

Caught in the middle

by [Michael Macdonald](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

It is not easy to be a moderate in the United Methodist Church today. On the right are the conservatives, exemplified by *Good News* magazine, who want Methodists to conform to their pinched vision of orthodoxy. On the left are the liberals, exemplified by the church bureaucracy and the Council of Bishops, whose concept of leadership seems to be limited to condescending sloganeering. Harsh words perhaps; but sometimes there is no way to take the sting out of the truth. We have seen this unhappy dichotomy on the issue of homosexuality for a couple of decades. Now we are seeing it in the response to the attacks of September 11.

The November-December issue of *Good News* contains a critique of the UMC response to the crisis by Mark Tooley, executive director of UMAction, a committee of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute on Religion and Democracy. The critique begins by praising the United Methodist worship he attended on the Sunday after the attack: "The minister wore a U.S. flag tie. And he asked his audience to rise and sing the national anthem. Every person rose and placed their hand upon his or her heart." He concludes by saying that, in contrast, the official United Methodist response "showed an almost complete absence of moral seriousness, Christian realism, or even any real sense of indignation."

The affiliated RENEW Network (a "Resourcing, Enabling Network for Evangelical Women") has called for reform of the Women's Division in light of its "virulently anti-American" leadership. All this because the Women's Division urged the ending of the bombing in Afghanistan and expressed concern over some of Attorney General John Ashcroft's more extreme proposals for countering terrorism.

I find this response to the United Methodist response troubling. It is not the job of churches or pastors to rally round the flag. Our loyalty is first to the kingdom of God, which includes people of all nationalities. Our job is to dampen the emotional fires that can lead to excesses in times of anger, however justified that anger may be. The phrase "Christian realism" is of course a reference to the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was a great theologian, and needs to be considered in light of the

current situation. But “Christian realism” has not been elevated to the status of orthodoxy. “Christian realism” is not the only morally serious response to the terrorist attacks.

Unfortunately, the Council of Bishops’ pastoral letter on the subject justifies the charge of an absence of moral seriousness. Apparently there was a great deal of debate within the council on whether the tone of the letter should be pastoral or prophetic, or whether the two could be separated. In the end, those who preferred a pastoral tone carried the day. An explicit call for the cessation of bombing in Afghanistan was proposed but not adopted. Instead, the letter simply implies strongly that the U.S. should shut down its military response to the attack.

This implication is made in two key passages. The first one says, “We, your bishops, believe that violence in all of its forms and expressions is contrary to God’s purpose for the world. Violence creates fear, desperation, hopelessness and instability.” On one level, this is a truism no one would deny. But the bishops give no guidance or teaching on how to apply this truism to the attacks on September 11. It is just as true that cancer is contrary to God’s purpose for the world. Yet it exists, and we humans have to cope with the brokenness of this world. A strong utilitarian argument could be made that the war has lessened the amount of fear, desperation and hopelessness for the Afghan people, without even factoring in the future harm to Americans that it has prevented. Repeating the slogan that violence is contrary to God’s will is a woefully inadequate response.

The second passage says, “The message of the resurrection is that love is stronger than all the forces of evil. Furthermore, it is only sacrificial love, not war, which can reconcile people to God and to each other.” I find this statement disingenuous. Who has claimed that this war or any other war would reconcile people to God and to each other? The purpose of the war is to keep Osama bin Laden and the Taliban from killing thousands more innocent people. A strong argument could be made that the war is morally wrong even for this purpose; the bishops have not made it.

Just as disappointing is the letter’s failure to even mention the theory of just war. I am not saying the bishops should have endorsed this theory. But no serious discussion of the American response to the terrorist attacks can simply pretend this concept does not exist. It is puzzling that no similar letter was issued about Kosovo. The Board of Discipleship and a couple of individual bishops condemned that bombing campaign, but the council as a body was silent. Are we to infer that it is

acceptable to use violence to protect non-Americans, but not Americans? Is there some criteria that made that campaign less morally ambiguous than the Afghan war?

Perhaps the bishops reject the theory of just war entirely. Do the bishops intend to ask the 2004 General Conference to remove the language allowing just war from the Social Principles and replace it with a statement endorsing total pacifism?

To go past sloganeering the bishops should have addressed these issues. The letter was intentionally brief so that it could be read from pulpits in worship services; perhaps they should have chosen a different format to address these issues. Though not the intent, the effect of citing slogans without teaching is to seem condescending.

That's why it's not easy to be a moderate in the United Methodist Church today.