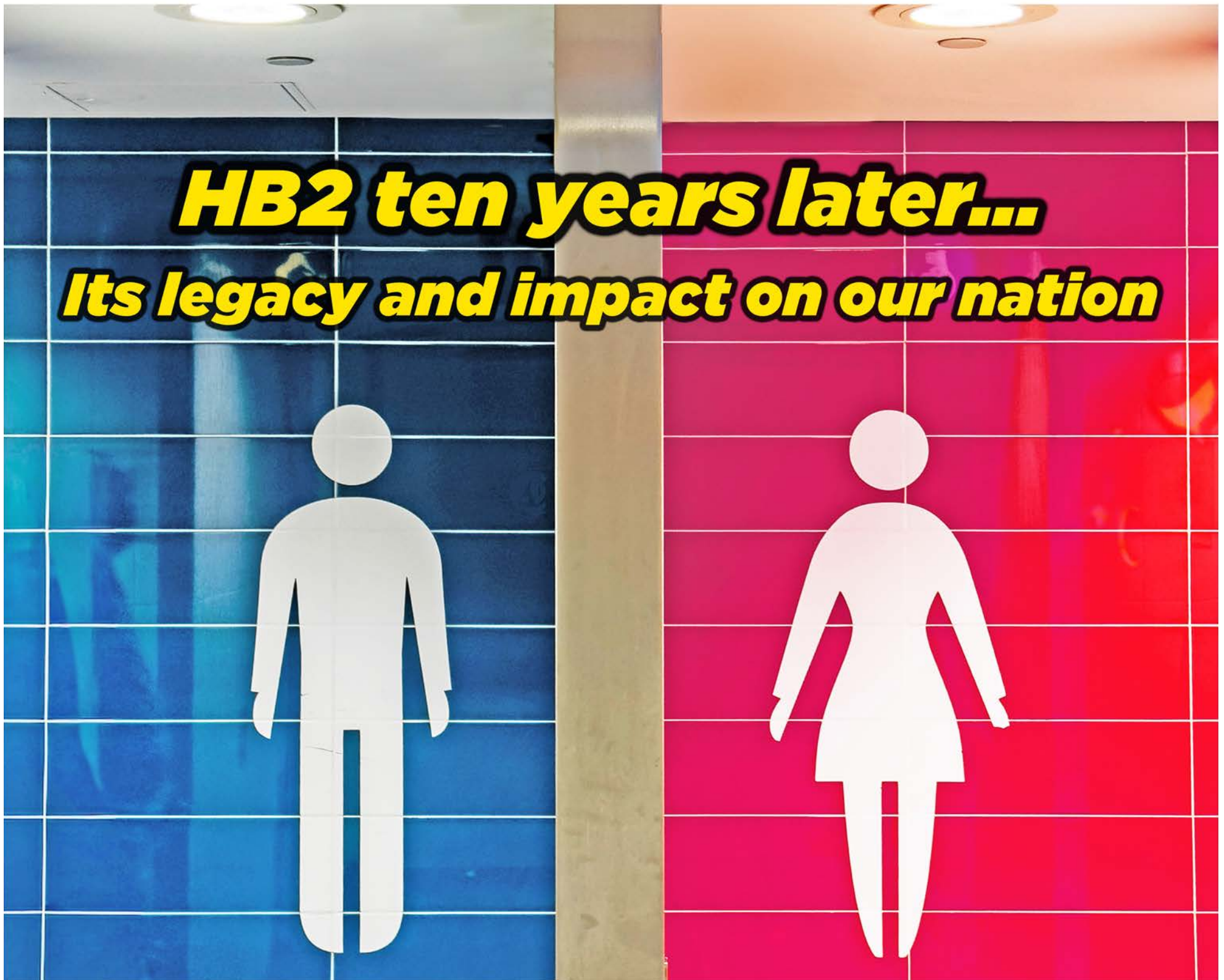


**Our democracy is at risk!**  
**If we are complacent it will FALL**



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### Mission:

The focus of *Qnotes* is to serve the LGBTQ and straight ally communities of the Charlotte region, North Carolina and beyond, by featuring arts, entertainment, news and views content in print and online that directly enlightens, informs and engages the readers about LGBTQ life and social justice issues.

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### Ellen DeGeneres speaks out on Renee Good

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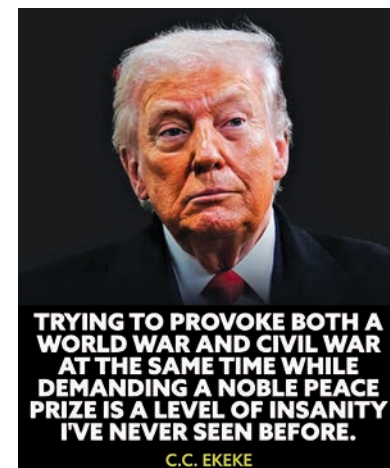
### Hate images found at Shalom Park

Antisemitic signs bearing a swastika and noose were found hung on buildings at the Jewish Community Center at Shalom Park. Charlotte residents have rallied around the city's Jewish community after the signs were discovered on the morning of January 20.

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# Is anti-LGBTQ+ bias on the rise in America?

Studies have shown a reported increase in resentment of the LGBTQ+ population in the US



by Taylor Heeden Larkins  
Qnotes Staff Writer

In today's day and age, some people feel identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community puts a target on your back. Whether it's sneers from strangers as you walk hand in hand with your partner or the brigade of conservative politicians filing bills to legislate discrimination against trans folks, a palpable disdain toward queer-identifying Americans seems to be hanging in the air.

And now, there's data suggesting acceptance of LGBTQ+ people has decreased according to Tessa E.S. Charlesworth and Eli J. Finkel, both of whom are research psychologists who study bias and political partisanship and wrote a guest essay for The New York Times on the matter.

A study conducted by Charlesworth receiving 7.1 million responses from Americans collected from 2007 to 2020 had researchers track both explicit bias and implicit bias toward LGBTQ+ related topics. Across every U.S. state and demographic group, anti-gay bias plummeted — by roughly 75 percent on explicit measures and 65 percent on implicit ones, on average. Forecasting models suggested that, at that pace, anti-gay bias could hit zero as early as 2022.

An analysis of 2.5 million additional survey responses collected from Americans from early 2021 through 2024 shows that progress has reversed. Anti-gay bias rose by about 10 percent in just four years.

Bias also increased toward Black, darker-skinned, older, disabled and overweight people, though by smaller margins. As attitudes toward gay people improved faster than others before 2020, they have since worsened more sharply.

The shift was most pronounced among Americans under 25. Young adults showed faster growth in bias toward marginalized groups — especially gay people — than older age groups. While conservatives recorded the steepest increases, anti-gay bias also rose among liberals.



Have you experienced anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination?

rights. If that were so, you would expect increases in anti-trans bias to be meaningfully correlated with subsequent increases in anti-gay bias, which the research does not show," Charlesworth and Finkel write.

"The second hypothesis is that the anti-gay backlash reflects the rise in moral panic language about sexual grooming, the notion that gay adults are recruiting or influencing children to become gay. But the research shows no evidence of spikes in grooming discourse (measured through Google searches) that are meaningfully correlated with subsequent spikes in anti-gay bias."

Research from the Pew Research Center supports this claim by Charlesworth and Finkel. A May 2025 report from the Pew Research Center

are nonbinary (14 percent) or transgender (13 percent). And over half (52 percent) say there's **not much or no acceptance at all** for transgender people, with 44 percent saying this is also the case for non-binary people.

In the same report, survey respondents were asked about acceptance now versus 10 years ago. Most LGBTQ adults say acceptance has grown over the past decade for gay and lesbian people, with 82 percent saying there is now much or somewhat more acceptance. Majorities say the same about bisexual people (76 percent), transgender people (66 percent) and nonbinary people (64 percent).

Even among those who say acceptance remains limited, most still report that it

percent of Americans expressed support for same-sex marriage.

However, this report also noted majorities of gay or lesbian adults (73 percent) and transgender adults (68 percent) say they have been subject to slurs or jokes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Transgender adults are about twice as likely as gay or lesbian adults to say this has happened to them recently — that is, in the 12 months prior to the survey (42 percent vs. 22 percent). Around 70 percent of transgender adults say they have feared for their personal safety at some point while about half of gay or lesbian adults (52 percent) and 28 percent of bisexual adults say the same.

With this data in mind, there's an even greater concern as more and more Americans have been open about their LGBTQ+ identities. A Gallup study on LGBTQ+ identification showed 9.3 percent of U.S. adults identifying as LGBTQ+ in 2024, representing an increase of more than a percentage point versus the prior estimate, from 2023. Longer term, the figure has nearly doubled since 2020 and is up from 3.5 percent in 2012 when Gallup first measured it.

What this shows is that many Americans are more vulnerable than ever as anti-LGBTQ+ bias, particularly against transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals has risen in the last four years.

What are your thoughts? If you're a member of our community, have you experienced any anti-LGBTQ+ actions or sentiment recently? We'd like to know what your experience has been. Is the data collected and reported in this story reflective of what you might have dealt with in the last few years? ::

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According to the two psychologists, while it's unknown what the cause of this decline could be, they suggest there are two reasons that can possibly be ruled out.

"The first is that the anti-gay backlash is a side effect, or spillover, of the backlash against the movement for transgender

showed a majority (61 percent) say there is a great deal or a fair amount of acceptance for people who are gay or lesbian while about half (52 percent) say the same for those who identify as bisexual. Much smaller shares say there's a great deal or a fair amount of acceptance for people who

has increased compared with 10 years ago. Another Pew Research Center report showed in 2004, 31 percent of Americans supported it, while 60 percent opposed. By 2015, 55 percent supported same-sex marriage, while 39 percent opposed. And support has continued to grow: In 2023, 63



# Spanberger sworn in as Virginia's first woman governor, moves swiftly to set agenda

After an inaugural address steeped in history, the Democrat signs a slate of executive orders aimed at affordability, education and economic stability

by Markus Schmidt | Virginia Mercury

Democrat Abigail Spanberger was sworn in Saturday, January 17 as Virginia's 75th governor, making history as the first woman to hold the commonwealth's highest office and pledging to lead with unity, affordability and pragmatic action amid deep national divisions and growing uncertainty coming out of Washington.

Within hours of taking the oath, Spanberger, 46, moved swiftly to define the priorities of her administration, signing a package of executive orders aimed at lowering costs for families, strengthening public education, responding to federal disruptions and reshaping the internal operations of state government — an early signal that her tenure will be focused on affordability and what she described as “delivering results.”

Standing on the steps of the Virginia state Capitol in Richmond, Spanberger framed the moment as both historic and forward-looking, calling the peaceful transfer of power “a cornerstone of our American democratic experiment” and a defining feature of American democracy.

“It is the honor of my life to stand before you and take the oath today,” Spanberger said, underscoring the gravity of the moment and her responsibility to all Virginians.

She reflected on the generations who expanded democracy in Virginia — particularly women who fought for the right to vote and hold office — saying she stood before those “who could only dream of a day like today.”

Spanberger was sworn in alongside fellow Democrats Ghazala Hashmi, who took the oath as lieutenant governor, becoming the first Muslim woman to win statewide office anywhere in the United States and Jay Jones, who was sworn in as Virginia's attorney general, making history as the commonwealth's first Black attorney general.

The ceremony drew a cross-section of Virginia's political leadership, including nearly all living former governors, from outgoing Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin to L. Douglas Wilder, the nation's first elected Black governor, who celebrated his 95th birthday Saturday and whom Spanberger recognized during the event.

Spanberger thanked Youngkin and former first lady Suzanne Youngkin for their cooperation during the transition, as well as former Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears, former Attorney General Jason Miyares and members of the outgoing administration for their service. The latter two did not attend the ceremony.

## A historic oath, a forward-looking message

Much of Spanberger's inaugural address traced Virginia's long democratic arc — from native sons George Washington and Patrick Henry to the suffrage movement and the Civil Rights era — but she repeatedly empha-



Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger is the state's first woman governor. She was sworn in alongside her family on Jan. 17, 2026. CREDIT: Charlotte Rene Woods / Virginia Mercury

sized that the day was ultimately about the future Virginians will shape together.

Citing Patrick Henry's warning that “United we stand, divided we fall,” Spanberger urged Virginians not to fracture into factions that threaten democratic institutions.

She said the work of perfecting democracy has never been finished, but argued that Virginia's history shows progress is possible when leaders and citizens confront challenges directly.

“This square has been the scene of remarkable dramas of equality and justice,” she said, referencing suffragists who pressed their cause at the Capitol, the delayed ratification of the 19th Amendment and the 1957 Pilgrimage of Prayer led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

She also invoked moments when Virginia leaders confronted division head-on, quoting former Gov. Linwood Holton's call to move beyond partisan camps and to “act together,” and highlighting Wilder's 1990 inauguration as another milestone that reshaped expectations of who could lead.

Throughout the address, Spanberger emphasized the meaning of Virginia as a commonwealth — a government designed to serve the common good — and framed unity as both a moral obligation and a practical necessity.

## Executive actions underscore affordability focus

The urgency of that message was reflected in Spanberger's first official acts as governor.

The series of executive orders she signed after the swearing in were designed to confront rising costs, reinforce public education and prepare the state for potential disruptions tied to federal policy changes.

“Today, we are responding to the moment,” Spanberger said. “We are setting the tone for what Virginians can expect over the next four years: pragmatic leadership focused on lowering costs and delivering results.”

The first three executive orders focus squarely on affordability — an issue that she declared a centerpiece of her 2026 agenda during a news conference in December.

One requires the governor's secretaries and all executive branch agencies to submit reports within 90 days identifying immediate, actionable steps to reduce living expenses for Virginians, including housing, health care, energy, education, child care and grocery costs.

A second establishes an Interagency Health Financing Task Force within the Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, charged with developing a unified financing strategy to reduce duplicative spending, maximize federal funding and strengthen Virginia's long-term health care infrastructure.

The task force is directed to assess programs most vulnerable to federal policy changes, review oversight of managed care organizations and evaluate shared technology, licensing and procurement systems.

A third directive launches a comprehensive review of housing development regulations and permitting practices, with the goal of eliminating unnecessary requirements and reducing barriers to housing production. It also creates a Commission on Unlocking Housing Production to recommend legislative, regulatory and administrative changes to increase housing supply statewide.

Academic progress is the focus of a fourth executive order directing the Department of Education to strengthen literacy and math instruction, review accountability measures and expand access to advanced math coursework.

The directive calls for implementing recommendations from a 2025 JLARC report, advancing a next-generation assessment system and launching a statewide listening tour of educators, parents and students.

Other executive actions respond to external pressures, including federal workforce reductions, funding cuts, tariff impacts and immigration-related effects.

One order establishes an Economic Resiliency Task Force to coordinate the state's response, including managing potential disruptions to Medicaid and SNAP, supporting displaced federal workers and expanding agricultural and forestry exports amid tariff uncertainty.

Additional orders initiate a review of the Board of Visitors appointment process for public colleges and universities; establish

narrowly defined standby emergency authority for senior officials if the governor is unreachable; formally delegate operational authority to the governor's chief of staff; and create a comprehensive equal opportunity and non-discrimination policy across state government.

A tenth executive order rescinds Youngkin's Executive Order 47, which required and encouraged state and local law enforcement agencies to divert resources toward enforcing federal civil immigration laws.

The directive redirects law enforcement to focus on core public safety responsibilities, including investigating crime, staffing local jails and engaging with communities.

The move aligns with a position Spanberger outlined during an interview with The Mercury in August, when she said she would move quickly as governor to end policies she argued pulled Virginia law enforcement away from their primary mission and strained already limited resources.

## A personal case for pragmatic governance

In her inaugural address, Spanberger did not name President Donald Trump, but repeatedly referenced federal actions and rhetoric she said were unsettling Virginians.

“I know many of you are worried about the recklessness coming out of Washington,” she said, citing concerns over health care access, rising costs, attacks on public servants and policies she said betray American values.

She rooted her priorities in personal experience, describing her middle-class upbringing, her work as a federal law enforcement officer and her service as a CIA case officer focused on counter terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

Those roles, she said, reinforced the importance of accountability and service — lessons she now brings to the governor's office. She also spoke as a mother of three daughters, emphasizing the strain rising costs place on families and the difficulty of planning for the future amid uncertainty.

Her policy agenda centers on affordability, education, economic growth and public safety. She pledged to tackle housing costs by cutting red tape and increasing supply, lower energy costs by ensuring high-volume users pay their fair share and protect health care access while addressing prescription drug pricing practices.

As she closed her address, Spanberger urged Virginians to consider how future generations will judge this moment.

“Choose to stand united. Choose to serve one another. Choose to act together,” she said. “As we continue forward, let us be united for Virginia's future.” ::

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## Ellen DeGeneres speaks out after ICE shooting of Renee Good

Ellen DeGeneres made a rare public political statement on Jan. 17, using her platform to respond to the shooting of Renee Nicole Good, a Minneapolis woman fatally shot by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent earlier this month.

In a series of Instagram posts, DeGeneres expressed support for Minneapolis residents and for Good's family, marking one of the few times the entertainer has weighed in directly on a current political crisis. The posts came after Good, 37, was shot in the head by an ICE agent on Jan. 7.

In a video message addressed to Minneapolis, DeGeneres referenced the city as the site of her final stand-up special, filmed in 2024. "I shot it there because they say it's the happiest city in America," she said. "So, my thoughts and my prayers are going out to everyone, and I'm proud of everyone who's

protesting peacefully, and I am sorry for anyone who has been hurt just for protesting."

DeGeneres also shared a separate post featuring a photo of Good, adding her own words alongside excerpts from a public letter written by Good's wife, Becca Good. "I'm so sad, and so angry, and so worried," DeGeneres wrote.

According to authorities, Good was shot while driving with her wife and their dog shortly after dropping their six-year-old child at school. She was transported to a hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Video footage released days later appears to show the moments leading up to the shooting, including verbal exchanges between Good, her wife and the agent who was later identified as Jonathan Ross. Multiple gunshots can be heard before the vehicle crashes.

The death has drawn national atten-



DeGeneres addressed the shooting in several Instagram posts in late January. CREDIT: Instagram screenshot

tion, particularly within LGBTQ+ communities. Good and her wife were married and raising a child together, and her death has become a focal point in broader debates over federal immigration enforcement, protest policing and the safety of LGBTQ+ families in public spaces.

In a public statement following her wife's death, Becca Good focused on who Renee was, not how she died. "If you ever encountered my wife, Renee Nicole Macklin Good, you know that above all else, she was kind," she wrote. "In fact, kindness radiated out of her."

DeGeneres' posts also prompted hostile replies online. Comments cited in coverage included, "Obey the law. It's just that simple," "Spare with the wrongness and sadness of what happened to this woman when SHE could've avoided it," and "Take a seat Ellen," posted beneath her messages about Good's death.

DeGeneres rarely comments publicly on political events. In this case, her posts centered on grief, protest and the words of Good's family, as Good's death continues to reverberate far beyond Minneapolis. The incident remains a deep loss for those who knew and loved her, as well as countless numbers of individuals who didn't, but are shocked by the needless violence perpetrated by representatives of the American government. ::

— Liz Schob

## Tennessee lawmakers target drag shows at start of session

The Tennessee House began its 2026 legislative session by advancing a bill that would significantly expand restrictions on drag performances, drawing immediate criticism from LGBTQ+ advocates, including the Tennessee Equality Project, who warned the measure could broadly impact performers and venues across the state.

The House voted Tuesday to approve House Bill 884, legislation that would reclassify businesses as adult-oriented establishments if they host even a single drag performance or sexually related show within a year. The bill passed 73-24 and now moves to the Tennessee Senate for consideration.

The measure would subject affected businesses to zoning restrictions typically applied to adult establishments, including a requirement that they operate at least 1,000 feet away from schools, parks, churches, residence-



A protester holds a "Drag Is Not a Crime" sign at the Tennessee State Capitol. CREDIT: Facebook

es, childcare facilities and family recreation centers. Critics argue the threshold would significantly limit where drag shows could legally be held, even on an occasional basis.

The bill was introduced by Republican Rep. Chris Todd of Madison County. Todd has supported legislation aimed at limiting drag performances in public-facing spaces and was behind a 2023 law that restricted drag shows in areas where children could be present.

That earlier law faced a legal challenge from Friends of George's, a Memphis-based theater group. While a federal judge initially blocked the measure, an appeals court later reversed the ruling, finding the group lacked standing. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to take up the case, allowing the law to remain in effect.

As lawmakers convened, opponents of the new bill gathered at the Capitol, holding signs and protesting inside the building. During floor debate, House Speaker Cameron Sexton directed state troopers to remove several people from the public gallery for disrupting proceedings.

Chris Sanders, executive director of the Tennessee Equality Project, criticized lawmakers for beginning the session with the bill. "This is the wrong bill to start the legislative session with. It sets the wrong priority,"

Sanders said. He also warned that "the bill's vagueness will make it difficult for local governments to enforce, and performers and businesses will have trouble figuring out whether they're complying."

Democratic Rep. Justin Jones of Nashville also criticized the decision to prioritize the measure, calling it "a veneer of hate to try to demonize another," and describing it as a response to a "non-existent threat."

Supporters of the bill have framed it as a clarification of existing law governing adult-oriented businesses. Opponents argue the bill treats drag performances as inherently sexual, raising concerns about free expression and LGBTQ+ cultural events.

The Senate has yet to act on its version of the legislation. A similar proposal stalled during the 2025 session, leaving the outcome of the current bill uncertain.

For LGBTQ+ performers and allies, the House vote signals that drag remains a central target in Tennessee's legislative agenda, even as legal challenges and public opposition continue. ::

— Liz Schob

## Judge orders HHS to restore pediatric health funding

A federal judge has ordered the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to temporarily restore nearly \$12 million in federal grant funding to the American Academy of Pediatrics, finding the organization is likely to succeed in its claim that the funding was cut in retaliation for its public advocacy, including positions on vaccines and gender-affirming care for transgender youth.

U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell issued the preliminary injunction January 11 in Washington, D.C., restoring funding for seven grants while the lawsuit proceeds. The grants were canceled in December under Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who oversees the department under the Trump administration.

In her ruling, Howell wrote that the case is not about whether the AAP or HHS holds the stronger position on vaccinations or gender-affirming care for children. Instead, she framed the dispute as a constitutional question about whether the federal gov-

ernment exercised its authority in a way designed to chill public health policy debate by retaliating against a trusted professional medical organization.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has been a vocal supporter of gender-affirming care for transgender youth and has publicly criticized federal actions targeting such care. The funding cuts occurred amid broader HHS efforts affecting trans health care, including announcements that hospitals could lose Medicare and Medicaid funding if they provide gender-affirming care to minors.

Administration officials cited several reasons for terminating the grants, including the AAP's use of what they described as "identity-based language," references to racial disparities and the use of terms such as "pregnant people." The AAP argued the cuts followed its criticism of changes to federal vaccine policy and constituted retaliation for protected speech.

The terminated grants support public

health programs aimed at preventing sudden unexpected infant death, strengthening pediatric care in rural communities, improving early detection of developmental disabilities and supporting adolescents facing substance use and mental health challenges. AAP leaders warned at the time that the sudden loss of funding would force

programs to shut down and disrupt services relied on by families nationwide.

"The sudden withdrawal of these funds will directly impact and potentially harm infants, children, youth and their families in communities across the United States," said Mark Del Monte, the AAP's chief executive and executive vice president.

In granting the injunction, Howell found that the AAP had shown it would likely suffer irreparable harm without the funding and that the public interest favored allowing the programs to continue while the lawsuit moves forward.

The AAP is represented by Democracy Forward, which argued the grant terminations violated the First Amendment. Skye Perryman, the group's president and CEO, said the ruling blocks the use of federal funding as a tool to punish pediatricians for speaking out in defense of evidence-based care.

The injunction does not resolve the lawsuit, which will continue in federal court. For now, the ruling restores funding to pediatric health programs and places limits on how federal agencies may respond to medical organizations that publicly support care for transgender youth. ::

— Liz Schob



U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell issued a preliminary injunction restoring federal pediatric health funding. CREDIT: Facebook



## NC sticks with its vaccination recommendations despite CDC changes

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is not planning to change its 2015 list of recommended vaccinations for children up to 18.

On Jan. 5, the CDC announced changes to its recommendations for vaccines for children and adolescents, cutting the list from 17 to 11. Vaccines for RSV, hepatitis A and B, meningitis, COVID, rotavirus, and influenza are now recommended only for certain high-risk populations or after discussion with a doctor or nurse.

In its announcement, the CDC said the United States is a "global outlier" among developed countries for the number of vaccines it recommends.

"There is a need for more and better gold standard science, including placebo-controlled randomized trials and long-term

observational studies to better characterize vaccine benefits, risks and outcomes," the agency said.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, N.C. Division of Public Health director Dr. Kelly Kimple said the new CDC list is still similar to the state's, including vaccines for measles, polio, chickenpox, tetanus, whooping cough and other diseases.

But Kimple said the state will follow the lead of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which is also declining to change its vaccine recommendations. She stressed that the AAP's recommendations are "evidence-based."

"I know that these changes are causing confusion, and we want to ensure people have clear, reliable information," Kimple said. "The scientific evidence around the vaccines

has not changed. These vaccines are safe and effective to prevent serious illness and death."

"The important point to take away is that we continue to have vaccines available and covered by insurance to keep our kids, families and communities healthy and safe," Kimple added.

State health officials also strongly urged North Carolinians to get a flu shot if they have not already and to make sure their families' MMR vaccines are up to date, especially if they're traveling to an area with a known outbreak of measles.

Three siblings in Buncombe County have been diagnosed with measles after the family traveled to Spartanburg, South Carolina, where measles is currently spreading.

Dr. Erica Wilson with DHHS said the infected children had had one of their MMR series, but could not say if they were fully vaccinated. Another case of measles in Polk County is also believed to be connected to travel to South Carolina.

According to Kimple, a 2024 analysis



North Carolina will continue with its current vaccine program, despite federal level directives.

found that childhood vaccines prevented around 508 million illnesses, 32 million hospitalizations and more than 1.1 million premature deaths for U.S. children between 1994 and 2023. These estimates don't include flu, COVID and RSV vaccines, she said. ::

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— Laura Leslie / NC Newsline

## CLT embraces Jewish community after hate images found at Shalom Park

Antisemitic signs bearing a swastika and noose were found hung on some buildings at the Jewish Community Center at Shalom Park. Supporters have rallied around Charlotte's Jewish community following the incident on the morning of January 20.

While the images and words were upsetting, Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte CEO Adam Kolett said he's been comforted by the solidarity expressed by many with Charlotte's Jewish community.

"We are grateful when public leaders and educators and law enforcement and our neighbors can stand with us in protection of religious freedoms," Kolett said Wednesday, January 21. The signs, which were posted around Shalom Park in south Charlotte, threatened to hang people and told people to join the Nazi party.

Shalom Park houses several Jewish organizations and schools on its 54 acres, according to its website, in addition to two

synagogues. The placement of the signs on the campus's buildings was strategic, Kolett said. One was posted near a Holocaust remembrance memorial, while another was posted near a school where kids and their families would have seen it in the morning, Kolett said.

The signs were found the week before International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Jan. 27. "It's a part of a broader pattern, one that has seen antisemitic incidents in our country reach a record high in 2024," Kolett said. "It's sustained escalation of Jew hatred and something that leaves folks feeling really unsettled, just to say the least."

There were 9,354 antisemitic incidents in 2024, according to the Anti-Defamation League, which tracks these incidents. Kolett said the imagery isn't just upsetting for Jewish people. A Black security guard who works at the park was also disturbed by the

use of the noose, Kolett said.



"I think that these images and words are pulled together with great thought," he said. The signs were taken down quickly after they were discovered Tuesday morning before students could see them, Kolett said.

According to a news release from the Levine Jewish Community Center, law enforcement is investigating the incident.

Kolett said he received a call from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Estella Patterson to offer support and to inform Kolett the department would increase patrols in the area.

Although this seems to have been an isolated incident, Kolett said it's important to respond to the hate message with education and support for one another. The Jewish Federation has an initiative called Outshine, which Kolett said has the goal of getting out ahead of antisemitism. "The question is not whether antisemitism is rising. We know the answer," he said. "The question is whether, together, we can rise faster and choose to outshine it." ::

*This article appears courtesy of our media partner The Charlotte Observer.*

— Jeff A. Chamer / Charlotte Observer

## Man sentenced to 24 years in killing of Corey Robinson

A man has been sentenced to decades in prison after pleading guilty in the 2024 killing of Corey Robinson, a Charlotte case that has left Robinson's loved ones grieving the loss of a son, brother and friend.

On Jan. 8, Ayyad Sukkar pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in Robinson's death. A judge sentenced Sukkar to up to 24 years in prison, bringing a measure of legal closure nearly 19 months after Robinson was found dead inside his home.

The investigation began on June 14, 2024, when Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police conducted a welfare check at Robinson's residence on North Graham Street. Family and colleagues had grown concerned after the 36-year-old failed to show up for work at Wells Fargo or respond to messages. Upon entering the home, which had been plundered, officers found Robinson

deceased. Investigators later determined he had died from blunt force trauma several days prior to the discovery.

Prosecutors said Robinson's home had been ransacked and that his credit cards and financial accounts were used after his death. Court testimony showed Robinson's Cash App account was accessed, and investigators traced financial activity connected to the case in the days following the killing.

During sentencing, Robinson's family filled the courtroom to share memories of a man they described as loving, ambitious and deeply connected to the people around him. His mother, Carmen Fowler, spoke about the pain of losing her son to someone he knew.

"He was my first born, he was my baby," Fowler said. "Everyone loved him. He was accepted by our family. He got killed by someone who couldn't accept his own

truth. I wish it was a stranger because what friend would do this?"

Testimony in the case established that Robinson and Sukkar had a prior romantic relationship. Sukkar's mother told the court that her son assaulted Robinson after Robinson allegedly made a pass at him and acknowledged that the two had been involved previously. Robinson's family said that detail made the loss even harder to bear.

Family members described Robinson as openly gay and said he encouraged people around him to be themselves. His sister, Skylar McClendon, has said Robinson never judged others and often urged those close to him to live honestly.

In addition to Sukkar's conviction, two other people were charged in connection with the case. Tracey Sukkar and Lasha Big Eagle face charges related to obtaining property by false pretense and identity theft. Their cases remain pending.

Robinson's family said he worked as a manager at Wells Fargo and had a strong support network there. Several of his former colleagues attended court proceedings

to support his loved ones.

While the guilty plea brings the criminal case closer to its end, Robinson's family has said no sentence can fully account for their loss. For them, the case reflects the devastating consequences of violence within trusted relationships and the lasting harm such acts leave behind. ::

— Liz Schob





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# HB2: Ten years later

What began as a rushed fight over a Charlotte nondiscrimination ordinance became a political playbook now reshaping transgender rights across the country



by Liz Schob  
Qnotes Staff Writer

Nearly a decade after lawmakers rushed House Bill 2 (also known as HB2, the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act and the “Bathroom Bill”) through the General Assembly in a single day, the political logic behind it endured. What began in 2016 as a state-level fight over a Charlotte nondiscrimination ordinance has since evolved into a broader strategy that has been sharpened, refined and repeatedly re-deployed. The same strategy that once thrust North Carolina into a national backlash now shapes how transgender people are targeted in law, culture and public life across the country.

HB2 was never just about bathrooms. It was about power, about who gets to define belonging and about how fear can be used to mobilize voters. In the years since its passage, the law has been partially repealed, re-branded and legally reshaped, but its influence has not disappeared. Instead, it has reemerged in new bills, familiar talking points and renewed efforts to regulate where transgender people can exist safely and openly.

## The Strategy Takes Shape

In 2025, Democratic lawmakers in North Carolina warned that Republicans were once again advancing discriminatory legislation. The proposed Women’s Safety and Protection Act would define “biological sex” in state law, restrict access to restrooms, locker rooms and sleeping quarters in public facilities and limit the ability of transgender people to update gender markers on birth certificates and driver’s licenses. Rep. Julie von Haefen, a Wake County Democrat, described the proposal as a “rehash of HB 2,” adding, “didn’t we learn our lesson?”

The groundwork for this moment was laid years earlier, during a push by then-Governor Pat McCrory, who used Charlotte as both a catalyst and a test case. In early 2016, Charlotte City Council passed a nondiscrimination ordinance extending protections to LGBTQ+ residents, including allowing transgender people to use restrooms that align with their gender identity. The ordinance was set to take effect on April 1. It never did.

Within hours, Republican legislative leaders called a special session. HB2 was drafted, introduced, debated, passed and signed into law in a single day. The bill overturned Charlotte’s ordinance before it could take effect, stripped cities and counties of the authority to enact their own nondiscrimination protections, mandated bathroom access based on sex listed on a person’s birth certificate and curtailed legal



The modern, coordinated Republican legislative movement targeting transgender rights is widely considered to have begun with North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory and House Bill 2 in March 2016.  
CREDIT: Wikimedia Creative Commons 2.0

recourse for people experiencing discrimination.

At the time, McCrory and legislative leaders framed the law as a matter of privacy and safety, but the timing told a different story. HB2 arrived in an election year as McCrory faced a difficult reelection campaign. The bathroom debate offered a wedge issue designed to mobilize conservative voters through fear and misinformation. Jeff Jackson, then a Democratic state senator from Charlotte said that lawmakers “didn’t anticipate this level of blowback.” “They really believed this was a lay-up,” Jackson said. “As it turns out, the world has changed faster than they thought.”

## The Fallout at Home

North Carolina was immediately thrust into the national spotlight. Lawsuits followed within days. The U.S. Department of Justice sued the state, arguing that HB2 violated federal civil rights laws. Business leaders began to speak out, and civil rights organizations warned that the bill would invite harassment and discrimination against transgender people rather than prevent it.

The economic consequences soon followed. PayPal canceled a planned expansion in Charlotte that would have created 400 jobs. Major entertainers, including Bruce

Springsteen, pulled concerts. The NCAA and NBA relocated championship events, including the 2017 NBA All-Star Game, a loss estimated at roughly \$100 million for the Charlotte region alone. The Associated Press later estimated that HB2 would cost North Carolina nearly \$3.8 billion in lost business over 12 years.

The state’s reputation took a significant hit, and so did McCrory’s political standing. In November 2016, he narrowly lost reelection to Democrat Roy Cooper. While analysts caution against attributing the loss to a single issue, HB2 was central to the race. So was Charlotte’s mayor.

Jennifer Roberts, the city’s mayor, became a national figure almost overnight. She defended the nondiscrimination ordinance as Republican lawmakers moved to override Charlotte’s decision through sweeping state preemption. “This legislation is literally the most anti-LGBT legislation in the country,” Roberts said. “Discrimination is never right and discrimination is not good for business. This is a bad bill for the Tarheel State,” she added. Advocates praised her leadership, while conservative officials targeted her relentlessly. HB2 dominated her tenure and reshaped the city’s political landscape. Roberts’ reelection loss in 2017 underscored how swiftly the state responded when local leaders challenged its approach to LGBTQ+ protections.

In 2017, under mounting pressure from the NCAA and business leaders, lawmakers partially repealed HB2, replacing it with House Bill 142. While HB142 removed the explicit bathroom mandate, it preserved state control over local nondiscrimination laws and imposed a moratorium on new local protections for years. For transgender North Carolinians, the damage had already been done.

## From State Experiment to National Playbook

Nationally, the lessons of HB2 extended beyond North Carolina. The law demonstrated that targeting transgender people through bathroom access could be politically mobilizing even when the economic fallout was severe. HB2 quickly became a reference point, with similar bills appearing in other states. Over time, the focus expanded beyond bathrooms to sports participation, healthcare, drag shows and limits on legal identity documents.

What shifted was not the strategy, but its reach. By the early 2020s, anti-transgender legislation was no longer experimental. It became coordinated. In North Carolina, lawmakers introduced restrictions on drag performances in 2023. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott signed a sweeping bathroom bill in 2025 applying to schools, prisons and government buildings. That same year, the Trump administration announced proposals that would strip Medicaid and Medicare funding from hospitals providing gender-affirming care to transgender youth, pressuring providers nationwide

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to abandon care regardless of state law.  
That coordination accelerated after President Donald Trump's reelection in 2024. Federal resistance weakened, national rhetoric hardened, and what once carried reputational risk increasingly became a reliable signal to a conservative base mobilized around culture-war politics. The deterrents that shaped the response to HB2 in 2016 now move forward in a political climate far less inclined to push back.



In North Carolina, the law's aftershocks continue to surface in local disputes. In 2023, a false accusation involving a transgender woman at the Waynesville Recreation Center prompted a police investigation that found no wrongdoing. Even so, the incident reignited familiar debates about bathroom access and public safety.  
Nearly ten years later, HB2's legacy is not confined to a single statute. It endures as a political blueprint. What once provoked national outrage and economic backlash now advances in a political climate shaped by conservative political power, weakened institutional guardrails and a fragmented media landscape.  
For the transgender community, the consequences are



deeply felt. Each new bill builds on the last, narrowing where people can exist safely and openly. For North Carolina, the unresolved question is whether the state has absorbed the lessons of the damage HB2 inflicted, or whether it is prepared to repeat that history under a different name.  
HB2 may be a decade old, but its impact remains very much alive. ::

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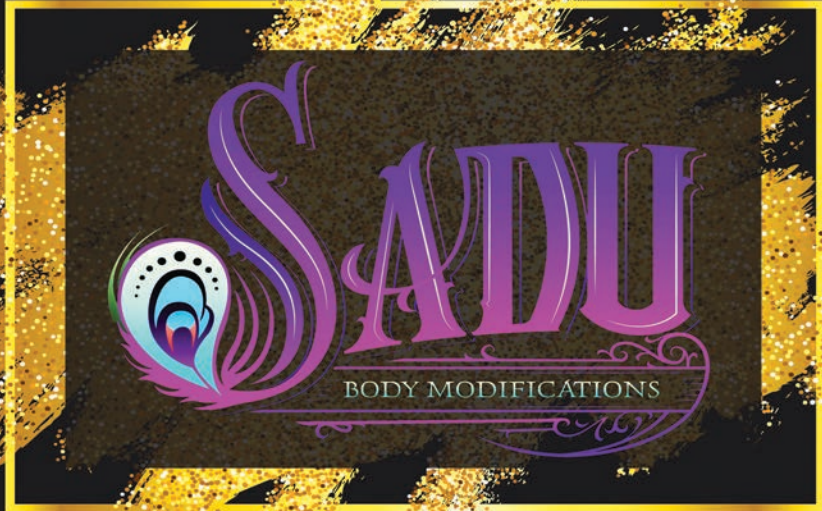
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# Evolving faith: Black queer clergy and the future of spirituality

Four Black queer clergy leaders talk about spirituality, truth and the courage to evolve



by Wendy Lyons  
Qnotes Staff Writer

This article is written with two personally dedicated truths. I am a journalist for *Qnotes*, and I am also an ordained, seminary-trained minister. I was shaped by the Black church, formed within its traditions, and entrusted with leadership inside its walls. I also know what it means to step away from institutional religion while still holding deep reverence for God, Source, Spirit and community.

As my faith has matured, I have found myself gently examining church practices that can unintentionally foster dependency or spiritual stagnation. Practices that elevate authority over discernment or silence questions instead of welcoming them as part of growth. For many, particularly Black queer people, this can quietly disconnect us from the confidence, agency and wholeness faith is meant to nurture.

In a time marked by political hostility, spiritual exhaustion and collective grief, many are searching for spaces that feel honest, affirming and life giving. Faith has often been weaponized against us, yet the desire for connection and divine presence has not disappeared. It has expanded beyond inherited structures and familiar formulas.



For this Black History Month feature, we spoke with four Black queer clergy leaders whose ministries reflect that expansion. Each conversation revealed a shared truth. The work is no longer about pulpits or performance. It is about presence, integrity and love in action.

## Apostle Marquis Hairston, Sr. *The church is not a building. It is a people.*

Apostle Marquis Hairston has spent nearly two decades navigating faith spaces shaped by both tradition and transformation. Raised in the Baptist church and later formed in Apostolic Pentecostalism, his calling emerged at the intersection of structure, spirit and discernment. His ministry reflects a deep respect for tradition without being constrained by it.

## Wendy Lyons: How did you come to understand your calling to ministry?

**Marquis Hairston:** I was raised in church, so ministry was always familiar. But I had to unlearn the idea that calling meant confinement. I came to understand that my assignment was not limited to a pulpit or a building. Ministry is presence. It is about truth telling with love and creating space where people do not have to fragment themselves to encounter God.

## WL: What do you see happening now in faith communities?

**MH:** People are not leaving God. They are leaving performance. They are leaving spaces that cannot hold their real lives, their questions or their trauma. Spirit is not declining. It is expanding. Faith is evolving beyond buildings into people centered communities. He is especially clear about the harm caused when scripture is weaponized. Naming “*bibli-idolatry*” (putting the Bible above God) as a spiritual danger, Marquis emphasizes that scripture must always be interpreted through love.

## WL: What legacy do you hope to leave?

**MH:** I want people to know they never had to abandon themselves to encounter God. Their lived experience is sacred too.

## Additional Qnotes Staff: Tell me about your congregation?

**MH:** We started with a predominantly trans group and now it's Black gay and trans.

## QN: From your social media post, you seem to be a very progressive sex positive person. How does that relate to your ministry?

**MH:** I have always been very sex positive in my teaching and in my theology. I believe that if we are going to affirm and amplify the voices and the experiences of LGBTQ+ people [then] we've also got to destigmatize sex. That's not just for the LGBTQ+ people that's also for, you know, the straight community as well.

I wanted to establish a ministry where the whole individual could, you know, be ministered to, and I think that we need sexual education, um, to go along with sexual freedom and sexual responsibility.

## QN: Do you have sexual programming of any kind?

**MH:** I've been doing blogs and things like that, but what I am now creating is a, a collective, if you will. A virtual group at this moment. It's housed with our ministry app and also on my Patreon. It is for Black gay men specifically and it's where we are encouraged to just live transparently, whatever that is, and it comes with counseling and therapy.

One of the core tenants of Christianity, is that Jesus had to be fully human and fully divine but we skip over the fully human part. Jesus as a human male, had to have some level of libido, sexuality. We talk about how we are the body of Christ so if there's anything that we can feel or desire, Jesus was touched with that as well. So we have to amplify the humanity of our Christ, so that Jesus can be Lord over even our sexuality.

**Resources:** “Good Form: Exposing the Performance” of Powerless Religion is available on Amazon and via [www.AMHairston.org](http://www.AMHairston.org). Worship and teachings are accessible through the City Nation app.

## Pastor Tiffany Adams *Integrity is the ministry.*

Pastor Tiffany Adams knew she was called early. At nineteen, walking across her college campus, she experienced what she describes as an arresting moment with God. Already out as queer and already asking difficult questions, her journey has always been rooted in honesty. In 2009, Adams began a Wednesday night Bible study at the Harriet Hancock Center in Columbia, South Carolina. It never

stopped. What began as study became The Way Columbia, a spiritual community intentionally moving away from rigid religion and toward conscious, embodied faith. Rooted in Christianity but devoted to the expansion of consciousness, she teaches scripture metaphorically, emphasizing symbolism, context and liberation. Additionally, Adams is a licensed therapist and Reiki master, intentionally extending healing beyond church walls.

## Wendy Lyons: How did your early faith journey shape the leader you are now?

**Tiffany Adams:** MCC introduced me to affirming faith. Later, I spent years in mainstream ministry learning structure, spiritual gifts and the mechanics of church. But when it came time to live fully and honestly, I chose integrity over comfort. I refused to live a double life.

## WL: Ministry followed you from the club to the church. What do you think people were responding to?

**TA:** I was a Spoken Word Artist and party promoter. When I stepped fully into my calling, people followed because they trusted me. I did not switch personalities. I stayed real. People want authenticity and teaching, not pretense.

## WL: How do you see church membership changing right now?

**TA:** Traditional church membership is declining, but spiritual engagement is not. People are hungry for truth, teaching and authenticity. They are not interested in religious routines that do not transform their



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lives. What is growing is conscious faith. Communities built on integrity, scholarship and real connection are thriving, even if they do not look like traditional churches.

**WL: What do people need most from spiritual leaders right now?**

**TA:** Teaching. Scholarship. Truth that frees. Integrity is the legacy I want to leave.

**Resources:** The Way Columbia meets Sundays at 11am with hospitality beginning at 10:30 and Wednesdays for Encounter in person and via Zoom. Educational offerings include Fact Versus Fiction. <https://thewaywc.org>

**Reverend Tara Gibbs**  
*Faith that allows you to evolve is faith that heals.*



Reverend Tara Gibbs brings the heart of an educator and the depth of a reflective theologian to her ministry. Her calling unfolded gradually through study, teaching and lived experience rather than a single defining moment. Gibbs' theology is grounded in Womanism (a social theory and form of feminism, coined by author Alice Walker in 1983, that focuses on the experiences of Black women) and centers on communal care, radical subjectivity, redemptive self-love and critical engagement. Her training includes a Master of Divinity from Shaw University and a Master of Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary.

**Wendy Lyons:** How did you come to ministry?

**Tara Gibbs:** It was never a lightning bolt. It was reflection. Looking back and realizing faith had always been present through questioning, teaching and curiosity.

**WL: What shifted your theology?**

**TG:** Hearing someone pray for who they were to disappear. I could not reconcile that with a loving God. That was the moment affirmation became non negotiable for me.

**WL: How do you define spirituality versus religion?**

**TG:** Labels are limited. Every spiritual person is not religious, and every religious person is not spiritual. I would rather talk about beliefs and practices than identities.

**WL: What trends are you observing around church membership today?**

**TG:** It depends on what we are measuring. Membership and attendance in traditional spaces may be declining, but identification with spirituality and meaning is evolving. Younger generations are less inclined to affiliate with organized religion, yet they are deeply engaged in spiritual exploration. What we are seeing is a redefinition of faith rather than its disappearance.

**WL: What would you say to those who feel spiritually hungry but disconnected?**

**TG:** The space you need exists. It may look different. It may be virtual. It may start with one honest conversation. Do not give up.

**Resources:**  
Website: <https://revtaragibbs.com>  
Suggested faith community: <https://www.instagram.com/theresroomnc>

**Elder Quandrico Rutledge-Wade**  
*Love is a verb.*  
Elder Quandrico Rutledge-Wade has been



ordained for over twenty years, with roots in the AME Zion tradition and deep involvement in affirming spaces across Charlotte. About five years ago, he realized his ministry no longer lived inside church walls. For him, spirituality represents freedom. Organized religion too often boxes, shames and silences authenticity. Rutledge-Wade speaks passionately about mental health, community care and meeting needs directly. He remains active in advocacy, including Black HIV Awareness initiatives in Charlotte.

**Wendy Lyons:** How has your understanding of ministry changed?

**Quanrico Rutledge-Wade:** God is not distant. God is present now. We do not have to wait for another life to experience divine presence. God is in us and among us.

**WL: Do you see church membership as declining or transforming?**

**QRW:** Membership is declining, but awakening is happening. People are questioning, studying and refusing to be harmed by fear based theology. They are no longer willing to stay in spaces where they feel boxed in or shamed. What is growing is spiritual awareness and self discovery. People want freedom, not control.

**WL: What must spiritual leaders do now?**

**QRW:** Be present. Get out of the building. People are hurting mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Love has to be visible and active.

**WL: What gives you hope?**

**QRW:** People are waking up. They are questioning fear based theology and choosing love. Love is still the answer.

**Resources:** Upcoming event: Black HIV/ Aids Forum: <https://bit.ly/4qCyOY5>

**Closing Reflection**  
Conversations with these four leaders reveal not the decline of faith, but its evolution. Spirituality is not confined to pulpits, programs or buildings. God, source, spirituality, a higher power, the creator – whatever name you identify with – is within us and moves through conversation, community care, digital spaces and everyday acts of love. For those who have stepped away from traditional church spaces yet still feel a spiritual pull, you are not lost. You are responding to a call toward wholeness. The invitation now is not to return to what harmed us, but to build what heals us. Presence over performance, integrity over image and love in action. ::

Additional Qnotes staff contributed to this story.



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# Music to make use of all those holiday gift cards

Out in Music



by Gregg Shapiro  
Contributing Writer

It's been said that cash is king, but gift cards are nothing to sneeze at. If either of these fungible currencies made its way into your holiday haul, what follows are a few suggestions of fabulous reissues to make good use of those gifts.

Having made an enduring musical impact throughout the 1960s with albums such as "Aftermath," "Between The Buttons," "Beggars Banquet," and "Let It Bleed," **The Rolling Stones** got off to a great start in the 1970s with 1971's "Sticky Fingers" and then followed that with 1972's "Exile On Main Street." But that kind of momentum was not easy to maintain throughout the decade, although they did manage to end it on a high note with "Some Girls" in 1978. The newly reissued and greatly expanded "Black and Blue" (Interscope), originally released in 1976, falls in the middle of the middling period. That's not to say it's not deserving of your attention. In addition to the Steve Wilson mix of the original album, the stunningly packaged super deluxe edition (available in CD and LP formats) includes "outtakes and jams"

featuring previously unreleased tracks, live recordings, live Blu-ray, a hardcover book and a poster. Song highlights include the emotional ballad "Fool To Cry," the nasty funk of "Hot Stuff," the New Orleans stomp of "Melody" (inspired by queer, honorary member Billy Preston) and the near-epic "Memory Motel." Even with band members releasing albums over the years, the band never broke up. Particularly remarkable is that the Rolling Stones not only had enough staying power to outlast other original British invasion bands of the 1960s but have also recorded a new studio album due out in 2026.

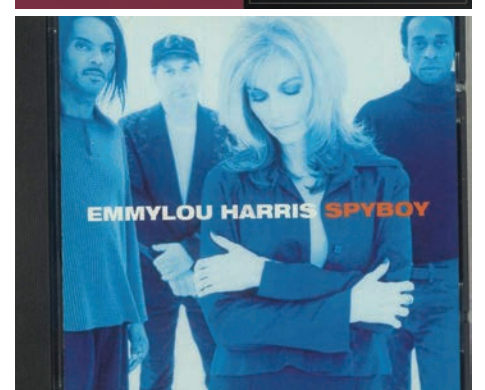
You've got to admire Sir Paul McCartney. When he formed the band **Wings**, more than a year after the breakup of The Beatles, he didn't try to replicate his previous musical unit. During Wings' eight years of existence, it released seven studio albums (as compared to the two dozen or so credited to McCartney alone, including his classical excursions). Every album bears the unmistakable mark of its leader, while still sounding unique to the band. This comes through loud and clear on the new compilation, simply titled "Wings" (MPL/Capitol/UMe), available in multiple formats, including three LPs or two CDs, both of which contain 32 tracks.

More than anything, the song selection illustrates Wings' willingness take musical risks, including disco ("Goodnight Tonight"), sonic experimentation ("Mull of Kintyre" and "Nineteen Hundred and Eighty Five"), alongside some of the biggest hit singles of the era ("Live and Let Die," "Band on the Run," "With A Little Luck," "My Love," "Jet," "Helen Wheels," "Silly Love Songs," and "Listen to What the Man Said." The package also includes a poster and booklet.

What a year 2025 was for **Stevie Nicks** fans! At the beginning of the year, the box set "Fleetwood Mac: 1975 to 1987" compiled the five albums by the band on which Nicks appeared. In late summer, the long-awaited CD and vinyl reissues of the long out-of-print 1973 album "Buckingham Nicks" by Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham was finally released. At the end of the year, Nicks' multi-platinum 1981 solo album "Bella Donna" (MoFi) was reissued in a beautifully boxed, limited edition (numbered), double LP, Ultradisc One-Step pressing by Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, as part of the Original Master Recording series. Spinning at 45 RPM, the songs from the album, including the massive hit singles "Edge of Seventeen," the Tom Petty duet "Stop Dragging My Heart Around," the Don Henley duet "Leather and Lace," and the dramatic title track, have never sounded so good. Your turntable will thank you.

For an artist renowned for her concert performances, it's surprising how few live albums **Emmylou Harris** has released during her more than 50-year recording career. Originally released in 1998, "Spyboy" (New West) has been reissued in an expanded edition that boasts five previously unreleased tracks, including covers of songs by Lucinda Williams ("Sweet Old World"), Tom Petty ("Thinking About You"); and one co-written by Harris with Kate and Anna McGarrigle ("All I Left Behind"). Named for the band (including Buddy Miller, Brady Blade and Daryl Jackson) that backed Harris, "Spyboy" features a fantastic selection of material, ranging from "Love Hurts" and "Boulder to Birmingham" to "Deeper Well" and "Where Will I Be."

We began with the first British Invasion and we conclude with the second. It's remarkable to think that "Songs From The Big Chair" (Mercury/EMI), now available in a triple-disc deluxe edition, was only **Tears For Fears'** second full-length album. Essentially a new wave/synth pop duo, Tears for Fears experienced success stateside with its 1983 debut album "The Hurting" via college rock radio, and songs including "Pale Shelter," "Mad World" and "Change." But it was 1985's "Songs From The Big Chair," containing the hit singles "Everybody Wants To Rule The World," "Head Over Heels" and "Shout," that propelled the band to international stardom. The expansive reissue includes a remastered version of the original album (which still sounds as thrilling today as it did 40 years ago), 16 tracks of edited versions and another dozen remixes of songs from the album. ::



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# Our People: Richard Stevens

LGBT Chamber of the Carolinas new board chair talks about his love of shoes, fitness and community



by L'Monique King  
Qnotes Staff Writer

**R**ichard Stevens is a progressive thinker who hails from Hampton Roads, Virginia, graduated from Tidewater Community College and eventually landed in the Charlotte area during the summer of the COVID pandemic. If any of that sounds familiar, it's because *Qnotes* first met and interviewed this young professional about three years ago.

Back then we were just getting to know Stevens. Since that time, Stevens has remained in Charlotte and continued to enjoy the area and grow his career.

Recently, while speaking at an LGBT Chamber of the Carolinas networking event, Stevens challenged event attendees to broaden their own horizons, enrich their lives and grow their business through purposeful connections.

During our interview Stevens updated *Qnotes* on his joys, concerns for our community, his passion for eclectic wardrobe items and personal growth.

**L'Monique King: What's changed since we last spoke almost 3 years ago?**

**Richard Stevens:** Oh, my goodness. I recently relocated to the Plaza Midwood area in 2024 and I absolutely freaking love it. Since we last spoke, I've also done a bit more in the LGBTQ community and have joined the kickball league of Stonewall Sports. That was a lot of fun. I'm not actively participating right now because I started running in 2025. I used to do 5 or 10Ks (which were very exhausting at the time) but this past year I've run 16.6 miles. I had no plan, no speed records, just me – doing it.

**LMK: Tell us what makes your new neighborhood great.**

**RS:** I love the walkability of the area, especially on nice days. I can walk to the grocery store or ride my bike to the gym that's around the corner and I'm only a couple of minutes away from work. There's a lot to do to keep me busy and it doesn't take a 30-to-40-minute drive like it did in the past. It's funny because my dog actually picked out the apartment. I'd viewed several others but when we went to see the one I now occupy, he perked up. It has a balcony, which he just loves.

**LMK: If you've been impacted at all, how have you been coping with the political climate of the last 12 months?**

**RS:** The power of community. I have a really amazing support group – my best friends. I call them my support group, my council and my tribe. [Being in their company] has always been a safe space where we can have open dialogue without fear of judgment. I remember one time when my mood had completely shifted. We were watching a new *Avengers* movie and got so triggered because though they were characters in a fictional movie – they mirrored many of the villainous real life people we see in the news. My chest was getting tight, my breathing was becoming erratic and then, a friend put her hand

on my shoulder and said she thought I was consuming too much news media. She asked me what my daily consumption was and recommended keeping it down to 30 minutes in the morning and not watching before bed – when your mind should be shutting down for rest. That has helped tremendously. I used to watch from the time I woke up until I went to bed. I no longer do that and it's made a dramatic difference.

**LMK: How do you find peace during turbulent times?**

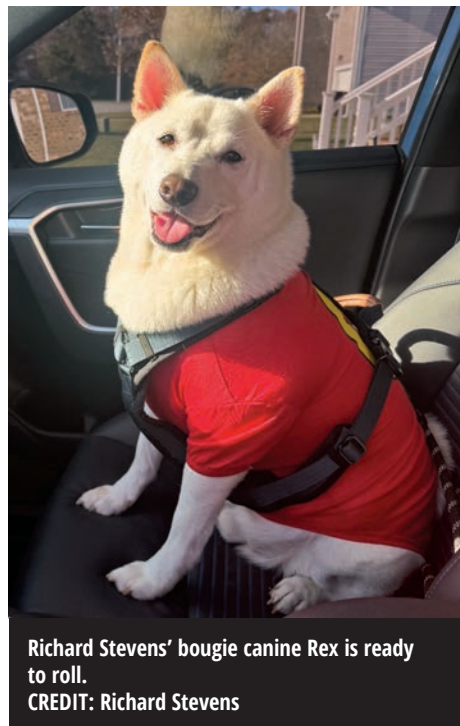
**RS:** By understanding I can only control what I can control. I assess the situation and how it affects me. If you want to make a change, you have to reach out to individuals who have the power to make change or work to make that change myself. This understanding brings me peace in understanding I'm not a superhero; If my cup is empty, I respectfully tell myself, hey love, you can't do it – not right now.

**LMK: Are you still with your partner – any wedding bells ringing?**

**RS:** <Laughter> Circumstances have changed in my previous romantic life. We're no longer a couple and I've met someone new. He kind of fell into my life when I was not expecting it. He gave me grace, compassion and the ability to exist as my whole authentic self. Only time will tell what the future holds, but as of this moment, I'm enjoying him and what we're building together. And Rex loves him too.

**LMK: Rex? Is there a troupe you didn't divulge?**

**RS:** <Hysterical laughter> No, Rex is my dog. He's a Shiba Inu and he just turned eight-years-old. He's very loving and very food motivated. He has his own Instagram page (Rex\_marksthespot). He is the most regal and bougie dog you've ever met. One time, while driving; me in my car and my partner driving his, we were on our phones speaking to each other; hands free of course. Well, my partner pulled up next to



Richard Stevens' bougie canine Rex is ready to roll.  
CREDIT: Richard Stevens

me and said, roll down the window so Rex can say hi to me. Rex gave the most nonchalant unimpressed expression and turned his head, barely looked at him. <Chuckles> He's a full-blown regal mess. He has to have his filtered water, food with warmed chicken broth and if his feeding time is missed, he'll fuss and even push me toward his bowl or pick it up and throw it at me.

**LMK: Recently, there's been lots of media buzz regarding celebrities coming out of the woodwork attacking the LGBTQ community while many are also supporting the GOP. What are your feelings about that?**

**RS:** <Deep inhale followed by forlorn sigh> Honestly, it's not new to me, the hostility, the aggression or the judgement that can come from the African American community. I'm not only African American, I'm also very gay in America and that's hard. We're both fighting the same battle so it's frustrating. If I could [speak to many of those celebrities, including Nicki Minaj] I'd argue, was it not the LGBTQ community and other marginalized communities that had a hand in lifting you up to where you are now? Many of us love the music and work of these people and it hurts. It really hurts to know their positions.

I've always been a music connoisseur – loving music of different types. Music is a form of communication and it adds emphasis to our memories. There were times when I was getting ready to go out with friends and blasting Nicki Minaj. But now, when her songs come on the radio or her music pops up on my playlist – I have to skip. I'm angry with her. How dare she say the things she's said about our community, about me. Her songs were a part of my life, go-to tunes for celebrating good times. Now, they are associated with someone who doesn't give a damn about me. Makes me think maybe she was just acting as though she was part of our tribe because she wanted the coin, the money, the fame, the power of lining her pocketbooks.

**LMK: While you find new artists to appreciate, what other plans do you have for the future?**

**RS:** Recently I accepted a Board Chair position for the LGBT Chamber of the Carolinas. My main goal is to further promote their footprint and to continue to build our membership through inclusive events and professional development, showing the effect the Chamber has had on the area's economy.



The chamber's new Board Chair is passionate about creating sustainable change for Charlotte's LGBT business community.  
CREDIT: Facebook

**LMK: Congratulations. Speaking for footprints, we heard you had a shoe fetish. Care to elaborate?**

**RS:** I love shoes. I probably have about 160 pairs. Sneakers make up about 50 percent, about 30 percent are boots; everything from Uggs, dress boots, Tims, Native American thigh high boots and combat boots. Anyone who has walked into my closet has asked, where are we going? Between the shoes and accessories like my full length pink hooded fur coat and cream iridescent cowboy hat with hanging jewels – my closet is a playground.

**LMK: Before we let you go. Do you have any 2026 resolutions for yourself or our community you'd like to share with our readers?**

**RS:** For myself, to continue walking in my faith – believing in myself; especially when looking at the news and current developments. During those times, we can often feel small, but the reality is we have more power than we realize and through our actions, a little ripple can have a big effect.

For our community my hope is that we re-unite. Unfortunately, we lost a very bright light in the Charlotte community recently. He was a shining star, only 25 years old and killed in a hit and run on the Plaza. My heart stopped when I found out. If you've ever had the privilege of meeting him, Lance Sotelo – you know how nice he was. What I saw in the wake of his death was how everyone (community members, bar owners, fellow runners) came together to show support and offer resources for managing the grief. Seeing Charlotte come together and not only grieve – but drive change – was inspiring. The conversations that have been started regarding how not to have a repeat of incidents like this – that's what I'd like to see more of. Conversations on protecting and promoting our general well being – without the death of a beloved community member as the catalyst. ::




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