

Human Sexuality: 30 Years of Covenant Controversy

The mid-1990s was a critical time for many Christian denominations and their struggle to discern morally, ethically, and biblically centered understandings about homosexuality.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (*i.e.*, PCUSA), there developed a renewed interest in exploring the permissibility of the ordination of gay persons after fifteen years of simmering disagreement. In 1978, a Task Force to Study Homosexuality recommended to the church's General Assembly that there should be *no prohibition* of the ordination of self-affirming practicing homosexual persons.⁷¹ In a 201-page report, the committee cited data from psychotherapy and the natural sciences, as well as a 70-page section on biblical authority and interpretation. This section contained four models that correlated with various theological schools of thought: scholastic theology of the Old Princeton School, neo-orthodoxy, liberation theology, and process theology.⁷² While fourteen members of the task force argued from the last two models for the ordination of qualified gay and lesbian people, the General Assembly instead voted to adopt the *minority report* that the guidelines should state that unrepentant homosexual practice was sinful and contradicted ordination requirements.⁷³

By 1993, the divide in opinion had become so palpable that further exploration was required. At the General Assembly of that year, some thirty gay and lesbian people took to the stage to say, "My name is _____. I am gay (or a lesbian). I want to offer my service to the church."⁷⁴ The demonstration convinced the PCUSA to recommend the study of the issue for three years. Few congregations took the opportunity, but in August of 1995, twenty-four Presbyterian scholars, including Dale Martin, Jeffrey Siker, and Choon-Leong Seow, convened in Chicago in a Consultation on Biblical Ethics and Human Sexuality, out of which came the edited volume *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality*, published

⁷¹ Preface to *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), viii.

⁷² Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 9.

⁷³ Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 9-10.

⁷⁴ Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 11.

in February of the following year, one of only a handful of scholarly texts on the subject available at the time⁷⁵

In August of 1996, New Testament scholar and Methodist minister Richard B. Hays published the book which has become one of the most cited and assigned volumes on biblical ethics, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. One of the more significant repercussions of its publication was Hays' commentary on homosexuality in chapter 16, an oft-cited source for Christians looking for a credible apologetic for a pastorally sensitive, albeit staunchly traditional sexuality ethic. Toward the end of the chapter, Hays sums up his interpretation of the evidence:

Thus, in view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence, in view of our culture's present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose.⁷⁶

In spite of his position on the indefensibility of ethical same-sex relationships, Hays was nevertheless sensitive to the spiritual and relational needs that some gay Christians would no doubt continue to seek out in the church.

Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4: 5). If they are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Preface to *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality*, viii.

⁷⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 399-400.

⁷⁷ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 400.

1996

Only two months before the release of *Moral Vision*, the Evangelical Covenant Church resolved to enter the fray in the ecumenical debate around sexual ethics. At the 111th Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois, delegates voted to adopt a *Resolution on Human Sexuality*⁷⁸; a document which continues to serve as the basis for Covenant policy and ministerial guidelines some thirty years later.

Human Sexuality was developed by the Christian Action Commission (CAC), then comprised of David Kersten, Steve Bilynskyj, Sharon Brennan, Ronald Brown, Covenant secretary John Hunt and chairperson Kyle Becchetti. The typical *modus operandi* of the committee was to poll Annual Meetings to discern topics to pursue, but in the year prior to the resolution Covenant President Paul Larsen insisted that the committee take up the topic of human sexuality. As we've seen, the topic of sexual ethics was receiving renewed attention in the broader ecumenical church at the time, a detail evidenced by the reference made in the resolution to the draft of a social statement that was being developed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) at the time.

The report makes a declarative statement concerning marriage; an oft-cited summation for those seeking Covenant approval for sexual encounters:

A publicly declared, legally binding marriage between one woman and one man is the appropriate place for sexual intercourse. Heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage—these constitute the Christian standard.⁷⁹

In addition to the delineating modifier of “heterosexual”, one other reference to homosexuality was made, buried within a list of “ministerial needs”:

...to care for persons involved in sexual sins such as adultery, *homosexual behavior* and promiscuity, compassionately recognizing the potential of these sins to take the form of addiction.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Human Sexuality*, A Resolution of the Evangelical Covenant Church, adopted at the 111th Annual Meeting (1996).

<http://covchurch.org/resolutions/1996-human-sexuality/>

⁷⁹ *Human Sexuality* (1996).

⁸⁰ *Human Sexuality* (1996). Emphasis mine.

These sentences constitute the entirety of the resolution's commentary on homosexuality. The remainder of the resolution neatly and succinctly addresses the institution of marriage, the gift of sexuality, and the danger of its misuse more generally.

Following the presentation of the resolution, Covenant pastor Denny Moon made a motion to postpone its adoption for two more years in order that the Covenant might have time for study, discussion and comment. He specifically asked that the CAC make a discussion guide to be made available by February of 1997, that churches would prioritize discussion of the resolution in their Christian education programs, that the regional ministeria would organize at least one event to discern pastoral implications, that the seminary faculty would also engage in the discussion, and that these various groups would bring their findings and concerns to the 1997 ministerial meeting for the purpose of creating materials to furnish to the delegates of the 1998 Annual Meeting when the vote would commence.⁸¹

A lengthy discussion followed. Some, such as pastor Art Nelson, spoke against the resolution, while others spoke in favor. Pastor Douglas Fondell recalls that a comment was made that "The Evangelical Covenant Church will not go down the road of the mainline churches."⁸² Eventually, President Larsen stood to address the delegates and called for the question. The motion to refer the resolution back to the CAC was defeated and the motion to adopt the resolution was carried by a large majority.⁸³

It is important to remember that the tradition of Covenant resolutions is that they are meant to be *non-binding*. Per the Covenant's website:

In the tradition of the Covenant, these resolutions are not binding. With the Covenant's long-standing emphasis on freedom in Christ as one of our core affirmations, individual churches and church members are free not to abide by resolutions. But they still carry significant weight. For one, they represent the majority opinion of the Annual Meeting, the highest decision-making body in our denomination.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1996, 364.

⁸² Douglas Fondell, personal correspondence, February 6, 2026.

⁸³ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1996, 364.

⁸⁴ <https://covchurch.org/resolutions-2/>

Covenant resolutions are akin to a temperature check. While meant to offer guidance, they are historical time capsules that reflect the will of a single Annual Meeting. This recognition is not meant to dismiss their significance outright, but rather to place them in their appropriate context. Resolutions are not meant to substitute as confessional documents or constitutional bylaws. David Kersten, former dean of North Park Theological Seminary, and in 1996, pastor and one of the authors of the resolution, recalls that the CAC understood the resolution to be non-binding and expected that the resolution would be referred back to the commission, as Denny Moon had motioned.⁸⁵ At the time, the CAC was not anticipating the later policies that would cite the resolution as their foundation.

Following the Annual Meeting vote, Paul Larsen commissioned the writing of an occasional paper that would expand upon the biblical and theological foundation for the 1996 resolution's conclusions. He selected Linda Belleville, then an assistant professor of New Testament at the seminary, to write the paper. Prior to 2007, when there would be an approved procedure for Covenant Resource Papers, there was no formal process for writing and publishing "occasional papers".⁸⁶ That being said, occasional papers were typically commissioned by a group and written in committee. In contrast, Belleville's paper, titled "A Biblical Perspective on Sexuality," was published in 1997 and presented as a seminar at that year's Annual Meeting.⁸⁷ Later, the paper would be republished with the "occasional paper" designation removed, and a note that it had been commissioned directly by Paul Larsen. Eventually, it would be removed altogether and replaced with another expository paper on human sexuality that would be published in 2007.

2003

At the Annual Meeting in 2003, Jeremy Males, delegate from Sojourner Covenant Church in Evanston, Illinois, who was accompanied by former Covenant secretary and CAC member John Hunt, stood to make a motion from the floor on the subject of "sexual morality". His concern, specifically, was that the Covenant did not have a firm policy on

⁸⁵ David Kersten, personal correspondence, January 9, 2026.

⁸⁶ "Resource Papers of the Evangelical Covenant Church," 2008.

⁸⁷ To date, I have been unable to procure a copy of this paper. It is no longer published on the Covenant website.

its posture towards homosexual members, and so he proposed that three documents—the 1996 Resolution, the Belleville paper, and a “Questions and Answers” paper on sexuality—be adopted as official policy of the ECC. Included in this resolution was an unprecedented call for gay and lesbian Covenanters to be excluded from both membership and the sacraments. He said, “Some day [the issue of homosexuality] is going to come our way, whether we like it or not...and to [adopt a policy] later would make it more difficult.”⁸⁸ Males moved that the resolution be referred to the Board of Ordered Ministry (BoOM) for a report presented at the next Annual Meeting.

It is vital that we remember the context here. On June 7, 2003, mere weeks before the Covenant Annual Meeting, Gene Robinson was elected Bishop of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church; the first such instance for an openly gay man.⁸⁹ This was a *huge* story at the time and sent reverberations throughout the global Christian Church.

Pastor Donn Engebretson, former executive minister of Ordered Ministry, spoke against the motion, reminding the delegates that the BoOM had already completed a two-year study on the issue just a few years earlier. The study had concluded that the 1996 resolution, the Rules for Ordered Ministry, the application for licensing, and the ethical guidelines for pastors already served to instruct the Covenant on these matters. Delegate Don Ostrom spoke in favor of the motion, saying, “I think we have been dancing around this issue and have been unwilling to talk about it.”⁹⁰ The motion to refer was passed.

2004

And so it was that in 2004 the Board of Ordered Ministry, the Covenant Executive Board, the Council of Administrators, and the Council of Superintendents presented a joint report on Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic. David Kersten, by then the executive minister of Ordered Ministry, gave the report to the Annual Meeting.⁹¹ Kersten introduced the report by saying, “We respect the seriousness and sensitivity of this topic

⁸⁸ Bob Smietana, “Discerning the Will of God for the Church: A Report from the 118th Annual Meeting,” *The Covenant Companion*, August 2003, 17. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/01/0308-DiscerningWill.pdf>

⁸⁹ Smithsonian Channel, “This Man Became the First Openly Gay Bishop in America,” *YouTube*, June 21, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ptxqgKFdLA> In 2003, Bishop Robinson lived with his partner, Mark Andrew. Their relationship was blessed by an Episcopal Bishop, but they would not be legally joined in a civil union until 2008.

⁹⁰ Smietana, “Discerning,” 17.

⁹¹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004. The brief report can be read in full on pages 328-329.

for the whole church. We recognize that many anguish over these matters, as they affect not only churches, but sons, daughters, friends, neighbors who are deeply loved.”⁹² In summary, the report concluded that

...the 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality has served as our consensus position and from that context that:

1. Celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage is our standard.
2. Covenant clergy are not permitted to officiate at same sex unions, blessings or marriages.
3. Pastors and congregations are called on to accurately represent the ECC position.
4. We desire to be marked by mutual trust and graciousness in our common life as we seek to live these matters out in our local settings.⁹³

The motion that was then put to the Annual Meeting for a vote read, “The Board of the Ordered Ministry recommends to the 119th Annual Meeting that the resolution on human sexuality adopted by the 1996 Annual Meeting serve the ECC as: 1) the guiding statement on human sexuality and the marriage ethic, and 2) the basis for ECC policy, practices, and guidelines on these matters.”⁹⁴

A period of debate followed. Pastor Doug Bixby spoke against the motion, saying that he was concerned “for our gay and lesbian children, grandchildren, siblings, and friends” who are “afraid of our churches,” and feel they can’t be a part of the community. “We’re missing the point of grace,” he continued. “We substitute the word morality for law and avoid the entire discussion on grace.”⁹⁵

However, two amendments were motioned that would occupy much of the meeting’s attention and give little time for the discussion of the resolution itself. The first, from Jeremy Males, who, a year earlier, created the impetus for the report, suggested a third recommendation: “3) The Annual Meeting urges clergy and churches to neither seek nor maintain standing within the Covenant unless they affirm this position both *privately*

⁹² Jane K. Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping the Mission in Mind: A Report on the 119th Annual Meeting,” *The Covenant Companion*, August 2004, 15. https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/npu_covcomp/id/575/rec/12

⁹³ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329.

⁹⁴ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329.

⁹⁵ Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 15-16.

and *publicly*.”⁹⁶ Herb Hedstrom, former moderator and member of the Constitution Revision Commission, raised a point of order:

Our constitution states that the Scripture is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct, and it strikes me that this comes perilously close to requiring members of Covenant churches to acknowledge another standard, which is that [1996 human sexuality] resolution.⁹⁷

The moderator ruled the amendment in order and Males was given time to defend it. In explaining his motivation, Males said that he was concerned that pastors who disagreed with the original resolution would lead their churches to “other ways of thinking.” He feared moral compromise, stating that “love without expectation” has the “potential of harming the faith of the larger community.”⁹⁸

A lengthy debate on the amendment followed. Former Covenant vice-president Timothy Ek spoke in favor of the amendment, saying, “We want to make sure that in the days ahead people understand that we are not going to come back again and vote on this, this is where we stand, and for those who somehow feel this determination of biblical understanding is out of harmony with who they are, they probably need to *seek affiliation elsewhere*.” Others spoke against the amendment. One pastor said, “I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder for the police to come when I’m trying to love people in the kingdom of God.” Another pastor added, “I’m very grateful for the treasure of the Covenant, which is to think, to reflect, to pray about issues that really matter.” A third pastor said, “I understand the desire to quit the dialogue, to be done with these kinds of issues. I’m not sure it’s honest. It isn’t where all biblical Christians are.” He expressed his discomfort about moving in a direction where “we cannot continue to ask questions, to dialogue, to listen to one another.”⁹⁹

Eventually, a delegate moved the question and the amendment was defeated.

The second amendment was given by another delegate, who proposed: “In order to implement the Board of the Ordered Ministry's desire for the gathering of further

⁹⁶ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁷ Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 16.

⁹⁸ Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 16.

⁹⁹ Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 16-17. Emphasis mine.

resources, I move to amend the current motion to include the creation of a task force by the Board of the Ordered Ministry. This task force should contain a diversity of opinions and continue the study and dialogue surrounding sexuality and the implications for pastoral care in the Evangelical Covenant Church."¹⁰⁰

At this point, the thirty-minute time limit had expired and a motion to extend the debate was defeated, meaning that no time remained to discuss the new amendment, nor even the resolution itself. A delegate challenged whether the new amendment was in order and the moderator ruled that it was. Another delegate challenged the moderator's ruling and several delegates spoke on this point as well as their opinion on the amendment to create a task force, even though time for that debate was up. The moderator was overruled and the amendment was deemed out of order. The vote on the original motion was taken by ballot and the next day the results were read: 529 for and 46 against.¹⁰¹

Over the years, a number of Covenanters have expressed concern that the action taken at the 2004 Annual Meeting was able to make binding that which was heretofore understood to be expressly non-binding, and that it was achieved after a mere *thirty-minute* period of discussion that was interrupted to contend with the amendments. Paul Keillor, member of Arbor Covenant Church in Madison, Wisconsin, wrote an article for *Pietisten*, describing his protest against the new position statement. He decried "binding resolutions", saying that they "limit Covenanter's future freedom to come to their own conclusions about the issues resolved."¹⁰² Keillor also challenged the claim given in the report that the 1996 resolution served as a consensus position, writing:

In claiming consensus, they didn't indicate whether it was a consensus of the entire Covenant or of their leadership groups. As far as I know, Covenant leaders have no poll results and must therefore rely on an assumption of consensus based on majority adoption

¹⁰⁰ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329-330.

¹⁰¹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 330, 332.

¹⁰² Philip Keillor, "Redefining the Covenant, Parts I, II, and III," *Pietisten*, 2004.

<https://pietisten.org/misc/redefining.html>

of the human sexuality resolution in 1996 and a perceived absence of significant disagreement since 1996. Consensus can't be achieved by simple proclamation.¹⁰³

Furthermore, Keillor viewed the action as a betrayal of Covenant distinctives. In reflecting on the Covenant's commitment to be *traditional, but not rigid*, Keillor wrote:

To make a resolution binding is an action of rigidity. Making the 1996 resolution on human sexuality binding has nailed our collective ECC* shoes to the floor: it defines, but also boxes in, the ECC position on the subject. Human sexuality, like sexual physiology, is complex and has its variants... The resolution leaves little room for the ECC to adapt to: a) a future, clearer understanding of the cultural context within which biblical statements about human sexuality were made, b) new scientific knowledge about the physiological causes of variants in sexuality, and c) our future experiences in knowing homosexual people. Maybe our present understanding of homosexuality is as incomplete as the Church's pre-modern understanding of mental illness. Sometimes people treat homosexual people as if they were demon-possessed.¹⁰⁴

2007

In spite of the fact that the amendment to assemble a task force was defeated, the Board of Ordered Ministry made the decision to create one anyway. This committee was tasked with engaging in “work to produce additional resources for the Church to stimulate and resource our ongoing reflection.”¹⁰⁵ Rather than being comprised of members coming from a diversity of opinions for the purpose of study and dialogue, this work was meant to consolidate that which the Covenant was beginning to refer to as *the discerned position*TM on sexuality.

Two major resources came out of this work. The first was an essay titled “Human Sexuality & the Marriage Ethic, Part 1: Toward a Biblical & Theological Discernment of God in Human Sexuality.” This 33-page document was created by the task force,

¹⁰³ Keillor, “Redefining.”

¹⁰⁴ Keillor, “Redefining.” *Keillor uses the acronym ECCA to distinguish the Evangelical Covenant Church *in America*, as opposed to the global denomination.

¹⁰⁵ Board of Ordered Ministry Task Force on Human Sexuality, “Human Sexuality & the Marriage Ethic, Part 1: Toward a Biblical & Theological Discernment of God in Human Sexuality,” 2007, 2. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ECCHumanSexuality-Final-Report-May-2007.pdf>

consisting of Howard Burgoyne (superintendent of the East Coast Conference), David Kersten, and pastors Sherry Peterson and Dwight Nelson.

The purpose for this essay is laid out in the introduction:

Our hope is that this resource and any that may follow will facilitate a clearer discussion about how we read (Luke 10:26) and participate in the Scriptures related to human sexuality and how we live in faithful obedience to Jesus' moral vision.¹⁰⁶

The essay touches on a number of topics of biblical and social concern regarding the ethics of sexuality. One thesis that stands out is the claim that a heteronormative gender binary is essential to the theological construction of the marital relationship and by extension the covenant between Jesus and the Church. The report quotes Stanley Grenz: "The biblical doctrines of creation and resurrection imply that our sexuality is basic to our sense of self and foundational to our understanding of who we are as God's creatures. God intends that we be embodied beings who are either male or female."¹⁰⁷ The report goes on to say, "The language and imagery of marital heterosexuality is the most graphic and powerful motif that the Scriptures use to frame the relationship between God and his covenant people."¹⁰⁸

The ways in which the existence of healthy and committed same-sex partnerships, as well as the existence of intersex, transgender, and nonbinary persons pose challenges to this theological understanding of marriage is not fully developed, but towards the end of the essay, some prescient questions are raised:

We are called to love people who sin more than they love their sin. How are we engaged in doing this? And how might the concept of sexual "orientation" affect our way of reading Scripture and responding to persons? Is it warranted to speak of orientation as a permanent state, or should we speak of affections that are subject to change? What influences shape our attraction and stimulate our arousal? For males, it seems that arousal is orientation. For females, attraction and arousal seem more complex. In what ways are our sexual longings to be understood as pointers to our createdness? In what ways are they

¹⁰⁶ "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic," 2.

¹⁰⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Westminster, John Knox Press) 1990, 1997; 29. Quoted on pg. 6 of "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic."

¹⁰⁸ "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic," 8.

a manifestation and form of our fallen human nature? What is their origin, and what is their end? While we are fearfully and wonderfully made we are also tragically and profoundly fallen.¹⁰⁹

All important questions, to be sure.

I feel that I would be remiss in my reporting if I didn't mention here that, to date, there have been no proactive attempts made by the Board of Ordered Ministry, the Covenant Executive Board, the Covenant Offices Leadership Team, the Council of Superintendents, or any other functional leadership body within the Evangelical Covenant Church to invite and include LGBTQ+ Covenanters or affirming pastors and lay leaders in conversations surrounding these questions and their implications for church ministry and community life. Nor have there been any attempts to discuss, study, interrogate, or platform perspectives of affirmation of same-sex marriage, ordination of queer persons, or other related issues of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

The second resource to come out of the action from the BoOM was a suite of teaching and discipleship resources that came to be known as *Embrace*.¹¹⁰ We'll come back to *Embrace* later, as it didn't really get going until about 2017.

Let's take a moment to contextualize the Covenant's response to conflicting understandings of sexuality and biblical ethics within the broader story of what was happening in the American Church in the mid to late 2000s.

In the PCUSA, the events of the 1993 General Assembly inspired several years of discussion and debate. Presbyterian scholars took seriously the theological and ecclesiological questions being raised and began publishing some of the most important works on contemporary Christian sexual ethics to date. On the conservative/traditional side was Robert Gagnon, at the time, associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. His 2002 book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* analyzes both Old and New Testament sources to assert the Bible's clear

¹⁰⁹ "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic," 23.

¹¹⁰ <https://covchurch.org/embrace/>

rejection of homosexual practice in all forms.¹¹¹ This book is referenced in the “Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic” paper. Scot McKnight, who at the time was the Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University, served as a manuscript consultant.

Two important works came from the progressive/revisionist side. The first was Dale Martin’s 2006 book *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*.¹¹² Martin, then the Woolsey Professor of Religious Studies at Yale, and a gay man, focused on textual criticism and how preconceptions about sexuality that we bring to the biblical text can get in the way of the message of the gospel. The other was the aforementioned 2009 book *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, by Jack Rogers.¹¹³ Rogers was Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary, formerly on faculty at Fuller Seminary, and onetime Moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the PCUSA. His book documents his journey from traditionalist to affirming in his understanding of the ethics of homosexuality, and draws on church history, neo-orthodox theology, biblical exegesis, and the confession of gay Christians.

In August of 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted a new social statement entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*.¹¹⁴ This document served as the foundation for resolutions that would allow ELCA churches to perform same-sex weddings, provided the congregation and pastoral staff affirmed them. One relevant passage reads:

On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.

¹¹¹ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, (Abingdon Press, 2002).

¹¹² Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹¹³ See note 11 on page 10.

¹¹⁴ *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2009).
<https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/HumanSexualityGiftandTrust2025.pdf>

They surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships.¹¹⁵

Over the last fifteen years (2011-2026), the most significant events in the controversy surrounding sexual ethics in the Covenant Church were the dismissals of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis and Awaken Church of Saint Paul, Minnesota. Before we go there, let's look at a number of developments which are essential to understand how we get from 2004 to 2019 and 2023. Each one of these could stand a lengthy discussion, but for the purpose of this report, we will only touch on them briefly and invite the reader to explore the footnotes to investigate further.

2011

First, let's talk about *that blog*. On January 3, 2011, Covenant Pastor Philip Brockett published the first entry in the blog *Coming Out Covenant*.¹¹⁶ This website, created by Brockett and gay North Park alumnus Andrew Freeman, published dozens of essays from Covenant members, pastors, and scholars, from both gay persons and straight allies and family members, from 2011 to 2015. Pastors Denny Moon and Art Nelson, previously mentioned as having spoken up at Annual Meetings, were among the writers. The blog is essential reading for anyone wanting to truly understand the experience and longings of the minority perspective on homosexuality in the ECC.

2014

The blog caught the attention of gay author, journalist, and public theologian Jeff Chu. Chu's 2014 book *Does Jesus Really Love Me?* chronicles his cross-country quest to see past the tension of the culture wars and understand his place in the American Church.¹¹⁷ Chapter 10, "Agreeing to Disagree," finds Chu in Chicago, and paints a picture of the zeitgeist in and around the Covenant church in the mid-2010s. Chu profiles Andrew Freeman, as well as long-time member of Salem Covenant Church in Washington Depot,

¹¹⁵ *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, 21.

¹¹⁶ <https://comingoutcovenant.com/>

¹¹⁷ Jeff Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*, (Harper Perennial, 2014).

Connecticut and North Park alumna Charlotte Johnson and her wife Joan Gauthey, and ResCov (Chicago) members John Knoff, Eva Sullivan-Knoff, and their gay son Benj. A number of Covenanters are interviewed. In a discussion about whether or not members of both sides of the debate can coexist, Howard Burgoyne asked, “What kind of church do we need to be where it’s actually possible and desirable to come into a community to process these issues together?” He went on, “Quite frankly, right now, the church is perceived as the last place you’d want to go.”¹¹⁸

For his part, Andrew Freeman had this to say about his church experience, as a gay man: “To be able to work in a church where the obstacles that once impeded me are completely taken off the table is both healing and liberating for me. They are doing amazing ministry that I want to be a part of, and they happen to not care one bit that I am gay.”¹¹⁹ To be clear, Freeman was speaking here about his new job as a parish administrator in an Episcopal church.

In October of 2014, three pastoral colleagues from the Pacific Northwest Conference (PNWC), Paul Corner of First Covenant Church of Seattle, Washington, Andy Goebel of St. John’s Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon, and Adam Phillips of Christ Church: Portland, gathered together in a Portland brewery and planted seeds which would eventually blossom into the non-profit organization known as Mission Friends for Inclusion (MF4i).¹²⁰ MF4i would later register as a 501(c)3 and assemble a board which included Andrew Freeman and North Park professor Michelle Clifton. MF4i described their purpose statement as follows:

Mission Friends for Inclusion is first and foremost a gathering of people deeply committed to the Evangelical Covenant Church, our historic ethos as companions of all who fear the Lord, and our aim of representing the rich diversity of the Body of Christ. Because we believe that the Covenant is united in Christ rather than common doctrine, we are also committed to honest engagement with varying theological and biblical interpretations

¹¹⁸ Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?*, 196.

¹¹⁹ Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?*, 197.

¹²⁰ This information was given to me by Krista Brumberg Stevens, the current chair of MF4i, as it was relayed to her from Paul Corner.

around human sexuality. As the Covenant process of open dialogue and charitable dissent has not been available in recent years, we seek:

- to create safe and supportive space for LGBT Covenanters and allies.
- to promote awareness of sexual orientation and gender identity as it relates to human life and community.
- to provide education and resources for LGBT inclusive theologies and ecclesial and pastoral practices.
- to advocate for the place of LGBT inclusive voices in denominational discernment, and the freedom of churches and clergy to do ministry as they discern appropriate in their context.¹²¹

2015

MF4i soon held what would end up being its largest event on January 29, 2015, at Trinity United Methodist Church in Denver, Colorado. Promoted as an unauthorized, alternative gathering during one evening of the Midwinter Conference, it attracted over 150 people from across the Covenant. Speakers included Michelle Clifton, who lectured on the history of faithful dissent in the Covenant; recent North Park Seminary graduate Tyler Krumland, who gave a testimony about his experience of coming out; and a keynote address from Christian ethicist, David Gushee, whose book *Changing Our Mind*,¹²² has become one of the best-selling explorations of an affirming Christian apologetic.¹²³

On February 4, less than one week after the Denver gathering, MF4i co-founder Adam Phillips, who had spoken from the stage, was informed that the ECC would be pulling the funding they had committed to his church plant, Christ Church: Portland, and would not support the church's addition to the ECC roster. Phillips had been interrogated by Greg Yee, superintendent of the PNWC as early as October—around the time of the formation of MF4i—about his stance on homosexuality.¹²⁴ Adams had neither misrepresented the ECC's institutional position on gay marriage, nor had he officiated a ceremony, but his personal view was that a Christian understanding of marriage should

¹²¹ <https://mf4inclusion.tumblr.com/>

¹²² David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind: The Landmark Call for Inclusion of LGBTQ Christians with Response to Critics*, (Read the Spirit, 2014, 2017).

¹²³ Recordings of the talks given at this event can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/user37061862>

¹²⁴ Krista Stevens, Personal correspondence.

be extended to same-sex couples was deemed out of order. He had expressed these views during the ordination process but was told to keep a “low profile”.¹²⁵ In spite of the 2004 amendment that would have required pastors to maintain both a public and private fidelity to the ECC’s institutional position being voted down, the dismissal of Christ Church now sent a message: that dissent on the matter was not going to be tolerated. Phillips publicly communicated the fractured relationship in an essay and video posted to *Coming Out Covenant* on February 16.¹²⁶

Around that same time, Andy Goebel was also seeing support for his church being pulled. St. John’s Covenant was a small church plant in a building in North Portland that had previously been owned by a different congregation. When the new congregation came in, the PNWC claimed ownership of the church property and leased it back to them. In the fall of 2014, with their church-planting appropriations money ending, St. John’s requested a restructuring of their lease agreement that would be more sensitive to their limited financial assets. Coincidentally, this occurred at the same time that Goebel and the church faced increased scrutiny for their LGBTQ-inclusive stance. After several months of back and forth, during which time the ownership of the building was contested, the board of St. John’s decided to vacate the property and meet elsewhere, citing both the tone and actions from the PNWC leadership having been “combative, bullying, and marginalizing.” St. John’s last gathering at the building was on February 8, 2015.¹²⁷

At the Annual Meeting on June 26, ECC President Gary Walter presented a report on human sexuality in which he addressed three points: 1) reviewing “three principles that guide our navigating forward,” 2) to provide delegates with an update about progress, and 3) “to underscore how important it is for us to keep doing better with these matters.”¹²⁸ Walter was referring to his own open letter in affirmation of the ECC’s policies that was

¹²⁵ Harry Bruinius, “Millennial Evangelicals push for full inclusion of LGBT Christians,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 21, 2015. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2015/0220/Millennial-Evangelicals-push-for-full-inclusion-of-LGBT-Christians>

¹²⁶ Adam Phillips, “Broken Hearted,” *Coming Out Covenant*, February 16, 2015. <https://comingoutcovenant.com/broken-hearted-by-adam-nicholas-phillips/>

¹²⁷ This information comes from personal correspondence with Krista Stevens as well as email transcripts between the leadership of St. John’s Covenant church and PNWC leadership.

¹²⁸ Gary Walter, “Report on the ECC and Human Sexuality,” presented to the 130th Annual Meeting, June 26, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWaodLHdSNM>

sent out on February 25, 2015, in which Walter alleged that there was “no intent to single out select behavior” and that same-sex attraction (and by implication gay marriage) was simply one in a list of temptations to sin sexually which included adultery.¹²⁹

Keep in mind the context. On June 26, *the very morning of Walter’s speech*, the United States Supreme Court issued its 5-4 ruling in favor of the plaintiff in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, leveraging the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution as a basis to grant and recognize same-sex marriages between consenting adults in all states.¹³⁰

In October, Covenant leadership released two relevant documents. The first was “Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality”.¹³¹ This document was an update to a previous set of guidelines issued in 2010.¹³² The guidelines define specific boundaries: that ordination credentials may only be given to persons in alignment with the standard of “celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage;” that Covenant clergy may not officiate same-sex weddings, nor even participate other than as a member of the congregation (a narrower restriction than those given in 2010); and that ECC facilities may not be used for same-sex marriage ceremonies.¹³³ Perhaps more concerning is this statement made policing a pastor’s personal beliefs and the freedom of faithful dissent:

In all pastoral activities the credentialed minister leads, teaches, and represents the affirmations, policies, practices, and guidelines of the ECC. Representing is more than the dissemination of correct information; it upholds and lives within, not undermines. A pastor’s dissent must never supersede the ECC position.¹³⁴

Two points of order have been raised regarding this document. First, the lack of clarity about the body that commissioned its drafting. Rules pertaining to Covenant

¹²⁹ Gary Walter, A Letter from Covenant President Gary Walter, February 25, 2015. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/A-Letter-from-Covenant-President-Gary-Walter.pdf>

¹³⁰ Matt Cohen, “Supreme Court Rules Same-Sex Marriage Legal Nationwide,” *dcist*, June 26, 2015. <https://dcist.com/story/15/06/26/gay-marriage-legal-this-is-huge/>

¹³¹ <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Guidelines-for-Covenant-Pastors-and-Congregations-Regarding-Human-Sexuality.pdf>

¹³² <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Human-Sexuality-Guidelines-for-Ministers-10.13.pdf>

¹³³ Guidelines, 2015, 3.

¹³⁴ Guidelines, 2015, 3.

ministers are meant to originate from the Board of Ordered Ministry, it has been alleged that the effort to redraft the guidelines originated in the Council of Superintendents. Second, these guidelines were never vetted or voted on by the Annual Meeting of the Ministerium, which is the policy for rules that affect the credentialing of ministers.¹³⁵

The second document was “Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy.”¹³⁶ The document is labelled as “a resource for pastoral reflection,” however, it should be stated that it is not technically a Covenant resource paper, and no authorship or development process is stated. The document recommends guidelines for ministers who find themselves holding to a dissenting position against the adopted policies of the ECC. Most notable is the fifth recommendation:

When a minister in dissent finds him/herself in permanent on-going disagreement, there are two principled options- either yielding to the position and practice of the ECC, or concluding service with the ministry and/or the ECC.¹³⁷

A number of concerns have been raised with the wording of this statement including the claim that it violates the Covenant ethos of diversity in theology and praxis, it offers no delineation of “faithful” versus “unfaithful” dissent, it appears to be a backdoor implementation of the amendment that had been voted down at the 2004 Annual Meeting, and it is addressed to individuals without taking into account the possibility that ministry groups or even whole congregations might jointly disagree with ECC policies.

On October 12, in a blog post published to *Coming Out Covenant*, Andrew Freeman wrote an open letter to ECC President Gary Walter in which he expressed the deep pain that the ECC’s framing of homosexuality and same-sex marriage was inflicting on gay Covenanters:

I have been hurt by words you have spoken, and I have also been hurt by that which you have left unspoken. Over the years I’ve heard many unkind, even hateful, things said about LGBTQ people. While I have pretty thick skin, our youth and others across our church

¹³⁵ These concerns have been relayed to me from several Covenant pastors.

¹³⁶ “Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy,” 2015. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Freedom-and-Responsibility.pdf>

¹³⁷ “Freedom and Responsibility”

who struggle to accept their orientation or gender identity are extremely vulnerable. In an age where hate crimes and suicide and depression are significantly higher within the LGBTQ population, we need to be able to call homophobia what it is: sin. And the church should be leading the way in the opposition of hatred and violence in all of its forms. One of the ways the church is uniquely equipped to combat hatred is with our core message that ALL people are created in God's image. Which is why our church's silence in condemning homophobia hurts so much. If we aren't part of the solution, we are part of the problem. Homophobia is sin, and our church is complicit.¹³⁸

This would be the final essay posted to *Coming Out Covenant*.

2016

On November 21, 2016, the TEDx YouTube channel published a presentation given by Matt Nightengale, former worship pastor at Redwood Covenant Church (now Bayside Santa Rosa), and his wife Luanne at TedxSonomaCounty.¹³⁹ In their talk, Matt, a gay man, and Luanne, a straight woman, describe the challenges that suppressed sexuality, coming out, and conversion therapy had on their lives and relationship, and the desire to prioritize love and hope.¹⁴⁰

2017

In February of 2017, the ECC published a paper called "God, the Bible, and Human Sexuality: A Response to Revisionist Readings" through its *Embrace* program. *Embrace* was an initiative of the Make and Deepen Disciples ministry team and was headed by that group's executive minister, Michelle Sanchez. One of *Embrace's* main projects was the series of thirty-one webinars published between March 20, 2018 and May 18, 2023, featuring a number of Covenant pastors as well as authors, Christian influencers, and several Side-B Christians—Christians who identify as gay, but live a life of celibacy or in a mixed-orientation marriage with a partner of the opposite sex.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Andrew Freeman, "An Open Letter to ECC President Gary Walter from a Gay Covenanter," *Coming Out Covenant*, October 12, 2015. <https://comingoutcovenant.com/open-letter/>

¹³⁹ Matt and Luanne Nightengale, "Choosing Gratitude and Hope," posted November 21, 2016, TEDx, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHJs04-YIYc>

¹⁴⁰ For more on Matt's story, check out this more recent interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nv1A_fn4GRk

¹⁴¹ <https://covchurch.org/embrace/webinars/>

The 2017 paper served as a biblical and theological underpinning to the rest of the *Embrace* resources. While uncredited, it was written by members of the faculty of North Park Theological seminary; namely Max Lee, James Bruckner, Stephen Chester, and Klyne Snodgrass. The paper discusses principles of biblical interpretation and the exegetical and hermeneutical examination of key texts such as those found in Leviticus 18, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6. While acknowledging that the paper seeks to focus “on the strongest and most popular revisionist arguments” for a gay-affirming sexual ethic, the writers admit in the introduction that the outcome of their study was predetermined:

In cooperation with the Make and Deepen Disciples mission priority of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the biblical faculty of North Park Theological Seminary have endeavored to write a clear, user-friendly commentary and interpretation on the texts of the Bible that explicitly address same-sex sexual relations... The Evangelical Covenant Church has discerned and adopted “faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness” as constituting “the Christian standard,” a position that aligns with two thousand years of global Christian conviction. However, more recently a number of revisionist readings have emerged... This resource responds to these revisionist readings of Scripture, ultimately undergirding the sexual ethic of the historic church and the discerned and adopted position of the Evangelical Covenant Church.¹⁴²

2018

At the 133rd Annual Meeting, on June 22, 2018, retired Covenant pastor Herb Hedstrom, a member of North Park Covenant Church in Chicago, put forward a motion to call for the formation of “a task force for the purpose of studying the denomination’s stance on sexuality.”¹⁴³ His recommendation was that the task force would include three lay members and a pastor from each conference, which would represent “gender, racial, theological, and sexual diversity,” as well as two faculty members from North Park Theological Seminary who hold differing views, to be appointed by the school’s dean. A vigorous debate ensued. We won’t look at every comment that was reported—curious

¹⁴² “God, the Bible, and Human Sexuality: A Response to Revisionist Readings,” *Embrace*, The Evangelical Covenant Church – Make and Deepen Disciples, 2017, 1. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/92/2017/02/NPTS-Embrace-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴³ “Delegates Vote Down Discussion on Sexuality,” Covenant News, June 22, 2018. <https://covchurch.org/2018/06/22/delegates-vote-down-discussion-on-sexuality/>

readers are invited to read the article—but one comment from Pastor Mark Nilson of Salem Covenant Church in Worcester, Massachusetts stands out. In describing how he has one son who is straight and another who is gay, he explained that he would be unable to officiate a wedding for either one: “I will not do for one what I am not able to do for both.”

The motion failed with 294 votes for and 538 against. Keep in mind that this was not a motion to change any existing position or policy, but merely to, for the first time in Covenant history, call upon a *diverse* body to study the topic of sexuality and present its findings to the broader church. *Thirty-five percent* of delegates at this Annual Meeting *wanted this to happen*.

In September, *The Covenant Quarterly*, the ministerial journal of the Evangelical Covenant Church and North Park Theological Seminary, published a paper by North Park professor Michelle Clifton titled, “Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-All?”¹⁴⁴ The paper draws on the Doughty affair (see previous section) and the subsequent Covenant document *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* (1963) (this document, with commentary by Hauna Ondrey was republished in the same issue of *Covenant Quarterly*) as well as a resolution on “Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War”¹⁴⁵ from the 2006 Annual Meeting to argue a model of “faithful dissent” that would give historically- and ecclesiologically-rooted answers to the questions raised by “Freedom and Responsibility.” With five orienting questions, Clifton provides a framework for navigating dissent in a way that does not undermine the Covenant affirmation of “freedom in Christ.” She writes, “Faithful dissent is a habit that helps the church grow in new ways, return to the word, and listen to marginalized voices. This is especially important when the dissent is coming from persons or groups whom the church has historically harmed.”¹⁴⁶

In the following *Covenant Quarterly* issue, a series of thoughtful and critical responses from Brian Bantum, Steve Bilyinskyj, Scott Erickson, Mark Safstrom, and Klyne Snodgrass were published, including more specific references to the application of

¹⁴⁴ See note 55 on page 25.

¹⁴⁵ Commission on Christian Action, “Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War,” 2006.
<https://covchurch.org/resolutions/2006-discipleship-in-war/>

¹⁴⁶ Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom”, 54.

dissent and freedom to the issue of human sexuality, as well as a response from Clifton.¹⁴⁷ Clifton concludes:

With an eye toward renewal through the conventicle-like work of reading together, I ask readers to wonder with me: Does the Covenant need to take a step back and refocus our energy on building and rebuilding relationships with one another rather than foregrounding doctrinal and moral disputes in our life together? Do we need a radical transformation and reimagination of who we are as a body of faith, as Bantum suggests? If lay people, leaders, pastors, and teachers could overwhelmingly say “yes” to this kind of renewal—not one of doctrine but of renewed relationships—Covenant freedom may be the very thing that saves the mission of those who have historically been friends.¹⁴⁸

2019

On February 7, 2019, Rev. Judy Peterson published “An Open Letter to My Church.”¹⁴⁹ Peterson had been suspended from her role as campus pastor of North Park University for officiating a wedding of two male North Park alumni in 2017; a move from the college which inspired public debate and a petition that gained 4,000+ signatures calling for her reinstatement.¹⁵⁰ The public pressure resulted in her return to her position in January of 2018, only to be fired at the end of the spring semester. Peterson made the difficult choice to give up her credentials, which had been suspended and then reinstated. She cited the ECC’s treatment of LGBTQ+ people, referring specifically to the *Embrace* program and the obdurateness witnessed at the 2018 Annual Meeting:

At the most basic level, the name *Embrace*, alludes to a desire to hold someone closely as a sign of affection, or to offer willing and enthusiastic acceptance or support. The naming of this curriculum alone is disingenuous, as the ECC seeks only to resource the ECC’s position of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage. The “embrace” only extends to those who do not disrupt the ECC’s discerned position.

¹⁴⁷ “Responses to Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, ‘Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?’” *Covenant Quarterly*, 76, no. 1-2 (2018): 24-57, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/86/85>

¹⁴⁸ “Responses to Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom,” 57.

¹⁴⁹ Judy Peterson, “An Open Letter to My Church,” February 7, 2019. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Judy_Peterson_Open_Letter_2019.pdf

¹⁵⁰ Adele M. Banks, “Evangelical chaplain’s suspension intensifies denomination’s gay marriage debate,” *Deseret News*, January 11, 2018. <https://www.deseret.com/2018/1/11/20625093/evangelical-chaplain-s-suspension-intensifies-denomination-s-gay-marriage-debate/>

Purporting embrace of the entire LGBTQ community while keeping at arm's length the majority of our siblings in Christ within that community—specifically those who simply desire that their own monogamous covenantal relationships be acknowledged as equally blessed—is not only disingenuous, but also damaging.

When LGBTQ persons come seeking the advertised loving embrace of the church only to find little more than the thin gruel of tolerance along with words of caution asking they remain within our guidelines in order to remain within our fellowship, it is devastating. It is devastating because hope after disappointment is like a balm, but disappointment after hope is like a blade: it will cut right through a person. Additionally, while the stated intent of Embrace was to equip the church to flourish in love for the LGBTQ community, I do wonder if anyone has considered how discouraging it might be for this community that it requires such extensive teaching for the church to learn how to embrace them.

It is also inauthentic to say we want to "do better and be better" when we refuse to hear the breadth of LGBTQ experiences within our own Covenant churches. Over and over, LGBTQ Covenanters and their allies have pleaded for a more robust conversation about their place in their church, but have continually been denied the opportunity to bear witness to their lived experience if it falls outside of the ECC's discerned position. Continuing to give preference and influence only to the majority position while failing to give a hearing to the minority voice within our own fellowship—a voice that longs to share the personal pain that the discerned position has caused them as Covenanters—undermines any genuineness concerning a real conversation or actual openness to doing and being better...

Furthermore, how is the ECC's desire to embrace LGBTQ persons to be believed at all in light of the fact that we voted as a denomination to discontinue any conversation surrounding the fuller inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church? We have legislated and proclaimed in procedural ways that the LGBTQ community will only be embraced on our own terms. Already the denomination is making final decisions, vetting out potential pastors, and disciplining credentialed pastors and congregations who are allies to the LGBTQ community, as if there is no more to be said: no new insight to be gleaned. Is there no openness to a story that might change our minds?¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Peterson, "An Open Letter," 4-5.

Peterson would go on to write:

I am not naive. I understand the full inclusion and blessing of partnered LGBTQ+ persons in the church is the issue of our day. I know that entire denominations are being torn at the seams and a significant portion of a generation has let go of the garment of the church altogether. I am not unaware of the tensions people find in the biblical text.

I wonder nonetheless how the church can continue to biblically defend its unwillingness to leave the 99 for the one. How can we claim to follow a God who left the purity of his privileged place to walk with the sinful and the marginalized, if we are unwilling to do the same?

How can we defend interpretations that tear people apart when Jesus broke a rule written in stone in order to make a brother whole? People of God, the Bible is not made of flesh and blood; it cannot be wounded, nor does it need a defender. But, according to Scripture, God's vulnerable children need to know we are willing to stand with them.¹⁵²

On April 22, Amanda Olson, pastor of Grace Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois, and former moderator of the Annual Meeting, submitted her doctoral thesis at Duke Divinity School, titled, "Out of the Church Closet: Hope for the Evangelical Covenant Church and Sexual Minorities in the Local Congregation and Beyond."¹⁵³ In it, she uses the model of "adaptive challenges" to explain the state of the Evangelical Covenant Church and offer a potential solution:

Adaptive challenges are complex by definition, and the processes to address such challenges are messy. The church, its leaders, and its members, will make mistakes and take missteps along the way. In so doing, the church will rest in its greatest truth: salvation is a gift of God; it does not rest on human performance, but it is unmerited, unearned favor that God offers to all through the atoning work of Christ. No matter where one aligns, it is essential to the unity and mission of the Evangelical Covenant Church that it take the conversation on homosexuality and gay marriage out of the closet. Christians must gather

¹⁵² Judy Peterson, "Why I sacrificed my chaplain's job and my reputation to marry a same-sex couple," RNS, March 6 2019. <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/06/why-i-sacrificed-my-chaplains-job-and-my-reputation-to-marry-a-same-sex-couple/>

¹⁵³ Amanda L. Olson, "Out of the Church Closet: Hope for the Evangelical Covenant Church and Sexual Minorities in the Local Congregation and Beyond," (DMin diss., Duke Divinity School of Duke University, 2019).

at tables with open hearts and minds, to share stories, study Scriptures, and search the will of God as guided by the Holy Spirit. This, by definition, is the church. To God be all glory.¹⁵⁴

The Removal of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis

On Friday, June 28, 2019, delegates at the 134th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Omaha, Nebraska, voted, for the first time in Covenant history, for the involuntary removal of an entire congregation from its membership.¹⁵⁵

First Covenant Church of Minneapolis (FCCM)—formerly known as “The Tabernacle”—was a church that predated the formation of the Swedish Mission Covenant as a denomination. FCCM served a diverse population in downtown Minneapolis, with ministries including a homeless shelter, childcare, and plans to build an affordable housing project. The church also ministered to a number of LGBTQ+ congregants and many members saw themselves as allies.

In April of 2017, FCCM pastor Dan Collison was asked by ECC leadership to reflect upon the “Freedom and Responsibility” paper after it had been revealed that he had preached a sermon titled “LGBTQ” on March 5.¹⁵⁶ In this sermon, Collison used lessons about the shift to a heliocentric model of the solar system as well as the stories of Jesus upsetting religious leaders to draw parallels with some Christians’ changing understanding of sexuality and the Bible. He presented four generalized historic understandings of what it means for a person to be LGBTQ that have developed over the last 2000 years of Christianity. Far from disparaging the Covenant, he explicated the ECC’s institutional position while also explaining why it is that a growing number of contemporary Christians have been developing an affirming understanding of gay people. This addresses what seems to have been an obvious pastoral concern for his particular congregation, and something which, on the face of it, is simply true: some Christians,

¹⁵⁴ Olson, “Out of the Church Closet,” 89.

¹⁵⁵ Yonat Shimron, “Evangelical denomination expels entire congregation over LGBT policy,” RNS, June 28, 2019. <https://religionnews.com/2019/06/28/in-a-first-evangelical-covenant-church-expels-minneapolis-congregation/> The article incorrectly gives the date as June 27.

¹⁵⁶ On the off chance that a delegate from the 134th Annual Meeting who voted for the removal of FCCM has never read or heard what Dan Collison actually preached, the very thorough sermon notes can be found here: <https://www.1stcov.org/s/LGBTQ-Dan-Collison-64a8.pdf>

including a percentage of Covenanters, understand being gay to be a form of natural sexual diversity and not a sin.

At the end of the sermon, Collison did something that the ECC *has never done*: he invited to the stage two married lesbian women, who in fact had met at FCCM, and asked them questions about their lives and experience with the church and let them speak with their own words. Instead of simply talking *about* LGBTQ people and asserting his *discerned* conclusion about them, he invited them to *tell their own stories*. One of the women, Lisa, whose family roots extended to the early years of FCCM mentioned that she “would argue that where we often feel most emotionally unsafe or concerned or even unwelcome, are evangelical spaces.”¹⁵⁷

As a part of his reflection, Collison wrote a letter to ECC leadership.¹⁵⁸ In this letter, Collison references the “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom” paper of 1963, as well as an article written to the *Covenant Companion* by John E. Phelan Jr., emeritus professor of theology and former dean of North Park Theological Seminary, and member of FCCM, called “Setting Boundaries or Finding Life?”¹⁵⁹ Collison argued that any dissent he may have expressed in the sermon was not individual, it was *communal*:

I have many faithful ordained clergy and faithful members of Covenant churches who continue to encourage me to frame an approach to sexual identity that is Scriptural, collegial, and in faithful dissenting dialogue with the ECC’s current stated positions such that more safe space is created for LGBTQ individuals and their families to participate in the life of the church as equals and not as “less than.”¹⁶⁰

In reference to the “Freedom and Dissent” paper, Collison called attention to that which has been previously referred to here, that point #5 “undermines the 2004 ECC Annual Meeting decision to not urge pastors or churches to leave if they dissent.” He continued, “In sum, it is not just a personal position or personal sense of integrity that

¹⁵⁷ No, seriously, read it: <https://www.1stcov.org/s/LGBTQ-Dan-Collison-64a8.pdf>

¹⁵⁸ Read this one too:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ced7d3015fcc0a49d02416c/1559067952886/Reflecti+on+and+Response+to+Freedom+and+Responsibility-Rev+Dan+Collison+April+2017-FINAL-2.pdf>

¹⁵⁹ See note 4 on page 7.

¹⁶⁰ Dan Collison, “Letter to ECC Leadership,” April 2017, 2.

leads to dissent with policy matters of the ECC. It is principled, open discussion within our community, leading to communal dissent that I expressed in the March 5, 2017 sermon.”¹⁶¹ The letter closes with a promise to not preside over a same-sex wedding and to accurately state the ECC’s position, while not defending it to the exclusion of all others.

Two years later, on May 23, 2019, a representative of the Covenant Executive Board posted an announcement to the ECC’s website indicating that the CEB was recommending the involuntary dismissal of FCCM which was to be added to the agenda of that year’s Annual Meeting (AM) in Omaha, Nebraska.¹⁶² The announcement came only one month before the AM would commence, well after the time that most churches would have commissioned their roster of delegates. By way of a justification for the CEB’s determination and recommendation to the AM, the following list of infractions was offered:

The Executive Board found FCCM to be out of harmony by contravening the following:

- The Evangelical Covenant Church’s standard of marriage by permitting same-sex marriage;
- The Evangelical Covenant Church’s prohibition of clergy officiating and participating at same-sex weddings;
- The Evangelical Covenant Church’s requirement that clergy adhere to a personal behavioral standard of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage;
- The Covenant’s guideline and expectation that congregations refrain from hosting same-sex weddings and related events;
- The authority of the Board of the Ordered Ministry by locally credentialing a pastor.

These statements require some clarification. Up to this point, First Covenant Church of Minneapolis had *never* hosted a wedding ceremony for a same-sex couple. Neither lead pastor Dan Collison, nor any other ECC-credentialed clergy of FCCM had *ever* officiated a same-sex wedding on or off property. *None* of the ECC-credentialed clergy of FCCM were in a gay relationship; they were either single or married to a person of the opposite sex. Reading the statement from the CEB in its entirety offers no clarification about the fact that, other than the fifth bullet point, none of the other criteria

¹⁶¹ Collison, “Letter (2017),” 2.

¹⁶² <https://covchurch.org/2019/05/23/ecc-executive-board-recommends-involuntary-dismissal-for-first-covenant-church-minneapolis-delegates-to-annual-meeting-to-vote-in-june/>

for dismissal are referring to *actual historic events* but instead are pointing to *hypothetical future events* based off of selective interpretation of discussions with and writings of Dan Collison and other FCCM leaders. I will leave it to the reader to decide if the omission of this context a mere month before delegates were expected to vote constitutes what one might hypothetically refer to as *poisoning the well*.

Can this be right? As was previously discussed, the 2015 Guidelines for Ministers and Congregations expressly forbid officiating and hosting same-sex weddings and same-sex partnerships amongst credentialed ministers. FCCM was not in violation of these guidelines. It does mention that “a pastor’s dissent must never supersede the ECC position,”¹⁶³ but it does not say that a pastor may not hold a dissenting position at all. Two things trouble the notion that a dissenting position, *per se*, might justify involuntary disaffiliation. First is the fact, as previously mentioned, that the 2004 Annual Meeting *voted against* leveraging either a *public* or *private* disagreement with the ECC’s position on sexuality as a justification for revoking the standing of either clergy or a church within the Covenant. Neither the 2015 Guidelines, nor the one-sheet on “Freedom and Responsibility” were adopted by either the ministerium or the Annual Meeting; they were simply instituted by executive fiat. Second, both of these documents *themselves* contain contradictory language about the value of dissent. “Dissent is a sacred, accountable space in the discipleship journey where one prayerfully and earnestly processes matters of faith and conscience,” reads the latter.¹⁶⁴ The former offers this, as a conclusion about what motivates the guidelines:

And so we call the ECC again to grace: first, a forgiving grace that holds our witness to the gospel as central to all we do; second an engaging grace, a grace that gives constant encouragement and connection to those seeking to live faithfully in the vocations of singleness and marriage, and the biblical requirements of each; third, a transforming grace that calls us to seek a greater and deeper healing in all areas of sin and brokenness; and finally, a costly grace that calls us to more fully embody the chaste and holy life Christ has for each of us.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Guidelines, 2015, 3.

¹⁶⁴ “Freedom and Responsibility” 2015.

¹⁶⁵ Guidelines, 2015, 4.

It is difficult to see where FCCM was in violation of the spirit of this exposition, if not merely in the questioning of what constitutes “the biblical requirements”.

On May 24, the day after the CEB announcement, Carina Aleckson, chair of the FCCM leadership team, published “An Open Letter Regarding First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota”.¹⁶⁶ In this letter, Aleckson explained that the reason FCCM was not withdrawing voluntarily is because the leadership team had come to the conclusion that, in light of the Covenant’s roots in pietism and history of maintaining fellowship in spite of disagreement, the church’s differing conviction on matters of sexuality did not rise to the level of irreconcilable disharmony.

The CEB’s counterargument appeared to hinge on a document furnished by the FCCM leadership team that was being referred to as the “Love All” statement.¹⁶⁷ The statement orients the church’s commitment to an ethic of loving their neighbor in the broader Christian and more specific Covenant traditions. The final two points appear to be at issue:

13. Welcome all persons and families, including LGBTQ+, to participate at all levels of community: serving in ministry, joining as members, holding staff and leadership roles.
14. Offer full pastoral care to all in our congregation without regard for ability, race, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. Pastoral care includes (but is not limited to) spiritual counsel, prayer, baptism, weddings, funerals, and visitation during illness.¹⁶⁸

Aleckson’s open letter explains that Dan Collison’s credentials had been suspended a month after this statement was published. This initiated correspondence between Aleckson and Covenant Executive Board chair Jenell Pluim dated from October 2018 to April 2019.¹⁶⁹ This exchange highlights the diametric perspectives of FCCM and the CEB, namely that the “Love All” statement, by itself, could be grounds for disharmony. Two

¹⁶⁶ Carina Aleckson, “An Open Letter Regarding First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota,” May 24, 2015. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ced42431905f4e61b993f95/1559052867435/OPEN+LETTER+-+5%3A24%3A2019.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ “Love All,” First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, April 2018. Archived at The Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190710051945/http://www.1stcov.org/ministry-guidance>

¹⁶⁸ “Love All”, 2018.

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ce822ef9b747a71ead9350c/1558717172299/LetterPacket.Chronological.pdf>

relevant details emerge from the letters. The initial investigation into FCCM appears to have been initiated by a letter presented to the leadership of the Northwest Conference and convened by a group of 27 heretofore unnamed pastors from the conference. According to Aleckson, no one from this group had talked with Collison prior to initiating their campaign. Additionally, the Northwest Conference had presented a report to the CEB at which representatives of FCCM were not invited or made aware of, and a written copy of which they had not received.¹⁷⁰ In explaining FCCM's contention that it had not met the prerequisite of disharmony and discipline, Aleckson wrote:

Historically, the Covenant has invited people who arrive at different scripturally based conclusions on non-salvific matters to choose harmony rather than part ways over these secondary matters. This is something that drew many of us to the Covenant. And in this time of increased polarization, a call to serve God together even when we disagree on non-salvific matters resonates with our understanding of Christ's call to love one another, and to be known by that love. Over the past several years, there seems to have been a shift from an invitation that calls all of us to fellowship despite divergent positions on secondary matters, to a cudgel demanding uniformity in beliefs on secondary matters... [The middle path of] acknowledging a position, and yet holding it with humility seems aligned with historic Covenant piety and reflects what I have appreciated most about the pietistic tradition as embodied by the ECC throughout its history. First Covenant Church continues to hold to historic Covenant and Christian teachings, and we believe that reasonable people of faith will come to differing conclusions on non-salvific matters. As pietists, we continue to hope that there is room in the Covenant for all; we persist in our belief that we are better together than apart.¹⁷¹

Aleckson's open letter also revealed the statement given by FCCM leadership to the CEB in their March 2019 meeting in which they reiterated the church's commitment to the Covenant affirmations.¹⁷² Following this meeting, FCCM was notified that they

¹⁷⁰ Carina Aleckson, Email to Jenell Pluim, January 28, 2019.

¹⁷¹ Carina Aleckson, Email to Jenell Pluim, December 18, 2018.

¹⁷² "Closing statement to Covenant Executive Board," presented by First Covenant Church Minneapolis, Chicago, March 2019.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ce823484e17b62b88205618/1558717256635/Closing+Statement.pdf>

were officially deemed “out of harmony”. Representatives from the CEB went to FCCM in April, where a suggestion to meet in a town hall-style setting with the congregation was denied. In their meeting with FCCM’s leadership team, the CEB representatives presented their requirements for reestablishing a harmonious position, which included recanting the “Love All” statement, forbidding pastoral staff not credentialed by the ECC from officiating same-sex weddings, supporting the decisions of the Board of Ordered Ministry, modifying their constitution and bylaws, and remaining in compliance for a minimum of four years before the case would be dropped.¹⁷³

On June 1, 2019, in response to Aleckson’s open letter, the ECC posted two open letters to its website. The first, with no specific authorship of either an individual or a governing body ascribed, was instead presented, somehow, as coming from the Evangelical Covenant Church itself.¹⁷⁴ The announcement provides no link to Carina Aleckson’s letter, nor even makes explicit reference to its content. It instead gives rebuttals to a post on the Mission Friends for Inclusion website in which the FCCM leadership team responded to the five out-of-harmony accusations.¹⁷⁵

The second letter came from ECC president John Wenrich.¹⁷⁶ Wenrich had been elected at the previous Annual Meeting in 2018, after having served for two years as executive minister of Start and Strengthen Churches. He said then to the delegates, “I want to be compassionate, and I also want to be clear. In the Covenant we always lead with love....If the gospel is not good news for LGBTQ persons, then the gospel is not good news for anyone.”¹⁷⁷ Before joining Covenant leadership, Wenrich was pastor at First Covenant Church of Portland, where he collaborated with Portland Fellowship, an ex-gay

¹⁷³ Jeff Houston, “Email to Carina Aleckson,” April 30, 2019.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ce8238b104c7be3e3c4b54c/1558717323510/Gmail+-Notes+from+meeting.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ “Evangelical Covenant Church Responds to FCCM’s Open Letter Ahead of Annual Meeting,” June 1, 2019.

<https://covchurch.org/2019/06/01/ecc-responds-to-fccms-open-letter-ahead-of-annual-meeting/>

¹⁷⁵ “First Covenant Church Minneapolis responds to involuntary dismissal recommendation,” MF4i, May 2019.

Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190704051532/http://mf4i.org/first-covenant-church-minneapolis-responds-to-involuntary-dismissal-recommendation/>

¹⁷⁶ John Wenrich, “Letter from Evangelical Covenant Church President John Wenrich Regarding First Covenant Church of Minneapolis,” June 1, 2019. <https://covchurch.org/2019/06/01/letter-from-ecc-president-john-wenrich-regarding-first-covenant-church-of-minneapolis/>

¹⁷⁷ “Wenrich Elected ECC President,” June 23, 2018. <https://covchurch.org/2018/06/23/wenrich-elected-ecc-president/>

ministry which offers “healing” for Christians with unwanted same-sex attraction.¹⁷⁸ The organization claims not to offer “reparative or conversion therapy”, but the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that a former participant found the program “unsuccessful” and claimed that “the program ‘shot’ his self-confidence and placed blame on those who don’t achieve freedom from their LGBTQ+ identity, participants they claimed were not trying ‘hard enough.’”¹⁷⁹

In his open letter, Wenrich offers a rosy depiction of how the topic of sexuality was presented in past Annual Meetings: “Throughout many difficult conversations for more than 20 years, delegates to the Annual Meeting have spoken, listened, shared stories, reflected upon scripture, and prayed together to understand what The Lord would have us to believe and practice concerning human sexuality.” He then plainly states, *contra evidence*, that “We have offered many workshops, forums and *created spaces for debate, lament and prayer.*”¹⁸⁰ He goes on to allege, concerning the ECC’s policy on sexuality, “This position is also in alignment with the ‘interpretive consensus’ of the historic and global church,” excepting the various historic denominations which in fact offer ordination and marriage to their gay members.

The tone of the letter is quite clearly a call to action.

I believe the future of our denomination rests on the discernment of this Annual Meeting...

I believe that future is now at risk...

Church, it is time to act—and to act courageously. It is time to act decisively at the Annual Meeting...

This Annual Meeting matters. This is a critical moment, and your voice and vote are needed.¹⁸¹

Wenrich dismissed the framing of the issue as either about the Covenant’s pietist ethos or theological debate: “Some are attempting to frame this conversation in reference

¹⁷⁸ Portland Fellowship, “Update Newsletter,” December 2004.

<https://www.portlandfellowship.com/newsletter/2004/dec2004.pdf>

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/focus-family/>

¹⁸⁰ Wenrich, “Open Letter,” Emphasis mine. Remember that Herb Hedstrom had presented his defeated motion to the Annual Meeting merely one year prior; the same meeting at which Wenrich had been elected.

¹⁸¹ Wenrich, “Open Letter.”

to pietism. To make this conversation about pietism is a distraction away from the true issues at hand.” Rather than thinking critically about how these things might inform Covenant members’ sense of camaraderie with the members of FCCM, he instead asked churches to “send their full compliment of delegates” and for delegates to “come to the Annual Meeting prepared to be strong and courageous.”¹⁸²

A number of Covenanters wrote letters and essays highlighting the significance and potential peril of voting to expel an entire congregation. Dan Collison penned his own open letter, part defense for FCCM, and partly for his own credentials. He alleged that Mark Stromberg, superintendent of the Northwest Conference, had told him that, “The Covenant is not going to even begin this conversation, because when people have conversations about human sexuality, they tend to change their minds.”¹⁸³ Stromberg, in his own letter, disputed the veracity of this statement.¹⁸⁴ Collison ended his letter with the following quote from the “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom,”

“Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities. Such minorities have no voice where conformity to 'official' interpretations is required. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.”¹⁸⁵

Leland Anderson, Covenant member and North Park graduate who worked professionally as a trial lawyer and mediator, wrote two letters. The first, written as a statement to the Covenant Church on June 1, minced no words as Anderson bemoaned what he saw as a betrayal of the Covenant’s distinctive character of theological diversity and the right of every member to read and interpret scripture for themselves. He wrote:

¹⁸² Wenrich, “Open Letter.”

¹⁸³ Dan Collison, “Open Letter to the Evangelical Covenant Church,” June 2019, 1-2. <https://www.northwestconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/REV-DAN-COLLISON-OPEN-LETTER-JUNE-2019.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ Mark Stromberg, “A Response from the NWC Superintendent to the Open Letter by Rev. Daniel Collison,” June 2019. <https://www.northwestconference.org/a-response-from-the-nwc-superintendent-to-the-open-letter-by-rev-daniel-collison/>

¹⁸⁵ Collison, “Open Letter,” 4.

Speaking pointedly, I charge the current leadership of the Covenant with heresy for being untrue to the commands of Christ as well as being out of harmony with the historical vision and purpose of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America. The persons who should walk the separate path are those who now seek to divide the church of my grandparents and great grandparents and turn it into something it was never intended to be. They have violated the historical norms and understandings of the Covenant Church and seek to set fire to the very foundations of the denomination.¹⁸⁶

He was drawing parallels to a story he heard while visiting Swedish Mission Covenant Church in which an earlier iteration of the church burned to the ground after drawing the ire of the local Lutheran Bishop for being “readers” of the word and interpreting the scriptures for themselves. When the Bishop expressed gladness that the small Mission Kyrka had been consumed, a member of the church told him, “The church building may have burned to the ground dear Sir, but the fire that burns in our hearts will never be extinguished.”¹⁸⁷

His second letter, published on June 6, was addressed specifically to John Wenrich. Here, Anderson draws on his experience as a lawyer to condemn the proposed church trial for its lack of due process, noting, among other things, improprieties such as “when an accused is not allowed to individually question and confront his accusers...when accusers are also the adjudicators of guilt or innocence... when the President of the denomination encourages his conference superintendents and clergy to register as many delegates as possible to stack the sentencing assembly with persons favorable to the prosecution; when all proceedings are conducted in secrecy and are not subject to public review or comment (even though the accused would waive the requirement of secrecy).”¹⁸⁸ He excoriates Wenrich’s claims to “clarity” and a “prophetic voice,” saying respectively, “I question whether six-hundred delegates over the course of an hour and a half can be sufficiently apprised of the facts and circumstances of a hotly contested factual and

¹⁸⁶ Leland Anderson, “A Statement by Leland Anderson, Denver, CO, Concerning the Proposed Involuntary Removal of First Covenant Church, Minneapolis,” June 1, 2019. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Leland_Anderson_Statement_2019.pdf

¹⁸⁷ L. Anderson, “Statement.”

¹⁸⁸ Leland Anderson, “Letter to John Wenrich,” June 6, 2019. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Anderson_Letter_Wenrich_2019.pdf

theological debate so as to render a just and fair decision relating to termination of the lifetime employment of another human being,” and

As to your claim to speak with a prophetic voice, Prophets speak out against kings. Prophets are outcasts who spoke the truth to power. You Mr. President are neither an outcast nor one who is speaking the truth to power. You are in fact the King, the one with the power, the one who is setting the agenda, stacking the assembly with your chosen ones, and predetermining the outcome of the controversy before the evidence has been presented.¹⁸⁹

He countered Wenrich’s claim to having been pained by the process, speaking to the pain experienced by LGBTQ+ people in high-control religious environments:

Pain, sir, is experiencing the loss of your identity, dignity and self-respect. Pain is growing up feeling that you are different, weird or unloved. Pain is being marginalized and ostracized because you are considered unnatural, abnormal. Pain is feeling the wrath of others when you attempt to be open and honest about who you are. Pain is being crucified on a barbed-wire fence in Wyoming. Pain is being told that your basic chemical and bodily instincts and vulnerabilities are an abomination to God. Pain is living a lie in order to be loved by your parents, accepted by your partners in business, your classmates, your fellow-workers and your fellow believers. Pain is lying about the most basic fact of your existence just so you can survive.¹⁹⁰

President emeritus of the Evangelical Covenant Church Glenn Palmberg posted a letter to Facebook on June 16 in which he stated his opposition to involuntary removal of the congregation of FCCM. Palmberg’s hope was to clarify to the delegates of the Annual Meeting that a vote to expel was only necessary insofar as delegates believed it was the best consequence, irrespective of whether or not FCCM was guilty of violating Covenant policy:

We are not voting on whether or not we agree with the ECC statements on human sexuality. We are not voting on whether we believe FCCM is guilty or innocent of the

¹⁸⁹ L. Anderson, “Letter.” The roster from the 134th Annual Meeting shows that attendance was much higher than Anderson’s estimate. There were 1049 total credentialed delegates. The Northwest conference sent the most delegates (262 persons from 103 churches).

¹⁹⁰ L. Anderson, “Letter.”

accusations. We are not voting on whether we feel the process was appropriate or not. We are only voting on whether or not we believe dismissal from membership in the ECC is the appropriate remedy.¹⁹¹

Palmberg also reminded Covenanters what it would mean to vote for the removal of an embodied church community:

This dismissal would include people who have found new life in Christ during the revitalization of this historic church. They will be told that their brothers and sisters in Christ from the Evangelical Covenant Church had just voted to involuntarily remove them from their larger church family. It would mean that the former Dean and President of North Park Theological Seminary, Covenant professor of New Testament at our seminary, Professor of Church History and Covenant History for many years, seasoned pastors who have served on multiple boards including chair of a conference board, a Covenant chaplain, a career Covenant missionary, Covenant church leader, Covenant authors, would all be involuntarily removed from the Covenant by vote of their fellow Covenanters. As a friend of mine said to me, “When you excommunicate a church you are not excommunicating a building. You are excommunicating the people.”¹⁹²

He concluded his letter with a quote from the 2008 Covenant resource paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible”

[The] record of misreadings in Christian history is cause for humility in our own reading of the Bible. It should cause us to pause before we make authoritative statements about a particular interpretation of a passage—especially if it is an interpretation on which Christians authentically disagree. Simply put: we sometimes get it wrong.¹⁹³

Art Nelson, former pastor of Winnetka Covenant Church and North Park professor and dean, sent a letter to Wenrich and the CEB on June 21. He expressed “sorrow” and “disbelief”, writing, “Approval of the recommendation by the Annual Meeting would seem to me to be one more denominational push to resist dialogue and openness to revisit

¹⁹¹ Glenn Palmberg, “Regarding the Executive Board recommendation to involuntarily remove First Covenant Church Minneapolis from the Evangelical Covenant Church,” June 16, 2019. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Glenn_Palmberg_Letter_2019.pdf

¹⁹² Palmberg, “Regarding.”

¹⁹³ *A Covenant Resource Paper: The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, The Evangelical Covenant Church, 2008. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Covenant-Resource-Paper.pdf>

interpretive diversities around the sacred text of scripture and the inherent genius of our part of the body of Christ to constantly honor the wonder of the life-giving Holy Spirit.”¹⁹⁴

Also published on June 21 was North Park Seminary professor Hauna Ondrey’s essay on Covenant history and the third way.¹⁹⁵ Ondrey recounted key details about the fundamentalist controversy and the Daughy affair from Covenant history which were explored in the previous section. She used these to draw comparisons to the current controversy on human sexuality which was at the heart of the decision put before the Annual Meeting. She questioned whether the dismissal of FCCM would orient the denomination on an ahistoric pathway to confessionalism:

If, on the other hand, congregations are not consistently dismissed for being out of harmony with all of the Covenant’s principles, policies, programs, and institutions but only the Covenant’s 2015 “Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality,” we must acknowledge that *heterosexual sex within marriage* has become the functional boundary for congregations’ membership in the Covenant. This would be a significant change. It cannot be equated with simply reaffirming or defending the authority of Scripture, with our sexual ethic as a test case. To frame it this way is to take a confessional perspective – where the boundary of the Covenant is not Scripture alone but a specified interpretation of Scripture. It is precisely this that the Covenant rejected at its founding and resisted again and again throughout its history.¹⁹⁶

Philip J. Anderson, professor emeritus of church history at North Park Theological Seminary, and FCCM member, published his essay three days later.¹⁹⁷ With reference to a number of orienting voices from Covenant history, such as Waldenström, Rosenius, Nyvall, and Bowman, Anderson noted that “By their ecclesial DNA, therefore, Covenanters should have the capacity and resources to understand nonconformity and dissent first-hand, and yet maintain the unity of the body.”¹⁹⁸ He wrote pointedly about the potential removal of his congregation:

¹⁹⁴ Art Nelson, “Letter to John Wenrich and the Covenant Executive Board,” June 21, 2019. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Art_Nelson_Letter_2019.pdf

¹⁹⁵ See note 20 on page 14.

¹⁹⁶ Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 5-6.

¹⁹⁷ See note 6 on page 7.

¹⁹⁸ Anderson, “Harmony.”

Until now, the Evangelical Covenant Church has had no experience in its long history of the involuntary dismissal of a single congregation. It is important not to mince words: “dismissal” from the rolls is “excommunication” from the ecclesial body — what seventeenth-century Puritans prosaically called “delivering up to Satan.” Though recognizing many forms and definitions throughout the Christian Church regarding processes of discipline, it is a formal death-knell. It is the ultimate marginalization in the Covenant Church, a group that has claimed to be *amicus dei*, friends of God and of one another in faith.¹⁹⁹

In the end, the letters did little to move the hearts of the delegates to lean into the hopeful discomfort of choosing fellowship in diversity over uniformity. Following a closed executive session, the vote tallies were read, with 75% of delegates voting for removal.

Six and a half years later, the once vibrant and active faith community that occupied First Covenant Church of Minneapolis is no more. The building no longer holds weekly worship services, but instead is being used as long-term housing.

In addition to the dismissal of First Covenant, the 134th Annual Meeting administered a church trial for two pastors who were deemed “out of harmony”. The first was Dan Collison. Since Collison’s story has already been shared in the context of his pastoral role at FCCM, I will simply provide links to his published opening remarks²⁰⁰ to the Board of Ordered Ministry on June 18 as well as the remarks he presented as a defense before the delegates.²⁰¹ The AM passed the motion with 77% of assembled delegates voting for the removal of his credentials.

The other person on trial was retired pastor Steven Armfield. Armfield, who had previously pastored at Thornapple Covenant Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, had an entry into the Covenant that was similar to my own. After graduating from Westmont College, he attended seminary at Fuller before returning to his first ministerial position

¹⁹⁹ Anderson, “Harmony.”

²⁰⁰ Dan Collison, “Opening Remarks for the Board of Ordered Ministry,” June 18, 2019.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56140fc2e4b058fd822e6d01/t/5ced4960652dea1af36f8f61/1559054689174/Dan+Collison+Opening+Remarks+for+Board+of+Ordered+Ministry+June+18+2018-FINAL.pdf>

²⁰¹ Dan Collison, “Defense Speech in front of the 2019 ECC Annual Meeting,” June 28, 2019.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/1y5jcswx4kcja5irmln4k/Rev-Dan-Collison-Defense-Speech-6-28-19.pdf>

at Montecito Covenant Church. After retiring in 2009, Armfield spent time working as conference staff for the Great Lakes Conference, as well as pastoring in Sweden with Covenant pastors Doug and Jodi Fondell. He personally expressed to me his affection for the Covenant and his wish to maintain his ordination to the end.²⁰²

In the fall of 2017, Armfield officiated a wedding ceremony for two men. One of those men was his own son, Matthew.

This initiated a series of events that culminated in Armfield's trial at the Annual Meeting. Technically, there were three trials: first, on Wednesday before the Board of Ordered Ministry, second, before the Covenant Ministerium on Thursday, and then, last, before the entire Annual Meeting on Friday night. By his own recollection, Armfield was not made aware that he would appear before the Ministerium until his meeting with the BoOM on Wednesday evening.

At the Ministerium meeting, Armfield was given eight minutes to present his defense, and then was asked to leave. North Park Seminary professor Klyne Snodgrass was called up as a witness to testify against Armfield. Per Armfield's attestation, Snodgrass had not been made aware that he would be a witness until he arrived at the meeting. The standing rules of the meeting required a 2/3 majority in order to recommend Armfield's removal of credentials to the Annual Meeting. According to witnesses at the meeting, Lance Davis, Executive Minister of Ordered Ministry, moved to reduce the vote requirement to a simple majority. This vote, to change the standing rules, required its own 2/3 vote, and failed. There was confusion as to whether or not the vote on Davis' point of order had occurred, as additional points of order had been raised. Liz Mosbo VerHage, president of the ministerium, overruled Davis' protest over the vote, but after additional protest was made, decided to put it to the ministerium to vote. A simple majority is all that is required to overrule the president, which was achieved and the standing rules were changed so that the motion to recommend the removal of credentials to the Annual meeting now only required a simple majority. A delegate called out the fact that a lawyer who was required to leave the closed session had been communicating with Davis during the meeting, but at that point it was too late. The recommendation to remove Armfield's

²⁰² Steve Armfield, Personal correspondence, February 13, 2026.

credentials received 66.1% of the vote; a majority, but just shy of the original 2/3 requirement.

I have personally spoken with many Covenant pastors who were in attendance at that Ministerium meeting. The words “disgusting,” “shit show,” “traumatic,” and “embarrassment to the denomination,” have all been used to describe what happened. Armfield remembers the first words that emeritus Covenant President Glenn Palmberg said to him when he was invited back in to hear the verdict: “That is absolutely the worst meeting that I’ve ever been in. You got screwed.”²⁰³

Armfield would go on to the Annual Meeting where he was given five minutes to present a defense. After thirty minutes of debate, 71% of delegates voted for the removal of credentials.

Here is the text of Armfield’s defense speech, which I offer in its entirety:

In September of 2017 I officiated at the wedding of my son Matthew to his partner Jeffrey. At that point all Covenant ministry was barred to me. In early 2018 I was invited to be interim pastor of Second Congregational Church, UCC in my home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan, an affirming and inclusive congregation. There, at the request of the church I officiated at the wedding of Carley and Kendra. Thus I am here.

In 1971 I stumbled onto the staff of Montecito Covenant Church in Santa Barbara, California. That opened up a new life for me. As I discovered more and more of what the Covenant is ... I, (coming out of a narrow, legalistic and rigid setting) said 1,000 times: “I did not know there was a group who embraced the best of Evangelical theology without the baggage of legalism. I have found the church that God prepared my heart for.” Now, almost 50 years later, as I stand here, you are soon to vote on whether I will be *allowed* to continue in this family.

I believe we all love Jesus Christ and we all want to be faithful in fulfilling the mission he calls us to. I love being a Covenant pastor; it is strange to feel so aligned with the Covenant in every aspect but this one and yet find myself facing the potential permanent revocation of my ordination and expulsion from the ministerial community. I cannot help but believe that there is a way we can advance together. I hope you do too.

²⁰³ Steve Armfield, Personal correspondence.

If I have a voice in our church family, I hope it will be a voice for unity; not sameness, but oneness in Christ, ... “in Christ that all things hold together.” We are not held together by policy or prohibitions, by sexuality or sameness. The answer to the issue we face will not be resolved by hermeneutics or polity or guidelines, nor by personal taste or passion, nor by suspensions or threats or resignations or expulsions. Unity will never be found in demanding everyone be on the same side of this issue. It is not a matter of “I’m right and you are wrong,” or “they are sinners and I am not.” Attempting to paint a mural of sameness is futile. As in the past, the Covenant will find its way forward and together by humbly placing its confidence in Christ.

For some time, I kept this matter (gay marriages), restricted to my own family. For me it was a matter of my family and my son. But I came to a place hermeneutically, ethically and pastorally where I said, “If I said ‘yes’ to my son, how could I say ‘no’ to your daughter.”

Yes, I went against a guideline, but I did so with transparency to Covenant leaders. Our own ministerial ethics calls Covenant clergy, and I quote, *“to act in the best interests of others, to seek their well-being, safeguard their interests and protect them, as we are able, protect them from danger and harm, even to the point of sacrificing our own interests.”* This care is to be extended *“regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation...”*

I fully and completely affirm the Covenant statement on marriage for the vast majority of humanity, but I do not for a small minority. And as you know the minority are the ones who are so often marginalized, rejected and cast out, even by the church.

Being a Covenant pastor is one of the great honors and joys of my life. It is being a Covenant pastor, shaped by the befriending spirit of the Covenant and its unique grasp of grace, family and relationship, that has led me here. I am a Covenant pastor.

I love our Covenant, I am so grateful that God led me to this family, where I have been so thoroughly embraced. I hope that now you will affirm that the Covenant is large enough to include someone like me.

God bless and lead you in your decision.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Steve Armfield, “Notes for Defense before the Annual Meeting,” Omaha, June 28, 2019.

2020

In May of 2020, Tyler Krumland published his memoir *Love Him Well: My Journey Toward God, Truth, and Self-Acceptance*. Krumland, who was previously mentioned as having shared at the MF4i event in Denver in 2015, tells the story of growing up Covenant, coming to understand himself as gay in a conservative Christian setting, attending North Park University and Seminary, and coming out.²⁰⁵

2022

By late 2022, two more Covenant churches, Awaken Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Quest Church in Seattle, Washington, were to be brought before the Annual Meeting for potential removal over violations of the guidelines concerning sexuality. In November of that year, a group of pastors from the Pacific Northwest Conference produced an open letter, asking Covenanters across the denomination to return to the affirmations, and in particular, that of freedom in Christ. The group wrote

The beautiful diversity of the ECC includes different theological beliefs including same sex marriage; but our unity in Christ means we do not have to divide over this disagreement. **We believe that remaining connected while having differences on non-essential matters is a key distinctive of being a Covenanter.** Therefore, we are advocating that at Gather '23, the ECC should decide NOT to remove Quest and Awaken because of their congregationally discerned positions on same sex marriage.²⁰⁶

Covenanters were invited to sign the open letter. In total, 890 people would add their names, asking the ECC to embrace fellowship over ideological purity.

2023

On June 5, 2023, Quest Church publicly announced its intention to voluntarily disaffiliate from the ECC. This was ahead of the Annual Meeting and after delegate materials were distributed that indicated an action item on voting for the church's removal. In a written statement posted to Facebook, and later republished on the *Pietisten*

²⁰⁵ Tyler Krumland, *Love Him Well: My Journey Toward God, Truth, and Self-Acceptance*, (Self Published, 2020).

²⁰⁶ Mat Hollen et al., "An Open Letter to the ECC Congregations: Clergy, Congregation Leaders and Members," November 2022. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Open_Letter_Signatures_2022.pdf

website, pastor Gail Song Bantum cited historic Covenant identity as a reason that the church chose to leave:

We have discerned that, to be the body of Christ, we must embrace the fullness of God's life in all of our members, including our LGBTQIA+ siblings. This belief emerges from our identity and values as an ECC church, not despite this identity and these values. We leave the denomination grieved that the ECC refuses to recognize God's work in our midst, and yet hopeful for the ways the Spirit is moving in our community...

We had hoped that the ECC would consider the impact of cutting off one of its limbs in the name of holding fast to a position on same-sex marriage (a non-essential of faith), a resolution paper that was voted on nearly three decades ago...

It speaks volumes to where the ECC's sense of urgency and values lie—clearly not around upholding convictions of anti-racism or gender equity. Somehow, the ECC has become a space that prioritizes doctrinal uniformity on a singular issue over relational unity in areas that are non-essentials of faith.²⁰⁷

The Removal of Awaken Church

On Friday, June 30, 2023, Awaken Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota became the second church to experience an involuntary removal from the Evangelical Covenant Church. Delegates at the 137th Annual Meeting voted with 74% of the vote in favor of removal. The events that precipitated Awaken's disfellowship followed a similar trajectory to those of FCCM.²⁰⁸

In 2021, the Pastoral Advisory Team (the name chosen for the church board) of Awaken Church adopted a statement on freedom in Christ and human sexuality. The statement professed integrity and historical resonance with the Covenant ethos as articulated in the *Covenant Affirmations* and asserted a sexuality and marriage ethic that is consistent with the Covenant's theological framework. Of note is the statement's exposition on pastoral care:

²⁰⁷ Gail Song Bantum, "Statement on Quest Church's disaffiliation with the ECC," *Pietisten*, 2023.

<https://pietisten.org/xxxviii/1/quest.html>

²⁰⁸ A summary of the Covenant Executive Board's actions that led to Awaken being brought before the Annual Meeting can be found in the 2023 Delegate Notebook, starting on page 55.

<https://covchurch.sharefile.com/share/view/s5a18b5bcce844d3fb70ff73dcd737765>

Awaken will support its Pastors as they follow their conscience and faith-filled convictions regarding their participation in same-sex marriage ceremonies (e.g., officiating, praying, or attending) trusting they: prayerfully study Scripture, follow the Spirit's leading, consider words of counsel from peers and Awaken leadership, and engage respectfully and honestly with the denomination who holds their credentials.²⁰⁹

The statement caught the attention of members of the Northwest Conference, including superintendent Mark Stromberg and Associate Superintendent Kara Stromberg (no relation). In a letter dated to August 23, 2021, Pastoral Advisory Team members Art Morrow and Donna Albinson wrote to Stromberg and Stromberg, stating, "We believe that our Freedom in Christ Policy reflects a robust and faithful Biblical, historical, and essentially Covenant framework for engaging a variety of social issues of the day, including legal, same-sex weddings between two people who follow Christ and who intend to commit to a faithful, lifelong, marriage."²¹⁰ The letter also addressed the scholarship that had taken place since the Covenant passed its resolution on sexuality:

On the topic of same-sex weddings, we recognize that in the past ten years Biblical and early church scholarship learnings (including among evangelical scholars) have elucidated a deeper understanding of the relevant Scripture texts and have raised interpretive questions that were not known or understood when prior ECC bodies elevated same-sex wedding policy to an essential, core doctrine. This indicates that it is time for the ECC to reassess its stance.²¹¹

On September 7, Micah Witham, pastor of Awaken, sent a letter to Mark Stomberg, as well as Lance Davis, John Wenrich, and Sharon Anderson, chair of the Board of Ordered Ministry, stating his intent to officiate a wedding between two Awaken Members who were both men. Witham had previously been suspended for five weeks in 2017 for praying for a gay couple on their wedding day; a suspension which drew the outrage of the Awaken congregation who voiced their frustration in a two-hour long meeting with

²⁰⁹ "Statement Regarding the Affirmation of Freedom in Christ: As it Relates to Human Sexuality," Awaken Church Pastoral Advisory Team, 2021. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Awaken_Freedom_2021.pdf

²¹⁰ Art Morrow and Donna Albinson, "Re: Awaken Freedom in Christ Policy and Upcoming Wedding," letter, August 23, 2021. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2021_Aug23_Awaken_Board_Memo_to_ECC.pdf

²¹¹ Morrow and Albinson, letter.

Dick Lucco, then executive director for ministry development.²¹² In the letter, Witham argues that his decision to officiate was done so out of fidelity to the pietist tradition and out of duty to pastoral care:

My dissent on this matter is principled and theological. It informs my actions as a Pastor and my vow as an ordained member of the Ministerium who is committed to extending pastoral care “regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation... as part of a sacred trust from God.” These principles call me to “act in the best interests of others, to seek their well-being, safeguard their interests, and protect them, as we are able, from danger and harm, even to the point of sacrificing our own interests.”²¹³

On October 8, Art Morrow sent an email to Davis, Wenrich, Mark Stromberg, and Karen Ingebretson, Director of Pastoral Support and Practice, contesting a letter of suspension sent to Micah Witham on September 23. The Pastoral Advisory Team had not been made aware of the suspension, as the letter was sent as an email directly to Witham, and furthermore, found the disciplinary action of suspension to be disproportionate to the policy violation. Morrow cited the following as “unacceptable and unnecessarily harmful”:

Mis-applying a suspension approach of banishment from the church campus and from preaching and pastoral service within the congregation, to a pastoral action requested by beloved members of our congregation and anchored in faithful dissent on a non-essential matter in alignment with the express policy of our congregation. (Surely this suspension approach was designed for use against pastors to protect congregations from ongoing or imminent harm in cases such as alleged embezzlement, child molesting, or serial adultery with congregational members.)²¹⁴

²¹² Micah Witham, “Opening statement to the Covenant Ministerium,” June 21, 2022.

<https://www.pietisten.org/xxxviii/1/statement.html>

²¹³ Micah Witham, “Re: Same Sex Wedding,” email, September 7, 2021. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2021_Sep7_MW_Self_Report_Letter_to_BOOM.pdf

²¹⁴ Art Morrow, Letter to Lance Davis, Karen Ingebretson, Mark Stromberg, and John Wenrich, October 8, 2021. https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2021_Oct8_Awaken_PAT_Memo_to_ECC_Leadership.pdf

This violation of the pastoral suspension protocol led to the investigation from the Covenant Executive Board starting in February of 2022 and culminating in the motion for removal at the 2023 Annual Meeting.

At the Annual Meeting of the Covenant Ministerium on June 21, 2022, Micah Witham presented his defense for retaining his ordination credentials. In a video recording, Witham, who was in Ireland at the time, drew from his relationship with Dick Lucco, who had served his previous suspension before becoming his advocate, as well as Julian of Norwich and the windows of her anchor-hold to both the church and to the people. He challenged the validity of the Covenant's discerned position on sexuality and that position's effect on gay members:

I and many of my colleagues in this room have come to this place and we are telling you that where you say there cannot be the fruit of God's Spirit—there is! The place where you say God cannot be present and cannot bless - God is present and is blessing.

You keep saying that you're not hurting and harming gay people who want to follow Jesus by asking them to live celibate lives even though they don't have the gift of celibacy and desperately want a partner to walk through life with. Yet, the vast majority of gay people I speak to are saying the opposite. That in fact, the church is harming them and that they would rather walk away from spiritual community than live alone.²¹⁵

Witham finished his opening statement with the following question:

Is the Covenant better or worse if there are pastors like me and churches like Awaken? Pastors and churches who will take them in. Who will love them, point them towards Jesus and invite them to participate fully in the work of the gospel. Pastors and churches who will baptize them and their babies and your grandbabies, confirm them and offer them Eucharist. I believe we are better together and I believe I am better with you than I am without you.²¹⁶

The Covenant Ministerium vote failed to reach the two-thirds majority needed to recommend the removal of ordination to the Annual Meeting. As of the writing of this

²¹⁵ Witham, "Opening statement. In addition to reading the article linked in note 212 on the previous page, you can also watch Witham's video recording at this link. <https://app.frame.io/reviews/a364ea89-6e12-4b1a-9a48-fe0eb7861286/1e373f6e-15db-444d-8600-d3469170d910>

²¹⁶ Witham, "Opening statement."

report, the Board of Ordered Ministry has made no changes to the status of Witham's credentials, leaving them in a prolonged state of suspension.

In the summer of 2022, Witham preached a series called "Lost in Translation," in which he explored the challenges with reading certain Biblical passages in contemporary English, and how meaning embedded in ancient Hebrew and Greek texts and their cultural context can easily be obscured. Two sermons in the series addressed texts that have been historically used to condemn gay relationships; the so-called "clobber verses." On July 31, he discussed 1 Corinthians 6:9 and the difficulty, and controversy, in translating the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsnokoitai*.²¹⁷ The second sermon, preached on August 14, tackled Romans 1:26-27 and the contrast between "natural" and "unnatural" sexual relations.²¹⁸

At the next Annual Meeting, on June 28, 2023, Covenant President Tammy Swanson-Draheim presented her presidential update during which she responded to a motion approved at the previous Annual Meeting which requested that she give an update to the ECC's divide on human sexuality. Swanson-Draheim acknowledged a "spectrum of thought" surrounding the issue and that individuals on both sides (those who support and those who reject the legitimacy of same-sex marriage) are all responding from a deep sense of conviction, are using scripture as their guide, and think they are being true to the ethos and history of the Covenant Church.²¹⁹ In a statement that reflected Amanda Olson's 2019 dissertation, she went on to describe the consideration of a denominational split as a "lethal technical solution to an adaptive challenge." While clarification about the foundation of the ECC's position and how that translates to policy was elucidated, no discussion about *how* the ECC was planning on bringing together the two sides in a way

²¹⁷ Micah Witham, "Lost in Translation: How to Love Gay People and the Bible," sermon at Awaken Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 31, 2022. https://awakencommunity.podbean.com/e/july-31_lost-in-translation-how-to-love-gay-people-and-the-bible/

²¹⁸ Micah Witham, "Lost in Translation: How to Love Gay People and the Bible, part 2," sermon at Awaken Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, August 14, 2022. https://awakencommunity.podbean.com/e/aug-14_lost-in-translation-how-to-love-gay-people-and-the-bible-pt-2/

²¹⁹ Tammy Swanson-Draheim, "Presidential Update and Organizational Design," address given to the 137th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 28, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXryitYOKbw&t=811s>

that would foster honest conversation and honor the perspective of LGBTQ-affirming Covenanters was offered, other than a desire to “bring down the temperature.”

It was shortly after this message that Awaken Church experienced their brief church trial before the delegates, after which they were summarily removed from membership in the Covenant.

It is difficult to see how precisely the temperature of the sexuality conversation has the possibility of being turned down when multiple church communities have expressed a desire to remain in fellowship, and to have a chance to elucidate their theological and ecclesiological diversity, only to be met with condemnation and rejection at nearly every turn of an investigative process concerning a practice which has never been a part of any noteworthy Christian confessional document, in which there is a widening lack of consensus among the broader Christian Church, and which is not considered a sacramental practice within our own denomination. How are affirming Covenanters expected to have any degree of emotional or intellectual safety when suppression and indifference are favored over curiosity and open dialogue, and when punishment and conformity are prioritized over mercy and communion?

2026...What Comes Next?

In the 2007 Covenant study guide on “Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic”,²²⁰ the authors write

Many thoroughly detailed studies have been published in recent years seeking a better understanding of the biblical texts and contexts. These seek to enlighten our understanding of the original intent and meaning of Scripture for the contemporary discussion of the church. The work done by scholars with varying viewpoints on these issues has helped identify thoughtless presuppositions, unhelpful prejudices, and unsubstantiated claims that cloud the issues and damage the witness of the church as a holy, just, welcoming and transforming community before the world. Much good can come as congregations confess their failure and begin to dialogue with and support individuals and families where a member experiences homosexual or lesbian attraction

²²⁰ See note 105 on page 38.

and desire. Conversations with such individuals based on honesty and accurate information will guide the church into being more redemptive and helpful.²²¹

It is vital that we, as a people connected to and through the Evangelical Covenant Church, recognize and admit that this work is being done, almost exclusively, from *outside the Covenant Church*. With only the few exceptions of sermons and discussion guides coming from individual church websites, as well as a few articles and essays published in *Covenant Quarterly* and the occasional *festschrift*, there has been essentially no official platforming or publication of “studies,” “work done by scholars,” or even “dialogue,” or “conversations,” which have provided even an ephemeral hint of legitimacy to a viewpoint which doesn’t espouse an unwavering prohibition of same-sex marriage or ordination of married gay persons. Making overtures to the “good [that] can come” from these conversations is appealing to a fantasy that has not existed in the ECC for the past thirty years, other than in small gatherings and discreet online platforms that operate largely underground and not in the public-facing media of the denomination. Even the brief debate that accompanied the disfellowshipping of congregations and pastors was done in a mandated executive session that has prevented even Covenant members—those who happened not to have been selected as delegates—from the ability to bear witness to some of the most significant moments in our denomination’s history.

In the United States the American Baptist Churches USA, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Friends General Conference (Quakers), the Mennonite Church USA, the Moravian Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and a number of independent Catholic communions, represent just some of the denominations who now offer the blessing of gay marriage, either as a denomination, or at the discretion of the local congregation. None of these denominations made an instantaneous or unexamined transition to a more affirming position; each one underwent an earnest, considered, and prayerful process which included seeking out and listening to the diverse perspectives from their respective memberships. Most made the most significant changes in just the last thirty years.

²²¹ “Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic,” 24-25.

The United Methodist Church is the most recent mainline denomination to have amended its policies regarding human sexuality. On May 1, 2024, the General Conference of the UMC voted to remove prohibitions on clergy-officiated same-sex marriages and on the ordination of partnered LGBTQ+ clergy.²²² This came after thousands of non-affirming congregations voted to leave the denomination, many switching over to the traditionalist Global Methodist Church.

While Evangelical denominations have been less inclined to adopt gay-affirming policies, some new organizations have emerged to provide support and credentialing for independent, post-evangelical, and erstwhile emergent churches. Groups such as the Post-Evangelical Collective²²³, of which David Gushee, who spoke at the MF4i event of 2015, is a board member, and the Curian Network²²⁴, founded by pastors who were disfellowshipped from the Church of the Nazarene, are promoting a decentralized and theologically diverse model for church affiliation. Coming out of the Covenant tradition is the Wild Fig Network²²⁵, organized by both former and current Covenant pastors. Wild Fig describes itself as an “emerging, post-denominational network for ministers and ministries longing for a more loving, just, and inclusive Christianity.”²²⁶

Within the Covenant Church, pastors, seminarians, and members are questioning and changing their minds on the current position on sexuality at an increasing rate. In addition to the involuntary removals of FCCM and Awaken, several more churches have voted for voluntary disaffiliation. Here are a few of them:

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Quest (Seattle, WA) | Artisan (Rochester, NY) | Vox Veniae (Austin, TX) | Roots (St. Paul, MN) |
| Genesis (Robbinsdale, MN) | Christ Church (Portland, OR) | DUST (Toledo, OH) | Last City Church (St. Paul, MN) |
| St. John’s Covenant (Portland, OR) | St. Thomas Church (Salem, OR) | Forest Hills Covenant (Jamaica Plain, MA) | Arbor Covenant Church (Madison, WI) |
| The Vine (Austin, TX) | Abbey Way Covenant (Minneapolis, MN) | Crossroads Church (Loveland, CO) | Metro Hope (Harlem, NY) |
| | | | Cityview (Pittsburgh, PA) |

²²² Yonat Shimron, “United Methodists redefine marriage, end official condemnation of homosexuality,” RNS, May 2, 2024. <https://religionnews.com/2024/05/02/united-methodists-redefine-marriage-and-end-official-condemnation-of-homosexuality/>

²²³ <https://www.postevangelicalcollective.org/>

²²⁴ <https://thecurian.org/>

²²⁵ <https://www.wildfig.org/>

²²⁶ Wild Fig Network (@wildfignetwork), “New to Wild Fig, or curious to learn more?” Instagram, February 24, 2026. <https://www.instagram.com/wildfignetwork/p/DVJ0qJXkv6n/?hl=en>

Several more have developed inclusion statements and are in a process of discernment about their continued fellowship in the Covenant. Many others have just started conversations about human sexuality and ministry for and inclusion of gay members and how those things can be pursued with authenticity while remaining under the Covenant authority.

To be clear, a number of churches have also disaffiliated because they found the ECC's policies to be *too permissible* for queer congregants, or because they anticipated liberalizing changes coming in the future. Many more have already made statements, and have even effected changes to their bylaws, that will automatically begin a voluntary removal process should the Covenant change its policy to a more affirming model.

Reflecting on the Covenant's history does not provide us with unambiguous answers about how to move forward from here. It is up to the church, or perhaps more specifically the Covenant member reading this, to interrogate their willingness to engage in fraught and difficult dialogue, both with our interlocutors, inasmuch as internally with our own consciences.

In October of 2024, New Testament scholar Richard Hays, author of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, along with his son Christopher, presented a sort of self-rebuttal to his oft-cited writings on homosexuality. In *The Widening of God's Mercy*²²⁷, Hays found himself recanting his previous biblically derived ethic on the prohibition of gay relationships. We end this section with Hays' words from the epilogue:

I have come to think I was wrong. As we have sought to show in the foregoing chapters, the argument for God's gracious inclusion of people of different sexual orientations...rests on the broad base of scripture's comprehensive story of God's counterintuitive but persistent mercy... For me, the change of opinion can be described as *metanoia*: a turning, a transformation of mind... I join with generations of the faithful in praying that heart-felt prayer, recognizing that I, along with all God's people, need God's mercy. May we all walk in God's merciful ways.²²⁸

²²⁷ See note 12 on page 10.

²²⁸ Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 223-226.