

This Schism Is Brought to You by the IRD

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June 2006 may be a turning point in the history of the Christian church in America and in one branch of Christianity worldwide.

Episcopalians meet in their triennial General Convention at Columbus, Ohio. Presbyterians hold their 217th General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama. Though held at virtually the same time and miles apart, they are both fighting a common enemy that most church members likely are not aware of.

Regular readers of *The Witness* may know well the wedge tactics employed by the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD). However, I suspect most pew dwellers haven't a clue what it does.

I wrote about the IRD in a 2004 article titled "Power, Money, Control ... It's the Church" for *Search*, a journal for the Church of Ireland. I drew on resources from General Convention 2003, The New York Times, and the work of colleagues digging into the IRD.

Many believe a schism in the Episcopal Church USA and the worldwide Anglican Communion is inevitable after this summer. If it does occur it will not be about homosexuality or Gene Robinson or the blessing of same-sex unions. It will have been planned, plotted and engineered by the IRD and its very rich, ultraconservative henchmen (some women, but mostly men) who have targeted the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Episcopal Church for nearly 25 years. Sexuality was just a hot-button issue the IRD could exploit along with "radical feminist theology" and what the IRD judges to be an abandonment of "biblical Anglican theology."

There's no better description of how the IRD works than *Hard Ball on Holy Ground, The Religious Right v. the Mainline for the Church's Soul* (Boston Wesleyan Press, 2005). This book, edited by Stephen Swecker, is a compilation of articles by several authors who expose the IRD for what it is.

"In the end, the IRD is not a program grounded in faith but, rather, in fear – both fear of change in general and fear of loss by those who benefit most from the status quo, *i.e.*, the wealthy and the powerful," writes Swecker in his closing article.

In other words the IRD has little to do with religion, except for control and contempt of it, and everything to do with democracy and demagoguery.

Do you think a church schism can't happen in your church? Jimmy Carter, the former president, laments in his book *Our Endangered Values* (Simon and Schuster, 2005) how it happened in his church.

“A major and perhaps permanent schism occurred at the annual Southern Baptist Convention in 2000, when a new ‘Baptist Faith and Message’ statement was adopted,” he writes. “In effect, this change meant substitution of Southern Baptist leaders for Jesus as the interpreters of biblical Scripture.”

President Carter also says it's about power. As for the IRD, it “is funded chiefly by people whose interests are primarily political and economic,” writes John B. Cobb, Jr. in the foreword to *Hard Ball on Holy Ground*.

Schisms are likely in the Episcopal Church, maybe in the Presbyterian Church, and, if the IRD has its way, in the United Methodist Church. The IRD is open about its agenda. Visit ird-renew.org; there for the world to see, without apology, is a clear strategy to foment disorder in the three mainline churches. On its home page are dropdown menus listing the action plan against the three mainline churches. The tactics are the same and they are brilliant. They consist of two initiatives.

The first IRD initiative is to court disaffected church members. It financially supports these small groups to wage conflict internally in their denominations. Episcopalians know of the American Anglican Council (AAC). It was created by the IRD, with whom the AAC shared offices for a number of years. Swecker's book also documents how the IRD shared board members and financial backing with ultraconservative dissident church groups, including the AAC, in the three targeted denominations. Another article digs further to illustrate how IRD board members have influenced, had access to, or ties with government agencies and the current presidential administration.

“It [IRD] brings to the task financial resources that are very large in comparison with the sums usually available to dissident factions in church disputes,” writes Cobb.

The second IRD strategy is to carefully place board members in secular and church media in an effort to whip up controversy in the so-called, “culture wars.” The influence these ideologues have on mainstream media and religious publications is really quite stunning.

In 2004 members of the IRD board of directors were also editors, frequent contributors or on the boards of such media outlets as *The New Republic* and *The Weekly Standard* (Fred Barnes, also now on Fox News); *National Review Online* (Richard Neuhaus, a guest on NBC's “Meet the Press” Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006); and *The New York Sun* and *Asian Wall Street Journal* (Mary Ellen Bork).

Why is this small but powerful group so determined to go after these churches in the first place? It is to silence the prophetic witness of faithful Christians across the country.

“The IRD’s stated goals, which consistently are at odds with the historical witness of the mainline churches, include increasing military spending, opposing environmental protection and eliminating social programs,” write Andrew Weaver and Nicole Seibert in their *Hard Ball* article “Follow the Money: Documenting the Right’s Well-heeled Assault on the UMC.” Other contributors document the sources of millions of dollars that have funded this effort to disrupt, distract or derail America’s traditional voice for the social gospel.

“In the whole history of the American church, there’s perhaps never been anything quite like the Institute on Religion and Democracy,” Swecker writes.

Church goers “and others will be dismayed to learn that the churches they love are targets of a campaign of destabilization,” the Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches says of the book. “We ignore this reality at our peril.”

So take three books to General Convention this June. *Hard Ball on Holy Ground* will tell you who you are up against and how we got to this point, and it belongs in your bags for convention.

Take your bible with all its passages on the poor and destitute (there are thousands). Read the story of Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman (Mt. 15:21ff) or the first council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to see what the bible teaches about inclusivity.

Take along your *Book of Common Prayer*. Pray for our church in the prayers in the back of the book. Pray for the church in a convention or meeting. Pray for the courage to renew our Baptismal Covenant, to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

And I invite you to pray, as Episcopalians do each November 3, the Collect for the feast of Richard Hooker. He is generally regarded as the author of Anglicanism’s vision of the “via media” – the middle way.

O God of truth and peace, you raised up your servant Richard Hooker in a day of bitter controversy to defend with sound reasoning and great charity the catholic and reformed religion: Grant that we may maintain that middle way, not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.