

## **“Where Have All The Bishop’s Gone”**

Here is what our 2000 Book of Discipline says about the Council of Bishops (I have italicized and bolded certain phrases) - -

“427. Council of Bishops

Bishops, although elected by jurisdictional or central conferences, are elected general superintendents of the whole Church. As all ordained ministers are first elected into membership of an annual conference and subsequently appointed to pastoral charges, so bishops become through their election members first of the Council of Bishops before they are subsequently assigned to areas of service. By virtue of their election and consecration, bishops are members of the Council of Bishops ***and are bound in special covenant with all other bishops. In keeping with this covenant, bishops fulfill their servant leadership and express their mutual accountability. The Council of Bishops is a faith community of mutual trust and concern responsible for the faith development and continuing well-being of its members.***

***The Council of Bishops is thus the collegial expression of episcopal leadership in the Church and through the Church into the world. The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships.***

Two active United Methodist Bishops, Timothy Whitaker of Florida and Marion Edwards of North Carolina, have bravely broken the vow of silence among the Council of Bishops in response to comments by Bishop Joseph Sprague.

“It's highly unusual for members of the Council of Bishops to disagree with one another publicly, especially on matters of theology," "But if there's silence from the Council, people feel like all the bishops agree. It's very unhealthy when there's controversy going on, and I did want to break that silence." - - Bishop Timothy Whitaker, Florida

"Responding to United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague's denial of key doctrines of Christian orthodoxy earlier this year, Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida has released a six-page statement affirming the traditional understanding of Jesus Christ's eternal deity, unique role as savior, virgin birth, physical resurrection, and atonement for the sins of the world. Sprague, who is bishop of Chicago, had rejected these articles of faith as "idolatrous" in a speech he gave earlier this year at a United Methodist seminary in Denver."

"The United Methodist bishop of North Carolina has joined the bishop of

Florida in publicly criticizing the theology of Chicago-area Bishop Joe Sprague, who has publicly questioned Jesus Christ's eternal deity, virgin birth, physical resurrection, atonement for the sins of the world, and unique role as savior. In an October 28 speech in Raleigh, Bishop Marion Edwards said Sprague's comments "strike at the heart of our ecumenical and United Methodist Church doctrine.""

In my opinion this "breach" in the wall of the Council of Bishops was created at the 2000 General Conference in Cleveland, when several of the Bishops took place in demonstrations both inside and outside the plenary hall resulting in their removal from the seat of the General Conference and their arrest and incarceration.

"May 10, 2000

CLEVELAND (UMNS) – More than 180 people, including a United Methodist bishop, were arrested May 10 for engaging in civil disobedience as a way of protesting United Methodist policies regarding homosexuality.

The arrests followed a rally and a march around the Cleveland Convention Center, where delegates to the United Methodist General Conference are meeting through May.

Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, head of the denomination's Northern Illinois Annual (regional) Conference, was among the first protesters arrested. At least nine other active or retired United Methodist bishops participated in the rally but did not appear to have been arrested."

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"May 11, 2000

CLEVELAND (UMNS) — Two United Methodist bishops were among a group of 30 people arrested May 11, during a protest that temporarily halted legislative proceedings at the denomination's quadrennial law-making assembly.

It is believed to be the first time anyone has been arrested on the floor of the denomination's General Conference.

Bishops C. Joseph Sprague of Chicago and Susan Morrison of Albany, N.Y., were among those arrested. As the 30 were escorted from the Cleveland Convention Center, their supporters — among them General Conference delegates — shouted "Shame!" to the police officers for removing the demonstrators and to the assembly for passing legislation prohibitive to homosexuals. The supporters joined together singing "We Shall Overcome." Several delegates, overcome by emotion, burst into tears, and the presiding officer called a 15-minute recess."

Maybe more Bishops will find the courage of their convictions and speak out! Most of the persons who are elected to the episcopacy haven't taken public positions beyond political correctness and human inclusiveness. In my experience almost all of them were most vocal during the interview process, prior to their election, on issues both great and small.

The Bishop Sprague controversy has been with us for some time now. The Bishop of the Phoenix Area, William Dew, released this statement in recent days

"In the days of Bush, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, in the days of violence to children, lack of trust in financial institutions, incurable disease and threat of terrorism Christmas comes to give us songs of hope to sing."

Bishop Dew has not said that he was putting our United Methodist President in the same league and Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden - - although the Institute on Religion and Democracy is now accusing him of that

We elect from our very best men and women of integrity, honesty and long distinguished service to the office of Bishop - - we then strip from them their membership in an annual conference where they were nurtured and loved - - sometime from infancy - - and stick them in a Council of other Bishops and tell them that they no longer have right of vote in the Annual Conference, Jurisdictional Conference or General Conference. We let them "chair" almost anything that comes along - - we figure having a Bishop in charge will add prestige to whatever the group is. Indeed, many of our bishops are exercising superb and visionary leadership of our boards, councils, agencies and institutions across the denomination.

The United Methodist Church is a connectional church - - that is who we are, it is part and parcel of our uniqueness. We each depend on the other to be a strong link in that connection. When one link is weak we hold on even tighter to help each other. Our form of church governance and polity is formed out of a representative body coming together every four years to again open up our entire "Book of Discipline". We call that the General Conference. It is made up of equal number of lay and clergy persons who were elected out of the body of their respective annual conferences. The General Conference struggles with the hard issues of our connection. The debate takes place within that covenant body. Votes are taken, some win and some loose - - some get mad and some are glad. Some go home and begin making plans to try again in four years. Friends that is our way - - it is not the only way - - but it is our way! The covenant trust comes when we all go home and depend on each other to be faithful to our words of covenant and promise until we meet again and do it all over again. For the glory of God, or not, that becomes our doctrine and polity for another four years.

Is that a perfect plan? Is it what God ultimately wills for us? Yes or no, by the grace of God, it is who we are right now.

A new phenomena has arisen across our covenant denomination during the last three

quadrennia. It goes something like this - - "General Conference you might have spoken - - but you did not speak for me, and I am not going to abide by your policy and doctrine and I am going to do everything I can to disobey that covenant and to demonstrate my opposition."

That is precisely at the place where we are just now across our church. The 2000 General Conference witnessed this first hand - - up front, personal and "in your face".

*Para 509 (2000 Discipline). Speaking for the Church*

*No person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution. Any written public policy statement issued by a general Church agency shall clearly identify either at the beginning or at the end that the statement represents the position of that general agency and not necessarily the position of The United Methodist Church (§ 717).4*

Well, who speaks for the church? It is obvious that the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church does not. They are fractured and wounded and their voice is growing weaker.

Someone, please, speak up!

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December 25, 2002