

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Fall 2019



New York Presbyterian Church Hosts Pagan Deity

Page 12

ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ What Nurtures and What Kills Churches? page 3
- ▶ Duke University, Methodism, and Discrimination page 8
- ▶ What Are America's Largest Seminaries in 2019? page 9
- ▶ Making Sins into Rights page 10
- ▶ Hymn Society Releases 'Queer Hymns' for LGBTQIA2S+ page 13



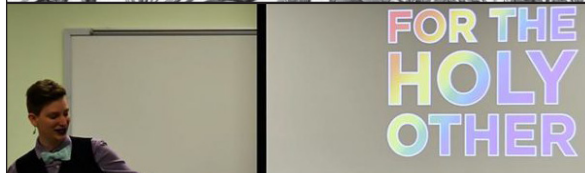
Anglicans consecrate their new sanctuary of the Falls Church Anglican in Falls Church, Virginia. See story on page 14. (Photo: The Falls Church Anglican)

FEATURES

- 10 MAKING SINS INTO RIGHTS
by Rick Plasterer



- 12 HYMN SOCIETY RELEASES
'QUEER HYMNS' FOR
LGBTQIA2S+
by Jeffrey Walton



- 16 IRD DIARY:
JOSHUA HARRIS DENOUNCES
CHRISTIANITY, DOESN'T DISTORT
IT
by Chelsen Vicari



PROGRAMS

- Church News 4
- International Briefs 6
- United Methodist
- 8 Duke University, Methodism, and Discrimination Mark Tooley
- Evangelical
- 9 What Are America's Largest Seminaries in 2019? Chelsen Vicari
- Presbyterian
- 12 New York Presbyterian Church Hosts Pagan Deity Josiah Aiden

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Cover: A sculpture of the Sviatovid idol, based off of a Medieval pagan deity, on display at the United Presbyterian Church of Binghamton, New York in September 2019. (Photo: Courtesy United Presbyterian Church of Binghamton)

What Nurtures and What Kills Churches?

In this issue **Jeff Walton** writes about the opening of Falls Church Anglican's glorious new sanctuary outside of Washington, D.C. (See "Itinerant Anglicans and Consecration of a New Home," page 14.) Their history is extraordinary. George Washington served on the parish vestry, and the original historic sanctuary dated to the 1760s. After the Episcopal Church elected its first openly homosexual bishop in 2003, igniting a schism, The Falls Church, one of that denomination's larger congregations, quit to help form the new Anglican Church in North America, aligned with growing Anglicanism in the Global South.

After litigation, Falls Church Anglican lost its property and was forced into seven years of roaming, which included often meeting at a Catholic high school in Arlington, Virginia. Its new sanctuary, costing more than \$20 million, has a prominent place in Fairfax County, its steeple looming over a major commuter route. It's also now closer to ethnically more diverse communities.

Despite litigation, losing its original historic property, and having no permanent base for much of the last 7 years, Falls Church Anglican has continued to thrive. As Jeff notes, it has more than 2,000 members, and its new sanctuary seats up to 1,000. More impressively, even after losing its property it founded eight new congregations in the D.C. area and beyond, which now have collective membership of nearly 1,500. The Episcopal congregation that retains Falls Church Anglican's old original property cannot match this record. Of course, the Episcopal Church, like all liberal Protestant denominations in America and around the world, is fast declining. It's lost half its membership since the 1960s and 27% just since 2003.

A recent "RealClear Religion" column featured this headline: "Is Political Activism Responsible for the Decline of the Episcopal Church?" It explained: "The Episcopal Church, and indeed most of the mainline Protestant denominations, have traded the wants and needs of their parishioners for alignment with the social and political views of what passes in this country for the intelligentsia." There's a lot of truth here. The social and political views of Mainline Protestant seminaries closely align with secular academia, and many if not most Mainline clergy parrot those views.

But the politics predominant among Mainline Protestant elites are not, I think, the utmost cause of their 55 year-long implosion, although the membership decline correlates with their increasing political radicalization in the 1960s. The politics in many cases became at least a supplement to—if not a complete substitute for—the Gospel's call for salvation, repentance, and transformation. Early in the 20th Century the Social Gospel, in



Falls Church Anglican Rector Sam Ferguson (left) and Bishop John Guernsey (right) celebrate communion at the consecration of the church's new sanctuary in Falls Church, Virginia on Sunday, September 8, 2019. (Photo: The Falls Church Anglican)

its frenzy to reform society, shifted from soul saving to political utopianism. The Liberation Theology of the 1960s–1980s amplified this shift.

Theological Modernism, which minimized or denied Christianity's supernatural aspects, is now mostly over. Liberal Protestantism is now comfortable with miracles and divine interventions. But soul winning still is not very large on its agenda. The LGBTQIA+ movement with which nearly all of liberal Protestantism now identifies is especially focused on affirmation rather than transformation. Under this rubric, church becomes a self-celebration. But the historic Gospel is ultimately about self-denial and following Christ to the cross.

Self-celebration with its wide and easy path superficially seems more appealing. But religions that demand little to nothing typically command few adherents and little energy. They make few converts. Why should they? Everybody is already wonderful! And everyone can self-celebrate at home, without need of church or other institutions. Growing religions, Christian or otherwise, intuit that all humanity realizes in some sense its spiritual quandary and is in search of redemption. Movements and organizations, religious or not, that are energetic and growing call for

Continued on page 15

Mark Tooley



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

Seminary Chapel Hosts Plant Confessional

Students at New York's Union Theological Seminary held a chapel service in September during which participants confessed to plants.

"Today in chapel, we confessed to plants. Together, we held our grief, joy, regret, hope, guilt and sorrow in prayer; offering them to the beings who sustain us but whose gift we too often fail to honor," Union tweeted on its official account. "What do you confess to the plants in your life?"

Rather than confess transgressions against an endangered grove or old growth forest, the student-led September 17 service featured what appeared to be a collection of houseplants and herbs. A photo accompanying the tweet showed a young seminarian seated on the floor facing cattails, palm, lily, and potted basil.

Union is among the most theologically progressive U.S. seminaries, known

for political activism and various liberation theology expressions tied to identity. Originally established by Presbyterians, the independent seminary is officially non-denominational.

Episcopal Divinity School merged into Union as an Anglican studies program following the shuttering of its Cambridge, Massachusetts, campus in 2017. Union also educates Unitarian Universalists and has Muslim faculty, among other religious traditions.

The plant confessional was met with derision on Twitter, as respondents joked the Union tweet was "low-hanging fruit." Others chimed in: "I think you smoked one of the plants first," and "I confess that some of them are delicious. Not you, kale, but some of the others."

The penance (confession) is one of seven sacraments in Roman Catholicism. In liturgical Christian traditions,

including Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and some forms of Anglicanism, a priest hearing confession provides absolution for the remission of sin and adherents are reconciled with the church community. It is unclear if the Union chapel service sought absolution from the plants themselves and with what community or ecosystem the participants were reconciled.

"In worship, our community confessed the harm we've done to plants, speaking directly in repentance. This is a beautiful ritual," Union later tweeted, explaining that the chapel was conducted as part of Union Professor **Claudio Carvalhaes'** class, "Extractivism: A Ritual/Liturgical Response."

"We are in the throes of a climate emergency, a crisis created by humanity's arrogance, our disregard for Creation. Far too often, we see the natural world only as resources to be extracted for our use, not divinely created in their own right—worthy of honor, thanks and care," Carvalhaes wrote. "Because plants aren't capable of verbal response, does that mean we shouldn't engage with them?"

Disciples of Christ Claim Distinction of Fastest Declining Church

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is on track to claim the top spot for fastest declining major U.S.-based denomination for 2018.

Total membership declined from 411,140 in 2017 to 382,248 (-7%) while average worship attendance declined from 139,936 to 124,437 (-11%). Baptisms dropped from 4,344 to 3,782 (-13%).

Continued on page 5



A student at Union Theological Seminary offers prayers of confession to plants during a September 17 student-led chapel service in New York City (Photo: Union Theological Seminary/Twitter)

Methodist School Appoints Muslim Chaplain

United Methodist affiliated Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, announced in August its first-ever non-Christian chaplain, hiring an Islamic woman as Muslim Community Coordinator.

“Shenandoah is open to people of all faiths, or no faith, exploring their belief system and being leaders in this world for the greater good. **Hanaa [Unus]** provides the opportunity to be what we always say we value, and that’s a place that cherishes religious diversity,” University Dean of Spiritual Life **Justin Allen**, an ordained United Methodist, explained.

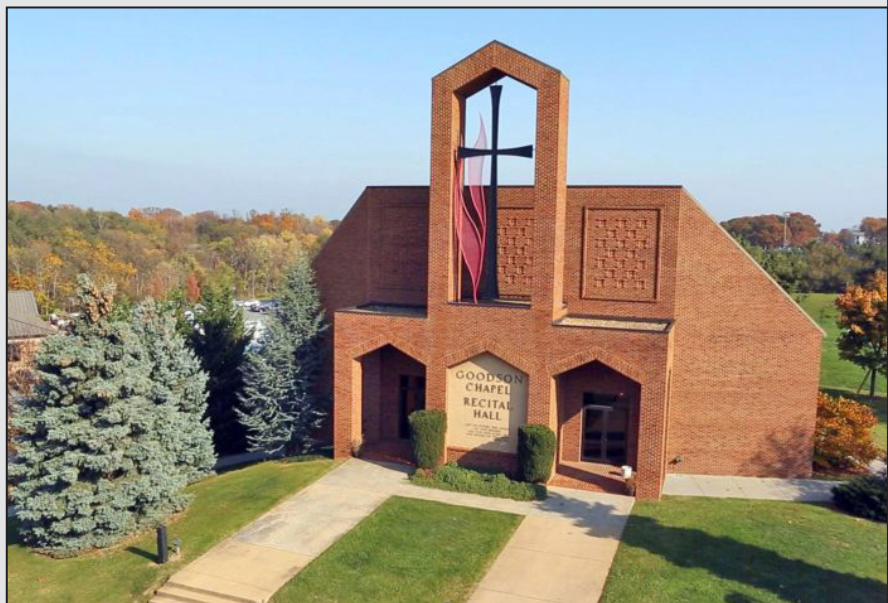
Shenandoah joins United Methodist affiliated Emory University, which recently hired a Unitarian Universalist as senior chaplain. More than a hundred universities and colleges affiliate with the United Methodist Church.

“We’ve always wanted to be more inclusive and more diverse,” the school news release explains about hiring a Muslim chaplain.

Shenandoah University’s Office of Spiritual Life includes a cleric from the Church Within a Church, an LGBTQ advocacy group. There are six listed staffers in Shenandoah’s Office of Spiritual Life, all of whom appear to be progressive.

It is not clear if Shenandoah’s new Muslim chaplain supports traditional Islamic beliefs about marriage and gender. Those beliefs are closer to official United Methodist teaching than what has been espoused by colleagues at Shenandoah in the Office of Spiritual Life.

“Hopefully, if students can learn about different faiths and different cultures, they can go out into the diverse world and be the change-makers Shenandoah hopes they will be,” Unus says in the release. ✚



Goodson Chapel on the campus of United Methodist-affiliated Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia (Photo: Shenandoah University)

At the current rate, the denomination will shrink by another 50 percent within a decade. This annual rate of decline exceeds that of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which reported a nearly 5 percent membership drop for the year 2018 and held the distinction of “fastest declining” for much of the decade.

The dramatic decline doesn’t appear to be registering among top denominational officials.

“I am genuinely hopeful for the future of this Church,” wrote the Rev. **Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens**, General Minister and President in an August 15 reflection following the denomination’s biannual General Assembly. “I saw signs of life and growth everywhere, of Disciples who are learning to abide whether that means waiting with

expectation or tarrying a while in the Presence.”

Owens described the denomination’s members as “primed for growing into what the Lord has in mind for us—to become a healing, helping force for good in this fragmented world.” Addressing sustained decline that has shed 80 percent of members since the denomination crested in 1964 did not appear to be a concern: “We must continue to abide, to remain, to persist.”

Denominational officials strongly embrace social justice causes. At a post-Assembly rally at the Iowa Capitol, Disciples’ public policy groups joined with ecumenical and interfaith partners on the religious left to proclaim support for government directed poverty alleviation programs. The denomination also embraces a sanctuary movement to shield

illegal immigrants from law enforcement, supports LGBT causes, and partners with an “Indigenous womxn-led collective” to “shift social and environmental paradigms by dismantling colonial institutions and replacing them with Indigenous practices.” (“Womxn” is the alternative spelling of the English word “women” preferred by some feminists to avoid using the word “men,” which reflects the biblical narrative that woman was taken out of man as described in Genesis 2:21–23.)

The July 20–24 General Assembly gathering in Des Moines, Iowa, included a resolution to receive the gifts of those with “gender-diverse identities.”

“God is further known to us as the male-bodied Jesus embodying God’s feminine Wisdom; and as the non-gendered Spirit,” the resolution reads. ✚

IRD, China Aid Join Together in Statement of Solidarity with Hong Kong Christians

As China in October commemorated 70 years of Communist rule, the Institute on Religion and Democracy and China Aid, joined by other Christian leaders and advocates, sent a Statement of Solidarity to Hong Kong's Christians and all those who fight to maintain their freedom in Hong Kong.

"We ask God to protect your fragile freedom and not allow this small bastion of religious liberty for Christians to be compromised and oppressed. We also urge the United States government to stand more strongly and more vocally

with the people of Hong Kong until your full freedoms are safe and democracy is guaranteed," wrote dozens of Christian leaders and religious freedom advocates to Hong Kong protesters in the statement of solidarity.

View the full statement and list of signatories online at www.TheIRD.org.

"We are concerned that churches and Christian organizations in the United States have not made a united appeal on behalf of the people of Hong Kong as China attempts to run roughshod over their democracy and, especially, their

religious freedom," wrote IRD Religious Liberty Program Director **Faith McDonnell**. "We are especially honored to have been joined in our communications to the Hong Kong Christians and other protesters by **Fengsuo Zhou**, one of the leaders of the Student Movement at Tiananmen Square, and Number Five on the Communist Party's Most Wanted List in 1989. Mr. Zhou, then a physics major at university, now the co-founder of Humanitarian China, understands more than most of us, the struggle of the Hong Kong protesters for their freedom. And by

the grace of God, Mr. Zhou found perfect freedom in knowing Jesus as well."

McDonnell expressed IRD's concerns to Dr. **Bob Fu**, the founder and president of China Aid. Fu, who works with persecuted Christians and other religious believers in China, warns that the proposed extradition law by China is a wider threat than many realize.

"The extradition law aims to extradite anyone, including foreigners, who live in or travel through Hong Kong to be arrested and tried in mainland China if they are deemed as 'criminal suspects' by China," Fu explained. ✠



Protesters hold signs and U.S. flags appealing to U.S. President Donald Trump during a rally in Hong Kong, China, on 8 September 2019 (Photo Credit: Reuters)



President Donald J. Trump meets with survivors of religious persecution from 17 countries, including The Rev. Samson and Pastor Gam Seng from Myanmar, on July 17, 2019, in the Oval Office of the White House. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Myanmar Military Drops Case against Pastor

Four days after the National Council of Churches (NCC) and American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) expressed concern for the safety of two Baptist clergy in Myanmar, their prayers were answered as a lawsuit against the clergy was withdrawn.

The NCC reported on September 5 that the Rev. Dr. **Hkalam Samson**, President of the Kachin Baptist Convention, faced a lawsuit from a Myanmar military commander. The NCC statement decried “this move meant to intimidate and silence dissent by people of faith across Myanmar.”

In an appeal to church member communions, the NCC explained, “Both of these clergy, our brothers in Christ, attended the recent Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the U.S. State Department.” Both the NCC and ABCUSA believe the lawsuit,

instigated by Lt. Col. **Than Htike** of the Northern Command, was a response to Samson and Pastor **Lanjaw Gam Seng**’s presence in Washington.

Samson was part of a group of victims of persecution invited to The White House to meet President **Donald Trump** during the Ministerial. The Kachin leader discussed the state of religious freedom in Myanmar with the president. According to the Irrawaddy news service, court documents revealed that Htike’s complaint cited a live broadcast of the conversation between Samson and Trump from the Facebook page of the ABC program *World News Now*.

American Baptist Church USA put out an urgent request for prayer to its member churches for the upcoming Sunday, September 8. ABCUSA General Secretary Dr. **Lee Spitzer** reminded church members:

“In the book of Acts, when Peter and John were detained and threatened by authorities in Jerusalem, the church received their news and ‘raised their voices together in prayer to God.’ In part, here’s what they prayed: ‘Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus’ (Acts 4:24; 29-30). Now, it is our turn—indeed, our responsibility—to pray with faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit!”

On September 9, the ABCUSA shared news that the lawsuit against Samson had been dropped that day—the very day that Samson had been summoned to appear in court. Spitzer declared that it was “a special and significant answer to ABCUSA’s churches’ prayers and advocacy.” ✝

Duke University, Methodism, and Discrimination

by Mark Tooley



Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina (Photo: Duke University)

The Student Government Senate of United Methodist-related Duke University in North Carolina has refused to recognize Young Life, an evangelical young adult ministry, because it upholds traditional views on sex, which was deemed “discrimination.”

Young Life’s Statement of Faith affirms in sexual conduct only “intimate sexual activity between married heterosexual partners.” Their policy is identical to the United Methodist Church’s, whose Social Principles say “sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.”

Adding to the contradiction, officially sanctioned campus ministry groups include not only United Methodists but also Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, whose official teachings on marriage and sexuality are the same. There is also a Muslim campus group, which presumably affirms Islamic teaching that sex is only for male/female marriage. Several evangelical campus groups that are long-established at Duke, including InterVarsity, affirm the same orthodox teaching on sex.

In its unanimous vote against Young Life, the Duke student senate cited the by-laws for student organizations prohibiting “discrimination.”

“Any group that engages in invidious discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sex, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status shall be referred to the university administration under Section 2 of this Title. If and when adjudication by DSG is deemed appropriate, the group shall be punished on

conviction for the major offense of Discrimination,” the by-laws read.

A religious group teaching that sex is only for male/female marriage was deemed discriminatory, but logically the concern should not end there. Understandably all of the campus ministry groups are led by persons who adhere to their respective faiths. A Muslim campus ministry will not hire a Catholic to lead it, and a

**Duke was mostly founded
and sustained by
Methodism across 150 years.**

Catholic group will not hire a Baptist or a Hindu. As they thus promote their respective religions, they are discriminatory.

The Duke student senate presumably hasn’t yet tried to challenge or oust long-standing campus ministries because of their longevity. But its rejection of Young Life implies that any traditional religious group would have trouble gaining new access to Duke University in the current political environment.

Some traditional Christian groups are facing discrimination at university campuses because of their teachings of unique truth claims that are at odds with political correctness. In some cases they have successfully litigated against state schools. Duke University is private.

Duke was mostly founded and sustained by Methodism across 150 years. But as with nearly all of United Methodism’s 117 schools, its ties to church and Christian faith are increasingly remote.

Duke University is a large independent corporation that’s mostly indifferent to, if not increasingly embarrassed by, the United Methodist Church, despite Duke Divinity School being one of the denomination’s 13 official seminaries. In recent years the longtime policy that two-thirds of Duke’s trustees be nominated by North Carolina’s two United Methodist conferences was eliminated in favor of a self-nominating board. The United Methodist bishop of North Carolina and one United Methodist minister currently are Duke trustees.

Earlier this year Duke University joined most other nominally United Methodist affiliated schools to denounce United Methodism’s traditional marriage teaching that was reaffirmed at the church’s governing General Conference last February. Across decades Duke has journeyed from being meaningfully Methodist to generically Christian to religiously neutral to increasingly hostile to traditional religion.

As United Methodism globalizes and reconfigures, increasingly inconsequential affiliations with secularized schools likely will be amended or ended. And traditional United Methodists will need to create a new vision of meaningful Methodist higher education. ✚



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

What Are America's Largest Seminaries in 2019?

by Chelsen Vicari

In 2016, I set out to understand the state of Protestant seminaries in the United States by evaluating student enrollment among accredited schools. The results revealed that students seeking training for church ministry were overwhelmingly attracted to orthodox, evangelical institutions. Meanwhile, the smallest accredited Protestant seminaries in the nation included three Episcopal seminaries and two Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) seminaries.

I wondered if there had been any significant changes in attendance at America's largest Protestant seminaries across the last four academic years. How have those small, progressive seminaries fared over the last three years? Had they seen miraculous growth or continued decline?

Given that Fuller Theological Seminary fell from the number #1 position, a progressive Baptist seminary shuttered its doors, and a Seventh-day Adventist school now ranks among the top 10 largest seminaries, there are, indeed, changes worth noting.

Reports available through the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) provide data for member schools from 1975 until the 2018–2019 academic school year. Seminaries in these reports must be ATS-accredited and degree-granting institutions and not departments or houses of studies within universities. This data includes only full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) in seminaries in the United States that serve Protestant denominations.

Today the top three largest Protestant seminaries in the United States are all affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). This is a change from

Top 10 Largest U.S.

Protestant Seminaries 2015–2016

Full-time

Students Enrolled

#1 Fuller Theological Seminary	1,542
#2 Southern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,438
#3 Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,356
#4 Asbury Theological Seminary	1,189
#5 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,067
#6 Dallas Theological Seminary	1,059
#7 Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary	973
#8 New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary	815
#9 Trinity Evangelical Divinity School	755
#10 Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	731

2015–2016, when interdenominational Fuller Theological Seminary claimed the top position.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is now the largest Protestant seminary in the country, after a 20 percent rise

experiencing a slight ten percent decline in FTE between the 2015–2016 and 2018–2019 academic years.

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary—the seminary associated with Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan—moved into the #10 position, after a seven percent increase in FTE between 2015–2016 and 2018–2019.

While the six SBC-affiliated seminaries were among the largest in the U.S. back in 2016, two liberal CBF-affiliated institutions were among the smallest. Baptist Seminary of Kentucky enrolled 31 full-time students in 2015–2016. That number was down to 24 full-time students in 2018–2019.

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR) is a sadder story. BTSR was the first stand-alone seminary started as a progressive Baptist alternative to the six SBC institutions. In 2015–2016, BTSR had 42 FTE. By 2018–2019, that number dropped to 35 FTE. However, in November 2018, BTSR announced that it planned to close “due to financial pressures,” according to *Baptist News Global*. On June 30, 2019, BTSR officially closed its doors.

Liberal mainline Protestant denominations continue to claim seminaries with the lowest FTE attendance. The Episcopal Church-affiliated General Theological

Top 10 Largest U.S.

Protestant Seminaries 2018–2019

Full-time

Students Enrolled

#1 Southern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,731
#2 Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,521
#3 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,417
#4 Fuller Theological Seminary	1,257
#5 Asbury Theological Seminary	1,246
#6 Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	1,215
#7 Dallas Theological Seminary	1,111
#8 New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary	873
#9 Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary	826
#10 Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary	745

in FTE between the 2015–2016 and 2018–2019 academic school years. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, now in the #2 spot, experienced an impressive 32 percent increase in FTE between those same academic school years.

Nearly all of the top 10 schools in 2015–2016 experienced growth except for Fuller and Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary. Fuller saw an 18 percent decline in FTE between the 2015–2016 and 2018–2019 academic years. Trinity actually saw an increase of 43 full-time students between 2016 and 2017 before

Continued on page 11



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



Moses Breaks the Tablet of Ten Commandments (Image: ffoz.org)

held to “single out” persons engaging in it for discrimination, although the rule in fact applies to everyone.

But all behaviors are plainly not equal. Nor is there is a clear criterion of “harm” that can be used to pick out just from unjust discrimination against behavior. Calling anything “harmful” depends on a common understanding of irreducible goods, and there are none in a project to re-engineer humanity. From the viewpoint of all human societies so far, the claim that consensual sex is harmless is highly debatable, given that the family has been the cornerstone of society, and the marital breakdown, illness, and death that have resulted from promiscuity. In essence, an absolute right to sexual choice and gratification has been found by proponents of the new morality.

Today controversy is focused on immaterial harm, i.e., giving offense to what one values. But again, all values cannot be legally protected. What there must be for personal offensiveness to be impermissible is a judgment about what is truly worthy in life. It cannot be a judgment derived from the equality of persons. What has really happened in behavior based anti-discrimination law is that various categories of sin have been declared rights, and discrimination against them (or even condemnation of them) is then understood to be immoral.

Making sin into a right is the genius of the liberal/left side of the culture war. It becomes impossible to condemn sin without attacking the personhood of sinners. In some measure this agrees with the Christian doctrine it is attacking. Christianity teaches that sin is indeed deeply embedded in our lives, and seems natural. We indeed love sin. The claim that condemnation of sin attacks what many people find most important in their lives is quite true. But we are commanded to turn from sin no matter how painful repentance is. We should seek the truth rather than hide from it. Hate speech doctrine, and the claim that Christian doctrine is “hurtful,” should be seen in this

Making Sins into Rights

by Rick Plasterer

Confronting the secularist offensive against traditional Christianity is difficult for Christians in America, because while we have a strong basis in the Constitution for the free exercise of religion as the first of rights, secularists appeal to the Constitutional ideals of freedom and equality in the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment. Effectively they say that religious freedom has been amended by the requirements of personal freedom and equality, as implemented by anti-discrimination law and policy and the “right to privacy” discovered by the Supreme Court. That this could not possibly be what the American founders intended by the “free exercise” of religion is clear from the First Amendment’s principle author, **James Madison**. The clear statement in his *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments* is that citizens’ duty to God is superior to their duty to civil society. Together with this is the compelling moral intuition that it is wrong to take action believed evil. The first should be religiously and legally decisive, the second morally decisive.

But of course it is not decisive where Christian morality is deemed immoral. The cultural left, from the 1960s on, has sought to expunge the Judeo-Christian concept of sin from law and culture. They had no easy way to do it using

Constitutional guarantees. Their solution, worked out slowly in court decisions and legislation over more than 50 years, has been to make sexual choices into an absolute right and categories of sinners into anti-discrimination categories.

Articles I’ve written have repeatedly returned to the theme of the irrationality of using behavior and inclination as an anti-discrimination category. Personal behavior and inclination do not define a group of people, and even if they did, membership in the group can change from moment to moment. Also, the ideals of liberty and equality simply cannot be applied to personal behavior and personal inclination. All behaviors are manifestly not equal. Some behaviors must be penalized. Nor is it obvious why one must not make an adverse judgment (and thus discriminate) against a personality characteristic that one does not like. It may not be pleasant to the person on the receiving end, but the alternative is requiring everyone to agree with everyone else, which is practically impossible. What has in fact happened is that particular personal behaviors have been declared immune from discrimination, and inconsistently held to be “equal.” Sexual behavior traditionally thought sinful has been singled out for immunity from discrimination. Any rule banning such behavior is then

Continued on page 11

light. Christian doctrine and morality indeed hurts, but that does not justify sin, but condemns sinners.

Important to the moral force of anti-discrimination doctrine is the claim that membership in a particular category is irrelevant to whether one is a good or bad person. But personal behavior and inclination are critical parts of what establishes virtue. They cannot be irrelevant to whether one is good or bad. To condemn a particular sin is indeed in some sense to condemn every sinner who commits that sin. Think, for instance, of the non-sexual categories of the New Testament vice lists, such as slander, theft, or kidnapping. We are indeed hostile to people in those categories, although we love them as sinners in need of salvation. Someone in one of those categories may be otherwise a good person, with many fine qualities, perhaps a genteel person. A white collar criminal may be very well-mannered. Or the person could be very different, a truly vicious person behind a mask of decency. But we still condemn the sin, and we condemn the sinner insofar as they are guilty of that sin. The person has dignity, while it is the sin that is condemned.

But it is precisely that kind of dignity, dignity for personal behavior and personal inclination, that the Supreme Court was surely claiming in its decisions advancing sexual liberation. And dignity cannot be given to all personal behaviors, and would be wrong even if it could. It is people, not their behavior, who have dignity. Nor can dignity (which is not at all mentioned in the Constitution) really be “given”—it must be based on reality. It is hard to see how a strictly scientific, empirical account of reality can give anything dignity. If God is the source of reality and human dignity, dignity makes sense. If God is excluded, one can only appeal to the uniqueness of human beings in the world as giving some kind of dignity, but that is still a dignity based on what one really is, not what one does or feels.

Dignity for sinful sexual behaviors is effectively what the Supreme Court has decreed in making contraception in non-marital intercourse (*Eisenstadt vs. Baird*,

1972), and homosexual sodomy (*Lawrence vs. Texas*, 2003) constitutional rights. This effectively turns morality on its head. Perhaps more than dignity, pain and humiliation were what the court was focused on, and yet pain and humiliation are precisely what Scripture prescribes for sin. A striking example is Ezekiel’s appeal to conquered and devastated Israel, in which he urged Israel to “be ashamed” of its sin (identified as idolatry and sexual immorality). But condemnation on any basis, whether biblical or not, aims at inflicting pain and humiliation, however much redemption may also be in mind.

The singling out of certain sexual behaviors for immunity from public judgment was originally done on the basis of the extremely personal and private nature of sex (*Griswold vs. Connecticut*, 1965). But however crucial sex is to one’s humanity, that hardly demonstrates that it should be immune from judgment. The importance of sex to humanity could be a reason why judgment is important. The alleged suspension of judgment (which for same-sex marriage has turned into a requirement for public approval) has now rendered sex and privacy practically meaningless. Beyond same-sex marriage,

transgenderism has rendered the words “male” and “female,” strictly speaking, meaningless terms. As often happens with the revolutions of the Left, the liberation destroys what it was intended to protect. Just as the unfettered “free speech” of the 1960s led to “hate speech” doctrine, so the “right to privacy” and suspension of public judgment about sex has destroyed privacy in public rest rooms.

Even if sinful requirements were not as irrational as they are, it would of course still not be possible for disciples of Christ to obey them. But that is somewhat irrelevant in our current society. The anger and resentment of those who hate certain of God’s commands may succeed in making obedience to those commands criminal—as such obedience already is where Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) laws exist. But faithful Christians must be obedient and take the penalty, and to know why they are right. ✚



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What Are America’s Largest Seminaries in 2019?

continued from page 9

Seminary recorded 33 FTE last year. The Disciples of Christ-affiliated Lexington Theological Seminary had 37 FTE and the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), recorded 42 FTE students during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Outliers remain. The plant-confessing chapel service at New York’s Union Theological Seminary made headlines (see “Church News,” page 4). Historically liberal, Union is an interdenominational seminary. While one might assume such plant-confession foolery does not attract students, Union reported a modest but significant 219 FTE attendance last year.

Predicting the future of Protestant denominations in the United States seems simple when analyzing seminary data overall. Orthodox, evangelical seminaries affiliated with denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention are experiencing significant growth in enrollment while liberal counterparts shut their doors. Meanwhile, the country’s Protestant seminaries with the lowest enrollment numbers reflect the decline of their associated liberal mainline denominations.

The latest ATS reports affirmed my findings from three years ago: Most full-time students called to ministry prefer orthodox Christianity to liberal trendiness. ✚

New York Presbyterian Church Hosts Pagan Deity

by Josiah Aiden

A Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation in New York made news this week after it featured the sculpture of a pagan deity in its chancel.

The United Presbyterian Church of Binghamton hosted “the Sviatovid idol,” which depicts a ninth-century Slavic deity, as part of a September 6–7 festival of lights.

Sviatovid (alternately known as Svetovid, Svantovit, Sventovit, or Svantevit)

track of, some scholars argue that Svan-tevit and “the Sviatovid idol” are the same as Perun.

This is the deity Binghamton Presbyterian hosted in the form of a beautiful, mesmerizing sculpture, during the Luma Festival. In and of itself, a church hosting an art installation displaying the image of a long-defunct god is not sacrilegious, though it may raise a few eyebrows. But not only did the god “materialize on the altar” of the church each night, “[t]he church spire, pipe organ and stained glass inform[ed] the new work.”

The purpose of Sviatovid in this festive context is not worship, but mere interest. Yet, there is something inside that recoils at erecting an ancient Slavic deity within a church chancel of the same God who commanded, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3, ESV).

Maybe Sviatovid was invited into the church in the spirit of multiculturalism. Perhaps it was a subtle nod to universalism. False teaching, but a desire for the best for (literally) everyone. To put a false god in the same spot as God’s communion table, regardless of the fact that it was not during a worship service, raises questions of prudential judgment and is possibly sacrilegious.

English poet **Philip Larkin**, a famous agnostic, wrote a thoughtful poem on briefly stepping inside an empty church. It is worth quoting a few sections of “Church Going” here:

*“Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I
take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence...*

*“Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and
pronounce
‘Here endeth’ much more loudly than I’d
meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the
door*

*I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping
for.*

*“Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this...*

*“A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions
meet,*

*Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious.”*

Larkin’s agnosticism is displayed in the poem, but what is more apparent is his confused reverence for church. He acknowledges his failure to understand the draw of the church, and his deep-seated reverence for it, though he did not believe a word of the teaching therein.

If a famous agnostic such as Philip Larkin is careful of his appearance and behavior within a church, how much more should a Christian congregation be mindful of what goes on inside its building, every day of the week.

United Presbyterian has not commented on its choice to host the Sviatovid idol. The church affiliates with More Light Presbyterians and describes itself as a progressive congregation.

“We are a community of people questioning, learning, celebrating, connecting, risk taking, creating, and making music and art,” the church describes itself on its web site. Statistics provided by the PC(USA) research service show that from 2013–2017, the congregation dropped from 220 to 178 members (–19%), while Sunday attendance declined from 64 to 53 (–17%). The congregation is not diverse, reporting only four nonwhite members, while 72% of members are age 65 or older. ✚

Sviatovid Sculpture on display at the United Presbyterian Church of Binghamton, New York (Photo: Instagram)

was a local Slavic god of war, fertility, and abundance in the Baltic region.

In the early twentieth century, an idol was discovered near the Zbruch River in Western Ukraine. This idol was originally thought to be the local god Svantevit, mentioned above, and merely called “the Sviatovid idol” for reasons that are unclear or unstated. Later scholarship decided that the idol, also called the Zbruch Idol for geographical reasons, *actually* depicted the highest pan-Slavic god Perun, also responsible for war, fertility, and abundance, but who also may have been the god of the cardinal directions and the four seasons. As if not enough to keep



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At left: Coordinator Cedar Klassen presents the new collection to The Hymn Society. (Photo courtesy of The Hymn Society)



Still other hymns focus upon gender-fluid identity. “Our genders may seem fixed, but even these may change as we find beauty in-between that may at first seem strange,” reads the hymn “As Colors in the Sky.” Another hymn, “God Loves Us in Mysterious Ways,” groups gender alongside class and race as “deep, confining tombs.” The gender-bending is transposed upon God himself: “God of many genders, our world reflects you,” reads “God of Many Faces.”

Some of the hymns embrace mind-body dualism; “Shedding clouds of flesh and gender,” begins one stanza of “God of Queer Transgressive Spaces.”

Some of the most cringe-worthy hymns do not specifically mention sexuality, but offer bland indiscriminate affirmation. The syrupy “God Calls You Good” contradicts scriptural admonitions that “no one does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:2–3) and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

One hymn, “Pour Your Freedom Over Me,” makes no mention of God but reads like something from a **Robert Jeffress** flag-draped worship of America: “Hand in hand let’s make a chain, and together proclaim, Land of the brave, home of the free, Pour your freedom over me.”

Not all of the hymns are cotton candy fluff. “Christ Our Health,” originally composed in 1984 for those afflicted with AIDS, identifies Christ as the root of victory. Use of words like *contagion*, *infection*, and *immunity* seem forced (especially when describing Christ) but there are genuinely good lines: “Christ for now and Christ for ages, Christ who lives in plague and pain, Christ upon a cross courageous, Christ who died shall forever reign,” reads one stanza.

The entire hymn collection is viewable in PDF form at: <https://thehymnsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Songs-for-the-Holy-Other-FINAL-7-10-19.pdf>



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Hymn Society Releases ‘Queer Hymns’ for LGBTQIA2S+

by Jeffrey Walton

An ecumenical non-profit association that seeks to promote congregational singing recently published a collection comprised of nearly 50 “queer hymns.”

Songs for the Holy Other: Hymns Affirming the LGBTQIA2S+ Community was released in July by the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada.*

Anglican Journal, the publication of the Anglican Church of Canada, publicized the songs, which were promptly shared online by the U.S.-based Episcopal Church. Both of the neighboring churches regularly promote LGBT causes throughout the worldwide Anglican Communion, but more concerning is the fact that some of the hymns trample on core Christian teachings and promote revisionist ideas about gender identity and human sexuality.

The musical compositions include: “A Hymn for Self-Acceptance,” “God Calls You Good,” “God of Queer Transgressive Spaces,” and “The Kingdom of God Is the Queerest of Nations.”

Many of the songs promise indiscriminate inclusion regardless of personal choices, praise alphabet-soup

sexuality as part of God’s intended design, and conflate romantic love with brotherly or familial love.

Anglican Journal frames the release of the hymns as especially timely because they were published immediately following the July General Synod in which Canadian Anglicans narrowly defeated an amendment to the marriage canon that would have recognized same-sex marriage. Many Canadian Anglican churches already participate in same-sex rites (the Diocese of Toronto has a bishop in a same-sex union) but the church’s canon law defines marriage as between a man and a woman.

Praise for the new music is offered by an Anglican church music director from Ontario “who identifies as gender-non-conforming, queer and asexual.”

“Don’t let the doctrines of our churches use the Word to misconstrue,” “A Hymn for Self-Acceptance” reads, “for it’s written in the scriptures, surely God delights in you!”

Some of the hymns call into question whom the object of praise is; many feature self-lionizing language. The hymn “Alchemy of Healing” does not mention God, instead praising courage and strength as the singer offers blessing.

“We’ll Build a World” similarly proclaims a utopia brought about by human means: “together hand in hand, we’ll create that promised land.”

*LGBTQIA2S+ is the acronym for the “lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, nonbinary, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, aromantic, two-spirit, and other sexual/gender minority community.”

A service of consecration for the new sanctuary of the Falls Church Anglican in Falls Church, VA on Sunday, September 8, 2019 (Photo: The Falls Church Anglican)



Itinerant Anglicans Consecrate New Home

by Jeffrey Walton

Homeless for seven years following the loss of a \$40 million 250-year-old historic church property through litigation with the Episcopal Church, a prominent Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) parish moved into its new home this autumn.

The congregation of the Falls Church Anglican (TFCA) in Falls Church, Virginia, celebrated a consecration service and dedication of their new sanctuary on September 8. Since separating from the Episcopal Church in late 2006, the congregation has planted eight congregations across the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area and in three other Virginia cities.

TFCA is one of the larger congregations within ACNA, reporting 2,194 members in 2018, with an average principal service attendance of 1,274 and operating income of \$6.3 million. The church's

daughter congregations reported a combined membership of 1,481 and an average attendance of 1,548 the same year. According to a 2015 congregational brochure, the existing property (which includes a multi-story office building) cost \$31 million, with an additional \$23 million for new construction on the site. The new sanctuary seats between 900 and 1,000 people.

TFCA's congregation has been, as Rector **Sam Ferguson** put it, "tabernacling" for seven years, migrating between three separate office spaces and even more worship sites. Walking into a new church home after many years in borrowed space is significant.

From 2001–2009, I was a member of TFCA, joining a group of approximately 70 people in 2009 sent out to plant an Anglican congregation in neighboring Arlington. I still have many friends there,

with whom I shared conversations amidst Episcopal Church denominational turmoil and eventual Anglican realignment.

In May of 2012, I returned to the church for its final worship service in the historic property. The service featured spirited singing of Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," and celebrated the many daughter congregations that TFCA had planted since a congregational vote to depart the Episcopal Church. As one longtime TFCA member prayed aloud that night, she was grateful that "the church planter is now the church planted," and was trusting God to lead them in a new and uncertain season.

At a standing-room-only service in 2019, Ferguson noted that the Bible has many examples of people displaced for a season. God providentially engages his

Continued on page 15

people in an activity or period of renewal that otherwise might not have occurred.

“God strategically forced us into a place of real weakness. As a church, we really didn’t know what was next. We really didn’t know what to do, except depend completely on him. Dependence, not independence, is strength,” Ferguson recounted of TFCA’s own journey. “Weakness will train you to lean on God.”

While TFCA’s new campus is only one mile south of the historic Falls Church building, the move already does seem strategically significant. The new site is adjacent to booming immigrant populations who populate the church’s English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. Likewise, the new building is a visible landmark along a well-traveled commuter artery from suburban Fairfax County into Washington, D.C.

To be candid, church buildings matter. They serve as missionary outposts in the communities that church congregations seek to minister amongst. While the buildings themselves are not “the church,” they establish a physical presence in a community. For Anglicans and other Christians in historic, liturgical traditions, setting is important.

I exited the early service to make room for a second, 11:15 a.m., crowd that welcomed international guests from across the worldwide Anglican Communion, the third-largest global family of churches. A friend pointed to an arrangement of flowers with a note of encouragement from the nearby Roman Catholic high school that hosted many of TFCA’s worship services during the past seven years. It was a touching reminder of the many Christians who welcomed Anglicans during their time away from their former church homes. Locally, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Evangelicals shared their spaces with the large Falls Church congregation that had many programs, but no property to house them in. It was a visible sign of an “ecumenism of the trenches,” in which the household of God joined together to provide during a time of need. Every other Anglican congregation I have spoken with has similar stories. Never before has our church life been so visibly international and ecumenical.

That Sunday was also an important day at my own congregation as we celebrated our one-year anniversary and our first membership Sunday. I am a member of Incarnation Anglican Church in southern Arlington, Virginia, which is TFCA’s first “granddaughter” congregation (planted in 2018 by Restoration Anglican Church in northern Arlington, which was itself planted by TFCA in 2009).

During the service, our vicar preached on the importance of inviting the Holy Spirit into our lives and asking for spiritual gifts. While I personally come from a broad church Episcopal background, the charismatic emphasis of my pastor is something I greatly appreciate. Encounter with the person of the Holy Spirit is a common theme across my Anglican diocese.

Just as at TFCA’s consecration, it is our hope at Incarnation that we increase

both numerically and in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Just as at TFCA, there was a buzz as we took vows of membership and signed a church register.

“We are God’s living stones whom he is shaping and configuring into his holy temple,” Ferguson preached earlier that day. “You can imagine it is one thing to build a beautiful building out of bricks and mortar. It is altogether another thing to build a unified and holy people. We are far harder to work with.”

How fitting. God is indeed full of surprises. ✝



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What Nurtures and What Kills Churches?

continued from page 3

sacrifice in pursuit of a higher good. They don’t focus on self-celebration, which only leads to futility.

Growing churches like Falls Church Anglican understand their mission ultimately is to seek and serve famished souls the Gospel’s unique message of redemption in Jesus Christ. Much of the old Episcopal Church, at least in its national policies, and the rest of USA Mainline Protestantism, is largely captive to self-celebration. For the churches that have historic liturgies, or hymnals, the old language about sin and salvation is still there. Doubtless many still hear it and believe it. But it’s not the dominant message. Governing conventions of liberal Protestant denominations don’t focus on calls to soul saving. They prefer, more banally and vaguely, to stress inclusivity, without fully explaining the ultimate purpose of inclusion. Most of their seminaries are similar.

For much of liberal Protestantism, politics fills some of the vacuum created by vague theology. If the church is not about soul saving, then it can be about saving the environment, or expanding the welfare state, or reducing USA military spending. But contrary to the headline

of the earlier mentioned column, I don’t think political advocacy is a major focus in typical Mainline Protestant congregations, or of itself a major cause for decline. Most clergy prefer to avoid needless controversy. The political stances of national denominations are mostly unmentioned in typical local Mainline congregations. But also mostly unmentioned is the imperative of winning souls to Christ. And without evangelism, churches stagnate, decline, and die.

Churches in liberal denominations aren’t the only ones failing to evangelize and consequently declining. Plenty of conservative churches, while theoretically committed to spreading the faith, have become insular and evangelistically indifferent. Evangelism is not just about adopting a stance, it is commitment to action. Growing churches almost always act on this commitment. Falls Church Anglican, based on its steady growth, and confirmed by my personal observation in the community across decades, is dedicated to winning new people to Christ. Most of the old declining Episcopal Church that it left behind, and to which it lost its historic property, is not. ✝

IRD Diary:

Joshua Harris Denounces Christianity, Doesn't Distort It

by Chelsen Vicari



It was once the case that we would hear through personal channels of Christians “fallen away” from the faith. Sadness and prayers for that individual’s renewed faith would quietly follow. Today, a departure announcement from the faith makes for a trendy Instagram post and attracts public interest. Such is the case of **Joshua Harris**, a well-known evangelical pastor and author of the popular and influential book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.

In an Instagram post published on July 26, Harris captioned a photo of himself declaring he has made a “massive shift” and “fallen away” from the Christian faith. Harris wrote, “By all the measurements I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.”

Harris writes that he has spent the past several years repenting for his teachings’ “fear-based approach to life,” views on women in the church, and parenting. What I find most striking is Harris’ apology specifically addressed to members of the LGBTQ community.

“[T]o the LGBTQ+ community, I want to say that I am sorry for the views that I taught in my books and as a pastor regarding sexuality. I regret standing against marriage equality, for not affirming you and your place in the

church, and for any ways that my writing and speaking contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry. I hope you can forgive me,” Harris shared.

On August 4, Harris posted photos of himself marching in a Vancouver, British Columbia, pride parade. *The Christian Post* reported that Harris posted several photos with the caption “An American in Canada marching with the British Consulate in the Pride Parade.” The photos of Harris at the parade appear to have been subsequently removed from Instagram.

A significant pause to affirm progressive sexual ethics amidst a denunciation of Christianity seems odd. Such a clean cut from Christianity is especially surprising when there is a push by progressives for Christians to expand historic traditional teachings on sexuality and marriage. If there is any bright spot to be seen in this sad post, it is that Harris doesn’t compromise or alter the faith’s teachings to fit a popular narrative, as is the tendency of so many influencers under the Institute on Religion and Democracy’s (IRD) monitor.

“Harris’ self-proclaimed exit from Christianity seems to have integrity,” explained IRD President **Mark Tooley**. “Unlike many others, he’s not demanding it bend to his purposes or denying its identity. He’s just leaving because he no longer believes.”

There is a refreshing honesty to Harris’ rejection. I recall other news stories and events sharing the same sad conclusion. A popular, influential Christian figure compromises on a hot button issue. Their theological alterations trigger reactions from across the ideological spectrum and often breed confusion, ultimately causing harm to Christian public witnesses. Harris spares Christians that.

Harris’ denouncement of the faith came one week after another, equally

saddening Instagram post sharing news of his separation from his wife—a shocking admission from the man who literally wrote the evangelical guidebook for courtship with the intention of preserving the sacredness of marriage.

Harris later rejected the courtship model popularized in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, but the book’s influence on an entire generation of young evangelicals is undeniable.

Oodles of articles publicly reflect on Harris, his books, purity culture, homeschooling, and “exvangelicals.” One valuable comment is published on *The Gospel Coalition*. A piece penned by Harris’ past friends **Collin Hansen**, **Kevin DeYoung**, **Justin Taylor**, and **Greg Gilbert** cautions those seeking to determine what went wrong.

“While some basic ruminations can be justified, we ought to be wary of making sweeping judgments either corporately or personally,” they write. “Our hope is that we may once again boast in the cross with our old friend. At the very least, we hope he will travel this new path with a bit more caution himself. Divorce and deconstruction are confusing. They are painful. They are destabilizing. It seems, therefore, better that they would be largely out of the public eye. Instagram seems a poor vehicle for honest self-assessment. Transparency, overrated in our day as it is, is certainly less sanguine when we aren’t sure who we are or what we will become.”

Their warning to avoid speculation and broad characterization is good advice.

It is never easy to report on any individual’s “massive shift” in regards to faith in Christ. Whatever the reasoning behind Harris’ denouncement of Christianity, I join others in prayer for Harris and his family. May his faith be renewed.

But perhaps it is better for Harris to publically denounce the faith altogether (hopefully temporarily) than to alter it and mislead another generation of young evangelicals. ✝



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