

Rachel Held Evans, Christian writer and speaker, dies at age 37

Evans's books *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, *Searching for Sunday*, and *Inspired* traced the evolution of her faith.

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) and [Christian Century staff](#)

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Rachel Held Evans. Photo courtesy of Maki Evans.

Rachel Held Evans, a popular progressive Christian writer and speaker, died May 4 at age 37 after a brief illness.

Evans had been in a medically induced coma for several weeks and never returned to an alert state. Her husband, Dan Evans, wrote [in an update on her website](#) that doctors found her brain was experiencing constant seizures while she was receiving treatment for an infection. Extensive swelling of her brain caused damage that was not survivable.

Evans gathered a large following through her blog posts and books, including the *New York Times* best seller *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, *Searching for Sunday*, and, most recently, *Inspired*.

“The question behind *Inspired* is one that many readers who have aged with the Bible will find painfully familiar. What do we do when the childhood wonder ebbs away, when we are left with our disquieting questions” about difficult texts? [Ashleigh D. Elser writes in a review for the *Christian Century*](#). “Evans makes her way back to ‘loving the Bible again’ not by setting her questions aside but by learning to see how similar questions animate the biblical writers’ own attempts to tell stories about beginnings and wars and walking on water.”

Evans was a convener of the Why Christian and Evolving Faith conferences, designed for progressive Christians and others who aren’t sure where they belong in the spiritual landscape. She also served on President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu, who started the Evolving Faith conference with Evans, [wrote in the *Washington Post*](#): “She used her writing to build the bridges so many of us needed to get back to God’s love, to one another, and to the church. And in a world that covets power, cash, and influence, she lavishly gave away all three. She centered the marginalized, quietly offering expertise, introductions, endorsements, speaking invitations, money, and more.”

Evans was raised in a nondenominational, evangelical Christian family in Dayton, Tennessee—home of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, a watershed case about teaching evolution in schools that caused many conservative Christians to feel alienated from the American mainstream. She attended Bryan College, a school known for promoting belief in a literal six-day creation. Her 2010 book *Evolving in Monkey Town*, later retitled *Faith Unraveled*, describes beginning to question the answers she had taught about faith.

She wrote about her subsequent journey away from church and what kept leading her back in 2015’s *Searching for Sunday*. She and her family worshiped at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Tennessee.

While chronicling her faith journey with honesty and humor, she rarely lapsed into us-versus-them arguments. Instead, she presented a vision of the church as a place with room for everyone.

“This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes,” she wrote in *Searching for Sunday*. “And there’s always room for more.” —Religion News Service; *Christian Century* staff

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