

The Sound and the Furious Reflections on UMW Assembly 2006

By Liza Kittle

William Faulkner published his most famous novel *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929. In this complicated and tragic work, the author describes the downfall of a prominent family which collapses into financial ruin, loses its moral compass, abandons its religious faith and ultimately dies a tragic death. It is a sad and telling tale of how traditional morality is replaced with modern hopelessness, and one which many scholars believe is full of biblical references.

After attending the 2006 United Methodist Women Assembly in Anaheim, California with the RENEW Network, I can't help but see the themes echoed in Faulkner's classic story. The family in this real-life tale however is United Methodist Women, an organization with a rich heritage grounded in biblical truth and traditional morality, which has been tragically led astray by the "progressive" feminist leadership of the Women's Division. The sights, sounds, themes and worship experiences at this recent quadrennial event reflect that financial, moral and theological decline are indeed a reality—and left unchecked will ultimately lead to the downfall of this once fruitful ministry.

Furious means full of extreme anger or a turbulent activity. Fury, the word from which it is derived, also can mean an angry and spiteful woman. One would hardly expect to find anger displayed at a Christian event for women, but sadly the Assembly showed evidence of this characteristic. Turbulent speakers espousing partisan political ideologies in plenary sessions, a radical fashion show decrying the United States military in the exhibit hall and angry women showing their displeasure at the presence of the RENEW team are all examples of the furious at this year's event. Even selections from the 2006 Reading Program sold at the Assembly expressed anger towards the current administration's public policy with titles such as: *Crimes Against Nature: How George W. Bush & His Corporate Pals Are Plundering The Country & Hijacking Our Democracy* by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.; *Shafted: Free Trade And America's Working Poor* edited by C. Ahn; and *Race and Resistance: African Americans In The 21st Century*, which includes an essay by ex-Black Panther activist Angela Davis.

Financial and Membership Decline

At a press conference during the Assembly, Chief Executive Officer Dr. Jan Love acknowledged the current financial crisis at the Women's Division. The Division has recently been forced to admit a pattern of financial mismanagement over the past several years, characterized by flagrant overspending in the midst of declining revenues. This lack of fiscal responsibility is an abuse of the faith United Methodist Women have placed in the leadership of their organization. While the Women's Division continues to report erroneous membership and giving figures, the decline in both areas is quite dramatic. Reports from the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) show that membership fell again in 2005 and is now 727,000 members (not the "almost one million" reported by the Division), and mission giving fell to \$16.8 million dollars, reflecting a 7.6% decrease in only one year (not the "almost \$25 million" annual giving reported by the Division).

United Methodist Women across the denomination are voting with their feet and their pocketbooks in response to growing dissatisfaction with the theology, programs and policies of the Women's Division. The Division continues to ignore this fact and blames their financial shortfalls on everything but the protest of its membership.

RENEW will soon release an updated Financial File detailing the spending patterns of the Division. This document is a telling expose which sadly reveals the virtual absence of evangelism in the mission outreach of the Women's Division. The concept of mission held by the Division continually emphasizes world transformation through a social justice gospel while ignoring individual heart change through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The current financial state of the Women's Division reflects a sad deviation from the biblical standard of honest, faithful stewardship which should be foundational in Christian ministry. (Note: While still facing a huge deficit from the last Assembly, the 2006 Assembly's \$2 million dollar price tag was financed in part through the sale of property from the Women's Division's extensive real estate portfolio.)

Moral Decline

The invitation to pro-homosexual practice activist Emily Sailer to lead a plenary worship session was the most recent indication of how misguided the Women's Division continues to be regarding the selection of speakers whose beliefs run counter to our *Book of Discipline*. In a recent interview while discussing her new book, co-authored with her father, Rev. Don Sailer, Ms. Sailer declared that she wasn't even sure she was a Christian. One would hardly expect such a controversial statement from a prominent participant at a large Christian gathering.

The Women's Division, while subtle in their press releases and public statements concerning the acceptance of homosexuality, continues to form alliances and monetarily support organizations which sanction alternative lifestyles while denouncing transforming ministries which reach out to the sexually broken. Morality takes a back seat as well when it comes to the issue of abortion. Dr. Love, in her address to the Assembly, emphasized the Women's Division's continued support for the "reproductive rights of women" which includes unlimited global access to abortion. Many of the organizations supported by United Methodist Women funds through the Women's Division actively support pro-choice positions.

The Women's Division also partners with numerous feminist organizations through the United Methodist Office at the United Nations, a program heavily subsidized with UMW funds. Many of these groups, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, actually praise and support the legalization of prostitution in countries like Holland. Incredibly, this "progressive policy" is viewed as an economic equality issue for women versus one of moral degradation.

Theological Decline

The most disturbing element at the Assembly by far was the lack of focus on Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior and Lord of all. A coliseum filled with 7,000 women, singing to a neutral (sometimes feminine) God and sisterhood, left this observer feeling empty and sad. Worship was uninspiring and devoid of the Holy Spirit. Focus groups and plenary speakers which proclaimed interfaith dialogue as the way, pluralism as the truth and an inclusive God as the life left one

perplexed about the uniqueness of the Christian faith. A preponderant observation at the Assembly was the total lack of acknowledgment of the sacrificial atonement of Jesus on the cross for our sins. Three crosses dominated the stage at Assembly but their significance was never mentioned.

The May 2006 issue of *Christianity Today* has a cover story by Mark Dever entitled “Nothing But the Blood” which describes a disturbing trend among some Christian believers to de-emphasize or reinterpret the atoning death of Christ as “merely a grotesque creation of the medieval imagination.” This “progressive” idea, that Christianity is “too atonement-centered” and that God sending his Son to die on a cross constitutes a double standard of His nature and is essentially divine child abuse, dismisses the very core of the Christian faith as revealed in God’s Holy Word. These theories, in my view, represent the worst form of spiritual pornography. By ignoring the substitutionary atonement of Jesus on the cross for our sins and by reducing the gospel message of Christ to social justice issues such as materialism, racism, feminism and nationalism—we take away the hope of redemption and salvation for a lost and hurting world that is forever ashamed, forever guilty and forever condemned before a Holy God.

We are left to conclude that the Women’s Division embraces these views when they embrace radical speakers like Delores Williams and showcase her views in programs, resource material and in *Response* magazine. Ms. Williams has famously been quoted as saying “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. ...I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff” when referring to the death of Jesus. The 2004 Program Book for United Methodist Women contained a program that asked the women of the church to re-evaluate whether the cross is the best symbol of the Christian faith and to consider one that was more palatable to women. A book offered for spiritual growth in the 2005 Reading Program by retired bishop Joseph Sprague denounced every foundational tenet of the Christian faith including the atonement of Jesus Christ.

What are we left to conclude? What has happened to this once great organization under the leadership of the Women’s Division? The Assembly should be a time for United Methodist Women to lay their burdens at the foot of the cross, worship their Lord and seek communion, hope and guidance with fellow sisters in Christ. Where is Jesus in the midst of all this political activism, feminist propaganda and aberrant theology? Where is Jesus in the midst of this financial quagmire? Where is Jesus in the midst of an organization losing its moral compass? And why are these women so furious? Why do many shut their eyes to reading a newsletter published by RENEW?

Without Jesus at the center of this organization, will this family meet the same fate as the one in Faulkner’s tale? Will the enormous opportunities to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world be lost forever and the fruitful heritage of United Methodist Women be eternally compromised under the present leadership of the Women’s Division? Are reform, accountability, and renewal possible in this family? Only our Holy God and Father knows the ending to this tragic tale.