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Choose compassion, not vitriol for same-sex marriage

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A Pentecostal pastor lays down a saw at a residence for homeless people with AIDS, raps on wood and expresses pride in being able to look out in his church and see two pews filled with people with HIV.

A retired Episcopalian schoolteacher in her 80s, with a shawl over the shoulders of her barely 5-foot frame, describes a series of religious visions at 3 a.m. that led her to start an AIDS hospice.

Men in crew-cuts embrace a colorfully dressed gay man as part of a care team at a block-long Southern Baptist church in Texas.



St. Paul Area Synod delegates overwhelmingly voted in favor of a resolution opposing a change in the state Constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman during the group's annual assembly at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church Saturday, May 19, 2012, in Burnsville.

David Joles, Star Tribune

These stories and images come to mind looking back 20 years when, amid widespread suffering caused by the AIDS crisis, many religious communities found themselves working through a response balancing traditional teaching on sexuality, fear of the unknown and the commands of their faith to love their neighbor.

Today, as President Obama comes forward to support same-sex marriage, many religious communities find themselves undergoing similar challenges balancing theology, experience and personal consciences on issues of sexuality.

Extremists continue to judge and condemn one another, and the vitriol may ramp up as the issue becomes part of the 2012 election. But new research offers a cautionary note for those who would try to fit members of different religious groups into monolithic boxes on gay and lesbian issues.

In interviews with 40 Christian clergy, researchers from Brandeis University and Clemson University found many pastoral leaders were still developing their opinions on sexuality and how they would respond to requests for ceremonies such as same-sex blessings.

Other studies show evolving attitudes among evangelicals and younger religious adults as the debate shifts away from theological forums and into the public arena.

In the pews and in the pulpits, U.S. religious groups continue to struggle with sex.

There have been significant shifts in public opinion in recent years in support of same-sex marriage; still, there are signs that religious individuals in general are not leading the way.

For example, the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey found that while 88 percent of religiously unaffiliated respondents supported same-sex marriage, support from Christian groups ranged from 45 percent of Catholics to 37 percent of evangelicals.

In studying data from the 2006-2007 National Congregations Study, researcher Andrew Whitehead of the University of Mobile reported that Catholic, mainline Protestant and politically and theologically liberal congregations were more likely to accept gays and lesbians in their churches.

Overall, however, many churches are not welcoming. Whitehead said 37 percent of congregations allowed gays and lesbians in committed relationships to become members, with around one in five allowing those members to hold leadership posts.

The results indicate "the access of gays and lesbians to religious congregations is clearly limited," he writes in the latest edition of the Review of Religious Research.

But attitudes are not set in stone.

A separate study examines the uncertainty experienced by pastors as they come to terms with issues from above — denominational stands on homosexuality; from below — the expectations and views of church members; and from within — their own developing understanding of same-sex issues.

In-depth interviews with 40 clergy from Catholic, Episcopal, Southern Baptist and United Church of Christ congregations revealed that seven in 10 pastoral leaders said they were unsure about their personal opinions on homosexuality, how they should act in pastoral settings relative to the issue, or uncertain about both their views and actions.

The sense of being on a journey crossed denominational lines, researchers Wendy Cadge, Jennifer Girouard, Laura Olson and Madison Lylerohr reported in the Review of Religious Research.

One Southern Baptist pastor said, "I'm on a journey with God. What I believe today about this issue I may not be believing tomorrow ... as I continue down the pathway of maturity."

A United Church of Christ minister said he looks to Scripture, science and his own experience and finds issues around homosexuality "terribly complicated and challenging. ... This is one of the questions of our day that we will for the rest of our lives continue to struggle with."

Still, as public opinion shifts to be more supportive of gay rights, and doctrinal mandates hold less sway over younger generations, a perceptible shift in attitudes also is occurring in religious communities, some researchers state.

In a study of 665 Christian heterosexual students at a Midwestern university, 85 percent of students said their religion's core teaching views homosexuality as a sin. But fewer than four in 10 respondents said their own beliefs about homosexuality were fairly consistent with the teachings of their religion, researchers Michael Woodford, Denise Levy and N. Eugene Walls said in article in the Review of Religious Research.

In a separate review article looking "Beyond the Culture War," researchers Jeremy Thomas and Daniel Olson of Purdue University note that more evangelical congregations can expect to face these issues as America's growing acceptance of homosexuality makes it likely more church members will be open about their sexual orientation.

Gays and lesbians "unwilling to sell their evangelical souls" to affirm their orientation will be coming out at a time when a growing number of churches are seeking to find ways to share values such as unconditional love, commitment, stability and monogamy within the context of how gays and lesbian members lead their lives, according to Thomas.

In these congregations, the focus is shifting to the idea that "We're here to help. We're here to minister," Thomas said.

Overall, new research is providing a more nuanced understanding of how many people in various religious communities, far from being rigid ideologues on the issue, are struggling to find ways to move forward.

This brings back to mind a conversation I had many years ago with a priest involved in AIDS ministry. Back then, some AIDS activists disrupted Masses and destroyed sacred hosts as they demanded that religious groups give unqualified acceptance of homosexuality. And some preachers filled the airwaves with the message that AIDS was God's punishment for homosexuals and drug users.

The cleric said what was needed was conciliation, the ability to seek forgiveness from one another for being judgmental.

What if today more Americans, instead of promoting polarization over dialogue on the issue of same-sex marriage, decided to forgive one another for the times they chose vitriol over compassion and respect for individual consciences on both sides.

Maybe then the nation could journey together toward greater understanding. Not a bad American dream.

David Briggs is a veteran religion writer and director of the International Association of Religion Journalists. He wrote this

column for his Ahead of the Trend Blog, sponsored by the [Association of Religion Data Archives \(ARDA\)](#).

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