

Under fire: A surfeit of sexual politics

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

In one of his classes, Stanley Hauerwas was asked, “What do you think of Willimon’s preaching?” Hauerwas said, “My main criticism is that Willimon is far too subtle, much too charming. It’s that southern soft-talk thing he does so well. I keep hoping that one of these days he is going to get the gospel so right and so clear that the university administration will finally figure out what he’s talking about and say, ‘This guy is against everything we believe! Fire him!’ He hasn’t yet preached that well, but I keep hoping.”

Well, the time for my termination may have come, but not at the hands of pluralistic, pagan university administrators. The call is coming from a few mad fellow United Methodists.

When I returned from a student mission trip in Honduras, where I had been doing the gospel as best I knew how, my wife greeted me with, “You have some vile stuff to read. And please don’t ask me again to check your e-mail while you are away.”

I assumed that she was referring to the reaction to Sunday’s sermon, or the student response to my attack on their alcohol problems. No. In its monthly newsletter, UM Action—having savaged bishops, church bureaucrats and almost any other United Methodist with whom it disagrees—had trashed me. UM Action, tool of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, informed its constituency that the time had come to pull the plug on Willimon. The group demanded my immediate resignation, and printed my e-mail address on its Web site.

For the past two weeks, I’ve been getting about a hundred e-mails a day. Two thirds of them call me cowardly for not resigning, a third of them write to show support for a brother attacked by “screwy right-wing homophobes” (not my term). Many raise questions about my sexuality (how could someone in Ohio know about that?). “Coach K is a greater Christian leader than you ever hope to be,” said one. “He won a national championship in basketball. You have lost the game of life.”

For 20 years I've been agitating for United Methodist renewal, and I have never met people like these UM Action people. I forwarded some of the more salacious e-mails to Mark Tooley, director of UM Action, since he instituted it all. He wrote back saying, If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.

The wrath of the righteous was kindled against me because Duke, after five years of saying that it would not permit same-sex unions in the nondenominational university chapel, has now said that it would. Last fall the president and I appointed a committee—made up of many United Methodist pastors, plus laity and a bishop—to study the matter. The committee unanimously recommended that, in the interest of continuing to foster vibrant ecumenical cooperation on our campus, we ought to allow those pastors who serve Christian churches that perform such unions, such as the United Church of Christ, to do them at Duke.

Most folk received this news as information. The two North Carolina United Methodist bishops, while reiterating that the United Methodist Church does not approve of these unions, issued statements saying that they understood the school's rationale. Over 20 different religious groups work on our campus. Many engage in ministries that are not mine. Some hold beliefs with which I am in deep disagreement. I don't "approve" of the worship of Catholics, but we gladly permit them to worship every week in our basement. I think the conservative evangelicals who don't ordain women are wrong, but I welcome their willingness to work with me.

Some Methodists still long for that Constantinian day when our church might be so powerful that we could cram down everyone else's throat that which we have difficulty enforcing even within our own congregations. That day, if it ever existed, is long gone at places like Duke. So it was nothing new to me to permit someone to do something with which I and my church disagree. I did not "approve" of same-sex unions, and I will not perform them. However, we have permitted those groups for whom this is a ministry (at least three in number) to do them.

One divinity school professor protested, saying that everyone knows that the UCC isn't much of a church to begin with. He added that for him the chapel is forever violated and desecrated. He would never again set foot in the place. He failed to indicate when the alleged desecration occurred—when the committee's report was received, when a union has been scheduled (to date, none has been), or when a UCC pastor might be invited to preach.

Where was this theologian's protest when the university had the gall to parade in an American flag at opening convocation? When I considered some of the heretical sermons that I have preached, some of the dumb things that have been done in that chapel, I thought this a strange and ill-considered overreaction.

My fate is ironic, since I have frequently decried the mushy, pluralistic tolerance of the modern university which, in the interest of can't-we-just-all-get-along diversity, accepts just about everything without engaging the real differences among us. This episode suggests to me that, though liberal tolerance has its theological problems, the intolerance of the Christian right is a theological embarrassment.

I agree with UM Action that matters peculiarly Christian are at stake here, though its reading of the situation at Duke is wrong and its tactics indefensible. Its construal of the action as an attack on biblical principles and the United Methodist Church is just plain silly.

I don't get it. Divorce? Remarriage after divorce? Greed? Those are biblical subjects on which we ought to have no disagreement. Our Lord has expressly forbidden such sin, even though my church has found a way to overlook it, even among our bishops. We are for lifelong, exclusive commitment to monogamy. We are therefore forced to create church practices that support our odd belief that there is no sex of value outside the promises of marriage.

But homosexuality? True, we have a few obvious texts on the subject (1 Corinthians 6 comes to mind) but surely nothing to merit the meanness of my mail. Half of my mail says that same-sex relationships are a horrible, terrible abomination and the other half says that such relationships are a marvelous expression of love. Both groups are sure of what the Christian faith has to say on this subject, and are proud to occupy the moral high ground.

As for me, I have ambivalence—which was once regarded as the supreme Methodist theological virtue! I just don't know. I cannot disregard Paul's anthropology, but I do not understand why he speaks against same-sex relationships. Once a church has admitted the possibility of remarriage after divorce, I am unsure how to proceed with Christian discipline in regard to sex. It seems to me more of a pastoral, ecclesial issue than a biblical one. I can feel the anger of those homosexual and lesbian Christians who wonder how in the world they got blamed for the failure of heterosexuals to keep their promises and for the breakdown of the American family.

I do not yet know how one is to hold both heterosexual and homosexual Christians accountable for their behavior once the promises of marriage are either broken in divorce and remarriage or else greatly expanded through same-sex unions. Because I know so much more about heterosexual sin, and because, as a pastor, I have not had the occasion to minister to much homosexual sin but daily have had to confront the ravages of heterosexual misbehavior, I think it is in bad taste for me, or any other pastor, to focus on homosexual sin as the worst of sin.

On the other hand, the theological romanticism in the letters from some of my gay activist admirers (“all you need is love”) is troubling. I’m trapped between my unwillingness to invoke liberal canons of tolerance and diversity and my repugnance for the skewed biblical interpretation of Mark Tooley’s cyber-storm troops. My theological ambivalence has cast me into the odd situation of not being pleased with either my negative or my positive mail.

With regard to sexual matters and the Christian faith, it is often an issue of proportion. Christianity, unlike, say, Islam, has not much to say on the sexual infatuations of our age. Richard Hays has written convincingly that, while there is New Testament evidence that the practice of homosexuality is contrary to Pauline views of the self under Christ, there is absolutely no biblical justification for making this the predominant issue for the church, the supreme test of fidelity.

Christians do not need to invoke “tolerance” or “diversity” in order to debate this issue. We have, within our faith, ample theological resources that have to do with a repeated assertion that Jesus Christ is Lord and that we (and our modern infatuations) are not. I wish we would talk less about sex and more about Jesus—not only because I minister among adolescents who are just dying to tell you about their sex life, but also because I believe in the whole Bible as well as in the power of baptism.

I’m old enough to remember when Bible-believing evangelical conservatives worried about whether you were saved, washed in the blood, redeemed—important matters. Today, sex seems the sole concern of conservatives and liberals. Tooley has allowed the sexual politics he despises to set his group’s agenda. Permitting just one pastor to preside at a same-sex union anywhere within 50 feet of our pulpit is an abomination, an invalidation of my ordination, a failure to cram the precepts of the United Methodist Book of Discipline down everyone else’s throat, and a desecration that merits my resignation.

Well, I'm not resigning. Because this past Holy Saturday we gathered about the font and in a darkened chapel illumined by flickering candlelight joined the Holy Spirit in making three new Christians. Despite all our academic defenses here at Duke, Jesus got three more.

At those baptisms, no one was asked about sex. Rather, we talked about Jesus, about what he did for the baptized that they could not do for themselves, about how he gives them the gifts they need to be faithful disciples all their days. We recited the whole story of salvation, from Genesis to Revelation, and made the baptized citizens of a new kingdom where, if scripture is as true as we believe it to be, there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ.

I was reminded that night of the true test of ministry, and I rejoiced at the Risen Christ's ability to get the world he wants. Despite my mail, my faith burned bright. And I took heart. What a great place to be in ministry, despite myself.

Sorry, UM Action, you're going to have to push me out of here with a crowbar.