Why Don’t Christians Care about Christians?

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Sin-Drenched Nations

Recently I had the pleasure of presenting a paper on “godly nationalism” at the annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. This gathering, with its many scholars and students committed to Methodist theology, is greatly encouraging. My paper compared John Wesley as loyal Englishman to Pope John Paul II, who equally loved his native Poland. Both understood that nations were divine gifts with providential purposes, but neither of course was naive about national sins. Wesley especially expressed his patriotic love by denouncing Britain’s many sins, even as he thought his country blessed and great. Several questions I got afterwards from young people in the audience were revealing. One asked if Christians must love countries like America and Israel founded on “stolen” land. Another similarly asked if American Christians must love their country built on greed. Still another skeptically asked about loyalty to a racist nation like America. An older man, who identified as a chaplain in the National Guard, interjected he would die and kill in defense of the Constitution, provoking visible horror from the youthful questioners. All nations are drenched in sin, I responded, yet we are called to love and serve the community where God has placed us, just as Christ himself did. And we should realize that, unlike Christ, we are ourselves sinful, each of us actively contributing to the faults of our own societies. So we should judge our nations, present or past tense, modestly and reluctantly. Smug contempt for our own people can be self-righteous.

Contempt specifically for America, held by many Christians, especially in academia, reflects partly the dominance of the Howard Zinn perspective, which chronicles American history as primarily a catalog of repressions. These recalled injustices are often very real, but the distortion is tagging America as uniquely perfidious, racist, sexist, greedy, militarist, etc. America is sinful, like all nations, but it never had a monopoly on sin. And more often than not, American ideals have provided a level of human justice unusual in world history.

The Christians who disdain America often suffer from parochial theological confusion, believing humanity basically good, while America is the odious aberration. They are also, ironically, often themselves persons of privilege, attending or teaching at expensive and prestigious academic institutions even as they lament America’s exploitation of the marginalized. Their harsh critique contrasts vitally with less privileged persons, for example the many African immigrant taxi drivers, Christians and Muslims, with whom I often converse, who seem generally very favorable about America, having lived elsewhere where human justice is more dilute.

Anti-American Christians often are very myopic about U.S. sins while uninformed about gross inhumanity elsewhere. They might know about the Holocaust but are often clueless about tens of millions liquidated by the Soviet Union and communist China, about genocides from Pol Pot and Mengistu’s Ethiopia, or mass murder and cannibalism by Idi Amin and Emperor Bokassa, about the Rwandan genocide, or the torture chambers of Saddam Hussein, North Korea, the Assads, Kaddafi, or scores of other regimes whose crimes were vicious but tragically exceptional.

The routine corruption, political oppression, racism, prejudice and casteism that plague most societies—usually far more pervasively and destructively than in America—are mostly unknown to the type of young Christians who asked me the negative questions at WTS. But these scoffers from the left side of the political spectrum are increasingly joined by some conservative Christians who imagine America, which previously was supposedly righteous, is now decadent, perhaps beyond redemption.

I don’t believe America is worse today than in the past, often more pervasively and destructively, including assaults on family, marriage and vulnerable human life, unborn or otherwise. My own consistent reading of history always reminds me both of America’s greatness and its shame.

There is an uninformed full-time Christian activist who speaks to major Evangelical groups about American racism as supposedly embodied in the Declaration of Independence and who recently has been denouncing Lincoln as a rabid racist. This misinformed individual should heed Michael Burlingame, who last month gave a fascinating talk at Ford’s Theater on “Abraham Lincoln and African Americans.” Burlingame describes Lincoln’s remarkable challenge to racism of his day, which stunned and irritated even his most supposedly enlightened anti-slavery allies. For example, when Lincoln welcomed blacks to the White House

FROM THE PRESIDENT

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

The Last Judgment as described by Christ in Matthew Chapter 25 verses 31-46, depicted in an Eastern Orthodox icon (Credit: Fr. Ted’s Blog)
Bill Hybels Facing Sexual Misconduct Allegations

Influential megachurch pastor Bill Hybels is facing several disturbing allegations from women and former colleagues who say that he engaged in multiple incidents of sexual misconduct. Hybels is the senior pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church, a Chicago-area megachurch that draws 25,000 in weekly attendance.

The Chicago Tribune reports the allegations include “suggestive comments, extended hugs, an unwanted kiss, and invitations to hotel rooms” and “a prolonged consensual affair with a married woman” who initially confided in a friend, expressing regret for the affair, but later denied the alleged affair when contacted by an elder who was investigating the matter, the Tribune found.

Among the unsettling allegations are claims that Hybels invited female colleagues to join him in his hotel rooms while on business trips, unwanted lingering hugs, career lobbies, and lewd jokes made by the Willow Creek pastor.

Hybels fervently denies the allegations, telling the Chicago Tribune, “This has been a calculated and continual attack on our elders and on me for four long years. It’s time that gets identified.”

“I want to speak to all the people around the corner that have been misled ... for the past four years and tell them in my voice, in as strong a voice as you’ll allow me to tell it, that the charges against me are false,” Hybels told the Tribune.

“There still to this day is no evidence of misconduct on my part.”

In a video posted on Willow Creek’s website, Hybels expressed, “This is one of the most heartbreakingly frustrating things I’ve ever experienced—for me, for my family, for our church family.”

“The lies you read about in the Tribune article are the tools this group is using to try to keep me from ending my tenure here at Willow with my reputation intact,” he said.

Shortly after the misconduct allegations made headlines, Pam Orr, Chair of Willow Creek’s Elder Board, shared comments in a video message. She accused two couples of “a coordinated effort to undermine Bill’s reputation.”

Orr explained that in April 2014 a couple brought an allegation against Hybels before the church elders. “The Elders thoroughly investigated it,” said Orr. “They even sought outside counsel to conduct a thorough and independent investigation. After doing so, we found no concern, nor did outside counsel.”

Most recently, however, leadership staff and the entire board of elders resigned and expressed their regret for initially reacting reflexively to the allegations.

Hybels, who previously planned to retire in October of this year, has since stepped down from his position as senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church.

Episcopalians Expand Same-Sex Marriage, Defeat Prayer Book Revision and Anti-Israel Divestment

Episcopalians gathered for their denomination’s General Convention and rejected a comprehensive revision to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer at this time.

Prayer Book revision was among the more controversial topics at the church’s triennial convention meeting in Austin, Texas July 5-13. Some conventions have advocated for gender-neutral language for God in the BCP, arguing that it makes the content more accessible and egalitarian.

Other deputies opposed changes, arguing that there is no groundswell of support among local parishes for a BCP revision.

Others questioned the practicality of pursuing such a major project when the denomination faces significant decline in membership and attendance. Revision of the BCP from start to finish was estimated at $8 to $10 million. Bishops did authorize $200,000 to develop “liturgical materials” outside of the BCP “utilizing inclusive and expansive language and imagery for humanity and divinity.”

Bishops also rejected an anti-Israel proposal that clergy and lay deputies had previously approved. Retired Bishop Ed Little from the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Indiana was a strong voice against implementing divestment. Little argued in the House of Bishops that resolution Do9, “Ending Church Complicity in the Occupation,” introduced by The Rev. Canon Brian Grieves, clergy deputy from the Diocese of Hawaii, would urge disengagement.

“All it does is make us advocates for one side in the conflict and remove us from our role as peacemakers,” Little told his fellow bishops during consideration of the resolution on July 11. “It is the most complex conflict on the planet.”

Little warned that divestment would do “irreparable damage” to the church’s relations with Israel.

Bishops and deputies eventually agreed upon a separate resolution tasking the church’s Executive Council to develop a “human rights investment screen” for church finances. David Paulsen of Episcopal News Service reported that unlike the rejected resolution Do9, the adopted resolution Box7 does not have a timeline for action by Executive Council or any reference to church complicity in the occupation, “though it ultimately could result in the church pulling money out of companies that do business there.”

Both houses of the bicameral convention did enact a policy effectively mandating access to same-sex marriage rites in all domestic U.S. dioceses. To date, eight dioceses decline to allow clergy and churches to use trial rites first authorized at the church’s Triennial Convention in Salt Lake City. Bishops who object to same-sex marriage now must connect interested parishes to a neighboring diocesan bishop who can oversee the process. Some church officials in the traditionalist “Communion Partners” dioceses agreed to the compromise, noting that it protected the conscience rights of bishops who object to same-sex marriage by not requiring their authorization. A handful, including Diocese of Albany Bishop William Love, objected.

“I don’t believe we’ve done the clergy a favor by this,” Love told The Living Church. He added that “up until now, the clergy in the diocese could actually use the bishop as the excuse as to why they can’t go along with or approve a request for a same-sex marriage in their parish.”

Now, Love explained, clergy with traditional views on marriage will have to draw that line themselves. Bisops rule their opposes’ hands to the nation’s capital to lobby lawmakers—Calvary made news by naming transgender pastor Allyson Robinson as an interim leader following the departure of Senior Pastor Amy Butler to lead Riverside Church in New York City. Differences between Calvary and the SBC go beyond human sexuality: Sarratt previously served as a part-time associate minister at a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Greenville, South Carolina. The church has also hosted organizations uniquely critical of Israel.

Episcopalians Expand Same-Sex Marriage, Defeat Prayer Book Revision and Anti-Israel Divestment

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Southern Baptists Cut DC Convention Ties over Lesbian Co-Pastors

Disagreement over the hiring of two married lesbian co-pastors by a DC congregation has severed the relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention (DCBC), which by extension was connected to the wider SBC. That led the SBC Executive Committee (EC) to give the DCBC 90 days to dismiss from its fellowship church organizations that affirm homosexual behavior.

But Calvary, which affiliates with multiple regional and national Baptist organizations, remained connected to the local DCBC, which by extension was connected to the wider SBC. That led the SBC Executive Committee (EC) to give the DCBC 90 days to dismiss from its fellowship church organizations that affirm homosexual behavior.

Baptist churches operate with a congregational polity and cannot be directly compelled into compliance by a denomination hierarchy. But their relational fellowship with other churches can be jeopardized.

It remains to be seen how much effect the move will have on the 153 congregations affiliated with the DCBC. According to SBC interim Executive Committee President D. August Boto, only eight DC churches support SBC work through financial gifts directed through the DCBC. Numerous other SBC-affiliated churches within the District of Columbia are likewise not affiliated with the DCBC.

Calvary Baptist Church has a relatively small congregation, claiming fewer than 300 active members. The church has hosted liberal events for some time, especially regarding sexuality.

In addition to hosting the Human Rights Campaign’s Clergy Call gathering—which brings LGBT-affirming clergy to the nation’s capital to lobby lawmakers—Calvary made news by naming transgender pastor Allyson Robinson as an interim leader following the departure of Senior Pastor Amy Butler to lead Riverside Church in New York City. Differences between Calvary and the SBC go beyond human sexuality: Sarratt previously served as a part-time associate minister at a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Greenville, South Carolina. The church has also hosted organizations uniquely critical of Israel.

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Karen Christians Rally to Recognize Burma Genocide

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housands of Karen people rallied in front of the U.S. Capitol on June 18, calling for political reform that will allow minorities to live in democratic freedom and to bring attention to persecutions at the hands of the government of Myanmar (Burma). Speakers addressing the crowd discussed ways to peacefully push for an end to the genocide.

The Karen people in Myanmar have been fighting the world’s longest running civil war for over 60 years. The military has disproportionate power in the state and has forced the Karen people to become refugees in their own land. They have no religious or political rights and are trapped in a country that is rife with corruption and chaos. Despite a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, the Burmese Army has constantly broken the peace to destroy Karen villages. Minorities there live in fear of being murdered or raped, and lack basic freedoms.

Of the approximately 20,000 Karen gathered in front of the Capitol, many traveled from across the U.S. to attend. Since the 1980s Karen refugees have been resettled in America, with the largest communities residing in Minnesota, New York, and Nebraska. The Karen people have enthusiastically adopted America as their new home. One young Karen man from Texas spoke with a heavy southern drawl and described himself as an “Asian cowboy.” Many shared gratitude for freedoms they enjoy in the U.S. One man from the crowd even grabbed a microphone to loudly proclaim “Thank you, America!”

Speakers highlighted a need to work with all of the 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, particularly the Kachin, Shan, and Rohingya peoples who have also suffered heavily at the hands of the Burman majority.

Former Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) argued that the situation in Myanmar constitutes ethnic cleansing, calling for political reform that will allow minorities to live in democratic freedom and to bring attention to persecution as a tool for peacebuilding around the world. As followers of the Prince of Peace, we can do no less,” the former congressman continued.

Evangelicals Pray for Peace, Omit North Korean Persecuted Christians

Prior to U.S. President Donald Trump’s Singapore summit with North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) released a statement on March 27 urging Christians everywhere to pray for peace on the Korean Peninsula. North Korean human rights violations, including the persecution of Christians, went mostly unmentioned.

“We pray for wisdom for our political, diplomatic and military leaders as they work across differences toward a goal of peace, security and freedom,” the statement read. “We pray that God will bless the efforts of citizens who seek to bridge the vast differences between our countries.”

“Decades of people-to-people contact between North Korea and the United States—through business, educational and other humanitarian exchanges—have put a human face on those who are sometimes characterized by one another as enemies,” the statement continued. “So, we pray with empathy and in a spirit of friendship, noting the image of God in every human being. However profound the differences between our governments, we do not view the North Korean people as our enemies.

On the contrary, we desire only the best for the people of North Korea.”

Signatories include the left-leaning Jim Wallis, founder and CEO of Sojourners, Robert Zachritz, Vice President of World Vision, Pastor Lee Younghoon, senior pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, Russell D. Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and more.

The NAE letter did note profound differences between the U.S. government and North Korea’s regime. North Korea’s government views the spread of Christianity as pernicious, criminalizes evangelism, and sentences Christians to labor camps where they face starvation and beatings.

Writing at Providence magazine, Robert S. Kim noted, “North Korea’s efforts to eradicate Christianity in Pyongyang and elsewhere in its territory have been so ruthless and systematic that today few outside of Korea know that it was ever there.”

United Methodist’s Capitol Hill lobby office was the first church agency to denounce U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. “We are deeply disappointed by President Trump’s decision to pull the United States out of the Iran deal. Even though we are disappointed, The United Methodist Church will continue to support diplomacy as an effective tool for peacebuilding around the world. As followers of the Prince of Peace, we can do no less,” the office stated. “Reinstating sanctions on Iran is concerning on many levels, but most pressing: it will worsen living conditions for the Iranian people. Further, the call for regime change of the Iranian government has not made progress: the best of our sanctions campaign is to support diplomacy around the world.”

The Methodist statement went on to criticize President Trump’s decision as a “good” and “Christian” option.

But strategic manoeuvres among nations are rarely if ever clearly “Christian” and “good” or clearly not so, notes IRP President Mark Tooley. The previous administration gained the deal only after sanctions and implied military threats, which the Methodist statement opposes, and believed it was the best available means for restricting Iran from nuclear development at least the duration of the agreement, at whose conclusion it was hoped other options would be available, or the nature of Iran’s Islamist regime changed. On the contrary, we hope it was at best a very flawed and temporary fix that empowered the Islamist regime by lifting sanctions, and that this newly empowered Iran has consequently asserted itself throughout the Mideast, especially in Syria.

The Methodist statement and earlier Sojourners pronouncements on Iran avoid acknowledging the reality of Iran’s Islamist dictatorship, its repression of its own people, its strategic ambitions, its regional aggressions, and its apocalyptically religious outlook conducive to possibly suicidal acts that are difficult to deter.

The Methodist statement specifically faulted desires for regime change in Iran. But shouldn’t all believers in God-given human dignity at least pray and hope that Iran some day is free of its current theocratic dictatorship?

“If there are good and realistic arguments for the Iran deal, these religious voices avoid them in favor of a fantasy-based vision of the world. Their choice to neglect the historic ethical tools of their faith about war, peace and power is sad and requires they not be treated seriously,” Tooley commented. “It’s their loss, but it’s also ours. Hopefully other Christian voices will speak with more fidelity and sobriety.”

Churches and the Iran Nuke Deal

Myanmar constitutes ethnic cleansing and genocide on a national scale and called on Congress to recognize it as such. If the situation does not change “significantly” in the next 30-60 days, he encouraged Congress to use the Global Magnitsky Act to impose sanctions upon the Burmese Government.

Other speakers criticized the current leader of the Burmese government, Aung San Suu Kyi, who, before coming to power, was a world-renowned advocate for human rights and was a Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 1991 for her criticism of the military junta. Since her coalition overwhelmingly won the 2015 election, she has received criticism from prominent diplomats, the U.N. Human Rights chief, and numerous international human rights organizations for turning a blind eye to the abuses of the military and failed to recognize the massacres it routinely carries out.

Several people were carrying signs with contents of Saw Oh Mya’s death as a reminder of the brutal repression the Karen fear from the Burmese Army. Moo was a peace advocate who had returned to his village to help organize assistance for the people displaced by the violence. He was shot by the Burmese in April, leaving behind his wife and seven children.

Most Karen are Baptists as a result of the pioneering missionary work of Adoniram Judson in the early nineteenth century. Their churches and organizations have endured for centuries but are under threat from the Buddhist-majority government.

Members of the Karen ethnic minority from across the United States rally in front of the U.S. Capitol June 18 seeking protection for fellow Karen in Myanmar/Burma. (Photo: Deed Leagueson)
I am an honor to be here. Thank you IRD for hosting this event. You are a beacon of all medications. Then I received a phone call and an unexpected love very much. I may be a slow learner, but this love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that heart?” (1 John 3:17).

With this understanding of real love, John said: “We can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not love his brother is a child of the devil, because we know from that the biblical reason for giving in the New Testament is to help poor persecuted Christians. I was surprised to find that persecuted Christians are really per-secuted people. They’re all listed in the book, Heirloom Love. Two-thirds of the verses, 468 of them, are specifically related to helping poor, persecuted Christians. I was surprised to learn that helping suffer-ing fellow Chris-tians is the primary reason for Christian giving in the Bible.

A lot of people are surprised when they hear this, but we shouldn’t be because we know from the biggest mistake that I ever made. It started when I was a new Christian and reading the final instruc-tions that Jesus gave us the night before he was crucified. That’s when he said: “Love one another just as I love you.” It haunted me that he didn’t say it just to me. How can this be? The biblical reason for Sunday church collections is to help poor persecuted Christians!

After reading these Scriptures, I started looking closely at all the New Testament churches that I had just loved poetry about the 150 largest Christian churches and the 20 largest denominations in the U.S. I told them that we wanted to support their programs to help the per-secuted. Sadly, only two of the 20 largest churches and 150 largest were actively caring for Christ’s suffering body. And only one of them was caring in a significant way.

How can this be? The biblical reason for Sunday collections is to help poor persecuted believers. But fast forward 2,000 years and here in the U.S. less than 1% half of what we give on Sunday is used for Sunday collections is to help poor persecuted Christians! One of the most effective things that you can do to help our persecuted family is start an educational program or group with a handful of your friends. 

Dominic Sputo is the founder of Lumen-life and the author of Heirloom Love.
Jesus, Justice, and Political Partisanship at Red Letter Revival

by Chelsen Vicari

Red Letter Revival participants gather at the E.C. Glass High School auditorium in Lynchburg, Virginia, on Friday, April 6, 2018. (Photo: Elliott Green/Red Letter Christians)

The "Red Letter Revival" was originally organized by Shane Claiborne, an activist and leader within the Red Letter Christian movement, as a protest against Jerry Falwell Jr.’s support of the Trump Administration.

On Friday night, the "revival's" opening prayer, sounding more like condemnation than a petition to the Almighty, clearly outlined the weekend's agenda. As part of her prayer, Charlottesville-based Pastor Brenda Brown-Grooms implored:

"Dear God, we have been seduced by our primal sin."

The first two speakers were both members of Native American tribes. Kaitlin Curtice, a member of the Potawatomi Citizen Band Nation, called participants "back to the land" and to "seeing it not just as people of colonized America, but as people who know that the land is a healer, that the land teaches us who God is." Curtice's speaker bio noted she writes on "the intersection of Native American spirituality, mystic faith in everyday life, and decolonizing the church."

As the wife of a veteran, I found it especially difficult to listen as poet Micah Bournes told service men and women that he is "not grateful for your service" and stated "fallen soldiers are victims, not heroes" during his "spoken word" segment.

There is room for disagreement on the political aspects of national security and opportunity for civil discourse. But instead of offering tangible national security measures, Bourne suggested we "fight evil with poetry." This speaker received a standing ovation.

LGBTQ activist and pastor Brandon Robertson also received a standing ovation. Reading his open letter to the Church from an LGBTQ Christian, Robertson declared "being on the fence about LGBTQ inclusion is not an option." Continued at the top of page 11

In brief remarks during the opening session, Claiborne commented, "One of the reasons we've come to Lynchburg is because some of the loudest voices in Christianity haven't been the most beautiful voices."

Careful not to use prayer or a worship service on Liberty University's campus as a showy spectacle, Claiborne invited "revival" participants to write down prayers on note cards to be delivered by Camacho to Jonathan Falwell, the senior pastor at Thomas Road Baptist Church. Event organizers such as Claiborne and Camacho seemed to work hard to steer the overall tone away from blatant liberal political politics and protests. Clearly not all the speakers got the memo.

Still, Claiborne insisted his group's "revival" was not intended to protest, but to "proclaim Jesus in Lynchburg." "

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From the President: Sin-Drenched Nations

as equals, extending basic courtesies, onlookers commonly and openly seethed. That Lincoln was shot to death by Booth specifically because he advocated voting rights for blacks apparently counts for little with the contemptuous Christian activist who smugly lectures attentive Evangelicals.

We are a sin-drenched country, but we are by divine grace a much better country than many others in almost every way. They who disdain our country by holding it to an inhumane or unparalleled standard are perhaps guilty of ingratitude or sanctimony. This derision, which comes from Christians left and right, now dangerously questions democracy itself, while offering no plausible alternative. The available alternatives to American democracy are actually quite hideous.

I offered my WTS proposal for "godly nationalism" as a summons to gratitude, realism, and constant societal reformation. Our attitude towards nation should be service and critique guided by love, not contempt.

"Reconciling" United Methodist Churches

Shrivel

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network between 2008 and 2014 declined and have never recovered.

Through my research of churches that joined RMN within the recent years for which data is readily available, I have found a clear overall trend, with only a few exceptions, of congregations declining after they make this change. Although the average decline varies among different congregations and regions, the fact is that the number of people leaving the church was almost always greater than the number of new people joining the church.

I strongly believe that the church should never turn away a lost sheep. In order to bring back those who strayed, I encourage churches to have grace, love those who are living a life that is displeasing to God, and to preach the biblical truth fearlessly. Finally, I pray that all of the pastors and leaders of "Reconciling" congregations and that those who are part of the LGBTQ community repent and come back to our loving Father's arms.
Duke Divinity Protesters Demand ‘Queer Theology’

by Esther Chung

Students identifying as LGBTQ interrupted Duke Divinity School Dean Elaine Heath while giving her State of the School Address on March 5. The group of students marched into the room chanting over bullhorns. One of United Methodism’s 13 official seminaries, Duke is in Durham, North Carolina.

According to an article published by The Herald Sun, the “immediate trigger for the protest apparently was the faculty’s rejection of a student request for a course on ‘queer theology.’” Queer theology is essentially rewriting Christian doctrines to affirm the nonbinary sexual behavior of LGBTQ individuals. Duke Divinity did not comply with the request. In addition, the students protesting said that they were “tired of making your school (Duke Divinity) look good yet no one has cut us a check for advertising.” They condemned how the school supposedly uses them merely for “advertisement” and does not fully accept LGBTQ individuals.

Student protesters further alleged that most of the faculty and staff at Duke are openly “non-affirming.” They demanded more representation within the school’s administration. The students also called on the school to treat them with more respect.

The protest lasted approximately 15 minutes. They marched into room B-17 where Heath was speaking and they were stopped by nobody. “They continued to chant until students from the audience stood up to tell their stories and feelings. At the end of the protest, the students made 3 demands:

Immediate: By the end of semester 1. Mandatory gender and sexuality training for staff and faculty 2. Faculty and staff allies listed on the OUTDuke website

3. LGBTQIA+ designated resources regarding admissions, field education, spiritual care and therapy, and student life made publically available online and in the necessary offices

4. Make mandatory Appendix 1 Guidelines for Inclusive Language in the Duke Divinity Bulletin. “All members of this Duke Divinity School community are invited to join together in using language that most adequately reflects the unity of the people of God and the reality of God.”

5. The implementation of a Non-Discrimination Policy to be signed by all incoming students, faculty, and staff

6. Clearly marked universal (gender non-specific) restrooms

Short-term: By Fall 2018 1. A Queer Theology class taught during the Fall 2018 semester 2. Queer affirming spiritual formation leaders and spiritual formation retreats 3. 3 yearfully tuition, need-based scholarships for trans and trans M.Div. students, prioritizing trans and queer female students of color 4. 1 yearfully tuition, need-based scholarship for queer or trans MTS student, prioritizing queer and femme students of color 5. At least 10 academic and 15 summer placements designated for trans and queer students at sites that are overtly affirming of LGBTQIA+ peoples (half of these placements must be made up of predominantly people of color)

Long-term: By Spring 2019 term 1. The beginning of the hiring process to appoint a black trans woman or gender non-conforming theologian 2. The beginning of the hiring process to appoint a tenure-track trans woman theologian 3. The beginning of the hiring process to appoint a tenure-track queer theologian of color, preferably a black or indigenous person, who will specifically teach queer issues

4. The hiring of someone to fill an office or staff position for LGBT student resources.

The students insisted that these demands be met or the administration of Duke Divinity “can expect further non-violent direct action.”

Dean Heath calmly told the protestors that she heard the students’ concerns and she will take them into consideration. She added that she too has faced hardships as the first woman dean at Duke Divinity. She said that “every time I give a public address there has been an important event in the last year and a half. There is disrespect shown to my leadership.” She continued by asking the students to “treat me with respect just as you want me to treat you with respect.”

The students disregarded these statements and continued their protest by saying, “If you hear me, harden not your hearts.” Eventually Dean Heath politely asked the students to take a seat while she finished her speech, but the students refused and stood in silence for a couple of seconds. Dean Heath continued her speech, but then the students interrupted and said, “So I’m ready to go. Are y’all ready to go?” They then proceeded to leave the room.

Heath announced August 2 that she is stepping down from her position as Dean. I encourage churches to pray for Duke Divinity School and for the students. Please pray that these students will have the transformative biblical truth of the Gospel instead of accepting “queer theology.”

Esther Chung served as the Spring 2018 Intern for the Institute on Religion and Democracy. She is studying political science at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

‘Reconciling’ United Methodist Churches Shriveled

by Esther Chung

S

exual morality is one of the most controversial and widely discussed issues in our society today. Churches are not immune from these controversies. Within the United Methodist Church, the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) has urged the denomination to stay from biblical teachings on marriage. The unofficial group of United Methodists now known as RMN emerged in 1982 to advocate for the gay and lesbian community. It has since launched a decades-long, unsuccessful campaign to get global United Methodistism to abandon biblical teaching and officially allow same-sex unions and ceremonies and the ordination of openly homo- sexually active clergy. However, RMN’s efforts have taken a toll on their affiliated congregations.

RMN’s stated mission speaks of “resisting evil, injustice, and oppression as we seek justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.” It believes that all sexual orientations are a gift from God and fights to bring churches to recognize this and celebrate related non-traditional sexual practices, including same-sex unions and sex-reassignment surgeries. Over the years, hundreds of U.S. United Methodist congregations (out of the denomination’s tens of thousands of congregations around the world) have declared themselves to be “Reconciling Congregations” formally supporting RMN.

I have often heard that when a United Methodist Church joins RMN, it takes a toll on the congregation. To test this theory, I have compiled data for most United Methodist congregations that joined RMN between 2008 and 2014. The denomination’s official online data directory, www.UMData.org, does not include key information before 2007 or after 2016. I identified the membership and worship attendance numbers for the year immediately before a congregation joined RMN to the statistics for the year immediately after this decision was made. I found that most congregations declined in both attendance and membership. For example, First UMC in Ferndale, Michigan, lost 20.55 percent of its members (from 219 to 177) and 21.18 percent of its average reported worship attendance (68 to 55).

However, it is helpful also to look at longer-term trends. When members are displeased about their congregation becoming affiliated with RMN, it may take a while for them to drift away from that church completely, and it can take two or more years after their last appearance in worship before they are actually removed from the membership rolls (per Paragraph 238 of the UMC’s governing Book of Discipline). Additionally, the actual decline may be far greater as the data is based on figures provided by the congregations.

Meanwhile, propogists of RMN sometimes argue that congregations that make decisions to conform to worldly views on sexuality can initially lose a number of people, but then eventually recover by attracting those who appreciate their lib- eral view of sexuality. A V-shaped curve is what the RMN supporters like to describe. Yes, it is true to a certain degree that some congregations do recover after both membership and attendance some time after joining RMN. But often this was followed by another period of decline. Out of the 130 congregations who joined RMN between 2008 and 2014, only 14 eventually saw their membership and attendance rise to exceed the numbers it had the year before they joined RMN. That is only about 10 percent of “Reconciling” congregations experiencing a V-shaped curve.

In other words, what the readily available data shows is that when congregations affiliate with RMN, in most cases they lose people initially and do not fully recover.

In the big picture, for each of the UMC’s five U.S. jurisdictions, I have cal- culated the average decline for recently RMN-affiliated congregations as a whole by comparing the TOTAL membership and worship attendance figures for all such congregations in each region the year before they joined RMN and com- paring these statistics to those for the last year on record (2006). This allows us to observe longer-term trends of 3-8 years. For example, the total membership for the Northeastern conferences before they separately joined RMN was 10,034. The total membership for these same congregations in 2016 was 9,117. So this was an overall decline of 9.4 percent for the newly “Reconciled” congregations within that jurisdiction.

Without exception, in all five juris- dictions, membership and attendance for RMN churches dropped, as shown in the table below:

Think of the toll such losses can mean for a single congregation. For example, Good Samaritan UMC in the California

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Nevada Annual Conference of the West ern Jurisdiction originally had 431 members and 207 people in average worship attendance before they joined RMN in 2011. The congregation suffered a decline trajectory, losing 66 percent of its members (down to 157) and 74.7 percent of its worship attendance (down to 53) by 2016. Similar dramatic declines were true for many of the RMN congregations all over the country. Again, with only a handful of exceptions, United Methodist congre- gations that reported as joining its
ANGELICAN

No ‘Fence Sitting’ for GAFCON Anglicans
by Jeffrey Walton

The Gospel of Jesus Christ requires people to make a choice, and that Gospel message must be transmitted faithfully, according to speakers at the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) that met in Jerusalem June 17-22.


“Some people fear the jeering of the crowd drawing upon people to make a choice, and that Gospel message must be transmitted faithfully, according to speakers at the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) that met in Jerusalem June 17-22.

“The false Gospel of inclusion with denominations has lost more than 1 million members or 25% of members, now down to 3.5 million, from 4.7 million ten years ago. At this rate of decline the denomination won’t exist in 30 years.”

Newly elected ELCA bishops might address this existential crisis with fresh energy. But a recent Religion Service News interview with six new women bishops shows no such interest. Instead, they seem to double down on the heterodox theology and political activism so destructive for Mainline Protestant denominations.

There’s almost no reference to the ELCA’s decline in the bishops’ interviews. Bishop Patricia Davenport of Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod asked bluntly, “What do we move from the mentality of ‘the church is declining, the church is declining,’ to building up the kingdom of God?”

Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson of the Northwestern Synod of Wisconsin noted that many churches are effectively museums, theaters or “political action committees.” But she didn’t really explain here what being real church entails.

Several bishops cited immigration as an advocacy issue. Bishop Deborah Hutterer of the Grand Canyon Synod predicted: “The Hispanic population will add a richness to the church that we haven’t quite tapped yet.”

But, the ELCA like all Mainline denominations is more than 90% white. Liberal Protestantism, unlike Pentecostalism, doesn’t work with immigrant groups. Won’t the ELCA have to change?

Then Davenport said: “I love that. That’s a path that we’ve always been on. I would say there are more people who are now living into this …”

Bishop Briner fully agreed: “We’re becoming bolder with our public witness, and I really appreciate that. And it’s not without a cost.”

Lutheran laity are traditionally more conservative politically, unlike their denominational elites. But the ELCA shows no such interest. Instead, they seem to double down on the heterodox theology and political activism so destructive for Mainline Protestant denominations.

Here’s my prophecy: In 15-20 years, when these bishops and other current Mainline elites are retired, and their denominations have further shrunk to a fraction of their current size, a new generation of leadership will recognize the disaster and embrace orthodoxy as the only hope for rejuvenation. They will seek to resurrect great ecumenical traditions by which time evangelical nondenominationalism may have run its course.

I hope and pray so.

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Jesus’ words stared at me from the hospital wall: μη φοβού μονον πιστεύε—“Do not fear, only believe.”

Easier said than done, I thought. But the synagogue ruler Jairus in Mark Chapter 5 had a worse situation than I: his daughter was at the point of death. I still wasn’t feeling great after emergency surgery in an unfamiliar land far from friends and family. God really was the only one who could intervene.

My first-time visit to Greece wasn’t supposed to go this way. I had traveled on a pilgrimage to visit Mount Athos —“The Holy Mountain”—home to 20 Orthodox monasteries. My Greek-American friend Dave organized the backpacking trek, and I was looking forward to being challenged by something outside of my comfort zone.

Some American friends were bemused as to why I was going. Among other eccentricities, Athos is the largest land area in the world from which women—and even female livestock—are strictly forbidden. A special visa is required and only 10 non-Orthodox persons are permitted visas each day for a visit not to exceed three days.

Unfortunately, my visit was quickly cut short after I fainted on the boat ride to Athos and struggled to walk. I was sent to a hospital in the town of Polygyros and then transferred on to a private hospital in the biblical city of Thessaloniki, the largest metropolitan area in northern Greece. A brief bout of food poisoning the night before had triggered something far worse: my body was rapidly losing blood. Several blood transfusions later, a scan revealed that the blood loss was originating in my small intestine, where a sizeable mass was detected. I would need surgery before returning home to the United States.

So much for vacation. But what had become “unplanned medical tourism” provided an opportunity to draw closer to God.

The private hospital in which I was treated, St. Luke’s, also provided an opportunity to connect with Greece’s small Evangelical community. At only about half a percent of the Greek population, being an Evangelical Christian in Greece is a counter-cultural move. About half of the employees at St. Luke’s are professing Evangelical Christians. I both asked for and received personal prayer with several of my caregivers, something I had not experienced in the United States. I was also dependent upon my friend Dave’s Greek family, his uncle generously visiting me, housing me after my hospital release, and navigating the hospital administration process for me.

My hospital room featured the framed excerpt from Mark Chapter 5. My thoughts were also on Saint Paul’s words to the residents of the city where I was being treated.

1 Thessalonians Chapter 5 verses 16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

 Probably 200 people were praying for me, and sulking about a spoiled vacation was not the appropriate response.

The chapter from Mark seemed especially relevant: I have struggled for three years with iron deficiency anemia, and my American doctors had few answers. Otherwise healthy young men do not typically struggle with the condition, and I had grown increasingly frustrated with a decreasing quality of life. My skin was pale and hands cold; my energy levels reduced to a state of lethargy. Mistakenly, I had thought the problem was brought about by an inability of my body to absorb iron. Instead, my sudden medical crisis in Greece revealed that it had been intermittent and—until now—undiagnosed blood loss that had caused these problems for so long.

Earlier in Chapter 5, St. Mark writes: “And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, ‘If I touch even his garments, I will be made well.’ And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my garments?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’” And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’”

This woman’s story resonates with my new experience. The kind Greek hospital staff and friends surrounding me helped in my healing. I’m still recovering and understanding what happened, but power has gone out from Christ, and like the woman in Mark Chapter 5, I have been made well. ✝️

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