

IRD Picks Top 10 Christian Stories of 2015

A professor suspended for saying Muslims and Christians worship the same God, church disputes and cheating pastors exposed in a hacking scandal made news throughout 2015. Below are the Institute on Religion and Democracy's top church news stories for the year.

Evangelicals Respond to Supreme Court Marriage Ruling: The U.S. Supreme Court recognized a Constitutional right to marriage between couples of the same sex. Nearly 100 church leaders signed on to an Evangelical Declaration on Marriage stating "Evangelical churches must be faithful to the biblical witness on marriage regardless of the cultural shift." Meanwhile, social justice activist Tony Campolo and former *Christianity Today* editor David Neff announced their affirmation of same sex couples, signaling a gradual movement among politically liberal evangelicals towards a reappraisal of historic Christian views on marriage and sexual ethics.

Indiana Religious Liberty Law Prompts Backlash: The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination was one of several groups to announce that its governing convention may not meet in Indiana after the state approved its own version of the longstanding federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The *Indianapolis Star* described the law as prohibiting "state or local governments from substantially burdening a person's ability to exercise their religion – unless the government can show that it has a compelling interest and that the action is the least-restrictive means of achieving it." The state legislature quickly modified the law to specify that it could not be used as a basis for discrimination.

Christians Back Businesses under Attack: A small town Indiana pizzeria experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune after

shutting its doors in the face of condemnation and threats. The owners of Memories Pizza in Walkerton, Indiana came under attack after answering a question from a television reporter in which one family member said they would refuse for religious reasons to cater a hypothetical gay wedding. The "Support Memories Pizza" page on took in contributions from 29,160 people.

Duke University Reverses Course on Muslim Call to Prayer: Plans to begin issuing the Muslim call to prayer from a bell tower at North Carolina's Duke University were withdrawn after public outcry. Duke has historic ties to the United Methodist Church, and the chapel's associate dean for religious life defended the initial plans as representing "a larger commitment to religious pluralism that is at the heart of Duke's mission." Evangelist Franklin Graham was among those critical of the proposal.

Wheaton College Suspends Hijab Professor: The "Harvard of Evangelicalism" made national news after a political science professor donned an Islamic head covering to express solidarity with Muslims during the season of Advent. Larycia Hawkins explained her action on Facebook, saying "we worship the same God," with the evangelical Illinois school confirming her suspension "pending the full review of which she is entitled as a tenured faculty member."

Schools Part with Council for Christian Colleges and Universities over Marriage: Goshen College and Eastern Mennonite University, two longtime members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), voluntarily withdrew from the organization after the two institutions changed their hiring guidelines to accept faculty who do not hold to the traditional Christian doctrine of marriage. Two other schools, Oklahoma Wesleyan University and Union University, earlier withdrew their membership in CCCU over the summer, citing dissatisfaction with the council's lengthy consulting process to address the matter.

Few Christians among Resettled Syrian Refugees: Civil War in Syria displaced millions. Few Syrian religious minorities – including Christians, who made up 10 percent of the country's population – were admitted to the United States despite being targeted for death, sexual slavery, cultural eradication and forced conversion. According to the State Department, resettled Syrian refugees were 97 percent Muslim. The Hudson Institute's Nina Shea showed that in the past five years only 53 out of 2003 Syrian refugees accepted by the U.S. are Christian.

United Church of Christ Divests from Israel: Legislation ending denominational investments with companies that do business with Israel was passed 508-124 at the United Church of Christ (UCC) General Synod in June. The UCC, which has just under one million members, voted to divest from companies conducting business in "Israel-occupied Palestinian territories" and boycott products made in those territories. Also this summer, Mennonites decided to postpone a vote on divestment for two years, while Episcopalians easily defeated a divestment proposal at their General Convention.

Ashley Madison Hack Rattles Churches: A hacked database full of customer data had far-reaching consequences, with Tabletalk Editor R.C. Sproul, Jr. and Family Research Council Action Executive Director Josh Duggar both admitting to viewing the adultery website. In his *Christianity Today* article, "My Pastor Is on the Ashley Madison List," Ed Stetzer, the Executive Director of LifeWay Research, estimated 400 church leaders, including pastors and lay leaders throughout the U.S. and Canada, were looking for an affair through the site.

Liberal Clergy Praise Planned Parenthood 'Doing God's Work:' Following the release of undercover video showing Planned Parenthood officials discussing financial compensation for fetal organs, a group of religious left officials including those from the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) released a statement calling for

continued federal funding for Planned Parenthood, the largest provider of abortions in the United States. Evangelical and Roman Catholic officials expressed outrage at the practice of harvesting organs from aborted children.