

THE INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY *Its Composition, Strategies, Goals, and Effects*

Who is the IRD? The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) was founded in 1981, chiefly by two conservative Roman Catholics, Father Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak. According to a 2001 IRD document, *Reforming America's Churches Project*, the IRD was founded "to combat the irresponsible political lobbying of mainline churches." The IRD's leadership body consists of 6 officers, a 20 member board of directors and a 19 member board of advisors. The denomination with the largest representation in IRD leadership is Roman Catholicism, with 6 board members and 4 on the advisory board. None of the officers and only 5 of the board members are United Methodist.

The IRD consists of a central organization and three sub groups, Episcopal Action, focused on the Episcopal Church in the U.S.; Presbyterian Action, focused on the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and UM Action, which is focused on the United Methodist Church. The IRD publishes a magazine, *Faith and Freedom*, and its three branches also publish newsletters, including *UMAction Briefing*, targeted at United Methodists. According to its figures, its circulation has grown almost 40%, to 440,000, in the last 4 years. Many of the IRD's staff also contribute pieces used by other media outlets. The IRD also operates a website, www.ird-renew.org, which offers editorial pieces and study resources, and has links to other conservative para-Methodist organizations, such as Good News, The Confessing Movement, The RENEW Network, Transforming Congregations, and Bristol House Publishing. The IRD is also "a chief organizer" and "the publicity and program arm" of the Association for Church Renewal, a "Coalition of conservative/ evangelical groups in all the major mainline churches."

The IRD's interest in the three mainline denominations may be as much for political and social influence as it is for religious reform. The *Reforming America's Churches Project* document notes (Episcopal, Presbyterian, and United Methodist) memberships include remarkably high numbers of leaders in politics, business, and culture. For example, over one third of the members of the U.S. Senate belong to these three denominations. These denominations include a disproportionate number of higher income and educated Americans. They are affiliated with hundreds of colleges, universities, seminaries, academies, and charitable outreach centers...These denominations are still flagship churches that directly or indirectly influence millions of Americans.

What does the IRD do? According to their current purpose statement, the IRD "is an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians working to reform their churches' social witness, in accord with biblical and historic teachings, thereby contributing to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad." However, the focus of the IRD's publications and postings is frequently criticism of mainline denominations' leaders and/or policies. Their pieces are often written in a divisive, inflammatory style, and frequently take quotes out of context. The character or motives of those being criticized are sometimes explicitly or implicitly called into question, and at times readers are asked to take action against certain leaders or policies. This can result in intimidation of church leaders, distraction of leaders and resources from ministry, and make productive resolution to vital conflicts more difficult, if not impossible.

For example, in a response to the Council of Bishop's 2005 document, "A Call To Repentance and Peace with Justice", in a December 22nd, 2005 fundraising letter, UMAction Director Mark Tooley characterized the Council of Bishops as "Flower children and chronic demonstrators who never really grew up and faced the real, sinful world." Another piece that appeared on the IRD website last month, "United Methodist Official Opposed to Old Glory?," was a response to the General Board of Church and Society's Rev. Clayton Childers. Childers expressed that the placement of American flags in church sanctuaries might imply support of policies that "run counter to...our Christian faith." Tooley responded, "Religious left figures...oppose the United

States flag because they are contemptuous of our country, its history, its institutions, its culture, and its leadership role in the world.” Headlines in the most recent issue of *UMAction Briefing* include “Pro-Homosexuality Activists Take Charge of General Conference Worship,” and “Episcopal Church Rejects Biblical Authority and Sexual Morality...”

Where does the IRD’s support come from? In a 1999 fundraising letter, Mark Tooley stated “You might be curious where UMAction gets its funding...we rely entirely upon the generosity of United Methodists like you.” However, from 1981-1984, several hundred thousand dollars in IRD seed money came from the conservative Scaife-Mellon and Smith Richardson family foundations. Other conservative donors who have given substantial amounts to the IRD include the Bradley, Coors, and Olin family foundations. Since 1985, these donors have given the IRD grants worth more than \$4,764,000. Conservative Episcopalians Howard and Roberta Ahmanson have given the IRD approximately \$1,288,000 since 1991; the exact amount of their gifts, which may be substantially more, cannot be tracked through current tax laws. Roberta Ahmanson chairs the IRD’s Board of Directors. According to recent sources, 50% of the IRD’s current expenditures are targeted at the United Methodist Church.

Foundations which have supported the IRD have also supported prominent conservative organizations, including the John Birch Society, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society, and the Christian Reconstructionist Movement, which advocates fundamentalist Christian theocratic government. A number of IRD board members have direct ties to some of these organizations. A new film, *Mine Your Own Business – A Documentary about the Dark Side of Environmentalism*, is a joint venture of the Heritage Foundation and the IRD.

How has the IRD responded to our Conference and its leaders? In the year 2000, the IRD supported General Conference legislation that cut our Desert Southwest Conference’s representation at General Conferences in half. In *Reforming the Churches Project*, the IRD called 2000 “The most productive General Conference in 40 years,” in part because delegates Voted to reapportion the composition of future general conferences so that declining (and liberal) regions of the church such as the northeast and west coast will receive fewer delegates. Growing (and more conservative) regions such as the southeast and overseas churches will receive more delegates. This will help insure that conservative trends...will continue at future general conferences.

In a sample resolution to be used at this year’s annual conferences, “A Call for Justice and Equity”, the IRD calls for a reconfiguration of the Episcopal areas, which would reduce the number of Episcopal areas in the Western Jurisdiction, and increase the number in the Southeastern Jurisdiction and others.

A May 9th, 2003 Commentary on the IRD Website, which identified Bishop William Dew as one of its targets, characterized debate about the Iraq war as a “Struggle for the soul of America, which is being carried out by two dramatically opposed armies. One is made up of traditional Americans with Judeo Christian beliefs...the other army is made up of the secular left, who don’t like words like ‘cowboy,’ ‘evil,’ or ‘war.’ They worship at the altar of the United Nations...one of the strongest regiments in this godless army is America’s mainstream protestant leaders.” The author also stated, “The real spirit driving the peace-mongering protestant leaders is not pacifism at all. It is the hatred of President Bush and America itself.”

The Summer 2006 issue of *UM Action Briefing* featured a story titled “United Methodist Officials Lobby for Liberalized Immigration.” The piece named Bishop Minerva Carcaño, who was asked by the Council of Bishops to speak for them on immigration issues, as one of several United Methodist leaders who, in the unnamed author’s words, “jumped into recent political debates” concerning immigration. The author implied that Bishop Carcaño’s support for an immigrant rights activist was inappropriate, and at the end of the piece, advised readers to “Contact your bishop

with your views about allowing Bishop Carcaño to speak for our church on controversial immigration politics.”

What are the goals of the IRD for our denomination? The current agenda of the IRD for the United Methodist Church, as reflected in the *Move Forward in Mission* statement of October 5, 2004, and the *UM Action Reform Agenda* of May 23rd, 2007, includes:

“The UMC shall abolish the General Council on Ministries, (the) Board of Church and Society, and (the) Commission on the Status and Role of Women.”

“The Social Principles shall be entirely rewritten...General boards and agencies shall not submit resolutions or petitions to General Conference.”

“Hold accountable the Bishops, Annual Conferences, UMC Agencies, and Women’s Division...Reform the seminaries...”

“We question the integrity of the ‘unity’ resolution which the 2004 General Conference hastily adopted...Irreconcilable differences on essentials are dividing the culture-conforming liberals – who want to re-write the Bible, the traditional Christian faith, and God’s plan for Man, Woman, and sex – from faithful United Methodists...we recommend allowing a gracious exit for those who cannot or will not accept the essential beliefs...”

The latest issue of the *UMAction Briefing* includes a piece titled “Time to Take Action at Your Annual Conference.” The unnamed author asks readers to bring IRD authored resolutions to local annual conferences, elect delegates to the next General conference that will be sympathetic to the IRD’s goals, and avoid “a takeover by the far-left activists that reject basic Christian beliefs...”

How should we respond to the IRD? Above all, the United Methodist Church is an inclusive family that welcomes all people, conservative, liberal, progressive, traditional, and all in between. Although we may disagree about the IRD and its activities, all United Methodists, and their perspectives, are an irreplaceable part of our denomination. The legitimate differences we have in our connectional church are a natural and healthy part of genuine diversity. It is a tragedy that often our rhetoric, and our society, have become so polarized in recent years. It is essential that our first priority, rather than seeking to exclude or marginalize one group or another, be to affirm our oneness in Christ, and seek solutions to our conflicts that have integrity with our Christian faith and our convictions. Even if agreement is elusive, our faith tradition still invites us into a covenant of mutual respect, remembering the words of John Wesley, “In essentials unity, in all else, charity,”

Unfortunately, at times the IRD has had the effect of deconstructing our covenantal fabric. If the IRD achieves its stated goals, the social witness of our church, and the voices of those who disagree with the IRD, will not be “reformed”; they will essentially be eliminated from our connection. All United Methodists are welcome, and encouraged, to raise their voice for change, or for the preservation of tradition, from within our church. They are welcome to use, or to reform, the institutions our faith tradition has created. The IRD, however, seeks to dismantle large sections of our denomination from the outside – with leadership and resources that have no connection with United Methodism. The elimination of dissent is not part of our faith tradition. Rather, it is an importation of the worst features of divisive and destructive politics into the life of the church.

We ask all United Methodists who have supported, or who have considered supporting, the IRD, UM Action, or their associated organizations, to be in prayer. We ask them to prayerfully consider if they should continue their support. And we ask them to prayerfully consider if the agenda of the IRD helps, or hinders, the mission of the United Methodist Church, as it seeks to share the gospel

of Jesus Christ in the world.

Where can I get more information about the IRD? Two resources have examined this organization and its activities in detail. One is *United Methodism @ RISK; A Wake-Up Call*, by Leon Howell, published by Information Project for United Methodists in 2003. Copies can be ordered from Cokesbury. Another is a DVD presentation, *Renewal or Ruin? The Institute on Religion and Democracy's Attack on the United Methodist Church*. The video, which appeared earlier this year, was created by United Methodist Minister Steven D. Martin. It features United Methodist Bishops Kenneth Carder and Beverly Shamana, and General Board of Church and Society Chair Jim Winkler. Copies can be ordered online at www.ird-info.com.