

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Summer 2024



'Kin-dom' and the Supreme Power of Christ

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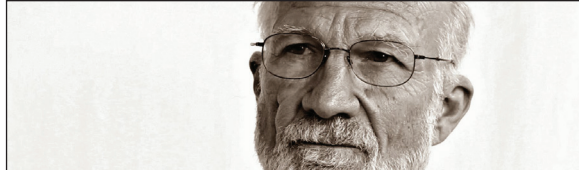
Participants at the 2024 Anglican Church in North America Provincial Assembly gather at a prayer service on the campus of St. Vincent College in Latrobe, PA on Tuesday, June 25, 2024 (Photo: Heidi Reichert / Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic)

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COVER: Following the consecration of deaconesses on April 29, United Methodist Bishops Robin Dease (left), Karen Oliveto, and Kennetha Bigham-Tsai lead singing of participants in the United Methodist General Conference in Charlotte, N.C. (Photo: Paul Jeffrey, UM News)

Blasphème and Olympiques

During the early 1990s there was controversy over federal funding for obscene and even blasphemous art through the National Endowment for the Arts. One federally subsidized photo showed the Crucifix dipped in urine. Another performance involved a toilet altar with Jesus on the lid. Funding was ended by a U.S. Congressional act requiring that federally subsidized art not violate “general standards of decency.” One artist sued, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against her.

The more recent Olympic games controversy over a drag queen parody of the Last Supper, evolving into a Feast of Dionysus, raised similar questions. But the Paris-based Olympic opening ceremony was hosted by an international body and viewed by hundreds of millions. In response to the condemnation, there have been partial apologies.

Also relevant is the 2015 mass shooting of a French satirical magazine staff by Algerian Muslims enraged by the publication of derisive cartoons about Muhammad. The irreverent magazine had also published cartoons lampooning Christianity. Typically, media that mock Christianity avoid mocking Islam either from political correctness or outright fear of physical violence.

It’s a safe bet that no enraged, deranged Christians will get violent over the Olympic ceremony. Modern Christianity does not expect the physical or legal suppression of blasphemy against its faith as much as Islam does. Christianity sees itself as a voluntary faith, chosen by individuals, not imposed by a society. Regardless of parody or mockery, Christians believe that God is sovereign, Christ is Lord, His Word endures forever, and the church is built upon a rock. Drag queen satires detract from none of God’s power or righteousness.

But the Olympic Last Supper parody cannot be easily dismissed. Perhaps it was intended only to spoof an iconic painting by Leonardo da Vinci. But millions of Christian watchers saw it as mocking their faith, which of course the Olympic organizers knew, but they proceeded anyway. Why? Some like to think mocking traditional faith conveys courage, independence, and irreverence. But mocking Christianity in France, where church attendance is about 8 percent and secularism is strong, is hardly brave or unique.

And the vast majority of viewers were not French but international. Most of the world outside the West is religious. About one third of the world professes to be Christian, or about 2.4 billion people, most of them in the Global South. France’s Catholic bishops, in their critique of the Olympics ceremony, thanked support from other denominations, and expressed concern for Christians globally who were watching. Doubtless millions of other Christians around the world were surprised and distressed by the parody of the Last Supper. Some perhaps who live as minorities in majority Muslim societies, like Egypt’s Coptic Church, which condemned the ceremony, felt more vulnerable because of it.

There are nearly 2 billion Muslims in the world, and they also honor Jesus in their faith. Much of Islam, and much of the world, views the West as ungodly and hostile to faith. The Olympic ceremony only confirmed that supposition. Unsurprisingly, a Russian church official condemned the Paris Olympic ceremony as



The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci, dated to c. 1495–1498

“demonic,” and showing “disdain for European civilization and Christianity as its foundation.” The Russian Orthodox Church functions as an arm of Putin’s dictatorship and is anxious to critique the democratic West in contrast with “Holy Russia.” This Olympic parody of the Last Supper gave them powerful ammo.

But the Russian official had a point about Christianity as the foundation of Western Civilization and of France. Would the French-hosted Olympics have considered imagery that favorably reflected Christianity’s historically decisive role in France and the West? If not, why?

Of course, Christianity’s high regard for the individual has bequeathed to the West its commitment to freedom of speech, which includes the freedom to critique, mock and think

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Mark Tooley



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

African United Methodists Begin Exit

United Methodism's largest overseas jurisdiction voted in May to quit the denomination in response to the church's divorcing sex from marriage at its governing General Conference.

The United Methodist Church in the Ivory Coast in 2022 reported more than 1.2 million members. Its departure means more than one-tenth of United Methodism in one day left the denomination. European website *La Croix International* offered an account:

"For reasons of conscience before God and His word, the supreme authority in matters of faith and life," the annual conference of the United Methodist Church of Ivory Coast (EMUCI, Eglise Méthodiste Unie Côte d'Ivoire), gathered for an extraordinary session on May 28 in Abidjan, and decided "to leave the United Methodist Church denomination."

Ivorian United Methodists said United Methodism "deviates from the Holy Scriptures" and prefers "to sacrifice its honor and integrity to honor the LGBTQ community."

La Croix International quoted Bishop **Benjamin Boni** saying "the United Methodist Church now rests on socio-cultural values that have consumed its doctrinal and disciplinary integrity."

The decision-making process for the Ivorian Methodists transpired over only two weeks after the United Methodist General Conference concluded May 3 in Charlotte, North Carolina. At that

General Conference, delegates removed the church's longtime stance that sex is only for marriage between husband and wife. Adultery and extramarital sex were removed as chargeable offenses for clergy, along with homosexual behavior.

African delegates to General Conference, who are overwhelmingly conservative and displeased with the UMC's new direction, were widely ignored and underrepresented. Between 70-90 delegates, at least one quarter, and perhaps one third, failed to obtain U.S. visas.

The speed of the Ivorian post-General Conference exit has prompted other United Methodist regions in Africa to act. On May 30, the Rwanda Provisional Annual Conference also voted to leave the United Methodist Church. In 2022 it counted 4,469 members.

United Methodists in Nigeria voted unanimously in June to leave the denomination. According to 2022 data, nearly 600,000 United Methodists live in Nigeria.

A special called meeting of 912 delegates met June 1 at Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria. The United Methodist Episcopal Area of Nigeria includes four conferences under Bishop **John Wesley Yohanna**.

Their reportedly unanimous resolution said United Methodism has adopted "cultural values divergent from our own" and "prioritizes the LGBTQ community over the traditional beliefs held by many in Nigeria." The Nigerians, "standing on



Ivory Coast Bishop Benjamin Boni said the separation was formalized during an 'extraordinary session' May 28 in Abidjan on the southern coast of the West African country. (Photo: Isaac Bourne / UMNS)

the true Word of God," voted to "leave the United Methodist Church pending the determination of litigations."

On July 29, the Transitional Leadership Council of the Global Methodist Church (GMC) welcomed Yohanna as an elder and clergy member and recognized him as an active bishop of the GMC.

Unlike in the U.S., most African nations don't have laws giving the denomination clear ownership of church buildings. If an entire overseas conference votes to exit, there's little to nothing that U.S.-based church officials can do.

In 2022, United Methodism reported nearly 7 million members in Africa, where the church often grows by several hundred thousand members annually.

United Methodism now reports 5.4 million members in the U.S., presumably based on 2022 figures. It does not include the full impact of 7,700 exiting churches, which combined with closed churches, included 1.5 million church members. U.S. membership is now likely close to 4 million, with Africans outnumbering Americans. ✝

Anglican Bishops Call Next Archbishop as Attendance Rebounds

Attendance within the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) rebounded in 2023 to pre-COVID numbers, according to congregational report data released June 25 at the denomination's Provincial Council meeting at St. Vincent's College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

The denomination in 2023 reported an increase of 36 congregations to a total of 1,013, an increase in membership of 3,115 (+2.5 percent) to a total of 128,114 and an increase in attendance of 9,211 (+12 percent) to a total of 84,794.

The 2023 attendance numbers are a full rebound, exceeding pre-COVID levels, and are broad: Only five of 29 ACNA jurisdictions reported any attendance decline in 2023.

Anglican bishops meeting in a conclave before the Council meeting selected

a new archbishop to lead the 15-year-old denomination.

The Rt. Rev. **Steve Wood**, who serves as Bishop of the Diocese of the Carolinas and rector of St. Andrew's Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, will lead the denomination.

Originally from Ohio, Wood became rector of St. Andrew's in 2000. It grew to become one of the largest parishes in the Episcopal Church (the seventh largest when it departed the denomination for the ACNA). Under Wood's leadership, St. Andrew's was described by the *Charleston Post & Courier* as, "one of the Low-country's biggest church success stories," growing to a membership of more than 3,200 and planting new churches in North Charleston and downtown Charleston.

In March 2020, Wood was hospitalized with COVID-19, recovering



Anglican Archbishop Steve Wood greets church members after the closing service of the Anglican Church in North America Assembly June 28, 2024 in Latrobe, PA (Photo: ACNA)

after treatment following 10 days on a ventilator.

Wood is to be "invested" in a service taking place in Charleston on October 30, but assumed the spiritual authority to take up his office on June 28. ✝

Traditionalist Archbishop Viganò Excommunicated

A leading Roman Catholic traditionalist and critic of **Pope Francis** has been found guilty of schism.

Archbishop **Carlo Maria Viganò** was subsequently excommunicated by the Vatican, a rare penalty intended to prompt a change in behavior, with an invitation to repentance and return to full communion.



Viganò previously served as diplomatic and religious representative from the Vatican to the United States (the Papal Nuncio) from 2011-2016, and was instrumental in promoting cross-Catholic relations between Italy and the United States.

A June 11 Vatican decree stated that if Viganò remained unresponsive through June 28, he would be sentenced in absentia. The Congress of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the department of the Roman Curia charged with the religious discipline of the Catholic Church, met on July 4 to conclude the penal process against Viganò, announcing his excommunication on July 5.

Although formal excommunication of Viganò was expected—he repeatedly denied the legitimacy of the Second Vatican Council and of Pope Francis as

Supreme Pontiff—his excommunication is a momentous step.

Viganò is among the more widely known and once-respected bishops, particularly in the United States. He is a well-known figure among U.S. Roman Catholic traditionalist online communities.

The now former archbishop has direct ties to former U.S. President **Donald Trump**, sending a 2020 Tweet to the then-President explaining his belief that both he and Trump were leading a "battle between the forces of good and evil."

It was not the first time Viganò interjected himself in American politics. He has repeatedly criticized Catholic public officeholders who favor abortion rights and same-sex marriage.

Tensions between Viganò and the Vatican had been brewing for years, until his relation to the Church was publicly called into question. The former

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò (Photo: exsurgedomine.it)

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Global South Anglicans Not ‘Bowing to the Demands of Revisionism’

by Jeffrey Walton

Anglicans from across the Global South are seeking a wider leadership role within the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which their churches increasingly represent an overwhelming share.

Forty countries were represented at the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans

broadly recognized Anglican provinces. It began the process of recasting itself as a covenantal, rather than an exclusively geographic, structure in 2016.

Both entities proclaim creedal orthodoxy and warn against “bowing to the demands of revisionism” that have increasingly characterized churches in

in 2009 at the direction of GAFCON; the Anglican Church in Brazil; and “extra-provincial” dioceses including the Church of Confessing Anglicans Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Diocese of the Southern Cross in Australia. Each has been recognized by GSFA as either a full (“ordinary”) or associate member. Mission partners, including missionary sending organizations, can also apply for and receive a recognized status within the GSFA.

“The creation of the membership category of Mission Partner is a huge encouragement to me, and I believe it will be a key component in helping biblically faithful global Anglicans in actively engaging in fulfilling the Great Commission together,” New Wineskins Missionary Network Executive Director **Jenny Noyes** told me. “We must keep our focus on reaching the 2+ billion people who still have no access to the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Bishop **Jay Behan** of the Church of Confessing Anglicans Aotearoa/New Zealand is grateful for the relationships and missional vitality he’s found in GAFCON but hopes that GSFA will offer something additional.

“GAFCON is a movement,” Behan shared with me. “GSFA is a structure.” And, in Anglican ecclesiology, structure matters.

The component members of GSFA and GAFCON also vary: Nigeria and Rwanda are heavily involved in GAFCON, but only lightly represented, or not at all, at GSFA, as their provinces have not initiated the process of joining the GSFA covenantal structure (though they were invited to participate as observers at GSFA Assembly). GSFA observers are in addition to the ordinary and associate members, including participants from nations including Cameroon, Burundi, and Angola.

At the GSFA Assembly last June, a delegation from the Chinese Christian



Archbishop Miguel Uchôa of the Anglican Church in Brazil prays with delegates from the Episcopal Church of Sudan at the first Assembly of the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans June 11-15 in Egypt. (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD)

(GSFA) first Assembly meeting June 11-15 outside of Cairo, Egypt.

The membership of GSFA significantly overlaps with another Anglican renewal group, the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), but each has a different, complementary area of focus.

GAFCON, which launched in 2008, seeks to address an evangelistic or missional deficit within the Anglican Communion, while GSFA, first convened in 1994 as a geographic fellowship, seeks to fill an ecclesial deficit. The former has stepped in to inaugurate orthodox Anglican expressions in geographic areas where the official Anglican Communion structures are perceived to be compromised. The latter chiefly (though not exclusively) works among existing,

the Global North, in the words of GSFA Chairman and Archbishop of South Sudan **Justin Badi Arama**.

In one sense, the GSFA gathering is not seeking to launch something wholly new, but rather to renew or to recognize renewal already underway as a “holy remnant” in the Communion. As Global South churches have grown numerically, they are ready to assume leadership responsibility and to work with one another without going through the historic See of Canterbury and the existing Communion-wide institutions, known as the “Instruments of Communion.”

Additional bodies unrepresented within official Anglican Communion structures also participated: the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), formed

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Council, the registered Protestant body in China, offered greetings. Enthusiastic reception on stage for the Chinese delegation raised some eyebrows as they relayed Chinese President **Xi Jinping's** words about the "sinicization of faith" that has been seen as euphemism for mandating Communist Party teachings within the life of the churches.

"There are some snakes in the tent," one bishop remarked to me in conversation. "Not many, but there are some."

Anglican Communion Secretary General **Anthony Poggio** was welcomed here, an appearance that would be less likely at GAFCON.

Poggio's appearance came as two potentially dissonant messages were conveyed by GSFA officials in Egypt. One is commitment to the historic Communion, with Archbishop Badi stating in his opening address that "we respect and relate to the seat of St. Augustine. It is always our prayer that the person who sits on that seat will always be faithful to the faith we once received from the Saints and faithfully transmitted."

Simultaneously, Badi expressed a different message when he noted that even as Canterbury says, "let us walk together, listen to each other and have a good disagreement," the GSFA Primates (first bishops in Anglican parlance) say "we cannot walk together in sin ... unless there is repentance by those who have gone astray, we cannot have unity at the expense of God's

life-giving truth." Badi also observed that previous Global South and Communion-wide statements have "never been taken seriously by revisionist Provinces."

The sentiment was echoed by Archbishop of Kenya **Jackson Ole Sapit**, who remarked that conversations disputing the obvious are unproductive.

"Grass can never be blue, chicks cannot be cubs, but we've been arguing over that which is plainly true," Sapit determined. Instead, he advised fellow Anglicans in the Global South to not argue with "empty words and talk" but instead preach and teach the Word of God.

In short, Global South Anglicans articulate that they want historic structures, but not at the expense of faithfulness to Scripture. Decades of dialogue have not resolved intractable conflict, but instead exposed a widening gulf between revisionism and proclamation of an authentic gospel truth.

The Anglican Communion sometimes functions with a lack of integration or "multiple personalities," warned conference host and Archbishop of Alexandria **Samy Fawzy Shehata**. "Your identity reflects your relationship with God and others."

The GSFA sought to address that with a covenantal structure between member provinces as well as elections by bishops, clergy and laity to hold office within its new structure. But the core of what took place in Egypt is an effort to be faithful to

hold fast to God's word as "the faith once delivered" (Jude 3) and seek to obey it.

"We cannot have unity at the expense of God's life-giving truth," Badi summarized. ✚



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Traditionalist Archbishop

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archbishop has been openly critical and hostile in past public disagreements with Francis and the Vatican. He released an 11-page statement on his concerns with Francis in August 2018, alleging Vatican cover-up of sexual-abuse scandals, including former Archbishop of Washington Cardinal **Theodore McCarrick** (who was laicized in 2019).

Frequent and repetitive attacks on Francis originating within the church have become an ongoing concern for the Papacy: A steady stream of bishops and priests have been excommunicated, primarily for undermining Francis' legitimacy or questioning Vatican II. ✚

Blasphème and Olympiques

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independently. But an independent magazine like *Charlie Hebdo* publishing irreverent, even blasphemous, cartoons is quite different from a major international body, as part of a global civic pageant, mocking a religion without consideration of consequences.

During the controversy over federal funding of blasphemous art 35 years ago, a group of upset religious leaders met with President George H.W. Bush. He declared his opposition to censorship. An official

from the National Association of Evangelicals responded that the issue was not censorship but government subsidy.

The International Olympic Committee is independent and privately funded. Doubtless the French government has spent a fortune to facilitate this year's Olympic games. But more importantly, the Olympics are a public collaboration of nearly all nations. It honors sports but it also honors the best of the participating nations and especially the host nation. A

drag queen caricature of The Last Supper does not exemplify the best of France. Instead, it conveyed disrespect and unseriousness. The Olympics entail discipline, focus, respect, diligence, honor, and good sportsmanship. The opening ceremony, in contrast, conveyed arrogance and decadence.

Free societies vigorously protect free speech. But healthy free societies do not celebrate insults. Nor should a society deeply shaped by Christianity be ungrateful for its inheritance. Hopefully, future Olympic ceremonies will be more thankful and respectful. ✚

Anglicans Moving Forward in the Worship of God

by Jeffrey Walton

This June the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) held its Provincial Assembly in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. The week was a series of three major meetings: the ACNA College of Bishops elected new Archbishop **Steve Wood** to a five-year term (see *Church News*, page 5), the annual Provincial Council adopted a budget and held elections, and the larger Assembly, which meets at least once every five years, ratified canonical changes.

divided with none of the most-mentioned names either eligible to serve or capable of securing a two-thirds majority to become Archbishop. That year, Bishop **Foley Beach** of the Anglican Diocese of the South was selected as a compromise candidate.

In 2024, the process appears to have been relatively smooth, with Wood (whose name had not been publicly circulated) selected on the second day. In a final vote held after it was clear Wood had

Wood’s Diocese of the Carolinas, formed in 2012, has not only grown to be among the largest in the ACNA (it reported a 20 percent attendance growth in 2023), it has done so through church planting. In a Q&A session with Assembly delegates following his election by the bishops’ conclave, Wood noted that only four churches in his diocese had a prior identity within the Episcopal Church. The other 36 were launched as church plants, several of which are now large, established parishes that have birthed mission congregations of their own.

Wood has not only espoused emphasis on evangelism and church planting, his diocese has created structures and systems that advance and support new church starts.

“Once he saves us, he sends us,” Wood and his wife **Jacqui** shared with Assembly delegates. The new Archbishop shared that reaching the more than 130 million people in North America who have never heard the Gospel is among those things that most animate him: “I really like and spend a lot of time with non-Christians.”

‘A Different Denomination’

The new Archbishop assumes office with more power than his predecessor, as Assembly delegates voted to ratify canonical changes substantially accelerating the process for inhibiting a bishop. During Beach’s time in office, two ACNA bishops were deposed from ministry, with their inhibition following a long process of presentment. An ACNA bishop can

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Participants at the 2024 Anglican Church in North America Provincial Assembly gather at a prayer service on the campus of St. Vincent College in Latrobe, PA on Tuesday, June 25, 2024 (Photo: Heidi Reichert / Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic)

Each of ACNA’s 29 dioceses sends a four-person delegation to Council, while Assembly delegations are proportionately based upon the attendance of the diocese.

New Archbishop

The June 22 election of Wood—a South Carolina senior pastor (known as a rector in Anglican parlance) and diocesan bishop—after a two day bishops’ conclave is significant. In 2014, bishops were deeply

secured the necessary support to become Archbishop, Wood received unanimous support from all diocesan bishops. This cannot be waived off as a mere courtesy vote: It communicated that every diocesan found Wood to be acceptable to serve as the top bishop in the ACNA. That starkly contradicted social media catastrophists who fretted that the 15-year-old denomination was about to fly apart amidst long-standing disagreement.



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



Following the consecration of deaconesses on April 29, United Methodist Bishops Robin Dease (left), Karen Oliveto, and Kennetha Bigham-Tsai lead singing of participants in the United Methodist General Conference in Charlotte, N.C. (Photo: Paul Jeffrey, UM News)

Kingdom, ‘Kin-dom’ and the Supreme Power of Christ

by Wyatt Flicker

One of the most bizarre turns of phrase to emerge from contemporary liberal churches is the “kin-dom of God.” Kin-dom is intended to remove the patriarchal, hierarchical, and allegedly oppressive connotations of kingdom, instead emphasizing the communal and egalitarian nature of Christ’s dominion.

Initially fringe academic theology, the term is a favorite of ecclesial liberals, notably featured in United Methodist Bishop **Karen Oliveto’s** General Conference sermon.

This disfigurement of traditional Christian language is familiar to those observing mainline churches, where “the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer” often replaces the historic Trinity. Much like the pseudo-modalism of the sanitized Trinity, preaching the “kindom” of God sacrifices Christian orthodoxy for a relativistic and deracinated faith, prioritizing a vague sense of inclusiveness over authentic Christianity. If contemporary Christians are irreconcilably uncomfortable with God’s kingdom, there is, perhaps, a more faithful term for Christ’s reign, albeit one progressives are unlikely to accept (more on that later).

The idea of the “kin-dom of God” originated with the Catholic modernist

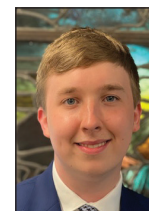
theologian **Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz**, who, beyond agitating for women’s ordination and same-sex marriage, sought to expand the scope of liberation theology to include Latinas. Liberation theology, initially intended to Christianize Marxism, faced criticism for ignoring women, homosexuals, and racial minorities.

In 1996, Isasi-Diaz published *Mujerista Theology*, a text that remains influential amongst liberation theologians today, arguing against a bibliocentric worldview and for a framework centered on worldly struggle. In this work, Isasi-Diaz also introduced the idea of Christ’s kin-dom as an alternative to his kingdom, which she attributes to a Franciscan nun, **Georgene Wilson**, a self-styled “spirit guide.” This phrase has since gained particular prominence among Christian feminists, who dispute the maleness of kingly imagery and prefer the vague familial connotations of “kin.” Proponents of this view, much in line with similar discussions regarding homosexuality or sin, note that “kingdom” is merely one of many potential translations of the original Greek term, *basileia*. A quick overview of the history of English Bible translations reveals they’re not entirely wrong; *basileia* has been rendered as “dominion,” “commonwealth,” or “rule.” Notably, never as “kin-dom.”

If the language of the kingdom of God is deemed too outdated for modern Christian churches, perhaps a new translation of *basileia* is appropriate. After all, the idea of a kingdom conjures up images of medieval castles and fantasy novels, not quite the kingdom Christ spoke of. Instead, why not use a more inclusive and historically accurate term to describe Christ’s rule: *empire*. “Empire” squares well with the Greek; the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire were called *basileiai* during Jesus’ life. Koine Greek lacked a distinction between kingdoms and empires, so both translations are fair.

If a kingdom is too stodgy and exclusionary, an empire is, definitionally, inclusive, reconciling multiple peoples and cultures to one political authority. This seems an apt model for Christ’s social kingship, or emperorship, in which there is neither Greek nor Jew.

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Anglicans Moving Forward in the Worship of God

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now be inhibited from ministry quickly by the Archbishop following review and consent of a seated panel of three diocesan bishops.

The changes are significant for a denomination that has been cautious about investing power in centralized authority. The ACNA operated functionally as a loose confederation of jurisdictions for its early history.

“We are a different denomination today,” ACNA Governance Task Force Vice-Chair Fr. **Andrew Rowell** explained, noting now-ratified canons requiring diocesan bishops to develop processes and procedures to report misconduct by priests, deacons, and even laity.

Wood inherits leadership of a denomination still deeply divided over the ordination of women (most ACNA dioceses do not ordain women to the priesthood, but nearly all of the largest, including the Diocese of the Carolinas, do). The ACNA also has overlapping diocesan lines, with some

regions, such as South Carolina, having churches from up to five different dioceses.

Achievements

In departing office, Beach, who will continue after sabbatical as a diocesan bishop, was overwhelmingly positive, noting that the denomination is seeing one church planted every two weeks. He pointed to publication of ACNA’s 2019 Prayer Book for worship, the Anglican Catechism, for being “the first that we know of that is designed to meet people in a post-Christian or non-Christian culture,” and financial support for the denomination as key achievements for the church during his period of leadership.

“God has been blessing the work of our hands,” Beach told Assembly delegates. “The Lord has been with the ACNA despite challenges from the secular culture, the world, and even within the church.”

Beach stated that the denomination has tried to remain focused on issues “directly related to our life in the ACNA”

and that, “We are about leading people into this transforming relationship, let us not forget this.”

The outgoing Archbishop in his address before the Assembly identified numerous challenges, among them those “on jihad” seeking forcible conversion to Islam, as well as an alarming increase in hatred against Jews.

“Any way you look at it, our world is on fire with evil, and yet the Church is moving forward despite all of this,” Beach summarized.

Signs of that movement include Anglicans now being among the larger chaplain corps in the U.S. military (the ACNA endorses nearly 300, far surpassing the Episcopal Church) as well as having more ethnically diverse congregations.

“I do not find country club congregations or chaplaincies to the elite,” Beach reported, listing Chinese, Nigerian, Karen, Ugandan, Persian, Kenyan, Mexican and Indian congregations. “Our people are serious about their relationship with Jesus Christ and sharing the message with a hurting and suffering world in which we live.”

“We are not perfect by any means, but we are moving forward in the worship of God, evangelism, and discipleship.” ✝

Kingdom, ‘Kin-dom’ and the Supreme Power of Christ

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For liberation theologians, who seek to contrast Christ’s rule with contemporary political authorities, the Empire of God contrasts nicely with the Empire of Caesar. The Empire of God also has no limits, surpassing the parochial connotations of the kingdom. Thus, for contemporary theologians, “empire” may offer a better alternative to the allegedly dated “kingdom” and clunky “kin-dom.”

Liberal clerics will, predictably, not be referring to God’s dominion as his “empire” anytime soon because the issue is not terminology. Substituting “kin-dom” for “kingdom” is not done out of a desire to grow closer to Christ and his Word but to twist the Word to satisfy

contemporary mores. In a decade, we may see “kin-dom” dismissed as too heteronormative and insufficiently inclusive of diverse family structures, replaced with an even more contrived term. No one will mourn its departure.

Traditional Christians will be vindicated, and ecclesiastical progressives will have moved on, straying further from the language granted to us by our forefathers, just as they have with past trends. “Empire” or “kingdom,” our words matter as they bear witness to Christ’s revelation.

Christianity has always been clear: Christ is the master of the universe and the Lord of the kingdom we are called to

serve. “Kin-dom,” or whatever will inevitably succeed it, describes a fundamentally different Gospel, one where Jesus is a member of a formless community lacking hierarchy, one that dethrones Christ in favor of anthropocentric appeals to “lived experience.” This distinction is not a mere semantic debate but a reflection of a broader struggle between a faith in the ultimate power of Christ and one that seeks to reshape the divine to fit contemporary cultural preferences.

Jonathan Edwards once said that “the seeking of the kingdom of God is the chief business of the Christian life.” It is now up to the Church to decide whether or not we believe him. ✝

Hauerwas: 'Last Thing One Should Want Is a Personal Relationship with Jesus'

by Jeffrey Walton

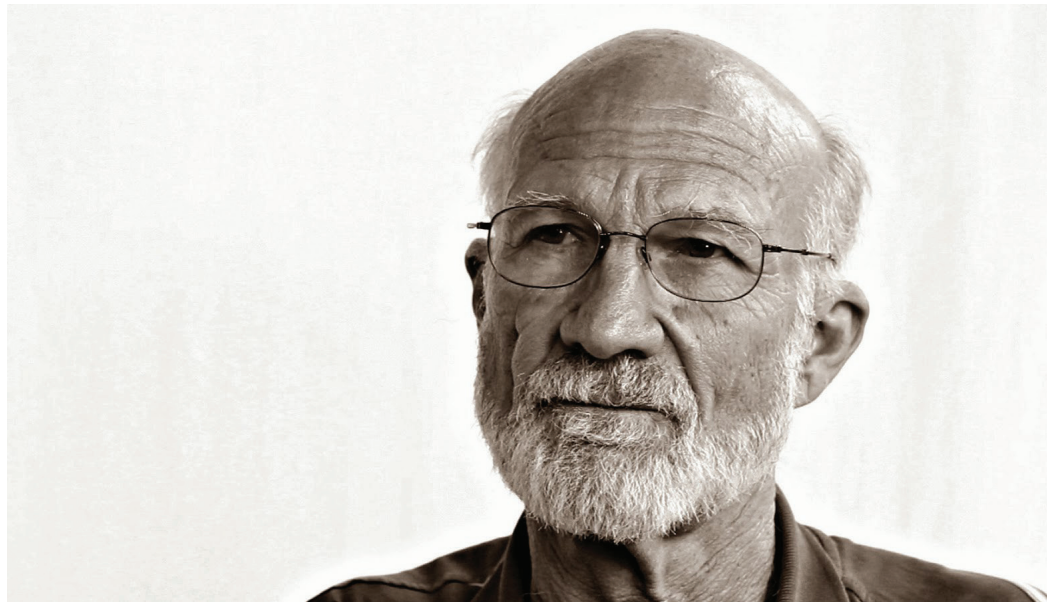
Named “The Best Theologian in America” by *Time* magazine in 2001, **Stanley Hauerwas** has an outsized influence on American Christianity, despite being an outspoken critic of America. From his faculty position at United Methodist-affiliated Duke Divinity School, Hauerwas popularized the neo-Anabaptist pacifist teachings of the less known Mennonite theologian and ethicist **John Howard Yoder**.

At Duke, Hauerwas’ conviction that nonviolence is essential to being a Christian spread not just into United Methodism and the Episcopal Church (of which he is a communicant), but also into American Evangelicalism. Famous for his contrarian disposition, Hauerwas extends this prohibition on violence not just to military action, but to any government coercion—including policing.

“I’m a person with strong convictions and, hopefully, strong arguments,” Hauerwas told *No Small Endeavor* host **Lee C. Camp** in a podcast conversation this July. The Duke academic discussed his struggle for patience with those he dislikes, his long-suffering first marriage to a spouse afflicted with mental illness, and his distance from both Evangelical and Progressive Christians.

“I’ve had to be fairly intentional about patience, in particular, patience towards people I do not like,” Hauerwas recounted. “I’ve found it very hard, for example, to work for people I do not like. That’s called the modern university [laughter] where oftentimes people that I don’t like want to take on positions that make it possible for them to tell me what to do. Learning to be patient in a way that recognizes that they may actually have something good that they represent is a big challenge for me.”

Hauerwas also addressed his concern around self-deception and his disagreement with piety, which he sees as an invitation to setting oneself up as a self-exemplar.



Stanley Hauerwas was named ‘America’s best theologian’ by TIME in 2001. (Photo: Facebook)

The Duke theologian is a curiosity for his disavowal of theological liberalism and simultaneous extreme dislike for evangelicalism. “I’m not a follower of either, because, one, I don’t think you get to make Christianity up: You receive it through the exemplification of people who live in a way that scares you.”

Hauerwas characterized America as a country that prides itself on being different. But the difference, he says, turns out to be prideful.

“I don’t see how you can say ‘Christian nation’ and at the same time say ‘Jesus is Lord.’ I try to help myself and others recognize what loaded things we say as Christians and how the implications may have remarkable outcomes in ways that Evangelicals betray,” Hauerwas reflected. “I just don’t know the Evangelical world, but what I know of it I dislike intensely. I mean, the last thing one should want is a personal relationship with Jesus—I mean, that’s letting yourself control who Jesus is.”

Hauerwas insisted that liberal Christianity is “very similar” to Evangelical Christianity.

“They both depend upon accounts of experience as an individual that I think is deeply problematic,” Hauerwas argued, identifying himself as a “post-liberal” with an emphasis on communal faith. “Protestant liberalism takes many different forms and some of it I’ve been deeply shaped by it. But, I have this mantra that ‘modernity is a time that produced people that believe they should have no story except the story they chose when they had no story.’”

Hauerwas argues that this leaves people insisting that they can make up their own mind about what they believe about Jesus.

“I think that Protestant liberalism’s presumption that you get to make up your own mind about Jesus was a deep mistake,” the theologian posited. ✚



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



Commissioners to the 51st Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly met June 10-14 in Richmond, Virginia. (Photo: Presbyterian Church in America)

The Presbyterian Church in America Moves Forward

by Rick Plasterer

The 2024 (51st) General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was held June 10-14 in Richmond, Virginia. Both the overtures (requests from lower governing bodies in the PCA for action by the General Assembly) that were submitted and reports from those who attended the GA indicate a strong and common desire to reaffirm and protect church life consistent with orthodoxy. This was evident even in some overtures that did not pass the assembly.

Same-Sex Attraction Controversy

Recent PCA General Assemblies grappled with the contentious issue of “Side B homosexuality” (self-identification as being same-sex attracted and celibate). In particular, the issue concerned whether such men were eligible for the spiritual offices of elder and deacon (ruling and teaching) in the Presbyterian polity. Overtures in 2021 and 2022 that would have added to the *Book of Common Order* amendments disqualifying men identifying as same-sex attracted for these offices

were passed by substantial majorities in their respective General Assemblies, only to fail to achieve approval by the needed two-thirds majority of presbyteries. These included Overtures 23 and 37 in 2021 and Overture 15 in 2022.

However, Overture 23, passed by the 2023 GA, was approved by the presbyteries in the 2023-2024 interim between General Assemblies (by a margin of 76-2). It requires men in the offices of elder or deacon to adhere to “chastity and sexual purity” in their “descriptions” of themselves, and in their “convictions, character, and conduct.” In the Side B homosexuality controversy, “chastity” was not really presented as an issue, as it was held that Side B involves physical chastity. The question was sexual inclination, and the organization of one’s life based on same-sex attraction, and even the celebration of such a life. Thus it involves organizing one’s life around a sinful orientation.

Commentary on a failed overture (Overture 15 from 2022) indicated that the assertion of same-sex attraction as legitimate was causing controversy and

prompting overtures. Other articles written in the early 2020s essentially said the same thing.

In the 2023 GA’s Overture 23, the term “sexual purity” seems to be a substitute term to exclude from ordination men earlier overtures referred to as “same sex attracted,” “homosexual,” or “gay Christians.” This change appears to have been sufficient to gain overwhelming approval by the presbyteries. Similar overtures advanced at the 2023 assembly (some of which did specifically refer to homosexuality) indicated that despite the failure of the 2021 and 2022 overtures to pass the presbyteries, the issue was not going away. Overture 23 received its final approval by a standing vote at this year’s assembly and is now part of the *Book of Common Order* (BCO).

Thus, the notable difference between the overtures that failed to gain two-thirds majority approval of the presbyteries and the successful 2023 Overture 23 approved this year is the absence of any explicit use of the terms “same-sex attracted,” “gay

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Christian,” “homosexual,” etc. It would seem that the sticking point was an apparent desire on the part of many not to exclude men who might experience same-sex temptation, but do not hold homosexuality as their identity, do not propose to organize life around it, and do not plan to ultimately demand celebration and accommodation as a “gay Christian.”

Other Issues Concerning Sexual Relations

The PCA ordains only men to the offices of elder and deacon, but some churches have evaded this by giving the title of “pastor” (or elder or deacon) to unordained persons. This appears to be similar to the current controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention over female clergy. Although the governing *Baptist Faith and Message* states that the office of pastor is reserved for men, and several authors of the recent (year 2000) version of document declared they meant all pastors, advocates of female clergy maintain the rule applies only to senior pastors.

Overture 26 from the 2023 PCA GA provides that only persons ordained to the offices of elder and deacon may hold the title of the office to which they were ordained. It was ratified by the needed two-thirds majority of presbyteries over the past year. Final approval by the assembly of an overture approved by presbyteries is usual, but reportedly this overture received the greatest debate at this year’s assembly. Korean PCA members objected that in Korean culture one addresses an older man as “elder,” and all Christians are addressed as “deacon” (which means servant) to emphasize that all Christians are Christ’s servants. Another objection some voiced was that their churches commonly train and commission female deacons, without ordaining them. However, Overture 26 did receive final approval by the GA, also making it part of the PCA’s BCO.

Other issues before the assembly were not necessarily dealing with sexual issues, but the possibility of sex abuse was surely a large part of the concern. In the first, Overture 17 from 2024 (originally offered as an amendment to the BCO), the GA voted instead a simple resolution

recommending background checks as policy for all churches and presbyteries. No requirement was established, as this was thought inadvisable in view of different legal requirements in different secular jurisdictions. On a second, the assembly approved an overture (Overture 26 in this year’s sequence) making any communicant member eligible to serve as counsel to an accused person in a church trial (this is already true in cases handled at the level of the General Assembly). On a third, an overture from 2023 (Overture 27), which was approved by the presbyteries, received final approval. This overture requires any confessions to be reviewed by the offended party. They may then provide their own comments about the confession before the approval of the final version of the confession by the confessor and the church court.

A last item in the area of sexuality, an overture (Overture 13) petitioning the U.S. government to protect “the lives and welfare” of minor children by refraining from the sexual destruction caused by “gender reassignment” (adoption of clothes, names, and pronouns of the opposite sex, administration of puberty blocking drugs, opposite-sex hormones, and surgery) easily passed the GA. It “humbly” petitions the government “to protect the lives and welfare of minor children from the physical, mental, and emotional harms associated with medical and surgical interventions for the purpose of gender reassignment.”

Other Action

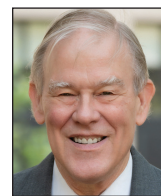
Another overture to allow atheists or persons who do not believe in a future state of rewards and punishments to testify in church courts (2024 Overture 1) was defeated. Currently such persons are not eligible to testify. It is often emphasized in the Presbyterian system that the purpose of church discipline is not primarily to achieve justice, but to reclaim sinners. State courts exist to achieve justice. In actual cases (which may well be sexual abuse cases), if an atheist doctor, psychologist, police officer, etc., needs to testify, his comments and advice can be obtained outside the court and included as thought

advisable in the testimony of an eligible witness.

Finally, the assembly dealt with the controversial book *Jesus Calling*. In this book, the late PCA missionary **Sarah Young** presents her meditation as the words of Jesus. This, it is felt, violates the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, which holds that all divine revelation is to be found in the Bible. Overture 33 presented to this year’s GA was unusual in that it came from a single individual, but the notoriety of the book likely contributed to its consideration. Ultimately, an amended version was passed that directed two committees connected with the book (Discipleship and Mission to the World) to (1) report on their involvement with the book, (2) give advice to the author, (3) determine the book’s appropriateness for Christians and the PCA in particular, and (4) recommend possible actions that the General Assembly should take in connection with the book.

Outlook

No one can know what the future holds. During a period of conflict, a denomination may feel it is imperative to address the presenting issue, and indeed it may be. The future may depend on how the issue is resolved. But resolving a problem does not guarantee peace and flourishing in the future. For the PCA, a crucial issue in the past decade has been the issue of self-identifying celibate homosexuals (although there have been other issues, such as the appropriate ministry for women in the church). The recent GA’s actions indicate that current contentious issues have been resolved in favor of biblical belief and practice. The church now has a good self-understanding. If doctrinal and moral commitments are strong in times of peace and growth, a church has the vitality it needs to meet any challenges, internal or external, in the future. ✚



Rick J. Plasterer is a staff writer for the Institute on Religion and Democracy

United Methodist Rift with the Gideons

by Wyatt Flicker

The longstanding relationship between The Gideons International and The United Methodist Church (UMC) reached a breaking point following the UMC's recent General Conference.

That conference saw the denomination abandon its commitment to traditional Christian sexual ethics, thereby destroying a century-long bond with the Gideons, who now will cease cooperation with United Methodist congregations who endorse same-sex marriage. As the UMC shifts its stance on doctrinal issues, it finds itself at odds with the Gideons and other historic partners, who remain steadfast in their adherence to biblical principles.

The Gideons International is an organization of Christian businessmen who distribute more than 70 million Bibles annually to prisons, military installations, and, most iconically, hotels. Founded in 1899, the Gideons have produced over two billion Bibles and are among the most prolific Bible distribution ministries on the planet. The Gideons also record testimonies of those who credit their salvation with chancing across a "Gideon Bible" in a time of dire need.

The relationship between the Gideons and Methodists stretches back to the beginnings of the Gideon's ministry. Since the first years of the Gideons, when the organization was small and restricted to the Midwest, Methodist churches were used to hold meetings. When **Teddy Roosevelt** was elected an honorary Gideon at the 1901 convention, he was elected at a Methodist church. Wherever the Gideons have gone, they have always had the enthusiastic support of Methodists.

This ministry is not Methodist by accident; the vigorous propagation of the Word is quintessentially Wesleyan. Where modern liberal Christians squirm

Christians. Among these requisites is the commitment to "the Biblical standard of marriage being between one biological man and one biological woman."

The Gideons International uses assent to its fundamental spiritual beliefs as a condition for collaboration in denominational ministries.

After this year's General Conference, when the UMC abandoned its commitment to Christian sexual morality, the UMC's relationship with the Gideons has been strained. Gideon Sunday has long been a target for progressives in the church, who take issue with the Gideons' commitment to biblical inerrancy and solely male membership. Women are welcome into the Gideons' Auxiliary, but the gender issue has proven a helpful wedge to justify disassociation by progressive pastors. Many more liberal jurisdictions have quietly disinvented Gideon speakers from their parishes this year, closing ranks around the gay marriage issue and distancing from organizations that hold to traditional Christian teaching on the matter.

The antipathy between the UMC and the Gideons is mutual. Currently, the Gideons have not blanketly disaffiliated from United Methodist churches due to sympathy for congregations who could not afford to exit the denomination. While adopting a case-by-case standard for continued involvement with UMC churches, they have not retreated from their firm opposition to same-sex marriage and noncelibate homosexual leadership. Collaboration with UMC churches will require



A Gideon Bible placed in a hotel bedside table
(Photo: Infobunny / Flickr)

at the Gideons' biblicism, Wesley would have delighted, labeling himself in his Journal as a "Bible-bigot." (As an etymological note, "bigot" in Wesley's time was a term of abuse for the excessively pious.) Thus, the Bible-printing mission of the Gideons is a natural complement to **John Wesley's** theological legacy.

To be a member of the Gideons, one must be an adult man and conform to a set of spiritual beliefs that are entirely uncontroversial for most Bible-believing

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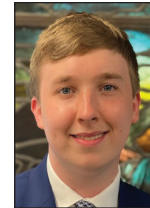
conversations with pastors to ensure that traditional sexual ethics are held. Faithful churches trapped in the UMC are, thus, still permitted to collaborate with the Gideons, conditioned on their repudiation of same-sex marriage and noncelibate LGBT clergy.

Despite the Gideons' willingness to exercise mercy towards individual congregations, as they report to Juicy Ecumenism, "most UMC churches will be ineligible moving forward from today." Given the UMC's doubling down on LGBT issues, this likely spells the end of Gideon's collaboration with the United Methodist Church writ large in the foreseeable future.

The Gideons' ministry will continue with or without the United Methodist Church. Gideon Sunday remains a tradition in Global Methodist, conservative Lutheran, Baptist, and other denominations that have maintained their commitment to historic Christian teachings.

The UMC's General Conference decisions have not only cost the denomination a quarter of its churches but also dislocate the UMC from its own traditions in real-time. For the past three years, the UMC has used #BeUMC as a slogan, but its decisions at General Conference have made the authentic practice of United Methodism, as historically conceived, nearly impossible. In the interest of

contemporary politics, the church claiming John Wesley's mantle, whose devotion to the Bible was so intense that he described himself as a "man of one book" (despite being highly educated), has now ostracized one of the largest organizations sharing God's Word. ✚



Wyatt Flicker is a summer 2024 intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy. He studies Classics, History, International Relations, and Religious Studies at the University of Delaware.

Callously Breaking Covenant

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traditionalists, people with whom they have covenanted for years.

This perhaps is the most heartbreaking aspect of this General Conference. Methodists do not just attend church together or, in popular parlance, "do life together." We covenant with God and one another. At our baptism and renewed at our confirmation, we enter into covenant, and we affirm these vows every time someone is brought into the life of the church and in services throughout the year. Nevertheless, the delegates carelessly tossed aside these covenantal vows.

In doing so, they demonstrated that they care more for the deposed monarchs of Hawaii (Queen Lili'uokalani received a formal apology for the denomination's complicity in her 1893 overthrow) than for people who have loved them and prayed for them throughout their time in the church. The 75-year-old man who taught their Sunday School class, the 85-year-old woman who helped them pour glue on to some silly craft at VBS, the now retired pastor who baptized them, the people who threw their baby showers, prayed by their side in sickness, cried with them at funerals and so many other moments—all were tossed aside. The circle simply wasn't wide enough to include them.

This Sunday, many Methodists, large

percentages of whom are elderly, will have difficult decisions to make. To lose one's church is a kind of death. It is not because of the physical building but the community of faith that exists within it and who hold it as a central part of their lives. Fellowship has always been important to United Methodists, and much fellowshiping happens within the walls of our churches. Its loss will be particularly hard on the elderly, who will be robbed of the ability to finish out their lives serving Christ in the churches to which they have dedicated so much of their lives.

Delegates to General Conference celebrated the end of disaffiliations, praising "unity" and instead, insultingly, offering a path for reaffiliation for churches that have departed. In 2019, "gracious exits" were offered for churches who could not affirm the outcome of the conference, and at that time liberal members of the church lost at conference. But in 2024, those liberals, now in the majority, denied that mercy to those who might wish to exit, and they praised themselves for denying to others the grace that was shown to them.

But we should not lose hope. God does not promise us a denomination, but He does promise to preserve His Church. The church, as C.S. Lewis described it,

is "spread out through time and space, rooted in eternity." Against this Church, Christ assures us, the "gates of hell will not prevail" (Matthew 16:18). And by His grace, a traditional and biblical expression of Wesleyanism will still be part of this Church. Through the Global Methodist Church, independent Methodist churches, and those who in the coming weeks and months make great sacrifices to leave the UMC, the Wesleyan witness will continue.

We must be like Christ, who wept when His covenant people rejected Him. By God's grace we must forgive those who have done great harm to us. We must live out our covenantal promise to pray for them—pray that their hearts are softened to the gospel, and they repent. If this happens, then someday, we may have a true unity with one another. Until then, we can take heart from the final words of Wesley himself, "The best of all is, God is with us!" ✚



Sarah Stewart is Director of Campus Outreach and Events for the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Callously Breaking Covenant: Reflections on UMC General Conference

by Sarah Stewart



Delegates, visitors and staff of the United Methodist General Conference in Charlotte, N.C., dance in the aisles to the 1970s O'Jays song "Love Train" while forming giant conga lines. (Photo: Mike DuBose/UMNS)

It was heartbreaking to be a United Methodist the week of General Conference. Among the reasons for traditional Methodists to be angry at what took place during the April 23–May 3 gathering in Charlotte, North Carolina, was the overturning of doctrine central to Methodist social witness.

Also aggravating was self-congratulatory and virtue signaling language used to masquerade deeply unchristian actions. While praising themselves for the passage of unbiblical legislation, delegates papered their actions in a veneer of love and kindness. This evil should be called out as such. It also violates the Wesleyan principle to “do no harm,” which had been bandied about in the lead-up to General Conference.

Delegates began by passing the regionalization plan, long opposed by conservative Methodists. Liberal delegates did this despite their majority making the plan unnecessary to achieve their desired changes to church teaching on sexuality. They praised themselves for “decolonizing” the church despite the objections of African churches. The sad reality is that the African church has been continually underrepresented at General Conferences. The UMC has been notorious for not helping African delegates receive necessary visas to attend Conference. This year more than 70 African delegates were unable to obtain visas. The U.S. delegates have disenfranchised the African churches’ ability to impact their fellow Methodists’ doctrinal beliefs

while praising themselves for being “de-colonialists.”

The delegates also praised the regionalization plan for allowing the UMC to remain connectional while disagreeing on doctrine. But how can we be connectional when we cannot recognize something as fundamental as one another’s marriages and ordained clergy?

Jubilant celebration of changes to the church’s stance on traditional marriage and ordination requirements was a spectacle. Delegates sang “Draw the Circle Wide.” This “circle” is apparently not wide enough to include

See ‘Callously Breaking Covenant’ on page 7



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