

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Summer 2022



Exiting United Methodism Now

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A representative of Planned Parenthood Pasadena and San Gabriel Valley speaks at the unveiling of pro-Abortion signage at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California on June 25, 2022 (Photo: Planned Parenthood via Facebook). See story on page 10.

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Cover: Bishops process into worship on Feb. 24, 2019, at the special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, held in St. Louis, Missouri. (Photo: Paul Jeffrey/UMNS)

Abortion and the Methodist Split

Some think United Methodism's split is over LGBTQIA+. But official United Methodism's angry reaction to the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* evinces it is much more.

The United Methodist Council of Bishops, United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, the United Methodist women's group, General Commission on Women in Society, and General Board of Global Ministries all denounced the court ruling, which discerned there is no constitutional right to abortion. Their statements ignored that the 2016 General Conference revoked United Methodism's official support for *Roe v. Wade* dating to 1976 and that United Methodism has been moving in a more pro-life direction since first backing abortion rights in 1970. They also ignored that the court's decision did not address the ethics of abortion but only found that the Constitution, which does not mention abortion, doesn't prevent states from restricting abortion.

Far more importantly, these United Methodist statements were theologically and ethically vacuous, ignoring two thousand years of rich ecumenical Christian teaching about the sacredness of all human life. They spoke instead in contemporary secular political language of equal access, autonomy, and therapeutic contextualization. The value and purpose of human life from a Christian understanding was unaddressed. Christianity, which is always biased in favor of the defenseless and the voiceless, for 2000 years has cherished the unborn and argued for their protection. The divine Savior of the world entered into his earthly existence as a human embryo and then a fetus. John the Baptist, in the womb of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, leapt for joy when the Virgin announced she had conceived. The unborn are important actors in God's view of human affairs.

Christianity has never, when faithful to its teachings, esteemed persons, born or unborn, based on their worldly standing, their intelligence, their capacity to care for themselves, or their ability to speak. Instead, all persons are assumed to image God and receive his love. We respect all persons, no matter their state of development, because they are of God. United Methodist statements did not acknowledge any of this received wisdom of love and care from the church universal.

Here is the chief difference between the contending factions in United Methodism. Postmodernists who govern U.S. United Methodism are tacitly divorcing from the church universal. They believe that the 95 percent of the contemporary global church, with 99 percent of the historic church, that affirms traditional teachings about marriage, human life, and God's gift of male and female—among other treasures of the church's received teaching dating to Christ and foreshadowed by the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets—is simply wrong. Not just wrong, but oppressive and retrograde. They believe Western progressive Protestantism, in sync with Western secularism, is uniquely the vanguard of truth, not just in application of the faith but on core doctrine and ethical teaching.

This postmodern view of the church does not comprise a timeless and boundaryless Body of Christ but rather a discordant collection of willful and self-actualized individuals, each of whom decides what is best. It's not a very appealing vision. But this different version of the church is what is splitting United Methodism, not sexuality per se.



Biblical frescoes depict the Communion of Saints in The Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta by Giusto de Menabuoi. (Photo: José Luiz)

It's unfortunate that United Methodism's split is precipitated by LGBTQIA+ demands instead of the wider underlying gulf in defining the church and its cosmic identity. Some traditionalists declare the split is about scriptural authority. Postmodernist Methodists insist they heed the Scriptures but through a contemporary, liberationist lens. This interpretation stresses justice and empowerment. Rightly or wrongly, this interpretation separates Western progressive Protestants from the rest of Christianity. Post-split, progressive United Methodism, like other U.S.-based declining liberal Mainline Protestant denominations, will reject the church universal's historic and global ecumenical consensus

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Mark Tooley



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

Resolution Reached in South Carolina Episcopal Case

Episcopalians and departing Anglicans in South Carolina have received nearly the final word in a mixed ruling this April that concludes the last major church property dispute in the North American Anglican realignment.

Fifteen Anglican parishes, including the historic St. Michael's Church and St. Philip's Church in Charleston, will retain title to their properties, while 14 parishes were initially ruled to be required to turn over their church properties to Episcopalians, including the Camp St. Christopher Conference Center.

One Anglican congregation, St. John's Church on Johns Island, has already turned over its property to the Episcopal Church and begun meeting for services at a nearby middle school. An Episcopal Church-affiliated congregation began worship on the site July 17.

The ruling from the South Carolina Supreme Court follows nearly a decade of litigation in which the parties disputed ownership of more than \$500 million worth of church properties. The case, which originally involved 36 parishes, took several twists and was repeatedly appealed.

"From our decision today, there will be no remand," the five justices wrote in April. "The case is over."

It was not. In June, eight of the 14 Anglican parishes set to lose their properties, including Old St. Andrew's Church in Charleston, the oldest surviving church building in South Carolina, filed petitions for rehearing, maintaining that they did not create a trust interest in favor of the Episcopal Church and therefore should retain ownership of their properties. The petition for Christ Church of Mt. Pleasant, SC, was denied in its entirety, but the court requested that the Episcopal Church submit

a response to the arguments made by the other seven parishes, which did so on June 20. The following week, legal counsel for the Anglican parishes filed their reply, providing counter arguments to those filed by Episcopalians.

On August 17, the South Carolina Supreme Court reversed course on the fate of six of seven parishes that had petitioned for rehearing. Of the 36 Anglican parishes that were parties in the South Carolina Episcopal Church lawsuit, 28 have retained control of their church properties.

"I'm grateful the South Carolina Supreme Court reversed course on the fate of six of our seven parishes that had petitioned for rehearing," Anglican Diocese of South Carolina Bishop **Chip Edgar** said in a press statement from his diocese.



Contested properties in the South Carolina Episcopal lawsuit included St. Michael's Church, St. Philip's Church and Old St. Andrew's Church in Charleston. (Photos courtesy of Cynthia Walton)

"Though there is still much to be done, I can see a time ahead when these lawsuits may actually be behind us. That future is growing ever more real and imminent. ✚

Mennonite Church USA Caves on Marriage

Membership Guidelines in place for 20 years that prohibited Mennonite Church USA pastors from officiating same-sex marriages have been repealed.

The May 29 move by the historically Anabaptist denomination's Delegate Assembly meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, followed an earlier unanimous vote by the 10-member Executive Board on April 16 to send a proposed resolution to "retire" the guidelines, which

read: "Pastors holding credentials in a conference of Mennonite Church USA may not perform a same-sex covenant ceremony. Such action would be grounds for review of their credentials by their area conference's ministerial credentialing body."

Delegates voted 404-84 to retire the Membership Guidelines, meaning 82.8 percent were in favor, according to

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Politicized Presbyterian Church (USA) Falls Further

The Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of the General Assembly has released annual statistics showing a decline in membership in 2021 of 51,584 persons.

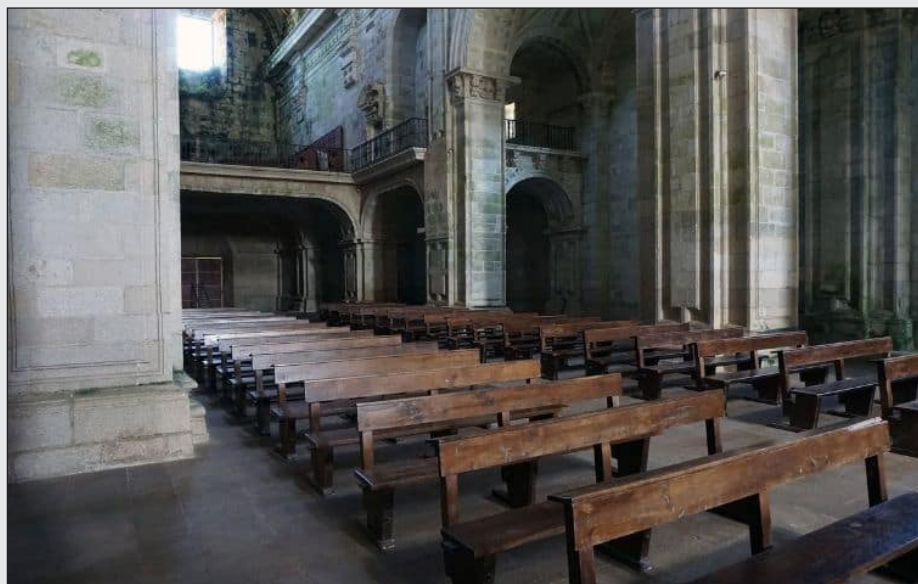
The report, released April 22, shows a 4.1 percent rate of decline and total membership of just over 1.19 million members last year, compared to 1.48 million in 2016, and 112 fewer churches than in 2020.

Losses are consistent with a precipitous and uninterrupted decline that intensified when the denomination revoked a “fidelity and chastity” clause from ordination vows that had required clergy to remain faithful in married life or chaste in single life. The General Assembly meeting this summer in Louisville, Kentucky, also enacted policies uniquely critical of the state of Israel and embraced a host of politically charged causes. An overture passed July 8 states “that the government of Israel’s laws, policies, and practices regarding the Palestinian people fulfill the international legal definition of apartheid.”

More than 20 percent of PCUSA congregations now number 25 or fewer members, and a total of 372 fewer ministers are serving compared to the previous year. A total of 10 new churches were planted across the entire denomination, while 104 were dissolved.

The PCUSA annual statistics are among the more reliable figures reported by mainline Protestant churches, with a high percentage of congregations submitting data. The denomination also assesses a per capita rate of \$8.98 per member, a financial incentive for congregations to clear inactive people from church membership rolls.

An increase in that per capita rate to \$9.85 for 2023 and \$9.80 for 2024 was approved by the General Assembly on July 9. The increase will place a larger financial burden on a smaller number of total members as the church seeks to fund denominational agencies amid declining resources. ✚



Anabaptist World. A subsequent vote of 267–212, or 55.7 percent in favor, approved a “Repentance and Transformation” resolution written by the Inclusive Mennonite Pastors group. That resolution confessed harm had been done to and affirmed the spiritual gifts of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people. It further committed to inclusive actions to “embody a theology that honors LGBTQIA people and relationships with all future MC USA theological statements.”

The Mennonite Church USA claims approximately 530 congregations and shares demographic problems faced by mainline Protestants:



Members of the Mennonite LGBTQIA group Pink Menno at the Mennonite Church USA 2015 Delegate Assembly in Kansas City. (Photo: Cody Newill / KCUR)

overwhelmingly white congregations, declining birth rates (corresponding to lower baptismal numbers), and an exodus of members who adhere to theologically orthodox teaching.

Affiliated with the liberal and declining National Council of Churches and the Mennonite Central Committee (which joins it with 15 fellow Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Quaker groups), the Mennonite Church USA has become politicized. In 2021 the denomination launched “Defund the Police? An Abolition Curriculum” as part of a study course for congregations. The Mennonite Central Committee is described as having “an anti-Israel agenda” by NGO Monitor. ✚

Evangelical Left Surrenders on Transgenderism

On the heels of an Episcopal Church House of Bishops pastoral statement this spring that condemned state laws opposed by transgender activists, the Evangelical Left also jumped aboard.

“It’s particularly important to speak out and act given recent actions by state legislatures and governors to marginalize, silence, and erase the very identities of transgender and other LGBTQ people, including children,” wrote *Sojourners* President **Adam Russell Taylor** in a column marking the annual International Transgender Day of Visibility.

Taylor, an ordained clergyman in the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, singled out state legislation in Texas, Florida, and Utah.

Texas Governor **Greg Abbott** directed the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services in February to investigate any reported instances of minors “being subjected to abusive gender-transitioning procedures.”

Utah in March banned biological males who identify as transgender girls from participating in female school sports.

Florida enacted a “Parental Rights in Education” law, preventing public school teachers from classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity for students in kindergarten through third grades. Governor **Ron DeSantis** at a press conference for the new law termed such curriculum as “indoctrination.”

Religious Left figures argue that such legislation is harmful, pointing to significantly higher levels of reported suicidal

thoughts among those who identify as transgender. Transgender activists claim those statistics indicate an unaccepting society that must change to remove stigma and affirm claims of gender fluidity. Critics interpret the same data as pointing to mental health crises for which hormones and body-altering surgeries are a maladaptive response.

Taylor alleges that the new state laws and proposals are disingenuous, introduced for short-term electoral gain and political ambition, and are not born out of genuine conviction.

“Only four transgender kids are playing high school sports statewide, only one of whom plays girls sports,” Taylor observed about the context of the Utah policy. “That this ban was enacted anyway is strong evidence that the law is aimed more at creating a political wedge and exploiting fear to rally politicians’ political bases rather than the purported goal of ‘preserving women’s sports.’”

Sojourners was noteworthy across decades for its embrace of Religious Left causes including an expansive welfare state and functional pacifism, while at the same time not contradicting Christian moral teaching on marriage.

“How we care for and protect transgender and gender nonconforming

people poses an ongoing test of how we live out the bold, inclusive love of Jesus,” Taylor wrote. In his view, that love doesn’t include opposing chemical castration of minors and radical, body-altering surgeries that Taylor and transgender activists benignly term “individualized, age-appropriate gender-affirming care.”

The vast majority of Taylor’s Baptist peers seemingly don’t advocate such “gender-affirming care.” ABCUSA doesn’t address transgender issues specifically, and the Southern Baptist Convention voted in 2014 to affirm “God’s good design that gender identity is determined by biological sex and not by one’s self-perception—a perception which is often influenced by fallen human nature in ways contrary to God’s design (Ephesians 4:17–18).” ✚



Sojourners President Adam Russell Taylor at a White House event in April 2022, a transgender youth depicted at a pride parade in 2018 (Photos: Twitter / Wikimedia Commons)

Kidnapped and Murdered Priests Latest in Nigerian Persecution

Nigerian Catholics are in prayer after two priests were kidnapped in Nigeria's northern Kaduna State, the latest in a recent escalation of clergy abductions.

Fr. **John Mark Cheitnum** and Fr. **Denatus Cleopas** of Christ the King Catholic Church were abducted from the parish rectory at approximately 5:45 p.m. on July 15.

"May Jesus, crucified on the Cross, listen to our prayers and hasten the unconditional release of His priests and all other kidnapped persons," Diocese of Kafanchan Chancellor Fr. **Emmanuel Uchekchukwu Okolo** appealed in a statement shared with the *Catholic News Agency* as news of the kidnapping was announced. Shortly thereafter on July 19, Father Cleopas managed an escape; Father Cheitnum was killed.

According to data compiled by the Aid to the Church in Need International (ACN), eighteen priests have been kidnapped in Nigeria in 2022 so far. Of those eighteen, five of the kidnappings occurred in the first week of July alone. Three of the victims were killed, though most were eventually released. Two months ago, the Rev. Fr. **Vitus Borogo** was killed while working on his farm.

Christians in Nigeria, especially in Islamic-majority regions in the north of the populous west African nation, suffer brutal acts of persecution.

OpenDoorsUK has reported that more Christians are martyred in Nigeria than in any other country. Early in June this year, at least forty Christians were killed by suspected Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) at a Catholic church

during Pentecost Mass. The ACN has also documented that in the Nigerian state of Benue alone, almost seventy Christians have been killed over the past two months.

"In the last 13 years, roughly 45,000 Christians have been killed," **Edward Clancy** of the ACN told IRD, painting a grim picture of the current situation. This equals almost 3,000 killed each year. Perpetrators have been mostly a combination of Boko Haram militants, ISWAP, and radicalized Muslim members of the Fulani tribe.

The Nigerian government's Muslim majority also presents a problem.

"In a country with Muslim-Christian tensions and where the government is majority Muslim, you can't get a fair hearing" said Clancy. He also explained that these groups use similar strategies employed by ISIS and others, taking advantage of an unstable political climate to gain power and influence. "As soon as you have a government that is inept or corrupt, you will end up with situations similar to what you see in Nigeria."

For various reasons, Catholic priests are targeted for kidnapping. Clancy notes that priests have been unwilling to cave to the pressure of radical groups, instead continuing to lead their churches despite the dangers.

"The priests have not stopped doing their work," Clancy said, making them vital to Christian communities and also high priority targets.



Father John Mark Cheitnum, left, and Father Denatus Cleopas, right were kidnapped on July 15, 2022. (Photos: Archdiocese of Kaduna)

Bishop **Jude Arogundade** of Ondo concurs; he believes the terrorists target the Catholic Church for strategic reasons. Not only do they instruct their parishioners in morals directly contrary to radical Islam, but due to the Catholic Church's global influence, any attack on the institution is guaranteed to bring media.

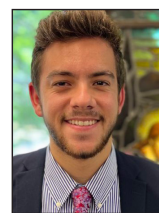
David Otto, director of the Geneva Centre for Africa Security and Strategic Studies, also noted that there is monetary gain to be had: The Catholic Church has been willing to pay ransoms demanded by extremist groups as high as \$200,000.

Clancy said that the prospects of financial gain are often used by extremists to recruit young Muslim men desperate to escape poverty.

"You may not live a long life, but at least you will live well," and have the opportunity to move up in society if you cooperate, Clancy says of kidnappers.

A protest was held by hundreds of Catholic priests at the funeral of a slain

See Kidnapped Priests, page 11



Giovanni Del Piero is a summer intern at the Institute on Religion & Democracy and a rising junior at the University of Dallas, where he studies politics, ethics, and theology.

'God Is Queer' Duke Divinity Students Proclaim

by Hope Rawlson

Praying to “the Great Queer One,” students at United Methodist-affiliated Duke Divinity School proclaimed God’s acceptance and support for LGBTQ relationships in a Pride worship service March 22.

Divinity Pride, a student group affirming the “dignity, faithfulness, and strength of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and gender/sexuality non-conforming Christians,” sponsored the worship service.

“Strange one, fabulous one, fluid, and ever-becoming one,” prayed second-year Master of Divinity (M.Div.) student **Caroline Camp** in opening the service. She stated that God is “mother, father, and parent” and “drag queen, and transman, and gender-fluid.”

Tirzah Villegas, an M.Div. student, encouraged listeners to accept their sexuality because “You are never called to abandon yourself. Abandoning the self is negating the truth of who you are, and that is always a lie,” Villegas stated. God is a “queer God” who loves “every part of us,” according to Villegas.

A self-identified trans woman, **C. J. Surbaugh**, a first-year M.Div. student, defended gender transition as biblical.

“I would like to suggest this as a trans text,” Surbaugh proposed about Genesis 32:22-31. The passage details Jacob wrestling with a stranger until daybreak. The man harms Jacob’s hip and commands Jacob, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” Jacob responds, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” As a result, God blesses Jacob and gives him the new name, “Israel.”

In this passage, Surbaugh sees “an example of a negotiated body, a trans body, which has been both momentarily injured and fundamentally blessed.” Surbaugh compares Jacob’s struggle to the experience

of taking testosterone to transition from a female to a male identity. Surbaugh wonders “how Jacob felt after the angel had gone” and if “he felt the same way I did on the clear October morning when I learned to give myself a hormone shot.”

Transition, according to Surbaugh, “can be framed as a choice,” but “transition is better framed as a calling. It is a calling to wrestle with God and not let go until we receive a blessing in our own bodies.”

Criticizing the church, **Justis Mitchell**, a first-year M.Div. student, stated, “In the pews we listen to the pastor who preaches about commandments, condemning those who disobey, predicating a future of fire and turmoil.” However, Mitchell believes that “We can become holy, we can become worthy, we can become valued...even as we remain queer, even as we discover our own queer God whose presence is within these walls.”

Second-year M.Div. student **Caleb Wolf** expressed pain that he felt when he was fourteen. “I was broken, I had been slayed by my family, people in school, and people in my church,” Wolf stated. “I loved God with all of my heart, yet they told me God didn’t love me.”

Wolf expressed that he “ran out the front door, barefoot with no jacket.” He recalled running behind a house and “banged my head against the brick.”

“I wanted to put an end to my suffering. I was tired of being disgusted with myself,” Wolf recounted. “I was tired of loving a God who did not love me back.”

While Wolf chose to live, many LGBTQ individuals do attempt suicide.



Duke Divinity School students lead a pride worship service in Durham, NC (Photo: YouTube screen capture / Association of Theological Schools)

Wolf states that he realized “it wasn’t God who didn’t love me, it was me who didn’t love me, because I listened to the hate that I had been marinating in all my life.”

Christian doctrine has historically defined the relationship between a man and a woman as the only biblical form of marriage. Yet, the Church is called to speak the truth and rescue the lost. Prominent Reformed theologian **John Piper** wrote, “No sin must keep a person out of heaven. None. What keeps a person out of heaven is the unrepentant pursuit of sin, and the rejection of God’s provision for its forgiveness in Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

According to Piper, Christians must count others as more significant than themselves, which “does not mean approving of what they feel or do. It means becoming a servant of their forgiveness, their rescue, their Christ-exalting hope. Christians should not bear ill will toward any. We live for the good of all.”

UPDATE: Video of the Pride worship service was removed from Duke Divinity School’s official YouTube channel after this article first appeared on IRD’s blog *Juicy Ecumenism*. 🌈



Hope Rawlson is an intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy in Washington, D.C. She is pursuing her bachelor’s degree in government and political theory from Patrick Henry College.

Methodist Cleric on Bible: Not Reliable

by Grayson Jang

As United Methodism divides, an Arizona United Methodist pastor confirmed some of traditionalists' worst fears about disregarding biblical authority.

"The notions of biblical inerrancy and the need to be born again create all kinds of discord and conflict in society... [and] keeps the whole church trapped in a quagmire of outdated fantasies," the Rev. **David M. Felten** declared in his sermon series *Defusing Christianity's Most Dangerous Ideas: Original Sin and Hell*, surmising "Not to put too fine a point on it, but original sin has got to go."

Felten argued that the notion of original sin is not biblical.

"Original sin is nowhere in the Bible, nowhere in the whole of Hebrew Scripture or the New Testament," but from Saint Augustine, Felten preached at The Fountains United Methodist Church in Fountain Hills, Arizona. "Augustine was a promiscuous guy after all...so he decided to pass the buck and say: hey, my behavior is not my fault. It's...Adam's fault."

The Methodist minister claimed that the concept that sinful human nature is inherited from Adam is invalidated by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

"The creation stories in the Bible are metaphors, not history...instead of the magical idea that human beings were once perfect and now because someone ate an apple, are damaged goods. How about simply acknowledging that Darwin was right?" Felten suggested. "We were never perfect. We are evolving, emerging as a species and as individuals."

"Is original sin in the Bible?" Felten asked rhetorically. "No...is it totally made up? Yes. Has it, and does it continue to do social, psychological, and spiritual harm to people? Yes." He proposed that because Paul and Augustine were unaware of biological evolution, they sought to account for inherited primal urges with the information that they had.

Paul and Augustine "made up a fanciful story about sin and the power of Jesus to redeem us... But science has given us a story that makes more sense for the twenty-first century," Felten

Felten argued that hell is pure fiction and contradicts God's nature, causing many believers to leave the church. People agonize between choices: "One, [becoming] people who threaten eternal torture



United Methodist Minister David M. Felten argues that biblical inerrancy is one of several 'outdated fantasies' perpetuating division within the Christian church. (Photo: David M. Felten)

insisted. "We are evolving creatures striving to emerge from the primal ooze of our past to achieve a more advanced form of life."

Human tendencies are not because of original sin but because of evolution, Felten insisted: "We need to leave behind our magical thinking... I hope you've outgrown the image of a childish, petulant tyrant, punishing generations of subjects because some ancestors screwed up long ago... We are an evolving species, emerging over countless millennia into something more sophisticated than our reptilian ancestors."

from a sadomasochistic God, or Two, [becoming] people who are too afraid to stand up and say no." Felten believes that this fabricated notion of hell distorts "the very core of what following Jesus is about."

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Grayson Jang is an intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy and is majoring in international studies and U.S. and International Law at Handong Global University in South Korea.

'No Restriction' on Abortion, Episcopalians Resolve at General Convention

by Jeffrey Walton

A representative of Planned Parenthood Pasadena and San Gabriel Valley speaks at the unveiling of pro-Abortion signage at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California on June 25, 2022 (Photo: Planned Parenthood via Facebook).

Abortion returned to prominence as a public policy matter at an increasingly reactive Episcopal Church General Convention. Lay and clergy deputies convened July 8-11 in Baltimore, responding to the *Dobbs v Jackson* Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Roe v Wade* and returned abortion policy to states.

General Convention reasserted denominational support for legal abortion at any stage of pregnancy, but also defeated legislation condemning pregnancy resource centers. Abortion even influenced debate about a call for reconsideration of holding the 81st General Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, where the state is widely expected to stop most abortions in the coming days.

Bishops of the global Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church is a part, recorded "abhorrence of the

sinful practice of abortion" at the 1930 Lambeth Conference of Bishops. However, that view eventually changed and

the Episcopal Church has supported legal abortion since 1967, before the 1973 *Roe v Wade* court decision struck down state laws restricting abortion.

General Convention is composed of two houses: the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies, with the latter

consisting of eight elected deputies (four clergy and four laity) from each diocese. Resolutions pass only if both houses concur.

Resolution Do83, "Addressing the erosion of reproductive rights and autonomy" affirmed "that all Episcopalians should be able to access abortion services and birth control with no restriction on movement, autonomy, type, or timing" and "Resolved, that the 80th General Convention understands that the protection of religious liberty extends to all Episcopalians who may need or desire to access, to utilize, to aid others in the procurement of, or to offer abortion services." It passed both houses.

Resolution Do54 would have called upon Episcopal Church officials to consider the relocation of the 81st General

It is distressing to see the denomination's governing body fail to recognize the dignity of those human beings still in the womb.

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Convention from Louisville and was discussed on the floor of the House of Deputies. It failed on a vote of 342 to 444. A separate resolution, A001 (Site of the 82nd General Convention scheduled for 2027) faced an amendment, which was rejected, to strike Orlando, Florida, as one of five potential sites. Florida prohibits most abortions after 15 weeks. Another prospective host city, Phoenix, Arizona, is within a state that further restricts abortion, but Orlando (the see city of the relatively traditionalist Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida) drew more attention. The final version of the resolution stated that “the Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Arrangements consider the physical and emotional well-being and safety of all members of The Episcopal Church when choosing a host location for any General Convention.”

Resolution D076, “Addressing the Ongoing Harm of Crisis Pregnancy Centers,” did clear the House of Deputies after a failed effort to pull the legislation from a consent calendar intended to speed along the passage of legislation in the convention’s compressed schedule (a normal General Convention transpires across approximately 9-11 days). The consent calendar is customarily for non-controversial resolutions (deputies from three separate dioceses could pull an item for floor consideration). The bar to pull resolutions was raised for this convention to one-third of all deputies.

The resolution text, which lacked scriptural support or reference to historic church teaching, “denounces the work of Crisis Pregnancy Centers, also known as Pregnancy Resource Centers,” and “apologizes for the Church’s previous support of Crisis Pregnancy Centers.”

The House of Bishops took up the pregnancy center resolution later in the week, rejecting it by a vote of 42-70.

Episcopalians emphasize language from the *Book of Common Prayer*’s Baptismal Covenant asking candidates for baptism if they will “respect the dignity of every human being.” It is distressing to see the denomination’s governing body fail to recognize the dignity of those human beings still in the womb.

Similarly, the Baptismal Covenant calls Episcopalians to “seek and serve

Christ in all persons” and to state their belief in “the holy catholic Church” and “the communion of saints.” Decisions of the General Convention to discard the teaching of the church universal concerning the sanctity of human life may no longer be surprising, but they are no less distressing.

Those who minister within the Episcopal Church on behalf of the vulnerable, such as groups including Anglicans for Life, can live into their own baptismal

vow to “persevere in resisting evil” and pray that those like us who have fallen into sin will “repent and return to the Lord.” ✝



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

Methodist Cleric on Bible: Not Reliable

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“Hell is like the crystal meth of theological drugs,” Felten preached. “Once you’re addicted, it’s almost impossible to break away without some very serious intervention.” The word *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) in the Old Testament is mistranslated, he insisted. “This [*Sheol*] wasn’t a place of punishment—just simply not living, kind of a precursor to limbo, [and] a much better translation of *Sheol* would simply be the grave.”

Then where does the notion of hell come from? Felten finds the answer in paganism. In the New Testament, Jews called hell *Gehenna*.

“It [*Gehenna*] was the stinking city dump where garbage was burned in a continuous smoldering fire before the Jews arrived,” Felten said. In the same manner as *Gehenna*, images of lakes of fire from 2 Peter are also affected by paganism.

“But these are from Egyptian and other pagan sources...the notion of hell as some sort of underground cavern of torture comes not from the Bible, but from Greek mythology and the idea of the realm of Hades.

“Too many preachers are guilty of allowing the idea of hell to fester,” Felten complained. “So, let’s begin by confessing that when it comes to our concepts of hell, for the most part, we are misinformed... So let me say it clearly... It’s all made up. The popular notions of hell are total fiction. Not to mention so contradictory to the gospel as to be laughable.”

Felten asked: “Is God really one who with one ear enjoys the music of the angels in heaven and with the other ear enjoys the screams of sinners tormented in hell?” He explained that “to plan for something in the afterlife, either for our own sense of self-aggrandizement or a sense of revenge...[is] not what Jesus had in mind.” Felten concluded: “If God is the manifestation of all things loving, merciful, and forgiving, hell cannot exist... Hell loses, and love wins.” ✝

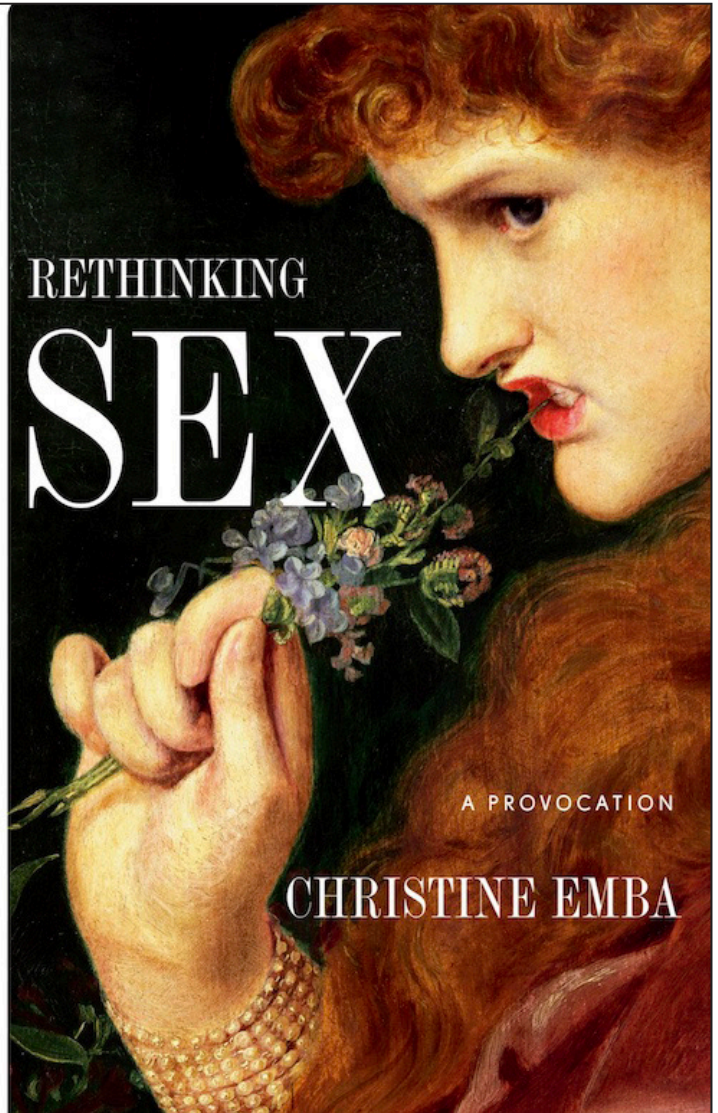
Kidnapped Priests

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priest on July 1. However it is unclear what, if any, action will be taken by the Nigerian government to quell the violence.

Rising tensions between Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers are compounded by religious conflict and difficulties caused by COVID-19, making the fate of the Christian community in Nigeria seem uncertain. Yet Clancy said the situation looks more hopeful than what is seen on the surface.

“Christians are undaunted,” Clancy said, and they have begun to organize more efficiently to increase their influence. “The Spirit is there and there is a future for Christians in that area,” even if it will take time for it to be seen. ✝



Self-identified polyamorous Christian Jennifer C. Martin authored a review critical of Christine Emba's *Rethinking Sex for the Religious Left* magazine *Sojourners* (Images: *Sojourners* / Penguin Random House)

No 'Vanilla Sex' Says *Sojourners*

by Jeffrey Walton

Non-monogamy, kink, same-sex couplings, or casual sex are healthy expressions of sexuality when engaged in a consensual manner, according to a writer published in the Religious Left journal *Sojourners*.

The April article is among recent examples of the *Sojourners* editorial team steering the publication far afield from its Evangelical Left roots. In March, *Sojourners* President **Adam Russell Taylor** authored a column decrying state laws

opposed by transgender activists, including those that seek to preserve women's and girls' sports for biological females (see "Church News" on page 6).

Contributor **Jennifer C. Martin**, a professed polyamorous Christian with three partners, authored a review of *Washington Post* columnist Christine Emba's *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. In her book, Emba, a convert to Roman Catholicism, questions the trivialization of sex and the objectification it brings,

arguing that a consent-only approach to sex has made us unhappy and that even consensual sex can be damaging.

Martin affirms Emba's appeal to raise expectations and pursue joy, but, shaped by her own off-putting experience with a fundamentalist purity culture, resists an argument for sexual boundaries.

"I don't think we need limitations in order to have good sex," Martin writes in

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Presbyterian Church (USA) Commissioners Charge 'Apartheid' in Israel Critique

by Sage Showers

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continued acceleration of its aggressive anti-Israel policies at the 225th General Assembly meeting June 18-July 8 in Louisville, Kentucky. Included was now-routine criticism aimed uniquely at Israel during the biannual governing body of the mainline Presbyterian denomination.

Presbyterian Commissioners passed an overture July 8 on a vote of 266-116 that states, "Recognize that the government of Israel's laws, policies, and practices regarding the Palestinian people fulfill the international legal definition of apartheid."

The overture defines apartheid as "inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them." Overture sponsors cited the United Nations Human Rights Council, Human Rights Watch, and other secular organizations for the basis of their criticism.

A host of additional overtures included one that instructed divestment from five major oil companies due to perceived inaction regarding climate change, and another that denounced any effort to limit abortion access.

Passage of the anti-Israel overture came shortly after the denomination garnered negative attention from Israel advocacy groups. The Philos Project, which works for positive Christian engagement in the near east, led a pro-Israel demonstration outside the Presbyterian Center in Louisville on June 28. Also present was Pathways, the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement, and the Anti-Defamation League. Philos presented a letter asking PC(USA) commissioners to reject the overture presented by the International Engagement Committee that names Israel an "apartheid-like state." The group



The Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly International Engagement Committee meets on June 27, 2022 in Louisville, KY. (Photo: General Assembly screen capture)

installed a balloon that read: "PCUSA: Fight Racism, Not Jews."

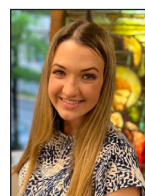
This wave of backlash followed after PC(USA) Stated Clerk Dr. **J. Herbert Nelson**, the denomination's top official between General Assemblies, described in January the Palestine/Israel relationship as "21st Century Slavery." The comment drew immediate rebuke. Some Presbyterian clergy spoke out against their leadership's anti-Israel sentiment, blaming incendiary comments for damaging interfaith witnessing in their local communities.

The petition issued soon thereafter by more than 240 PC(USA) clergy and lay leaders rebuked Nelson for "disregarding

and dismissing" relationships in local communities.

"We respectfully, but urgently, ask the Stated Clerk and other PCUSA denominational leaders to change their approach and seize this moment to rebuild trust between our denomination

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Sage Showers is a rising senior from Cedarville University in Ohio serving as a summer 2022 intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

No 'Vanilla Sex' Says Sojourners

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reviewing Emba's book. "We ultimately differ on what constitutes healthy sex."

Martin argues that while Emba's end goal is a good one, "the way she gets there is through reiterating gender roles and differences, decrying kink culture and casual sex, and attaching the values of purity to our sexual encounters."

"What kind of consensual sex is considered 'damaging'?" Martin asks, concluding that Emba is overly critical of the sexual liberation movement:

"She [Emba] believes that liberated sex comes 'without norms and boundaries' and 'we don't know where things will stop—so we're afraid to start at all.' Her argument continues saying that sex 'could be a delightful space of possibility. But without limitations, we're too worried to really enjoy ourselves.' She doesn't state exactly what sexual 'limitations' we should be enacting on ourselves."

Martin herself eschews the sexual boundaries that the church has historically instructed. She identifies herself as "a Christian who happens to have multiple partners, including two who live with me and my children.

"I have had to re-examine the intersection of sex and faith and what it means to have ethical sex," Martin recounts. "I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian home and was expected to maintain my purity until marriage. I got engaged at 19, married at 20, and had two children by age 25. My attempts to live out traditional sexual ethics led me to oppress parts of me that often fell in love with other people, or parts of me that were attracted to other genders. Ultimately, my husband and I found love outside our marriage while still maintaining love inside our marriage."

Martin is partly reacting against the excesses of 1990s-era purity culture, characterized by books like **Josh Harris'** *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* as well as rituals including courtship and purity rings. Those who advocated purity culture were

themselves reacting against the cultural wreckage brought by the sexual revolution, but their pursuit of personal holiness sometimes came at the expense of grace and detoured into moralism. Authors including the late **Rachel Held Evans** spoke to the experiences of Christian women hurt in the pendulum swings between sexual liberation and purity culture.

Purity culture in some cases twisted the scriptural call to holiness by demarcating a separation between the virtuous who are "in" and those whose sexual vice made them "out." However, if Christians believe that every part of ourselves is touched by sin, then everyone was at one time "out" and everyone—through Christ's work on the cross—has a path to be brought "in."

This redemptive hope doesn't throw out all rules. When Martin criticizes boundaries for sex, I would counter that, as in sports, rules facilitate the beauty of the game. Otherwise there is no structure or order. Sexual conduct matters because it cuts so intimately into ourselves. The epistles are replete with admonitions "to

keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27) and Jesus himself references consequences of sexual immorality (*porneia*) in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

"For those of us raised in environments where anything other than heterosexual, vanilla sex for cisgender people within the confines of marriage would send you to hell—where sexual assault was at least partially the fault of the victim, where your purity and spirituality were directly tied to the status of your virginity—*Rethinking Sex* might feel dismissive as it overtly dances around touchy subjects like gender roles, birth control, and same-sex couplings," Martin reviews.

Maybe so, but examining the Christian call to steward our sexuality for the good of ourselves and others seems like a reasonable place to begin. ✚



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

From the President: Abortion and the Methodist Split

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on the sacredness of all human life and God's core purposes for the human person. Traditional Methodists will join global Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and other Christians, today and in past centuries, who heed the life-affirming traditions of our common faith.

Traditional Methodism affirms that unborn persons merit protection and love, along with all vulnerable image bearers of God. And traditional Methodism will

need to craft a new Wesleyan social witness that affirms ecumenical Christian ethics and abundant life with dignity for all people. Most importantly, traditional Methodism will see itself as part of the church universal, which is the Bride of Christ and, by his grace and in his eyes, without blemish.

Official United Methodism's unserious reaction to the overthrow of *Roe v. Wade* will help Methodists find clarity for the decisions that lie ahead. ✚

Presbyterian Church (USA) Commissioners Charge 'Apartheid' in Israel Critique

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and the American Jewish community,” the petition read. Unfortunately, it seems there has been a concerted effort amongst PC(USA) authorities to ignore such pleas.

A strong rebuke came from Rabbi **Eugene Korn**, the former Academic Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Jerusalem.

“INT-02 also advocates a Palestinian ‘right of return.’ People aware of the conflict’s history know that this is code for the destruction of the Jewish state—Israel—even before its 1967 occupation of the West

Bank areas. This is blatantly inconsistent with PCUSA’s alleged support of the right of Israel to exist,” Korn wrote in an open letter to PC(USA) officials.

If the PC(USA) truly advocates for peace between Israel and Palestine, the church cannot continue to ignore crimes the Palestinians have committed against Israeli citizens. Korn noted the one-sided perspective the overture presented by simply absolving Palestinians of all guilt.

“Not holding Palestinians morally responsible for their behavior smacks of bigotry. It judges Palestinians incapable of

moral agency and living according to moral standards. This resolution dispels any notion that PCUSA is an honest or faithful observer of the conflict,” Korn wrote.

The church has explained the “apartheid” designation cites Human Rights Watch as a credible pro-Palestinian source.

“I think it fair to say PC(USA) has shown more hostility to Israel over a longer time than any other denomination,” **Elliott Abrams** of the Council on Foreign Relations remarked.

The Leftist progression in mainline Protestantism is unsurprising, and this recent development signifies denominational focus on issues tangential to the Gospel. However, the PC(USA)’s continued uninterrupted membership decline (see Church News, page 5) and uniquely anti-Israel animus confirms its Christian voice is devolving into weak murmurs of what it once was. ✚

IRD Diary: Exiting United Methodism Now

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40,000 clergy are guaranteed nearly lifetime employment regardless of competence. They are mostly untrained in sound Methodist doctrine or evangelism. The seminaries marinate them in identity politics and revisionist theology that is irrelevant and often destructive to local churches. Many of these clergy are themselves victims, having been incubated in a false reality by their seminaries, boards of ordained ministry, and bishops.

Of course, thousands of clergy minister faithfully, sacrificially, and effectively. However, for this they are often sidelined or punished by the bishops and church bureaucracy, who resent their success and fidelity to official doctrine. Thriving pastorates are often replaced by successors who reject orthodox teaching and blight the fruit of their predecessors.

In this vein, dying U.S. United Methodism ignores and disdains lessons from growing churches in other communions and even growing United Methodist churches in Africa. Our denomination is proudly content to die.

There’s no reason anybody who wishes well for their local United Methodist church should wish to stay affiliated with the dying denomination that hangs about their necks like an albatross. Why pay thousands if not tens or even hundreds of thousands annually to a destructive bureaucracy extolling causes that denigrate Methodist teaching? Why be subject to a bishop who does not share your beliefs? Why allow your property to remain hostage to an unstable denomination that has the power to seize your property and disburse your congregation? Why allow your pastor to be imposed on you by an outside force without regard to fidelity, competence, or suitability?

If your congregation leaves United Methodism by next year’s deadline under paragraph 2553 you will own your church property, have authority over your next pastoral appointment, no longer subsidize the United Methodist bureaucracy, and be able to plan for a hopeful future. You can join the new Global Methodist Church, or any other

denomination, and proclaim the Gospel without interference.

Multigenerational loyalties to denominations are largely concluded. Churchgoers now expect churches to earn their loyalty. Exiting dying United Methodism will empower congregations to meet this expectation.

Mostly traditionalists, conservatives, and evangelicals are exiting United Methodism. But anyone who cares about competence, accountability, and hope for the future should exit. Begin the process now. Time is short. United Methodism as a sprawling 1960s bureaucracy is dying. But Methodism as a movement, unchained from that expiring behemoth, can now anticipate some of its best days. ✚



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

IRD Diary:

Exiting United Methodism Now

by Mark Tooley

An old friend phoned this summer to say his large downtown church's congregation voted—by 96 percent—to disaffiliate from United Methodism. I was surprised, having visited there years ago when the pastor was institutionalist. My friend previously served on the board of a national United Methodist agency, which had made him cynical about the denomination. But now he said he feels he has his church back.

It's time for Methodists to get their churches back, and I'm not just referring to traditionalists, conservatives, and evangelicals. Everyone tired of control and manipulation by the dysfunctional and bloated bureaucracy of a dying denomination must take advantage of this opportunity to liberate their congregation.

United Methodist properties are owned by the denomination. But the 2019 General Conference ratified an exceptional law, expiring next year, allowing churches to vote themselves out of the denomination. They must pay two years of apportionments plus clergy pension liabilities but retain their property. One church member recently told his pastor that for their church this amount equals what the parishioner spends on a new truck, so he considered it a bargain.

Sadly, some resentful bishops, like doomed vampires just before dawn,

are adding exorbitant surcharges. Nevertheless, liberation from an imploding denomination is a bargain at almost any price. U.S. United Methodism is dying. It lost 5 million members and as of 2020

on its national bureaucracy including \$60 million on church agencies and nearly \$20 million on bishops plus \$14 million on education, mainly seminaries. How does this huge bureaucracy



Woodlands Methodist Church, a Texas megachurch with 14,200 members, voted in August to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. (Photo: Daily Citizen)

was losing 200,000 members annually. The pandemic, during which thousands of churches closed for much of if not more than a year, and the publicly unfolding schism will dramatically accelerate this loss. The average age for United Methodists is near 60 and climbing. U.S. United Methodism is more than 90 percent white and incapable of reaching non-whites and immigrants. United Methodism has almost no capacity to plant successful new churches. Instead, it closes hundreds annually.

United Methodism has an unsustainable 1960s bureaucracy built for a church that had 11 million in the U.S. but now has 6 million. It spent \$114 million in 2020

serve the local church? It doesn't. The seminaries, agencies, and most U.S. bishops ignore Methodist historic and official beliefs. Instead they focus on self-perpetuation, revisionist theology, and politics. They have no interest in evangelism, reversing 58 years of continuous church decline, or meaningfully helping local churches.

Annual conferences and local districts also support wasteful bureaucracies, sustaining nearly 50 U.S. bishops and hundreds of district superintendents. What do they do for local churches and the Gospel? Almost

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