

U.S. leaders confess church failures: Repentance for silence on Iraq

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

Leaders of the U.S. denominations belonging to the World Council of Churches created a small buzz at Porto Alegre by delivering a letter to the Ninth Assembly in which they confessed the complicity of the U.S. churches in actions and policies that are detrimental to the well-being of the world. They mentioned three areas in particular: the Iraq War, the global environmental crisis and global poverty.

Using confessional language, the signers of the letter said, “We lament with special anguish the war in Iraq, launched in deception and violating global norms of justice and human rights.” The letter further states, “We confess that we have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to call our nation to global responsibility for creation, that we ourselves are complicit in a culture of consumption that diminishes the earth.”

At a press conference with the denominational leaders, Sharon Watkins, president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), almost tearfully explained that the letter was not intended to undermine U.S. troops. “They are brave men and woman who are our sons and daughters and our neighbors. But here [at the assembly] we gather with Christians around the world, and meet the parents of other sons and daughters.”

The church executives acknowledged that their letter might be controversial back home. The Institute for Religion and Democracy quickly complained that the penitence expressed in the letter is false: “These church leaders are not confessing their own sins; they are trying to confess the sins of George W. Bush, who never asked them to perform that service for him.” But this predictable IRD barb missed the point of the letter, which was to acknowledge complicity with U.S. policies and to confess that the church and its leaders haven’t done enough to challenge them.

Three of the denominational leaders involved told me independently that the major reason for writing the letter was their need to respond to challenges from people in

their own communion from around the world, who repeatedly asked: Where is the American church on issues of war, the environment and poverty? The only religious voices being heard from the U.S., they had been told, are those supportive of the Bush administration.

John H. Thomas of the United Church of Christ, who initiated the writing of the letter, said that “Americans tend to see themselves as benevolent doers of good in the world. But right now we’re seen as a dangerous national community that is intent on doing harm for our own benefit in a variety of ways.” Some of the executives said that they would be pleased if the letter stimulated more debate in U.S. churches about these issues.