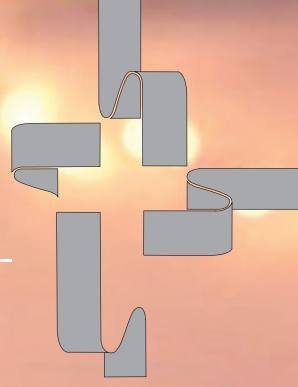


faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Winter 2022



'Pajama Boy' Intellectuals and the Future of the American Clergy

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Diana Butler Bass (above left) had concerns about possible Anglican roots of Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin (right). See page 11. (Bass Photo: SLOWKING / Wikimedia Commons GFDL v1.2; Youngkin Photo: Kate Magee Joyce / flickr2commons cc-by-sa-2.0)

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Cover: "Pajama Boy" is a 2013 photograph posted by Organizing for Action that was mocked and ridiculed across social media for encouraging family Christmas conversations in support of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). (Photo: Ethan Krupp / Organizing for Action)

Vulgarly Reawakening America

San Antonio's Cornerstone Church was roundly denounced on social media this autumn as it hosted a November 11–13 event in which the sanctuary crowd chanted “Let’s Go Brandon!,” a euphemism for f—k the President. Retired General **Michael Flynn** also declared at the event that America should have “one religion under God” and “we should have one church under God.”

These events occurred not during worship at Cornerstone Church but during a Thursday–Friday conference there for the “Reawaken America Tour,” which specializes in conspiracy and grievance advocacy. Flynn seems to be the organizing name behind the event. Longtime Cornerstone Lead Pastor and prominent Christian Zionist **Matt Hagee** welcomed and briefly spoke to the crowd, but later issued an apology that the organization was not “appropriately vetted” and promised in the future to “ensure that organizations using our facility are an appropriate reflection of our mission and vision.”

Denunciations of the video clips have deplored the Christian Nationalism of the conference and its host church. Perhaps a better term for it is populist nativist folk religion. Several clergy are involved with the “Reawaken America Tour,” but the tour does not claim to be Christian per se.

Critics have focused on Flynn’s “one religion” as backing for a state church or overturning religious freedom in America. Flynn’s relatively brief remarks are rather rambling and almost incoherent. It’s doubtful he had any clear theological and political message other than a very esoteric view of God and country. To ascribe his comments to civil religion, which is a venerated tradition, or describe them as Christian Nationalism is to credit more content and purpose than they likely deserved.

As to the “Let’s Go Brandon” chant, it syncs with the rally tour’s chief theme of resentment and rage. Obviously chanting an obscene epithet is inappropriate in a church, and should be inappropriate for Christians or decent people anywhere. A sanctuary should be a place for prayerful intercession, not curses.

Critics denounced the rally as uniquely idolatrous and horrific. Many if not most comments assumed or implied the rally was itself a church gathering. Some even assumed Hagee was leading the vulgar chant. Actually it seems to be tour organizer **Clay Clark**, a self-identified entrepreneur podcaster. Given the politics and history of Cornerstone, presumably it was picked

because it was deemed supportive. Dallas and Phoenix rallies also are meeting in churches. An Oregon rally will be at a civic center.

Cornerstone and its pastor quickly disassociated themselves from The Reawaken America Tour and its vulgarity in their sanctuary, with Hagee issuing a November 18 statement saying “I deeply regret, and ask forgiveness, for what took place in the Cornerstone sanctuary as a result of my oversight.” Meanwhile, some online critics are demanding the church’s tax exempt status be revoked, as though this event were uniquely deplorable.

Across 30 years I’ve personally attended many extremist leftwing political events directly hosted by churches and denominations. There’s nothing exceptional about unwise and intemperate religious sponsored political conferences and rallies. The Reawaken America Tour seems to have filled the sanctuary with many hundreds and perhaps several thousand people, so it attracted more than any of the leftist church events I’ve attended. The rightist folk religion to which this rally appealed has a wider popular appeal and more significant political implications than its leftist equivalent, so it gets much more attention. The Christian Nationalism ascribed to it is widely attributed to American Evangelicalism. Flynn comes from a

Roman Catholic background. The churches hosting the tour, and the clergy speaking at it, are non-denominational. Arguably they are disconnected from historic Protestant teachings about political theology.

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A poster promotes Clay Clark’s “Reawaken America Tour” conference at San Antonio’s Cornerstone Church. (Image: Charisma Media)

Mark Tooley



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

LGBTQ Concerns Prompt ELCA Lutheran Synod Move from Messiah University

A regional body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is relocating a major gathering from the campus of an evangelical Christian university based upon LGBT objections.

“The Synod Council voted not to hold our assembly at Messiah University, due to a conflict between that institution’s recent public controversy regarding LGBTQIA+ students and the Lower Susquehanna Synod’s status as Reconciling in Christ,” read a December 1 email from Synod Secretary **Beth A. Schlegel** to congregations and rostered ministers.

Reconciling in Christ is a program recognizing 883 LGBT-affirming Lutheran congregations and organizations. The Lower Susquehanna Synod sought a Reconciling in Christ designation in 2016.

The Synod had been scheduled to convene its annual assembly in June 2022, but the event could be postponed as an alternative location is sought. The large annual conference has been hosted on the

school’s Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, campus across many years and was last held in person in 2019.

Messiah University was founded by the Brethren in Christ Church in 1909 as Messiah Bible School. Like many colleges and universities, it hosts conferences and camps during the summer as important revenue boosters during months when most students aren’t on campus.

The University’s Sexuality and Relationships Policy affirms Christian marriage “to be the union of one man and one woman and that human sexuality should be understood within this framework.” The policy states that students are expected to refrain from “same sex sexual expression.”

Deacon **Marsha Roscoe**, Assistant to the Bishop for the Lower Susquehanna Synod, pointed to the Synod’s welcome statement which reads, “We welcome with full participation and inclusion all who are seeking God’s love and grace. We welcome all because God welcomes all, regardless of race or culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, or relationship status.”

The ELCA is the mainline Protestant Lutheran body ministering in the United States. As of 2020, the denomination’s summary of congregational statistics reported 3,142,777 baptized members. Lutheran predecessor bodies counted approximately 6 million members in 1968, dropping to 5.3 million in 1988 when the denominations merged. Across the last

reporting decade the ELCA has lost more than 1 million members or 25% of membership. This follows a 2009 Churchwide Assembly vote to open the ministry of the church to gay and lesbian pastors “living in committed relationships.”

In September the ELCA became the first mainline Protestant denomination to install a bishop who identifies as transgender.

In 2019 the ELCA Office of Research and Evaluation projected that the entire denomination will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 attending worship on an average Sunday by 2041. ✚

United Church of Christ to Sell Cleveland Headquarters

In a sign of declining staff and resources, one of the original “seven sisters” of mainline Protestantism is preparing to sell its Cleveland, Ohio, denominational headquarters.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) has been in a state of uninterrupted decline since its 1957 founding as a merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches.

The denomination relocated its nationwide organization, known as the National Setting, from New York City to Cleveland in 1990 in an effort to both

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At left: The entrance to the United Church of Christ Headquarters Building in Cleveland, Ohio (Photo: UCC)

reduce expenses and locate closer to the bulk of church membership.

The church has now listed that 120,000-square-foot building for \$7 million. Plans are in place to move staff to a single floor of an office building half a mile away.

“Making this move saves the National Setting hundreds of thousands of dollars a year by leasing one floor rather

than maintaining a nine-story building that once housed 330 employees,” UCC General Minister and President Rev. **John Dorhauer** said in an announcement. Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, the National Setting planned to redesign the space to accommodate 117 employees.

The denomination’s reach and influence have been significantly curtailed; the 802,256 person membership has rapidly shrunk in recent years. In 2016 a UCC internal report forecast a further 80 percent decline in the following 30 years,

dropping a denomination that once was a spiritual home to more than 2.1 million U.S. Christians to a predicted 200,000 members in 2045.

While the denomination traces its origins to the puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, its spiritual antecedents would likely not recognize it today; it is among the most theologically liberal church bodies.

The recent UCC General Synod that met virtually in July adopted resolutions calling upon local churches to “ritualize environmental grief,” advocate for a ban on conversion or reparative therapy, and even pandered to a fringe Hawaiian separatist organization. ✚

Alarm Bells as Episcopal Church Decline Accelerates

Episcopalians took a major hit in the year 2020, not only in attendance but also in membership and—unusually—in the pocketbook of the historically affluent denomination.

Statistics released this autumn by the Office of the General Convention show domestic membership in an uninterrupted drop of 61,243 persons to 1,576,702 (–4%) from 1,637,945, while average Sunday attendance declined 60,232 persons to 458,179 (–12%) from 518,411.

These numbers indicate a doubling in the rate of membership decline and a tripling in the rate of attendance decline over the previous year. Median Average Sunday Attendance in the denomination has dropped from 57 persons in 2016 to 50 persons in 2020. Long-term, 61% of Episcopal parishes saw their attendance decline 10% or greater in the past five years.

The statistics cover the year 2020 and are the first affected by COVID-19 restrictions, although the church only reported attendance data for the pre-pandemic period January 1 through and March 1 (missing the traditionally high-attendance periods of Christmas and Easter). Membership and giving were reported across the entire calendar year.

In a first, the church’s giving metric, known as “plate and pledge,” dropped \$59 million (–4.3%) from 1,353,835,316 to 1,294,757,071. This is noteworthy as the U.S. inflation rate was only 1.4% in 2020, easing from 2.3% in 2019; fewer Sundays to attend corresponded with fewer opportunities to give, and collection plates suffered.

In response to a newly surveyed question, 24% of Episcopal parishes reported a “very significant” negative impact of the pandemic upon their congregation’s finances, while an additional 39% reported a “somewhat significant” impact.

Many Episcopal parishes closed to in-person worship for much of the pandemic. Parts of the Episcopal Church ceased services altogether—streaming or otherwise—with parishioners directed to either a diocesan-wide virtual service or to the Washington National Cathedral.

The church’s official 2020 table of statistics includes information on baptisms, confirmations, receptions, weddings and burials. Unlike membership, attendance, and giving (three objective metrics that illustrate how the church is doing at present), weddings and baptisms provide an idea of how the church will fare in future years.

From 2019–2020, weddings across the denomination dropped from 6,484 to 3,530, down 46% (an additional 309 weddings were reported conducted online in virtual services). Children’s baptisms dropped from 19,716 to 7,286, down 67%. Adult baptisms dropped from 3,866 to 1,649, down 57%. ✚



The Rev. Randall Day, pastor at St. Mark’s-in-the-Valley Episcopal Church in Los Olivos, Calif., speaks during an outdoor Ash Wednesday service. Ashes were handed out in biodegradable cups on a tray and administered by individual members instead of church leaders under COVID-19 modifications. (Photo: Janene Scully / Santa Barbara Noozhawk)

State Department Omits Vietnam, Nigeria from Religious Freedom Watch Lists

On his first official trip to Africa in November, U.S. Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** announced those nations to be designated Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) or placed on a Special Watch List (SWL).

Nigeria and Vietnam each have well-documented religious freedom viola-

egregious violations of religious freedom. That is the reason why the Vietnam Human Rights Act is more important now than ever.”

There is evidence that State Department officials may have disregarded information provided by groups monitoring global religious freedom. In its annual report documenting persecution of Christians, watchdog group Open Doors USA rated Vietnam 19th on the list of the top 50 persecutors of Christians in 2020.

The State Department defines a CPC as a country that engages in serious violations of International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)-defined offenses, including torture, degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty or the security of persons. Nations placed on the

SWL tolerate serious violations of religious freedom.

The State Department and USCIRF do not agree on which countries were designated as a CPC or were placed on the SWL. Vietnam was delisted by the State Department, while USCIRF recommended that the Southeast Asian country be listed as a CPC.

One concern documented COVID-19 as an excuse to crack down on churches. Two Ho Chi Minh City area pastors, the Rev. **Vo Xuan Loan** and her husband the Rev. **Phuong Van Tan** of the Revival Ekkelesia Mission Church, were questioned by

police in October after accusations were made that the church was responsible for an outbreak.

The Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 3001) awaits action in the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship. Efforts are underway by religious freedom advocates to notify House members of their support for the legislation. ✚

Maenza Awarded Cedar of God Accolade

In Defense of Christians (IDC) past president Toufic Baaklini presented **Nadine Maenza**, Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), with the *Cedar of God* award at the IDC solidarity dinner this summer. Baaklini praised Maenza, elected USCIRF chair in June, as a tireless worker throughout her career for religious freedom for Christians both in the Middle East and globally.

These words are engraved on the cedar award: “With extreme gratitude for your focus on religious freedom and its vital role in combating Christian persecution around the world. We thank you for all that you have done for the protection and preservation of Christians and Christianity in the Middle East.”

Psalms 92:12, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, and grow like

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Fr. Joseph Tran Duc Ngoi recites Lenten meditations at central Vietnam's Trai Le Parish in 2016 (Photo: Fr. Anthony Le Duc / Catholic News Agency)

tions, but neither will appear on either list this year, contrary to recommendation from the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and to the chagrin of religious freedom advocates.

“Vietnam has been recommended annually as a CPC by USCIRF since 2002. So I am disappointed but not surprised by the State Department decision,” U.S.-based Vietnamese Human Rights Activist Dr. **Q. H. Tran** reacted to the delisting of Vietnam, following an official visit by Vice President **Kamala Harris** there this summer. “CPC is a valuable tool to deter



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Chair Nadine Maenza receives an award from In Defense of Christians this September in Washington, D.C. (Photo: IDC)

a cedar in Lebanon,” was also engraved on the award.

The *Cedar of God* accolade is presented by IDC annually at its national summit, which included panel discussions titled “Saving Lebanon: The Last Free Bastion of Christianity in the Middle East” and “Turkey: Ottoman Fantasies and Geo-strategic Realities,” as well as advocacy sessions with members of Congress.

In her acceptance speech, Maenza said the honor felt extra special as she had visited Lebanon and marveled at the Cedars of God, trees that grow exclusively on Mount Lebanon, just last month.

“Washington is only as good as how it understands what is happening on the ground,” Maenza remarked in thanking IDC for the organization’s advocacy and extensive knowledge on the conditions of Christians not only in the Middle East but around the globe.

Maenza has traveled to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Thailand, Taiwan, and Uzbekistan with USCIRF delegations since first being appointed to the commission by former President Trump in 2018. She also traveled to Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Bangladesh, and northeast Syria in a

personal capacity in order to better understand religious freedom conditions there.

Maenza reminded the audience that work in the international religious freedom space is a challenge, but not to give up hope: “Lebanon is hard, Turkey is hard, but we have to keep working on it.”

Kim Jong-Un, Taliban, and Nigeria Named Worst for Christians

Human Rights watchdog International Christian Concern (ICC) unveiled its annual list of the top global persecutors of Christians at a November 16 press conference in Washington, D.C. The ICC list names the worst individual, entity, and country achieving the dubious honor of being either the top persecutors or most dangerous place to be a Christian for the year 2021.

North Korean leader **Kim Jong-Un** again claimed an infamous position as top individual persecutor, surpassing Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, Indian Prime Minister **Narendra Modi**, and Chinese Leader **Xi Jinping**.

Kim has maintained the family tradition: Since his clan’s dynasty began at the end of the Second World War, it is estimated that millions of North Korean Christians have either been imprisoned or murdered for their faith.

“Christians are in fact political prisoners,” **Jinhye Ho** testified at the ICC event of her experience

in North Korea. Ho stated that “being a Christian would determine which reeducation camp that they would be assigned to.” Current estimates place the number of Christians in the country at around 400,000 people.

Afghanistan’s Taliban regime was named as the worst entity persecuting

Earlier in the evening, Baaklini thanked the Biden Administration for adopting policies IDC advocated for: recognizing the Armenian Genocide and announcing \$100 million in additional aid to Lebanon after last year’s catastrophic port of Beirut explosion. ✚

Christians, surpassing problematic groups including the Allied Democratic Forces insurgency in Congo and perennial attackers Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Grey Wolves of Turkey, and Somalia’s Al-Shabaab.

The Taliban, an Islamist “student movement,” returned to power after a chaotic U.S. evacuation earlier this summer and bodes poorly for Afghan Christians.

Taliban rulers have improved records captured from the toppled Afghan republic that potentially expose Christian

believers’ identities. Before the Taliban regained power there were an estimated 10,000 Christians in Afghanistan. Almost all are converts from Islam, a crime punishable by death.

For nearly two decades jihadists have operated in Nigeria. Islamist militant groups are present in neighboring northern Cameroon, Niger and Chad, but ICC ranks the West African country of Nigeria, where Boko Haram is active in the northeast and Fulani tribesmen stage attacks against Christians in the

country’s middle belt, as the worst in which to be a Christian.

Nigerian military and police do not engage insurgents unless attacked themselves by militants. Christians are left unprotected to suffer for their faith, where more than 50,000 have perished across the past two decades. ✚



North Korean Official Kim Jong Un pictured on June 30, 2019 at the Korean Demilitarized Zone. (Photo: Shealah Craighead / White House)

'Pajama Boy' Intellectuals and the Future of the American Clergy

by Peter Burns and Matias Perttula

Global pandemic, racial tension, and a polarizing presidency put the United States through its most significant stress test in 2020 since the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Throughout these crises we have had a growing concern about the rising class of young Christian thought leaders, clergy, and theologians in the United States. Their writings and conversations have focused more and more on current hot topics. In many cases they seem to be bringing their substantial intellectual firepower to bear against those on the radical fringes of public discourse whom they find understandably distasteful. We wonder what the underlying motivation is for this discourse. We fear that it is a desire to be liked—to be seen as acceptable to mainstream culture, or “polite society,” or in certain cases by a populist base.

Throughout history, and certainly in U.S. history, the church at its best has been a prophetic voice for the dignity of all people as bearers of God’s image. The anti-slavery and civil rights movements embodied this willingness of Christian leaders to boldly carry the banner of the gospel for change in the face of great opposition. Yet, in our current moment the standard bearers of the Church seem to be falling in line behind the lead of secular intellectuals and trying to reconcile the gospel with those intellectuals’ vision of human dignity.

An attempt to be acceptable is turning many rising church leaders into “pajama boy” intellectuals who seem boldest in their condemnation of the man in the pew, while that lay person is looking at the



“Pajama Boy” is a 2013 photograph posted by Organizing for Action that was mocked and ridiculed across social media for encouraging family Christmas conversations in support of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). (Photo: Ethan Krupp / Organizing for Action)

world with increasing confusion and fear. A gospel-centered message should instead give our rising leaders an unparalleled strength to face our culture and speak the truth knowing that the only approval they need comes from God, not humankind. These leaders should have the humility to know that God is the arbiter of all truth so they do not have to be; and that they are here to guide his bride to the work that we are given to do in this present age.

We do not intend to point to specific cases in this letter since we have no interest in the sorts of salacious ad hominem attacks that some have used to raise their own profile at their target’s expense. We are also going to avoid specific names because we consider many young leaders within the American church as friends, who we hold in high regard, and do not wish to point a finger at any particular individual. The spirit of these remarks is to raise a genuine debate, not pass final judgment.

This observation is largely focused on Protestant Christianity. We have not observed the same tone and movement within the Roman Catholic Church, though largely Catholicism is historically less politically charged within the United

States—with a few notable exceptions like the Pro-Life movement—as compared to the passion of Evangelicalism or the activism of mainline Protestantism. This may be because each parish priest is not responsible for taking a position on every cultural trend that is passing through his flock. Protestants, and especially evangelicals, expect and often desire their pastor and church leadership to address current issues, as they are generally the only biblical authority to which congregants look. This inherent structure tends to make Protestant churches more susceptible to being caught up in the politics of the moment. There also appears to be a shift towards traditionalism within young intellectual Catholicism in America.

The threefold stress test of COVID-19, inflamed racial tensions, and divisive domestic politics has put all our institutions under incredible strain, and we have seen many cracks appear in walls that were thought to be unbreakable. The church has been no exception, a fact which causes us significant concern. In a moment of profound fear, anger, and suffering, the Church does not seem to be focused on bringing

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to bear the powerful freedom from fear, hope for the future, and comfort in pain we have in the gospel. Much of the discourse among the rising clergy and theologians of the Church has centered around teaching the laity how they ought to think about the pandemic, racial discrimination, and the state of American politics. These could be honorable and important projects that at certain times we look to our spiritual leaders to provide. But, in the face of a season where our families and institutions are cracking under pressure, the voices of moral guidance in the Church seemed to routinely be majoring in the minors.

When the coronavirus first swept across the U.S., churches scrambled to determine what their response should be. Many went quickly to virtual services to comply with state shutdown orders. As the pandemic shutdowns quickly passed the “two weeks to slow the spread,” some churches began to wonder what the biblical response was in the face of state orders not to convene in person. The New Testament seems clearly to prescribe the gathering together of the local church as an important element of Christian life. This sparked an ecclesial debate that seemed to mirror a debate happening in the larger culture.

The larger political debate was one of individual liberty versus the power of the government to ensure safety during an emergency. The political right reacted strongly in favor of devolved power and the individual’s right to assume his own risk, while the political left pushed state emergency power in a time of crisis and for social responsibility to follow government response strategies. Largely we didn’t know the nature of the virus or what the available facts portended, so the debate was happening in the dark. For the church the debate was between maintaining the important and traditional functions of the church or remaining in a pandemic posture out of prudence and a high concern for protecting the congregation from the virus.

While many urban churches remained virtual, many rural churches, which were not under lockdown orders, continued to meet. Some theologians roundly condemned churches meeting in person. In no uncertain terms they warned against prioritizing being in person over the safety of the members. There was a distinct moral tone to the condemnation. They asserted that these churches were irresponsibly endangering people’s lives and in so doing jeopardizing their gospel directive to care for their commu-

The year 2020 presented an incredible opportunity for the Church to meet and serve people in their moment of need and vulnerability.

nities. For yuppie theologians who mostly live in urban areas these concerns were quite rational. But they rarely took into account the fact that many of the churches choosing to stay open were rural churches, often with fewer than one hundred members. Some of these congregations did not see a COVID case until midsummer 2020.

There was a striking lack of an attempt to graciously consider the different contexts of different parts of the Church, or admit the real danger that extended isolation also presented to followers of Christ. While the desire to return to in-person gatherings was often portrayed as selfish, little consideration was given to how jealously guarding one’s own health and welfare might also lead to increased selfishness.

The exception we saw, which was a bright spot, was churches that made clear

that virtual church was an imperfect measure taken temporarily in extreme circumstances, and that they would be back together the moment they could reasonably do so. Even so, in many cases it has been difficult to get members to come back, even when the vaccine became widely available. Some churches that were the most cautious about returning have struggled to get members to return at all.

Motives against returning to in-person worship often seemed like moral grandstanding from young church leaders in mediums like the press and on Twitter, where few church attendees are likely to see it. They seemed to be attempting to demonstrate to outside onlookers that they opposed the reckless, conspiratorial elements of the Church who did not take the virus seriously.

The pandemic was in full swing when vicious killings of multiple black men rocked the country and unleashed a summer of “mostly peaceful” protests. While many gatherings were not violent, all too many others were vicious and destructive. The cultural debates and conflicts that were thrown into the spotlight by these events took many forms—from

defunding the police to the mainstreaming of critical race theory, and also the coming out party for the Woke movement.

Many, perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say all, church leaders felt the

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Mark Driscoll Won't Be the Last

by Barton Gingerich

Among the top podcasts is *Christianity Today's* "Rise and Fall of Mars Hill," a series that explores the founding, dynamics, scandals, and aftermath of Mars Hill Church, founded by Pastor **Mark Driscoll** in Seattle, Washington. It joins a slew of documentaries, exposés, and historical dramas that explore cults, spiritually abusive groups, and prominent (but ultimately dysfunctional) ministries.

The American public is fascinated by the nexus of faith, narcissistic personalities, avariciousness, and power dynamics that one finds in such stories. Abusive religious groups and their scandals cannot help but create a reaction.

Many Christians have reevaluated bylaws, canons, institutional structures, rhetoric, and practices to stave off predatory personalities, insatiable egos, and very real harms inflicted upon Christ's flock. To see the Lord's sheep fleeced in the name of biblical fidelity and Christian discipleship is a particularly ugly blasphemy, with its fair share of sacrileges. Others respond by questioning ancient Christian doctrines and practices and the validity of religious communities altogether.

Nevertheless, one theme emerges from all of these reactions: a desire that such abusive projects never occur again. There is a deep aspiration to tamp down if not extinguish the popularity of religious gurus, whether they be **Rajneesh** (the **Bhagwan**) or abrasive, manipulative pastors who flee from church discipline. In fact, some seem willing to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater to achieve such ends, tossing out fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy to ensure safety and sanity.

However, Christians must not be naïve about the realities at play when it comes to spiritually abusive groups. People are attracted to strong personalities for leadership and identity, regardless of the era or the place. At the same time, we live in a time of disintegration and alienation, even while we are social creatures. We will

crave a place to belong. Similarly, relativistic views and secular discourse that stifle deep spiritual investigation and devotional meditation starve us religiously. Biblical illiteracy exacerbates lack of discernment. And, perhaps most crucially of all, what is "normal" in our society is deeply contested and, in some areas, deeply wrong. As Christian norms, values, and teachings are sidelined, mocked, and suppressed, two trends will likely arise.

First, biblically faithful Christians will seek leaders who reject errors forthrightly, boldly, and even dramatically. Brash behavior and rhetoric against the spirit of the age will draw supporters. Meanwhile, idiosyncrasies and doctrinal confusion not only go unaddressed, but are doubled down on as beneficial or even essential. To gain a loyal following, one must often be "weird." Sins of beloved leaders may receive a blind eye in the name of an institution's survival. Why kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, even when the goose is preaching poison from the pulpit, exuding a far-from-blameless character, or unjustly enriching himself?

Second, it will be harder for clergy and laity alike to vet personalities and their ministries. When the strange and immoral become normalized, the doctrinal and moral "sniff test" becomes more difficult to apply and use. When is someone being counter-culturally faithful, and when is someone leading others in a sectarian, exploitative, or heretical trajectory? Christians cannot trust the surrounding culture to form and accurately assess what is and is not acceptable in a preacher or teacher.

What is a Christian to say? What are Christians to do?

Remember that corrupt religious figures have haunted history; similarly, faithful Christians have also exerted themselves

in ministry, often at great sacrifice. To this day, there are good people fulfilling their vocations, being salt and light to the world. There is no need to reject religion altogether: it is almost assuredly impossible to do so. Also, Christians must not feed their fascination for the novel, shiny, and faddish.

Finally, ancient Christians expected pastoral leaders to be wise gatekeepers for their flocks (as outlined in the Pastoral Epistles). Pastors and well-informed laity must help congregants exercise discernment. This entails a familiarity with fields of study germane to such sober-minded religious assessments. Seminaries must double down on the unglamorous traditional subjects required for the M.Div. and equivalent degrees: thorough training in biblical languages, church history, and theology. A general knowledge of logic, philosophy, and history will also prove helpful. Unfortunately, even evangelical seminaries haven't been completely immune to fads or cutting academic corners, often pushing for fewer years of study or investing in novel counseling theories.

Even with such preparations, corrupt religious leaders will still gather followers. Certain people have the talents and desire to lead others, and, in this case, they happen to excel at leading others spiritually astray. The hope is that Christians in faithful churches won't be so easily deceived, and that they can effectively help others to avoid or escape toxic personalities and organizations for better pastures. ✝



Former Mars Hill Church pastor Mark Driscoll preaches (Photo: Acts 29 Network)



Barton J. Gingerich serves as a priest at St. Jude's Anglican Church in Richmond, Virginia, and previously served on the staff of the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Diana Butler Bass Frets Youngkin ‘Anglican Roots’ and ‘Literalist Faith’

by Jeffrey H. Walton

Election week was a challenge for Progressive Christian author and Episcopalian **Diana Butler Bass**.

“I just went to YouTube to watch a video on how to pronounce a Korean phrase and had to watch an ad for [Virginia gubernatorial candidate] **Glenn Youngkin**. He is freaking everywhere and I hate it. Hate it,” the Duke University PhD in religious studies fumed to her more than 50,000 Twitter followers as Virginia’s off-year election approached.

Youngkin went on to win election and was sworn in as Governor on January 15. Bass wrote that GOP candidate Youngkin is “creepy” and “a wolf in fleece clothing.” Maybe worst of all, she alleged: Anglicans lurk behind the curtain.

A religion scholar, Bass doesn’t offer policy critique or a direct criticism of the fleece vest-clad Republican businessman. Instead, she questions religious connections that she believes place the candidate in uncomfortable proximity to charismatic-influenced church renewal.

“I find myself with questions. Worrisome questions about Youngkin’s campaign, about how the particular practices and political twists of Holy Trinity Brompton have found their way to Virginia’s governor’s race,” Bass wrote October 29 in her subscription newsletter *The Cottage* about the large evangelical Church of England parish that Youngkin once attended while in London.

Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) is known for launching the Alpha Course, an evangelistic ministry emphasizing personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. It has spread far beyond the United Kingdom or Anglican circles. Alpha, HTB, and Vicar **Nicky Gumble** appear to be the primary points of Bass’ concern, although she also makes mention of charismatic-influenced Episcopalians in general, name-checking Truro Church of Fairfax, Virginia, and The Falls Church in the eponymous Virginia suburb.

Bass has a significant social media following in progressive Christian circles both in mainline Protestant denominations and in the Emergent Church movement. She says that Youngkin “isn’t being straightforward about his connections, his intentions, and his political agenda. Youngkin is shaped by a religion that, over the decades, has slowly and surely given its soul to Trump Republicanism,



Author and Religion Scholar Diana Butler Bass reads at Politics and Prose Books in Washington, D.C. on April 9, 2018. (Photo: SLOWKING / Wikimedia Commons GFDL v1.2)

revealing it[s] worst motives of inequality, racism, and authoritarian order.”

The former president didn’t appear in the Youngkin campaign, however, which had messaging centering upon mostly kitchen table concerns. That, Bass insists, is because the candidate has “learned to cloak whatever may be off-putting or seem extreme regarding his faith in regard to politics. He knows how to speak to the secular world and how to use power. The fleece, the smile, the genteel ‘Anglican roots,’ all serve to smooth over an exclusivist and literalist faith, right-wing political activism, and its theo-political quest

for the Kingdom of God on earth. It is Christian nationalism with a human face, and carrying a prayer book to boot.”

Youngkin’s congregation, Holy Trinity Church (HTC) in upscale suburban McLean, is independent, although—possibly uniquely for a non-denominational church—it has a vestry, was pastored for several years by Church of England clergy, and adheres to the 39 Articles of Religion. I visited on a Sunday morning and found it to be upbeat and evangelistically vibrant, consistent with the Alpha course that it is structured around. It does have Anglican roots, but doesn’t claim Anglican identity; anyone unfamiliar with Anglican Christianity wouldn’t detect those roots in an otherwise generically evangelical worship service.

Youngkin served for a time as Senior Warden at HTC. The church had the support of Holy Trinity Brompton (which is Anglican) but due to the experimental nature of the plant and its U.S. location, a decision was made to be nondenominational.

HTB in London is vibrant enough that church liberals have tried to throw up roadblocks to the church “re-seeding” old CoE parishes with young families (liberals would rather sell church buildings and have the proceeds distributed throughout a diocese).

To what extent this has any relevance on Youngkin’s governorship is unclear, but Bass herself is certain, quoting Matthew 7:15, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

If there’s anyone a liberal Episcopalian like Bass fears, it’s apparently a secret Anglican. ✚



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

Looming Catholic Civil War

by James Diddams

If you haven't heard of "post-liberalism" or "integralism" you're possibly missing out on the spiciest intellectual battle among conservatives since WWII.

Roman Catholics are particularly vexed; on one side post-liberals sound an alarm that unless aggressive, preferably revolutionary action isn't taken soon the remnants of Western Civilization will dis-



Princeton Professor Robert P. George speaks at the Ethics and Public Policy Center panel on September 22, 2021, in Washington, D.C. (Photo: YouTube screen capture)

solve. The other side could be described as "normal": Catholics who believe in the American project of liberal constitutional democracy and divided powers. They have the unenviable position of being assailed by progressives to their left, sometimes with charges of "theocracy," while resisting actual theocrats to their right.

While the ideological struggles following WWII were between liberalism and communism, after the fall of the Berlin Wall some speculated that we had arrived at the "end of history." The liberal democratic project had seemingly overcome its sole competitor in the form of Marxist-Leninist ideology; the rest of history would be simply the hegemony of liberalism gradually covering the Earth.

This confidence turned out to be entirely misplaced. Now integralists argue the power structures liberalism supplanted, particularly those of the church, must be restored. I've written several pieces dealing with integralism and post-liberalism, which have different connotations for different people.

Critics of the liberal democratic capitalist regime can seem to hold novel views upon first impression; they attack both social progressivism and unregulated markets as threats to the family and church, defying the usual left-right American political boundaries. Of course, while perhaps unusual today, these arguments were much more popular in the 19th century when political Catholicism was not yet so clearly beaten.

Though mostly confined to more academic climates, these shifts indicate a tangible change in the intellectual tenor of a new generation of Christians. Philosopher theologians **Alasdair MacIntyre**, **Stanley Hauerwas**, or **Charles Taylor** opposed secular progressivism, but are too communitarian for American conservatism's usual emphasis on individual liberty. They are also postmodern, being much more amenable to Marxism and other critical theories than average Republicans. Ironically, despite **Karl Marx's** anti-religious views, his analysis of how capitalism displaces traditional religion has proved invaluable to the post-liberals.

What are the "normal" Catholics to do? Why does so much of the conservative intellectual energy seem to be held by radicals? In response **Robert P. George**, an esteemed Princeton professor, and **Ryan T. Anderson**, President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC), are leading the defense of the American project.

In the Fall 2019 essay *The Baby and the Bathwater* George and Anderson met the critics of liberalism head-on by changing the terms of the debate. In it, they conceded that there certainly are conceptions of liberalism that are undesirable; those of **John Stuart Mill**, **John Locke**, and **John**

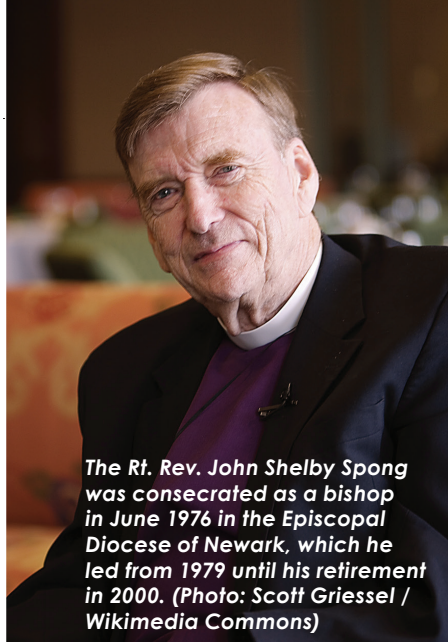
Rawls that are grounded in "anti-perfectionism," or the belief that the state should not take an active role in intractable moral disputes across different groups. Instead of looking to the last few hundred years for the underpinnings of liberalism, they look to the legacy of Classical and Medieval Christianity, from **Plato** and **Aristotle** to the Patristics to **Aquinas**.

Anderson and George hosted a large reception in Washington, D.C., on September 22 to discuss the essay and reiterate its core doctrines. They continued to clarify the particular middle-ground position they hold; without naming names, they accused the integralists of choosing to "give up" the fight for the American project, which George called "fundamentally true." In an apparent dig at conservative-libertarian writer **David French**, Anderson challenged Americans to differentiate between positive "blessings of liberty" and negative "abuses of liberty"; French became a great antagonist for the integralists when he referred to public spaces being indiscriminately used by both Christian and LGBT groups as a "blessing of liberty."

Anderson also took aim at libertarian-minded conservatives who are reluctant to utilize the state to support any conception of the common good. In response, he argued that the left will promote their own substantive view of human flourishing no matter what—and conservatives should be willing to do the same. Anderson also pushed back against the idea that offering first amendment protections for a variety of groups entails a tacit assertion that all, whether Satanists or Baptists, are morally equal. Many activities are clearly immoral, but the state is not called upon to enforce every moral precept. ✚



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The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong was consecrated as a bishop in June 1976 in the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, which he led from 1979 until his retirement in 2000. (Photo: Scott Griessel / Wikimedia Commons)

Bishop John Shelby Spong (1931–2021)

by Jeffrey H. Walton

One of the Episcopal Church’s most controversial liberal bishops, whom IRD frequently critiqued, has died. The Rt. Rev. **John Shelby Spong** passed away September 12 at his home in Virginia according to an announcement from the Richmond parish he once pastored. He was 90 years old.

The bishop claimed he wanted to “save” Christianity by deleting all parts conflicting with modernism and its particular version of science. But by his life’s end, theological modernism had largely expired, its themes no longer perceived as relevant for persons born after the 1960s.

Spong in his final years belonged to the now largely defunct Jesus Seminar, which voted with marbles on which Scriptures were authentic. With those scholars, Spong rejected divine interventions, including Jesus’ deity, resurrection, virgin birth, and miracles. In the end, Spong denounced theism itself. He also questioned Christian teachings about the afterlife and suggested that their primary purpose was control of human behavior in this life.

“Heaven and Hell have got to go,” the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, retired bishop lectured at United Methodist-affiliated Drew Theological School after authoring his 2010 book *Eternal Life: A New Vision: Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*. “Nobody knows what the afterlife is all about; nobody even knows if there is one,” he asserted.

Spong served as a bishop from 1976–2000 and was an outspoken proponent of the ordination of noncelibate homosexual clergy. His revisionist theological views brought him into conflict with Episcopal

Church and Anglican Communion traditionalists. Spong struggled to understand a rapidly growing Global South Christianity that embraced traditional church teachings and upheld a high view of Scripture as trustworthy and the Word of God—teachings that he insisted in his 1999 book *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* were detrimental to the church’s ability to reach modern people.

In a 1998 interview with the *Church of England Newspaper*, Spong said of Christians in Africa: “They’ve moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They’ve yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we’ve had to face in the developing world.”

In dismissing African and Caribbean bishops upset by his remarks, Spong countered, “that’s too bad: I’m not going to cease to be a 20th-century person for fear of offending someone in the Third World.”

Under pressure from fellow Episcopal Church bishops whom he had embarrassed, Spong partly backed down, stating that “superstitious” had been “an unfortunate” word choice.

Spong eventually described himself as a non-theist, rejecting the very idea of a personal God.

I had the opportunity to hear Spong in person articulate his revisionist viewpoint. In 2013, as Spong preached at the Good Friday service of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, he asserted that several of the apostles were “mythological” and declared that Jesus Christ did not die to redeem humanity from its sins.

In addition to dismissing the historicity of biblical characters, Spong also attacked atonement theology, dismissing blood washing away sins as a “barbaric theology.”

“Jesus does not die for your sins in this [John’s] gospel; he dies to make you whole,” Spong announced. “As evolving creatures,

the problem is not that we have fallen, but that we are not yet fully human....

“We are not sinners, the church got that wrong, we are rather incomplete human beings,” Spong concluded.

It remains unclear what aspects of Spong’s legacy might endure: his work fell by the wayside as younger seminarians did not share his modernist perspective. Students at the Episcopal Church’s Virginia Theological Seminary politely received him, but pushed back at his rejection of Scriptures—ironically equating the rigidity of his viewpoint with the literalism of the fundamentalists he so strongly opposed.

But perhaps the most difficult item to square with Spong’s legacy is the Diocese of Newark itself, reflecting more than any other place his revisionist beliefs. Episcopalians in Newark declined by more than 43 percent during his tenure from 64,323 to 36,340, a loss of 27,983 members in 21 years. Interviewed by *60 Minutes* host **Lesley Stahl** for a report on Spong, Former IRD President and Episcopal Church renewal leader **Diane Knippers** recalled Stahl’s mouth “dropping like a rock” when Knippers shared the diocesan statistical report. Shortly after Spong’s retirement, journalist **Robert Stowe England** noted that the diocese under Spong declined at a rate 20.1 percentage points higher than the rate for the entire Episcopal Church across the same time period.

Today, the Diocese of Newark has declined another third, down to 23,045 baptized members in the most recent report (2019). The diocese that most heeded Spong’s words that Christianity must change or die found itself in an uninterrupted collapse across four decades. ✚



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

'Pajama Boy' Intellectuals and the Future of the American Clergy

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necessity of addressing these racial challenges, especially younger clergy. With some notable exceptions, this commentary took the form of Christianized sensitivity training, often critiquing the laity for their failure to approach racism well. This is not to suggest this was all empty moral lecturing. In many cases it was well intended and came from a desire to more truly manifest the gospel within the Church. The effect of this messaging has often been to leave people feeling alienated and frustrated, or in some cases smugly morally superior. Strident calls for justice from a cadre of theologians and leaders who had made their banner “grace above all else” was jarring and left the laity again to assume that the lecturing from Church leaders was to demonstrate the political correctness of the Church more than to help church goers process the trauma their country was experiencing.

It is not necessary to describe the similar story that played out during the 2020 election cycle and during the confusing, frustrating, and finally tragic post-election circus. Much moral indignation and pearl-clutching was done by the theological yuppie class, while many people in the pews of America who felt unheard by those leaders thrashed about looking for voices that spoke to their frustration and fear. Too often the alternative voices they found were not credible sources of information.

The year 2020 presented an incredible opportunity for the Church to meet and serve people in their moment of need and vulnerability. Sadly, instead of pushing into this opportunity, many churches seem to have become more divided with many congregants conspiratorially searching for hidden progressive agendas in their church leaders' teaching.

Church leaders should not expect, nor be expected, to comment on every aspect of these crises as many issues are beyond their responsibility. A pastor recently brought this timely insight from **C. S. Lewis** to our attention:

*When they ask for a lead from the Church most people mean that they want the clergy to put out a political programme. That is silly. The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever; and we are asking them to do quite a different job for which they have not been trained. The job is really on us, the laymen. The application of Christian principles, say to trade unionism or education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters; just as literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists—not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)*

We want to make clear we are not arguing for recklessly populist church leaders, or that we support church leaders who seem to think the church is a wing of the Republican party. These are also distractions from the work of the church and

should be guarded against. We address them less only because we observed them less among emerging church leaders.

It is worth adding an addendum to this letter that we generally haven't found the old guard—the generation of church leaders that includes the likes of **John Piper, Timothy Keller, and Albert Mohler**—to have subordinated their message to the shifting winds of cultural debates. This is not to say at different times and in different ways they have not advised laity on how they will approach cultural and political issues, but when they have done so it has been laced with nuance, an elevation of the gospel above temporal issues, and a reticence to become a cultural commentator. For this, we have been grateful. We hope that young church leaders will follow their example.

We are living through a moment of incredible opportunity for the gospel to meet the very real needs of people across our nation and world, and the Church is incredibly well suited to move into that space. As laymen of the church, we hope and pray that our leaders will boldly lead us in these challenging days. ✚

From the President: Vulgarly Reawakening America

continued from page 3

Politically themed rallies in or hosted by churches, even if temperate, are generally a bad idea and confuse perceptions about the church's chief mission, which is Gospel proclamation. Clergy themselves should be reluctant in any venue to attach themselves to overtly political causes. Temporal politics is chiefly the vocation of lay people.

But the clergy and the institutional church do have important roles in fostering temperance, wisdom, moderation, prudence, and civility in Christian political witness. All Christians who speak

and act politically do so as mere mortals with sinful self-serving impulses and finite wisdom and knowledge. Christians should be slow to ascribe evil intent to opponents and quick to reflect on their own motivations.

Whatever their association with the Reawaken America Tour, hopefully these churches will focus on truly reawakening America through Gospel proclamation and not through echoing vulgar political bromides or hosting groups that chant them. ✚



Pastor Craig Duke (right) practices for his drag performance (Photo: Jakes Giles Netter/HBO)

IRD Diary: How to Respond to United Methodist Drag Queens

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called “How Drag Queen Clergy Help the Church” that I encourage you to read. In it he writes:

But even for traditionalists, the emergence from the vestry of drag queen clergy provides a teachable moment for the church. When we see a drag queen, we see something in our own souls... wrapped in a gaudy, bedazzled vessel. And taking a long, reflective look in the mirror may be exactly what Christ wants the church to be doing right now. If you haven't noticed, the church in North America is currently being pruned by our Vinedresser (John 15). Branches not bearing fruit are being lobbed into the fire so a leaner, more fruitful configuration can emerge to the glory of God. Drag queen clergy show us our own addiction to fabulous at the expense of fruitful.

Megachurch pastors wearing \$3,000 sneakers are an easy example of gaudy self-expression celebrated in the church. But run-of-the-mill congregations platform the flesh in our own ways. We love to hype our own trappings of success, intellectualism, architecture, social awareness, or cultural relevance. If drag seems a weird flex, it is really just the garden-variety pride with which we all are tempted. Carnality run amuck demands the

spotlight. We tell ourselves it is somehow for a greater good when it is really just the same old internal Golden Calf—manufactured with the help of our excess jewelry—leaking out to be praised instead of God.

E. Educate church goers about the coming separation in the UMC—and the exciting potential for ministry in the Global Methodist Church.

Help people in the pews, who know little of denominational disagreements or coming division, understand what is happening. Pastors have sought to shield parishioners from it either because they are afraid of division or difficult questions about their own theology.

We have the opportunity to cast a vision for what is coming—which is exciting and hopeful.

I recently saw progressive clergy in a Facebook group talking about how much they disagree with our theology but how they admire the exciting work for renewal of local churches that has been done in preparing for the GMC! They are actually jealous of what we are preparing.

F. Meet local church members and givers where they are regarding tithes and offerings.

Many correspondents tell me that members simply won't or can't put money

in the offering plate anymore. They are deeply offended and do not want their money supporting this kind of teaching.

Some pastors I've talked with are concerned because laity are voting to stop paying apportionments (also called mission shares). Pastors must not be involved in any decision not to pay Annual Conference tithes as this is a chargeable offense. Encourage the laity to write directly to the Bishop to express their disappointment and concerns.

G. Pray.

Pray for the church. Pray for God's word to go forth with both truth and grace to set people free. Pray for LGBTQ persons, for pastors, and for an amicable separation for the UMC as soon as possible.

Now on to the question of “When can I/we separate?”

Hopefully the protocol will be passed in less than a year. I'm cautiously optimistic that General Conference can be held as scheduled in 2022. But I can't guarantee that.

Churches can disaffiliate now with a high price tag. Most that have disaffiliated want to be independent, but churches should be in connection. Pastors/congregations need healthy accountability to prevent problems: I've seen too many violations of trust including financial abuses in independent churches.

A few churches have considered disaffiliation now and joining the Global Methodist Church later. This is possible. But the money that would be given to the conference is money your local church could use to reach the lost, feed the hungry, and help those in the bondage of addiction be set free.

Some pastors say they are considering retirement. My answer is the same as Mary to the servants at Cana: pray and “do whatever Jesus tells you to do.” Here is the thing—Jonah took the first boat out of Joppa and ended up as fish puke. The big question to discern is what God is calling you to do!

I'm praying for you and appreciate your prayers for me. God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. ✝

IRD Diary:

How to Respond to United Methodist Drag Queens

by Beth Ann Cook

Recently I returned from a wonderful retreat with artist friends, during which I stepped off of social media. When I turned my phone on I discovered many people had reached out to me about a Religion News Service (RNS) article.

The pastor in the article “Meet the UMC Pastor Featured on Drag Reality

Most communications I’ve received contain two questions: (1) What do I do? and (2) When can I/we separate from this?

Let’s start with the “What do I do?” question.

A. Think/speak theologically.

As pastors and lay leaders our job is to help people in the pews understand God’s word, God’s heart, and how to be God’s people in the midst of the culture we live in. This is an opportunity to do so.

B. Affirm that God loves LGBTQ persons.

Let’s start with where we agree with Duke. God loves LGBTQ+ persons including Duke’s daughter [who identifies as non-binary]. Every person is made in the image of God, loved by God, needs the ministry of the church, and should be welcome.

The debate in our church is whether God’s word affirms same-gender sexual relationships and whether non-celibate gay clergy should be ordained. We should also be aware as we respond that LGBTQ persons have been hurt by churches. We need to speak the truth in love.

Many theological conservatives are angry at the way progressive leaders in the UMC have disregarded the decisions of General Conference and done outrageous things that cause division in our churches. In our anger let’s make sure we don’t sin! Too often the church has given the impression that the sins of gay people are somehow worse than the sins of straight people. They are not. All people sin and fall short of God’s glorious standard.

C. Seek to understand what others believe and how that will shape future churches.

Duke explains to RNS why he preached in drag: progressive clergy believe

this is God’s will and a way to reach a marginalized community. He has a different understanding of what God’s call and holiness looks like than I do. His understanding has been shaped by his love for his daughter and her friends.

The handwriting is on the wall for what kind of church the post-separation United Methodist Church will be. We should pay attention to the values, goals, and ideals of those leading the church in the future.

The Indiana Room for All Coalition brought Drag preacher Isaac Simmons (Penny Cost) in as keynote speaker. The Room includes District Superintendents and General Conference delegates who have been clear that their vision of the church is “fully inclusive” of practicing LGBTQ clergy.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association and Global Methodist Church Transition Team are casting a different vision based on a different understanding of holiness. Every church should explore the vision and values of both the post-separation/continuing UMC and the Global Methodist Church.

D. Do some soul searching.

My friend **Chris Ritter** is a gift to the church. Chris is in the Illinois Great River Annual Conference where Simmons seeks ordination. He wrote a thoughtful and helpful blog

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Pastor Craig Duke appears in drag on the HBO show “We’re Here.” (Photo: Jake Giles Netter/HBO)

Show “We’re Here” is Indiana United Methodist Elder **Craig Duke** of Newburgh United Methodist Church. I was aware of the taping of the show, which happened some time ago. My understanding is that Duke sprang this on his congregation as a surprise, which makes it even more disturbing.

I’m also aware that the “Room for All Coalition” (a group of self-described progressives and centrists) recently held an event at Broadway UMC in Indianapolis featuring **Isaac Simmons** who performs in drag as “Miss Penny Cost.”

These events have been upsetting as pastors and lay leaders struggle to deal with the fallout.



Beth Ann Cook is an ordained United Methodist Elder and pastor of Logansport First UMC. This piece originally appeared as an email to supporters of the Indiana Confessing

Movement, of which Cook serves as president, and is edited for length. Republished with permission.



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