

Bush, ‘proud Methodist,’ opens a door: First meeting with UMC bishops

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

It was a modest gesture, but some United Methodists hope that President Bush’s first meeting with bishops in his own denomination will contribute to a new relationship with mainline church leaders.

While in Washington for a semiannual bishops meeting, Peter D. Weaver, president of the UMC Council of Bishops, and four colleagues had a private, ten-minute meeting May 3 with the president and aides at the White House. The five bishops then joined 13 other invitees from mainline churches whom Bush addressed briefly.

Two days later, Weaver sat together with Bush and first lady Laura Bush at the National Prayer Breakfast in the White House’s East Room. Weaver, who leads United Methodists in the Boston area, gave the closing prayer at the multifaith event that included music by a choir from St. Olaf’s College in Northfield, Minnesota.

“Laura and I are proud Methodists,” said Bush in his remarks at the May 5 breakfast, echoing the sentiment he expressed earlier to the five bishops.

Bush said he “was very delighted to be meeting with us” and “was interested in things we were doing in the United Methodist Church,” said Weaver, according to the United Methodist News Service. The delegation’s agenda “was not to cover a laundry list of issues” in that short meeting, Weaver said.

Following the breakfast, Weaver concluded, “I think there is a new openness in the relationship.” The other bishops with Weaver in the private meeting with Bush were John Schol of the Washington, D.C., area; Janice Huie, president-designate of the Council of Bishops; Ernest Lyght, council secretary; and Charlene Kammerer of the Richmond, Virginia, area.

Schol, credited with making the contact with the White House, told the Century that after he became bishop of the Washington area in September he was made aware of past Methodist concerns over the lack of entrée to the Bush administration. For example, before the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 the White House rebuffed attempts by UMC bishops to explain their opposition.

This time “several of us worked to meet with the president, and the White House was quite willing to allow the meeting,” he said.

Asked whether some United Methodists might become overly optimistic about gaining Bush’s ear, Schol cautioned: “The president is very clear and forthright about what his agenda and commitments are. If any particular denomination thinks it is going to sit down and influence this president on domestic and international policy, it doesn’t know how [he] operates.”

In his May 3 remarks to the Methodists and other clergy, Schol said, Bush defended his controversial nomination of John Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and also said he has a duty to lead despite knowing that a large part of the nation disagrees with him on certain issues. “He affirms that he has been influenced by the United Methodist Church,” Schol said, but indicated that that was on a personal level.

Mainline church leaders were pleased the week before when Bush, answering a question at his April 28 news conference, appeared to distance himself from the claims made by conservative Christians at the televised “Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster Against People of Faith” rally in Louisville, Kentucky.

Rally sponsors Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council contended that liberal Democrat senators were opposing some of Bush’s judicial nominees because of the nominees’ strongly held religious beliefs. To a reporter’s question, Bush said, “I think people oppose my nominees because of [the] judicial philosophy of the people I’ve nominated,” adding that he didn’t think it was “an issue of faith.”

Bush’s response was praised by Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, who sent an e-mail to the president saying his remark helped in “easing a debate that has become increasingly contentious.”

Wrote Edgar: “You state quite forthrightly that people in political office should not accuse their opponents of being ‘not equally American if you don’t happen to agree with my view on religion.’”

The Methodists’ Council of Bishops, who held their meeting May 1-6 in Arlington, Virginia, had signed two Bibles that were given at separate times to President and Mrs. Bush by Weaver, reported the United Methodist News Service.

As Weaver presented the second Bible to Laura Bush in a small gathering of program participants before the National Prayer Breakfast, the president told him, “Take our greetings to the Council of Bishops.”

At their private meeting with Bush two days before, the five bishops prayed with Bush and said they wanted to build on a relationship with the White House that would produce “fruits of human justice, peace and hope,” said Weaver, citing the AIDS pandemic in Africa as one issue of common interest.

Nearly a dozen Methodist bishops from Africa met with some legislators, including House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California. Jim Winkler, chief executive of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, which hosted the visits, observed, “We’re actually at a moment in American history where political figures are very, very interested in hearing from religious people.”