

**2008/2009 UMW Mission Study Review of**

***I believe in Jesus***

**Authored by: Minerva G. Carcaño**

**“THEOLOGICAL WHIPLASH”**

**Reviewed by: L. Faye Short**

No doubt, author Bishop Minerva Carcaño *does* believe in Jesus. Many of the personal accounts she shares in this study show her humble, Christian roots—and a personal faith passed on to her through her grandmother and mother. Yet, even as she embraces and extols the truths of the Christian faith, she is open to and affirming of Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Womanist Theology and Mujerista theologies—all of which have departed radically from historic, scriptural Christian teachings. Bishop Carcaño references feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Reuther and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and black theologian James H. Cone recommending these radical theologians as those whose voices speak persuasively to the church and need to be heard. (See pgs. 45-52.)

Bishop Carcaño speaks of the need for Christians to overcome sin. She postulates, “...saving faith leads the believer to a life that is pleasing to God” (pg. 13). Yet, in several references, she makes it clear that she does not view homosexual practice as one of the sins to be overcome, or as a lifestyle that is not pleasing to God, despite clear scriptural teaching on human sexuality. At one point, Bishop Carcaño charged, “Movements within the church have also challenged the church’s exclusionary institutional policies that have maintained gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons on the edges of the church solely because of their sexual orientation” (pg. 74). (See also, pgs. 11, 39, 85.)

While concurring at some level that “Jesus is the name above all names; the salvation of the world” (pg. 66), Bishop Carcaño tells the reader there are competing understandings of Scripture and “What we are all called to do is to live in the dynamic tension of competing claims within the Gospels and within the entire Bible. In doing so we will be better equipped to live in a pluralistic world allowing room for the competing claims of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other faith expressions” (pgs. 65-66). (See also, pgs. 67, 68, 86.)

Reading *I believe in Jesus* gives a sense being pulled between truth and error. Bishop Carcaño provides an excellent overview of Church history as she writes of the heresies that led to the various councils and the consequent formation of creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed (pgs. 23-29). She offers an excellent wrap-up when she writes:

*In summary, the Christian church ultimately affirmed that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah proclaimed by the prophets of the Old Testament and that*

*Jesus is both human and divine; the incarnation of God, yet also a human being who has experienced our human weakness, sufferings, temptations, and even death. The encounter of the early Christians with the Risen Lord and their witness through the power of the Holy Spirit led the Christian church to proclaim that God had resurrected Jesus from the cruel cross of death to life. Jesus is Christ, Lord, and Savior of the world. Death is the ultimate consequence of human sin, and thus the Resurrection is understood as Jesus Christ's overcoming the penalty of sin in the world and the redeeming of creation to a right relationship with God and with all creatures.*

Following this excellent treatment of Church history and summation of basic Christian doctrine, Bishop Carcaño proceeds to share several “theories of atonement” that are in conflict with the historic understanding of atonement professed by the Christian Church as espoused in the Doctrinal Standards and Articles of Religion of The United Methodist Church (pgs. 29-33). A good measure for doctrine is shared in ¶101, pg. 42, *The Book of Discipline*: “Nonetheless, the basic measure of authenticity in doctrinal standards, whether formally established or received by tradition, has been their fidelity to the apostolic faith grounded in Scripture and evidenced in the life of the church through the centuries.”

While being broad in her scope of inclusion of radical theologians, atonement theories and a diversity of religions, it is unfortunate that Bishop Carcaño’s assessment of conservative, evangelical Christians who hold to moral and religious absolutes taught in Scripture is not so magnanimous. She views those Christians as “narrow-minded” (pgs. 52, 54-55), and fearful the Christian faith might be too inclusive (pg. 80). It leads her to conclude:

*I believe in Jesus and I believe that he is for me the “way, truth, and life.” I am called to share that faith with passion and conviction with those around me, but I should not make claims that diminish the integrity and dignity of those who sincerely practice a religion other than Christianity. I am fully aware of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 and the responsibility of every Christian to fulfill Jesus’ command, but I need to see others within the framework of love of neighbor and even enemy that Jesus gave to his disciples. (pg. 68)*

In her heart, Bishop Minerva Carcaño is probably closer to her evangelical brothers and sisters than she knows—yet, in her mind, she is torn by the conflicting ideologies she has studied, the demand for indiscriminate tolerance and the pressure of inclusiveness. As God so mirrored in Jesus Christ—to love is to reveal God’s standard—then, to provide the wherewithal for all (“whosoever will) to obtain it.

**Study Guide Review for**  
***I believe in Jesus***  
**Prepared by: Glory E. Dharmaraj**

**Reviewed by: L. Faye Short**

The study guide for *I believe in Jesus* is supportive of and integrated with the study itself.

Unfortunately, a huge “red flag” is thrown down by the initial “Methodology” outlined for the guide (pg. 113). Ms. Dharmaraj indicates she is using a model from Letty M. Russell’s book *The Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Those who are familiar with the writings of Letty Russell know that she is a radical feminist whose theology, as the feminists mentioned in the main text, go far outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. While the round table style recommended by Ms. Dharmaraj is not in and of itself evil—one has to ask why United Methodist Women need to be introduced to such a radical teacher as Russell in their mission study text. (An on-line search of Letty M. Russell’s writings will authenticate our concern.)

Glory Dharmaraj shows creativity in the visuals and symbolism she recommends for the study sessions. Some of the sessions are community-building and beneficial to applying some of the study concepts.

One section of the study centers on baptism, and postulates a perspective on baptism that is not held by many United Methodists. On page 120 the statement is made, “...we are a people branded by baptism against identity theft.” From this precept, participants go on to “explore” the application of this principle in a litany. Unfortunately, the litany takes us back to our baptism instead of to Jesus Christ. On page 128 the statement is made, “People of God, in baptism we receive both our identity and mission.” For evangelical United Methodists, baptism is a holy sacrament, instituted by Jesus and connected to our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is not in and of itself salvific, but is an integral part of our Christian witness and commitment. Jesus’ atoning death alone is the provision for our salvation. Our identity is in Christ—our mission is to share Christ.

The study guide reflects overtones of liberation theology and feminist theology, which coincides with the mission study. Like many United Methodist litanies, assumed guilt is heaped upon the participants whether deserved or not. Accepted, biblical theologies of atonement and mission are called into question as participants are encouraged to explore other options. For example, session four guides the participant toward a paradigm of mission that is grounded more in liberation theology than in the Great Commission.

Information on modernism and post-modernism is sketchy, yet, the dialogue between representatives of these two views shows the post-modern representative in a positive (albeit inaccurate) light, and the modern representative in a repressed (also

inaccurate), backward light. In his book *A Primer on Postmodernism* Stanley Grenz provides a responsible introduction to post-modernism, exploring what is good and bad about this era. He also seeks to discern how the Church can be in meaningful ministry to those who embrace the post-modernist perspective. Grenz concludes:

*This project involves using the tools of our faith to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the postmodern ethos. And postmodernism comes up short at many points. Therefore, we dare not simply 'move with the times' and embrace uncritically the latest intellectual trend. At the same time, critical engagement with postmodernism cannot end with a simplistic rejection of the entire ethos. Our critical reflections must lead us to determine the contours of the gospel that will speak to the hearts of postmodern people. We must engage postmodernism in order to discern how best to articulate the Christian faith to the next generation.*

*The gospel of Jesus Christ has gone forth in every era with power to convert human hearts. Today that gospel is the answer to the longings of the postmodern generation. Our task as Christ's disciples is to embody and articulate the never-changing good news of available salvation in a manner that the emerging generation can understand. Only then can we become the vehicles of the Holy Spirit in bringing them to experience the same life-changing encounter with the triune God from whom our entire lives derive their meaning.*

Grenz provides the kind of balanced information about post-modernism we as Christians need. How good it would have been had Bishop Carcaño and Ms. Dharmaraj done the same.

We as Christians have “a story to tell to the nations”—a story of truth that will turn their hearts to the right...just as it did ours when we believed in Jesus.

**2008/2009 UMW Mission Study Review of**  
***I'm Living the Faith***  
**Youth Spiritual Growth Study:**  
**with Leader's Guide**  
**Authored by: Jay Godfrey & Alison Lutz**

**Reviewed by: L. Faye Short**

**Chapter 1: I Believe in Jesus**

*I'm Living the Faith* begins appropriately with the co-authors sharing their personal “story” regarding how they came to believe in Jesus. Like Bishop Minerva Carcaño, their early experiences were typical of young people raised in a traditional United Methodist Church environment. Their early belief was predicated on the faithful Christian lives of those around them, and upon their simple child-like acceptance of the teachings of scripture. And, like Bishop Carcaño, their early faith was challenged and shaped by the experiences they had in their youth and young adult years. In all three cases, these “progressive” experiences seemed to produce as much doubt as faith, and to push back against absolutes, or defining biblical truths, finding them restrictive, rather than freeing. The accounts almost seemed to assume that broad life-experiences in and of themselves produced a new truth, incompatible in ways with what had gone before.

In the study, little barbs are cast at those who would be so naïve as to believe in absolute truth, despite Jesus’ claim that He is *the way, the truth and the life*—and that no one comes to the Father, *except* through Him. Jesus’ claim, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free,” takes on new overtones as experience redefines “truth.”

This chapter was summarized well in the quote used from Buechner, “Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and time.”

**Chapter 2: Deepening the Relationship**

This very Methodist chapter looks at *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, and at the historical account of John Wesley’s life and Christian experience that led to the formation of the Methodist movement. While a bit sketchy (as it had to be in such limited space), and sometimes shallow in its assessment of Wesleyan theology, it is, nevertheless, a helpful chapter.

**Chapter 3: Whose Faith Counts**

In this chapter, the theological whiplash recurs as the reader moves from the theology of John Wesley to that of Chung Hyun Kyung who was introduced at the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference by the leader—“Her bowel is Shammien, her heart is Buddhist, her right brain is Confucian, and her left brain is Christian.” At this infamous gathering, Kyung herself introduced her personal “trinity”—“The three goddesses I want to share

with you are Cali, Quani, and Inna. These are my new Trinity...I got to know about their presence through my participation in Asian women's movement." Chapter 3 references Kyung's book, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, and it would be helpful to read her book in order to better understand her thinking. However, as in her Re-Imagining presentations, Chung Hyun Kyung takes radical leaps in theological understanding that intentionally leave behind the Apostolic teachings of the Christian Church and the Jewish tradition upon which Christian faith in Jesus Christ is founded. At one point in her book, Kyung speaks of new emerging images of Jesus:

*The freer Asian women become from the patriarchal authorities of their family, church, and society, the more creative they become in naming their experience of Jesus Christ. Sometimes the images of Jesus are transformed to the degree that they show the radical discontinuity between the ones found in the Jewish and Christian culture and those from the Asian women's movement. Some Asian women have become confident enough in themselves to name the presence of Jesus Christ in their own culture, indigenous religions, and secular political movements, a Christological identity that is not directly connected in the traditional sense with Christianity. (pg. 62)*

Indeed, Chung Hyun Kyung's story shows her to be beyond traditional Christianity into a strange mix of theological constructs that are a conglomerate of many religions. Is this the example we want United Methodist youth to emulate?

Another personal story is that of Bishop Desmond Tutu and his *Ubuntu* Theology. This is a theology of interdependence that certainly has merit. However, there is a ring of universalism in it, and a diminishing of the personal and powerful work of the redemption of Jesus Christ in individual hearts and lives as sins are forgiven and persons are set free to live in real community with one another. Community and selflessness does not save us—Jesus does—resulting in community and selflessness.

The final story is that of Steven Charleston, an Episcopal bishop and member of the Choctaw Nation. Bishop Charleston has found ways to combine his Native American spirituality with his Christian experience. The authors of our study tell us, "Bishop Charleston seeks to live his life in a way that promotes justice for all of God's people." He is quoted as saying:

*We welcome difference as the active presence of God's Holy Spirit moving amongst us. Our witness is not to conformity but to community. We are not concerned that everyone in the pews believes exactly the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. Instead, we are concerned that no one is left out of those pews because of what they believe, who they are, or where they come from.*

Is it not our *oneness* in Jesus Christ that binds us together, regardless of our background or nationality? “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

#### **Chapter 4: A Revolutionary Relationship**

This final lesson pulls heavily upon the writings of Brian McLaren. Drawing from what is included in this chapter about McLaren’s writings—and googling him further—it seems he, like the other individuals whose stories we have heard throughout this study, has found a new paradigm for his faith. It is not having to believe anything in particular (one would assume this means the teachings of Scripture, the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, or the defining moral and ethical values deduced from these two). The text concludes, “Faith is not a formula. It is not ‘believe this or that so you can go to heaven when you die.’ Faith is an interactive relationship with God through Jesus Christ.”

Most Christians would not disagree that “faith is an interactive relationship with God,” yet neither would they discount the understanding that God has defined how we come into that relationship with Him, how it is maintained, and how it affects all that we are and do in this world and in the world to come.

The authors of this text seem to have lost their understanding of Christians who hold an Apostolic, Biblical worldview. They are satisfied to discount them and make light of the very tenets of the Christian faith and the acts of Christian love and grace on the part of followers of Jesus Christ that initially brought them to faith. Perhaps they have not fully examined with open hearts the loving community and far-reaching ministries of those who are categorized as bible-believing, evangelical Christians. If they would do so, they might discover “...the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude, vs. 3)—a faith that includes gospel proclamation, transformed lives, and a love for God and others that motivates all of our interactive relationships.