

# The Tennessee Journal

The weekly insiders newsletter on Tennessee government, politics, and business

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## Religious themes color politics in 'born again' Tennessee

In 1994, a Democratic legislator and devout churchgoer was on the campaign trail in Middle Tennessee when someone handed him an endorsement list from the Christian Coalition.

Nearly all the favored candidates were Republicans, and before the lawmaker could check himself he expressed, in the presence of two newspaper reporters, his disgust with “those damn Christians.”

The episode illustrates a common problem in mixing religion and politics: One can easily end up cursed. Still, with religion at least partly informing the values of most Tennesseans, such a mixture, whether silent or proclaimed, is inevitable.

According to a 2009 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and a 2012 Gallup poll, Tennessee is either the fifth or sixth most religious state in the country. The Pew study found religion is important to 72% of Tennesseans, with 70% saying they pray every day. A statewide survey by Vanderbilt University last month indicates 67% of Tennesseans consider themselves “born again Christians.”

In the Volunteer State, not many atheists get elected to office. Nearly all public officials are at least nominally religious — mostly Christians with a smattering of Jews.

Both the state House and state Senate open each floor session with a prayer from a “chaplain of the day.” At least twice this year, Rep. Terri Lynn Weaver (R-Lancaster) sang hymns during sessions.

Persons of the same faith can have as many different political opinions as graduates of the same university. In the Senate, all 33 members are Christians: two Catholics and 31 Protestants, including seven Baptists, five Methodists, four Presbyterians, and four members of the Church of Christ. Both the Presbyterian and Church of Christ contingents are evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. Other denominations are lopsided toward Republicans because the GOP outnumbers Democrats in the Senate 26-7.

**How would Jesus vote?** Last February, former senator Roy Herron, the newly elected Tennessee Democratic Party chairman, penned a newspaper op-ed piece

in which he declared he was a Democrat “because I am a Christian.” Eyebrows were raised, but the piece didn’t ignite a statewide controversy. Herron didn’t go so far as to label Republicans heathens. In fact, he prefaced the comment with the point that he had “repeatedly” been asked how he could reconcile his Christianity — he’s a former Methodist minister — with Democratic politics.

And in his book *God and Politics: How Can a Christian Be in Politics?*, Herron acknowledges that while the Bible provides guidance for voting and conduct in the political arena, not all who apply its principles will come to “identical conclusions or vote the same.”

But if state GOP Chairman Chris Devaney had declared he became a Republican because he is a Christian, there almost certainly would have been an outcry.

The reason one party’s Bible-thumping is viewed differently from the other’s can be debated. Republicans see media bias, but stereotypes dating to the conservative Moral Majority and Religious Roundtable movements of the 1980s also come into play. Moreover, the Bible emphasizes helping the poor, and Democrats more successfully sell their positions as doing so. U.S. Rep. Stephen Fincher (R-Frog Jump) didn’t fare well in the public relations arena this month when he suggested that helping the poor with other people’s money isn’t the point of the dictum.

In any case, Democrats of late have been more prone than Republicans to cite scripture and couch their positions in religious terms, especially regarding the Medicaid expansion issue. State House Democratic Caucus Chairman Mike Turner of Nashville invoked scripture more than once in his opposition to the workers’ compensation reform bill, using the oft-quoted passage in Matthew in which Jesus says that what is done to “the least of these” is done to him.

At a news conference in April, Herron quoted the same verse in denouncing a different bill by Sen. Stacey Campfield (R-Knoxville) and “the radical Republicans.”

**Aggressively Christian.** Herron is not the first Democratic chairman to depict the party’s views in moral and religious terms. In 2005, shortly after taking

the reins of the party, Nashville lawyer Bob Tuke quoted 20th century Christian apologist C.S. Lewis in a presentation to a legislative committee. And at a Democratic leadership summit, he described President George W. Bush's "ownership society" philosophy as "un-Christian," arguing people do not own anything but are stewards of what God has provided.

Herron, like Tuke, is fighting a national trend in which churchgoers have heavily aligned themselves with Republicans. According to exit polling, the "religiously unaffiliated" have voted more than two to one for the Democratic presidential nominee since 2000 — 70% to 26% in 2012 — but Protestant Christians have overwhelmingly favored the Republican nominee.

Mitt Romney's losing campaign won the Protestant vote 57% to 42%. The margin was tempered by President Obama's 95% support from black Protestants. White Protestants favored Romney 69% to 30%. White Catholics voted for the Republican 59% to 40%, but Hispanic Catholics went for Obama 75% to 21%.

**'Born again.'** National polls repeatedly have shown church attendance to be an important predictor of Republican voting tendencies.

Voting results aside, in Tennessee church attendance is not a predictor of party identification, according to the May poll by Vanderbilt, which found that 39% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats attend a place of worship weekly or almost every week — no statistically significant difference. Likewise, when asked if they were "born again" — defined by the questioner as having "personally had a conversion experience related to Jesus Christ" — 72% of Republicans and 69% of Democrats said yes. Independents gave a 57% affirmative response.

There was a significant difference by ideology, with 77% of conservatives declaring themselves born again, compared with 60% of moderates and 43% of liberals.

**'Mr. Corker is wrong.'** In light of the findings, it's hardly surprising a Tennessee candidate would want to depict himself as practicing good religion or — trickier and more dangerous — his opponent as not doing so.

In a TV ad during his 2006 U.S. senatorial campaign, Democrat Harold Ford Jr. stood in the sanctuary of Mount Moriah-East Baptist Church in Memphis. With the image of a cross in the background, he told viewers that "here I learned the difference between right and wrong — and now Mr. Corker is doing wrong."

Republican Bob Corker, the eventual winner, didn't use religion to swipe at his opponent, but he did mention a church mission trip he took to Haiti in an ad intended to establish his pro-life credentials.

**'No religious test.'** While Tennesseans are religious, they long have been leery of religion in government. The Tennessee Constitution prohibits any "religious test" as a qualification for office, though in seeming conflict with the provision is an unenforceable section, in Article IX, providing that no person "who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments, shall hold any office in the civil department of this state."

The constitution contains another unenforceable provision barring ministers and priests from serving in the legislature. Many have served. Rep. Johnny Shaw (D-Bolivar), for example, is currently pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church in Stanton.

Like other interests, ministers occasionally converge on the Capitol to lobby for a holy cause — or against an unholy one. During the lottery debate more than a decade ago a Nashville pastor memorably told a legislative committee that, yes, lottery proceeds would benefit college students, but "it's money from hell."

In April, a group of ministers delivered loaves and fish to the governor and legislators to promote TennCare expansion — the bread was real, but the fish, because of concern about the smell, was paper.

A similar group called on Gov. Phil Bredesen a decade ago, urging him not to go through with planned TennCare enrollment cuts. Bredesen later told reporters he appreciated their concern, but if they really wanted to help they could start by finding him \$650 million.

**'The least of these.'** Gov. Bill Haslam more than once has spoken of a meeting of governors with President Obama at the White House last February in which Republicans called for less federal control over how Medicaid funds are spent. The president, Haslam said, told the group he wasn't confident the states would watch out for "the least of these" to the extent he wished. Haslam replied that Republicans wanted to make sure the program was efficient and "sustainable."

Matthew 25: 31-46 — "the least of these" passage — is familiar to Haslam, a Presbyterian who serves on the Tennessee board of the Christian organization Young Life and once considered a career in the ministry. In his 2010 election campaign, he was asked at a Republican gathering if someone from a wealthy family like his could "really understand the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled, and what state government needs to do for those."

He gave a long answer, which concluded with the statement that "for me this is the way to serve that fits best . . . if you're serious about . . . the call to serve the least of these."

That same year, another gubernatorial candidate, Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, discussed his Christianity at length during a town hall telephone conference, declaring at one point that "Jesus Christ is my lord and savior, and I'm not ashamed to talk about that."

Ramsey is one of the Senate's five United Methodists, all Republicans. He belongs to the same denomination as Herron, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Turner, and two of the House's most caustic critics of Republican policies, Reps. Sherry Jones and Mike Stewart, both Nashville Democrats.

Speaker Beth Harwell (R-Nashville), who leads a 99-member House of Representatives that claims 45 Baptists, attends Covenant Presbyterian Church.

**Religion & Republicans.** While Republicans generally are careful not to bring up religion when pushing legislation, it nonetheless is a driving force on some issues, including the unsuccessful effort, backed by the

# Tennessee News Digest

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● House Speaker Beth Harwell has named Robin Bennett of Chattanooga to the Tennessee Regulatory Authority. Bennett, a vice president and financial center manager for First Tennessee Bank, replaces Sara Kyle of Memphis, who resigned in March.

● Tennessee's unemployment rate for May was 8.3%, compared with 8% in April, state officials said Thursday. The national rate for May was 7.6%.

● U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Brentwood) led Republicans in Tuesday's floor debate of a bill restricting most abortions to the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. It passed 228-196 but is expected to go nowhere in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

● Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Maryville) delivered last Saturday's weekly Republican radio address and argued it would be "fairer to students and fairer to taxpayers"

to let the financial market determine interest rates on student loans.

● Doug Bailey, a political consultant who worked closely with Lamar Alexander in the 1970s and '80s and founded *The Hotline*, a popular political news digest distributed by fax, died June 10 in Arlington, Va. He was 79.

● The city of Niota in McMinn County lost its liability insurance and has shut down most services, AP reported.

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Family Action Council of Tennessee and other groups, to force Vanderbilt to change its "all comers" non-discrimination membership policy for student religious clubs.

It will be a factor next year as pro-life organizations work for passage of a referendum on whether to make the Tennessee Constitution neutral on abortion.

And while Democrats sometimes position themselves better for news coverage, election results in recent years suggest that if questions of faith are motivating Tennessee's religious voters, Republicans are doing quite well in the religion department at the grassroots level.

## Political roundup

### Layoff ruling delayed until Monday

Davidson County Circuit Judge Amanda McClendon on Monday extended for a week a temporary restraining order blocking more than 200 state layoffs.

The original order was issued June 10, before state officials saw the lawsuit filed by the Tennessee State Employees Association. TSEA charged the state violated the law when, a third of the way through a 60-day notice and job counseling period, it shut down NeoGov, a website on which state job openings are posted.

TSEA argued that many of the laid-off workers weren't told why they were chosen for pink slips and thus were denied the opportunity to argue their dismissals were improper under legal criteria of seniority, ability, and disciplinary record. The state contended due process rights weren't applicable in the case and there were no grounds for the restraining order. The affected workers were not at risk of "irreparable harm," argued Leslie Bridges, senior counsel in the attorney general's office, because any improperly lost wages could be covered with a payment from the state.

In its brief, the state called attention to some employees on the layoff list who had elected to retire. It argued a delay into the next fiscal year, which starts July 1, could complicate the retirements.

Larry Woods, the TSEA attorney, contended layoffs should be blocked until NeoGov has been active for 60 days after notification. Bridges said such an injunction would cost the state \$1 million.

After hearing arguments Monday, McClendon left the order in place but promised to rule Monday.

The state contends it has met requirements of the law. It says the website was shut down so new salary

schedules could be implemented for 37,000 employees through the Edison payroll system.

Effective July 1, in addition to a 1.5% raise that goes to all employees, 86% of executive branch workers will receive an adjustment based on a market-comparison study performed by the Mercer consulting firm. Nearly \$58 million is budgeted for the adjustments, on top of \$22 million for the across-the-board hike.

**Jones out.** Ron Jones, fiscal services administrator for the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, was fired effective this week by Burns Phillips, the new commissioner, *The Tennessean* reported.

Since March, Commissioner Karla Davis, Deputy Commissioner Alisa Malone, administrator Turner Nashe, and now Jones have left the department, which was the subject of a highly critical comptroller's audit released shortly after the initial departures.

The former officials are defendants in two lawsuits charging discrimination against white employees.

**Court of Appeals.** Ten lawyers and judges met Wednesday's deadline to apply for a seat on the western section of the Court of Appeals. The post won't be vacant until Sept. 1, 2014, after Judge Alan Highers retires, but the Judicial Nominating Commission plans to screen applicants and make recommendations to the governor on June 29, the day before the commission, which was not renewed by the legislature, goes out of existence. The same procedure is planned for June 27 and 28 regarding announcements of 2014 retirements on the middle and eastern sections.

The judges who applied are Chancellor Arnold Goldin and Circuit Judge Robert Childers, both of Memphis.

**Pilot pleas.** Three more employees of Pilot Flying J, without being indicted, pleaded guilty in federal "information" filings this week to charges of conspiracy to commit mail fraud. This brings to five the number of account representatives and sales managers who have admitted a role in short-changing some trucking companies on rebates for diesel fuel purchases.

The information filings likely mean they have agreed to testify against higher-level employees.

Knoxville-based Pilot is run by Jimmy Haslam, brother of Gov. Bill Haslam and owner of the Cleveland Browns. Gov. Haslam, a former company president, hasn't been involved in its operation for more than a decade but still owns part of the business.

## Tennessee Notes & Quotes

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■ Deputy to the Governor **Claude Ramsey**, Gov. **Bill Haslam**'s top aide, will retire at the end of August. Ramsey, 70, the former mayor of Hamilton County, will serve seven months beyond the two years to which he committed himself, according to Haslam, who termed his service "invaluable." Ramsey initially served both as deputy governor and chief of staff, but last July special assistant **Mark Cate** was promoted to chief of staff.

■ The state Board of Education, which in April approved on the first of two required readings a new state minimum salary schedule for teachers and a differentiated pay policy, was set to take final action on the items in a special meeting today. The Tennessee Education Association has fiercely opposed the new schedule, which lessens emphasis on years of service and stops paying extra for advanced degrees. Education Commissioner **Kevin Huffman**, who presented the proposals, wants to move toward performance-based pay, a goal shared by Gov. **Bill Haslam**. Democratic legislators held a news conference Thursday to denounce the plan, which they charged would result in lower teacher pay. Huffman said by law no teacher's pay will be reduced and the Haslam administration has increased teacher salary funding by \$130 million over the past three years.

■ At the news conference Rep. **Mike Stewart** (D-Nashville) hurled personal insults at "this guy" **Huffman**, describing him in terms such as "complete failure." This isn't the first time he's done so. Makes you wonder if Huffman cut line on him at Starbucks.

■ "This is border security on steroids." — *Sen. Bob Corker (R-Chattanooga), on an amendment Sen. John Hoeven (R-N.D.) and he proposed to the Senate immigration bill. Designed to pull more GOP votes, it would double the number of border control agents and add 700 miles of fencing on the southern border.*

■ A joint Government Operations subcommittee got an earful Wednesday from a group of Williamson County parents upset about school textbooks. Concerns ranged from anti-Semitic material to inclusion of foul language in an account of a 1959 conversation between Vice President **Richard Nixon** and Soviet Premier **Nikita Khrushchev**. Ultimately, the panel recommended keeping the Tennessee Textbook Commission in existence for another year, concluding its members are overwhelmed with work. But the issue is expected to get further legislative attention.

■ "There's absolutely no question that I've got to approve the budget. There's no question I can raise taxes . . . It's the last thing in the world I want to do . . . but just look at the statute. The authority is powerful." — *State Comptroller Justin Wilson, Monday, on the two letters he had written Memphis officials warning that steps had to be taken to improve the city's finances.*

■ The statute to which **Wilson** referred is TCA 9-21-403, which reads in part: "If the budget does not comply with this chapter, then the comptroller of the treasury or the comptroller's designee shall have the power and the

authority to direct the governing body of the local government to adjust its estimates or to make additional tax levies. . . ." **Wilson** raised several concerns in recent weeks and criticized a so-called "scoop and toss" debt service proposal by Mayor **A C Wharton** that he said deferred too much debt payment to the future.

■ Memphis officials received a letter from the comptroller's office Tuesday indicating a budget plan they had worked out "appears to have complied" with directives. The City Council gave tentative approval to \$30 million in new budget cuts and abandoned previous plans to restore employee salaries to their level prior to 2011 reductions. Meanwhile, **Wharton** has revised the debt repayment plan, and a property tax increase is planned, though the council hasn't yet settled on the amount. The council is set to take final action Tuesday.

■ The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees approved Thursday a 6% tuition hike. It also approved a 1.5% pay raise for faculty and staff, with those making under \$40,000 receiving a flat \$600 increase. UT-Knoxville Chancellor **Jimmy Cheek** and UT-Martin Chancellor **Tom Rakes** were given 10% "market-based" adjustments. University president **Joe DiPietro** received a 4.5% increase in his base salary, pushing it to \$465,618. Meanwhile, the Board of Regents was scheduled to act today on recommended tuition and fee hikes of 3% at community colleges and of 1.4% to 6% at the system's six universities.

■ **Sergio Marchionne**, CEO of both Chrysler and Fiat, which are merging, took part in a ribbon cutting ceremony in Pulaski Sunday marking the expansion of the Fiat-owned Magneti Marelli shock absorber plant, which now will make headlights for Chrysler and other automakers. The plant intends to add 800 jobs over the next few years and invest \$53.7 million, and that in itself might have lured Gov. **Bill Haslam**, Economic and Community Development Commissioner **Bill Hagerty**, Sen. **Lamar Alexander**, and Rep. **Marsha Blackburn** (R-Brentwood) to the event on Father's Day. But Marchionne also is considering where to locate the headquarters of the merged companies, and the state leaders seized the opportunity to meet with him.

■ "They've been working me over pretty well." — *Marchionne, to reporters at the event, according to Nashville's WPLN-FM.*

■ Senate Majority Leader **Mark Norris** (R-Collierville) was reelected this week as chairman of the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, whose most pressing task at the moment is a comprehensive study on annexation. The report, to be given to the General Assembly, is due in January.

■ The commission does a lot of important but dry work. **Norris** should do something to bolster morale. Maybe he could organize a softball team.

■ Wonder if "Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations" will fit on a jersey.