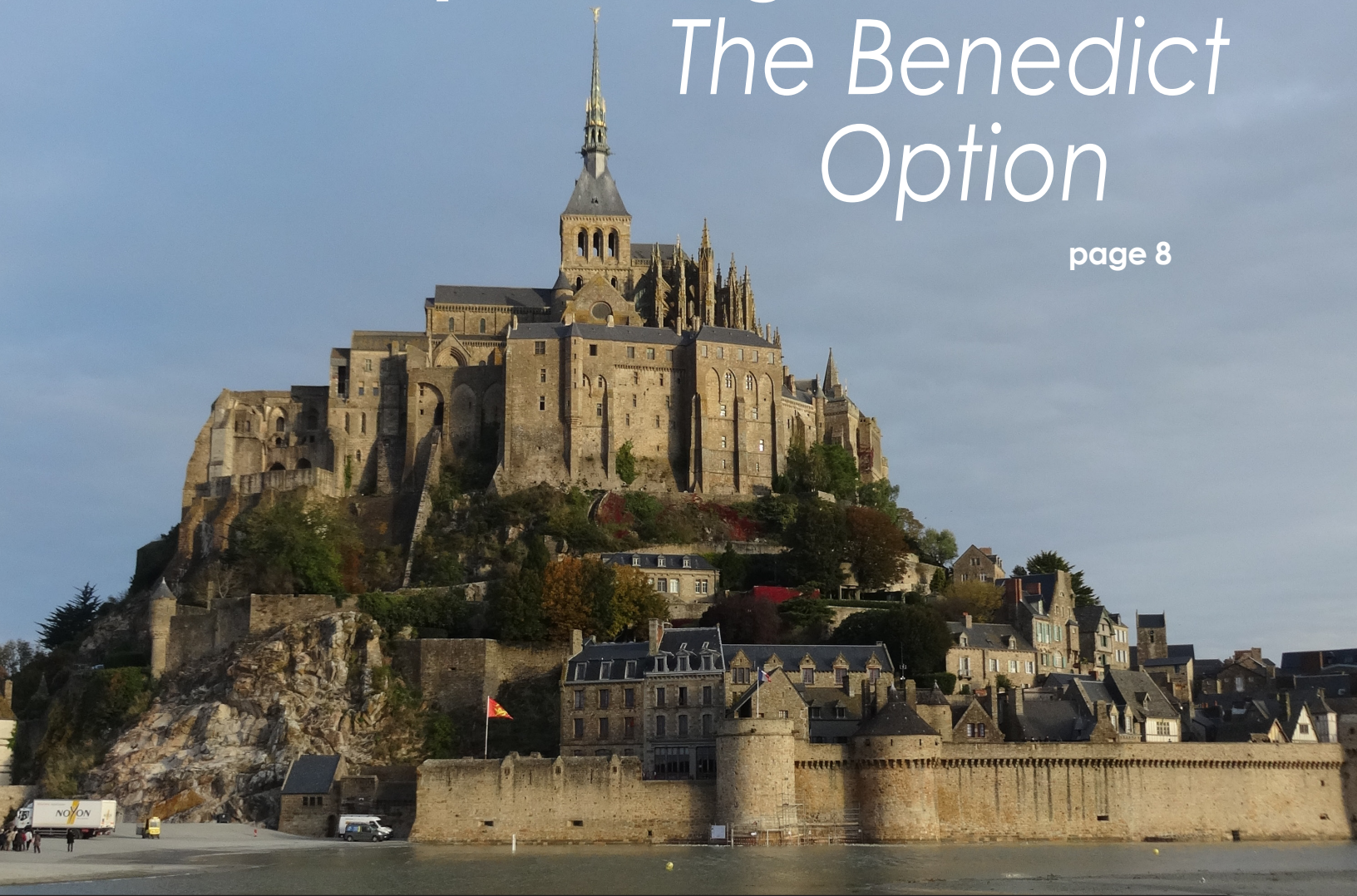


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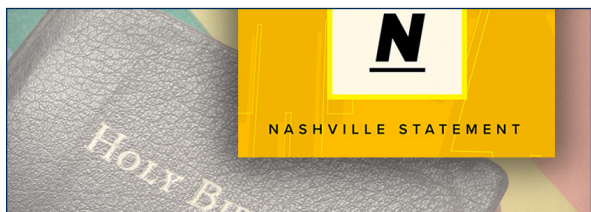
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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson at his confirmation hearing on January 11, 2017; see "International Briefs" on page 6
 (Photo: Office of the President-Elect)

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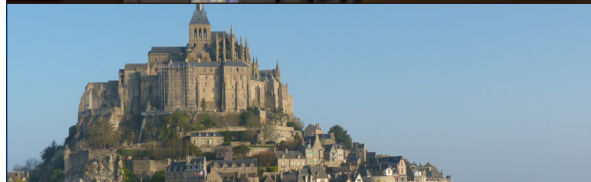
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Cover Photo: The island commune
 of Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy,
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Hillary Clinton, Methodism & Progressivism

A retired United Methodist pastor friend of **Hillary Clinton** is publishing a book, since withdrawn for plagiarism, with daily devotionals he emailed her during the 2016 presidential campaign. Apparently after the election she told him that she would like to preach herself as a United Methodist laywoman.

An [article](#) describing this exchange appeared in *The Atlantic*, exciting surprise by both liberals and conservatives that Clinton is a lifelong Methodist deeply shaped by the church. Many today often assume that serious religious commitment is contrary to progressive political beliefs.

But much of what we identify as political progressivism emerged from Anglo-American Protestantism, especially Methodism. Clinton grew up as a traditional Methodist in a Chicago suburb. She was deeply influenced as a teenager by a progressive youth pastor who went on to teach at Drew Seminary in New Jersey. She also enthusiastically subscribed to an official Methodist young adult magazine that became so radical that the denomination shut it down in the early 1970s.

Decades later Clinton recalled she kept every issue of that Methodist magazine and was especially influenced by an anti-Vietnam War article in it by **Carl Oglesby**, president of Students for a Democratic Society.

The Methodism that so influenced Clinton in the 1960s was very different from today. It was larger, more confident, more activist and in most ways more liberal theologically and politically. It was, before 50 years of membership decline, still America's largest Protestant denomination. It was actively involved with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, along with emerging feminism, environmentalism, demands for a wider federal welfare state and income redistribution, disarmament, plus solidarity with Third World anti-colonial revolutions.

Methodism was also in the 1960s shifting toward abortion rights affirmation and openness about homosexuality. A poll showed most Methodist clergy disbelieved the literal virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ. Social action was displacing traditional Methodist emphases on personal faith. The General Board of Church and Society emerged on Capitol Hill as a liberal lobby, displacing the old temperance society. The missions board in New York was abandoning overseas evangelism in favor of political projects of liberation.

Hillary Clinton matured at the crest of that Methodist shift. Few if any in the church then fully appreciated the imminent decline of Methodist progressivism as it had been a dynamic force ascendant since the early 1900s. USA United Methodism is

much smaller, more marginal to wider society, less political, and, in many ways, surprisingly to many, less liberal.

Clinton is just one of many progressive Midwestern politicians over the last century deeply influenced by Methodism's social zeal. They include **Walter Mondale** and **George McGovern**, both sons of Methodist clergy, plus **Hubert Humphrey**, who attended Methodist worship while growing up. Further back,

William Jennings Bryan, a founder of American progressivism, often attended Methodist churches. So five Democratic presidential candidates have been Methodist influenced Midwestern progressives.

Why Midwest Methodism? Methodism's early founders, chiefly **John Wesley**, were not progressives. But Methodism's drive to reform society, reinforced by postmillennialism, an expectation of God's emerging Kingdom, and spiritual perfectionism, all fueled political progressivism's aspiration for an egalitarian society.

Methodist progressive activism was especially strong in the upper Midwest, settled by the New England Puritan diaspora, focused on equality and political reform.

The Puritan vision of the idealized city on a hill was naturally receptive to Methodist social perfectionism. It created a cultural/political dynamo that even now keeps pushing for more equality and justice.

But this dynamo in American political culture has been mostly secularized and disconnected from its original Christian anthropology. It strives for endless new entitlements for the individual without fully understanding the human person as God's image bearer, with duties, moral limits, and established identity. Classic Methodism rejects Utopianism and understands the boundaries of political perfectionism in fallen humanity. But classic Methodism, even as it has theologically revived over the last half century, operates within a diminished denomination and hasn't focused on political theology.

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Mark Tooley



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

Top Evangelical Leaders Back New Nashville Statement on Sexuality

More than 150 Evangelical leaders representing churches, seminaries, and ministries have signed a statement affirming biblical themes of marriage, gender, and sexual morality. The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) released the coalition statement, called the Nashville Statement, on Tuesday after gathering key Evangelical leaders for a meeting hosted by the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission in August in Nashville, Tennessee.

"The Nashville Statement is an urgently needed moment of gospel clarity," stated CBMW President **Denny Burk**. "In a culture nearly defined by sexual confusion and brokenness, the church of Jesus Christ has to proclaim with one voice God's good design for gender, marriage, and sexuality."

While Burk is responsible for spearheading the statement, CBMW told IRD that key Evangelical leaders such as **John Piper**, **Albert Mohler**, and **Daniel Akin** advised the proclamation's spiritual architecture.

the most basic questions of our humanity." The statement's preamble reads, in part:

Evangelical Christians at the dawn of the twenty-first century find themselves living in a period of historic transition. As Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, it has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being. By and large the spirit of our age no longer discerns or delights in the beauty of God's design for human life. Many deny that God created human beings for his glory, and that his good purposes for us include our personal and physical design as male and female. It is common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God's beautiful plan, but is, rather, an expression of an individual's autonomous preferences. The pathway to full and lasting joy through God's good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives that, sooner or later, ruin human life and dishonor God.

Top Evangelicals leaders within the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination representing over 47,000 Baptist churches across the United States, signed the statement.

Other major signatories include Anglican pastor and apologist **Sam Alberry**, popular author and pastor **Francis Chan**, Charisma Media founder and CEO, **Steven Strang**, and Asbury Seminary Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament **John N. Oswalt**.

To read the statement in its entirety, visit: cbmw.org/nashville-statement ✚



A yoga practitioner at the indoor labyrinth of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, California (Photo: Grace Episcopal Cathedral)

Virginia Seminary Labyrinth to Commemorate Black Episcopalians

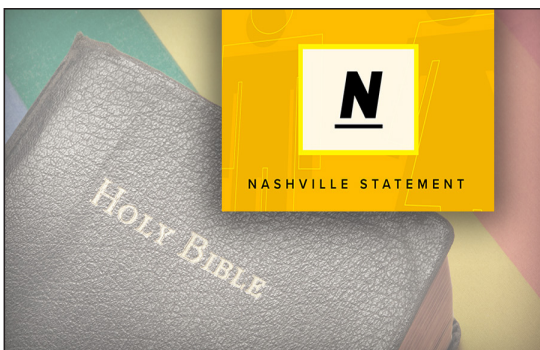
An Episcopal Church seminary is seeking to commemorate African Americans who once worshiped on its Alexandria, Virginia campus by constructing a late 20th-century innovation that would have been unfamiliar to them: a modern labyrinth.

The Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) classes of 2009 and 2017 jointly gifted the installation after culling through ideas from a class survey. An initial idea was to construct a Stations of the Cross to commemorate St. Cyprian's Chapel, built in the early 1880s at the then-segregated VTS for the local African American community following the Civil War and later moved in the 1920s, or to build a permanent labyrinth.

"There was really strong sentiment in favor of commemorating the St. Cyprian's Chapel," said organizer **Serina Sides** in an article about the installation featured in the summer 2017 edition of the VTS journal *News from the Hill*. "Race relations, racial justice, racial reconciliation—all have been a point of discussion ever since we arrived on campus."

The walls of the 1881 Chapel Garden were not stable enough to support additional work, so members of the class

Continued on page 5



(Photo: Stream.org)

Piper, a co-founder of CBMW, says the statement's goal is to "shine a light into the darkness" and offer clarity in an age where "confusion reigns over some of

Virginia Seminary Labyrinth

continued from page 4

combined the ideas and named the labyrinth in honor of the chapel.

“Commemorating a 19th-century African American church with a labyrinth has all the historical resonance of marking the site of the pilgrim landing with a new Apple store,” noted IRD Anglican Program Director **Jeffrey Walton**. “Far-removed from the historic religious experience of black America, labyrinths are more commonly associated with upper middle class middle-aged white people doing yoga to pan flute music.”

Designer **David Tozmann** explained in News from the Hill that, “We used the

‘Vision Quest’ design, which is a modern design that I created. There is a lot of demand for labyrinths because of the stories of the people who use them and the value people find in having them. These go back thousands and thousands of years.”

The modern “labyrinth movement” traces its origins to the late 1980s at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. While the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth constructed in the late 12th century is cited as an inspiration for the modern movement, Jesus Christ doesn’t feature prominently. Instead, proponents of labyrinths see them as “making space for the inner journey” in the words of **Judith Tripp** of Veriditas, which promotes programs centered on the labyrinth.

The Veriditas web site notes eastern religions, the new age movement, and the 1987 “Harmonic Convergence” as context for the emergence of the labyrinth movement. African American church history—and Jesus Christ—are not mentioned.

The VTS marker says nothing about the chapel (and now labyrinth) namesake, St. Cyprian, the 3rd century bishop of Carthage and early Christian writer. An opponent of the Novatianist heresy, Cyprian advocated a policy under which former idolaters could be once again admitted to communion with the church following public penance.

An installation named for St. Cyprian could point to Christian martyrs: Cyprian was martyred at Carthage under Emperor Valerian’s persecution. ✚

Died: Michael Cromartie (1950-2017)

Longtime Ethics & Public Policy Center Vice President **Michael Cromartie** died of cancer August 28. An evangelical Anglican, Cromartie expertly explained American Christianity to the secular press and in turn assisted Evangelicals in understanding the operations of the nation’s capital.

“Mike was uniquely at his best when advocating a thoughtful, careful, realistic, temperate, non-utopian and above all non-crazy Christian political witness, characterized by what he called an ‘Augustinian sensibility,’” recalled IRD President **Mark Tooley**, who knew Cromartie across three decades.

Cromartie joined IRD’s *Providence* foreign policy journal as a contributing editor, speaking at the launch event in 2015 and sharing his passion for an Augustinian sensibility in the arena of security and foreign policy.

Here’s how he described it:

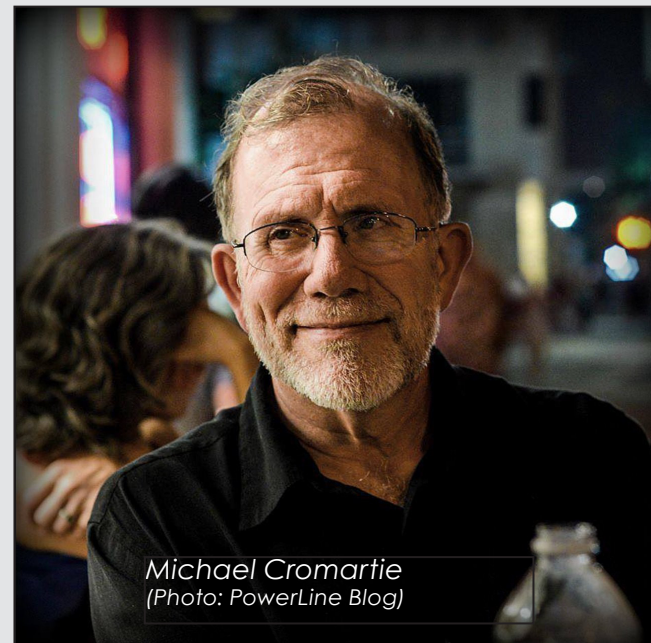
I mean that we need to adopt a form of Christian realism that recognizes that, because of the Fall, we live in a world that will remain sinful and broken until the end of time. While living in a broken world, our task, if it’s

political, is to help the state curb that brokenness and that sinfulness in a way that aims toward justice. I use the phrase “Augustinian sensibility” to lean against a Utopian temptation for people on the Right or the Left who give the political realm more significance than it should be given.

So it’s a chastened view of politics, but it’s not anti-political. People should have firm, clear political convictions on what justice means, without becoming so ideologically wired that they have over-expectations for what can happen in the public policy realm. It’s a Christian cast of mind. Having that cast of mind can help nurture a form of Christian civility that is really important in these times, when we have a culture that is more shrill than ever.

“Having worked as a young man for Prison Fellowship founder and Watergate personality **Chuck Colson**, Cromartie

knew and understood the faults, weaknesses, virtues and strengths of Evangelicals,” recalled Tooley. “He knew their tendencies toward impatience, emotivism and apocalyptic assumptions, as well as



Michael Cromartie
(Photo: PowerLine Blog)

their devotion to serving humanity and God. He successfully strove to articulate and channel their highest aspirations, especially their political expressions in Washington, D.C.” ✚

Tillerson Releases International Religious Freedom Report

United States Secretary of State **Rex Tillerson** announced the release of the 2016 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom on August 15. The global report is a requirement of U.S. law and came about through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

Tillerson said that the IRFA “upholds religious freedom as a core American value under the Constitution’s First Amendment, and as a universal human right.”

The Secretary reaffirmed and strengthened former Secretary of State John Kerry’s 2016 declaration of genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims by ISIS. He pledged U.S. support to those groups and other religious minorities under threat. He also promised to protect their cultural heritage.

“The protection of these groups—and others subject to violent extremism—is a human rights priority for the Trump administration,” the Secretary said, promising that the U.S. government will keep working with regional partners “to protect religious minority communities

from terrorist attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.”

Tillerson also called out the Islamic Republic of Sudan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its violations of religious freedom. The Secretary said “in Sudan the government arrests, detains and intimidates clergy and church members.” He added that the government “denies permits for the construction of new churches and is closing or demolishing existing ones.”

Tillerson also called for the “swift confirmation” of Sam Brownback, governor of Kansas. Nominated as the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom, Gov. Brownback will be “the highest ranking official ever to take up this important post,” he said. Brownback has long defended human rights and religious freedom. ✚



Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (Photo: Office of the President-Elect)

Presbyterian Official Denied Israel Entry amidst Divestment Tension

Advocacy by the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has contributed to some legislative wins and corresponding pushback by the lone Middle East democracy this past summer.

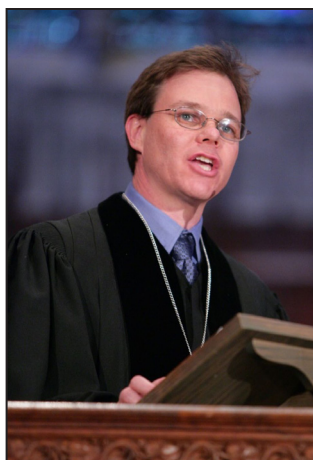
Anti-Israel activist groups, including the Liberation Theology group Friends of Sabeel North America (FOSNA), touted resolutions passed by the United Church of Christ (UCC), Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and Mennonite Church USA. Soon after, five members of an interfaith delegation were denied entry into Israel, a ban that they claimed was a direct result of their BDS advocacy.

In the incident last August, a former moderator of the Presbyterian

Church (USA) General Assembly was denied entry into Israel according to a report from the Presbyterian News Service (PNS). The entry ban prevented Rick Ufford-Chase and four other interfaith officials from boarding a flight from Washington, D.C., to Tel Aviv.

“We suspect that we were the first to feel the impact of the Knesset’s [Israel’s Parliament] recent declaration that they will deny entry for anyone who has supported nonviolent strategies to force Israel to end the occupation,” the former General Assembly Moderator told Rick Jones of the Presbyterian News Service.

Israel’s parliament passed legislation earlier this year barring entry to non-citizens who publicly support a boycott of Israel or are employed by an organization that does.



Former Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase (Photo: fansshare.com)

Israeli Interior Minister Aryeh Deri said in a statement to the Associated Press that the five had a long record of advocacy for the BDS movement. BDS activists typically call for divestment from Motorola Solutions, Hewlett-Packard, and Caterpillar, among other companies that sell non-lethal products to the Israeli military.

Resolutions from all three denominations single out Israel for condemnation but say little—if anything—about violence against Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East.

The resolutions garnered swift condemnation from Jewish groups, including the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

“It is deeply disappointing that the Disciples of Christ denomination has adopted the path dictated by the discredited BDS movement, attributing to Israel sole responsibility for failing to end the conflict and casting spurious allegations of human rights violations upon Israel,” said Rabbi Noam Marans, AJC Director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations. “People of good will should be encouraging negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians leading to a two-state solution, not offering transparently lopsided indictments of Israel that lead nowhere.” ✚

What Is Eugene Peterson Thinking on Marriage?

by Jeffrey Walton

In possibly the quickest change of direction in Evangelical Christianity since World Vision USA reversed its employment policies concerning same-sex marriage, *The Message* author **Eugene Peterson** endorsed—and then opposed—same sex marriage in the span of one day.

Peterson made news in July when Religion News Service columnist **Jonathan Merritt** published an interview in which the retired Presbyterian Church (USA) pastor was asked about his views on same-sex marriage.

“I think it’s a transition for the best, for the good. I don’t think it’s something that you can parade, but it’s not a right or wrong thing as far as I’m concerned,” Peterson responded.

Merritt circled back for a follow-up:

“If you were pastoring today and a gay couple in your church who were Christians of good faith asked you to perform their same-sex wedding ceremony, is that something you would do?” the columnist asked.

“Yes,” Peterson replied.

But just as in 2014 World Vision rescinded within 48 hours a newly announced policy of allowing employees to enter into same-sex marriage (after reportedly more than 3,000 monthly sponsors canceled their support in a single day), Peterson also seems to have had a few conversations.

World Vision had not been fully prepared for the 2014 uproar. Southern Baptist leaders, representing America’s largest Protestant body, strongly denounced the initial policy change. The head of the 3 million member Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, urged members to reroute funding away from World Vision, later urging support after the relief organization reversed its policy. **Franklin Graham** very publicly lamented that World Vision no longer believed in the Bible.

There were signs of disappointment after Peterson’s July interview, too.

“So disappointing,” tweeted **Dr. Russell Moore** of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

“Truly, how sad that a creative voice like Eugene Peterson would forsake the Scriptures and the Tradition that he so eloquently wrote of,” tweeted Moore’s

ERLC colleague **Andrew Walker** of Southern Seminary.

“The way forward for Eugene Peterson is repentance,” tweeted **John Stonestreet** of the Colson Center. “Denying the created order is no small theological mistake for a minister of the Gospel.”

And perhaps most significantly, LifeWay Christian Resources told Baptist Press it would stop selling all works by Peterson if he confirmed he holds the views reported by RNS.

“LifeWay only carries resources in our stores by authors who hold to the biblical view of marriage,” LifeWay told BP in a statement. “We are attempting to confirm with Eugene Peterson or his representatives that his recent interview on same-sex marriage accurately reflects his views. If he confirms he does not hold to a biblical view of marriage, LifeWay will no longer sell any resources by him, including *The Message*.”

Fast-forward to the following day, when *Christianity Today*’s **Kate Shelnett** reported the evangelical author retracted his response and upheld the traditional stance on marriage instead:

“To clarify, I affirm a biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman. I affirm a biblical view of everything,” Peterson said in a statement.

That was fast.

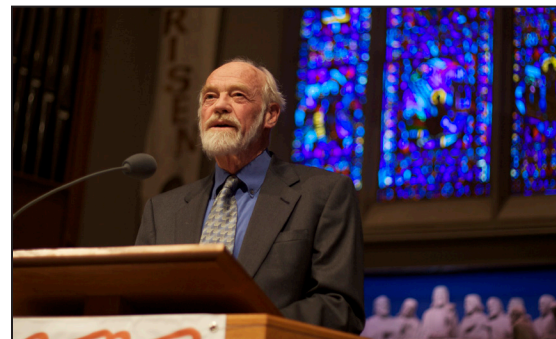
Shelnett also reports a telling tidbit. LifeWay Christian Stores had reached out to “confirm with Eugene Peterson or his representatives that his recent interview on same-sex marriage accurately reflects his views.” If he had indeed shifted on the issue, the chain would no longer carry his books, which include dozens of versions of *The Message* as well as his titles *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* and *The Pastor*.

LifeWay, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, bills itself as “One of the world’s largest providers of Christian products and services.” Readers of this journal may recall when the chain chose to remove books by now-liberal Episcopalian **Rachel Held Evans** and blogger **Jen Hatmaker** after those authors staked out positions not in accord with its doctrinal standards.

While Peterson says that he has concluded writing books and is only engaged in correspondence, his final book, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, came out in May and its sales certainly would have been affected.

Merritt posted a follow-up piece on RNS in which he explains how the interview took place (yes, it was recorded with permission) and why he asked questions about same-sex marriage:

“Some have asked me why I would ask these questions at all. There were two primary reasons. First, he is one of the most influential Christian thinkers in the world and homosexuality is one of the most contentious debates in the church



Author Eugene Peterson lectures at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, WA, sponsored by the Seattle Pacific University Image Journal in May 2009. (Photo: Clappstar - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7110992>)

today. What Eugene Peterson believes about this topic matters, which is more than evident in the reaction it generated.

Second, and perhaps more interesting, I had spoken with several prominent pastors, authors and theologians who intimated to me that Peterson had told them privately that he was affirming of same-sex relationships. This prompted my curiosity about his views. If true, I know my readers would be interested.” ✚



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

Responding to The Benedict Option

transcribed by Daniella Royer
edited by Jeffrey Walton



The island commune
of Mont-Saint-Michel
in Normandy, France
(Photo: N1D0/Flickr)

Saint Benedict founded a vibrant monastic movement in the ashes of the imploding Roman Empire, an inspiration for those who despair of redeeming postmodern Western Civilization and counsel a Christian retreat into separatist communities to rebuild Christian culture through faithful discipleship. But throughout the church's history, most believers have had a vocation to live and work within the world, with all of its temptations and snares.

Because IRD is focused on advocating a thoughtful social political witness for Christianity, Author **Rod Dreher's** *The Benedict Option* and its call for Christians to, at some level, step back from



Panelists at IRD's National Press Club event "Responding to the Benedict Option." Left to right: Alison Howard, Mark Tooley, Cherie Harder, Joseph Capizzi, Joseph Hartman, and Bruce Ashford (Photo: Joseph Rossell / IRD)

political engagement is of interest and of concern. Here, five experts offer constructive, thoughtful critiques from their own perspective and experience.

The following are excerpts from IRD's "Responding to the Benedict Option" panel held July 12, 2017, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Joseph Capizzi

Rod Dreher gives a concise description of why he thinks this is a moment for Christians to rethink their engagement with American politics. He describes that Christian project as essentially having failed in our day. We now have, he argues, to "develop a creative communal solution to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them. We have to choose to make a decisive leap into a truly counter-cultural way of living Christianity or we would doom our children and our children's children to assimilation." It's pretty dark stuff—the language of doom—language of consigning future generations to an assimilation that he really doesn't quite define.

Dreher declares the purpose of the book to wake up the church and to encourage it to strengthen itself while there is still time. He writes, "If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and practice." What is it that brings about this concern that we're dooming our children and their children's generations to assimilation and possibly, if we want to survive, the end of the Church? He identifies two

particular moments that he signals are the signs of doom.

First is the *Obergefell* decision that declares a constitutional right to same-sex marriage. The second is the capitulation of conservative politicians, largely Republican under corporate pressure, in not backing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. His conclusion is that conser-

vative Christians have been routed. We are now living in a new country. I'm not dismissing the significance of those moments. But if we work backwards, we've experienced moments like this in the past and maybe, in some cases, worse. One could think of 1973 when the Supreme Court decided to legalize abortion.

There have been moments where we've lived in situations of profound injustice.

Imposition of Jim Crow Laws in the South burdened African-American communities. Why wouldn't those themselves be inflection points? There's this notion that the country is new subsequent to *Obergefell* and the capitulation of politicians.

It's important to think about another time where Christians faced something similar: Konrad Adenauer in Germany after the Second World War. Mayor of Cologne in Germany from about 1917 to 1933, he was ousted by the Nazis for refusing to fly the swastika from city hall as Hitler paraded through Cologne.

Continued on page 9

Adenauer thought of political engagement as consistent with his Catholic faith. He also thought that there are lines that have to be drawn. He lived it. At the conclusion of the war when Germany is devastated by the comprehensive nature of its defeat, he steps forward to serve as the first Chancellor of this rebuilding nation of West Germany. He is a principal architect of its staggering recovery from 1946 until 1963.

If ever there was a time to quit politics and to disengage, to say that the Christian thing had ended and ended poorly, to be pessimistic about the possibilities of creating decent civil political communities, one could make the claim that Adenauer faced it. He could have quit the game but he didn't. His compromise in his negotiation were, as they were in 1933, rooted in Christian principles regarding human freedom, the spirit of the individual, the need to restrict the power and the reach of the state.

This is not a guy for whom political engagement was abstract. So this was the time to say, "No. We're done. It's a new Germany. It's a new moment, and we're out." Dreher may say, "Look, that's not what I'm saying." Okay, all right. Adenauer faced it, and he showed an alternative. The alternative, I think, is seeing the world as mission territory for Christians. It's the place we engage because of what we believe. The Christian challenge has always been rooted in the discordance between the Kingdom that is promised by Christ's victory and our lived experience of its incompleteness in time.

The Kingdom of God, in its fullness, does not come in human history and certainly does not come about as a consequence of our political endeavors. It is brought to us by God's grace and by Christ's victory. In the meantime, we are called to work for even marginal and temporary improvement of the conditions in which we as believers live.

My fear with Dreher is not even that he misreads the times. It's that his mission is ecclesial introversion. As Christians, we don't need that. We know the Church is preserved by God's grace. We know we are called to engage the world.

Joseph Capizzi is Executive Director, The Institute for Human Ecology; Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and

Ordinary Professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of America

Cherie Harder

Rod starts the book by claiming that American Christianity is in rapid decline and, in fact, is on the verge of sputtering out. What threatens us is what he calls a new barbarism brought on by increasing secularization and a lack of orthodoxy.

A few areas struck me as potentially problematic. One is his description of what ails us. Rod will often use language that seems to thrill to the apocalypse. Claiming that the light of Christianity is flickering out is overwrought and unhelpful. That kind of apocalyptic thinking both doesn't look at our own American history and fails in many ways to look across the world as well. There is much that we should criticize and we should be deeply concerned about in our culture. But is it fair to say that we have it now worse than at any other time?

I was a fairly young staffer on Capitol Hill back in the mid-90s when *First Things* came out with an issue where the title was, "The End of Democracy?" It asked whether judicial usurpation had become so great in America that conscientious citizens could no longer abide by the laws of the "regime," which was a term they used. In the mid-90s, this conclusion was a bit more understandable. In a course of only 30 years, murder rates had doubled. Aggravated assault rates had quadrupled. Violent crime overall had more than doubled. Teen pregnancy had gone way up. Teen suicide had tripled. The amount of TV watching time, through the roof. Divorces had more than doubled. Unwed pregnancies were up. Marriage rates were down. By almost any measure, America was doing worse off in terms of its cultural practices.

Flash-forward to where we are now. While we are certainly not awash in truth, beauty, and goodness, by some of those indicators, there have been improvements. Divorce rates have leveled off. Abortion rates are going down even as teen pregnancy rates drop. Violent crime rates have gone way down. It's been a huge triumph, largely of public policy, one more way that we care for our neighbor. However, we've also changed culturally in different and somewhat disturbing ways. We may be

less violent. We are also more distracted, depressed, indebted, medicated, obese, porn-addled, divided, polarized, isolated, and lonely. All of those developments have profound implications. One of the things they call for is outreach on the part of the Church and of Christians.

At times Rod is more polemical in print than in person. But at times there was what struck me as language that was



Cherie Harder

overwrought to the point of encouraging further divisiveness. For example, he claimed that we live in an age of a new barbarism. He said that barbarians are governed only by their will to power and neither know nor care a thing about what they are annihilating. Now to understate, it is more difficult to love your neighbor wisely and well if you are convinced they are a barbarian who annihilates all that is good without knowing or caring. I don't know that encouraging a stance of thinking about our neighbors that way actually aids us in creatively and lovingly showing the love of Christ into the world.

This is a time when loneliness, alienation, division, and polarization are at closed to unprecedented levels. At a time when we as Christians have such a unique opportunity to show the love of Christ to our lost neighbors, to show His healing power, to pray for them, to invite them into our home, to get to know them, and to model that kind of care and concern, withdrawing from them may not be the best way to either love God, pursue our

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own vocations, or show His love to our neighbor.

Cherie Harder is President of The Trinity Forum, served in the White House as Special Assistant to the President and Director of Policy and Projects for First Lady Laura Bush.

Joe Hartman

David Brooks in the *New York Times* called *The Benedict Option* the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade. Damon Linker compared it to Richard John Neuhaus' *The Naked Public Square*.

I want to focus on Dreher's diagnosis. This idea that Western civilization has endured this catastrophic decline from a sort of high point of Christian civilization, which I think he sees as the Medieval Period, to this kind of new dark age of modernity. He describes the most prominent feature of this decline as the supplanting of a quest for moral virtue with this kind of moral relativism.

I think his Benedict Option, as I understand it, is this strategic effort to shore up the foundations of Christianity in the face of this new barbarism. Several times in the book, he says that the Benedict Option is the only tenable Christian response to what he considers the decadence of modernity and secular liberalism. Rod explained that when we all talk about the Benedict Option, we think of the Benedictines, but the name actually comes from another book by a Scottish philosopher named Alasdair MacIntyre who wrote *After Virtue*. It's essentially this book-length critique of modernity.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that a central feature of modernity is this repudiation of the language of virtue and the pursuit of or the practice of virtue. And he sees that as best articulated in a kind of Aristotelian teleological understanding. And so according to MacIntyre, modernists confront a choice. We can either try to recover and reconstruct

a kind of Aristotelian model of virtue or we're left descending into a kind of relativistic Nihilism that he illustrates through Nietzsche. We either choose traditional virtue or we abandon ourselves to relativism. If we choose modernity, we basically have chosen relativism. In fact, for MacIntyre, we're already there.

Both MacIntyre and Rod clearly identify a break, a point at which there's this kind of pivot. Augustine offers a different perspective. And if you think in Augustinian terms, we live in the time between Christ's first and second coming. We live in the *seculum*. And in this epoch, we can't identify a trajectory. We can't say, "Oh, history is moving in this direction or that direction." We don't know. Human history for an Augustinian is ambiguous.

I'm now the third here to level this criticism of the account of history. Why, in 2015 with the *Obergefell* decision, why is that the point? History, this side of the Eschaton, is guided providentially, but only known dimly. So this kind of catastrophic narrative, I think, as a Christian, is just problematic.

The second issue I want to raise is this discussion of ethics, because Rod repeatedly talks about the Christian life as characterized by the need to pursue traditional virtue. As Rod puts it, to live after virtue then is to dwell in a society that not only can no longer agree on what constitutes virtuous belief in conduct, but also doubts that virtue exists.

The post-lapsarian world is a world after virtue. With this understanding, the goal of the Christian life, in my mind, isn't necessarily the achievement of virtue. It's certainly the goal of an Aristotelian, but the goal of the Christian life is surrender of our will to Christ. I would challenge this whole discussion of virtue. Not to say that virtue in itself is a bad thing. But again, I'll echo someone else. I think what we need is not virtue, but we need to both give and receive grace.

To say that the West has been abandoning Christianity for quite some time is to miss how thoroughly Christian many of our public demands for justice, fairness, and equality are and remain.

Joseph Hartman is an attorney and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Georgetown University Department of Government. His doctoral dissertation is titled "In His

Image: God and Man in the Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr."

Alison Howard

I don't necessarily see Rod calling us to flee to the woods. Rather, I believe that the Benedict Option is separating from worldly principles, rethinking our sanctification, being in the world but not of the world, and embracing the communal heart of the Gospel. That is focusing more on ministry to people and communities. I would argue that our public policy is a clear way to affect those people in those communities. That said, legislation can either be a weight to us as a faith community or a wing to us opening doors and giving us freedom to serve as we need to and are called to.

Some have found an excuse in the Benedict Option: permission to withdraw and retreat. I know that would provide much easier comfort and convenience than dealing with all of this. I know many of us have thought about retreating and maybe just raising our kids in Wyoming with no access to television or cable. It's still an option for me. But I would argue that is a spiritually lazy option and, thankfully, the brilliant Oswald Chambers agrees with me and convicts me. He says, "The true test of spirituality occurs when we come up against injustice, degradation, ingratitude, and, turmoil, all of which have the tendency to make us spiritually lazy while being tested. We'd want to use prayer and Bible reading for the purpose of finding a quiet retreat. We use God only for the sake of getting peace and joy. We seek only our enjoyment of Jesus, not a true realization of Him. This is the first step in the wrong direction. All these things we are seeking are simply effects and yet we try to make them the cause. The real danger in spiritual laziness is that we do not want to be stirred up. All we want to share about is a spiritual retirement from the world. Yet, Jesus Christ never encourages the idea of retirement. He says, 'Go and tell my brethren.'" (Matthew 28:10)

I think the Benedict Option can be a refreshing reminder that we do need to separate at times from the stressors of this world. I don't think that means running off

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Joe Hartman



Alison Howard

to a monastery for most of us. I think that means putting our phone down, taking a moment with the Lord, and being more reverent of the fact that we get another chance at life today, and what that means for us. I do not believe we're ever called to withdraw or disengage. Rod Dreher said he did not mean to encourage that. I don't know. But any temporary break from society's deluge of shiny entertainment and distraction should be in order for us to refocus on the true Gospel.

We all know that the political and legal battles we're fighting are just the immediate battles. Many, I've heard, have said, "If we could only go back to the days before now." And someone said to me, "Yeah. But even those days were bad." There's always something, so we're not to be fearful of our current situation. If we don't engage and push back on the idea of withdrawal—if we all have Christians in the marketplace living out their faith as Cherie said, as corporate lawyers, as legal advocates, as social services as pastors—I'm afraid that those who believe that the Benedict Option would allow them to retreat will have very limited options.

My biggest contempt with the Benedict Option, as many think, is that they could in any way just become a homogeneous community and separate ourselves and be left alone. It has been made very clear that we will not be left alone. If we don't engage and help keep freedoms open, those who want to retreat will not have that option.

My concern is that this Benedict Option has led many to consider withdrawing, and that is not an option for believers. We should be encouraged to confront and solve many of our current societal problems. We can invest in our local Churches and our families, pursue Gospel truths,

and then turn around and go and remind the world what makes us different.

Alison Howard is the Director of Alliance Relations at Alliance Defending Freedom working to serve, strengthen, and expand the alliance on life, marriage, and religious freedom.

Bruce Ashford

Everyday Americans in a democratic republic are ambassadors to the King through their everyday life in many ways and through voting, involvement with political parties and so forth.

I want to give a nod toward what this might look like in our 21st century context. I'm going to give four categories of things that everyday Americans can understand and grasp and do.

The first thing we need to do is re-center God in a desecralized or partly or mostly desecralized public square. We've got to find appropriate ways of calling attention back to the cosmic King. One way that we do it is that through our speech and our words, we make clear that Jesus is Lord, and by implication, that sex and money and power are not. And these sort of things that we tend to absolutize, these idols like sex and money and power, are powerfully influential in the public square and in politics. We have to find ways to show that Jesus is Lord and those things are not.

In terms of political ideology, you have the idols like individual autonomy, material equality, ethno-nations, social progress, cultural heritage. All of these ideologies will tend to lapse into absolutizing something other than Christ. We want to make clear that Christ is Lord. We also want to make clear that the Bible provides the true story of the whole world. We want to frame things in light of the Bible's narrative-and-show that our political allegiances are tentative in light of our allegiance to Christ. Occupants of Caesar's throne come and go. Jesus remains forever. Let's re-center God.

Number two, I think we need to decenter self. For believers, I think that means we need to lead the way in seeking the common good, the public good and not merely the good of our own tribe. I think identity politics of the sort that

seeks only its own interests is the death of a democratic republic. We also de-center ourselves when we refuse to demean and degrade the people on the other side of the aisle, even if they are at that very moment doing that to us.

The third thing is reframing issues. If it is true that Jesus is Lord, and if his Lordship shapes us in the depths of our being, then there will be times in ways when our way of viewing issues is very different from the GOP or the Democratic Party. There are times when my Christianity helps me to re-frame an issue in a way that makes it interesting, and is helpful to the public in a way that breaks American society's ability to classify us or



Bruce Ashford

stereotype us and therefore dismiss us as a special interest arm of any given political party.

Finally, we need to revitalize culture. Cultural institutions are powerful agents of change. They shape desires and thought patterns. We need to play the long game and take the broad view. As Rod says, we can't put all of our eggs in the basket of short-term activism. Unlike Rod, I want to put a lot more eggs in that basket than he does. But we don't put all of our eggs in the basket of short term activism, because if we do that, believe it or not, we'll often sacrifice our witness on the altar of a short-term political gain.

Bruce Ashford is Professor of Theology and Culture, Provost and Dean of Faculty, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author of One Nation under God: A Christian Hope for American Politics (2015) ✚

As Losses Mount, Presbyterian Official Declares: 'We Are Not Dying. We Are Reforming'

by Jeffrey Walton

Updated statistics made available by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of the General Assembly show a denomination continuing a steep, uninterrupted decline in 2016. The U.S.-based denomination shed 89,893 members in 2016, a decline of 5.7 percent, dropping below 1.5 million members for the first time. A net 191 congregations closed or were dismissed to other denom-



The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson addresses the Covenant Network at the 222nd General Assembly (2016). (Photo: Eric O. Ledermann)

inations, bringing the denominational total to 9,451 congregations.

"We are not dying. We are Reforming," PCUSA Stated Clerk **J. Herbert Nelson, II** declared in a statement made available soon after the statistics were released. "We are moving towards a new future as a denomination."

Of those who will not be moving towards that new future, 43,902 departed via certificate, while 75,064 are listed as "other." Deaths accounted for a decline of 26,193 members in 2016.

In 2015, the PCUSA declined by 95,107 active members. Since 2005 the denomination has reported losing more than a third of its active membership, declining from 2,313,662 active members in 2005 to 1,482,767 in 2016 (-36%).

"Despite cries proclaiming the death of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we remain a viable interfaith and ecumenical partner in many local communities while

proclaiming a prophetic witness throughout the world," Nelson stated.

Other global Presbyterian denominations have continued to distance themselves from the PCUSA in response to the actions of its General Assembly to permit the ordination of practicing homosexuals in 2011.

"We are well-respected for our priestly and prophetic voice within Christendom," Nelson asserted. "Our challenge is to see the powerful opportunities that are before us while declaring with Holy Spirit boldness that God is doing amazing work within us right now."

In early 2016, a meeting of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) predicted membership losses of approximately 100,000 for both 2015 and 2016 and 75,000 each year thereafter through 2020.

The decline contrasts with several years of steady growth among some other reformed denominations in the United States. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—which split from one of the PCUSA's predecessor bodies—has reported growth for each of the past five years, rebounding from a short period of decline that began in 2008. Separately, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) have reported significant growth each year, partly due to receiving congregations that sought dismissal from the PCUSA. In June, the EPC announced the addition of 16 new congregations in the 2016–2017 reporting period, of which 14 are former PCUSA congregations.

The PCUSA reached peak membership in 1965 at 4.25 million. During the past several years, more than 500 congregations have opted to leave the denomination. Finances have also declined. While the church's investment income has increased, the PCUSA saw declines in contributions, capital and building funds, and bequests in 2016. Expenditures also dropped.

The rate of decline has accelerated since the denomination's General

Assembly voted to change the definition of marriage from "one man and one woman" to "two people, traditionally a man and a woman" in 2014. The change allows clergy to perform same-sex marriages.

PCUSA controversies are not limited to human sexual expression. At the church's most recent General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, in 2016, an Islamic leader offered a prayer during the service in which he referred to Mohammed as a prophet alongside Jesus and decried "bigots" and "Islamophobes." The prayer stirred up controversy and eventually precipitated an apology from PCUSA officials.

Political issues have also polarized the denomination in recent years. After a decade of heated debate, backtracking, and suspenseful votes, the PCUSA voted for divestment from three companies that do business with Israel. At 2016 General Assembly, the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement successfully prompted Presbyterian commissioners to pass a resolution stating that the PCUSA should: "Prayerfully study the call from Palestinian civil society for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against the state of Israel..."

Over the last forty years, the makeup of the United States has changed considerably, yet the PCUSA remains overwhelmingly homogeneous. According to 2016 statistics about the racial composition of congregations, the denomination is 90.93% white.

"As we are challenged to become a more racially diverse denomination in order to grow into the future, it is imperative that we invite new immigrants into our congregations as members," Nelson advised. ✝



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

The Rev. M Barclay, left, kneels at the Northern Illinois Conference's commissioning of provisional deacons on June 4, 2017, in St. Charles, Ill. (Photo: Anne Marie Gerhardt/Northern Illinois Conference)



First 'Non-Binary Gendered' Deacon Commissioned as UMC Considers Amendment to Include All 'Genders'

by John Lomperis

In June, the Northern Illinois Conference commissioned for deacon's orders the "first openly non-binary trans person" for ministry in the United Methodist Church.

The full inclusion of such persons in ordination could potentially be mandated in every region if United Methodist annual conferences meeting this summer vote to adopt Proposed Amendment #2. This amendment would change the UMC Constitution—the narrow section of the UMC *Discipline* that trumps all other parts of church law—to mandate absolute inclusion at all levels of denominational governance regardless of "gender," without making clear that this is limited to only male and female.

M Barclay does not identify as male or female, and insists on using "singular they pronouns" as Barclay no longer accepts being referred to with feminine pronouns such as "her" or "she."

Such pronoun preferences can get so confusing that reportedly even leading LGBTQ activists in the denomination could not agree on how to do it. When in my writings, I decline to join Barclay in denying the good, God-given gift of her female identity, it is not because of ill will. But among the things at stake in the language used in such matters are fundamental questions such as whether or not there is objective, physical reality about human bodies, or if people actually have the ability to redefine their own realities as

radically as an XX-chromosome woman declaring that she is no longer a woman. A key principle of psychological care is that when patients experience unhealthy fantasies and cannot accept certain realities, it is harmful to "play along" and speak and act as if fantasies were realities.

Barclay is no stranger to controversy. [IRD previously reported](#) on Barclay seeking (ultimately unsuccessfully) to be ordained in the more theologically diverse Southwest Texas Conference, while she was at that time openly cohabiting with her lesbian partner.

While seeking the affirmation of the United Methodist Church, Barclay is not seeking to pastor congregations. United Methodist deacons find their own employment and normally do not work as full-time congregational pastors. Instead, this clergy status gives Barclay a personal sense of affirmation, as well as some validation of her work in full-time LGBTQ activism in her role as the communications director for the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN). RMN is the largest unofficial liberal caucus group within the denomination, and recruits United Methodist clergy to openly break the United Methodist standards they have vowed to uphold against homosexual practice and other forms of sex outside of marriage.

[RMN was quick to celebrate](#) Barclay's approval for commissioning as a great leap forward for the LGBTQ cause within the UMC.

The declining Northern Illinois Conference has long been a hotbed of theological radicalism. Its former bishop, **Joseph Sprague**, publicly denied core Christian doctrines including the eternal divinity of Christ and his physical resurrection. Sprague's successor, **Hee-Soo Jung**, appointed a board of ordained ministry that [unanimously approved](#) a policy of publicly welcoming "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and straight candidates" for ministry.

In response to a Judicial Council ruling about how boards of ordained ministry must screen ordination candidates for compliance with biblical standards of sexual self-control, **Bishop Sally Dyck** (the current bishop) later ruled this policy "out of order" and the Northern Illinois Conference board of ordained ministry said that they would do the required work of [fully examining ordination candidates](#) for their commitment to these standards.

Approval of a transgendered individual for ministry is not the same sort of defiance as ordaining someone who is openly homosexually active.

The United Methodist Church's governing *Book of Discipline* is clear that homosexual practice is inherently "incompatible with Christian teaching," that the church does not recognize homosexual marriages, and that "self-avowed

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Sudden Financial Crisis Hits Yellowstone Methodists

by Jeffrey Walton



A swarm of earthquakes hitting the region surrounding Yellowstone National Park this summer captured the attention of geologists studying the volatile region. But United Methodists in the area are just now learning about a seismic shift of their own that threatens the continued operation of their conference.

“Unprecedented financial challenges have emerged in the last five months radically challenging our short term sustainability,” warned a presentation by the United Methodist Church’s Yellowstone Annual Conference on June 10. “Unfolding in 2017 is a[n] unprecedented level of deficit that could end normal operations of the conference.”

In February, IRD reported that some congregations in the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area—which includes the Yellowstone Annual Conference—were facing decreasing membership and financial contributions following the election, consecration, and appointment of the **Rev. Karen Oliveto** as bishop for the region. Oliveto, who is married to another woman, faces opposition from some United Methodists both within and outside of her Episcopal area.

Methodists in the region launched a “sustentation fund”—later re-styled a “generosity fund”—to compensate for financial “stress” in local congregations, but now problems with local congregation finances have manifested themselves at the conference level.

“We must decide and execute a course of action quickly, to be completed in the next 3–4 months,” the presentation urges.

A Sudden Crisis

While a scarcity of financial resources has afflicted the tiny, declining Yellowstone

Annual Conference for some time, the conference report is phrased in urgent language, describing a grim financial shortfall that has developed only in the past 4–5 months. Reasons cited include “weakened local churches due to death and loss of significant givers” and “reaction to [Oliveto’s] episcopal election”—which conference officials admit was a significant factor, if “only one of many.”

The Yellowstone Annual Conference has faced a loss of income of \$30,000 a year from 2014 through 2016, but the pre-

If Oliveto's appointment as bishop is indeed one of the contributing causes to a financial shortfall, she could step down to relieve some of the distress.

sentation reports that in 2017 this loss has grown to \$25,000 a month under 2016 income levels in 2017. Forecast income for 2017 is projected to be \$935,000, while the forecast deficit is \$303,356. At the start of 2017, conference reserves were only \$294,000.

“By year’s end most reserves will be depleted with no new income projected to continue conference operations,” the report states. Citing only three levers of control, the report concludes that the conference must decrease spending, increase income (through squeezing more money out of the congregations within the conference), and delve into the conference’s financial reserve.

Subtracting denomination-wide “general church” apportionments (the conference is planning to pay \$302,095, which would be slightly below average national and its own giving percentage levels for 2016), program and administrative staff (\$398,625), office expenses (\$62,000), and Cabinet Level Staff (\$297,488), only \$240,148 remains in the conference budget. Of this amount, all but \$51,250 is needed to pay retiree health-care, but \$188,898 is needed for remaining discretionary items—an amount dwarfed by the projected deficit.

Tough Decisions Ahead

Plans for borrowing funds, raising money from outside the conference, and squeezing more dollars out of struggling congregations—who have lost some of their own large contributors—are not sustainable.

All sources of significant spending reductions involve staff reductions, deep cuts to general church apportionments, and eliminating costs such as United Methodist campus ministry.

The presentation suggests increasing conference income through setting of fundraising goals for congregations as part of a conference-wide campaign. But the amount of new funds needed would be significant: to take no more than \$100,000 from reserve finds, approximately \$150,000 would need to be raised (or cut in spending) by the end of 2017.

“Extraordinary efforts will need to be taken,” the presentation warns. If fundraising is not successful, the annual conference must have a plan ready to execute in November/December to severely curtail operations of the conference.

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First 'Non-Binary Gendered' Deacon Commissioned as UMC Considers Amendment to Include All 'Genders'

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practicing homosexuals” are not to be ordained. These standards were strengthened by recent [Judicial Council rulings](#).

United Methodist teaching and standards are less explicit as they relate to transgenderism. General Conference rejected petitions that would have put the church on record as more clearly affirming or rejecting transgenderist ideology, which alleges there are more than two genders or that “fluidity” allows people to change their gender over time.

We are left in a less clear place. [IRD urges Christians](#) within and beyond the United Methodist denomination to think about ministry with individuals struggling with their gender identity (as with other forms of mental illness) in ways that are both truthful and compassionate.

If Proposed Amendment #2 is adopted, some activists will try to use the language of full inclusion at all levels of church governance, regardless of

“gender,” to mandate imposition of transgenderist ideology throughout the United Methodist Church, ending this discussion before it has even begun. ✚



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Hillary Clinton, Methodism & Progressivism

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Interestingly, Clinton’s retired minister book-writing friend self-describes as “a bit of a process theologian, which means that, as life goes along, I believe in an all-loving God who may not always be in control, rather than an all-powerful God who is not loving.” Process Theology, refined by Methodist theologian **John Cobb** in the 1960s/1970s, claims God is not omnipotent but constantly evolving in interaction with creation.

Process Theology is arguably an emasculated version of Methodist holiness

and perfectionism, believing God is perfecting creation while also being perfected with it. It’s a dated theological fad arisen at Methodist progressivism’s crest, and is mostly now confined to retired clergy.

Methodism’s creative contribution to political progressivism now seems mostly to have run its course, with the secular progressive heirs uninterested in the spiritual origins. But Clinton’s journey, with her minister friend’s withdrawn book, is important to understanding where we are today. ✚

IRD Diary: Unreached People Groups: Religious Liberty for Beautiful Feet

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hell are starkly involved. I’m not diminishing the importance of domestic religious freedom or the crucial witness of the persecuted Church. Both should remain priorities of American Christians. But comparing the loss of a business and loss of life to eternal separation from God can provide a more holistic perspective.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:14–16)

Missionaries not only carry the freedom of the Gospel to the unreached: They are messengers of the liberty to say yes to the love of God. For many, surviving the brutality of daily life is a struggle. Grace is in the grit. God is in the grind. They don’t have the luxury of the abstract. For them, religious liberty is simply the ability to ask their neighbors to choose Jesus. That’s it. Let’s not forget the ground they walk on or the people they reach. Let’s not forget these beautiful feet. ✚

Sudden Financial Crisis Hits Yellowstone Methodists

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In the presentation, turmoil or financial distress experienced by local congregations is not addressed. The concern is focused entirely upon a conference budget largely controlled by the bishop (Oliveto). If Oliveto’s appointment as bishop is indeed one of the contributing causes to a financial shortfall, she could step down to relieve some of the distress.

The Yellowstone Annual Conference is already proposing a [merger](#) with the neighboring Rocky Mountain Conference. It remains to be seen if the financial difficulties will accelerate or force the hand of the proposal for Yellowstone to merge into a new Mountain Sky Annual Conference.

The Yellowstone Annual Conference is among the most liberal within the denomination. At its gathering last year, the group of churches in Wyoming, Montana, and a sliver of Idaho voted to [affirm abortion provider Planned Parenthood](#) and a host of other progressive causes tied up in sexuality and gender identity. ✚



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

IRD Diary: Unreached People Groups: Religious Liberty for Beautiful Feet

by Daniella Royer

My earliest memories involve a lot of staring. At kids my age in tattered rags, starving on the streets, eyes desperate for comfort. Every day, on my walk to get bread, a blind amputee would be hunched on the curbside, never failing to shake his cup, eyes hollowed by the harrows of hopelessness. To this day, the clinking of coins always brings me back to the same street. The same kids. The same eyes. Every single day.

I grew up as a missionary kid in the Middle East, in a city of one million people and zero surviving churches. My parents would go on to plant a church that met inside our apartment. Outside of my home, “Jesus” did not exist in the vernacular vocabulary.

Now, there are multiple churches on each corner of my Oklahoma neighborhood. Cultural Christianity of the “Bible Belt” is tangible. Here, I hear “Jesus” almost every hour.

After a decade living in the U.S., I continuously struggle to reconcile these two realities. And I fear that I’m forgetting that increasingly unfamiliar hopelessness.

“Religious liberty” is back in the news. I’m not sure I know what it means. When I ask folks to name the first thing they imagine after hearing these two words, I hear everything from “ISIS” to “gay wedding cakes.” [Religious liberty in America](#) is under increasing assault. [Cultural apathy and even animosity of my generation](#) towards faith in the public square are causes for grave concern. But there is

always a bigger picture.

Even in an international context, most of the young Christians I know view religious freedoms primarily through the lens of the persecuted Church. Daily news of Jesus followers losing their lives for their faith overwhelm and desensitize us to the actualities of being a non-Western Christian. But there is still a bigger picture.

This may be hard to comprehend for Christians living in a country enveloped in tepid cultural Christianity exacerbated by rampant individualism, but there are still cities in the world with no Christians. No Church. [Joshua Project](#) defines an “unreached people group” (UPG) as “a people group whose number of followers of Christ and amount of resources make outside assistance necessary to reach the rest of the group with the gospel.” The 100 largest UPGs include 1,866,000,000 people, or 25 percent of the world population. One out of four people alive today is in an unreached people group. Eighty-one percent of the world’s Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian.

For every one Christian missionary, there are approximately 300,000 Muslims, 175,000 Hindus, 170,000 Buddhists, 80,000 nonreligious people, and 15,000 adherents to tribal religions. **Sixty percent of unreached people groups live in countries closed to missionaries from North America.**



The Lu Mien people of southeast Asia; also below (Photo: [prayforthemien.com](#))



Examining North American Christians’ [giving to foreign missions](#) is even more telling. Eighty-seven percent goes to work among already Christian groups. Twelve percent is sent to non-believers within reach of the Gospel. Embarrassingly, only one percent of our giving is directed toward unreached people groups. The missionaries in organizations such as [Anglican Frontier Missions](#), [Operation Mobilization](#), and [Ethnos360](#) are giving their lives to bring Jesus into foreign territory. Where is our awareness of them? Where is this same zeal for religious liberty?

The Church will continue to thrive under persecution. But for missionaries trying to evangelize unreached people groups, religious liberty means more than advocating for the persecuted Church. For them, it’s not a matter of suffering the evils of earth with the assurance of heaven. It’s a matter of eternal destiny. Often uncomfortable ideas of heaven and

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Daniella Royer was a summer intern at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.



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