “majority report” from a legislative committee, which called for recognition that “faithful and thoughtful people who have grappled with this issue deeply disagree with one another; yet all seek a faithful witness.” The assembly replaced the majority report by a 517-416 vote. The committee had voted 39-27 to ask for United Methodists and others “to refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to new insights.” Frederick Brewington, a layman in the New York Annual (regional) Conference who chaired the legislative committee, said the proposed statement would eliminate a sentence that has “caused festering sores among the body for three decades.”

The Rev. Eddie Fox, director of world evangelism for the World Methodist Council, led the effort to retain the current language. “My integrity will not allow me to be silent,” he said in introducing the “minority report” to keep the church’s stance unchanged. He said the Social Principles must be faithful to biblical teaching, and he suggested that any change in the language would harm the global church.

In approving the minority report, the assembly affirmed that all persons are “individuals of sacred worth created in the image of God.” Delegates also retained statements asking “families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.”

In a separate resolution, the conference asked the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, the church’s social advocacy agency, to develop educational resources and materials on the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, the discrimination or prejudice against lesbians or gay men by heterosexual people.

The conference also retained a rule that prohibits United Methodist clergy from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions.

### **Membership**

General Conference let stand language in the Book of Discipline regarding pastoral authority over church membership. Petitions were brought to the assembly after considerable controversy over a 2005 decision by the United Methodist Judicial Council supporting the Rev. Ed Johnson of Virginia who [delayed in giving] membership to a man who was in an openly homosexual relationship. The council reinstated Johnson after he had been placed on involuntary leave by the Virginia Annual Conference. A majority report of a legislative committee asked the conference to make it clear that pastors and congregations “are to faithfully receive all persons who are willing to affirm our vows of membership.” The Rev. Ted Virts, a superintendent in Sacramento, Calif., argued for the majority report. He said his job is to be “an errand-runner for God” who tells people they are “invited to a banquet,” not to be “a ticket-taker or a security guard.”

A minority report urged delegates to declare that “pastors have the responsibility of discerning one’s readiness to take the vows of membership.” The Rev. Bob Moon, a pastor in Macon, Ga., supported the minority report, saying pastors must be good shepherds who care for their flock. Allowing anyone to come into the community could have unintended consequences.

The minority report was defeated 515-384, while the majority report was defeated by 51 percent of the delegates, leaving in place the Discipline’s current language: “All people may attend its worship services, participate in the programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection.

### **‘Sin of racism’**

“If we’re going to be serious about the future of our church around the sin of racism, some tables will have to be overturned,” New York Area West Bishop Violet L. Fisher said in her morning sermon to the assembly. She said Jesus deliberately and unabashedly modeled both gender and racial inclusiveness by going into Samaria and speaking with the woman. “Are we willing to go through Samaria?” Fisher asked. The bishop encouraged the denomination not to pretend it’s done all it can do to “eliminate racism, white privilege, discrimination and clever tactics of subterfuge that leave our racial and ethnic ministries and pastors of color underfunded, underappreciated, and misunderstood.” The church must create and build “ministries that are culturally congruent with God’s children,” said Fisher. United Methodists must also “confront the institutional racism that infects the structures of the church and perpetuates the forces of oppression in the world,” she added.

### **100 years of men’s ministry**

Shortly before adjourning at noon, delegates celebrated the 100th anniversary of ministry to men in The United Methodist Church and predecessor denominations. A six-minute video presentation noted that men’s ministry was launched in 1908 because two-thirds of Methodists worshipping on Sunday morning were women. The video displayed ministries of United Methodist men such as scouting, hunger-relief efforts through the Society of St. Andrew, the Upper Room Prayer Line, Big Brothers and providing a historic book of daily devotions for members of the armed forces. The video concluded when Dale Long, a Dallas resident who has served as a big brother to six boys over the past 30 years, introduced his little brother, 15-year-old LaDarius Douglas.

### **Fewer U.S. bishops**

Delegates approved a plan that will result in one less bishop in four of the five U.S. jurisdictions beginning in 2012. In an April 29 legislative session, delegates agreed that savings from those reductions will be used to fund new episcopal areas outside of the United States. The North Central, Northeastern, South Central and Western jurisdictions each will have one less bishop under a new formula for determining the number of bishops. The action will not affect the Southeastern Jurisdiction, which already has one less bishop than the current formula allows. The Northeastern Jurisdiction likely will lose a bishop in 2008 under the current formula and a second one in 2012 under the new formula.

### **The Philippines**

Delegates adopted a resolution addressing the “unabated and egregious violations” of human rights in the Philippines that have resulted in 886 extrajudicial killings and 179 disappearances, including pastors and church workers. The church called on the Philippine government to “immediately stop the killings and all other forms of human rights violations” and asked other nations to look into the situation. A second resolution pledged to “pray for the Filipinos as they disciple among their people and call them to fidelity to our Lord Jesus Christ’s imperatives for love, compassion, justice and peace.”

- *By J. Richard Peck, UMNS #GC87; April 30, 2008. Website: [www.gc2008.umc.org](http://www.gc2008.umc.org).*

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*Duty, honor, country: those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be,  
what you can be, what you will be.*

*They are your rallying point to build courage when courage seems to fail,*

*To regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith, To create hope when hope becomes forlorn.*

*- General Douglas MacArthur*

### **Global Outlook**

*In war, resolution;*

*In defeat, defiance;*

*In victory, magnanimity;*

*In peace, goodwill.*

*- Winston Churchill*

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### **Russia. Court Closes United Methodist Church in Russia**

UMs are investigating a court liquidation of a church in Smolensk, Russia. Forum 18 News Service reported that the Smolensk Regional Court dissolved the UM congregation there on March 24 in response to a suit filed by the regional public prosecutor's office. The church already had been under government scrutiny because of a complaint from Smolensk's auxiliary Orthodox bishop. During an investigation of this complaint-regarding a planned missionary college-Smolensk Regional Organized Crime Police concluded the church was conducting "educational activity" without a license. The church's pastor, Aleksandr Vtorov, and Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, told UM News Service (UMNS) on March 26 that the church apparently was shut down because it had a Sunday school. Forum 18 examined the suit from the Smolensk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office against the UMs, where evidence of the four-member Sunday school class includes the fact that the children's lessons are graded from two to five points, "although these are presented to the children in the form of sea creature symbols." (Two points-shark, three points-fish, etc.) In a March 13 complaint to Smolensk Regional Court, Vtorov said the Sunday school is "not a professional religious institution for the preparation of clergy and religious personnel, but serves as an instrument for the teaching of religion to and the religious upbringing of our followers."

According to Forum 18, Russia's 1997 Religion Law distinguishes between educational institutions founded by religious organizations, which must be licensed, and the right to engage in the teaching of religion to the followers of religious groups. Bishop Hans Vaxby, of the Eurasia Episcopal Area, based in Moscow, told UMNS in a March 27 e-mail that the denomination is working with a lawyer to follow up on the court's action, including an appeal. While not a complete ban, the liquidation forbids the 36-member congregation "from maintaining or developing any form of public profile as an organization, such as through missionary work," Forum 18 reported.

*- Linda Bloom UMNS, as reported in NewScope, April 11, 2008.*

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*No man is free who is not master of himself. – Epictetus*