

IRD Points to Top Church News Stories of 2011

Mainline church disputes, threats to religious freedom and budget battles made news throughout 2011. Below are the Institute on Religion and Democracy's top church news stories for the year.

Church officials respond to the death of Osama Bin Laden: Torn by pacifist misgivings, many mainline Protestant officials and liberal evangelicals reacted negatively to the May 1 killing of al-Qaida's chief terrorist. Officials of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the National Council of Churches refrained from agreeing with President Obama's assertion that "justice has been done" in the U.S. military raid. Others, like emergent church guru Brian McLaren, bemoaned young Americans who celebrated in the streets. These religious voices implied that lethal force was never acceptable.

Church Battles on Human Sexuality, Scriptural Authority Escalate: With the church trial of an openly partnered lesbian United Methodist Minister convicted of performing a same-sex union in violation of her denomination's Book of Discipline and two lesbian Episcopal priests married by their Massachusetts bishop, 2011 was a year in which church disputes over sexuality only intensified. Episcopal Church membership dropped below 2 million as disputes over the authority and interpretation of scripture continued to take a toll on the dwindling mainline churches.

Joy and Tears in the Sudan: A successful and largely peaceful Southern Sudanese independence referendum created the new country of South Sudan, home to millions of Christians. Hardship in Sudan continued however, with violence against the people of the Nuba Mountains by the Islamist government in Khartoum, as well as northern air strikes against Christian

and Muslim refugees. Meanwhile, even amid the strife, Sudan's Anglicans un-invited the head of the liberal U.S. Episcopal Church and recognized the new and orthodox Anglican Church in North America.

Presbyterians in Disarray: Repeal of the PC (USA) "Fidelity and Chastity" clergy standard split traditionalists and liberals in America's largest Presbyterian denomination. The decision by most local presbyteries to remove the clergy vow of fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness caused conservatives to reexamine their place in the 2.3 million-member denomination, while the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico dramatically severed its connection to the U.S. church.

Christians Battle over Budget, Spending: With a Jim Wallis led "Circle of Protection" coalition opposing restraints on the growth of federal social programs and "Christians for a Sustainable Economy," which included IRD, opposing endless government debt, Christian groups were heavily involved in the budget and spending confrontations that played out in Washington, D.C. Religion also struggled to claim a place in the largely secular Occupy Wall Street Movement. Liberal clergy embraced the occupiers, only to see Trinity Church Wall Street come under attack for resisting the group's property use demands.

Persecution of Christian Churches: Religious minorities came under increasing pressure in 2011. Iranian evangelical Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani continues to fight a death sentence for apostasy, while villages and churches were attacked and burned in Nigeria. Moderate Muslim officials were assassinated in Pakistan, where anti-blasphemy laws were used as an excuse to attack Christian communities.