



Global Methodists Do Annual Conference Differently

Page 8



ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ Church Banality on Mideast Terror page 3
- ▶ Disciples Suffer Massive Membership Drop Post-2019 page 6
- ▶ Bad Church Advice on Hamas page 7
- ▶ Romans 13 and the Liberal Tradition page 11
- ▶ Beautiful Anglican Mists page 16



The Rev. Leah Hidde-Gregory leads a break-out session during the inaugural session of the West Allegheny Annual Conference of the Global Methodist Church. See story on page 8. (Photo: Allegheny West Convening Annual Conference website)

faith & freedom

VOLUME 42 NUMBER 4



THE INSTITUTE ON
RELIGION & DEMOCRACY
1023 15th Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202.682.4131
Web: www.TheIRD.org
E-mail: 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

Ryan Danker
Scholar on Methodism

Sarah Stewart
Outreach and Events Director

Max Prowant
Research Assistant

Josiah Reedy
IRD Interns

FEATURES

6 DISCIPLES SUFFER MASSIVE
MEMBERSHIP DROP POST-
2019
by Jeffrey Walton



7 BAD CHURCH ADVICE ON
HAMAS
by Mark Tooley



11 IRD DIARY: BEAUTIFUL
ANGLICAN MISTS
by Mark Tooley



PROGRAMS

From the President

3 Church Banality on Mideast Terror Mark Tooley

4 Church News

United Methodist

8 Global Methodists Do Annual Conference Differently John Lomperis

Ecumenical

11 Romans 13 and the Liberal Tradition Rick Plasterer

Cover: Some of the 149 Methodist ministers ordained during the inaugural session of the West Allegheny Annual Conference of the Global Methodist Church. Story begins on page 8. (Photo: Allegheny West Convening Annual Conference website)

Church Banality on Mideast Terror

Mainline Protestant agencies are typically hostile to Israel. So their morally empty statements this autumn about Hamas terrorists murdering hundreds of Israeli civilians are lamentably unsurprising. These denominations are largely inconsequential given their decline and loss of public influence.

Here's the United Methodist missions board statement:

We are witnesses to the escalation of violence in the region and we call on Methodist people all over the globe to continue to pray for peace and for an end to the violence.

Pray for those who have lost family members and livelihoods, the injured, for those who perpetuate violence and for World Leaders that they may work for peace, the churches and all religious leaders and for those who work for peace in the region.

The situation is complicated, and we recognize the fear and sense of injustice that are felt, but we call on both sides not to resort to further violence and to engage in negotiation to establish a peaceful solution for all who live in the Holy Land.

"Complicated." United Methodist agencies and officials make lots of controversial political statements about very complicated situations that don't hinder their often polemical perspectives. But terror against Israel is apparently too complicated for any strong opinion.

The official Presbyterian Church (USA) prayer is perhaps worse:

Bloodshed has come once again in the latest clash between Israelis and Palestinians with declarations of war and revenge coming from Israeli leaders. As hundreds lay dead and thousands injured, we grieve. We stand in shock that this long, battle-scarred conflict has taken yet another deadly turn.

We pray for those that have died, are dying, and wounded on both sides. We ask the Holy Spirit to intervene to bring calm and reason when vengeance and hatred now appear to have taken control.

We pray for our mission co-worker who must navigate this ever-changing landscape and for our partners who have placed their own safety on the line, not only seeking solutions to the ongoing crisis in the region, but also those in Gaza, at the hospitals that are overwhelmed with the dead and injured. We pray that leaders on both sides can step back and consider a peaceful and just solution that benefits all.

While these events continue to unfold, we come to you, O Lord, for your calm voice and guiding hand. Even in the midst of fire, destruction, and the cries of pain from both sides of this horrific scene, we know you are in the midst. May your Spirit dwell among them and guide them to a peaceful outcome for all.

Note the Presbyterians lament "declarations of war and revenge coming from Israeli leaders" without even mentioning Hamas. The terror attacks are merely referenced as "the latest clash between Israelis and Palestinians."

"Clash" indeed.

Here's The Episcopal Church's comment:

We offer our prayers and support during this time of violence in Israel and Palestine. In Luke 19:41, we are reminded 'That when Jesus drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.' Many still weep.

We pray for those who have been killed, injured, are searching for loved ones, and are struggling with grief and fear. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem has consistently advocated for peace and justice, teaching us all what it means to walk in the way of love, to which Jesus points.

We are praying for Israelis and Palestinians.

We give thanks for the dedicated staff at al-Ahli Arab Hospital

in Gaza, part of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, and for all who are offering medical care in the region. We pray for their strength and safety.

"Time of violence."

Jewish friends need not fret very much about these statements, which speak for almost no one, including the shrinking numbers of people in these once influential denominations. The political pronouncements of Mainline denominations are unserious and nearly irrelevant, except as examples of how once great and mighty churches commit suicide. ✚



Bodies of Hamas terrorists who committed the Be'eri massacre sit bagged outside of the burned out Israeli kibbutz on October 11, 2023. At least 130 people were killed in the attack, including women, children, and infants, claiming the lives of 10 percent of the farming community's residents (Photo: Kobi / Wikimedia Commons)

Mark Tooley



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

National Cathedral Apologizes for Christmas Eve Charges

Officials with the Washington National Cathedral have reversed course and apologized after announcing a ticketing system of paid \$7 passes for several church services across the Advent season, including Christmas Eve.

“After hearing concerns from members of the community, we realize that a required processing fee for passes to some holiday services is a barrier to worship. That was never our intent, and we apologize,” a November 28 statement on the Episcopal cathedral’s website read.

The statement came after online criticism on X (formerly known as Twitter) from Episcopal clergy and laity following the November 27 announcement of paid passes.

Attendance at worship services is customarily exempt from fees, but the sixth-largest cathedral in the world has for several years charged tourists an admission of \$18 per adult or \$13 per child. These fees offset operating costs for the landmark facility that is still repairing \$38 million in damages incurred in a 2011 earthquake. Cathedral performances including Handel’s *Messiah* are also ticketed, but without controversy.

Attendance on major holidays, including Christmas Eve, is substantially higher than typical Sunday services and the cathedral website states that the reserved passes are necessary due to capacity concerns.

The cathedral passes have been rebranded as a “pay-what-you-wish” selection. “All worship services at the Cathedral are free,” the cathedral website now states. “Payment of the suggested \$7 processing fee is optional.” ✝



A Christmas service at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC (Photo: Washington National Cathedral via Twitter)

United Methodist Exits Top 7,600

As of the time of publication, 7,649 congregations have exited the United Methodist Church, nearly 25 percent of total U.S. congregations. By the close of 2023, UMAction Director **John Lomperis** predicts even more churches will have completed disaffiliation. But some churches, despite voting by the required two thirds of the congregation, have been denied exit, including four in the North Georgia Annual Conference.

The week of November 18, the Iowa Annual Conference approved 59 additional disaffiliations, and the Missouri Annual Conference approved 20. North Georgia approved a further 261 disaffiliations. Late last year, North Georgia’s departing bishop **Sue Hauptert-Johnson**, on nearly her last day before moving to another conference, instituted a ban on

further exits. But 186 churches litigated and won, forcing the conference, under new bishop **Robin Dease**, to ratify more exits.

But the special North Georgia Annual Conference refused exit for four churches that had met the requirement of their congregations voting by two-thirds for exit.

The Arkansas annual conference previously rejected exit for several churches, prompting litigation. Virginia refused exit for one church whose congregation abandoned the now-empty property. Most churches whose disaffiliation was rejected also have aggrieved church members wanting to remain United Methodist and arguing against approval for exit. The Virginia church’s

Continued at top of page 5

United Methodist Exits Top 7,600

continued from page 4

obstacle was descendants of the original land donor.

In North Georgia, McEachern Memorial United Methodist Church's congregation voted 69 percent to exit, over the opposition of the pastor. On November 18, 55 percent of the more than 1,400 members of the conference voted against exit. Within 11 hours, church members organized a new church service for the following morning. Over 200 worshiped on Sunday at a funeral home across the street. The sanctuary was left mostly empty.

North Georgia was once the only growing area of U.S. United Methodism with 1,100 churches. Across 15 years it has

closed or lost 62 percent of them, now down to just over 420 churches, with many more closures likely ahead.

Sale of closed church properties has grown the bank account of the North Georgia Conference, which has increased five fold in value to \$100 million in 2023. ✚



One day following rejection of their disaffiliation vote by the North Georgia Annual Conference, McEachern Memorial United Methodist Church members organized across the street, leaving only a handful in the old church building. (Photos: McEachern Memorial Methodist)

Episcopalians See Partial Attendance Rebound as Membership Melts Down

More than 55 percent of Episcopal parishes now find themselves in a state of long-term decline, dropping 10 percent or more across the past five reporting years, while only 12 percent are growing an equivalent amount across the same period, according to Episcopal Church statistics released this autumn.

Information compiled from 2022 parochial reports by the Episcopal Church

Office of the General Convention reveals a partial attendance rebound following the conclusion of COVID restrictions as well as a much steeper-than-usual decline in denominational membership.

Episcopal membership rolls dropped 88,306 persons from 1,520,388 in 2021 to 1,432,082 in 2022, down six percent, the largest single-year loss in reported memory. The denomination has now lost 23 percent of its members in the past 10 years, and the rate is accelerating.

Attendance increased by 56,306 persons across the same year, up 19 percent. However, this reflects only a third of the number lost in the prior year when attendance dropped by 165,328 persons due to COVID. The denomination shuttered a net 45 parishes in 2022, down from 6,294 to 6,249.

Revenue is customarily a bright spot in the annual reports of the Episcopal Church, which draws an affluent membership relative to the overall U.S.

population. In 2022, the annually tracked giving metric rose from \$1,335,654,413 to \$1,336,349,803 (up \$695,390 or .05%). However, an average inflation rate of 8 percent in 2022 more than erases that increase in a real loss of inflation-adjusted dollars. Plate-and-Pledge accounts for 55 percent of Episcopal Church income.

While there are fewer Episcopalians, those who remain continue to contribute a larger share of finances. The average pledge has actually increased over the past decade. This may be due to having older congregants (49.5 percent of Episcopalians are age 65 or older) in a late career or early retirement stage of life, when incomes customarily peak.

According to the Episcopal Church's analysis of the 2022 parochial report data, in 2013 the average pledge was \$2,553 while in 2022 the average pledge was \$3,658. This is an overall increase even when accounting for inflation during this time period.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on religious life across the country. Nearly half (47.5 percent) of Episcopal congregations indicated that the pandemic had a somewhat significant or very significant negative impact on them. ✚



An angel carved of stone lies damaged on the Washington National Cathedral tower following the 2011 Virginia Earthquake that caused extensive damage to the cathedral (Photo: Washington National Cathedral).

Disciples Suffer Massive Membership Drop Post-2019

by Jeffrey Walton



National City Christian Church in Washington, DC is decorated for Pride Month in June, 2023 (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD)

Recent years have been difficult ones for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

One of the original “seven sisters” of mainline Protestant Christianity, the Indianapolis-based denomination has seen repeated declines in membership, attendance, and total number of congregations exacerbated by COVID. Their ability to minister as a denomination of nationwide reach is rapidly fading.

Like other mainline Protestant churches, the denomination reached its pinnacle with almost two million members in the mid-1960s. By 1993, that number had halved, and was again halved by the early 2010s.

By 2019, the DoC was down to 350,618 members and average attendance of 126,217, according to the denominational yearbook, smaller than the mid-sized Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which reports 390,319 members.

COVID restrictions accelerated decline. In 2021 the DoC reported 281,348

members and attendance of 97,402. In 2022, membership again dropped to 277,864 and attendance of 89,894. This final number is the most troubling: many denominations reported some attendance rebound in 2022 after 2020-21 closures, although the gain varies widely. From 2019-2022, there was a 21 percent drop in membership, a cataclysmic rate of decline. These most recent statistics are from ALEX, a subscription-based database for the DoC.

Congregations have also declined (see chart below) from more than 8,000 to 3,624. Ministers have hovered around 7,000 since the early 1970s.

North American Context

Mainline Protestants have all experienced uninterrupted decline, as have two large conservative bodies, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod beginning in the late 1990s, and the Southern Baptist Convention beginning in the mid-2000s.

There are exceptions: the PCA, Assemblies of God, and a handful of

smaller denominations including the Wesleyan Church report growth. Additionally, some “mainline-adjacent” conservative offshoots like the Global Methodist Church and Anglican Church in North America are adding to their numbers.

That said, these are denominational outliers in North America. Multiple religious landscape studies show increasing numbers of both “nones” and non-denominational Christians.

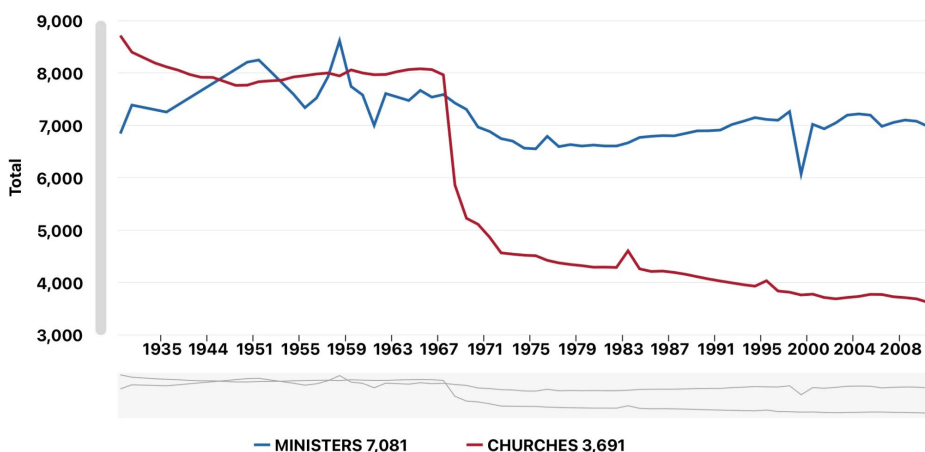
Not all denominations will survive this time period. The DoC is in a downward spiral and will likely halve its membership again by the close of the decade.

Readers of this journal are already familiar with declines in The United Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian (USA) churches. Hard-hit by COVID restrictions, these three belatedly reopened to discover that a significant number of their congregants had either dropped regular church attendance or had migrated to churches that more quickly resumed public worship. Each experienced a gradual level of uninterrupted decline across decades, but each continues to have a nationwide presence and a large, if diminished, membership.

That can no longer be said of the DoC. Heavily concentrated in the Midwest, more than a third of the denomination’s members live in Kentucky, Indiana, and Missouri, the early 19th century new frontier where **Barton W. Stone**, **Thomas Campbell** and his son, **Alexander**, ministered.

The Road Ahead

An important caveat to this report: nearly every denomination has pockets of



Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Ministers & Churches (1925 – 2010)

Continued on page 14

Bad Church Advice on Hamas

by Mark Tooley

Sometimes, church prelates unwisely speak to political questions, exceeding the mandate of their vocation and the range of their practical knowledge. The Gaza war provides the latest example.

The Pope has called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas: “We say ‘ceasefire, ceasefire.’ Brothers and sisters, stop! War is always a defeat, always.” A week ago, Archbishop of Canterbury **Justin Welby** also urged a ceasefire, joining with Palestinian church prelates. Old-line British church officials also backed a ceasefire. So too did Churches for Middle East Peace, which includes U.S. Mainline Protestant officials from The United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Church, United Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ.

These churchly pleas for a ceasefire appeal to our common humanity. But they are foolish.

Hamas, which has governed Gaza since 2006, on October 7 broke a relative peace by murdering more than 1,400 Israelis, which included decapitations, infanticide, and mass rape. The sprawling brutality was deliberate and celebratory. Hamas is a theocratic Islamist political

movement that wants to eradicate Israel and establish a caliphate. It’s never been interested in coexistence. It remains in power in Gaza through cruelty, fueled by focused, weaponized hatred, with funding and arms from Iran.

Israel has tried to live with the Hamas regime, despite routine rocket attacks on Israel, for 17 years. But Hamas is not



Pope Francis greets Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby (Photo: Archbishop of Canterbury / Twitter)

interested in living with Israel. Its purpose has never been to serve the people of Gaza who must live under its terror. Its core purpose is killing Israelis, in service to its own blood lust and in service to its patron, the regime of mullahs in Iran, who similarly brutalize their own people.

The statements from the above cited church prelates have lamented the “violence” without strongly distinguishing between the intolerable aggressor, Hamas, and the nation state that wishes to live in peace. A terror group devoted to destruction cannot be seriously negotiated with or lived alongside. Hamas has

been tolerated for nearly two decades with hopes of its eventual moderation—hopes that have proved tragically vain.

So now Hamas must be neutralized. A small country like Israel cannot survive if vulnerable to repeated attacks killing hundreds. As a percentage of population, the October 7 attack was equal to nearly 60,000 killed Americans on one day. Would America, or should America, ever tolerate such an outrage? No serious nation could.

A ceasefire as advocated by church prelates and groups who live thousands of miles away in safety would only prolong the horror by giving additional time for Hamas to plot and further arm. Most of these church voices likely hope to avoid any further Israeli military action altogether in exchange for returned hostages and a truce. But for Hamas to suffer no grave consequences for its outrageous brutality only guarantees future attacks and emboldens other similar terror groups, like Hezbollah, not to mention Iran itself. This churchly counsel for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas would only fuel more death and destruction.

Israel seemingly is responding to Hamas with thought and caution.

Continued on page 15



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

Global Methodists Do Annual Conference Differently

by John Lomperis



History was made this autumn as pastors and lay members from hundreds of Global Methodist congregations convened for the inaugural session of the Global Methodist Church Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference, encompassing Ohio and the western third of Pennsylvania.

“So many have been working and yearning for this day for years,” enthused the Rev. Dr. **Jessica LaGrone**, Asbury Theological Seminary’s Dean of the Chapel. The annual conference triumphantly concluded with 149 Methodist ministers ordained, reportedly the largest ordination group in North America, and perhaps the world.

The October 12–14 session, held at Reynoldsburg Community Church outside of Columbus, Ohio, was unlike any official United Methodist conference I have ever attended.

I asked several pastors to compare this inaugural meeting of this Global Methodist annual conference and its clergy session to their experience of similar conferences in the United Methodist Church. With overwhelming enthusiasm, they consistently told me this was

refreshingly different. Here are quotes and paraphrases of what they reported:

- “You can’t compare them!”
- “Night and day!”
- “I couldn’t believe that this was annual conference,” when it is “not painful” and “I don’t have to have my guard up.”
- This was “the first time in ten years that I actually looked forward to going to conference.”
- There were no undercurrents of agendas or division.
- You don’t have fellow conference members refusing to even greet you because of your outspoken support for historic Methodist doctrinal and moral standards.
- Clergy session participants felt a movement of God, with safety to weep in front of each other. This was “totally unlike” United Methodist clergy sessions during which “business was tedious and decisions were based on inside information known only to the board,” while there was “tension in the room” due to “mistrust and simmering divisions among the clergy.”

Above: Delegates to the Allegheny West Convening Annual Conference gather for a Friday night worship service during the October 12-14 gathering in Reynoldsburg, OH (Photo: Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference)

Conference President Pro-Tempore The Rev. Dr. **Jeff Greenway** noted, “Not everything in our former connection was bad,” and so cautioned, “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”

Yet participants were driven by a hunger to go deeper than what they often experienced in mainline United Methodism. As Greenway put it, the main goal was never disaffiliation, but rather “to move forward as a movement of like-minded, warm-hearted, Spirit-filled, Jesus-loving, evangelical, orthodox, Wesleyan Christians committed to offering the whole Gospel to the whole world,” to be “a movement of disciples who make disciples who make disciples!” Other speakers highlighted the importance of recovering Methodist theology of sanctification and related practices of highly accountable small groups. LaGrone declared

Continued at the top of page 9

that in the GMC, “we have no desire to play church,” merely “going through the motions” while failing to fully access the treasure God has given us.

The Rev. Dr. **David Watson**, Academic Dean at the UMC’s United Theological Seminary, recalled growing up in a church culture that did not expect much to happen during worship or as a result of prayers, before he encountered different streams of charismatic Christians, who “believe that God actually does stuff.”

Several factors made for a different Methodist conference.

First, unity in core doctrine. David Watson realized that Global Methodists will disagree about secondary issues, but said, “I don’t think we’re going to debate basic doctrine.” Greenway celebrated how “none of us have our fingers crossed behind our backs” in reciting the Apostles’ Creed.

When the ordination class stood before the conference to answer to John Wesley’s historic questions for would-be Methodist preachers, Bishop **Mark Webb** stopped after the question about ministers not being “in debt so as to embarrass you in your work,” to stress the importance of honesty in these vows, explaining that sincerity for this question really calls for congregations to step up to relieve ministers from burdensome debt. While these same questions have long been asked of United Methodist ordination candidates, this episode highlighted the new denominational culture of ministers actually meaning what they say in their ordination vows.

I only recall two, brief mentions in plenary sessions of anything about homosexuality. Bishop Emeritus **Mike Lowry** preached that intra-Methodist disagreements over such matters were “just the tip of the iceberg,” and that “*the* issue that brings the Global Methodist Church together” is the basic creed, “Jesus is Lord.” LaGrone made clear that the GMC is “a church that does not hate or exclude LGBTQ persons,” but rather offers them the same welcome into repentance and new life that the church offers

everyone, which provoked enthusiastic applause.

Secondly, this Global Methodist annual conference has a lean bureaucracy, with a focus on empowering local congregations as the center of mission. Webb spoke of the need for accountability as a *two-way street* between bishops and congregations.

Within each of its “circuits” (intentionally smaller versions of what United Methodists call “districts”) this Global Methodist annual conference is planning to soon have all congregations jointly sup-

Greenway celebrated
how “none of us have our
fingers crossed behind
our backs” in reciting the
Apostles’ Creed.

port one international mission partnership, one national mission, one local mission, and one new church plant.

Speakers explained that the GMC practices “a modified appointment system,” in which there are “no forced marriages,” which have caused such pain in the UMC. In Global Methodism, both pastors and congregations have the right to say “no” to a suggested match, although “there’s not an unlimited number of NOs.” The Rev. **Leah Hidde-Gregory**, the pioneering President Pro Tempore of the Mid-Texas Global Methodist Annual Conference, encouraged fellow clergy sisters to trust the system. She cited a recent example of a Global Methodist clergywoman in her annual conference who was the first choice of three different congregations seeking a new pastor.

With less bureaucracy, there was less administrative business to conduct. The business session was extraordinarily brief. Greenway invited participants to discuss the short business agenda presented for

approval. But apparently no one was interested in offering debate or floor speeches, which showed a new level of trust.

Thirdly, the break-out workshops were biblical and theologically grounded, and should make a positive difference in how congregations approach their ministries.

Hidde-Gregory led an interactive workshop on renewing and revitalizing existing congregations, covering such topics as re-focusing on discipleship, welcoming demographically diverse visitors, and overcoming roadblocks such as a “scarcity mentality.”

Church-planting pioneer **Steve Cordle** led a workshop encouraging *every* congregation to help plant new congregations, for the sake of better reaching new disciples, providing new leadership opportunities for members, and re-energizing the parent congregation.

The Rev. Dr. **Kevin Watson**, Director of Academic Growth and Formation at Asbury Seminary (no relation to David), stressed the importance of having spiritual fathers and mothers in congregations, who can mentor spiritually younger believers as they grow and face inevitable crises of faith on the journey to becoming fully devoted.

David Watson’s workshop outlined “the consensual tradition” of historic Christian orthodoxy, refuted popular misconceptions, and taught how Global Methodists’ thinking about contemporary issues must be shaped by this firmer foundation rather than emotivist, relativist, shallow, or fad-chasing mindsets. He warned that the GMC was at risk of losing its rich, faithful Methodist heritage if it was not intentional about preserving it, including by recovering key characteristics of Methodism that were abandoned or distorted in the UMC. Among other things, the New Testament professor explained how John Wesley’s promotion of “social holiness” meant communal discipleship—in contrast to how United Methodist leaders have long

Continued at the top of page 10

misrepresented this phrase as dragging the church into divisive, left-wing social-justice causes—and noted that Methodism’s founder only used this particular phrase *once* in his extensive writings.



Asbury Theological Seminary Dean of Chapel the Rev. Dr. Jessica LaGrone addresses the Allegheny West convening annual conference held October 12-14 at Reynoldsburg Community Church outside of Columbus, Ohio (Photo: Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference)

LaGrone conceded that not everyone would want what this new expression of Methodism offers. But for those eager to be part of this new movement, she summarized, “Welcome to the Global Methodist Church, where”:

- “Annual conferences look less like rules and reports, and more like holy conferencing and prayer and renewal”;
- Bishops contend for integrity and faithfulness;
- Pastors can move on from a congregation, trusting their denominational system to ensure that their successor in their former congregation will build on the same biblical theological foundation, and their new church will have already had the same faithful foundation laid;
- Small- and medium-sized congregations (which she called “normal churches”) enjoy similar privileges to those long enjoyed by large United Methodist congregations of having greater input in the selection of their pastors.

Speakers compassionately addressed the wounds almost everyone there had brought with them, and offered assurances of the GMC’s commitment to not repeat the United Methodist Church’s mistakes.

“I know for you all to come here was difficult,” Lowry acknowledged, and “required trusting God.” He urged facing our own grief from the losses—including lost friendships and feeling that years of self-sacrificial service to the UMC “have gone down the drain.” “It must be faced, and not denied!,” Lowry preached.

Lowry pivoted to noting that “true healing cannot take place without confession,” declaring “it’s past time to confess *our own* complicity” in unfaithfulness.

But while healing our wounds is essential, Global Methodists must ultimately, as Greenway exhorted, “look forward” and “not keep looking back.” Kevin Watson recalled Joshua preparing to finally lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, urging this Global Methodist annual conference to focus on God’s exciting new future rather than the wounds and wrongs of the past.

Speakers emphasized that we are not saved in isolation, but into community. And what a wondrously large community this Global Methodist annual conference is! The Allegheny West Provisional Annual Conference has received 539 congregations, with more coming, and already has nine new church starts. This makes it larger than the majority of American United Methodist annual conferences, and it is the largest Global Methodist annual conference. A repeated proverb of Greenway’s was to “be gentle with those who come early and gracious with those who come late.”

With such growth, now almost anywhere you go in Ohio or western Pennsylvania (except for the city of Pittsburgh), there is probably a Global Methodist congregation within a half-hour drive.

Those gathered still face serious challenges.

Lowry warned, “make no mistake: the road ahead will be difficult.” Global

Methodists must beware “that disease of cultural Christianity” which is presently “crashing down around us.”

Other speakers underscored that the conference’s congregations need a deeper change than merely changing the denominational affiliation on their signs. Hidde-Gregory urged tackling the problem of how the membership of many congregations who have recently emerged from the UMC is much older and whiter than those who live around the church building. She insisted on the urgency of Global Methodists abandoning the culture of “just checking the box of one hour on Sunday,” because “God is calling us to be an army that goes out and makes disciples.”

Greenway admitted that the GMC will have its own internal problems and disagreements, but implored conference members to not indulge the devil’s desire that they turn against each other.

Since church members will die, move away, or walk away, Cordle stressed the necessity of the GMC continually bringing in new people, especially through aggressive church planting, in order to even maintain its numbers, let alone grow. “We don’t need another shrinking denomination” in America, he said.

But, Lowry reminded, “it doesn’t all depend on us—thanks be to God!”

Greenway preached that Paul himself may have felt tempted to water down his message to avoid offense. But instead, wherever he went, the apostle both named sin and offered grace, provoking violent opposition, but also seeing great fruit, as the Jesus movement grew from 120 followers to tens of thousands in just a few decades.

As Greenway put it, “Serving God in a fallen world is not for the faint of heart—but we are not the faint of heart, we are the church of Jesus Christ!” ✝



John Lomperis directs the UMAction program at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.



Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director of the 9Marks ministry (Photo: YouTube screen capture)

Romans 13 and the Liberal Tradition

by Rick Plasterer

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director of the 9Marks ministry, spoke at the Second Prince George's Conference on Reformed Theology at Greenbelt Baptist Church in Greenbelt, Maryland, on September 30 regarding the authority of governments expounded in Romans chapter 13.

He examined the question of whether, in fact, God commands obedience to all governments, and how in particular people who have a liberal democratic background should understand Paul's teaching in this chapter.

"American Christians don't quite know what to do with this particular text," Leeman said. Does it mean that Christians are obliged to submit to every government, no matter how bad? Does it mean that "if you resist Hitler, really, you resist God?" People "sit uneasily ...

with the text." Are certain laws or policies enacted by the government we live under evil and if so, should they be obeyed? Leeman endeavored to unpack exactly what the text means, but turned first to the background Americans bring to the text.

Biblical Morality and Liberal Doctrine

American government was founded, he said, on "some version of philosophical liberalism." Liberalism has its different varieties, but that America was founded on general principles that, whatever else they are, must be acknowledged as liberal is undeniable. A just government, it is thought, is established to secure people's liberties. It "maximizes" liberties as far as possible.

Political debate in American history generally involves which liberties people

want and should have. People on the Left want "social liberties" or "moral liberties." Some want freedom to dispose of their unborn children. Others on the Right want economic freedom, to be realized in some measure by lowering taxes and reducing the size and presence of government. This latter objective was an important motive for the American Revolution. But both Left and Right "foreground" liberty to justify their claims. The Protestant Reformation and its doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" contributed to ideas of self-government and liberty, Leeman maintained. The contending Protestant sects at the time of the American Revolution made religious liberty important in the constitutional order.

But he pointed out that at the time of the Revolution, "there was a broad moral

Continued on page 12

Romans 13 and the Liberal Tradition

continued from page 11

consensus” based on Judeo-Christian morality. Americans were divided “on the sacraments [and] church government.” But since there was consensus on biblical morality, if not ecclesiastical doctrine and practice, the new nation was able to “get a long way towards justice.”

American liberalism’s goal is “maximizing liberty.” But “is that what the Bible says?” he asked. “Not quite. The Bible says a just government is the one that punishes the wrong and approves the right” (Romans 13:3). Similarly, the First Epistle of Peter commands submission to government authority, since government authorities were established “to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14). So despite early American agreement on biblical morality, biblical and liberal morality are “two different forms of moral evaluation.”

Because of this difference, “the more Americans define justice as maximizing liberty, the more we tend to set aside” ideas of right and wrong. Doing this, he said, “works when there is a broad moral consensus, when we all basically agree on right and wrong.” But, he asked, “what happens when that moral consensus vanishes?” What happens to “rights, freedom” in that case? As the moral consensus vanishes, “different values” are put into the logic and rhetoric of freedom. There are now “rights” to things that would have been wrong before. Having more individual rights works against those with disfavored moral doctrines. Grave and very basic violations of morality can occur, as when the state sanctions the killing of unborn children for the quality of life of adults. With the same justification, the government can declare a right to define one’s own sex. If the new freedoms receive social approval, those holding to the old morality are penalized.

Privatizing and Eliminating Biblical Morality

One way to handle this conflict has been to claim that one is “personally opposed” to a new freedom (such as the right to abortion), but in favor of the right to make that choice. This is, of course, ludicrous. If abortion is evil, it should be illegal. He noted that **David French**—a political commentator and former attorney who has argued high-profile religious liberty cases—takes the same position on same-sex marriage. Leeman said that French appealed to “the logic of religious liberty” in doing so. French claimed that America “can create space for people who have deeply different world views to live together, work together, and thrive together even as they stay true to their different religious faiths and moral convictions.”

But some conviction must prevail in the public square, and for French, Congress correctly determined it would be same-sex marriage in its Respect for Marriage Act (2022). Thus, privately French opposes same-sex marriage, but publicly supports it. To this way of thinking that gives priority to personal freedom and peace of mind, there is “no rational, publicly acceptable” argument in support of biblical or other traditional, religious morality, Leeman said. This writer would add that to say that abortion or same-sex marriage should be legal is necessarily to say that they are *not* evil, which contradicts both the Bible and the natural law on which all reasonable people should agree. But as Leeman observed, the application of biblical principles (even if they coincide with common sense) are regarded by many as an imposition. Personal freedom is held to override both religious doctrine and rational argument. “My freedom, my rights, my choice” is the slogan regardless of any other considerations. This attitude (which it is, more than an argument) can be used against any moral principle and

can be seen even among Christians. They are effectively “working within a liberal framework.”

A Biblical Framework for Just Government

But Leeman said, “something about this isn’t right.” The apostle Peter declares that “governments exist to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do good” (1 Peter 2:14). “What language do we use,” Leeman asked, if we may not speak with the voice of either faith or reason to moral deficiencies in society?

Of course there is none if personal freedom against traditional culture is held supreme in public law and policy. But if political authorities are allowed to reasonably consider the things that make for a good life and society (as really must be done to know what rights people should have), then biblical principles can be advanced as the superior basis for society. Leeman addressed how Christians should engage questions of justice based on Romans 13, and offered six principles:

1. **We should be subject to the governing authorities, because authority comes from God.**
2. **Resisting the government incurs just judgment.** Neither laws nor governments are always just, however. They should not “be obeyed in all circumstances.” Governments have the authority they do from God, not simply from the ruler(s) or the people. If they did, it could be unlimited. But because the government’s authority comes from God, it is also limited by him.
3. **A just government approves what is good.**
4. **The government should bear the sword against wrongdoing.** But this is based on what God declares to be good and bad. The government exceeds its authority if it does otherwise and becomes “an unjust government.” (This leads to a discussion of “civil disobedience, rebellion,

Continued at the top of page 13

[and] revolution,” but Leeman said he would not address that.)

5. **We should obey governments to avoid punishment, but also for the sake of conscience** (doing the right thing).
6. **We should pay taxes and give honor to those in the government to whom it is owed.**

“Paul is not laying out an entire philosophy of government,” Leeman said. Romans 13 must be read in light of what was said in Romans 12: “vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). Individuals are not authorized to execute justice. It is through the state that God executes punitive justice. “We all know what good and bad are based on natural law,” as the Epistle to the Romans asserts (Romans 1:20-21, 2:14-15). But Leeman proposed that Romans 13 does not charge the government with addressing “every conceivable good, every conceivable bad.” Human authorities, he said, are specific to particular tasks or “domains.” A pastor has authority in a church, a parent has authority in a family, a teacher has authority in a classroom, a workplace manager has authority in a workplace, a store clerk has a certain authority in a store. Similarly, the government has proper authority. The question is, what does it extend to? Government is primarily charged with keeping the peace, Leeman maintained. He pointed out that Paul was speaking of pagan rulers, yet they had authority from God to keep the peace. Rulers have temporal authority, in the here and now. The shedding of blood is to be required by the shedding of blood (Genesis 9:6). The government’s power extends only to this life. Thus, our ultimate fear should not be toward the state, but toward God.

Because governments have only temporal authority, we should work to further the “protectionist” function of government, whereas the church exists for a “perfectionist” function. “The state

has the power of the sword,” whereas the church has the power of the keys of heaven. The church’s counsel is “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Of course, Leeman said, governments from that of Pharaoh to the Beast of the Book of Revelation have sought “not to protect God’s people, but to devour God’s people.” But such governments are not exercising legitimate authority. God-given functions of government do not inter-

Governments are justly
charged with giving
freedom “to live peaceful
and quiet lives in all
godliness,” not with giving
freedom to do anything
one wants.

fere with discipleship.

Although governments have only temporal authority, nevertheless, the purpose for which God has ordained them is to prepare persons for redemption. “What is the purpose of guardrails on the road?” Leeman asked. They have a “proximate” purpose “to keep the car on the road.” But their “ultimate purpose” is to ensure that one reaches one’s destination. Similarly, governments first of all exist “to keep people alive.” But governments are finally intended to keep people alive “so that they might know God.” The “common grace” that God gives governments to carry out their functions “sets the stage” for saving grace.

Two passages from the Bible make this clear, Leeman said. He referred to Acts 17:26-28: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach

out for him and find him.” Secondly, 1 Timothy 2:1-4 commands that “petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth.” Governments are justly charged with giving freedom “to live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness,” not with giving freedom to do anything one wants.

Although the ultimate objective of government is the salvation of souls, governments are “not to make disciples ... That’s the church’s job,” Leeman said. The government is exercising its “limited jurisdiction” of maintaining public order when, for instance, it “builds the streets ... protects the womb, protects the currency, protects marriage and the family (‘not redefining marriage’),” and provides equal protection before the law “so that the church can call people to salvation.” It must recognize the sanctity of life, because all people are “made in God’s image, and we’re all called to love and serve one another.” Legitimate government thus has a limited jurisdiction. We should “vote for the party or the candidate” that furthers the government’s legitimate protective functions.

Romans 13 is thus not a mandate to obey any and all tyrannies, nor to obey commands that involve disobedience to God, but to protect life, ensure liberty within in the bounds of human nature, and preserve rights to property so that people may flourish and fulfill their ultimate duty, which is to glorify God and serve him forever. ✝



Rick J. Plasterer is a staff writer for the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Beautiful Anglican Mists

continued from page 16

These majority white Anglican denominations have followed the sad trajectory of other theologically liberalized Protestant denominations. Newer and more conservative Anglican denominations are sometimes growing but are much smaller. Even if they were to grow quickly, it would take generations for them to attain what denominations like the Episcopal Church once had. The theologically orthodox Anglican Church in North America has under 130,000, or less than 10 percent of the Episcopal Church’s current U.S. membership, although it does now have current attendance equivalent

to 22 percent of that of the Episcopal Church.

There’s no point in waxing too nostalgic about the once significant role of Anglicanism in American public life. It will not be restored, but we can be grateful for its magnificent legacy. Its accomplishments have much to teach us today. Much of early British America was literally founded as an Anglican society. Recently I was vividly reminded of this history by visiting the two earliest English colonies in America.

The Lost Colony at Roanoke Island in coastal North Carolina was the first

attempt in 1585. There evidently was an Anglican cleric who baptized the first English child born in America, **Virginia Dare**. The native friend to the English colony, **Manteo**, was baptized shortly before Virginia and was likely the first native convert in America to Anglicanism. He and Virginia Dare are celebrated by the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina. Both Manteo and Virginia Dare disappeared with the colony into the mists of history.

Continued at top of page 15

Disciples Suffer Massive Membership Drop Post 2019

continued from page 6

vibrant ministry, and I do not expect that every Disciples congregation will be gone in the next decade. Far from it! But the Disciples struggle without a distinctive “brand” (partly due to the ecumenical nature of the movement that emphasized Christian unity).

Renewal organizations, including Disciple Heritage Fellowship, exist to support churches with a common heritage in the Stone-Campbell movement.

It is now common for me to run across other churches meeting in spaces

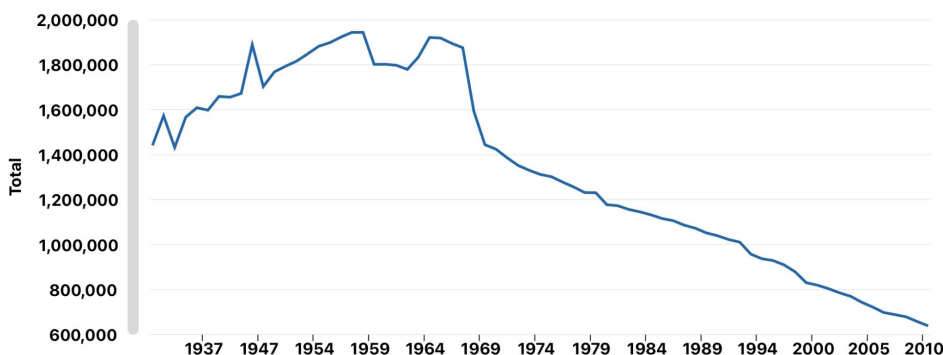
that were once DoC church buildings, even in parts of the United States that experience population growth.

Disciples have firmly moved in a theologically revisionist direction on matters of human sexuality, gender expression, and radical individual moral autonomy. The 2023 General Assembly meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, July 29-August 1, 2023, emphasized the “kin-dom of God” rather than God’s Kingdom.

Close to IRD’s offices in downtown Washington, the beautiful National City

Christian Church was constructed in the 1930s as the denomination’s national church. Built to accommodate more than a thousand worshippers, the **John Russell Pope**-designed neoclassical structure is festooned with various iterations of pride/progress flags and Black Lives Matter signage. What it lacks is members, with online participants seeming to be the majority of those counted as attending services. Total membership dropped from 664 in 2019 to 275 in 2021. 📉

Chart data on clergy, members, and churches are taken from the National Council of Churches’ Historic Archive CD and print editions of the Council’s Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.



Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Members (1925 – 2010)



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

Unlike the Lost Colony, the 1607 settlement at Jamestown endured as Britain's first surviving American colony. It too included from the start an Anglican cleric, and the original thatched and mud Anglican church occupied the center of the fortification. Church attendance was mandatory.

Eventually, a more permanent brick church was constructed whose front tower is the only remaining above ground structure from Jamestown. A new memorial church was added onto the old tower on the 300th anniversary in 1907. Early Jamestown notables remain buried beneath. America's first elected legislative assembly convened in the church in 1619, representing embryonic democratic America. **Pocahontas**, the native chief's daughter who helped save Jamestown during famine, was likely baptized here. The attempted native massacre of the Virginia Colony in 1624, which killed 20 percent of the colonists, would have been worse absent the warning from a native converted Anglican boy recalled as **Chanco**. The Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia has a retreat center named for him.

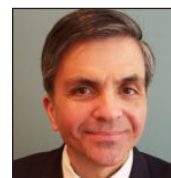
The Church of England was the established church for the Virginia Colony until post-revolutionary Virginia disestablished it at the urging of **Thomas Jefferson** and **James Madison**, themselves both lifelong Anglicans who favored full religious liberty. Nearly all of the southern Founding Fathers like **George Washington** were Anglicans, among others, like **Alexander Hamilton**. It's impossible to imagine America without its Anglican roots, which fed the seedlings of liberty, public order, and social tolerance.

After disestablishment in states like Virginia, Anglicanism became the church of the wealthy and upper middle class in the United States, producing presidents, senators, supreme court justices, and countless other leaders. It was numerically overtaken exponentially by the revivalist churches

emerging from the Second Great Awakening. But what it lacked in sheer numbers it more than compensated for in cultural influence.

Some Episcopalians still enact the assumptions and rites of past social prestige. But the Anglican movement in America in all its branches has become a niche culture for persons who appreciate its historic rites and beauty of worship. Evangelical nondenominational Christianity, largely Baptist in ethos, has become America's default Protestant religion. This is not good or bad news. Christianity, especially Protestantism, is never static. Its churn across the decades and centuries never ends.

In another half century or so, some new form of Christian practice might become paramount in America. Perhaps the last living U.S. Episcopalians can greet that new church movement's ascendancy, grateful for the past but also hopeful about the future. God always presides over his churches.✝



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

Bad Church Advice on Hamas

continued from page 7

Hamas presumably would like to drown advancing Israelis in blood from its vast underground tunnels filled with Iranian supplied arms. Israel, we can expect, is planning intelligent alternatives. All of lawful civilization must support Israel's neutralization of Hamas. Hopefully, Gaza can be liberated from Hamas rule and have a decent government that cares for its citizens. But Israel's vocation is protecting its people. We can pray that some people of Gaza want alternatives to Hamas and desire peace with Israel.

Such peace would not be possible if the counsel of some Western church prelates and groups were accepted, which thankfully it won't be. A ceasefire now would undermine any serious hope for peace or justice by strengthening Hamas. No long-term peace or justice is possible under uninterrupted Hamas rule over Gaza.

Church prelates and church groups, with all Christians, seek to serve the Prince of Peace, understanding that his peace will consummate only with his return. Until then, we seek approximate

peace, which is only possible if governments protect their people and collaborate together for coexistence and the common good. Hamas is uninterested in that project.

Christian leaders should call for peace but only with the understanding that force may be required to achieve it. They should not, as church officers, offer detailed policy advice, to which they have not been called. God has ordained governments, accountable to their peoples, to decide specific policy. Church officials should point to a vision of a better world amid prayer. Ideally, they offer sound broad principles, rooted in realism about fallen human nature, which edify governments and peoples.

The churchly pleas for immediate ceasefire between Hamas and Israel do not edify anyone. Their advice is cheap and irrelevant, undermining Christian witness. Hamas is a terror group, and Israel is a government. Wise church leaders should know the difference. And they should offer Christian Realism, not Christian naiveté.✝



Beautiful Anglican Mists

by Mark Tooley

It's been half mockingly but half seriously remarked that the last surviving U.S. Episcopalian is likely now among us. In the 1960s The Episcopal Church's membership peaked at 3.6 million. It's now down to a mostly aging 1.6 million, and declining fast. Like the Unitarian Universalist Church, it'll likely endure as an institution almost indefinitely thanks to considerable financial assets, even without many people. But its demise, with other Mainline Protestant denominations, has been dramatic. Although never huge in numbers, the Episcopal Church across centuries

served as America's religious finishing school, educating our leaders and providing liturgies for our national life.

The Episcopal Church is part of the global Anglican Communion, a spiritual fraternity of many national churches that descend from the Church of England, which itself is fast shrinking. A recent poll of Church of England clergy found most saying Britain is no longer a Christian nation. While their church remains the official state church, fewer than half of the British now identify as Christian. The Church of England's average worship number on a typical Sunday is only about half a million. Its pageantry shines

during British public rites, such as funerals, weddings, and coronations. But its direct impact on most British people is sadly minimal.

Anglicanism is vibrant in Africa, where most of Anglicanism's 70-80 million adherents now live, especially in Nigeria. But everywhere in the white majority Anglosphere, Anglicanism is in steep decline, from North America and Britain to Australia and New Zealand. This decline, absent direct divine intervention, is likely irreversible in majority European societies.

Continued on page 14



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