

## Five Trends Christian Millennials Must Stop Doing

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St. James Episcopal Church in Milwaukee, WI was sold in 2017. See "Bishop Curry's 'Love' Language Doesn't Halt Episcopal Decline" on page 14. (Photo: Carl Swanson/Milwaukee Notebook)

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# 'Massive' National Council of Churches Arises!

**D**uring this autumn's Supreme Court nomination hearings, the Associated Press [reported](#): "A massive coalition of U.S. Christian churches attended by 40 million people wants **Brett Kavanaugh** to withdraw his Supreme Court nomination."

The report fueled a multitude of other media about this supposed "massive coalition" about which almost no readers, and likely most of the writers, had never heard.

What was this "massive" religious group?

The National Council of Churches!

Presumably its [reported](#) seven full- and part-time employees were justifiably thrilled that its news release reiterating opposition to Judge Kavanaugh, first announced in August, ignited such reaction.

For them, it must seem like 1958 again. Articles variously claimed the NCC's 38 member denominations have 40 or even 45 million members. "Massive" indeed.

These numbers date to many years ago. Today's membership of all member churches is closer to perhaps 36 million. Even this number includes several denominations that haven't counted their membership in a decade or more.

One of the NCC's useful programs was publishing for decades an annual directory of U.S. and Canadian denominational statistics, which ironically chronicled the NCC's own decline. Eventually the cash-starved NCC discontinued publication.

But with its few remaining staff the NCC still posts political statements from its small Capitol Hill office. Few heed them, and the explosive attention to the Kavanaugh statement apparently shut down the NCC's usually low traffic website.

One commentator with over 1 million Twitter followers who gushed over the Kavanaugh statement [asserted](#) that the NCC isn't even liberal. Such claim evinces the NCC has become so obscure that even well-informed people don't know what it is.

Highlighting the NCC is almost akin to showcasing the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which also still exists, and like the NCC also was powerful in another bygone era.

My own career of church activism began 30 years ago contra the NCC! I wasn't long out of college and introduced a resolution to the Virginia Annual Conference of United Methodism for our denomination to withdraw from the NCC and World Council of Churches. I pointed to the ecumenical councils' support for Marxist revolutionary guerrilla groups and regimes that were decidedly repressive.

Such was their notoriety that when I asked strangers to help me distribute materials on the convention floor, after I explained the cause, they gladly responded SURE! Today, most, even at a United Methodist gathering, would not know what the NCC is.

The NCC became really controversial in the 1980s when *60 Minutes* and *Readers Digest* reported church dollars were supporting Marxist causes. Arguably the NCC never fully recovered. Founded after WWII, the NCC, like its predecessor, the Federal Council of Churches, was always left of center and left of its mostly bourgeois Mainline Protestant membership. But it didn't turn far left until the 1960s, by which time its major denominations had begun their 50-year decline.

The Rockefellers built The Interchurch Center in New York to house the NCC and Mainline Protestant agencies. But most of those agencies, along with the NCC, shrunk and are now relocated.

Once having hundreds of employees and budgets in tens of millions, the NCC now has seven employees and a budget just over \$2 million.

Its largest donors have traditionally been United Methodism and the Presbyterian Church (USA), which once gave millions annually but now just several hundreds of thousands.

In the 1990s I attended NCC general assemblies (which no longer meet) and board meetings as a reporter. The chief topic was often budgetary crises. Even after its Cold War controversies, the NCC continued its reflexive far-left political polemics.

Few media or others typically listened, as it was clear the NCC did not meaningfully speak politically for its church-going constituents, most of whom were more conservative. **Jerry Falwell** by himself got more attention than the NCC, despite its claims to speak for millions.

Thirty years ago my anti-NCC resolution to the Virginia United Methodists failed partly because most clergy regarded the NCC as an important if flawed voice for ecumenism. Almost nobody considers the NCC important today.

I literally hear almost nobody discuss the NCC, pro or con. Few but some retired clergy would feel any loyalty to it. Almost no lay people know about it. The IRD, founded in 1981 in part to critique the then large, moneyed and mighty NCC, now has more employees than the NCC.

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*Disciples of Christ General Minister Sharon Watkins speaks June 15, 2016, in Washington, DC (Photo: Steven Martin/ National Council of Churches of Christ USA)*

*Mark Tooley*



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

## Episcopal Marriage, Baptism Numbers Collapse

**D**espite the prominence of marriage in the Episcopal Church's public conversation, statistics made available this autumn by the church's Executive Office of the General Convention reveal that the number of marriages taking place in the denomination has collapsed nearly 60 percent in the past 15 years, and the addition of same-sex marriage has done nothing to halt the trend.

Episcopalians have faced gradual and consistent decline in membership and attendance during the same time period (see additional coverage in this issue on page 14). Membership has declined from 2,320,221 in 2002 to 1,712,563 in 2017 (–26%). Statistics including baptism, marriages, confirmations, and receptions are indicative of not just where the denomination is today,

but where it will be in 20 years' time. With these latest numbers, the decline will continue and likely accelerate. An increased age of the average Episcopalian and a lack of children has resulted in the denomination figuratively eating the seed corn of its future.

In the past year alone, marriages conducted in the denomination dropped 8 percent, contributing to an overall decline of 43 percent in the past decade, and nuptials are down 59 percent since 2002—the year before the consecration of **Gene Robinson** as the church's first openly partnered gay bishop.

Data from the Pew Research Center shows that while U.S. marriage rates are down significantly since they peaked in 1960, the share of adults who are married has [remained relatively stable](#) in recent

years, in contrast to the steep decline in Episcopal Church marriages.

Baptisms have also declined precipitously. Child baptisms dropped 55 percent from 44,995 to 20,069 since 2002, while adult baptisms dropped 53 percent from 6,299 to 2,927.

Other figures tracked year-over-year also sank since 2002. Confirmations of children are down 14,996 to 7,043 (–53%), while adult confirmations sank from 17,701 to 8,595 (–51%). For those who were confirmed in another denomination and are received into the Episcopal Church, the number has dropped from 7,785 to 5,506 (–29%).

Marriage has been a central issue in the denomination, which officially redefined marriage as between any two persons in 2015. At the 2018 General Convention held July 5–13 in Austin, Texas, bishops and convention deputies voted to [require](#) dioceses to permit parishes within their diocesan boundaries to solemnize same-sex marriages. ✚

## Nadia Bolz-Weber Steps Down as Pastor to Be “Public Theologian”

**N**adia Bolz-Weber, the tattooed pastor who gained celebrity status uncommon for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) clergy, is back in the news. A *New York Times* best-selling author and popular speaker on the Christian conference circuit, Bolz-Weber is trading in her infamous *Pastrix* title for “public theologian.”

*Religion News Service* (RNS) [reports](#) Bolz-Weber stepped down late this summer as pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS), the ELCA-affiliated church she founded in Denver, to focus her attention on writing, speaking, and “increase her contact with secular audiences.”

“I was aware how dangerous it was for founders to stay too long,” Bolz-Weber told RNS about her decision to step down and elaborated, “the church still loves me, but I don't think the church still needs me.” The compelling and controversial pastor led HFASS full-time as senior

pastor until 2015, when she transitioned into a part-time role.

Bolz-Weber represents a unique variety of progressive Christianity that often leans on traditional doctrinal elements. “I'm actually a very orthodox Lutheran theologian,” Bolz-Weber [once told](#) the *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* segment for PBS. In her sermons and writings, she regularly acknowledges sin, humanity's innate brokenness, the need for confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and evil spiritual forces at work in this world. However, it is her unorthodox conclusions on sexual sin, hell, and [public support](#) for Planned Parenthood that earns the Religious Left's admiration.

Perhaps it was Bolz-Weber's traditional elements that helped her grow HFASS from a gathering of eight people in her living room in 2008 to roughly 500 congregants today, as RNS reported. Such growth—however gradual—for an ELCA congregation is impressive. Within the Rocky Mountain Synod, to which HFASS belongs, official ELCA [data](#) noted that out of the 167 congregations, 110 were designated “declining” during 2005–2010.

The latest ELCA [membership reports](#) are from 2016 and define HFASS as a “small” congregation with between 151–350 congregants. Weekly attendance shows 190 people on average, and the ELCA designated the congregation's growth status as “stable.”

Whatever good came from Bolz-Weber's traditional foundations, it will be interesting to see how the congregation fares under new leadership. ✚

Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber (photo: YouTube)





A multi-faith service "of wondering and commitment" as part of the September Global Climate Action Summit featuring participants on stilts dressed as trees. (Photo: Grace Cathedral / Facebook)

## Cathedral Goes Green in Liturgical Eco-Disaster

Fresh off publicity from their recent [Beyoncé Mass](#), Grace Cathedral is back with more liturgically questionable performance art in a worship service. The San Francisco Episcopal Cathedral hosted a multi-faith service of "wondering and commitment" as part of the September 12–14 Global Climate Action Summit featuring participants on stilts dressed as trees.

Episcopal Diocese of California Bishop **Marc Andrus** sported a cope with butterfly and bear images, while shirtless dancers performed during a cello-accompanied segment. ✚



Above: Dancers performed during multi-faith service "of wondering and commitment" as part of the September 12 Global Climate Action Summit at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. (Photo: Grace Cathedral / Facebook)

## Azusa Board of Trustees Rejects Sexuality Compromise

A [policy decision](#) implemented by school administrators to embrace LGBTQ romances on campus was quickly reversed by Azusa Pacific University's Board of Trustees. The board [stated](#) in September that they are "never willing to capitulate to outside pressures, be they legal, political, or social."

Azusa was chartered as a Free Methodist college and is now officially non-denominational. But the school's Board



Azusa Pacific University campus in Azusa, California (Photo: Azusa Pacific University)

of Trustees reaffirmed it is "unequivocally biblical and orthodox in our evangelical Christian identity."

Administrators' earlier decision to permit LGBTQ relationships on campus was announced September 18. The university garnered an outpouring of pressure and frustration from alumni, parents, students, faculty, and staff. And in the same vein as the 2014 World Vision debacle, a swift reversal was enacted.

"Last week, reports circulated about a change to the undergraduate student standards of conduct. That action concerning romanticized relationships was never approved by the board and the original wording has been reinstated," read a Board of Trustees press release. "We pledge to boldly uphold biblical values and not waiver in our Christ-centered mission. We will examine how we live up to these high ideals and enact measures that prevent us from swaying from that sure footing." ✚

## Sizer: Christian Support for Zionism is a Danger

Arab-Israeli conflict is perpetuated by misguided Christians who are the primary supporters of Zionism, according to controversial activist clergyman the Rev. Dr. **Stephen Sizer** of Peacemaker Trust. Sizer spoke on “The Historical Roots of Christian Zionism, Its Theological Basis and Political Agenda” October 23-24 in Washington, D.C., at successive events held by St. Mark’s Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill and the offices of the Jerusalem Fund.

Sizer has drawn **criticism** from the Board of Deputies of British Jews for alleged anti-Semitic views and comments; including sharing a web site over social media in 2015 that **asserted** Israel was responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Sizer later issued

is a member of the Anglican network Reform and also the Church Society. Sizer’s theological presentation included an interpretation of covenant theology and supersessionism.

“Zionism is primarily a Christian movement, not a Jewish one,” Sizer asserted to the 40 mostly white, retirement-age individuals gathered for the Tuesday night presentation, citing a Pew Forum survey that 60 percent of U.S. Evangelicals view it as their responsibility to support Israel.

That support, Sizer insisted, was a danger.

“The Arab-Israeli conflict is perpetuated by misguided Christians,” Sizer determined. The former Church of England vicar asserted that nine out of ten Zionists are Christians, and that a

Restorationist movement among Christians preceded Jewish Zionism by 50 years.

Sizer outlined three groups of Christian Zionists: those motivated by messianic claims, including groups such as Jews for Jesus, those motivated by apocalyptic claims, like popular *Left Behind* author **Tim LaHaye**, and finally those with political motivations, including San Antonio pastor and Christians United for Israel founder **John Hagee**.

“Jewish Zionism is heavily reliant upon Christians,” Sizer asserted. He was recently in Oklahoma for the **Christ at the Checkpoint** conference, a gathering primarily of anti-Israel critics who seek to end Evangelical support for Israel.

“They are inflicting an apocalyptic war,” Sizer warned, focusing upon premillennial dispensationalist groups that popularized eschatological fiction novels.

“Too many people take these books seriously, and that’s the problem.”

Sizer did not note that few major U.S.-based seminaries now teach dispensationalist theology, or address Christian support for Zionism independent of such theological teaching.

Sizer did discuss pro-Israel political groups active in the United States.

“I think the Zionist lobby is more permanent than your U.S. President,” Sizer announced. “The lobby is very influential, and we cannot blame it on the Jewish minority in this country.”

Instead, Sizer charged that such organizations “rely on the Christian Zionist lobby to influence politicians and pay the bills.”

“There is a plethora of these organizations and they are zealous and diligent in lobbying for Israel,” Sizer added. He also critiqued “Christian friends of Israeli communities” active in encouraging churches to adopt West Bank settlements. ✚

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### From the President: ‘Massive’ National Council of Churches Arises!

*continued from page 3*

This tragic demise of a once influential and morally serious Christian council can’t be celebrated. It once did embody Mainline Protestantism’s lofty ecumenical and socially conscious ethos that was so central to American civil society. There’s no meaningful successor.

The NCC’s demise is a warning to other Christians tempted to minimize historic Christian doctrine in favor of supposedly more important political activism. Forgetting its original calling to foster unity in the Body of Christ, the NCC became a parody.

Erroneous portrayals of the NCC as “massive” only underscore the loss and tragedy. But hopefully some Christians will heed the example and not do likewise. ✚



*The Rev. Dr. Stephen Sizer speaks on Christian Zionism October 24, 2018 at the offices of the Jerusalem Fund in Washington, D.C. (Photo: YouTube screen capture)*

an **apology**, and an investigation by his Church of England diocese resulted in the Anglican clergyman being **directed** to suspend use of social media for a period of six months.

St. Mark’s **describes** itself as expressing a “progressive, somewhat non-theistic approach to worship.” In contrast, Sizer identifies as an Evangelical and



*Jair Bolsonaro debates with Maria do Rosário during a general commission in the plenary of the Chamber of Deputies. (Photo: Marcelo Camargo for Agência Brasil/Wikimedia Commons)*

## Brazilian Evangelicals Turn Out for Populist Bolsonaro

**B**razilians head[ed] to the polls October 28 to elect their next president, a stark choice between **Jair Bolsonaro**, variously described as a far-right, uncouth, law-and-order populist, and **Fernando Haddad**, the handpicked successor to jailed former President **Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva** of the leftwing, deeply corrupt Workers Party (PT). The *New York Times* suggested it was a sad choice for voters in Latin America's largest democracy. Nonetheless, Bolsonaro was comfortably elected with a large mandate to govern.

The President-elect appears to hold views that can charitably be described as anti-democratic. A former military officer and longtime legislator, Bolsonaro has mused publicly about the benefits of a return to dictatorship, spoken in favor of torture, and threatened the national Congress. His son recently suggested it would be easy to close the Supreme Court.

One of the more curious aspects of Bolsonaro's rise to prominence is that members of the rapidly growing evangelical community are among his strongest supporters. Bolsonaro himself professes to be a nominal Catholic, although he attends a Baptist church and in 2016 asked to be baptized in the Jordan River by a prominent Brazilian Assemblies of God pastor. He actively courted the charismatic Protestant community in Brazil and a number of leaders in the movement.

In the 2010 census, more than 85 percent of Brazilians professed Christianity; some 65 percent claimed Catholicism, and more than 22 percent claimed evangelical beliefs. Some estimates suggest that the 2020 census will show nearly 30 percent of the population to self-identify as evangelical.

Like most if not all Brazilians, members of religious communities across the board are sick of corruption, crime, and stagnant economic prospects. There

appears to be a complete and visceral rejection of the PT, in part due to its secularism and in part due to a perception of the social licentiousness that PT governments ushered in. Brazil megachurch pastor **Edir Macedo** wrote, "Christians don't agree 100 percent with Bolsonaro...but they disagree 100 percent with the return of the PT."

Bolsonaro is publicly bombastic and boorish, yet he was elected. And one thing appears to have stood out among voters: the view that, despite his extreme rhetoric, he is incorruptible, and that he will "stand up" to forces undermining Brazil. This matters to a citizenry battered by massive and continuing corruption scandals and a stagnant or even regressing quality of life. So much the better, some supporters say, that he is also anxious to engage the culture wars in an effort to yank Brazil on to a different path. To many, it seems this may just be the leader they have been awaiting, a strong personality unencumbered by party or tradition who claims the mantle of savior of his deteriorating nation. ✚

—This item is adapted and excerpted from "Brazil's Tumultuous Presidential Election: Why Do Brazilian Evangelicals Support Jair Bolsonaro?" by Eric Farnsworth, October 26, 2018, *Providence: A Journal of Christianity & American Foreign Policy*.

## Presbyterian Pastor Released from Turkish Prison

**E**vangelical Christians are celebrating the release of Pastor **Andrew Brunson** after a Turkish court determined he adequately served a sentence for allegedly aiding terrorists in a failed coup against President **Tayyip Erdogan**.

Brunson was arrested and jailed for the allegations on October 7, 2016. The charges sparked outrage among Christian clergy, lay leaders, and the Trump Administration. U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom **Samuel Brownback** traveled to Turkey in April to support Brunson during one of his trial hearings, as did U.S. Senator **Thom Tillis** (R-NC).

A North Carolina native, Brunson and his wife lived and ministered for 23 years in Izmir, located along

Turkey's Aegean coast. He was the pastor of Resurrection Church in Izmir and is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. ✚



*Pastor Andrew Brunson, served in Izmir, Turkey, for 23 years.*



# Five Trends Christian Millennials Must Stop Doing

by John Wesley Reid

**Y**oung Christian millennials are increasingly pressured to sacrifice their Christian values for the sake of being relevant to the world. Christ said that the world will hate you because of your love for him. You can love the world like Jesus loves the world and still be hated. It's not your fault, so don't change your convictions. Advocacy for Christ should never come at the expense of relationship with him. Here are five ways that many Christian millennials are hampering their communication of the gospel to a world that desperately needs it.

## 1. Tolerance

Tolerance flies in the face of the gospel because it is apathetic both to brokenness and holiness, and when we don't recognize our brokenness we will never recognize our need for holiness...and thus Jesus becomes, at best, superfluous.

Many millennials assume that affirming the individual means affirming their sin. This message is due in part to the poison of church progressivism, and many young Christian millennials sing the same tune. Instead of hating sin for the separation that it causes between us and God, they accept the sins of others in the name of "loving them for who they are."

**But the problem with tolerance is that when we accept people for who they WANT to be, we neglect the people that Jesus MADE them to be.**

Jesus was the prime example of love, but he never displays an ounce of tolerance. Indeed the cross was proof of his intolerance. What type of tolerance prompts a king to step off his throne to die for his people? Tolerance was never part of the story!

**The gospel does not boast "come as you are, stay as you are" but rather**

**"come as you are TO BE RESTORED!" We don't get to make up the narrative here, folks! The story has already been written—and it is beautiful!**

## 2. Neglecting Theology

Consider the etymology of the word "theology"; *theo*—God, *logy*—study: the study of God. A trendy message among young Christians these days is "I don't need theology, I just need Jesus." The problem here is that the two are dependent on each other. The more we know Jesus, the more we love him and the more we love him the more we want to know him and so the cycle continues. Our desire to know him (theology) should be an implication for our love for him. And the more this continues the more we will desire to live like him and thus love his people AS HE loves them.

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**To say you love Jesus but don't need theology is like a husband telling his wife, "I love you, Poopsies. But I don't care to know your heart, your character, your desires, your attributes, or anything about you."**

But when theology is neglected, the ramifications are made known in the way we treat others. Even with a Christian label we only love on them with a wishy-washy love that promotes no agenda for change and restoration. When theology is neglected Christian millennials succumb to weak cultural ideas and defective scriptural interpretation such as "Jesus just said to love people, so why should we be opposed to gay marriage?" and "the Bible says not to judge, so don't tell me that I shouldn't be sleeping with my boyfriend!" when the Bible actually tells Christians to judge each other (Matthew 7:24, 1 Corinthians 5:9-13). A good theology will inform the individual that not only are they wrong in their sin, but that Jesus wants so much MORE for them—more joy, purity, and intimacy with him.

### 3. Separation from the World

You are not of the world, so don't act like you are (Romans 12:1-2). "But John, Jesus partied, so I can party!" Well, sure I guess you can say he partied because he did attend parties and even contribute wine to one (and yes, I affirm that this wine was alcoholic). But the above quote is used in a defense of a partying style that is NOT consistent with Jesus' partying style, and those who make the argument know that full well. As Christians, we are to be light and salt to the world (Matthew 5:14). Salt gives flavor to bland food, light gives vision in darkness. See the analogy there? We are to be different and we are to be good. Good in behavior and good in our advocacy for Christ. Does this mean we can't drink? Not necessarily. Does it mean we can't get drunk and cuss and make poor decisions with people that we likely wouldn't have without the influence of alcohol? Yes, it absolutely does if our agenda is to represent Christianity.

But even the movies we watch and the music we listen to are important. If it has an explicit language sticker on it then there's really no justification for listening

to it. It needs to be tossed. "But I'm an adult." Yes, which means you're a Christian and you're old enough to know better. Not to mention you're supposed to be setting the example. Junk in, junk out no matter your age.

We're quick to sing popular worship songs like "O to Be Like You" and "Jesus, Be the Center of My Life" but how practical do we allow this to be? We need to be Daniels, Esthers, and Joshuas. We need to be people of faith who love without ceasing and represent without compromise.

Also, I understand that nobody is perfect, but it's one thing to sin and try to justify it while it's another to sin and repent, confessing and turning away from sin.

**Stop flirting with what you can get away with, and instead pursue the holiness that we have through Jesus Christ.**

### 4. Bashing the Church

Christian Millennials are quick to throw the Church under the bus. Blogs are constantly cycling the internet like "3 reasons why I left my youth group" (of course it's always the youth group/youth pastor's fault, not the student who left). While the Church isn't perfect, I feel it is much more effective to celebrate the good that the Church is doing than the negative, which a lot of times isn't even negative, it's rhetoric. For example, it is easy to knock a mega church for putting money into their building, but how many mega-church bashers have actually researched the hundreds of thousands of dollars that said mega-church is giving to inner-city and overseas missions?

It's also important to remember that as Christians we ARE the Church; therefore, we are the imperfection that is, the difference that needs to be, and the good that the Church is doing.

### 5. Declining Accountability

The same group of Christian millennials will be the first to dish out accountability, usually in the form of Church-bashing, but will be the last to

receive it. It'll be rendered them, but they won't accept it. If you call them out on wayward behavior they will notoriously accuse you of judging them and use the Bible to support their plight. But indeed the Bible says that Christians ARE to judge each other, as we saw earlier. If you identify as Christian then you, oh beloved, fall within the God-appointed jurisdiction of judgment from your sibling in Christ. To be clear, judgment should be read as corrective counsel in attempts to hold one accountable and thus point towards restoration.

**Accountability is not only biblical, it is wonderful. Repentance is a means of turning from darkness and receiving the gift of restoration that is found in Jesus. It's easy to read repentance as a scary thing. But Hebrews paints a wonderful, gospel-reflecting image of it:**

*"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace, to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).*

There is nothing scary about that. If anything it's overwhelmingly comforting that WE, sinners made pure through Jesus, are not only allowed to but are ENCOURAGED to enter the highest of throne rooms to receive mercy and grace from the Almighty, the one who we have grievously sinned against.

God sees you as his child, beautiful and righteous through his son, Jesus. Let us all remember the love that has been lavished on us and make sure that we go and love likewise, in truth and in grace.✝



**John Wesley Reid** is a Christian blogger and political analyst based in Washington, D.C. Reid served in the United States Marine Corps and received a degree in political science from Biola University before pursuing seminary at Liberty University.

# A House for Fruitbombs and Saints

by Jeffrey Walton

**C**arina Julig at *Religion News Service* wrote a story this autumn about controversially profane Lutheran pastor **Nadia Bolz-Weber** departing her Denver church for life as a “Public Theologian” (see “Church News” page 4). Bolz-Weber is succeeded by an Episcopalian, the Rev. **Reagan Humber**, as senior pastor at House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS).

The Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) have a full-communion agreement for the exchange of clergy between their congregations, so Episcopalians can pastor

One of Fruitbomb’s performances, a lip-sync of Radiohead’s “No Surprises”—in which the drag queen enacts staged abortions—is viewable on the streaming service [Vimeo](#).

Humber himself looks to be a bit of a character. Julig’s story features a photo of the Episcopal clergyman wrapped in a metallic chasuble emblazoned with an owl. I was surprised I had not first encountered him on the “Tacky Vestments” blog. Humber is a product of Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley—a huge red flag—and St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, known as a whackadoodle activist parish

that [selectively appropriates Eastern Orthodox traditions](#) like a buffet line, but also practices open communion for “everyone” regardless of baptism into the Christian faith, apparently also welcoming pets to the holy table.

Although HFASS has not been a bastion of orthodoxy, many of us at IRD have mixed reactions to Bolz-Weber’s work. As my colleague **Chelsen Vicari** notes, the ELCA pastor regularly acknowledges sin, humanity’s innate brokenness, the need for confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and evil spiritual forces at work in this world. However, her unorthodox conclusions on sexual sin, hell, and public support for abortion provider Planned Parenthood have earned the Religious Left’s admiration.

In short, Bolz-Weber acknowledges the reality of evil and sin, but then claims undermining the sanctity of human life and shedding much of historic Christianity’s moral architecture is not sinful. My [colleagues and I](#) found [worthwhile content](#) in Bolz-Weber’s book *Pastrix*, but we cringed when she tweeted about [making a financial contribution to Planned Parenthood](#) of the Rocky Mountains.

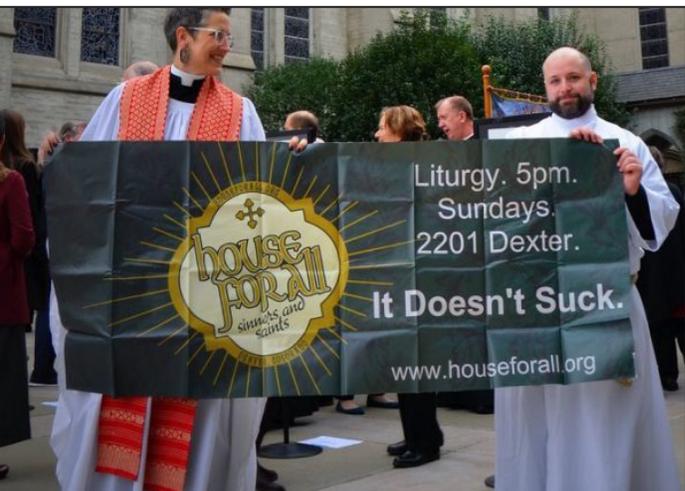


The Rev. Reagan Humber, who will take over as pastor at House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver (Photo: The Rev. Theresa S. Thames)

While HFASS reports a “stable” attendance of 190, the church is likely facing a difficult threshold to cross, and it will be worth following to see if Humber can guide HFASS through it, or if the congregation will recede without celebrity Bolz-Weber at the helm.

An attendance figure nearing 200 requires a church to transition from a pastoral model (where the pastor knows everyone) to a programmatic model where responsibilities and relational contacts can be divided among multiple staff members. In the Episcopal Church (and, assumedly, in the ELCA as well) it is difficult to cross this threshold and continue growing. Not only are there pragmatic difficulties, but congregants sometimes push back against growth above this level because it ceases to have a “family” feel where everyone knows everyone else. Fewer than [four percent of Episcopal congregations](#) make it to an average Sunday attendance of 300 or greater.

Reading the *RNS* piece, it sounds like Bolz-Weber realized she would not be able to navigate this transition well. How Humber fares at HFASS remains to be seen. ✚



The Rev. Reagan Humber (right) and Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber hold a banner advertising their Denver church during Humber’s ordination service December 8, 2015, in San Francisco, California. (Photo: St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church/Twitter)

Lutheran congregations and ELCA pastors can be called as rectors or vicars of Episcopal congregations. Julig reports:

*Humber, who came to HFASS from St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, is well-equipped to carry on the church’s alternative vibe. His partner is a hair stylist who moonlights as the drag queen Fruitbomb, and Humber is open about his struggles with opiates and alcohol.*



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

# Robert George Praises Universal Declaration of Human Rights

by Joshua Arnold

Princeton philosopher **Robert George**—whom conservatives may recognize as a pro-life stalwart—praised the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) at a Q&A with **William Saunders**, Director for the Program in Human Rights for the Institute for Human Ecology. The Declaration was passed in 1948 and this year celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. George called the Declaration an “extraordinary feat” because it united countries from every philosophical and cultural background in the world in affirming the inherent dignity in every human being.

George said the Declaration was virtually an accident of history; it could not have passed at any other time. The preamble explained that “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind.” Only the revulsion against the atrocities of World War II could have prompted such an effort, said George. However, its quick ratification was also important; just months after its passage, the breakdown in U.S.-Soviet relations would bring the U.N. to a grinding halt.

During the negotiations, philosophers from around the world vigorously debated a range of issues before they developed the Declaration that was finally passed, George said. For example, Confucian philosophers and Christian philosophers argued about *why* humans possessed inherent dignity. However, George pointed out, the important thing is that they did agree on one critical point: human dignity was “not in virtue of any special strengths—beauty, intelligence, social standing—but simply in virtue of their humanity.” Because of man’s sin nature, he said, we are constantly at risk of falling into the belief that these superficial differences do matter. “It’s hard to

stick to it,” the philosopher observed, but the UDHR provides a permanent, international reminder that all human beings are equal in fundamental dignity.

George debunked the claim that the Declaration is merely an example of Western cultural imperialism. He admitted that such declarations of rights do come out of Western philosophical traditions—no doubt thinking of documents like the Magna Carta, or the English and

high ground before my claim is even challenged. If anyone questions my “right” to the good or status I want, then I can easily vilify them by accusing them of denying my human rights and comparing them to groups who are (justly) infamous for denying human rights, like Nazis and racists. Does this sound familiar?

Immediately this raises an objection. Sometimes, legitimate human rights are really being violated. What’s more, human

rights violators routinely attempt to justify their behavior by denying they are, in fact, violating a human right. This is why human rights language is so easy to co-opt for other purposes. George described this second problem using economic inflation as an analogy. Just as increasing the money supply makes the currency less valuable, so increasing the number of “human rights” makes fundamental human rights less valued. As human rights are devalued, George said, would-be autocrats feel freer to

pick and choose which fundamental rights they will actually respect.

George also highlighted the difficulty in defining positive rights in a positive declaration. A negative right is a right someone has that no one is allowed to take, like life or liberty. A positive right is a right someone receives that someone else has to provide (like healthcare or education). He didn’t deny that these positive rights were good things, but he said it is unclear who bears the responsibility

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Princeton philosopher Robert George (right) says Universal Declaration on Human Rights protects religious liberty around the globe. At left is IRD Board member William L. Saunders (Photo: Joshua Arnold/IRD)

American Bills of Rights. However, he pointed out that the whole world affirmed the UDHR without Western coercion. He said it passed unanimously in the U.N. General Assembly, with only a handful of abstentions. At least in theory, then, if not in practice, the whole world has agreed to basic human rights.

George was not blind to the dangers raised by the Declaration. He noted that as the human rights movement has become more powerful, its language has become dominant. Every movement, whether genuinely related to human rights or not, tries to capture the momentum of the human rights movement by adopting its language for itself. As a result, George said people are constantly inventing new “rights” that are really nothing more than wants. In other words, if I want something, the best strategy to obtain it is to claim I have a right to it. I automatically gain the moral



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The Rev. Adam Hamilton speaks to the *Uniting Methodists Conference* in Dallas, TX, July 16-18. (Photo: *Lovers Lane UMC, YouTube*)

# Adam Hamilton: Liberal United Methodists Have a 'High View' of Scripture, Too

by Dan Moran

**D**iversity, inclusion, compromise, and unity were the mantra of the [Uniting Methodists](#) Conference at Lovers Lane UMC from July 16–18. In their view of the liberal and conservative divide over homosexuality within the denomination, “Both perspectives are biblical and evident in the church today, and both are necessary.” Though they claim to be a theologically diverse group, this conference definitively showed that the caucus is dominated by liberals who would largely like to see the removal of traditional values on sexuality in the UMC, evidenced by their major support of the “One Church Plan.” Central to the conference was [Rev. Adam Hamilton](#), conservative-turned-liberal senior pastor of the 22,000-member United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, who provided a keynote talk defending the way liberal United Methodists interpret the Bible in regards to homosexuality.

[Hamilton](#) attempted to present a case for affirming homosexuality as biblically sound by confounding scriptural authority and interpretation. He asked, “What constitutes a high view of Scripture?” To him, someone with a high view of Scripture reads it daily, asks God to speak to them through it, uses it for prayer, and reads its “minor chords” and “major chords.” They always take Scripture seriously, but not necessarily literally. Hamilton says we all take some verses literally and not others. This picking and choosing helps explain our differing interpretations of the Bible.

Hamilton attempted to show that conservatives are no less guilty of not taking the Bible literally or very seriously than liberals. One egregious example he used was that of Matthew 16:19, which begins “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.” If conservatives are so concerned about taking Scripture at face value, he half-joked, they should get rid of their savings accounts, or even their pensions through Wespeth. By not doing so, Hamilton claims, conservatives show they do not honor biblical authority any better than progressives do, imposing their own personal interpretations on the text. Since we all agree that saving is sound biblically and logically, to him this is proof we all “pick and choose.”

To further complicate matters, he discussed how the phrase “the word of God” in the Bible rarely refers to something written down. Rather than a text, he says, it is usually said in reference to something a prophet or disciple has shared, a message that has come to them from God to relay to the people. This, he says, means that “the word of God” is something bigger than the Bible. Particularly, Jesus is the “Word,” as evidenced by John 1. To Hamilton, there seems to be a difference between all of Scripture and Jesus and his own words, the latter being more authoritative and definitively free from error.

To add to this, Hamilton commented on a piece of Scripture foundational to this debate, 2 Timothy 3:16, which says that “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for

correction, and for training in righteousness” (NRSV). Hamilton shared that Paul’s word for “inspired” isn’t found anywhere else in the Bible, and is rare even in non-biblical texts of that time, so we have little context for it. “If it means God-influenced, what then?” he asked. The megachurch pastor also said that we go too far to say that this verse means Scripture is inerrant. In all, he presented the verse as carrying much less weight and importance than it is normally given.

To wrap up his argument, Hamilton described the references to homosexuality in the Bible as if they were vague and confusing. “The question we’re left [with] is, those six or seven verses in the Bible that say something about some form of same-gender something, and we can’t even be sure on some of those, are those passages more like the things we all agree are timeless...or are they more like the passages we just have said we no longer apply to us today?” Hamilton’s strategy seems simple: ascribe a false sense of ambiguity to straightforward statements on human sexuality that support God’s unambiguous design described in Genesis. All of this is necessary to the “Uniting Methodists” talking point that the UMC’s divide on issues of sexuality are not worth dividing over.

While at face value Hamilton’s points on word usage and language are correct, I feel that more importantly he is sowing seeds of doubt on the authority of Scripture, our accepted canon. Were the people who wrote, translated, or transcribed the various books of the Bible across many centuries perfect or free from error? No, but I believe a perfect God who wants all of mankind to truly know him has watched and guided these processes at every step. Instead of creating space for biblically sound debate, Hamilton justified disregarding verses one finds inconvenient and encouraged doubt in the absolute authority of all Scripture. ✚



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# 'Uniting Methodists' Panelists: 'The Bible Is Wrong'

by Dan Moran

Millennial Panel at Uniting Methodist Conference in Dallas, Texas, July 16-18  
(Photo: Lovers Lane UMC, YouTube)



On July 16–18, the “Uniting Methodists” caucus hosted a conference to organize their support for the so-called [One Church Plan proposal](#) for the special United Methodist General Conference in February. Around 200 people gathered at Lovers Lane UMC in Dallas, Texas, along with another 200 watching online. The caucus urges the UMC to unite around the basic idea of ordaining homosexually partnered clergy and allowing but not requiring clergy to perform same-sex weddings, repeatedly claiming that such proposals would bring unity to the denomination. The caucus describes itself and its agenda as “centrist” despite actually being rather liberal. **John Lomperis** has written a [series of articles](#) analyzing the Uniting Methodists’ cause and leadership.

Many of the conference’s most memorable moments came from a panel discussion led by the **Rev. Mike Baughman**, an ordained elder serving as the lead pastor for Union, a new church start in Dallas, Texas, and featuring four young millennial leaders from its worship planning team. Disappointingly, the millennial panel lacked the kind of theological diversity that should define any truly “Uniting” Methodists movement. All were fully LGBTQ-affirming. The unorthodox beliefs shared by these “Uniting Methodists” panelists appear to speak clearly to the heart and future aspirations of this caucus and its preferred plan.

**Stephen Cristy** was brought on the panel to share his story of changing from a conservative, traditional view to a progressive, “compatibilist” one. To Union Church’s credit, when he first came to the church with traditional orthodox views, he was welcomed and encouraged to share his contrasting outlook with the progressive majority. As he spent more time in the congregation, his beliefs shifted. After befriending and serving alongside many

LGBTQ individuals there, he came to believe that homosexual practice is not sinful, to support same-sex marriage, and to support the ordination of openly homosexually partnered individuals.

**Lauren Manza**, who identifies as lesbian, was unabashed in criticizing the Bible itself. She too grew up in a conservative family, and felt conflict with her upbringing. When speaking on same-sex marriage and the verses that traditionalists use to argue against it she said, “I believe if I sat down with Paul today, Paul would say ‘I’m not down for that,’ but I **think the Bible’s wrong.**”

For the time, Manza refuses to formally join a UMC church because she feels the *Book of Discipline* calls all of her humanity “incompatible with Christian teaching.” She’s holding out for the UMC, though, hoping earnestly that the denomination that is her church home will change its ways. However, she made it clear that she will only join when all UMC churches fully affirm her sexuality, a goal the “One Church Plan” fails to meet.

Instead of providing a counterpoint to her attack on biblical authority, Baughman continued Manza’s train of thought. Recalling meetings with some of these young church leaders at Union he said:

“There were times that folks like Stephen and some other members of the team would just say like ‘Can we just say the Bible’s wrong?’ and one of the things that’s been interesting is I think there is this sense among a lot of millennials that just because the Bible says something, that doesn’t mean it has any authority whatsoever.”

**Angela Uno**, who grew up outside of the church and joined Union a year ago, was surprised to discover that churches were still debating same-sex marriage and partnered gay clergy. She thought the American public as a whole had already “moved on” beyond these issues because

the right choice was so obvious to her. “I think that by now, it shouldn’t be a question,” she said.

**Sinclair Freeman** is a young man who identifies as queer and feels strongly compelled to pursue ordination within the UMC. He currently works for Union as a worship community curator. He, too, grew up in a conservative family, and as a result battled with his sexuality in high school. Today, he is determined to fight for change from within the UMC, even if the “One Church Plan” is not adopted. Like many of the speakers at the conference, he emphasized “intersectionality,” specifically how he saw issues of race and sexuality as entwined. Like his black ancestors before him, he refuses to be denied what he believes are his essential rights: “I’m not allowing my God or a church that I feel passionately about to be hijacked from me.”

Baughman and the panel ultimately disregarded the fundamental concept of the Bible as the ultimate source of religious truth and authority. They commended this approach to their audience on the grounds that some young Americans at this particular moment in cultural history find it acceptable. All believers grapple with understanding the Bible and knowing how to best apply it to their lives, but this was something very different.

Unanimous affirmation of same-sex marriage and ordination of openly homosexually active clergy. Changing from traditional, orthodox views to progressive ones. Placing personal experience above Biblical authority. These were the ideals presented, and these peers of mine were put on stage as shining examples of who the Uniting Methodists hope will lead their congregations in years to come. If there was any doubt that the agenda of the “One Church Plan” and its most enthusiastic supporters is liberalizing the UMC, this panel dispelled it. ✚

# Bishop Curry's 'Love' Language Doesn't Halt Episcopal Decline

by Jeffrey Walton

**E**vangelistic language and exhortations to embrace the “Jesus Movement” by Presiding Bishop **Michael Curry** have not yet resulted in a decrease in Episcopal Church decline, according to



*Episcopal Diocese of Virginia Bishop Shannon Johnston presides during a same-sex blessing ceremony for Mother Leslie J. Hague, rector of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Arlington on November 23, 2013. (Photo: The Knot)*

statistics recently released by the Office of the General Convention.

Episcopalians continue a multi-year decline in both membership and attendance in 2017.

A loss of 13,709 attendees to a total of 556,744 resulted in a 2.4% decline in average Sunday attendance (ASA), despite occurring in a year when Christmas Eve occurred on a Sunday, which typically boosts attendance figures. The church's 10-year decline in attendance currently stands at 24%. The mean ASA is 55 persons, down from 57 in 2016.

Membership experienced a more gradual drop, down 32,593 (1.9%) to 1,712,563 baptized members in U.S. domestic dioceses. Membership, attendance, and plate-and-pledge income are among three objective data points tracked year-over-year by the denomination.

Curry, elected as Presiding Bishop at the denomination's 2015 General Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, has garnered significant media attention for

his embrace of language associated with evangelism and revival. In May of 2018 he delivered a [homily](#) at the Royal Wedding of **Prince Harry** and **Meghan Markle** in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle in the United Kingdom. The address led to numerous televised interviews in the following days in which Curry repeated his message that “love is the way.”

## Uninterrupted Decline

Most Episcopal Church dioceses across the United States experienced declines in membership and attendance, with those in the northeastern Province I hit hardest (down 2% in membership and 4.2% in attendance) followed by the upper Midwest Province V (down 3.2% in membership and 3.6% in attendance). Rural and Rustbelt dioceses continue the steepest declines, which are more gradual in the South and Mid-Atlantic regions.

The tiny Diocese of Northern Michigan—known for selecting a [Zen Buddhist bishop-elect](#) in 2009 whose election was denied necessary consent by the wider church—continues to be among the hardest-hit, experiencing a 12.7% decline in ASA, now down to 411 persons. The remaining Episcopal Diocese of Quincy was prompted to juncture into the neighboring Diocese of Chicago when it reached approximately 380 attendees. While a juncture of dioceses could save on administrative expenses and shared resources, it would also result in the loss of eight seats in the church's House of Deputies, making for a strong disincentive. Each diocese in the church may send a delegation of four clergy and four lay delegates to the triennial General Convention, regardless of the size of the diocese.

“Renewing dioceses” attempting to rebuild after their leaders and majority of congregants voted to depart the Episcopal Church continue to be a mixed bag:

the Episcopal Church in South Carolina reports a 3.6% gain in membership and a 1.2% decline in attendance, while the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin suffered a 5.3% drop in members and 6.9% drop in attendance to 810. The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth declined 0.5% in members and 5.1% in attendance, while Pittsburgh lost 4% of members but inched up 1.3% in attendance.

Some of the “Communion Partner” dioceses that have opted out of same-sex marriage rites held steady. Albany experienced a modest 1% drop in members and 0.4% drop in attendance. Dallas also had a 1% drop in members and a 0.3% drop in attendance. Central Florida saw a 2.3% decline in members but only a 0.5% drop in attendance. Florida was a rare diocese to see both membership (1.8%) and attendance (0.2%) growth, with Tennessee close behind at 0.2% growth in members and a 0% change in attendance. Springfield (Central and Southern Illinois) saw only a 0.3% drop in members, but a 5.7% drop in attendance. North Dakota experienced a 3.4% drop in members but only a 0.8% drop in attendance.

In contrast, some of the denomination's steeper losses were in some progressive dioceses. New England dioceses of Vermont and New Hampshire faced 5% and 5.1% declines in attendance, respectively, with Rhode Island decreasing 5.7%. Other dioceses facing outsized attendance declines were El Camino Real (Central California coast) 5.7%, Northern California at 5.4%, Navajo Missions at 12.4%, Micronesia at 10%, West Missouri at 5.1%, Northwest Texas at 5.2%, South Dakota at

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# IRD Diary: Polyamory 'Holy,' 'Beautiful,' Says Minister

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the young fresh face of progressive Christianity on a national stage for which he was unprepared.

Robertson believes himself to be an innovator, presenting novel ideas on sexuality and sin that few have imagined before—a reoccurring trend among young progressive Christians who grew up in evangelicalism. Their ideas on inclusion and tolerance have already been implemented by liberal mainline Protestant denominations, and their embrace of sin hasn't fared well.

Robertson is senior pastor of a Disciples of Christ-affiliated church. And no matter how welcoming or "radically inclusive" the Disciples' table, fewer souls are taking a seat.

IRD's Jeffrey Walton reports the shaky congregational numbers of the Disciples of Christ. "Church membership shrank to 411,140 in 2017 (down from 497,423, or 17 percent, from 2014), while average worship attendance dropped to 139,936 (down from 177,141, or 21 percent, from 2014)," notes Walton. "While these figures in themselves are striking, two objective numbers that often serve as future indicators—baptism and transfers in—are even more dramatic. New additions by baptism are at 4,344 (down from 5,808, or 25 percent, from 2014) while

additions by transfer are 7,441 (down from 15,111, or 51 percent in 2014), not nearly enough to keep up with deaths and transfers out."

There is no joy in watching a soul wander deeper into darkness. I pray the Holy Spirit intervenes and removes Robertson from his liberal bubble so that he might recognize the destructive and

deceitful path that he is headed down with others following closely behind.

My prayer for Robertson is that by the time he enters his 30s and 40s, these troubling remarks on polyamory and his mistaken understanding of human sin will be a wonderful part of his testimony about blind eyes that gained sight. What was meant for evil, God can use for good. ✚

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## Robert George Praises Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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to provide them. Is it business, churches, or the state? Should a local, regional, national, or international government be responsible to ensure that the right is provided? George pointed out that reasonable societies can come to different conclusions about who should provide these positive rights—to say nothing of how much should be provided.

One audience question expressed concern that the language of rights builds in an ideological liberalism that relies on the notion of the "atomized" individual—an individual who can exist without connection or relation to any community. George recognized that this was a legitimate concern. He believed it was possible to articulate human rights apart from that, but it did require defenders of human rights to be careful in how they argued. However, he noted that the Declaration supported the notion that individuals exist in community. [Article 29 begins](#), "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible."

Dangers aside, George made clear the benefits of the Declaration were significant. At the very least, he said, it bolstered the legitimacy of international watchdog organizations to criticize rogue states for their human rights abuses. Additionally, it sets forth an objective standard of morality that does not evolve with the increasingly relativistic culture that has come to dominate the West. No Supreme Court or Congress can move the goalposts every five years on the rights set forth in this Declaration. This is especially important

because the Declaration provides extensive protections for religious liberty—covering both practice and belief. George quoted Article 18, which states:

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."*

Even though many nations fail to live up to this standard of human rights, they acknowledged its rightfulness seventy years ago. This provides an internationally legitimate basis to criticize nations such as Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Venezuela, for their religious persecution—by a standard to which these nations have themselves agreed.

George said the strength of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the plurality of traditions that supported it. The whole world agreed that humans had inherent rights and dignity that governments were obligated to protect, and nations who try to go against this consensus find themselves out of line with the international order. ✚

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## Bishop Curry's 'Love' Language Doesn't Halt Episcopal Decline

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5.1%, Ohio at 5.2%, Central Pennsylvania at 5%, and Louisiana at 7.7%.

A few dioceses reporting attendance growth were Rochester, New York, at 12.3%, breaking a long trend of decline with an increase of 368 attendees to 3,362, and Central Gulf Coast at 2.7%, with an increase of 152 attendees to 5,686. The tiny rural diocese of Western Kansas increased attendance 3.2%, increasing by 18 persons to 574 in total. Overseas dioceses including Taiwan and Colombia also reported increased attendance of 10.3% and 11.3%, respectively. ✚



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# IRD Diary: Polyamory 'Holy,' 'Beautiful,' Says Progressive Christian Minister

by Chelsen Vicari



Pastor Brandon Robertson spoke March 4, 2018 at Missiongathering Christian Church in San Diego, Calif. (Photo: YouTube Screen Capture)

In October, a friend called to my attention a video circulating on social media of a young minister declaring open and polyamorous relationships “holy” and “beautiful” before his congregation. Polyamorous relationships are committed arrangements involving three or more people who engage in sex with some or all of the others in the group with the consent of everyone involved.

“For those who are in an open or polyamorous relationship here this morning who might be squirming, because this is an uncomfortable question to hear in church sometimes, I want you to hear me loud and clear as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Your relationships are holy. They are beautiful and they are welcomed and celebrated in this space,” said **Brandon Robertson**. “We call all of us together to the same set of standards that we call everyone to: to seek to follow Jesus in all of our relationships. To seek to be honest and respectful and self-sacrificial and consensual and loving with your partners. When any of us live into these standards we can be sure we are on the path to wholeness and holiness.”

Robertson, a Religious Left rising star, at 26 is senior pastor of Missiongathering Christian Church, a church plant affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in San Diego. Robertson is also a graduate of evangelical Moody Bible Institute as well as United Methodist-affiliated Iliff School of Theology.

By 23 years old, Robertson had impressive byline placements in *Time*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Huffington Post*. He is a regular speaker at the Wild Goose Festival and his mentors include retired Episcopal Church Bishop **Gene Robinson** and Pastors **Rob Bell** and **Brian McLaren**.

Robertson’s video received significant criticism.

“This is not remotely defensible from any credible Christian position. This guy is leading people right off the cliff,” tweeted *The Benedict Option* author **Rod Dreher** in response.

“Wolves dressed as sheep...pray for those who are being led astray, including this young man,” tweeted Evangelical radio host **Janet Parshall**.

Executive Director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood **Colin Smothers** reminded his followers

of 1 Corinthians Chapter 5 verse 1: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans...”

“What’s so maddening about this is that we predicted it. We were waived off as bigoted fear-mongering nuts. Now they celebrate it,” *The Christian Post*’s **Brandon Showalter** observed. “What ‘slippery slope’? I predict no progressive religious leader with a [Twitter] blue check will say a peep.”

There’s plenty to be said about the sinful, harmful nature of polyamorous relationships. I suspect readers understand the sanctity of marriage and how a covenant between husband and wife reflects the covenant relationship with Christ and his Church. So instead, I want to consider Robertson.

In 2015, I watched Robertson tout the “Evangelical” title as he advocated for same-sex marriage, later defining himself as “Christianish,” and now calling himself a gay “Renegade Reverend” who is rethinking sin “as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Robertson is an acquaintance. We’ve broken bread together here at the IRD office and shared congenial conversation. We disagree on many things, but I feel sadness and compassion for Robertson, who has endured painful experiences and struggled to find his complete identity in Christ. The old guards of the Religious Left placed a 23-year-old Robertson on their shoulders and paraded him as

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**Chelsen Vicari** directs the Evangelical Action program at the Institute on Religion and Democracy.



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