

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Summer 2023



'Sparkle Creed' Is Dim and Dull

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Liberal United Methodists embracing other religions' spirituality is seen in such examples as this non-Christian, Native American religious ceremony performed within First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh. See story on page 8. (Image: YouTube screen capture)

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Cover: *The Council of Nicea with Scriptures seated in the place of authority. (Image: Public Domain via fortquappellelutheran.ca)*

Tim Keller: Right or Wrong?

New York church planter and author **Tim Keller** passed away this May following a long treatment for pancreatic cancer.

He was the focus of some controversy in his final year of life. **James Wood** in *First Things*, an admirer, suggested in 2022 that Keller's brand of "winsome" Christianity appealing to urban elites is past its shelf life. **David French** responded with a defense of Keller's so-called "third way" that rejects Christian fidelity to partisan tribes.

Keller was one of America's most influential Protestant voices. Ordained in the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), he founded Manhattan's Redeemer Church 1989. That church has been very successful and helped create a new, high-brow evangelical subculture in New York City. Keller's example and writing inspired other urban church plants, many associated with the PCA.

Almost 20 years ago I occasionally attended one of those church plants in D.C. It met in a glorious old downtown Methodist church that seated 500–600. The evening service filled every seat with mostly young people in their twenties and early thirties, and contrasted with the struggling United Methodist congregation that owned the building, which was down to dozens. That Presbyterian church continues to thrive and planted other churches. It is theologically conservative of course, although years ago a friend who visited there told me it was liberal because they discussed recycling, which made me smile.

Keller left a tremendous legacy by demonstrating that thoughtful orthodox Protestantism can be planted in urban areas and appeal to educated young professionals. Much of white middle class Protestantism departed America's cities in the 1950s and 60s. Keller's influence introduced a new generation of churches into the cities that were mostly white but more racially diverse than the old Mainline Protestantism. Since traditional Methodism is often scarce in large cities, over the years when I have traveled, I have sometimes attended Reformed urban church plants inspired by Keller, and I am invariably impressed. The congregations are mostly young, the clergy thoughtful, the worship is serious and traditional but with pizzazz. A Methodist bishop once told me he didn't appreciate Keller because he's too Reformed. But sadly there's no Methodist equivalent to Keller, from whom Methodists can learn much.

Keller's example of church planting could be reaching the end of its widespread application. If so, it is unclear what will replace it. But it has served a godly purpose and created urban space for thoughtful Christians that might not have otherwise existed. In his critique, Wood appreciated Keller's positive legacy but thinks his style of "third way" Christianity that strove to avoid culture war controversies is no longer viable. Secular culture was more neutral towards Christianity 30 years ago, he notes. But under the current more adversarial conditions, such



Presbyterian pastor and author Tim Keller
(Photo: Zoom screen capture/IRD)

detachment is no longer sustainable. Bolder stances against this adversity are now needed.

Wood's critique reminded me somewhat of my attitude towards Billy Graham when I was young. Graham seemed to me like a relic from the 1950s who was too tame, too benign, too nice, too avoiding of controversy and confrontation, somewhat dull, appealing to old people at church but no longer relevant. He represented *Reader's Digest* Christianity. I preferred more hard-nosed polemical Christianity. In later years I more fully appreciated Graham's approach, which was conciliatory, without compromising doctrinal essentials. Whatever his faults, Graham advanced the Gospel more than any of his critics. **Jerry Falwell, Sr.**, amid his Moral Majority battles, once flew his private plane to

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Mark Tooley



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

Pat Robertson (1930–2023)



Transformative religious broadcaster **Pat Robertson** passed away on June 8 in Virginia Beach. He is remembered as a savvy businessman, political organizer, and a forerunner of a post-denominational America.

The scion of an old Virginia family, he inherited the political instincts and shrewdness of his politician father.

Robertson was a key founder of the modern Religious Right. Like other evangelicals of his time, he shifted from supporting **Jimmy Carter** in 1976 to backing **Ronald Reagan** in 1980. He urged evangelicals to focus on social issues, oppose the Soviet Union, and support Israel.

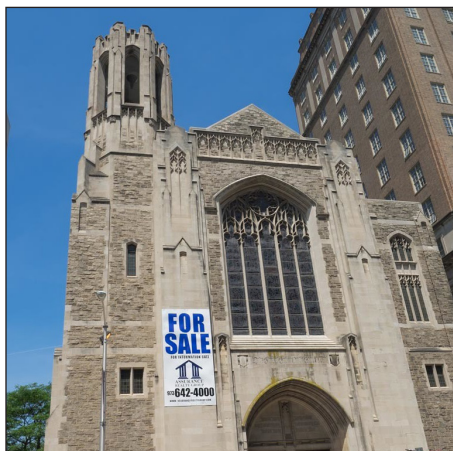
Raised Southern Baptist, Robertson had a born-again experience in his twenties and was ordained a Southern Baptist minister. After an experience speaking in tongues, he became a charismatic Christian who helped lead an American upsurge in charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity that spilled over into Latin America with global implications. Robertson's flock was generically evangelical and mostly viewed him on television (he founded the Christian Broadcasting Network in 1960 and was a longtime presence on *The 700 Club*).

Robertson founded parachurch ministries that were evangelistic, instructional, humanitarian, academic, philanthropic, and political. He had many

Televangelist Pat Robertson visits Victory Fellowship Church in Metairie, Louisiana, on February 12, 2006, in support of Operation Blessing, an international relief and development non-profit that he founded in 1978. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

controversies but, unlike some of his contemporaries, largely avoided scandal.

"As far as the majesty of worship, I'm an Episcopalian; as far as a belief in the sovereignty of God, I'm Presbyterian; in terms of holiness, I'm a Methodist ... in terms of the priesthood of believers and baptism, I'm a Baptist; in terms of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I'm a Pentecostal, so I'm a little bit of all of them," Robertson once explained. ✝



Second Presbyterian Church For Sale on Washington Street, Newark, New Jersey in 2015. Photo: (Flickr / jag9889)

Presbyterian Church (USA) Membership Drops, Stated Clerk Departs Early

The Presbyterian Church (USA) in May reported a decline of 53,105 members in 2022, dropping the mainline Protestant denomination down to 1,140,665 active members. The loss reflects a 4.5 percent decline, consistent across recent years as PC(USA) membership ages.

Membership dropped below 1.5 million for the first time in 2016, down to 1,482,767 that year.

Among the U.S.-based denominations, the PC(USA) is disproportionately white, elderly, and female compared to the overall U.S. population. In 2022, the denomination's membership was 89.08 percent white, while only 25 percent of members were age 40 or younger. A newly tracked statistic lists 0.15 percent of members (1,317 persons) identifying as either

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Anglican Attendance Strongly Rebounds

Anglican congregations in the United States, Canada, and Mexico are reporting a significant attendance increase of 17,228 persons following a widespread return to regular worship services post-COVID. The Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) additionally reported modest growth in both membership and total number of churches in 2022.

Presbyterian Church (USA) Membership Drops, Stated Clerk Departs Early

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Non-Binary or Genderqueer. The denomination ordained its first “Non-Binary Minister of the Word and Sacrament” in 2019.

Stated Clerk **J. Herbert Nelson, II** stepped down from his post in June, more than a year before his term in office was set to conclude. Nelson served as the denomination’s top official between biannual General Assemblies for the past seven years.

“This was not an easy decision,” Nelson said in an April 25 statement released by the Office of the General Assembly. “From my first day on this job, I have said that the PC(USA) is not dying but is reforming. In the next few years, the national church will undergo major reform to better meet the needs of our presbyteries and churches.”

An Acting Stated Clerk will assume Nelson’s duties until the General Assembly elects a replacement for him in July 2024.

Nine churches were dismissed to other denominations in 2022 and 104 were dissolved outright. The denomination lists a total of 8,705 churches.

“While the pandemic may be over, the impact on church membership is still being felt,” Nelson disclosed, calling for “finding new, innovative ways to be church.” ✝

Overall Average Principal Service Attendance in 2022 was 75,583, up 30 percent from 58,255 in 2021. Membership increased 2,549 (up 2 percent from 122,450) in 2021 to 124,999 in 2022. Congregations grew by three to 977 total. Baptisms were up 27 percent and confirmations up 25 percent from 2021–2022.

“The bottom line in 2022 is that membership and the total number of our congregations showed modest increases, while attendance has rebounded encouragingly and pastoral ministry has bounced back significantly,” ACNA Canon for Communications **Andrew Gross** told ACNA Provincial Council on June 23 at Christ Church Cathedral in Plano, Texas. Gross noted that attendance remained down from a pre-COVID high of 84,310 in 2018.

Attendance appears to be healthy across most of the ACNA: 26 dioceses out of 29 total reported an increase from 2021 to 2022. Membership, which was less volatile amidst the period of COVID restrictions, was mixed: 18 of the 29 reported a gain across the same period.

Among dioceses reporting the largest attendance increases are the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina, up 2,722 (48 percent); the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic, up 1,756 (53 percent); and the Diocese of Churches for the Sake of Others (C4SO), up 2,540 (46 percent).

Gross shared that the largest number of ACNA congregations are in the state of Texas (113), followed by South Carolina (101), California (73), Pennsylvania (55), and Virginia (51). North Dakota remains the only U.S. state without an ACNA congregation. ✝



Anglican Church in North America delegates gather at Christ Church Cathedral in Plano, Texas for the denomination’s annual Provincial Council in 2019. The provincial cathedral again hosted Provincial Council June 21–23, 2023. (Photo: ACNA)

Declining Church Council Prematurely Celebrates 75th Anniversary

by Josiah Hasbrouck

African Methodist Episcopal Church Retired Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie was announced on May 16, 2023 as the new President and General Secretary of the NCC (Photo: NCCUSA / Facebook Screenshot)

The once-prominent National Council of Churches in the USA (NCC) launched its 75th anniversary celebration on May 16, with a worship service at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C.

Founded in 1950, the ecumenical council does not actually turn 75 for another two years. This was recognized during the service, as the Rev. **Margaret Rose**, Episcopal Church Deputy to the Presiding Bishop for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations, clarified the event was about “launching into the deep waters of the future of the NCC to see where God is calling us in the next 75 years.”

Given the NCC’s precipitous decline in influence and size, the organization may not last another 75 years. The NCC website lists seven staff members, and while the organization counts 37 member communions and once claimed a membership of more than 35 million people, this number has shrunk in recent years as liberal mainline denominations like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shed members at an alarming rate.

The lightly attended NCC anniversary service included readings and comments from various denominational leaders, interspersed with hymns. The Ebenezer A.M.E. Church choir was prominently featured, performing gospel-style songs that made no mention of

Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection—the core of the biblical Gospel.

African Methodist Episcopal Church Retired Bishop **Vashti Murphy McKenzie** was announced at the service as the new President and General Secretary of the NCC after holding the position in interim since April 2022 following the departure of former NCC General Secretary and past United Methodist lobby chief **Jim Winkler**.

McKenzie spoke on Judges 7:13–15, focusing on Gideon’s command to “get up” and defeat Midian.

Like Gideon, McKenzie said, Americans today must “get up, step up, and make it happen.” That is, Americans must “push the refresh button on a justice agenda where we can join hands and heart and intellect and inclusion and voice and vision to push back the entrenched disparities, disrupt systemic racism, and bring about positive social change for all of us and not just some of us.”

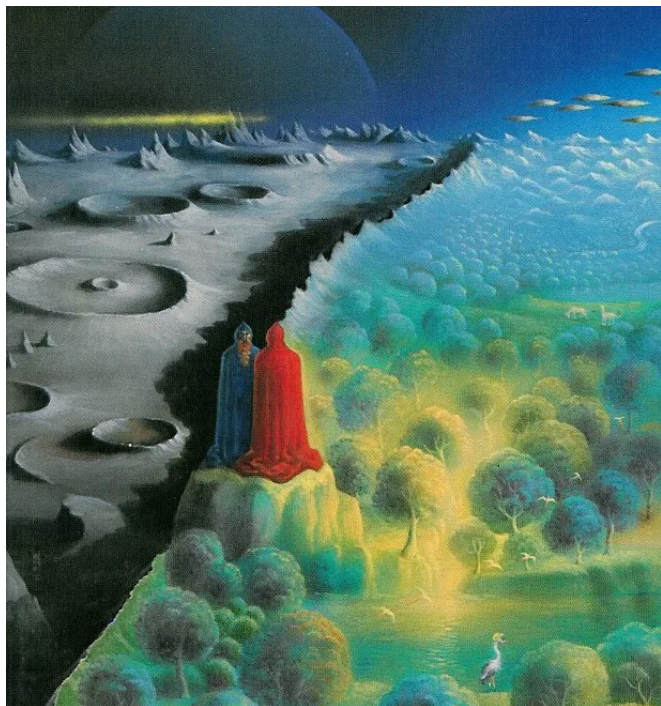
In addition to a host of similar liberal platitudes, McKenzie also referenced the story of Gideon’s army being shrunk by God earlier in Judges chapter 7: “the fight wasn’t about numbers, it was about God. It wasn’t about getting enough soldiers, it was about getting the right soldiers. We need to get the right soldiers in the right place to do the right things.” There is some truth to McKenzie’s point, but it also seems a thinly veiled excuse for the NCC’s dwindling numbers and decreased relevance.

Despite the optimistic attitude among speakers at the anniversary service, there seem to be few legitimate reasons for optimism, as seen in the NCC member communions’ own membership declines. Though McKenzie quoted Romans 12:2, charging service attendees to “not be conformed to this world,” many liberal NCC member denominations—including the PC(USA) and The United Methodist Church—have done just that, bowing to worldly religious and political agendas.

The fate of theologically and politically liberal groups like NCC and its constituents are a cautionary tale for other Christians. Despite aligning themselves with the priorities of secular liberal philanthropies, organizations like the NCC are shrinking, not growing. It is likely only a matter of time until they vanish and are unable to celebrate impending anniversaries. There is, however, a problem with these groups even greater than their numeric failures: a rejection of the timeless truths of Scripture, which will never cease to be celebrated by the true Church. ✚



Josiah Hasbrouck is a Summer 2023 intern with the IRD, recently graduating *Summa Cum Laude* from Cairn University with a BA in Politics and minors in Bible and Philosophy.



That Hideous Strength: A Fictional Tale Becoming Reality?

by Rena Mainetti

That Hideous Strength is the final book in C. S. Lewis's theological science fiction *Space Trilogy*.
(Image: Collier Books)

Our technological world is rapidly changing. Last year, ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, was introduced—potentially disrupting job security, education, and even threatening to transform humanity. As transhumanism aims to overcome the limitations of biology, we risk losing our humanity to computerized versions of consciousness.

Marianne Wright, Peter Mommsen, and Susannah Black Roberts recently appeared together on the PloughCast to discuss C.S. Lewis's 1945 science fiction novel *That Hideous Strength*, its criticisms of transhumanism, and man's role in a political system.

That Hideous Strength was written amid World War II as the final installment of Lewis's *Space Trilogy*. The story follows a young married couple. The husband, Mark, is an academic whose university is being subsumed into a plot to improve humanity, the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E.). The husband is swept up into the institute, which turns out to be a front for sinister supernatural forces. His wife, Jane, however, ends up in an organization opposing N.I.C.E.

An overarching theme of the book is the dichotomy between pure knowledge gained through artificial consciousness

and people striving to live out their humanity.

That Hideous Strength is “a story about people trying to live as human beings; how to make families and societies in the face of the wicked temptations of power,” Wright evaluated.

Another theme of the book is the relationship between science and the meaning of humanity. Roberts argued that Lewis's technological society “is very much like a vision of technological society that is seeking to do what technological society starting with the Tower of Babel has always done, which is to reach heaven on our own terms without being subject to God's rule and ... to make ourselves gods.”

Although the idea of immortalizing the individual human being and creating human-like machines that are outside of biological laws seems modern, Lewis pointed to it being an ancient idea wrapped up in human nature.

“This is a very old dream. And the nature of that dream—I think that nightmare—is what he's really examining here,” said Roberts.

Lewis also addressed the question of political power and how Christians should live well in political systems. Roberts suggested that living together and waiting for “the moment” to come is how Christians should pursue political ends.

As Roberts said, “You can't tinker with a society even with the best intentions to fix it through political or technological power. There's no technique of being politically well ruled.”

Lewis suggests that we should leave the big picture to God and focus on our duties.

“There is big picture political stuff going on, but it's probably not your business, it's the business of various principalities and powers,” argued Roberts.

The New Testament establishes that Christians are members of one body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. However, Jesus also speaks of some who are great in the Kingdom of God in Matthew 5:19.

Wright used Lewis's other 1945 novel, *The Great Divorce*, as an example. She described a heavenly scene where a great lady, who was beautiful beyond description, approached. It turns out that one of heaven's greatest queens was a humble

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Rena Mainetti is a Summer 2023 intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy and a rising junior at Grove City College studying political science.



Liberal United Methodists embracing other religions' spirituality is seen in such examples as this non-Christian, Native American religious ceremony performed within First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh. (Image: YouTube screen capture)

United Methodists Mixing Christianity, Other Religions

by John Lomperis

As many wonder what theological boundaries, if any, The United Methodist Church truly has, some liberal United Methodists have gone beyond even progressive Christianity to mix their spirituality with other religions.

United Methodists cross the line into *syncretism* when they intentionally mix the spirituality of other religions, distinct from Christianity, into their own.

In embracing the marketing slogan of “open hearts, open minds, open doors,” the UMC has refused to draw clear, consistent doctrinal boundaries.

In New England, at least two congregations—the United Church of

Winchester and the Federated Church of Marlborough—proclaim they are jointly affiliated with the UMC, the ultra-progressive United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).

The United Church of Winchester’s three-way federation of Methodists, Congregationalists, and Unitarian Universalists began in 1931.

Once denominational leaders allow any of their congregations to formally unite with Unitarian Universalism—as New England United Methodist leaders evidently have done across decades—they have declared both the divinity of Jesus Christ and basic biblical Christian

teaching about salvation as “non-essential issues.”

Even in the relatively conservative Indiana Conference, a United Methodist congregation recently announced that it “will be partnering with First Presbyterian, the Unitarian congregation, the Hindu temple, and other interfaith partners to put on the first fully inter-faith **Peace Camp**” for children ages 5–12. Joint sponsorship with non-Christians means this “fully inter-faith” summer camp is unlikely to challenge young people to decide to follow Jesus, as one would expect at typical church camps.

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Back in the mid-aughts, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that even in Texas, “a witch leading worship isn’t scandalous” and “isn’t even that unusual” at Trinity UMC in Austin. The church has “hosted American Indian shamans, Buddhist priests and other faith leaders, including Wiccans, before” and “even practice[s] their own pagan-inspired rituals at services.”

In Western Pennsylvania, by far the most conservative-leaning conference in either northern jurisdiction, First UMC of Pittsburgh has been a leading liberal congregation. Among the groups this congregation welcomes into its building is “OWL Tribal Goddess,” an organization the congregation includes in its “Partners in Ministry” list. That group’s Facebook page records their having held a “Winter Solstice Ecstatic Dance” at the church.

Among this congregation’s recent “spiritual formation opportunities” was “Buddhism for Lent”! This program, co-facilitated by the Rev. **RoBear Bob Wilson**, First UMC’s previous pastor, included “consider[ing] how Buddhist practice might be incorporated into Christian spirituality.”

The Facebook page of the Western Pennsylvania Conference’s Committee on Native American Ministries (aka CONAM)—an official ministry of this United Methodist conference—last month featured a re-post by Wilson promoting a fundraiser encouraging direct financial support of the “Caney Indigenous Spiritual Circle.” The group is also known as “the Mother Earth Church of the Grand Caney, Taino Religion, Taino Spirituality,” and is “devoted to the path of shamanic enlightenment as it was trailblazed by ancient mystics and wise elders of the Taino Native people in the Caribbean islands over four thousand years ago.”

In March 2021, CONAM sponsored the production of a video of a Taino Full Moon Ceremony, held and recorded in the sanctuary of First UMC (apparently in front of its altar). CONAM hosted a video premiere of this event on its YouTube channel on Palm Sunday. Wilson

(who chaired CONAM in 2019 and 2021 and gave introductory remarks in the video) announced that this was “a collaboration” between CONAM and the Caney Indigenous Spiritual Circle. Supposedly no United Methodists directly participated in the ceremony, and disclaimer text in the “educational” video claimed that it was “not an actual ceremony being performed.” But the latter claim strains credibility, as the video records adherents of this religion reciting words and enacting a ritual.

This ceremony performed and recorded within First UMC’s sanctuary included a “medicine wheel” altar with multiple carved religious figurines (i.e., idols), participants “open[ing] up those channels within our body” for releasing negative spiritual energies and bringing in positive spiritual energies “through those portals within ourselves,” and songs of praise, reverence, and supplication offered to multiple “sacred divinities.”

Sometimes, United Methodists’ adoption of other religions’ spirituality has been welcomed at the highest levels of denominational leadership.

In the mid-1990s, *Wellsprings*, an official journal for United Methodist clergywomen issued by the UMC’s Division on Ordained Ministry in Nashville, published two articles, one by a United Methodist pastor, celebrating “croning” rituals for older women. The Confessing Movement, among others, critiqued such rituals and their Wiccan/witchcraft influences. Rev. **Karen Booth** offered detailed critiques and reported that United Methodist Bishop **Susan Morrison** refused to confirm or deny if she had personally participated in a croning ritual.

In 2003, the American Humanist Association (AHA) issued a “Humanist Manifesto” outlining its atheistic worldview and values. Among the public endorsers was the now-late Dr. **John Swomley**, then Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics of the UMC’s St. Paul School of Theology. Swomley had previously written for *The Humanist*, the AHA’s magazine. Despite the apparent influence of atheism on his worldview, this

longtime prominent leader in training United Methodist ministers remained a United Methodist clergyman in good standing until his 2010 death.

Last fall, we provided extensive documentation on how United Methodist seminaries, generously funded by the apportionments taken from United Methodist offering plates, openly promote the practice and spread of other religions such as Islam, Unitarian Universalism, neo-paganism, and humanism.

No, not all liberal United Methodists personally go as far as those in the examples above. But the UMC’s lack of clear doctrinal boundaries makes embracing other religions’ spiritualities acceptable for United Methodist congregations and even prominent denominational officials.

Some in the UMC’s newly dominant liberal faction find this openness refreshing. Other liberal United Methodist leaders may not be personally comfortable with these examples, but are much more intolerant of those who do not support non-celibate gay ministers. I am hard-pressed to think of a single active bishop or large-church pastor remaining in the UMC, any leader in any of the liberal or supposedly “centrist” caucuses, or any United Methodist official who describes themselves as “theologically traditionalist except on sexuality” who has demonstrated the courage and conviction to clearly, publicly say that any of the United Methodist syncretism noted above crosses a line and deserves to be held accountable.

These differing United Methodist approaches to other religions show how the denominational split, with the formation of the new, orthodox Global Methodist Church, is about far more than sexuality. ✚



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

How Many Methodist Exits?

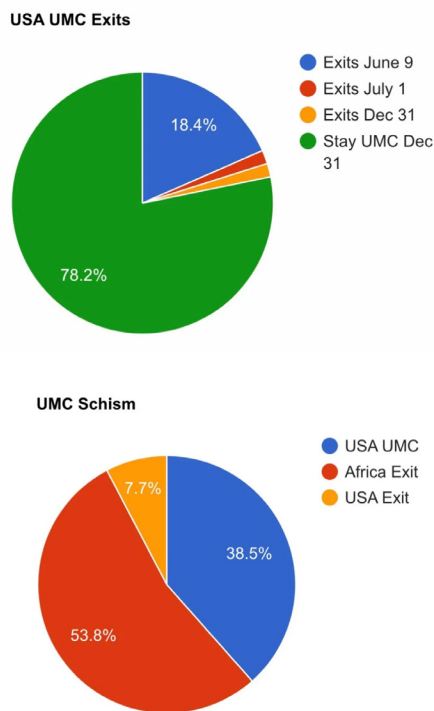
by Mark Tooley

As of publication there are 6,181 ratified church exits from U.S. United Methodism. Likely at least another 500 will be approved at the 19 or more special conferences meeting this summer and fall. So 6,500 or more churches will probably exit this year before the deadline, or about 22 percent of the 29,598 U.S. United Methodist churches existing in 2020 before the pandemic and schism.

Of course, even more churches could leave. In some conferences, deadlines have not yet passed for starting the exit process. Seeing 7,000 or more churches depart is not impossible. But even 6,000 churches exceeds most expectations. In a 2021 interview, large church pastor **Adam Hamilton** predicted 15 percent or at most 20 percent of churches would leave under the then still alive Protocol, which would have allowed easier exits, including by whole conferences. Under the Protocol, I thought as much as one third of the U.S. church could leave.

By the end of next year, after United Methodism officially liberalizes its marriage and sex teaching, I expect at least 25 percent of U.S. churches will have exited. If the May 2024 General Conference approves a new exit ramp, which is unlikely, the number will be higher. But even with the current exit ramp ending this year, some churches will, with great difficulty, find ways to exit, through property purchase, litigation, or property abandonment.

Individuals are also exiting. Many, perhaps most, traditionalists are not members of exiting churches, which require a two-thirds majority. A 2019 United Methodist poll said 44 percent of United Methodist laity are traditionalists. Many will quit their United Methodist churches as they witness the impact of the denomination's liberalization. In some cases, congregations have already divided, especially when congregational



majorities failed to reach the two-thirds needed for exit.

Where will Methodists ultimately land? I expect total U.S. exited churches will include about one million members. United Methodism had nearly 6.3 million U.S. members in 2020. The possibly incomplete 2021 stats say 5.7 million. United Methodism now likely has fewer than 5 million U.S. members. By the end of 2024 it could be 4.5 million. The church was losing 200,000 members annually before the pandemic. That number likely will double.

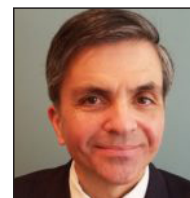
Most United Methodists are in Africa, which at last count had 7 million members. They are overwhelmingly strongly traditionalist. Some U.S. United Methodist institutionalists think that excluding Africa from new liberal marriage and sexuality standards will persuade them to stay. Maybe, but I doubt it. Africa has rejected similar proposals in the past. Many bishops in Africa, whose salaries are U.S.-paid, want to stay United

Methodist. But they will be hard-pressed to persuade Africans to do so after United Methodism fully liberalizes next year.

Africans will wonder why they, a growing 7 million strong, should remain subordinate to policies dictated by a shrinking U.S. church of fewer than 5 million. And many U.S. progressives are not anxious to accommodate Africans whose views they deem reactionary. If delegates at General Conference were apportioned fairly, Africa would already have a majority. U.S. progressives who think ahead will not want to repeatedly contend with growing numbers of Africans whose views are so opposed to their own.

Sadly, as Africa ultimately departs United Methodism it will likely fracture. Some will join Global Methodism. Some will become autonomous, which might better facilitate funding from all sides in the U.S. Others might align with British originated Methodism in Africa. Tribal and political divisions will emerge. Fiefdoms may form under strong personalities. To stay together, Africa needed United Methodism to remain at least officially orthodox. Liberalized United Methodism cannot lead or unite Africa. And as it shrinks, so too will its funding for Africa.

Amid division, hopefully many Methodists will rediscover who they are. United Methodism, founded in 1968, was never known for strong doctrinal reflection. In finally having to make choices about alignment, a rediscovery by many of Methodism's distinctions is possible, centered in the grace and holiness of God available to all people. For this outcome we can hope and pray. ✝



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

How Should Christians Respond to *Sound of Freedom*?

by Rena Mainetti

Based on a true story, *Sound of Freedom* follows U.S. Department of Homeland Security agent Tim Ballard on a vigilante mission to rescue trafficked children in Central America. (Photo: Angel Studios)

A story centered on the gritty world of child sex trafficking is among the highest profile films this summer, crossing the \$100 million line of box office returns in only its 16th day of release.

Sound of Freedom star **Jim Caviezel**—best known for his role in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*—portrays real life U.S. Department of Homeland Security agent **Tim Ballard**. Throughout his career at the Department of Homeland Security, Ballard locked up hundreds of pedophiles, but he’s haunted by the fact that the child victims are beyond his grasp. The drive to free these children lights a fire within Ballard, so he embarks on a vigilante mission to rescue trafficked children in the South American nation of Colombia.

Despite some logical inconsistencies, sparse dialogue, and few climatic events, the film uses raw emotion and graphic honesty to expose the exploitation of the innocent. Some critics claim that the film is a recruiting tool for far-right conspiracies; however, it ultimately depends on a story, not political or religious propaganda, to drive its message.

Human trafficking is a vile trademark of human depravity—*Sound of Freedom* makes that abundantly clear.

Human trafficking, however, is a complicated and nuanced issue—venturing into the jungle and snatching children

out of captors’ hands isn’t usually the answer.

Including both sex and labor trafficking, there are an estimated 27.6 million trafficking victims worldwide. The trafficking industry generates an estimated annual global profit of \$150 billion.

Traffickers prey on the most vulnerable individuals—like those undergoing migration or relocation, wrestling with substance use or mental health concerns, involved with the child welfare system, and being a runaway or homeless youth. The evildoers leverage their victims’ vulnerabilities to maximize control and dependency. Often, victims won’t seek help or even realize they are in a trafficking situation due to fear, isolation, guilt, shame, misplaced loyalty, and expert manipulation.

Sound of Freedom is a film, so the story takes creative and dramatic liberties with facts. Unlike *Sound of Freedom*’s portrayal, children are not often snatched from the streets. A study analyzing press releases and online media reports from over nine years found that fewer than 10 percent of cases involved kidnapping. More often, child traffickers prey on children in socially and economically vulnerable situations—such as children living in poverty or experiencing physical or sexual abuse or addiction. Traffickers recruit these children through trust and manipulation tactics.

Ballard’s real-life organization, Operation Underground Railroad (OUR), is known for dramatic rescue missions like the ones depicted in the film. While rescue operations do occur, they represent the minority of anti-trafficking work. Some of the anti-trafficking measures depicted in the film, such as creating a sex island to lure traffickers or buying children out of sex trafficking to free them, could inadvertently create more demand for trafficked children and worsen the problem, one critic noted.

More often, anti-trafficking organizations focus on supporting victims, advocating for stronger anti-trafficking laws, and training law enforcement and employers to recognize the signs of human trafficking. Some ministries support survivors in addiction recovery, relationship building, and poverty-fighting.

Sound of Freedom achieves its goal—it uses emotional connection and storytelling to raise awareness about modern-day slavery. However, we can’t jump into

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Archbishop Ben Kwashi of Jos, Nigeria addresses the Global Anglican Future Conference on April 21, 2023 in Kigali, Rwanda. Kwashi serves as GAFCON Secretary (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD)



As Anglicans ‘Re-order’ Communion, Structures Take Back Seat to Doctrine, Mission

by Jeffrey Walton

A “Kigali Commitment” released at the conclusion of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) meeting April 17–21 in Kigali, Rwanda, seeks to re-order the worldwide Anglican Communion away from the See of Canterbury as the “First Among Equals.”

“Our Chairman [Archbishop **Foley Beach** of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA)] in his opening address encouraged us to be a repenting church, a reconciling church, a reproducing church and a relentlessly compassionate church,” the conference statement reads. “This is the church we want to be.”

GAFCON was inaugurated in 2008 as a fellowship of many disparate groups seeking reform and renewal within the family of churches descended from the missionary activities of the Church of England.

Sometimes perceived as a fellowship of nine Anglican Provinces (national churches in Anglican parlance), GAFCON is, in fact, a wider Anglican renewal movement.

Key points of the conference were a response to the Church of England General Synod decision in February to bless those in same-sex unions, a call for the centrality of God’s Word as the final authority, and GAFCON’s identity as a missional movement.

“It grieves the Holy Spirit and us that the leadership of the Church of England is determined to bless sin,” the conference statement, crafted across the duration of the event and speaking for the more than 1,300 delegates from 52 countries registered for the gathering.

GAFCON and the Global South

Central to the statement is the call to “re-order” the Anglican Communion in cooperation with the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans (GSFA). The organizations share an overlapping membership and the same orthodox theology.

However, in a press conference on the opening day of GAFCON, Beach responded to a question that he did not see a merger between GAFCON and GSFA soon. The GAFCON official noted that each group has a distinct mission.

“The leadership of both groups affirmed and celebrated their complementary roles in the Anglican Communion. GAFCON is a movement focused on evangelism and mission, church planting and providing support and a home for

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faithful Anglicans who are pressured by or alienated from revisionist dioceses and provinces. GSFA, on the other hand, is focused on establishing doctrinally based structures within the Communion,” the statement reads.

Essentially, GSFA aims to address an ecclesial deficit and seeks chiefly to work inside Canterbury-recognized structures. GAFCON more and more sees itself as a missional body working to provide alternative structures where historic, Canterbury-recognized organizations have abandoned scriptural orthodoxy. This has shifted in more recent years, and GSFA recognizes and includes groups like ACNA outside of the Canterbury-led Communion.

“Resetting the Communion is an urgent matter. It needs an adequate and robust foundation that addresses the legal and constitutional complexities in various Provinces. The goal is that orthodox Anglicans worldwide will have a clear identity, a global ‘spiritual home’ of which they can be proud, and a strong leadership structure that gives them stability and direction as Global Anglicans,” the Kigali Commitment states.

Teaching

Structural matters were not how most time was allocated at GAFCON’s Kigali meeting.

Instead, conferees heard ministry updates from new GAFCON-aligned churches and scriptural teaching, with studies on the letter to the Colossians offered each morning. Church of England Minister **Rico Tice** of All Souls Langham Place in London, alongside **Richard Boragon**, discussed the importance of one-on-one evangelism and study of the scriptures. The Rev. Dr. **Ashley Null**, Canon Theologian for the Province of Alexandria (Egypt), addressed the conference on “The Heart of Anglicanism” emphasizing shared theological belief rooted in the English reformation rather than structural connections.

One measure of the conference statement’s success was that the Archbishop of Canterbury’s office at Lambeth Palace apparently felt obliged to respond.

“The Archbishop continues to be in regular contact with his fellow Primates and looks forward to discussing this and

many other matters with them over the coming period,” the statement from Canterbury read.

Perhaps more to the point, Archbishop of York **Stephen Cottrell** seemed to obliquely refer to GAFCON in his presidential address to the York Synod: “The criteria by which we will be judged, is not doctrinal orthodoxy, because many of us—probably most of us—will from time to time, and even with the very best intentions, gets things wrong, but by our love,” Cottrell insisted.

The Kigali Commitment calls for “Resetting the Communion” and for “those provinces, dioceses and leaders who have departed from biblical orthodoxy to repent of their failure to uphold the Bible’s teaching.” The Commitment states that the Archbishop of Canterbury “has himself welcomed the provision of liturgical resources to bless these [same-sex blessing] practices contrary to Scripture. This renders his leadership role in the Anglican Communion entirely indefensible.”

That Hideous Strength

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woman from East London who took care of all the neighborhood cats and people.

As Mommsen summarized, “One thing that Lewis’ book has to say about how Christians should promote the common good...is to live out your vocation and...not to do what N.I.C.E. does, which is to seize the political moment and attempt to force through a vision of the perfect society.”

Sound of Freedom

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a motorboat and travel to the jungle’s depths to rescue children.

So, what’s the answer? The best way to fight trafficking is through education and community involvement. A great place to start is the Polaris Project—an anti-trafficking organization that runs the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline and conducts research on modern-day slavery.

We all want to hear the sound of freedom—like the joyful tears of a father reunited with his lost children. But fighting trafficking requires us to do the small

Will those who attended this GAFCON event disregard a Canterbury invitation to the next Primates’ Meeting, which Welby has called to convene April 2024 in Rome?

If every primate who attended GAFCON stays true to the words of the Kigali Commitment, it will be a rude awakening for the Archbishop of Canterbury.

For those at GAFCON, a priority has been set.

“Life is here. Make your commitment,” preached GAFCON Secretary and Archbishop **Ben Kwashi** of Jos, Nigeria, pointing to the body and blood of Christ as GAFCON prepared to share in Holy Communion at the conclusion of the event. ✚



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

The earthly social order emphasizes power and intelligence—and it is not afraid to use whatever necessary means to accomplish its goals. God’s social order paints a vastly different picture—emphasizing humility, justice, and gratefulness rooted in God’s sinless nature. As Christians, we must first accept that man cannot create perfection and then reject the temptations of power from the earthly social order. ✚

things—like volunteering at a community safe-house or educating ourselves and others on the issue. The National Human Trafficking Referral Directory shows volunteer opportunities in your area and across the country (humantraffickinghotline.org/en/find-local-services).

The world is full of incomprehensible evil. No one person, organization, or political movement is the answer. However, we can influence change by humbling ourselves, praying, and actively chasing the truth. ✚

'Sparkle Creed' Is Dim and Dull

by Mark Tooley

There was an online hullabaloo this summer about the “sparkle creed” at a progressive Lutheran church near Minneapolis. Offered as a substitute for more traditional creeds, the clergywoman cited God as “nonbinary,” and having “two dads.”

spotlights misdeeds towards native peoples:

We acknowledge that Edina Community Lutheran Church is located on the traditional, ancestral and contemporary lands of the Dakhóta Oyáte*, the Dakota nation. Treaties developed through

by some white liberal Protestant churches. And the overall project of theological deconstruction almost entirely belongs to white progressives in fast declining Mainline Protestant denominations.

Theological progressives often herald their latest favorite fads as representing the inevitable future. And some dour traditionalists gladly collaborate in this prediction. After all, isn't the world, and the church, constantly degenerating to ever new depths of depravity? And nothing can be done but complain!

But, in truth, the progressive Protestant project of North America and Northwestern Europe is fast concluding. It abandoned orthodoxy early in the 20th century in favor of a cold modernism that rejected supernaturalism in favor of stern moral reform. That focus on science and rationality gave way to postmodern self-discovery and deconstruction, with obsession over self-identity, including race and ethnicity, and lately a fixation on sexuality and gender. One hundred years ago “God” was a metaphor for implementing egalitarian social justice. Now “God” is a projection for anxiety over self-actualization.

The audience for these trends was never sustainably large. Liberal Protestantism around the world began shrinking 60 or more years ago. Few regular people were interested in sermons about how Christ's resurrection was not really physical but poetic. Even fewer have time for a sexually confused “nonbinary” deity who's busily apologizing for 1,000 years of Western Civilization. Most regular people harken to religion when it speaks to their basic spiritual needs about who they are, what they should do, and where they are going. Christianity typically thrives when it offers salvation, morality, and hope in a personal, active deity. Esoteric religious movements appeal to special niches of activists and intellectuals focused on specific contemporary situations. Such



Edina Community Lutheran Church co-pastor Anna Helgen leads her Minnesota congregation in recitation of the “Sparkle Creed.” (Photo: YouTube screen capture)

A Fox News segment reported on the sparkle creed as a “crisis” for Christianity. But no one needs to worry that Christian orthodoxy is seriously threatened by sparkle theology.

The cleric at Edina Community Lutheran Church cited her belief in the “rainbow spirit who shatters our image of one white light and refracts it into a rainbow of gorgeous diversity.” What does that mean? Likely neither she nor the congregation that stood to join her could really explain.

The church's website highlights the congregation's advocacy for “LGBTQ-IA+ inclusion, racial justice and eco-faith.” It also mentions immigration and “reproductive justice.” And it

exploitation and violence were broken. Tribes were forced to exist on ever smaller amounts of land.

Acknowledging this painful history, we as a congregation confess our complicity in the theft of Native land and acknowledge that we have not yet honored our treaties. We further confess that Christians and Christian churches have benefited from this land theft. We commit to being active advocates for justice for Native People and to truth telling that leads to healing.

Do any native people attend Edina Community Lutheran Church? Most churches with native people tend to be more traditional and focused on typical Christian work, not the activism preferred

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movements never represent the future. They don't even represent the past. But they will always be with us in some form, even if in small numbers, experimenting, reacting, deconstructing, striving for ever new levels of self-knowledge.

There will always be "sparkle creeds" trying to displace more traditional creeds like the Nicene and Apostles Creed. Supposedly those ancient creeds are restrictive impositions, demanding that we believe what we really logically can't. But they have endured for millennia because they claim a transcendent permanence outside of ourselves. Before we were, God is. We can't define Him. He reveals Himself to us and defines us. Christ was not confused about His maleness. He had

"two dads" who were/are God the Father and His stepfather Joseph. Importantly, He was born to a mother. The Virgin Mary was not confused about her gender. She was a woman and will always be the blessed mother of Christ. And He will always be the eternally begotten Son of the Father. We look with awe to these assertions surrounded by majesty and mystery. Many reject their claims, but these claims offer compelling cosmic insights that no version of a sparkle creed can ever approximate. In a few years, nobody will recall the sparkle creed. In one thousand years, millions will still recite the Nicene and Apostles' creeds.

The traditional creeds also offer what sparkle does not: redemption. Sparkle

congregations must strive and agonize over thousands of years of injustice, for which there is no real remedy but constant apologies to which nobody is really listening. No member of the Dakota tribe, dead or alive, cares about pleas for forgiveness from a Lutheran congregation. No BLM sign or march will compensate for slavery or segregation.

In contrast, the historic creeds offer a definitive gift: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." And "His kingdom will have no end."

No amount of sparkle will ever compete with that claim. ✚

Tim Keller: Right or Wrong?

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see Graham and reportedly told Graham to keep doing what he was doing and not to step into Falwell's battles.

Graham of course was chiefly an evangelist and not a public theologian. Keller was more intellectual and was a public theologian. But his perspective as a church planter informs his public theology. What kind of witness will work with young urban professionals? His recipe was fairly successful, but it is not the final word, and he never claimed it was. In his responsive essay, French recalls the 1990s in New York were not necessarily neutral towards evangelical Christianity, which then barely existed in the city, except in the historic black Protestant churches, which was a different brand. Church plants had to litigate for years to get equal access for renting public buildings for worship. Urban elite culture has perhaps never been friendly to evangelical Christianity. In the 19th century and early 20th century preachers targeted saloons, brothels, and casinos, which was bad for business, and a threat to corrupt urban political machines. Mid-20th century Mainline Protestants were tamer and unthreatening, but their churches emptied as post-WWII middle class white Americans relocated to the suburbs.

Today's secular hostility to Christianity focuses almost entirely on the church's traditional teaching about sex and gender. Secular culture is indifferent to doctrines about the Trinity or salvation or the Bible's miracles, topics of great conflict in the past. Postmodernity mostly declares: Spiritually believe whatever you want! But insisting on particular moral norms about sex and gender is deeply controversial. Keller firmly upheld orthodox teaching about sex but did not highlight that teaching. Likely, many in his congregation had liberal views. In recent years I lunched with the Keller-inspired D.C. pastor who told me after the Supreme Court affirmed same-sex marriage his church, for clarity, posted their orthodox view on marriage. Some congregants were distressed, but the church moved on.

The Keller approach somewhat recalls the early Methodist approach to slavery. Methodism opposed slavery, but Bishop **Francis Asbury** soon realized that Methodist association with the anti-slavery movement would kill Methodism in the south, cutting off Methodism from white and black audiences. Asbury never changed his views on slavery, but he stopped talking about it publicly. Was he wrong, or right? Had he insisted on a strong anti-slavery

stance, maybe Methodism would have disappeared from the south. But maybe there would have been wider resistance to slavery that could have led to peaceful abolition instead of Civil War. This side of the eschaton, we will never know.

All clergy and every church must operate in a particular culture that entails accommodation. Nobody has the pure virtue, pure courage, and opportunity to exercise complete and faithful loud Gospel proclamation at all times where they are. Pastors in "red state" regions carefully navigate on some issues, just as pastors like Keller do in "blue state" regions. Even the best, wisest and most faithful congregations will only tolerate so much challenge. Every church requires discretion and conciliation. Not everything can be openly and forcefully articulated. No congregation is composed exclusively of sanctified saints who will hear and heed the full Gospel.

Maybe Falwell's advice to Graham to keep doing what he was doing was wise for acknowledging Graham's particular vocation. Not all Christians, whether shepherds or flock, are called simultaneously to the same fields. God powerfully used Keller, just as He used Graham, and millions of others who were incomplete as individuals but who collectively comprise God's church across time and culture. Whom will He use next? Of course, all of us are chiefly called to ask ourselves: How is He using me? ✚

An Unexpected United Methodist Prayer Detour

by Jeffrey Walton

Last spring while driving past a local United Methodist church, I felt a sudden conviction to pull into the lot, park, and prayer walk around the property.

I am not a charismatic Christian. But friends who have had “spirit filled” experiences share about the need to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to act in obedience. This felt like both.

I guess there’s a first time for everything.

With its location on Washington Street, Christ Crossman United Methodist Church has a prominent building at the gateway of Falls Church, Virginia, a leafy inner-ring suburb populated by highly educated, culturally liberal government workers. I’ve passed Christ Crossman UMC hundreds of times without much thought across the past two decades.

A service leaflet posted on the church’s website describes the congregation of 54 persons as “questioning, scientifically informed and socially conscious.” Church signage has rainbows and touts affirmation. Seemingly, this church is primed to appeal to the zeitgeist of its neighborhood.

It was unclear, as I wound my way through a peace garden with ceramic lambs grazing among bright daffodils, if the prayer walk was for the church’s spiritual benefit or for my own. I prayed for the gospel to be preached there, for the sheep to be pastorally tended, and for repentance that would begin in my own heart.

Across Washington Street, a massive building project is underway at Columbia Baptist Church that

welcomes a growing number of participants with services in Spanish, Arabic, Korean, and Vietnamese.

A few blocks to the west, the 2,800-family St. James Catholic Church is undergoing its own renovations and has a thriving Spanish language ministry and a school recently voted best in the city.



Images from the campus of Christ Crossman United Methodist Church in Falls Church, Virginia (Photos: Jeff Walton / IRD)

My own congregation, the Falls Church Anglican, opened a new campus just outside the city on a bustling commuter artery and has steadily grown in worship attendance.

The Jesus Movement is visibly alive and well in the City of Falls Church, but the question is whether United Methodists are still part of it. Galloway United Methodist, less than a mile to the south, is wrapped in large banners—for a Korean Baptist congregation that rents space there (Galloway reports a United Methodist congregation of 29). A third UMC

congregation, Dulin Church, meets less than a mile to the east and appears to have dropped the word “Methodist” from their website landing page. A rainbow of colors under the words “welcoming and affirming” constitute the entirety of the “beliefs” page.

Christ Crossman is itself the product of a merger between Crossman UMC and Christ UMC in adjacent Arlington. The latter building was sold to a thriving classical Christian academy—Rivendell School—that has itself undergone a significant expansion.

Clearly, location isn’t the problem here: Gospel-centered Christian churches and schools are thriving, even amidst a progressive community that conventional wisdom says is supposed to be disinterested.

Christ Crossman stewards a pleasant, if underutilized, campus that is easily walkable to a residential neighborhood, adjacent to a retirement community, and even a nearby metro station. What could the Lord have in store for these people, or this parcel of land?

I have no profound spiritual insight to share, except to say that the Lord has breathed new life into old bones many times before. Perhaps you’ll pass a church in the coming days and feel a similar tug to stop and pray. I hope that you’ll join me in doing so. ✚



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