

Ten most significant religion stories of 2022 named

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—News of the past 12 months tells a story of deepening division in American and global society, as issues from abortion to same-sex marriage to antisemitism seemed not only to inflame debate between individuals but to destabilize institutions.

Faith communities and organizations, often at the center of some of the year's most indelible moments, were no less vulnerable to these roiling shifts.

Religion News Service editors selected what they considered the 10 most significant faith-related stories in 2022.

1. The U.S. Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*

When Justice Samuel Alito's draft opinion [in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*](#) leaked, it gave the country, and activists on both sides, time to prepare for the Court's 6-3 decision to return abortion law to the states.



Anti-abortion protesters gather

outside the Supreme Court in Washington, Friday, June 24, 2022. The Supreme Court ended constitutional protections for abortion that had been in place nearly 50 years, a decision by its conservative majority to overturn the court's landmark abortion cases. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

Christian-run pregnancy centers vowed to expand, while pro-choice advocates mounted protests and prepared lawsuits, including a synagogue in Palm Beach County, Fla., that sued Gov. Ron DeSantis over the state's imminent ban on abortions after 15-weeks of pregnancy.

The victory at the court for religious conservatives, 50 years in the making, proved to be a mixed blessing. Voters in Kansas and Michigan rejected ballot measures favoring strong abortion restrictions and pro-choice sentiment seemed to fuel the Democrats' hold in the 2022 midterm elections. Muslim, Jewish and Christian faith leaders put out statements affirming abortion rights.

Even Pope Francis, receiving U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the days following the Dobbs ruling, tacitly rejected ongoing efforts by U.S. Catholic bishops to deny Communion to Pelosi and other pro-choice Catholic politicians.

2. Russia invades Ukraine

Whatever prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to order an [invasion of Ukraine](#) in February, his ally in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, made clear Russia's "special military operation" was

motivated at least in part by moral considerations. He cited the West's spiritual and cultural imperialism, marked by the proliferation of "gay parades," an apparent reference to LGBTQ Pride Day celebrations common in Western countries.



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, on Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

The war for Ukraine's soul is playing out more concretely in the conflict between Kirill's Russian Orthodox Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which declared its independence under its own patriarch in 2018.

For Kirill and the Russian leaders, political and religious, said one U.S. Orthodox Christian leader, "The idea that the Ukrainians could have an independent church not under the jurisdiction of Moscow is just unfathomable."

[Kirill's support for the war](#) created cleavages within his own church and brought opprobrium from faith leaders around the world. The World Council of Churches considered expelling the Russian Orthodox delegation, while Pope Francis excoriated the war, even as he tempered his direct criticism of Kirill and Russia in hopes of keeping lines of dialogue open.

3. Antisemitic attacks and rhetoric continue to mount



An interfaith group of clergy gathered at Good Shepherd Roman Catholic Community in Colleyville to support law enforcement and the families of those taken hostage in the 11-hour standoff Jan. 15 at Congregation Beth Israel. Pastor Bob Roberts of Northwood Church in Keller stands far left next to Azhar Azeez; Rabbi Andrew Paley is at center front and Imam Omar Suleiman is behind him, wearing a Muslim head covering. (Via Twitter January 16 / Distributed by RNS)

Two weeks into the new year, an armed British Muslim entered Congregation Beth Israel, a [synagogue in Colleyville](#) and held its rabbi and three others hostage for 11 hours.

The incident was the latest to rock American Jews, who have watched as anti-Jewish conspiracies, stemming back to the Charlottesville and the 2018 massacre at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue, have gained footholds across the country. The Colleyville incident, which spurred new security

measures, was followed by reports of physical abuses and taunts of Jews on the streets of U.S. cities.

The violence has been matched by rhetoric from white Christian nationalists and the rapper Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, who in October began a series of antisemitic statements, mainly on Twitter, mischaracterizing or threatening Jews, while claiming that Black people themselves are Jews.

The rising antisemitism prompted the White House to hold a roundtable on how to combat it, led by Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff, who said: “We cannot make this normal. We cannot.”

4. Christian nationalism pushes into the political mainstream

As the anniversary of the Jan. 6 insurrection approached, experts were concerned [the attack on the Capitol had encouraged Christian nationalist ideas](#), not only among extremist groups but also members of Congress and moderate politicians.



Gov. Ron DeSantis appears in a controversial ad titled “God Made a Fighter.” (Video Screen Grab)

Those fears seemed to be realized as Gen. Michael Flynn and pastor Greg

Locke held rallies that were part political event, part religious revival and as candidates in the midterm elections, most notably state senator Doug Mastriano in his bid for Pennsylvania governor, fused Christianity and patriotism in increasingly blatant fashion.

By September, a survey showed 3-of-4 Republican evangelical Christians would like to see the United States declared a Christian nation.

Mastriano lost his election, but more potent candidates have signaled that they will tap Christian nationalist themes. Weeks after announcing his re-election campaign, Donald Trump dined with the rapper Ye and Nick Fuentes, a conservative commentator and passionate white Catholic nationalist, while Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Trump's biggest rival for the Republican nomination, ran commercials late in his gubernatorial run titled "[God made a fighter](#)."

5. United Methodist churches move to begin schism

With the UMC's General Conference meeting originally scheduled for 2020 postponed for a third time to 2024, many [conservative Methodists gave up waiting](#) for a vote to approve an orderly dissolution of the 54-year-old denomination over LGBTQ issues and began [disaffiliating from their regional bodies](#), known as annual conferences.

Some joined the newly launched Global Methodist Church, while other large churches are going their own way, or planning to form smaller networks. Still others have chosen to sue the UMC to free themselves of the financial obligations that are part of the existing disaffiliation process.

Leaders of the UMC largely have supported churches who have applied to leave, while cautioning that they won't abide churches that foment schism or spread misinformation about the reasons for their departure.

6. Hindu nationalism makes inroads in United States

The Hindu nationalist movement that has gripped India since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014 found echoes in the Indian American community, including disturbing signs of growing anti-Muslim sentiment.

Much of the fallout has occurred on American campuses, where life on campus has been politicized for many Hindu students, while some Hindu groups have protested a heightened awareness of caste discrimination as a form of Hinduphobia in itself.

7. Pope Francis travels to Canada to apologize for mistreatment of indigenous people

After meeting with Indigenous people at the Vatican in March to hear accounts of historic abuse in church-run residential schools in Canada, Pope Francis announced he would go on a "journey of reconciliation" to Iqaluit, the tiny capital of Canada's northernmost province, Nunavut, to [apologize for the mistreatment and cultural assimilation](#) indigenous communities suffered at the hands of Catholic clergy.

On his three-day trip, Francis also held up indigenous people as models of caring for the environment and respect for elders, and urged young people, "supported by the example of your elders," to "care for the earth, care for your people, care for your history."

The apologies were met with relief from many indigenous leaders, but also brought criticism from survivors and families of other indigenous communities who did not see the apology as enough.

8. LGBTQ faculty and students stake a claim on religious campuses

The slow fracturing of religious colleges over the affirmation of LGBTQ students and faculty broke into public view this year as students and faculty pressured school administrators to confront their policies and the theology behind them.

Calvin College, a flagship school of Reformed Christianity, trustees [allowed faculty members to dissent](#) from a confession of faith that regards sex outside of heterosexual marriage as sinful.

At Seattle Pacific University, associated with the Free Methodist Church, faculty and students sued the board to end a policy barring people in same-sex relationships from being hired.

While conservative Christian schools were cited as “unsafe” for LGBTQ students, Yeshiva University in New York was ordered by a court to recognize an LGBTQ club the school claimed would violate its Orthodox Jewish values.

9. Southern Baptist Convention confronts its history on sexual abuse

In Anaheim, Calif., messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting in June [approved a series of reforms](#) to address sexual abuse in the nation’s largest Protestant denomination—including the creation of a website that will track abusive pastors and church workers.



Anderson Cooper of 60 Minutes interviewed SBC President Bart Barber. (Video Screen Grab)

They were spurred in part by a report released a month earlier that found SBC leaders had downplayed the issue of abuse in local churches for years while demonizing abuse survivors as enemies of the church.

At the same gathering, the delegates elected as SBC president Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, who in personal statements and in an [appearance on 60 Minutes](#), has sought to hold individual pastors and the convention at large accountable for its attitudes toward sexual misconduct.

10. Big and small U.S. religious groups welcome a tide of refugees



Pavlo Romaniuk said members of First Baptist Church in Hallsville opened their hearts to his family when they relocated as refugees from Ukraine. (Photo / Ken Camp)

In what one aid official called a “return to moral leadership,” the Biden administration proposed in September accepting up to 125,000 refugees to the United States for the second year in a row. In the previous months, thousands fled Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, while nearly 60,000 Venezuelans made contact with U.S. border authorities.

Many of these people will be resettled by nine [faith-based organizations designated by the federal government](#) as official partners. One of those nine is the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, which in November received a \$15 million donation from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

In June, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Lutheran World Federation and HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), announced they are strengthening their cooperation to provide a more effective response.

Their effort in many places will be buttressed by the work of [individual churches whose volunteers mobilized to provide homes and support](#).