

The Top 10 Church News Stories of 2014

A Sudanese woman sentenced to die for her faith, church disputes and friction between religious freedom and LGBTQ causes made news throughout 2014. Below are IRD's top church news stories for the year.

1) Christian Woman in Sudan Sentenced to Death on Charges of Apostasy, Adultery: A Christian woman sentenced to death by a Sudanese court after refusing to recant her faith was eventually freed after widespread outcry. Mariam Yahya Ibrahim was charged with apostasy and adultery for marrying a South Sudanese Christian man and gave birth to a daughter while in shackles.

2) Supreme Court Rules for Hobby Lobby in Religious Liberty Case: The U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Obamacare's HHS mandate compelling religious employers to subsidize insurance for contraceptives and abortifacients. The case split religious groups, with oldline churches largely endorsing the mandate while Catholic Bishops, Orthodox Jews, Evangelicals and Christian Colleges identified the mandate as an assault on religious liberty.

3) Presbyterians Divest from Israel: Amid spiraling membership, overtures to redefine marriage to a relationship between any "two people" and ending denominational investments with companies that do business with Israel were adopted at the Presbyterian Church (.) General Assembly in June. Overtures required church agencies to divest themselves of holdings in Motorola Solutions, Hewlett Packard and Caterpillar, which all sell non-lethal equipment used by the Israeli military.

4) World Vision Reverses Employee Policy on Same-Sex Marriage:

World Vision USA, the Christian international humanitarian organization, reversed a policy announced only two days prior to change its conduct policies to permit employees in same-sex marriages. World Vision's president and board chair apologized and reaffirmed the group's policy of "sexual abstinence for all single employees and faithfulness within the Biblical covenant of marriage between a man and a woman."

5) Supreme Court Prayer Ruling Protects Freedom of Religion and Speech: U.S. Supreme Court justices ruled that legislative bodies such as city councils can begin their meetings with prayer. The court ruled 5 to 4 that Christian prayers given before meetings of the town council of Greece, New York, did not violate the constitutional prohibition against government establishment of religion.

6) Christian Leaders Stand in Solidarity with Imperiled Religious Communities: More than 150 American Christian leaders, including IRD, issued a call to action in response to a crisis facing ancient faith communities. Prominent American Christian leaders released a "Pledge of Solidarity & Call to Action" on behalf of Christians and other religious communities in Egypt, Iraq and Syria who are increasingly threatened in the lands they have inhabited for centuries.

7) Methodist Same-Sex Disobedience: The clergy credentials of defrocked United Methodist Pastor Frank Schaefer were restored after an initial conviction of violating the denomination's ban on same-sex marriage was overturned on a technicality by a regional appeals panel. A New York bishop dropped clergy trials for same-sex ceremonies, with retired minister and past dean of Yale Divinity School Thomas Ogletree facing no punishment for conducting a same-sex wedding.

8) Harvard Black Satanic Mass: Plans for a Satanic black mass at Harvard University drew criticism from the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. The Harvard Extension Cultural Studies Club partnered for the event with the Satanic Temple of New

York, which eventually relocated the ceremony off campus. Harvard's president called hosting the black mass "abhorrent" for mocking Catholicism, while she defended Harvard's commitment to "free expression" and attended a packed Catholic Eucharistic Holy Hour on campus.

9) Activists Seek to Divide U.S. Evangelicals and Israel amid Gaza Conflict: Conservative Christians witnessed a new movement of young activists seeking change enthusiastic support for Israel. Proclaiming a "pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, pro-peace" stance, activists at Bethlehem's "Christ at the Checkpoint" conference connected to Wheaton College, suburban Chicago's influential Willow Creek megachurch and World Vision sought to shift U.S. Evangelicals away from historically strong support for Israel.

10) Nigerian Schoolgirls Abducted by Boko Haram: Over 200 Nigerian schoolgirls remain captives of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram. Word of the girls' plight spread quickly through the #bringbackourgirls hashtag. Escaped girls told of forced marriages and conversions to Islam. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Boko Haram's leader threatened to sell the girls "in the market" and referred to them as "slaves."