



faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Winter 2018

Cambodian Anglicans Chart a New Path

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The Khmer-language congregation at the Anglican Church of Christ Our Peace mixes after services on the morning of October 22, 2017, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Photo Credit: Jeff Walton / IRD). See story on pages 8–9.

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VOLUME 37 NUMBER 1



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Lay Pastor Nass Sowannia leads neighborhood children in an activity at Rokakos Church, a rural preaching station outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on October 23, 2017. (Photo Credit: Jeff Walton / IRD).

Trashing Megachurches

Trashing megachurches is often popular. According to the standard stereotype, they’re big exurban factories resembling car dealerships with giant American flags flapping over enormous parking lots, catering to rich, socially irresponsible SUV-driving Sunbelt Republicans anxious to hear superficial, self-serving health and wealth sermons from huckster preachers in flashy suits.

A recent column by Jonathan Merritt of Religion News Service cites a liberal advocacy group report asserting that, of the 100 largest congregations in America, none are LGBTQ affirming, over 90 percent have white pastors, and only one has a female pastor. Merritt calls this report “explosive” without directly condemning the churches. But many on social media have predictably issued their disapproving tut-tuts. The originating advocacy group wants to shame these churches.

Megachurches of course aren’t generated, subsidized or regulated by government fiat or any centralized authority. They’re big because they’re popular, typically founded by entrepreneurial pastors who are very talented at presenting winsome messages that broadly appeal. They are almost always Evangelical and theologically more traditional.

There are thousands of churches in America with liberal clergy. They could become megachurches if their messages and appeal were compelling to more people. But they aren’t. Growing religion, Christian or otherwise, in America or globally, now and across history, is almost always in some sense traditionalist. It challenges and demands with cohesive beliefs and practices. Where are the growing liberal churches, mosques, and temples around the world? They exist, if at all, in the minds of some Western theologians and sociologists. More permissive and theologically lax religion may sound appealing but it rarely attracts a sustained crowd, anywhere. (No, big crowds don’t equal theological truth, but chronically dying congregations are hardly validating spirituality.)

This latest slam against megachurches implies they’re racially exclusive because over 90 percent of pastors are white. Most megachurches have originated in mostly white suburbs and exurbs, but their congregations are more diverse than commonly imagined. A 2015 survey found that 10 percent of megachurches reported no racial majority, while 37 percent of megachurches reported between 20 percent and 49 percent minority presence in their majority white congregations. Megachurches also report that about 20 percent of their worshipers are between ages 18–34.

Compare those stats with “inclusive” liberal Mainline Protestant denominations, whose memberships are 88 percent to 96 percent white, excepting the American Baptist denomination, the least liberal among the seven, which is 73 percent white. Their memberships are also much older. One survey says only 12 percent of Episcopal Church members are millennials. Likely far fewer



(Photo Credit: Saddleback Church/Facebook)

are active worshipers. One survey says the average age of a megachurch worshiper is 40. For Mainline Protestants it’s close to 60.


Liberal Mainliners like to boast of LGBTQ inclusion. But I strongly conjecture the average megachurch, even though not affirming LGBTQ causes, still by virtue of its size and variety of programs has more LGBTQ people than the average mostly empty liberal church proudly waving rainbow flags to little effect.

As to female clergy, my own United Methodist denomination to which I’m committed has ordained women since the 1950s. All the liberal Mainline denominations ordain women. But the vast bulk of global Christianity doesn’t, including of course Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and most of global Protestantism. Much of global Pentecostalism does though women pastors are a small minority. Almost no other major global religions have female clerics, such as Islam, Hinduism, etc. Although I’m happy in my tradition, I’m loathe to condemn as intrinsically bigoted the vast majority with different teachings. If megachurches are chauvinistic and bigoted why do they more successfully attract women and non-whites than the ostensibly more enlightened liberal churches?

I’ve never desired to worship at a megachurch. They seem too choreographed and overwhelming and often too dependent on the pastor’s personality for my taste. Some of the stereotypes about them have grains of truth! I prefer smaller, more traditional churches. But megachurches can reach many more with the Gospel and provide a variety of ministries that my preferred churches cannot and likely never will.

So thank you, megachurches. For some of us you’re just too glitzy. But please ignore often peevish critics, and keep feeding many spiritually famished souls who otherwise might go hungry. ✝

Mark Tooley



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

Moody Bible Institute in Turmoil Following Allegations

Allegations of questionable spending practices and wavering Biblical orthodoxy have contributed to a sudden change of leadership at Chicago's Moody Bible Institute (MBI). President **J. Paul Nyquist** and Chief Operating Officer **Steve Mogck** both resigned January 10 and Provost Dr. **Junias Venugopal** retired, citing MBI's need for "a new season of leadership."

Hints of the college's financial problems were first visible when *Christianity Today's* **Kate Shelnuitt** reported MBI was preparing to close its Spokane campus and Pasadena satellite site and cut Chicago campus faculty in order to "preserve Moody's long-term financial wellbeing."

An open letter anonymously submitted to *The Moody Standard* in November, apparently written by faculty, detailed questionable spending and student and faculty frustrations with a non-responsive administration in the wake of nearly one-third full-time faculty cuts.

An investigation by Moody Radio host **Julie Roys** made public January 9 revealed a \$500,000 interest-only loan to Nyquist for a condominium, providing a luxury suite for *Left Behind* author and former Chairman of the Board of Trustees **Jerry Jenkins**, and a multi-million dollar new building project in the midst

of the institute's financial woes. Roys confronted MBI Board Chair **Randy Fairfax** and was abruptly dismissed from her show seemingly as a result of her reports. She was notified of her termination in an email from **Greg Thornton**, MBI senior vice president of media, and was told only that "after consulting with the Executive Committee of the Moody Board, leadership is terminating your employment." According to Roys, no reason was given.

Allegations of an unorthodox theological shift among MBI faculty and staff also raised eyebrows.

According to Roys, MBI Trustees were set to discuss a "professor who supports Planned Parenthood, liberation theology, and a host of other liberal causes"

and "professors who deny the inerrancy of Scripture."

Despite the sudden executive resignations, a statement from Fairfax, Thornton, and Interim Provost **John Jelinek** on January 23 insisted "there is no corruption, or any illegal and unethical activity taking place at Moody" and "Moody is steadfast in our wholehearted commitment to the historic, orthodox doctrines of the faith and to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Word of God."

Roys doubled down on her evidence, which she maintains confirms allegations of questionable financial practices and theological drift away from orthodoxy. Roys argued, "[A]ll is not well, and Moody's latest statement has only further muddled the waters."

Roys asserts that her investigation is about truth telling, not mudslinging. "Unity requires dealing with sin, not denying it," she writes, urging, "So please MBI leadership, own and name your mistakes. And then let's move on with a clean slate and fresh vision." ✚

Presbyterian Theologian R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) Passes

When he passed away in December at the age of 78, Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) theologian and Ligonier Ministries founder **R.C. Sproul** didn't get much ink. Even in the religious press the obituaries passed over some of his most important work.

A common charge leveled against people with religious beliefs, Sproul observed, was that their convictions were motivated solely by psychological needs. He thought this charge was worthy of a reply and in 1974 wrote *The Psychology of Atheism*.

Sproul detailed what Freud, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche thought about theism and its causes. Since there is no God, as atheists believe, why is there religion? For his part, Sproul wondered why atheists even bothered with a causal explanation for religion.

"If the atheist can live intellectually with massive causeless effect such as the material universe," Sproul wrote, "why is he constrained to provide a cause for such a small thing as religion?"

As Sproul saw it, the actual psychology of atheism is a kind of trinity. Confrontation with God can shock, and therefore involves *trauma*. In a process of *repression*, the atheist buries the knowledge of God in the subconscious. The *substitution* that follows generally produces either a militant evangelical atheism or a bogus religion, but either way it involves "the exchange of truth for a lie."

Sproul argued that the right to life, liberty, and free speech cannot emerge from the belief that nothing plus time

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DC Episcopalians Eschew Gendered Pronouns for God

Episcopal Church dioceses are passing resolutions in the lead-up to their church-wide General Convention this July. These measures confirm the denomination is headed in a further politicized and progressive direction.

It took less than an hour for Diocese of Washington convention delegates to approve legislation "On Becoming a Sanctuary Diocese: Offering Sacred Welcome to Immigrants," "On Inclusion of Transgender People," and "On the Gendered Language for God" at the Washington National Cathedral on January 27.

"On Inclusion of Transgender People" called upon the diocese to "remove all obstacles to full participation in congregational life by making all gender-specific facilities and activities fully accessible, regardless of gender identity and expression."

Resolution drafters cited Episcopal Baptismal Covenant wording—"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"—as a basis for transgender advocacy. The statement dived into intersectionality theory, charging that "the intersections of racism, sexism,

homophobia and transphobia give rise to discrimination" and "fixed boundaries of gender identity are being challenged and churches need to respond."

The rationale for "On the Gendered Language for God" related to *Book of Common Prayer* revisions that will potentially be considered by the national church:

"...utilize expansive language for God from the rich sources of feminine, masculine, and non-binary imagery for God found in Scripture and tradition and, when possible, to avoid the use of gendered pronouns for God."

Resolution drafters asserted that perception of God has changed over time: "Our current gender roles shape and limit our understanding of God. By expanding our language for God, we will expand our image of God and the nature of God. Our new *Book of Common Prayer* needs to reflect the language of the people and our society ... language

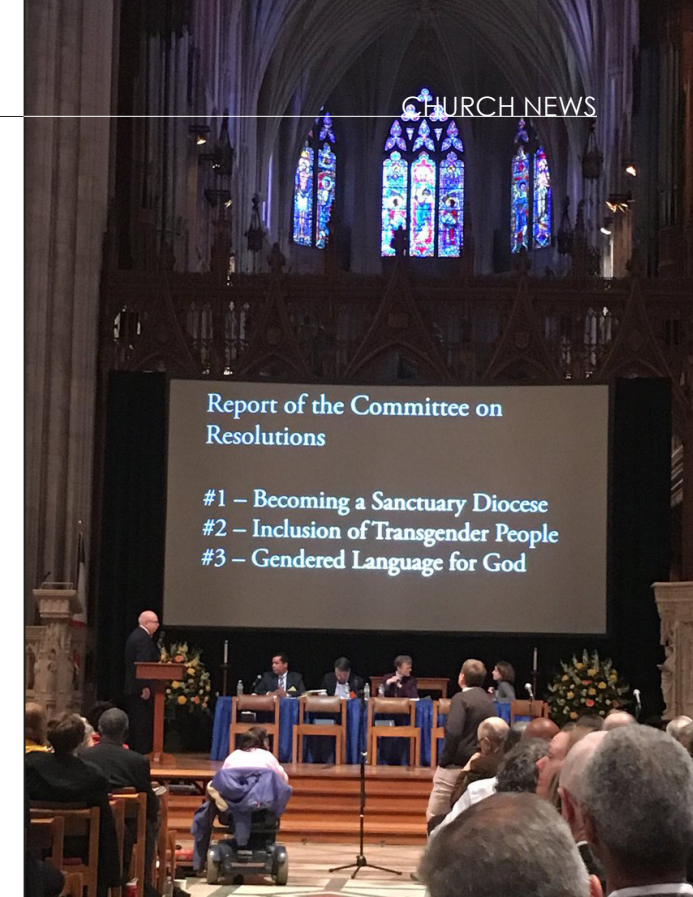
Presbyterian Theologian R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) Passes

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plus chance equals order and complexity. Sproul was not going to let that conviction go unchallenged, but he kept things in perspective.

Asked what he wanted on his tombstone, Sproul reportedly said, "I told you I was sick." ✚

Theologian R.C. Sproul
(Photo Credit: Ligonier Ministries).



The Episcopal Diocese of Washington considered three resolutions during its yearly Diocesan Convention on January 27, 2018 (Photo: Becky Zartman / Twitter).

should not be limited by gendered pronouns when avoidable."

Speaking in favor of the resolution, clergy delegate **Linda Calkins** brandished a copy of *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* and read from Genesis Chapter 17, in which God tells Abraham, "I am *El Shaddai*." Calkins asserted, "If we are going to be true to what *El Shaddai* means, it means God with breasts."

El Shaddai is traditionally translated as "God Almighty," but *The Inclusive Bible* reads "...and God said, I am the breasted one."

"I wrote a thesis on liberation and freedom and non-equality in feminist theology and existential counseling," Calkins told the convention. "Many of us are waiting and need to hear God in our language, in our words and in our pronouns."

Attendance in the diocese declined 17 percent since 2006, while baptisms and weddings declined 35 percent and 39 percent, respectively. In April, diocesan clergy will hear from an organization assisting churches "to move from a place of plateau or decline to sustained congregational health." ✚

Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois
(Photo Credit: Son of Thunder/Public domain via Wikimedia Commons).

New Anglican Leaders for South Sudan and Rwanda

Two Anglican Communion provinces located in the Global South have elected new top leaders.

On January 21, the Rt. Rev. **Justin Badi Arama** was elected to be the new Archbishop of Juba and Primate of South Sudan. The election follows Dr. **Laurent Mbanda's** January 17 selection as the next Archbishop and Primate of the Anglican Church of Rwanda.

Anglicans are experiencing significant numerical growth in both countries, with the Anglican Church of Rwanda now counting nearly one million members and the Episcopal Church of South Sudan claiming 3.5 million members. Both churches have a significant role in the Anglican realignment, entering into full communion with the Anglican Church in North America while cutting ties to the national U.S.-based Episcopal Church.

Archbishop-elect Arama succeeds the Most Reverend **Daniel Deng Bul**, who announced his retirement this past July. Arama's Diocese of Maridi is in Western Equatoria, bordering the Congo. During the war waged on the South by the Islamist government in Khartoum, Arama ministered to fellow

South Sudanese who had been displaced. His diocese has two companion dioceses: **Albany, New York**, and **Down and Dromore, Northern Ireland**.

Lt. Colonel **Jan Ransom** of the UK-based Christian ministry **Flame International** was thrilled to hear of Arama's election, whom she referred to as a "man of real integrity" and "very wise."

Flame International takes volunteers into war-torn and suffering communities to minister. The group has worked alongside Arama since 2005 when he was the first South Sudanese church leader to invite **Flame International** into the country. "He is evangelical, he stands by the Word of God, and he stands his ground," Ransom shared.

According to **Anglican Ink**, in a statement to the

media released after the election, Bishop Arama said the unification of the church in the midst of a devastated political environment will be one of his top priorities.

"As I come, my vision is that Christians in South Sudan should see themselves as brothers and sisters," Arama said in the statement.

The Most Rev. **Onesphore Rwaje**, Primate of Rwanda, turns 65 and must step down from office in June. His successor Mbanda is a former vice president of



Dr. Laurent Mbanda is interviewed by reporters following his election to be Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Rwanda (Photo Credit: A Living Text).

the Christian non-governmental organization **Compassion International**. During his enthronement as Bishop of Shyira in November 2010, Mbanda said that his focus would be to train church people holistically and spiritually to lead transformation in society.

"It is very humbling to carry this responsibility, but one I strongly believe I have been prepared for," Mbanda told the *Anglican Communion News Service* in 2010. "I have been in evangelism before, I have traveled to over 65 countries around the world. God will use the experience I have lived, learnt to serve the people." ✝

Dr. Laurent Mbanda during his enthronement ceremony as Bishop of Shyira Diocese, Rwanda in 2010. (Photo Credit: The Rwanda New Times).



Anglican Archbishop Stephen Than Mynt Oo (center) participates in the 2017 Rangoon Christmas Festival (Photo Credit: Anglican Church in Myanmar).

Christmas Comes to Rangoon

For the first time in 50 years, Christian communities in the city of Rangoon (Yangon) were [permitted to celebrate Christmas](#) in public, sources in the Anglican Church in Myanmar tell **George Conger** of *Anglican Ink*.

The military junta that ruled Myanmar (Burma) since independence began a series of democratic and economic reforms in 2010 that led to the 2015 election of democracy activist **Aung San Suu Kyi**. The junta had forbidden public

Christian festivals and limited Christian worship to the interiors of churches. Burma's population of 51.4 million is predominantly Buddhist, with approximately 3 million Christians.

In December, Christians in Rangoon held their first Christmas festival with worship services, outdoor processions, feasts, and activities in a public area – with the permission and presence of government leaders. The proceedings began on the evening of the 23rd with worship at

Holy Trinity Methodist Church and concluded with a mass at Santa Maria Catholic Cathedral on Christmas Day.

Naw Nilar San, a Baptist, told the *Fides News Service* that "in 50 years I have never experienced this kind of Christmas feast; many Christian singers sang Christmas hymns, and Christians offered food and drink to the people of Yangon, without any discrimination, bringing everyone a greeting and a wish for peace."

"This year is very significant in the history of Burma because Christians were allowed to celebrate Christmas publicly with the people of the city," said Catholic priest **Fr. Thet Tin**. "This Christmas Festival in the city was intended to promote social cohesion, interreligious understanding and friendship among citizens."

Phyo Min Thein, Prime Minister of the Regional Government of Yangon, told church leaders that public celebrations of Christmas would be permitted in years to come. ✝

Brownback Confirmed International Religious Freedom Ambassador

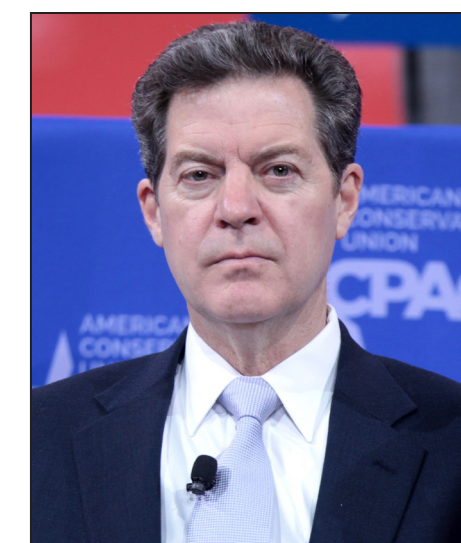
The United States Senate on January 24 voted to confirm Kansas Governor **Sam Brownback** as the U.S. State Department Religious Freedom Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Brownback now leads the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom, monitoring religious freedom abuses across the globe.

Brownback will face critical issues including implementation of provisions in The Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act that the State Department has never implemented. Among these provisions are such key issues as creating a comprehensive list of religious prisoners (persons who are detained, imprisoned, tortured, and subject to forced renunciation of faith), and requiring international religious freedom training for all Foreign Service Officers. Brownback also faces calls from Sudan human rights activists

to reverse the recent Trump Administration decision lifting some sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Sudan.

"With more countries than ever before actively engaged in systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom, Ambassador Brownback has a challenging job," commented IRD Religious Liberty Director **Faith J.H. McDonnell**. "The real test for Brownback will be to see if words are backed up with actions. It is still up to concerned citizens and human rights/religious freedom organizations to make that happen."

There is reason for optimism: in Congress, Brownback was a key defender of the persecuted and oppressed around the world. He has been a vocal advocate for international religious freedom for marginalized peoples in Sudan and for human rights in North Korea and China. ✝



Kansas Governor Sam Brownback speaks at the 2015 Conservative Political Action Conference in National Harbor, Maryland (Photo Credit: Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia Commons).

Cambodian Anglicans Chart a New Path

by Jeff Walton



The Rev. Steven Seah leads a tour of the future sanctuary of the Anglican Church of Christ Our Peace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD).

Space is tight in the Phnom Penh chapel where Cambodian Anglican Christians have gathered to worship on a Sunday morning.

“If you can’t find a seat, just stand for a few minutes and seats will open up when the children go to their Sunday school,” advises Pastor **Jesse Blaine**, a Khmer-speaking American who leads the congregation.

Circulation fans whir in the quaint rented space that offers stained glass windows and a central location in the bustling Southeast Asian city, but no air conditioning. The church has tripled in size in the past year. A missionary outpost of the worldwide Anglican Communion, it is one piece of the growing Christian community in Cambodia, where church attendees weigh the truth claims of Christianity a generation removed from the Khmer Rouge genocide.

A Rapidly Changing City

Blaine preaches on Matthew Chapter 19, his Khmer peppered with recognizable brands: B-M-W, Ferrari, and Lamborghini. The message is about the rich young ruler who is dismayed to learn that he must give up the material things he loves in order to follow Jesus. Members of the congregation nod. Blaine later shares that foreign investment—some of it legitimate, some not—has brought new wealth and materialism to Phnom Penh. The neighborhood in which the Church of Christ Our Peace (CCOP) Khmer ministers bears little resemblance to its appearance just a few short years ago. An upscale

gym near the church advertises an \$800 annual membership, a price unimaginable to most Cambodians. A new Bentley dealership has also opened.

The Khmer Rouge regime-initiated genocide, which resulted in the deaths of between one-quarter and one-third of the Cambodian population in the late 1970s, left little church presence. Christians, along with any western-educated Cambodians, were targeted by the atheist regime. The church—like the 19th-century French Gothic Roman Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh, torn down stone by stone—was nearly completely wiped out.

Ten years after the genocide ended, only a few hundred Cambodian Christians survived. Today, that number has increased to approximately 150,000 Christian believers, according to Blaine, making it one of the fastest growing Christian populations in the world. Some estimate that 2-3 percent of Cambodia’s citizens practice Christianity while approximately 97 percent of Cambodia’s population follows Theravada Buddhism.

Protestant missionary activity in Cambodia dates to at least 1923, but the church grew slowly. Anglican Church

activity began in 1993 after the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to the King of Cambodia asking permission to form a worshipping congregation in Phnom Penh. Three Anglican churches now minister in the city, with four mission extensions in the provinces.

“Serving in Cambodia is very challenging for many different reasons,” explains Blaine. “There is a very strong ‘cultural inertia’ towards retaining their culture, their historical background. For many Cambodians, it is difficult for them to consider something beyond what they’ve already known. On the flip side, it is very difficult for many young Cambodians because they want to chart a new path for themselves and the country going forward. As they do that, it’s hard for them to find role models. It’s hard for them to find ideas and pathways that they can pursue.”

Blaine explains that a successful Alpha (basic Christian beliefs) course this past autumn and a personal finance training course are pushing the church out into the community and forcing them to find ways to creatively bring people into the church.

“Our hopes were to have 8-10 people for each [Alpha] session, and we ended up averaging about 30,” Blaine shared. “It



Khmer-speaking Christians take part in an Alpha course at the Anglican Church of Christ Our Peace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Photo: Jesse Blaine/SAMS). See story on pages 8–9.

was a pure joy on our parts to welcome several participants into the family of faith and we look forward to baptizing them in February,” Blaine explained that

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the Alpha course helped the disproportionately young congregation articulate their Christian beliefs. Two more Alpha sessions are planned for 2018.

Blaine is also instructing his flock on the importance of the sacraments. The congregation has increased from having communion only once a year, to twice a year, to now monthly. Later in 2018, the congregation will have communion weekly.

Dania Prak attends the morning prayer service at CCOP. She is an English-speaking Cambodian who once lived in the struggling neighborhood adjacent to the church that is now transformed with western brands and boutique hotels catering to foreign tourists. Prak remembers that as a small child the free biscuits lured her to church. She kept returning—and created mischief during Sunday school. But the Gospel message took hold in her heart, and now she is a key lay leader in the congregation.

The Khmer congregation has outgrown its small chapel, but there will be more room when the congregation’s new building—shared with the English-speaking international congregation—is completed in mid-2018. The eight-story building replaces the congregation’s original repurposed villa and is slated to open in June. Classrooms, offices, guest apartments, and a sanctuary seating more than 300 persons will facilitate ministry. A separate large meeting space will permit the Khmer congregation to worship simultaneously with the international congregation.

In Transition

The Rev. **Gregory Whitaker**, who leads the International Congregation at the Church of Christ Our Peace, says that the congregation has found itself serving a highly transient community of educators, doctors, and non-government organization (NGO) workers.

“The challenge is not to see them as appendages or someone whom ‘oh, you’re only here a short time and it doesn’t matter what we do with you because you’ll be gone.’ If we adopt that mindset, then 70 percent of the church goes unpastored,” Whitaker explained.

On a typical Sunday, between 140-200 internationals and English-speaking

Khmer meet in an auditorium for a 90-minute liturgical worship service that also features a praise band and evangelical songs. According to Whitaker, only about five members of the congregation have an Anglican background. Families with kids, Canadians, Nigerians, and Americans are in attendance.

Anglicans are also ministering among the sizeable Khmer-language ethnic Chinese population, nearly 80,000 strong in Phnom Penh, some of whom hail from the Chinese diaspora and others from mainland China.

At Church of the Good Shepherd (COGS) in Phnom Penh, one visiting Chinese pastor is in the process of relocating after police shut down his Bible school in China. Cambodia has relatively few religious restrictions, and enterprising pastors see the growing ethnic Chinese population as receptive to the Gospel.

Congregants sing songs in Khmer at a recent Sunday service, some of which are Taiwanese compositions instead of songs translated from English. A multi-ethnic feel permeates the space; two recently arrived students from Beijing introduce themselves. The pair will learn Khmer and then teach Chinese, with the ambitious goal of learning the language in four months.

Rokakos Field Visit

Outside of the city, ministry takes place at informal rural preaching stations, including a small tidy building in Rokakos, where young children pile in for games and stories.

Ministry in Rokakos, by necessity, looks different from that in Phnom Penh. According to The Rev. **Steven Seah**, Associate Dean for Cambodia, the congregation has only three adults but dozens of children—up to 200 came on Christmas Day. The difficulty of ministering to so

many children with little adult help has led to the goal of discipling a smaller number of children who, as they grow older, can serve as leaders to educate the younger children.

Children, Seah notes, are far more receptive to the Gospel than their parents, although parents encourage them to



Vendors sell “merit birds” along the riverfront in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on October 25, 2017. The birds are believed to carry away the misdeeds of those who purchase them. Most Cambodians consider themselves practitioners of Theravada Buddhism, but various animistic practices also endure (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD).

attend church ministries because they see value in the structure and moral instruction that the children receive.

Nass Sowannia, a Khmer lay pastor at the site, says they could do a lot here if they had more help.

Church growth has also been facilitated through ministries like **Project Khmer Hope** (PKH), where vulnerable young people in Kampong Speu Province learn skills and are disciplined. Begun as a ministry of St. Andrew’s Cathedral in Singapore, PKH has identified ways at-risk

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

What's Happened Since a Texas Baptist Church Affirmed Homosexuality?

by Chelsen Vicari

In November 2016, a prominent Dallas-area Baptist church cast a 577-367 vote to extend full membership to homosexually active people, including leadership ordination and marriage officiation. “Open to all, closed to none,” is now Wilshire Baptist Church’s proud slogan.

It’s been one year since the church’s controversial vote made headlines. What’s happened at Wilshire Baptist Church since then? To find out, the Institute on Religion and Democracy conducted a phone interview with Wilshire Baptist’s Senior Pastor **George Mason**.

Some church members have left, while others have joined. But Mason insists Wilshire continues to be a fruitful and orthodox church, depending on how you define “fruitful” and “orthodox.”

Losses Versus Gains

Fallout from the vote is what Mason calls “the biggest misjudgment of my ministry.”

Clarifying, Mason explained he was shocked by “the consequence of the number of people for whom this would be a decision [that meant] they could no longer remain in the church.”

“So my miscalculation was that I knew that there would be a lot of people

who would vote ‘no’ on this. What I didn’t know was they would leave over it,” admitted Mason.

At the time of the vote in November 2016, Mason noted Wilshire claimed about 1,500 active, resident members. After the vote in favor of LGBTQ affirmation, not all of those members continued calling Wilshire their church home.

“Months later, after the bleeding had stopped, the church counted its losses: About 250 members left, taking \$700,000 of annual giving with them,” *Advocate Magazine* reported in November 2017. “Three Sunday school classes of older adults disappeared altogether.”

Mason confirmed the *Advocate*’s report of membership loss was accurate. However, he assured me new members continued to join Wilshire. Nearly 120 have joined since last November, he said later on in the interview.

“Let me say, yes we’ve lost these members. But again, we’ve gained back nearly half the ones we’ve lost. Maybe forty percent at this point,” explained Mason. “So yes, our numbers have declined in attendance. But I would remind us all numbers are declining in American Christianity all across the board. Year by year churches are all struggling with their attendance and their participation.”

For Mason, the decline in church attendance across the nation, as he notes, has to do with the growing rise of secularism in the West. Mason holds firm LGBTQ affirmation has less to do with a church’s decline.

“I think to put such a fine point on saying churches that choose to include LGBT persons fully or to affirm them are sort of the litmus test to whether you’re going to decline or you’re going to continue to grow, I don’t think that’s fair.”

Wilshire’s efforts were done in the name of inclusion and diversity. IRD wanted to know whether their efforts actually resulted in attracting more people from a variety of backgrounds. “It’s not like we’ve seen a lot more African American folk or Latinos,” began Mason. “But the question really that we were asking is does that include LGBT persons. And so we were answering that question with this vote. The answer was yes it should, and it does. And yes, we have had a number of gay Christians join the church. And even more than that worshipping with us.”

However, the majority of Wilshire’s new members are not LGBTQ people, as Mason candidly offered.

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“The majority of people—and there’s more than 100 now who have joined since the vote, maybe about 120 at this point—are not gay, but they want to be in a church that has no restrictions on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity,” said Mason. “But it’s not like Millennial gay people have joined our church in droves or anything like that. More of them have been middle age and Millennials.”

Following the Footsteps of Liberal Mainline Protestants?

A driving force behind Mason’s personal advocacy of the Church’s LGBTQ affirmation seemingly stems from his concern same-sex attracted Christians are fated to a life of singleness and celibacy in non-affirming Evangelical churches.

“It seems to me [Evangelical churches] don’t have a fruitful path for gay Christians in non-affirming churches. I think if you try to think about where that leaves the Church, it leaves the Church with many gay Christians who do not have a way to exercise their spiritual gifts on behalf of the body of Christ in a healthy, wholesome way. They are forced to be among us, if they are at all, as people who must be alone.”

Of course, there do exist affirming denominations such as the [Episcopal Church](#) or the [United Church of Christ](#).

During the interview, I pointed out Washington D.C.’s massive Mainline Protestant sanctuaries that tout rainbow flags and yet see sparse and aging Sunday morning attendance.

Is Wilshire following the declining trajectory of some Mainline denominations that have adopted revisionist sexual ethics? Mason hopes not, but he offered, “Honestly, I don’t know the answer to that question. I think we’re going to have to see.”

Questioning Orthodoxy

Most interestingly, Mason takes issue with how orthodoxy is being defined by conservative Christians.

“I often hear people, more conservative Evangelical people and Orthodox, Catholic, and whatnot, that this is a heretical point of view. For instance, it’s not part of Christian orthodoxy,” elaborated Mason. “And I’d just ask us to think about

whether historically orthodoxy includes the question of marriage or if we’ve not added that as something we’re now adding to the doctrine of God, the Nicene Creed, all of that.”

Mason suggests conservative Christians are adding new, restrictive layers on what constitutes orthodoxy.

“So often what I start reading from people who are saying this is not orthodox or it’s Christian heresy, I want to say, ‘Where in the creed are we in violation?’ And then they’ll want to say, ‘Well let’s go to the Bible, the Bible plainly says.’ Alright, the Bible is not where we talk about Christian orthodoxy,” claimed Mason.

He added, “Historically, when we’ve talked about orthodoxy we’ve talked about it in terms of our creedal tradition of what orthodoxy is, which has to do with who God is, with who is Jesus Christ, what is salvation, what is the nature of God...we have not had as part of these creeds, marriage is between a man and a woman only.”

Who Gets It Wrong?

Wilshire made headlines in 2016 when his state’s Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) swiftly severed ties with Wilshire for its departure from traditional Christian teaching on marriage.

The dissolved affiliation meant Wilshire could no longer send representatives, called “messengers,” to BGCT’s annual meetings; contribute funds to

mission projects; or have congregants participate on the convention’s leadership boards and committees.

I found 215 churches in Dallas listed as affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. They are diverse in many ways, but not in their teachings on marriage.

When asked if these pastors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds get the LGBTQ issue wrong, Mason answered, “I’m only responsible for, I think, what we do and for the decisions we make.”

Although Mason personally advocates for LGBTQ affirmation, he assured me he is not angry with conservative Christians who hold a traditional understanding of marriage. In fact, he says he held a traditional view of marriage for most of his ministry.

“God in time may prove that I was wrong about this, or that our church was wrong. I don’t know that,” concludes Mason. “But we only have this moment to be responsible for the decisions we make. And so I’m willing to live with that.” ✝



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

Cambodian Anglicans Chart a New Path

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children can achieve financial security by preparing for work in Cambodia’s growing hospitality sector.

Susan Gok served as cabin crew with Singapore Airlines for 15 years, became a Christian in 2001, and eventually came to Cambodia to serve at PKH. With a background in hotel/hospitality management, she trains the approximately 50 people ages 17-23 who cycle through PKH’s two-year program each year. English is taught the first year. First and second year students can be placed in internships with hotels,

including some of the top hotels in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh.

Many of the trainees become Christians—48 were baptized last year—and the program has grown from placing trainees from its first graduating class in 2006 in three hotels to 15 hotels today.

“[Our] ongoing prayer request is that God would raise up leaders, Cambodian leaders, from within the congregation, maybe from within Alpha groups or within the financial peace group,” Seah reports, “people who have a true heart for the Lord and heart for their country.” ✝

David Watson: United Methodist Pro-Life Witness

by Mark Tooley

At the annual service of United Methodism’s pro-life caucus on January 19, United Theological Seminary Dean **David Watson** defended the sacred humanity of all persons, including the disabled.

The service was in the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill, which for decades housed abortion rights advocacy. But the denomination’s 2016 General Conference renounced over 40 years of support for *Roe v. Wade* and the church’s membership in an interfaith abortion rights coalition.

Watson’s remarks at the January 19 morning service preceded the National March for Life nearby on the National Mall.

“All of creation belongs to God, but we human beings belong to God in a particular way,” Watson said from the pulpit of the Methodist Building’s chapel. “We are created in God’s image. All of creation is good, but only human beings bear the divine image. What does this mean, that we bear the image of God? It’s a difficult question to answer.”

Watson noted **Augustine** and **Aquinas** identified “intellect and rationality as the markers of the divine image” but doing so implies people with dementia or intellectual disabilities lack the true image of God. He warned:

The equating of humanity and intellect, however, seems to have permeated Western thinking very deeply. Perhaps that is one reason that 80-90% of pregnancies in which Down syndrome is detected are terminated, often at the urging of medical practitioners. In fact, in Iceland, people with Down syndrome have been almost entirely eliminated as a people group by means of prenatal testing and abortion. Why is this allowed? Why are we not calling this what it is: eugenics? Perhaps the reason is that people with diminished intellectual capacities are somehow

seen as “less than”—less than the rest of us, less than human.

And Watson continued:

If I might channel my inner Stanley Hauerwas for a moment, let me suggest that people with diminished intellectual capacities challenge the most cherished value of a liberal society: individual freedom. You see, if we can think, then we can do. We can achieve. We have freedom, and freedom—choice—has become a value above all other values. We want freedom to do what we want, to shape our identity and destiny. Today we have the freedom even to defy our biology, to reshape with the scalpel our appearance, even our gender. People with diminished intellectual capacities don’t fit the template of human beings as entirely free and rational subjects, and therefore they are viewed as aberrations. Theologian Hans Reinders summarizes this nicely: “The culture of modernity, according to Hauerwas, seeks to get rid of people whose very existence makes a mockery of its most cherished ideal, namely, that individual freedom defines the moral meaning of being human.”

Again citing Hans Reinders, a Dutch Christian ethicist who wrote *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2008), Watson observed:

To be created in the image of God, he says, has nothing to do with our capacities. It means that we are created to be drawn into loving relationship with God and one another. Consider the nature of the Christian God: God is three persons existing in a unity of love. God is love, and love is necessarily relational. Thus to be created in the image of God means that we are created to be in relationship with God and one another. It is not



United Theological Seminary Dean Dr. David F. Watson (Photo Credit: Seedbed / YouTube).

good that we should be alone. We are created for togetherness.

“Not all human beings can think,” Watson said. “But all human beings can be in relationship to God and other people. Not all people can love, but all people can be loved—loved uniquely by God, and loved by one another.”

Watson asked:

Did God really say that those other people, the ones who are inconvenient for us, the ones not like us, the ones we really don’t like, are created a little lower than God, and are crowned with glory and honor? Through the years we have found myriad ways to answer this question with a resounding “No!” Human beings have achieved feats of genius in our attempts to dehumanize the other, to make ourselves more and others less, and most often with tragic and lethal consequences. History is rife with examples of how we make our tribe, our race, our people, our nation somehow more human than those unlike us. We hear that the fetus is not human, as if the image of God only appears after a certain point in the pregnancy. We call people with severe brain injuries “vegetables.” We call people of other cultures savages. We all know the tragic history of the dehumanization of European Jews. Our history in this nation is rife with examples of the dehumanization of people of color. We should not be so naive as to think that the genocide against people with Down syndrome

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

Why I’m Glad Joshua Harris Is Rethinking His Dating Advice

by Chelsen Vicari

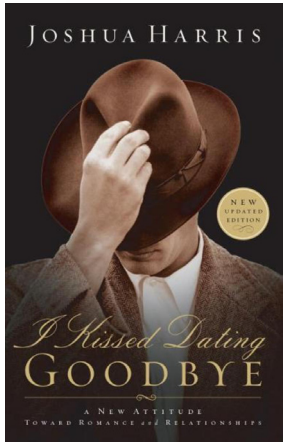
It’s been twenty years since Joshua Harris wrote *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (IKDG), a book offering Christians a new approach to dating and romance. Namely, replacing dating with friendship-based courtship. The book exploded in popularity within Evangelicalism and rapidly climbed the best-seller lists. Harris was only 21 years old when he wrote IKDG. Now the author is rethinking his dating advice.

Stories of damaging consequences experienced by many people who took IKDG to heart revealed the book’s shortfalls, according to Harris, who addressed his reevaluation during a recent [Tedx event](#).

“My eyes have really been opened,” shared Harris. “I didn’t leave room for the idea that dating could be a healthy way of learning what you’re looking for in a long-term relationship, that it could be a part of growing personally.”

I’ll admit here that I couldn’t make it past the first chapter of IKDG. That could be because I didn’t attempt to read the book until I was in my early twenties. While I respect Harris’ pushback against society’s harmful hook-up culture, IKDG’s overall concept seemed impractical to me. As a young woman working virtually non-stop for a non-profit in Washington, D.C., I just didn’t have time for an interview-style, no-strings-attached coffee meeting, which I’d argue is an unhelpful result of IKDG culture. Instead, I found intentional casual dating a healthier approach.

Please note the purpose of this post is not to analyze the merits of IKDG. Obviously, I cannot in good faith step into that discussion, not having read the book in its entirety. My only intent here is to highlight why Harris’ admission that he over-looked the benefits of dating is significant.



The best dating and romance advice I found during singlehood came from the experienced evangelical women around me. One of those mentors was (and still is) Dr. **Janice Shaw Crouse**, the author of *Marriage Matters: Perspectives on the Private and Public Importance of Marriage* and chair of the Institute on Religion and Democracy’s board of directors.

In fact, it was a tweet by Crouse that first notified me of Harris’ Tedx talk. So I asked Crouse to explain why she is grateful Harris is rethinking some of his early advice to single Christians.

“Having talked with countless young women about today’s dating culture, I know the longing they feel for the days when a guy actually called and asked for a date, arrived to pick her up and took her to a planned evening of entertainment... or just to sit, talk, get to know each other at a coffee shop,” wrote Crouse in an email. “That’s distinctly different from a guy saying he’ll meet you somewhere and he feels no responsibility for seeing that the evening is a success.”

There is a chapter in *Marriage Matters* titled, “Bring Back Dating,” explained Crouse, where she argues intentional casual dating actually builds self-confidence and social skills.

“It also helps young people discern who they are in relation to the opposite sex, helping young people hone in on those characteristics that they want in a husband or wife,” explained Crouse. “[It] teaches young people good judgment in terms of assessing character and integrity and helping young people develop the antenna that they need in order to recognize when others are not who they present themselves to be.”

She continued, “I fell in love with my husband in part because our dates were

carefully planned, very special occasions; he worked at planning them to make sure that I felt special and had a good time.”

Harris seems to agree with Crouse’s observations on the benefits of intentional casual dating for Christians, and has now apologized for the damage done in the name of IKDG. ✨



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

United Methodist Pro-Life Witness

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will not eventually extend to people with other disabilities.

And Watson further warned:

We are in rebellion, not simply against our creator, but against the way in which we are created. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways. And if the church will not rise up and proclaim loudly the value of human life, the divine image within each and every person, then there is literally no hope. There is no hope for a people who don’t know who they are. There is no hope for a church that will not live into its calling.

Watson shared about his own eleven-year-old son who has Down syndrome:

I have no ambiguity about his value as a human being. He is created a little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor. He bears the divine image. He is fearfully and wonderfully made. And he is a baptized Christian. I know who he is, and I know whose he is. Much of the world does not. Much of the world would suggest that it would be better had he never been born. But they are wrong.

And Watson concluded: “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.” ✨

You Might Have Mainline Myopia If...

by John Lomperis

Among members and especially leaders of America’s mainline Protestant denominations—the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, American Baptist Churches, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—there is a widespread, spiritually crippling condition known as “mainline myopia.” This involves having a very narrow conception of Christian faith and the body of Christ while uncritically accepting major biases and blind spots of this shrinking minority of American Protestantism.

You might have a case of mainline myopia if you are a member of one of these denominations *and* have one or more of these symptoms:

1. You use a phrase like “all the major denominations” or “the churches in America” and do not mean to include any beyond those identified above.
2. You use dismissive classifications such as “VERY conservative,” “ultra right-wing,” “extreme,” and/or “fundamentalist” to describe the renewal movement(s) within your denomination, or institutions like Fuller Seminary or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.
3. You are significantly more theologically liberal than any of the folk listed in the previous item, and yet think of or call yourself a “centrist.”
4. You have never heard of an actual case within the last couple of decades, not even to friends of friends, of a lay member of a local congregation facing formal church discipline.
5. You use “the young people” to refer to those in your church younger than 60.
6. You have ever excused your congregation’s or denomination’s decline with the (absolutely false) claim that, “Well, all churches are declining in America.”

7. You think it is obvious that values such as compassion for the poor **automatically and necessarily** involve strong support for an expanded federal welfare state, more progressive taxation, and liberal Democratic politicians. And you do not readily admit that this involves any partisan or left-of-center ideological biases on your part, but insist that this is a very simple and undebatable matter of being faithful to the Gospel.

8. You assume without any evidence that someone in a high position in your particular denomination’s hierarchy, such as a bishop or a denominational agency staffer, is automatically a spiritually mature disciple of Jesus Christ.

9. Your idea of Christian ecumenism is largely limited to (1) working with members of other mainline denominations on feel-good secular social causes and/or (2) sitting around sharing disdain for traditional evangelicals and Catholics with nominal Methodists who don’t really follow John Wesley’s theology, nominal Lutherans who don’t really follow Martin Luther’s theology, and nominal Presbyterians who don’t really follow John Calvin’s theology.

10. You would be more shocked if a leader of your denomination declared that he did not support ordination of women than if he refused to unambiguously affirm the historic, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

11. After reading the previous item, you are more concerned about whether John Lomperis supports women’s ordination (for the record, I do) than about removing the resurrection-deniers from denominational leadership.

12. You are utterly unfamiliar with complementarian vs. egalitarian, cessationist vs. charismatic, or pre-trib vs. post-trib debates. (Bonus point if you are clueless about any of those terms!)

13. You are unaware of how much of the body of Christ in this country views

your denomination as not merely having different opinions, but as apostate.

14. You cannot remember the last time you seriously, non-jokingly called something “heretical.” You don’t use such antique language.

15. You consider approval of homosexual practices as the sort of matter on which Christians are very divided, with little appreciation of how marginal the support for revisionist agendas is among the body of Christ as a whole.

16. You think that the use of male-gender pronouns for God is one of the major reasons churches fail to attract more people.

17. You assume that New Testament warnings against individuals **within** the church who are false teachers and/or seek to use religion for their own financial gain could never apply to any leaders within your denomination’s hierarchy.

18. You think it is unusual or extreme for a non-ordained Christian to have actually read the entire Bible.

19. You do not think it’s odd when leaders in your church speak as if those you should seek to draw in are limited to religious “nones”—to the implied exclusion of atheists, adherents of other religions, and merely nominal Christians, who should be left in peace.

20. You have never heard a sermon on biblical passages other than Matthew 7:1a (“Do not judge...”), 1 John 4:8b (“...because God is love”), and Micah 6:8b (“...what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”). ✚



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U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivers remarks on the 2016 International Religious Freedom Annual Report, at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., on August 15, 2017 (Photo Credit: State Department / Public Domain).

Dishonor Roll: State Department Lists Countries of Particular Concern

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

They were late out of the starting gate, missing the deadline in November 2017 for naming the top violators of religious freedom. But on January 4, 2018, the U.S. State Department announced that on December 22, 2017, Secretary of State **Rex Tillerson** made the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) designations. In spite of having some sanctions lifted, thanks to a massive and expensive public relations effort directed by international law firm Squire Patton Boggs, the genocidal regime of Sudan made the list, as it has done since the first time CPCs were designated.

According to the State Department press release, Secretary Tillerson re-designated the following as CPCs: Myanmar (Burma), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. He also placed **Pakistan** on a Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. There are definitely other countries that should be on this list, but it is a good start.

The annual designation of “Countries of Particular Concern” is one of the valuable provisions of the **International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)**, signed into law in 1998. IRFA was a watershed for U.S. foreign policy, officially incorporating concern for global religious freedom within U.S. diplomacy—and IRD was proud to play a part in its creation. In IRFA the Secretary of State annually designates as CPCs governments that have

“actively engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

The State Department is mandated by this law to designate CPCs no later than 90 days after it releases its annual **International Religious Freedom Report** (another legacy of IRFA). The **Special Watch List** is a new provision, created by the **Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016**.

The State Department’s press release explains:

The protection of religious freedom is vital to peace, stability, and prosperity. These designations are aimed at improving the respect for religious freedom in these countries. We recognize that several designated countries are working to improve their respect for religious freedom; we welcome these initiatives and look forward to continued dialogue. The United States remains committed to working with governments, civil society organizations, and religious leaders to advance religious freedom around the world.

It is only right and just that in spite of the U.S. decision to permanently lift certain sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Sudan that were lifted conditionally by President Obama, the notorious jihadist state of Sudan remains a Country of Particular Concern.

There’s no doubt that **Sudan fits the bill**. It “actively” engages in “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.” In Sudan, religious freedom and secular democracy would promote peace, stability, and prosperity—not only for the marginalized and oppressed people within the country, but throughout the region. It is encouraging that the State Department did not allow Sudan’s favorable, sanction-lifted condition to blind it to the regime’s persecution of religious minorities. But the Trump Administration should be aware that certain entrenched elements in the State Department still view the aspiring Caliphate-builders through rose-colored glasses. They underestimate Sudan’s ongoing role in global jihad and its inhuman treatment of Sudan’s indigenous black African ethnic groups.

There’s also no doubt that Pakistan belongs on the violators of religious freedom Special Watch List ... or even the CPC. Many members of Congress and human rights groups do not believe the State Department has gone far enough in its assessment of Pakistan. They are not sure that being on the Special Watch List is enough to pressure the Pakistani government to make more serious efforts to rid the country of its **egregious blasphemy laws**. Pakistan has tolerated the **brutal actions of Islamic extremists** against **religious minorities** for far too long. And much of the country, including Karachi, is hosting the Taliban. This compounds the misery for Christians and other religious minorities.

In any case, as with all previous administrations since the passage of the IRFA, the real test will be whether the State Department backs up these designations with **actions**. Concerned citizens and human rights/religious freedom organizations must help make that happen. ✚



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IRD Diary: Why I Left a Non-Denominational Church for the SBC

by Brady Weller

My family has attended our area's most well-known non-denominational church for over 20 years. I would generally describe the feel of my childhood church as somewhere between Baptist and Presbyterian, which seems like an attractive theological flavor for many church-going millennials. Alongside today's young, restless, and reformed movement is a subculture of non-denominational churches accommodating the needs of theologically curious and culturally aware millennials who desire real community, and who are dissatisfied by the religious rhythms of their youth.

When I went to college, the first church I attended was a small multi-ethnic church plant affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). There I saw Asian-American students from neighboring schools, white and black families from the local community, and a Korean-American pastor. This community is very different than the >95% white congregation that I grew up in and more committed to understanding the church's place in a changing society.

Both the multi-ethnic SBC church and the independent church of my youth are growing exponentially. They have healthy leadership structures, a diverse age demographic, large children's ministries, and share the gospel weekly. Does it matter if your church is affiliated with a denomination? I think so. Let me share two primary reasons why I am leaving non-denominational churches behind and committing to the SBC.

First, I left the non-denominational church for the deep roots that life in the SBC provides. I am eager to learn how my faith applies to the world around me, like many young Christians who recognize that it is becoming ever more difficult to find Christian influences

on secular culture, or traditional Christian values being welcomed into the public square. For me, seeing a collection of young leaders who are affiliated with and committed to the historic denominations, while simultaneously upholding a call to engage the culture and make disciples, created a desire to see Christ grow more and more central in my life.

Within the SBC, I find that the current approach to church life and Christian witness being promoted by our leaders

I love that our current leaders are bold in the face of cultural opposition, and I like that we collaborate well with other denominations and communities that share the broader expressions of our faith.

is both refreshing and motivating. Men like **Al Mohler** at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and **Bruce Ashford** at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary give me hope that the next generation will be well equipped to speak, write, and teach for the glory of God and the edification of the church. These are men, among other men and women, whom I trust to direct the church toward radical discipleship and distinctly Christian moral and ethical worldviews.

The second, and perhaps more universal, reason that I decided to commit to growing and leading within the Southern Baptist Convention is because of the historic theological and philosophical traditions that inform modern church life as part of an established denomination. I appreciate that the decisions our local church leaders make are not only bound to the accountability of the other elders, deacons, and church members, but also to the historic confessions, statements, affirmations, and denials that have shaped SBC life for years.

I want to be part of a community of believers that celebrates leaders who conserve what is necessary while working to understand how the church is meant to continually adapt and grow in the face of cultural ostracization. Now, as I become an increasingly more informed and theologically aware member of my church, I want to know that my local church leaders can be held accountable in some way to the confessions that our other 47,000+ Southern Baptist churches have affirmed and upheld for generations.

Notice that I haven't proclaimed the SBC as the nation's only right and true denomination, nor have I announced the supremacy of my current multi-ethnic church over the homogeneous church of my youth. What I want to emphasize is that the expressions of Christianity in America take on many forms, and at times emphasize different aspects of the faith. The SBC is one expression of Christianity that I have grown to appreciate and resonate with. I love that our current leaders are bold in the face of cultural opposition, and I like that we collaborate well with other denominations and communities that share the broader expressions of our faith. I am grateful for the growth that I had during my time in an independent Bible church, but I've chosen a wider allegiance to a larger body of believers that will endure wherever life takes me. ✝



Brady Weller is a former policy intern at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He studies rhetoric and philosophy at Loyola University

Maryland and is the president of the campus chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA.



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