

# How an Oklahoma pastor helped his church officially support transgender rights

*Christian denominations took stances on issues like transgender care, Christian nationalism*



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The Oklahoman



*The Rev. David Wheeler is seen on Sept. 7 at the New Covenant Church in Oklahoma City. Sarah Phipps/The Oklahoman*

## Anti-transgender legislation and Christian nationalism.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada recently expressed its views on these hot button issues at the denomination's recent General Assembly, approving a statement opposing legislation "harmful" to transgender and "gender-diverse" individuals, while also supporting a statement voicing objections to Christian nationalism.

The Rev. David Wheeler, of Oklahoma City, helped draft a resolution titled "Invitation To Oppose Anti-Trans Legislation and Affirm the Dignity of Transgender and Gender-Diverse people." He said Christian denominations have different interpretations on various issues, but he felt it was "a Christian responsibility" to stand up for a group he feels has been singled out for discrimination through anti-transgender legislation passed by numerous state legislatures, including Oklahoma's.

"I see Jesus as the ultimate 'includer,' and that was always the movement of the Church. In fact, Christianity includes much of Jewish faith and tradition and Scripture," said Wheeler, senior minister of New Covenant Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 12000 N Rockwell.

### **More: Pro-LGBTQ+ Free Mom Hugs Conference will debut in Oklahoma City**

"That's always been, to me, the trajectory of the Christian faith — to draw the circle wide, and not to narrow it."

The Rev. Don Heath, co-pastor of Edmond Trinity Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 1400 NW 178, was particularly enthusiastic about his denomination's resolution opposing Christian nationalism.

In its statement, the denomination defined Christian nationalism as "a cultural framework that fuses a radically exclusionary form of Christian supremacist identity with the political and civic participation of a nation's citizens through the appropriation of Christian language and imagery to amass political power."

"It's not really Christianity, and it's not really patriotism," said Heath, whose church held a forum in July that addressed the issue. "It's really more of a secular movement to attach the Christian name to a right-wing ideology." Heath said the Disciples of Christ General Assembly resolution regarding transgender and gender-diverse individuals was brought up for an emergency vote, meaning it was allowed to be considered even though it came up after the time



*Don Heath, DOUG HOKE/THE OKLAHOMAN*

period for the 2023 proposed resolutions had passed. Heath said he thought Disciples of Christ were alarmed at the numerous anti-trans laws that passed in recent legislative sessions and that's why there was a consensus that the topic needed to be addressed immediately.

In part, the resolution encourages Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada to "uplift religious texts and stand in solidarity with transgender and gender-diverse individuals against harm being done against them often with the misuse of religious texts and symbols."

The resolution also called on Disciples of Christ to designate themselves and their spaces as "safe spaces" for transgender and gender-diverse people, and encouraged members of the faith group to educate themselves on pronoun usage and to write their legislatures in support of the transgender and gender-diverse community.



*The Rev. David Wheeler is seen on Sept. 7 at the New Covenant Church in Oklahoma City. Sarah Phipps/The Oklahoman*

## Views differ between Oklahoma groups

The faith group was among other denominations who shared views on this topic and other issues through resolutions and statements during meetings held during the summer months.

The Disciples of Christs' stance of support for transgender rights is in stark contrast to a resolution approved at the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in June. Delegates, called messengers, gathered for the annual meeting of the the nation's largest Protestant faith group where they approved a resolution "Opposing Gender Transitions."

The statement did not generate much buzz, perhaps because attention at the time was primarily focused on the denomination's face off with the Rev. Rick Warren over female pastors, along with a task force's report on sex abuse reforms. Also, Southern Baptists have made statements on gender identity and gender transition in the past, notably with a resolution in 2014 and in the denomination's Baptist Faith & Message.

While the Southern Baptist Convention's most recent resolution extended the love of Christ and compassion to individuals "experiencing identity or body-related distress and/or those undergoing or who have undergone gender transition interventions," the statement condemned "gender-affirming care and all forms of "gender transition" interventions.

"We oppose 'gender transition' interventions as a futile quest to change one's sex and as a direct assault on God's created order," the resolution stated, while calling on legislatures to reverse laws and policies that support such interventions, undermine parental rights or create "supposed sanctuary jurisdictions" that facilitate those interventions to minors.

The Rev. Blake Gideon, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Edmond, said he supported the resolution.

"The Bible is clear — we are created either male or female. To doubt this is to doubt God's revealed will," Gideon said.

"People who struggle with their identity must look to Christ. He created them, specifically as they are, for His glory. Transgenderism is not only against God, but against the true wellbeing of people. It perverts the family and adds to the moral downgrade of society. Transgenderism is a lie against God's creative purpose. However, there is tremendous hope in Christ for all who are willing to repent and believe."





*The Rev. David Wheeler is seen on Sept. 7 at the New Covenant Church in Oklahoma City. Sarah Phipps/The Oklahoman*



*The Rev. Pamela Holt, PROVIDED*

Southern Baptist Convention resolutions, according to the denomination's official website, have "traditionally been defined as an expression of opinion or concern" and is not used to direct an entity of the denomination to specific action "other than to communicate the opinion or concern expressed." The denomination is Oklahoma's largest faith group, with more than 1,700 churches across the state.

Similarly, the Rev. Pamela Holt, regional minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma, said resolutions approved by delegates at the denomination's recent General Assembly meeting are not binding – they are not "edicts" and not every Disciples of Christ church in the state (there are 121 Disciples of Christ houses of worship

in Oklahoma) may support these stances. But, she said Disciples of Christ are from diverse backgrounds and they hold that diversity together carefully, with "honesty and transparency and care for everybody on their journey."

"So, our General Assembly does not dictate how a church should believe or act but we have overarching suggestions that we try to live into," Holt said.

Holt said the resolution opposing Christian nationalism showed that Disciples of Christ know about this issue.

"I am super proud of our larger body of church that is aware of and very attentive to the issues surrounding Christian nationalism," she said.

## **Christian national ideology should be called out as heresy, pastor says**

Heath said a couple of people spoke against the Christian nationalism statement, but when the Disciples of Christ took a voice vote there were only a few scattered "no" votes.

In part, the resolution called for the denomination's leaders and members to speak out "boldly" against Christian nationalism "which has taken on more aggressive and overt form" in the U.S. and Canada.

"Christian Nationalism promotes, with violent rhetoric and authoritarian approaches to civic life and public policy, an extremist ideology of social hierarchy, including white supremacy, antisemitism (and other forms of religious bigotry), xenophobia, persecution and scapegoating of LGBTQ+ persons, misogyny, and ableism; and ... appropriates the name of Jesus Christ and the language and imagery of scripture to promote this ideology, in direct contradiction to the gospel Jesus preached, a liberative and loving gospel that the Christian Church 26 (Disciples of Christ) cherishes," the statement read.

Heath said he felt it was important that his denomination speak out against Christian nationalism ideology because he thinks it may be found in many churches across the country and should be called out as heresy.

He said there was a general sense that the resolution would be approved because the recent General Assembly meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, included workshops on identifying Christian nationalism, how to resist and confront it. Also, a dinner at the gathering featuring an author who has written books on the topic, quickly sold out.

"There was also lot of interest in it because it's popping up in legislation in the states," he said.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, senior minister of East Sixth Street (Disciples of Christ), 1139 NE 6, also called the ideology heresy. He said it is often difficult to get a resolution before the General Assembly for a vote so he was pleased to see the Christian nationalism statement come up for a vote.

"I was glad to see my church church stand up and say this is who we are," he said. "We don't have to hide that or be ashamed — we need it on the record that this is who we are and we stand against this."

Jackson said he remembered earlier this year, there was a movement to get Disciples of Christ ministers to discuss the Christian issue of Christian nationalism on a Sunday at their churches so that people would be able to "address it as a heresy." Jackson said he had already been talking about the topic.

"I was like 'Dude, I just preached about this last week,'" he said.

"I mean, this is not a right or left (political) issue. This is a heresy because you are twisting and bending and perverting the Gospel."

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