

United Methodist General Conference Resolution on Eugenics-adopted April 30, 2008

Vote on Main Motion ADOPTED 836-28

Repentance for Support of Eugenics (81175-C2-R9999)

Eugenics, the belief that certain “genetic” traits are good and others bad, is associated in the public mind mostly with the extreme eugenics policies of Adolf Hitler, which ultimately led to the Holocaust. The study of eugenics did not begin with Hitler or his German scientists, but rather was first promoted by Sir Francis Galton, in England. Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, who expanded on Darwin’s theories and applied them to the human population. In an article entitled "Hereditary Character and Talent" (published in two parts in MacMillan's Magazine, vol. 11, November 1864 and April 1865, pp. 157-166, 318-327), Galton expressed his frustration that no one was breeding a better human:

“If a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvement of the breed of horses and cattle, what a galaxy of genius might we not create! We might introduce prophets and high priests of civilization into the world, as surely as we can propagate idiots by mating cretins. Men and women of the present day are, to those we might hope to bring into existence, what the pariah dogs of the streets of an Eastern town are to our own highly-bred varieties.”

Galton in the same article described Africans and Native Americans in derogatory terms making it clear which racial group he thought was superior. Francis Galton, the founder of the Eugenics Society, spoke hopefully about persuading people with desirable genes to marry and have large families. Galton's successor at the helm of the Eugenics Society was Major Leonard Darwin (1850-1943), a son of Charles Darwin. Leonard Darwin, who ran the Eugenics Society until 1928, made the transition from positive to negative eugenics, and promoted plans for lowering the birthrate of the unfit.

Built into the idea of natural selection is a competition between the strong and the weak, between the fit and the unfit. The eugenicists believed that this mechanism was thwarted in the human race by charity, by people and churches who fed the poor and the weak so that they survived, thrived, and reproduced.

Ironically, as the Eugenics movement came to the United States, the churches, especially the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians, embraced it.

Methodist churches around the country promoted the American Eugenics Society “Fitter Family Contests” wherein the fittest families were invariably fair skinned and well off. Methodist bishops endorsed one of the first books circulated to the US churches promoting eugenics.

¹Unlike the battles over evolution and creationism, both conservative and progressive church leaders endorsed eugenics. The liberal Rev. Harry F. Ward, professor of Christian ethics and a founder of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, writing in *Eugenics*, the magazine of the American Eugenic Society, said that Christianity and Eugenics were compatible because both pursued the “challenge of removing the causes that produce the weak.”² Conservative Rev. Clarence True Wilson, the General Secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Board of Temperance,

Prohibition and Public Morals, and the man chosen to debate Clarence Darrow after William Jennings Bryan's death, believed that only the white Aryan race was the descendent of the lost tribes of Israel.³ Methodists were active on the planning committees of the Race Betterment Conferences held in 1914, and 1915. ⁴In the 1910s, Methodist Churches hosted forums in their churches to discuss eugenics. In the 1920s, many Methodist preachers submitted their eugenics sermons to contests hosted by the American Eugenics Society. By 1927, when the American Eugenics Society formed its Committee on the Cooperation with Clergymen, Bishop Francis McConnell, President of the Methodist Federation for Social Service served on the committee. In 1936, he would chair the roundtable discussion on Religion and Eugenics at the American Eugenics Society Meeting. The laity of the church also took up the cause of eugenics. In 1929, the Methodist Review published the sermon "Eugenics: A Lay Sermon" by George Huntington Donaldson. In the sermon, Donaldson argues, "*the strongest and the best are selected for the task of propagating the likeness of God and carrying on his work of improving the race.*"⁵ Both the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South promoted eugenics. Most of the time, church advocates of eugenics supported positive eugenics—essentially careful selection of mates. Nevertheless, sterilization became an acceptable kind of eugenics along with marriage laws limiting marriage between whites and non-whites. Some annual conferences supported such laws and a few opposed them. Indiana passed the first forced sterilization law in 1907; eventually 33 states passed similar laws. Most used Harry Laughlin's model law that provided for the sterilization of "*feeble minded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, and dependent*" including "*orphans, ne'er do wells, tramps, homeless, and paupers.*" Virginia passed in 1924 a sterilization law based on the Laughlin model and on the same day passed a law making marriage between a white person and a non-white person a felony. Thirty-three US States eventually passed laws authorizing sterilization of criminals, the mentally ill, the "*feeble minded*", Sterilization of the allegedly mentally ill continued into the 1970s in several states, by which time about 60,000 Americans had been involuntarily sterilized. In 1933, Hitler's Nazi government used Laughlin's Model Law as the basis for their sterilization law that led to the sterilization of some 350,000 people. ⁶ State sponsored Eugenics reached an abhorrent extreme in the Nazi extermination programs of the 1930s and 1940s. Initially directed at people with similar health or social problems as were targeted by the U.S. sterilization laws, these were eventually expanded to cover entire populations—Jews, Gypsies, Poles—judged by the Nazi regime to represent "*worthless lives*" (*lebensunwerte Leben*). While certain overt State policies such as the use of gas chambers have not been used recently, "*ethnic cleansing*" has emerged several countries— including Bosnia, Ruanda, Cambodia, and Sudan and shows that eugenic horrors have not disappeared. While Germany has a now has a strong sensitivity to the issues of eugenics, in the US apology for past eugenic excesses has been slow in coming. California did not repeal its law until 1979 and, in 1985; around 20 states still had laws on their books that permitted the involuntary sterilization of "*mentally retarded*" persons. Family planning programs around the world have included forced sterilization as a tool even recently. In 2002, Peru's Minister of Health issued an apology for the forced sterilization of indigenous women during the recent presidency of Alberto Fujimori. The state governments of Virginia, California, Oregon, and North Carolina have apologized for their support of eugenics including sterilization. United Methodist General Conferences have called for an end to forced sterilization, but have not yet apologized on behalf of Methodist predecessors who advocated for eugenic policies.

The New Eugenics

The new eugenics is not so much the negative eugenics of state coercion or the oldest positive eugenics of better baby contests, but rather the eugenics made possible by the emerging biotechnology sciences, such as Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis. ⁷Parents, not the state are the new eugenicists. They, as never before, are confronted with choices about which children they should have based on an incomplete science pointing to the genetic links of many conditions.

Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) is only one of many emerging genetic and reproductive technologies in need of broad public discussion and regulation, but we view PGD as a gateway technology. PGD, if permitted to continue unregulated, could pave the way to new eugenics, where children are literally selected and eventually designed according to a parent's desires and fears.

Recent rapid developments in PGD indicate that we are stumbling down a slippery slope toward this future rendering a policy response an urgent matter. Finally, unfettered developments of PGD applications in the US attest to the general failure of the US policy regarding genetic and reproductive technologies. This policy failure must be corrected if we are to prevent a new eugenics in the US and abroad.

Germany, Austria, Ireland, Switzerland, and Southwest Australia have banned PGD outright. Other nations, including the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Greece have limited the use of PGD. Even in the US, until recently, PGD was used exclusively for medical purposes.

Today, two thirds of the fertility clinics in the world offering PGD are in the US. Some clinics are blatantly performing PGD for selection. Many other clinics have used PGD to avoid late-onset diseases like Alzheimer's and recently breast cancer. A growing number of couples are using PGD to select an embryo that would grow into a child intended to be a tissue match for its sibling. None of these applications was subject to formal regulatory review or public deliberation prior to their use. In the case of sex selection, the practice specifically violates the voluntary guidelines of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine.

The US lack of regulation has resulted in advocates of expanded PGD in other countries to push for more permissiveness abroad. Some of the advocates, including Robert Edwards, who in 1977 performed the first successful IVF procedure in humans, explicitly promote the new eugenic approach. Edwards has predicted that *"Soon it will be a sin for parents to have a child which carries the heavy burden of genetic disease. We are entering a world where we have to consider the quality of our children."*⁸

Today, thirty years after the birth of Louise Brown from Edward's IVF technique, more than one million children have been born from the process of IVF. The parallel development of genetic testing has resulted into the merger of genetic testing and assisted reproduction into preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). Parents can now choose which of their embryos to implant in the mother's womb based on the outcome of more than 1000 genetic tests that potentially could be performed on the embryos. These tests at present only indicate probabilities for most conditions. We lack an adequate understanding of how the 98% of the human genome that is not made up of genes affects the genes that we can measure. The church needs to help its members sort through the implications of this new information that will never be complete. The overt racism of the eugenic campaigns of the last century is no longer acceptable in today's civic square or pulpits, but the impetus toward eugenics remains. Controlling the reproduction of the social body and individual bodies, controlling the quality and quantity of the next generation in order to form a more perfect union -- these impulses remain part of culture. The church needs to remind its members that as Christians we are called to stand apart from culture and rejoice that our identity comes from being 'adopted' by Christ and where we are all welcomed as children of God regardless of our genetic make-up. Matthew in the opening of his gospel (Matthew 1:1-16) reminds us that in Jesus' earthly family were not just Jews, but also four Gentile women. As Christians, we are not called because of our genetic identity; we are not called to re-engineer our bodies or those of our children, or destroy those different from us, but rather to follow Christ.

Repentance for Support of Eugenics

The United Methodist General Conference formally apologizes for Methodist leaders and Methodist bodies who in the past supported eugenics as sound science and sound theology. We lament the ways eugenics was used to justify the sterilization of persons deemed less worthy. We lament that Methodist support of eugenics policies was used to keep persons of different races from marrying and forming legally recognized families. We are especially grieved that the politics of eugenics led to the extermination of millions of people by the Nazi government and continues today as "ethnic cleansing" around the world.

~~We direct~~

~~The General Board of Church and Society to continue to monitor ways that the belief that some persons are genetically more worthy affects decisions about their medical treatment and care. We further direct the Board to monitor the development of new genetic technologies that can determine which genes a person has even at the earliest stage of life and to develop materials that are sensitive to the different cultural understandings of disability across the life of the church. These materials should recognize that the science of genetics is not deterministic, but represents current knowledge about the probability of disease. We urge the Board to work~~

Comment [jh1]: Note that the United Methodist General Conference Legislative Committee on Church and Society deleted this section primarily as an "unfunded" mandate to the agencies listed below.

~~closely with disabilities rights groups as it monitors new developments and to speak out against eugenic policies that discriminate against persons with disabilities.~~

~~The General Commission on Religion and Race to monitor the ways that new developments in genetic technologies are used to reinforce racial stereotypes and to monitor especially where these stereotypes appear in church sponsored events and publications. To monitor the Church's response to eugenic arguments in discussions about immigration policy.~~

~~The General Commission on the Role and Status of Women to monitor the ways that genetics is used to reinforce stereotypes about the roles of men and women in society and in the church.~~

~~The General Commission on Archives and History carefully to preserve the history of predecessor denominations support for eugenics policies including sterilization laws, anti-immigrant laws, and marriage laws.~~

¹ George Henry Naply, THE TRANSMISSION OF LIFE, Philadelphia: J. Fergus, 1871 endorsed by Bishop Levi Scott and Bishop T. A. Morris, both of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

² Harry F. Ward, "Is Christian Morality Harmful, Over Charitable to the Unfit?", EUGENICS I (December 1928):20

³ Robert Dean McNeil, VALIANT FOR TRUTH, Oregonians Concerned About Addiction Problems, Portland, (1992), pp.19,141 Prohibition was Wilson's main concern as the head of the Methodist Episcopal Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals, but eugenics, anti-immigrant programs, anti-Catholic sentiments were a key part of his message. He believed that Indians and Negroes were especially prone to alcoholism. (See his THE POCKET CYCLOPEDIA OF TEMPERANCE, p.252.)

⁴ Methodist Episcopal Bishop John Hamilton of the San Francisco Area served on the planning committee for the 1915 Conference. See PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RACE BETTERMENT, August 4-8, 1915,

American Eugenics Society, program for "Round Table Conferences and Annual Meeting," New York, 1936

⁵ George Huntington Donaldson, "Eugenics: A Lay Sermon" METHODIST REVIEW, 112 (1929), p. 60

⁶ See C.L. Dorris, "The Impending Disaster," METHODIST REVIEW, 75 (1926):720-724
www.eugenicsarchive.org <<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org>>, Essay 8-Sterilization Laws.

On March 20, 1924, the Virginia Legislature passed two closely related eugenics laws: SB 219, entitled "The Racial Integrity Act[1]" and SB 281, "An ACT to provide for the sexual sterilization of inmates of State institutions in certain cases", henceforth referred to as "The Sterilization Act". The Racial Integrity Act required that a racial description of every person be recorded at birth, and felonized marriage between "white persons" and non-white persons. The law was the most famous ban on miscegenation in the US, and was overturned by the US Supreme Court in 1967, in Loving v. Virginia. Virginia repealed the sterilization in 1979. In 2001, the House of Delegates voted to express regret for the state's selecting breeding policies that had forced sterilizations on some 8,000 people. The Senate soon followed suit.

⁷ Aron Zitner, "A girl or a boy, you pick," LOS ANGELES TIMES, July 23, 2002, A1
American Society of Reproductive Medicine, 1999, "Sex selection and preimplantation genetic diagnosis," FERTILITY AND STERILITY 72(4):595-598

⁸ Edwards speaking at European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology as reported in METRO (UK),
July 5, 1999

