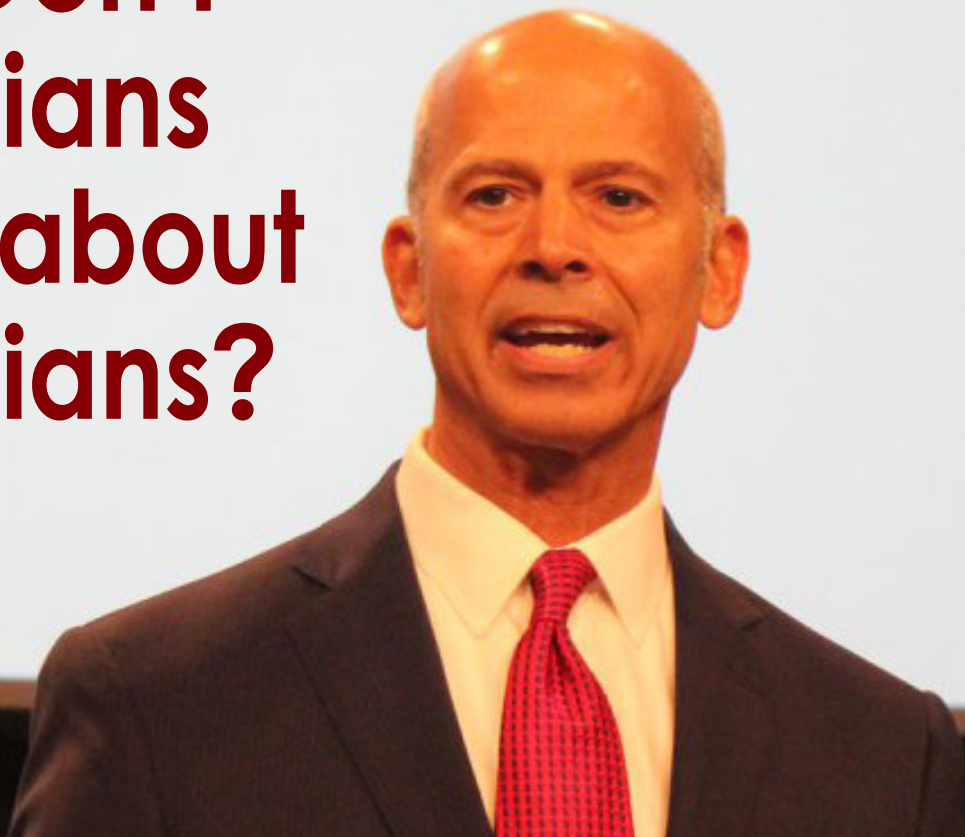


## Why Don't Christians Care about Christians?

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An attentive audience listens to author Dominic Sputo at IRD's Global Summit on Christian Persecution May 10 in Washington, D.C. See story on page 8. (Photo: Jeffrey Walton / IRD)

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Author Dominic Sputo speaks at IRD's Global Summit on Christian Persecution May 10 in Washington, D.C. (Photo: Jeffrey Walton / IRD)

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 recall 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.

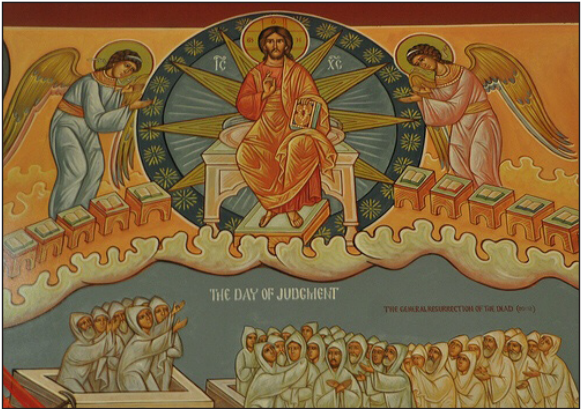
The Christians who disdain America often suffer from particular theological confusion, believing humanity basically good, while America is the odious aberration. They are also, ironically, often themselves persons of privilege, attending or teaching at expensive and prestigious academic institutions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

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 unexceptional.

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. Every sin prevalent today was present in the past, often more pervasively and destructively, including assaults on family, marriage and vulnerable human life, unborn or otherwise. My own constant 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



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)

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Mark Tooley



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



## 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, caresses, kisses, 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 country 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 not evidence of misconduct on my part.”

In a video posted on Willow Creek’s website, Hybels expressed, “This is one of the most heartbreaking and 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.

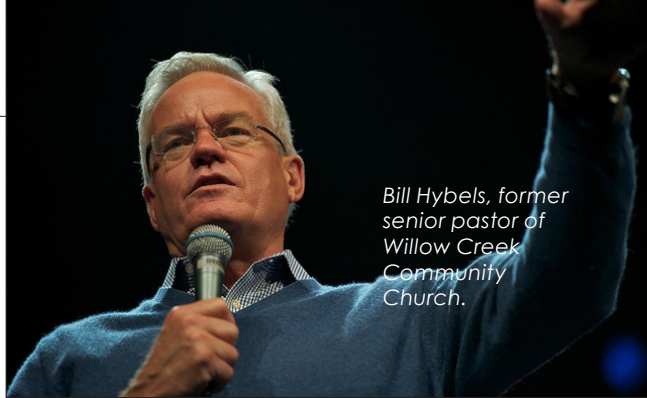
Shortly after the misconduct allegations made headlines, **Pam Orr**, Chair of Willow Creek’s Elder Board, shared comments in a video message. She accused two couples of “a coordinated effort to undermine Bill’s reputation.”

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 concerns, 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. ✚



Bill Hybels, former 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 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 convention deputies 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 \$8-10 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 D019 “Ending Church Complicity in the Occupation,” introduced by The Rev. Canon Brian Grieves, clergy deputy from the Diocese of Hawaii, would urge divestment.

“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 D019, the adopted resolution B016 *does not* have a timeline for action by Executive Council or any reference to church complicity in the

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Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. (Photo: Christian Post)

## Southern Baptists Cut DC Convention Ties over Lesbian Co-Pastors

Disagreement over the hiring of two married lesbian co-pastors by a Washington, D.C., congregation has severed the relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention (DCBC).

The historic Calvary Baptist Church announced a unanimous vote calling **Sally Sarratt** and **Maria Swearingen** as co-pastors in January of 2017. A theologically progressive and activist congregation, Calvary officially severed its connection to the SBC in 2012, claiming that foundational distinctives of the larger body had been lost.

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 churches 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

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

*Continued from page 4*

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 2015 General 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 Partner” 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

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. ✚

with traditional views on marriage will have to draw that line themselves. ✚

*Bishops raise their hands to oppose Resolution D019, which sought to end the church’s “financial complicity in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.” The resolution failed, 48-78. Photo: (David Paulsen/Episcopal News Service)*





## Karen Christians Rally to Recognize Burma Genocide

**T**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 persecution 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 Nation-wide 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

*Continued on page 5*

## Evangelicals Pray for Peace, Omit North Korean Persecuted Christians

**P**rior to U.S. President **Donald Trump's** Singapore summit with North Korean Leader **Kim Jong Un**, the National Association of Evangelicals

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 of a megachurch in South Korea, as well as several Korean-American church leaders. Others include **Kyle Healy**, 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." ✚



*Drawing by North Korean prisoner depicting Christian prisoners in detention camp at the North Korea Genocide Exhibit on Capitol Hill (Photo credit: Faith McDonnell/IRD)*

(NAE) released a statement on March 27 urging Christians everywhere to pray for peace on the Korean Peninsula. North



*Image from Spiritual Dimensions of the Islamic Revolution by Mohammad-Taqi Rahbar, Blake Archer Williams*

## Churches and the Iran Nuke Deal

**U**nited Methodism'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 by high-ranking U.S. officials has all the markings of comments leading to war."

Presbyterian Church (USA) Stated Clerk **J. Herbert Nelson, II**, followed suit issuing a statement May 9 condemning President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, citing that containment of Iran's nuclear program has been "severely jeopardized."

**Jim Wallis** of Sojourners starting organizing a religious coalition opposing military action against Iran during the Bush Administration and was a vocal proponent of the nuclear deal. In 2015 he explained it was a "good" and "Christian" option.

But strategic maneuverings among nations are rarely if ever clearly "Christian" and "good" or clearly not so, notes IRD 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 for 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.

Opponents of that deal believe 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 avoided acknowledging the reality of Iran's Islamist dictatorship, its repression of its own people, its strategic ambitions, its regional aggressions, and its apocalyptic 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." ✚

## Karen Christians Rally to Recognize Burma Genocide

*Continued from page 6*

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 pictures of Saw Oh Moo, 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



*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: Dede Laugesen)*

**Adoniram Judson** in the early nineteenth century. Their churches and organizations have endured for centuries but are under threat from the Buddhist-majority government. ✚





# Why Don't Christians Care about Christians?

Heirloom Love author **Dominic Sputo** was keynote speaker at IRD's Global Summit on Christian Persecution May 10 on Capitol Hill. We're publishing excerpts from his address in order to more widely share a dynamic personal testimony: how a deathbed phone call and an unexpected healing led Sputo to a study of Scripture that prompted him to reexamine how—and why—Christians give.

It's an honor to be here. Thank you IRD for hosting this event. You are a beacon in the good fight to uphold the name of Jesus through the witness of the church.

Today I'd like to share with you what I learned from the biggest mistake that I've ever made. It started when I was a new Christian and reading the final instructions that Jesus gave us the night before he was crucified. That's when he said, "Love one another just as I loved you."

It haunted me that he didn't say it just once, or twice, or even three times. He said it four times that night! It's as if he's saying to us—to you and me, "if you don't do anything else, make sure that you love one another!"

I was so taken by Jesus' command to love our brothers and sisters that I vowed to use my income to help them. But, then the Lord blessed me to start a software company with some friends. The Lord gave us the right product at the right time and within two years our company went public on Nasdaq and I conveniently

forgot my vow. Oh, I gave 10% to my church and another 10% to charity probably just to silence my conscience because I turned my back on those who I vowed to help.

One of the first things that I did was build a waterfront house that was five times larger than the home we were living in when I made the vow. Shortly after we moved into our new home, I was bitten by a tick while on a church camping trip. I was infected with an aggressive strain of Lyme disease that didn't respond to antibiotics and my health declined rapidly. The Lyme caused severe arthritis that made it hard to get out of bed and very difficult just to walk from one side of the big house to the other.

It also affected my brain in a way that made it difficult to complete my sentences. I had liver complications and candida from excessive antibiotics. I had green fungus growing in my nails. And if I didn't look pitiful enough already, I had red bumps the size of pencil erasers growing on my head and neck. I was quite a sight.

Shortly after I became sick, the Lord revealed to me that he was disciplining me for my unfaithfulness with His money. I may be a slow learner, but this time I repented quickly!

After 18 months my wife and I were losing hope. My earthly days seemed to be coming to an end. There was nothing else the doctors could do for me and I was off of all medications. Then I received a phone

Author Dominic Sputo speaks at IRD's Global Summit on Christian Persecution May 10 in Washington, D.C. (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD)

call from a friend in church. He said the Lord told him to tell me that He was going to heal me. At that moment, on the phone, the Lord healed me. All the Lyme disease symptoms immediately left my body. My brain and speech were restored. The arthritis was gone. The green fungus disappeared. Even the red bumps were gone! The Lord gave me a second chance!

## MONEY: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

After the Lord healed me I felt compelled to create a plan for how to use the Lord's money. I started by studying what the Bible says about money. I counted 426 verses in the New Testament that are meant to direct our giving. They're all listed in the book, *Heirloom Love*.

Two-thirds of the verses, 281 of them, are specifically related to helping poor, persecuted Christians. I was surprised to learn that helping suffering fellow Christians 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 1 Corinthians Chapter 16:1-2 that the biblical reason for Sunday church collections is to help poor persecuted Christians!

After reading these Scriptures, I started looking for ways to help persecuted Christians. I contacted the leaders of the 150 largest Christian churches and the twenty largest Christian denominations in the U.S. I told them that we wanted to support their programs to help the persecuted. Sadly, only two of the 20 largest denominations and only three of the 150 largest churches 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 ½ half of 1% of what we give on Sunday is used to help them. I'm not saying that 100% of Sunday offerings should be designated for the persecuted. My point is to highlight the shift away from biblical values.

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One of the reasons why we've fallen away is we're reading the New Testament out of context. The New Testament was written with the tears and blood of Christians at a time when the normal Christian life was defined by suffering and loss. But here in the U.S., our default lens for reading the Bible is distorted by our comfort and security so that we don't fully see its persecution context.

For example, when we read the commands to be hospitable, we might think about having friends over for dinner. We don't understand that biblical hospitality is about caring for our brothers and sisters who are refugees fleeing from persecution and desperately need us to provide them with life sustaining aid.

As many of you know, this is critically relevant today. Persecution is raging at an all-time high. In just the last few years ISIS and Boko Haram have driven millions of Christians from their homes. They've been without food, starving and have even died while waiting for our "hospitality."

This is why I wrote *Heirloom Love*, to help us understand the New Testament in its original persecution context.

## LOVE JUST AS

When Jesus said love one another just as I have loved you, he was just a few hours away from the cross. He meant love each other *sacrificially*. That's why in the same John 15 passage he told us to "lay down your lives" for each other (John 15:12-13). John reinforced this point in his letter when he said: "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

The love that Jesus requires from us doesn't make sense to a church whose world view is framed by comfort and security. But it makes total sense to Jesus followers who understand that they are one body and members one of another and responsible for bearing the burdens of 215 million other Christians who are suffering today for Christ.

Jesus said that we should love and care for all people. This is so important that I need to say that again. Jesus taught that we should love and care for all people. But He was also clear that His brothers and sisters are a priority. Paul confirmed

this when he said, "Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

People oftentimes ask why Jesus' brothers and sisters are different from other needy people. The answer to this question may be the most important thing that I share with you today.

## LOVING THEM = LOVING HIM

Before Saul became Paul, he was on his way to imprison and kill Christians when he was blinded by a great light and a voice said to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" Then Saul asked, "Who are you, lord?" and the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" (Acts 9:3-5).

This passage teaches us that those who persecute Christians are really persecuting Jesus. In the same way, when we care for persecuted Christians we're really caring for Jesus! That's why Jesus said whatever we do for the for the least of His brothers and sisters we're really doing for Him (Matthew 25:40). It also means when we forget, neglect or deny care to needy believers, we're really forgetting, neglecting and denying Jesus! That's why Jesus also said, whatever you did not do for the least of these brothers of mine you did not do for Me (Matthew 25:45).

## PETER

If I could only leave you with one verse today it would be from 1st Peter. Peter wrote his first letter in the context of the Christian refugee situation that started in Acts 8. Peter talks about both love and persecution in every chapter of the letter.

1 Peter 4.8 is remarkable in this context. It says, "*Above all things* have fervent love for one another" (1 Peter 4:8, NKJV). The words "above all things" means this should be our highest priority. Peter then gives us the application starting in 4.9 by saying, "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Peter is saying that our highest priority should be to care for the suffering body of Christ.

## JAMES

James also wrote his letter in the context of the refugee situation that originated in Acts 8. He's writing to church goers who aren't helping the Christian refugees who need food and clothing. And they're not caring

for the widows and orphans whose fathers and husbands were most likely martyred.

James said that these church goers are "foolish" and "deluded" about their standing in Christ. James' theology on what he called "pure religion" and genuine saving faith was inseparable from caring for persecuted believers.

## JOHN

By the time the apostle John wrote his first letter around 95 AD, Christianity had been around for 60 years and false teachers had perverted what it meant to be a Christian. John wrote his letter to set the record straight on what it meant to be a true Christian. I want to leave you with one verse from his letter. But before I do, let's quickly revisit John's description of real love. "We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up 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 person?" (1 John 3:16-17 NLT).

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 live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God" (1 John 3:10 NLT). John's test for telling who are the children of God and the children of the devil is sacrificial love for other believers!

## CLOSE

I close with just two thoughts. (1.) We're here today because Jesus is still being persecuted through His children and how we respond to the persecuted is really our response to Jesus.

And (2.) To let you know that the Lord is using my book, *Heirloom Love*, to radically multiply the number of American Christians who are caring for our persecuted brothers and sisters. *Heirloom Love* is designed as a personal devotional and as a small group study. One of the most effective things that you can do to help our persecuted family is start an *Heirloom Love* small 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)

It is fair to critique Evangelicals in lock-step with a political candidate or party whose platform opposes Christian teaching. We've heard these critiques quite a bit lately. However, the recent "Lynchburg revival" proved Evangelicals who are liberal politically can fall into the same trap as their conservative counterparts.

On April 7-8, 2018, I attended the "Red Letter Revival: A Revival of Jesus and Justice," hosted by the left-leaning Red Letter Christian (RLC) group in Lynchburg, Virginia. I truly hoped the event would live up to its name. Preachers would share the Gospel, resulting in lost souls saved and lives transformed by God's goodness and mercy. But sadly, what I witnessed looked more like a rally intended to stir a partisan base than a Holy Ghost-led revival.

The "Red Letter Revival" was originally organized by **Shane Claiborne**, an activist and leader within the Red Letter Christian movement, as a seeming protest of **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 the myth of redemptive violence. We*

*have failed to resist the unholy and preemptive wars of choice and have even fought for the death penalty. As the youth of America are raising their voices against gun violence, many Christians remain silent, many even working to sustain and further a culture of guns and violence. From an unrestrained militarism, Lord save us.*

Glancing around the EC Glass Civil Auditorium, I noticed the usual middle-aged mostly white crowd nodding in agreement with Brown-Grooms. But there were several groups of young people scattered throughout the crowd and even some small children alongside their parents on day one of the "revival."

When Shane Claiborne initially posed the idea of hosting an event in Lynchburg to challenge the "toxic evangelicalism of Jerry Falwell Jr.," nearly 2,000 people responded favorably on Twitter. About two hundred people attended the auditorium on opening night.

Public confession is an important component of revival. So perhaps this is why after a brief introduction expressing concern over the "co-opting of Christianity today for political purposes," RLC Executive Director **Don Golden** encouraged participants to "acknowledge what we did to Native peoples" because "that is 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 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 Christian approaches to national security and opportunity for civil discourse. But instead of offering tangible national security measures, Bournes suggested we "fight evil with poetry." This speaker received a standing ovation.

LGBTQ activist and pastor **Brandan 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*

"Because at the end of the day this isn't a question of theological disagreement, but about human rights and dignity," Robertson stated. "Silence is complicit in oppression. Indifference is the grease on the mechanisms of marginalization. It's time to take up your cross and follow Christ."

Robertson also co-led a Saturday morning workshop titled, "LGBTQ+ Christians and their Allies." Unfortunately, by the time I arrived at the workshop the room was at capacity and so I chose a less sensational forum. However, my friend John did attend the workshop and he was shocked when a young woman defended polyamorous relationships during the Q&A session while listeners nodded and "Mhmmmed" as she spoke.

While dubbing himself theologically conservative, activist and North Carolina-based pastor, the Rev. Dr. **William Barber II** advocated for universal healthcare during his keynote address. "We claim allegiance to the Jesus. And if Jesus did anything he set up free health clinics everywhere he went. He never charged a leper a co-pay," Barber said.

"But in the wealthiest nation—Oh but by the way, we have American exceptionalism, but we are the only country out of the twenty-five wealthiest that do not offer some form of universal healthcare."

On day two of the "revival," Religious Left fixture **Tony Campolo** delivered perhaps the most balanced discussion. Recalling **Jerry Falwell Sr.**, Campolo spoke fondly of their unity in Jesus Christ. "I worry in today's society that the political differences that exist in the Church are dividing the Church that grieves Jesus," said Campolo.

"I don't know about you, but I learn more from my critics than I do from my friends. They point out my shortcomings. They point out my inadequacies more than my friends do. So we need to listen to each other."

Jerry Falwell Jr.'s name was cleverly left unmentioned. But **Jonathan Martin**, an event organizer and Oklahoma-based pastor, said, the revival "is not about any particular personality out there." Martin warned, "What we do share in common is that we are followers of Jesus who believe there are some principalities that need to be resisted."

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 Campolo to **Jonathan Falwell**, the senior pastor at Thomas Road Baptist Church.

Event organizers such as Claiborne and Campolo 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." ✝



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

## From the President: Sin -Drenched Nations

*Continued from page 3*

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 inhuman or unparalleled standard are perhaps guilty of ingratitude as well as 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 Shrivels

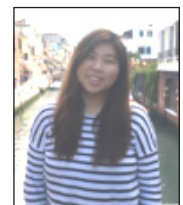
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network between 2008 and 2014 declined and have never recovered.

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. ✝



**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.



# 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, 2018 (Photo: Madeleine Rebouche / YouTube Screen Capture)

**D**emanding that Duke Divinity School promote “queer theology,” a small handful of students identifying as LGBTQ interrupted Dean **Elaine Heath** during 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 unbiblical 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 advertisement.” They condemned how the school supposedly uses them merely for “advertisement” and does not fully accept LGBTQ individuals.

Student protestors 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 chanting, “I am somebody and I won’t be 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 15 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 I: 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 yearly full tuition, need-based scholarships for queer and trans M.Div. students, prioritizing trans and queer femme students of color
4. 1 yearly full 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 (½ 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 a queer theology course

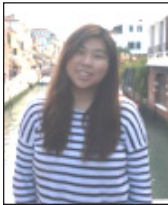
4. The hiring of someone to fill an office or staff position for LGBT student resources.

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 with me that the students will embrace 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 Shrivels

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 stray 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 also launched a decades-long, unsuccessful campaign to get global United Methodism to abandon biblical teaching and officially allow same-sex union ceremonies and the ordination of openly homosexually active clergy. However, RMN’s efforts have taken a toll on their affiliated congregations.

RMN’s stated mission speaks of “resist[ing] 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 congregation 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](http://www.UMdata.org), does not include key information before 2007 or after 2016.)

When comparing 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 174) and 21.18 percent of its average reported worship attendance (85 to 67).

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 228 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, proponents 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 liberal 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 have experienced growth in 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 calculated 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 comparing these statistics to those for the last year on record (2016). This allows us to observe longer-term trends of 3-9 years. For example, the total membership for the Northeastern congregations 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 9.14 percent for the newly “Reconciled” congregations within that jurisdiction.

Without exception, in all five jurisdictions, 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-

Jurisdiction	Decline in Membership	Decline in Attendance
Northeastern .....	9.14%.....	16.60%
Western .....	11.57%.....	21.29%
North Central.....	5.74%.....	11.49%
Southeastern .....	10.56% .....	16.60%
South Central.....	6.95% .....	3.75%

Nevada Annual Conference of the Western Jurisdiction originally had 435 members and 207 people in average worship attendance before they joined RMN in 2011. The congregation suffered a decline trajectory, losing 17.70 percent of its members (down to 357) and 34.78 percent of its worship attendance (down to 135) by 2016. Similar dramatic declines were the case with many other congregations all over the country. Again, with only a handful of exceptions, United Methodist congregations that RMN reported as joining its

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# 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 like Pilate want to take a pass on deciding about Jesus," assessed

False promises of prosperity were one of several distortions of Scripture that speakers warned against, distortions that cut across cultures and damage the witness of the church.

"Any distortion of the Scriptures is a distortion of the Gospel of God and therefore a false gospel," declared Archbishop **Nicholas Okoh**, Chairman of the GAFCON Primates Council in an opening plenary address.

A sense of urgency pervaded the presentations. The church, Okoh assessed, "never fits the mood of a particular age because it is made for all ages" and "a gospel without offense is no Gospel."

Instead, the Metropolitan of the Church of Nigeria — the largest Anglican Communion province with more than 20 million adherents — insisted "preaching must not be compromised, but is to be

discharged faithfully in every generation, as Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."

With the rival teachings found within parts of the worldwide Anglican Communion squarely in his sights, the senior Nigerian Archbishop noted that making a choice means drawing a line between those who embrace Christ's message and those who reject it.

"The false Gospel of inclusion without repentance has been embraced by North America," Okoh warned, alluding to teaching from officials in the U.S.-based Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. "If we walk together with those who deny the orthodox faith, in word or deed, we have agreed that orthodoxy is optional."

Okoh also argued for an Anglicanism centered upon mutually held core beliefs,

rather than mere historic ties among the international family of churches descended from the missionary activity of the Church of England.

"We do not accept that the office of Canterbury defines Anglicanism," Okoh summarily declared about the centrality of institutions anchored and funded in the Global North. "The Gospel is given to us ... we must be willing to challenge church leaders who deny the apostolic boundaries of the Gospel."

An afternoon session featured another voice from the rapidly growing Global South contingent within the Anglican Communion. The Rt. Rev. **Miguel Uchoa**, recently installed as the first archbishop and primate of the Anglican Church in Brazil, spoke about ministry in his South American nation. Uchoa was bishop of the Diocese of Recife, which withdrew from the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil (IEAB) in 2004. Following strong growth, the Diocese of Recife split into three dioceses that form a new Anglican province, the Anglican Church in Brazil, operating parallel to the IEAB. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the official instruments of the Anglican Communion only recognize the IEAB, but GAFCON has strongly supported and embraced the new Anglican Church of Brazil, which is theologically conservative and opposes the same-sex marriage innovations that the IEAB recently approved.

This move to effectively bypass existing Anglican Communion structures closely follows the same move by GAFCON officials to embrace the Anglican Church in North America, formed in 2009 from churches and dioceses that split from the U.S.-based Episcopal Church. ✚



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

Delegates embrace at the start of GAFCON 2018 in Jerusalem on June 18, 2018 (Photo: GAFCON)

Bishop **Alfred Olwa** of the Diocese of Lango, Uganda, in a morning Bible study drawing upon Luke Chapter 22:66-23:25. "Some people fear the jeering of the crowd more than the judgment of God."

Olwa spoke before nearly 2,000 Anglican Christians assembled for the quinquennial conference, the central gathering of an orthodox reform movement within the worldwide Anglican Communion. Delegates gathered from more than 50 nations to strategize mission, hear teaching and, in the words of conference organizers, "proclaim Christ faithfully to the nations."

A clear repudiation of the prosperity gospel occurred early in the conference. "Some people are interested in Jesus only as long as he is blessing them," Olwa observed. "They proclaim prosperity, not the true Gospel."

# Liberal Lutherans Doubling Down

by Mark Tooley

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has lost more than 1 million members or 25% of membership, 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' interview. Bishop **Patricia Davenport** of Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod asked without really answering the question: "How 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 Northwest 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."

True, 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 its message? None of the bishops indicated so.

Instead, Bishop **Susan Briner** of Southwestern Texas Synod declared: "Because I'm telling you what, the Spirit is up to something ..."

And the other bishops responded: "Amen. Yes, she is."

And Briner said: "... if we would just let her out."

The bishops then responded: "Let her out. Get out of her way."

Then Briner said: "Open the doors and let her out."

And her fellow bishops concluded: "She's out! She is loose!"

Presumably the bishops were referring to the Holy Spirit, whom Scripture and the universal church call "He." Alternative pronouns are usually confined to some quarters of Western liberal Protestantism, not orthodoxy. Are these new bishops minimizing orthodoxy in favor of more liberal Protestantism?

Comments about the ELCA's political activism confirm the latter. RNS asked the bishops about "the rise of the religious left," of which the ELCA would be considered part, and whether members felt "energized."

Bishop Davenport responded: "I'm not going to say it's a resurgence for me. I'm going to say it's a continuation."

Bishop **Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld** of Southwestern Wisconsin Synod added: "That has been where the Lutheran Church has been, particularly this branch of Lutheranism and its predecessor bodies. So it's not new for us. We're continuing that legacy that says we're in the world and that Christ was in the world and that we take that as a model."

Then Davenport said: "I love that. This is 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 should, per the bishops, firmly identify as Religious Left.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton was installed Oct. 5, 2013, at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel in on the campus of the University of Chicago. (Photo: ELCA)

Bishop Thomas-Breitfeld said: "And we're reminded that Jesus was political. He wasn't partisan. God is not a Republican or Democrat or independent. God is God. Jesus called out issues of how the poor, how the widows were being treated. That wasn't a partisan issue. That was a gospel issue."

But for liberal church officials, "Gospel" issues always turn out to be on the political left.

These bishops seem unaware of ELCA's need for course correction. Undoubtedly ELCA will lose another million members over the coming decade, in sync with other U.S. Mainline 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 ecclesial traditions by which time evangelical nondenominationalism may have run its course.

I hope and pray so. ✚



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



# IRD Diary: Finding Healing in Thessaloniki

by Jeff Walton

Jesus' words stared at me from the hospital wall: μη φοβου μονον πιστευε—"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



"Do not fear, only believe": the author's hospital room in Thessaloniki where Mark 5:36 hangs on the wall. Greek friend Kleanthis is pictured at left. (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD)

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. God provided.

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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