

Briefly noted

News in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

Noting that the war of words between the U.S. and Iran has reached “dangerous” levels, the board members of the United Methodist Church’s social action agency last month urged both governments “to moderate their language and begin constructive conversation about a peaceable future.” The Church and Society resolution, framed at an April 20-23 meeting in Washington, quoted the wisdom-over-weapons-of-war counsel in Ecclesiastes 9:17-18. James Winkler, the board’s top executive, lamented in his comments that an attack on Iran continues to be raised as a possibility by U.S. government figures and that Iran’s leaders continue to concern the UN and Western nations over the suspected development of Iranian nuclear-weapons capability.

Three men charged with conspiracy and arson in the burning of nine churches in rural Alabama pleaded not guilty in mid-April. Federal judge John Ott set a June 5 trial date for the case. Defendants Russell DeBusk Jr., 19; Benjamin Moseley, 19; and Matthew Cloyd, 20, also face state charges in connection with the fires in early February. The men, students at colleges in Birmingham, have been held at Shelby County Jail since their arrest in March. Each count of the federal charges has a mandatory sentence of at least five years in prison. Five of the churches were destroyed, and two firefighters were injured in fighting the blazes. Defense lawyers have not ruled out a possible plea agreement, Associated Press reported, especially since the men have expressed remorse.

The Southern Baptist Convention saw a slight membership increase in 2005, but its churches are reporting a decline in baptisms at a time when officials have made baptisms and evangelism a denominational focus. The latest statistics from the Annual Church Profile, released April 18 by the denomination’s LifeWay Christian Resources, show that membership in 2005 totaled 16,270,315, a .02 percent increase over the 2004 figure of 16,267,494. (The 2004 figures are the latest reported in the new 2006 *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*.) Baptisms for 2005 totaled 371,850, a 4.15 percent decrease from 387,947 in 2004. Baptisms had increased in 2004 after a four-year decline, but the new figure for 2005 indicates

that decreases are the longer-term trend.

An influential think tank focusing on foreign relations has launched a new initiative that will study and explain the role religion plays in foreign policy. The Council on Foreign Relations, with offices in New York City and Washington, designed the plan to expand on its existing lectures and roundtable talks on foreign policy and religion. Workshops are being developed to bring religious figures together with influential foreign-policy thinkers. The advisory committee includes former secretary of state Madeleine Albright. "My sense is that the timing for this educational initiative is just right," said another adviser, Luis E. Lugo, director of the Washington-based Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. In recent weeks, tensions arose worldwide after Danish political cartoons lampooned the Muslim prophet Muhammad. Also, conflict between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims is having a profound impact on the U.S. military effort in Iraq.

Two church groupings in Norway have agreed to form a council spanning all the major churches, including Lutheran, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal bodies. The new grouping is to be formally inaugurated September 1. The merger of the Christian Council of Norway and the Norwegian Free Church Council was approved in separate meetings March 30. The Council of Free Churches was founded in 1903 as an instrument for the free churches to promote their religious rights in a nation where the (Lutheran) Church of Norway is a state church. The Christian Council of Norway was established in 1992 as a council of churches with a broad ecumenical agenda that gathered all major denominations except the Pentecostal Movement.