

## **WOMEN'S DIVISION NATIONAL SEMINAR TARGETS AMERICAN STRUCTURES**

**By Dennis W. & L. Faye Short**

Against a large newsprint backdrop, curiously resembling a military battlefield map, the Women's Division staff and directors rolled out their strategic plan of action for the next four years with help from guests and assembled participants at its National Seminar in Nashville, TN, August 11-16. The Seminar theme was "For Christ's Sake... Turn the World Upside Down." A major concern was that the targets of action all ended up being in the United States.

The newsprint backdrop was filled with institutions and topics such as: The White House; Department of Defense; Veteran's Administration; Department of Education; insurance; malpractice lawyers (though no mention of John Edwards); military recruiting costs; re-enlistment bonuses; local churches; and others. All targeted for serious restructuring.

Approximately 200 women, selected for their diversity and commitment to social justice, attended the National Seminar. Ethnic minorities and young women were well represented. Much of the work was done in small reflection and process groups with assigned process and resource leadership to assist. Press was excluded from these small-group sessions. The budget for the event was \$250,000.

### **Bible Study**

The Bible study leader was the Rev. Janet Wolf, an ordained United Methodist elder in the Tennessee Conference and now professor at American Baptist College in Nashville. Rev. Wolf made constant references to "powers and principalities" yet instantly substituted the structures and institutions of American political, military and economic life for the evil *spiritual forces* referred to in the Bible.

Throughout the week, Rev. Wolf dropped a few theological bombshells. Particularly problematic was the fact that "evil" was presented as *systemic* rather than *personal*, and the path to progress was identified as confronting the changing current systems rather than working to improve them. Rev. Wolf made the highly questionable claim in one of her presentations that "When sin is referenced in scripture, sin is collective and structural and not about individual moral failure." She also quoted Dr. Walter Wink in saying, "There are no unclean people in God's world" and "all healings are radical re-orderings of power." Such a view overlooks the fact that Christ's call to repentance and discipleship was nearly always personal and individual. To deny the reality of personal moral failure in the church's definition of sin is to seriously misread the biblical witness.

John Wesley figured prominently in Rev. Wolf's presentations. Her take on Wesley's theology was a bit like her interpretation on the scriptural view of sin—off target. Wolf stated, "John Wesley felt it was more important for the salvation of your soul to hang out with the poor than to attend communion." She quoted Wesley as saying, "When I hang

out in the streets I hear a whole new ‘gospel’.” In actuality, Wesley was first and foremost an evangelist. When in the streets he preached “the Gospel of Christ” rather than searching for a “whole new gospel.” In *Catholic Spirit* Wesley wrote, “A man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgement concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine.”

In another bible study, Rev. Wolf referenced Wesley’s quote on the future of Methodism and linked its possible demise to the increase of wealth. Wesley said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.... And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both to doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out.”

No doubt prosperity can be one factor that quells spiritual fervor, but it is apparent in this quote that Wesley was concerned about the loss of spiritual vitality for any reason. Ms. Wolf claimed that Wesley had a preferential option for the poor. Of necessity, being shut out of preaching in the pulpits of the Church of England, Wesley found his calling in the fields and cities preaching to common women and men. Yet, he preached also to the well-educated and well-heeled. Wesley’s understanding was that the Gospel was available to all—“whosoever will,” and that God is no respecter of persons. In his exposition on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley makes his interpretation of “...blessed are the poor in spirit...” clear when he writes, “Who then are ‘the poor in spirit’? Without question, poverty of spirit belongs to the humble—those who truly understand themselves and are convinced of their sinfulness. The poor in spirit are those to whom God has given that initial repentance that precedes faith in Christ.”

### **Guided Group Interaction and Grassroots Movements**

Guided group interaction was a major feature of the National Seminar. This included: pre-written skits (very dramatic, with various themes of oppression and victimization), group reflection on scripture passages used in the bible studies; group processing of Issue Group visits and Public Witness events. The “voices” of the oppressed were heard in meetings at Scarritt-Bennett and at other off site pre-planned events. Through the Bible study, interactive groups and field trips, most of the major American institutions were charted as potential targets of action.

The National Seminar would have done Joan of Arc proud in that it focused on “hearing the voices” of the poor, marginalized and victimized in a variety of settings. While previous National Seminars featured big-name, outside speakers predominately from left-leaning perspectives, at this event the Women’s Division relied on a broad network of local social justice action groups. There were learning experiences and field trips to locations for: Economic Justice; Community Food Supply; Public Education; Health Care; Militarism, Peace and National Security; Immigrant and Refugee Rights; and Environmental Justice.

Grassroots movements also helped orchestrate the “Public Witness” events which included involvement in vigils or “demonstration” type activities. These included: the Vigil to Stop the Violence of Poverty In Memory of Tara Cole Murdered 8/12/06; Action to Stop Raids by U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement; Action to Support the Struggle of Vanderbilt University Low Wage Workers. Some of the specific groups assisting with these Seminar programs will be identified in a separate report.

Most of these “actions” promoted adversarial approaches and a radical emphasis upon individual and group rights with no balancing insistence upon the responsibilities of those who receive or learn about their “rights.” Many Americans would feel that these “actions” are unworkable, not pragmatic, out-of-sync with other effective, broad-based approaches, and thus, potentially destructive of community.

### **Networking**

Back at Scarritt-Bennett on Wednesday morning, Makani Themba-Nixon, Media Resource Person, addressed the group briefly, telling about the Katrina Information Network (KIN), of which she is one of the staff members. Makani is also Executive Director of The Praxis Project. She reference a paper she wrote titled “The Bridge Just Beyond” which she said could be obtained at the KIN web site, [www.KatrinaAction.org](http://www.KatrinaAction.org). Follow-up research produced concern about the underlying purpose of some of the social justice groups with whom the National Seminar is encouraging cooperation.

The Praxis Project was one of the sponsoring conveners of the U.S. Social Forum that met in Atlanta, Georgia the last of June 2007. On the U.S. Social Forum web site, [www.USSF.org](http://www.USSF.org), this statement appears on the headline banner and further in the body of the site: “If another world is possible, another U.S. is necessary.” Under the description of the forum purpose is the following: “The USSF sends a message to other people’s movements around the world that there is an active movement in the U.S. opposing U.S. policies at home and abroad.”

The World Social Forum, the international parallel to the U.S. Social Forum, met in Nairobi, Kenya in January of 2007. The Women’s Division sent a delegation of eleven (six from the U.S., five from Africa). The delegation included two Women’s Division staff persons, two General Board of Global Ministries staff persons (regional missionaries in Africa), two Women’s Division Directors, one member of the Teen and College Women Consultative group, one United Methodist law student from Congo, two African UMW Presidents and one person from the Highlander Center (A Women’s Division partner organization). The trip was financed with \$15,000 in Mission Giving funds.

Research has revealed that the World Social Forum holds a strong anti-capitalism, anti-free market position, and has showcased radical socialist/Marxist speakers, including Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan at the 2006 gathering. More information about the World Social Forum can be found in the report of the fall board of directors meeting of the Women’s Division, “Dry Bones or Live

Bones?”, posted on the RENEW Network web site, [www.renewnetwork.org](http://www.renewnetwork.org) and at the World Social Forum web site,

If the Praxis Project, KIN and the U.S. and World Social Forum are indicative of the organizing groups that pull other grassroots social action groups together for a common cause—and that common cause is “another U.S.,” then, caution is essential.

### **Dismantling America’s Foundational Structures**

The Wednesday morning session was titled “Daring to Dismantle Structures.” The assumption of failure within most American structures was evident in one group session when participants were asked to name the institutions that were barriers to progress and needed to be “turned upside down.” The “called out” responses included: capitalism; the church; Congress; The White House; education; the military; the media; health care; Department of Defense; corporate world; banking; family; law enforcement; and belief systems as they relate to patriotism and the role of government. One was left wondering what kind of nation this would be were all of these institutions to be “turned upside down.” The question also surfaced in one’s mind—“Why are so many trying to get into a nation so apparently in need of revolution?”

Participants were asked to answer the question, “Where do you see God at work challenging and changing structures?” Initially participants began naming such things as the family, ourselves, the volunteer veterans and the like. The facilitators were looking for other answers and reminded the group that some of the things they were describing done by these particular groups were “acts of compassion” as over against organizations that make a lasting difference. These were things that “bind up the wounds” they said, but not that stop the problem from happening.

Still the group persisted in naming a veteran’s organization, a commission established by the Governor’s office, and the Gold Star Families for Peace who contact their congressional representatives for older vets to assure they continue to receive adequate healthcare. Again the leaders pressed for an expansion of the group’s thinking. Finally the kind of groups they were looking for surfaced: the ACLU (advocating for the “rights” of people through the courts, including for detainees at Guantanamo Bay); the Southern Poverty Law Center (when people need attorney’s to fight injustice); the NAACP; and the UMW. Even still others mentioned Samaritan’s Purse, food closets and doctors and dentists who volunteer their time to treat the poor. Again the facilitators stressed that, while these things were good, it was important to identify groups that worked for a more radical and structure-changing social justice.

The next question was, “What power do we have?” In this area the participants were encouraged to see how UMW is in relation to other groups—groups with whom they have an aggregate relationship. They were encouraged to join other groups nationwide in order to have more power for outreach and effectiveness. The group was also challenged to find their “voice” and make it heard in the areas of organizing power, boycotts, voting,

petitions and legislative events. The leader indicated that educating and organizing are very important ways to reshape national understanding and debate.

### **A Sad Conclusion**

“Power is the ability to force others to inhabit your vision of reality,” Rev. Wolf told National Seminar participants on Monday. Throughout the week, this appeared to be the goal of the planners and conveners of the Women’s Division 2007 National Seminar. The “vision of reality” that was presented portrayed a strong anti-American bias that determined, almost without exception, that current American governmental systems and foundational democratic structures needed dismantling and replacement—but with what?

If the groups with whom the Women’s Division networks (see Financial File IV for a comprehensive listing) are any indication, then a globalist, feminist, socialist, liberationist and radically inclusivist vision comes into view. An early indicator was the fact that the “learning process” for the National Seminar was adapted from radical feminist Lettie M. Russell’s “Methodology in Liberation/Feminist Theologies: A Theological Spiral of Action/Reflection, and from “Educating for Change” by Arnold, Burke, James, Martin and Thomas.

The emphasis of identifying and dismantling the many bankrupt structures of American society and reordering them through radical, social justice action was a repeated theme throughout the National Seminar. Exactly how the reordered structures would function and what they would achieve, however, was not clearly identified. Sadly it all seemed like an agenda for radical social revolution rather than for spiritual transformation with a resulting social reform—the true Wesleyan model.