

# faith & freedom

*Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness*

Summer 2021



## Methodist Panel Laments 'Horrific Assault on Gaza' by 'Apartheid' Israel

Page 10

### ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ After Max Lucado Apology, Is Justin Welby Welcome at National Cathedral?  
page 8
- ▶ Does the Religious Right Cause Church Decline? page 12
- ▶ LGBT-Affirming Former Assemblies of God Church Exits Campus Months Later  
page 14
- ▶ IRD Diary: Slick Heresy and Misunderstanding What Love Is page 16



The Rev. Max Lucado preached in a prerecorded video submitted for a service in the National Cathedral that resulted in both cathedral and diocesan officials begging forgiveness. See story on page 8

## FEATURES

### 12 DOES THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT CAUSE CHURCH DECLINE?

by Mark Tooley

### 14 LGBT-AFFIRMING FORMER ASSEMBLIES OF GOD CHURCH EXITS CAMPUS MONTHS LATER

by Jeffrey Walton

### 16 IRD DIARY: SLICK HERESY AND MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT LOVE IS

by Carolyn Moore



## PROGRAMS

4 ..... Church News

6 ..... International Briefs

### Episcopal

8 After Max Lucado Apology, Is Justin Welby Welcome at National Cathedral? ..... Jeffrey Walton

### Methodist

10 Methodist Panel Laments 'Horrific Assault on Gaza' by 'Apartheid' Israel. .... Kennedy Lee

# faith & freedom

VOLUME 40 NUMBER 1



THE INSTITUTE ON  
RELIGION & DEMOCRACY  
1023 15th Street NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: 202.682.4131  
Web: [www.TheIRD.org](http://www.TheIRD.org)  
E-mail: [info@TheIRD.org](mailto:info@TheIRD.org)

PRESIDENT  
Mark D. Tooley

EDITORIAL  
Jeffrey Walton  
Executive Editor,  
Communications Manager

### STAFF

John Lomperis  
UMAction Director

Rick J. Plasterer  
Staff Writer

Marc LiVecche  
Scholar on Christian Ethics,  
War and Peace

Kennedy Lee  
Research Assistant

James Diddams  
Research Assistant

Corey Gunter  
Arielle Leviste  
Paulina Song  
IRD Interns

**Cover:** Israel's "Iron Dome" missile defense system intercepts and destroys Hamas rockets launched against Israel on May 11, 2021. (Photo: Nir Elias/REUTERS)

# America Needs Evangelism

**W**hat does Gallup's new survey showing fewer than half of Americans now self-identify as church members mean?

It means U.S. Christianity must prioritize what is now unfashionable: evangelism. The Church has many tasks, but all are subordinate to sharing the Gospel.

This evangelistic task is not just a spiritual imperative for the Church. It's a cultural, social, and political imperative for the nation. Only revived religious institutions can counter polarization and political extremism while seeking social harmony based on a vision of divinely ordained human dignity for all.

Hyper-individualism fueled by internet fantasies, "reality" TV, and faux online communities can only be displaced by revived congregations that are politically, racially, and economically diverse. And while nondenominational churches are often strong engines for Gospel proclamation and service, America needs revived denominations with sound ecclesiology and wider perspectives on social renewal.

America is where it is today partly because once great denominations, both liberal and conservative, forgot their first task is to evangelize. Only 47% in Gallup's new survey said they belong to a religious congregation, compared to over 70% from the 1930s to the 1980s.

It's no great surprise, given that surveys show about one quarter of Americans now identify as religiously unaffiliated.

Gallup's new survey shows over 70% of Americans still identify with a religious tradition, although apparently nearly a third of them don't identify with any congregation.

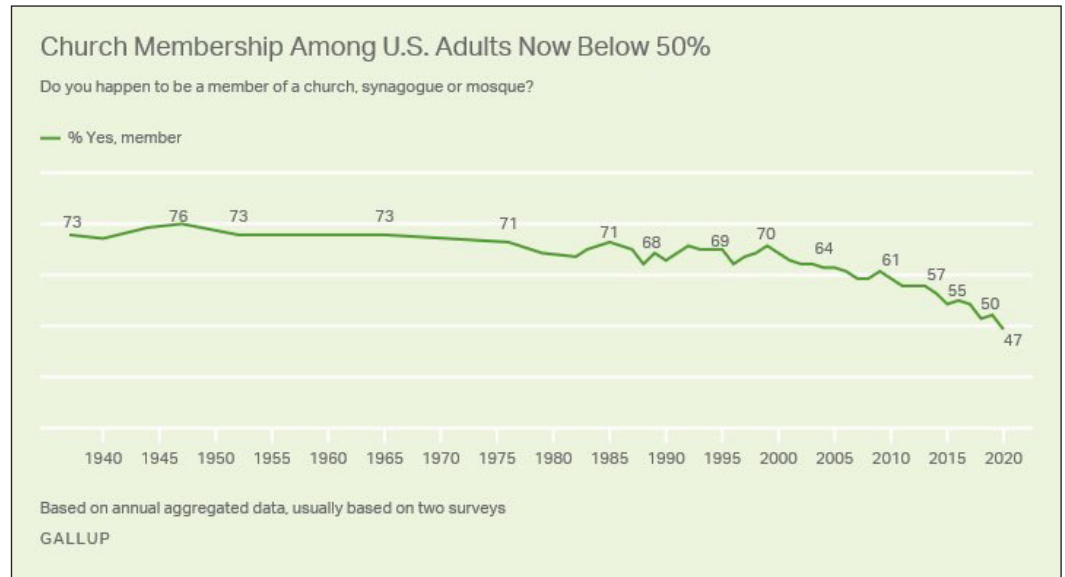
The survey is about self-identification, not actual church statistics. Almost certainly, more people believe they are church members than actually are.

For example, the 2012 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* counted nearly 160 million members of Christian denominations in America. Gallup found 61% of Americans identifying as religious congregational members about that time, equaling about 200 million. Even factoring in non-Christians and nondenominational Christians not captured by the *Yearbook*, self-identification clearly exceeds church data.

For historical context, it's important to recall that 20<sup>th</sup> century church membership was higher than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A 1986 study by **Roger Finke** and **Rodney Stark** from *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* found that 14% of Americans in 1800 were church members. It was 26% by 1830 and by 1860 it was

almost 39%. In 1890 it was 43%. By 1906 it was 50%. In 1916 it was almost 54%, and 58% in 1926.

The past was not always as religious as we imagine. The Second Great Awakening jumpstarted religion in the early 19th century. And, often helped by succeeding revivals, it kept climbing, as the historic Protestant denominations became more established, built great churches, started schools and publishing houses, and came to dominate much of American civic life.



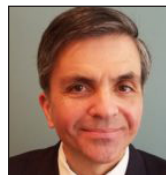
A Gallup survey reports the percentage of the U.S. population with church membership. (Image: Gallup)

Population growth and urbanization brought people who were previously isolated on the frontier or the countryside into closer proximity to churches. The Catholic Church also became a growing force in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century with waves of immigration from majority Catholic European countries.

Most Protestant historic denominations, having become "mainline," began their 60-year decline in the early 1960s. Catholicism, although not numerically declining at the same rate, began declining as a share of population in recent years.

Continued on page 11

*Mark Tooley*



**Mark D. Tooley** is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy



# Bishop Love Joins Anglican Church after Release from Episcopal Church

**A** former Episcopal Church bishop compelled to resign for upholding traditional marriage has joined the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA).

Bishop **William H. Love** stepped down as diocesan bishop for the Episcopal Diocese of Albany in February and was, at his request, “released and removed” from ordained Episcopal ministry by Presiding Bishop **Michael Curry** on March 30.

Love cited biblical teaching and the *Book of Common Prayer* in his 2018 decision not to permit clergy to solemnize same-sex weddings in his upstate New York diocese. He requested to be released

and removed from Episcopal ministry in a March 25 letter to Presiding Bishop Curry that was made public on April 1. The three-page document states Love’s conviction that, fifteen years after his election as a bishop, he cannot remain within the Episcopal denomination.

“The passage of [General Convention Resolution] B012 [mandating same-sex marriage rites] and my subsequent conviction by the Hearing Panel clearly shows ‘there is no place in this branch of the church’ for theologically conservative and orthodox bishops to uphold the traditional understanding of marriage as that between one man and one woman as clearly revealed by God in

Holy Scripture and taught by the Church for over 2000 years,” Love wrote.

Curry had earlier restricted Love’s ministry, preventing him from disciplining any clergy who violated his restriction on the use of same-sex rites. Later brought up on charges before a church Hearing Panel, Love did not contest the facts of the case, but argued that he acted in accordance with his ordination vows.

Love cited his obligation as a bishop “called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church” among several reasons for his decision against implementing the rites. The bishop characterized the dispute as part of his dioceses’ “faithfulness in upholding God’s Word.”

The Hearing Panel disagreed, finding that Love’s refusal to implement same-sex marriage conflicted with a resolution passed by the church’s General Convention.

The Anglican Diocese of the Living Word (ADLW) announced April 3 that Love has been received into the ACNA diocese as a retired bishop and appointed to assist Bishop **Julian Dobbs**. The two officiated an Easter service at Bishop Seabury Anglican Church in Gales Ferry, Connecticut.

“We are thrilled to welcome the Right Reverend William H. Love and Mrs. **Karen Love** into the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word,” diocesan officials wrote in a statement.

The ADLW announced in early March that several clergy from the Episcopal Diocese of Albany were in the process of being licensed for ministry in the ACNA diocese, and since then at least two new church plants have launched, led by former Episcopal clergy. ✝



Albany Bishop William Love celebrates the Eucharist at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, New York, in November 2015. Photo: St. George's Episcopal Church



Left: Transgender Bishop Megan Rohrer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Photo: ELCA)

## Transgender Lutheran Bishop Challenges Nicaea

**L**utheran Bishop **Megan Rohrer** of Sacramento is America's first transgender bishop following an election on May 8 to lead the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America. Rohrer, who was born female and identified as lesbian now identifies as "they."

"The first council of Nicaea's first action was to try to limit the leadership

roles of trans pastors and bishops. I'm grateful the Lutherans of the @sps\_elca are beginning to dismantle this and some of the other hurdles BIPOC\* and LGBTQ pastors encounter," Rohrer tweeted soon after her election about the fourth century Council of Nicaea that set parameters of Christian doctrine.

Rohrer potentially was referencing Canon 1 from the council declaring eunuchs can be priests unless they castrate themselves. The early church did not fault eunuchs who had been castrated against their will for service to nobles or rulers, but did condemn self-mutilation as an assault on the goodness of the human body. Self-mutilation was not typically an effort to change genders but to escape sexual temptation.

*Continued on page 9*

\*BIPOC is the acronym for "Black, Indigenous, and People of Color."

## New Global Methodist Church Announced

**A**fter the United Methodist Church agrees to divide, a new Global Methodist Church will form for traditionalist conferences, congregations, and persons to join, it was announced this spring.

The Transitional Leadership Team of the anticipated new denomination includes 17 persons, three retired bishops among them, plus the Rev. **Martin Nicholas** of the Houston area. Nicholas is an IRD board member who chairs the UMAction steering committee. A vision for the emerging church was first posted in 2020, with Nicholas, IRD President **Mark Tooley** and UMAction Director **John Lomperis** participating.

United Methodism's governing General Conference is scheduled to meet August 29, 2022. Its chief action item will be to divide the church, likely under the proposed Protocol for Separation. The draft protocol stipulates four years for conferences and congregations to choose their preferred denomination.

Potentially three or more denominations may emerge from United Methodism: progressive, traditionalist, and radical. Each will craft its own theological parameters.

"Dividing United Methodism after many decades of theological battles will be difficult but is much needed," Tooley argues. "I look forward to Global Methodism replanting traditional Methodism in America after 56 year of domestic decline and continued overseas growth." ✝



**GLOBAL**  
**METHODIST CHURCH**



# Church of Scotland Moves Towards Redefinition of Marriage

Scottish Presbyterians moved closer this spring towards allowing ministers to officiate the marriages of same-sex couples.

Church of Scotland Commissioners approved draft legislation, known as an Overture, at the General Assembly on May 24 allowing clergy licensure to celebrate same-sex marriage ceremonies. The vote was 319 to 217.

Legislation next goes to presbyteries for further consideration. Most presbyteries must back the legislation for it to become church law. Such a move would further compromise a church body already facing fierce cultural headwinds.

The mother church of Presbyterians mirrors many state churches in western Europe, and U.S. mainline Protestant

denominations, in a declining number of adherents.

In 2013, the Church of Scotland reported 398,389 members (7.5% of the total population); this was the first time it had dropped below 400,000. By 2018 (the most recent reporting year) membership dropped to 325,695, or 6%. According to the 2018 *Annual Report of Scotland's People*, 22% of the Scottish population (down from 34% in 2009) reported belonging to the Church of Scotland. In contrast, the same census reported that 841,053 Scots held membership in the Catholic Church in Scotland, or 15.9% of the population.

Increased secularization, demographic change, and urbanization all contribute to declines in the Church of Scotland, which correlates with theological innovations.

Officially, the Church of Scotland affirms a traditional understanding of marriage between one man and one woman. At present church law allows ministers and deacons to marry only opposite-sex couples. But the General Assembly has been on a trajectory to develop legislation authorizing same-sex unions since 2018. Local churches already can call pastors in same-sex civil marriages, prompting church traditionalists to argue that orthodox teaching on marriage is essentially being chipped away.

Worldwide, a small number of Presbyterian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), permit clergy to solemnize same-sex marriages. The PCUSA General Assembly moved to redefine marriage as between any two persons in 2014, following the ordination of persons in non-celibate same-sex relationships in 2011. The latter caused the Mexican Presbyterian Church to conclude its 139-year-old relationship with the PCUSA. Other overseas partners, including Presbyterians in Brazil and Peru, soon followed in concluding their partnerships with the PCUSA.

Like the Church of Scotland, the PCUSA has been in steep decline. Theologically orthodox Presbyterians looked to the exits as the “fidelity and chastity” clause was removed from PCUSA clergy ordination vows in 2010 and redefinition of marriage was approved by the General Assembly and ratified in 2015 by a majority of presbyteries. The denomination reported 2,016,091 members in 2010, down to 1,245,354 in 2020, a loss of 770,737 members across the decade (38%).



Photo: Mark Runnacles / The Times



Former U.S. Ambassador Morse Tan spoke March 26, 2021 at a Faith and Law forum of U.S. Congressional Staff  
(Photo: Voice of America screenshot)

## ‘Can’t Ignore China’s Genocide’ says Former Global Criminal Justice Envoy

Revelations of an ongoing genocide against the Uyghur people, a predominantly Islamic ethnic minority in China’s westernmost territory of Xinjiang, continue to escalate. Despite mounting international pressure, the Chinese government forces millions of ethnic and religious minorities into reeducation camps.

Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice **Morse Tan** described ongoing horrors of Chinese attempts to fully assimilate Xinjiang’s population alongside the Han majority as well as international and American responses to the atrocities.

“These sorts of mass atrocity crimes that we’re talking about, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, these are and should continue to be bipartisan and nonpartisan,” Tan told Faith and Law, a U.S. Congressional staff organization discussing politics and theology on March 26. “If you’re a human being with a conscience, the law written on our hearts,

it would be hard for one not to care about these sorts of issues to the extent that one is aware of it.”

Tan occupied the top position in the federal government regarding mass atrocities.

Tan explained that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is guilty of several different legal definitions of genocide. One definition is when a government inflicts “upon the people pains that make it physically or psychologically hard to continue with their lives in various ways... Under that category, one of the things that is pointed to are the sexual crimes that are being committed, the rape, the torture of various kinds that have been committed against Uyghurs.”

Former Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo** focused on the definition of genocide entailing the active prevention of births. This “has been done whether through forced sterilization or IUDs [Intrauterine Devices],” Tan said.

“80% of IUDs in [China] have gone into 2% of the population... There are also forced abortions that are occurring after pregnancy and implantation has occurred, there is also the injections that cause early menopause and make it so that the women in question are not able to reproduce subsequently,” Tan reported.

Much of the justification for the persecution of Uyghurs comes from their running afoul of official Chinese policies regulating the number of children. However, in contrast to the rest of China, Tan pointed to “a very disproportionate application of population control measures for the Uyghurs.”

Tan argued that CCP actions in Xinjiang were one part of a broader effort to bring more of the world under Chinese Communist hegemony. In addition to the persecution of Uyghur Muslims, China has revamped oppression against Christians and Buddhists. ✚



# After Max Lucado Apology, Is Justin Welby Welcome at National Cathedral?

by Jeffrey Walton



Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. photographed in 2015.

The Episcopal Church's Washington National Cathedral stumbled into another controversy earlier this winter when it invited evangelical author **Max Lucado** to preach. The professionally aggrieved class quickly asserted hurt at the invitation, and both cathedral and diocesan officials begged forgiveness.

If a mild and winsome evangelical like Lucado isn't acceptable to preach at the National Cathedral, what evangelical who holds to the church's historic understanding of Christian marriage is?

Lucado offered a pre-recorded sermon this past Sunday addressing the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. The Texas megachurch pastor isn't the first evangelical to speak at the Cathedral, but his invitation incensed LGBTQ activists who launched a petition drive in protest of the invitation.

The widely published author's transgression was a 2004 sermon in which he regarded homosexual practices as sinful, alongside polyamory, incest, and bestiality. On February 11, Lucado issued a letter addressed to the cathedral community stating that he believes in the "traditional biblical understanding of

marriage" but apologized for words that he termed disrespectful and hurtful.

Both Cathedral Dean **Randy Hollerith** and Episcopal Diocese of Washington Bishop **Mariann Budde** have offered apologies for not rescinding the invitation.

---

If a mild and winsome  
evangelical like Lucado  
isn't acceptable to preach  
at the National Cathedral,  
what evangelical who  
holds to the church's  
historic understanding of  
Christian marriage is?

---

"In my straight privilege I failed to see and fully understand the pain he [Lucado] has caused," Hollerith wrote to the cathedral congregation. "I failed to appreciate the depth of injury his words have had on many in the LGBTQ

community. I failed to see the pain I was continuing. I was wrong and I am sorry."

The controversy has generated enough hand-wringing to justify three separate articles from the Episcopal News Service. I won't attempt to replicate that work, except to note that many of those protesting the invitation appear to have been unfamiliar with Lucado or his writings until this month's controversy. Lucado himself has spoken before theologically liberal audiences in the recent past (I last heard him address the Wild Goose Festival, an annual Religious Left gathering of mostly post-evangelicals and older Mainline Protestant clergy patterned after Britain's Greenbelt Festival).

The National Cathedral, or the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul as it is formally known, regards itself as not just home to an Episcopal congregation but also as "A Spiritual Home for the Nation."

It's worth looking back at other evangelicals who have spoken or preached at the National Cathedral. Are they still welcome to preach at the "House of Prayer for All People"?

Archbishop of Canterbury **Justin Welby** has preached from the cathedral's

*Continued at top of next page*



Canterbury pulpit, most recently providing a prerecorded video address for the September 27, 2020, Sunday service. Welby, in his capacity as top cleric of England's established state church, has a vote in the U.K. House of Lords, as do the Archbishop of York and the Bishops of Durham, London, and Winchester. In 2013, Welby voted against Prime Minister **David Cameron's** legislation to legalize same-sex marriage.

**Russell Levenson**, rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston (the largest parish by attendance in the Episcopal Church), has also preached at the cathedral, offering the sermon message at the December 2018 funeral of President **George H.W. Bush**. Levenson is associated with the theologically traditionalist Communion Partners group of rectors and bishops and does not officiate same-sex weddings.

Other evangelicals who have preached at the National Cathedral include California Megachurch Pastor **Rick Warren**, Theologian and *The Crucifixion* author **Fleming Rutledge**, and Evangelist **Billy Graham**.

To my knowledge none of these preachers addressed marriage or sexuality

in their National Cathedral messages, but neither did Lucado.

Former Iranian President and Islamic cleric **Mohammad Seyed**

**Khatami** also spoke at the cathedral. Presumably his views on same-sex marriage would be ruled out of order today. ✚



The Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson presided February 7 at Washington National Cathedral's livestreamed worship service. The Rev. Max Lucado, inset, preached in a prerecorded video submitted for the service. (Photos: Washington National Cathedral and Episcopal News Service)

## Church News: Transgender Lutheran Bishop Challenges Nicaea

*continued from page 5*

Nicaea is demonized or enshrouded in mythological conspiracies by dissenters from orthodox Christianity who wish to believe their preferred—and ostensibly more liberating—theologies were suppressed for nefarious purposes.

Many of the books supposedly suppressed by Nicaea, according to contemporary religionists like popular author **Elaine Pagels**, were Gnostic alternative gospels rejecting ecumenical orthodoxy in favor of secret knowledge stressing self-actualization and inner journeys instead of salvation and worshipping the Creator. The Gnostics minimized or ignored the Hebrew Scripture that orthodox Christians deem sacred and the foundation of God's self-revelation.

"Where Judaism and Christianity emphasize the role of faith and works in salvation, and salvation of both body and spirit, Gnostics taught that the soul's salvation depended on the individual possessing quasi-intuitive knowledge (*gnosis*) of the mysteries of the universe and of magic formulas," **Ben Witherington** of Asbury Seminary explains. "Gnosticism fundamentally rejected Jewish theology about the goodness of creation, and especially the idea that all the nations could be blessed through Abraham and his faith."

Witherington notes that Elaine Pagels highlights a phrase attributed to Jesus by the gnostic gospel of Thomas: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you."


"The strength of this saying is that it does not tell us what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self evidently true," Pagels wrote.

"Here we find the appeal to personal impressions or experience as the final authority," Witherington observes. "The believer is not asked to believe specific things that come from without (by revelation), nor to submit to any authority but the self. Instead, we are to be the measure of ourselves and to find our own truths within us."

In this spirit, Rohrer says she's glad her liberal Mainline Protestant denomination is "beginning to dismantle" the injustice at the Council of Nicaea. ✚

# Methodist Panel Laments 'Horrific Assault on Gaza' by 'Apartheid' Israel

by Kennedy Lee



*The Israeli anti-rocket system 'Iron Dome' intercepts rockets fired from the Gaza strip (Photo: Reddit)*

A webinar hosted by the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) and United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR), originally titled “Waking the World to Israeli Apartheid,” blamed and condemned Israel for retaliating against thousands of rockets launched from the Hamas-ruled Gaza strip in May.

Hamas is a militant group on the United States’ list of designated terrorist organizations, receiving financial aid, weapons, and training from Iranian patrons. During the webinar, panelists lamented Israel and Gaza being compared as “equal parts” in press coverage, not because Gaza is under control of a terrorist organization, but because of unequal power dynamics between the two.

Although panelists repeatedly referred to Israel as an apartheid state, MFSA Executive Director **Bridget Cabrera** began the event by insisting that the webinar was a safe space in which “we do not tolerate any sort of hate speech.”

“We didn’t know when we planned this that it was going to be in the middle of sets of Israeli violations,” proclaimed **Phyllis Bennis**, fellow at the Institute for

Palestine Studies. Bennis asserted that hot conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza “takes place in the context of ongoing settler expansion, colonialism, and apartheid.”

Bennis further insisted that Israel “chose” this specific time to attack Gaza for political, strategic, and military reasons. In reality, Hamas launched the first rockets into Israel on May 10.

MFSA and UMKR were hopeful earlier this year that the incoming **Biden** Administration, with the help of vocal new members of Congress, would take harsher actions against Israel. Bennis, however, expressed disappointment with the new administration in changing U.S. policy on the matter.

“Until Biden reverses those [President **Trump’s**] policies, his commitment to human rights cannot be taken seriously,” stated Bennis, referencing former President Trump’s pro-Israel moves such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Despite this disappointment, she asserted that “there has been a huge change, partly because of new members of Congress who came in who are Palestinian rights champions.” Bennis

also referenced prominent members of the Christian Left, including Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor the Rev. **William Barber**, who are “now calling this apartheid.”

After Bennis cited the need for Gaza to be “a testing ground for Israeli weapons” as one of the reasons Israel “chose for this to happen now,” panelist **Philip Farah**, co-founder of Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace (PCAP), declared that Gaza is “also a testing ground for American weapons.”

Farah furthermore shared Bennis’ view of Israel being an apartheid state. He maintained that apartheid and settler colonialism “are the foundations of the Israeli state.”

Although Bennis praised clergy like Barber for their anti-Israel views, Farah expressed disappointment in the “church establishment” for its statements on this week’s events.

Specifically, Farah stated that he was “stunned” by a sermon that **Pope Francis** gave in the Vatican this week in which he stated in his homily that the “two

*Continued at top of page 11*



sides should come together and find an agreement.”

“It’s like asking the wolf and the sheep to come together and find an agreement,” declared Farah.

When asked by moderator **Jim Nibbelink** of the UMKR steering committee what activists can do to help the situation, Bennis proclaimed that “it’s about stopping this horrific assault on Gaza. That’s what can be done today.”

Many prominent U.S. politicians, including Secretary of State **Antony Blinken**, have expressed their support for Israel’s ongoing fight against Hamas.

“To be very clear, we strongly condemn the rocket attacks out of Gaza that are targeting innocent Israeli civilians, and Israel has a right to defend itself,” stated Blinken.

On May 11, UMKR co-sponsored a rally in front of the State Department in Washington, D.C., about a decades-long legal case postponed by the Israeli Supreme Court May 9 involving Sheikh Jarrah, a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem.

Farah cited the rally as evidence that the movement is doing “extremely well” at the grassroots level, as he was “surprised”

by the number of participants, especially young people, who came to speak out against Israeli policy and put pressure on U.S. decision makers. ✚



**Kennedy Lee** is a student in the Comparative Politics of Eurasia Master's program at the Russian Higher School of Economics and holds a BA in Russian and Political Science. During her undergraduate studies,

Kennedy was involved with the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Initiative on Faith and Public Life, Passages Israel, and the Tikvah Fund.

## From the President: America Needs Evangelism

*continued from page 3*

Evangelicalism, sometimes rooted in denominations but increasingly non-denominational, began growing dramatically in the 1960s and continued until relatively recently. The largest Protestant and Evangelical denomination is the Southern Baptist Convention, which began declining about 15 years ago. Growing evangelical churches tend to be more Pentecostal and racially diverse, such as the Assemblies of God. Nondenominational churches are the fastest growing religious movement in America but their numbers are hard to quantify.

A 2015 Pew study found over 25% of Americans are Evangelical, nearly 15% are Mainline Protestant, 6.5% are black Protestant, and nearly 21% are Catholic. Jews are nearly 2% and Muslims are 1%. The religiously unaffiliated are 23%, including 3% who are atheist and 4% agnostic, leaving over 16% as “nothing in particular.”

A survey released early this year, presumably conducted before the pandemic closed many churches, found 33% saying they attend church about weekly, and another 11% attending monthly. Nearly 30% said they never attend, and 25% said they seldom do. A 2019 Pew poll similarly found about 45% attend church monthly or more. Gallup surveys across decades found weekly church attendance from 37% to 39% in the

1940s, rising in the 1950s to 49%, falling to 38% in the 1990s, climbing again, and more recently declining.

Among all Americans, including the religious, active denominational loyalties, like many historic denominations themselves, have plunged. A 2017 Gallup survey found that only 30% of Protestants identified with specific denominations, compared to 50% in 2000. Almost certainly that number has declined further. The fastest growing and largest congregations are almost all nondenominational.

Of course, we don’t know the pandemic’s full impact on religious participation. But very likely many churches that stayed closed for the last year, which is many if not most Mainline Protestants, will never recover. Some from those congregations may have moved to Evangelical or Catholic churches, which opened sooner. And some will abandon regular physical church attendance altogether.

Religious belief among Americans continues with or without church affiliation or attendance. A 2018 Pew study found 56% professing belief in the God of the Bible. One third professed belief in a higher power they might call God. Ten percent rejected any higher power. A 2017 Gallup poll found 87% professing belief in God, not very different from year 2011 when 92 percent professed belief.

Declines in church affiliation likely will further facilitate more esoteric and heterodox views of God and spirituality, with discordant political and social implications. Although a steady minority of Americans continue their church attendance, the nominal religionists who previously retained a denominational affiliation continue to detach from institutional religion.

Some Christians may celebrate the decline of nominal religion as clarifying. Now the true believers are more readily apparent! Supposedly. But even nominal religious affiliations at least connect the ambivalent and uncertain to a wider community of faith. The ongoing retreat of historic religious traditions in favor of spiritualized individualism is bad news for social harmony in America.

Christians and churches tempted to barricade themselves within their own silos against cultural adversity can’t successfully evangelize and can’t effectively serve wider society. Across four centuries American churches have nurtured the nation’s democracy and wider civic life by offering transcendent themes that override tribalism and hyper-individualism. Democracy and society are now suffering from the churches’ retreat.

Only churches’ full return to their evangelistic vocation will restore their vitality and renew America’s democracy. ✚



An image of God painted within the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City (Michelangelo 1475-1564)

destructive forces to hijack the gospel.

And:

It's also telling that just before Gallup's new data was released, the governor of Arkansas signed an alarming law that allows doctors to refuse to treat someone based on religious or moral objections, a law opponents say will allow health care providers to turn away LGBTQ people; similar legislation is being explored and proposed in many other states. Instead

of being defined by all the things we are against and the people we want to exclude, Christians should be striving to be defined by our radical love, especially toward those who have been most excluded, as well as by our commitment to advance justice for all. This commitment does not fit neatly in the political categories of Left and Right, Democrat or Republican. Instead, the church must serve as the "conscience of the state," transcending partisanship and holding all sides accountable to our gospel values and priorities.

Well, yes to the church "transcending partisanship" and aspiring to be the "conscience of the state." But exclusively faulting conservative Christianity is itself rather partisan and omits a significant fact: Liberal Christianity in America has been declining and by some measures imploding for nearly 60 years while conservative churches

were often growing. Even now USA evangelicalism by some measures is retaining its share of population unlike liberal Protestantism and Catholicism. There's

Continued on next page

# Does the Religious Right Cause Church Decline?

by Mark Tooley

Conventional wisdom among some liberal Christians and others is that conservative Christianity is to blame for U.S. church decline. Responding to the latest Gallup poll showing fewer than half of all Americans are church members, **Adam Russell Taylor** of Sojourners, a liberal Christian advocacy group, recently aired this view:

*In reaction to Gallup's findings, David Campbell, a professor at Notre Dame University, told The Guardian that the decline in church membership was an "allergic reaction to the religious right" and "the perception that many ... American religions are hostile to LGBTQ rights." I share Campbell's concern. I have often wondered why many parts of the evangelical church have remained so*

*silent about the detrimental impact of white Christian nationalism on the reputation of the church. Though*

---

Many who are post-religious or non-religious are actually on the populist Right.

---

*these church leaders may believe they are remaining "apolitical," by failing to challenge the unholy marriage between the church and Republican Party, these leaders have enabled*



little in the retreating example of liberal Protestantism over the last half century or more that offers an inspiring example for church growth.

Sixty years ago one of every 7 Americans belonged to the seven largest liberal Mainline Protestant denominations. Today it is fewer than 1 of every 15. Today all liberal denominations in America are fast declining. Some conservative denominations are also declining. But some denominations are growing, and they are all conservative. So too are nondenominational churches, which are the fastest growing part of Christianity in America. Those churches attracting immigrants, non-whites, and lower income people are overwhelmingly conservative. Those few evangelical congregations that recently have gone liberal on sexuality and otherwise have usually quickly imploded.

If conservative Christianity's politically high profile has hurt the church's influence in America, liberal churches have had every opportunity to offer supposedly more winsome alternatives. Why are liberal churches not fully exploiting this opportunity of conservative Christianity's presumed unpopularity to showcase their professed more inclusive policies? Shouldn't they readily fill this vacuum and appeal to the more progressive and secular minded who are pivoting away from traditional Christianity? Why is there no revival now in the liberal Mainline Protestant world that espouses all the social and political causes that they maintain are so appealing?

Also noteworthy about these claims that conservative Christianity is smothering the church in America is the assumption that persons who have left or who were never in organized religion are culturally on the Left. Many who are post-religious or non-religious are actually on the populist Right. They like their guns, cherish property rights, home school their children, and are suspicious of cultural elites. Many succumb to conspiracy theories like Q-Anon because they emphatically reject mainstream

media. Such people who share these perspectives but retain no religious affiliation number in the many millions and are growing. They will never be evangelized by the Religious Left's brand of religion. So what answer do religious liberals offer them?

Political scientist **Ryan Burge** recently found polling evidence that more people—including non-Christians—now identify as evangelical based on their rightist politics:

*There's an argument to be made here that evangelicalism is not just influ-*

---

There's little in the  
retreating example of  
liberal Protestantism over  
the last half century  
or more that offers an  
inspiring example for  
church growth.

---

*encing all of American Christianity, it's seeping into all aspects of American religion. More Catholics are evangelical today than ever before, the same is true for mainline Protestants. Many Muslims, Jews and Buddhists now take on the moniker. It's no secret that many Americans have antipathy toward evangelicals, in no small part due to their embrace of Donald Trump. But it's surprising that all that political baggage has not made the term radioactive. In fact, that linkage between Trump, the GOP and evangelicals has actually opened up the "born-again" identity to a larger segment of American religion.*

It's not great news for Christianity that "evangelical" is becoming more of a political and cultural identifier than a

theological term. Every branch of Christianity should aspire to stand on its own spiritual distinctives and not tribal identity. Parts of conservative Christianity may now be too identified with voting patterns and ideology. But conflating faith with the political Left, as some urge, is no solution. As demonstrated by liberal Protestantism, it can be demographically calamitous.

In his comments above, Adam Russell Taylor of Sojourners cited a new Arkansas law protecting conscience rights of medical personnel who decline to participate in non-emergency procedures like abortion, sex change operations, and assisted suicide. Such protections don't exemplify "radical love," he complains. In his liberal Christian view of radical love, Taylor evidently thinks Christians should reject conscience rights in favor of compulsory chaplaincy to secularism's latest demands.

Much of conservative Christianity no doubt has failed to exemplify the Gospel and has contributed to U.S. church decline. But serving as "me too" echo chambers for aggressive secularism, including its attacks on any conscience-based dissent from secular shibboleths, is hardly a winsome—much less a faithful—alternative.

Taylor wants the church to be the "conscience of the state," transcend partisanship, and hold all sides accountable to "gospel values and priorities." Maybe such Gospel values should be rooted in ecumenical church teaching and not current U.S. fashion. Maybe the church should seek to protect persons who strive to uphold these teachings amid controversy. Such fidelity may not win popularity contests. But it may win converts to a faith based on sustained transcendence, not today's fads. ✚



**Mark D. Tooley** is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

# LGBT-Affirming Former Assemblies of God Church Exits Campus Months Later

by Jeffrey Walton

Less than a year after an Assemblies of God (AG) church embraced “full affirmation” of same-sex relationships and subsequently separated from the denomination, it has also separated from its church campus.

Pastor **Dan Matlock** of Eikon Church in Kyle, Texas, preached in 2020 that Biblical teaching on sexuality “is not a matter of salvation.” The former AG pastor led his congregation out of the 1.8 million

member Pentecostal denomination and presided over the change of policy in his local church on same-sex practices. (See “Texas Church Embraces LGBTQ, Exits Assemblies of God” in the Spring 2020 issue of *Faith and Freedom*).

The Austin-area congregation declared itself open to LGBTQ persons on staff and that the church building would be available to host same-sex wedding ceremonies.

“Next week I want to encourage you to come back to hear some of that encouragement that may show us that this journey, though it may be hard, Church it’s gonna be worth it,” Matlock preached in a three sermon series structured around the change.

It appears a significant portion of the congregation did not come back.

One year later, the church has taken a significant loss. Eikon Church lists four staff, including Matlock and his wife **Kelly**, down from six in 2020. It now meets virtually.

Matlock concluded full-time at Eikon Church in October 2020 and now has secular employment in the private sector as a fractional sales associate. The church held an estate sale in September at its former campus that once hosted hundreds of worshippers across two Sunday services.

In a telephone interview, Kelly Matlock explained that Eikon exited the church campus, the owner of which sought to conclude the lease agreement due to financial changes in the congregation attributed to COVID. That campus is now owned by another evangelical congregation, and Eikon lists a post office box as its address.

The Eikon Church congregation first refurbished and moved into the building in 2016. At one point it sought to expand a 75-space parking lot that church officials found to be insufficient for Sunday traffic.

Matlock shares that Eikon drew an average Sunday attendance of approximately 400 prior to the LGBT affirming sermon series, decreasing to between 300-350 the



Pastor Dan Matlock (above) led Eikon Church to embrace LGBT affirmation and within a year departed its church campus south of Austin. (Photos: Eikon Church video screencapture, Google Maps street view)

Continued on next page



following weeks before switching to virtual worship due to COVID-19. Some congregants did depart Eikon because of the sermon series, while others came to the church due to its LGBT-affirming position. Since that time it has been unclear if additional persons chose to depart.

In October of 2020 the congregation of Vertical Chapel purchased the campus. Vertical Chapel's congregation holds to an orthodox understanding of Christian marriage, noting on the beliefs page of its website that "Marriage is sanctioned by God—joining one man and one woman."

In the case of Eikon Church, changes in teaching were not limited to blessing same-sex unions. In the past year, the former AG church hosted a speaker series on "deconstructing faith" in which "lived experience" displaced the authority of Scripture. The series featured those questioning what Pastor Kelly Matlock termed "a very fundamentalist evangelical environment."

"We just want to normalize this idea of bringing questions and doubts and really deeply interrogating the things—especially the things that we've believed for a really long time. Sometimes when we stop and think about them we start

to realize that maybe those things aren't necessarily serving us well or serving others in the world well," Kelly Matlock said introducing the series. "It can cause

---

In the case of Eikon Church, changes in teaching were not limited to blessing same-sex unions. In the past year, the former AG church hosted a speaker series on "deconstructing faith" in which "lived experience" displaced the authority of Scripture.

---

us sometimes to have just these deeply rooted questions about things maybe we have believed one way for our whole life and then all of a sudden maybe our lived experience doesn't so much line up with that anymore and it can start to feel like things are unraveling."

Few former evangelical congregations have embraced same-sex marriage, but almost all that have done so saw congregants—and their tithes—quickly diminish.

In 2015, GracePointe Church outside of Nashville was named in *Time* magazine as "one of the first evangelical megachurches in the country to openly stand for full equality and inclusion of the LGBTQ community."

LGBTQ activists sought to spotlight GracePointe as an inroad for those seeking to change evangelical views on marriage and sexuality. Church elders and half of the congregation's 2,200-person membership quickly decamped following the LGBT announcement.

In 2017, the church, trimmed by staff layoffs, sold its suburban building to a growing multi-site evangelical congregation and relocated to rented space in Nashville.

GracePointe's collapse remains a cautionary tale to liberal clergy who seek to quickly lead a congregation in a revisionist direction. Eikon Church's experience offers a further point of reference. ✚



**Jeffrey H. Walton** is the Communications Manager and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

## IRD Diary: Sick Heresy and Understanding What Love Is

*continued from page 16*

*believes the motion of the trees creates the wind. For most of human history and in most parts of the world today, people adhere to the former view. The consensus has been that the invisible lies behind and is the source of the visible. Only recently, and particularly in the west, has the latter view emerged, that the motion of the trees creates the wind. Unfortunately, this recent view has had a profound and pervasive influence on Western culture...*

*It has also profoundly influenced and shaped western Christianity, turning most of us into practical, functional deists..."*

Friends, a decision to wrap ourselves around an American cultural ethic will exclude us from the timeless and world-altering gospel of Jesus. The question we all have to wrestle with is this: What leads? Does Jesus lead? Does love come from God? That's the most important

thing, not to the exclusion of everything else but as the influencer over all the cultural strangeness that is our world. Because Jesus and the scriptures (which, remember, never disagree) will consistently call us to self-giving ("take up your cross") and holiness ("Be holy because I am holy"). To follow Jesus means laying down our fallen preferences in favor of his call to a holy life.

What leads? That's the sanctifying question. ✚

# Slick Heresy and Misunderstanding What Love Is

by Carolyn Moore

I saw this cartoon online a few weeks ago. It's Jesus schooling a group of religious leaders. "The difference between me and you," he says, "is you use scripture to determine what love means and I use love to determine what scripture means."

When I saw it online, it had all kinds of "amens" in the comment section. And I have to admit: it sounds good. What could sound more anti-bad-religion and pro-Jesus than the idea of letting love be our filter for understanding what the Bible says? The wording is so slick and catchy that it's a shame it is such bad theology.

And it is.

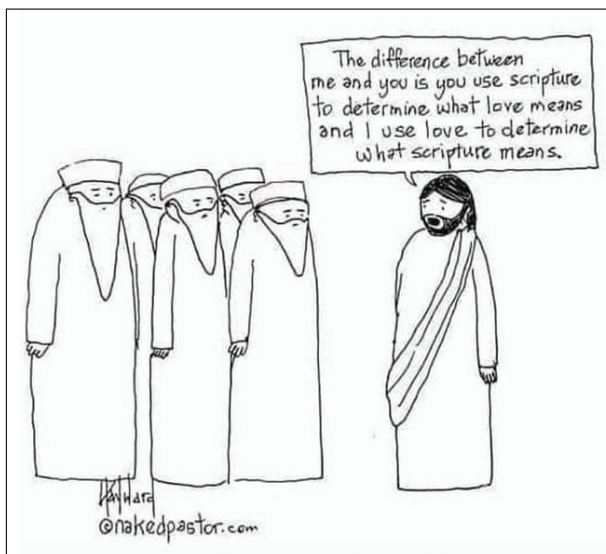
In fact, this cartoon is the mirror opposite of what John would say about love. John (you remember him, right? The beloved disciple? The resident expert in the New Testament on what it means to love like Jesus?) would tell the creator of this cartoon that **we can't know love apart from divine revelation.\*** Which means that we can't project our feelings or preferences onto God and his word and expect them to stick. Sure, it's Jesus in this cartoon, but I get the implication. And even Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:9-10).

True love flows down. It begins with God and is expressed through

\*Thanks to United Theological Seminary Academic Dean David Watson for this line.

Jesus. But it is never divorced from the commands of God found in scripture.

John was completely taken by Jesus' command to love, and wants us to know that this is the essence of God. But he goes to great lengths to connect the love of God



with the commands of God. We could pull a dozen examples from his writings. This one from 2 John 6 sums it up: "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands." Jesus absolutely wants us to walk in love, but love and truth are inextricably connected. In other words, Jesus and the Bible never disagree (and, by the way, Jesus also doesn't proof-text).

I want to shake the creator of that cartoon. "The difference between me and you is you use scripture to determine what love means

and I use love to determine what scripture means." That's crazy talk, friends. You don't want me or anyone else deciding what love is. Can you imagine the chaos if love was independently defined by each of us, according to our own preferences? What if my idea of love includes actions that harm others? What if my idea of love and your idea of love completely disagree? And of course, that happens, and then we try to apply those random definitions to the Bible and now the Bible sounds like it disagrees with itself. Then, before we know it we're dividing the Bible up into buckets—things we think are true and things we think were never true.

That's chaos! It is relativism. And no one is safe in that world.

G. K. Chesterton wrote about that world a hundred years ago. In *The Unseen Real*, Steve Seamands quotes him:

*"When the wind is blowing and the branches of the trees are waving, there are two kinds of people in the world. One group believes the wind moves the branches; the other group*

*Continued on page 15*



**Carolyn Moore** is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and has served the people of Mosaic Church in Evans, Georgia, for 18 years. She is chair of the global governing Council of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

This piece originally appeared on her personal blog and is slightly edited. Republished with permission.



**The Institute on Religion & Democracy**

We are Christians working to reaffirm the church's biblical and historical teachings, strengthen and reform its role in public life, protect religious freedom, and renew democracy at home and abroad.

Support IRD by adding us  
to your will today!  
[www.TheIRD.org/donate](http://www.TheIRD.org/donate)