

Introduction

As a point of focus for this report, let us all consider our answers to this question:

“What does it mean to be *Covenant*?”

The Evangelical Covenant Church has been my church home for most of my adult life. During my time as a student at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, I briefly attended Community Covenant Church of Goleta, and later Montecito Covenant Church. It was at CCC where I got to know a fellow student named Elisa, after she found out I had a car and started asking me for rides to church. It was at Montecito Cov where I got my start volunteering in youth ministry. Shortly thereafter, in 2008, Elisa and I were married in that same church. After moving to Oakland, California for graduate school, Elisa and I would find ourselves immediately plugged into the community at First Covenant Church of Oakland. During our 13-year stint in the Bay Area we were involved in connection groups and Bible studies, high-school and college group ministries, young adults ministry, CHIC trips, retreat organizing, and I served on the worship team. We officially became members in 2016 and had all three of our children dedicated and witnessed our oldest son’s baptism there. Three years ago, our family moved to Sacramento, where we now attend Common Ground where Elisa has become a member.

It was in Covenant churches that my relationships with friends and pastors fed into my spiritual life and informed my sense of belonging to a faith community. A belonging that was in many ways taken for granted. After the move to Sacramento, my family was invited into a nearby local church from a different denomination. Our time at this church intensified a latent sense of disconnect that I had been having with the broader American evangelical church. As has become a common experience for my generation, I found myself in a time of profound faith deconstruction and renegotiation of my relationship to the Bible and the Christian tradition. During a prospective new members orientation, I was confronted with the all-powerful *statement of faith*. A document to which I was expected to consciously assent in order to become a member. I pored over the hyperfine details about beliefs that the church leaders had deemed to be

“correct”: penal substitutionary atonement, Hell as a state of eternal conscious torment, an inerrantist understanding of scripture, a pre-millennial dispensationalism, women’s subordinate roles in ministry, and an understanding of human sexuality that precludes certain people from the blessing of marriage. These were all doctrines that I knew were not universally accepted by *all* Christians. None are presented *systematically* in the Bible; I understood them rather to be theological conclusions based on *certain* interpretations of *certain* scriptural texts. It felt like a faith that was less concerned with relationship and transformation, and more of an exercise in performative intellectual conformity.

It would be both uncharitable and inaccurate to say that this church was not also concerned with relationships and transformation. My time there was also marked with friendship, pastoral care, and inclusion. However, as so often is the case in Christian spaces, aspects of that inclusion were still conditional upon having the “right” beliefs. When I opened up to our youth pastor about my changing understandings of sexuality and the church, I was immediately removed from my volunteer role in the high school ministry. No curiosity about the experiences and conversations I’d been having, no questions about how I was reading and understanding scripture, no acknowledgment about how my decades of experience as both a high school teacher and youth leader helped me to hold space for teenagers navigating questions of identity. A switch had been flipped. I was no longer a trusted fellow traveler on the journey; I was a threat—to the pastor’s authority, to a narrow orthodoxy, and perhaps even to salvation itself.

That experience highlighted what I see now as a widespread unhealthy faith practice; what biblical scholar Peter Enns refers to as “the sin of certainty”:

We think true faith *is dependent* on maintaining a particular “knowledge set” and keeping a *firm grasp* on a tightly woven network of nonnegotiable beliefs, guarding each one vigilantly, making sure they all stay above the water line no matter how hard the struggle—because if what we “know” sinks, faith sinks right down with it. Correct thinking provides a sense of certainty. Without it, we fear that faith is on life support at best, dead and buried at worst. And who wants a dead or dying faith? So this fear of losing a handle on certainty leads to a *preoccupation* with correct thinking, making sure familiar beliefs are defended and supported at all costs.¹

¹ Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs* (HarperOne, 2016), 17-18.

I mention my experience of faith deconstruction with the full awareness that this term conjures up many different conceptions of what that experience might entail, or what it says about the person who self-identifies with the term. Without speaking for everyone, I can say that, for me, deconstruction meant an acute awareness of the inconsistencies within, and harm perpetuated by the church, particularly over the last, let's say, 10 years, resulting in a profound sense of alienation from the tradition in which I was raised. Rather than leading to acrimony and disengagement, I felt myself compelled to take my faith and my identity as a Christian *more* seriously, leading to a time of more focused study, reading, listening, and conversation that continues to this day.

The same month that I was summarily dismissed from my ministry role, I was sensing a pull back to the Covenant Church. My membership into First Covenant Church (FCC) was noteworthy for how little of a requirement there was for me to confess doctrinal purity. As with most Covenant churches, I simply had to respond affirmatively to two questions: "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord?" and, "Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct?"² A non-creedal, non-confessional, pietist "free" church, made up of "readers" and "mission friends" was exactly the kind of diverse faith community where a person with evolving beliefs could find belonging. I had of course known this throughout my time in the Covenant, but it was now coming sharply into focus. If there was any Christian denomination that had the ecclesiological flexibility needed to withstand divergent and volatile perspectives on sexuality and gender, surely it was the Evangelical Covenant Church...

...I had forgotten about Omaha.

Thinking back, I remember hearing about the involuntary removal of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis in 2019. It was at an after-church members meeting in the FCC Oakland gym. Our pastor told us about what had happened at the Annual Meeting. I remember feeling somewhat bewildered, but I wasn't yet in a place to

² <https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/>

understand the full implications for the denomination, its history, its polity, its pastors, and its queer and affirming members. I've now come to believe that, like myself in 2019, few Covenanters have done the work to fully understand these implications.

After relocating back to an ECC church, I had a conversation with a Covenant pastor friend who had recently experienced angry pushback simply for discussing in public how the church does ministry with its LGBTQ+ members. I was confused. This seemed completely out of character with what I understood the Covenant Church to be.

I had already been learning about how other denominations were navigating shifting perspectives on sexuality and gender: the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Church of the Nazarene, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA). I wanted to know more about how the ECC was handling and processing these changes, and how they fit into the broader historical narrative of the church. So, I started reading. Articles, essays, blog posts, meeting minutes, open letters, Facebook conversations. I listened to podcasts and watched YouTube videos. I reached out to people via email and messenger. I had hours-long phone and Zoom calls with dozens of people.

I heard painful stories. Stories of silencing, of blacklisting, and of disenfranchising. Stories of belittling, demonizing, and gaslighting. Stories of pleas ignored and wagons circled. Stories of steamrolled meeting agendas and out-of-order proceedings. Stories of desperate brothers and sisters brought to their lowest points, juxtaposed with the celebration and cheers of their colleagues. Stories of "handlers" brought in to keep people in line. Stories of confrontation and intimidation at ordination hearings, and in one case, threats of physical violence. Stories of excommunication and abandonment.

The acknowledgement of these real and raw testimonies of fellow Covenanters is not meant to construct a totalizing narrative for the entire denomination. The ECC is made up of churches in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is joyfully proclaimed. Places where people are finding hope, healing, reconciliation, and fellowship. Places in which needs are being met, communities are being strengthened, where truth is being proclaimed and justice is spoken to power. Places in which, right now, LGBTQ+ persons,

with and without partners, along with allies, traditionalists, skeptics, and questioners still continue to choose to gather and worship together in spite of differing viewpoints.

It is within this context that I felt called to pursue this project. I was never able to sign that statement of faith, but I now feel ready to make a statement.

THE ECC IN COLOR is my statement of hope.

My hope is in a Covenant Church that “*shall be an expression of the communion of saints, that is to say an association of Christians solely on the ground that they are Christians... capable of staying together, despite many different opinions.*”³ Hope for a community of believers committed to “[moving] toward the center, the heart of Christian faith as a lived reality... [seeking] to assure many points of access to enable even the most skeptical or broken to move toward the heart of God.”⁴ Hope that “pastors being examined for ordination [will be] expected to defend their views and practices from the Holy Scriptures rather than simply demonstrate their acceptance of the denomination’s distinct theology or statement of faith.”⁵ Hope for congregations that will continue to be a reflection of the Covenant’s commitment to diversity, containing “lifelong Covenanters... who have served the congregation and denomination for many years; young families and professionals engaged by vibrant life in [their] context; new believers, and therefore, new to the Covenant; a marvelous diversity of ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic status; and, surely not least, the bright young faces of children running around, learning, secure in their faith community, trusting of caring adults who look to their best interests and budding faith.”⁶ Hope for a “return to such a gracious way of gathering around the scriptures, where ‘Where is it written?’ would become once again, ‘What do you see that I might have missed?’”⁷

³ P. P. Waldenström, “The Christian Congregation Has Room for All Who Believe (1899),” in *The Swedish Pietists: A Reader*, ed. Mark Safstrom (Pickwick Publications, 2015), 106-107.

⁴ John E. Phelan Jr., “Setting Boundaries or Finding Life?” *The Covenant Companion* 53, no.2 (2011): 12.

⁵ Phelan, “Setting Boundaries,” 12.

⁶ Philip J. Anderson, “Harmony and Congregational Liberty in the Tradition of the Evangelical Covenant Church,” *The Pietist Schoolman*, June 24, 2019, <https://pietistschoolman.com/2019/06/24/harmony-and-liberty-in-the-covenant-church-phil-anderson/>

⁷ Judy Peterson, “An Open Letter to My Church,” February 7, 2019, 8.

With candor, let me say that I am confronted by a litany of reasons to temper or even suspend that hope. I am writing to you, the Covenant Church, as a witness to the undercurrent of estrangement, disorientation, and despair that has been deeply felt by a percentage of our membership over the past seven years. If what I'm writing here seems confusing, out of touch, or melodramatic, I can only implore you to understand that this is an accurate description and invite you into a space of listening, consideration, and contemplation.

The following report is a genuine attempt to create that space. Last year, from September 15 to October 17, I sent via email and Facebook Messenger an open letter along with an invitation to complete a survey to thousands of contacts across the ECC: pastors, leadership, church chairs, North Park faculty, members, as well as a number of former Covenanters who have recently left our fellowship.⁸

As I wrote in that letter, the purpose of the survey was to “help better understand how Covenanters, current and former, have been processing changing understandings of human sexuality and the impact of events in the ECC reaching back 10+ years.”

My hopes for the survey are

- 1) to provide Covenant members with the opportunity to consider how their own relationship to LGBTQ+ Christians impacts the shaping of our church culture,
- 2) to gather data that will inform the extent to which the ECC is interested in fostering continued fellowship with LGBTQ+-affirming pastors, members, and congregations, and
- 3) to facilitate connections between interested persons for the purpose of elevating the conversation on the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity, relationships, faith, and inclusion.⁹

These continue to be my hopes and goals for the broader project and that which I intend to present within this report.

The report has a number of sections to which I invite interested readers. We begin with a *Historical Background*, intended to briefly summarize defining moments in the development of Covenant Church's unique ethos and ecclesiological identity, viewed

⁸ Jonathan Rea, email to the Evangelical Covenant Church, September 15, 2025. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Email_Invitation_Final_Draft_2025.pdf

⁹ Rea, email, 2025.

through the lenses of the Covenant distinctives, and then an overview of key events in the 30-year-long discourse on *Human Sexuality* within the ECC. Next will be a brief description of the *Methodology* of one of the more recent contributions to the discourse: the survey. This will lead into detailed reporting of the *Survey Data* as well as some *Analysis* of survey results that I found to be noteworthy. The survey itself generated varied and passionate responses, and I expect that the acquired data will be even more controversial. For these reasons, the following section will be an attempt to orient those with divergent views about the significance or utility of the survey data around what I'm offering as a selection of *Agreements for Good Faith Dialogue* about a polarizing subject. This will lead to a series of *Questions for the Covenant* that I hope all readers will honestly and faithfully ask of themselves, and finally my *Conclusion*, which will include my own personal commentary that also draws on dozens of other voices within the Covenant community and with whom I am in conversation as well as recommendations for next steps and my hopes for future iterations of this project.

This report is not a vehicle for presenting a systematic apologetic for the LGBTQ+-inclusive and affirming position within Christianity. The present report is focused on exploring ways in which the ECC can authentically honor multiple viewpoints and as such will be aware of and sensitive to the arguments and experiences that inform the affirming position. To be sure, in many places, both survey responses and indeed my own commentary will present that position in a positive light and will levy criticism of certain traditionalist responses; I'm not trying to hide that. It will not, however, be focused on laying out those arguments as a means of convincing readers to shift their whole paradigm. For skeptical and curious readers who were hoping that I might clearly and explicitly define my own theological and ethical conclusions for the purposes of critique, solidarity, or just genuine interest, I'm sorry, but that's not what I'm doing here (though what *I am* doing will most certainly generate those responses, and more). For readers who are genuinely interested in what a *biblically and theologically informed case for full acceptance and affirmation of LGBTQ+ persons into the ministry and sacraments of the Christian faith* looks

like, my personal recommendation is to start with either Matthew Vines¹⁰ or the late Jack Rogers¹¹ written contributions on biblical criticism, ethics, and church history, following with the more expansive and inclusive gospel narrative approach of Christopher Hays and his father, the late Richard Hays.¹² Additional resources, from a variety of media, including from Covenant voices, can be found at *THE ECC IN COLOR'S* [website](https://eccincolor.com/).¹³

The contents of this report are meant to be *an invitation*. An invitation, firstly, to consider the question posed at the beginning of this section: *What does it mean to be Covenant?* How would you articulate an answer to this question? How are others, both throughout Covenant history and presently, answering this question? What are the hallmarks that distinguish the Evangelical Covenant Church from other historic Christian denominations, and what are the orientation points that denote inclusion within the Covenant fellowship? Which aspects, if any, should we fight to hold on to, welcome with embrace, or let go of? It is an invitation, secondly, to consider your relationship with the LGBTQ+ brothers, sisters, and siblings in your life, both personally, and in the context of the community of believers. How have your own words and actions been received by queer Christians and allies? What have you learned, or might you learn, through your shared humanity and interconnection with the same? To what degree have you been open to, or closed off from, hearing and considering perspectives and stories from outside your personal experience, religious tradition, or location of comfort?

This is not to say that the content of the report will only feature polite conversation or naïve optimism. As mentioned, this is also meant to be a testament to trauma and fracture. Expect to find instances of raw expressions of pain and loss, criticism and rebuke, and unfiltered language. Creating a realistic and hope-filled vision for the future demands coming to terms with the reality of the past. May our interactions with harsh and uncomfortable discourse be viewed through a lens of that hope.

¹⁰ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2015).

¹¹ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

¹² Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (Yale University Press, 2024).

¹³ <https://eccincolor.com/>

The title of the project, *THE ECC IN COLOR*, “was chosen as a tribute to the diversity found in our denomination, which includes a remarkable spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity that is and always will be a part of our churches.”¹⁴ My inspiration came from the experience of sitting with the weight of the division I was encountering in our community while listening to a song from one of my favorite artists, My Morning Jacket, entitled “In Color”.¹⁵ Permit me one final invitation: to take a moment to ponder your initial reactions to those questions on Covenant identity and human sexuality while listening to this song. My recommendation...

...Play it loud.

In Fellowship,

Jonny Rea

Husband, father, teacher, member, advocate

Sacramento, CA

April 2026

¹⁴ Rea, email, 2025.

¹⁵ “In Color,” track 3 on *My Morning Jacket*, *My Morning Jacket*, ATO Records, 2021. Listen on your preferred music streaming service or at <https://open.spotify.com/track/08ezn6XeocKl507k8lg9lA>