

U.S. Anglican Church archbishop accused of sexual misconduct, abuse of power

An attempted kiss, cash payments and other allegations roil the Anglican Church in North America.

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Shapira interviewed the priests and former employees who wrote affidavits in the presentment against the archbishop of the Anglican Church in North America. He and Reshma Kirpalani traveled to South Carolina, where Kirpalani took videos and photos for this story.

The Anglican Church in North America — forged from the headline-grabbing conservative revolt against the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop — is now confronting allegations by clergy and parishioners against two of its top leaders: One is accused of sexual misconduct, while the other allegedly abused his power by allowing men with troubling histories into the church.

The denomination's senior-most official, Archbishop [Stephen Wood](#), 62, has been accused by a former children's ministry director of putting his hand against the back of her head and trying to kiss her in his office in April 2024. The incident allegedly occurred two months before he was elected to the helm, according to a new church presentment, which The Washington Post obtained in advance of its Monday submission.

The woman, who gave an interview to The Post, also accused Wood of giving her thousands of dollars in unexpected payments from church coffers before the alleged advance. Wood, a married father of four sons, remains the rector of St. Andrew's Church in the Charleston, South Carolina, area, and a bishop overseeing a diocese of more than 40 churches across the South.

If the presentment triggers an ecclesiastical trial, Wood could be defrocked and forced to step down. He is the first archbishop in the Anglican Church in North America to face a presentment, a denomination spokeswoman said.

Wood declined to answer specific questions about the accusations in the presentment.

"I do not believe these allegations have any merit," Wood said in a statement. "I place my faith and trust in the process outlined in our canons to bring clarity and truth in these matters and respectfully decline to comment further at this time."

Wednesday morning, the senior warden of St. Andrew's Church informed congregants of the complaint against Wood and alerted them to The Post's reporting. "This is a painful and very personal process for all involved," wrote Mike Hughes, the church's senior warden, in an email.



Then-Bishop Stephen Wood of St. Andrew's Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, in 2020.

Then-Bishop Stephen Wood of St. Andrew's Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, in 2020. (Grace Beahm Alford/Charleston Post and Courier)

The presentment — a report that chronicles formal allegations of canonical offenses — is unfolding amid a protracted ecclesiastical trial against another leader, Stewart Ruch III, an Anglican bishop who oversees a diocese of 18 churches in the Midwest. Parishioners and clergy have accused Ruch, 58, of allowing men with histories of violence or sexual misconduct to worship or hold staff or leadership roles in his diocese.

Testimony in Ruch's trial, which was conducted privately on Zoom, wrapped up in mid-October. A verdict from the court's seven-member panel of judges — a group of bishops, priests and parishioners — is expected to arrive later this year. Ruch declined to comment through a diocese spokeswoman, who cited a court directive prohibiting him from media interviews during the trial.

"Unfortunately, the problems at the highest levels of the ACNA are deeper, wider and more entrenched than many of its own parishioners realize," said Andrew Gross, an Anglican priest who was the Anglican Church's communications director from 2013 until early this year. "The ACNA has never before had to deal with serious allegations of misconduct by the

archbishop. This is a crisis without precedent, and how these concerns are handled will determine the future trajectory of the denomination and its credibility.”

A denomination spokeswoman, Kate Harris, said the church could not comment on the accusations against Wood, but she noted that the alleged misconduct predates his tenure as archbishop. She added that once the complaint is “validated as a presentment,” a Board of Inquiry will determine whether it warrants an ecclesiastical trial.

Claire Buxton, 42, the former children’s ministry director at St. Andrew’s who accused Wood of trying to kiss her, said that the alleged advance came after numerous church employees remarked upon Wood’s “excessive praise and fondness” for her.

“I was in shock,” said Buxton, a divorced mother of three sons. Her issues with Wood, she added, are symptomatic of the denomination’s wider problems. “It’s just bizarre to me how far we — the Anglican Church in North America and its leadership — have gotten away from basic morals and principles.”

Founded in 2009, the denomination has churches that span 49 states, plus several regions in Canada and Mexico. It counts 128,000 members across more than 1,000 congregations. In the suburbs of D.C., the Falls Church Anglican in Virginia — with about 1,400 Sunday worshipers — is one of its largest and includes among its members the former chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence, a federal judge appointed by President Donald Trump and a former chief executive of a massive Republican super PAC.

The denomination, which identifies as a “province” of a global network of orthodox Anglican churches, [anchors](#) itself in the Old and New testaments and the Book of Common Prayer, while supporting causes embraced by political conservatives.

The Anglican Church in North America [labels](#) same-sex relationships a sin and refuses to bless same-sex marriages or ordain “persons who engage in homosexual behavior,” according to the church’s canons. Women may serve as deacons and priests in some dioceses but are barred from becoming bishops or archbishops. The denomination also [opposes](#) abortion.

A cascade of controversies

Beyond confronting the allegation of making an unwanted advance on his employee, Wood also faces complaints from priests that he plagiarized sermons and bullied and disparaged church staffers in the years before he became archbishop. The presentment accuses Wood of violating his ordination vows, committing sexual immorality and bringing “scandal and offense” upon his office.

In recent years, the denomination has been confronted by other controversies involving top leaders.

In June 2020, one Anglican bishop was [removed from ministry](#) after pleading guilty to ecclesiastical charges of “sexual immorality” and “conduct giving just cause for scandal” for his use of pornography. Another bishop was [defrocked](#) in May 2024 after sending more than 11,000 text messages to a married woman, among other accusations. Later that year, the current and former rectors of the Falls Church Anglican were [issued](#) “Godly admonitions” for mishandling sex abuse allegations against [a former youth minister](#) from the 1990s.

This year, in June, the Rev. Austin Becton, rector of an Anglican church in Nashville, was [admonished](#) and said he was [suspended](#) because he [posted](#) on Facebook that the church should repent for excluding LGBTQ+ Christians. His bishop wrote Becton a letter saying his social media post “sound[s] to reasonable readers as affirming sexual practices outside of norms held by scripture and tradition.” Becton ultimately [resigned](#).



St. Andrew's Church.

“I have grown increasingly troubled by broader patterns within the Anglican Church in North America,” Becton [wrote](#) to parishioners, explaining his resignation. He noted the problems involving Ruch, the Upper Midwest bishop, and added: “These are not simply lapses in judgment or isolated failures in leadership. They are symptoms of a structure designed, often unknowingly, to protect itself at all costs.”

Meanwhile, the ecclesiastical trial against Ruch has deepened the church’s crisis. One prosecutor [quit](#) after accusing in a public letter a trial judge of using material “not properly in the trial record” to question the Ruch investigation in open court. In his [own public defense](#), the chief judge said their inquiries were appropriate. The next prosecutor also quit after a potential conflict of interest was [raised](#) between him and Ruch.

When the controversies surfaced in August on the podcast “Anglican Unscripted,” whose weekly episodes attract thousands of listeners, the conversation ventured into the uncertainty engulfing the denomination.

“Can we now say that the ACNA has integrity at the very top anymore?” [asked](#) the show’s co-host, the Rev. George Conger, who presides over an Episcopal church in Florida.

Co-host Kevin Kallsen, an Anglican parishioner in Maryland, speaking as though he were talking directly with church officials, [replied](#): “You have evolved from something glorious into something hideous.”

The episode’s title: “Is the ACNA Past Tense?”

‘My Lord’ Wood

The Anglican Church in North America was born after a moment of moral outrage. In August 2003, a majority of Episcopal Church bishops [voted to confirm](#) the Rev. V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the denomination’s first openly gay bishop.

The decision — which led the front pages of major newspapers — compelled many of the Episcopal Church’s conservatives to [break away](#). Eventually, those traditionalists formed the new Anglican denomination.

Wood — then a rector overseeing St. Andrew’s — guided his parishioners through the split and, by 2010, [his church voted](#) to join the Anglican Church in North America. Soon, he began climbing the denomination’s hierarchy. Two years later, he took on a second job as its first bishop of the Diocese of the Carolinas. During his consecration, Wood wore a cross around his neck and carried a large staff. He was [introduced](#) as “My Lord.”

“I have learned more from my boys and my wife about the nature of the Gospel than anybody other than Christ and his Spirit,” he [told parishioners](#) at the ceremony.

In his new role, Wood joined the Anglican Church's College of Bishops, the body that appoints the archbishop and disciplines bishops who violate church canons. The church's rules require that a bishop must "uphold and defend the faith and order of the Church willingly and as God wants him to — not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to his care, but being a wholesome example to the entire flock of Christ."

For Wood, who grew up in Ohio, the path toward God was hardly preordained, he said last year [during a church assembly](#). Initially, he wanted to go to law school, then become a prosecutor and land in Washington.

"I wanted to put bad guys in jail," Wood said, "and then I wanted to go to Congress and write good laws so that bad guys don't hurt people."

A \$60,000 truck

In September 2019, seven years into his tenure running both St. Andrew's and the Diocese of the Carolinas, Wood confronted pushback. In a letter to Wood, which was private until now, the Rev. Hamilton Smith, the rector of St. Thomas' Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, wrote: "I do not feel you have moral authority required to hold the office of Bishop."

Wood preached sermons he did not write and tried to pass them off as his own work, Smith alleged. During staff meetings, Wood publicly shamed and cursed at colleagues, the letter said. Smith also questioned a \$60,000 truck provided by the diocese for Wood's church visits, noting that Wood mentioned the vehicle to him only in the context of Wood's hunting trips.



The Rev. Hamilton Smith, the rector of St. Thomas' Church in Mount Pleasant, questioned Wood's behavior.

"Is a \$60,000 truck the most cost efficient vehicle to accomplish this task?" Smith asked in the letter. "There are clergy in the Diocese that do not have any or have poor health insurance or retirement plans. ... You have told me numerous times that you are a sinner who had 'a really bad year'/'a horrible season' in which you did things you now regret. While I rejoice in this self understanding, grace and forgiveness have limits."

The next day, Wood offered a short reply, according to correspondence Smith shared with The Post.

"As you note at the end of your letter I do have a different perspective on the items you enumerate," Wood wrote. "Please continue to pray for me/us."

But Smith could not overcome his frustrations with Wood, and soon led his parishioners to leave Wood's diocese.

"This was the most difficult decision of my ministry," Smith told his church at the time.

The new archbishop

In June 2024, two months after Buxton alleged that Wood tried to kiss her, the College of Bishops met in conclave and [elected him](#) as the Anglican Church in North America's third archbishop.

The ascension to the church's highest position vested Wood with substantial authority.

He chairs many of the church's top governing bodies, which set the annual budget and ratify key constitutional changes, among other tasks. When a bishop faces a presentment, Wood gets to appoint the members of a Board of Inquiry, which determines whether the accusations warrant ecclesiastical trials. On top of that, Wood also can select the prosecutors for those trials. In his own case, he would recuse himself from those appointments, a denomination spokeswoman said.



Wood, during a rehearsal for his investiture service in October 2024.

Wood also retained his job as rector of St. Andrew's and kept his position as bishop of the Diocese of the Carolinas, which includes churches in Texas, Georgia and Tennessee.

Because Wood is still a bishop, he holds on to yet another power — the ability to vote on punishments for any bishop found guilty at an ecclesiastical trial.

In South Carolina, Wood's elevation rattled a group of his former colleagues, most of them now priests. For years, they said in interviews, they privately shared stories that Wood demeaned them or others when they worked at St. Andrew's. But it was Claire Buxton's fresh accusations that spurred them to action.

By early 2025, the group drafted formal church charges based on six affidavits that accuse Wood of abusive behavior. In September, the group quietly secured the support of at least 10 Anglican priests and parishioners to sign and swear to the presentment, a prerequisite for its submission.

But the day after the presentment was submitted, the denomination threw up what its authors regard as a roadblock: The denomination asked that all 11 endorsers re-sign the presentment under a statement attesting to the allegations' truth "under penalties of perjury." In an email to the lead signatory, a denomination official said this was "common practice," noting that prior presentments have been resubmitted for the same reason.

The Rev. Rob Sturdy, an Anglican priest who wrote one of the presentment's affidavits, said in an interview that his group will not comply. He said they followed the denomination's canons, which do not contain a "perjury" standard.



The Rev. Robert Sturdy wrote one of the affidavits that accuse Wood of misconduct.

“This noncanonical requirement feels like an attempt to intimidate our signatories with potential legal action,” Sturdy, now an Anglican chaplain who serves students at The Citadel, said in an interview. “A church that can’t do right by victims of sexual abuse should not exist.”

His affidavit alleges, among other things, that Wood frequently bragged about a woman from another church whom he said “he could have ... anytime he wanted.”

“We have out-of-control men with absolute power and leaders who refuse to hold them accountable,” Sturdy said.

Surprise payments for ‘Claire Bear’

In her interview and affidavit, Buxton said Wood began to act inappropriately with her in October 2021, shortly after she was promoted as the children’s ministry director at St. Andrew’s. At a local park for a celebration of Wood’s tenure, he hugged her, she said, but then slowly slid his hand down her lower back, letting it linger.

“I called my parents afterward to tell them that it felt ‘sensual’ and I was concerned that he was attracted to me,” Buxton wrote in her affidavit, “but they both said it was probably nothing and I was mistaken, so I told myself it was nothing.”

A year later, in September 2022, during a visit to his office, Wood gossiped about sexual affairs of other people at his church and elsewhere, Buxton wrote. He said he fired one employee because, in his words, “she slept with everyone.”

Two months later, by the church’s front desk, Wood handed her a folded check for \$1,500 made out to her, she said. The check, reviewed by The Post, came from a church account, labeled “St. Andrews Church Rector’s Mercy Fund.” She said in her affidavit that it was signed by him.



Claire Buxton, formerly a children's ministry director at St. Andrew's Church, alleges that Wood tried to kiss her in April 2024.

Wood told her it was from someone who thought she “was doing an amazing job,” she wrote in her affidavit. “I looked up shocked, and he was smiling back at me as he walked away.” The payment felt unusual, Buxton said — bonuses typically came with formal notices and were deposited into bank accounts. But she needed the money and accepted the check.

As the months went on, he called her “Claire Bear” in front of other people, she wrote. One female colleague told Buxton she’d pray that Wood would find her “repulsive.” Buxton reported her concerns to at least four employees named in the affidavit.

In July 2023, she said, a church official deposited \$500 into Buxton’s bank account, telling her that Wood said she needed it. Buxton shared her online bank statement with The Post confirming the transaction.

That September, Wood summoned her to his office and said he was “prepared to send” her to a nearby luxury resort, The Sanctuary, because she seemed “off.” “You can get spa treatments, I’ll hire you a babysitter. You can get a fancy room, whatever you want,” she recalled him telling her. Buxton declined.

“With all his growing attention and affection, I was really terrified that if I went, he might come,” she wrote in the affidavit.

Three months later, Wood handed her an envelope in her office with cash inside, she wrote. She told him, “You can’t do this,” but he said the money wasn’t from him. She didn’t believe him but accepted it. Then, he told her to count the cash right there. So, she did. The amount was \$1,500.

By this point, she said, she’d received a total of \$3,500 in surprise payments over 13 months.

“We are taught to trust someone in his position, so it often felt wrong for me to question or say no to him, even when I felt uncomfortable,” Buxton said. “But I also knew it would come in handy for Christmas presents for my kids. Ultimately, it wasn’t worth saying no because it would have been a confrontation.”

In the spring of 2024, after Wood learned Buxton was going on a church mission to the Bahamas, it was announced that he and his wife would join, too. Buxton feared that even with his wife’s presence, Wood might “try and initiate a physical relationship” with her, she wrote. So, she decided to confront him.

On April 23, 2024, she arrived at his third-floor office, whose green walls were mounted with numerous taxidermied animal heads. She took a seat on a leather chair, while he settled into a rocking chair next to her.

“I’m so tired. I can’t do this,” she recalled saying to him, according to her affidavit.

But she was afraid of being too direct.

“You know how special you are to me. You’re my favorite person in the world,” he told her, Buxton’s affidavit said.

He encouraged her to think of the trip as a vacation and said he “didn’t want” his wife to go, she wrote. He mentioned a beach bar and a pool, recounting someone saying, “You can get knocked up just by swimming in that pool.”

As she got up to leave, Wood tried to give her an “intimate” hug. Then, she said, he escalated the situation.

“He put his hand on the back of my head and tried to turn it up towards him while he slowly brought his face towards my face to kiss me,” she wrote in her affidavit. “I dropped my face down towards his shoulder so he couldn’t. He held for a second and then let go, and I said, ‘Ok, bye,’ and ran out of his office.”

She immediately told a colleague about the incident, she said.

During the Bahamas mission, she said, nothing physical transpired between them. But she said in her affidavit that his behavior made her uncomfortable. At a lunch with other people, she said, he put a forkful of food in her face and insisted she eat it.

Two months later, in June 2024, Buxton resigned. But Wood’s election as archbishop later that month galvanized her.

“I was devastated when he became archbishop. It was the responsibility of the bishops to vet him and they failed at it, horribly,” Buxton said. “Now, I just want the truth to come out so other people don’t get hurt and that the church is held accountable.”

Earlier this year, during his address at the Anglican Church’s annual governing meeting, Wood touted growing attendance and the church’s new profitability. New rules, he said, were adopted to protect congregants from abuse.

“I take it seriously,” [said](#) Wood, dressed in a blazer, a purple bishop’s shirt and white clerical collar. “It’s why you’re going to hear a lot about safeguarding from me this year.”

Top: Illustration by Michael Domine/The Washington Post; Grace Beahm Alford/Charleston Post and Courier; Courtesy of Claire Buxton